

# Lesser Known Than Spotted Owl, Murrelet Impacting Logging Too

Rob Manning | Aug. 4, 2012 12:55 p.m. | Updated: Aug. 6, 2012 6:38 a.

What rare bird has stopped seven logging projects in Oregon? If you're assuming it's the Northern Spotted Owl, you're wrong.

A high-pitched call belongs to the marbled murrelet. It's a threatened seabird. But it nests on the branches of big, old trees. Rob Manning went looking for the bird and came back with this report.

Before I took to the woods to find a marbled murrelet, Ann Forest Burns warned me about the experience. She's with the timber industry group, the [American Forest Resource Council](#).

She explained, "One goes out before light, lies on the ground, or even in the middle of a logging road, somewhere you can see up into the sky and watches for something the size of a robin flying at 50 miles an hour."

That description sure made finding a murrelet seem like a long shot.

She said, "A murrelet survey does sound like a traditional snipe hunt."

Noah Greenwald with the [Center for Biological Diversity](#) and my guide into the Coast Range this very early morning said laughing, "I don't know what she means by that, actually."

He added, "I don't think we have snipes in Oregon, do we? I think that's like a Midwest and eastern bird, the common snipe."

Greenwald eventually got the joke. But he rejects the notion that the search for a murrelet is a proverbial 'wild goose chase.'

We didn't lie down on a logging road. We stood. And craned our necks at the sky for an hour and a half peeking through a break in the trees. We strained to hear a passing murrelet.

Even though we enhanced the recording, the bird call is still tough to hear.

Greenwald laughed, "See, it's no snipe hunt."

But we never actually saw a murrelet.

Few people have led as many murrelet surveys as Oregon State University expert, Kim Nelson. More than twenty years ago, Nelson was a graduate student tracking birds in Oregon's coast range, when she heard something she didn't expect.

Nelson said, "I was on Marys Peak, which is 30 miles inland, and I heard a seabird call. And I thought 'well, that's strange, what is a seabird doing here?' And I found out by observing them the next year that they were indeed, marbled murrelets coming into the forest."

By 1994, when the ambitious Northwest Forest Plan was adopted, the marbled murrelet -- along with the Northern Spotted Owl - became a key indicator species of healthy, old forests. The spotted owl of course, spurred years of rancor.

Ann Forest Burnssaid, "My sense is the marbled murrelet is the new 'you can't cut it' bird. Fast replacing the spotted owl."

Forest Burns' group, the American Forest Resource Council has been through years of litigation over the Northern Spotted Owl. Now the council is suing to block a federal map of protected murrelet habitat.

Environmental groups have also sued over the marbled murrelet. They're alleging the [Oregon Department of Forestry's](#) logging plans could harm habitat, in violation of the Endangered Species Act. ODF responded by postponing the seven sales in question.

County officials whose coffers depend on timber revenue weren't happy. David Ivanoff with Hampton Lumber is disappointed, too.

Ivanoff said, "Really compromises the domestic, family-owned forest manufacturing sector's ability to maintain orderly operations. So, my hope is that the litigation around this can be resolved in a very timely manner."

Scientists agree that murrelets prefer nesting on the wide branches of old growth trees. Finding which trees they're actually using, though, can be hard – even for an experienced researcher, like Kim Nelson.

Nelson explained, "I had five of my researchers standing around a known nest tree -- where we knew where the nest branch was - no one saw the bird go in, but we all saw it come out. But we had a video camera on the tree, and of course the video picked up the bird going in."

The challenge of finding murrelets is one reason researchers don't bother to pin down exactly where a murrelet is nesting. Instead, if they observe a murrelet circling or approaching a tree, they protect the entire stand. Deanna Lynch with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says that also helps the bird.

Lynch said, "We find that it's more likely to be successful if it's a larger area that gives them multiple nesting locations, that's protected from predators, it's protected from blowdown ..."

Back in the Coast Range, Noah Greenwald walks me by an area that was logged about six years ago, and suffered major wind damage the following spring. The state calls this a Marbled Murrelet Management Area.

Greenwald said, "All this brush that's come up underneath feeds a lot of the nest predators, jays and corvids and really isn't something that benefits murrelets, and almost certainly harms them."

State foresters argue murrelets had disappeared from this area. Environmentalists say the state should find more room for the bird, not less.

The timber industry argues the benefits of maintaining this land for the bird are hard to quantify. But logging losses are not.

However, while the bird may be difficult to find in its old growth nests, it's easy to find in its other habitat: the open ocean. Scientists do surveys there, too.

Craig Strong, a marine biologist with Crescent Coastal Research says he's been doing murrelet surveys at sea since 1992.

"A good day in a high-density area would be 80 to 150 birds. So, a lot of them."

It's his surveys -- not searches in the forest -- that have found the bird's population is dropping close to four percent a year.

Timber industry rep, Ann Forest Burns says what's happening in the ocean may also be the reason the murrelet is declining.

"There's a problem at sea that's far greater than any in-shore problem they have," she said.

But Craig Strong says the importance of habitat is clear.

"If you look at murrelet distribution at sea along the West Coast of the United States, and the distribution of suitable habitat inland, there's a really strong relationship of where murrelets are, and where the remaining nesting habitat is," he said.

Strong says scientists are studying other factors like changing ocean conditions.

Ultimately, the courts may decide what happens to these woods.

And the guidelines for the so-called "snipe hunts" for the murrelet may change, too. The seabird group that drafted them in the first place is updating them. It may recommend more pre-dawn trips into the forest.