



Audubon ALASKA News

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Thousands Respond to BLM's New Plan for Oil and Gas near Teshekpuk Lake

By Pat Pourchot, Senior Policy Representative

The federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released a plan for oil and gas leasing near Teshekpuk Lake this summer, and Audubon and fellow conservation groups responded with vigor and near unanimity. Tens of thousands of scientists, Alaskans, Alaska Natives, conservationists, hunters, and Audubon members across the country urged BLM to stay away from Teshekpuk Lake, one of the most important goose molting habitats in the world.

BLM's new plan (a.k.a., Supplemental Draft Integrated Activity Plan/Environmental Impact Statement) attempted to correct deficiencies from the original plan from 2004—deficiencies that caused a federal district court to block an oil and gas lease sale near Teshekpuk Lake in September 2006, two days before the scheduled sale. This summer's supplemental plan contained new sections discussing cumulative impacts, climate change, and human health impacts, which were missing from the old documents. Cumulative impacts, however, received only cursory discussion, with little analysis of how new development, when combined with dramatic climate changes and with existing development across the North Slope, would impact the unique resources of the Teshekpuk Lake area.

Teshekpuk Lake is in the northeastern portion of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A) on the North Slope of the western Arctic, and the area surrounding Teshekpuk has long been recognized as one of the most productive wetlands in the Arctic. The lakes and tundra throughout the area provide habitat for tens of thousands of molting geese, including up to 30 percent of all Pacific Flyway Brant. Hundreds of thousands of waterfowl and shorebirds nest, molt, and migrate through this wetland complex, including more than a dozen bird species on the Alaska WatchList. Most of the calving of the 45,000-head Teshekpuk Lake Caribou Herd each year occurs around the lake, and the herd provides an important subsistence resource to several North Slope villages.

continued on page 3



The large lakes near Teshekpuk are ideal for molting geese; the flightless birds can swim away from predators to safety.

Photograph by Steve Zack, The Wildlife Conservation Society



INSIDE

The Next Forty Years:
Oil and Gas on the North Slope2

Balancing Conservation &
Resource Development
in Alaska4

Todd Eskelin:
Profile of a Top eBirder5

Big Questions on the Big Issue6

Chapter News7

Audubon Alaska
Board and Staff8

ALASKA WATCHLIST SPECIES

Photograph on masthead by Milo Burcham

King Eider

Somateria Spectabilis

The King Eider is a relatively large bodied seaduck that nests in remote, Arctic coastal areas (such as the Teshekpuk Lake wetlands) and gathers in large groups in Bristol Bay in spring. The male sports bright colors and an ornate bill during breeding, while the female is perfectly camouflaged for tundra nesting. They can dive as deep as 150 feet, feeding on shellfish and other invertebrates. They are highly vulnerable to oil spills and marine contaminants, and biologists have observed declining numbers of spring migrants at places like Point Barrow.



DIRECTOR'S VIEWPOINT

 **Audubon ALASKA NEWS**

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Audubon ALASKA

The Next Forty Years: Oil and Gas on the North Slope

By Stan Senner, Executive Director

"Welcome to our world," said Richard Glenn, with a broad smile and his arms spread wide. Mr. Glenn is the VP for Lands and Natural Resources for the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation (ASRC), and the occasion was the recent North Slope Borough Oil and Gas Forum, "The Next Forty Years," in Barrow.

Mr. Glenn's comment followed contrasting remarks by Edward Itta, North Slope Borough Mayor, and Oliver Leavitt, ASRC's VP for Government Affairs, both of whom have served the people of the North Slope ably for decades. Their perspectives have much in common but also highlight the complexity and conflict of decisions on the future of North Slope oil and gas.

Mayor Itta acknowledged that "our local economy is built on oil," but he also spoke eloquently about the dramatic changes experienced by the residents due to the oil industry and warming climate and how subsistence is "the entryway through which our culture can be understood and appreciated."

His bottom line was this: "In the next 40 years, I think it is crucial that government and industry adjust their perspective and show a willingness to consider that some pool of oil or gas may sit in a spot that could be developed, but shouldn't be, because of the overwhelming subsistence values that exist in the area."

In contrast, Mr. Leavitt spoke about how the people of the North Slope "should not be afraid of change" and noted that you "need cash to go subsistence hunting now." Mr. Leavitt's bottom line was this: "If you scare away the industry, they will go somewhere else. Do you want to turn the page back?"

Blanket toss in Barrow, Alaska. North Slope Borough Mayor Itta recently stated that subsistence is "the entryway through which our culture can be understood and appreciated."

Photograph by Milo Burcham

continued on page 3



The Next Forty Years... continued from page 2

....People will revert to where they came from when there is no industry."

The dilemma confronted by Alaska Native leaders on the North Slope is also one that concerns us at Audubon. We have a responsibility to address North Slope oil and gas issues in a way that is sensitive to the culture and needs of its residents but also protective of the fish and wildlife habitats and wild landscapes in which we all have a stake, whether we live in Barrow, Anchorage, or Miami.

Audubon is committed to protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as wilderness and key parts of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (e.g., Teshekpuk Lake, Utukok-Colville uplands), and we advocate moving very slowly with any oil and gas activities in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas. At the same time, Audubon acknowledges that the central Arctic (e.g., Prudhoe Bay, Kuparuk) is committed to petroleum production and there are likely to be a natural gas pipeline and westward expansion of development activities.

It is possible to tap existing and new oil and gas reserves on the North Slope for the benefit of its residents, Alaska, and the nation. But we can and must do so without sacrificing every wild landscape and critical wildlife habitat across the Arctic. Yes, indeed, welcome to our world. ♦

Thousands Respond... continued from page 1

Each year up to 35,000 Greater White-fronted Geese and 37,000 Brant molt at Teshekpuk Lake. *Photograph by Gerrit Vyn, The Macaulay Library at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology*

Although BLM did not present a "preferred alternative" in the new plan, the alternatives remained largely unchanged from the original document, with all but the "no action" alternative calling for leasing most of the Teshekpuk Lake area. Notwithstanding the fact that 13 million acres in NPR-A, including 87 percent of the Northeast Planning Area, are now open to oil and gas leasing, the BLM appears intent to hold a lease sale in the Teshekpuk area in the fall of 2008.

If you didn't get a chance to submit official comments on the new plan by the November 6, 2007 deadline, it's not too late. Send a letter or email to Dirk Kempthorne, Secretary of the Interior, 1849 C Street NW, Washington, DC, 20240. You can go to www.audubonalaska.org to find talking points, submit comments online, and help protect this invaluable Arctic wildland. ♦



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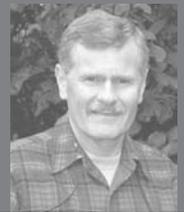
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FOCUS ON THE FIELD

Balancing Conservation and Resource Development in Alaska

By John Schoen, Senior Scientist

Alaska has a mystique of “wildness” that is unmatched by any other state, and Alaskans are proud of this wildness. In spite of the common interest Alaskans share for wildlife and the outdoors, we seem to be in constant internecine warfare between developers and environmentalists. Some tension is a healthy part of our democratic process. But recently, the polarization has become more contentious. The perceived conflict between development and conservation has been generated, in large part, because many resource issues are defined by extreme interests.

In my view, conservation is all about striking a balance that provides for a sustainable economy and a high quality of life, both of which depend upon a healthy environment. Audubon’s approach, particularly in the Arctic and the Tongass, emphasizes this balanced approach and has expanded receptiveness to conservation in Alaska.

Arctic

Let’s be clear: oil and gas development on the North Slope is one of Alaska’s economic mainstays. Most of us drive cars and use petroleum products every day. I recognize the value of Arctic oil and gas to Alaska and also give credit to the industry for new technology and environmental standards. However, impacts of development in the Arctic are expanding in an ever-increasing spider web of industrial sprawl. Currently less than two percent of the North Slope is permanently protected, and there is no master plan for industrial development or protected areas on the North Slope. Some key habitats of highest ecological values should be protected, including Teshekpuk Lake, the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Colville River corridor, the Utukok Uplands, and Kasegaluk Lagoon. These areas make

up less than 20% of the North Slope. Oil and gas development is appropriate on the North Slope but not throughout the entire region. Representative protected areas are an important part of balanced management of the Arctic.

Tongass

Industrial-scale logging has occurred in Southeast Alaska for 50 years. During that time, the largest trees have been clearcut on the most productive islands and watersheds. There are still intact watersheds of high biological value, however, scattered across the Tongass National Forest. Audubon Alaska and The Nature Conservancy have identified these areas and are recommending a conservation strategy that protects the highest value watersheds in their entirety (see www.audubonalaska.org). We also are recommending restoration of other high-value fish and wildlife habitats. This balanced approach will safeguard the ecological integrity of Southeast Alaska’s rainforest and all the human uses it sustains. Just as important, it also will provide an opportunity for a sustainable timber industry that transitions timber harvest from old growth to second growth.

A Balanced Message

It’s easy to preach to the choir and enjoy the accord. It is more difficult and important, however, to reach out to broader audiences who may disagree. But often when environmentalists communicate with broader audiences, we risk getting labeled as being against everything.

When discussing Arctic issues, I find it useful to acknowledge up front that I’m not against oil development in the Arctic, but I don’t think it should occur everywhere. That’s a different message than what people expect, and it has helped open the door for better communication. In the Tongass, our science-based approach for protecting key places also has opened doors with new constituencies who would have been easily turned off if they thought we wanted to stop all logging. Audubon’s key message of balanced conservation seems to resonate with all Alaskans. ♦

Conservation is all about striking a balance that provides for a sustainable economy and a high quality of life, both of which depend upon a healthy environment.

Photograph by John Schoen

Todd Eskelin: Profile of a Top eBirder

By Rich Capitan, Education Specialist



Todd Eskelin, a biologist with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, is a "Top Alaska eBird User" and a regional eBird administrator who helps verify unusual records. *Photograph by USFWS*

Have you ever gone to the Alaska eBird website and wondered about the "Top Alaska eBird Users" listed on the right? Who are these birders, and what kinds of cool birds are they finding?

Well, we wondered, so we asked Todd Eskelin of Soldotna, Alaska to tell us more about himself, his birding, and his eBirding adventures.

"Todd, what is your profession, and how long have you been birding?"

"I'm a biologist with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and I've been birding for 17 years."

"Why do you use Alaska eBird?"

"I use it to keep track of my sightings, to see what others are observing, and to determine the relative rarity of the birds I have seen."

"A lot of birders, regardless of level, have told me how much they enjoy Alaska eBird. What do you like about eBird?"

"It's easy to use. There are a ton of extra resources like the Birds of North America Online and Google Maps. Oh, and also, it's free! I've been using it about a year now, and I enjoyed it so much that I signed up to be a regional administrator to verify the validity of sightings."

"Birding in Alaska is certainly unique and has its own set of challenges. What are the challenges of birding in your area?"

"Our biggest challenge is the sharing of potentially good sightings. The birding community is quiet here or transient, and it is hard to get people to even call in to a bird hotline to report what they are seeing. Hopefully eBird will bring some of those folks out of the woodwork."

"As a biologist in Alaska, you've probably seen some interesting birds. Do you have a favorite sighting?"

"Ivory Gull at the Kenai Flats in Winter 2006-7."

"Thanks for your time, Todd, but before I let you go: if you wanted to convert someone to eBird, what would you tell them?"

"Check out how easy it is to use. I find it easier than most of the expensive programs you buy for over \$100 and this one is free. There is no easier way out there to keep track of where and when you saw birds." ♦



Photograph by John Schoen

Jenna, Simon, and Danika Hamm, stewards and managers of Camp Denali, warmly welcomed the Audubon Alaska board and staff to Camp for their summer retreat. It was an unforgettable weekend of exploration, birding, wildlife, delicious food, fellowship — and a little Audubon business on the side. **Thank you to the Hamm Family** and the entire Camp Denali staff for their generosity and hospitality.

Alaska
eBird

Alaska eBird is a free online tool where you can record your bird sightings and find bird records throughout Alaska and across North America.

Log on at www.ebird.org/ak to add a checklist, find birding hot spots, create maps and graphs of your sightings, and contribute to avian science. See you on eBird! ♦

Big Questions on the BIG Issue...

By Iain Stenhouse, Director of Bird Conservation

This summer I spent a month on Sandøen, a tiny, low-lying island at the mouth of a deep, narrow fjord in northeast Greenland. My Danish colleague and I were there to study Arctic Terns and Sabine's Gulls that breed on the island and how climate change may be affecting their migrations. On Sandøen we experienced some of the worst summer weather the area has seen in ten years. We spent day after day confined to our small tents, beaten and hammered by gale force winds, torrential rains, and wind-whipped sand. How incubating birds could possibly sit through it, I will never know. In the end, it was flooding that got them—and us.

When our tents finally gave in and we could no longer stay dry, we evacuated the island in extremely difficult conditions, knowing that, in the few nests that were still active, the small chicks that were hatching were not going to survive. Their parents will have to wait a whole year to try again, and, in between, they will have traveled as far as the shores of Antarctica and back again.

The Arctic is thought to be the region most rapidly affected by climate change. The specter of climate change has raised a dark cloud in our collective consciousness, and rightly so. It is the primary issue of our time and will remain so for generations to come. While the news media is paying increased attention to the effects of the "climate crisis" in Alaska, ornithologists are asking, "How exactly is climate change affecting Alaska's birds?"

Of course, earlier breeding has been documented in some species, and we are certainly witnessing changes in bird distributions. For example, on Cooper Island, an Important Bird Area off of Barrow, Alaska, Dr. George Divoky has shown that Black Guillemots have been laying eggs three days earlier per decade since the 1970s, while the lengthening Arctic summer has allowed Horned Puffins to move northward and take over guillemot



Ice melts off Cooper Island, an Important Bird Area off of Barrow, where Dr. George Divoky has shown that Black Guillemots have been laying eggs three days earlier per decade since the 1970s. *Photograph by George Divoky*



Iain spent a month this summer on Sandøen, an island off Greenland, to study Sabine's Gulls and how climate change may be affecting them.

Photograph by Gerrit Vyn, The Macaulay Library of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

nest cavities. Identifying which species will be most dramatically affected by climate change, however, is still largely the stuff of crystal ball gazing. Most of the major ecological consequences of climate change are still fairly difficult to predict, never mind the nuances and subtleties. As with any ecological shift, however, there will be winners, and there will be losers. And it is the losers that are the immediate concern for conservation-minded scientists.

There are, of course, a few obvious losers right off the bat—specifically, any bird species that, like the polar bear, is heavily reliant on the presence of ice for at least part of its annual cycle. These are relatively few, no doubt because such adaptation is highly specialized, and specialization, although efficient, can also be risky in evolutionary terms.

The Kittlitz's Murrelet is strongly associated with ice as it forages in the outflow from tidewater glaciers. As these glaciers rapidly shrink and associated habitats disappear, a few hardy field ornithologists, like Michelle Kissling of the US Fish & Wildlife Service in Juneau, are working hard to understand the ecology of this species. But with population declines of up to 80 percent in former strongholds like Glacier Bay, is it possible to determine whether habitat loss will lead to its extinction before it actually does?

Another high-risk species is the Ivory Gull. It breeds in the High Arctic and forages among loosely packed sea ice year-round. This year an international research group deployed satellite tags on a number of individuals of this species, which will give us valuable information on how these birds move around the Arctic. But as the seasonal pack ice of the Arctic Ocean literally melts away, will this elusive gull vanish, too?

Clearly, there are many more questions than there are answers, but there also is hope in the shape of a growing army of dedicated individuals—identifying, measuring, counting, recording, classifying, and documenting. From those huddled in tents above the Arctic Circle to those who simply take the time to log their backyard bird observations in eBird, scientists and citizens around the world are seeking knowledge and a greater understanding of the reaches and effects of climate change.

Of course, the climate crisis cannot be halted overnight, and we are destined to feel the effects of our previous actions for some decades. But **any** alteration of our behavior that lowers our personal and collective greenhouse gas emissions today will have a measurable impact on generations to come. ♦

CHAPTER NEWS

Anchorage Audubon Society

By Blair Christensen, Anchorage Audubon President

Over the last year Anchorage Audubon has tried to focus on community outreach. We see our future as trying to give all those who think birding is for boring nerds something a little different. Anchorage Audubon is in the process of putting together an after-school program for at-risk young adults interested in nature and conservation issues. To this end, Anchorage Audubon had a very successful garage sale in May and is looking at partnering with a couple different groups to create a program that will include both classroom and field experience.

We have also been trying to expand our member fieldtrips and went on our first field trip overnight—to Kodiak. We are currently looking at other possible trips to Barrow and Dillingham for the coming year.

We also committed our support and our funds to helping the state of Alaska purchase some available tracts of land that will be added to the Potter Marsh preserve, which is a very important birding area for every birder in Anchorage. And, finally, we had another successful year for our loons at Connor's Lake. ♦

Juneau Audubon Society

By Jeff Sauer, Juneau Audubon President

Juneau Audubon continues to be active on several fronts. We have many education activities: several popular spring bird walks; several "Saturday Wild" walks (tidepools, alpine flowers, berries, mushroom identification); Wednesday bird walks downtown; Berners Bay educational cruises; and a strong Christmas Bird Count.

We have been involved in several local and regional conservation issues, including:

- The Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge, with threatened impacts from airport expansion and a proposed second bridge crossing of Gastineau Channel;
- The Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve in Haines, lending support to Lynn Canal Conservation;
- Berners Bay, involvement in Kensington Mine and a proposed road through the Bay, as a member group of Southeast Alaska Conservation Council (SEACC); and
- The Tongass National Forest, involvement with SEACC and Audubon Alaska.

We have an up-to-date web page (www.juneau-audubon-society.org) and an active board. Two of our chapter members are on the Audubon Alaska Board (Matt Kirchoff and Steve Zimmerman), and Steve is also on the National Audubon Society Board. ♦

Kodiak Audubon Society

By Claudia Anderson, Kodiak Audubon President

Kodiak Audubon has had a busy year. This summer the long awaited signs for the Potato Patch Lake observation platform finally arrived. City crews installed signs depicting the lake's birds and mammals.

We voiced opinions on several habitat/land use issues. We submitted comments to the Kodiak Island Borough regarding their Comprehensive Plan. Of particular concern to us is the escalating damage caused by unregulated ATV use. Our conservation chair encouraged Kodiak legislators to make the Narrow Cape area part of the Alaska State Park system. Board members weighed in with the Borough Assembly concerning development

on Near Island. Chiniak Bay is now officially recognized as an IBA for Steller's Eider, Emperor Goose, and Black Oystercatcher.

Our final accomplishment was to get a Kodiak Audubon web page up and running, and it's gorgeous. As always we hosted speakers, organized 2 Christmas Bird Counts, participated in 5th grade outdoor education outings, and offered guided hiking throughout the summer. All in all we had a busy year. ♦

Prince William Sound Audubon Society

By Milo Burcham, PWS Audubon President

PWS Audubon held monthly meetings from October 2006 through April 2007. Speakers gave presentations on natural history topics and destinations ranging from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the Galapagos Islands. The final meeting was a collaborative effort where many chapter members who had recently visited Costa Rica gave short trip reports, resulting in a diverse view of that country.

Our Christmas bird count was held on December 16, 2006 and drew 26 participants. The weather held for the event, and 62 species of birds were observed. Sales of Aaron Lang's Birds of the Copper River Delta: A Checklist continues to be our main fundraising effort. We have now sold out of the first printing of 500 checklists and will start another printing this year.

PWS Audubon helped coordinate the 2007 Copper River Shorebird Festival. Scott Weidensaul was our keynote speaker, and the popularity of the event is continuing to increase, with over 200 people registering this year. We also helped a local raptor rehabilitation specialist by paying for the shipping costs of an injured bald eagle to be released back onto the Copper River Delta. ♦

Arctic Audubon Society

By Gail Mayo, Arctic Audubon President

During the past year the Arctic Audubon chapter presented six public programs at the Noel Wein Library, covering diverse topics including an overview of the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, shorebirds on the North Slope, birding adventures in Costa Rica and Panama, and Invasive Plants. We added one field trip to listen for owls to our regular spring field trips series each weekend in May.

We pursued our local conservation interest, the Tanana Lakes Recreation Area, by helping with clean-up, attending planning meetings, and encouraging the development of a master plan. For those familiar with Fairbanks Birding areas, the Tanana Lakes Recreation Area was formerly known as South Cushman, a notorious place to bird while observing the junk and trash of Fairbanks. The Recreation area will be ten or more years in the making. In addition chapter members are following the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge proposed land exchange and preparing comments on the Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. We are trying to build up an email list of those who want to be more active so we can notify them of deadlines/issues.

In the area of environmental education, the chapter has participated in the fall wildlife film festival, earth day, spring migration celebration, and the sandhill crane festival, putting in many hours helping folks enjoy the birds at Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. The chapter also purchased an environmental education course called "Bird Sleuth" for trial with a local fourth grade class. Arctic Audubon also continues to maintain the birding hotline for interior Alaska at 907-451-9213, thanks to the dedication of Laurel DeVaney and Ken Russell. ♦

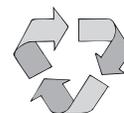


AUDUBON ALASKA BOARD AND STAFF

The Audubon Alaska board and staff at Camp Denali, June 2007. Kneeling, left to right: Lorelei Costa, Stacy Studebaker, Rich Capitan, Eric Myers, David Wigglesworth. Standing, left to right: Iain Stenhouse, Simon Hamm, Matt Kirchhoff, Dee Frankfourth, Denny Takahashi Kelso, Margery Nicolson, Dave Bonfilio, Frank Keim, Gretchen Hazen, Pat Pourchot, Stan Senner, Mimi Hogan, Steve Zimmerman, Penny Rennick, Dan Taylor, Katherine Pope, John Schoen. Audubon Alaska especially thanks Stacy Studebaker and Penny Rennick, founding board members, who retired from the Audubon Alaska board in 2007. ♦

Photograph by John Schoen

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