



PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632  
Phone 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667  
Email [info@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:info@naturalistjourneys.com)

## **Naturalist Journeys – Ultimate Alaska Natural History & Birding June 2 – 17, 2012 Trip Report**

*Greg Smith and Kelly Vandenheuvel, guides, with participants Jean and Bernie, Linda, Lynda, Fred, Janice, Georgia, Sue, Nancy, Gloria, Jennifer, and Martha*

**Saturday, June 2**

**Arrival in Anchorage**



It took all of us a couple of days to arrive in Anchorage before starting our journey. For those who arrived early enough, we walked down to Cook Inlet from our lodging and birded the estuary on our way to Westchester Lagoon.

The mudflats had a few shorebirds but we were fortunate

enough to come upon a flock of Hudsonian Godwits in their spring splendor. We also had Semi-palmated Plover and a trio of Sandhill Cranes. We got excellent looks and then moved onto to find Black-capped Chickadee, Alder Flycatcher and Orange-crowned Warbler.

We heard Mew Gulls screaming and looked up to find an adult Bald Eagle being harassed by the gulls. Everytime the gulls went off, we would look up and find another eagle; pretty cool.

At the lagoon we had three pairs of Red-necked Grebes, different waterfowl and one Lesser Yellowlegs. The salmon had yet to start their runs up the creek, as that cold, clear water awaited their arrival. It was time to head back for lunch...

**Sunday, June 3**

**Potter Marsh / Seward**

The sun was trying its darnedest to break through the morning clouds as we all hopped in the vans and headed south towards Seward. Our first stop was Potter Marsh where another pair of Bald Eagles surveyed the wetlands looking for potential prey. Small groups of waterfowl dotted the surface as Arctic Tern and Mew Gull took turns screaming at us. A cow moose was bedded down off to the side of the boardwalk as we listened to Northern Waterthrush and Yellow Warblers belt out their seasonal



enticement to breed. It was time to take a drive down Turnagain Arm and see what wildlife was out and about.

We stopped to look for Dall sheep, and we were not disappointed! There were ewes with lambs and a small group of rams on the hillside above us. We turned our bins to the other side to take a look for beluga whales, but the tide was rushing out. The tidal bore was so strong that we were able to see three-foot standing waves! Not that the whales would have a

problem with the current, but the low tide had restricted the channel to a level that might have made for an uncomfortable approach. No whales, so off we went to lunch at the Bake Shop in Girdwood.

We had about a two-hour drive to our lodging in Seward, but wanted to stop on one of the passes that had lots of snow on everything but the highway. And there they were, the birds on the cover of Sibley feeding on the open snow without a tree nearby. They gleamed a steely-blue that sparkled against their burnt orange breast. Stunning! Had to go, though, as Ray's was waiting and we all wanted to try some of their great fish dishes at our welcome dinner!

**Monday, June 4**

**Resurrection Bay Boat Trip**

We had a nine-hour boat ride scheduled for 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, where the very local Kittlitz's Murrelet nested in the glacial moraine deposits.



The seas were flat in the bay and it was mostly overcast, which would make for a great day on the water. There were lots of Marbled Murrelet and Common Murre on the water as we made our way up the channel. And then we saw those dorsal fins, those long dorsal fins of killer whales.

It was a pair of killer whales: one male and one female. They did get fairly close to the boat, and just leisurely surfaced as they patrolled their domain. They didn't seem to want to leave the area as we motored off.

Just after leaving Fox Island, we saw our first humpback of the day. It was just taking its time swimming slowly near the surface, filling those immense lungs with fresh air and not the least bit bothered by anything!



Next up were four flocks of Ancient Murrelet. It is really uncommon to get good looks at these little ones on their breeding turf. Every time you get anywhere close, they either dive or fly away. But one of the groups didn't read the script and allowed us all to get good looks!

Then something different happened; we headed out to the Chiswell Islands. Usually we enter Harris Bay and head towards the NW Glacier, but given how small the seas were, we were going to visit the islands

twice today.

The Chiswell Islands are home to colonies of seabirds, including Red-faced Cormorant, Tufted & Horned Puffin, Black-legged Kittiwake, Cassin Auklet and Ancient Murrelet. They also host a sizeable colony of





the rare Steller's sea lion. So there was a lot to see as we motored around the island. The air and sea surface was alive with flying birds and diving puffins. As the clouds disappeared, you couldn't look anywhere without having a view of different seabirds!

Then we turned into the fjord and started to see bergie bits. Little pieces of ice from the glacier floated our way as we motored into

the fjord. This is also where we got our first look at a few Rhinoceros Auklets.

On the slopes above us were mountain goats, does each with a single kid, while resting on a large slab of granite was a buck. In the water 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 ice load. With the boat motor off you could feel the strain as ice fell from its face, rolling down chutes and then finally crashing into the water. It was surreal hearing the solid blue ice creak and moan in the world that was silent.

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

**Tuesday, June 5**

**Seward to Alyeska**



It was another gorgeous morning and we were headed to the Seward Sea Life Center. The Center was funded as a result of the Exxon Valdez accident from years before. As an educational and wildlife rehab center, it serves as an educational asset for visitors to the community. Everyone got an up close view of some of the birds being rehabilitated. And for photographers, there were wonderful opportunities for close-ups of these alternate-plumaged beauties..

With everyone in the vans we headed over to

Resurrection Roadhouse for some lunch and then it was off to Alyeska!

Alyeska with its fine rooms and wonderful setting was the fitting end to our two days in Seward. We arrived at 4:45 and had just enough time to change for our dinner up on top of the mountain at the Seven Glaciers restaurant. It takes less than ten minutes to climb 2300' and experience the stunning view of Turnagain Arm and the glacier-covered mountains. Truly a spectacular setting for a wonderful meal...

### **Wednesday, June 6**

### **North to Fairbanks**

We left Alyeska after a morning of birding and then breakfast. We followed Turnagain Arm back into ANC with a quick stop at the Potter Marsh turnout. A couple of us discovered that Arctic Tern were nesting on the edge of the paved area as they dived repeatedly towards our hats! We arrived at ANC with just a little time to catch up on our journals and then we flew north.

It was an easy flight to Fairbanks and after arriving we hopped into our van and headed over to the Museum of the North on the University of Alaska – Fairbanks campus. This museum 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!!!

### **Thursday, June 7**

### **Fairbanks**

It was a sunny morning as we headed to Creamer's with two local birders Jim and Frank. There were a few mosquitoes as we left the Alaska Bird Observatory and headed to the trails. 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, and others were just wandering.

Next up was a pair of Black-capped Chickadee and then a male Tree Swallow poking its head out of a nest box. Lots of sparrows and swallows around the field, but the sun seemed to make most of the forest birds disappear, all except a relentless Hammond's Flycatcher.



After lunch it was still sunny and warm so we drove to Smith Lake on the UA Fairbanks campus. Ring-necked Duck and a flock of Bohemian Waxwings were expected treats as we worked our way back to the campus.

One final stop at the peat ponds where we saw Bufflehead, Rusty Blackbird and a mixed flock of waterfowl lounged on the closest pond. We packed up and headed back to our cabins as we had plans for the evening.

We spent the evening at Mary Shield's place learning about dog mushing and the Iditarod. She was the first woman to complete this race through the long Arctic nights. She talked about the determination needed to be to finish this grueling race and how she trains her dogs for the competition.

**Friday, June 8**

**On to Denali**

It was an overcast morning as we boarded the train for our ride to Denali Station. Moose and Trumpeter Swan were seen along the way. One of the interesting sightings was the numerous Mew Gulls nesting on top of the oil tanker car in the Fairbanks rail yard.

The folks from Camp Denali met us at the station, but there were some clouds gathering in the sky. We headed into the park for the start of our bus ride to camp and to find what wildlife was out there.

Dall sheep dotted the hillside as they grazed above the valleys . A silvertip grizzly sow with the three

two year olds that matched mom's coat appeared to be digging for roots or bear burritos.



After our picnic dinner we birded some of the kettle ponds formed when large chunks of ice broke off of the retreating Muldrow Glacier. These chunks melted as material aggraded around them leaving the ponds that waterfowl love so much. And then we were there at camp, and ready for dessert.

**Saturday, June 9**

**Denali**

After breakfast some went on the moderate naturalist hike and a few went for the more strenuous trek. The rest of us went on the naturalist foray where we learned about the geology surrounding the camp and some of plants that are a part of the alpine tundra.

We all had lunch in the field and then birded the kettle ponds where there were more waterfowl and shorebirds, with a Killdeer being a first in Denali for most everyone, including staff! Three Tundra Swan decided to get mixed into a flock of Taiga White-fronted Geese as we turned the bend for the drive up the valley.

The inlet and the exit to Wonder Lake are less than a hundred meters apart; such are the oddities of glacier-formed lakes. The surprise at the inlet was a beaver sitting at the edge of the water resting. Excited as it was, it wasn't ready to move, and didn't.

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 Scott Weidensaul on bird migration. It was a very informative talk and Scott, as always, is very animated!

**Sunday, June 10**

**Denali**

Today was the day we ventured further into the park, same choices for levels of activity but different habitats than yesterday.

Our first stop was going to be Eilson Visitor Center and it was there we caught our first glimpse of Mt. McKinley. It wasn't the entire mountain, but we could see most of it. The summit was obscured by a large lenticular cloud, as wisps of fog allowed us hide and seek views of the lower reaches. It was really a treat to actually see the mountain before the fog monster swallowed it up for the day.

It was time to start wandering the valleys east of Eilson where wildflowers were starting to carpet the tundra. Different louseworts were mixed with anemones, while shooting stars peeked above different species of avens. This was the beginning of the Arctic spring.

And to make sure that seasonal change was forefront in our minds, a stunningly crisp adult Long-tailed Jaeger went careening by us. This strictly pelagic species was on land for its once a year nesting. It

appeared to be hunting small rodents, or maybe shorebird chicks as it hovered in the wind. A stunning aerial show by this very adept flyer...



It was a wildflower year here in Denali, so we spent more time exploring different examples of belly botany. But by late afternoon we had to head back to camp and get ready for another tasty meal and one more lecture by Scott. What a great day!

**Monday, June 11**

**Denali to Anchorage**

It was time to head to Anchorage and we boarded the bus at 6:45 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 two grizzly up a slope and a few more caribou, but for the most part the drizzle kept the wildlife at bay. That was until we got the hand signal that a pack of wolves were going to pass by the bus.





And then the first one came walking by about fifty feet from the bus. Given her mostly white color and the telemetry collar she was wearing, we were told she was the alpha female for this group. Then another four individuals followed her, all silently moving by the bus. We had been hoping to have a sighting of this apex predator, but at this distance, it was totally unexpected!

We arrived at the train station where we boarded the train and headed towards Anchorage. The further

south we went, the clearer the weather. We saw lots of moose and black bear 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.

## **Tuesday, June 12**

## **Anchorage and Eagle River**

This morning was going to be a less traveled one after our long day yesterday. We were going to say goodbye to those who weren't going heading north to Nome with us. And then we had the opportunity to spend some time in the Anchorage museum.

By lunchtime, the rain had decided to pay us a visit. Nothing too heavy, but definitely persistent as we hopped in the van and headed to Eagle River.

We spent time hiking the trails while looking for birds. Robins and Yellow-rumped Warblers didn't seem to mind the wet stuff, as we made our way down to the marsh. It seemed that something was causing the nesting yellowlegs and snipe to perch on top of the trees and give alarm calls, but we could never figure out who the culprit was.



We spent more time birding before heading back to the Copper Whale. It was time to pack up, as tomorrow was the beginning of Nome days...

**Wednesday, June 13**

**North to Nome**



It was raining in Anchorage as we boarded our flight to Nome. There were brief glimpses of mountains showing through the clouds as we winged north. After checking into our rooms we went to lunch and then headed to Anvil Mountain.

Lots of wildflowers were showing on top of the mountain even though it 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 made our way slowly down the

hill where we found Golden-crowned Sparrow, Hoary Redpoll and Yellow Warbler, 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 sticking close to their mother. A really special sight!

Long-tailed Jaeger were buzzing around and there were certainly shorebirds on their territories. It is always interesting to see how the related shorebirds seem to favor very similar locations for their nests. Semi-palmated Sandpiper were nesting right alongside Western Sandpiper in six inch deep tundra; we just had to be patient to make sure we were getting the correct field marks as they darted in and out of that lichen and plant mat.

Then it was time for the Airport Café, one of our favorite places to eat in Nome!

**Thursday, June 14**

**Kougarok Road**

We headed up the road with our first stop being the Nome landfill. There were lots of different age classes of Glaucous and Mew Gull. We even had a few Herring Gulls, but the highlight was the adult Slaty-backed Gull! A great way to start our daylong journey up the Kougarok.

We birded our way up the road finding Wandering Tattler along the riverbank, while in the middle of the current Harlequin Duck were swimming. A little later we found a Golden Eagle nest. Gyrfalcons were putting in appearances where there were rocky cliffs and Gray-cheeked Thrush and Arctic Warbler were a dime-a-dozen. It was a stunningly gorgeous day and all the passerines were singing.

We had just gotten back in the van and hadn't driven more than two miles when we saw a grizzly sauntering down the hillside. If he was doing anything, it was most likely looking for a bear burrito. The early morning light made this bear just sparkle. What a treat!



We kept climbing and then did a slow descent where we parked at Grand Central River. Here there was a pair of fly catching N. Waterthrush, along with Yellow Warbler and a number of that aerial acrobatic Bank Swallow. But our next stop was Bluethroat Hill along the shores of Salmon Lake.

The reports had said there were 3 – 5 different birds in the area and it did look like great habitat. But it also looked like great

grizzly habitat. Hmmm... In five minutes, that really didn't matter as we had three different Bluethroat cross our path and perch for a length of time. That was easy!

But we weren't done; our next stop yielded Gyrfalcon perched above its nest (an old eagle nest). Then an American Golden Plover on a tussock made sure we didn't do anything inappropriate.

Things were adding up, a gorgeous Rough-legged Hawk sitting cooperatively on a shrub; Velvet Scoter and maybe the biggest surprise for the day, an adult Horned Puffin swimming on a pond at mile post 62. This bird was a long way from the coast, but when it took flight, it did head off in the right direction.

We had been out for just about twelve hours on our first full day and it had been really spectacular. And tomorrow we had Safety Sound...

## Friday, June 15

## Council Road and Safety Sound

It was a calm morning, and mostly clear. That made it cool, but not cold, and we were ready to see what Safety Sound was going to bring us. A very sophisticated looking Pacific Loon was offshore at the quarry, along with three Brant and numerous Common Murre. Further on there were numerous displaying Lapland Longspurs trying to outdo one another in the morning light.

We talked with some researchers who were color-banding WeSa and SPSa along Safety Sound. They had done a pretty effective job given the number of banded birds we ran across. A flocks of over two hundred Tundra Swan was hanging out with Common Eider and other waterfowl as we made our way to Bonanza Bridge. But just prior to the bridge we stopped to look for the nesting colony of Aleutian Tern. And there they were, about a dozen individuals in a loose group between the sound and the road.

We stopped and boarded the Train to Nowhere, relics from the mining era in Nome. You are always wondering in the back of your mind who the folks were that worked the train and just how successful the line was?



Now we turned away from the coast and headed into the interior. We found an all-white Gyrfalcon on the ground with a kill (probably a ground squirrel) and watched it eventually lift off and fly over the hill. Next a Raven nest with four young almost at eye level of the van caught our attention and then a brown Gyr sitting on a cliff with its eyrie below.

We climbed up Skookum Pass as beads of showers tumbled down to the tundra. A patchy mosaic that was miles away given the view we had. We stopped at the top and

explored what seemed like pristine arctic tundra (remember, some ecologists insist that anything below the Arctic Circle is at best alpine tundra, but then they could be wrong...).



Flowers were blooming in paper-thin patches of soil scattered between the lichen-covered rubble. We got a scope on a very cooperative N. Wheatear that seemed to be reveling in its preferred habitat. Off in the distance, a very large herd of musk ox was feeding on a field of summer greens.

Other than the road, this was really a fine example of what Seward Peninsula wilderness looked like at the onset of

the short Arctic summer. Really one of the more awe-inspiring views we had seen!

It was four PM and we had at least a ninety-minute drive ahead of us if there weren't any stops. But then this was Nome and we birded our way back. The best birds on this return were a Red-necked Stint and a Black Turnstone, both feeding along the muddy edge of Safety Sound. All three jaeger species put in an appearance, with a Pomarine being the last just outside of the city. It was seven and we needed to stop and then head over to Airport Café for dinner. It had been a long and wonderful day...



It was sunny to the east, but we were going with the clouds. We birded Penny Creek where we had all of the warblers (including more Arctic) and most of the sparrows. The pair of American Dipper that had nested under the bridge for years was gone. Apparently the very hard winter took its toll on these birds throughout Alaska. It may take years for this population to recover...

There were lots of Long-tailed Jaegers on this road. Some were on nests and sometimes there would be a third being chased out of their territory.. The aerial acrobats with their tail streamers are just so agile

as they cut through the air with such ease.



Different species of waterfowl, and a single Rock Ptarmigan were some of the other wildlife we saw as we drove towards Wooley Lagoon. This is where we were going to look 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.

A dark phase Pomarine Jaeger flew overhead and landed next to its nest as a second bird joined from the east. These barrel-chested pirates are the biggest of the Arctic clan and take mammals and birds for prey. What a treat to see them so close!

We had lunch next to a wild stream falling out of the hills. The lagoon was off in the distance and it was blue sky everywhere. When we finished we jumped in the van and headed up a barely visible track to the top of a marine terrace. Some of us saw Snow Bunting, while all of us got great looks at a female alternate-plumaged Red Knot.

All of this was great, but what really intrigued all of us at this site were the fields of wildflowers! Purples, yellows, pinks, blues and whites, saturated the hillside with color! An absolutely unexpected feast for the eyes...

A lot of wildlife and birds in some incredibly spectacular scenery, what a day! But we had another 90-minute drive to get back to Nome and we did want a little time to explore the finish line of the Iditarod. And of course, one more meal at the Airport Café...

**Sunday, June 17**

**Flights Home**

After an early breakfast we caught our Alaska Airline flight back to Anchorage. There were few clouds and we got to see most of the Nome area from the air. We got to see the Safety Sound Wetlands, the mounds of old dredge spoils and the wide open waters of Norton Sound. We had a great time in Nome, but now we were headed to south to our homes in the Lower 48!

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