



Audubon ALASKA News

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The New Political Reality

Despite the tumult of the new year, many things remain the same. Tundra Swans are restless to start migrating back to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge where they'll raise their cygnets under the midnight sun. Somewhere on the Tongass National Forest a brown bear is tucked away in a den, slumbering away until winter breaks and the salmon and berries of summer arrive. But we cannot ignore the reality of our new political landscape. There is a renewed eagerness to industrialize, privatize, and deregulate the lands and waters that Alaska's birds, wildlife, and people rely on.



Long-tailed Duck.
Photograph by Dave Shaw

At Audubon Alaska, we've spent the past few months adapting to this new reality, with the recognition that we must move into a defensive posture in order to protect the conservation gains we've made in the past years.

In the coming months, some of Alaska's most ecologically valuable areas will face an array of challenges. It is possible that politicians will try to determine the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge by attaching an oil and gas development "line item" to the 2018 budget, effectively paving the way for drilling in the Refuge. In the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, Teshekpuk Lake is positioned between two major oil discoveries, which could lead to attempts to undo the Lake's designation as a special area within the Reserve. Alaska's congressional delegation appears eager to find ways to reverse President Obama's withdrawal of 125 million acres of the Arctic Ocean from future oil and gas leasing. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of acres on the Tongass National Forest could be privatized through congressional land transfers.

continued on page 3

The Kongakut River in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.
Photograph by Dave Shaw



ALASKA WATCHLIST SPECIES

American Golden-Plover

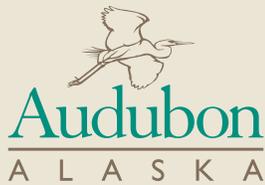
Pluvialis dominica

The American Golden-Plover is a Red WatchList Species. A long distance migrant, these birds spend their non-breeding season in South America after traversing the Central Flyway of the United States. Roughly 8% of all American Golden-Plovers breed in the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Photograph on masthead by Milo Burcham

INSIDE

- Qupaṭuk (coopa-luke) 2
- Chapter Happenings..... 4
- Bowhead Whales: A page from the *Ecological Atlas of the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas* 5
- People of Audubon..... 6
- Troubling News for Arctic Caribou..... 7
- Join Audubon Alaska in the Galápagos 7
- Ken Leghorn Receives Founders' Award..... 8



For almost 40 years Audubon Alaska has worked to conserve Alaska's birds, wildlife, and the habitat crucial to them. Audubon Alaska is financially independent, raising all our own funding—this means your support is critical to protecting the birds and wildlife you care about.

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DIRECTOR'S VIEWPOINT

Qupałuk (coopa-luke)

By Nils Warnock

When I took over as director at Audubon Alaska I knew I'd go far to help protect Alaska's birds, but I didn't know that reach would extend to tropical Southeast Asia!

Leaving sub-zero Anchorage for sultry Singapore this past January was a shock – over 100°F and 30 hours' flight time separate the two cities. I arrived tired and overheated, with a bad case of jet lag and serious questions about the value of these excursions. However, a cold beer and an air-conditioned hotel room soon brought me back to point: Alaska and Asia are intimately connected by one of the world's great migratory pathways, and face-to-face meetings with scientists and policymakers concerned for the future of our shared species are critical for lasting conservation measures.

This year, the *Arctic Migratory Bird Initiative* (AMBI) meeting, usually held in colder climes like Norway, Iceland, or Alaska, was being held alongside the biannual *East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership* (EAAFP) meeting in Singapore. For me, it was a fantastic opportunity to participate in flyway conservation in a single trip.

An initiative under the *Arctic Council's Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna* working group, AMBI has identified five priority Arctic shorebirds for conservation: Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Great Knot, Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, and Dunlin. Perhaps the biggest threat to these species is the loss of intertidal habitat along the *East Asian-Australasian Flyway* (EAAF), especially at the Yellow Sea.

The *East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership* (EAAFP) brings together 35 partners from national and international government agencies and organizations, NGOs, and private sector organizations in the Flyway, forming a cooperative framework protecting migratory waterbirds and their habitats (www.eaaflyway.net). The United States is a founding partner of EAAFP and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska office is the current Chair of the Partnership. Significantly, the EAAFP develops a network of sites that provide habitat for internationally important concentrations of flyway birds. Over 125 sites are recognized in 17 countries; but, only one site was recognized in Alaska, an area within the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

Consequently, one of the highlights of my trip was the celebration of the nomination of a second EAAFP flyway site in Alaska – the *Qupałuk EAAF network site*. Thanks to the dedicated efforts by Alaska staff from the Bureau of Land Management and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, an area just north of Teshekpuk Lake in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska was successfully nominated as a network site for breeding Dunlin of the *arcticola* race. This population is on Audubon's Red WatchList because of population declines attributed to habitat loss on its wintering grounds, particularly at the Yellow Sea. Fittingly, the site name, Qupałuk (coopa-luke), stems from the Iñupiat word for small shorebird. The nomination symbolizes to me, as did my trip to far-flung Singapore, just how connected birds are to different parts of the globe and how disparate the challenges are to keeping our bird populations healthy. ■

Kokolik River in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.

Photograph by Dave Shaw

The New Political Reality (continued from page 1)

These and other lands in Alaska face greater pressure and uncertainty than perhaps ever before. In light of this, we will be calling on the voices of our members and supporters to help us elevate these issues like never before. We are launching an updated action alert system to facilitate groundswells of targeted messaging directed at our representatives. With this system, we will advocate on behalf of birds and demonstrate that there is wide support for protecting their critical habitats in Alaska. Administrative and legislative actions that put Alaska's sensitive ecosystems at risk will not go unchallenged.

While the road ahead will be difficult, we feel optimistic knowing that Audubon Alaska is part of an effective, wide-reaching conservation network. Our efforts in Alaska are magnified on a national scale and can serve as a rallying cry for bird advocates across the nation. After all, the birds that rely on Alaska's pristine landscapes are the same birds that visit the eastern seaboard, the Pacific coast, the deserts of Arizona, and countless other destinations across the globe.

Armed with our robust scientific work, our dedicated supporters, and our nationwide network, we are poised to effectively withstand threats to Alaska's precious natural resources. We have weathered storms before, and we will do so again. ■



An old-growth hemlock on the Tongass National Forest.

Photograph by Nick Jans

We Need Your Help

At Audubon Alaska, we are grounded in science. We analyze ecological data to inform conservation recommendations that policymakers use in order to design balanced management plans. By providing this science, we are protecting the phenomenal, life-sustaining landscapes in Alaska that are just too special to lose. In an age when facts are questioned and many regulations are at risk of being overturned, our scientific work is as important as ever. We must move forward, boldly identifying the ecological risks and consequences of short-sighted decisions, or we risk losing crucial habitat for birds and other wildlife that we can't get back. The challenges ahead are numerous, and we need your support to protect the birds and wildlife you care about. Make a donation today at www.audubonalaska.org. ■



The Steller's Eider is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Photograph by Milo Burcham

Chapter Happenings



Merlin. Photograph by Milo Burcham



Common Redpoll. Photograph by Milo Burcham



Marbled Murrelet. Photograph by Milo Burcham

Anchorage Audubon Society www.anchorageaudubon.org

The Anchorage Audubon Society has an exciting spring ahead. From March 24th to 25th, we will host our annual Big Anchorage Birding Day. Over the course of 24 hours, teams will compete to see how many species they can find from Eklutna to Portage.

In 2016, professionals from HawkWatch International partnered with Anchorage Audubon Society and Mat-Su Birders to complete a ten-week HawkWatch. This was the most extensive monitoring of the site ever. We are excited that this season-long monitoring will happen once again! It started on March 7th and will continue until May 15th. If you would like to participate, find out more information on our website. You can also join us (and Mat-Su Birders) for the Gunsight Mountain HawkWatch Weekend, which will take place from April 15th to 16th at MP 118.8 of the Glenn Highway. A special birder's banquet will be hosted by the Sheep Mountain Lodge on Saturday night, and plans include a talk by the professional HawkWatchers from HawkWatch International. There is no ornithological tailgate party like this anywhere in the country!

Our next membership meeting will take place on April 20th at the BP Energy Center at 7:00pm. ■

Arctic Audubon <http://arcticaudubon.org>

Over the winter, Arctic Audubon presented great programs at the Noel Wien Library on topics such as the National Park Service Insect BioBlitzes, "How Birds Find Their Way," and "Exploring the West Coast of South America." We are also working on educating the public on the harm of feeding ducks on the Chena River in winter. If they're fed, they do not migrate, and then over 400 mallards concentrate in a small area.

We had a good Christmas Bird Count even though it was delayed two days due to a snowstorm and strong winds. We also have a local feeder count that has been going on

in Fairbanks for over three decades. Birds are counted on three Saturdays in the winter, with the last one in March. It is presently sponsored by the Alaska Songbird Institute.

We are continuing to comment against oil drilling in the 1002 area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and we are also supporting the efforts to protect Denali wolves. We plan to comment on the BLM's Central Yukon Resource Management plan. We hope people around the state will comment as well.

Masses of redpolls have descended on Fairbanks, and with the retuning sun, we know migrating birds will soon be arriving. We have four birding field trips in April and May. Find out more about these upcoming trips on our website! ■

Juneau Audubon Society www.juneau-audubon-society.org

We are starting to see the very beginnings of migrant birds returning to Juneau. Already we have seen a small flock of Robins and soon the Red-breasted Sapsuckers will be announcing their return to Juneau by tapping on our trees and homes. In March, our members will be constructing more new Tree Swallow bird houses and refurbishing the old to get them in place by April 1st. This will be our third year of trying to enhance available housing for swallows in Juneau.

We all look forward to our guided birding walks on Saturdays in spring. Our bird walks start in mid-April and continue through mid-June. Our Program Chair, Jason Colon, is rounding up the leaders and experts for those events in March. One of our Important Bird Areas in Juneau is Berners Bay. Juneau Audubon Society sponsors two catamaran trips to Berners Bay each spring, hopefully in timing with the eulachon (hooligan) run. Herring and eulachon runs attract many birds. The wildlife spectacular includes Thayer's Gulls, Bald Eagles, sea lions, whales, loons, and scoters. Spring is bursting with activities to enjoy and learn more about birds in Juneau. Check out our website for more information! ■

Kodiak Audubon

Visit Kodiak Audubon on Facebook

Since 1994, Kodiak Audubon has been working to preserve 1060 acres of one of the most popular trail systems on our road system. These trails wind through beautiful coastal Sitka Spruce forest on the northeast end of our island. Known as Termination Point, it was nominated by our Conservation Chair, Stacy Studebaker, for acquisition from a private landowner with habitat restoration funds from the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill (EVOS) Trustee Council because land and wildlife were injured by oil from the 1989 Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, which drifted all the way to our archipelago from Prince William Sound.

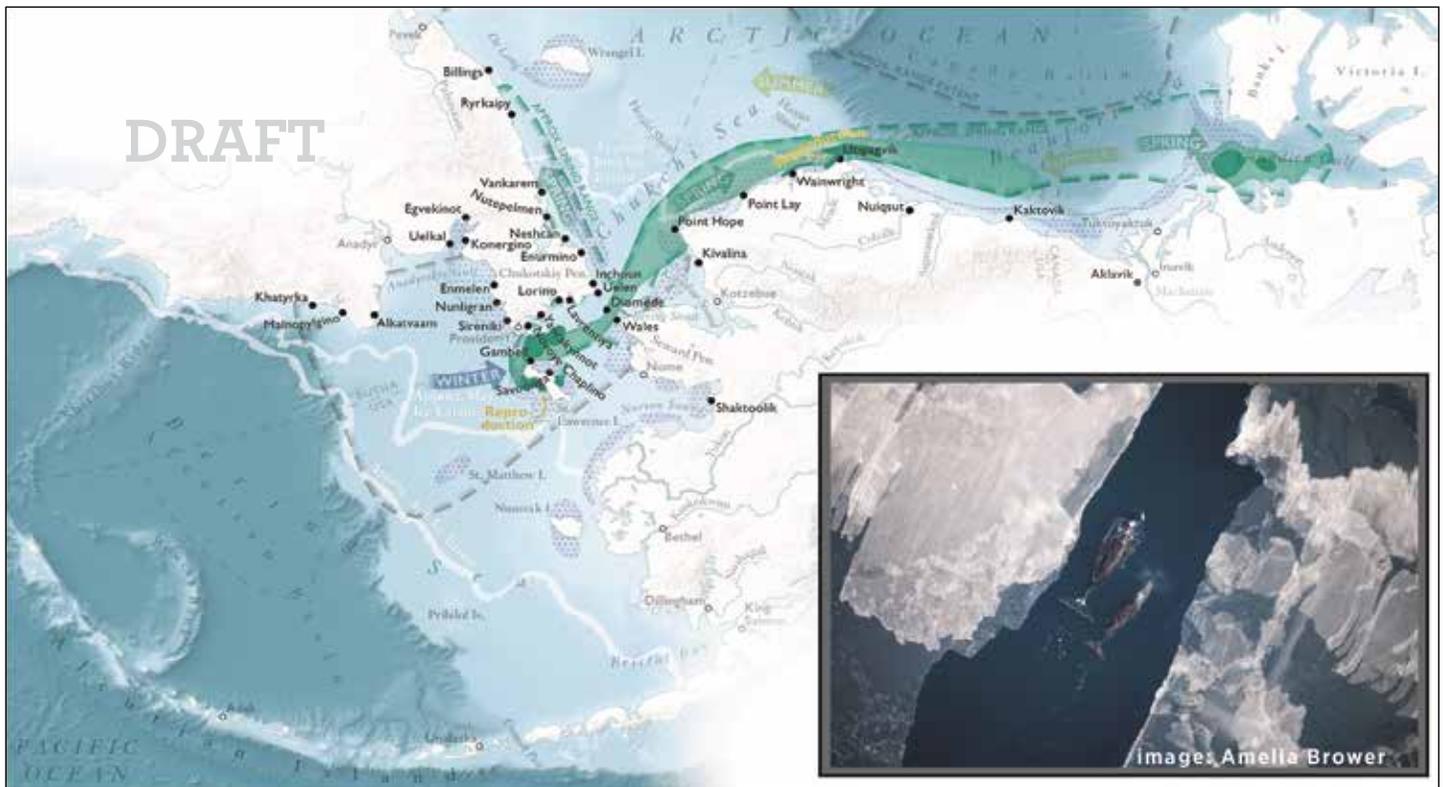
The old-growth forest of Termination Point is nesting habitat for Marbled Murrelets, small seabirds whose populations were injured by the oil throughout the spill region. Leisnoi, Inc., a local native corporation that owns this area, chose to clear-cut their forested lands at the south end of our road system in the Chiniak area. Naturally, local conservationists and hikers were afraid that the same fate would befall Termination Point. Kodiak Audubon took the lead on this conservation effort and has been working since 1994 with the EVOS Trustee Council, local government, and more recently, the Great Land Trust and the Kodiak Island Trails Network to conserve these very important lands for our community.

Last December, the Kodiak Island Borough Assembly voted to assume management of a conservation easement that would protect Termination Point from future development in perpetuity. A community ribbon cutting ceremony and celebration are planned for late May. This is a major conservation accomplishment that our chapter is very proud of. ■

Bowhead Whales: A page from the *Ecological Atlas of the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas*

By Max Goldman

The Audubon Alaska science team is hard at work producing a new atlas, the *Ecological Atlas of the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas*, building on our 2010 publication, the *Arctic Marine Synthesis*. The Atlas, due out in July 2017, provides a holistic look at the dynamic Arctic Ocean ecosystem. The maps within will contain information on protected areas, energy development, and the physical environment, such as sea ice dynamics and the distribution of ice-dependent species. This collection of information will be an important tool for scientists and policymakers in setting conservation priorities and designing balanced management plans in this sensitive Arctic region.



This map, from Audubon Alaska's upcoming *Ecological Atlas of the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas*, shows the range, movements, and areas of concentration for bowhead whales during the spring season when they return to high Arctic waters to feed and reproduce.

Bowhead whales are distributed in seasonally ice-covered waters of the Arctic and near-Arctic. They spend their lives in and near the pack ice, migrating north to the Chukchi and Beaufort seas in summer, and retreating southward through the Bering Strait in winter with the advancing ice edge. The bowhead whale has a massive bow-shaped skull that is over 16.5 feet long and makes up about 35% of their total body length. This giant skull allows them to break through or lift thick ice sheets with its head. Bowhead whales are unique, with dark bodies and a distinctive white chin. Unlike most cetaceans, they lack a dorsal fin. Their 17-19 inch (43-50 cm) thick blubber layer is thicker than any other whale's blubber, allowing them to thrive in the frigid waters of the high Arctic. At about 45-60 feet and weighing 150,000-200,000 pounds, Bowheads are among the largest animals on the planet, with some of the biggest babies in the world, weighing about 2,000 pounds at birth!

Bowhead whales have long been a subsistence species harvested by native Alaskans and Chukotkans each spring and fall. During the spring, as the whales use leads and cracks in the ice to access areas that were out of reach during the winter due to heavy ice coverage, subsistence hunters pursue them in small craft. After successfully killing the whale, they pull the animal to shore, where they divide the bounty among villagers. During one such hunt in 2007, hunters came across a particularly old spear point, presumably left in the animal during a previous failed attempt to harvest this specific bowhead. After researching the spear point, Craig George of the North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management determined it was a bomb lance from the 1880's. This spear would have been paired with a cylinder filled with black powder. When the spear was thrust into the whale, the charge would have detonated, sending the point even further into the body of this massive animal.

continued on page 6

People of Audubon

BOARD



Audubon Alaska is excited to welcome **John Alexander** back to our Board! John lives in Sheffield, Massachusetts and is a retired Vice President of Chicago's Harris Trust & Savings Bank. He serves on the Cornell Lab Administrative Board and is a member of the Lemur Conservation Foundation and the Lincoln Park Zoo Boards. He is also a member of the American Museum of Natural History's Advisory

Committee for Biodiversity and Conservation. An accomplished wildlife photographer and mountain climber, John is a graduate of Purdue University, attended the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, and has a master's degree in Environmental Science from Green Mountain College. ■

STAFF



Audubon Alaska welcomes **Elisabeth Gustafson** as our new Communications Manager. Elisabeth is originally from Los Angeles, CA and holds a BA in History from the University of Southern California. Before joining Audubon Alaska, Elisabeth served as the Communications Manager for Alaska Geographic where she was responsible for strategic communications, member outreach, and community engagement.

Elisabeth has a particular passion for reaching out to new audiences as a way to grow support for conservation efforts. She has worked to engage diverse, young Alaskans in the outdoors as a National Crew Leader with the Student Conservation Association, a backcountry expedition leader with Alaska Geographic, and an intern on the Chugach National Forest helping to coordinate the Chugach Children's Forest program. ■



Audubon Alaska thanks **Beth (Peluso) Grassi** for her dedicated seven-year tenure as Communications Manager. Beth did an amazing job producing our online and print publications and working with partners and community members to coordinate fun and educational outreach events for Alaskans across the state. Her expertise and attention to detail led to polished,

professional communications materials that clearly conveyed the breadth and depth of our scientific research and synthesis, and garnered support for our conservation goals. We'll miss Beth and wish her the very best in her next endeavors! ■



Susan Culliney has stepped up as our Policy Director. In this role, she will take the lead in identifying and implementing our policy strategies as we work to protect the Arctic Refuge, the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, the Arctic Ocean, the Tongass National Forest, and other ecologically important areas in Alaska. ■

Bowhead Whales (continued from page 5)



Bowhead whale.

Photograph by Vicki Beaver

The specific brand of bomb lance found that day was only produced for a few years before being supplanted by a more efficient tool, which means that the whale that was harvested in 2007 had survived an attempt over 100 years before. This revelation led George and other researchers to rethink their understanding of bowhead whale longevity. Paired with tests done on the eye fluid of these whales, scientists estimate that bowheads may live past 200 years old, making them the longest-lived mammal. Since the global moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986, the bowhead population has enjoyed a substantial rebound, and time will tell if the demographic makeup of this species is regularly graced by 200-year-old whales, or if this was just a "fluke." ■

Answer to WatchList Quiz

Red Knot

Calidris canutus roselaari



The Red Knot is a Red WatchList species. Only a few thousand *roselaari* nest in Alaska, but all of the North American population migrates through Alaska. This subspecies, like others, is thought to be declining. A conservation concern includes low reproductive success on the breeding range.

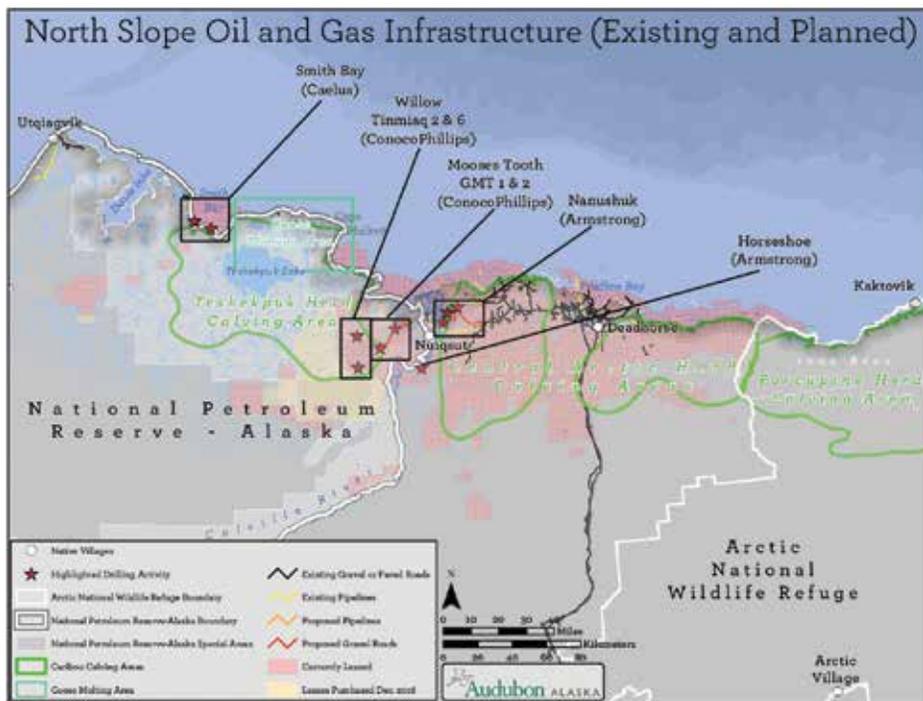
Photograph by Milo Burcham

Troubling News for Arctic Caribou

By Ben Sullender

The most recent population surveys from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game brought some troubling news for Arctic caribou: the population of the Central Arctic Herd has decreased by nearly 70% in a matter of six years. Biologists have identified high adult female mortality as one of the main factors driving the decline, and this raises pressing questions about the compatibility of oil development and caribou habitat suitability. Previous studies identified significant spatial shifts in the Central Arctic Herd's calving grounds – the annually important areas where pregnant females give birth – potentially due to the expanding construction of oil-related infrastructure.

The Central Arctic Herd is not the only herd in decline. In fact, three of the four Arctic caribou herds are declining. Only the Porcupine Caribou Herd, which calves in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, has a stable or increasing population trend. As Audubon Alaska continues to widen our understanding of the effects of gravel pads and road-based development on wildlife, the caribou population declines add an element of urgency and further emphasize the importance of taking a precautionary approach to expanding oil infrastructure. Recent industry announcements of major oil finds in the areas surrounding the Teshekpuk Caribou Herd's calving grounds (the Willow and Smith Bay discoveries) further highlight the importance of getting development right. ■



Caribou in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska

Photograph by David Shaw



Red-footed Booby.

Photograph by Charles J. Sharp

Join Audubon Alaska in the Galápagos!

February 28 – March 10, 2018

The Galápagos Islands are known the world over as a top destination for studying endemic species, biodiversity, and natural history. Join us as we explore the Islands' various habitats—from mangroves, lagoons, and sandy beaches to cactus forests, lush highlands, and grassy pampas.

We'll come face-to-face with iconic wildlife: Blue-footed Boobies, land and marine iguanas, Darwin's finches, Galápagos Penguins, Flightless Cormorants, and giant Galápagos tortoises, among others. Don't miss the wildlife-viewing trip of a lifetime!

Registration will open on April 1st. Visit www.AudubonAlaska.org for more information. ■

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Ken Leghorn.
Photograph by Mark Kelley

Ken Leghorn Receives Founders' Award

On March 1st, former Audubon Alaska board member Ken Leghorn received a Founders' Award from the Juneau Community Foundation. The award honors Ken for his lifelong dedication to conservation, community, and philanthropy.

For the past six years, Ken has been an invaluable member of the Audubon Alaska board, consistently finding new ways to spread his enthusiasm for birds and wildlife in Alaska. An experienced outdoorsman and expert birder, Ken has led birding trips for Audubon Alaska donors and supporters. Through these trips and other innovative engagement efforts, Ken has inspired many to share his passion for conservation. In addition to Ken's numerous contributions to Audubon Alaska, Ken served for many years on the Alaska Conservation Foundation Board; he was a violinist with the Juneau symphony; he launched Discovery Southeast, a nonprofit that offers nature-based youth education; and he was a co-founder of the Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association.

We thank Ken for his dedicated service to the wildlife, landscapes, and communities of Alaska. ■

WatchList Quiz Bird

Can you identify
this species from
the WatchList?

Answer on page 6.

