

Status and Occurrence of Scripps's Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus scrippsi*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin.

Introduction and Distribution

The Scripps's Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus scrippsi*) is a small alcid species that breeds on islands off the coast of southern California from the Channel Islands and along the coast of western Mexico on islands off the west coast of Baja California at least as far south as Islas San Benito (Drost and Lewis 1995). Santa Barbara Island supports the greatest majority of nesting birds in southern California (Drost and Lewis 1995). The Scripps's Murrelet has a lengthy nesting season that lasts from February to June (Drost and Lewis 1995). During this time the species' distribution is closely centered around its nesting islands with the highest numbers being found around Santa Barbara Island (Briggs *et al.* 1987). The fledging period peaks in April or in some years in May, throughout southern California, from near San Diego to Rodriguez Dome, 90–100 km west-southwest of Point Conception (Drost and Lewis 1995). As family groups disperse the nesting grounds in midsummer, there are high numbers found away from the nesting islands (Unitt 1984, Briggs *et al.* 1987). Most records of Scripps's Murrelet's in Baja California waters are also from around breeding islands. Islands with definite breeding records are Islas Los Coronados, Islas Todos Santos, Isla San Martin, Isla San Geronimo, and Islas San Benito (Kaeding 1905, Bent 1919, Jehl and Bond 1975) with the southernmost confirmed nesting location found on the Islas San Benito (Boswall 1978).

After the breeding season when Scripps's Murrelets are not at the breeding colonies, individuals occur along the Pacific Coast from at least the southern tip of Baja California to Washington State (Drost and Lewis 1995). There is little known about the occurrence of this species in offshore waters of Baja California, except in vicinity of the breeding islands (Drost and Lewis 1995). From August through October, a few Scripps's Murrelets occur in California waters south of Point Conception and San Miguel Island (Drost and Lewis 1995). The highest numbers during this time are found from Point Conception to Monterey Bay and Point Año Nuevo, mostly 20–100 km offshore (Briggs *et al.* 1987). Numbers in the wintering areas decrease after November, but a few Scripps's Murrelets have been recorded off central California as late as February and March (Briggs *et al.* 1987). There are relatively few winter records for the distribution of this species between the months of November and December (Drost and Lewis 1995). The birds reported in April may be early post-breeding wanderers, or non-breeders (Drost and Lewis 1995).

This species is reported as rare, but annual off Oregon where there are over 20 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee and is no longer a review species for the state (OFO 2012). The Scripps's Murrelet is also a rare, but annual off Washington State where there

are 7 accepted records for the newly split Scripps's Murrelet, but over 40 accepted records under the species old name, the "Xantus's" Murrelet, by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2013). In British Columbia, the Scripps's Murrelet is a casual to possibly a very rare potentially annual occurring species in the pelagic waters of the Province with over 30 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). The Scripps's Murrelet has not been recorded in Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2013).

The Scripps's Murrelet and its sister species the Guadalupe Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus hypoleucus*) were formerly lumped together as one species that was called the Xantus's Murrelet (Chesser *et al.* 2012). The Xantus's Murrelet was officially split into the two new species by the American Ornithologist's Union in 2012 (Chesser *et al.* 2012). The Guadalupe Murrelet has a more southerly range than the Scripps's Murrelet and is uncommon north of Baja Mexico along the west coast of North America from southern California to Washington State (Drost and Lewis 1995, Howell and Web 2010). The status of this new species is not yet clear in British Columbia, but it has been recorded for certain once in Provincial pelagic waters on August 2, 1994, 15 Nautical Miles west of Moresby Island, in the Queen Charlotte Islands, coordinates (52°23.2'N, 132°29.2'W)(M. Force Pers. Comm.).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Scripps's Murrelet is covered in all standard North American field guides. Older field guides show this species under Xantus's Murrelet (Sibley 2000). The Scripps's Murrelet is a small, cleanly marked alcid that has a short slender bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The birds measure 23–25 cm in length with a wingspan approximately 40 cm, and adult birds weigh 148–167 grams (Drost and Lewis 1995, Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The top of head and neck, back, wings, and tail are solid black with a bluish-gray cast, especially in fresh plumage (Sibley 2000). In worn plumage the dorsal colour is gray-black, sometimes a dull brown cast, but generally still showing some bluish-gray (Drost and Lewis 1995). The bill is thin, short and black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Under the bill the chin is white with a distinct demarcation line from the bill to the eye where the dark of the head meets the white of the throat (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The demarcation line isn't straight and has a small white wedge in front of the eye (Gaston and Jones 1998). There are two distinct thin white eye-arcs above and below the dark eyes (Gaston and Jones 1998). On sitting birds, the dark on the neck comes down towards the breast, but not across the chest and as a result doesn't show an extensive neck collar (Gaston and Jones 1998). The throat, breast, and undertail coverts are gleaming white (Sibley 2000). The underwing in flight is bright white with a dark secondary edge that extends up to the primary tips (Gaston and Jones 1998). The upper surface of the wing is all dark (Gaston and Jones 1998). The flight style is straight and direct with rapid wing beats (Gaston and Jones 1998). This species sits upright in the water and takes off in a characteristic manner

by rising straight out of the water then flying away (Gaston and Jones 1998). This take off manner makes them appear different to other alcids found in British Columbian waters.

The Scripps's Murrelet is pretty much the same looking to the Guadalupe Murrelet except for the facial pattern (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Guadalupe Murrelet has an extensive amount of white around the eye and on the cheek (Sibley 2000). Given close up views this field mark will distinguish the two species.

The similar Craveri's Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus craveri*) is a flat blackish-brown, without the bluish-gray tones, and shows stronger brown cast in worn plumage (Gaston and Jones 1998). The Craveri's Murrelet has dark feathers forming a partial collar at sides of neck that is longer and narrower than on Scripps's Murrelet (Gaston and Jones 1998). The underwing coverts on the Craveri's Murrelet are gray or mottled gray and white with the inner vane of primaries a dull brown (Gaston and Jones 1998). The flanks are a solid brownish-gray (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The underparts, including throat and undertail-coverts are snowy white (Sibley 2000). The bill is long and thin with black on the chin that extends further down below the eye than on the Scripps's Murrelet (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) and the Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*) in winter plumage can recall a Scripps's Murrelet, but the latter species lacks white the scapulars of both the Marbled and Long-billed Murrelet's (Gaston and Jones 1998). The Marbled Murrelet has dark underwings and though the Long-billed Murrelet has light underwings, they are not gleaming white as found on the Scripps's Murrelet (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Scripps's Murrelet is a casual to possibly very rare annual occurring species in pelagic waters off British Columbia with 34 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). All have been found in pelagic waters from near shore to well offshore on the continental shelf (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This species leaves its breeding islands in May and birds tend to disperse northward in June and July (Drost and Lewis 1995). Records in British Columbia show a definite spike in August with 11 records and September having 13 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). There are single records for the months of April and June (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). There are 4 records for the months of July and October (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 2). The majority of records come from the west coast of Vancouver Island with 23 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). There are 11 records from the waters around the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). This species prefers warmer water to feed on fish and small invertebrates (Drost and Lewis 1995). The pattern of occurrence

in British Columbia is the same as in Washington State and Oregon (Wahl *et al.* 2005, OFO 2012). In Washington State, records of the Scripps's Murrelet are concentrated in early August through early October (Wahl *et al.* 2005). What isn't clear is if the warm water conditions of El Nino, where the ocean temperature is 16°C or higher, pushes this species north in greater numbers than in a year where the ocean temperatures are cooler (Wahl *et al.* 2005). In Washington State prior to the early 1970s, the Scripps's Murrelet had been collected a couple of times, but was essentially unknown in Washington pelagic waters until the 1970's when regular pelagic trips started to go well offshore and observers began to encounter this species (Wahl *et al.* 2005). This species is difficult to gauge in its overall occurrence in British Columbia because there are so few pelagic trips undertaken and most trips do not ever go as far as the continental shelf break. The vast majority of records come from research vessels that are able to go far offshore and spend extended periods in this area. Another consideration to the lack of sightings from the few pelagic trips undertaken in British Columbia is that they are organized far too late in the fall to have a good chance to find this species. These trips are run to maximize species diversity for the participants and this is totally understandable. However trips going offshore in late July through August and early September would likely yield a higher probability of success in detecting Scripps's Murrelet in Provincial waters. There are at least five records for the inner mouth of the Juan de Fuca Strait on both sides of the border (Wahl *et al.* 2005, Toochin 2012). It is possible that further investigations by observers into this area could yield this species with greater frequency in the future. As with any alcid, the Scripps's Murrelet is a species that is most likely to be found well offshore, but can be encountered close to shore and observers should always be on the lookout for this elusive seabird. It is likely, given the frequency that this species is encountered in nearby Washington State, there will be future records of Scripps's Murrelet in British Columbia.



Figure 1: Scripps's Murrelet adult found off Westport Washington on September 7, 2014. Photo © Michael Ashbee.

Table 1: Records of Scripps's Murrelet for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult July 14, 1948: Charles J. Guignet: 29-32 km west of the Goose Group (51.25°N, 129.97°W)(Carter *et al.* 2005)
- 2.(1) adult female October 25, 1971: (specimen: WSM 26808) died after hitting ship in south Hecate Strait (51°15'N, 129°58'W)(Sanger 1973)
- 3.(1+) August 1, 1981: off west coast of Vancouver Island (48.80°N, 126.60°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 4.(2) adults August 26, 1988: 130 km, Offshore of Vancouver Island (48.10°N, 126.82°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 5.(2) adults October 31, 1988: 63 km, Offshore of Vancouver Island (48.37°N, 125.87°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 6.(1+) adults June 29, 1990: off Cape Flattery near B.C. border (48.38°N, 124.79°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 7.(2) adults August 2, 1994: Michael Force: 15 NM west of Moresby Island tip, Queen Charlotte Island (52°23.2'N, 132°29.2'W)(Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 8.(2) adults September 27, 1994: Michael Force about 40 NM west of the Brooks Peninsula (49°39.2'N, 128°35.5'W) (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 9.(1+) September 3, 1996: off Queen Charlotte Island (51.00°N, 130.69°W)(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 10.(1+) October 25, 1997: off west coast of Vancouver Island (48.43°N, 126.02°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)

- 11.(2) adults September 15, 1998: Adrian Dorst, mobs: 16 km west of Tofino (49.04°N, 126.28°W) (Dorst 2007, Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 12.(1+) August 8, 2000: off west coast of Vancouver Island (48.58°N, 126.17°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 13.(1+) August 8, 2000: off west side of Queen Charlotte Island (52.46°N, 132.71°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 14.(1+) September 6, 2000: off west coast of Vancouver Island (48.70°N, 127.26°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 15.(1+) September 6, 2000: off west coast of Vancouver Island (48.73°N, 127.50°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 16.(1+) September 18, 2000: off the west side of Queen Charlotte Island (51.00°N, 131.82°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 17.(1+) August 27, 2001: off Vancouver Island (48.58°N, 126.17°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 18.(+) September 8, 2002: off the south end of Queen Charlotte Island (51.67°N, 130.85°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 19.(1+) September 1, 2003: off west coast of Vancouver Island (48.82°N, 128.55°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 20.(2) adults September 25, 2004: Adrian Dorst: 15-20 miles west of Tofino (49.03°N, 126.32°W) (Cecile 2005a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 21.(2) adults August 29, 2005: Tom Plath: off the south end of the Queen Charlotte Island (51.30° N,132.01°W)(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 22.(1+) August 29, 2005: off the south end of the Queen Charlotte Island (51.52°N, 132.11°W)(Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 23.(1+) July 20, 2006: off west coast of Vancouver Island (48.85°N, 128.20°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 24.(1+) July 20, 2006: off west coast of Vancouver Island (48.88°N, 128.19°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 25.(1+) September 10, 2006: west coast of off Vancouver Island (51.47°N, 134.27°W) (Kenyon *et al.* 2009)
- 26.(1) adult October 1, 2006: Adrian Dorst (photo) Father Charles Channel, off Tofino (Cecile 2007a, Dorst 2007)
- 27.(1) adult September 8, 2007: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Shirley (Toochin 2012b)
- 28.(1) adult August 1, 2009: Michael McMann: 1 km off Cape Scott (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 29.(1) adult August 5, 2009: Rick Toochin: Shirley (Toochin 2012b)
- 30.(1) adult August 8, 2009: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: off Botanical Beach, Port Renfrew (Toochin 2012b)
- 31.(1) adult April 20, 2012: Peter Hamel: from B.C. Ferry, 14-15 km out in Hecate Strait off Queen Charlotte Islands (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.)
- 32.(1) adult July 31, 2013: Paul Lehman, mobs: 120 miles SW of Vancouver Island (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 33.(1) adult September 6, 2015: Mike and Sharon Toochin: 50 NM off Cape Scott (50°52:55.9'N, 129°44:31.4'W)(Yahoo message #9904 VANBCBirds)
- 34.(2) adults September 11, 2015: Mike and Sharon Toochin: 17.6 NM WSW north of Brooks Peninsula (50°02:44.2, 128°21:34.4'W) (Yahoo message #9904 VANBCBirds)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Scripps's Murrelet records in British Columbia:

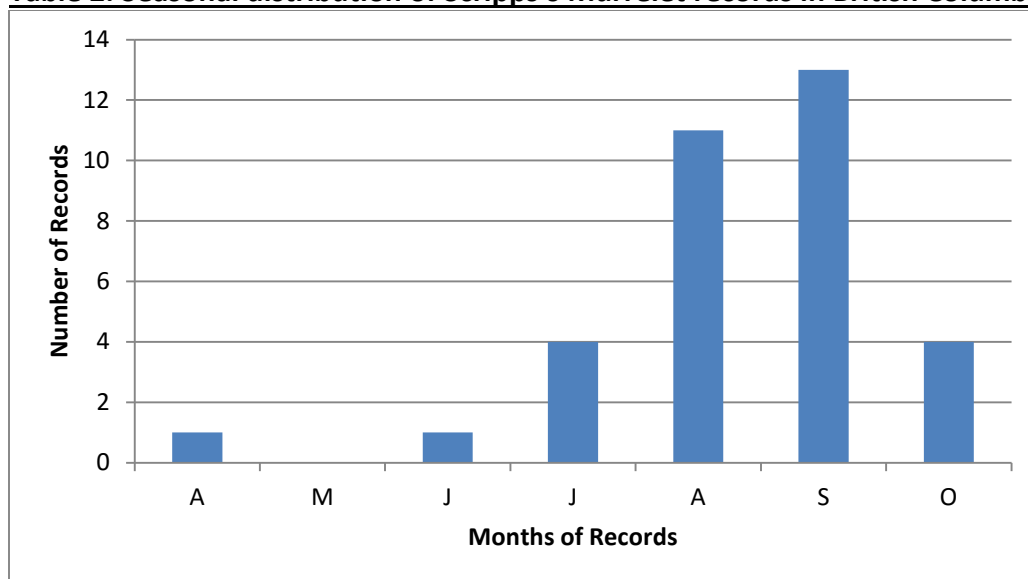


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the summer of this species with August and September having the highest number of records.

Acknowledgements

I wish thank Don Cecile for editing the manuscript. I also want to thank Michael Ashbee for allowing me to use his photograph of a Scripps's Murrelet taken off a Westport Washington pelagic trip. I also want to thank Peter Hamel for information on a recent record from the Queen Charlotte Islands. All photos are used with permission of the photographer and are fully protected by copyright law. These images are not to be retransmitted or used for any purpose without the expressed written consent of the photographer.

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