

Want to see puffins? Try downtown Rockland

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The new Audubon Project Puffin Visitor Center in downtown Rockland could do more for conservation from its urban location than many other Audubon nature centers around the country, say the biologists running it.

They hope to get people who are unfamiliar with - even uninterested in - conservation through the door.

"There are all kinds of wild festivals (in Rockland): the (North Atlantic) Blues Festival, the (Maine) Lobster Festival. The average Joe and Mary will wander into this store," said Pete Salmansohn, a Project

PROJECT PUFFIN VISITOR CENTER

WHAT: Grand opening

WHERE: Route 1, Rockland

EVENTS: Giant costumed puffin will greet children; crafts and seabird activities for children; tours of center; and Maine's first-ever puffin-calling contest hosted by Robert "the Humble Farmer" Skoglund.

CALL: 596-5566

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TO LEARN MORE about puffins: <http://www.projectpuffin.org/puffins.html>

PUFFINS AT A GLANCE

PUFFINS ARE USUALLY 10 inches tall and weigh only as much as a can of soda.

PUFFINS CAN CARRY several fish at a time, with the average catch around 10 fish per trip, but the record is a whopping 62 fish at once. The large design of the

Puffin staff member who has written four environmental books. "I want to say, anytime we could bring a message of hope and inspiration and conservation about wildlife, it's significant."

beak allows the bird to haul so many fish back to its nest.

A PUFFIN CAN fly up to 55 miles an hour and beats its wings as many as 400 times a minute.

THE LIFE SPAN of the puffin is as much as 20 years, although the oldest known puffin lived to be 29 years old.

The visitor center opened its doors on June 15, but the grand opening on Saturday will offer a variety of displays and hands-on conservation lessons to the public, Salmansohn said.

MAINE PUFFINS WERE over-hunted by early settlers for food and feathers. By 1900 the puffins were gone from the Gulf of Maine except for two isolated colonies.

Source: National Audubon Society

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Located on Route 1 in Rockland, across from the Farnsworth Art Museum, the center will reach the people who would not normally be taking a puffin cruise or going to an Audubon camp, Salmansohn said.

But the message, Salmansohn said, is not so much to get people on the puffin tour boats as it is to take their imaginations to the islands.

The animated puffins may become educators, as well as ambassadors of the Gulf of Maine.

As such, the brightly colored, tuxedoed birds might do more for the Maine coast than further eco-tourism, said biologist Stephen Kress, who recolonized Maine's breeding puffin population and started Audubon's Project Puffin in 1973.

The visitor center is not just about seabirds, Kress said, it's about marine conservation.

"People, I believe, have a responsibility to be stewards for their resources. And, the connections (in nature) are not always obvious (to the public)," Kress said.

Because puffins migrate to Maine and nest on offshore islands, it's difficult to see them, or, as Kress pointed out, to even know about them. Most puffins only come to Maine during the summer to nest on islands 20 miles from the mainland.

There are two Maine Audubon touring boats that lead puffin cruises in Maine, one out of Boothbay Harbor and another out of New Harbor.

Audubon's Project Puffin Visitor Center will offer the next-best

view of puffins, Kress said. At the center, children will be able to crawl into a simulated puffin burrow and watch on a video screen baby puffins in their island habitat.

Visitors will be able to sit at a bird blind and, watching video footage, take observations that biologists gather on the breeding islands.

Live footage of puffins nesting on Eastern Egg Rock will be shown on a large screen from May through August, with views so clear, the puffins will appear as though they're right there.

The video also will show Arctic and common terns, black guillemots and common eider ducks.

Ideally, Kress said, the visitor center will help people understand how vulnerable the Gulf of Maine ecosystem is, and what it needs to stay healthy.

For example, Kress said recent research shows the herring populations have been in decline, a finding that led to changes in commercial fishing regulations in the past year.

Evidence shows that the puffin colony on Machias Seal Island is suffering from a lack of herring, Kress said.

Right now the puffins are not breeding as successfully as in the past on that island, he said.

"We are very concerned about the Machias Seal Island population. That's on the border, and by far the largest puffin colony in the Gulf of Maine," Kress said. "That really hasn't produced healthy young. They're underweight. The herring is not in the diet. The birds are feeding on little shrimp, marginal food."

Kress, who helped bring the puffin back to Maine 33 years ago, said the bird could easily be extirpated from the Gulf of Maine again.

This is one message he hopes to impart through the new visitor center.

"It is a long-term process to bring them back," Kress said. "It took eight years. . . a lot of hard work. It would be more prudent to be responsible to the population we already have. There is no guarantee we could do it again."

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