

## F O C U S

# Murrelets

Rich Stallcup

IT HAS BEEN A LONG DAY! You got up at 4 AM to scramble your eggs and your gear and to take a pill. After a two-hour drive in the dark through the drizzle and the fog, and after discovering that there weren't enough quarters *anywhere* to cover your parking tariff at the wharf, you run out to the dock, saltines in your wake, skeptically anxious about the pelagic trip ahead.

But the day goes well (though it could have been a lot smoother), and great sea-birds and mammals are everywhere. After five gruelling hours off Point Pinos and traveling north towards "the canyon" through the "ten-mile pits" you realize there is just one more major rush—the storm petrel flocks. Two more hours of staring, and almost everyone is exhausted, collapsing into nooks and crannies as the boat turns toward the harbor.

Soon peaceful sleep takes command, even though shearwaters are still streaming by. Startled awake by someone yelling "Synthliboramphus!" and not knowing what kind of animal to expect, you stumble to wobbly feet, bouncing off other people in the same condition, and reach the rail just in time to see two tiny blackish forms flying low against the water towards the horizon. Someone explains why they were Craveri's Murrelets, and once again you wonder if you are having a good time.

MURRELETS (pronounced mur-lets, not muir-a-lets) may be difficult to identify even with a good view, and good views are not common. The five identifiable types of four currently recognized species regular in Pacific-California are small, white below, and generally dark above. When healthy and not gorged on food they are spooky about approaching boats, do lots of rapid diving, and are often seen flying away.

Knowing when and where to expect them (status and spacing) will be helpful. A summary of identification marks and mention of possible confusing species follow. If you refer to a field guide while reading this discussion, keep in mind that there are problems with most murrelet illustrations. See "The Field Guides," which follows.



## Status and Spacing

Craveri's MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus craveri*) and Xantus' are real look-alikes and have been generically merged with Ancient (whose similarities are remote). Craveri's enters our jurisdiction from mid-July through October only and like Xantus' comes to us from breeding areas well to the south. It is either not as rare as formerly thought (perhaps misidentified as Xantus'), or there has been a subtle shift in its ocean habitat (probably due to changes in water temperature). Whatever the case, this bird is now found annually within and outside of Monterey Bay (and, no doubt, the rest of pelagic northern California at times), including in very deep waters beyond the continental shelf. Healthy Craveri's and Xantus' Murrelets are only rarely seen from shore.

XANTUS' MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus hypoleucus*) has two easily identifiable races (some authorities have the strong feeling that they are actually different species). Both occur in our region. The more northern race (*S. h. scrippsi*) has been found here slimly throughout the year with most records from August through November. The rarer, more southern *S. h. hypoleucus* has occurred only in the autumn and not at all in most years. The preferred ocean habitats of Xantus' seem to be exactly those of Craveri's, though Xantus' may not go as far seaward.

ANCIENT MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) nests far to the north of California, and though there are a couple of summer season records we really only expect them from late October through early April. They may be seen from coastal points, sometimes loosely with Marbleds, but pairs or small flocks also may be found well offshore.

MARBLED MURRELET (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) is a resident species of coastal northern California and may be seen from

shore (e.g. Bodega Head, Princeton Harbor, and Pigeon Point) at any time of year. They cling to the shore and are seldom found more than a few hundred meters off the beach. In this southern part of their range they apparently nest on branches near the tops of huge Douglas firs and coast redwoods and may be heard flying over and through these forests at night. They almost always travel in twos unless out of range. Adults are cryptically brown in spring and summer. The chicks' first feathering is the basic, winter-type black and white, and in late summer and fall one of these and one brown adult are often found swimming together. This nearshore species is almost never seen from offshore boats.

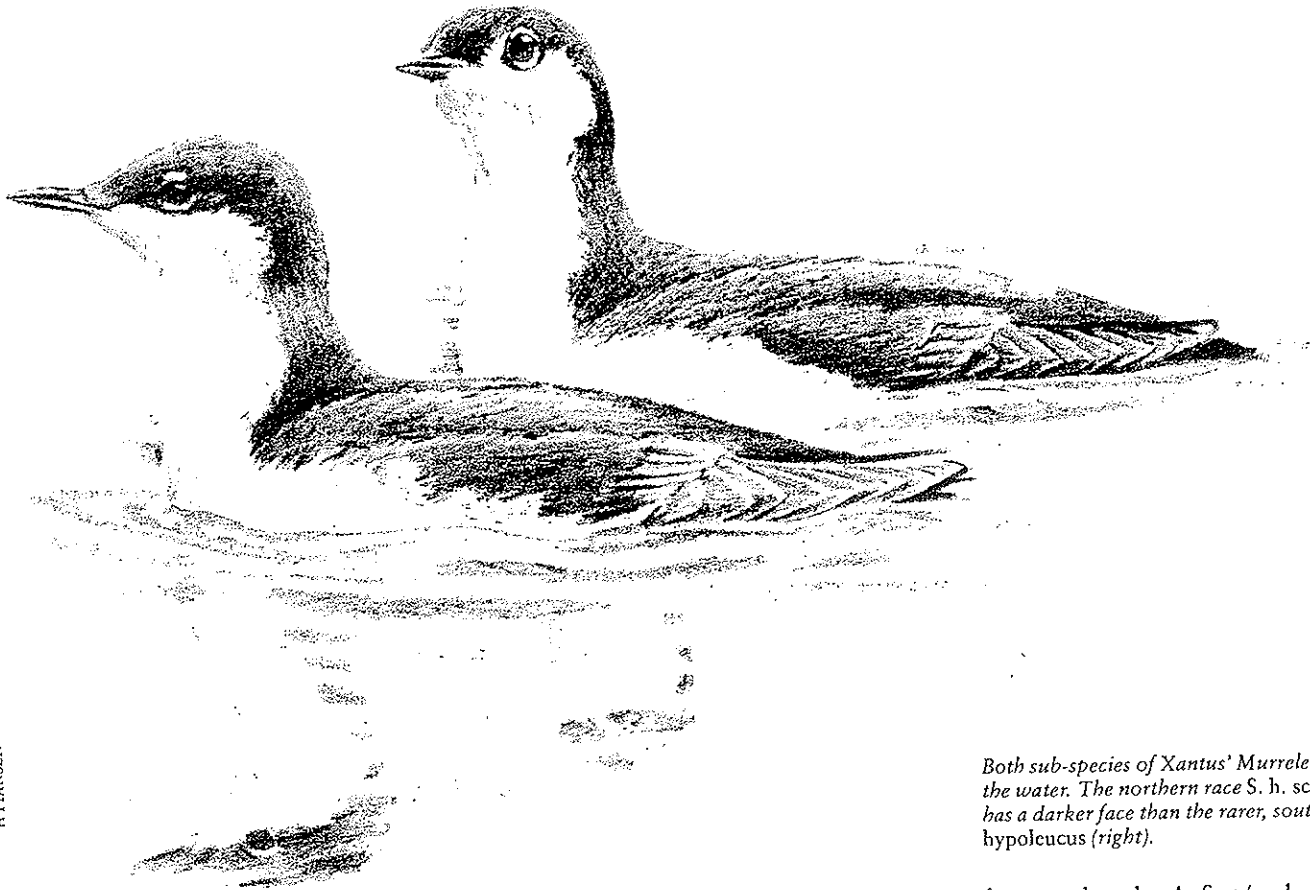
## Identification

THE SOUTHERN MURRELETS (Craveri's and Xantus') are uniform blackish above and white below. They have tense postures while swimming, with necks fully erected—and they look at you. The tall stance may distinguish them from Ancient and Marbleds, the northern two.

Craveri's on the water have slightly longer, thinner bills than Xantus', but this feature requires comparative experience to be useful. In fresh plumage, Craveri's has a dark brown frosting to the black back making them appear *darker* than Xantus'. Where the black facial feathering extends forward, it meets at the ventral base of the bill; the anterior-most chin (not throat) is black.

Nervous, sitting birds will often stand up and stretch their wings. The underwing coverts are mostly gray as are the ventral surfaces of most of the flight feathers. Many individuals, however, show a narrow mid-wing wedge of white. A good feature for birds in flight: Craveri's show a triangular peninsula of black from the sides of the upper back invading the white upper breast, a feature lacking on Xantus'. (This characteristic is not reliable on swimming birds.)

XANTUS' subspecies are easily separable by facial pattern. *S. h. hypoleucus*, usually rare here, has its eye mostly surrounded by white which comes up from the throat. *S. h. scrippsi* lacks these white markings and has a face almost identical to *S. craveri*. Both subspecies have bills subtly shorter and thicker than Craveri's' and in fresh plumage have an ashy sheen to the black back that yields a *grayness*. Xantus' black face feathers extend forward to meet the bill at the gape; the feathered chin is



H. HANSEN

Both sub-species of Xantus' Murrelet sit erect in the water. The northern race *S. h. scrippsi* (left) has a darker face than the rarer, southern *S. h. hypoleucus* (right).

entirely white. The underwing usually looks immaculate, all of the coverts and the ventral flight feather surfaces white. In flight, Xantus' lacks the partial black neck-lace shown by Craveri's.

ANCIENTS are fairly easy: different from the others and portrayed well enough in the field guides. They ride low in the water, and their heads are usually hunched down so no neck shows, or not much. In all plumages the pale gray back sharply contrasts the black crown, and white from the throat climbs the sides of the neck, forming an incomplete broad, white collar. You can see the yellow bill at a surprising distance.

MARBLEDs in basic plumage (most of the year) are blackish on the upperparts but not quite as black as Craveri's and Xantus'; the border between dark above and white below is not as crisp either. The white scapulars (black feathers that cover the closed wing) gleam from within dark surroundings in both flying birds (dorsal surface only) and swimming ones. The posture of a Marbled Murrelet at ease is between the statuesque southern ones' and the scrunched Ancient's.

### Possible Confusing Species

**I**N ADDITION TO PROBLEMS in telling some of these murrelets apart from one another, two other alcid species, Pigeon Guillemot and Common Murre, are sometimes mis-

taken for one or more of their little cousins. Pigeon Guillemots in juvenile or basic plumage have been mistaken for basic Marbled Murrelets, and they are similar. Guillemots, though, have tall necks, lots of white flecking on the back and crown, are bigger, have big orange legs, and the white patches on their sides are dorsal wing coverts (growing from the wing), not scapulars.

The problem with murrelets, which are twice as big as any murrelet, is the juveniles, which are flightless and leap into the ocean and swim along with one attendant parent

for several weeks. At first (early fall) the young murrelets look just like the adults (basically black above and white below) but are only half as big. We have heard several reports of one murre and one Xantus' (or Marbled) Murrelet hanging out together! A young murre apart from its parents could stir some thought. However, small murrelets' flight feathers are not yet grown and look very inadequate, while their feet and legs are almost fully grown and twice as big as any adult murrelet's, the tarsus being almost as thick as a drinking straw.

## The Field Guides

**T**HE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC GUIDE shows Marbled on a different page and in a different scale than the other three murrelets, so if one is just paging through, it appears much smaller. Also the plate on page 175 shows the winter Marbled as too gray, especially the back, suggesting it is more like Ancient than it is. In fact, it is a uniform blackish above. The plate on page 177 fails to show the difference in posture of the *Synthliboramphus* species. Most Craveri's have smoky gray underwings, many with a white core, but those shown seem to be bi-color, brown and gray. The chins and relative bill shapes of Craveri's and Xantus' are very well shown here.

Peterson's western guide, 1961, shows Marbled and Ancient accurately but maybe too clean and sharp. The Xantus' has too big a head, too short a neck, and in life, there is no gray zone

between the black dorsum and white ventrum.

The Audubon Society Master Guide photos at the bottom of page 117 and the top of page 123 are probably of sick birds and do not demonstrate their real postures. The Marbled's wing is dragging in the water and the Craveri's looks as though it is about to sink. The bottom two paintings on page 121 show the underwings (and a couple of other marks) adequately, but to see the birds from that angle the observer would have to be a fish.

Robbins' Golden Guide has all the murrelets riding far too buoyantly—they look like fishnet floats. In life, Marbleds in "winter" do not have barred backs; Ancients' backs are paler gray than shown, and their bill tips are yellow; and the leftmost flying Xantus' must be a Craveri's with its long bill, black on the foremost chin, and partial black collar on the white neck.