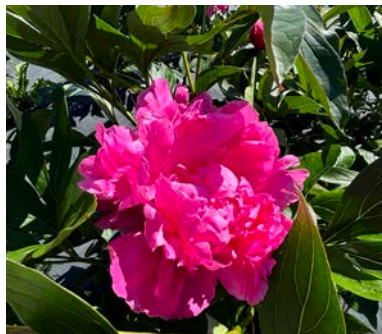
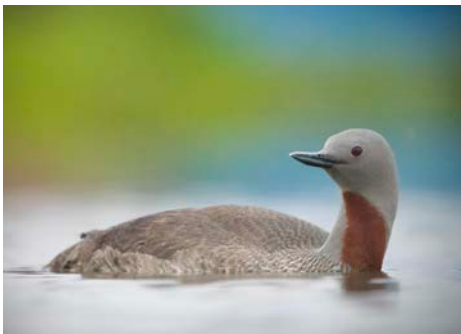


Alaska Sampler: Anchorage, Seward and Homer | August 9-17, 2024 | Trip Report | by Kelly Vandenheuvel



Guides: Bryan Calk and Kelly Vandenheuvel

Guests: Charlie, Donna, Kathryn "Kay", Reba, Pam, Ann, Gregg, Lucy, Herb and Susan.



Fri., Aug. 9

Guests arrived at the Copper Whale Inn in Anchorage. Some of us had breakfast together and started to get to know one another. Everyone had a chance to explore Anchorage today for sightseeing and cultural activities. We all met in the lobby of the hotel in the early evening so that we could walk together to our welcome dinner at Orso Restaurant in Anchorage.



Sat., Aug. 10 Potter Marsh | Tern Lake | Moose Pass | Seward

Today was our first day in the field, and we started by stopping on the outskirts of Anchorage at Potter Marsh Bird Sanctuary. This is a popular spot for BioLife viewing as the open wetlands here border wooded areas, and these border habitats with plenty of freshwater and vegetation can be host to a variety of birds and other wildlife. Today, though, we were entertained by the Alder Flycatchers in the brush and we had a really nice comparison of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. We also discussed and studied the Cook Inlet gull hybrids between Herring and Glaucous-winged Gulls. We started to make our way to Seward with a couple of stops at some pull-offs. First was at Beluga Point along Turnagain Arm, where we scanned the open water for cetaceans and the rocky slopes for other mammals, and just as we were leaving an American Black Bear poked itself out from the trees at the top of the ridge looking down on all of us below. While a brief encounter, it was an exciting way to get the trip going. At one of the several ponds along the road, we found a family of Common Loons, allowing for a really nice view through the scope, and as we were enjoying them, a Merlin flew up to the top of the tree close to us. At Tern Lake, we were able to see families of both Red-necked Grebes and Trumpeter Swans before heading to a cozy lunch spot in Moose Pass. We made one last stop at the Bear Creek Weir where Coho Salmon were making their way upstream to spawn and a Brown Creeper hitched its way up the conifers. Finally, in Seward we got checked into our hotel -- with a sea otter sighting from the lobby windows -- then to Ray's Waterfront for a yummy seafood dinner overlooking the harbor.

Sun., Aug. 11 Fjord Cruise | Chiswell Islands | Seward

We met this morning on the dock attached to our hotel, where we boarded one of Major Marine's boats to explore the estuary fjord ecosystems around Resurrection Bay. On our way out of the harbor, we started seeing some signs of sea life, like Pigeon Guillemot and the Sea Otters. Low clouds were draped like lace across the mountain peaks surrounding the bay, and the bases of the mountains plunged straight into the water with narrow, steep cliffs of shale, granite, and basalt. Waterfalls periodically flowed out from the deep green forest, covering the sides of these mountains and islands. As the sun peaked out, there was a rainbow coming from the cloudy fog. Exploring the bouncy open waters and protected coves, we had nearly constant excitement from the wildlife. A small group of Orcas and a few Humpback Whales were definitely highlights for everyone. We saw



dozens and dozens of Tufted and Horned Puffins, Common Murre, and Marbled Murrelets, colonies of thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes, and even a couple of Red-faced Cormorants. A Mountain Goat was seen grazing up on a grassy slope above the crashing waves, Steller's Sea Lions and Harbor Seals lounged on the rocks, and we lost count of Bald Eagles sitting on the treetops, cliffs, and even some young birds in a giant nest. After the incredible ride, we made it back to dry land and went out for just a brief excursion to the Exit Glacier overlook. This vantage point really demonstrated the power of the glaciers here to shape the dramatic valleys and peaks over millennia, and how quickly we have been losing them on a warming planet in recent history. Back in Seward, we reconvened for our checklist and dinner with some free daylight in the evening for everyone to explore town on their own.

Mon., Aug. 12 Sea Life Center | Local Birding | Homer

We started our day with some birding around Seward, including the backyard feeders of a couple of generous locals who welcome birders. Around these residential areas, we picked up some nice forest birds that can otherwise be harder to track down like Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Stellar's Jay, and Varied Thrush. Back in downtown Seward, we visited the mile zero marker of the Iditarod before heading into the Alaska Sea Life Center where we got to see and learn about some Alaskan species up close and personal including some really impressive multi-level aquarium displays with seals, puffins, and many native fish and other sea creatures. The rest of the day was mostly spent traveling to Homer. We stopped in Copper Landing for a yummy lunch, then took the scenic route along Skilak Lake Road where we found a nice flock of songbirds and a couple of Black Bears chowing on some berries right beside the road! We stopped at a nice overlook to take in Cook Inlet and the volcanic Mt. Iliamna before finally arriving at our lodging at the very end of Homer Spit which juts into Kachemak Bay.



Tues., Aug. 13 Bear Viewing | Homer Wildlife and Culture | Homer Spit

Today our group split two different directions. Half of our group got up early to fly into Katmai National Park in search of coastal Brown Bears. We donned our hip waders before we loaded up on bush planes in Homer that took us out of Katchemak Bay and across Cook Inlet. The ride gave us incredible views of volcanoes covered in glaciers that fed braided rivers, dumping fresh water into the bay where the turquoise and dark blue waters met. We landed on the beach where we had a few shorebirds to look through, but soon we were watching the stars of the show -- at least twelve bears quietly grazing in the most classic Alaskan panoramic scene you could imagine. We spent a couple of hours with the bears, learning from our local guides about their ecology and behavior and what makes these coastal bears unique among others of the same species. The final show was a mother with three very young cubs!

The rest of our crew spent the day exploring Homer, including the Alaska Islands and Ocean Visitor Center where we explored the exhibits and learned about these delicate wetland and marine ecosystems that bring so much life to this area. Along the trails around the center, we found several warbler species, nuthatches, and even some Sandhill Cranes hanging out. We then wandered into the Pratt Museum, and as we meandered through the galleries, we were captivated by the vibrant displays of indigenous art and the intriguing artifacts that told stories of Alaskan life. We certainly left with a deeper appreciation for the region's rich cultural tapestry. We stopped for a delicious lunch at a local cafe before our last stop of the day, a tour of a local peony farm. These highly sought after flowers require particular growing conditions, and we learned about how they are cultivated and what makes this region of Alaska so perfect for growing them. The grounds were stunning, the blooms were gorgeous and varied, and we stopped for some homemade gelato on the way back to the inn.

Wed., Aug. 14 Homer Birding | Gull Rock | Halibut Cove

Some of us started off this morning with a little walk along the rocky beach below our hotel before breakfast. The colony of Black-legged Kittiwakes living underneath the pier allowed us to study their different plumages and admire some fluffy chicks. But the bird highlights were definitely the Wandering Tattlers that gave us nice



views and the Surfbird working some distant rocks. After breakfast, we headed back to the mainland part of Homer where we walked the Calvin and Coyle trail at one of the city parks. This trail took us through mature wet spruce woodlands dotted with small meadows and clearings. The birding here was excellent with the clear crowd favorites being the gang of three “teenage” American Goshawks screaming and terrorizing the forest and the Boreal Chickadees that made us work hard for good views. Flocks of birds with warblers and Black-capped Chickadees would come within just a few feet of us along the trail to investigate what we were up to. But too soon it was time to hurry back so we could make it to the docks to board the Danny J. Ferry over to Halibut Cove, a small community situated on the opposite side of Kachemak Bay from Homer. Along the route, the captain of the vessel took us on a bird tour around Gull Island, a densely occupied rookery site where we saw many Kittiwakes, Murres, and Tufted Puffins. On the rocks by the water’s edge were a few Black Oystercatchers as well as a Rock Sandpiper, and Sea Otters played in the surf. Once we docked, we headed up to The Saltry, a restaurant built into the side of the rocky cliff overlooking the inlet below -- a surreally beautiful setting to dine on some of the freshest and finest seafood, including mussels that were only ever on land for the 30 yards between the restaurant and the docks below. We then had a bit of time to walk the boardwalk that takes you around the island, where some of us got to see Harlequin Ducks as well as a small art gallery filled with pieces by artists who live in the community. We then ferried back to the spit, had a bit of downtime, ran through our checklist, and had dinner at a restaurant on the spit that featured more delicious fresh seafood - yum!

Thurs., Aug. 15 Cooper Landing | Girdwood | Anchorage

This was another big moving day, getting from Homer back to Anchorage. Along the way, though, we made some nice stops. First was at an overlook of the Ninilchik River where the scenery was so peaceful with the gently flowing stream and the breeze in the spruce. We did find a few fun birds here, with the highlights definitely being some very cooperative Boreal Chickadees and a Canada Jay. Next, we took a pit stop at a cute gift shop in Copper Landing and back on the road we had a 50 mile per hour close encounter with a young bull moose standing right beside the road! By the time we turned around, he had sauntered back into the woods. We stopped for lunch at The Bake Shop in Girdwood. This little family diner was lined with huge, stunning dahlias that we sat next to on their patio with lovely overcast weather. Finally, we made it to our new lodging



right on the edge of Lake Spenard and Lake Hood, the largest seaplane base in the world. We walked along the shore which is lined with parked seaplanes, and scoped the water for ducks. We found a nice variety and got to study the subtle differences between the Scaup and Goldeneye, and even found a couple of Black Scoters diving frequently. Finally, we gathered back together for the species checklist and dinner with a view of the lake.

Fri., Aug. 16 Eagle River Nature Center | Westchester Lagoon | Departures

On our last full day together as a group, we started with an early morning excursion to nearby Kincaid Park to search for Moose, and perhaps some early morning birds. Along our walk to a pond, we did find a female Moose walking up the hillside, and along the banks of the pond was a singing Northern Waterthrush playing hide and seek in the brambles. A pair of Sandhill Cranes flew over us, and juncos and chickadees played in the trees. Next, we headed back to Lake Hood and Spenard where we drove the loop around the entire water body to check it more thoroughly. Our efforts really paid off with a supremely cooperative Red-throated Loon. It started out very close and only came closer to investigate us. The details on the head and the red throat were just stunning to see. Back at the hotel, we had a fresh breakfast and refreshed ourselves before heading back out for another adventure, this time to the Eagle River Nature Center. We took some time to read the exhibits and learn more about the native wildlife before heading down a short trail to a few boardwalks along the banks of the river at the bottom of the valley. The view here is truly breathtaking and gives you a sense of scale for the geological forces at play in this area. The glacier-carved mountains loom above as the river continues to erode the valley to this day. Along the path we saw fresh bear scat and an impressive beaver dam. Back in Anchorage, we stopped by Goose Lake where a pair of beautiful Pacific Loons were still in the height of their breeding plumage and gave great views through the scope. Next, we had lunch at a famous local brewery before we made our final birding stop of the journey at Westchester Lagoon. We scanned the lake and found a Trumpeter Swan family, a pair of Short-billed Dowitchers, and at the outflow were several Short-billed Gulls and the stars of the visit, a few Arctic Terns preening and flying around, dipping into the water on some unsuspecting prey.

Photos: Group (Bryan Calk - BC), Red-throated Loon (BC), Grizzly Bear (BC), Group Birding (Kelly Vandenheuvel - KV), Forest scenic (BC), Harbor (Kay Rhoads - KR), Puffin Mural (Reba Collins - RC), New friends (Donna Seymour - DS), Wildflowers (KV),

Plane selfie (BC), Hike (BC), Grizzly Bears (BC), Group at the Peony Farm (KV), Group Birding (DS), Scenic (DS), Boreal Chickadee (BC), Flower (KV), Loon watch! (BC), Scenic (BC), Group (RC)