The Coasst Line

COASST

News for COASST Citizen Scientists | Spring/Summer 2005

It's not Tufted, it's Horned!

"It's certainly a magnificent looking bird, really quite intriguing!" remarked Bert Johnstone of Yachats, OR. It looked remarkably like a Tufted Puffin, but with a light belly and a dark throat collar, it just couldn't be! "It was certainly something we'd never seen before," Mike Patton of Ocean Shores, WA told us. This winter, when COASST's first Horned Puffins washed ashore along the coast of Oregon and Washington, Bert and Mike weren't the only ones surprised. Bob Paine, a marine ecologist working on Tatoosh Island, WA recently spotted a live Horned Puffin just off the Cape Flattery Coast.

Horned Puffin on its nest in Alaska

So where do Horned Puffins come from? More than 85% of the world's one million Horned Puffins breed in the Gulf of Alaska and Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea. Unlike their burrow nesting cousings, the Tufted Puffins, Horned Puffins nest in rock crevices hidden among cliffs and beach boulders. In a pinch, they'll even take advantage of artificial "crevices" such as the piece of scrap wood shown in the photo above. Horned Puffins hatch one chick per year, and mates take turns searching for fish. Sometimes they travel more than 50km in search of food! After a little more than a month, this express sushi delivery service becomes less and less reliable, and the hungry chicks head out to sea.

Adult Horned Puffin found on South Butterclam in the South Coast on February 27th

Just why would puffins travel south from Alaska? Ask any field biologist, and the answer is clearÐ because it's really, really cold and miserable up there in the winter! With the fall storms and advancing winter ice, Horned Puffins travel down to the offshore waters of Washington, Oregon, and California. While here, they typically stay more than 180 kilometers offshore, making their living off deep water prey like laternfish and squid.

Given their proclivity for offshore waters, Horned Puffins are rarely seen on beached bird surveys. Between 1978 and 1997, Bob Loeffel, retired Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife employee and long-time beached bird monitor in Lincoln City, Oregon found only 12 Horned Puffins (nine of which were found in March and April of 1980). This year appears to be another spike in Horned Puffin beaching. COASST has recorded six finds from January through April on the South Coast of Washington and in Oregon. BeachWatch, the Gulf of the Farallones

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Horned Puffins cont.

National Marine Sanctuary, California, beached bird program also found one Horned Puffin this year. Of our six, five were adults and most looked to be in good condition. Mike Patton said the one they found "didn't appear to have anything wrong with it, it was just a nice, normal bird. And no signs of starvation either–not like the fulmars last year."

Juvenile Horned Puffin found on Oregon Mile 196 on February 26th

It remains unclear why Horned Puffins came closer to shore this year, as well as way back in 1980. Maybe subtle changes in offshore ocean conditions altered their at-sea distribution. Regardless of the reason for their presence, these COASST findings have caused quite a stir among seabird biologists on the West Coast. John Piatt, a seabird biologist with the USGS Alaska Science Center was mystified and intrigued by our puffin pulse. "I can only guess that more Horned Puffins must have died at sea this year, and based on dates Puffins were found, whatever the cause was seemingly widespread. Truthfully, wintering Horned Puffins are somewhat of a black box–it's unfortunate that COASST doesn't exist in Alaska, so we could have a better idea of the trends of seabird mortality West Coast wide."

With more than 80 species accounted for, it gets harder and harder to add to the COASST species list. So the Horned Puffin is a truly exciting addition for this year!

News Briefs

Contribute to *The Coasst Line!*

We're very excited to share the story by Lauren Wentz-Middleton (page 4), a North Coast COASSTer, in this edition of ***The Coasst Line***. We would like to include volunteer submissions in future issues and for that–WE NEED YOU! If you have a great COASST story you would like to share, please submit it, along with a picture of you and/or your beach, to ***coasst@u.washington.edu***.

COASST Year Close-Out

Time to clean out those drawers! COASST will begin data analysis for the annual report in June. If you have an old data sheet lying around the house, or if you've completed a survey near the end of May, make sure to get it in the mail right away!

Funding Update

COASST receives continued support from NOAA Fisheries

COASST thanks Kim Rivera, National Seabird Coordinator, and the Protected Resources Division of NOAA Fisheries Alaska Regional Office for a $10,500 contract to continue COASST surveys in Washington and Oregon, report on incidents of fishery-associated mortality, and calculate beaching rates of species sensitive to bycatch in North Pacific fisheries. We look forward to this continued collaboration with NOAA Fisheries.

News Briefs cont.

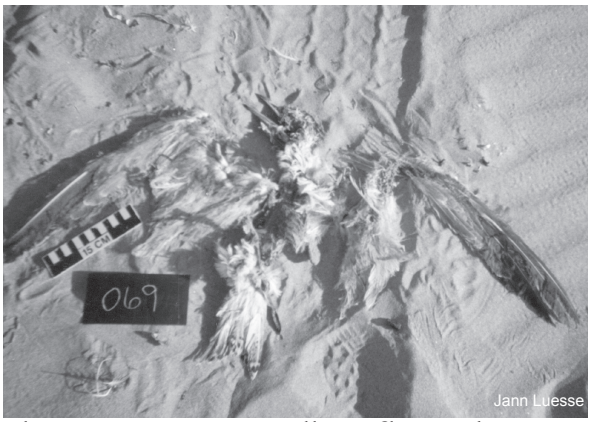
The Who, Where and How-to of COASST Beaches

Have you received your official beach directions sheet in the mail? We're compiling a comprehensive list of beaches surveyed by COASST, driving and parking directions, and exactly where to start and turn around. This information will help COASST cover beaches in a crisis situation and help direct substitutes any time you are unable to cover your beach.

"Substitutes" you ask? One of your friends could be surveying for COASST and you might not even know it! By sending in the tan volunteer directory postcard, you can be included. Use the directory to get connected with other volunteers in your area or set up a substitute for your beach when you're on vacation.

The Run Down

Lately, we've had some confusion over vehicles on beaches - so what counts as a vehicle anyway? If it has an engine and wheels, it's a vehicle. Other modes of transportation to and from beaches including canoes, kayaks, strollers, bikes, or hang-gliders do not count as vehicles. Ask yourself, can it run you (or a bird) over and do serious damage? If not, then it's not a vehicle. However, if you see a "non-vehicle" that you think is disturbing to the habitat or the live wildlife, please make a note in the comments section.



This Large Immature Gull was flattened on Oregon Mile 327 *after* washing ashore

"What do I do if I find a dead bird, but not during my usual COASST survey? Should I count it?"

This is a question we hear a lot. Although it is great to get information on all the dead birds you find (especially rare species), it is the data from your ***official*** COASST surveys that is most valuable. Because COASST surveys are standardized–you walk the exact same stretch of beach each time, always walk the beach both ways, search for birds the same way, and complete your survey every month at approximately the same time–we can ensure that your data are rigorous and unbiased. In short, up to the most exacting scientific standards!

COASST data are used to establish the baseline, or "normal," pattern of beached bird deposition in the Pacific Northwest. Slow changes from baseline gives us information about long-term health of our resident marine bird populations. Big spikes away from baseline indicate unusual events, such as increased mortality during an El Niño year. Should an oil spill occur, the COASST baseline data will be used to determine the percent increase in marine bird mortality the spill caused.

As you can see, it is the number of birds found during your official COASST surveys that gives us the most accurate scientific picture of beached bird deposition. So, please feel free to send us information about the incidental birds you find–we are always interested in hearing about your finds. But remember to get out there for your official surveys, ***because those are the ones that really count!***

If you would like to receive this newsletter via e-mail in PDF format, please send a request to coasst@u.washington.edu.

To the Techies—Instructions for Digital Photos

In the past year, COASST has received over 400 digital photos in its inbox. It's a scrapbooker's nightmare! If you're sending digital photos to the COASST e-mail account, we have a few suggestions to make identification and processing of your files easier for the COASST interns:

First, the ***file type***–Please save your photo files in **jpg format**.

Second, ***resolution***–Take photos on the **medium-high** setting (this might be fine or extra fine on your digital camera). The image size should be approximately 21" x 15" at 72 pixels per inch (or approximately 4" x 5" at 300 pixels per inch). This resolution should result in a file size of **500KB-1MB**.

Third, ***file name***–This is the most confusing part, but ***really vital*** to us in keeping track of your files here in the COASST office. The file name should contain the **beach name, survey date, species code, cable tie number, and a letter** if you took more than one photo of the same bird. In order to get all of that information into the required **27 or fewer characters**, please use the following convention:

Beach Name (11 or fewer characters). To do this, **leave out the vowels** in your beach name and abbreviate North, South, East, and West as N, S, E, and W, respectively. Still too long? Please contact COASST for the proper abbreviation.

Survey Date–**yyyymmdd**.

Species Code–the standard **four letter species code** (refer to ***Beached Birds***), or UNK if you don't know the species.

Cable Tie Number (1, 2, or 3 digits)

Lowercase letter–If you took more than one photo of the same bird, please add an "**a**" "**b**" "**c**" etc. to the end of your file name to differentiate each photo.

Follow this example–Two photos from Port Williams North taken on March 4th 2005 of a Common Murre, cable tie #15 should be labeled:
prtwllmsn20050304comu15a.jpg and prtwllmsn20050304comu15b.jpg

Let us know if you have any questions. We know it can be a bit confusing, but we ***really appreciate*** your help in keeping things straight!

Volunteer Report—Beware Beach Logs!

Submitted by Lauren Wentz-Middleton, COASST Volunteer, Kalaloch Beach South

Any COASST Volunteer who surveys a log-strewn beach has seen them–the signs warning beach visitors of the potential dangers of so-called "beach logs" that can roll suddenly in high surf. A cartoon-like depiction of a person being tossed from a log punctuates the message.

My husband Bob and I pass one of these signs every time we descend the steps to the wide, sandy expanse of Kalaloch Beach on our monthly COASST survey. We marvel at the number and size of the logs that cover the highest reaches of "our" beach, and we always make sure to safely search for birds among the logs on the return leg of our survey. It wasn't until October 2004, though, that we experienced the danger portended by the battered sign we passed on our way out to the beach.

Our first find of the day was a set of tern wings, perhaps 25 meters from the leading edge of the surf. Bob,

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Beach Logs cont.

the data collector, took the measurements and reported them to me. After I recorded the data, I placed our chalkboard and ruler next to the wings and prepared to take a photo-standard COASST procedure, of course. I was just about to press the shutter button when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a shallow wave approaching faster than we had expected. I grabbed the backpack and cable ties just in time to avoid wet feet, but we lost our chalkboard and ruler in the surf, and our unphotographed tern wings were carried at least 50 meters toward the high beach, coming to rest between two logs. I finally took the photo, and we continued our survey.

Bob and Lauren at Kalaloch Beach

Not long after that, Bob and I both observed that waves seemed to be coming in higher and faster than we could recall from any of our previous walks at Kalaloch. We were between tides, with the tide coming in gradually, but there still seemed to be something different about the surf that day. Our walk followed a zig-zag route as we attempted to keep our feet dry (yes, we were wearing waterproof boots, but they're no longer waterproof when water fills them from the top!) but we eventually found ourselves walking nearer and nearer the swath of logs covering the higher parts of the beach. Quite unexpectedly, a surge of water raced up the beach toward us. By the time we could gauge its speed and depth, we were forced into making a split-second decision: stop and let the wave hit us or clamber onto one of the logs and-we thought-stay out of trouble.

The sign warning of the killer logs

Bob is much more nimble than I, so he quickly jumped up onto a very large, partially buried log to avoid the wave. No problem. Meanwhile, being neither nimble nor near a very large log, I managed to hook one leg over a medium-sized, horizontal trunk and hang on. Luckily, the log on which I took refuge only shook violently as the wave swirled around it. I feared it might roll out from under me or, worse, over me in that instant. My right leg got soaked, over the boot-tops and under the rain pants up to mid-thigh, and I could feel the pull of the undertow as the wave subsided. That cartoon-like image of a person flying off a beach log suddenly flashed through my mind-I could have been that person! Bob extended a hand to help me stand back up, and we both paused to collect ourselves before moving on.

We were half a kilometer in either direction from a good exit point from the beach, so we decided to continue moving south-faster now-toward our turn-around point. When we arrived we saw a storm looming on the horizon, no doubt the source of the high, powerful surf, and, for the first time since we started surveying Kalaloch Beach, we watched massive logs being tossed like toothpicks in the waves. Logs that we had used as distance markers in the past because they appeared to be permanently anchored in the sand were now being rearranged by the surf. We decided that any attempt to return to our starting point would put us in real danger.

We clambered, wet-footed and shaking, up the trail and out to Highway 101. From there, we walked along the highway back to our car, a little worse for the wear-but safe. As I climbed into the car, I caught a glimpse of that weather-beaten gray sign we'd walked past so many times before. This time, that warning, "Beach Logs Can Be Dangerous," finally hit home. Here's hoping that our fellow COASSTers will heed that warning, too.

Answers: ***Top) Completely dark plumage, 4 free toes, and a square tail. When he's not scavenging at the beach, he's probably digging through your trash can. It's an American Crow.***

Bottom) Lobed toes, long neck, and flat tarsi- it must be a grebe, and only one Grebe's eye is in the dark portion of the faceÐa Western Grebe.

Testing your COASST ID skills...

Found: 1/26/05
Hobuck Beach
Neah Bay, WA
Bill: 71mm
Wing: 21cm
Tarsus: 79mm

Found: 11/9/04
Oregon Mile 327
Del Rey, OR
Bill: 42mm
Wing: 31cm
Tarsus: 57mm

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