



## 2020 Year In Review

*Conserving Alaska's boreal birds through ecological education & research*

## Reimagining ASI in 2020... and beyond!

By Tricia Blake, Executive Director

2020 was steeped in challenge and change, but also unanticipated opportunity. It was a year where millions of people, spending long hours at home, discovered the incredible winged wildlife sharing their yards and spaces. Businesses selling bird feeding supplies saw record breaking sales. People discovered that bird watching is easy to do while maintaining safe social distance! New and seasoned birdwatchers alike turned to birds and the steady rhythm of migration for solace, joy, and diversion. Only time will tell, but it is reasonable to hope these new connections will endure, providing much needed support for bird conservation.

Here at ASI, 2020 was a year where **all plans changed**. At the North American Banding Council's recommendation, we cancelled spring banding, hunkered down with our community, and assessed how to best meet our mission in a strange new world. Our innovative STEM educator quickly pivoted to capture the energy of spring migration—virtually—by creating a series of six Alaska-specific bird watching videos. She crowd-sourced content and engaged teachers and students tackling the new challenge of distance learning. Her videos reached over 13,000 people! They are a great resource and can be found on our website.

As nesting season arrived in Interior Alaska, conditions did not allow us to offer our traditional mentoring and high school internship programs. Instead we worked closely with two teens and one household group to monitor 53 nests and band 433 swallows at Creamer's Field and UAF. Although we missed the energy and joy inherent in banding birds with our usual crew of 10-12 year olds, our older students reported deep and personal learning experiences that allowed them to take on greater responsibility and challenge themselves in new ways.

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## A Message from the Board of Directors

Dear ASI Community:

The year 2020 has brought an exceptional series of challenges that have affected every Alaskan, and indeed every human being across the world. Yet, just like every other year, 2020 is nearing its end and we will soon welcome the coming of 2021. The month of January is named for Janus, the Roman god of doors, gateways, and transitions, possessing two visages—one looking forward and the other back. As I pause to reflect in the waning days of 2020, I am deeply thankful for the peace and inspiration our grand Alaskan landscape provides – and the delights of living with and learning about its wild birds. In short, it has been a great year to “unplug” and spend some good socially distant time outdoors. Boreal birds are an enduring presence that allow us to step back from external concerns, and live in the here and now. Our wild birds go about the business of life like any other year. Whether the antics of nuthatches at the feeder, the boisterous chortling of White-winged Crossbills, or the summer flourish of birdsong from now departed long distance migrants, our boreal birds provide a welcome respite and steady presence in a tough year. Amid the pandemic, we at ASI have had to change our day to day activities. But, we've been able to maintain our core projects, such as the fall banding season at Creamers Field Migration Station, behind the scenes. I'm thankful for all the wonderful people who have continued to support ASI with their time and financial support. To all our dedicated volunteers, supporters, and staff: **thank you**. To all the students, teachers, and other community members who we couldn't see in person this summer: **we miss you!** In the pages that follow, you can learn of all the things that have happened behind the scenes in 2020, and look forward to a return to normal in 2021. Best wishes.

Gerald "J.J." Frost, ASI President

# Creamer's Field Migration Station (CFMS)

By Claire Stuyck, Lead Bander

CFMS' 29<sup>th</sup> year was one for the record books. The global pandemic brought unforeseen challenges and we decided to forgo spring banding. We established rigorous health and safety protocols following recommendations from the Bird Banding Lab, North American Banding Council, and others to allow operation in fall. This was the first year in CFMS history that the station wasn't open to the public. We missed the helping hands, smiling faces, and joy synonymous with an early morning at the station.

Overall it was a rainy, warm year without a hard frost until late September (compared with August 15 last year). Yellow-rumped Warblers (Myrtle subspecies, pictured below) maintained their reign at the top of the capture charts with American Tree Sparrows creeping up to #4. This increase in American Tree Sparrows was due to a late fall influx at Creamers Field; hundreds of them swarmed filling the early morning air with song, calling and fluttering from bush to bush. By midmorning they were gone, our only evidence of their presence was our full data notebooks! Unusual captures included a Red-breasted Nuthatch, Wilson's Snipe and TWO Belted Kingfishers! We were surprised to capture just two woodpeckers this year, Hairy and American Three-toed.

It's infrequent for others to recapture or report birds banded at CFMS, and even rarer for someone to report a band on a living bird that isn't captured. This may be because our station is the farthest north, without others nearby, and it's nearly impossible to read a songbird band without multiple pictures from a high-powered lens! We received exciting news through the Bird Banding Laboratory of a male American Robin observed building a nest and raising young in Ester this summer. It turns out that this male was originally banded at CFMS in September of 2017 as a hatch-year which makes him three years-old this year!

In 2019, we began contributing to a joint University of Alaska - Anchorage and State of Alaska tick surveillance program that seeks to understand the range expansion of ticks and potential transmission of tick-borne diseases. Their first peer-reviewed publication came out this year. To help, we've been examining our songbirds for hitch-hiking ticks. Last year, we detected two individuals carrying ticks (in their ears!) The results are back, and they were Hare Ticks (*Haemaphysalis leporispalustris*) which are native to Alaska and rarely feed on humans. We only discovered one American Robin with ticks (again in the ears!) this year. If you encounter a tick, Alaska's Submit-a-Tick program would love to know about it!

Despite the challenges in our world today, we are excited and hopeful that our community will be able to come together soon. We hope you'll stay in touch and join us in 2021.

(Reimagining ASI...from page 1)

We safely opened CFMS for fall migration with amended protocols. Although closed to the public for the first time, our crew was determined to bring CFMS to the people! They kept a blog, were active on social media, created videos for our YouTube channel, started an "Ask A Bander" series, and created a Creamer's Field Virtual Field Trip using an ArcGIS Story Map. Like our traditional field trips, it travels from the historic buildings and trails to our bird banding station, exploring the natural and human history of the refuge, with a close look at our research. Even our 2020 Raven Art Show went virtual this year with 15 statewide artists and over 1,500 participants from around the world!

ASI's virtual outreach created new science learning resources across diverse platforms and topics for tens of thousands of people this year. These digital stories reflected the creativity and innovation of our talented staff, and brought birds, ASI scientists, and conservation into the hearts and minds of people near and far. As life slowly returns to "normal," these new resources and outreach tools will continue to increase access for people unable to visit us in person.

In 2021 CFMS will begin its 30<sup>th</sup> season, and ASI will begin a three-year capacity building project generously funded by the M.J. Murdock Char-

itable Trust. Our goal is two-fold: to prepare the station to best meet Alaska bird conservation needs, and also to prepare this unique community conservation legacy to endure the next 30 years. With all its uncertainty and challenges, 2020 has been an unanticipated but valuable crash course in preparing for this effort. We are grateful for the lessons that have allowed us to reimagine our work, and we are so excited for all that lies ahead!



## Data Analysis Takes Flight

By April Harding Scurr, ASI Founder & Research Associate

CFMS has been banding birds since 1991. That's a long time, and you might ask, "Why?" Good question. Aside from some truly amazing educational opportunities, the main scientific objectives are to examine changes in migration patterns and monitor populations.

In 2019 ASI joined forces with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to

answer at least one aspect of these long-term objectives. Fall banding data from CFMS and the Pump Station (operated in Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge from 1993-2015) were analyzed. The main objectives were to: 1) Examine changes in capture rates for 21 species at CFMS to inform sampling design; and 2) Examine changes in timing of fall migration. Well, I'm happy to say the analyses should be complete by the end of 2020, just in time for the cold weather to hit and to start writing up results for publication. Like all good research, I believe the results will lead to more questions, and help the conservation and management of Alaska's songbirds.

It has been so rewarding to be involved in this process from banding to analyses. Seeing the fruition of banding thousands of Yellow-rumped Warblers and Juncos is truly amazing. Thanks to my collaborators, Julie Hagelin and Grey Pendleton (ADFG), Kristin Dubour (USFWS), and Tricia Blake and Claire Stuyck (ASI) for all their hard work and brainstorming sessions.



# ASI Volunteer Spotlight: Laurel Devaney



ASI is a community-based organization. We rely on the generosity of our volunteers for everything from data collection and entry, to event planning, governance, financial management, and project planning. Superstar volunteer Laurel Devaney has just about done it all! After a long career with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service where she created youth and community science education programs in rural and urban Alaska, Laurel has continued to support kids and the Fairbanks community through volunteer work. She began volunteering at the Creamer's Field Migration Station 26 years ago and in recent years has been honing her skills as a banding apprentice at CFMS and on our Tree Swallow project. (She also serves on ASI's Event's Committee!) We can't thank Laurel, and all of our dedicated volunteers, enough for making ASI's work possible! CFMS intern Chelsea Arnold sat down with Laurel (virtually!) this fall to learn more about what inspires her.

## When did you start volunteering at the CFMS?

I started volunteering at (then) ABO in the fall of 1994. We had been living in Corvallis Oregon. Ken got a job in March and moved to Fairbanks earlier than me. He started volunteering at the banding station for the spring migration and I was so jealous. I had participated in songbird banding just enough to get a taste for it. Having a permanent project that we could volunteer with in our new home was like a dream come true. I signed up as soon as I got to Fairbanks in early August, and volunteering at the station has been a highlight of my falls in Fairbanks ever since. I told Ken years ago that when I retired and had time to devote to it, I wanted to learn to band songbirds myself.



**What drives your passion for volunteer work?** I feel we all have the duty to do what we can to make the world a better place-if only in a small way. So many groups are doing great work, but have limited funds and personnel. Just sharing some of your time with them can help so much.

**What motivates you to come back year after year and volunteer for ABO and now ASI?** Getting to spend time with birds and the people who love them! The staff banders at ABO and ASI over the years have all been extraordinary people. They are so knowledgeable, passionate about their work, and always willing to share what they know. The interns who have come through have been fun to meet, and the other long-term volunteers feel like extended family.

**What are some of your favorite things about volunteering here?** I like being part of a team that is doing valuable work, and I like learning new skills. Learning to band has been a huge but very gratifying challenge for me.

**What are your favorite or most memorable birds captured at the station?** The young goshawk that blasted past the banding station at eye-level and ensnared in net 26 just long enough to be caught is a strong memory. The rarities like Arctic and Palm Warblers and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were fun surprises. The days of rounding the corner in the peak of fall migration to see net 25 as a wall of feathers and color stands out. Really, though, even catching the common birds feels like such a gift. To briefly intersect my life with a bird's in such an intimate way is an experience I never tire of.

**What are some things you hope to see in the future from ASI or in the Fairbanks bird community?** Climate change is making massive changes in all of our world but especially has an impact on migratory birds. I hope that the data we collect at ASI will add to the picture of what birds are facing, and what they need to survive.

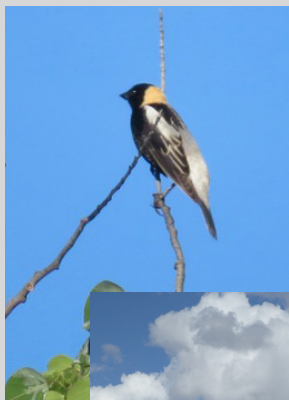


## Birding Therapy Amid COVID

*By Michelle Lake, Teacher, Effie Kokrine Charter School and Secretary, ASI Board of Directors*

The loss of past and present students, along with this whole Coronavirus situation, made me rely more heavily on birding this year than I ever imagined was possible. Thank goodness I was able to find other like-minded birders who didn't judge and just enjoyed the birds, perhaps needed the birds, just as much as I did to get through this pandemic, other local Fairbanks birders that I just so happened to meet through ASI.

Since all of our summer plans came to a halt, ASI's Board President, JJ Frost, suggested a couple of birding trips that he had been wanting to do with other birders for years. Long time supporter, Jeff Walters, lead bander, Claire Stuyck, Paul Leonard, and myself made a summer of it and birded Eagle, Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge, the Fortymile River via kayaks and raft, and Gold Hill out of Chisana. We saw and heard many awesome birds including the 6<sup>th</sup> Alaska



record of Bobolink (pictured above), a Least Flycatcher, Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, Tennessee Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, a Pied-billed Grebe (the first interior record?), Sora, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Upland Sandpipers, Smith's Longspurs, and Timberline subspecies of Brewer's Sparrows, including the first documented Timberline Sparrow nest in Alaska.

While I obviously needed to see some good birds to help me get through, I think I needed the company of like-minded birders even more. I can't thank the "Timberline Crew" and other birders who I saw out and about this spring, summer, and fall, enough for their support and willingness to go birding this summer. I don't know where my sanity would be right now without you all!



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