

PhotoFile

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Featuring Photography and Articles by
John R. DeLapp



St. Paul Island

A Trip to a Pribilof Island Far Off Alaska's Southwest Coast

In This Issue...

St. Paul Island



After having lived in Alaska for almost forty years and never having visited the Pribilof Islands, I decided that the summer of 2016 was the time to finally make the trip. Luckily, three of my photography friends were organizing a trip and invited me to join them on a week-long trip to St. Paul Island, the largest of the Pribilof Island group.

The island was originally occupied by Russian fur traders as early as 1786. There is no evidence that the island was occupied by native people prior to that. The Russians enslaved Aleut Natives from the Aleutian Islands to work in harvesting and processing the millions of Northern Fur Seals inhabiting the island's waters and rookeries. The result was the establishment of a permanent village on the island, which today, has a population of about 480. The fur seals were nearly decimated early on but now number some 800,000 and are protected by the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. Under an agreement with the federal government, the Tribal Government of St. Paul is allowed to harvest a limited number of fur seals for subsistence purposes. The rookeries are off limits to visitors unless accompanied by a guide authorized by the National Marine Fisheries. Photos of the harvest are not permitted.

The Pribilofs are also noted for the millions of sea birds that nest on the islands and for the many species that appear during annual migrations. It is estimated that 80% of the world's Red-legged Kittiwakes nest on these islands. Storms will often bring birds from Asia that are rarely seen in the U.S. Many birders visit the islands in hopes of sighting rarely seen birds. During our visit there was one resident bald eagle which somehow had made its way to the island.

The local Native corporation, TDX (Tanadguisix Corporation), provides tour packages for visitors that include lodging, meals, local transportation, and guides that lead tours to rookeries and bird nesting areas. During our visit, our guides were Scott Schuette (director of St. Paul Island Tours), Stephan Lorenz, and Alison Vilag. The guides provided all our transportation on the island and, without exception, had an amazing knowledge about the birds and other wildlife on the island. They accompanied us in the field and lead us on a number of hikes that provided great viewing and photo opportunities of many birds and the fur seal rookeries. The island also has a population of arctic foxes (blue-phase) which we saw nearly every day, including in the middle of town.

FRONT COVER: A Northern Fur Seal reveals rows of sharp teeth while keeping an eye on people visiting a rookery on St. Paul Island.

BACK COVER: A Tufted Puffin sits on a rocky cliff above the Bering Sea on St. Paul Island.

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PhotoFile #5: *Havana!*, May 2015

PhotoFile #6: *Bear Boat*, September 2015

PhotoFile #7: *A Season to Remember*, April 2016



St. Paul Island

St. Paul is a treeless, wind-swept, and notoriously foggy island surrounded by the Bering Sea. It is located about 260 miles northwest of Unalaska, the nearest Aleutian island, and about 320 miles from Alaska's southwestern coast. The island has a 6,500 ft. paved air strip and a network of two-lane and single track gravel roads leading to remote capes and beaches.

Most areas on the island can be reached within a fifteen to twenty minute drive from the village.

The village rests on a low hill above a natural harbor where a marina and sea food processing plant are located. The plant processes a variety of fish as well as crab. St. Paul has a well stocked store, a hotel adjoining the airport terminal about three miles from town, and a piped water and sewer system in town. While pet cats are allowed, dogs are not allowed on the island because of the risk

of infecting fur seals with distemper.

The island was formed by volcanoes and is covered by volcanic rock and sand.

Travel from Anchorage to St. Paul requires a 3-1/2 hour flight with Pen Air which serves St. Paul three or four times per week. The outbound flight from Anchorage normally stops in Dillingham for additional fuel before heading to St. Paul.

Our group was a mix of photographers and birders. Our daily routine consisted of being driven each morning by our guide to the fish processing plant cafeteria for breakfast. After breakfast, we spent the day with the guide driving and/or hiking to various island locations and then returning to the processing plant for lunch and dinner. Usually, there was also an option for additional touring in the evenings.

The cold Bering Sea dictated

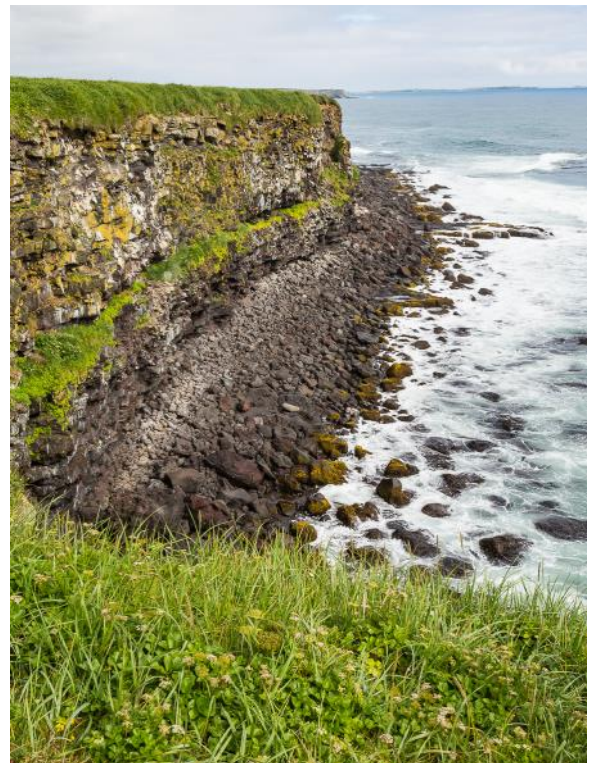
the weather during our week-long stay, giving us nearly constant wind, often with morning fog which tended to dissipate later in the day.

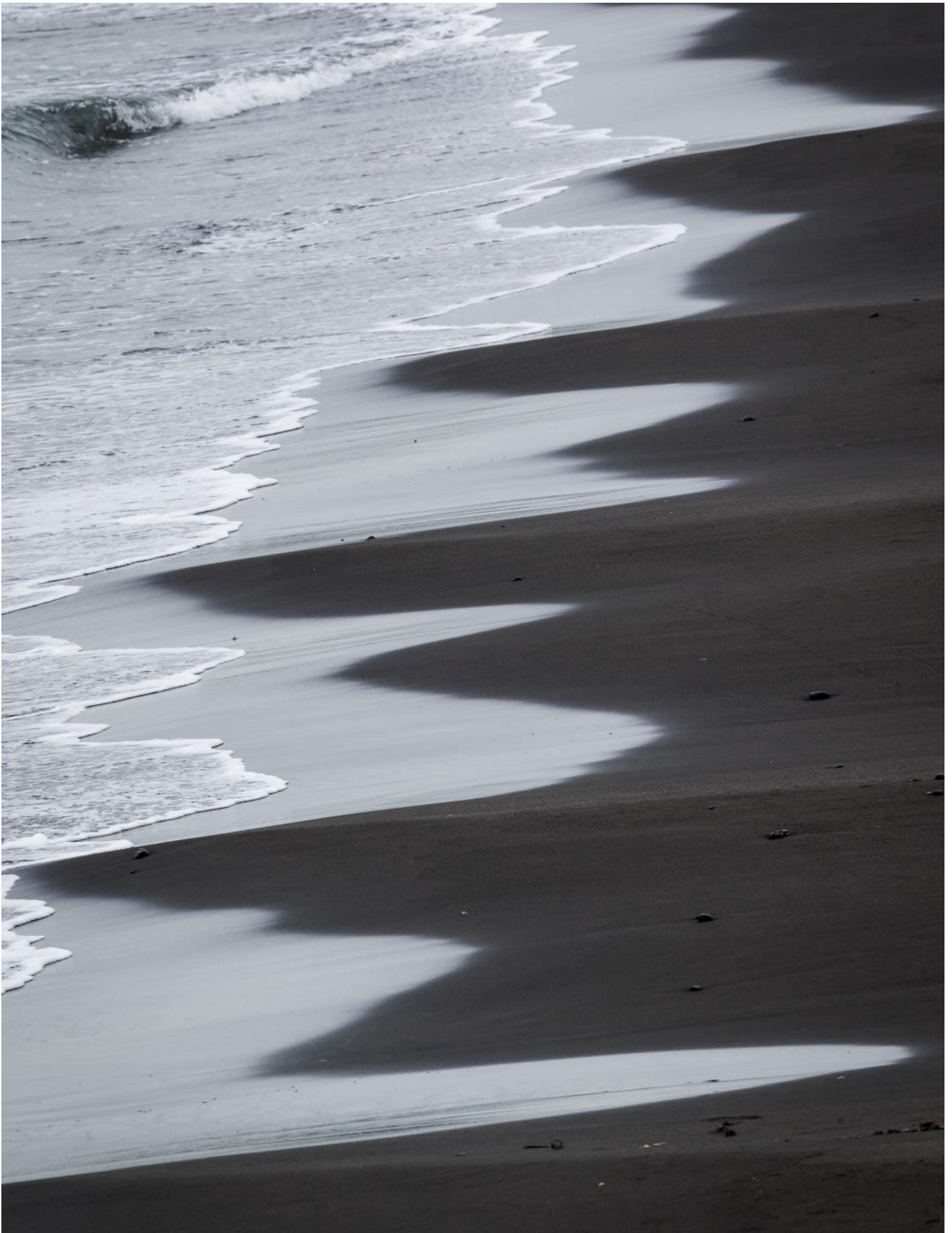
Since most of the bird activity is located on the steep cliffs, a long lens is needed to make a close-up picture of the nesting birds. Some locations required hiking a few miles to remote beaches and cliffs.

According to the records I kept during our week long-visit, our group saw 41 bird species, which I was told is fairly typical for a short visit like ours. I was particularly thrilled to twice see a Bartailed Godwit, thought to be the only one on the island at the time. This bird nests in Western Alaska and normally migrates non-stop in the fall back to New Zealand, a trip of some 7,000 miles. Unlike seabirds, the Godwit cannot land on the ocean to rest or eat.

**Island Geology.**

St. Paul's most visible crater clearly provides evidence of the island's volcanic origins. In spite of the rocky and sandy terrain, lush, green vegetation carpets all but the steepest cliffs due to the moist maritime climate. Remnants of two other craters can be seen in the distance.







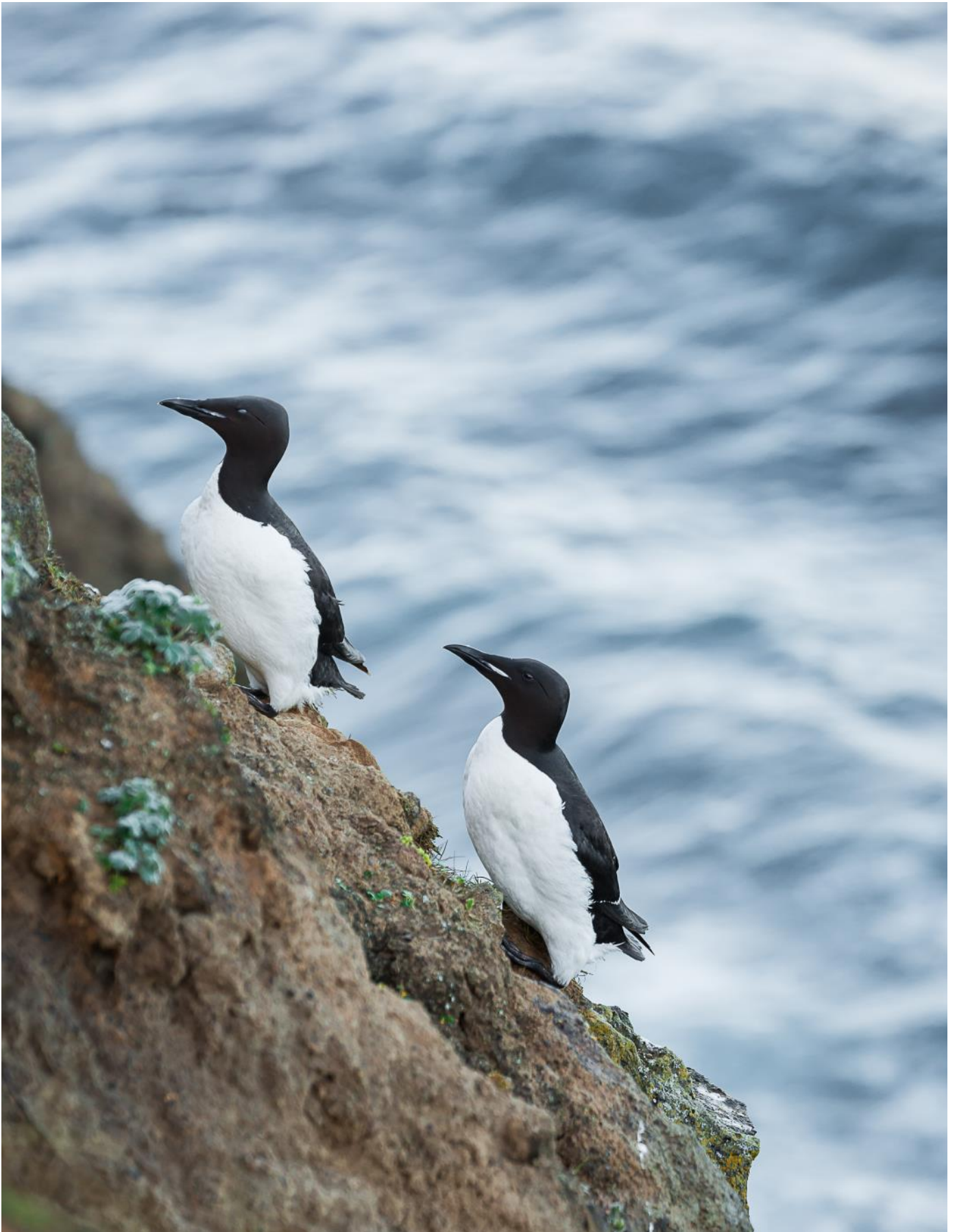
Beaches and Hills.

Much of the shoreline around the island is rocky with cliffs of varying heights, but there are also beautiful black sand beaches that can be reached without too much effort, like the one on the opposite page.

Beach Fleabane, the yellow flower, is seen along much of the shoreline.

One other notable flower growing in many locations on the island was the purple Monkshood. This flower is well known to be very poisonous plant—not to be eaten. The roots and leaves contain the toxin aconitine and deaths have occurred when the plant is eaten. But in addition, references indicate that touching the leaves without gloves can lead to poisoning, and possibly even death.





Seabirds.

Thick-bill Murres (left) and Horned Puffins (below) of the Alcids family, breed and nest above the Bering Sea on rocky cliffs, often in tightly packed colonies. A breeding pair of Murres or Puffins produce one egg which is placed directly on the rock without a nest.

Both species spend their lives in and around Arctic

waters, wintering in ice-free, cold ocean waters. Murres can dive over 100 meters deep in search of fish, and other food and both Murres and Puffins are adept at “flying” under water, but they need to paddle on the water or launch from a cliff to get airborne. Once airborne they may fly many miles to feeding sites.





Crested Auklet.

This member of the Alcids family is very similar in size and appearance to the Parakeet Auklet. Range and habits are nearly identical to other auklets.

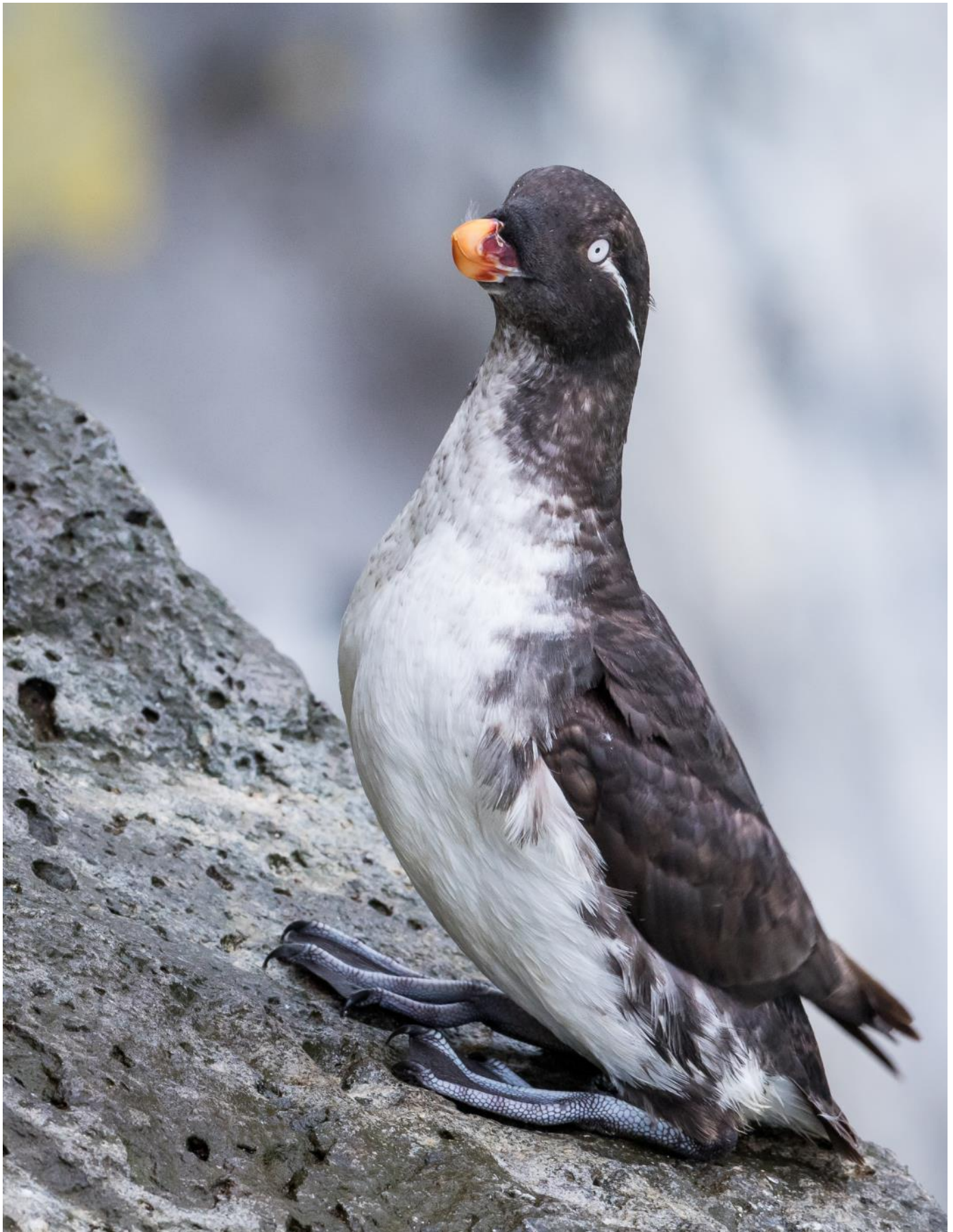
Least Auklets.

These small 6-inch birds, like all members of the Alcids family, come to shore only to breed. Winters are spent on inshore and offshore marine waters.

Parakeet Auklet.

This 10-inch bird is also a member of the Alcids family. Members of the Alcids family are considered the penguin of the Northern hemisphere. They are shaped like footballs and can “fly” underwater in pursuit of prey. All have web feet, short legs and can fly long distances.









Kittiwakes.

Both Black-legged and Red-Legged Kittiwakes are common visitors to the Pribilof Islands. Large flocks often rest on sand bars in the Salt Lagoon near town.



Red-faced Cormorants.

These somewhat rare and shy birds are considered by some as the least known of all North American species. They spend winters off shore in North Pacific or Bering sea wa-



Northern Fur Seals.

To insure visitors' safety, viewing and photographing seals can only be done during guided tours and generally only from raised blinds or from inside vehicles which can park near some of the rookeries.







Arctic Fox, Blue Phase.

The arctic foxes indigenous to the Pribilof Islands do not turn white in the winter like their relatives in the arctic. The five kits in the photo above, were curious about us but remained close to their den. Foxes were seen a number of locations, included a pair that apparently had a den in town under a metal storage container.





Gray-crowned Rosy-finch.

Red-necked Phalarope.





Snow Bunting.

Longspur. Lapland



Snow Bunting, juvenile.





Winter (Pacific) Wren. (above)

This tiny wren is a year-round resident of the St. Paul Island and somehow manages to survive the harsh winters.



Ruddy Turnstone. (left)

These shorebirds breed in arctic and western Alaska always very close to marine waters. They migrate to lower latitudes and can survive in varying climates and habitats. Usually found in flocks.

Parakeet Auklet. (right)

These Auklets spend winters in the North Pacific but their range and southern limits are not well documented.





Our Group.

Pictured to the right are Bob, Geoff, Harry, Ray, and me surrounding Alison, who was our guide for that particular day. The structures in the background are used as blinds and shelters for biologists and researchers who periodically monitor the fur seals and birds



Left: Three hikers from our group get ready to descend a steep, rocky, slope covered with slippery vegetation. The purple flowers in this picture are the toxic and very dangerous Monkshood which we carefully avoided touching during our outings.

