



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

February 24, 2023



Common Murre on Westward Beach.
Photo taken by Constanze Heynold.



Patient after initial intake exam.

The Common Confusion About Common Murres

Here at CWC we frequently receive phone calls in the winter months about an injured “penguin” on the beach in Malibu. An interesting fact is that all 18 species of penguins live in the Southern Hemisphere. We do have a species of bird that looks very similar to a penguin, and that is the Common Murre. Murres are pelagic birds who spend their entire lives on the ocean, except when they come to land in order to nest on arctic cliffs. They are very similar to penguins, except murres evolved to keep a rudimentary ability to fly. It is thought that this evolution occurred because murres needed to be able to fly up to cliffs in order to lay their eggs in a place safe from arctic foxes and bears. Common Murres have a relatively large body, and it takes a lot of energy for them to fly. In fact, they have the highest “flight cost,” or energy expenditure during flight, of any species.

Murres do not build a traditional nest, and instead lay a single egg directly on cliff ledges above the ocean. Pairs are monogamous and will stay together for several years and some will even mate for life. Both the male and female will take turns incubating the egg and caring for newly hatched chicks. When a murre is about three weeks old the male parent will swim below the cliff and call out to his chick. The young animal will then hurl themselves off the ledge and drop 800 to 1,000 feet into the ocean. For the next one to two months the fledgling will stay with their father, while learning how to fish and survive on their own.

Outside of the breeding season Common Murres do not spend any time on land. They will forage close to shore but will remain in the ocean even while at rest. This means that if a murre is found on the beaches of Malibu, then they are in need of help. This was the case for one Common Murre that was recently admitted to CWC after being spotted on Westward Beach. The reporting party noticed the bird being tossed around in the surf and trying to come on shore. The finder immediately contacted CWC, and our Marine Mammal Response Team found the lethargic murre nestled in the rocks.

Once at CWC, hospital staff examined the patient and determined that they were emaciated and suffering from odiferous and dark diarrhea. Diagnostic tests were performed, and it was discovered that the murre was suffering from an intestinal parasite called coccidia. Coccidia is a single-celled parasitic organism that infects the intestinal tract. An overwhelming burden of the parasite can quickly cause lethargy, dehydration,



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emaciation, and even death. Luckily, this murre was brought to CWC where they immediately started to receive fluid therapy and nutritional support. Their parasitic infection will be cured with the use of specific antiparasitics, and we expect the patient to eventually make a full recovery.

If you find a penguin-like bird on the beach in Malibu, contact our Marine Mammal Response Team at 310-924-7256. You can do even more to help wildlife by donating at cawildlife.org!