

ICELAND

VOLUME TWO - THE BIRDS

PUFFINS, PUFFINS, PUFFINS!

It was made very clear to me from the very start of this Flying Pig Adventure that seeing puffins would be the single most important quest. Seeing other birds, other encounters and other experiences would have to orbit around the puffin world.

Knowing that we would be there at the end of the normal nesting season for the puffins and that outside of nesting season puffins live well out at sea, created some pre-adventure concerns about being able to see any at all.

For the first week I don't think we did see any at all. Wendy and Pat were beginning to hallucinate that the distant black specks out at sea and off into distant sky were, in fact, the puffins they were never going to see.

When we came upon the first sizable puffin colony I was very relieved and felt the great puffin sighting burden lift from my shoulders.

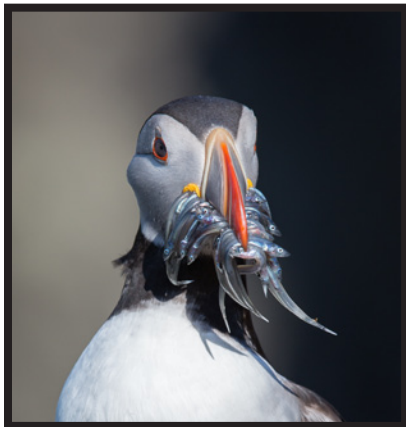
By the end of our Iceland adventure we had several visits to different puffin colonies, all special and enjoyable and some extraordinary!



CHANGES IN PUFFIN BEHAVIOR

After insuring that Wendy's and Pat's puffin fix was having the appropriate 'ohs and awes' affect, I started considering photographs of puffins. As a photographer, photographs of puffins with beaks full of food were a high priority goal. Having no experience photographing puffins I knew there would be unknowns and a bit of a learning curve to photographing them. With the new found first hand knowledge of Iceland's phenomenally erratic changing weather conditions of rain / clouds / sun and wind / more wind / extreme wind that was acquired over the first few days of our adventure, I knew it was not necessarily going to be easy and more probably, would definitely not be.

The first significant puffin colony we visited brought up an entirely new variable I'd neither heard of or considered. The puffins were fishing and coming back with beaks full of food but were being chased by the Black-legged Kittiwakes who wanted to steal their food.



Because of this the puffins would fly and/or dive directly into their underground cave nests, spending no time outside of their underground cave nests! Already I was starting to dislike those damn kittiwakes. When one finally pooped on my camera while my attention was looking through the view finder and having no peripheral vision, I successfully smeared it all around before figuring out what the wet feeling was. What a mess! I really despised those kittiwakes after that!

For an hour or so I tried, without success, to follow the puffins in flight with a 600mm lens and 'maybe' catch them for the split second after they landed and were standing outside of their underground cave nests. The only thing I was able to catch in the way of a "beaks full o'food" photograph, was a new and greater appreciation for just how difficult those photographs of puffins with "beaks full o'food" were to get.



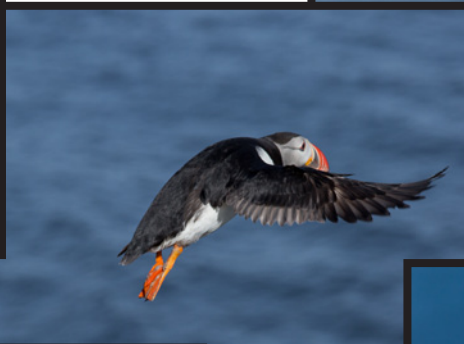
Luckily for me, and all puffins other than in this colony, this bad Black-legged Kittiwake behavior was not normal. We did not see this sort of bad behavior at any of the other puffins colonies in Iceland.

Atlantic Puffins and the Black-legged Kittiwakes eat from the same food supply and that food supply had become more scarce in this area of Iceland in the last couple of years. The conjecture is that because of this change in the food supply, the kittiwakes took to stealing food from the puffins in this area.

Very interesting, and luckily for me photographically, the behavior had not changed at other puffin colonies around Iceland. The puffins there were still very proud and willing to strut around with their beaks full of food (which they do regardless of having any young to feed or not).

It was very interesting how quick the kittiwakes and puffins had adapted to this change in food supply, and just in the area of Iceland. A call it my Icelandic Charles Darwin experience in evolution.









At this small island the puffins were so thick it was impossible for me to focus on just one puffin and photograph it in flight. It was so overwhelming. I remember stopping the futile effort to photograph just one, laughing and just watching and enjoying the show. I imagined myself looking like our cat when I make the laser pointer dance around the room walls, ceiling and floors... head spinning around, watching in torment, and the futile effort to catch it... Karma again...



Wendy and Pat on a bird cliff, Black-legged Kittiwakes below.



Birds nesting on the 'bird' cliff below Wendy and Pat.



Red-necked Phalarope



Eurasian Teal Chick



Red-necked Phalarope



Common Redshank



Northern Fulmar



Whimbrel



Great Skua



Common Redshank



European Shag



European Shag



Arctic Terns

The dreaded Arctic Tern is extremely territorial when you pass anywhere near their nesting fields. It is a very Alfred Hitchcock The Birds experience. People get freaked out by their dive bombing and screeching. A common practice is to carry a tall stick, holding it above the head so the terns will attack the stick and not the person, (see photo below).

My opinion is that the terns may shit on you but they are not going actually hit you. I never carried a stick and I did not duck, flinch, flail, scream, whimper, cry, or run... and not once did they whack me. They came close and once or twice I shrugged when they surprised me... and they never shit on me... it took a Black-legged Kittiwake to do that.



Wendy (in the foreground wearing the purple jacket / gray hood) with a group of bird watchers trying to hold off the terns with her stick. The little blue flag on the top of each stick gives the terns a nice target.





Arctic Tern scolding and warning me as I lay prone on the guano covered ground in the middle of a huge nesting area for this prospective. It was the last day I wore those clothes before a thorough wash!



Arctic Tern chick scolding me before its parent to the left stepped in and took over.

Black-legged Kittiwake



Black-legged Kittiwake and chicks



Black-legged Kittiwake chicks





While I was photographing this pair of tranquil Eurasian Oystercatchers that were a few yards apart from each other, another (a third) Eurasian Oystercatcher landed nearby and this pair immediately came together and began a stressful sounding call and marching around in unison with each other. The pair continued this uniformed marching and calling for about five minutes, until the intruding oystercatcher left. The pair then separated by a few yards and all was tranquil again.





While not a bird, this is where I'll put in the few photographs I took of a very young arctic fox pup we found hanging out near a farm we stayed at. The pup's mother had been killed and he was befriended (for the time being) by the people and other animals on the farm.



That's it for the bird issue. The next issue (waterfalls) will be published soon.
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