



THE MURRELET'S SECRET

Viola L. Anderson

Photographs by William Anderson

WE WATCHED a dark robin-sized bird from the rail of a sportfishing boat in Monterey Bay, California. It rose slowly to the crest of a rolling swell and disappeared into the trough. All binoculars were focused on the spot. Now the bird appeared again and there was no doubt—a marbled murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratum*) in breeding plumage. The swell leveled and the short-necked alcid rode high with bill and tail cocked at perky angles. Well named, the chubby sea bird displayed a dark back variegated with chestnut-brown resembling two-toned dark marble. The underparts were white, mottled with plumbeous. Male or female? It was impossible to tell. The sexes are identical in color. Perhaps the boat was too close for comfort. Without warning, the bird tilted its head down, spread its small narrow wings, and dove. Characteristic of the family, the wing tips and end of the tail formed a diminutive triangle on the surface after the body submerged. Unlike loons and grebes, all members of the alcid family use their wings and actually fly through the water when evading danger or pursuing food. Seconds later, the marbled murrelet surfaced and continued in a wavering flight over the waves toward the open sea.

The marbled murrelet is not uncommon at any season in Monterey Bay but wherever found, it is a bird of intense interest. Of all our bird species, this is the only one which has been able to keep its North American nesting site a secret.

As one travels north along our west coast, the number of marbled murrelets encountered is augmented. All summer the sprinkling of these

little alcid in breeding plumage becomes increasingly noticeable along the shores of Oregon and Washington. They are common the length of the British Columbia coast. And, in many localities, this is the most abundant sea bird in Alaskan waters. They spend their lives on the water and leave only to nest.

Where have these thousands of pelagic birds nested? How have they been able to keep these sites undiscovered throughout the ages? Records of the search for the nest of the marbled murrelet date back to 1842. All islands and rocky promontories where its relatives nest have been explored again and again. A female was collected by George G. Cantwell in Alaskan waters in May of 1897. She carried an egg ready to be laid. It was cylindrical-ovate in shape and pale greenish-yellow in color, peppered all over with blackish-brown spots. Since then, other females with well-developed eggs have been taken. Their destinations are unknown.

According to *Birds of Alaska*, Mr. and Mrs. Stanton Warburton, Jr., and Earl R. Osborn reported finding a marbled murrelet's nest on June 13, 1931, while checking bird habitats in Alaska. It was in a rock slide high above the timberline on Mt. Doolth, Chichagof Island. A single egg rested on a mossy setting within a rocky cavity. This record, however, has been seriously questioned by Vaurie (*The Birds of the Palearctic Fauna*). The nest probably belonged to a different species.

Throughout the years, these little sea fowl have been observed flying inland at locations south of Alaska. They followed streams into

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dense forests. An immature, not able to fly, was picked up on the rain-soaked floor of an Oregon forest twenty-five miles from the ocean in September 1918. Small flocks of from three to fifteen birds have been reported circling and crying through the foggy tree tops in the coastal redwood belt in California. These occasions were usually at dawn or dusk. And, on June 15, 1957, a fledgling marbled murrelet was brought to the naturalist in Portola State Park. The bird was found floating on Pescadero Creek. The location is in the Santa Cruz Mountains about forty-five miles south of San Francisco and ten air-miles from the Pacific. This habitat, like others where young birds were reported during the breeding season, did not remotely resemble a rock slide above timberline.

If the marbled murrelet follows the pattern of certain other murrelets, it will nest in a burrow or other ground crevice, and mates will exchange places during the night. With this thought in mind, a team of naturalists explored the Portola State Park area. They camped along Pescadero Creek, hoping the tangle edging the bank might harbor a nesting burrow. They listened every night for a call that could reveal a change of guard at a nest. The search was fruitless.

On August 18, 1960, an immature marbled murrelet was picked up in campground 'A' in Big Basin State Park. This park is on the opposite side of the Butano range and directly south of Portola State Park. Unlike any previous record, this young bird was not found in or near water. Redwoods towered above the ground. Bloom Creek, bounding

the campground on the south, is a dry pebbly bed during the summer.

Could the parents have nested in a hole high in a tree? This would be most unalcid-like. The team of naturalists conferred. They recalled that the nests of wood ducks are usually built in natural hollows in the trunks or rotted-out limbs of old trees—occasionally in woodpeckers' holes. This is certainly unducklike. With renewed hope the curious naturalists visited the park. There were dozens of possible nesting trees—each at least two hundred feet tall! By chance, some lumberman could untangle the riddle. Always a negative shake of the head. Their interest was strictly in processing wood.

There is a legend regarding an Indian in the deep coastal forest who depicted a crude nest on a redwood bough. A chubby bird with an uptilted bill perched nearby. Only the wildest flights of imagination could conjure up such an idea. However, the Bonaparte's gull fashions a pigeon-type nest in the spruce-fir forests of the far north. Did an Indian actually observe such a scene or was it a fabrication of his imagination—or just a case of unfounded folklore?

The search continues. The National Audubon Society has gone so far as to offer a prize of \$100 to the person who finds and properly documents the first North American nest of the Marbled Murrelet (Audubon Field Notes 24:654). As Ralph Hoffmann wrote in *Birds of the Pacific States* almost half a century ago, "Someone has a tremendous thrill before him when he first takes a marbled murrelet off her eggs."

