

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

SCRIPPS'S MURRELET

Synthliboramphus scrippsi

Family: ALCIDAE
B241

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

In California, Scripps's murrelet (*S. scrippsi*) is a fairly common breeder on the Channel Islands, where it occurs from March through July (Garrett and Dunn 1981). The state's entire population of 3500 is restricted to this area; 95% breeds on Santa Barbara Island. The remaining 5% nests in small colonies on Prince Island, Sutil Island, East Anacapa Island, Snag Rock, and Gull Island (Sowls et al. 1980). After breeding, the species moves northward. In fall and winter, it is observed most often in Monterey Bay (McCaskie et al. 1979). Scripps's murrelet was formerly considered the northern race of Xantu's murrelet (*S. hypoleucus scrippsi*). The southern race, formerly (*S. h. hypoleucus*), now called Guadalupe murrelet (*S. hypoleucus*), is a rare visitor to southern offshore waters in late summer and fall (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Larval fish are important in the diet; northern anchovies, Pacific sauries, and rockfish are the most frequently taken prey at the Channel Islands (Hunt et al. 1979). Northern anchovy is a particularly critical prey species; availability may affect breeding success (Hunt and Butler 1980). Usually forages in pelagic waters adjacent to island colonies (Sowls et al. 1980). As all alcid, forages by diving and pursuing prey underwater.

Cover: When not incubating eggs or foraging, usually found at sea in daylight hours. May light on offshore rocks and roost in cliff crevices at night (Hoffmann 1927).

Reproduction: Breeds in large colonies on rocky, undisturbed islands (Harrison 1978). Nests in rock cavities or crevices along, or near, cliff ledges. Also has been recorded nesting in hollows under dense brush, in agave foliage, in vacant rabbit burrows, under old pelican nests, and in debris (Harrison 1978, Hunt et al. 1979). Nest is merely a hollow or scrape on the ground, with no lining (Harrison 1978).

Water: No known requirements for fresh water.

Pattern: For successful breeding, requires rocky, undisturbed islands with productive marine waters nearby.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, circadian activity. In breeding season, in daytime, forages at sea or stays at nest (Sowls et al. 1980). Nest site selection, incubation shift changes, and fledging occur at night (Hunt et al. 1979).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Post-breeding dispersal apparently is northward. Found near mainland waters after breeding (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Most winter on pelagic offshore waters from the Monterey area south; only occasionally seen as far north as British

Columbia (Cogswell 1977).

Home Range: On Santa Barbara Island, during nesting period, adults foraged 2-14 km from the island (Drost and Lewis 1995).

Territory: On Santa Barbara Island, average distance between nests was 5 m (range = 0.15-40m, n=172), depending on the distribution and size of suitable caves, crevices and shrubs (Murray et al. 1983, as cited in Drost and Lewis 1995)

Reproduction: Lays eggs from early March through late June, with a peak from early April through early May (Hunt et al. 1979). Hatching and fledging occur from mid-April through August, with a peak from mid-May to late June (Hunt et al. 1979). Monogamous, colonial nester (Harrison 1978). Lays 2 eggs as clutch; occasionally a single egg (Harrison 1978). Incubation duties are shared by both parents; eggs are incubated for 41 days (Hunt et al. 1979). Highly precocial young fledge at about 2 days (Sowls et al. 1980). Flightless, downy young leave the nest at night and swim out to sea with parents (Hunt et al. 1979).

Niche: Peregrine falcons, western gulls, deer mice, and island foxes are all natural predators (Sowls et al. 1980). Peregrine falcons occur only as migrants on the Channel Islands; probably not a serious threat (Hunt et al. 1979). Santa Barbara and Anacapa are the only islands without foxes, possibly accounting for the large breeding colonies there (Sowls et al. 1980). Deer mice prey on eggs and possibly chicks, but evidently do not deter successful breeding (Hunt et al. 1979, Winnett et al. 1979). Feral rats on Santa Barbara Island apparently reduced the population from the turn of the century until 1975, when most feral rats were eliminated (Hunt et al. 1979). Vulnerable to oil pollution; an oil spill in the California Bight region in the breeding season would be disastrous because adults and flightless chicks would be concentrated near the colonies (Sowls et al. 1980).

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