Trip Report: Xantus's Murrelets Monitoring

Seabird biologists Darrell Whitworth and Josh Koepke of the California Institute of Environmental Studies began the seventh year of Xantus's Murrelet nest monitoring on Anacapa Island in April 2006. Anacapa is one of only 12 islands where Xantus's Murrelets (*Synthliboramphus hypoleucus*), a California state threatened species, are known to breed, and the survival of this important colony had been threatened by predatory non-native Black Rats (*Rattus rattus*). The researchers have been monitoring the population status before and after rat eradication. This report documents the second field trip of the season on April 20-21, 2006.

Whitworth and Koepke, along with Channel Islands Naturalist Corps volunteers John Kuizanga and Larry Harris and Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary Research Assistant Dani Lipski departed for Santa Cruz Island on the sanctuary's R/V Shearwater. Captain Luman Moody and First Mate Charlie Lara also had on board park researchers who were transported to Santa Cruz Island for an overnight expedition to collect specimens of an endangered plant of which only four individuals are known on the island.
After the CINP botanists disembarked, the seabird monitoring crew enjoyed calm seas as they sailed to Frenchy's Cove at Anacapa Island.

Once the fog lifted, the researchers and volunteers accessed the sea caves using a small inflatable skiff. Keopke expertly handled the small boat while Whitworth searched the caves. At the easily accessible sites, the volunteers also enjoyed exploring the caves. Of the five caves at this first site, two nests and 3 eggs were found.

Sea caves at Anacapa on a foggy morning

At the second site, Landing Cove, the volunteers toured Anacapa lighthouse with Coby Bishop, the park ranger, while Whitworth and Koepke searched the cliffs and found one nest with eggs.

Koepke and Whitworth searched a few more caves at Landing Cove in the skiff and found one nest before returning to Shearwater for the evening.

At 11pm and 2am surveys began for adults in nocturnal social aggregations on the water. Koepke and Whitworth, with two volunteers, surveyed two transects. While Koepke used a GPS to keep the skiff on transects parallel to the island, Whitworth used a powerful spotlight to scan the water and volunteers assisted with data recording. There were few birds on the water that night and Whitworth suggested that perhaps the birds were late returning to the islands.

Whitworth holds a Xantus's murrelets egg

The researchers also attempted to capture adult Xantus's Murrelets to attach bands to their legs. They were successful at capturing one bird, which already had a leg band, indicating it had been captured before. Unfortunately, the band numbers were unreadable making it impossible to tell at what location the bird had been banded.

Lipski holds an adult Xantus's murrelet

The following morning there was one last set of caves to search for nests and eggs. The volunteers also got a chance to see a rare American Oystercatcher, (*Haematopus palliatus*), a bird species not usually seen on the West Coast, before heading back to Santa Cruz Island to pick up the Park botanists, whose expedition had been successful, and heading back to the mainland.

The Xantus's Murrelets surveys will continue through May 2006.