



## Alaska Sampler: Anchorage, Denali & Seward

August 8 – 16, 2016

with Guide Mark Smith and participants Christa, Robert, Robert, Edith, Helga, Allan, Janell, Donald, Karen, Chuck and Eileen

### Tues., Aug. 9, 2016

We depart the Copper Whale in Anchorage and after a short visit at Westchester Lagoon with remarkable Red-necked Grebes feeding young up close, we continued to Potter Marsh on the edge of the city, where we had our closest encounter with eagles, two young Bald Eagles sitting below the platform feeding on Chum Salmon headed upstream to spawning grounds. Gulls fought for their share. We enjoyed the fine views of the Turnagain Arm of mighty Cook Inlet, in a broad, glaciated valley, like the many we would see today in the Kenai Mountains of the Kenai Peninsula, as we crossed in sun and cloud south to Seward. The Alaska Sea Life Center was an education, and the puffins charming and comical. The Russian element of the regional history is always a surprise. Ray's on the Waterfront served fine seafood and a view.



### Wed., Aug. 10, 2016



This morning from the Seward docks we embarked on a nine-hour cruise to the Chiswell Isles and Northwest Fjord in Kenai Fjords National Park, where a half-dozen pale blue glaciers poured into the sea from the huge Harding Ice Field above. Rock isles and cliffs were festooned with Arctic and Tufted Puffins, murrets, guillemots, Pelagic Cormorant, and Steller's Sea Lion. The sea was glassy and whales were easily spotted, with fine observations of Humpbacks breaching and lob-tailing, and killer whale pods three times came very close. Sea otters often stole

the show, as did Rhinoceros Auklet and three murrelet species.

Naturalist Journeys, LLC / Caligo Ventures PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 520.558.1146 / 800.426.7781  
Fax 650.471.7667 [www.naturalistjourneys.com](http://www.naturalistjourneys.com) / [www.caligo.com](http://www.caligo.com) [info@caligo.com](mailto:info@caligo.com) /  
[naturalistjourneys@gmail.com](mailto:naturalistjourneys@gmail.com)

## **Thurs., Aug. 11, 2016**

We explored the backside of the bay and the steep “shingle” beach, and then took time with a close Trumpeter Swan pair and five cygnets. Eva's feeders had red crossbills and siskins, and warblers in the thicket. We reached Anchorage and had evening options, including sighting four Hudsonian Godwit with Short-billed Dowitcher at Westchester Lagoon.

## **Fri., Aug. 12, 2016**

Near the hotel we caught a bus to drive through somber skies and light rains to Denali National Park, where midday we met our North Face Lodge (NFL) bus and staff for our first drive into the park. Three individual Grizzlies were our closest of the trip, one quickly crossing a river valley and one sprinting up slope. Denali and ten other peaks of the Alaska Range showed each of our four days under varied majestic skies and blazing sunsets. We enjoyed a sumptuous picnic dinner and dessert on arrival as we meet NFL staff.



## **Sat., Aug. 13 – Mon., Aug. 15, 2016**



Two days we had options to take longer hikes in the tundra and boreal forest, or to take smaller walks from the bus as it plied the park road looking for wildlife, vistas, and flora. Many waterfowl species were on tundra ponds and a cow Moose swam and dove to her dripping salad. Hikers found Collared Pika and Hoary Marmot on the ridges, and a stunted brilliant tundra with lichens, mosses, a dozen species of ripe berries for the bears, and diminutive dwarf birch and willows in fall colors. Our drive out on Monday found more Dall Sheep on high slopes, and scattered Caribou, including antlered stags. Golden Eagle and

Harrier circled, and Willow Ptarmigan and Spruce Grouse were observed.

The train dome car afforded remarkable views beneath dramatic skies to Anchorage, with many mountains, rivers, and lakes, eagles, swans, and an osprey nest. Again at the Copper Whale, we said farewell to four travelers, and saw them again in the morning. As leader, I enjoyed the interesting and upbeat company and was sorry to see our ranks dwindle.

## **Tues., Aug. 16, 2016 — Homer Extension**

We again went south to the Kenai Peninsula and took the fork southwest to Homer, arriving at our hotel, Land's End, at the end of the four-mile spit reaching into vast Kachemack Bay. Many waterfowl and shorebirds were seen along the spit over four days, varying with the tide. Our rooms had big bright views of the Bay and Pacific Golden Plover, pipit, and Pomerine Jaeger were seen from the rooms.

## **Wed., Aug. 17 & Thurs., Aug. 18, 2016**



The cruise across the glassy bay to pretty Halibut Cove and its artisan community stopped at Gull Island, teeming with seabirds. Several Humpback Whales surfaced and breached in the distance, including one black-tailed individual with a deep slice into the left side of the fluke, thus well known by researchers, which lob-tailed 27 times in rapid order; even our crew was impressed. The next day in the wooded hills above Homer we walked the trails through spruce forest and beside meadows at the Wynn Nature Center. We were greeted by Gray Jay and some spied Moose. After noon we toured the excellent Pratt Museum and later sought shorebirds at high tide; Pectoral and Baird's were noted. A compact raft of 25 floating Sea Otters looked like waterfowl. And again fabulous seafood.



## **Fri., Aug. 19, 2016**

Before returning to Anchorage, we began in Homer by visiting the headquarters and slick interpretive center of the 1500-mile long, 5-million acre (including 2500 islands) Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, which extends from the Kenai to the end of the Aleutians. On departure, two young moose calves were gorging willows by the parking area. We had half an hour of close observation and photos, then continued to the town of Kenai and its beautiful blue Russian Orthodox Church, built in 1895.

On a break in the Kenai Mountains we again enjoyed Helga's fine scope to see both Dall Sheep and Mountain Goats on a craggy ridge. A tidal bore was raging up Cook Inlet as we reached the Anchorage airport and hotels.



This was an exciting and enjoyable tour. Thank you everyone.

*Mark Smith, August 2016*

Images: Caribou, Sea Otters, Seward, Willow Ptarmigan, Peg Abbott; Bald Eagle, Dall Sheep, Humpback Whale, Greg Smith.