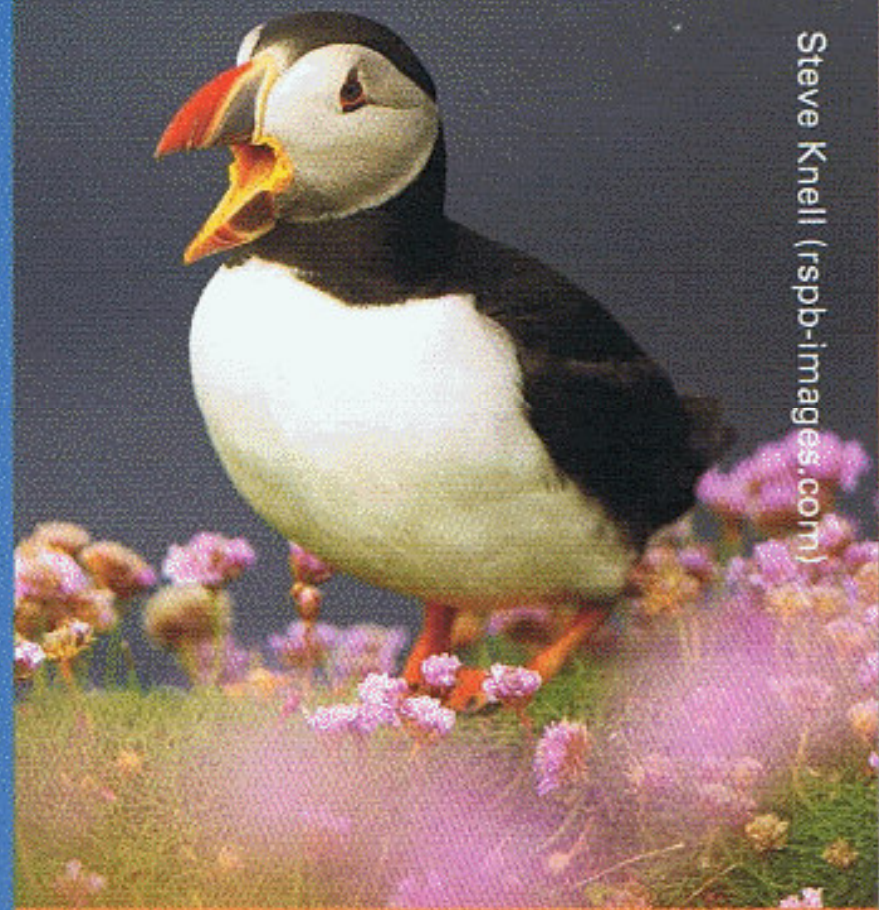


An **auk** on the wild side

Auks are a small group of seabirds that spend most of their lives out at sea – only coming to land to nest. The best known of the auks is the **puffin**.



Steve Knell (rspb-images.com)

Family favourite – the much loved puffin

Auks suit a life spent mostly swimming rather than flying as they have stubby wings, stocky bodies and webbed feet. Auks are sociable birds and nest in large colonies on sea cliffs and islands. **See pages 20 and 21 for more on auks.**

“A puffin! A puffin! Look Sophie, a puffin!”

These were the words of my then 33-year-old brother Simon as he grabbed my sleeve excitedly and pointed out the small, jaunty bird with orange feet sitting on the water a few yards away. He was instantly captivated by their magic and soon the seabirds cast their spell on me too. It was our first trip to Skomer Island, off the West Wales coast.

Bold puffins scurried back and forth to their burrows just a few feet away from where we stood. Next we discovered their cousins, guillemots and razorbills – the former crowded onto ledges among dozens of other birds, the razorbills preferring not quite such intimate neighbours. Then we watched some incredibly graceful birds flying in circles on perfectly straight wings, before returning to their nest in a crack in the rocks. These were the fulmars, with their tubenoses and infamous projectile vomiting habits.

But the best was yet to come. We waited eagerly for darkness to fall and the Manx shearwaters to return. Their unearthly, throaty cries filled the air as hundreds of them flocked back to the island – often crash landing with an ungainly thud. So adept at sea, on land they are mole-like. Their feathers look like soft black fur in the dark. They move clumsily and can't seem to find their way – and at the witching hour they charm you so you can't bear a year to pass without the chance of seeing them again.

Sophie Atherton, RSPB Media and Communications Officer