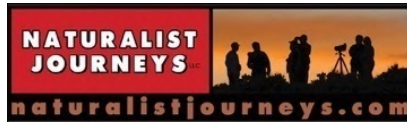
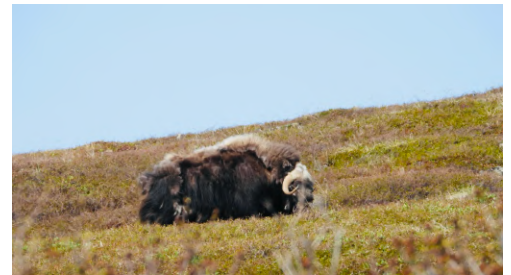


Classic Alaska: Birding and Wildlife | June 3-12, 2025 | Trip Report | by Dan Donaldson



Guide(s) Dan Donaldson and Greg Butcher and participants Cheryl, Geri, Ellen, Carol, John, Cindy, Mary, William, Barbara H, Shirley, and Barbara C.



Tour Summary: Our recent 'Classic Alaska' birding adventure took us through diverse landscapes, from coastal plains to snow-capped mountains, yielding incredible wildlife encounters and 124 bird species. We visited three classic birding-regions in central Alaska – Anchorage, Nome, and Seward. In Anchorage, we hiked the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail along the Cook Inlet to the famous Westchester Lagoon where Loons, Arctic Terns, and Red-necked Grebes nest in plain view and made several trips to Potter Marsh. Then we experienced the nearby, amazingly beautiful, Eagle River Valley where we explored the temperate coastal rain forest for birds (crossbills, woodpeckers, and more), megafauna such as moose and Dall sheep, and scanned the mountain sides for Grizzlies.

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, "The Last Train to Nowhere," Coffee Dome, and we easily



observed breeding behaviors of numerous sandpipers, plovers, bluethroats, wagtails, and dippers, along with daily run-ins with muskox and moose.

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

Tuesday, June 3: 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 our group and headed out to get our first looks at local birds. We headed straight to Potter Marsh, with its famous boardwalk and wetlands. This is perhaps the best spot in Anchorage to view Arctic Terns. They are a constant presence over the patches of open water and tidal creeks. We found a couple of nesting pairs very near the parking turnouts along the road. Short-billed (Mew) Gulls were the gull of the day, with a few European Herring gulls flying along Turnagain Arm Bay. We got our first look at moose here as well, albeit mostly viewing patches of brown fur moving deep in the Alder thickets. Waterfowl were here of course, and we picked up Canada Geese, Trumpeter Swans, Northern Shovelers, Mallard x Green-winged Teal, and Ring-necked Ducks. Bald Eagles nested within view of the boardwalk this year, giving us great scope views. Sandhill Cranes, Violet-green and Barn swallows, Common Ravens, and Rusty Blackbirds rounded out our birds of the afternoon. We returned to our hotel to freshen up for our first dinner together at the Simon and Seafort's restaurant.

Wednesday, June 4: Ship Creek | Eagle River | Palmer Hay Flats

After a nice continental breakfast buffet at the Copper Whale Inn, we headed out to the town of Eagle River and Eagle River Valley. From Eagle River, it's a 12-mile drive up Eagle River Road, taking us from coastal wetlands up the Eagle River Valley to coastal rainforest. The nature center is nestled in the forest at the end of the road. After parking we were immediately warned of a very protective moose mother that had been charging hikers. We still hiked, but we kept our eyes open and made it a point to not be quiet.



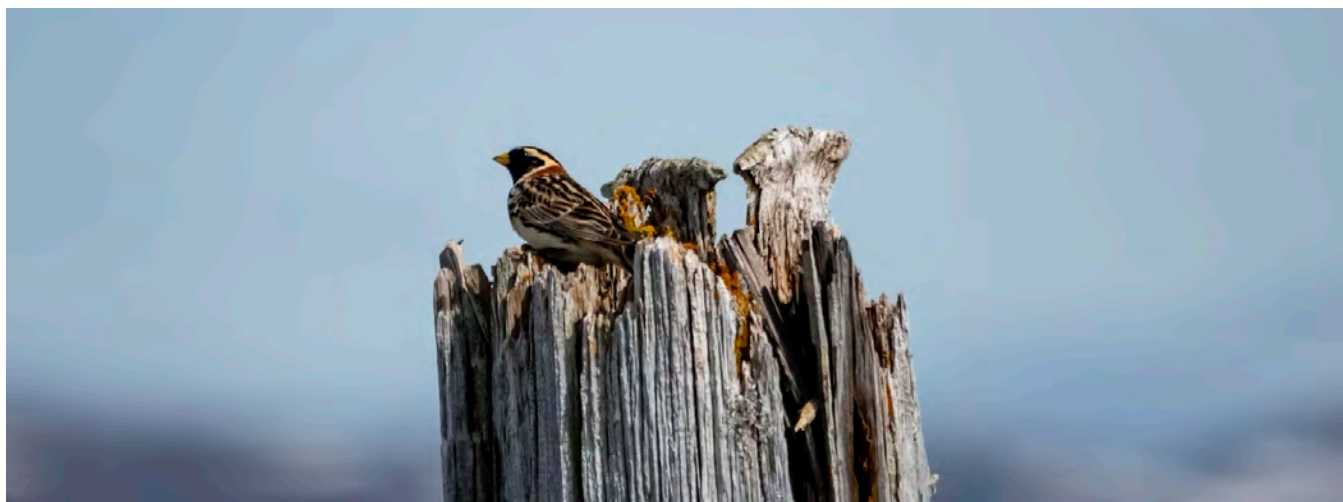
We birded/hiked down the Albert Loop trail to the valley floor where it opens up to flat, lush, green meadows surrounded by the Chugach Mountains towering 7000 feet above us. There was still plenty of snow up there and careful scanning by the group produced a Dall Sheep high on the rocky slopes above the tree line. Wouldn't you know it, we weren't at the meadow for more than 5 minutes before a moose walked into view not far from where we were standing. This cow seemed to be a loner and while it did notice us, she was more interested in feeding in the river and on the shoreline. Her feeding eventually brought her nearer into the open, which gave us absolutely stunning views and photographs.

We birded/hiked the 3.5-mile loop through beaver marsh wetlands, temperate rain forest, and upland meadows. American Dippers stole the show as we discovered a nest near one of the boardwalk platforms. Wilson's Snipe calls were a constant presence, and we located several pairs. Black-capped Chickadees are here as well along with Yellow-rumped, Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warblers. Varied thrushes were seen and heard in the forest along with Pacific Wren, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Juncos. We also observed multiple trips of newly hatched fish being delivered.

After a lunch at a café in Eagle River, we made our way to Palmer Hay Flats where we had great looks at Blackpoll Warblers and Violet-green Swallows. A very cooperative Common Loon rested in the pond here as Greater Yellowlegs worked the shoreline.

Our last stop of the day was at Westchester Lagoon in Anchorage. Here, there are many Arctic Terns and Short-billed (Mew) Gulls nesting on the islands that are close to the walking path around the lagoon. Red-necked Grebes nest here as well. A surprise Sandhill Crane worked a very small wetland area near the bike path, oblivious to all the activity around it. Bank Swallows were here in great numbers and we found a Bonaparte's Gull mixed in with feeding Arctic Terns.

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



Thursday, June 5: Transfer to Nome | Swanberg Dredge | Nome River Bridge | Cape Nome

We had a 7:30am flight to Nome this morning, so we were up early and off to the airport. 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 immediately know you're somewhere different and remote.

By 10:30am we were in our vans and ready to do some local birding. Our hotel rooms wouldn't be ready until late afternoon, so we headed straight to East End Park on the edge of town. This little park has just one picnic shelter, but it has two small lakes - one on either side of the road - that are remnants from the gold rush days. The ponds each hold a pair of nesting Red-throated Loons, along with plenty of Red-necked Phalaropes that often fed just feet away from us. Arctic Terns were here too, sitting on telephone wires like kingfishers or nesting in small grass tufts near the ponds. Northern Waterthrushes, Redpolls, and Yellow Warblers were constantly calling from the nearby willows.

Moving just down the street a bit, we stopped at the nearby Swanberg Dredge (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swanberg_Dredge). The Swanberg is a smaller dredge, but it's still a hulking mass with a large trenching boom that can pull itself up stream valleys, creating its own ponds to float in while processing the soil for gold. There are many such dredges in the region abandoned on the landscape, some many times larger than this one. The pond that it sits in here is likely the last bit of dredging this machine performed before being abandoned. There's a pair of nesting Red-throated Loons here along with more Red-necked Phalaropes, but this time they were closer and allowed for amazing photographs. Glaucous Gulls were nesting on the roof structure and a Wilson's Snipe posed for pictures on the boardwalk leading up to the dredge. Short-eared Owls worked the tundra hummocks along with the occasional flyby Parasitic Jaeger. We picked up more songbirds here as well with good looks at Golden-crowned Sparrow, Redpolls, Tree and Bank Swallows, and American Tree Sparrow. A flock of Pigeon Guillemots flew along the beach just across the street.

We made a quick stop for lunch in town, then headed farther down Nome-Council Road, past the Swanberg Dredge, toward Cape Nome. It's a 15-mile drive, but it's a dirt-road, so it takes us the rest of the afternoon to get there and back. Council Road takes us along the edge of the Bering Sea, so it's beach and ocean on one side and vast tundra speckled with willow patches as far as you can see. The birding here is wonderful. We seem to stop every couple hundred yards for new birds. Small roadside wetlands hold ducks and shorebirds and even Long-tailed Jaegers. American Widgeons, Mallards, Northern Pintails, and Greater Scaups are all here. A stop at



the Nome River bridge and estuary gave us our first look at Bar-tailed Godwits, Pacific Golden-Plovers, Pacific Loons, Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers.

This is a quick trip and our turn around spot is at Cape Nome. This mountainous point has a growing gravel mining operation and now the pier is no longer available to birders, but the road in this area is high above the water. We took a quick peek over the edge and spotted a pair of Harlequin Ducks, the first of many we will see here in Nome, and a flyby Pelagic Cormorant.

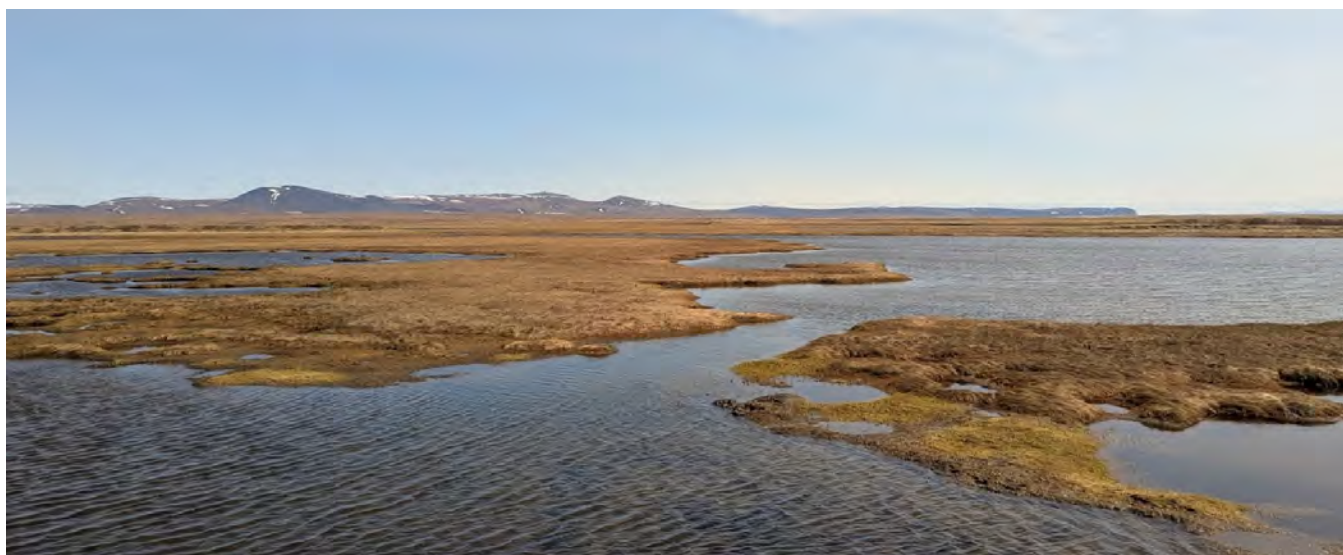
We returned to Nome to claim our rooms at the Aurora Inn in the late afternoon. We rested a bit before our dinner at Milano's - Nome's only Italian restaurant. It was a long day of travel for us, so after dinner we did our bird list and turned in, even with it being bright and sunny outside.

Friday, June 6: Council Road Day

There are three main birding routes in Nome: Council Road, Teller Road and Kougarok Rd. Today, we were back on Council Road driving approximately 50 miles (one way) 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 stopped again at yesterday's stops - Nome River Bridge and Cape Nome - and kept on driving to Safety Sound and beyond. We had even better birds at Nome River with Common Eiders, Tundra Swans, Red-breasted Mergansers, and Long-billed Dowitchers added to our lists. The drive onward to Safety Sound was amazing. We found an incredibly cooperative singing Yellow Wagtail on breeding territory near one of the camps along the road, where he remained most of the day. The road really hugs the Bering Sea shoreline here and when we approached Safety Sound, we were on a narrow spit for several miles. We heard a rumor of an Emperor Goose that was now behind us a couple miles. We hopped back in our vans, drove back past the wagtail, and found it without much trouble, thanks to the mile markers along the road. Arriving at the Safety Sound bridge, we came up on a feeding flock of Sabine's Gulls, and Black-legged Kittiwakes feeding just below us along with 20 or so Red-necked Phalaropes. Artic Terns, loons, and Common Eiders were regular flybys overhead, going to and from the Bering Sea and the sound. Two Red-necked Stints were easily observed from the elevated road approaching the bridge.

We stopped for our picnic lunch at the famous "Last Train to Nowhere," the iconic Alaskan spot with its abandoned locomotives, pumps and other rusting iron equipment from the gold rush days. Lapland Longspurs and Savannah Sparrows kept up company while we ate in the bright sunshine (and wind). We turned around



here and birded our way back to Nome, stopping for waterfowl, Arctic Warblers, and Fox Sparrows. Ravens nest on most any elevated structure here on the tundra and we found a nest with very large chicks on a large metal storage box at a closed sand mining operation on the roadside. Back in Nome, we had dinner at Airport Pizza, reviewed our checklist and retired for the evening.

Saturday, June 7: Nome-Teller Highway Journey

Day 2 and Road 2 on our Nome adventure - Nome-Teller Rd. takes a farther 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. There are many creeks running off the highlands down to the coastal plains. We stop at every bridge, roadside pond and wetland as we go. Our first official stop was the Snake River bridge where we observed American Dippers (they nest under the bridge) actively foraging underwater, then bringing food back under the bridge. As we drove on, Willow Ptarmigans were plentiful and the roadside creeks and wetlands gave us great looks at phalaropes as well as American Widgeons, Northern Pintails, Green-winged Teals, Greater Scaups, and Red-breasted Mergansers. The faster flowing creeks were great spots for Harlequin Ducks and we had several occasions for great views and photographs.

Some of the low rolling mountains here have rocky outcrops which make for great raptor habitat. We found an active Rough-legged Hawk's nest complete with 2 adults (perhaps a chick) that was initially being harassed by a falcon - too far of a view to determine which falcon species.

We spent quite a bit of time at the Cripple Creek Bridge area. We ate lunch here and birded the willow thickets and just spent time relaxing and scanning the river from the bridge. It's a wonderful spot. Shorebirds worked the shoreline of the river. We had great looks at Wandering Tattlers, Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Wilson's Snipe, flyover Sandhill Cranes and Greater White-fronted Geese, and Pomarine Jaeger. The willow thickets were thick with songbirds and we were serenaded by Northern Waterthrushes, American Tree Sparrows, along with plenty of Wilson's, Yellow, and Orange-crowned Warblers.

Arriving at Woolley 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. The tundra wildflowers here were amazing. 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, on the way out, we worked the same meadows, ponds, and landscapes as we did on the way in. We made another lengthy rest stop at the Cripple River bridge. Back in the vans, we drove back towards Nome and about 3 miles down the road we noticed some strange bird activity off to the side. A quick look in our binoculars and Bam! Bluethroats!! We quickly exited the vans to get a quick look. Turns out, a male Bluethroat had set up a territory right at this spot. We remained here for about 20 minutes getting incredible views and photographs as this male moved from willow bush to willow bush singing and performing displays in flight. What a day! Obviously, it was a satisfying trip back to Nome. We got back to town early enough for a quick stop at the local giftshop before returning to the hotel for dinner and our checklist.

Sunday, June 8: Kougarok Road Day | Coffee Dome

Today is our last full day of birding in Nome and we're off to bird Kougarok Road "from Nome to Coffee Dome" - 70 miles each way. Our quest today is to spot Bristle-thighed Curlews in the Coffee Dome area. Thankfully, Kougarok Road is a stunningly beautiful drive and the birding is always spectacular. Flushing many Willow Ptarmigans as we headed inland, we stopped at the many roadside ponds and streams for waterfowl - Harlequins, Northern Shovelers and Pintails, along with flyby Cackling and Greater White-fronted Geese. As we continued inland, granite outcrops start to appear, eventually becoming towering granite cliffs. We stop at a historic Golden Eagle nest that has been used for generations of eagles. Through our spotting scopes, we are able to see at least one adult and a large chick on the nest.

We made a stop at Salmon Lake Campground. This incredibly beautiful mountain lake, surrounded by snow-covered peaks, is largely iced over, but there are waterfowl in some of the openings: Red-throated Loons, Tundra Swans, and Greater Scaups. The campground area is great Bluethroat habitat, so we spend some time birding the willow thickets, but all we find are ptarmigans, more Gray-cheeked Thrushes and Yellow and Wilson's Warblers. A special treat was seeing nesting Say's Phoebes in the campground area. We had many miles to go to Coffee Dome, so back to the vans.

Arriving in Bristle-thighed Curlew country, we pull off the side of the road for lunch before we hike up Coffee Dome. Actually, it's Coffee Dome adjacent, as the dome we hike is unnamed for now. We've got a good two hours of tougher hiking here and our group splits up at this point. Those that are not hiking will continue up Kougarok Road for more birding while the hiking groups tackle the challenging tundra hike up to the top of the dome.



This hike can be a real slog in wetter conditions, but today the mud was minimal and we made good time. The defined trail slowly disappears as we make our way to the top, and then had to walk in pothole tundra where every step is critical for the health of our ankles and any nesting birds within. Once on top, we were standing in a vast tabletop tundra with 360° views of the mountains and valleys below. We were the only ones up here so we spread out a little bit and made our way across the top. Whimbrels breed here too, sometimes making Curlew ID difficult, but we spent the drive here practicing our ID and vocalization skills. We spotted several Whimbrels nearby and eventually were able to pick out the Bristle-thighed amongst them. Then as we started our walk back toward the vans, we had a flying pair vocalizing as they flew right by us and descended over the slope of the dome. Such a great observation made the hike back down much more enjoyable. The folks that opted to bird farther down Kougarak were rewarded with more great looks at Bluethroats. We rested a bit, snacked, put our gear back in the vans and retraced our route back to Nome. Our day on Kougarak road was an exciting and satisfying way to spend our last day in Nome. Mountains, lakes, vigorous hiking, and of course Bristle-thighed Curlews!

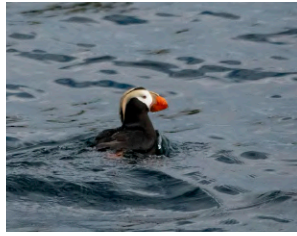
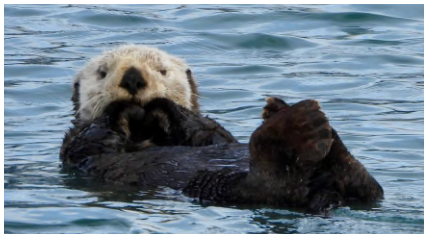
Monday, June 9: Transfer Day Nome-Anchorage-Seward

Today was a transfer day. We had an early flight back to Anchorage, then we picked up our rental vans and stopped at Pipers Sports Lounge on the shore of Lake Spenard in Anchorage for lunch. After lunch, we drove the lake's perimeter road and located a large flock of Barrow's Goldeneyes and got close looks at a lone Redhead with some Canvasbacks thrown in for Redhead/Canvasback comparisons. Back on the road, we birded our way to Seward (glacier country).

We made a nice stop at the Turnagain Pass Rest Area, one of the most beautiful rest tops in Alaska tucked between towering ice-capped mountains on either side of the road. We hiked a bit on the trails here, then drove through the small town of Moose Pass and descended into Seward located at the beginning of Resurrection Bay. 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 would have an early start tomorrow for our Glacier/Resurrection Bay adventure.

Tuesday, June 10: Kenai Fjords | Northwestern Glacier Fjord Cruise

This morning, we had a nice, quick breakfast at the hotel and then walked onto the dock just outside the door and got in line for the all-day Northwestern Glacier Fjord Cruise. We boarded Viewfinder, a smaller, more intimate boat, that gets us up close to wildlife and the glaciers. We're all outside on the boat's deck on this beautiful, sunny day, as we head out to Resurrection Bay.



We start seeing wildlife as soon as we pull away from the dock. Eagles sitting on navigation buoys watched us as we pass by them, and we spotted a Wandering Tattler on the break wall as we left the marina. Black-legged Kittiwakes and the larger Glaucous Gulls were actively feeding at the mouth of the marina. It was not long before we start seeing Sea Otters. Our captain stopped the boat and we floated next to a couple for a while for photos. As we got closer to the ocean, we started picking up flyby Ancient Murrelets and Horned Puffins that come into the bay to feed.

Heading out of Resurrection Bay, we came to the stunning Chiswell Islands where the seabird action was, well, just amazing. We had hundreds of Puffins flying overhead with many in the water below the boat, and more tucked up in the cliffs above. First, it was Horned Puffins, then as we moved farther out, it was the larger, and darker Tufted Puffins. Tiny Parakeet Auklets were here as well. We had 5 feeding in the water near our boat at close range. Thick-billed and Common Murres were here in great numbers as well. Black-legged Kittiwakes now numbered in the thousands as we motored by their breeding cliffs. We picked up a pair of Red-faced Cormorants nesting in a nearby sea cave. Before we can enter the Northwestern Fjord, we have to go around Granite Island and a mountainous point of the mainland of Kenai Fjords National Park. Here, we spotted Mountain Goats on the nearly vertical cliffs and low along the shoreline where the females climb down to give birth their young. After a couple weeks, they'll head back up higher in the mountains.

Making the turn into the protected waters of the Northwestern Fjord, the captain navigated through the original glacial moraine that nearly blocks the entrance to the fjord. Once through, we're in mirror flat waters and have our box lunches and keep our eyes peeled for seals and specialties that inhabit the fjord. Once done eating, we were back outside. The water here is a cool opaque green from the glacial dust. It's not long before we got the bird we were looking for, the rare Kittlitz's Murrelet!! We were thrilled to see 15 of this rare glacial fjord specialist as we made the 6 mile journey to the face of the Northwestern Glacier. We floated in front of the glacier for about an hour, watching and photographing Harbor Seals and listening to the glacier popping and cracking, hoping to catch some ice calving off the face. We had three or four calving events and even netted some ice (thousands of years old) to pass around the group.

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 happened upon a nice pod of Killer Whales. The pack swam between us and the



Holgate Glacier, making for stunning photographs. Back inside the waters of Resurrection Bay, we spotted a Humpback Whale feeding along the seaside cliffs. We watched about a 6 feeding cycles before we turned away to get back to Seward on schedule.

After a wonderful full day on the water, we headed back to the hotel for a quick rest and then checklist and dinner out in the historic district of Seward at the Apollo restaurant.

Wednesday, June 11: Alaska Sealife Center | Seward Birding | Anchorage

We had some time this morning before we headed to the Alaska Sealife Center, so we birded the Seward Airport Mudflats. We first birded a small wooded area between the road and the runway. This nice little woodlot had Steller's Jays, Hermit Thrush, Fox and Lincoln Sparrows, and Orange-crowned and Yellow Warblers. Next, we walked right past the end of the runway and headed down the mowed trails toward the mudflats. The remaining tidal pools had a lot of Green-winged Teals working the edges of the ponds and Gadwals and Northern Pintails in the open water. Semipalmated Plovers fed actively on the newly exposed mudflats. Savannah and Lincoln's Sparrows were active in the waist-high vegetation along the meadow trails. A Belted Kingfisher (our first for the trip) made a brief appearance, quickly catching a fish and flying off. The Alaska Sealife Center a remarkable center with wonderful live exhibits of marine mammals, fish, and seabirds. The aviary is quite amazing as we had close up experiences with many of the birds we saw yesterday, both on and below the water.

We stopped at Ava's feeders. Here, the feeding stations are always full of seeds and local birds. We were immediately greeted by a flock 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.

Farther up the road, we stopped at the Bear Creek Weir. Here, the weir is operated in a cooperative project to increase sock-eye and coho salmon runs by releasing millions of young salmon into the system. This fast-moving stream is loaded with Coho Salmon and a viewing place offers a great place to watch management techniques and to see adult fish attempt to leap up the artificial falls. The forested area just downstream of the weir is a delightful walk and a perfect habit for American Dippers, several of which we found here along the creek. We stopped for lunch at Trail Lake Lodge in Moose Pass and birded a bit around Trail Lake before loading up and heading back to Anchorage. Enroute, while driving around Turnagain Arm, we spotted a ram Dall Sheep feeding on the cliffs along the road. Luckily, there was a turnoff parking area and we were able to get out for views and



photographs. Intent on stripping leaves off the trees growing along the cliffs, he worked his way down the cliff, coming quite close to us, before we slowly backed away and loaded back up in the vans.

Back in Anchorage, we settled into our hotel, the Lakefront Anchorage, right on the shores of Lake Spenard, so we went for our last full group bird outing before dinner. Being our last evening together, we spent a lot of time reviewing our trip list, shared our favorite memories and exchanged contact information. Dinner was at the hotel, making for a very comfortable evening and allowing us to easily prep for tomorrow's departures.

Thursday, June 12: Departures

This morning, those that did not fly out early met for breakfast for one last round of comradery before shuttling to the airport.

Our 'Classic Alaska' tour proved to be the perfect exploration of the Last Frontier's diverse ecosystems. Across Anchorage, Nome, and Seward, we delved into temperate rainforests, vast tundra, and magnificent fjords, each offering unique opportunities to witness Alaska's iconic birds and megafauna. The thrill of spotting Bristle-thighed Curlews high on tundra mountain tops, the awe of seeing Humpback and Killer Whales in Resurrection Bay, and the joy of countless close-up birding moments will undoubtedly stay with us. This Naturalist Journeys trip truly highlighted the wild spirit and natural beauty of Alaska, leaving us all eager for our next adventure.

Photos: Group (Greg Butcher - GB), Horned Puffin (John Bartos - JB), Dall Sheep (Barbara Hamilton - BH), Muskox (Mary Matus - MM), Arctic Tern (BH), Black-billed Magpie (BH), Moose (JB), Greater Yellowlegs (BH), Exploring (Cindy Bartos - CB), Lapland Longspur (BH), Long-tailed Jaeger (BH), Short-eared Owl (MM), Nome scenic (CB), Willow Ptarmigan (BH), American Golden-Plover (BH), American Beaver (JB), Bluethroat (JB), Scenic (GB), Tufted Puffin (BH), Scenic (GB), Orca boat ride (BH), Seals (MM), Horned Puffin (JB), Tree Swallow (MM)