

From "Pacific Wilderness" by D. Hancock, L. Hancock and
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Expedition to a Puffin Island

Lyn shouldn't have started to climb the gully by herself, but she did. I was still lugging our packs to the edge when she shouted.

"Daaaaavid! I'm falling!"

I dumped the packs and scrambled up the crevasse to find her spread-eagled against the face of the cliff, her fingers straining into tiny crevices and her toes braced against ridges in the flaking shale.

She grabbed the climbing rope I tossed to her and her foothold gave way. After what she graphically described as "falling weightless for an eternity" (by which she meant sliding 10 feet), I was able to seize an arm and pull her to safety. Shock over, she dissolved in tears and then burst out angrily:

"Who wants those stupid birds anyway!"

I knew then that everything was going to be all right, for the same sequence of fright, frustration and anger had been displayed before on other expeditions. Within a few minutes she was on top of the world again.

The importance of our own little drama dimmed all the more quickly because we had a thousand exciting distractions around us. Screams, growls, and the whirring of countless wings drove everything else out of our minds, for we were in the very midst of the big tufted puffin colony on Solander Island, a tiny point of jagged rock just west of Cape Cook near the northern tip of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Our objective — to study and collect several of these gaudy sea parrots for the New York Zoological Society.

Months before, the Director of the Bronx Zoo asked me to collect puffins for the Zoo's new Aquatic Bird House. I had visited puffineries before and had handled and raised many birds over the years, but I admit I didn't appreciate the full problem of catching, holding, and then transporting these pugnacious little gladiators until my wife and

I made this expedition for the New York Zoological Society.

The flight from Vancouver was spectacular. The green mosaic of the Gulf Islands gave way to the jagged, snow-clad mountains of western Vancouver Island, splashed with emerald glacial lakes. Even the fishing village of Kyuquot at the mouth of a deep fiord, our base camp, was picturesque.

With our 600 pounds of gear (wooden shipping crates for the birds, puffin holding pens, three weeks' supply of food, gas, water, stove, clothing, sleeping gear, cameras and tent) piled on the wharf at Kyuquot, local connections had to be made. On this late Saturday afternoon, boats of all kinds were coming and going in the tiny harbour, fishermen were unloading their day's salmon catches and loading water and supplies.

Doug Henderson, the Fishery Officer, had everything arranged in a matter of minutes. On Monday, Wally Arnett would take us to Solander in the *Audrey H.* Sleeping quarters all arranged, storage for our gear all arranged, come and have a cup of coffee. As simple as that!

On Sunday I showed Lyn a small rowboat and said, "Practise!" Not having the strength to heave boxes ashore, she would have to handle the boat. This meant decisively judging the reefs and swells to manoeuvre close enough to the rock face of the island for me to land and jump ashore with the freight and row out again before the swell caught her in its downsurge. After an hour of perseverance she was a tired but experienced oarswoman.

On Sunday evening several fishermen went out of their way to warn me that Cape Cook was "smoking" (i.e. the wind was so strong that it was blowing the crests off the waves) and that no dinghy would get ashore in that "lump" (swells). We were downhearted, but Wally was game to give it a try at seven o'clock Monday morning.

The harbour was like a millpond as we sailed



Adult puffin sitting on guard outside puffin burrow.

out the next morning, but ten minutes more and we met many of the fishing fleet coming in. We turned back. If it was too rough to fish, it was certainly too rough to negotiate Cape Cook, whose weather was about the worst in North America.

Early Tuesday morning, in the cold and dark, we slipped out again, and in four hours Solander came into view. Puffins dotted the water and flocks flew overhead endlessly. We drove on until Solander's tall green grass was in plain view. It was bowing and swaying in gusty winds. The sou'easter pounded great waves against the only side of the island where we could land. Leeward, there was calm but no way of getting up the abrupt cliffs with all our gear. There was nothing to do but to keep going, anchor in Kishkish Inlet — and wait.

Wednesday morning was clear and our hopes were high, but then the radio began to squawk as fishing boats called the *Audrey H* from a radius of 50 miles.

"Pretty heavy lump down here today!"

"How's the crew? You'd better take care!"

"Heavy fog moving in off the Cape this morning — a real peasouper!"

Wally decided to try anyway, and 200 yards off Solander I shoved off in the rowboat to find a place to land. I was scarcely away when the fog caught me and only the pounding surf guided me toward the shore. Just as I came up on the rocky bluffs the curtain lifted to reveal the air filled with puffins, gulls, guillemots, and cormorants — and a 15 foot wide barnacle-encrusted channel with vertical walls. It would do for landing. I returned to the *Audrey H* for Lyn who rowed me ashore to test whether we could climb ashore from the tide level. Her Sunday afternoon practice in the harbor

paid off. Not without incident, but fortunately without mishap, we got our six dinghy loads ashore.

To get to the puffin burrows on the grassy slopes above our landing channel, we climbed slowly and painfully up the ledges where hundreds of cormorants had balanced their mound nests. The cormorants didn't like it, and neither did we, but the lure of the puffins was too great. We had to find out the age of the young. The older they were, the stronger they would be for shipping.

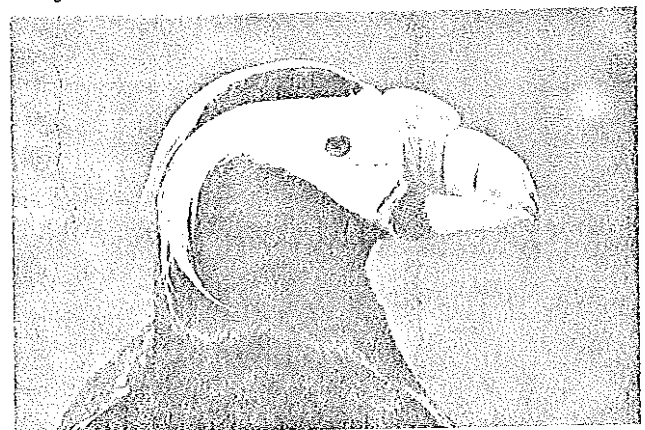
"Just stuff your arm in as far as it'll go," I told Lyn. "They won't hurt you through your gloves."

Carefully, Lyn's arm entered an excreta-moistened burrow. Nothing so far. In went the arm up to the elbow, then boldly up to the shoulder.

"Ouch." She lurched backward. Hanging to the fingers of her glove was an indignant adult puffin, gripping with a beak as powerful as a vice. I explored the same burrow and brought out a tiny, black, squeaking chick. It was a relief to see that it was well-advanced — old enough to withstand shipping.

Puffins nested practically everywhere on the island, wherever there was enough dirt for burrows. Lyn quickly learned the first rule of puffin catching; which is, to grab the puffin's beak before it grabs you. By evening, we had investigated 50 occupied puffin burrows and had counted two Cassin's auklets (the only ones we found) and hundreds of petrels. Cormorants nested on every steep cliff and gull chicks crouched on all the rocky outcrops. I searched long for the big colony of Stellers sealions the Kyuquot fishermen had described, but somehow it wasn't up to full strength at the moment — one frightened bull was all I found.

Adult tufted puffin in breeding plumage — the golden tassels, white facial feathers and the gaudy orange bill are all sloughed off in winter.



We returned to camp early that first night. After much hacking at the uneven ground, we scraped a shallow depression for a bed and added reinforcements to the tent against the freshening wind. Lyn started preparing dinner over the Coleman stove, and everything was going well until she asked in an ominously small voice.

"Where did you pack the plates and cups?"

Since she had been in charge of the food supplies, that meant only one thing. So for the rest of our stay we ate out of cans and drank coffee from the one saucepan, always under a slight rain of seabird droppings.

It was the next day while we were climbing the cliffs above camp and getting ready to set up a blind that Lyn came so close to her nasty fall.

Our clothing was white with the falling excreta of the flying birds before we had the blind in place. Once inside, puffins landed all around. Two adults came down simultaneously on a grassy tussock 20 feet away. Both had a faceful of gleaming, four inch needlefish. Normally a parent returning with food flies directly into the burrow entrance to foil the gulls which try to intercept the flight and relieve them of their fish. The uneasiness of the puffins was apparent, though the gulls were nervous in the presence of our newly erected hide and dared not attack. A couple of males nearby growled affectionately and tried to make advances but the two females presumably preferred fish to late-season romance, and departed.

The brisk northwest winds created perfect flying and soaring conditions. Thousands of birds were overhead at any moment, climbing fast in the updraught along the face of the cliff, peeling off out to sea, and then soaring back into the south end of the bluff to repeat the circuit.

The days passed swiftly and the final three days before our scheduled departure we spent rehearsing trapping and handling procedures. We wanted to know exactly how long it would take to catch enough adults and young, as we didn't want to collect any birds until the boat was waiting offshore and our return was assured. Experience of others had warned us that these birds could easily die of shock if confined too long.

Digging out the chicks was relatively easy, but the big problem would be capturing adults quickly. They do not brood at the advanced stage the chicks had reached, and after timing feeding visits, we found that adults stay in the burrows from four to 37 seconds. Scrambling up a 200 foot, 70 degree bluff in even 37 seconds might be exciting but



Immature puffin still wearing crown of down.

it was hardly likely to be successful. Fine nets strung across their flight path worked but it was time consuming to remove a bird and discouraging to find a gaping hole it had torn in the fine threads. We devised a stratagem.

Lyn, partly concealed by the tall grass, waved her handkerchief to increase the curiosity of the flying puffins while I took station 40 feet downwind with a net on the end of a mist-net pole. Most birds were so intent on looking over their shoulders at Lyn's gestures that I could easily snag them out of the air. In one hour, I caught 20 gaudy adults. As each bird was brought down I taped its beak tightly to prevent fighting in the crates on my back pack. Six birds to a crate and two crates per trip. Up and down the cliffs we clambered, increasing our skill with each trip. After we had the routine perfected, we released the trial birds unharmed.

The pre-arranged departure day came and we sat in camp watching for the *Audrey H* — our pick up boat from Kyuquot. For six days the wind had not dropped below 30 mph and high seas were running. Should we go and start collecting, just in case Wally could get in? What if he arrived and we weren't ready? Collecting and carrying to the shore would take at least eight hours and Wally certainly couldn't "put to" out there for that long. We decided to wait, sure that Wally would not face such seas.

Just before dark we heard a loud toot. A big fish packer was slowly edging towards the shore. I ran down to the rocks and shouted a request that the captain radio Wally to come for instruction the next day for sure, unless there was a real gale blowing. I hoped the captain understood.

By noon the next day all our gear was stowed and the *Audrey H* was in sight. By signals worked out in advance, we let Wally know that all was going well and that we would be ready to leave at 10 a.m. the next day. He turned away and we started up the cliffs to begin catching adults, only to find that the wind had shifted and they were no longer flying the pattern that had made them such easy prey before. There was nothing to do but try the burrows systematically. By six o'clock we had only six adults and their young. So much for all our plans and optimism.

But if winds shift one way, they can shift another. Just before dusk the stream of circuiting puffins again came within netting distance. In minutes I had pulled ten more out of the air. As the moon followed the last streaks of the setting sun, the puffins were mostly on ledges or out to sea. We felt the whirr of delicate shapes in the night sky as petrels flitted, swooped and chittered. From beneath the waving grass we heard the brrr of nesting petrels — probably helping to guide their mates home. Several landed on our heads and shoulders.

By 4:30 a.m. the sky was lightening, the petrels were departing, and the puffins were coming on duty.

Burrow after burrow we searched and our collection mounted. As we were descending the cliffs with the last load, the *Audrey H* came into view. We broke camp and lugged our gear to the shore. At the last moment, the birds were placed in their separate compartments and the lids were screwed on. Then we dashed to the tideline to meet Wally, for now the real race was on.

Four hours on a calm sea and we were in *Kyuquot*. I sprinted to the airlines agent. We had radioed ahead to have a charter plane waiting for us, for there were still 200 miles to go, and only four hours to get the birds on a New York bound jet.

"We couldn't get you a plane today," the agent told me. "Maybe tomorrow evening, though."

This was a heavy blow. The puffins' chance of survival would be less if they had to stay cooped up a whole day. I must have looked as stricken as



Puffin Colony — puffin nests are placed in burrows extending 3-10 feet underground.

I felt, for the dispatcher took pity, rescheduled several charters and within an hour and a half, Mike Carr-Harris and his float plane were at the dock.

Fifteen minutes before the New York jet took off from Vancouver, we carried the crates into the freight office. Papers were written and stamped in record time, the birds were stowed with loving care, the aircraft began to taxi, and Lyn and I went in search of baths and sleep.

When we awoke the next day there was a telegram from the Director of the New York Zoological Society awaiting us. It said the shipment had come through in fine shape and that the puffins were magnificent. Well they should be. None of the young had been out of their burrows more than 33 hours until they arrived in New York — three fourths of them only 14-18 hours. And considering the burrow-digging, the hill climbs, the unreliable weather, the seven surf landings, the 30 mile bounce on a fish boat, the 200 mile charter flight, and the Vancouver-Seattle-New York jet ride, I thought Lyn and I had a right to feel pretty proud of those puffins as we read and re-read that telegram.