

BIRDS 8-3-91 Marbled murrelet placed on endangered species list

SANTA CRUZ — The marbled murrelet, a rare coastal bird found in the north coast area of Santa Cruz County, was placed on the endangered species list Friday by the State Fish and Game Commission.

There are believed to be less than 2,000 of the birds left in California. As many as 800 of those may live in the Big Basin State Park area of Santa Cruz County.

The designation could affect logging and development in areas where the robin-sized seabird is found. A number of studies are being conducted to determine the boundaries of the marbled murrelet's habitat and what needs to be done to protect them.

The marbled murrelet dives for fish, but is unique among seabirds in that they nest in trees miles from the beach. Scientists say the murrelets also prefer to live in old-growth forests, which places them at odds with timber harvest plans that intrude upon

their habitat.

Little is known about the nesting habits of the birds as only a handful of their nests have been found. The first marbled murrelet tree nest in North America was found in Big Basin State Park by a tree surgeon in 1974.

In recent years researchers discovered two more nests in the area, but in both cases the birds or their chicks were killed by marauding predators, usually other birds.

The Fish and Game Commission considered placing the gnatcatcher songbird, a bird native to Southern California coastal marshes, on the endangered species list, but delayed voting. The gnatcatcher stands in the way of a number of highway projects and developments in Orange and San Diego counties.