

Text by:

- Brian Small
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Alaska is a bird photographer's paradise! There is such a wonderful variety of subjects in the state and a multitude of habitats holding unique and varied species. Whether it's the tundra pools of the North Slope, the streams and rivers of the Seward Peninsula, the coastal forests of the south, or the rocky cliffs of the Pribilofs, Alaska's wilderness offers fantastic photo opportunities. And you don't have to visit one of Alaska's remote outposts to take great bird photos. Even a couple of days around Anchorage can provide many fine chances for photography. Places in and around Anchorage like Kincaid Park, Westchester Lagoon, Potter Marsh, Glen Alps, and Hillside Park are sure to yield great bird photographs. All it takes is a little time and a lot of patience.

Our cover image for the September 2010 *Birding* is of a calling Red-necked Grebe. I took this photo at Westchester Lagoon only minutes from downtown Anchorage. The grebes that regularly breed on this lake are very used to all the bikers, dog walkers, joggers, birders, and others who visit this park regularly. The birds don't seem to mind bird photog-

rappers with big lenses! The only trick to getting this particular image was finding a part of the lake where the birds were feeding close to shore and where I could get the sun at my back. I simply got down as low to the ground as I could. Then I sat quietly and waited until the birds moved around in front of me. The adult in this photo is calling to its nearby mate. I created this image with a Canon 600mm IS lens, a Canon 1D Mark IV camera body, and late afternoon light.

—Brian E. Small

To see more of Brian Small's Alaska images, be sure to visit his website: briansmallphoto.com.

I entered Ohio Wesleyan University as a birder knowing that ornithology was my path. I chose Ohio Wesleyan over a local college in Boston purely because my good friends Wayne and Betty Petersen had recommended that I study ornithology with Professor Edward H. ("Jed") Burt. Prof. Burt studies the evolution of color, and I jumped on research in my first semester. My first project looked at the physical (structural) differences between black and white feathers. However, this project tied me to the lab, and I wanted some field experience.

Many times I have asked myself,

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“What selects for color on *this part* of the bird?” Finally, we arrived at bills. Prof. Burt had a hypothesis from a previous study in the 1980s on what might select for bill color, and I could test it by birding! It has been a perfect project—one that requires lots of observation in the field of as many species and individuals that I can find. Birding has been data collection for my senior honors thesis, and you can never have too much data.

Everything has fallen into place. After obtaining the field data on how much time various species spend in the sun, I needed to measure the actual color of the birds’ bills. Since I am from Boston, birder friend Dr. Jeremiah Trimble has helped me gain access to the specimens in care of the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. We started seeing nice patterns in the bills themselves—no pun intended. There was a substantial number of species with dark upper mandibles and pale lower mandibles. This result supported our theory that the part of the bill in the bird’s visual field would be selected to be dark if visual acuity is vital for the species. Even some species with pale upper mandibles, such as Great Egret and Yellow-billed Cotinga, have a dark line on the upper ridge. We haven’t been able to find a single ABA Area species in which the lower mandible is darker than the upper. To this date, we know of only one species that follows that pattern: the Chestnut-mandibled Toucan of Central America and northern South America. Please, if you can think of *any* other species in the world with a dark lower and light upper mandible, let us know.

An Anomaly from Larids and Anatids: Can You Help?

In many avian families, there are anomalies here and there, but the overall trend is apparent: Birds that forage in the sun have dark bills. Cory’s Shearwater, Great Egret, and American Oystercatcher are exceptions, but the general rule applies in their families. However, an exceptionally large number of species of gulls, terns, and waterfowl have pale bills, and yet they forage in open, sunlit habitats practically 100% of the time. Currently, we do not have many ideas to explain this large anomaly. After a presentation at a recent American Ornithologists’ Union meeting, one creative member of the audience commented that some species of waterfowl and larids have eyelids that refract ultraviolet radiation. Upon further inspection, we found that the nictitating eyelids of most species that dive—or otherwise need to see underwater—do indeed have a notably high refractive index. We will continue to explore other explanations, and we welcome your suggestions.

—Sean M. Williams

On my mother’s authority, I began watching birds as a toddler. I remember watching an American Robin’s nest in a yew bush just outside our living room window and being inconsolable the day the nestlings were dragged from the nest by a red squirrel. Like my coauthor Sean Williams, I chose college based on my having access to an ornithology course and a field station. After graduating from Bowdoin College, I attended the University of Wisconsin. There I had a conversation with Jack Hailman in which we discussed why Red-winged Blackbirds have red epaulets. We were not interested in why the epaulets, but, rather, in why red? Why not blue, yellow, or any contrasting color?

In thinking about the evolution of color, I began to look at every part of the bird. Why are wing bars usually white, and why are they placed on the secondary coverts? Why is the upper mandible almost always dark, as in the Red-necked Grebe on the cover? After some preliminary work on warblers (the subject of my doctorate) and flycatchers, I suggested that reducing glare might be the reason for dark bills. However, a broad comparative approach awaited that special student with outstanding birding skills and the energy to collect data on hundreds of species. In the fall of 2007, Sean arrived on the Ohio Wesleyan campus and I knew he was the student and colleague to pursue the “bill color” question.

—Edward H. (“Jed”) Burt, Jr.