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Ultimate Alaska – Natural History & Birding
31 May – 14 June, 2011 Trip Report
Greg Smith and Kelly Vandenhuevel, Guides, with ten participants
Photos by Greg Smith www.flickr.com/photos/slobirdr



Tues., May 31 - Arrival in Anchorage

The group arrived over a three day period in Anchorage before the start of our trip, enjoying much of what this vibrant northern city has to offer. This morning we had everyone but two. We walked down to Cook Inlet from our lodging at the Copper Whale to bird the edge and work our way down to Westchester Lagoon.

The mudflats were devoid of shorebirds but we were fortunate enough to come upon a pair of Sandhill Cranes. They were less than a hundred feet from us in a wonderful morning light. We got excellent looks and then moved onto to find Black-capped Chickadees and Orange-crowned Warblers.

We heard Mew Gulls screaming and looked up to find an adult Bald Eagle being harassed by the gulls. This was the first of six eagles for the morning, with the rest being in the lagoon area.

At the lagoon we had crisp plumaged Red-necked Grebes, assorted waterfowl and one Greater Yellowlegs. There was also a female Downy Woodpecker almost foraging at our feet as collected grubs for the young in her nest. After looking at a pair of eagles on their nest it was time to head back for lunch and to get ready for our welcome diner at Simon and Seaforths, a

great Anchorage restaurant!

*Wed., June 1
- North to
Nome!*

It was raining in Anchorage, but no worries for us as we were flying to Nome. Patches of mountains

showed through as we winged north and when we landed it was just overcast, but definitely not raining. After getting into our rooms we went to lunch and then hopped in the van. We were headed to Anvil Mountain, named for the anvil-shaped rock that sits at the summit.



Lots of wildflowers were in bloom on top of the mountain even though the weather was gray and a little windy. Moss Campion, rhododendron, lousewort and more were in bloom, but it was quiet on the bird front. So we drove slowly down the hill

where we found Golden-crowned Sparrows, Hoary Redpolls and Yellow Warblers, all singing.

The highlight of the afternoon was all the muskox on the hillside. We had a group of ten females, all with calves, an adult male herd and a group that appeared to be adolescents. The calves all looked to be just a few weeks old and were suckling and stick close to their Mom. A really special sight!

Thurs., June 2 – Kougarok Road, Nome

We headed up the Kougarok Road with our goal being to find Bristle-thighed Curlew, but that opportunity was still 72 miles away. In the meantime we found grizzly tracks, maybe a day old, alongside the road.

We birded our way up the road, finding Wandering Tattlers, Harlequin Ducks and a Golden Eagle on a nest. Next we passed through snow-covered hillsides towards Salmon Lake, finding it was iced over. .

With ice so prevalent we worried snow might block our route, but with luck we kept climbing on our drive to Coffee Dome, where we parked and started our hike on the opposite hill. Hiking in tussock is slow going, but after about thirty minutes we made it. It was a quiet climb with no Whimbrels or curlews calling – the two species look much alike so calls are very helpful. It took another thirty minutes before the bird let us know where it was – score!. And then we had as long as we wanted to look at this rarity. It just foraged in front of us until we left. Excellent looks on a perfect day.



But we weren't done; another stop yielded sightings of a Gyrfalcon perched above its nest (an old eagle nest) with a reindeer foraging below. Then a honey-colored Grizzly Bear sow with a yearling cub gave us great looks while being backlit by the sun. The curlew

was hot, the grizzly were smoking!

Fri., June 3 – Council Road and Safety Sound, Nome

It was a windy morning, with mostly clear skies. That made it cold, but we were bundled and ready to roll. What ice was left on Safety Sound had blown to the very west end and piled around the ice were hundreds of Brant. But there was no sign of the Spectacled Eider found two days ago. There were numerous displaying Lapland Longspurs trying to outdo the wind, and they were stunning in the morning light.

At Safety Sound we found a large group of birders all staring intently in the same direction, and that is always a good thing. And this group was staring at two Emperor Geese in the flats below us. Stunning looks at these yellow-legged geese!

Small groups of Tundra Swans, Cackling Canada Geese, Common Eiders and Sandhill Cranes dotted the water and the shoreline. A Pacific Loon in pristine alternate (breeding) plumage gave us brief looks before disappearing. A flock of peeps littered the road as we crossed over the Bonanza Bridge. Then we headed inland.

We were going to search some locations from previous Naturalist Journeys trips where we had observed Bluethroat, one of the prized Asian-affinity songbirds known to frequent Nome. As we climbed toward Skookum Pass we found more and



more snow along the road. It was getting mushy as we neared some of the locations, and we found the Bluethroat sites covered with snow. No Bluethroat and no Bluethroat habitat, it was all covered by snow!

On our way at Safety Sound we found three Muskox grazing on the beach – hmmm unusual. After we crossed the bridge someone asked if moose are found this close to the beach, which was not likely. Then they asked if moose weren't found in this grass-covered sand, do they have donkeys out here, because they saw something of that shape bedded down next to a fishing cabin. We went back to the cabin to find the donkey and instead found a cow moose bedded down by the front porch. Not a shrub within miles, but there she was...

We had a Northern Shrike and Blackpoll Warblers to finish off the day just as the rain started!

Sat., June 4 - Teller Road, Nome

It was sunny to the east, but we were heading west with the clouds. No rain just clouds for the first three hours. We birded at Penny Creek where we had all of the warblers except Arctic – just a little early for these guys. But we had great looks at both Blackpoll Warbler and Northern Waterthrush.

There were lots of Long-tailed Jaegers on this road. Some were on nests and some were still courting – sometimes there were three, with one of them being chased by a pair. The aerial acrobats with their tail streamers are just so adept in cutting through the air with such ease.

Assorted waterfowl, Rock Ptarmigans and gorgeous Red Fox were some of the other wildlife species we saw as we drove towards Wooley Lagoon where we were looking for those

stunningly
gorgeous
Black-bellied
Plovers in
alternate
plumage.
And when we
found them,
they really
were drop-
dead
gorgeous, as
were the
American and
Pacific
Golden



Plovers. We got to see all three within one mile on this narrow road to the lagoon.

Rough-legged Hawks, Northern Wheatears and Harlequin Ducks were added to the list as we made our way to Teller. More Muskox in a semi-circle and Arctic Ground Squirrel made it to the mammal list for the day. A lot of wildlife and birds in some incredibly spectacular scenery, what a day!

Sun., June 5 - On to Seward

After an early breakfast, we caught the first Alaska Airline morning flight of the day back to Anchorage. It was broken clouds and we got to see most of the Nome area from the air. We looked down on the immense wetlands of Safety Sound, the hundred year old dredge spoils and what was left of the pack ice. We had a great time in Nome, but now we were headed to Seward for a boat trip that should be filled with glaciers, seabirds and marine mammals. But first we were going to have dinner at Ray's, remember Ray's?

Mon., June 6 – Resurrection Bay Boat Trip

We had a spectacular, nine-hour boat ride scheduled today, traveling the length of Resurrection Bay and then out to the Chiswell Islands, a group of islands with large nesting seabird colonies. And at the far end of the trip was Northwestern Glacier (NW), where the very rare Kittlitz's Murrelet nested in amongst the glacial moraines.

The seas were flat in the bay and it was mostly sunny, hopefully portraying a very nice day on the water. There were lots of Marbled Murrelet and Common Murre on the water



as we made our way towards the open ocean. And then we saw those dorsal fins, those long, narrow dorsal fins. You know, the ones that mean the landlord is home and patrolling their waters.

It was a pod of killer whales: one male, five females and a

young of the year. They didn't get too close to the boat, but they did put on a little show by spy hopping and tail slapping. They kept up with their antics, but didn't seem to want to leave, so we did. We had birds and glaciers to find!

Just as we were entering the fjord where NW Glacier hangs out, we saw our first humpback of the day. Actually there were two and they surfaced together and sounded together, so whenever we saw one, there would be a second taking part in the synchronized dive.

Then we turned into the fjord and found our first bergie bits, little pieces of ice from the glacier floated our way as we motored into the fjord. The deeper into the fjord we motored, the more ice we encountered. There were Kittlitz's Murrelets (a life bird for everyone!) in the water and female harbor seals with their pups hauled out on the larger chunks of ice. And then we were there, at the base of the NW glacier!

It groaned and creaked under the weight of its ages old ice load.

With the boat motor off you could feel the strain as ice fell from its face, down chutes and then finally crashing into the water. It seemed that every time the Captain started the motors, the low

rumble of the diesels started another icefall, almost like a call and response. It was surreal hearing the solid blue ice in a world that was otherwise silent...



After lunch we passed harbor seals with pups as we headed to the Chiswell Islands, home to colonies of seabirds.

Red-faced Cormorants, Tufted & Horned puffins, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Cassin Auklets and Marbled Murres. But the species everyone wanted to see was the



Ancient Murrelet, and we did. They were like nerf footballs on steroids, as different flocks blasted by the boat. Another lifer for everyone!

We still had one more sighting as we headed back to port and that was the second largest animal on the planet, a Fin Whale. It surfaced three times on the starboard side of the boat and then was gone. That was our seventh marine mammal to go along with the nine alcids and four pelagic species for the day. Outstanding!

Tues., June 7 - Seward to Alyeska

This was our first rainy morning, but that was okay as we were headed to the Alaska Sea Life Center. The Center was funded as part of the mitigation of the Exxon Valdez accident from years before. As an educational and wildlife rehab center, it provides a basis for resources found in this part of Alaska and serves as an educational asset for



visitors to the community. Everyone got up an up close and personal view of some of the birds (under

rehabilitation) we had seen the previous day. Just about everyone was photographing these alternate plumaged beauties, while watching behavior from a steady vantage point. No boat rock and roll to inhibit an appreciation of what we were seeing. It was a wonderful 2.5 hours at the Sea Life Center.

It was still raining so we headed out to Lowell Point so everyone could see Marbled Murrelets up close and personal. There were at least eight actively foraging along the road as everyone got good looks of this tree nesting alcid.

At the end of the road we found an Alder Flycatcher that would not give us anything but a brief view. But the tree where it disappeared led us to a pair of Pine Grosbeaks foraging in a small, deciduous tree. What a treat!

Next we stopped at a Bald Eagle eyrie that Kelly had found two days previous. We had great looks at our national symbol as we headed to the Roadhouse for a very tasty lunch. The fish & chips were great.

It was not raining after lunch, so we decided to bird the forest around the Roadhouse. The few that finished lunch a little later were treated to Steller's Jay and Townsend's Warblers in the parking lot. The forest edge had Orange-crowned, Yellow and Wilson's warblers. Red Squirrels were chattering up a storm, but we couldn't find the source of their consternation! Back in the parking lot we had both Tree and Violet-green swallows foraging over the river.

With everyone in the vans we started our drive to Alyeska, a beautiful ski resort in the Chugach Mountains. It had started to rain again and most took this opportunity to catch up on some sleep as we had been pushing it hard since Nome, flying and yesterday's nine-hour boat trip.

Alyeska is such a treat with fine rooms and a wonderful setting. We arrived 4:45 and had just enough time to get unpacked and changed for our 6:30 dinner up top at the Seven Glaciers

restaurant. We all met at six for the gondola ride up to the restaurant. It takes less than ten minutes to climb 2300' and it was perfect timing as the clouds started to dissipate. We had seating for eleven in a room to



ourselves. And then there were the glassed-in views on three sides! A spectacular setting for a wonderful meal as looked around at the glacier-filled mountains. We finished at ten and headed to our rooms. We had a flight in twelve hours as we headed north to Fairbanks!

Wed., June 8 ~ North to Fairbanks

We left Alyeska at 7:30 drove along Turnagain Arm in a wonderful morning light. Dall Sheep dotted the mountainside as the sun reflected off of the water. We slipped through rush hour in Anchorage and walked into the terminal at 8:45, fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. And then we flew north.

We hopped into our van headed over to the Museum of the North on the University of Alaska – Fairbanks campus. This is great museum that gave us all insight into the natural history of Alaska and an understanding of the cultural background of the people that had lived here for centuries. This really is an excellent museum!!!



We drove down to Arctic Geogeson Botanical Gardens and birded this hillside demonstration garden of how to grow plants in Alaska. A wonderful flock of Bohemian Waxwings greeted us, as did singing Song Sparrows and Yellow Warblers. A pretty birdy location for all of us...

We then spent the evening at Mary Shield's place learning about dog mushing and the Iditarod. And she talked about just how determined you

need to be to finish this grueling race. We got to pet the dogs, each with a unique personality and trust for their owner, Mary. Her cozy log home, complete with sod roof, festooned with Alaskan wildflowers, gave us a taste for crafting an interesting life in the north.



Thurs., June 9 – Creamer's & More

This morning we headed to Creamer's Field, a great place for Sandhill Cranes and general birding. And there were a few mosquitoes as we left the Alaska Bird Observatory and headed to the trails – what Alaska trip would be complete without this signature winged species? We could hear the cranes before we saw them and when we rounded the corner there was a flock of about thirty. Some were feeding, some were squabbling, while others were just wandering about.

Next up we found a pair of Black-capped Chickadees and then an adult Boreal Chickadee poking its head out of a nest box. Lots of sparrows and swallows darted around the field, but our day was shadowed with rain that seemed to make most of the forest birds disappear, all except a relentless Hammond's Flycatcher.

After lunch it was still raining so we drove roads on the north side of Fairbanks looking for Northern Hawk Owl, an irruptive species common in some years, absent in others. Ideal habitat, but maybe the rain caused them to hunker down and sit in less exposed locations. The rain didn't make it an easy day for birding, so we got ready for our trip to Denali tomorrow.

Fri., 10 June 10 – On to Denali

It was a wonderfully clear morning as we boarded the train for our four-hour train ride to Denali Station. Moose and different birds were scattered along the way. But probably the most interesting sighting was the numerous Mew Gulls nesting on top of the oil tanker car in the Fairbanks rail yard.



We were met at the train station by friendly staff from Camp Denali. Then we loaded our baggage and headed into the park for the start of our adventurous ride to camp – a 90 mile route through Denali National Park with all its splendid scenery. We were keen to see what wildlife was out there.

Dall Sheep were readily apparent in their white suits as they grazed the beige-colored hillsides above the valley. We came over one pass and there was the mountain. You don't get to see Denali on every trip inside, and we were staring at this mass of white with just a few small clouds adorning its slopes. It was spectacular!

After our picnic dinner we saw the Grizzly Bear sow and her two two-year old cubs. This wouldn't be our last sighting of this trio, but it was a great start to our visit. The Moose was the last animal for the day but we did sprinkle a number of birds into the ride. And then we were there at camp, and ready for dessert.

Sat., June 11 – Denali National Park

We all had our cabins and all we had to do was look out the window for our last peak of the mountain. The clouds were coming and this would be the last of we would see of the mountain.



After breakfast some of us went on the moderate naturalist hike and some went on the strenuous hike. The rest of us went with the guest naturalist Stan Stenner, former President of Audubon Alaska. His background in birds helped us all get a better understanding of how different

adaptations help bird nest this far north in the interior of Alaska.

We all had lunch in the field and then continued out for more birding as the skies lightened. More waterfowl and shorebirds on the kettle ponds as we scanned. Our final stop was at the glacier-formed Wonder Lake where an absolutely drop-dead gorgeous Common Loon was hanging out. We were so entranced with the beauty of this bird that we almost missed the N. Pintail hen with six ducklings.

Time to get ready for dinner, so we hopped on the bus for our ride back to camp. Dinner was salmon and was followed by a photo presentation by Stan on the birds of Alaska. Great photos!



*Sun., June
12 - Denali*

Oh, today was the day. Most of us went on the birder's trip with Stan. And we did see some birds. But it was those hump-backed bruins that made our day. (Photo © Kelly L Vandenneuvel)

After spending time wandering up in the hills and along streams loaded with wildflowers we headed over to a spot to look for Arctic Warblers. And on the way over the hill the sow and her cubs were pretty close to the road. They were digging for tubers and bear burritos and didn't pay us any mind. We got some great looks and some great pictures. But we had a warbler to look for.

Our noisy (on purpose) group went down to the willows to search for this diminutive warbler. We made just enough racket to let any grizzly know we were a big group and something to be reckoned with. Fortunately we did not have to test that theory.

Right away Stan could hear a warbler singing and sure enough there at the top of a tree was the warbler. It had just finished its amazing migration from the Philippines in the last 24 hours. How did we know in the last twenty-four hours? Stan had checked forty-eight hours previous and the birds weren't there. This little guy was fresh off the boat!

We headed back to the bus as it was time to head back to our lamb dinner at camp. In the back of everyone's mind was the hope that we would see the grizzly family again. And we did!



The bus had to descend a series of road switchbacks and it seemed the family was determined to follow us all the way to the bottom of the hill. Everyone got wonderful views and even better photographs as the sow laid on her back to

nurse, or the three grazed alongside the bus. This was the highlight of the trip for many, right up there with the Resurrection Bay boat trip.

Mon., June 13 – Denali to Anchorage

It was time to head back and we boarded the bus at 0645 for the four-hour drive back to the train station. There was a light drizzle, but its only impact was to minimize any chance of seeing the mountain on our way out. We did see the grizzly family again, but they were a little further from the bus. A few more Caribou, but for the most part the drizzle kept the wildlife at bay. Stan helped us look for Northern Hawk Owl on the way out, but again no luck.

So we boarded the train and headed towards Anchorage. The further south we went, the clearer the weather. Lots of Moose and Black Bear were seen as we sat down in the Gold Star dining car and had our farewell dinner. We arrived in Anchorage a little after eight and got into our rooms for a much needed rest. Tomorrow we were flying!

Tues., June 14 - Flights Home

The first flights went out at 1030, with the second set around noon. Taking care of car rentals, confirming flights and seating took up more time. For those with flights out late that night, some went birding while the rest enjoyed local museums or started further travels. Fifteen days in Alaska enjoying wilderness, natural history and birds was really a treat and with a bird list of a 145 and a mammal list of 24, everyone had the opportunity to see an abundance of wildlife!



Now for the views of wildlife waiting for me at home...

