



WEST MARIN WILD

By Jeff Miller

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The Bolinas Penguin

We hit Bolinas beach recently for some much-needed R and R. The plan was to lie on the beach and pretty much do nothing except play cribbage, catch up on sleep and watch the terns and pelicans fishing. However, there on the beach was a small seabird, looking weak, dazed and out of place. As we approached, a couple showed us several dozen yards of fishing line they had just untangled from around the bird.

I realized this was a Common Murre (*Uria aalge*), which spends most of its lifetime on the open sea, usually only venturing ashore to breed on rocky cliffs or islands. The fact that it was hanging out with the sunbathers on Bo beach meant it was sick or injured. Several passers by remarked "hey, look at the penguin!" Now the common murre is a smart little bird that does have the back and white tuxedo coloring, chunky build, and impeccable posture reminiscent of a penguin. But it is an alcid, the family of birds including puffins and auks, not related to penguins.

Murres are similar to penguins in their feeding behavior – both are good swimmers and "fly" underwater in pursuit of prey, mainly small schooling fish. Both are clumsy on land, but unlike penguins, murres are able to fly, flapping their stubby little wings quite rapidly to get airborne.

The disoriented murre was shivering, and getting battered by incoming waves, weak and cold from its entanglement ordeal. After a meathead surfer deliberately stepped right over it and a dog approached menacingly, we decided it was time to rescue "Demurre" and take it somewhere for recovery. We called WildCare (www.wildcarebayarea.org), an amazing volunteer organization with a wildlife rehab hospital and education center in San Rafael, with the facilities to treat the murre if we brought it in.

We then called the Marin Humane Society (www.marinhumanesociety.org), which sent an officer to meet us in S tinson Beach to transport the bird. WildCare later transferred Demurre to the International Bird Rescue Research Center (www.ibrrc.org), a rescue clinic in Fairfield specializing in seabirds that also treats avian oil spill victims. A phone call this week revealed that Demurre is recovering nicely and swimming fat and happy around the rehab pools. We volunteered to pick the little Bo penguin up and release him at Duxbury Reef when he is fully recovered.

Saving one bird may not make much of a difference, but it felt good to know that this murre survived. If you do find a sick or injured bird, keep dogs & people away. Never feed injured or sick birds, or for that matter any wildlife. Call WildCare at (415) 300-6359 or the Humane Society at (415) 883-4621. For marine mammals call the Marine Mammal Center at (415) 289-7325. I am going to post these contact numbers at the entrances to Bo beach.

There are more threats to murres than fishing line entanglement - such as pollution, oil spills, and shifts in offshore currents and krill food resources due to global warming (aka climate chaos). Other alcids at the Farallon Islands, such as Cassin's Auklet, have been abandoning their nests in recent years and many chicks are weak and have died of starvation. You can help by supporting bird research and conservation groups such as the Point Reyes Bird Observatory (www.prbo.org). Do what you can to lower your carbon footprint and get involved with local groups working to reverse global warming. I'll put in a shameless plug here for the Center for Biological Diversity's climate program (www.biologicaldiversity.org).

West Marin Wild is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Contact me at PO Box 111, Bolinas.