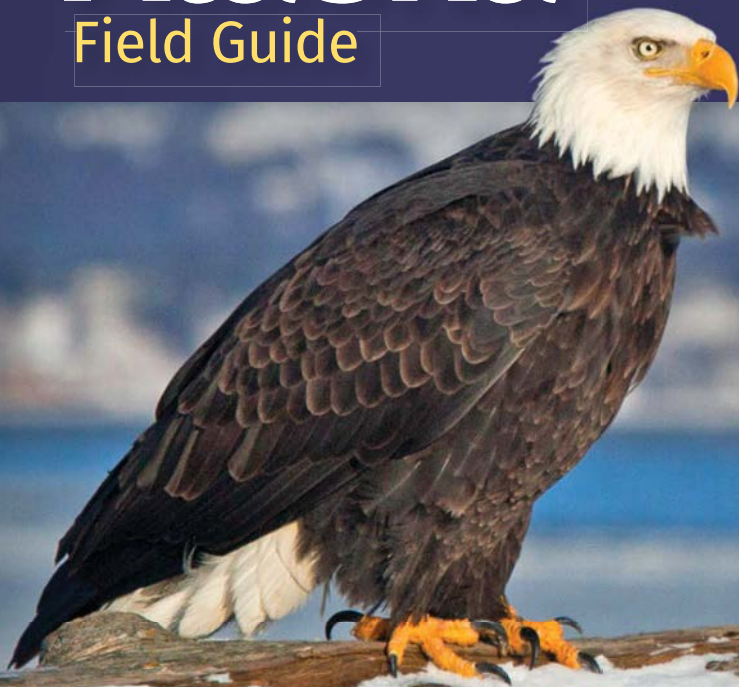


2ND EDITION

Birds *of* Alaska

Field Guide



Stan Tekiela

Birds that are mostly black

p. 25



Birds that are mostly black and white

p. 45



Birds that are mostly blue

p. 107



Birds that are mostly brown

p. 117



Birds that are mostly gray

p. 259



Birds that have prominent green

p. 343



Birds that have prominent orange

p. 353



Birds that have prominent red

p. 357



Birds that are mostly white

p. 371



Birds that have prominent yellow

p. 397



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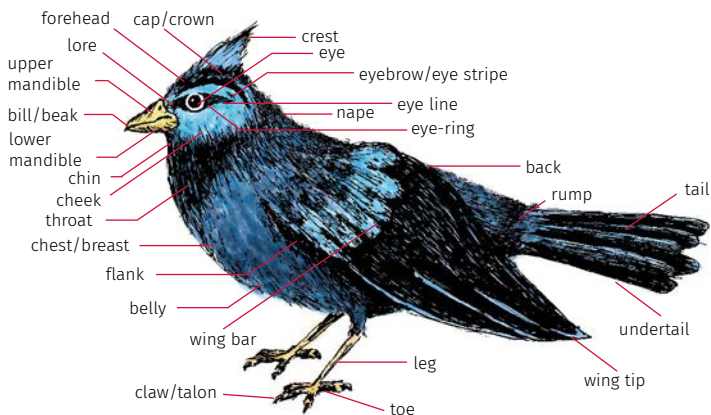
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BIRD BASICS

It's easier to identify birds and communicate about them if you know the names of the different parts of a bird. For instance, it's more effective to use the word "crest" to indicate the set of extra-long feathers on top of the head of a Steller's Jay than to try to describe it. The following illustration points out the basic parts of a bird. Because it is a composite of many birds, it shouldn't be confused with any actual bird.



Bird Color Variables

No other animal has a color palette like a bird's. Brilliant blues, lemon yellows, showy reds and iridescent greens are common in the bird world. In general, male birds are more colorful than their female counterparts. This helps males attract a mate, essentially saying, "Hey, look at me!" Color calls attention to a male's health as well. The better the condition of his feathers, the better his food source, territory and potential for mating.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

To help you quickly and easily identify birds, this field guide is organized by color. Refer to the color key on the first page, note the color of the bird, and turn to that section. For example, the male Downy Woodpecker is black and white with a red mark on its head. Because the bird is mostly black-and-white, it will be found in the black-and-white section.

Each color section is also arranged by size, generally with the smaller birds first. Sections may also incorporate the average size in a range, which in some cases reflects size differences between male and female birds. Flip through the pages in the color section to find the bird. If you already know the name of the bird, check the index for the page number.

In some species, the male and female are very different in color. In others, the breeding and winter plumage colors differ. These species will have an inset photograph with a page reference and will be found in two color sections.

You will find a variety of information in the bird description sections. To learn more, turn to the sample on pp. 22–23.

in flight





YEAR-ROUND

American Crow

Corvus brachyrhynchos

Size: 16" (40 cm)

Male: Completely black with a black bill, legs and feet. Can have a purple sheen in direct sun.

Female: same as male

Juvenile: similar to adult

Nest: platform; female builds; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 4–5; pale blue with brown markings

Incubation: 16–20 days; female incubates

Fledging: 28–35 days; female and male feed young

Migration: non-migrator; will move around in winter to find food

Food: insects, fruit, seeds, fish, small mammals, carrion; comes to seed and ground feeders

Compare: The American Crow is smaller than the Common Raven (p. 39), but lacks shaggy throat feathers and has a smaller bill and a lower pitched, more hoarse call.

Stan's Notes: One of the most recognizable birds in Alaska. Often reuses nest every year if not taken over by a hawk or owl. Can mimic other birds and human voices. One of the smartest birds and very social. Entertains itself by provoking chases with other birds and animals. Feeds on roadkill, but is rarely hit by cars. Cooperative hunting, with one crow sitting in a tree to watch for traffic while the other walks out to feed on the carrion. Extended families roost together at night in winter and communicate the location of food. In the morning the group flies to the food source. Unmated birds from the previous year help parents raise the current year's young. Can live 20 years.

in flight





YEAR-ROUND

Common Raven

Corvus corax

Size: 22–27" (56–69 cm)

Male: Large all-black bird with a shaggy beard of feathers on throat and chin. Large black bill. Large wedge-shaped tail, best seen in flight.

Female: same as male

Juvenile: same as adult

Nest: platform; female and male construct; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 4–6; pale green with brown markings

Incubation: 18–21 days; female incubates

Fledging: 38–44 days; female and male feed the young

Migration: non-migrator; moves around to find food

Food: insects, fruit, small animals, carrion

Compare: American Crow (p. 31) is smaller, lacks the shaggy throat feathers and has a smaller bill and a lower pitched, more hoarse call. Glides on flat outstretched wings unlike the constant flapping of the American Crow.

Stan's Notes: Considered by some people to be the smartest of all birds. Known for its aerial acrobatics and long swooping dives. Soars on wind without flapping, like a raptor. Sometimes scavenges with crows and gulls. A cooperative hunter that often communicates the location of a good source of food to other ravens. Most start to breed at 3–4 years. Complex courtship includes grabbing bills, preening each other and cooing. Long-term pair bond. Uses the same nest site for many years.

male

female





YEAR-ROUND

Downy Woodpecker

Dryobates pubescens

Size: 6½" (15 cm)

Male: Small woodpecker with a white belly and black-and-white spotted wings. Red mark on the back of the head and a white stripe down the back. Short black bill.

Female: same as male but lacks the red mark

Juvenile: same as female, some with a red mark near the forehead

Nest: cavity with a round entrance hole; male and female excavate; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 3–5; white without markings

Incubation: 11–12 days; female incubates during the day, male incubates at night

Fledging: 20–25 days; male and female feed the young

Migration: non-migrator

Food: insects, seeds; visits seed and suet feeders

Compare: The Hairy Woodpecker (p. 53) is larger. Look for the Downy's shorter, thinner bill.

Stan's Notes: A year-round resident in parts of Alaska where trees are present. This is perhaps the most common woodpecker in the U.S. Stiff tail feathers help to brace it like a tripod as it clings to a tree. Like other woodpeckers, it has a long, barbed tongue to pull insects from tiny places. Mates drum on branches or hollow logs to announce territory, which is rarely larger than 5 acres (2 ha). Repeats a high-pitched "peek-peek" call. Nest cavity is wider at the bottom than at the top and is lined with fallen wood chips. Male performs most of the brooding. During winter, it will roost in a cavity. Doesn't breed in high elevations but often moves there in winter for food. Undulates in flight.

winter



breeding





Ruddy Turnstone

Arenaria interpres

Size: 9½" (24 cm)

Male: Breeding male has a white breast and belly with a black bib. Wings and back are black and chestnut. Head has a black-and-white marking. Orange legs. Slightly upturned black bill. Winter male has a brown-and-white head and breast pattern.

Female: similar to male but duller

Juvenile: similar to adults, but black-and-white head has a scaly appearance

Nest: ground; female builds; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 3–4; olive-green with dark markings

Incubation: 22–24 days; male and female incubate

Fledging: 19–21 days; male feeds the young

Migration: complete, to coastal California and Mexico

Food: aquatic insects, fish, mollusks, crustaceans, worms, eggs

Compare: Black Turnstone (p. 57) is overall black with dark legs. Look for orange legs and a bold pattern on head and neck to identify.

Stan's Notes: Summer resident and migrant in Alaska. Also known as Rock Plover. Named "Turnstone" because it turns stones over on rocky beaches to find food. Known for its unusual behavior of robbing and eating other birds' eggs. Hangs around crabbing operations to eat scraps from nets. Females often leave before their young leave the nest (fledge), resulting in males raising the young. Males have a bare spot on the belly (brood patch) to warm the young, something only females normally have.





SUMMER

Tree Swallow

Tachycineta bicolor

Size: 5–6" (13–15 cm)

Male: Blue-green in spring, greener in fall. Changes color in direct sunlight. White from chin to belly. Long, pointed wing tips. Notched tail.

Female: similar to male but duller

Juvenile: gray brown with a white belly and a grayish breast band

Nest: cavity; female and male line a vacant wood-pecker cavity or nest box; 2 broods per year

Eggs: 4–6; white without markings

Incubation: 13–16 days; female incubates

Fledging: 20–24 days; female and male feed the young

Migration: complete, to Mexico and Central America

Food: insects

Compare: The Barn Swallow (p. 109) has a rust belly and deeply forked tail. The Bank Swallow (p. 125) has a breast band and lacks the Tree Swallow's iridescent blue green colors. The Cliff Swallow (p. 127) is a similar size and has a unique tan-to-rust color pattern.

Stan's Notes: The first swallow species to return each spring. Most common along ponds, lakes and agricultural fields. Can be attracted to your yard with a nest box. Competes with bluebirds for cavities and nest boxes. Builds a grass nest within and will travel long distances, looking for dropped feathers for the lining. Watch for it playing and chasing after feathers. Flies with rapid wingbeats, then glides. Gives a series of gurgles and chirps. Chatters when upset or threatened. Eats many nuisance bugs. Gathers in large flocks to migrate.

male



female





Mountain Bluebird

Sialia currucoides

Size: 7" (18 cm)

Male: Overall sky-blue bird with a darker blue head, back, wings and tail. White lower belly. Thin black bill.

Female: similar to male, but paler with a nearly gray head and chest and a whitish belly

Juvenile: similar to adult of the same sex

Nest: cavity, old woodpecker cavity, wooden nest box; female builds; 1–2 broods per year

Eggs: 4–6; pale blue without markings

Incubation: 13–14 days; female incubates

Fledging: 22–23 days; female and male feed young

Migration: complete, to southwestern states and Mexico

Food: insects, fruit

Compare: Larger than Bluethroat (p. 275), which is gray with blue only around the area of the throat. Look for male Mountain Bluebird's dark blue head, back and wings.

Stan's Notes: Common in open mountainous country. Main diet is insects but will also eat fruit. Often hovers just before diving to the ground to grab an insect. Due to conservation of suitable nesting sites (dead trees with cavities and man-made nest boxes), populations have increased dramatically. Like other bluebirds, Mountain Bluebirds take well to nest boxes and tolerate close contact with people. Female sits on baby birds (brood) for up to six days after the eggs hatch. Young imprint on their first nest box or cavity and then choose a similar type of box or cavity throughout their life.

male
p. 271



female





Dark-eyed Junco

Junco hyemalis

Size: 5½" (14 cm)

Female: A plump, dark-eyed bird with a tan-to-brown chest, head and back. White belly. Ivory-to-pink bill. White outer tail feathers appear like a white V in flight.

Male: round bird with gray plumage

Juvenile: similar to female, with streaking on the breast and head

Nest: cup; female and male build; 2 broods per year

Eggs: 3–5; white with reddish-brown markings

Incubation: 12–13 days; female incubates

Fledging: 10–13 days; male and female feed the young

Migration: partial to complete migrator, throughout the U.S.

Food: seeds, insects; visits ground and seed feeders

Compare: Rarely confused with any other bird. The Dark-eyed Junco is not in Alaska during the winter. Look for the ivory-to-pink bill and small flocks feeding beneath seed feeders to help identify the female Dark-eyed Junco.

Stan's Notes: This is one of Alaska's common summer birds. Adheres to a rigid social hierarchy, with dominant birds chasing the less dominant birds. Look for the white outer tail feathers flashing in flight. Often seen in small flocks on the ground, where it uses its feet to simultaneously "double-scratch" to expose seeds and insects. Eats many weed seeds. Nests in a wide variety of wooded habitats in April and May. Several subspecies of Dark-eyed Junco were previously considered to be separate species but have now been combined into one.





Northern Waterthrush

Parkesia noveboracensis

Size: 6" (15 cm)

Male: A large, overall dark brown warbler. Chest, chin and belly are white to pale yellow with heavy dark streaks. Long narrow eyebrows, white to pale yellow, extending from base of bill to back of head.

Female: same as male

Juvenile: similar to adult

Nest: cup; female builds; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 3–6; pale white with brown markings

Incubation: 10–13 days; female incubates

Fledging: 10–11 days; female and male feed young

Migration: complete, to Mexico, Central America and South America

Food: insects, crustaceans, tiny fish, mollusks

Compare: Larger than Arctic Warbler (p. 265), which shares light eyebrows, but lacks the heavy brown streaking of Northern Waterthrush. The Blackpoll Warbler (p. 45) is slightly smaller and lacks light eyebrows.

Stan's Notes: One of the wood warblers. Found along woodland streams and creeks, where it hunts for insects. Spends much of its time walking along stream banks or wading in shallow water, often flipping leaves, looking for insects to eat. Constructs its nest under roots, rock shelves and overhanging banks near the water's edge. Constantly bobs head and pumps tail up and down while walking, hunting or just after landing.

winter





Short-billed Dowitcher

Limnodromus griseus

Size: 11" (28 cm)

Male: Winter plumage back and wings are gray to light brown and the belly is white. Has a long, straight black bill. Off-white eyebrow stripe. Dull-yellow-to-green legs and feet.

Female: same as male

Juvenile: similar to winter adult

Nest: ground; female and male construct; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 3–4; olive-green with dark markings

Incubation: 20–21 days; male and female incubate

Fledging: 25–27 days; male and female feed the young

Migration: complete, to coastal Mexico

Food: insects, snails, worms, leeches, seeds

Compare: Nonbreeding Black-bellied Plover (p. 313) is similar in size, but has a tiny bill unlike the long bill of the Short-billed Dowitcher. The nonbreeding Red Knot (p. 309) lacks the dark patch on head and has a shorter bill. Red-necked Phalarope (p. 289) is smaller and has a much shorter bill.

Stan's Notes: Summer resident seen along southern coastal Alaska and inland on freshwater lakes and marshes. With a rapid probing action like a sewing machine, it uses its long straight bill to probe deep into sand and mud for insects.





YEAR-ROUND

Rock Pigeon

Columba livia

Size: 13" (33 cm)

Male: No set color pattern. Shades of gray to white with patches of gleaming, iridescent green and blue. Often has a light rump patch.

Female: same as male

Juvenile: same as adults

Nest: platform; female builds; 3–4 broods per year

Eggs: 1–2; white without markings

Incubation: 18–20 days; female and male incubate

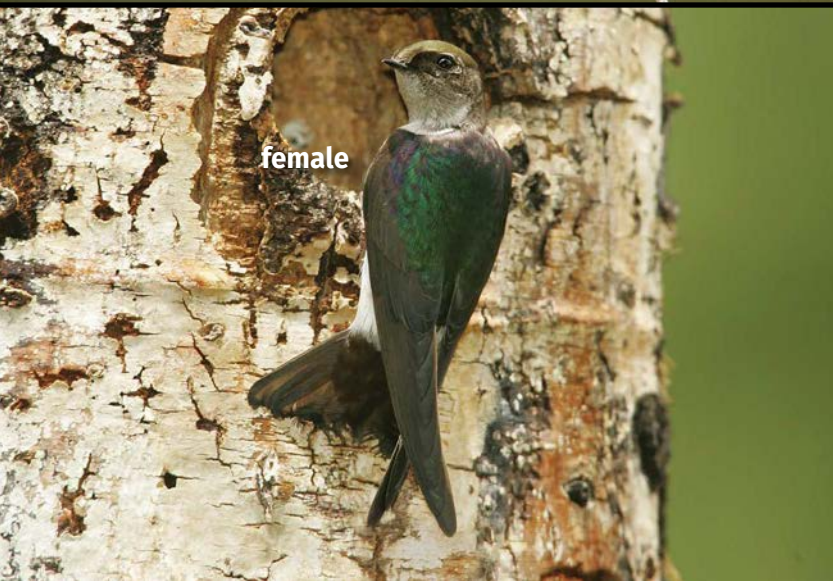
Fledging: 25–26 days; female and male feed the young

Migration: non-migrator

Food: seeds

Compare: The Eurasian Collared-Dove (p. 317) has a black collar on the nape.

Stan's Notes: Also known as the Domestic Pigeon. Formerly known as the Rock Dove. Introduced to North America from Europe by the early settlers. Most common around cities and barnyards, where it scratches for seeds. One of the few birds with a wide variety of colors, produced by years of selective breeding while in captivity. Parents feed the young a regurgitated liquid known as crop-milk for the first few days of life. One of the few birds that can drink without tilting its head back. Nests under bridges or on buildings, balconies, barns and sheds. Was once thought to be a nuisance in cities and was poisoned. Now, many cities have Peregrine Falcons (p. 327) feeding on Rock Pigeons, which keeps their numbers in check.





Violet-green Swallow

Tachycineta thalassina

Size: 5¼" (13.5 cm)

Male: Dull emerald green crown, nape and back. Violet-blue wings and tail. White chest and belly. White cheeks with white extending above the eyes. Wings extend beyond the tail when perching.

Female: same as male, only duller

Juvenile: similar to adult of the same sex

Nest: cavity; female and male build nest in tree cavities, old woodpecker holes; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 4–6; pale white with brown markings

Incubation: 13–14 days; female incubates

Fledging: 18–24 days; female and male feed the young

Migration: complete, to Central and South America

Food: insects

Compare: Similar size as the Cliff Swallow (p. 127) which has a distinctive tan-to-rust pattern on the head. Barn Swallow (p. 109) has a distinctive, deeply forked tail.

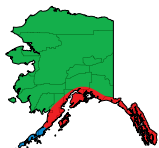
Stan's Notes: A solitary nester in tree cavities and rarely beneath cliff overhangs. Like Tree Swallows, it can be attracted with a nest box. Will search for miles for errant feathers to line its nest. Tail is short and wing tips extend beyond the end of it, seen when perching. Returns to the state in late April and begins nesting in May. Young often leave the nest by June. On cloudy days they look black but on sunny days they look metallic green.

female
p. 231



male





YEAR-ROUND
SUMMER
WINTER

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Size: 19–21" (48–53 cm)

Male: Large, bulbous green head, white necklace and rust-brown or chestnut chest. Gray-and-white sides. Yellow bill. Orange legs and feet.

Female: brown with an orange-and-black bill and blue-and-white wing mark (speculum)

Juvenile: same as female but with a yellow bill

Nest: ground; female builds; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 7–10; greenish to whitish, unmarked

Incubation: 26–30 days; female incubates

Fledging: 42–52 days; female leads the young to food

Migration: complete to non-migrator in parts of Alaska

Food: seeds, plants, aquatic insects; will come to ground feeders offering corn

Compare: Male Red-breasted Merganser (p. 349) has a shaggy crest and an orange bill. The male Northern Shoveler (p. 347) has a white chest with rust on sides and a dark spoon shaped bill. Male Northern Pintail (p. 241) has long tail feathers and a brown head.

Stan's Notes: A familiar dabbling duck of lakes and ponds. Also found in rivers, streams and some backyards. Tips forward to feed on vegetation on the bottom of shallow water. The name "Mallard" comes from the Latin word *masculus*, meaning "male," referring to the male's habit of taking no part in raising the young. Male and female have white underwings and white tails, but only the male has black central tail feathers that curl upward. Unlike the female, the male doesn't quack. Returns to its birthplace each year.



male



female



Varied Thrush

Ixoreus naevius

Size: 9½" (24 cm)

Male: Potbellied robin-like bird with orange eyebrows, chin, breast and wing bars. Head, neck and back are gray to blue. Black breast band and eye mark.

Female: browner version of male, lacking the black breast band

Juvenile: similar to female

Nest: cup; female builds; 1–2 broods per year

Eggs: 3–5; pale blue with brown markings

Incubation: 12–14 days; female and male incubate

Fledging: 10–15 days; female and male feed young

Migration: complete to non-migrator, to western states

Food: insects, fruit

Compare: Similar size and shape as American Robin (p. 299), but the Varied Thrush has a warm-orange breast unlike the red breast of Robin. Male Thrush has a distinctive black breast band.

Stan's Notes: This intriguing-looking bird nests in the southern two-thirds of Alaska. Prefers moist coniferous forests. It is most common in dense, older coniferous forests in high elevations. In the Lower 48 States, it migrates in an east-west pattern. Some birds in western states fly eastward in fall, showing up in nearly any state. Usually is very elusive, feeding on the ground in dense vegetation. Tosses leaves around in search of fallen berries and insects. Gives a distinctive song of long whistles, repeated after a short pause.



male



female
p. 407



YEAR-ROUND

White-winged Crossbill

Loxia leucoptera

Size: 6½" (16 cm)

Male: Red-to-pink sparrow-sized bird with black wings and tail. Two large white wing bars. Gray sides and lower belly. A long, slender crossed bill with a dark spot at base (lore).

Female: pale yellow breast with indistinct streaks, dark wings, 2 large white wing bars, dark tail, a long, slender crossed bill

Juvenile: similar to female, the first-year male is pale yellow or pale red

Nest: cup; female builds; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 3–5; pale blue with brown markings

Incubation: 12–14 days; female incubates

Fledging: 16–20 days; female and male feed young

Migration: non-migrator to irruptive; moves around in winter to find food

Food: seeds, berries, insects; comes to seed feeders

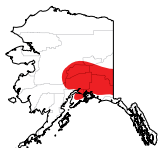
Compare: The male Red Crossbill (p. 357) is very similar to the male White-winged Crossbill, but lacks white wing bars. Male Pine Grosbeak (p. 361) is much larger and lacks the crossed bill.

Stan's Notes: This bird dangles upside down to reach pine and spruce cones, using its long crossed bill to extract the seeds. Eats berries and insects to a lesser extent. Usually seen on the ground picking up grit, which helps grind the seeds. Moves around to find a plentiful supply of seeds. Plumage can be highly variable among individuals, with older males more colorful than the younger ones.



winter





YEAR-ROUND

White-tailed ptarmigan

Lagopus leucura

Size: 12½" (32 cm)

Male: Winter plumage (Oct–Apr) is entirely white. Small dark bill.

Female: same as winter male

Juvenile: similar to breeding female, white on wings

Nest: ground; female builds; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 4–8; tan with brown markings

Incubation: 22–24 days; female incubates

Fledging: 10–15 days; female shows young what to eat

Migration: non-migrator to partial; will move around in winter to find food

Food: leaf and flower buds, seeds, insects, berries

Compare: The winter Willow Ptarmigan (p. 377) has black sides on its tail. The winter male Rock Ptarmigan (p. 375) has a black eye line.

Stan's Notes: Alone or in small unisex flocks in winter. Ptarmigans molt three times each year; other birds molt twice. In late autumn, molts to an all-white plumage that blends with winter landscapes. Moves to lower elevations during winter. Late summer plumage (Jul–Oct) is gray with rust and black spotting. When courting, male displays swollen red combs and alternates the pace of strutting, fast with slow. Female builds a shallow nest in spring, usually under a shrub, and lines it with fine grass, lichens and feathers. She delays nesting until fully molted into her summer camouflage plumage. If threatened at the nest, the female will perform a distraction display that includes hissing and clucking. Male leaves female shortly after eggs hatch. Species name *leucura* is Greek and means “white tail.” Other ptarmigans have black-sided tails.

in flight



breeding

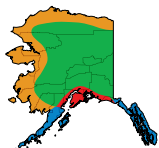


juvenile



winter





YEAR-ROUND
SUMMER
MIGRATION
WINTER

Herring Gull

Larus argentatus

Size: 23–26" (58–66 cm); up to 5' wingspan

Male: White with slate-gray wings. Black wing tips with tiny white spots. Yellow bill with an orange-red spot near the tip of the lower bill (mandible). Pinkish legs and feet. Winter plumage has gray speckles on head and neck.

Female: same as male

Juvenile: mottled brown to gray, with a black bill

Nest: ground; female and male construct; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 2–3; olive with brown markings

Incubation: 24–28 days; female and male incubate

Fledging: 35–36 days; female and male feed the young

Migration: complete, to southern coastal Alaska, western states and Mexico; non-migrator in parts of Alaska

Food: fish, insects, clams, eggs, baby birds

Compare: Glaucous-winged Gull (p. 387) is similar, but has gray wing tips with white spots. Glaucous Gull (p. 389) is also similar, but has unmarked white wing tips.

Stan's Notes: A common gull of large lakes. An opportunistic bird, scavenging for human food in dumpsters, parking lots and other places with garbage. Takes eggs and young from other bird nests. Often drops clams and other shellfish from heights to break the shells and get to the soft interior. Nests in colonies, returning to the same site annually. Lines its nest with grass and seaweed. It takes about four years for the juveniles to obtain adult plumage. Adults have spotted heads during winter.

female



male





Wilson's Warbler

Cardellina pusilla

Size: 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (12 cm)

Male: Dull-yellow upper and bright-yellow lower. Distinctive black cap. Large black eyes and small thin bill.

Female: same as male, but lacking the black cap

Juvenile: similar to female

Nest: cup; female builds; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 4–6; white with brown markings

Incubation: 10–13 days; female incubates

Fledging: 8–11 days; female and male feed young

Migration: complete, to coastal Texas, Mexico and Central America

Food: insects

Compare: The Orange-crowned Warbler (p. 399) is paler yellow and lacks the black cap of the male Wilson's Warbler. The Eastern Yellow Wagtail (p. 403) is larger, has white eye brows and lacks male Wilson's black cap.

Stan's Notes: A widespread warbler of low to mid-level elevations. Can be found near water in willow and alder thickets. Its all-insect diet makes it one of the top insect-eating birds in North America. Often flicks its tail and spreads its wings when hopping among thick shrubs, looking for insects. Females often mate with males that have the best territories and that might already have mates (polygyny).



male



female



SUMMER

Yellow Warbler

Setophaga petechia

Size: 5" (13 cm)

Male: Yellow with thin orange streaks on the chest and belly. Long, pointed dark bill.

Female: same as male but lacks orange streaks

Juvenile: similar to female but much duller

Nest: cup; female builds; 1 brood per year

Eggs: 4–5; white with brown markings

Incubation: 11–12 days; female incubates

Fledgling: 10–12 days; female and male feed the young

Migration: complete, to southwestern states, Mexico, and Central and South America

Food: insects

Compare: Look for the orange streaking on the chest of the male. The Orange-crowned Warbler (p. 399) is paler yellow. Yellow-rumped Warbler (p. 273) has only spots of yellow unlike the orange streaking on the chest of the male Yellow Warbler.

Stan's Notes: A common warbler throughout most of Alaska. Seen in gardens and shrubby areas close to water. A prolific insect eater, gleaning caterpillars and other insects from tree leaves. Male sings a string of notes that sound like “sweet, sweet, sweet, I’m-so-sweet!” Begins to migrate south in August. Returns in late April. Males arrive in spring before females to claim territories. Migrates at night in mixed flocks of warblers. Rests and feeds during the day.

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About the Author

Naturalist Stan Tekiela is an award-winning wildlife photographer and the author of many popular state-specific field guides. He has written educational books about wildlife, including children's books, quick guides, and more, presenting birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, trees, wildflowers, and cacti.

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ISBN 978-1-64755-366-1



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