

Wildlife Viewing Seasonal Calendar

Western Alaska

January

Polar bears are sporadically observed along the coast where they feed on seals, walruses, and whale carcasses. During winter, moose sometimes move out onto snow-free ridges where they may be easy to spot. More commonly, they use tall-shrub thickets along rivers.

Boreal and black-capped chickadees, gray jays, downy, and three-toed woodpeckers occur in forests during winter. They can be attracted to birdfeeders. Look for the less common Siberian tit in willow and alder thickets in river valleys. In southern areas of this region, snow buntings may remain through winter. McKay's buntings, a species found nowhere in the world except the Bering Sea region, occur along the mainland coast of this region during winter.

The Western Arctic caribou herd winters on the Seward Peninsula and the Unalakleet area.

February

Arctic and red foxes travel widely in search of food. Arctic foxes often search over the pack ice for seals killed by polar bears. Both Arctic and red foxes often visit dumps around villages. Tundra hares (also known as Alaska hares) occur in upland and willow

thickets throughout western Alaska. Populations are cyclic and in times of abundance may be seen in large groups. During winter their fur (or pelage) is white.

In some years, huge flocks of white-winged crossbills may be seen in forested areas.

March

During March and April, walruses move north in ice leads along the coast. Ringed and bearded seals may be visible around ice holes. Arctic foxes begin breeding in March and pairs of animals may be seen. Long-tailed ducks, common and king eiders, and red-breasted mergansers occur in ice-free waters off the coast. Snow buntings and redpolls are among the first migrant birds to return, usually arriving in mid-March. Resident forest birds begin courtship during March. Listen for woodpeckers drumming and the melodic songs of pine grosbeaks and boreal chickadees. Gray jays become hard to find as they build nests and lay eggs.

Ptarmigan begin migrating to nesting areas. Flocks of thousands occur in some mountain passes and river drainages.

April

Caribou wintering on the Seward Peninsula begin their northward migration. Walruses, beluga, and bowhead whales begin to follow the retreating pack ice north along the coast. These marine mammals as well as seals may be seen from planes or the coast among nearshore leads or on ice.

Brown bears emerge from hibernation and may be seen digging for roots or ground squirrels on snow-free south-facing slopes. Boars emerge earlier than sows with cubs. Muskoxen begin calving on Nunivak Island and the Seward Peninsula during late April and early May. Muskoxen should be observed only from a distance.

In mid-April, northward eider migration begins. Small flocks and individuals appear in leads and on ice floes initially, but soon flocks of thousands hurry north. All four species (king, common, spectacled, and Steller's eiders) may be observed. Watch for them along barrier islands and over spits of land wherever leads are nearshore. Hooper Bay, Cape Nome, Cape Prince of Wales and, by late May, Cape Lisburne provide excellent observation outposts.

Common and thick-billed murres, black-legged kittiwakes,

auklets, puffins, and other seabirds migrate north to established nesting colonies on sea cliff faces. They may be seen in transit. In southern areas of this region, many waterfowl arrive in late April. Canada, greater white fronted, emperor, and brant geese along with northern pintail, American wigeon, and green-winged teal may be observed in migration and courtship.

Golden eagles, northern harriers, and short-eared owls begin migrating through southern parts of this region.

May

Walrus, ringed, and bearded seals may be observed along the coast either in the water or sunning themselves on top of sea ice. Bowhead and beluga whale migration continues and gray whales may be seen. Prominent points of land including Cape Nome, Point Hope, and Cape Prince of Wales provide good observation opportunities.

Moose calves are born. Look for females with young in muskegs and tall-shrub thickets along rivers. Arctic foxes begin shedding their white winter coat and don a brown and cream-colored coat for summer.

During the last week of April and first week of May, sandhill cranes en route to nesting grounds in western Alaska and eastern Siberia, pass through this region. Some good places to observe the migration include Wales, Seward Peninsula, and Bethel.

Ptarmigan begin their courtship during late April and early May. Their raucous cackling can be heard for long distances, particularly in mountainous areas.

Shorebirds give courtship displays from mid-May (southern areas) through mid-June (northern areas). In wet and moist tundra, look for lesser golden and black-bellied plovers, ruddy turnstones, red and red-necked phalaropes, long-billed dowitchers, dunlins and pectoral and western sandpipers. Some western Alaska shorebird specialties include dotterel, bristle-thighed curlew, black turnstone, and rufous-necked sandpiper. In alpine tundra, look for whimbrels, red knots, and rock sandpipers. Look for white wagtails, Arctic warblers, and bluethroats in tall-shrub thickets during May and June. They are most conspicuous during courtship.

Yellow wagtails are common in grassy disturbed sites. Northward migration of waterfowl continues through late May. Red-breasted mergansers, Arctic, red-throated, and common loons

arrive later than other waterfowl. Most brant, greater white-fronted geese, and northern pintails arrive on their nesting grounds while others head to the Arctic.

Snow geese bound for Siberia migrate through in mid-to late May and may be observed along the lower Yukon River some years.

Migrant songbirds return in mid- to late May. In tundra areas, Savannah sparrow, snow bunting, and Lapland longspur are the most common songbirds. In forests and tall-shrub thickets, listen for gray-cheeked and varied thrushes, American robins, ruby-crowned kinglets, Wilson's and blackpoll warblers, northern water-thrushes, dark-eyed juncos, and Savannah sparrows.

June

Females and young caribou use wet tundra during calving. They are particularly sensitive to disturbance at this time of year. Dall sheep lambs are born on steep cliffs along the middle Noatak River.

Gray whales migrate along the coast and may be visible from peninsulas or spits of land along the coast. Grass nests built in winter by lemmings and vole tunnels through grass become visible as the snow melts.

Sandhill cranes nest throughout this region, but they are most common in the central and southern portions. Their impressive courtship dances can be easily viewed during early June. Tundra swans, brant, greater white-fronted, Canada, and emperor geese nest in wet moist tundra areas. Highest densities occur on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

Seabirds begin concentrating at nesting islands and cliffs during May and June. Pelagic cormorants, glaucous gulls, black-legged kittiwakes, common and thick-billed murre, pigeon guillemots, parakeet, crested, and least auklets, and horned and tufted puffins may be seen. Listen for the haunting calls of Arctic, red-throated, yellow-billed, and common loons on lakes and rivers in forested areas and wet or moist tundra. Most shorebirds hatch young in mid- to late June so adults with young may be observed.

Wood frogs begin chorusing around lakes and streams in forested regions. The chum salmon run up the Noatak River begins. King, chum, and sockeye salmon runs begin in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

July

Walrus and seals are occasionally sighted near shore in northwestern and Bering Strait areas, and haul

out on King Island, Big Diomede, and Round Island. Northward migration of gray whales continues along the coast throughout this month. Beluga whales may be observed in large lagoons on occasion. Kotzebue Sound and Kasegalu Lagoon provide good viewing possibilities.

Caribou move to coastal areas to escape harassing insects. Dall sheep may be seen on steep cliffs and tundra slopes along the middle Noatak River. July is the best month to view muskoxen on Nunivak Island and from the road system on the Seward Peninsula. Cows with calves may be seen. Brown bears frequent stream and rivers to catch salmon.

A northward migration of brant occurs along the coast as juveniles and failed breeders head north to molt on large tundra lakes. Young shorebirds may be seen with adults. Many emperor geese (failed nesters and non-breeders) begin departing the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and migrate to molting areas on St. Lawrence Island. Large numbers may be seen around Hooper Bay. During July, hundreds of thousands of drake eiders pour out of the

Arctic. Their migration can be observed along the coast from Cape Lisburne. In mid-July, dunlins, plovers, phalaropes, pectoral, western, semipalmated, and Baird's

sandpipers begin moving into salt marshes and other coastal wetlands. Safety Lagoon near Nome provides good viewing.

Loons and mergansers hatch their young in mid- to-late July. Red-throated loons may be seen flying back and forth to the coast carrying fish to their young.

August

Caribou migration occurs across the Kobuk, Ambler, Hunt, and Noatak Rivers. The southward migration of gray whales begins. Watch for them anywhere along the coast. Muskoxen begin rut. Bulls occasionally fight.

Fall migration of many waterfowl, cranes, and shorebirds begins in early August. Brant begin concentrating in salt marshes along the coast in preparation for fall migration. Arctic terns hedge their young and begin congregating on barrier islands along the coast.

Swallows fledge their young and quickly depart. Most other passerines soon follow.

September

Bull moose have full antler racks. Rutting begins and males spar with their antlers. Watch for them in tall-shrub thickets. Beavers renovate lodges and dams in preparation for winter. They are most active in early morning and late evening.

Caribou bulls have full antler racks and begin to display aggressiveness towards each other. Arctic foxes, tundra hares, collared lemmings, and weasels begin turning white as winter approaches.

Wheatears, yellow wagtails, and bluethroats migrate through on their way to Asia. Watch for them around buildings, draws, and brushy areas.

Sandhill cranes migrate south from Siberia to wintering grounds. Spectacular flocks can sometimes be seen around Nome or Solomon. Swans stage on large lakes and marshes prior to southward migration. Gray-colored young (called cygnets) may be observed with their parents.

October

Beluga and gray whales migrate south along the coast. Ringed seals may be numerous along the coast, particularly near Pt. Hope. Bowhead whales begin migrating southward into the Bering Sea. They may be seen from prominent points of land, but unpredictably.

Moose rut continues. Jostling between males may be observed. Caribou rut occurs. Brown bears enter their winter dens and begin a period of dormancy.

Willow ptarmigan occur in large flocks in tall-shrub

thickets along streams. Watch for gyrfalcon hunting ptarmigan in these areas.

November

Moose start shedding their antlers in late November.

Dall sheep in the western Brooks Range begin rutting during late November.

Most long-tailed ducks, eiders, and seabirds depart as freeze-up occurs in early November. A few may remain in ice leads offshore throughout the winter, however. During winter, ptarmigan often visit windblown gravel bars and ridges to pick up grit. This aids digestion of alder and birch buds, which they eat during winter.

December

Adult male caribou shed their antlers during November and December, while females and young retain theirs through spring.

Common ravens may be easy to observe around towns, dumps, and construction camps. Inland, look for ptarmigan (often in flocks of hundreds) in tall-shrub thickets. Look for gyrfalcons and snowy owls along ridges and cut banks.

Other resources:

Wildlife Viewing Program:
www.wildlifeviewing.alaska.gov

State of Alaska Travel Info:
www.travelalaska.com

Alaska Public Lands Information Centers:
www.alaskacenters.gov

Alaska State Parks:
www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks

Alaska Marine Highway:
www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs

US Forest Service:
www.fs.usda.gov/r10

