

Yellowlegs Tries Life on the Rocks

NOTES: This skit was created for Ocean Horizons 1985, a residential environmental education camp for youth 11-15 in Newfoundland, Canada. It was originally part of an evening program on seabirds and shorebirds in August 1985. Costume and rehearsal time was three hours; this ease of production makes the skit suitable for groups without access to elaborate materials. The greater yellowlegs' lines were largely improvised, the seabirds' scripted in advance. The order of the characters is random, with the yellowlegs approaching each in turn. All parts can be played by men or women with minimal alteration; each character should be encouraged to develop distinctive mannerisms and style.

The skit served as the lead-in to a field trip to Cape St. Mary's Seabird Sanctuary on the south coast of Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula. As with its predecessor skit, *The Intertidal Zone*, campers enjoyed identifying the birds they saw by equating them with their instructors' characters.

CAST: Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*), Razor-Billed Auk (*Alca torda*, tinker), Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*, hatchet-face), Northern Gannet (*Sula bassanus*), Thick-Billed Murre (*Uria lomvia*, turr), Double-Crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*, shag), Black-Legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*, tickleace),

COSTUMES are best improvised from local materials. The OH costumes consisted of large foam beaks that tied on the face or masks that fit over the head; construction-paper feet, shorts and tights in appropriate colors (yellow, red, black or white); and "wings" made from plastic garbage bags or sheets. Peterson's Field Guide to The Birds was consulted for the specific field markings of each bird. The costumes should be as simple and distinctive as possible.

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NARRATOR: Close your eyes, and travel with me to a peaceful bog pond deep in the forest. Sedges carpet the spruce-lined banks, and the shorebirds feast elegantly on fine worms and insects. But all is not gourmet dining in the land of Mr. and Mrs. Yellowlegs.

YELLOWLEGS (offstage): I've had it! One more slimy worm in this poky little pond and I'll...I'll...go cuckoo! Mud, mud, mud, that's all we ever talk about—mud and nesting sticks. And if I spend one more season cooped up in that tuft of sedges YOU call a nest, I'll start cracking more than snail shells. I'm OUT!
YELLOWLEGS enters, a real Valley Girl. She has a high ponytail, a sun suit, sunglasses and a beach bag, and a strong nasal whine.)

YELLOWLEGS: (chewing gum) Forget it. Just forget it. I am NOT spending my life in the middle of a spooky forest listening to owls and waiting to get jumped by who knows what. I'm not gonna splash around in the shallows until I'm too old to lay eggs—I'm gonna fly, gonna see the world! Tropical beaches, desert sands, tall, dark and handsome men in tuxedo suits—which way is the ocean? I'm headed for deep water!

YELLOWLEGS: (to RAZOR-BILLED AUK) Oh! Oh my! Who are YOU? Are you some kind of a hawk? (aside) He sure has the beak for it! And that tux—what is this place, a casino? Now we're talking!

RAZORBILL: My dear shorebird, don't stand there and gawk!
One would think that you'd gone into shock.
Since you ask, I'm no hawk (my, you're far from your flock!)
I'm an alcid, the Razor-Billed Auk.
I must tell you, our family tree
Is as blue-blooded as it can be.
But our highest degree is extinct, don't you see—
(The Great Auk's no more. (I'm not he.)
We build nests in the lee of a rock
So our young ones don't fall when they walk.
For we can't have them squawk, or drop off of the block
And we haven't got front doors that lock.
(If you wish, you may live just like me
In a penthouse nook over the sea.
You need pay no fee, just drop in for some tea—
Providing your fine pedigree.

YELLOWLEGS: You mean—wow, a penthouse! This is the life! Check it out, man!

RAZORBILL: Ahem, ahem. Miss.....

YELLOWLEGS: Yellowlegs. Greater Yellowlegs. But my friends call me "Legs."

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- RAZORBILL: Are you related to the Lesser Yellowlegs, by any chance?
- YELLOWLEGS: Well, uh, sort of. I mean, we're kind of like cousins. But I've left all that behind now—I'm free as a bird!
- RAZORBILL: Ahem, yes, well, a SHORE bird. I'm afraid we're not set up to handle your kind of people here. You wouldn't find the accommodations at all what you're used to. Good day. (aside, with a shudder) Worms for breakfast, most likely! Ugh!
- YELLOWLEGS: Old stuffed shirt. But here's another one in formal dress—oops! Must be the entertainment, with that nose! Who are you? And can you tell me the way to the nearest restaurant?
- PUFFIN: I'm a "hatchet-face," or just a puffin
Atlantic-style. When I got nuffin'
To eat for my dinner, I start getting thinner
'Til my beak with small fish I start stuffin'.
In my beak of bright blue, red and yellow
I'm a most unmistakable fellow.
White shirtfront, with a back
Head and tails basic black
I've a costume distinguished but mellow.
I travel far out on the ocean
Tracking capelin by wind and wave motion.
In the summer I burrow
Down deep in a furrow
(There to nest far away from commotion.
So if you've a heart that's romantic
And a yen for the cold North Atlantic
Come and tunnel with me
And live far out to sea
Far away from the dull and pedantic.
- YELLOWLEGS: Yeah, you mean ol' tinker-toes over there. Hey, cutie, you're something else!
- PUFFIN: And so are you, my dear. Have a fish. (Pulls aluminum-foil capelin out of beak)
- YELLOWLEGS: Why, thank you! (gulps and chokes) Ptooey!
- HPUFFIN: Won't you join me for dinner? And perhaps an extended vacation?
- YELLOWLEGS: Uh, thanks, but, um, not right now. Maybe later? But I dunno about all this burrow stuff. Sounds like mudpie time to me. I'm just looking for a place to crash, no strings attached; just for awhile, y'know, 'til I get my bearings. I'm new in town!
- GANNET: Hey, sister, what's happening? Give old clown-face the bird and c'mon with me!
- YELLOWLEGS: Who are you?

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- GANNET: Like wow, man! This cool cat's a species of gannet.
The books say "pelagic;" my friends call me Janet.
We all like to hang out way out on the ocean—
We groove to the waves and get into the motion.
We take the big plunge when we dive with our goggles
Binocular vision AND depth! The mind boggles.
We just fold up our wings and shoot down to the herring;
Do lunch on the run on the way up! How daring.
I've got my own pad on the rocks with my fellow w
We look like we're made for each other—both yellow.
I just can't dig the predators out on the meat racks
(You know, sandy beaches.) Give me the safe seastacks.
So, you wanna split from the bog scene? I saw some
Great real estate here. Check it out, man—it's awesome!
- YELLOWLEGS: Yeah, to the max. What's with those guys in the spiffy suits?
- GANNET: Ah, them. Alcids, the lot of 'em; some of them hung up on name-
dropping, some just hopeless romantics. They've been around here
forever; claim to be the first settlers, and all that stuff. You'll meet
more of 'em, too, but don't let 'em lay their trip on you. They're just
jealous of anybody with a long neck.
- YELLOWLEGS: So, you got a space at your pad?
- GANNET: Aw, honey, wish I could; but you know this real estate scene is
getting tighter by the day. We got what you might call "condos"
here; everybody owns their little piece of the Rock and nobody else
gets an in. But ya wanna go dive for some fish?
- YELLOWLEGS: Um, well, I'm not so sure. I didn't bring my goggles along.
- GANNET: Bummer! Well, be seeing you!
- YELLOWLEGS: Man, oh man! This place is totally awesome! Life in the big city!
There must be thousands of them! I wonder where they all eat. (to
MURRE) 'Scuse me, who are you? And can you tell me where I
can find a good hotel?
- MURRE: In Newfoundland the fellers call me "turr"
But really I'm a species called a murre.
You can tell me by my thick bill
And the way my downy chick will
(Cotton to me like a downy ball of fur.
I'm an alcid too, related to the auk
But I prefer to swim instead of walk.
When I dive below the surface
My long ribcage shows its purpose
For it keeps me full of air so I can stalk.
I can open up my wings while underwater
As well as in the air like when I oughter.

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Both for flight and swimming size
They're the perfect compromise—
I think I'll pass them on down to my daughter.
If you'd like to leave your bog pond and your sedges
Come and join us on our seastacks and cliff ledges.
But you'll have to lay your egg
Kind of pointed like a peg
So it rolls in rings and won't fall off the edges.

.YELLOWLEGS: Yeah, well, I'm not into the egg-laying scene right now. So, you're another one of those alcid types, huh? Well, so long. (aside)
Family, family, family! Just what I came here to get away from!
(spies CORMORANT) Now here's a laid-back kind of a guy. What's with you, man? What's happening?

CORMORANT: The common cormorant, or shag
When perched on rocks above a crag
Can commonly be seen with wing
And feathers outspread—proper t'ing!
I'm not your basic greasy bum
or drifter, even though me t'umb
Points backwards on me webby foot
And all me clothes are black as soot.
I've got no oil in me glands
To grease me feathers when I lands
And keep me dry like other birds
Who dive for fish in flocks and herds.
I have to dry 'em in the breeze
And so I sometimes nest in trees.
But I still eat fish just like my mom ate
And I've got her feet—they're totipalmate.
To live with us you just relax—
Eat fish, hang out on rocks and stacks!

YELLOWLEGS: Sounds great! What's for lunch?

CORMORANT: Fish, natch. So, midear, are you staying with us?

YELLOWLEGS: Um, not exactly, but thanks anyway. (aside) Another fish-eater!
With weird feet, yet. Oh, who's this?

KITTIWAKE: Kitti-wa-a-ake! Kitti-wa-a-ake! Well, I'm really a gull
But I'm not like those scavenger chaps.
You know the ones: herring, or black-backed. How dull!
To be circling fish boats for scraps.
I'd rather be sailing far off the Grand Banks
With the spindrift and fog at my back
And before me, a great school of small silver fish
For the diving. There's nothing I lack!

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Except for a mate and a family, of course.
For that I return to the cliffs.
In great flocks of ten thousand or more we will nest
Bringing mud, fluff and straw home in shifts.
So, if you'd care to join us, just dust off a ledge
And set up a nook for your things.
We'll be leaving in August to head for the Banks;
I hope you've a strong pair of wings!

[YELLOWLEGS: Will you be stopping at any ponds along the way? I don't think I can eat fish.

KITTIWAKE: Ponds? There's no ponds on the Grand Banks, midear. Waves and whitecaps, clouds and capelin. It's the life!

*YELLOWLEGS: How long do you stay out for?

KITTIWAKE: The winter long. This is just a summer place here, you know—we live out there on the ocean.

YELLOWLEGS: On an island or something?

KITTIWAKE: No, no, silly goose! On the wing! or on the water.

WYELLOWLEGS: But...but...I can't swim. And I'm not a goose! I'm a greater yellowlegs.

GANNET: Oh, so that explains it. What would you do with those great gawky long legs in a plunge dive?

YELLOWLEGS: Well, we don't have to plunge dive to hunt for snails and worms.

RAZOR-BILL: Snails as well as worms! Worse than I thought.

YELLOWLEGS: Yeah? Well, they're better than old slimy fish!

PUFFIN: I'm deeply hurt. My best capelin, no expense spared!

MURRE: And she wasn't even eating them to feed her family!

CORMORANT: Midear, p'raps you'd best be heading back to harbor wit' you.

YELLOWLEGS: Yeah, I guess you're right! It was nice meeting you! (aside) Even if you do all smell a little fishy! 'Bye! (flaps off; seabirds roost)

YELLOWLEGS (offstage): Honey? I'm home! Ooh, escargots for dinner! My favorite! (lights out)