FIRST RECORD OF DOVEKIE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The Dovekie (Alle alle), or Little Auk, is a small alcid that breeds primarily in the High Arctic and overwinters primarily in the North Atlantic Ocean (Renaud and others 1982; Montevecchi and Stenhouse 2002). Dovekies breed in dense colonies in Greenland, Norway (Jan Mayen, Svalbard), and Russia (Franz Josef Land, Novaya Zemlya, Severnaya Zemlya). Exceptionally large breeding populations have been documented in northwestern Greenland (Renaud and others 1982; Stenhouse and Montevecchi 1996; Montevecchi and Stenhouse 2002).

In the North Pacific Ocean, individuals breed on Little Diomede Island in the Bering Strait; additional nesting Dovekies are thought to occur on King Island, St. Lawrence Island, St. Matthew Island, and the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea and possible nesting occurs on Big Diomedé Island (Day and others 1988). Summer aggregations occur as far south as Talan Island (UTM: Zone 55, 618504E, 6576508N, NAD83) in the northern Sea of Okhotsk (Kondratyev and others 2000). In the western Canadian Arctic, Dovekies are considered casual (American Ornithologists’ Union 1998), and a small breeding population has been documented in Home Bay on eastern Baffin Island (Finley and Evans 1984). This is the only known breeding population in the Canadian Arctic, but unconfirmed individuals or small groups may breed on Ellesmere Island and elsewhere (Finley and Evans 1984; Gaston and Jones 1998).

During winter, Dovekies may be abundant along coastal areas in northwestern Europe,
northwestern Greenland, Iceland, the Svalbard Archipelago, and Newfoundland and Labrador (Renaud and others 1982; Stenhouse and Montevecchi 1996; Montevecchi and Stenhouse 2002; Sealy and Carter 2004). Day and others (1988) suggested that Dovekies that breed on Little Diomede Island probably overwinter in the North Pacific, possibly as far south as the Aleutian Islands. In August and September, adult Dovekies undergo prebasic molt that renders birds flightless (Pyle 2009), usually prior to their migration from Arctic breeding grounds to overwintering areas in the North Atlantic.

On 21 August 2013, we were participating in marine mammal and seabird at-sea surveys off the northern British Columbia coast aboard the fishing vessel (FV) Ocean Royal. At 06:45 (PST), we observed a Dovekie resting on the water within 20 m of the vessel while anchored in Sharp Bay at Campania Island, British Columbia (UTM: Zone 9, 463672E, 5891962N, NAD83; Fig. 1). Due to the bird’s small size, short neck, stubby bill, and unique plumage (specifically, a black throat extending to the upper breast and a distinctive white line on two-thirds of the upper eye-ring), it was immediately separated from other alcid species (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). Typical of a
Dovekie in breeding plumage, the bird's dark head, throat, neck, and upper breast contrasted distinctly against its white underparts (Montevecchi and Stenhouse 2002). All primaries were viewed when the bird flapped, indicating that it could fly at the time of observation. However, it is unclear whether this Dovekie was a non-breeding bird that had already completed prebasic molt, or an adult bird that had not yet initiated the prebasic molt. Typically, prebasic molt in breeding Dovekies occurs from August–October (Gaston and Jones 1998). Small areas of white streaking were apparent on the median and greater coverts and greyish-black streaking was visible on the flank. We observed the bird swimming alongside the vessel for several minutes, occasionally stretching its wings and preening. We also observed high concentrations of unidentified small schooling fish, jellyfish, and planktonic organisms in the waters surrounding the boat. The bird may have been attracted to potential prey, but it was not observed diving or surface seizing. The Dovekie departed Sharp Bay at approximately 07:00, flying in a southerly direction. Visibility was excellent, with unbroken cloud cover, a light breeze, and calm (glassy) sea-state conditions. The bird was not observed again after the FV Ocean Royal departed Sharp Bay, and headed northward towards Prince Rupert. Despite the long distance that this bird had traveled to reach Campania Island, it appeared to be healthy and in good condition when observed.

This observation apparently constitutes the 1st record of a Dovekie in British Columbia (for example, Campbell and others 1990). Based on previously published records for Dovekie, this record may also represent the southernmost record of this species along the Pacific coast of North America (Montevecchi and Stenhouse 2002). However, 3 individuals have been recorded in Japan in: (1) Tsukumi-shi, Ōita Prefecture 1 km northwest of Hotojima Island (UTM: Zone 53, 223181E, 3668138N, NAD83), on 1 June 2002 (Nakamura and others 2003); (2) Kunigammi-son, Okinawa Prefecture in January 1992 (Okinawa Wild Bird Study Group 1993); and (3) Oku Suruga Bay, Numazu-shi, Shizuoka Prefecture, on 19 May 1996 (Shizuoka Prefecture Environment Department 1998).

Records of Dovekie in northwestern North America since 1935 have been obtained between the Chukchi Sea and North Pacific waters south to the Aleutian Islands, from May to September. Records usually consist of single birds, although up to 5 birds have been recorded together (Day and others 1988). Carter and others (2011a) uncovered a reference to an earlier specimen of a Dovekie obtained by Abalashchev in 1828 in Bering Strait that was reported by von Kittlitz (1858). Day and others (1988) summarized Dovekie locations away from the Bering Strait region as follows: (1) Chukchi Sea at Point Barrow and Wainwright; (2) central Bering Sea, east of the village on St. George Island, approximately 130 km northwest of St. Paul Island, off Reef Point at St. Paul Island, and at St. Matthew Island from Big Lake and the Glory of Russia Cape; and (3) Aleutian Islands area, 19 and 93 km south of Unimak Island and 370 km south of Agattu Island. Gibson and Byrd (2007) identified additional Dovekie locations: (1) in an
auklet (Aethia spp.) colony at Kasatochi Island in the western Aleutians; and (2) at Vsevidof Island in the eastern Aleutians. Records summarized more recently by Gibson and Byrd (2007) do not suggest an increase in frequency of Dovekie observations in the southern Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands area.

In eastern North America, inland movements or "wrecks" of Dovekies can follow unusual weather events in late summer, fall and winter, displacing birds from coastal habitats in Atlantic Canada and the northeastern United States (Stenhous and Montevecchi 1996). Confirmed records exist from 1872 to 1983 for Québec, Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New York. Atlantic vagrants have been recorded as far south as Cuba and the Canary Islands (about 15°-20°N; Baird and others 1884; Montevecchi and Stenhous 2002; Sealy and Carter 2004).

Similar records of vagrant alcid species exist for the coast of British Columbia, indicating that some vagrant alcids can survive for extended periods outside their normal range (Carter and others 2011b; Sealy and Carter 2012). In 1980, a vagrant Kittlitz's Murrelet (Brachyramphus brevirostris) overwintered for over 4 mo between November and April, 1985–1986, near Victoria, British Columbia (Carter and others 2011a, 2011b; Sealy and Carter 2012). On 7 June 2013, a Least Auklet (Aethia pusilla) was recorded flying 97 km northwest of Vancouver Island (BC Rare Bird Alert 2013a). As recently as 8 September 2013, a Crested Auklet (Aethia cristatellla) was recorded near Discovery Island near Victoria, British Columbia (BC Rare Bird Alert 2013b).

The Dovekies observed at Campana Island most likely originated from the relatively small population of Dovekies that inhabits primarily the Chukchi and Bering seas. When and under what conditions this individual travelled to northern British Columbia are not known, but it apparently flew there. This observation may be attributed to a weather event or oceanographic conditions, although we cannot rule out the possibility that this vagrant travelled over land from the Atlantic Ocean.

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