

Rare bird flies into limelight

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SANTA CRUZ — For hundreds of years, the marbled murrelet lived an obscure life in coastal forests on the Pacific Northwest and Alaska.

But the birds, which search for food in the sea and nest in forests miles away, will probably become anything but obscure.

A proposal Monday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to classify the marbled murrelet as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act has put them in the forefront of the controversy surrounding logging in old-growth forests.

"The birds are obviously in danger," said Steve Singer, a local naturalist who has researched the birds for about 20 years.

The murrelet's habitat runs from Big Basin Redwoods State Park up the coast to Alaska. They nest on horizontal branches that are up to 24 inches in diameter on trees of old-growth forests, which environmentalists say are being destroyed by logging.

"They need the big branches and the only place they're found are in the old-growth forests," Singer said. "Of course that's what the loggers want."

The new proposal, if approved, would declare the murrelet threatened in California, Oregon and Washington.

Logging could continue unless it was determined that it would adversely effect the species, but no



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Marbled murrelet expert Steve Singer has spent nearly 20 years researching the bird.

specific policies have been determined, according to a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who did not want his name to be used.

After the proposal is printed in the federal register

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later this week, there will be a 90-day period for public comment. After that, the wildlife service reviews any comment and decides whether or not to implement the policy, officials said. Historically, most proposals have been accepted.

Wildlife biologists estimate that there are anywhere between 350 to 800 murrelets in the Big Basin area of Santa Cruz County and in park areas in San Mateo County. The only other areas they nest in California are Humboldt County forests.

In Alaska the birds thrive and are not close to being considered threatened. Singer said there could be millions of murrelets there. The areas in the continental United States where it lives now has been relegated to untouched old-growth in public parks.

"It's breeding habitat has been removed extensively," said David Suddjian, a wildlife biologist with Habitat Restoration, an environmental research group.

Habitat Restoration was hired by the Big Creek Lumber Company to study a 1,500 acre site next to Butano State Park where the company has logging permits. Preliminary surveys indicate that the birds are nesting in the park and flying over areas Big Creek wants to log, according to Suddjian.

"It's a species that needs protection, but I think it's unfair to pit the wildlife against humans," he said.

The human cost of protecting the birds was a con-

cern of Big Creek Vice President Bud McCrary.

"My family is getting on the endangered list very quickly," he said. "What about humans looking for a nest?"

McCrary said a ban on logging would effect people that use lumber as much as the timber producers.

"If you're thinking about building a house, you're probably not going to build it out of wood," McCrary said.

He said the environmental impact of using fossil fuels to produce steel or plastic as substitutes for wood would be more detrimental than losing old-growth forests.

"We have to make some serious philosophical and political decisions here," McCrary said. "There has to be a balance in the way things are looked at."

Murrelets were first observed in the late 1700s, but it wasn't until the 1974 that the first North American murrelet tree nest was found accidentally by a tree surgeon at Big Basin. Since then only three other nests have been discovered. In 1989, Singer — a research associate at the Santa Cruz Natural History Museum and a former ranger at Big Basin — helped find two more nests in Big Basin. Another nest was found on Kelp Island in Alaska in 1984.

The bird has webbed feet and dives for food in the ocean. Most seabirds nest close to the water rather than in the inland forests like the murrelet.