when the merlins were perched at the top of trees near their roost area. Their choice of roost trees was conifers, but did not always involve the same tree. If you took your eye off them for a second or two, it was easy to miss them zooming into their roost. All the merlins I observed roosted low in the trees. I watched one spring off its perch, flying low to the ground and inches from a person standing near its roost in a conifer. The entire show lasted seconds, and the person never knew the bird had flown into the tree right beside him.

A second male was observed on 18 January, bringing the total to four merlins for the winter at the Spring Grove. This male was bluer with black wings, black head, and minimal peachy coloring on the belly and legs. I watched this bird go to roost a foot or so off the road in plain view, low near the trunk of a sweetgum.

We don't know exactly when the merlins departed for the north. The last reported sighting for a brown bird was on 11 February 2004. My last view of the cemetery merlins was on 18 February, in an area where they normally were not seen. It was only a fleeting glimpse of a merlin streaking out of a heavily wooded area. The merlins' winter was over at Spring Grove.

Horned larks were good photographic subjects in Muskingum Co. during February 2004. *Photo by Robert Royse.*



# Annals of Pelagic Birding in Ohio: Thick-billed Murre

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*In the winter of '96-7 a driving storm from the Labrador coast caught up a considerable number of these multitudinous sea-fowl and swept them far inland. When the storm had spent its fury the Murres were found promiscuously stranded in the lakes and water-ways, or wandering about dazed and helpless in the fields of Ohio, Indiana, and neighboring states. Many specimens were taken by the hand and others shot at scattered localities; and the village oracles were sorely put to it to tell what this strange fowl might be. The first published record for Ohio was of the one taken by Rev. J.M. Keck, of Mentor, on December 19[1], 1896. A score of others have since come to light, all taken at about the same time or a few days later. This memorable inundation by Brünnich Murres was general throughout the Eastern States and records were made as far south as South Carolina.*

---William L. Dawson, *The Birds of Ohio* (1903)

The thick-billed murre (*Uria lomvia*) is a circumpolar Arctic breeder. Its southernmost colony in eastern North America is a small remnant one in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, but after centuries of depredations by humans most murres nest, often in staggering numbers, on remote cliffs far to the north. These populations winter at sea in the icy western Atlantic, with a few regularly seen as far south as Long Island.

A thick-billed murre mount from the OSU Museum, #14007. Collected 20 mi from Sandusky, 19 Dec. 1896. (E.C. Mosely)

This sleek, foot-and-a-half long black and white alcid is a salt-water bird, its diet mostly small fish. It is well suited to cold temperatures and the violent storms of northern latitudes. Its winter range and habitats in eastern North America fairly closely resemble those of the dovekie *Alle alle*, which has never been confirmed in Ohio, yet the thick-billed murre has dozens of records for the state. How this came to be is a curious tale.

Beginning in 1890, numerous reports emerged of unprecedented

[1] Probably 18 December---see Jones 1902b.

numbers of thick-billed murres in locations where they had never been common or even recorded (see Fleming 1907). Averill (1891), stating he knew of no Connecticut records of the species, reported large numbers of Brünnich's murres (the standard name in the US for *Uria lomvia* in those days) in the state during the winter of 1890-91, with many reports of tame, weak, and starving birds in odd places, and hundreds shot and thousands seen offshore.

For the Great Lakes, there seem to be only two reliable records of this species before 1894: in Quebec and in Lake Ontario (Gaston 1988). No Ohio record was established until 1896. The open waters of Lake Erie must have been the last frontier for Ohio bird observers in the late nineteenth century. The careful Wheaton (1882) accepts only seven Ohio gull species (judging four of them rare to accidental), and no alcids. Today we recognize nineteen gull and five alcid species. Knowledgeable observers were few in those days, and it was only the large wrecks of murres in the Lake Erie area from the 1890s on---numerous enough that they came to the attention of taxidermists, hunters, and even farmers—led to the specimens that allowed Ohio ornithologists to document their occurrence. Nearly all specimens examined of the wrecked murres were hatch-year birds, and most showed signs of starvation. There are no records of birds returning east from the Great Lakes, so theirs was a one-way journey.

In 1894, Dionne described "numerous flocks" of murres flying past Quebec, adding that "hundreds have been shot by sportsmen and some have even been killed with sticks near the wharves." This local "novelty" continued from mid-November through early January, with reports of birds in the mountains ten miles from the St. Lawrence River. Barrows (1895) recounted the discovery the same year of a dying murre in a small stream in Montcalm County, Michigan, far from large bodies of water, and pronounced it the state's first record, saying its confirmation rendered "more probable the several more or less reliable reports of capture of other members of the family within the State."

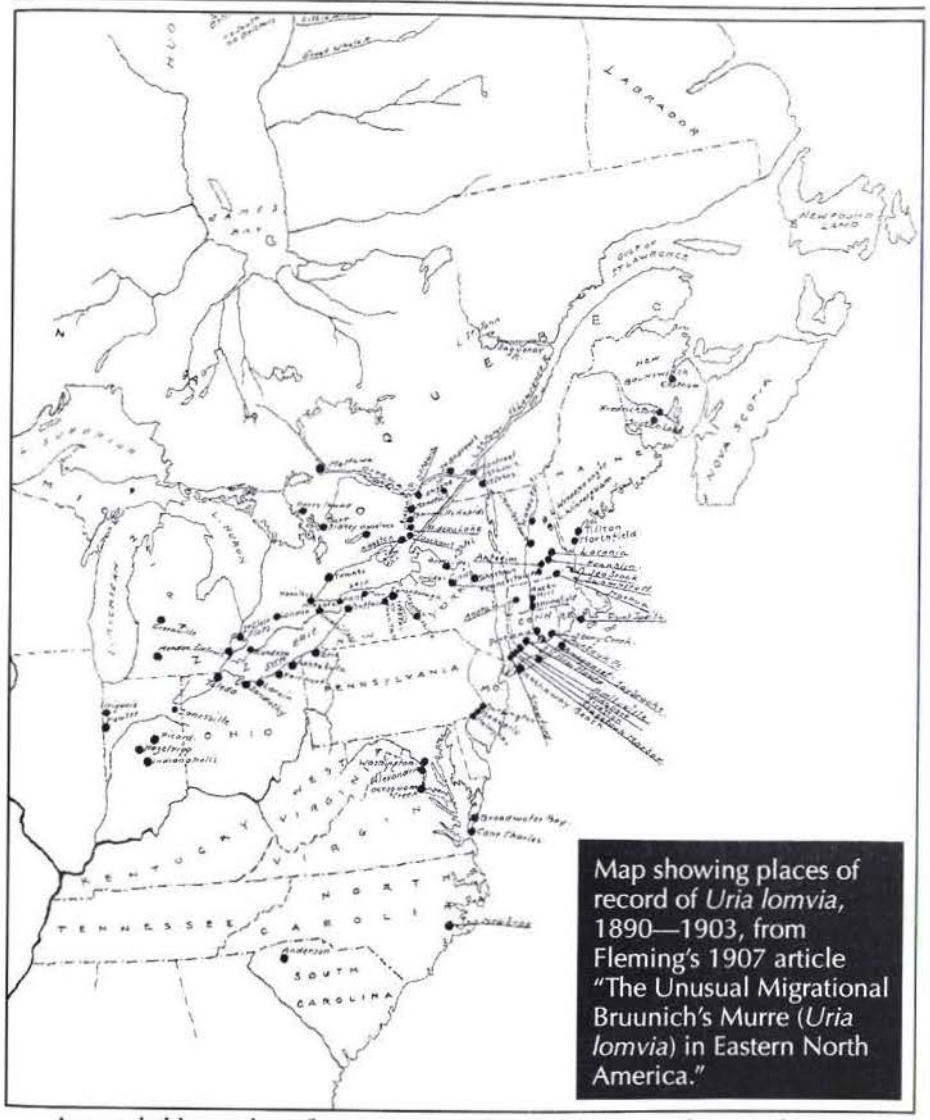
It was not until 1896 that their sheer numbers brought them to the attention of those who kept Ohio bird records. The first records date from 18 December of that year, with two birds shot near Painesville in Lake County (Jones 1902b). The following day, more birds were shot in the western basin of the lake. Over the next week a number of records accumulated. Oliver Davie (1900) reported that

> *We can now, for the first time, add this bird to the avifauna of Ohio. A mounted specimen before me, was captured alive by Mr. R. T. Stewart in a field near Fair Haven, Preble county, Ohio, December 19th, 1896[2]. The bird was kindly identified for me by Mr. Charles W. Richmond, Assistant Curator of Birds in the National Museum. He states that a wave of these birds was scattered, by a storm which occurred about the above date and Prof. E. L. Moseley reports two specimens being shot at Put-in-Bay and two at Sandusky on December 19th.*

[2] The tag on an unmounted skin at OSU reads "Ohio, Preble Co., Israel Twp. Fairhaven Dec 20 1896. Robert T. Stewart. *Uria lomvia lomvia*. Mounted by W.A. Scott from University Catalog Entry 1288."








Map showing places of record of *Uria lomvia*, 1890—1903, from Fleming's 1907 article "The Unusual Migrational Bruunich's Murre (*Uria lomvia*) in Eastern North America."

A remarkable number of reports emerged over the next week to ten days, most of birds shot by curious gunners who then brought them to others' attention. Some reached the hands of ornithologists, some those of taxidermists, and more had to remain as credible anecdotes. Untold numbers probably went unnoticed or at least unpublished. If a bird could end up in a Preble County snowdrift, how many more must have gone undiscovered across the state? Very few people could identify even a corpse of this unfamiliar species, but some at least recognized them as something unusual. At least 12 thick-billed murres were reported and published for 1896 for Ohio, but it would not be surprising to learn that a hundred times that number actually passed through the state. Here are the 1896 details:

❖18 December 1896: two specimens taken near Painesville, Lake Co (Jones 1902b), one now at the OSU Museum; Williams (1950) reports they were "picked up by J. M. Keck of Mentor (in his yard, according to F. N. Shankland)."[3]

❖19 December 1896: one specimen Preble Co., probably now at OSU Museum(Davie 1900); tag data indicate the date of collection as 20 December 1896, and the specimen is unmounted, though it may have later been relaxed

❖19 December 1896: three immature birds taken in Sandusky Bay (Jones 1902b, 1909), with one mount at OSU Museum

❖25 December 1896: four taken just west of Lorain, Lorain Co., from group of six (Jones 1899, 1902a, 1909)

❖"during the last half of December" 1896: Jones (1909) mentions "others reported from Ottawa Co," without further details.

There are December 1896 records in nearby states with less direct connections via water to the Atlantic, such as Indiana (six), Michigan (two), and even landlocked Iowa. That five of the aforementioned records, even the remote Iowa one, predated Ohio's first occurrence suggests how many may have simply gone unnoticed here. A recently identified specimen from Milwaukee, the sole record for Wisconsin and for Lake Michigan, can be dated only to prior to 1900, but probably was among the great wreck of '96 (Idzikowski 2002).

The period from 1893 through 1909 featured numerous irruptions of thick-billed murres into the Great Lakes (Gaston 1988). Not all of them reached as far west as Lake Erie, however, and the next murres here were noted in 1907:

❖1 December 1907: one seen in Sandusky (Moseley 1908)

❖3 December 1907: four taken of a group of six, presumably in or near Sandusky (Moseley 1908)

❖3 or 4 December 1907: two specimens, perhaps those remaining alive after the previous record, presumably Sandusky area (Moseley 1908)

❖"a few days" before 22 December 1907: one taken in Jefferson, Ashtabula Co., ten miles inland (Sim 1908)

❖"late December" 1907: a wing of this species found at Cedar Point, Erie Co., by Jones (ed. note to Sim 1908).

The following year brought one report:

❖December 1908: Jones (1909) writes "Professor E. L. Moseley tells me that there were either five or seven in Sandusky Bay in December, 1908." It seems likely this is an error, and refers instead to the 1-4 December 1907 birds described above.

Only a single published report—this one involving a bird allowed to live---arose after those of 1907, this time from 1920:

❖12 December 1920: Doolittle (1924) of Painesville described a bird swimming off a Lake Erie breakwall, just where the author asserts another had been shot in 1896.

[3] The record is unclear here. Doolittle (1924) writes he saw this species from a breakwall in Lake Erie in 1920, saying "one was shot at this very spot in 1896." If Williams is correct, this 1896 murre must be another beyond the two he cites (1950). Williams, without citing evidence, locates this breakwall in Fairport; Doolittle, of Painesville, writes (1924) only that it was "extending far out into Lake Erie."





Another major regional pulse of thick-billed murres occurred in 1950. Many were reported from Ontario, and a couple of records came from SE Michigan at this time. Ohio's record of the species in 1950 is less than fully satisfactory, and derives from Milton B. Trautman's draft of an unfinished work on the birds of western Lake Erie. Here he has this to say:

> *One of the worst blizzards in Ohio during my lifetime began Thanksgiving Day, 23 November 1950. On 24 November the temperature remained around 10°F, on 25 November the temperature rose no higher than 12°F, and the blizzard conditions prevailed until sometime after 3:00 p.m. on South Bass Island. There was a foot of drifted snow on the island, 19 inches of snow in Cleveland, 11 inches in Columbus and 29 inches in Pittsburgh! Some snow fell daily from 26 November to 9 December and for seven days the temperature did not rise about 32°F. Hearing rumors of an invasion of murres I walked, sometimes hip-deep through snow, for three miles along the south shore of South Bass Island. Opposite Starve Island I saw a bird which was swimming close to shore, and I assumed was a Thick-billed Murre. Later Frank Ligas described a murre which he saw that was similar to the one I saw and may have been the same bird.*

Incomplete as it is, this 54-year old report constitutes the most recent for this species in Ohio. In fact, since 1950 only a few reports have come from the entire Great Lakes region, one in New York in 1983, and birds in Ontario in 1995 and 1998. Field identification techniques for alcids have advanced considerably, and we no longer have to rely solely upon dead birds to confirm their presence. Numbers of alert observers have increased substantially. In fact, three new alcid species---Atlantic puffin, black guillemot, and long-billed murrelet—have been added to the Ohio list during the last 25 years. Yet for a period more than twice that long, we are without a single report of our most oft-recorded alcid, the thick-billed murre. It seems something must have changed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and then again changed—perhaps reverting to a former state---in the mid twentieth century.

Many authorities who have studied the seesawing fortunes of thick-billed murres in the Great Lakes, such as their westward journeys as many as 225 miles from Lake Erie into the interior of Indiana, and fully 550 miles west of Toledo into Iowa (both during the major wreck of '96), have advanced theories to explain the phenomenon. Fleming was the first, in his "The unusual migration of Brünnich's Murre (*Uria lomvia*) in eastern North America" (1907) where he reviews published records of thick-billed murres during the previous seventeen years, and concludes that wintering birds in Hudson Bay were sometimes cut off from their food source by ice and then migrated overland to the south.

Other students of these phenomena have presented theories of their own, many having to do with violent storms as the cause of these displacements. Gaston (1988), co-author of the *Birds of North America* account of *Uria lomvia*, summarizes these arguments in the light of his research, and finds all of them wanting. He observes

that there is obvious clumping of wrecks of murres in the Great Lakes, and that it is statistically highly significant. He cites contemporaneous accounts of the birds' movements as proof that their course was westward rather than southward, heading inland from the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Study of the morphology of specimens from the wrecks established most birds as members of populations from further north than Hudson Bay. Though major storms at times may have played a role in speeding the murres' progress, Gaston found no clear correlation of wrecks with severe weather events or with overall climatic trends. These birds winter in areas where violent nor'easters are frequent, and while individual birds can occasionally be displaced by storms, it seems unlikely that thousands would so often be blown hundreds of miles inland.

Gaston brings up several other coincidences to suggest that a biological cause for the phenomenon is more likely than a physical one. The vast majority of specimens from the wrecks are first-year birds. There is a strong correlation among the wrecks as to time of year, with most records occurring November through mid December. There is no evidence that anything but death was the fate of the wrecked birds, ruling out repeated irruptions for any segment of the population. The spikes in numbers of wrecked birds, lasting from one to ten years, also suggest a cause other than weather or climate. Finally, there seem to be no clear correlations with irruptions by related species wintering in the same seas.

We are left with a picture in which young inexperienced birds irregularly fly in great numbers west up the Gulf of St. Lawrence and into the Great Lakes or even beyond them. These flights sometimes accompany flights south along the Atlantic coast far beyond the normal wintering range. The wrecks tend to occur for several years at a time, and at predictable times of the year. They seem unrelated to storms, or to flights of other seabirds. Gaston postulates that the cause may have been failures in murres' food sources, such as capelin *Mallotus villosus*, a fish species known to vary widely from year to year in numbers. These prey fluctuations have of course continued in the 50-plus years since the last major murre wrecks, but the pressure on winter food supplies has abated with population declines in thick-billed murre numbers in western Greenland and perhaps in the High Arctic colonies as well. If this theory is sound, only a strong rebound in numbers of breeding thick-billed murres is likely to bring them back (admittedly only to die in the attempt to find food) to Ohio. Most likely, however, the thick-billed murres of Ohio will become another historical curiosity, like rolling clouds of passenger pigeons, or night-long choruses of upland sandpipers overhead, or the hordes of prairie-chickens that used to stroll the streets of old Toledo.

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January 2004 provided opportunity for a gorgeous porttrait of this American tree sparrow in Licking County. *Photo by Robert Royse.*

## A Parting Shot . . .

The long-eared owls of Killdeer Plains WA in Wtandot Co. seem accustomed to human attention. This male faced down photographer Gary Meszaros on 14 February 2004.