

The Status of Selected Birds in East-central Alaska

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The status of 14 species of birds in east-central Alaska is discussed. Many records are unusual (first records), but information on distribution, abundance, and natural history of some species also is included.

Key Words: Birds, status, distribution, first records, east-central Alaska.

The avifauna of east-central Alaska, defined here as the drainages of the Porcupine, upper Yukon, and Tanana rivers (Figure 1), is well-known. Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959) summarized early records, and other researchers subsequently have clarified the status of a number of bird species in the region (Kessel 1960; Yocum 1963, 1964; White and Brooks 1964; Kessel and Springer 1966; Kessel 1967; White and Haugh 1969; Gibson 1972). Kessel and Gibson (1978) have provided the most recent and comprehensive update of Gabrielson and Lincoln's (1959) species accounts and have included many additional records for the region.

Since the mid-1970s, we have conducted breeding surveys of raptors along the rivers of east-central Alaska. During these investigations, we have recorded some unusual species as prey in Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) eyries (e.g., Brown Thrasher, *Toxostoma rufum*) and have made additional noteworthy observations (e.g., first nest records for the Townsend's Solitaire, *Myadestes townsendi*, in interior Alaska; Ritchie et al. 1982). The purpose of this paper is to summarize our records on 14 selected species of birds in east-central Alaska, to include notes on the natural history of some of these species, and to supplement the information on their status presented by Kessel and Gibson (1978).

Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*)

Murie (in Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959: 244) "received a report that some [Common Mergansers] may occasionally winter on Clearwater River and Lake in the Tanana Valley." Murie also observed Common Mergansers and Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) on the Clearwater River between 22 March and 7 April 1937 (unpublished notes, Rasmussen Library, Archives, University of Alaska, Fairbanks). Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959: 244) added that "there are, however, no unquestioned records for the interior at this season." The Common Merganser was identified as a regular winter resident in open-water areas west of Delta Junction during surveys for Bald

Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) in January-February 1979-1981. For example, 47 birds were counted between Clearwater Lake (64°04'N, 145°35'W) and a point approximately 10 miles downriver from Delta Junction along the Tanana River on 14 February 1980.

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)

Turkey Vultures are reported as casual as far north as east-central Alaska (American Ornithologists' Union 1983); this description was based on an observation of one Turkey Vulture observed near Delta Junction in May 1979 (American Birds. 1979. 33: 798). While counting Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*) on 3 May 1987, Richard Rohleder (Homer, Alaska, personal communication) observed a Turkey Vulture near Tok. This is only the second record from interior Alaska, although boreal records are not necessarily unusual (Palmer 1988a).

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)

Although Merlins may be locally-common breeders in some mountainous regions of Alaska (e.g., Denali National Park; Dixon 1938, Murie 1963, Laing 1985), their breeding status in east-central Alaska best might have been described as uncommon. Only a few nests (University of Alaska Museum, unpublished nest records) and adults with fledged young (White and Haugh 1969) have been recorded north of the Alaska Range.

Our observations suggest that Merlins are common, at least along rivers, in east-central Alaska. We located 11 Merlin nests in the area between 1982 and 1986. Seven nests were on the Porcupine River, two were on the upper Tanana River, and two were on the upper Yukon River. Eight nests were in parasitic growths ("witch's broom" rust, *Chrysomyxa arctostaphyli*) on spruce trees (*Picea* spp.), one was on the ground beneath an uprooted tree, one was in a large stick nest on a cliff fronting the river, and one was in a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) nest in a Cottonwood (*Populus balsamifera*). Elsewhere, Merlins have been recorded

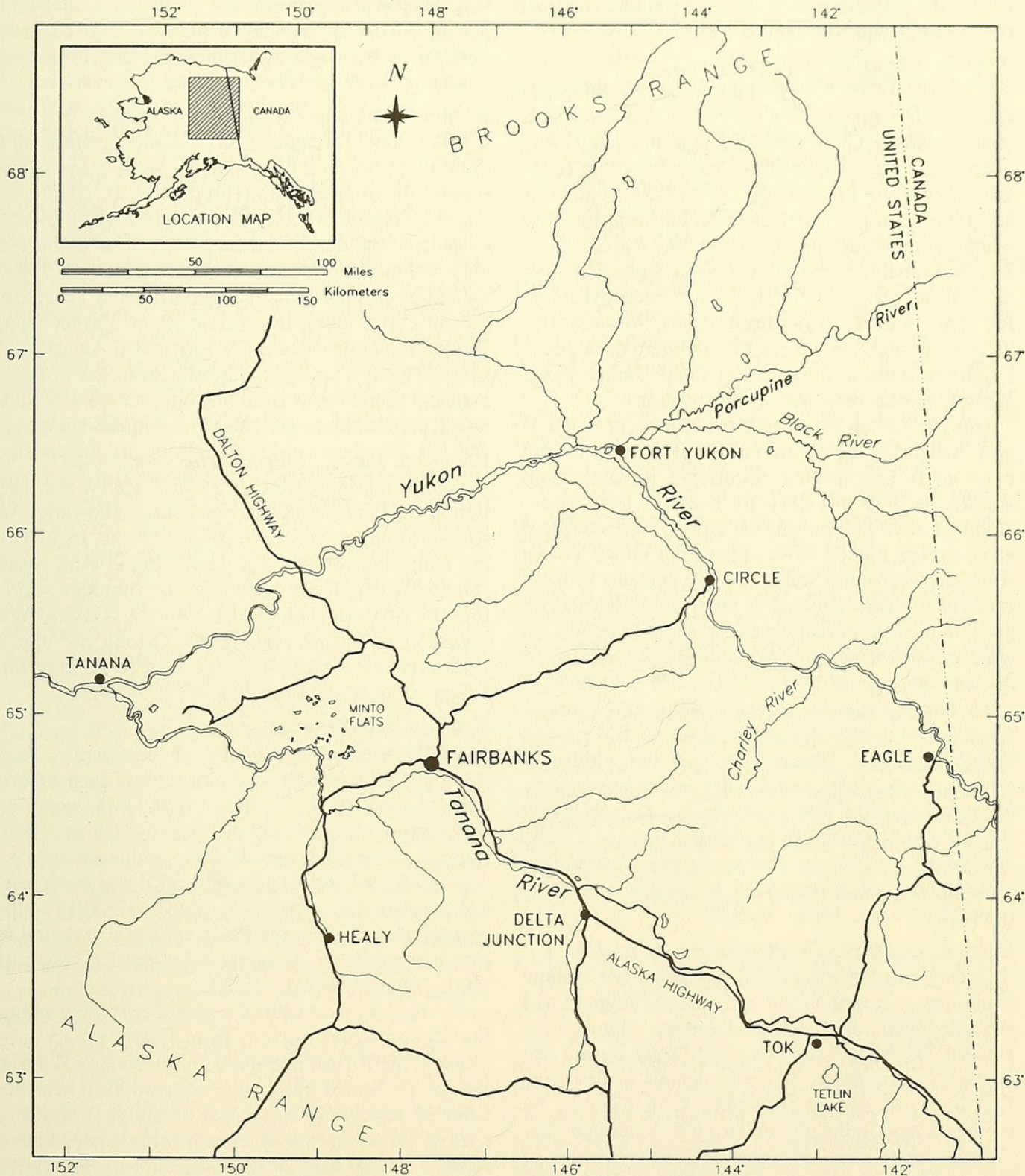


FIGURE 1. Map of east-central Alaska, showing areas referred to in the text.

nesting in abandoned nests of Black-billed Magpies, *Pica pica* (Dixon 1938; Laing 1985), nests of other corvids (Palmer 1988b), tree cavities (Bent 1937), and on the ground.

The prevalence of nests in parasitic growths is interesting but may simply reflect substrate limitations, because stick nests such as those constructed by magpies and used regularly by Merlins in Denali

National Park (Laing 1985) are rare or absent in this region. Parasitic growths, on the other hand, are abundant in this region. Additionally, the value of these growths to Merlins may increase markedly if they are modified by a species such as the Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*). Four of the nests that were located in parasitic growths may have been used previously by Red Squirrels. Bent

(1937) described a crow's nest in Labrador that had been used by squirrels before Merlins nested in it.

American Coot (*Fulica americana*)

Kessel and Gibson (1978) described the American Coot as a rare migrant and summer visitant in central Alaska. Most records were of single birds and were confined to the Tanana River basin between Tetlin Lake and Minto Flats. Trapp et al. (1981) found this species breeding in the Tanana River basin in 1980. Numerous sightings in 1980, including a group of 20 adults, probably were related to drought displacement from prairie wetlands, as has been described for some waterfowl (Hansen 1960). Associations between drought on the prairies and high duck populations in Alaska did occur in 1980 (James King, Juneau, Alaska, personal communication).

Our records of the regular occurrence of coots as prey remains in Peregrine Falcon nests offer further evidence of this species' occurrence in east-central Alaska. In 1980 and 1981, for instance, freshly-severed feet of two coots (one each year) were collected at Peregrine Falcon eyries along the upper Yukon River upriver from Circle. In 1981, remains of three coots also were collected at three Peregrine Falcon eyries along the Porcupine River, more than 400 km north of known breeding areas on the Tanana River. As was the case in 1980, 1981 was a year of high duck populations for Alaska (King and Conant, unpublished manuscript prepared for U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Juneau, Alaska), and additional records of coots may be related: concentrations were observed in fall 1980 in the upper Tanana River basin, including 50 birds on Yarger Lake (65°58'N, 141°40'W) on 18 September, and 1981 was the first year a coot was recorded in western Alaska (American Birds. 1981. 35: 970).

Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*)

Kessel and Gibson (1978) described the Upland Sandpiper as a rare spring and summer migrant and possible breeder in east-central Alaska. Although the Upland Sandpiper was observed rarely during our studies, its occurrence as fresh remains in Peregrine Falcon eyries in mid-July suggest that it may be more common in the region during summer than previously was thought. For example, 24 specimens of Upland Sandpiper (nearly 5% of all specimens collected) were identified in nests along the Porcupine River between 1979 and 1984. Upland Sandpipers also occurred, although less frequently, in Peregrine Falcon eyries on the upper Yukon and Tanana rivers during the same period; many of these individuals were freshly killed. The appearance of so many birds as prey in mid-summer collections at Peregrine Falcon nests, records of breeding in the Ogilvie Mountains of Canada (American Birds. 1979. 33: 789) and drainages on the southern slope of the Brooks Range in Alaska (Kessel and Schaller 1960; Campbell 1967), and suspected breeding in east-central

Alaska's intermountain plateau (Kessel and Springer 1966) lead us to believe that Upland Sandpipers are regular summer visitants in upland areas adjacent to the Porcupine and Yukon rivers.

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)

The Ruddy Turnstone is considered a coastal bird outside of the breeding season, with only a few records in inland areas (Hayman et al. 1986). In Alaska, Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959) apparently considered the Ruddy Turnstone as coastal and listed only two inland records, at Anaktuvuk Pass. In 1987, we collected prey remains regularly from Peregrine Falcon eyries along the Yukon River upriver from Circle. Sometime between 6 July and 6 August that year, a Ruddy Turnstone was brought to one of these eyries; a single tarsus from this bird, complete with a faded, plastic color band, was found in this eyrie.

Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)

Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959) stated that the Pomarine Jaeger had the most restricted range in Alaska of any of the three jaeger species. Its breeding habitat is restricted to low-lying coastal areas (Maher 1974). There have been no previous sightings of this species in east-central Alaska. We recorded Pomarine Jaegers once along the upper Yukon River, a partially-eaten bird in a Peregrine Falcon eyrie on the Charley River in July 1983.

Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*)

Northern breeding colonies of the Caspian Tern occur in the Great Slave Lake region, in northern Alberta, and on the Pacific Coast as far north as Washington (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). Regular and recent records from southeastern (e.g., American Birds. 1981. 35: 853, 970) and south central Alaska (American Birds. 1983. 37: 1018) support suggestions that the Pacific Coast population is expanding and progressing northward (Campbell 1971; Gill and Mewaldt 1983).

We observed an adult Caspian Tern flying along the Yukon River upriver from Circle on 15 July 1984. The following day, U. S. National Park Service personnel observed a Caspian Tern near the Charley River, 12 miles east of the first sighting (Steve Ulvi, personal communication). These records are the first for the Caspian Tern in interior Alaska.

Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*)

Eastern Kingbirds have been described as casual summer and fall visitants to northern Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978) and the Yukon Territory (Godfrey 1966). In addition, there are single records for central Alaska at Delta Junction on 19 September 1976 (Kessel and Gibson 1978) and in the Susitna River drainage on 11 July 1980 (American Birds. 1980. 34: 921). Additional Alaska sightings are limited to southeastern Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978).

We recorded Eastern Kingbirds at two localities in

east-central Alaska. Two adult-plumaged birds observed on 21 July 1981 at Sam Creek (63°39'N, 144°04'W) were perched within a meter of each other in a tree on the edge of a flooded meadow. The second record came from the identification of a single Eastern Kingbird reitrix found in a Peregrine Falcon eyrie on the Porcupine River in July 1984. The identification was verified by Roxy Laybourne (U. S. National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC, personal communication). The sighting of a pair is interesting, because it suggests breeding. Sightings in the Yukon Territory provide further support for this suggestion: a pair on the Dempster Highway on 23 June 1979 (American Birds. 1979. 33: 879) and an adult feeding young at Snafu Lake on 26 July 1978 (American Birds. 1978. 32: 1186).

Mountain Bluebird (*Sialia currucoides*)

Mountain Bluebirds breed in east-central Alaska and the southern Yukon Territory (American Ornithologists' Union 1983). However, nest records in east-central Alaska are limited to a few locations in the Tanana drainage and south of the Arctic Circle: near Fairbanks, the Chisana River, the upper Tanana River (Kessel and Gibson 1978; William Lehnhausen, Fairbanks, Alaska, personal communication), and possibly at Eagle on the upper Yukon River (White and Haugh 1969).

During our investigations, we also recorded Mountain Bluebirds along the Yukon River between Eagle and Circle at three locations in 1984 and once in 1985, although they were not recorded there during research every year between 1973 and 1983. One 1984 record on the Yukon River (65°06'N, 141°28'W) was of a pair with fledged young. In 1985 and 1986, we identified bluebirds as prey in Peregrine Falcon eyries on the Yukon River upriver from Circle. In addition, we located a Mountain Bluebird nest containing three nearly-fledged young in a small cliff crevice on the Porcupine River (66°59'N, 142°41'W) on 1 July 1983.

Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*)

Kessel and Gibson (1978) described the Townsend's Solitaire as a rare migrant and breeder in east-central Alaska. Our records, including the first nest records for Alaska (Ritchie et al. 1982), however, suggest that it is a regularly breeding species along the main rivers in east-central Alaska, especially on cliffs and dry, south-facing slopes that are vegetated with sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.), Quaking Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*), and White Spruce (*Picea glauca*) forest. Along the Yukon River, it occurred regularly as prey in Peregrine Falcon eyries, being seen in four eyries in 1985 and in three eyries in 1986. It also was abundant in some areas (e.g., eight singing males recorded on cliffs along approximately 30 km of the upper Porcupine River, in June 1983).

Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*)

The classification of the Brown Thrasher as accidental in Alaska was based on a single record of this bird from Point Barrow (Kessel and Gibson 1978) and on the fact that Brown Thrashers breed only as far north as southern Manitoba and Alberta (Godfrey 1966). Thus it was surprising to identify the distinctive rufous-colored retrices and tail coverts of this species in a Peregrine Falcon eyrie in east-central Alaska during each of two different years. The first specimen (U. A. M. No. 4283; identified by Richard Banks, U. S. National Museum of Natural History, personal communication; verified by Roxy Laybourne, personal communication) was found in a Peregrine Falcon eyrie on the Yukon River upriver from Circle in July 1983. The second record was collected from another Peregrine Falcon eyrie in July 1984; this nest was on the Black River, approximately 150 km north of the first collection site.

This coincidence probably was unique, because raptors have been known to select unusual, and consequently vulnerable, prey (Glue and Morgan 1977). However, a third interior specimen (U. A. M. No. 5683), a dead fall-plumaged adult brought in by a dog to its owner near the Robertson River on 27 May 1990, leaves us perplexed as to the actual status of this species in east-central Alaska.

Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*)

Magnolia Warblers are casual summer and fall visitants to southeastern Alaska and have been recorded as accidentals in both northern and western Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978). In 1986, the distinctive retrices of a Magnolia Warbler (U. A. M. No. 5364) were identified in the prey remains of a Peregrine Falcon eyrie on the Yukon River upriver from Circle.

Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

Red-winged Blackbirds have been recorded breeding in the upper Tanana River valley as far west as George Lake; birds occasionally have reached Fairbanks (Kessel and Gibson 1978). We located a pair defending a nest on 1 June 1990 in the Goldstream Valley (64°54'N, 147°56'W), 16 km northwest of Fairbanks. The nest, which was built in cattails (*Typha latifolia*) on the edge of a pond, contained four eggs. Although the fate of this nest was not determined, a pair of Red-winged Blackbirds also was observed in this area in late June 1990 and 1991.

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