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Winging It North

The Returning Birds of Valdez

They appear at just the right juncture of the seasons, when characteristic cold begins to dissolve under the warming northern sun. We usually hear them before an actual sighting, their liquid notes soft against our eardrums, in contrast to the winter’s-long prattle of crows and seagulls. They seem at first out of place, these birdsongs, against the backdrop of residual snow that peels away in patches from the Prince William Sound landscape.

American Robins are the first songsters, the harbingers, the avian minstrels that proclaim a subtle but dramatic shift in temperature and dramatic shift in the seasons. These are followed closely by their lookalike cousins, the “telephone birds”, or Varied Thrush. The two different species can often be seen hunting side-by-side, sprinting along still-wet ground in search of insect life.

Their arrival is a game-changer. It isn’t long before other notes sound throughout winter-quiet neighborhoods. These are comprised no longer of just the chipping of Redpolls and Chickadees, but rather, songs fluid, melodious, insistent.

The birds of Valdez are back.

We all have our favorites, from the flamboyant yellow warbler to the chest-puffing Rufous Hummingbird to the tall and stately Great Blue Heron. A few seem to occupy an amazing niche of their own, however. They are standouts in a remarkable avian lineup.

The Common Swift

Small and drab, this bird may not look like much when perched, but it remains unmatched in its aerobatic skills. Returning here from its far wintering grounds in sub-Saharan Africa, its jaw-dropping speed and endless, eyeblink maneuvers in search of flying insects astound even the most stoic of Valdezeans.

Yet, even this is not the full story. If one trait could truly define this unpretentious specimen, it is this bird’s ability to *not* perch at all for long periods. In fact, swifts fitted with tracking devices have been known to stay airborne for ten months at a time! They mate, eat, socialize, and, although it’s uncertain how, they even sleep on the wing.

Arctic Tern

You’ll know it when you see it—brilliant white body with black cap, pointed, crimson bill, knife-edge wings and sharp V tail, and with an annoying habit of divebombing anything (or anyone) it considers an interloper. Vigilant and fiercely defensive of its nesting site and young, this pugnacious little flyer hovers, plummets, and skims the air just inches above the water. Either out at the Duck Flats on the outskirts of Valdez, or in town at the small boat harbor, you’ll stand amazed at this avian dynamo as it veers, dips, and flawlessly banks around boats, people, and dock pilings.

If an award could go to the bird with the most impressive migration, the Arctic Tern would easily take it. Twenty-five thousand annual flight miles, from Alaska to Antarctica and back again, make this diminutive the champion of long-distance travel. Small as it is, the Arctic Tern spends most of its life in transit from one end of the earth to the other.

Trumpeter Swan

It’s hard to imagine a more graceful and intrinsically lovely bird than the trumpeter swan. Gliding across a pond’s surface with barely a ripple, its every movement a study in grace, this snowy white waterfowl with its perfect reflection has been the focus, throughout history, of both fables and science. For this large, elegant creature exhibits perhaps the most human of deep emotions within the bird world.

Monogamous and mating for life, the trumpeter swan is an animal model of fidelity and emotion. Their trait of intertwining their long necks in an avian embrace is well-known, and the obvious affection the pair has for each other can be a lesson even people can take to heart. So deep is this reciprocal devotion that, with the death of a mate, the surviving swan often exhibits behavior consistent with deep grief.

Much has been written in storybook style about the “swan song”, wherein a grieving swan will fly its highest, then fold wings and plummet earthward in the ultimate act of self-destruction. While that scenario may not be completely accurate, uncounted anecdotal accounts do tell of grieving swans refusing to eat, acting listless with depression, or swimming into deep waters to purposely drown. Though “science” has yet to document many of these accounts, the evidence throughout history is too numerous to dismiss. Swans apparently feel a deep and abiding connection to the one to which they are joined in life.

So, the next time you’re at the 7 Mile pond off the Richardson Highway, watch the swans together, consider your own lifetime mate, and marvel.

And maybe give your own husband or wife a big hug…

Dipper

Though not migratory, our resident Dippers warrant an honorable mention. Robin-sized, dusky gray, a little on the portly side, the Dipper (formerly called a “Water Ouzel”) remains one of the most consistently intriguing birds in the Valdez area. Their rather bland coloring and unremarkable shape belie a talent unmatched in any other bird species. You see, this solitary and head-bobbing character doesn’t just “dip” into clear streams in search of food—it plunges completely underwater and, facing into the fast current, walks along the creek bed while the water spirals and surges overhead. Not only that, it can “fly” underwater, its wings half-folded as it flaps its way upstream.

Not a comprehensive list, by any means, but a good start. Valdez and its incredible surroundings unmasks itself day by day, first revealing one mysterious facet of itself, then another. Our diverse bird population, often looked upon as merely part of the landscape, is actually an integral part of the marvel that all Valdezeans call home.