

Alaska Songbird Institute

Conserving Alaska's boreal birds through ecological education & research



2016 Year in Review

BIRD NOTES

The first North American bird banding records are from none other than artist/naturalist John James Audubon. In 1803 he tied silver cord to the legs of Eastern Phoebes in Pennsylvania. Two banded nestlings returned the following year, and North American bird banding had begun. It would be another century before the American Bird Banding Association was formed to organize and assist the growing number of bird banders. This eventually became the Bird Banding Lab (BBL) that we know today. Jointly administered by the U.S. Geological Survey and the Canadian Wildlife Service, the BBL is tasked with overseeing bird banding efforts throughout North America, issuing permits, collecting data, and receiving band reports.

Like all aspects of modern life, avian research technology has advanced exponentially since the days of Audubon. We have progressed from silver cord to tiny light-sensing data loggers called geolocators. When retrieved, data can be processed to reveal migratory routes, stopover points, and wintering ranges of even the smallest warblers.

Despite technological advances, bird banding remains an important, economical staple of research and monitoring. On average the BBL receives 1.2 million banding records each year. Included in these are the thousands of birds banded at Creamer's Field each year by ASI. The information gleaned from these records reveals changes in population size and timing, helping us assess species' potential to adapt to changing climatic and environmental conditions. The recapture and recovery of banded individuals continues to be a tool for connecting nesting, migratory, and wintering grounds, a critical step in building effective conservation plans to protect bird habitat.

And so we band. We continue the work of those before us, amassing a long-term dataset on Alaska's boreal birds in a changing environment. We engage students, interns, teachers, and tourists in our work, building knowledge and understanding about the path from science to conservation.

We are grateful for the steadfast commitment of all of you in the ASI community. You recognize the importance of taking the long view. You make ASI's research and education efforts possible. You make a difference. 

ALASKA SWALLOW MONITORING NETWORK

Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) are aerial insectivores. They eat flying bugs, and a lot of them. A single adult Tree Swallow consumes about 2,000 insects per day, and feeds another 6,000 to its growing chicks. Scale up to the average 40-day nesting cycle for Fairbanks birds, and it takes 280,000 bugs to raise a family. But it's not just numbers that count. Chicks' energetic demand peaks around day 8. When it comes to survival, timing is everything.

Phenology is the study of timing.

It's sometimes called nature's calendar, and is of keen interest to scientists who

study birds' responses to climate change. As the timing of spring green up advances, so does the emergence of overwintering insects, the timing of new hatches, and so on. This changes when and how much food is available. Will birds adapt? Is the timing of migration and nesting flexible? What happens when the need for and availability of food is mismatched?

In 2016 ASI and partners launched the Alaska Swallow Monitoring Network. We aim to investigate these very questions in communities around Alaska, using Tree Swallows as a model species. In 2016, network partners monitored 242 active nests and banded 1,309 Tree Swallows at seven sites around the state. We offered five internships, trained 24 volunteers, and offered 23 public programs in host communities for at least 1,451 people.

(continued on page 4)



Ella Carlson (age 10) releases a banded Tree Swallow at Creamer's Field. Ella is one of 17 youth & teens who together volunteered over 515 hours with ASI over the summer.

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25 YEARS OF “PICKING BIRDS” AT CFMS

In 2016 the Creamer’s Field Migration Station (CFMS) celebrated its 25th anniversary field season. It is the northernmost songbird banding station on the continent and the only project of its kind in Alaska. Over a quarter century, CFMS has captured and banded over 100,000 birds, educated tens of thousands of students and visitors, and trained a whole generation of biologists and science educators.

The foundation of CFMS, and its common thread through the decades, is its cadre of passionate and hardworking volunteers. They are the people power behind the station—getting up before dawn to set up and open mist nets, carefully retrieving birds, recording data, and sharing stories over cinnamon rolls. Some volunteers have a season or two of experience. Others, like Judy Williams, have been carefully honing their mist netting skills for decades. Judy (pictured at top right) began volunteering at CFMS in 1992, its very first season, alongside founder Tom Pogson of the Alaska Bird Observatory. Judy’s steady hand and smiling face has helped the station through organizational changes, wildfires, snow squalls, and everything in between. Her dedication to Alaska’s birds, long-term conservation research, and community volunteerism is an inspiration. Thank you, Judy! See you this spring!

As a newcomer to Fairbanks in the winter of 1992, I was intrigued by an announcement in the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* about some upcoming talks at the Creamer’s Farmhouse, including one about a new project of the Alaska Bird Observatory. The Creamer’s Field Migration Bird Banding Station would be opening that spring and was looking for volunteers. Little did I know when I headed to the station on May 4, 1992, through five inches of snow, and the slough that filled my too-short Wellies, it would be the beginning of an adventure that continues to this day.

For a number of years, we had no way to communicate with one another while we were on net runs. On one back net run in the spring of 1998, I saw a moose calf apparently stuck in some tires, with the cow nearby, beyond the fence. I walked back to find the bander in charge. Fortunately, by the time we walked back, the calf was free and apparently unharmed. We borrowed three two-way radios from ADF&G in August 1998. We now have radios to call for additional help at a busy mist net, to give routine reports on the number of birds we are bringing back to the station, and possibly to report an emergency.

On another pre-radio day, caribou moved through the refuge. We stayed busy keeping them away from the nets, first as they headed

toward College Road, and again as they turned back, away from the busy road.

8/28/2000 “(Moose) cow and calf in seasonal pond/meadow as we headed to open net #23. We waited till they headed to far side. Midway the calf nursed with loud slurping sounds. As we returned to (go to) net #24, the cow was watching with ears up. Waited until she resumed eating branches.” We could report this situation on a two-way.

9/6/2000 Some Western Bird Banding Association conference attendees were in town early and came out to the banding station. They, and we, were in for a big surprise! Banders were busy inside the station, volunteers were busy getting birds out of nets, guests and young helpers were busy shuttling birds in bags back to the station, and empty bags back to folks at the nets. At the end of the day, we often guess how many birds have been captured. My guess that day was 370. According to my notes, the official count was 584, to my knowledge the station’s record to this day!

These are but a few of the adventures. There is often some challenge – the feisty Black-capped Chickadee to get out of a net; rain/snow/wind which cancels a day of banding, delays opening nets, or causes early net closure; weasels or wasps in the area which necessitates keeping some nets closed; high water/ice which makes getting to some nets challenging or in some cases keeps nets closed for the season; windy fall days when getting leaves out of the nets while trying to close them is tricky.

Now operated by the Alaska Songbird Institute, the Creamer’s Field Migration Station, with its wonderful birds, banders, staff, interns, volunteers, school groups, guests, and surroundings, continues to be a great place to spend time and learn. That goes for spring days where bird numbers may be low, but we greet each species with awe when they arrive, and for fall days with so many young of the year passing through on their first trip south, and we wonder if that day will be the big day of the season. 

- Judy Williams

Interested in volunteering? Shifts are available mornings in April, May, August, & September. All training is provided. Contact April: April.HardingScurr@aksongbird.org or (907) 888-2121.



NEW BIRD TRAILS AT CREAMER'S FIELD

One of ASI's strategic goals in 2016 was to increase accessibility to our projects and programming, including opportunities to visit and volunteer at the Creamer's Field Migration Station. We aimed to increase interpretive materials and formal programs, as well as to increase our hours of operation.

We kicked off this effort on June 5 with a trail day offered in partnership with REI's Fairbanks store. Despite incessant rain, 35 brave participants assisted with trail work around the station, clearing brush to make way for new interpretive signs, repairing woodwork, and building new benches for the education area.

Throughout the summer, volunteers continued to repair net lanes, poles, and walkways, and interact with new visitors. Eagle scout candidate Nick Samuel organized a crew of 40 that cleared brush, worked on trails, built and installed new signs to warn visitors of seasonal flooding, and installed new interpretive sign holders.

In partnership with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, ASI designed a series of new interpretive signs for the trails around the station. Look for them to be installed on the trails during the 2017 season. This work was generously funded by grants from REI and the Golden Valley Electric Foundation's Goodcents Program.



2017 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

JAN 21: The Incredible Gray Jay with Dr. Carol McIntyre, 2 PM at the Morris Thompson Cultural & Visitors Center, 101 Dunkel Street (MTCVC)

FEB 11: 25 Years of Banding at Creamer's Field with April Harding Scurr, 2 PM at MTCVC

FEB 18: 3rd Annual Songbird Soirée, a fundraiser featuring live and silent auction, music, appetizers, dessert, beer, & wine. 5-8 PM at the Unitarian Universalist Church, 4888 Pikes Ave. \$20/pp in advance, or \$25 at the door. Kids are free.

MARCH 4: Last day of **Fairbanks FeederCount**. Return your data sheets to ASI via mail or email.

MARCH 25: A presentation on Smith's Longspurs with Heather McFarland. 2 PM at the MTCVC.

APRIL 3: Registration opens for spring bird banding field trips

APRIL 17: First day of spring banding at CFMS

APRIL 17-MAY 14: Spring bird banding field trips

APRIL 22: Mad World—the Island Continent, travel, birds, and ecology of Madagascar with Philip Martin. 2 PM at MTCVC.

MAY 1: Applications due for ASI's 2017 youth mentoring and high school internship programs

MAY 12: Start of the annual **Boreal Bird-a-thon**

JULY 27: Open house and orientation for new volunteers at the Creamer's Field Farmhouse. Details to come.

JULY 31: First day of fall banding at CFMS

WEDNESDAYS & SATURDAYS IN AUGUST: Free guided walks to CFMS. Help to check mist nets and see live birds up close. Meet at the Creamer's Field Farmhouse at 10 AM.

AUG 1: Registration opens for fall bird banding field trips

AUG 12: Bird Banding Breakfast. Have breakfast with the birds in the boreal forest at Creamer's Field. \$10/pp.

AUG 21-SEPT 29: Fall bird banding field trips

AUG 25-27: Tanana Valley Sandhill Crane Festival. Join us for a guided walk or drop by ASI's bird banding station.

NOV 3: ASI's annual **Raven Art Show**. 5 PM at MTCVC.



(Alaska Swallow Monitoring Network, continued from page 1)

In 2017 we are integrating new downloadable data apps and online training materials. All will be available on the project website: <http://aksongbird.org/alaska-swallow-monitoring-network>.

Thanks to the Environmental Protection Agency regional environmental education grant program for funding the network's development, and to our 2016 partners: University of Alaska, Fairbanks, University of Alaska, Anchorage, Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge, Calypso Farm & Ecology Center, and University of Colorado, Boulder Museum of Natural History.

We would also like to welcome our new partners in 2017: Arctic Audubon Society, Innoko River School, Fairbanks Soil & Water Conservation District, and Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

Special thanks to the following organizations and businesses who provided grants and Adopt-A-Net sponsorships in 2016:

- Environmental Protection Agency
- REI
- BP
- Flint Hills Resources
- Golden Valley Electric Association Goodcents Program
- TOTE
- ExxonMobil Foundation
- ABR, Inc.
- Kinross/Ft. Knox
- Studebaker Family Environmental Education Fund
- Camp Denali/Northface Lodge
- Usibelli Foundation
- Arctic Audubon Society
- Design Alaska
- North Pole Physical Therapy
- Rotary Club of Fairbanks
- Alaska Feed Company
- Martha Hanlon Architects
- Barbara Logan
- Randy Meyers



ASI staff and students traveled to Cordova, AK in December for the 17th Alaska Bird Conference. Youth volunteers Aubrey Spillane and Dana Woolery (pictured at left) presented the Alaska Swallow Monitoring Network at the evening poster session, and ASI Science Director April Harding Scurr presented on 25 years of banding at the Creamer's Field Migration Station.

The 18th Alaska Bird Conference is tentatively planned for fall 2019 in Fairbanks! Volunteers are needed for the organizing committee. Contact ASI for info.



Many thanks to the 120 hardworking volunteers who logged over 2,260 hours on our projects in 2016; to our advisory committees for their vision and expertise; and to YOU, our generous community of members. You hail from at least 19 Alaskan communities from Kotzebue to Juneau, and 20 other U.S. states. You are a diverse bunch, united by an appreciation for birds, and a commitment to research, conservation, and science education.

You make our work possible.



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Please contact me about becoming a Frequent Flyer (monthly or quarterly sustaining donor). YES NO

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