

## **SUMMARY OF SOUTHEAST ALASKA BIRD OBSERVATIONS:**

*Spring: March–May 2014*

### **Sub-regional Compilers:**

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This report summarizes bird sightings from Southeast Alaska for the spring season, March–May 2014, and is intended to provide interesting observations for inclusion in an Alaska-wide column written by Thede Tobish for the journal *North American Birds* (published by the American Birding Association <http://www.aba.org/nab>). Generally we report on sightings of birds that are out of range or out of season or occur regularly in small numbers, noteworthy breeding records, unusually large or small numbers of a particular species, unusual migration dates, etc., and so on, and so forth.

Spring temperatures were close to normal in March and April, and precipitation at Sitka and Juneau was about normal in those months as well. March and April were wet months in Ketchikan, however, where precipitation was 49% (16.2 in. total) and 126% (21.2 in. total) above normal. May was warm and dry across the region—it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> warmest May on record at Juneau, and Sitka birders enjoyed less than one inch of precipitation for the month (83% below normal).

Highlights this spring included Alaska's first documented Long-billed Curlew, and very rare Southeast Alaska sightings of Steller's Eider, Swainson's Hawk, and Little Gull. It was clear that migration this spring was very different. At Ketchikan, migration of waterfowl, shorebirds, and some passerines (e.g., Fox Sparrows) was well below average. Nat Drumheller noted that shorebird migration at Gustavus did not build to peak numbers observed in most years, and there were few shorebird highlights this spring. It seems likely that many migrant waterfowl and shorebirds and some passerines passed to the west of the region, and nice weather (i.e., few storms) in May allowed migrants to stream past.

We would like to thank the people who sent us observations, shared their photographs, and answered our inquiries about their sightings, all of whom are cited below. We particularly appreciated the reports from Nat Drumheller (Gustavus), Matt Goff (Sitka), Elaine Furbish (Skagway), Bonnie Demerjian (Wrangell), and Paul Lehman. We benefited from access to sightings entered into eBird ([www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org)) which we've incorporated into this report, and we thank Gus van Vliet for reviewing eBird data from Juneau. Gus van Vliet, Nat Drumheller, and Matt Goff provided information and reviews that improved the final draft of this summary. Our past seasonal reports (since fall 2008) have been archived at the Juneau Audubon website (<http://www.juneau-audubon-society.org/SE%20AK%20Birding.html>).

**Names and Initials of observers cited in the text or who reported sightings:** Debbie Ackerman (DA), Beverly A. Agler (BAA), Robert H. Armstrong (RHA), Gwen S. Baluss (GSB), Pam Bealer (PB), Linda Behnken (LB), Anissa S. Berry (ASB), Ryan Carpenter (RC), Amy C. Courtney (ACC), Thomas Courtney (TC), Lucas H. DeCicco (LHD), Bonnie H. Demerjian (BHD), Nat K. Drumheller (NKD), Susan Wise Eagle (SWE), C. Elaine Furbish (CEF), Matt R. Goff (MRG), Nick R. Hajdukovich (NRH), Steven C. Heinl (SCH), Karen Johnson (KJ), Martina Kallenberger (MK), Laura Kaltenstein (LK), Alexia Kiefer (AK), Suzanne Kennedy (SK), Jerrold F. Koerner (JFK), Laurie A. Lamm (LAL), Paul E. Lehman (PEL), Jim H. Lewis (JHL), Jan Lovett (JL), Walter Moorhead (WM), Bill K. Neumann (BKN), Bruce B. Paige (BBP), Eric V. Parker (EVP), Lucy Pizzuto-Phillips (LPP), Andrew W. Piston (AWP), Pam T. H. Randles (PTHR), Patty A. Rose (PAR), Carol L. Ross (CLR), Doug Sanvik (DS), Mark W. Schwan (MWS), Sandi Shaw (SS), Marsha Squires (MS), Owen Squires (OS), Chuck P. Susie (CPS), Phoebe B. S. Vanselow (PBSV), Gus B. van Vliet (GBV), Marge L. Ward (MLW), Nils Warnock (NW), Mary Whitley (MW), E. L. "Butch" Young (ELY).

## SPECIES ACCOUNTS:

**BRANT:** Three Brant at Gustavus 31 March 2014 (NKD) and two at Eagle Beach, near Juneau, 12–13 April 2014 (ACC, GBV) established new early arrival dates for both locations. Maximum at Gustavus was 400 on 1 May 2014 (NKD), about average for that location. Maximum at Sitka was 100 on 17 May 2014 (MRG).

**CAACKLING GOOSE:** An estimated 1500 Cackling Geese (subspecies *minima*) were observed flying north past Coffman Cove, Prince of Wales Island, during a 3-hour period 27 April 2014 (LHD). That observation jived with the typical late April–mid-May peak migration period in Southeast Alaska. Maximum counts elsewhere, however, were below average (45 at Gustavus 8 May 2014; BBP) or well below average (130 flying over Ketchikan 26 April 2014; LHD, NRH), and only small numbers reported at other locations (m.obs.).

**CANADA GOOSE:** Six small, light-breasted geese near Juneau 12 April 2014 were identified as probable Lesser Canada Geese, subspecies *parvipes* (ACC, GBV). This subspecies is a rare or uncommon migrant in most of Southeast Alaska, though it sometimes occurs in “pretty good numbers” at Gustavus (*fide* NKD).

**EURASIAN WIGEON:** The Eurasian Wigeon is a rare, regular spring migrant in Southeast Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978). Four at Skagway 5 May 2014 provided a large count (Mary Whitley), and singles were noted at Gustavus on four dates 3–22 April 2014 (NKD), at Sitka 21–26 April 2014 (MRG, LPP, RC), and at Juneau 25 April 2014 (GBV).

**BLUE-WINGED TEAL:** A drake Blue-winged Teal at Ketchikan 6 April 2014 (JHL) was extremely early. This duck is typically a May–early June migrant (Kessel and Gibson 1978); the earliest Alaska arrival date that we know of is 14 April 2003 (*North American Birds* 57:389).



Figure 1. Oddities at Sitka this spring included a classic drake Mallard × Northern Pintail hybrid (left) 13 April 2014 and an adult Bald Eagle with symmetrically-patterned, pure white outer primaries photographed 1 May 2014. The eagle has been observed in the Sitka area since 2005 or 2006. *Photos by Matt R. Goff*

**GREEN-WINGED TEAL:** A drake Eurasian Green-winged Teal was found at Gustavus 13 April 2014 (NKD). Eurasian subspecies *crecca*, which breeds in the Aleutian Islands (Gibson and Byrd 2007), is a rare, regular migrant and winter visitant along the Pacific Coast (Campbell et al. 1990a, Marshall et al. 2003).

**CANVASBACK:** The Canvasback is a rare migrant in Southeast Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978). Singles at Gustavus 3 May 2014 (NKD) and 14 May 2014 (BBP) and Juneau 19 April 2014 (GBV) provided the only reports.

**REDHEAD:** Rare Redheads included up to six at Skagway 5 May 2014 (CEF, MW) and at least three in the Juneau area 16–18 May 2014 (GSB, ACC, GBV, AK). This species is a rare spring migrant in Southeast Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978).

**STELLER'S EIDER:** A female Steller's Eider at the mouth of the Good River 28 April–9 May 2014 provided the first Gustavus record (NKD, BBP; Figure 2). The regular winter range of this species extends east along the Pacific coast to Kodiak Island and lower Cook Inlet (Gibson 1984); it is casual in Southeast Alaska, where there are around 15 records.



Figure 2. Female Steller's Eider with scoters at the mouth of the Good River, near Gustavus, 28 April 2014. Note the gray bill, dark brown plumage, square head with pale area around the eyes, and secondaries bordered by two white bars. *Photo by Nat K. Drumheller*

**YELLOW-BILLED LOON:** A total of 27 alternate-plumaged Yellow-billed Loons at Glacier Bay 18 May 2014 (PEL et al.) was astounding and certainly the largest count for a single location in Southeast Alaska. It is highly likely that these birds continued their migration overland to breeding grounds in northern Canada, as suggested by North (1993) and supported by recent satellite-telemetry studies; e.g., see

<http://www.briloon.org/uploads/documents/LoonCenter/ADKLoon/Yellow-billedLoons040413.pdf>

**LAYSAN ALBATROSS:** Single Laysan Albatrosses were photographed offshore of the Sitka area 12 March 2014 (KJ, photo) and the Fairweather Grounds 25 May 2014 (EVP; Figure 3).



Figure 3. A trip to the Fairweather Grounds offered an excellent opportunity to photograph pelagic birds 25 May 2014, including a Laysan Albatross (left), Pomarine Jaeger (center), and Black-footed Albatross (right). *Photos by Eric V. Parker*

**LEACH'S STORM-PETREL:** A total of 1300 Leach's Storm-Petrels were tallied on offshore waters from west of Forrester Island south to the British Columbia border in a two-hour period 19 May 2014 (PEL, et al.).

**BRANDT'S CORMORANT:** A few Brandt's Cormorants lingered in the Ketchikan area into late April–early May; latest 10 May 2014 (SCH). Wintering birds typically depart the area by mid-April.

**SWAINSON'S HAWK:** A subadult Swainson's Hawk was a very rare find near Juneau 12–16 May 2014 (GBV photos, m.obs.). In Alaska, this raptor is found primarily in the eastern Interior where it is rare (Tobish 2004); there are fewer than 10 Southeast Alaska reports, most of which are from the Juneau area.

**ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK:** Juneau's wintering Rough-legged Hawk was last observed 17 April 2014 (GBV). Single migrants were report at Gustavus 11 April 2014 and 16 April 2014 (NKD). This hawk is a rare migrant in Southeast Alaska, primarily along the mainland where suitable habitat is most prevalent.

**SORA:** The Sora is a rare migrant and local summer visitant and breeder on mainland Southeast Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978). A Sora at Gustavus 31 May 2014 (PBSV) provided the only report.

**AMERICAN COOT:** Wintering American Coots lingered to at least mid-March 2014 at Ketchikan (two; AWP, JHL) and 29 April 2014 at Gustavus (NKD) and three at Sitka with last observed 21 April 2014 (MRG).

**BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER:** Bucking the trend in what was mostly a subpar shorebird migration was a high count of 650 Black-bellied Plovers at Gustavus 18 April 2014 (NKD)—an early date for such large numbers and a high count at any time.

**AMERICAN GOLDEN-PLOVER:** It was a subpar spring for migrant golden-plovers. Up to two American Golden-Plovers at Juneau's Mendenhall Wetlands 16–21 May 2014 (m.obs.) provided the only reports.

**PACIFIC GOLDEN-PLOVER:** Single Pacific Golden-Plovers at Gustavus 28 April 2014 and 8 May 2014 (NKD) provided the only reports this spring.

**GREATER YELLOWLEGS:** A Greater Yellowlegs at Gustavus 20 March 2014 (NKD) provided one of the earliest arrival dates ever for Alaska. One at Ketchikan 29 March 2014 was found on a more typical arrival date (AWP).

**LONG-BILLED CURLEW:** The birding highlight this spring was Alaska's first documented Long-billed Curlew near Juneau 3–7 May 2014 (MK, DS, m.obs.; Figures 4–5). The Long-billed Curlew breeds as close as central southern British Columbia where it is an early migrant, arriving late March–early April; non-breeding coastal migrants occur in southwestern British Columbia in May (Campbell et al. 1990b). There were only three prior sight reports for Alaska, likely also nonbreeding spring overshoots: one, 5–6 June 1973, Juneau, Eagle River beach, W. P. Dunn; one, 4 May 1992, Sergief Island, Stikine River flats, P. J. Walsh (*American Birds* 46:464); and one, 30 May 2008, Yakutat, lower Situk River, J. DeWitt (*North American Birds* 62:464).



Figure 4. This photo of two curlews, a Whimbrel (sitting, left) and a Long-billed Curlew (standing, right) at Scout Camp, near Juneau, 3 May 2014, established the first documented record of the Long-billed Curlew in Alaska. *Photo by Doug Sanvik*

**HUDSONIAN GODWIT:** The Hudsonian Godwit is a rare, regular spring migrant to northern Southeast Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978). This spring, Hudsonian Godwits were reported in small numbers at the usual locations: Gustavus 7–17 May 2014 (maximum two on 12 May; NKD, BBP) and the Juneau area (at least three) 5–11 May 2014 (m.obs.). Single Hudsonian Godwits at Sitka 4 and 18 May 2014 (RC, MRG; Figure 6) marked the 4<sup>th</sup> consecutive local spring reports.

**RED KNOT:** Two color-banded Red Knots were found this spring. One on the outer coast just north of Cape Fairweather 4 May 2014 (ASB) had been banded at Guerrero Negro, Baja California Sur, 30 November 2008 (*vide* Nallely Arce Villavicencio). Another knot at Eagle Beach, near Juneau, 11 May 2014 (ACC, GBV, MWS, BAA; Figure 7) had likely also been banded at Guerrero Negro. Maximum counts this spring were 13 at Gustavus 19 May 2014 (BBP) and 21 at Low Island, Sitka Sound, 17 May 2014 (MRG; Figure 6).



Figure 5. Additional photos of the Long-billed Curlew near Juneau 5–6 May 2014. In the left photo, note the larger size, longer bill, buffier plumage, and lack of bold head stripes on the Long-billed Curlew, on the right compared to the Whimbrel on the left (*photo by Gwen S. Baluss*). In flight, the Long-billed Curlew’s cinnamon underwings are distinctive and unmistakable as shown in the photo on the right (*photo by Robert H. Armstrong*).

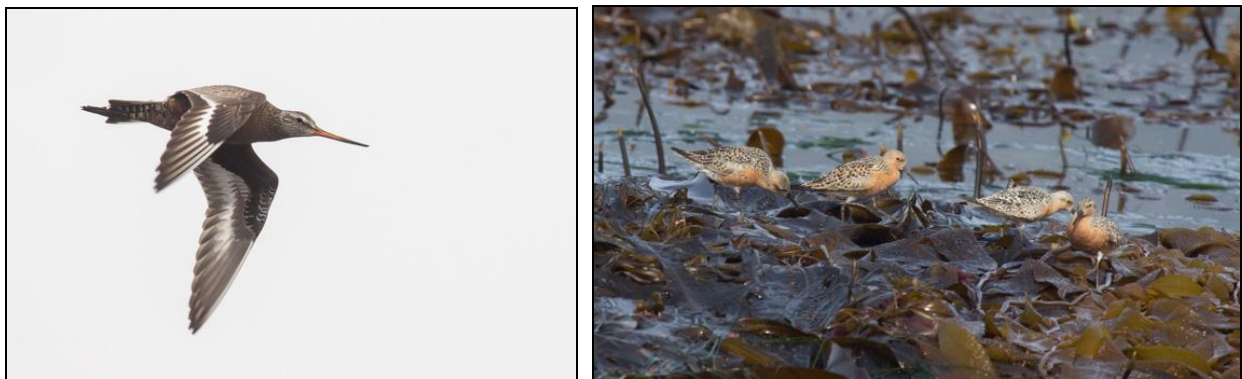


Figure 6. Nice shorebirds in the Sitka area this spring included a Hudsonian Godwit 18 May 2014 (left) and four Red Knots (right), part of a flock of 21 at Low Island 17 May 2014. *Photographs by Matt R. Goff*

**RED-NECKED PHALAROPE:** Very interesting was a report of 50,000 Red-necked Phalaropes in Clarence Strait near Coffman Cove, Prince of Wales Island 3 May 2014 (SWE). The birds were gathered in flocks of 100–1000+, as the observers boated across Clarence Strait toward Coffman Cove, Prince of Wales Island—flocks were densest near the Blashke Islands and thinned out as they approached Coffman Cove. This species is a common or abundant migrant along the coast. Such large concentrations have been noted occasionally in spring and fall, including an estimated 35,000 in Nichols Passage, near Annette Island, 30 April 2003 (Heinl and Piston 2009) and 20,000 off Cleland Island, British Columbia, 15 May 1969 (Campbell et al. 1990b). Large concentrations are also often found in western Icy Strait in late July–early August, with numbers occasionally in the tens of thousands (*fide* NKD). A large but not unusual total of 4700 were at the mouth of Cross Sound 18 May 2014 (PEL).



Figure 7. This Red Knot at Eagle Beach, near Juneau, 11 May 2014 had probably been banded at Guerrero Negro, Baja California Sur. *Photo by Beverly A. Agler*

**BONAPARTE'S GULL:** A Bonaparte's Gull at Gustavus 3 April 2014 (NKD) provided a new local arrival date by about a week. Five at Ketchikan 23 March 2014 (AWP) was a typical arrival date for southern Southeast.

**LITTLE GULL:** A 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle Little Gull at Ketchikan 10 April 2014 (SCH, AWP, JFK; Figure 8) provided the 3<sup>rd</sup> local record. This species is a casual migrant and summer visitant to Alaska (Gibson et al. 2003), and there are about a dozen records for the state.



Figure 8. First-cycle Little Gull (left) with three adult Bonaparte's Gulls (right) at Ketchikan 10 April 2014. The smaller size of the bird compared to the Bonaparte's Gulls is difficult to judge in this photo, but note the extensive dark gray cap and blackish wing coverts that forms a large black bar across the wings—characters not shown by 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle Bonaparte's Gull. *Photo by Andrew W. Piston*

**CALIFORNIA GULL:** Five California Gulls at Ketchikan 12 March 2014 (AWP, SCH) were about on time for first spring migrants. Typical numbers were observed across the region, including northern Southeast, where rare but regular, near Juneau at Eagle Beach (two, 7–10 May 2014, MWS, ACC, AK) and Sawmill Cove (one 11 May 2014, ACC), and at Pack Creek, Admiralty Island (one, 12 May 2014, NW).

**CASPIAN TERN:** Two Caspian Terns at Ketchikan 27 April 2014 (CPS) were the first arrivals. Subsequently, none were observed at Ketchikan the rest of the spring. Maximum this spring was seven at Gustavus 19 May 2014 (BBP).

**EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE:** Eurasian Collared-Doves were reported in normal small numbers throughout Southeast Alaska. Four at Skagway 1 April 2014+ (DA) were of note, as they provided the first successful overwintering record for that town (CEF).

**ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD:** Anna's Hummingbirds successfully overwintered at feeders at several locations in Southeast Alaska. At least two were present through the entire spring at Ketchikan (JFK, AWP). At Sitka, one Anna's was present to 4 May 2014 and another lingered there through the entire spring (MRG). At least five Anna's successfully wintered at feeders in the Juneau area (GBV, PAR, GSB, Karla Hart)—including an adult male that displayed vigorously to a female at an Auke Bay feeder for about a week in late March (GBV), possibly the first time such behavior has been observed during the breeding season in Alaska. Most of the Juneau birds disappeared by the end of April, with the last observed 3 May 2014 (GSB).

**AMERICAN KESTREL:** Two American Kestrels were reported at Sitka: a very early bird 31 March 2014 (JL) and another on 24 April 2014 (LB). This species is found more regularly during migration on the Southeast mainland of southeast Alaska (likely because there is more open habitat), and it is much less numerous in the Alexander Archipelago (Heinl and Piston 2009).

**SAY'S PHOEBE:** A Say's Phoebe was found in subalpine habitat just inside the Alaska border at White Pass, north of Skagway, 29 May 2014 (PEL et al.). The bird was likely at the edge of its normal range as the observers found multiple birds just a little farther north into British Columbia where phoebes are known to nest (Campbell et al. 1997). Kessel and Gibson (1978) described this species as a casual migrant in Southeast Alaska, primarily in the fall; it was also considered a very rare probable breeder based on observations in Glacier Bay in the 1960s (Wik and Streveler 1968).

**WARBLING VIREO:** A Warbling Vireo at Ketchikan 10 May 2014 (SCH) was early.

**HORNED LARK:** A Horned Lark at Gustavus 27 April 2014, followed by three there 3 May 2014 (NKD), and maximum five at the Mendenhall Wetlands 11 April–5 May 2014 (MWS, GBV) provided the season's only reports. The Horned Lark is a rare or locally uncommon migrant and summer visitant along the mainland and a casual or very rare migrant in the Alexander Archipelago.

**TREE SWALLOW:** A flock of 10 Tree Swallows at Ketchikan 5 April 2014 (JHL, SCH) provided a record early arrival date for Alaska by one day. First arrivals otherwise began appearing after mid-April.

**VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW:** Migrant Violet-green Swallows appeared to be “dropping out of the sky” at Point Bridget S.P., where an estimated 60 birds were present 2 May 2014 (GSB), a larger than average total for the area.



**NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW:** A Northern Rough-winged Swallow at Gustavus 14 May 2014 and two at Gustavus Lake 25 May 2014 (BBP) provided very rare local sightings. This swallow is a rare migrant and breeder in Southeast Alaska, primarily on the mainland (Kessel and Gibson 1978) and islands near the mainland.

**CLIFF SWALLOW:** A Cliff Swallow at Gustavus 19 April 2014 (NKD) was extremely early and provided the 2<sup>nd</sup>-earliest arrival date for Alaska (the earliest Alaska sighting is 14 April 2012). This swallow is a rare spring migrant and very rare summer visitant and breeder in Southeast Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978), primarily on the mainland.

**BARN SWALLOW:** A Barn Swallow at Ketchikan 18 April 2014 (AWP) provided a record early date for Alaska. This species typically arrives the first week of May and previous early arrival dates are all from the last week of April.

**MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD:** The Mountain Bluebird is a locally uncommon spring migrant in Southeast Alaska, where it occurs primarily on the mainland. Normal numbers were reported this spring: up to nine in the Juneau area 19 April–4 May 2014 (m.obs.), two at Skagway 21 April 2014 (SK), and singles at Gustavus 24 April 2014 (NKD) and Point Agassiz 30 April 2014 (ELY).

**TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE:** Townsend's Solitaires were widely reported this spring. Singles were found at Pelican 17–21 April 2014 (PB, photo), Ketchikan 20 April 2014 (CPS), Auke Bay 23 April 2014 (GBV), and Skagway 4–5 May 2014 (SK, MW), and at least three were located in the Eagle Beach area, near Juneau, 4–5 May 2014 (MWS; PAR, BAA, ACC, AK). This species is a rare migrant and probable breeder in southeast Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978).

**HERMIT THRUSH:** A Hermit Thrush at Wrangell 5 April 2014 (BHD, CLR, WM) was very unusual. The bird may have successfully wintered in Southeast; however, there are very few overwintering records; e.g., a wintering bird that lingered at Ketchikan to 4 March 2011 is the only March record for Alaska. Or, it was an extremely early migrant. Normal arrival in southern Southeast is after mid-April. This spring, a Hermit Thrush at Ketchikan 14 April 2014 (AWP) tied the previous early arrival date for Southeast.

**BOHEMIAN WAXWING:** At least one Bohemian Waxwing at Sitka 22 and 25 April 2014 was very late (MRG, LK), as this species usually departs Southeast Alaska by early April.

**YELLOW WARBLER:** A male Yellow Warbler at Ketchikan 6 May 2014 (SCH) was early (2<sup>nd</sup> earliest local arrival date).

**CHIPPING SPARROW:** A Chipping Sparrow at the Mendenhall Forelands 22 May 2014 (MWS) provided one of the earliest spring arrival dates for this species in the Juneau area, where it is a rare breeder.

**FOX SPARROW:** It was a funny spring for Fox Sparrows in the Ketchikan area. This sparrow is a common or abundant migrant from late March to mid-April, and in a normal year it isn't unusual to spish up 20 or even 50 from a single good patch of brush or tally more than 100 in a day. Maximum counts this spring, however, were fewer than 20 birds and their numbers were clearly well below normal (AWP, SCH). Perhaps the main movement of northbound birds passed to the west of Ketchikan.



Figure 9. Orange-crowned Warblers regularly visit nectar-bearing flowers, such as blueberry, salmonberry, and ornamental red-flowering current (SCH, pers. obs.). This taste for nectar occasionally brings them to hummingbird feeders, like this bird at Juneau 1 May 2014. *Photo by Sandi Shaw*

**WHITE-THROATED SPARROW:** Wintering White-throated Sparrows were last noted at Sitka 16 April 2014 (MLW) and Auke Bay, near Juneau, 20 April 2014 (GBV). Singles were also noted at Ketchikan 3–21 March 2014 (SCH, AWP) and 29–30 April 2014 (AWP).

**BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD:** A male Brown-headed Cowbird at a Ketchikan feeder 25 April 2014 was joined by a female in May and both remained through the end of the period (JFK). This species is a rare migrant and breeder in Southeast Alaska; however, this marked the first time that a pair was observed for an extended period in the Ketchikan area.

**PURPLE FINCH:** A singing male Purple Finch at Skagway 17 May 2014 (PEL et al.) marked the 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive spring this species has been found in northern Southeast. This species is a very rare fall and winter visitant to Ketchikan (Heinl and Piston 2009), but has been considered a casual visitant elsewhere in Southeast Alaska (Gibson and Kessel 1992).

**COMMON REDPOLL:** Very late Common Redpolls were singles in the Juneau area 22 April 2014 (GBV) and 5 May 2014 (MWS), and two at Haines 9 May 2014 (PTHR).

**PINE SISKIN:** Pine Siskin numbers remained low throughout the spring, following a winter in which this species was barely present in the region. Maximum counts were all from the Juneau area and only reached 25 birds (22 and 25 April 2014; BAA).

**HOUSE SPARROW:** A male House Sparrow at Petersburg feeders through at least 8 April 2014 (BKN, ELY) was likely the same bird that has been observed around town since December 2012.

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