

LEVELED Book • T

Puffins

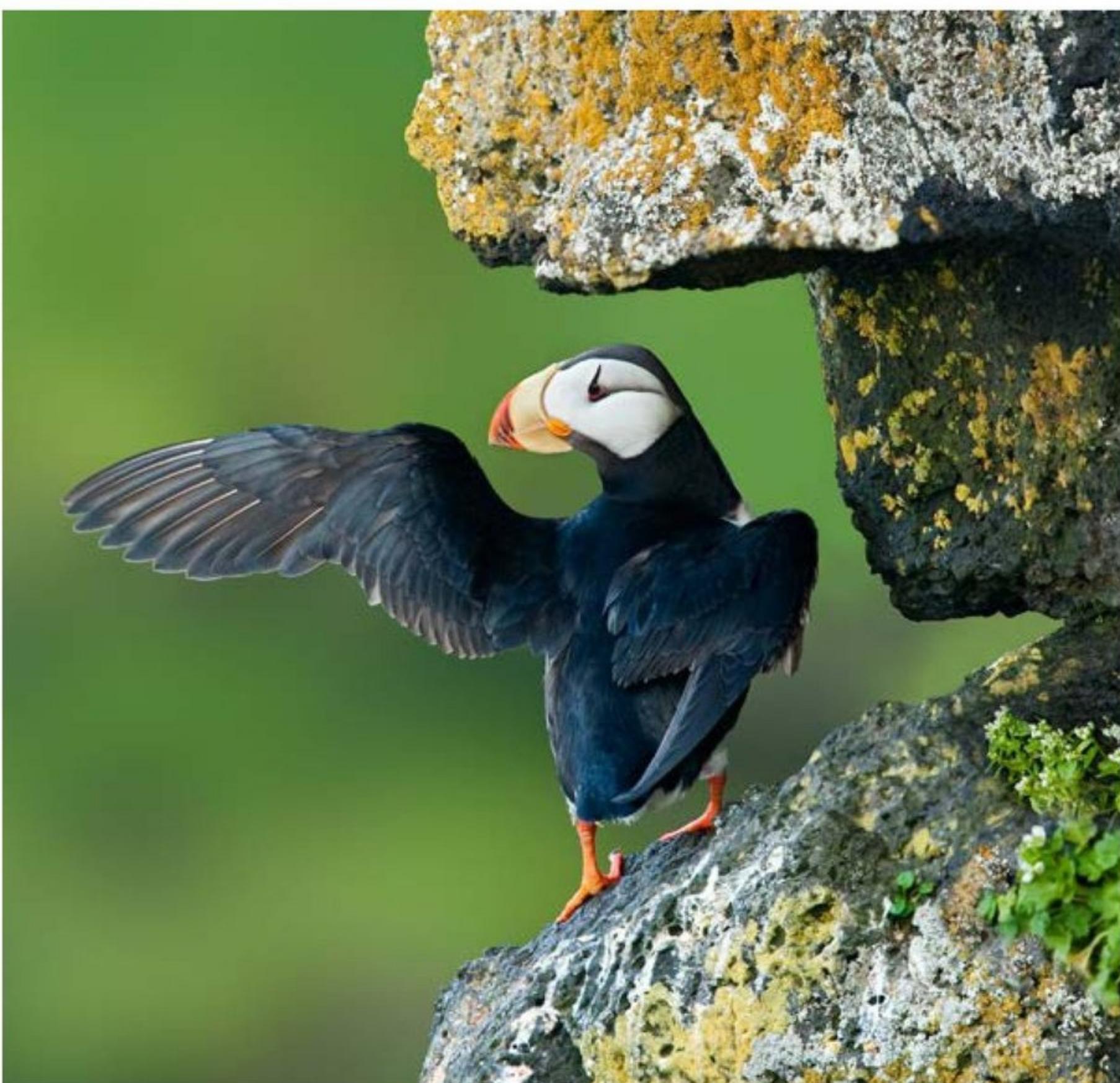


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Written by Kira Freed

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Puffins



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Focus Question

How does the appearance of each species of puffin change during its breeding season?
Why do these changes occur?

Words to Know

breeding season
burrow
climate change
coastal
colonies

inhabit
reproduce
tufted
webbed

Front and back cover: A group of Atlantic puffins nests on Bird Island, near Labrador, Canada.

Title page: A horned puffin is sometimes called a “sea parrot” because of its colorful bill.

Page 3: A horned puffin attempts to land on a rock in the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge.

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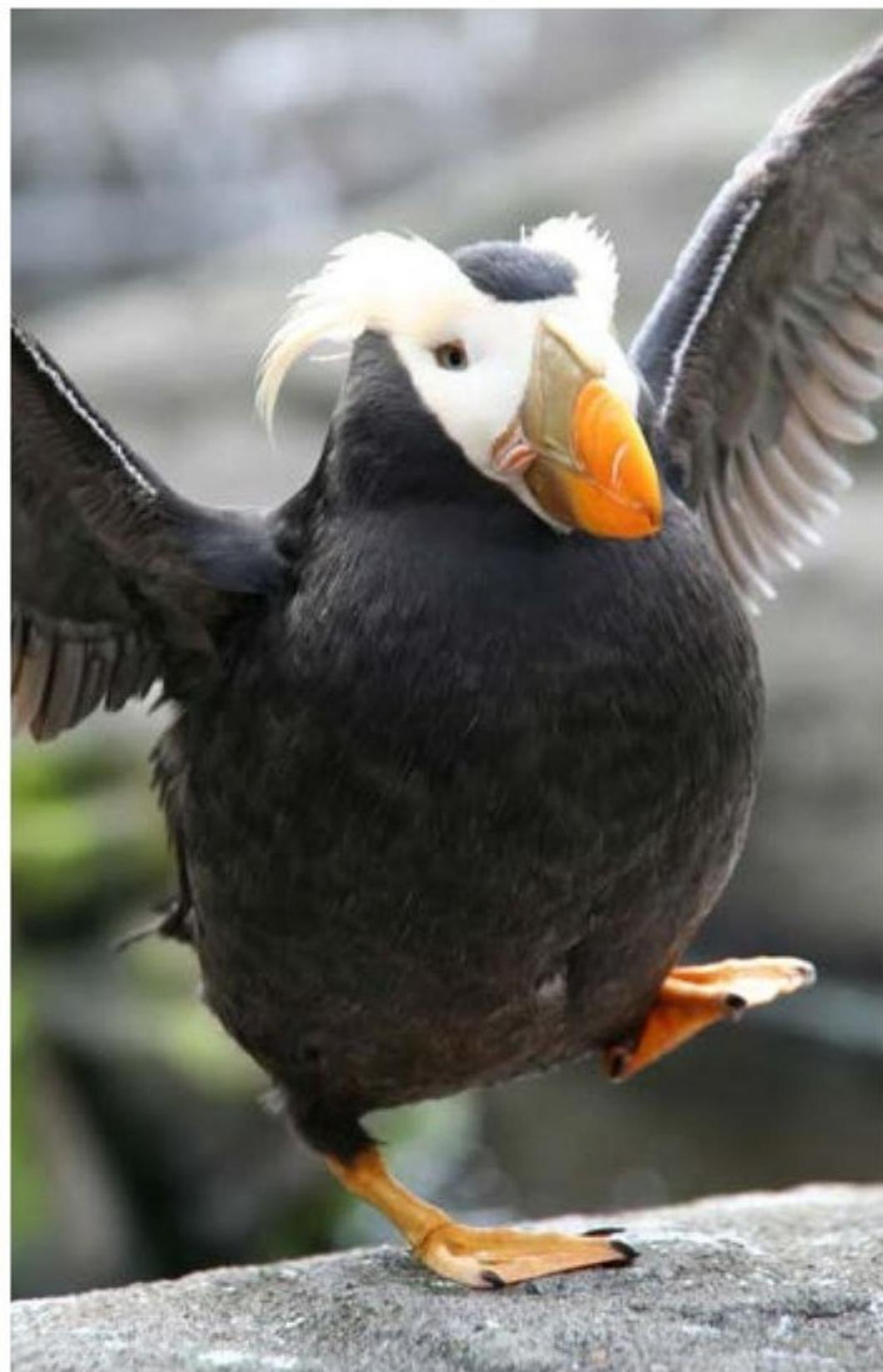
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Due to their amusing and colorful appearance, puffins have earned the nickname "clowns of the sea."

Sea Clowns

If you've ever seen a puffin, you're not likely to forget the experience. Even if you haven't, you probably know what these appealing birds look like. Their appearance is unmistakable, with their plump bodies, black and white feathers, and huge, colorful beaks. They're also recognized by their upright stance and determined walk. With their unusual characteristics, these sturdy little birds have captured many people's imagination.

Meet the Puffins

Puffins are seabirds—members of a group of birds that spend most of their lives on the open ocean. As skillful swimmers, they're perfectly designed to **inhabit** the ocean. They zoom through the water using their wings as flippers and their feet to steer. They can dive 100 feet (30 m) or more and stay underwater for about half a minute.

You might think that puffins' expert swimming abilities would take away from their flying skills. That's a common myth about these birds, but they're actually quite capable in flight. They also walk with ease over rocks and other surfaces.



Puffins swim as if they're flying underwater.

When puffins fly, they flap their wings as fast as 400 beats per minute.



One of the largest Atlantic puffin colonies is in the Labrador Sea, near Canada.

From mid-spring through summer, puffins live in nesting **colonies** on islands and **coastal** cliffs in the North Atlantic and North Pacific Oceans. They have large, colorful beaks, areas of bright white feathers, and extra feathery decorations to attract a mate. In addition, their **webbed** feet become bright orange. The rest of the year, while these birds are far out at sea, they look much plainer. They wear mostly black, white, and gray versions of their **breeding season** costumes.

The four types of puffins each have features that help people tell them apart.

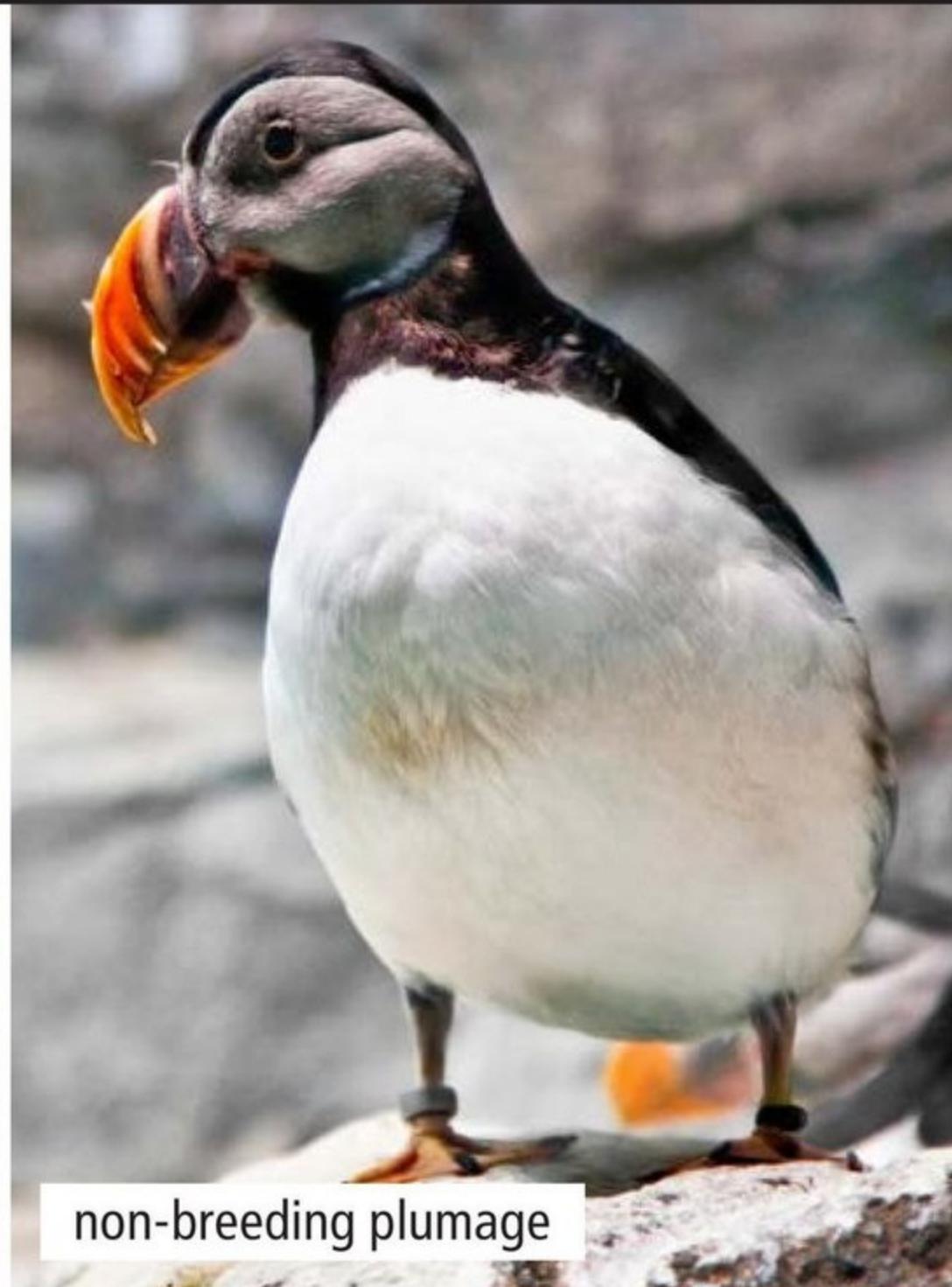
Do You Know?

The scientific name for the Atlantic puffin is *Fratercula arctica*, which is Latin for “little brother of the north.”

Atlantic Puffin



breeding plumage



non-breeding plumage

Adult Atlantic puffins are 10 to 12.5 inches (25 to 32 cm) tall.

Atlantic puffins live on both sides of the North Atlantic Ocean, with more than half living along the coast of Iceland during the breeding season. Atlantic puffins are the smallest of the puffins and the least fancy, even when they are “dressed up.” Their beak is bright orange at the tip with a blue-gray section trimmed in yellow. They have orange feet and a white face, chest, and belly.

Adult male and female puffins look alike, though the males may be a bit larger. Young puffins look similar to non-breeding adults.

Horned Puffin



breeding plumage



non-breeding plumage

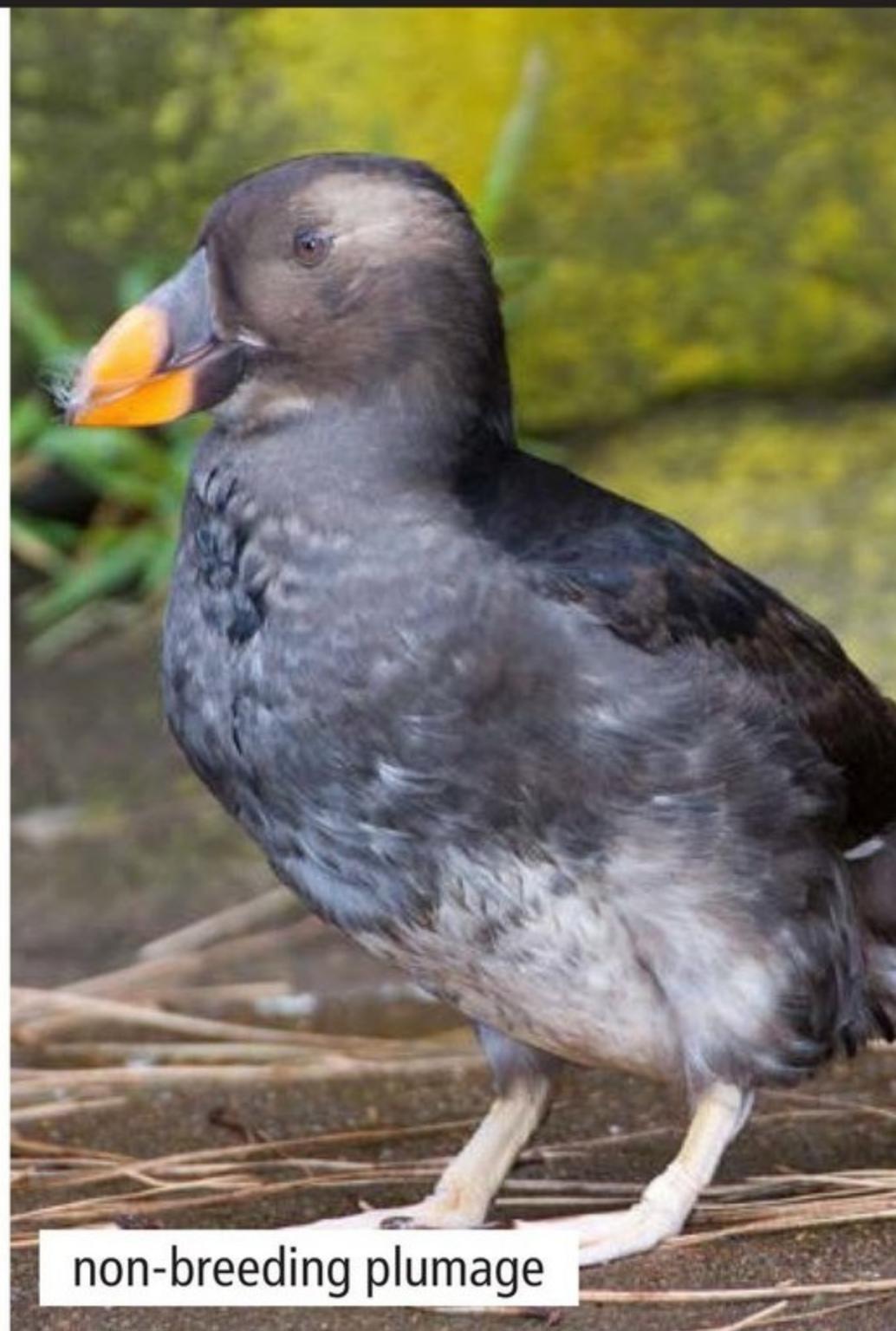
Adult horned puffins average 15 inches (38 cm) tall.

Horned puffins live in the North Pacific Ocean, mainly south of the Arctic Circle. During the breeding season, they look roughly similar to Atlantic puffins with their white face and underside. However, a spike of black "eyelashes" above each eye gives them away. These eyelashes make horned puffins look as though they're wearing makeup. They also have a black line from behind each eye to the back of their head. Another clue is the large yellow area at the base of their beak. (Atlantic puffins instead have blue-gray on their beak.)

Tufted Puffin



breeding plumage



non-breeding plumage

Adult tufted puffins average 15 inches (38 cm) tall.

Tufted puffins live in more places than other types of puffins. They are found on both sides of the North Pacific Ocean as far north as Alaska and as far south as Japan and central California. Unlike Atlantic and horned puffins, tufted puffins have a black chest and belly. In winter, they're black with large red-orange beaks, but they look quite different during the breeding season. They have a white mask, an olive-yellow beak section, and long tufts of gold feathers above their eyes. Orange feet and eye rings complete their summer look.

Rhinoceros Auklet



breeding plumage



non-breeding plumage

Adult rhinoceros auklets average 13.8 to 15 inches (35 to 38 cm) tall.

Rhinoceros auklets are less well known than the other puffins. They also look very different, which is why they are sometimes considered close cousins instead of actual puffins.

“Rhinos” live along the Pacific coast of North America and along the coast of Asia near Japan. During the breeding season, their thin yellow-orange bill has a short “horn” at the base. Rhino feathers are mainly brown—dark on the back and lighter on the chest and belly. These birds have two narrow stripes of white feathers on each side of their head.

Puffin Habits

Puffins usually return from the sea in late March or early April. During the breeding season, they often live in colonies as large as several thousand birds. They usually stay with the same mate and return to the same nesting sites yearly. Once they return, each pair prepares a **burrow** where the female lays a single egg. Tufted and European Atlantic puffins, along with rhinoceros auklets, usually dig burrows in soft soil. Horned and North American Atlantic puffins instead often nest in openings between rocks on coastal cliffs.



A newly hatched puffin is called a *puffling*!

Parents take turns keeping the egg warm. Both parents feed the chick for one to two months until it can fly. Some sources report that puffin parents stop caring for their chicks at some point. In truth, the chicks leave on their own when they are ready. Puffins become adults around the age of five and can live for twenty years or more.

All types of puffins mainly eat small fish. In winter, when fewer fish are available, puffins may also eat squid, shrimp, crabs, and other small creatures.

Adult puffins eat while they are underwater. They also collect fish to take back to their chicks. Puffins can carry fifteen or more fish in their beak at a time. Their rough tongue and the spines on the roof of their mouth help them hold the fish.



Puffins can “stack” dozens of fish at a time.

Protecting Puffins

Humans have hunted puffins for hundreds of years for their meat, eggs, and feathers. In some places, these seabirds are still hunted. Humans also catch too many of the particular types of fish that puffins eat. The fish get caught far faster than they can reproduce. Warmer sea temperatures due to **climate change** are also resulting in fewer fish for puffins. Some types of fish that are now plentiful are too big for chicks to eat, and others are less nutritious.

Puffins also get caught in fishing nets, and they are harmed by pollution. Humans have disturbed many of their nesting areas. Another serious threat is other predators, including gulls, eagles, rats, and foxes.

In places where puffins live, people are working to solve the problems so these amazing seabirds can continue to live. They are unique members of Earth's natural community. They are also important signs of the health of our oceans. When the oceans are healthy, puffins are healthy.



Dr. Steve Kress

Meet a Puffin Expert

Wildlife scientist and puffin expert Dr. Stephen Kress first became interested in nature in fourth grade. He saw that spreading suburbs near his home were wiping out natural habitats. As he learned more about nature, he decided to pursue a career in wildlife.

In the early 1970s, Dr. Kress visited Eastern Egg Rock, a small island off the coast of Maine. Atlantic puffins had lived there one hundred years earlier. Dr. Kress wondered if it might be possible to bring them back. He founded Project Puffin and used imaginative techniques—including “thinking like a puffin”—to bring these seabirds back to Eastern Egg Rock. As of 2014, the island had 148 breeding pairs.

Project Puffin is sponsored by the National Audubon Society, which works to protect birds, other wildlife, and their habitats. To learn more about Project Puffin, visit the program’s website: <http://projectpuffin.audubon.org/>.



An Atlantic puffin stands outside its den on a coastal cliff in Iceland.

Seeing Puffins

To see puffins in the wild, remember that they're out at sea for many months each year. They're only on land during the breeding season. They'll mainly be found on cliffs and islands that are difficult to reach, but it's worth the effort if you can get there. Choose a place that allows wildlife viewing. Be careful not to disturb nesting birds.

People may hike many miles to see puffins and only catch a glimpse of one or two. You may have an easier time seeing them on a boat tour. You'll probably be able to see them from a closer distance. Tour companies know the prime areas for puffins, and they'll share interesting information about these birds. Wherever you travel to see puffins, take binoculars and a camera. These little clowns are sure to amuse and fascinate you.

Glossary

breeding season (<i>n.</i>)	a time of the year when animals of a particular species reproduce (p. 6)
burrow (<i>n.</i>)	a hole dug in the ground by an animal for use as a home (p. 11)
climate change (<i>n.</i>)	the long-term, lasting changes in Earth's weather patterns or the weather patterns of a region (p. 13)
coastal (<i>adj.</i>)	having to do with the coast of a sea or ocean (p. 6)
colonies (<i>n.</i>)	groups of animals that live together (p. 6)
inhabit (<i>v.</i>)	to occupy or live in (p. 5)
reproduce (<i>v.</i>)	to make offspring that are similar to the original living thing (p. 13)
tufted (<i>adj.</i>)	having a cluster of strands such as feathers, hair, or grass that grow close together (p. 9)
webbed (<i>adj.</i>)	having fingers or toes joined by thin skin (p. 6)

Puffins

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Connections

Writing

Is it important to protect puffins? Take a stand. In a letter to your local newspaper, describe your position, including details from the book.

Science

Pick one of the puffin types to research. Make a poster showing its habitat accurately. Include interesting facts about the puffin.

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