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WILDLIFE WATCHER'S NEWSLETTER



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Nongame Wildlife Program

Game Division

Alaska Department of Fish & Game



Sue Quinlan Leaves ADF&G

After wrapping up production of this year's educational packet for *Alaska Wildlife Week*, Sue Quinlan resigned from the Department of Fish & Game to develop a private biological business with her husband.

Sue had been involved with the Nongame Wildlife Program from its start in 1981, and many of the program's achievements are the result of her creativity and hard work. The first three *Wildlife Watcher's Reports*, the *Guide to Wildlife Viewing in Alaska*, and the field study that discovered a nest of the elusive marbled murrelet are examples of her early work for the nongame program. Since 1985, she devoted herself to writing Alaskan wildlife education materials.

Publication of the 1988 *Alaska Wildlife Week* packet, "Alaska's Living Tundra," completes a series of six units on wildlife and their habitats in our state. Alaskan

teachers now have a ready source of background information and activities dealing specifically with Alaskan environments, wildlife, and conservation issues.

The nongame program will miss Sue, but her departure from ADF&G does not mean Alaskan wildlife is losing a strong supporter. Sue plans on staying in the Fairbanks and continuing to be involved in wildlife conservation. We wish her well in her new venture.

Spring Wildlife Viewing

If you're like many people, with these long sunny days of spring you'd like to get out, but aren't sure just where to go to observe birds and other wildlife. Fortunately there are state refuges used by large numbers of migrating birds near each of our three major cities.

Potter Marsh — Anchorage

Potter Point State Game Refuge, with its extensive tidal flats, marsh communities, and alder-bog forest supports some of the greatest numbers and diversity of birds in the Anchorage area. At least 130 species of birds have been sighted in the refuge. Premier viewing occurs at Potter Marsh. Peak concentrations can be seen during spring migration from late-April through mid-May when waterbirds stop on their way to breeding grounds in the north, and again in late-July and August when shorebirds begin to flock-up in preparation for their southward migration.

A diversity of waterbirds can also be found nesting in Potter Marsh. The most conspicuous and well known is the lesser Canada goose. There are several nesting pairs which provide entertainment to refuge visitors each summer with the antics of their large "gosling nurseries." Other waterbirds commonly found in the marsh include the mallard, pintail, shoveler, American wigeon, canvasback, red-necked and horned grebes,

yellowlegs, and red-necked phalarope. Arctic terns and mew gulls are also common nesters at the marsh. During migration trumpeter and tundra swans, snow geese, short-eared owls, and an occasional pair of Pacific loons can sometimes be seen. Northern harriers and bald eagles may be seen as well.

But that's not all. Muskrats and moose are regularly observed on the refuge. The marsh supports a resident population of muskrats that build "pushups," piles of vegetation stored for food, scattered throughout the marsh. Moose can sometimes be seen feeding on aquatic or shrubby vegetation in the marsh. Beaver, coyotes, least weasels, mink, snowshoe hares, red squirrels, voles, and shrews are also resident of the refuge. Lynx, land otter, red fox, and black and brown bears are infrequent visitors.

Potter Marsh, located just south of Anchorage on the new Seward Highway, is easily Anchorage's most popular wildlife viewing area. Parking space, an elevated boardwalk, and interpretive signs along the highway are provided. When you visit, take care near the highway where traffic roars past at high speeds. Also, remember that feeding of wildlife is prohibited, and that entry into the marsh is restricted to protect the wildlife from disturbance.

Creamer's Field — *Fairbanks*

Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge is best known as the stop-over point for themigrating geese whose arrival marks the return of spring to the Fairbanks area.

Geese and other water-birds have been attracted to Creamer's ever since a dairy was developed on the site in the early 1900's.

When the dairy was operating, the birds were drawn to the fields by the early snow-melt caused by the spreading of manure and by the availability of grain for food. Today, the fields are managed to keep them attrac-

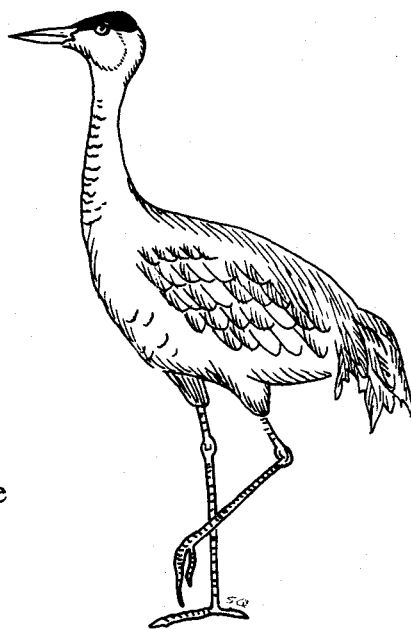
tive as open space and by providing food.

The first spring migrants to pass through Creamer's are the snow buntings that usually arrive in mid-March. About a month later the first Canada geese arrive. From late April through May the fields attract a variety of birds, including the tundra swan, white-fronted goose, mallard, northern pintail, northern shoveler, American wigeon, green-winged teal, sandhill crane, golden plover, yellowlegs, Lapland longspur, and sparrows. The sighting of less common species, such as the snow goose, Eurasian wigeon, or even a common crane (seen once) keeps bird watchers alert. Birds of prey can regularly be seen soaring over the fields or perched around their borders, including rough-legged and red-tailed hawks, northern harrier, short-eared owl, and less commonly, bald eagle and peregrine falcon. Most of these spring migrants move on to nesting areas to the north or west, but a few, such as sandhill crane, savannah sparrow, and American kestrel, can be seen in and around the fields all summer.

With most of the publicity lavished on the geese and the farm fields, the variety of other wildlife and habitats on Creamer's Refuge are frequently overlooked. The fields actually comprise only 15% of the refuge. The remaining 85% encompasses a variety of natural habitats common to the interior of Alaska, including forest, shrub, muskeg, and wetlands. A 2-mile nature trail passes through these undeveloped lands. One hundred and fifty species of birds have been seen on the refuge. Of these, 20 are year-round residents, 55 are breeders, 57 are migrants, and 18 are occasional visitors. Moose are the largest and most conspicuous mammal on the refuge, but red squirrels, snowshoe hares, red fox, voles, and shrews are also common. Visitors from the lower 48, and many local residents as well, are surprised to learn that woodchucks live in the farm fields.

Several projects are underway at Creamer's. Ducks Unlimited funding was used to develop a series of ponds for breeding waterfowl in the northeast portion of the refuge. Additional habitat enhancement for sandhill cranes is scheduled for the near future in a cooperative project with several State and Federal agencies. And, finally, the historic farmhouse is being fixed up to serve as refuge headquarters and visitor center.

The Arctic Audubon Society and Fairbanks Bird Club lead groups of schoolchildren on visits to Creamer's during spring migration. A trail guide to the nature path is available at the ADF&G office located near the start of the trail off of College Road.



Mendenhall Flats — Juneau

This state game refuge near the Juneau airport includes forest, shrub, and grass meadow habitats — as well as the extensive tidal marsh for which it is named. The wide variety of habitats attracts a diverse complement of birds. Year-round residents include the mallard, Canada goose, several sea ducks and gulls, bald eagle, song sparrow, and pine siskin. During spring migration (starting in late March) visitors to the refuge may see large numbers of snow buntings and Lapland longspurs, and such unusual species as mountain bluebirds and rosy finches on the grassy upper marsh. A large movement of shorebirds and waterfowl begins in early to mid-May. Nearly every spring cinnamon teal (single males or pairs) are seen, and gadwalls are becoming fairly common migrants. Other, more common, dabbling duck species are the northern shoveler, blue-winged teal, American wigeon, green-winged teal, and northern pintail. A few canvasback, ring-necked duck, and redhead are seen in spring some years, along with large numbers of greater and lesser scaup. Small numbers of lesser snow geese, white-fronted geese, and lesser Canada geese stop over each spring to rest on the upland marsh portions of the refuge.

Thousands of sandpipers — dunlin; pectoral, least, semipalmated and western sandpipers — use the mudflats during migration, while larger shorebirds such as whimbrels, and black-bellied and golden plovers regularly visit the upland portions of the tide flats in late May. Greater and lesser yellowlegs, spotted sandpipers, common snipe, and both dowitcher species use refuge lands all summer.

Throughout May many migrating warblers (yellow-rumped, orange-crowned, Wilson's), and sparrows (white-crowned, golden-crowned, fox, tree, savannah, Lincoln's) move through the refuge with some savannah, song and Lincoln's sparrows remaining to nest.

Warm days and resulting hatches of aquatic insects provide an excellent opportunity to view several swallow species such as the tree, barn, and violet-green. Occasionally bank swallows from a colony upriver may also be seen, and for several weeks each summer Vaux's swifts commonly feed over refuge lands.

The most common raptors seen along the tidal uplands are short-eared owls and northern harriers. Merlins, peregrine falcons

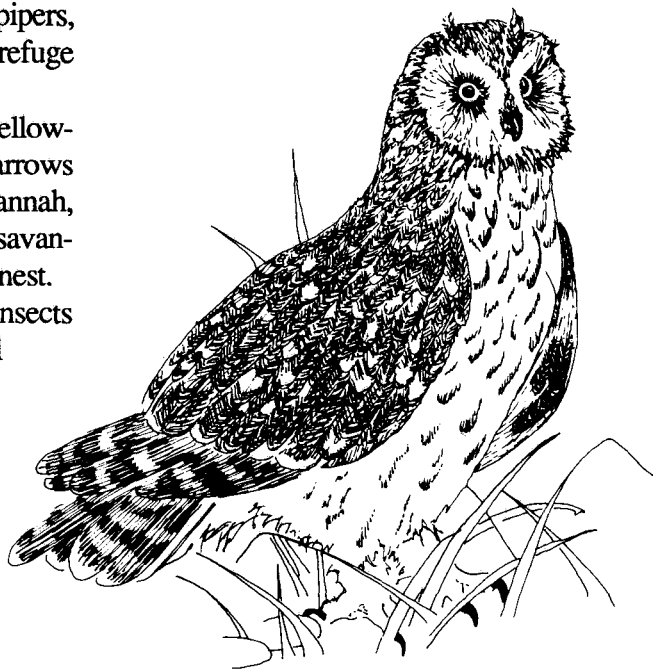
and sharp-shinned hawks are commonly seen over the wetlands or adjacent uplands.

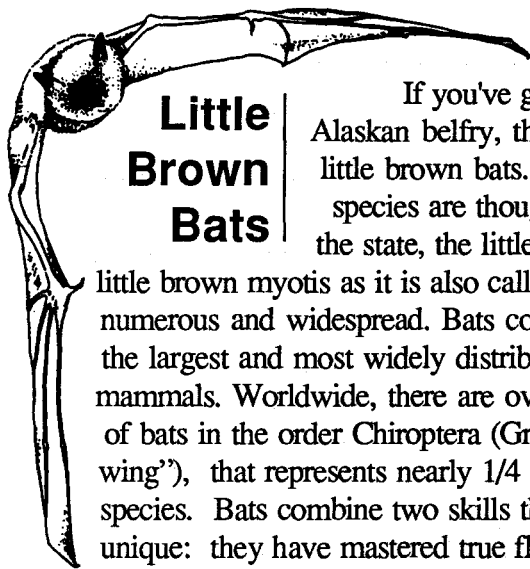
Later in summer, as fireweed begins to bloom, rufous hummingbirds may be seen in large numbers along the margins of the refuge. Ducks with broods, nesting Arctic terns, lesser yellowlegs, Bonaparte's gulls and spotted sandpipers are some of the more conspicuous summer birds.

With luck a visitor to the refuge may see Wilson's phalaropes, an eastern kingbird or Say's phoebe, or even something as unexpected as a northern mockingbird (the only one recorded in Alaska was seen at Mendenhall flats).

The Juneau Chapter of the Audubon Society, in conjunction with Juneau Parks and Recreation staff, leads a series of spring bird walks on the refuge. By accessing the refuge through the gate near the west end of Juneau Airport (along the Mendenhall River) a visitor can walk along a dirt road separating uplands from the tidal flats. Maps showing access points and brochures providing information on the natural history of the refuge are available at Fish & Game offices and visitor facilities in Juneau.

— Thanks to Don McKnight, ADF&G Headquarters in Juneau, for contributing this article on Mendenhall Flats.





Little Brown Bats

If you've got bats in your Alaskan belfry, they're probably little brown bats. Although five species are thought to occur in the state, the little brown bat, or

little brown myotis as it is also called, is the most numerous and widespread. Bats constitute one of the largest and most widely distributed groups of mammals. Worldwide, there are over 950 species of bats in the order Chiroptera (Greek for "hand-wing"), that represents nearly 1/4 of all mammal species. Bats combine two skills that make them unique: they have mastered true flight, and they can fly in complete darkness using echo location.

Little brown bats normally spend daylight hours at their roost sites resting and emerge at night to feed. They seem to prefer to roost in small colonies among the rafters in buildings, but are sometimes found resting alone in tree cavities or rock crevices. During the spring and summer months, they feed on insects — especially mosquitoes — shortly after dusk. After an hour or so of feeding, they rest either at the daytime roost or elsewhere. Often they will feed again for a short period just before dawn. Not all individuals feed every night. If the weather is cold, bats are reluctant to emerge from roosts.

What goes on with bats in your belfry is particularly interesting in the spring. Males become quite solitary or form small groups while female often gather in large maternity colonies of a hundred or more individuals. Here the young are born and grow rapidly. The single young is born in late June or early July.

Young receive good care and are nursed regularly. They grow quickly, developing from a blind and nearly hairless infant to near adult size in three weeks. At this time they take their first flight, a skill which seems to be largely innate but no doubt improves with practice. The young become independent by late summer and, like adults, must eat well during autumn in order to build up energy reserves for the winter season when few insects are awing. In some regions, little brown bats migrate to winter roosts. We have no records of bats overwintering in Southcentral or Interior Alaska, and though we suspect they migrate, we do not know their migration routes or the locations of their winter roosts.

Contrary to the beliefs held by many Alaskans, bats are harmless creatures. Bats can get rabies, just as dogs, cats, foxes and wolves can, but a rabid bat has never been reported in Alaska. Only 10 people in the entire

U.S. and Canada are believed to have gotten rabies from bats in the last 45 years. Simply leave bats alone and they will gladly return the favor, and continue to eat mosquitoes too. If you have bats around your property we'd like to hear from you, contact Jeff Hughes in the Anchorage or John Wright in the Fairbanks ADF&G regional offices.

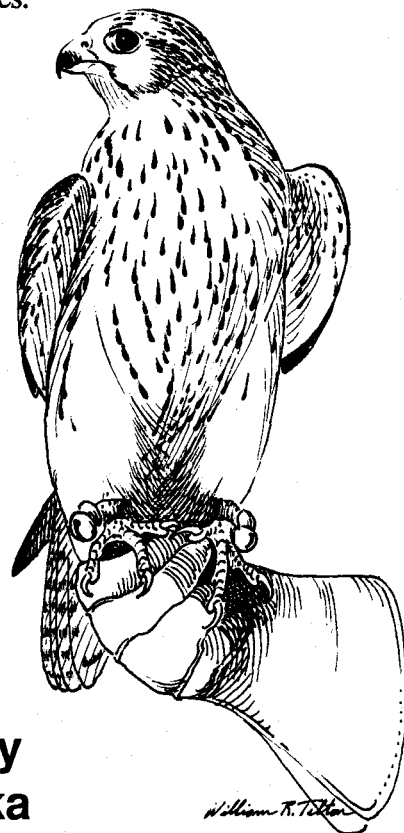


Illustration by William Tilton, Alaska Falconers Association

Falconry in Alaska

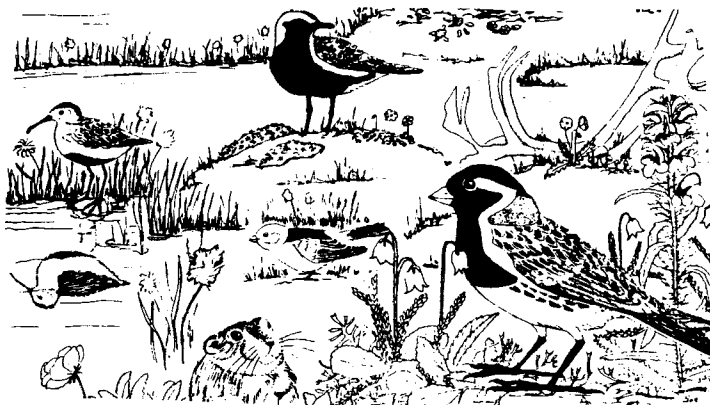
Falconry likely originated over 4,000 years ago in the Near or Middle East, and then spread west through Arabia and Persia, and on to central Europe by the 3rd or 4th century B.C. Many of the methods developed during the height of its popularity in Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries are still in use today.

In the U.S.A., falconry has a small but dedicated following. Approximately 5,000 individuals practice the sport in the 46 states that permit falconry. Most states, including Alaska, are participants in a joint federal/state permit system. In the lower 48, the most common species used for falconry are red-tailed hawks, captive-reared Harris' hawks, and prairie falcons.

In Alaska, about 15 birds are presently held by the 23 falconers with active permits. As might be expected because of our location, a different array of birds are used for falconry in Alaska — two-thirds are gyrfalcons, with goshawks second in number. In the wild, these species are year-round residents of Alaska's tundra and boreal forest.

Wildlife Education Page

1988 Alaska Wildlife Week



ALASKA'S LIVING TUNDRA

Imagine a vast wetland that receives less rainfall than many deserts. A place where animals seek warmth on hills built of ice. A region where 100 year-old plants are only a few inches tall. Imagine a place where a visitor might encounter billions of insects, millions of birds, and hundreds of thousands of mammals — but just a month or two later would see only a desolate expanse of wind swept snow.

At first glance, many assume that tundra is a barren wasteland. But this environment, that covers nearly half of Alaska, provides habitat for a surprising variety and abundance of living things. This year's *Alaska Wildlife Week* educational packet presents a comprehensive unit on "Alaska's Living Tundra."

Alaska Wildlife Week educational packets are produced each year by the Nongame Wildlife Program for distribution to schools throughout our state. This year, over 3,000 packets were sent out to more than 450 schools. Each packet includes 1) a teacher's guide full of information on Alaska's alpine and lowland tundra, activities, games, and worksheets; 2) a full-color poster of tundra landscapes and wildlife; 3) a set of tundra wildlife cards; and 4) two additional tundra wildlife posters. Activities are designed to help students develop skills and knowledge in science, social studies, language arts, math, and art.

Production of this year's packet on Alaska's tundra completes a six-unit set of materials. Past packets covered 1) ecology, 2) wildlife population dynamics and management, 3) habitat, 4) wetlands, and 5) forests. In the future we plan to revise the materials and put more effort into teacher workshops. Check with your local ADF&G office to see if workshops on wildlife education are scheduled in your area.

Project WILD

An "Aquatic Education Activity Guide" has been added to this nation-wide environmental and conservation education program. Materials are available through instructional workshops. For information, contact Delores Scott, ADF&G, P.O.Box 3-2000, Juneau, AK 99802 (465-4190).

Please fill out appropriate information and return this coupon:

☐ Please add my name to your mailing list.

☐ Address correction.

☐ I want to participate in Loon Watch 1988 on _____ Lake, between Sutton and Willow. Daytime phone # _____

Suggestions for the Nongame Wildlife Program:

☐ I have information on bats in Alaska: _____

☐ Send me _____ copy(ies) of a *Guide to Wildlife Viewing in Alaska*. Enclose \$12.95 per copy (includes shipping), order from Anchorage office.

Upcoming 1988 Loon Watch

This will be the fourth year loons have been studied in the Anchorage and Mat-Su areas. The increase in human population and development in these areas has prompted concern for loons nesting on local lakes and ponds. Six states in the lower 48 no longer have nesting loons and 2 others have substantially reduced populations due to human disturbance and development. Fortunately, loon populations in some of those areas have stabilized and even increased when protective measures have been implemented.

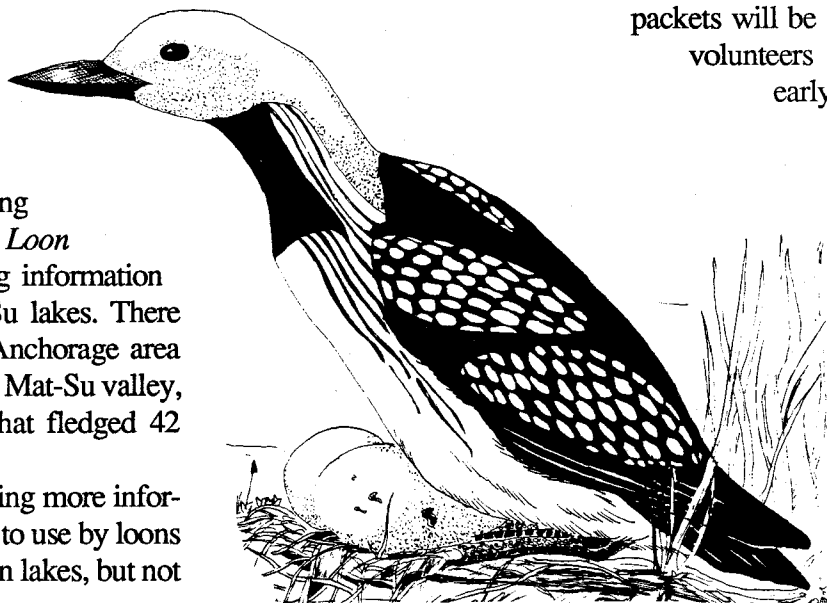
Our surveys began in 1985 in Anchorage and were expanded in 1986 and 1987 to include lakes in the Mat-Su Valley. Last summer, 134 volunteers participated by submitting their observations of loons. The *Alaska Loon Watch 1987* was successful in obtaining information on 41 Anchorage lakes and 158 Mat-Su lakes. There were 8 pairs of breeding loons in the Anchorage area and 7 chicks survived to fledging. In the Mat-Su valley, there were at least 51 breeding pairs that fledged 42 chicks.

Plans for summer 1988 include gathering more information on lake characteristics in relation to use by loons to determine why the birds nest on certain lakes, but not

on others. Protecting habitat and controlling human disturbance is important for the future of breeding loons in these areas. Signs alerting people using lakes to the presence of nesting loons has successfully reduced disturbance on several lakes, allowing loons to nest and raise young.

If you did not participate in Loon Watch 1987 and would like to help in 1988, send in the coupon in this newsletter, or call Nancy Tankersley at 267-2149. Observers for Mat-Su lakes between Sutton and Willow are especially needed. Information

packets will be sent to volunteers during early May.



Celebrate Alaska Wildlife Week ***25-29 April 1988 — Alaska's Living Tundra***

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