

Alaska Birding & Wildlife

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



June 2 – 13, 2019

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Naturalist Journeys, LLC



**“How could anyone
go through their life
without going to
Denali?”**

— Ellen Lahlum



In a world where the treasures of wildlife and wild places dwindle, Alaska remains a wilderness jewel. More than any place in North America, its wild character and ecological integrity make a visit here a must. We explore in June to take advantage of endless daylight, active birds, breeding wildlife, and very few biting insects.

In Nome, Anchorage, Denali, and Seward we visit signature landscapes — from the coast to boreal forests. We explore the Arctic tundra and search for nesting shorebirds, seek out moose and a variety of birds in thick spruce forests, circumnavigate seabird nesting islands amid the narrow fjords of Kenai, and hike in Denali National Park.

Itinerary

Sun., June 2 Nome

Today is arrival day in Nome where you are met by your guide, Greg Smith, at the Nome Airport. The plan is to rest and relax after your travels. If you arrive in time, feel free to explore the town or bird the tundra habitats near our hotel; our accommodations are ideally situated on the shore of Norton, which could sport a partial cover of ice and snow. Plan to explore at your own pace since flights arrive throughout the day and into the evening. Those arriving in time can join our guide for an informal dinner at a local restaurant.

Accommodations at the Aurora Inn, Nome (D)

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Explore Nome's wild tundra landscape while searching close to the Arctic Circle for Asian vagrants and nesting waterbirds
- ✓ Stand on the finish line of the Iditarod
- ✓ Explore vibrant downtown Anchorage
- ✓ Cruise into the Gulf of Alaska while viewing a diversity of marine mammals and nesting seabirds
- ✓ Experience the sights and sounds of an actively calving glacier in Kenai Fjord NP
- ✓ Indulge in fine food, scenic hikes, and abundant wildlife at the renowned North Face Lodge in Denali NP
- ✓ Relax on a stunningly scenic train ride from Denali to Anchorage
- ✓ Take advantage of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities to photograph Alaska's wildlife and scenery

Tour Summary

12-Day / 11-Night Alaska Sampler Tour with Greg Smith
\$6590, from Nome, departing Anchorage
Arrival Airport is Nome (OME), Departure Airport is Ted Stevens Anchorage International (ANC)





Mon., June 3 – Wed. June 5 Three Great Days in Nome!

Twenty thousand people lived in Nome at the turn of the last century, seeking their fortunes in gold found in the abundant beach sands. Today, only about 5,000 people live here at the edge of the Bering Sea. Nome is the service center for much of Western Alaska; huge barges give insight to the challenges of life on a 21st Century frontier. Birding the sea wall near the harbor can be rewarding, with sightings of large flocks of sea ducks, Glaucous and Mew Gulls, and a variety of shorebirds, now bright in breeding plumage.

Three main roads lead into the wilds of the Seward Peninsula — the Council Road, the Kougarok Road, and the Teller Road — and we travel a combination of these based on current conditions, wildlife sightings, and the interests of the group. We should find Lapland Longspur perched on driftwood, Grizzly Bear or Red Fox digging up Arctic Ground Squirrels, or a Reindeer roadblock, raised here for meat. Gyrfalcon, Long-tailed Jaeger, and Rough-legged Hawk nest in the region and some years can be found hunting the tundra (their numbers cycle with lemmings, their primary prey).

The Council Road leads to Cape Nome, with panoramic Bering Sea views and sightings of Arctic, and maybe Aleutian Terns, as well as different eiders and scoters. The road continues on to Safety Lagoon and points beyond, where we could find Bar-tailed Godwit, Arctic Loon, and large flocks of Tundra Swan. Short-eared Owl are on patrol, looking for their next sandpiper, while small patches of wetlands might hold a Red-necked Stint or an alternate-plumaged Red Phalarope. Near Solomon, old railroad cars and engines silently rust away — the “Last Train to Nowhere.” The Council Road has the only spruce forest that can be accessed by vehicle from Nome. If snow is scarce, we drive to the end of the road in search of Bohemian Waxwing, Boreal Chickadee, and Pine Grosbeak.

The Nome-Kougarok Road leads 83 miles north into the Kigluaik Mountains. It is a stunning drive, with diverse birding habitats along the way. Willow bottoms attract Arctic Warbler, Gray-cheeked Thrush, and Bluethroat, and may also hide a group of Musk Ox with young! Small lichen-covered rocks provide perches for Willow and



Rock Ptarmigans, Northern Wheatear, and Horned Lark, all while Peregrine Falcon hunt overhead. This is probably the most wildlife-rich and photogenic location on this part of our journey.

The tundra provides nesting habitat for American and Pacific Golden Plovers, Ruddy Turnstone, Parasitic Jaeger, and for willing hikers, Bristle-thighed Curlew that nest high on the slopes adjacent to Coffee Dome. With luck, they are calling or displaying, a great reward for the tough climb to the top, and maybe even for folks who choose not to make the climb. Salmon Lake provides us a wonderful picnic spot, and at this time of year there are still snowfields around and ice covering the lake.

The Nome-Teller road leads off to the Northwest. Blackpoll Warbler use the willows of several small drainages along the way, while other habitats provide nesting areas for Northern Shrike and Long-tailed Jaeger. The side road to Cape Woolly is prime nesting habitat for three plover species: American Golden, Pacific Golden, and Black-bellied. This is one of very few locations we can get out of the vehicle and see all three species together in their nesting habitat! The sand spit at the end of the road in Teller is well-known for its rarities, including Black Guillemot, Steller's Eider, and various sandpipers.

Accommodations at the Aurora Inn (B,L,D daily)

Thurs., June 6 Departures from Nome | Anchorage

We depart Nome early afternoon, after a last (and hopefully productive!) morning of birding. We arrive in Anchorage in time to settle into our accommodations and explore the sights of downtown for a bit. There is a good trail for walking and birding along the Cooke Inlet close to our hotel, and those that wish can stretch their legs and explore Westchester Lagoon. Dinner tonight is at a favorite local restaurant, specializing in fresh seafood with a varied menu.

Accommodations at the Copper Whale Inn (B,L,D)

Fri., June 7 Denali National Park | North Face Lodge

Today is an early start for Denali National Park, and we take a shuttlebus from Anchorage to the train station at the entrance of Denali National Park. Our shuttle passes through boreal forest, where we see abundant black spruce interspersed with ponds and wetlands. We should see Trumpeter Swan, Moose, and other wildlife as we drive north. As we get close to Denali, the mountain scenery is quite dramatic and one of our restroom stops



even provides our first look at “The High One.” Guides from North Face Lodge await us at the station and load our luggage. Lunch is provided for you to have en route since our time at the station is short.

Then it’s into the wilds of Denali National Park, where we drive the scenic 88 miles to our remote and peaceful lodge. En route, any number of up close wildlife sightings are possible, from Gyrfalcon to Grizzly Bear, Moose to Dall Sheep, and more. Along the way, we enjoy a picnic dinner featuring wild Alaskan delicacies. We arrive in time for dessert, an orientation to North Face Lodge, and hopefully stunning views of the mountain.

Accommodations at North Face Lodge, Denali National Park (B,L,D)

Sat., June 8 & Sun., June 9 Denali National Park | North Face Lodge

We have two full days to enjoy the spectacular wilderness of Denali National Park. Our lodgings offer us great comfort, delicious meals, private baths, and warm hospitality. Each morning, expert naturalists offer three hike options in tundra, mountain, and forest habitats. These are described in detail at breakfast; you can select from an easy-paced “naturalist’s foray,” or either a moderate or strenuous hike that often follows ridgelines or riverine routes in Denali National Park.

Each outing is unique, and each of the three choices have abundant wildlife and wildflowers. On all hikes you learn about fascinating aspects of tundra ecology, geology, and more. We check creeks and tundra ponds for ducks and geese, and distant hillsides for wildlife. This is the best time of year to see Caribou, Red Fox, and Grizzly Bear. In addition to the large mammals, we may encounter Hoary Marmot, Pine Marten, Rock and Willow Ptarmigans, a variety of songbirds, and a wonderful mix of tundra wildflowers. You can hike as much or as little as you wish. The lodge offers an on-site library, canoes, bikes, and fishing gear, as well as trails just outside the door. Evening programs by the lodge staff or visiting guest speakers focus on Denali’s natural and cultural history.

Accommodations at North Face Lodge, Denali National Park (B,L,D, all days)

North Face Lodge, Denali National Park

We return again to North Face Lodge this year, one of the Cole/Hamm family's two lodges. Views from the lovely living and dining room are superb! Camp Denali has a rich history and reputation as one of the first wilderness lodges in Alaska.

Over 50 years ago, people with vision and a true love of the wilderness had the foresight to establish Camp Denali in one of the most pristine areas adjacent to Denali National Park. Since 1975, the Cole family has extended this vision, adding North Face Lodge and managing both properties with an impressive commitment to both conservation and quality of experience. With the expansion of Denali National Park and Preserve in 1980, this owner-operated facility now sits in the center of the most scenic and wild portion of Denali National Park. Guided hikes and programs conducted by expert naturalists, with a keen focus on geology and natural history, are the key to providing far more than just a backcountry stay. Combine wonderful views of Denali with an unparalleled educational and wildlife viewing opportunity and you have the North Face/Camp Denali experience.

With all this to their credit, they also provide incredible service, delicious meals with fresh foods from their own greenhouse and gardens, and well-appointed, comfortable rooms with private bath at the Lodge. Canoes and bikes are available, as is optional flight seeing (additional cost). The location, facilities, and programs are unique, and Naturalist Journeys is proud to offer this location as part of our itinerary.



Mon., June 10 Denali National Park | Train to Anchorage

Our return trip through the park is full of anticipation ... we never know what we may see. We keep our eyes open for rare sightings of Gray Wolf and even Lynx — not likely, but possible! We have seen Arctic Ground Squirrel, the blue morph of Red Fox, and, in some years, Northern Hawk Owl. We do have to meet the train so we can't linger, but we always hope for unusual sightings and photo opportunities.



By noon, we are at Denali Station where we board the train to Anchorage. We have upgraded everyone to the Gold Star Class so lunch and dinner, plus two drinks are included. This is an eight-hour journey, so make sure you bring your camera, journal, or a good book, or just enjoy sightseeing or visiting with each other from your dome car seating. Dinner seating on the train is in the dining car at tables of four.

Accommodations at the Copper Whale Inn, Anchorage (B,L,D)

Tues., June 11 Potter Marsh | Scenic Drive to Seward | Alaska Sea Life Center

This morning you can have a bit of a “lie-in,” as our British friends say, or a walk at your leisure on Cooke Inlet. Your guide makes a run to get our vans.

Mid-morning, we pack up and start our drive southwest to Seward. This is a stunning route, and we stop for photography, birding, and sightseeing. From the boardwalk at Potter Marsh we hope to observe salmon, as well as nesting Bald Eagle, and a number of waterfowl and waders. We drive along the edge of Cooke Inlet, scanning the rugged slopes for signs of Dall Sheep and Moose, and the waters for Beluga Whale.

We also look for birds of the temperate rainforest, a habitat that extends up from Southeast Alaska to rim the more easterly-situated Prince William Sound. Birds not often found north of here include Rufous Hummingbird, Steller’s Jay, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, and Townsend’s Warbler.

Upon arrival in Seward, we check into accommodations across the street from Resurrection Bay, and then we walk to the Alaska Sea Life Center. We head into the Center, which is an outstanding marine interpretive center funded by the Exxon Valdez. The Center provides information about the resources associated with Alaska’s coastal waters and provides an opportunity to photograph and get up-close looks at rehabbed birds. Both species of puffins and kittiwakes, murres, and auklets, along with various waterfowl and shorebirds are on sight and ready for their close-up. And given that we visit during the Arctic nesting season, all are in alternate plumage — they are stunning!

Then we enjoy fresh seafood or steaks at Ray’s on the waterfront of the harbor— one of our favorite restaurants in Alaska and a great place to enjoy the view. It’s fun to wander after dinner, watch the halibut harvest come in, and marvel at the many boats while looking for Northern Sea Otter, often just off the docks!

Accommodations in Seward (B,L,D)

Wed., June 12 Chiswell Islands | Northwestern Fjord Cruise | Seward

Today we embark on an all-day boat trip into Kenai Fjords National Park, heading towards Northwestern Glacier. This is a stunning day spent cruising among whales, glaciers, and seabird nesting islands in the Gulf of Alaska. As we leave the dock, we look for Northern Sea Otter, Marbled Murrelet, Pigeon Guillemot, Double-crested and Pelagic Cormorants, Bald Eagle, and Glaucous-winged Gull.



Scenery and some wildlife here are on a massive scale, and we should find several active Humpback Whale groups that spend summers feeding in these food-rich ocean waters. We may also find pods of Orca or Dall's Porpoise, and on bergy bits (glacial ice chunks) near Northwestern Fjord, Harbor Seals with pups.

The Chiswell Islands National Wildlife Refuge are prime seabird nesting sites, and here often close to the boat we find Tufted and Horned Puffins. Common Murre are abundant too and easy to see and photograph. Hopefully our captain is able to find the much less common Thick-billed Murre. Black-legged Kittiwake are also common, and while cruising around the island we also hope to find a few Parakeet Auklet.

As we enter the narrow channel that leads to Northwestern Fjord, we look for Rhinoceros Auklet, and possibly Ancient Murrelet. The rare Kittlitz' Murrelet is usually found in the water adjacent to scree slopes near freshwater inlets. The boat must navigate floating ice recently calved from Northwestern Glacier, but our captain is still able to pull quite close to the glacier. Here we float among the ice and experience the sounds of an actively calving glacier — extraordinary! On the way back, we venture into deeper water where we look for Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwaters, other alcids, and Fin Whale. As we reenter Resurrection Bay, we search for Red-faced Cormorant, and may even find a Black Oystercatcher foraging along the rocky coast. After we regain our land legs, we enjoy a final meal together in celebration of our great adventure.

Accommodations in Seward (B,L,D)

Thurs., June 13 Local Hotspots | Return to Anchorage

After breakfast we pack our bags and load the van, then drive the harbor's edge looking for alcids and gulls. Sometimes out-of-place birds follow a fishing boat back into the harbor. We continue birding at a local set of feeders where we could see all three species of chickadee, Pine Grosbeak, and Red Crossbill. Next stop is Bear Creek, where we watch Sockeye Salmon making their way upstream towards their spawning redds and keeping an eye out for the resident American Dipper. We plan lunch on the way back to the airport and then arrive at the airport in time for the first flight out *after* 3:00 PM. If flight departures allow, we can take a little more time in returning to the airport. Many flights leave Anchorage after 10:00 PM, so for those with later night connections, we can enjoy dinner at one of the hotels near the airport and drop you off — or if very late, you can take a shuttle. For those with next day morning flights, we are happy to drop you at an airport hotel. We recommend the Millennium Lakefront Hotel. *(B,L)*

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Group Size

Maximum of 12, minimum of six. Please make sure your tour is fully confirmed prior to booking air.

Travel Information The arrival airport for this journey is Nome Airport (OME). Please plan to arrive in Nome, Alaska, at a time convenient for you on June 2, 2019. Your guide, Greg Smith, will be there to meet you. If you wish to arrive early to Nome, it's a short taxi ride to any of the hotels. You may depart at after 3:00 PM on June 13. We drive back from Seward that day, will do an airport drop, and for those with late flights, we can do a bit more birding or sightseeing until about 6:00 PM. If you need to overnight to catch a next day flight, we suggest the Lakefront Hotel near the airport, but there are many choices there, all easy to book online.

Cost of the Tour

Cost of the two-week journey (11N/12D) is **\$6590 DBL / \$7550 SGL**, from Nome, Alaska, departing Anchorage. This cost includes: accommodations for 11 nights, all meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner), park entrance and other activity fees for activities as described in the itinerary, Gold-Car Class Upgrade on the Alaska Railroad train from Denali to Anchorage, the all-day boat tour in Kenai Fjords National Park, return one-way flight from Nome to Anchorage, professional guide services, pre-departure materials and miscellaneous program expenses.

Tour Cost does not include: airfare to Nome, Alaska, or from Anchorage, Alaska. Note, we do book and include the group flight segment (one-way, on Alaska Air) from Nome back to Anchorage. Cost also does not include items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, or gratuities for luggage handling or personal services.

Going to Alaska is an adventure! Please note that your cost does not include alternate hotels required at the last minute if inclement weather precludes landing or departing in Nome. Nome is in the far north, almost at the Arctic Circle, and flights can be delayed due to fog or other inclement weather. We have not experienced this in recent years with modern and improved navigation equipment on the planes, but it can happen that your plane is turned back to Anchorage where alternate hotel reservations would be required. As we will not be able to cancel rooms paid for in Nome due to such a delay, have a contingency amount of \$150 in your budget in the unlikely event that we rebook. Our office will make every effort to rebook at a reasonable rate at a convenient location. Again, this has not happened in recent years, but parts of Alaska are still considered the frontier and part of the adventure is getting there.

Please note that the single occupancy rate includes single accommodations for all but three (3) nights at Denali, where most occupancy is shared. We have one single supplement available for an additional \$300.00 at this location — be the first to sign on and you may have a chance at it. Please note that we pay single supplements direct to hotels and they incur no markup.

Photo Credits

Grizzlies, Greg Smith (GS); Horned Puffins, Peg Abbott (PA); Musk Ox, PA; Willow Ptarmigan, PA; Harbor Seal, PA; Grey Wolf, GS; Orca, PA; Tufted Puffins, PA; Last Train to Nowhere, GS; Short-eared Owl, Tom Dove; Rock Ptarmigan, GS; Bristle-thighed Curlew, GS; Aleutian Terns, GS; Nome Scenic, Naturalist Journeys Stock (NJS); Musk Ox, GS; Moose Cow, PA; Polychrome Pass, GS; Grizzly in Denali, GS; Canoeing in Denali, GS; Train to Anchorage, PA; Caribou, PA; Bald Eagle, GS; Sea Otter, PA; Humpback Whale Fluke, PA; Harlequin Duck, PA; Harbor Seals with Pup, PA; Chiswell Islands, PA; Glacier, NJS; Common Murres, PA.