

# YUKON FLATS

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

It's springtime on the Yukon Flats refuge in Alaska, at the northernmost stretch of the Yukon River, and millions of canvasbacks, pintails, scaup, wigeon, shovelers and other waterfowl are transforming the landscape. They fly in from 11 foreign countries, eight Canadian provinces and 45 of the 50 states to create the next generation. Along with other migratory birds such as sandhill cranes, trumpeter swans, terns and phalaropes, they alter the 9-million-acre refuge—from a quiet place of about 13 hardy avian species in the bitter, minus-70-degree-Fahrenheit winter, into a spring landscape of more than 150 species engaged in the chaos of courtship and rearing. The throng includes 65,000 northern pintails, 125,000 scaup, 16,000 loons and 100,000 horned and red-necked grebes.

Yukon Flats bears proof—there are still places in the world where wild creatures are so integrated in the seasonal character of the landscape that their migrations thoroughly alter the face of the Earth. This refuge supports one of the highest nesting densities of waterfowl on the continent and has become an increasingly crucial breeding area as prairie pothole habitat in the lower 48 states and Canada has been degraded by agriculture, development and global warming. In addition to its significance for birds, the Yukon Flats is home to black bears, grizzlies, moose (a staple food of local subsistence hunters), caribou and one of the densest populations of lynx in the state. At its core is the refuge's 300-mile-long Yukon River with its endless network of creeks and rivers that provide habitat for 18 species of fish, including coho, Chinook and chum salmon. These fish may travel 2,000 miles to reach and spawn at their natal streams—a longer migration from the sea than on any other river system in the world.

At issue on the Yukon Flats is oil exploration and development. Long fought off at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the battle at Yukon Flats is largely out of the public spotlight. According to the refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (the planning document required of all refuges by the 1997 law and for Alaska refuges by the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act), oil development is not compatible with the purposes of this refuge and is prohibited. But instead of accept-



ing this decision, Doyon, Limited, an Alaska native corporation, is attempting to negotiate a land swap with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The deal, which would give Doyon a single, large block of contiguous refuge habitat with potential oil reserves in exchange for smaller, scattered parcels owned by Doyon within the refuge, is specifically designed to skirt the strong protection

standards for wildlife refuges: If the land is no longer in the refuge, those standards will not apply. This political maneuvering is putting at risk more than 200,000 acres of the refuge—which provide some of the only habitat on the refuge for Dall sheep—and could affect whole communities of species including wolves, wolverines and moose. In fact, the land sought by Doyon is considered so unique and pristine by FWS that the agency proposed in 1987 that the area be designated as “wilderness”—a protective classification reserved for the country's most pristine wild areas. FWS has acknowledged that if the land swap occurs, it would split the proposed wilderness down the middle, which would almost certainly undermine any possibility of future wilderness designation. This ill-conceived land swap would also subject the refuge to the web of roads, pipelines and pollution that inevitably accompany oil and gas development.



Dall sheep | © Michio Hoshino/Minden Pictures