



Alaska Songbird Institute

P.O. Box 80235, Fairbanks, Alaska 99708

www.aksongbird.org

2018 Year In Review

Conserving Alaska's boreal birds through ecological education & research



Image by George West

Creamer's Field Migration Station: Analyzing the past to look to the future

2018 was the year of the Yellow-rumped Warbler at ASI's Creamer's Field Migration Station. MYWAs, as they are sometimes called at the station, made up almost 42% of all captures this year. (MYWA is the four-letter ornithological code for "Myrtle" Warblers, the distinct subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warbler found in the eastern U.S. and the boreal forest of Alaska and Canada.) Our 2018 intern and apprentices became quite adept at aging the species, many of which were hatch-year birds.

Analyzing the demographics of our captures year to year (relative numbers of adults and hatch-years) can help us assess the productivity and relative population of a species over time. Although rapid advancements in technology (geolocators, telemetry, satellite tracking, radar, bioacoustics, and big data) are revolutionizing what we know about bird migration, banding at migration stations like ours remains an essential and economical tool to monitor populations over the long term.

In 2019, ASI will embark on a collaborative effort to analyze 20+ years of data gathered at migration monitoring stations in Alaska. Together with our partners, we seek to examine changes in migration phenology, species diversity, productivity, and abundance, with particular attention given to taxa identified as *Species of Greatest Conservation Need* by the state of Alaska.

Our goals are two-fold. We seek to provide a conservation tool for resource managers and the ornithological community. We also seek to evaluate our overarching research questions, methods, and our role in research and conservation in the years ahead. Stay tuned, and thank you for helping to build this vital tool for Alaska songbird conservation!

A message from the President

Dear ASI Community,

Thank you for being a part of the Alaska Songbird Institute. As I write these words, January has given way to February, the sunshine hours are lengthening, and the Common Redpolls on my tray feeder have taken on an increasingly rosy flush. As any Alaska sourdough knows, the pace of life quickens rapidly this time of year and before long spring migrants will be reaching our part of boreal Alaska from all over the globe. Here in Interior Alaska, we occupy a special place in the heart of the boreal forest—one of the Earth's largest biomes, yet one with very few long-term observatories. We at ASI are proud to shine a light on this little studied region and the birds that inhabit it, and to share the information we gather to promote scientific research and inspire the next generation of Alaskans. We could not do it without devoted supporters and volunteers, generous with their time and money. On behalf of all of us at ASI, thank you for your support. We look forward to seeing you at an ASI event soon!

Gerald "J.J." Frost, President
ASI Board of Directors

ASI Board of Directors & Staff

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Studying Swallows: A local, state-wide, & continental scale

On any given day in June, you can find ASI's intrepid team of students out and about at Creamer's Field and the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Armed with bird bags, stealth, and patience, they are capturing and banding Tree Swallows. In 2018, ASI's 17 youth and teens volunteered 560 hours monitoring 150 boxes. With an occupancy rate of just over 50%, we tracked 76 active nests about eight weeks, banded 50 new adult birds, recaptured 65 adults banded in previous years, and banded 347 chicks.

Data on Fairbanks Tree Swallows date back to 1994, when the first boxes were installed and monitored at Creamer's Field. This year's crew compiled year 25 of this long-term dataset investigating the timing and productivity of swallows close to the northern extent of their boreal breeding grounds.

Why swallows? Swallows are aerial insectivores. They rely on flying insects for the high caloric demands of migration, egg production, and rearing chicks. As climatic conditions change, so may the timing of green-up, flowering, and the large booms in insect populations that can also be the bane of our own summertime adventures. The jury is still out as to whether swallows, and other avian species, will be able to respond by adjusting the timing of migration and breeding. ASI's students are helping to find out.

In addition to monitoring Interior Alaskan swallows over time, we contribute to a larger scale look at aerial insectivores through the *Alaska Swallow Monitoring Network*. Founded in 2015, the network allows us to compare phenology, occupancy rates, nest success, and banded bird return rates (survivorship and site fidelity) across Alaska. The network includes four core sites (Fairbanks, Anchorage, McCarthy, and King Salmon), as well as six citizen-science sites from Juneau to Bethel.

Our students' data also contributes to large-scale studies of the species conducted in collaboration with ornithologists throughout North America. This year we contributed to two publications: *Constructing and evaluating a continent-wide migratory songbird network across the annual cycle* (Ecological Monographs) and *A range-wide domino effect and resetting of the annual cycle in a migratory songbird* (Proceedings of the Royal Society B).

Special thanks to our 2018 field crew: Katelyn Weiss, Dana Woolery, Aviana Mitchell, Caitlyn Berrian, Ainsley Sauer, Adah Decker, Lily Downing, Stratton Neibaur, Annabelle Valentine, Zarah Laker-Morris, Kyle Williams, Frances Berge, Annika Merkel, Matteo Kuizenga, Atigun Pensley, Noelle Bertram, Ken Alt, & Brian Bast.



Photo above: Camp Habitat's Nature Sprouts learn about songbirds at Creamer's Field through a visit to ASI's Tree Swallow project.



Photo above: Zarah Laker-Morris is a four year veteran of ASI's youth mentoring program. Zarah is well-versed in collecting, recording, and entering phenology and banding data. She has helped with the most difficult captures and the most delicate tasks related to chick growth rates. Zarah's work earned her an award at the district-wide science fair and a scholarship to attend the 2018 Field Ornithologists Conference in Ventura, CA. We are so proud of her! Here Zarah measures the culmen (nares to tip) of an 11-day old chick.

Each year we band almost 400 swallow chicks. They are rarely recaptured, but their condition (within and between clutches and sites) allows us to compare growth rates and timing. It also provides clues about food and environmental conditions. This year we received a report of a banded male Tree Swallow breeding at Copper Kettle Reindeer Farm, 25 miles outside Fairbanks. He was one of ours, banded in 2017 at the UAF Reindeer Farm!



North for Science! 2018



June 6-13, a team of eight middle school students led by ASI's Carol Scott traveled the Dalton Highway on the 2018 *North for Science!* Expedition. The group endured a winter storm and high winds while camped at Marion Creek Campground on the south slope of the Brooks Range. Despite the challenging weather, they participated in bear safety

Birding for a cause!

ASI's 2018 Boreal Bird-a-thon

By Claire Stuyck & Paul Leonard

Last year marked an important milestone in bird conservation, the centennial of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. In recognition of this powerful piece of legislation, hundreds of organizations across the U.S. celebrated 2018 as the *Year of the Bird*. Birders supporting ASI led the charge with the **2018 Boreal Bird-a-thon**. Together 12 teams raised over \$6,000 for bird conservation!

When we began our own Boreal Bird-a-thon, we didn't know what the year would bring. We hoped to have some amazing experiences together and share the joy of birding with everyone we met along the way. Our efforts took us across Alaska from the Kenai Peninsula to Nome where we saw iconic species like Spectacled Eider, Eastern Yellow Wagtail and Muskox. Travels to Texas brought surprises like Aplomado Falcon, Groove-billed Ani and a mountain lion! Indiana shared sparrows galore, and Congaree National Park in South Carolina didn't disappoint with a woodpecker grand-slam. (We were never really quite sure if it was a Ghost Orchid we were looking at in Corkscrew Swamp...)

Throughout these travels, we were continually reminded how large and connected our world is. The same subspecies of Dark-eyed Junco that we enjoy all summer long in Fairbanks was already in Florida for the holidays. The very same Northern Wheatears that we watched with glee on Eagle Summit migrated to Africa, where Michelle Lake, ASI Board Member and another Boreal Bird-a-thoner, added 150 species to her life list!

Looking back across our year birding for conservation, we will never forget hearing our first Whooping Crane, the Snail Kite deftly plucking a snail in the early morning fog, or the delicate and carefully hidden nest of an Arctic Warbler. We will also never forget the wonderful places and people we met and birded with along the way. There were no dividing lines; we were bound by a common love. This may be the most important lesson.

Bird-a-thon (continued on page 4)



Image by Pam Seiser

The Alaska Bird Conference returns to Fairbanks

The 18th Alaska Bird Conference will be held at the Westmark Hotel & Conference Center March 4-8, 2019. Hosted by ASI in cooperation with a local organizing committee, the conference features something for everyone, from professional ornithologists and educators to local birdwatching enthusiasts. Full conference rates are available, as well as discounted daily, volunteer, and student rates.

Each day features invited speakers focused on large-scale changes to bird habitat throughout the state, as well as presentations by ornithologists, students, and educators working with birds throughout Alaska. There are also workshops, special sessions, and community events, including *Celebrating Alaska's Birds* at Well Street Gallery, and a free public presentation by Keynote Speaker Cole Sartore at UAF's Murie Auditorium. Field trips include a guided owl ski & snowshoe and a behind the scenes tour of the University of Alaska ornithology collection. Friday, March 8 features a full day *Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) Workshop* in partnership with the Alaska Center for Unmanned Aircraft Systems Integration (ACUASI) and Dr. David Bird, a leading expert on UAS (drone)-based avian research.



Thanks to our generous sponsors: ADF&G, USFWS, BLM-Arctic District Office, ConocoPhillips Alaska, USGS-Alaska Science Center, NPS-Arctic Network Inventory & Monitoring Program, BLM-Alaska State Office, City of Fairbanks Hotel-Motel Discretionary Fund, Arctic Audubon Society, Audubon Alaska, Delcourt Aviation, Alaska Airlines, Zeiss, UAF's Institute of Arctic Biology, Ducks Unlimited, Kinross/Ft. Knox, Wildlife Conservation Society, ABR, Inc., and Northern Alaska Tour Company.

Full schedule and registration: www.alaskabirdconference.org.

North for Science! (continued from page 2)

training, studied fire ecology, conducted hare pellet counts, learned about lynx radio-telemetry, visited the community of Wiseman, and more. When the weather cleared, they drove over Atigun Pass for a much-anticipated trip to UAF's Toolik Field Station and its Long Term Ecological Monitoring plots. Through it all, participants remained upbeat and engaged, returning to Fairbanks tired, dirty, and smiling. Thanks to our partners: *U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management.*

The 2019 *North for Science!* Expedition will take place June 5-12. We are committed to making *North for Science!* accessible, regardless of financial need. You can sponsor a student at www.aksongbird.org/north-4-science-sponsor-a-student/. For information email: north4science@aksongbird.org.



Cole Sartore works alongside his dad Joel building the Photo Ark with the National Geographic Society. Together they aim to create intimate portraits of an estimated 12,000 species in hopes of inspiring awareness and care for Earth's incredible biodiversity.

PHOTOARK

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A heartfelt thanks to our volunteers, members, and our community of sustaining donors, the **Frequent Flyers**.

You hail from at least 19 Alaska communities and 20 states. You are a diverse group, united by your appreciation for birds and your commitment to conservation, research, and science education.

Thank you!

www.aksongbird.org/donate



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P.O. Box 80235
FAIRBANKS, AK 99708



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UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP OF FAIRBANKS

4448 Pikes Landing Rd
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Saturday, April 6, 2019
5 pm – 8:30 pm

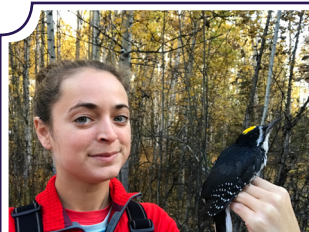
Please join us to celebrate the return of migratory birds at ASI's biggest annual fundraiser.

Enjoy live music, complimentary food, beer/wine, and the chance to bid on bird-themed art, desserts, outdoor adventures, and so much more. You'll have the opportunity to support ASI's **Future Scientist Fund** and one lucky winner will go home with Iris Sutton's original work **Grosbeaks!** Tickets & info at: www.aksongbird.org

Bird-a-thon (continued from page 3)

However, the future of many birds we love hangs in the balance. What will happen to the Red Knot? Steller's Eider? Olive-sided Flycatcher? Whooping Crane?

As we begin our journey in 2019 and the 101st year of vital protections provided by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, we challenge everyone to think critically about how each of us supports bird conservation. The **Year of the Bird** may have come to a close, but we can all continue to honor and support the birds that bring us together.



Meet 1232-17382, a male Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*). He has been sought after by local and traveling birders alike, and is fast on his way to becoming a local superstar. First captured as an adult at our Creamer's Field Migration Station in September 2017, he is at least 3 years old. (The longevity record for this species is 4 years 11 months.)

Black-backed Woodpeckers are uncommon and mysterious. They show a strong association with recently burned coniferous forests. So what's he doing at Creamer's Field? He's taking advantage of the boom in wood boring beetles (and their larvae) thriving on the dead and dying birch trees, victims of increased seasonal flooding. On your next walk on the Seasonal Wetlands Trail, keep an eye and ear out for his characteristic, high-pitched **pik pik pik**. He's easily identified by his solid black back and long white mustache. If you're lucky, you may catch a flash of his golden crown as he forages; females lack this distinctive color patch. Rumor has it, there's a banded female out there too. Creamer's Field may be hosting a celebrity couple!