



 Audubon ALASKA

# Alaska WatchList

**2010** Highlighting Declining and  
Vulnerable Bird Populations

## What is the WatchList?

The Alaska WatchList is Audubon Alaska's science-based, early warning system to identify birds at risk. It is a tool to focus attention and resources on vulnerable and declining bird populations across the state. Species and subspecies on the WatchList face some combination of population decline, small population size, or limited geographic range.

Audubon Alaska compiles the WatchList every few years by evaluating the vulnerability of each regularly occurring bird species (and select subspecies and populations) in the state. Drawing upon current data from online sources, agency reports, and peer-reviewed publications, we consider four criteria: population size, population trend, range size, and percentage of the population dependent on Alaska habitats. The fourth item allows us to consider Alaska's stewardship responsibility for each species by highlighting the birds most dependent on Alaska habitats.

The list recognizes two levels of conservation concern. The Red List has the highest level of concern: species are vulnerable and currently declining, or depressed from a prior decline. The Yellow List is of somewhat lesser concern: species are vulnerable, but populations are either increasing, stable, or unknown.

Attempting to recover species at the brink of extinction is difficult, costly, and controversial. Working cooperatively to protect birds and their habitats before crises arise is far more effective. Hence, the primary aim of the WatchList is to encourage research, monitoring, and conservation by agencies, organizations, and concerned individuals to prevent birds from becoming threatened or endangered.

## Threats to Birds

Around the world, the greatest threat to bird populations is the fragmentation, degradation, and loss of habitat. Over the last century, natural resource extraction, industrial development, and urban encroachment have often driven these losses. Other threats to bird populations include pollution (such as marine oil spills and toxic contaminants), excessive harvest, introduced predators, and increased human disturbance. Today, climate disruption and ocean acidification are long-term factors that will affect birds on a global scale, especially in the Arctic.

In Alaska, we are fortunate to have relatively intact natural ecosystems, and to have state and federal conservation units that protect large portions of the landscape. Birds know nothing about state and national boundaries, however, and migratory species often travel to distant locations where birds and their habitats may not have the same degree of protection as in Alaska and the United States. The WatchList calls attention to declining or vulnerable populations, regardless of the cause.





## A Success Story

The positive news from the Alaska WatchList 2010 is that several species made it off the list. The Trumpeter Swan is one of them.

Habitat loss and market hunting of these magnificent birds once pushed Trumpeter Swans to the brink of extinction in the Lower 48. By the 1930s, there were fewer than 80 individuals known to exist. Unknown to researchers, Alaska's remoteness provided protection for some Trumpeter Swans. In 1954, a biologist identified breeding pairs in Alaska's Copper River Basin as Trumpeter Swans, not Tundra Swans as previously assumed. Subsequent surveys revealed more breeding trumpeters. Following strict protection from hunting and disturbance, populations began to recover. The US Fish and Wildlife Service removed the Trumpeter Swan from the national Endangered Species list in 1968.

Today, there are approximately 35,000 Trumpeter Swans in North America, with two-thirds of those breeding in Alaska. The population has increased steadily over the last 30 years, and has expanded its breeding range in Alaska beyond historically used areas.

Given these trends, we feel confident in removing the Trumpeter Swan from the Alaska WatchList 2010. Should loss of wetlands, either from development or climate change, cause a reversal in these patterns, the species could once again make it on the WatchList. For now, this is a conservation success story to celebrate.



Trumpeter Swans / Milo Burcham

# Alaska WatchList 2010 Key

The WatchList identifies Alaska birds that are vulnerable or declining, therefore warranting special conservation attention. We graded all regularly occurring bird species in Alaska (and some subspecies) based on four criteria:

- **Global population size:** small populations are most vulnerable;
- **Minimum range:** populations concentrated in a small area are most vulnerable;
- **Percent of global population occurring in Alaska:** our stewardship responsibility is greatest for species that have a large percentage of their population in Alaska;
- **Population trend:** declining populations are at greater risk than stable or increasing populations.

The table below lists each WatchList species and includes estimated global populations, percent of that population dependent on Alaska at some time of year, population status, and notes on reasons for declines or other natural history information.

“Depressed” population status signifies a low population that may be stable or recovering, but remains well below recent historical levels.

A technical report on the 2010 WatchList describes methods and results, and compares this list with other, similar lists. A copy of that report is available at [www.AudubonAlaska.org](http://www.AudubonAlaska.org).

■ Red: Populations are vulnerable, and declining or depressed.

■ Yellow: Populations are vulnerable, but not declining.

\* Species also on the National Audubon WatchList.

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SPECIES OR SUBSPECIES	GLOBAL POPULATION	PERCENT IN ALASKA	POPULATION STATUS	NOTES
<b>Loons</b>				
<b>Red-throated Loon</b> <i>Gavia stellata</i>	395,000	4	Depressed	This species is the smallest of the loons. The population in Alaska declined substantially between 1977 and 1993, and has not rebounded. Birds that winter in Southeast Asia may suffer PCB-related reproductive losses.
* <b>Yellow-billed Loon</b> <i>Gavia adamsii</i>	24,000	14	Possible Decline	The largest of the loons, this Arctic-breeding loon is also the rarest. Fall subsistence surveys indicate unsustainable levels of harvest. It has qualified as a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act.
<b>Cormorants</b>				
* <b>Red-faced Cormorant</b> <i>Phalacrocorax urile</i>	155,000	13	Declining	The largest colonies of this bird are found in the western Aleutians. Surveys are complicated by overlap with other cormorant species, but in colonies where this species is differentiated, significant declines are occurring. Reasons for the decline are unknown.
<b>Waterfowl</b>				
<b>Greater White-fronted Goose (Tule)</b> <i>Anser albifrons gambelli</i>	14,000	100	Stable	The Tule Goose is a large, dark subspecies of the Greater White-fronted Goose. This form breeds along Cook Inlet in Alaska, and it winters in the Sacramento Valley of California. The Tule Goose is one of the least abundant of any goose subspecies, but populations appear stable.
<b>Canada Goose (Dusky)</b> <i>Branta canadensis occidentalis</i>	8,700	100	Declining	The Dusky Canada Goose subspecies breeds exclusively on the Copper River Delta and Middleton Island. The 1964 Good Friday Earthquake raised the delta, changing plant succession, and increasing predators (e.g., brown bears, coyotes, Bald Eagles). The 2009 population estimate was the lowest recorded since surveys began.
<b>Brant (Pacific)</b> <i>Branta bernicla nigricans</i>	147,000	100	Stable	Teshkepuk Lake, on the North Slope of Alaska, supports roughly 37,000 Brant during the critical molting season. Virtually all Pacific Brant stage in Izembek Lagoon. With warming trends, and increased availability of eelgrass during winter, as much as 30 percent of the population now winter along the Alaska Peninsula.
* <b>Emperor Goose</b> <i>Chen canagica</i>	78,000	100	Depressed	Most of the world population breeds on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, and spends spring and fall staging periods on the Alaska Peninsula. These birds declined from an estimated 139,000 in 1964 to 42,000 in 1986, for reasons that are not well understood. Populations since are stable or increasing.
<b>Green-winged Teal (Aleutian)</b> <i>Anas crecca nimia</i>	10,000	100	Stable	The Aleutian Green-winged Teal is listed as vulnerable because of relatively small estimated population and range. The Aleutian subspecies breeds and winters on the Aleutian Islands.
<b>Common Eider (Pacific)</b> <i>Somateria mollissima v-nigrum</i>	170,000	32	Depressed	The Pacific Common Eider breeds primarily along the North Slope, Western Alaska, and Aleutian Islands. Populations declined substantially from the 1950s to late 1980s on northern Alaska, Western Alaska, and Canadian breeding grounds. Populations since are stable to slightly increasing.



Song Sparrow (Aleutian) / John Schoen

Northern Goshawk / John Schoen

Canada Goose (Dusky) / Milo Burcham

Olive-sided Flycatcher / Bob Armstrong

SPECIES OR SUBSPECIES	GLOBAL POPULATION	PERCENT IN ALASKA	POPULATION STATUS	NOTES
<b>King Eider (western population)</b> <i>Somateria spectabilis</i>	470,000	100	Depressed	King Eider populations winter in two geographically distinct areas along either coast. Surveys of the western population suggest significant declines between 1976 and 1996, with possible increase since then. During migration, the entire Pacific population passes by Point Barrow in very large flocks.
* <b>Spectacled Eider</b> <i>Somateria fischeri</i>	363,000	100	Depressed	Populations of Spectacled Eiders were federally listed as threatened following declines of more than 90 percent in Western Alaska. For the last decade they have been slowly recovering. Virtually the entire global population winters in Alaska waters; tens of thousands of birds congregate in ice-free waters south of St. Lawrence Island.
* <b>Steller's Eider (western population)</b> <i>Polysticta stelleri</i>	220,000	68	Depressed	Once numerous on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, this species virtually disappeared from breeding areas there. The Arctic Coastal Plain population trend is variable, with highest densities near Barrow. The majority of the world population winters in Alaska, from the eastern Aleutians to lower Cook Inlet. It is federally listed as a threatened species.
<b>Black Scoter (western population)</b> <i>Melanitta nigra americana</i>	200,000	75	Declining	Surveys of the western population indicate a significant decline over the last 7–15 years. A popular subsistence species because of its high fat content, about 7,000 ducks are harvested annually on the Yukon Delta in Western Alaska. Reasons for the long-term decline are unknown.
<b>Raptors</b>				
<b>Northern Goshawk (Queen Charlotte)</b> <i>Accipiter gentilis laingi</i>	1,400	61	Unknown	This subspecies occurs in low densities throughout the coastal temperate rainforest of Southeast Alaska and British Columbia. Range-wide population estimates are 300–700 pairs, with an unknown number of non-breeders. Clear-cut logging has probably reduced populations substantially from historical levels, especially in the southern half of its range.
<b>Grouse &amp; Ptarmigan</b>				
<b>Spruce Grouse (Prince of Wales)</b> <i>Falcapennis canadensis isleibi</i>	< 25,000	100	Unknown	This subspecies occurs in the Prince of Wales Island complex in southern Southeast Alaska. Population size is unknown, but is probably under 25,000 individuals. Threats include mammalian predators (pine marten, wolves, human hunters), avian predators (Northern Goshawk), and vehicles on roads.
<b>Rock Ptarmigan (Evermann's)</b> <i>Lagopus muta evermanni</i>	< 25,000	80–100	Unknown	This subspecies was extirpated on a number of Aleutian Islands by introduced foxes in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Foxes have now been successfully removed from a number of these islands. Recent reintroduction efforts show promise for eventually restoring this subspecies to its original distribution and status.
<b>Shorebirds</b>				
* <b>American Golden-Plover</b> <i>Pluvialis dominica</i>	200,000	45	Declining	The American Golden-Plover is apparently declining, possibly due to habitat loss on wintering grounds in South America and changing agricultural practices on migratory staging grounds in the American Midwest.
<b>Black Oystercatcher</b> <i>Haematopus bachmani</i>	10,800	65	Stable	This large-bodied shorebird has a small population that depends on a narrow strip of rocky, coastal habitat throughout the year. Oystercatchers are highly sensitive to disturbance and mammalian predators.
<b>Short-billed Dowitcher</b> <i>Limnodromus griseus caurinus</i>	75,000	100 <sup>1</sup>	Unknown	This subspecies breeds almost entirely within Alaska, and has a small population. Trends are unknown, but other subspecies are declining. Threats include harvest for subsistence and loss of habitat on winter range.
* <b>Hudsonian Godwit</b> <i>Limosa haemastica</i>	70,000	11	Unknown	This species is a long-distance migrant, moving from a few Arctic breeding sites to a small wintering range in southern South America. In preparation for this long flight, it gorges on aquatic plants—an unusual diet for a shorebird. The Alaska population is small, genetically distinct, and relatively vulnerable.
* <b>Bar-tailed Godwit</b> <i>Limosa lapponica baueri</i>	100,000	100	Declining	This subspecies breeds only in Alaska, wintering in Australia and New Zealand. Its grueling 7,000-mile southward migration is the longest nonstop flight of any shorebird, and it loses half its body weight. Threats include habitat degradation and hunting at northward migration stopover sites along the Yellow Sea in eastern Asia.

<sup>1</sup>A small number of this subspecies breed in northern British Columbia and isolated parts of the Yukon.



Lesser Yellowlegs / Eric Begin

Red-faced Cormorant / Milo Burcham

Black Turnstone / Jan van de Kam

Ivory Gull / Tim Lenz

Marbled Godwit / Milo Burcham

SPECIES OR SUBSPECIES	GLOBAL POPULATION	PERCENT IN ALASKA	POPULATION STATUS	NOTES
* <b>Marbled Godwit</b> <i>Limosa fedoa beringiea</i>	2,000	100	Unknown	This subspecies has a very small population size, and breeds only along a small section of the central Alaska Peninsula. Fewer than a dozen nests have been found.
<b>Whimbrel</b> <i>Numenius phaeopus rufiventris</i>	26,000	85	Unknown	Populations of this Alaska and western Canada subspecies are small, and trends poorly known. Drastic reduction of the intertidal mangrove habitat Whimbrels depend on in Latin America wintering grounds is a concern.
* <b>Bristle-thighed Curlew</b> <i>Numenius tahitiensis</i>	10,000	100	Unknown	An estimated 3,200 breeding pairs nest only in the Andreafsky Wilderness near the Yukon Delta and on the central Seward Peninsula. The birds overwinter on widely scattered mid-oceanic islands. Populations may be negatively affected by factors on the nonbreeding range.
<b>Lesser Yellowlegs</b> <i>Tringa flavipes</i>	400,000	45	Declining	This species is declining rapidly based on Breeding Bird Survey data. Causes may include drying of boreal wetland habitat on its breeding grounds as a result of recent climate changes and habitat degradation on wintering grounds in Latin America.
<b>Solitary Sandpiper</b> <i>Tringa solitaria cinnamomea</i>	50,000	80	Declining	A dispersed nester in boreal woodland forests, this subspecies has a relatively small population. Populations are declining for unknown reasons.
* <b>Wandering Tattler</b> <i>Tringa incana</i>	25,000	60	Declining	The Wandering Tattler is a montane-nesting shorebird that migrates and winters along rocky shorelines. Populations are small, and are declining based on Breeding Bird Survey data. Reasons for the decline are unknown.
* <b>Black Turnstone</b> <i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>	95,000	100	Stable	The entire global population of Black Turnstones breeds in Alaska. During migration, the species historically staged on beaches in Prince William Sound where herring once spawned in abundance.
* <b>Surfbird</b> <i>Aphriza virgata</i>	70,000	79	Declining	More than 75 percent of the small global population of Surfbirds nests in Alaska. These birds historically concentrated at one site on Montague Island during migration to feed on herring spawn—a resource that is no longer abundant there.
* <b>Red Knot</b> <i>Calidris canutus roselaari</i>	39,000	100	Declining	Only a few thousand birds of this subspecies nest in Alaska, but all of the North American population migrates through Alaska. This subspecies, like others, is declining. Conservation concerns include unsustainable hunting on the wintering grounds and low reproductive success on the breeding range.
* <b>Rock Sandpiper</b> <i>Calidris ptilocnemis ptilocnemis</i>	25,000	100	Declining	This subspecies breeds on Bering Sea islands, where its habitat has been markedly altered by reindeer grazing. A major portion of the small population winters in Cook Inlet, the furthest north of any Pacific shorebird.
<b>Dunlin</b> <i>Calidris alpina arcticola</i> , <i>C. a. pacifica</i>	500,000	100	Declining	The <i>pacifica</i> subspecies nests in western and northern Alaska. A small percentage of the <i>arcticola</i> subspecies nests in western Canada. Both subspecies are relatively abundant, but appear to have undergone significant declines. The <i>arcticola</i> subspecies has suffered an alarming rate of habitat loss on its wintering grounds in eastern Asia.
* <b>Buff-breasted Sandpiper</b> <i>Tryngites subruficollis</i>	56,000	27	Declining	This species dropped from millions of birds to near extinction by 1920 due to market hunting and habitat loss. In Alaska, it breeds on the northeastern Arctic Coastal Plain. The widespread conversion of grasslands to agriculture on wintering grounds in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil contributes to its ongoing decline.

## Seabirds

* <b>Black-footed Albatross</b> <i>Phoebastria nigripes</i>	109,000	18	Depressed	Black-footed Albatross nest on the Hawaiian Islands, but forage during summer in Alaska waters, sometimes making 5,000-mile round-trips to obtain food for chicks. Plume hunters decimated the species during the late 1800s. Since 1997, mandatory seabird deterrent devices have reduced bycatch in long-line fisheries, but populations remain far below historical numbers.
* <b>Short-tailed Albatross</b> <i>Phoebastria albatrus</i>	2,400	32	Depressed	Decimated by plume and egg hunters, the species was thought extinct by the 1950s. A few juvenile birds at sea survived, eventually returning to volcanic Toroshima Island to breed. Volcanic eruption is the biggest threat. In the nonbreeding season birds forage in Alaska waters, exposed to bycatch in long-line fisheries. This species is federally listed as endangered.



Red-legged Kittiwake / Milo Burcham



Black-footed Albatross / John Schoen



Kittlitz's Murrelet / John Schoen

SPECIES OR SUBSPECIES	GLOBAL POPULATION	PERCENT IN ALASKA	POPULATION STATUS	NOTES
* <b>Ivory Gull</b> <i>Pagophila eburnea</i>	28,000	4	Declining	This gull inhabits Arctic ice floes and snowfields. It has a patchy, circumpolar breeding distribution. Small numbers winter in the Bering and Chukchi seas. The birds feed in open water near ice, or scavenge polar bear kills. Ivory Gulls, which are rare and known to be declining in North America, are on Canada's Endangered Species list.
* <b>Red-legged Kittiwake</b> <i>Rissa brevirostris</i>	213,500	98	Variable	This gull breeds in only five or six locations in the world, all in the Bering Sea. A single colony, on Saint George Island, contains 80 percent of the world's population. Population trends vary among different colonies. Because the population breeds in just a few places, it is deemed vulnerable.
* <b>Aleutian Tern</b> <i>Onychoprion aleuticus</i>	18,500	51	Declining	The Aleutian Tern is rare worldwide, with about half of the population occurring in Alaska. The species is poorly monitored, but populations in both Siberia and Alaska appear to be declining. Aleutian Terns are not as aggressive as Arctic Terns, and are sensitive to disturbance and predation on nesting colonies.
* <b>Marbled Murrelet</b> <i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>	360,000	75	Declining	This noncolonial seabird nests in the upper canopy of old-growth trees. It is federally listed as threatened in the Lower 48 states. Threats in Alaska include marine regime shifts that affect food supply, predation by avian predators, incidental bycatch in gillnet fisheries, and logging of old-growth habitat.
* <b>Kittlitz's Murrelet</b> <i>Brachyramphus brevirostris</i>	24,000	76	Declining	This noncolonial seabird nests on non-vegetated rock on mountain tops. It breeds in scattered locations along the northern Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea coast. Densest numbers are in fjords with glacial influence. Principle threats include oil spills, habitat change, and mortality from avian predators such as eagles and falcons.
* <b>Whiskered Auklet</b> <i>Aethia pygmaea</i>	121,000	96	Stable	These small seabirds are endemic to a group of volcanic islands in the western Aleutians and the Commander and Kuril islands of Russia. Introduced foxes decimated the auklets, but the birds are slowly recovering following fox removal. The birds remain highly vulnerable to predation by rats.
<b>Perching Birds</b>				
* <b>Olive-sided Flycatcher</b> <i>Contopus cooperi</i>	1,200,000	25	Declining	This species has a low reproductive rate for a songbird. Populations are declining 3–3.5 percent annually in North America. A suspected cause is loss of forested habitat in South American wintering grounds. This species favors post-forest fire habitat with standing dead trees, so fire suppression efforts may be detrimental.
* <b>Varied Thrush</b> <i>Ixoreus naevius</i>	30,000,000	50	Declining	The Varied Thrush breeds in wet coniferous or mixed forests. It prefers mature forests with a closed canopy. It is abundant, but declining by 3–4 percent per year. Threats include loss of mature forest due to logging, especially in the southern portion of its range.
* <b>Blackpoll Warbler</b> <i>Dendroica striata</i>	20,000,000	30	Declining	This warbler breeds in boreal coniferous forest, tall shrubs, and alder thickets. It winters in Puerto Rico and northern South America, flying a migration route that includes 1,800 miles across open water. Although abundant and widespread, it is declining at 2.6 percent annually. Cause of the decline is unknown.
* <b>McKay's Bunting</b> <i>Plectrophenax hyperboreus</i>	31,000	100	Unknown	One of North America's rarest songbirds, McKay's Bunting breeds only on two small islands in the Bering Sea. It winters along the western Alaska coast. Given its small population, tiny range, and ground-nesting habits, it is deemed vulnerable.
* <b>Song Sparrow (Aleutian)</b> <i>Melospiza melodia maxima</i>	< 25,000	100	Unknown	This subspecies, found in the central and western Aleutian Islands, is the largest form of song sparrow. Little is known about the status of these birds, other than population range and size are relatively small, and they are island endemics. They are vulnerable to introduced mammalian predators.
* <b>Smith's Longspur</b> <i>Calcarius pictus</i>	75,000	33	Unknown	Smith's Longspur population numbers and trend are poorly known. The Smith's Longspur is polygynandrous (each sex mates with multiple partners). Over a period of just one week, a female will copulate over 350 times on average, making it one of the highest known copulation rates of any bird.
* <b>Rusty Blackbird</b> <i>Euphagus carolinus</i>	2,000,000	29	Declining	The Rusty Blackbird declined from an estimated 13 million birds in 1965 to only 2 million birds today. Loss of wintering habitat plays a role. Other possible factors in the decline are acid rain and mercury accumulation on the breeding grounds, and alterations in boreal forest wetlands associated with climate change.

## What Can You Do to Help?

The WatchList identifies species and subspecies that deserve focused monitoring and research, if not special management and protection. Audubon Alaska's intent is to educate people about the conservation needs of Alaska's birdlife, and to help decision-makers set management priorities.

If you are concerned about the future of Alaska's birds, here are ways you can help:

- Tell resource managers and policy-makers that birds are important to you.
- Promote protection for Important Bird Areas (places essential for birds for breeding, migration, or wintering) in your community and throughout Alaska.
- Participate in citizen science projects, such as the Christmas Bird Count, Great Backyard Bird Count, or Alaska eBird ([www.ebird.org/ak](http://www.ebird.org/ak)), which gather valuable information about birds.
- Volunteer for your local Audubon chapter.
- Contribute financially to conservation organizations, such as Audubon Alaska, that work to protect wild birds and their habitats.
- Visit Audubon Alaska's website ([www.AudubonAlaska.org](http://www.AudubonAlaska.org)) to learn more, donate online, find a local chapter, subscribe to our action alert email list, and get involved in citizen science projects.



 **Audubon** ALASKA

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Established in 1977, Audubon Alaska is the Alaska State Office of the National Audubon Society. Our mission is to conserve Alaska's natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats, for the benefit and enjoyment of current and future generations.



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