

Cassin's Auklet North Pacific Winter Wreck 2014-2015

Who:

Cassin's Auklet, *Ptychoramphus aleuticus*, a small (~200g, or 7oz) krill and larval fish-eating seabird that breeds along the West Coast of North America, from Baja to Alaska. Easy to recognize, Cassin's have blue feet, dark back and wings, pale belly, and a pale spot on the lower bill right at the chin.

Population Size: ~3.5 Million

Population Center: British Columbia, the Scott Island group, off the NW tip of Vancouver Island, supports ~80% of the world's breeding population.

Longevity: 6-10 years, max 23

Clutch Size: 1 egg annually except in the southern end of the range, where double clutching (essentially two back-to-back breeding seasons) have become common

Range: Tracking studies have shown that adult birds from Triangle Island and Haida Gwaii travel south at least as far as CA.

Conservation Status: Recently recommended for listing as a species of "Special Concern" in Canada. The U.S. population has declined sharply in some parts of the range (e.g., Farallon Islands).

What:

From October 2014 through the present (early January 2015), Cassin's Auklets have been washing ashore from Haida Gwaii south to Central California in unprecedented numbers. Estimates are very preliminary, and suggest that tens of thousands of these birds are washing ashore, at rates 10-100 times "normal." To date, the majority of these birds are young-of-the-year, hatched in 2014.

Synthesis

High breeding success put more than usual numbers of young-of-the-year on the water. Canadian birds – fledglings and adults – migrate south to WA, OR and CA. The onset of winter storms coincided with the deaths of both young and adult birds (a normal occurrence). The higher number of young birds may be increasing the mortality signal, as young have a naturally higher mortality rate.

There is currently no sign of disease, poison, or other contagion.

Environmental conditions, including a shifting in prey availability, and/or location, are distinct possibilities exacerbating the wreck event.

When, Where and How Many:

October – outer coastline of Washington south to Monterey Bay, CA

November – outer coastline of Washington south to Monterey Bay, CA

December – Haida Gwaii, BC south to Marin County, CA

This table provides information on how many fresh (not previously found) Cassin's Auklets were encountered by **COASST data collectors**, on average, in October, November, and December of 2014. The "How Many Times Normal" column indicates the difference between this event and all other years. The "Max" column reports the single highest beach reporting in the region, in the relevant month.

CAUTION – numbers will change as more volunteers submit their data.

Region	Month	Average CAAU/km	How Many Times Normal	Max CAAU/km
N. Washington	Oct	0.20	17	3.3
	Nov	1.00	56	6.4
	Dec	2.30	128	14.3
S. Washington	Oct	0.40	24	7.5
	Nov	1.80	15	18.8
	Dec	4.20	32	23.0
N. Oregon	Oct	0.80		9.1
	Nov	4.30	27	30.0
	Dec	5.20	50	71.3
S. Oregon	Oct	0.06	1	0.6
	Nov	2.30	144	10.0
	Dec	1.50	15	9.0
N. California	Oct	0.00	0	0.0
	Nov	0.50	100	3.8
	Dec	1.10	110	7.2

Necropsies:

Post mortem exams conducted on freshly dead specimens shipped to the USGS National Wildlife Health Center from Sonoma and Monterey Counties (CA) and Coos County (OR) in November and December indicated emaciation and starvation as the proximate cause of death. No viral or bacteria infections were detected in specimens submitted. The majority of the carcasses were young-of-the-year. Additional carcasses from Washington and British Columbia are being examined, with results pending.

Contact Information:

USGS National Wildlife Health Center: nwhc-epi@usgs.gov

Laird Henkel, CA Dept. of Fish and Wildlife: Laird.Henkel@wildlife.ca.gov

Media Relations – Environment Canada 819-934-8008, media@ec.gc.ca

Breeding Success in 2014:

Triangle Island – the outermost island in the Scott Island Group, B.C. Triangle houses upwards of half a million Cassin's Auklets. In 2014, breeding success (percent of pairs fledging their chick) was above 80%. Maximum chick weights were extremely good, as high as 237grams (or 118% of adult weight).

Farallon Islands – a significant seabird colony for northern California, the Farallones (26 miles west of San Francisco) support a much smaller population (30,000) of Cassin's Auklets that have undergone significant declines over the past several decades. In 2014, breeding success was exceptional, nearly 100% for the first clutch. However, nearly all parents abandoned their second breeding attempt. Maximum chick weights were above average; as high as 192 grams (or 106% of adult weight for the Farallon population)

Contact Information:

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California - Russ Bradley, Point Blue Conservation Science, rbradley@pointblue.org and/or Jaime Jahncke, jjahncke@pointblue.org

Data Collectors:

Seven organizations collectively totaling over 1,200 trained coastal residents linked to marine biologists at major scientific institutions on the West Coast are collecting data on hundreds of beach sites monthly, from Alaska south to Monterey Bay, California:

British Columbia Beached Bird Survey (BCBBS) – British Columbia, Canada
Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team (COASST) – Alaska south to

Mendocino County, U.S.

ODFW surveys - Lincoln County, OR

Redwood National Park – Del Norte to Humboldt County, CA

Humboldt State University – Humboldt County, CA

Beach Watch – Mendocino County to San Mateo County, CA

Beach Coastal Ocean Mammal/Bird Education and Research Surveys
(BeachCOMBERS) –San Mateo County to Los Angeles County, CA

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WA, OR, CA – (COASST) Jane Dolliver (Beached Bird Coordinator) dolliver@uw.edu 206-221-6893, Julia Parrish (Executive Director) jparrish@uw.edu 206-221-5787

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CA – Humboldt State University, Humboldt County, Dr. Dawn Goley
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CA – (Beach Watch) Jan Roletto, Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, 415-561-6622 ext 207 or Kirsten Lindquist, Farallones Marine Sanctuary Association, 415-561-6625, ext 302. Inquires from media, contact Mary Jane Schramm, 415-561-6622 ext 205 or Carol Preston, 415-561-6622 ext 201.