

FIRST SPECIMEN OF THE HORNED PUFFIN (*FRATERCULA CORNICULATA*) IN MEXICO

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ABSTRACT: A dead and partially decomposed Horned Puffin (*Fratercula corniculata*) found on the beach near Ensenada, Baja California, on 12 June 2023 represents the first specimen and first definite record of the species for Mexico, as well as the second southernmost. The specimen is preserved in the bird collection of the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Ensenada. The late spring/early summer date agrees with the timing of many occurrences of the Horned Puffin along and near the coast of Upper California since the 1970s.

On 12 June 2023, during a summer census of the Snowy Plover (*Anarhynchus nivosus*), we found a dead Horned Puffin (*Fratercula corniculata*, Figure 1) in the intertidal zone of the beach at El Ciprés (31° 48' 29.7" N, 116° 36' 38.0" W), Bahía de Todos Santos, Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico. The carcass was identified by its distinctive large, laterally compressed, triangular bill; also by its culmen with its unmistakable cusp, white belly, and black head, back, wings and tail, all of which distinguish it from the sympatric Tufted Puffin (*Fratercula cirrhata*) (Piatt and Kitaysky 2002). Because of the specimen's state of decomposition, its sex, mass, wingspan, or body condition could not be determined.

For preservation, the specimen was cleaned as much as possible and injected with undiluted formaldehyde in various parts of its body and deposited in the Ornithological Collection of the Vertebrate Laboratory of the Faculty of Sciences, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, with catalog number UABC-2369. The measurements of the specimen are total length 320 mm, exposed culmen 32.8 mm, bill height 24.8 mm, and tarsus length 30.9 mm.

The Horned Puffin is fairly common throughout its wide distribution in the North Pacific Ocean, occupying diverse habitats throughout its life cycle. In the breeding season, it nests on the coast and offshore islands of British Columbia in Canada, although it is uncommon there. Its most significant nesting areas include the Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, Sea of Okhotsk, Kuril Islands, and the Bering and Chukchi seas, which are located in the North Pacific between Russia and Alaska. On occasion, the species makes southward movements, reaching areas as far south as the coasts of Oregon and California (Piatt and Kitaysky 2002).

The southernmost records of this species are those of the Southern California Bight and based on dead birds washed ashore near San Diego, California, and preserved at the San Diego Natural History Museum (SDNHM). The oldest record is of a specimen found 5 km north of La Jolla on 25 February 1933 (Huey 1933, SDNHM 16183). Additional specimens were found near La Jolla on 28 September

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FIGURE 1. Horned Puffin (*Fratercula corniculata*) dead on the beach at El Ciprés, Bahía de Todos Santos, Baja California, 12 June 2023.

Photo by René A. Valdés-Peña

1974 (SDNHM 38925), at Del Mar on 12 May 1976, at the Tijuana river mouth (which is only 2 km from the Mexico border) on 3 May 2007 (SDNHM 51716), and at North Island Naval Air Station, adjacent to Coronado, on 31 July 2007 (SDNHM 51782) (<https://doi.org/10.15468/dot7ae>, accessed via GBIF.org on 3 October 2024). The southernmost documented sight records have been near San Clemente Island, in 1971 and 1975 (Unitt 2004), and on 20 July 1989 one individual was recorded at the same latitude of our record in Mexico, but far offshore at 340 km west of Punta Banda, within the U.S. maritime limits (<http://seamap.env.duke.edu/dataset/507>, accessed via GBIF.org on 3 October 2024).

As for any previous Mexican records, the Horned Puffin was presumably seen in northwestern Baja California during the irruption of May 1975; however, the sightings were reported only as 160 birds along a route from Point Sur in Monterey, California, to Punta Banda, in Ensenada, Baja California (McCaskie 1975). Because of the lack of documentation of the observations and of the exact locations where the birds were recorded along the route, later publications did not consider this source as valid for the Horned Puffin's inclusion in Mexico's avifauna, and therefore regarded the record as hypothetical (Howell and Webb 1995, Howell et al. 2001). Despite the potential record for Mexico in 1975, our specimen represents the first confirmed record of the species for Mexico and its coastal waters.

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