As winter turns to summer, Alaska explodes with avian life!

Returning to Alaska

Plentiful food, endless daylight, and large open spaces make Alaska the perfect haven for migratory birds. More than 293 species of birds return to Alaska for the short summer breeding season. On their journey these birds follow highways in the sky, called flyways, which link their seasonal homes. Globally, there are eight identified flyways. While none are named the “AK Flyway,” four of the eight flyways converge in Alaska, providing pathways for nearly five billion birds every year.

Feeding and Resting

Having wintered in short, birds must immediately claim their breeding territory and mate. They have as little as two months to build a nest, lay eggs, and raise their young.

Breeding and Nesting

During the winter, Bristle-thighed Curlews prepare their bodies by molting their old feathers for new ones and fattening up for the shift to carrying their chicks and keeping them safe from predators.

Leaving Alaska

Shortening days signal the birds that it is time to leave. They cannot stay; there is not enough food to support them in winter. Birds prepare their paths for nearly five billion birds every year.

Rearing and Fledging

Young birds need to grow up quickly in Alaska. Parents take advantage of the daylight, working almost nonstop to provide nutritious food for their chicks and keep them safe from predators.

Northern Wheatear

The Northern Wheatear flies 180 miles a day for a total flight of 8,500 miles. This is the longest non-stop flight for any bird. The Northern Wheatear breeds on dry, rocky mountains. As winter turns to summer, the birds use the vest to head west and return to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Bristle-thighed Curlew

Without help from adults, young Bristle-thighed Curlews have to find their own food. They are the only shorebird that molts their old feathers for new ones. This process is called a complete molt. As an adult, Bristle-thighed Curlews become flightless during molting, the process of swapping old feathers for new ones.

Sandhill Crane

Sandhill Cranes fly a speedy 50 mph to return to Alaska. To consume enough energy for their long journey, they catch a lift from the rising wind currents called thermals and ride fast-moving winds in the jet stream. Using these forces, Sandhill Cranes can travel more than 5,000 miles over two months and approximately nearly 12,000 miles. Using winds to propel them north, they arrive in Alaska in late May to early June, where they build nests, start families, and rear their chicks in the open tundra and forage on insects.

Bar-tailed Godwit

Bar-tailed Godwits migrate a staggering 12,000 miles. Using winds to propel them north, they fly 7,200 miles non-stop over eight days to return to the Arctic. Without help from other birds, Bar-tailed Godwits cannot take off if they land in the water. Can you imagine flying thousands of miles over the ocean with no rest?

Arctic Tern

Chasing the sun, Arctic Terns migrate more than 24,000 miles a year between Alaska and Antarctica. These birds see more of the sun than any other animal on earth. This allows for extra time to fish and refuel for their long migrations.

Longest Distance

Arctic Terns can live to the age of 30. During their lifetime, they will complete the equivalent of three trips to the moon and back.

Blackpoll Warbler

Blackpoll Warblers cross continents and oceans in a loop migration that totals 14,000 miles. Using winds to propel them north, they arrive in Alaska in late May to early June, where they build nests, start families, and rear their chicks in the open tundra and forage on insects and breed in the boreal forest.

More than a half-million Sandhill Cranes gather each spring for the first time in nearly a year and often weigh up to seven pounds before their journey north.

Followalong with 6 notable migrants as they fly to Alaska

Alaska explodes with avian life! Highways in the sky connect Alaska to the world. Learn more at www.blm.gov/AKFlyway