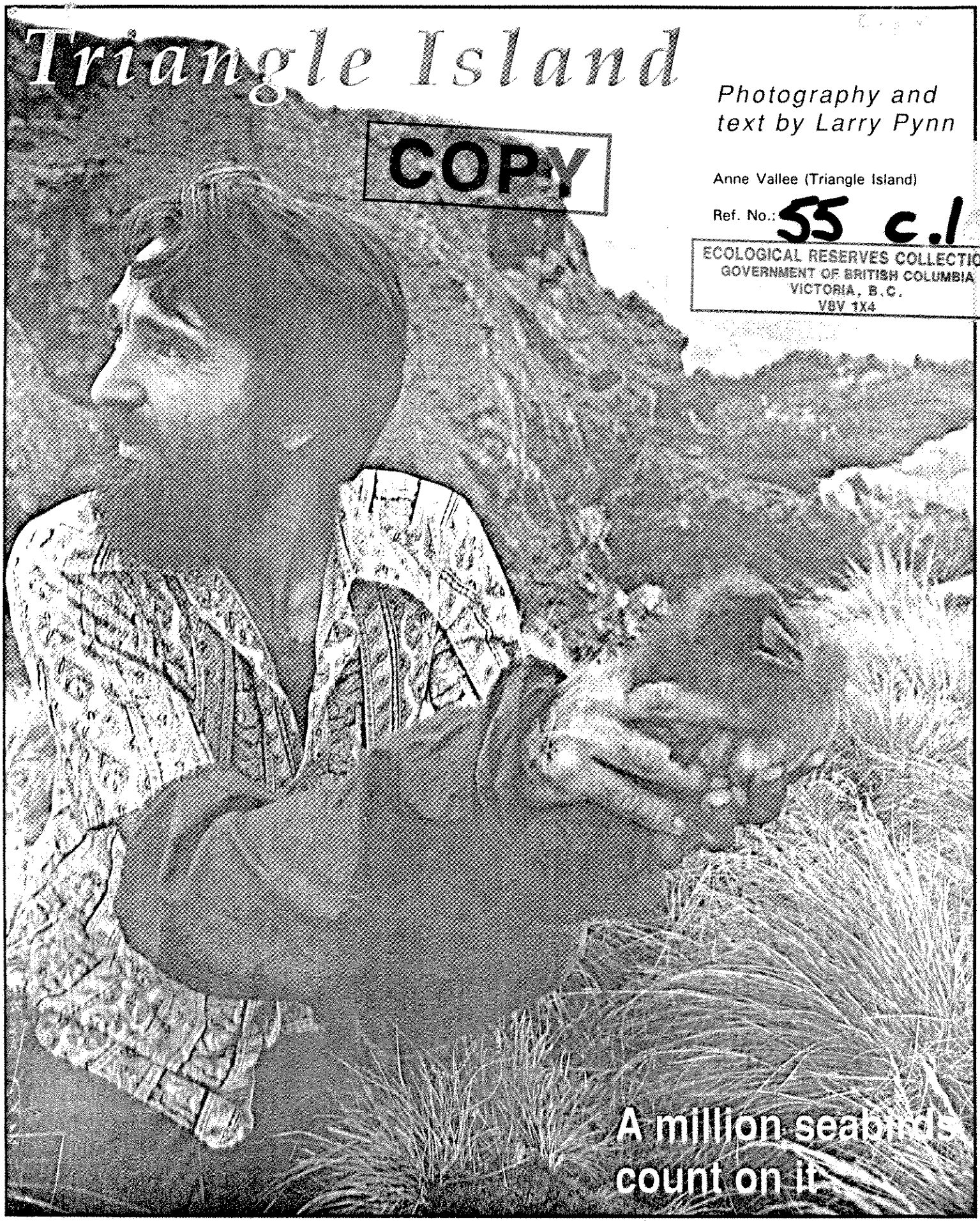
Triangle Island

Photography and text by Larry Pynn



Anchored amid the swirling mists and breakers off northwestern Vancouver Island is a place so small and seemingly inconsequential it remains virtually unknown. But to more than one million seabirds, Triangle Island is British Columbia's greatest nesting colony. In a province with 27,300 kilometres of rugged and largely unpopulated coastline, this remote island is the nesting place of one-fifth of B.C.'s breeding seabirds. Its numbers nearly equal those of the Queen Charlotte Islands combined.

Located 45 kilometres northwest of Cape Scott, at the outermost of the Scott Islands group, 85-hectare Triangle Island is on the marine highway to nowhere. The island served as a lighthouse station from 1910 to 1919. However, that function was all but useless, even though the lighthouse was, at 210 metres, the highest one on the coast. In 1912 a hurricane blew the well-secured tower over a cliff. Soon rebuilt, it was doomed to close because heavy fogs frequently obscured its light. Today only mice, voles, and rabbits permanently inhabit this forbidding island. Human visitors, thankfully, are as infrequent as sunshine. They are occasional fishermen seeking safe haven in Pacific storms, and researchers pondering the propagation of seabirds.

Each year, however, between April and September, a hail of birds arrives from the surrounding North Pacific. They squawk and snipe in a frenzy to select nesting sites, defend them from predators, and raise their chicks. Species include Cassin's and rhinoceros auklets, tufted puffins, common murres, glaucous-winged gulls, pigeon guillemots, pelagic cormorants, black oyster catchers, bald eagles, and peregrine falcons.

About one million Cassin's auklets — more than 40 percent of their world population — are the first to arrive. They burrow under the tufted hair grass and salmonberry bushes that carpet the green and brown landscape. Like some 84,000 of their rhino cousins, the stubby Cassin's auklets commute each day from ocean feeding waters to hungry chicks waiting in burrows. They return under the protection of darkness, their unmistakable silhouettes drawn in thick fluttering waves to the steep 210-metre-high hillsides.

"It's amazing," remarks Ken Summers, 42, of Aldergrove, who has conducted research at Triangle Island for four years. "They come in at night and know exactly where to go. When they leave in the morning, you just hear the wind whistling through their wings."

Previous page: *possibly the only humans who can be helpful to the birds of Triangle Island are biologists, and even they must tread carefully. Biologist Michael Rodway examines a puffin chick removed from its burrow.*

Cassin's auklets are the most prolific breeders among B.C.'s 15 seabird species, with as many as 400 separate burrows in a single 10-metre-square space on Triangle Island.

Some 52,000 tufted puffins, the largest colony on the Pacific coast south of Alaska, are active, even brazen, around their burrows during the day. On congested breeding sites such as Puffin Rock, they circle, holding silvery sand lance crossways in their beaks, orange feet trailing awkwardly, and distinctive locks of pale yellow hair flowing.

Crowded together on exposed rocks and cliff ledges, an estimated 10,000 common murres stand penguinlike over their young. They lean into the rock, shrieking madly, guarding against airborn predators like gulls, crows, eagles, and falcons. Murres are well-adapted, perhaps too well, to cliff nesting. Birds that fail to breed continue with their normal nesting behavior as though nothing had happened.

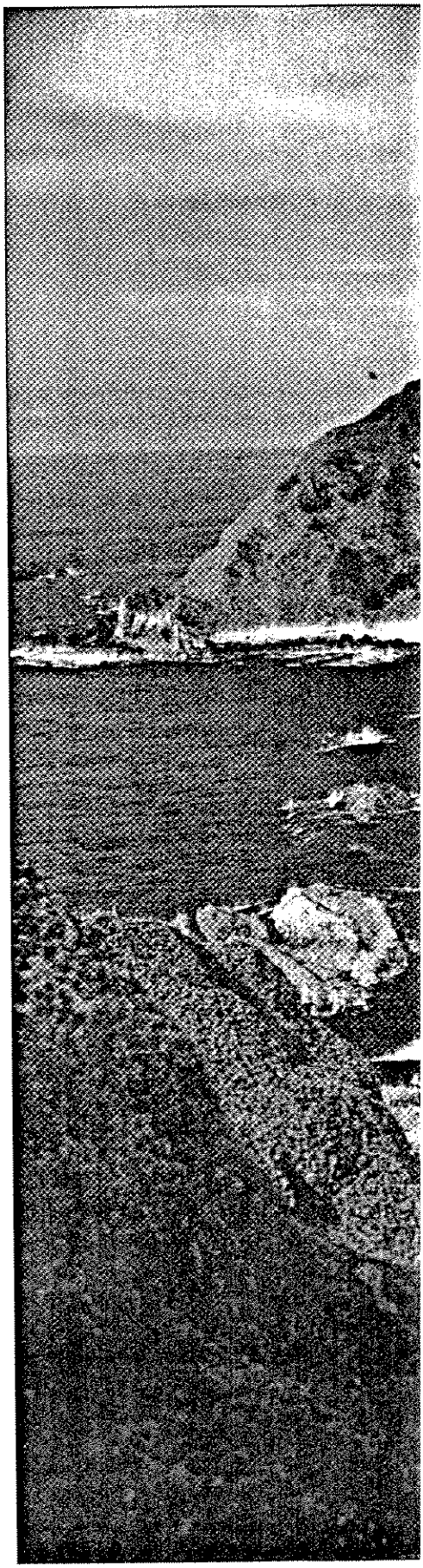
"They'll bring in fish and lay them down, or go through all the motions of nesting, even rolling the egg over, with nothing beneath them," says Summers. Protected from hunters on the west coast, murres remain traditional game birds under Newfoundland's terms of Confederation in 1949, explains Steve Wetmore, B.C.'s chief of migratory birds for the Canadian Wildlife Service. "They're shot by the boatload on the east coast. They taste kind of oily, greasy, and fishy. Kind of yucky."

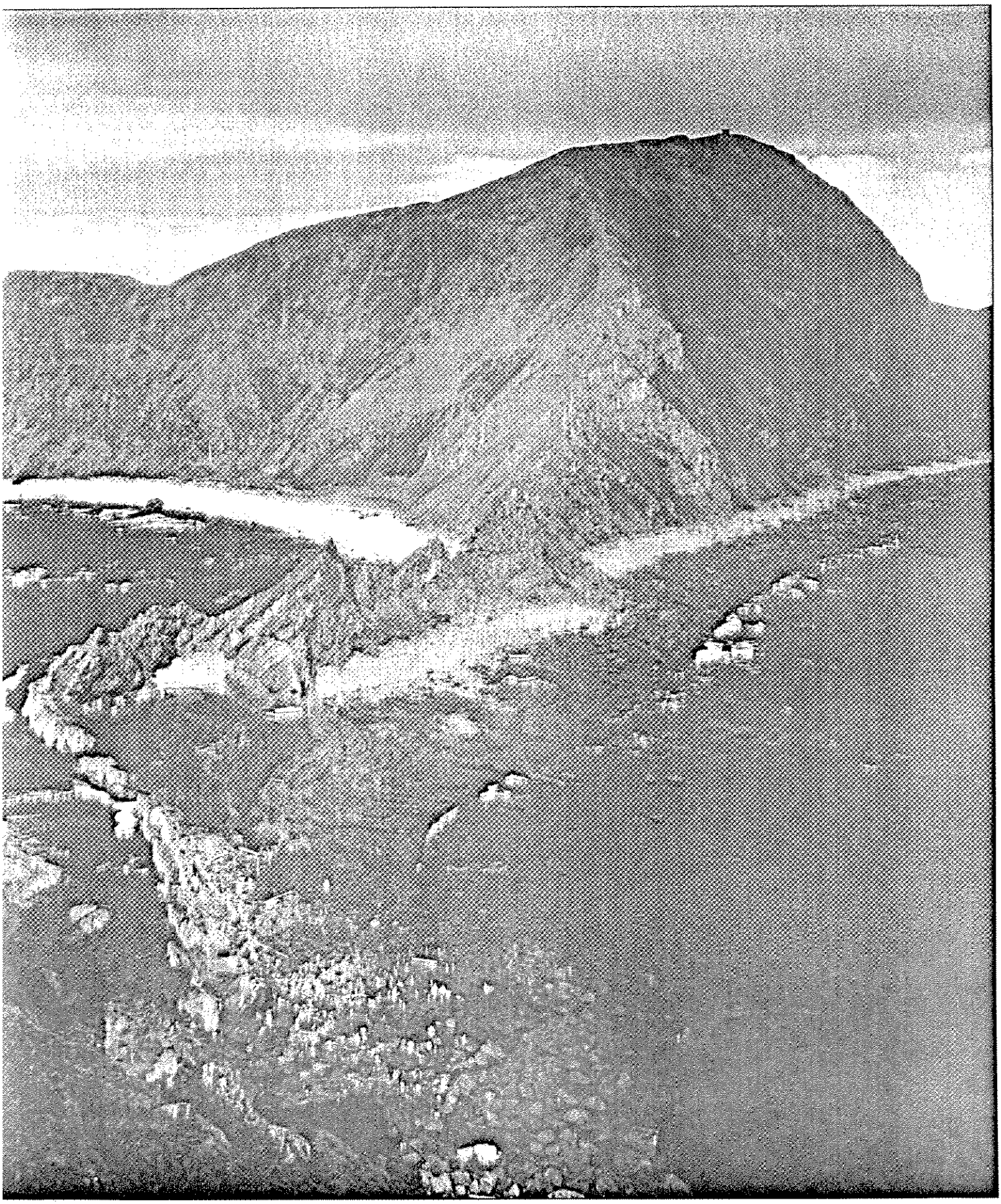
Elsewhere on Triangle Island, wide-eyed gull chicks huddle on the uppermost ledges, sizing up the lethal surf below, preparing for a first flight. On nearby rocks, cormorants stand with waterlogged wings outstretched, as if in worship to the setting sun. And, with Triangle Island being one of four breeding rookeries in B.C., up to 800 Steller's sea lions writhe about in harems, protecting their wrinkled pups with an incessant chorus of barks and belches.

That this treeless, windblown refuge has continued to thrive while some other key seabird sites in B.C. have declined is due as much to its geographic isolation as its prime breeding habitat and abundant marine life. To date it has avoided the disruption facing nesting sites in the newly created South Moresby National Park Reserve, namely from introduced rats and raccoons, recreational boaters, and uneducated nature lovers.

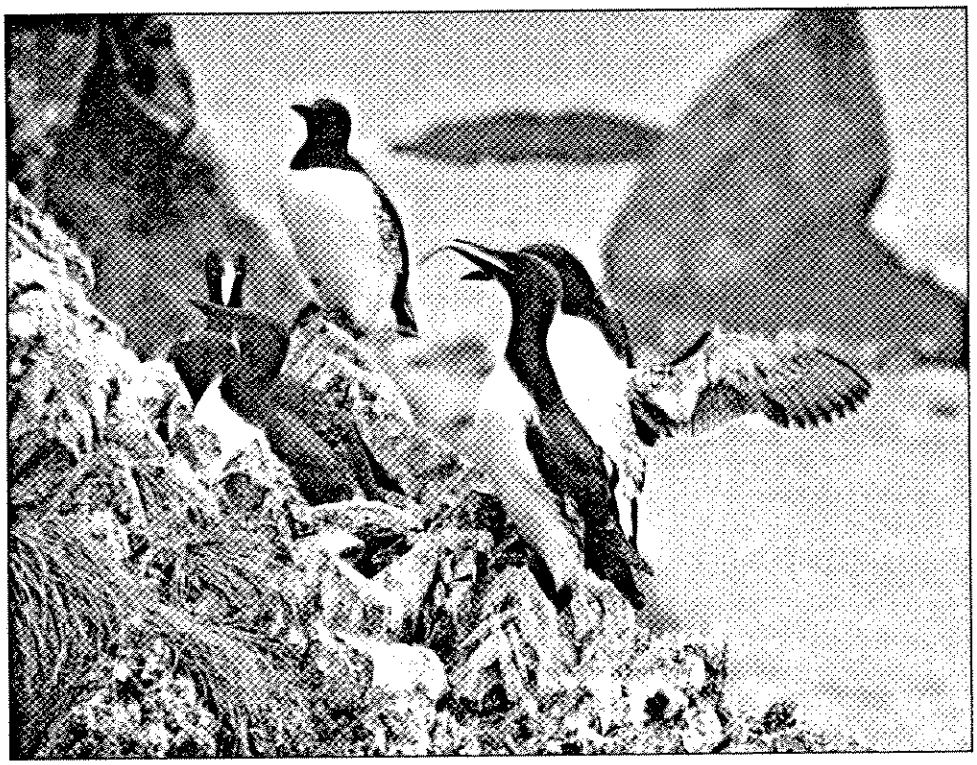
Triangle Island also receives some provincial protection as the Anne Vallee Ecological Reserve, named after a University of British Columbia master's student from Québec who fell to her death in 1982. The province issues visitor permits only for scientific and educational purposes, although lack of enforcement staff and penalties makes conformance largely voluntary.

The ineffectiveness of current regulations protecting B.C. nesting sites was shown during an 875,000-litre spill of bunker C fuel oil in December, 1988, from the





Named for its geometric shape, Triangle Island is the outermost of the Scott Islands group off northwestern Vancouver Island.



Nestucca barge off Grays Harbor, Wash. Oil from the barge drifted northward into Canadian waters against the prediction of the U.S. Coast Guard, fouling Vancouver Island's west coast and closing commercial shellfish harvesting. At least 12,500 seabirds — more than three-quarters of them common murres — were found dead in B.C. and Washington, although the actual kill may be closer to 50,000 birds.

Isolated, fist-sized blobs of oil floated with the prevailing currents as far as Triangle Island, more than 500 kilometres north of the spill site. The experience made a mockery of a federal 10-kilometre exclusion zone around seabird colonies and other land sites in the event offshore oil drilling proceeds on the west coast. A final decision on drilling awaits a five-year moratorium imposed by the B.C. government in March, 1989, shortly after the *Nestucca* spill.

Concerned about the spill's impact on Triangle Island, the Canadian Wildlife Service hired Summers and fellow researcher Michael Rodway, 38, of Ladner, to conduct a $72,000 census of the nesting seabirds last summer.

Dividing the island into sample plots, they scour its surface on hands and knees, checking

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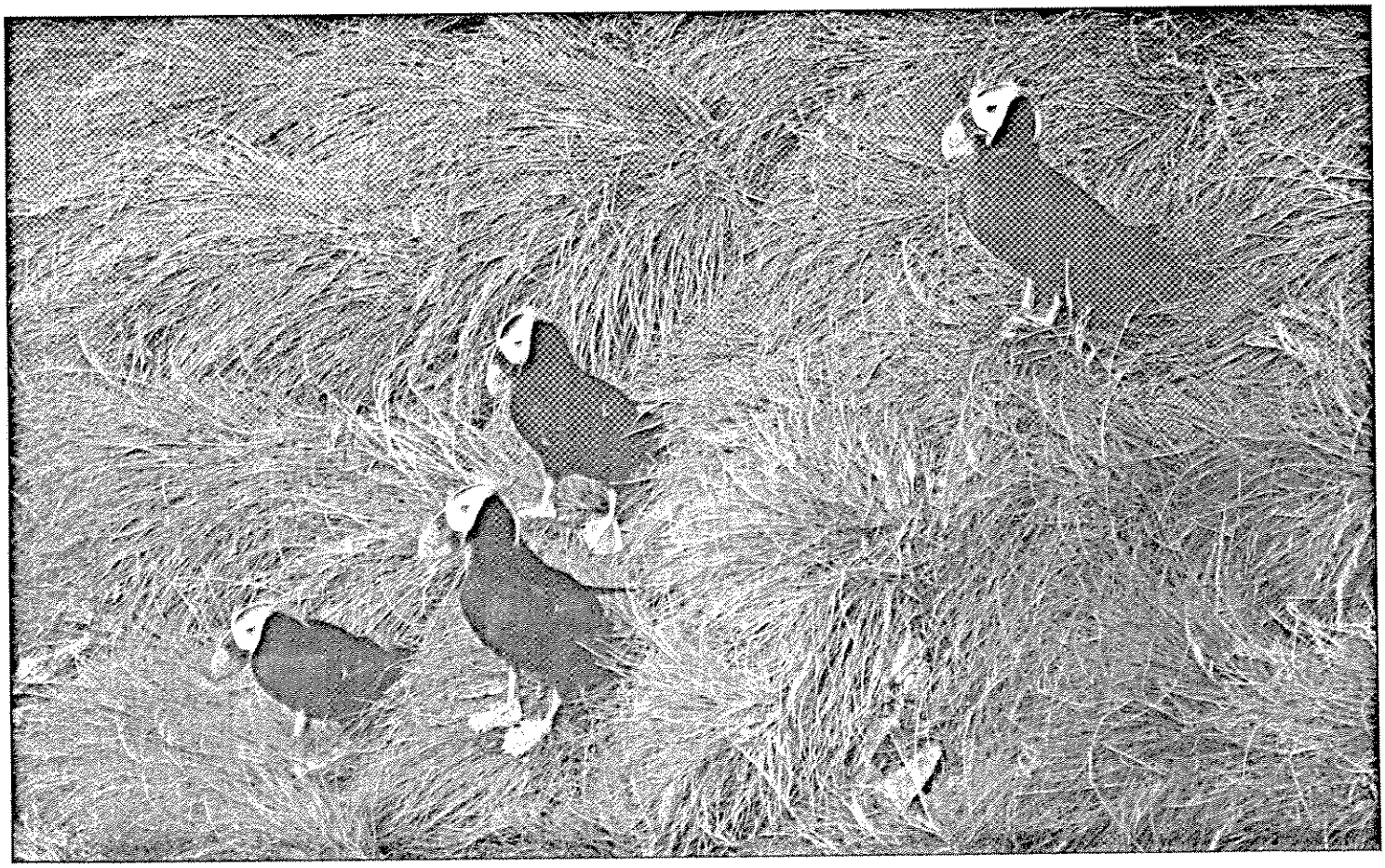


for egg shells, feces, and feathers that mark an active burrow. Sometimes they ferret out chicks to determine breeding success. They also photograph rock cliffs from a five-metre-long inflatable craft, using a telephoto lens, later counting the adult birds by putting the photos under a binocular microscope.

"This is the main site for murres right here," says Rodway, staggering to focus his lens and pointing to the waterfall of guano pouring off a crowded ledge. As Summers works the outboard motor against the rising ocean swells, Rodway watches the young murres and adds: "At 20 days, they jump off the cliff. The males lead them out, and the females, needing to build up their reserves, stay for a couple of extra days."

The luxury of studying such abundant wildlife has its own problems. For example, getting the information without disrupting your subjects can be nerve-wracking. The island is like a mine field. A heavy foot can easily collapse shallow burrows, squishing the chick or exposing it to predators. Researchers made amends by carrying around tiny wooden shingles for quick repairs. Even approaching too close while photographing the cliffs can spook entire colonies of murres: they tend to exit en masse, like crowds after a concert, and leave their young undefended.

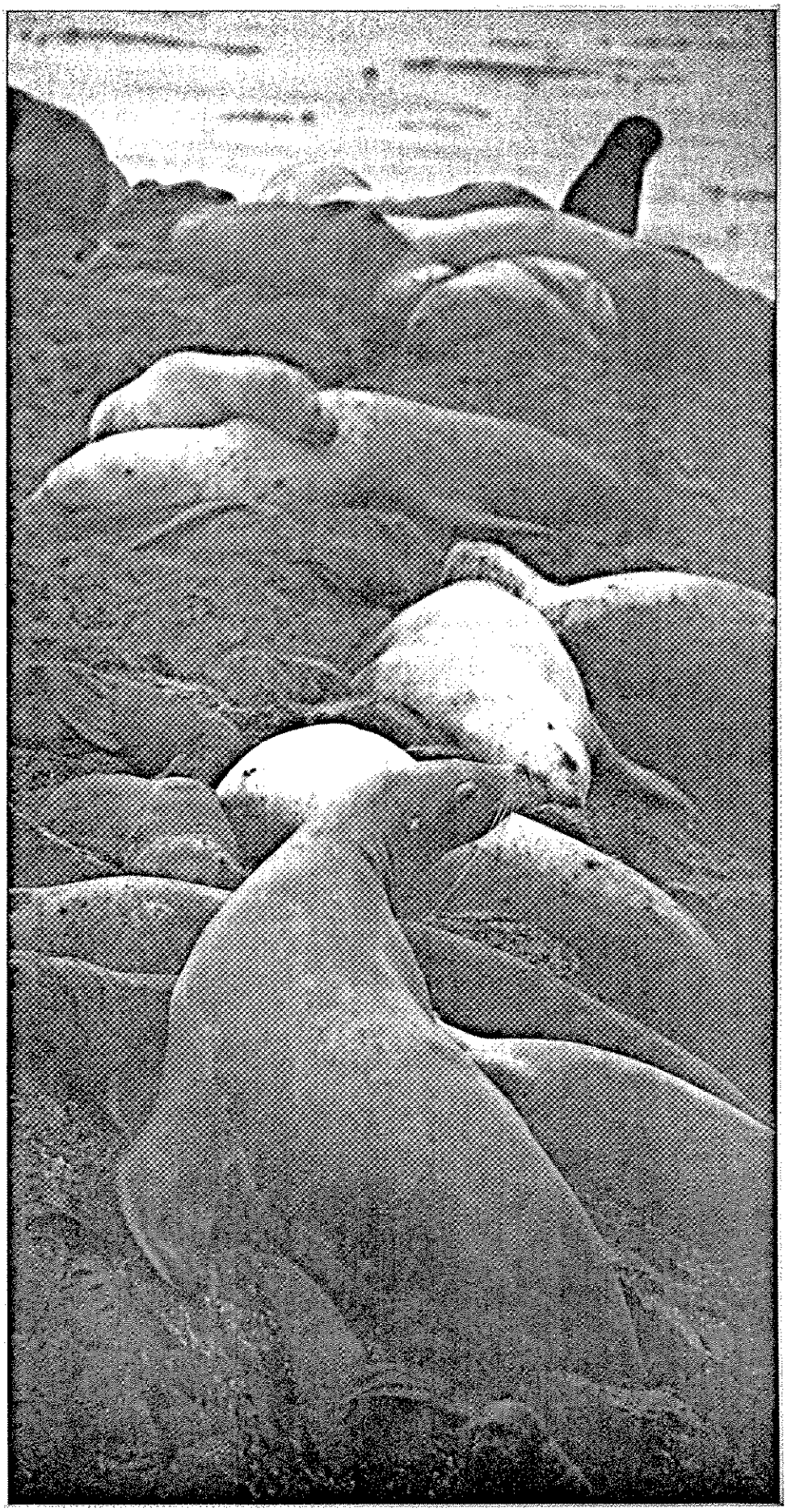
While the federal study shows total populations are healthy on Triangle Island, the virtual breeding failure of some 2,000 murres on nearby Castle Rock is possibly linked to the oil spill.

Despite the ever-present threat of oil spills and the undetermined impact of both high seas and inshore gill-net fishing, the seabirds' future on Triangle Island looks stable, provided humans keep away.

Bird research on the island is still in its infancy. Experience at other irreplaceable wildlife sites, most notably the killer whales rubbing beaches at Robson Bight on northern Vancouver Island, show even small-scale public viewing has a negative impact.

In the meantime, the public must be content with seabirds serving a more practical purpose — providing an early-warning system to environmental problems that could affect man.

"Often they are the first indication of something going wrong with the food chain," notes Steve Wetmore, holding a gull chick which will probably spend the winter at a garbage dump rather than at the remote landscape where it was born.



Opposite top: *common murres return with sand-lance fish to their breeding colonies on the island's cliffs.* ***Opposite bottom:*** *tufted puffins stand out against their burrows on hillsides covered with hair grass.* ***Right:*** *as many as 800 Stellar's sea lions breed on the rocks surrounding Triangle island.*

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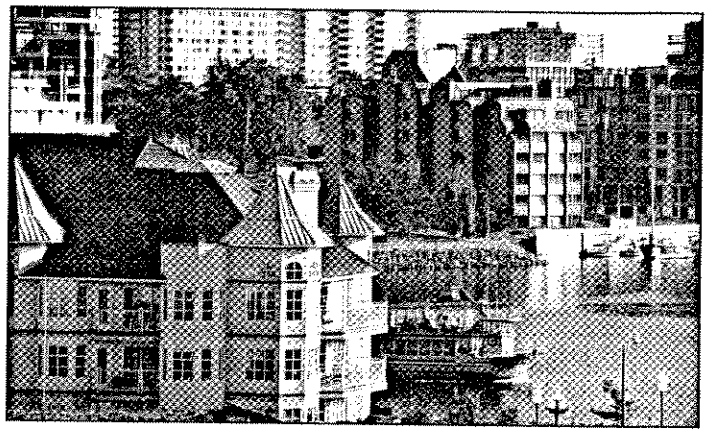
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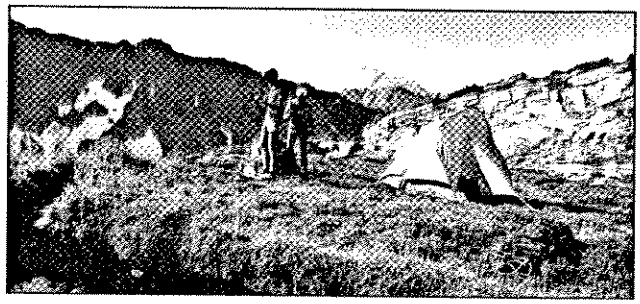
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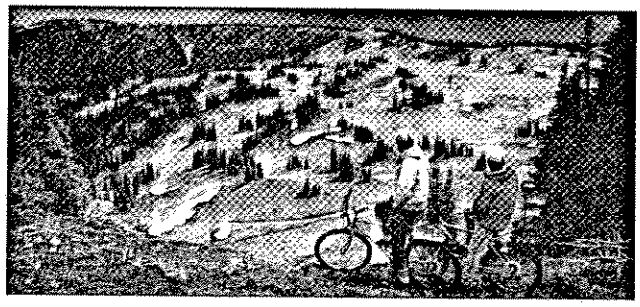
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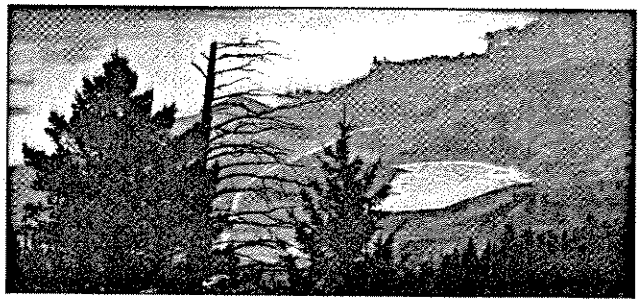
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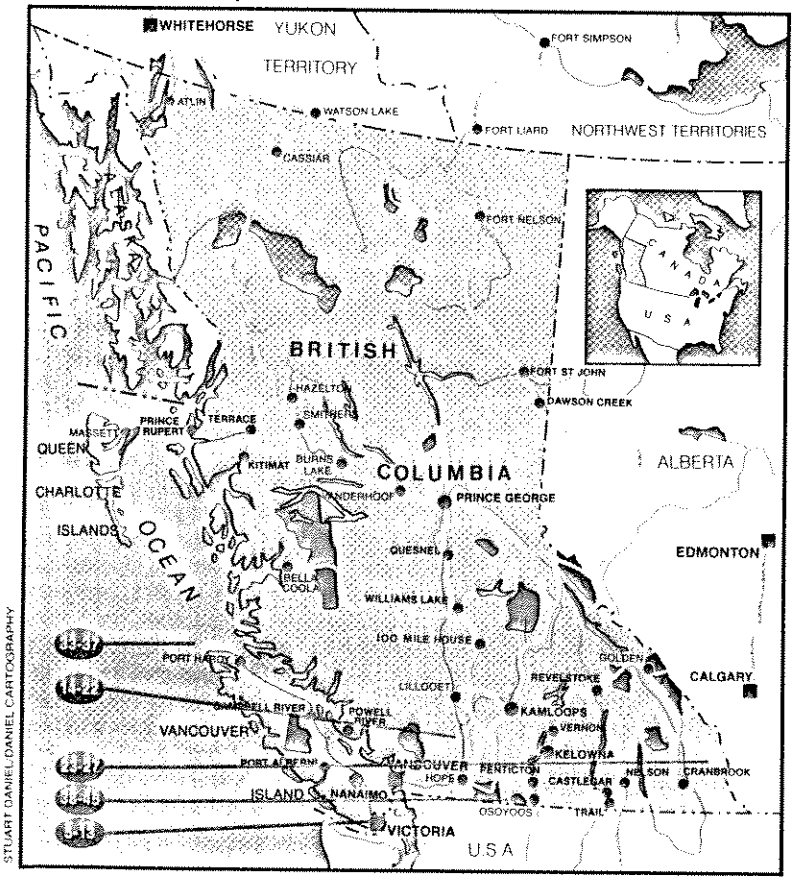
▼ Location Map



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