

# Alaska: Birding & Nature | Trip Report

June 6 – 17, 2021 | Written by Greg Smith



With Guide Greg Smith, and participants Keith, Julie, Jane, & Mike





## **Sun., June 6 Arrivals in Nome, Alaska**

Everyone was checked into our rooms at the finest hotel in Nome by early afternoon. We took a couple of hours before dinner and went to Safety Lagoon to check out some of the wildlife and birds. A ringed seal, along with Black Brant, Red-throated Loon and Lapland Longspur made for a wonderful appetizer to our dinner at Airport Express. We got to know one another and mapped out days here about 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle...

## **Mon., June 7 The Kougarok**

Snow was predicted, and snow was also coming down as we headed north along the road to the interior. The road was pretty wet from rains during the previous days, but the winds probably kept it a little drier than it could have been...

First stop was the Nome dump, a local hang out for the gulls and ravens of the area. By far the most abundant gull to take advantage of the local dining opportunities were the Glaucous Gulls, followed by the smaller but more boisterous Mew Gulls. These were the two common gulls of Nome, but it was those that were interlopers in the local area that we were searching for. We found one different species, the Herring Gull. There were three different age classes represented, so that was helpful in explaining the plumages. But unfortunately, none of the sought after Slaty-backed Gulls.

We spent time looking for and finding some of the more common land birds. With Wilson's Snipe winnowing in the background, we got good looks at both Wilson's and Yellow warblers, along with a treetop Northern Waterthrush belting out their come-hither notes. Most thrushes are usually a little reticent to come to the tops of the trees and expose themselves to onlookers, but at this time of year the local Gray-cheeked Thrushes threw caution to the wind. The other two passerines we that joined us for our trip up the road were the redpolls, both Common and the Hoary. Nice to view them side-by-side.

Mammals were scarce, but water birds were not—Harlequin Duck, Red-breasted Merganser and Wandering Tattler were all in their appropriate habitat, while both the Semipalmated Sandpiper and Plover were the most visible shorebirds.

When we came across some those in-your-face Willow Ptarmigan, all males and all on the lookout for wayward interlopers and predators. Perched on the tops of minor-sized alders and snow piles, their stunning spring wardrobe seemed appropriate for the ever-increasing snow. The females must've all been on the nest incubating next year's crop of adults.



The clouds and fog were now about 50 meters overhead and the snow was continuing. We had one more stop we could make before driving into the clouds and increased snow, and that was at the north end of Salmon Lake. And this stop was specifically for Bluethroat. And right on a cue a male took to the air to display his multi-tasking capabilities—singing while undertaking his display flight. Great views for everyone on this visitor from Asia.

It was the snow and low clouds that prevented us from going much further on the Kougarok, so we turned around and headed back down towards the coast. Not that the weather was any better, but the lower elevation made it more plausible for a safe experience on less snow-covered roads...

## **Tues., June 8 Council Road**

Rain and snow were predicted, but they failed to make an appearance, and that boded well for us...

The first ten miles is a run to Cape Nome where the local jetty rock quarry is situated. We had birded here yesterday after having to get ourselves out of the snow. Yesterday we had Slaty-backed Gull, Parakeet Auklet, and Black Guillemot. Today we added Yellow-billed Loon, with both alcids still present. There were numerous Harlequin Ducks and lots of scoters flying by, especially White-winged.

We birded our way along Safety Sound that three days ago was loaded with numerous species of shorebirds and waterfowl. The lagoon had a few Least and Western Sandpipers, along with numerous Semipalmated. However, the diversity had just dried up compared to the earlier days.

At the Safety Sound Bridge, we had about twenty Sabine's Gulls foraging with the Arctic Terns. There were small groups of both Red and Red-necked Phalaropes foraging offshore, along with numerous Common Eiders. But that was it for the surging entrance to the lagoon.

## **Wed., June 9 Teller Road**

The days of rain and snow were taking its toll on road conditions, and the Teller Road was well known for being the worst! We started heading north with our first stop being along Granite Creek Road to look for both golden plover species and the Whimbrel that nested along this road. All three species cooperated, as did Wilson's Snipe, and Semipalmated Plover.



Next up was the Snake River bridge. Arctic Tern, Yellow Warbler, and Rock Pigeon were all numerous. And then for a few Musk oxen bulls just up the road. A flyby male Northern Harrier was all we had for this stop. The Penny River has a wonderful riparian component as you drive towards the bridge. Red Fox Sparrow, Gray-cheeked Thrush, both Wilson and Yellow warblers were putting in some vocal appearances along with both *Zonotrichia* species. But the two highlights for this stop were the nesting American Dipper under the bridge. One of the individuals fed about 30-feet upstream from the bridge giving us excellent looks. Second up was one of the season's first Arctic Warblers, sporadically singing and playing peek-a-boo. We started up the hill towards House Rock passing displaying Bluethroat while looking for more Rock Ptarmigan. No Rocks, but more Willow Ptarmigan...

Then the road conditions started getting sloppy with the back end of the van starting to fishtail a bit. The well-spaced ruts in the road were filled with mud and water making for treacherous driving conditions. We had made it 18 miles and there was still another 55 miles to drive. And that wasn't going to happen for us or for the other company vans that were following us. Everyone turned around and headed back to town, or to other roads.

We went to Cape Nome where both the Black Guillemot and the Parakeet Auklet were still hanging tight. Scoters and Black Brant were still heading north in small flocks. Further up the road toward the Safety Sound Bridge, we found fresh grizzly scat, but couldn't locate the perpetrator. We were checking out all of the offshore birds looking for King Eider and more Arctic Loons but to no avail. As before, shorebirds and waterfowl were very low in numbers. We headed to the east of Solomon to look for a grizzly that had been found the day before, but no luck here either...

## **Thurs., June 10 Back to Anchorage**

Of course, the weather settled down a bit on our departure day, a little fog along the coast was the only challenge. A challenge for our incoming flight, as we heard the jet come in for a landing and then retreating to full power as it zoomed off. Hard to see that runway with the fog. We watched it on my phone's radar app as it circled three times over Norton Sound before another attempt, that it nailed. A collective sigh in the screening area made things right as we boarded and flew towards Anchorage in the early afternoon.

Folks had the afternoon to do whatever they wanted, with most opting for a break from everything while prepping for our evening meal of halibut cheeks and more from Simon & Seaforts. And also prepping for our early departure from Anchorage to drive up to the Denali Railroad Station.



## **Fri., June 11 North to Denali National Park**

We were up early as our shuttle had a 06:30 AM departure time for the drive north to Denali. It was a mild, and thoughtfully sunny day as we left Anchorage and headed towards Talkeetna. We had a stop planned for the Alaska Wilderness Lodge where we would take a short break, before making it to Denali and the waiting Camp Denali buses. We arrived at 12:45 PM and left on those same buses at 13:15 for our ninety-mile drive through one of the most stunningly scenic places in the U.S.

It was sunny with broken clouds which just enhanced the snow-covered peaks of the Alaska Range. We learned about the geology of the area, the old rocks on the north as opposed to the younger rocks to the south. Spectacular views to the south as we climbed Polychrome Pass. Dall Sheep were common sights on the high peaks as we made to the other side of the pass. Denali was partially concealed by clouds, but we just knew we would be seeing The Great One in its entirety very soon, it was just that kind of weather.

We rolled into Camp Denali at seven and were greeted by staff and welcomed into the dining hall where soup and salad, along with home-baked rolls awaited. They do have some fine pastry makers there...

## **Sat., June 12 & Sun., June 13 Camp Denali and Environs**

Most of us went on the Naturalist Foray or the moderate hike on Saturday and, while some stayed at camp on Sunday, or repeated the Naturalist Foray on Sunday. Again, it was stunning weather on both days, and Denali was completely cloud-free from 3AM – 10AM on both days, with Alpenglow showing off the peak on Saturday morning pre-sunrise.

The foray on Saturday showed us a grizzly and the response by a number of individuals in the local Woodland caribou herd. Wildflowers were in abundance, and a pair of red fox were busy foraging for a den-full of kits that were apparently still too young to venture outside.

Those that stayed at camp on Sunday and birded the area were surrounded by a flock of Boreal Chickadees. Varied and Swainson's thrush were out and about along with Dipper, Wilson and Yellow Warblers, and the ubiquitous, White-crowned Sparrow. Fox Sparrow and Slate-colored Junco rounded off the more common species in the area. A fine weekend at Camp Denali was a treat for all of us. But tomorrow morning we would be up early and heading back to the train station.

## **Mon., June 14 Back to Anchorage**

The usual drill for heading out was breakfast at six and in the buses and on the road by 06:30 AM. It had worked just fine, and it did again this morning. The early start provided better lighting for viewing the jangled mass of ice and gravel that was the surge of the past few months from the Muldrow Glacier. What was the view from 2019, was vastly different than today's view. The foreground was still the lumpy, vegetated ice from previous flows



and surges of the glacier. But behind that was the jangled mass of ice and rock of what formerly the smooth looking Muldrow Glacier.

Early morning drives were free of other buses and people, so until the top of Polychrome, we really didn't pass anyone else on the road. Well people no, Arctic ground squirrels and many more Dall sheep and Woodland caribou yes! And today the mountain was cloud-free until we boarded the train and points south. A remarkable day for views and warm temperatures. And after our time in Nome, the last four days were a welcome treat.

Our train trip provided multiple Trumpeter Swan sightings along most of the route and latter sightings of moose closer to the outskirts of Anchorage. We did get to see two black bear about halfway thru the ride, which got everyone up and out on the rear veranda. We rolled into the station and then onto our lodging ready for a good night's sleep before our drive to Seward the next day...

## **Tues., June 15 On to Seward**

After picking up our rental vehicle, we drove to Westchester Lagoon for a short walk around the west side of the wetlands. The island had numerous Lesser Scaup, Mew Gull, and Cackling Goose. We also had both yellowlegs, American Wigeon, and the prize on the island (although it lasted only fifteen seconds...) was a group of 16 Hudsonian Godwit. Not sure what made them take flight, but they left us with a view of their signature black tails with a gleaming, white rump. Diagnostic for sure, but only the briefest view.

Our next stop was Potter Marsh, an emergent, freshwater wetland separated from that salt-laden Turnagain Arm by the berm-holding rail tracks and Alaska State Route One. Here we had great views of a pair of Bald Eagles, and Alder Flycatcher, along with nesting Trumpeter Swan, and Arctic Tern. Gadwall, Mallard, and Northern Pintail also put in appearances, especially near the roadside pullouts. By then it was lunch time and we drove two exits back towards town to eat at the very popular Firetap Ale House.



Next stop was Seward, home to Kenai Fjords Tours, the company that would take us to NW Glacier the next morning. After checking into our hotel, we walked over to the Alaska Sea Life Center to freshen up on our pelagic bird identifications skills for the next day. And then it was onto the iconic Ray's on the waterfront for halibut Adaman and seared ahi...

### **Wed., June 16 Northwestern Glacier Boat Trip**

The weather forecast had both good and not so good news. The good news was that swells were only 1' in the bay and 2' in the outer waters. The not so good news was a farce when it said rain most of the day. We might have had 15-minutes of rain total, and it was a light rain at that. So great boating and viewing conditions as we made our way out to the glacier and to the Chiswell Islands.

We got excellent views of the following hard to find birds, Ancient Murrelets right next to the boat, nesting Red-faced Cormorants, pairs of Kittlitz's Murrelets on glassy waters, and Parakeet Auklets lifting off and repeatedly landing in front of the boat. The only species we couldn't find was Thick-billed Murre, but we did have seven mountain goats along the side of the waterfalls at Cataract Cove.

Marine mammals included in order of abundance were harbor seal, Steller Sea Lion, Dall's Porpoise, Killer Whale, Fin Whale, and Humpback Whale. Of course, the stars of the show were the killers, with one male, two female and a recently born calf. At one point they swam directly towards the boat after foraging on a school of salmon. Certainly, the sighting of the day for most, especially with the follow up fresh-baked chocolate chip cookie...

### **Thurs., June 17 Back to Anchorage**

We retraced our steps from Tuesday, but with a few added stops that we hadn't visited on the first day. We stopped at Ava's feeders which were a little quiet, especially for the time of year. We had calling Chestnut-backed Chickadees, a flock of Pine Siskins, a recently fledged brood of Downy Woodpeckers, the dark, chocolate-colored Song Sparrow, and nesting Tree Swallows.

Next up was the Bear Creek salmon counting station, where loads of sockeye salmon were in the stream heading to different lakes to spawn. The always-present American Dipper were actively foraging on the wire grate just above the salmon diversion. Varied Thrush made sure we knew they were in the neighborhood, and then we headed on to Anchorage where we finished up our tour and said our goodbyes...



**Photo Credits:**

Steller Sea Lion, Greg Smith (GS); Columbine, GS; Marbled Murrelet, GS; NW Glacier, GS; Chocolate Lily, GS; Moose Cow, GS; Sabine's Gull, GS; Glaucous-winged Gulls, GS; Musk Ox Bulls Head Butting, GS; Nugget Pond & Denali, GS; Denali Alpenglow, GS; Denali Muldrow Surge Ice, GS; Harbor Seal w Pup, GS; Red-necked Grebe, GS; White Bog Orchid, GS; NW Glacier, GS; Pigeon Guillemot, GS; Killer Whales, GS, Light Harbor Seal, GS.