FIRST CONFIRMED RECORD OF COMMON MURRE *URIA AALGE* FOR THE MID-ATLANTIC AZORES

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ABSTRACT

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On 06 December 2024, a Common Murre *Uria aalge* was photographed in Praia da Vitória fishing harbour, Terceira, Azores. This constitutes the first record for the archipelago, far from the species' usual nearshore range. The bird remained for several days; plumage features confirmed subspecies *U. a. aalge*. Alcidae are vagrants in the Azores, with the Little Auk *Alle alle* and Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica* most often reported. This observation refines knowledge of seabird distribution and vagrancy in this mid-Atlantic oceanic archipelago.

Key words: guillemot, North Atlantic, seabirds, oceanic islands, vagrant

INTRODUCTION

The Alcidae family includes 11 genera and 25 species, all of which are well-adapted to marine ecosystems (Winkler et al., 2020). They are laborious flyers, owing to wings also used in underwater "flight" (Ainley et al., 2015; Pennycuick, 1987). In fact, they are also skilled divers and swimmers, using their wings. Otherwise, their short legs and webbed feet make for an awkward gait on land (Audubon Seabird Institute, n.d.; Howell & Zufelt, 2019).

There are five accepted subspecies of the Common Murre *Uria aalge*, with a wide distribution across the North Atlantic and North Pacific Oceans, primarily occurring in colder, coastal waters and breeding on rocky cliffs and islands in large colonies (Birkhead & Nettleship, 1987; Gill et al., 2024). In Portugal (mainland), two subspecies occur: the more common (and nesting) *U. a. albionis* and the *U. a. algae* during the winter.

For *U. a. algae*, unlike *U. a. albionis*, sightings likely involve individuals that have strayed from their usual, more northerly range (Ainley et al., 2021; Aves de Portugal, 2024; Meirinho et al., 2014). Seabird vagrancy may result from adverse weather, disorientation, or oceanographic shifts affecting prey (Gaston & Jones, 1998; Johns et al., 2020).

Historically four species within this family have been recorded in waters of the Azores, where they are considered vagrants. The Little Auk *Alle alle* and the Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica* have been the most frequently reported alcids (Table 1). The presence of *U. a. aalge*, a subspecies typically distributed in colder North Atlantic waters (Ainley et al., 2021), aligns with similar observations of Alcidae in the Azores, for which most records have occurred during the winter (October–December) or spring (January–March) (Table 2). Occurrence coincides with the strongest winds and storms in the archipelago (Andrade et al., 2008).

DESCRIPTION OF THE OCCURRENCE

On 02 December 2024, one of us (Rúben Coelho—RC) and Vanessa Mendonça identified and photographed a Common Murre *Uria aalge* (Fig. 1) at Praia da Vitória's fishing harbor, which is located at Terceira Island, Azores (Fig. 2). This represents the first record of this species for the Azores archipelago (Portugal). Later that evening, the bird was also sighted by Rui Oliveira, RC, and Vanessa Mendonça.

TABLE 1
All Alcidae species reported in waters of the Azores archipelago, with IUCN status and total number of sightings per species[a]

Species	Common name	IUCN status[b]	Total
Alle alle (Linnaeus, 1758)	Little Auk	LC	49
Fratercula arctica (Linnaeus, 1758)	Atlantic Puffin	VU	47
Uria lomvia (Linnaeus, 1758)	Thick-billed Murre	LC	5
Alca torda (Linnaeus, 1758)	Razorbill	LC	5

[a] Date of the oldest records could not be determined.
[b] International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) statuses: LC, Least Concern; VU, Vulnerable.

TABLE 2
Reports of alcid species in waters around the Azores during approximately the last decade, by island and date of occurrence

Species[a]	Island	Date
Little Auk	Terceira	28 December 2013
Little Auk	Pico	18 January 2014
Atlantic Puffin	Pico	18 February 2014
Atlantic Puffin	Faial	02 March 2014
Atlantic Puffin	Terceira	19 March 2014
Atlantic Puffin	Terceira	20 March 2014
Atlantic Puffin	Graciosa	29 April 2014
Thick-billed Murre	Corvo	02 June 2017
Little Auk	São Jorge	14 January 2018
Little Auk	São Miguel	15 January 2018
Atlantic Puffin	Pico	16 May 2018
Atlantic Puffin	Corvo	28 May 2019
Little Auk	São Jorge	20 February 2021
Atlantic Puffin	São Miguel	04 December 2021
Atlantic Puffin	São Miguel	10 December 2021
Atlantic Puffin	Terceira	29 January 2022
Atlantic Puffin	Terceira	30 January 2022
Atlantic Puffin	Graciosa	30 January 2022
Atlantic Puffin	Corvo	01 February 2022
Atlantic Puffin	Terceira	08 February 2022
Atlantic Puffin	Terceira	08 February 2022
Atlantic Puffin	Graciosa	02 December 2022
Atlantic Puffin	Terceira	22 January 2025

[a] Little Auk *Alle alle*, Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica*, Thick-billed Murre *Uria lomvia*

Fig. 1. Common Murre *Uria aalge* seen at Praia da Vitória Fishing Harbor (Azores, Portugal), on 06 December 2024. Photo by Rúben Coelho

The following day, the bird was sighted again by Elizabeth Coelho, RC, and Simon Buckell. A positive identification as *U. a. aalge* was possible by comparing the photographs with the characteristics of this subspecies. The *U. a. aalge* subspecies has a variable amount of dark streaking on the flanks, "armpits," and underwing coverts, which differentiates it from the less-streaked *U. a. albionis*. The latter is typically less streaked, with some being entirely non-striated (Harrison et al., 2021; Svensson et al., 2010). After this initial observation, several attempts were made to resight the bird, albeit unsuccessfully.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

LMDB: Conceptualization, writing the draft, elaboration of Figure 2, identification of the bird, revising the text. RC: Writing the draft, data acquisition, photography and identification of the bird. JPB: Conceptualization, supervision, final revision of the text.

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Fig. 2. Location of the Common Murre *Uria aalge* sighting (38.731°N, 027.056°W, yellow dot) in Praia da Vitória fishing harbor, with the location of two other birdwatching spots: Paúl da Praia da Vitória (PPV) and Paúl da Pedreira do Cabo da Praia (PPCP); inset shows location of the Azores archipelago (AZO) in the North Atlantic relative to Portugal (PT) and the United Kingdom (UK).

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