



Northern Shoveler



Northern Pintail



Bufflehead



Common Goldeneye



Red-necked Grebe

Quick Reference



Semipalmated Plover



Lesser Yellowlegs



Spotted Sandpiper



Arctic Tern



Yellow Warbler



White-crowned Sparrow



Rusty Blackbird

Common Birds of the Tanana Lakes Recreation Area



Semipalmated Plover

Artwork by George West
www.birchsidestudios.com

Funding for this brochure was generously provided by:



Alaska Bird



Observatory

Alaska Bird Observatory
Fairbanks, AK
www.alaskabird.org
2007

Habitats of Tanana Lakes

Although it may not seem like it at first, birds are not found randomly throughout the environment. They tend to specialize in what they eat, how they obtain food, and where they nest. This selectivity allows more species to live in the same area. Tanana Lakes has 4 basic habitat types: the lakes, shorelines, shrubs, and forests.

Lakes: Lake size and depth determine bird use. Shallow lakes are home to dabbling ducks, these birds "tip-up" to feed on plants and invertebrates found on the bottom. Deeper lakes are favored by diving ducks, which totally submerge to feed. Grebes, loons, gulls, and terns also use the lakes.

Shorelines: The shallow edge of these lakes is great habitat for shorebirds. Shorebirds move along the shoreline, probing for invertebrates that live in and on the mud. Bill and leg length varies greatly among shorebirds, this allows them to feast at different depths. Other birds cruise the shores with emergent plants to eat insects that crawl out of the water on the grasses and cattails. Some birds nest in the shoreline vegetation.

Shrubs: Songbirds love shrubs, especially tall shrubs. Shrubs are woody plants that have multiple stems (no main trunk). They can be no taller than your foot or way over your head. Shrubs provide cover, singing and hunting perches, insects, and nest sites for many small birds. Warblers are generally found in the branches, sparrows are usually on the ground foraging beneath them or at the top singing.

Forests: There are tracts of coniferous, deciduous, and mixed forests here at Tanana Lakes. Forest birds nest in tree cavities (chickadees, woodpeckers, goldeneyes), use the understory plants (thrushes), and hang-out in the upper canopy (kinglets).



Black Spruce

Other Local Birding Areas

Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge

Located in Fairbanks, this state refuge hosts large numbers of migrating waterfowl and other birds in spring and fall. The refuge has a visitor center and nature trails that lead through fields, wetlands, and boreal forest habitats.

Fairbanks International Airport

A variety of ponds, dikes, and mudflats provide excellent habitat for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. The front ponds are the most accessible, but the gravel roads behind the airport lead to additional birding areas.

University of Alaska Fairbanks

There are three main bird-viewing areas on the UAF campus. The agricultural fields on the south side of campus provide a stopover site for migrating waterfowl, cranes, and shorebirds. The UAF ski trail system takes you through boreal forest and wetlands, the trails may be quite wet in spring and early summer. Take the trail to Smith Lake to look for nesting waterfowl, shorebirds, and songbirds.

Chena River State Recreation Area

This area runs from mile 26 to mile 51 of Chena Hot Springs Road. The road is lined with aspen, birch, and spruce forest, with various ponds and lakes. It also provides access to the Chena River and its tributaries. Operated by the FNSB.

Chena Lakes Recreation Area

Located about 17 miles southeast of Fairbanks, this 2,000-acre park includes a large lake, a nature trail, and parallels parts of the Chena River. Operated by the FNSB.

Steese Highway (Hwy 6)

Twelvemile and Eagle Summits are good places to view alpine tundra and find alpine specialists like Northern Wheatear, Surf-bird, and Rock Ptarmigan. It is well-worth the 100 mile drive. Weather can be unpredictable. Trails maintained by the Bureau of Land Management.



Rusty Blackbird

Euphagus carolinus

Description—Male: All glossy black with bright yellow eye. Female: All slate gray, slightly darker above with bright yellow eye. Both have dark, sharp-pointed narrow bill, dark legs. In fall, both sexes have feathers tipped with brown to give "rusty" appearance. The brown edges wear away to reveal glossy black or gray breeding plumage.

Habitat—Boreal wetlands. Willow shrubs adjacent to water.

Natural History—Rusty Blackbirds have experienced steep population declines in the last century. The continental population has declined 90%. Loss of wetlands on the wintering grounds in the southeastern US, along with loss of breeding habitat in the Northeast due to acid precipitation may be contributors to this decline. Their call (a harsh chip) is heard more often than their song.



Welcome to the Tanana Lakes

This area has been a hotspot for birders for many years. The mix of habitats and the proximity of the Tanana River create a good spot to see a wide variety of birds. Look for waterbirds and shorebirds near the lakes, ponds, and rivers. Songbirds can be found in the nearby shrubs and trees. 135 species have been seen here; of these, only 15 are resident year-round. The accessibility of the park and the avian diversity make it a great place to start watching birds.

This guide describes a dozen of the most common and conspicuous birds (6 waterbirds, 3 shorebirds, 3 songbirds) and tells you a little of their natural history. With a little practice and patience, you can become familiar with these amazing animals. These birds can be found in similar habitats throughout Interior Alaska.

Please enjoy the Tanana Lakes Recreation Area and its birds. Remember that your behavior can impact their welfare. Avoid making a disturbance at nesting and roosting sites. Tread lightly. Share your knowledge with others.

The Boreal Forest

Tanana Lakes is a small part of the vast boreal forest. This northern forest extends from Alaska to the Atlantic coast of Canada. It represents 60% of the forests in North America. A mix of wetlands, shrubs, coniferous and deciduous forests; it is a vital ecosystem for birds. Half of the birds found in North America regularly use or breed in the boreal forest.

Fortunately, most of this incredibly productive habitat is intact. But that is no reason to be complacent. Resource extraction in the North is on the increase and we need to be diligent to preserve habitat and encourage responsible development. Tanana Lakes is a good example of diverse, multiple users planning and working together.

The Alaska Bird Observatory is a private, non-profit organization whose mission is to advance the appreciation, understanding, and conservation of birds and their habitats through research and education.

418 Wedgewood Drive
PO Box 80505
Fairbanks, AK 99708



Phone: 907-451-7159
Fax: 907-451-7079
birds@alaskabird.org
www.alaskabird.org

Waterbirds

Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata

Description—Dabbling duck.

Male: Iridescent green head, white chest, rusty sides, black bill, yellow eye.

Female: Patterned gray, brown, and black. Greenish bill with yellow base, dark eye.

Both sexes have bright orange legs and large, broad, spoon-shaped bills.

Habitat—Shallow, muddy ponds

Natural History—The most conspicuous feature of this duck is its extra-large bill. Inside are many rows of fine filaments that are used to strain food from the water. The shoveler takes a billful of water and squirts it through the filaments, much like a Humpback Whale.

Northern Pintail

Anas acuta

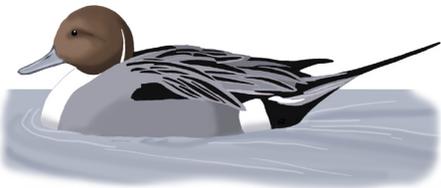
Description—Dabbling duck.

Male: White neck, chest and belly, white stripe on the side of chocolate brown head, gray back and sides. Long, black, pointed tail. Gray bill, dark feet, dark eye. **Female:**

Brown, black, tan with tan face, gray bill and feet, dark eye. Both sexes have a long, delicate neck.

Habitat—Lakes, ponds, marshes. Nests well away from water.

Natural History—Like most ducks, the males abandon females during incubation. She will incubate for 24 days. After hatch, she will lead her ducklings to the nearest lake or pond, sometimes over a mile away. Pintails nest throughout the Northern Hemisphere.



Songbirds

Yellow Warbler

Dendroica petechia

Description—**Male:** Face, throat, chest, and belly bright yellow with chestnut streaking on chest. Back yellow-green to olive. Wings edged in yellow. Yellow spots on tail. Plain face with dark eye, black legs and bill. Most yellow of all warblers. **Female:** Throat, chest, belly light yellow. Back and face yellowish-green. Little streaking on chest. Black legs and bill.

Habitat—Wet, willow thickets

Natural History—Very abundant and widespread, it breeds throughout North America and winters from northern Mexico to Peru. Feeds mainly by picking insects from trees and shrubs (gleaning). Will also grab flying insects (hawking) on the wing. Song is characteristic: "Sweet, sweet, I'm so sweet."

White-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys

Description—Sexes similar. Face, neck, and breast gray. White throat and abdomen. 2 white wing bars and dark brown tail. Head is distinctive: 2 broad black stripes separated by white stripe. White eyebrow stripe with black stripe from eye to back of neck. Legs brown to pink. Yellowish bill, dark eye.

Habitat—Shrubby areas with grass and bare ground near water.

Natural History—Widespread and abundant, it is the most widely-studied bird in North America. Recent work has shown that during migration, they sleep for only 2 hours/day with no ill effects. A constant singer, mostly atop high perches.



Arctic Tern

Sterna paradisaea

Description—Sexes similar. Pale gray upper wings, back, and belly. White underwings, cheeks, rump. Tail white with dark gray borders. Black cap. Red bill. Very short red legs. Dark eye. Slender bird with long, pointed wings. Very long, slender, forked tail.

Habitat—Inland lakes and rivers. Coastal areas.

Natural History—Winters near pack ice in Antarctica, a 25,000 mile migratory round trip. Socially monogamous, both parents care for young. Very aggressive nest defense with adults swooping, pecking, and defecating on intruders. Families migrate south together. They hunt by hovering and then plunge-diving or surface-dipping. Characteristic buoyant, graceful flight. May live as long as 30 years.



Bufflehead

Bucephala albeola

Description—Smallest diving duck.

Male: Dark, iridescent head with black back, white chest and sides, large white patch on side of head, gray bill, pink feet, dark eye.

Female: Dark brown head and back, gray chest and sides, small white patch behind the eye, brownish gray bill and feet, dark eye.

Habitat—Mixed coniferous-deciduous forest near lake or pond.

Natural History—These ducks are cavity-nesters, usually using old Northern Flicker holes. They will use nest-boxes. Ducklings jump out of nest a day after hatching. Pairs are monogamous and will return to nesting and wintering areas.



Common Goldeneye

Bucephala clangula

Description—Medium diving duck with large head. **Male:** Dark, iridescent green head, black back and tail, white sides, belly, and neck, round white patch below eye, black bill, bright yellow eye.

Female: Dark brown head, gray wings, back, and tail, white neck and belly, black bill with yellow tip, yellow eye.

Habitat—Lakes, ponds, and rivers with trees near water.

Natural History—A cavity-nester, these birds will lay eggs into other nests when cavities are in short supply. Some nests contain as many as 30 eggs. After hatch, ducklings from many nests form large groups called creches. These large groups may reduce a duckling's chances of predation. Goldeneyes dive to the bottom to feed and can remain underwater for up to 50 seconds.



Marvelous Migrants

The vast majority of the avian inhabitants of Tanana Lakes are migrants. Birds travel to Alaska from all over the world to take advantage of our long summer days, abundant food, and low risk of nest predation. Northern Wheatears winter with the giraffes in east Africa. Arctic Warblers fly here along the Asian coast from the Philippines. Many warblers come from Central and South America, while American Robins make a short hop from British Columbia. One thing they all have in common is that as soon as breeding is over, they molt, fatten for migration and head for their wintering areas. It is the impending reduction of food that drives this southward movement. In the winter, insects are mostly unavailable and vegetation and seeds are covered with snow. The birds retreat to more welcoming habitats until it is time to travel north again.

Red-necked Grebe

Podiceps grisegena

Description—Sexes similar. Bright rufous neck with white cheeks, black cap, gray sides, and brownish-black back. Long, straight, sharp bill, dark with yellow base.

Habitat—Shallow lakes and large ponds with emergent vegetation.

Natural History—An avid hunter, this grebe looks for fish and aquatic invertebrates while diving. They intentionally ingest feathers to protect their stomachs from sharp fish bones.

Parents feed feathers to their young. Grebes perform elaborate courtship displays, running towards each other on the water surface. They build a floating mound of vegetation for a nest. Young are boldly patterned and ride on the parent's back after hatching.



Shorebirds



Semipalmated Plover

Charadrius semipalmatus

Description—Sexes similar. Brown back and head, white belly, throat and forehead, broad black band across chest. Black bill with yellow base, yellow to orange legs, dark eye.

Habitat—Sandy shoreline, grassy or mossy tundra.

Natural History—Repeatedly runs and stops along shoreline with head up, looking for prey. Feeds on surface invertebrates. Does not probe like other shorebirds. Both sexes incubate and care for young. Youngsters can run and feed on their own immediately after hatch. Semipalmated means partially webbed toes.

Lesser Yellowlegs

Tringa flavipes

Description—Sexes similar. Gray-brown, black and white mottled plumage, white belly, rump, and tail, long, bright yellow legs, long dark bill, long neck, dark eye. A slender graceful bird.

Habitat—Boreal wetlands

Natural History—A noisy occupant of the boreal forest, this shorebird vigorously defends its nest. It nests on the ground on dry mossy ridges or hummocks underneath low shrubs or small trees. Both parents incubate. The female leaves before the youngsters can fly, so the male remains behind to tend the chicks.



Spotted Sandpiper

Actitis macularius

Description—Sexes similar. Brown to olive-gray back, neck, and head. White chest and belly with bold black spots. Females have larger spots extending farther down the belly. Only shorebird with spots. Orange bill. Pale legs. Dark eyes.

Habitat—A generalist. Found in many different habitats usually near water. The most widespread shorebird.

Natural History—This shorebird exhibits sex-role reversal. The females arrive first, establish a territory, and attract mates. She lays a clutch of 4 eggs and the male incubates. She then attracts another male and lays another clutch that the second male incubates. She can lay up to 5 clutches in one breeding season. This system is called polyandry (many males). Spotted Sandpipers have a characteristic teetering gait along the shore and a low, stiff-winged flight.

