Birds in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Snowy Owl, Wilbur Mills

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,[1] about 180 species of birds have been observed within the Arctic Refuge. The coastal plain alone is visited by about 135 species, including shorebirds, songbirds, waterfowl, loons and raptors.[2,3] Most of these birds are migratory species that come to the refuge to nest or to rest during their migration and then fly back to at least five continents and each of the "lower 48" states. About 70 species regularly nest upon the coastal plain. These species include Snow Geese, Tundra Swans, Pintail Ducks, American Golden-Plover, Arctic Loons, Snowy Owls, and Lesser Scaup. The numbers using the coastal plain total in the millions.[2]

For example, up to 325,000 Snow Geese stop on the Arctic Refuge coastal plain, mostly within the 1002 area, to build up fat reserves prior to their 1,400-mile nonstop flight to southern Alberta, en route to wintering grounds in the southern United States and Mexico.[4] Snow geese are particularly sensitive to disturbances and have been displaced by human activity that occurs as much as a mile away.[1] Should they be disturbed often enough they may fail to gain enough fat to survive the long trip south.

Birds are vulnerable to many facets of oil development. Displacement from prime nesting, feeding, or staging habitat could lower survival rates and productivity, due to increased predation and reduced fitness. Direct losses of habitat at Prudhoe Bay and in the surrounding oil fields have altered the distributions of birds nesting and foraging within oil fields. For example, many nesting shorebird populations decreased that were near roads; they include King Eider, Dunlin, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Lesser Golden Plover, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Red Phalarope, Lapland Longspur species.[5] Oil fields also attract bird predators such as Glaucous Gulls, Common Ravens, grizzly bears and arctic foxes. Bird feathers are particularly sensitive to oil contamination losing both the ability to fly and their insulation properties.

Even small amounts of oil transferred to birds' eggs by incubating adults are typically fatally toxic to the embryos inside. If spilled oil were to reach the barrier islands and lagoons along the coast, tens of thousands of waterfowl and shorebirds would be placed at risk, just as was the case following the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Other development activities like mining for gravel and extracting the available water resources may severely impact the habitats required for bird species that utilize those areas.[1]

1. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2001. Refuge Bird List, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge official website: http://www.r7.fws.gov/nwr/arctic/muskox.html

2. Audubon Alaska. 2001. Background Analysis: Migratory Birds and Oil Development in the Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Unpublished report, Audubon Alaska. Anchorage, AK.

3. Clough, N.K., Patton, P.C., and A.C. Christiansen, (eds.) 1987. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska, coastal plain resource assessment – Report and recommendation to the Congress of the United States and final legislative environmental impact statement. Washington, DC. P.31

4. Garner, G.W. and P.E. Reynolds. 1986. Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain resource assessment: final report, baseline study of the fish, wildlife, and their habitats. Section 1002c, ANILCA. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Anchorage.

5. Troy Ecological Research Associates. February 1993. Bird use of the Prudhoe Bay oil field. Anchorage: BP Exploration (Alaska) Inc. P. iii-iv.

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http://www.audubon.org/chapter/ak/ak

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www.akvoice.org

Alaska Wilderness League
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The Wilderness Society
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