

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE
LASKEEK BAY CONSERVATION SOCIETY

SPRING AND SUMMER 1992

INTRODUCTION

The Laskeek Bay Conservation Society continued its program of research and monitoring of seabirds in Laskeek Bay, encompassing the area between Lyell Is, Reef Is, Skedans Is and Louise Is. The season was extended into July, three weeks longer than last year which allowed us to start new programs with oystercatchers and forest birds as well as to almost double the number of volunteers.

LBCS joined with CWS, to assess the effect of rat predation on Ancient Murrelet colonies at Dodge Point and at Ramsay Is.

Interpretive tours were extended to four charter companies and two school groups.

Dr. Tony Gaston, in affiliation with Carleton University, conducted a ten day course in biology field techniques with two Ontario students.

The first accident on Limestone Is resulting in a serious leg fracture with medi-vac to Vancouver makes safety and rescue procedures a priority for LBCS.

LIMESTONE ISLAND FIELD PROGRAM 1992

Dr. Tony Gaston with volunteers began research work on Limestone Is on March 12, which is the earliest date that Ancient Murrelets have been confirmed present on the colony. The field program ran continuously from April 9 - July 3 for a total of 343 person days. Of these, 235 days were contributed by 26 volunteers who participated for periods up to three weeks. Eight of these were returning volunteers from last season and 15 were Queen Charlotte Islands' residents.

1. Ancient Murrelet Banding Program

Adult Ancient Murrelets were caught and banded in the pre-egg laying period, March 12-14, and also in the late and post-incubation period, May 20 - June 22. A total of 284

adults were captured including 66 birds retrapped from the previous three years. Six of the retrapped birds had been banded as chicks on Limestone Is in 1990.

A total of 674 chicks were weighed and banded in six funnel areas from May 12 - June 3. This compares to 561 chicks in 1991 and 873 in 1990 from the same catchment area. The rise in chick numbers over last year is probably a reflection of the removal of three raccoons from Limestone Island in the summer/fall of 1991. The period of chick departure was five days shorter than in 1991 and 11 days shorter than in 1990. Median date of chick departure was May 22/23 compared to May 23/24 in both 1991 and 1990.

A total of 25 burrows in two study plots were monitored with temperature probes throughout incubation and the occupant chicks and adults were banded just prior to fledging. Fifteen birds found in burrows were retraps found in the same burrows in 1990 and 1991. Eight of these birds were pairs. Fourteen new adults were banded in burrows. Of 25 burrows, 20 fledged successfully and five deserted. Of the five, one bird attempted incubation without a mate and eventually gave up, one pair attempted to incubate three eggs, two birds deserted after laying only one egg and one bird deserted due to our disturbance. One nest incubated only one egg.

2. Predation

Evidence of Ancient Murrelet kills was counted every six days along six 20 meter wide transects set up through the colony as in 1991 and 1990. Transects cover 17% of the colony area. Levels of predation were much lower than in the past two years. There were a total of 18 incidences of predation, mostly feather piles, as compared to 127 in 1991, many of which were headless carcasses from birds killed by three raccoons present on the island in 1991.

One fresh Ancient Murrelet carcass was found on June 11, but subsequent shoreline circuits by boat and scat transects on land carried out by Michelle van den Brink and LBCS staff did not locate any raccoons on East Limestone. There was no sign of dug up burrows this year compared to many dug burrows last year.

3. Staging Area Count

Each evening, numbers of Ancient Murrelets were counted by telescope on the staging grounds between Limestone Is and Low Is to give a relative index of numbers of nonbreeders visiting the colony. The highest number of birds seen to pass in a 10 minute interval was 359 on May 4. The tumultuous activity of flying and calling birds on that night was delightfully observed by LBCS staff and a group of visitors from the Maple Leaf. The last birds seen on the count were nine on June 24 after which most birds have left the colony area.

4. Visitor Interpretation

Four commercial tour operators brought a total of 61 visitors to Limestone Island. Each group was given an orientation talk and a tour of the chick-catching areas and burrow study plots. Many also observed and assisted with night catching and banding of Ancient Murrelets during the chick-hatching period. All expressed enthusiastic interest in the natural history of burrowing seabirds and in the research and conservation work.

Another 21 visitors, including MOE Conservation Officers, Haida Watchmen, kayakers and local people visited the island.

5. Educational Programs

Two school groups from Queen Charlotte Elementary and Secondary School camped at Vertical Point during the week of May 9 - 16. One group of four students and two teachers from the Kayak Club spent two nights on the colony and received a daytime tour of the colony and an orientation to field research methods. Six students from the grade 12 biology class accompanied by two teachers spent one night on the colony and observed chicks departing. They also saw adults and chicks being banded in burrows. Both groups participated in intertidal and plant life explorations with their teachers and LBCS staff.

Two B.Sc. graduates from Guelph University and from Carleton in Ontario completed study projects for university credit from June 22-July 3 under the direction of Dr. Tony Gaston, research director for LBCS. One student documented the comparative diversity of forest birds in different island habitats. The other student completed a study of food preferences of Black Oystercatchers in the Laskeek Bay area. Both reports will be included in the LBCS Scientific Report for 1992.

6. Forest Bird Banding Program

Dr. Tony Gaston spent 10 days on Limestone in late June-early July to review current projects and to initiate new ones. Three mist nets were set up near the cabin and water source and were monitored most mornings and evenings. A total of 126 birds were caught, making up 17 species of passerines and woodpeckers. The most common species caught were Golden-crowned Kinglets, Townsend's Warblers and Brown Creepers.

7. Marbled Murrelet Sea Surveys

Boat transects covering 43 km as set up in previous years were run every two weeks for a total of five replicates between April 28 and June 28 to count Marbled Murrelets and

other seabirds. On the April survey a total of 80 Marbled Murrelets were seen on the transects after which numbers increased sharply and remained fairly constant at 300-350 birds total on offshore and inshore transects. This number indicates that 1200-1500 Marbled Murrelets were present in the Laskeek Bay area in May and June, an increase over the last two years. No juveniles were seen.

The last two surveys were extended to include 50 km of shoreline and open water from Haswell Is to Tanu, Lyell Is and Kunga Is. On both occasions, concentrations of up to 160 Marbled Murrelets were seen off Heming Head, Porter Head and the SE side of Kunga Is. One of these surveys extended down the east side of Lyell Is and concentrations of Marbled Murrelets were seen between Fuller Point and Gogit Point.

Numbers of Rhinoceros Auklets were more numerous on the transects than in previous years. Other birds commonly seen were Pigeon Guillemots, White-winged Scoters, Pelagic Cormorants, Pacific Loons, Glaucous-winged Gulls, Ancient Murrelets, and Common Loons. A flock of 160 non breeding Pelagic Cormorants was frequently seen feeding south of Skedans and roosted at night on Limestone, Vertical Point and Kingsway Rock.

8. Other Projects

- 16 nest boxes for Cassins Auklets were set in an area disturbed by raccoons last year but none were used.
- surveys of breeding pairs of woodpeckers located 10 Red-breasted Sapsucker nests, two pairs of Hairy Woodpeckers and one nest of Northern Flicker.
- nests of Glaucous-winged Gulls were counted and eggs measured at all colonies in the Laskeek Bay area: Skedans Is, Low Is, Kingsway Rock and Lost Is for a total of 233 nests.
- a complete survey of Black Oystercatcher nests in the Laskeek Bay area located 19 nests and 8 chicks were weighed and banded.
- counts were kept of sea lions at Skedans Is and Reef Is.
- West Limestone Island was surveyed for signs of Ancient Murrelet burrowing activity and predation.
- a daily species list of all birds seen was kept and a total of 60 species were counted, 6 more than in 1991.
- a plant survey located specimens of rare plants.

- a record was kept of marine mammal sightings: 2 Minke whales March 14, 2 Humpback whales June 4 and 1 Minke whale June 29. No Orcas were seen.

- checks were made of the Peregrine Falcon eyries at Limestone Island, Titul Island and Reef Island. Only Reef was occupied: 2 adults and 1 juvenile were seen.

REEF ISLAND PROJECTS

Burrow occupancy was checked on study plots on Reef Is on June 8 and 41 burrows out of 138 checked had their wooden hatch covers removed, many accompanied by signs of predation. The cause is not known, since raccoons are not thought to be on Reef Is. Five of 26 nest boxes had been used by Ancient Murrelets, whereas in previous years only one had been occupied.

Cassins Auklets were mist-netted and banded on the night of May 25/26 for a total of 26 birds caught of which 11 were retraps from the past 8 years. Results continue to supply information on the survival rate of this species.

DODGE POINT SATELLITE CAMP

From June 5-19, 1992, seven volunteers from the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society participated in surveys of the seabird colonies on Lyell Is and Ramsay Is, led by Moira Lemon of the Canadian Wildlife Service. Ten of the original 22 transects surveyed in 1982 were resurveyed throughout the Ancient Murrelet colony area surrounding Dodge Pt. The colony appears to have contracted, with areas at the two extreme ends showing very little nesting activity compared to that observed in 1982. A total of 52 burrows in six locations within the existing colony were excavated to determine breeding activity this season. Twenty-nine (56%) had been occupied this year, but of these 29, seventeen (or 59%) held either depredated adult birds or eggs. Indications were that rats were responsible for the failure of these nests. This is a much higher rate of predation than was seen in 1982.

On Ramsay Island permanent plots originally set out in the seabird colonies there in 1984 were re surveyed. A slight increase in burrow density of Ancient Murrelets was found.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Laskeek Bay Conservation Society gratefully acknowledges the following groups and individuals who provided support for the 1992 season:

- Wildlife Branch, Ministry of Environment, for permission to conduct research in the Skedans, Limestone and Reef Is Wildlife Management Area.
- Canadian Parks Service for financial support and Doug Burles and Tucker Brown for logistical support
- Canadian Wildlife Service for financial support and Dr. Tony Gaston for his enthusiastic and ambitious research direction
- Mr. Ted Miller of the Royal British Columbia Museum for loan of recording equipment and advice on Red-breasted Sapsucker studies
- Rick Nickerson on "Clipper II" and Husband Charters on "Kingii" for assistance with transport of supplies
- Marvin Boyd of South Moresby Air Charters for weekly transport of volunteers and groceries
- Natalie MacFarlane and the Queen Charlotte Islands Museum for storing our gear and for creating an excellent museum display on our Ancient Murrelet program
- Brian Leach for a supply of chocolate bars to last the duration of the night chick-catching season
- all those who donated money and bought T-shirts
- all the enthusiastic, untiring and variously skilled volunteers
- the beautiful surroundings and interesting creatures that make up Limestone Island