



Egg Rock Update

Newsletter of the Seabird Restoration Program
of the National Audubon Society

2014

MAINE PUFFINS REBOUND

Cooler water helps puffins

Maine puffins experienced a dramatic increase in nesting success in 2014 following two years of food shortage. But what does this tell us about changes in their ocean habitat?

How cooler water benefits puffins

As any Maine swimmer knows, frigid water is a hallmark of the state's coastal waters. Cold water that originates from melting ice in Greenland and the high Arctic may chill swimmers, but it also creates ideal temperatures for white hake and Atlantic herring—the puffins' most important forage fish. But recent warming of the sea surface has driven these fish northward and into deeper, cooler water. Warmer water and increased precipitation has also affected

the timing of the spring phytoplankton bloom, which transfers the sun's energy up through the food chain, into the fish that puffins feed on, and to puffins themselves—along with a multitude of other ocean creatures.

Left: In 2014 marine conditions provided an abundant supply of white hake supplemented by Atlantic herring, sand lance, and Acadian redfish. At Eastern Egg Rock, dawn-to-dusk observations showed that some chicks received as many as 25 feedings per day.

This pattern became apparent when the "ocean heat wave" of 2012 raised Gulf of Maine sea surface temperatures to the warmest recorded level in the past 150 years.

The return to "normal"

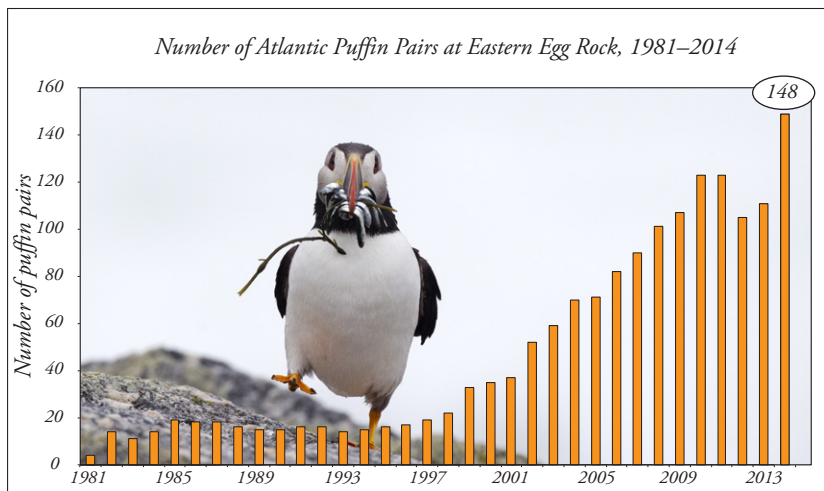
The relatively cold winter of 2013–2014 resulted in a chilling of Maine's seawater, bringing the average sea surface temperature in the Gulf of Maine down within the high end of "normal" during the first six months of 2014 compared to the same period in 2013. This temperature helped to produce a modest plankton bloom that permitted

Maine puffins to begin laying eggs during the last week of April, the normal period for egg-laying.

Puffin eggs hatch six weeks after the egg is laid. The chick's first meals are usually tiny white hake and herring that have returned to the coastal waters to feast on the spring plankton, especially small copepods. Our researchers found that white hake and Atlantic herring made up 48% and 22% respectively of the puffin chicks' diet at Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) last summer; large sand lance made up an additional 19% of the diet. Only a few butterfish were observed. At Seal Island the number of nesting puffins rebounded. As a result, 84% of burrows were occupied by incubating adults, compared to just 68% in 2013. Seventy-five percent of the 2014 pairs fledged chicks—a dramatic improvement from 2013 when just one in ten pairs did so.

The puffin season was similar at other Gulf of Maine colonies where 66% and 44% of puffin pairs at Matinicus Rock and Machias Seal Island respectively fledged young. This was a dramatic recovery from 2013 when less than 10% and 15% respectively fledged. White hake was by far the most important item.

Eastern Egg Rock puffins also experienced an excellent year in 2014 with a surge in nesting pairs to a record high of 148 nesting pairs.



Eastern Egg Rock puffins reached a record high of 148 breeding pairs in 2014. In 2012, predation by river otters and the "ocean heat wave" resulted in the first big decline in puffin nesting pairs in 39 years.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN BY ROBERT BUKATY

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The 2014 Maine Research Team

Front Center: Debbie Wood. **First Row (left to right):** Kristina McOmber; Silvestre Montesinos; Steve Kress; Lauren Lescure; Lila Wright; Max Feldman; Shannon Massey; Taylor Hale; Claire Schollaert; Paula Shannon; Alejandra Fabila; Ravin Thomasson. **Second Row:** Rose Borzik; S.J. Kwiatkowski; Col Lauzau; Emma Rhodes; Maggie Post; Pete Salmansohn; Sara Stadulis; Paul Dougherty; Keenan Yakola. **Third Row:** Halley Walsh; Frank Mayer; Julia Gulka; Facundo Franken; Sarah Daniels; Nicole Passeri; Aspen Ellis; Tim Healey; Catherine Pham; Adam DiNuovo; Sue Schubel. **Absent from photo:** Jacqueline Anderson; Austin Brayton; Sandy Flint; Ted Gaine; Scott Hall; Anthony Hill; Eliza Kurth; Robby Lambert; Ayla Liss; Stephanie Marchionne; Marie Martin; Kaitlyn Nafziger; Dan Ober; Emma Ober; Sally Ober; Colin Pennock; Kristin Pennock; Charlotte Peterson; Jean Peterson; Randy Peterson; Stella Walsh; Ellen Westhaver.

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STEPHEN W. KRESS

THE MESSAGE FROM THE PUFFIN'S EGG

**What puffins can tell us about changes
in the Gulf of Maine**

Since 1981, Project Puffin interns have annually celebrated the summer's first sighting of a puffin carrying fish. This means that the first chick of the year has hatched and will soon receive a meal. And since puffins have a fixed six-week incubation period, counting backward from the first hatch tells us when the first egg of the year has appeared. A new analysis shows that this first hatch of the year has broad importance as an indicator of the health of the Gulf of Maine ecosystem.

Hatch date indicates spring plankton bloom

Puffins lay just one egg each year. Compared to the weight of the female puffin, the 2.3-ounce egg (the size of an extra-large chicken egg) is huge, comprising about 15% of the female's body weight. To bulk up and lay her massive egg, the female puffin must find ample supplies of food (likely plankton-eating crustaceans and small forage fish) near the nesting islands during the two weeks prior to egg-laying. If ample food is not found, the females will lay their eggs later in the season or may abstain from nesting for the year.



SUSAN SCHUBEL

Top: The Atlantic Puffin's egg comprises about 15% of the female's body weight. Bottom: Puffins only lay one egg each year and then only in years when the female finds ample food in the weeks prior to egg-laying. Her ability to lay an egg early in the season is a measure of the health of the Gulf of Maine. Puffin parents take turns incubating their single egg for 42 days.

Egg Rock Update 2014

Since 1986, puffin hatching dates at Eastern Egg Rock have occurred slightly later each year and more irregularly since 2005. We are also finding that the hatch date is correlated with the size and timing of the spring phytoplankton bloom, the annual event that provides food for every creature in the marine food web. Early hatch dates signal large plankton blooms—years when puffins and forage fish are likely to thrive. Late hatch dates indicate smaller or even undetectable spring blooms. The trend toward later and less regular hatch dates is consistent with independent evidence showing a trend towards lower phytoplankton productivity in the Gulf of Maine.¹ Less phytoplankton means less food for zooplankton and the foods required to produce the puffin's super-sized egg.

The plankton-puffin connection

The fluctuating pattern in hatch dates coincides with a pattern of extreme precipitation in the northeast since 2005 associated with increased climate variation from one year to the next. Four of the eight wettest years of the last century in Maine occurred between 2005 and 2010, a pattern associated with global warming. As a result, the Gulf of Maine surface waters have not only become warmer, but also less saline because of the increased precipitation and increased pattern of melting Arctic ice. One explanation for the decreased phytoplankton productivity is that increased amounts of organic matter in river runoff can absorb the light that is necessary for phytoplankton to grow and thrive. Another hypothesis is that the increased freshwater is potentially affecting the ocean circulation that delivers nutrients to surface waters for subsequent phytoplankton growth.

Lastly, the process known as ocean acidification (caused by increased global atmospheric CO₂ associated with fossil fuel burning) may be affecting ocean ecosystem production and health.



STEPHEN W. KREISS

Project Puffin intern, Col Lauzau, holds one of the 148 healthy puffin chicks that hatched this summer at Eastern Egg Rock. She spent three months on Egg Rock, part of a team of four that protected and studied seabirds.



SHAWN P. CARRIE

Since 1981, the sight of the first puffin returning to Egg Rock carrying fish is a cause for celebration at this restored colony. Now, the date of this first sighting holds meaning as an indicator about the health of the Gulf of Maine.

All of these factors combined may lead to great variations in the date and size of the annual spring phytoplankton bloom—and accordingly in the production of foods that determine the first hatch date for puffins.

Puffins require an ample food supply to produce their huge egg and this is only possible when there is an ample spring phytoplankton bloom that comes early enough in the year so that they have a full three months for incubation and chick rearing before their migration urges pulls them back to the sea.

The events of 2012–2014 demonstrate that changes of just a few degrees in sea surface temperatures can have a dramatic effect on ocean food chains—especially in the Gulf of Maine, which is warming faster than most parts of the world's oceans.²

Yet Maine puffins demonstrate that when they find ample food, they can continue to have successful nesting seasons and replenish their numbers. Because they can live for 20 or more years, puffins do not need to breed annually for their populations to thrive.

Puffins are showing us that the productivity of the Gulf of Maine is becoming more variable. Clearly, puffins know a good year when they see one, and those that monitor the health of coastal waters and its important fisheries can now use the puffins' hatch date as an early signal about the size of the spring plankton bloom that feeds all life in the Gulf of Maine.

While reducing the impact of global warming and ocean acidification will require international policy change, local fisheries can help now by leaving more fish in the sea for puffins and other seabirds during otherwise lean summers. Likewise, it's also important to help puffins and other rare seabirds at their nesting colonies by reducing losses from predators so they can successfully raise chicks without interference when they have the opportunity.

¹Balch W. M. , D. T. Drapeau1, B. C. Bowler, T. G. Huntington, Step-changes in the physical, chemical and biological characteristics of the Gulf of Maine, as documented by the GNATS time series. *Marine Ecology Progress Series*, Vol. 450: 11–35, 2012 doi: 0.3354/meps09555. Published March 29, 2012.

²Whittle, Patrick. *Gulf of Maine warming faster than most bodies of saltwater, research finds*. Portland Press Herald. Associated Press. September 3, 2014

Read more at:
projectpuffin.audubon.org/conservation-news

Maine Island Updates



◀ STRATTON ISLAND

Another banner year for nesting terns: 1,314 pairs of Common Terns nested, the highest count since 2001, and 110 pairs of endangered Roseate Terns fledged about one chick per pair, making Stratton Island the largest Roseate Tern colony in the Gulf of Maine. Also, 99 pairs of state-endangered Least Terns (about 40% of the state population) nested, and 3 pairs of American Oystercatchers nested here and at nearby Bluff Island.

◀ MATINICUS ROCK

Thanks to ample forage fish, Arctic and Common Terns fledged an average of 0.96 and 1.38 chicks per nest respectively, the highest productivity for both species since 2002. Likewise, puffin nesting success returned to the normal range of 0.65 chicks per pair after two poor years in 2012–2013. Six geolocator puffin tags were recovered from 2013 and we deployed nine additional tags this summer to learn about winter migration and a new puffin tagging project began using GPS tags to learn about summer feeding areas.

OUTER GREEN ISLAND

Common Terns remained stable at 1,139 pairs, and an abundance of herring permitted the colony to fledge about 1600 chicks. Also found: 15 active Black Guillemot burrows, including 4 new ones.



▲ POND ISLAND N.W.R.

Despite predation from Great-horned Owls and mink, 612 pairs of Common Terns nested and produced about 800 chicks. Four pairs of Arctic Terns nested and fledged 5 chicks.



▲ EASTERN EGG ROCK

A test plot of coastal hair grass (inset), a native, low-growing plant, shows promise for creating improved tern nesting habitat. Road Scholar volunteers removed dozens of trashed lobster traps, cleared invasive mustard and re-roofed the “Egg Rock Hilton.” Excellent food permitted nesting of a new record high of 148 puffin pairs, of which 94% fledged chicks. Also, 70 Roseate Tern pairs nested and fledged 83 chicks.



▲ JENNY ISLAND

Lack of predators and abundant herring led to the highest number of nesting Common Terns since 2000. These produced about 1,900 healthy chicks. Also, 16 Roseate Tern pairs nested, more than twice as many as in 2013.



ALL ISLANDS

Weather in 2014 was usually cool with only occasional heavy rainfall; no major storms significantly affected breeding. Total precipitation of eleven inches was near the ten-year average. Likewise, air and sea surface temperatures and number of foggy days were near ten-year averages.

Predators were disruptive on Pond Island requiring removal of two Great Horned Owls and a mink. Peregrine Falcons disrupted all islands, taking tern adults and chicks, and a Snowy Owl predated terns at Stratton Island in May. The presence of resident interns reduced predation from Laughing, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls and prevented most eagles from landing.

Food was ample for terns and puffins on all islands this summer. Sand lance dominated the tern chick diets on Stratton and Pond Islands, while herring was king in Casco Bay. White hake was the primary food fed to tern and puffin chicks at Matinicus Rock, Seal Island and Egg Rock.

▼ SEAL ISLAND N.W.R.

Puffin pairs increased by about 16% from 425 pairs in 2013 to 492 pairs in 2014 and fledged about 0.75 chicks per pair. Six geolocator tags were placed on puffins this year, and five were recovered with migration data from 2013. Razorbills also increased with a high count of 75 and at least 22 breeding pairs. About 30 state-threatened Great Cormorants fledged and “Troppie,” the Red-billed Tropicbird, returned for the tenth consecutive year!



PROJECT PUFFIN OUTREACH HIGHLIGHTS

STEPHEN W. KRESS



ART AT THE PPVC

The Northern Gannet linocut below is by Sherrie York, noted wood print artist. Sherrie was the featured seabird artist at the Project Puffin Visitor Center in Rockland, Maine, last summer where she exhibited a show about seabirds in art. *The sale of this and other seabird wood cuts by Sherrie York benefits Project Puffin. See the collection at <http://projectpuffin.3dcartstores.com>*



LIVE CAMS

Puffin and osprey live cam viewing greatly exceeded previous years in this third year of Project Puffin's partnership with Explore.org. In 2014 there were nearly 8 million views by more than 2.5 million cam watchers in more than 218 countries. Cam watchers spent more than 2 million hours viewing puffins and osprey. For the first time, viewers recorded notes about the foods fed to puffin and osprey chicks. More than 8,400 visitors viewed the live cams and exhibits at Project Puffin Visitor Center in Rockland.

INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIPS

Sylvestre Montesinos (right, holding a Common Tern chick at Pond Island NWR) is from Ensenada, Mexico where he is a biologist with Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas, A.C. (GECI). He was one of three recipients of Herz International Seabird Fellowships. Sylvestre, Alejandra Fabila (also from GECI), and Facundo Franken (from Aruba) participated in the three-month Maine internship to learn seabird management techniques.



STEPHEN W. KRESS

HOG ISLAND AUDUBON CAMP

Twelve popular camp sessions for adults, teens, and families about coastal birds and nature were attended by 372 participants. Most sessions included a cruise around Egg Rock and a lecture by Stephen Kress. Participants in the fall Maine Seabird Biology and Conservation session also landed on Egg Rock to help with habitat management. The Hog Island campers unloaded crushed lobster traps and marine debris that they removed from Eastern Egg Rock (below). A new Toyota TogetherGreen Innovation Grant will help to expand island cleanups in 2015.



STEPHEN W. KRESS



NEW BOOK

Read the complete story of Project Puffin by founder Stephen Kress and *Boston Globe* columnist Derrick Z. Jackson. Learn about the challenges and vision that brought puffins back to Egg Rock. Yale University Press. 376 pages. April, 2015 www.yalebooks.com



ROBERT BURKATY

BOAT TOURS

More than 7,600 people learned about puffins and other seabirds on day-trip puffin-watching cruises. Hardy Boat Cruises from New Harbor and Cap'n Fish's Cruises from Boothbay Harbor are led by Project Puffin narrators. A total of 11 trips each week visited Egg Rock, circling the island and providing excellent views of puffins.

2013–2014 CONTRIBUTORS

Contributions listed were received from October 1, 2013 through September 30, 2014. Space restrictions prevent us from listing our 1,305 Supporter-level friends. Every donor is important to us and we sincerely regret any omissions. Your continuing participation makes our work possible.

IN MEMORY OF

Donal C. O'Brien

Katie O'Brien and family

Puffin "Farallon"

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IN MEMORY OF

Steven Walker

Our dear friend and Project Puffin's first Adopt-A-Puffin photographer, Steven Walker, of Basking Ridge, New Jersey, died suddenly on August 9, 2014. Steven volunteered during the 1998–2001 field seasons, participating as both an island Research Assistant and official photographer at Eastern Egg Rock and Matinicus Rock. Memorial gift givers include:

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STEPHEN W. KRESS

LEAVE A LEGACY FOR SEABIRDS

With the addition of the following paragraph to your will, you can leave a legacy for seabirds through the Seabird Restoration Program: Project Puffin Endowment Fund.

"I bequeath ____% of my residuary estate (or a specific sum of \$____) to the National Audubon Society, Inc., a not-for-profit environmental conservation organization with its headquarters at 225 Varick St., 7th Fl, New York, NY 10014 for the permanent endowment of its Seabird Restoration Program (also known as "Project Puffin").

ADOPT-A-PUFFIN

Puffin devotees who contribute \$100 or more (tax deductible) to the Seabird Restoration Program will receive a certificate of adoption for one Eastern Egg Rock puffin, along with a biography that includes a color picture of the bird.

**Adopt online at
projectpuffin.audubon.org/donate-project-puffin
or call us at (607) 257-7308**



BARL SCHOUTZ