

Forest Practices and Marbled Murrelet Recovery – The Challenge of Delay

Ben van Drimmelen

Director, Forest Practices Board, PO Box 9905, Stn Prov Govt, Victoria, BC V8W 9R1,
< Ben.vanDrimmelen@gems9.gov.bc.ca >, Phone: 250-356-1293; Fax: 250-387-7009

Marbled murrelets are small seabirds that live along the Pacific coast. They nest in old-growth forests. Marbled murrelets are still relatively abundant, but they are threatened because populations are declining, probably due to loss of nesting habitat.

The Forest Practices Board is a public watchdog in BC. It reports about the soundness of management of forest resources. The Board reviewed the designation of wildlife habitat areas to protect murrelet nesting habitat in old growth forest. Such designation usually prevents habitat fragmentation by forest roads and cutblocks.

The Board found that potential habitat areas are rapidly being lost to forest development while protection was being considered and negotiated. Somewhere between 25 and 44 per cent of potential habitat for marbled murrelet that was available in 1995 on BC's south coast was gone by 2001, due to recently approved forest practices. Provincial forest practices legislation has not been particularly effective, primarily because the designation process is cumbersome. There is no incentive to designate wildlife habitat areas; the incentives are to delay.

The Board issued a report in January 2003. It pointed out that resource managers must not, and murrelets cannot, wait until researchers learn all that must be known about what marbled murrelets need for nesting, or exactly where those nests are, to protect this species. Government has to designate interim wildlife habitat areas quickly, using the best available information. Otherwise, conservation options are being logged and lost at a startling rate. It is equally important, however, that interim protected area boundaries be refined promptly so that areas not needed by marbled murrelets can be utilized. That requires real incentives for government and industry.

Now, it is a year later. Negotiations have continued, a plodding process that defies acceleration. There is no interim designation, and no incentive to identify what murrelets don't need. There are two lessons from the field: Time itself is the challenge. Success is slow.