

Jim DeWitt and Brad Andres

YAKUTAT

The village of Yakutat is located on the Yakutat Foreland, a varied lowland habitat located immediately east of Yakutat Bay. It is spectacularly surrounded by glaciers—Malaspina Glacier, on the west side of Yakutat Bay, is larger than the states of Rhode Island and Delaware combined—and glacial peaks, including 18,008-foot Mount Saint Elias. Although the area has not been intensively birded, it may be as important a rest area for birds as its more famous neighbor, the Copper River delta. In addition, Yakutat Bay is large enough to support pelagic species, while the adjoining Situk River supports extravagant numbers of fish, attracting a wide range of fish-eating birds. A decent road system in the village and surrounding Tongass National Forest makes access to a variety of habitats fairly straightforward.

Yakutat is probably best known for its fishing. The adjoining Russell Fiord Wilderness Area and spectacular Hubbard Glacier are also attractions.

Roads generally don't have signs, but there aren't enough roads to let you get lost very easily. Following are a few interesting birding areas.

LOST RIVER/SITUK DELTA ROAD

From the Yakutat Airport, follow the main highway toward the town itself. A short distance past Situk Leasing, turn left onto a road leading to the Lost River and the mouth of the Situk River. The road winds through second-growth forest and wet meadows around the margin of the Yakutat Airport, on its way to the mouth of the Situk River and Ahnkin Lagoon. During spring migration, the wet meadows and roadsides can have hundreds of flycatchers, thrushes, and sparrows. Birders have seen Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Great Horned Owl, and Short-eared Owl hunting in the wet meadows where Lincoln's Sparrows and Short-billed Dowitchers nest.

At the Situk River mouth, park in the designated parking areas and walk downriver to the north shore of Ahnkin Lagoon. Pulses of young salmon come down the Situk River all spring and summer and attract amazing numbers of fish-eating birds. Black, White-winged, and Surf Scoters, Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, Double-crested and Pelagic Cormorants, Great Blue Heron, Bald Eagle, Bonaparte's, Mew, Herring, Glaucous-winged,

Glaucous, and Sabine's Gulls, and Arctic and Aleutian Terns congregate to forage on the smolt moving downstream.

In migration, thousands of Greater White-fronted and Snow Geese along with Sandhill Cranes pass through and thousands of shorebirds feed on the mudflats in the lagoon, especially Marbled Godwit, Western and Least Sandpipers, Dunlin, and Short-billed Dowitcher. Upstream from the landing, along the Lower Situk River Trail to the weir, and particularly in the old-growth forest, you may find Northern Saw-whet Owl, Hairy Woodpecker, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Hermit and Varied Thrushes, and Red Crossbill. Along the lower Situk River itself, watch for Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, Great Blue Heron, Belted Kingfisher, and Spotted, Solitary, Western, and Least Sandpipers.

CANNON BEACH ROAD

From the airport, drive toward Yakutat; turn left at unsigned Cannon Beach Road 0.25 mile from the airport. About 1.3 miles south along the road stop on the north side of the bridge across the slough. The ponds and slough are usually worth a look where Common Yellowthroat, Song Sparrow, and Red-winged Blackbird can be found. Limited parking is available on the north side of the bridge. Or, you can continue across the bridge to the Forest Service day-use area and walk back. Beyond the day-use area is the beach, extending to the west to Yakutat and east to the Lost River delta. This is the Gulf of Alaska, and the surf can be huge. Sometimes you might encounter surfers in dry-suits, riding the big waves. Closer in, you can find Sanderlings and other shorebirds. The big spruce trees along the beach can have almost any migrant during migration. Varied Thrushes sing in the mossy forest. Hairy Woodpecker, Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Wilson's Warbler forage here.

FOREST SERVICE ROAD (FR 10)

FR 10 is the longest road around Yakutat. There can be a fair amount of traffic between downtown Yakutat and the Situk River bridge. Beyond the bridge it is quieter.

From the airport, drive into town, past Ophir Creek and the municipal generator. FR 10 heads off to your right. If you come to the railroad engine, you missed the turn. FR 10 passes through a subdivided area, where many homeowners maintain hummingbird feeders. Beyond the subdivided areas the road travels in a straight line through some clearcuts for several miles. Just before the curve, scan the wet meadows on both sides of the road for Wilson's Snipe, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Orange-

crowned Warbler. Anything from Bald Eagles to Northern Harriers to Rufous Hummingbirds to Ruby-crowned Kinglets can turn up here. A half mile past the only curve is the Situk River bridge. If there aren't too many fishermen around, scan the river for Harlequin Duck, Common Merganser, and other river ducks. Winter Wren and Varied Thrush are usually singing. Red-breasted Sapsucker, Osprey, and Bald Eagle nest along the river.

Beyond the Situk River bridge the road is sometimes in poor condition. You will travel through the mixed forests and wetlands to the road's end at the Dangerous River. At the end of the road breeding Gray-cheeked Thrushes can be found and Vancouver Canada Geese breed at Harlequin Lake. Northern Pygmy-Owls have been seen along this road. Watch for Brown Bears in this area.

OPHIR CREEK ROAD

From the airport, drive west toward town. You'll cross Ophir Creek right at the first curve. Just across the bridge, Ophir Creek Road bears left (south) toward the beach. The trail winds through a mixed forest, along small lakes and a few small clearcuts. Mixed flocks of passerines rest here in the spring. You can see hundreds of Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets and equal numbers of thrushes. Western Screech-Owls have been heard along this road and Trumpeter Swans nest on ponds near the ocean.

MONTI BAY

Monti Bay, on the southeast side of Yakutat Bay, supports large mixed flocks of gulls, including Bonaparte's, Mew, Trayer's, Herring, Glaucous-winged, Glaucous, and Sabine's (migration only). Yellow-billed Loons are common summer residents and Caspian Terns have been increasing in numbers here. Ocean storms can push lots of Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels and phalaropes into the bay. The rocky shores of the islands that protect the bay usually have a few Black Oystercatchers, Surfbirds, and Wandering Tattlers during migration. The best views of Monti Bay are from the hills around the village, or from the small-boat harbor. You can get still better views from the bay itself by chartering with one of the many fishing guides. The guides know the waters, but usually don't know the birds very well.

YAKUTAI BAY

Yakutat Bay is big, wide open to the Gulf of Alaska, and can have fairly rough water. On the other hand, it is stunningly beautiful in good weather, and along its length offers an impressive array of birds. At the southern end you can find pelagic species, including Northern Fulmar, Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwaters, and Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel. Less common but still possible

are Black-footed Albatross and rafts of Red and Red-necked Phalaropes. Kittitz's Murrelets are fairly common on the east side of the bay.

At the north end of Yakutat Bay, large rocky cliffs support Black-legged Kittiwake, Pigeon Guillemot, Horned Puffin, among others. Look for Marbled Murrelets in this area. If Hubbard Glacier lets you through Disenchantment Bay and around into Russell Fjord, you will likely find still more cliff-nesting birds along the steep shores of the Russell and Nunatak Fjords.

Yakutat birding is in its earliest stages. It's worth a visit.

LOGISTICS

Yakutat is generally accessible only via Alaska Airlines from Juneau or Anchorage. The Alaska Marine Highway stops there on occasion; consult the Alaska Marine Highway web site for more information.

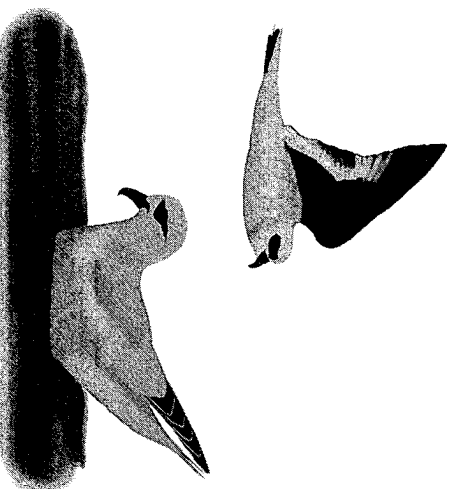
Rental cars are available. While they are not the kind of vehicles you would drive at home, they are generally reliable. Contact Situk Leasing.

Reserve in advance at Yakutat's several lodges—during prime fishing and hunting all the lodges can be completely booked. You can camp in Tongass National Forest, but keep in mind the comments about weather below. There are several small grocery stores. The restaurants tend to be at the lodges. Prices are fairly high.

Yakutat is sandwiched between the Gulf of Alaska and one of the highest mountain ranges in North America. It gets amazing amounts of rain and snow. Average rainfall is 146 inches. During fall and winter, prodigious storms can blow through. Waterproof outer shells and fleece or wool clothing is a necessity. May, June, and July generally have the best weather, but Yakutat is overcast more than 80 percent of the time.

Andres, Brad and B. Browne. 2004. *The Birds of Yakutat, Alaska*. U.S. Forest Service.

Yakutat Chamber of Commerce, www.yakutat.alaska.com



Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels

INSIDE PASSAGE

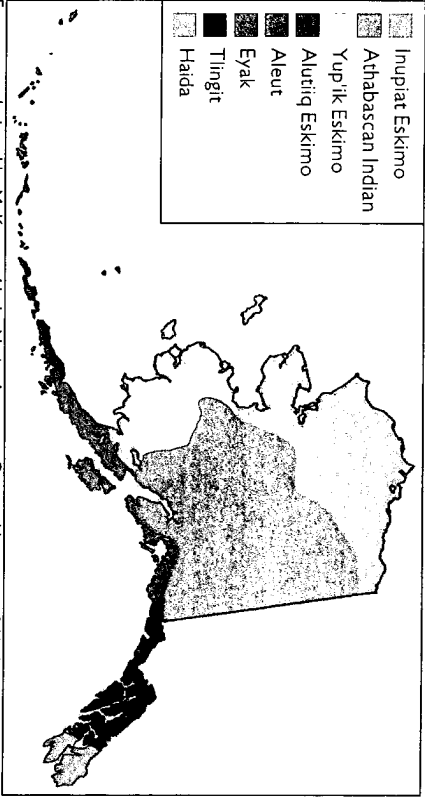
George West

The Alaska Marine Highway System runs ferries between Bellingham, Washington, and most of the major southeast Alaska cities. The ferries can also be boarded at Prince Rupert, BC. One ferry, the *M/V Kennicott*, takes several trips each summer from Juneau across the Gulf of Alaska to Valdez and Seward (see page 515). There are several options for routes within southeast Alaska, but most people select the most direct route north. Stops along this route are in Metlakatla, Ketchikan, Craig, Hyder, Wrangell, Petersburg, Sitka, Juneau, Hoonah, Haines or Skagway, Gustavus, and Yakutat. Different ferry runs stop in different communities. Check with the Alaska Marine Highway System (see *Logistics* below) if you want to stop at a particular village. Some of the smaller villages are not covered in this guide. You must make reservations well in advance for travel during the summer months, especially if you want a cabin or plan to bring a vehicle on board (see contact information below).

Several cruise ship companies ply the Inside Passage from Vancouver, BC. Some of these ships also cross the northern Gulf of Alaska and should be better for birding than the ferry through the Inside Passage (see page 435). Most cruise ships continue into Glacier Bay, sometimes Yakutat Bay, and on to Valdez or Seward. Birding from the ferry and tour boats between Bellingham and the northern ports of southeastern Alaska is limited. These ships stay in protected waters most of the time, so there is little opportunity to observe pelagic species. Birding opportunities in some of the port cities are included in the chapters that follow.

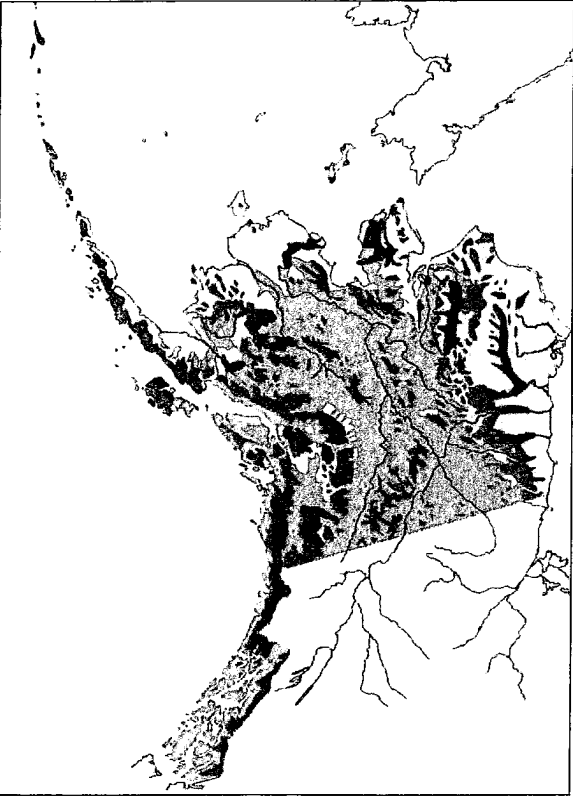
In summer you can expect to see a variety of marine species from the ferry between Bellingham and Skagway or Haines: Pacific and Common Loons, Sooty Shearwater, Fork-tailed and Leach's Storm-Petrels, Brandt's, Double-crested, and Pelagic Cormorants, Canada Goose, Harlequin Duck, Surf and White-winged Scoters, Bald Eagle, Parasitic Jaeger, Bonaparte's Mew, Western, and Glaucous-winged Gulls, Black-legged Kittiwake, Arctic Tern, Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot, Marbled Murrelet, Rhinoceros Auklet, and Tufted Puffin. If your ship turns out into the Gulf, you might find Laysan (rare) and many Black-footed Albatrosses, Northern Fulmar, Pink-footed Shearwater, phalaropes, South Polar Skua, jaegers, Sabine's Gull and Cassin's Auklet. If you can see the rocks along the shoreline, look for Black Oystercatcher, Black Turnstone, and Surfbird.

ALASKA NATIVE CULTURES



From a map designed by M. Krauss, Alaska Native Language Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1974

ALASKA'S VEGETATION



- Moist and wet tundra dominated by sedges and grasses.
- Shrub thickets of alder and willow.
- Boreal forest consisting of white and black spruce, paper birch, aspen, willows, and balsam poplar, along with some tamarack. This includes not only upland forest but also permafrost-underlain bog meadows with scattered black spruce and tamarack.
- Coastal Forest—the northern extension of the Pacific Coastal Coniferous Rain Forest, with Sitka spruce, hemlock, occasional Alaska cedar, and black cottonwood.
- Alpine Tundra, glacial ice, and snow peaks.

From a map compiled by L.A. Viereck in Viereck and Little (1972)

A BIRDER'S GUIDE

TO

ALASKA

BY

GEORGE C. WEST



American Birding
ASSOCIATION

2008

Asheville, NC

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