

Pigeon Guillemot: Accessible Alcid

Jane Henderson

“Accessible alcid” – an oxymoron? Not when it comes to Pigeon Guillemots. If you are near cliffs where they nest, it is no challenge to get a good look at these birds while your feet are planted firmly on the ground.

This is not true of most alcids, the bird family to which Pigeon Guillemots belong. Unless you are at their nesting grounds, the best opportunity to see them is from a boat out at sea, where you catch a quick glimpse before they take off and fly away from the boat, or, even more frustrating, just before they vanish behind a swell. You can sometimes get a distant scope view from shore.

One very good place to see and photograph Pigeon Guillemots at close range is along the sandstone cliffs in Santa Cruz, California, which lies between San Francisco and Monterey. West Cliff Drive, a three-mile long, two-lane drive, follows the coastline of Monterey Bay from Natural Bridges State Park to the municipal wharf. The nooks and crannies in the cliffs between Stockton Avenue and Swift Street provide excellent nest sites for small colonies of guillemots.

Nearly every crevice in the cliffs is a home for either a Rock Pigeon or a Pigeon Guillemot. Well-meaning people feed crumbs to the pigeons. The Pigeon Guillemots feed themselves from the bounty of Monterey Bay.

I saw my “life” Pigeon Guillemots in Santa Cruz in June of 1986 when I was taking a stroll among the dog walkers, bike riders, rollerbladers, young mothers and fathers with babies in strollers, and people just enjoying a leisurely outing. Everybody was out on West Cliff Drive enjoying the fresh air and great scenery.

I heard a trilled “seeeeeew,” turned around, and saw a group of Pigeon Guillemots come flying in for a landing on the cliffs, their bright reddish-orange webbed feet splayed out behind. They looked as if they were surely headed for a crash landing, almost

like cartoon birds. But, at the last moment, just before the point of impact, they changed their flight attitude, adjusted to an upright position, landed feet first, and finally settled comfortably into the cavity that they had chosen for their summer home. They had been out in the bay, where they had spent up to 75 seconds at a time under water diving for food (Ehrlich et al., 1988).

When the morning fog lifts, and the sky turns “Santa Cruz blue,” the sun accentuates the guillemots’ bright reddish-orange legs and webbed feet as they leave their places on the cliff and speed away toward a splash on the water.

In summer, in alternate plumage, Pigeon Guillemots are black with bold white wing patches, reddish-orange legs and feet, and pointed black bills. In basic plumage, they are mottled gray and white. The young are dusky gray above, with smaller wing patches. In all plumages, their light brownish wing linings distinguish them from the similar eastern Black Guillemots, which have white underwing linings. They have roundish heads, and their mouth linings are reddish-orange. Pigeon Guillemots sometimes sit upright in the water with their necks stretched upward. In this posture, they look a little like grebes.

When courting, pairs of Pigeon Guillemots twitter and trill. In the springtime, they engage in a lively water-dance in which several pairs chase, submerge, call, and present their red mouths to one another.

Pigeon Guillemots have been known to arrive on their nesting grounds in central California, and other locations along the coast, as early as February and leave as late as October (Roberson, 1985). The largest numbers occur in midsummer, when they don’t venture more than a hundred yards or so from the cliffs to feed.

I had never seen Pigeon Guillemots either near shore or out on the bay when I visited Santa Cruz in winter, and I wondered where they go then. So I asked

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a local authority, Don Roberson, who has written extensively about seabirds, and who serves as a guide on pelagic trips. He told me that they go north after breeding, and winter in or around Puget Sound.

The Pigeon Guillemot's scientific name is *Cepphus columba*. *Cepphus* comes from the Greek *kepphos*, meaning "a kind of sea bird." "*Columba*" means "dove." In other words, the Pigeon Guillemot was named for its sea-going life, as well as its resemblance to pigeons or doves in both size and shape. "Guillemot" comes from the French "Guillaume" or "William" and means "Little William."

Others in the alcid family include dovebies, razorbills, murrelets, auklets, and puffins. Alcids range in size from 6 ¼" (the Least Auklet) to 18" (the Thick-billed Murre). Although Pigeon Guillemots appear quite small, especially when they are on the water, their average size is 13 ½". Like penguins, alcids use their wings for propelling themselves through the water. Unlike penguins, alcids also use their wings for flying.

Guillemots can also nest on rocky islands among boulders or under driftwood, and often use the same nest site year after year. Both males and females get involved in burrow excavation by using their beaks and claws. The nest itself is a shallow scrape lined with shells, dirt, and pebbles. Their one or two blue-green eggs have grayish brown blotches. The incubation period lasts about a month. Both male and female tend the young, which are able to fly in about 35 days. They fledge at night. Their diet consists of marine invertebrates such as crustaceans and mollusks. The young are fed mainly on small fish (Ehrlich et al., 1988).

Besides Santa Cruz, other good places to find them from shore in California are: Point Reyes, Morro Rock, Montana de Oro, Point Lobos Reserve State Park, and Humboldt Bay. In Oregon: Coquill Point near Bandon, Haystack Rock at Cannon Beach, Cape Arago State Park, Newport Wharf, and Yaquina Head. In Washington: Straits of Juan de Fuca, San Juan Islands, Point Roberts, Cape Flattery, and Port Townsend (Zimmer, 1985).

Literature Cited

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