

Birding in the vicinity of Sheep Mountain Lodge

Milepost 113.5 Glenn Highway, Alaska

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Anjanette Steer

Checklist*

The following codes accompany each species on the list:

Time of year the species is most common:

P - permanent; year-round

S - summer

M - migration (March 15 - May 31)

W - winter

Ease of finding the species at a time of year:

1 - Most easily seen. The birds occupy much of a widespread habitat, or they are abundant seasonally.

2 - Seen with moderate effort. The birds occur regularly in restricted areas, or they occur in low numbers in widespread habitat, or they arrive in moderate numbers seasonally.

3 - Seen with substantial effort or good luck. Individuals are scarce, but within the species' geographic range.

4 - Seen with luck. The birds are irregular visitors outside the species' normal geographic range.

Please note:

Observation areas and habitat notes (*italicized*) have been added by Anjanette Steer from her three seasons of observations in the area. This list has been cross-referenced with the species list from the Copper Basin (Glennallen) and Palmer areas but is still considered a working draft. The list includes all species a traveler might see within 20 miles of Sheep Mountain Lodge.

Please contact us at anj@ak.net to add additional species observations or locations, or with any suggestions or corrections. Have fun birding in one of Alaska's most beautiful mountainous locations. **Additional copies of this list can be picked up at the Sheep Mountain Lodge for a small donation to the Mat-Su Birders.**

___ Red-throated loon	M 3; S 3
___ Pacific loon	S 2
___ Common loon	S 2

These species can occasionally be viewed in the ponds and lakes along the roadside between Palmer and Glennallen. Wilderness lakes and ponds provide ideal habitat for rearing young during Alaska's short summer season. Observations possible late May – August.

WATERFOWL

___ Tundra swan	M 2
___ Trumpeter swan	M 2; S 2
___ Greater White-fronted Goose	M 3
___ Snow Goose	M 3
___ Canada Goose	M 1; S 3
___ Green-winged Teal	M 2; S 2
___ Mallard	M 1; S 1
___ Northern Pintail	M 2; S 2
___ Northern Shoveler	M 2; S 2
___ American Wigeon	M 2; S 2
___ Canvasback	M 3; S 3
___ Greater Scaup	M 2; S 2
___ Lesser Scaup	M 2; S 3
___ Harlequin Duck	M 3; S 3
___ Long-tailed Duck	M 3; S 3
___ Surf Scoter	M 3; S 3
___ Common Goldeneye	M 2; S 3
___ Barrow's Goldeneye	M 2; S 2
___ Bufflehead	M 2; S 2
___ Common Merganser	M 3; S 3
___ Red-breasted Merganser	M 3; S 3

The lakes in the Tahnetta Pass summit area (Milepost 119-124) are common resting points for waterfowl during late May/early June migration. In addition, the lakes between Sheep Mountain and Glennallen are known breeding habitat for Trumpeter swans. The surf scoter has been seen in the ponds between milepost markers 119 and 122.

EAGLES AND HAWKS

___ Osprey	M 3
___ Bald Eagle	M 2; S 2
___ Northern Harrier	M 1; S 2
___ Gyrfalcon	M 3 ; S 3
___ Peregrine Falcon	M 3
___ American Kestrel	M 3; S 2
___ Merlin	M 2; S 1
___ Northern Goshawk	M 3; S 3
___ Sharp-shinned Hawk	M 2; S 3
___ Swainson's Hawk	M 4
___ Red-tailed Hawk	M 1; S 2
___ Rough-legged Hawk	M 1
___ Golden Eagle	M 1; S 1

Golden eagles are the first migrating raptor to pass through the Sheep Mountain area. We begin seeing them in small numbers in mid-March. Peak flights occur in late March with 50-200 possible on a peak day. More Harlan's hawks are viewed here than anywhere in the world, with 1,000 individual species possible during Spring migration. This data is available in the lodge in our notebook of natural history information

located on the lodge bookshelf. The first known wintering pair of sibling golden eagles spent the winter in the Sheep Mountain area – 09/10.

GROUSE/PTARMIGAN

___ Spruce Grouse	P 2
___ Willow Ptarmigan	P 1
___ Rock Ptarmigan	P 2
___ White-tailed Ptarmigan	P 2
___ Ruffed Grouse	P 3

The sub-alpine and alpine habitats surrounding the Sheep Mountain area are ideal habitat for ptarmigan species. Spruce grouse are common residents in forested habitat closer to Palmer and from mile 135 east to Glennallen. Willow Ptarmigan are abundant seasonally on the trails of the Gunsight Mountain and Belanger Pass areas.

___ Sandhill Crane	M2
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Sandhill cranes are often heard migrating over the Sheep Mountain area in early May. A friend tells me that migrating birds always fly in high numbers right before a low-pressure system moves in. After seeing and hearing hundreds of cranes fly over this spring just prior to a 3-day snowstorm, I believe she might be on to a true pattern. There are two geographically isolated populations of cranes that summer in Alaska. One population spends the summer is southcentral, the other population summers in the vast expanses of wetlands of the Yukon Kuskokwim delta. Each fall hundreds of Sandhill cranes fly east through the mountain pass here. We are unsure if these birds originate in the southcentral area of Alaska or have begun their migration earlier from the far reaches of northern and western Alaska.

SHOREBIRDS

___ Greater Yellowlegs	S 2
___ Lesser Yellowlegs	S 2
___ Sandpiper species	S 2
___ Least Sandpiper	S 2
___ Common Snipe	S 1
___ Semi-palmated Plover	M 3
___ American Golden Plover	S 3
___ Red-necked Phalarope	S 2
___ Long-billed Dowitcher	M 3

Yellowlegs nest near the ponds along Alascom Road (near Milepost 119 Glenn Highway). Other sandpiper species have also been observed here from a distance, a canoe or kayak allows for positive species identification. The low “wup-wup” of the snipes wings in flight can be heard early mornings during the summer.

GULLS & TERNS

___ Bonaparte's Gull	S 2
___ Mew Gull	S 1
___ Herring Gull	M 3
___ Arctic Tern	S 2

These three species can all be viewed flying over the ponds of the sub alpine valleys along Alascom Road.

OWLS

___ Great Horned Owl	P 2
___ Northern Hawk-owl	P 2

___ Great Gray Owl	P 3
___ Short-eared Owl	M 3; S 2 (Sometimes seen near mile post 123)
___ Boreal Owl	P 2
___ Northern Saw-whet Owl	P 4

Quiet winter nights are accompanied by aurora borealis and an occasional hoo-hoo, hoo hoo from the Great Horned Owl. The northern hawk owl is a year round inhabitant of the spruce forest between mile 112 and 120. Perched at the tops of the spruce trees this owl hunts during the day.

___ Belted Kingfisher	S 2
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Look for these distinct birds near streams, they love to perch on electrical or telephone wires and eat their prey.

___ Downy Woodpecker	P 2
___ Hairy Woodpecker	P 2
___ Three-toed Woodpecker	P 3
___ Northern Flicker	M3; S 3

The spruce bark beetle infestation of the middle 1990's left plenty of standing dead trees that make great woodpecker homes. Look carefully while out hiking on the trails near the lodge and many times you will find a woodpecker or flicker hole carved out in a dead spruce tree.

___ Olive-sided Flycatcher	S 2
___ Western Wood-pewee	S 2
___ Alder Flycatcher	S 1
___ Say's Phoebe	S 3
___ Hammond's Flycatcher	S3 (heard in 2005, Alascom Road)

Listen carefully in mid June and on a good day, you'll hear at least thereof these species not far from the lodge. On a bad day, you'll have to walk a mile, to a nearby creek, to hear others.

___ Horned Lark	M3; S 3
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___ Tree Swallow	S 1
___ Violet-green Swallow	S 1
___ Bank Swallow	S 2
___ Cliff Swallow	S 2

___ Gray Jay	P 2
___ Black-billed Magpie	P 1
___ Common Raven	P 1

Ravens and magpies come in to the dog kennel daily looking for extra food. Ravens and magpies are intelligent birds with an amazing repertoire of sounds and the ability to mimic. More than once we have been told that someone thought they heard Zack speaking, but when they looked around all they saw was a raven.

___ Black-capped Chickadee	P 1
___ Boreal Chickadee	P 2
___ Nuthatch	S2

The chickadee species are tiny year round residents that feast on alder and birch tree seeds. They survive cold winter nights by constantly eating during the short day light hours. Their bodies have an adaptation that

allows their body temperature to drop by 5 degrees during the night before becoming hypothermic. Chickadees group in flocks of 10-12 during the winter and use dense conifers and empty nests for shelter. Nuthatches are here seasonally during summer months, we are at the edge of their range.

___ Brown Creeper P 3

Non-descript and small, brown creepers are difficult to see. They have a distinct eating habit of spiraling up a tree, in search of seeds or insects, and then moving to the next tree and repeating the motion on another trunk.

___ American Dipper P 3

This bird depends on the productivity of streams and rivers; it dips below the surface of the water gleaning insect larvae and small fish. Around Sheep Mountain, the streams are not productive since they are quite acidic from nearby hard rock drainage. Also, many of the streams are ephemeral, only flowing above ground during May and June. This bird will be seen at lower elevations where water remains open year round. Dippers have been seen closer to Palmer, foraging in streams during cold spells, a good strategy if the water is 40 degrees warmer than the air.

___ Arctic Warbler	S 2
___ Golden-crowned Kinglet	S 4
___ Ruby-crowned Kinglet	S 2
___ Northern Wheatear	S 3
___ Townsend's Solitaire	S 3
___ Gray-cheeked Thrush	S 3
___ Swainson's Thrush	S 2
___ Hermit Thrush	S 2
___ American Robin	S 1
___ Varied Thrush	S 2

Arctic warblers are summer residents near Milepost 121 and the Belanger Pass area. Recent research in the Denali Highway area has shown that these birds prefer subalpine habitat with a sparse cover of low to moderate height shrubs. A trained ear may hear these closer to the lodge.

Both species of kinglets are thought to be spring migrants of this area, but only the ruby-crowned has been heard near the lodge. These birds are more common where the spruce trees are taller and the insect population more plentiful.

The Northern wheatear can be seen, with good luck, in the rocky outcroppings of Gunsight Mountain. The wheatear comes all the way from Africa and is a standout in terms of migration distances among Alaska's summer residents. Prepare for a half day hike to see this bird.

The hermit thrush is commonly heard in the Sheep Mountain area, Gray cheeked thrushes are Arctic tundra breeders and are only heard in the spring when they stop briefly before flying further north. Swainson's thrush is more common near riparian woodlands and spruce forest edges. Varied thrushes prefer dense understory found more commonly at lower altitudes and further south.

___ American Pipit M 2; S 2

___ Bohemian Waxwing M 2

These birds are nomadic, forming large flocks in search of seeds and berries; and most commonly viewed in the spring. Bohemian waxwings frequent the Sheep Mountain area in the summer in smaller numbers and nest in area spruce trees.

___ Northern Shrike P 3

Ever seen a shrew or vole impaled on a sharp branch? This is likely the work of a Northern Shrike. After capturing their prey, they use sharp twigs and branches to kill them and often leave it for later consumption.

___ Orange-crowned Warbler M1; S 1
___ Yellow Warbler S 1
___ Yellow-rumped Warbler M1; S 1
___ Townsend's Warbler S 3
___ Blackpoll Warbler S 3
___ Northern Waterthrush S 2
___ Wilson's Warbler S 2

A careful ear will hear most of these species singing within a ½ mile of the lodge in June. The best time to see the birds is in late May/early June; just prior to leaf out, the willows are flitting with warbler activity.

___ American Tree Sparrow S 1
___ Savannah Sparrow S 2
___ Fox Sparrow S 2/3
___ Song Sparrow S 3
___ Lincoln's Sparrow S 3
___ Golden-crowned Sparrow S 2
___ White-crowned Sparrow S 1
___ Dark-eyed Junco M 1; S 1
___ Lapland Longspur M 1; S 3
___ Snow Bunting W 2

Snow buntings are the first to arrive in March, followed by the Lapland longspurs in April and the sparrows in May. Smith's Longspur could probably be spotted in April along with the Lapland's but have not been confirmed to date.

___ Pine Grosbeak P 2

Pine grosbeaks are most commonly viewed during the winter season, feeding on alder cone seeds and occasionally road kill moose.

___ White-winged Crossbill P 3
___ Common Redpoll P 1
___ Hoary Redpoll P 3
___ Pine Siskin P 2

Common redpolls are year round residents that delight us with their in-flight call even in the deep cold of winter.

***This list is based on the following sources:**

Armstrong, Robert H. 1995. Birds of Alaska. Alaska Northwest Books. Portland, Oregon.

Bronson, Michael T. 1988. "Birds of the Palmer Area. Palmer, Alaska. Media North Printing. Unpaginated.

Checklist for Copper River Basin (Glennallen and surrounding areas) (1989)

<http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/othrdata/chekbird/r7/copper.htm>

Bureau of Land Management, Glennallen District in association with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game; Glennallen, Alaska; Wrangell-St. Elias National Park; Glennallen, Alaska. 1989. The Birds of the Copper River Basin and Surrounding Areas. The Bureau of Land Management, Glennallen District in association with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game; Glennallen, Alaska; Wrangell-St. Elias National Park; Glennallen, Alaska. Unpaginated. Jamestown, ND: Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center Home Page.
<http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/othrdata/chekbird/r7/copper.htm>
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Fritz, Cecily– Observation Summary of Raptor Migration Glenn Highway Milepost 118-120, Alaska 2001-2002

Fritz, Cecily and Paul. Observations during mid-May bird counts. Unpublished data. 2004.

Mat-Su Birders. 2004 Draft. Birds of South/Central Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Alaska (2005).

Useful websites

Dan Gibson's Bird Checklist for Alaska, U.S. Geological Survey

<http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/othrdata/chekbird/r7/alaska.htm>

Arctic Audubon link

<http://www.ptialaska.net/~audubon/>

Anchorage Audubon link

<http://www.anchorageaudubon.org/>

Boreal Partners in Flight

<http://www.absc.usgs.gov/research/bpif/bpif.html>

National Audubon Society, Alaska State Office

<http://www.audubon.org/chapter/ak/ak>

Checklist for Copper River Basin (Glennallen and surrounding areas) (1989)

<http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/othrdata/chekbird/r7/copper.htm>

Palmer Area Birds (Printed 1989)

<http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/othrdata/chekbird/r7/palmer.htm>