

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



Common Murre

Uria aalge

Region:

Alaska

Area affected:

Prince William Sound

Climatic change:

Warming oceans

Impact:

Starvation due to food web changes

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

Common murres are widespread seabirds, with populations occurring along the north Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the United States and in northern Europe and northeastern Asia. Related to puffins and auks, they are the size of a small duck, with a large, pointed bill, dark gray-brown upperparts and white below. They nest in dense colonies on sea cliffs, laying their eggs directly on rocky ledges. The eggs have two special adaptations to these crowded, high-elevation conditions: They are elongated almost to a point on one end to limit rolling if jostled and have shells with highly variable speckled patterns that help parents identify their own eggs. Murres are more agile underwater than in flight, using their wings to “swim” as they dive to about 100 feet deep to feed on schools of small fish like herring, cod and capelin.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

In late 2015, a biologist in Whittier, Alaska, made a grim discovery: nearly 8,000 dead birds washed up on the beach that borders the Chugach National Forest, a die-off described as “unprecedented” for a single location. **By late January 2016, over 22,000 dead murres—more than were killed in the Exxon Valdez disaster—had been found in the Prince William Sound area.** The dead birds—and the birds still living—showed signs of starvation, but no evidence of disease or parasites. Researchers suspect that a combination of climate change and El Niño conditions were to blame. The schools of small fish that the murres depend on prefer cold water, and the waters of the Gulf of Alaska were more than 5 degrees warmer than normal for months on end in 2014 and 2015. No one is certain whether the prey fish populations are also declining or have moved to cooler waters out of reach of the birds. The warm waters may also have triggered harmful algal blooms that exposed the birds to deadly toxins.

References

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. Common Murre (species profile). https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Common_Murre/lifehistory

Rosen, Y. 2016. Scientists think Gulf of Alaska seabird die-off is biggest ever recorded. *Alaska Dispatch*. January 29. <http://www.adn.com/science/article/murre-die-believed-be-biggest-record-and-related-warm-waters/2016/01/29/>



DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

1130 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036-4604

For more information on other wildlife affected by climate change, visit our website at www.defenders.org/climatechange