

Pacific Seabird Group



DEDICATED TO THE STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF PACIFIC SEABIRDS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

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Mr. Geoff Haskett

Regional Director, Alaska Program

1011 E. Tudor Rd.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Anchorage, AK 99503

Subject: Monitoring Kittlitz's Murrelets and Aleutian Terns

Dear Geoff:

On behalf of the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG), this letter concerns priorities for implementation of the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, which requires the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to monitor and assess the status and trends of all bird species, subspecies and populations. While we recognize and understand that lack of funds makes compliance with this requirement difficult, the PSG wants to highlight the need to and importance of monitoring and understanding the status and viability of the Kittlitz's Murrelet (*Brachyramphus brevirostris*) and Aleutian Tern (*Onychoprion aleuticus*) in Alaska.

The PSG is an international, non-profit organization that was founded in 1972 to promote the knowledge, study, and conservation of Pacific seabirds. It has a membership drawn from 14 nations, including Canada, Mexico, Russia, Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand, Peru, and the USA. The PSG's members include biologists and scientists who have research interests in Pacific seabirds, government officials who manage seabird refuges and populations, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations and individuals who are interested in marine conservation.

In February, PSG met in Juneau for its annual meeting. Members voiced strong concern about the status and population trends of the Kittlitz's Murrelet and Aleutian Tern, each of which has a high percentage of its global population in Alaska. Accordingly, we offer the following

assessments and recommendations to you based on the best-available science and discussions with PSG members with expertise in these two species.

Kittlitz's Murrelet

The Service recently determined that listing the Kittlitz's Murrelet under the U.S. Endangered Species Act was not warranted. This species remains of significant interest and concern to the PSG because of unclear population trends (Kuletz et al. 2011, Piatt et al. 2011, Kirchhoff et al. 2014, Kissling et al. *In review*), changes in glacial habitats that the species associates with, and genetic distinctness within the population (Friesen and Birt 2012). We understand that the listing determination was based, in part, on a "lack of sufficient data" linking known and potential threats directly to measuring population viability. Thus, we recommend long-term monitoring and continued research until population viability can be measured or determined unequivocally. With respect to the listing determination, we recommend that the Service provide support to enable peer-reviewed publication of relevant research that was used in the finding.

Aleutian Tern

Recent surveys at known colonies suggest widespread and steep declines for the Aleutian Tern across Alaska (e.g., Corcoran 2012), with many colonies disappearing in the last few decades. Terns will move among colonies and colonize new nesting sites (Pyare et al. 2013), thus additional information is needed in order to understand the severity and significance of the survey results. We recommend that future surveys sample both a subset of known colonies as well as potentially suitable nesting habitats outside of known colonies.

Other Comments

In addition to the aforementioned long-term monitoring and research recommendations, we suggest the timely development and implementation of proactive management plans for both species. We recommend plans that identify priority areas for monitoring, develop monitoring protocols that yield precise, unbiased estimates, identify key research questions to understand important population drivers, and support peer-reviewed publication of findings.

Lastly, significant populations of both species occur on lands managed by other agencies (e.g., National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service¹) and in other countries (e.g., Russia, China and Japan). Monitoring and research efforts will require external collaboration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the appropriate agency to lead this effort. Wherever possible, the PSG would like to assist the Service as it has active members from all of the appropriate state and federal agencies in Alaska, and in Russia, Japan, and China. Our organization is prepared to assist with development of survey protocols, ranking survey sites, and identifying pertinent research questions. I invite you to contact me to discuss how our organization can help.

¹ For example, at least half of the known Alaska population of Aleutian Terns occurs on lands in the National Forest System, including the single largest colony, which is on Black Sand Spit near Yakutat.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Stanley Senner
Vice-Chair for Conservation

Copies

USFS Regional Forester, Alaska Region (Beth Pendleton)
NPS Acting Regional Director, Alaska Region (Joel Hard)
ADF&G Commissioner (Cora Campbell)
USGS Alaska Science Center Director (Mark Shasby)

Citations

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