

News Release



Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Pacific Regional Office
911 NE 11th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97232-4181
Phone: 503/231-6121 Fax: 503/231-2122
<http://pacific.fws.gov>

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Contact: Doug Zimmer, 360-753-4370

Marbled Murrelet Remains Threatened

Seabird still needs protection, agency says

Citing continued declines in the population of marbled murrelets in Washington, Oregon and California, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said today the small seabird continues to need the protection of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and will retain its status as a threatened species.

The decision to deny a petition to delist the Washington, Oregon and California population of marbled murrelets is based on strong science and recognition that the tri-state population is distinct from marbled murrelets in Canada and Alaska.

“Overwhelming evidence shows marbled murrelets are in deep trouble in Washington, Oregon and California, and we cannot deny them the protection they need,” said Tom Strickland, the Department of the Interior’s Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. “This decision strongly reflects the Obama administration’s deep commitment to basing ESA decisions on the best available science.

The marbled murrelet spends much of its life at sea but nests mostly in old-growth forests along the northern Pacific Coast. A 2009 Fish and Wildlife Service review of the species showed the population from San Francisco Bay to the Canadian border declined as much as 34 percent between 2000 and 2008. South of San Francisco Bay, the population dropped 75 percent between 2003 and 2008. About 18,000 birds are estimated to remain in the three states.

“We are committed to continuing our work with partners to stop this downward trend and get this species on the road to recovery,” Pacific Region Director Robyn Thorson said.

A petition filed in 2008 by the American Forest Resource Council and others sought to remove the Washington, Oregon and California population of marbled murrelets from the list of federally protected species. The petition cited a 2004 Fish and Wildlife Service review that concluded the tri-state population did not qualify as a Distinct Population Segment (DPS) under the agency’s DPS policy. The 2004 conclusion was based on a Bush administration determination that there were not significant differences between the birds or their protections in Washington, Oregon and California, and those in Canada.

In 2009, the Service conducted another review of the species, concluding the tri-state population is discrete at the international border.

“We believe the DPS analysis in 2004 was fundamentally flawed,” Thorson said. “The petitioners’ arguments for delisting are based on that flawed analysis.”

The 2009 analysis found that the Washington, California and Oregon population of marbled murrelets is discrete at the international border due to the following reasons: 1) the coterminous United States has a substantially smaller population of murrelets (approximately 18,000) than does Canada (about 66,000); 2) breeding success of the murrelet in Washington, Oregon and California is considerably lower than in British Columbia; and 3) there are differences in the amount of habitat, the rate of habitat loss and regulations between the two countries.

The species faces a broad range of threats that are contributing to population decline. Although some threats such as entrapment in gillnets and lack of regulatory mechanisms have been reduced since the species was first protected, most threats remain, including loss and degradation of nesting and foraging habitat, and high rates of predation. The species also faces newly identified threats such as abandoned fishing gear, harmful algal blooms and changes in the quality of the bird’s marine food supply. Given the species’ small and declining population and the scope and magnitude of the ongoing and new threats, the Service concluded the species continues to meet the definition of a threatened species under the ESA. Therefore, removing the murrelet from the list of threatened and endangered species is not warranted.

The Washington, Oregon and California population of the marbled murrelet was federally listed as threatened in 1992 and critical habitat was designated in 1996. In 1997, the Service approved a recovery plan for the marbled murrelet that specified actions necessary to halt the decline of the species. The plan is available online at <http://endangered.fws.gov/recovery/index.html>

The marbled murrelet is a small diving seabird of the Alcidae family. Murrelets spend most of their lives in the marine environment where they forage near shore and consume a variety of prey species, including small fish and invertebrates. In the murrelet’s nesting habitat on land, the presence of platforms (large branches or deformities) in mature trees is the most important characteristic of their breeding habitat. In the breeding season, murrelets use large, mature trees in old-growth forests, contiguous areas not fragmented, and forests close to the marine environment.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.