

Oregon increases protections for ‘enigma of the Pacific’

By Gillian Flaccus
Associated Press

PORTLAND (AP) — Oregon environmental officials on Friday increased protections for the marbled murrelet, a rare diving seabird known as the “enigma of the Pacific” because it lives and hunts in the ocean but nests far inland in the high canopy of mossy, old-growth forests.

The 4-2 vote by the Oregon Commission on Fish and Wildlife to boost the relative of the puffin from threatened to endangered status under state law was the latest development in a long-running debate about how to manage a secretive species that breeds in dense Pacific rainforests that are also prime logging grounds.

State environmental officials must now draft guidelines for ways to maintain bird population numbers, including possibly limiting logging in nesting areas owned, managed or leased by the state.

Logging interests reacted with dismay, calling the move premature and a further blow

to their industry. Timber harvests, once a powerful economic engine in the rural Pacific Northwest, have declined dramatically since the 1990s because of protections for the marbled murrelet and the spotted owl.

The murrelet lives along the Pacific Coast from Alaska’s Aleutian Islands to central California and was listed as threatened under federal law in Oregon, Washington and California in 1992. It is considered endangered by Washington state and California and is protected in Canada. It was listed as threatened in Oregon in 1995. It is not protected in Alaska.

In 2015, there were believed to be about 11,000 marbled murrelets in Oregon, but survey numbers are uncertain because the birds have only been counted at sea and are extremely elusive

in the forest, said Christina Donehower, strategy species coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Their short wings, perfect for diving, mean they must fly up to 40 miles per hour to stay airborne, she said.

State and federal protections for the marbled murrelet have meant less logging in the Northwest, but environmentalists say timber harvests on state lands have nonetheless damaged prime nesting habitat in Oregon. The unusual brown-and-white flecked seabird forages in the ocean but flies up to 55 miles inland to breed, laying a single egg in a mossy depression high in the forest canopy.

The species uses trees that are more than 80 years old as nest sites and has a 36 percent nest success rate in Oregon, Donehower said.

Nearly 80,000 acres (32,000 hectares) of this prime nesting habitat was lost in Oregon between 1993 and 2012 — about 9 percent, said Noah Greenwald, endangered species director for the Center for Biological Diversity. Twenty-one percent of that lost forest was on state or private land.

One demographic model showed there is an 80 percent likelihood the marbled murrelet will be extinct in Oregon by the year 2100, Donehower said in a presentation to the commission before the vote.

A coalition of environmental groups petitioned the commission two years ago to revisit the bird’s protected status after growing concerned about population numbers.

Jim Geisinger, executive

vice president of Associated Oregon Loggers, called the debate premature and said not enough is known about the species to determine whether it’s truly in jeopardy.

A major study of the marbled murrelet is currently underway at Oregon State University that could tell biologists more, he said.

“Most of the focus has been on the forest habitat where it nests. As more research is done, we believe the bigger issue is in the ocean where it feeds,” he said.

Rising water temperatures, low oxygen and ocean dead zones could be harming the species as much as deforestation, Geisinger said.

“These birds spend 80 percent of their time in the ocean,” he said.

Health officials concerned about STDs

BEND (AP) — Health officials in Central Oregon say they’re concerned about a big jump in the number of cases of sexually transmitted diseases.

The Bulletin reports that chlamydia cases have been rising since 2010, increasing from 432 cases in Deschutes County a decade ago to 675 last year. The number of cases in Crook County has nearly doubled and the number in Jefferson is up 52 percent.

Syphilis cases are also on the rise, and gonorrhea diagnoses rose from single digits in the early part of this decade to 65 cases in Deschutes County, 49 in Jefferson and 14 in Crook County last year.

Public-health officials say the evolution of HIV infection into a manageable condition has reduced the perceived risk of unprotected sex for many, allowing chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis to spread more rapidly. They say the emergence of dating apps for phones hasn’t helped.

Still, some of the increase might be attributed to better monitoring or easier testing for the diseases.

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