

Atlantic Puffin: New to Ontario

by

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On the afternoon of 15 December 1985, Douglas Lapointe and Cathie Timm discovered a small black bird on the roadside 3 km southeast of Westmeath, Renfrew Co. (Figure 1). It was barely alive and had ice caked to one wing and the upper tarsus of one leg. The bird was unlike any they had ever seen. Upon consulting their field guides, they concluded it must be an Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*). Noting also that puffins rarely range inland, they contacted and later delivered the bird to Jacques Bouvier of nearby Pembroke. The puffin, an immature, was subsequently photographed (Figure 2) and taken to the Avian Care and Research Foundation at Verona, north of Kingston, Frontenac Co. The puffin weighed 315.0 g upon arrival at Verona on 16 December 1985. On 10 January 1986 the puffin weighed 390.0 g, having regained a substantial portion of its lost weight. For comparative purposes, one October immature from West Greenland and a winter immature from Newfoundland weighed 511.5 g and 503.0 g respectively. Both specimens are housed in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. One specimen,

housed in the National Museum of Natural Sciences (NMNS), Ottawa, of a bird found dead from starvation at Chateauguay, Quebec, weighed 283.4 g.

The puffin was kept at Verona until 10 January 1986 when it was returned to Ottawa, Ottawa-Carleton R.M., and placed on a commercial flight to Newfoundland. Arrangements were made to have it stay at the Salmonier Wildlife Park until its feathers regained their natural water-proofing.

There is a previous report of an Atlantic Puffin from Ontario, but this is uncorroborated. White and Scott (1883) reported "A young bird of this species was shot on the Ottawa River towards the end of October 1881. It had probably been blown inland by a severe storm, which took place some days previous". Lloyd (1923), in a list of the birds of Ottawa, wrote "Accidental. One record, that of a young bird shot late in October 1881. Fate of specimen unknown, but E.G. White remembers the occurrence and prepared the specimen, which was in the White collection for some time". The specimen was apparently never examined by an ornithological

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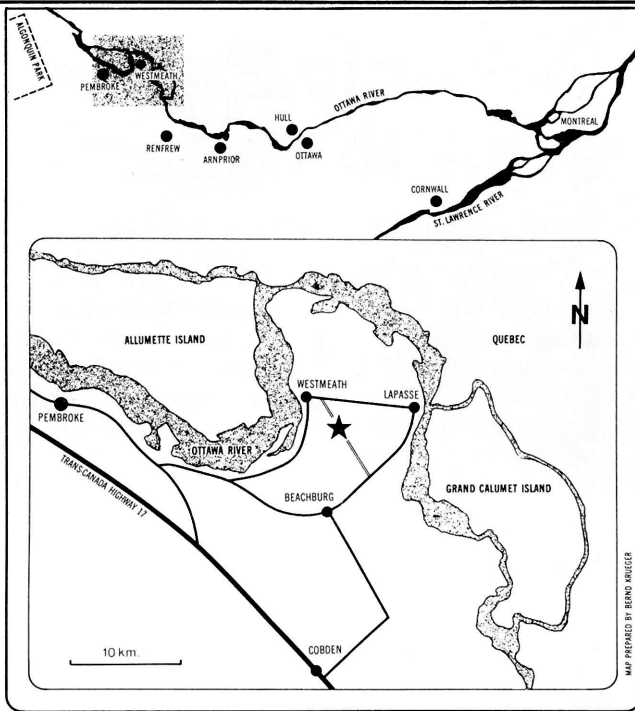


Figure 1. Map showing location of Atlantic Puffin discovery (star).

curator of a major institutional collection which would have validated the identification of the bird under the guidelines of the Ontario Bird Records Committee. Furthermore, it was never established if the bird was actually taken in Ontario.

The unresolved question as to the exact location where it was shot on the Ottawa River (which is the Ontario-Quebec boundary) resulted in the Atlantic Puffin being given "hypothetical" status for Ontario by James *et al.* (1976). The Westmeath bird therefore, represents the first provincial record of Atlantic Puffin.

We can only speculate on the origin of the Westmeath bird. All nearest extralimital records are

from the St. Lawrence River Valley in southern Quebec. They are single immature birds from Lake St. Peter, 30 October 1949 (specimen in NMNS collection), Sainte-Geneviève, November 1961 (David 1980) and Chateaugay, 30 December 1980 (specimen in NMNS collection). Other inland records of the Atlantic Puffin listed by the American Ornithologists' Union (1983) include Rutland, Vermont, and Toledo, Ohio. It appears that the most likely route taken by the Westmeath puffin was up the St. Lawrence River from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Ottawa River, although one cannot discount the possibility that the bird originated from James Bay.

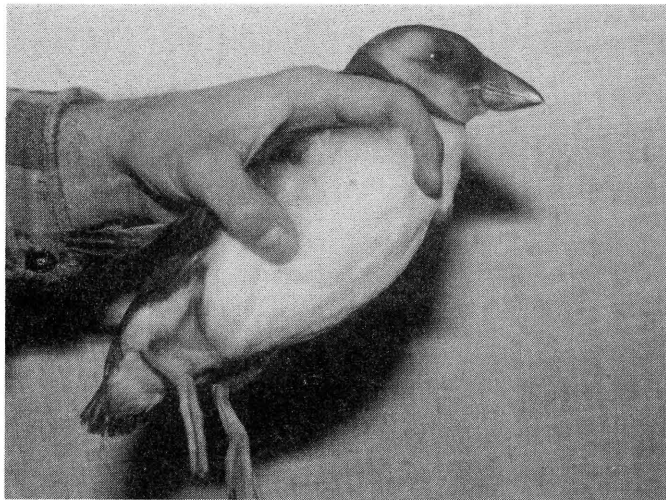


Figure 2. Immature Atlantic Puffin (*Fraterecula arctica*), 15 December 1985. Photo by J. Bouvier.

How the puffin ended up on a roadside 3 km from the Ottawa River is a question in itself. It is worth noting that very low temperatures were recorded during the night of 14–15 December 1985, possibly freezing up the remaining open water and forcing the bird to wander inland. No strong wind or major weather disturbance was noted in the eastern part of the continent prior to the discovery.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our appreciation to the original discoverers of the bird for bringing it to our attention, and to Louise Damant for typing the manuscript, Bernd Krueger for preparing the map, and Richard Blacquiere, David Gray, Ross Harris, Alan Wormington and Douglas McRae for their helpful comments.

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