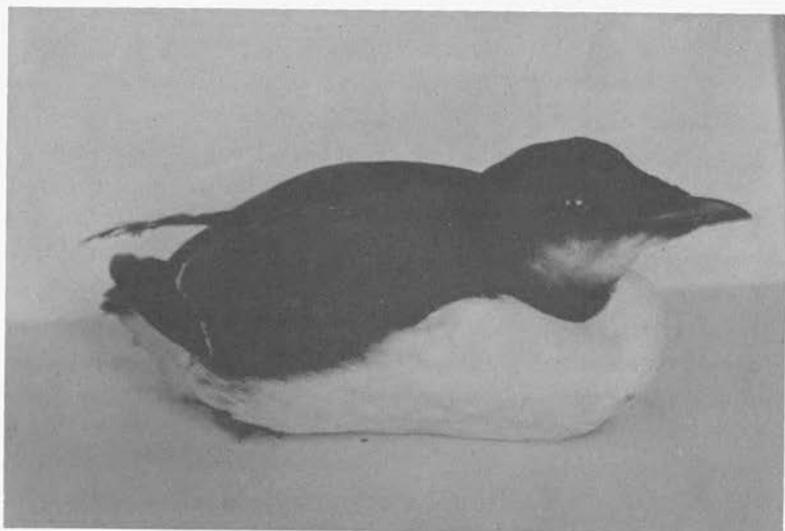


Dark (black?) and white are the predominant color tones of this month's At A Glance mystery species. To be precise, the bird in the photograph is strikingly dark above and light below — the characteristic counter-shaded pattern shown by a number of seabird species. Although superficially resembling a duck, the portrait bird shows a slender, pointed bill, practically no tail, and a decidedly flattened look to its head. Because most ducks have broad, flattened bills with rounded tips, a noticeably longer tail, a distinctly longer neck, and a more rounded head profile, it is safe to assume that the mystery bird is not a duck. Closer examination of the bird's bill reveals no distinct hook at the tip or tubular nostrils on the upper mandible, features that also eliminate any of the small black-and-white shearwaters (e.g., Manx Shearwater) as possibilities.



Photograph by Gilbert Emery

The only Massachusetts seabirds otherwise so marked are the alcids — auks, murre, Dovekies, puffins, and guillemots. A hallmark of this family is the remarkable variation in shape, structure, and color of the bills of the different species. For example, as adults, Atlantic Puffins have spectacularly large and colorful bills, Razorbills exhibit distinctive, laterally compressed bills with one or two distinct white vertical stripes on the sides, and Dovekies possess stubby, plankton-straining bills. Because the mystery bird's bill fails to show any of these characteristics, they can all be eliminated as options. The Black Guillemot is also out of the running because guillemots display a conspicuous white wing patch in all plumages, and in breeding plumage are totally black below. On the basis of bill shape alone, only the two murre species, and possibly a Razorbill in immature plumage, are strong identification possibilities. Even though first-

winter Razorbills have smaller, unstriped bills than adults, their bill never appears as pointed and narrow as that of the mystery bird; also, their tail would appear conspicuously longer.

Having narrowed the choices to either Thick-billed Murre or Common Murre, it is necessary to examine several features carefully. Because the bird has a whitish throat with a partial collar at the sides of the neck, it means that it is not in breeding plumage, since both murre species (as well as the Razorbill) have a completely dark throat and lower neck in breeding plumage. Having said this, it should be noted that in full winter plumage, Common Murres typically show extensively white cheeks crossed by a distinct dark line running backwards and downwards from the eye. Furthermore, Common Murres have rather long, slim bills that are often held slightly upward, much in the manner of a Red-throated Loon, although a murre's bill is much shorter than that of a loon. Common Murres also generally show a few distinct, dusky streaks along the flanks.

By contrast, Thick-billed Murres in winter plumage typically possess dusky, less extensively white throats than Common Murres (partly due to an early pre-nuptial molt that sometimes brings them into breeding plumage by mid-winter), and their faces are consistently darker, never showing a dark line across a white cheek. In addition, Thick-billed Murres tend to keep their heads drawn in close to their body when swimming, not held high with bills pointed in the air like Common Murres. As suggested by the species' name, the bill of a Thick-billed Murre is slightly thicker and not as long and slim as that of a Common Murre, and it often shows a distinct white mark along the tomium (i.e., the cutting edge of the upper mandible), though this is variable and often difficult to see, especially in winter plumage.

With these differences in mind, the alcid in the photograph can only be a Thick-billed Murre (*Uria lomvia*) in transition molt between winter and breeding plumage, and looking much like many of the Thick-billed Murres that one encounters in winter in Massachusetts. Thick-billed Murres are generally uncommon midwinter visitors to the inshore waters of the Bay State, although occasionally they are more numerous, as they were during the winter of 1998-1999.

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AT A GLANCE

Photograph by Hal Harrison



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