

Opening the Windows of Curiosity

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Despite their short wings and chubby bodies, puffins are strong fliers.

Puffins can fly up to 55 mph (89 kph) and flap their wings up to 400 times per minute.

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PUFFINS

These diving seabirds are easily identified by their colorful beaks and round bodies. Puffin populations are declining due to warming oceans, and some places have special laws to protect them.

Using its rough tongue, a puffin can hold many fish in its beak at one time.

Nicknames

These birds got their name due to the “puffball” appearance. Their round bellies and black back also inspired their genus name, *Fratercula*, or “little friar,” because they resembled medieval friars. Puffins are also known as “sea parrots” or “clowns of the sea.”

Behavior

Puffins live in large colonies on coastal cliffs or offshore islands. They are social birds, nesting in crevices among rocks or in burrows in the soil.

Food for thought

Puffins are carnivores and eat small fish such as herring, hake and sand eels. They also eat plankton and squid. Puffins often follow whales and seals in their search for food.

Bringing up baby

Puffins are known to mate with the same partner for many years, sometimes even for life.

Puffins build their nests on the sides or tops of high cliffs on secluded islands. Both parents take turns incubating the egg for 36 to 45 days before the baby bird hatches.

Baby puffins are called **pufflings** and are cared for by both parents.

Four species

There are three species of puffins: Atlantic, horned and tufted. Some scientists also classify a close relative, the **rhinoceros auklet**, as a puffin. Puffins belong to the group of diving birds called the auks. Like all auks, puffins spend most of their lives at sea. All puffin species have predominantly black or black and white plumage, a stocky build and large beaks that get brightly colored during the breeding season. They shed the colorful outer parts of their bills after the breeding season, leaving a smaller and duller beak.

Atlantic puffin

About the size of a robin, this is the smallest puffin species. Atlantic puffins have black and white feathers and a large parrotlike beak.

Puffins spend most of their lives out at sea, resting on the waves when not swimming.



10-11 inches (26-29 cm)
11-19.4 ounces (310-550 g)



The Atlantic puffin is seen around the coastal areas of the North Atlantic Ocean in places like Greenland, Newfoundland, Iceland and Norway.

Pufflings leave the nest about 40 to 50 days after hatching.

They leave on their own, without their parents, usually at night.

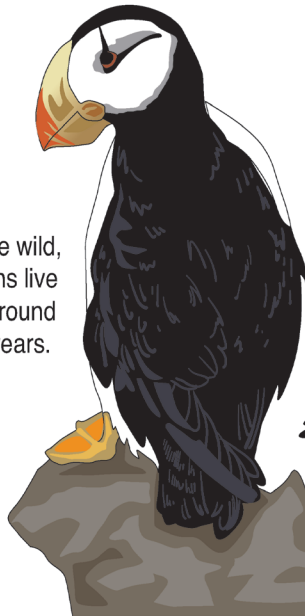
They are fully mature at about 3 years old. At this time, they return to the nesting colony where they hatched to find a mate.

Some puffin populations are in decline. The main threats are overfishing, which can lead to a shortage of food for puffins, and pollution — particularly oil spills.

Horned puffin

In the breeding season, horned puffins have white “cheeks.” During winter, the white patch becomes darker and the “horn” above each eye disappears.

In the wild, puffins live for around 20 years.



14-15 inches (36-38 cm)
17-23 ounces (483-648 g)



The horned puffin is found along the North Pacific Ocean, from Alaska south to Washington and Oregon.



Puffling

Tufted puffin

Tufted puffins spend most of their lives on the open ocean far from shore. They usually nest in burrows more than 5 feet (1.5 m) deep, dug into cliff edges.

A puffin's webbed feet help it swim and dive, while strong nails aid in climbing on rocky cliffs.



14-16 inches (35-40 cm)
1.5-2 pounds (520-1,000 g)



The tufted puffin is also found around the Pacific Ocean but is more southerly, from Japan to mid-California.

Rhinoceros auklet

Genetic testing has shown that this auk is a close relative of the puffin. It is also known as the horn-billed puffin or unicorn puffin. The distinctive “horn” on its bill is shed at the end of summer and regrows each spring.

This puffin feeds its chicks only at night.



11 inches (29 cm)
12-22 ounces (350-620 g)



The rhinoceros auklet lives along the western coast of North America and the eastern coast of Asia.

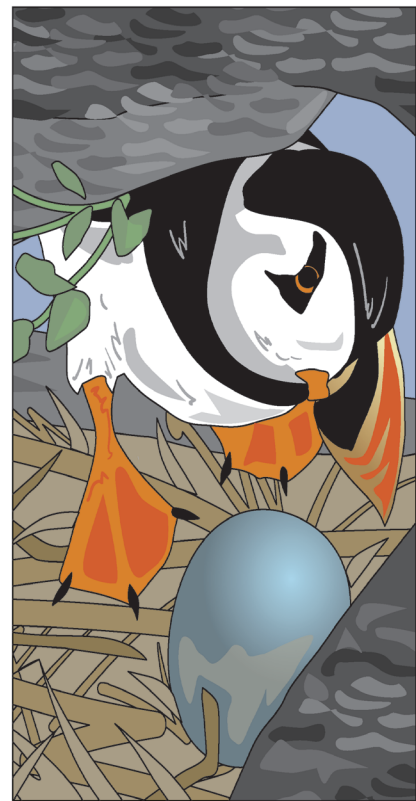
Did you know?

Research has suggested that puffins are smart. Atlantic puffins have been observed using sticks as tools.

Puffins can dive up to 150 feet (46 m) deep in the ocean to hunt for fish. They can stay underwater for up to a minute, but most dives last 20 to 30 seconds.

Puffins have a third eyelid that helps protect the eyes while underwater. Like other seabirds, they have a special gland that allows them to drink salt water.

The female puffin lays only one egg each mating season, after which each parent develops a bare spot on its belly called a **brood patch**. This patch has extra blood vessels that help keep the egg warm as the parent holds it in place with its wings.



SOURCES: World Book Encyclopedia, World Book Inc.; <https://en.wikipedia.org>; <https://www.britannica.com>; Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History; <https://www.allaboutbirds.org>; <https://www.montereybayaquarium.org>

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