



# Audubon ALASKA News

*Published twice a year by the Alaska State Office of the National Audubon Society*

## Arctic Ocean: Shell's Comedy of Errors Isn't Funny

Shell's comedy of errors in the Arctic Ocean this past summer was no cause for laughter. Shell's rush to drill in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas was a testimonial to Murphy's Law. If something could go wrong, it did, eliminating any confidence that Shell can operate safely in an Arctic environment known for harsh extremes including hurricane-force winds, extended sub-zero temperatures, moving pack ice, and darkness half the year.

Both brutally harsh and biologically productive, the Arctic Ocean and surrounding coasts are unique. The Chukchi and Beaufort seas provide vital habitat for many of our nation's most iconic Arctic wildlife species such as polar bears, walrus, ice seals, bowhead whales, and beluga whales. Millions of birds that migrate across the globe rely on Arctic coastal areas for rich food supplies and successful nesting. A large oil spill in this Arctic environment could be devastating, with effects lasting long into the future.

For many years Audubon Alaska has maintained that the oil industry is ill-prepared to safely drill for oil in the Arctic Ocean. We did not anticipate proof of this criticism would come from Shell itself.

Shell's efforts have been plagued by a long list of mishaps and misadventures. At the beginning of summer, ice lingered in the Chukchi Sea long into the supposedly "open water" season, raising questions about Shell's readiness for Arctic conditions from the start. Ice aside, Shell couldn't manage to finish its oil spill response barge and meet Coast Guard certification, even after downgrading the barge certification requirement. Shell finally sent its rigs north without the barge. Along the way, the crew of the drillship *Noble Discoverer* nearly ran the vessel aground in the port of Dutch Harbor. Shell also admitted, at the eleventh hour, that it couldn't meet the terms of its air quality permit and demanded a pollution waiver.

Trying to catch up later in the summer, Shell finally undertook a field test of its barge and much-touted oil spill "containment dome" (similar to the one used in the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster) in the calm, ice-free waters of Washington State. As operators attempted to lower the dome over a hypothetical "oil spill" the winches failed, the dome was severely damaged, and an underwater remote operating vehicle got tangled in the dome anchor lines and sank. Finally, Shell sent divers down to salvage the dome and avoid further damage.

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Sunrise on the Chukchi Sea near Point Hope. *Photograph by Melanie Smith*



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## ALASKA WATCHLIST SPECIES

*Photograph on masthead by Milo Burcham*

**Spectacled Eider**  
*Somateria fischeri*

Strictly a sea duck of northern waters, in 1995 researchers discovered the world population of Spectacled Eiders even winters on the Bering Sea. The species was listed as threatened in 1993 following declines of more than 90 percent in Western Alaska, one of the eiders' nesting strongholds. Today, their numbers are slowly climbing. Learn more about these mysterious birds of the north in the article in the November 2012 issue of *Alaska Magazine*.


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**Audubon ALASKA**


**DIRECTOR'S VIEWPOINT**

## The Changing Arctic

By Nils Warnock

I flew to our far-north neighbor Barrow, Alaska, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean on 27 August 2012, not knowing that on 26 August a sobering record had been set, one with global significance. I was on my way to meet noted writer and avid outdoorsman Ted Williams. He was on the North Slope to talk to people about the implications of drilling for oil in one of the world's last frontiers, the Arctic Ocean.

Characteristic of Barrow for much of the year is the presence of sea ice that sits just offshore of town, circulating around the Arctic Ocean. On my previous trip to Barrow, in March of last year, sea ice lay in huge, jumbled pressure ridges right at the edge of town, stretching to the North Pole. This visit, on my arrival to Barrow, no ice was visible. Gray Whales passed by offshore and in the distance I could see thousands of Short-tailed Shearwaters gliding in the brisk Arctic winds, but no ice. For August, this is not so unusual, but 2012 is an unusual year.

The day I flew to Barrow, The National Snow and Ice Data Center announced that "Arctic sea ice cover melted to its lowest extent in the satellite record yesterday, breaking the previous record low observed in 2007." This is half the amount of sea ice found at this time of year only 50 years ago! Life in Barrow is changing rapidly. Along with changes to the sea ice, temperatures are warming and permafrost thaws sooner and deeper. Snow melts earlier and birds such as Black Guillemots lay eggs earlier. Storms hit Barrow more frequently and the coastline is eroding into the sea at about three feet per year.

On top of these changes, Shell Oil has secured the permits needed to begin drilling for oil in waters off the shore of Barrow. Drilling rigs are moving into position as I write. This has happened despite the fact that we still lack much of the basic understanding of how this Arctic ecosystem normally functions, never mind how it is responding to rapid changes, and despite the fact that oil spill response capabilities in the Arctic are at best untested and undoubtedly severely limited.

Not surprisingly, people in Barrow, already faced with their rapidly changing backyard, are concerned about drilling in the Arctic. One whaling captain that Ted and I talked to spoke about the spiritual connection that he and his people have with the Bowhead Whales they hunt to help feed their people through the long winter. He is worried. Will oil development scare away the whales? What happens if there is a spill? How will a booming oil industry impact these small villages that still rely on food that they hunt and fish for daily to feed themselves? Will their children still have the strong spiritual connection to their surroundings if their subsistence lifestyle is totally replaced by a dollar-driven economy? These are deadly-serious questions for a community that has lived in the Barrow area for thousands of years.

Audubon also remains deeply concerned not only about the rapid changes occurring to the environment in the Arctic, but also about the specter of oil development in this poorly researched, remote, and fragile environment. As with other parts of Alaska, we think there are appropriate and inappropriate places for development. The Arctic Ocean, for now at least, remains one of those places where oil drilling should not occur. ♦



A commercial barge passes by north of downtown Barrow. *Photograph by Nils Warnock*

## Arctic Ocean (continued from page 1)

"After countless promises from Shell about how ready it is, the truth is evident for all to see," says Eric Myers, Policy Director for Audubon Alaska. "It's painfully obvious: Shell is not prepared to drill for oil safely in the Arctic Ocean."

With its severely damaged containment dome and response barge stuck thousands of miles away from the drill sites, Shell officially announced it was not ready to drill into oil-bearing layers of rock. Instead, it would only drill "top holes" this year, shallower wells that won't reach oil. Even that scaled-back plan had trouble. Only hours after the *Noble Discoverer* started drilling in the Chukchi Sea, an enormous ice sheet roughly 12 miles by 30 miles across forced the drill rig to evacuate. The ice sheet—about 15 times larger than the island of Manhattan—kept Shell away from the drill site for days, raising the obvious question: How could Shell effectively respond to a blowout and spill if it can't even maintain a consistent presence over the well site?

After its string of spectacular failures, Shell won't be making any oil discoveries in the Arctic Ocean this year. Proposals to drill in the Arctic Ocean, however, are not going away, with other oil companies besides Shell considering their own plans. Even after the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in the Gulf of Mexico exposed how poorly prepared the oil industry is to respond to a large spill, Congress has yet to take action to establish needed reforms and safety requirements for off-shore oil drilling.



Shell's drill rig the *Kulluk*. *Photograph by Beth Peluso*

Please raise your voice for the Arctic to make sure that elected leaders know that Shell's comedy of errors this past summer is unacceptable, before the comedy turns into tragedy. You can speak out by contacting your representatives in Congress and writing a letter to your local newspaper. ♦

## Izembek-Moffet-Kinzarof Lagoons Important Bird Area

Izembek Lagoon is located on the Alaska Peninsula near where the Aleutian Islands start. It's part of an Important Bird Area (IBA) of global significance because large numbers of waterbirds stop here to refuel on their long migrations to and from Arctic breeding grounds. More than 80 species have been documented here. The State of Alaska manages Izembek and Moffet lagoons and intertidal habitats as Izembek State Game Refuge, while the US Fish and Wildlife Service manages the surrounding uplands as part of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge.

The IBA is especially critical for the many species of waterfowl and shorebirds that migrate across vast stretches of ocean to reach wintering habitats on the lower North Pacific coast or South Pacific islands. The tidal areas of Izembek Lagoon contain one of the largest eelgrass (an aquatic plant) beds in the world. The area regularly supports more than 90 percent of Brant that use the Pacific

Flyway, more than half the world population of Emperor Geese, and a significant percentage of the world populations of Steller's Eider and Taverner's Cackling Goose. Shorebird habitats are diverse, with extensive mud and sand flats throughout the lagoons. Twenty-eight species of shorebirds have been recorded here, twenty as migrants and eight as breeders.

### Izembek Decision in November

The US Fish and Wildlife Service is considering a controversial plan to build a road through the Wilderness area of Izembek National Wildlife Refuge to link two local communities, even though Congress has already spent \$37.5 million to provide regular and emergency ferry service. The US Fish and Wildlife Service is scheduled to announce its decision about this critical migration stopover in November. Learn more on [www.AudubonAlaska.org](http://www.AudubonAlaska.org).



Large flocks of Brant stop in Izembek Lagoon during migration. *Photograph by Beth Peluso*

## Keeping Tabs on Alaska's Urban Important Bird Areas



Bald Eagles gathered at the Clam Gulch IBA. *Photograph by Beth Peluso*

By Aaron Bowman

The alarm goes off at 4:30 AM and I stagger out to the car and drive to the start of the transect. Every monitoring transect has its surprises and today was no different. The low-tide walk down a beach was packed with Bald Eagles and gulls feasting on halibut scraps thrown out by the busy charter fishing fleet.

Last June four of us at Audubon Alaska traveled to the Jim Creek, Anchorage Coastal, Clam Gulch, and Homer Spit Important Bird Areas (IBAs) to conduct bird surveys. This was the first year of a project to monitor the long-term change of bird populations in IBAs located near Alaska's fastest developing areas. Jim Creek IBA, near Palmer, has seen increased pressure by recreational users from the growing local population and Anchorage. The Anchorage Coastal IBA encompasses the coastline of the most densely populated location in Alaska. The Clam Gulch and Homer Spit IBAs border areas with Alaska's fastest population growth.

Each survey started just after 5:00 AM so that we could complete it within 5 hours, while birds singing on their territory are most active. Transects were typically 5 miles round-trip walking or biking on a road or trail through a forested area or along a beach.

Every site had its surprises—birds and otherwise. While on the Anchorage coastal trail monitoring the Anchorage Coastal IBA, I had to stop twice for moose. On one occasion, a surprised calf that was hidden in the grass near the trail gave a negative report about me to its mother, who was down the trail. She stared at me with ears flopped flat against her head. Some of my favorite bird encounters included hearing the chirping of Aleutian Terns flying overhead and watching three Caspian Terns fly southward along the Clam Gulch beach. On the Kenai Peninsula, as we approached one census point in a black spruce bog, a Black-billed Magpie alerted us to the presence of another bird tucked into a spruce tree: a Northern Hawk Owl.

Through long-term monitoring, Audubon Alaska hopes to increase awareness of the valuable yet fast-changing habitat for birds near Alaska's population centers. This first year of monitoring showed that we will need to adapt our IBA monitoring protocol for some locations. Transects at the Clam Gulch and Homer Spit IBAs, for example, were along beaches bordered by steep bluffs that blocked detection of many songbirds. These sites were, however, very productive for seabirds, which will require a different survey method. At the Anchorage Coastal IBA, the present method detected songbird species but did not represent the wetland and mudflat species very well. For next year, we will use more site-appropriate methods, now that we have learned from some of the surprises. ♦

### Hats Off to Audubon Alaska

This fall, Audubon Alaska offers something new: an online store featuring ball caps and other apparel with an Audubon Alaska Spectacled Eider graphic. We even have a camouflage hat sporting a Brant. Now you can keep the sun out of your eyes as you scan for that rare bird and support Audubon Alaska at the same time! All profits go to support Audubon Alaska. Visit [www.AudubonAlaska.org](http://www.AudubonAlaska.org) to find out more.



## ON THE HORIZON

*In addition to the issues we currently work on, Audubon Alaska looks ahead to see what might be on the horizon. We are continually trying innovative ways to apply science and mapping to serve as tools for conservation.*

## Important Bird Areas Downstream from Proposed Pebble Mine

Salmon are the main focus of the debate swirling around the massive proposed Pebble Mine in the Bristol Bay watershed. While salmon provide the foundation of the ecosystem, almost no one is talking about a major piece of the puzzle: the millions of birds that rely on Bristol Bay. Audubon Alaska plans to fill that information gap. This past July, for example, Audubon Alaska submitted comments to the Environmental Protection Agency about potential impacts the mine could have on birds.

The coastal and marine waters of the Bristol Bay region support millions of birds through the year; birds stop here during migration, as well as breeding and wintering. In particular, large numbers of seabirds, waterfowl, and shorebirds are attracted to Bristol Bay because of an abundance of bottom-dwelling invertebrates, the primary diet of many waterbirds while in marine habitats. The nutrients salmon leave behind after spawning provide essential ingredients for this whole food web. In the winter, Bristol Bay waters provide the northernmost ice-free coastal habitat in Alaska.

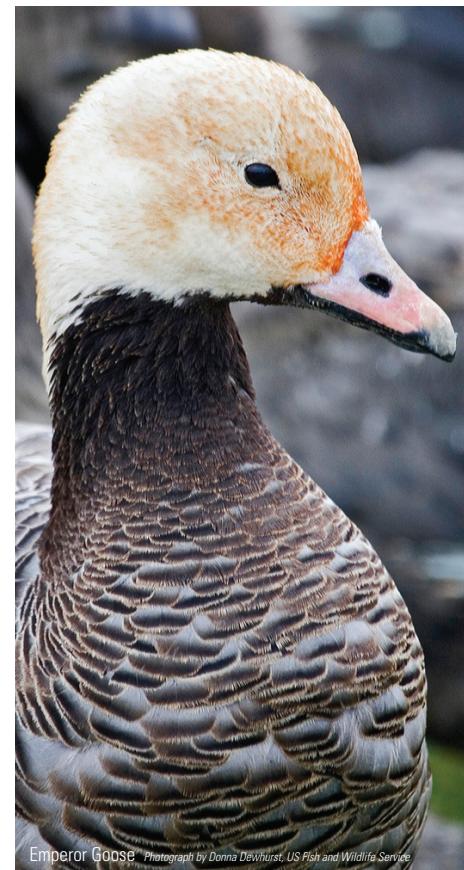
The sheer number of birds that depend on Bristol Bay is staggering. The world population of Emperor Geese migrates through Izembek Refuge each spring and fall. In inner Bristol Bay, Kvichak Bay and Nushagak Bay are key molting areas for King Eiders. The eiders can't fly away from disturbance during wing molt, making them vulnerable to catastrophic events. The entire Pacific Brant population stops at the Izembek-Moffet-Kinzarof Lagoons Important Bird Area for up to six weeks in fall and up to four weeks in spring to refuel

during migration. Over one-third of Alaska's breeding population of Bar-tailed Godwits may stage at Egegik Bay prior to migrating to New Zealand and Australian wintering areas. Breeding seabirds at seven globally significant colonies in the Bristol Bay region number over 1.2 million birds.

The Pebble deposit holds massive amounts of gold, copper, and molybdenum. Tailings from the mining process are likely to have high concentrations of copper, which is especially toxic to fish and invertebrates in freshwater and marine systems. The proposed mine would sit at the headwaters of the Kvichak and Nushagak Rivers, two of the eight major rivers that feed Bristol Bay. If built, Pebble would be one of the largest mines in the world. Located in a seismically active region, Pebble would require the world's largest earthen dam to be built, some 700 feet high and several miles in length.

If a large tailings dam broke at the proposed location of the Pebble Mine, in addition to the Nushagak River and Kvichak River watersheds, toxic waste waters could easily impact birds using the estuarine and marine waters of Bristol Bay. Such a spill could disrupt or destroy the food resources connected to the nutrient-rich waters that flow through the Bristol Bay watersheds.

The proposed Pebble mine poses a huge risk for the entire Bristol Bay ecosystem. As agencies evaluate the mine proposal, Audubon Alaska is dedicated to ensuring that birds are included among the extraordinary wildlife values of Bristol Bay. ♦



Emperor Goose. Photograph by Donna Dewhurst, US Fish and Wildlife Service

The greater Bristol Bay region is a globally significant area for wildlife, especially birds. Within the watersheds that drain into Bristol Bay are:

- 27 globally Important Bird Areas (including both land and marine IBAs at Izembek-Moffet Lagoons)
- critical habitat for threatened Steller's Eiders
- 2 national parks
- 1 national monument
- 4 national wildlife refuges,
- 1 Ramsar (an international treaty) wetland of international importance
- 1 state park
- 1 state sanctuary
- 2 state game refuges
- 5 state critical habitat areas
- 2 designated Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) sites
- 8 proposed WHSRN sites



Emperor Geese are one of many species that relies on Bristol Bay. Photograph by Donna Dewhurst, US Fish and Wildlife Service

## Arctic Update: Make Your Voice Count!

Rumor has it there will be big news for the Arctic this November as federal agencies release final management plans for the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

### National Petroleum Reserve—Alaska

Last August, Secretary of Interior Salazar announced a proposed “preferred alternative” for managing the Reserve as part of creating the first-ever area-wide management plan. This alternative, called “B2”, would make several Special Areas, including the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area (a globally-significant Important Bird Area), off-limits for oil and gas leasing.

Alternative B2 provides a responsible balance that would protect about half of the nearly 23-million acre Reserve while still allowing for the vast majority of the area’s oil to be accessed and developed.

Your voice will be critical in one last comment period. Visit [www.AudubonAlaska.org](http://www.AudubonAlaska.org) for more information on submitting your comments.

### Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

In November, the US Fish and Wildlife Service will announce its preferred alternative for the plan that will guide management of the refuge for the next 15 years. The agency will announce the final decision in December.

Audubon supports Alternative C because it includes a recommendation that Congress should add the Coastal Plain, the “biological heart” of the Arctic Refuge, to the National Wilderness Preservation System. ♦

### Psst ...Here's an Insider Tip on How Alaskans Can Contribute

Did you know you can help support Audubon Alaska through your PFD? When you fill out your Permanent Fund Dividend application online, look for Audubon Alaska on the “Pick.Click.Give.” list of nonprofit organizations and donate a portion of your dividend. (Good thing we’re on the “A” list!)

For more information, contact our Development Director Ship Bright at (907) 276-7034 or [sbright@audubon.org](mailto:sbright@audubon.org).



Signs of caribou in the Arctic Refuge. Photograph by Taldi Walter

# People of Audubon

## BOARD



**Alexis Maybank** served on the Audubon Alaska board from fall 2009 until spring 2012. Before joining the board, she explored the Marsh Fork of the Canning River in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on an Audubon Alaska trip with Wilderness Birding Adventures. She was a key member of the board's development committee and an enthusiastic supporter of Audubon Alaska. She is passionate about using the internet to reach people in innovative ways. For two years in a row, Alexis' online business the Gilt Groupe donated a portion of the earnings on Earth Day to Audubon. She recently joined the board of the National Audubon Society. We thank Alexis for her enthusiasm, and wish her luck with her new endeavors—and know she will bring a voice for Alaska issues to the National Audubon board. ♦



**Dave Sonneborn** served on the Audubon Alaska board from the spring of 2009 through the spring of 2012. Dave is a strong supporter of science as the foundation of conservation work. As a member of the Development Committee, he promoted the continued success of Audubon Alaska. He was always willing to help raise money for the organization, including generous donations and serving as a gracious host for Audubon events at his home. He was also an invaluable contributor in the creation of the Anchorage Birding Map, which highlights the best spots for birding in the Anchorage area. His commitment to Audubon is a reflection of his long-standing passion for birding and his unrivaled accomplishment as the person who has seen the most birds in Alaska, more than 400 species! ♦

## STAFF



Audubon Alaska welcomes **Kathy Wells, Assistant Development Director**. She will assist in grants management and fundraising. Kathy moved to Alaska with her husband in 1980. She has an A.A.S. in Ornamental Horticulture and owns a small business that provides landscape consultation and design services. She has held various positions at non-profits, including Executive Director of a local non-profit promoting land use planning with a conservation perspective. She received the 2008 Secretary of Interior Cooperative Conservation Award for work as a partner organization in the Mat-Su Salmon Habitat Partnership and the Frontiersman Newspaper selected her as Civic Person of the Year in 2004. She is excited to join the Audubon Alaska team.



She loves to spend time with her husband, sisters, and close friends hiking, backcountry skiing, cross-country skiing, and bird watching. ♦



**Aaron Bowman** worked with Audubon Alaska this past summer as an Important Bird Area biologist and outreach assistant. Aaron became interested in birding at the age of 11 while living in Japan. He participated in many Japanese bird monitoring projects, his favorite being the weekly monitoring of Izunuma and Uchinuma, two remnant wetlands in northern Japan with large wintering flocks of waterfowl. Aaron earned his B.S. in Wildlife Biology at the University of Minnesota. Since moving to Anchorage in 2009, Aaron enjoys hiking the Chugach with his wife Laura and leading birding events for Anchorage Audubon. Thanks for your help this summer Aaron, especially on early morning surveys! ♦

### Answer to WatchList Quiz

Black-footed Albatross  
*Phoebastria nigripes*

Photograph by Beth Peluso



Black-footed Albatross nest on the Hawaiian Islands, foraging in Alaska waters during summer, sometimes making 5,000-mile round-trips to feed their chicks.

# Audubon ALASKA

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## Congratulations to the Winners of the Great American Arctic Birding Challenge 2012

Many thanks to everyone who participated, we hope you enjoyed the time outdoors and learned about the amazing birds that connect the Arctic with your state.

To be fair, we decided to have separate Lower 48 and Alaska divisions, since the birds are converging on Alaska. The competitive spirit was strong this year: the previous high count was 91 species, which all of the teams that placed managed to beat. The enthusiastic Water Oozles creatively exploited the lack of geographic boundaries in the rules, birding widely both in and out of Alaska!

### Lower 48 Winners

1st Place: Dungeness River Audubon Center: 142 species  
2nd Place: Surf Scoters: 108 species  
3rd Place: Audubon Omaha-Lame Duck Prez: 101 species

### Alaska Winners

1st Place: Water Oozles: 153 species  
2nd Place: The Kenai Refugees: 132 species  
3rd Place: Team Pika: 96 species

### WatchList Quiz Bird

Can you identify this species from the WatchList?

Answer on page 7.



Participants searched for Arctic-nesting species such as this Long-tailed Duck. *Photograph by Dave Shaw*