



# Rare Bird: Pursuing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet

*Maria Mudd Ruth*

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## **Rare Bird: Pursuing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet** Maria Mudd Ruth

Part naturalist detective story and part environmental inquiry, *Rare Bird: Pursuing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet* celebrates the fascinating world of an endangered seabird that depends on the contested old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest for its survival.

“This chunky little seabird stole my heart.” So confesses Maria Mudd Ruth, a veteran nature writer perfectly happy to be a generalist before getting swept up in the strange story of the marbled murrelet. This curiosity of nature, which flies like a little brown bullet at up to 100 miles an hour and lives most of its life offshore, is seen onland only during breeding season, when each female lays a single egg high on a mossy tree limb in the ancient coastal forest.

Ruth traces reports of the bird back to Captain Cook’s ill-fated voyage of discovery on the Pacific Ocean in 1778, and explores the mindset of 19th- and 20th-century naturalists who — despite their best efforts — failed to piece together clues to the whereabouts of the bird’s nest. Ruth ventures to coastal meadows before dawn and onto the ocean at midnight to learn firsthand how scientists observe nature. She interviews all the major players in the drama: timber company executives and fishing fleet operators whose businesses are threatened by conservation measures, as well as the so-called cowboy scientists who are devoted to saving the marbled murrelet from extinction. And, ultimately, Ruth puts her curiosity and passion for this rare bird onto the page for readers to savor.

## **Rare Bird: Pursuing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet Details**

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Author : Maria Mudd Ruth

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## **From Reader Review Rare Bird: Pursuing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet for online ebook**

### **Valerie says**

I received the book through Goodreads First Reads.

This book is almost a mystery book about marbled murrelets. They are such secretive odd seabirds! So secretive that it took an insane amount of time for ornithologists/birders to find out where their nesting habitat is.

The author shares so well her passion for those little birds. Her work is admirable.

"To my eye, the egg color was pale green with spots of lavender-gray and brown that formed a kind of Milky Way band around its lower third. The closer I looked at the spots, however, the less willing I was to call them gray or brown. The gray had the cast of silver, the brown seemed both bronze and gold. It was a very beautiful egg."

"All of a sudden, I felt the soles of my feet. They had never walked so far off the beaten path in such a forest. I wasn't walking on dirt, possibly not even on earth. I was standing, firmly rooted, on thousands and thousands of years of fallen redwood needles and trees."

"When I tell the story of how this chick first leaves its forest nest for the sea, I can hear a pin drop. It is always then - in the silence of a darkened room - that the enormous space between the mossy nest and the crashing waves becomes real, that those listening join me in urging the fledging chick toward its destination, that the distance between our two species seems to disappear. It is then that I feel most hopeful and most inspired to return the life, beauty and solace that this rare bird has given me."

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### **C. Atteridge says**

loved it.

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### **Sheila says**

What a great book. For anyone with any interest at all in the Marbled Murrelet, I would highly recommend this book. The author's love of the subject is infectious. I learned so much, and I was engrossed the whole time.

For me, I have been interested in this little known bird since I first heard of it in 1988. My college roommate did an externship with a researcher studying the Marbled Murrelet. She would come home and tell me about it, and at that time my thoughts were "The marbled what??" I had never heard of this bird, that lived in my own backyard.

Now over 25 years later it is fascinating, yet sad, to read this birds story, and to learn of its decline. The future does not look bright for this very particular bird, who doesn't adapt well at all to any changes in environment. I would love to stand in an old growth forest meadow someday though at daybreak, and hear

the keer keer keer of the Murrelets as they fly home from the ocean to their nests. Sadly, that will probably never happen, and someday in the not too distant future the Murrelets could be gone.

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### **Kerri Anne says**

Such an interesting book, and such an interesting little bird! Extremely thorough and well-researched and quite lovely, indeed. I had a blast reading this book, and was thrilled to realize we've seen and heard the strange, unique, and oh so elusive marbled murrelets, even as we'd no idea the mystery and history to which we were privy. That so much of our old-growth forests are gone, pillaged in equal parts by greed and need and unethical lumber companies makes me so incredibly sad. But these birds are brown bundles of hope for old-growth conservation, and a testament to how much we still have to learn about the myriad complicated, integrated ecosystems active alongside our coastlines.

[Four-point-five stars for a beautifully penned story of a beautifully bizarre bird, and the hodge-podge of dedicated people who fell (and continue to fall) in love with protecting it.]

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### **Elena Rodriguez says**

Wonderfully written. Introduced me to an endearing and highly endangered bird that lives in the waters right outside my door. This bird was such a mystery for so long, and there still lingers about it an air of mystery even after some pretty intense years of study. It's only during the last quarter of the last century that scientists and birders pinned down where these birds nest and how their young fledge. Amazing. They are equally, if not more, dependent than spotted owls on the habitat of old growth forests to live. But it's not just the degradation of the forests that's causing their numbers to plummet. They also need clean water, abundant prey fish -- all the things we are destroying.

Ruth has written an insightful book based on lots of science, giving us all the facts. Yet it's so engaging. Her personal story is woven through, and the brief character studies of the biologists, ornithologists, loggers and lawyers all make it much more readable. Reading her book is like a really interesting, well-informed friend telling you stories about the most exciting thing they've just learned.

If you think you aren't interested in reading about the marbled murrelet, you're wrong! You want to read this book.

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### **Rob Slaven says**

As usual I received this book for free from a GoodReads giveaway. Despite that kindness I will give my candid opinions below.

To begin, it's important to understand what this book is exactly. By my math the text works out to be about 10% history, 20% science and 70% biography of the people involved in studying it. As a reader I was disappointed by this split and expected something much more scientifically detailed. While we do get a fair amount of data on the species the focus is less on the bird and more on the people involved with it.

Moving on to the standard positive/negative bits, the positive centers around the author's obvious passion for this animal. Rarely have I seen any book so determined to tell the story of something so specific. Ruth's writing is abundantly well executed and immaculate in detail. For those who care about this animal as much as she does, this a veritable Bible, a feast of information and ideas.

To the negative, the book seems to want to cross genres and be alluring even to those who don't have a grand passion for birding but this it utterly fails to do. Unless you're already a fanatic, this book is just too much in the specific. It gently adopts this rather oddball bit of ornithology but doesn't quite convince me as personally as to why I should care about this one species more than all the others that are threatened by ecological changes. I get the message but even after reading this tome I'm more interested in saving the forests themselves than I am this specific piece of nature's grand puzzle. I won't say that I came away thinking, "so what?" but I did not find myself infected with the author's obvious frenetic interest in this bird.

In summary, a marvelous book to pick up if you're already thoroughly infected with the bug for bird-watching but this will be a far too heavy a work for the marginally interested outsider. It is wondrous to see such passion from an author but at the same time rather wearying as well. I applaud the work but do not claim it as my particular cup of tea.

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### **Chelsea Lynn says**

As someone who has done 2 seasons of MAMU field work, I appreciated learning more about the history of the species in an engaging story format. I was also tickled by her descriptions of her experiences shadowing biologists in the field (they are quite accurate, btw). I also liked how she incorporated some of the larger issues of wildlife conservation, often in a touching and thought provoking way.

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### **Blue says**

I got a copy of this book through Goodreads First Reads. Thanks!

Rare Bird is a rare treat. I am not a birder. Never been, never will be. I have never heard of a murrelet before, let alone a marbled one. I do not have any passion towards birds, just a general interest in animals. But one thing that I am is a scientist. Despite the fact that I do not have any passion for birds or birding in particular, I found Rare Bird fascinating. The mystery of its nesting site, which took two centuries to figure out (in the scientific sense, meaning with proof and documentation and some understanding of how), the mystery of its nesting and fledging behavior, the lives of all the naturalists, birders, rangers, scientists, and the conservation and recovery efforts of the red wood forests as an ecosystem as well as the marbled murrelets as a species along the west coast were all discussed in detail and with vivid passion. The author has a lot of passion not only for the birds and their habitat, but also the efforts the scientists put into research. To some, this may seem like too much effort into understanding one little thing in all of life, but that is how science in general works. We spend our lives trying to learn everything about one thing (this is not always advantageous for knowledge, but rather a way that somewhat works for someone to do so much work, specialize, so that they can actually make a career out of their studies.)

The book can be divided into three: the mystery of the murrelet's nesting site (it is a very strange waterbird, indeed!), the mystery of how chicks are fed and eventually fly off the nest, and the conservation and

recovery efforts, all with the scandals, court struggles, and politics of loggers vs. bird/forest. Ruth does a very good job of presenting both sides. She has one very interesting interview with a representative of the logging company, one that I hope all campers, nature lovers, anti-loggers read. The story in general is an ode to how anyone can contribute to research as a naturalist.

As a scientist, Ruth's constant surprise at the scientific method, its difficulties, and its triumphs was fascinating. She has a genuine interest in how science is done, and does a very good job of explaining the science in lay terms (I know, because all this bird stuff is completely new to me.) At some point, Ruth cites a sentence from a scientific paper to illustrate the difficulty of reading these papers for the lay audience, and I had to laugh, because I did not find this sentence difficult at all. But I know if she had not done a good job explaining the surveying methods, for example, I would have been lost.

Recommended for those who love long-lasting, beautiful wood furniture, lumberjacks, fluffy chicks, and carrots.

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### **Holly says**

Flawless science writing, unabashed enthusiasm, and self-deprecating humor (the author has "attention surplus disorder"). Steps into the world of bird watchers and scientists (as in her initial observations at a three-day Pacific Seabird Group Conference:

"Each presentation is short -- fifteen minutes -- and requires the scientist at the podium to summarize the highlights of the previous year's research. Needless to say, these scientists talk very fast. Many of them seem to take one very deep breath and talk very rapidly while slowly exhaling. When they inhale again, they are done.")

Judiciously explores the political contexts and scientific implications of endangered species research. Revealed to this non-birdwatching reader (who has never gotten up in the middle of the night to sit and wait for an elusive bird) the miracle of this pudgy neckless little birdlet.

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### **Anna says**

I love finding obscure bits of history, so it was a joy to read Maria Mudd Ruth's own extensive journey in covering the story of the Marbled Murrelet. It's always a treat to read about someone up-ending their life in pursuit of knowledge; the kind of knowledge that you have to (literally) track down, wake up at 5am and tromp to the coast for. The kind of knowledge that is found in people's cups of coffee as they try to recall the exact details of a particular event.

The history of the marbled murrelet is fascinating - a story of mystery and science - and Ruth did an excellent job putting together the many pieces of the puzzle.

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### **Jessica says**

I was lucky enough to win Rare Bird as a goodreads giveaway.

Rare Bird is a great read for bird lovers and nature lovers alike. It is geared toward the nonscientist, but as a scientist, I think she did a great job of incorporating important scientific facts with easy to understand explanations, while also explaining the somewhat oddball way we scientists do things.

Ruth has a quirky sense of humor that will keep a smile on your face throughout the book. And even though the book is relatively upbeat, Ruth does a good job reminding you that these birds are threatened and need protection.

All in all, a good read for anyone who appreciates conservation biology.

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### **Manek says**

A bird that looks like a potato!

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### **Susan says**

The author's fascination with the marbled murrelet takes her (and her family) out west to explore the history of the bird and the recent state of the species in the U.S. The author shows plenty of her own enthusiasm for the bird in the book, but it sometimes isn't enough to really engage the reader.

Although some of my favorite books are non-fiction journalistic endeavors, this book doesn't really compare to the best in the genre. It starts rather slow, and I started/stopped a number of times before finishing.

However, after the first few sections with a more historical point of view, the pace picks up in the "Pursuit" section. The author does a much better job weaving the story around her time in the field with experts and modern day research. Thankfully, since some time has passed since this book was first published, there is an epilogue in this edition that provides a 2013 update on the species.

There is a lot of value in recording this tale of the marbled murrelet and, to some extent, the species is a representation of all the unknown threatened and endangered species that haven't been given the spotlight. While bird lovers will likely find the tale very engrossing, the average reader may find this book to be hit or miss. Overall, once I got past the slow start, I did find the book enjoyable and am glad I gave it a try.

\*\*Copy received free through Goodreads First Reads\*\*

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### **Daniel says**

I received an advanced reading copy of this (a re-release of the 2005 text with an updated epilogue) from the publisher via Goodread's First-Reads giveaway program.

Ruth's book chronicles the history of our discovery and understanding of this enigmatic Pacific coastal bird, the people involved in uncovering the data on its basic biology and behavior, and the threatened state the

birds face on account of the direct and indirect influence of humanity. Throughout, Ruth chronicles her own burgeoning fascination with the elusive and unfamiliar bird.

Although I found this book difficult to get into, it grew on me enormously as it continued, as I became more aware of exactly where Ruth was going in relating the story and what she was focusing on. As others here have mentioned, the book focuses far more on the details of human behavior than that of the birds, such as descriptions of what birders, biologists, rangers, etc, do to observe the birds, gather data, fight for their protection, or adversely impact the population. In this way the book is actually far more about people and their relation to the bird than the bird itself. Yes, the book covers bird behavior, particularly in terms of nesting and raising chicks. But still, these details flow from the focus on relating the tale of human discovery of the bird's actual nesting and rearing behaviors. As I realized the book wasn't going to be zeroed in on the birds quite as I expected, I found myself intrigued in the tales.

The final chapters detailing the conundrums of modern conservation - regardless of what species one is talking about - or what habitat were the most intriguing and thought provoking. Faced with our dependence on modern conveniences and the necessities of this world for sustaining the human population at its size - nevermind growing - it becomes easy to see how hard it is to champion conservation fully. Yet, when one considers what is at stake, honestly, it is a question worth seriously addressing. Overall the book ends up being inspirational as one realizes the boundless complexity of biology and its interaction with the environment that is exemplified in this bird's story. Reading this affirms the beauty of life and the importance of its appreciation and study.

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## **Carol Smith says**

Disclosure: Won on Goodreads First Reads.

How is it that I've never heard of the marbled murrelet before? The spotted owl has received all the press, but this plucky and mysterious little seabird who depends on old growth Pacific forests deserves as much attention and concern.

*Rare Bird* is a mixture of many things: history, natural mystery, and environmental writing, with large doses of biologist biographies and the author's personal experiences as a budding birder and murrelet fan tossed in along the way. I found that certain aspects of this recipe pull off better than others, but on the whole they add up to a well-rounded and informative examination of how the whole business of species protection really works, from the forest floor on up to the nation's capital.

My enjoyment of the book, which includes no photographs, was enhanced by watching murrelet web videos along the way. There's some good ones out there - check 'em out.

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