

PUFFINS

We love puffins *because they remind us of our infant selves.*

MARK COCKER

Sea Parrot and Ocean Clowns

In the summer puffins' bills are a distinctive bright red, blue and yellow, hence their nicknames Sea Parrot, Bottle Nose and Clown of the Ocean. In winter the colourful outer part of the beak is shed, leaving a smaller, duller one behind.

For most of the year, puffins bob about on the Atlantic and Arctic oceans, hundreds of miles from land. They dive down to great depths, using their wings as paddles and their webbed feet as a rudder. Their beaks have backward pointing spines so they can store rows of fish in their mouths without swallowing them. The average catch is 10 but the record is 62. In Spring, puffins return to land to breed, digging holes in the cliff-top turf or refurbishing old rabbit burrows. They use their beaks as picks and their feet as shovels. Their loud growling noises from underground sound like muffled chainsaws. Out at sea they are totally silent.

Puffins have been hunted for food for centuries. In Norway, special puffin dogs dig them out of the ground, and in Iceland and the Faroes they are caught on the wing using a 12-foot (3.7 metre) pole with a net on the end. Once thought to be half-bird, half-fish, Catholics ate them on Fridays and in Lent. On St Kilda they were used to flavour porridge. However, puffins are not endangered – there are 10 million Atlantic puffins in Iceland alone.

Puffins usually mate for life, the males give the females presents of grass or feathers and they produce one egg a year between them.

Puffinus puffinus is the scientific name, not of the puffin, but of the Manx Shearwater.



Puffins are faster than giraffes (top speed of 50 mph vs 33 mph).

Baby puffins are called 'pufflings'.

Where the small burn spreads into the sea loch, I found the mad, clever, clown's beak of a puffin.

NORMAN MACCAIG (1910-96)

Clan Puffin

There are four species in the genus *Fratercula* ('little brother'): the Atlantic puffin, the Horned puffin, the Tufted puffin and the Rhinoceros Auklet.

Puffins are a kind of auk. The smallest auk is the Least Auklet - the male has testicles that are larger than its brain.

Due to a papal dispensation, puffins are classed as fish and so Catholics are permitted to eat them during Lent.

The mediaeval rent on the Isles of Scilly, payable by the Lord of the Isle to the Crown, was in puffins.



The Exchange (Jon Langford)

"Hello, sir. How may I help you?"

"I'd like to return this alarm clock, please."

"What's wrong with it?"

"The alarm doesn't work."

"How do you mean?"

"The alarm makes no sound."

"Did you troubleshoot using the manual?"

"Yes."

"And it still didn't work?"

"No."

"Okay. Do you have the receipt?"

"No. I can't find it anywhere."

"Then I can't give you a refund."

"Oh no, you misunderstand. I don't want a refund. I just want to exchange it for one that works."

"Okay. Do you have the original packaging?"

"No. I threw it away."

"I can't do an exchange without the original packaging."

"It came in a plastic clamshell. I had to hack it open with a knife. I don't understand. Why do you need the packaging?"

"Our policy for all exchanges is that the product be returned in its original packaging."

"It was just a load of ripped up plastic. Why would I keep that?"

"In case you needed to return the item."

"I didn't think an alarm clock would break after a few weeks. So you're telling me you can't do anything to help?"

"To do anything I need some proof of purchase."

"I'm proof! I'm telling you now that I bought it here. In fact, I think you might have even served me."

"Did you register the product warranty number online?"

"No."

"Ah well, that's a problem. How did you pay for it? Cash or card?"

"Cash."

"If you'd paid on card you could've got a statement from your bank proving you'd made a purchase here and on what date."

"Well, I paid cash."

"The thing is, other stores sell this brand too. You could've bought it anywhere."

"I could. But I didn't. I bought it here and it doesn't work and you owe me an alarm clock."

"When did you buy it?"

"A few weeks ago."

"Our exchange policy is twenty-one days so you might be out of warranty anyway."

"I bought it last month sometime. I don't remember the exact date."

"We've been selling this model for a couple of years now."

"Are you saying I'm lying?"

"No, sir. I'm simply saying that you might have bought it twenty-two days ago and in that case, even with a receipt and the original packaging, I wouldn't be able to do anything to help."

"Nothing?"

"No."

"So now I just have a faulty alarm clock forever?"

"Well, you could send it off to the manufacturer with a letter explaining the problem."

"It was made in China. That's more hassle than it's worth."

"Then I would suggest taking it to a repair shop."

"That sort of thing usually costs more than what you paid for something in the first place."

"I know."

"Can I speak to the manager, please?"

"The manager's off today."

"Then can I speak to whoever's in charge?"

"You already are."

"Is the manager in tomorrow?"

"No."

"When's he next in?"

"It's a she."

"Okay. When's *she* next in?"

"Monday."

"I'll come back Monday then."

"Very good. Can I help you with anything else today, sir?"

"I doubt it."

"Okay. Would you like to open a store card? It's completely free and you get five percent off every purchase."

"No thank you."

"If you open one today you get a free gift."

"What's the free gift?"

"An alarm clock."