



National Park Service

## Arctic Birds of Concern



USFWS

Citizen Science Program

Gates of the Arctic  
National Park and Preserve



Bird Identification Guide

Biologists study birds and their habitats all over the world. These studies allow biologists to identify species of concern.

Birds can be listed as species of concern because of:

- population declines;
- low population numbers;
- loss of significant breeding or wintering habitat due to climate change, development, or natural disasters; or
- because of a lack of general biological information about the species.

Species of concern are studied and where necessary management plans are made to protect the populations.



# Index

---

## DUCKS

- Harlequin Duck .....p. 4-5
- Long-tailed Duck .....p. 6-7

## LOONS

- Yellow-billed Loon .....p. 8-9

## OWLS

- Short-eared Owl .....p. 10-11

## SONGBIRDS

- Bluethroat .....p. 12-13
- Golden-crowned Sparrow .....p. 14-15
- Gray-cheeked Thrush .....p. 16-17
- Northern Shrike .....p. 18-19
- Northern Wheatear .....p. 20-21
- Rusty Blackbird .....p. 22-23
- Smith's Longspur .....p. 24-25
- Yellow Wagtail .....p. 26-27

## RESOURCES

- Point Count Location Mapping .....p. 28
- Point Count Data Table .....p. 29
- Habitat Types .....p. 30-31
- Sources .....p. 32

# Harlequin Duck

---



Look for: A small duck 13 to 18 inches long. Males are slate blue with a very distinctive colorful feather pattern. Females are brown and have three white dots on each side of their head. They have a short dark slate blue bill and a steep forehead.

You could mistake it for a female bufflehead who has a long white head mark and smaller bill.

How they act: They fly low and fast over water following the river bends. When they are not breeding they are often found in flocks.

They eat: insects, fish and marine invertebrates

Look here: These ducks nest near fast flowing cold streams on the shore in dense vegetation. They are found throughout Alaska. They spend the winter on the ocean often where the waves break.

Habitat: Fast Rivers; Ocean



## Long-tailed Duck



Look for: A medium sized duck 16 to 22 inches long. During breeding season the males have a large white mask and a tail of long thin black feathers. Half of the male's bill is black, the rest is pink. Females have a grayish white eye ring with a brown cheek inside it. Their bill is all black. They both have white sides but males have a dark brown chest that contrasts with the white.

How they act: They make a lot of noise when they are in flocks.

They eat: insects, crustaceans, fish, fish eggs and plants.

Look here: Long-tailed Ducks nest on the ocean shore and along tundra lakes. They build their nests on the ground in covered areas sometimes under shrubs.

Habitat: Tundra Lakes; Ocean



# Yellow-billed Loon



Look for: A large bulky diving bird up to 35 inches long. When swimming, most of it's body is underwater. Breeding males have a black head, and black and white markings on the neck and body. Females, juveniles and non-breeding males are a lot paler. All of them have a yellow slightly upturned bill.

You could confuse it with the Common Loon but the Common Loon does not have a yellow bill.

How they act: When floating on the water they point their bill slightly upward. If threatened, they dive for safety rather than fly. Loons can stay underwater for over a minute and dive as deep as 240 feet.

They eat: small fish, aquatic plants, insects, and frogs that they dive for.

Look here: The Yellow-billed Loon is usually found in western Alaska near the ocean. It likes deep and large tundra lakes. Unless it is nesting on tundra islands or along the shore it will be on the lake. Yellow-billed loons build mounds of rotting vegetation for a nest.

Habitat: Tundra Lakes; Ocean



**Tundra Lakes**



**Ocean**

## Short-eared Owl

---

Did you know? Short eared owls are found on many islands and every continent but Antarctica and Australia.



Look for: A 15 inch owl with a light colored chest and dark brown vertical marks, and dark wings with light colored markings. Their light facial disk has dark eye rings. When it is flying you can see black wrist marks.

You could confuse it with a Northern Harrier but Harriers have a white rump easily seen during flight.

How they act: These owls hunt over open areas during the day. They fly with erratic wing beats and clap their wings while flying during breeding displays. They roost on low branches.

They eat: small rodents mostly but will also eat birds and insects.

Look here: They like open tundra and marshes where they find their prey. They nest on the ground.

Habitat: Open Tundra; Marsh



**Open Tundra**



**Marshes**

# Bluethroat

---



Did you know? Sometimes these birds imitate other bird calls.

Look for: A 5 ½ inch brownish gray bird with a white eye stripe and black bill. Breeding males have a blue throat with a rust colored patch in the center, followed by a dark chest stripe. Females have much less blue. Females and non-breeding birds have a dark chest stripe. Males and females have rust colored tail sides and a dark stripe on the end easily seen during flight.

How they act: These birds are usually quiet and hard to see. Generally they run on the ground with their tail cocked up. During breeding season the male will sit on top of branches singing loudly and put on flight shows.

They eat: insects caught in flight or found in leaf litter on the ground.

Look here: Bluethroats hang out in arctic shrub thickets near water. Shrubs provide food and cover. They build cup shaped nests under a shrub or in a clump of grass.

Habitat: Shrub Thickets Near Water



**Shrub Thickets/ Water**

## Golden-crowned Sparrow

---



Did you know? Male and Female Golden-crowned Sparrows look alike.

Look for: A 7 inch brown bird with darker brown stripes on its back and wings. Adults have a golden crown lined by bold black stripes. Their upper bill is dark and their lower bill is lighter.

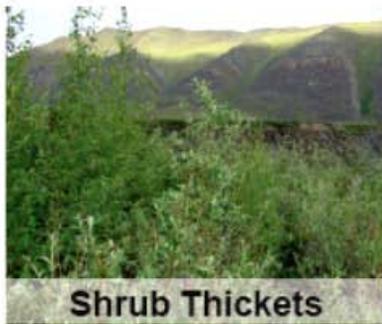
You could confuse it with a White-crowned Sparrow but they do not have a yellow crown and their bill is a lighter color.

How they act: Like many sparrows, they are easily seen and heard and are bold and powerful singers.

They eat: insects, seeds, flowers, and berries they look for on the ground.

Look here: They hang out in willow and alder shrub thickets but they nest on the ground.

Habitat: Shrub Thickets (willow and alder)



## Gray-cheeked Thrush

---



Did you know? The Gray-cheeked Thrush spends the winter in South America.

Look for: A 7 1/2 inch bird with a gray cheek patch. It also has a faint and incomplete eye ring, dark spots on a pale breast, and brownish gray flanks and tail.

You could confuse it with: The Swainson's Thrush is browner and has an obvious tan eye ring, or the Hermit thrush which has a reddish tail and some reddish feathers on its wings.

They eat: insects foraged on the ground and berries in the fall.

How they act: You can see them running on the ground foraging for food, but they can be hard to see and hide from threats.

Look here: They live in moist coniferous and mixed woodlands, open tundra and riparian thickets. They build cup-shaped nests in low shrubs and in root masses at the base of trees using grasses, sedges, bark, weeds, stems, twigs, and mosses.

Habitat: Open Boreal Forest; Mixed Forest; Open Tundra; Shrubs by Water



**Open Boreal Forest**



**Mixed Forest**



**Open Tundra**



**Shrub Thickets/ Water**

## Northern Shrike

---



Did you know? Shrikes are sometimes called "butcher birds" because they impale their prey on their beaks, sharp sticks, and thorns.

Look for: A 10 inch bird with a large head; with a large, heavy, hooked bill; and a dark eye mask. They are pale gray above with a white rump and belly, and dark tail. The wings are dark with a white patch. Juveniles are lighter and have a brownish tint.

You could confuse it with a Northern Wheatear but they have a more distinct white eyebrow above the black mask and do not have a hooked beak.

How they act: They often perch in high places bobbing their tail up and down while they look for prey.

They eat: rodents, snakes, small birds, and insects.

Look here: They like open boreal forest, tundra shrub thickets, and woodland margins near fresh water and saltwater marshes.

Habitat: Open Boreal Forest, Tundra Shrubs, Shrub Thickets, Mixed Woodlands; Marshes (next to water)



**Open Boreal Forest**



**Tundra Shrubs**



**Shrub Thickets**



**Mixed Forest**

## Northern Wheatear



Did you know? They have a habit of silently watching you from a boulder or rocky outcrop so keep your eyes open!

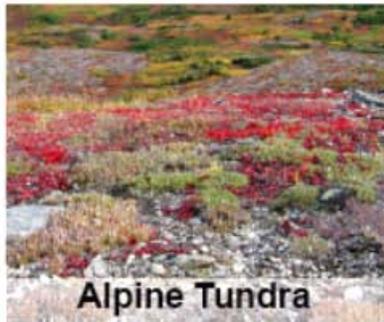
Look for: This 6 inch bird has a clear gray crown and back. Males have a black eye and cheek mask with a white stripe above. They have black wings, a white rump and white tail with a black band on the end. Females are tanner in color and have a brown eye stripe rather than a mask.

How they act: These birds move around a lot and bob their tails up and down.

They eat: insects found on the ground or taken in flight, seeds and berries.

Look here: They spend summers in open tundra or on rocky mountain slopes. They nest in crevices or under rocks.

Habitat: Tundra (alpine); Rocky Slopes



**Alpine Tundra**



**Rocky Slopes**

## Rusty Blackbird

---



Look for: a slender black bird 12 to 14 inches long including its long tail. A breeding male is a glossy black with yellow eyes. Breeding females are dark gray. Non-breeding birds have rusty feather edges and a tan eyebrow stripe.

You could confuse it with a brewer's blackbird but brewers' eyes are whiter and they have a purple glint on their head.

How they act: After raising its brood, this bird may be seen at garbage dumps.

They eat: anything edible on the ground: insects, spiders, berries, seeds, snails, fruits, etc.

Look here: Rusty Blackbirds live in wet woodlands and marshes. They nest in trees or shrubs near bogs and water.

Habitat: Mixed Forest, Marshes, Shrubs by Water



## Smith's Longspur

---



Did you know? When they first arrive in Alaska, these birds are very active and social. Once they nest they are quiet and harder to find.

Look for: A 6 inch brown streaked bird with a stout beige bill, and long pointed wings. The two outermost feathers of the long pointed dark tail are white. Breeding males have an orange belly and distinctive black cap with white eyebrows and white cheek patches. Females and non-breeding males are duller with less contrast on the face and head.

You could confuse it with the Lapland Longspur who has a different head pattern for both males and females.

How they act: Smith's Longspurs sing only from the ground or a perch and not while flying in the air.

They eat: seeds of grasses, sedges, and forbs, as well as insects they find on the ground

Look here: In Alaska, Smith's Longspurs build nests in shallow depressions in open arctic tundra and damp, tussock meadows. They stay in open areas.

Habitat: Open Tundra



## Yellow Wagtail

---



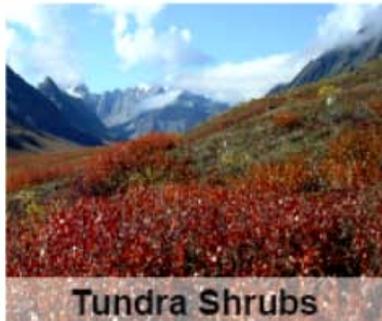
Look for: A 6 inch olive green bird with a white eye stripe, dark cheeks, and a yellow belly. They have a long dark tail with white edges.

How they act: When perched on a willow stem or on the ground these birds wag their tails up and down.

They eat: insects foraged on the ground

Look here: They breed in the Arctic in the summer. They like to be in willows and other shrubs. They nest on the ground under grass.

Habitat: Tundra Shrubs; Shrub Thickets



**Tundra Shrubs**



**Shrub Thickets**

# Habitat Types

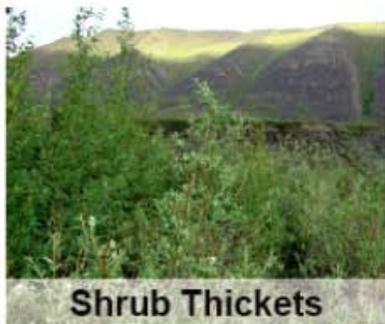
---



Tundra Lakes



Open Tundra



Shrub Thickets



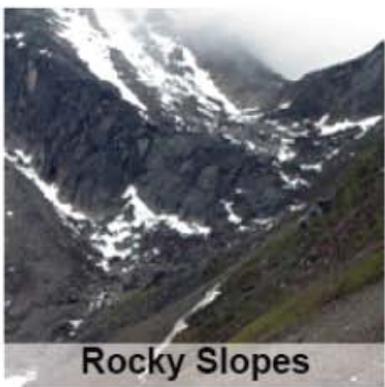
Shrub Thickets/ Water



Rivers



Fast Rivers



Rocky Slopes





**Open Boreal Forest**



**Mixed Forest**



**Ocean Shore**



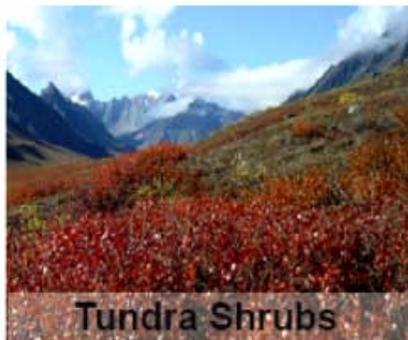
**Ocean**



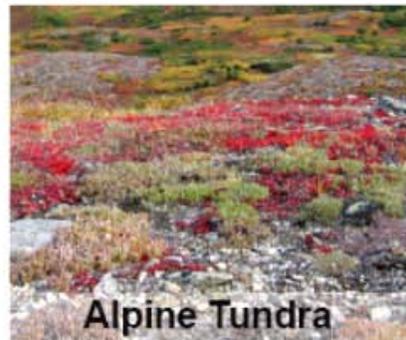
**Forest Edge**



**Marshes**



**Tundra Shrubs**



**Alpine Tundra**

Sources:

National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of  
North America, 4th edition

Guide to the Birds of Alaska

The Sibley Guide to Birds

The Complete Encyclopedia of Birds and Bird  
Migration

Kaufman Focus Guides: Birds of North America

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game Wildlife  
Notebook

The Folklore of Birds, Laura C. Martin

Sea Duck Joint Venture

*Photos in this guide provided courtesy of:*

*US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)*

*National Park Service (NPS)*

*US Geological Survey (USGS)*

*Arctic Research Consortium of the US (ARCUS)*

*Jake & Kristin Timm*

*Ken Wright*

*Wikipedia Commons*

# Data Collection Sheet

---

Name:

Address:

Phone Number:

E-mail address:

Species	Date	General Location	Latitude / Longitude

Species	Date	General Location	Latitude / Longitude

Please send this data collection sheet to:

Species of Concern Visitor Bird Survey  
Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve  
4175 Geist Rd, Fairbanks AK 99709