

Family rescues errant puffin

By Marie Zettler
Sun Reporter

A funny thing happened to the members of a Westmeath family as they were bringing their Christmas tree home. They found a young Atlantic puffin at the roadside.

Doug Lapointe, his wife Cathie Timm, and their children, Caleb and Jeremiah, and a young friend, Sara Tomlinson, were travelling along Westmeath Township Road 7 where they live when something unusual flapped across the road in front of the car. They stopped to investigate, and in the roadside ditch found a strange-looking bird with ice caked on its wings.

They took it home and unsuccessfully pursued their bird books in an effort to identify it. They suspected that it was a puffin, but it didn't look like any of the puffins in their books, because the pictures were of adult puffins, which look quite different than the young.

Finally Cathie's aunt, Ray Grylls, who lives nearby, found a picture of an immature puffin in her bird book. He looked like the little stranger at the Lapointe-Timm house.

The bird was obviously not in good condition, and his rescuers had no idea how to help him. So they contacted Jacques Bouvier of the Pembroke Bird Club. He arranged to have the bird transported to a wild bird hospital run by Robin and Kit Chubb of Verona, north of Kingston, Ontario.

Experts speculate that the puffin was likely blown off course in high winds, or became disoriented and headed up the St. Lawrence River and later the Ottawa River instead of flying out of the Atlantic Ocean where he was supposed to winter.

Preening, a procedure whereby the bird pinches its preening gland at the base of its tail, is necessary for the bird's survival. This stimulates the secretion of a body oil which it then spreads with its bill all over its body. That's what waterproofs seafowl and allows them to bob on the surface of frigid waters, or to dive in and come up dry. Since water can't touch their skin, they are protected in this way from drowning or freezing to death.

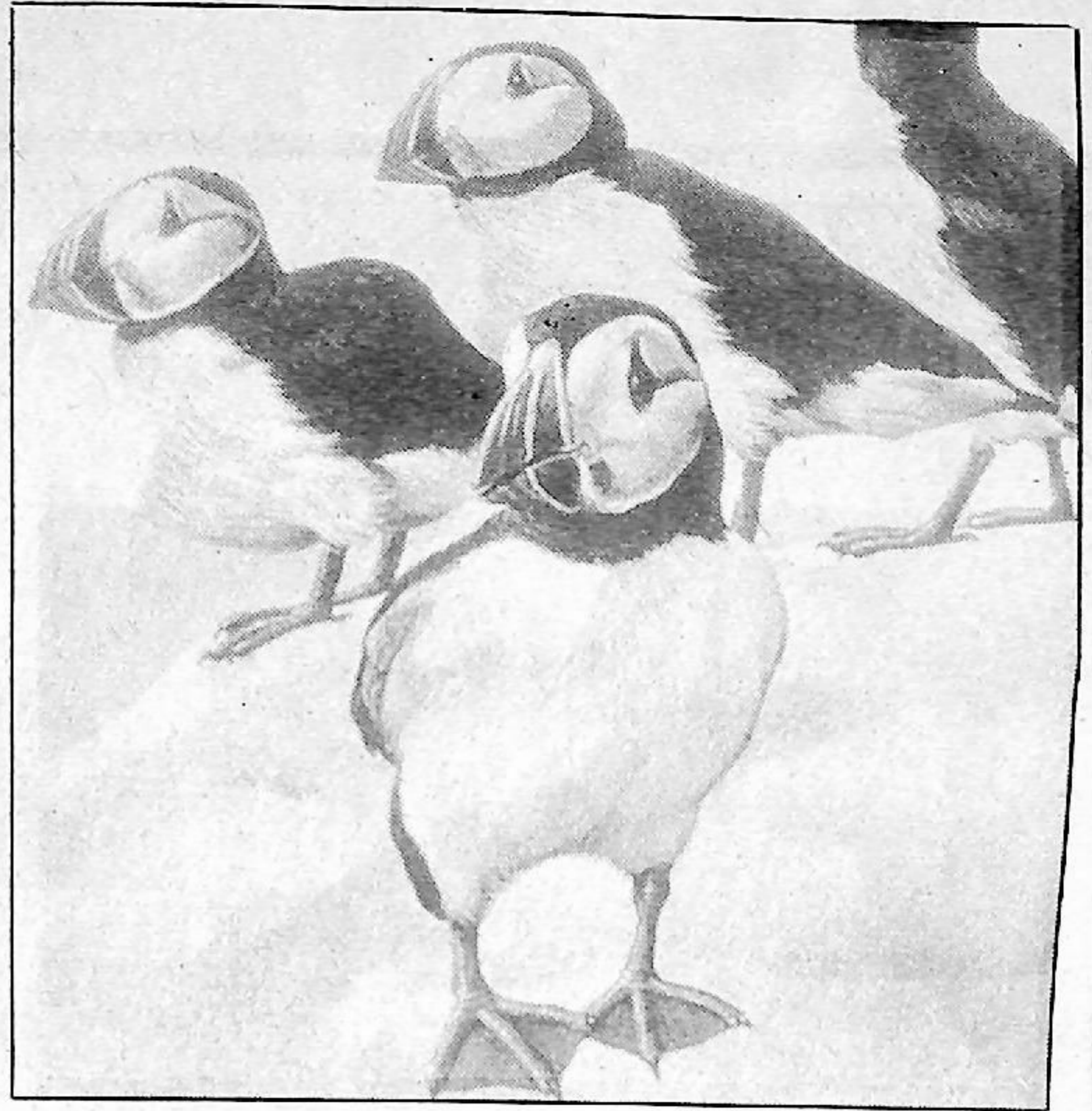
By the time the puffin was found, he was simply too pooped to preen. The protective oil was all gone, and, when placed in a laundry tub, he just sank.

The Chubbs treated the bird by dipping him frequently into water to try to revive its instincts.

The puffin was found on Sunday, December 15. Mr. Bouvier called an acquaintance, Bruce DiLabio, of Ottawa, who is a former employee of the ornithological section of the museum.

"He's probably the most active birder in this part of the country," says Mr. Bouvier. Mr. DiLabio came to Pembroke to pick up the bird and transported him to Verona the next day.

By Friday, December 20,



This picture shows what puffins look like. The unusual birds are common in Canada's north, particularly in the Atlantic region. But a Westmeath family found a young puffin along the road last week.

the Chubbs were reporting that the bird was showing some signs of preening.

Mr. Bouvier told The Sun Monday that he had had no recent progress reports on the puffin.

"But I'm sure he's doing well, because we would have heard if he wasn't," he said. "It's a question now of waiting until he has put on some weight and finding someone who is travelling to the Atlantic Ocean who can take him and release him there."

"The finding of an Atlantic puffin in this area, dead or alive, is a major ornithological event," says Mr. Bouvier. "There are probably a lot of other interesting things going through, but you need an aware and informed public

to spot them."

This is the first confirmed finding of an Atlantic puffin in Ontario. Local bird lore has it that one was shot near Ottawa in 1881 and subsequently ended up in a private collection of mounted birds. However, the specimen was lost and it cannot be confirmed that it was actually the real thing. There are other similar bird species.

Kit Chubb believes that the stray is about a year old. He's 25 centimetres long and has a small bill, a grey masked face, a black head and back, and a whitish breast.

The adult Atlantic puffin is about 33 centimetres long with a colourful orange triangular bill marked with red, yellow, and blue.