



Alaska Birds & Wildlife

June 1 - 14, 2016

Trip Report

Guide Greg Smith, with 10 Participants:

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Report and Photos by Greg Smith & Karen Worcester

Wednesday, 1 June – Anchorage

Arrivals were happening through the day and by midnight we had everyone accounted for. Tomorrow was our flight to Nome, and one last check of the weather let us all know that we were in for a treat – blue skies...

Thursday – Monday, 2 – 6 June - Nome

With four full days and the three roads out of Nome, we had ample opportunity to bird the area. We would do Teller, the Kougarok, and finally the Nome-Council Road.



We still had half a day on our arrival, so after checking into our rooms we grabbed a quick bite to eat on the shore of Norton Sound. Then we headed out towards Safety Sound glassing different areas and watching the aerial acrobatics of the numerous Long-tailed Jaegers. There were a few seabirds off shore and a number of shorebirds along the edge of Safety Sound, but what caught our attention were the small, scattered flocks of passerines making landfall from the south. We had small flocks of Bluethroat, Yellow Wagtail and Savannah Sparrows flying in off of the water and foraging along the edge of the road. Certainly a great way to start our time in Nome...

We got back to our rooms after seven for a quick cleanup and then headed over to Airport Pizza Express for dinner. Never let it be said that you walked out of there feeling hungry.

We woke up to a slightly overcast day that gave way to sun about three hours later. It was cool, but when the wind started midday, it got a little chilly. We found a Short-eared Owl coursing back and forth over the same spot on a hillside adjacent to Penny River and finally got the scope on a red fox that was causing all the anxiety. Penny River was loaded with Yellow Warblers, Northern Waterthrush, Tree Sparrows and lots of Zonotrichias. Unfortunately, the Dippers from years past had not re-colonized the historic nest under the bridge.

Further on up the road at the Sinuk River we had a pair of alternate-plumaged Bar-tailed Godwits foraging in pools of water. There were numerous Arctic Terns and one distant Aleutian Tern and a number of waterfowl. After finishing here we drove to a marine terrace overlooking Wooley Lagoon. Here it was windy but loaded with wildflowers. This was the perfect setting for the Snow Buntings we got good looks at before driving down to Wooly Lagoon. The middle section of the road down to the lagoon is always the best location to find Black-bellied, Pacific Golden and American Golden Plovers nesting in a fairly discrete area. Amazing how well they blend in with the local surroundings. We drove further north but it seemed like the wind kept most everything from getting more than six inches off of the ground. A good time to head back to our rooms and some dinner... and some heat!





Next we headed up towards Council (this was our second day of birding the Safety Sound portion of the road). Birds on the coastal part of this road included both Western and Semi-palmated Sandpiper, Common Eider, lots of Lapland Longspurs, a large flock of both Sabine's Gull and Tundra Swans, Short-eared Owls and quite a few species of waterfowl. The inland section of the road gave us looks at incubating Gyrfalcon, flying Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Wheatear, Varied Thrush, Blackpoll Warbler and Boreal Chickadee. But there were two highlights, a herd of Musk Ox

feeding along and in the Salmon River right next to the road. And then great looks at a Bristle-thighed Curlew about three miles from the end of the road. It was foraging about ninety feet off of the road and didn't seem the least bit concerned with us. Definitely a great way to finish the drive out to Council.

Teller was the third of the long roads and has its own micro-habitats. Our highlights included four plover species: American Golden, Pacific Golden, Black-bellied and Semi-palmated. With the first three on the same hillside! Long-tailed Jaegers cruised the soft tundra skies, while Long-tailed Ducks used some of the ponds. Not as birdy as the other two roads, but some great wildflowers and unique birds...



Ah, the Kougarok Road. It started with lots of old friends: Gray-cheeked Thrush, Willow Ptarmigan, Golden-crowned Sparrow and those redpolls. The adult Golden Eagle incubating on

its nest gave us great looks, and even better looks when the other adult flew into the view. Bluethroat was a challenge at Salmon Lake, probably because of the wind. But as we headed back towards Nome we came a round a bend and there was the blondest grizzly any of us had ever seen. And it was only thirty feet off of the road! While folks were watching the bear wander in and out of the shrubs, a Bluethroat started displaying right in front of the van. That was certainly a great way to finish our drive up the Kougorok.



We birded the area around Nome and found a couple more Aleutian Terns, but other than those good looks, we weren't able to add any additional species to our list. So we got on our flight and headed back to Anchorage. We had the afternoon to explore the city and enjoy a little down time before we headed off on the next leg of our tour...

Tuesday, 7 June – Anchorage/Seward

In the morning we took the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail along the edge of Cook Inlet where we got great looks at Alder Flycatcher, Orange-crowned Warbler, American Wigeon Sandhill Crane, Bald Eagle and Red-necked Grebe with newly hatched young. We also got to see a large flock of Hudsonian Godwits roosting on the island of Westchester Lagoon. Arctic Terns were nesting on the island and were not the least bit afraid to dive bomb any gull or eagle that got too close.



We started our drive to Seward with a stop at Potter Marsh, a wildlife area with abundant wetlands. The boardwalk took us out along the edge where we found numerous drake Green-winged Teal, Greater Yellowlegs and Arctic Tern. Tree Swallows and Black-capped Chickadees utilize the nesting boxes making for great looks at feeding young. Alder Flycatcher were singing from the exposed tops of the willows, while a pair of Bald Eagles surveyed their marsh from trees adjacent to their huge nest. And it was a wonderfully warm and sunny day for all this viewing...



We made it to the Resurrection Roadhouse in time for a late lunch, with only a ten-minute drive left to the town. After lunch we drove to the Alaska Sea Life Center, which is a treasure of information on all things in the natural history of the Seward area. But the hidden highlight is the alcid and waterfowl aviary of rehabbed birds of the area. These are all birds that cannot be released back into their appropriate habitat, but still go through the courtship and nesting as if in the wild. Really a treat to see them in their nuptial plumage at such a close range, especially the alcids which were usually viewed from a rocking boat!

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

Wednesday, 8 June – Seward

After an early breakfast we were on our boat the by 8:30 and heading out of the harbor by eight. Pelagic Cormorants and Marbled Murrelets were the first to put in their appearance (well after the flocks of ever-present Glaucous-winged Gulls. When we turned into Fox Island we saw our first of many Horned and Tufted Puffins. We could see small flocks of Common Murre and Black-legged Kittiwakes



flew down the face of the glacier before splashing into the water. Really a treat to be exposed to this sliding sheet of ice, all the while with three mountain goats looking down on us...

Our final stop was the Chiswell Islands with all those nesting seabirds. The sky and the water were littered with both species of puffins. Mixed in were a few Ancient Murrelets and Parakeet Auklets and we had one fly by Red-faced Cormorants.

We got to see Dall's porpoise and more humpbacks as we made our way through the incredibly calm water. This was a really fine way to finish the outer waters before heading back to Seward...



winging past and heading to the SW. Soon enough we were able to see spouts up ahead of us in a little cove that was protected from the small ocean swell. There appeared to be three humpback whales feeding as indicated by the flocks of kittiwakes that would circle and scream just before the whales surfaced. Pretty magical with the backlighting of the blows and circling birds...

Our next stop was at the Holgate Glacier where we heard the creaking and groaning of moving ice. Then a loud tinkling sound as the ice cracked and



Thursday, 9 June – Seward/Anchorage

All of us got a little longer sleep this morning after our long day on the water. But it was time to head back to Anchorage and we made our way through many of the passes along this scenic route. Snow-clad mountains and blue skies with puffy cumulus clouds made for an easy drive back. After we arrived, some folks went back to Westchester Lagoon, while others visited the Anchorage Museum. And that evening everyone packed, had one more great meal downtown and then got ready for our trip up to The Mountain in Denali National Park...

Friday - Monday, 10-13 June – North to Denali

Our early morning shuttle to Denali waited for us about three blocks from our hotel and by seven we were on the road. One of our stops along the way was at the Princess McKinley Lodge, where Denali was in full sun with few clouds. It was one of those sightings that for those of us who have been here many times, well you really knew how unique this was. So everyone was taking pictures!



We made it to the park in plenty of time and met up with our buses and guides from North Face Lodge and took off into the park.

Our drive got us great looks at grizzly, caribou, Dall sheep and stunning scenery. 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. Our picnic dinner next to the river gave all of us some insight into the vastness and sense of wilderness we had been allowed to visit. What a treat to turn that last corner and find the welcome staff of NFL waiting for us with dessert and coffee. We had arrived...

The next two days had all of us taking one of three 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 a more moderate hike. The rest of us took a different route heading out for short, bus-based hikes into the tundra. All got intimate looks into the plants and some of the wildlife found in the park. But one thing no one got to see for the two days was The Mountain, Denali. That stunning view on the ride up from Anchorage would be our only view.



Sightings of more grizzly, moose, lots of caribou, Bufflehead and Short-eared Owl during our days in the field only added to the wonderfully stunning scenery of the Alaska Range and Muldrow Glacier. A drive to the end of the end of the western-most road in North America put some of us in the Kantishna area, an area of the park that had been a part of the Alaska gold rush.

Monday was our day to leave this wonderful setting in Denali National Park and Preserve and head to the railroad depot. Beyond the scenery and the wildlife on our drive out, we were

excited see what new views the ride south would share with us. We found that the further south the train travelled, the sunnier the scenery was becoming. We did get to see black bear, more moose and plenty of Trumpeter Swans on this our last night in Alaska...

Tuesday, 14 June – 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 Island 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 got to experience on our Alaska Sampler tour...