

The AK Flyway

Highways in the sky connect Alaska to the world



As winter turns to summer, Alaska explodes with avian life!

Returning to Alaska

Plentiful food, endless daylight, and large open spaces make Alaska the perfect haven for migratory birds. More than 250 species of birds return to Alaska for the short summer breeding season. On their journey these birds follow highways in the sky, called flyways, which link their seasonal homes. Globally, there are eight identified flyways. While none are named the "AK Flyway," four of the eight flyways converge in Alaska, providing paths for nearly five billion birds every year.

Feeding and Resting

Birds travel great distances from all parts of the world to reach Alaska. Once here, they fan out across the diverse Alaskan landscape to refuel on the land where they were raised. Some head farther north into the tundra to feast on the explosion of insects, many turn to the shelter of the boreal forest, while others stick to the coasts to consume the clams and worms of the tidal flats.

Breeding and Nesting

Alaska's summer is short. Birds must immediately claim their breeding territory and mate. They have as little as two months to build a nest, lay eggs, and raise their young.

Rearing and Fledging

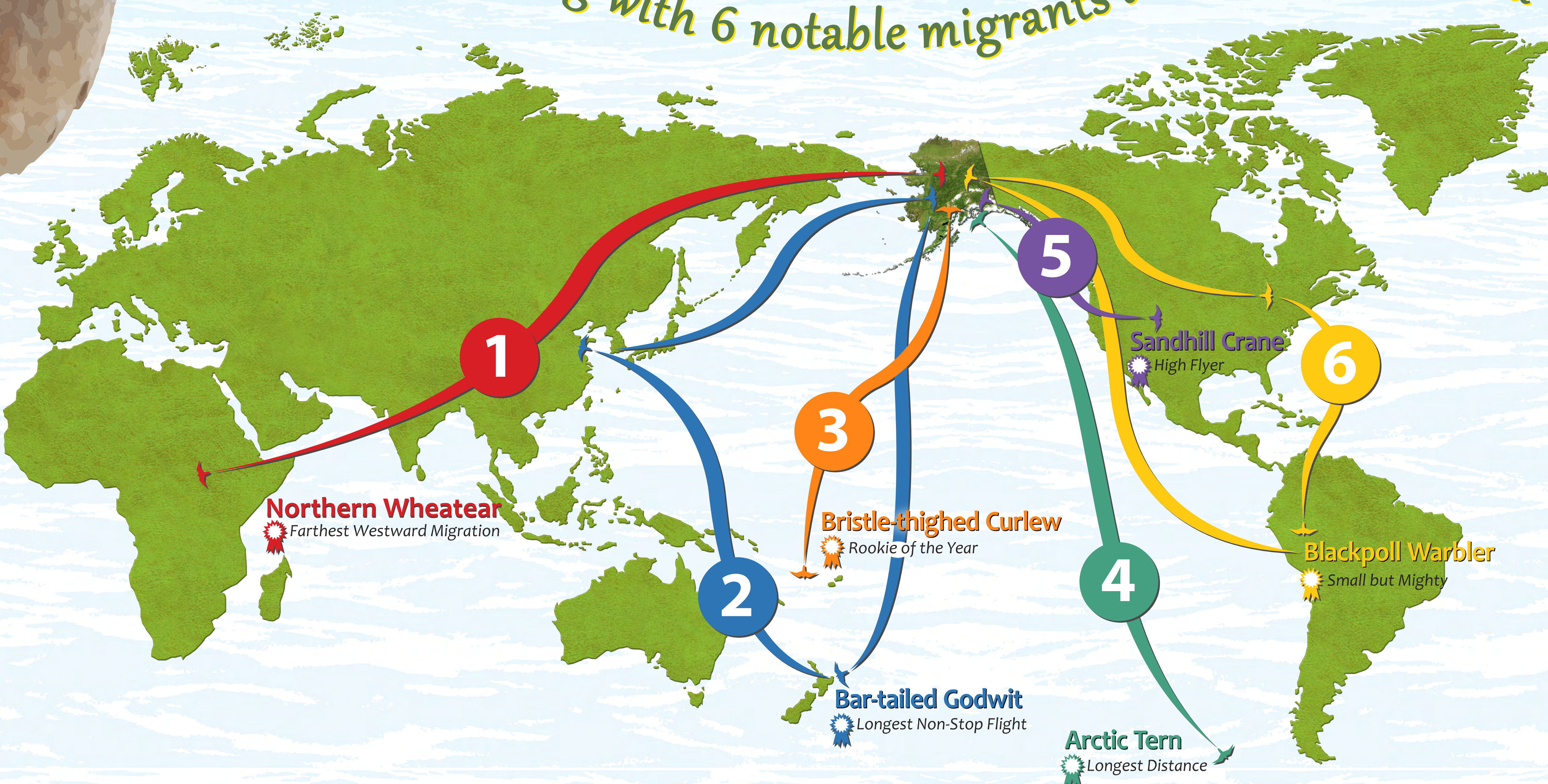
Young birds need to grow up quickly in Alaska. Parents take advantage of the daylight, working almost nonstop to provide nutritious food for their chicks and keep them safe from predators.

Leaving Alaska

Shortening days signal the birds that it is time to leave. They cannot stay; there is not enough food to support them in winter. Birds prepare their bodies by molting their old feathers for new ones and fattening up for the journey. Some birds prepare for long solo flights while others, like gulls and waterfowl, flock together to travel. It is time to migrate again.



Follow along with 6 notable migrants as they fly to Alaska



1 Northern Wheatear

Farthest Westward Migration

Arriving in Alaska for the summer, Northern Wheatears breed on dry open tundra and forage on insects. In the fall, these birds use the wind to head west and return to sub-Saharan Africa.

FUN FACT: The Northern Wheatear flies 180 miles a day for a total flight of 8,500 miles. This is the longest east/west flight path of any bird.

2 Bar-tailed Godwit

Longest Non-Stop Flight

After feeding along the Yellow Sea, the Bar-tailed Godwit arrives in western Alaska to nest. In mid-July, these birds gather by the tens of thousands on our mudflats to refuel for migration. When the north wind starts blowing, they fly 7,200 miles non-stop over eight days to New Zealand.

FUN FACT: Unlike many other birds, Bar-tailed Godwits cannot take off if they land in the water. Can you imagine flying thousands of miles over the ocean without rest?

3 Bristle-thighed Curlew

Rookie of the Year

Without help from adults, young Bristle-thighed Curlews join other fledglings and migrate more than 3,000 miles to islands in the Pacific Ocean they have never seen before.

FUN FACT: During the winter, Bristle-thighed Curlews lose their ability to fly. They are the only shorebird that becomes flightless during molting, the process of swapping old feathers for new ones.

4 Arctic Tern

Longest Distance

Chasing the sun, Arctic Terns migrate 24,000 miles a year between Alaska and Antarctica. These birds see more of the sun than any other animal on earth. This allows for extra time to fish and refuel for their long migrations.

FUN FACT: Arctic Terns can live to the age of 30. During their lifetime, they will complete the equivalent of three trips to the moon and back.

5 Sandhill Crane

High Flyer

Sandhill Cranes fly a speedy 50 mph to return to Alaska. To conserve energy on their long journey, they catch a lift skyward on columns of warm rising air called thermals and ride fast-moving winds in the jet stream. Using these forces, Sandhill Cranes can reach altitudes of over two miles above the earth.

FUN FACT: More than a half million Sandhill Cranes gather near the Platte River in Nebraska to rest and put on weight before their journey north.

6 Blackpoll Warbler

Small but Mighty

Barely bigger than a hummingbird, Blackpoll Warblers cross continents and oceans in a loop migration that totals 12,000 miles. Using winds to propel them north, they arrive in Alaska to fill up on insects and breed in the boreal forest.

FUN FACT: Blackpoll Warblers fly 40-50 hours straight and flap their wings 20 beats per second to cross the Atlantic Ocean.