

## PIGEON GUILLEMOTS BREEDING ON A MOVING VESSEL

*Samuel de Beer*

*Geology Department, c/o Plutonic Gold Mine, PMB 46, Meekatharra, WA 6642, Australia*

The Pigeon Guillemot (*Cepphus columba*) is a seabird of the North Pacific Ocean and in the eastern part of its range breeds along the coast from Alaska to California (Ewins 1993). It is a cavity and crevice-nesting species that utilizes a wide variety of natural substrates including rock cliffs, boulder rubble, tree roots, disused rabbit burrows, caves, and piles of large driftwood cast ashore (Ewins 1993). It may also excavate its own burrow under dense shrubs and in soft soils below tree roots on cliff faces (Hatter and Stordeur 1978, Campbell et al. 1990). In British Columbia, as elsewhere, stationary human-made structures are also utilized for nesting. These may include wharves (Campbell 1977), piers, bridges, light beacons, drain pipes, beached ship hulls, and log pilings (Campbell et al. 1990).

While on a visit to the Queen Charlotte Islands, BC on 21 July 2007 I had to travel between two of the largest islands by a small ferry. The ferry, the *Kwuna*, runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, between the village of Skidegate on Graham Island and Alliford Bay on Moresby Island (Figure 1). The length of the trip is 6.5 km (3.5 mi) and takes about 20 minutes. The ferry goes in opposite directions every half hour. The speed of the ferry is estimated between 18 and 20 km/h.

After the vehicles were parked I got out and started looking at the birds on the water. There were a few gulls quite far away, several Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) could be seen in trees along the coastline and on the water, quite close to the ferry, were numerous Pigeon Guillemots. They did not seem to be afraid of the ferry and were quite comfortable around it. Once the ferry got moving the guillemots took to the wing and flew straight to the ferry to clumsily land on the loading ramp.

There were up to 10 guillemots on the ramp at a time (Figure 2). I noticed that two birds landed on one of the front structural pillars that housed the



**Figure 1.** The small ferry, the *Kwuna*, operates daily throughout the year between the two largest islands on the Queen Charlotte Islands and during the summer months Pigeon Guillemots breed in structural openings on the vessel. Skidegate Inlet, BC. 21 July 2007 (Samuel de Beer). BC Photo 3577a.

ramp hydraulics. I also saw a bird flying by with something that looked like a small eel, about 10 cm long, in its bill. The bird tried to land on the left hydraulic pillar but seemed to be unsuccessful. It was only with the third effort directly from the front that the bird disappeared inside the pillar.

I realized that the bird must be feeding chicks inside the pillar (Figure 3), but I was quite skeptical since I have never heard of birds breeding on a moving vessel. The birds fed the chicks three times during the 20 minute ride, and often landed in the water in front of the ferry until we passed and would then fly up and go inside the pillar.

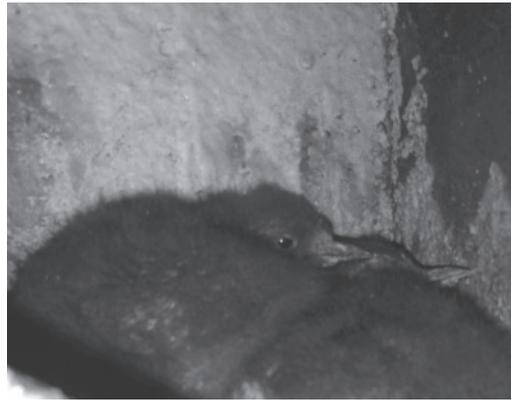
When we landed at the dock I inspected the hole where the birds went into and was actually surprised to see how small the slit was between the mounted light and the steelwork. I could not see inside the pillar but decided to stick the lens of a small pocket digital camera through the slit between the hydraulic piston and the steel pillar. I took two photographs and was quite surprised to see that there were two big



**Figure 2.** Shortly after the ferry *Kwuna* left its berth for the 6.5 km trip across Skidegate Inlet, BC, Pigeon Guillemots flew and landed on the boarding ramp. 21 July 2007 (Samuel de Beer). BC Photo 35677b.



**Figure 3.** Pigeon Guillemot nest site inside a metal pillar on board the vessel *Kwuna*. Skidegate Inlet, BC. 21 July 2007 (Samuel de Beer). BC Photo 3577c.



**Figure 4.** Two downy Pigeon Guillemot chicks inside a metal crevice on board the vessel *Kwuna*. Skidegate Inlet, BC. 21 July 2007 (Samuel de Beer). BC Photo 3577d.

chicks in the “nest” (Figure 4).

During the voyage over the strait, two other birds were inspecting the pillar on the opposite side of the ramp. They would attempt to land on the pillar directly from the sea but with the ferry being a small moving target and with the strong crosswinds, the birds were seldom successful. They would often land on the loading ramp and then take a short flight up to the top of the ramp where they would shuffle around and disappear and re-appear from behind the structure. They seemed to be quite territorial around it and would defend it from other guillemots trying to land by outstretching their necks, opening their bills, and opening their wings.

In British Columbia, Glaucous-winged Gulls (*Larus glaucescens*) and Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) have been reported successfully nesting on moving barges, ferries, and ships (Campbell et al. 1990, 1997) but I cannot find any reference to an alcid nesting on a moving vessel.

#### *Literature Cited*

**Campbell, R.W.** 1977. Use of man-made structures as nest sites by Pigeon Guillemots. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 91:193-194.

**Campbell, R.W., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser, and M.C.E. McNall.** 1990. *The birds of British Columbia:*

Volume 2 – nonpasserines (diurnal birds of prey through woodpeckers). Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, BC. 636 pp.

**Campbell, R.W., N.K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J.M. Cooper, G.W. Kaiser, M.C.E. McNall, and G.E.J. Smith.** 1997. *The birds of British Columbia. Volume 3 – passerines (flycatchers through vireos).* University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, BC. 693 pp.

**Ewins, P.J.** 1993. Pigeon Guillemot (*Cephus columba*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 491 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, DC.: The American Ornithologists' Union. 24 pp.

**Hatter, I., and L. Stordeur.** 1978. An inventory of Canada Geese and seabirds nesting in Juskatla, Masset, Skidegate, and Long inlets, Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia. *British Columbia Fish and Wildlife Report*, Victoria, BC. 44 pp.

#### *About the Author*

Sam was born in South Africa and as a boy was encouraged by his parents to spend time outside in nature. While in South Africa he spent most of his spare time birdwatching. Sam was editor of a bird club magazine, wrote a book on the distribution of birds over a 150-year period in his hometown, co-authored the handbook for South African bird

ringers [banders], and co-authored several papers. Professionally he worked as a geologist, soil scientist, and consultant in South Africa, Northwest Territories, Alberta, and British Columbia. Although a Master Bander his travels have prevented him from getting involved again with his life-long passion of ringing.

---