

# alaska region



## T. G. TOBISH, JR.

**A**lthough the northbound migration protracted well into June, the otherwise disappointing spring passage continued to disappoint. Only a handful of tardy migrants showed up at outposts from Hyder to Gambell. June settled into a very warm and storm-free month. Regionwide, although even with a quickly strengthening El Niño event, the Interior was slow in reaching its usual mid-June 70+° F conditions. Insectivores were slow to reach breeding areas and set up territories, at least south of the Brooks Range, while the traditional last-to-arrive species (Yellow Warbler, Alder Flycatcher) were on the late end of normal. The very strong El Niño influence dictated near-drought conditions across the Mainland, except for the eastern Interior, which had several heavy storm events; the Aleutian Low's contribution to weather conditions east of the Bering Sea Coast was negligible—virtually no low pressure systems reached the Mainland or the North Gulf Coast after mid-May. North Pacific and southern Bering Sea surface temperatures reached a mid-season peak of 58°F south of the Alaska Peninsula and 55+°F near Bristol Bay, easily 12+° F above each area's July norms. Late season seabird die-offs began to be reported by the end of July, including local losses of murre and Short-tailed Shearwaters.

The Region received excellent above-average coverage even into July, and good

numbers of seasonal rarities were reported from the usual pioneer sites (Hyder, Gambell, Nome, St. Paul Island), as well as from newer sites (alpine areas of west Upper Cook Inlet, Cape Romanzof, eastern Interior). In that vein, a joint Russian-United States Geological Survey-Biological Resources Division field camp set up near alpine Turquoise Lake on the northwest slope of the Chigmit Mountains about 240 kilometers west of Anchorage produced fascinating data. This area clearly encompasses a faunistic mixing zone of north-south forms, where such species as Northern Wheatear, Lapland Longspur, Baird's Sandpiper, Long-tailed Jaeger, and Whimbrel are at the south edge or beyond previously known breeding ranges. With these data it should be assumed that many of these northerly alpine species reach their southwest breeding extremes in the southern Chigmits. Only one species was substantiated for the Alaska list this summer, from Ketchikan.

With the increase in agency funding for wide-ranging breeding bird surveys, this year's road systems were blanketed with coverage—and we have begun to understand the full extent of the ranges of Alaska's rarer, once considered casual, summer visitors. As has become custom, the bird tour reports—when on time—contribute widely and efficiently to the Region's data, especially for Asiatics at the late end of spring migration. It continues to be a major disappointment that I receive few and sporadic reports from resident birders and

field researchers, the very observers needed to summarize field study results and even occasional finds in their coverage. Except for the standard reporters from a couple regularly birded sites, no reports came in from other Alaska resident birders. I strongly urge those of you that spend any time afield to submit summaries for each season. [Note the following reporting deadlines, to be sent to me: Fall = by December 20; Winter = by March 20; Spring = by June 30; Summer = by August 31. Please feel free to use e-mail: [tgt@alaska.net](mailto:tgt@alaska.net).]

**Abbreviations:** North Gulf (*North Gulf of Alaska*); SE (*Southeast Alaska*); SC (*Southcoastal Alaska*); SW (*Southwest Alaska*); UCI (*Upper Cook Inlet*).

## LOONS TO RAILS

Breaking a pattern of the past several years, no Arctic Loons were reported all season. Hearsay reports from July of an ad. Yellow-billed Loon from the Kenai Peninsula's Skilak L. were confirmed by a July 24 sighting (ph. GHR, MOB), the peninsula's 2nd summer report. A **Great Egret** on Juneau's well-covered Mendenhall Wetlands June 4–5 (RA, PS, GVV) furnished the Region's 6th report, all but one of which span the period mid-May to early July. No details were included, however!

Waterfowl highlights were thin but included a female Gadwall into the Bering Sea at St. Paul I., where casual, June 11–13 (WINGS, ST PAUL); scattered Eur. Wigeon, including a late male at Wonder L., Denali N.P., June 4–5 (NE, *vide* SS), at least one drake at St. Paul I. June 13–28 (ST PAUL), and at least three at Nome's Safety Sound June 11–15 (ATTOUR); a summering pair of Ring-necked Ducks all season at Sitka's Swan L. (MLW, MT) and a female with a late brood in Eagle R. n. of Anchorage July 18 (TGT), one of SC's southernmost nesting reports; and the female Steller's Eider ensconced at Anchorage's cooling ponds May 20 through the period, a first in summer for UCI (m.ob., ph. DFD). Of the 3 reports of Hooded Merganser broods, a female with eight young offshore at Staney Cr., Prince of Wales I., June 22 (VF) was the most unusual and one of few known breeding records for the Alexander Archipelago.

Several early season thunderstorms may have contributed to the below-average nest success of e. Interior Bald Eagle and Osprey productivity; both were well below 50% (TJD). Significant for SE, a Merlin nest with four flight-capable young was located at Margarite Bay, Revillagigedo I., June 29 (CF, CC-B, †SCH). Although there are few nest records for all of SE, specimen evidence indicates that *F. c. suckleyi* is the assumed breeding form, at least on the s. SE Mainland. This may be the first offshore SE nest report. The Region's 6th **Eurasian Hobby** followed the pattern of most previous reports when it arrived at St. Paul I. July 14–23 (ph. PY, ph. AD, ST PAUL).

The Juneau area's now famous Eagle R. trail marsh again produced a calling **Virginia Rail** June 8–21 through the period (GVV, BA, MS), the 3rd record there since 1994. The same marsh sheltered a Sora July 12 (DWS). The only Interior Sora report was of a pair at remote Ten Mile Hill L., southeast of Tok, June 10–11 (TJD).

#### SHOREBIRDS TO ALCIDS

Unusual or suspect shorebird nesting sightings included a lingering Solitary Sandpiper on a weak territory at Juneau's Mendenhall Glacier ponds July 6 through the period (LE, ME), one of few summer reports. After years of suspicion and leading behavior in the Gambell area, a pair of **Ringed Plovers** was located at a nest site with a single egg June 1–11 (WINGS, PG, ATTOUR, ph. RMS). This represents the 3rd confirmed nesting for the Region, coming from the only site where this species occurs with regularity in the Region.

Trans-Pacific/Asiatic northbound shorebirds continued well into June and included a late single Wood Sandpiper at Gambell June 11 (ATTOUR); at least two Gray-tailed Tattlers June 13–20 (ST PAUL) and a Black-tailed Godwit June 3 (ST PAUL, FIELD GUIDES), both at St. Paul I.; a Temminck's Stint, the season's only report, from Gambell June 9 (ATTOUR); and a Long-toed Stint, also from St. Paul I., June 3 (ST PAUL, FIELD GUIDES).

Mild summer conditions generated an early southbound shorebird passage, and all standard early summer staging sites noted early arrivals of adults. Although most highlights focused on Beringian/Asiatic forms from the Bering Sea, there was a nice mix of Nearctic wanderers: From St. Paul I., a single Wood Sandpiper July 5 (ST PAUL), up to four Gray-tailed Tattlers through July 30 (WINGS, ST PAUL), a single Com. Sandpiper July 17, and a Terek

Sandpiper July 27 (ST PAUL). An unusual Upland Sandpiper was at Juneau, where casual, July 28 (PS); an ad. Marbled Godwit around Anchorage June 18–July 8 (DFD, DWS, m.ob.), the 5th UCI and first in summer; an offshore Semipalmated Sandpiper July 6 (ST PAUL) and two Red-necked Stints July 10 & 25 (ST PAUL), both from St. Paul I.; and an ad. **Curlew Sandpiper** also at St. Paul, at least the 2nd summer record, July 7–8 (ST PAUL). At least two different ad. Rock Sandpipers at St. Paul I. July 3 & 27 (ST PAUL) were identified as other than the expected local breeding nominate *ptilocnemis*.

Summer season Larid highlights were scattered between Nome and Juneau and included up to four *brachyrhynchos* Mew Gulls in the Bering Sea at St. Paul I., where distinctly rare offshore, June 11–25 (WINGS, ST PAUL), and at least three *kamtschatschensis* Mews identified by the observers there June 4 (ST PAUL); another SE ad. **Black-tailed Gull** n. of Juneau July 10 (†PS), the 4th SE record; noteworthy California Gulls, three adults in Salisbury Sound offshore n. of Sitka June 7 (TGT) and an adult near the Mendenhall Glacier gull colony in Juneau June 26 (GVV); and a distinctly rare for the Bering Sea (and one of few well described) Thayer's Gull at St. Paul I. June 25 (†RH).

Slaty-backed Gulls returned to last year's newly discovered nest areas on Anik-tun I. near SW's Cape Romanzoff. One nest with an attendant pair over 3 eggs was located July 3 (CH, HM). Glaucous-winged Gulls lived up to their ability to improvise with a "roving" nesting colony established in mid-town Anchorage. The site, an old regraded gravel pit located some 5 mi from intertidal feeding areas, included 76 nests in late June and produced at least 29 young by July 23 (TGT). Adults appeared to scavenge from adjacent business areas, and who knows what these young were fed.

After May arrivals of small numbers of Caspian Terns came to Cape Romanzoff, the Neragon I. site that produced last year's nests, which again sheltered 3 nests by July 2 (BJM). Caspians were well represented at other standard coastal sites. Two arrived in Anchorage (DWS, DFD, TGT) and remained settled through July on a freshwater lake at nearby Ft. Richardson (m.ob.). Noteworthy offshore in the Bering Sea were two Aleutian Terns at Gambell June 5–6 (WINGS, ph. GHR).

Excellent summer alcid reports included at least seven Dovekies at the Gambell auklet colony June 10–11 (ATTOUR) and

an incredible mid-season tally of at least 200 Marbled Murrelets within Juneau's Auke Bay July 25 (GVV), the highest ever one-day count from the Juneau area.

#### OWLS TO MOTACILLIDS

Extralimital summer owl sightings as always were few, and included an odd-date N. Hawk Owl near Juneau June 14 (DR, RA), one of few SE in summer; a rather northerly single N. Pygmy Owl at Yakutat June 19 (†BA), probably a local first; another offshore pair of Barred Owls on Prince of Wales I. June 8 (JM, MS); and suspicious mid-season e. Interior Short-eared Owls, with a single near Northway June 12 and at least two e. of Tok June 20–23 (TJD), where there are few breeding data.

Common Nighthawks made news when the Region's first documented nest activity concerned at least three displaying males with a single female on a successional riparian alluvium along the Klehini R. n. of Haines June 12 (\*DDG). The female was in clear breeding condition, with a developing brood patch. Later on, others noted at least eight calling birds in the same general area July 11 (MS, †JM), and up to five up the Chilkat R. at the Kellsall R. confluence June 11–July 24 (AD) also displayed obvious territorial behavior. Other reports repeated sightings from the past 2 summers, with up to five around Tok June 8–18 (MR, RAS, †KWL). The closest known area of regular occurrence to these 2 sites are the dry Lodgepole Pine forests in s.w. Yukon to at least Haines Jct.

A female **hummingbird** captivated surprised observers at the Canning R. Delta on the Arctic Ocean coast June 25 (†RD et al) as it cavorted with a male redpoll. Identified by the observers as a Ruby-throated, this could constitute Alaska's 3rd record.

For the 3rd consecutive year, and the season's only report, a pair of **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** was found on isolated wooded habitat at Ten Mile Hill s.e. of Northway June 11 (†TJD). Since the recent onset of expanded, federally funded breeding bird surveys, few species groups have seen an increase in reports as have *Empidonax*. Again this year, **Yellow-bellied Flycatcher**, considered accidental before the late 1980s, was widespread and in numbers. At least eight singing birds were detected in the e. Interior, mostly from the vast Taylor Hwy. boreal forests, June 12–28 (†TJD). Another was calling near Skagway, a local first, June 12 (†BA). Only three Least Flycatchers were detected, singles at Scottie Cr near the Canada Border on the Alaska Hwy

June 11 (KWL, †HKT), at Kenny L. June 22–July 6 (RLS, TJD), and near Haines July 5–7 (BB, †MSG). Although most of these birds call from territories for weeks at a time, there is still no definitive nest evidence. A pale-bellied Barn Swallow made it inland from the Bering Sea to Bethel June 17 (†BJM), a first local record and one of few Mainland non-*erythrogaster* records.

Finally, an actual nest was located of Alaska's last resident species to have such documentation when Wilderness Birding Adventurers discovered a pair of **Gray-headed Chickadees** at a nest cavity in riparian poplars at the headwaters of the Marsh Fork of the Canning R. June 17–18 (†RD, LM, PD, LD, CS, PS, SW, TW). The nest cavity was only 8" off the ground in a small popular grove within a larger willow stand, habitat that had been suspected as breeding substrate. Earlier evidence of nesting has been sparse and included a family group on the Kongakut R. in the early 1980s.

Early and rare for the s. Bering Sea (away from the Aleutians) was an ad. Arctic Warbler at St. Paul I. July 7 (ST PAUL). This species' Nearctic nesting range was pushed farther south and west with at least one pair breeding in willows at Cape Romanzoff June 30 through the period (BJM). A **Northern Mockingbird**, at least the 7th for Alaska and 2nd in SE, was reported by 4 independent observers in the Haines area June 6–July 12 (KK, AD, BA, JM, MS). White Wagtail, considered casual with no substantiated nest evidence on the Bering Sea coast s. of Norton Sound, was confirmed as a breeder there when a nest with an attendant pair was located at Cape Romanzoff June 24 (BJM). By July 7 the 5-egg clutch had been depredated.

#### VIREOS TO FRINGILLIDS

Warbling Vireos were felt to be in peak local numbers in the Hyder riparian woods in early June (DDG *et al.*), while a fast moving bird singing in e. Anchorage woods June 28 accounted for UCI's 6th record. A week and 17 years after—and less than a kilometer from—UCI's first and only other report, a singing Red-eyed Vireo was heard briefly in Anchorage June 23 (TGT). Juneau's first-ever Red-eyed was a singing bird at Pt. Bridget June 22 (PS)—none other was encountered.

Sparse details came in for a female Tennessee Warbler feeding young near Haines July 11 (JM, MS)—there are similar reports from the Region with weak documentation. Another male was near Skagway June 13

(BA) and none was found this year in the Juneau area. Although this species, which breeds close to the Haines-Skagway-Juneau region in s.w. Yukon and n.w. British Columbia, is nearly annual in this part of the State, documentation of observations has been minimal. Heinel couldn't ignore a persistent singing **Chestnut-sided Warbler** in alders out his bedroom window June 22 (\*SCH), the Region's first substantiated record. A fall immature at isolated Middleton I. in the North Gulf was the first Alaska report.

A singing **Ovenbird** near Juneau June 3 (†PS, SZ), likely an overshoot from the n.e. British Columbia population, provided the Region's 3rd and SE's first report. Common Yellowthroats again reached into the e. Interior in June, with singing singles s.e. of Northway Jct. June 20 and along the Northway Rd. June 23 (TJD, tape).

A male **Black-headed Grosbeak** photographed at a feeder near Wrangell May 23–June 5 through the period (ph. RC) pushed the arrival date for this recently detected species for the Region. A female near Fish Cr. and a suspicious pair at the edge of town, both near Hyder June 7 (KW) & 10–12 (LJO, TGT), furnished the 3rd local report from that outpost.

Rare and out-of-season for SC was a Chipping Sparrow in Anchorage's John's Park June 14 (†JH). A year and a day later, another **Brewer's (Timberline) Sparrow** wandered to the coast at Hyder June 7 (\*DDG), the Region's 2nd report away from known nesting areas in remote alpine areas of the e. Alaska Range. Probably the first find since the early 1980s, an imm. male **Yellow-headed Blackbird** drifted over the Hyder intertidal flats near dawn June 10 (†TGT, LJO) and sang a few times before disappearing. The only extralimital Brown-headed Cowbird was a male out the Teller Rd. near Nome June 26 (BA), obviously one of few Bering Sea reports.

A female-plumaged Com. Rosefinch appeared in the Cape Romanzoff willow thickets July 11–14 (†BJM, CM). This individual was later heard singing, and was captured and banded as a 2nd-year male (by plumage, †HM). Two female-plumaged Com. Rosefinches also passed through Buldir I. June 11–14 (IL, *fide* JW). White-winged Crossbills made a showing into the SC forests by late June, with small groups and local large flocks detected at least as far north as UCI (ERL, m.ob.), while Reds were more numerous but concentrated along the coastal Sitka Spruce/W. Hemlock fringe w to Kodiak I (m ob ) A late report

was submitted of a northbound migrant Hawfinch, a male, e. to St. Paul I. June 4–7 (ST PAUL), the 3rd location for spring 1997 reports.

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