

Chapter 1

Ecology and Conservation of the Marbled Murrelet in North America: an Overview

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Abstract: Over the past decade, the Marbled Murrelet has become a focus of much controversy. It was listed as threatened in Washington, Oregon, and California by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in February 1993. In order to aid the various agencies with management, the Marbled Murrelet Conservation Assessment was formed to bring together scientists, managers, and others to gather all the available data on this small seabird. This volume of research is the culmination of that effort. In this chapter, we integrate the results of the investigations and summaries on the past history, present status, and possible future of the species, based on the data presented in this volume and other published research. We also propose what we consider the most important research needs. Then, based on the findings of this volume, we suggest actions for management to help ensure the survival of the species.

The recent decline and fragmentation of Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) populations in the southern portion of its range (California, Oregon, and Washington) resulted in an awareness that the species was in need of protection or it risked extirpation. In 1982 and 1986, the Pacific Seabird Group developed a set of resolutions that called attention to the Marbled Murrelet and the threats it faced. The Group requested that the appropriate agencies involved in management decisions consider research about the species. The response from the agencies was muted at best. On January 15, 1988, the National Audubon Society petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the California, Oregon, and Washington populations of the species as a threatened species. The Service's 90-day finding stated that the petition had presented substantial information to indicate that the requested action may be warranted. It was published in the Federal Register on October 17, 1988. Because of increased research efforts and the amount of new data available, several public comment periods were opened to receive additional information on the species and the potential threats to it. On the basis of the positive 90-day finding, the Marbled Murrelet was added to the Service's Notice of Review for Vertebrate Wildlife as a Category 2 Species for listing.

In 1990, the Marbled Murrelet was proposed as a threatened species by the British Columbia Ministry of Environment, Lands, and Parks to the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. The species was designated as nationally threatened in June 1990. A recovery team was established in September of that year and was unique to Canada because it included representatives of both the federal and provincial governments, the forest industry, environmental non-governmental organizations, and academia. The species was listed as threatened mainly because of loss of nesting habitat, but also because of fishing-net mortality and the threat of oil spills.

In 1991, the State of California listed the species as endangered because of the loss of older forests. On June 20, 1991, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a proposed rule in the Federal Register to designate it as a threatened species in Washington, Oregon, and California. The main reason for listing was the loss of older forest nesting habitat. Secondary threats included loss due to net fisheries and the potential threat of oil spills. In July 1992, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published another notice in the Federal Register announcing a 6-month extension for determining the status of Marbled Murrelets. However, the Service was taken to court for not meeting the legal time frames provided for in the Endangered Species Act and, in September 1992, published a final rule in the Federal Register, listing the Marbled Murrelet as a threatened species in the three States. A recovery team was established in February 1993 and is now in the final stages of a recovery plan for the three-State area (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in press).

The State of Washington is now reviewing a recommendation to classify the Marbled Murrelet as a threatened species. To date, the Marbled Murrelet has not been recommended for listing in Oregon.

This chapter reviews the results of published research and new investigations presented in this volume, discusses the likely future of the species and its habitat in North America, and outlines the actions considered necessary to maintain viable populations.

Background and Assessment of Available Information

Distribution and Habitat

Summary—*Marbled Murrelets in North America occur from the Bering Sea to central California. During the breeding season, the majority of murrelets are found offshore of late successional and old-growth forests, located mostly within 60*

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Table of Contents Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu

1. Understanding the eBook Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - User-Friendly Interface

4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu User Reviews and Ratings
 - Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu Free and Paid eBooks
 - Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu Public Domain eBooks
 - Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu eBook Subscription Services
 - Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu Compatibility with Devices
 - Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Interactive Elements Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
8. Staying Engaged with Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Setting Reading Goals Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time

12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Ecology Conservation Of The Marbled Mu
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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