

MARBLED MURRELET: A FIRST MASSACHUSETTS RECORD

by Kathleen S. Anderson, Manomet Bird Observatory

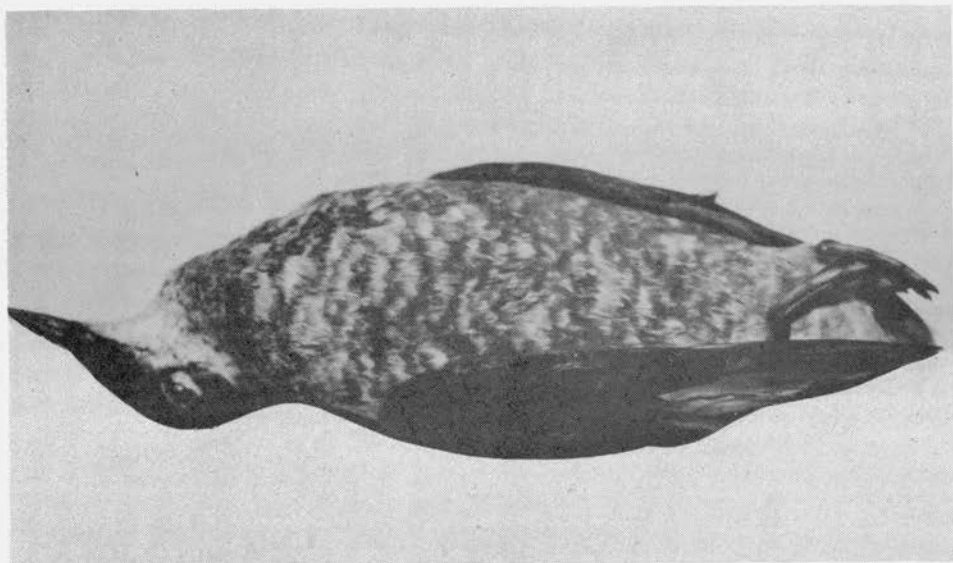
Massachusetts has come through again with another unexpected bird species. On September 17, 1982, a Marbled Murrelet of the Asiatic race (Brachyramphus marmoratus perdix) was discovered, freshly dead, in a garage 0.83 kilometer east of Great Quitticus, one of the Lakeville ponds. The circumstances of this first state record and other occurrences of this species away from the west coast of North America are quite inexplicable, but the details of such observations, as we know them, merit documentation.

At about 5 P.M. on September 17, Mrs. John Harrison returned to her home on Marion Road in Middleborough, 0.5 kilometer from Black Brook, a tributary to Great Quitticus Pond. The Harrisons have four cats, proven hunters, who habitually deposit their trophies inside the garage beside the steps to the house. On this evening she found no trophies; but twenty minutes later John Harrison reached home and discovered a bird beside the steps. He has no doubt that it was brought in by one of the cats although there was no human witness to the event.

With the aid of the Singer illustrations in A Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America, Mr. Harrison first thought it was a murrelet of some kind, but when he saw the ranges depicted on the maps decided that was impossible and passed the bird on to Mrs. Sherry MacDonald for her help in identification. Eventually the specimen was brought to me by Mrs. MacDonald. My initial identification of the bird as a Marbled Murrelet was subsequently confirmed by Kevin D. Powers and Brian A. Harrington, both of whom had seen live specimens on the west coast.

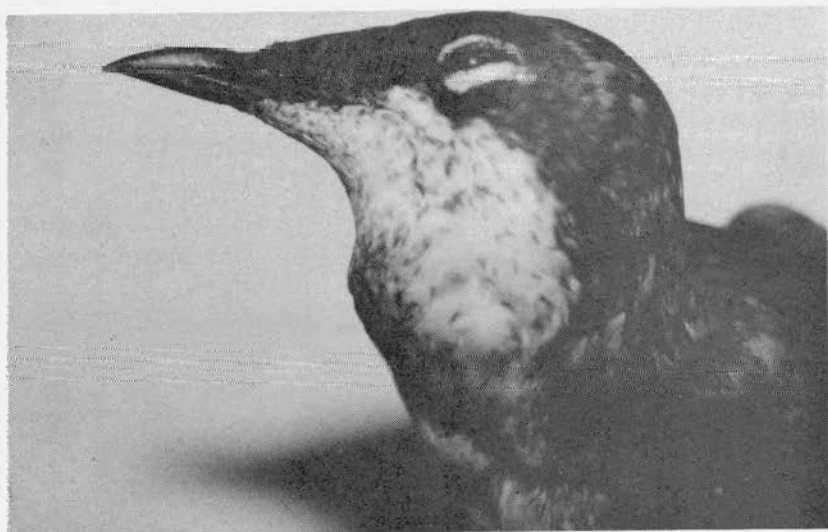
The bird was recently dead although rigor mortis had set in. Its plumage was intact except for a laceration at the neck. It was about eight inches in length and about the thickness of a large Mourning Dove, sans tail. The bird was large enough so that a cat would have had to carry it by the neck. It was in alternate plumage. The upper parts were dark brown and appeared almost black. The under parts were deep brown with a mottled appearance due to pale feather edges. It had a broken but thick white eye ring, and the cheek and throat appeared to be quite pale. Photographs of the bird appear on the following page.

The bird closely resembled the Asiatic specimen shown by Jehl and Jehl (1981) in American Birds, and its measurements conform to those of the Asiatic race of Marbled Murrelet (B. m. perdix). Careful examination also disclosed that the bird was in active primary molt out to the eighth primary. The two outermost primaries were old and heavily worn. It would seem the bird was flightless at the time of its death,



**Marbled Murrelet**

*Photo by Wayne Petersen*



**Marbled Murrelet**

*Photo by Wayne Petersen*

perhaps having come up on shore. We have to speculate that days or weeks earlier it had been flying over the Lakeville ponds and, for whatever reason - weather or physical condition, set down on one of the ponds, presumably Great Quitticus. The bird was thin and, at this writing, is still in a frozen state. It will be interesting to learn what, if anything, is found in the stomach. The bird is being sent to Dr. George Watson at the Smithsonian Institution for confirmation, at which time the skin will be made into a partial museum skin and skeleton, sex determined, and stomach contents identified.

The nominate (North American) race of the Marbled Murrelet (Brachyramphus marmoratus marmoratus) breeds on the northeastern Pacific coast from northern California to the central Aleutian Islands, nesting on evergreen limbs, but perhaps also ground-nesting in the treeless portions of its still little known Alaskan range. The Asiatic race, B. m. perdix, is found from the Kamchatka Peninsula to southern Japan. There have been no published records of perdix from either coast of North America. The most northern record of the Asiatic race is from the Bering Sea off the eastern coast of Kamchatka, but the closest Asian locality where the Asiatic race has been collected is the Commander Islands. Thus, the known breeding ranges of the two subspecies of the Marbled Murrelet appear to be geographically separated only by the Bering Sea, a distance of approximately 500 kilometers (Sowls, et al. 1978). The North American race winters south along the west coast of North America to southern California, and there are no records away from the immediate coastal region.

Spencer Sealy summarizes North American occurrences of the Asiatic Marbled Murrelet in the October 1982 issue of The Auk as follows:

- 1) Specimen in a Quebec museum, presumably collected April 13, 1913 at Montreal.
- 2) Specimen shot November 11, 1979 by a hunter in Quebec.
- 3) Specimen found dead ashore at Mono Lake, California, August 9, 1981.
- 4) Specimen shot on Lake Lemon, Indiana, December 1, 1981.

Sealy also mentions two additional specimens in museums labeled "from the Bering Sea" which may have been taken within North American waters. Incredibly, yet another Asiatic Murrelet reached North America this fall. A bird, now in the Denver Museum of Natural History, appeared on a pond in Colorado in early October where a non-birder photographed it at point-blank range. The picture appeared in a local paper where it was "discovered" by someone who recognized it as other than a puddle duck (Chandler S. Robbins, personal communication). Why it should be the Asiatic race which has been found in the interior and east coast of North America is still an unsolved problem.

Suffice to say, it may be just as well that this first state record for the Marbled Murrelet was in the form of a specimen. Had I seen a small, dark, short-necked bird paddling about on a Lakeville pond and then had the temerity to call it a Marbled Murrelet, would anyone have believed me?

#### REFERENCES

- Jehl, D. R. and J. R. Jehl, Jr. 1981. A North American Record of the Asiatic Marbled Murrelet (Brachyramphus marmoratus perdix). American Birds 35: 911-912.
- Robbins, Chandler, S., Bertel Bruun and Herbert S. Zim. 1966. A Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America. Golden Press.
- Sealy, S. G., H. R. Carter and D. Alison. 1982. Occurrences of the Asiatic Marbled Murrelet Brachyramphus marmoratus perdix (Pallas) in North America. The Auk 99(4): 778-781.
- Sowls, A. L., S. A. Hatch and C. J. Lensink. 1978. Catalog of Alaskan Seabird Colonies. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Biological Services Program, FWS/OBS-78/78.

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