

Birds changing with the environment

by Todd Eskelin

With frost nipping at my fingertips, I clutched my trusty drake Mallard call and gave a couple of inquisitive honks. No response, and for that matter I have not seen a duck fly in the three hours I have been sitting in this wet, muddy blind. I can see it in the eyes of my golden retriever, “where the heck are all the birds?” As many of the regular duck hunters will profess, the locals are gone and the “Northerns” have not arrived yet. That may or may not be the case. Plastered across the news we constantly hear about the effects of global climate change. Rising oceans, melting sea ice, changing habitat, receding glaciers, the list goes on and on with the predictions our future environment holds for us.

What we don’t hear is how these major shifts will affect some of the smaller life forms that we take for granted. How will the ducks and geese do with a changing environment? Or how will these changes affect the migrant songbirds that are coming from northern Peru to spend their breeding season in Alaska? These are likely questions we won’t be able to answer until the changes have already happened. What we can do is try and track these changes in the beginning and maybe that will allow managers to prioritize or manage for changes that will be coming down the pike. Confused? Me too.

Here is a scenario. Let’s say it is predicted that sea level is going to rise by several feet over the next 50 years. I am a manager in charge of a large saltwater marsh complex that is home to dozens of species of dabbling ducks. The elevation of my marsh is only eight inches above sea level and the entire area would likely be underwater in my lifetime. My gut human reaction would be to fix it, build dikes, build them higher, and control the water coming in. But if you think about it, our manipulation of habitats has likely contributed to the climate problems we are experiencing now. So rather than make more changes and more potential mistakes, another approach would be to react to the changes. Knowing my marsh will likely flood, I should roll with the punches and manage it for diving ducks rather than dabblers. This would avoid a catastrophic situation like New Orleans from happening to all my nesting puddle ducks and wading birds.

Back to Earth, or more specifically to the Kenai Peninsula, we have been tracking the arrival dates of all the bird species that reside or even pass through our area. We use reports from the Central Peninsula Bird Hotline (262-2300), from eBird (www.eBird.org), and from the birders that work at the refuge. We combed the past literature for the earliest arrival and latest departure date for every species we could find. This year we actually set records for the earliest arrival date for 29 different species.

That seems like a lot of different species that all arrived earlier than normal. There does not seem to be any pattern to the species that came early. Ducks, songbirds, gulls, shorebirds, and raptors all had members that came to the Kenai early. Migrant species from Ecuador, like the Semipalmated Sandpiper, and short distance migrants like the Ruby-crowned Kinglet wintering in Washington found their way to the Peninsula ahead of schedule. Following these species on an earlier journey were predators like the Peregrine Falcon I spotted chasing ducks at the Kenai Flats on April 14th.

What does it all mean? Well, the jury is still out on that one, but one thing is certain. Without keeping detailed records we would never know that the Snow Geese are a week earlier than usual, or that White-fronted Geese are coming through the area in unprecedented numbers. I encourage everyone to report even common birds to the Bird Hotline if you think they are out of the normal time period you usually see them. Or even more fun is to enter your bird sightings in eBird. It is fun, free, and some bird nerd like me is sitting at a computer somewhere crunching the numbers and looking for irregularities in the movement patterns of Mallards. Who knows, that flock you saw at Skilak Lake in February may be the missing piece of the puzzle predicting that a huge wintering flock of ducks will be a regular event on the Kenai.

The other thing I know is that after sitting in this duck blind for four hours, with nary a duck flying by, I am going to have to find another way to fill the freezer or I will starve to death. At least next year when I am sitting here freezing my toes off, I will be able to look back at the dog and say, “this is normal” remember last

year when we did this on Oct. 1st and saw no ducks?

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