Alaska Songbird Institute
P.O. Box 80235, Fairbanks, Alaska 99708
www.aksongbird.org

2022 Year In Review

Conserving Alaska's boreal birds through ecological education & research

A Message from the Board of Directors

Greetings ASI Members,

To live in Alaska, is to experience the constant cycle of seasonal change. With each day, the landscape, the soundscape, the quality of light, and the life cycles of living things change just a little bit—or even a lot! As I write these words, we've entered the season of short days—but what the daylight lacks in quantity, is compensated for by an immaculate palette of winter pastels and sparkling textures refracted through frosty branches. Through all this, birds offer a steady presence, and for many of us, an enduring delight. They enrich, inspire, and provide a strong sense of place. They also offer a common thread that unites people from varied backgrounds and walks of life. Fairbanks is a vibrant community that exists and thrives in the midst of what is essentially a wilderness extending in all directions. In winter, we can connect with the hidden life of birds in a place and season in which there are very few human eyes and ears to observe their comings and goings. Like following a "breadcrumb" trail across the landscape, hardy observers who spend time outdoors can make exciting discoveries. In recent days, reports emerged of two remarkable vagrants from the boreal forests of Eurasia—a Little Bunting, and a Eurasian Bullfinch—from neighborhoods in Fairbanks and North Pole. These discoveries were made by residents who keep watch in their own backyards, with camera in hand, motivated by a drive to connect with nature. The Little Bunting was not seen again, but as of the time of writing, the Eurasian Bullfinch has obliged several "twitterpated" local birders. This is all a great example of the value and power of community, and once again, boreal songbirds have helped foster human connection. At ASI we strive to make these connections thrive. 2022 has been an exciting year, with our core programs proceeding apace, and a return to in-person events. To all our staff, volunteers, members, and donors—thank you! On behalf of ASI's staff and board of directors, may you and yours enjoy peace and joy this holiday season.

The distinctive black cap and rosy underparts of the male Eurasian Bullfinch offer bold contrast to the snowy Interior Alaskan landscape. Photo by J.J. Frost

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

Eat, Drink, & Live Bird Friendly

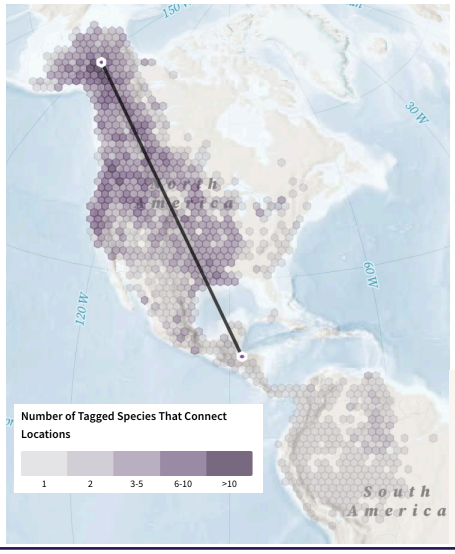
Bird species around the world are threatened with extinction. The most itinerant of creatures, birds pose unique conservation challenges as they traverse ecological and political boundaries throughout their annual cycle. To successfully conserve these species, we must reach across boundaries too. We must study the ecology of a species throughout the entire year, including breeding habitat, migratory routes, essential stopover locations, and overwintering habitat. We must learn which life stages have the largest influence on populations, and where species are most vulnerable. Finally, we must conserve those essential habitats and ensure safe migratory passage. And we must work quickly. The bird population in the United States and Canada has declined by almost 30% — a loss of 3 billion birds across biomes — since 1970. Habitat loss is the driving force.

The Alaska Songbird Institute's long-term migration and nest monitoring projects at Creamer's Field are a part of this work. YOU are a part of this work too! As an ASI supporter, you have helped sustain our ongoing research of songbirds in the boreal forest for over three decades. However, there is more we can all do.

During the quiet, monochromatic days of winter in Interior Alaska, we often daydream about the mountains, jungles, mudflats, farms, and villages around the world where "our" birds are passing the season. Thanks to a new digital tool created by the National Audubon Society, you can see for yourself precisely where some of these locations are. Using data contributed by hundreds of researchers (including ASI!) the **Bird Migration Explorer** (explorer.audubon.org) paints an incredible picture of over 9,300 individual birds (of 458 species) as they trace the rivers, lakes, mountain ranges, and coastlines of North and South America throughout their migratory journeys. You can zoom in to learn the stories of individual birds connecting diverse locations, explore the conservation challenges they face throughout their annual cycle, and so much more.

This map depicts the locations of 4,679 birds of 49 species connecting Fairbanks to places throughout the western hemisphere. The line connects Fairbanks to the Republic of Honduras where nine birds of two species tagged in Fairbanks were detected, including Olive-sided Flycatchers tagged by ADFG and Tree Swallows tagged by ASI at Creamer's Field!

(*continued on page 2*)



The Thrill of the Hunt

By Michelle Sopoliga, Secretary, ASI Board of Directors

Lucy's Warblers are gray overall with a cinnamon rump and crown patch. Photo by Michelle Sopoliga

It's not every day that you find a rare bird in Alaska. It's why some of us keep at it. It's the thrill of the hunt. You never know what you're going to find. You might go out, hoping to find something new for your year list, or maybe, if you're really lucky, something new for Fairbanks. You might give up on trying to find anything new for the day and end up just enjoying the fact that there are swarms of common birds still around, fattening up for their big trip south. And that's when it happens. Something... different. Is it a weird juvenile Orange-crowned Warbler with no yellow at all on it? It's not the right shape or shade of gray to be a Ruby-crowned Kinglet... But nothing else around here has anything even close to a red spot on the top of its head! You notice that it is way paler gray than the rest of the warblers that you are used to seeing. You know it's a warbler because of the sleek small shape of the body and thin, pointy bill. But what is it? You watch it flit around for a few minutes and take a photo for documentation purposes. You get super lucky and it lands perfectly still for about 10 seconds, knee height off the ground less than 20 feet away. You only get one photo before it flies off with a group of juncos and chickadees. Somehow, the one photo you take is not blurry for a change. You get your field guide to try to figure out what it might be. You pull the photo up on your laptop and zoom in. And see it. A rufous rump, just barely visible between the folded wings. Only seen on one species of warbler in North America. A Lucy's Warbler. But they're supposed to be in the deserts of the southwest U.S., as in Arizona. This is what you've been waiting for. This moment, right here. Turns out, Lucy's Warbler has never been documented in Alaska before, let alone in Fairbanks. And then it hits you. The urge and motivation to drive to Anchorage to look for the first documented Least Tern in Alaska, so you drive. And you hope that you are successful enough for the chase to never get old.

One of only two warbler species that nest in cavities, Lucy's Warblers breed in mesquite bosques of the Southwestern U.S. and winter along the Pacific coast of Mexico and Central America. So how did this bird end up in Interior Alaska? Migrating birds can be blown off course by storms. Juvenile birds sometimes disperse northward after the breeding season in what is called post-breeding or vagrant wandering. Occasionally birds migrate in a direction opposite to what is expected, a phenomenon called reverse migration, perhaps caused by a malfunction in the bird's internal navigational system. We don't yet fully understand these movements, although they seem to happen more often in recent decades. It is also important to remember that species' ranges change slowly over time. Birds such as Black-billed Magpies and Red-breasted Nuthatches are more common in the Fairbanks area than just a few decades ago. To find out where common and uncommon birds are found throughout the year and around the globe, check eBird (ebird.org). Consider uploading your own sightings to contribute to a growing database documenting these changes.

Live Bird Friendly (*continued from page 1*)

We can all have a positive impact on bird conservation by supporting habitat protection. For many of our Alaskan birds, this means supporting research and habitat conservation along migratory routes and overwintering locations, as well as at home. Using tools like the **Bird Migration Explorer** we can learn where these important locations are and make informed consumer choices to support our values. Here at ASI, we were thrilled to recently discover Deep Breadth Coffee, a small Fairbanks roaster offering Smithsonian certified Bird Friendly® beans. This is the gold-standard among certifications, ensuring farms maintain a mix of foliage cover, tree height, and biodiversity to support bird habitat. Deep Breadth currently offers certified Bird Friendly®, organic beans from Honduras. Hooray for our Tree Swallows and Olive-sided Flycatchers overwintering there! This coffee is also entirely produced by women in Manos de Mujer (Hands of Women). Check out the varieties they offer at **deepbreadth.coffee**, or find them on facebook.

2022 By the Numbers

2022 Report from the Field: Creamer's Field Migration Station

by Robert Snowden, Creamers Field Migration Station Project Director

The 31st year of operation at the Creamer's Field Migration Station was one of growth, as we saw increases in bird capture rates, volunteer participation, and public visitation at the banding station. While we still have goals to further increase productivity and engagement, we continue to make progress in improving and expanding our banding program in the community.

Prevailing environmental conditions are often a major influence on when we can band and what we catch at CFMS, and 2022 was no exception. Though our spring banding season was limited by the very late and wet breakup this year — we had the latest start date for the spring season in station history — the dry summer resulted in a very different flavor during fall migration. For the first time since 2014, our frequently flooded "gulley" remained dry virtually the entire season. These wetland nets (11-23) are often the busiest nets for catching birds, and banding personnel and volunteers greatly appreciated not having to wade through several feet of water to check them this fall. In CFMS' early years, the gulley was more often dry, and was much more wooded. The recent trend of persistent inundation (likely from wetter summers and changes to geomorphology) has caused a distinct change in vegetation structure as trees and larger shrubs have died off. The photos below demonstrate how different net 15 looks in 2022 compared with 15 years ago.

The dry conditions appeared to impact species composition of our captures this fall. Despite higher overall capture rates compared to last year, we caught considerably fewer species than recent seasons. Wetland-affiliated species like Rusty Blackbirds were entirely absent from 2022 captures, and unlike 2021 we had no ducks, shorebirds, or kingfishers. On the other hand, the lack of flooding may have been conducive for catching greater numbers of birds that favor grassy habitats, like Lincoln's Sparrows.

Now for some specific highlights: the most unique capture of 2022 was a juvenile Chipping Sparrow caught at the start of the fall season — only the third-ever banding record of this species at CFMS! We were also excited by a pair of young Merlins caught together on August 17. One of our standout recaptures was our very first bird of the year, a Hammond's Flycatcher. This female was first caught in the very same net in May 2018, recaptured in spring 2019, and then absent from our nets until this year. Banders recorded her as an adult during her first capture in 2018, which means she's made the trip down to her wintering grounds in Central America and back to Creamer's Field at least 5 times––that's a lot of mileage for a 10-gram bird to log!

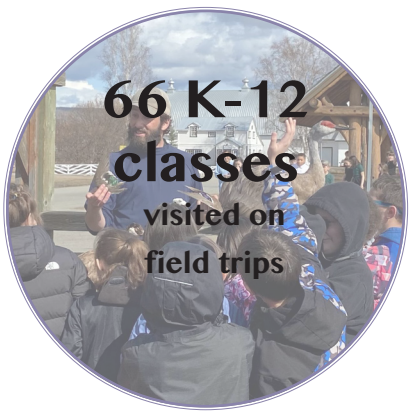
Thank you for your support this year. We look forward to growing our volunteer involvement and banding research objectives in 2023 and beyond.


Net 15 (2022)

A record of change:

Ecological succession, the process by which the mix of species and habitat in an area changes over time, is an important consideration for a long-term project like ASI's Creamer's Field Migration Station. In 2022 we completed another round of standardized vegetation surveys, completed every five years. Our objective is to track changes to plant species and habitat structure around our mist nets and the potential impact on avian communities. Like many northern ecosystems, our study site at Creamer's Field is experiencing rapid and profound change, faster than would be expected by succession alone. The photos above show net 15 in 2022 (left) and in 2007 (right), the first year the surveys were conducted. Once a seasonal wetland, persistent flooding and changing ground conditions have killed the canopy and mid shrub layers of the forest, resulting in significant change in abundance and composition of the bird communities utilizing the area. We owe a debt of gratitude to plant gurus J.J. Frost and Sue Bishop for their time and expertise in completing this year's surveys! Thank you!


Net 15 (2007)



Thank you for supporting the Alaska Songbird Institute!

Adopt-a-net Sponsors

Master Bander: ABR inc.

Intern:

Camp Denali · UCM · Quartz Lake Biological Institute

Birder: North Pole Physical Therapy · Spirit of Alaska Federal Credit Union · Design Alaska

Michelle Sopoliga
Martha Hanlon & Jeannette Smith

Community Member:

Arctic Audubon Society, Randy Meyers, Laurel Devaney & Ken Russell, Sandy Dauenhauer, In memory of Betty Anderson

M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust

ConocoPhillips Alaska

TOTE Maritime

Goodcents building a stronger community · Golden Heart Community Foundation · GRAPHICNORTH

$1,000+ donors

Ritchie Charitable Trust, Dr. Ron & Mary Kay Teel, Frank & Judy Williams, FitzWilliams Fund in honor of Jeff Walters, Carol Linkswiler & John Rose, Curtis Thorgaard, Jonathan M. Crosby Fund *at the Alaska Conservation Foundation*, Carol McIntyre & Ray Hander, Carole Romberg

A heartfelt thanks to all our volunteers, generous members, and to all who donate through Pick.Click.Give and other local giving programs.

Special thanks to our generous community of sustaining monthly donors, the *Frequent Flyers!*

Like the birds we study, ASI's 2022 supporters hail from communities across Alaska from the tundra of Northern and Western Alaska to the rainforest of Southeast, and from throughout the boreal forest of the Interior. We are also honored to have support from states across the U.S. from Vermont to California! You are a diverse group, united by your commitment to conserving Alaska's wild birds and their habitats.

Thank you!

ASI Board of Directors & Staff

Dr. Gerald Frost, President
Dr. Rebecca Young, Vice President
Michelle Sopoliga, Secretary
Amy Turner, Treasurer
Dr. Carol McIntyre, Member
Dr. Dan Rizzolo, Member
Tricia Blake, Executive Director
Robert Snowden, CFMS Director
Carol Scott, North for Science! Founder & Coordinator

April Harding Scurr, Research Associate
Laurel Devaney, Bird Bander
Tony Zambito, Educator
Katja Diekgers, Intern
Sam Simon, Intern
Lily Downing, Lead High School Intern
Elizabeth Cable, Molly Cable, Melanie McBride, Ainsley Sauer, Laurel Valentine, & Lydia Wies, High School Interns

"If you take care of birds, you take care of most of the environmental problems in the world."

– Dr. Thomas Lovejoy

Please consider a tax-deductible donation to the Alaska Songbird Institute. A donation of any amount makes you a member of ASI. Membership lasts 12 months. Members receive ASI's print newsletters, invitations to special events, and best of all, the knowledge that you are making a difference by supporting songbird research, science education, and conservation in Alaska's boreal forest. 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, or in becoming an **Adopt-a-net Sponsor**, visit our website or call (907) 888-2121.*

Name(s) : _____

Address: _____

City, State & Zip Code: _____ Email: _____

Donation Amount: _____

May we recongize your donation in print and online? YES NO

Mail to: ASI, P.O. Box 80235, Fairbanks, AK 99708.

- ☐ Donate to the ***Creamer's Field Migration Station***
- ☐ Donate to ASI's ***Future Scientist Fund***
- ☐ Use my donation where it is needed most