



The Redpoll

Newsletter of the Arctic Audubon Society

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Mission of Arctic Audubon: Earth has unparalleled natural diversity, productivity, and beauty, and provides for life. Recognizing the full value of nature, we work to protect Alaskan ecosystems by encouraging research, education, and management that will contribute to appreciation and good stewardship of this natural heritage. We also strive to conduct our own lives in harmony with nature.

Arctic Audubon Society presents...

The Bears of McNeil River

presentation by Bud Marschner

Tuesday, February 5th, 7:00 pm

Noel Wien Library Auditorium

In 1967, the Alaska State Legislature designated the McNeil River area as a wildlife sanctuary (and enlarged it in 1993) to protect the world's largest concentration of wild brown bears. As many as 144 individual bears have been observed at the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary through the summer with as many as 74 bears observed at one time!

Bud Marschner has photographed wildlife in Alaska for the last 25 years and has visited McNeil River at four different times during the season. Bud will describe his McNeil experience and explain how bears feed in various areas according to where salmon occur.



Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain Oil & Gas Leasing Program Draft EIS: Comment Now

by Pamela A. Miller

On the eve of the darkest night of winter, BLM posted the Coastal Plain Oil & Gas Leasing Draft EIS to its website. A week later during the federal government shut-down, the Federal Register notice on December 28 started a 45-day public comment period to end February 11, 2019.

Uncertainties remain, such as whether requests to extend the comment period will be granted, but it is clear that Acting Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt is keen to keep up the rushed process with abbreviated comment periods and rushed analysis to undo the long legacy of Arctic Refuge protection. Interior pushes for a lease sale later this year instead of conducting a multi-year, multi-part process with sufficient opportunity for public input. The Tax Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-97) provisions required that the Coastal Plain be opened to oil and gas leasing with 400,000 acres offered for lease within 4 years and a second lease sale within 7 years.

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Fairbanks Christmas Bird Count Results Announced

by Laurel Devaney, CBC Co-coordinator

The 2018 Fairbanks Christmas Bird Count took place on December 15, and it was a remarkable day in many ways. It was the first count in 21 years without Gail Mayo at the helm. Thanks, Gail, for keeping Fairbanks part of the longest-running Citizen Science project in the United States!

Despite landing on the first cold snap of the winter, 151 people—the most participants in many years—spent the day watching their feeders and driving, hiking, skiing, and snow-shoeing the count circle to find a record-tying 32 species. Notable finds included the first-ever Ruby-crowned Kinglet, a first for count day Bald Eagle, and the first recorded Townsend's Solitaire in many years. In addition to the rarities, unusually high numbers of Redpolls, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Boreal and Black-capped Chickadees, Northern Goshawks, and Northern Shrikes were discovered. Near misses were a White-crowned Sparrow and what would have been the first-ever Red Crossbills that were seen one day after the count week concluded! Review the count data online at <https://www.arcticaudubon.org/fairbanks-cbc-data-archives/>

Arctic Refuge Draft EIS

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BLM addressed 4 alternatives in the DEIS: Alt A – no-action which considers Coastal Plain in its current state; Alt B and C which would offer the entire 1.56 million acre Coastal Plain for oil and gas leasing and development, and Alt D which would lease more than 1 million acres. The alternatives are an inadequate range of alternatives that comprise much more acreage and pace than required by the Tax Act.

The DEIS is deficient in numerous ways that fail to ensure protection of original purposes of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Even though the Tax Act added an oil and gas program in the Coastal Plain part of the refuge as a purpose, BLM failed to consider how this will interfere with the US Fish and Wildlife Service's management or to ensure the wilderness, conservation of fish and wildlife populations and their habitats in their natural diversity, water quality and quantity, and subsistence purposes are upheld. BLM does not adequately evaluate the impacts of destructive oil and gas activities on the unique wilderness and ecological resources of the Coastal Plain nor their cumulative impacts. It fails to address this winter's proposed 3D seismic plan, nor to address the climate impacts of this oil and gas development. The DEIS underestimates impacts to caribou, polar bears, and birds, among other resources. It fails to accurately account for the cultural and spiritual importance of the Coastal Plain to the Gwich'in people.

The Porcupine Caribou Herd uses all of the Coastal Plain for vital calving and post-calving and other habitat needs during its annual migration. While the BLM acknowledges that oil and gas activities will likely disturb and displace caribou, especially sensitive cows and calves, it fails to adequately address these impacts and to consider the full range of areas that are important to caribou. Unlike other areas of the North Slope, the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge does not contain large quantities of fresh water which is particularly scarce in winter when most surface water is frozen, yet the DEIS fails to identify how water would be obtained and impacts of withdrawals.

The DEIS underestimates harm to birds and their habitats. The Coastal Plain provides essential nesting, foraging, and migratory stopover habitat for millions of birds each year. The combination of coastal, tundra, and upland habitat support a diverse array of waterfowl, shorebirds, songbirds, raptors, and other Arctic birds that arrive on the Coastal Plain from across the nation and around the globe. The BLM's analysis is at best weak, and at worst erroneous, when describing how the proposed oil and gas activities will cause direct and cumulative impacts to Coastal Plain bird populations. The DEIS contains large loopholes that would allow oil and gas activities to move forward, regardless of the harm to birds.



Take Action: Express Your Concern for the Arctic Refuge

Write your valentine for the Refuge! Take 10 minutes with pencil or keyboard to jot down what your love and experience of life in this special place. Like Dr. Klein's nature walk on the river bar (see page 7 article), paint a picture, weave the story of the wholeness of this protected ecosystem and what's important about this existing environment. Keep going past tears about all that's at stake and outrage of what's proposed, then raise some substantive issues about problems with the DEIS.

- Go to National Audubon Society for an article and basic alert for quick actions:
<https://www.audubon.org/news/report-arctic-drillings-environmental-impacts-deeply-flawed-critics-say>
- Northern Alaska Environmental Center has provided more detailed information to help in drafting substantive comments:
<https://northern.org/wp-content/uploads/Arctic-Refuge-Talking-Points.pdf>

Submit your comments by February 11 (or later IF there is an extension of the comment period):

Online in ePlanning:

<https://www.blm.gov/programs/planning-and-nepa/plans-in-development/alaska/coastal-plain-eis>

By email to Nicole Hayes:

mnhayes@blm.gov Please cc ryan@northern.org in online comments.

By mail:

Attn: Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program EIS
222 West 7th Avenue, Stop #13
Anchorage, Alaska 99513

In Person:

Watch for announcements for meeting times and dates. Meetings to be scheduled in Anchorage, Arctic Village, Fairbanks, Kaktovik, Fort Yukon, Venetie, and Utqiagvik and Washington, D.C.



Great Backyard Bird Count

February 15–18

Launched in 1998 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, the Great Backyard

Bird Count was the first online citizen-science project to collect data on wild birds and to display results in near real-time.

Now, more than 160,000 people of all ages and walks of life worldwide join the four-day count each February to create an annual snapshot of the distribution and abundance of birds.

We invite you to participate! For at least 15 minutes on one or more days of the count, **February 15-18, 2019**, simply tally the numbers and kinds of birds you see. You can count from any location for as long as you wish!

If you're new to the count, or have not participated since before the 2013 merger with eBird, you must create a free online account at <http://gbbc.birdcount.org/> to enter your checklists. If you already have an account, just use the same login name and password. If you have already participated in another Cornell Lab citizen-science project, you can use your existing login information.

Arctic Audubon's March 6th Program...



National Geographic's Photo Ark

Cole Sartore will present "Creating the National Geographic Photo Ark" for Arctic Audubon's March program on Wednesday, March 6th, 7 pm at the UAF Murie Auditorium.

Cole has been assisting his father, photographer Joel Sartore, build the Photo Ark for 12 years. The Sartores hope to capture a brief moment within each species life, to tell its story, and to inspire awareness and care for the incredible beauty in Earth's biodiversity. The PhotoArk team has already traveled to 40 countries and predict it will take 25 years to complete their mission.



Alaska Bird Conference

March 4-8 in Fairbanks

The 18th Alaska Bird Conference is coming to Fairbanks March 4-8! The conference is hosted by the Alaska Songbird Institute, organized by a committee of local volunteers, and includes a wide diversity of learning experiences.

Everyone interested in Alaska bird research, education, and conservation is welcome to attend at the Westmark Hotel.

Daily and student rates are available. Information on registration, a complete schedule, and more can be found at www.alaskabirdconference.org. For the most updated information, follow the Alaska Bird Conference Facebook page. The conference features three full days of scientific presentations, an art show at Well Street Art Company, a poster session, a banquet and a free public presentation at UAF's Murie Auditorium, both featuring keynote speaker Cole Sartore of National Geographic's Photo Ark.

Daily invited speakers will open each day by sharing recent findings on changes to bird habitats across Alaska. They include Uma Bhatt, University of Alaska Fairbanks Dept. of Atmospheric Sciences, Torre Jorgenson, Alaska Ecoscience, and Chris Arp, UAF Water & Environmental Research Center. The conference also includes a citizen-science training workshop with COASST (Coastal Observation And Seabird Survey Team) from the University of Washington, and presentations on data tools available through SNAP (Scenarios Network for Alaska & Arctic Planning) and NOAA (National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration).

Last but not least, there are field trips to the UAF Museum Ornithological Collection with Jack Withrow, an owling ski with local pro John Shook, and a drone workshop! Officially called Unmanned Aerial Systems, this workshop will teach you the capabilities and regulations for using drones in Alaska, as well as the types of data that can be collected and how to apply these data to wildlife research. The workshop is offered in collaboration with ACUASI (Alaska Center for Unmanned Aircraft Systems Integration) and features special guest Dr. David Bird, Emeritus Professor of Wildlife Biology at McGill University.

Final Day of Fairbanks FeederCount!

Participate in the final count day of this citizen science project on Saturday, March 2.

Details at www.aksongbird.org.

An Exciting Winter Visitor

by Sherry Lewis

The Fairbanks Christmas Bird Count this year was December 15, with the count week December 12-18. On December 19, five Red Crossbills showed up at my feeder. This may not seem that exciting as we had over 1,000 White-winged Crossbills, which don't normally visit seed feeders, on the count. However, Red Crossbills, which readily use seed feeders elsewhere, have never been reported in the Interior in the winter; three were netted years ago in the summer and another was salvaged one year in summer. I was in my chair under a quilt with my dog near the window. I had to slide out of the chair and crawl away in order not to scare the birds to get my camera. Photographs were needed to document this unusual occurrence.

I sent pictures to others, including Dan Gibson, who is a member of the Alaska Checklist Committee. When Dan saw the birds' bills in my pictures, he thought it possible that they came from the east, a larger-billed subspecies *bendirei*, not from south of the Alaska Range, where subspecies *minor* occurs from Kodiak Island east along the Pacific coast. SE Alaska Red Crossbills have small bills because the cones they feed on are small. Birds from interior NW Canada have larger bills as they feed on pine cones. There are Red Crossbills in Whitehorse this winter, but to date it is not clear which subspecies is involved.

A few weeks after fledging, crossbills' mandibles cross slowly either to the left or right. The proportion of right over left versus left over right suggests it is simple right-handedness and left-handedness. They pry open conifer scales with their curved bill tips and use the tongue to remove the seed. Red Crossbills have been divided into several 'call types' by their vocalizations. Different subspecies also have different bill sizes, with populations of small bills feeding primarily on spruce, fir and hemlock. Larger billed ones can open pine cones. Crossbills use their feet and bills when climbing in trees, like parrots. There is even a Parrot Crossbill with a very thick bill in Scandinavia and NW Russia. Britain's only endemic species is the Scottish Crossbill.



I hope you are enjoying our irruption of White-winged Crossbills and redpolls this winter. Keep looking out for other species that may drop in unexpectedly. And if you see any Red Crossbills, try to record any calls they might make! And please let me know!

Photos demonstrate the difference in color of the female Red Crossbill above and male below. See the online newsletter for color photos at arcticaudubon.org.

Photos by John Wright

Updating Arctic Audubon's Fairbanks Hiking & Birding Guide

By Gail Mayo

Arctic Audubon's *Fairbanks Area Hiking and Birding Guide* map, originally printed in 2007, has served locals and visitors well for more than 10 years with over 1000 maps sold. Not surprisingly, the map needs to be updated. In the intervening decade, more top birding spots have developed while a few of the included spots have declined. More importantly birding information has exploded with the likes of eBird, Boreal Birder, and all the other internet birding apps. Arctic Audubon is now considering how to bring birding information for Interior Alaska up to date for beginning birders, visiting birders, and experienced birders.

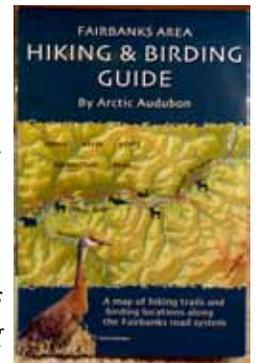
We would like to hear from you! What ideas do you have for bringing our collective information up to date? What format or formats will serve us all? We're looking into all possibilities, but realize that we do need to move forward so we must make decisions in time to follow through. Our Committee members so far are Frank Keim, Joyce Potter, Darla Theisen, Beth Grassi and Gail Mayo. We will have a comment page available at our public meetings this spring, including at the Alaska Bird Conference, and we look forward to any and all suggestions you may have. The sky is the limit, we can apply for grants or develop graduate projects so please feel free to think big or small.

If you would like to inform, advise, or join us we will be delighted.

A Champion for Birds



We lost a champion for birds when Rod King passed away in December 2018. We know much more about the Sandhill Cranes and Trumpeter Swans of Interior Alaska thanks to his projects with these birds while he was working with the USFWS in Fairbanks. He will also be fondly remembered for his efforts and relationships with the local Ravens which added to our understanding of Raven biology and Raven character. Charlotte Van Zant-King can be contacted at PO Box 1232, Goldendale WA 98620.



Message from the President...

Ptarmigan vs Raven

By Pamela A Miller

Just over a year ago, a board member asked if I was willing to join Arctic Audubon's board. Yes! I love birds and our community and so stepped up now to give a little more in this challenging era for the earth's unparalleled natural diversity and our work to protect Alaskan ecosystems.

This winter our human residents argue Ptarmigan vs Raven. "What use are they except for food?" I heard on KUAC from a proponent for ousting the feather-footed bird from its post as Alaska state bird, touting the brilliant corvid. "We need a good debate in Alaska," they crow, perhaps to distract from real discussions about oil dominance, urgent actions needed to uphold the original purposes of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and a vision and real plan by Alaskans to take meaningful steps towards a renewable and truly sustainable economy in the face of global climate change.

Some experiences come to mind in this latest Alaska skirmish. "Raven keeps the earth clean," says Sarah James before a traditional Gwich'in raven dance. I recall spying white ptarmigan feathers lining a longspur nest during a walk on a willow island with caribou ecologist Dr. David Klein in June 2001. While dinner was cooking at our camp along the Aichilik River in the Arctic Refuge, my field notes recorded Klein pointing out small things—willow buds, ptarmigan piles, Woolly lousewort flowers, woolly bear caterpillars,

Willow ptarmigan fill their crops all day with willow buds. During spring, they are covered by snow while they digest all night long what they have eaten that day and pump out piles of up to 50 worm-shaped scats. These fertilize the willows, which slow down the flow of surging spring waters which carry silt that settles around the plants and build up nutrients on the gravel bar, then the ancient plant called horsetail take hold. Even under the snow, these plants stay green and are a good source of food for geese, bears, and other animals. See, signs of voles, last year's bear droppings, muskox droppings rounder than moose nuggets.

The next day on a tundra walk Dr. Klein talked about caribou food,

The early spring flower, Woolly lousewort is one of the highest quality and most nutritious plants. Caribou take it opportunistically early in the spring as a source of protein. With willows, the caribou search out the food, the strategy is to feed for a while on the same kind of plants. The caribou strips leaves off the willows with up and down head movements. With lichens, they keep head down nibbling. With the lousewort, they pluck the



Dr. David Klein overlooks the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in June 2001. Photo courtesy of Pam Miller

woolly flower buds, "Oo, there's something." On a daily basis, they switch strategies, and mix. Eriophorum, or cotton grass, is what the caribou like most, and they are most interested in the floral heads."

Dave tutored about caribou on the move, *Keeping moving is a strategy for caribou feeding, and also to keep them from the predators. Weather is also a factor. All of those interconnections are part of the system, the physical parts, the timing of the snow leaving, the biological effects like insects and vegetation.*

Perhaps during lunch break Dr. Klein spoke at length to the environmental leaders and journalists on this trip,

Be careful not to dwell solely on caribou because the whole system is interrelated. It's an intricate, dynamic system. That's too much for both George Bush's and Dick Cheney to appreciate.

This is the kind of diversity that you don't see from the air. When Senator [Frank] Murkowski takes a bunch of Senators around and they say it's a barren wasteland, they don't see these details. Around the polygons near the coast, with sedges and marsh in the center or in troughs, the caribou and muskoxen work their way feeding around these.

Against this winter's sports-team like debate, Ptarmigan vs Raven, it's hopeful that Alaskans are at least talking about birds. We each have the chance to widen the context of the conversation about birds and their habitats and to inspire the next generation of leaders. Birds connect us across Alaska and to distant friends, family, and other chapters. I ask you to share your knowledge and love of "our birds" and actions needed now for the Arctic Refuge, Teshekpuk Lake and other imperiled public lands in our community and beyond. Many will act, some will even surprise you, if you ask.

