

Alaska Songbird Institute

Conserving Alaska's boreal birds through ecological education & research




2015 Year in Review

STRETCHING OUR WINGS

Another year for the books! In 2015 ASI interns, apprentices, students, and scientists once again worked together to study migration and nesting songbirds in Interior Alaska. Beyond the field season, we offered service learning opportunities, community presentations, art shows, and training for everyone from scout troops to professional biologists.

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. As a small, community-based organization, we reach our greatest capacity and resiliency by working with partners who challenge and inspire us. This year we sustained our core collaborations, such as our partnership with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game. Together we introduced almost 75 local classes to birds and conservation on Creamer's Refuge during spring and fall migration. We also forged new partnerships in 2015. We moved into a new office with Folk School Fairbanks and Northwoods Book Arts Guild, two groups also dedicated to lifelong learning and community engagement. We look forward to working with them more in the future. Other new partnerships include the University of Alaska and the Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge. They are among the groups that will help us work with communities around the state to study and teach about the nesting ecology of aerial insectivores, a group of passerines experiencing significant decline in the north. You can read more about this project on page 3.

But our greatest collaborative relationship—indeed the reason we are here at all—is our partnership with YOU, our community of financial supporters and volunteers. You are students and teachers, families and birders, foundations and corporations. You are scientists, farmers, conservationists, miners, and business leaders. You hail from households throughout Alaska, and at least 15 other states. You are a diverse community with a common interest in learning more about Alaska's birds and their habitats, and in educating the next generation of Alaskan scientists. YOU are the Alaska Songbird Institute! Thank you for making this important work possible! 


THE CREAMER'S FIELD MIGRATION STATION

NOT JUST ANOTHER BANDING STATION

Since its inception in 1992, the Creamer's Field Migration Station (aka "the banding station") has been a community project. From start to finish, station set-up through data analysis, it is driven by a diverse group of volunteers, interns, educators, and biologists who share a passion for birds, conservation, and learning. The banding station exemplifies a model where



Banding apprentice, Jessica McLaughlin releases a Rusty Blackbird at CFMS. "Rusties" are one of North America's most rapidly declining species. They breed in boreal wetlands, like those at Creamer's Field. In fall, their diet switches from aquatic insects to seeds, and they can be found in birch forests throughout Interior Alaska preparing for migration.

research and education are blended, engaging people of all ages, from all walks of life, with the natural world around them. This year, despite a lot of rain (and snow!), almost 2,500 people took advantage of myriad opportunities to learn about migratory songbird ecology and to be involved in research at the station. 74 classes from the greater Fairbanks community and the University of Alaska visited on field trips. We offered free, guided walks during the height of fall migration, hosted an open house during the refuge-wide Spring Migration Celebration, and held a bird banding breakfast during the 18th annual Tanana Valley Sandhill Crane Festival. Hundreds more visitors dropped into the station on their own. This work was made possible by 45 community volunteers and three interns who together collected data on over 1,500 birds of 31 species and contributed 1,314 hours to the project. Thank you! Thanks as well to Adopt-a-Net sponsors and ASI members. If you are interested in adopting a net or volunteering in the future, contact ASI's Science Director: April.HardingScurr@aksongbird.org or visit <http://aksongbird.org>. See you in the spring! 

Staff:

Tricia Blake, Director
April Harding Scurr, Science Director
Barbara Logan, Banding Apprentice
Jessica McLaughlin, Banding Apprentice
Tawna Morgan, Bander
Bennett Wong, Banding Intern

Board of Directors:

Beth Peluso, President
Amy Turner, Treasurer
April Harding Scurr, Secretary
Tricia Blake
Dr. Gerald "J.J." Frost
Dr. Edward Murphy
Dr. Rebecca Young



ALASKA SWALLOW MONITORING NETWORK

May is a vibrant time in Alaska. With it comes the long awaited midnight sun, the dreaded hordes of mosquitos, a whirlwind green-up, and...THE RETURN OF MIGRATORY BIRDS! It is an exciting time for avid and casual birders alike, as each and every day brings new arrivals. Tree Swallows are one species returning to open fields and wetlands across the Interior. These iridescent, aerial acrobats average just under 22 grams, yet they undertake incredible migrations. Geolocators retrieved from returning birds in Fairbanks in 2014 revealed their wintering grounds in Central Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula (which they reach by traveling the Mississippi River Valley and crossing the Gulf of Mexico!) The recapture of locally banded birds has also taught us that they can be remarkably faithful, sometimes returning to the very same nest box with the same mate. But our 17-year data set has taught us more than relationship status and real estate preference. We have recorded changes in timing, including earlier lay and hatch dates. These changes in timing could have profound implications. A Tree Swallow chick in Fairbanks hatches and grows to adult size in less than three weeks. Energetic demands are extraordinarily high and parents are constantly hunting to feed 5-7 hungry mouths. Rain and wind can ground their primary prey, aerial insects, and young birds can starve. Breeding earlier may be an adaptation to earlier green up throughout the birds' migratory route. But is unpredictable weather more likely early in the season? Is an earlier breeding strategy more risky?

These are just some of the questions that we aim to answer. And who is answering these questions? In 2015 it was 14 students (ages 10-17) in ASI's youth mentoring and high school internship programs. Together they volunteered more than 590 hours monitoring 175 nest boxes on Creamer's Refuge and the University of Alaska, Fairbanks campus. Half of these students were returning for their second or third season. They were assisted by ASI bird banding apprentice Bennett Wong.

Working alongside an ASI mentor, the students followed 67 active nests (390 eggs!), and documented our first ever record of a banded female renesting after her first clutch failed. We banded 97 breeding adults (43% were returning from previous years) and 166 chicks. It was a remarkably successful year for swallows in Interior Alaska with over 95% fledging. This is in stark contrast

to 2013 and 2014 which saw low occupancy and high weather-related mortality, respectively. Stay tuned as we begin to understand how these highly variable years fit into the big picture.

2016 will be the 18th consecutive year that students have monitored nesting Tree Swallows in Fairbanks. We are excited to report that beginning next year we will be expanding the project to work with partners statewide. The new **Alaska Swallow Monitoring Network** connects a core group of Tree Swallow projects already underway and establishes new sites. We are very excited to be leading the charge, along with partners Dr. Audrey Taylor (University of Alaska, Anchorage), Melissa Cady (AK Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge), Dr. Julie Hagelin (ADF&G), and Dr. Alex Rose (Niwot Ridge Long Term Ecological Research Station). Our local project partners include: University of Alaska, Fairbanks Student Wildlife Society, Fairbanks Soil & Water Conservation District, and Calypso Farm & Ecology Center. Together we will generate statewide research goals, build an interactive website, and provide training opportunities, all while integrating education and outreach opportunities for local communities. The project is generously funded by a multi-year Environmental Education Grant from the Environmental Protection Agency.

This work exemplifies a model of integrated teaching and learning that has come to be known as PPSR (Public Participation in Scientific Research). PPSR is more than simply a volunteer workforce. It is an intentional and thoughtful collaboration, with scientific goals and measureable, educational outcomes. This type of participatory research is a way to address complex, interconnected environmental challenges because it can produce large data sets. But equally as critical, it creates an engaged and educated citizenry with the critical thinking skills and motivation to create solutions. Thank you for undertaking this work with us!

We would like to thank the **Skaggs Foundation**, long-time supporters of the Swallow Ecology Project. *(continued on page 3)*

Photos left to right: Students from Randy Smith Middle School volunteer cleaning boxes and cataloging nests in preparation for the 2015 season; ASI high school intern Symcha Gillette takes morphological measurements on a 10-day old chick; an adult Tree Swallow with a damselfly meal; our hard working crew constructed 24 replacement nest boxes under the direction of Eagle Scout candidate Will Samuel; newly hatched chicks await their first meal.

CFMS CELEBRATES 25 YEARS



2016 marks 25 years since the Creamer's Field Migration Station began monitoring songbird migration in Interior Alaska. Since that time, a dedicated community of volunteers, staff, and interns have banded over 100,000 birds and educated tens of thousands of people about the importance of migratory birds and the boreal forest ecosystem.

ASI is honored to be managing this unique and important project as we mark this milestone. We have a number of events planned throughout the year to celebrate. We hope you will join us!

February 27: Second annual Songbird Soirée, a bird-themed auction featuring music, craft beer, and ASI collector cups. Proceeds help fund CFMS. Tickets and info at: aksongbird.org/annual-fundraiser/

April 18: Opening day for spring banding

Aug 18-May 19: K-12 spring field trips to CFMS.
aksongbird.org/education/school-programs/

April 30: Spring Migration Celebration at Creamer's Field. Kids can get banded like a bird while learning about conservation and research with ASI.

Aug 1: Opening day for fall banding at CFMS

Aug 17-Sep 30: K-12 fall field trips to CFMS.
aksongbird.org/education/school-programs/

Aug 28: Bird Banding Breakfast at CFMS. Enjoy breakfast and birds at this family-friendly event during the *Tanana Valley Sandhill Crane Festival*

Every Tues & Thurs in Aug: Free guided bird walks to CFMS. Visit our crew and see bird research in action. Meet at 10 AM at the Farmhouse.

This is just a selection of major events. For a full calendar of ASI & other bird-related programs, visit <http://aksongbird.org/events/>

WE NEED YOU!

Throughout its history CFMS has been a community effort, and we need your help as we embark on the next 25 years. Here are some ways to get involved. Information on all of these opportunities can be found at <http://aksongbird.org>.

- 1. Become a volunteer.** Watch for 2016 training dates. There are many ways to volunteer. Here are just a few:
 - check mist nets & remove birds
 - teach K-12 field trips & assist with outreach
 - assist with data management
 - join an advisory committee
- 2. Become a banding apprentice.** ASI's bird banding apprentices work closely with ASI staff to learn bird banding and field ornithology skills. Apprenticeships are arranged on an individual basis by contacting ASI Science Director April Harding Scurr.
- 3. Adopt a net.** Our adopt-a-net sponsors are local businesses and individuals dedicated to providing CFMS with core, sustaining support. YOU can adopt a net by visiting: <http://aksongbird.org/how-to-help/adopt-a-net-sponsorships/>
- 4. Drop by and visit with your friends and family.** CFMS is always open to drop in visitors! Check our website for banding dates and important weather information. Groups are invited to schedule a visit by contacting ASI in advance.
- 5. Become a member.** Our members provide our core support. Visit our website to learn how to become a frequent flyer, view our wish list, join our e-newsletter, and more.

Special thanks to George West for creating the 25th anniversary image you see here. Special edition tee shirts and tote bags will be available soon!

G.C. West 2016

Alaska Swallow Monitoring Network (continued from page 2)

The generous support of the **Skaggs Foundation** has helped to make this unique opportunity available to almost a generation of Fairbanks students. Additional support was generously provided by the **Studebaker Family Environmental Education Fund**, **Flint Hills Resources**, and ASI's membership.

Our 2015 high school internships were supported by the **Arctic Audubon Society** and an anonymous donation in honor of

Mary Kay Teel and **Laurel Devaney**. These two fabulous Fairbanks women have been long-time supporters of birds and youth programming in the Fairbanks community. *Thank you!*

Visit aksongbird.org/education for information and application materials on our 2016 youth mentoring and high school internship opportunities.





PLEASE JOIN US IN THANKING THESE GENEROUS SUPPORTERS OF SONGBIRD RESEARCH, SCIENCE EDUCATION, & CONSERVATION IN ALASKA

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ADOPT-A-NET Sponsors

Varied Thrush: ABR, Inc.; Flint Hills Resources

Tree Swallow: ExxonMobil Community Summer Jobs Program; LGL

Boreal Chickadee: Usibelli Foundation; Camp Denali/North Face Lodge

Yellow Warbler: Arctic Audubon Society; Design Alaska, Inc; North Pole Physical Therapy; Rotary Club of Fairbanks

Ruby-Crowned Kinglet: Alaska Feed Company; Laurel Devaney & Ken Russell; *In Honor of Joan Fay*; Barbara Logan; Martha Hanlon Architects; Randy Meyers; Sunrisers Rotary Club

Finally, a heartfelt thanks to the hard working members of our advisory committees. We could use more help. Visit our website to learn how to join.

Events Committee: Barb Andersen, Robin Davis, Laurel Devaney, Dan McGauhey, April Harding Scurr, Kristine Toth, & Jeff Walters.

Scientific Advisory Committee: Aleya Brinkman, Dr. Gerald Frost, Dr. Julie Hagelin, Dr. Edward Murphy, April Harding Scurr, Dr. Frank Williams, Judy Williams, & Dr. Rebecca Young.

Education & Outreach Advisory Committee: Maria Berger, Tricia Blake, Jarrod Decker, Sarah Keller, Dave Merrill, & Carol Scott.

