

TRIP REPORT

Saturday August 13th, 2022
Farewell to Puffins Fundraiser Boat Tour



Prepared by: Amanda Colbert
*all photos provided are TSSS & A. Colbert's property
(unless otherwise noted)



Vessel, Captain, and
Crew provided by:



CAPTAIN: Matt Stolmeier
DECKHANDS: Alex Patia &
Sofie Broznowski

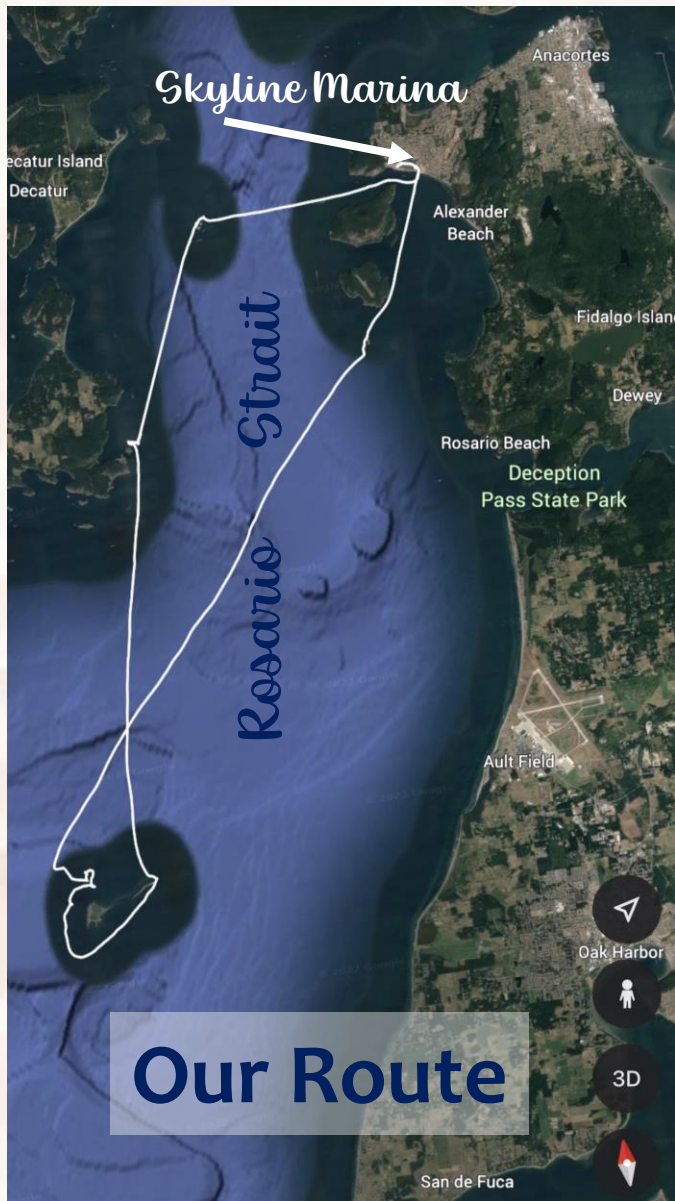
The Salish Sea
SCHOOL



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Amy Eberling
EDUCATION COORDINATOR: Amanda Colbert

Farewell to Puffins Fundraiser Boat Tour

I first want to take a moment to say **THANK YOU** for joining us for our annual “Farewell to Puffins” fundraising event! Saturday’s weather made for a beautiful evening out on the water, and we were anxious to share a few “hotspot” areas that we’d been seeing a great diversity of sea and marine birds this summer season. Pushing off from Skyline Marina, the excitement and anticipation to see the Tufted Puffins was palpable amongst the group. Your naturalist team was just as excited to “see what we might turn up,” too. Below you will see the route that Outer Island’s Blackfish IV embarked upon during the duration of our trip, with call out areas and corresponding silhouetted species (I’ll dive into details throughout!).



Williamson Rocks – Rosario Strait



Double-crested
Cormorants

Pelagic Cormorants



Our first few wildlife sightings of the trip occurred before we could even cruise out of Skyline Marina! There were a couple harbor seals meandering in the water near the docks, and of course the expected gulls, cormorants, and a Great Blue Heron nearby.

Entering Burrows Bay, we began a south, south-westerly cruise toward Smith Island, but we would have one of our first “hotspot” stops along the way. Motoring near Williamson Rocks we turned up some diverse species—not all of them feathered—and began to note Double-crested Cormorants on nests, Pelagic Cormorants sprinkled throughout, a few familiar summertime gull species (Heermann’s, California, and a plethora of hybridized gulls – Glaucous-winged x Western mixed), and I heard a few Black Oystercatchers “squeeing,” but never got a visual. We were also on the look out for rogue, juvenile Brown Pelicans, as reports of these birds have been sporadic, but fairly consistent, the last few weeks around the San Juan Islands. This outing we were unsuccessful, but it was worth keeping an eye out!

Williamson Rocks – Rosario Strait



Pelagic Cormorants

Before leaving this location, I scanned the water around the rocks where more harbor seals were found, as well as some Pigeon Guillemots, a few Rhinoceros Auklets, and 1, maybe 2, Common Murre a bit farther out.

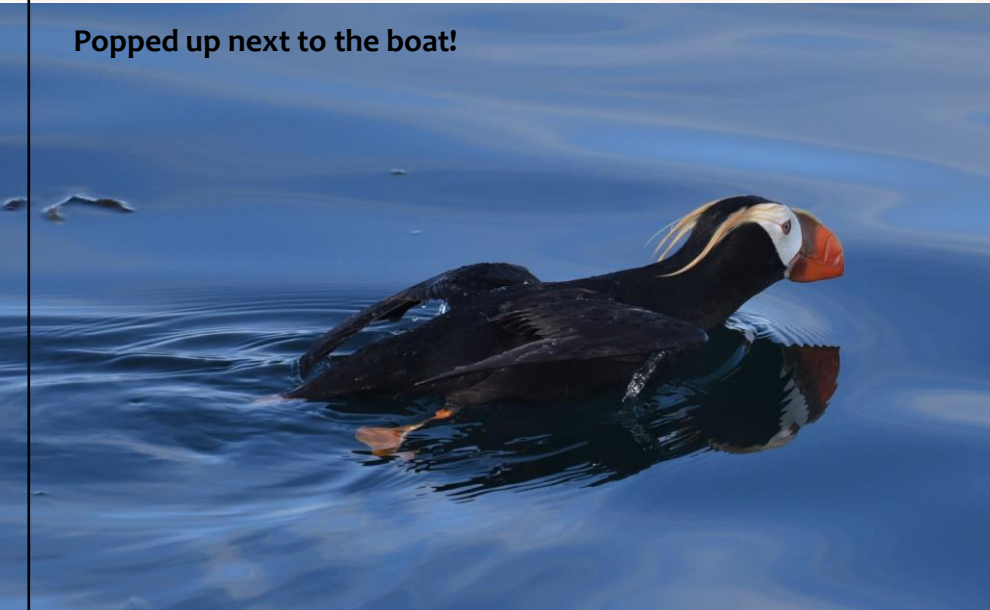
Next up was a “Cormorant Condo,” (as I’ve been calling them with our students this summer) which was a red channel marker brimming with Pelagic Cormorants who were rearing young on almost each “shelf.” What a treat to see these downy young!

Smith Island - Tufted Puffins

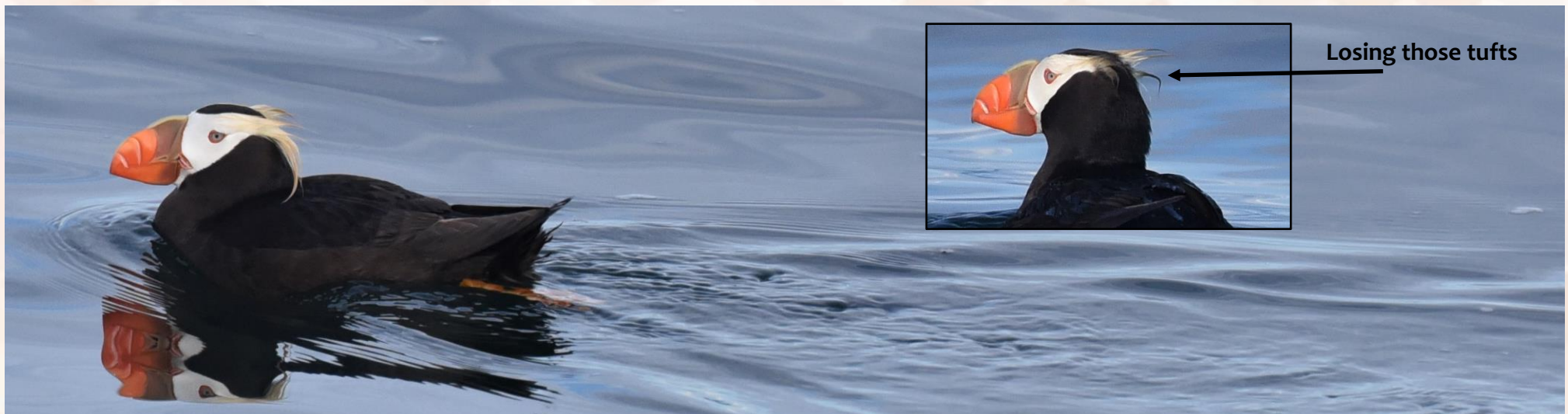
While the cormorants, gulls, and common Alcid species are great to spot and watch for a short time, we knew we wanted to be able to spend as much time as possible looking for, and experiencing, our tufted friends, so off we continued to Smith Island in some of the smoothest conditions that this summer has afforded us in the ever expanding, open water.

It wasn't long before we started encountering individuals on the north side of Smith, to the delight of everyone on board. A "first" for us this season was to note an individual who showed marked signs of thinning out those beautiful golden tufts, though for the timing, it seems interesting (to us) that most of the TUPUs spotted still had thick plumes and full white faces.

Popped up next to the boat!



...and decided s/he was too close...



Smith Island – Tufted Puffins & (a) Horned Puffin(s?)!

While still admiring some of the dozen or so individual Tufted Puffins we had turned up, we had also been scanning rapidly as we were trying hard to see if we would turn up the rare, out-of-range, much-coveted Horned Puffin on this trip—and before long, excited shouting, pointing, and all eyes and binoculars were turned to a far-off individual with a very white face and breast (that I believe naturalist Alex spotted first). Success! Captain Matt began slowly heading in that general direction, knowing that this bird had proven skittish on past encounters; s/he would live up to that reputation again this evening, not sticking around for long before taking flight and moving in a northern direction and out of sight.

My photos of this Horned Puffin weren't great with the distance we kept, but an exciting capture nonetheless!



I just have to mention how lovely the lighting was at different points/angles throughout this trip. I could wax poetic about the soft, swirling, watercolor-esque seas and the handsome Tufted Puffins for far more pages than I'll include in this report, but I can't overlook just how wonderful the viewing and photographing conditions were.

Horned Puffin!



Smith Island – Mixed Flock Shenanigans



We continued motoring around the Northwest side of Smith Island, eventually turning south, noting the bluffs, the burrow openings just under the grassy area that many Alcid species use at this location, the numerous gulls (with Heermann's doing their little cackle at us as we went), the tower with the Bald Eagles' nest, some Red-necked Grebes, and then little mixed groupings of Common Murres, Tufted Puffins, and gulls, all likely fishing for the same forage fish (mostly Sand Lance) just beneath the surface.

I love when a mixed grouping of birds presents, because what a lovely look at their size differences, bill differences, and to watch some of their behavior and interactions. Like a juvenile gull formulating a possible klepto-parasitic move on a wary Tufted Puffin.



Sand Lance in bill!

Mine?!

Smith Island – Love is Love: A Puffin Story

Speaking of “mixed groupings,” suddenly a passenger exclaimed that she had the Horned Puffin in her sights once again, but this time, s/he was found with a Tufted Puffin “friend.”

This single event of our evening was likely the most climactic and swoon-worthy of our bird sightings together—it seemed likely not one person was inside the cabin at this point; our collective imaginations and speculative love stories between these two birds were being mused at and chuckled over. And we were left with more questions about these two birds than we would ever receive answers for:

- Was this a second Horned Puffin, seeing as the first flew north, and we were now on the west side of Smith Island?
- Can these two separate puffin species even communicate with each other?
- Was their seabird relationship platonic, or something more?
- Why do you seem SO LOST little HOPU?
- What would we call the puffling sired between a Tufted and Horned Puffin? A Torned Puffin? A Horfted Puffin? Would said mythological seabird even have both horns and tufts?

...I don't know...but this is a seabirdy soap opera that I would absolutely tune in to!
“Next time, on ‘As the Tide Turns’.”



Smith Island & approaching Minor Island

Smith Island



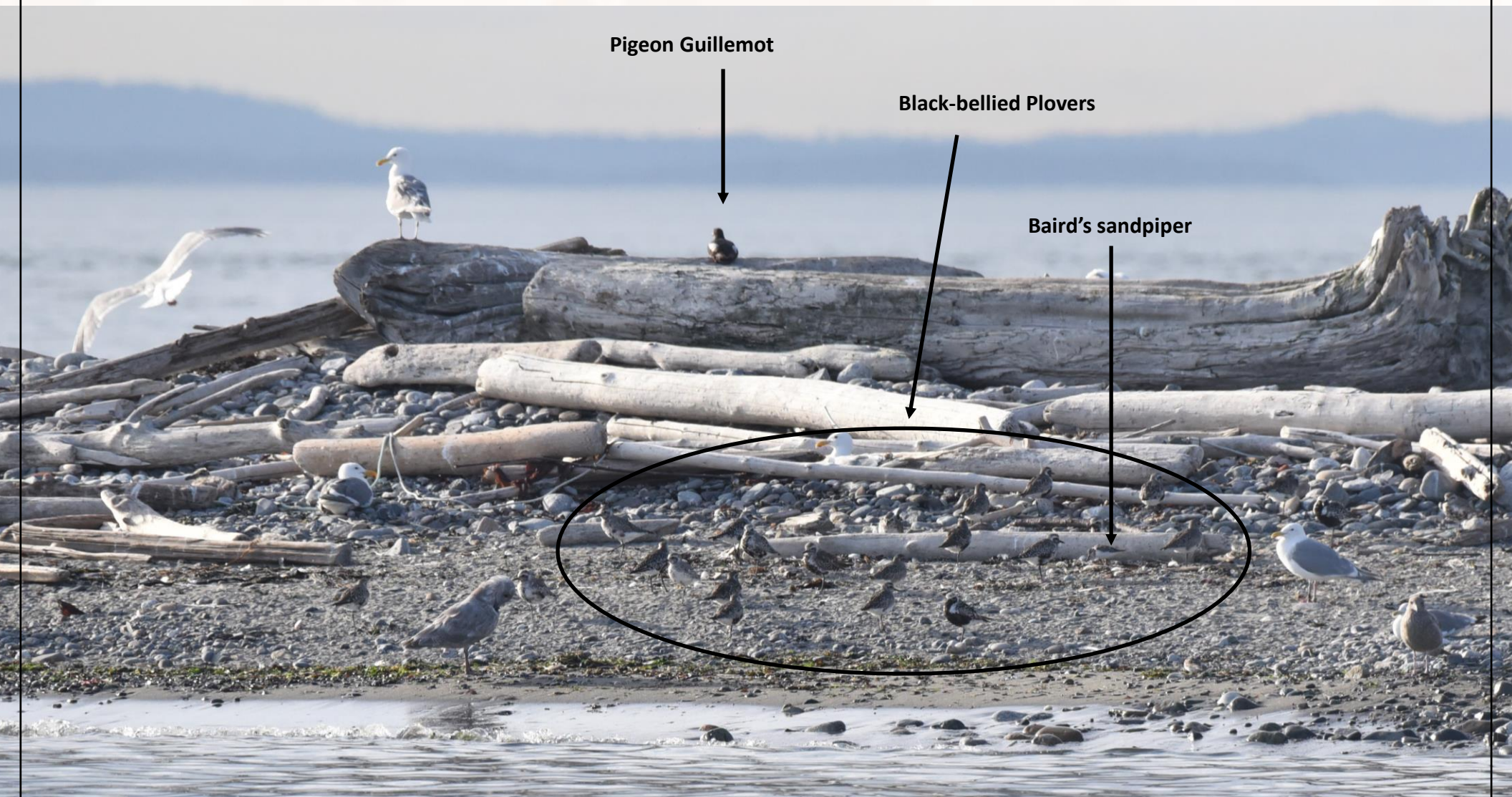
Leaving the oddly-matched puffin pair and continuing onward, we were treated to views of the southwest side of Smith Island in some beautiful light. A couple Bald Eagles spooked up all the gulls sitting on the island and in the bull kelp beds at this point, and the sky around the island turned into a gull-fill snow globe. Our best “guestimate” for gulls out here this evening was roughly 5,000 (+ or – a couple hundred).

We would continue along the south side of the island where Smith tapers into shallow waters, and eventually Minor Island slopes slightly above the water to the east. More bird species awaited us, here.

Common Murre



Minor Island & the Shorebirds



Pigeon Guillemot

Black-bellied Plovers

Baird's sandpiper

Before reaching the end of Minor Island, two Common Loons, several Red-necked Grebes, and Pigeon Guillemots were paddling around just offshore. More beautiful evening light almost seemed to highlight the birds found along the shore as well as turn Lopez island (background) into soft shades of lavender.

To the surprise of many, Black-bellied Plovers were sighted in a decent number (34), and 2-3 Baird's sandpipers, though very small and blending in well, making them difficult to spot, were mixed in, probing along the seaweed.

Minor Island & the Shorebirds



Crossing over to the other side of the spit that is Minor Island, more shorebirds presented themselves, including Sanderlings (est. 185), Western Sandpipers (~8), Black Turnstones (29) and another 14 Black-bellied Plovers. The view of the Swantown/Oak Harbor area bluffs and Mount Rainier in the background were glorious.

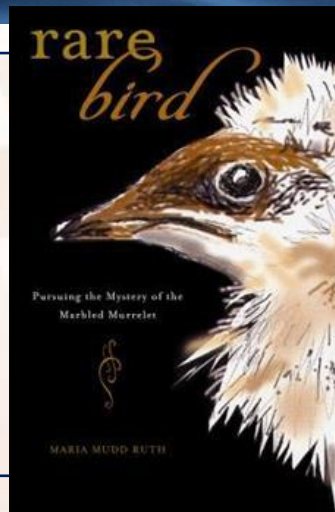
Watmough Bay, SE Lopez Island



Our last bit of excitement for the evening would be found along Watmough Bay (SE side of Lopez Island) and at Bird Rocks, the remaining two “hotspots” on our list.

Near Watmough Bay, a pair of Marbled Murrelets appeared just where Captain Matt had said they might, almost as if he conjured them there. These two birds were surprisingly cooperative and didn't seem to mind the waves drifting our vessel closer to them. Still in breeding plumage of browns, almonds, buffs, beiges, and whites, it won't be long before these tiny seabirds swap all their earth tones for black and grays to better blend into a winter environment out at sea.

*Sidebar: if you have not yet read the book “Rare Bird: Pursing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet” by Maria Mudd Ruth I cannot recommend this book enough. Even for the non-birdy, but naturalist-leaning type, the mystery, discovery, and excitement of this book is phenomenal.



Bird Rocks & A Rare Visitor

Sea Otter (rare sighting!)



Not far from Watmough Bay, we moved north toward Bird Rocks, a protected area that The Salish Sea School has been collecting bird data at the last two seasons. Occasionally some flipped individuals steal the bird thunder at this location, and tonight was not an exception.

Harbor seal with pup



Steller sea lion



A rare sea otter has been gracing Bird Rocks the last several weeks, but this is a rare sighting. Once abundant in this region, humans hunted sea otters to extirpation for their soft fur (no longer found in this area). Lots of work is being done to try to bring this animal back to the region, and how lucky we've been to introduce students, and you all, to this rare visitor this summer.

Harbor seals with pups were around, too, resting in the kelp, and a couple seemingly grumpy Steller sea lions were probably wondering why we were meandering. What fascinates me most about Bird Rocks is that we're not far from other islands and land and look at the diversity we can find just a short boat ride from Skyline Marina and busy Anacortes.

Bird Rocks



A parcel of Black Oystercatchers

A gulp of Brandt's Cormorants

My last two bird photos of our trip were a large grouping of Black Oystercatchers (known as a “parcel”) as well as some nice looks at Brandt’s Cormorants. “Beefier” than the Pelagic variety, having a dark blue eye, and buffy-to-yellow cheek patch, they are not always easy to distinguish when they are not in breeding plumage or among the other cormorant species.

With the light beginning to fade, and the evening drawing on, we crossed Rosario Strait, entered Burrows Bay, and turned into Skyline Marina to conclude our “Farewell to Puffins” Tour, where I can truly say I think we got much more than we bargained for.



SPECIES LIST FOR OUR TRIP

We could not have asked for a better puffin trip to “endcap” our summer on the water with the community that supports our initiatives. We hope you all feel the same way about our time spent on the water! Let’s share some more time adventuring out in the beautiful Salish Sea soon!

With sincere gratitude,

Amy Eberling & Amanda Colbert

and the Outer Island Crew

pinnipeds

- Harbor seal
- Steller sea lion

mustelids

- Sea otter (rare!)

other

- Bull kelp
- Sand lance

birds

- Harlequin Duck
- Red-necked Grebe
- Black-bellied Plover
- Black Oystercatcher
- Black Turnstone
- Sanderling
- Baird’s Sandpiper
- Western Sandpiper
- Common Murre
- **Marbled Murrelet**
- Pigeon Guillemot
- Rhinoceros Auklet
- **Horned Puffin**
- **Tufted Puffin (34!)**
- Heermann’s Gull
- California Gull
- Glaucous-winged x Western hybrid gulls
- Caspian Tern
- Common Loon
- Brandt’s Cormorants
- Pelagic Cormorants
- Double-crested Cormorants
- Bald Eagle
- Great Blue Heron



California Gull

Our dedicated team of staff and volunteer educators **THANKS YOU** for contributing to our FUNdraising event. Your ticket purchase for the “Farewell to Puffins” Tour helps to ensure we can continue expanding our student programming, create new curriculum, and enables us to educate everyone we can about the Salish Sea and the wonderful wildlife found in and around it!

THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!



THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!

STUDENT ADVENTURES



The Salish Sea
SCHOOL

SEA Clubs Pre-K – 5th | Art-Ventures Pre-K-5th | Guardianes del Mar – High School | Guardians of the Sea – Middle & High School | Mindfulness in Nature – all ages | Birding Courses – all ages | ID & Seek – Middle & High School | Students Training as Research Scientists (STaRS) – Middle & High School | Community Service Projects | Student Leadership Team | Free Family Hikes & More!