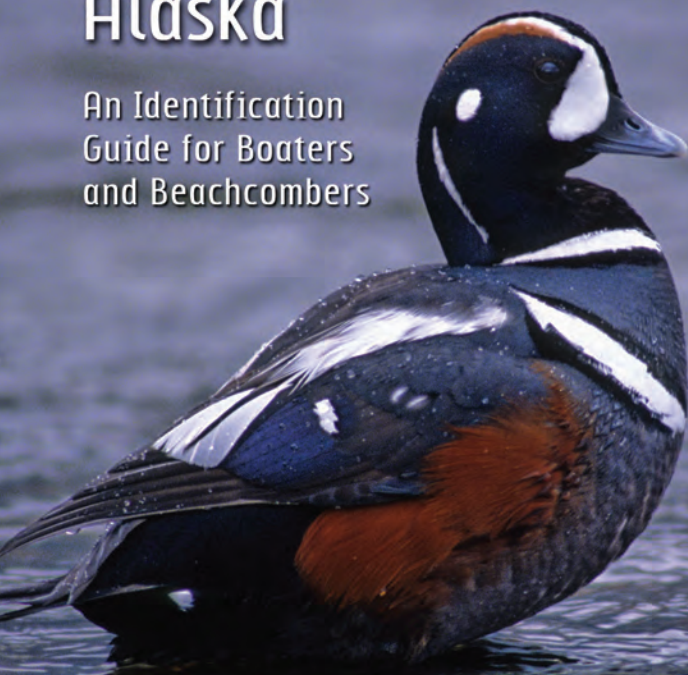


# Common Marine Birds of Southeast Alaska

An Identification  
Guide for Boaters  
and Beachcombers



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# What's that bird?



You're out on the water—the boat's tossing, sun's glinting off the waves—and that silhouette bobbing in the distance could be just about any kind of bird. But train a pair of binoculars on it and an array of field marks and unique behaviors come into view. Identifying marine birds can be challenging, but the tips in this guide can help by pointing out those tell-tale features.

Our illustrations include the birds most commonly seen (or seasonally abundant) on inside waters. Key features are highlighted and characteristic behaviors noted. There are always exceptions but, in most cases, general truisms should help identify the bird. For example, oystercatchers are usually seen on the beach, murrelets are frequently in pairs, scoters are normally found in big flocks known as rafts. First identify the kind of bird—is it a loon or a merganser—then you can narrow it down to the exact species.

Size and weight are useful for relative comparison. The familiar mallard weighs about two pounds

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and is about 23 inches long. That's about the same size as a merganser, and noticeably bigger than a bufflehead or a harlequin duck. Marbled murrelets are the smallest of the common resident seabirds. Cormorants and loons are the largest (disregarding gulls, which are pretty distinct relative to other seabirds). The familiar glaucous-winged gull is noticeably larger than a kittiwake or mew gull, and the relatively small size of a Bonaparte's gull is a good clue.

Generally, sea ducks are more common during spring migration and winter, as many nest farther north or inland in summer. A big flock of ducks in winter may include a mix of species, ages and sexes. That's a good chance to compare species and pick out the more distinctive males.

This guide identifies all birds by their common name and gives the bird's sex where plumages vary. With some birds, like loons, murrelets and gulls, the sexes are similar and plumages vary by season. With others, like the oystercatcher, the sexes are similar and plumage stays consistent year-round. All birds shown, with the exception of one gull, are adults. Illustrations are not to scale and colors may look different in the field based on light, location and the artist's interpretation.

# Harlequin Duck

**L** 17 in

**W** 1.5 lb

## FEMALE

Three white patches on head; dark brownish-gray overall

## MALE

Bold, varied colors



Harlequin Duck

## Identifying Traits

- Swift flight with abrupt turns
- Often seen bobbing near shore or on rocks at waterline
- Colorful male may appear solid dark from a distance
- Squeaky calls

# Bufflehead

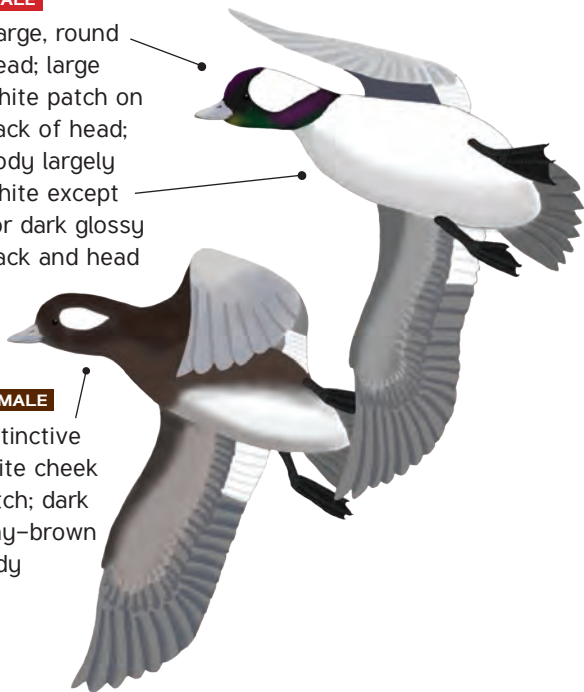
**L** 13.5 in  
**W** 13 oz

## MALE

Large, round head; large white patch on back of head; body largely white except for dark glossy back and head

## FEMALE

Distinctive white cheek patch; dark gray-brown body



Identifying  
Traits

- Low, swift flight
- Flies straight up from a water take-off
- Usually in small flocks

# Long-tailed Duck

**L** 16.5 in

**W** 1.6 lb

Long-tailed Duck



**MALE** **SPRING**

Breeding: dark brown overall; pale patch on head; white flanks; stubby bill



**MALE** **WINTER**

Non-breeding: white on crown, back, and underneath; dark cheeks



Identifying  
Traits

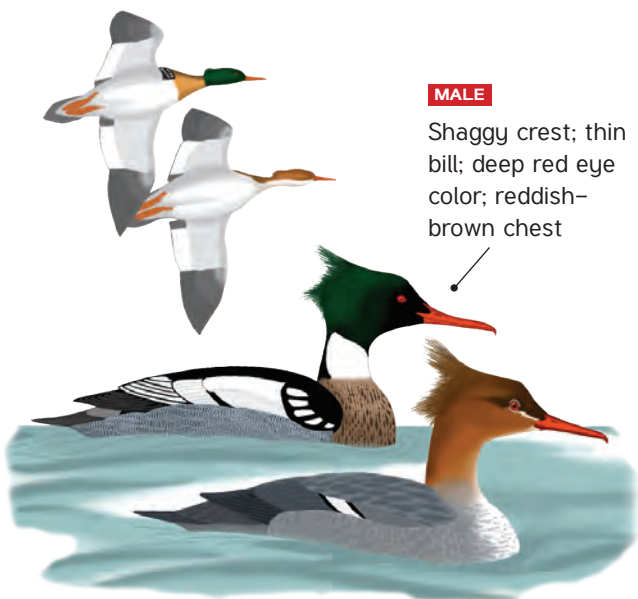
- Swift, low flight with changing formations
- Usually in small groups
- Very vocal; incessant call often sounds like ow-owoolee

# Red-breasted Merganser

L 23 in

W 2.3 lb

Red-breasted Merganser



**MALE**

Shaggy crest; thin bill; deep red eye color; reddish-brown chest

**FEMALE**

Orange-brown head

Identifying  
Traits

- Frequents saltwater bays and inlets
- One of the fastest flying ducks



# Common Merganser

**L** 25 in

**W** 3.4 lb

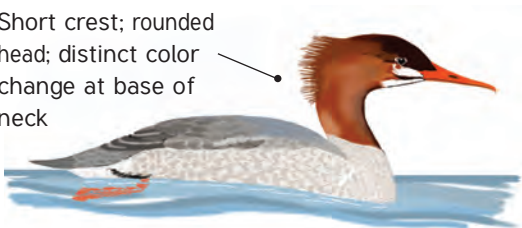
## MALE

Mostly white body; black back; smooth, dark head



## FEMALE

Short crest; rounded head; distinct color change at base of neck



## Identifying Traits

- Flocks move in single file low over water
- Found in saltwater bays and inlets but prefer freshwater

# Common Goldeneye

**L** 18.5 in

**W** 1.9 lb



**MALE**

Dark underwing;  
whistling wings

**MALE**

Round-shaped  
patch



## Identifying Traits

- Barrow's and common goldeneyes fly high and strong
- Wings of both species make distinctive whistling sound in flight

# Barrow's Goldeneye

**L** 18 in  
**W** 2.1 lb

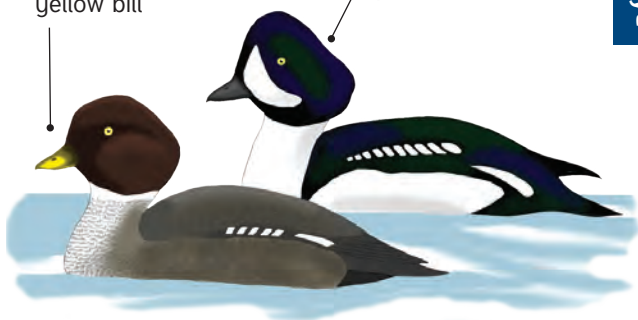
Barrow's Goldeneye

**FEMALE**

Mostly yellow bill

**MALE**

Crescent-shaped patch



## Identifying Traits

- Note difference in black and white wing marks between common and Barrow's
- Common and Barrow's females very similar, but common has a dark bill with yellow tip

# Surf Scoter

**L** 20 in

**W** 2.1 lb

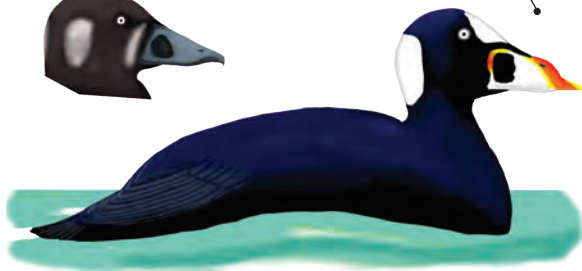
## FEMALE

Pale spots on head; darker brown upper parts



## MALE

Multicolored bill; sloping bill profile; white patches on head and nape



## Identifying Traits

- Scoters travel in loose flocks, often in irregular, wavy lines close to waves
- Gather on water in small to large flocks of thousands, often a mix of scoters

# White-winged Scoter

L 21 in

W 3.7 lb

White-winged Scoter

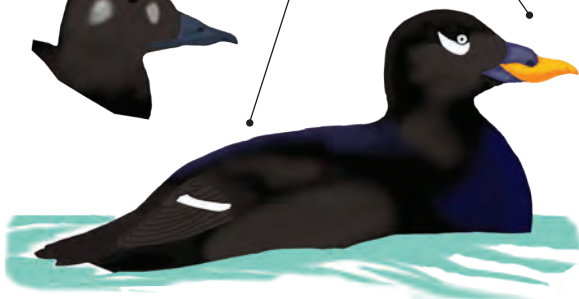
## FEMALE

Dark brown with light gray spots on head



## MALE

White patches on wing; white crescent below eye; red-orange bill tip



## Identifying Traits

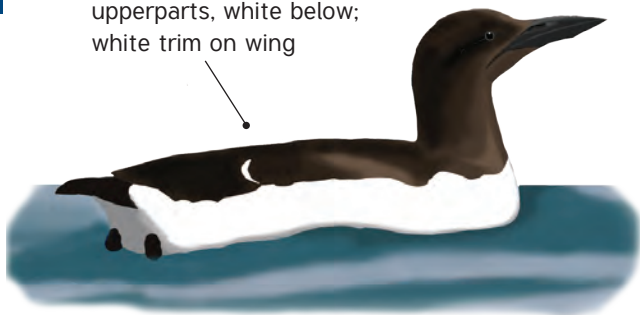
- White-winged has noticeable feathering on bill
- Surf and white-winged often flock together

# Common Murre

**L** 17.5 in  
**W** 2.2 lb

## SUMMER

Breeding: long, pointed bill; dark, sooty brown upperparts, white below; white trim on wing



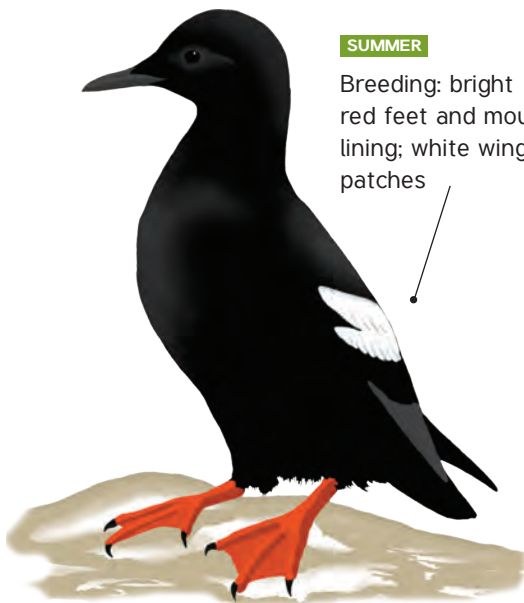
## Identifying Traits

- Solitary or in small groups
- Penguin-like when perched
- Winter plumage similar except neck is mostly white with dark line behind eye
- Sexes have similar plumage

# Pigeon Guillemot

**L** 13.5 in  
**W** 1.1 lb

Pigeon Guillemot



## SUMMER

Breeding: bright red feet and mouth lining; white wing patches

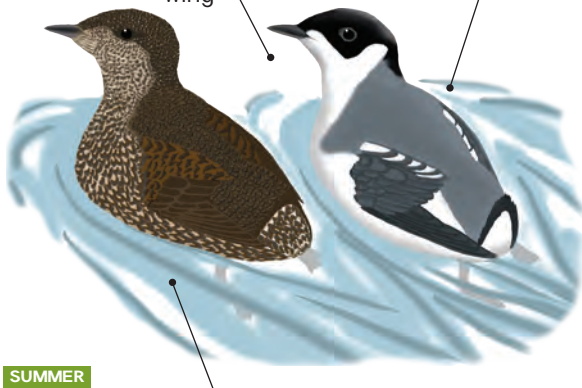
## Identifying Traits

- Seldom far from land
- High, squeaky whistles around nest
- Sexes have similar plumage
- Winter plumage white with black mottling on upper parts and crown

# Marbled Murrelet

**L** 9.75 in**W** 8 oz**WINTER**

Non-breeding: dark gray-brown upperparts; dark cap and cheek; white collar and patches on upper wing

**SUMMER**

Breeding: brown overall; heavily mottled on underparts

## Identifying Traits

- Often in pairs
- Flies low with fast beats of long, pointed wings
- Often dives when approached
- Sexes have similar plumage



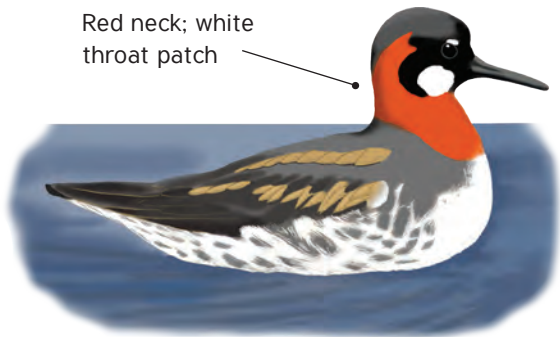
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# Red-necked Phalarope

|   |         |
|---|---------|
| L | 7.75 in |
| W | 1.2 oz  |

## SUMMER

Red neck; white throat patch



Red-necked Phalarope

## Identifying Traits

- Often gathers in flocks on the water during migration and winter
- Spins when feeding, creating a small whirlpool
- Sexes have similar plumage, but female is brighter

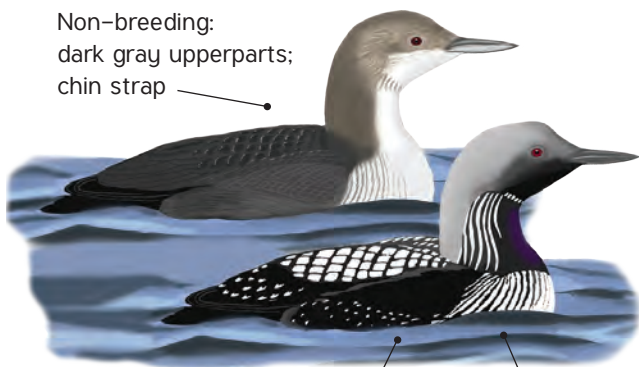
# Pacific Loon

L 25 in

W 3.7 lb

## WINTER

Non-breeding: dark gray upperparts; chin strap



## SUMMER

Breeding: pale gray head; white stripes on black neck; iridescent throat patch; slender gray bill

## Identifying Traits

- Loons are usually solitary but may form small loose groups
- Long-bodied
- Low to the water
- Pacific loon calls characterized by high, yodeling sounds

# Common Loon

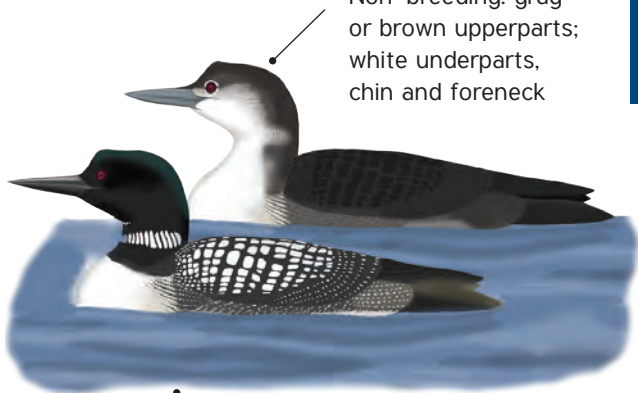
**L** 32 in

**W** 9 lb

Common Loon

## WINTER

Non-breeding: gray or brown upperparts; white underparts, chin and foreneck



## SUMMER

Breeding: glossy black head; stout black bill; checkered back

## Identifying Traits

- Note differences in head and neck between common and Pacific loons
- Common loon has distinctive low, wailing call

# Black Oystercatcher

**L** 17.5 in**W** 1.4 lb

Long, bright orange-red bill;  
yellow eyes; pink legs



## Identifying Traits

- Crow-sized shorebird commonly seen near waterline on rocky islands
- Voice is a loud piercing whistle
- Juvenile bill is pink
- Sexes have similar plumage

# Pelagic Cormorant

L 28 in

W 3.9 lb

Pelagic Cormorant

## SUMMER

Breeding: black with iridescent sheen; long, slender neck; bill hooked at tip; white patch on flanks



## Identifying Traits

- Usually solitary
- Direct flight with quick, choppy wingbeats and neck stretched straight
- Often seen perched on rocks
- Dives with a distinctive lunging hop (mergamers may also do this)

# Mew Gull

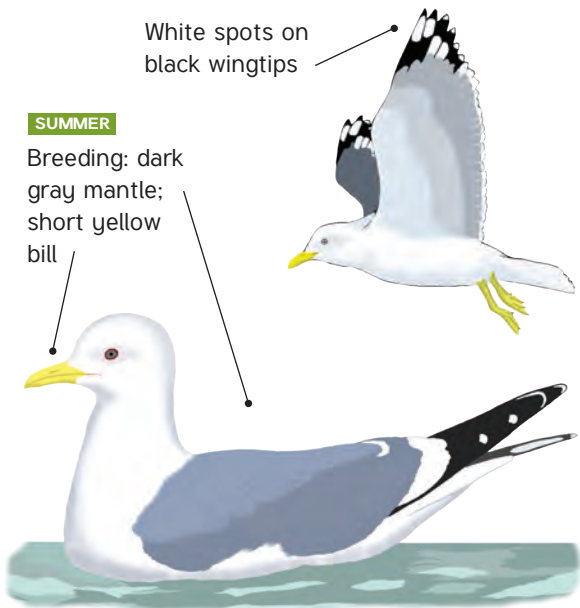
L 16 in

W 15 oz

## SUMMER

Breeding: dark gray mantle; short yellow bill

White spots on black wingtips



## Identifying Traits

- Graceful, buoyant flight
- Neck has brown wash in winter plumage
- Sexes have similar plumage (same for all gull species)

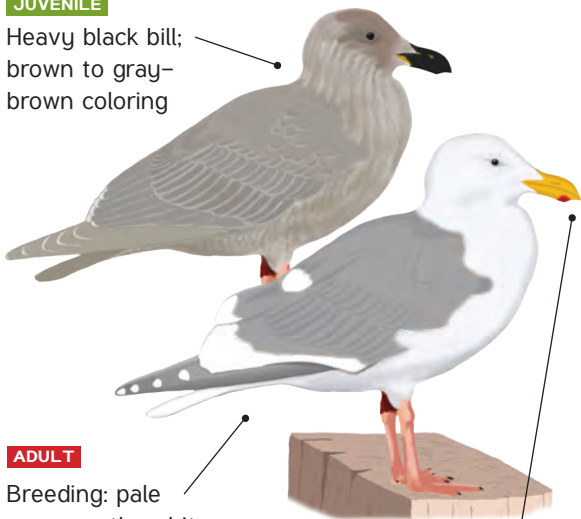
# Glaucous-winged Gull

L 26 in

W 2.2 lb

## JUVENILE

Heavy black bill;  
brown to gray-  
brown coloring



## ADULT

Breeding: pale  
gray mantle; white  
head and neck; darker gray wingtips; yellow bill  
with red dot near lower tip; pink legs

## Identifying Traits

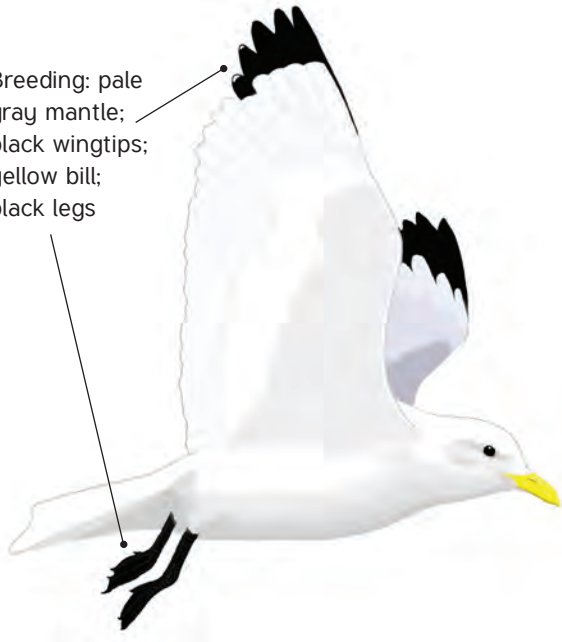
- Most common gull in Southeast Alaska
- Robust; chunky
- Broad-winged
- Often nests with other gulls producing hybrids, making ID difficult

# Black-legged Kittiwake

L 17 in

W 14 oz

Breeding: pale gray mantle;  
black wingtips;  
yellow bill;  
black legs



## Identifying Traits

- Smaller gull with relatively long wings
- Often forages by hovering and plunge diving
- Winters on open ocean
- Juveniles largely brown and gray with black bill



# Bonaparte's Gull

**L** 13.5 in

**W** 7 oz

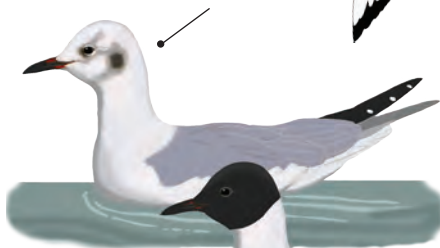
Bonaparte's Gull

Thin black bill;  
red-orange legs;  
white outer primaries;  
dark wingtips



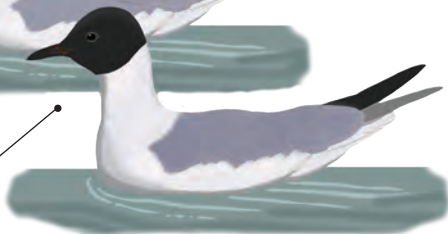
## WINTER

Non-breeding: mostly white head with dark ear spot



## SUMMER

Breeding: black hood



## Identifying Traits

- Smallest of common gulls
- May gather in flocks by the hundreds when food is abundant
- Distinctive buzzy, almost duck-like call

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# A Checklist for Common Birds of the Inside Waters

This is not meant to be an exhaustive checklist for Southeast Alaska; that list would contain more than 300 birds! Instead we've included birds commonly seen in and around the inside waters and noted the seasons in which they are most abundant. Some birds not listed here may be very common, but only in particular areas. For example, tufted and even horned puffins or Kittlitz's murrelets are frequently seen in Glacier Bay, while in outside waters like Cross Sound and Dixon Entrance, common pelagic (or ocean-going) birds include shearwaters, fulmars, storm petrels and albatross. As for the seasons, spring and fall refer to migration periods, which can vary by species. The number of species appears most sparse in summer because many birds will fly to Interior, Arctic or Western Alaska breeding grounds to nest.

| SPECIES                     | SPRING | SUMMER | FALL | WINTER |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|------|--------|
| Red-throated Loon           | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Pacific Loon                | ●      |        | ●    | ●      |
| Common Loon                 | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Horned Grebe                | ●      |        | ●    | ●      |
| Red-necked Grebe            | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Pelagic Cormorant           | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Tundra Swan                 | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Greater White-fronted Goose | ●      |        | ●    |        |

| SPECIES                | SPRING | SUMMER | FALL | WINTER |
|------------------------|--------|--------|------|--------|
| Snow Goose             | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Canada Goose           | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Green-winged Teal      | ●      | ●      | ●    |        |
| Mallard                | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Northern Pintail       | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Northern Shoveler      | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| American Wigeon        | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Greater Scaup          | ●      |        | ●    | ●      |
| Lesser Scaup           | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Harlequin Duck         | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Long-tailed Duck       | ●      |        | ●    | ●      |
| Surf Scoter            | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| White-winged Scoter    | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Common Goldeneye       | ●      |        | ●    | ●      |
| Barrow's Goldeneye     | ●      |        | ●    | ●      |
| Bufflehead             | ●      |        | ●    | ●      |
| Common Merganser       | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Red-breasted Merganser | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Bald Eagle             | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Red-necked Phalarope   | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Bonaparte's Gull       | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Mew Gull               | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Herring Gull           | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Thayer's Gull          | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Glaucous-winged Gull   | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Black-legged Kittiwake | ●      |        | ●    |        |
| Arctic Tern            | ●      | ●      | ●    |        |
| Common Murre           | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Pigeon Guillemot       | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Marbled Murrelet       | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |
| Belted Kingfisher      | ●      | ●      | ●    | ●      |



## Alaska Department of Fish and Game

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