



Time for Nature



Ancient Murrelets are tough but vulnerable

Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site

When Ancient Murrelet chicks are just two or three days old, they leave their nests, scamper down to the shore and swim far out to sea to take their first bite of food.

It takes a pretty tough bird to make such a journey. But the species is still no match for rats and raccoons. These predators have been introduced to the Murrelets' habitat in the Queen Charlotte Islands. That's why the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada says the Ancient Murrelet is of special concern.

Parks Canada is helping to enhance the species' chance for survival at Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve and Haida Heritage Site.

Home to a quarter of the world's population

The Ancient Murrelet is a black, gray and white seabird about the size of a pigeon. A tuft of white feathers that appears on the bird's head during the breeding season gives it the "ancient" look that probably accounts for its name.

Ancient Murrelets nest in large colonies on remote northern Pacific islands. Gwaii Haanas contains about one quarter of the world's population.



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The ancient murrelet is a black, gray and white seabird about the size of a pigeon.
© Dan Tallman.

These babies aren't babied

Ancient Murrelets' large eggs contain enough yolk to nourish the chicks in preparation for their migration to sea. Parents don't feed their chicks on land. Instead they fly to the sea, leaving the chicks behind to hop, scramble and tumble down to the shore. Once the chicks reach the water, they rendezvous with their parents by mutual recognition of calls. Parents and chicks then travel to feeding areas far offshore.



An invasion of predators

Historically, the isolation of the Ancient Murrelets' island habitats helped provide natural protection from predators. Unfortunately, in the last century or so rats and raccoons arrived on several of the islands. These introduced predators have attacked parents, chicks and eggs.

Two of the largest Murrelet colonies in Gwaii Haanas, at Dodge Point and Kunghit Island, were virtually wiped out by rats. And in 1990, three raccoons invaded East Limestone Island, a colony just north of Gwaii Haanas' boundary. They reduced chick survival by almost 50 percent before they were removed.

Despite declines the Ancient Murrelet populations in the 1990s, scientists believe that overall populations are now generally stable.



Ancient murrelet chicks swim out to sea before taking their first bite of food.
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Cooperating to protect the species

Parks Canada is working with partners to give the Murrelets a better chance in the Queen Charlotte Islands.

Volunteers from the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society are monitoring the birds, following procedures developed by the Canadian Wildlife Service. Their work at the East Limestone colony provided incontrovertible proof of the impact of raccoons.



Ancient murrelets nest in burrows on islands where they seek protection from predators.
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Parks Canada is also working with federal and provincial agencies to control introduced predators. Rats have now been removed from several islands that once supported large seabird colonies. If the rats can be kept away, there is hope that the birds will return.

With good luck and hard work, the future looks bright for the survival of these amazing birds.

For more information visit: www.pc.gc.ca/gwaiihaanas