

ALASKA SAMPLER: Anchorage, Denali & Seward

August 6 – 14, 2018 | Compiled by Dodie Logue



Participants: Guide Dodie Logue with guest Ann Sealey from Trinidad, and Dick, Linda, Roger, Donna, Suga, Billie, Dave, Cindy, Pat & Karen



Monday, Aug. 6: Anchorage

Some folks had arrived a few days early and some came in this day, which was calm and overcast. At 4:00 pm most of us met for a birding walk along the coastal trail, which is right behind our hotel, and never gets old! There are birds and bikes and other strange peddling contraptions, dogs, runners, walkers, hand-holders. We spent some time deciphering the various gull species – three species on this walk (Bonaparte's, Mew, and Herring). There were also Alder Flycatcher, Sandhill Crane, and many Red-necked Grebe with stripe-headed babies on Westchester Lagoon when we finally arrived there. We also saw some shorebirds including Short-billed Dowitcher, Solitary Sandpiper, and both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. The day was beautiful and mild, a bit of sun and a wee bit of rain.



At 7:00 pm we finally all met as a group in the lounge of our hotel, the Copper Whale Inn. Some folks knew each other from a previous trip, and a few knew Ann Sealy (who was a special guest guide on this tour) from visiting the Asa Wright Nature Center on Trinidad where she is the director. We did introductions and went over the schedule for the next day. Then a short walk next door to a wonderful

dinner at Simon and Seaforts, where most of us had some kind of seafood. Back at the hotel we all went directly to bed after a long travel day.

Tuesday, Aug. 7: Drive to Seward

Today was our drive to Seward along the Turnagain Arm. We packed and were on the road by 8:00 am, first stop Potter Marsh – in the rain! We all piled out with our rain gear on and right off the boardwalk saw Bald Eagle, Wilson’s Snipe, Short-billed Dowitcher, and some gull species. The rain never let up and



we headed down the road sooner than we wanted. The drive was beautiful though, and quintessential Alaska; Turnagain Arm was full of mud-flats as the tide was low, and we were happy to start seeing some glaciers peeking out from the clouds along the Chugach mountain range as we made our way south. Rain was quite heavy, so we changed our schedule a bit and got further down the road before stopping again, this time at Tern Lake. There were no terns – this is an Arctic Tern breeding area but they had already left for the season. We did see a Trumpeter Swan family, Widgeon, and a mother Greater Scaup with young.



After this we backtracked a few miles to have a great and welcomed lunch at Summit Lake Lodge, a cheery, homey place with good food. The rain was letting up some now, and after eating we made our way close to Seward before stopping again, this time at Bear Creek Weir. This is in deep sitka spruce forest; here we saw salmon in the creek, and had great looks at a your dipper walking along the weir structure, foraging for food. This

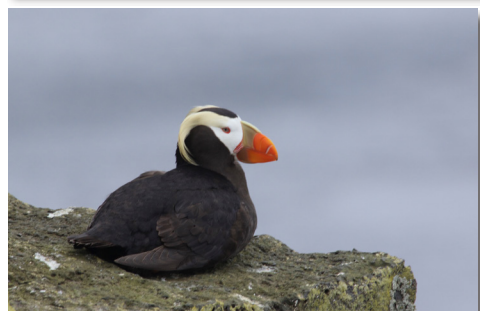
is a place where the fish start at Resurrection Bay, are counted on their way up Bear Creek, and spawn in Bear Lake. The forest here is beautiful!

After this we pulled into “Ava’s feeders” and were lucky to meet Ava herself, gun on her hip! I think this was a highlight for some of us. She was headed out fishing and said the bears had been really present in the area. We did see a nice “sooty” Fox sparrow here, and a few Siskin, but otherwise it was quiet. We backtracked a bit next to look at a close-range Bald Eagle nest with three young in it.



Driving into Seward around 3:30 pm, we went directly to the Sea-Life center, always a fun place to visit. The sea-bird room and the baby Sea Otter did not disappoint! Off the back deck some of us saw Marbled Murrelet, Pigeon Guillemot, Red-neck Phalarope, and Black-legged Kittiwake. It had been a long day, and around 4:45 pm we checked into the Edgewater Hotel and had a bit of a needed break. We later did the check list at 6:45 pm in the hotel lobby, then drove downtown to an 8:00 pm

dinner. We had a bit of time beforehand to walk along the docks and look at the boats and Sea Otters. Dinner was at Rays, another fine seafood dining establishment.



Wednesday, Aug. 8: Kenai Fjords boat tour

Today we breakfasted at our hotel and left by 7:45 am to be back on the docks and in line for our all-day Kenai Fjords boat tour. It was a Beautiful day! There were Otter in the harbor again, and our punctual group we got good seats up in the bow of the boat. Most of us spent the majority of our time outdoors, watching the landscape and the sea. A full day of sun and calm water – very fortunate. Some of the Mammals seen were Sea Otter, Harbor Seal, multiple Hump-backed Whale, coastal Mountain goat, and Steller Sea Lion. We visited Northwestern glacier, stopping the boat and spinning 360 a few times, as well as other glaciers along the route.

There were many memorable bird sightings, including both Horned and Tufted Puffin, Pigeon Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, and Marbled and Kittlitz's Murrelets (only some saw Kittlitz's). Many photo ops were had this day! Ann and others held an iceberg fragment for photos, and we all loved being in the presence of the huge ancient glaciers.

A breakfast snack and lunch were served on board, and the trip went by quickly. After the 9 hour tour, we all did our own thing for dinner, enjoying some reflection time.

Thursday, Aug. 9: Drive from Seward to Anchorage

Another breakfast at our hotel, then we packed up the vans and headed to Ava's feeders again. We had a nice chat with her - what a great local character! The birds were slow but we had Pine Grosbeak, a Hairy Woodpecker, and a few sparrows - along with another good Bald Eagle look.

Continuing back up the Seward road, we made another quick stop to scope Tern Lake – the same suspects were there – then we made a stop at Summit Lake Lodge for fortification and a wc break. Next we pulled into Tenderfoot campground just past the lodge, and thanks to Roger and Dave staying back by the vans, we finally had a nice migrating warbler flock, including Townsend's Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Wilson's Warbler, Orange-crowned, Warbler and a Black-capped Chickadee. Next we drove

for about another hour along the Turnagain arm – the tide was nearly at low point again. We stopped in Girdwood for lunch at the Bake Shop by the ski resort. Some of us enjoyed the co-op art gallery next door as well. Potter Marsh pullovers were next, we had good looks at a Red-necked Grebe and youngster; then we did the boardwalk again, saw many of the same birds as before, but this time glorious weather and stream-fording salmon. We checked into our hotel by 4:00 pm, and as the vans needed to be returned and a few errands run, everyone scattered to do their own thing. We met as a group at 6:30 pm for briefing about the next day, and off to dinner we went.

Friday, Aug. 10: Bus to Denali and North Face Lodge

An early depart! Off to Egan center to catch the 6:30 am bus to Denali. Thanks to punctual folks, all went smoothly. It was a beautiful day and Denali (The Great One) showed himself nearly the whole way. No sightings on the bus ride from Anchorage, except Trumpeter Swan, but our driver sure entertained with his stories. One brief stop at Teklanika Lodge was made for bathrooms and/or snack break. Here we had a wonderful view of the mountain range, but then we were off again.

We made it to the Denali train station at 12:30 pm, loaded up our new North Face Lodge Bus and were back on the road a little after 1:00. Now the sightings began. Our first large mammal was a gorgeous male Caribou. Then another. I finally lost count of Grizzlies seen, must have been around a dozen yearlings (this year's young), most with the characteristic Toklat coloring. Dall Sheep were seen a few places up on the slopes, Snow Shoe Hare (the only rabbit species in the park) were all over the roads later in the day, as were Arctic Ground squirrel. Our last mammal sighting was a little Red Fox, who peed about three times, looking back at us, marking its territory. Birds seen were Golden Eagle, Greater White-fronted Goose, Boreal Chickadee at a rest stop, (by some) as well as Orange-crowned Warbler, Merlin, and Northern Harrier.

Denali was out the whole day! It was mostly sunny with some clouds. We received a warm welcome at the lodge complete with a Trinidad and Tobago flag to welcome Ann, and yummy poppyseed cake with our briefing. We got settled into our keyless rooms, wandered around a bit, took in the view - sleep was close, but so hard with such a view and so much light!



Saturday, Aug. 11: North Face Lodge, Denali

Today most of us chose to go on the Foray. Two stayed back at the lodge to paint, and one joined the intermediate hikers for a day out in the field. The Foray group saw lots of waterfowl - Long-tail Duck, Common Goldeneye, Northern Pintail, Widgeon, Harlequin Duck, and Greater Scaup.

We also had our share of Grizzly, Caribou, flora, and the grand scale landscape – vast mountains – and the minute – small rhododendron, willow, and plants less than a few inches tall. We saw scat, and tracks, including wolf and Caribou. We enjoyed lunch on the spongy tundra, and saw Short-eared Owl and Gyrfalcon. The day may be best described by a poem we wrote together with our spectacular guide Iris' compilation:

*Camaraderie and laughter
we made it to a picnic on the Tundra
amongst crowberries at our feet
so many hawks and owls!
our world, and us, are breathing
like the worlds smallest azalea
sometimes it was a tropical place
vast, pure, limitless
with so many sizes of water and plants
and playful, tiny bears
maybe the bears were just smelling the flowers
while we just rolled on by, barely noticed, insignificant.*

The intermediate hiker had a nice day in the field; and the painters set up at Camp Denali to get the full view, creating some wonderful watercolors. Later we enjoyed cocktails, appetizers, and dinner: fresh local salmon and the best blueberry tart ever, full of antioxidants from the flavorful local berries. Some went to the evening program



program by climber, writer and Anchorage Professor David Stevenson, who had images of some climbs, talked and read from his book.



Sunday, Aug. 12: North Face Lodge, Denali

Today there were yummy buckwheat crepes for breakfast, as well as too much other food. No one would go hungry here! The Foray today, which all of our group did except one person (the same hardy soul as the previous day) set off to the far end of Wonder Lake where we had our first Bohemian Waxwing! This was a life bird for many of the group. On the lake there were some White-wing Scoter and a few Common Loon. On the road we had our first and only Swainson's Thrush. We next made a few kettle pond stops, where we saw Greater Scaup, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, and Green-wing Teal.



Lunch was eaten on the tundra overlooking Wonder Lake with a view of the whole snowy mountain range. It truly was a sublime day....

After lunch we headed up to Camp Denali so folks could check that out. There was a Merlin family flying all around and making a ruckus. Some of the group continued on up to the end of the road in Kantishna, where we had a pair of Spruce Grouse on the road. The van made it back to North Face Lodge by 3:00 with time to rest, repack, walk, etc.

Before dinner we did the checklist and enjoyed drinks in the lobby as well as an art show of watercolors that

David and Cindy had done on their trip. How they managed to get so much done I don't know! The work was beautiful and inspiring – bravo! Dinner tonight was chicken with fresh garden greens; afterwards David Stevenson gave another talk, this time about books by various authors on climbing, and he read a very moving essay that he had written.

A ditty I learned today when asked what Lichen are: *Freddy Fungus and Alice Algae took a Lichen to each other; but soon their relationship was on the rocks.*

Monday, Aug. 13: Travel from Denali to Anchorage, Alaska Railroad

Today was our departure, breakfast at 6 am, our last meal at the lodge. The bus was loaded and we were on the road by 6:45. We enjoyed some wonderful Grizzly Bear sightings, as well as our first Moose sighting, and a few Caribou. Our last views of the mountains and landscape were taken in, and this ended up being the chilliest day of our stay.

Our group made it to the train station by 11:30 am. We had an hour to explore or check email etc., the train departed at 12:30. We all had Gold-star treatment with a dome viewing roof - quite a few Moose sightings! Lunch, dinner, and a few drinks were included. A nice way to prepare for re-entry into the "normal" world, as roads and cars and finally small towns were passed by. It rained much of the day, and by 8 pm we pulled into the train station in Anchorage. We got through the madness of the luggage scramble, hopped into cabs and were back in our familiar rooms at the Copper Whale.



We said our farewells and went to our own musings and sleep. Some were headed home the next day, and some were continuing on to do a bit more Alaska exploration.



What fantastic weather we had, especially on the boat and in Denali. Thank you all for making this a truly special trip, and especially to Ann for joining us and making it all the better!

Photo credits: Fireweed, Seward Harbor, Trumpeter Swan, Bohemian Waxwing, Peg Abbott; Sandhill Cranes Bald Eagle, Arctic Tern, Red-necked Phalarope, Otter, Tufted Puffin, Dall Sheep, Grizzly Bear, Red Fox, Moose, Greg Smith; Suga with an iceberg fragment in hand, Catching sight of a Canada Jay, Ann enjoying the view and lunch at Wonder Lake, Ann is ready for drinks, Dodie Logue; Group shot, North Face Lodge guide.

