

The Ohio Cardinal is devoted to the study and appreciation of Ohio's birdlife. The Ohio Cardinal is published quarterly.

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The Ohio Cardinal
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The Ohio Cardinal exists to provide a permanent and timely record of the abundance and distribution of birds in Ohio; to help document the occurrence of rare species in the state; to provide information on identification of birds; and to provide information on birding areas within Ohio.

The Ohio Cardinal invites readers to submit articles on unusual occurrences of birds, bird distribution within the state, birding areas in Ohio, identification tips, and other aspects of ornithology. Bird reports and photographs are welcome from any area in the state. Report forms are not a necessity but will be supplied on request. Unusual species should be documented--documentation forms are also available on request from the Editor, Publisher, and Records Committee Secretary.

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Cover: Northern Shrike, CVNRA (Summit Co.), 11/8/96.
Photo by Gary Meszaros.

A Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*) in Ohio by Victor W. Fazio III and Dan Webb

Dan Webb, a Heidelberg College student in biological sciences, undertook a survey of waterbird usage at the local Seneca County upground reservoir (variously known as Clyde Reservoir or Beaver Creek Reservoir) during the autumn migration of 1996. In the course of his survey he recognized an alcid, likely a murrelet, around noon on November 12. He contacted Fazio shortly after and we subsequently observed the bird from 1:30 to 2:00 p.m. under worsening weather conditions, but allowing the identification of a "Marbled Murrelet". Discrepancies in field characters compared with those depicted in the available field guides were immediately evident, such that further literature study that evening suggested the "Asian" race *perdix*, subsequently elevated to species status, and now known as the Long-billed Murrelet (Friesen et al. 1996). The bird cooperated in further study by staying through the evening of November 18, entertaining more than 300 observers from Ohio and surrounding states. Over the ensuing days, diagnostic photos and behavioral notes were obtained by the principal observers (the authors and H. Thomas Bartlett), combining for approximately 60 field hours.

Identification

The murrelet presented itself as a small, buoyant waterbird less than half the length of the Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) available for direct comparison. The distant black and white pattern and short-necked silhouette gave the quick impression of a short-necked Horned Grebe

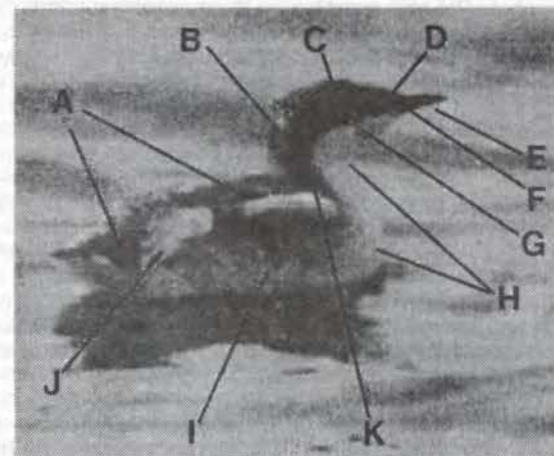


Long-billed Murrelet, Beaver Creek Res. (Seneca Co.), 11/13/96.
Photo by Victor Fazio.

(*Podiceps auritus*). Closer inspection revealed the slender, pointed, all dark bill, and a patterning of white (underparts) and black (upperparts) punctuated by broad white scapular lines unique to *Brachyramphus* murrelets in basic plumage.

[Editor's note: the following remarks pertain to the labeled image at the top of page 3].

A) The charcoal back could appear darker in direct sunlight, but was never as dark as the jet black wings. The back graded to sooty-gray on the rump, which was sometimes bluish in shadow/overcast conditions. The bird exhibited a contrasting browner hindneck and head which appeared as a dark chocolate color in shadow/overcast to a "coffee" color in warm low-angle sunlight. **B)** Pale nape patches were readily detected. Regarding this mark, Sibley (1993) notes that "at a distance this pale area combined with the straight border between dark and light on the sides of the neck creates a Pacific Loon-like (*Gavia pacifica*) appearance". This is a prominent field mark (in direct sunlight), notable in binoculars (8 x 42) from 100 meters (although cloudy conditions diminish this effect). There is a nice example photographed by T. Cardamone on Hallam Lake, Aspen, CO in September 1982 (Kingery 1983, p. 206). **C)** Eye-arcs were clearly evident in life, though proximity and the angle of viewing varied their appearance. They certainly did not hold the prominence seen in Lee Harper's photo of the Cornwall, Ontario bird (Di Labio 1996). An apparent Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) in Farrand (1988, p. 62) exhibits eye-arcs approximately equal to those of the Ohio bird, weakening this feature as a possible distinguishing character. Indeed, Erickson et al. (1995) observed among specimens that "there was complete overlap, with some *marmoratus* showing bold eye-arcs and some *perdix* showing indistinct eye-arcs". **D)** A structural bulge of the fore-skull could be clearly seen in life within 30 meters with binoculars (8 x 42). This was not rendered by Sibley in the Cornwall bird, nor is it evident in any *marmoratus* photo (n = 5) or drawing (n = 10) we have seen. This distinctive feature is noted in a drawing on p. 156 of Sealy et al. (1991) as a dichotomy between the two races (now species). However, in the photos I have seen (n = 4) of other *perdix* this feature is not in evidence, and while perhaps a real difference between the two species, it is still of dubious field value. **E)** The gonydeal process was readily seen at close distances (or Questar views at 40 meters), and was even remarked upon by some novice observers. Again, this feature is prominently distinguished in Sealy et al., but not elsewhere, to our knowledge. **F)** A completely dark loreal area on the Ohio bird is in keeping with Sibley's remarks noting "*perdix* being entirely dark above the gape". The Cornwall bird was intermediate in this character, while the December 1995 Humboldt Bay, CA *perdix* was "very limited" in this regard (Bailey and Singer 1996). However, that can also be said of the apparent *marmoratus* in Farrand (1983, p. 116 and 1988, p. 62). Indeed, this is simply not a *perdix* character; see Tim Zurovski's photo on p. 308 for apparent *marmoratus* in winter plumage- dark-lored and white-lored individuals side-by-side. Also view the fledgling on p. 310 (all in Campbell et al. 1990). Furthermore, the 1982 immature *perdix* from Colorado exhibits an obvious pale loreal area (Kingery p. 206). Additionally, there is an example on the World Wide Web (<http://www.teleport.com/~sei/images/bird.jpg>) of a dark-lored *marmoratus*.



G) The Ohio bird exhibited little color below the eye in keeping with the Cornwall bird, the Humboldt Bay bird, and the Aspen, CO immature *perdix*, but in contrast with the Farrand *marmoratus* and that in Stokes and Stokes (p. 215) and both individuals in Campbell et al., where much of the cheek is dark. This is further supported as a *perdix* character by Erickson et al. and Di Labio. **H)** The immaculate white underparts showed no spur of color off the neck to the breast; the latter character appears highly variable. A spur may be prominent in *marmoratus* (Stokes and Stokes), barely evident (Farrand 1983), or absent (Farrand 1988). **I)** The well-marked sides of the Ohio bird contradicts comments made on the Cornwall bird (Sibley) and Humboldt Bay bird (Bailey and Singer) and those of Erickson et al. as a *perdix* character. **J)** The prominent white patches on either side of the rump were visible from great distances. Present in both the Long-billed and Marbled Murrelets, it is curious that this mark is not depicted in the various field guides, with one notable exception being Godfrey (1986, Plate 40). Peterson (1990), Scott (1987), Harrison (1983), Robbins (1983), Sonobe and Robinson (1982), & Tuck and Heinzel (1980) all fail to depict these wing patches, but this is perhaps understandable given the apparent confusion over the features of *perdix* and *marmoratus*; leading to artist renderings that are an amalgam of characters. It is not uncommon, for example, for N. American Marbled Murrelets to be depicted with the long, slender bills of their Asian counterparts.

In distinguishing the Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*) and Marbled Murrelet (*B. marmoratus*) in basic plumage, Erickson et al. give weight to the "entirely dark hindneck, a narrow band of black below the

eye, and limited black on the sides of the breast" of *perdix*, as contrasted to *marmoratus* exhibiting a "nearly complete white nuchal collar, more black below the eye, and extensive black on the sides of the breast. Other plumage characteristics are inconsistent or are average differences only." Di Labio erroneously gives credence to the prominent white eye-arcs, while supporting the thinner black line below the eye in *perdix* as well as the details of the hindneck. In our review of the various photographs of *perdix* and *marmoratus*, we were able to find a disconcerting degree of variation in the appearance of the eye-arcs and the black on the sides of the breast, such that we cannot endorse these as distinguishing field characters. Erickson et al. further note that "some juveniles of *marmoratus* lacked extensive dark sides of the breast". We further reiterate that features of the lores and color spurs off the shoulder are useless in making a distinction between the two species. Pale nape patches and the fore-skull bulge warrant further study, both as to their variability and field integrity. Erickson et al. found only two specimens of *perdix* with this feature, yet every published photo mentioned here (representing five birds, including that in Warner and Pranty, 1995) clearly exhibit this feature. Erickson et al. further caution that "juvinal and transitional plumages of *marmoratus* may show nape patches if incoming white feathers appear there first". We do not share this caution, as it is doubtful that such white feathering would duplicate the "loon effect" described above. The longer bill in *perdix* may be a useful field character only for observers with comparative experience with Marbled Murrelet. An identification of *perdix* in Iowa (Dinsmore 1993) was based largely on an apparently long bill, yet was contradicted by an extensive white neck collar, a feature of *marmoratus*. The Iowa bird may therefore represent a hybrid or a unique inland record of *marmoratus* (Di Labio). In summation, there remain two clear *perdix* characters for identification from *marmoratus*-- the broad pattern of color covering the hindneck, and the thin black line below the eye. Next to the white scapulars and the white rump patches, the broad color of the hindneck (K) provided one of the stronger impressions upon sighting this bird and could offer a good distance character for *perdix*. However, Erickson et al. give caution to this character insofar as "specimens showed that some juvenile and molting *marmoratus* can have hindneck patterns suggestive of *perdix*". The identification of the Ohio *perdix* is based upon the combination of a long, slender bill, broad color to the hindneck, and the thin line of black below the eye exhibited by a bird not in transitional plumage.

Behavior

The bird seemed to enjoy good health throughout its stay, frequently diving, retrieving fish, and on one occasion, taking a brief flight across the reservoir (pers. comm. Ed Pierce). The bird's position in the reservoir was often coincident with that portion most exposed to wave action and along the northern (deeper) end. Waterfowl hunter activity along the southern edge may have provided further incentive for the bird to remain in the north basin; however, on at least one occasion the bird was seen swimming among the decoys set at the southern end. Dives appeared not only to function as foraging bouts, but served also to traverse great lengths of the reservoir. A systematic census of foraging bouts over several days revealed a mean of 18.4 seconds per bout (n = 30). The bird would resurface generally within 20 meters of the dive.

Traverses, however, would last approximately 50-55 seconds, with the bird resurfacing 200-250 meters from the dive point. In fishing, the bird brought up 3-5 cm. fish, swallowing them at the surface. It could be found fishing any time of the day but seemed to be most active toward evening. Most peculiar was the phalarope-like spinning occasionally exhibited. Usually counter-clockwise, the bird would make several rotations on the surface of the water, followed by an apparent foraging dive. It would be interesting to discover whether or not Marbled Murrelet engages in such behavior.

Appearance in Ohio

The Long-billed Murrelet normally winters at sea off Siberia's Kamchatka Peninsula south to the Sea of Okhotsk, off Hokkaido, Japan (Sonobe and Robinson). Yet the occurrence of the species, usually during late fall/early winter, in the central and eastern portions of the North American continent is not without precedent. There are approximately 15 other records away from the west coast (summarized in Di Labio), including recent records from Alberta (Moore 1995), Ontario (Sibley), N. Carolina (Davis 1995), Florida (four records since 1987, Warner and Pranty), and Colorado (two records, Traun and Percival 1997). This long-distance vagrancy has been examined by Sealy et al., who hypothesize that a weather scenario linked to the El Nino Southern Oscillation may be a causal factor. This involves an intense low pressure system over Alaska generating particularly strong westerly airflows. Although there was no El Nino event underway in 1996, a similar weather pattern was illustrated by televised radar maps in the three-four days preceding the discovery of the bird in Seneca Co., and was partially responsible for record lake-effect snows that buried much of the northeastern portion of Ohio. Unfortunately, we have no more than this suggestive information to offer as an explanation for the appearance of this species in Ohio. We can suggest from the proliferation of records in recent years that it is not likely the last appearance of Long-billed Murrelet in Ohio.

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Very Like A Whale: A Lesson by Bill Whan

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius: By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale?
Polonius: Very like a whale.

Hamlet III.ii.392 ff

Birders who flocked to Seneca County in November 1996 to see a reported Marbled Murrelet had a good chance to contrast a real bird with its idealized version in the field guides. All of us had heard that the bird had been studied by experts, so there seemed no question about its identity; our simple mission was to find the bird, enjoy looking at it, and add it to our lists. This nine-day wonder seemed like easy pickings, floating and diving on an open, diked, public reservoir. As it was, I had a chance to talk with more than 20 observers on the banks of that reservoir, and learned that many found their mission more complicated than they had anticipated.

Some eager observers looked fairly uncritically at the bird. Hadn't it already been identified? It had to be one of the alcids-- a small, almost neckless black and white diving bird, whose shape and color, lack of extensive white behind or above the eye, and obvious white "racing-stripe" along the scapulars distinguished it, or so the field guides stated, from all others as a Marbled Murrelet in basic plumage. That was that. If a few things looked odd, well, they weren't odd enough to make it look like anything else. Check it off the list.

Others, myself included, had read that all of the score or so Marbled Murrelets recorded east of the Mississippi had proved to be of the Siberian race, acknowledged as distinguishable in the field, and moreover rumored soon to be recognized as a separate species. Photos and drawings of this race helped us to prepare for what to look for in the Seneca County bird, and these distinctions seemed borne out by our observations. The bird, we concluded, was not a Marbled Murrelet at all, but possibly a new species, far rarer in the US. While perhaps we knew more than others about what to look for, we also obediently scanned for what we'd been told to notice. Finding these marks, we were easily satisfied. Others perhaps hadn't done as much homework, but like them we followed the book.

Among better birders, many looked puzzled by what they were seeing. They kept trying to get better looks, and consulted their field guides frowningly. These observers seemed less than immediately enthusiastic with the find, and they lingered to talk it over with others. They seemed to think the bird was anomalous: it had no partial white neck collar, no apparent area of white above and behind the bill, and hardly a hint of that sharp blackish extension of the upperparts' color from the shoulder onto the breast. It didn't look like the photos or paintings of the Marbled Murrelet; it didn't really look like anything in the guides. One wondered about the smooth and uninterrupted demarcation between black and white on the head, throat, and breast-- something like a Pacific Loon's,