

Birds of Passage

by Thomas Rothe



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As Alaskans, we are all too often frustrated by being left off maps of the United States or being regarded as "foreigners" in the eyes of the lower 48ers. But in some respects, notably for strategic defense, Pacific Rim trade, and international air travel, Alaska is a major crossroads of the northern hemisphere. The circumstances of our geography also make Alaska a converging point of migration paths and the summer destination of millions of birds.

The exceptional diversity and abundance of our summer birds can be attributed to Alaska's physical connections to the rest of the world, the history of the earth's surface, and even to the midnight sun. Birds are guided to Alaska northward along the Pacific coast and the Rocky Mountains, eastward from Asia along the Aleutians and Gulf Coast warmed by the Japanese current, and around the edge of the Arctic Ocean. The closeness of Siberia where the Bering land bridge once connected the continents brings frequent visits by European and Asian birds.

Alaska's present array of birds is a result of a long history of occupation by some species and a pioneering northward of species from other parts of North America. During the last ice age (about 10,000 years ago) much of Alaska's north and west coasts were not covered by the advancing glaciers, and it is likely that swans, geese, and other birds were migrating across the ice sheet in spring and fall. Isolation of these species on the northern nesting grounds contributed to the formation of separate species, such as trumpeter and tundra (whistling) swans, or subspecies groups like the six kinds of Canada geese that are found in different parts of Alaska. As the ice retreated, nesting grounds and migration routes were fixed by tradition in many birds, and new habitats were uncovered for pioneers to occupy.

Many of the world's birds have developed a strategy of migration to take advantage of rich seasonal food resources for raising their young in the high latitude summers and mild weather of equatorial areas for the non-breeding season. Although most of Alaska and northern Canada are locked in ice and snow most of the year, the long days of summer provide 24-hour daylight for growing plants, emerging insects, and moving fish—all important foods for nesting birds and their young. In addition,

Alaska's extensive coastline and numerous rivers form a broad complex of habitats that are "fed" by nutrient-rich waters from the ocean and interior. Not surprisingly, most of Alaska's birds are waterbirds, drawn to productive coastal marshes, river deltas, lagoons, and great expanses of lakes and wet tundra. In the interior, meandering rivers and periodic fires create an ever changing variety of forest, shrubs, and meadows that are important to songbirds, raptors, and grouse.

It is natural, with our justifiable pride in Alaska, to take a possessive attitude about "our" fish and wildlife. On a cherished vacation to Hawaii a group of us were watching whales in the Molokai Channel when a fellow Alaskan piped up that the humpbacks in Glacier Bay were much bigger than the ones in the clear waters below us. It was very possible that the same whales we were watching had been feeding in Glacier Bay a few months earlier. The same misunderstanding could be held with a tundra swan in North Carolina, a sandpiper in Brazil or gyrfalcon on the steppes of the Soviet Union. A few examples illustrate the extent to which Alaskans share the enjoyment of and responsibility for migratory birds with people in other lands.

Black brant, distant relatives of the Canada goose, are closely associated with marine coastal areas and nest in Siberia, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of Alaska and the Canadian arctic islands. During July, the region around Teshekpuk Lake on the central North Slope takes on international significance as immature brant and those that have lost nests gather from the breeding grounds to molt their flight feathers. Up to 25 percent of the entire population spends a month feeding in safety of large lakes with their international cousins. In fall, the world's black brant move down Alaska's west coast to Izembek Lagoon near Cold Bay. After regaining body weight and fat reserves from the lagoon's eel grass, they depart en masse in early November, bound mostly for the west coast of the Baja California peninsula in Mexico.

Most of the snow geese seen in Alaska are only passing through to and from arctic nesting areas in other countries. Several hundred thousand of these noisy white geese nest in large colonies in Canada's western arctic, but make a vital refueling stop in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on their

way south in September. A smaller population of snow geese that nests on Wrangel Island in the Soviet Chukchi Sea is an anticipated sign of spring on the Stikine River Delta, Kenai Flats, and Cook Inlet as they move north during April. Both of these populations winter in central California and some end up in the Rio Grande valley of New Mexico.

Waterfowl are perhaps the most understood group of long-distance migrants because of extensive leg-banding studies that have been done over the last 100 years. We have discovered that many of our ducks, white-fronted geese, and sandhill cranes from interior and northern Alaska travel through the mid-west and winter on the Texas and Louisiana coast or farther south in Mexico. Pintails and teal even press into Central America and northern South America.

Although we know more about ducks and geese, shorebirds and seabirds are the most phenomenal international travelers. The American golden-plover is a common nesting shorebird across Alaska, but in winter can be found from the golf courses of Hawaii to southern Argentina. We know of 19 species of shorebirds that winter in South America and six that travel over 8,000 miles to Patagonia on its southern end. The record holder for migration, however, is the arctic tern, the delicate darting fishers we see on the Copper River Delta, Tern Lake on the Kenai Peninsula, and most of coastal Alaska. Each year these birds make a 20,000 mile round trip between Alaska, South America, Africa, and Antarctica.

Little is known about movements of birds over the open ocean, but pelagic seabirds of the Pacific cover great distances and roam broadly in search of food. Shearwaters, storm-petrels, and fulmars concentrate seasonally to take advantage of fish and other marine animals that are abundant where deep ocean waters well up to the surface or are funneled through island passes in the Aleutian Chain. Shearwaters and albatrosses nesting in Australia and the South Pacific travel to Alaska to spend their "winters" with us.

From these few examples it is clear that we share most of "our" birds with other countries of the western hemisphere and the Pacific Rim. The realization of bird movements brings not only appreciation of these interesting creatures and their part in Alaska's natural history, but also a sense of responsibility to conserve our bird resources and the breeding grounds they depend on. Many unrelated global events and processes become relevant to the birds we enjoy. The endangered peregrine falcon has been hindered in its recovery by the use of pesticides in South America. El Nino, the phenomenon of ocean warming off Central and South America, has caused major food shortages for marine birds and has markedly altered their distribution and abundance in the North Pacific. As many as a quarter-million seabirds are entangled in the nets of the Japanese drift net fishery each year.

Perhaps the most familiar and extensive bird conservation programs, to most of us, are the management of waterfowl and other migratory birds that are hunted, as well as efforts to conserve wetland habitats that are necessary to maintain bird populations. Vastly more important than the harvest of birds by hunters are the steady long-term losses of productive bird

habitat throughout North and South America. Expansion of agricultural development throughout the mid-continent in Canada, the United States, and Mexico, and the withdrawal of water from natural wetlands used by wildlife is rapidly diminishing the amount of productive nesting and wintering grounds for many birds. On a grander scale the deforestation of South America is affecting the wintering grounds for many of our songbirds and raptors.

The conservation of migratory birds is the focus of numerous efforts by conservation organizations and government agencies. National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation, Ducks Unlimited, and the World Wildlife Fund are only a few of the citizens' groups that are raising money, supporting research, and promoting conservation programs on an international level. The U. S. Department of the Interior, through the Fish and Wildlife Service, has primary responsibility for management of our migratory birds, especially ensuring that research and management programs are coordinated among the states and other nations that host the birds we share. Our national goals and policies are represented in migratory bird treaties with Canada, Mexico, the Soviet Union, and Japan.

The State of Alaska does and should play an active role in migratory bird conservation. Birds have always been important symbolically and economically in Alaska. Migratory loons, eagles, geese, and other birds are important in the religion and folklore of both Indian and Eskimo cultures. Waterfowl, cranes, and seabirds provide an important economic base for tourism, as well as welcomed table fare for many Alaskans. ADF&G operates waterfowl and nongame programs that conduct management projects, studies, and regulatory programs on migratory birds in cooperation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and land managing agencies. Because Alaska is a breeding ground for many North American birds, the state often plays a key role in interstate management efforts, such as serving on the Pacific Flyway Council (11 western states) and working with the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The challenge of ensuring the welfare of migratory birds and their habitats in Alaska requires the cooperation and concern of all Alaskans, our fellow citizens in other states, and international neighbors. In sandpipers, eagles, and warblers we have a biological and psychological connection to the rest of the world.

It can be both humbling and exhilarating to know that the sandhill crane lunching on Delta barley was recently winging over a Siberian village and will soon be dining on Texas peanuts, or that the roast duck with low-bush cranberry sauce was basking at Cabo San Lucas last winter. And on a snowy night in December I occasionally think about the arctic tern rounding Cape Horn and the tiny red phalarope wintering entirely at sea. So this autumn, as you watch the birds departing, or as they arrive again next spring, wish them bon voyage, adios, and dosvidanya!

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