The Durlston Guillemots

“Hello, my name is Tufty and I am one of the Durlston Guillemots. In fact I am the most famous one. The rangers even have a birthday party in my honour. If you look on the live camera pictures I am the one with a tuft on the back of my head. I have been coming back to the cliffs for fourteen years, ever since I was old enough to breed when I was five. All together there are about four hundred of us living on the ledges along the cliffs at Durlston.

We spend the winter at sea - our favourite places being Lyme Bay, the Irish Sea, the part of the Atlantic called the Western Approaches and the Bay of Biscay. From December to late March we come and go before we claim our territory at the beginning of April. Because there are so many of us we only have $0.05m^2$, the smallest of any bird.

When we have established our territory we re-establish the bond between our mates and in late April / early May we lay our eggs. The egg is an unusual shape and is called a “pyriform” egg. This means that it is pointed at one end and is designed not to roll off the ledge. As you can imagine it is very cold on the rock and so we incubate our eggs on our feet. Both the male and female Guillemots take a turn at incubating the egg.

The egg takes about 30 days to incubate and hatches in late May / early June. Both parents take turns at feeding the chick. Our favourite food is small fish, particularly sand eels. Fish is really nutritious and the chick grows really rapidly. After about 21 days the chicks are ready to leave the nest. They can’t fly so it takes a little bit of persuasion to get them to jump the 60 feet into the sea. We make them jump at dusk as there is less chance of predators such as Peregrines and Greater Black-backed Gulls catching them.

It’s us male birds that guide the chicks out to sea while the female stays around for a few more days. After about 50 days (late July / early August) the chicks are able to fly and by early September they are able to look after themselves.

The breeding is hard work and in August and September we are flightless while we moult and get our new feathers. The young birds stay at sea for up to four years before they come back to land while the adults come back to the breeding ledges in early December and the whole cycle starts again”.