

General Field Notes

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First Record of Common Murre in North Carolina

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On the afternoon of 2 February 2001 I noticed a dark bird swimming on the ocean off the shore of Cape Hatteras Point, Dare County, North Carolina. As the bird came into view through my binoculars, it dove with wings partially extended. Recognizing that it was an alcid, I continued to watch, hoping to see the bird as it reappeared on the surface. Over the next five minutes the bird surfaced several times, only to dive within moments. The short amount of time on the surface and the deep waves prevented a clear view. The bird was feeding with an actively foraging flock of Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*) 50 to 60 meters offshore. The bird was dark above and approximately 25% longer than the accompanying Bonaparte's Gulls.

At this time, approximately 3:45 pm, I excitedly flagged down Patricia and Russ Tyndall, who were also birding at Cape Hatteras. With three sets of binoculars and scopes on the bird we were able to determine that the bird was a Common Murre (*Uria aalge*) in basic plumage.

The bird had a dark crown, nape, back of neck, back, and wings. The underparts were white from the throat to the vent. The sides of the face were white behind and below the eye with a long, dark post-ocular stripe. The stripe extended almost as far back from the eye as the distance from the eye to tip of the bill. The bill was long, solid back, relatively thin and tapered to a point. The secondaries were faintly tipped in white.

As the afternoon progressed the bird began to dive less frequently and became much easier to view through spotting scopes. It continued to associate with the Bonaparte's Gulls, which allowed us to keep track of the bird whenever



Figure 1. Common Murre at Cape Hatteras Point. Photo by Patricia Tyndall, February 2, 2001.

it dove and was not visible. At this time the bird was 150 to 200 meters east of the point and 40 to 50 meters offshore at its closest point to the shore. Other birders in the area were contacted and began to show up in the area at around 4:30 pm. In addition to the Tyndalls and me, approximately seven other people were able to see the bird Friday afternoon. By dusk the bird had moved approximately 100 meters farther to the east than when it was first spotted. In addition to the murre and Bonaparte's Gulls, a Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) foraged with the flock for a few moments.

The next day, 3 February, the murre was seen briefly in the morning and later in the afternoon. From approximately 4:30 to 5:00 pm the bird was seen by numerous birders aboard a Brian Patteson pelagic trip. The morning sightings were in the same general area as the 2 February sightings, but the afternoon sightings were out farther from shore. The bird was not seen on 4 February despite active searching all day and was apparently not seen again.

The bird was determined to be a Common Murre primarily due to the long, post ocular eyestripe, narrow, tapered bill, and size relative to the Bonaparte's Gulls. The Thick-billed Murre (*Uria lomvia*) in basic plumage is most similar to the Common Murre but has a completely dark face, thicker bill base, and often a white line on the lower edge of the upper mandible (Harrison 1983).

Thick-billed Murre has been documented 9-10 times in North Carolina coastal waters from 9 December to 28 February (R. Davis, pers. comm.; Lee 1995).

Despite the moniker 'Common,' the Common Murre is the rarer of the two murre species along the east coast of the United States. Thick-billed Murre is the "expected" murre as one goes south along the coast and has been recorded as far south as Florida (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Hybrids between Common and Thick-billed Murre have been documented and exhibit characteristics of both species (Gaston and Hipfner 2000). However, the bird observed on 2-3 February is probably not a hybrid because it did not exhibit any characteristics of Thick-billed Murre. Common Murres typically winter at sea but, as with other alcids, are occasionally seen from shore.

The Razorbill (*Alca torda*) is the most frequently observed alcid in North Carolina waters but has a thicker bill and neck in basic plumage than the Common Murre and has a predominantly dark face. Razorbills have been recorded in North Carolina primarily from mid-November through mid-February. Numerous birds are often seen on winter pelagic trips off the coast of North Carolina.

The age of the North Carolina bird may not be determinable due to confusion among informational sources. Harrison (1983) indicates that first winter birds have mostly dark ear-coverts and do not have post-ocular eyestripes, and Gaston and Jones (1998) indicate that first-winter birds have the white streak behind the eye obscured. However, Cramp (1985) and Svensson *et al.*, (1999) indicate that first winter birds have post-ocular eyestripes as with adults. Svensson *et al.* (1999) and Gaston and Jones (1998) also note that adult northern European Common Murres molt into breeding plumage (November-February) earlier than first-winter birds, but Gaston and Jones (1998) indicate that adult birds may not molt until March in the northwestern Atlantic (Newfoundland). Unfortunately, the presence of basic plumage is not useful in determining the age of the North Carolina bird due to overlap in molting times among adult and first winter birds. All sources agree that first-winter birds have shorter bills than adult birds (Cramp 1985; Gaston and Jones, 1998; Harrison, 1983; Svensson *et al.*, 1999).

Five subspecies of Common Murre have been described, but only one subspecies is considered to be separable at sea, *U. a. albionis* of the northeast Atlantic (Harrison 1983). While the North Carolina bird was probably *U. a. aalge*, the only subspecies to breed in the northwest Atlantic, we were not able to determine the subspecies of the bird.

This report and a photograph by Patricia Tyndall were submitted to the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. The Committee has accepted the photo and description, placing the species on the Official List (North Carolina Bird Records Committee 2002). This sighting represents the last alcid species that regularly breeds on the Atlantic North American coast to be documented in North Carolina (Davis 1999; Davis and Carter 1996; Galizio *et al.* 1998; LeGrand and Dias 1995; Potter *et al.* 1980).

The Common Murre has been reported as far south as Florida, where it is listed as hypothetical (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). South Carolina's only

Common Murre record was noted on 17 January 1995 (South Carolina Bird Records Committee 1996). Even as far north as New Jersey the Common Murre is listed as an 'extremely rare ... winter visitant along the coast and offshore,' according to Leck (1984). Virginia has one accepted record, from 13 February 1994 (C. Friend, pers. comm.). Maryland's first record occurred on 12 March 1994, and the state has had at least three accepted records since then (P. Davis, pers. comm.).

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