

Podcast
USDA Forest Service in Alaska – May 30, 2011
Topic: Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival, Cordova, Alaska
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Welcome to FOREST FOCUS, presented by the Alaska Region of the USDA Forest Service, I'm Bob Belongie.

One of the world's most amazing sights just took place not far from Cordova, Alaska. As many as five million shorebirds making a pit stop on the Copper River Delta during their annual migration.

For the past 21 years, the Forest Service, in partnership with the local Chamber of Commerce, the Prince William Sound Science Center and a host of public agency and private sector organizations, have celebrated the arrival of these feathered visitors during the Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival.

Martin Moe is the Executive Director of the Cordova Chamber of Commerce:

We are extremely proud of our environment here. We are on the edge of the Copper River Delta, which is over 800-thousand acres of ... wetland, it's the largest ...contiguous wetland on the Pacific Coast of North America.

Most of the millions of birds landing here are Western Sandpipers, with their distinctive white and brown plumage. Accompanying them are a number of other species, including Dunlands, various waterfowl, raptors and songbirds, making it an extremely audible as well as a visual experience.

What is it about this particular remote stretch of coastal Alaska that makes it a popular stopover point for these long-distance avian travelers? For the answer, here is Forest Service Wildlife Biologist for Prince William Sound Erin Cooper:

There're two reasons why shorebirds really gravitate toward this area. There's about seventy miles of mud, first off, and that's a lot of habitat. Secondly there's a lot of biomass, there's a lot of critters that live in that mud. There are Macoma clams and all sorts of marine invertebrates, and they double their weight while they're here. And they also gain a lot of fat, and this is one of the last places these birds stop before they hit the breeding grounds. And so the fat that they gain here is used while they're breeding. This is probably one of the most critical stopovers that shorebirds have before they hit the breeding grounds.

This migration also draws other visitors to the region as hundreds of people also flock to Cordova to witness and document the spectacle for themselves.

Martin Moe says it's well worth the effort it takes them to get there:

We think that it's quite a showcase, both for Cordova—for Prince William Sound—and for the public lands that support these birds. The Forest Service manages that 800-thousand acres of the delta, and so we're surrounded by all that. and just in general, our environment here in Cordova, we're not on the road system, so you can only get here by plane or by the ferry, we're a town of about two-thousand people, and yet we're surrounded by the ocean, we're surrounded by snow-capped mountains, and seven glaciers within driving distance or walking distance from town."

While giving a boost to tourism is a central aspect of the Shorebird Festival, it also serves as an important tool for public education about this unique ecosystem supporting a hugely diverse wildlife population.

Prince William Sound is an important location for research. Tim Joyce with the Forest Service is the Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist for the Wildlife Shop in Cordova. He tells us the event serves as an excellent opportunity to teach:

We have quite a few activities that go on here during the bird festival. We involve the grade school, quite a bit, on many of the activities, they'll go out and look at the different types of invertebrates, as part of their science class, they'll look at some of the things are in the mud they may have never ever discovered before, and seeing some of these little creatures, you know, that some of the birds eat, and we'll have binoculars and spotting scopes set up so they can actually go out and see and look at these different birds.

However, if you're thinking about attending next year's festival, Joyce says that you'll need to make your plans early, the town's hotels and bed and breakfasts are booked full months in advance. But for those who want to be in the midst of one of the world's great natural wonders, he says there's nothing quite like the Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival:

This area is one of those few spots in the world where you can really make a difference, and really see things that you wouldn't see anywhere else. This is almost like the Serengeti for shorebirds here. It's something that's a sight to behold.

For more information, please visit <http://www.cordovachamber.com>.

Forest Focus is produced for the Alaska Region of the USDA Forest Service Office of Public Affairs and Communications.

In Juneau, I'm Bob Belongie.