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WOTR

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Sea coasts rough sailing for breeding birds

by Richie Swanson

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 and looking at breeding birds like this for weeks.

Birds that breed near the Pacific Ocean are in danger, says the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Spotted owls and marbled murrelets lack the old-growth woods they need to prosper. American peregrine falcons compete with development along sea cliffs. The eggs of snowy plovers on beaches get run over by ATVs or broken by wandering dogs.

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 rocks. Finding his mate, he rubs breasts with her but when she opens her bill as if to beg, he holds his catch 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 look at 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. Hidden beneath the bird is its brood, safe from gulls and crows looking to gobble vulnerable chicks.

Meanwhile, as the wind almost starts to howl, I spot four fuzzy nestlings huddled high on a foot-wide ledge, an adult Brandt's cormorant standing over them, its wings widespread. 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 baby bird thrusts its head so high

into its parent's mouth that all but his belly and feet disappear.

This cliff is alive. On another ledge a pelagic cormorant flashes violet-bronze plumage and two classy head-tufts in the wind. Three "teenage" birds crowd the adult, wagging full-grown bills, begging. The parent seems peeved, shaking its head out of reach. One teenager persists, jutting its bill forward, until the parent lashes it. The two birds fence vigorously, growling, grabbing beaks, 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. 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 bustling with humans: No oystercatcher chicks.

>That evening I looked for birds on a quiet beach, and as I came around a rock, heard a man say gruffly, "Get your shoes, I said!" A fishing pole whirred as the man whipped it across a boy's back.

The boy ran off as a flung, 64-ounce jug of pop thunked between his 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 for 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 masses of adult murre spread their drone through the sea air. Aggression occurred constantly, but none of the thousand birds I watched harmed its own offspring deliberately.

Richie Swanson is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of *High Country News* in Paonia, Colorado (hcn.org).

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