

NEWS RELEASE

U. S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE - REGION I

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June 17, 1991

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES THREATENED STATUS FOR MARBLED MURRELET

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today proposed that the marbled murrelet, a robin-sized seabird of the north Pacific coast, be designated as a threatened species in Washington, Oregon, and California.

Today's action follows completion of a status review in which data about the murrelet was gathered and analyzed. The proposal to list the bird as threatened begins a 1-year review period during which public comment about the proposed listing will be sought before a final decision is made.

The Service found that critical habitat for the marbled murrelet is not presently determinable, but is seeking additional information regarding critical habitat for this species. Studies are continuing in all three states to gather additional information on distribution, habitat use, and nest site characteristics of the murrelet.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's determination that the marbled murrelet be proposed as a threatened species in the three states is based primarily on impacts on the species posed by loss and modification of its nesting habitat in old-growth and mature forests.

Numerous other species residing in old-growth are candidates for listing as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Adoption of effective conservation strategies in the Pacific Northwest for old-growth dependent species could benefit these other candidate species, as well as the marbled murrelet.

Service Director John Turner said, "I believe it is essential that we strive to develop conservation strategies that protect species before the need for listing occurs. This is the only way that we can make the most of our chances to preserve our precious wildlife heritage without encountering the frictions that sometimes arise in the Endangered Species Act process."

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The marbled murrelet's range extends from Alaska's Aleutian Islands, Kodiak Island, and Kenai Peninsula, south to central California. Some murrelets winter as far south as southern California. Current population estimates are about 2,000 birds in California, 2,000 birds in Oregon, and 5,000 birds in Washington. Elsewhere within the species' range, between 20,000 and 45,000 birds are estimated to exist in British Columbia and between 50,000 and 250,000 birds in Alaska.

The Service's finding cites the loss of old-growth and mature Douglas fir, mixed conifer, and coastal redwood forests as a principal threat to the murrelet. While California, Oregon, and Washington comprise about a third of the murrelet's overall range, less than 10 percent of its population currently exists there. This reduced population in the southern portion of its range is attributed to loss of nesting habitat. Most murrelet nesting habitat in the three states is believed to be found on Federal and state lands.

The marbled murrelet is an elusive bird once it comes ashore to nest. In southeast Alaska and points south, it nests in dense coniferous forests. Twelve tree nests have been documented in North America, all located on large moss-covered branches of old-growth and mature trees. Murrelets may not reproduce every year and pairs lay only one egg in a nest, making it unlikely the population can recover quickly once numbers have been depleted.

In 1990, two such tree nests were discovered in Oregon, both in old-growth Douglas fir found on Federal land. Data gathered following the discovery of both of these new nests, as well as field data from related studies in 1989 and 1990, were used in the Service's evaluation that led to the proposed listing.

Canada listed the marbled murrelet in British Columbia as a threatened species in 1990, and the States of California, Oregon, and Washington have recognized it as a species of special concern.

The Fish and Wildlife Service was petitioned by the National Audubon Society in 1988 to list the marbled murrelet as a threatened species in California, Oregon, and Washington. That year the Service found the petition contained substantial information, and it conducted a status review for the species in 1989. To incorporate new data about the murrelet from expanded research efforts that year, the status review period was reopened in 1990, with the concurrence of the petitioner.

A complete description of the Service's proposal to list the marbled murrelet as a threatened species in Washington, Oregon, and California will be published in the Federal Register the week of June 17, 1991. Public comments about the proposal will be taken for 90 days thereafter and should be sent to: Field Supervisor, Portland Field Station, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2600 S.E. 98th Avenue, Suite 100, Portland, Oregon 97266.