

## Audubon Alaska guide pinpoints birds in Anchorage

### Finding feathered friends

By MELISSA DeVAUGHN

mdevaughn@adn.com

(06/09/08 00:55:17)

POTTER MARSH -- When the big black bear came into view on the far back side of the marsh, Eric Myers glanced at it through his binoculars then quickly trained the lens back to what really held his interest: a flock of swallows flitting to and from by the water's edge.

Myers, a self-described "birding geek," was far more interested in differentiating the color variations between the two types of swallows than he was in the bruin. He found the birds active behavior intriguing, too.

This is just the way it is for birders, joked Myers, the primary author behind a newly released Anchorage birding map that will make bird-watching much more accessible to the novice.

Armed with the map, published by Audubon Alaska, a beginner can visit 34 locations from Eagle River to Portage to see such species as the arctic tern, downy woodpecker, red-necked grebe, American widgeon and the Pacific loon in their natural environment.

It is the first such map that focuses solely on the Anchorage Bowl, said Stan Senner, executive director of Audubon Alaska, and he hopes it will serve two audiences.

"I think it will hit people who don't really realize what they have in their back yards. And second, the visitors will be able to use it," Senner said. "We get calls so often from people coming up here wanting to know where to bird, and it's always a little awkward because Audubon Alaska is not in the trip-planning business."

Still, Senner said, the organization is in the information business, and it wants to highlight the importance of Alaska's natural spaces as necessary bird habitat.

The map, then, is a good start. Boosted by a \$5,000 Anchorage Park Foundation donation, the nonprofit Audubon group got to work. Myers volunteered to coordinate the effort, but it took the expertise of avid birders throughout Southcentral to create a comprehensive representation of Anchorage's best birding.

"We're trying (with the map) to provide a cross-section of habitats," Myers said.

That's why you'll find three color-coded destinations -- alpine, forest and freshwater as well as coastal locations.

Seeking owls, ptarmigan or raptors? Focus on the alpine destinations of Arctic Valley or Glen Alps.

Snow geese, swans and cranes can be spotted at such coastal locations as the Oceanview Bluffs and Potter Marsh.

And if it's songbirds or active perching species you're after, the forests of Hillside Park, Far North Bicentennial Park, Conner's Lake Park, Kincaid, and even right in town at lakes Hood or Spenard are your best prospects.

## BY SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

With binoculars in hand, Senner and Myers walked along a quiet wooded path in the meandering but tucked-away Johns Park. Early in the morning or early evening is the best time to see birds at their most active, but even now, at 11 a.m. on an overcast day, birds still moved about.

Walking slowly, we stopped now and then to listen or watch as a small blur flew past.

"We call them LBJs, or Little Brown Jobs," Myers said of the many species of birds that at first glance look exactly the same -- like small brown balls of feathers.

But then Myers heard a call that he recognized immediately.

"It's a yellow-rumped warbler," he said, pointing to a cluster of willows and alders in which the bird had disappeared. "They're fairly common."

To the inexperienced birder, though, discovering the distinctive warbler, called "butter butts" for their telltale yellow rumps, is an "ah-ha" moment. Through the binoculars' lens, the bird seemed much more vibrant, its pale-gray body contrasting against the yellow along its breast and rump.

Senner, with binoculars to his face, followed the bird's activity. Both men have seen hundreds of these warblers --one of a half-dozen species of warblers in Alaska -- so they're nothing new. For those who keep lists of their bird sightings, the yellow-rumped warbler was likely one of the first to be checked off.

Despite that, they still watched with interest.

"In the end, for most birders, the list isn't important," Senner said. "It's getting to know how the birds live and what they do that is an endless source of amazement."

The Anchorage birding map is surprisingly easy for a nonbirder to navigate.

A key feature was creating driving directions to the locations, so visitors could find the birding spots. That task fell to Myers, who said it was difficult to winnow the list to 34 places.

"This is just a sampling," he said.

To the average Alaskan, Anchorage's bird population may be just another sign of spring, Senner said, especially as the birds pass through during migration.

"Birding is actually big business and people spend a lot of money," Senner said. "We think it's important for the community to understand the significance of this, and for (visitors) to have a resource (like the map) to help them while they're here."

Once, Senner said, a party of experienced birders was destined for Attu, in the Aleutians, where some of the world's best birding is available. But their flights were continually canceled due to poor weather, leaving them in Anchorage to pass the time.

What did they do?

Well, go birding, of course.

And Anchorage did not disappoint. How many cities, he said, can claim to be home to nesting loons, such as can be spotted at Conner's Lake Park.

Or what about the horned grebe, a local celebrity that has been spotted near Potter Marsh, below the railroad tracks, for the past few years?

#### JOY OF DISCOVERY

On the east side of Potter Marsh, along the Old Seward Highway, we stopped to watch a northern water thrush -- another LBJ with a brown and white striped chest -- perched at the top of a spruce tree. The bird trilled, lifting its head and opening its beak as if announcing its presence to all who would listen. At each call, its feathers fluffed and its body shook.

The map, for someone beginning birding, will direct you to exactly this same spot if it's the water thrush you want to see.

It's not exactly the same as having two Audubon experts along to point out the sounds and sites of birds in Anchorage. But it comes close.

Besides, Senner said, that's part of the fun.

"One of the joys of birding is the opportunity of self-discovery," Senner said. "Some of my biggest thrills came when I wasn't a very experienced birder and discovered (a species) myself."

Print Page

Close Window