

## **The First Record of Whiskered Auklet (*Aethia pygmaea*) in British Columbia and Canada.**

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### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Whiskered Auklet (*Aethia pygmaea*) is a small alcid endemic to an arc of volcanic islands formed by the Aleutian, Commander, and Kuril island chains (Jones 1993b, Gaston and Jones 1998). This species breeds in rock crevices on these oceanic islands (Stejneger 1885b, Knudtson and Byrd 1982, Hipfner and Byrd 1993). The Whiskered Auklet feeds in nearshore marine waters, usually within 10 km of its colonies (Byrd and Gibson 1980, Day and Byrd 1989). In North America, the Whiskered Auklet is a locally common breeder throughout Aleutian Island Chain, primarily west of Unimak Island (Kessel and Gibson 1978, Byrd and Gibson 1980). Areas of particular concentration are the Krenitzen group, Islands of Four Mountains, Atka Pass to east Sitkin Sound, and Buldir Island (Byrd and Gibson 1980, Nysewander *et al.* 1982, Troy and Bradstreet 1991, Springer *et al.* 1993). There are summer records outside the Aleutian Islands that include two sightings at St. Lawrence Island with a specimen taken July 9, 1931 (Friedmann 1932) and a single bird observed on July 20, 1971 (Johnson 1974e). The Whiskered Auklet winters in Alaska in nearshore waters of the Aleutian Islands (Byrd and Gibson 1980, Troy and Bradstreet 1991, Hunt *et al.* 1993b, Byrd and Williams 1993). This species is likely a year-round resident near breeding areas.

In Russia, the Whiskered Auklet is found breeding on Commander Island (Stejneger 1885b) and is more common on Medni Island than on Bering Island (Kozlova 1961), and south to at least the central Kuril Islands of Ekarma, Rasshua, Sredneva, Iturup, Urup, Simushir, Raikoke, Ushishir, and Matua islands (Flint and Golovkin 1990b). This species has also been seen on Iona Island and Yamski Island in the Sea of Okhotsk. The Whiskered Auklet has been recorded in summer, but breeding has not been confirmed, on Sakhalin Island in the Sea of Okhotsk (Kozlova 1961). The winter range in Russia is poorly known, but most birds remain near Commander Island and the central Kuril Islands (Flint and Golovkin 1990b). This species has been observed as far south as Honshu and Shikoku in Japan in the winter months (Gizenko 1955).

The Whiskered Auklet is not particularly migratory with most birds probably remaining near their breeding colonies throughout the year (Troy and Bradstreet 1991, Byrd and Williams 1993). There is a possible local movement to southern Japan in winter, away from breeding colonies in the Kuril Islands. (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1951, Byrd and Gibson 1980, Flint and Golovkin 1990b).

South of Alaska, the Whiskered Auklet is an accidental vagrant anywhere along the west coast of North America. There is 1 accepted record for Washington State with a bird at Penn Cove, Island County from May 16-17, 1999 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2016). In British Columbia, the Whiskered Auklet is an accidental vagrant with a very good sight record from a research vessel off Haida Gwaii (Force 2002). There are no accepted records for Oregon (OFO 2016) or for California (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2017).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Whiskered Auklet is covered in most standard North American field guides. The Whiskered Auklet measures 19.68 cm in length, with a wingspan of 35.56 cm, and weighs 120 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This is a very small alcid and only the Least Auklet (*Aethia pusilla*) is smaller measuring 15.87 cm in length, with a wingspan of 30.48 cm, and weighs 85 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The following description of aging Whiskered Auklets is taken from Gaston and Jones (1998).

Adults hold breeding plumage from February to September (Sibley 2000). Birds in breeding plumage have upperparts and underparts nearly uniform blackish-gray, darker and more bluish-tinted than similar Crested Auklet (*Aethia cristatella*), but with undertail coverts, vent, and lower belly light gray to whitish. The head and neck are slightly darker. The belly is white and the vent colour graduates evenly into the breast, and can be difficult to see in normal poses on land. The flight feathers, upperwing, and underwing coverts are blackish-gray or blackish-brown. Adults in summer plumage normally have a mix of worn brownish flight feathers and newer, recently moulted, clean blackish primaries and secondaries. The tail is short and blackish-gray. The eyes are white and slightly larger than other species of *Aethia*, which is likely due to its nocturnal nature and night foraging behaviour. Legs and feet are bluish-gray. The head has spectacular feather plumes with a long slender forehead crest, white facial plumes, and a bright blood red bill with a whitish tip to the upper mandible.

Adults hold winter plumage from October to February (Sibley 2000). Winter plumage adults resemble birds in summer plumage, but have reduced white facial plumes, and a dull red bill. The summer plumes are grown early in the winter and birds can acquire full breeding plumage by February.

Sub-adults (birds that are 1 – 2 years old) resemble adults in breeding plumage, but lack the long crest of adults but may acquire a short crest, and have short facial plumes that are sometimes brownish tinted. The head is brown which is produced by worn contour feathers that contrast with the crisp dark colouration of the rest of the underparts. The bill is dull red.

Juvenile and first winter plumage is held from August to February (Sibley 2000). Birds at this age resemble winter plumaged adults, but the eyes are gray, there is only a faint trace of facial plumes, and the bill is black.

For more information on separating Whiskered Auklet from other alcid species see Gaston and Jones (1998), or Sibley (2000).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Whiskered Auklet is an accidental vagrant to the pelagic waters of British Columbia with a good sight record of an adult by experienced observer Michael Force from the deck of a research vessel west of Tasu Sound, Moresby Island, Haida Gwaii (52°33.4' N, 136°47.4' W) on June 7, 2001 (Force 2002, Kenyon *et al.* 2009). This species regularly wanders south into the waters off northern Japan between the months of February to April (Brazil 2009). The Whiskered Auklet doesn't appear to move southward past the waters of the Aleutian Islands (Vernon and Williams 1993). In North American pelagic waters, this species prefers turbulent seas, particularly where rip tides occur (Brazil 2009). With more pelagic coverage it is possible that there will be future records of this species in British Columbian ocean waters.

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