PUFFIN FUN FACTS

(These facts are adapted from National Wildlife Federation’s Ranger Rick® magazine)

KNOW YOUR PUFFINS

- Of the 300 species of seabirds, puffins are among the smallest at only 10” tall. They are also the most colorful and whimsical.

- The Atlantic puffin lives in the northern part of the Atlantic Ocean, and breeds as far south as Maine and France.

- The Horned Puffin gets its name from the small, fleshy horn-like projection that extends above the eye. Unlike other puffins, which nest in burrows, the Horned Puffin typically nests in rock crevices and cliffs in the Pacific Ocean.

- The Tufted Puffin is the largest of the breed and makes its home in the northern Pacific. It gets its name from the long, straw-colored feathers that extend from its crown during mating season.

- As global warming changes air and ocean temperatures, seabirds are especially impacted. Scientists are seeing changes in their migration patterns, their behavior, their food supply and their breeding seasons.

PUFFIN FAMILIES

- Puffins mate for life, which can be 30 years. Their relationship is a true partnership with both sexes sharing the duties of cleaning the nest, incubating the egg, hunting for food, and rearing the chick.

- After spending several months at sea, puffins return to the same colony and inhabit the same three-foot burrow with the same mate. Each year they clean the two rooms of the nest - lavatory and nursery - and line the nursery with fresh feathers and grass.

- Deep inside her cozy burrow, each female lays a single egg. For about six weeks, she and her mate take turns keeping the egg warm and safe. Gulls are their biggest worry—they will try to steal and eat puffin eggs and chicks.

- When the egg hatches, out pops a fluffy, black puffin chick, called a “puffling.” For two more months, the puffling stays deep in the burrow, safe from predators. Parents bring meals of fish up to ten times a day!

- Even though puffins are territorial, they are very social birds who often “chat” with one another. They will congregate outside their nests or on the hillside above at the end of a day of fishing.

PUFFIN ADAPTATIONS

- These comical birds exhibit some amazing adaptations. Their two-tone color provides clever camouflage from predators. The black feathers on their backs make them hard to see from above when floating on top of the water; and their white belly feathers make them less visible to potential predators beneath them in the sea.

- A puffin’s large beak, which increases in size as it ages, can hold several fish at one time. The average catch is around 10 fish, but some have caught 50-60 fish at once.

- Puffins may not appear graceful on land or when taking off and landing from flight, but they are very adept swimmers. They can dive up to 60 meters and use their wings and feet to propel them through the water.
• Puffins are usually on land from April to August incubating and raising their young. The rest of the time they dive, fish, and sleep out at sea - usually for months at a time. With water-proofed feathers, the ability to drink sea water and catch fish they are very well adapted to a life at sea.

• Puffins beat their wings very fast in flight — up to 400 beats per minute.

• Puffins must race across the water to get speed to take off.

• During the summer breeding season, puffins wear their colors proudly but in the winter their beaks and feet fade to a dull gray. They also shed a portion of their colorful outer beak.

• Puffins “fly” both in the air and the sea. They can dive for up to one minute, scooping up small fish one-by-one. The puffins hold the fish crosswise in their beaks with their tongue while diving for more. The biggest haul on record is 62 fish at once!

• The Great Black-backed Gull can catch and eat an adult puffin in mid-air.