



Audubon ALASKA News

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INSIDE

Location, Location, Location: The Important Bird Area Program in Alaska

You really can see Russia from here. Little Diomed Island sits just 2.5 miles east of Russia’s Big Diomed Island in the middle of the Bering Strait. At slightly less than three square miles in size, Little Diomed’s steep, boulder-strewn slopes harbor a colony of at least a half million Crested, Parakeet, and Least Auklets—among the largest such colonies in the world. Turbulent, nutrient-rich currents flow northward through the Bering Strait, concentrating zooplankton that are a critical food for both species. For auklets, it is the ultimate real estate—location, as they say, is everything.

Hatching Important Bird Areas in Alaska

Identifying Important Bird Areas (IBAs), and raising public awareness of these places, have been part of Audubon Alaska’s bird conservation work for more than a decade. In 2000, Audubon began working with scientists in the Russian Bird Conservation Union and BirdLife International to identify sites in Alaska that were globally or regionally important to birds.

With more than 100 million birds, and largely pristine marine and terrestrial habitats, Alaska is, arguably, one gigantic IBA. Audubon Alaska, however, is focusing on finding the truly special places—the crème de la crème of Important Bird Areas. We are looking for places that hold more than one percent of the global population of a species at any one time, more than five percent of the global population of a species cumulatively over the migration, or significant numbers of birds listed as threatened or endangered. We then rank these places based on their importance at state, continental, or global levels.

We have met with notable success so far. Currently, there are 145 designated IBAs in Alaska, mainly concentrated along the coast. Alaska proudly boasts nearly a quarter of the recognized “globally important” bird areas in the United States. That it is only the beginning.

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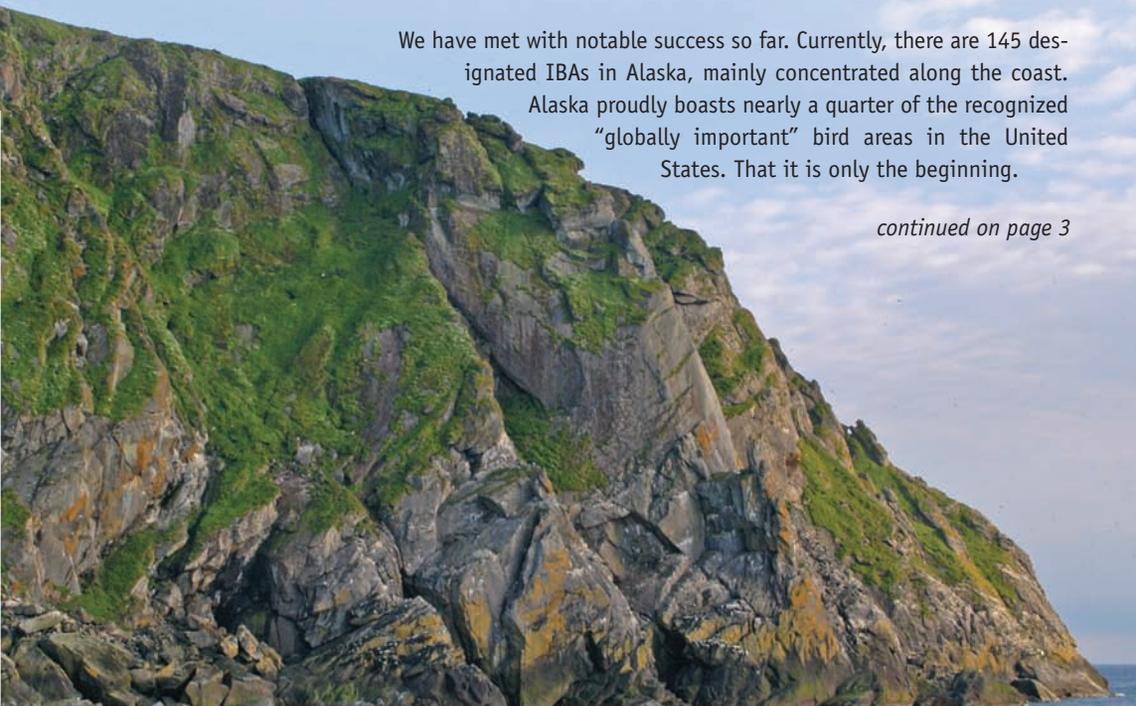
ALASKA WATCHLIST SPECIES

Photograph on masthead by Ken Wright, US Geological Survey, 2010

Yellow-billed Loon

Gavia adamsii

The rarest loon species, the Yellow-billed Loon nests in lakes and rivers in treeless Arctic tundra. In Alaska, they are most abundant during the breeding season along the North Slope, from the Colville River to Wainwright. Loons raise only one or two chicks per year, so a small population size (an estimated 3,000–4,000 in Alaska during breeding season) makes them vulnerable to over-hunting, habitat loss due to oil and gas development, and fishing by-catch.



Steep cliffs on Fairway Rock, part of the Little Diomed Island IBA, provide a nesting high-rise for thousands of seabirds. *Photograph by John Schoen*

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DIRECTOR'S VIEWPOINT



From Highways to Flyways: Barrow to Baja and Beyond

By Nils Warnock

At the end of March, I found myself flying to Barrow, Alaska. Blinding white snow covered the flat tundra south of town, contrasting with the jumbled snow and ice covering the Arctic Ocean north of town. It is a stark and beautiful place. For me, even after working many summers on the North Slope, it felt like one of the most isolated places in the world. In three days, I did not see a single bird, but by mid-May hundreds of thousands to millions of birds will stream past town from the south to breed on the rich tundra.

To reach the Arctic, birds follow highways in the sky shaped by evolution and time. The concept that birds followed predictable migratory flight paths was first developed in the early 1930s by Bureau of Biological Survey biologist, Frederick Lincoln. Analyzing bird banding data from North America, Lincoln showed that birds migrated along four distinct flight corridors or "flyways"—the Pacific, Central, Mississippi, and Atlantic flyways. Adopted worldwide, there are now up to 13 flyways recognized.

Flyways provided a much-needed unifying bird management framework for a disparate group of federal, state, and local government agencies as well as non-governmental organizations. For Audubon Alaska, flyways connect our conservation actions to places all over the world. More than 75 percent of all of the birds that breed in Alaska spend nine months of their year somewhere else. Birds that breed in Alaska use all four North American flyways, as well as flyways that connect with all the other continents.

Consider the case of the Whimbrel banded as T6. I helped the US Geological Survey put a satellite tag on this nesting shorebird last June near Barrow. After breeding, T6 moved west and then south down near Bristol Bay until the second week of August. T6 then flew nonstop to the southern end of California's Central Valley, where it fed in agricultural fields for a week before heading to a tidal estuary in Baja California, Mexico. T6 soon crossed Baja to mainland Mexico, where it fed in fields near Los Mochis until mid-September. Next, it flew non-stop over the Galapagos Islands before landing on the coast of Peru. T6 eventually ended up overwintering near Santiago, Chile. At the beginning of April, T6 was back in Mexico, beginning its return to a piece of tundra near Barrow.

T6 symbolizes how the flyways connect Audubon's work from the local to the hemispheric scale. Barrow is not an isolated town at the top of the world; rather it shares a global connection of places, people, and conservation issues. Thanks to Frederick Lincoln, the flyway framework helps us connect and better understand the complex challenges that T6 (and other birds) will encounter, such as changes in the tundra due to climate change, changes in California stopover sites due to shifting agricultural practices, and changes in South American wintering sites due to coastal development. ♦



Illustration of the Pacific Flyway by Bob Hines in Frederick C. Lincoln's book *Migration of Birds*

*Important Bird Area Program in Alaska (continued from page 1)***Branching Out**

Like any fledgling, the IBA program in Alaska continues to grow and change.

For the IBAs already on the map, so to speak, it is time to take them to the next level. Many IBAs were originally nominated nearly a decade ago. At that time, the best method available was gleaned knowledge from researchers and other experts familiar with particular places. Sometimes this involved simply drawing lines on a map.

Digital mapping and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have advanced in leaps and bounds since the designation of the first IBAs. Melanie Smith, Audubon Alaska's Landscape Ecologist, and Matt Kirchhoff, Director of Bird Conservation, have been reexamining existing marine IBAs, using scientific surveys and research to refine the methods used to determine the boundaries. Reassessing the areas this way makes the IBA designation a more precise and powerful conservation tool.

In addition to the existing sites, potential IBAs of global importance wait in the wings. Some areas need more current surveys (for Alaska, data must be within the last 15 years). We identify other areas by reanalyzing survey data with tools such as GIS. Only a sprinkling of IBAs exists so far in the vast Interior of Alaska, so we will take a closer look at what's going on there.

While some IBAs are located on protected lands, such as state or national wildlife refuges, having a place recognized as an IBA doesn't confer automatic protection. The lack of attached regulations makes it easier to gain formal recognition, but it also means more work lies ahead to foster IBA site conservation. Drawing lines on the map is only useful if followed by on-the-ground efforts. We do that by educating, engaging, and empowering local communities to work on behalf of conservation. Audubon Alaska provides the catalyst for that local action.

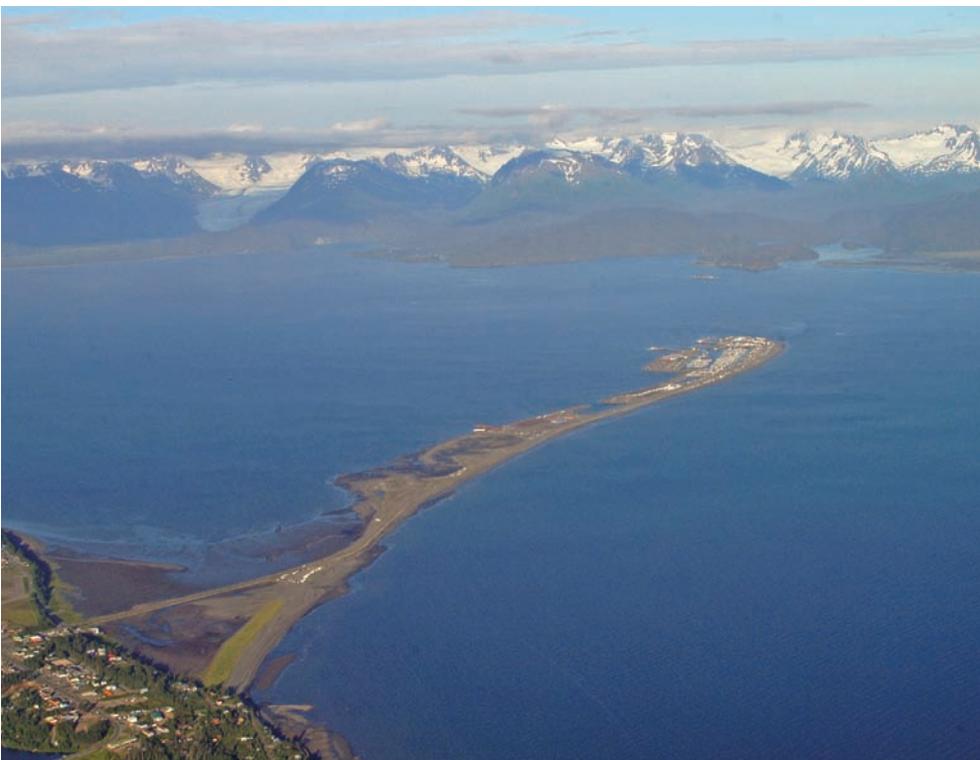


More than 50,000 geese of several species rely on Teshekpuk Lake IBA during molting.

Photograph by Gerrit Vyn, Macaulay Library at Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Audubon Alaska is coordinating with interested groups, in communities such as Homer, to publicize the importance of these areas to birds through an IBA adoption program. Bird monitoring, habitat monitoring, citizen science projects, public education, and conservation advocacy are all potential elements of an effort to engage and empower citizens where the threats to birds are greatest. Volunteers would both help protect IBAs and have the opportunity to learn more about what the birds already know—why particular places draw them back year after year.

Informed by science, and powered by people, IBAs are integral to the work of Audubon Alaska. We appreciate the support of funders and members that makes this work possible. If you would like to learn more about the IBA program in Alaska, or help with on-the-ground monitoring and assessment work at an IBA near you, please contact our Director of Bird Conservation, Matt Kirchhoff, at 907-276-7034. ◆



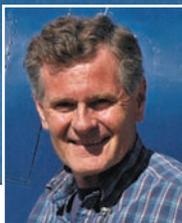
The Homer Spit Important Bird Area

From a bird's-eye view, the Homer Spit is a fine tendril of sand and mudflat that reaches far into Kachemak Bay in lower Cook Inlet. It is also, literally, the end of the road. Unlike Little Diomed Island, this IBA has its fair share of development. The narrow upland is crowded with seasonal tourism-related businesses, all overlooking an intertidal, globally significant Important Bird Area.

The Homer Spit draws birds year-round. In winter, about five percent of the global population of Rock Sandpipers huddles on the spit. The most spectacular time is spring migration, when as many as 100,000 shorebirds alight on the Homer Spit to refuel on their way north. The most numerous are Western Sandpipers, Surf-birds, and Rock Sandpipers. IBAs near communities can bring economic benefits—this concentration of shorebirds has fueled the Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival for 19 years and counting.

Photograph by John Schoen

FOCUS ON THE FIELD



On to the Next Adventure

By John Schoen

At the end of May, I will be leaving Audubon after nearly 15 years to explore new opportunities and challenges. I first began work with Audubon in January of 1997 following 20-plus years with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. My wife Mary Beth and I plan to remain in Alaska, and I will continue my life-long interest in wildlife conservation, wildlife photography, and exploring Alaska's wild lands and waters. We are also enjoying watching the budding careers of both of our adult children, who are pursuing Alaska careers in wildlife and marine ecology.

We hope to travel both in and out of state to explore some of the major wildlife areas we have always wanted to visit. Our health is good and our energy high for new interests and challenges.

I plan to stay engaged in several key Alaska conservation issues, including the Tongass, but at my own pace. I have a commitment to help finish Audubon's North Pacific Rainforest book (which I am co-editing with board member Gordon Orians). If a bill is introduced in Congress to protect key Tongass fish and wildlife watersheds, I will enthusiastically go back to Washington, D.C. and testify. I also have some exciting wildlife photography and writing projects on my docket.

Audubon Alaska has a unique leadership role in Alaska conservation. We have a proven track record for pragmatic, science-based conservation work, which has garnered broad respect from friends and adversaries alike. I am proud of that record, first established by Dave Cline and expanded upon by Stan Senner and myself. I have much confidence that our conservation legacy will continue and flourish under Nils Warnock's capable leadership. I am very proud of the caliber and dedication of Audubon Alaska's staff. I believe there is no better group of professional conservationists in Alaska or in Audubon. I am also proud of the leadership and commitment of the Audubon Alaska board.



John and Mary Beth Schoen

Staff and board share a strong commitment and strategic approach to Alaska conservation. We have a unique opportunity and responsibility in Alaska to protect ecosystems on a landscape/seascape scale with all their ecological parts. There are few places in the world where that opportunity still exists. I believe, to be successful over the long term, conservation must rise above environmental rhetoric and fundamentalism and engage in a strategic search for pragmatic, science-based solutions that resonate with a broad base of Alaskans. Audubon Alaska is one of the best organizations to lead that effort.

I will always feel like a part of the Audubon Alaska team, and appreciate all of the hard work and support the staff, board, and our dedicated members and supporters have provided to our program over the last 15 years. You are all an integral part of our effective team. Thank you for your trust and support.

Best regards and I'll watch for you on the trail. ♦

The Arctic Refuge Spring Migration Birding Challenge

The Arctic Refuge Migration Birding Challenge is back for the spring! Birds that breed in the Arctic Refuge have ranges that reach all 50 states and 6 continents. How many can you find in your state? The reigning champs, the Mississippi Team, spotted 87 species for the fall migration challenge. Want to try to top that?

The Contest

Gather a team. Scour the countryside for birds on the Arctic Refuge checklist. Submit your checklist by May 31. We'll announce the winners (yes, there are prizes!) on June 15.

For contest rules, prizes, and species checklist, go to www.AudubonAlaska.org, or contact Taldi Walter at twalter@audubon.org or 202-861-2242 ext. 3042.



Arctic Updates

A Vision for the Western Arctic

Did you know that hundreds of thousands of migratory waterfowl, an unusually high density of nesting raptors, and the nation's largest caribou herd all occur in the National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska? This January, Audubon updated our *Habitat Conservation Strategy* for the Western Arctic. We compiled the best available biological research to create maps revealing the extraordinary wildlife habitats in the Reserve and recommendations for how to conserve them.

For decades, Congress has recognized that special areas of the Reserve warrant “maximum protection.” To provide balance between wildlife needs and development, Audubon advocates a combination of no lease areas, no surface occupancy, and specialized restrictions in specific places. On our website, www.AudubonAlaska.org, you can read the details of our recommendations and see the maps of where caribou calve, walrus and seals rest, and eiders nest.



Two of Alaska's largest caribou herds depend on vital calving grounds and insect relief areas in the Reserve. Photograph by Taldi Walter

Keeping an Eye on the Arctic Refuge

Some members of Congress are again pushing to open the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge to oil and gas exploration. We need to keep reminding them that the coastal plain is home to important wildlife such as polar bears and the Porcupine Caribou Herd, as well as birds that migrate to six continents. We are working hard to keep the coastal plain wild.

An important opportunity to show your support for the Arctic Refuge is the upcoming public comment period, likely starting in June, on the new Comprehensive Conservation Plan. In the plan, the US Fish and Wildlife Service will make management recommendations for the Arctic Refuge. We'll need your help in urging the agency to recommend a Wilderness designation for the coastal plain. Only Congress can officially designate land as Wilderness, but a strong recommendation from the agency would be an important first step toward permanent protection.

Chukchi Sea—A Large-scale Blowout in the Arctic Ocean?

In April, the federal government officially acknowledged the possibility of a *Deepwater Horizon*-scale oil well blowout in the Arctic Ocean. Last fall, a court ruling forced the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (BOEMRE) to go back to the drawing board on its Environmental Impact Statement for the sale of Lease 193 in the Chukchi Sea. Subsequently, BOEMRE announced that, for the first time, it would include an analysis of the impacts of a potential “very large oil spill.” Preliminary analysis by BOEMRE indicates that a blowout in the Chukchi could result in a massive spill that would take at least 39 days to stop, resulting in the release of 58 million gallons of crude oil. This analysis is an important step in showing the full picture of the risks of drilling in the Chukchi Sea. Stay tuned for the upcoming public comment period. ♦



Alaska's North Slope provides important nesting grounds for vast numbers of waterfowl, such as King Eiders and Long-tailed Ducks. Photograph by Milo Burcham

Good News for the Tongass!

On March 4, 2011 US District Judge John W. Sedwick reinstated the Roadless Rule in the Tongass National Forest, finding that the reasons the Bush Administration gave for the exemption were “implausible” and “contrary to the evidence in the record.”

You may remember back in 2001 when the Clinton Administration created the Roadless Conservation Area Rule. The purpose of the Roadless Rule was to protect water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, biological diversity, recreation, and other values associated with undisturbed watersheds. In 2003, the Bush Administration excluded the Tongass from the national rule—the Tongass was the only national forest excluded. In 2009 the Organized Village of Kake, ecotourism businesses, and environmental groups filled a lawsuit to challenge the Bush-era exclusion.

Judge Sedwick’s decision restores protection for about 9 million acres of roadless areas in the Tongass that were not otherwise protected. We have yet to see how this will affect the Tongass on the ground. Some opponents say the decision will prevent mining and personal use wood permits. In fact, the rule will not interfere with access to mining claims, and specifically allows for personal-use woodcutting. Audubon hopes the recent decision will encourage the US Forest Service to continue their work to transition out of old-growth logging and into sustainable second-growth forestry and restoration work. ♦



Brown bear cubs enjoy a salad bar on Admiralty Island. *Photograph by John Schoen*

Crossing the Line in the Tongass

The Tongass may be the largest national forest in the United States, but the trees don’t stop at the Canadian border. The coastal forest stretches down through British Columbia, comprising one of the largest remaining temperate rainforests in the world. For decades, researchers in both countries have explored the forest on their side of the border. This piecemeal approach has left two separate libraries of information that each stop at the border; they need a translator to fit them together. Even for fundamental aspects, such as tree size and canopy cover, researchers have used different methods at different scales, and in different units of measurement, making it difficult for anyone to study the forest seamlessly.

Melanie Smith, Landscape Ecologist, and Nathan Walker, GIS Biologist, of Audubon Alaska are working on an international project piecing together the landscape data from both countries. Partners on this project include the British Columbia Ministry of Forests and Range, the US Forest Service, the Nature Conservancy, the University of Alaska Southeast, Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, and others.

Why do we need an eagle-eye view of the rainforest? It will give forest management agencies on both sides of the border a more accurate idea of the effects their decisions have on the whole region. Another reason is to have the tools to monitor the effects of climate change on the rain-dependent forest. The range of different types of trees, shrubs, and other plants may shift in the future; this data will help scientists to assess changes on a very broad scale.

By sorting through the information and finding how to merge it in a common language, Audubon Alaska will help provide usable information to those who need it. Researchers and land managers in Alaska and Canada will be able to conduct projects and make decisions that encompass the coastal forest as a whole. ♦



Prince of Wales Island *Photograph by Melanie Smith*

People of Audubon

BOARD



Audubon Alaska welcomes new board member **Ken Leghorn**. Ken passed through Juneau on his way to Fairbanks in 1978 and never left. He owned Alaska Discovery for 25 years, running wilderness expeditions by raft, kayak, and canoe throughout Southeast Alaska and the Brooks Range. Ken served on the Alaska Conservation Foundation board for 17 years.

He also launched Discovery Southeast, a Juneau-based non-profit offering nature-based outdoor youth education, and he was a co-founder of the Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association.

Ken enjoys playing violin in the Juneau Symphony; doing lots and lots of backcountry, cross-country, and downhill skiing; tutoring algebra; hanging out with his 14-year-old daughter; and birding after the backcountry ski season ends around mid-June. ◆



This spring, the tireless **Mimi Hogan** finished her term on the Audubon Alaska board after serving for six years. A retired waterfowl biologist, Mimi lent expertise, common sense, and valuable local connections to our board during her tenure. She also served as chair of our development and real estate committees.

Perhaps what we appreciated most about Mimi was her alacrity for volunteering. Mimi was always happy to help—even with the small stuff, such as stuffing envelopes, entering computer data, or picking up ice before a reception. Thanks so much for your service, Mimi! ◆



Audubon Alaska also thanks **Anissa Berry-Frick** for the time she contributed to the board. Anissa has volunteered for Audubon Alaska in various capacities, including working with Matt Kirchhoff studying murrelets in the field and flying John Schoen for aerial surveys of the Tongass. ◆

STAFF



This winter, **Nathan Walker** started as the new Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Biologist with Audubon Alaska. He works on three main programs: the Arctic, Tongass National Forest, and Important Bird Areas.

Nathan received his bachelor's degrees in Biology and Literature from the University of California at Santa Cruz in 2006. Before Audubon Alaska, he worked as a seasonal biological science technician for the National Park Service in Colorado; Michigan; Minnesota; and Washington, D.C.; and as a cartographic technician at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. In these positions, he trapped beavers, radio-tracked turtles, monitored Piping Plovers, counted snails, sprayed weeds, planted trees, and mapped trails. Nathan enjoys hiking, biking, and skiing, and is having a great time exploring Alaska. ◆



Taldi Walter, Audubon's Assistant Director of Government Relations, was selected as one of 22 up-and-coming wildlife conservationists worldwide to participate in a two-year training course called Emerging Wildlife Conservation Leaders. The US Fish and Wildlife Service along with national and international nonprofit partners manage the program.

The course trains in leadership and campaigning skills, offers networking and mentoring opportunities, and facilitates tangible on-the-ground international conservation projects that benefit imperiled wildlife. Taldi's project will involve education and outreach addressing the over-exploitation of the critically endangered radiated tortoise, endemic to Madagascar. Congratulations, Taldi! ◆



Melanie Smith's responsibilities have shifted with her new position as Landscape Ecologist. In addition to supervising Nathan's position, she is overseeing a number of projects that include complex modeling and coordinating with partner organizations. Her projects include caribou modeling for the Arctic Climate Change and Cumulative Effects project, and managing the science and spatial analysis aspects of Audubon Alaska's North Slope, Tongass, Arctic Ocean, and Important Bird Area programs. ◆

Answer to WatchList Quiz

Bar-tailed Godwit

Photograph by Milo Burcham





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Alaska Birding Festivals

Birding festivals pack the calendar for the next few months.
For descriptions, see the Audubon Alaska website: www.AudubonAlaska.org.

Stikine River Birding Festival
April 28–May 1, Wrangell

International Migratory Bird Day
April 30, Fairbanks
May 7 & 8, Juneau
May 15, Anchorage
May 21, Kodiak

Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival
May 5–8, Cordova

Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival
May 5–8, Homer

Kenai River Birding Festival
May 19–22, Central Kenai Peninsula

Yakutat Tern Festival
June 2–5, Yakutat

Potter Marsh Discovery Day
June 11, Potter Marsh boardwalk, Anchorage

Tanana Valley Sandhill Crane Festival
August 26–28, Fairbanks

Alaska Bald Eagle Festival
November 9–13, Haines

WatchList Quiz Bird

Can you identify
this species from
the WatchList?

Answer on page 7.

