



Audubon CALIFORNIA



Caryl Hart, PhD, Chair
California State Park and Recreation Commission
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May 8, 2013

Dear Chair Hart and Commissioners,

On behalf of our 150,000 members and active supporters, Audubon California and the Monterey Audubon Society write to respectfully request that the California State Park and Recreation Commission (Commission), at its May 17, 2013 meeting, direct the Department of Parks and Recreation (Department) to revise the General Plan and Final Environmental Impact Report (General Plan and FEIR) for Big Basin Redwoods State Park. As written, the General Plan would further imperil the central California population of the marbled murrelet, a state endangered and federal threatened species that is critically dependent on old growth redwood forest in Big Basin State Park. It would also fail to adequately support U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) recovery goals for the western snowy plover.

For background, the mission of Audubon is to protect birds and their habitats and connect people with nature. Our long and productive relationship with the Department includes programs to provide outreach, research, and protection for western snowy plover, California least tern, black oystercatcher and other species. Big Basin State Park is contained within the Ano Nuevo Important Bird Area, designated by National Audubon in 2004. We view the General Plan process as an opportunity for continued collaboration with the Department and the Commission.

We are concerned that the Department's comments on the General Plan and DEIR issued in April 2013 does not address the very serious concerns expressed by the Service, the Center for Biological Diversity, Audubon California and others during the 2012 45-day comment period on the General Plan and DEIR. These comments focus on the predicament of the "highly imperiled"¹ central California population of the marbled murrelet, now estimated at approximately 450 individuals² with extremely low breeding success, and also on the federally threatened western snowy plover.

Summary of Santa Cruz Mountains marbled murrelet scientific information, causes of decline, and keys to recovery

The best available scientific information is described in detail in the 2012 comment letters provided by the Service and the Center for Biological Diversity on the Draft General Plan and DEIR and may be briefly summarized as:

- Due to historic logging of more than 90% of old growth habitat and increases in predation, the central California population has been reduced to less than 600 individuals, suffers from extremely low breeding success, and continues to decline despite the immigration of northern birds into the central California region. Reproductive success in the Santa Cruz mountains appears to have declined by an order of magnitude over the past century and is now too low to sustain the population.^{3, 4}
- Mean annual rates of decline for the central California population have been estimated at 2.5-10%.^{5, 6} In its 5-year review, USFWS projected that the population has a 100% chance of extinction within 20-40 years.⁷ Scientists have further noted that this population should be treated as a separate management unit due to its relative geographic, genetic and demographic isolation.⁸
- Department lands, including Big Basin, Butano and Portola State Parks contain the largest remaining stands of old growth forest and murrelet nesting habitat remaining in central California. Big Basin State Park contains 40% of the old growth forest in the Santa Cruz Mountains - the largest remaining stand of old growth habitat in the region - and virtually all the known breeding habitat. The Park is therefore a priority for murrelet conservation.
- A primary factor constraining stabilization and recovery of marbled murrelets in the region is high nest predation by corvids, particularly Steller's jays and common ravens, that have dramatically increased in number due to human food subsidies. Particularly high densities are found near campgrounds and their immediate vicinity⁹ due to these food subsidies.¹⁰
- Scientists have concluded that reducing predation by corvids would "likely constitute an effective means for recovering a declining murrelet population in central California."¹¹

Overall, decades of scientific study has demonstrated the foundational importance of Department lands to the survival of the central California marbled murrelet, as well as the continuing decline of the population. Continuing declines are due in large part to predation by corvids due to anthropogenic enhancement of food resources from campgrounds and picnic areas adjacent to or breeding areas within old growth habitat.

The Department's April, 2013 response to comments on the 2012 General Plan provides additional information on marbled murrelet ecology and conservation, but does not include a disclosure of the high risk of extinction for the marbled murrelet in Big Basin State Park and other regional parks in the near future. The General Plan also fails to describe science-based measures needed to recover this population, which include a significant reduction in nest predation at breeding sites within the Park according to recent population viability analysis.¹²

The General Plan would further imperil marbled murrelets

The 2012 General Plan included the following provisions in support of marbled murrelet recovery: restriction of new facility construction in the old growth redwoods, and relocation of the visitor center outside of the Headquarters area, to Saddle Mountain. Furthermore, 2013 changes to the General Plan in response to comments removes the proposal to construct 10 overnight cabins, parking facilities and utilities infrastructure in the Sky Meadow area, and also includes the intent to locate future amenities at Sky Meadow outside of old growth forest. The 2103 FEIR also acknowledges that the Preferred Alternative would result in significant, unavoidable impacts to marbled murrelets and notes that “some removal or relocation of existing recreation facilities may be necessary to protect significant resources and preserve the plant and wildlife habitats in the old growth forest.”(pg 173.)

We are pleased with these modifications, however, the revised FEIR still falls well short of reflecting the Service’s comment on the need for the General Plan to include provisions to “relocate camping and picnic facilities to outside of marbled murrelet habitat, and (begin) coordination between the Department and agencies toward the long-term survival and recovery of the Santa Cruz (Mountain) marbled murrelet population...”

The General Plan would likely exacerbate, rather than improve, conditions for marbled murrelets in the Park because it a) proposes to increase overall visitation in the Park and Wilderness areas; b) does not change use patterns of Blooms Creek, Sempervirens, or Jay Camp, the campgrounds located in the heart of murrelet breeding areas, and c) contains weak overall provisions for murrelet stewardship.

Even accounting for the removal of the Sky Meadow construction, the Service has made clear that the General Plan would “likely to cause direct and indirect impacts to marbled murrelets that could rise to the level of take as defined in the Endangered Species Act” and would require the Department to apply for an incidental take permit pursuant to section 10(a)(1)(B) of the Act. The Service encouraged the Department to work with other agencies and species experts to “take all necessary measures to ensure the goal of long-term recovery and survival of the species is achieved.”

The General Plan devotes only two pages to a set of eight vague and poorly described marbled murrelet conservation goals and conservation guidelines (pgs 4-17 & 4-18). It also includes poorly described management measures in “Area-specific Guidelines” (pg 4-57), for five areas: Park Headquarters and Sky Meadow; Saddle Mountain and Highway 236; Waddell Beach and Rancho del Oso; Little Basin; Wilderness and Backcountry. The development of additional housing, trailer pads and amenities in the Sky Meadow area would occur adjacent to old growth forest.

The General Plan states that “Park managers, as stewards of the resources, are challenged to provide recreation and camping facilities within the old growth redwoods while protecting the nesting habitat of marbled murrelets. This will be achieved in coordination with DFG and USFWS.” (pg 4-57) Without further detail on the goals and anticipated outcomes for interagency coordination, this statement holds little meaning.

The FEIR is inadequate

The FEIR fails to meet CEQA's minimum standards in that it does not adequately describe the existing conditions threatening the marbled murrelet, which constrains the public and decision-makers from understanding the Plan's impacts or the effectiveness of its mitigation measures. It does not adequately describe alternatives to the General Plan that allow comparison of the relative merits or feasibility of the alternatives, nor does it provide an inadequate explanation as to why Alternatives 1 and 2 are not feasible.

Alternative 1, Facilities Removal and Increased Resource Protection is supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Service has noted that "it appears prudent to support Alternative 1: Facilities Removal and Increased Resource protection. Alternative 1 would focus on the protection, sustainability, and biodiversity of the plants and animals within the old growth forest. Measures to ensure this protection would include: removing some or all of the existing campgrounds and picnic areas within the old growth redwood forest; relocating the food service concessionaire, and Park offices to Saddle Mountain and Little Basin; removing long-term parking from the Headquarters area; and establishing a visitor shuttle system. The campgrounds in old growth habitat would be removed or reduced in size, or closed on a seasonal or rotational basis. These and other provisions would reduce the overall amount and variety of visitor facilities in the Park."

The Service further recommends that Parks "evaluate the effects that establishing additional facilities and visitor services in Big Basin Redwoods State park, particularly the Headquarters and Sky Meadows areas, trails and facilities in the backcountry and wilderness areas, and Waddell Creek, will have on listed species and their habitats. We recommend that the Department review the recovery plans and recent 5-year status review reviews for federally listed species addressed in the General Plan to gauge what steps would be necessary to facilitate their recovery and long-term survival."

Western snowy plover

Western snowy plover is a federally threatened species listed in 1971 that has not reached its recovery goals.¹³ In 2012 a revised critical habitat designation for western snowy plover was published, including Waddell Beach, Unit CA-17, with a recovery management potential to support 10 breeding birds¹⁴ This critical habitat unit was occupied at the time of species listing and has historically been an important breeding and wintering site, although no breeding birds have been documented in at least 10 years. The 2012 General Plan had noted only that "Western snowy plover nests in small numbers on Waddell Beach," (pg 2-51) and "Red foxes pose a potentially serious threat to the threatened western snowy plover, which ground nests in the Rancho del Oso area." (pg 2-52).

The Service notes in its 2012 comment on the General Plan "that goal is not currently being met, likely due to human facilitated predation and human disturbance. We encourage the Department to manage this critical habitat area diligently, implementing seasonal beach closures, trash management, interpretive signage, and any additional protective measures outlined in the recovery plan and critical habitat rule."

In response to 2012 Service comments, the Department has suggested the following 2013 revision to the General Plan: “Manage the Waddell Creek Beach critical habitat to support breeding western snowy plovers, implementing seasonal beach closures, trash management, interpretive signage, and any additional protective measures to ensure habitat suitability for breeding birds.” (pg 4-16)

We support this revision, although detail is not provided on how the Department will encourage Snowy Plovers to return to this beach as a nesting site. We do not support the additional suggested revision in the Preferred Alternative to “incorporate day use parking (approx. 50 -100 spaces), distributed on either the inland side of Highway 1 depending on resource constraints and future roadway alignment, with safe pedestrian access along Waddell Creek from the inland side of the highway to the Waddell Beach.” We cannot support increased parking facilities at the beach which would likely lead to increased disturbance to western snowy plovers attempting to nest there. We do support an approach to designate and restore a portion of the beach specifically for wintering and breeding plovers, while maintaining public access on other portions of the beach, in a controlled and restricted manner as has been done on other state park properties supporting nesting snowy plovers.

Conclusion and recommendations

In our view and the view of others, the General Plan process represents a singular opportunity for the Department and the Commission to reverse the decline of marbled murrelets and to protect western snowy plover and other special status species, while providing ample recreational opportunities for the public. It is important to note that other state agencies and private groups have over the years made tremendous investments in money and time to support marbled murrelet recovery. The California oil spill trustee councils have dedicated over \$2.73 million in mitigation and settlement funds for land acquisition, corvid management, at-sea surveys and other projects in the Santa Cruz Mountains; another \$1.8 million is allocated for future work through 2020, totaling an investment of over \$4.5 million.¹⁵ Sempervirens and other groups have raised millions of dollars to purchase remaining old growth habitat, and fund monitoring surveys that are critical to understanding the status of the population. Collectively these investments will help secure the future of a recovered population of marbled murrelets in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Big Basin State Park is a key to the recovery of the species. We respectfully suggest the Commission recognize the importance of revising the General Plan to be in keeping with the essential need to protect and restore marbled murrelets in the Park, as well as the contributions of the oil spill trustee councils, other agencies and private groups.

In summary, we recommend the General Plan be revised to:

- Better describe and reevaluate Alternatives in the DEIR including Alternatives 1 and 2;
- Reduce camping facilities and infrastructure in or adjacent to old-growth habitat, particularly at Blooms Creek, Sempervirens, and Jay Camp;
- Analyze options to relocate camping facilities, concessions, trails, and other infrastructure to other areas of the Park, including but not limited to Saddle Mountain and Little Basin;

- Remove or relocate the food store from the Headquarters area to reduce food sources for corvids;
- Remove the intent to create additional staff housing, trailer pads, and amenities in the Lower Sky Meadow residence area;
- Remove the intent to build trails, expand trailhead parking, and add trailside camps within the State Wilderness Area;
- Include comprehensive and binding measures for trash management, corvid control, and public education that improve upon existing measures that have been inadequate;
- Work with the Service, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, oil spill trustee councils, and outside experts to create an institutionalized management and recovery plan for the central California population of marbled murrelets. The plan should focus on habitat protection and acquisition, corvid management and other priorities. This is especially important in light of the cessation of oil spill trustee council funding for habitat acquisition and corvid management activities in 2020.

For western snowy plover, we recommend the General Plan be revised to:

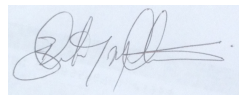
- Remove intent to add additional parking spaces at or near Waddell Beach;
- Consult with the Service and outside experts on best practices and approaches to fulfill the Parks intent to “ensure habitat suitability for breeding birds.”

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. We ask that these comments be included in the administrative record of proceedings for the Big Basin State Park General Plan process. We stand ready to work with the Department to identify a plan that better responds to the concerns listed here while maintaining the visitor experience in these areas important to wildlife and people. Thank you very much for your consideration of our comments.

Sincerely,



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California



Blake Matheson
President, Monterey Audubon
Society

Cc: State Parks Director Major General Anthony L. Jackson, USMC (Ret)

¹ USFWS 2005. Regional Seabird Conservation Plan, Pacific Region. Migratory Birds and Habitats Program, Pacific Region, Portland, OR.

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- ² Henry, R. W. Tyler and M. Peery. 2012. Abundance and productivity of marbled murrelets off central California during the 2010 and 2011 breeding seasons. Final report to the Luckenbach and Command Oil Spill Trustees.
- ³ Beissinger, S. and Z. Peery. 2007. Reconstructing the historic demography of an endangered seabird. *Ecology* 88:296-305.
- ⁴ Peery, M. and R.W. Henry. 2010. Recovering marbled murrelets via corvid management: a population viability analysis approach. *Biological Conservation*.
- ⁵ McShane, C., T. Hamer, H. Carter, G. Swartzman, V. Freisen, D. Ainley, R. Tressler, K. Nelson, A. Burger, L. Spear, T. Mohagen, R. Martin, L. Henkel, K. Prindle, C. Strong, and J. Keany. 2004. Evaluation report for the 5-year status review of the marbled murrelet in Washington, Oregon and California. Unpublished Report. EDAW Inc. Seattle, WA. Prepared for USFWS, Region 1, Portland, OR.
- ⁶ Peery, M. and R.W. Henry. 2010. Recovering marbled murrelets via corvid management: a population viability analysis approach. *Biological Conservation*.
- ⁷ USFWS 2009. Marbled murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) 5-year review: Washington Field Office, Lacey, WA.
- ⁸ Peery, M. and R.W. Henry. 2010. Recovering marbled murrelets via corvid management: a population viability analysis approach. *Biological Conservation*.
- ⁹ Suddjian, D. 2005. Summary of 2005 corvid monitoring surveys in the Santa Cruz Mountains: final report to the Command Oil Spill Trustee Council. September 2005.
- ¹⁰ Peery, M. and R.W. Henry. 2010. Recovering marbled murrelets via corvid management: a population viability analysis approach. *Biological Conservation*.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ USFWS 2007. Recovery Plan for the Pacific Coast Population of the Western Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*). Sacramento, California.
- ¹⁴ USFWS 2012. Federal Register 50 CFR Part 17. Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Revised Designation of Critical Habitat for the Pacific Coast Population of the Western Snowy Plover; Final Rule. June 19.
- ¹⁵ Steve Hampton, Resource Economist, Office of Spill Prevention and Response, California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Personal Communication with A. Weinstein. April 2013.