



# Audubon | ALASKA News

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## New Seasons, New Strength

By David Krause, Vice President-Alaska Program



Beluga whales in the Chukchi Sea.

Photo: Vicki Beaver

As I write this note, a late August rain is falling against the first yellowing birch leaves. The screechy chatter of our neighborhood’s five Merlin has moved on with the autumnal winds, and beluga whales are working the shores of upper Cook Inlet for salmon. Fresh wild blueberry pie left all our smiles purple during a recent staff meeting. While the energy of summer is fading, the work of Audubon Alaska is not—in fact, we’re picking up steam.

As highlighted in the following pages, this past spring, Dr. Liliana Naves joined our team as our new Director of Conservation, and Ben Sullender returned to Audubon as the program’s Director of Geospatial Science. Both have incredible academic and professional credentials, a deep understanding of the region, and a passion for everything that makes Alaska so special.

With the strategic communications expertise of Lauren Cusimano, invaluable operations support from Cassandra Smith, and additional shared positions between our Alaska Program and the national public lands team (Christopher Simmons) and the Latin America program (River Gates), we now have an integrated and sophisticated team that can not only rise to the challenges of the day but also change the future for the better.

Audubon Alaska has been in the business of protecting and defending wild Alaska for nearly a half a century. Looking ahead, our new team will be working to ensure that priority habitats like the Teshekpuk Lake Wetlands Complex and Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain remain free from all oil development. We’ll also be furthering new initiatives like Liliana’s shorebird education work on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and leveraging Ben’s keen ability to apply rigorous science to complex marine conservation questions.

With our new teammates, I’m feeling hopeful about the challenges we’ll overcome and the solutions we’ll advance. Please join me in welcoming Liliana and Ben to our Audubon community, and we look forward to working with all of you to safeguard Alaska and all that it provides for the world’s birds. ■



## Northern Fulmar

*Fulmarus glacialis*

The Northern Fulmar is patterned somewhat like a gull but has very different in-flight behavior (and a stubby bill). It flies fast with quick wingbeats and stiff-winged glides, wheeling effortlessly in strong winds, often swinging up in high arcs over the waves. Its habitat is often the open ocean, where it may encounter marine vessels (see Page 6). It’s found generally over cold waters, including around the edges of pack ice in the Arctic Ocean. In North America, it breeds mainly in high Arctic Canada and colonially on open sea cliffs off islands in the Bering Sea. Unlike many related birds, fulmars are active around nesting colonies in daylight.

Photo: April Eisele/Audubon Photography Awards

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## ALASKA

For more than 45 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.

### Audubon Alaska Staff

**David Krause**

*Vice President of the Alaska Program*

**Lauren Cusimano**

*Communications Manager*

**River Gates**

*Pacific Shorebird Conservation Initiative Coordinator*

**Liliana Naves**

*Director of Conservation*

**Kassandra Smith**

*Senior Finance and Operations Associate*

**Benjamin Sullender**

*Director of Geospatial Science*

### Audubon Alaska Board Members

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**Karen Hardigg**

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**Acacia Johnson**

**Beth Kerttula**

**Aaron Lang**

**Karen Murphy**

**Tom Paragi**

**Scott Rupp**

**Kristin Smith**

### **Audubon Alaska**

750 West Second Ave., Suite 100  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501  
907-276-7034

Website:

[ak.audubon.org](http://ak.audubon.org)

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Eric Cline of TerraGraphica

### Land Acknowledgment

Audubon Alaska recognizes that we work throughout the ancestral territory of the Indigenous Peoples of Alaska.

Our office is located within Dena'ina Athabaskan, the traditional land of the Dena'ina Athabaskan, but our work spans the entire state of Alaska. We owe deep gratitude to the Indigenous Peoples of Alaska for their continued care and stewardship of the land on which we work.



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## People of Audubon

### Thank you for your service to Audubon Alaska!

Audubon Alaska would like to express its heartfelt thanks to Cindi Jacobson, Aaron Lang, Scott Rupp, and Dave Secord for their years of service to Audubon Alaska as members of the advisory board.

**Aaron Lang**



**David Secord**



**Dr. Cynthia Jacobson**



**Scott Rupp**



**Aaron's** international skills and knowledge in bird identification, birding sites, and remote Alaska communities were indispensable during his term with the Alaska program.

**Dave**, thanks to his humor, mastery of relationship-building, and cultural knowledge on an international scale, was a guiding star for our programmatic work during his 13-year tenure.

**Cindi's** warmth and proficiency as a conservation social scientist ensured our statewide work was inclusive, welcoming, and mindful of the unique ways of life in remote, rural, and urban Alaska.

**Scott's** knowledge of climate and its profound effect on Alaska's landscapes, wildlife, and bird species, in addition to his expertise in subarctic and Arctic ecosystems, ensured our work was founded in science and understanding. ■

### Grace Miller



Photo: Lauren Cusimano

**Grace Miller** (she/her/hers) joined Audubon Alaska this summer through the Alaska Conservation Foundation's Ted Smith Conservation Internship Program. She collected incredible imagery for Alaska's birding trails, helped lead bird walks in Anchorage and Utqiagvik, and created some fantastic content on bioacoustics.

Grace is a third-year student at the University of California, Los Angeles, majoring in environmental science and minoring in conservation biology and film. At school, she pursues every opportunity to connect with nature, whether that means surfing, leading hikes with the Excursion Club, or simply hammocking on campus. Originally from Massachusetts, Grace grew up exploring the ocean and woodlands, which sparked her lifelong love for wildlife conservation—especially birds. In fall 2024, she studied abroad in Costa Rica, deepening her knowledge of neotropical bird species and seeing some magnificent species, like the Resplendent Quetzal! In her free time, Grace also enjoys painting, yoga, and baking.

Grace was an essential team member, and we wish her the best of luck in her future endeavors. ■

## New Audubon Faces

Please welcome Audubon Alaska’s new Director of Conservation, Dr. Liliana Naves, and Director of Geospatial Science Ben Sullender.

### Liliana Naves



Photo: Courtesy of Liliana Naves

**Liliana Naves** (she/her/hers) develops and implements conservation strategies and collaborations for Audubon Alaska. Naves has more than 20 years of life and work experience in Alaska dedicated to bird conservation, research, and management. These efforts have been in collaboration with state and federal land and wildlife management agencies, Tribal governments, and nonprofit organizations, among other entities.

Naves’ work has blended natural and social sciences, focusing on bird ecology, harvest assessment, Indigenous knowledge, co-management, outreach and education, and place- and culture-based conservation actions. In 2023, she received the Alaska Bird Conference Isleib Award for outstanding contributions to bird conservation in Alaska.

Naves earned a B.S. in Oceanography and M.S. in Biological Oceanography from the Federal University of Rio Grande (Brazil) and a PhD in Biodiversity from the Sorbonne-Université Pierre et Marie Curie (France). Contact Liliana Naves at [liliana.naves@audubon.org](mailto:liliana.naves@audubon.org).

### Ben Sullender



Photo: Andy Cochran

**Ben Sullender** (he/him/his) oversees spatial conservation for Audubon Alaska. Sullender is a longtime Alaska resident and has been working in GIS in some capacity for 15 years, including as a spatial ecologist with Audubon Alaska. He holds an M.S. in Conservation Biology & Sustainable Development from the University of Wisconsin and is currently completing his PhD in Environmental and Forest Sciences at the University of Washington.

Fieldwork has taken him from east Africa to central China and, more recently, the North Slope, the North Cascades, and Denali National Park and Preserve. His publications are similarly varied but revolve around themes of spatial conservation, climate change, and movement ecology.

When not playing with maps, Sullender can be found exploring Alaska’s mountains, coastlines, and rivers. He is an avid backcountry skier, packrafter, and hunter, and is slowly but surely building a cabin on the Kenai Peninsula along with his wife and their retired (and famous) sled dog Prusik. Contact Ben Sullender at [ben.sullender@audubon.org](mailto:ben.sullender@audubon.org).



Northern Pintail.

Photo: Tim Bowman

## Shorebird Festival and WHSRN Site Turns 35

By River Gates

At the 35th Annual Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival in May 2025, hundreds gathered in Cordova, Alaska to honor one of the most important migratory shorebird sites in the Western Hemisphere. The celebration marked 35 years since the Copper River Delta was designated a Site of Hemispheric Importance in the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN)—the first such site in Alaska and among the earliest in the network’s history. The four-day birding festival—featuring guided birding trips, art workshops, family activities, and community celebrations—honored a legacy of science, partnerships, and conservation.

The Copper River Delta is the largest contiguous wetland system along the Pacific Coast of North America. It consists of a network of glacially fed wetlands, rivers, and tide-water sloughs. Each spring, up to 5 to 8 million migratory shorebirds gather here to rest and refuel before continuing to Arctic and Boreal breeding grounds. During spring migration, the Copper River Delta supports the largest concentrations of Western Sandpipers and Dunlin along the Pacific Flyway.

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WHSRN is a coalition of over 125 critical shorebird sites in 17 countries, protecting more than 40 million birds annually. Sites are recognized at one of three levels—Regional, International, or Hemispheric—based on the number of shorebirds they support. Hemispheric sites, like the Copper River Delta, are the rarest and most significant, each hosting at least 500,000 shorebirds annually or 30% of a species’ biogeographic population.

During a special festival ceremony, Julia Salazar, Salt and Shorebird Specialist for the WHSRN Executive Office, presented commemorative certificates to long-time site partners: the U.S. Forest Service Chugach Forest, City of Cordova, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and Native Village of Eyak. Each partner plays a role in stewarding the delta’s ecosystems, which also support salmon, waterfowl, moose, and numerous other species of birds.

The 35th anniversary of the shorebird festival and the site designation underscored that conservation goes beyond habitat protection; it’s about building enduring relationships between people, communities, and landscapes. The Copper River Delta’s success stems from collaboration among government agencies, Alaska Native and Tribal corporations, scientists, and residents who share a commitment to sustaining its migratory bird populations and cultural heritage.

As the ceremony ended, one message resonated among the invited speakers: shorebird conservation transcends geography and cultures. It thrives in the connections we forge across borders, the knowledge we exchange, and the choices we make to protect what migratory shorebirds—and communities—need to thrive. The Copper River Delta’s three-decade legacy is a testament to what can be achieved when communities unite for the sake of both migratory birds and sustainable communities. ■



Photo: Erin Cooper/U.S. Forest Service

Left to right: Nancy Bird (retired President, Prince William Sound Science Center), Pete Mickelson (retired chairman of the Wildlife and Fisheries Program, University of Alaska Fairbanks), Kristin Smith (Mayor, City of Cordova), Jenell Larsen Tempel (Wildlife Biologist, Alaska Department of Fish and Game), Jen Youngblood (Chugach Forest Supervisor, U.S. Forest Service), Mary Anne Bishop (Research Scientist, Prince William Sound Science Center), Julia Salazar (Salt and Shorebird Conservation Specialist, Manomet), River Gates (Pacific Shorebird Conservation Coordinator, Audubon Alaska), and Steve Namitz (Chugach District Ranger, U.S. Forest Service).

# Yup'ik Dance Mask Connects Indigenous Tradition and Shorebird Conservation

By Lilitiana Naves

I froze in place as a long-billed shorebird, carved from wood, pixelated into place on my computer screen, revealing on its back a smiling yua spirit face. This powerful object, an old Yup'ik dance mask, has taken me on an unexpected journey across traditional Indigenous worldviews, art history, and shorebird conservation. Yup'ik dance masks were material of shamans' dreams and visions shaped into myriad beings, human and non-human, who mediated communication with the spiritual world during Agayuyaraq (way of requesting or praying for abundance), a communal ceremony whose primary purpose was to request abundant harvests. Yup'ik masked dances faded in the early 1900s, suppressed by Euro-American missionaries. I came upon this path via more mundane ways: researching the importance of shorebirds in Yup'ik culture in the context of management of subsistence bird harvest during my tenure with the Division of Subsistence of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

As a masterpiece of Yup'ik art, the shorebird mask was embraced by the French Surrealism movement. Nonetheless, post-collection descriptions disagreed with bird anatomy and the species that usually occur where this mask was collected. I craved to understand the iconography and meaning of the shorebird mask, how this mask portrays relations between Yup'ik people and shorebirds, and its socio-ecological context with continuity into the present. I researched shorebird ecology and related Indigenous knowledge, Yup'ik stories and songs, the mask's original context and potential mate masks, harvest patterns, and shorebird conservation history.

This study clarified suitable candidate species and suggested the Yup'ik name *sugg'erpak*—a long-billed shorebird—to describe the mask based on Indigenous ethnotaxonomy. A geographically concentrated harvest of godwits occurs where the mask was collected. The creation of the *sugg'erpak* mask from 1905 to 1916 matched a period of acutely depressed shorebird populations in North America because of intense commercial harvest and habitat loss. The representation of *sugg'erpak* on a dance mask is likely intended to facilitate communication with the spiritual world and request abundance, perhaps evoking or forecasting its scarcity.



Yup'ik dance mask representing a long-billed shorebird.

Photo: © musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, photo Pauline Guyon

Shorebirds provide supplemental food, relate to key Yup'ik cultural values, and are part of daily life. Animals, plants, lands, and waters are not just resources, but companions to whom Yup'ik people are inherently connected and depend upon. Art and material culture embody such worldviews and relations with the natural world.

Nowadays, shorebird populations are again acutely depressed. Traditional Indigenous worldviews guide environmental sustainability in the modern world. Naturally, Indigenous people are important partners in ongoing efforts for bird and shorebird conservation. I dream of a *sugg'erpak* mask being danced, paced by Yup'ik drums, as we envision and act for shorebirds in abundance, together. ■

## Where Ships Meet Seabirds

By Benjamin Sullender

Alaska's marine environment supports a staggering abundance and diversity of birdlife. But, in recent years, coastal residents and researchers alike have been seeing an abrupt uptick in the abundance and diversity of less welcome seasonal visitors: vessel traffic. Seabird biologist Kathy Kuletz, Michigan State University postdoc Kelly Kapsar, and I recently completed an analysis, published in *Conservation Biology*, that lays out when and where birds and boats are most likely to overlap.

A trifecta of factors seems to be drawing ships further north: declines in sea ice, increasing Arctic resource extraction, and shifting fisheries. This growth tacks on even more pressure to seabirds that are already acutely feeling the effects of climate change. Ships can collide with wildlife, discharge harmful pollutants, accidentally catch birds or marine mammals while targeting fish, or, in the worst-case scenario, spill oil.

We found that some new hazards are emerging, too. With longer ice-free shipping seasons, boats can now operate in the early fall, after the polar sun starts setting. The bright lights aboard these boats can distract and attract migrating birds unaccustomed to anthropogenic light sources. This can cause what mariners have taken to calling a "bird storm:" when a flock of birds gets ensnared by the vessel's light, with often fatal consequences.

The two places that jumped off the map for us are the Bering Strait and Unimak Pass, which is the easternmost entrance through the Aleutian Islands. Given Audubon Alaska's decades of work in the Bering Strait region, this is no surprise; it's a huge migratory bottleneck and breeding hotspot for tens of millions of birds. Unimak Pass is a newer focus for us, but the *Ecological Atlas of the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas* put it on our radar. Huge cargo ships and tankers of all types travel through this narrow corridor at the same time as foraging fulmars and shearwaters.

Overall, our paper presents a couple calls to action. First off, we found very little data on observed vessel-bird conflicts besides sporadic, anecdotal reports. Systematic, widespread reporting would help us track this emerging threat. Secondly, navigational measures like vessel routing plans and speed limits can be effective.

We don't want mariners to completely upend all their practices, but by carefully targeting actions like minimizing light pollution at the times and places that matter most to birds, we can make sure that our conservation efforts are effective in helping seabirds navigate our changing Arctic. ■



Photo: Jeff Williams / USFWS

A bird storm strikes the R/V *Tiglax* near Kasatochi Island in 2003.

Crested and Least Auklets near the Aleutian Islands.

Photo: Ian Jones

## Alaska's Audubon Chapters

Alaska hosts five National Audubon Society chapters where Audubon members and their friends and family can enjoy and protect local birds and nature.

### Anchorage Audubon Society

[anchorageaudubon.org](http://anchorageaudubon.org)

This summer, Anchorage Audubon volunteers led walks in the new Great Land Trust Potter Marsh Watershed Park, at the Independence Mine Family Day celebration, and guided Outside visitors on their birding trips to Anchorage. The Chapter is also involved in trying to save the wetland area in front of the Audubon Bench from the destruction planned by the re-routing of the Anchorage Coastal Trail. Saving this treasured habitat is our Chapter's current focus. ■

### Arctic Audubon Society

[arcticaudubon.org](http://arcticaudubon.org)

Arctic Audubon Society is celebrating new and continuing board members. Carissa Pienkowski became Program Chair and represented AAS as one of the northernmost chapters at the National Audubon Society Leadership Conference in Montréal this summer. Emily Donaldson also recently stepped up to co-lead our field trips. Emily has 10 years of professional experience in collaborative, climate adaptation, natural resource management, and environmental education. Finally, Gail Mayo is AAS's longest-serving board member and one of its 1980 founders. She fought for the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, helped organize bird-watching events, and continues to advocate for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Gail is currently active in writing a management plan for our 340-acre Audubon Riedel Nature Reserve. ■

### Juneau Audubon Society

[juneau-audubon-society.org](http://juneau-audubon-society.org)

Juneau Audubon Society is an independent non-profit organization in Southeast Alaska. Since 1977, JAS has been focused on birding, education, and conservation in Southeast Alaska with an all-volunteer board. This chapter offers seasonal field trips, lectures, and educational services. ■

### Kodiak Audubon Society

[kodiakaudubon.blogspot.com](http://kodiakaudubon.blogspot.com)

Kodiak Audubon had a good 2025. As usual, we taught Kodiak fifth graders about birds and then took them all birding. We conducted our annual Eagle Count, and we participated in Kodiak's Community Clean Up to keep our roads (and birding areas) pristine. The Kodiak Audubon Board will meet again this fall, but we've already mapped out our programs. In October, we'll be celebrating World Migratory Bird Day by building bird feeders with kids and hosting an ambassador bird from the Bird Treatment and Learning Center. We'll continue monitoring the subsistence bird hunting regulations, and for fun,

we'll be working on our Wingspan gaming skills, so we can host an Audubon game night. And of course, we'll keep making eBird entries from all the amazing habitats that Kodiak has to offer. ■

### Prince William Sound Audubon Society

[coppershorebird.com](http://coppershorebird.com)

Prince William Sound Audubon meets monthly from September to April. Our monthly meetings always include a presentation and are in collaboration with the Prince William Sound Science Center's Tuesday Night Science Talks. Our Christmas Bird Count has taken place for 53 years and is scheduled for the first weekend of the 2025 count. ■



Photo: Emily Donaldson

■ Arctic Audubon Society member at 12-Mile Summit on the Pinnell Mountain National Recreation Trail.



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## 2026 Bird of the Year Candidates

It's already time again! Voting is open till December 15, 2025 for Bird of the Year, and we're highlighting three special candidates: Dunlin, Lapland Longspur, and Sandhill Crane. Cast your vote, and graphic artist Eric Cline will illustrate the winner. See more information at [ak.audubon.org/birds/bird-of-the-year](https://ak.audubon.org/birds/bird-of-the-year). Meet your candidates!

### Dunlin



*Photo: Tim Bowman*

Vote for me, the Dunlin, a stand-out shorebird amongst flocks of thousands. I flock with all sorts – Western Sandpipers and Sanderlings are my BFFs. I'm an equal opportunity flockist. We'll blot out the sky with all our shorebird friends when we migrate, but only if you help protect the wetlands and mudflats that keep Alaska wild and thriving! ■

### Lapland Longspur



*Photo: Tim Bowman*

Representing Alaska's wide-open spaces, lush tundra, and Arctic fashion, I'm the Lapland Longspur running for the 2026 Bird of the Year! But even hardy birds like me face threats from policies pushing development into fragile Arctic habitats. Elect me as Bird of the Year, and I'll use my song to keep Alaska's tundra wild, thriving, and full of life! ■

### Sandhill Crane



*Photo: Ted Sears/Great Backyard Bird Count*

I'm the Sandhill Crane, living proof birds descended from dinosaurs – tall, elegant, and famous for my spectacular dances. But the wetlands we depend on are threatened by policies favoring development over conservation. Vote for me as Bird of the Year, and together we'll protect Alaska's wild places so future generations can keep marveling at us! ■