

## ANCIENT MURRELET : A NEW BIRD FOR LUNDY AND THE WESTERN PALEARCTIC

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On May 27th 1990 an Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquum* in breeding plumage (Harrison 1983,198) was found swimming and flying around Jenny's Cove. The bird was first seen and identified as being an extremely rare vagrant by Richard Campey and Keith Mortimer; additional observers included John Waldon, Stan Davies and Gordon Vaughan.

### DESCRIPTION AND CHARACTERISTICS

The Ancient Murrelet is a small alcid of the temperate North Pacific (Harrison 1983,400). It breeds from the Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska south along the coast to British Columbia; the total Alaskan population is estimated at 400,000. It also breeds in Asia from the Commander Islands and Kamchatka to Korea. It is present during the summer off Hokkaido, Japan but breeding has not been proved. Winters are spent offshore from the breeding range south to Baja California and occasionally to the northern coast of Asia. Wind-blown individuals have been found far inland in North America.

Due to its small size (half that of accompanying Guillemots), the bird was initially thought to resemble a Little Auk *Alle alle*. Distinguishing features, however, confirmed its identification as an Ancient Murrelet. These included a dark head and prominent white 'eyebrow', a bluish-grey back and a white belly; the chin, throat and flanks were dark. It appeared as a chunky bird with angular head and small biscuit-coloured bill. When viewed from behind the 'eyebrow' met behind the head and was most distinctive.

### BEHAVIOUR

The behaviour of Ancient Murrelets is generally similar to that of Manx Shearwaters *Puffinus puffinus* in that they normally only come within sight of land at night. They spend most of the day at sea, returning at dusk to a burrow or crevice where they incubate their two eggs.

The Lundy Murrelet remained in Jenny's Cove for about an hour, spending its time swimming largely with Razorbills *Alca torda*, but also with Guillemots *Uria aalge* and Puffins *Fraterecula artica*. Its behaviour in the company of Razorbills is of particular interest: on getting too close it would crash-dive, resurface some 7-8m away and then return to swim close-by. It carried out short sporadic flights before, after about an hour, slowly drifting further out to sea with the other accompanying auks. Recent correspondence between David Hatton and Ian Jones (Hatton 1991) confirms this unusual behaviour.

The bird stayed on and around Lundy until at least 23rd June 1990. It was viewed by some 4000 visiting birdwatchers and is one of the most unexpected rarities ever to have been found on Lundy and possibly in Britain. It reappeared on 14th April 1991, again in Jenny's Cove, having presumably spent the winter at sea with other Lundy auks.

### REFERENCES

- Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds: an identification guide*. Croom Helm, London.  
Hatton, D. 1991. Unique behaviour of the Lundy Ancient Murrelet. *Birding World* 4(3).