



This makeshift cabin is home to interns who study endangered puffins during the summer. (Globe Photo / Bill Regan)

## Getting to the puffin place

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By Jane Roy Brown, Globe Correspondent | August 1, 2004

EASTERN EGG ROCK, Maine -- "Puffin flying at one o'clock!" someone shouts. What looks like a black-and-white Nerf ball whizzes by about 25 yards off the bow, wings pinwheeling.

Sixty or so eager puffin watchers, binoculars and cameras pressed to their faces, swivel starboard. The bird puts down in the rolling sea, and the crowd gets a glimpse of its clownish white face and the chunky beak striped in orange, yellow, and black.

Seconds later, the seabird dives. The passengers sigh. Then a voice cries, "Puffin flying at seven o'clock!" and heads jerk to port.

It's hard to match the excitement of a wildlife cruise, whether the quarry is whales or seals or little birds. The thrill doubles when the creature is rare, and in the puffin's case, recovering from being all but wiped out on the Maine coast in the early 20th century. This cruise out of the pristine fishing port of New Harbor is one of two (the other sails from nearby Boothbay) that take visitors to see the birds and tell the story of their remarkable rebound.

National Audubon Society guide Pete Salmansohn began the tale of Project Puffin as the boat headed into the mouth of Muscongus Bay at 5:30 in the evening. The destination: Eastern Egg Rock, a few miles offshore.

The stony 7-acre scrape is one of four Maine islands where puffins have returned to nest since Audubon seabird specialist Stephen Kress began luring them back in the early 1970s. At the southern end of the puffins' range, Maine is the only state where Atlantic puffins come ashore to breed. Feather hunters, however, killed off puffins and most other seabirds on this coast over three centuries of unchecked slaughter, said Salmansohn. Some feathers were used to stuff pillows and mattresses, but the more striking plumage adorned women's hats. By 1901, only one pair of puffins survived south of Canada, on Matinicus Rock in Maine's Penobscot Bay. A lighthouse keeper had protected them.

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 made it illegal to kill most wild birds, and many seabird species gradually recovered. The Matinicus Rock puffins multiplied: Today, they number 150 pairs, especially remarkable considering puffins lay only one egg a year. However, puffins never returned to Eastern Egg Rock or three other Maine islands they had inhabited.

Kress, Salmansohn, and others embarked on an experiment. Kress moved newly-hatched chicks from a puffin colony in Newfoundland to Eastern Egg Rock. The young birds survived, and during their maiden ocean voyage, which can last up to three years, Kress made dozens of puffin decoys, which he mounted on the rocks to fool the birds into thinking this was a great place to return to, socialize, and mate. The trick worked, and Kress repeated his success at another former nesting spot, Seal Island in Penobscot Bay.

Today, Eastern Egg Rock is home to 59 nesting pairs of puffins.

By the time Salmansohn has recounted the tale, the boat begins a slow circle of the island. Salmansohn spots the first puffin: "Ten o'clock, in the air!" Despite its football-shaped body and large head, the bird is a frustrating target in the air because of its speed. Even on the water, it rarely dawdles on the surface but dives in search of small fish to

feed its young. Puffins "fly" even underwater, beating their wings to propel them as far as 100 feet deep, ruddering with their feet. Moments later, the bird pops up, two or three fishtails clamped in its beak.

The boat heads back to shore. The photographers with digital cameras lean together, comparing their bounty shot by shot. This time, the "hunting" is strictly catch and release.

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