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<b>BIRD IDENTIFICATION</b>	One adult Thick-billed Murre in alternate plumage
<b>DATE(S) OF OBSERVATION</b>	February 19, 2022
<b>TIME OF DAY</b>	9:20 AM
<b>LOCATION</b>	Atop the dunes at Siltcoos Estuary, Lane County, looking out at the ocean.
<b>LIGHTING AND WEATHER CONDITIONS</b>	There was a light wind from the west-northwest; almost 100% cloud cover, but not heavy, creating fairly even light. It started to mist very lightly around 9:40, but was dry for the most part. At the time that the bird was observed, the sun had poked through the clouds a bit and we had slightly more light at our backs than when we arrived.
<b>DETAILS</b>	We stopped at the crest of the dunes to watch the ocean and immediately noticed quite a bit of activity. Many alcids (many COMUs, and a surprising number of RHAU) and loons, all headed north. Very few scoters, and a moderate number of gulls. No tubenoses. After about 20 minutes, a long, northbound string of approximately 30 COMU flew by right off the breakers, 250-300 meters from us. Nolan quickly scanned them, noting that approximately 75% were in alternate plumage. Toward the back of the flock a murre caught his eye. Nolan immediately alerted Joshua to its presence, but only indicated it was toward the back of the flock, and before Nolan could say it was the third bird from the back, he had already got on it. By this time, there was a bit of sun peeking through the clouds, and the light had improved – no change in the weather conditions. This bird was also in alternate plumage with full black hood, extending down through the throat; however, it was blacker than adjacent COMU, and appeared stubbier, chunkier, bulkier, and heftier. The neck was shorter, the back looked more hunched, the head was thicker, and the bill may have been broader but it was hard to tell at this distance. It flew with the same cadence as COMU.

Underwing, flank patterning, and facial features (such as a loreal stripe) were hard to distinguish with birds in flight and at a distance. It was easily discernible from the COMU in alternate plumage right behind and in front of it by structure alone; the blackness of the plumage accentuated this difference. After we viewed this bird for approximately 30 seconds we both looked up and started describing the bird without looking at field guides and other references. We noted that even though we did not see all of the field marks, what we observed was congruent with TBMU. We would have felt not nearly as solid had this bird been on its own, but adjacent to COMU of similar plumage it just stuck out and was strikingly different. The complexity of the separation of TBMU from COMU is notoriously complex, and we wanted to err on the side of caution. Following the observation we sent a WhatsApp note out and decided we could not list it as a definitive TBMU without further study. That evening we reviewed many photos of TBMU and COMU. This checklist (<https://ebird.org/checklist/S1958440>) from Alaska provides direct side-by-side comparison of TBMU and COMU in flight at a distance. These pictures verified for the us that while TBMU vs. COMU is a challenging identification, the combination of structure, plumage coloration, and presence of both species at the same time often provides enough information to come to a firm identification. We concluded that based on these pictures, and many others, in addition to our field experience, noted field marks, and decent weather and viewing conditions that the bird we saw was a TBMU. Additionally, this observation coincides with a large COMU movement, maybe the first of the season, and during a time of year when TBMU could easily be moving through. TBMU is almost certainly underreported in Oregon due to the difficulty of the identification and lack of optimal viewing settings.

**DO YOU HAVE ANY  
PRIOR  
EXPERIENCE  
WITH THIS  
SPECIES?**

Nolan has never seen TBMU, but has studied the identification fairly intensively. Joshua has seen them among flocks of COMU in Nome, AK.

**SIMILAR SPECIES**

Common Murre is really the only consideration here. Both of us have extensive experience with COMU and feel this bird was not a COMU. As previously noted, this bird appeared overall stockier, with a shorter neck and blacker plumage (compared to the dark brown of COMU); these field marks made it stand out

among COMUs of similar plumage, even at a distance. The overall gestalt of this bird seemed wrong for COMU; it wasn't nearly as stream-lined, it lack any brownish tones, and its neck was not elongated. Being able to directly compare to COMU really solidified that this bird was a TBMU for us. See above for more details as to how we separated this individual from COMU.

**DO YOU HAVE  
PHOTOS?**

No

## TBMU-2022-21 (Thick-billed Murre)

1<sup>st</sup> round vote – May 10, 2022

Accepted: 8  
Not Accepted: 1

**ACCEPTED**, sight record, single report

Thick-billed vs. Common Murre is a notoriously challenging identification. From a reviewer perspective, it is hard to be certain without photos; however, the observed field marks and general gestalt of the bird seem consistent with Thick-billed. The date of the observation also seems within the expected window of time during which Thick-billed could be seen in Oregon. I remain convinced that this bird was a Thick-billed Murre.

Two or more reports are always preferable for sight records, but the description provided in this single report seems sufficient to Accept. The observers had a direct side-by-side comparison with Common Murres and were able to instantly see the difference in color, pattern, and structure. Side-by-side in-flight comparisons may be one of the best ways to pick out Thick-billed Murre from Common Murre, as in this case. I'm not sure what to make of the white gape mark, but it certainly doesn't detract from the ID as TBMU. The structural description and darker color are consistent with this species.

This report is believable. The observers had adequate time to observe the bird and viewed it in direct comparison to Common Murres. The description of the overall structure of the bird and the fact that the bird was blacker on the back than the nearby Common Murres helps confirm the identification of the bird as a Thick-billed Murre. It would have been preferential if the observers had each submitted their own report.

Experienced observers viewed bird in good light. What bothers me is that the tomial (white cutting bill edge) was not observed or described and it should have been visible. However, observers did a good job describing the structure and coloration in direct comparison to Common Murres.

First off, I'm not sure whether to treat this a single report, since two observers have written a combined report here - two good observers lend even more credence to this observation, so maybe it should be considered a multiple observe report. While TBMU certainly poses some considerable identification challenges, this report by two very experienced and careful observers is highly convincing. Their description (in direct comparison to COMU) is very detailed and clearly points out the differences between the two species, and I feel confident in their ID.

A well written and reasoned report. It sounds as though both observers were able to see the bird in question as well as can be expected given the circumstances and distance. Most of the major differences pertaining to TBMU vs COMU in alternate plumage have been addressed, at least when viewing birds in flight at that distance. There's always going to be a fraction of doubt owing to the nature of sea watches, but this report sounds pretty solid to me.

A very nice description, which is particularly convincing to me given my similar experience with a bird in 2013. Based in part on that (admittedly anecdotal) experience, I feel that distinguishing murre species in flight is a very achievable thing when the species are side by side for direct comparison and are observed in good conditions for a reasonable period of time.

Structural features that separate TBMU from COMU described well by observers. The combination of features observed is unlikely to occur in an aberrant Common Murre or an individual from a different population than birds typically seen in the region given the differences observed in comparison with COMU

flying in the same group. The hunchbacked appearance, overall stockier appearance than the adjacent COMUs, and the thicker-looking head are all consistent with a TBMU. The observers also observed noticeably darker coloration of the upperparts, which, while not definitive by itself, lends further evidence to the identification. The one detail that gives me some pause is the fact that the bird was in full alternate plumage by mid February. While this is early, Pyle notes pre-alternate molt generally occurs February-April, so it would not discount this species. The observers were not able to observe details of the bill or the white stripe at the gape, but that is not unexpected given the inconsistent lighting conditions and distance to the birds (plus the fact this feature is less obvious on some individuals). While identification of TBMU in flight without photographic evidence is difficult and generally requires substantial evidence, I feel that both observations submitted in this round provide sufficiently detailed observations of key features in relatively good conditions for observation to confirm and accept the submissions.

**NOT ACCEPTED**

Both of these murre reports can be considered probable reports. I would need more info on bill and plumage than what fly-bys just can't confirm for Oregon.

A distant 30 second view that admittedly doesn't have all the field marks of an exceptionally rare bird in mostly bad light doesn't make for an acceptable record in my opinion.

This bird may very well have been a Thick-billed and I'm willing to be convinced it is. Currently I am troubled by the fact that the observers note that they did not see a white gape despite a relatively close observation with good lighting. In studying photos of birds in flight this feature is fairly obvious. This combined with the short duration of the observation make me lean to a no vote. This would be a good record for further discussion with the full committee.

## TBMU-2022-21 (Thick-billed Murre)

### 2<sup>nd</sup> round voting – July 16, 2022

Accepted: 9

Not Accepted: 0

ACCEPTED, sight record, single report

I continue to stick by my analysis in the 1st-round although acknowledge that neither TBMU submission this round is a slam dunk owing to the difficult nature of identifying this species in flight without photographs. Happy to discuss in 3rd round if necessary.

While I agree with those who voted against this report in the first round of voting that flyby sightings of Thick-billed Murres are difficult to evaluate, I think that the observers provided a reasonably convincing description of a Thick-billed Murre.

As with Jay's report, I remained convinced that this was a Thick-billed Murre. I appreciate the hesitancy expressed by other members, and it definitely made give both of these records a second hard look, but I think they are legitimate and will vote to accept in the second round.

I continue to believe that direct in-flight comparison with Common Murres is one of the best ways to identify Thick-billed Murre, and the description is sufficiently convincing.

As with Jay's TBMU, I believe it is possible to identify this species in flight, especially when seen in direct comparison to COMU. The description by two very careful and knowledgeable observers is fully consistent with the ID of TBMU, and I feel confident in their assessment.

Will vote to accept for reasons expressed in first-round comments.

Observers are astute and careful observers. Gestalt and comparison of TBMU was articulated. Observers stated that they did not see all of the field marks, which I took to mean specifically the white tomial edge to bill since it wasn't mentioned, but otherwise the species was adequately described.

I understand and appreciate the caution exhibited by some of the other members and alternates of the committee. In this instance however, I still feel confident enough that the bird was observed long and well enough for the observers to gain enough information to make a correct identification. I will admit that my margin of confidence has shrunk a bit, and lacking sufficient prolonged experience with sea watches myself, wonder if this is an ID challenge that can be made in the field with a high degree of confidence?

I'll accept arguments from 1st round