THICK-BILLED MURRE  *Uria lomvia*

**Conservation Status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ALASKA: Not at Risk</th>
<th>N. AMERICAN: Moderate Concern</th>
<th>GLOBAL: Least Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breed</td>
<td>Eggs</td>
<td>Incubation</td>
<td>Fledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June-Aug</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30-35 d</td>
<td>16-30 d</td>
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**Life History and Distribution**

Thick-billed murres (*Uria lomvia*) nest on narrow ledges on precipitous cliff faces. Breeding colonies are extremely dense and can number up to a million birds. Birds nest shoulder to shoulder, laying one egg on bare rock, with densities reaching 10–30 eggs per square yard. Eggs are round at one end and pointed at the other. The unique shape helps them to roll around in a circle if they are bumped, instead of falling off the cliff. Egg color and mottling vary greatly from green to pinkish and may assist the parents in recognizing their own egg. One parent incubates and guards the egg while the other goes to sea to feed. Foraging trips may be up to 100 miles from the colony and can take up to two days.

Murres are tough and hearty. Only three weeks after hatching, flightless chicks jump off high cliff ledges and plunge into frigid ocean water below. The first day after leaving the nest they begin an incredible migration southward, remaining with the male parent who feeds them for another month. First, they swim up to 600 miles, then once their flight feathers have developed, they fly further south to their wintering grounds.

The breeding range is circumpolar, including arctic and subarctic regions in the Atlantic, Arctic, and Pacific Oceans. In North America, they nest in Atlantic and arctic Canada, Alaska, and a few pairs in British Columbia. In Alaska, they breed from Cape Lisburne in the northwest, along the coast of western Alaska (Kotzebue Sound, Diomede, Nunivak, St. Lawrence, St. Mathew, and the Pribilof islands) to the Alaska Peninsula, and throughout the Aleutian Islands. They also breed along the southern coast of Alaska off Kodiak, the Barren, and Middleton islands, and at Cape St. Elias and St. Lazaria Island in Southeast Alaska.

**Alaska Seasonal Distribution**

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<td>Southeastern *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern</td>
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the Atlantic). The Pacific subspecies is *Uria lomvia arra*.

**Population Estimates and Trends**

The total world population is estimated at 15-20 million individuals. In Alaska, where the breeding range overlaps extensively with that of Common Murres, it is difficult to identify and assign every individual to a species. As a result, population estimates in Alaska include a percentage of unidentified murres at all colonies censused. The Alaskan Thick-billed Murre population is approximately 2.2 million birds at 174 colonies.

At sites where counts of murres are made from the water, it is especially difficult to differentiate the species. Thick-billed and Common Murres are often combined at these sites for population trend analysis. For sites where murres are not combined, significant negative trends were found for Thick-billed Murres on Hall Island in the Bering Sea (-2.4% per annum 1983-1997) and on St. Paul Island in the Pribilof Islands (-1.7% per annum 1976-2002). On Buldir Island in the Aleutian Islands, Thick-billed Murres showed a significant positive trend of +7.7% per annum between 1974-2003.

**Conservation Concerns and Actions**

Cliff life presents many hazards to murres. Storms, cold weather, and disturbance by humans can cause both chicks and eggs to be blown or knocked off their narrow ledges, killed by exposure, or left undefended to be snatched by predators. Murres at breeding colonies are especially sensitive to helicopters, gunshots, and disturbance from above the. Few predators prey on adult Thick-billed Murres, but some introduced species such as the arctic (*Alopex lagopus*) and red (*Vulpes vulpes*) fox are known to do so.

Effects of human activity include hunting. In Alaska, adult murres and eggs are taken by Native subsistence hunters. Between the early 1990s and 2000, about 9,195 adult murres and almost 37,000 murre eggs were taken, with the majority of adult murres taken on St. Lawrence Island. The murres were not identified to species in subsistence surveys and comprised both Common and Thick-billed Murres in census figures. Effects on the populations are not directly known, but current harvests are not thought to cause severe impacts. Eggs are also harvested by two Native communities in the eastern Canadian Arctic, where population effects are also thought to be unlikely. Winter subsistence hunts in Newfoundland and Labrador currently take about 200,000 Thick-billed Murres per year. Heavy hunting also occurred at breeding colonies in western Greenland where hunting was probably the major cause of population declines in this century.

Thick-billed Murres are vulnerable to the effects of oil pollution because they have a low reproductive rate, large populations, and dense concentrations in coastal habitats. The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1989 in Prince William Sound, Alaska, is the largest murre kill yet, with an estimated mortality of 185,000 murres (most were Common Murres).

Drowning in fishing nets is also a cause of mortality and has been reported for much of the species range.

**Recommended Management Actions**

- Continue the current level or increase monitoring of Thick-billed Murre populations in Alaska.
- Initiate additional introduced predator removal programs, continue the rat introduction prevention program, and begin a rat response program.
- Work with state and federal agencies and fisheries councils to better understand and minimize the negative impacts of fisheries interactions.
- Support efforts to minimize the incidence of fuel spills near breeding and wintering areas and measure contaminants in Thick-billed Murre eggs.
- Work with the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (AMBC) to monitor subsistence use of Thick-billed Murres.
- Reduce human disturbance at colonies.

**Regional Contact**

Branch Chief, Nongame Migratory Birds, Migratory Bird Management, USFWS, 1011 E. Tudor Rd., Anchorage, Alaska 99503

Telephone (907) 768-3444

**References**


Full credit for the information in this document is given to the above references.