



Audubon ALASKA News

Published two times a year by the Alaska State Office of the National Audubon Society



INSIDE

The Best of Alaska, The Worst of Ideas

By Iain Stenhouse, Director of Bird Conservation

The magnificent Bristol Bay on Alaska's southwest coast is a place of many superlatives. Its offshore waters support commercial fisheries for king crab, herring, halibut, pollock, and cod, while the inner bay is home to a famous sport fishing industry, the world's largest commercial sockeye salmon fishery, and an irreplaceable subsistence harvest of salmon, the life-blood of traditional Native cultures in the region.

Bristol Bay is also home to dozens of globally-significant Important Bird Areas. Vast numbers of migratory waterfowl and shorebirds, including Emperor Geese and Marbled Godwits, use the wetlands, bays, and lagoons of Bristol Bay, while the offshore waters support millions of seabirds, notably Short-tailed Shearwaters, and dozens of species of marine mammals, including the world's most endangered whale species, the North Pacific right whale.

The Bristol Bay ecosystem is already under considerable stress from climate change and warming ocean temperatures, but now two enormous development proposals threaten to squeeze the Bay between potential sources of massive environmental contamination—one seaward and one landward.

Oil and Gas Leasing

In the 1980s, large, offshore tracts of Bristol Bay were leased for oil and gas extraction, but after the Exxon Valdez spill in Prince William Sound, Congress placed the region under a drilling moratorium and bought back the leases. The Bush Administration has now lifted the moratorium, however, and plans to lease millions of acres of marine and coastal waters for offshore drilling, including Bristol Bay. Considering the Bay's high winds, powerful seas, variable ice, and cold temperatures, federal agencies predict that drilling in this area would result in at least one major oil spill and numerous smaller spills. Yet, there is presently no feasible method for oil spill clean-up in rough seas or ice-laden waters. In November 2006, Audubon Alaska and the World Wildlife Fund together provided 35 pages of comments regarding the plan.

Pebble Mine

Offshore drilling is only the beginning. Enter Pebble Mine, a plan for an enormous opencast mine north of Iliamna Lake in the Bristol Bay headwaters. Although based in Anchorage, the lead company, Northern Dynasty Mines, is a wholly owned subsidiary of a Canadian company.

continued on page 3



Climate Change: Not a Time for Hand-Wringing2

Tongass Report and Roundtable Creating New Conservation Opportunities4

Breaking News on Cook Inlet Belugas5

Staff News5

Teshkepkuk Lake Update6

Board of Game Maintains Protection for McNeil Bears6

Introducing *Alaska eBird*: The Future of Birding is Now!7

Audubon Alaska Board of Directors8

ALASKA WATCHLIST SPECIES

Photograph on masthead by Rich MacIntosh

Marbled Murrelet

Brachyramphus marmoratus

The Marbled Murrelet is a small, rather secretive seabird of the North Pacific, ranging from Northern California to Alaska. Unlike other members of the acid family, the Marbled Murrelet nests solitarily in coastal old-growth forest, where it lays its single egg on mossy limbs of large trees. Due to population declines, primarily driven by habitat loss to logging and coastal development, it is listed as Threatened in the Lower 48 and Canada. Gill-net fishing and oil spills are also known to increase mortality in this species.

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Audubon ALASKA

DIRECTOR'S VIEWPOINT



Climate Change: Not a Time for Hand-Wringing

By Stan Senner, Executive Director

While some folks continue to dither about the sources of global climate change, any one who has been in Alaska for a good stretch of time has no choice but to acknowledge the reality of a warming climate and all its manifestations at high latitudes. Eroding coast lines, reduced marine ice cover, melting permafrost, receding glaciers, and drying forests and tundra—all are evidence of a rapidly warming climate. And for every physical change underway, there are corresponding biological and ecological changes, such as the dramatic population declines of nesting Rusty Blackbirds in the boreal forest and of Ivory Gulls, which follow polar bears and scavenge from their kills on what is now the shrinking Arctic ice pack.

Audubon is a science-based organization, and we don't tackle problems or propose solutions that aren't supported by sound science. In the case of climate change, the weight of international scientific opinion clearly points to human sources as a major contributor, and there is finally a growing political consensus that we must take action now. Even President Bush, albeit reluctantly, has acknowledged the role of CO2 emissions from the burning of fossil fuels as a contributor to global warming. By now, Pogo's admonition is a cliché, but: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

This is no time, however, for hand-wringing. There really is no choice but to ask the hard questions about what is happening and why and then quickly move on to what can be done about it. This is the process in which the National Audubon Society is engaged at all levels, including here at Audubon Alaska.

At the national level, Audubon President John Flicker has said, "Audubon is uniquely positioned to educate the public, increase grassroots activism, and motivate change through our chapters, state offices, and activist network across the country. Audubon members realize that without action on global warming, many of the conservation gains they've worked so hard to achieve could be erased."

In Alaska, as a first step, Audubon Alaska has joined a dozen or so sister organizations in formally petitioning the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation to adopt regulations requiring major emitters of greenhouse gases to publicly report and quantify their emissions. The attorneys at Trustees for Alaska drafted this petition, since we must first identify sources of emissions and then consider how to reduce them.

One might argue that there are many other places with far greater emissions of greenhouse gases than Alaska, so why pick on Alaska. Leadership, however, should start at home, and—given that Arctic regions are warming at twice the rate of the rest of the world—we need to be part of the solution, and not just point fingers elsewhere.

There are many conversations to come about global climate change and what it means for Alaska, but I wanted you to know that Audubon Alaska will be an active part of those conversations and solutions. We can't sit this one out, and neither should you. ♦



Ivory gulls depend on Arctic ice for survival and are particularly threatened

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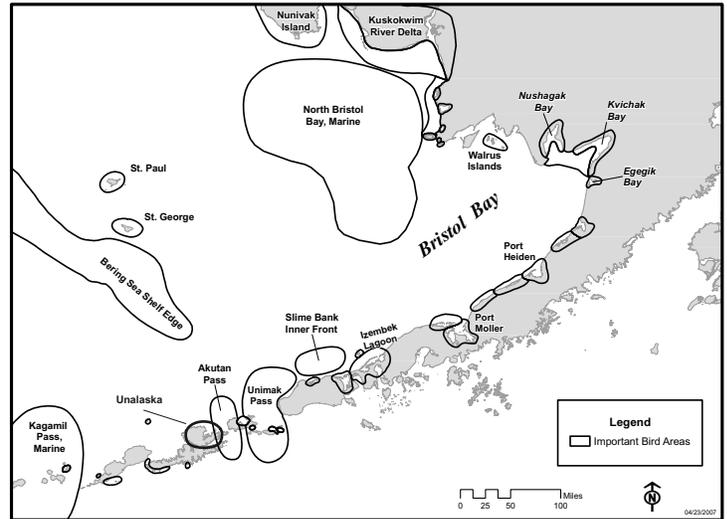
If developed as planned, the Pebble Mine would be the largest open pit mine in North America, large enough to be clearly visible from space. The pit itself would be about two miles wide and several thousand feet deep. Over its lifetime, the mine is projected to produce three billion tons of waste, which Northern Dynasty plans to contain in toxic holding ponds held behind several earthen dams, each up to 700 feet high and several miles long. A second planned underground mine to the east would likely utilize a block caving method to extract ore; although this produces less waste rock, it can cause massive subsidence at the surface, allowing water to percolate down and contaminate groundwater. All of this would be sited in one of the most active earthquake zones in Alaska.

The potential impacts of Pebble Mine would reach much farther than Bristol Bay. The plan includes a proposed road from the mine around Iliamna Lake to a port on Iniskin Bay in lower Cook Inlet. The proposal calls for taxpayers to foot the bill for 90 miles of road, an estimated \$150 million.

Gambling with Alaska's Future?

Between the two proposals—onshore mining and offshore oil and gas drilling—dozens of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) would be affected. Most of these IBAs are globally significant, collectively providing essential habitat for an estimated 16 million birds, including two threatened species, the Spectacled Eider and the Steller's Eider, and at least 15 other species on the Alaska WatchList. In the event of an oil spill, for example, any oil reaching protected lagoons, such as at Izembek, could be there for decades.

Beyond these potentially devastating consequences, there is a simple economic argument against the two developments: in contrast to the short-term profits of drilling and mining, the natural resources of the Bristol Bay watershed (especially salmon) are renewable and contribute hundreds of millions of dollars annually to Alaska's economy. This economic value is dependent on the region's pure clean water, healthy habitat, and pristine wilderness setting. These proposed developments pose an enormous and unacceptable risk to Alaska's economy.



The good news is that literally dozens of stakeholder groups, often at odds in the past, have come together with a firm, common voice in opposition. This diverse coalition includes commercial and sport fishermen, subsistence harvesters, conservationists including Audubon Alaska, native communities, and concerned citizens from across the political spectrum. Many are supporting a proposal from state Senator Gary Stevens (R-Kodiak) to establish a 5 to 7 million acre game refuge in the Bristol Bay headwaters. Although this would not necessarily eliminate mining claims, it may prevent dumping of industrial wastes. This refuge proposal will be reviewed by the state legislature later this year.

In the meantime, Audubon Alaska will be working with other stakeholders to seek creative solutions to defend the best of Alaska from the worst of ideas. ♦



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Photograph by Anne Gore



FOCUS ON THE FIELD

Tongass Report and Roundtable Creating New Conservation Opportunities

By John Schoen, Senior Scientist

Unlike most national forests in the Lower 48 states, the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska still possesses significant, intact landscapes with a high degree of ecological integrity. During the last half-century, however, substantial portions of its old-growth forests have been harvested to support the region's forestry industry, focusing on the most accessible and highest-quality timber lands, which often overlap with the most valuable fish and wildlife habitats.

Despite past logging, we still have an unprecedented opportunity on the Tongass for protecting the unique natural qualities of this coastal rainforest—important to all Americans—while also sustaining local economies and maintaining the quality of life valued by the people who live and work in the region.

For the last two and a half years, Audubon Alaska has worked with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to develop a conservation assessment of the Tongass. In March, Audubon and TNC released our final report: "Conservation Assessment and Resource Synthesis of the Coastal Forest and Mountains Ecoregion of Southeastern Alaska and the Tongass National Forest." This peer-reviewed report includes over 600 pages of text, maps, and photographs.

The assessment identifies watersheds and sub-watersheds for varying levels of protection, including some places recommended for complete protection and other areas where both timber management and conservation could occur.

It also includes the following key conservation recommendations:

- Maintain and expand the existing conservation reserve network to include additional intact watersheds (Conservation Priority Watersheds as mapped by Audubon and TNC);
- Establish ecological restoration priorities for selected watersheds throughout the Tongass (these areas have also been identified and mapped);
- In logging areas, apply the conservation strategies from the 1997 Tongass Land Management Plan (TLMP), including habitat conservation areas, old-growth reserves, habitat buffers, and standards and guidelines.

Audubon and TNC are distributing the assessment to dozens of resource managers, policy makers, and stakeholders. We are working to get it online, and it is available on CD upon request.

The assessment has already been an important advocacy tool and scientific foundation for working with the US Forest Service. More than one year ago a federal court ordered the Forest Service to revise the 1997 TLMP because it had over-estimated market demand—an error that would have opened up many of the Tongass roadless watersheds for logging. The Forest Service's draft plan for a revised TLMP presents seven alternatives with a range of logging levels and protection of intact areas. Audubon believes that Alternative 1 is the best of the options presented by the Forest Service. It has the greatest focus on protection of intact watersheds and the fish and wildlife values they support, while also maintaining the local timber industry at a modest, sustainable level. Audubon has provided the Forest Service with extensive comments and a proposal for additional watershed conservation measures based on our recent assessment.

The conservation assessment has also served as a tool for the Tongass Futures Roundtable, which is coordinated by TNC and the National Forest Foundation to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders long involved in Tongass management issues. The Roundtable is exploring



Mud Bay on northern Chichagof Island is Congressionally protected and has some of the highest ecological values in the East Chichagof Province of the Tongass National Forest.

how this broad range of stakeholders can address public policy issues and work together to achieve a long-term balance of healthy and diverse communities, vibrant economies, and responsible use of resources, including timber, while maintaining the natural values and ecological integrity of the forest. The nearly 30 Roundtable participants include representatives from conservation, the timber industry, commercial fishing industry, tourism, tribes, southeastern Alaska communities, Forest Service, Fish and Game, and others.

I serve on the Roundtable as one of the conservation representatives. At the sixth meeting held in Sitka, the Roundtable identified a number of issues of common interest. The top consensus issues, which will be recommended to the Forest Service, were:

- Protect most intact watersheds with important values;
- Transition timber harvest from old growth to second growth;
- Provide a steady, reliable, and predictable supply of timber to the industry; and
- Promote a forest and riparian stewardship program.

At the April meeting in Juneau, conservation organizations, the timber industry, and Forest Service agreed to work collaboratively on timber sales in previously roaded areas. The idea is to review and offer suggestions to improve timber sale economics, while still protecting fish and wildlife habitats and resources. In the interim, a sub-group is working to evaluate whether it is possible to apply a one-year time-out for new timber sales in undeveloped roadless areas of the Tongass on a trial basis.

The ecological integrity of the Tongass rainforest will depend on a broad group of stakeholders working together to balance industrial development with sound conservation measures, including an expanded watershed-scale reserve system. You can be sure that Audubon will be there at the table. ♦

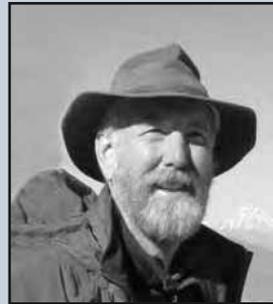
Breaking News on Cook Inlet Belugas

On April 20 the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proposed a new rule to list the Cook Inlet beluga whale as “endangered” under the federal Endangered Species Act. The long-awaited announcement came in response to a listing petition filed by several conservation groups, including Audubon. Scientists estimate there may only be 300 Cook Inlet belugas remaining, down from 1300 in the 1980s.

NMFS is soliciting public comment on the listing through June 19, 2007. Please visit our website, www.audubonalaska.org, for details. ♦

Staff News

We are thrilled to welcome some new smiling faces to the Audubon Alaska staff, and we are sad to bid farewell to one staff member.



Pat Pourchot is a veteran of public service in Alaska and of the conservation community. He came to Alaska in 1972 with the US Department of the Interior and had the enviable job of paddling the wildest rivers in our state for study as potential National Wild and Scenic Rivers. From 1985 to 1992, Pat served in the Alaska State Legislature, both in the House and Senate, and then as Legislative Director and Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources during the Tony Knowles Administration. Pat has an MPA from Harvard University and works part-time as Audubon’s Senior Policy Representative on western Arctic/National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska issues.



Lorelei Costa, a native of Gloucester, Massachusetts, is Audubon’s new Director of Development and Communications. Lorelei and her husband backpacked and paddled in Denali National Park, Kenai Fjords, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge before moving to Anchorage in March. Lorelei was Development Director for the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust from 2004 to 2007 and Associate Director of Triangle Land Conservancy for five years before that. She got her BA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a nonprofit management certificate from Duke University. Lorelei is a musician, runner, and novice birder. She is excited to explore more wildlands of Alaska and aid in their conservation.

Lorelei replaces **Anne Gore**, who left Audubon for a job in The Wilderness Society’s Alaska Office in Anchorage. Anne was the first Audubon development staffer in the Alaska State Office and did a fine job. She designed the first Audubon Alaska brochure, upgraded the design of the newsletter, and worked closely with the Executive Director and Board to obtain the funds needed to sustain Audubon’s program in Alaska.

Finally, we also welcome **Tom Van Pelt** in the temporary position of Seabird Biologist. Tom has a master’s degree from Glasgow University in Scotland and worked for many years for the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the US Geological Survey. He has considerable international experience in the Russian Far East and elsewhere in Asia. He is working with Audubon’s Director of Bird Conservation, Iain Stenhouse, to document Important Bird Areas and to develop the seabird aspects of a Fishery Ecosystem Plan for the Aleutian Islands. ♦

Teshkepuk Lake Update

By Pat Pourchot, Senior Policy Representative

After a victory in court last September, Audubon Alaska continues the struggle to protect the Teshkepuk Lake area from oil and gas development.

Located in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPR-A) on Alaska's North Slope, the Teshkepuk Lake area contains one of the most important wetlands in the Arctic. It provides nesting habitat for a myriad of shorebirds and waterfowl and is a critical molting area for tens of thousands of geese, including up to 30 percent of Brant in the Pacific Flyway. It is also the primary calving and insect relief area for the 45,000-head Teshkepuk Lake Caribou Herd, a key subsistence resource for seven North Slope villages.

Despite its location in NPR-A, Teshkepuk Lake was designated a "Special Area" in 1977, and the area north of the lake has never been available for drilling. Yet early in 2006 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposed leasing the area for just that purpose. The National Audubon Society and six other conservation groups filed suit. Last September a Federal District Court stopped the lease sale, finding that, in particular, the BLM had not considered the cumulative impacts of oil and gas development.

Late in 2006 BLM began preparing a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) to address the Court opinion. Audubon Alaska and others submitted scoping comments, addressing the cumulative impacts of expanded oil and gas exploration and development on fish and wildlife and human health, the effects of global warming, and the need for a new analysis of impacts on endangered species. We again



Teshkepuk Lake is a critical molting area for Brant. Without their flight feathers, they are especially vulnerable to disturbance. Photograph by Tim Bowman, USFWS

strongly expressed our belief that the Teshkepuk Lake area should not be leased because its biological resources are too significant and vulnerable, and because development would be too difficult, if not impossible, to mitigate.

BLM plans to release a draft SEIS this summer and a Record of Decision in March 2008. The agency plans to hold a new lease sale as early as the summer of 2008. Meanwhile, Audubon and its partners are pursuing other actions to protect Teshkepuk Lake. The new congressional leadership is more responsive to conservation concerns, and we are exploring legislative options for interim and permanent protection of this priceless area.

Please visit www.audubonalaska.org for the latest news and for ways to get involved. ♦



Board of Game Maintains Protections for McNeil Bears

In early March Audubon Alaska testified before the Alaska Board of Game, urging the Board to maintain a hunting closure for brown bears in the Kamishak Special Use Area, located between the McNeil Sanctuary and the Katmai National Park. Comments from the public ran thousands-to-one in favor of maintaining protections for brown bears between the park and sanctuary. Recognizing the strong public interest in this issue, the Board voted to maintain the hunting closure in this important area, thus protecting the famous McNeil bears. ♦

Photograph by John Schoen

Introducing *Alaska eBird*: The Future of Birding is Now!

By Rich Capitan, Education Specialist

Audubon Alaska is excited to announce the launch of *Alaska eBird*, a new website that connects people to nature, birds to the internet, and your sightings to conservationists and scientists.

Alaska eBird is an easy-to-use internet tool through which you can record bird observations made anywhere in North America—from your backyard or neighborhood or while you're on vacation—at any time for your personal use. You can then retrieve information on your sightings or access the entire historical eBird database to find out what other eBird participants are reporting across the continent.

But *Alaska eBird* is more than a fancy life list. The program can map your bird observations and compile them into graphs and bar charts. It can document the presence, absence, or abundance of species, or you can create tables of your observations summarized by week, month, or year.

How does *eBird* work? You can find out by going to www.ebird.org/ak, registering for free, and choosing a username and password. Then you simply enter when, where, and how you went birding, and fill out a checklist of all the birds you saw and heard during the outing.

Developed jointly by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and Audubon Alaska, and funded by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game through a State Wildlife Grant, *Alaska eBird* is a portal to the greater *eBird* online database, linking you to birders across North America. Thus, bird data can be analyzed across political and geographic borders. For example, you can find observations of the Cape May Warbler in Puerto Rico, or you can look at the entire Cape May Warbler data set gathered by *eBird-ers* across the western hemisphere. The database will be used by birdwatchers, scientists, and conservationists who want to know more about the distributions, numbers, and movements of birds across the continent and in Important Bird Areas in particular.

Alaska eBird brings birds to the internet... but you may prefer to leave the computer at home and record your observations later.

Photograph by Lorelei Costa

As for data control, regional bird experts have created sophisticated, automatic filters to review all submissions before they enter the database. For example, if someone records a Harpy Eagle sighting in Anchorage, the computer filter will flag the record and experts will review the record before admitting it to the *eBird* database.

Best of all, *Alaska eBird* will act as a long-term monitoring tool and will assist in the tracking of WatchList birds and other species of concern, such as the Rusty Blackbird. This species has had an extremely dramatic population decline—90 percent over the last 40 years throughout North America. Prior to *eBird*, the only two direct methods of monitoring have been the North American Breeding Bird Survey and Christmas Bird Counts. The Rusty Blackbird is poorly understood on its breeding grounds and even less understood during migration. Through observations recorded in *eBird*, we can hope to better understand habitat usage and seasonal movement of this interesting bird. By entering your own observations into *eBird*, you can have fun and help conserve the birds you love to watch.

You can connect to *Alaska eBird* and learn more at www.ebird.org/ak and at the Audubon Alaska website, www.audubonalaska.org. You can also contact Audubon Alaska's education specialist, Rich Capitan, for more information at rcapitan@audubon.org or 907-276-7034. See you on *Alaska eBird*! ♦





AUDUBON ALASKA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

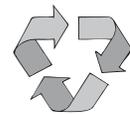
In October 2006 the Audubon Alaska Board of Directors welcomed two new members: David Wigglesworth and Katherine Pope. David is the watershed project coordinator for the Municipality of Anchorage; prior to that he worked for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation and the Alaska Conservation Foundation. Katherine is an anesthesiologist in Maine who once worked at the Alaska Native Health Hospital in Anchorage and still has close ties to this state. We thank all of our Board members for their many contributions to Audubon Alaska.

Above: The Audubon Alaska Board of Directors. From left: Margery Nicolson, Mimi Hogan, Simon Hamm, Stacy Studebaker, Steve Zimmerman, Dee Frankfourth, Matt Kirchoff, Eric Myers, Denny Takahashi Kelso, Penny Rennick, David Wigglesworth, and Katherine Pope. Not pictured: Frank Keim. ♦

Photograph by John Schoen



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