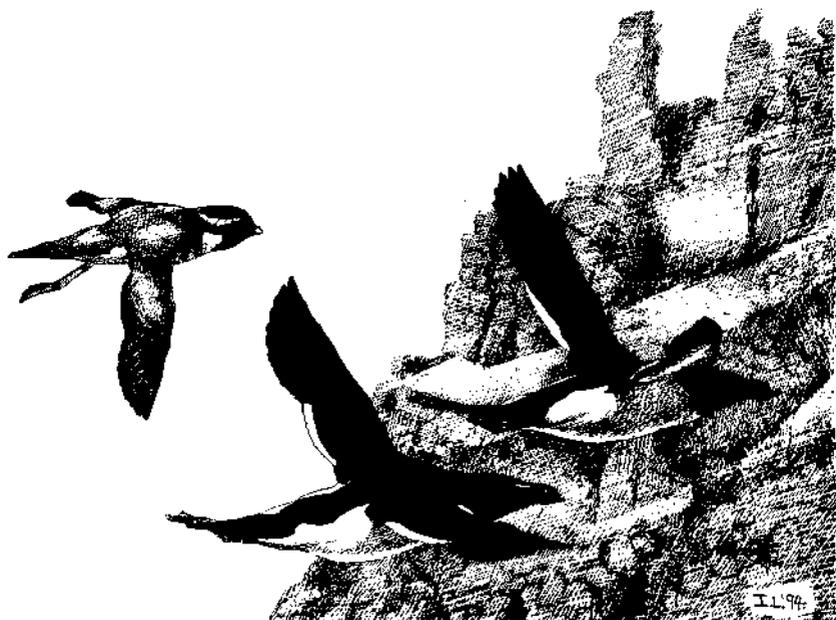


British Birds

VOLUME 87 NUMBER 7 JULY 1994



Ancient Murrelet in Devon: new to the Western Palearctic

John Waldon

While Fair Isle or the Isles of Scilly in autumn are undeniably exciting, gross rarities sometimes appear at the least expected times and in the most unlikely places and are all the more memorable for that.

The RSPB South West office organised a trip to Lundy, Devon, to see Puffins *Fraterecula arctica* on 27th May 1990. Most of the people who took the trip were delighted to be able to see Puffins and showed little or no interest in the finding of a small, 'auk-like' bird: but it was this that was to become the centre of attraction for the rest of that summer and the following one for hundreds of visiting birders.

At 14.15 BST, I was watching Common Guillemots *Uria aalge* and Razorbills *Alca torda* on the water in Jenny's Cove. Two Puffins were also seen. Keith Mortimer and Richard Campey were watching from farther south and I was surprised to see Keith heading quickly my way, as he ran up to report that they had been watching a small, auk-like bird in the bay. He said that it had a pale bill and was smaller than all the other auks.

By 14.25, I had walked to the spot where Richard and Keith were watching, and they had relocated the bird in question, flying far out to sea. I watched through Richard's telescope and saw the mystery bird flying with two Common Guillemots.

It was obviously smaller, not much more than half the size of the Common Guillemots; it looked long-winged, with plain upperwings except for darker primaries, and was basically dark above and pale below. It flew strongly, low over the water, usually ahead of the Common Guillemots, until all three landed together on the water. It swam low in the water, and looked small-headed, with the general appearance of a dark head and a dark horizontal line along the paler body. It soon dived and I lost track of it, feeling somewhat bemused.

At 14.45, I spotted a group of auks well out to sea, flying towards the land. One was noticeably smaller than the others, raising my spirits when I realised that the intriguing mystery individual had been relocated. All four - three Common Guillemots and what by now was evidently a murrelet - landed on the water about 200 m from the rocks. It was lost to view at 15.00.

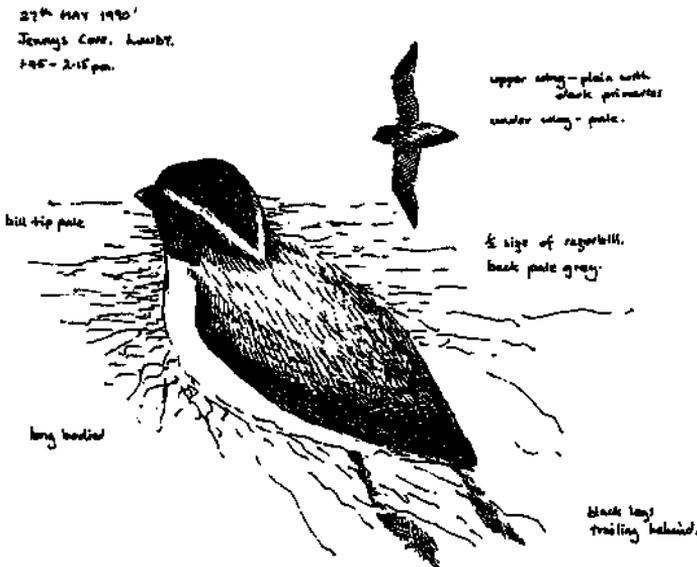


Fig. 1. Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*, Lundy, Devon, May 1990 (John Walden)

Richard and Keith had gone to find a reference book, so I watched the bird, using a 20× telescope, and made a drawing (fig. 1) and the following notes:

Back grey; very dark—black—edge to folded wing; pale below. Wings and tail similar length. Head smallish, black, with prominent white stripe [from above eye] meeting in V at nape. Bill small and pale (horn-coloured). Legs trailed behind and could be seen clearly. They were dark—almost black—and looked long and thin in the water.

The bird dived a few times and then flew out to sea accompanied by one Razorbill and a Guillemot. It was clearly only half the size of either. It was slender-looking, a 'long' bird, wings plain grey with markedly darker primaries. Its upper body was plain and it was paler below.

The lack of a good reference guide made positive identification difficult at the time: no-one had expected to find a murrelet on a summer visit to Lundy. When we borrowed and consulted Harrison's *Seabirds: an identification guide* (1983), the illustrations suggested the possibility of Japanese Murrelet *Synthliboramphus usumizusume* ('Crested Murrelet' in that book), because of the marked white V on the nape. It was only on the boat on the way home, when we were feeling somewhat mixed emotions of elation and confusion, that we looked at Tuck & Heinzel's *A Field Guide to the Seabirds of Britain and the World* (1978) and found, somewhat to our surprise, that the illustration of Ancient Murrelet *S. antiquus* clearly matched the bird we had seen. We were, then, confident that what we had seen was, incredibly, an Ancient Murrelet.

When we had returned to Exeter, Richard Campey sought the agreement of the Lundy Island Administration and then began the process of alerting the telephone bird-lines.

Most people's reaction was one of incredulity: even a suspicion that the whole thing was a hoax. One birder, who should perhaps remain anonymous, refused to believe the story at all until he came to my house, made me get my six-year-old daughter out of bed and quizzed her: once she had answered all his questions with the right replies and without evident prompting, he dashed off to book his boat trip for the next morning.

The Ancient Murrelet remained on the island until 26th June 1990, and returned in subsequent years from 4th April to at least 20th June 1991 and from 30th March to 29th April 1992. It was, for the most part, elusive and best seen very early in the mornings before it flew off to sea to feed. Although there were many who made more than one trip without success, most people, nevertheless, were eventually able to see the bird, which was surely one of the least expected additions to the West Palearctic list for many years.

John Waldon, c/o RSPB, 10 Richmond Road, Exeter, Devon EX4 4JA

Rob Hume (Chairman, British Birds Rarities Committee) and Dr Alan Knox (Chairman, British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee) have commented as follows: 'As well as the Little Auk *Alle alle*, there are 12 species of murrelets *Brachyramphus*, *Endomychura* and *Synthliboramphus* and auklets *Ptychoramphus*, *Cyclorhynchus*, *Aethia* and *Cerorhinca* which breed in locations scattered around the Pacific from California to Japan. Of these, most can be ruled out of the identification process by uniformly dark plumage, sharply black-brown plumage with white underparts extending to the chin, or generally scaly brown coloration.

Least Auklet *A. pusilla* has a white throat and a long white scapular line. Rhinoceros Auklet *C. monocerata* has a browner back and a narrow white supercilium, not extending to the nape, only in breeding plumage, when the bill is orange with a distinctive basal "horn". Parakeet Auklet *C. psittacula* has a very fine white streak behind the eye and a large, orange bill.

As the observers quickly realised, Japanese Murrelet is the most likely species to confuse with Ancient Murrelet, but the black throat is less extensive, and the white patch on the side of the nape is broader towards the rear and forms a large triangle on the hindneck, invaded by a narrow, pointed black crest from the rear crown. The impression given by the Lundy bird, of a large and conspicuous white V from eyes to nape, was more than to be expected from the relatively narrow and streaked supercilia typically illustrated, but unlike Japanese in detail. Also, the Japanese Murrelet's legs are yellowish, not black as was noted on the Lundy bird when it swam.

Thus, the identification was confidently made by the capable group of observers who first saw the bird, and later hundreds of people were able to repeat the process for themselves. The BBRC had a simple role, quickly processing and accepting the record without further debate (*Brit. Birds* 85: 532; 86: 496). Similarly, identification was accepted on a single circulation of the BOURC (*Ibis* 134: 213).

The Ancient Murrelet breeds in Asia from Commander Island and Kamchatka south to Korea and Japan, and in North America from the Aleutian Islands eastwards to Alaska and south to British Columbia and Washington state. Some disperse south in winter as far as California.

Ancient Murrelets are not known to be held in captivity.

Although at first sight an unlikely candidate for natural vagrancy to the Western Palearctic, there were already European records of two other small Pacific alcids: a Crested Auklet *A. cristatella* collected at sea north of Iceland in August 1912 and a Parakeet Auklet collected on Lake Vättern in Sweden in December 1860 (*BWP* 4: 229-231).

More than any of the other murrelets and auklets, there are numerous inland reports of Ancient Murrelets across southern Canada as far as Quebec and across mainly the northern United States to Ohio. The species has even been recorded in Louisiana, although not previously as far as the Atlantic. Marbled Murrelet *Brachyramphus marmoratus*, on the other hand, though rarer inland in North America, has been found on the Atlantic coasts of Newfoundland, Massachusetts and Florida (DeSante & Pyle, 1986, *Distributional Checklist of North American Birds*). Occurrence of Ancient Murrelets inland is most common in October and November and has been associated with storms offshore and poor visibility along the Pacific coast at the time. Fewer inland records have been reported in the spring, although some of the farthest east have been in March, April and May (*Wilson Bull.* 77: 235-242; *Condor* 68: 510-511). The species is apparently able to survive on fresh water for considerable periods.

There were larger-than-usual numbers of Ancient Murrelets along the coast from British Columbia to northern California in December 1989 and January 1990. There were also four inland records that winter: in Washington state on 2nd November 1989, on the Columbia River between Washington and Oregon on 23rd November to 3rd December 1989, in Michigan on 25th-26th November 1989, and in Idaho on 29th January 1990 (*Amer. Birds* 44: 94, 152, 297, 319).

Unlike Crested and Parakeet Auklets, which have already occurred in the Western Palearctic, the Ancient Murrelet does not occur in the Beaufort Sea or even in the northern Bering Sea. It is therefore not a likely candidate for vagrancy via a northern route.

A possible scenario is that the Lundy bird crossed North America after a coastal storm sometime between autumn 1989 and spring 1990. Finding itself on the "wrong" side of an ocean, the bird subsequently migrated east and north: Lundy is at the same latitude as British Columbian nesting areas. The Ancient Murrelet then may have joined the Lundy breeding auks at sea and followed them inshore.

Taking all this into consideration, the BOURC voted unanimously to place Ancient Murrelet in category A of the British and Irish List (*Ibis* 134: 213). Eds