

W I L D L I F E



V I E W I N G

An Introduction to Yukon Birds





Pacific Loon, J. Jantunen

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Cover illustration of Common Redpoll by Misha Donohoe.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps like no other wildlife, birds stir passion and interest in humans. Birds can be found just about anywhere in Yukon, from wind-swept mountain peaks to quiet lake shores. A single eagle soaring overhead, thousands of swans honking noisily, a Boreal Chickadee puffed up against the cold winter air—these sights are but a few of the special experiences birds provide for us. The first section of this booklet will introduce you to the world of Yukon birds. Birdwatching or “birding” information is provided in section two. The final section describes common Yukon birds, grouped by the habitat they are usually found in. With over 300 species documented in the territory, not all could be included. We hope this introduction will lead you to further learning and discovery of Yukon birds.

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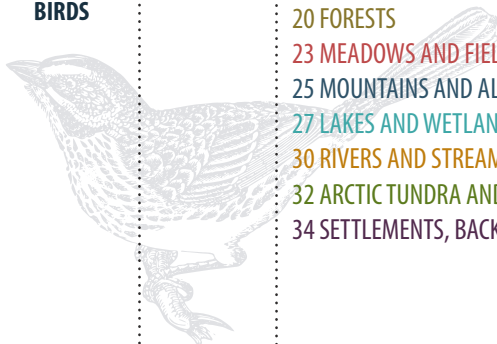
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ALL ABOUT YUKON BIRDS

What is a bird?

A bird is an animal with a back bone and feathers. Believed to have evolved from dinosaurs, there are nearly 10,000 species of birds in the world today. All birds share the same basic physical traits: a rigid beak with no teeth, two wings, strong hind legs, and a relatively long neck and short tail. Scientists have classified all birds into a group called Aves.

Birds and Yukon First Nations

Birds feature prominently in the cultural history of Yukon First Nations people. The hunting of waterbirds, grouse, and ptarmigan for food continues to this day.

Downy feathers were used for insulation and comfort in blankets and pillows. Other feathers and bones were used for ceremonial and decorative purposes.



Common Raven, C. Eckert

Birds are also central to many stories told by Yukon First Nations people. Common Raven, or “Crow”, is often described as the Creator, the transformer, and the trickster.





Greater White-fronted Geese, C. Eckert

Migration

The seasonal mass movement of birds (and other animals) is called migration. Hundreds of species of North American birds migrate each year.

Why do so many birds move around so much?



How do they know when it's time?

Scientists think combinations of changes in day length and temperature, genetic differences, and shifting food availability are what trigger birds to migrate.

A Nesting locations: Many species come north to breed, where they find their special habitats required for nest-building. When fall approaches, these birds and their offspring begin the return journey south.

B Food: Food, especially insects, is plentiful in the North and new-born birds grow quickly with this abundant nourishment.

Yukon is home to spectacular spring bird migrations. April is the waterbirds: swans, ducks, and geese. These birds gather by the thousands to rest and feed at limited open water sites in the Southern Lakes region. Early May brings flights of Sandhill Cranes following the Tintina Trench diagonally across the territory, southeast to northwest. Tens or even hundreds of thousands of cranes pass over the communities of Faro and Ross River. Later in May, shorebirds, warblers, and sparrows show up in large numbers; some will continue another 1,000 km to distant nesting grounds in the far North.

Yukon birds can be classified based on when they spend their time here.

Migrants

Spend part of the year in the territory, usually the spring and summer. Most of our birds, about 87 per cent, are considered migrants. April and May are exciting months for birding, as most Yukon migrants are on the move.



Yellow Warbler, C. Eckert

Residents

These hardy birds live year-round in Yukon. While many birds can withstand freezing winter temperatures, finding food is the real challenge. This is why warblers, which eat mostly insects, must migrate south for the winter. In contrast, finches, such as redpolls and crossbills, eat mainly seeds. These birds find nourishment in our spruce forests and backyard feeders.

ADAPTIONS

Feathers

Perhaps the most obvious feature of birds is their feathers. Found on no other living animal today, feathers are a link to a distant ancestor of birds—dinosaurs! Feathers are made of keratin, a stiff protein that also forms the basis of scales, claws, and even human fingernails. They serve many important functions for birds—protection from weather and the environment, communication with potential mates, camouflage from predators, and contributing to flight.

Feather type	Important for
Down & semiplumes	Insulation
Contour	Social displays, protection, waterproofing, and streamlining
Flight	Providing lift and control in the air (stiffest and largest feathers)



Feathers only comprise 5-10 per cent of a bird's total weight, yet are still two to three times heavier than its ultralight skeleton!



Rough-legged Hawk, C. Eckert

Flight

Self-powered flight is rare among animals with a backbone. Birds, bats, and the extinct pterosaurs are the only vertebrates ever able to fly using flapping wings. Many physical adaptations allow birds to fly.

Light-weight skeleton

Most bird bones are pneumatic—having spaces filled with air, which are sometimes linked to the bird's lungs.

Breathing

In addition to lungs, birds have up to nine air sacs throughout their bodies. Air flows through the system only one-way, not like the in-out movement of air in mammals. This system is very efficient; it delivers oxygen during inhalation and exhalation. This allows birds to fly in low-oxygen environments, such as during high-altitude migrations.



Anna's Hummingbird, C. Eckert

Circulation

With the highest blood pressures of any vertebrate, bird hearts and blood vessels are particularly strong. Flying requires large, constant delivery of energy, oxygen, and nutrients to muscles. A bird's circulatory system has evolved to meet these needs.

REPRODUCTION

Mating

Some of the most interesting aspects of birds—their bright feathers, beautiful songs, and intricate movements—are central to successful mating and reproduction. Males compete with each other to win the favour of females, who assess the subtle differences in their potential mates before making a decision.

Colourful males—“the brighter, the better”—are often preferred by females. Males also sing intricate songs to attract a mate—our warblers and sparrows are good examples.

However, the Sharp-tailed Grouse found around Dawson and southwestern Yukon put on the best show. Mating occurs at communal sites called “leks”—part dance floor, part battle ground. Males fight with each other, often and violently. They also engage in elaborate dances with rapid foot-stomping and tail rattling. Their yellow eye combs swell and a purple air sac on the neck inflates—all to convince a female to mate.



Sharp-tailed Grouse, C. Eckert

Nests and eggs



Birds build nests in a variety of types and sizes. Some species, such as Common Nighthawks, simply lay their eggs on the ground. In contrast, Bald Eagles build large nests of sticks, typically 1.5 – 1.8 metres across. Cliff Swallows build their nests from mud pellets they painstakingly place to form an enclosed structure with an entrance hole.



C. Eckert

Eggs are incubated by one or both parents. The timing of hatching varies by species and region in the territory. American Robin chicks are expected by early June in southern Yukon. Young Boreal Owls hatch as soon as early May.

Young

Some birds are born prepared for survival in their new world; others are completely dependent on their parents.

Precocial	Altricial
Fairly independent	Completely dependent on parents for survival
Have down feathers	Featherless
Able to regulate body temperature well	Not able to keep warm
Well-developed muscles	Blind
Examples: ducks and shorebirds	Examples: warblers, sparrows, and thrushes

FOOD AND EATING

Like all mammals, including humans, birds are “warm-blooded”. Scientists use the term “endothermic” to refer to animals that produce heat inside their bodies. Food is the raw fuel for this heat production.

Birds in Yukon eat a wide variety of food: insects, seeds, berries, fish, mammals and even other birds.

A bird’s bill (beak) provides clues to its preferred food:



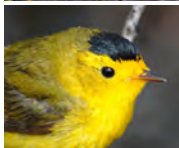
Shorebirds have long, narrow bills for plucking insects and other invertebrates out of sand and mud.



Finches have short, thick beaks for cracking open seeds and nuts.



Raptors have strong, hooked bills for tearing open prey.



Warblers and swallows have fine, pointed bills for catching insects in flight and gleaning them off vegetation.

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Gleaning: Careful, meticulous picking of food from a surface such as a tree, branch, grass or leaves.

CALLS, SONGS AND SOUNDS

Birds use sounds to communicate with each other. For humans, these sounds are often useful in locating and identifying birds that would otherwise go undetected.

Birds are capable of producing an astounding array of sounds—up to 33 different categories have been used to describe the vocalizations of the Common Raven alone. The syrinx is the organ that produces vocal sounds in birds.

Songs

Loud, long, and repeated, songs are used to attract a mate or defend a territory. Both sexes may sing; however, among Yukon songbirds, it is the male song that is most often heard.



White-throated Sparrow, C. Eckert

Calls

Shorter and simpler than a song, calls can communicate many things between birds. For example, calls are used to maintain proper spacing in a flock of flying birds, warn of predators, and invite offspring to a food source.

Non-vocal sounds

Birds produce sounds in non-vocal ways as well. Woodpeckers drum during the mating season, often on hard, percussive surfaces like utility poles and chimneys. This drumming is thought to have a similar purpose to songs: courtship or territory defense.

The male Common Nighthawk makes an impressive “booming” sound during steep dives at females or threats. The sound is produced by air rushing through the long flight feathers on the ends of its wings.



Hairy Woodpecker, J. Jantunen

BIRDING BASICS

How to identify a bird

While simply watching birds is a pleasant pastime, many people wish to know the names of birds they see. Identifying what you are looking at can lead to more learning and discovery about the world of Yukon birds.

Over 300 species of birds have been documented here; almost 200 of these are known to breed in the territory. Luckily, you can narrow down the possibilities by focusing on four key things:

- 1 Size and shape:** Start here and focus on the bird's silhouette. You can judge the size of the bird by comparing it to a bird you know well. Is it bigger or smaller than a robin? Than a raven? Also examine the size and shape of body parts: the bill (beak), tail, wings and legs can all aid in identification. Size and shape will help you eliminate many possible species and place the bird in a group (e.g., sparrows, warblers, woodpeckers).

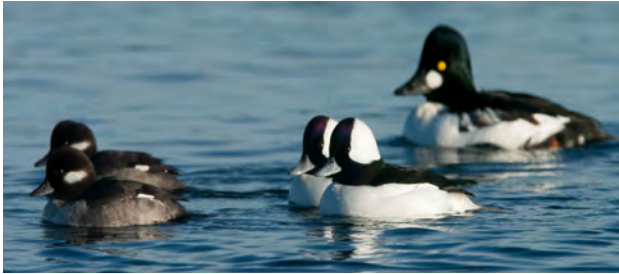


Tennessee Warbler, J. Jantunen



White-throated Sparrow, J. Jantunen

- 2 Colour pattern:** What are the prominent colours, overall, on the bird? Focus on the patterns of light and dark, especially on birds at a distance or viewed in poor light. Patterns are of great value when viewing ducks and other waterbirds.



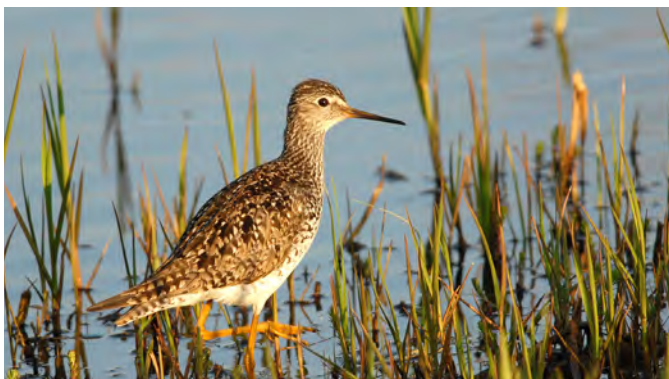
*L-R: Female Buffleheads (2), male Buffleheads (2), and male Common Goldeneye (1)
J. Jantunen*

- 3 Behaviour:** This involves watching the bird carefully, as long as it will let you. Pay attention to its posture, the way it moves on the ground and in the air, and especially how it eats. Swallows snatch their insect prey out of the air during flight, while finches crunch through seeds at rest. Some species, such as Bohemian Waxwing or White-winged Crossbill, are much more likely to form flocks than other more solitary birds, like the Belted Kingfisher.



White-winged Crossbill, J. Jantunen

4 Habitat: Habitat is a bird's home, providing essentials for food, water, shelter, and nesting. Become familiar with the preferences of common birds to help you narrow the choices. Time of year is important too—only about 40 species spend the winter in Yukon. Range maps in field guides also help you judge the likelihood of a species being in your area.



Lesser Yellowlegs, C. Eckert

Sometimes you'll spot a bird that just doesn't seem to match any expected species. It could be an unusual plumage of a familiar species, or a rare wanderer to your area. To hone the identification, make field notes or a sketch, and try to get a photograph. Letting other birders know of rare sightings is a great way to help document a rare species or even a new one for Yukon.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

If you can only bring one thing, bring **binoculars**. Even an inexpensive pair will make your birding excursion more enjoyable. Spotting scopes are also handy, especially for perched or floating birds at a distance.

Field guides will help you identify the birds you see. There are many options: Sibley, National Geographic, Peterson, and others. Compare them at your local bookstore or library, and ask other birders for recommendations.

Checklists tell you which birds are expected in your area, at different times of the year. For regional Yukon checklists, visit: yukonbirds.ca/checklists

A **notebook** is useful for recording birds you see and for making notes and drawings of unknown birds.

Birding apps are the latest tool for identification and tracking. An excellent free app is “Merlin Bird ID” by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, available for iOS and Android devices (merlin.allaboutbirds.org)



BIRD ORGANIZATIONS



YUKON BIRD CLUB

yukonbirds.ca | yukonbirdclub@gmail.com

This charitable, non-profit organization promotes awareness, appreciation, and conservation of Yukon birds and their habitats. The club hosts many free birding field trips each year and moderates the popular Yukon Birds Facebook group.



SOCIETY OF YUKON BIRD OBSERVATORIES

www.yukonbirdobservatories.org |
teslin.bird.banding@gmail.com

Also a non-profit organization, the society is committed to the conservation of migratory birds in western North America. The group operates three seasonal bird banding stations in southern Yukon. The public is welcome to visit the stations and volunteer opportunities exist.



Ducks Unlimited Canada
Canards Illimités Canada

DUCKS UNLIMITED CANADA

www.ducks.ca

A national conservation group, Ducks Unlimited Canada works to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands and grasslands to benefit waterbirds, wildlife, and people. It has been involved in the Swan Haven Interpretive Centre and A Celebration of Swans festival for many years.

FESTIVALS

A CELEBRATION OF SWANS

April to early May | www.env.gov.yk.ca/swans

Yukon's premier birding festival brings residents and visitors alike out to great swan viewing areas to welcome spring to the North. The mass migration of tens of thousands of swans, ducks, and geese is not to be missed. The Swan Haven Interpretive Centre, open daily in April, is the hub of the festival.

CRANE AND SHEEP FESTIVAL

Early May | www.faroyukon.ca

In spring, tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes darken the skies above Faro as they migrate to their breeding grounds in northern Yukon and Alaska. The uniquely coloured Fannin's sheep dot the hillsides around town. This small town hosts a friendly and fun weekend of wildlife discovery.

WEEKEND ON THE WING

Early June | www.env.gov.yk.ca/tombstone

Summers are short in Tombstone country, but the birding is marvelous. Join a group hike to search for rare Yukon species including Surfbird, Long-tailed Jaeger, and Northern Wheatear. The festival is co-hosted by Environment Yukon and Friends of Dempster Country.

ALASKA BALD EAGLE FESTIVAL

November | baldeagles.org

In fall, Bald Eagles gather in large numbers near Haines, Alaska to feed on Chum and Coho salmon. The American Bald Eagle Foundation hosts a week-long celebration of this impressive spectacle.

VIEWING TIPS AND ETIQUETTE

Do:

- Use binoculars, spotting scopes and zoom lenses to get a closer look.
- Sit quietly and slowly scan your surroundings. Watch for movement, shapes, and colours.
- Learn about the habitats different birds prefer and when they use it. Focus your attention on these times and places.
- Keep your distance from nests and nesting areas. Birds are more vulnerable to disturbance during the nesting season (May to July).
- Review the Yukon Bird Club Code of Ethics (yukonbirds.ca).

Safety:

- All of Yukon is bear country. Review bear safety information regularly (www.env.gov.yk.ca/bears).
- Much of the territory is wild and remote. Let family or friends know when your birding adventures will take you off the beaten track, and when you expect to return. Always be prepared for cold and wet weather, pack a first aid kit, and consider carrying a personal locating device (e.g., SPOT, inReach).
- Most hunting seasons for Yukon ungulates (e.g., Moose, Thinhorn Sheep) open August 1 each year. Be respectful of hunters and wear highly visible clothing.

How you can help:

- Keep cats inside. Each year in Canada, hundreds of millions of birds are killed by cats. Even well-fed pets still have the instinct to hunt and kill.
- Record the birds you see in eBird, a real-time, online bird reporting system (ebird.org). You can also submit sightings to the Yukon Conservation Data Centre (867-667-5331, yukoncdc@gov.yk.ca).
- Report wildlife safety concerns and any suspected illegal activity such as polluting, hunting out of season, etc. to the Yukon TIPP Line: 1-800-661-0525.

Found a baby bird? Leave it be; it doesn't need your help. If you are concerned, then leave the bird where it is and call Conservation Officer Services (1-800-661-0525).



Mountain Bluebird, C. Eckert

BIRDS BY HABITAT

Habitat is home for birds and other wildlife, and different species have different preferences and needs. These habitat accounts describe birds commonly found there.

FORESTS

Boreal forest blankets almost 60 per cent of Yukon. Trees and shrubs provide food, shelter and nesting locations for hundreds of species throughout the year. The lush White and Black spruce forests of southeastern Yukon are home to a remarkable array of birdlife.

Northern Goshawk

Accipiter gentilis | resident

Burly and aggressive, the Northern Goshawk lives year-round in mature and old-growth forests across much of the territory. Along with its migratory relative, the much smaller Sharp-shinned Hawk, the goshawk has relatively short wings and a long tail.

The female Northern Goshawk is larger than the male and will fiercely defend her nest site. Keep your distance, as you will be attacked when venturing too close. Be wary of the loud call, a vibrant “kye kye kye.”

Spruce Grouse

Falcapennis canadensis | resident

A thick, stout, chicken-like bird, the Spruce Grouse is one of seven species of grouse and ptarmigan



found in Yukon. Males are impressive, sporting red “combs” above the eyes and a dark tail, tipped with reddish-brown.

The bird is aptly named as it prefers spruce forest habitat, year-round. Its winter diet is almost exclusively needles and buds of spruce trees.

Great Horned Owl

Bubo virginianus | resident

This large, powerful owl is found across Yukon, the entire North American continent, and parts of South America. Listen for its nocturnal hooting, year-round. Two feather tufts on the head—the “horns”—break up a thick, chunky silhouette.



In Yukon, Great Horned Owls eat primarily Snowshoe Hares. However, when hare populations drop, owls will eat many other animals including muskrats, ducks, and even other birds of prey.

Northern Flicker

Colaptes auratus | migrant

An attractive woodpecker, brown with black speckles, the Northern Flicker is as often encountered on the ground as in a tree. In flight, look for a white rump patch and yellow on the underwings (in most of western North America, this bird has red underwings).



The Northern Flicker has a long, barbed tongue, which

it uses to pick ants off the ground. Unlike other Yukon woodpeckers, the Northern Flicker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker migrate south for the winter.

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Setophaga coronata | migrant

Adding a colourful splash to the Yukon spring and summer, the Yellow-rumped Warbler is widespread and by far the most common warbler found here. Bright yellow patches on the rump and sides contrast sharply with black, white, and grey. Males also have some yellow on the top of their heads.

The Yellow-rumped Warbler flits quickly around the forest, eating insects as it goes. It will take prey in mid-air, and also glean from vegetation. The male's song is short and sweet.



Dark-eyed Junco

Junco hyemalis | migrant

This very familiar little sparrow is common throughout our forests and, during migration, can be seen just about anywhere. Look for its pale bill, dark body, and relatively long tail with white outer feathers.



The Dark-eyed Junco hops about the forest floor looking for food. Seeds are the primary source, but they will also eat insects during the breeding season. A few winter at Yukon bird feeders each year.

MEADOWS & FIELDS

Open areas are home to an array of bird life. Some species breed on open ground, others hunt, and some simply pass through on migration.

American Kestrel

Falco sparverius | migrant

The tiniest falcon on the continent, the American Kestrel is a summer visitor to Yukon. Watch for it along roadways, perched on fence posts and telephone wires. Both sexes are striking in appearance; males have slate-blue wings that contrast nicely with a reddish-brown back and tail.



Being small themselves, American Kestrels prey on insects such as grasshoppers and dragonflies, as well as small birds and mammals.

Say's Phoebe

Sayornis saya | migrant

Often seen darting from a perch to grab an insect morsel, the Say's Phoebe is fairly common throughout the territory. It is plain but distinctive—look for its rusty belly, pale grey wings, and black tail to distinguish it from other flycatchers.



The Say's Phoebe builds a simple nest on a cliff, building, or bridge, usually near a watercourse. One nest was found in an old, abandoned truck along the North Canal Road.

Cliff Swallow

Petrochelidon pyrrhonota | migrant

One of six species of swallow in Yukon, the Cliff Swallow is often noticed by highway travellers.

While this bird does nest on cliffs, it commonly uses human-made structures as well. Watch for busy flocks darting in and out of bridges and large culverts along Yukon highways.

Swallows are considered “aerial insectivores” meaning they feed while they fly, picking insects from the air. The avian aerobatics on display at nesting sites are impressive.



J. Jantunen

Savannah Sparrow

Passerculus sandwichensis | migrant

A common songbird throughout the Yukon and the rest of North America, the Savannah Sparrow spends most of its time on the ground eating seeds, insects, and spiders. It's a streaky, brown bird with yellow in front of the eye.

Watch your step when walking in fields and meadows—Savannah Sparrows nest on the ground in small cups woven from grasses.



C. Eckert

MOUNTAINS AND ALPINE

Yukon is a hilly place. Mountains ranges span much of the territory from the southern border with B.C. almost to the Beaufort Sea in the north. The treeless tops of mountains are termed “alpine tundra” and provide habitat for many bird species.

Rock Ptarmigan

Lagopus muta | resident

One of three species of ptarmigan in the territory, Rock Ptarmigan is at home in the tundra of Yukon mountains. Its breeding call is a low guttural “aaaaarrrr”, often delivered in flight. This bird, unlike Willow Ptarmigan, keeps its all-white, winter feathers into spring, well after most snow has melted. White-tailed Ptarmigan are usually only found at high elevations and have an all-white tail.



All ptarmigan species roost under the snow to conserve heat in winter.

American Golden-Plover

Pluvialis dominica | migrant

A large, striking shorebird, the American Golden-Plover comes to Yukon each summer to breed on both arctic tundra near the Beaufort Sea, and alpine tundra throughout the territory. Its golden and black speckled back sparkles in the sunlight.



American Golden-Plovers migrate a very long way to arrive in our territory—some birds winter as far south as Chile and Argentina! During the second half of May, these birds are often seen resting and feeding on mudflats and farm fields in southern and central Yukon. They promptly continue on to their nesting grounds to breed and raise young.

American Pipit

Anthus rubescens | migrant

Common in alpine and arctic tundra where it breeds, American Pipit is also commonly seen during spring migration in open habitats such as wetlands, fields, and roadsides. Its white, outer tail feathers can be useful in identification; however, this field mark is shared by Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and Dark-eyed Junco.



The American Pipit forages on the ground for insects and seeds, bobbing its tail as it darts about. Flying birds often produce their namesake call, a high-pitched “pip-it”.

Golden-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia atricapilla | migrant

An attractive alpine songster, the Golden-crowned Sparrow is found in shrubby, stunted forests near the treeline. Adults show a golden-yellow crown that is beautifully bordered by black stripes above the eye.



Dejected miners during the Klondike Gold Rush called this species the “no gold here” bird, referring to its plaintive, three-note song.

LAKES AND WETLANDS

From the sinuous Southern Lakes to the extensive, northern wetlands of Old Crow Flats, Yukon has a rich diversity of wetland habitats. Large and small, our lakes and wetlands provide critical habitat for a host of birds, wildlife, and biodiversity.

American Wigeon

Anas americana | migrant

Arriving in Yukon in early April, the American Wigeon is one of our most common and abundant ducks. The male's bright white forehead and hip-patch are visible from a distance. Up close, its silvery-blue bill and green stripe across the face are stunning in the right light.



J. Jantunen

This dabbling duck breeds across the territory. The male produces a whistling call, reminiscent of a child's squeaky toy. Listen for it at wetlands in spring.

Northern Pintail

Anas acuta | migrant

Long-necked and graceful, the Northern Pintail is a very common duck in the territory. The male's markings are striking and distinctive, but the silhouette alone is often enough to identify either sex.



J. Jantunen

This duck is abundant during spring in the Southern Lakes region—almost 4,000 were counted on April 21, 2015 at M'Clintock Bay on Marsh Lake!

Barrow's Goldeneye

Bucephala islandica | migrant

A stocky diving duck, the Barrow's Goldeneye can be found on various waterbodies during spring migration. A white, crescent-shaped patch is visible on males in front of the eye. The female's bill is bright orange in spring, but soon darkens to a dusky black in the nesting season.



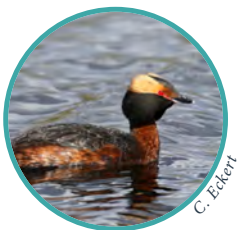
C. Eckert

A large portion of the world population of Barrow's Goldeneye breeds in the territory. Old Crow Flats in northern Yukon hosts thousands of individuals each June as they gather to moult (drop and grow new feathers).

Horned Grebe

Podiceps auritus | migrant

Common throughout southern Yukon, the Horned Grebe is outrageously flashy in the breeding season. Both sexes have piercing, red eyes and bright yellow “horns”—feather patches that can be manipulated by the bird.



C. Eckert

Look closely at swimming grebes—you may see tiny chicks catching a ride on the parent's back. Of the five species of grebe found in Yukon, the Horned and the Red-necked are the most common by far.

Lesser Yellowlegs

Tringa flavipes | migrant

A common, long-legged shorebird, the Lesser Yellowlegs is found during summer near ponds, wetlands, or in open, boggy forest. Our many shorebirds can be very difficult to identify. Start with size and shape, in particular the length of the bill and legs.



The young of Lesser Yellowlegs are raised by both parents. The female often leaves the family first, with the male staying to defend the chicks until they can fly.

Rusty Blackbird

Euphagus carolinus | migrant

With a song like a squeaky hinge, the Rusty Blackbird's voice is more conspicuous than its appearance. In spring the male is a sleek iridescent black, while in fall all birds show a rich rusty-brown head and may be mistaken for Brown-headed Cowbird. Search for this bird in flooded woods, marshes, and along pond edges.



Rusty Blackbird populations across North America have plummeted at an alarming rate—scientists estimate decreases of 85 – 99 per cent over the past four decades. Please report sightings of this bird (see **Viewing Tips and Etiquette** for ways to report).

RIVERS AND STREAMS

Travelling by canoe down a Yukon river is a superb way to spot birds and other wildlife.

Spotted Sandpiper

Actitis macularius | migrant

With its constantly bobbing tail and teetering movements, the Spotted Sandpiper is frequently spotted by canoeists along Yukon riverbanks and lakeshores. In breeding season, the adult's white belly and sides are darkly spotted.



Male Spotted Sandpipers take a lead role in parenting, including incubating eggs and caring for young chicks. Females will sometimes mate with multiple males, with each father caring for a separate group of eggs.

Mew Gull

Larus canus | migrant

Our most common and widespread gull, the Mew Gull is found on lakes and rivers, and also in alpine areas and settlements. Gull species can be challenging to distinguish, so pay careful attention to the size and colour of the eye, bill, and legs. Mew Gulls have an all-yellow bill and legs, a creamy white head, chest and belly, and bold black and white wing tips.



Mew Gull pairs nest in groups called colonies. Simple cup-shaped nests are built on the ground or in a tree, depending on the site.

Belted Kingfisher

Megasceryle alcyon | migrant

With its blocky head topped with a spiky crest, the Belted Kingfisher cuts a fine figure as it flies along rivers and shorelines. In addition to the powder blue and white feathers, females sport a rusty band across the belly.



Belted Kingfishers deserve their name—they eat mostly small fish. The bird hunts from a perch overhanging the water or by hovering in mid-air. When it spots a fish, the Belted Kingfisher plunges into the water, seizing the prey using its thick, sturdy bill. Listen for its noisy, rattling call.

American Dipper

Cinclus mexicanus | resident

A delight to watch as it hunts, the American Dipper catches small fish and insects underwater in Yukon creeks and streams. Its shape is similar to a thrush or robin, with grey feathers all over.



Watch for American Dippers plunging into icy water, year-round, in pursuit of prey. On rocky shorelines they constantly bob their bodies up and down.

ARCTIC TUNDRA AND COASTAL

The northern coastal tundra is teeming with life in the short, intense arctic summer. This is critical breeding habitat for countless birds each year. The Arctic is a challenging place to visit, but the effort and expense can lead to exceptional and rewarding experiences.

Snow Goose

Chen caerulescens | migrant

While only a handful are seen during spring migration, the Snow Goose masses by the hundreds of thousands in late summer on the coastal tundra of northern Yukon. Few people see this spectacle, but it is one of Yukon's most impressive natural events.



C. Eckert

In flight a Snow Goose looks like a small swan with black wing tips. They are voracious vegetarians, eating many different plants, and just about any part of the plant. As well, small pets and unattended children may be at risk from this apex predator goose.

Rough-legged Hawk

Buteo lagopus | migrant

Often seen perched on roadside poles during spring migration, the Rough-legged Hawk is at home on coastal tundra during the brief Yukon summer. Some individuals are lighter in colour, overall. These “light morph” birds show mostly white undersides with a dark belly and wrist patches.



C. Eckert

Herschel Island is an important nesting area for Rough-legged Hawks in Yukon. The female builds a bulky stick nest on the edge of a cliff or river bank with materials collected mostly by the male. Sometimes caribou bones are included in the building materials.

Long-tailed Jaeger

Stercorarius longicaudus | migrant

A graceful bird that spends most of its life at sea, the Long-tailed Jaeger breeds on open tundra in northern and central Yukon. The two central tail feathers extend well past its tail and flow gracefully in flight.



C. Eckert

As some Long-tailed Jaegers nest in alpine tundra along the Dempster Highway, Yukon is one of the best places in North America to see this beautiful seabird. Two other jaeger species (Pomarine and Parasitic) also occur along Yukon's Arctic Coast.

Lapland Longspur

Calcarius lapponicus | migrant

The most common breeding bird on our coastal tundra, the Lapland Longspur is frequently seen in southern Yukon during April and early May, sometimes in flocks of thousands. Its thick, yellow bill contrasts with a black throat and face.



C. Eckert

Even with the 24-hours of arctic daylight, males seem to sing most in early morning.

SETTLEMENTS, BACKYARDS AND FEEDERS

Easy, year-round access and serendipitous discovery are but a few advantages to birding in your own backyard. Winter in particular is an excellent season for in-town birding. Keeping a “yard list” is a great way to track the seasonal comings and goings of birds.

Black-capped Chickadee

Poecile atricapillus | resident

Cute and chirpy, the Black-capped Chickadee is common throughout southern Yukon. Its round black and white head and black throat is a familiar sight at backyard bird feeders.



C. Eckert

The Black-capped Chickadee prefers deciduous trees and shrubs. The Boreal Chickadee is widespread in spruce forests across the territory.

Bohemian Waxwing

Bombycilla garrulus | resident

Flamboyantly handsome, the Bohemian Waxwing is commonly seen in winter feeding on berries around towns. Its reddish under-tail distinguishes it from the less common Cedar Waxwing.



C. Eckert

The Bohemian Waxwing often forms large flocks of hundreds of birds in fall and winter. Their gentle, trilling call often announces their arrival at a berry-laden tree.

American Tree Sparrow

Spizelloides arborea | resident

A plump sparrow with a long, thin tail, the American Tree Sparrow arrives early in the Yukon spring and leaves late in the fall. A rusty patch caps the grey head—beware the similar-looking, and often seen, Chipping Sparrow.



American Tree Sparrows are ground birds, foraging for food and nesting there. They are commonly seen during migration in communities and shrubby wetlands.

White-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys | migrant

Among the most common backyard birds during spring migration, the White-crowned Sparrow is found across the territory. The adult's bold black and white head stripes are especially eye-catching.



The male White-crowned Sparrow sings a sweet, whistling song. It has been extensively studied by scientists and is a familiar sound of spring in Yukon.



Concerned about birds colliding with your windows? Not sure what to do? FLAP Canada can help: www.flap.org

Pine Grosbeak

Pinicola enucleator | resident

A large and beautiful finch, the Pine Grosbeak is frequently seen at backyard feeders in winter. Males are coloured a lovely pinkish-red at maturity, but resemble the plainer grey females when young.



During breeding, adult Pine Grosbeaks develop small pouches in the bottom of their mouths. The pouches are used to carry insects, spiders, and other food to their young.

Common Redpoll

Acanthis flammea | resident

Busy and active, the Common Redpoll is familiar in winter and early-spring around town. Its short, stubby bill and red forehead patch are noticeable on perched birds.



Common Redpolls are often seen at feeders with other finches. Watch for the less common Hoary Redpoll—paler overall with less streaking on its sides.

TO LEARN MORE

Links

- www.env.gov.yk.ca/birds
- www.yukonbirds.ca
- www.yukonbirdobservatories.org
- www.ducks.ca
- www.allaboutbirds.org
- www.macaulaylibrary.org
- www.flap.org

Apps

- Merlin Bird ID (Cornell Lab of Ornithology): merlin.allaboutbirds.org
- eBird (Cornell Lab of Ornithology): ebird.org

Books

- *Birds of the Yukon Territory* (2003).
Pamela H. Sinclair [et al.]
- *Tingmiłuit: A Guide to the Birds of the Yukon North Slope* (2016).
Wildlife Management Advisory Council (North Slope)
- *The Cornell Lab of Ornithology Handbook of Bird Biology, 3rd Edition* (2016).
Irby J. Lovette and John W. Fitzpatrick



Northern Wheatear, J. Jantunen

A migration like no other

The Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) is a small songbird with a big travel history. Like many species, it comes to Yukon to breed each summer. Winters, however, are spent in sub-Saharan Africa! Its migration path crosses Alaska, the Bering Strait, Asia, and the Middle East—a one-way journey of some 21,000 km.

The Dempster Highway is an excellent area to see the Northern Wheatear. It breeds in rocky tundra in late May and June. It is sobering to think that twice a year this tiny bird survives a journey halfway around the planet.

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