

Dancing Puffineers

Since I was a tyke I've been prone to fits of dancing (frenzied flailing, friends might more accurately describe it) in moments of high emotion. The summer of 1995 I suffered a flurry of dancing fits, inspired by two weeks spent living with Maine's seabirds and their devoted puffineers.

One hundred years before my visit, Maine's once-thriving population of Atlantic Puffins had been virtually exterminated by hunters. To the rescue came visionary biologist Stephen Kress, founder of Project Puffin, the National Audubon Society's Seabird Restoration Program, in 1973. With the help of dedicated Audubon staff and volunteers along with the cooperation of U.S. and Canadian wildlife agencies, more than 1,800 young puffins were eventually transplanted from a huge colony in Newfoundland to two of Maine's offshore islands. As hoped, after maturing for several years at sea, some of those puffins returned to the islands from which they were released and eventually bred.

Flocks of field researchers, a.k.a. the Puffineers, migrate each summer along with the seabirds to the seven islands that Project Puffin now helps manage. Some are Audubon Society staff members. Some are volunteers, often college students studying wildlife biology or a related field, or aviculturists (as I was in 1995) working with captive seabirds at zoos and aquariums. During my spell at Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge in outer Penobscot Bay, three volunteers including me worked alongside three Audubon staff researchers. Volunteer John Quimby was dubbed The Master for his knowledge of knots, while another among us had a talent for armpit flatulence. Both skills proved handy as after-work entertainment on the isolated island.

Early July of 1995 found me perched by the glittering Atlantic Ocean in a wooden blind at the edge of Seal Island's tern colony. I tried to keep my eyes seaward, though all around talkative terns whisked past the open sides of the blind, while below me amid a jumble of pale boulders Black Guillemots were dancingly signaling one another. When I first glimpsed the inside of their bills, the vivid velvety redness there dis-

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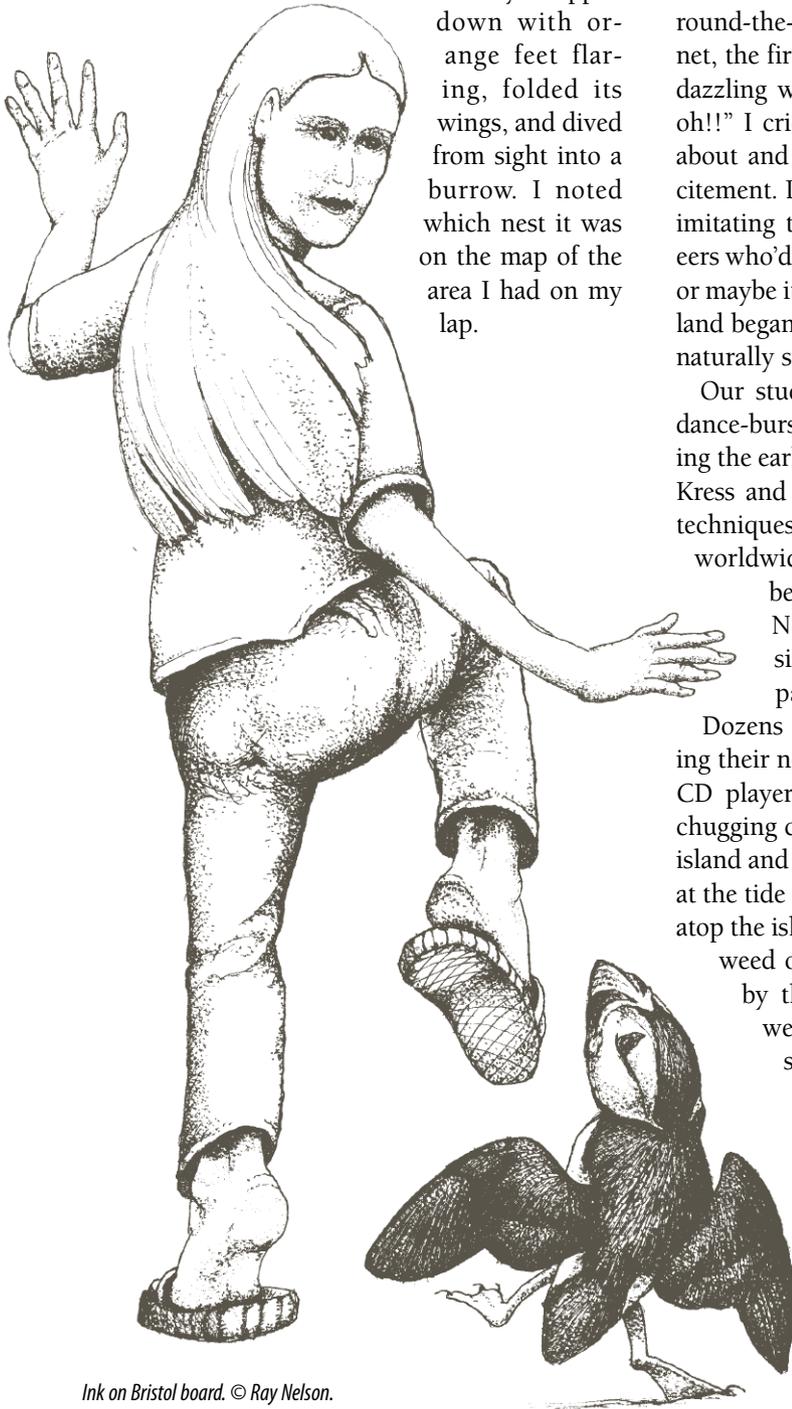


Acrylic on paper. © Ray Nelson.

tracted me from my watch.

A chunky bird shape caught my eye. Small blurs of wings whirred away heroically to keep it aloft. It was a puffin I confirmed through my binoculars. It circled past me, bill draped with quivering silver—a fish feast for its chick waiting in a burrow below. I kept my eyes on this one black shape among the steady flurry of transiting birds. The puffin traced several circles in the air above the boulder jumble and the ocean, then on its next

pass over the stones suddenly dropped down with orange feet flaring, folded its wings, and dived from sight into a burrow. I noted which nest it was on the map of the area I had on my lap.



Ink on Bristol board. © Ray Nelson.

During three-hour data-collecting stints like this, I did my best to refrain from disturbing the birds, staying as motionless as possible. But once I'd hiked out of sight of the seabird colony, I had to surrender and dance a bit, flail my limbs in honor of that island's granite spine buoying me at the heart of a canyon of vibrant sky, in honor of the ice-white foam seething round the island's brink and the rumpling wind muscled with a kelp-tinged sea musk.

Attacks of dancing spread among the other puffineers. I can't recall exactly how it started. Maybe it was on the round-the-island dory trip when a great Northern Gannet, the first I'd ever seen, swept over us off a cliff edge, dazzling white and jet-fighter sleek. "Oh! oh! oh! oh! oh!!" I cried pointing and afterwards waving my arms about and jiggling on my seat in a brief release of excitement. I think I remember my jolly dory companions imitating that saw-a-gannet dance later for the puffineers who'd stayed ashore. Maybe that was the beginning, or maybe it had been going on before my turn on Seal Island began. Perhaps bursts of delighted movement were naturally sparked in that place.

Our studies of the Project's gannet nests led to the dance-burst we officially named the Gannet Dance. During the early years of the puffin transplant process, Steve Kress and his crew pioneered seabird social attraction techniques that have since helped with conservation worldwide. A prototype gannet attraction site had been established on Seal Island to try enticing Northern Gannets to its cliffs. (The larger version was launched two years later in Québec in partnership with Canadian organizations.)

Dozens of blue-eyed decoys posed staunchly brooding their nests of mounded seaweed. Meanwhile, from a CD player concealed close by, recordings of gannets' chugging calls were continuously buffeted by wind over island and water. After gathering hanks of slick seaweed at the tide line, then winding strands into the nests high atop the island, our hands were drying gummy with seaweed oozings. Shaking them off, we briefly danced by the impassive decoys celebrating such work we'd been blessed to do, while away to the east swept the open Atlantic, teeming with rollicking waves dandling cream crests that set my saliva streaming.

Besides Atlantic Puffins, the thriving tern colony had also been restored to Seal Island using the same social attraction techniques—decoys and recorded calls. Around 1,175 pairs nested there during the 1995 season: Common Terns, Arctic Terns, and one pair of endangered

Roseate Terns. Aground, the birds had an endearingly dorkish quality, especially the Arctics with their almost absurdly short legs, but airborne they appeared formidable, bowed-back boomerang wings flinging them along. Their astounding migrations (up to 11,000 miles one-way in the case of some Arctic Terns) seemed more plausible after watching them fly.

Besides monitoring puffin activity, we volunteers helped collect data for long-term studies involving the tern colony. Our island supervisor, Kristin Williamson, trained me in fish identification; then, equipped with a series of fish drawings and descriptions, I took turns in the Tern Blind, watching as adults brought meals to their offspring at specific nest sites. Often the chicks spied the incoming delivery amid the whirl of bird bodies above and would alert me by splaying wide their stubby beaks while peeping imploringly. I had moments only to scrutinize a maybe-inch-long fish clutched in the parent's bill as sunlight trembled off its scales before a chick engulfed it. Early on I had to avail myself of the "unknown fish" category more times than I liked. But I progressed, learning to tell a tiny hake from a less-jiggly herring.

Now and then, the seemingly chaotic hither-and-thither winging of the chattering terns would suddenly hush, coalescing into an immense wheel of intently hurtling birds that would swirl out over the waves. The island was doused in curious quiet while the terns tilted, undersides flashing like mica flecks above the blue, then turned almost simultaneously and came tearing back all squalling full-out in a rasping clamor.



A "dread" Kristin called it when I asked, and once I spotted the Peregrine Falcon that she spoke of, carving a dark arc through the colony's airspace.

Other research we worked on involved taking a series of weights and wing measurements from a group of tern chicks as they quickly matured. Walking stooped over through the colony seeking the chicks, you had to look before taking every step to avoid crushing any eggs or chicks. Meanwhile, the adult terns whose nests you were looming over reeled about your head scolding non-stop with rusty-hinge voices, dived down to whack your head with their hard bills, and drizzled warm white wastes upon you. One way to protect yourself from their bill strikes was to affix to your hat a sturdy plant stem about a foot long. The terns would hit the highest point

of you (the stem), rather than your head. Tern chicks themselves are amazingly camouflaged in grayish down sprinkled with dark dollops, and they lodge themselves deftly into any available hiding spot, so finding them to get our data was a challenge.

Across the soft flanks of the island I was also taught upon arrival to walk most cautiously, to avoid collapsing the burrows of slumbering Leach's Storm-Petrels. Each night, these dainty coaly seabirds crisscrossed the island in tilting flight, casting humps of chuckling song through the watery darkness. From underground they churred—a rising phrase like a question repeated across acres all hours of the island's nights. Stepping from my tent I watched the petrels' shadow-shapes flick in and out of my vision and the pale bridge of the moon's light stretched at us over the black water. I walked, ever careful of the burrows, through what felt like a dream, touching the warmth of my skin and the coolness of the island's pelt to know, yes, this is me, really here.



Acrylic on poster board. © Ray Nelson.

On the eve of the year's highest tide, after all our data for the day had been collected and entered into the records, after the sun, tiger-orange, had winked below our world's brim, three of us puffineers lingered near the small shed that sheltered the supplies. Later, in the darkness softened with lights from moon and stars and an aging fire, we danced together—the High Tide Dance we dubbed it. Bent over double from laughing at the way the others had bounced in my vision—partly from my own head's jouncing—I couldn't remember feeling happier than I had on that roofless place, TV-free, with only the stories of my companions and the island's songs to listen to after nightfall, as bright sparks from our fire soared from our midst.

The *Rose Plunkett* emerged from the following morning's gauzy fog coverlet to bear me away. My Seal Island time was shifting into history. I would rejoin the zoo penguins in their rectangular enclosures behind glass. Somberly I embraced each of my companions, struggling to speak my farewells as my throat lumped up. On board now, bending over to help stash my duffle, tears were beading my eyelashes.

"What are they doing?!" I heard a crewmember ask incredulously over the boat's chugging.

I turned back towards the receding island to see. "They're dancing!" I gasped. Then, laughing and crying together, I rallied into a brief answer-dance alongside the guffawing boatman—the Goodbye Dance.

Goodbye, my fellow puffineers—you shining hearts. Goodbye, puffins, jaunty in your wispy feather pantaloons. Goodbye, Seal Island—how much richer is my inner realm for having known you.

Epilogue

During the 2007 season, puffineers counted 712 pairs of puffins and 8,616 tern pairs (including 222 pairs of endangered Roseate Terns) nesting on the island sanctuaries.

Project Puffin remains a beacon of hope amid an overall sobering picture for seabirds. According to BirdLife International, the condition of seabirds since 1988 has declined alarmingly compared to other groups of birds. For example, 10 of the world's 17 species of penguins are endangered or threatened with extinction, along with a staggering 19 of 22 albatross species. Commercial longline fishing continues to pressure albatross populations as the birds swallow baited hooks intended for fish such as tuna, and wind up drowning. And there are many other menaces to seabirds today, including competition for food with fishing fleets and introduced predators such as rats and cats.

By restoring former seabird colonies as Project Puffin does, populations are spread over wider areas and are thus less vulnerable in disasters such as oil spills. More information on Project Puffin, including volunteer opportunities, is available online <www.projectpuffin.org>.