

Book Review: *Nesting Seabirds of Machias Seal Island* K. Herriott and D.R. Herriott. 1989.

Videotape, 46 minutes, VHS format. Produced by Herriott, 1237 Isabel Drive, Sanibel, Florida 33956. ABA Sales No. 862. \$29.95 (+ \$2.90 shipping).

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 Murres, 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 by 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 the large boulders, on rocky ledges, or in the lush knee-high grass. The birds steal the show, as the Herriotts focus on species that many of us eventually see only by toughing it out on Atlantic 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; Common Loon; Great Blue Heron; and Bald Eagle. Leach's Storm-Petrel nests on the island but is nocturnal on the breeding grounds and is therefore not shown. Much of the tape focuses on nesting species, providing excellent footage of activities that include courtship flights, copulation, 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 strikes the intruder. Sensible birders duck and thus miss the view captured here. About 1000 Arctic Terns share the island with a much smaller number of Common Terns. Adult terns of both species forage as far as ten 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 bumblebee-like flight. About 2500 Atlantic Puffins nest on the island; individuals faithfully return year after year to the same burrow. 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. The Herriotts' shots of the puffins were taken at point-blank range and are stunning. Excellent footage of Razorbills and Black Guillemots is also included.

A lively segment of the video shows a typical visit by a birding group. We meet Captain Barna Norton and his gruff son John, who take groups of visitors out to the island from Jonesport or Cutler at 7 AM from May through mid-August on their boat, *Chief*. An early departure helps to avoid landing in rough waters. On the trip out we are shown seals, whales, porpoises, and several species of birds. This segment helped me 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 United States and Canada over the sovereignty of Machias Seal Island. The island is U.S. territory according to the original grant in 1621; 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 North America. It is a pleasure to be able to play a video like this one 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, it will certainly whet your appetite to visit soon.

Bill Murphy
7202 Mathew Street
Greenbelt, Maryland 20770