

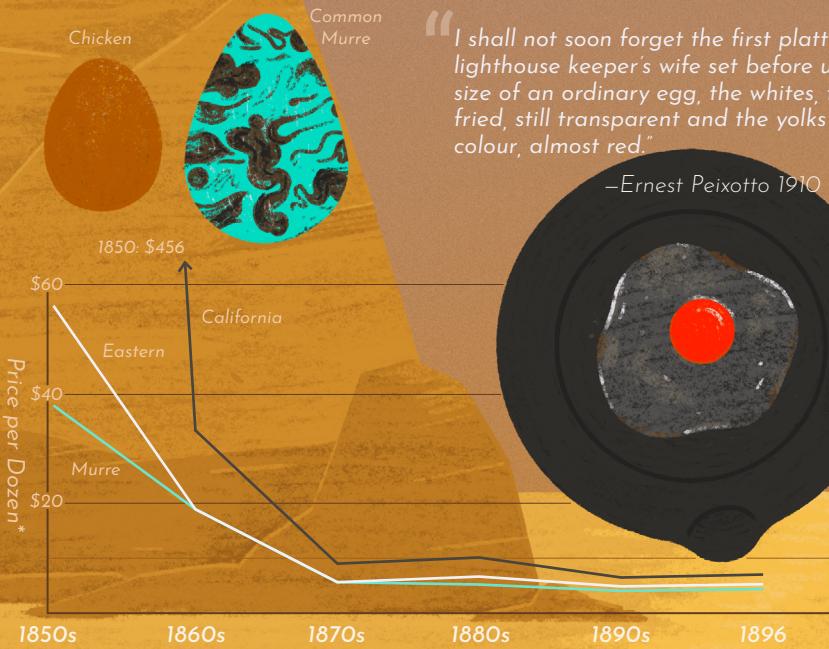
# Murre-der for Eggs:

Conflict, economics, and conservation in early San Francisco

Soon after California was ceded to the United States in 1847, San Francisco saw a dramatic increase in population as settlers arrived during the California gold rush. This influx created a major supply and demand problem for basic goods, chiefly among them: eggs. The majority of eggs available were known as "Boston" or "Eastern" eggs, which were laid in New England and took a months long route by sea around South America before reaching market. These eggs were hard to come by and of poor quality. Fresh eggs were even more scarce, and were sold at an extreme premium.

As luck would have it, in 1849 a new source of eggs was discovered on a treacherously craggy group of islands 25 miles out to sea: a millions strong colony of common murres. While decidedly unusual, murre eggs were there for the taking, and for six weeks a year San Franciscans could have fresh eggs at much lower prices. Competition for control of the islands and the egg supply was fierce, coming to a deadly front when two rival commercial groups engaged in a shootout known as "The Egg War" in 1863. The Pacific Egg Company won, and maintained their monopoly through force until they were eventually evicted by the federal government in 1881 for endangering the lighthouse keepers resident on the islands. Local fishermen were now able to take eggs from the island, in a less organised but no less harmful manner.

In 1896 all "egging" operations were officially banned due to concerned ornithologists, though the amount of murre eggs taken annually had already declined. Eastern eggs were now easier to get by rail, and a boom in the local poultry industry improved availability of fresh eggs. As supply levels better matched demand, all types of egg now cost roughly the same.



South Farallon  
Murre Population

2021  
1996  
1910  
1850

"I shall not soon forget the first platter that the lighthouse keeper's wife set before us: eggs double the size of an ordinary egg, the whites, though thoroughly fried, still transparent and the yolks of a fiery orange colour, almost red."

-Ernest Peixotto 1910

Eggs Taken  
per Year

Due to federal regulation and increasingly poor economics, even illegal egging petered out in the first decade of the new century, but by this point the murre colony had already been reduced to around 1% of its original size. In this state, the colony struggled to cope with further man-made challenges, with numerous oil spills throughout the 20th century impeding recovery. Only in the past 25 years has the colony gained momentum, reaching roughly 300,000 birds, 15% of its original size.