

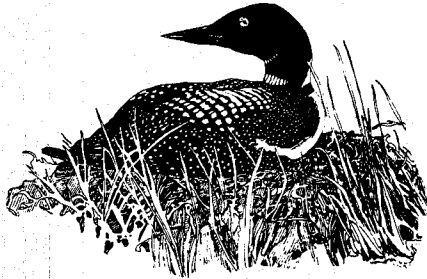
WILDLIFE WATCHERS' NEWSLETTER

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Nongame Wildlife Program

Game Division

Alaska Department of Fish & Game



Common loon.

Loon Watch Continues

A survey of loons was begun in 1985 to assess the distribution and nesting success of these birds in Alaska's most heavily populated and developed area. Loons are widely regarded as "wilderness species," yet the Anchorage area, with more than 250,000 people, is a summer home to a few pairs of nesting Common and Pacific loons (Pacific Loons were formally called Arctic Loons). Generally the distribution of nesting loons has retreated as human populations have increased. As far as we know, Anchorage is the largest city in North America to have nesting loons.

The growing number of people in Anchorage and the nearby Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Valley has substantially increased development and disturbance on lakes, and this has led to concern about the future of loons in these areas. The survey begun in 1985 in Anchorage was expanded in 1986 to include lakes in the Mat-Su Valley, thanks to the help of more than 100 Loon Watch volunteers.

The Alaska Loon Watch 1986 was successful in obtaining information on loons using 45 Anchorage lakes and 119 Mat-Su lakes. There were no more than 12 pairs of breeding loons in the Anchorage area and only 5 chicks were observed (3 Pacific, 2 Common). In the Mat-Su Valley, 61 breeding pairs were seen, and they raised at least 31 chicks (10 Pacific, 21 Common). The number of chicks appears low, but it falls within the range of values for young per breeding pair published from studies in Alaska, North America, and Scandinavia (copies

of the full report on the 1986 Loon Watch are available from the Anchorage ADF&G office).

Plans for the summer of 1987 include gathering information on lake characteristics in relation to use by loons, and, on some lakes, managing human activities which may displace or disturb loons. Further investigation is needed to determine why loons nest on certain lakes, but not on others. Protecting habitat components (such as fish, clear water, suitable marshy nest site, and a quiet nursery area) and controlling human disturbance is important for the future of breeding loons in these areas. We will once again be relying on volunteers. If you would like to help, contact Nancy Tankersley (send in the coupon in this newsletter, or call 267-2149).



Preparing for Summer

The days are rapidly lengthening and some resident birds, like the Great Horned Owl and Gray Jay, have already begun their breeding activities. It's time to prepare for the short, intense spring and summer period when Alaska is alive with birds.

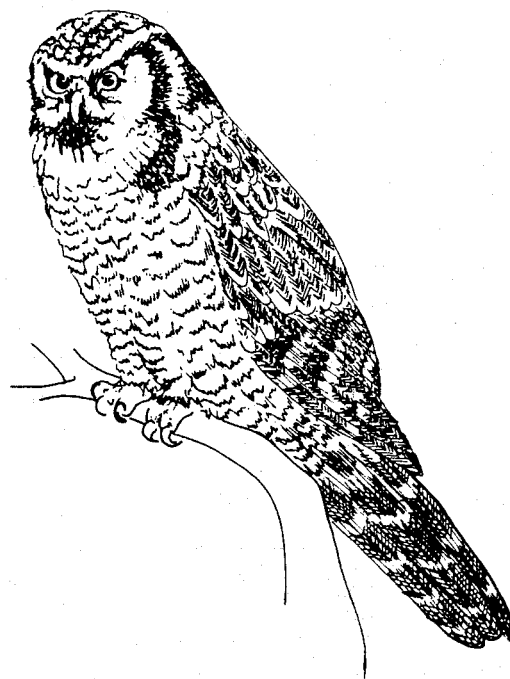
Listening to recordings of bird songs is one way to refresh your memory and get ready for influx of summer birds—another is to build and put up bird houses. We usually think of providing nest boxes for swallows and other small, perching birds, but a variety of birds use cavities for nesting. American Kestrels may use nest boxes built to the proper specifications and placed in the right



location. Some diving ducks, such as golden-eyes and buffleheads, are cavity nesters and may use nest boxes. Boreal and Saw-whet owls will use nest boxes, though boxes should be put up by February to be ready for their early breeding season. Remember to maintain your bird houses once they are up. Clean them out and repair them before the arrival of the birds. Detailed information on dimensions, construction techniques, and placement of houses for a variety of birds is available in *Bird Houses for Alaska*, a Wildlife Watcher's Report available free at ADF&G offices. [Bat Houses — In other parts of the world, specially designed boxes are used to attract bats to desired areas. There are plans to build and place some bat boxes in the Anchorage and Matanuska-Susitna area this spring. If you are interested, contact Jeff Hughes or Jack Whitman at the Anchorage ADF&G office, phone 267-2179.]

Planting shrubs, trees, and flowers with wildlife in mind can benefit animals and produce enjoyable viewing opportunities. *Landscaping for Wildlife in Alaska*, another Wildlife Watcher's Report, provides a step-by-step guide to creating a better place for wildlife and includes detailed information on nearly 100 native and exotic plants for Alaska.

The National Wildlife Federation's *Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program* includes a certification program, designed to promote interest in creating attractive landscapes for wildlife and to develop a national network of people who care about wildlife. They produce a comprehensive *Gardening with Wildlife Kit* to help people design an area attractive to wildlife. Contact: Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program, National Wildlife Federation, 1412 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036-2266.



Northern Hawk Owl

This medium-sized owl is most often seen in broad day light, perched atop a spruce tree overlooking a patch of muskeg. Unlike most owls that feature special adaptations for hunting in the dark, the hawk owl is active in the daytime and shares many traits with the diurnal hawks. Its long tail, horizontally barred underparts, pointy wings, and high pitched voice are all more reminiscent of a hawk than an owl. But when it is frightened by a potential avian predator, its ancestry shows when it assumes an upright concealing pose just like that used by a variety of other owls.

Hawk owls are found in boreal forests around the northern hemisphere. In Alaska, they occur in all regions but the far north. They are not known to take part in regular migrations, but are considered nomadic and in some winters show up far south of their normal, subarctic range. These irruptions to the south are thought to be movements away from areas where their food supply has crashed. In central Alaska, red-backed, tundra, and singing voles are the predominant prey of hawk owls.

Just as the hawk owl's southerly movements are thought to be dictated by the abundance of its prey, so is its breeding. In years when voles are abundant in muskeg and forest clearings, hawk owls will likely be present and rearing young. When vole numbers are down, the owls will probably be off looking for a neighborhood with sufficient prey to rear a family.

Surnia ulula is the scientific name for the hawk owl. The species name, *ulula*, is onomatopoeic—an abbreviated imitation of the trilling call given by the male early in the nesting season. In most years, males begin calling in March and nesting starts in April. Hawk owl nests are usually found in the top of a broken-off spruce. They do not appear to do any nest building, the female lays and incubates the eggs directly on the rotten heartwood in the broken top of the hollow tree. The male provides food for the female, and the owlets as they hatch. Then, before they are fully capable of flight, the young leave the nest, closely attended by the female, while the male continues to bring food.

In recent years, sightings of this special northern species have been uncommon in the Fairbanks area. Many people recall a time in the late 1960s and early 70s when hawk owls were regularly seen perched atop a spruce during the short winter days, flicking their tail, waiting to glide and pounce on their prey. We are interested in your observations of hawk owls in the Fairbanks area. If you see one, let us know. Contact John Wright at the Fairbanks ADF&G office, phone 456-5156.

Winter Birds in Fairbanks



One participant in this winter's counts at bird feeders described it as "boring." Bird activity in the the Fairbanks area certainly was different from the previous year. A year ago, diligent effort was needed to keep birdseed available as redpolls swarmed to feeders. Redpolls accounted for more than three-quarters of all birds counted and were recorded at every feeding station in March 1986 (our initial count).

This winter, redpolls were scarce. In November and December 1986 counts, redpolls

were reported from less than one third of the feeding stations and they accounted for only 13% of birds seen during feeder counts. Preliminary results from March 1987 counts showed redpoll numbers increasing to 40% of all birds counted, with 70% of feeding stations reporting redpolls.

Fluctuations in redpoll numbers such as these do not surprise biologists who have worked with the species for any length of time. The irregular movements of the common redpoll, especially, are well known. Some biologists have noted a biennial pattern in repoll invasions of southern Canada and the lower 48 states, and think it may be related to the production of birch seeds in the north.

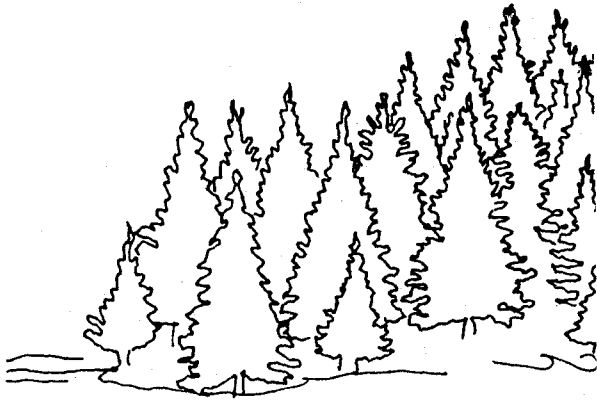
Numbers of other winter-resident species were fairly consistent with last year's reports. In order of abundance, they were Black-capped and Boreal chickadees, Pine Grosbeaks, Gray Jays, and Downy and Hairy woodpeckers. A large flock of 400 Bohemian Waxwings was counted in November. Of special interest was an American Robin, feeding on sunflower seed hearts in March—apparently the first robin to make it that far through a winter in Fairbanks.



Guides to Wildlife Viewing and Photography

If you looking for a location to find a particular bird or mammal in Alaska, *A Guide to Wildlife Viewing in Alaska* is a good place to start your search. This book lists distribution and habitat-preference information, plus viewing tips, for each of the bird and mammal species that regularly occur in our State. Another section describes specific areas, such as parks, refuges, and sanctuaries, within each region of Alaska. Information is also organized by month of the year, so you can pick the best time to find your objective.

Wildlife Education Page



ALASKA'S FORESTS **1987 Alaska Wildlife Week**

"Alaska's Forests — more than just trees" is the theme for the 1987 celebration of Alaska Wildlife Week, scheduled for April 20-25. Two of the world's great forests, the Pacific coastal forest and the boreal forest, are prominent habitats in our State. These forests are home to deer, moose, squirrels, woodpeckers, salmon, and bears, and also to less well-known wildlife such as parasitic wasps, brown creepers, and white-footed deer mice. In addition to being important habitat for wildlife, forests are a source of fuel, food, building materials, paper, and other products— and also serve as watersheds, air purifiers, climate modifiers, and recreational and scenic areas.

Alaska Wildlife Week educational packets are produced by the Nongame Wildlife Program and distributed to the more than 450 schools in Alaska (*if your school did not receive the materials, let us know*). Each packet includes background information for teachers, games, activities, worksheets, filmstrips, wildlife cards, and a colorful poster. All feature Alaska-specific information relating to our state's forests and forest wildlife.

The long-term aim for this project has been to develop 6-7 years worth of packets, then make the entire set available to schools for integration into their curriculums. Thus, after 12 years of school, each student would have had two units on each theme — one at the primary or elementary level where students are developing awareness of the world around them, and one at the higher grade levels where they are perfecting their problem-solving and decision-making skills.

Public information and education can play an important role in the conservation of our State's

valuable wildlife resources. With five years of materials developed, the goal for Alaska Wildlife Week is only a year or two away. Unfortunately, with current budgetary constraints the project is in jeopardy.

Project Learning Tree

Explores many sides of forestry issues

Project Learning Tree is an environmental education program for teachers, park and nature center staff, and youth group leaders. Co-sponsored nationally by the American Forest Foundation and the Western Regional Environmental Education Council, this package of lessons and activities is designed to encourage students to explore many sides of a resource issue, and to make decisions based on information rather than just emotion. Teachers receive, free of charge, a 250-page activity guide after attending a one-day training workshop. For more information contact: Tony Gasbarro, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, 99775-5200 (tel. 474-6356).

Project Wild

This award-winning environmental and conservation education program provides instructional workshops and supplementary curriculum materials for teachers of kindergarten through high school. Project Wild addresses such questions as — How can the quality of life be maintained for people and other life? How can wildlife be conserved and protected? How can there be a balance between human development and natural environments?

Project Wild is based on the premise that we all have a vital interest in learning about the earth as home for people and wildlife. Interested? Contact Delores Scott, ADF&G, PO Box 3-2000, Juneau AK 99802-2000 (465-4190).

Teacher Training Courses

By the time this reaches you, this spring's courses for Alaska Wildlife Week (covering the three educational packages described on this page) will be underway. They are being held in Anchorage and Fairbanks through the continuing education program of the University of Alaska. For information on future courses, contact the individuals mentioned above, or the Nongame staff in Anchorage or Fairbanks ADF&G offices.

This full-color, 170-page soft-cover book is available at many bookstores throughout the state, or via mail from the Anchorage ADF&G office (check the coupon in this newsletter).

Photographing Wildlife in Alaska is a Wildlife Watcher's Report for beginning photographers who are just becoming acquainted with Alaska and its wildlife. It covers some basic concepts of camera operation, equipment selection, film choice, and wildlife photo techniques. This 10-page brochure is available free from ADF&G offices or through the mail (check coupon).

Alaska Bird Checklists

Bird checklists are useful supplements to regional or continental field guides. Local lists provide more detailed information on which species are likely, or not, to be encountered in a given area. Checklists also serve as a convenient method of recording your observations for future reference. Here are some of the lists currently available in Alaska:

Checklist of Alaska Birds (Sales desk, Univ. Alaska Museum, Fairbanks AK 99775)

Birds of Interior Alaska (same as above)

Checklist of the birds of the Seward Peninsula (same as above)

Birds of Southeast Alaska, a checklist (US Forest Service, PO Box 1628, Juneau AK 99802)

Birds of Glacier Bay National Park (Glacier

Bay NP, Gustavus AK 99826)

Birds of Chugach National Forest (US Forest Service, USDA, Anchorage AK 99508)

Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge and Kodiak Island Archipelago Bird List (Kodiak NWR, 1390 Buskin River Road, Kodiak AK 99615)

Birds of the Pribilof Islands (Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, 202 Pioneer Ave, Homer AK 99603)

Birds of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (Kenai NWR, PO Box 2139, Soldotna AK 99669)

Birds of Katchemak Bay (Anchorage Audubon Soc., PO Box 101161, Anch. AK 99510)

Birds of Anchorage (same as above)

Checklist of Birds of the Palmer area (M.T. Bronson, PO Box 2176, Palmer AK 99645)

Bird Checklist for Denali National Park (Superintendent, Denali NP, McKinley Park AK 99755)

Bird-finding guide to Denali National Park (same as above)

Birds of the Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge (Tetlin NWR, PO Box 155, Tok AK 99780)

— lists for other National Wildlife Refuges may also be available, check with the specific refuge or contact Public Affairs Office, USFWS, 1011 E Tudor Road, Anchorage AK 99503. For the National Parks, check with the individual parks. Thanks to Dan Gibson, of the University of Alaska Museum, for sharing his list of lists.

Please fill out appropriate information and return this coupon:

Name, address, and daytime phone number:

Please add my name to your mailing list

Suggestions: _____

I have information on Northern Hawk Owls:

I would like to help monitor loons on _____ lake in Anchorage or the Mat-Su Valley.

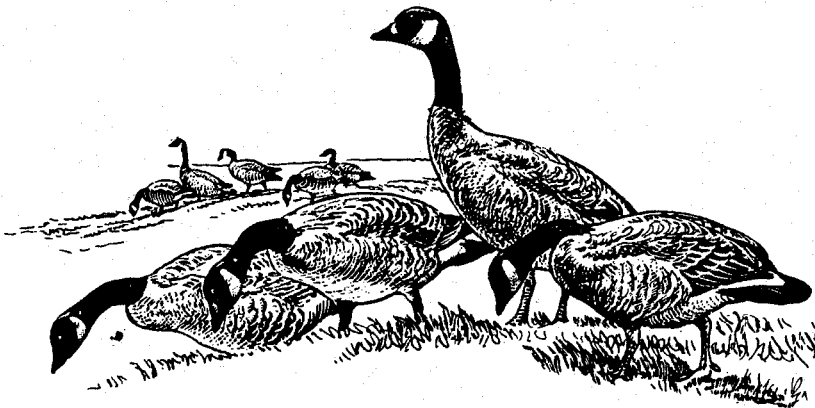
I have information on Ospreys in Alaska:

Please send me a copy of the Wildlife Watcher Report on:

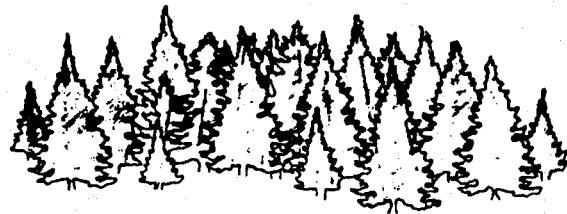
- Bird Houses
 Landscaping for Wildlife
 Wildlife Photography

Send me _____ copy(ies) of a *Guide to Wildlife Viewing in Alaska*. Enclosed is a check or money order for \$12.95 each (includes shipping). Order from Anchorage office.

Celebrate Alaska Wildlife Week this Spring



20-25 April 1987
Theme: *Alaska's Forests*
— *more than just trees*



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