

THE TAMING OF THE

Close inshore to the harbour and esplanade at Oban, the dainty Black Guillemot is one of the town's non-human characters and an all-year-round resident. They have become an integral, and extremely pleasant, part of the local seascape, whose antics are greatly appreciated by local residents and visitors alike.

Black Guillemots are the most sedentary of the four auks (Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin make up the quartet) that can be seen in Argyll waters. They are also the least gregarious, preferring to nest (at most) in small groups around the coast, often under boulders inside rocky caves. During the spring and summer months, up to 15 pairs of this uniquely-plumaged seabird choose to nest in the man-made piers and esplanade walls of the town. In doing so, these birds can often be seen at extremely close quarters, when their strikingly beautiful 'black' and white plumage, and bright red legs can be seen to best advantage.

The George Street entrance to Oban's North Pier, and the esplanade area adjacent to the roundabout at the Corran Halls are the best places to look, for those hoping to catch a sight of this remarkably confident nesting bird. Two or three pairs usually nest annually in the harbour wall, near the Columba Hotel, while as many as 12 birds may indulge in their courtship displays, as they congregate at high tide during an early spring morning along the Corran esplanade. During this pre-nuptial cavorting, Black Guillemots emit a thin, high-pitched whistle, which is believed to be the source of another name that they commonly go by in the Northern Isles, and throughout the west coast of Scotland: Tystie.

Along with the Turnstones that frequent the local foreshore in winter, the local breeding Black Guillemots rank as one of the most popular wild birds in Oban.

Local birdwatcher, Stuart Gibson, said: 'Many visitors to Oban had never heard of a Black Guillemot, let alone seen one, prior to coming to Oban.'

'Then, in the time it takes to walk along the Corran esplanade, people are enjoying getting 'up-close-and-personal' with these mirthful little seabirds.

'Their plumage does make them stand out, and they can be quite noisy, in their own sort of way, which helps draw attention to them. However, like the Turnstones, it is the fact that they are so unimaginably tame that endears them to many.'

The majority of the British population of Tysties



(around 37,000 individuals) are to be found in Orkney and Shetland, although significant numbers nest on the Western Isles, and along the length of the west of Scotland coastline. Very few breed in England or Wales, which explains visiting birdwatchers' delight at seeing so many Black Guillemots, at such close range, when they come to Oban on holiday. Nest-site quality and the availability of a sustainable food supply are important factors in determining how well Black Guillemots prosper from year-to-year. Breeding locations, away from potential predation from gulls, crows, mink, rats and otters, offer the