Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

GUILLEMOT
(Uria aalge)

Z96

Description

The UK's coasts have many stretches of sheer cliffs where seabirds breed and the guillemot is one of the most numerous birds in the great 'seabird cities'. It comes to land only to nest, spending the rest of its life at sea. Adult birds are 38-46cm in length, with a 61-73cm wingspan. They have a thin dark pointed bill and a small rounded dark tail. The face becomes white in winter.

Guillemots defend the smallest nest territory of any bird, at times just 2 inches (5cm) square. They huddle together on cliff ledges, laying their eggs onto the bare rock, forming some of the largest, densest breeding colonies in Britain. Altogether there are more than 1.2 million birds living in at least 28 colonies, each with more than 10,000 birds. The largest on Handa Island, Scotland, contains almost 100,000.

In Britain guillemots are divided into two subspecies. In southern Britain as far north as St Abbs Head in southern Scotland a brown-backed variety (*Uria aalge abionis*) prevails. North of this point the black-backed variety (*Uria aalge aalge*) is in the ascendant. It is possible that this specimen, which is rather brown, belongs to the southern subspecies.



Breeding

Guillemots breed on narrow horizontal or sloping ledges on sheer cliffs and rock stacks. They lay a single egg on bare rock ledges. Proportional to body weight this egg is one of the largest produced by any British bird. The egg is pointed, so that if disturbed it rolls in a tight circle rather than fall off the ledge. Eggs are also variable in base colour and have an infinite variety of squiggles and blotches. This variety has probably evolved to help parents identify their own egg in the densely packed conditions of the loomery (the name for a guillemot colony). They leave their colonies when the young are only half grown and all disappear out to sea, safe from predatory large gulls.

What does it sound like?

The colony as a whole makes a loud whirring noise. Their gruff conversational calls gave rise to their original English name 'murre' (pronounced myrrh) which is the common name for them still in the USA.

Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

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Vital Statistics

Eggs: 1
Incubation: 28-34 days
Fledging: Leave ledges at 2-3 weeks; fly at 6-7 weeks
Maximum lifespan: 10 years
Length: 38-45cm
Wingspan: 64-73cm
Weight: 850-1,130 g
UK breeding population: 600,000 pairs





UK Distribution

Resident
Summer
Winter
Passage

What does it eat?

Guillemots forage for food by swimming underwater. They mainly eat small schooling fish (maximum 200mm long), also some crustaceans, marine worms and squid. They are fine swimmers in pursuit of food. They usually dive for more than a minute, with a maximum recorded time of 202 seconds. The deepest known dive is a massive 600 feet (180 metres).