

Tufted Puffins

on the Salish Sea

July 28, 2024



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This fun and incredible journey wouldn't have been possible without the collective efforts and dedication of several individuals and organizations. We extend our deepest gratitude to [Skagit Audubon Society](#) (Jeff Osmund and Colleen Shannon), Eric Ellingson ([check out his Flickr!!](#)), Paraclete Charters, and all of YOU who participated in this memorable event.

Your unwavering support not only helps us organize these trips but also allows us to ***provide crucial scholarships***, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to explore and learn about the fascinating marine life in our local ecosystems.

For many students, these experiences mark their first time stepping onto a beach or boarding a boat. We believe these immersive encounters with nature can ignite a lifelong passion for the preservation and protection of the Salish Sea.

Thank you for being a part of this journey. We hope to continue inspiring future generations of environmental stewards through our shared love and appreciation of these remarkable habitats and creatures!



Thank you for joining us on a fun and beautiful journey on the Salish Sea aboard the beautiful Koinonia!

July 28th, 2024 - Trip route and species report:

- 3 Harlequin Duck
- 2 Surf Scoter
- 1 Red-necked Grebe
- 39 Black-bellied Plover
- 1 Ruddy Turnstone
- 8 Sanderling
- 32 Rhinoceros Auklet
- 11-14 Tufted Puffin
- 1 Horned Puffin
- 20 Pigeon Guillemot
- 41 Heermann's Gull
- 135 Glaucous-winged Gull
- 2 Ring-billed Gull
- 3 Brandt's Cormorant
- 29 Pelagic Cormorant
- 10 Double-crested Cormorant
- 3 Bald Eagle
- 1 American Crow

Puffin Observations

Minor Island, Harbor Seals, Gulls, Shorebirds, & Cormorants!

Williamson Rocks
and baby cormorants!



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This mom or dad is about to have ONE HAPPY PUFFLING! The average bill load is around 10 fish per trip but the record in Main was 62 fish! These baitfish are known as sand lance and have been the only fish in TUPU's bills that we have personally observed at Smith Island.

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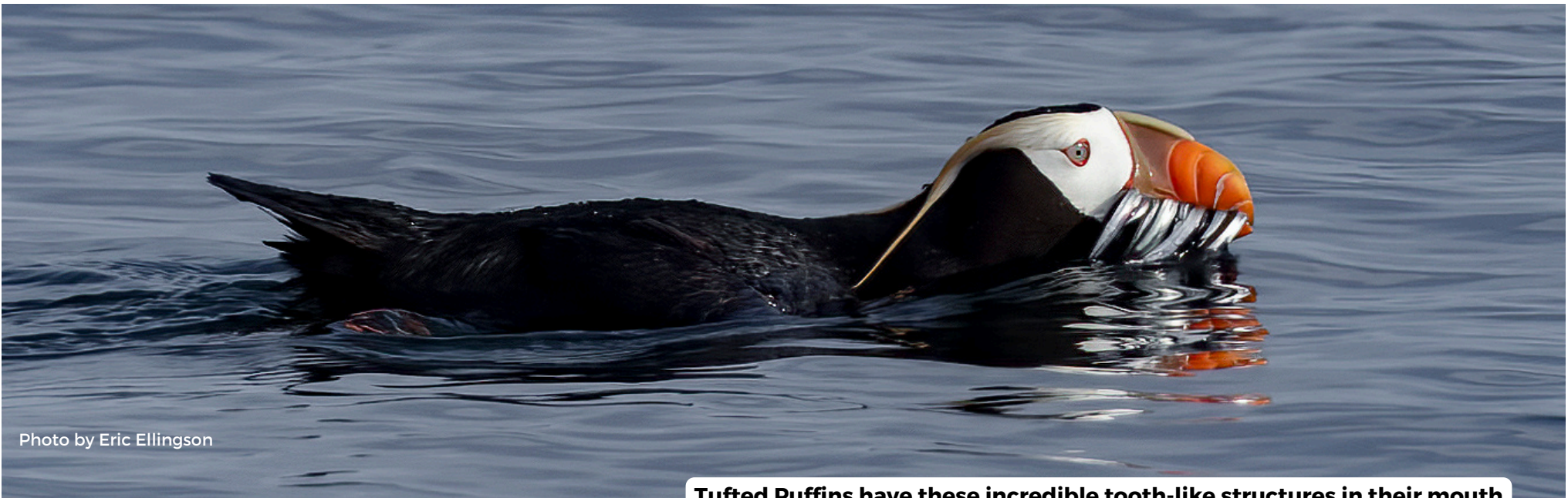


Photo by Eric Ellingson

Tufted Puffins have these incredible tooth-like structures in their mouth called Denticles. These allow them to catch and carry many fish at a time!

Here you can compare their summer plumage with their winter plumage (below).



Allaboutbirds.org



Photo by Oregon Coast Aquarium



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These gulls were enjoying the forage fish feast as well!



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We love this time of year as their tufts turn into fun Einstein hairdos. Gorgeous Rhinoceros Auklet floating along in the background. Would pay a lot of money to know what they are saying to each other!



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Check out those nails! These are important to help dig their burrows!



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The Tufted Puffins were loving all of the forage fish during our trip as they were on continual dives. Luckily, we caught up with some that weren't fishing, allowing us to observe their stunning features on top of a gorgeous water reflection here!

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Who doesn't love these beautiful and sleek Pigeon Guillemots?

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We were very lucky to find the elusive (and lost?) Horned Puffin. This HOPU has been documented on eBird at Smith Island since 2017! Unlike other puffins, which only nest in burrows, the Horned Puffin sometimes nests in rock crevices and on cliffs.

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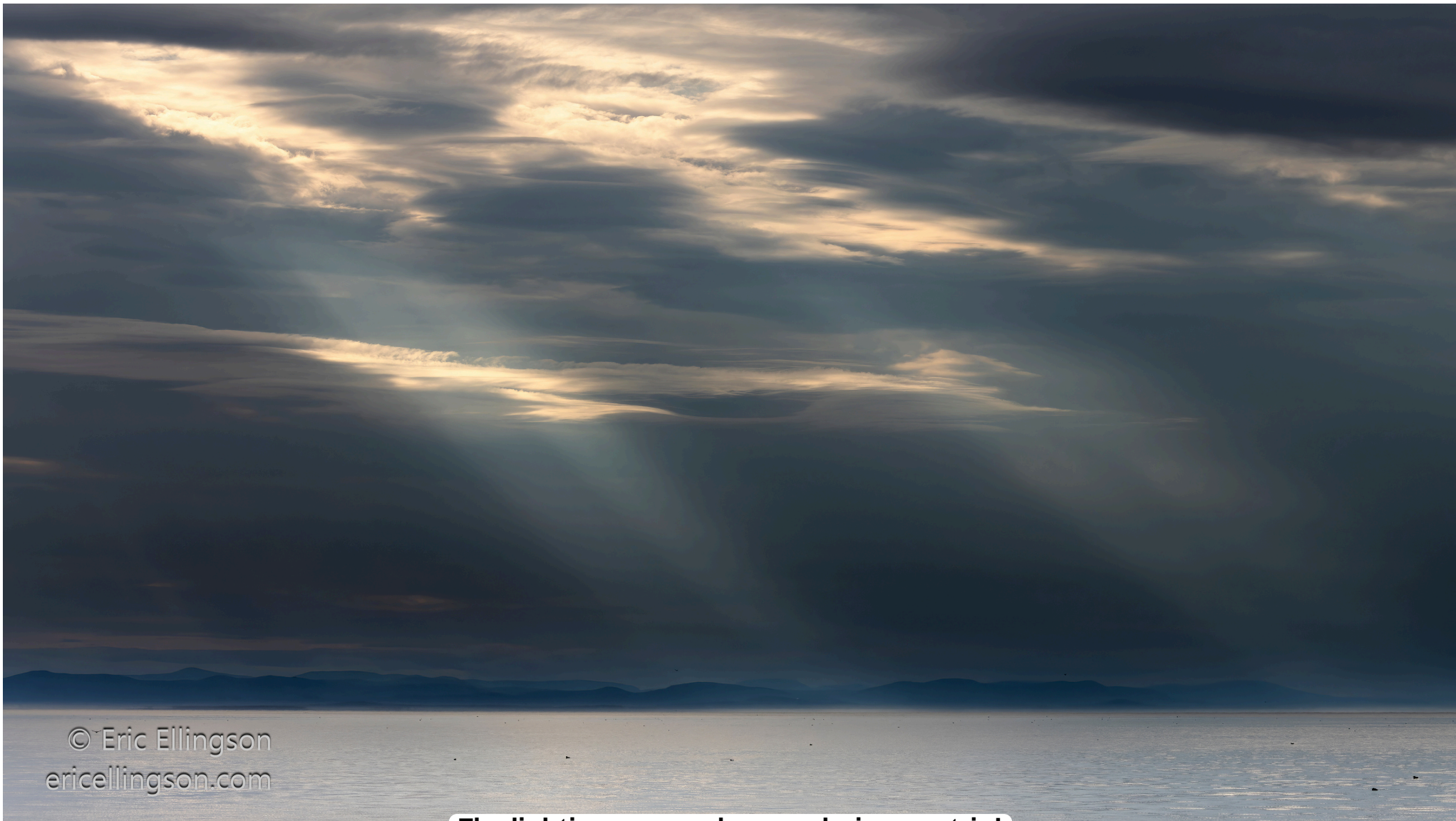
What a cool shot of the Horned Puffin's horns from a different angle!



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Here you can see the burrows, some of which may be safely holding a baby puffin (a Puffling!), awaiting forage fish to be returned to the nest!

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The lighting was so dreamy during our trip!

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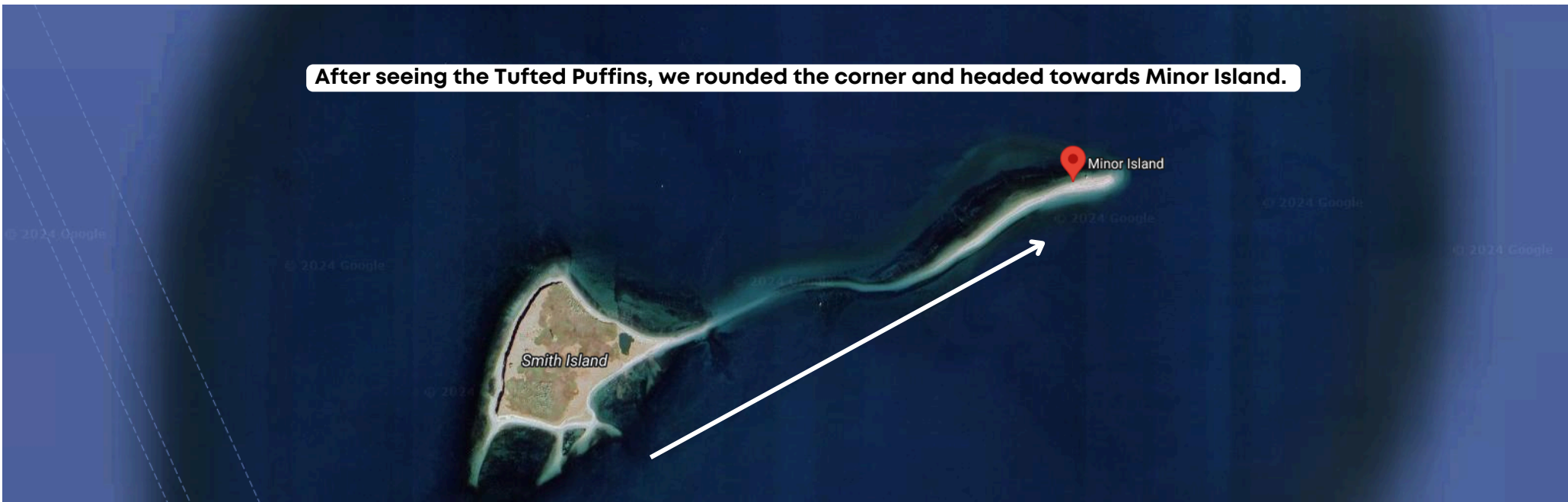


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What a find! This sea otter seemed to be enjoying his evening float in the kelp bed. They have the thickest hair of any mammal on the planet with ~ one million per square inch. After a moratorium on hunting, we have seen a very slow increase in the Salish Sea with around 3-4 sightings per year.

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After seeing the Tufted Puffins, we rounded the corner and headed towards Minor Island.



Can you spot the harbor seals? They blend in so well!!



Photo by Jerry Hammond



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Sanderlings are extreme long-distance migrants breed only on High Arctic tundra, but during the winter they live on most of the sandy beaches of the world.



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Black-bellied Plovers in a wide range of plumage transitions (black bellies = breeding plumage). These birds perform distraction displays including running, faking wing injuries, and head bowing to draw a predator's attention toward themselves and away from the nest



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Black-bellied Plovers, female Harlequin ducks in the foreground, and a potential Ruddy Turnstone in flight. From Eric: Orangish leg, white wing-bar, golden on the shoulder, black collar going into the face. 'Rare' but not sure what else it could be. Suitable habitat, just not for this time of the year.



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Heermann's Gulls are one of the easiest gull species to recognize with these features. They have an unusual "backwards" migration: they breed mostly south of the United States and then move north for the nonbreeding season. After breeding is over in July, the gulls quickly come north all the way to southern Canada. They head back southward by December, and most breeders are at the breeding grounds in Mexico by March.

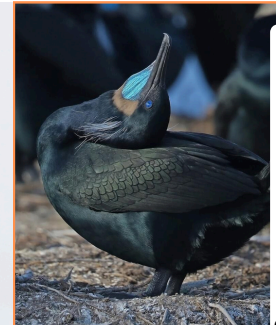


Photo: AllAboutBirds.org

Brandt's Cormorants have gorgeous teal eyes and a blue skin patch, also known as a gular pouch!

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A beautiful profile shot of the cormorant in the circular window.



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Our final stop was a quick look at Williamson Rocks - loved all of the nesting cormorants!



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Pelagic

Double-Crested

Here you can see the amazing size difference in body and bill between these two cormorants!



An incredible close-up up a Double-crested Cormorant! Aren't they gorgeous?





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We were so fortunate to see the cutest baby cormorants! Peliagic cormorants usually lay between 3 and 5 eggs and both parents participate in incubations and chick rearing. The incubation period for this species is typically between 26 and 37 days and chicks fledge 35 to 40 days after they hatch.



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What a trip! Thank you for supporting our beloved Tufted Puffin friends and The Salish Sea School! It was our pleasure to have you onboard! We hope to see you on another one of our trips to see all of the amazing birds listed in the ID guide at the end of this trip report. We have some amazing Fall and Winter visitors. A huge thank you to Eric Ellingson for sharing his photos!

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