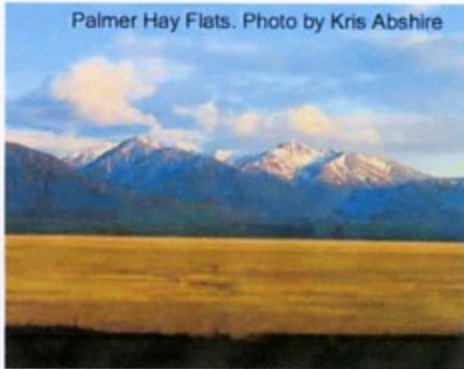


BIRDING IN MAT-SU

PALMER HAY FLATS STATE GAME REFUGE



Palmer Hay Flats. Photo by Kris Abshire

Where: Primary access is from Hayfield Road via K From Wasilla take Knik Goode Bay Rd 4.1 mile. Turn left on Fairview Loop Rd. Go 1.9 miles. Go straight ahead onto Hayfield Rd

From the Parks Hwy: Take the Hyer Rd exit. Turn right onto E. Fireweed Lane. Take first left onto Fairview Loop Rd. Continue 9 miles. Turn left onto Hayfield Rd. Follow Hayfield Road about 1.3 miles. Lucy Lake Road on the right, the Hay Flats access road on the left, and a Palmer Hay Flats Refuge sign on the right. Drive 0.4 miles down to the parking lot.

What: This estuary is one of the most productive waterfowl stopover and nesting areas accessible in south central Alaska. It is an important migratory stopover for large numbers of ducks, geese, swans and Sandhill Cranes, as well as shorebirds. A variety of raptors such as Northern Harrier, Rough-legged Hawk and Short-eared Owl can be seen regularly during migration with some nesting as well. Warblers, sparrows, longspurs, thrushes and other songbirds also frequent the area.

Some species that occur in the Hay Flats have special conservation status including Trumpeter Swan and Rusty Blackbird. International BirdLife and National Audubon Society nominated the Refuge as an Important Bird Area (IBA). A very rare Sora Rail was observed for a few consecutive years in the spring.

Note: Knee boots or hip waders are often necessary if you proceed onto the Flats.

REFLECTIONS LAKE

Where: Mile 30 of the Glenn Highway. Exit at the Knik River Access off-ramp. North bound turn left under the overpass then left on the frontage road that proceeds towards the Knik River. South bound proceed straight ahead on the frontage road. Park at the maintenance road on the right. This quiet lake at the confluence of Knik and Matanuska Rivers offers year round stunning views, and an easy 1-mile walk around the lake



Reflections Lake by Kris Abshire

What: Numerous species of waterfowl including Trumpeter Swan, American Wigeon, Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Canvasback, Redhead, and Barrow's Goldeneye frequent the lake as well as Pacific Loon, Red-necked Grebe and several species of shorebirds. The surrounding diverse woodlands and wetlands provide excellent habitat for woodpeckers, chickadees, warblers, kinglets, flycatchers, thrushes, sparrows, finches and Rusty Blackbirds.

Note: Both Palmer Hay Flats and Reflection Lake are part of the Palmer Hay Flats State Refuge. Managed by Alaska Department of Fish & Game. A local citizens group, Alaskans for Palmer Hay flats, is dedicated to its preservation. (www.palmerhayflats.org).

BIRDING IN MAT-SU

GUNSIGHT MOUNTAIN HAWKWATCH SHEEP MOUNTAIN FLYWAY

Where: Glenn Highway roadside from Matanuska Glacier to Eureka Roadhouse.

Each spring from late March through early May birders gather at the pullouts along the Glenn Highway in the vicinity of Gunsight Mountain (about five miles before reaching the Eureka Road House). The big Hawkwatch Weekend is generally the 3rd weekend in April @ the Mile 118.5 pullout. Anchorage Audubon hosts Saturday and Mat-Su Birder have a pot luck BBQ on Sunday



Golden Eagles return to the area in late March.

Twelve additional raptor species pass through, with the heaviest flights occurring the last two weeks of April. In March 2006, 220 Golden Eagles were counted in 2.5 hours – a record-setting flight! Observers generally watch every weekend and some weekdays - weather permitting.

What: This is a diverse region that spans two primary life zones – South Central Alaska woodlands/alpine and Interior Alaska taiga forest. It is an important raptor migration flyway in April. The small lakes in the area can have large numbers of migrating waterfowl at breakup in May. Most land birds known to occur in South Central and Interior Alaska including songbirds, raptors and a good number of swans can be found here. Many species of waterfowl, marsh and boreal songbirds, hawks and owls nest here.

Several species found here have special conservation status including Rusty Blackbird, Townsend's Warbler, Olive-sided Flycatcher and Blackpoll Warbler. Sheep Mountain is an Important Bird Area (IBA) as designated by International BirdLife and National Audubon. Difficult to find species that regularly occur here during one or more seasons include Arctic Warbler, Gyrfalcon, White-winged Crossbill, Northern Hawk Owl, long tailed duck.

MATANUSKA RIVER PARK



Where: Traveling east on the Old Glenn Highway in downtown Palmer, before crossing the Matanuska River Bridge, turn left into the Park.

What: The park's woodlands harbor warblers, sparrows, thrushes, flycatchers, ducks in the small woodland stream, and woodpeckers. There are several trails for hiking in the summer (or skiing in the winter) that loop through the area and to the river where you may find Bald Eagles, waterfowl (including common merganser) and gulls.

BIRDING IN MAT-SU

PALMER AIRPORT FIELD:

As you leave Matanuska River Park and return to Palmer, check the field on the left (south) side of the road just before re-entering Palmer. This field is especially good in the spring and fall for staging geese and Sandhill Cranes. Check any of the open fields in and around the Palmer area for migratory waterfowl.

OLD MATANUSKA TOWNSITE



Where: Driving south on the Glenn Highway from Palmer, turn left at mile 36.5 directly across from the Kepler-Bradley State Recreation Area. As you come down the hill from the Glenn Hwy, there is a pullout to the right where you can park. The town of Matanuska originally occupied this area. Walking down the road, you cross Spring Creek and a set of railroad tracks. Walk the road and bird the marshy habitat on the left.

What: Much of the original town site is flooded and offers bog, slough, thickets and wooded habitat for nesting and migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, sparrows, warblers, thrushes, swallows and flycatchers. Osprey, Bald Eagle and Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk are often seen and it's a good place to listen for owls in February and March. This is a great place to see Wilson's Snipe performing their mating ritual flight display known as "winnowing" as stiffened outer tail feathers produce a pulsing whistling sound as they go into steep glides. Bald Eagles, Osprey and Belted Kingfishers are often seen.

Note: The property at the end of the road is private as are the RR tracks. RR employees are strict about enforcing the no-trespass policy.

NANCY LAKE STATE RECREATION AREA

Where: Travel north on the Parks Highway from Wasilla. North of Houston at milepost 67.3 turn left at the brown sign for the State Recreation Area onto Nancy Lake Parkway. Bird along the 6.5 mile parkway, on foot trails or by canoe throughout the extensive canoe system. Contact Alaska State Parks for information on trails, boating and public use cabins. The ranger office is at mile 1.3 of the parkway.



Brown Creeper Photo by Doug Lloyd

What: Primarily wooded rolling terrain, some bog habitat and lots of lakes and ponds. Good for migratory and nesting waterfowl (including Common and Pacific Loon), and woodland songbirds and raptors. Good location to listen for Boreal, Northern Saw-Whet and Great Horned Owls in February and March. Blackpoll Warbler is reliably found here and also other warblers, sparrows, and thrushes. A good place to find Ruffed and Spruce Grouse.

BIRDING IN MAT-SU

JIM-SWAN WETLANDS AREA

Where: Follow the Old Glenn Highway from Palmer across the Matanuska River to Maud Road (2.5 miles after crossing the river). Turn left onto Maud. Travel about 2 miles.

Continue about 2.5 more miles on the rough gravel road and turn into the large parking area on the right. (Might need 4 wheel drive in early spring) Mud Lake is a short walk down the hill. Or drive another 1.5 miles to the end of the main road. A short road leads to the right to Jim Lake. A woodland trail (Rippy Trail) starts here and continues to the southeast paralleling the wetlands. This trail offers woodland birding and views of the swamp, alpine meadows and cliffs and Knik Glacier. There are canoe and small boat launch sites at both lakes so birders can bird by boat throughout the wetlands.



Mud Lake by Bob Winckler

What: A diverse area of interconnected lakes, bogs, anadromous streams, wooded uplands and alpine habitat on the north side of the Knik River. Drainage off the south-facing slope warms the wetlands and often provides the only ice-free staging area for early arriving and late departing swans. The area provides nesting and/or migratory staging habitat for over 20 species of waterfowl, a wide variety of songbirds, upland game birds and raptors. Shorebirds are observed in relatively small numbers. Check the cliffs for Dell Sheep and Golden Eagles.

Species difficult to find in other areas of the borough are reliably found here such as Song Sparrow, Townsend's Warbler, American Kestrel, Golden Eagle and Hammond's Flycatcher. Some species that occur regularly have special conservation status including Trumpeter Swan, Rusty Blackbird, Townsend's Warbler, Olive-sided Flycatcher, White-winged Crossbill and Blackpoll Warbler. The Jim-Swan area is an Important Bird Area (IBA) of state significance as designated by International BirdLife and National Audubon.

Note: Jim-Swan area is part of the Knik River Public Use Area managed by Alaska Department of Natural Resources

BIRDING IN MAT-SU

HATCHER PASS



Where: Drive north about a mile from Palmer on the Glenn Highway. Turn left onto Palmer Fishhook Road. At 8.6 miles, this road crosses the Little Susitna River and turns into the Hatcher Pass Road. The road follows the gorgeous Little Susitna River in the lowlands for a few miles, and then rapidly ascends into the alpine.

What: The brushy areas along both sides of the road have warblers, sparrows, thrushes and finches in spring and summer. In spring, the otherwise difficult to find Harlequin Duck is common along the river and in the beaver ponds between the road and the river. American Dipper, Common Merganser can be found in the fast moving streams with a little effort. White-tailed, Willow and Rock Ptarmigan live throughout this area although not reliably in any one location. For your best chance at seeing ptarmigan, be alert when driving the road, or try hiking Gold Mint Trail, the bowl around Independence Mine, or anywhere along Archangel Road. Winter snowshoeing or skiing in these areas are often productive for ptarmigan as well. Golden Eagles and Gyrfalcons nest in the alpine regions; Merlins at lower elevations. Other difficult to find species that occur in the Hatcher Pass area (in their preferred habitat) include Say's Phoebe, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Gray-crowned Rosy Finches and Wandering Tattlers.

For more information,

Refer to the American Birding Association's, "A Birder's Guide to Alaska" by George C. West.

Report Alaska sightings to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/akbirding>.

Contact Mat-Su Birders, a local wild bird club at: msbirder@mtaonline.net, or visit our website at: <http://www.matsubirders.org>.