

ALASKA: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report

June 1 – 14, 2018 | Text & Photos* by Greg Smith



Participants: guide Greg Smith, with guide-assist Xavier Munoz, and 11 participants (in order of photo): Jim & Ed (Edilyn), Ann, Terry, Bill, Tad, Stan & Mary, Xavier, Dave & Ruth, and Jim.



Friday, June 1 Arrival in Anchorage

A wonderful day to arrive in Anchorage, the mountains were flowing with glaciers, most all peaks were capped with eons-old ice and the city sparkled in a sea of green. We dined at our hotel's onsite restaurant, discussed tomorrow's plans for Nome and headed off to get a little sleep while the sun perched above the horizon...

Saturday, June 2 Our Nome Adventure Begins!

After an early breakfast, we boarded our flight to Nome, about 90-minutes as the jet flies. Denali was standing proud in the distance as we headed northwest. A broken layer of clouds greeted us as we landed in Nome and after a quick lunch and check-in to our hotel, we headed out to Safety Sound.



There was a steady breeze, but it was of just enough strength to keep birds in the air a little longer for identification purposes. The male Lapland Longspurs were show stealers with their aerial displays and their fine song. Next in line for the chorus and stunning flight displays were the Semi-palmated Sandpiper males. Their song is nothing more than an unrelenting chatter, but their flight is a stiff-winged hover that can last for ninety seconds. We could hear the call but it always seemed to take a bit to find this diminutive shorebird in the sky. There are always lots of other birds along Safety Sound, but we had a whole other day to explore this area...

Sunday, June 3 Kougorok / Coffee Dome & Curlew Hill



Our first full day promised to be rainless and mostly sunny, so that meant the Kougorok! We started off with a quick stop at the Nome landfill getting good looks at the numerous Glaucous Gulls, and then found an adult Slay-backed Gull, and a third year Glaucous Gull. Next up we had a cooperative Bluethroat sharing its aerial display and song, and then landing atop a shrub giving us great looks. Rock Ptarmigan were perched on the piles of snow adjacent to the road. Salmon Lake was frozen and inaccessible, and warblers were a little scarce compared to last year. But that was made up for by the blonde grizzly bear ambling across the valley below us. A big animal! Spring comes late so close to the Arctic Circle...



We finished the day with a hike up Curlew Hill, across the road from Coffee Dome. It does take a while to make it to the top where the birds hang out, and when we arrived, we got together with

another group of birders. It took us about ninety minutes to find a Bristle-thighed Curlew, but we weren't convinced it was a curlew. But after some discussion with another group leader, we realized this was just a challenging bird from a plumage perspective. He had studied the bird on the ground and found it to be inconclusive. But then he saw the bird fly off with a Whimbrel and noted the size difference and the bright rump, diagnostic for a Bristle-thighed. Not sure it would've been conclusive without that discussion... Elusive birds!



Monday, June 4 Council Road

Next day we went back out Safety Sound along the Council Road where we got wonderful looks at Common Eider, nesting Pacific Loon, all three jaeger species, Blackpoll Warbler, Rusty Blackbird and Rough-legged Hawk. We also saw Gryfalcon, nesting Semipalmated Plover, White-winged Crossbill and Aleutian Tern. Our final for the day was a mixed flock of shorebirds on the beach that included: Surfbird, Black & Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling and Dunlin!



Tuesday, June 5 Teller Road

Our last full day was a drive up the Teller Road, with its rugged and grand scenery. First views of the day were of the numerous Muskox pushed up against the shoulder. They were all males, as the females with their six-week old calves weren't nearly as confiding at this time.



The surprise of our drive was the return of American Dippers at Penny Creek! Most all of the beaver and all of the known American Dipper were frozen out of the Nome area about five years ago. The cold was so intense that streams and ponds froze to the bottom, preventing any foraging.



Next up was a Northern Wheatear that landed on a talus slope below as we perched on the top of a

cliff! We were very fortunate at our next prolonged stop at Wooley Lagoon. We were told the road was washed out as it wound towards the coast and Wooley Lagoon. Fortunately, it was in the middle of the plover nesting grounds and not before. Here we got good looks at alternate plumaged Black-bellied, American Golden and Pacific Golden Plovers. And the lichen-covered boulders and stones made for the finest bouquet of colors that hid their somewhat-sublime color patterns. What a treat!!!

Wednesday, June 6 Another Fine Morning of Birding Nome / Flight Return to Anchorage

We had one more morning for a little local birding, so we went all piled into the vehicles and headed back out on the Kougarok Road for a little over three hours. Yesterday there had been a late-afternoon report of an Arctic Warbler singing at mile 22, and we were going back to see if we could find this late-comer to the Seward Peninsula. We tried but had no luck, as apparently this species was a couple of days late (when we got to Denali they still hadn't arrived ...). We did find a gathering of six moose, more, lots more Willow Ptarmigan spent and large numbers of singing Gray-cheeked Thrushes singing in the roadside willows.

Thursday, June 7 Anchorage/Eagle Creek

Eagle Creek was set to be sunny and fine this morning, it was, which was as much an attractant to moose, bears and birds! A Townsend's Warbler made its appearance in the parking lot just before we headed downhill and found the black bear family. As they went in the opposite direction, we continued on into an ensemble of thrushes. With Varied Thrush on bassoon, Swainson's Thrush picked up the tempo on piccolo, while Hermit Thrush were the perfect flute section! Next up, the much sought-after American Three-toed Woodpecker, followed by a family of Brown Creeper.



As we crossed the marsh on the elevated boardwalk a gray, stubby-tailed screamer made its presence known, quickly identified as an American Dipper when the parent arrived with a minnow. And finally on the home stretch of our three-mile loop we ran into the bull Moose. The bull Moose who had thought it fun to charge a pair of folks earlier in the morning. After making the appropriate retreat (minimal at best...) the Moose must've felt that seven in a group of people was just too high a number...



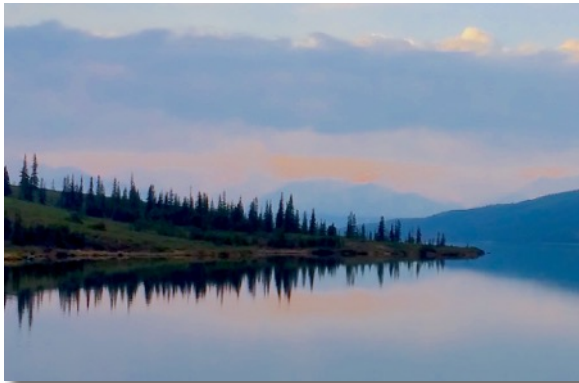
Friday, June 8 Denali National Park

Bright and early on Friday it was time to make our way to where we would meet our shuttle to Denali National Park. We arrived at the bus and at the park, on time and had Drew as our driver/naturalist into Denali and then to North Face Lodge. Lots of spectacular scenery, ever-changing scenery loaded with Dall sheep, moose and GRIZZLY BEAR! Ten in total for the drive, with some hugging the shoulder and others on hillsides. All with one thing in common, eating. Or better yet, grazing. These Alaskan Grizzly Bears are primarily vegetarian, taking protein when available and it seemed like today's menu was either Eskimo potato or horsetail. An eventful entry into the Denali wonderland...



Saturday and Sunday, June 9 & 10 Denali National Park

With all the options for outings with lodge guides available to us at North Face Lodge, it really was a challenge to choose. But for those that went on the naturalist foray, it was an opportunity to get out into the tundra and learn about this miniature world. Denali does have birds, but most all that reside here, we had seen previously in Nome. So here we could just take it all in.



It is the experience of Denali's dramatic scenery and the geology that formed our views – that led our eyes into the vastness that seems so near.

Add to this the wildlife, the large and small herbivores that make a living in this vastness. It is a shock to some when trying to put everything in place: the scenery, the weather and the fact that so many animals call this their year-round home.



The foray stayed relatively close to the lodge, mostly within 10 – 12 miles of on the first full day, then another foray went further back into the park on the second full day. The wildflower show

was a little behind schedule this season, but there was still plenty to pique one's curiosity. Nothing of any height to pull your eyes away from the ground for this is tundra. And the tundra flowers always seem to proceed the wildflowers found in the riparian and treed areas of the park. Most all of the leaves, lichens, mosses and rocks are different shades of gray, some green and a little blue. Then the flowers come into focus with pungent yellows, exotic blues and the ever-present pinks. Definitely a feast for our eyes...

We saw more Grizzly Bear on every day of our visit. Moose were in the willowed parts of the park and were readily visible, Dall sheep were there, but distant in the higher parts of the park. Caribou were closer to the road this year and last with low predation pressure, given the continued onslaught of those in Alaska that feel it is a rite of passage to take a wolf simply to hang on the wall. Alpine Ground Squirrels, those cute bear burritos were everywhere and becoming mas grande every day. Hoary Marmots were encountered down the road from the lodge and with the perpetual daylight, it made for easy viewing of those industrious Beaver at ponds that dot the terrain.

Quite a treat to be able to experience all of this, all while being well-fed and taken care of at the North Face Lodge.

Monday, June 11 Return to Anchorage

We did have to leave Monday morning to catch the train back to Anchorage, with Ann searching out and finding three different Northern Hawk Owls on the drive! But the 4" – 5" of snow that fell as we drove left us all with different view of the Alaska Range and Denali National Park.

We settled into our Gold Star car on the Alaska Railroad, with time to visit and work on projects, enjoy dinner, en route back to Anchorage.

Tuesday, June 12 South to Seward

We started our morning off by loading everything we owned into the van and heading towards Seward. Our first stop was at Potter Marsh where the local Tree Swallows were being so cooperative, that binoculars weren't a necessity. Alder Flycatchers were tee'd up and singing



away, while a pair of Sandhill Cranes foraged through the wetlands. Mew Gulls were nesting along with the geese from Canada. It was still spring and it seemed that nesting was in high gear for all sorts of species. We had over thirty species at Potter Marsh, and all were with young, sitting on nests of staking out their territories, definitely some fecundity going here.

After a fun lunch at Firetap (with just so many choices on the menu), we continued on our two-hour drive to Seward. Against a backdrop of mountains that blushed with snow, glaciers or conifers, we discussed the 1964 earthquake and its impact on the natural resources of the area. The hooligan run hadn't started so saw far too few Bald Eagles, but a Merlin here and there along with numerous species of waterfowl seemed to make the drive a little shorter than it actually was.



We arrived in time to check into our hotel and then walk across the street to the Alaska Sea Life Center. Their impressive exhibits, including live animals of many taxa, helped us tune up for tomorrow's nine-hour boat ride out to Northwestern Glacier. We finished the day off at Ray's, where seafood reigns supreme and some pretty good deserts too.



Wednesday, June 13 Kenai Fjords Cruise / Northwestern Glacier & the Chiswell Islands

We could not have asked for finer weather when we awoke. It was sunny, with a slight breeze that eventually disappeared by noon and some very flats seas. Driving to board our boat, it was a bit of a challenge to stop watching the Humpback

Whales lunge-feeding across the road, but we knew we would see them from the ship.



And after boarding and leaving the harbor, it was pretty much wildlife and scenery from start to finish: Numerous Dall's porpoise, over thirty killer whales, a dozen Humpback Whales, lots of alcids including Kittlitz's & Ancient Murrelets and Parakeet Auklet, Coastal Mountain Goats, calving glaciers, vertical rock walls weeping with waterfalls and some of the most stunning scenery to date. Just a phenomenal day, and one that will be discussed for many a year!



Thursday, June 14 Birding Seward / Spawning Salmon / Departures

Our final day started off with a visit to Ava's feeders just outside of Seward. Pine Grosbeak, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Belted Kingfisher the monster Alaska Song Sparrow, Red Crossbill, Rufous Hummingbird and more. What a great way help everyone get great views of new species. All in about forty-five minutes of time there gave us great results.



Our final stop before heading to the airport was at Bear Creek where Sockeye Salmon were piling up in the creeks, all in the name of procreation and to feed the family of Bald Eagle that were nesting over our parked vehicles. With a continued determination, they muscled their way over the barriers and just kept heading

further upstream. There must have been at least two hundred waiting for their turn to move inland, quite a sight, and really a very fitting way to end our fourteen-day tour of the finest that Alaska had to share.

As most flights leave in the afternoon or evening, we returned to the airport in plenty of time for check-in. A few stayed on in Anchorage to enjoy a bit more time.



*Photo credits: All photos by Greg Smith except for the Caribou photo by Peg Abbott.