

# ABOUT BOOKS

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## Auks Between the Covers

*Mark Lynch*

There are nowhere near as many books about alcids as there are books about shorebirds, owls, raptors, or warblers. Even gulls, terns, and jaegers have entire volumes dedicated just to their field identification, but not yet auks. Aukophiles looking for help in the field must be content with small sections of books about all the species of seabirds or the popular field guides. I am not sure why this is so. Perhaps publishers and authors see books on alcids as appealing only to a limited niche market. After all, most alcids are restricted to coastal locations of predominantly the northern areas of the Northern Hemisphere. Although auks are certainly seen as far south as California on the Pacific coast, here on the Atlantic, most alcids are seen from New England north. Most birders see alcids only in the chill of winter, not the most popular time of the year to bird. Finally, when we do at last see these coveted auks, they are often mere black and white specks whirring far out and low over the ocean at breakneck speeds, offering typically dismal views. The idea of writing an in-depth identification guide to help in that difficult field situation seems hopeless. This may explain in part why books on the family of auks are few and far between.

This is a shame because auks are a fascinating and beautiful family of birds, that we in Massachusetts see quite frequently. Although no species of alcid have been proven to breed in Massachusetts (hope springs eternal for the Black Guillemot), several species do breed next door in Maine. Six species of alcids regularly visit our shores in varying numbers in winter, and some species like Razorbill and Black Guillemot are rather common at that time. Your odds are, in fact, much, much better of finding Razorbills at Andrew's or Race Points in December than finding a Snowy Owl on Plum Island at the same time. Two additional species of alcids have been found as vagrants in Massachusetts: Long-billed Murrelet and Ancient Murrelet. Finally, Massachusetts used to be part of the wintering range of the extinct Great Auk, the only flightless bird that lived even part of its life in our area in historical times. Below are listed a few books that I have found useful for learning about and identifying alcids of the western Atlantic.

### **The Monographs**

These are books about the behavior, distribution, migration, and identification of the auks.

Typically these titles contain loads of information about the lives of the auks but are not really geared for the birder looking for helpful hints on field problems.

*AUKS: AN ORNITHOLOGIST'S GUIDE* by Ron Freethy. This is a good, if somewhat dated, general overview of all species of auks, illustrated with black and white drawings as well as a few color and black and white photographs. There is a wealth of

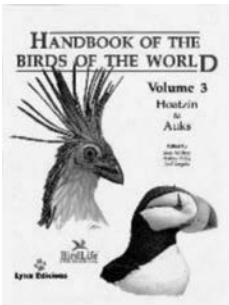
information on auk movements, feeding, populations, and behavior as well as a chapter on humans and auks.

*THE AUKS: ALCIDAE* by Anthony J. Gaston and Ian L. Jones. This is one of the *Bird Families of the World* monographs being published by Oxford University Press. The text is much more detailed and current than Freethy's book. For many species there are complete tables of measurements and of what comprises each species diet. Range maps are large and easy to read. There are general introductory chapters on the breeding environments of auks, their evolution, systematics, and distribution, followed by individual species accounts. The color plates by Ian Lewington and Ian L. Jones are very well done and feature most plumages and include a nice single page of alcids in flight. To date, this is the best single volume dedicated to auks.

*THE GREAT AUK* by Errol Fuller. This is Fuller's exhaustive coffee-table paean to the majestic extinct auk. It is an extremely detailed account of every aspect of the Great Auk's life, physical remains still extant, and impact on human society. This book is obsessive in its collection of arcane auk lore. It is a real masterwork of research but obviously of limited interest to those birders still trying to figure out how to tell basic-plumaged murrelets apart. See my detailed review of this book in *Bird Observer* V. 28, N. 5 (October 2000), pp. 329-32.

### The Identification Guides

These are not portable and popular field guides, but larger books to be used as home references. Typically they contain very detailed descriptions of alcids in most plumages, while also containing some notes on behavior and distribution. None are dedicated entirely to auks.

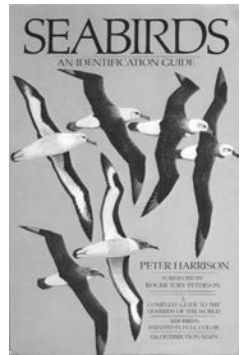


*HANDBOOK OF BIRDS OF THE WORLD. VOLUME 3: HOATZIN TO AUKS.* The auk plates and text are on pages 678 to 722. As is typical with this outstanding series, a very thorough general overview of all aspects of the lives of auks is accompanied by stunning color photography from the world's best bird photographers. Interestingly, in the individual species accounts, the drawn plates only feature breeding plumages. One of the best concise accounts of auks in print, but not useful for field problems.

*SEABIRDS OF THE WORLD: THE COMPLETE REFERENCE* by Jim Enticott and David Tipling. Auk text and photographs are on pages 212 to 227. This is not a well-known book here in the states. The species accounts are brief and concise, opposite the photographs, but break no new ground. The color photography is first rate and in many cases shows both breeding and non-breeding plumages of the auks. Several of the auk species are shown in flight. A nice companion to the Harrison identification guide.

*SEABIRDS: AN IDENTIFICATION GUIDE* by Peter Harrison. Auk plates are on pages 188 to 199, and the species written accounts are on pages 392 to 406. This was

the title that began the still-running identification guide series published by Helms and Princeton University Press. Also included in this one book are cormorants, tubenoses, gulls, terns, and skuas. Most long-time birders will remember being excited about this book because it gave the first full accounting and illustration of most of the albatrosses, shearwaters, and petrels. The species accounts are in a separate section from the plates. The written accounts contain a wealth of details on plumage and key fieldmarks for telling similar species apart. Notes on distribution, food, and behavior are more concise and sometimes sketchy. The plates, also by Harrison, are good but at times are somewhat dark and muddy in early versions of this title. The paintings of the auks appear somewhat stiff. Most plumages are shown as well as most of the species in flight. This book remains a very useful reference.



*THE HANDBOOK OF BIRD IDENTIFICATION FOR EUROPE AND THE WESTERN PALEARCTIC* by Mark Beaman and Steve Madge. Plates of auks are on pages 446 to 448 and the written accounts are on pages 464 to 468. I am amazed that more New England birders do not own this book. Granted that this is an expensive book. The fact that we do not share many of the same species of Passeriformes that are found in Europe may also deter many Americans from buying this book. But many species of waterfowl, gulls, terns, shorebirds, and all of the auks occur on both sides of the Atlantic. And it's for these accounts that this book is so valuable to us Yank birders across the pond. This is a thick, stunningly illustrated book with very complete details on plumage, molt sequences, and useful fieldmarks for telling similar species apart. The plates, by a cadre of artists, are clean, bright, and well-painted and are a great resource for field observers. The auks are shown in most plumages as well as in flight. This book is also very useful for identifying the odd European vagrants that show up here, like Garganey and Yellow-legged Gull.

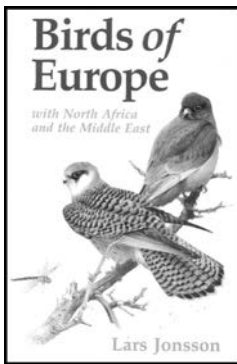
### **The True Field Guides**

These are the concise and supposedly portable books we carry with us out to those rocky and windblown promontories where we hope to get a brief glimpse at a Razorbill or murre. The focus in these books is simply field identification and therefore the illustrations are crucial.

*A FIELD GUIDE TO SEABIRDS OF THE WORLD* by Peter Harrison. Plates are on pages 163 to 173 and text is on pages 276 to 283. This is a more portable and concise version of Harrison's seabirds identification guide mentioned above. Instead of drawn plates, photographs are used for the most part. Although some of the photographs are very good and interesting, others are poor and not all species' winter plumages are shown. The text is as basic as you would find in any field guide and is in a separate section from the plates. This is the first printing of this guide, and later printings may have corrected some of these shortcomings.

*A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF EASTERN AND CENTRAL NORTH AMERICA* (Fifth Edition) by Roger Tory Peterson and Virginia Marie Peterson. The plates and

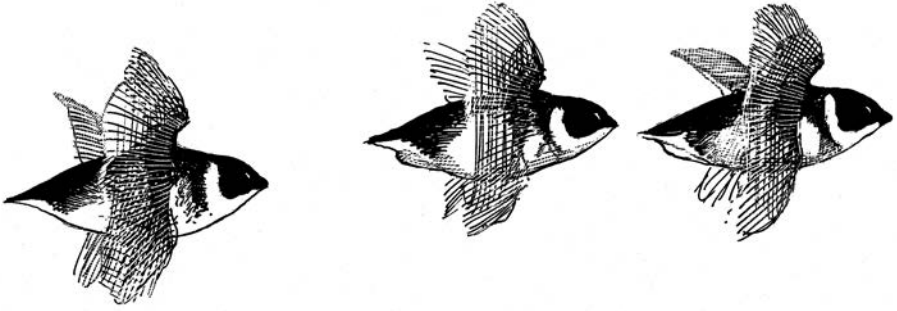
text concerning auks are on pages 192 to 195. This remains a fine field guide that has been extensively updated for this latest edition. The painted plates are opposite the text. Those of the auks are virtually the same as in previous editions. The text includes several personal observations on identifying auks in the field. For instance, under Dovekie, Peterson observes “In flight, flocks bunch tightly like starlings” (p. 194). Smaller versions of the distribution maps are now found next to the species descriptions as well as the larger versions at the end of the book. It is interesting to compare David Sibley’s illustration of the head of a winter/adult non-breeding Razorbill with Peterson’s. Details of the white behind the eye, proportions of the head and body, and position of the head of a bird on the water are certainly truer in Sibley’s guide. One shortcoming of the Peterson guide is that the two vagrant alcid species to New England are not illustrated, although the Great Auk is! A true field guide: it is easy to carry in a pocket.



*BIRDS OF EUROPE WITH NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST* by Lars Jonsson. The auks are found on pages 294 to 298. This field guide features large, sumptuous plates, many based on direct field observations. Jonsson’s artwork consistently captures the appearance of real birds in the field, but his auks on the water are not among his best work. The very evocative text features helpful clues for identifying alcids in the field. Under Little Auk (Dovekie), Jonsson states: “On the water, the short podgy neck and the head with its almost negligible little bill are striking. In flight, its strangely bobbin-shaped and ‘bill-less’ profile and very fast wing-beats are characteristic features” (p. 296). Included is a wonderful and very useful single page illustration of auks in flight. A fairly hefty field guide.

*FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA* (Fourth Edition) by National Geographic. The auk pages run from 224 to 232. This is a fully revised and updated version of this classic field guide. This new edition illustrates the newly-split species, Long-billed Murrelet, as well as all the other auks found in North America. The illustrations are very good, but again look at the Razorbill (p. 225). The illustrations in the National Geographic show too massive and deep a bill and a shorter, thicker neck than typically appears in the field. A good field guide that is large, but still fairly portable.

*THE SIBLEY GUIDE TO BIRDS* by David Allen Sibley. The auks are on pages 241 to 253. All auk species of North America are shown, including the arctic populations of the Black Guillemot. The illustrations and text are together on a page, making this a unique field guide. All pertinent plumages are completely illustrated. All species of auks are also shown in flight, typically in two different plumages and showing upper and underwing patterns as well. Could a birder ask for anything more? It is, when you look at the pages of a family of “tough to identify in the field” birds like the auks, that the usefulness and importance of David Sibley’s guide become obvious. The illustrations appear lifelike, the proportions and attitude of the birds on the water ring




DOVEKIES BY DAVID A. SIBLEY

true. When I see alcids, THIS is what they look like. Also included is a wealth of details of how auks appear and behave in the field, and these are sprinkled over all the pages. This is the best field guide to take alcid-watching, bar none with the following caveat. The one very real drawback to the Sibley Guide, and the price that is paid for all this detail and wonderful illustration, is that this book is huge for a field guide and heavy, and therefore not very portable.

#### **One Novel and One Overview:**

*The Great Auk* by Allan W. Eckert. Granted that puffins figure in many children's books because of their colorful and comical (to some) appearance, but *The Great Auk* is something different. Eckert wrote a great novel for young adults and adults, told from the viewpoint of the last Great Auk. Yes, it's sentimental and anthropomorphic as all get out, but this is also a great and moving book about extinction. The book includes a wonderful two-page map of the Great Auk's migration route.

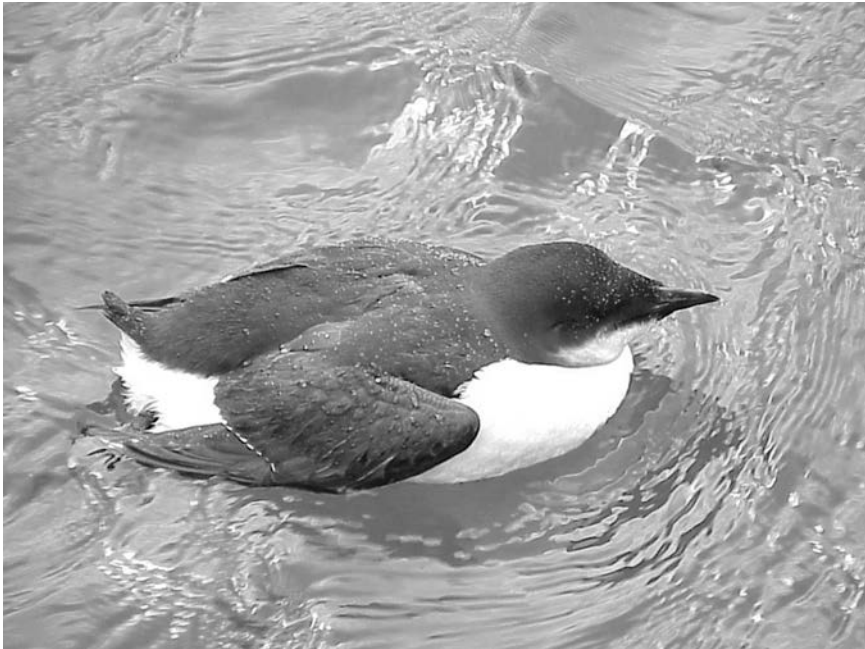
Finally, *In Search of Arctic Birds* by Richard Vaughan is a fine accounting of the author's passion for birds that breed above the Arctic Circle. Part history, part anthropology, and part natural history, this book is a wealth of information on the birds that breed in the Arctic and the people who studied and even hunted them. It is the closest thing I have read to an ornithological overview of the entire region. Auks are of course featured, as well as shorebirds, jaegers, Snowy Owls, and all the other species of this complex ecosystem. Profusely illustrated with black and white photographs and line drawings. A must read for any aukophile who has wished to see breeding Dovekies. 

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THICK-BILLED MURRE BY DAVID LARSON