

Status and Occurrence of Parakeet Auklet (*Aethia psittacula*) in British Columbia.
By Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland.

Introduction and Distribution

The Parakeet Auklet (*Aethia psittacula*) is a small species of auklet found breeding in the Beringia region of Alaska and Russia (Gaston and Jones 1998). This species has an Alaskan population estimated at 1 million birds (Gaston and Jones 1998). There is also a Russian population, but the exact population total is not known, due to a lack of population inventory work, but it is estimated to number about 400,000 birds with the vast majority, about 300,000 birds, found in the Sea of Okhotsk (Gaston and Jones 1998). The Parakeet Auklet has breeding colonies that are found on rocky mainland points and islands in the Gulf of Alaska (Jones *et al.* 2001). These sites include: Shumagin Island, Semidi Island, Chirikof Island near Kodiak, locally in Kenai Peninsula and southeastern Alaska with small numbers south to St. Lazaria, Hazy and Forrester Island; and in the Aleutian Islands west to Buldir and Agattu Island; and in the Bering Sea at Little Diomedea, St. Lawrence Island, King Island, St. Matthew Island, Pribilof Island and Nunivak Island (Sowls *et al.* 1978). The Parakeet Auklet also breeds in Russia in the Kurile Island chain with colonies on Chirinkontan, Lovushki, Raikoke, Matua, Yankicha, Simushir, Brat Chirpoev, Urup, and Iturup Island (Jones *et al.* 2001, Brazil 2009). They are also breeding on islands in the Sea of Okhotsk with colonies on Sakhalin, Tyuleniy, Iona, Talan, and Yamskye Island (Jones *et al.* 2001, Brazil 2009). The Parakeet Auklet is also found breeding on Commander Island, and northwards locally along coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula, on Karaginski Island, Cape Navarin, and on Chukotka Peninsula (Konyukhov 1989, Kondratyev *et al.* 2000, Jones *et al.* 2001, Brazil 2009). The northernmost colony in Russia is located at Ratmanov on Big Diomedea Island in the Bering Strait (Jones *et al.* 2001, Brazil 2009). The southwesternmost colony in Russia is at Tyuletiy Island near Sakhalin Island in Sea of Okhotsk (Konyukhov 1989, Jones *et al.* 2001, Brazil 2009). In Russia, the Parakeet Auklet wanders north and west to Cape Serdse Kamen' and Cape Shmidta (Jones *et al.* 2001). This species winters in Russia off south Sakhalin Island, and the southern Kurile Islands (Jones *et al.* 2001, Brazil 2009). In Japan, the Parakeet Auklet winters along the north and northeast coasts of Hokkaido, and southwards along the east and west coasts of Honshu and Kishu Island, but does not occur along the west coast of the Sea of Japan (Brazil 2009). In Alaska, the Parakeet Auklet regularly moves into the Chukchi Sea during the months of August and September, occasionally wandering north to Point Barrow, Alaska (Jones *et al.* 2001, West 2008). The winter range of the Parakeet Auklet is poorly known, but this species moves far into offshore waters, and moves farther south into the central North Pacific compared to other Auklet species (Gould and Piatt 1993). It has been noted that most individuals probably vacate Bering Sea during winter: the Parakeet Auklet is not found in the Kodiak Island area from November to March (Forsell and Gould 1980). The Parakeet Auklet normally winters in the north Pacific far offshore, and probably south, regularly to 40°N, and less commonly to approximately 30°N (Gould and Piatt

1993). The Parakeet Auklet is a rare to probably uncommon winter visitor in the pelagic offshore region of the province with over 35 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The lack of records is more reflective of the lack of observer coverage of the offshore pelagic zone in the winter months than a lack of birds present (Jones *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). It is also likely that more pelagic coverage off the Queen Charlotte Islands would produce more records, and even the possibility of a breeding record (Jones *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). In Washington State, there are 14 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). This species was officially removed as a review species in 2010 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In Oregon, there are 18 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In California, there are 294 accepted records by the California Bird Records Committee with records found from the pelagic waters up and down off the coast of the state with the southernmost record coming from La Jolla in San Diego County (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). Although large numbers were found relatively close to shore in Monterey Bay, California, during the winters of January 1905 and 1908 by Rollo Beck, few have been found close to shore since; the species is probably regular well offshore over deep water as far south as northern and central California (Rottenborn and Morlan 2000). This species has occurred as a vagrant to Kure and Midway Atolls in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (Clapp 1986). Incredibly, there is a specimen record from Sweden at Lake Vättern from December 1860 (Cramp 1985, Lewington *et al.* 1992).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Parakeet Auklet is covered in all standard North American field guides. This species is a chunky alcid, measuring 25 cm (10 inches) long and weighing 315 grams (11 ounces) (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is very distinct with blackish-gray upperparts and white underparts, superficially resembling other small auklet species, that could be confused with a Cassin's Auklet (*Ptychoramphus aleuticus*) or a Rhinoceros Auklet (*Cerorhinca monocerata*) if not seen well or by more inexperienced observers (Gaston and Jones 1998, Jones *et al.* 2001).

Adult birds hold their breeding plumage from April to September and their winter plumage from October to March (Sibley 2000). In all plumages, the sexes look alike (Jones *et al.* 2001). In breeding plumage, the bill is dark orange-red with a dark base to the upper mandible, the tip slightly upturned (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eyes are light white with a long white plume flowing out from the eye (Sibley 2000). The head, neck, back wings, rump, tail and throat are black (Sibley 2000). The chest, belly and undertail coverts are white with slight dark mottling down the sides and flanks (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The legs and feet are dark (Gaston and Jones 1998). In winter plumage, the amount of white on the underparts is greater extending up on the upper chest and throat (Gaston and Jones 1998). The bill in winter plumage is orange-

red, but is reduced in brightness, yet still shows a small white plume extending back from the pale white eyes (Gaston and Jones 1998). In flight, the Parakeet Auklet has a dark underwing with a narrow pale line in the middle of the wing (Gaston and Jones 1998, Sibley 2000). The wings are broad in shape and rounded with varying slow and fast wing beats (Gaston and Jones 1998, Sibley 2000).

Juvenile birds hold this plumage from August to March (Sibley 2000). These birds have very short facial plumes, a stubby dark bill that looks smaller than an adults bill in breeding plumage, and dark eyes, but otherwise look similar to adults (Gaston and Jones 1998, Sibley 2000).

Other Alaskan species of alcid are superficially similar to the Parakeet Auklet, and are all accidental to casual in occurrence in the province (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The Parakeet Auklet appears superficially similar to Least Auklet (*Aethia pusilla*), but is more than twice as large (Jones *et al.* 2001). At sea, the Parakeet Auklet may be more difficult to identify; it is best distinguished from Crested Auklet (*Aethia cristatella*) in flight by white underparts and rounded wings because Crested Auklet has uniformly dark and longer pointed wings (Jones *et al.* 2001). When resting on the sea surface, white underparts may not be visible (Jones *et al.* 2001). Parakeet Auklets show more extensive white on their underparts, including lower breast, belly, and vent, than Whiskered Auklets (*Aethia pygmaea*) which have a pale vent only (Jones *et al.* 2001). At sea, Parakeet Auklets resemble Least and Cassin's Auklets most closely, but are larger, have slower wing beats, broader wings, and at close range, have a round, red bill (Jones *et al.* 2001). In the waters of British Columbia, the Parakeet Auklet could also be mistaken at a distance for a Rhinoceros Auklet, but that species has a longer, pointed bill and a less chunky body shape (Jones *et al.* 2001). Parakeet Auklets have a distinctive pot-bellied shape compared to the streamlined appearance of Murrelet species such as (*Synthliboramphus* or *Brachyramphus*) (Jones *et al.* 2001).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Parakeet Auklet is a rare to uncommon visitor in the winter and early spring to British Columbia with 37 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This pelagic species is found offshore normally near the Continental Shelf break, and further south than British Columbia (Jones *et al.* 2001); current records for the province are likely conservative in number relative to the true status of the species in provincial waters (Jones *et al.* 2001). Though most birds have been recorded well offshore, there are records of individual birds seen closer to shore (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The records for British Columbia are divided between 21 records from the waters off the west coast of Vancouver Island and 16 records from the waters around the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). When looking at the highest number of records that have been found, the stand out month is February with 14

records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). Almost all these sightings were made from research vessels that were able to run transects in the deeper pelagic zone near or off the Continental Shelf (Kenyon *et al.* 2009). The fact that this species likes to feed this far offshore makes running commercial trips impossible due to the dangers of travelling far out at sea in the turbulent winter months. The lack of winter trips offshore explains the few records from the months of November to January (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). During the winter months of January to February 1989, there was an oil spill from the barge Nestucca off Washington and southern Vancouver Island that washed ashore, along Long Beach in Pacific Rim National Park (Jones *et al.* 2001). Up to 15 Parakeet Auklets died, further showing that this species likely winters off the coast in higher numbers than are recorded annually (Jones *et al.* 2001). There are only 2 March records and 4 April records from both Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlottes (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). There are also 3 records from May and June from the waters around the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). Though a nest has never been found in British Columbia, this species has nested on Forrester Island, Alaska, which is at the southernmost part of the Alaska Panhandle and is less than 60 km from Langara Island in the Queen Charlotte Islands (Jones *et al.* 2001, P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). It is very possible that there could be a few breeding pairs not yet discovered at the various seabird colonies found around the Queen Charlotte Islands (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). There are no records for July or August in British Columbia, but there are 3 records for September and 6 records for October (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). It is entirely likely that strong rapid moving Low Pressure Systems can push pelagic species, such as the Parakeet Auklet closer to shore in the winter months (M. Meredith Pers. Comm.). This happened to Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland while conducting a sea watch on December 8, 2007, when they had an adult in winter plumage close to shore in company of other alcids off Botanical Beach in Port Renfrew (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). With more observer coverage and extensive sea watches during and just after large Northwesterly and Westerly storms, particularly in the winter and early spring, at areas such as Amphitrite Point in Ucluelet and Botanical Beach in Port Renfrew, it is entirely likely that more observers will luck into their own observations of this elusive alcid. If there were better access to areas such as the Brooks Peninsula and the various islands in the Queen Charlottes, it is very likely that Parakeet Auklet records in British Columbia would increase. Until there are more commercial pelagic trips done in British Columbia throughout the year, this species, like many other deep-water pelagic birds will remain elusive to most keen observers.



Figure 1 & 2: Parakeet Auklets adult birds off Grays Harbour Washington State on March 4, 2012. Photos © Ryan Merrill.

Table 1: Records of Parakeet Auklet for British Columbia:

- 1.(1-3) adults February 24, 1971: R. Wayne Campbell: 1 came aboard a ship 15 miles sw of Estevan Pt. (Campbell and Shepard 1973)
- 2.(1+) adults September 27, 1982: well offshore south of QCI (51.38°N, 133.73°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 3.(1+) adults September 28, 1982: south of QCI (51.77°N, 130.95°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 4.(1+) adults September 16, 1983: well offshore of QCI (50.78°N, 130.38°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 5.(1+) adults October 14, 1984: off QCI (53.40°N, 132.95°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 6.(1+) adults October 14, 1984: off QCI (53.72°N, 133.28°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 7.(1+) adults October 14, 1984: off QCI (53.77°N, 133.37°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 8.(1+) adults October 15, 1984: off QCI (54.35°N, 133.02°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 9.(1) adult October 27, 1988: 120 km west of Vancouver Island (48°19'N, 127°10'W) (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 10.(15) adults January 3-February 8 ,1989: (15 oiled birds) found from Pachena Pt to Long Beach PRNP, s of Tofino (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 11.(3) adult May 13, 1993: Rob Butler, mobs: 1.5 km north east of Talunkwan Island, QCI (52.84°N, 131.58°W) (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

- 12.(1) adult March 20, 1994: Ian Jones: off San Josef Bay, Cape Scott (50°34'N 128°35'W, 18)
(Bowling 1994a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 13.(1+) adults June 8, 1995: off QCI (52.73°N, 132.61°W)(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 14.(1+) adults February 14, 1997: off Vancouver Island (48.67°N, 126.87°W)
(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 15.(1+) adults February 14, 1997: off Vancouver Island (48.66°N, 126.79°W)
(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 16.(1+) adults February 14, 1997: off Vancouver Island (48.64°N, 126.59°W)
(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 17.(1+) adults February 26, 1997: off Vancouver Island (48.83°N, 128.90°W)
(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 18.(1+) adults February 22, 1998: off Vancouver Island (49.09°N, 132.27°W)
(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 19.(1) adult May 15, 1998: Rob Butler: off Howay Island, QC1 (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 20.(1+) adults February 9, 1999: off Vancouver Island (48.58°N, 125.73°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 21.(1+) adults February 8, 2001: off Vancouver Island (48.84°N, 129.00°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 22.(1+) adults February 17, 2003: off Vancouver Island (48.76°N, 127.87°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 23.(1+) adults April 1, 2003: off Vancouver Island (48.96°N, 126.47°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 24.(1+) adults April 1, 2003: off Vancouver Island (48.75°N, 125.89°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 25.(1+) adults February 27, 2004: off Vancouver Island (48.67°N, 127.73°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 26.(2) adults February 6, 2006: Mike Bentley: well offshore of Vancouver Island
(48.91°N, 129.82°W)(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 27.(2) adults February 19, 2007: Mike Bentley: well offshore of QCI (51.24°N, 133.01°W)
(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 28.(1) adult December 8, 2007: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Botanical Beach, Port Renfrew
(48.52°N, 124.44°W) (Cecile 2008a, Kenyon *et al.* 2009, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 29.(2) adult May 13, 2008: mobs: from ferry off QCI in Hecate Strait (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)
- 30.(1) adult breeding plumage February 8, 2009: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Shirley
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 31.(3) adults breeding plumage March 30, 2009: Ryan Merrill: NW of Cape Flattery in BC Waters
(Toochin *et al.* 2014.)
- 32.(1) adult breeding plumage April 17, 2010: Roger Foxall, mobs (photo) off Tofino at
Clayoquot Canyon (Charlesworth 2010b)
- 33.(1) adult breeding plumage April 4, 2011: Margo Hearne: on ferry in Hecate Strait [QCI side]
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 34.(1) adult breeding plumage February 21, 2012: Ryan Merrill: off south coast of Vancouver
Island (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 35.(1) adult winter plumage November 17, 2012: John Sprague : Outer Ganges Harbour, Salt
Spring Island (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 36.(7) adults June 1, 2013: Paul Lehman, mobs: 45 Miles off center of Queen Charlotte Islands
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 36.(7) adults June 1, 2013: Paul Lehman, mobs: 45 Miles off center of Queen Charlotte Islands
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)

37.(1) adult winter plumage October 17, 2014: Rick Toochin, Peter Hamel: Skonun Point, Masset (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)

Hypothetical Records:

- 1.(1) age unknown mid - 1975: 50 miles off Vancouver Island (no citation or bibliographical information given *in* Taylor 1994)
- 2.(1) age unknown mid - 1975: between Scott Island and Cape Scott (no citation or bibliographical information given *in* Taylor 1994)
- 3.(1) age unknown September 12, 1986: 150 miles southwest of Estevan Point (no citation or bibliographical information given *in* Taylor 1994)
- 4.(1) age unknown September 18, 1986: 40 miles southwest of Ucluelet (no citation or bibliographical information given *in* Taylor 1994)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Parakeet Auklet records in British Columbia:

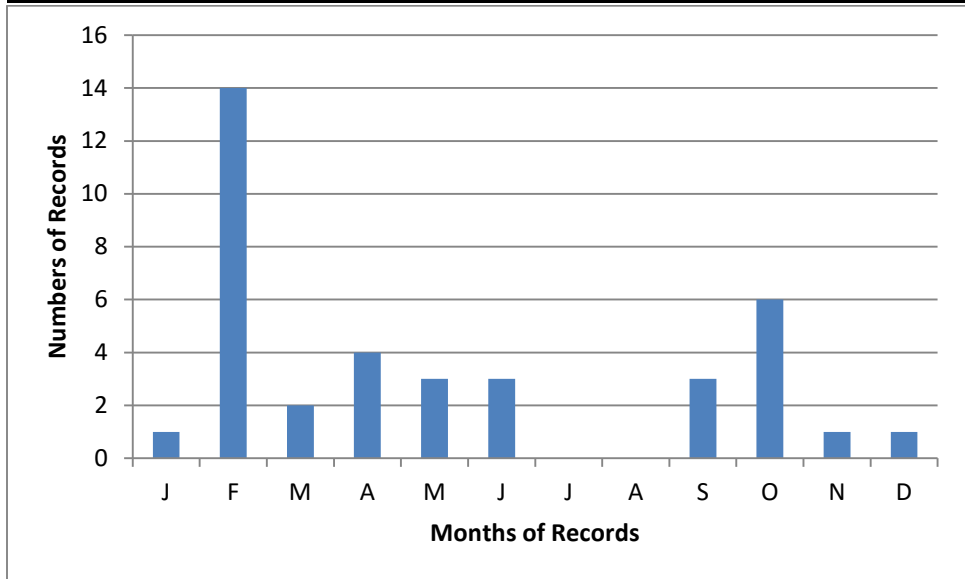


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the winter of this species with February having the highest number of records. Records reflect the amount of coverage given at specific times of the year so are slightly biased.

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