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Diving Birds of North America: Frontmatter

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Paul A. Johnsgard

Diving Birds

of North America

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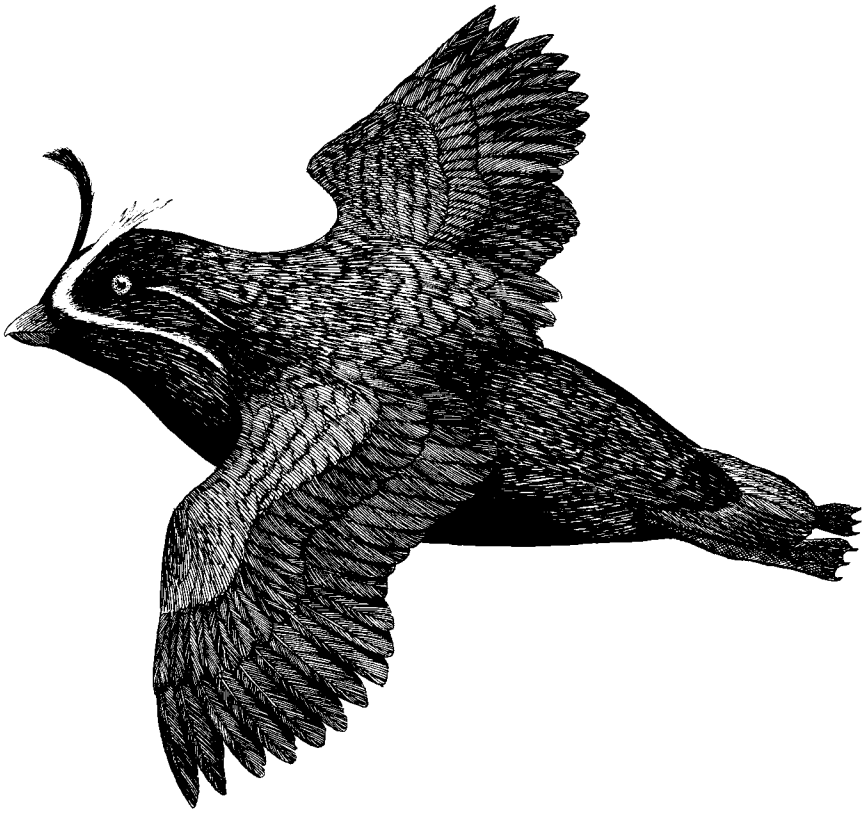

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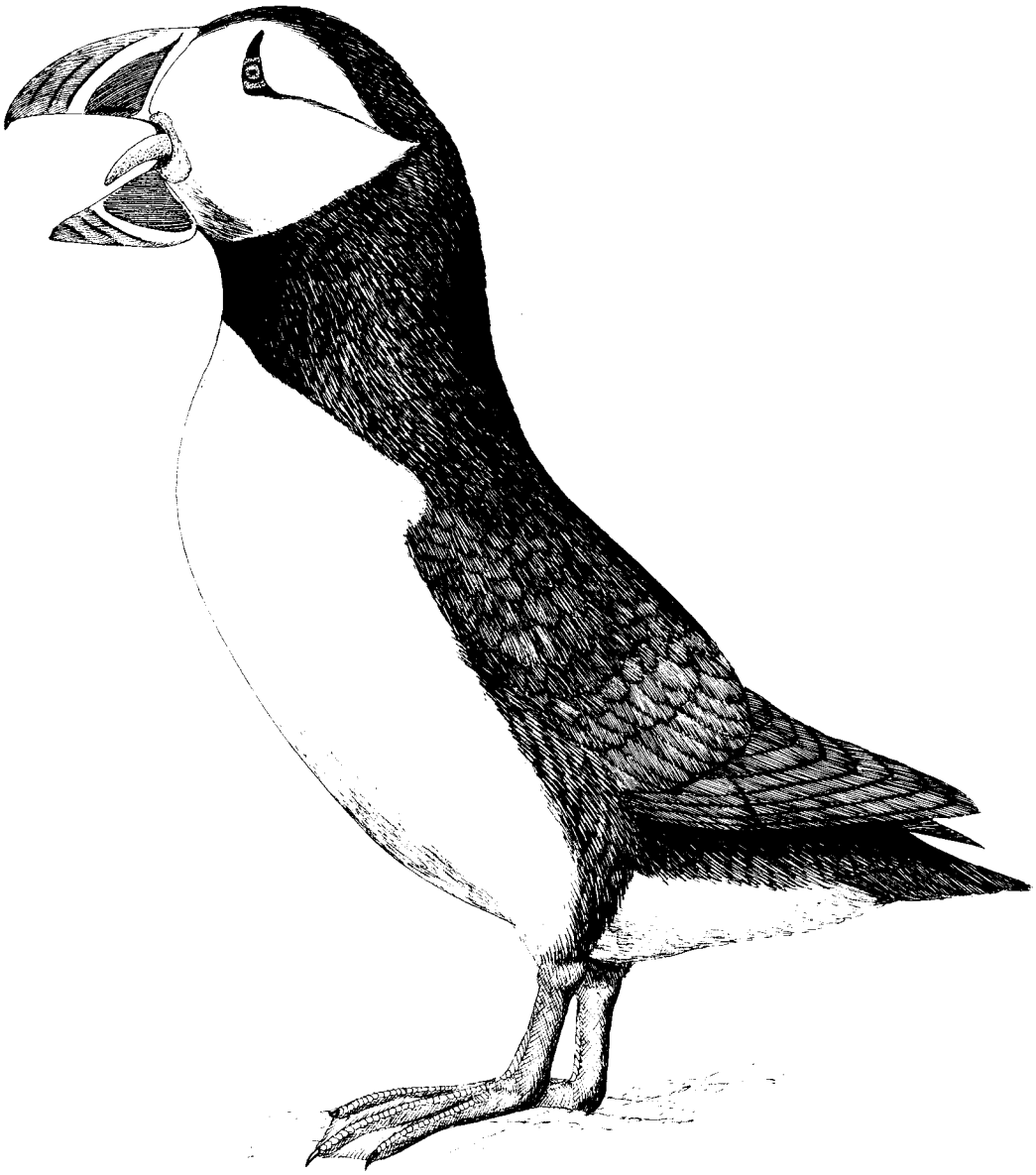

Preface

Considering the great nostalgic attraction of such birds as the common loon for people who have lived at least part of their lives around the lakes of Canada and the northern United States, and given the endearing visual appeal of species like puffins and auklets, it is rather surprising that there are so few books on these groups of aquatic birds. During my childhood summers at our Minnesota lake cottage I used to spend hours watching loons and red-necked grebes, and I marveled at their wonderful diving ability and powerful voices. Much later, the wild puffins and massed breeding colonies of murres along the rugged coasts of Scotland and Alaska were some of the most memorable sights of my entire life. In trying to learn more about these wonderful species I found myself forced repeatedly to turn to A. C. Bent's classic *Life Histories of Northern American Diving Birds.* This book, published in 1919, was the first in Bent's long and distinguished series of authoritative references. Yet it provided a frustratingly small amount of biological information, since at the time very little was known of the breeding biology and ecology of most of these elusive species.

At about the same time Bent's book was published, ornithologists taxonomically isolated the auks from the loons and grebes. Researchers thus ceased to deal collectively with these three groups, and the birds' generally remote nesting sites, as well as the minimal economic significance of most, caused them to be relatively neglected by ornithologists. Each summer as I returned to Minnesota and was excited by the sights and sounds of breeding grebes and loons, I wondered if a book dealing with them might not be worthwhile. But it was not until the late 1970s, after I had seen several of the auks on their nesting grounds, that I began to think in terms of dealing collectively with all the North American "diving birds," in spite of the artificial "lumping" this approach would require. As I considered it further, it seemed that such coverage would emphasize the impact of convergent and parallel evolution better than would dealing with the patterns of adaptive radiation within a single phyletic group as has been the typical approach of my earlier books.

This vision became stronger after a trip to the seabird colonies on the Pribilof Islands in 1982, and soon thereafter I began organizing references for my book. In attempting to learn if any works on the same subject area were in the offing, I eventually discovered that Dr. Asa C. Thoreson had nearly finished a book on the auks of the world. When I wrote to him it became apparent that our planned books were oriented in rather different ways. In any case, none of the comparative aspects of diving bird biology would be dealt with by his book, which consists almost exclusively of species accounts. Thus I went ahead with my project and was further aided by Dr. Thoreson, who very kindly sent me a photocopy of his text, which greatly helped me in my own work and allowed me to avoid unnecessary overlap with his.

The literature on the North American loons, grebes, and auks is diverse and also is very unequally distributed among the thirty-one species concerned, largely as a reflection on the varied distribution patterns and relative abundance of each of the species, as well as differing amounts of public interest in them. Thus, of 237 literature references in my loon card file, 41 percent relate to the common loon, 31 percent to the arctic loon, 16 percent to the red-throated loon, and 12 percent to the yellow-billed loon. Of 292 available references to North American grebes, 30 percent refer to the eared grebe, while the horned, red-necked, and western grebes each account for 20–25 percent, 16 percent refer to the pied-billed, and 5 percent refer to the least grebe, including duplicate coverage. Of 755 references in my auk file, 25 percent relate to the common murre, 14 percent

to the Atlantic puffin, 13 percent to the razorbill, 8 percent to the black guillemot, 6 percent each to the dovekie and thick-billed murre, from 2 to 3 percent each to the Craveri and Cassin auklets, ancient and marbled auklets, and tufted puffin, with less than 2 percent each pertaining to the remaining ten species. There is thus roughly five times as much information available on the eared grebe as on the least grebe and more than ten times as much literature on the common murre as on nearly half of the other North American auks. I have not attempted to provide complete bibliographies for all these groups, but Thoreson (in press) listed 570 references relating to the Alcidae. Likewise Clapp et al. (1982) have provided an extensive literature listing for all the species of loons and grebes that I consider North American, with the sole exception of the yellow-billed loon. I have included in this book all the references that I consider of general North American significance to this species. Cramp and Simmons (1977) and Bauer and Glutz (1966) have provided additional references relative to this species in the Palearctic.

I began writing this book in 1983 and continued through the 1984–85 academic year. A summer fellowship from the University of Nebraska's Research Council enabled me to travel in 1983 to the Peabody Museum of Yale University to do preliminary library work as well as to begin related work in that museum and the American Museum of Natural History. I obtained specimens on loan from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and the Nebraska State Museum in Lincoln as well as from the two museums previously mentioned. I observed alcid diving behavior at Sea World in San Diego, whose staff allowed me access to special viewing tanks. I also appreciate the loan of library materials from the Van Tyne Memorial Library and access to the library and museum collections at the University of Kansas Museum, Lawrence, the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, and the California Academy of Science, San Francisco. I offer my sincere thanks to all these institutions as well as to the persons who helped me, in particular Luis Baptista, John Fitzpatrick, Ian Galbraith, Robert Mengel, Charles G. Sibley, Lester Short, Jr., Frank S. Todd, and David Willard.

A very large number of people assisted me with various kinds of information or provided help on illustrations. Chief among the latter were Jon Fjeldså, who provided the splendid painting of downy grebes, Mark E. Marcuson, who painted the least grebe and auklet scenes, and John Felsing, Jr., who did the superb horned puffin painting. Photographs were offered or provided by Robert Armstrong, Thomas Cardamone, Robert Day, Kenneth W. Fink, Greg Hiemenz, Stuart Johnson, Alan Nelson, Gary Nuechterlein, David G. Roseneau, Asa Thoreson, Frank S. Todd, and C. Fred Zeillemaker. Other kinds of assistance were provided by James Bellingham, Scott Drieschmann, Bruce Elliott, Kenneth W. Fink, Otto Höhn, Scott Johnsgard, Ned Johnson, Brina Kessel, Judith McIntyre, David Rimlinger, John Rogers, George Watson, Duff Wehle, and the Bird Banding Laboratory at Patuxent, Maryland. The entire manuscript was critically read by C. Fred Zeillemaker and Kenneth W. Fink, and parts were also read by David Rimlinger.