

Half Moon Bay Review

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Birds return romance to Egg Rock

By Nicole Achs Freeling

Egg Rock, a boulder just offshore from Devil's Slide that used to be the home to thousands of unusual birds, is getting to be a busy place once again. Today the population of live murre is beginning to approach that of painted plaster decoys set out to tempt passing birds on the lookout for mates.

Apparently, the decoys and mirrors are working better than wine and soft music for creating an atmosphere of romance: The birds have been returning and breeding at a rate faster than expected.

This is according to scientists who perch all day long at the cliff edge gazing at the rock through powerful scopes.

The rock was known to bird-watchers as one of the most southerly habitats of the common murre, a species native to Canada and Alaska. Until the mid-1980s, more than 3,000 murre claimed that tiny piece of coastal real estate as their home.

"It used to be packed out there," field researcher Marty Murphy said. "The whole rock was black with birds."

In 1986 an oil spill from the Apex tanker Houston decimated the population and drove the surviving birds away. They did not begin to return until a decade later, when scientists from Humboldt State University and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, embarked upon a major effort to lure them back.

"We are further along than we ever hoped to be," said Michael Parker, U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist who is heading the project to restore the rock's native population of common murre. The decoys supposedly fool these

extremely social birds into believing that they are living in a thriving community.

He produced one of the painted plastic dummies that form an inanimate colony, 300 strong. But Murphy says the decoy birds "don't fool them for long."

The restoration project is also trying to attract murres by playing mating calls 24 hours a day from a solar-powered CD player on the rock. Small mirrors have also been installed to capture the birds' attention so they will linger on the rock.

The number of breeding pairs this season reached 110, surpassing the project's original goal of 100 several years ahead of its completion. Ninety chicks were born this year.

The mating season will end this week as the last of the newborn chicks head out to sea with their parents and the scientists pack up their gear and return to several months of laboratory work.

The birds live on the rock from April to early August, and spend the rest of the year on the ocean. The murres are extremely habitual animals that mate for life and return each year to the same place to breed. If one nests on a particular side of a particular decoy one year, it will be back the next year in precisely the same spot, according to Murphy.

That has helped the scientists to restore the population. Parker says one explanation for the birds' quick return may be that murres displaced in the oil spill were eager to return to their native perches.

"Maybe the birds were flying by every year and checking the rock out. When they saw the decoys they said, Hey, everybody's back." The chicks spend two to four years out at sea before returning to their birthplace to mate. Scientists

are hoping for even more birds on the rock next season as a baby boom of chicks born in 1999 begins to come home to roost.