

# Karen Telleen-Lawton: California Murres Taking Flight Off San Miguel Island

After century hiatus, re-established colony takes up residence on islet of Prince Island

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 12.02.2011 10:51 a.m.



You can be forgiven if you haven't heard of seabirds called murres. California common murres (*Uria aalge californica*) disappeared from the [Channel Islands](#) and Southern California in 1912, thought to be victims of human disturbance and egg harvesting.

If you saw one, you'd think it might not be a bird in our habitat, since it belongs in the Alcid family with the cute clown-faced puffin of northerly waters and wears a tuxedo outfit we associate with penguins. But it is one of ours, and thanks to a [re-established colony](#) off [San Miguel Island](#), you might see one out on the water.

Murres are amazing. Both parents feed the chicks for the first two weeks, alternatively serving as caretakers and hunters, diving for anchovies, sardines and juvenile rockfishes. Then the juveniles toddle from their cliff-top nests while they're still adolescents, acting about as foolhardy as their human counterparts. They stumble over and careen toward the sea, figuring out how to fly on the way down. Their (anxious?) fathers are waiting below, and proceed to teach them to fish on the open ocean. As football-sized adults, they "fly" through the water as far down as 500 feet to chase prey.

It may be even more amazing that after a century hiatus, the common murre is found to have taken up residence again on Prince Island, a little islet off San Miguel.

Biologists Laurie Harvey, David Mazurkiewicz and Jonathan Felis, researchers from the [U.S. Geological Survey](#) and [National Park Service](#), discovered them during a research trip last summer. They counted 125 birds, about half of which were incubating. The researchers were excited to note before they left that one

chick had hatched; they don't know how many others hatched or fledged successfully.

Explaining the re-colonization is a different matter. As to whether the birds have benefited from habitat restoration on the Channel Islands, the present ocean conditions, or some other factor, is unknown.

“We'll be monitoring next year to track this colony,” promised Harvey, a seabird biologist for Channel Islands National Park under the Montrose Settlements Restoration Program.

The new colony has chosen a fortuitous location not only within Channel Islands National Park and [National Marine Sanctuary](#), but also within the recently designated Harris Point California Marine Protected Area. With help from Montrose Settlements Restoration Program and the California Institute for Environmental Studies, biologists will be able to monitor the site.

Meanwhile, its very presence has caused a stir of excitement at the park headquarters.

“With this murre colony,” wrote Yvonne Menard, chief of interpretation and a public information officer for Channel Islands National Park, “Prince Island now hosts 13 nesting seabirds, making it one of the most important and biologically diverse nesting habitats on the West Coast of North America.”

A good reason to check out our fabulous offshore islands, binoculars in tow.

Another reason, hot off the press: If you travel by public conveyance ([Condor Express](#), [Truth Aquatics](#), [Island Packers](#) or [Channel Islands Aviation](#)), you'll be entertained and educated by one of us from the [Channel Islands Naturalist Corps](#), named the nation's top federal volunteer program of 2011.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com).*