



Conserving Alaska's boreal birds through ecological education & research

A Message from the Board of Directors

Greetings ASI Members,
The many migratory birds that breed in our northwestern corner of the North American continent include some of Earth's true champions of long distance migration. These species possess a special power that belies their small size—the power to connect continents, landscapes, and people. Earlier this spring, I bumped into many longtime friends, and met new ones, who like me were participating in ASI's inaugural Fairbanks Birding Challenge. We were united by a common interest and passion in learning about and experiencing boreal birds and their habitats. As we enter the subarctic winter season, I often think of some of the individual birds I encountered that are now passing the winter in other parts of the world. And, of course, I marvel at the resourcefulness and tenacity of our winter residents. Behind each individual bird is a compelling life story—and you can read some inspiring examples in the pages that follow. The Alaska Songbird Institute exists, and thrives, in helping to connect people with the birds in the Earth's boreal forest biome, a vast, wild region that encircles the globe's northern latitudes. We're proud to operate one of very few long-term banding stations anywhere in the circumboreal region, and the role we are able to play in connecting Alaskans of all ages with the avian kingdom. On behalf of all of us at ASI, thank you for your continued interest and support. I look forward to seeing you out and about in the field, and at an ASI event soon.

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

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Creamer's Field Migration Station: A Community Conservation Legacy

The Creamer's Field Migration Station (CFMS) was founded in 1992. Three decades later, it has become a rare and valuable record of long-term change in boreal songbirds. Each of the over 120,000 birds captured in our nets over the years has shared a small piece of its story with us, and these stories have educated and inspired a whole generation of visitors. CFMS is the only long-term banding station remaining in Alaska to document the stories of boreal songbirds over time. Rooted in the idea that research and conservation are everyone's responsibility, CFMS continues to utilize a community-based research model, relying on the hard work and passion of hundreds of volunteers, students, educators, and scientists as well as on the generosity of our community for financial support. As we reflect on 30 field seasons (and thousands of hours in waders!), we are proud of all we have accomplished together. The value of our work has never been clearer in light of a changing climate and continental-scale bird declines. We are grateful to all who came before us (a few are pictured below!), and we look forward to the next 30 years. Together we can make a difference in the conservation of Alaska's birds and their habitats, starting right here at Creamer's Field.



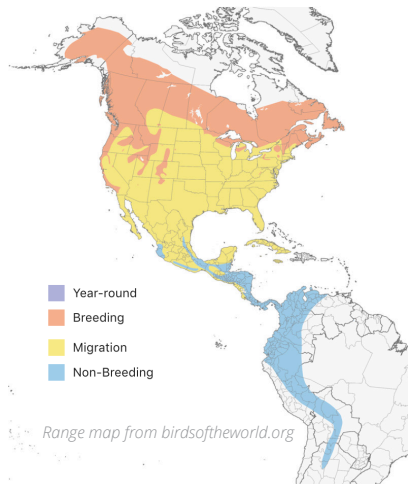
Photos ASI & ABO archive

Counter-clockwise from top right:
1. Tom Pogson, CFMS Founder (Spring set up hasn't changed!)
2. Anna Marie Benson, former CFMS Manager and Senior Scientist with Jim Logan, ABO's first Director
3. Nancy DeWitt, ABO Director 1997-2006 with volunteer Carol Brice;
4. Sue Guers & April Scurr (ASI Founder), former CFMS Managers;
5. Vince Weber & Olivia Ridley, 2021 CFMS crew, with Robert Snowden, current CFMS Director

Where are they now? A story about the wintering areas of Swainson's Thrush that nest in interior Alaska

By Carol McIntyre, ASI Board Member

Every year when the sun stays below the horizon longer than it stays above, I often wonder where all the migratory birds that graced my big backyard (aka interior Alaska) last summer are spending their winter. Yesterday I was thinking about Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*), one of my favorite summer birds. We've long known that Swainson's Thrush that nest or are raised in interior Alaska are long-distance migrants, and that they spend the winter in South America. But South America is a huge continent, and until recently we didn't know what routes our Swainson's Thrush used to get there and back or their specific wintering locations. To begin to answer these questions, we used tiny archival light-level loggers (aka geolocators) and GPS data-loggers to study the annual cycle movements of several species of migratory passerines that nest in Denali National Park and Preserve and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. Results of those studies are helping fill in some of the knowledge gaps about their migratory ecology and wintering areas.



Perhaps best known for its flutelike upwardly spiraling song, Swainson's Thrushes breed in northern forests and winter into South America. Studies like this one help researchers refine range maps and identify key breeding, wintering, and stopover habitats to prioritize conservation efforts.

Our sample of Swainson's Thrush departed their breeding areas by early September and flew approximately 12,500 km across North, Central, and northern South America before settling on their wintering areas in November. They all wintered in a relatively small area in mid-elevation forests on the eastern slope of the Andes in southwest Bolivia and northwest Argentina and stayed put until they started heading north in February and March. They arrived back on the breeding areas by late May, completing a round-trip journey that often exceeded 24,000 km. This high mileage puts northern breeding Swainson's Thrush firmly into the group of northern breeding passerines that travel extremely long distances, and complete trans-hemispheric migrations between breeding and wintering areas each year. This group also includes Alaska Northern Wheatears who winter in sub-Saharan Africa and Alaska Blackpoll Warblers who winter in northeastern South America. Like many other migratory birds, our sample of birds spent about 75% of the year away from Alaska, with much of that time on another continent. These hemispheric movements emphasize the need for us to work with others to identify and protect the resources these birds need to survive throughout the year. Interestingly, these birds showed a strong affinity to forested areas near mountainous terrain,

We live in a truly exceptional time for migration research! Advances in tracking technology are just one of the powerful new tools rapidly expanding our knowledge of bird migration. Amidst all this technology, bird banding remains an essential and economical tool to answer questions about migratory movements and patterns, demographics and morphology. Banding studies like ours at CFMS



provide a snapshot of a location, revealing changes over time. In our case, this location is the boreal forest, an essential breeding habitat for so many species. When used in collaboration with other locations, banding data can reveal trends at larger scales.

Recloaking a banded bird can be like finding a needle in a haystack. A Swainson's Thrush, like the one pictured above, was captured and banded at CFMS on August 21, 2021 and was found in Wisconsin on September 9, just 19 days later! Although rare, recoveries like this one offer tremendous insight into migratory routes, stopover habitats, and timing.

If you encounter a banded bird, do your part and report it at:

www.reportband.gov

spending the summer near the towering peaks of the Alaska Range and Wrangell Mountains, and the winter near the Andes. So, when I wonder where "my" Swainson's Thrush are spending the winter, I now know that there is a good chance that they are in a forested area on the eastern slope of the Andes and that many of their winter neighbors are from Alaska too.

Watching raptors during autumn migration decades ago was the spark that ignited my fascination with birds and migration. We've learned a great deal about the ecology of migratory birds since then and my fascination with them and migration only grows stronger. At the same time, my concern about their future has grown stronger and my daily thoughts often turn to what actions we need to take to ensure they have the resources they need to survive. Honestly, at times my increasing concern about migratory birds overshadows the joy they bring to my life, resulting in a behavior that a former colleague called "constructive discontent". But I don't want to be discontent. I'd rather think about how happy I'll be when I hear my first Swainson's Thrush song spiraling up and up and up in my big backyard in spring. And, when I finally spot those singing birds, I'll think about how far they traveled, what they encountered, and what hazards they dodged on their way back to their summer homes, and all that I need to do to help them and their offspring return back again next year.

2021 Reports from the Field *CFMS: 30 years and counting!*

by Robert Snowden, Creamers Field Migration Station Project Director

The 30th year of banding at CFMS was an eventful one, with new beginnings, challenges, and as always, interesting birds. As I became familiar with my new role as the banding program director, we also navigated the ever-evolving demands of the pandemic and unpredictable environmental conditions. Fortunately, after a year without spring banding or public visitation, CFMS was able to band in a limited capacity in spring 2021, before fully opening to volunteers and visitors in the fall.

In what's becoming a trend, it was a relatively wet year at CFMS, with extensive flooding in spring followed by one of the rainiest Augusts in decades. The wet conditions had some impact on accessibility and capture rates. We banded 1,168 birds of 33 species across our spring and fall seasons. Orange-crowned Warblers were the top species banded (154 individuals), followed closely by Swainson's Thrushes and Dark-eyed Juncos. Yellow-rumped Warblers, which comprised nearly half our captures in 2020, were a modest 4th place in 2021. Their numbers are known to fluctuate widely from year to year. The persistence

of wet conditions throughout the season also lead to some unique captures, including several species of ducks (which we do not band), a Wilson's Snipe, and three Belted Kingfishers. Prior to 2021, only nine kingfishers have ever been caught here! We had a few superstar recaptures too. You can read about three of them in these pages. As the northernmost banding station in North America, it's rare for our banded birds to be reported elsewhere, even though they can travel thousands of miles on their migration journeys.



ASI photo

This year we began contributing to the Bird Genoscape Project, an effort to map population-specific migratory routes for over 100 focal species through modern genomic techniques. To support this effort, we collected feathers from species such as American Robin, Swainson's Thrush, and Rusty Blackbird, to be sent to researchers in Colorado for genetic analysis. Our samples are among thousands contributed by banding stations across the continent. Analysis can identify migratory connections, allowing scientists to

identify declining populations and develop conservation strategies.

We look forward to growing our volunteer opportunities with new research objectives in 2022. Thank you all for your continued support in these unpredictable times! We hope to see you out at the station.

Mentoring Alaska's next generation



ASI photos

The seeds of ASI's youth mentoring and high school internship programs were planted in 1999 when the Alaska Bird Observatory revitalized a nest box monitoring study at Creamer's Field originally started in 1994. With the help of two "junior scientists," ABO monitored 13 nests that year. In 2021, 18 youth and teens ages 9-18 volunteered 971 hours monitoring 60 Tree Swallow nests from initiation through fledging, banded 112 breeding adults, and 316 nestlings. Together we are building a long-term record of timing and success of aerial insectivores, a rapidly declining group of birds, at the northern extent of their range. *Clockwise from left: First banded as an adult at nest box #47 in 2014, our students have recorded 2511-41096 at one of just three neighboring nest boxes every year. He was captured at CFMS in spring 2021; Molly, Skye, & Adah band swallows at Creamer's Field in June; ASI high school interns band Violet-green Swallow chicks.*

Of the thousands of birds banded at CFMS, only a fraction find their way back into our nets, and they can have fascinating stories to tell. One such superstar is 1232-17382, a male Black-backed Woodpecker. First banded in August 2017, he was aged as an adult (at least one year) at the time. Four years later, after occasional resightings by keen-eyed birdwatchers, he returned to our nets in September.

His recapture was notable—not only because it's only our 10th Black-backed Woodpecker capture, but also because of his age. According to North American banding records, the oldest known Black-backed Woodpecker was at least 4 years, 11 months, so our Creamer's bird may be a contender for the all-time longevity crown!



ASI photo

Before you label him a "super senior," take caution. Banding data for this species is sparse. The longevity record for its more common cousin, the Hairy Woodpecker, is at least 15 years. Black-backeds are found almost exclusively in burned forests in western mountains and boreal regions where they chip away charred bark for juicy, wood-boring larvae. The habitat at Creamer's Field may become increasingly suitable for them in coming years, as persistently flooded wetlands kill greater numbers of birch trees. Perhaps we will improve our knowledge by catching more individuals, but we'll be just as thrilled if 1232-17382 keeps hanging around!

Thank you for supporting the Alaska Songbird Institute!

Please join us in thanking these generous supporters of bird research, conservation and science education in Alaska!



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A heartfelt thanks to all our volunteers, generous members, and especially our community of sustaining monthly donors, the *Frequent Flyers*

Like the birds we study, ASI supporters hail from communities across Alaska, large and small, from Nome to Hoonah, and at least 23 other states from New York to Hawaii! You are a diverse group, united by your commitment to conserving Alaska's wild birds and their habitats.

Thank you!

MEMBERSHIP EXPIRATION DATE: _____

Please consider a tax-deductible donation to the Alaska Songbird Institute. A donation of any amount makes you a member of ASI. Your membership lasts 12 months from the date of your last donation. Members receive ASI's print newsletters, invitations to special events, and best of all, the warm, fuzzy knowledge that you are making a difference by supporting songbird research, science education, and conservation right here in Alaska. Fill out and return the form below, or join immediately online at: aksongbird.org/donate. *If you are interested in joining ASI's Frequent Flyers, our amazing community of sustaining donors, visit our website or call (907) 888-2121.*

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