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A Conversation with Natalie Dawson, Audubon Alaska’s New Executive Director

On February 19, 2019, Dr. Natalie Dawson joined Audubon Alaska as the new executive director. Although quite busy, she found some time to sit down with us and answer a few questions. Here is part of that conversation.

Q. What about Audubon made you interested in coming to work for this organization?

A. I was attracted to Audubon Alaska for its long history of informing policy through science-based conservation, which has led to building strong and diverse partnerships. Because it is such a big state, it is important to work across boundaries—geographic, sociopolitical, cultural, and ecological—in order to accomplish tasks like permanent protections for the Arctic Refuge and the Teshekpuk Lake wetlands, or highlighting the importance of climate change.

Q. Alaska has many amazing habitats for birds and other wildlife. Is there one place that stands out to you?

A. I think it is more the processes that stand out to me: the Arctic Refuge’s large caribou migrations across mountains, rivers, and coastal plains; the freshwater of the Western Arctic tundra lakes that create nesting habitat for birds from across the globe; the salmon-rich rivers that feed the islands and old-growth trees of the Tongass National Forest; the glacial outwash of the tributary rivers that create the world’s richest salmon nurseries in Bristol Bay. It is in these dynamic processes that Alaska’s places become special, iconic, and in need of protection.

Q. And, we have to ask. What is your favorite bird?

A. I love the Bohemian Waxwing. I grew up in Michigan where Cedar Waxwings were abundant. When I first started working in Alaska I noticed a bird that looked like a Cedar Waxwing and asked my boss, who informed me it was a Bohemian Waxwing, a close but distinct relative. I see them often, and they remain both a reminder of the north and of my first home.

Read the full conversation at ak.audubon.org/news/birdblog. ■

■ Natalie Dawson.



Pectoral Sandpiper

Calidris melanotos

The Pectoral Sandpiper is a Red WatchList Species. Roughly 13% of all Pectoral Sandpipers breed in the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but breeding numbers can vary greatly among years. The Pectoral Sandpiper gets its name from the inflatable air sac on a male’s chest which puffs out during mating flight displays. Its distinctive brown-streaked breast forms a sharp border with its bright white belly.

Photograph on masthead by Mick Thompson

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ALASKA

For more than 40 years, Audubon Alaska has worked to conserve Alaska's birds, wildlife, and the habitat crucial to them. Audubon Alaska is financially independent, raising all our own funding—this means your support is critical to protecting the birds and wildlife you care about.

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DIRECTOR'S VIEWPOINT

With Change Comes Opportunity*By Natalie Dawson*

The week before I started at Audubon Alaska, I was skiing across the Riggs Glacier, halfway between Glacier Bay National Park and the Chilkat River in southeast Alaska. The region is part of the world's largest protected landscape, representing a collaboration between two countries, multiple governments, and indigenous groups. As the sun set, we camped on the edge of the toe of the glacier, steeped in the transition from winter to spring as an American Dipper landed in the only available open water and started feeding. Its call eee-eee-eee matched the rhythm of the water winding within ice, carving a path towards spring. The call was a welcome to the change of season on this frozen river.



This spring, my husband and I start our own transition as we return to Alaska and I begin my tenure at Audubon. Change can be challenging. It requires energy, compassion, and vulnerability. It stretches and grows us in new, sometimes uncomfortable ways. But with every challenge comes opportunity for creativity and engagement. For Audubon Alaska, new leadership will bring opportunities to forge new partnerships, develop new strategies and strengthen current priorities. We will look ahead to the future while working hard in the present for the birds, wildlife, public lands, and priorities set forth by a collective vision of both new ideas and reverence for a rich foundation of experience and dedication across Audubon's expansive network.

The greatest gift of change is the opportunity to come together as a community in conservation. You may notice recent and future modifications to our look that better matches that of National Audubon Society. With our national colleagues, we have the ability to elevate the voices of Alaskans, and those who care about the incredible wild lands and wildlife of this state, across innovative networks with the resources of a robust national organization. In these challenging times, it's important for all of us to work together!

And we have a lot of work to do. Right now, I am reaching out to old friends and new colleagues across Alaska and beyond. I am visiting remote villages and urban communities to talk about Audubon Alaska's priorities, and forging new relationships with individuals and organizations who will help us elevate our organization to new heights. With this work comes incredible opportunities, from organizing actions for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Washington, D.C. to working with local communities in southeast Alaska to protect the Roadless Rule.

We can't do this work without you. As I take the helm at Audubon Alaska, I ask that you continue to support us through your generous donations. Engage in your local communities. Take critical action to be involved in public processes through action alerts and advocacy. You are the reason I came here, and it is your support that will create the bedrock on which we will garner our strength and work through transition to a new future. Please reach out to me anytime—I am thrilled to meet you! ■

The Tongass National Forest Benefits the People, Wildlife, and Economy of Southeast Alaska



Provides **safe nesting trees** for Northern Goshawks and Marbled Murrelets



Provides many **outdoor recreation** options, including hiking, fishing, bird watching, and hunting



Provides protection from **landslides** and **coastal erosion**, access to **clean water**, and food **resources** for human communities



Plays a major role in the **tourism and fishing industries**, which make up **20%** of the region's employment

Produces more **wild salmon** than all other national forests combined



Is the **largest intact temperate** rainforest in the U.S. and encompasses four of the ten largest islands in the country



Supports diversity of understory plants including blueberry and elderberry

Provides habitat to **endemic animals** like the Prince of Wales Spruce Grouse and the Alexander Archipelago wolf



The Tongass is the **only forest** of the National Forest System still implementing a logging program focused on clearcutting old growth. It takes about **250 years** before these forests will fully recover. If we are to save the remaining old-growth forests of the Tongass for current and future generations, we need to realize its full, sustainable value—a value that far surpasses the heavily subsidized timber industry.

Chapter Happenings

Arctic Audubon Society

www.arcticaudubon.org

Arctic Audubon awaits spring's joyous return of "our" Arctic birds that connect us to all continents and 49 states. Spring Migration Celebration on April 27 at Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge marks the return of geese, ducks, and Sandhill Cranes. Our spring field trips are May 11 on Shorebird identification and May 18 on songbirds and birding by ear.



Ken Whitten and Mary Zalar are among Arctic Audubon members at BLM's open house on the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain oil and gas leasing program draft EIS on February 4, 2019.

Photograph by Pamela A. Miller

We have been busy with education and advocacy for the Arctic Refuge and Teshekpuk Lake. As the closest chapter to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, we "adopted" the area in 1987 when oil and gas development threatened the 1002 area/Coastal Plain. The BLM began a rushed process in 2018 to implement the Tax Act's oil and gas leasing provision for the Coastal Plain.

Our first fall program featured Ken Whitten, retired ADF&G biologist, on "Is Developing the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Worth the Risk?" which illustrated the Refuge's key significance as part of a larger conservation system protecting the Porcupine Caribou Herd and other wildlife.

In December, Dr. Carol McIntyre, wildlife biologist at Denali National Park, spoke on seasonal movements of Alaska's

migratory Golden Eagles. Some immature birds migrate to the Arctic calving grounds of the Porcupine herd and constitute the highest predation of young calves. With five days' notice, members joined 200 Fairbanksans at BLM's open house on the draft EIS for Refuge oil and gas leasing. This became a remarkable hearing after Alaska Native leaders stood up to speak directly to public officials.

We also hosted Cole Sartore's public presentation Building the National Geographic Photo Ark at the Alaska Bird Conference's to raise awareness about global bird extinction and climate crisis. ■

Juneau Audubon Society

www.Juneau-Audubon-Society.org

JAS Education Chair Alexia Kiefer has been working with home school and after school programs. Recent topics covered were bird identification, hornworms and woolly bear caterpillars, and all-about-beavers. All were popular.

For bird identification the children were taught to look for clues like field marks, size and habitat, and how to use binoculars. They were able to handle real skulls, bones, and feathers. There was a scavenger hunt for birds painted onto rocks and learning to ID with a phone app.



Young birders in Juneau.

Photograph by Alexia Kiefer

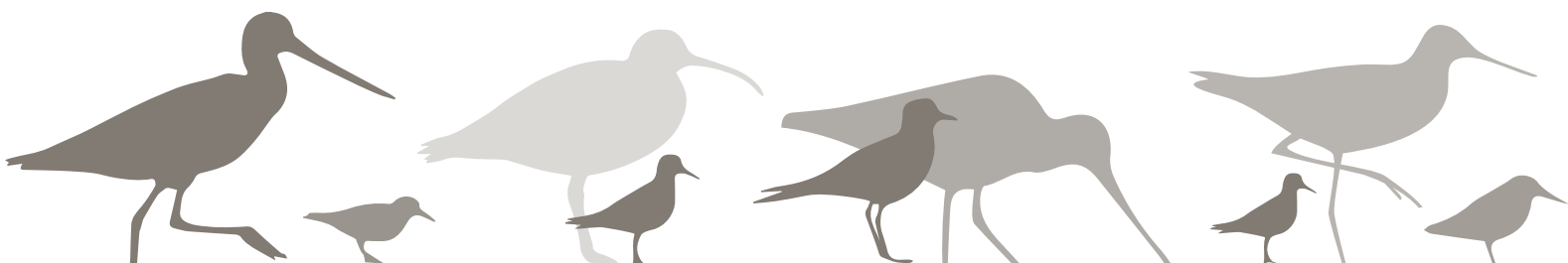
Alexia also organized a young birders' team to participate in the Christmas Bird Count.

The Tree Swallow nest box project is another opportunity for youth involvement in field activities. School and scout groups are helping with box construction and placement, and they will be invited to help with monitoring the nests this summer. ■

Prince William Sound Audubon Society

Cordova's 47th annual Christmas Bird Count was held on Saturday, December 15. We had great participation with 25 field counters and 6 feeder watchers. We lucked out with beautiful weather, despite rains and wind immediately preceding and following Count Day. We also had interesting results. 60 species were counted on Count Day and six additional species were seen on the three days before and after the count. Normally common winter birds, including Pine Siskin, Common Redpoll, Pine Grosbeak, and Red and White-winged Crossbills, were absent. Some rare species, however, filled the voids. Unusual waterfowl on Eyak Lake were particularly noteworthy: Tufted Duck, American Coot, Ring-necked Ducks, Canvasback, and the first ever Redheads. Other notable species include Bonaparte's Gull, Surf Bird, Northern Hawk Owl, Short-eared Owl, and a very out-of-season Hermit Thrush. We broke a record for the American Wigeon: we counted 55 and our previous high count from 2001 was 47.

2019 Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival will be held from May 2-5th. Our Keynote Speaker will be Pete Dunne. He is the author of nearly twenty books on treating birds, birding, natural history and conservation including *Tales of a Low Rent Birder*, *The Feather Quest*, *Hawks in Flight*, *Pete Dunne on Birding*, and most recently, *Gulls Simplified* (with Kevin Karlson). ■



Public Support for Protecting the Alaska Arctic

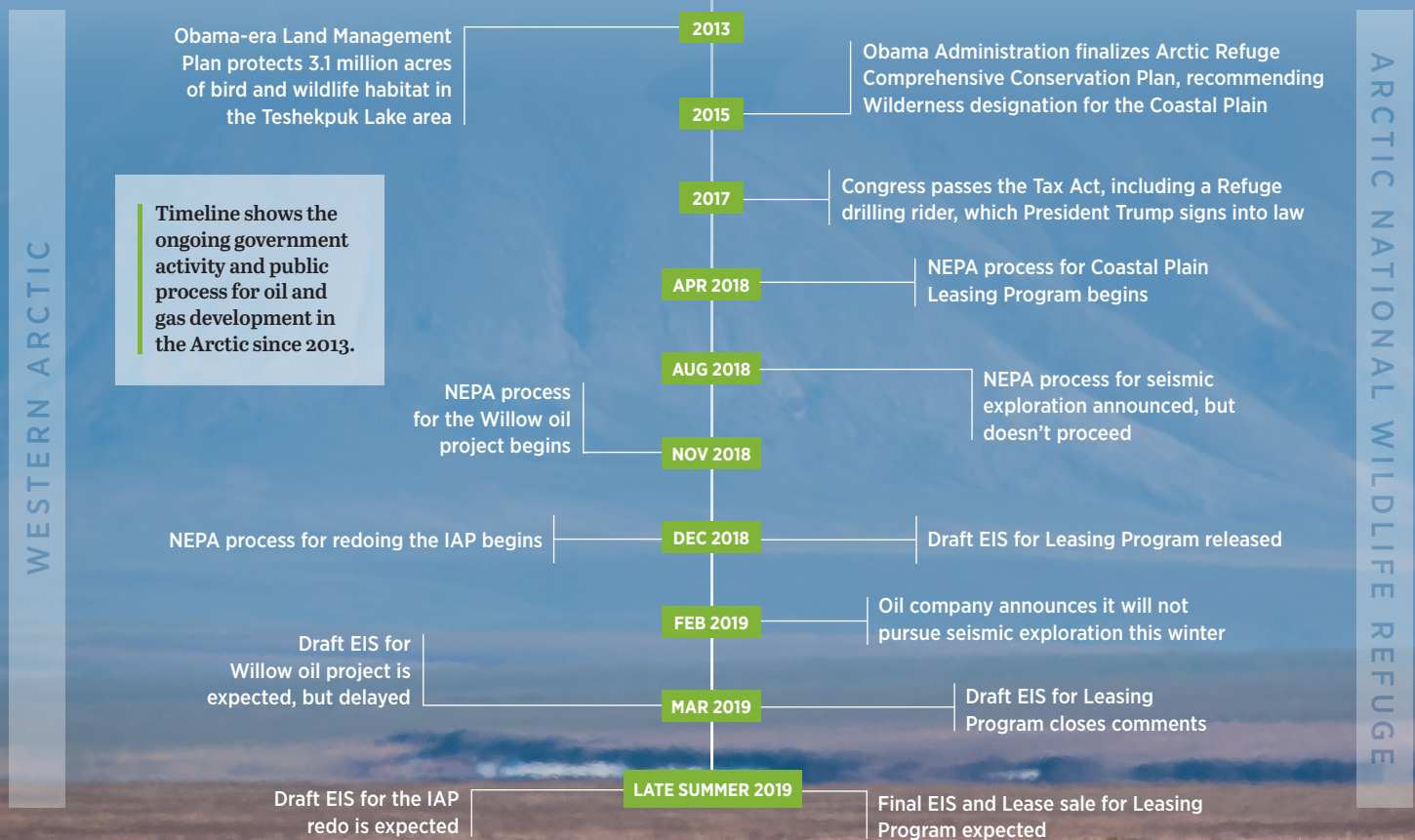
Western Arctic

Teshekpuk Lake in the Western Arctic is at the heart of a large wetlands complex that is one of the world's most important Arctic bird habitats. As part of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A), the Teshekpuk Lake wetlands complex has long been recognized for its extraordinary wildlife habitat. As a result of this long history and sound science, most of the wetlands are now a Special Area off-limits to industrial development. But the Teshekpuk wetlands now face a new and unprecedented threat from oil development. The Department of the Interior is speedily redoing the Integrated Activity Plan, which directs management of the NPR-A. Redoing the Integrated Activity Plan appears poised to crack open the Teshekpuk Lake area for oil development. There is also a threat from ConocoPhillips' Willow oil development project. The Willow development would put a giant new industrial footprint at the doorstep of the protected wetlands. But there is still hope. During the last comment period, more than **25,000 Audubon members** wrote in support of protecting the Teshekpuk Lake wetlands. Building public support and scientific credibility will urge future lawmakers to continue to protect this incredible bird and wildlife haven.

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

While the fight is still brewing around Teshekpuk, the battle is boiling over in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Despite decades of protection, the 2017 Tax Act opened the Refuge to oil development. The Department of the Interior now plans to hold an oil lease sale in the Refuge this summer or fall. And, up until February, it had appeared that the Department would allow oil companies to conduct seismic oil exploration over the winter. But in response to these attempts, more than **27,000 Audubon members** joined scientists, indigenous leaders, and communities around the nation in submitting comments to oppose oil and gas development in the Refuge. And in a significant win for conservation, seismic exploration efforts stalled after media attention and agency blunders revealed that the heavy machinery could gravely impact denning polar bears. **Your voice matters** more than ever in these fights to protect bird and wildlife habitat on public lands in Alaska.

Don't forget to visit ak.audubon.org/take-action and sign up for our action alerts! ■



Caribou.
Photograph by Dave Shaw

People of Audubon

BOARD



This spring, we are excited to welcome **David Secord** back to the Board. Dave served on the Board for six years before terming off in late 2017. Descended from Alaskans, Dave is a marine invertebrate ecologist by training. He holds degrees from Pomona College and the University of Washington, where he taught and ran various interdisciplinary environmental programs. After serving as the Alaska/BC Program Officer for the Wilburforce Foundation, and VP Strategic Grantmaking at Tides Canada Foundation, he began to consult independently. He serves on various boards, and his clients include foundations, environmental and indigenous organizations, and universities. He and his spouse Amy live on an island in BC and they love travel, nature, history, and theatre. ■



Audubon Alaska said goodbye for now to **Milo Burcham** after seven years on the Board. Milo is a familiar name on Audubon Alaska publications: as a well-known wildlife photographer based in Cordova, Alaska, his photos have been published widely and shared freely with Audubon Alaska. His conservation interests include preserving Alaska's vast wild places and, of course, being from Cordova, conserving shorebird habitat. We thank Milo for his service and dedication to Alaska conservation issues through the years and look forward to continue working with him in the future. ■

STAFF



We thank **Melanie Smith** and **Erika Knight** for their hard work and dedication as they both transition out of the Audubon Alaska office. The good news is that they are both remaining part of the greater Audubon family. Melanie is now the Program Director within the Migratory Bird Initiative, part of the National Audubon Science Division. Erika is now GIS/Data Analyst for the same initiative. The purpose of this new program is to create a migratory bird information system that will map and assess conservation needs of North American birds. We are confident Melanie and Erika will both do an amazing job. ■



The staff at Audubon Alaska would also like to thank **Michelle LeBeau** for her leadership as interim executive director over the past several months. Michelle returns to her role as deputy director as we welcome our new executive director, **Natalie Dawson** (see cover story). ■

Audubon Alaska's 2019 Bird of the Year

Our new Bird of the Year is the Belted Kingfisher! These popular fish-eating birds are one of the most widespread landbirds in North America, and many can be found in aquatic habitats throughout Alaska during the summer breeding season. As this year's "spokesbird" the Belted Kingfisher will help highlight our work to protect birds on the 2017 Alaska WatchList. Belted Kingfishers are not on the list, but recent surveys show a decline in their populations. They have been identified as a species to keep an eye on.

Help protect vulnerable bird species throughout Alaska by making a donation to Audubon Alaska. Donate today and receive your Belted Kingfisher Bird of the Year sticker! ■



Join the 2019 Great American Arctic Birding Challenge!

During the spring, birds migrate from all over the United States to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and other ecologically rich areas of Alaska's Arctic. Birds rely on the Arctic ecosystem for nesting, breeding, staging, and molting. Compete to find as many of these spring migrants as you can as they pass through your state! Challenge runs March 15–June 1.

Learn more and register your team at: ak.audubon.org/GAABC. ■



Savannah Sparrow.
Photograph by Milo Burcham

Answer to WatchList Quiz

Marbled Murrelet

Brachyramphus marmoratus



This chunky seabird is a non-colonial seabird. Unlike other alcids, Marbled Murrelets nest in the upper canopy of old-growth trees. Because of their dependence on this habitat for nesting, they are critically impacted by loss of old-growth forests from logging and are federally listed as threatened. They usually nest in trees greater than 200 years of age, making protecting old-growth habitat crucial to their continued survival. Photograph by Milo Burcham

Birds of Bristol Bay: The Tufted Puffin

Perhaps nowhere else on Earth is so important to so many birds from so many different places as Alaska's Bristol Bay. In any given year, millions of marine birds arrive here from around the globe to breed, forage, or rest. Some travel great distances to reach Bristol Bay. They migrate from nesting sites in the Southern Hemisphere to spend their winters (our summers) foraging in the region.

Other seabirds, like Tufted Puffins, choose to breed in the rocky cliffs and islands that punctuate the Bristol Bay shoreline. These colorful characters have bright orange feet, a fleshy orange bill, and two tufts of yellow feathers that start behind the eyes and curl back around their heads like a messy comb-over. Tufted Puffins spend their summers in Bristol Bay building nests in deep burrows that dig into the sides of cliffs and steep grassy slopes. Unlike many other birds, they need a running start to take to the air. Like others in their family, they can dive and even swim underwater at great depths (up to 200 feet). They use their wings and feet to steer underwater to feed on small fish, which they catch in their bills. Puffin parents can be seen packing ten or more small fish crosswise in their bills to bring back to hungry chicks waiting in their rocky nests. These small fish and other tiny plankton are the foundation of the rich food web that gives rise to Bristol Bay's productive salmon fishery and supports the incredible abundance of bird life. After 6–7 weeks, the young Tufted Puffins leave the nest and head out to sea. If they aren't yet ready to fly, you may see these adorable little ones walking towards the water.

Bristol Bay is an amazing place full of bird stories like this one. But this fragile ecosystem is facing challenges. It is already under stress from climate change and warming ocean temperatures, and now is being threatened by resource extraction and development. A large-scale open-pit mine, like the proposed Pebble Mine project, poses an

untenable risk to the region's food web, which supports millions of salmon and birds—including Tufted Puffins. Given Bristol Bay's global significance for birds, protecting this remarkable resource is a priority for Audubon Alaska.

Visit ak.audubon.org/conservation/bristol-bay to learn more about our efforts and how you can get involved. We will also feature more Bristol Bay birds in our BirdBlog in the coming months at ak.audubon.org/news/birdblog. ■



Photograph by Tom Ingram

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Birding in Cuba
November 15–22, 2019



Cuban Green Woodpecker.
Photograph by Gail Hampshire

Experience Peru
November 9–18, 2020



Machu Picchu.
Photograph by Pixabay.com

2019 Alaska Bird Festivals

A great way to enjoy bird watching is by going to festivals. Find out more about upcoming bird festivals happening in Alaska this year.

Visit ak.audubon.org/birds/bird-festivals-alaska for details. ■



WatchList Quiz Bird

Can you identify
this species from
the WatchList?

Answer on page 7.

