

Wildlife Viewing Seasonal Calendar

Northern Alaska

January

During winter, Arctic foxes disperse widely over the pack ice to feed on seal carcasses left by polar bears. Some also frequent towns, garbage dumps, and camps to scavenge food.

Polar bears usually range over the pack ice though individuals occasionally wander along the coast and into villages. Females with young remain in dens.

February

In February and March, wolverines bear their young, usually in snow caves. A litter averages 2 to 3 kits, which remain with their mother until fall.

A few spring-fed streams in the Brooks Range remain open through winter and American dippers may remain for most of the year feeding on insect larvae they pick off the rocks.

March

Arctic foxes begin breeding in March and pairs of animals may be observed. Pups are born in May in dens excavated by the adults in sandy, well-drained soils.

Female polar bears with young emerge from their dens by late March or early April. After the cubs acclimate to outside temperatures, the

group travels to areas in the drifting sea ice in search of food.

April

Alaska marmots emerge from winter hibernation—their long piercing whistles can be heard up to two miles away.

Bowhead whales begin migrating from the Bering Sea to the Beaufort Sea using leads (or openings) in the ice. They are often seen in nearshore leads.

Non-pregnant female caribou shed their antlers while pregnant females and young retain their antlers until May or June. Females and young of the previous year begin congregating in preparation for spring migration.

The first eiders and glaucous gulls arrive and land in offshore leads in the pack ice. Ravens remain common around villages. Gyrfalcons begin setting up nesting territories, particularly along inland river bluffs. In late April, ptarmigan flocks begin dispersing to nest. Flocks of thousands may be seen in some mountain passes and river drainages with dense willows.

Migrant glaucous gulls and eider flocks often fly over

spits of land along the coast. Snow buntings arrive and begin singing during April and early May.

May

Wolf pups are born during May and adults may be seen away from the den on hunting trips. Arctic foxes begin losing their white winter pelage and don a brown and cream summer coat. Collared lemmings molt into summer pelage.

Caribou begin migrating to calving areas on the wet tundra of the coastal plain. Females and young travel together, while males form separate bands. Brown bears emerge from winter hibernation. Dall sheep lambs are born in May in the Brooks Range. They can be seen along the Haul Road (Dalton Highway) near the Dietrick River and other steep cliff areas.

This is the best time of year to observe bears, wolves, foxes, and wolverines as they are easy to spot against the background of remaining snow.

Beluga whales heading east along the coast of northern Alaska may be observed in nearshore leads. They can also

be seen along the west coast in the Chukchi Sea.

Intense king and common eider migration occurs in May as birds move from wintering in the North Pacific and Bering Sea to breeding areas in Northern Alaska and Canada. Huge flocks fly along coastal leads. Rock and willow ptarmigan begin their raucous courtship cackling. Males have brown heads but their bodies and wings remain white, while females are all brown during courtship.

In mid- to-late May, waterfowl migration intensifies. Greater white-fronted geese, brant, northern pintails, and long-tailed ducks migrate in large flocks along the coast and through mountain passes and river valleys. Pomarine, parasitic, and long-tailed jaegers migrate along the coast and through major mountain passes.

June

Caribou calve in wet tundra on the coastal plain from late May through early June. Calving caribou are sensitive to disturbance.

Ringed and bearded seals begin to shed their coats and haul out on the ice to bask in the sun. Beluga whale migration along the coast continues. These white whales may be visible along barrier

islands or from over-looking bluffs.

Arctic fox pups are born in soil dens dug out in riverbanks, pingos, and high-center polygons. Foxes may begin feeding on birds and bird nests in addition to lemmings, voles, and carcasses. Major sheep concentrations occur in localized areas of the Arctic National Wildlife Range. Look for singing voles in flood plains with willow.

Eider, brant, greater white-fronted goose, northern pintail, and long-tailed duck migration continues. Shorebirds and Lapland longspurs arrive in early June. Spectacular courtship displays of a variety of birds can be observed. Look for long-billed dowitchers, pectoral, Baird's, semipalmated, and white-rumped sandpipers, lesser, golden and black-bellied plovers, Lapland longspurs, and snow buntings. Watch for horned lark, wheatear, yellow wagtail, whimbrel, and red knot in alpine tundra. Look for the rare buff-breasted sandpiper on dry tundra ridges. Lapland longspurs, among the first birds to nest, are feeding chicks by mid-June.

In years of high lemming populations, pomarine, parasitic, and long-tailed jaegers and snowy and short-eared owls may be abundant on the coastal tundra during

June. Brant, greater white-fronted geese, and tundra swans court and lay eggs during the first week of June. They occur in wet tundra and coastal wetlands. Pacific and red-throated loons lay eggs during mid-June. Courtship and nesting begin in mid- to late June. Long-tailed ducks and brant from Canada and southern parts of Alaska begin migrating along the coast to molting areas. Long-tailed ducks concentrate in lagoons.

July

Caribou bulls band together with cows and young. These herds often move to windy coastal areas to escape insect harassment. Sometimes frenzied animals run for long distances to escape insects.

Arctic fox pups emerge from dens and may travel short distances. Watch for red-backed voles in rocky areas and singing voles in willow thickets. Arctic ground squirrels are easy to see near their burrows in well-drained soil along rivers.

Brown bears often travel along streams with low willows where they hunt ground squirrels and singing voles.

Look for gray and killer whales along the coast as most nearshore Arctic Ocean waters become ice-free.

Common eiders, long-tailed and other ducks are incubating eggs. Male ducks depart to molting areas. Sandpiper eggs begin hatching in early July. Distraction displays by adults are more intense. Huge flocks of westward-migrating drake eiders form on days of favorable weather; they often fly along barrier islands. Brant, greater white-fronted goose, and tundra swan broods hatch in early July. Pectoral sandpiper males begin westward migration; often, large flocks occur in wet tundra.

Female red and red-necked phalaropes begin staging along barrier island beaches. Molting drake long-tailed ducks concentrate in the thousands in coastal lagoons. Red-throated loons fly to and from the coast to carry fish to their young. Listen for their characteristic quack call. From mid-July to August, brant, Canada, and greater white-fronted geese molt their wing feathers in large lake basin complexes of the coastal tundra. Huge numbers of red and red-necked phalaropes stage along barrier island coasts. Peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, and northern harriers fledge young.

August

Caribou begin migrating back to the foothills in early to mid-August. Wolf pups are moved from dens to

rendezvous sites in tall-shrub thickets. They are left at these sites while the adults hunt.

In late August, gray whales begin migrating west and southward. Look for them in Chukchi Sea areas.

Muskoxen begin rut in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Singing voles build forage piles of grasses. Some piles contain eight to ten gallons of grass. Look for them along alpine slopes, river valleys, and in tall-shrub thickets. Late August and early September are a good time to observe furbearers because their brown coats stand out against early snows. Young long-billed dowitchers, and western, semipalmated, and pectoral sandpipers occur in flocks on exposed mud of drying wet tundra or in salt marshes along the coast. August is the best month for spotting rare and accidental birds in northern Alaska. Snow buntings and Lapland longspurs begin flocking together in preparation for southward migration. Arctic terns and black-legged kittiwakes begin staging in flocks of thousands and migrating along the coast and barrier island-lagoon systems.

Large flocks of snow geese gather from nesting grounds in Canada and move on to the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Female and juvenile eiders migrate along the coast in

peak numbers of up to 1,000 or more during late August. Thick-billed murre, other alcids, and short-tailed shearwaters occur in offshore and nearshore Chukchi Sea waters. Large flocks of dunlin congregate in mudflats and salt marsh areas prior to fall migration.

September

Arctic foxes, collared lemmings, and ermines begin turning white as winter approaches. Wolf pups begin traveling with the pack on hunting trips. Use a spotting scope to scan alpine hillsides and ridges. Caribou bulls have full racks, shed their velvet, and begin aggressive rut behavior. Also, caribou herds begin migrating to wintering grounds. Most northern herds winter on the south side of the Brooks Range.

Look for migrating Pacific, red-throated, and yellow-billed loons along the barrier islands. Greater white-fronted and Canada geese migrate southeast through mountain passes and the MacKenzie River Valley of Canada. Spectacular migrations of glaucous gulls migrating south occasionally occur along the coast. Watch for Thayer's gulls mixed in with them. Willow and rock ptarmigan have turned white. Flocks of hundreds often gather in tall-shrub thickets and moist tundra.

Long-tailed ducks migrate along the coast in late September. Overwhelming numbers pass along the coast during favorable weather as these birds surge out of the north barely ahead of freeze-up. Watch for them along points of land, barrier islands, and from ships.

October

Collared lemmings, Arctic foxes, snowshoe hares, and ermines are in full winter pelage. Caribou rut occurs. Moose are in rut. Males with full antlers spar in tall-shrub thickets. Males can be dangerous at this time of year, so maintain a safe distance. Brown bears enter dens for a period of winter dormancy. They occasionally emerge from their dens during winter. Arctic or tundra hares have long white fur. This bigger hare, compared to the snowshoe hare, can be found in upland tundra. Hundreds of Ross' gulls occur offshore near Point Barrow and other coastal spits of land, providing a unique opportunity to view this pink Siberian bird. Long-tailed ducks may remain in large numbers if open water is available.

November

Pregnant female polar bears seek out dens in snow along the coast or on the pack ice. Dall sheep begin rut in alpine

areas. Moose begin losing their antlers.

Watch for common ravens around villages, and gyrfalcons and snowy owls in inland areas. Large flocks of ptarmigan occur in tall-shrub thickets.

December

Adult caribou males shed their antlers during November and December and are antlerless by January. Pregnant females and young retain their antlers through the spring. Dall sheep occur mainly on windswept ridges where they feed on exposed grasses, lichens, and herbaceous plants. Scan windswept areas carefully.

Polar bear young are born, but remain in the den. Males and non-pregnant female bears are active but are dispersed over the pack ice and rarely seen.

Few birds remain in northern Alaska during winter. Common ravens can be observed around inland towns. Gulls, black guillemots and other web-footed diving seabirds that belong to the Alcidae family may linger near leads in the pack ice. Inland, watch for gyrfalcons and snowy owls. Flocks of 100 or more willow and rock ptarmigan gather in tall-shrub thickets along river bottoms.

Other resources:

Wildlife Viewing Program:
www.wildlifeviewing.alaska.gov

State of Alaska Travel Info:
www.travelalaska.com

Alaska Public Lands
Information Centers:
www.alaskacenters.gov

Alaska State Parks:
www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks

Alaska Marine Highway:
www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs

US Forest Service:
www.fs.usda.gov/r10

