

The December At a Glance picture quite obviously captures an unusual photographic perspective. Although it may not be the most familiar of an ordinarily distinctive species, it nonetheless provides enough clues to be identifiable.

Clearly, the bird is uniformly black above, and at least the breast and belly appear to be white. Because the bird's upper body and neck are turned directly away from the camera, it is difficult to ascertain whether the black on the sides of the neck continues around to form a collar on the front. It is obvious, however, that the entire top of the head is black, in contrast to the light color on the sides of the head. Furthermore, the whitish color on the face is indisputably connected on the back of the head by a thin bridle of light gray. The final impression gained from the photograph is that the mystery bird exhibits prominent bulges on either side of the head. Since birds do not have externally visible ears, and because few species have "popeyes," we can only conclude that these bulges are either feathers or some exaggerated portion of the bird's beak.

Collectively, these clues make it possible to identify the mystery bird with confidence. The sturdy build, thick neck, and lack of dorsal pattern all point to the bird being a seabird of some kind. The upright stance (suggestive of a penguin), the dark back color, and the thick neck all combine to remove cormorants, ducks, and gulls as possibilities. Thus, the bird's identity as an alcid species seems reasonable. At this point, identification is easy. The only Atlantic alcid that displays a pale, connecting bridle behind the head, has whitish cheeks, and has a black neck collar is the Atlantic Puffin, *Fratercula arctica*. The peculiar bulges on the sides of the pictured bird's head are created by the fleshy process at the gape on each corner of the otherwise distinctive bill.

The Atlantic Puffin shown here was photographed in July at Machias Seal Island, New Brunswick.



Atlantic Puffin

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen

AT A GLANCE

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Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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