



WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller

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The Possibility of Puffins

I like to entice my friends to make the trek out to West Marin for ill-advised hikes, foolish excursions, all-day death marches and random exploring. The theme of these jaunts is usually chasing after some mythical wildlife species and my favorite bait for coastal hikes is the dubious possibility of seeing puffins from shore. They're out there in the fog and sea somewhere, those cute little cartoon birds with candy-corn beaks. Puffins are without a doubt near the top of anyone's adorable avifauna list.

Three of the four puffin species can be spotted off of the Marin coast: the **horned puffin** (*Fratercula corniculata*), **tufted puffin** (*Fratercula cirrhata*) and **rhinoceros auklet** (*Cerorhinca monocerata*). Named for the ridiculous way they puff their chests out when walking on land, puffins must run across the surface of the water or dive off cliffs in order to get airborne. Although terrestrially amusing, puffins are aerially and aquatically impressive, flying up to 55 mph by flapping their wings an amazing 400 beats per minute and diving under water for up to a minute and over 100 feet deep.

Puffins and auklets are members of the auk family of birds. Puffins are pelagic, meaning they live mostly on the open sea. In the summer puffins head in from the ocean to mate and breed in large colonies on sea cliffs or rocky islets. Puffin pairs mate for life. Puffins like to feast on small fish, squid and krill and can carry more than one fish in their mouth at a time, which is pretty dang cute. The colorful horned puffins resemble the Atlantic puffin, their East Coast counterparts. They have a white face and cheeks with a small black "horn" above their eyes and a large, triangular orange bill with a red tip, earning them the nickname of "sea parrot."

About 1.2 million horned puffins breed in the North Pacific and winter southward at sea. Horned puffins have been sighted from Chimney Rock at Point Reyes.

The large tufted puffins are colorful and bizarre. Breeding adults sport long pimped-out yellow feather tufts behind each eye, contrasting nicely with their huge orange bills, white faces and glossy black bodies. The southernmost permanent tufted puffin breeding colony is at the Farallones. Former colonies at Point Reyes and Bird Rock are long gone. More tufted puffins are here in winter than summer, although they are mostly seen off Point Reyes from mid-April through July.

Although not as gaudy, rhinoceros auklets are still puffins. The males go all Pinocchio during breeding season, growing a pale knob reminiscent of a rhinoceros horn on their upper bills. The rhinos nest in burrows they dig deep underground into soft soils. Their numbers in are increasing in California. They have re-colonized the Farallones and also breed on Año Nuevo Island. Off Point Reyes, the greatest numbers of squawkllets are seen mid-October through April – but check the water below the headlands for local breeders in May and June. Rhinauklets have been sighted from shore off Bodega Head, Bird Rock at Tomales Point, Chimney Rock at Point Reyes, and the Cliffhouse in San Francisco!

The best local places to observe puffins and auklets are the offshore National Marine Sanctuaries in the Gulf of the Farallones (www.farallones.org) or off Cordell Bank (<http://cordellbank.noaa.gov/>), so if you really want to see puffins, book a pelagic bird or whale watching trip.

***West Marin Wild* is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Write to Box 111, Bolinas.**