

New bird species expand the Kenai Peninsula list

by Todd Eskelin



The Asiatic Barn Swallow looks like its American counterpart, but differs by having a complete breast band and a whiter belly. Photo Credit: Justin Adolph

Several weeks ago in the Refuge Notebook we highlighted the occurrence of a new bird species on the Kenai Peninsula. This was the brief sighting and photo of a Northern Mockingbird at the mouth of the Kasilof River. This was however not the only new species we added to the Kenai Peninsula bird checklist in 2008. There were actually 4 new species and one new subspecies that boosted the total number of bird species on the Peninsula to 277.

With the climate undergoing changes, we're likely to see new species showing up every year and, if you throw in the fact that bird watching is a very fast growing activity in the U.S., we are prime for reports of new species here on the Kenai Peninsula.

The first new species sighted for the year was a Spotted Towhee at Seaside Farm out East End Road from Homer. This is a very birdy spot and Mossy

Kilcher has done a wonderful job landscaping her property to be very enticing to birds. This site has been home to previous new records for the Kenai Peninsula, including an American Goldfinch in 2003. Unfortunately for the rest of us, the Spotted Towhee stuck around just long enough for Mossy to get a photo and was never resighted. Spotted Towhees range up and down the west coast and breed as far north as British Columbia, but are still listed as casual in Alaska with most if not all of the sightings coming from Southeast Alaska.

The next bird to show up was actually a subspecies and not a full-blown new species, but it was so interesting, I want to share it anyway. It was equally as impressive as any of the new species and was completely unexpected. I received a call from Justin Adolph, that he had a strange swallow hanging out at his house near Cabin Lake and he thought it was a barn swallow. His description fit, but he only had a poor picture that didn't really tell the whole story.

So, I went out and hunted for Justin's bird. I did manage to get one fleeting glance at the bird as it flew over my head and darted through the neighborhood, but all I could see was that it was definitely a barn swallow. I looked several more times and was never lucky enough to be there at the right time, but a few days later Justin captured a very nice photo of an Asiatic Barn Swallow paying tribute to the American flag on the front of the house.

After four or five days in the Cabin Lake area, the bird was not resighted again. It was well done by Justin to not only recognize it as a new species, but then to be quick enough with his camera to get identifiable shots. The Asiatic Barn Swallow differs from the American subspecies mainly by a complete breast band and a whiter belly. The Asian sub-species of barn swallow shows up occasionally in western Alaska and has been seen as far south and east in North America as Washington.

There was a little lull in good bird sightings and then along came a Western Kingbird that decided that the Seward Little League fields were a good place to hawk for insects. The Alaska Checklist indicates that this species is casual in Alaska, which means sight-

ings in the state are not annual, but we would expect continued sporadic sightings in years to come. This sighting was a bummer because there was a little snag in our alert system and none of the normal emails or phone calls were made to let people know about this bird for about three days.

On Monday a few people went to Seward and spotted the Western Kingbird right where it had been for several days. On Tuesday, when I showed up, the typical Seward wind had been howling all night long and the bird was nowhere in sight. Besides the wind, the fields were overrun with recreational dog walkers and kite fliers. Then the grounds crew came to mow the field and alas it was not meant to be, so we headed home empty handed.

A bit later in the summer the above-mentioned Mockingbird showed up but did not reveal itself any birders besides the photographer.

Then on September 15th a Short-tailed Albatross was spotted south of the Chiswell Islands. While this species is known to be in the Gulf of Alaska, it had yet to be documented in “Kenai Peninsula” waters. The arbitrary boundary we drew last year was very close to where the albatross was spotted. With the aid of a GPS and mapping software, I determined the albatross was inside the line by less than two miles.

The Short-tailed Albatross is considered somewhat of a success story. This bird was hunted to near ex-

inction by the late 1930s. By then, the only remaining breeding area was on the Japanese island of Tori Shima. After World War II it was believed that the species was extinct as no birds returned to breed on the island. Fortunately, some of the juvenile birds returned from several years at sea and tried to breed. In 1954, with approximately 50 individuals remaining on the island and attempting to breed, the first egg in years was hatched. As of 2003, the world population was believed to be around 1800 birds. It is not unprecedented to see them on a ferry trip from Homer to Dutch Harbor, but they prefer to fish along the continental shelf so a sighting within 25 miles of the Kenai Peninsula coast is very nice.

In a nutshell, it has been a pretty good year for birding despite the fowl weather this summer, pardon the pun. To top it off, we broke the earliest arrival or latest departure dates for 16 of the 277 native species of birds on the Kenai. If you would like to see the entire list or the early and late record dates, contact me at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge 262-7021.

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/>.