

Birding Tourism for Western Alaska



Alaska skies are filled with birds. Like its waters are filled with fish.

More than 450 species of birds live in or pass through Alaska, and the majority of them can be found in Western Alaska. Furthermore, birds visiting from Asia — called accidentals — can be sighted in Western Alaska — often the only place in North America where these birds can be seen.

Birds visiting the great wetlands of the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta or the ocean way stations of Gambell and the Western Aleutians, for example, could well bring birders — people whose hobby is to watch and study birds — to those villages that wish to increase local tourism.

Many birders at present stick to the road system. Western Alaska offers all the birds found in the Railbelt and more. Western

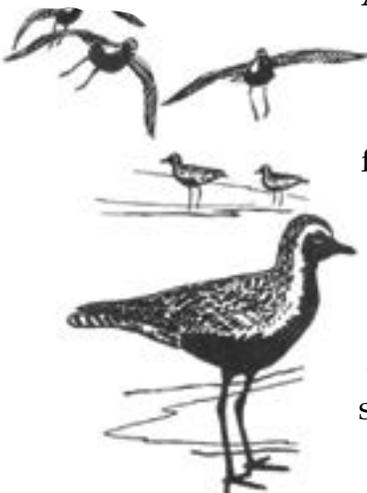
Alaska is one of the great birding areas of North America and offers exciting opportunities for visitors to see rare birds. Local road systems make much of this area accessible to birders.

Who Are These Birders and What Do They Want?

While Anchorage and Juneau get major floods of tourists from cruise ships and recreational vehicles, birders tend to travel to more remote places, often in small groups with guides. These groups may range from a handful of birders to groups of several dozen.

Birders are famous for keeping detailed lists and logs of the birds they have seen. These are “life lists” and are a great source of pride for birders. An experienced birder with 20 years dedicated could have 600 or more birds listed. Many birders will pay large sums, travel long distances and experience significant discomforts to add a new species to their life lists.

Birders may also keep a state list where they separately list the birds they have observed in a particular state. There could be country lists or city lists. Some birders might list all the birds seen on their birthday. Birders with a sense of humor may also keep a roadkill list or have an outhouse list — not everyone is reading mail-order catalogs!

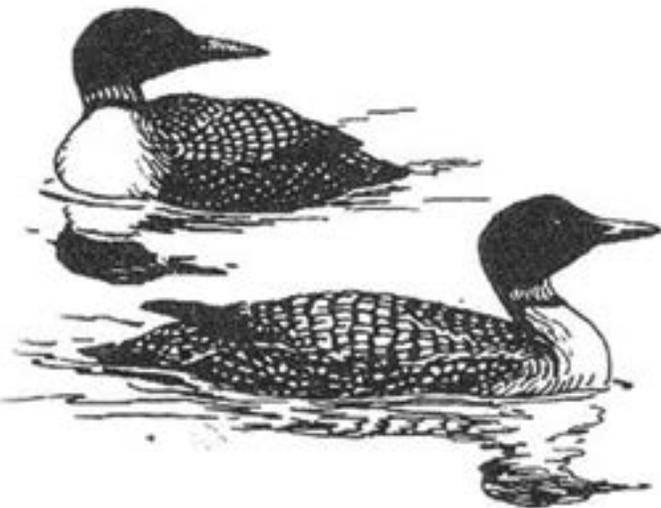


In the Internet age, birders can keep abreast of recent sightings through online billboards. There are also telephone hotlines with recordings of recent sightings. One late spring day, sightings of a Hooper swan, a black-headed gull and a black wing stilt — all rare species for North America — were reported in the Pribilofs and caused a flurry of activity from birders.

How Can My Village Participate in Bird-Related Tourism?

Unless you are especially knowledgeable about birds, or willing to study the subject, it may be more practical to hook up with existing bird guides. First on a birder's requirements for a successful trip is to add to his life list. An experienced guide will know what the birders want to see and how to accommodate them.

But number two on the birder's list is food, and some bird guides pack in extensive provisions because local sources of food are not available. If you wish to provide food for sale, you should work with a guide to make sure you are fulfilling state safety and health regulations. Providing food or lodging for birding groups could significantly increase the likelihood birders would visit your village.



Tending to be of a higher income level than many tourists, birders visiting Western Alaska could easily become interested in buying craft items or attending cultural performances. They may be interested in viewing other wildlife, hunting, fishing or scenic travel, all of which could also be provided by members of the village.

Other Resources

- Alaska Raptor Center, Sitka
www.alaskaraptor.org
- Anchorage Audubon Society
www.anchorageaudubon.org
- Arctic Audubon Society
www.arcticaudubon.org
- Juneau Audubon Society
www.juneau-audubon-society.org
- Kodiak Audubon Society
<http://kodiakaudubon.blogspot.com>
- Bird Treatment and Learning Center
www.birdtlc.net
- USF&W Alaska Region
<http://alaska.fws.gov>
- Alaska Science Center (USGS)
<http://alaska.usgs.gov/science>

If villagers who know the terrain could also become knowledgeable about the local birds, they could hire themselves out as guides and work with the formal bird guides. Or they could be “expeditors,” solving problems in all of the above areas.

There are other opportunities to work with visiting birding groups — providing local transportation, for example. Birding groups tend to stay in touch by radio and a sighting will cause a surge in interest to get to that site fast. In villages where ATVs are the only mode of land transport, entrepreneurs might consider constructing or purchasing a cart that could be hauled by ATV to ferry birders from one sighting to the next.

Some Important Considerations

Before inviting birders to your village, ask yourself and your neighbors how they would feel about sharing their communities with visitors. Are there areas where tourists would not be welcomed? Are there special times of the year when strangers in town would be considered a disruption? Most birders would be visiting during May and June.

Tourism will bring changes, for at least part of the year. An unwelcoming village can spell doom for any tourism effort. Make sure you have local support. Tourism is a good alternative for economic development in rural Alaska. But tourism is very different from other industries where you produce a product and ship it to your customers. In effect, it is your customers who are “shipped” to you.

Buying a tour is different for the customers, too, who must make their purchase sight unseen. Therefore, it is vital to make sure the tourists know what to expect.

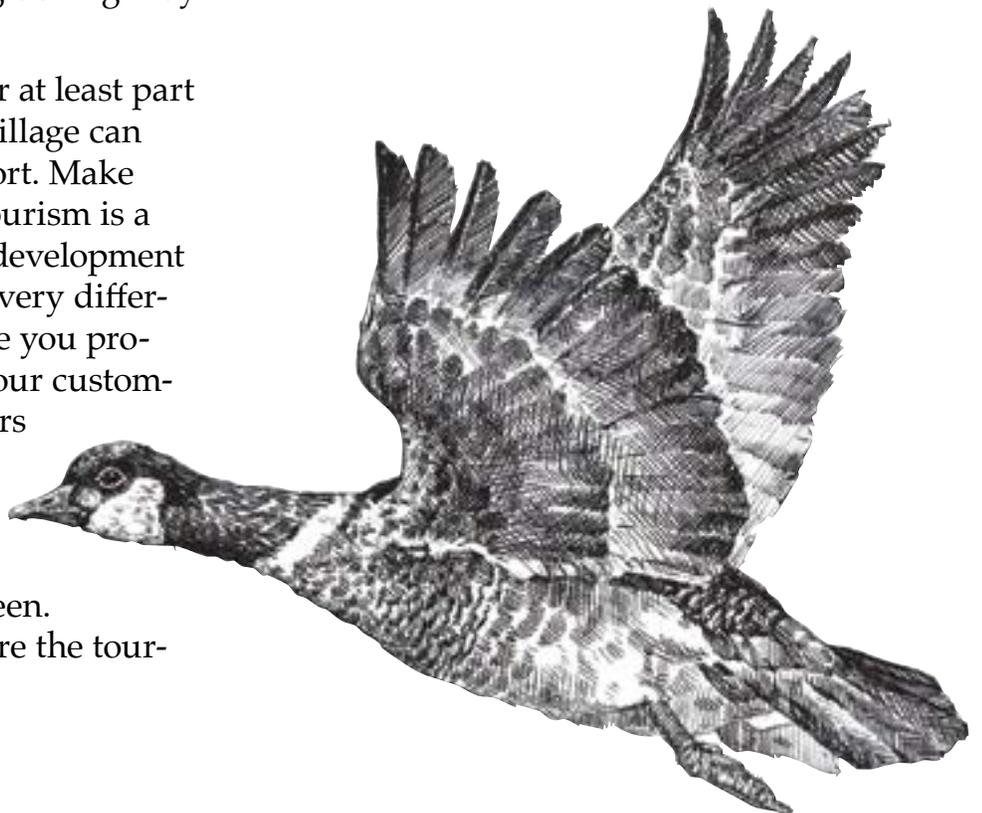
Before proceeding, perform an inventory of local resources. Tourists need a place to stay, food to eat, etc. How much of this will you provide and how will you do it?

Tourists — especially birders on the trail of an exciting species — may not balk about sleeping on the floor or using a honey bucket. But the responsible tourism entrepreneur will let visitors know in advance what conditions to expect.

Investigate insurance costs before investing in any plans. They may be too high to make the enterprise work.

You will have to anticipate special needs, too. If there is no pharmacy in the village, for instance, tourists should be advised to bring any medicines they will need.

One common problem is when birders encounter local youths target shooting at birds. If the village wishes to attract and retain a positive reputation among birders, youths should be taught that birds are a local resource that should be protected.



Another tip is always to understand that birders are most interested in seeing birds on their trip — this is more important than any other activity. Birders might suddenly leave a cultural performance or organized meal if a report of the sighting of a rare bird come over the radio.

Getting Started

Check with the local or regional Native corporation for help. The Alaska Office of Tourism Development, 907-465-5478 or www.commerce.state.ak.us/ded/dev/tourbus/home.cfm, can help find birding guides or tour companies presently operating in the state.

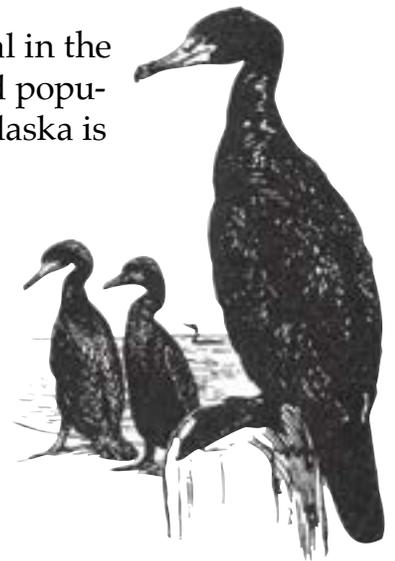
You can learn a lot about birds in the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's new Wings Over Alaska program, which provides materials for birders to obtain certificates for logging 50, 125, 200 and 275 species in the state. The highest level of certificate will be signed by the governor. The Wings Over Alaska program can be accessed

online at www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=birdviewing, wings or by calling 907-465-4190.

Even those whose ultimate goal is to run birding tours might consider hooking up with an existing guide at first in order to obtain the necessary knowledge about the needs and interests of birders. Your local or regional U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office can help gauge birding resources in your area. Another source is the Audubon Society in Anchorage. An excellent book to survey Alaska resources from a "birder's-eye" view is *A Birder's Guide to Alaska* by George C. West, published by the American Birding Association.

The tourism potential in the vast and diverse bird populations of Western Alaska is quite real.

Good luck!



www.uaf.edu/ces or 1-877-520-5211

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