Oregonian Nov. 5-1933

The Murre Multitudes

BY WILLIAM L. FINLEY.

THE warm south wind blowing its wave of white and yellow flowers across fields and hills also touches lightly the ocean with its message of spring. Off the Oregon shore schools of shad, smelt and salmon feel the urge and the coastal waters stir under the spawning instinct. The flank of every green wave is flecked with birds of seal brown, wearing white waistcoats. These are California murres. Every schooner that plies the trade pushes its way, mile after mile, through these great rafts of sea fowl. Fed fat on the fingerlings of southern waters, with one accord they now take thought of sea-girt rocks, carved by wind and wave, along the northern shores.

The murre multitudes are moving under the homing instinct, pressing north with flap of wing and patter of foot, lifting now here, now there, rising and falling in the trough of white-tipped waves. They move steadily and with purpose, as vast armies move. June awakens to find the murre tribe gathered thick on cliff, crag and pinnacle for 3000 miles of rugged coast line. The very basalt and granite are warmed by the mothering multitude.

Among our diving birds that live beyond the shore line the murre is the most populous species of the sea. One might wonder how there came to be so many of them. The reasons are sufficient. Although the mother murre cradles but one egg a setting, and a duck or grouse may lay from 10 to 15 eggs a season, the latter have decreased rapidly in numbers everywhere, but the murres still remain in something like the numbers of yesterday. They have certain traits and habits that have helped them to grow and flourish, while their cousin, the Great Auk, has lost out in the long struggle.

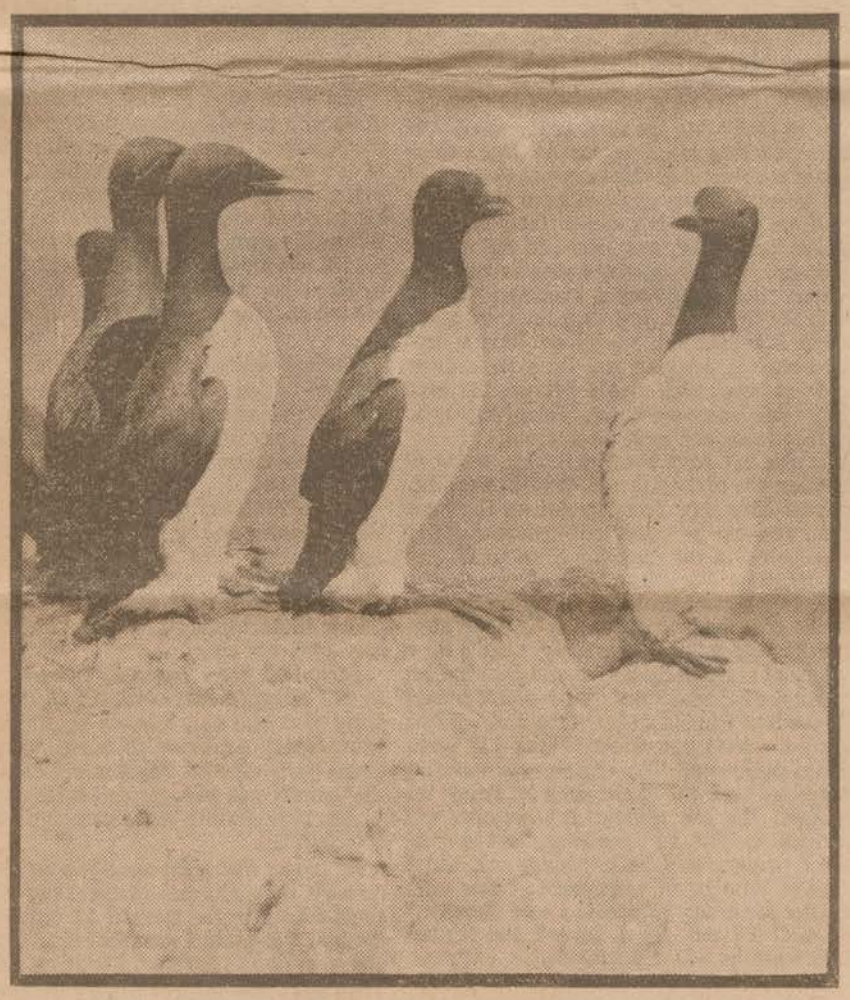
The Great Auk was the only North American bird incapable of flight. Like the murre, he lived on the sea rocks where it was handy to flop into the water and eat his fill of fish fry. All he had to do was to climb back on the rock again and sit around, not even exercising his wings, until another hungry spell was on. Did he formerly have the power of flight and lose it through disuse, or had he never attained the flying stage? It is hard to say. Time passed without his knowing that the age of man was full upon him. Then naturalists discovered that he had been pushed over the edge of the universe and was gone for good. The last records of the species were a single bird killed in 1842 off the Newfoundland coast and a pair in 1844 on some rocky islands near Iceland. All that remains of these flightless swimmers are about 70 skins, 65 eggs and some 25 more or less perfect skeletons. This is just what might happen to the penguin family of the south arctic if the far-awayness from civilization did not protect them. They walk along like foolish people with their heads in the air, without a thought that some day they may have use for wings.

The murre is not so helpless. He is built upon serviceable lines, equipped for the life he leads. Not graceful in flight, like the gull, he cannot poise, turn quickly, drop or rise with ease, but he pushes forward on rapid wings, swift of purpose and bent upon business. He rises from the sea with difficulty, splashing along the surface to get a start. His legs and webbed feet are at the very end of his body, so he walks quite as easily as a man would with his feet tied, but his feet are where they are the most useful as propellers. He needs them more for water than for walking on land. He flies below the surface more expertly than he does above, using his wings like the side flippers of a seal. A stiff tail as a rudder helps him turn and twist quickly in the chase for fry.

Fortunately the flavor of murre meat has not tempted sportsmen as has the taste of our river and sea ducks, yet in many places fishermen and other sea folk are not unmindful of the thousands of murre eggs that lie thick on the sea rocks, for these, when fresh, are fit for food.

On the California coast the product of the murre was commercialized for many years. As early as 1850 the Farallone Egg company was organized to collect eggs and ship them into the San Francisco market. It was estimated that 25,000 dozen eggs a year were taken from the Farallones up to 1873; after that an average of about 15,000 dozen were shipped annually, but by 1897 that number had decreased to 7645 dozen, showing that traffic was more than even the murre numbers could bear. The following year the government prohibited the taking of eggs. Off the California coast was the only place in the west where murres were robbed to such an extent. In many places the murre multitudes have been undisturbed, and it is like going back 50,000 years into the past to visit some of the great murre loomeries, or colonies, along the shores of the Pacific, for there is not the least sign of civilization.

The murre is a tenement dweller because he prefers it. He likes the jostle and feel of the mob. Someone has said he would die of lonesomeness if separated from the flock. A space of but a few inches is all he needs for a home. He makes no nest. When he sits down he looks as if he were standing up. No social settlement worker could visit a big murre colony without complaining of the living conditions. Yet for all this Mother Nature seems to have made abundant provision for her murre children.



THE TWELVE APOSTLES.

California murres or guillemots are the most abundant birds nesting on the sea cliffs from California to Alaska. They make no nest, but lay a pear-shaped egg as large as the egg of the domestic turkey. Where so many birds and eggs are scattered along the ledges, the top-shaped appearance of the egg often prevents it from rolling over the edge. Instead of rolling, it swings around on its own axis and stops. A murre looks as if he does his sitting standing up.—Photograph by William L. Finley and H. T. Bohlman.