

How I rescued a marbled murrelet

by Noah Nelson (with help from Chloe Nelson and Cindy Sherlock)

My name is Noah. I am eight years old and am home schooled in Kasilof. On August 25th, our family had just sat down for lunch when I heard my dog, Kasi, barking and growling. I jumped up and ran outside to see what the matter was. She was chasing after a baby bird. I caught Kasi and put her in our garage. By that time, my mom had come out to see what was going on. She had me get a box to put the baby bird in.

We weren't sure what kind of bird we had but thought it might be a loon or murre. It was black and white and had a pointy beak and webbed feet. We live near the Kasilof River, but we didn't think we were close enough to have a water bird in our yard. Whenever I tried reaching in the box to pet it, it would open its beak and lunge at my finger so I thought it was mean. I tried giving it some bread but it wasn't interested.

My mom made a few phone calls to find out where we could take our bird. I've rescued a lot of birds that have hit our windows, but this one was special and we didn't know how to care for it. She found out the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in Soldotna would care for our bird. We met Liz Jozwiak at the Refuge and she said they would find out what kind of bird we had and would care for it.

Liz later told us the bird we found was a Marbled Murrelet, one of only three that she has treated in 15 years of doing bird rehabilitation at the Refuge. The other two Marbled Murrelets were discovered in 1991, one was found in Clam Gulch on August 9th (later released in Homer) and the other was found at Ward's Cove in Kenai on August 19th (it did not survive). All three of these murrelets were juvenile birds. Kathy Kuletz at the Migratory Bird Management office in Anchorage told us that our photos showed the egg tooth, as well as other juvenile plumage characteristics. Egg teeth are a growth at the tip of the bill that baby birds use to break out of their shell. Kathy thought that our murrelet had fledged from the nest within the past week because the egg tooth disappears from older juveniles.

Liz sent our murrelet to Cindy Sherlock, an experienced and licensed bird rehabilitator. Cindy knew what to do immediately. Even before an injured or

starving bird receives any food, it needs to be rehydrated with fluids. Cindy used a tube to give our murrelet fluids directly into its stomach. This is known as the gavage technique, and can be very stressful to small birds especially if not done properly.

Once the murrelet was well on its way to getting rehydrated, Cindy then needed to provide it with nutrition. So what do murrelets normally eat in the wild? Cindy contacted veterinarian Pam Tuomi at the Sea Life Center in Seward, and she was able to provide not only the necessary information, but also sent us some tiny fish to feed it. The murrelet really went for those fish!

Since murrelets spend the majority of their lives in the water when they are not nesting, Cindy provided our murrelet with a large tub of water. The murrelet's keel, or breastbone, needed to be cushioned from the hard ground when it was not in the water. So Cindy rigged up netting material to suspend the murrelet when it was not swimming in the pool.

Dr. Tuomi discovered a bump or nodule on the elbow joint of the murrelet's right wing that prevented it from flying. It may have collided with something and injured its wing on its journey from the nest to the Cook Inlet. Dr. Tuomi determined that our murrelet would not survive if it was released back into the wild like we had hoped. Cindy has already found it a new home at the Seattle Aquarium.

We looked up information on the internet to learn as much as we could about these birds and here are some facts we discovered. Marbled Murrelets are a marbled brown color in the summer and black and white in the winter. They have short, compact bodies and strong wings that allow them to "fly" underwater catching anchovies, herring and other small fish.

Marbled Murrelets can be found along coastal waters from Alaska to California and Russia to Japan. They are listed as a threatened species in Oregon, Washington, and California, but they are abundant in Alaska. Only 160 nests have ever been found! They are small seabirds that nest inland in coniferous trees or on cliffs. They lay one egg per year which is incubated for about 28 days. Once the eggs hatch, the parents feed the chick a small fish two or three times

per day (not bread.) The parents fly out at dawn and return at dusk so they are rarely seen.

This has been a fun experience and I've learned a lot. And if you ever find a bird that is injured or too young to care for itself, the Refuge is the place to take it.

Noah and Chloe Nelson are home-schooled children in Kasilof who enjoy learning about wildlife. Cindy Sherlock is a licensed wildlife rehabilitator who volunteers her expertise at the Refuge. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.