

# Findings concern researchers

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“What we’re seeing is essentially a population still struggling to persist through this epidemic and only just beginning to recover,” said Eric Owen, the citizen science coordinator at the Haystack Rock Awareness Program.

How and where the wasting disease strikes has always been patchy, said Sarah Gravem, a postdoctoral student at Oregon State University who has studied the disease since the first outbreak. Part of what makes the disease so hard to research is its untraditional way of spreading.

“The reason it is so hard to understand is because the virus is in the water, and it can move so easily,” Gravem said. “It can survive in sea water for awhile, move with currents. We don’t have a smoking gun of why it pops up here or there, or why it went to California and Washington first.”

Over the past two years, Gravem said the percentage of sea stars affected by the disease at survey sites along the Oregon Coast have settled at closer to 10 percent.

The figures reported in Cannon Beach in January are some of the earliest for the year, Gravem said, but could possibly be a worrisome indicator.

“Some populations are recovering, but they aren’t out of the woods,” she said. “If another outbreak occurred, it’d be concerning for the survival of the whole species.”

Many questions still remain about what aggravates the disease and why some areas are affected more than others. Historically, die-offs have been associated with warm ocean temperatures, but

Melissa Miner of

MARine — the Multi-Agency Rocky Intertidal Network — said the organization has not seen a correlation between higher water temperatures and sea star wasting.

“Other localized groups who conduct surveys felt they saw relationship, but we don’t see that as the case on the broad scale,” Miner said.

Haystack Rock, like many places along the coast, had a significant resurgence of sea stars in 2015.

The drop in wasting in early 2015 could be a result of a massive reproduction effort in response to the disease, Owen said.

“Most of the sea stars surveyed during this time were very young recruits,” he said. “The subsequent spike in percent wasting may correlate with a resurgence of the disease as many of these juveniles then became infected as well.”

While many Oregon sites have made a substantial recovery, Gravem said, the sea stars are smaller. The role sea stars play in the ecosystem is a “big mean predator,” she said, and their job is to eat prey like snails and limpets. If smaller sea stars are eating less, that could lead to an overabundance of snails and limpets, threatening the intertidal balance.

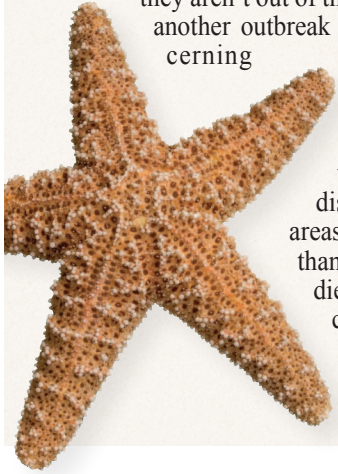
“Their ability to eat stuff is their ecological importance. A big star can eat more than a little sea star,” she said.

Overall, a higher population of juveniles point the fate of sea stars in a positive direction. But anomalies like Haystack Rock remind researchers there are still many unanswered questions.

“We don’t know what 2018 will hold,” Gravem said.



Left: Erick Owen, Melissa Keyser and Bonnie Neugebauer look for sea stars that have been decimated in recent years by a mysterious disease. Bottom: Lisa Habecker uses a flashlight to locate sea stars during a survey by the Haystack Rock Awareness Program in Cannon Beach.



# Oregon uplists marbled murrelet to ‘endangered’ status

By Mateusz Perkowski  
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Oregon’s wildlife regulators have “uplisted” the marbled murrelet from a threatened to an endangered species, which will likely result in stricter logging limits on state forestland.

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission voted 4-2 to upgrade protections for the coastal bird at its Feb. 9 meeting in Portland.

The change to endangered status means that scientists at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, which is overseen by the commission, must complete “survival guidelines” for the marbled murrelet by June.

Those guidelines are expected to further restrict logging in the bird’s suitable habitat, if existing protocols for state forestland are found to be insufficient.

Though Oregon’s version of the Endangered Species Act only applies to property owned by the state government, some private forestland owners worry the uplisting will effectively move Oregon toward more stringent regulations for all forests.

Bruce Buckmaster, a commission member who voted against the change, said he shared their concerns.

“They’re old enough to know it’s an ironclad law they will undoubtedly be affected,” said Buckmaster, a retired business owner.



COURTESY U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission voted to put the marbled murrelet on the state’s endangered species list.

Commission members originally considered ordering the agency to develop those survival guidelines without uplisting the species.

This proposal, set forth by commissioner Bob Webber, would have had the effect of creating a roadmap for the murrelet’s recovery that wouldn’t be legally enforceable.

However, the motion resulted in 3-3 deadlock vote, after which Webber changed his mind and supported the uplisting.

“I stated my preference but my least favorite option would be to do nothing,” said Webber, an attorney.

The federal government listed marbled murrelets as threatened in 1992 and Oregon extended the same status to the birds three years later.

Washington and California

consider the species endangered.

Marbled murrelets are known as the “enigma of the Pacific” because so little is still known about their life cycle, said Christina Donehower, strategy species coordinator for ODFW.

“Actual nests for marbled murrelets are extremely hard to find,” she said.

The birds forage for fish and invertebrates in the Pacific Ocean but lay their eggs in depressions formed on the branches of large conifer trees, typically found in “old growth” forests, she said.

Nests are found as far as 50 miles inland along the coast, meaning the species must travel up to 100 miles round trip to feed its young.

Large conifer habitat for the species in Oregon’s coastal forests declined by 58 per-

cent between 1936 and 1996, she said.

Populations of the bird sharply fell in 1996 but the trend was stable to slightly positive between 2000 and 2015, when 11,000 marbled murrelets were estimated to inhabit Oregon, Donehower said.

However, demographic models for the species project it has an 80 percent chance of extinction in Oregon within the current century, she said.

The species is doubly challenged because, apart from specialized forest nesting habitat, it’s vulnerable to fluctuating ocean conditions.

The bird’s reproductive potential is low to begin with, as it reaches sexual maturity relatively late and typically only lays one egg per year.

If food sources in the ocean are inadequate for fledging murrelets, the adults won’t attempt to breed, as occurred in 2017.

“They might not be as resilient as other species to changing conditions,” Donehower said.

Oregon State University is conducting a 10-year study of marbled murrelets that involves capturing the birds at sea, outfitting them with tracking tags and monitoring their forest nests.

Multiple woodland owners and timber industry representatives urged the commission against uplisting the species until the OSU research sheds more light on its life cycle.

Jim James, executive director of the Oregon Small Woodlands Association, said the uplisting would be premature before the science is better understood.

“It’s not urgent that you make a decision today,” he said. “Murrelet populations are stable.”

An uplisting will likely require private landowners to submit plans for protecting the bird to state regulators, despite assurances the change will only impact state forests, said Rick Barnes, OSWA’s president.

“We all know that’s not the way things work,” he said.

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# Whales remain a mystery

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developed guidelines, which are contained in a brochure.

Vessel operators are advised to stay 100 yards away from adult whales and 150 yards from calves to let the animals decide where they want to go and avoid “corralling” against the shore and not to spend more than 30 minutes in a whale’s vicinity.

Torres’ research also found a “very strong statistical link between where the whales forage and kelp.”

“If you’ve ever seen gray whales here, they’re often tucked right into the kelp, feeding around the kelp beds,” Torres said.

But, by lowering a GoPro camera on a stick and a plank-

ton net into the ocean, the researchers discovered another popular Oregon coast habitat: The local gray whales enjoy areas where there are more amphipods, small shrimp-like crustaceans.

“This was really surprising to us,” Torres said. “We aren’t able to prove they were eating the amphipods, but it certainly seems like they prefer the habitat where that amphipod was more abundant.”

By understanding where whales congregate during certain times of the year, scientists will know which habitats need to be protected, Torres noted.

In the past four years on the west coast, occurrences of whales getting entangled in fishing gear — especially

Dungeness crab gear -- have been increasing. Torres said. The entanglements endanger both the whales and the stability of the Dungeness crab industry, which brings in \$63 million a year to Oregon, she added. Several groups affected by the problem have organized the Oregon whale entanglement working group to develop ways to reduce the risk.

Torres’ team also is examining the long-term impact of ocean noise on whales. Preliminary data gathered by taking fecal samples and analyzing cortisol, progesterone and testosterone hormones from healthy whales feeding in low noise levels and other whales living in high noise levels should be available in another year or two, Torres said.



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