

Yukon Delta recognized for importance to East Asian-Australasian Flyway

Millions of waterbirds breed each summer in the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, then leave this vast wetland cradle to migrate along flyways spanning the Americas. But about half a million migrate along a lesser-known route: the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.

The East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership (Partnership) was launched in 2006 as a framework for voluntary, international cooperation aimed at protecting migratory waterbirds and their habitat in eastern Asia and the south Pacific Ocean. The flyway extends from Russia and Alaska, through East and South-east Asia, to Australia and New Zealand, encompassing 22 countries. Migratory waterbirds share this flyway with 45% of the world's human population.

The Partnership recently recognized the international importance of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge by designating it as an East Asian-Australasian Flyway Network Site (EAAF). EAAF status is similar to that of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff members Brian McCaffery and Doug Alcorn (who also serves on the Pacific Coast Joint Venture board of directors) submitted the nomination for EAAF site recognition. "Identifying the Yukon Delta Refuge as an East Asian Australasian Flyway Partnership Network Site demonstrates to our international partners that the United States is committed to conserving species that migrate beyond our borders by protecting habitat within our borders," says Alcorn.

EAAF initiatives include development of the Flyway Site Network for sites of international importance to migratory waterbirds, raising awareness of migratory waterbirds along the flyway, and building capacity for the sustainable management and conservation of migratory waterbird habitat.

The entire area included within the new EAAF network site is administered by the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. Abundant and diverse wetlands are the dominant features of the refuge, which includes the combined deltas of Alaska's two largest rivers: the Yukon and the Kuskokwim. Grass-sedge meadows, estuaries, sea coast and an offshore island add to this complex mosaic of habitats. It's a dynamic landscape, shaped by flooding, tidal action, frost-heaving, and riparian erosion and sedimentation. When the wetlands thaw in summer and autumn, they provide breeding and post-breeding habitat for millions of waterbirds.

"Although many migratory birds use these habitats for only a few months each year," says Doug Alcorn, "they are critical for the species' survival. In leading by example, we hope that other countries are able to follow a similar refuge model to protect habitat within their borders."

More information:

The Partnership for the East Asian-Australasian Flyway

<http://eaaflyway.net/>

Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge

<http://alaska.fws.gov/nwr/yukondelta/index.htm>

Audubon Alaska video map showing the migration paths of Alaska's breeding birds

<http://ak.audubon.org/videos/where-do-alaska-birds-go>