

A Starter Guide to Birding in Juneau, Alaska

By Lauren Cusimano

Alaska is known as a great place for birding — but Southeast? This state's distinct tail of islands and communities offers more than 350 bird species. Juneau, the capital, is set along the Southeast Alaska Birding Trail and features many bird-heavy trails and viewing spots on its own. Here, it's common to see the iconic bald eagle sitting atop a light pole or a flock of glaucous-winged gulls flying in off the ocean.

If you're new to town, visiting, or just enjoying an extended stay, here's a starter guide to birding in beautiful Juneau.

The Best Birding Trails and Viewing Spots

The Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge and the [Juneau International] Airport Dyke Trail offer a walk along the wetlands — and one of the most accessible birding habitats. The trail is level, about a mile, and only a little slippery if ice is still present. As the peak of spring approaches, thousands of birds are seen here at the end of Radcliffe Road. Along with families, and dogs, a multitude of species can be seen throughout the year including the Northern Harrier, Short-Eared Owl, Common Redpoll, Pectoral Sandpiper, Gadwall, American Wigeon, and more at the mouth of the Mendenhall River.

Near the northernmost part of Juneau, Point Bridget State Park and Cowee Creek offer forest, meadow, riverine, and marine habitats — though keep in mind this option takes commitment thanks to the drive and hiking required. The trail cuts through muskegs, a wet forest, and along the Cowee meadow. When you reach the mouth of the creek, you can look out toward Berners Bay. From here, spot Northern Goshawk, Warbling Vireo, Common Yellowthroat, Three-toed Woodpecker, and more.

Eagle Beach State Park is an extensive intertidal mudflat on the eastern shore of Lynn Canal and the perfect spot to view shorebirds, gulls, waterfowl, and seabirds — including the Western Sandpiper and, of course, the Bald Eagle. Find a (usually free) tide book and time your walk to view godwits or turnstones mixed in with the many peeps and dowitchers.

The Mendenhall Glacier forelands along Mendenhall Lake yield ponds to big puddles where a variety of species can be spotted. Think the American Redstart, Northern Waterthrush, Vaux's Swift, Gray-cheeked Thrush, and Warbling Vireo. You can head down to the shore a number of ways, but a good one starts next to the glacier's viewing ramada.

But not all of Juneau's excellent birding spots are trails. Head to the Aurora Harbor downtown or

Statter Harbor toward Auke Bay to view shorebirds galore off the docks. That includes the Glaucous-winged Gull, the Red-breasted Merganser, and the quick-diving Marbled Murrelet. Spots like these are also ideal for spotting multitudes of ducks (a great beginner way of identifying birds as they're often large, slow-moving, and in the open).

Best Guides to Birding in Juneau

Traveling light? The free Merlin Bird ID mobile app may be all you need to identify birds in Juneau and Southeast Alaska. Just be sure to log what you spot in the also-free eBird app from The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. But if you're used to physical guides, we have a few suggestions — as well as where to find them.

Discovery Southeast offers a laminated, trifold guide packed with labeled, hand-drawn illustrations of resident and migratory landbirds, as well as Southeast's birds of the sea, shore, and marshes. This is an extremely easy-to-use guide, helping even the most novice bird watcher spot the difference between a Common Raven and an American Crow, and identify one of Southeast's most distinct birds — the Steller's Jay. The "Discovery Guide to Common Birds of Southeast Alaska" can be found in the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center, Hearthside Books & Toys (two locations), and more.

Find the Juneau section in "A Birder's Guide to Alaska" on page 421. This chapter was written by local birder Steve Zimmerman and highlights Juneau's primary birding areas, including Fish Creek, Gold Creek Basin, and Sheep Creek Valley. This large spiraled guide is found pretty much anywhere, even online, but we snagged a decent copy for just a few bucks at The Amazing Bookstore from The Friends of the Juneau Public Libraries in Mendenhall Valley.

If you're downtown, the entire front room of Rainy Retreat Books is dedicated to Alaskan authors and topics — including birds! Find go-to guides here like "Guide to the Birds of Alaska" by Robert H. Armstrong and the "Birds of Alaska Field Guide" by Stan Tekiela.

And what's an outdoorsman in this town without a copy of "90 Short Walks Around Juneau" — even though it's actually more like 130? This popular guide to Juneau trails often references what birds can be found on what paths and access points throughout town.

Where to Gear Up

Of course, any excursion into Alaska — even the more accessible trails we suggested — requires some outdoor gear. And there are many locally owned outdoor gear outposts in Juneau.

Find Foggy Mountain Shop downtown, which is loaded with Alaska-approved gear like clothing and outerwear, backpacks, boots, and binoculars. In the Valley, find Nugget Alaskan Outfitter

(NAO) anchoring Mendenhall Mall stocked with clothing, backpacks, camping gear, survival and protection gear, and pairs of XTRATUF boots — aka the Alaskan sneaker ideal for donning on muddy trails, shallow streams, or just a wet parking lot.

For birding gear on a budget, Second Wind (also in the Valley) comes recommended. This is a resale shop absolutely packed with well-loved but not well-worn clothing, footwear, protective gear, and some recreation equipment, too. You may just find the perfect puffer for hitting the birding trails during spring in Southeast.