Records Committee, Iowa Ornithologists' Union Printed: 07/17/93

Marbled Murrelet Record Number: 91-48
12 Dec 1991 Classification: A-D
Red Rock Resevoir, Marion Co., IA
*S. Dinsmore
IBL 62:56, 71, Dinsmore 1993

DOCUMENTATION: Stephen J. Dinsmore
LETTER
S. G. Sealy to James J. Dinsmore, 15 Dec 1992 [not reviewed by committee, Sealy did not respond to a request from the committee to review the record, but did review the article prior to publication at the request of the editor]
REFERENCES
Field Reports: IBL 62:56
Records Committee: IBL 62:71
Dinsmore, S. J. 1993. First record of a Marbled Murrelet for Iowa. IBL 63:1-2.
VOTE: 7 A-D
A-D, Excellent bird and a good document. Sorry I was an hour late.
A-D, Extraordinary sighting which was very well documented. Description of bill eliminates Ancient Murrelet, a more likely (!) species. Horned Grebes can look short-necked at times but I don't believe they would ever have white patches decribed.
A-D, The description seems to pretty clearly indicate Marbled Murrelet, and the accompanying analysis strongly supports the identification. At the very least, the ID is satisfactory for Alcid Sp. I concur with the observer that the greatest source of possible confusion is with Guillemot. I am voting A-D based upon the description provided, but strongly suggest that the committee put this out for outside review. I for one do not have any relevant experience with these species, except for knowledge that they are difficult to separate even in their expected range. It does appear that there is some precedent for wandering inland, but certainly not enough to consider this an expected vagrant in Iowa.
A-D, The characteristics seems to describe the winter plumage Marbled Murrelet on page 117 of The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding. The Forster Tern shaped black bill, white scapular patch, very fast wing beat, and nearly complete white collar are diagnostic. Size and bill shape eliminate most water birds including petrels, auklets, and guillemots. Pigeon Guillemot has a similar shaped bill, but holds it parallel to the water and is too large to be the described bird. Xantus', Craveri's, and Crested Murrelets have similarly shaped bills but would show no white scapular patch. In addition, the Marbled Murrelet has established an inland vagrancy pattern, whereas none of the other similar birds have.
A-D, The field notes and sketch, description of thought process and subsequent events, and analysis of the literature for field marks and vagrancy are convincing to me. Sealy et al. establish vagrancy based on 10 specimnes and 3 sight records. Sealy calls the sight records "probable", but does he mean

probably Asiatic race or probably Marbled Murrelet? I would recommend that we send this record to Sealy for his opinion. I have some hesitancy based on rarity and brevity of observation by a competent observer who has little experience with alcids, but the evidence seems compelling to me.

A-D, Excellent detailed description of bird in question. Drawing very similar to photo in Seabirds (Harrison) as mentioned in description. Article in Western Birds is enlightening. El Nino seems to be important in records of this species inland in N.A. We have had a strong El Nino-Gulf of Alaska low pressure system flow this winter. This record follows prior patterns of vagrancy for this species. An excellent study by Dinsmore.

A-D, Good details and discussion provided indicate a winter plumage Marbled Murrelet. The Sealy article mentioned indicates a limited vagrancy of the species. Peterson's Western Birds guide shows an accidental sighting in Colorado. A Kittlitz's Murrelet was reported on the Iowa Birdline to be in Chicago during the Dec 1991-Jan 1992 period. This is quite a fascinating record!

IOWA BIRD LIFE

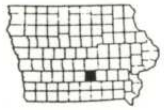
Winter 1993

Volume 63, Number 1

CONTENTS

FIRST RECORD OF A MARBLED MURRELET FOR IOWA

STEPHEN J. DINSMORE



At 3:15 p.m. on 12 December 1991, Brian Warson and I observed a basic-plumaged Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) at Red Rock Reservoir, Marion County. The bird was swimming alone in a large area of open water near Whitebreast Cove on the south side of the reservoir. We watched the bird with a 20-60 power spotting scope until 3:24 p.m. as it swam westward along the south shore of the reservoir, about 200 meters offshore.

When I first saw the bird, I thought it was a Horned Grebe. But after watching the bird for about a minute, it was apparent that I was looking at a small alcid. The short neck, head posture, and conspicuous white patches on each flank were very unlike a grebe. I studied the bird for the next nine minutes, at which time it flew a short distance, dove, and never reappeared. Size was hard to judge, since there were no other birds for direct comparison. I estimated the bird to be the size of, or slightly smaller than, a Horned Grebe. The overall posture and shape of the bird was very reminiscent of a loon, except that the bird had a shorter, thicker neck and a larger head. The head was held tilted slightly upward, like that of a cormorant. The bird rode very low to the water, often disappearing behind wave crests for periods of a few seconds. The bill was almost equal to the length of the head, looked black, was straight, and was quite thin and pointed at the tip. The bill shape reminded me of that of a tern (i.e., Forster's). The forehead, crown, and cheek were black. Eye color was not noted. The mantle, wings, uppertail, and back of the neck were also black. The chin, throat, underparts, and undertail were white, with the white color extending posteriorly around the midneck, forming an almost complete white collar. The most conspicuous markings on the bird were the two white oval-shaped patches on each side. To me, the patches appeared to be about the same length and ran parallel to the waterline. The posterior patch was clearly a flank patch. The anterior patch, however, was more intriguing. During the brief look I had of the bird in flight, I did not notice the exact position of the white patch I saw. In later consultation with field guides, I learned that this patch is formed by the white scapulars, which show up in flight as a thin white line at the base of each wing. I was not able to confirm this fieldmark in flight. The bird had a distinct shape in flight: chunky body and very thin, rounded wings. The underwings, as seen in flight, appeared pale, though definitely not as pale as the underparts. I was not able to see the feet and legs when the bird was flying. The bird flew with very rapid wingbeats and low to the water during the short flight it made. After the bird flew and was not immediately relocated, I left to try to notify other birders. Brian Warson remained to continue to look for the bird but never relocated it.

On the basis of the above features, I identified the bird as a winter-plumaged Marbled Murrelet. The small size of the bird eliminates all of the large alcids from consideration, such as murres, Razorbill, and guillemots. Dovekie, Ancient Murrelet, and all of the auklets differ from this bird by having shorter, stubbier bills. Separation from other murrelets, especially Kittlitz's Murrelet, is based on the presence of two obvious white patches on each side of the bird, a dark cap that included the eye, and to a lesser extent by bill shape. Kittlitz's Murrelet has a shorter bill than this bird had.

91-48

Marbled Murrelets are extremely rare vagrants in interior North America. The North American subspecies *B. m. marmoratus* breeds along the West Coast of North America but is not known to wander inland. The Asiatic subspecies *B. m. perdix*, which nests along the coast of Siberia and northern Japan, is known from specimens in interior North America (Jehl and Jehl 1981, Sealy et al. 1991). Sealy et al. (1991) list ten extralimital specimen records, all *B. m. perdix*, and three other inland sight records that could not be classified as one subspecies or the other, but were assumed also to be *B. m. perdix*. Based on these records, the timing of vagrancy appears to be late summer/early winter. Monthly records were as follows: July (2), August (5), September (1), October (1), November (1), and December (3). Records were widely scattered and occurred in Alaska (1), California (4), Colorado (1), Indiana (2), Massachusetts (1), Florida (1), Saskatchewan (1), Quebec (1), and Newfoundland (1). The two subspecies are separated by, among other features, the length of the exposed culmen (Sealy et al 1992), Sealy et al. 1991). *B. m. perdix* has an exposed culmen length greater than 18 mm. While the chance of a Marbled Murrelet reaching Iowa seems remote, it should be noted that this bird occurred at a time when such records might be expected. Also, the murrelet I observed appeared to have a bill longer than those pictured in many field guides, indicating to me that the bird may have been *B. m. perdix*. Such a sighting would concur with other inland occurrences of Marbled Murrelets. This is the first record of this species from Iowa or the Upper Midwest.

LITERATURE CITED

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.

Sealy, S. G., H. C. Carter, and D. Alison. 1982. Occurrences of the Asiatic Marbled Murrelet [*Brachyramphus marmoratus perdix* (Pallas)] in North America. Auk 99:778-781.

Sealy, S. G., H. R. Carter, W. D. Shuford, K. D. Powers, and C. A. Chase III. 1991. Long-distance vagrancy of the Asiatic Marbled Murrelet in North America, 1979-1989. Western Birds 22:145-156.

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EARLY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS IN IOWA

JAMES J. DINSMORE

Christmas Bird Counts (hereafter CBCs) are one of the most popular birding activities in North America. Since these counts were begun in 1900, participation has increased greatly. In 1991, about 43,500 individuals took part in about 1,650 counts in the United States, Canada, and Latin America. Despite this interest, little has been written about the history of CBCs in Iowa. Starting with the 1937 count, an annual summary of Iowa CBCs has been published in *Iowa Bird Life*. A summary of 20 years of Iowa CBCs (1937-1956) was the first summary of long-term CBC data for Iowa (Brown 1957). However, other than a list of the counts (Pierce 1938), no one has summarized data from Iowa's CBCs prior to 1937. The goal of this paper is to summarize those data and to compare the results of those counts with information from recent Iowa CBCs.

METHODS

I systematically went through back issues of *Bird-Lore* from 1901 to 1937 and extracted information on all Iowa CBCs. I also collected data on a few CBCs that were published in *Iowa Bird Life* from 1931-1937 but not in *Bird-Lore*. For each CBC, I compiled data on the year and location, the number of species seen, and which species were seen. To make the counts more comparable to recent counts, I excluded reports of a few species where I considered the identification questionable. Thus all reports of Golden Eagle, Ferruginous Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Great Gray Owl, and Chipping Sparrow were excluded here. I assume that a "Hoot Owl" was probably a Great Horned Owl but excluded it too. In following current practice, I combined all reports of meadowlarks as meadowlark species. There were few reports of shrikes, mostly Northern Shrike, and I left them as they were originally reported.

RESULTS

The first CBC in Iowa was made by Rett Olmstead of Decorah on 25 December 1903. He saw nine species and 34 individuals. No more CBCs were done in Iowa until 1906 when counts were held at Cedar Rapids and Waukon. Grinnell and Cedar Rapids held counts in 1907, and National and Wall Lake held counts the next year. The number of CBCs per year gradually increased (Tables 1 and 2), and at least one CBC has been held in Iowa yearly since 1906.

From 1903-1936, a total of 170 CBCs (158 reported in *Bird-Lore* and 12 in *Iowa Bird Life*) were held in 36 Iowa towns and cities. Thirteen of those counts were held at least five times (Table 3) and comprise 75% of the counts. Counts were run only once at 11 sites. Many of the counts were started under the leadership of a prominent Iowa birder. Thus long running CBCs in such small towns as Winthrop, Pierson, Ogden, and Wall Lake are a testament to the endeavors of Fred Pierce, Wier Mills, Walter Rosene, and John A. Spurrell respectively.

A total of 95 species were seen on those counts (Tables 1 and 2). These include the typical winter residents one expects to see in Iowa along with a variety of rarer species. Only four species (Hairy Woodpecker, American Crow, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch) were seen on at least one Iowa CBC in all 32

91-48

91-48

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December 15, 1992

Dr. James J. Dinsmore
Editor, Iowa Bird Life
Department of Animal Ecology
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa 50011

Dear Jim:

I have looked over the note in which the Marbled Murrelet record for Iowa is recorded. I have no doubt that the bird was a Marbled Murrelet. The only inconsistency in the observation is the "rounded wings" when in fact the species' wings are pointed. However, from 200 m away that would be a field mark difficult to discern. The observers seemed to have been very careful in their documentation of the record.

The Kittlitz's Murrelet has a bill shorter than the nominate race of the Marbled Murrelet (see Sealy et al. 1982).

I would like my co-worker, Mr. Harry R. Carter, to look over the notes, too. He can be reached at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, 6924 Tremont Road, Dixon, CA 95620 USA.

All the best in 1993.

Best regards,

Spencer

S.G. Sealy
Professor

SGS/ud
Encl.

91-48

DOCUMENTATION FORM

Species: Marbled Murrelet
Number: 1 winter plumage
Location: Red Rock Reservoir, Marion Co.-off Whitebreast Cove
Habitat: large patch of open water on reservoir
Date: 12 Dec 1991
Time: 3:15-3:24 p.m.
Observer: Stephen J. Dinsmore 2600 Glen Burnie Raleigh, N.C. 27607
Others who saw bird: Brian Warson, Donnellson, IA

Description of bird(s): At 3:15 p.m. on December 12, while birding the west side of Whitebreast Cove where it joins the main reservoir, I noticed a small, peculiar-looking bird swimming about 200 meters offshore. The bird was alone, and the nearest birds for comparison were a group of Common Mergansers 200-300 meters away. When I first saw the bird, I immediately thought Horned Grebe since that was the only small, black and white bird I would expect at this date and location. However, it was quickly apparent the bird was not a grebe. The neck was too short, it had a different head posture, and there were two white patches on each side of the bird which were very conspicuous and unlike the markings of a Horned Grebe. I was then convinced the bird was a murrelet, and I thought it was a Marbled because I remembered seeing photos of that species that looked a lot like this bird.

I was able to study the bird for the next nine minutes, at which time it flew a short distance, dove, and never reappeared. Initially, the bird appeared very small, about or slightly smaller than a Horned Grebe. There were no other birds for direct comparison. Throughout the observation, the bird swam slowly and dove 3-4 times. When diving, the bird sank under the water surface with no noticeable neck arch. A complete description of the bird is as follows. The overall posture and shape of the bird was very reminiscent of a loon, except that the bird had a shorter, thicker neck and a larger head. The head was held like that of a cormorant: head tilted upward at an angle of about 10-15 degrees. The bird rode very low to the water, often disappearing behind wave crests for periods of a few seconds. The bill was almost equal to the length of the head, looked black, was straight, and was quite thin and pointed at the tip. The bill shape reminded me of that of a tern (i.e. Forster's). The forehead, crown, and cheek (including the eye) were black. Eye color not noted. The back of the neck, mantle, wings, and uppertail were also black. The chin, throat, underparts, and undertail were white, with the white color extending posteriorly around the midneck, forming an almost complete white collar. The most conspicuous markings on the bird were the two white oval-shaped patches on each side. To me, the patches appeared to be about the same length and ran parallel to the waterline. The posterior patch was clearly a flank patch. The anterior patch, however, was more intriguing. During the brief look I had of the bird in flight, I did not notice the exact position of the white patch I saw. In later consultation with field guides, I learned that this patch is formed by the white scapulars, which show up in flight as a thin white line at the base of each wing. I was not able to confirm this fieldmark in flight. The bird had a distinct shape in flight: chunky body and very thin, rounded wings. The underwings, as seen in flight, appeared pale, though definitely not as pale as the underparts. I was not able to see the feet and legs when the bird was flying. The bird flew with very rapid wingbeats and low to the water during the brief (roughly 100 meters) flight it made.

After the bird flew and was not immediately relocated, I left to try to notify other birders. Brian Warson remained to continue to look for the bird, but never sighted it again. The first (and only) birders I reached were the Armstrongs. I informed Eugene that I had found what I though was a Marbled Murrelet at Red Rock Reservoir. Later that evening, after consulting the NGS Guide (the only field guide I had with me), I began to question my initial identification. The confusion was generated by the presence of the two white patches on the bird's side. The illustrations in the NGS Guide depict only one patch (the white scapular edges). Also, the bill length of the Marbled Murrelets in the NGS Guide seemed shorter than the length of the bill of the Red Rock bird. Having no other resources at hand, I began to think the bird had been a guillemot for two reasons: guillemots have more white on the wing, which might be interpreted as two patches on Pigeon Guillemot, and because of the slightly longer bill length of guillemots. The next afternoon (Dec. 13), while looking through the photos in Harrison (Guide to Seabirds of the World) with P. Petersen and T. Schantz, I can across the photograph (p. 168) of a winter-plumaged Marbled Murrelet. The bird in the photograph looked very much like the bird I had seen and described in my field notes. I realize now that I should have trusted my initial identification of Marbled Murrelet. My lack of experience with West Coast alcids, coupled with the fact that I had no immediate references with me other than a misleading illustration in the NGS Guide, caused me to incorrectly and temporarily identify the bird as a guillemot spp.

On the basis of the above features, I correctly identified the bird as a winter-plumaged Marbled Murrelet. In the two weeks after the sighting, I located several articles on the distribution and extralimital records of Marbled Murrelets in North America. The most interesting discovery was that all interior records verified by specimens have been of the Asiatic subspecies *B. m. perdix*, rather than the nominate North American subspecies *B. m. marmoratus*. Sealy, et al. (1991) list ten extralimital specimen records, all *B. m. perdix*. The three other inland sight records could not be classified as one subspecies or the other, but were assumed also to be *B. m. perdix*. Based on these records, the timing of vagrancy appears to be fall/early winter. Monthly records were as follows: July (2), August (5), September (1), October (1), November (1), and December (3). The two subspecies are separated by, among other features, the the length of the exposed culmen (Sealy, et al. 1982; Sealy, et al. 1991). *B. m. perdix* has an exposed culmen length >18 mm. While the chance of a Marbled Murrelet reaching Iowa seems remote, it should be noted that this bird occurred at a time when such records might be expected. Also, the murrelet I observed appeared to have a bill longer than those pictured in the NGS and other guides, indicating to me that the bird may have been *B. m. perdix*. This would be in line with other inland occurrences of Marbled Murrelets, and would explain the seemingly larger bill I observed on the Red Rock bird.

Similar species and how eliminated: The bird was clearly an alcid. The small size rules out the murres, Razorbill, and guillemots (see earlier discussion). The long, thin bill eliminates Dovekie, Ancient Murrelet, and all of the auklets. The bill shape, dark cap that included the eye, and presence of two white patches on each side eliminates all other murrelets, especially Kittlitz's.

91-48

Viewing conditions and equipment: Viewing conditions were very good with overcast skies. Estimated viewing distance was 200 meters. I used a Kowa 20-60x spotting scope.

Previous experience with species: I had never before seen a Marbled Murrelet, or for that matter any murrelet/auklet. I have had limited experience with all of the East Coast alcids, especially Dovekie and Razorbill.

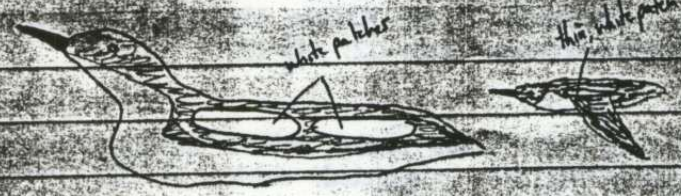
References consulted:

NGS Field Guide to the Birds of North America
Harrison A field Guide to the Seabirds of the World
Harrison Seabirds
Farrand Western Birds
Armstrong Guide to the Birds of Alaska
Jehl, D. R., and J. R. Jehl, Jr. 1981. A North American record of the Asiatic Marbled Murrelet (B. m. perdix). American Birds 35: 911-912.
Sealy, S. G., H. C. Carter, and D. Alison. 1982. Occurrences of the Asiatic Marbled Murrelet (B. m. perdix) in North America. Auk 99: 778-781.
Sealy, S. G., H. R. Carter, W. D. Shuford, K. D. Powers, and C. A. Chase III. Long-distance vagrancy of the Asiatic Marbled Murrelet in North America, 1979-1989. Western Birds 22: 145-155.

How long before field notes made: written during observation (copy enclosed)
How long before this form completed: written 23 Dec 1991

91-48

3:15–3:24 pm Marbled Murrelet
Red Rock Res., Marin Co. – whitebreast – winter plumage



- small alcid, appeared to be near size of Horned Grebe
- general posture and body shape similar to a loon, except head and neck fatter
- most obvious feature - 2 white, oval-shaped patches on each side, parallel to water
- bill dark, slender, slightly less than head length
  - also straight and pointed
- dark-colored (black) on top of head, back of neck, mantle, and down to wings and flanks
- rest of bird white
- dark color included eye
- bird dove 3 or 4 times during observation
- head held slightly tilted up like Pacific or Red-throat Loon
- bird "sank" into water when diving - no noticeable neck arch
- bird rode very low to water, even lower than a loon
- bird seen briefly in flight - some white (patch) on upperwing and a pale surface to underwing
- flew a couple of inches off water with very rapid wingbeats