

Scientists track scarce seabird

Murrelet numbers feared in decline

By REGINA KIRCHMEYER
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Birds 5-14-00
SANTA CRUZ — Jamie Christian, a biologist at UC Berkeley, spends his days in a battered blue truck, which he lovingly calls Little Blue. Most days, Little Blue and his van-brother Big Blue, each carrying a big antenna on its roof, are parked along Highway 1 between Santa Cruz and Franklin Point, north of Davenport.

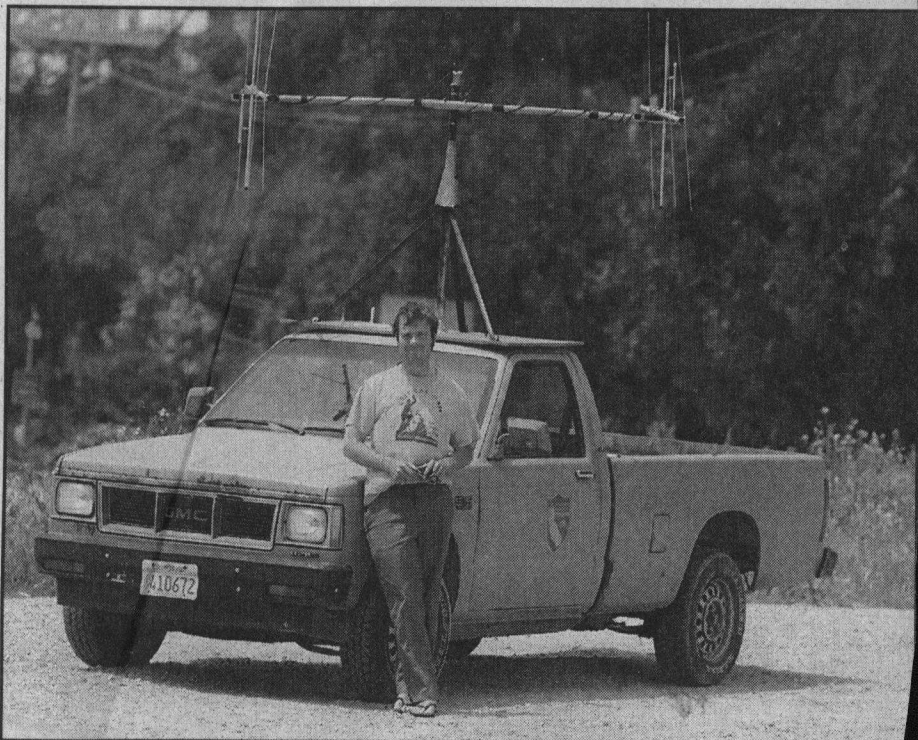
The big antennae pick up radio signals from 20 tagged marbled murrelets that belong to the southernmost population of this elusive and mysterious seabird, which was put on the list of endangered species in 1992.

"Populations in Northern California, Washington and

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stead, he once again gave thanks

Biologist Jamie Christian tracks the elusive marbled murrelet along the North Coast of Santa Cruz County.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Murrelet

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Oregon seem to be declining," said Steven Beissinger, a conservation biologist at UC Berkeley who leads the current study. "This population is the most isolated one and it seems to be declining faster than the others."

Scott Newman, a researcher at UC Davis, and Esther Burkett, a wildlife biologist with the state Department of Fish and Game, which owns the trucks, are collaborating with Beissinger.

"We want to know whether they are nesting and where they are nesting," Beissinger said.

The researchers plan to fit 25 birds with radio transmitters to track the birds' secret reproductive lives. Only a few details have been revealed since the first nest was discovered in 1974 high up in a Douglas fir in Big Basin Redwoods State Park.

The small seabirds, which are about the size of a robin, live in areas ranging from Alaska to Central California. They are usually heard more often than seen. Their high-pitched "keer" calls penetrate the air around sunrise when the parents switch their 24-hour nest shifts, Christian said. He gets up at 4 a.m. to document birds flying to and fro the coastal forests, hoping to determine the number of nesting birds.

Although the murrelet is actually a seabird that spends most of its time on the water and feeds on small fish and marine invertebrates, the birds nest only in the canopy of ancient forests up to 50 miles inland. They lay their single egg on a bed of moss already growing on flat limbs up to 200 feet in the air. Nesting high in the canopy protects murrelets from predators, such as Stellar's jays, ravens and raccoons, Christian says.

This preference for ancient forests made the marbled murrelet, along with its better known avian companion, the spotted owl, an important symbol of the biological consequences of the logging of the last remaining old-growth coastal forests in the Pacific Northwest.

A marbled murrelet recovery plan, that covers California, Washington and Oregon, was launched in No-



Associated Press file

The rarely seen marbled murrelet is an endangered seabird that nests high in old-growth forests.

vember 1997. It calls for conserving habitat and is built around the Northwest Forest Plan, a comprehensive plan for the maintenance and restoration of timber lands.

For example, Big Creek Lumber Co. doesn't work in certain areas between April and September when the birds fly overhead.