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# FRIENDS OF ORNITHOLOGY

## Newsletter

Number 18  
Jan 2023



Grus, The Crane (Willughby & Ray 1678)



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### From the Curator

*Kevin Winker*

The long dark nights of winter and the quiet stillness of the cold landscape here in Fairbanks bring a good time for pause and reflection. It's been an unusual year in many respects. I was on sabbatical for the academic year, with my head buried deeply in new topics. It takes a lot of time to learn new things and to retool, and sabbaticals provide that needed time. We've also been slogging through years of budget cuts to the university, and this past year finally saw that shrinkage stop. As if our usual stresses weren't enough, we've all been on this COVID ride for too long. Coming slowly out of that (psychologically, at least) and readjusting has provided cautious optimism. It's also produced a burst of renewed activity, as things long on hiatus began to happen again. In the Bird Lab, we've been steadily productive throughout, some of which you will see in the following pages. One area of particular long-term importance has been our skeleton collection, which has long been in suboptimal space and as a consequence rather neglected. The most critical aspects of the space issue have been sorted, and Symcha Gillette has been getting much of the backlog into shape for use. This collection I being increasingly used, and we're confident that it will continue to attract a diversity of researchers.

As we look forward to the coming year, we're planning our occupancy of some new (to us) off-site collections space, some major collections-related activity, and, of course, seeing new frontiers explored by our students. As previous projects are wrapped up,

exciting new projects are beginning. It's a great time to be an ornithologist.

### The Department of Ornithology

Our existence and many of our activities are centered around the Bird Collection, but it is the people involved who make it all happen:

#### Residents

*Kevin Winker* (Curator)

*Jack J. Withrow* (Collections Manager)

#### Students

*Symcha Gillette*

*Kathleen Collier*

*Caitlyn Oliver Brown*

#### Research Affiliates

*Daniel D. Gibson*

*Johannes Erritzoe*

*Rose A. Z. Meier*

*Kevin G. McCracken*

*Christin L. Pruett*

*Kyle K. Campbell*

*Matthew Miller*

#### Volunteers

*David W. Sonneborn*

*Jennifer Jolis*

*Alaska Checklist Cmte.*

*Elizabeth Schell*

#### A SAMPLING FROM STAFF

##### *Jack Withrow*

*"Every so often an ornithologist ticks off the evidence about the European Widgeon and reiterates a theory from the 19th century – that some birds of this species nest in the New World. ... But where?" (Wetmore 1965:168).*

During field work in the Aleutian Islands this past June, Alexander Wetmore's question was answered (at least in part). Over the course of a week and half in early June I observed three broods of Eurasian Wigeon (*Mareca penelope*) at Amchitka Island and two on Adak Island and collected breeding wigeon specimens from each place (Fig. 1). Eurasian Wigeon has always been noted as an often-conspicuous migrant in the western and central Aleutians, and specimens collected at Amchitka in the 1970s were suggestive of nesting, but there had never been any hard evidence of nesting until now. This evidence constitutes the first documentation of nesting by the species in North America.



Figure 1: Two adult female Eurasian Wigeon (*Mareca penelope*) collected 7 June 2022 on Amchitka Island, Alaska with two of five downy young seen on the same small pond (Fig. 2) and presumably offspring of the female(s). The bottom most downy wigeon was from a different brood collected 1.25 km away the next day. All three downies were nearly identical and are arranged to show lateral, ventral, and dorsal aspects. Specimens are, from top to bottom, UAM 47580-3 and 47589 (J. J. Withrow)

Based on my observations, Eurasian Wigeon

was simply an “uncommon” nesting duck in the western and central Aleutians, more prevalent than all but Greater Scaup, Green-winged Teal, and Common Eider, about as common as Mallard, and much more so than Northern Pintail among nesting ducks. Extrapolating from the number of broods I observed, area covered, etc., there may have been as many as several hundred broods of the species in the Near, Rat, and Andreanof islands in 2022.

The status of Eurasian Wigeon as a breeding bird in North America has been a subject of speculation for at least 140 years. Frequent mention of the possibility of nesting was based on the relatively high numbers seen across the continent, but particularly on the west coast since the 1960s. This speculation included Alaska as a potential location for breeding since the earliest days of ornithological work in the state, when E. W. Nelson, on assignment from the Smithsonian Institution, surmised that they might nest in the Aleutians (he later took a more circumspect view). Almost certainly based on Nelson's work, the first two editions of the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list stated without elaboration that the species bred in the Aleutians, but this treatment was short lived and by the third edition in 1910 this statement had been dropped. In part based on this confusion, Gabrielson and Lincoln in their 1959 *Birds of Alaska* described its status in the Aleutians as “somewhat uncertain.” This sentiment aptly described the situation for the next 63 years.

A number of other Asian species have nested once or occasionally in the Aleutians, including Whooper Swan, Common Snipe, Common Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, White-tailed Eagle, White Wagtail, and Brambling. Garganey, Lesser Sand-Plover, Eurasian Skylark, and Olive-backed Pipit may have done so (see Gibson and Byrd 2007). Perhaps most reminiscent of the situation in wigeon, Green-winged Teal is a common breeder throughout the Aleutians as the Old World subspecies *Anas crecca crecca*, switching to

the North American *A. c. carolinensis* at some point near the end of the Alaska Peninsula.

Despite now having an answer to whether and where (there may also be other places) Eurasian Wigeon nest in North America, it is my view that the situation in the Aleutians does not necessarily explain the number of Eurasian Wigeon seen on the west coast of North America. For example, there is no evidence to support the idea that Eurasian Wigeon migrating through (or nesting in) the western and central Aleutians (where far more common than in the eastern Aleutians) are en route to and from North America. The Aleutian birds simply represent the eastern edge of normal (if peripheral) north/south movements within the East Asian Flyway, and they are unlikely to fully explain the numbers encountered on the west coast of North America. Those numbers far exceed the number we might reasonably presume are raised in the Aleutians (see above), and west coast birds likely include a significant proportion of direct migrants from Asia (as well as hybrids).

The number of American Wigeon breeding in Alaska increased tenfold from the mid-1950s to the early 2010s, in an apparent northward shift away from the historically high densities in the prairie pothole region, and they might now nest at least occasionally in Chukotka, Russia as well. Thus, the increase in west coast records of Eurasian Wigeon since the 1960s might be a reflection more of opportunities for Eurasian Wigeon to associate and migrate with increased numbers of American Wigeons in Alaska and the Bering Strait region than any change in the status and distribution of Eurasian Wigeon in the region.

The full version of this work will appear in a forth coming issue of *Western Birds* for those interested in reading more.

### Literature Cited

Gibson, D. D., and Byrd, G. V. 2007. Birds of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska. Nuttall Ornithol. Club and Am. Ornithol. Union. Ser. Ornithol. 1.

Wetmore, A. 1965. Water, prey, and game birds of North America. National Geographic Society, Washington, D. C.

### A New Curatorial Assistant

*Caitlyn Oliver Brown*

I see working as a Curatorial Assistant as a great honor. My job has granted me the privilege of working with the most beautiful and unique bird species. I have been able to hold species that many people will never see. The first time I see a new species in the lab is always a highlight of my day and I take some time to observe the beautiful details that I would not normally be able to see. Not only do I preserve the beauty of each individual bird, but I preserve the scientific knowledge held within it. Specimens that I prepare are placed with others, some decades old, to be used for scientific research now and long into the future.



## ANNUAL REPORT - ORNITHOLOGY, FY22

This year entailed slowly coming out of the long COVID shadow of reduced activity. We saw some great fieldwork get done, some of our important student-led research get published, and important progress was made on collections development activities. Kevin Winker was on sabbatical, spending time learning new genomics techniques, studying multiple aspects of taxonomic nomenclature, and working with others to summarize our knowledge of Beringian birds. We've also had a particularly rich year working with collaborators on diverse projects, mostly in songbirds. Former student Fern Spaulding got an exciting job as a biologist with the Alaska Army Corps of Engineers, and K. A. Collier began an internship in conservation genomics at a lab in Abu Dhabi. New masters student Caitlyn Oliver Brown began with us in the fall.

Bird lab activities included exciting opportunities to get back into the field, including important trips to sample along the Dalton Highway, among the Aleutian Islands, and on the Seward Peninsula. Additional sampling was done on the Tetlin NWR and numerous other Interior locations. With the new Bone Lab fully operational, we also greatly increased our skeleton operation, and Symcha Gillette has been making great strides there. Historically an underdeveloped aspect of Alaska bird specimens generally, we've become an important resource for a diverse array of researchers needing skeletal material.

Our many diverse activities would not be possible without our students, volunteers, collaborators, and the Friends of Ornithology. Thanks so much to you all!

Volunteer hours	745
Acquisitions	1,500
Publications	5
Reports	7
Loans	17
Data requests	168*
Professional visitors	9
Student visitors	4
Public contacts	100

Students working with collections

PhD	5
MS	4

\* Excludes > 10,000 electronic database requests  
downloading > 36 million records.

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#### **RECENT PUBLICATIONS**

(FY22)

Ocampo, D., K. Winker, M. J. Miller, L. Sandoval, and A. C. Uy. 2022. Rapid diversification of the variable seedeater superspecies complex despite widespread gene flow. *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution* 173:107510.

Winker, K. 2022. A brief history of English bird names and the American Ornithologists' Union (now American Ornithological Society). *Ornithology* 139: ukac019.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ornithology/ukac019>

Spaulding, F. R., J. F. McLaughlin, T. C. Glenn, and K. Winker. 2022. Estimating movement rates between Eurasian and North American birds that are vectors of avian influenza (AI). *Avian Diseases* 66:155-164.

Chesser, R.T., S. M. Billerman, K. J. Burns, C. Cicero, J. L. Dunn, B. E. Hernández-Baños, R. A. Jiménez, A. W. Kratter, N. A. Mason, P. C. Rasmussen, J. V. Remsen Jr., D. F. Stotz, and K. Winker. 2022. Sixty-third supplement to the American Ornithological Society's *Check-list of North American Birds*. *Ornithology* 139: ukac020 (pp. 1-13). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ornithology/ukac020>

Gibson, D. D., L. H. DeCicco, N. R. Hajdukovich, S. C. Heintz, A. J. Lang, R. L. Scher, T. G. Tobish Jr., and J. J. Withrow. 2022. Checklist of Alaska birds, 28th edition. University of Alaska Museum.

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[www.universityofalaskamuseumbirds.org](http://www.universityofalaskamuseumbirds.org)

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*The birds of Alaska have never been in better hands.*

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