



2023 Year In Review

Conserving Alaska's boreal birds through ecological education & research

A Message from the Board of Directors

The year 2023 marked a significant milestone for the Alaska Songbird Institute as we celebrate our 10th year! On a midwinter day in January 2013, ASI came into being as a 501(c)(3) non-profit with our founding board of directors Tricia Blake, April Harding Scurr, and Amy Turner. I am very happy to say that these individuals remain major contributors to ASI's operation and success.

Befitting a 10th anniversary year, 2023 was a busy one at ASI. The Creamer's Field Migration Station—known to most as simply “the banding station”—was abuzz with activity. CFMS Project Director Robert Snowden, along with a dedicated group of seasonal staff and volunteers, recorded one of the busiest fall banding seasons in recent memory. Earlier in the summer, a bright cohort of young students took the reins on the annual effort to monitor nesting Tree Swallows at Creamer's and elsewhere around Fairbanks as part of the Tree Swallow Ecology Project, part of a national program to track migratory swallows. This year's students came up with a creative and engaging webpage with regular updates on the nest status of several breeding pairs of Tree Swallows. One look at the webpage, and I was hooked, checking back on a daily basis for the next installment of thoughtful observations and up-close photographs of eggs, nestlings, and of course, the parents. Among our student volunteers in 2023 was Hazel Sutton, a young woman who set the Alaska birding community en fuego with her discovery in late May of Interior Alaska's first known record of a Red-necked Stint, a tiny, colorful sandpiper that winters in southeast Asia and ordinarily migrates to the Siberian Arctic. Hazel and her mother Iris were birding at Tanana Lakes as part of ASI's “Big Day” when they managed to find this Asiatic stray on a patch of mud where it likely escaped

the notice of several other birders (including yours truly) earlier that day. The stint stuck around for several days, to the delight of many. The enthusiasm and skill of Hazel and her peers bodes well for the future of ASI's mission—to conserve Alaska's boreal birds through education and research.



“Hazel's Stint” by G. Frost

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As we near the end of another Alaska year, I'd like to thank everyone reading these words for supporting ASI and carrying our mission forward through your contributions and actions. I also invite you to learn more about ASI activities and upcoming events in the pages that follow. On behalf of the ASI Board of Directors, I wish you peace and joy this holiday season and look forward to seeing you at an ASI event in 2024!

Gerald “J.J.” Frost, President, ASI Board of Directors

Spark birds! cultivating enduring connections

It is a bright Alaskan summer day at Creamer's Refuge in Fairbanks. The near-constant sunlight yields incredible productivity. Warblers sing, drowning out the droning buzz of mosquitoes. Industrious swallows dive, harvesting aerial prey, and a shadow rolls over us as the resident flock of nonbreeding Sandhill Cranes blithely soars to a preferable spot in the field. Life seems to effervesce from every nook and cranny of June on the refuge.



Youth volunteer Molly Koczaja safely releases a banded swallow

ASI's 2023 cohort of 20 youth volunteers (ages 9-17) are divided into teams, each led by a high school intern. Field notebooks in hand, some check the progress of incubating females, others crouch amongst the field peas and irises, preparing to trap adults for banding. Still others return to the nests of adults banded days before to verify hatch rates. Together our 2023 crew volunteered over 1,069 hours monitoring 64 Tree Swallow nests and banding 120 adults and 327 nestlings.



Lead high school intern Molly Cable bands an adult Tree Swallow

Tree Swallow nest boxes were first installed at Creamer's Refuge in 1994. Although the number of boxes and total effort has ebbed and flowed over the years, the project has remained rooted in hands-on science education for students from elementary school all the way to graduate school. When ASI took the reins in 2013, we standardized protocols, built a central database, and began to systematically band breeding adults and nestlings. Simultaneously, we strengthened educational efforts, increasing recruitment and training, and fostering a unique, multi-age learning environment. Today, 20 students in ASI's youth mentoring and high school internship programs volunteer alongside university interns and early career scientists to monitor almost 150 boxes from nest initiation through fledging each year. Adults are captured for banding during the early nestling period, a skill at which our youngest volunteers excel! Nestlings are banded at ~11 days. Our data are added to a continuously growing record of nest chronology and vital rates (demographic parameters) that when combined with sites around Alaska and throughout North America can be used to understand and address changes in aerial insectivore populations, one of the most rapidly declining guilds of birds.

Equally as important as the data collected, this project provides a unique and authentic experience with scientific research *(continued on page 3)*

North for Science returns!

We were thrilled to bring back *North for Science!* (N4S) in 2023, for the first time since before the pandemic. N4S was founded in 2014 by Fairbanks middle school teacher Carol Scott. Carol noticed a lack of science programs outside of the classroom for this age group in our community. She envisioned an expedition-style science immersion program in northern Alaska's public lands, serving primarily urban, underserved middle school students. Today, N4S is an annual, 8-day road-based camping trip through the central Brooks Range culminating in a visit to University of Alaska's Toolik Field Station. N4S has been a part of ASI since 2016 and is offered via a unique partnership between ASI, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the National Park Service (NPS).

N4S 2023 was a remarkable success with a diverse group of seven middle school students traveling the Dalton Highway together June 7-14. They participated in bear awareness and *Leave No Trace* trainings, hiked to Marion Creek Falls, collected data alongside arctic researchers, and of course, looked for birds! They visited the communities of Wiseman and Toolik Field Station to gain perspective on living and studying in Alaska's arctic ecosystems. Despite the rapidly changing (and often wet!) weather, they enjoyed living outdoors with new friends, hiking, camping, playing on a field of auffs, and soaking up every new experience in wild Alaska. In the words of one participant:



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"If I was telling people about North for Science I would tell them what a great program it is. I would tell them all of the amazing opportunities there are and the friendships that you could build...it is honestly just an incredible experience and a great place to build teamwork skills. I would tell them about all of the adventures they will go on like hiking to a waterfall or helping real scientists with their studies. I would tell them about seeing beautiful landscapes...I would tell them about getting to go to a real science lab. I would tell them how great it is to spend a week in the wild away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and how great it is to wake up knowing that all you are going to do is learn and have fun."



(Left to right) Working on transects, practicing telemetry, & sorting macroinvertebrates on N4S 2023.

A heartfelt thanks to all who support ASI's unique science education programs, including our partners at BLM, NPS, and USFWS. North for Science is not possible without you!

2023 Interior Alaska Birding Spotlight

The warbler family includes some of the most colorful, and vocal songbirds that migrate to Alaska. Seven species regularly occur in the Fairbanks area. The most familiar is the Yellow-rumped "Myrtle" Warbler, a common forest denizen known affectionately as "butterbutt." Others include Orange-crowned Warblers (whose namesake crowns are, alas, rarely visible), Blackpoll Warblers, Townsend's Warblers, and Wilson's Warblers. Rounding out the list are riparian species—the aptly named Yellow Warbler, and the oddly named Northern Waterthrush (really a warbler and not a thrush!) Two additional species found in the eastern Interior are Common Yellowthroats and Tennessee Warblers, a regular breeder in Canada that seems to be increasingly spotted in Alaska. (Two were banded at CFMS this fall!) Being partly or wholly dependent on insects for sustenance, Interior Alaska's warblers are highly migratory and depart the region in early fall as insect populations wane. How unlikely, then, that FIVE different warbler species appeared on the same day, in the same forest patch, on the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus in late October!

On October 19, UAF graduate student (and alumni of our high school internship program!) Joe Randsell-Green glimpsed a warbler outside his window. He pursued it to

find Interior Alaska's first-ever Nashville Warbler, a colorful relative of the Orange-crowned, normally found only as far as southern Canada. Word quickly spread, and several other warblers came out of the woodwork, to the delight of birders from near and far. This most unlikely mixed flock for October in Fairbanks ultimately included not one, but TWO Palm Warblers. While rare in Alaska, there is a regular pattern of occurrence in the Fairbanks area in late fall. (Palm Warblers have been captured seven times in CFMS' 32-year history, all in September.) Rounding out this unlikely warbler group was an extremely late Blackpoll Warbler, a "butterbutt", and an Orange-crowned.

The presence of these warblers at the same location at this time of year was unlikely, and few if any were seen in the days that followed. Did they migrate together? Move on to another area? Were they able to escape the coming Alaska winter? These birds are yet another reminder of the strong migratory drive of these creatures, and their uncanny ability to show up in unlikely places. This group also made some indelible memories for those who were able to spend time with them on that October day.

You can help scientists track common and unusual birds by reporting your sightings to ebird.org.



Nashville Warbler by G. Frost



Blackpoll Warbler by G. Frost



Tennessee Warbler by G. Frost

Report from the field: A busy year at CFMS!

The 32nd year of banding at ASI's Creamer's Field Migration Station was a productive one! With over 2,300 total captures across our spring and fall seasons, we enjoyed some of the busiest bird activity since ASI assumed station operations in 2013. As always, environmental conditions at CFMS were dynamic and unpredictable with a historically late spring breakup, persistent smoky days in August, and hungry mosquitos



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lingering into September. Despite all that Mother Nature threw at us, our intrepid team of volunteers and staff was up to the task.

Spring tallies were bolstered by the return of Common Redpolls, our most common spring species with 28 captures, including several recently fledged juveniles in May. Autumn migration was a banner season for sparrows! Most of our regulars had their highest capture rates in many years, with Lincoln's Sparrows (like the one pictured at left) finishing the year as the most abundant species for the first time in station history. As expected, large flocks of young Lincoln's Sparrows frequented our open habitat nets in early fall, but they persisted in high numbers longer in the fall than usual. The latter half of the season brought big numbers of American Tree Sparrows, helping propel the station to 100+ bird capture days as late as mid-September!

Along with the common birds, we had some uncommon highlights this year. In early May, we were delighted to catch several charismatic Bohemian Waxwings together, only the second time we've caught this species in the last decade. Our rarest birds of the fall were a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher in mid-August (12th station record), followed by two Tennessee Warblers on separate days a few weeks later (8th and 9th records). Other late-season standouts were a pair of young male Rusty Blackbirds and a Golden-crowned Sparrow, the respective first captures of these species since 2021 and 2017.

While the majority of the birds we band are not encountered again, we recapture a few individuals banded in prior years each season. These "returns" help us better understand survival rates and changes in body condition over time. Black-capped Chickadees, unsurprisingly, have the highest frequency of recaptures across years, and there were several particularly familiar faces this fall. Most notable was band #249063623 (pictured at right). First banded in July 2019, it has been captured a whopping 39 times! Only two other chickadees have been caught more often in our station's history. The spring also saw the return of a long-lived Hammond's Flycatcher (band #268004809). First banded as an adult in 2018, she showed up for the first time in several years last May. Sure enough, she was back again this year on May 10 making her at least six years old. (The oldest Hammond's Flycatcher in North American banding records was seven.) This species overwinters in cool montane forests in Mexico and Central America, so she has logged an impressive number of miles for an ~11-gram bird!

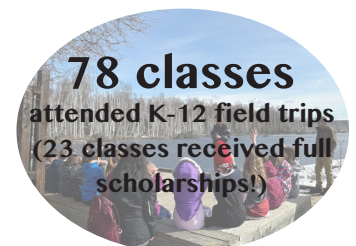


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A big thank you to all the volunteers, ASI members, and Adopt-a-net Sponsors for supporting our efforts this year. We look forward to what 2024 brings to the banding station!

(Spark birds! continued from page 1) and conservation action for young people. Its multi-age learning environment allows older students to learn organically about leadership, collaboration, and communication, while younger students see opportunities to grow into greater responsibilities. In reflecting on their experience, students shared a newfound appreciation for data as a tool to describe the lives and survival of birds. After seeing firsthand the impact of weather events on nests, they considered what larger climatic changes might mean for whole species. They reflected upon the interconnectedness of living things, and how as birds traverse their migratory routes year after year, they bear witness to changes that we, as humans, can't even perceive yet. The return of banded birds was a lesson in resilience, demonstrating how individual birds used past experiences to create a more successful future. And it's all because of the intimate connections they forged with the birds they got to know so well day after day over the course of a nesting season. ASI's programs are not only an effective (and fun!) way to teach science. They make time and space to cultivate connection. With wild birds. With our shared habitats. With data. And with each other. They are a powerful tool for building self-efficacy in science and fostering a lifelong conservation ethic. Thank you for helping ASI make these profound learning experiences happen! To support this work, consider sponsoring a high school intern, or making a donation to ASI's Future Scientist Fund! (See page 4).

2023 By the Numbers



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Thank you for supporting the Alaska Songbird Institute!

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A heartfelt thanks to our volunteers, generous members, advisory and events committee members, and 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 2023 supporters hail from almost 30 communities all across Alaska from the tundra of Utqiagvik to the dunes of Hooper Bay, through the Interior boreal forest to the temperate rainforest of Hoonah! We are also honored to have support from over 20 states across the U.S. from Massachusetts all the way to Washington! You are a diverse group, united by your commitment to conserving Alaska's wild birds and their habitats.

Thank you!



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We are so proud of our staff and students who shared our work with the world in 2023! ASI presented at the Western Bird Banding Association annual meeting (Santa Clarita, CA), the North American Association for Environmental Education conference (virtual), and the 20th Alaska Bird Conference (Anchorage, AK). An ASI bander traveled to Bethel, AK to train USFWS staff and volunteers, and our high school interns contributed photos and recordings to the Community Climate Archive at the Anchorage Museum (available until Jan 2025).

Please consider a donation of any amount to become a member of ASI. Your membership lasts 12 months. Members receive print newsletters, invitations to events, program discounts, and best of all, the knowledge that you are making a difference by supporting songbird research, science education, and conservation in Alaska. Return the form below or join online at: aksongbird.org/donate. To join the Frequent Flyers, our community of sustaining donors, or to become a 2024 Adopt-a-net Sponsor, visit our website or call (907) 888-2121.

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