



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Birds: From the Arctic to Your Backyard

The Invaluable Habitat of the Coastal Plain

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge provides vital habitat for some of America's most spectacular wildlife. Birds, in particular, rely heavily on the Arctic Refuge. The Arctic Refuge comes alive during the summer months and is awash with color and life. When the weather turns warm, the Coastal Plain of the Arctic Refuge becomes a haven for millions of migrating birds, affording them a safe place to feed, mate and nest. The Coastal Plain consists of the 15 mile strip of land between the Beaufort Sea and the Brooks Range; the geography of the region is characterized by salt marshes, coastal lagoons, riparian willow shrub communities, and open expanses of tundra. This rugged, beautiful, and diverse landscape represents the ideal assortment of habitat types for migrating and nesting birds. The Coastal Plain is known as the biological heart of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for the abundance of wildlife that it supports.

Bird Communities of the Coastal Plain

One hundred eighty distinct species of birds have been recorded in the Arctic Refuge. Seventy of these species depend on the Coastal Plain for their nesting grounds. Birds from all 50 states and 6 of the world's continents migrate to the Arctic Refuge for the summer.¹ Many birds you might see in your own backyard depend on the nesting and breeding habitat of the Arctic Refuge. For example, some of the species of waterfowl most valued by hunters depend on the Arctic Refuge for their summer habitat, such as the canvasback duck, northern pintail, snow goose, and greater white-fronted goose. Likewise, the Arctic Refuge also supports many species of birds enjoyed by birdwatchers and outdoor enthusiasts, such as the golden eagle, peregrine falcon and short eared owl. By providing essential summer habitat for millions of birds, the Arctic Refuge links together ecosystems from every state in the Union.

Oil Drilling Would Devastate Bird Populations

The Coastal Plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is currently threatened by a proposal that would allow oil exploration within the boundaries of this sanctuary. Oil exploration and development in the Arctic Refuge would prove devastating to the fragile ecosystems the Arctic Refuge was established to protect. The development of the Arctic Refuge for oil would necessitate the construction of roads, drilling pads, pipelines, processing plants, dormitories, gravel mines, solid waste disposal sites, and airports. These structures would fragment and degrade the habitat of the Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain, which would greatly compromise the bird populations of the Coastal Plain.²

The effects of oil development on the Coastal Plain would be further compounded by frequent noise disturbances and the threat of oil spills. Oil development poses a very serious threat to bird populations: the Exxon Valdez of 1989 killed more than 250,000 marine birds and caused irreparable damage to the local ecosystem. Ecological damage on a similar scale could occur in the Arctic Refuge if oil development were to be allowed. Since the Arctic Refuge supports migratory birds from all fifty states, the negative consequences of oil development could reverberate throughout the United States, resulting in a decline of avian populations not just in Alaska, but across the entire country.

¹ US Fish and Wildlife Service. *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Fast Facts*. <http://arctic.fws.gov>.

² Martin, R.H. 1986. *Impact of oilfield development on shorebirds, Prudhoe Bay, Alaska*. Unpubl. Ph. D. thesis, university of Colorado, Boulder.

