



Threatened and Endangered Species

Kittlitz's Murrelet

(Brachyramphus brevirostris)

Status

The Kittlitz's murrelet was designated a candidate species throughout its range in March, 2004.

Description

The Kittlitz's murrelet (*Brachyramphus brevirostris*) is a small diving seabird that lives in Alaskan coastal waters from Point Lay to southeast Alaska. Its summer plumage is mottled gray or tan, and is easily confused with its close relative, the marbled murrelet. It is a secretive breeder, laying a single egg in a depression on bare ground. Only about 2 dozen nests have ever been found.

Range and Population Level

Most of the world population of Kittlitz's murrelets breed, molt, and winter in Alaska; a few breed in the Russian Far East. The winter range of the Kittlitz's murrelet is not well known, however. There are records of occasional winter sightings in southeast and western Alaska, and locally common sightings in a few locations in southcoastal Alaska. Kittlitz's murrelets also occur during winter in the mid-shelf regions of the northern Gulf of Alaska.

This species has undergone population declines in four of its six known core population centers in Alaska: Kenai Fjords, Prince William Sound, Malaspina Forelands and Glacier Bay. No trend data exist from the two other known population centers, Icy Bay and Lower Cook Inlet. An estimated 16,700 Kittlitz's murrelets occur in Alaska. The Russian population numbers in the hundreds to low thousands.

Habitat and Habits

During the breeding season, Kittlitz's murrelet distribution is clumped



Kittlitz's murrelets are members of the Alcid (auk) family, related to puffins, auklets, and murrelets. The Kittlitz's murrelet is a small diving bird that breeds primarily in Alaska. It is sometimes seen foraging near tidewater glaciers. USFWS photo.

within its geographic range. The birds prefer habitats near tidewater glaciers, and to a lesser extent, areas offshore of remnant, high-elevation glaciers and deglaciated coastal mountains. They tend to forage around tidewater glaciers among icebergs and brash ice, but avoid areas that contain heavy ice. They also feed along coasts where waters are influenced by glacial outwash such as the Malaspina Forelands, where glacial runoff seeps across miles of exposed coast. In general, this species is more highly associated with glacially-influenced waters than the closely related but genetically distinct marbled murrelet (*B. marmoratus*). Kittlitz's murrelets nest in unvegetated scree fields, coastal cliffs, on barren ground, rock ledges, and talus above timberline in coastal mountains.

Reasons for Current Status

Interpretation of Kittlitz's murrelet population status and trend data is complicated but the best available information indicates that Kittlitz's murrelets in Alaska's Prince William Sound have declined by about 18% per year. If this trend continues, they may disappear from Prince William Sound in approximately 30 years.

In Glacier Bay, population declines since 1991 appear to be slightly less severe than those in Prince William Sound. Nevertheless, the Glacier Bay population could disappear in 40 years if the current rate of decline continues. By one estimate, Kittlitz's murrelet populations in the Malaspina Forelands declined by at least 38%, and likely about 75%, between 1992 and 2002. The greatest downward trends are reported for southcentral Alaska, where populations have declined by 84% over an 11 year period



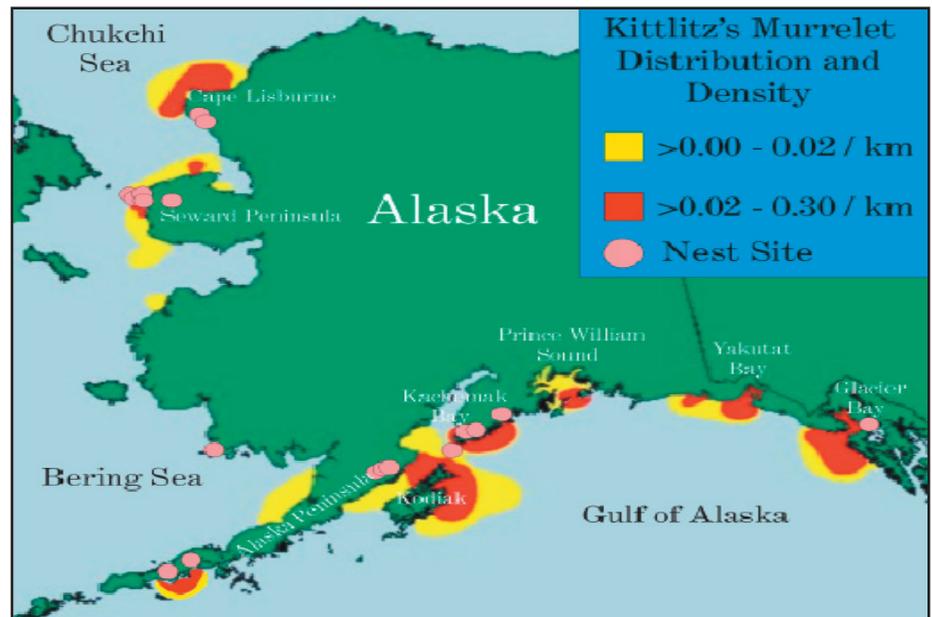
Kittlitz's murrelet in winter plumage. USFWS photo.

Factors that are known to result in direct mortality of Kittlitz's murrelets include oil spills and gill-net fisheries. One source estimates that as much as 3-10% of the global population of this species was killed by oil in the Exxon Valdez oil spill, although other estimates are lower. Numbers killed in salmon gill-nets are not monitored regularly, but more than 100 individuals were estimated to have been killed in gill-nets in Prince William Sound in a 1991 study.

Factors that are strongly suspected to have negative effects upon Kittlitz's murrelet populations (and which may actually be driving their population trends) include glacial retreat and cyclical changes in the oceanic environment. Glacial retreat may be a consequence of global warming.

Factors that are suspected to result in some level of Kittlitz's murrelet mortality or take include chronic oil pollution, disturbance by commercial and recreational boaters, and cruise ships.

For more information on this and other threatened and endangered species, contact the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Ecological Services Field Office near you. Contact information is on page 5 of this publication.



Population density and distribution of Kittlitz's murrelet in Alaska.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
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