

## Local bird hotline leads to little treasures all year long

by Leah Eskelin



As our days shorten and the snow inevitably starts falling here on the Kenai Peninsula, it is hard to imagine standing quietly along the river bank or on one of the Refuge trails watching for a particular bird. It becomes easier and more interesting when you know that three other people have just seen this special little bird in the past week. Your search is a treasure hunt now, not just a hope for a chance encounter.

Using the Central Peninsula Birding Hotline, we all have the opportunity to hear about new and interesting bird sightings and share our own finds with everyone else. With a quick listen to today's message, for example, we can learn that there is an impressive number of waterfowl right now on the Peninsula, and that there has been a sighting of a relatively rare Great Gray Owl.

The sightings listed on the Hotline are not just for the birders trying to get their Kenai 200 (two hundred different species seen on the Peninsula), but for anyone who spends time on the Peninsula. You can bird from your car in the Safeway parking lot just as you can on a local trail. The species you see will be different, but I am already waiting for the waxwings' arrival this winter on the trees outside the CES fire station, and love seeing them just as much as the shorebirds down on the Kenai beach.

I have been birding on the Kenai for six years and

still have not seen many common species. (I would love to hear where you saw a Three-toed Woodpecker, or Varied Thrush.) However, I have seen an Ivory Gull at the Kenai Flats and made it to the Soldotna landfill in time to see the Iceland Gull a few years ago, too. As a relatively inexperienced birder, I know I have much to learn about field identification, and could not have picked out these two special birds in the bunch without help from other birders. So, I regularly check the hotline before I head out for the day just to be sure I don't miss a great bird. It always helps to know what to look for, so I can take a quick look at the bird book and get the bird's field cues into my head.

Likewise, when I see a cool bird, I just can't keep it to myself. Who do I call? Instead of making my way down the list of all the birders who just can't miss this birding opportunity, I call one number: the Central Peninsula Birding Hotline: 262-2300. Unlike some hotlines that only allow the caller to listen to a pre-recorded message; the Refuge recognizes that our community members often have the best information to share. So, in recognition of that fact, this hotline has been set up to be very interactive. It relies on your input! Where did you see that beautiful eagle? When did you spot that swan cygnet? Indeed, this hotline is only as successful as its users, and that means you, too.

Have you used the Hotline in the past? It has undergone some changes that might throw you for a loop, but listen carefully to the new list of options and you'll find the Hotline happily sharing the line with the Refuge's wildlife crossing study on the Sterling Highway. As the Hotline coordinator, I am now checking the messages weekly and updating the Hotline sightings at least bi-weekly starting this month.

Beyond the Hotline, our Central Peninsula community has opened its arms to birding. Have you checked out the new viewing platform just off of the City of Kenai port road? It provides a great view of the Kenai River mouth, where many gulls, eagles and shorebirds feed. A look into the marshy tidal flats reveals several species of waterfowl preparing for their upcoming migration.

Though winter may see a decrease in bird num-

bers here on the Kenai, it doesn't mean that they all migrate. My backyard birdfeeder is a favorite spot for chickadees, nuthatches and the occasional jay. My family enjoys watching these wintering birds flit between the suet and black oil sunflower seeds. My two-year-old daughter insists on running to the window when the larger birds arrive, and she is a pro at helping her dad refill the feeders when they get low on seed. In my opinion, the presence of birds at our window makes the long, cold winter much more enjoyable.

Now I mentioned a pretty special recent bird sighting at the beginning of this article. I know several of our most active birders probably dropped the paper, called the hotline for details and picked up their binoculars at that point ready to confirm the sighting, but

those of you who stuck with me may still be curious about that owl.

Where was the Great Gray Owl seen? Now you know what I'm going to tell you! The Hotline is here for us all to use, so call it now (907-262-2300) to find out about the first sighting, but call it again when you get home and leave me a message about what birds you saw while enjoying this beautiful land we call home.

*Leah Eskelin is a Visitor Services Park Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and the new Bird Hotline moderator. You can check on local birds or report your bird sighting on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Birding Hotline (907) 262-2300. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*