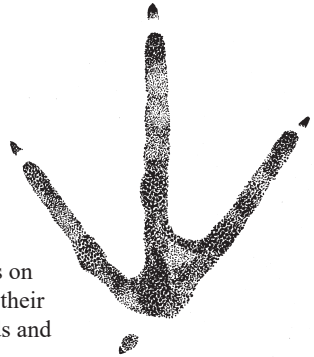
Discoveries

News & views from Discovery Southeast — *Spring 1999*

PS 2020: In the late 1990s, part of my Discovery income came through EPA grants funding the Water Watch program. DSE committed to 2 newsletters on water-&-watershed themes: this one, and the *Wolfshed* feature, *Winter, 1999.*



Birds and wet places

Richard Carstensen

. . .united by the voice of a single flight,
by the unity of fire,
by blood,
by thirst, by hunger,
by the cold,
by the precarious day that wept
before being swallowed by night,
by the erotic urgency of life:
the unity of birds
flew
toward the toothless black coasts. . .
Pablo Neruda, Migration

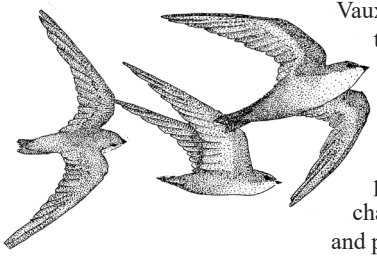
Standing in the marsh, ears clutch eagerly at a far-off bubbling rattle that slowly swells to victorious trumpeting. The music of cranes gets sweeter each year, as memories layer, one upon another.

Celebrating return of loved birds is an ancient practice, all the more poignant as their numbers diminish, and as science illuminates the genuine miracle of their journey. Festivals greet the migrants in Ketchikan, Wrangell, and Cordova. Discovery naturalists trade observations at staff meetings, and listen to kids' descriptions of strange new bird sounds. International Migratory Bird Day is on May 8th this year, a time when communities throughout the Americas share their devotion to the world's great travellers. The theme of IMBD for 1999 is birds and wetlands.

Wet, open places shut down pretty firmly to feathered things in the Alaskan winter, and it's no surprise that nearly all of our wetland birds are migratory, a few to as far away as Pablo Neruda's Chile. Let's examine the impressive diversity of Southeast's migratory bird life, and 8 of the wetland types that support them.

Ponds ● Vaux's swift

Swifts are the fastest of small birds. Their sickle wings are even longer and narrower than those of swallows. Swift feet look almost mammalian, with all four toes pointing forward, used only for wall-clinging.



Vaux's are western relatives of the chimney swift. They nest in hollow trees and sometimes chimneys, usually near water. Small twigs, broken off in flight (!), are glued to the inner tree wall with saliva. Nest trees are usually near rivers, lakes or ponds, where swifts chase aerial insects, and pluck the struggling

In this issue

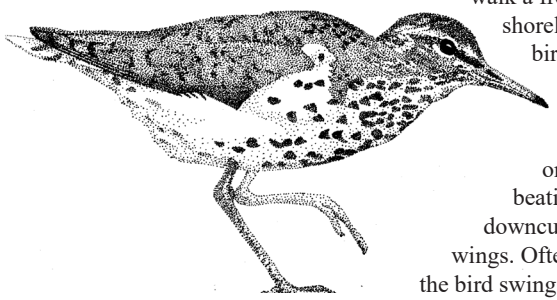
Banner: Sandhill Crane track, ~4". (Heron has long rear toe.)

hatch from the water surface.

On August 28, 1977, thousands of Vaux's swifts in a flock 3 kilometers wide passed over Comox, British Columbia, bound for Mexico and Central America.

River banks & rocky beaches • spotted sandpiper

Spotted sandpipers can be recognised at a glance by their flight style and evasion tactics, even when too far away to detect other field marks. As you walk a fresh or saltwater shoreline, a small shorebird crying *weet-weet-weet-weet* launches out low over the water ahead of you on stiffly beating downcurved wings. Often the bird swings in a semicircle and returns to shore behind you. On landing, it '*teeters*' like waterthrushes and dippers and other birds of the water's edge.



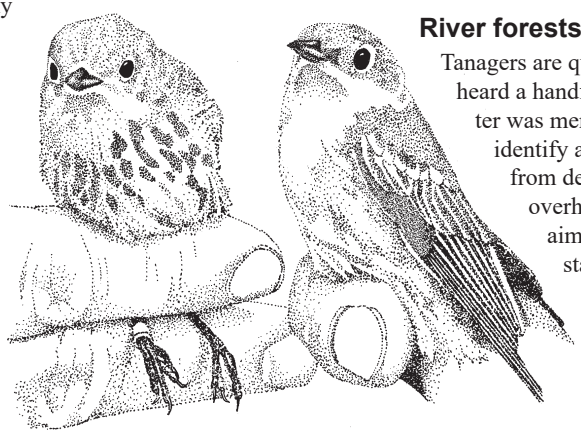
Eggs are laid in open gravel/cobble bars with scattered vegetation. I drew this breeding plumage bird from a Bob Armstrong photo.

Streamside thickets • Yellow Warbler

Bird banders can identify yellow warblers by feel alone. When they reach into the cloth holding bag and a fiesty little bird snaps its sharp bill and attacks, it's probably a Yellow Warbler.

Like the warbling vireo and American redstart, these warblers are mostly found in valleys of big mainland rivers, where they nest in tall streamside willows. Unlike the common yellowthroat, they're uncommon on islands of our southeastern Archipelago except in migration.

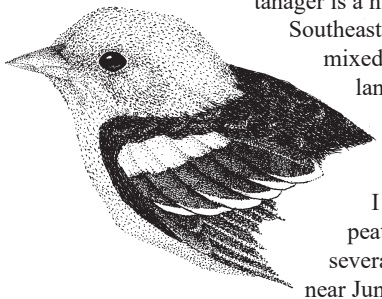
Male on left, female on right.



River forests • western tanager

Tanagers are quite rare around Juneau. I've only heard a handful, and seen just one. The encounter was memorable though. I was trying to identify an odd robin-like song coming from dense red alder foliage about 20 feet overhead along Montana Creek. Peering aimlessly through binoculars, I was startled to see an extremely red face peering back. Since we lack cardinals in Alaska, the tanager must surely be the brightest red of any of our songbirds.

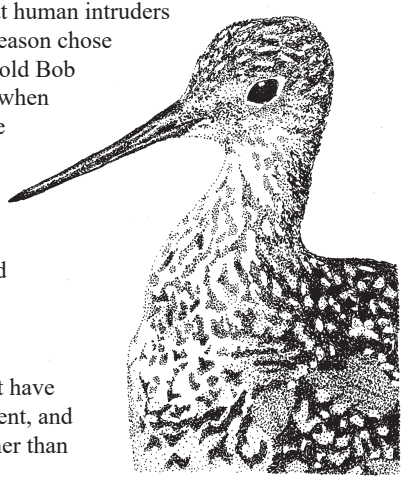
In much of the West this



tanager is a high montane forest bird, but in Southeast Alaska it's mostly restricted to mixed coniferous/deciduous woodland along big rivers.

Bogs • greater yellowlegs

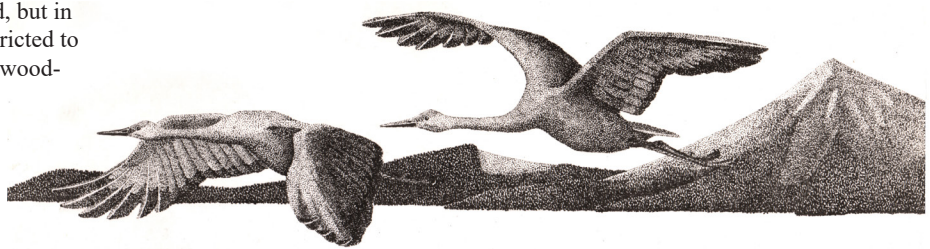
I was once taking a peat core sample with several palynologists in a sphagnum bog near Juneau's rifle range. We'd been working for 20 minutes before I noticed that a female yellowlegs was quietly sitting on her eggs only 10 feet away! Normally the "*tattletale*" (its nickname in market hunting days) yells nonstop at human intruders near the nest, but this one for some reason chose to rely on her camouflage instead. I told Bob Armstrong about her, and he visited when her chicks hatched, taking the picture from which I made this drawing.



Bogs have little food to offer a large shorebird like the yellowlegs, and many parents probably commute to more productive wetland types to forage.

Fens • sandhill crane

Fens superficially resemble bogs, but have stronger lateral groundwater movement, and are usually dominated by sedges rather than



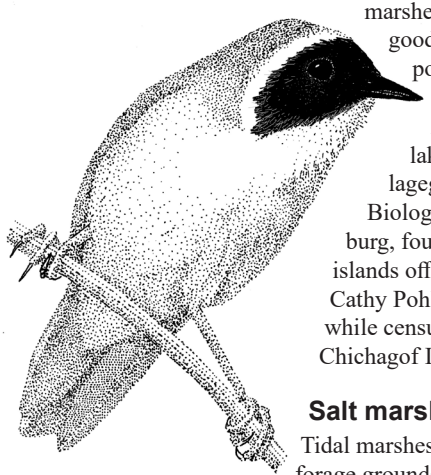
sphagnum mosses. Compared to bogs, fens not only grow more nutritious forage plants; they also support more insects. The Dude Creek Flats on the Gustavus Forelands are "poor fens," not so lush as some, but a famous migratory resting place for sandhill cranes. Although the omnivorous cranes consume lowbush blueberries at Dude Creek, the primary attraction is open vistas where predators can be seen approaching. Brush is invading these fens, which will reduce their appeal in coming decades.

In late April, 1996, camped at the mouth of Alsek River on the outer coast, Steve Merli, Hank Lentfer and I watched endless circling flocks of cranes—several hundred each—coming out of Desolation Valley and bearing northwest for the fens of Yakutat Forelands.

These sandhills comprised a sizable portion of the roughly 20,000 cranes that pass through Southeast and the Copper River Delta, *en route* to nesting grounds in Southcentral Alaska. Much larger numbers summer on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Living at Juneau's Eagle Beach I would usually only see a few flocks each spring and fall.

Marshes • common yellowthroat

Distribution of these very widespread North American marsh breeders is not well documented within Southeast Alaska. But they're found in fresh water



marshes on both islands and mainland. A good place to search in the CBJ is kettle ponds rimmed by tall emergent vegetation in Mendenhall Recreation Area. I've also seen them in brushy lake-fringe sedge marsh on Revillagegido Island on the southern Tongass. Biologist Peter Walsh, formerly of Petersburg, found them widely distributed on big islands off the mouth of Stikine River. And Cathy Pohl has heard them in beaver marshes while censusing breeding birds on northern Chichagof Island.

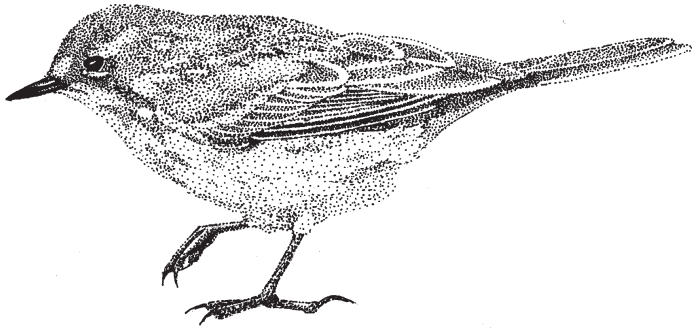
Salt marsh • American pipit

Tidal marshes serve only as way stations and forage grounds for birds, because any female foolish enough to lay eggs there would soon find them covered in salt water. But in migration, salt marshes vibrate with twitters of shorebirds and whistles of teal. Songbirds like American pipits, bound for nests on mountain tundra, swarm over winter's yellowed grasses, plucking shorebugs and crustaceans. Pipits will wade into shallow water like shorebirds.

British Columbia studies show three times as many fall migrants as in spring, which suggests heavy losses on the wintering grounds or in passage.

The global backyard • learning about migration

Discovery naturalists will be out there this spring with Juneau's kids, training spotscopes on the marshes, or sitting under trees making birdsong maps. At Discovery, we focus on the close-at-hand, whether it's a bird or a mink track or



a caddisfly case. Especially with young children, we forego the abstract and far away for the tangible pieces of our coastal home.

But in that magical period from mid-April to mid-May, when almost every day a new bird species appears, there's no hiding from the world's enormity. These birds come from distances kids can hardly conceive of—and here's where computer technology can complement Discovery's hands-on teaching.

As teachers and parents and older friends, you can help kids explore the wealth of information about migratory birds now available on the internet. Some great birding websites are listed below. Best thing about them is they inspire you to go back outside and *find more birds!*

Here's to the wet places of California and Nayarit and Oaxaca, for sheltering our birds again through the winter of 1998-99!

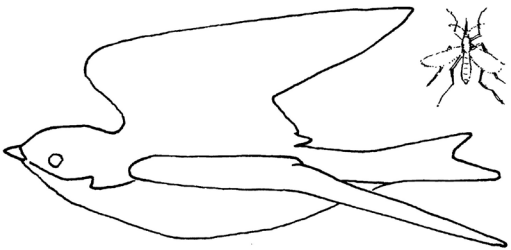
eBird: *https://ebird.org/home*
iNaturalist: *https://www.inaturalist.org/*
Shorebird Sister Schools: *https://www.fws.gov/sssp/*
Juneau Audubon: *http://www.juneau-audubon-society.org/*

***PS**: All links still active as of 2020.*

Coloring page *migratory birds of Alaska's wet meadows*

Richard Carstensen

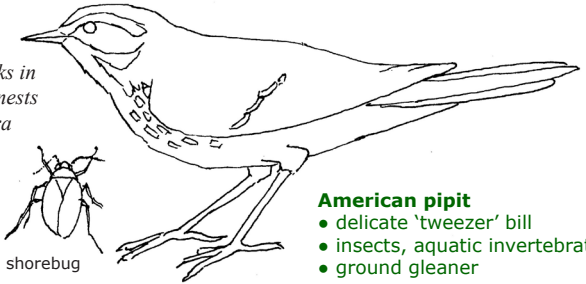
In spring, the salt marshes and beach meadows bustle with insects and voles. Only a few ground-nesting sparrows actually raise their familes in the grassy meadows. Most birds use the open coastal flats as 'refuelling stations' on their long trip north. Color these birds, using a field guide for reference.



mosquito

tree swallow
- short but wide 'catchers mitt' bill
- eats flies, mosquitos, bugs, moths, beetles
- aerial forager, occasional foliage gleaner

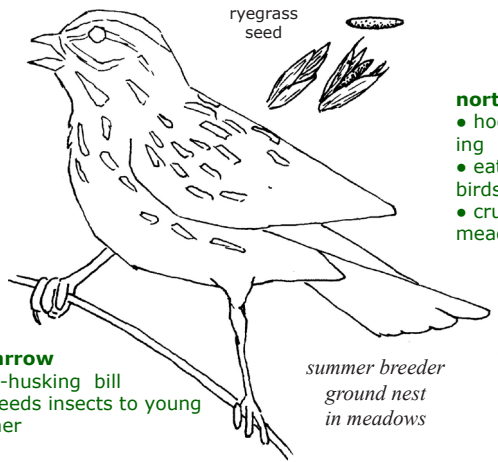
summer forager
tree cavity nester



spring & fall flocks in beach meadows; nests in alpine tundra

shorebug

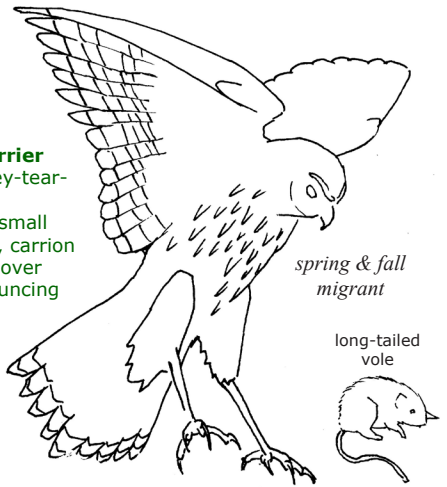
American pipit
- delicate 'tweezer' bill
- insects, aquatic invertebrates
- ground gleaner



ryegrass seed

savannah sparrow
- conical, seed-husking bill
- eats seeds, feeds insects to young
- ground gleaner

summer breeder
ground nest
in meadows



northern harrier
- hooked, prey-tearing bill
- eats voles, small birds, insects, carrion
- cruises low over meadows, pouncing

spring & fall migrant

long-tailed vole

Lemon wetlands in 3D, 1962

Old air photos are a great way to examine changes caused by natural succession or human development. In this north-left stereopair, the left-side image has been overlaid with some highlights of the subsequent half century's human alterations.

In 1962, Lemon Creek wetlands were roughly 30 inches lower than today. High tides then reached well above Glacier Highway along Switzer Creek. Naturally rebounding land, along with expressway construction and wetland filling, has since removed all but the lower right corner of this view from daily tidal influence. Today, only a 10-acre parkland east Dzantik'i Heeni Middle School (DZ, yellow box) remains undeveloped.

Tallest trees in 1962 grew on the triangular alluvial fan that became Switzer Village. Some spruces may have exceeded 200 feet tall. But largest trees grow on best-drained soils, also desirable for development. Debris was scraped into the salt marsh, becoming the Wallmart pad. Switzer Creek was rerouted southward, and gravel was mined from dredge ponds.

Viewing 3D To 'free-view,' hold the page a foot away. Looking over the top, focus your eyes on a far wall. Then drift them down onto the photos, and try to make the double images converge . . . Didn't work? Well, you will soon have your very own hi-tech plastic 3D viewing device! Details are coming in a member-ship letter.