

Birdwatching

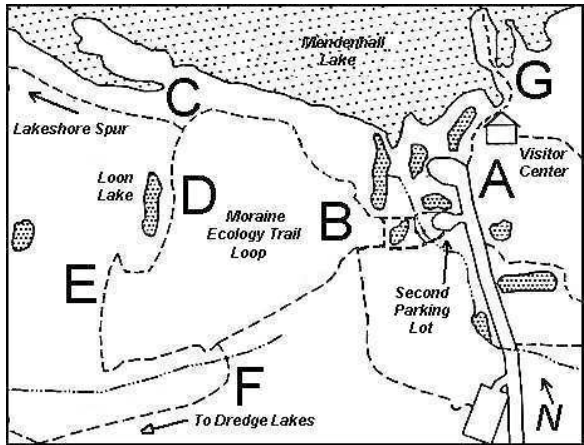
On the Moraine Ecology Trail

Location: Trail can be accessed from either side of the second parking lot (the lot further from the lake).

Trail Profile: Well-maintained gently rolling foot path. Spur routes vary in condition.

Length: 1.5 miles; **Elevation Gain:** 25 feet

Time: 45 to 75 minutes; **Difficulty:** easy



Introduction

Welcome to the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area and the Tongass National Forest in Juneau, Alaska. Birdwatching opportunities in Juneau are diverse, and the post-glacial areas in front of the Mendenhall Glacier are locally renowned as excellent bird habitat. As the Mendenhall Glacier relinquishes its hold on the valley, it exposes new land. Mosses, alder, willow, cottonwood and spruce slowly colonize this barren landscape, creating a diversity of habitat that is particularly attractive for many species of birds. Since Juneau is situated along an important flyway for migratory

birds, the Mendenhall Valley briefly hosts many species on their way to or from their Arctic breeding grounds. The Mendenhall Glacier area also hosts summer residents such as Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, Warbling Vireo, and Tennessee Warbler, species that reach the northernmost part of their range in Southeast Alaska. These species may be more common in some years than in others.

The best time of the year to birdwatch at the glacier is from late April to early October. Large flocks of migrants come through in the spring and fall, and resident breeders are present throughout the summer. This guide focuses on this time period, though notable winter birds are mentioned, as well.



A – Parking Area/ Steep Creek

The Visitor Center parking area has earned a modest reputation as a good location for birding. Several unusual species have been seen from the lots in recent years, including Rusty Blackbird (uncommon), Common Nighthawk, Brown-headed Cowbird, and Northern Flicker (all rare). Look for nesting Barn Swallows under the eaves of the Kiosk and the Covered Viewing Area. This is one of the better areas in Juneau to see occasional groups of Vaux's Swifts flying high overhead. Tree, Bank, Violet-green, and Cliff (rare) Swallows occasionally join them. Look for Bald Eagles in the cottonwoods or on the icebergs in the lake. Steller's Jay and Common Raven frequent the area all year. In spring, you should be able to hear the "booming" of Blue Grouse from anywhere in the area.

The thick brush around Steep Creek can hide interesting birds, such as Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Warbling Vireo. Watch and listen for American Dipper along the creek. Tennessee Warbler (rare) and Gray-cheeked Thrush have been recorded here. Be aware that black bear frequent this area during salmon spawning season (June – October).

B – Pitted Outwash

The plants in this area have experienced slower post-glacial succession due to excessive water drainage through the coarse gravels. The result is an open habitat with small trees and many small kettle ponds. Common summer breeders in this area are Wilson's, Yellow-rumped (Myrtle's) and Orange-crowned Warblers; as well as Fox Sparrow, Dark-eyed (Oregon) Junco, American Robin, and Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes. Listen for the "telephone" song of the Varied Thrush. In the fall, this area hosts large flocks of various sparrows, including Golden-crowned and White-crowned. A Migratory Avian Productivity Survey (MAPS) banding station in this area has produced birds of interest, such as MacGillivray's Warbler (uncommon) and White-throated Sparrow (accidental).

Check the beaver pond for breeding Common Merganser, Mallard, Belted Kingfisher, and Great Blue Heron. Harlequin Ducks sometimes use this area. In spring, listen for Wilson's Snipe winnowing above the ponds.



C – Lakeshore Spur Trail

This spur trail follows the lakeshore (often flooded at the trail junction). The low-shrub flats along this trail are good for Chipping Sparrow (rare) and Wilson’s Snipe. Killdeer and Spotted Sandpiper are possible along the shore. With a spotting scope, it is possible to view the large gull colony across the lake. Although breeding Glaucous-winged and Herring Gulls make up most of this colony, a Lesser Black-backed Gull joined them for almost a decade (last seen 2002). In late summer, flocks of juvenile gulls congregate on the icebergs, and may include Mew and Thayer’s Gulls (uncommon). Arctic Terns may be seen patrolling the lakeshore. In summer, listen for Cedar Waxwing (rare) overhead.

D – Loon Lake

Local birders often refer to this wooded pond as “Loon Lake,” since Red-throated Loons have nested here in past years. Passerines to watch for here include American Redstart, Northern Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat, and Gray-cheeked Thrush (all uncommon). Lincoln’s Sparrows sing from the dead snags in the pond. Check the pond for waterfowl. Keep your eye out overhead for Northern Goshawk, Merlin, Sharp-shinned Hawk and, during migration, Northern Harrier. Myrtle’s Warbler can be abundant here.

E – Mixed Forest

The forest in this area is more developed than most along this trail, providing more suitable habitat for forest species such as Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Townsend’s Warbler, and Winter Wren. Also look for Fox Sparrow, Swainson’s and Hermit Thrushes lurking in the undergrowth.

F – Dredge Lakes Area

The Dredge Lakes area presents birders with miles of trails in similar habitat to that found on the

Moraine Ecology Trail. A map at the junction of the Dredge Lake Spur and the Moraine Trail will give you a better idea of the myriad trails in this productive area. The old creek channel just beyond the junction is worth a look for various passerines, including Alder (uncommon) and Hammond’s (rare) Flycatchers. Look for Northern Goshawk around Moraine Lake, particularly for immatures in the fall. Western Tanager can occasionally be heard singing from the treetops. Also listen for the “heenk heenk” of Red-breasted Nuthatch. Cassin’s Vireo (rare) is possible.



The flooded areas (rubber boots needed) around the now-defunct trail to Norton Lake provide excellent habitat for waterfowl and many swamp-loving species, including Olive-sided Flycatcher, Northern Waterthrush, and Rusty Blackbird (all uncommon) A Sora (casual) was discovered here in 2004. Audubon’s Warbler (rare) has nested in this area. In spring and fall, Trumpeter Swans (uncommon), Ring-necked Ducks, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser (rare), Lesser and Greater Scaup, and Common and Barrow’s Goldeneye frequent the lakes, most notably Moose Lake. **Note – Use the provided maps; it is easy to get lost in this area. Some trails may be completely flooded depending on rainfall and beaver activity.*

G – Arctic Tern Colony

Though not on the Moraine Ecology Trail, this area is worth a detour. In recent years, Arctic Terns have been using the sandy beach in front of Photo Point as a nesting area. Numbers fluctuate, but observers have counted as many as 100 adults here in past years. The terns begin arriving in early May and are usually gone by early August. Early season birders may get a chance to witness courtship activities, while later season birders may see the fledglings take their first

flight. Spotted Sandpiper, Killdeer, and Semipalmated Plovers are often seen here during this season. Savannah Sparrows can be heard singing from the lupine on the sand spit. **Note: This is sensitive nesting habitat; please refrain from walking on the sandy areas in front of Photo Point.*



Birdwatching in Winter

Winter brings an interesting challenge for birders in Juneau. Many bird species have migrated south, but others arrive from further north to spend their winters here. Black-billed Magpie is the most abundant and obvious example. Other species to keep an eye out for are Common Redpoll, Bohemian Waxwing, and Red Crossbill. White-tailed, Willow, and Rock Ptarmigan move down from higher elevations. Also look for year-round residents such as Common Raven, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Pine Siskin, and Golden-crowned Kinglets.

For More Information:

For a complete list of the area’s birds, pick up a copy of *Birds of Juneau, Alaska – Checklist* by the Juneau Audubon Society. The checklist is available at the Alaska Natural History Association (ANHA) Bookstore in the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center.



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