THE PUFFIN PLAN

RESTORING SEABIRDS TO EGG ROCK AND BEYOND

Stephen W. Kress & Derrick Z. Jackson

To my son Ben, who shared my love of science, oceans and the Maine coast, and to future wildlife stewards everywhere. – S.K.

To my wife Michelle Holmes, who got me into the outdoors when we dated. We've never come back indoors.– D.J.

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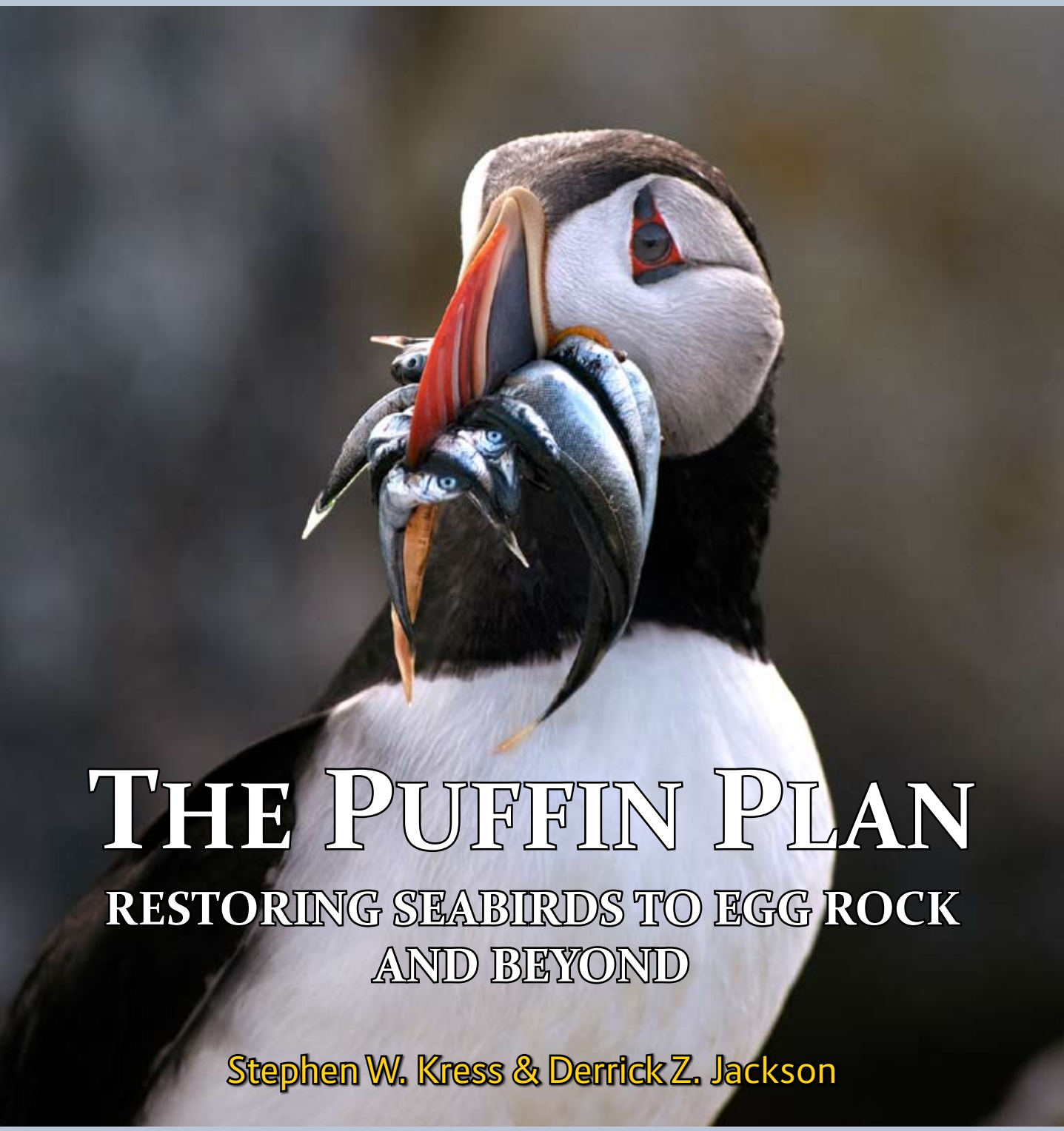

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1.

Lizard Tails and Spark Birds

I grew up in Bexley, Ohio, a cozy suburb of Columbus. The mid-1950s, my childhood years, were a time when families let ten-year-old kids romp from house to house and disappear for hours alone at neighborhood parks. My greatest passion was exploring open spaces where I had a chance to catch a frog or toad.

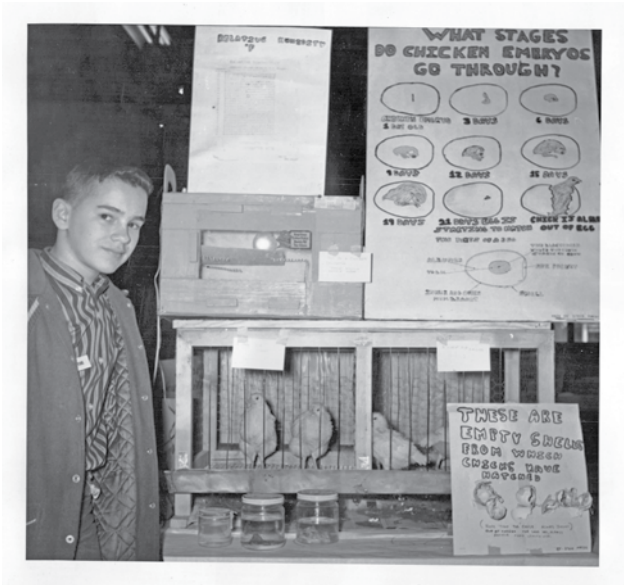
My favorite park was Blacklick Woods, in part because it was just a twenty-minute drive from my suburban home. It contained old forests and undisturbed swamps. I felt different from most of the kids at school who seemed happy playing sports or hanging out. I felt most at home outdoors.

The moist swamp forest made Blacklick Woods rich with reptiles and amphibians, like wood frogs, spring peepers, and salamanders. Even though this was a park, I explored off the trails more than on them. Only poison ivy patches limited my exploring! Every weekend, I pestered my mom, Lina, to take me there.

She often dropped me off at Blacklick with a friend, Mac Albin, a bag lunch, and a dime in my pocket to call her from the pay phone when I was ready to come home. By the time she showed up, we were usually soaked and happily exhausted from our explorations. My mom was annoyed that we soaked the cloth car seats, but to her credit, she knew our swamp jaunts were important to us and put up with the mess.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was so lucky to have a friend like Mac Albin living just down the street. Our mutual enthusiasm for nature made it all feel so normal to be outside. It didn't matter that other kids showed so little interest.

The park naturalists were our heroes. They saw that we shared their passion for nature. I found their "Junior Explorers" club more engaging than anything I was doing in school. After years of free ranging in the park woods, I wrangled a summer job cleaning cages in Blacklick's trailside museum. This led to end-of-summer gifts, including a four-foot-long rat snake and occasional raccoons or opossums that I brought home to my tolerant parents.



My 7th grade science fair project was my first science success, earning a red ribbon and membership in the Ohio Academy of Science. I used a trial and error approach to designing the homemade incubator — the beginning of a lifelong path of hands-on bird research. Photo by Herman Kress

My dad, Herman, owned a business that sold bags of all shapes and sizes. He was handy with wood working—a talent that was helpful for building cages for my ever-growing collection of frogs, snakes, and turtles. He even brought home box turtles he found on the road during his business trips to farms. All Mom asked was that I keep my "zoo" in the backyard or basement. Perhaps she took comfort from my Grandmother Anna's observation, "Don't worry — he'll outgrow it!"

While every creature, large or small, fascinated me, my favorite animal in Blacklick Woods was a lizard called the five-lined skink. To Mac and me, it was the greatest prize of all. Perhaps it was its rarity, or its speed at avoiding capture. Or perhaps it was the beautiful, neon-blue tails of young skinks.

The prize of prizes for Mac Albin and me was a sighting of a blue-tailed skink, the neon-tailed young of the five-lined skink. Photo by dwi putra stock via Shutterstock.

When we found one sunning on a stump, we would admire it for a moment, then pounce! But we rarely caught one. Skinks are food for a very long list of sharp-eyed birds, reptiles, and mammals, including herons, owls, hawks, jays, snakes, skunks, raccoons, and foxes. Only the fastest skinks survive. They also have a unique escape trick. When seized from behind by a predator, their tail may snap right off—leaving the twitching tail in the jaws of the predator... or in the hands of a frustrated boy!

Today we know that capturing wildlife, especially in parks, violates the ethics of respecting wildlife. A better way to "capture" wildlife is in a photograph. I hope children, whether in nature clubs, school trips, or scout programs, never lose the opportunity to explore in their backyards and nearby parks, because it will lead to many more adventures. Many years later, while doing college research, I learned that when children handle snakes gently and with respect, it helps to build positive feelings. Without such experiences, kids may fear snakes.

I credit my fourth-grade teacher at Montrose Elementary for sparking my interest in birds. One spring day, Mrs. Reed spotted a bird below her 2nd floor classroom window. She gathered the class around and asked, “Who can identify that brown bird pecking at the ground?” I ran to get the Golden Guide to Birds from the classroom shelf. When the robin-sized bird flew up, it flashed its white rump and yellow underwings. I found a perfect match with Yellow-shafted Flicker (now Northern Flicker). It was my first success at bird identification—my spark bird! After that, on many nights, my mom would find me, asleep, still clutching a Golden Guide.

My “spark bird” was a Northern Flicker, which I identified from the second floor of Montrose Elementary School in Columbus. Much later I learned that my birding guru, Roger Tory Peterson, also claimed the flicker as his spark bird. Photo by Helmer Nielsen.

As Mac and I entered our teens, we added birding to our list of animal adventures. At one Junior Explorer gathering, a naturalist mentioned that a local birder was willing to take kids birding with him, and he wondered if anyone in our club was interested. Of course, Mac and I leaped at this chance to explore further from home.

That birder was Irving (Irv) Kassoy. Born in Russia in 1904, Irv moved to the United States as a toddler. He was an original member of the Bronx County Bird Club, the legendary teen birding group whose members, including Roger Tory Peterson, later became ornithology leaders. Irv grew up to be a New York City jeweler and equipment supplier, but he was much more enthusiastic about birds than glittering diamonds. He was such an expert on barn owls that in 1936, the *New Yorker* magazine featured him as the "Owl Man." The article mentioned his thick eyeglasses and observed that he even looked like an owl.

By 1950, Irv sold his jewelry supply business and moved to Ohio. On weekdays, he was an upholsterer, covering furniture. On Saturdays, armed with binoculars and spotting scope, he became my birding superhero. He would arrive at my front door at dawn to pick up Mac and me as my parents slept. Off we went, looking for Rough-legged Hawks, Short-eared Owls, Barn Owls, Golden Plovers and any other birds that we found along the way. Despite his thick glasses, Irv was an amazing birder. He could spot birds miles away off the two-lane country roads that we prowled.

While other kids played sports, I tromped through corn stubble and grassy fields, counting short-eared owls. During the day, these owls roost together on the ground, so we would spread ourselves out in a long, straight line and walk across the field to flush the birds. On a good day, we would usually see 20 or more of these graceful birds.

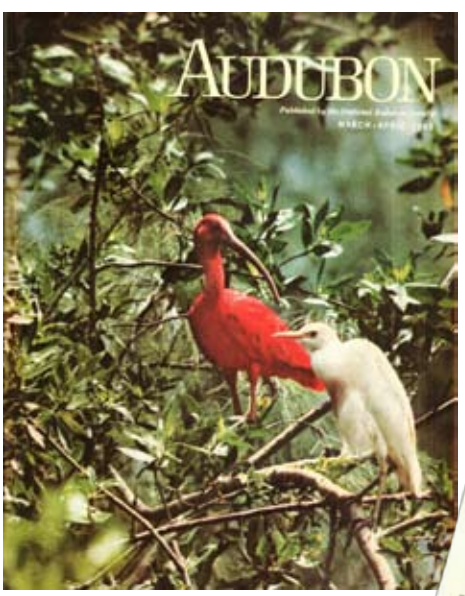
Through Irv and other mentors, I also started going to birdwatching talks. On one momentous evening, Roger Tory Peterson was the featured speaker at an Audubon Wildlife Film series. Irv introduced us. I felt as if I was at the feet of God! I was so inspired being around these birders that, even though I was only sixteen, I wanted to attend an Audubon adult summer camp in 1963. The only problem was that one had to be 18 to attend. Undaunted, I wrote letters asking if they could use an enthusiastic helper.

I heard nothing from the camps in Maine and Wisconsin, but I was shaking with excitement when a letter arrived from Duryea (Dur) Morton, then-director of Audubon's camp in Greenwich, Connecticut. CONNECTICUT! For this Ohio nature boy, the letter could have just as well come from Mars. All I could think about was that Connecticut was far from Ohio and, even better, Greenwich was near the ocean. I could have walked on air with happiness. Later, I learned that Dur Morton hired me for exactly the same job he had when Audubon first hired him: student assistant dishwasher. He eventually rose to be National Audubon's vice president for education. He liked to joke, "All good men start as dishwashers."

Dur always gathered the student assistants together before the arrival of a new group of campers for a pep talk. At one meeting, he explained that since humans were the only species capable of destroying other species, we should be caretakers of life on Earth. This was the first time I had heard of the concept of stewardship. Suddenly, I realized I

had been mistaken in catching and keeping wild animals, and I recalled those that had perished on my watch. For the first time, I started thinking less about how to make animals part of *my* environment and more about taking care of *their* environment.

Student assistants, even dishwashers, conducted nature projects of their own design. Mine focused on bullfrogs and their sounds. I noticed that every time an airplane flew over, the frogs sang. I was totally thrilled when Audubon Magazine expressed interest in my research and published it in 1964 as "Bullfrogs Sing Along with Jets." It was my first published writing, and I received a hundred dollars for it. I proudly framed the magazine's acceptance letter and hung it on my bedroom wall.




Bullfrogs Sing Along with Jets

By STEPHEN W. KRESS

My first published research paper appeared in Audubon Magazine in 1965 when I was 19. It reported on my study of nocturnal frog calls at the Greenwich Audubon Center. Photo by Stephen Kress.

After four summers of working at Audubon camps in Greenwich and Wisconsin, Dur invited me to serve as a naturalist at a community nature center in St. Andrews, New Brunswick. Although I had hoped to work that summer at the Audubon Camp in Maine on Hog Island, I quickly accepted this position because it brought me back to the coast. My job was fun — exploring tidal pools with children and teaching bird biology to adults. But I lived for the weekends, when I got to explore more remote habitats. More good luck came my way when I met Mary Majka. She came to the nature center to take my birding class and stayed on as a volunteer.

I didn't know it at the time, but Mary was to become one of Canada's most famous naturalists, likened to Rachel Carson for drawing attention to birds and conservation. Like Irv Kassoy, she shared her passion and her wheels to take me on birding adventures. It was with Mary that I first saw puffins.

One weekend I drove with her and her family down to Cutler, Maine, just over the US border. Here we met Purcell Corbett, a Maine coast seaman who used only his watch and compass for navigation. He motored us 12 miles out to Machias Seal Island, an 18-acre jumble of boulders, surrounded by waves and seaweed. The lighthouse keeper, Jack Russell, offered birders overnight lodging in his home. Jack's wife, Rita, warmed us up with seafood chowder. Then Jack took us out onto the boulders.

This was my first visit to a seabird colony, and I was dazzled. In our first moments ashore, Arctic Terns attacked us with wild screams, pecked at our heads, and shot poop our way as we walked the boardwalk to the buildings. The attacks were for a good reason—parent birds were defending their fluffy chicks, hidden in nearby patches of vegetation.

My eyes could not have been wider at my first up-close view of puffins. They were everywhere, perching atop bird blinds, buildings, and high rocks. These otherworldly creatures, with their rainbow-colored beaks, bright eyes, and tuxedo-like black and white bodies, had me hooked forever! Jack proceeded to pull an adult puffin and a chick from their rocky burrows for a closer look.

At night, we searched under the lighthouse for another incredible sight: puffin fledglings working their way toward the sea. Puffin chicks, with no guidance from parents, leave their nests by night, when they feel the time is right, and scamper to the edge of the sea.

Normally, they head for light on the horizon. But on an island with a lighthouse, the chicks sometimes become confused and march to porches and doorsteps by mistake. Jack loved to tell the story of one very dark night when the fog was so thick, he could “slice it with a knife.” Hearing a tapping at the lighthouse door, he opened the door cautiously to see who had knocked at such a late hour. At first, he saw nothing but the fog. Then he happened to glance down to see an eight-inch-tall puffin looking up at him.

I returned to St. Andrews for a second summer in 1968 and continued my weekend seabird adventures, always reaching further afield. Seabird islands were my passion.

My first puffin experiences were on Machias Seal Island, located on the Canadian/U.S. border. I stayed overnight in the lightkeeper's quarters and spent several days exploring the island during the summer of 1967. Now, Machias Seal Island supports about 5,000 pairs of puffins. Photo by Derrick Z. Jackson.

Take Action for Seabirds

Because we are connected to everything else, small actions really help. Together, we can make a big difference for seabirds!

Take action at home.

- Become educated about climate change: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's recent report (https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/) says reducing carbon emissions is necessary to keep us below a safe level of warming (1.5°C). A carbon tax can help us transition from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy sources
- Talk to your family, friends, and neighbors about why you care about seabirds and climate change.
- Encourage your family to consider energy efficiency when purchasing vehicles and household appliances such as refrigerators and freezers.
- Turn down air conditioning and heat.
- Turn off lights when leaving a room.
- Conserve water by not letting the tap run and taking shorter showers.

Reduce and recycle plastic -- most of it eventually reaches the oceans.

- Never release helium-filled party balloons (especially metallic ones). Too often they end up at sea where they can choke seabirds, marine mammals, and sea turtles.
- Avoid using single-use plastics, including straws, utensils, and bags. Bring your own bags and containers. Explain your reasons to restaurant and supermarket staff.

- Pick up and recycle plastics along roadsides, sidewalks, and parks.
- Eat sustainable seafood.
- Before buying seafood at restaurants and supermarkets, check the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program: https://www.seafoodwatch.org/ Download the app.
- At restaurants, ask your server if their seafood comes from sustainablesources.
- Look for the Marine Stewardship Council logo on seafood packaging. https://www.msc.org/home

Create bird-friendly habitats at home and in schoolyards.

- Avoid fertilizers and yard pesticides. These can poison backyard wildlife and runoff your land, eventually reaching lakes and oceans.
- Replace lawns with plantings that provide more food and cover for wildlife. Less lawn mowing also reduces air pollution.
- Plant native plants to provide food for birds and other wildlife.
- Provide nest boxes and brush piles for shelter

Encourage the adults in your life to vote for representatives that care about ocean conservation and climate change.

Join groups that advocate for birds and climate change policy such as the National Audubon Society www.audubon.org and 350.org (www.350.org).

Support seabird conservation by "adopting" a puffin. http://projectpuffin.audubon.org

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My deepest thanks go to the more than 700 “puffineers”—the young biologists that live with the seabirds on Maine Islands. Their great commitment has made every step of Project Puffin possible. I thank David Nettleship and the Canadian Wildlife Service for their collaboration and thank the staffs of the Maine Coastal Islands NWR and Maine Dept. of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife for their ongoing support. I also thank my co-author Derrick Jackson for the research, interviews and writing that he contributed to this book and thank our publisher, Penny Noyce for guiding *The Puffin Plan's* journey from vision to print. The book benefitted greatly from designer Yu-Yi Ling who merged our story with dynamic photographs donated by so many talented photographers. I am especially pleased to share the amazing travels of an Atlantic Puffin, Manx Shearwater and Arctic Terns with maps that reveal for the first time their remarkable journeys. For these, I thank Annette Fayet, Mark Baren, Linda Welch and Michael Langlois for creating seabird tracking maps. The chapter ‘The Case of the Missing Fish’ greatly benefited from the review of oceanographer, Dr. Lewis S. Incze. I also thank my wife, Elissa Wolfson and daughter Liliana Pearl Kress for reading the text and offering helpful suggestions. I look forward to more island adventures with my son Nathan and grandson Max. Their enthusiasm gives me hope for the puffin's future. — S.K.

My loving thanks go to my wife Michelle Holmes, for prodding Steve and I with hard questions to focus us on the purpose of our Project Puffin writings and to her and my youngest son Tano and his wife Clarissa for their suggestions to assure diverse voices of the next generation in this book. I of course also thank Steve for inviting me into the inner “burrows” of Project Puffin. And I owe a great debt of gratitude to my late mentor and editor, Les Payne of Newsday. He understood ahead of his time that it was important for people of color to cover environmental issues and sent me to the Eastern Egg Rock burrows for my first story on the project in 1986. Finally, I would like to thank my oldest son Omar, who as a child asked us to pick up a wounded blue jay by a biking trail in Wisconsin and cycle to a vet. I hope that is a metaphor for how the next generation will take care of a wounded planet. — D.Z.J.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

STEPHEN W. KRESS is a world-renowned ornithologist. He is the founder of Project Puffin and retired Vice President of Bird Conservation for the National Audubon Society. He is a Visiting Fellow of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

Steve Kress with puffin chick.
Photo by Derrick Z Jackson

Derrick Jackson at Eastern Egg Rock in 2015 with a puffin fledger.

DERRICK Z. JACKSON is an award-winning former columnist for the Boston Globe. An accomplished photographer, his column was a finalist for the Pulitzer prize, and his UCS blog won a 2018 first prize from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists.