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## Murmurations That Motivate

By David Krause, Vice President for Alaska

Earlier this spring, with colleagues and family, I made my annual migration to the Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival in Cordova, Alaska. Late in the morning on our first full day, we found ourselves on the muddy shores of Hartney Bay, a coastal body of water about 5 miles outside of town. In front of us, the spectacle of shorebird migration was taking place in all of its splendor and magic.

With the purring of thousands upon thousands of wings, undulating waves of Western Sandpiper and Dunlin repeatedly took flight, flowed as one, and settled. Upon landing, some rested but many scurried and fed with the excited energy of birds on the move. We watched and listened, mostly without speaking, as the phenomenon played out at the water's edge.

As the tide retreated and birds began to disperse, it was hard for me not to think about the ecological and social conditions that enabled such a scene. In many ways, the festival and the community of Cordova exemplify what Audubon is working to achieve throughout Alaska and across the hemisphere.

In Cordova, you have a community and festival almost entirely built around a healthy, well-managed ecosystem. The region's rich waters support robust commercial fisheries, culturally irreplaceable resources for Indigenous communities, and places that draw tourists and their dollars from across the globe. At the shorebird festival, art, culture, science, and stewardship all came together to celebrate a natural wonder that provides astonishment and joy. Through all of this, Cordova seems to carry a humble sense of pride and relevance as a small coastal community that plays an outsized role in feeding premium wild seafood to the world, while also protecting the hemisphere's migratory birds.

We left Cordova motivated for all the necessary work that lies ahead to inspire communities' varied constituencies so that nature and migratory birds thrive. And like the birds, we'll be back on the mudflats of Hartney Bay next year. ■



Photo: Courtesy David Krause

Vice President for Alaska David Krause and his son at the 2024 Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival.



### Dunlin

*Calidris alpina arctica*  
and *pacifica*

Dunlin are a medium-sized sandpiper found throughout Alaska's coastal wetlands habitats. There are two breeding populations in Alaska and their ranges overlap near Point Hope. The *pacifica* nests in Western Alaska and spends the rest of the year on the Pacific Flyway. The *arctica* nests across the Arctic Coastal Plain and spends the rest of the year on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Teshekpuk Lake Special Area supports 19% of the global *arctica* population (Page 4) and the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve IBA sees 1% of the *pacifica* population during fall migration (Page 3). Both appear to have undergone declines in the last 40 years, especially the *arctica* population which has suffered an alarming rate of habitat loss.

Photo: Milo Burcham

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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 enena, the traditional land of the Dena'ina Athabascan, 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

The Audubon Alaska team has a few new faces.

## River Gates

Pacific Shorebird Conservation Initiative Coordinator



Photo: Siade Sappora

River joined Audubon in 2017 and has more than 20 years of experience in leading international shorebird conservation and research projects in the Pacific and East Asian-Australasian Flyways. She earned her M.S. in wildlife conservation from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 2011, studying the breeding and migration ecology of Dunlin. River co-created the Pacific Americas Shorebird Conservation Strategy and serves as the coordinator for the partnership. She advises shorebird conservation programs more broadly through her service on the following

executive councils: U.S. Shorebird Conservation Partnership, Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network's Hemispheric Council, and Western Hemisphere Shorebird Group. ■

## Hannah Gilmer

Outreach and Communications Advocate



Photo: Courtesy of

Hannah is from Nashville, Tennessee, and is currently a junior at Middlebury College in Vermont, majoring in Environmental Studies and Religion with a minor in Anthropology. At Middlebury, Hannah has become involved in local Vermont conservation efforts, learning about and fighting logging in the Telephone Gap, one of New England's oldest forests. She also spends her time at school providing college advising for low-income high school students empowering them to attend colleges where they will thrive. Outside of college, Hannah spends

much of her time running. She is planning to run her first marathon in Anchorage this summer! You can also find her hiking, skiing in the winter, listening to music and going to concerts, painting pottery, experimenting with new latte recipes, and playing with her two Australian Shepherds, Frank and Pepe. ■

## Christopher Simmons

Senior Manager, Public Lands Policy



Photo: Courtesy of

Christopher's primary focus is Alaska, Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. He specializes in mitigating climate change and wildlife impacts of energy development on federal public lands as well as implementing Tribal co-stewardship and co-management into federal land use planning. Prior to National Audubon Society, Christopher worked in upstream oil and gas essential health and safety regulations and policy. He's an alumnus of AmeriCorps, CU Boulder, and the University of Denver. He serves on Audubon's Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging staff

council and the EJays (Environmental Justice) Working Group to ground the organization's conservation work in equity of access. Additionally, he was appointed in 2022 by Colorado Governor Jared Polis to serve on the Orphaned Well Mitigation Enterprise Board for a term expiring September 1, 2025. As a lifelong Westerner, he values ease of access to nature and advocates for the remediation and restoration of our natural environment so future generations can enjoy its enduring beauty. ■

# Importance of the Chilkat Valley to Migratory Birds

Last summer, Bill DeLuca, Senior Manager of Migration Ecology at National Audubon Society, applied the Migration Passage Analysis to the 18,100-hectare Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve Important Bird Area. The analysis is a way to quantify just how important a site is for migratory birds by demonstrating if a site supports greater than or equal to 1% of the total North American population of any bird species.

To everyone's surprise, DeLuca and the other authors of the "Importance of the Chilkat Bald Eagle IBA Region to Migratory Birds" (read at [bit.ly/Chilkat-IBA-Migration](https://bit.ly/Chilkat-IBA-Migration)) report found 18 species reaching or surpassing the 1% threshold.

During spring migration, those species are Surf Scoter (18%), Glaucous-winged Gull (2%), Barrow's Goldeneye (2%), Western Sandpiper (2%), and Bonaparte's Gull (2%). Species that hit the 1% mark are Trumpeter Swan, Rock Sandpiper, White-winged Scoter, Varied Thrush, American Pipit, and of course Bald Eagle. During fall migration, the study area sees Surf Scoter (9%), Glaucous-winged Gull (6%), Sharp-shinned Hawk (3%), and Bald Eagle (2%). Species hitting the 1% mark are Trumpeter Swan, Bonaparte's Gull, Horned Grebe, Northern Goshawk, Dunlin, Golden Eagle, Harlequin Duck, and American Wigeon.

The Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve IBA is located near the Chilkat Indian Village of Klukwan and the community of Deishú (Haines) in Southeast Alaska. It's home to the world's largest congregation of Bald Eagles, the annual Alaska Bald Eagle Festival, and the Jilkaat Kwaan Cultural Heritage Center and Bald Eagle Preserve Observatory. What's more,

Audubon played an instrumental role in the Preserve's formation in 1982.

So the area is known for Bald Eagles and, as we've proven, tons of other birds, but that's just a fraction of what occurs here.

"The [Chilkat] valley hosts the most mammal species in Alaska (we're up to 39 after a fisher was trapped here last winter), the most bird species detected in Alaska during the annual United States Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey, and the most vascular plant species found in Alaska," says Stacie Evans, Science Director at Takshanuk Watershed Council.

"The Chilkat Valley is one of the most biodiverse places in Alaska," says Lani Strong Hotch, an award-winning textile artist and Chilkat Indian Village-proclaimed culture bearer. "We live amongst all these birds and animals and they're part of our daily life. We respect them and appreciate them, and they add to our life experience and quality of life."

But the region is under threat by the Palmer Project, a proposed mixed metals mine that would be built at the headwaters of the Chilkat Watershed. Shannon Donahue, Executive Director of Great Bear Foundation, says it is incredibly risky to develop a volcanogenic mass sulfide deposit because of its acid-generating rock.

Learn more about the Migration Passage Analysis, the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve IBA, and the threats of – and advocacy against – the proposed Palmer Mine at [bit.ly/Chilkat-IBA-Migration](https://bit.ly/Chilkat-IBA-Migration). ■



The Chilkat Valley on Jilkaat Aani.

# O N E H E C K

One special morning (April 19, to be exact), the Department of the Interior made two important announcements: Protections were strengthened for 13 million acres of Special Areas in the Western Arctic, and the “No Action Alternative” was selected in the proposed Ambler Road permit process. Here’s a breakdown.

## Special Areas of the Western Arctic

A new rule strengthening protections for 13 million acres of “Special Areas” in the National Petroleum Reserve–Alaska (NPR–A) was finalized. The rule also creates a process for designating new special areas within the Western Arctic—a region that is home to numerous Alaska Native communities and one of the most important habitats for birds and wildlife on the planet.

“This rule is critical to protecting the Western Arctic,” said Marshall Johnson, Chief Conservation Officer at National Audubon Society. “As the Arctic rapidly warms, these new regulations will ensure that critical bird habitats like the Teshekpuk Lake Special Area will be resilient in the face of climate change. It is long past time that these lands and waters are given maximum protection.”

Alaska’s Western Arctic has five “Special Areas” that are designated locations within the 23-million acre NPR–A with significant subsistence, recreational, fish and wildlife, or historical or scenic value. The Special Areas include the Utukok River Uplands, Kasegaluk Lagoon, Colville River, Peard Bay, and Teshekpuk Lake—a crucial place for birds.

To recap, this follows a Biden administration announcement from September 6, 2023 that stated the BLM was to initiate a new conservation rule to strengthen protections for Special Areas and establish a process for creating additional Special Areas within the Western Arctic. This prompted a 90-day comment period during which time Audubon generated 19,675 comments urging the agency to ensure the strongest protections possible for these invaluable regions of the Western Arctic. ■



Caribou at Teshekpuk Lake Special Area.

Photo: Kilifi Yuyan

# O F A D A Y !

## The Brooks Range and Ambler Road

The Biden administration formally acknowledged that no Ambler Road is the best path forward for the Brooks Range by selecting the “No Action Alternative” in the proposed road’s permit process. More than 135,000 Americans—dozens of communities, nonprofits, and companies, more than 82% testimony at hearings in Alaska, and 88 individual Indigenous governments across the region—supported this in the recent comment period. A Record of Decision was issued on June 28.

“The announcement is consequential and demonstrates that the Biden administration follows Western science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge to make informed decisions about truly irreplaceable places. The wild and fully intact ecosystem of the proposed Ambler Road corridor is of both local and hemispheric importance as the lands and waters of this region support important subsistence resources like the Western Arctic Caribou Herd and nesting habitat for birds that migrate to distant places like Peru and Colombia,” says David Krause, Vice President for the Alaska Program. “The cumulative effects of roads and mining are enormous. The proposed Ambler Road would have fundamentally compromised the ecological and cultural values of the region.”

The Ambler Access Project would have been a private industrial corridor that would connect the Dalton Highway to multiple planned open-pit copper mines. It would cut through Native corporation, BLM, and state lands, plus 26 miles of the Gates of the Arctic National Park. This part of Alaska—the Brooks Range, Gates of the Arctic National Park, and the surrounding region—is home to the Western Arctic Caribou Herd and the Kobuk and Koyukuk river fisheries. These are two critical food sources for the surrounding Indigenous and rural communities. The way of life for 66 Alaska Native villages would have been directly impacted by the road and upstream open-pit mining activities. ■



■ The Brooks Range.

## Western Alaska's Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Is Big ... for Arctic-Breeding Shorebirds

The following is a well-established fact: Most North American shorebirds have declined significantly since the 1970s. However, information about the abundance and trend of many shorebird populations is still unknown. With that, let's zoom in on one region of southwestern Alaska, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (YKD).

This area—roughly the size of Maine—is the ancestral land of the Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Deg Xit'an peoples and home to 50 Indigenous communities. The region's ecological importance to birds has been prioritized and elevated by its designation as a site of hemispheric importance by various parties. YKD is partially the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge and has two global Important Birds Areas (IBA)—Central Yukon-Kuskokwim IBA and Yukon River Delta IBA. It's also a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) and an East Asian-Australasian Flyway Network site.

According to WHSRN, more than 500,000 shorebirds use the refuge annually, including over 30% of the global population of Bar-tailed Godwit and Bristle-thighed Curlew. Limited data indicates that the YKD has high densities of breeding shorebirds as well, but the area hadn't been thoroughly surveyed until 2015 and 2016. The result of the research can be found in the recent journal article "Alaska's climate sensitive Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta supports seven million Arctic-breeding shorebirds, including the majority of six North American populations" (read at [bit.ly/YKD-Shorebirds](https://bit.ly/YKD-Shorebirds)). The paper also reports that the YKD is important to 21 shorebird species. Here

you'll find most of North America's breeding Pacific Golden-Plovers, Black Turnstones, Western Sandpipers, and Dunlin.

One co-author is Audubon's own River Gates, Pacific Shorebird Conservation Initiative Coordinator. Gates' role in the research was to redesign the survey protocols and develop a standardized database for the field data collected by co-authors in the field (like Rick Lanctot, Alaska Region Shorebird Coordinator with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

"We have known for a long time that the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta hosts millions of shorebirds," Gates says, "but this study allowed us to systematically survey the region and generate shorebird precise population estimates to improve management of the refuge."

The paper also emphasizes how the region is under various threats from climate change. The region is susceptible to intensifying weather events and rising sea levels. The resulting habitat loss and degradation at estuaries and delta ecosystems could be driving population declines for many species.

Looking ahead, these results will be helpful for conservation planning. That means "The information [from the study] is useful for setting global population numbers," Gates says, "which are used frequently to justify the protection of critically important sites for birds." ■



Bristle-thighed Curlew.

# 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 spring, the Anchorage Audubon Society is proud to have brought migrating birds back to Alaska for the 250,000th year in a row! We were also proud to present the best weather for the Gunsight Mountain Hawkwatch Weekend party in years. It was gorgeously sunny and warm and featured a near-record flight of over 250 hawks in one day. The chapter continues its monthly natural history programs, participation in educational activities such as the BLM Outdoor Week for sixth graders, field trips, birding competitions, and providing local guides for visiting Outside birders. We look forward to another season of "Spreading the Bird Word" throughout our area. ■



Photo: Courtesy Arctic Audubon Society

An Arctic Audubon Society bird walk.

## Arctic Audubon Society [arcticaudubon.org](http://arcticaudubon.org)

Arctic Audubon's work at our Audubon Riedel Nature Reserve has ramped up with a technical assistance award from the National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program to create a guiding plan for the management of the reserve. This is thanks to the work of long-time board member Gail Mayo and our volunteer Reserve manager Darla Theisen. We held a public program about its history and have hosted four field trips so far this year. Additionally, we're involved in a new climate change research project by Dr. Sarah Ellen Johnston with the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Department of

Chemistry & Biochemistry to look at headwater streams and ponds influenced by discontinuous permafrost thaw and whether these environments are sources of carbon to the atmosphere. Brennan Grahan, another UAF researcher, continues automated recording in the Reserve to study how air quality changes from forest fires may affect boreal bird detection rates. We sample ponds and streams across the Fairbanks area spanning the discontinuous permafrost region to collect data on a range of small streams and ponds. ■



Photo: Lauren Cusimano

Mendenhall Wetlands.

## Juneau Audubon Society [juneau-audubon-society.org](http://juneau-audubon-society.org)

JAS continues to work diligently on the conservation of the natural ecosystems of Southeast Alaska while focusing on birds and other wildlife. Year-round educational opportunities such as bird and natural history field trips, cruises, evening programs, and other events continue as well as our summer bird research through the work of our Bird Studies and Conservation Intern.

Conservation issues such as habitat protection of the Mendenhall Wetlands, window collision deterrents, and bird-friendly coffee have been at the forefront. Community partnerships with the University of Alaska Southeast, Southeast Alaska Land Trust, and Trail Mix, Inc. support our efforts to safeguard birds and their habitat, connect with other conservation-minded individuals and groups, and share the pleasure of birding with others. Thank you to our hard-working board and volunteers who make all this happen! ■

## Kodiak Audubon Society [kodiakaudubon.blogspot.com](http://kodiakaudubon.blogspot.com)

For the 36th year, the Kodiak Audubon Society offered a classroom presentation about birds to local fifth graders, followed by a field trip through five different birding habitats. Audubon volunteers provided binoculars and set up scopes to help the kids identify birds as they walked along. Spring is an ideal time to help our young people learn about birds, especially those that nest on the ground. This awareness might help save a nest or two from people and ATVs this summer. Every year on World Migratory Bird Day, we help kids build feeders to attract our feathered friends into the neighborhoods. Our summer hiking program offers an event that focuses on bird identification by listening to their songs. Other hikes include watching the migrating Gray Whales, following coastal trails, and climbing local mountains. Come join us this summer in Kodiak. ■




Flock of shorebirds.

Photo: Milo Burcham

## Prince William Sound Audubon Society [coppershorebird.com](http://coppershorebird.com)

The Prince William Sound Audubon Society is a volunteer, nonprofit organization located in Cordova that provides monthly educational programs about birds and nature. They are involved with the annual Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival and the annual Christmas Bird Count. ■

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## 2024 Bird of the Year

After a harrowing election season, the Snow Bunting (whose Iñupiaq names include Amaulligaaq, Amautligaq, Avataligauraq, and Avatalik) has won Audubon Alaska's 2024 Bird of the Year! Here's a word from your appointed public servant:

"It's an honor to be elected as 2024's Bird of the Year. I'm not just the world's northernmost passerine species and a bird who loves the cold. I represent the spirit of the Arctic: resilient, unique, and utterly enchanting. As your Bird of the Year, I am committed to safeguarding our Arctic homes and ensuring Alaska remains a haven for all its winged inhabitants."

Looking for 2024 Bird of the Year gear?  
We have hats! Check out  
[audubon-alaska.square.site](https://audubon-alaska.square.site). ■

