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## Alaska Sampler Trip Report

June 5 – 24, 2015

Guide: Greg Smith

With participants: Jim, Kathleen, Carol, Rob, Judy, Maggie, Sunday, Pat,  
Katherine, Robert, Dave, Nancy and Penny



**Friday, June 5 – Tuesday, June 9 Nome**

We arrived in Alaska with four full days and three roads out of Nome; our journey began with ample birding opportunities. Over the next five days, we would do the Kougarok, then Council and finally Teller Road.



With half a day on our arrival, we headed out towards Safety Sound where we found a unique natural phenomenon underway. The hooligans were running! This small species of fish were coming right up to the beach. And when they were in the shallow water they were fair game to hundreds of Black-legged Kittiwake, different gulls and their accompanying jaegers. The kittiwakes and gulls would plunge into the water right at the shoreline and surface with one or two hooligans in their bills. And then, the chase was on for any of the three jaegers wanting to pilfer a free meal.

Our days on the Kougarok started with lots of old friends: Gray-cheeked Thrush, Willow Ptarmigan, Golden-crowned Sparrow and those redpolls. As if on cue, the Salmon Lake Campground had Bluethroat, and Curlew Hill across from Coffee Dome had the requisite Bristle-thighed Curlew. Not a bad first day!

Next we headed up towards Council (we did this two different days). Birds on this road included both Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Common and Spectacled Eiders, many Lapland Longspur, more of the hooligan feeding frenzy, Gyrfalcon, Varied Thrush, Northern Wheatear and a grizzly. The diversity of habitat we traveled through definitely expanded the diversity of species we saw.



Teller was the third of the long roads and it has its own micro-habitats. Our highlights included four plover species: American Golden-, Pacific Golden-, Black-bellied and Semipalmated. The first three species were on the same hillside! Long-tailed Jaeger cruised the soft tundra skies, while Long-tailed Duck fed nearby in some of the ponds. Teller was not as birdy as the other two roads, but offered some great wildflowers and unique birds. It is also a striking location on an extended rock and sand spit.

We spent some time exploring town and exploring minor backroads. Musk Ox, Short-eared Owl and other species fill these small habitat blocks and provide some diversity to the three longer roads out of Nome. By far, the finest looking bird (and it is pretty common) is the Red-throated Loon — absolutely striking!

### Wednesday, June 10 Anchorage

All of us in Nome took the morning flight back to Anchorage, where we met up and celebrated with the folks who flew into ANC for the start of the Main tour at our welcome dinner at Simon and Seafort's. A

great meal and great company, and the weather was heading to something above sixty degrees. We were off to a great start.

#### **Thursday, June 11 Anchorage**

We took the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail along the edge of Cook Inlet where we got great looks at Alder Flycatcher, Orange-crowned Warbler and American Wigeon. We also got to see Hudsonian Godwit foraging along the edge of the inlet. We then made our way to Westchester Lagoon where we got to see nesting Red-necked Grebe, Cackling Goose and Arctic Tern. We had a respectable list of 29 species in three hours before we headed off to lunch at the Snow Goose and Sleeping Lady Brewery.



We spent the afternoon at the Anchorage Museum, one of the two finest museums in Alaska, before heading back to dinner and packing for our ride up to Denali in the morning.

#### **Friday, June 12 – Monday, June 15 North to Denali**

Our early-morning shuttle to Denali waited about three blocks from our hotel and by 7:00 AM we were on the road. Some construction made the drive a little longer, but we arrived with plenty of time to board the North Face Lodge bus.



Our drive into Denali National Park got us great looks at grizzly, wolf, Dall Sheep and stunning scenery. This morning in Denali found a snowstorm that left six inches on most of the park, a very different view than we would see in the coming days. The top of the mountain wasn't visible, but so many of the smaller peaks and their slopes stood out against the blue sky in the late afternoon sun. A picnic dinner on the road in was a treat, and so was turning that last corner and finding the welcome staff of NFL waiting for us with dessert and coffee. We had arrived.

The next two days saw us taking field trips to different parts of the park based on how much exercise you wanted to incorporate into your day. Some took strenuous hikes, while others opted for more moderate hikes. The rest of the folks took a different route, heading out for short, bus-based hikes into the tundra. They got a more intimate look into the plants and some of the wildlife found in the park. But one thing everyone got to see for the two days was The Mountain: Denali. Stunning views from every viewpoint were the highlight of the days for all of us — what a treat!

Sightings of more grizzly, ptarmigan, Caribou, Bufflehead and Short-eared Owl during our days in the field only added to the wonderfully stunning views of the Alaska Range and Denali. A drive to the end of the western-most road in North America put us in the Kantishna area, an area of the park that had been part of the Alaska gold rush. There was plenty to experience.



Monday was our last day in this wonderful setting in Denali National Park and Preserve before we headed to the railroad depot. Beyond enjoying the scenery and the wildlife on our drive out, we were all wondering if the train would be able to make the run south to Anchorage. The Willows Fire had closed the Parks Highway and was burning on both sides of the tracks. When we left the station, we had a fire fighting team on board and we were told we would have to go at a very slow speed through

the fire area. This was to prevent damage to the rails and to be able to stop in case there was damage to the rails from the fire. Sure enough, when we rolled slowly through the fire area, there were smoldering areas and small patches of flames being tended by firefighters right at the edge of the tracks. Our normal eight-hour train trip to ANC took us just under twelve hours, but we did make it. Thankfully we were in the upgrade car! We also managed to see Black Bear, Moose and plenty of Trumpeter Swan.

### **Tuesday, June 16 To Homer**

A new day and a new fire to contend with along our drive to Homer on the Sterling Highway. The good news was that the fire was south of the highway and the winds were blowing from the north. Fires are



atypical for June, normally something to watch for later in the season. We had a later start than normal given our late arrival on the train, but were still able to bird Potter Marsh where nesting Cackling Goose, Greater Yellowlegs and Arctic Tern gave us great looks!

After lunch at the Bake Shop in Girdwood, we took the afternoon for our drive to Homer. A Harlan's Hawk was the highlight of the drive, along with more moose. It was good to settle into Land's End Resort, which put us amidst the beautiful and placid waters of Kachemak Bay.

### **Wednesday, June 17 Homer**

After breakfast we headed to the hills above Homer for some woodland birding. We had great looks at Sandhill Crane, and then stopped at the Carl Wynn Nature Center where we saw Varied Thrush and both

Townsend's and Blackpoll Warblers. We had lunch planned for Halibut Cove, so we headed down the hill and back out to the Homer Spit.

Noon was when we left the harbor aboard the *Danny J* and motored towards Gull Island. Gull Island hosts about 16,000 nesting seabirds, ranging from puffins to Black-legged Kittiwake. Throw in a few thousand Common Murre and a few Red-faced Cormorant and it was a treat to be out on the very calm waters of Kachemak Bay.

Next was our lunch stop at The Saltry in picturesque Halibut Cove. A wonderful meal in in 80-degree temps made for a special experience on this island. We then had time to walk the boardwalks that rim the island and spend time birding and wandering through the various art galleries. The ride back was just as calm and allowed us to enjoy the birds and the stunning glaciers of the Harding Icefield.



#### Thursday, June 18 To Seward

After breakfast we began our drive to Seward. We could see the smoke from the fire burning near the Sterling Highway, the only drivable route out of this part of Alaska. As we got closer we discovered that the only effect of the fire was low smoke on the highway, but not enough to close the road.

We made it to the Resurrection Roadhouse in time for lunch, with only a ten-minute drive left to town. After lunch we drove to the Alaska SeaLife Center, which is a treasure of information on all things natural history in the Seward area. But the hidden highlight that we just didn't expect to see was the alcid and waterfowl aviary for rehabbed birds. These are birds that cannot be released back into their appropriate habitat, but still go through courtship and nesting as if in the wild. It was really a treat to see them in their nuptial plumage at such a close range! Photography is fun here, evidenced by the close-up shot of this Smew!



We finished the day with the always-tasty dinners served at Ray's on the Waterfront in Seward.

#### Friday, June 19 Seward NW Glacier

Today brought some clouds, but no rain, and that was how the day started and finished. And without any wind, it meant we would have flat seas, and we did! This made for great views of whales, nesting

puffins, kittiwakes, murres and gulls. Soft, diffused light made for superb views of scenery, glaciers and wildlife.



Our time at NW Glacier was spent watching this impressive mass shed sheets and chunks of ice, both shattering as soon as they hit the rocks below. Harbor seals, most with pups, were unimpressed by all the noise, as were the kittiwake and gull roosting on the bergy bits.

We slowly motored away from the terminus of this fjord and around one of the islands towards other glaciers. It was here that we found the Kittlitz's Murrelet. There were three pairs, and two of the birds sat on the water giving us long, relaxed looks. They do resemble

Marbled Murrelets, but with the views we managed we were able to see all the field marks. This was a fitting way to leave the fjord as we headed back to Seward.

#### **Saturday, June 20 Flights Home**

After breakfast it was time to head back to Anchorage for most everyone's flights home. Three of us were going out to the Pribilof Islands on Sunday, so we had a little time once we got back to the city. For everyone else it was time to relax and take in all that we experienced on our Alaska Sampler tour.

#### **Sunday, June 21 – Wednesday, June 24 A Scouting Extension to the Pribilof Islands**



Three of us boarded our four-hour Penn Air flight to St. Paul Island. This island has no trees and wasn't inhabited until colonization by Russians in the 1700s. When we landed, we got our gear into our rooms and then headed out to do a little pre-dinner birding.

Rock Sandpipers are the most common shorebird on the island and that became apparent on the airport entry road. Then there were all the kittiwakes bathing in freshwater ponds, both Black-legged and Red-legged. There were many Red-necked Phalarope, but

very few other shorebirds. So we headed over to the crab processing plant cafeteria and had our dinner. We then headed out again towards the far end of the island to a hill that seemed to have the ability to attract Asian vagrants, but not today.

The next morning was foggy and drizzling, but that gloom ended just as soon as we turned on to the main road. There, sitting on a small mound, was a young male Snowy Owl, and that was totally cool! We

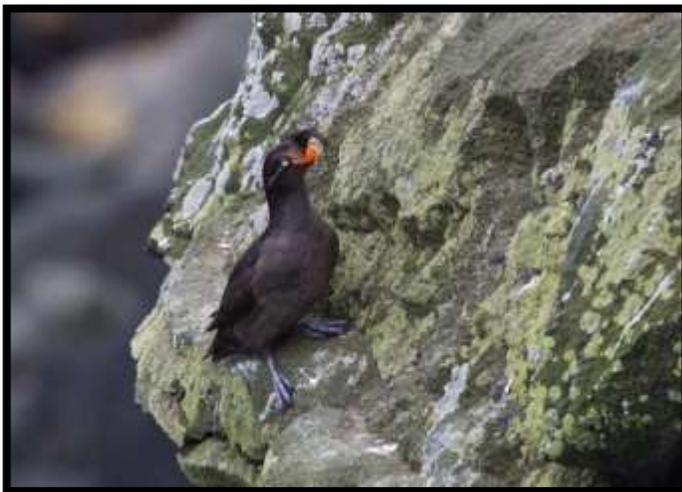
spent the day scoping offshore and spending time on top of the seaside nesting cliffs that were covered with birds. Puffin, Northern Fulmar, Thick-billed Murre, Parakeet Auklet and Red-faced Cormorant were nesting within 100 meters of our sit down site.



In the afternoon we sat down on the edge of a Least Auklet nesting colony and let the birds come to us. With their white eyes and tiny stature, they were comical as they tried to bluff one another with their constant trilling. We enjoyed great looks at one of the most common alcids in the world.

Our final stop was out at the end of the island by vagrant hill. We saw many Northern Fur Seal below us, along with Arctic Fox and Snow Bunting. We did re-find the Brambling that had been there for a few days, and got great looks

before getting a call that two Lesser Sand-Plover (Mongolian Plover) were in the estuary.



On our final full day we went to more sea cliffs where we got great looks at Crested Auklet and other pelagic species. It was sunny for part of the day and the lighting was crisp (and we finally broke forty-five degrees). Other highlights for the day were two Ancient Murrelet, three King Eider and two Yellow-billed Loon.

We had the morning to bird before our flight back to ANC and seventy-degree temperatures. We really didn't find anything new or exotic. But another group of birders did — a European Golden-Plover! We spent some time looking for the bird, but it was never re-found. You never

know what you are going to find, so you always have that edge about what might be around the next corner. What a great way to finish our time on the island and our two, for some three-week trip to Alaska!

Trip Report and all photos by Greg Smith. Find more of Greg's images at [www.flickr.com/slobirdr](http://www.flickr.com/slobirdr).