

LEAST AUKLET IN CALIFORNIA

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During the afternoon of 15 June 1981 a distressed Least Auklet (*Aethia pusilla*) was found on Thornton State Beach in Daly City, San Mateo County, California, the first location southeast of Kodiak, Alaska, where the Least Auklet has been recorded. A park ranger rescued the bird and delivered it to the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo. Despite care the auklet died overnight. On 18 June I confirmed the identification and secured the specimen for the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ), University of California, Berkeley.

Figure 1 is a ventral photograph of the auklet as frozen, with the head turned in profile and the feet folded forward. Both plumage and soft parts were typical of breeding adults. The bird was not molting. Its measurements were total length 160 mm, extent 338 mm, wing chord 94 mm, tail 26 mm, tarsus 18.7 mm, culmen 9.4 mm, length of bill knob 2.8 mm, height of bill knob 2.6 mm, and bill depth through knob 7.8 mm.

Robert M. Zink prepared the specimen as a study skin and partial skeleton, MVZ168469. It was a male with testes 4×2 mm. After freezing it weighed 55.5 g, much lighter than the published averages, 86.3 g (Bedard 1969) and 96 g (Hughes 1970). At preparation emaciation and lack of fat were noted, but otherwise there were no apparent internal or external injuries, diseases, or organ abnormalities. The only visible parasites were a few mallophaga, which were collected. Although the bird likely starved, its temperature of 42.5°C on arrival at the Humane Society (fide Sandi Stadler) suggests that disease or heat stress may have been involved.

The Least Auklet nests in vast colonies on islands in the Bering Sea and the Aleutians. The southeasternmost reported colonies are in the Shumagin and Semidi Islands (American Ornithologists' Union 1983), but Sowl (1979) stated that there was no evidence that Least Auklets nest in the western Gulf of Alaska, and he doubted all previous reports of nesting east of the Aleutians. Apparently most individuals winter near their nesting colonies, but some winter off northwest Pacific coasts southwest as far as northern Japan (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). In the eastern Pacific, conversely, the only previous record east or south of the breeding islands is W. J. Fisher's collection of five at Kodiak during January 1882 (Friedmann 1935, Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959). Kessel and Gibson (1978) indicated no new distributional records, and Roberson (1980) found none for British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, or California. The California record listed by the American Ornithologists' Union (1983) is the one I detail here.

No storms affected the California coast around the time of the auklet's arrival. Rather, the bird appeared in the midst of a long period of record hot, clear, calm weather. Possibly heat stress contributed to the bird's death.

This Least Auklet could not have been an escapee from captivity. The species has been kept only by Sea World of San Diego, which found it difficult to maintain (W. T. Everett pers. comm.). The primaries were faded on their exposed edges and surfaces, but there was no unusual wear as expected in captives. There may be some possibility the bird was transported inadvertently by a ship, as Least Auklets sometimes come aboard at sea (G. V. Byrd pers. comm.), but most seabirds that seem to have been transported by ships appear at naval bases or inside ports, not on ocean beaches. Thornton State Beach receives direct Pacific Ocean surf, which regularly deposits dead and dying seabirds there; it is a likely site for an unaided waif to beach itself.

As most far northern species are thought of as moving south in the winter, both the summer arrival and the alternate plumage might seem unlikely for the first Least Auklet to reach California unaided. However, these fit the pattern recently established

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by two other Bering Sea alcids. The Horned Puffin (*Fratercula corniculata*) now reaches California mostly during early summer, often in alternate plumage (Hoffman et al. 1975, Roberson 1980). A Horned Puffin found 29 July 1975 on Ocean Beach, San Francisco (CAS68979 in the California Academy of Sciences) was only 4 km north of the Least Auklet's landfall. Furthermore, on 16 July 1979 a Crested Auklet (*Aethia cristatella*) was found dying on a beach 33 km northwest of Thornton State Beach (Weyman 1980), and on 7 July 1980 another was found near Cedros Island, off Baja California, Mexico (Pitman et al. 1983). Thus I conclude that this Least Auklet was a vagrant. This record was accepted by the California Bird Records Committee (Binford 1983).

I thank Robert Graf for alerting me to the Least Auklet's occurrence and disposition and Sandi Stadler for providing additional information on the bird's arrival and death at the Peninsula Humane Society. Special thanks go to Robert M. Zink for preparing and dissecting the specimen and for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this note. G. Vernon Byrd and Ned K. Johnson also improved the manuscript.

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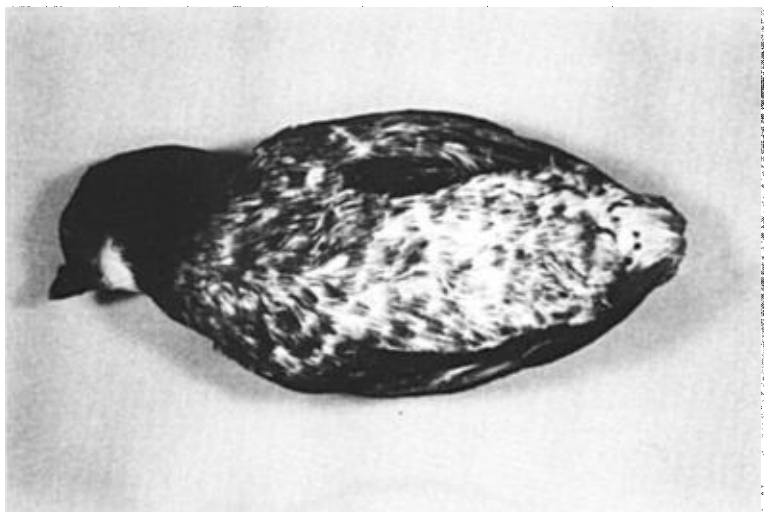


Figure 1. Least Auklet picked up at Daly City, San Mateo Co., California.

Photo by Stephen F. Bailey

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