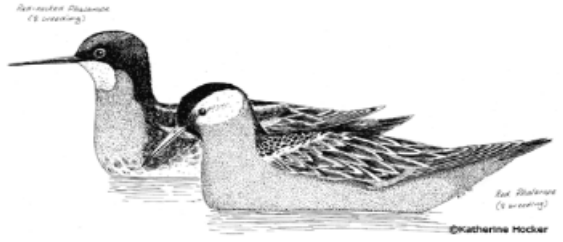




Phalaropes

Phalaropes (pronounced FAL-ah-ropes) are medium-sized shorebirds found throughout Alaska. Although all three species of phalaropes occur in the state, only the **red phalarope** (*Phalaropus fulicaria*) and the **red-necked phalarope** (*P. lobatus*) are common. **Wilson's phalarope** (*P. tricolor*), the third and largest species, is an occasional visitor to southeastern and central Alaska.

Phalaropes differ from other Alaskan shorebirds in that they are exceedingly tame and can be approached easily. They are highly aquatic and are often noted for spinning in circles while feeding on water (in fact, one Native name for this bird, *Nimishuruk*, means "spins in a circle"). Males and females reverse normal parental roles. Males shoulder the work of incubating and rearing young, allowing females to produce multiple sets of eggs, have multiple mates, or quickly replace destroyed eggs. This special system provides a unique strategy for coping with problems associated with nesting in the northland, including unpredictable weather and occasional high losses of eggs to predators.



For most of the year, phalaropes live at sea, principally off the coasts of southern South America and Africa. The birds migrate to Alaska in spring to nest and raise their young. Red-necked phalaropes (known to Alaska Natives as *Kaiyiorgon* and *Sabra-nna*) nest from Yakutat northward to the Arctic coast and westward to the Aleutian Islands. Red phalaropes (also known as *Auksruak* and *Sabra*) nest in areas of coastal Alaska from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta northward.

General description: Phalaropes are relatively small birds; a large one weighs one-tenth of a pound (45 g). Females are 20 percent larger and are more colorful than males. During breeding season, a red phalarope has rusty-red underparts, a dark crown, a white eye patch, and a yellow bill with a dark tip. A breeding red-necked phalarope has a white belly with a slate-gray back, sides, and crown; a rust-red neck; and a dark slate-gray bill. In winter, both species have slate-colored backs, dark bills, and white underparts and head which makes differentiation difficult. Both species have conspicuous white wing stripes in all plumages. The scalloped lobes on their toes make swimming easy.

Main habitats: Red-necked phalaropes nest in coastal and alpine marshes and muskeg. Nesting red phalaropes are limited to coastal marshes and are rarely found more than 40 miles (64 km) from the coast. During spring and fall migration, phalaropes can be found in all marine waters of the state. In autumn, large concentrations (10,000 or more) of these birds are not uncommon in nearshore waters. From late July through August, red phalaropes are often the most abundant shorebirds along the Beaufort Sea coast.

Life history: Unlike most other Alaskan birds (except, perhaps, the spotted sandpiper), male and female phalaropes reverse normal parental roles. Males alone incubate the eggs and tend the young. Females, meanwhile, may mate with other males or return to the sea. Females have been known to produce four sets of eggs in the same nesting season; the total weight of these 16 eggs is about twice the female's body weight!

Phalarope nests are typically located on the ground near water. Males and, to a limited extent, females scratch out a small depression in the ground and then line it with grasses, dead leaves, and lichen. Males add to this lining during the egg-laying period and early incubation.

The typical clutch size is four eggs, laid one per day. Incubation begins with the laying of the third egg and usually lasts from 18 to 23 days. Since only the male incubates the eggs, he has limited time for feeding. Males seen feeding hurriedly (two pecks per second) are often ones tending nests. After hatching, the downy chicks are led from the nest by the male. He may remain with the chicks for as long as 14 days, warming them when they are cold, leading them to food, and warning them of predators. The young feed themselves, grow rapidly, and are able to fly when 18 to 21 days old.

Approximately 10 percent of adult red phalaropes and 50 percent of adult red-necked phalaropes return to the same nesting locations in successive years, and they occasionally mate with the same partners. Unlike other shorebirds, phalaropes are not territorial. However, during the nesting season, mates may be vigorously defended. This behavior reinforces the bond between the mated birds. Home ranges vary from one to ten acres or more and overlap greatly.

Predators on the nesting ground include foxes, weasels, jaegers, gulls, and owls. Jaegers can capture and feed on phalaropes at sea. Occasionally there is mass mortality of phalaropes at sea due to starvation. Some phalaropes probably live for ten or more years.

Food: Phalaropes are visual hunters. During the summer, their diet is principally freshwater insects and other invertebrates. The birds swim or walk in shallow water or at pond edges and pick adult or larval insects (such as midges and crane flies) from the vegetation or the water. When feeding in deeper water, phalaropes sometimes swim rapidly in a small circle and create a vortex. As food items are raised from the depths, the birds peck from the center of the circle.

At sea, these birds feed on zooplankton such as krill, copepods, arrow worms, and amphipods. Phalaropes sometimes associate with other animals, such as gray whales and oldsquaw ducks, which apparently stir up food from the bottom while feeding. Phalaropes have even been seen gleaning parasites from the backs of whales.

Economic and ecological value: There is little economic value attached to phalaropes. Although they are reported to be a delicacy, they are quite small and are seldom used for food. They are an integral part of both terrestrial and marine ecosystems and, in some areas of Alaska, are the most abundant avian foragers on insects or zooplankton. Nearly one million red phalaropes visit Alaska each year; an equal or greater number of red-necked phalaropes also establish seasonal residency in Alaska's wetlands.

Management: Since phalaropes are widespread throughout their preferred nesting habitats, there are currently no pressing management concerns with respect to the terrestrial habitat. However, responsible development practices that preserve viable coastal ecosystems are necessary to sustain healthy phalarope and other shorebird populations as human development spreads over more of coastal Alaska. One problem already observed is attraction of foxes to artificial food sources in developed areas. A concentration of foxes can cause very high predation losses to phalarope nests in these areas. During migration at sea, these birds concentrate in tide rips, along convergence lines, in leads in the ice, along spits, and in lagoons. Here, they are potentially susceptible to oiling, as spilled oil tends to concentrate in these same marine habitats. Experiments have shown that phalaropes can rapidly learn to avoid small patches of oil, but only after an initial learning period. Destruction or depletion of their marine invertebrate food sources would be critical for the birds.