

Alaska Sampler Trip Report

May 31 – 13, 2017 with Guide Greg Smith



With Participants Cindy & Don, Gay, Mary, Marquita & Jay

Thurs., June 1 – Mon., June 5 Nome

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



Our late-morning arrival flight took us over miles of countryside and it showed that either there was very little snow this winter or it had been very warm and had accelerated the melting of the snow. There was no pack ice visible on the flight in either.

With half a day to explore, we took advantage of Anvil Mountain, its multiple herds of muskox and the balmy 50+ degree temperatures. Very few of the muskox had lost their winter coats, so they must have been very warm. Bird numbers were certainly much lower than the last five years, given that we only saw five Golden-crowned

Alaska Sampler Trip Report

May 31 – 13, 2017 with Guide Greg Smith

Sparrow this afternoon. We had a respectable list for the areas covered and we still had three more days here. Biggest surprise of the day was that Airport Pizza was closed.

Friday, we headed out Council Road along Safety Lagoon. The weather forecast for our five days was to be sunny with slight amount of broken clouds on two days. No rain, and by the time we left on Monday at noon it was 72!

The Council Road had a mixture of habitats, with the first 30 miles mostly along Safety Sound and its huge lagoon system. Birding for this part was all about checking out shorebirds and water birds. The tide was high, which meant that any shorebirds that weren't nesting (and most all should be ...) were pressed pretty tightly against the shoreline. We had Surbird, all three small peeps, Hudsonian Godwit, Pectoral Sandpiper, Black Turnstone, Pacific Golden Plover, Black Guillemot, and Parasitic Jaeger. Water birds included Common Eider, Tundra Swan, Bonaparte's Gull, Sabine's Gull, and later in the week on a short run, Aleutian Tern.



The remaining part of the 75-mile drive was through upland habitat where we got good looks at Rough-legged Hawk, Bluethroat, White-winged Crossbill, Rusty Blackbird, Blackpoll Warbler, Alder Flycatcher, Varied Thrush, and American Tree Sparrow. Nice first day, and again, stunning weather.



Our second full day was spent up along the Teller Road. With more musk ox along the way, we also got to see Fox Sparrow, at least eight different Rough-legged Hawk, Surf Scoter, Black-bellied Plover, Long-tailed Jaeger, Willow and Rock Ptarmigan, White Wagtail, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, and moose.

Alaska Sampler Trip Report

May 31 – 13, 2017 with Guide Greg Smith



Certainly one of the highlights of the day was being flagged down by Donald, a lifelong-resident of Teller and an native artist. He asked if we were interested in seeing some of his whale-bone carvings and other items. We were, and he met us a little bit later and showed us his wares. It seemed like almost everyone bought at least one piece, and then he mentioned his brother had some bone carvings back at his place. So we drove over there and succumbed to the urge to spend a little bit more money! Really didn't need



to go shopping in Nome now, but we did on our last full day.

Sunday found us driving up the Kougarok Road, home to the Bristle-thighed Curlew. The drive up to Curlew Hill is 72 miles, and we birded our way up to that location. Along the way we had Arctic, Wilson's, Yellow, and Orange-crowned Warblers, Northern Waterthrush, along with American Pipit and lots of Gray-cheeked Thrush.

When we made it to the hill, there was one other group on top when we arrived. We ate our lunch and then made the side-stepping ascent to the top where we talked with the other group who had not had any luck in finding the curlew. We each went our separate ways but in the same direction and both groups found the birds at the same time. There were three of them, along with some Whimbrel and

Alaska Sampler Trip Report

May 31 – 13, 2017 with Guide Greg Smith

stunning American Black-bellied Plover! The hike down through tussock-land was even more challenging than the hike up, but everyone was smiling.

Our last morning was spent along Safety Lagoon and Cape Nome where we had a Thick-billed Murre. Then it was off to a late breakfast, back to the hotel to get our bags, and then to the airport for our flight back to Anchorage. We finished the day with a fine meal at Simon and Seafort's.

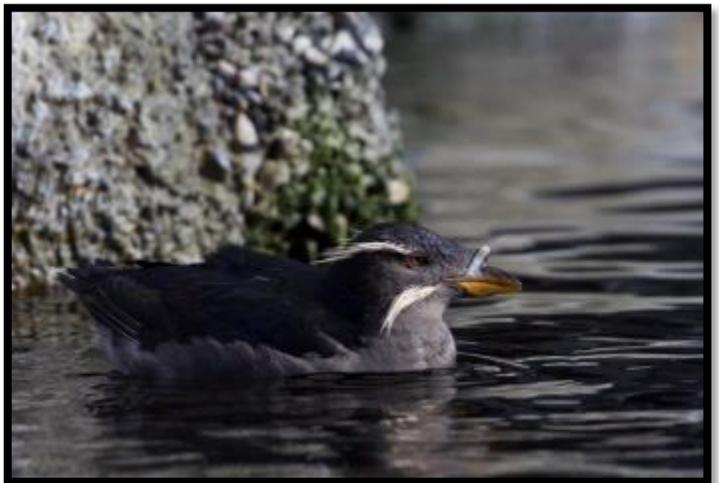
Tues., June 6 – Thurs., June 8 Seward

After a good night's rest at the Copper Whale we headed out to Westchester Lagoon. We had a nice assortment of water birds including: Hudsonian Godwit, Lesser Yellowlegs, Red-necked Grebe, Arctic Tern, and numerous waterfowl species. There was also a pair of Bald Eagle nesting on the far side of the lagoon that got everything in a tizzy when one took flight.

Next stop was at Potter Marsh, a local freshwater lagoon adjacent to Turnagain Arm. Nesting Tree Swallow, Alder Flycatcher, and another pair of Bald Eagle were the primary birds on the boardwalk, but along Highway One there were nesting Mew Gull, Arctic Tern, and Cackling "Canada" Geese, nice habitat for all.

We checked on our boat trip to Northwestern Glacier, scheduled for the next day, and found out that the seas were at seventeen feet, so this trip was canceled. We had three other options and ended up taking the longest of them. This would get us out to Holgate Glacier, not quite as far as Northwestern, but into the kind of habitat for some of the birds we were seeking. It would be three hours shorter and wouldn't depart until 11:30, so we had tomorrow morning to visit the Alaska SeaLife Center.

The SeaLife Center had a wonderful aviary with numerous species of pelagic and freshwater birds. Stunning King Eider, Smew, both puffins, Rhinoceros Auklet, Long-tailed Duck, and more. It was certainly a good primer for our boat trip later that day



Alaska Sampler Trip Report

May 31 – 13, 2017 with Guide Greg Smith

It was glassy and calm as we left the harbor on the Glacier Express, and it stayed that way until we caught sight of our first Humpback. A couple of solo male Coastal Mountain Goats were both bedded down on different ledges of the vertical cliffs. But then we had to cross the open ocean to cross over to Aialik Bay. So we all came indoors and sat down for the thirty minute crossing. Glad we did — there were some big, fifteen-foot swells out there! We did see Ancient Murrelet, Parakeet Auklet, and groups of Common Murre as we made the crossing, and a number of people were very happy that was behind them.



We made our way up to Holgate Glacier without seeing any more alcids, but we did find a few more Humpback Whales. On our way out, we found a number of small flocks of Rhinoceros Auklet, very confiding Rhinoceros Auklet, and two Red-faced Cormorant, but little else. The highlight of the journey back to the harbor was a pod of killer whales, about eight or nine. We spent about fifteen minutes with them and then headed back to the harbor. Probably the most surprising issue of the day was that we did not see one Marbled Murrelet.

The next morning we birded a number of locations before heading back to Anchorage. First was a stop at Ava's place, where her feeders attracted Pine Siskin, Rufous Hummingbird, Pine Grosbeak, and Red Crossbill. There were others, so we added at least seven species to our list. A drive out to Lowell Point finally gave us distant looks at a pair of Marbled Murrelet, and these were the only individuals for the trip!

We finished our drive with a stop at the Alyeska and hiked some trails where we saw Varied, Hermit, and Swainson's Thrush and Townsend's Warbler. Nice finish to our time on the coast, since tomorrow we headed inland and north to Denali National Park and Preserve.



Fri., June 9 – Mon., June 12 **Denali National Park & Preserve**

Our shuttle to the Denali RR Station was a little early arriving, so this gave us a little time to explore the visitor center and the bookstore. We boarded our Camp Denali/North Face Lodge buses and started the journey to our lodge. Drew, our driver, shared his incredible wealth of knowledge on geology as we made our way deeper into the park. It wasn't until we passed

Alaska Sampler Trip Report

May 31 – 13, 2017 with Guide Greg Smith

the Toklat River that we started to climb through passes, see wildlife, and leave the boreal forest behind.

Caribou started making an appearance, and then a sow grizzly with her two two-year old cubs sleeping the day away on a hillside were definitely a treat, and numerous Dall sheep. Long-tailed Jaeger, Golden Eagle, and the ubiquitous White-crowned Sparrow were being seen as we neared the lodge ... and then there was the geology. Just before the lodge the Muldrow Glacier and all its impacts became very visible to the south, and we got to see up close just how much of a landscaping effect this amount of ice can have.



They were ready for us at the lodge with hot beverages, a marbled bundt cake, and warm smiles. After directions on how the lodge functions, and where our rooms were located, we settled in for a well-deserved night's sleep.

Sunrise occurred at 3:19 AM, after which it was a bit of a challenge to keep on sleeping. White-crowned Sparrows were singing and there seemed to be some holes in the clouds. Maybe the "High One" would put in an appearance?

After an incredibly tasty breakfast, we took off on a foray to explore the area's birds with Iris, a North Face naturalist. She had insight into the plants, their potential uses and of course, birds. We saw numerous species of waterfowl with Barrow's Goldeneye and Surf Scoter. Most songbirds were up and singing from the tops of spruce, with the Olive-sided Flycatcher being tops. The striking Common Loon sitting on its nest was just outstanding!



The next day's the foray took us out far beyond the Kantishna Hills area, about thirty-five miles back into the park. This got us great looks at nesting Long-tailed Jaeger, hunting Red Fox,

grazing Grizzlies and lichen-eating herds of Caribou (complete with young). We saw five Short-eared Owl on the wing, a perched Gyrfalcon, and some Greater White-fronted Geese. Getting out into the park just opened up so many wildlife viewing opportunities, and this is always a favorite!

Alaska Sampler Trip Report

May 31 – 13, 2017 with Guide Greg Smith



The next day was our travel day back to Anchorage, and we saw a couple of grizzly mating, which gave us a total of twelve different animals! But really, the highlight was the adult Gray Wolf taking a Caribou haunch back to its den! This was just before the Teknolika restroom area (heading east) and gave the fifth species of Alaska's big five!

The train ride back to Anchorage had rain at the start, and cloudy but clearing skies when we rolled into town. By the time we boarded our flights home the next day, it had been fourteen days of travel in the forty-ninth state. We had seen 150 species of birds, nineteen mammal species, three

Inupiaq villages, three national parks, and the highest peak in North America.