



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Tundra to the Tropics

Alaska's Migratory Birds Bring People Together



Casey and New Zealand delegate with local farmers, who now also operate as tour guides.



Touring the rice fields with the local farmers.

With the tropical sun beating down, I peer through my binoculars and scan a rice field where the seasonal monsoon flood is finally receding. Sweat beads up, making it difficult to focus through the lenses. There are so many birds here, including species that are completely new to me. The purple herons, whiskered terns, little and great egrets, greenshanks, and long-tailed shrikes are exciting to see, but they aren't the reason I'm here. Then I see it! A medium-sized shorebird, heavily streaked with a bright white belly. This is a pectoral sandpiper, a bird that may have nested on the arctic tundra, then traveled halfway around the world, and is now here, like me, in the Philippines.

Although not obvious at first, the connections between our very different countries became very apparent to me during my week in the Philippines. We share a number of migratory birds, primarily shorebirds and a few songbirds. Our countries provide different components of what these migratory birds need to survive during



The CEPA Working Group Delegation, representing the USA, South Korea, Russia, Japan, Philippines, Myanmar, North Korea, China, Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, and EAAFP Secretariat.



Casey presenting on the breeding birds and habitat of the Arctic tundra at the NatGeo Migratory Bird Youth Seminar.



Low Young, Chief of the EAAFP Secretariat and Casey (back row, left to right) with a group of Philippine students and their teacher at the NatGeo Migratory Bird Youth Seminar.

their entire lifecycle. What is less obvious, and what I was excited to learn, was how much we in Alaska have in common with the people managing the birds and their habitats in the Philippines and in many other countries throughout the East Asian-Australasian migratory bird flyway.

I was invited to the Philippines as a representative of the United States to participate in a Communication, Education, Participation and Awareness (CEPA) workshop hosted by the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership. The Partnership works to ensure migratory birds and their habitats are recognized and conserved for the benefit of people and biodiversity. This goal fits well with the management of wildlife and habitat in Alaska, where habitat and species are often managed with subsistence and other human uses in mind. In Alaska we cannot manage our birds alone, we need to work with managers throughout the flyway to ensure nesting, stopover, and wintering habitat is available.

After sharing CEPA activities from Alaska and hearing from the ten other countries represented, we worked to identify coordinated outreach actions that can span multiple countries. I was amazed to hear the similarities of bird and habitat management in very different countries, including Russia, China, and North Korea. These shared experiences build bridges between countries, cultures, and languages. The CEPA group is a great example of a successful international partnership.

Following the CEPA workshop, I presented at a National Geographic-sponsored Migratory



Birds of the Philippines (from top left, clockwise): common kingfisher, long-tailed shrike, purple heron, chestnut munia, white-collared kingfisher, black-winged stilt.



Bird watching with a group of students at the NatGeo Migratory Bird Youth Seminar.

Bird Youth Seminar to about 150 high school students from the metro Manila area. These kids were eager to learn, and have not had much exposure to natural habitats and migratory birds. During introductions, each school group shared an art project and a cheer for migratory birds. Following my presentation on the birds, the habitat, and various research and monitoring activities in the arctic tundra, the inquisitive kids asked many questions and wanted pictures with me and my counterparts. After lunch, we took the kids to one of the only patches of natural habitat in the Manila area, where we observed kingfishers, herons, and a variety of songbirds in a mangrove and tidal flat habitat.

This brings us back to the Candaba rice field where this story began. Upon arriving in the adjacent small town, we were greeted by the local mayor, and then led by two farmers on levees between the rice fields. Some farmers also grow tomatoes, and when we figured out that tomatoes cost 30 times more in Alaska than in the Philippines, they jokingly hatched a plan to load my bags with tomatoes to take home and sell so they could get rich. Society for the Conservation of Philippine Wetlands trains farmers to manage the cropland for birds and lead bird tours. The group recently started working with Manila tour companies to develop this trip for the public. Only an hour and a half north of Manila, this area has great potential to attract wildlife watchers while maintaining agricultural production. I was honored to be a “test tourist” and hope that providing a direct economic value to habitat management will help conserve this important habitat.

As a sponsored invitee, I was fortunate to be able to travel to the Philippines to share the Alaskan perspective. I made many contacts and connections that will be useful in managing birds and their habitat and will continue as we develop outreach activities that show how our shared migratory birds bring people together.

— Casey Burns,
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Note: BLM Alaska is part of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership.: <https://eaaflyway.net/>