

# Classic Alaska: Birding & Wildlife

## June 4 – 13, 2024 | Trip Report by Dan Donaldson



**Guides: Dan Donaldson and Mason Flint**  
**Participants: Marilyn, Norma, Yvonne, Ann, Wayne, John and Elizabeth, Steven and Mary, Randy and Peggy, Christine and Richard**



**Tour Summary:** Classic Alaska! This tour visited three classic locations in the central region of Alaska – Anchorage, Nome, and Seward. In Anchorage, we hiked the Coastal Trail along Cooks Inlet to the famous Westchester lagoons where Loons, Arctic Terns, and Red-necked Grebes nest in plain view and made several trips to Potter Marsh. In nearby Eagle River, we experienced the amazingly beautiful Eagle River Valley where we explored the temperate rain forest for birds (crossbills, woodpeckers, and more), megafauna such as moose, Dall sheep and scanned the mountain sides for Grizzly.

In Nome, we spent 3 days exploring this gold-rush town and its three classic birding routes – Council, Teller, and Kougarak Roads with habitats ranging from low coastal plains to the snow-capped Kigluaik Mountains. We had incredible birding experiences at Safety Sound, Railroad to Nowhere, Coffee Dome, and we easily observed breeding behaviors of numerous sandpipers and plovers, Blue-throats, Wagtails, Dippers, along with daily run-ins with Muskox and Moose.

Seward is in the land of glaciers and the Kenai Fjords National Park. Here we boarded the Viewfinder for a day long excursion out through the Chiswell Islands to the beautiful Northwestern Fjord and glacier. Orca, Humpbacks, seals, sea otters, Dall's Porpoise were all easily seen and photographed here along with Horned and Tufted Puffins, auklets, eagles and falcons as we made our way through the fjords to the stunning Northwestern Glacier. We visited the Alaska Sealife Center, local birding hotspots Ava's feeders, the Seward Airport mudflats and Bear Creek Weir.



**BIRDS: 128 species were recorded.** The eBird link <https://ebird.org/tripreport/266981> details the birds our group observed during the tour. If you're new to eBird, be sure to click "Show All Details" on the right side of the list to expand the report and reveal where and when each of the birds were seen and how many.

### **Tues., June 4: Early Arrivals**

Many in the group arrived in Anchorage a day early, which is not unusual for this trip. By two in the afternoon, we had assembled a group of eight of us, so we decided to scout some local birding locations. First stop, Potter Marsh is a

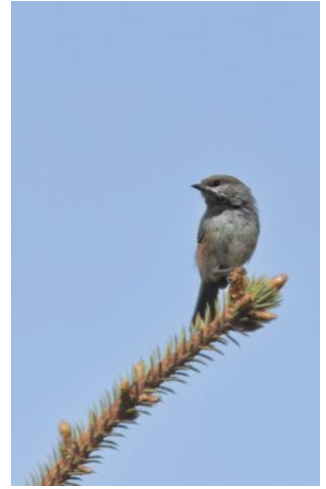
nice boardwalk wetland where we had our first looks at local birds: Alder Flycatcher, Orange-crowned Warbler, Black-billed Magpie, and, of course, Bald Eagles. Then, a quick stop at Westchester Lagoon for waterfowl. Barrow's Goldeneye, Common Mergansers, shovelers, widgeons, and Greater and Lesser Scaups were present in great numbers. Arctic Terns and Short-billed Gulls were here in great numbers and would lift off in squawking clouds to pursue every eagle that flew by.

### **Wed., June 5: Ship Creek | Eagle River | Palmer Hay Flats**

After a nice continental buffet at the Copper Whale Inn, we headed out to the town of Eagle River and Eagle River Valley. It was a bit rainy this morning with it expecting to stop around 10:00am, so we took our time getting to Eagle River with stops at nearby Ship's Creek Harbor and Eagle River Boat Launch. When the tide is out, this can be a terrific spot for local shorebirds and waterfowl. On this damp morning, we did manage good looks at Cackling Geese, Northern Shovelers, Yellowlegs, and Glaucous-winged Gulls.

The rain indeed stopped by the time we arrived at the Eagle River Nature Center. It was overcast, but the low clouds and slight fog gave the entire valley a beautiful hue of a Bateman painting. Yes, it was cloudy, but the birding was wonderful. After a quick stop in the nature center, we took the forested hiking trails down into the stream valley. The woodland birding was wonderful with views of Wilson's Yellow-rumped, Yellow, Orange-crowned and Northern Waterthrush Warblers. Pine Siskins worked busily in the evergreens along the trail while troops of White-winged Crossbills noisily flew from treetop to treetop.





Once down in the wide stream valley, vast beaver impoundments created a huge shrubby wetland complex along the river. Here, Lincoln's Sparrows were calling from perches just off the water and American Dippers were feeding in the stream. Beavers created rapids and Wilson's Snipes were here in great numbers, constantly calling and performing flight displays. We got our first look at Boreal Chickadee here along with Violet-green Swallows, Redpolls and Rusty Blackbirds.

We made a quick stop at Palmer Hay Flats for shorebirds and waterfowl and picked up Short-billed Dowitchers, Lesser-yellowlegs, Red-necked Grebes, American Widgeon and Green-winged Teal.

Returning to Anchorage, we had dinner at the Orso restaurant in downtown Anchorage, returned to Copper Whale for our bird list and prepare for our early transfer to Nome in the morning.

## **Thur., June 6: Transfer to Nome | Swanberg Dredge | Nome River Bridge | Cape Nome**

We were up and breakfasted early this morning to catch our 7:30am flight to Nome. Everything went off without a hitch and we arrived in Nome on time. Nome is a tiny outpost town with a tiny outpost airport, with one baggage claim, one ticket counter, and an outdoor gate. Stepping off the plane in this windswept, treeless landscape is exciting. You know you're somewhere different and remote.

By 11:00am we were in our vans and ready to do some birding. Our hotel rooms would not be ready until late afternoon, so we headed straight to the East End Park on the southern edge of town. This little, undeveloped part of town has two lakes - one on either side of the road - that are remnants from the gold rush days. Today, like most any freshwater pond in the region, it is a breeding habitat for Red-throated Loons, Red-necked Phalaropes and other waterfowl. There were two pairs of Red-throated Loons on one pond and they put quite a show on as the pairs confronted each other, and then performed some pair bonding calls and displays with their mates. The many Red-necked Phalaropes were in bright breeding plumage and often 5 or 6 feet away from us as we walked along the road and shoreline. Arctic Terns were here as well and would be a constant presence while we were here in the Nome area. Northern Waterthrushes, Redpolls, and Yellow Warblers were here on breeding territory as well.

Next was a quick stop at the Swanberg Dredge ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swanberg\\_Dredge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swanberg_Dredge)). The dredge is a hulking barge with a larch trenching boom that can pull itself up stream valleys while processing the soil for gold. There are many such dredges abandoned on the landscape in the region - some many times larger than this one. The pond here where it sits is likely where it performed its last bit of dredging before being abandoned. Of course, there's a pair of nesting Red-throated Loons here along with more Red-necked Phalaropes, but this time they were closer and allowed amazing photographs.



We continued along Nome-Council Road, making stops at the Nome River Bridge, Cape Nome, and Fort Davis Road turnoff. Willow Ptarmigans and Long-tailed Jaegers were easily seen and photographed along the way. A quick stop at Cape Nome gave us our first looks at Harlequin Ducks, Black-legged Kittiwakes, and several flyby Pelagic Cormorants.

We returned to Nome late in the afternoon for hotel check in and to rest a bit before dinner.

### **Fri., June 7: Council Road Day**

There are three main birding routes in Nome: Council Road, Teller Road and Kougarok Road. Today, we drove approximately 50 miles (one way) on Nome-Council Road through an amazing diversity of habitats. A large portion of the route is along the coast, with the wide-open Bering Sea on one side of the road and vast coastal tundra plain on the other.

We re-traced our route from yesterday afternoon, stopping at Nome River Bridge and Cape Nome. New species here included Red Phalaropes, Tundra Swans, Long-tailed Duck, Black Scoter, Common Ravens, with Gray-cheeked and Hermit Thrushes singing on territory. Arriving at Safety Sound, we birded from the long, elevated bridge, easily observing a cooperative flock of Sabine's Gulls, over 100 Red Phalaropes, Sand Hill Cranes, and a flock of 20 Brants. We had a seal resting on some floating ice, which we guessed was our first look at Ringed Seal.

There was another birding group eating lunch at the "Last Train to Nowhere" location, so we drove on to bird the wetlands in the area to give them time to clear out. We immediately found a pair of Arctic Loons, and Lapland Longspurs seemed to be everywhere. We returned to Last Train to Nowhere for a relaxing lunch in the sunshine and to spend some time taking in the surreal display of abandoned trains and goldmining equipment.

After lunch, we birded our way to the bridge on the east fork of the Solomon River where Gyrfalcons sometimes nest under the bridge or on the nearby cliffs. With some effort, we finally located a pair of Gyrs on the cliffs above the road where we could get good looks in the scope and then witnessed a few acrobatic pairs bonding in flight. This was our turnaround location to start heading back toward Nome with stops at the Safety Sound Bridge (Yellow Wagtail), opportunistic stops along the road, (Merlin, Sharp-shinned Hawk), and plenty of Lapland Longspurs and Long-tailed Jaegers along the way.

We returned to Nome for dinner and check list.





### **Sat., June 8: Kougarok Road Day | Coffee Dome**

Today, we're off to bird Kougarok Road from Nome to Coffee Dome – 70 miles each way. We barely made it out of town before we had our first stop to watch a herd of Muskox grazing near the road. This was a smaller group of 8 that eventually crossed the road and disappeared into the shrubby willows. Willow Ptarmigans were so plentiful on the road that within an hour, we didn't stop for them anymore. This is dirt road birding at its best. Stops along the road produced Willow and Rock Ptarmigan, American Golden Plover, Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstones, and surfbirds, all on breeding sites. Stopping at roadside lakes and ponds, we found Greater White-fronted geese, Black Scoter, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, and Cliff Swallows.

Our drive took us by the rugged Kigluaik Mountain range - a small group of granite mountains that seem to erupt out of the tundra like the Rocky Mountains. They're only 4000 ft. tall, but this far north, that means they're snow covered most of the year and are home to Alaska's western-most glacier. The road takes us through the mountain pass and, as we descend on the north side of the range, we arrive at Coffee Dome. Those of us that were hiking to the top of the nearby hill geared up and started our hike, while others in the group stayed behind in the van to bird the sprawling valley below. This mile-long hike can be a real slog and usually takes well over an hour to make it to the top, but today the mud was minimal and we made good time. As we made our way to the top, the defined trail slowly disappears into pothole tundra, where watching every step is important to protect our ankles and any nesting birds. Upon arriving at the top, we had a Short-eared owl working the area and having this predator around may have limited our odds a bit. We spread out and carefully walked the top for about 45 minutes. The Bristle-thighed Curlew, our target bird for all this effort, eluded us. However, the hike itself is a memorable experience and we did have wonderful encounters with Whimbrel, many American Golden Plovers, and nesting Lapland Longspurs. The views from the top of the rolling glaciated landscape were pretty amazing as well.

We made several stops on our 70-mile return trip for Common Redpolls, Northern Waterthrushes, many more ptarmigans, Muskoxen, Moose, and Hoary Marmots.

### **Sun., June 9: Nome-Teller Highway Journey**

Today, we had a hot breakfast at the Polar Bear Café, then headed out for our last full day of birding in the





Nome area. It was the third leg of our birding route - Nome-Teller Highway. Nome-Teller takes an inland route along the coast into the first elevations above the coastal plain – prime shorebird breeding habitat. This was another long day on a dirt road with many roadside stops.

First stop was Snake River, just outside of town. Rock Pigeon, an unusual bird in these parts, was observed at the bridge. There are ponds and wetlands in the broad stream valley here and we picked up Moose, Wilson's Snipe, Least Sandpiper, Arctic Terns, Red-necked Grebe, and a very inquisitive Wilson's Warbler.



The roadside scrub is home to many Yellow Warblers and Gray-cheeked Thrushes that sing constantly from perches. Ptarmigans seemed to be on the road every half mile as we made our way north to our turnaround spot. A Yellow Wagtail brought the vans to a stop and we managed a few pictures before it moved on. The nearby ponds held Tundra Swans, Long-tailed ducks, Red-necked Phalaropes, more Willow Ptarmigans, and a hunting Parasitic Jaeger. Much better looks at Rock Ptarmigans were a bit further down the road.

Arriving at Wooley Lagoon Road, we are only allowed on the first portion of the road, as the

native settlement beyond is off limits. The tundra meadow on both sides of the road here is an interesting habitat as the frost cycle pushes large rocks to the surface creating a large rock field within the tundra. This unique habitat is reliable for nesting shorebirds. Today we easily saw nesting American Golden Plovers, Golden-crowned Sparrows, and a few Jaegers that made a couple passes in the area. We turned around here and worked the same meadows, ponds, and landscapes we did on the way in. We made a lengthy rest stop at the Cripple River Bridge. After spending 20 minutes here, we headed down the road and stopped at a spot where Bluethroat, another target bird for this trip, was reported earlier. Sure enough, after spending 10 minutes walking the road in the area, we located a cooperative, male Bluethroat that seemed to be staking out a





breeding territory along a 200-yard stretch of the road. We watched it fly from willow to willow and got pretty good photographs of this beauty.

Upon returning to Nome, we stopped to take pictures of a famous abandoned plane in one of the ponds just outside of town and found a nesting Northern Shrike there. We got back to town in the middle of the afternoon, allowing for some discovery/shopping time in Nome. Tomorrow will be our transfer day back to Anchorage.

### **Mon., June 10: Transfer Day Nome-Anchorage-Seward**

This was mainly a transfer day. We had an early flight out of Nome back to Anchorage. Once in Anchorage, we picked up our rental vans and spent the rest of our day birding our way to Seward (glacier country). We made a lunch stop at Pipers Sports Lounge for both convenience and its location - sitting right on the shore of Lake Spenard in Anchorage. While waiting for food, we scoped the lake finding Canvasback, Redheads, Ring-necked, Greater Scaup, White-winged Scoter, and Barrow's Golden-eye ducks, along with Horned and Red-necked Grebes.

We made a nice stop at the Turnagain Pass Rest Area, one of the most beautiful rest tops in Alaska, tucked in-between towering ice-capped mountains on either side of the road. We hiked a bit on the trails here, then got back on the road, drove through the small town of Moose Pass, then descended down into Seward. We stayed at the Harbor 360 Hotel right in the middle of the harbor, and our departure spot for tomorrow.

Dinner this evening was at the famous Ray's Waterfront Restaurant, just a quick walk from our hotel. Afterwards, many of us walked the docks and around the storefronts here before turning in. We will have an early morning departure for our glacier tour.



## **Tues., June 11: Kenai Fjords | Northwestern Glacier Fjord Cruise**

This morning, we had a quick breakfast at the hotel, then walked out the door onto the dock to get in line for the all-day Northwestern Glacier Fjord Cruise. We boarded Viewfinder, a smaller, more intimate boat that will get us up close to wildlife and the glaciers. It's an overcast day, with chances of on-and-off rain, but for now, it's pleasant and we're all on deck as we head away from the docks and out into Resurrection Bay toward the towering Chiswell Islands.

It's not long after we depart when the wildlife sightings start. Eagles are plentiful here and we passed several resting on navigation buoys. We passed large feeding flocks of Black-legged Kittiwakes (perhaps the most numerous gull once away from the town of Seward where Glaucous-winged gulls rule). We get our first looks at a few pairs of Sea Otters as we motor by. Flyby Ancient Murrelets and Horned Puffins build the excitement for what's to come.

Heading out of Resurrection Bay, we come to the stunning Chiswell Islands where all of the seabird action is. We had hundreds of Puffins flying overhead with many in the water below the boat, and more tucked up in the cliffs above. We easily counted 300 Tufted and Horned Puffins, but we're sure there were many, many, more. Tiny Parakeet Auklets were in the water at close range, and at one point, the captain put the nose of the boat right up against the cliffs where they breed, giving us great looks and photos. Thick-billed and Common Murres were here in great numbers as well. Black-legged Kittiwakes now numbered in the thousands. We picked up a Black Oystercatcher and Red-faced Cormorant while scanning the many Steller Sea Lions basking on the island rocks. A pod of Dall's Porpoise came by for a quick visit as we headed around Granite Island and the mainland of Kenai Fjords National Park. Here, we also spotted Mountain Goats on the nearly vertical cliffs along the mainland.

Making the turn into the protected waters of the Northwestern Fjord, we had our box lunches and kept our eyes peeled for seals and specialties that inhabit the fjord. After lunch, we're back outside. The water here is a cool opaque green from the glacial dust. It's not long before we get the bird we're looking for - the rare Kittlitz's Murrelet - just 8 feet from the boat, giving us amazing looks and photos!!





A light rain started as we neared the face of the glacier, but we still stayed outside for an hour while we loitered, watching in awe as large blue chunks of ice calved off the face of the glacier into the waters of the fjord. The waves gently rocked our boat as well as the many harbor seals resting on the ice flows.

We reversed our route to get back to Seward, passing by the same island and landscapes. We focused on whales on the way back and, before entering Resurrection Bay, we spot a Hump-backed whale feeding along the seaside cliffs. We watched about a dozen feeding cycles before we turn away in time to have a small pod of Killer whales pass by the mouth of the bay.

We returned to Seward after a wonderful full day on the water. We headed back to the hotel for a quick rest and then dinner out in the historic district of Seward at the Apollo restaurant.

### **Wed., June 12: Alaska Sealife Center | Seward Birding | Anchorage**

We enjoyed a little later start this morning, as we were waiting for the Alaska Sealife Center to open. Since we had some time, we headed to Ava's Feeders. Ava's is a local birding hotspot, as her feeding stations are always full of seeds and local birds. We were immediately greeted by a large flock (50+) of Red Crossbills and Pine Siskins. Steller's Jays made their noisy appearance as well. The nearby creek attracts Violet-green Swallows and they were resting on the nearby wires. Then, we were off to the amazing Sealife Center with wonderful live exhibits of marine mammals, fish, and seabirds. The aviary is quite impressive as we had close up experiences with many of the birds we saw yesterday, both on and below the water.

We then began our journey back to Anchorage with a stop at the Seward Airport. Alaska is just different, and here we just walked (with permission) out onto the runway and down to the mudflats looking for shorebirds. The tide was way out and shorebirds were not here except for a lone Greater Yellowlegs, but the nearby brush produced Savanna Sparrows, a Red-breasted Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Tree and VG Sparrows.

Farther up the road, we stopped at the Bear Creek Weir aquaculture farm. This is an interesting fishery location where they manage local trout populations. Today, they were removing adults from the creek. This is a pretty reliable location for American Dippers, and we found several here along the creek leading to the fishery structures.

Back in Anchorage, we settled in to our hotel - the Lakefront Anchorage. This hotel is right on Lake Spenard, so we go for our last full-group bird outing before dinner. No new birds were to be had, but we enjoyed a relaxing



walk with good, reaffirming looks at the birds we got to know on this trip. Most of the group will be heading to the airport in the morning, while some are headed to Utqiagvik (Barrow, AK) on the high arctic extension.

### **Thurs., June 13: Departures | Extension**

This morning many participants made their way to the airport at varying times. Those of us that were going on the extension birded locally on our own until our afternoon flights to Utqiagvik.

### **Utqiagvik (Barrow ) Extension | Jun. 13-16**

Utqiagvik is a unique outpost town - remote and busy and yet so wild. It is the U.S.'s most northern city, located 320 miles above the Arctic Circle. We experience true 24 hours of daylight here, which means you can bird 24 hours a day if you wish. We made a point to have a midnight birding outing, which was actually quite pleasant. The sun was low on the horizon, giving that magical golden hour of light the whole time. Like Nome, there are only a few roads from which to bird, namely Cakeeater, Nunavaaq, Egasak, and Sakeagak roads. These well-travelled roads take us through town, past ponds and salt lagoons, along the shoreline, or out to the tundra and coastal wetlands.

### **Thurs., June 13: Arrival in Utqiagvik**

We arrived in Utqiagvik at 5:00 PM. We first went to get settled into the top of the world and get a quick dinner at the local Chinese restaurant, so we could then do some evening birding. We headed out to Cakeeater Road past the South Salt Lagoon to look for shorebirds and where Eiders are often seen. We had some great birds here, including many Greater White-fronted Geese, Brant, Long-tailed ducks, many Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, Pacific Loon, and a nice Short-eared Owl, but not the eiders we're looking for. Still satisfied, we headed back to the Top of the World hotel.

### **Fri., June 14: Arctic Birding**

After a very nice breakfast at the hotel, we were off birding at Cakeeater Road again after getting reports of Eiders being present. We found them soon after arriving, near the salt lagoons. The nearby lake had both Stellars and King Eiders that were easily observed and photographed from the road or by standing on the rockpile berms along the road. Pomarine Jaegers were also observed pretty regularly this morning with both light and dark morph individuals. Snow geese and Brants were seen daily, along with the ever present Greater White-fronted geese. A treat today was the presence of many Pectoral Sandpipers calling and performing their breeding displays. We saw many individuals on our drive through town and along Cakeeater Road.



Next, we were off to Nunavaaq Road. This road takes us along the western shore, by the end of the runway of the airport, up onto the tundra, past the town's native Imaiqsaun Cemetery and out into the tundra. Our first stop was a gravel quarry pond near the end of the runway. A Red-necked Stint was reported here and we quickly found it. Semipalmated Plovers seem to be nesting here and the reports of a Ringed Plover here kept us coming back again and again, whenever we had time to stop by. However, we never did confirm seeing this bird, as it is difficult to discern from Semipalmated Plover. Baird's and White-rumped sandpipers found here today made up for missing out on the Ringed Plover. We stayed out late (9:00PM) and returned to our hotel with plenty of light left in the day.

## **Sat., June 15: More Arctic Birding**

We headed out this morning to check out the gravel pit again for the Ringed Plover, but made a quick stop at a home with a bird feeder - a rare find up here as bird feed is expensive and hard to come by. We spent 15 mins. here and observed Lapland longspurs, Common Redpolls, and Snow Buntings enjoying the feeders. Then, we were off to the gravel pit again where we saw a few more species of ducks - Green-winged Teals, Northern Pintails, and GWF geese. We spent some time picking through Semipalmated Plovers searching for the Ringed with no luck, so we stopped back at the cemetery, and then drove the Nunavaaq Road tundra areas.

Our last outing of the day was heading back out to Cakeeater Road to try and locate Spectacled Eiders. We saw many Pectorals, and Red and Red-necked Phalaropes. We did get our van stuck in a soft spot on the dirt road and did some roadside birding while our vehicle was pulled out. Common Ravens and Pomarine Jaegers kept us company.

This is also the day we did some midnight birding and searching for Polar Bears. The town is very different late at night with a lot of recreational four-wheeling taking place. We drove the shoreline as far north as we could, finding Yellow-billed Loons and running into other birding groups looking for Polar Bears. We dipped on the bears that, according to locals, didn't seem to be as regular as in years past.

## **Sun., June 16: Birding and Flight Back to Anchorage**

Our flight back to Anchorage wouldn't be until 5:00pm, so we had some time to bird. We spent the morning around town, visiting several of the locations we'd birded earlier including the bird feeder house (added White-crowned Sparrow), and areas out at Cakeeater Road (not crossing the soft spot in the road this time). We heard a rumor of a Common Snipe in the area and we spent some time tracking it down in a residential neighborhood. We found it associating with the many Wilson's Snipe in the area. We did manage a couple looks at the beautiful scaled feathers on its sides while on a telephone pole and again flying around with a Wilson's Snipe. We also had many more Pectoral Sandpipers in this area.

Our flight back to Anchorage was right on time and those of us that had flights immediately after arrival made them. Others spent an additional evening to fly out in the morning.

*Photo Credits: Group (Yvonne Hunter), Group (Mason Flint), Potter Marsh (Randy Skaggs), Red-necked Grebe, Lincoln's Sparrow, Eagle River, Boreal Chickadee, Long-tailed Jaeger, Smiles in Nome (Mason Flint), Muskox (Randy Skaggs), More Nome Smiles, Nome Hike (Mason Flint), Group Birding (Yvonne Hunter), Rick, Miner, Mason & Dan (Mason Flint), Seward Highway Pullout (Randy Skaggs), Seward Harbor (Yvonne Hunter), Sea Lions, Kittlitz's Murrelet, Halibut Catch (Randy Skaggs), Scenic x2 (Yvonne Hunter)*