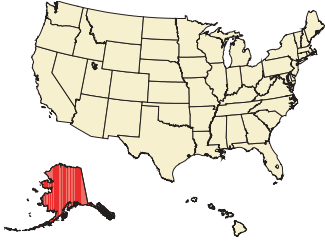


Alaska: A Great Land for Wildlife

by Peter A. Dratch and
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Alaska, the name given our largest state, comes from an Aleut word, *Alasbka*, meaning “great land.” Alaska’s national parks are indeed a great land for wildlife. More than 54 million acres (21.8 million hectares) support most of the state’s native species at incredible levels of abundance. Alaska contains 65 percent of the National Park System’s total land area but only about one percent of the species listed under the Endangered Species Act.

While many of Alaska’s parks still have not been inventoried for wildlife and plants, surveys to fill the gaps have begun under the National Park Service’s Natural Resource Challenge. (See “Endangered Species and the National Park Service,” beginning on page 4.) Of the 1,244 federally listed species, only 13 are currently listed as endangered or threatened in Alaska, and we expect that all are present in national parks except the endangered Aleutian shield fern (*Polystichum aleuticum*) and leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). The listed species in Alaskan national parks

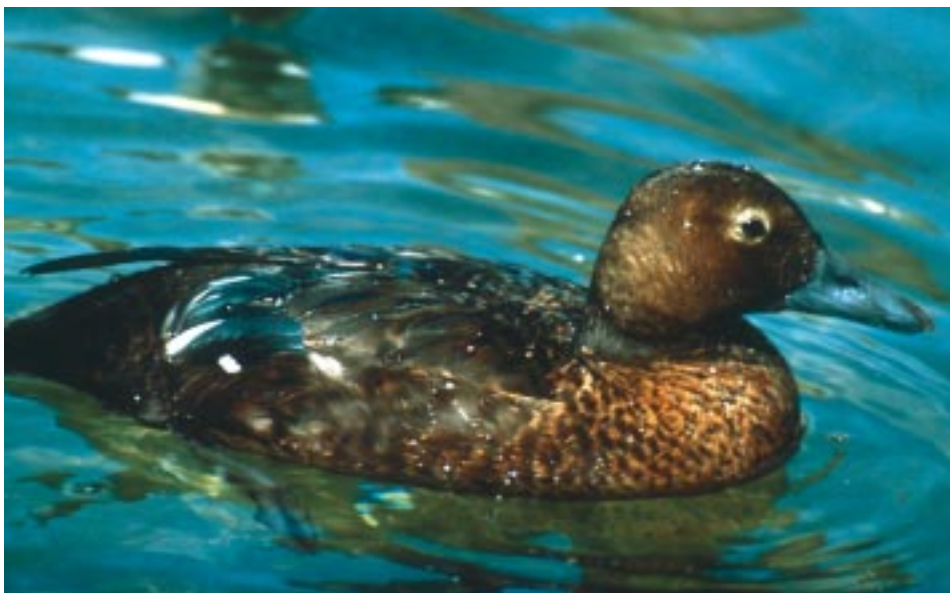
are all migratory; they breed in ecosystems that are different from where they overwinter. This not only makes monitoring difficult but sometimes requires international cooperation for their recovery. Two of the rarest migratory species in Alaska’s national parks are the short-tailed albatross (*Phoebastria albatrus*) and the Eskimo curlew (*Numenius borealis*), both endangered.

While Alaska’s national parks are generally considered remote, they are experiencing significant increases in human visitation. During 1999, recreational visits totaled more than two million, a seven percent increase over the previous year. Because wildlife viewing is predicted to increase even faster than the rate of the state’s rapid population growth, it is likely that the pressures on wildlife will increase as well.

In southern coastal Alaska, Glacier Bay National Park provides critical habitat and an important marine sanctuary for endangered finback whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*), endangered humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), and the threatened population of Steller sea-lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*). Humpback cows and calves seek refuge and forage within the deep waters of the Kenai Fjords National Park and Preserve (NPP), but a marked increase in tourism within the park has resulted in conflicts between the whales and recreational boats and tour vessels. Two humpback whales have collided with tour boats. In one instance, a 120-foot (36-meter) boat traveling at 20 knots (23 mph) hit a humpback, resulting in considerable damage to the boat. Although there was no visible injury to the whale, this is still considered “take” under the Endangered Species Act. Four other endangered

Steller’s eider hen

Photo by Glen Smart/USFWS



whales are also found in Alaska's park waters: the sei (*Balaenoptera borealis*), blue (*Balaenoptera musculus*), bowhead (*Balaena mysticetus*), and sperm (*Physeter catodon*) whales.

To prevent similar incidents, Kenai Fjords NPP works with the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to hold an annual workshop for tour boat owners. The workshop helps to ensure that the 60 - 80 attending boat operators receive a consistent message on adherence to the marine mammal protection guidelines established by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. Furthermore, by following these guidelines, operators learn that this will improve the quality of the viewing experience for the park visitors.

Katmai and Lake Clark NPP's may harbor some of the largest known wintering populations of threatened Steller's eiders (*Polysticta stelleri*). Steller's eiders breed in northern Russia and on the central coastal plain of Alaska, primarily near Barrow. The number of nesting pairs in Alaska is estimated to be only 1,000 out of the estimated 220,000 birds in the world population. However, at least 150,000 of these eiders winter in Alaska's shallow near-shore marine waters from the eastern Aleutian Islands to the Lower Cook Inlet.

In February 2001, critical habitat in western coastal Alaska was designated in four areas for the threatened spectacled eider (*Somateria fischeri*) and in five areas for the Steller's eider. Such designations are intended to ensure that any actions permitted, funded, or conducted by federal agencies will not adversely modify habitat necessary for the conservation of the eiders.

An example of the progress in recovery of Alaska's threatened and endangered species came in March 2001, when the Aleutian Canada goose (*Branta canadensis leucopareia*) was delisted. With the cooperative efforts of many federal and state agencies and private landowners, particularly in

controlling nonnative Arctic foxes (*Alopex lagopus*) on the nesting islands, the goose has recovered from fewer than 1,000 individuals in 1975 to more than 37,000 today.

The American peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) was declared recovered and was delisted in 1999. After delisting, resource agencies are required to monitor a species' condition for at least 5 years to ensure that population declines do not recur. Post-recovery monitoring of the falcon in Alaska is being conducted primarily on Yukon-Charley NPP with funding provided by the U.S. Air Force. (See *Endangered Species Bulletin* Vol. XXVI, No. 1.) The gray whale, delisted in this part of its range in 1994, is not currently the focus of monitoring efforts.

Alaska's great size and few residents have kept most species off the endangered species list. With the increased tourism and residential growth, Alaska will be the best test of our ability to manage wildlife properly.

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Steller sea lions
Photo © Craig Johnson

Humpback whale
Corel Corp. photo

