

August 2011

Dear Friend,

Summer is winding down in Alaska. The salmon are running in many rivers. The sound track has changed from singing birds to the calls of rowdy fledglings begging for food. Some of the Arctic-nesting shorebirds have already started their southward migrations. Along with these changes, the Audubon Alaska e-news will shift as well. The e-news will now be monthly so we can keep you on top of the exciting work we're doing in Alaska, with the help of supporters like you.

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## **New Bill in Congress Threatens Teshekpuk Lake**

[Teshekpuk Lake](#) and the surrounding wetlands provide world-class habitat for huge numbers of birds, caribou, and other wildlife. This thriving area within the [National Petroleum Reserve Alaska](#) (NPRA) has been protected for decades by law. Congress is currently considering a bill (H.R. 2150) that would overturn that protection and require oil and gas leasing in the area.

The Teshekpuk Lake area is a globally significant [Important Bird Area](#) because it provides nesting, staging, and molting habitat for a variety of waterfowl and shorebirds. Up to 30 percent of the Pacific Brant population relies upon this area, along with significant populations of White-fronted Goose, Canada Goose, Snow Goose, and others. You may even have a chance of seeing some of these birds where you live—they migrate south from Alaska along all four of the nation's flyways (migration corridors) to overwinter in locations across the United States. Three bird species recognized under the Endangered Species Act nest in the Teshekpuk Lake area: Steller's Eider, Spectacled Eider, and Yellow-billed Loon.

The area also hosts the calving grounds of the 67,000-animal Teshekpuk Lake caribou herd and includes Critical Habitat for the endangered polar bear.



Photo of a mixed flock of White-fronted, Snow, and Cackling geese on Teshekpuk Lake by Gerrit Vyn, Macaulay Library at Cornell Lab of Ornithology



Photo of south Teshekpuk Lake by Gerrit Vyn, Macaulay Library at Cornell Lab of Ornithology

In June, Eric Myers, Audubon Alaska's Policy Director, was invited to Washington, DC to testify against the proposed legislation before the House Energy and Mineral Resources Subcommittee. A representative of the Obama Administration also testified in opposition. Oil industry representatives and the State of Alaska support the bill.

Why are we so concerned? Audubon has a long history of working to protect Teshekpuk Lake through scientific research, policy advocacy, and litigation. [Audubon's testimony](#) pointed out that Congress itself specifically identified Teshekpuk Lake as deserving of 'maximum protection' in 1976. "Past presidential administrations as philosophically disparate as those of former President Jimmy Carter and former President George W. Bush have embraced the need for protecting these areas."

H.R. 2150 would trump all existing protections of the lands around Teshekpuk Lake, regardless of critical habitat for birds, caribou, and polar bear. Places such as caribou calving grounds and goose molting areas would be back on the table for oil and gas leasing.

The House Subcommittee voted to pass the bill along and is now awaiting consideration by the full House. Audubon will keep a close eye on this bill, so stay tuned for future updates.

For a closer look at Audubon's science-based recommendations about how to balance conserving the most important wildlife habitat with development in the NPRA, see our [2011 Habitat Conservation Strategy](#).

## Peering into the Lives of Alaska's Yellow-billed Loons

Like many Arctic species, much is unknown about Yellow-billed Loons, an [Audubon Alaska WatchList](#) species. US Geological Survey biologist Joel Schmutz is leading a field research project, with help from US Fish and Wildlife Service aerial survey crews, in the National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska (the Reserve) to learn more about this large, and largely mysterious, loon. The focus is on two questions: Where do Yellow-billed Loons go when they leave Alaska? What does a loon look for in nesting real estate?

In past years, researchers tagged loons with satellite transmitters to track their migration to wintering grounds. It turns out most of the Yellow-billed Loons in Alaska's western Arctic spend the cold winter months in the Yellow Sea of China and the Sea of Japan. Although Red-throated Loons wintering in that area of Asia show elevated levels of some contaminants, Schmutz says so far Yellow-billed Loons don't seem to have the same problem. This is possibly because they stay farther out from shore, away from pollution sources.

This summer, researchers are collecting blood and flight feather samples from captured birds. The researchers will look at isotopes in the samples to discover what kind of fish and invertebrates the loons consume, and from where. Since loons molt their flight feathers during winter, the feathers will reveal information about the loons' diet on Asian wintering grounds. The blood samples will reflect fish eaten recently on breeding grounds. Finding the right kind of prey may determine which lakes loons choose for nesting.

In addition to taking blood and feather samples, researchers fitted each Yellow-billed Loon with a unique combination of colored leg bands. This way, the biologists can discover if individual loons return to the same nesting lakes each year. They can also track the daily movements of banded loons. Do the birds interact with neighboring loons? Is there a social component to where loons choose to nest?

The combination of chemistry and close observation will start to answer some of the many questions about why Yellow-billed Loons live where they do in the Reserve.

## **Sandhill Crane Family in Homer, Alaska—Video**

The group Kachemak Crane Watch, based in Homer, Alaska, is dedicated to protecting Sandhill Cranes in the Kachemak Bay area near Homer.

Check out this [Sandhill Crane video](#): Who knew such a large birds could swim like ducks?

For more photos and information about Sandhill Cranes and Kachemak Crane Watch, visit the group's website [www.cranewatch.org](http://www.cranewatch.org). For more videos of the crane family, click on the Video tab and go to the bottom of the list.

## **WatchList QUIZ**

*What [Alaska WatchList](#) bird spends its life on narrow, rocky beaches sandwiched between the ocean and dry land?*

**HINT:** Although their population is stable, these noisy birds are sensitive to disturbance and mammalian predators.

**PRIZES!** This month I'll do a drawing and three lucky contestants will win an Audubon waist-pack. It's the perfect size to fit a guidebook and snack. Email me your answer by August 26 to enter.

## **"Picture the Heart of Homer" Photo Contest**

### **Picture the Heart of Homer: Beluga Slough & Bishop's Beach Photo Contest**

*DEADLINE:* 5:00 pm Alaska Time on Friday, September 16.

The "Picture the Heart of Homer" photo contest celebrates the acquisition of some small wetlands that will be an addition to the Islands & Ocean Visitors Center site. If you visited Beluga Slough or Bishop's Beach during the Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival (or any other time!), here is the chance to let your photos shine. See the Audubon Alaska Events page for [contest details](#).

Thank you for reading Audubon Alaska's e-newsletter. I welcome your comments and questions by email ([bpeluso@audubon.org](mailto:bpeluso@audubon.org)) or by phone (907-276-7034).

Happy birding,  
Beth Peluso

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