

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

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ANCIENT MURRELET

*Synthliboramphus antiquus*

Family: ALCIDAE

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

B243

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

An uncommon winter visitor to California's marine pelagic habitats, and to rocky subtidal coves (Cogswell 1977). From November through March, occurs regularly off northern and central California, but rare south of San Luis Obispo Co. (Cogswell 1977, Garrett and Dunn 1981). May be most common off Sonoma Co. (McCaskie et al. 1979). In late spring and summer, moves north to breed on islands off the coasts of Washington and British Columbia (Sealy 1972), and rare in California at this time (Cogswell 1977). One found dead at Mono Lake in 1985 (McCaskie et al. 1988).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** In British Columbia, Sealy (1972) found the primary prey to be euphausiid shrimp, mainly *Euphausia pacifica* and *Thysanoessa spinifera*; also ate small fish (*Ammodytes hexapterus*). Usually forages in waters greater than 30 m (98 ft) deep, typically at least 40 km (25 mi) from the nesting colony (Sealy 1972). Feeds by diving and pursuing prey underwater.

**Cover:** Sealy (1972) reported it assembles at staging areas on water near the breeding colony before returning at night or flying out to feed at sea in the morning.

**Reproduction:** Nests on islands in very large colonies (Harrison 1978). Uses abandoned burrows of other species, or rock crevices, sometimes as long as 1 m (3 ft), often lined with dry grass (Harrison 1978).

**Water:** No known requirement for fresh water.

**Pattern:** For successful breeding, requires undisturbed islands and nearby productive waters (Sealy 1972).

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Visits nesting colony only at night; feeds in daylight hours (Sealy 1972).

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** In nonbreeding months, (November through March), may move southward from nesting colony, often in family groups. Some move as far south as southern California; others winter close to breeding grounds off Washington or Canada (Sealy 1972).

**Home Range:** No additional data found.

**Territory:** May be territorial, defending the entrance to burrow (Sealy 1972).

Reproduction: Lays eggs from late April through late May (Sealy 1972). Monogamous; nests in large colonies. Most clutches have 2 eggs; occasionally only 1. Interval between egg laying and hatching is 42 days for the 1st egg, and 35 days for the 2nd. Incubation does not begin until day after 2nd egg is laid (Sealy 1972). Incubation shifts are 72 hr, and are undertaken alternately by parents. Highly precocial young remain in the nest for an average of 2 days (range 2-4), and are not fed during this period. Fledglings depart at night with parents and move out to sea (Sealy 1972).

Niche: Peregrine falcons were the major predators of adults nesting on islands off British Columbia (Sealy 1972). Introduced black rats have been reported preying on adults, young, and eggs (Sealy 1972). As with most seabirds, vulnerable to pollution from oil spills.

## REFERENCES

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- Harrison, C. 1978. A field guide to the nests, eggs and nestlings of north American birds. W. Collins Sons and Co., Cleveland, OH. 416pp.
- McCaskie, G., P. De Benedictis, R. Erickson, and J. Morlan. 1979. Birds of northern California, an annotated field list. 2nd ed. Golden Gate Audubon Soc., Berkeley. 84pp.
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