

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Fly Alaska

*Conservation Careers for Pilots*



*Fly through mountain passes traversed by caribou, along braided rivers full of salmon, across a wide expanse of wetlands full of migratory birds...*

*Your work as a pilot for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska is critical to our mission, helping wildlife, habitats, and people thrive in this great land.*

*Join our team for a unique career that could take you to amazing places.*

*The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.*

*Cover: USFWS plane on the tundra.  
Alexis Bonogofsky for USFWS.  
Below: Landing a cub on the lake.  
Lisa Hupp/USFWS*

## How We Fly

Alaska is a vast landscape with few roads. The work of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service takes us to the farthest corners of the state, from the Arctic to the Aleutians.

We use aircraft, mostly fixed-wing, single engine planes, much as a vehicle or tool to conduct our field operations. These include:

- waterfowl and migratory bird population surveys
- low level surveys and radio tracking large mammals
- law enforcement surveillance
- fire reconnaissance
- flights to drop off and pick up crew and supplies in remote field camps.

The Alaska region employs the greatest number of pilots in our agency, some of the most unique and specially trained positions in the conservation profession. These positions range from full time pilot positions to “dual function” biologists, law enforcement officers, and special agents who fly.

Whichever path your aviation career with us takes, it is important that you love to fly small planes. Each position requires time and interest to meet the full requirements of either a dedicated pilot or a dual function pilot biologist or law enforcement pilot. If you love wildlife and aviation, exciting opportunities await!



# Our Positions

## Pilot Biologist

Job Series GS-0401, 0402, or 0486

### National Wildlife Refuge Program

The National Wildlife Refuge System conserves habitat and wildlife at over 560 refuges nationwide. Alaska has 16 National Wildlife Refuges located across the state, and refuge pilot biologists are typically stationed within the main community adjacent to the refuge.

Pilot biologists in this program vary from generalist wildlife biologists to more specialized disciplines, such as bear biologists, mammal biologists, fish biologists, botanists, ecologists, etc. They use aircraft as a tool or vehicle to conduct field work in remote places that are not accessible by vehicle or boat.

Some of the field work that refuge pilot biologists perform include wildlife (e.g., moose, bear, caribou, waterfowl) surveys, tracking animals with radio-telemetry, and flying into remote refuge locations to conduct plant, water, and other ecological studies. Refuge pilot biologists may also support field operations for other projects within the refuge, including remote camp logistics.

### Migratory Bird Program

Pilot biologists in the Migratory Bird Program are stationed throughout the United States, and in Alaska they are stationed in Anchorage. These employees are responsible for monitoring waterfowl population trends and distributions for the purposes of establishing harvest regulations, conducting waterfowl status assessments, and conserving waterfowl habitat.

The dual functions of biologist and pilot challenge the employee to take direct responsibility for data collection protocols and presentation of results and also serve as pilot-in-command on low level aerial waterfowl survey missions, including pre-mission planning and logistics, adherence to survey protocols, and post-survey briefings.

New pilot biologists typically go through a period of 1-3 years of training prior to taking over full responsibility for data collection and piloting roles.



Pilot biologist Heather Wilson with swan and plane on survey. USFWS.

*“When I’m flying the plane so viscerally—making constant small adjustments to maintain 125 feet above the ground, staying on transect, scanning for obstacles, scanning the instruments, staying ahead of traffic and radio calls—all while letting the bird observations flow in, instantaneously translating them to vocal observations I record through my helmet microphone, it feels good.*

*I feel very lucky to have found my job. Airline-style flying would have never been for me, and neither would lab work. Finding a position that blends field biology and natural resource flying has been unbelievably satisfying.”*

*Pilot Biologist Heather Wilson, Migratory Bird Management*

*Quoted in Outside Magazine: “The Alaskan Pilot-Biologist on the Front Line of Climate Change” by Kristen Schmitt.*

## Law Enforcement Pilot

### Federal Wildlife Officers at National Wildlife Refuges

Job Series GS-1801  
Federal Wildlife Officers (FWOs) are first and foremost law enforcement officers who use aircraft as a tool to perform their duties, which include investigation, apprehension, arrest, detention, or prosecution of people who violate laws, rules, and regulations enacted to protect and provide for the safe use of lands managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These positions work within the National Wildlife Refuge System. In Alaska, FWOs are stationed in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and various smaller communities adjacent to Alaska’s 16 National Wildlife Refuges.

### Special Agents for the Office of Law Enforcement

Job Series GS-1811  
Special agents are federal law enforcement officers who conduct investigations, make arrests, execute federal search warrants, and serve subpoenas. Special agents focus their enforcement efforts on unlawful commercialization of wildlife and protection of sensitive species and habitats. Special agent pilots support enforcement operations by providing personnel transport, logistical support, and conducting aerial reconnaissance. Currently, special agent pilots are stationed only in Alaska.

## Pilot or Instructor

### Single Function Pilot

Job Series GS-2181  
Single-function pilots fly full time as their job duty. They support a variety of field operations, including dropping off and picking up field crews, supplies and equipment; conducting wildlife surveys and radio-telemetry; and assisting law enforcement officers with surveillance and patrol. Single function pilots are currently located in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

### Airplane Flight Instructor

This Anchorage-based position serves as the Alaska Regional Aviation Trainer to oversee the fleet pilot training program. They develop aviation training policies, standards, methods, guidelines, and procedures for the agency’s training program. Additionally, the instructor develops regional pilot training syllabi and lesson plans for specialized resource flight missions and assists the Regional Aviation Manager and other bureau representatives to plan, schedule and conduct flight clinics for specialized types of flying such as float, ski, instructor, resource, off airport, and glacier clinics.

*“As a pilot-biologist for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I conduct low altitude surveys for everything from moose and caribou to trumpeter swans. I will also spend a lot of time in the Kenai Mountains doing surveys and radio-tracking missions for Dall sheep and mountain goats, which requires additional Department of the Interior training and experience flying at low altitudes in the mountains.*

*My other duties include flying colleagues and gear to remote locations for projects such as lake surveys for aquatic invasive plants and maintaining refuge cabins and trails, as well as aerial photography flights, checking snow depth markers and other specialized missions.”*

*Dom Watts, Kenai National Wildlife Refuge*

*Aerial telemetry radio-tracking survey. USFWS.*



# Education, Training, and Experience

## Dual Function Positions

With any of our dual function positions, a successful candidate must meet specific education or training requirements in their field of interest (biologist or law enforcement). It takes time and dedication to not only obtain the training in the primary career field but also the flight requirements to become a pilot, so a strong interest in both functions is important!



*Flying over Kodiak Refuge.  
Lisa Hupp/USFWS*

## Pilot Biologist Education

At minimum, candidates must meet the entry requirements for a Wildlife Biologist (0486 series), Fishery Biologist (0482 series), or a Fish and Wildlife Biologist (0401 series). This is the completion of a full four year course of study in an accredited college or university leading to a bachelor's degree in biological sciences, agriculture, natural resource management, chemistry, or a discipline related to this position. Be sure to check the [OPM.gov](https://www.opm.gov) job series listing for any specific required courses, such as botany.

If you have not completed that requirement, you may qualify if you have a combination of both education and experience that includes course work equivalent to a major (i.e., 24 semester hours) in biological sciences, agriculture, natural resource management, chemistry, or a discipline related to this position; PLUS appropriate experience or additional course work. The quality of the combination must demonstrate that you possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform the work of the position and is comparable to that normally acquired through the completion of a full four year course of study with a major as described above.

## What advice would you give people who want to fly for the Service?

*“Keep at it. Keep your eye on the prize. It’s a long road, but we need you. It takes a lot of work and some investment, but it will pay off.”  
- Nikki Guldager, Pilot Biologist at Yukon Flats Refuge*

## Federal Wildlife Officer Pilot (uniformed officer)

To qualify for a Federal Wildlife Officer (GS-1801), candidates must successfully complete an arduous 17-week course at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, five weeks of advanced officer training at the National Conservation Training Center, and 10 weeks of Field Training and Evaluation.

## Special Agent Pilot (Office of Law Enforcement)

At minimum, candidates must meet the entry requirements for the GS-1811 criminal investigator position. Both education and prior employment will be considered when applying for an agent position. In addition, selected applicants will be required to successfully complete the Criminal Investigator Training Program at the Federal Law Enforcement Center, Office of Law Enforcement Special Agent Basic Training, and the Field Training and Evaluation Program.

For both law enforcement positions, a college degree is not required to qualify, but applicants will be more competitive with a degree in biology, natural resources (fish, wildlife, ecology, etc.), or criminal justice or a similar field.



*Pilot preparing for takeoff. USFWS.*

## Dual Function Pilot Requirements

To qualify for a dual function pilot position, the successful applicant must meet the job requirements in their position of interest (biologist or law enforcement), AND:

- 1) possess a current Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Commercial Airman Certificate with rating appropriate for the duties performed;
- 2) possess an instrument rating, and 10 hours as Pilot-in-Command in actual or simulated instrument flight rules conditions;
- 3) have completed a minimum of 500 hours of flight time as Pilot-in-Command;
- 4) have completed 25 hours as Pilot-in-Command at night; and
- 5) possess a current Class II FAA Medical Certificate.

## Single Function Pilot Requirements

Pilot requirements are the same as above with the exception of 1500 flight hour requirement as opposed to 500. This position does not have an education qualification requirement.

## Flight Instructor Requirements

Flight instructors must:

- 1) must possess a current FAA Commercial Pilot Certificate, Certified Flight Instructor rating, and FAA single engine seaplane rating;
- 2) have completed at least 1500 hours of total flight time which includes at least 1200 hours of flight time as a Pilot-in-Command; at least 75 hours of night flight flying AND at least 100 hours of flying time within the last 12 months;
- 3) have at least 75 hours of instruments flight time and at least 10 of these hours logged in actual instrument weather;

4) possess a current Class II FAA Medical Certificate;

5) must be familiar with operating single-engine piston aircraft on wheels (conventional and tricycle gear), floats, amphibious floats, skis, and retractable wheel skis; and

6) must be familiar with conducting missions, including low-level aerial wildlife surveys, animal radio tracking, off airport operations, and aerial reconnaissance.

This position does not have an education qualification requirement.



*Plane on skis near the Arctic Circle. Lisa Hupp/USFWS.*



*Flying on floats over the mountains. Lisa Hupp/USFWS..*

## How to Fly for Us

Many of our pilots get started flying on their own to obtain the foundational FAA pilot certifications, private pilot certificate, commercial pilot certificate, and instrument rating, and build up their hours (to 500 or 1500 hours, depending on the position).

### Apply on USAJobs.gov

All U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service job opportunities are announced on [USAJobs.gov](https://www.usajobs.gov). Check [OPM.gov](https://www.opm.gov) for specific job listing qualifications.

*Tip:* set up email notifications for specific job series, and search for positions within specific locations.

### Questions?

Alaska Regional Aviation Program: 907/786 3368

### Mentorship and Extra Training

We offer a mentorship and training program for new pilots to meet qualifications required to fly an array of natural resource specialized missions. Additional training may include: low level wildlife surveys, animal radio-tracking, aerial remote sensing, law enforcement patrols, off-airport landings, and multiple aircraft configurations (wheels, skis, floats, amphibious floats).

The Alaska region has a Regional Aviation Trainer who develops and oversees all fleet pilot training. We also have many experienced fleet pilots who serve as Instructor Pilots in addition to their normal dual-function and/or piloting duties to assist in specialized flight training. External flight schools may also be utilized to provide specialized aviation skills such as Upset Recovery Training, off airport training, and mountain survey flying.

### Our Fleet

We fly a variety of different fixed-wing aircraft configured multiple ways, depending on what is required to complete the mission objectives and maximize safety.

The Alaska fleet consists primarily of single-engine and turbo-prop aircraft modified to maximize performance and carry externally mounted equipment.

Our aircraft can be configured on tundra tires, floats, amphibious floats, skis or retractable wheel skis, or normal (small) tires.

We currently operate the following aircraft in Alaska:

**Cessna 206 F, G, and H model Stationair**

**Cessna 185F Skywagon**

**Cub Crafters CC18-180 Top Cub**

**Pacific Aerospace (formerly Found) FBA2C Bushhawk**

**de Havilland DHC2 Beaver**

**Daher (formerly Quest) Kodiak 100**



## More About...

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the premier government agency dedicated to the conservation, protection, and enhancement of fish, wildlife and plants, and their habitats. We are the only agency in the federal government whose primary responsibility is the conservation and management of these important natural resources for the American public.

Our origins date back to 1871 when Congress established the U.S. Fish Commission to study the decrease in the nation's food fishes and recommend ways to reverse that decline. Today, we are a diverse and largely decentralized organization within the Department of Interior, employing about 8,000 dedicated professionals working out of facilities across the country, including a headquarters office in Falls Church, Virginia, and eight regional offices representing the 12 Unified Interior Regions.

*Photos: pilots and amphibious aircraft at an airstrip. Left: Lisa Hupp/USFWS. Right: USFWS.*

### The Alaska Region

This region covers the entire state of Alaska, with a regional office located in Anchorage, the largest city with a population of nearly 300,000, as well as offices in communities around the state.

There are 227 Federally Recognized Tribes in Alaska. We live and work on Indigenous traditional homelands.

### Our Shared Purpose

At the US Fish and Wildlife Service Alaska we are shared stewards of our nation's last true wild places and world renowned natural resources. The lands and waters of this place we call home nourish a vast and unique array of fish, wildlife and people. We cultivate a reverent awareness and respect for all things, from Alaska's smallest plants and most iconic animals to its diverse communities and cultures. Today and for generations to come, we live with, live from, enjoy and learn from the wildness of this awe-inspiring land and the people who love it.

### Additional Employment Criteria

- Must be a U.S. Citizen or National.
- Individuals assigned male at birth after 12-31-59 must be registered for Selective Service.
- Must possess and maintain a valid State driver's license at all times during their tenure.
- Must successfully pass a background investigation and drug testing.
- Must meet medical requirements.
- You may be required to carry a firearm in the performance of your duties.
- Official U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service uniform may be required.
- May be required to successfully complete a probationary period.

*Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs and activities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is available to all individuals regardless of physical or mental disability. For more information please contact the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.*

*The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service strives for a work force that reflects the cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity of the Nation, including people with disabilities.*

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**  
**U.S. Department of Interior**

[www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov)

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