



# Audubon ALASKA News

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

## Alaska's IBAs: Jewels in the Crown

By Iain Stenhouse, Director of Bird Conservation

It will probably come as no surprise to you, but in terms of its importance for birds, Alaska is simply spectacular. And you may find our new map of Important Bird Areas pretty spectacular, too.

Over the last seven years, Audubon Alaska has combed the state for areas essential to the survival of bird populations. We now have 145 sites statewide that are officially identified as Important Bird Areas (IBAs). The majority of them are also recognized as globally or continentally significant. In fact, Alaska has almost half of all globally significant IBAs identified in the United States so far.

Our new, poster-sized map displays all 145 sites, plus a handful of potential sites that we believe are highly likely to meet the criteria in the near future. As a bonus, the map also features original artwork by David Allen Sibley, illustrator and author of *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. (For a sneak preview of the map and artwork, turn to page 3.)

### IBAs Across the World

The IBA program is a structured, science-based approach for addressing the greatest threat to birds—habitat loss—through site-based conservation designed to engage people and communities. It is coordinated worldwide by BirdLife International and is truly a global effort, with 26 countries involved in the Western Hemisphere alone. Here in the United States, the IBA program is without a doubt the flagship conservation endeavor of the National Audubon Society, which is leading the IBA charge across the country.

The goal of the IBA program is two-fold: the first phase identifies areas essential to the survival of bird populations, while the second phase aims to enhance the protection of these areas through cooperative conservation measures.

*Continued on page 3*



Kagamil Island is one of the Islands of Four Mountains in the central Aleutians. It provides habitat for a large colony of seabirds and is currently recognized as a state-significant IBA. Photograph by Ed Bailey, USFWS



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## ALASKA WATCHLIST SPECIES

Photograph on masthead by L. Lauber, USFWS

### Whiskered Auklet

*Aethia pygmaea*

The Whiskered Auklet is a small, highly ornamented seabird of the Bering Sea, with a long forehead crest, white facial plumes, and a bright red bill. Like most members of the alcid family, Whiskered Auklets nest in dense colonies on remote islands. To avoid predators, they are nocturnal at colonies, feeding their chicks after nightfall. They forage in dense flocks on plankton where ocean currents concentrate their prey, making them vulnerable to oil spills and entanglement in nets. Introduced mammalian predators, especially rats, pose another major threat to this species.

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## DIRECTOR'S VIEWPOINT



### Conference Presents Cutting Edge of Alaska Ornithology

*By Stan Senner, Executive Director*

In early March, 200 researchers, resource managers, conservationists, and educators gathered in Fairbanks for the 13th Alaska Bird Conference, organized this year by the Alaska Bird Observatory. If you want to deepen your understanding of birds and meet people engaged in avian research and conservation, or if you just care about the future of birdlife in Alaska, there is no better forum than the Alaska Bird Conference.

The terrific attendance at this three-day, biennial conference demonstrates the vibrancy of Alaska's ornithological community, which, in my experience, matches or exceeds anything found in the Lower 48 states. No doubt, this is a reflection of both Alaska's fantastic avifauna and the many critically important conservation concerns that confront "our" birds.

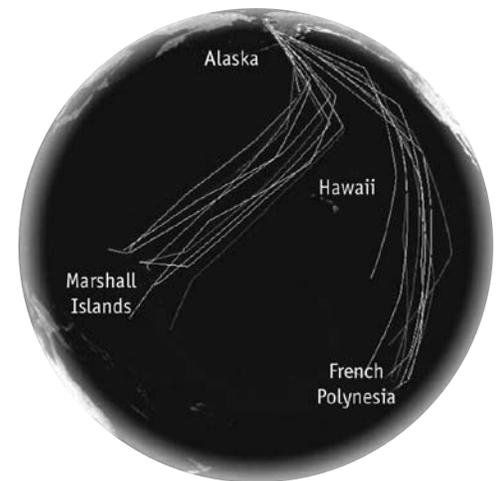
It was especially gratifying to see many young people in attendance, some in high school or college, in addition to many aging veterans (myself included). It was also gratifying to hear Audubon's Important Bird Area, Alaska WatchList, and Alaska eBird projects discussed widely.

At the bird conference one can learn about the latest in avian research, long before the results reach the pages of any ornithological journal. Here is just a sampling of some of the many fine papers presented this year:

- Black Oystercatchers that have colonized Middleton Island since 1976 (because of tide lands created by the Great Alaska Earthquake) are already genetically distinct from other oystercatchers in Alaska (Brian Guzzetti, University of Alaska Fairbanks, et al.).
- The eastern Chukchi Sea is a crucial staging area for the entire western North American King Eider population, plus the majority of the Siberian population (Steffen Oppel, University of Alaska Fairbanks, et al.).
- The smallest black chest "badges" on Black-capped Chickadees in Fairbanks are associated with the highest levels of aggression, lowest body mass, and highest levels of a stress hormone (Sarah Youngren, University of Alaska Fairbanks, et al.).

Abstracts from all the conference papers are on the Alaska Bird Observatory website: [www.alaskabird.org](http://www.alaskabird.org)

Audubon Alaska and the Arctic Audubon Society in Fairbanks were proud to be sponsors of this year's bird conference. The next one will be held in Anchorage in 2010, with Audubon Alaska as host. Watch our website for details: [www.audubonalaska.org](http://www.audubonalaska.org). I hope to see you there. ♦



**USGS**  
science for a changing world

**Southward tracks of satellite-tagged Bristle-thighed Curlews from two discrete breeding sites in Alaska suggest widely separated wintering areas in the South Pacific. Bob Gill, US Geological Survey (USGS), presented these results on behalf of the Pacific Shorebird Migration Project, an endeavor of USGS and Point Reyes Bird Observatory Conservation Science, with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.**

Alaska's IBAs... continued from page 1

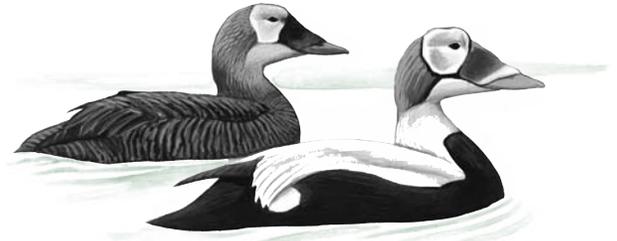
IBAs are usually discrete sites that stand out from the surrounding landscape as having local, continental, or global significance for birds. For a site to qualify as an IBA, it must support bird species that: are of conservation concern; exhibit restricted ranges; are tied to rare or unique habitats; or congregate in high densities. It's worth noting, however, that in Alaska the IBA designation has no legal standing and does not affect the rights of landowners.

So far, the program has identified more than 2,100 IBAs across the United States, including 151 considered globally significant and 9 considered continentally significant. Of these, 69 of the global sites and 8 of the continental sites are in Alaska!

**Conserving IBAs**

Even though we'll continue to add new IBAs to the list, conservation and management issues on existing IBAs are increasingly a focus for Audubon Alaska. We've been actively defending some IBAs, like Teshekpuk Lake in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, for many years. Conservation issues regularly develop or become increasingly important at other sites, however, and we take advantage of every opportunity to highlight the international recognition of our IBAs.

For example, the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council recently considered a proposal to extend the northern limit of the bottom-trawl fishery in the Bering Sea, which would have taken the fleet into the main wintering area of most of the world's Spectacled Eiders. The Spectacled Eider is designated as threatened in the United States under the Endangered Species Act. We highlighted the area's global IBA



**Spectacled Eider**  
Illustration by David Allen Sibley

DAS 2008

designation in oral and written testimony to the Council. Alongside other organizations, we advocated for a freezing of the current bottom-trawl fishery footprint, which was eventually supported by the Council.

Looking ahead, the IBA program will increasingly focus on encouraging partnerships and cooperative conservation efforts, fostering local support and stewardship, and initiating a monitoring program to track threats and conservation successes.

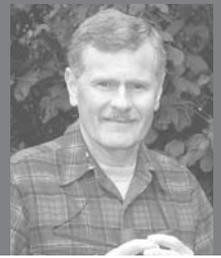
Audubon is not alone in this great endeavor. Identifying IBAs in the Bering Sea Ecoregion, for example, was a cooperative effort, and we worked closely with bird experts from the Russian Bird Conservation Union and BirdLife Asia.

The program certainly could not have come this far without the help and support of numerous organizations, including the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, or the many dedicated individuals involved in the IBA nomination and review process. We are extremely grateful to all of them for their contributions to this exciting endeavor. ♦

TO ORDER A MAP OR LEARN MORE...

We would be delighted to send one complimentary copy of the Alaska IBA map to your household (though donations to offset costs and support our conservation work are happily accepted). Please call 907-276-7034 or email [ghazen@audubon.org](mailto:ghazen@audubon.org) to order your copy while stocks last.

You can read more about our IBAs on our website, [www.audubonalaska.org](http://www.audubonalaska.org). There, you will find a link to the national IBA database, including full IBA site descriptions.



## FOCUS ON THE FIELD

# Tongass Plan Amendment Offers Opportunities and Challenges

By John Schoen, Senior Scientist

On January 23, 2008, the US Forest Service released its amended Tongass Land Management Plan (TLMP) as ordered by the Ninth Circuit Court in 2005.

Audubon Alaska gives the revised TLMP a mixed review. The new plan is still flawed, but parts of it are a step in the right direction and directly responsive to our science and policy recommendations.

The amended plan addresses three key issues: 1) protecting high-value roadless areas, 2) providing sufficient timber to meet market demand, and 3) protecting wildlife and biodiversity.

The good news is that the amended plan would be implemented in three phases, with the first phase restricting logging in many of the most valuable intact (roadless) watersheds. Later phases with higher harvest levels and risks to priority watersheds would kick in if market demand increases.

The bad news is that the revised plan has the same allowable timber harvest as the old plan: 267 million board feet per year. A harvest at this level would be a six-fold increase over the average annual harvest from the last seven years. Such a harvest would take the Tongass back to industrial-scale forestry, and it would significantly compromise its fish, wildlife, recreation, and subsistence values.



A pair of bear cubs play at Admiralty Island. Photograph by John Schoen

As you may recall, Audubon Alaska, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy (TNC), conducted a comprehensive analysis of the ecological values of the Tongass, identifying, mapping, and describing the most biologically important watersheds (both intact and developed) for protection. We shared this extensive scientific information with the Forest Service during the agency's planning process, and now 89 percent of our priority intact watersheds are off-limits to logging in the immediate future, likely for five or more years. This means that we have bought time for many of the most valuable, intact wildlife habitats in the Tongass.

Nevertheless, the amended TLMP fails to permanently protect many key fish and wildlife watersheds and targets them for eventual logging. In addition, the plan fails to protect some core areas of old growth in previously logged watersheds that still have ecological values.

In the long term, implementation of this plan will place at risk many of the most important fish and wildlife values in the Tongass that people care about. Over the next few years, however, we will continue working with our conservation partners, the Forest Service, Alaska Fish and Game, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the timber industry to find a better resolution to this problem.

One opportunity for finding resolution is the Tongass Futures Roundtable, a diverse group of 32 stakeholders that is seeking consensus on how to manage the Tongass in a way that balances conservation concerns and community values with a sustainable timber industry. At the Roundtable meeting in late February, we discussed the new TLMP and acknowledged the need to seek a congressional resolution. These discussions will be ongoing. Following adjournment of the Roundtable, several stakeholders, including myself, were invited to brief several state legislators. The legislators had remarkable interest in the Roundtable process and enthusiasm for finding a resolution to this long-standing battle.



This rare, old-growth stand of large trees at the head of Saook Bay on northeastern Baranof Island is in one of the Audubon-TNC priority watersheds that would be temporarily protected under phase 1 of the revised Tongass Land Management Plan.

Photograph by John Schoen

Continued on page 5

*Tongass Plan... continued from page 4*

Meanwhile, Audubon Alaska is collaborating closely with TNC, Trout Unlimited, Alaska Wilderness League, Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, Sitka Conservation Society, The Wilderness Society, and others to achieve balanced forest management that recognizes the many important values the Tongass provides to the people of southeast Alaska, including subsistence use of resources, recreation and tourism, hunting and fishing, and economic sustainability of local communities. The broader American public also has a strong interest in the Tongass National Forest, and we recognize the unique opportunity—perhaps in the world—that still remains on the Tongass for conserving intact watersheds with all their ecological parts.

Our conservation coalition is using the science-based conservation area design developed by TNC and Audubon as a foundation for crafting a protected areas strategy for the Tongass. In addition, we are reaching out to Southeast communities, timber mills, commercial fishermen, and Native tribes as we try to craft a conservation solution that balances habitat protection with local community needs.

Over the next year and a half, we anticipate developing a legislative proposal that garners broad support from the people who live and work in southeast Alaska, as well as from national and regional conservation organizations. We believe this kind of support will result in an enduring solution that provides benefits to the greatest number of people over the long term. ♦

## Midterms in Murrelets

Audubon Alaska is partnering with the University of Alaska Southeast and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to offer a new field course and internship in marine ornithology this summer.

The five-week, four-credit undergraduate class will focus on the natural history of seabirds and will include lectures, labs, and extended field work from a base camp on north Chichagof Island, directly across Icy Strait from Glacier Bay. From there students will be surveying marbled and Kittlitz's murrelets, both of which are on Audubon's Alaska WatchList.

With support from the Studebaker Environmental Education Fund, Audubon Alaska offered competitive scholarships to partially defray expenses for selected students. Be sure to check our website ([www.audubonalaska.org](http://www.audubonalaska.org)) and next newsletter for photos of our students in the field. ♦



Marbled Murrelet *Photograph by Milo Burcham*

## Audubon ALASKA Donation Form

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Mail this form with your donation to: Audubon Alaska, 715 L Street, Suite 200, Anchorage, Alaska 99501 ♦ 907-276-7034 ♦ [www.audubonalaska.org](http://www.audubonalaska.org)

*If you're already a member, please pass this on to a friend. Donations are also gratefully accepted online.*

## Big Bucks Bid for Bear Abode

By Pat Pourchot, Senior Policy Representative

The Chukchi Sea, off the coast of northwest Alaska, is one of the most productive ocean ecosystems in the world. Its vast, shallow sea floor and seasonal ice cover provide nutrients and pristine habitat for a multitude of organisms, ranging from phytoplankton at the base of the food chain to the top predator mammal, the polar bear.

But changes to the Chukchi are coming. This past February the US Department of the Interior held the first of several planned oil and gas lease sales on nearly 30 million acres of the Chukchi—an area about the size of Pennsylvania. After the bidding ended, nearly 10 percent of the offered acreage was sold for a near-record \$2.6 billion.

Audubon, in coalition with several environmental and Alaska Native groups, filed suit in January to challenge this lease sale, and a federal district court hearing is pending. Because of the suit, the leases could be subject to later court rulings, and future injunctions could be sought to prevent exploratory or development drilling or additional lease sales.

### Wildlife of the Chukchi

The Chukchi Sea is an incredibly rich marine habitat, home to roughly half of America's polar bears (one-tenth of the world's population), in addition to Pacific walruses and four species of ice seals. Endangered gray, fin, and humpback whales feed in the Chukchi's shallows, and up to 3,500 beluga whales use the estuary of Kasegaluk Lagoon near Point Lay for calving and molting. In addition, most of the Arctic Ocean's endangered bowhead whales, the most important subsistence and cultural resource of many Alaskan North Slope residents, migrate along the Chukchi coast.

The bays, inlets, and river outlets lining the Chukchi also provide breeding, feeding, and staging areas for millions of migrating shorebirds, seabirds, and waterfowl. At least 15 species on Audubon's Alaska WatchList use the Chukchi, including Steller's and spectacled Eiders, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and Yellow-billed Loons and Kittlitz's Murrelets, which are under consideration for ESA listing. Several globally and continentally significant Important Bird Areas are within the Chukchi, including Ledyard Bay, just south of the new oil and gas leases, a Critical Habitat Area for Spectacled Eiders. About 33,000 Spectacled Eider and 500,000 King Eider (the entire western North American population) feed in the shallow waters of the Bay.

### Balance in the Arctic

Although Audubon has not opposed oil and gas leasing and development in many areas of the Arctic, there are several places where natural values are so important, or where so little is known of the dynamic environment,



The ribbon seal is an ice-dependent species of the Chukchi Sea, relying on ice edges for giving birth and nursing their pups. Photograph by Liz Labunski, USFWS

that further development should not be allowed. The Chukchi Sea is one of those special places.

Global climate change is a growing threat, and its effects in the Arctic are obvious and dramatic. In 2007 the summer polar ice pack lost more than 1.5 million square miles, 20 percent more than had ever been previously recorded—more than the states of Alaska, Texas, and California combined. Some scientists predict that the permanent Arctic Ocean sea ice may be gone by 2040.

With the disappearance of sea ice habitat, there has been a flurry of petitions and proposals to protect several of the Arctic's at-risk, ice-dependent marine mammals under the ESA. Given indications of population decline and stress, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed listing the polar bear as threatened, but the agency did not issue its final determination in early January as mandated. Thus the Chukchi lease sale took place without the scrutiny it would have received had the polar bear been listed. Meanwhile, the National Marine Fisheries Service is considering listing ringed, bearded, spotted, and ribbon seals, and petitions have been filed to list the Pacific walrus.

Relatively little is known about the Chukchi Sea ecosystem and the unique wildlife that depends on it. The government's environmental impact statements for the lease sale are largely based on outdated, incomplete, and inadequate research and analysis. The chances of an oil spill in these fragile waters are very real, and the technology for oil cleanup in these remote, ice-choked waters does not exist.

In addition to the lawsuit against further Chukchi development, Audubon Alaska is compiling and mapping data on the ecological resources of the Arctic Ocean and is also identifying research needs. We are also working with our conservation and Alaska Native partners to press Congress to enact "time-outs" for Arctic Ocean oil and gas development until more is known about the environment and the impacts of development and climate change. As always, check our website ([www.audubonalaska.org](http://www.audubonalaska.org)) for more information and for the latest action alerts. ♦

In 2007 the summer polar ice pack lost more than 1.5 million square miles, an area larger than Alaska, Texas, and California combined.

Photograph by Milo Burcham

## People of Audubon

### BOARD

We are delighted to welcome two new members to our Alaska Board: **David Sonneborn, MD**, and **Gordon H. Orians, PhD**.



**Dr. Orians** is Professor Emeritus of Biology at the University of Washington and past president of both the Ecological Society of America and the Organization for Tropical Studies. His research and publications span five decades and range from behavioral ecology of blackbirds to analyses of shearwater populations to human habitat selection. He has served on National Research Council committees to evaluate wolf and bear management in Alaska and cumulative effects of oil and gas exploration on Alaska's North Slope. We are thrilled to have Dr. Orians' tremendous expertise and stature on the Board.



**Dr. Sonneborn** is a cardiologist practicing full-time in Anchorage. A birder all his life, Dr. Sonneborn moved to Alaska 30 years ago and has been an Audubon member for at least 50 years. He has traveled all over Alaska to chase rare birds and has been involved with the University of Alaska Museum of the North and its studies in the Western Aleutians on the threat of avian-flu distribution by Asiatic migrants. Dr. Sonneborn and his wife Alexandra (Andy) have four children and three grandchildren. He is among the most skilled and experienced birders in Alaska, and we are delighted that he is joining the Board.

### STAFF



On the staff side, we are pleased to introduce **Melanie Smith**, who will be our new Staff Biologist and GIS Analyst starting in late April. Melanie comes to us from Missoula, Montana, where she worked as Environmental Scientist and GIS Director for the Ecosystem Research Group, a private consulting firm. Melanie has a BA in Environmental Studies from Prescott College, an MA in Geography from the University of Montana, and a GISP certificate. Melanie worked at the Glacier Bay Lodge for three summers and spent a semester in college traveling the state. Melanie has backpacked in the Brooks Range, Denali, and Prince William Sound, and she also loves to kayak and ride horses. We are excited to put her exceptional skills to work at Audubon.



We are sorry to say goodbye to **Rich Capitan**, who was our Education Specialist for two years. He launched Alaska eBird and piloted a community naturalist internship program at Westchester Lagoon, among other projects. Rich transferred to the Imaginarium in Anchorage this winter, and we will miss his humor and his passion for birds and nature.



Meanwhile, **Iain Stenhouse** has shifted positions from Audubon Alaska to the National Audubon Society. Iain was Alaska's Director of Bird Conservation for four years, and he led Audubon Alaska through its first statewide survey for Important Bird Areas. Iain and his wife now live in Maine, and starting in April, Iain will be National Audubon's Senior Scientist for Important Bird Areas across the country.

Good luck, Iain and Rich! We are filling these open positions and look forward to introducing two new fantastic staff members as soon as they're in place. ♦

## Wanted: Audubon Home

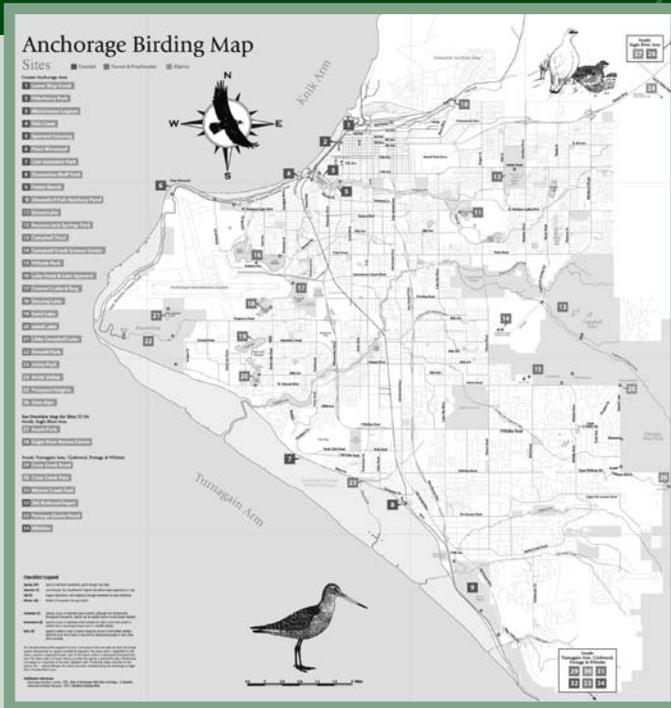
Audubon Alaska needs a new home. We have been renting space from The Nature Conservancy in downtown Alaska, and we are grateful for their generosity in sharing their space for more than four years. Happily, both Audubon Alaska and The Nature Conservancy are growing in staff; sadly, that means we need new office space.

In the short-term, we will need rental space, ideally about 3,000 square feet in downtown Anchorage. In the long-term, we are interested in a more permanent home. If you have any ideas or leads, or if you would consider donating land or a building, please contact Lorelei Costa at 907-276-7034 or [lcosta@audubon.org](mailto:lcosta@audubon.org).



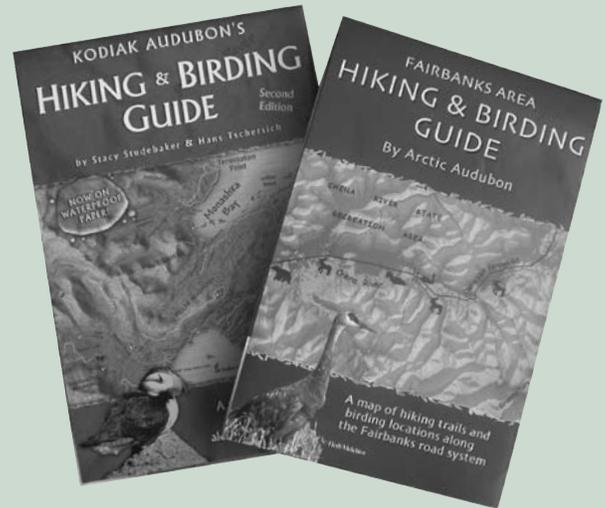
# Birding Maps Available!

# Audubon ALASKA



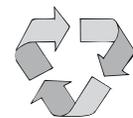
Just in time for spring migration, birding maps are now available for the greater Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Kodiak areas. All three maps include local bird checklists and site descriptions for dozens of local birding hot spots. They are 2'x 3' when unfolded but fold down to a handy 6" x 9" pocket size.

For more information on all three maps, go to [www.audubonalaska.org](http://www.audubonalaska.org), or call the numbers at left to order a copy. Thanks to our local chapters for putting together such fantastic birding resources!



- ANCHORAGE:** Call Audubon Alaska, 907-276-7043
- FAIRBANKS:** Call Gail Mayo, Arctic Audubon President, 907-479-2954
- KODIAK:** Call the Kodiak Convention and Visitors Bureau, 907-486-4782

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