AMERICA'S ARCTIC BIRD CONNECTION

Over 100 migratory bird species use the Arctic coastal plain of Alaska

FACT SHEET—

Northern Pintail

(Anas acuta)

The Northern Pintail is an attractive duck that breeds throughout the northern latitudes of North America, as well as Europe and Asia. This duck gets its name from the males' distinctive pointed tail. It is a very migratory species, with some birds regularly venturing to many of the islands in the North Pacific and North Atlantic, although the majority spend the winter in the middle latitudes of the New World and Old World. During the years of drought in the prairies of North America, some pintails will not stop at their usual nesting areas in central Canada and northern United States. Many will cross Canada and Alaska to nest in northern Siberia. Individual pintails do not maintain traditional nesting and wintering areas from year to year. Some ducks will winter in Louisiana one year and in California the next, while a few, males especially, may breed in Siberia one summer and eastern North America the next. During the past 50 years the North American nesting population has ranged from 2,000,000 to 10,000,000 birds, making the Northern Pintail one of the more numerous species of waterfowl. It is not unusual to find tens of thousands of pintails feeding in a favorite wintering area.

A pair of Northern Pintails.

Arctic Bird Connection

Northern Pintails depend upon a very large continental area from which to select their nesting habitat each year. During the frequent years of drought across the middle of North America, pintails are forced further north in larger numbers to find appropriate wetlands for breeding. During periods of drought, 40–60% of all breeding pintails in North America are found in Alaska, while only 20–25% of the continental population normally breeds in Alaska. The Arctic Coastal Plain of Alaska remains a major breeding area for this duck; the pintail is the most abundant duck nesting across the tundra in this area.

Description

Males in full breeding plumage are distinctive with a brown head and a white stripe running down each side. A white neck, grey back and sides, and a long pointed tail further distinguish the males. Females are the same general shape, but they have a much shorter tail (4–6 inches *vs*. 7–9 inches for males) and overall have a mottled, dark brown coloration. During the late summer molt, male pintails resemble females. The breeding plumage is acquired by late fall or early winter, when courtship begins.

Food

The Northern Pintail eats a variety of grains, such as rice, wheat, barley, and corn, as well as other seeds, pond weeds, aquatic insects, crustaceans, and snails. Like most waterfowl, the pintail consumes large quantities of coarse gravel and similar materials to help grind their food in the gizzard before digestion starts. Feeding takes place in a wide range of habitats. On the wintering grounds and when migrating, waste grain is often consumed at night in fields. Small ponds and other unfrozen wetlands are used at all times of the year. Many feed in shallow water by tipping their heads down and their tails up to reach for submerged food. In winter, some pintails travel up to 30 miles or more daily from roosting and resting areas to reach feeding sites. The ducklings feed largely on insects and aquatic plants.

Habitat

The Northern Pintail is associated with wetlands at all times, although it may feed and nest some distance from water. Brackish and freshwater marshes containing shallow water are important to this duck. Nests may be placed up to 2 miles from the nearest water, helping the duck avoid the

heavy nest predation rates usually found near the edges of ponds and lakes. The habitats used by the pintail may be only intermittently or seasonally wet.

Breeding and pair bonds

Pintails usually begin to breed at 1 year of age. Pairs form on the wintering grounds in November and December, and the males follow the females back to her nesting area. The pintail pairs are among the first migratory birds to return to the Arctic coastal plain each May. As soon as some open ground becomes available, the pintails return. Nesting may begin shortly thereafter. Nests are usually hidden under tall grasses and other vegetation and lined with down plucked by the female from her breast. A few nests have been found in Alaska on barrier islands. Males accompany the females until the clutches of 5–10 (sometimes 3–12) eggs are completed and incubation has begun. Males leave the incubation of the eggs and rearing of the young pintails to the females. Males may chase and mate with any available females at this time. A clutch of 10 eggs weighs about 55% of the average female. The eggs are incubated for 22–24 days. The males start molting in mid-June after leaving the females and assemble in large flocks on the larger lakes in the region. Females remain with the young until late August when all are able to fly.

Arctic Conditions

If the snow melts late and ponds remain frozen later than normal, the pintails will have little chance of replacing any nests lost to predators, particularly if incubation is in an advanced stage. Slightly smaller clutches in the Arctic and longer day lengths normally allow the birds to start incubating sooner and let the young feed during the full 24 hours of daylight. Thus, in nearly all years the pintails can produce good numbers of young by August.

Young and development

The downy ducklings can feed within hours of hatching and are quickly led to the nearest water by the female. The hen pintails will defend the young with distraction displays while the ducklings hide in the vegetation. The downy young also can dive to avoid predators. By 2–3 weeks of age, the downy pintails start to show their first juvenile plumage. Their first flights takes place in about 5–6 weeks in Arctic Alaska (7–8 weeks at lower latitudes with fewer daylight hours). At hatching, a Northern Pintail weighs slightly less than an ounce; by the time it leaves the Arctic it weighs more than a pound.

Migration and winter

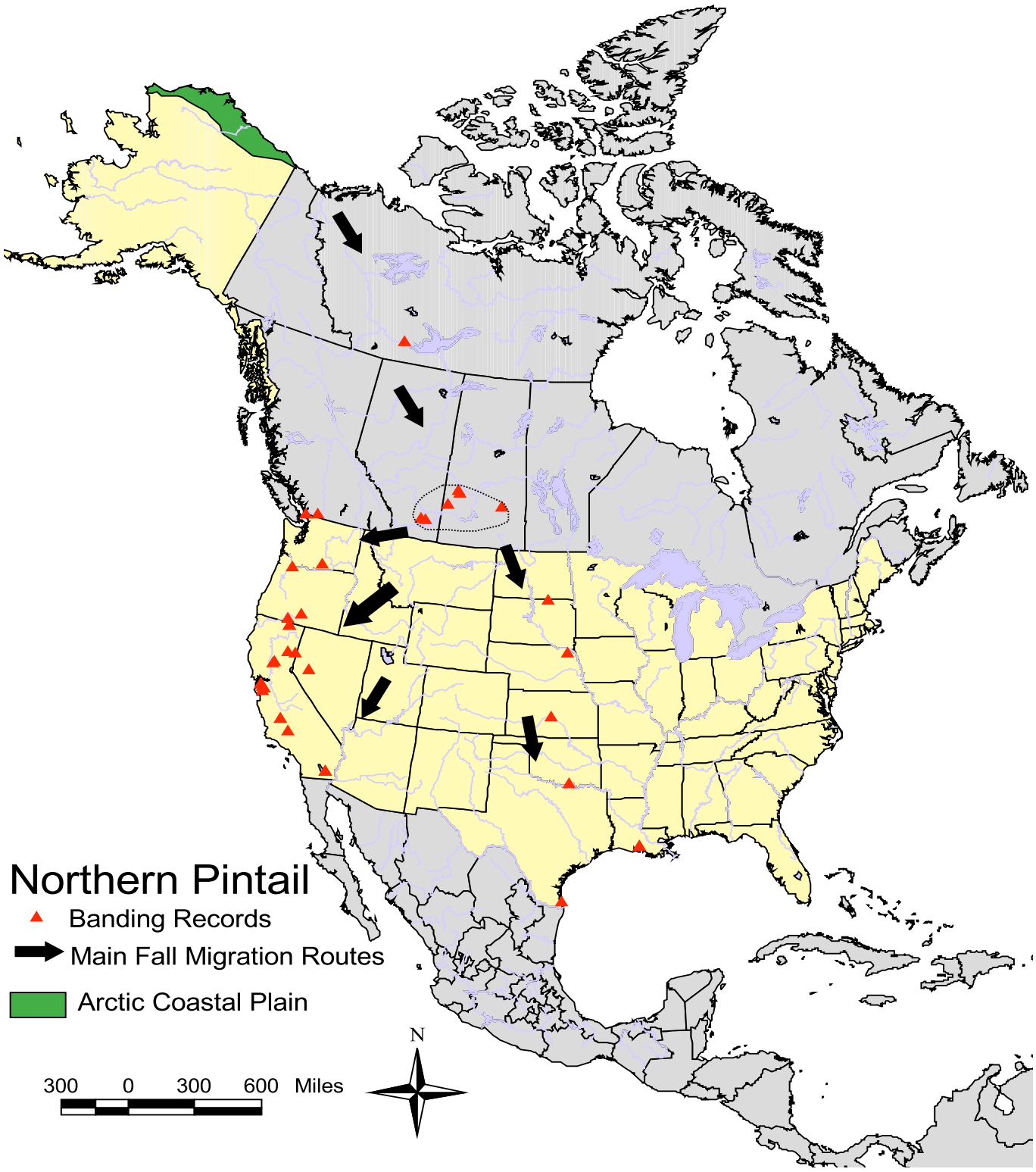
Adult pintails go through a complete and simultaneous molt of the major flight feathers on the breeding grounds. For about four weeks they cannot fly. The adult males acquire a dull, female-like plumage at this time. As soon as the males can fly in early August, they head south; some may arrive in California within days after leaving the breeding grounds. The females follow a few weeks later. The young pintails depart from the Arctic nesting grounds starting in late August; all are gone by late September just as the ponds and lakes become frozen. Families do not travel together, and individuals from one brood may scatter in various directions. All fall migration is generally southward. Most females and young pintails start arriving on their wintering grounds in October.

During late fall and early winter, birds add considerable fat reserves; often doubling their weight from early fall. The males molt for the second time into their full breeding plumage, while the females also molt a second set of body feathers. By early March most pintails are headed north. Therefore, an abundance of food and associated resting habitat on the wintering grounds is essential for the pintail to succeed in the subsequent breeding season.

Mortality

Young pintails face a large number of potential predators on the Arctic coastal plain. If they leave the water, foxes and weasels may find them. They may be picked off the water by a passing Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*), Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*), or Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*). Snowy Owls (*Nyctea scandiaca*), Gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*), or Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) are also likely to take an unwary pintail back to their nests. Incubating hens are frequent victims of foxes and other mammals. While on migration, the ducks are often harassed and sometimes even killed by falcons and other raptors. Hunting in North America accounts for less than 3% of the Northern Pintail annual losses. Diseases and poor or lost habitat are the greatest threats to pintails and waterfowl in general.

(Additional information on back page)



North American Range Map: This is based upon all 45 Arctic Alaska-banded or –recovered Northern Pintails. Most were banded elsewhere and up to 14 years later were recorded on the Arctic coastal plain. Only the banding and recovery locations outside of Arctic Alaska are plotted; because of the long migration periods, no attempt was made to separate the winter and migration records. Major migration routes are shown; most pintails assemble or pass through south-central Canada (outlined area), with the majority going to California for the winter. Although all current records are from west of the Mississippi River, a larger sample will likely show Arctic birds traveling to Siberia, Hawaii, eastern United States, and Mexico.

NORTHERN PINTAILT FACTS—

Wing Span (adults)	32–37 inches
Total Length (adults)	21–30 inches
Weight (adults)	20–44 ounces
Clutch Size	usually 5–10 eggs
Egg Weight	1.5 ounce
Incubation Period	22–24 days
Age at first flight	36–56 days
Age at Parental Abandonment	6–8 weeks
Age at First Breeding	1 year
Oldest Wild Bird	22 years 3 months
Max. Length of Migration (1-way)	4,500 miles
Max. Sustained Flight Speed	65 miles per hour
Max. Altitude (migration)	Unknown
Normal Altitude (migration)	1,000–3,000 feet

Primary information sources:
Austin, J. E., and M. R. Miller. 1995. Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*). *In* The Birds of North America, No. 163. The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia; American Ornithologists' Union, Washington.

North American Bird Banding Files, US Geological Survey, Laurel, MD.

Photo Credit: Brian E. Small, Los Angeles

THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY'S Migratory Bird Project

Following unmarked pathways more ancient than any living organism, using guidance systems that rival or surpass man's instruments, nearly all of the birds using the Arctic coastal plain of Alaska each summer migrate hundreds or even thousands of miles to areas best suited for their survival each winter. The Wilderness Society has initiated a special educational project to research and describe the major migratory pathways, stopover sites and wintering grounds for the bird species that depend upon the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain.

One need not to travel to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or even to Alaska, to be deeply interested and involved in the efforts to have its vital habitats protected for all time. Designating Wilderness on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, where the birds, caribou, musk-oxen, polar bears, and other animals rear their young, will forever protect it. This land is where the giant multi-national oil companies are pushing hard for the Congress to grant full industrial-scale construction of roads, drill pads, airstrips and other facilities related to oil exploitation. The area of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge needing wilderness designation represents only 5% of the Arctic coastal plain in Alaska; the rest is already subject to development.

The Wilderness Society project will produce maps, informational brochures, exhibits and other educational materials so the public may learn firsthand about the many migratory bird benefits received from the Arctic, a legacy that our generation holds in trust for our children and, in turn, theirs, indefinitely. The material you are reading was prepared, in part, by the project. Comments and inquiries are welcomed. Please ask how to become more involved with protecting the Arctic coastal plain of Alaska.

The Wilderness Society thanks The Aspenwood Foundation of Sandpoint, Idaho, for its generous support of this project.