

## NOTES

### A NOTEWORTHY RECORD OF XANTUS'S MURRELET NEAR TOFINO, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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While traveling by boat 3.2 km west of Tofino, British Columbia on 1 October 2006, I noted a murrelet on the water. Taking a second look, I noticed that the pattern on the neck was different from the winter plumaged Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) I would have expected to see. I slowed the boat and examined the bird using eight power binoculars. The line of demarcation on the head and neck separating the black from the white ran down in an even line and lacked the white "collar" of the familiar Marbled Murrelet. The bird did have some white on the back and on the flanks directly behind the secondaries as in the marbled. It also tended to hold its tail in the air, as does that species. My conclusion at the time was that it was likely a Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*).

I immediately began attempting to photograph the bird. Light conditions were less than ideal. The sun was low because it was only 20 or 30 minutes before sunset and was largely obscured by clouds. Using a 35 mm camera with 200 mm lens, I took several shots of the bird, in between dives, at f 2.8

and 1/250<sup>th</sup> second (Figure 1). When the photos came back from processing there was only a hint of white to be seen on the back. My conclusion was that this was due to the rather poor light conditions that originated from low on the horizon. I still held to the opinion it was a Long-billed Murrelet. I scanned the photos and posted them on a birding website and e-mailed one or two to R. Wayne Campbell. Later, I received word that three ornithologists who had seen the photos, Harry R. Carter, Ken H. Morgan, and Dr. Spencer G. Sealy believed that the bird was actually a Xantus's Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus hypoleucus*). Remembering the white on the back and on the flanks, I discounted that possibility. It should be noted that the white is much less visible in the scanned photos than in the originals.

A month or so later I decided to check the original transparencies again and scrutinized them very carefully using a high powered loupe. To begin with, I noticed that the bird in the photo shows the low profile of a Xantus's Murrelet. I initially attributed that feature to the fact that I was snapping photos immediately after it emerged from a dive. The small strip of white visible on the back appears to be on the upper scapulars or possibly between the scapulars and the mantle, not on the lower scapulars as would be the case with the Long-billed Murrelet. Had I amplified the extent of the white in my own mind I wondered? I noticed too that in the photo, the area immediately in from the upper mandible (lores) appears entirely black as in Xantus's Murrelet. The little white wedge in front of the eye is visible and also suggests Xantus's Murrelet. Indeed, it is these



**Figure 1.** Two profiles of the Xantus's Murrelet photographed 3.2 km west of Tofino, British Columbia on 1 October 2006, the fifth record for the province. (Adrian Dorst). BC Photo 3524.

last two characteristics that convinced me that I had been mistaken in my earlier identification of this bird.

To summarize, all features visible in the photos are consistent with this being a Xantus's Murrelet, except for the white behind the secondaries (flanks?) and a thin strip of white in the area of the upper scapulars. I do not have an explanation of why this should be present on a Xantus's Murrelet but then it is too thin and too high up for a Long-billed Murrelet. Field-guides tend to simplify identification and differentiate one species from another with clear and simple rules. However, in the real world, it is often not so straightforward.

This incident demonstrates once again just how important it is to photograph rarities whenever that is possible and deposit the documentary evidence in the British Columbia Photo File for Wildlife Records, or other credible repository.

There are four previous records or reports for British Columbia, one in summer and three from the autumn period (Figure 2). The first record (an unverified report), overlooked by Campbell et al. (1990), was a sighting of a single bird (based on a drawing) by Charles J. Guignet 29-32 km west of the Goose Group on 14 July 1948 (Carter et al. 2005).

The next two occurrences, both specimen records from 1971, were reported in pelagic waters between Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands by Crowell and Nehls (1972) and Sanger (1973). An adult female was collected after it died colliding with a ship about 92 km southeast of Moresby Island in southern Hecate Strait (51° 15' N, 129° 58' W) on 25 October. The specimen was preserved, catalogued (UWBM 26813), and deposited in the University of Washington Burke Museum in Seattle. A second murrelet, only a partial skeleton, was collected on 16 November and also added to the same vertebrate collections (UWBM 16809).

On 15 September 1998, two Xantus's Murrelets were observed by the author during a pelagic birding trip about 16 km southwest of Tofino. Details of the

sighting are on file with the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies, but photos are lacking.

The Xantus's Murrelet breeds on the Channel Islands in southern California and southward on islands off the west coast of Baja California. During the post-breeding period, from late summer through autumn, part of the population regularly disperses northward along the Pacific coast with some birds reaching central British Columbia (Wahl 1975, Karnovsky et al. 2005).

In Washington State the Xantus's Murrelet is regularly reported in offshore waters between late July and mid-October each year (Wahl et al. 2005) and it is likely that the species occurs, although more irregularly, in pelagic waters off British Columbia during the same period.

Both subspecies, *S. h. scrippsi* and *hypoleucus* occur in British Columbia (Drost and Lewis 1995, Carter et al. 2005).

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**Figure 2.** Annual occurrence of the Xantus's Murrelet in British Columbia, 1948-2006.

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#### ***About the Author***

Adrian is an experienced naturalist and well known nature photographer who has lived on the west coast of Vancouver Island for the past 36 years. His photographs have appeared in over 50 books as well as calendars and environmental posters. Go to [www.adriandorst.com](http://www.adriandorst.com) for more information.

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