

## Name that tune—the Kenai Peninsula’s songbirds are back for the summer

by Liz Jozwiak

A central theme each June to our Refuge Notebook series is an article about the spring arrival of birds to the Kenai Peninsula.

Most songbirds such as the warblers, juncos, thrushes and sparrows arrive on the Kenai Peninsula to breed by early June. Flycatchers and peewees arrive a few weeks later. These songbirds are also known as “neo-tropical migrants” because they winter far south in the neotropics of Central and South America and migrate to Alaska in the spring to breed.

This is also the time of year that I get ready to “bird by ear” and conduct forest bird surveys on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge with Chet Vincent, an expert birder and volunteer with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Each spring we survey two routes of the North American Breeding Bird Surveys (BBS); one in the Swanson River and the other in the Skilak Lake and Mystery Creek area.

The data that Chet and I collect along with the other 4,100 BBS routes surveyed in North America help biologists estimate continental and regional changes in bird populations.

We identify most of the birds in our surveys by their songs. In most habitats, the vast majority of birds are simply not visible, and listening to songs and calls is the only way to sample these habitats. You may have heard a bird singing in your back yard and wondered what it was. It is great fun and a rewarding challenge to identify birds by their vocalizations, as well as by their appearance and behavior.

There are many Web sites on the Internet dedicated to helping individuals learn bird songs in their area. One excellent site that you can download bird song recordings (as .wav files) is at

[www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs](http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs). You can also purchase the excellent two-CD set *Bird Songs of Alaska*, published by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

I started learning bird calls by trying to identify something unique about the song of each bird. For instance, the song of the black-capped chickadee sounds like “chick-a-dee, chick-a-dee-dee-dee.”

The varied thrush sounds like one long metallic low note, which reminds me of the ringing of a European telephone. The song of an olive-sided flycatcher sounds like it’s saying “Quick, three beers.”

My most favorite bird song is that of the hermit thrush, which I hear along the upper elevation hill-sides along Skilak Loop Road. The song of the hermit thrush sounds like a melodic flute which always ends on a high note. You can make up mnemonics like these on the spot to keep bird songs in your memory until you can use an audio guide for a positive identification.

*Elizabeth Jozwiak is a wildlife biologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She just returned from a wintertime assignment with the Disease Investigation Branch of the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, WI. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.*