

IDENTIFICATION QUIZ



The short, delicate bill, nearly neckless appearance and webbed feet of this bird identify it as some species of small alcid. A number of small alcids show a dark-and-white pattern during the nonbreeding season, but many of these can be eliminated from consideration easily. Least Auklets (*Aethia pusilla*)—and other auklets for that matter—have stubbier, thicker bills. Marbled Murrelets (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*), Ancient Murrelets (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) and guillemots (*Cepphus spp.*) all may show a dark face and white throat, but all have the white of the underparts extending up behind the auricular patch to form a half-collar. In addition, a Marbled

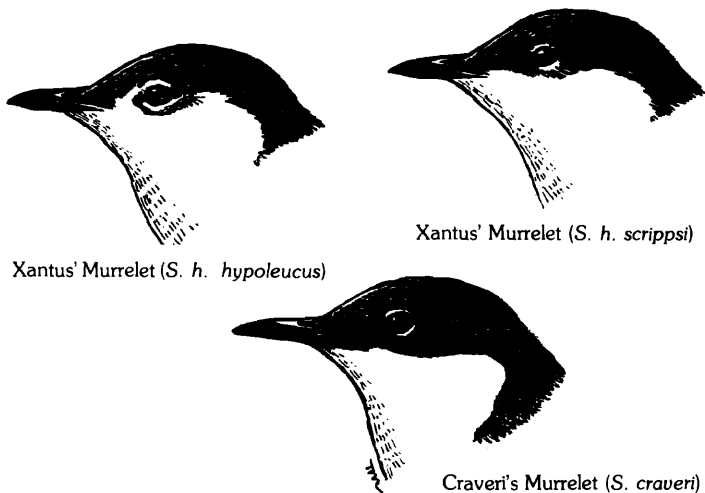
Murrelet should show some white on the back even in this view, whereas an Ancient Murrelet would have a pale bill and show contrast between a dark crown and a paler, gray back.

Indeed, the bird must be one of the two species of what we used to call *Endomychura* murrelets (the Sixth Edition of the AOU Check-list has placed them in *Synthliboramphus*—just try calling that out on a pelagic trip!): it is either a Xantus' Murrelet (*S. hypoleucus*) or Craveri's Murrelet (*S. craveri*). The view is very much like that which one often obtains aboard ship—of a bird flying away or low over the water with fast-beating wings, making it impossible to judge underwing covert color, which is white on Xantus' and dusky on Craveri's. Though the difference in underwing pattern between the two species is a good point to note in making an identification, it is also a difficult one to see in the field.

Another point to note is bill shape—distinctly shorter in Xantus' Murrelet, especially the northern race *S. h. scrippsi*, which breeds off southern California. The bird in the photo has a short bill consistent with Xantus'. Furthermore, its chin and malar region are white, as the dark area of its face extends down only to the level of the bill gape. On a Craveri's Murrelet the dark color of the face extends down onto the malar region and chin. Finally, the bird lacks a dark half-collar on the side of the breast as shown by many, but not all, Craveri's.

Beyond identifying the bird as a Xantus' Murrelet, we can also assign it to *scrippsi*, since white feathers do not extend up around the eye as is characteristic of nominate *hypoleucus*. Any white on the eye of this bird is limited to very narrow white eyelids. This Xantus' Murrelet was photographed at Monterey Bay, California, in July 1980.

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Xantus' Murrelet (*S. h. hypoleucus*)

Xantus' Murrelet (*S. h. scrippsi*)

Craveri's Murrelet (*S. craveri*)

Sketches by Tim Manolis