

Project Puffin: The Improbable Quest to Bring a Beloved Seabird Back to Egg Rock by Stephen W. Kress and Derrick Z. Jackson

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Source: The Condor, 117(4) : 689-690

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1650/CONDOR-15-138.1>

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Published October 28, 2015

Project Puffin: The Improbable Quest to Bring a Beloved Seabird Back to Egg Rock by Stephen W. Kress and Derrick Z. Jackson. 2015. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, USA. xvi + 357 pages, 8 color plates, 30 black-and-white photographs. \$30.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-300-20481-0.

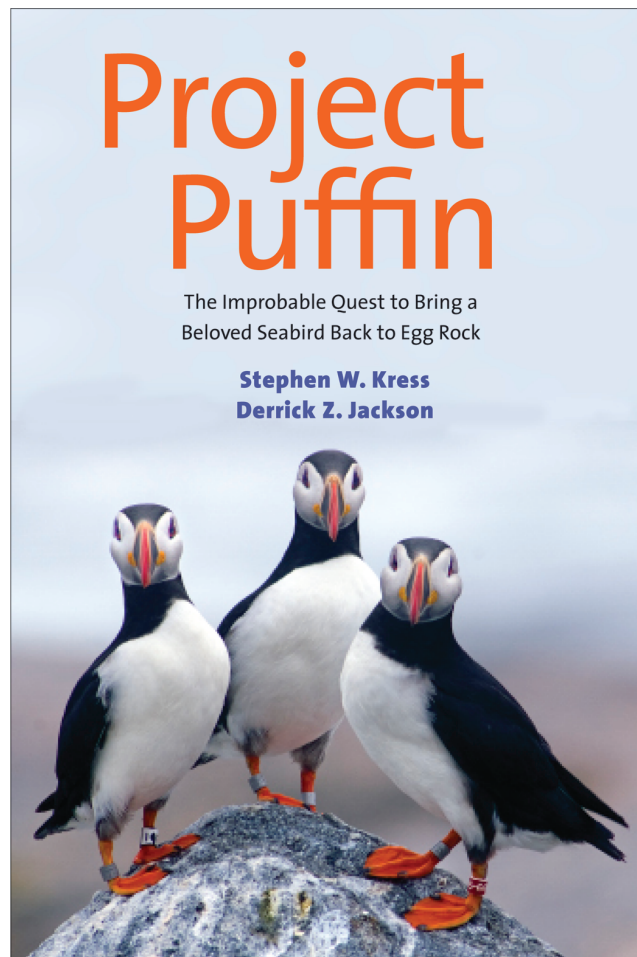
Some ideas, when you are first exposed to them, seem so naturally intuitive and elegant that you may forget that someone had to develop that idea, nurture it carefully, test it thoroughly, and painstakingly and incrementally refine the whole hypothesis. So it is with seabird colony restoration based on the concept of “social attraction”—a suite of basic tools (decoys, playbacks, etc.) used by conservation-minded ornithologists these days. Researchers use these tools worldwide to help save endangered species from imminent catastrophe, restore threatened species to their former ranges, move problematic species to more favorable locations, or boost the chances of seriously declining populations. But the original idea, the very spark that lit the way for a significant shift in our collective conservation thinking from reactive to proactive, started with just one person with a bold vision, as these things so often do. That person is Dr. Stephen Kress.

In this book, Kress, now a National Audubon Society vice president, joins forces with Derrick Jackson, a seasoned associate editor with *The Boston Globe*, to weave a captivating tale that spans 40 years of invention, perseverance, and,

ultimately, success. The road is long and winding, but this is an uplifting journey that is well worth taking. The tale is populated with a cast of colorful characters—a small army of Kress’s dedicated tribe, from Dr. Kathleen Blanchard, the very first project hire (well known in her own right for many years of service to seabird conservation), to the most recent batch of fresh-faced interns (all yet to make their mark in the field, should they choose to do so).

Not content with just telling the unfolding story of what came to be known as “Project Puffin,” the authors give us a biography of Kress himself—not surprisingly, since Kress and Project Puffin are largely inseparable—but along the way also tell us the story of the National Audubon Society and of the broader bird-conservation and environmental-education

movement over the past 50 years or so. The story takes us from a teenaged Kress’s wide-eyed amazement at being in the presence of a “National Treasure,” Roger Tory Peterson, to his absolute horror at capsizing a boat



and dunking the 80-year-old Peterson in the drink some 20 years later!

For the uninitiated, Project Puffin grew out of Kress's early obsession with the idea of restoring Atlantic Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) to their former range in the Gulf of Maine. Puffins were extirpated from that area in the late 1800s by the pressures of hunting and egg harvesting. To achieve this dream, Kress developed the idea of translocating puffin chicks from rugged colony islands in Newfoundland, where they breed in abundance, to former breeding islands in Maine. Armed only with youthful enthusiasm and dogged determination, there really was nothing to stand in Kress's way—except, maybe, convincing curmudgeonly wildlife officials at government agencies in two countries that such a thing was not only worth trying but really deserved their active support, not to mention a permitting morass and figuring out just how to transport, house, feed, and release healthy, happy puffin chicks (something no one had ever attempted before). But convince them he did, and so began a project of 40+ years that would take over his life. This is the tale of that seemingly far-fetched idea, how it took root, how it survived, and how it evolved to change the face of seabird conservation across the globe.

Throughout this book, Kress and Jackson weave a genuinely fascinating narrative full of the tragedies and triumphs of on-the-ground conservation in action. Stumbling through the trial-and-error of it all, you feel as though you are right there with Kress and colleagues for the lows (overturning a skiff in the frigid surge when trying to land on the slippery, rocky shore of Eastern Egg Rock) and the highs (watching their young charges leave the safety of an artificial burrow for the first time and take to the sea).

Personally, I appreciate Black Guillemots (*Cephus grylle*) every bit as much as Atlantic Puffins, so I was interested to learn of their role as a surrogate for puffins. In the early years, Kress and Blanchard attempted to learn all they could from raising guillemot chicks on the porch of a rustic cabin on Hog Island, seeking any hint of knowledge or insight that might make them better custodians to their adopted Canadian pufflings. Actually, rugged, rock-strewn islands provide a constant backdrop throughout this story, from Great Island in Witless Bay, Newfoundland, to Hog Island and Eastern Egg Rock in Muscongus Bay, Maine. In my mind, and perhaps because I am lucky enough to know all of these places intimately, these islands are central characters in this engaging drama,

every bit as much as the puffins or Kress and his hardy colleagues are.

It's one thing to raise chicks to fledging and then wait anxiously for years for their return, but encouraging them to come to land long enough to decide whether it is suitable enough to stay and breed—that's another story altogether. And that was precisely Kress's next challenge. His inventive solutions, using decoys and playbacks to give returning puffins the look and feel of an active colony—essentially playing on the puffin's own desire for social interaction—proved to be the underpinnings of seabird colony restoration as we know it today. In a 2012 scientific paper, Kress and coauthor Holly Jones tallied 128 active restoration projects across the globe and reckoned that these methods, pioneered by Kress in the 1970s, have now been used to protect 47 seabird species in at least 14 countries.

There are, of course, many ways to measure the success of this or any other conservation project; not least is the number of young biologists who have cut their teeth during intense summers of fieldwork on the windswept rocks of coastal Maine. When you think about it, Steve Kress has been an adoptive parent to a whole host of individuals. Restoring puffins to the Gulf of Maine has brought puffins and people together again. Every visitor to these islands or the surrounding waters—whether a determined intern, in for the long haul, or a windblown day-tripper on a boat charter—departs with a genuine sense of wonder and connection with a small, black and white bird. Inevitably, Steve Kress and his trusty colleagues at Project Puffin, such as “Seabird Sue” Schubel and “Puffin Pete” Salmansohn, continue to change the world one person at a time, just as they did one puffin at a time.

Kress and Jackson present a ripping yarn that, ultimately, is just the first installment in the slowly ripening story of Project Puffin and the people who dedicate their lives to the cause of seabird conservation. Even knowing some of the individuals involved, and having heard some of the stories before, I found it extremely enlightening to go back and live this project with them. This is a fine read, and I highly recommend getting up close and personal with the islands that these seabirds choose to call home, and, while you're at it, delving into the improbable.

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