

*Accepted (7-0)***SPECIES:***Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*)***DATE:**

Tuesday, December 5, 1995

**LOCATION:**

Chatfield Reservoir State Recreation Area

**COUNTY:**

Jefferson/Douglas County, Colorado

**TIME(S) AND PLACES OF OBSERVATION:**

All times are Mountain Standard Time (MST)

Time: Observation From:

11:30-11:45 Handicapped Fisherman's access peninsula (located just west of the South Shore Marina)  
- 13:00-14:15 Handicapped Fisherman's access peninsula  
15:00-15:45 On top of the dam next to the outlet building/tower  
16:00-16:15 Handicapped Fisherman's access peninsula

**OTHER OBSERVERS WHO INDEPENDENTLY IDENTIFIED THIS BIRD:**

Jack Reddall, 4450 South Alton Street, Englewood, Colorado 80111  
Dick Schottler, 25 South Indiana Place #1A, Golden, Colorado 80401  
Hugh Kingery, 869 Milwaukee Street, Denver, Colorado 80206  
Steve Stachowiak, 8675 South Cresthill Lane, Highlands Ranch, Colorado 80126  
Glenn & Jeane Hageman, 448 South Leyden Street, Denver, Colorado 80224  
Norm Erthal, 7761 Everett Way, Arvada, Colorado 80005  
J.B. Hayes, 1517 West Briarwood Avenue, Littleton, Colorado 80120  
Other observers available upon request.

**OPTICAL EQUIPMENT I USED:**

Zeiss 10x40 Binoculars  
Bausch & Lomb Elite 77mm spotting scope (20-60x zoom eyepiece)  
Questar (Glenn Hageman's scope) We used both his low and high power oculars.  
Low power - 50X and 80X and  
high power - 80X and 130X

**WEATHER CONDITIONS:**

**SKY:** Clear in late morning to mostly clear (a few high thin clouds) by late afternoon  
**WIND:** East 0-4 mph all day  
**TEMP:** 40-55°F

**BIRD/SUN ORIENTATION:**

In all instances below assume the observer is in the middle of a clock and the bird is at 12:00.

<u>Time:</u>	<u>Location of Sun:</u>
11:30-11:45	Sun is at 6:00 (behind the observer)
13:00-14:15	Sun is at 7:00 (behind the observer)
15:00-15:45	Sun is at 2:30 (to the front right of observer)
16:00-16:15	Sun has just set behind the mountains (11:00)

The bird was constantly in bright sunlight except the last observation (sun had just set).

**DISTANCE FROM BIRD AND HOW MEASURED:**

From the Handicapped Fisherman's access peninsula Varied from 100 yards to 500 yards  
(best estimate)  
On top of the dam next to the outlet building/tower ~130 feet (estimate)

**NUMBER OF BIRDS SEEN:**

1 (one)

**SEX:**

Unknown

**PLUMAGE:**

Near winter - White eyebrow feathers not present; black of chin and throat extended down from the bill to a little more than half way to the water (see sketch, last page).

**SIZE:**

A very small bird in total length and very short from top of head to water. A male Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) landed behind this bird shortly after I found it. I could not tell the distance between these two but the goldeneye appeared to be twice the size of this murrelet!!

**BEHAVIOR AND DEMEANOR:**

This bird was observed swimming and diving throughout the day (although I never saw it come up with anything in its bill). While swimming this bird rode very high in the water exposing much of his undertail coverts (similar to an Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*)). In a few cases, just before diving, I noticed this bird stretch-out flat on the water and appear to "look" under the water. The bird would then rise up, his wings held partially open and over his back, and dive below the surface.

The bird was observed in flight only once. Many of us were standing on the tip of the Handicapped Fisherman's peninsula and saw it fly very low over the water from near the outlet tower on the dam to just beyond the marina sand "hook" east of the marina. This bird had an extremely fast, deep wingbeat. This bird did not land in the manner that I expected. I expected it to land like any other duck by coming down and "skiing" along the surface with his feet and body until he came to a stop. This was not the case. Instead, this bird sort of dropped or "plopped" into the water with a little splash. It was more of a crash than graceful planned-out landing.

**HEAD & NECK:**

Head, nape, chin, and throat black; Neck short and thick. White "thumb" shaped area intruded from the lower neck and shoulders up to just under the eyes on both sides of the bird. This white area could be seen at great distances. No white eyebrow feathers were seen on either side of this bird's head. This lack of an eyebrow indicates winter plumage, however, the extensive black on his chin and throat (with no white flecking) suggests (to me anyway) that this bird is in breeding plumage!

**EYES & LORES:**

Eyes black; Small white "eye crescents" or arcs could be seen above and below the eyes when I viewed the bird at a closer distance up on the dam. Lores black (same as head and nape).

**UPPER & LOWER MANDIBLES:**

Both the upper and lower mandibles were yellowish-white (horn colored). The base of both appeared dark. The bill was relatively short and appeared stubby. Because of the water color in the background, I could not tell if the very tip was dark.

**LEGS & FEET:**

The legs and feet were seen very briefly, twice while the bird scratched his head (just after the sun had set). The legs and feet just looked dark, no specific color could be discerned through my scope because of the distance.

**UPPERPARTS:**

Back bluish-gray; scapulars same color as the back and unmarked. Sides clean white with some dark gray smudges along the upper sides near the wings.

**UNDERPARTS:**

The breast and belly were white; under tail coverts clean white. This bird rode very high on the water with much of the sides, some of the breast and an amazing amount of the under tail coverts visible. The "lower" sides and flanks were clean white with dark gray smudges on the "upper" sides and flanks (close to the wings). The belly was seen several times, when the bird would rise up just before a dive, once when the bird reared up and flapped his wings (then settled back onto the water) and in flight. While in flight several of us commented on the thick smudgy line of dark gray on the birds side where the wings met the body.

**RETRICES:**

Tail black, very short and was held erect. The tail seemed longer than what National Geographic Society "Field Guide to the Birds of North America" Second Edition shows.

**WINGS:**

Short, thin and rounded. In flight, the wingbeat was extremely rapid. So rapid that I could not see any details of the primaries or secondaries other than general overall wing color.

**UPPERWINGS:**

Bluish-gray; appeared slightly darker than the back (observed while bird was swimming).

**UNDERWINGS:**

Flashed bright white in flight; a thick smudgy line of dark gray was on the birds side where the wings met the body.

**VOCALIZATION:**

No vocalizations were heard.

**ELIMINATION OF SIMILARLY APPEARING SPECIES:**

Only small black and white water birds are considered here.

Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) - This small grebe has a white throat not black. The back color does not contrast with the nape and head color. Sides dirty white all the way to the water. Head usually shows a pointed peak. The white mark on the side, rear of the head is thin, dirty white and goes up the rear of the neck/head. While this grebe does sit high in the water it does not show gleaming white undertail coverts. Bill longish and thin, not short and stubby.

Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) - This small grebe has a white throat not a black throat. The back color does not contrast with the nape and head color. There is no "thumb-shaped" white patch on the side of the neck. This grebe does not sit high in the water showing gleaming white undertail coverts. The neck, on an alert bird is slender. Bill longish and thin, not short and stubby.

Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) - This murrelet has a white throat not black. The back color does not contrast with the nape and head color. Marbled shows white lores in adult winter plumage; Juvenile plumage shows almost complete eye ring. Both juvenile and adults show at least some trace of white on the scapulars, whereas the Chatfield murrelet showed none. Bill color is black not yellow. Marbled underwings not white. Marbled does not show a distinct white "thumb-shaped" patch extending up from the shoulders.

#### PRIOR EXPERIENCE WITH THIS AND SIMILARLY APPEARING SPECIES:

Eared Grebe - Have seen thousands in Colorado over the last 10 years in all plumages.

Horned Grebe - Have seen thousands in Colorado over the last 10 years in all plumages.

Marbled Murrelet - Have seen only one. The bird was in basic plumage off of Point Pinos, Monterey, California in November 1988.

#### BOOKS, ILLUSTRATIONS AND ADVICE CONSULTED THAT INFLUENCED THIS REPORT:

When I first discovered and identified this bird I did not have a field guide with, however I did use the National Geographic Society "Field Guide to the Birds of North America" Second Edition later in the day to compare and contrast field marks. This source was also used for common and scientific names used in this report.

#### NARRATIVE:

The breeze could barely be felt and the reservoir was like a mirror. I decided to scan the reservoir for winter birds (Just two days ago, at Chatfield, Brandon Percival reported two Red-throated Loons (*Gavia stellata*) and four Pacific Loons (*Gavia pacifica*) and J.B. Hayes found a Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*)). While standing at the end of the handicapped fisherman access peninsula I scanned the lake with my binoculars. Every bird on the lake could easily be found by looking at the wakes and diving circles on the calm water.

Several Common Goldeneyes (*Bucephala clangula*) and Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) were scattered about. In front of the outlet tower on the dam (about 500 yards away) I noticed a small black bird with white on the head. "Coot", I thought. I proceeded to train my scope on this bird and focused perfectly on a birds rump going underwater. "Possible Oldsquaw?", I wondered. When the bird popped up and turned sideways my heart beat faster. "Nah," I said aloud, "It can't be . . . My God, it is." At this point I knew that I had a murrelet. Checking the bill and the sides told me that this was an Ancient Murrelet and not a Marbled. I watched it for fifteen minutes trying to convince myself that I really was seeing an Ancient Murrelet and not something else (remember, this bird was almost on the other side of the reservoir).

I realized that people would have a hard time believing that I saw this bird so I left as fast as I dared go. I returned to work (less than 12 minutes away at Lockheed Martin) and called Steve Stachowiak.

"Hi, Steve," I said calmly, "How's it going?"

"Pretty busy," he replied.

"Can you break away for the rest of the day?"

Steve replied, "No."

"I've got one for you," I taunted. "Steve," I paused, "I've got an Ancient Murrelet at Chatfield."

"No," he replied in disbelief.

"It's swimming and diving," I said trying to assert that this bird was for real.

"I CAN take a lunch," he responded.

I told Steve that I was going to make a few phone calls and stop home to pick up my camera (in case I got REAL close...I didn't). I needed about 45 minutes to make my phone calls, run home and return to Chatfield. I asked him to call Jack Reddall, Duane Nelson, Karleen Schofield and J.B. Hayes. I told him that I would meet him at 1pm at the Handicapped Fisherman's area. I hung up and called Norm Erthal (spokesperson for the Colorado Rare Bird Report) at his work number and left a message. I then left a message on the CRBA just in case Norm took the day off. I called Glenn and Jeane Hageman and told them. Next, I called Bob Spencer. I then proceeded to wrap up things at work and took the rest of the day off (my boss . . . what a nice guy)! I arrived home in record time and picked up my camera and left messages on the phones of Hugh Kingery and Alan Hay. Then, I left.

- Approaching the marina I noticed Jack Reddall's minivan and told him where I had seen the bird. As Jack and I arrived at the peninsula parking lot Glenn and Jeane Hageman as well as Steve Stachowiak were unloading their scopes from their vehicles. We all walked out to the tip of the peninsula and started to scan. I relocated the bird very quickly. Glenn set up his Questar and we all had AWESOME, lengthy looks at this bird. We could easily see the bird's face, bill color, and flanks.

After about fifty minutes the bird flew! We all watched the bird fly towards us and a little to the right with VERY fast wingbeats. He came down just beyond the Marina sand spit. The bird, well, didn't exactly land like a duck normally would. He just sort of "plopped" into the water! Really! In about twenty minutes this bird was again back in the deep water near the outlet tower! Several people had to return to work (Dick Schottler, Doug Ward, Steve Stachowiak, and Walt Hackney). Jack Reddall said that he was going to look for the Black (*Melanitta nigra*) and White-winged Scoters (*Melanitta fusca*) that had been seen at McClellan Reservoir for the last week or so. J.B., Glenn, Jeane and I went to the old heron overlook to see if we could spot the Red-necked Grebe that J.B. saw there on Sunday. We found it! I told everyone that I was going to head over to the dam to see if I could see the murrelet better (closer). Everyone agreed that this was worth a try. We arrived and carried our scopes out along the dam until we arrived near the outlet tower, stopping frequently to scan the water. It took us awhile to relocate the bird (again, this bird was small and our elevation probably did not help us much). After a few minutes we found the bird diving fairly close to the tower. We all got great looks through our respective scopes.

The surface of the water was still incredibly calm, which, combined with the angle of the sunlight, made viewing quite nice. At one point I observed the bird dive underwater and noticed a trail of air bubbles developing. "He's moving farther out!" I shouted to J.B. I

continued to follow the air bubble "trail" and up he popped dead middle of my scopes field of view! J.B. and I watched (and followed) him several times using the bubble trail to track his movements. I have never heard of anyone following a diver in this manner. If it was not for the angle of the sun combined with the absolute calm of the water, we would not have been able to see the bubble trail. We watched the bird for a little while longer and then left. We last observed the bird moving out away from the dam towards the middle of the lake. I decided to take one last look from the Handicapped Fisherman's access area.

I walked out to the tip and greeted Hugh Kingery, Alan Hay, and Duane Nelson. All seemed QUITE pleased to see this bird. As we returned to our cars Joe Roller pulled up. Everyone wanted to go over to the old heron rookery overlook to see if they could see the Red-necked Grebe. I told Joe that I would walk out on the peninsula with him (he was pressed for time and had only about fifteen minutes before he had to leave to get back for a meeting at work. Time was not a problem and Joe had good looks despite the fact that the sun had just set. I then left to pick up my wife from work.

**COMMENTS:**

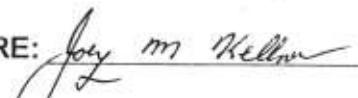
For two days following its discovery intensive searching by others and myself could not relocate this bird, even though the water remained remarkably calm.

This report was written from the notes taken in the field while observing this bird.

**AUTHOR OF REPORT:**

Joey M. Kellner  
8612 West Hinsdale Place  
Littleton, Colorado 80123

SIGNATURE:



DATE: 12/7/95

Ancient Murrelet  
Charfield Reservoir  
December 5, 1995

