

# Donations to fund puffin research at Haystack Rock

Study will be first on the coast

By Brenna Visser  
Cannon Beach Gazette

Tufted puffins have been on the decline at Haystack Rock for decades, and no one really understands why.

This summer, a \$15,000 donation from the Friends of Haystack Rock will enable the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to study what factors are keeping puffin populations low.

The research will be the first of its kind on the Oregon Coast.

"We really need to collect more data and it has taken a long time for us to do that," said Shawn Stephensen, a wildlife biologist with the Oregon Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex. "This gives us the opportunity to do that."

More than half of the research money can be attributed to the "Protect our Puffins" sweatshirt campaign started last summer by John Underwood, a Friends of Haystack Rock board member and longtime Cannon Beach homeowner.

It started with Underwood questioning why, every summer when he came back to visit Cannon Beach, there were fewer and fewer puffins flocking around the rock. He partnered with the awareness program to design and donate a few dozen sweatshirts to sell around the community, with the hope profits would eventually go toward education and research.

A year later, the idea raised more than \$9,000.

"I was hoping it would do well, but I didn't know what to expect," Underwood said. "I'm happy people care."

While Haystack Rock is



Olivia Goward peers through a scope looking for puffins and other birds at Cannon Beach.

COLIN MURPHEY/THE DAILY ASTORIAN



A puffin over Haystack Rock.

LOU SOLITSKE

still home to Oregon's largest tufted puffin colony, along the Oregon Coast the species has steadily declined from about 5,000 birds nesting 20 years ago to just a few hundred today.

Researchers have theorized factors such as rising ocean temperatures and lack of accessible prey could be causing the die-off, but haven't had resources to test it.

The donations will purchase five transmitters, which will be attached to puffins and track where exactly the elusive seabirds go in the win-

ter. Researchers also plan to take blood and fecal samples, which will be used to analyze what the birds eat and whether the colony on Haystack Rock is genetically unique from other tufted puffins.

Answering these questions will bring the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service closer to figuring out why the puffin population on Haystack Rock has dropped from 368 in 2010 to the just over 100 today.

Researchers are also hoping this information can build a case for listing the tufted puffin as endangered in Or-

regon. The listing would help the bird qualify for more research funding, which ultimately could help save the dwindling population, Stephensen said. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife voted to put the puffin on the endangered species list three years ago.

With funding in place, the next challenge will be physically attaching the transmitters and collecting the samples. This August, Stephensen and his team will have a two-week window to catch and sample multiple puffins. Researchers will have to do this by boat at night, when puffins are often rafting on the water near Haystack Rock, by the light of a spotlight and the grace of luck.

"That will be the tricky part," Stephensen said.

But it's a labor of love Stephensen is ready to take on, as he is hoping this will be the first of several projects.

"This study will be instrumental in helping us make a determination on whether listing the puffin is warranted" he said.

Future research will take more money, however, a challenge the Friends of Haystack Rock will continue to take on, Board President Stacy Benefield said.

"This is something new for us," Benefield said. "We've never funded research like this before. We hope to keep participating to protect our puffins."

Underwood said the board is working with the Audubon Society and other environmental groups to try and sell more sweatshirts outside of the local area.

"I'm really happy this has generated a lot of enthusiasm," Underwood said. "Now, we need to extend our reach."

# Red-winged blackbird wins city recognition

Beats out the beloved puffin

By Brenna Visser  
Cannon Beach Gazette



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY NEAL MAINE

The red-winged blackbird is being proposed to be Cannon Beach's official "city bird."

— the tufted puffin — was not chosen. The council asked Maine if puffins were considered.

"No, we didn't really consider the puffin. It wasn't about the puffin," Maine said. "Though it has been portrayed as a kind of battle of the birds."

Maine reiterated that the committee believes the red-winged blackbird deserves the visibility more than the elusive tufted puffin, which only nest on Haystack Rock a few months a year. The bird will always be an icon and already has the Haystack Rock Awareness Program protecting their interests, Maine said.

Without hearing any strong objections, the council unanimously decided to schedule the proclamation for next month.

For Mayor Sam Steidel, the tension between the red-winged blackbird and tufted puffin was described succinctly in a letter from a former Cannon Beach Elementary School student who was a part of the Little Pompey Wetland project.

"Puffins are second homeowners," Steidel quoted from the letter. "But the red-winged blackbirds are the residents."

After months in limbo, the red-winged blackbird will take the title of Cannon Beach's official city bird.

City councilors brought the proposal to a work session June 12 after voting to postpone a proclamation last month that would have promoted the medium-sized, black-and-red songbird. The idea was to give the public a chance to raise any concerns over the pick, or to suggest a different species.

But alas — the tufted puffin lobby was silent.

"Is there anyone here on behalf of the puffins?" City Councilor George Vetter asked with a smile.

Nominating the red-winged blackbird was brought to the city council in April by Neal Maine, a longtime nature photographer and representative of the 12 Days of Earth Day committee. The group wanted the city to recognize an official bird to honor the 100th anniversary of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a landmark federal law that protects dozens of species of birds. This bird was chosen because they are abundant and represent the local ecology, Maine said. Recognizing the birds would also hold historical value as many live on the Little Pompey Wetland - a marsh named after the son of Sagagawea from the Lewis and Clark Expedition by Cannon Beach Elementary School fifth-graders more than 20 years ago.

Part of the reason councilors delayed the proclamation was in response to some in the community asking why the town's iconic bird

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