



Skomer Island
Andy Davies Photography
Workshops

Participant's Portfolio 2014

Steve Crampton

Skomer Island Photography Workshop Portfolio 2014

The season on Skomer began in early April with a spectacular haulout of Atlantic grey seals on North Haven beach and we waited with baited breath for the return of the three species of auk that breed on Skomer each year. The winter storms of 2013/14 were the most violent in living memory and the question on everyone's minds was how could the auks have possibly survived the rapid succession of gales out in the ocean with some of the low pressure systems reaching hurricane status. The evidence that all was not well was clear as news rolled in of the tragic "seabird wreck" with many corpses being washed up along the western facing Atlantic coastline of France, England, Wales and Ireland.

I witnessed this on Pembrey Beach where there was a dead emaciated body of a guillemot every metre or so along the strand-line with the occasional razorbill. All the time I was fearing what the impact would be on the Skomer birds? Would the ledges by the steps leading up to the warden's meeting point be empty in 2014? Would the puffins be at the Wick to entertain the visitors with their comical behaviour?

Miraculously, the guillemots and razorbills were on the ledges by the steps when we arrived on the first boat of the season and they were crammed full until mid-July with at least three guillemot chicks being raised, unusual as this has traditionally been a location occupied by immature loafing birds. This is a precarious spot to bring up your offspring as a great black-back nests in close proximity on the rocky point a few tens of metres away.

A new character appeared this year in the form of Jack the jackdaw who had a semi-permanent comical bad hair day as his head feathers were terribly unkempt possibly as a result of a fulmar vomiting on him. He was a constant companion on the workshops and was always there to greet us at the Warden's meeting point and then reappeared again at Captain Kites to listen in on the introductory talk.

The puffin numbers were frustratingly unpredictable as they were at the Wick one day and few and far between the next. Something was definitely amiss and our best guess is that the underwater visibility was extremely poor due to the winter storms grinding up the cliffs producing vast quantities of fine silt which remained suspended in the water column.

Effectively, this meant that it was permanent night time for marine life as sunlight couldn't penetrate through the water resulting in the phytoplankton (tiny plants) being unable to photosynthesize and grow. These organisms are at the base of the food chain and are eaten by zooplankton (tiny animals) which are in turn eaten by sandeels that form the vast bulk of a puffin's diet.

It appeared that the puffins had to fly much further afield to find their food expending more energy in the process. Indeed, the female puffins were in such poor condition from fighting against heavy winter seas, extreme winds and from starvation as their prey species tend to dive deeper in these conditions making finding something to eat extremely difficult. This led to the first eggs being laid three weeks later than average with many probably skipping the breeding season completely.

The island was again carpeted in a memorable tapestry of blue, pink and white as the blue-bells and pink campion occupied the interior with the sea campion and pink thrift decorating the cliff edges. The sea mayweed at the Wick flowers at the Wick after the sea campion and this was the best display I have ever seen with the puffins scurrying amongst the dense covering.

The first shots of sandeels being brought in were taken on the 8th June and the numbers built up until the end of July when they were still large numbers of puffins present with the occasional puffling spotted at the entrance to a burrow. Now and again they were mobbed by herring gulls and great black-backs who occasionally managed to steal a free meal.

We also witnessed them catching and feeding on rabbits and shearwater chicks, a harsh reminder of the life and death struggle that these animals have to endure. Many participants managed to capture superb in flight shots with a number achieving the Holy Grail image of a puffin in mid-air with a beak full of sandeels.

The razorbills and guillemots near the landing provided a great finale to the end of the workshop allowing spectacular in flight shots to be captured as they came in to the land at the ledges. We were also blessed with great views of the short-eared owls hunting in the valleys and a constant stream of kittiwakes flying to and fro from the Wick and Moorey Moore after huge waves had washed their nests away. The season was capped off with the seals returning to the island at the end of August to have their pups. This year has seen a record number born so the harsh winter last year does not seem to have impacted their numbers or their ability to breed.

Perhaps the most memorable day on the island was the one that I was going to cancel. The forecast leading up to the day was for supercell thunderstorms accompanied by tennis ball size hailstones! I contacted those who were travelling for the day and suggested they came another time but five had already booked and paid for accommodation.

The morning started in bright sunshine and we had a great time at the Wick with numerous close encounters with puffins. The sky then turned black and the first large raindrops began to fall. We hastily retreated to Moorey Mere hide and played sardines whilst the heavens opened outside. The visibility reduced to nearly zero as one of the heaviest deluges I have ever heard drummed on the roof of the hide. Forty-five minutes later the sky cleared and we returned to the Wick to witness hundreds of puffins bringing in new nesting material to rescue their flooded burrows. A magical day that nearly didn't happen!



Adam Bishop





Alison Lythgoe



Alison Lythgoe





Ann James



Ann James









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Sue Baudains



Sue Baudains





Jayne Bond

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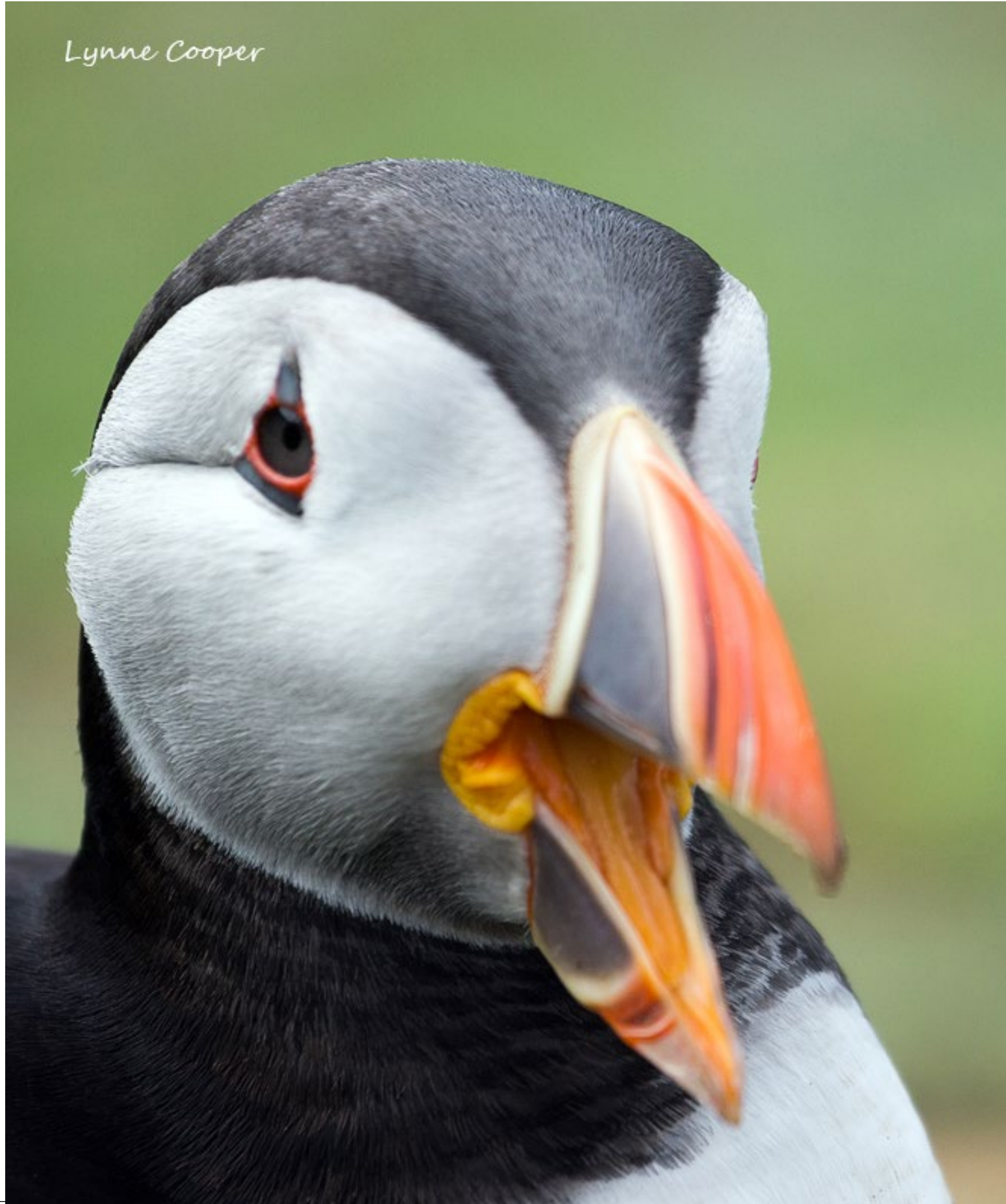


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