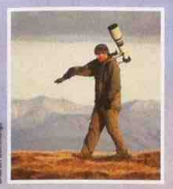
BIRDING ALASKA'S ARCTIC

by David Shaw

A research biologist walks the open spaces of Arctic NWR in search of the loons, jaegers, sandpipers, redpolls, and other birds that fill it with abundant life



Sharon Cummings

The wind blew from the north carrying the chill of the Arctic Ocean. It was a bright June day, and the long, gray fingers of fog often carried by the breeze were nowhere in sight.

I was perched above a blue river, breathing the clean scent of emptiness, listening to the wind in the tundra grasses, admiring a Red-throated Loon as it fished a calm side-channel. Through my binoculars I could make out every feather on the bird's body, from the gray wings to the rich maroon throat.

I watched as the loon flinched and peered up at a Long-tailed Jaeger passing above. I, too, watched the jaeger until it disappeared toward the mountains, then turned to find the pool empty, no loon in sight.

I was camped along the Canning River, on the western border of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska with two fellow bird photographers. (See map, next page.) From our tents, the tundra stretched 20 miles to the north until it met the beaches and ice of the Arctic Ocean. To the south, the coastal plain rose in long, grassy hills to the crags and valleys of the Brooks Range. The Canning flowed past camp, clear and cold, bearing chunks of melting ice. The wind and the rushing water created a constant barrage of white noise, broken occasionally by the calls of the American Golden-Plovers, Parasitic Jaegers, and Hoary Redpolls that shared our camp.

What I wasn't seeing, hidden beneath hundreds of feet of tundra, soil, and permafrost, was the oil. I was in the infamous 1002 Area, a part of the coastal plain left out of the wilderness designation that protects most of the rest of the refuge.

To call the future of this region disputed would be an enormous understatement. For years, oil interests and their allies in government have been battling for legislation that would open the expanse to oil and gas exploration. The land is the only substantial portion of the Arctic coast currently protected from industrialization. Most of the rest of the North Slope falls into the National Petroleum Reserve, of which more and more is opened to development each year.

The thought of oil exploration here terrifies supporters of wilderness, wildlife, and the environment. I include myself among them. I'm a research biologist for the Alaska Bird Observatory, a writer, photographer, and bird guide. Foremost, however, I love birds and the wild places where they live. I've guided in Antarctica, the tropics, and Alaska. I've conducted research in Mexico, Peru, and all across the north. And I've encountered few places that pull at my heart like this one. I like to think the refuge calls to me the way it must to the migrant birds.

We were dropped off earlier in the day by a bush plane, which landed roughly on the river bar. After the plane departed, we were left alone for several days until the pilot would return to fly us down river, closer to the coast. The nights were filled with sweet, low sunlight, and we spent them on the tundra looking for birds.

The first evening, we climbed a steep hill to the top of a bluff above the river. We moved slowly, stopping often to view and photograph the rolling landscape of the coastal

For all things Arctic, start here: Arctic NWR, (907) 456-0250, arctic.fws.gov

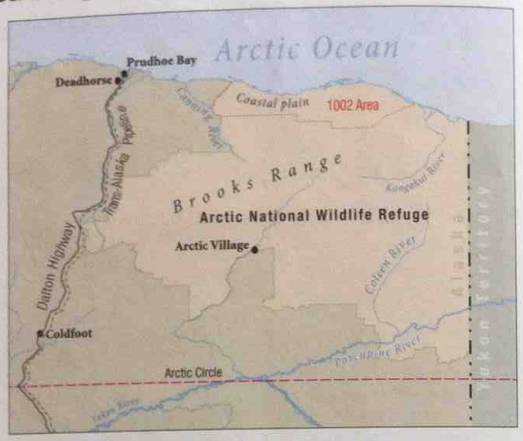
David Shaw

America's largest wildlife refuge

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the largest refuge managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, covers 19.3 million acres of the northeastern corner of Alaska. As shown on the map at right, the refuge borders Canada's Yukon Territory to the east and lies entirely north of the Arctic Circle. It has many rivers and no roads.

The 700-mile-long Brooks Range stretches across the refuge from east to west. The 1.5-million-acre Arctic coastal plain, known officially as the 1002 Area and shown on the map bordered in red, is the hotly contested site of potential future oil development.

West of the refuge, the Dalton Highway is the only north-south road. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline runs alongside it, carrying oil from Prudhoe Bay south for 800 miles to Valdez.



plain and the distant Brooks Range. A white blob, incongruous on the brown and yellow tundra, drew our gaze. I raised my binoculars and discovered, as I suspected, that it was a male Rock Ptarmigan, still white in its winter plumage, conspicuously perched atop a tussock. Its eye-catching plumage was exactly what it seemed: an invitation to predators.

Male Rock Ptarmigan retain their white plumage long into summer to draw attention away from their drably colored mates, which during this season are either sitting upon eggs or guarding their young. Somewhere in the tundra nearby, a female was likely tight to her nest, her mottled brown feathers blending with the surrounding grass. We were unlikely to find her.

Eventually, we left the ptarmigan for two nearby lakes rumored to hold a pair of Yellow-billed Loons. It was past midnight. The sun had dropped to its lowest point, a hand's breadth from the horizon, and the wind felt cool. We moved swiftly to stay warm and eventually came upon water still mostly covered in ice.

The lakes were much larger than they appeared on the map, and shattered blocks of ice frustrated our view. Scanning with binoculars, I detected a pair of distant birds along the far shore. Even from several hundred yards, the bright yellow, upward-tilting bills were clear.

Yellow-billed Loons are scarce and little understood. The lakes in which they breed are widely dispersed across Alaska, Canada, northern Europe, and Russia, making research studies and population estimates difficult. Recent concern for the species prompted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to designate the loon a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act. The coastal plain is the loon's only breeding stronghold in the United States. I couldn't help but wonder for how many more years this pair would nest here before they returned one spring to find that their lake now falls in the shadow of drill rigs.

When we finally departed the lakeshore and headed back toward camp, we had been out for nearly 12 hours, but we were not so tired that we passed up the opportunity to photograph a pair of Long-tailed Ducks in a tiny tundra pool. Nor were we too tired to pause and watch a distant band of caribou, a displaying American Pipit, and the river valley curving toward the mountains.

Perfect habitat

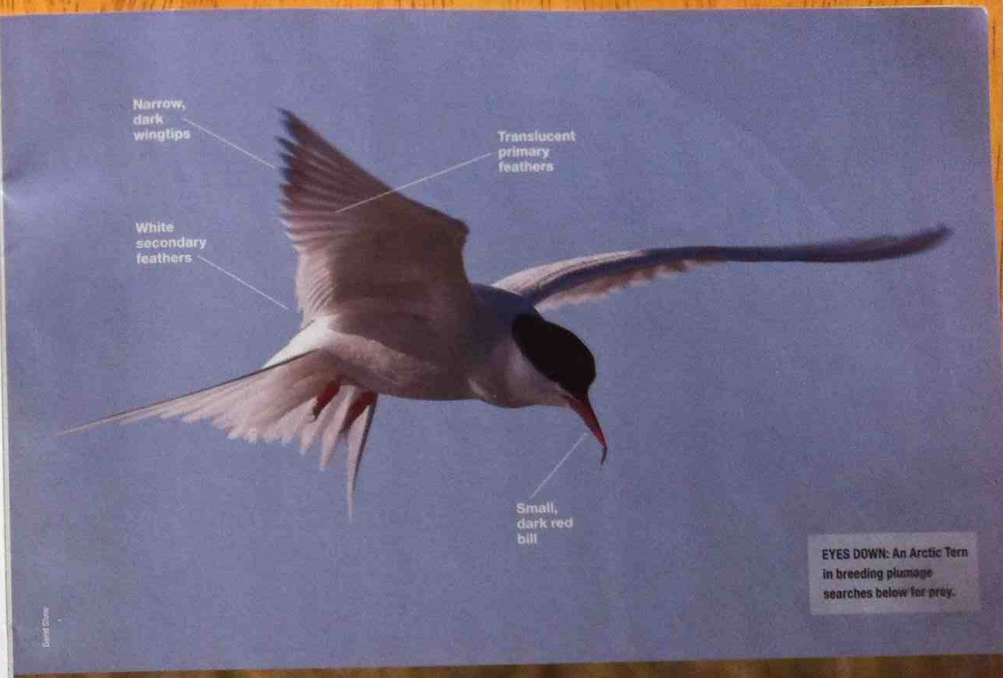
For three sunlit nights, we explored the uplands. On the morning of the fourth day, our pilot returned, jarring us with the sound of his plane's engine, to shuttle us north, where the Canning fanned out into a network of channels. As we flew, the earth below appeared like a jigsaw puzzle. A geometric maze of triangles, squares, pentagons, and amorphous blobs honeycombed the land, creating tiny ponds, wet trenches, and areas of dry earth. Formed by freezing, thawing, and shifting of the permafrost, the mosaic creates perfect habitat for the dozen or so shorebird species that breed there.

Climate change, the effects of which are already being felt in the arctic, is dramatically changing habitats dependent on permafrost. As the frozen soil melts, it changes the tundra's surface, allowing water to drain in ways it has not in the past. Habitats like the polygons we flew over are as threatened as the wilderness in which they lie.

Our pilot dropped us off on a mudflat, and we struggled to haul our gear to a dry spot above the river. It was colder close to the Arctic Ocean. We could see towering pressure ridges of sea ice to the north, looking like distant mountains poking above the horizon. Although

Want to go?

Plan for a 5- to 12-day wilderness backpacking or river-float experience. Access is by airplane.



EYES DOWN: An Arctic Tern in breeding plumage searches below for prey.

WINGS UP: A male Buff-breasted Sandpiper advertises to females.

23 BREEDING SHOREBIRDS

The shorebirds below breed in Arctic NWR. Nineteen make their nests on the coastal plain, 12 south of it.

- Black-bellied Plover
- American Golden-Plover
- Semipalmated Plover
- Spotted Sandpiper
- Wandering Tattler
- Lesser Yellowlegs
- Upland Sandpiper
- Whimbrel
- Ruddy Turnstone
- Surfbird
- Sanderling
- Semipalmated Sandpiper
- Least Sandpiper
- White-rumped Sandpiper
- Baird's Sandpiper
- Pectoral Sandpiper
- Dunlin
- Stilt Sandpiper
- Buff-breasted Sandpiper
- Long-billed Dowitcher
- Wilson's Snipe
- Red-necked Phalarope
- Red Phalarope

Source: *Arctic Wings: Birds of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*, Stephen Brown, ed., Mountaineer Books, 2006.

PUFFED UP: A displaying Pectoral Sandpiper inflates its throat sac.

RIVALS: A pair of Long-billed Dowitchers fight on their breeding grounds.

Sharon Donnellan

the sun shone brightly, it offered little warmth, and the wind was blowing a gale. The chill air quickly sent me digging in my bag for a warm coat, cap, and gloves.

We napped through mid-day, as was our routine, and ventured out as the sun hung low in the evening sky. We hoped to encounter the breeding displays of Buff-breasted Sandpipers. Knowing that the males often return to the same general areas, we spread out in order to improve our odds of finding the birds. The three of us walked a couple of hundred yards apart, birding as we went.

Elaborate displays

Lapland Longspurs, always nearby, were the most common birds on the tundra. As I watched, a male performed his elaborate flight display. He pitched up 30 feet from his perch on the ground, then made a long, fluttering, parachute-like descent, his song piercing the arctic wind. Approaching the earth, he alighted atop a tussock and shouted his two-note call.

I regularly spooked foraging Semipalmated Sandpipers from the wet trenches and was occasionally startled by a female slinking away when I came too close to a nest. A male Pectoral Sandpiper, resting between performances of his booming flight displays, watched from a tussock. His grossly enlarged chest appeared almost comical.

I paused often to observe the other species I came across. Red and Red-necked Phalaropes in the flooded grass, a single flying Whimbrel, Long-tailed Ducks and Northern Pintails paddling the shallow lakes. I also spent many fruitless minutes trying to photograph uncooperative Pacific and Red-throated Loons. Once, a small flock of Common Eiders flew out of nowhere and circled me. I spun in place, watching them, until the birds turned and wheeled away.

When I wandered out of sight of the others, I scrambled to a high point, where through my binoculars I could see my companions a half-mile away, crouched down, eyes to their viewfinders. I crossed the distance as fast as I could, but when I finally arrived, they were sitting back from their cameras looking pleased with themselves. They had been photographing a Stilt Sandpiper, which had flown off shortly before I staggered up.

The following evening, I was off admiring a cluster of blooming lapland rosebay, a tiny red flower of the arctic, when I noticed one of my companions gesturing. After much searching, he had found a displaying male Buff-breasted Sandpiper being trailed by two females. We spent several hours with the birds, following as they moved across the tundra, the male displaying by flashing his wings and pointing his bill to the sky. They showed no fear, and at times a bird would forage so close I could have touched it. Finally, the trio took flight and disappeared into the surrounding wetlands.

Distant splashing

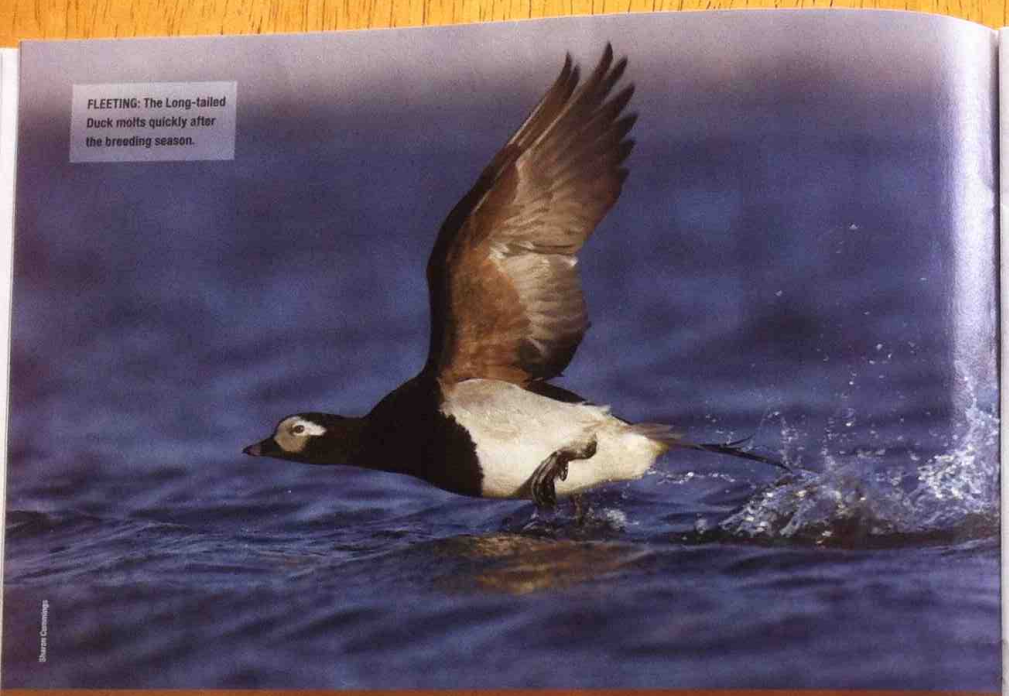
As I watched the sandpipers disappear, I reflected on how many of the species we'd encountered were vulnerable. For example, the Alaska Audubon Society includes the Yellow-billed Loon, Red-throated Loon, Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, American Golden-Plover, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper on its

Birding guides

Arctic Wild
(888) 577-8203
www.arcticwild.com

Ouzel Expeditions
(800) 825-8196
www.ouzel.com

Wilderness Birding Adventures
(907) 694-7442
www.wildernessbirding.com



FLEETING: The Long-tailed Duck molts quickly after the breeding season.

Sharon Cummings

LINGERING: The male Rock Ptarmigan wears his winter white into breeding season.

CHICKADEE OF THE FAR NORTH

Gray-headed Chickadee has been described as "perhaps the least-often-seen nesting species in North America." It is found only in far northern Alaska and Canada, along the edges of spruce forests and in willow scrub habitats. Sightings, though rare, are most likely in the Brooks Range near the Canning River within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Few birders find it without the assistance of a guide.

ONE FOR THE LIFE LIST: A Gray-headed Chickadee perches in Alaska's Brooks Range.

Aaron Lang/VIREO

WatchList. How much impact can the birds sustain? What of the cumulative impacts of oil development in the National Petroleum Reserve and the loss of wintering areas? What of declining habitat in migration stopover locations? Would development here in the Arctic refuge drive the species to extinction? Perhaps not, but it occurred to me that protecting this corner of Alaska could go a long way toward saving them.

The following afternoon, I awoke to the sound of distant splashing. I wriggled from my tent and found, for once, the wind was not blowing. I raised my binoculars toward the sound and saw animals moving along and through the river — caribou.

No animal is more emblematic of the refuge. The Porcupine Herd, numbering about 100,000 individuals, drops their calves each year on the coastal plain. The Porcupine caribou, though, were far away in the mountains. I had not anticipated that we would encounter any large numbers.

Rich in its emptiness

Surprised, I ran to the bluff, gazed over the tundra, and gawked, open-mouthed, at the sight of more than 3,000 caribou crossing the coastal plain.

This was the Central Arctic Herd, a lesser group that also uses the refuge. Small bands of animals splashed in the river as packs of hundreds ranged across the tundra in constant flux, appearing and disappearing out of the shimmering heat. If I looked away from a cluster for a minute then peered back, they were often gone, swallowed up by the huge expanse of earth. After midnight on the final evening, I walked a mile to an overlook of the mudflats and the ice of the Arctic Ocean. Glaucous Gulls flew over the pack ice, colors were coming into the sky, and the call of a Pacific Loon rose from a nearby lake.

I stood in silence as a small band of caribou trotted by, part of the great herd that had passed the day before. The sun dropped to its lowest point in the northern sky, and the coastal plain to the south flamed with color.

When the caribou wandered off, I ambled toward camp, watching the sunlight play across the landscape. A flock of Snow Geese, the first seen during the trip, flew over the tundra, their white feathers sharp against the dark mountains. During spring and summer, Snow Geese are rare in the refuge, but in autumn they arrive by the tens or hundreds of thousands to forage and prepare for migration.

I arrived back in camp just as the sun slipped behind the few clouds. I fell back against a dune, sheltered from the breeze, and looked again over the tundra. Some people declare this an empty and worthless land, good for nothing but its potential for oil development. I stared across the expanse and felt sorry, no… pity, for the poor souls who lacked the ability to appreciate this place for what it is, rather than for what we can make it.

It is not a landscape easily appreciated from afar; it's best stood upon, feet enveloped by soft grass. The coastal plain is finest under golden night sun, when the tundra glows in the light. The Arctic refuge is a place, at least for now, rich in its emptiness, full of wind, sky, grass, and the calls of birds.

David Shaw is a research biologist with the Alaska Bird Observatory in Fairbanks.

Birds worth going for

Red-throated Loon, Yellow-billed Loon, Gyrfalcon, Surfbird, Snowy Owl, Arctic Warbler, Gray-headed Chickadee, Northern Wheatear, Bluethroat, Ruff, Smith's Longspur