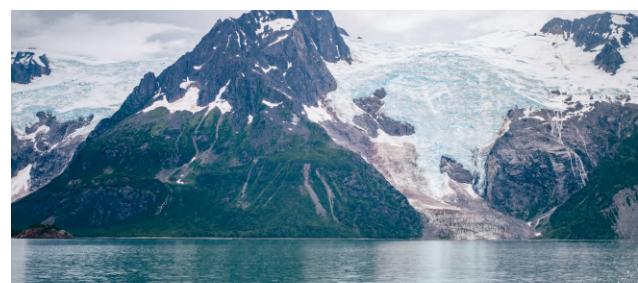


Alaska Sampler: Anchorage, Seward, and Homer

Aug. 11-19, 2025 | Trip Report | by Greg Butcher



Compiled by guides Greg Butcher and Mollee Brown. Our clients included Stacy, Roger, Nick, Nel, Michael, Lora, Diane, Christine, Chris, Betty, and Beth.



August in south-central Alaska can be a bit of a gamble. Three years ago, our group had dark, cloudy weather all week and saw very little songbird activity. This year, we had mostly sunny weather with lots of songbirds, many moths, and one butterfly. We hit the magic 100 species mark! Guaranteed to please in any weather are the all-day trip from Resurrection Bay in Seward to Northwestern Glacier and the flight from Homer to see Brown Bears eating salmon. The scenery throughout is outstanding, with inlets, rivers, lakes, both treed and rocky mountains, and lots of glaciers. It's a good mammal trip from Humpback Whales, Steller Sea Lions, and Dall's Porpoises to moose and Mountain Goats, plus both Sea and River Otters. We saw many salmon on their way to their breeding waters. Seward and Homer are two of the most picturesque seaports imaginable, and we explored both by land and by boat.



Monday, August 11 Arrival in Anchorage | First Seafood Dinner

Most of us arrived on Sunday and had a chance to visit Westchester Lagoon and one or more of Anchorage's museums or unique stores. By staying at the Copper Whale, we could walk to the lagoon and to our first night's dinner at Simon and Seafort's Grill, where most of us had our first taste of Alaskan seafood. Think halibut and salmon! Most of us visited Westchester Lagoon after dinner, where the highlights were a frisky Merlin and baby Greater Scaup and Red-necked Grebes hanging out with their parents.

Tuesday, August 12 Westchester Lagoon | Potter Marsh | Moose Pass / Seward

We returned to the lagoon in the morning and went southwest around the corner to Fish Creek to find our only Arctic Tern for the trip, one of the few Redpolls and Alder Flycatchers, and a pair of Sandhill Cranes. The Merlin put on a great show! The dowitchers were too far away to identify to species, but we had both yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper, and Semipalmated Plover. We had Bonaparte's and an American Herring Gull among the Short-billed (formerly called Mew) Gulls. We could see Denali in the distance, but it was much clearer yesterday for the folks who visited then. A River Otter was a big bonus here! Potter Marsh is only a bit south of Anchorage, and it was very productive. The highlights were many Wilson's Snipes and 13 species of songbirds, including a flyover Rusty Blackbird. We missed the nesting Bald Eagles, but we were able to find a few (!) on the rest of the trip. After the marsh, we had a bit of a drive to lunch at Trail Lake Lodge in Moose Pass. After lunch, we stopped at Bear Creek Weir to see all the salmon lined up to jump the low waterfall. I was surprised to see a Glaucous-winged Gull along the heavily wooded stream apparently attracted by the dying salmon. In Seward, we drove to Waterfall Beach to get our first glimpse of Resurrection Bay and the Seward Harbor. More than a hundred Black-legged Kittiwakes were there to greet us, along with our first Pelagic Cormorants, Pigeon Guillemots, and Marbled Murrelets. We saw a lot of birds at the Seward Airport Mudflats, but nothing new. South-central Alaskans aren't used to having pigeons around, but we saw them in Anchorage, Seward, and Homer, so I think they are there to stay! Dinner at Ray's Waterfront, another of Alaska's great seafood restaurants.



Wednesday, August 13

Resurrection Bay to Northwestern Glacier

As I mentioned on Facebook, this boat trip competes for the best 8.5 hours in nature! Here's why: At 8:30, we wound our way through Seward's crowded harbor, filled with Black-legged Kittiwakes and some Glaucous-winged Gulls. We cruised through the fjord with green, rocky, and glaciated mountains on both sides. It wasn't long before we started seeing puffins, first Horned, then Tufted. The captain of the boat was a gem; he knew where all the birds and mammals hung out and got us close. One of the hardest was the Red-faced Cormorant, but at least one flew out as we approached (and we found one sunning on a close rock later). Soon after, he eased the boat close to a group of four Parakeet Auklets and then a few Black Oystercatchers. He also found a nearby Mountain Goat (and a Fox Sparrow!) to show us. As we got into more open water, we started cruising by flock after flock of Rhinoceros Auklets (considered by some to be honorary puffins). We were able to follow a Humpback Whale and see it surface at least four times. We had a few Ancient Murrelets dive in front of the boat, and we closely approached a Short-billed Shearwater that did not want to fly. When it finally did, Mollee got a photo that showed why – its wings and tail were both in full molt with some missing feathers and many others that weren't fully grown. We turned a corner when we were close to Northwestern Glacier, and it felt like the temperature dropped 10 degrees. Harbor Seals covered small icebergs close to the glacier. At least once a minute, there was a crashing sound as ice dropped from the glacier into the water. The rewards for the birders were the Kittlitz's Murrelets that were found only close to the glacier. On the return trip, we saw many Steller Sea Lions in the Chiswell Islands. Open water produced a Sooty Shearwater, a pair of Leach's Storm-Petrels, a flock of four Red-necked Phalaropes, and two surprising Black Turnstones flying over the boat. Two different pods of Dall's Porpoises joined the boat to swim with us next to the bow – we could almost touch them below us! On the return, we watched Seward and its harbor grow gradually in the distance. The captain slowed down so we could get close looks at one of the many Sea Otters floating on its back. We had endured a few rain showers, but they lasted perhaps a half-hour of the trip. The sea was very smooth throughout, so all-in-all, a very successful trip. We ate dinner at Apollo's Restaurant, which sounds Greek but seems more Italian.



Thursday, August 14 Alaska Sea Life Center | Anchor Point | Homer

We started this morning at Lowell Point State Recreation Site, where we had a pleasant walk through the northern limit of the Pacific rainforest (that continues south into California). Unfortunately, we only heard the Varied Thrush, but we enjoyed the flock of Chestnut-backed Chickadees near the northern edge of their range. Pacific Wren, Steller's Jay, Brown Creepers, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and American Red Squirrels rewarded us for our early morning hike. Afterwards, we were off for two hours in the incomparable Alaska Sea Life Center, where they have large exhibits with a wide variety of seabirds and marine mammals, as well as fish and marine invertebrates. We could watch swimming seals and sea lions and get close to both Horned and Tufted Puffins, plus eiders that were too far north in summertime for us to see in the wild, including King, Steller's, and Spectacled Eiders. Center staff recommended Zudy's Café nearby, so we enjoyed an early lunch there before the relatively long drive to Homer. En route, we stopped at Anchor River State Recreation Area and enjoyed birds by the edge of Cook Inlet. We didn't find any new birds, but we definitely enjoyed the break from the drive. The highlight for me was watching a piece of heavy equipment being driven down to the beach to haul a couple of fishing boats out of the water – a way to launch and retrieve boats without a dock. We heard a lot of oohs and aahs as folks saw their quarters at Lands' End at the tip of the Homer Spit (five miles east of Homer). Everyone had a seaside view with the constant passage of boats and birds plus floating Sea Otters. (Homer calls itself the halibut fishing capital of the world.) More oohs and aahs during dinner at The Chart Room restaurant, featuring – you guessed it – seafood! (We had one participant who didn't like seafood, but I think she found good meals everywhere.)

Friday, August 15 Brown Bear Bay or Wynn Nature Center | Boat Harbor

Eight of us flew to bears while five of us hiked and visited birds near Homer. After a short flight, the bear group had close-up sightings, photos, and videos of a Brown Bear cavorting and devouring a salmon at Brown Bear Bay. They enjoyed our only flocks of White-fronted Geese. At the same time, the hiking group visited the East End of Beluga Lake, where we just missed two moose, but saw Boreal Chickadees, both kinglets, and our only American Robin of the tour. We had a pretty hike in Wynn Nature Center with a great volume and variety of wildflowers, Canada and Steller's Jays, ravens, more Boreal Chickadees and kinglets, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, two Hermit Thrushes, a junco, and Golden-crowned and Lincoln's Sparrows. Lunch was at Wild



Honey Café, which featured delicious savory crepes. Reunited later in the afternoon, we walked to the boat harbor to immerse ourselves in an unusual Black-legged Kittiwake rookery – unusual for being on the mainland, not an island, and for having most of the nests on docks and other human infrastructure. While driving to dinner, we first noted a camera, then a telescope, pointed in the same direction. We screeched to the side of the road (very carefully, of course) to enjoy a nearby bull moose casually foraging in the field near the road. We finally made it to AJ's Oldtown Steakhouse, which sounds like a change of pace, but being in Homer, there was plenty of seafood on the menu in addition to the steaks.

Saturday, August 16 Mariner Park | Gull Island | Halibut Cove

Homer Spit is a great place for shorebirds, but you have to time the tide right. Either we timed it right or got lucky at Mariner Park Lagoon where we found Semipalmated Plovers, both species of yellowlegs, and three species of peeps – Least, Semipalmated, and Western Sandpipers – along with the usual gulls. On the other side of the spit, we had Harlequin Ducks and White-winged Scotters. We revisited the East End of Beluga Lake and picked up our only two swallows of the trip (Violet-green) and a beautiful, mostly cooperative pair of White-winged Crossbills. The afternoon featured a leisurely trip to Halibut Cove on the Danny J, a small boat that fits about 35 people. En route, we passed by Gull Island where we reconnected with several of the nesting seabirds from Seward – Pelagic Cormorant, Black Oystercatcher, Tufted and Horned Puffins, Marbled Murrelet, and Pigeon Guillemot. The biggest difference was the predominance of Common Murres here; I counted 200, but I'm sure I didn't count them all. The numbers of all nesting seabirds are down here compared with previous years because the island has been discovered by Bald Eagles, which are happy to eat birds (mostly young ones) in addition to fish. Halibut Cove is a beautiful slice of maritime Alaska, with a great lunch at The Saltry. After lunch, we took a walk on the island's long boardwalk; our reward was a flock of 16 Harlequin Ducks in a bay on the other side. Unfortunately, the return featured higher winds and swells, so not everyone was 100% on our return. Most of us enjoyed a surprisingly good dinner at the funky-looking Twisted Goat in town.



Sunday, August 17 Beluga Lake – East End | Anchor Point | Kasilof River Mouth

Today featured the long drive back to Anchorage. To break it up, we included two stops along Cook Inlet. The first stop was a return to Anchor River State Recreation Area. Much to our surprise, the parking lot was almost full – it was Sunday and the sun was shining, so all the fishermen were out! There were mostly gulls onshore, but the seabirding was good: Harlequins and White-wings again, plus lots of Pacific and Common Loons. We enjoyed our last look at floating Sea Otters. Kasilof River Mouth was a pleasant contrast; fewer people and lots more shorebirds. We were all surprised by a flock of 11 Sandhill Cranes feeding in saltwater at the edge of a beach. Our next surprise was a cooperative American Pipit on a close railing. Good things come in threes, so we all enjoyed a breeding plumage Red-throated Loon. We were visited by a flock of 8 Golden Plovers, seven of which were in bright golden nonbreeding plumage. We are pretty confident that there were both American and Pacific in the flock, but the key traits are hard to see well. It was our only 10-shorebird site! We had a sleepy Whimbrel that showed its relatively short-for-a-Whimbrel, but decurved, beak just enough for a positive ID. A Sanderling flew overhead, we had good looks at a Baird's Sandpiper, and a group of 3 Black Turnstones landed on the beach for our best views and photos of the trip. Unfortunately, the Sunday crowds all went to Acapulco Mexican for lunch in Soldotna, so we returned to Anchorage later than planned. Luckily, dinner was in the hotel, so we all got to bed at a reasonable hour.

Monday, August 18 Eagle River Nature Center | Palmer Hay Flats

Roger led an early morning outing on Lake Spenard, but I didn't get a full report on what they saw. After breakfast, we all headed north. At Eagle River Nature Center, most of the river access was off-limits, either to protect us from bears eating salmon, or more likely, to protect the bears from us. The one riverside viewing platform was in the middle of one of the best-built beaver dams I've ever seen. From there, we saw a Barrow's Goldeneye family, a Common Merganser, and a Belted Kingfisher. Christie was not to be denied, so one of the many white spots on the adjacent mountains really was a Mountain Goat. Another surprising addition to the mammal list was a Masked Shrew that continued foraging just a couple of feet away from us. The birds were quiet, but the woods were pretty, and the mountains reminded us that it was our last full day in Alaska. At Reflections Lake in Palmer Hay Flats State Game Reserve, the most interesting mammals were the dogs being trained. We added our last new bird for the trip – an immature White-crowned Sparrow. Dinner was at Orso, another fabulous Anchorage seafood restaurant.



Tuesday, August 19 Departures

Three of us took off on the Alaska Railroad's Denali Star, two flew to see the Anthropology Museum in Vancouver, British Columbia, and the rest headed home. We had four early departures, but the rest of us enjoyed a final buffet breakfast at The Lakefront Hotel near the Anchorage airport. The views from the airport continued to be impressive!

Photos: Group (Mollee Brown - MB), Alaskan Brown Bear (MB), Sea Lions (Beth Potter - BP), Yellow Warbler (BP), Scenic (MB), Sandhill Crane (Chris Unsworth - CU), Belted Kingfisher (CU), Birding (MB), Tufted Puffin (CU), Birding Resurrection Bay (MB), Gull (BP), Sea Otter (BP), Bald Eagle (CU), Alaskan Brown Bear (MB), Exploring by Boat (MB), Scenic (MB), Chestnut-backed Chickadee (CU), Lesser Scaup (CU), Roger (Lora Reynolds), Group Exploring (Greg Butcher), Alaskan Brown Bear (BP)