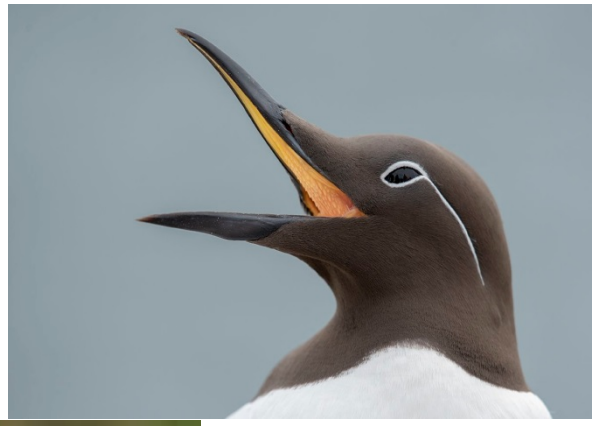
AUKS



By Silas Brown

Auk Ambassador

Ullapool Sea Savers

An introduction to Auks

Auks, not to be confused with orcs (fictional monsters) or orcas (marine mammals), are a family of seabirds that include guillemots and puffins. Their colour scheme is generally black on top with a white belly. Their wings are short and narrow and they have to fly with rapid wing-beats because their wings are so small. But once upon a time there was one called the Great Auk that couldn't fly at all and sadly went extinct in the 19th Century.

Auks have barrel-shaped bodies with legs far back which makes it hard to walk. They mostly live in the sea (the word for this is 'pelagic') and only come on to land to breed. They often breed around cliffs and some breed in large colonies. They dive for fish in very deep water and most like eating sand-eels.

There are twenty-three species of Auk in all, but only a few are found in the north-west coast of Scotland where the Sea Savers are based. The latter are listed below with their Latin names.

- Black guillemot (*Cepphus grille*)
- Common guillemot (*Uria aalge*)
- Puffin (*Fratercula artica*)
- Razorbill (*Alca torda*)
- Little auk (*Alle alle*)

This factfile will have a page for each type and the pages will be coloured according to their conservation status. Red is the most endangered and green is the least.

At the bottom of each page, there is a link a recording of each bird's call.

Black Guillemot

Gaelic name: *Gearra-glas*

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Also known as a tystie, the black guillemot isn't as big as a common guillemot and is easily distinguishable by its black feathers and white spot on the wing. Plus it has cute red legs, whereas the common guillemot has grey legs (see figure 1).

Its winter plumage, however, is quite the opposite. It is very white and has a dappled grey pattern on its back (see figure 2). This might be why the Gaelic for it is 'gearra-glas'. Glas means grey.

Also unlike its common cousin, it doesn't live in colonies but in small groups or even on their own. They lay their eggs in crevices in cliffs and big rocks (see figure 3).

Length: 32–38cm

Wingspan: 49–58cm

Lays: 1–2 eggs a year

Food: fish, fish, fish!

[Link to sound recordings.]

Common Guillemot

Gaelic name: *Eun-dubh-an-sgadan*

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

[Link to sound recordings.]

The common guillemot is similar to the black guillemot in shape but many things set them apart. For example, their colouring is different and their feet are grey. They have spectacle-like markings around their eyes (see figure 4). The juvenile has the same colour-scheme but is fluffier (see figure 5).

They live in large colonies (see figure 6) and they live for over twice as many years, typically twenty-three but the maximum age is forty!

Guillemots build their nests on ledges so narrow that the eggs have to be pear-shaped so they don't fall off! The chicks have proportionally large feet. When fledging, they jump off the cliff and meet their daddy at the bottom.

Length: 38–46cm

Wingspan: 61–73cm

Lays: 1 egg a year

Food: fish

R

Gaelic name: *Coltraiche*

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Razorbills are beautiful birds with a black body and white belly like most auks. What really sets them apart is their beaks. They are black and blunt with white streaks (see figure 7).

It lives on cliffs and lays one egg a year. (see figure 8.) they live in small colonies, sometimes amongst other auks.

Like guillemots, when the chick is ready to fledge, they jump of their rock or cliff and meet with their father in the sea.

Length: 38–43cm

Wingspan: 60–69cm

Lays: 1 egg a year

Food: fish and invertebrates (spineless animals). (see figure 9).

Link to sound recordings

Puffin

Gaelic name: *Buthaid*

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Also known as the Atlantic puffin, (as opposed to the tufted puffin.) the puffin is probably the most famous auk and is known throughout the world. The puffin has a white belly, a white face, and has a beautiful coloured beak. It lives in burrows on and around cliffs (see figure 10.). The chicks stay in the burrows until they are ready to fledge. Multiple burrows are built together in colonies (see figure 11).

Puffins have colourful beaks which are serrated to help them hold dozens of sand eels at one time (see figure 12). The highest amount of sand eels held in a puffin's beak is 83!

Length: 28–34 cm

Wingspan: 49–58 cm

Lays: 1 egg a year

Food: sand eel

Link to sound recordings

Little Auk

Gaelic name: *Colcach-bheag*

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

[Link to sound recordings.]

Also known as a dovekie, the little auk lives up to its name in all respects. It's little, about as big as a starling, and it's an auk. It has the stereotypical auk colouring (see figure 13.) but there is a big difference between it and other auks in the local area. It lives and breeds in big colonies (see figure 14) the arctic and comes to Britain in the autumn and winter.

Because of their small size, they are often blown off course and have been found far inland around Britain. They beat their wings very fast in order to keep in the sky and make a whirring sound.

As you can see from the colour of the slides, the little auk is the least endangered out of all of the auks in this area. They are also the hardest to spot because there are fewer of them around Britain.

Length: 19–21cm

Wingspan: 34–38cm

Lays: 1 egg a year.

Food: plankton

Sources

Francis, I. and Cook, M., eds. (2011) *The Breeding Birds of north-East Scotland.* Scottish Ornithologists' Club. Aberdeen.

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Svensson, L. (2009) *Collins Bird Guide, 2nd edn.* London: Harper Collins.

Tictchmarsh, A. (2007) *The Nature of Britain: A Celebration of Our Landscape and Wildlife.* BBC Books.

Xeno-canto: sharing bird sounds from around the world Available at: https://www.xeno-canto.org/.

R.I.P

Please bear in mind that there was once a beautiful bird called the Great Auk, that sadly departed from this world in the 1840s.