

## Mockers on the move

by Todd Eskelin

The mouth of the Kasilof River has been a focal point for many activities this summer including personal use dipnetting, commercial fishing, ATV and horseback riding on the beach. Even the destructive hoodlums find pleasure at the flats driving trucks and ATVs or 4-wheelers over the dunes and destroying the fragile habitat.

On August 29<sup>th</sup> the activity of the day was birding. One of our local birders was out for a morning trip to the flats. The target was shorebirds and as the tide began to recede the shorebirds were streaming in to the newly exposed mud. It wasn't the Semipalmated Sandpipers on their way to Ecuador or the Bar-tailed Godwit embarking to New Zealand that caught the birder's attention on this morning.

It was a relatively drab grey and white bird with a long black tail that turned his head away from the mud flats. It was hanging out in the parking area on the north side flitting from spruce to spruce. Initially, it appeared to be one of the Northern Shrikes that often patrol that area, but there was that unmistakable long bill that didn't fit. A quick look through the binoculars confirmed what he thought he was seeing. There in the spruce tree was a Northern Mockingbird!

Don't let the name fool you. The normal breeding range of the "Mocker" is from roughly New York across the country to Nebraska and on to Nevada. They are really considered a bird that prefers a warmer climate than Alaska offers. In fact, there have only been about 10 or 12 records of this species in the state. Of those statewide sightings, mockers have ever been spotted on the Kenai Peninsula.

The bird is so widely distributed in the southern states that many a song has been written about the melodic song they produce. Texas loved them so much that they made the Northern Mockingbird their state bird in 1927. No offense intended, but you know the bird has to be special for Texas to adopt anything that has "Northern" in the name.

Unfortunately, the Kasilof bird did not entertain the birder with song, but this species has been documented to remember 25-30 different songs. If one viewed this ability to learn songs as a sign of intelligence, the mockingbird would be one of the geniuses of the bird world. One caveat is that these birds are mimickers. So, none of their material is original. Not only will they imitate other birds or animals they hear, but will also belt out the sound of car alarms or sirens.

So what is a mockingbird doing in Alaska? It is likely a result of reverse migration. This phenomenon happens when smaller birds are wired wrong and end up migrating 180 degrees from their intended target.

Another possibility is that within many bird species there is a small portion of the population which are pioneers. They often go to a new area and die because the conditions are not suitable for them to make a living. As the climate changes to something more favorable, these pioneers make it and become the seed population for the species in an entirely new area.

Whatever brought this new species to the Kenai Peninsula, one local birder was gracious to get a view of it. The brief appearance was quite disheartening to the rest of us who didn't even get a glimpse. Mockingbirds often like berry trees in the wintertime, so keep your eyes peeled for this bird to show up in mountain ash trees early this fall. I leave you with the following quote.

"Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy." The first caller to call the bird hotline and report the author of this Pulitzer Prize winning novel will receive a prize.

*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 Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*