CATALINA ISLAND CONSERVANCY

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

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Research Team Finds Rare Seabird Breeding on Catalina's Ship Rock

Confirmation of Ashy Storm-Petrel Nests at Island

SHIP ROCK, Catalina – A seabird research team from the Catalina Island Conservancy and the California Institute of Environmental Studies (CIES) scaled the rugged faces of Catalina's massive Ship Rock to discover Ashy Storm-Petrels, a rare nocturnal seabird, were breeding there, it was announced today.

Harry Carter, the team leader, and Darrell Whitworth, both of the California Institute of Environmental Studies (CIES) in Davis, CA, along with Tyler Dvorak, a Conservancy wildlife technician, found six Ashy Storm-Petrel nests on the enormous rock formation that is located near Catalina's Two Harbors.

Since 1978, the Ashy Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma homochroa)* has been listed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife as a "California Bird Species of Special Concern," or at risk of becoming threatened or endangered. Ashy Storm-Petrel breeding had not been confirmed on Ship Rock or Catalina – although there were some early, unconfirmed reports of naturalists finding the small seabird's eggs at Catalina in 1903 and 1937.

"This is a rare seabird, with roughly about 10,000 estimated worldwide, that is mostly found in southern and central California," said Carter. "A small population of less than 50 nests likely occurs at Catalina. Now that breeding is known, efforts can be taken to provide protection."

He said the Ashy Storm-Petrel also breeds just south of the U.S.-Mexico border, but its population has been greatly impacted by human-caused changes in breeding habitats, as well as by predators, and it has lower reproductive success because of the pesticide, DDT, in the marine food web.

In the 1990s, Humboldt State University's researchers, which included Carter, Whitworth and others, first noted many potential nest crevices with the distinctive smell of storm-petrels at Ship Rock. In 2008, CIES noted an adult Ashy Storm-Petrel in a potential nest crevice but no egg was found. These important clues led to a special survey to finally document breeding. In July 2014, CIES and the Conservancy teamed up to re-examine Ship Rock at the time of year when most adult Ashy Storm-Petrels should be incubating eggs.

"Catalina is a good example of our limited knowledge about this rare species," said Dvorak. "The Ashy Storm-Petrel lays a single egg in a rock crevice or other cavities on offshore rocks or islands. Adult storm-petrels visit their nests only at night when the birds are difficult to detect."

Carter piloted an inflatable boat and dropped off Whitworth and Dvorak at Ship Rock, which is privately owned and managed by the Conservancy. As one of the largest rocks found along the Catalina Island coast, it provides many potential rock crevices for breeding by Ashy Storm-Petrels.

Whitworth and Dvorak carefully climbed the rock, without special climbing equipment, and found six nests near the top of the rock. In four of the nests, they could see an adult with an egg or a chick in each crevice. Only an adult could be seen in the other two crevices. At this time of year, Carter said eggs or chicks likely were present because an adult was present.

"Long-term monitoring is needed to determine the trends for this small population and more surveys are needed elsewhere in its breeding range to find other small populations that have not yet been documented," said Carter. "The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) decided not to list the Ashy Storm-Petrel as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 2011 and 2013. It may reconsider listing the seabird under the ESA in the future if better evidence of decline and significant threats to survival are found."

Some management actions already are underway to help restore Ashy Storm-Petrel populations at other California islands – even without ESA listing. The Montrose Settlements Restoration Program and Channel Islands National Park have been restoring Ashy Storm-Petrels at Santa Cruz Island since 2008. The Luckenbach Trustee Council and USFWS also are planning to restore Ashy Storm-Petrels at the South Farallon Islands in the near future.

The rare Ashy Storm-Petrel nests in rock crevices, returns to breeding islands at night, and feeds far out to sea during the day. Photo by Darrell Whitworth.

For more information on Ashy Storm-Petrels, surveys and CIES, please contact Harry Carter, seabird biologist; carterhr@shaw.ca; 530-400-3944.

About CIES

The California Institute of Environmental Studies (head office: Davis, California) is a non-profit organization formed in 1976 that is dedicated to research, monitoring, conservation, and restoration of seabirds in California and worldwide. Focal species include the California Brown Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Scripps's Murrelet, Guadalupe Murrelet, Cassin's Auklet and Ashy Storm-Petrel. Most projects have been conducted in the southern California Channel Islands and islands off northwestern Mexico.

About the Conservancy

Formed in 1972, the Catalina Island Conservancy is one of California's oldest land trusts. Its mission is to be a responsible steward of its lands through a balance of conservation, education and recreation. Through its ongoing efforts, the Conservancy protects the magnificent natural and cultural heritage of Santa Catalina Island, stewarding approximately 42,000 acres of land, more than 60 miles of rugged shoreline, an airport and 50 miles of biking and nearly 150 miles of hiking opportunities within its road and trail system. The Conservancy conducts educational outreach through two nature centers, its Wrigley Memorial & Botanic Garden and guided experiences in the Island's rugged interior. Twenty miles from the mainland, the Island is a treasure trove of historical and archaeological sites. It also contains numerous rare and endangered animals and plants. The Island is home to 60 species – and counting – that are found only on Catalina.

For additional information, visit www.catalinaconservancy.org