

Murre than we'd bargained for.

by Jan Parrott-Holden
Vancouver, Washington

It began last summer at the beach. My husband, Steve and I had gone to the Oregon coast in pursuit of tranquility and a respite from our enjoyable, yet arduous job of caring for sixty-plus birds. We hadn't planned a schedule. We hadn't wanted anything to do but walk along the sand, listen to the ocean's roar and pick up a few shells. We picked up our shells, most of them broken. And we picked up a seabird, exhausted, starving and floundering clumsily in the wet sand. Though we didn't realize it at the time, we had discovered a murre, the most common seabird to the Pacific Coast. (Funny, I'd always thought that title belonged to the ubiquitous seagull.)

Like most inland dwellers, Steve and I didn't know much about pelagic birds. Had we suspected that we might one day be "foster parents" to one, I'm certain we would have read something about their habits. But now there was no time. Here was a bird which must not be left to fend for itself. A bird which was about to be attacked by a group of gulls. (One often hears of similar incidents in the avian world. This type of behavior is quite common, and very likely the reason that

sick or injured birds try to "mask" their vulnerability.)

By the time the gulls had begun an attack, a group of curious beachcombers had gathered, like us, to see if there was anything they could do. There was a debate as to what type of bird was under assault, with one woman swearing that it was a young gull, another stating that it was a small duck. The bird had webbed feet, true. But the bill was all wrong. It was slate-gray, elongated and pointed at the end. A perfect device for spearing fish. It didn't possess the hook which is a distinct feature of the gull's bill. And the coloring was incorrect. This bird was a combination of dark brown, black and white. He had dark eyes and a black "tear" running from the corner of each eye, extending to the white cheeks. His legs and feet were a smokey brown and his black wings were tipped with white. Not a pretty bird exactly, but beauty was not the consideration now.

By the time the gulls had fled, most of the curious onlookers had departed as well. Obviously there were no legitimate bird lovers among the gathering.

Steve gently picked up the bird and I wrapped it in my "I Love Oregon" sweatshirt. Immediately he let out a shrill cry and started to peck frantically at the drawstring on my sweatshirt's hood. It didn't require a degree to figure out that this little guy was hungry.

Now it didn't really matter that we had not identified the bird as a murre. The important thing was that this was a seabird, a fish-eater, and it needed fish. The best thing we could provide immediately was something from the grocer's meat counter. While Steve baby sat our charge in the Safeway parking lot, I went "fishing." A few minutes later I emerged with a package of Dover sole and another package of uncooked shrimp. I was wondering if it was going to be a chore getting a wild bird to take the fish from a human's hands. Would we have to make some kind of a fish milkshake and syringe the concoction into the creature? My worries were dispelled immediately as the youngster yanked thin strips of fish from my fingertips. If this orphan felt fear, it was overpowered by a greater need for survival.

With a bird underwing, Steve and I extended our vacation one more evening and smuggled the bird up to our motel room. The bathtub became a wading pool, a cardboard box, lined with sand, served as a bed. It all seemed a little ridiculous. But this bird seemed right at home.

The next morning, after another meal of sole fillets and shrimp, Steve and I browsed the local library's bird section. An illustrated volume on seabirds revealed that we had crossed paths with a common murre.

Common murres live in colonies which they establish on the rocky headlands just out to sea. According to our research, murre pairs use no nesting materials but deposit a single, speckled egg on the bare crags. It is their one and only chance at parenthood for the breeding season. Young murres generally emerge from the egg in June and are cared for by their parents until late August. Often times the male will stay with the youngster for a period of time in order to teach it to fish. Tragically, however, separation often takes place or abandonment by a neglectful parent. This is the reason that beachcombers can often find great numbers of young murres lying dead within a short stretch of beach. More often than not, a diminishing food source coupled with the ineptitude of the fledgling leads to enormous seasonal losses of the breed.

Avian Research Grants

Research grants are awarded annually by the American Federation of Aviculture to qualified applicants. Areas of interest include: avian nutrition, infectious and non-infectious diseases, disease control techniques and vaccination, diagnostic procedures, incubation and artificial insemination techniques, field studies and general avicultural techniques. Proposals may also be submitted for consideration by the AFA Conservation Committee.

All proposals will be reviewed by committee members and consultants knowledgeable in the field and must be scientifically sound, specific and feasible. Preference in awarding grants will be given to members of AFA.

A brief letter of intent should

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The bird we had befriended was still weak that afternoon as we packed our belongings into the car. It could neither stand upright (a characteristic of the breed), nor could it walk without teetering. It could only flop about, using its undeveloped wings like pontoons on a catamaran to provide balance.

Naturally, Steve and I knew that this murre's future was meant to be carved out in a coastal area. Yet we could not bring it upon ourselves to return the youngster to the beach until it had gained enough maturity and strength to have a better than average chance at survival. The decision was made to bring the bird back with us and consult with a rehaber friend concerning its care prior to release. Being an optimist, I couldn't imagine a seabird being much different than a duck, a pigeon or any number of avian specimens we had housed throughout our birding careers. I was about to learn differently.

For starters, I learned the true significance of the old saying "a fish out of water." Only in this case we had a murre out of water and he wasn't at all happy about it. The air inland is nothing like the sea air. Even on cooler days, our murre would hold his mouth open and become stressed if he wasn't provided with water in which to swim. Murres, like other members of the family "Alcidae," are expert swimmers and divers. In captivity they cannot be expected to drink their water from a bowl like a caged bird. They are used to obtaining necessary moisture while swimming. Thus, we purchased a kiddies' wading pool and kept the water clean.

Every day I found myself growing more and more attached to this comical little bird. He seemed almost too tame to be a wild bird, eating willingly from our fingers, moving close to either Steve or I when we had him out waddling in the grass. Though I knew he must avoid imprinting, it seemed increasingly more difficult to look at our orphan as anything less than a pet.

During the evening we kept him housed indoors in an 8 x 4 x 6 foot walk-in cage. Hardly the type of environment for a bird who is used to large rocks, pilings and long stretches of beach. Still, it kept him safe from predators, and it was easily cleaned — an important consideration considering the "fishy" smell of the bird's excrement.

Every few days I would weigh the murre, record his gain and list the amount of fish he had consumed. By now we had tossed aside using pack-

aged fish from the grocers. Not only was it too pricey but it lacked all the necessary nutrients needed by a seabird for proper development. (There are special benefits obtained from the fish's head, bones, tail, and even entrails.) Because we fed mostly smelt and herring, which we purchased frozen from a bait shop, it was necessary to supplement the diet with some vitamins and minerals frequently lost during the freezing process. Most notably we included a quarter of a 250 milligram tablet of B-1 hidden in a chunk of smelt. We also included a few drops of avian vitamins to the bird's daily regimen. Finally, in order to provide the training that this bird's parents neglected, we purchased dozens of feeder goldfish so that our murre could do some of his own "fishing." I'm afraid this last project was more challenging than we'd anticipated. Lazy and trusting, our murre had to be very hungry before he'd fend for himself. When he did, however, it was a sight to behold! I'd thought only seals could glide through the water like that!

After three weeks, we felt it was time to relinquish our bird once again to the wild. I called Dan Deuel, a good friend and experienced coastal rehaber to arrange for a release date. Plans were made. But these plans, too, were not to be carried out as hoped. Just three days before our scheduled trip to Bandon, Steve and I noticed a small swelling on the side of the bird's neck. Our first thought was that the protrusion was caused by a bee sting since yellow-jackets were frequently seen around the bird's wading pool where the fresh fish was a constant lure. But this suspicion was thrown aside when the lump grew larger, extending from the esophagus around to the right shoulder. The lump felt solid to the touch and was definitely not caused by a sting. By now we realized that it was time for an expert's opinion. We made an appointment with a local vet, one who was certified to handle wildlife and who had knowledge concerning the habits of seabirds.

After an initial exam, it was concluded that the bird must be anesthetized and the lump opened. What was found still boggles the mind. It was a pocket of fish, fish that had already begun to decompose. The smell was unforgettable. Neither Steve nor I could imagine eating seafood again.

After removing the fish and stitching up the cut, our vet suggested we use Claforan, a strong, broad-spectrum antibiotic, to diminish chances of

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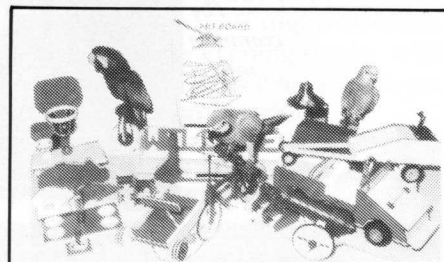
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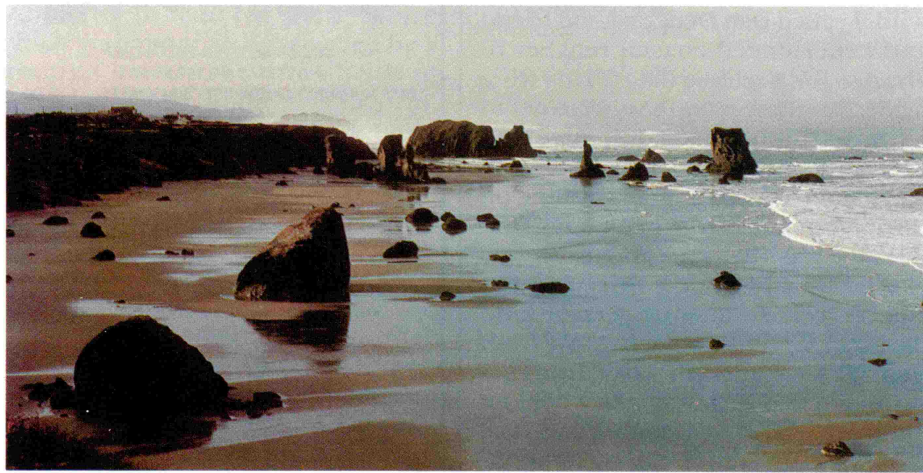
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The common murre.



Large, offshore rocks serve as nesting areas for murres and other pelagic birds.



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infection. He also assured us that despite our rigorous efforts on behalf of the orphaned murre, it was a slim chance that we would be able to release the bird down the road. Definitely we realized that the bird was not normal. But even after consulting with experts from the International Bird Rescue and Research Center in Berkeley, California, we were just as perplexed about what had actually started the downhill slide of a seemingly healthy specimen.

After that, there were good days and bad. We had maintained our first seabird for some six weeks. But the time was overdue for placing the creature with a rehaber. In a sense, we had finally come to terms with the fact that there was nothing more we could do.

It was a five hour drive to Bandon, Oregon and the Southcoast Bird Rehabilitation Center run by Dan Deuel. For Steve and I it was a quiet, solemn, reminiscent trip. For our murre it was simply another day. I watched him as he preened contentedly in the back seat. He looked good. The feathers had a lustre. His appetite was fine. But he wasn't taking on weight. Though he still enjoyed water, his equilibrium appeared to be gone. Instead of swimming normally he would paddle a bit then roll over to one side with little ability to right himself.

We said "goodbye" to him that evening, feeling a little guilty that we had left Dan with a bird that was clearly on the downhill slide. Our guilt was not assuaged by the fact that Southcoast Bird Rehabilitation Center had "inherited" four more of the breed that same day, carried in by a host of well-meaning beachcombers.

Two weeks after our return home I received a phone call. I can still remember, it was ten a.m. exactly. The voice on the other end was familiar, the message somber. Dan had made the kind of decision all rehabers must make in their type of business. Our murre had not shown improvement and prospects for survival were bleak. Dan had put him down. I wasn't really surprised, though I had hoped that things might work out differently.

It's unlikely that Steve and I shall forget our small, firsthand experience with a common murre. It may well be these little encounters which lead cage-bird people to look more outward to the avian world around them. And to see that the living bird they hold in their hands, sees what they see, breathes the air they breathe and struggles, as they struggle — to survive. ●