



## U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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*News*

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### **Kittlitz's Murrelet a Candidate for Endangered Species Act Protection**

In its 2004 Candidate Notice of Review, published today in the Federal Register, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service named Kittlitz's murrelet as a candidate for protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Service periodically publishes an updated Candidate Notice of Review, primarily to solicit new information on the status of candidate species and the threats to their survival.

The Kittlitz's murrelet was designated as a candidate species because its numbers have declined sharply and it may warrant listing as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Candidate species are not subject to the regulatory protections of the Endangered Species Act, and human activities that may affect candidate species are not restricted.

The Service places a species on the candidate list when it has sufficient information on biological vulnerability and threats to the species to warrant proposing to list it as endangered or threatened. Service biologists rely on data from a variety of sources when making the scientific determination of whether a species may require listing under the Act, including information from private, university and government scientists, local, state and federal land management and planning agencies, and private citizens. Candidate status signals that there are conservation concerns about a species, and the Service encourages agencies, organizations and individuals to participate in research and conservation activities that may preclude the need to list the species. The Service will prepare a proposal to list the Kittlitz's murrelet when funding becomes available.

A small diving bird related to puffins, murres, and auklets (the alcids), the Kittlitz's murrelet is one of the rarest seabirds in North America. The entire North American population of these birds occurs in Alaska's waters, migrating between winter offshore and summer inshore regions. Lower numbers are scattered along the coast of eastern Russia. Estimates of the total world population size range from 9,000 to 25,000 birds.

The Service's best available information indicates that Kittlitz's murrelets in Prince William Sound have declined by 84% since 1989, and could disappear from the region in 30 years. Recent declines in the Glacier Bay population center would, if continued, wipe out that population of birds in about 40 years. Data from the Malaspina Forelands suggests that its local population of Kittlitz's murrelets declined by at least 38%, and perhaps by as much as 75%, between 1992 and 2002. In the Kenai Fjords area, it's estimated that the murrelet population has declined by as much as 83% since 1976.

Because Kittlitz's murrelets tend to forage in glacially-fed waters during the breeding season, it has been speculated that the decline in Kittlitz's murrelets is related to the retreat of tidewater glaciers. Most glaciers in Alaska, including many of those surrounding Glacier Bay and Prince William Sound, have been receding since the turn of the century. Exactly how glacier retreat might affect murrelets is unknown. However, studies in other regions have recorded low biological productivity in fjords with receding glaciers, as a result of increased sedimentation and lowered salinity. These factors could result in fewer forage fish for the murrelets, while the sedimentation might reduce the birds' ability to see and catch prey. These are all untested hypotheses, of course, and we must continue to obtain basic information about Kittlitz's murrelet habitat, foraging behavior, and food requirements to increase our understanding of these birds and improve our ability to determine the reasons for their population decline.

In addition to the global climate impacts on fjord habitats, Kittlitz's murrelets may have also been affected by changes in their available prey species, due to changes in the greater marine environment. Some researchers have reported seeing few juvenile birds at sea, and speculate that lack of food has led to poor reproduction for this murrelet. It's also possible that the breeding birds are disturbed by marine vessel traffic, or even by helicopter flights over their mountain-scrub nesting areas. Primary breeding areas for Kittlitz's murrelets - the Kenai Fjords, Prince William Sound, and Glacier Bay - are all experiencing increases in tour operations. The preferred habitats of Kittlitz's, near tidewater glaciers, are also prime destinations for tour and cruise ships, increasing the potential for disturbance.

At least two sources of human-caused mortality for Kittlitz's murrelets have been identified, although their impacts on the total population are not known. These include gillnet fisheries and oil spills. Being small-bodied, near-shore divers, these birds do sometimes get caught in gillnets and drown. The same traits make them highly susceptible to oil spills; including both catastrophic spills such as the 1989 Prince William Sound disaster to smaller, but more frequent, spills resulting from small vessel sinkings.

More information, including public domain photographs of Kittlitz's murrelets, can be found on the web at: <http://alaska.fws.gov/external/newsroom/issues.htm> .

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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