

First Photographic record of Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin

Introduction

The Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*) is a species of alcid that has a range that is confined to eastern Asia breeding from the Kamchatka Peninsula south along the coastal regions of the Sea of Okhotsk south to Sakhalin Island and the adjacent coastline of Russia in the northern Sea of Japan, to northern Japan on Hokkaido Island and along the Kuril Islands (Gaston and Jones 1998) (Brazil 2009). The winter range of Long-billed Murrelet is poorly known but it is known to winter in the Sea of Japan in the waters around northern Japan (Gaston and Jones 1998). It is suspected of occurring on the coastline north of Kamchatka Peninsula in the Bering Sea in the breeding season but is as yet not been proven (Gaston and Jones 1998). The Long-billed Murrelet is not known to breed in the Aleutian Islands and it is the closely related Marbled Murrelet that is known to breed in the western Aleutian Islands and is suspected to breed on Attu Island (Gaston and Jones 1998). There have been Murrelets found on the nearby Commander Islands but these have not been clearly identified to species (Gaston and Jones 1998). On June 10, 2007 while sea watching at Sheringham Lighthouse in Shirley Louis Haviland and I discovered a Long-billed Murrelet (Toochin 2012b). Though obtaining digital pictures is difficult while sea watching, a couple of images were obtained of this very rare Asian visitor. There is only one other sighting of Long-billed Murrelet for British Columbia. This was an adult bird in breeding plumage found by Patrick Sullivan and the author on Charlie Lake, outside Fort St. John in the Peace River country on June 21, 1994 (Toochin and Fenneman 2008). The bird found on Charlie Lake was likely the same adult bird in alternate plumage that was found dead on Saskatoon Lake in Northern Alberta on July 2, 1994 as it is less than 140 km away (Mlodinow 1997). In the Birds of BC Volumes 1-4 there is no mention of any Long-billed Murrelet sightings for British Columbia. As it stands this recent photographic record is the first documented record of this species for the Province. Since the increase of observers and the splitting of Marbled Murrelet into 2 species by the American Ornithologists' Union in 1997 (A.O.U. 1997), there has been a steady increase of records of Long-billed Murrelet in North America. California has had 15 accepted records with the majority of the records occurring in the fall between the months of August through October. (Hamilton et al, 2007). Oregon has had 1 record from August 13, 1994 which was photographed in Coos Bay (OFO 2012). Washington has had 7 records with the majority being found in the fall from July through November (WBRC 2012). Long-billed Murrelets have been recorded throughout North America as vagrants with birds occurring in all seasons as far south as Florida and as far east as Quebec, Newfoundland and Massachusetts (Mlodinow 1997). There are 3 records for this species in Europe (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). With careful scrutiny of all Marbled Murrelets encountered it is likely that this species will occur again.

Identification and Similar Species

The Long-billed Murrelet is a closely related species to Marbled Murrelet. Long-billed Murrelets are larger bodied and longer billed to Marbled Murrelets. A bird appearing on its own would prove hard to judge on size alone. There however plumage characters that separate both species from each other. Long-billed Murrelet in winter plumage is very black and white looking. This plumage is acquired in October and is held till April. However non breeding birds can likely hold this plumage later into the summer (Sibley 2000). The head and neck of Long-billed Murrelet is thick and elongated in shape which helps the bill look longer and thicker. Around the dark face are 2 thin light eye arcs (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The head is dark and runs along from the bill under the eye down the sides of the neck onto the side to the breast and flanks (Sibley 2000). An important field mark is that basic plumaged Long-billed Murrelets have a dark neck with no white cutting up the back of the neck as in Marbled Murrelet (Lethaby 2000). Below the dark area is a white area that encompasses the throat, breast and flanks and under tail coverts (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a broad white line along the scapulars and which is separated by the dark folded wing and separates a large white patch that comes up high on the flanks (Gaston and Jones 1998). This gives the bird 2 white patches that are obvious while sitting on the water (Gaston and Jones 1998). The Long-billed Murrelet in flight has light under wings that are not pure white but light looking (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bird found off

the Sheringham Lighthouse was a bird in transition from winter plumage to breeding plumage. So when looking at the bird it was possible to see the winter plumage characteristics as it was acquiring alternate plumage. The Shirley bird still had the broad white scapular patch and the white throat but was acquiring the dark plumage on the back and breast. Alternate plumage is acquired by Long-billed Murrelets in April and is held through September (Sibley 2000). These birds are mottled brown color white an obvious white throat and mottled breast feathers (Lethaby 2000). Juvenile Long-billed Murrelets look similar to basic plumaged adults but are more mottled looking on the breast and flanks. This plumage is held after fledging from August through October. Marbled Murrelets are smaller birds and have a smaller bill, head and neck. In winter plumage acquired by October and held through April, Marbled Murrelets are very black and white looking (Sibley 2000). What makes Marbled Murrelets stand out from Long-billed Murrelets is that the white on the neck extends up the neck giving the bird a white collar (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This helps separate the black of the face giving the check a dark patch (Sibley 2000). There are no white eye arcs above and below the eye (Sibley 2000). The white at the base of the bill goes up separating the eye from the bill (Gaston and Jones 1998). The white scapular patch is not as thick or bright as a Long-billed Murrelet and the white on the flank doesn't flare up as far as on a Long-billed Murrelet (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In flight the under wings are dark (Sibley 2000). In alternate plumage which is acquires by April and held through September adult Marbled Murrelets are dark brown colored (Sibley 2000). They have dark brown throats and are dark mottled colored on the breast (Sibley 2000).

One species that is rare but regular to British Columbia that should be ruled out if a bird is encountered is Scripp's Murrelet. This was formerly Xantus's Murrelet until in 2012 the A.O.U. split Xantus's Murrelet into Scripp's and Guadalupe Murrelet (Chesser et al, 2012). The Scripp's Murrelet is black on top and white below with white under wings (Gaston and Jones 1998). This species also has a long black bill but has white eye arcs (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The black on the face however demarcated as a line with white below as a straight line from the base of the bill under the eye to the neck that is all black (Sibley 2000). Guadalupe Murrelet is also black on top and white below white the white almost encompassing the dark eye (Gaston and Jones 1998). They have a long bill and white under wings Both Scripp's and Guadalupe Murrelets lack the white scapular patch found on Long-billed Murrelet and are a bit larger in size (Sibley 2000). There are 31 records of Scripp's Murrelet off the British Columbia Coast with records starting in July and peaking in early August with records going through till October (Toochin and Fenneman 2008). To date there is only one record of a Guadalupe Murrelet in British Columbia of 2 birds seen on August 2, 1994 15 NM west of Moresby Island of the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin and Fenneman 2008).

Documentation

It is becoming clear that any Marbled Murrelet encountered inland in British Columbia should be carefully scrutinized for Long-billed Murrelet. It is unfortunate that neither of the observers of the Charlie Lake bird were aware of the existence of the Asian subspecies "perdix" of Marbled Murrelet which would eventually be split into Long-billed Murrelet. Photos of that bird were not possible but the observers took note of the bird as it was of interest. The Sheringham Point bird was immediately recognized as a different looking Murrelet. Unfortunately obtaining good pictures of rare or interesting birds while sea watching has proven very difficult however by digi-scoping the bird 2 pictures of the bird were obtained on June 10, 2007 (Toochin 2012b). The bird was observed sitting on the water on its own and in the loose company of 2 Marbled Murrelets. Direct comparisons of the Long-billed Murrelet and Marbled Murrelets were possible. The Long-billed Murrelet was clearly larger in size and longer in bill length to the Marbled Murrelets. The bird was first spotted by Louis Haviland as the bird flew into feed in front of the Sheringham Lighthouse. The bird had a light blotchy breast in flight and had light under wings when it flapped its wings. While watching the bird, the observers were immediately was struck by the birds' plumage. There were many different looking things seen on this bird that made the observers rule out a Marbled Murrelet. The birds' head was long and the bill elongated in shape. The crown and back of the head were dark giving the white throat a clean demarcated line that runs along the bill base across under the eye and just past the area below the eye before running down the neck to the chest, highlighting the white throat which gave the bird the look of a Scripp's Murrelet. There were no white markings running up the neck like on Marbled Murrelet. There was a definite dark mottled band that ran across the chest from the bottom of this band seen in flight and when the bird raised up to flap

while sitting in the water, was a white lower breast, belly and flank but with black mottled feathers. There was a large long white scapular bar that ran horizontal to the body. There was also a very large white flank patch that with the folded wings gave the back area of this bird a huge white patch. The bird was primarily alone but a couple of times swam by a pair of Marbled Murrelets in alternate plumage. It was clearly larger body sized, longer billed and thicker necked and more robust in shape. The Long-billed Murrelet appeared on the rising high tide and sat in a rip-line to feed. As the tide got higher the bird came very close to shore and was studied at length. This is when photographs were obtained. When the bird lifted itself out of the water to flap the under wings looked pale, not glowing white but definitely pale. This was different to the dark under wings of the Marbled Murrelet. The wings of our bird also looked heavier and wider in shape. The vent of the bird was white. There were 2 white eye arcs that were above and below the birds' eye and are barely visible in the photographs of the bird on the water. Over the next 2 weeks the bird did appear a couple of times but was by no means predictable when it would appear. A few people got to see it but the bird proved elusive for others.

As observer knowledge increases with better field guides, better optics and the vast tools found on the internet increases, our knowledge of the birds occurrence and identification will allow for many more observers to be able to recognize this species if it is encountered again. It seems highly likely that the Long-billed Murrelet will occur again in British Columbia in the future. It is possible anywhere in the Province but interior observers should pay particular close attention to any Murrelet that they might encounter.



Figures 1 & 2: Though these pictures are of poor quality they do show the long bill and head shape of a Long-billed Murrelet. Photos © Rick Toochnin taken on June 10, 2012 off Sheringham Lighthouse, Shirley.

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