

Birds! Mysterious Death 7/22/73 Of Common Murre

A mysterious mass death of thousands of Common Murres, a penguin-like sea bird seldom seen along the coastal beaches, is being closely examined by state marine biologists and law officials.

For the past few weeks, citizens have reported hundreds of dead birds on the beaches from the mouth of the Pajaro River out of Watsonville northward.

One of the large concentrations has been along Manresa Beach State Park, between Sunset Beach State Park and La Selva Beach.

Bruce Elliott, unit manager, State Department of Fish and Game, for the South Bay Area, said Saturday night that the Common Murre is of the Alcidae family which spends almost its entire life at sea, coming to remote rocky outcrops on shore only to breed.

Unlike the penguin, it has abilities of powerful flight, but does not dive for its food as a pelican.

It dives from the surface and chases its food toward the surface.

Elliott said that while this problem was out of his jurisdiction, he was giving mutual aid to the marine officials.

Many of the Murres found on the beaches, and he estimated that there were some 3500 dead birds from the Pajaro to Half Moon Bay, have been sent to a lab in Sacramento.

"It was determined," he said, "that the Murres had drowned.

"They were not sick birds. They were fat and healthy, their craws and stomachs filled with fish. All the signs point toward a rapid death, because of the water found in many of the birds' lungs.

Unofficially, he has heard reports of the birds becoming caught in fishermen's nets.

"There is probably no law broken on the fishermen's part, if this is the cause," he said. "The Murres might have dived under the nets and become entangled."

He said they have been washing up mostly on south beaches, a very few near Santa Cruz.

They are black, with a light build and walk upright like a penguin, but there the similarity ends. They breed on the Farallon Islands, then head far out to sea.

But upwellings of colder water closer to shore may have brought them in for small fish.