

## Arctic Survival—

## Murre, 'Penguins' of the Arctic, Prefer Ancient Cliffs

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Dec. 3, 1962By HOWARD ROCK  
Times Editor

The murre, the bird that lays unique cone-shaped eggs, in recent years has touched off one of the most heated arguments in Alaska. And the argument stemmed over the fact that the black and white bird, a counterpart to the Antarctic's famous penguin, will only lay and hatch its eggs on ancient cliffs.

From time immemorial, the yearly migration of the murre to Alaska occurs during May. Hundreds of thousands of them come to nest on the cliffs of Cape Lisburne and Cape Thompson in Northwest Alaska.

The two capes are located

near the villages of Point Hope and Kivalina. Cape Lisburne is 40 miles northeast of Point Hope; Cape Thompson is 30 miles southeast of this village. Forty miles to the southeast of Cape Thompson is Kivalina.

## Caused Controversy

Since 1958 Cape Thompson has been the subject of controversy with the natives of the area, some scientists and conservationists on one side, and the Atomic Energy Commission, on the other.

The AEC started plans to detonate nuclear devices for experimental excavation on the eastern edge of the bird cliffs at Cape Thompson.

Soon the question arose; if

Project Chariot were triggered, would it destroy the egg cliffs by shock and seismic action of the detonation?

Some scientists believed the impact of the explosion would cause the face of the cliffs, where murre and other sea birds lay and hatch their eggs, to collapse.

## Similar to Penguins

Though the murre is similar in many respects to the famous penguin of the South Pole region, particularly in markings, it is unlike the penguin in that it is a swift and strong flyer. When resting on the cliffs, the stance of the murre is upright and straight-backed, much like that of the penguin.

Early in May in great V formations the murre flock to the Capes. They skim low over the ice hummocks or over the open sea. Occasionally they rise into the air only to skim low over the surface.

It is not uncommon to see them in formations with eider ducks that migrate at the same time. There seems to be a kinship between these two species of marine birds.

The great migration of the murre is, of course, to propagate their species on the ancient nesting areas at Cape Lisburne and Cape Thompson, two of the few known nesting sites.

## Nesting Sites

The others are at the Chamisso Islands, Little Diomed and Big Diomed Islands. Big Diomed is located on the Russian side of the International Date Line three miles from the Little Diomed. The nesting sites on these islands are relatively small colonies compared with those at the cape rookeries. In Cape Thompson the murre that use this site have been estimated to number about 220,000.

The murre apparently follow a strong instinctive pattern, an ancient natural law, in nesting the aforementioned areas. They ignore other cliffs that would seem to be ideal for expansion of their propagation habits.

## New Cliffs

One of these cliffs is Eezhrin-yik or Cape Lewis. As scientists have observed, Cape Lewis is a relatively new cliff, believed to have been formed by earthquake action. It would seem that murre would expand their colonies to this cliff but for some strange reason they have not done so.

This behavioral pattern raised a question among scientists who made environmental studies for the Atomic Energy Commission in connection with Project Char-

iot, whether the great colonies of murre at Cape Thompson would establish new nesting places if the face of the ancient cliff were demolished.

Would they abandon the cliffs of Cape Thompson because of their seeming dislike of newly-formed cliffs? If this phenomenon took place, where would they go?

## Economic Value

At any rate, in view of the behavioral pattern of the murre, the conservation of these birds became foremost in the opinion of many scientists in raising the question at the same time remembering the economic value of these birds to the Eskimos who use them for food and who are fond of the eggs they lay.

The meat of the murre, although eaten quite extensively by the people of the cape areas, is not considered as favorite food by them. But the eggs of the murre is a great delicacy.

There are two species of murre, the common murre and the thick-billed murre.

## No Nests

Murre do not build nests. The common murre simply lays its eggs on long ledges on the face of the cliff. The thick-billed murre lays its eggs on shorter or discontinuous ledges.

The size of the murre egg is about twice that of a large chicken egg, with a very unique shape. The side view of the egg gives it the appearance of a wedge of pie rounded on the large base and on the small end.

The natural reason for the unique shape of the egg is to prevent it from falling off the rocky ledge. When it rolls, it rolls in a small arc and stops with the large end down the incline.

The shell is thick which would seem reasonable because it is laid on the rock surface.

## Beautiful Eggs

The color of the egg is usually is beautiful light blue-green, mottled with brown flecks all over it. Few are buff color to almost milk-white, mottled with brown flecks.

When the murre eggs are freshly laid, the people of Point Hope ready their umiaks for egg-gathering trips, either to Cape Lisburne or Cape Thompson. Kivalina to the south travels to Cape Thompson.

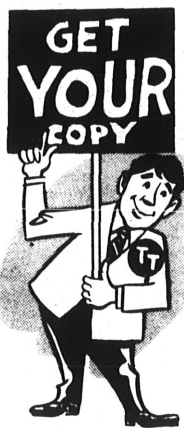
Several days' provisions are taken along for camping near the cliffs.

Dry weather is chosen for egg gathering. In scaling the cliffs, dry footing is needed. When the cliffs are wet and or damp, they become slippery from leavings of the murre on the ledges; therefore, extreme care has to be taken by the picker to keep from falling off the cliffs.

The picker also has to overcome another distracting and disquieting obstacle. The laying murre swoop down at great speed and just miss the head of the picker.

There is a great temptation by the picker to throw up his hands to scare the murre away. To do this, however, would mean disaster for if he should lose his hold on the cliff, the picker would fall to almost certain death.

And so, the tradition of gathering murre eggs prevails to the present time in the Arctic. This age-old custom of food getting is a way of getting welcome change in diet. It was, and is, a pleasant diversion, though somewhat dangerous, and must be classed as one that has contributed to the survival of man in the Arctic.



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## LEGAL NOTICE

NOTICE OF FILING OF UTILITY TARIFF REVISION  
The ALASKA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION hereby gives notice of the filing of tariff revision by YAKUTAT POWER, INC. (TA3-53), DOT LAKE ELECTRIC, INC. (TA1-70), KOTZEBUE ELECTRIC ASSOCIATION, INC. (TA3-17), and NORTHWAY POWER AND LIGHT, INC. (TA2-1) for the purpose of including automatic rate adjustment clauses in their respective tariffs. These clauses would allow each of the utilities to change its electric rates to reflect increases or decreases in the price of fuel oil used by that utility for generating electricity. Yakutat Power, Inc. proposes an adjustment of .0926¢/KWH for each 1.0¢/gallon change in fuel cost. Dot Lake Electric, Inc. requests an adjustment of 0.2¢/KWH for each 1.0¢/gallon change in fuel cost. Northway Power and Light, Inc. proposes a change of 0.1¢/KWH for each 1.0¢/gallon change in fuel cost. Kotzebue Electric Association, Inc. proposes that a compensating surcharge, computed as follows, be added to each consumer's monthly billing: for the first 3.0¢ increase per gallon in fuel costs over 26.475¢/gallon the surcharge would be 0.5¢/KWH, and for each succeeding 6.0¢ increase per gallon, there would be an additional surcharge of 0.5¢ per KWH.

More detailed information may be obtained from the utilities whose addresses are Yakutat Power, Inc., P.O. Box 257, Yakutat, Alaska 99689; Dot Lake Electric, Inc., Mile Post 1361, Dot Lake, Alaska; Northway Power and Light, Inc., Northway, Alaska 99764; and Kotzebue Electric Association, Inc., P.O. Box 44, Kotzebue, Alaska 99752. The complete filings are available for inspection also at the Offices of the Alaska Public Utilities Commission, 1100 MacKay Building, 338 Denali Street, Anchorage, Alaska 99501.

Any interested party may file with the Commission by 4:30 P.M., February 12, 1974, a statement of his views and specific reasons in favor of, or in opposition to, any of the above described tariff revisions, together with written confirmation that the same statement has also been mailed or delivered to the utility which filed the tariff revision. DATED at Anchorage, Alaska, this 28th day of January, 1974.

ALASKA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION  
J. Lowell Jensen  
Executive Director  
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