

Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*) at Murrells Inlet: Third Documented Record for South Carolina

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On 31 December 2007, I observed a Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*) at the Murrells Inlet jetties (33° 31.422' N, 79° 01.682' W), accessible from Huntington Beach State Park, Georgetown County, South Carolina. The unwary guillemot swam along both sides of the west jetty (13:50–14:20 hr), usually within 5–10 m of the boulders, affording excellent views through binoculars (Zeiss, 10 × 40). I took a few photographs with a Canon Powershot A570 camera (7.1 megapixels) that showed the diagnostic plumage characters, but I was unable to obtain high-magnification photographs through a spotting scope because the guillemot rarely paused more than 5–10 seconds between dives in the rolling swells. I returned on 1 January 2008 for a more leisurely study (10:00–12:00 hr) and obtained better photographs of the guillemot, including several taken through a spotting scope (Swarovski HD–ATS 65).

The guillemot's unmarked white wing patch and pale body plumage indicate it was an adult in definitive basic plumage (Fig. 1). The body plumage was white with a prominent black crescent in front of the eye, faint black flecking on the crown, and black mottling on the mantle, upper tail coverts, and scapular tips. Primaries, secondaries, and rectrices were black. The unmarked wing patch was observed at close range (8–15 m) in excellent light. The absence of black markings on the greater wing coverts ruled out the similar Pigeon Guillemot (*Cepphus columba*), which in any case is unknown from the Atlantic Ocean. The identification was also corroborated by a fortuitous photograph of the diving guillemot which showed 12 rectrices typical of *Cepphus grylle* (Pigeon Guillemots usually have 14 rectrices). The legs and feet were reddish-orange; the bill was black and sharply pointed.

The guillemot appeared to be healthy and unimpaired. It actively foraged around the submerged boulders along the base of the jetty and paused only a few times to preen during the observation period. Several relatively large but unidentified prey items were brought to the surface for processing and consumption. The guillemot took flight twice, once across the inlet from jetty to jetty and the second time from the middle of the west jetty around the tip to the opposite side. The circuitous route was at least 500 m when a direct flight across the jetty would have been less than 40 m. The guillemot was reported irregularly by observers through early February 2008.

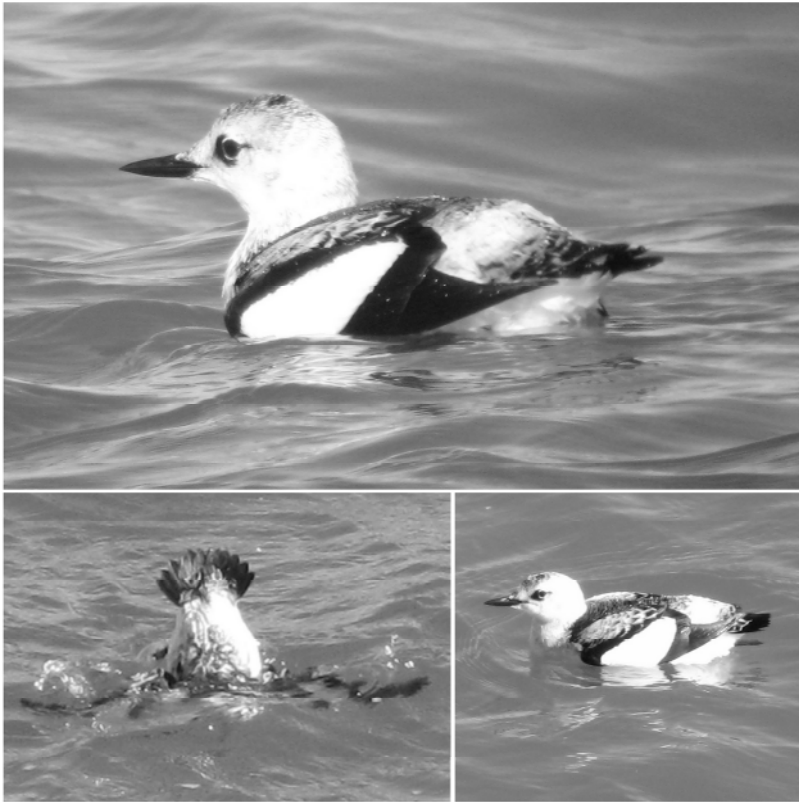


Figure 1. Adult Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*) at the west jetty at Murrells Inlet, Huntington Beach State Park, Georgetown County, South Carolina. Photographs taken on 1 January 2008 by Gary R. Graves.

Black Guillemots exhibit subtle geographic variation with the amount of white in definitive basic plumage increasing from south to north in the breeding populations of the western Atlantic (Cramp 1985). The degree of dorsal mottling on the Murrells Inlet guillemot suggests that it originated from one of the more southerly breeding populations. In the western Atlantic, Black Guillemots winter irregularly south to Long Island with few documented records south of New Jersey (AOU 1998). The species has been reported several times in South Carolina (Burton 1970; Probst 1976) but only two previous records have been accepted by the South Carolina Bird Records Committee, an immature in first basic plumage photographed in November–December 1992 at the west jetty at Murrells Inlet (Buerger 1993), and a second individual at Litchfield Beach in 1994 (Worthington 1995). Worthington states the date of that observation as 29 Dec 1994 but the correct date was 29 Jan 1994, during the winter meeting of the Carolina Bird Club (Kent Fiala, pers. comm.). The present sighting is the third

accepted record for South Carolina. The Murrells Inlet records represent the southernmost occurrences of Black Guillemot in North America that are documented by diagnostic photographs. I thank Will Post, Robin Carter, Donna Slyce, Jack Peachey, and Taylor Piephoff for providing information.

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