

Nesting Seabirds of Machias Seal Island

By Karis Herriott and Donald R. Herriott. Videotape, 46 minutes, VHS format. Produced by Herriott, 1237 Isabel Dr., Sanibel, Florida 33957. \$29.95.

By William Murphy



Twenty miles east of Jonesport, Maine, and 10 miles offshore, a rocky outcropping called Machias Seal Island lies awash in the cold Labrador current. In all of New England, only at this picturesque location can naturalists closely and simultaneously observe and photograph nesting Atlantic puffins, razorbills, common murre, and Arctic terns. Through this video Karis and Don Herriott have documented the biology of the island's avian inhabitants and publicized the disputed sovereignty of the island.

The tape begins with a general overview of the island and examines the biology of most of the nesting species, continues with footage of a visit with a birding group, and ends with a discussion of the sovereignty of the island. Don Herriott narrates slowly and clearly throughout.

Machias Seal Island is inaccessible to terrestrial predators. As a true sanctuary it hosts myriad breeding seabirds that nest in burrows between large boulders, on rocky ledges, or in lush knee-high grass. The birds steal the show as the Herriotts focus on species that most of us eventually check off only by toughing it out on February pelagic trips. They also include other species likely to be seen en route to and from the island, such as Manx, sooty, and greater shearwaters, bald eagle, common loon, and great blue heron. Leach's petrel nests on the island but is nocturnal on the breeding ground and therefore is not shown. Much of the tape focuses on nesting species, with excellent footage provided of activities that include courtship flights, breeding, catching food, feeding young, and preening.

My most vivid memory of Machias Seal Island involves shimmering clouds of Arctic terns gliding overhead like ice crystals against the deep blue sky, a sight captured well in this video. One particularly noteworthy segment shows a camera view of tern response to human intrusion. The terns rise in massed flight, and then the pair whose nest is being threatened dives on, defecates on, and often strikes the intruder. Sensible birders duck and thus miss the view captured here. About 1,000 Arctic terns share the island with a much smaller number of common terns. Adult terns of both species forage as far as 10 miles from the island to obtain food for their young, which they continue to feed for eight weeks. As with other species of colonial nesters, parents and young somehow manage to recognize each other instantly out of a veritable sea of look-alikes. Footage of this phenomenon is well done.

The Atlantic puffin is the major attraction and the comic character of the island, with its droll appearance, waddling walk, and buzzy, bumblebee-like flight. About 2,500 Atlantic puffins nest on the island, faithfully returning year after year to the same burrows. The eggs hatch in five to seven weeks, and about 38 days later the young leave the nest at night and head for the sea, where they become completely independent of their parents. Puffins swim underwater by flapping their wings and are able to catch as many as 10 small fish before surfacing. Herriott's stunning shots of puffins were taken at point-blank range.

Only about 200 pairs of razorbills nest in the western Atlantic; about half of the population nests on Machias Seal Island. Their eggs hatch in 35 days, and the young scramble down to the sea at dusk long before they are ready for flight. In contrast to puffin parents, razorbill parents assist their young after they leave the nest. Razorbills are known to dive to 300 feet to feed.

Black guillemots are rare on Machias Seal Island itself but mass socially early in the breeding season just off the island. From the large numbers seen there, it may be difficult to believe that there are fewer black guillemots in the world than there are any other species of alcid. Like puffins, black guillemots nest in burrows, and the young are independent. Black guillemots are known to dive to 165 feet when feeding.

A lively segment of the video shows a typical visit by a birding group. We meet Captain Barna Norton and his gruff son, John. They take groups of visitors out to the island from Jonesport or Cutler at

7 a.m. from May through mid-August on their boat, *Chief*. An early departure helps guarantee gentle seas during landings. On the trip out we are shown seals, whales, porpoises, and several species of birds. Captain John rows the dory from *Chief* to the island, ferrying visitors to the landing area. With all hands ashore, Barna explains the rules, offers advice on photo techniques, and turns the group loose. This segment helped bring back lots of memories and will give a wonderful preview of the island to birders who have yet to make the trip.

A four-minute postscript examines a continuing controversy between the Nortons and Canada over the sovereignty of Machias Seal Island. The island is U.S. territory according to the original 1621 grant. That status has since been confirmed by the Treaty of Paris and many other treaties. Canada built a manned lighthouse on the island in 1832 and still operates it. Barna Norton's grandfather claimed the island in 1865, in accord with the

accepted practice that anyone can put navigational aids on any property without affecting sovereignty. In 1978, Canada declared the island a wildlife refuge with limited public access. The U.S. Department of State has advised Barna to ignore the Canadian claims but has made no move to intercede for him.

Videotapes such as this are a joy to view again and again. It seems that most of us birders are allotted one visit per lifetime to some of the hundreds of hotspots in America. It is a pleasure to be able to play a video and relive our visits. If you have ever visited Machias Seal Island, this videotape will bring back the thrill of your adventure; if you have never been there, this film will certainly whet your appetite to visit soon.

William Murphy is a biologist and nature tour guide. He is the author of *A Birder's Guide to Trinidad and Tobago*.