

MURRE MULTITUDES

Among our diving birds that live beyond the shoreline of the Pacific, the California murre is the most populous species of the sea. In early spring the flank of every green wave is flocked with these birds of seal brown wearing white waistcoats. Every schooner that plies the trade pushes its way mile after mile through great rafts of seafoam. The murre multitudes are moving under the homing instinct, pressing north with flap of wing and pattering of foot, lifting now here, now there, rising and falling in the trough of white-tipped waves. They move steadily with purpose as vast armies move. June awakens to find the myriads of the murre tribe gathered thick on cliff, crag and pinnacle for three thousand miles of rugged coastline.

The murre is built upon serviceable lines, equipped for the life he leads. He is not graceful in flight like the gull. Nor can he poise, turn quickly, drop or rise with ease. He pushes forward on rapid wings, swift of purpose and bent on business. With difficulty he rises ~~from~~ the sea, flashing along the surface to get a start. His legs and webbed feet are at the very end of his body, so he walks as if his feet were tied, but they are most useful as propellers. He flies below the surface more expertly than he does above, using his wings like the side flippers of a seal. His stiff tail is used as a rudder to help him turn and twist quickly in his chase for fish.

Fortunately the flavor of murre meat has not tempted sportsmen, as has the taste of our river and sea ducks. Yet in many places fishermen and other sea folk are not unmindful of

the thousands of murre eggs that lie thick on the sea rocks, for these when fresh are fit for food.

On the California coast the product of the murre was commercialized for many years. As early as 1850 the Farallone Egg Company was organized to collect eggs and ship them into the San Francisco market. It was estimated that 25,000 dozen eggs a year were taken from the Farallones up to 1873. After that an average of about 15,000 dozen were shipped annually, but by 1897 that number had decreased to 7645 dozen, showing that the traffic was ~~xxxx~~ more than even the murre numbers could bear. The following year the government prohibited the taking of eggs. Off the California coast was the only place in the West where murre were robbed continuously to such an extent. In many places the murre multitudes have been undisturbed, and it is like going back fifty thousand years into the past to visit some of the great murre loomeries, or colonies, along the shores of the Pacific, for there is not the least sign of civilization.

A single egg is all one pair of parents can attend to. It has to be held on the shelf day and night during the period of incubation, so each takes a turn. If unguarded it is too likely to be jostled over the edge or gobbled up by some watchful gull. Fortunately it has a tough shell so that even when buffeted about it does not break on the sharp corners of the rock. It is shaped like a top so in case it starts rolling toward the edge of the ledge it naturally swings around on its own axis and stops a few inches down. These little things may seem of small moment, but they play their parts in the very existence of the species.

It is a comedy to watch the daily round of life in a big loomery. When an old murre returns from the fishing ground he takes a good start from seaward to gather speed so he can swing up to the eaves of his home rock. Like a man in an airplane, safe landing is often a puzzle. Twenty paces from the ledge he looks uneasily for a soft spot, then begins back-pedaling rapidly and, with webbed feet spread, he heaves in awkwardly and lands with the same lack of grace a man sometimes does when he inadvertently puts too much trust in a patch of glare ice, or unconsciously treads on a banana peel.