

**SUMMARY OF SOUTHEAST ALASKA BIRD OBSERVATIONS:
*WINTER SEASON—December 2008 to February 2009***

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The following report is a summary of the interesting bird sightings from Southeast Alaska for the winter period, which covered December 2008 to February 2009. A quick scan of this report will reveal that this winter was a slow one for interesting and unusual bird sightings, particularly when compared to the previous winter (2007–2008). Perhaps most interesting, and despite the abrupt cold-snap in mid-December, large numbers of sparrows lingered through the winter. New Christmas Bird Count (CBC) highs were recorded for Fox, Lincoln's, and Golden-crowned sparrows at Ketchikan, and all were found throughout the winter in larger numbers than previously reported. Purple Finches also made a good showing at Ketchikan, and it was a good winter throughout the region for the regularly occurring finches (crossbills, siskins, and redpolls). Sharp-shinned Hawks were also widely reported this winter, particularly at Ketchikan where they were almost exclusively associated with feeders.

EMPEROR GOOSE: One was photographed at Yakutat on 22 January 2009 (F. Latham, R. Johnson; Figure 1). This Beringian species regularly winters as far east as Kodiak and Afognak islands; in some winters, small numbers occur east to Cook Inlet and along the Gulf of Alaska coast (Petersen et al. 1994). This species is casual in Southeast Alaska during the winter.



Figure 1. Emperor Goose at Yakutat on 22 January 2009. *Photo by R. Johnson*

CANVASBACK: Late Canvasbacks were found at Sitka on 13 December 2008 (M. Ward, M. Tedin) and Juneau on 20 December 2008 (B. A. Agler, L. Shaw, T. Strand). This species has not been reported annually during the winter in Southeast Alaska.

EURASIAN WIGEON: One Eurasian Wigeon was found at Juneau, near the mouth of Fish Creek, on 21 January 2009 (P. Suchanek). This duck is casual in Southeast Alaska during the winter (Kessel and Gibson 1978); it has been found in the Juneau area in four of the previous 10 winters.

LONG-TAILED DUCK: The peak winter count on the Ketchikan waterfront, where large numbers typically congregate, was about average with a maximum of 600 on 14 and 30 January 2009 (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heidl).

YELLOW-BILLED LOON: This loon is a rare or uncommon winter visitant in Southeast Alaska, though they appeared to be present in smaller numbers than normal. Single immature birds at Sitka through the winter (M. R. Goff; Figure 2) and at Ketchikan 22 February 2009 (S. C. Heidl, A. W. Piston), and up to two at Juneau through the winter at Juneau (P. M. Suchanek) were the only reports.



Figure 2. Yellow-billed Loon at Sitka 4 December 2008. The neat scaly pattern on the upperparts, very pale overall appearance, and the shortish bill (for a Yellow-billed Loon) identify it as 1st-winter bird. *Photo by Matt R. Goff*

FORK-TAILED STORM-PETREL: On 17 February 2009, Paul M. Suchanek observed 7 Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels near Pt. Couverden, near the junction of Icy and Chatham straits, while riding the ferry between Juneau and Hoonah. We know of no mid-winter records of this species on the waters of the Inside Passage, but its winter status in the region is poorly known. This storm-petrel is known to winter offshore in the Bering Sea and in the Gulf of Alaska (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959, Boersma and Silva 2001), and Day (2006) considered it to be rare in the Gulf of Alaska in December and March.

BRANDT'S CORMORANT: An adult was observed on 6, 10, and 16 February 2009 at the Bar Harbor breakwater in Ketchikan (S. C. Heidl, A. W. Piston). During the winter, this species has only been found in Alaska in the Ketchikan area where it is a regular winter visitant, but primarily along the more open shores south of Ketchikan (Heidl and Piston 2007).

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK: It was a better-than-average year for wintering Sharp-shinned Hawks in Southeast Alaska. More than half-a-dozen birds were present through the period in the Ketchikan area (m. obs.), two or more wintered in the Juneau area (P. A. Rose, M. W. Schwan, G. B. van Vliet), and at least one was reported at Sitka (K. LaBounty).

RED-TAILED HAWK: One light-morph bird at Juneau on 22 February 2009 provided one of very few mid-winter records for northern Southeast Alaska (G. B. van Vliet). Single birds were also reported at Sitka on 7 January 2009 (C. Hisaoka) and in mid-January 2009 (V. Vosberg). This species made an excellent showing at Ketchikan, where it is normally a very rare winter visitant. Single birds were found on 24 December 2008 (A. W. Piston, ph.), 13 February 2009, (J. H. Lewis, ph.), and 28 February 2009 (T. L. Goucher), but there were likely more than three birds in the area.

As an interesting side note, we also report the apparent occurrence of two different Red-tailed Hawks attacking penned ducks at Ketchikan. One bird was found dead inside a duck pen on 8 January 2009 (J. Johnson). This pen was covered and the only access for the hawk was to crawl under the loose wiring at the bottom of the pen.

Another bird was observed twice by Rod E. Neterer at his chain-link duck pen (30' x 12') north of town. On 8 February 2009, Rod saw a Red-tailed Hawk sitting in a tree near the pen and scared it off. The next morning he found one of his two ducks pulled through the chain link fence up its shoulders and all the meat had been stripped off its head, neck and chest "like an ear of corn." Rod placed another layer of webbing around the entire pen; however, there was a 4' wide section with only a single layer of webbing at the entrance. On 2 March, Rod's dog flushed a Red-tailed Hawk off his last duck, which lay dying where the hawk had apparently managed to pull it through the web in the only location possible. Rod said, "the only way that hawk could get that duck was if the duck walked over to say hello! All the duck had to do was stand a foot away from the netting!" *Believe it or not!*

MERLIN: Single birds were found in the Juneau area 10 January 2009 (P. Suchanek) and at Ketchikan 20 December 2008 (S. C. Heinl, J. F. Koerner). This species is a rare but regular winter visitant along coastal southern Alaska.

AMERICAN COOT: Normal small numbers of this rare winter visitant were reported. Two were found at Juneau on 1 December 2008 (G. B. van Vliet) and at least two wintered at Ketchikan (m. obs.). Seven at Sitka's Swan Lake through early December provided a new local high count (M. R. Goff). Another coot wintered at Bear Cove, near Sitka, where it subsisted on fish food in hatchery salmon net-pens (L. Pizzuto-Phillips).

DUNLIN: A flock of 300 at Wrangell Narrows in late February 2009 was in an area where this species regularly winters in good numbers (B. H. Pawuk).

ROCK SANDPIPER: Forty-two birds mixed with Black Turnstones and Surfbirds at Ketchikan on 17 and 20 December 2008 were good counts in an area where the species is typically uncommon (S. C. Heinl, A. W. Piston).

WILSON'S SNIPE: Snipe lingered in good numbers into December: six were recorded on the Ketchikan CBC and five were recorded on the Juneau CBC (all on 20 December 2008). Many of the snipe observed in Ketchikan in mid-December (after the onset of heavy snow and cold weather) appeared to be sluggish and stressed. This species is very rare in mid-winter in Southeast Alaska; singles were reported at Juneau on 1 January 2009 (P. A. Rose) and at Sitka in early January (M. R. Goff) and 26 February 2009 (P. H. Norwood).

BONAPARTE'S GULL: Small numbers lingered at Ketchikan, including three birds on 14 December 2008 (S. C. Heinl) and a single immature observed through 10 February 2009 (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl). This species generally departs the Ketchikan area by mid-December but has lingered into January–February in nine years since 1990.

GLAUCOUS GULL: One or more first winter birds were present throughout the period at both Ketchikan (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl) and Sitka (M. R. Goff, L. Pizzuto-Phillips). This species is a rare regular winter visitant in Southeast Alaska.

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE: One immature bird was at Ketchikan 8 February 2009 (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl). This species is sparsely distributed in the Bering Sea and throughout Gulf of Alaska in winter (Hatch et al. 2009) and is a very rare winter visitant to the inside waters near Ketchikan.

MARBLED MURRELET: The largest concentrations of Marbled Murrelets reported this season were 1,150 near Juneau on 16 February 2009 (G. B. van Vliet) and 650 at the north end of Wrangell Narrows on 20 December 2008 (B. H. Pawuk).



Figure 3. Eurasian Collared-Dove at Ketchikan 14 February 2009+. This bird represented the 3rd Ketchikan report in as many years, and the first winter report for Alaska. *Photos by S. C. Heinl*

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE: An adult Eurasian Collared-Dove visited a feeder in Ketchikan 14 February 2009 and was present for nearly two weeks (J. F. Koerner; S. C. Heinl, A. W. Piston; Figure 3). The bird sang often, and responded to taped calls by singing and displaying. This bird represented the third recent record of this species in Ketchikan and the first Alaska winter report. Collared-doves were first reported in Southeast Alaska in 2006 (several reports), followed by reports from at least seven locations between Ketchikan and Yakutat in 2007; only one was reported in Alaska in 2008 (at Ketchikan).



Figure 4. The Western Screech-Owl is a rare but widespread resident throughout Southeast Alaska. This bird was photographed at Ketchikan on 23 February 2009. *Photo by Liz Bower*

BOREAL OWL: A Boreal Owl was turned in to the Sitka Raptor Center in December 2008 (V. Vosberg) but it did not survive. Another Boreal Owl was photographed at Glacier Bay N.P. in February 2009 (K. Ney; Figure 5). Scattered sightings around Southeast Alaska, including February sightings in Glacier Bay in 3 of 4 previous years (2004–2007; N. K. Drumheller), suggest this species is likely a rare resident in Southeast Alaska but its full status is not known.

ANNA’S HUMMINGBIRD: One visited a Juneau feeder on 9 December 2009 (P. A. Rose; Figure 6). This species is a very rare fall and winter visitant to southeast Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978).

RED-BREASTED SAPSUCKER: One sapsucker at Juneau on 31 December 2008 provided a very late record for northern Southeast Alaska (G. B. van Vliet). Heavy snow and cold temperatures brought large numbers of sapsuckers down along the Ketchikan roads system beginning in mid-December. High counts included five at Ward Lake on 18 December 2008 (T. L. Goucher), a new Ketchikan CBC high count of 15 on 20 December 2008, and six along approximately two miles of north Tongass Highway on 25 December 2008 (A. W. Piston). Small numbers were also found at Sitka during December and January (M. R. Goff). Major cold-snaps in several recent winters resulted in large influxes of sapsuckers to low elevations in the Ketchikan area (e.g. more than 30 birds in January 2005); these influxes suggest this species is present all-year-round and in larger numbers during the winter than is generally realized—at least in the southern portion of the region.



Figure 5. This Boreal Owl was photographed in Glacier Bay N.P., near Cooper’s Notch, in February 2009. *Photo by K. Ney*

DOWNY WOODPECKER: A small influx of this species into the Ketchikan area in December provided a new local CBC high count of four birds—all in the same tree—on 20 December 2008 (A. W. Piston). Single Downies were also observed at various other locations around Ketchikan on 7, 18, and 21 December (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heint). There were only 10 prior December–February records of the Downy Woodpecker from Ketchikan where it is primarily a rare spring and fall migrant.



Figure 6. Anna’s Hummingbird (female or immature male) at a Juneau feeder 9 December 2008. *Photo by P. A. Rose*

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET: Late lingering singles were at Ketchikan on 7, 19, and 20 December 2008 (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heint, and J. H. Lewis), and three were found near Juneau on 7 December 2008 (G. B. van Vliet).

CHESTNUT-BACKED CHICKADEE: A pair was observed inspecting a nest box at Ketchikan on 22 February 2009 (A. W. Piston). The pair stayed near the box for approximately 4 minutes and one of the birds entered the box twice for about 20 to 30 seconds each visit. The bird removed one cedar chip from the box before departing. No further activity was observed at the nest box during the period. We have not observed nesting activity at Ketchikan prior to April, but chickadees apparently scout nest sites well before actual nesting activities begin.

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH: Three nuthatches wintered at feeders in Ketchikan where the species is a casual winter visitant. Nuthatches were also described as unusually abundant at Sitka last fall; numbers decreased a bit during the winter, but were still considered fairly common through the end of the winter (M. R. Goff).

AMERICAN ROBIN: Despite the cold winter weather, small numbers of robins wintered at Ketchikan, with a peak count of 20 on 8 January 2009 (J. H. Lewis). Also reported in “smaller than usual numbers” at Sitka during January and February (M. R. Goff).

HERMIT THRUSH: A very late bird was found at Juneau on 17 December 2008 (G. B. van Vliet) and multiple birds were reported at Sitka in December 2008 (*vide* M. R. Goff). This species is casual in mid-winter, and one at Sitka on 6 January 2009 (C. Anglin) was particularly noteworthy considering the unusually cold conditions that prevailed this winter.

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER: There are few Southeast Alaska records of the Orange-crowned Warbler beyond November, so three reports in December 2008 were notable—singles were found at Sitka on 1 December 2008 (M. R. Goff), Juneau on 2 December 2008 (S. C. Heinl), and Ketchikan on 7 December 2008 (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl).

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER: Late lingering birds were found at Sitka on 1 December 2008 (M. R. Goff) and at Ketchikan on 7 December 2008 (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl).

WILSON’S WARBLER: A Wilson’s Warbler at Juneau on 7 December 2008 (G. B. van Vliet) was extremely late, but represented the last of the unusually strong late fall showing of this species in Southeast Alaska.

AMERICAN TREE SPARROW: Rare-in-winter American Tree Sparrows were one near Juneau on 1 January 2009 (P. A. Rose), one at an Auke Bay feeder all winter (G. B. van Vliet), and at least four at Ketchikan (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl, J. H. Lewis).

SPOTTED TOWHEE: Alaska’s ninth Spotted Towhee, a bird that had been observed sporadically at Juneau since 11 November 2008, was last observed on 9 December 2008 (B. Wright).

FOX SPARROW: This species lingered in much larger than normal numbers at Ketchikan, as indicated by the **97** recorded on the Ketchikan CBC on 20 December 2008—quadruple the previous Ketchikan CBC high count. Many more Fox Sparrows were actually present in Ketchikan when one considers areas outside of the count circle. At least three Red Fox Sparrows wintered at Ketchikan as well. Unusually large numbers also wintered at Sitka, including one Red Fox Sparrow (M. R. Goff; Figure 7).



Figure 7. The “Red” Fox Sparrow is a casual or rare migrant and winter visitant in southeast Alaska; this individual spent the winter at Sitka. *Photo by M. R. Goff*

LINCOLN’S SPARROW: This sparrow also made a very strong winter showing. Single birds were found near Juneau at Fritz Cove (through at least January 2009; G. B. van Vliet) and at an Auke Bay feeder (present all winter; G. B. van Vliet), and at a Sitka feeder during January 2009 (M. Ward, M. Tedin). Most good feeding operations at Ketchikan had one or more Lincoln’s Sparrows through December, as illustrated by the new Ketchikan CBC high count of eight on 20 December 2008 (prior CBC record was only two). Above average numbers lingered at Ketchikan through January and February as well; e.g., we found three birds during an hour of birding in town on 23 January 2009 (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl).

SWAMP SPARROW: One that had been present at Ketchikan since October 2008 successfully survived the winter through at least February 2009 (J. H. Lewis); another bird was a one-day-wonder in a brushy patch in town on 7 December 2008 (A. W. Piston, photo; S. C. Heinl). This species is casual in northern Southeast Alaska, but has occurred nearly annually in the Ketchikan area in the fall and early winter.

HARRIS’S SPARROW: An immature found at Ketchikan on 5 February 2009 was present through the end of the period (J. H. Lewis; Figure 8). This species is a casual migrant and winter visitant in Southeast Alaska.

WHITE-THROATED SPARROW: At least two birds wintered at Ketchikan (K. M. Ripley, S. C. Heinl); both of which had lingered since the fall period. Two White-throated Sparrows were also reported in Juneau to at least early December, one of which spent the entire winter (P. M. Suchanek). This sparrow is a rare winter visitant in Southeast Alaska.

GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW: This sparrow was also present at Ketchikan in larger numbers than is typical; e.g., 17 on the Ketchikan CBC on 20 December 2008 was a record count. Most of those birds appeared to survive the winter at feeders.



Figure 8. Immature Harris's Sparrow at Ketchikan on 5 February 2009. *Photo by J. H. Lewis*



Figure 9. Basic-plumaged Purple Finch at Ketchikan 11 February 2009—one of at least five birds that were found wintering in the Ketchikan area. Characters that separate this species from the very similar Cassin's Finch include the slightly curved culmen (top edge of the upper mandible; easily seen in this photo), the lack of pale eyering, and the broad blurry streaking on the back and flanks. *Photo S. C. Heinl*

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD: A male near Juneau on 8 February 2009 provided a very rare mid-winter record of this species in Alaska (G. B. van Vliet).

PURPLE FINCH: At least five Purple Finches were found at Ketchikan feeders through the winter, including a male and two basic-plumaged birds at one feeder on 11 January 2009 (K. E. Mix) and singles at other feeders (Figure 9)—a nice showing for a typically very rare winter visitant.

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL: Large numbers of this crossbill were present in the Ketchikan area through most of the period, where it is normally an uncommon and irregular visitant. High counts were 64 birds on 20 December 2008 and 50 birds at various locations on 22 December 2008, 18 January 2009, and 15 February 2009 (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl, J. F. Koerner). White-winged Crossbills were also reported throughout the period at Sitka (M. R. Goff), and were present in very good numbers at Juneau (G. B. van Vliet).

RED CROSSBILL: This species was present in average numbers at Ketchikan (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl) but was reported to be found in very low numbers at Juneau this winter (G. van Vliet).

COMMON REDPOLL: This species was reported to be present in very good numbers at Juneau in mid-February (G. B. van Vliet) and there were scattered reports of small numbers from Sitka south to Ketchikan.

HOARY REDPOLL: A small group of redpolls at a Juneau feeder included one Hoary Redpoll on 31 January 2009 (P. A. Rose; Figure 10). This species could be considered casual or very rare in Southeast Alaska, but its status is poorly known because of the difficulty in identifying Common and Hoary redpolls in the field. See Czaplak (1995) for a nice identification overview.



Figure 10. This Hoary Redpoll was nicely photographed at a Juneau feeder on 31 January 2009. The overall pale tone to the plumage, including the head and mantle, the proportionately small bill, completely unstreaked white rump and undertail coverts, and sparsely streaked flanks help separate this species from the similar Common Redpoll. *Photos by Patty A. Rose*

PINE SISKIN: Siskins were present in very good numbers at both Juneau (G. B. van Vliet) and Ketchikan (A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl), and they were abundant at Sitka (M. R. Goff).

HOUSE SPARROW: Following a sighting of three House Sparrows in a Ketchikan neighborhood last October, House Sparrows were again found in the same neighborhood on 16 January 2009 (male and female; S. C. Heinl) and 10 February 2009 (two males and two females; A. W. Piston, S. C. Heinl, photo). These birds represented the 2nd winter record for Ketchikan and Southeast Alaska. This species has been recorded from all seasons on the adjacent British Columbia coast at Prince

Rupert (CBC average 30 per year, 1993–2002) and Stewart (maximum, six on 2 March 1996 and 30 June 1974; Campbell et al. 2001).

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