

Little bird's big impact

Marbled murrelet likely to affect logging, parks

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

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SANTA CRUZ — For more than a century scientists and bird watchers tried to solve the mystery of where the marbled murrelet nested.

It was a hot topic, as bird watching topics go, and when a nest was discovered in Big Basin Redwoods State Park in 1974 it promised to put an end to the nesting controversy.

Not so, for when the nest and others were subsequently discovered high in the branches of ancient, North Coast trees it ignited a new controversy over what should be done to protect the enigmatic sea-bird.

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species of Santa Cruz
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"In Santa Cruz we have such a small population (of murrelets) that we can't afford to lose any

more birds," said Steve Singer, bird expert and research associate for the Santa Cruz City Museum of Natural History. "All evidence indicates they are dependent upon old-growth forests for nesting."

Earlier this month, the marbled murrelet was declared an endangered species by the state, which, under guidelines now being developed, could have far-reaching effects on logging, park development and recreational use of the forests in murrelet nesting areas.

Singer and others estimate about 400 to 600 marbled murrelets live in the forests near Big Basin Park and southern San Mateo County. Much of that land is held by timber interests, including Big Creek Lumber of Davenport, and is slated to be logged.

Finding himself caught up in the controversy is Bud McCrary of Big Creek Lumber, who has been forced to become an unintended expert on the murrelet.

For every timber harvest Big Creek attempts, it must prepare lengthy studies of whether the bird lives in the harvest area or might be disturbed.

"I'm interested in saving the bird, but I'm not sure what we are doing is going to save the bird," McCrary said.

In the past year Big Creek has spent more than \$100,000 in murrelet studies, recording where they fly, live, and even building sophisticated recording devices designed to turn on and record only when triggered by the song of a murrelet.

Please see MURRELET — A22

Endangered list: Is it out of control?

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — They slither, jump, bloom, soar and ooze through the Santa Cruz area, some more magnificent than others, but all able to slow or stop development, farming, logging and use of an area.

They are the more than 45 plants, animals and insects considered threatened or endangered species in Santa Cruz County.

The names include Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, the monarch butterfly, the Dolloff cave spider, the Empire Cave pseudoscorpion, the Santa Cruz tarplant, the Scotts Valley spineflower and most recently, the marbled murrelet.

The list, which is growing as more and more species become endangered, has led some to ask when will it stop, and why try to save them all.

"The marbled murrelet is the latest icon. It's part of the trend

of the future," said Big Creek Lumber owner Bud McCrary. "It doesn't end with the marbled murrelet, we have people talking about rare lichens, tree mosses and insects. Where does it all end? ... What kind of economy are we going to have when we only have a service economy? If you can't grow forests, mine coal and iron, where will we get the building materials?"

McCrary and other businessmen see the endangered species list and its accompanying restrictions as being used to shut down logging and other business. They point to the recent removal of 11.6 million acres of timberland from harvest in order to protect the spotted owl.

Professor Michael Soule, chairman of the board of environmental studies at UC Santa Cruz, said that economic arguments are not enough to warrant the destruction of a species.

"Hundreds and hundreds of species have become extinct in

the last thousand years, not one a natural extinction, but all caused by humans," Soule said. "We often ask the question what is the importance (of a species) as if when God created life each species has to be important — especially to humans ... When a species dies it can not be replenished. We are the most powerful and have a responsibility to protect the (other) species."

Most extinctions, Soule said, are due to man's "greed and need for land" due to overpopulation. The loss of species in Santa Cruz is significant over the past decades, he said.

"People forget that 50 years ago there were black bears, grizzlies, wolves, eagles and condors here," Soule said. "All of these driven to extinction (locally) by humans. Now we're down to the smaller species that are slowly being driven out. There are virtually no large animals left. We have to draw the line. No extinction is permissible."

The debate, and recent flurry of candidates for the endangered species list, eventually ends up at the Department of Fish and Game, which is in charge of determining which species makes the list and how to protect it.

"It's almost bankrupt the department," said Don Pine, a fish and game biologist, of the numbers of studies the department now handles. "You have to remember the public passed these laws (endangered species acts) requesting we do this. It will end when the public says it doesn't want them protected and I don't think that will happen."

In the meantime the department of fish and game hires more and more biologists to special in the study of endangered species and the list keeps growing.

"We don't have a quota (as to how many species will be listed) either they are endangered or they are not," Pine said. "I won't give up trying to save species) as long as there is (individual animal) left."

Murrelet

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"What I think we might find is there are a lot more of these birds than people think," McCrary said.

It is a gamble for McCrary. If his studies show the endangered bird in other areas and wider-ranging habitats, it could result in greater timber harvest restrictions once the state protection plan is finalized.

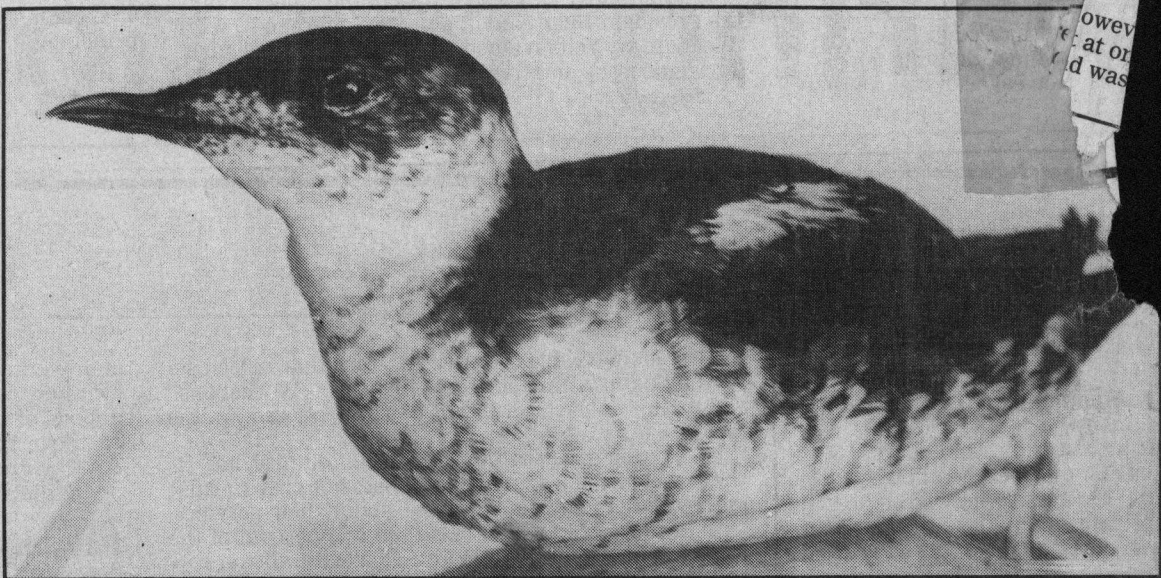
"Some people are worried about exposing themselves to more (restrictions)," McCrary said. "My point is to gain more information. Let the facts speak for themselves and the chips fall where they may."

One thing is certain, tracking the murrelet isn't much easier today than it was 100 years ago. Despite the excitement over the first nest find — which was discovered by a tree trimmer at Big Basin Park — ornithologists have found only four other nests.

All of the nests had been in old-growth Douglas fir trees, until this summer when Singer and others discovered a nest in an old-growth redwood tree.

"The most intriguing thing is it took over 100 years before the first nest was found," Singer said. "The biggest names in ornithology never found it. The mystery of the marbled murrelet has always been, where does it go? It's seen off shore but you never find its nest."

Marbled murrelets are robin-sized seabirds that gather each day on the ocean. They fish for small fish and pry crustaceans



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Protection for the marbled murrelet will probably mean a reduction in logging.

off the ocean floor, diving as deep as 200 feet.

Unlike most seabirds, however, the marbled murrelet flies up to 20 miles inland each evening, making its home in the hidden branches of huge, old-growth trees, often nesting nearly 200 feet above ground.

Singer said the murrelets are clumsy birds once in the trees. Their webbed feet do not make them well-suited for forest life. They chose only wide branches, often 12 inches in diameter to nest upon, and at times do nothing more than lay eggs in branch depressions, rather than build a nest.

Old-growth trees may be the only trees with branches large enough, high enough, and with enough cover to be suitable for the birds. Singer said no nests

have been found in second-growth forests — those which have been logged previously.

The bird is found in several isolated spots in California with the largest population in the Santa Cruz mountains. Oregon, Washington and Alaska also have marbled murrelets. The greatest number are in Alaska, which may have a population of as many as several hundred thousand.

Recent studies, designed to help California develop a protection plan, call for prohibiting the cutting of any old-growth forests where the birds are found, a logging buffer zone of a half-mile around each nest, and limiting human incursions such as hiking, birding or bicycling, which might disturb the birds.

Such guidelines could have an

effect on Big Basin Park.

"I'm sure there will be a tightening (of activities) of some sort," said Big Basin head ranger Quentin Kaye. "I see any sort of (park) expansion or carving out new sites as being very difficult."

McCrary said that depending upon how stringent the regulations are, it could remove as many as 20,000 acres out of timber production in the Santa Cruz area. Guidelines also call for no logging during marbled murrelet mating season, which runs from April to September — the prime months for logging.

"It could shut down most timber harvesting in the worst situation," McCrary said.

Singer said that until more is known about the marbled murrelet, such measures may be necessary.