

Elusive seabird's nests found in trees

By MAYA SURYARAMAN
STAFF WRITER

A seabird so elusive that scientists have found it impossible to determine its number has been found nesting in the old-growth forests of the Santa Cruz Mountains. The find could help prove environmentalists' claims that it is an endangered species.

A team of Santa Cruz researchers spied the nests of the marbled murrelet last summer, in the upper reaches of two old-growth Douglas firs in Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

The nests were only the third and fourth marbled-murrelet nests found in North America, the researchers' recent announcement said.

The discovery strengthens a petition before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the marbled murrelet as an endangered species. The petition, filed by several Oregon and Washington chapters of the National Audubon Society, argues that the bird depends for habitat on old-growth forests, which are fast disappearing.

But the petition still faces a rough road because so little is known about the bird, said David Marshall, a Portland wildlife biologist whose assessment of the bird's status forms the basis of the petition.

"We are with the marbled murrelet where we were with the spotted owl 20 years ago," Marsh-

all said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has already proposed endangered status for the Northern spotted owl, which is also found in old-growth forests. It is now gathering public input on the proposal.

If the marbled murrelet were listed as endangered, the federal government would have to take steps to protect its habitat from destruction, including possibly intervening to slow the logging of old-growth forests. In California, about 95 percent of these forests have been logged.

Last summer's find of two marbled-murrelet nests came after a painstaking combing of Big Basin Redwoods State Park by a team led by Steve Singer, a research associate with the Santa Cruz City Museum of Natural History.

Because the bird builds its nests in branches 100 feet or more off the ground, its nests are extremely difficult to spot. To add to the difficulty, the bird is only active on land in the twilight of dawn and dusk, and has a coloring during breeding season nearly identical to tree bark.

For more than 100 years, ornithologists had no clue where the web-footed marine bird, which ranges the Pacific Coast from Alaska to California, nested. Unlike other seabirds, it had never been spotted on offshore rocks or coastal cliffs, Singer said.

Then in 1974, a tree trimmer in

Big Basin State Park accidentally discovered a nest. Like the two spotted by Singer's team, it was in an old-growth Douglas fir. The only other known North American tree nest was found in Alaska.

In addition to the nest finds, various data indicate a connection between the bird and old-growth forests. Even after the summer nesting season, the bird flies in from the ocean to visit the ancient stands of trees, Singer said.

"Just before dawn, it circles around for maybe 45 minutes, then returns to the ocean," said Singer, who has heard its sharp, piercing whistle during these morning visits.

Offshore, the bird has been spotted only along stretches of coastline adjacent to old-growth forests, Singer said.

A 1988 study by the Point Reyes Bird Observatory says California now has about 2,000 of the birds, which are about the size of a robin. This compares with a statewide population of about 360,000 for the marbled murrelet's cousin, the common murre.

Singer fears that the some 300 birds counted in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties could easily be wiped out by a single disease.

In the entire Pacific Northwest, the bird's numbers are roughly equivalent to that of the Northern spotted owl's, said Marshall, the Portland wildlife biologist.

Despite such low counts, en-

dangered status may be difficult to gain, Marshall said.

"We don't have any data from the past and that's what makes the whole case (for endangered status) weak in the eyes of a lot of people," he said.

Ornithologists have no idea what the bird's population was 20 years ago. Without such data, it is difficult to prove its numbers are declining, Marshall said.

Ornithologists have traditionally counted seabirds during breeding season, when they concentrate near shore. Because for many years no one knew where the marbled murrelet nested, it was not counted.

Even with the discovery that the birds nest in trees, scientists have found breeding season tallies to be extremely difficult. They have resorted to counting from boats at sea, and are just beginning to collect data.

Still there are many gaps in their knowledge, including how much old-growth habitat the bird needs to survive, and how tied it is to this habitat. In Oregon and Washington, although the birds have been seen or heard, researchers have yet to find a single nest.

Singer plans to continue his field research next year. For him, the task has a special urgency.

"For all we know," he said, "these birds may be on a slow decline to extinction."