



The First Journey of
Ari
the Mediterranean Shag

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Illustrations Kristina Krhin



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Two young Mediterranean Shags, Ari and Šime, sat on a remote islet in the middle of the sea. They were talking and watching their nest friends fooling around in the water.

"Today mom and dad said that I've grown into a big boy and that starting tomorrow, they won't be bringing me food anymore. I'll start taking care of myself," Ari said proudly.

"But are you really big enough to be on your own?" Ari's younger friend Šime asked doubtfully.

"I'm three and a half months old! I'm big enough to fly to the shallow sea in the North, about which the older ones always talk. There are schools of fish there, easy to catch. The young ones go there to gain fishing experience and our parents go there when they want an easy meal," Ari explained to his uninformed friend. "I'm flying there tomorrow."





"I'm going to miss my family and our village. My mom and dad really took great care of me and my two sisters. We hatched around New Year's Day, I was the first, and I remember our parents had those silly crests on their heads back then," Ari said dreamingly, remembering his early days. Šime remained silent and let Ari relive the memories.

The next morning Ari really did leave his home rock in the Kornati islands and went to fly above the open sea. When his eye caught a school of fish, the inexperienced youth flashed towards it into the depths of the sea, but they were too fast for him. He flew to a nearby islet and spread his wings to dry up.



"Oh, I'm so hungry," Ari moaned in desperation, when a seagull named Ante flew by and noticed the gloomy bird. He sat beside him and asked: "What's the deal with you?"

"I'm just so very tired and so, so very hungry," Ari lamented.

"Ah, but that's not really a problem! Come with me and I'll show you where you can get a nice big meal."

Ari followed Ante, but he was surprised to discover that they were flying towards mainland. "Why are we flying away from the sea?" he wondered out loud.

"Don't be so impatient, we'll find food in a heartbeat," Ante replied sulkily.

They landed in a huge garbage dump, filled with other seagulls. One of them, a seagull named Nedeljko, noticed them and jokingly said: "Ante, dude, dig up your food." Ante knew Nedeljko and his provoking nature well, so he simply ignored him and started gorging himself with food. "Come on, try it, it's really good," he said with his mouth full.

"Yuck, how can you eat this, it's gross!" Ari exclaimed. He was used to eating freshly caught fish, not garbage, so he quickly flew back to the sea. "Fine, stay hungry then!" Ante cried after him and went back to feasting.



Ari returned to the sea, continuing his journey north, when he noticed a giant fish gliding through the waves.

"Hello, who are you?" he asked.

"Well hello birdie. My name is Makarena and I'm a tuna fish," Makarena answered.

"I've never met a fish so big," Ante said admiringly.

"Tuna are a very big species of fish and we're very good swimmers. We're even faster than dolphins," Makarena bragged. "What about you, who are you and where are you heading?" she asked.

"My name is Aristotle, after my grandfather who hatched somewhere near the Greek coast. My friends and family call me Ari. I'm flying towards the

north for the first time, because they say that the waters there are shallow and the fish are plenty," Ari said.

"I don't have anything to eat here either. The smaller fish, which are my main food source, are getting scarcer and scarcer. If only the fishermen weren't here. Not only do they catch so much of our food, but many of my friends and relatives finish in their nets as well. Do people hunt your kind too?"

"I don't think so," Ari said.

"You're lucky then," Makarena replied and rushed away.

"I hope those fishermen don't get you!" he cried after her, but she was already too far away to hear him.



Ari was carefully examining the water in the vicinity of island Cres for some fish to eat, when suddenly a big animal swam to the surface.

"Hello!" he greeted. "Miss Fish, can you please tell me how deep the sea is here?"

"Hello! It's true that I swim under water, but that doesn't make me a fish," the strange animal kindly answered. "I'm a Mediterranean Monk Seal named Ane. But it's not surprising that you don't know me, since I have no friends or relatives around here."

"How come you don't have any friends?" little Ari asked curiously.

"Human avarice! My kind used to hunt for food in these waters, but as we did so, we unintentionally ripped the fishing nets that the fishermen placed here. So they started shooting us."

Ari was speechless.

"Oh, that's right, you asked me about the depth of the sea. It's pretty deep, but I wish it were deeper. It's easier for me to catch octopuses, squids and different fishes where the sea is deeper."

"Easier for you, but not for me," Ari said in a disappointed voice. "That's why I'm flying towards the north you see. The sea there is supposed to be shallower, which makes hunting less tiring. But I really shouldn't waste any more time, I'm very hungry. Good luck to you!" Ari said to his new friend.

"I wish you a pleasant journey," Ane cried after him and then disappeared into the watery depths.





He flew on. When he got tired he landed on the calm surface of the sea and let it cradle him gently. Suddenly, he noticed a school of anchovies and darted after them, determined to catch them. When he finally managed to catch a few, he was startled by a big sea turtle that appeared in front of him.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he apologized. "I was so hungry that I lost my head for a moment when I saw the anchovies, and nearly bumped into you."

"Don't worry about it kiddo. Just be careful you don't fly in the wrong

direction. If you're looking for fish, they're swimming there, to the north," the young Loggerhead Sea Turtle named Zehra advised him. "I've just come from there, it's a place filled with tasty sea creatures. I learned how to dive, eat slugs, seashells, crabs and other things right there, in a shallow bay. But now I'm going home, to Turkey. It's going to be a long journey for me, but you should be where you're heading in no time, as long as you continue in the right direction. Good luck!" Zehra said.

"Thanks for the advice. I wish you a safe journey back home," Ari said and then they went their separate ways.



Exhausted, Ari finally reached the place with plenty of fish. He caught several and ate until he was completely full. Then, as night was descending, he looked for a nice rock near the coast on which he would rest. He was very happy because he finally reached his destination and had a full belly. He closed his eyes, but soon something woke him up. There were noises coming from the grass nearby and when he turned to see what caused them, he saw a fox crawling towards him. He flew away in the nick of time, heading back to the sea. With the help of the moonlight he managed to make out outlines of several different islets and, breathless, landed on one of them.

"Uh-oh, what scared you so much?" a voice from the neighbouring islet asked. It belonged to a Mediterranean Shag named Ivez.

"Oh-uh, hello, uh, uh, I just escaped uh, uh, in the last moment, uh, uh, from the giant beast there on the shore. Uh, uh, it was trying to eat me!" Ari said, breathing shallowly.

"Hmh, so you're new here, huh?" his neighbour asked.

"Yes, I flew here today and I'm really glad I ran into you. Name's Ari," Ari replied.

"I thought you looked a bit green. Beware of the shore; it's not a good place for a rest, especially during the night. That's when foxes, martens and such hunt for inexperienced little birds like you. So it's better to spend the night on these buoys," his new friend said and continued: "My name's Ivez and I too am glad that there are more of our kind here every day."

"These are buoys? I thought they were islets!" Ari said in amazement.

"Yes, these are floating buoys all right. They're held together by ropes and nets, on which seashells attach themselves.

It's a perfect place for a rest and the food is right next to your beak."

This late night conversation made Ivez tired, so he wished Ari good night and closed his eyes. Ari did the same and soon the two were sleeping peacefully.





Ari spent the winter in the Slovenian sea, sleeping on the buoys near the city of Strunjan. He met a lot of new friends during that time; one of them was Sven, a Black-throated Diver. They hunted for fish together and talked a lot. But one day, as the sun grew warmer, Sven said to Ari: "My dear friend, we need to say goodbye. I'm leaving on a long journey tomorrow."

"You're leaving? On a long journey?" Ari was so surprised that he forgot to close his beak.

"Yes Ari. I'm just a winter guest here. I'm going home tomorrow," Sven answered.

"Where are you from?" Ari asked curiously.

"I come from far away in the north. When I arrive back home, I'll swap my winter clothes for a shiny breeding plumage. I need to look my best this year and sing with my best voice, because I intend to find a wife, one that will be with me until the end," Sven explained dreamily.

"I'll miss you," Ari said, touched.

"I've become very attached to you as well, my dear friend. But we need to go our separate ways. But we might see each other again next year. We'll have a lot of catching up to do," Sven tried to find some comforting words, but he was sad as well.





As the next morning arrived, Ari noticed that the sun really was warmer than before. He and Sven said their goodbyes and promised to meet each other again next year in Strunjan. When Sven flew away, Ari spent a long time staring into the sky.

His other friends woke him from his contemplation. They invited him to go fishing along with them, so he joined them on the open sea and they spent the day together.

Ari stayed with the other Mediterranean Shags for a while longer, roving who knows where. But when his brown feathers turned into shiny black and green ones, the time came for Ari to return back home, to the Kornati islands. He became a dad there..





The Mediterranean Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis desmarestii*) is a seabird that doesn't nest in Slovenia, but gathers in the Slovenian sea in the period after nesting, from the late spring on. Some of the younger ones, however, stay there throughout the year. The closest nesting colonies can be found in the islands of Brioni, Kvarner and the Central Adriatic Sea. Over 1,500 individual birds, roughly 11 percent of the entire population, come to the group resting places in Sečovlje, Strunjan and Debeli rtič. For safety reasons the birds spend their nights on buoys, but during the day they go fishing out

on the open sea, where they spend most of their days. The population of the Mediterranean Shag is relatively small and in decline due to a number of factors that threaten the existence of this bird: human disturbance, mostly of nesting colonies; sea pollution by oil spills; loss of habitat; unintentional capture; excessive fishing; chemical pollution, and poaching. Moreover, the birds have to evade their predators and compete with other species for food. All these factors have contributed to the fact that the Mediterranean Shag is now included in the list of priority protection species.

Photo: Tone Trebar
(www.naturephoto-tone.com)



The Atlantic Bluefin Tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) is a sea fish that can swim as fast as 70 km/h. It's widely spread across the Adriatic Sea, but due to excessive fishing it is now an endangered species.

Photo: Polona Kotnjek (društvo Morigenos)



Like most **Yellow-legged Gulls** in Dalmatia, the Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus michahellis*) Ante, whom Ari meets, hatched on inaccessible cliffs in the middle of the Adriatic Sea.

Photo: Tomi Trilar



Forty years ago **Mediterranean Monk Seals** (*Monachus monachus*) lived in the vicinity of the southern Dalmatian islands. The formerly numerous population was driven to the edge of extinction because they were hunted ruthlessly and their food was scarce. Another problem they faced was the noise caused by tourism. Some individual specimens have, however, been spotted in the vicinity of Istra and island Cres, which shows that all is not lost.

Photo: Matthias Schnellmann



The Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*) is an endangered species of the Mediterranean. It lays its eggs on the sand beaches of Greece, Cyprus and Turkey, while the Northern Adriatic presents one of the species' two most important feeding grounds. The sea turtle can mostly be seen in Slovenian waters during April and November, when the weather is warm.

Photo: Brian Gratwicke (Wikipedia)



Sven is a **Black-throated Diver** (*Gavia arctica*), who came to the Slovenian sea to spend the winter. Come spring, he will fly back to Sweden, where he had hatched.

Photo: Kajetan Kravos



