NESTING ON AÑO NUEVO ISLAND
THE IMPORTANCE OF CERAMIC NEST MODULES
What is a home? For Rhinoceros Auklets and Cassin’s Auklets - two small seabirds - it can be an underground burrow on windy, lonely Año Nuevo Island. It can also be an artificial nest placed there by researchers. Both locations yield eggs; both yield a future. But one may be more secure than the other.
These illustrations show intimate moments in the lives of auklets on the island, particularly around their new homes, and explore the importance of ingenuity in conservation.

Currently, Oikonos and many programs the world over are working to protect seabirds.
The Island
Año Nuevo Island is a tiny island a kilometer off the coast of California. It sits in the center of Año Nuevo Bay, surrounded by chilly waters that support seabirds, sea otters, elephant seals, and California sea lions. Kelp lines its rocky shores. Buildings from a historic light house station are now Oikonos' base of field operations.
A Rhinoceros Auklet alongside salt grass blooms. Rhinoceros Auklets, are dark grey, football-shaped auklets about the size of a crow. They are a close relative of puffins. Rhinoceros Auklets spend their days at sea diving for fish. At night, they return to Año Nuevo Island to rest and feed their chicks. They are resilient birds.
Two Rhinoceros Auklets lounging by a ceramic nest module. Año Nuevo Island is one of only three breeding colonies of Rhinoceros Auklets in California. Oil spills, fragile soil, and sea lions trampling across the island have threatened their habitat. Still, with help from researchers, they have prevailed.
A nesting module designed for Rhinoceros Auklets. These modules are sculpted from clay, painted with ceramic glaze, and fired in a kiln. Then they are transported to the island by boat and buried in opportune spaces. These tough modules keep auklets safe from erosion and meandering sea lions.
An adult Western Gull. Western Gulls are large gulls with white and grey plumage that live only on North America's Pacific coast. Western Gulls breed in a raucous colony of about six hundred nests on Año Nuevo Island’s beaches and cliffs. Auklets have evolved to nest underground mainly to avoid their predatory gull neighbors.
A Cassin’s Auklet sitting on a module porch. Cassin’s Auklets are blue-grey auklets the size and shape of a plump Robin. They are the smallest auklet on the island, and they live alongside Rhinoceros Auklets in shorter earthen burrows and clay nest modules.
A Rhinoceros Auklet standing on top of an unglazed module. Research cameras have spotted auklets standing upright, spreading their wings, and hissing in territorial displays around their burrows. They have also seen auklet couples also bumping each other’s bills in greeting.
A Cassin’s Auklet chick peering out of a module. Cassin’s Auklet nest modules are designed with “baffle,” or a wall inside the module’s tunnel that has a smaller entrance in it. This prevents larger birds, like Rhinoceros Auklets, and predators, like Western Gulls, from entering their nests.
A Cassin chick’s perspective from inside a nest module and behind a baffle wall.

Baffle walls are a secondary wall inside the tunnel that order to protect them from predators and give the birds a safe place to look out from the nest entrance.

Designs of ceramic nest modules are adjusted for the needs of each species of seabird.
A Market Squid, a juvenile Short Belly Rockfish, and a Northern Anchovy. All of these fish are favorite foods for Rhinoceros Auklets. During breeding season, adult auklets catch and deliver prey to waiting chicks. The amount of fish an auklet brings back in their beak is called a “bill-load.”
A Rhinoceros Auklet feeding its chick inside a nest module.

Auklet chicks, like their parents, are fish eaters. Both the mother and father will bring back fresh fishes for their chick. The chick lives in the burrow, cared for by its parents.

After six weeks, the chick will be ready to go to sea and take on the world as an adult auklet.
Cuttings of coastal bush lupine, salt grass, and yarrow. These native plants provide barren Año Nuevo Island with a splash of color. They were all planted during efforts to enhance and restore habitat for auklets at the island.
Oikonos is a nonprofit organization that works to conserve and restore imperiled seabird habitats. We work with diverse communities worldwide through scientific and artistic collaborations. Since 2010, we have worked with California College of the Arts and ceramicist Nathan Lynch to create ceramic nest modules for seabirds in California and Hawaii. You can find us at www.oikonos.org.