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Hope in the (Decreasing) Dark

By David Krause, Interim Executive Director

“Hope is not like a lottery ticket that you can sit on the couch and clutch, feeling lucky. ... Hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth’s treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope. ... To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable.”

Over a recent meal, my mother-in-law recently shared this remarkable passage by Rebecca Solnit. As daylight returns and continues to lengthen during these early days of 2024, hope will continue to be the inspiration behind Audubon Alaska’s work within the region and across the globe’s flyways. Hope drives our efforts to protect irreplaceable ecosystems and to change systems that threaten nature.

From America’s Arctic to the Tongass National Forest, we have big plans for the coming year. Alaska’s diverse ecosystems, cultures, and politics require unique and creative solutions for both nature and people—and that’s what we’ll continue to bring to the table. Among a host of ongoing projects, we aim to finalize a novel regulatory package to safeguard the Western Arctic’s 13 million acres of designated Special Areas, including the globally unique Teshekpuk Lake wetlands complex. We’ll be building off the success of our Southeast Alaska Birding Trail mobile app to further advance sustainable tourism within the region. And we’ll be working to ensure that places of tremendous ecological and cultural importance, like the Chilkat Valley, remain free of mining activities.

Thanks for your continued commitment to and support for Audubon Alaska. Your hope for birds, wildlife, and the places they need motivates us every day. Forward we go! ■



Snow Geese at Teshekpuk Lake Special Area in the Western Arctic. Photo: Killii Yuyan



Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*

Known as Ukpik in Iñupiat, the Snowy Owl is one of Alaska’s most charismatic—and probably best camouflaged—birds. However, data for the North American population indicate a decline: up to 50% from 1970 to 2019. A resident of the high Arctic tundra, the Snowy Owl breeds in the northern and Western Arctic, including the National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In 2023, the Biden administration took action to strengthen conservation protections in America’s Arctic (see Page 3).

Photo: Killii Yuyan

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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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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 eInena, 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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Save the Date: Arctic Refuge Virtual Birding Festival 2024

The 2024 Arctic Refuge Virtual Birding Festival will be the sixth annual opportunity to learn about the science, culture, and art of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This incredible place serves a vital role for birds that make their way to all 50 states across the country. We hope you will join us, our partners at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and bird lovers from across the country for this online festival highlighting the wildlife of the Arctic Refuge.



Photo: Mick Thompson

The online event will be held on August 28, 29, and 30. The theme, focal bird species, and partner wildlife refuges will soon be announced. For more information, visit arcticbirdfest.com or search the hashtag #ArcticBirdFest on Facebook, Instagram, and X. ■

Thank You, Evie Witten!

Audubon Alaska would like to express a heartfelt thank you to Evie Witten for her years of service to our state office, most recently as the chair of the advisory board. Evie's tenure has been marked by inspiration, steadiness during this time of transition, and an unwavering commitment to helping build sustainable communities across the state.

Of particular note, Evie helped to co-lead the creation of Audubon Alaska's Vision and Values, a guiding document that helps ensure that our work is carried out respectfully and inclusively.

Thanks for everything, Evie. We'll see you on the trails! ■



Evie Witten, Audubon Alaska's former chair of the advisory board.



Evie Witten in the Arctic Refuge, which you can check out remotely during the Arctic Refuge Virtual Birding Festival. Photo: Courtesy of Evie Witten

The Latest on America's Arctic

Fall 2023 was busy for Alaska's Arctic, to say the least. On September 6 the Department of the Interior announced a three-part suite of constructive and historic actions that would strengthen conservation protections and help address climate change in the only Arctic ecosystem in the United States.

The announcement regarded two regions in northern Alaska: the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (Arctic Refuge) and the National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska (NPR–A) or Western Arctic, together known as America's Arctic.

First, the Department of the Interior announced it was canceling the illegal Trump-issued oil and gas leases on the Coastal Plain of the 19.6 million-acre Arctic Refuge—announcement number one. The second announcement initiated the next steps in the much-needed process of reassessing the environmental impacts of the Refuge's Trump-era oil and gas leasing program. The Biden administration did this by issuing a draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) that better recognizes the conservation needs and cultural distinction of the Refuge, prompting a 60-day comment period.

The third announcement addressed the 23-million-acre NPR–A, the nation's largest tract of public land. Despite its unfortunate and misleading name, the landscape supports some of the most important avian habitat on the planet and is culturally irreplaceable for numerous communities across northern and western Alaska. The Western Arctic is home to five "Special Areas" (the Utukok River Uplands, Kasegaluk Lagoon, Colville River, Peard Bay, and Teshekpuk Lake), meaning areas of the Reserve with significant subsistence, recreational, fish and wildlife, or historical or scenic value.

Also on September 6, the Biden administration initiated a new conservation rule that would strengthen protections for the 13 million acres of designated Special Areas and establish a process for creating additional Special Areas within the region, prompting a 90-day comment period. Recently, large oil and gas projects, including the Willow



■ The Teshekpuk Caribou Herd near the Western Arctic Pipeline. Photo: Kiliii Yuyan

Master Development Plan, have been approved in the region, making the need for further protection timely and extremely important.

Audubon's Alaska Interim Executive Director, David Krause, and the Audubon Public Lands team have worked tirelessly to educate and brief administration officials about the threats to birds and to urge protections for priority habitats and sacred lands through these policy mechanisms. These efforts have been years in the making, and this advocacy is beginning to pay off for millions of acres of America's Arctic.

During the public process for both regions, Audubon heavily encouraged comments from the public. Audubon generated 26,408 comments during the Arctic Refuge public process that ran from September 8 to November 17. For the Western Arctic public process, open from September 8 to December 7, Audubon generated 19,675 comments.

Now Audubon's efforts are focused on delivering a final administrative rule that defines "maximum protection" for the Reserve's Special Areas. We are also working to develop new ways to better manage and steward this irreplaceable landscape. Stay tuned! ■



■ The Teshekpuk Caribou Herd in the Western Arctic. Photo: Kiliii Yuyan

Alaska's Federal Public Lands Updates

D-1 Lands

The Bureau of Land Management is currently considering the management direction of 28 million acres of federal public lands. Known as D-1 lands, Audubon is engaging in this important public process to ensure that irreplaceable habitats for fish, wildlife, and birds are not repurposed for extractive industrial development. During the 60-day comment period from December 15, 2023 to February 14, 2024, Audubon generated 32,158 comments urging the Bureau of Land Management to keep Alaska's D-1 protected lands intact.

Ambler Road

The proposed Ambler Access Project would be a 211-mile, 415-foot-wide private, industrial road connecting Dalton Highway to multiple planned open-pit copper mines in the Brooks Range. On October 13, the U.S. Department of the Interior released a new Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) examining the effects of the proposed Ambler Road on Indigenous communities, clean water, and wildlife in North America's largest protected and roadless region. Audubon Alaska is engaged in the litigation and campaign to stop Ambler Road's approval and working with three Tribal governments on the ecological and cultural importance of migratory birds that utilize the region. During the 60-day comment period from October 20 to December 19, 2023, Audubon generated 34,990 comments urging the Bureau of Land Management to prevent the construction of Ambler Road by choosing the No Action Alternative in its Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement.

Izembek National Wildlife Refuge

Last spring, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed a scoping period for a new Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for transportation alternatives through the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. As this environmental review process continues to move forward over the coming year, Audubon remains committed to ensuring that Izembek's designated Wilderness and globally recognized habitats are protected.



Arctic Refuge

As mentioned on Page 2, the Department of the Interior announced on September 6, 2023 that it was canceling the illegal Trump-issued oil and gas leases on the Coastal Plain of the 19.6 million-acre Arctic Refuge. That same day, the Department also initiated the next steps in the much-needed process of reassessing the environmental impacts of the Refuge's Trump-era oil and gas leasing program. The Biden administration did this by issuing a draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) that better recognizes the conservation needs and cultural distinction of the Refuge. This prompted a 60-day public process, during which Audubon generated 26,408 comments calling for the government's environmental review to comprehensively analyze culturally irreplaceable resources such as the Porcupine Caribou Herd. The ask also insisted that the analysis include the best available climate change science, and complete information on Indigenous ways of life.

Western Arctic

Also mentioned on Page 2, the Biden administration had a third September 6 announcement that addressed the 23-million-acre NPR-A and its Special Areas—areas of the Reserve with significant subsistence, recreational, fish and wildlife, or historical or scenic value. The Bureau of Land Management initiated a new conservation rule that would strengthen protections for the 13 million acres of designated Special Areas and establish a process for creating additional Special Areas within the region, prompting a 90-day comment period. During that public process, Audubon generated 19,675 comments urging the agency to ensure the strongest protections possible for the invaluable Utukok River Uplands, Kasegaluk Lagoon, Colville River, Peard Bay, and Teshekpuk Lake. Now Audubon's efforts are focused on delivering a final administrative rule that defines "maximum protection" for the Special Areas and seeks to develop new ways to better manage and steward places of importance within the region.

Tongass National Forest

The Tongass National Forest—the country's largest forest carbon sink, holding approximately 20% of all carbon stored in the United States National Forest system—is home to the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples and approximately 350 species of birds. In January 2022 the Biden administration fully restored Roadless Rule protections for more than 9.3 million acres of the Tongass. With the Roadless Rule in place and the completion of Audubon's Southeast Alaska Birding Trail mobile application, our work over the coming year will focus on fostering sustainable economic development.

Southeast Alaska Bird Trail—What’s Coming in 2024

In the last newsletter, we told you about the launch of the Southeast Alaska Birding Trail mobile application—the on-your-phone version of the virtual birding trail showcasing nearly 200 birding sites among 18 communities throughout Southeast Alaska. This first-of-its-kind app spotlights Southeast Alaska since it’s home to the Tongass National Forest, the Mendenhall Wetlands Important Bird Area, Glacier Bay National Park, and the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, and boasts more than 350 bird species.

When the app launched last summer with a presentation by its developer and Audubon Alaska GIS Analyst Victoria (Tory) Elmore on June 3, 2023 at the Yakutat Tern Festival in Yakutat, Alaska, we promised more to come in 2024.

At the moment, in version 1.1, the app offers a downloadable mobile map package with birding site details and directions, species checklists, search features, community bookmarks, and more—all accessible regardless of internet connection or cell service if downloaded in advance. (If you’ve ever been trying to spot a Queen Charlotte Goshawk in remote Prince of Wales Island, you know that’s a big deal.)

Over the coming year, we’ll be working to further improve the app and to grow its usage within the region. We plan to expand partnerships with local Southeast Alaska businesses,

including adventure guides and outfitters, to elevate the trail’s value. With the goal of fostering sustainable economic development built around the bioregion, we’re excited to highlight how birding tourism opportunities can strengthen economies while assisting in the shift away from resource extraction (i.e. mining, timber sales, etc.).

“If you look at the numbers, ecotourism—by many orders of magnitude—provides more jobs for Southeast Alaskans than the timber industry,” says Melanie Smith, Bird Migration Explorer Program Director at National Audubon Society, in a recent Audubon Magazine feature on the trail app. She helped create the trail in 2016 when she was with Audubon Alaska. “A birding trail is a contribution in that direction,” she says.

Those numbers—according to a study by Audubon Alaska and the University of Alaska Fairbanks—say that nearly 300,000 birdwatchers came to Southeast in 2016, spending \$378 million and supporting more than 4,000 jobs. In 2023, Alaska’s cruise industry drew nearly 1.7 million passengers to the region with no signs of slowing down in 2024.

The Southeast Alaska Birding Trail mobile application is available on phones and tablets in the App Store for iOS and Google Play for Android. Visit bit.ly/SEAKBT. ■



■ A Great Blue Heron in Ketchikan—a stop on the Southeast Alaska Birding Trail. Photo: Benjamin Limle

Alaska's Audubon Chapters

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

Anchorage Audubon Society anchorageaudubon.org

For Anchorage Audubon, 2023 was a banner year. We made a valiant effort to return to the way things were in the "Before Times." After years of isolation, the chapter returned to in-person monthly programs, field trips, and events. The Gunsight Mountain Hawkwatch Weekend was resurrected, and the Christmas Bird Count Tally Party made a comeback after an absence of three years. Last June, the chapter aimed for the moon and pulled off one of the biggest projects in the history of Anchorage Audubon when we gave away 10,000 White Spruce seedlings to help Anchorage bird habitat recover from the devastating Spruce Bark Beetle attack of the last few years. It was a good year for Anchorage Audubon, and we're glad to be back. ■

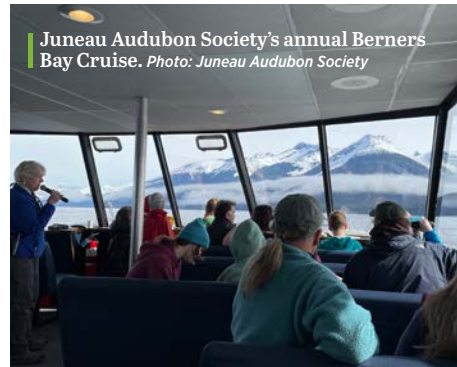


Northern Hawk Owl at Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge. Photo: Melanie Graeff

Arctic Audubon Society arcticaudubon.org

Arctic Audubon Society had a busy 2023 in and out of the field. An unusual field trip season began in May with a quiet Delta River wetlands, followed by a trip to our Audubon Riedel Nature Reserve, and ended in August with Murphy Dome alpine birds and blueberries trip canceled by forest fire. However, our popular Birding By Ear walk at Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge highlighted a Northern Hawk Owl pair atop a snag—everyone got a good view! Later, our December program was a photographic chronology as the Northern Hawk Owl

courted, nested, and raised a family. This year's Christmas Bird Count recorded only a single Northern Hawk Owl at Creamer's Field. In the fall, we turned out for a barrage of hearings and comments on Arctic Alaska federal public land issues focusing on Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain oil and gas leasing programs, Teshekpuk Lake and other Special Areas in NPR-A threatened by the Willow Project, and the proposed Ambler Road south of the Brooks Range. These choices are of earth-shattering proportions in conservation history. ■



Juneau Audubon Society juneauaudubon.org

JAS is looking forward to another productive year. A major accomplishment of 2023 was redesigning our website (juneauaudubon.org) which we will continue to update in 2024. Another accomplishment was updating our chapter bylaws to reflect our current efforts better. This year, we will continue our educational evening programs every month through April followed by the popular bird walks and field trips in the spring, including the Berners Bay Wildlife Cruise highlighting our local Important Bird Areas. This summer, we plan to host a Bird Studies and Conservation Intern. We also have been working on educational signage around Juneau about local bird life with other nonprofit partners while continuing to work on increasing outreach, furthering diversity equity, and inclusion, improving communication efforts, and focusing on conservation issues. ■

Kodiak Audubon Society kodiakaudubon.blogspot.com

KAS had another busy year offering outreach programs for kids and adults, including two hikes per weekend (June through August) despite the rainy weather. Then we learned that several rare species had landed on our shores (including Mountain Bluebirds) which kept us searching the lagoons, hoping for good photos. Our group has a strong conservation mission, and 2023 was especially challenging. We are working to protect public lands (with prime birding habitats) from Alaska Aerospace's bid to restrict public access. Our recent Winter Birds presentation provided our membership with a refresher on the birds we're likely to see during the annual Christmas Bird Count when Kodiak birders usually find over 75 species. ■



Prince William Sound Audubon Society coppershorebird.com

This volunteer, nonprofit organization located in Cordova provides monthly educational programs about birds and nature, especially when we work with the Prince William Sound Science Center for the Tuesday Night Talk winter lecture series. We are involved with the annual Christmas Bird Count as well as the Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival, happening this year from May 3 to 5 with keynote speaker Subhankar Banerjee. ■



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2024 Bird of the Year Candidates

It's that time again! Voting is open till Friday, March 29, for our 2024 Bird of the Year and we're highlighting three special candidates—Brant, Snow Bunting, and Marbled Murrelet. Cast your vote and graphic artist Eric Cline will illustrate the winner. See more information ak.audubon.org/birds/bird-of-the-year. Meet your candidates!

Brant

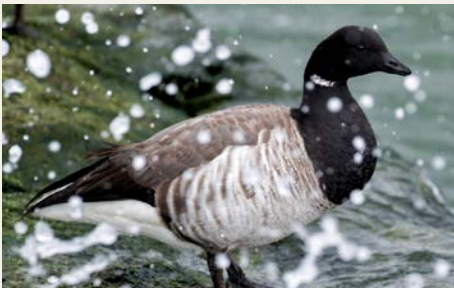


Photo: Matt Felperin/Audubon Photography Awards

I—a sociable goose with a penchant for Alaskan coastlines—am flapping into the race. Why vote for a Brant? Because I'm for Alaska. It's not just a scenic backdrop. Places like Teshekpuk Lake and Izembek Lagoon are our home, nursery, and buffet. Imagine your favorite eelgrass restaurant turned into a parking lot; that's how habitat loss feels to us! A vote for me is a vote for an undeveloped Alaska. ■

Marbled Murrelet



Photo: Milo Burcham

I aim to highlight the importance of the Roadless Rule repeal and protecting old-growth forests. A vote for me is a vote of gratitude toward conservation groups, a celebration of the country's largest forest carbon sink, and a commitment to the preservation of the Tongass National Forest. Together, let's safeguard the life thriving in Southeast Alaska's majestic coastal rainforest! ■

Snow Bunting



Photo: Shirley Donald/Audubon Photography Awards

Why does a frost-loving Snow Bunting deserve your vote? Aside from being adorable, I am the world's northernmost passerine species, proving how far I'm willing to go as 2024's Bird of the Year. I don't just love the cold; I represent the Arctic spirit—resilient, unique, and enchanting. A vote for me is a commitment to ensuring the Arctic remains a haven for all its winged inhabitants. ■