



Text and photos courtesy of Augusto Atturo, Italian conservation officer

Situated in the North Atlantic, between Iceland and Scotland, lie the Faroe Islands, an archipelago of 18 islands covering about 545 square miles. They are roughly 70 miles long and 47 miles wide, with 690 miles of coastline. They are a self-governing region of the Kingdom of Denmark with their own parliament, and are not a member of the European Union. Faroese is the national language, which was derived from the language of the Norsemen, who settled the islands over 1,100 years ago. The population consists of 48,000 people, with about 18,000 concentrated in the metropolitan area of the capital Tórshavn. Commercial fishing and aquaculture are the main industries and source of income for the country.

The landscape consists mostly of grass and rock outcroppings, and villages are connected by narrow roads (often one lane with pullovers for passing) where you'll need to watch for unattended grazing sheep if you're touring by car, motorcycle, or bike. The islands are built up of layers of volcanic basalt and are tilted with the eastern shores sloping into the sea and the western coasts rising up in soaring cliffs. The weather is maritime and subject to change, with an average temperature of 11°C in summer, and the climate is moderated by the Gulf Stream.

During my visit on the Faroes last July I spent some of my days walking and taking photographs along the cliffs of two of the smaller islands, Mykines and Nolsoy, probably the most interesting for wildlife viewing purposes. With the help of a local guide and well-known ornithologist, Jens-Kjeld Jensen, I visited in Nolsoy the world's largest colony (about 200,000 pairs) of Storm Petrels. It's an enchanting experience hearing their voices from nest burrows under the rocks at night, giving a purring sound with interposed grunts, or seeing the flight of thousands of birds returning together from the sea in the faint nocturnal light, just for an hour at twilight every day to minimize the risk of predators. During the visit some birds were briefly captured, to be ringed, using a mist-net.

The Faroes are a bird watcher's paradise with over 40 different species of breeding birds and no endemic terrestrial mammals. The main interest for the summer visitor is represented by the great number of seabirds and it is estimated that there are some two

million nesting pairs, despite a worrisome decline of the populations over the past few decades due to decreasing of fish stocks.

Several cliffs are occupied by guillemot, razorbill and kittiwake colonies, while the spectacular puffins colonize the steep grassy slopes near the top of the cliffs. The shoreline is also full of shags, cormorants and black auks, and there are a few colonies of Arctic terns. Eiders nest on the rocky and grassy shore, and it seems that food from the salmon farms in the many fjords also help to keep their populations well fed. Merlins ("Smyril" in Faroese) are the only raptor present, with about only 20 pairs in all the islands.

The fulmar is now the most common seabird in the archipelago, while the majority of gannets breed only on the islet of Mykineshølmur. The pasture land in the archipelago, with the typical low-growing treeless vegetation of the outfields which are heavily grazed by sheep, is full of oystercatchers, the Faroese national bird. Manx shearwaters are also present but only fly at night and are difficult to observe in daylight. The storm petrel breeds in the less accessible rocky areas in a few islands (the ones without rats), nesting near the water in burrows or among rocks. The opportunistic great skuas, eating fishes taken from the surface of the sea or from other birds, use as a nest a shallow depression in the grass, defended with fierce dives.

Sport hunting is absent on the Faroes and harvesting of some wild species is only for food purposes, with the shooting of some guillemots and razorbills between October 1 and

January 20, and the harvest of guillemot and puffin eggs in summer, from May 20 until the end of June. For centuries, seabirds were of importance as a source of food. Today, fulmars are primarily caught and approximately 50,000 to 100,000 are taken each year. Research conducted on the amount of litter contained in the stomach of Fulmars' (part of the EEC project "Save the North Sea" which is a study of pollution in the oceans) has revealed an average of seven pieces of plastic inside a single bird!

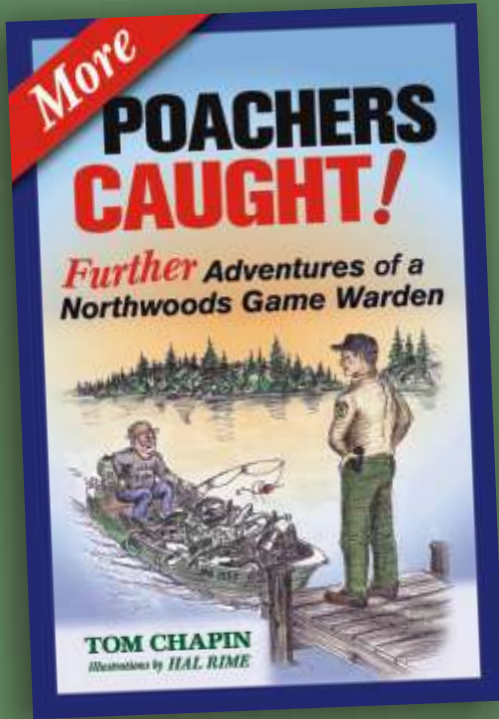
On Mykines and other islands about 30,000 common puffins are caught every year, plucked, and prepared for sale or personal consumption. Some people use a fleg, which looks like a four-meter long lacrosse pole, to catch them in flight. Hunters who do this require great skill and take pride in capturing only puffins that are not bringing back food to their young. This reduces the take of breeding birds. This year's breeding success has been hampered due to low food levels in the surrounding sea.

Food sources for local residents include the mountain grazing sheep of the Faroes which provide up to 60% of all locally produced meat, as well as wool. There is also some catching of sea birds such as puffins and fulmars, the coastal hunting of pilot whales for their meat and blubber, enough dairy cattle to satisfy all domestic milk needs, and many small potato crops carefully cultivated by private households for their own use.

The local hunting of about 1,000 pilot whales per year, considered here an ancient right, is a controversial matter, with past world campaigns against it. The hunt begins when



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offshore boats sight a pod of whales. Other boats arrive and together drive the whales toward inshore bays where islanders gather to assist in the killing. The whales are stampeded into the shallows, to try to beach as many as possible, and the butchery can begin. The catch is divided among those taking part in the drive and the local residents of the whaling bays and districts in accordance with a complex, traditional community sharing system.

Sport fishing, by rod and line only in brooks and streams, is only permitted from the 1st of May to the 31st of August. Fishing on Sunday is forbidden. The minimum size for all salmon and trout species is 30 centimetres or about 12 inches. Generally, fishing from the coast is always allowed. All lochs are private and in some of them anglers must produce a valid fishing permit upon request. Foreign anglers must disinfect their fishing equipment before arriving in the islands or when landed at the Vagar International Airport.

There are no wildlife officers in the islands and all fish and wildlife regulations are enforced by the local police (www.politi.fo). In the Kingdom of Denmark the Faroe Islands constitute an independent police district. The chief constable, who is known as the "landsfoged" is based in Tórshavn. There is a coast guard, also enforcing fisheries regulations, which has three ships and two helicopters. Poaching could cost a ticket of 2000

Faroese/Danish kroner (about 325 \$US) and the seizure of the gun and the boat. Seals, once hunted, are now protected. ☺

For further information on the Faroe Islands check out the following:

www.tourist.fo
www.faroeislands.com

www.visit-faroeislands.com
www.framtak.com

Local museum of natural history:

Ornithological data:

Mykines island:

Nolsoy island and naturalists' infomations:

www.ngs.fo

<http://birdingpal.org/Faeroe.htm>

<http://heima.olivant.fo/~mykines/indexgb.htm>

http://heima.olivant.fo/~jkjensen/gb_index.html



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