

## Auks – Classification and Adaptation

Members of the Auk family include the Black Guillemot, Guillemot, Puffin, Little Auk and Razorbill.

These are medium-sized seabirds with long barrel shaped bodies, short tails, very small wings and short legs set far back on the body. Most can hardly walk, but stand upright on cliff ledges where they come to breed each spring.

They fly low and fast with whirring wings. The birds are excellent swimmers and divers who use their wings to fly underwater.



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## The Black Guillemot

It's striking black and white plumage and bright red feet make it easy to identify in summer. Unlike most other European auks the black guillemot is typically found in ones and twos, scattered around rocky islets. It is typical of the larger sea lochs of western Scotland, and the northern and western isles, but is also found in Ireland, the Isle of Man and in a handful of spots in England and Wales.



### Where to see them

Largest numbers are on the Shetland and Orkney islands, and down the west coast of Scotland. Small numbers can also be found on the Cumbrian coast at St Bees Head, along the N Ireland coast, and on the Isle of Man.

### When to see them

All year round

### What they eat

Fish and crustaceans

### Population

Europe 130 – 300 000 pairs

United Kingdom 39, 316

Wintering in the UK  
(October to March)

58 000 to 80 000 birds

### Characteristics

#### Black guillemot (breeding)



**Size:** between blackbird-pigeon

**Feather colours:** brown, black, white

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey, red/pink

**Beak length:** medium

**Beak thickness:** medium

**Beak shape:** medium

**Leg colour:** orange

**Behaviour:** part of flock

#### Black guillemot (winter)



**Size:** between blackbird-pigeon

**Feather colours:** black, white, grey

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey

**Beak length:** medium

**Beak thickness:** medium

**Beak shape:** medium

**Leg colour:** orange, red

**Behaviour:** part of flock



## The Guillemot

The UK's coasts have many stretches of sheer cliffs where seabirds breed. It comes to land only to nest, spending the rest of its life at sea, where it is vulnerable to oil spills. Dark brown and white it is not as black as the similar razorbill. Easy to recognise it has white ring round the eye and stripe behind it.



### Where to see them

Found on small areas of cliffs on the south coast of England, very locally on the coasts and islands of Wales and in a handful of places in the north of England and Northern Ireland; more widely spread on cliffs of Scotland. RSPB nature reserves such as Bempton Cliffs in Yorkshire, Fowlsheugh in Grampian and Marwick Head in Orkney have large colonies.

### When to see them

Guillemots are best seen at the nesting colonies, from March to the end of July.

### What they eat

Fish and crustaceans

### Population

United Kingdom 1,420, 000

### Characteristics

#### Guillemot (breeding)



**Size:** between pigeon-mallard

**Feather colours:** brown, black, white

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey

**Beak length:** medium

**Beak thickness:** medium

**Beak shape:** medium

**Leg colour:** black/grey

**Behaviour:** part of flock, bird walks/runs on the ground, dives underwater

#### Guillemot (winter)



**Size:** between pigeon-mallard

**Feather colours:** brown, black, white

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey

**Beak length:** medium

**Beak thickness:** medium

**Beak shape:** medium

**Leg colour:** black/grey

**Behaviour:** part of flock, dives underwater

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## Little Auk

It is half the size of the Atlantic Puffin 19-21 cm in length, with a 34–38 cm wingspan.

The little auk is a small seabird, the size of a starling. It is black above and white below, and in flight it shows dark underwings. It has a black stubby bill, and a short neck and tail. It flies with very fast whirring wingbeats low over the sea. It is a winter visitor to the waters around the UK in small numbers each year. It breeds in the Arctic and winters in the North Atlantic. Some birds enter the North Sea in autumn and large numbers can be seen passing offshore during gales.



### Where to see them

Storms in late autumn can drive large numbers of little auks into the North Sea. Look for them along the coast of eastern Scotland and England in late October and early November. Wintering birds can be seen off the northern coast of the UK.

### When to see them

Mainly from late October to February.

### What they eat

Plankton, other tiny marine creatures and fish.

### Characteristics

#### Little auk (winter)



**Size:** between robin-blackbird

**Feather colours:** brown, black, white

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey

**Beak length:** short

**Beak thickness:** short

**Leg colour:** black/grey

**Behaviour:** bird walks/runs on the ground, dives underwater



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## The Puffin

An unmistakable bird with its black back and white underparts, and distinctive black head with large pale cheeks and a tall, flattened, brightly-coloured bill. Its comical appearance is heightened by its red and black eye-markings and bright orange legs. Used as a symbol for books and other items, this clown among seabirds is one of the world's favourite birds. With half of the UK population at only a few sites it is an Amber List species.

### Where to see them

The RSPB's Bempton Cliffs (N Yorks) and South Stack (Anglesey) reserves; the Farne Islands (Northumberland); the Isle of May (off the Fife coast); Burhou and the Shetland and Orkney Islands.

### When to see them

Adults arrive back at the breeding colony in March and April and leave again in mid-August. Some remain in the North Sea at winter, other move further south to the Bay of Biscay.

### What they eat

Fish, especially sandeels

### Population

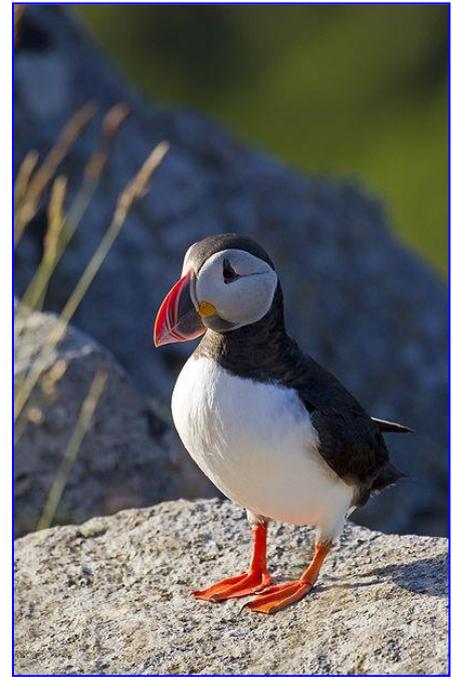
United Kingdom

580, 799 pairs



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### Puffin (breeding)



**Size:** between blackbird-pigeon

**Feather colours:** black, white, grey

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey, orange, yellow, blue, red/pink

**Beak length:** medium

**Beak thickness:** medium

**Beak shape:** medium

**Leg colour:** orange

**Behaviour:** part of flock, bird walks/runs on the ground, dives underwater

### Puffin (first-winter)



**Size:** between blackbird-pigeon

**Feather colours:** black, white, grey

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey, brown/buff, yellow

**Beak length:** medium

**Beak thickness:** medium

**Beak shape:** medium

**Leg colour:** orange

**Behaviour:** part of flock, bird walks/runs on the ground, dives underwater

## The Razorbill

The razorbill is a medium-sized seabird. It is black above and white below. It has a thick black beak which is deep and blunt, unlike the thinner bill of the similar guillemot. It breeds around the coast of the UK, with the largest colonies in northern Scotland. Birds only come to shore to breed, and winter in the northern Atlantic. The future of this species is linked to the health of the marine environment. Fishing nets, pollution and declining fish stocks all threaten the razorbill.

### Where to see them

seabird colonies in the breeding season, particularly in northern Scotland. You may see them around the coast at other times.

### When to see them

On the breeding cliffs from March to end of July. Rather scarce in inshore waters the rest of the time.

### What they eat

Fish, especially sand eels, sprats and herrings.



### Characteristics

#### Razorbill (breeding)



**Size:** between pigeon-mallard

**Feather colours:** black, white

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey

**Beak length:** medium

**Beak thickness:** medium

**Beak shape:** medium

**Leg colour:** black/grey

**Behaviour:** part of flock, on ground, bird walks/runs on the ground, dives underwater

#### Razorbill (winter)



**Size:** between pigeon-mallard

**Feather colours:** black, white

**Beak colours:** black/dark grey

**Beak length:** medium

**Beak thickness:** medium

**Beak shape:** medium

**Leg colour:** black/grey

**Behaviour:** part of flock, dives underwater

### Population

United Kingdom

188,576 birds



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