

 Audubon ALASKA

Alaska WatchList

2017 Red List of Declining
Bird Populations



What is the WatchList?

The Alaska WatchList is Audubon Alaska's science-based warning system to identify birds at risk. It is a tool to focus attention on vulnerable and declining bird populations across the state. The WatchList recognizes two levels of conservation concern. The Red List has the highest level of concern: species are 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 and costly. 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 fragmentation, degradation, and loss of habitat. Over the last century, natural resource extraction, industrial development, urban encroachment, and climate change have driven these losses. Other threats to bird populations include pollution (such as oil spills and toxic contaminants), excessive harvest, introduced predators, and increased human disturbance.

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. However, even in Alaska, there are serious concerns about habitat loss, as natural resource development, road building, and other human influences expand into remote areas.

Of course, birds know nothing about state and national boundaries. 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 threats throughout the ranges of Alaska's birds.



A Success Story

While we have added new species to the Alaska WatchList 2017, we are pleased to say some species have increased. One of them is the Emperor Goose.

A beautiful and unique goose, it spends its whole life in the Russian Far East and Alaska, moving from breeding grounds on both sides of the Bering Sea to coastal wintering areas along the Aleutians and the Alaska Peninsula like Izembek Lagoon and Kodiak Island. Based on significant declines of the population in the early 1980s, no fall/winter hunting has been allowed since 1986. Additionally, in 1987, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Goose Management Plan reached an agreement that stopped the subsistence harvest of the Emperor Goose until a three-year average count of 80,000 birds was reached during the annual spring survey.

Since the hunting closure, the Emperor Goose population has rebounded, and in 2015, the three-year spring survey index hit 81,875 geese. While details are still being worked out, in the spring of 2017, a limited subsistence hunt resumed for rural residents in the Aleutians, Bristol Bay, and in western Alaska.

Given the increasing trend of this goose population along with tight regulations, we cautiously remove the Emperor Goose from our Red List in 2017. It stays as a vulnerable species, but it stands as testament to the power of science-based monitoring, local community efforts, and regulation of threatened and endangered species.



Emperor Goose / Milo Burcham



Emperor Geese / Milo Burcham

Alaska WatchList 2017 – Red List

The WatchList identifies Alaska birds that are declining or vulnerable, 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 more vulnerable than large populations;
- Minimum range occupied seasonally: populations concentrated in a small area are more vulnerable than populations spread over large areas;
- Area importance (percent of global population occurring in Alaska): our stewardship responsibility is greater for species that have a large percentage of their population in Alaska than for species with a small percentage of their population in Alaska.
- Population trend (weighted x3): Declining populations are at greater risk than stable or increasing populations.

If a species or subspecies that qualified for the WatchList (≥ 20 points) is either declining or depressed (population trend ≥ 4 points), they appear on the Red List. Non-declining, yet vulnerable, species scoring at least 20 points appear on the Yellow List. Further details and the Yellow List are available at www.AudubonAlaska.org/Conservation/Alaska-Watchlist.

The table below lists each Red List species and includes estimated global populations, percent of that population dependent on Alaska at any time of year, and population status.

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SPECIES OR SUBSPECIES	GLOBAL POPULATION	PERCENT IN ALASKA	POPULATION STATUS	NOTES
Loons				
Yellow-billed Loon <i>Gavia adamsii</i>	24,000	15	Depressed	The largest of the loons, this Arctic-breeding loon is also the rarest. Recent (last ten years) surveys from the Arctic Coastal Plain indicate an increasing population, although numbers are still depressed. Pollutants picked up on non-breeding grounds in Asia have been identified as a potential problem for this species.
Grebes				
Red-necked Grebe <i>Podiceps grisegena holboellii</i>	12,000	27	Declining	This subspecies breeds in e. Asia and North America. Alaska’s largest and most common grebe, the Red-necked Grebe is a prevalent breeder on lakes and other bodies of water in interior Alaska. It is poorly monitored, but recent data from the Arctic Coastal Plain and the interior boreal forest region of Alaska (BCR4 ¹) indicate declining breeding populations.
Tubenoses				
Short-tailed Albatross <i>Phoebastria albatrus</i>	4,354	12	Depressed	The Short-tailed Albatross was formerly the most abundant albatross in the North Pacific, once numbering in the millions. Decimated by plume and egg hunters in the early 1900s, the species was believed extinct in the 1950s. Fortunately, a few juvenile birds at sea survived; eventually returning to Toroshima Island, near Japan, to breed. Today, the population is slowly increasing and expanding. Outside the breeding season, this species spends most of its time foraging in Alaska waters where it is exposed to bycatch in long-line fisheries. This species is federally listed as an endangered species.
Cormorants				
Red-faced Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax urile</i>	200,000	10	Declining	The largest Red-faced Cormorant colonies 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 declines are unknown.
Waterfowl				
Canada Goose (Lesser) <i>Branta canadensis parvipes</i>	4,319	100	Declining	The Lesser Canada Goose is a small race of the Canada Goose whose population is found in interior Alaska. Breeding Bird Survey data indicate both long and short-term declines in the interior boreal forest region of Alaska (BCR4). Reasons for the declines are unknown.
Greater Scaup <i>Aythya marila nearctica</i>	561,000	93	Declining	Greater Scaup breeding distribution overlaps with the conspecific Lesser Scaup, but it is more frequently found in northern Alaska and USFWS breeding waterfowl strata 8-11 in interior Alaska. Population trends are variable by location with suggested increases in northern Alaska and declines on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Christmas Bird Count data in recent years in Alaska also indicate declines in the wintering population.

¹ BCR = Bird Conservation Region



Dunlin / Pat Ulrich / Audubon Photography Awards



Violet-green Swallow / Christine Haines
Audubon Photography Awards



Black Scoter / Kristine Sowl - USFWS



Orange-crowned Warbler / Milo Burcham

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Spectacled Eider <i>Somateria fischeri</i>	363,000	100 (of listed population)	Depressed	Populations of Spectacled Eiders were federally listed as threatened following significant declines (more than 90%) in western Alaska, but have been slowly recovering over the past decade. Only 10% of the global population breeds in Alaska, but virtually all winter in Alaska waters. Tens of thousands of Spectacled Eiders congregate in ice-free waters south of St. Lawrence Island in winter.
Steller’s Eider (western population) <i>Polysticta stelleri</i>	117,500	70	Depressed	The population of Steller’s Eiders on the Arctic Coastal Plain is variable, with highest numbers in the Barrow area (several hundred birds). 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.
Black Scoter (western population) <i>Melanitta nigra americana</i>	200,000	70	Declining	The Black Scoter is a tundra and boreal breeder. Breeding surveys indicate significant declines on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and the Arctic Coastal Plain. A popular subsistence species because of its high fat content, about 7,000 ducks are harvested annually on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in western Alaska.
Grouse				
Blue Grouse (Sooty) <i>Dendragapus obscurus sitkensis</i>	533,843	23	Declining	Populations of Blue Grouse appear to be in decline, particularly in southeast Alaska and British Columbia (BCR5). This grouse is found in the forested regions of southeast Alaska, including the Tongass National Forest, and is poorly monitored.
Shorebirds				
American Golden-Plover <i>Pluvialis dominica</i>	500,000	56	Declining	A long-distance migrant, the American Golden-Plover spends its non-breeding season in South America after traversing the Central Flyway of the US. Roughly 8% of all American Golden-Plovers breed in the 1002 Area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The global population is in decline, but reasons are unknown.
Lesser Yellowlegs <i>Tringa flavipes</i>	660,000	38	Declining	Recent Breeding Bird Survey data indicate declines in the interior boreal forest region of Alaska (BCR4). The reasons for these declines are unknown. Causes may include drying of boreal wetland habitat on its breeding grounds as a result of climate change, habitat degradation on its wintering grounds in Latin America, and hunting.
Bar-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa lapponica baueri</i>	90,000	100	Declining	This subspecies breeds only in Alaska and winters on the southeastern coast of Australia and in New Zealand. On the southward migration, it undertakes the longest nonstop flight of any shorebird species, covering over 7,000 miles and losing half its body weight in the process. Loss of intertidal habitat in the Yellow Sea has led to annual declines of >3% per year in recent years.
Red Knot <i>Calidris canutus roselaari</i>	21,800	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 thought to be declining. Conservation concerns include low reproductive success on the breeding range. Hunting on the non-breeding grounds is a concern for other populations of Red Knot, but it is unknown if this is a concern for this population.
Pectoral Sandpiper <i>Calidris melanotos</i>	1,680,000	70	Declining	Roughly 13% of all Pectoral Sandpipers breed in the 1002 Area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but breeding numbers can vary greatly among years. In some years, birds may visit Alaska breeding grounds and then fly further east into Arctic Canada or west into Russia. The global population is in decline, but reasons are unknown.
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper <i>Calidris acuminata</i>	160,000	>60 ²	Declining	The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper breeds in the Russian Arctic, but in the fall, a majority of the juvenile birds cross the Bering Sea to stage in western Alaska where they put on prodigious amounts of fat before flying back across the Pacific to wintering grounds in Australasia. Adult birds are rarely seen in Alaska. Declines are probably due to habitat degradation, especially along the Yellow Sea coast in eastern Asia.

² Percentage of global population of juvenile population that occurs in Alaska



Kittlitz’s Murrelet / Milo Burcham

Sooty Grouse / Kathleen Kitto
Audubon Photography Awards

Western Wood-Pewee / Francesco Veronesi / Creative Commons

Buff-breasted Sandpiper / Peter Brannon
Audubon Photography Awards

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Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina arctica</i>	500,000	100	Declining	The <i>arctica</i> subspecies nests in northern Alaska and to a much lesser extent western Canada. This subspecies is relatively abundant, but appears to have undergone significant declines. <i>Arctica</i> has suffered an alarming rate of habitat loss on its wintering grounds in eastern Asia, especially at the Yellow Sea.
Buff-breasted Sandpiper <i>Tryngites subruficollis</i>	56,000	25	Declining	The Buff-breasted Sandpiper is unique among North American shorebirds in having a lek mating system. It dropped from a population of millions in the 1800s to near extinction by 1920 as a result of unregulated market hunting and habitat loss. In Alaska, breeding occurs on the northeastern Arctic Coastal Plain. The bird migrates through the central US to wintering grounds in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. The widespread conversion of grasslands to agriculture on its winter range is contributing to the ongoing decline, although the population may have recently stabilized.
Gulls and Terns				
Ivory Gull <i>Pagophila eburnea</i>	19,500	<10	Declining	As its genus implies, the Ivory Gull is a species that is dependent on sea ice throughout its annual cycle. Perhaps the biggest long-term challenge for the Ivory Gull is the rapid decline of Arctic sea ice due to changing climate conditions, including rising temperatures. In Alaska Arctic waters, this gull occurs during fall and winter months. Usually not more than one to tens of birds are seen at a time. It is suspected that most Alaska birds come from Russian breeding colonies to the east and possibly from Canada to the west.
Black-legged Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla pollicaris</i>	2,500,000	53	Declining	The Black-legged Kittiwake is an abundant, colony-nesting seabird occurring throughout much of coastal Alaska (small numbers in northern Alaska). Once finished breeding, the bird moves out to pelagic realms around ocean shelf breaks. Numbers in the Gulf of Alaska dropped after the 1989 <i>Exxon Valdez</i> oil spill and have been in a long, steady downward trajectory over the last three and half decades. Current declines appear to be correlated with increasing ocean temperatures.
Red-legged Kittiwake <i>Rissa brevirostris</i>	306,000	68	Declining	The rare cousin in the <i>Rissa</i> genus, Red-legged Kittiwakes only breed in the Bering Sea and at fewer than 10 locations. About 80% of the world’s population breeds on St. George Island. Populations declined steeply from 2008-2013 from an all-time high. Reasons for the declines are not well understood.
Aleutian Tern <i>Onychoprion aleuticus</i>	31,131	18	Declining	The Aleutian Tern is rare worldwide, with a breeding distribution split between Russia and the United States and a wintering distribution in Asia. The species is poorly monitored, but numbers at known colonies in Alaska have declined a staggering 92% in the last three decades. The reasons for declines in Alaska are unclear, and a redistribution of colonies to Russia has not been ruled out. Non-breeding habitat degradation in Asia is likely a factor.
Alcids				
Marbled Murrelet <i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>	385,000	70	Depressed	The Marbled Murrelet is a non-colonial seabird that nests in the upper canopy of old-growth trees. The bird is federally listed as threatened in the lower 48 states, where loss of old-growth nesting habitat from logging is a suspected cause for declines. 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. Population declines appear to have stabilized in the last decade.
Kittlitz’s Murrelet <i>Brachyramphus brevirostris</i>	33,583	95	Depressed	The Kittlitz’s Murrelet, like the Marbled Murrelet, is a non-colonial nester, but it is significantly less common, and it nests on non-vegetated rock on mountain tops. The bird breeds in scattered locations along the northern Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea coast, and it is found as far north as the Chukchi Sea. Highest densities are found in fjords with glacial influence, including Glacier Bay, Icy Bay, and Prince William Sound. Populations declined until about 2000, but they appear to have stabilized. Principal threats include oil spills, habitat change (such as melting glaciers), and mortality from avian predators.
Tufted Puffin <i>Fratercula cirrhata</i>	2,970,000	79	Declining	The Tufted Puffin is a widespread breeder in Alaska waters. The largest breeding colonies are found in the eastern Aleutians and along the Alaska Peninsula (over 80% of Alaska’s birds). Like the Horned Puffin, Tufted Puffin populations in the Gulf of Alaska are predicted to continue to decline, perhaps in response to global temperature increases.



Spectacled Eider / William Pohley / Audubon Photography Awards



Black-legged Kittiwake / Richard Hebardt / Audubon Photography Awards



Pectoral Sandpiper / Milo Burcham



Marbled Murrelet / Milo Burcham

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Horned Puffin <i>Fratercula corniculata</i>	1,200,000	77	Declining	An abundant breeding seabird of western and southwestern Alaska waters, Horned (as well as Tufted) Puffins have been hit hard by die-offs in the past few years. The northern Gulf of Alaska breeding populations have decreased between 2007 and 2016, while the breeding populations of the southeast Bering Sea region have been variable during this period. Declines appear to be related to food scarcity caused by abnormally warm water around their breeding and feeding areas.
Owls				
Snowy Owl <i>Bubo scandiacus</i>	300,000	10	Declining	One of Alaska's most charismatic birds, the Snowy Owl mainly breeds in Arctic regions of western and northern Alaska, especially in years of high lemming activity. Data for the North American population indicate a declining population (-64% ³), and Arctic Coastal Plain breeding trend data also suggest declines, although numbers vary among years.
Hummingbirds				
Rufous Hummingbird <i>Selasphorus rufus</i>	18,432,129	20	Declining	The diminutive Rufous Hummingbird is Alaska's only regularly breeding hummingbird. Found mainly in the southeast (and north up to Girdwood), BBS trend data for western US indicate significant declines as do North American trend data (-60% ³). Reasons for the declines are unknown.
Landbirds				
Olive-sided Flycatcher <i>Contopus cooperi</i>	1,876,022	23	Declining	The Olive-sided Flycatcher has a low reproductive rate for a passerine. It breeds in montane and northern coniferous forests at forest edges and openings. Populations have declined 78% from 1970-2014 in North America. Significant long-term (1993-2015) decreases have been detected during BBS surveys of BCR's 4 & 5 in Alaska. A suspected cause is loss of forested habitat on its South American wintering grounds. This species favors post-forest fire habitat with standing dead trees, so fire suppression efforts may be detrimental.
Western Wood-Pewee <i>Contopus sordidulus</i>	11,867,817	2	Declining	The Western Wood-Pewee is an uncommon forest breeder in southcoastal, southcentral, and central Alaska. Significant population decreases were detected during BBS surveys of BCR's 4 & 5 in Alaska, both in the long and short-term, as well as nationally (-47% ³). This species is part of a suite of aerial insectivores in Alaska that are in decline.
Violet-green Swallow <i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>	8,497,913	5	Declining	Violet-green Swallows have declined in North America in recent decades (-19% ³). This species is common in central and southcoastal Alaska, and populations have significantly declined (BCR's 4&5). This species is part of a suite of swallow species and other aerial insectivores in Alaska that are in decline.
Bank Swallow <i>Riparia riparia</i>	25,716,241	10	Declining	The Bank Swallow has experienced great declines in North America in recent decades (-89% ³). Our smallest swallow and common only in central Alaska, the population has significantly declined in BCR 4. This species is part of a suite of swallow species and other aerial insectivores in Alaska that are in decline.
Gray-headed Chickadee <i>Poecile cinctus lathamii</i>	<5,000?	75	Declining?	The Gray-headed Chickadee may be North America's most poorly studied breeding bird species. A denizen of the harsh northern boreal woods, it is rarely seen, making it one of the most coveted species to spot in North America. There are some suggestions of declines in birds breeding along central and eastern rivers of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.
Orange-crowned Warbler <i>Oreothlypis celata</i>	79,918,135	37	Declining	Orange-crowned Warblers have declined in North America in recent decades (-30% ³). Common breeders throughout much of Alaska except western and northern tundra regions, this greenish warbler has significantly declined in BCR's 4 & 5.
Blackpoll Warbler <i>Setophaga striata</i>	58,721,922	26	Declining	One of the first songs to disappear for the hearing challenged, the high "zi-zi-zi" song of the breeding Blackpoll Warbler echoes around the boreal forest. Blackpoll Warbler populations have plummeted (-92% ³) in North America in recent decades, including in Alaska's boreal forest (BCR4).

³ % change in population from 1970-2014 (PIF 2016)

What Can You Do to Help?

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

- Participate in citizen science projects, such as the Christmas Bird Count, Great Backyard Bird Count, or Alaska eBird (www.eBird.org/ak), which gather valuable information about birds.
- Tell policymakers that birds are important to you.
- Volunteer for your local Audubon chapter or Audubon Alaska.
- Make a donation to Audubon Alaska to support bird conservation.
- Visit www.AudubonAlaska.org to learn more, donate online, and subscribe to our email list.



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