Connecting Indiana with Alaska through Wildlife
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Though thousands of miles away, Indiana and one of the remotest parts of Alaska depend on each other to support countless wildlife populations. Migratory waterfowl, shore birds, and raptors (birds of prey) use Indiana’s wetlands and riparian corridors to rest as they travel between their Arctic nesting grounds in Alaska and their winter homes as far south as Central and South America. Each point on birds’ migration paths is extremely important. Failing to protect or properly manage one will adversely affect the others and, consequently, deprive sportsmen and women and wildlife watchers of the opportunities to appreciate the wildlife they love. To ensure the millions of migrating birds will still continue stopping in Indiana, we must focus our conservation advocacy efforts outside of our state and weigh in on the management of Alaska’s continentally important wildlife habitat.

The National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve), the largest single tract of public land in the United States that covers 22 million acres of Alaska’s North Slope, is one of the most critical nesting areas for migratory birds. Containing multiple important habitat, calving, and nesting areas for animals such as waterfowl, caribou, fish, birds of prey, seals, whales, and polar bears, the Reserve has wilderness and wildlife values “that rank among the highest on the continent,” according to the National Audubon Society. Birds, such as long-billed dowitchers, semipalmated sandpipers, pectoral sandpipers, dulins, stilt sandpipers, and many others nest in the Reserve and travel through Indiana every year.

This critical wildlife area also contains substantial oil and gas deposits. Balancing the interests of conservationists and industrialists, in 1976, the federal government authorized the leasing and development of the Reserve for oil and gas and at the same time recognized the Reserve’s value to wildlife. The Department of the Interior (DOI) was charged with protecting the Reserve’s environmental, fish and wildlife, and historical or scenic values as oil and gas development proceeded.

To protect wildlife and habitat in the Reserve and to mitigate the impacts oil and gas development in the area, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the agency managing the Reserve, began a new comprehensive planning effort in 2010. The new management plan will encompass the entire Reserve, including four DOI-designated Special Areas of significant wildlife and wilderness value. BLM completed a draft plan and initiated a 60-day public comment period at the beginning of April.

The federal government has recognized the importance of an approach to oil and gas development that protects the biologically diverse wildlife and wildlife habitats of the Reserve. We must reinforce the importance of balancing energy needs with protecting the critical wild spaces on which wildlife around the world depend.

One way we can all contribute is to write Sec. of the Interior Ken Salazar and let him know we support his efforts to protect wildlife and habitat in the National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska.

Please weigh in with your support of the new Integrated Activity Plan and Environmental Impact Statement that became open to public comment in early April. We will have 60 days to let the Secretary of the Interior know we strongly encourage the DOI to protect critical wildlife habitat in the Reserve.

For more information about the Reserve and the Indiana connection in sustaining migratory waterfowl, shorebird, and raptor populations please call the Indiana Wildlife Federation at 317-875-9453 or email info@indianawildlife.org.