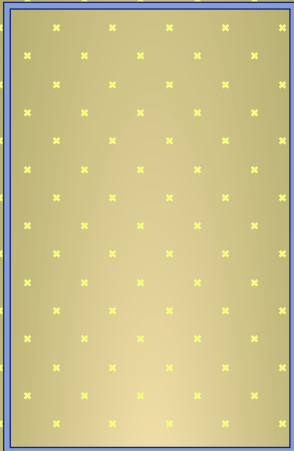


INSIDE

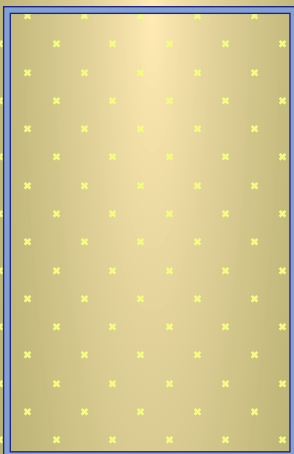
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PHOEBASTRIA NIGRIPES

A Marbled Murrelet Fledges at Big Basin

By Alex Rinkert, Stephanie Singer, Steve Singer



Most birders are introduced to the Marbled Murrelet on boat trips—a small alcid bobbing on the ocean, diving when the boat approaches. Sometimes they're close enough to shore to be seen with a scope.

For those landlubbers who venture into the old-growth forest in the hours before dawn, the murrelet may reveal its second persona. As it flies to and from the ocean, through the giant trees, you may hear its eerie “keer-keer” calls to its fellow murrelets. Find a spot with a view of the sky and you may see them flying like giant bumblebees.

There is a third facet of the Marbled Murrelet, unseen by most. If its forest flights are successful, the bird will find a suitable large branch high in an old-growth tree and lay a single egg. It is a cause for celebration any time that an active murrelet nest is found. The one that Alex Rinkert found this summer in Big Basin Redwoods State Park was extra special, since 98% of the park was burned in the CZU Lightning Complex Fire, and most of it burned with high intensity.

Alex tells the story:

During a dawn survey at the park on July 1, I observed an adult murrelet carrying a fish while flying over a small patch of green, lightly burned forest. The murrelet circled below the canopy and flew up to its nest on a large, moss-covered limb of a Douglas-fir, where a downy chick received its morning meal. A small group of researchers monitored the chick intermittently in the following days as its downy plumage was slowly replaced by juvenal feathers, and, by July 9, the chick had attained full juvenal plumage and was ready to fledge!

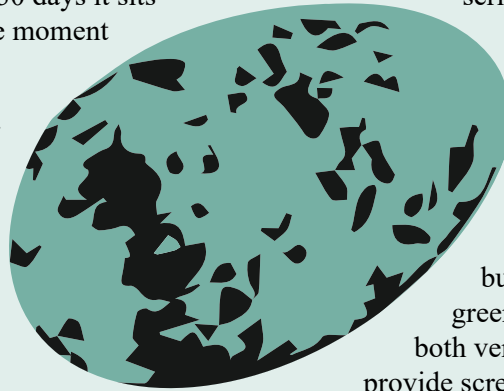
That evening, the nest was staked out in anticipation of a fledging. An adult brought the chick one last fish, and then with a “full tank” and in fading light, the chick launched off the limb and took its first flight, 24 minutes after sunset! Renowned local photographer Frans Lanting and crew were on hand, and despite the challenging light and distance, they captured the first ground-based footage of this species fledgling from a tree nest. We left that evening feeling ecstatic, tired, and relieved.

Observations of murrelets over the years have revealed how amazingly fine-tuned their instincts are. The young chick first sees the world as a collage of branches and sky, and has only



This drawing, by Ken Carlson, appeared in The Wilson Bulletin in 1975.

taken a few steps around its nest. For 30 days it sits alone on the branch, and then when the moment is right, it preens off all of the downy feathers revealing its black and white juvenal plumage. After a few bouts of wing-flapping, it jumps off the nest branch and flies rapidly towards the ocean. Alone. No adults around. Once on the water—and it has never before even *seen* water—the fledgling knows how to dive and fly underwater to catch fish!



THE SCBC CONNECTION

Santa Cruz County has been a key place for solving the mystery of the Marbled Murrelet's nest. In 1930, long before the Santa Cruz Bird Club was founded, a young Les Hawkins was birding along railroad tracks just south of what is now Henry Cowell State Park. He saw two murrelets chasing each other and calling repeatedly. He noted: "*...I know of no cliffs up the canyon from whence they might have come but many dead stubs full of holes. They are small enough—why can't or why aren't they nesting in holes in trees??...Just see if this prophecy doesn't come true.*" He was wrong about nesting in cavities, but right in that they nest in trees— a bizarre location for a seabird.

There were sporadic observations of Marbled Murrelets in the Santa Cruz Mountains from the 1930s through the early 1970s, including a nest search in 1957 by members of the newly formed Santa Cruz Bird Club and other naturalists. They searched along the banks of Pescadero Creek, but failed to find a nest.

It wasn't until 1974 that a nest was found— in a Douglas-fir at Big Basin Redwoods State Park. After two more nests were found at Big Basin in 1989, the Santa Cruz Bird Club joined forces with Steve and Stephanie Singer to search for nests in 1990. Success came in May 1991, when 14 club members met at dawn at Big Basin to stake out potentially suitable nest trees. Bonnie Bedzin and Rebecca Cull made the key observation that led to finding the fourth Marbled Murrelet nest ever found in California. Unlike the other three nests, this one was successful! With nine club members observing, the chick fledged successfully on the evening of July 3. Santa Cruz Bird Club members were the first people to ever observe the fledging of a Marbled Murrelet in person!

In the intervening years, 16 more nests were found in the Santa Cruz Mountains. However there have been no

serious nest-finding efforts in the park in the last 20 years. The parents of this year's nest had to find their way to the breeding area over a landscape that was much different than what they were used to. Their chosen tree was in a rare, tiny 9-acre patch of lightly burned forest that still had some green canopy. The nest itself lacked both vertical and horizontal branches that provide screening cover, and was much more visible than is typical. This year's chick somehow managed to avoid predation by corvids, perhaps because their numbers have been significantly reduced by the fire. Remarkably, the fledging of this year's nest occurred 30 years after Santa Cruz Bird Club members had witnessed the first ever fledging of this species from another tree only 500 meters away.

While there is much excitement about this year's nest, the severely burned old growth forest surrounding this tiny patch of remnant green canopy portrays a different reality. Nearly half of the potentially suitable murrelet nest trees at Big Basin were lost in the fire. Only time will tell whether this unique and endangered species can continue to breed in the rest of the park as the forest slowly recovers.

Links for more information:

Frans Lanting video of the fledge: www.vimeo.com/592467183/5149ad27c7

More about the fire's impact on Big Basin Redwoods State Park: www.scmcb.org

About the 1991 nest & fledge: https://santacruzbirdclub.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/MAMU_Suddjian_-1991_Albatross_V37.No_.1.pdf

About the 1974 nest (in Pacific Discovery):

https://archive.org/details/sim_california-wild_july-august-1975_28_4

(in Wilson Bulletin): <https://sora.unm.edu/node/3375>

About the 1957 search for a nest: https://santacruzbirdclub.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/MAMU_Anderson-1972-1_PacDiscovery-article.pdf



Marbled Murrelet nestling - Estrella Bibbey



*Adult MAMU, breeding plumage
- Beth Hamel*

What a wonderful bird is the murr'let chick,
He swallows fish whole – that's a neat trick.
From his nest in a tree, he flies straight to the sea,
In pitch dark, no ad'ult to guide it!

- Stephanie Singer



*Right:
Alex Rinkert with scope
Alex' MAMU sketch
Alex sketching*

