

Birding hotline established for the central Kenai Peninsula

by Todd Eskelin

Bird watchers on the Kenai Peninsula will be happy to learn the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is sponsoring a birding hotline for the central peninsula area. The number for the hotline is (907) 262-2300. For people who are not avid birders, some of the focus and excitement of spotting a new bird may seem down right bizarre. For the rest of us it is exciting to now have another tool available to help us find new birds in our area.

Here is how a birding hotline works: When you call the hotline, there will be a message notifying callers of any recent rare or unusual bird sightings. For more unique species, there will be directions to the last known location and the hotline will be updated daily. During slow periods, when there are not a lot of new birds around, the hotline might be updated every week. Regardless of the season, the success of the birding hotline is dependent on birdwatchers reporting their sightings. At the end of the message you will be prompted to leave your bird sighting, date, time, location, and a phone number.

Some readers may think the hotline is only for elite birders, but this really isn't the case. From my experiences with birding hotlines, novice birders initiate the majority of the best sightings. Often the reports describe a bird that just doesn't fit any of the pictures in the bird book. From these reports, more experienced birders are able to track down the bird and help the beginners with the identification. Sometimes this produces an outstanding rare bird sighting.

A perfect example of this was the occurrence of a rare woodpecker in the Talkeetna area in 2002. Myrtle and Steve Heinrich saw a pair of woodpeckers at their feeder and initially thought they were Hairy Woodpeckers. The male appeared to be injured as it had a bright red patch on the underside. After watching the pair, they realized the red patch was not an injury and called the birding hotline to report this strange woodpecker that did not appear in any of their bird guides. Experts from Anchorage visited their house and confirmed the bird was a Great Spotted Woodpecker, which is a resident of Russia as far east as the Kamchatka Peninsula. Previously, there had only been eight other sightings of this species in North America and they were all in the far western Aleutians and St.

George Island.

When Myrtle placed that call, she had no idea that this would trigger a nationwide response with people flying up from at least 15 different states to catch a glimpse of the rare woodpeckers. Obviously, this is not the normal response one would expect from every unknown bird that is reported to the hotline, but it brings home a key point regarding the possible economic gain of bird watching to communities in our great state.

A network of serious birders exists, connected to the Internet, with a handful of frequent flier tickets in their pockets. While there are a lot of people who just come to the Kenai for fishing, many would also like to get out and see some new birds while they are in the area.

Bird watching is the second fastest growing hobby in North America. A 1991 national study estimated that 27.7 million people participated in some level of bird watching and spent \$14.4 billion while doing so. It is also interesting to note that 36% of Alaskan residents participate in some level of bird watching. This ranks Alaska #4 in the nation for percentage of resident bird watchers.

I consider bird watching one of Alaska's great untapped renewable resources. The possible economic benefits to the community from people visiting our area are staggering. We just need to get the word out that we have great birding opportunities here on the Kenai.

So, this spring when you are out watching birds and you spot an unusual or rare bird that you think someone else may want to see, make sure you report your sighting to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Birding Hotline (907) 262-2300. If you are taking the relatives down to the Kenai Flats to watch the spring waterfowl migration, call the hotline and see if any unusual birds have been spotted. Your participation will make our new birding hotline an effective tool for birding enthusiasts on the Kenai.

Todd Eskelin is a Biological Technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in birds and has conducted research on songbirds in many areas of the state. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.