

**Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*)
at Ithaca, New York
17-20 Dec 2001**

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It was a cold and rainy Monday morning when Taylor and I set off to school and work on 17 Dec 2001. We made our daily stop at Stewart Park, located on the southwestern end of Cayuga Lake in the city of Ithaca, Tompkins Co., to census the birds at the park for BasinBirds (<http://woodpecker.ornith.cornell.edu/BasinBirds/>) a Cornell Lab of Ornithology project whose purpose is to inventory the bird life of the Cayuga Lake Basin. On our way to the park I mentioned that I thought this was a great way to start the week as it was one of the few times during the balmy fall that a major cold front was sweeping out of the northwest. I knew this weather pattern would occasionally bring unusual birds to the south end of Cayuga Lake, but I certainly did not think we would see anything as unusual as New York's second record of Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*) (Levine 1998), a bird that has been seen less than 50 times in all of North America.

We were scanning the waterfowl when I observed a bird diving in a manner different from the many diving ducks in the area. Smaller than the other nearby waterfowl, it would lithely raise its body out of the water and spread its wings to begin its dive. I watched this individual repeatedly dive, spending more time below than on the surface. From the distance I was viewing, (about 400 meters) the overall coloration of the bird was dark with gray flecking on the sides. It had a dark head and white throat and breast. Based on its size, and profile, and that it was spreading its wings before it dove, and knowing that alcids "fly" underwater, propelling themselves with partially outstretched wings I realized that I was looking at a murrelet. I watched the murrelet for approximately ten minutes, made several phone calls alerting the local bird community and left the park.

The bird was not relocated until late in the morning, when Gerard Phillips and others positively identified it as a Long-billed Murrelet. It was not until late in the afternoon that I was able to return to Stewart Park. Once there, Kevin and Jay McGowan directed us to the bird, which was less than 50 yards offshore, and I was able to easily observe the bird. It was appreciably smaller than the many ducks near it, appearing more similar in size to a phalarope than the many Hooded Mergansers. When the bird was floating on the surface the white scapulars produced a broad white crescent over the dark wings. Its crown and nape were very dark and the throat, belly and flanks were white. This created a distinct demarcation, from the bill through the eye and along the neck, between the dark upperparts and light underparts. The bill was long, black, and pointed.

Based on the size of the bird, larger alcids such as Common Murre or Razorbill were eliminated. The overall color and shape and especially the broad white crescent above the wing eliminated most of the other small alcids, leaving only the three *Brachyramphus* murrelets, Kittlitz's, Marbled and Long-billed. Since Kittlitz's Murrelet has more extensive white on its face and paler gray upperparts, it was eliminated. The Marbled Murrelet and Long-billed Murrelet are very similar in appearance and habits. In fact, Long-billed Murrelet was considered a subspecies of Marbled Murrelet until 1997 when it was elevated to a full species (AOU 1997). The major distinction between the Long-billed and Marbled murrelets is the color of the nape. The Long-billed has a dark nape to the neck while on the Marbled it is white. The bird observed off Stewart Park had a dark nape.

The Long-billed Murrelet is known to breed from Japan (Hokkaido Island) north along the Kamchatka Peninsula of Siberia, and is suspected to breed in the Commander Islands near the Aleutians (Nelson 1997). They winter in the waters off Japan and Korea. Interestingly, all inland and eastern North American records of Marbled/Long-billed Murrelets have turned out to be Long-billed Murrelets (Mlodinow 1997).

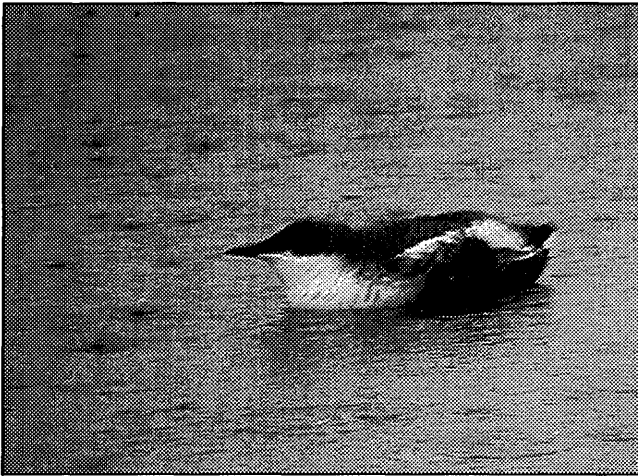
How did the Long-billed Murrelet end up on Cayuga Lake? We believe that the bird's journey may have begun when a storm occurred off eastern Asia. Almost all of the Long-billed Murrelet sightings in North America are correlated with major weather fronts passing through the North Pacific several days prior to their observation. (Mlodinow 1997). Once in North America the bird may have taken a route similar to other waterfowl and shorebirds, which passes through the Finger Lakes Region of upstate New York. These fall migrants begin their migration in northern Alaska and northwestern Canada. They follow the chain of lakes that stretch from Alaska south and east through Canada to the Great Lakes. Some of these migrants continue east over the Great Lakes and then head south over the Finger Lakes, eventually reaching their wintering waters of Chesapeake Bay. For example, the largest flights of Common Loons in North America have been documented over Cayuga Lake during November and early December (Evans et al. 1994). We speculate that once the Long-billed Murrelet reached North America it followed this same general route taken by many shorebirds and waterfowl during their fall migration and ended up on the south end of Cayuga Lake.

The Long-billed Murrelet remained through 20 Dec. This follows the general trend of most Long-billed Murrelet sightings in North America in that they typically remain in one location for 3 or 4 days before disappearing (Kevin McGowan pers.comm.). It was an exciting several days along the south shore of Cayuga Lake, as many birders keen to see the murrelet visited the region. To view images of the bird please visit the McGowan's website (<http://birds.cornell.edu/crows/lbmurrelet.htm>).

Taylor and I continue to do regular counts of the birds along the south end of Cayuga Lake. While the excitement of those December days when we saw the murrelet has diminished, each morning we take a little extra time searching the waves off of Stewart Park.

Literature Cited

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Long-billed Murrelet
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Jay and Kevin McGowan