

Indelible Season

I remember hunkering atop a tall grassy bluff and edging my face over it until I could see a pair of Tufted Puffins four feet below, each with one red-rimmed eye fastened upon me. From so close, the red-orange of their bills, legs, and feet almost crackled with brilliance. The clear white of their masks was brighter than the foam furling against the shore below. Blooming sky-wide beyond was the rumpling ocean, its easing scent coating my airways, its primary color that evening the pure gray of a kittiwake's soft mantle.

I had journeyed to Alaska's Middleton Island because of its Black-legged Kittiwakes. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service was trying to get to the bottom of these seabirds' widespread breeding failure in the area. When wildlife biologist Brian Fadely called to tell me that I'd received the volunteer position assisting with the kittiwake studies, I leapt around the apartment in a flailing, howling dance of excitement. And so from mid-April until mid-August 1989 the small seabird island (about a mile wide by six miles long) in the Gulf of Alaska was my home. Almost daily I was hunched behind a spotting scope collecting data for two- to three-hour stretches, no other person in sight, in the company of hundreds upon hundreds of birds. It remains the most incredible season I've yet spent, and also the most disturbing.

The kittiwakes with their pristine plumage and startling tongues of glamorous red populate my memory. I see them low-slung on dainty-twig legs with deft, inky feet, their dark eyes watching me alertly from their nesting bluffs as I pass by, toting a backpack full of the day's snacks and equipment. Pairs of Pelagic Cormorants pepper the colonies on the bluffs, slithery-necked with jewel-green eyes, fluttering their throat pouches on warmer days. And the murre! Thronged on ledges, the luscious, smooth chocolate of their backs against their glimmering out-thrust white chests, they talk among themselves with grating, gargling growls.

One of my duties was helping with an island-wide

census of the kittiwake population, which in 1989 turned out to be around 41,000 pairs (down from a peak of 82,000 pairs in 1981, according to Dr. Scott Hatch, a research wildlife biologist in charge of the project). My job also included re-sighting birds banded in previous years to help keep track of adult survival rates. I remember wildlife biologist Bay Roberts telling



Black-legged Kittiwake colony. Round Island, Alaska; 2 July 2001. © Tom Walker.

me that breeding kittiwakes tended to have "high nest-site tenacity", so maps of their nests from the season before helped in finding the returning birds. Later I watched to gather details of the banded birds' breeding lives, such as their mates' identities, how many eggs each pair produced, how many eggs hatched or were lost (usually to the predatory Glaucous-winged Gulls), and how many chicks fledged.

I had never really associated stillness with purposefulness until I watched from the weathered blind as the kittiwakes incubated. With their plush bodies pressed into their thick, rounded nests, the little gulls looked overflowing with purpose. Even when doused with a squirt of guano from a neighboring cormorant, the kittiwakes were unswerving. The gooey bird might shake itself and briefly and fruitlessly preen, then continue its sitting marathon.

I remember my awe when Brian showed me an incubation secret. He brushed aside the breast feathers of a dead adult Glaucous-winged Gull we'd come across on the beach to reveal the brood patch: three roughly-egg-

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shaped naked areas arranged in a triangle on the bird's underside, to help the parent bird pass its body heat to the eggs.

Breeding birds were not the only ones bedazzling me that season. I learned to keep alert for migrants materializing at the island's edges and all across its interior. One June day I found a raft of Harlequin Ducks out beyond the breakers, some with tails upheld stiffly, some with swiveled heads and bills tucked beneath back feathers, resting as the waves wafted them up and down. The males displayed froth-colored markings rimmed in rich black, repeated precisely on each one's plumage, as though symbols from some exotic alphabet. I gaped at them through my binoculars until my arms ached.

I remember jogging along a gravel strip, a chalky sky scudding close above the island, a sea-sopped wind tugging at my clothes and hair. Hearing a clamor of Glaucous-winged Gulls coming behind me, I turned my head as a great gray bird swept over me, long neck reaching forward uttering a tremendous rattling, hounded by the gull mob. I ran wildly for where they'd dropped from view over a rise. I lurched to a standstill at the slope's top, heart galloping—for there below stood a crane, tall, piercing orange eye fixed upon me. Moments later I ran stumblingly back toward where Brian and fellow volunteer Don Garnier were, crying out long before they could hear me: "There's a Sandhill Crane!" It was the first I'd seen except for flat renderings in books. But now this soul-filled creature, befeathered before me, jolted me with wonder.

All was not birdwatcher ecstasies, however. There I was in Alaska on the most isolated sliver of land I'd ever visited, with immense snow-slated islands thrusting at far sky, yet the perimeter of our island was spattered with trash. More washed ashore each day. Amid the twisted seaweed and other natural debris lolled tangled fishing nets, Styrofoam packing peanuts, plastic bags, drinking straws, plastic tampon applicators, fishing line, sodden sneakers—you name it.

Our human print on the seabird island grew uglier still. The Exxon Valdez had struck a reef that March of 1989, and although the oil spill itself did not reach the island aside from a few small tar balls, its stained victims did. Every week we'd take turns walking the beaches, the three of us—Don, Brian, and I—gathering broken bird bodies as evidence. I began a mental list of species I'd seen in death, which I never could bring myself to write down as I did my "living" life list.

I left it all after four months. I had to go back to the world I grew up in, to move at improbable speeds, propelled past all the scents and subtler sounds. For a short time, just a trip to the grocery store left my senses jangled by the uproar of lights and glintings, the clamorous colors, and the rigidly geometric spacing. I cradle my seabird island season within, its voices and visions a potent spirit-salve. I remember rusty-golden mosses and silvery grasses crouched against the wind. I remember sniffing a kittiwake, which I carefully held for banding and its faint powdery-sweet odor and the thrum of its heart against my fingers. I remember the pale northern sun, so often cloud-veiled, and how it lay upon the ocean and the galaxy of hues it could wake there. The things that haunt me are the stained-brown corpses and the snarled messes of trash.

Ever since I've wanted to convey to others the vivid intangibles that wilder places carry—to tell about the soul-hunger they satiate. I've wondered how many people remain numb to that hunger in themselves, as for years I did, whipping along senses so jangled that the jangledness seems necessary, even natural? I've wished for a voice with power to thaw inner barriers to release cravings—to rouse carings.



POSTLUDE

Now under the auspices of the U. S. Geological Survey, Dr. Hatch continues to study Middleton's Black-legged Kittiwakes.

The kittiwakes have abandoned many of the nesting areas I helped observe, and much of the work now concentrates on an artificial nesting habitat the birds have gradually adopted—an old Air Force radar tower that Hatch and his crew have enhanced, including the installation of hundreds of one-way mirrors to create a truly unique research site.

The 2003 census found just 10,000 nesting pairs of Black-legged Kittiwakes on

the island. "Middleton happens to have undergone a very serious decline, but [kittiwakes] are fairly stable or even increasing in some areas of their range," Hatch says. Natural habitat changes on the island have contributed to the decline, but food shortages seem to be a primary factor. "A generalization is that the Pacific kittiwakes are very long-lived animals compared with their Atlantic counterparts," says Hatch. "It is just a whole different adaptation to an environment that seems not to promote really high breeding productivity."



Adult Black-legged Kittiwake. Round Island, Alaska; 2 July 2001. © Tom Walker.