

**OF MURRES AND MEN**  
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Thirty thousand birds called common murre stand in penguin-like suits atop a single sea rock, crammed as tightly together as commuters on a bus. All drone tones as low and somber as monks: *arg-arg-arg-arg-arg-arg-arg*.

With a spotting scope, I watch the murre raise their chocolate heads, puff out their white breasts and point their bills skyward. They seem caught in a trance of their own sounds mixed with surf thunder. I've been bicycling along the Oregon coast, watching breeding birds for weeks.

Some species that breed near the Pacific Ocean are in danger, say U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists. Spotted owls and marbled murrelets lack old-growth woods. American peregrine falcons avoid developed sea cliffs and lay eggs slightly thinner than pre-DDT days. Snowy plovers are eaten by scads of predators, including dogs, cats, gray and red foxes, and crows that follow biologists to nest sites.

At Yaquina Head in Newport, Ore., murre and dark-drab cormorants bustle only 100 feet from a viewing fence, providing intimate looks. Suddenly a murre dad drops down to the sea rock, returning from a trip that may have taken him 50 miles offshore. He holds a silver fry in his bill, and the *arg-arg-arg* intensifies as he holds the prize high while squeezing through countless birds.

As hundreds of murre peck and snap at him, he waves stubby wings and inches forward, waddling and sliding clumsily down rock. Finding his mate, he rubs breasts with her but when she opens her bill as if to beg, he holds his prize high. Then the parents bow, and their one chick wiggles a fluffy head between them.

Finally Dad drops the fish into the chick's mouth, and I turn to follow a double-crested cormorant in its bed of sticks, as it raises its rump in a telltale way. The bird dumps a plentiful shot of whitewash onto the head of a second cormorant below, hunkered in its nest. The lower "cormie" shakes its head slightly and preens its breast calmly, ignoring the whitewash. Hidden beneath the bird is its brood, safe from gulls and crows looking to gobble vulnerable chicks.

Meanwhile, as a cold wind roars, I spot four fuzzy nestlings huddled together high on a foot-wide ledge, while an adult Brandt's cormorant stands over them, its wings spread open. The nestlings wave wing-stumps frantically, and the parent pumps its neck as if to vomit bits of fish. But it spits no food. Instead it opens its bill, and one nestling thrusts its head so high into its parent's mouth that all but its belly and feet disappear.

This cliff is busy. On another ledge a pelagic cormorant flashes two classyhead-tufts in the wind. Three "teenage" birds crowd the adult, wagging bills, begging. The parent seems peeved, shaking its head out of reach. One teenager persists, and the two birds fence

vigorously, lashing bills, growling, raising crests.

Meanwhile a Brandt's cormorant wiggles its head sleepily and shoves its bill beneath a murre lying flat on an egg. The much-smaller murre pokes its bill forward and flashes its pale orange mouth but does not get up. A wad of the murre's nest-seaweed and grass-appears in the cormie's bill, and the cormie passes it to its mate, who tucks it fastidiously around its own eggs.

"Keek! Keek! Keek!" Below, two black oystercatchers leap from a wave-smashed rock, their bills quivering as if electrified, looking ridiculously red and long for their plump black bodies. The birds scream their way to higher rocks, but though I checked for hours, I saw the same sad absence I saw at other beaches busy with humans. No oystercatcher chicks.

That evening I looked for birds on a quiet beach, and as I came around a rock, I heard a man speak gruffly, "Get your shoes, I said!" A fishing pole whirred as the man whipped it across a boy's back. The boy ran, and Dad flung a 64-ounce jug of pop that thumped between the child's shoulders.

The boy stumbled, picked up shoes and raced away through driftwood. Dad yelled at him, "Plan on getting your ass kicked when you get home!" He glared at two other boys. "All of you plan on it!"

I slept in hiker-biker camps in state parks two months, waking most mornings to Swainson's thrushes belting out wild chords. Males sang to maintain territories, and their flute-notes rang until I left the woods for coastal cliffs, where thousands of murre swarmed sea rocks, droning on and on.

Aggression occurred constantly, but none of the thousand birds I watched harmed its own offspring deliberately.