

First Confirmed Least Auklet (*Aethia pusilla*) for British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin (Revised: April 2016)

Introduction and Distribution

The Least Auklet (*Aethia pusilla*) is a species of alcid that is only found in the western and north western coastal waters of Alaska in North America (Gaston and Jones 1998). Most of the summer breeding range for this species is found in the Bering Sea with colonies found throughout the Aleutian Islands, and in the Bering Sea region with scattered colonies in Far Eastern Russia in the Sea of Okhotsk (Gaston and Jones 1998). The northern breeding population of Least Auklets retreat south for the winter to the Aleutian Islands starting from Kodiak Island and continuing west to the waters off northern Japan (Gaston and Jones 1998). While conducting extensive 4-8 hour weekly sea watches of the Strait of Juan de Fuca from the Sheringham Lighthouse in Shirley on the west coast of Vancouver Island, this species was encountered a few times between the years 2007 - 2009. Though the bird would appear on sea watches, it was by no means predictable in its appearances and proved to be elusive in not being photographed until June of 2009. The bird would show up on rising or falling tides and feed in the rip tides that would form. It was often observed in the company of other common alcid species including Rhinoceros Auklet, Common Murre, Marbled Murrelet, Tufted Puffin and Cassin's Auklet. It was directly compared to a swimming Red-necked Phalarope on one occasion. The Least Auklet is such a small bird that further occurrences of this species in British Columbia waters could be hampered because the bird is as small as a sparrow (Sibley 2003). A bird of such small size can prove difficult to locate when sitting on the water.

Identification and Similar Species

Least Auklets are the smallest alcid in the world (Gaston and Jones 1998). They are identified by their small chunky round shape with a short neck, and dark color above with variability in how white the scapulars, secondaries and greater coverts will look (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Some birds are very bright white on the scapulars, secondaries and greater coverts (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Others are duller looking (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The forehead and lores are white streaked with bristly feathers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill is stubby and knobbed shaped, and is dark red in color with a light tip (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In breeding plumage, which is acquired early in January, there are white streaked feathers behind the bright pale eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The under parts are variable; some birds being dark with white mottling on the belly and other birds being almost all white with dark mottling on the breast and sides (Gaston and Jones 1998). In winter plumage Least Auklets are entirely white below on the belly area (Sibley 2003). In all plumages Least Auklets have small pointed wings that are dark on top with a light white line along the inside of the secondary edge (Sibley 2003). The underside has light axillaries with a dark perimeter that encompasses the outer edge of the

wing, the primaries and secondary edges and this dark line goes along the sides where the wing meets the body (Sibley 2003). This gives the open under wing a unique look of having white inside the wing completely surrounded in a black edge. The bird that was observed at Shirley appeared to be in basic plumage as it had a clean white belly and no white facial plumes. The bird at Shirley was viewed in flight as well as feeding on the water. The flight style of the Least Auklet is like no other commonly occurring alcid in British Columbia. The bird bobs from side to side in flight and has fast fluttering wing beats. The round tennis ball-like shape of the bird's body gives the observer the impression the bird is a ball, tethered by a string to a paddle, and is being bounced along the waves as it weaves and bobs in flight (J. Fenneman pers. Comm.). The bird was directly compared to Common Murre, Marbled Murrelet, Rhinoceros Auklet, Tufted Puffin, Cassin's Auklet and a Red-necked Phalarope. Being the size of a sparrow, the Least Auklet looked extremely small when compared to other alcid species that were swimming nearby. At one point in one observation of the Least Auklet, it swam up beside a juvenile Red-necked Phalarope and was considerably smaller to the Phalarope.

In British Columbia there is no other alcid outside of Cassin's Auklet that looks similar to the Least Auklet. Cassin's Auklet's have dark gray on the upper wings, back and head with lighter gray coloration on the neck and throat and flanks (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The birds have lighter grayish-lined under wings and a pale belly (Brazil 2009). Cassin's Auklets are small to in relation to other alcids found in British Columbia but they are 3 inches (or close to 7cm) larger in relation to a Least Auklet (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Cassin's Auklet has a longer thicker bill that is all dark except for a pale base of the lower mandible (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). They do have a pale eye, but it is not as bright as the eye of a Least Auklet (Sibley 2003). Cassin's Auklet also has a pale white crescent above the eye that is found in all plumages (Gaston and Jones 1998). In flight, Cassin's Auklets are chunky and elongated looking and fly like most Auklets being a fairly straight and level consistent flight style (Gaston and Jones 1998). They do not teeter like Murrelets or bounce and weave like a Least Auklet (Gaston and Jones 1998). As vagrants, Crested Auklet have occurred a couple of times in British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2013). This is a small alcid found in Alaskan waters but is larger than a Least Auklet in both body size and wing size (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species is entirely dark on the body and on the upper side and under side of the wings (Sibley 2003). In all plumages Crested Auklet has obvious head plumes that protrude out of the forehead (Sibley 2003). They also have a bright orange bill (Sibley 2003). Another vagrant to British Columbia is Whiskered Auklet which has been seen once (Toochin *et al.* 2013). It is very small, only a little bit bigger than a Least Auklet (Gaston and Jones 1998). Like Crested Auklet, it has a different elongated body shape and is entire dark in plumage except for the white found on the lower belly and ventral area of the bird (Gaston and Jones 1998). In all plumages Whiskered Auklets have small facial plumes (with a head plume in adults) and dark under wings (Sibley 2003).

There are no records for the West Coast, south of Northwestern Arctic Alaska of Dovekie (Gaston and Jones 1998). This bird is a tiny alcid, but has dark under wings, a dark black bill and eye, and a totally different body shape (Sibley 2003). In summer plumage, Dovekie has an all dark head with a light eye crescent above the eye, a white trailing edge along the secondaries and white marks on the back (Sibley 2003). In juvenile and basic-plumaged birds, Dovekies have a black neck collar and white that extends from the cheek up towards the back of the eye (Sibley 2003).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Least Auklet population in Alaska is estimated at about 9 million birds (Gaston and Jones 1998), but it could be as high as 20 million birds (Gaston and Jones 1998) making this species one of the world's most common auklets. Breeding sites are found across the Aleutian Islands and in the Bering Sea on Islands such as the Pribilof Islands (Gaston and Jones 1998). Like the range of Crested Auklet, Least Auklets winter in Alaskan waters along the Aleutian Chain of Islands off shore (Gaston and Jones 1998, Brazil 2009). There are only a couple of records for this species outside of Alaska. It is impossible to know where the Shirley bird would go after spending time feeding by the Sheringham Lighthouse. Since alcids are long lived birds, it is likely this bird could still be in the Juan de Fuca Strait for another few years. All the observations made from the Sheringham Lighthouse at Shirley were of the same bird. It would appear in the summer months on its own, but would end up feeding with other alcid species. The Least Auklet would appear on the rising or falling tides and feed in the rip line that would be created. It was never observed with prey in its bill, so it impossible to know what the bird was targeting for food. Least Auklet has only occurred south of Alaska once before in coastal California and once along the coast of the Northwest Territories (please see Table 1). Given how common this bird is in Alaska, and how it is now known by observers that Alaskan alcids can stray well south of their range, it is highly likely another Least Auklet will be found in British Columbia. Given the tiny size of the bird, it might take many years before the next occurrence will be recorded.

On June 19, 2009, while sea watching at Sheringham Lighthouse, the previously reported Least Auklet was located swimming close to shore near a couple of Rhinoceros Auklets. It was during this observation that 4 videos were obtained. Although the images are not of professional quality, they clearly show the bird to be this species. This record constitutes the first record for British Columbia and the second record for Canada. The series of photographs below were taken from the videos and have been put into a series of images allowing for all markings to be seen on this individual. The images available clearly show all the important field marks and the correct structure of a Least Auklet.



Figures 1, 2, 3: [From a series of 12 images]: Least Auklet June 19, 2012 off Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley Photos © Rick Toochin



Figures 4, 5, 6: [From a series of 12 images]: Least Auklet June 19, 2012, off Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley Photos © Rick Toochin



Figures 7, 8, 9: [From a series of 12 images]: Least Auklet June 19, 2012, off Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley Photos © Rick Toochin



Figures 10, 11, 12: [From a series of 12 images]: Least Auklet June 19, 2012, off Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley Photos © Rick Toochin

Table 1: Records outside of Alaska: British Columbia, California and Northwest Territories:

British Columbia Records

- 1.(1) adult September 2, 2007: Rick Toochin (FN) Shirley (Toochin 2012)
- 2.(1) adult August 31, 2008: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Shirley [same bird as above] (Toochin 2012)
(1) adult September 6, 2008: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland, and other observers: Shirley [same bird as above] (Toochin 2012)
- 3.(1) adult June 19 & 27, 2009: Rick Toochin, and other observers: Shirley [same bird as above] (Toochin 2012)
(1) adult August 8, 2009: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Shirley [same bird as above] (Toochin 2012)

California Records

- 1.(1) 1st alternate plumage June 15, 1981: found alive at Thornton State Beach, San Mateo County (Hamilton *et al.* 2007)

Northwest Territories (Canada) Records

- 1.(1) age unknown January 1927: Kittigazuit, northwestern Mackenzie, Northwest Territories (Godfrey 1986)

There are no records for Washington State (WRBC 2012) or for Oregon (OFO 2012).

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