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## Alaska

**4 June – 14 June 2014**

***With Nome Pre-Extension***

**30 May – 4 June**

Extension: Greg Smith, guide with Rick & Carole, Eddie & Carol

Main Tour: Greg Smith & Kelly Vandenheuvel guides, with participants: Christine & Alex, Stephen & Karen, Ginny & Sandy, Julie & John, Carole & Rick, and Randy



### **Saturday, 31 May**    *Off to Nome*

Those of us heading north to Nome took the shuttle to ANC and then boarded our flight. The previous day's flight had been cancelled because of weather, so the usual combi-plane for this flight had been replaced with a standard B737. It was a full flight, but it was only a 75-minutes long and we were on the ground by noon.

After collecting our bags, we headed over to the Aurora Inn, checked into our rooms and then walked across the street for a quick sandwich and a Bonaparte's Gull. It was sunny and time to go birding...

We headed to the harbor just to see who was floating on the incoming tide. Common Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Arctic Tern and a single Herring Gull were mixed in with the ubiquitous Mew and Glaucous Gulls.

Next we headed towards Anvil Mountain and the Muskox we had seen on our flight into Nome. We did find a large herd behind the emergency services building and took some time to observe them as they browsed into the wind. They didn't seem the least bit perturbed, which is not surprising given they regularly forage in people's yards. It was nice to have them so close...



Snow prevented us from reaching the top of the mountain, but there is a plateau a little lower down that gave us looks out to King Island. We also got to see our first Gray-cheeked Thrush, along with a pair of soaring Long-tailed Jaegers and the soon to be ubiquitous Golden-crowned Sparrow.

Heading down the hill and to the harbor for one more quick check of the harbor where we added a pair of Long-tailed Ducks to our

list. Then it was time for dinner at Airport Express....

### **Sunday, 1 June      *Safety Sound/ Council Road***

Birding in Nome is all about the weather and when you should explore certain roads. Today it was cloudy inland towards the mountains, so we headed along the coast and Safety Sound. We checked the Nome River estuary, but because of the high tide and the abundant snowmelt, everything was underwater. That just meant we would look through some small ponds just south of the river and see if anything had collected there.

Nesting Red-throated Loon, displaying Semi-palmated Sandpiper and a Pomarine Jaeger were using the ponds for different reasons and giving us great looks! We drove towards Cape Nome passing between very large snowdrifts and this is where you always look for redpolls. And sure enough we had both species!

Cape Nome had White-winged Scoter, Black Brant and Common Murre flocks buzzing by. A N. Harrier cruised the top of the slope as we headed into Safety Sound country. Lots of peeps nesting in the tundra, but that low tide that had filled the Nome River, also filled Safety Sound. That didn't prevent us from seeing Tundra Swans and numerous other species' of waterfowl, but shorebirds had moved on...

When we turned inland towards Council we had more redpolls and jaegers, but our goal now were the different raptors. We checked three different Gyrfalcon nests from previous years and two had been abandoned and one taken over by Common Ravens. The one Rough-legged Hawk nest was also abandoned; it was not a good year for raptors.

We continued on towards Council up and over Skookum Pass and then into the spruce forest. We heard and caught glimpses of Varied Thrush, Boreal Chickadee and Blackpoll Warbler. We had made it to the end of the road and it was time to head back. We did see two Moose on the way back, but nothing different in the way of birds. That was a fun eleven hours of birding...

**Monday, 2 June Kougatok Road**

The Kougatok was partly cloudy this morning so we made the drive inland. First stop was the landfill with only Common Ravens and Glaucous Gulls. Lots of the usual passerines until we got about twenty miles inland, where we found two of our day's seven Bluethroats. Both were doing aerial displays in just the habitat you would expect them before alighting on the top of a willow. We were entranced by that stunning little thrush.

Now it seemed that there was an American Robin, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Fox Sparrow or Gray-cheeked Thrush on the tops of alternating shrubs, all singing their hearts out. Even with all the snow and ice, they were ready to nest.

We checked two more Gyrfalcon eyries and one of a Golden Eagle, all unused. We did eventually see a couple of eagles further up the road...



Pacific Loons on Salmon Lake, Black Scoter on tundra ponds, Willow Ptarmigan along the road and lots of dramatic scenery, a typical drive on the Kougatok. But we were headed to Coffee Dome to look for the Bristle-thighed Curlew. We had seen and heard Whimbrel, so now it was the curlew's turn to put in an appearance.

It is not an easy hike up the side of Coffee Dome, what with tussocks surrounded by water everywhere. So we started the forty-five minute hike up the hill under a high overcast,

which helped keep the temps down. We hadn't hiked for ten minutes when all of a sudden a curlew pops up in front of us doing a broken wing act! We had apparently stumbled close enough to a nest to cause the bird to conduct its distraction display. We spent about two or three minutes watching the

bird and then headed downhill. This was certainly the easiest and best look any of us had had of the curlew on Coffee Dome!



When we started back, we stopped at Pilgrim Hot Springs, an orphanage that was created during the flu epidemic of 1917. Lots of abandoned buildings that seem to be poised for restoration by one of the local Inupiaq companies. We did find hundreds of redpolls feeding on the alders that lined the road and also found Greater Yellowlegs and Rusty Blackbird in the wetlands. This was our last trip into the hot springs as now everything is posted “No Trespassing”.

We made some stops along the way back for Moose and the two different species of golden plover and also rechecked the eyries in case we just didn’t see the Gyrfalcons, but

no luck. Then we headed back to Nome after a very successful day of birding...

**Tuesday, 3 June      *Teller Road***

Teller Road is always interesting as you just never know what you are going to find. It was overcast for the entire day, but that just made it seem that the birds were staying lower in the sky. We birded Penny River where we had American Waterthrush, Blackpoll, and Yellow Warblers. Numerous other passerines and a group of three bull Muskox.

Long-tailed Jaegers were thick and this was where we started to regularly find Rock Ptarmigan. We were headed to Woolly Lagoon and made it to the turnoff after three hours of birding. The road down to

Woolly Lagoon is one of the best to find the three large nesting plovers on Seward Peninsula. Black-bellied Plovers use the rocky tundra where black and green colored lichens cover flat rocks making it almost impossible to find a bird sitting on its nest. The American and Pacific Golden Plovers use the more grassy areas to nest. And just to make it four equal-sized birds, Ruddy Turnstones utilize the interface between the grass and rocky areas for their nests.



We were looking forward to the lagoon for shorebirds and waterfowl, but when we saw the heavy equipment and culverts we realized the lagoon had been temporarily drained for construction.

So we headed onto Teller passing herds of reindeer and more plovers. Teller had some peeps, different waterfowl and a number of Yellow Wagtails. We drove as far as we could on land so we could scope the open sea, that is when we realized our 75-mile drive northwest was just enough distance to preclude the pack ice from melting. We saw lots of harbor seals and pups on the ice which was totally cool, but not much in the ways of birds.

We did get good looks at Sandhill Cranes on the way back, but really nothing new in the way of birds. It was time for another visit to Airport Express where they really do have the freshest salads in town and some very interesting pizza combinations. Oh, and a reasonable wine list and some really great beers on tap!

### **Wednesday, 4 June Arrivals to Anchorage for the MAIN ALASKA SAMPLER TOUR**

Greg Smith & Kelly Vandenheuvel guides, with participants: Christine & Alex, Stephen & Karen, Ginny & Sandy, Julie & John, Carole & Rick, and Randy



All of us arrived today, and celebrated the beginning of our journey with a welcome dinner at Simon and Seaforts! Halibut Cheeks Piccata was the most requested meal and one of the tastiest! The weather was looking very good for the start of our Alaska Sampler Tour...

### **Thursday, 5 June Anchorage**

We had a relatively easy start to the day to give everyone a chance to catch up from their flights north to Alaska. We headed out the door of the Copper Whale and walked down to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. This multi-use trail stretches along the edge of Cook Inlet with views of mudflats, the open water and snow etched mountains on the opposite shore. Coastal lagoons dot the shore mixed in with assorted homes and vegetated slopes. Some saw a River Otter cavorting in the channel the day before, but not today. We did find some interesting nesting birds: A pair of Bald Eagles who were constantly harassed by the nesting Mew Gulls, a pair of nesting Red-necked Grebe, and Arctic Tern. Spring had definitely sprung here in the Anchorage area!

Singing passerines included: Orange-crowned Warbler, White-crowned Sparrow, and American Robin. Usually this stretch of coast has singing Alder Flycatcher, but not this year.

After a rooftop lunch at a local rooftop brewery, we headed over to the Anchorage Museum with its superb interpretation of all things Alaska. We had a 7AM departure on our shuttle to Denali, so most everyone made it an early night...

Friday, 6 June

## Denali Bound



We had to be at our shuttle location by 6:45 and we were. We boarded our Alaska Tour and Travel bus to Denali and headed north with that sense of anticipation. Denali is a wildlife and scenic showcase wrapped up into one giant park. We were going to meet the folks from North Face Lodge at the train station and start our over eighty-eight mile ride into the park.

After getting our luggage packed we boarded the bus for our drive. Passing the braided rivers that make up so much of Denali, we entered grassland and

mossy habitat favored by Caribou. We ended up seeing a few of the 2100 member herd grazing the tundra. It was still too early for the hordes of mosquitos to appear, so the herd spreads out through the park.

Next there were Dall Sheep, numerous small female-based herds of this all white sheep were above the road. They were making their way to higher elevations as the snow melted, exploring newly exposed grasses and experiencing cooler temperatures. In the fall they would reverse this route and descend to lower elevations.

We stopped for our picnic dinner where we were we would be treated to homemade breads, jams and pickles. With numerous meats and cheeses, nobody would go hungry. But a couple of amorous Grizzly Bears had other plans. No sooner had the North Face crew unloaded and laid out all the food, when the bears showed up heading straight for the buffet. The order to get back on the bus and the subsequent deconstruction of the buffet and placement back on the bus was done in tens of seconds.



With the bears marching through the lunch site, we realized we were not going to eat for at least another hour and we were only halfway to our destination, so it was time to move.

We found Moose, Northern Harrier, Long-tailed Duck, and Black Scoter as we wound our way deeper into the park. But the highlight had to be the eight different bears starting with those two at our picnic. There were different-colored animals, with the most common being the Toklat Grizzly Bear morph. It is an all blonde animal except for its four legs, which are a very dark, chocolate brown.



We passed the Muldrow Glacier and then made the turn north along Wonder Lake. We were only a few miles from the lodge and when we arrived, (which was an hour later given Yogi and Bobo at our picnic...) we gathered in the main room for dessert and a little introduction to our stay at the lodge. No sighting of the mountain this night as it was shrouded in clouds, even though we were sitting in the late-evening sun...

#### **Saturday, 7 June      Denali National Park**

You can't say you got up at first light here because it never gets dark. So folks woke up at all sorts of hours and starting at four AM. And starting at that early hour "The Great One" was cloud free and remained that way for the next seven hours. What a treat to wake up on our first day and see the highest mountain in North America. That does not happen too often...

At North Face Lodge every meal is an original recipe and deliciously prepared, a very fine way to start off our morning. The Lodge offers three different levels of naturalist led hikes: foray, moderate and strenuous. Our group broke up and went our separate ways based on our desired exercise level. Given the stunning weather and outstanding views, everyone would be enjoying views of Denali.



More Grizzly Bears and Moose, lots of different waterfowl, shorebirds, passerines, alpine plants just starting to bloom and that overwhelmingly huge mountain. Just a stunning day for all of us in the field, and this was followed up with fresh Copper River sockeye salmon done to perfection...

**Sunday, 8 June Denali National Park**

This is the day where all of us, whether going out on the foray or the more distant hikes, drove back into the park for 20 -30 miles. Covering more territory always provides for more wildlife and scenic opportunities. No, the “mountain” wasn’t too visible today, that was yesterday’s treat.



Today we would visit Eielson Visitor Center and head further east from there. After taking the time to photograph three more Grizzly Bears, we pulled over to do a little birding. And then is when we finally got to see a Gyrfalcon, it was sitting on top of a rocky point. We just barely got a look in the scope when it took flight and flew directly at us and then only to interact with another flying Gyrfalcon. Pretty cool seeing just how fast these feathered missiles can fly through the air.

After Eielson, we found two sleeping Grizzly Bears on the side of the road, then a small group of caribou grazing along the roadside. And when we decided it was just about time to turn around, we pulled over for a short hike. This was up a roadside hill covered with spring wildflowers. Azalea, Colt’s foot, Forget-me-nots and many more covered the hillside. Summer maybe a short season here, but it isn’t any less prolific in wildflowers than the lower forty-eight.

On the way back we had a couple of more Grizzly Bears with one actually napping on the road when rounded a corner. Then it was back to the lodge in time for dinner and another great talk by Scott Weidensaul, this time about bird migration.

**Monday, 9 June Return to Anchorage**

Today was an early one. We had to leave North Face Lodge and head to the Denali train depot for our return to Anchorage. And we needed all the time we could get so that when we saw wildlife, we would have the opportunity to take some time and observe.

This was the year of the Grizzly Bear for the Alaska Sampler as we saw more heading out of the park, a total of twenty in four days. We



also got to see a group of adult male Dall sheep feeding right alongside the bus. But it was those puffy,

white cumulus clouds with snow-clad peaks and patches of blue sky that stole the show. Everywhere we looked it was a patchwork of earth/sky drama. And the ride ended far too quickly as we pulled into the station.

It was a leisurely eight-hour ride into ANC, but there was plenty to see. Tundra Swan, Black Bear, Moose, odd-looking man-made structures, wild rivers moving so fast you thought the world was ending. It was non-stop scenery, so much so that it seemed over all too quickly as we pulled into the station where Kelly was waiting for us. We got our baggage, hopped into the vans and were back at the Copper Whale in minutes. We all considered this a nice day.

### **Tuesday, 10 June      *Heading to Homer***

After a leisurely breakfast we loaded everything into the vehicles and headed out towards Homer. The day was overcast and dreary, but the weather forecast said it would clear by the afternoon. Our first stop was Potter Marsh, a wetland along Turnagain Arm, complete with elevated boardwalks for birding. We took the time to watch nesting Tree Swallows, displaying Greater Yellowlegs and feeding waterfowl.

The highlights of the stop were all the Arctic Terns and their aerial acrobatics. From diving and capturing fish to offering it to their mate, these long distance travelers were in the midst of courtship and it was a treat to watch them in action. But we had some distance to cover, so off we went to Homer.

The weather was clearing and the winds were beginning to blow, but by the time we got into our lodge they had dissipated into a slight breeze. Good thing as were about to get on a boat for a ride over to

Halibut Cove.



Clem was 89 years young and had been captaining his boat for decades. Those lucky enough to sit in the wheelhouse were regaled with stories of his life. Those lucky enough to sit outside were treated to spectacular views of the glacier-covered mountains of Kenai National Park. We slipped into the quiet waters of Halibut Cove and had some time to shop the different galleries and then sit down for an incredibly tasty meal with amazing desserts...

### **Wednesday, 10 June      *Homer: Birding, Hiking & the Pratt***

Today we split up into two groups, one going hiking and the rest going birding. Both groups got to see different parts of the countryside around Homer, especially that view across the bay. New birds and new experiences for everyone and then we met for lunch. The rest of the afternoon was spent at the Pratt Museum for an opportunity to learn about the history of Homer and Alaska.

We finished off the day with a very tasty meal at Wasabi's. The meal was outstanding, but the view of Kachemak Bay and the Harding Ice Field was even more amazing!

**Thursday, 11 June**

**Seward & the Sealife Center**

After breakfast on the shore of Kachemak Bay, we got on the road headed to Seward. We were headed to Kenai to visit the oldest Russian Orthodox church in North America, an incredibly small church with a capacity of 30 – maybe. Apparently we got there at just the right time, as we were told in two hours the Bishop for this part of the state was coming to bless a small gift shop addition to the complex. We spent a small amount of time listening to our interpreter before folks for the event started showing up. Next stop was Starbuck's as we had a couple of hours of driving to Seward ahead of us.



We made Seward and the Resurrection Roadhouse just in time (again) for lunch. We had called ahead with our orders, as there really isn't anyplace to eat between Homer and Seward. Our lunch was waiting.

Our last stop for the day was the Alaska Sealife Center, an introduction to all things in the ocean around us. From fishing, to wildlife, to birds and whales, this is an excellent venue for interpreting what we would see the next day in Resurrection Bay...

**Friday, 12 June Kenai Fjords National Park**

Oh, it was a little cloudy with some drizzle this morning, probably not unusual for Seward, but definitely the first time on the Alaska Sampler tour. And while picking up the boarding passes they said the seas had picked up outside of Resurrection Bay. What that meant is that we would not be making it out to the Chiswell Islands or the Northwestern Glacier. But Kenai Fjords Tours did have a backup plan, so out we went.

Just out of the harbor we spotted Harlequin Duck, Marbled Murrelet, and Northern Sea Otter, and then we were surrounded by a pod of Dall's Porpoise and then small groups of Tufted and Horned Puffins. Mountain Goat were browsing up on the slopes of the sheer cliffs, Bald Eagle were like so many ornaments on holiday trees and then there were the humpback whales...



With the seas being eleven feet, the Captain was probably a little bit surprised when he asked if folks were willing to make a fifteen-minute crossing of the choppy Alaskan waters and the answer was yes.

This still wouldn't get us to the Northwestern Glacier or the Chiswell Islands, but it would get us to the Holgate Glacier! SO we were instructed to take a seat and not get up until the Captain said it was okay. A quarter of an hour later and we were on the smooth waters of Aialak Bay.



Yes we saw Rhinoceros Auklets and more Marbled Murrelets, and even got some flying away glances at Kittlitz's Murrelet, but it was the glacier that put on the show. The sound of centuries-old ice groaning under its own weight followed by the crashing of pulverized ice hitting the water. This went on for the whole time we were there, just mesmerizing. It didn't seem to bother the female Harbor Seals with their pups, so it must have been a very regular occurrence.

We did eventually leave the bay and made the open ocean crossing again to some Black-legged Kittiwake nesting colonies. Mixed in with these birds were Common Murre, and the two puffins. We did get to see Steller's Sea Lions, a Red-faced Cormorant, and nesting Glaucous Gulls. Thousands and thousands of seabirds thrilled us, and then it was time to head back to port. That journey was interrupted by some incredibly delicious, fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies...

We had our farewell dinner at Ray's this evening and talked about all we had seen and experienced in Alaska. We also talked about the macadamia-encrusted halibut we had for dinner. A fitting end to our fourteen day Alaska Sampler tour...

**Saturday, 13 June Flights Home**

It was our last drive together. Some were going to stay an extra day or two in Alaska while others had flights, so we headed to the airport and said our goodbyes...



*Tour Report and Photos by Greg Smith.*