# ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE SOUTHERN LIMIT OF THE ANCIENT MURRELET IN BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

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The Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) has been recorded six times in Mexican waters, five times off the northwest coast and once off the southeast coast of the Baja California peninsula. The first record, and the only specimen, was of a bird taken near Ensenada on 25 December 1927 (Grinnell 1928). The second record was of a group of five seen near Islas Los Coronados on 24 February 1980 (McCaskie 1980, Erickson et al. 1995, Howell and Webb 1995), not 1975 as given by Wilbur (1987). An apparently unhealthy bird in first-year basic plumage was photographed at close range in Ensenada harbor on 9 January 1994 (Erickson et al. 1995). The following year, a group of three was observed west of Punta Arena near the southeast tip of Baja California Sur on 21 December 1995. These birds had "black bibs with white [plumage] behind" (Erickson and Howell 2001:126), suggesting individuals in their second year or older. This record is the most southerly of the Ancient Murrelet on the eastern coast of the Pacific Ocean. Nearly three weeks later, on 8 January 1996, one Ancient Murrelet was seen just north of Ensenada at El Sauzal harbor. Last, an individual was observed at Ensenada on 3 January 1998 (Erickson and Howell 2001).

While examining specimens of alcids in the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) at Harvard University, Sealy located the specimen of a female Ancient Murrelet (Figure 1) collected "near Ensenada" in 1927 (original field number 2311 in the Wright M. Pierce collection, now MCZ 250816, original number 11697). No additional information was given on the label. Judged from the bird's plumage and measurements (flattened wing 139.2 mm, culmen 12.0 mm, bill depth 5.8 mm, tarsus diagonal 27.7 mm), the specimen is of an individual in its first year, not "apparently [an] adult," as Grinnell (1928:56) had stated (see Sealy 1976, Sealy et al. 2001). The white throat and gray chin, lack of white feathers encircling the crown, and slightly worn primaries, secondaries, and wing coverts are typical of individuals in December of their first winter (Gaston 1992, 1994, Sealy et al. 2001).

Figure 1. Specimen of a first-year female Ancient Murrelet (MCZ 250816) taken near Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico, on 25 December 1927.

*Photo by Jeremiah Trimble*

From October to December, Ancient Murrelets normally arrive in various portions of their primary wintering range between southern British Columbia and central California (Gaston and Jones 1998). Numbers build up from November through January, then decline in February and March when birds depart for breeding colonies, which are attended as early as March in the Queen Charlotte Islands in northern British Columbia (Ainley 1976, Sealy 1976, Gaston et al. 1993, Gaston 1994). The Ancient Murrelet has been recorded in Mexican waters between late December and late February, during the nonbreeding period of primarily southward dispersal. A link has been suggested between sightings in Mexico in 1980, 1994, and 1995 and the larger-than-usual numbers of individuals occurring south of central California, commonly considered the southern limit of the species' winter range, in the winters of 1979–80, 1993–94, and 1994–95 (McCaskie 1980, 1996a, b, Erickson et al. 1995, Erickson and Howell 2001). Mexican records from 1927, 1996, and 1998, however, apparently did not coincide with unusually large numbers in southern California (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie 1996a, b, Erickson and Howell 2001). In fact, Ancient Murrelets occur in small numbers in southern California in winter in many years (even rarely in summer), with several records near the United States–Mexico border (Howell 1917, Unitt 1984). All Mexican records except the one from Punta Arena are from within 100 km of the border but still within the southern periphery of colder waters of the California Current within the Southern California Bight (Dailey et al. 1993). The northernmost part of the Baja California peninsula probably represents the previously overlooked southern extent of the Ancient Murrelet's winter range, which supports small numbers of birds in certain years. The southern extent of the winter range, therefore, is slightly north of that mapped by Gaston and Jones (1998:217). The southern extensions of the winter ranges of several other alcids, such as the Common Murre (*Uria aalge*), Pigeon Guillemot (*Cepphus columba*), Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*), and Rhinoceros Auklet (*Cerorhinca monocerata*), occur in the same part of Mexico, at the southern end of the California Current (Erickson et al. 1995, Howell and Webb 1995, Gaston and Jones 1998). Only three species of alcids, Xantus's Murrelet (*S. hypoleucus*), Craveri's Murrelet (*S. craveri*), and Cassin's Auklet (*Ptychoramphus aleuticus*), winter regularly in coastal waters south of the California Current, although this is not mapped accurately for the Xantus's Murrelet in Gaston and Jones (1998:207). Two of the latter species also breed to some extent south of the California Current, whereas all Craveri's Murrelets apparently breed south of this current (Gaston and Jones 1998).

The group of three Ancient Murrelets observed at Punta Arena (23.5° N) was 1700 km south of the United States–Mexico border. These birds were much farther south than the other records and were south of the point to which the California Current extends in any year. Thus these birds likely were vagrants of one of the most vagrancy-prone alcids, with approximately 100 extralimital records for North America, often far inland (Munyer 1965, Verbeek 1966, Sealy and Carter 1980, Sealy et al. 2001). Most birds found inland, however, have been first-year birds in basic plumage, whereas the Punta Arena birds apparently were in alternate plumage, that is, subadults or adults. On the Asian side of the Pacific Ocean, occurrences of the Ancient Murrelet as far south as Hong Kong (22.5° N) have been regarded as accidental (Chalmers 1986). Additional observations along the west coast of Baja California, south of Ensenada, are needed to reveal whether Ancient Murrelets winter occasionally south of the waters of the California Current. Observers should look for birds in both basic and alternate plumages, especially between October and March.

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