

Birding in the Great White North

Contributed by Ben Tupper
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Since returning back to the United States from South Africa I have to admit that my birding has stalled quite a bit....there is something missing here for me, perhaps its the brightly colored breast of a roller or the call of the woodland kingfisher or the majesty of the fish eagle in flight. This is beginning to change though....all it took was a 4,000 mile journey north to my new home....Alaska!

Since arriving in the last frontier I have sadly retired my Sasol and traded it in for a new National Geographic and Sibley's. The ride up to Alaska provided me a great opportunity to hone my twitching skills for my home continent. After finding my passion for birding in South Africa it was a really fun feeling to bring the same enthusiasm back to my home country. So I began the 4,000 mile journey north with my binocs and my bird books riding shotgun and the bluegrass music blaring in the background. I saw a number of birds and fumbled with my new book trying to get acquainted with it and trying to clear my head of names like pied starlings and hornbills. My first great sighting of the trip was at a large lake surrounded by mountains with ice still covering most parts. There on a floating piece were two raptors. I found a nice spot in the spruce trees and got out the Nikon and the binos. I not so quickly identified them as two immature bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) who were enjoying there afternoon lunch of fish. The bald eagle is the only eagle unique to North America and whose scientific name signifies a sea (halo) eagle (aaetos) with a white (leukos) head. There are over 70,000 of these birds and over half reside in Alaska, my final destination. Since being in Alaska I have located some nice birding spots along the ocean in and around Anchorage. I made a stop at Potters Marsh one sunny afternoon. Potters Marsh is a popular bird sanctuary wedged next to the ocean over the railroad tracks and is part of the Coastal Wildlife Sanctuary. You can find birders and photographers of all sorts snapping and twittering away nearly every day of the year. My first stop was quite wonderful!!

During my time there I found a nice spot and got out my bino's to test my skills and see what I could find for my first bird outing in Alaska. Right away I spotted some Canadian Geese floating comfortably across the marsh. Then came the gorgeous Trumpeter Swan (*Cygnus buccinator*). The trumpeter is the largest native bird of North America. These birds have white plumage with a long neck, a black bill subtly marked with salmon-pink along the mouthline, and short black legs.

After watching the trumpeter for a bit my attention turned to the tern's fluttering around. I am almost certain they were arctic terns (*Sterna paradisaea*). The species is strongly migratory, seeing two summers each year as it migrates from its northern breeding grounds to the oceans around Antarctica and back (about 24,000 miles) each year. Other birds that were spotted on my journey were lots of gulls, both Mew's and Kiitiwake's.

I am looking forward to a beautiful summer chasing birds through the wild Alaskan unknown...