

AT POINT CABRILLO LIGHT STATION: PIGEON GUILLEMOT

Donald Shephard



Pigeon Guillemot photos courtesy of Tom Grey

Lately my wife and I have taken our daily walk from the farmhouse at the top of Point Cabrillo Light Station to the lighthouse. There is a narrow gulley cut into the cliffs to the north of the lighthouse that threatens to ensile the building. The sight of Pigeon Guillemots in that gulley provides one of the harbingers of spring.

The first time I sailed on our pelagic trip, the monotone black, white and gray colors of the sea birds struck me. What a contrast Pigeon Guillemots display. True, in winter, the head and upperparts lighten slightly, giving them a dusky, mottled effect; their white

under parts barred with buff on the flanks and dusky wing linings. As adults, the sexes look alike and immature guillemots have a mottled wing patch. True too, in breeding plumage, a large white wing patch interrupts two black stripes and the body turns a dull black. But, every time I see Pigeon Guillemots the brilliant red, I would say crimson, of their legs, feet and beak lining, takes my breath away. This flash of color probably plays a role in courtship when their displays include mutual circling, bill touching, and rapid zigzagging chases on the water, while calling and diving after each other.

The Pigeon Guillemot often scales vertical rock faces by vigorous flapping of its wings combined with the use of the sharp claws on its webbed feet. Unlike most alcids, Pigeon Guillemots use their feet for steering as well as their wings for propulsion underwater, where they forage by searching the bottom, diving up to 150 feet. They will also swim on the surface with their heads submerged. You may see them sit on rocks with fish held crosswise between their bills until they swallow them. They predominantly eat small fish and other aquatic animals, including crabs, shrimp, marine worms, and mollusks.

The nesting practices of Pigeon Guillemots vary from those of other alcids. They regularly lay two eggs, rather than one, and, while they will nest in loose colonies, they also nest singly. Birds do not breed until age 3-5 years. The male chooses the site in a crevice or cave, among boulders, under driftwood, or in a man-made structure such as a wharf or pipe. The pair may excavate their own nest, or use the abandoned burrow of another animal, which they reuse from year to year. These nests are hard to detect and once the young ones fledge Pigeon Guillemots leave the area.

(continued)

At Point Cabrillo Light Station: Pigeon Guillemot (continued)



Juvenile Pigeon Guillemot.

north as far as British Columbia, but northernmost Alaska breeding birds head south to the edge of the pack ice. Guillemots in the central range area of British Columbia and Oregon may be permanent residents.

Take a walk down to the cliff face north of the lighthouse and you may see a small group of Pigeon Guillemots with their startlingly red feet, legs and mouths. You may not see enough to warrant the use of their collective noun, but if you do, you should know you have seen a loomery of guillemots.

A Correction

Toby Tobkin sent me a charming note explaining that the Red-necked Phalarope described in my last month's Whistling Swan article as "the smallest of our pelagic birds" should be described as "one of the smallest of our pelagic birds". The Least Auklet is shorter and has less wingspan. She cites Sibley's Guide to Birds.

Least Auklet L 6.25" WS 12" WT 85g

Red-necked Phalarope L 7.75" WS 15" WT 35g

Thanks Toby

They scrape a shallow nest in a pile of soil, pebbles, or shell scraps. Both parents incubate the eggs for about four weeks and they both feed the young until they leave the nest at about 4-6 weeks old. Because they feed their chicks constantly throughout the day, the chicks fledge faster than equivalent sized auks who only feed at night. After 30 to 54 days, under cover of darkness, the young scramble or flutter down to the water, now able to dive and swim. It takes them another few weeks to achieve full flight capacity.

In winter, many California birds move

Note the red mouth and the black wedge within the white wing patch.

