

Classic Alaska: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report

May 30 – June 10, 2021 | Written by Peg Abbott



With Guide Peg Abbott, and participants Val, Karen, Kathy, Steve, Ken, Doni, Mark, Lois, Doug, and Ruth



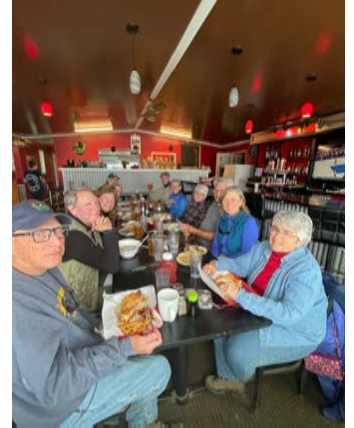


Sun., May 30 Arrivals in Nome | Local Birding

Val and Karen, Ruth, Ann, and Doug had arrived for the trip early and this morning they joined Peg and Greg to check the first ponds near town, and birds at the Nome River Mouth and Cape Nome. We sighted three species of scoters but found out later that we had missed two individuals of a fourth species, wanderers from Russia that are very hard to identify unless in flight, but on this day were reported by keen-eyed David Sibley. We had seen someone working quietly from his car with a scope pointed the scoter's flight direction. He observed from a more sheltered bay, while we buffeted strong winds at the Cape Nome tip there were white caps, and the birds were far for our view. It turns out that photographs are the best way to identify these two as one needs to see the flanks, visible in flight with a lifted wing. Next time! Braced at the end of the jetty we did get fine views of Long-tailed and Harlequin Duck, and two well-lit Pacific Loon. What an intriguing start!

Mark and Lois came in mid-day to join us. Peg met them at the airport, and they did a quick visit to the nesting Red-throated Loon and Red-necked Grebe combo at Cemetery Pond in route back to the Aurora Inn. We all had some delicious croissants from Pingo Bakery for lunch, filled with smoked salmon and cream cheese or ham and cheese, plus homemade cookies. No losing weight when in the Arctic where an often-cold wind seemed to increase our appetites with gusto.

At 2 p.m. we headed back out, deciding to head west to the Penny River area, always a good corridor for birds' migration through. Nome is the first landing point for those coming in from the sea and from this spot you can almost feel the sense of migration, as shorebirds drop down into the wet meadow by the river, and lines of swans, scoters or jaegers fly along the opposing ridge. We listened to robust calls of Northern Waterthrush which sang from exposed perches, so much sound from such a tiny soul. Yellow and Wilson's Warblers were present and singing, and a real treat was seeing Wilson's Snipe on the wing and calling. Under the bridge was a resident pair of American Dipper, nice to see this active again as several years ago a long winter freeze up affected them and the beavers. We watched one of the pair feeding, listened to it sing, reverberating from the structure of the bridge. Time passed quickly, returning to Nome we noted several Long-tailed Jaeger and worked on some of the shorebirds visible at Snake River crossing.



Four others came in today after 5 p.m. We enjoyed our first dinner in the back room of Milano's where we sat surrounded by a season's worth of supplies. Not your usual décor but perfect as in our own room we could do introductions, our first day's bird list, and outline of tomorrow's plan. The menu is remarkably varied, from some delicious Korean food to American hamburgers, Mexican quesadillas, and Japanese tempura dishes. They recognized Greg Smith from his years of guiding here and we were treated like old friends.

Walking back to the hotel we marveled at full daylight at 9 p.m.! Indeed, it would be bright until about 2 in the morning, then dusky, then light again by 4 a.m. The sun gleaming over the Bering Sea drew some out for walk along the beach road.

Mon., May 31 Nome | Kougarok Road

We left at 8:30 a.m. to allow time to get breakfast and our sandwiches to go, with plans to be out the full day. This is perhaps Nome's most spectacular road, and it was still quite covered in snow, Salmon Lake along the way was still frozen except a few open holes. We started at the Nome Dump, a sure bet place to see gulls and bingo – there were two Slaty-backed, a species we hoped to find. We could compare them to Mew and Glaucous, two other gull species we'd get to know well over the next few days. Common Ravens cawed and twirled about in the sky as we headed on. We kept our eyes open for Moose in the abundant willows that lined the Nome River we followed.

We sorted out the birds of the bush, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Fox Sparrow (red form), American Tree Sparrow, Wilson's, and Orange-crowned Warblers, and behind each stop we heard winnowing Wilson's Snipes, fun! Northern Waterthrush sang from willow tops and were quite common.

Heading up to mile 20-21, we found four Wandering Tattlers and got very good looks along a rushing stream. Harlequin Ducks were a thrill, in lovely plumage. They were joined by Red-breasted Mergansers.



At the Grand Central Bridge, we had friendly Tree Swallows, more vibrant Harlequin Ducks, and good looks at Hoary Redpoll which proved to be quite common this year in Nome. As we climbed in elevation, we stopped for lunch at a scenic viewpoint, hoping to find Golden Eagle but instead studying some wonderful ridge-top, bird-like rocks. The flower show was awesome, and we did a bit of belly hugging to get just the right shots.

This landscape was just stunning, and with luck we found a bird we really hoped to see this day, Bluethroat. We got close enough for photographs and watched their flight song behavior. Continuing, we had one surprise after another and vistas too splendid to describe. Highlights included a wading Moose, a coursing Short-eared Owl, Long-tailed Duck, Tundra Swans and more.

Coffee Dome, mile 74, we reached fairly late in the day. We gathered our gear and started the ascent, scrambling a bit through tundra on a bit of a trail. Foot after foot, we felt the anticipation grow. Would we find Bristle-thighed Curlew, a fascinating bird that breeds on these remote tundra domes of Alaska and winters in Hawaii. And with some work, YES, we did. Peg saw it do a flight song on the ridge, and Greg got up there to zone in and spot it. We all got very good views, not super close but as it seemed to be the only one arriving to date, we gave it space and just admired it. There were some other species atop this dome, but aside from the curlew what took our attention was just the view of miles and miles of wild untamed country, snow peaks, huge rivers – Alaska true and true.

Back down we went, 75 miles of dirt road home, and back to Airport Pizza for dinner where we topped off our choices with some nice cold brews, good stories of our day and fun.

Tues., June 1 Nome | Teller Road

We left again at 8:30 a.m., with open-ended plans on how far we would go, for sure getting to Wooley Lagoon but perhaps not the additional 25+ miles pending on our stops and what we would see. In the end it was gale force winds that turned us back, but for the morning we were oblivious to this, and we picked up a lot of good species.

We glanced at several ponds en route, but the first significant stop was the Penny River, which was hopping. We parked back a way, noting Northern Waterthrush, Wilson's Warbler, Yellow Warbler and in the open area, a good number of shorebirds. Almost 20 Pectoral Sandpipers came in in small groups of 4-5, flying up the river and landing in the wet grassy area to feed. They did not linger long, but more were right behind them, migration in motion. Wilson's Snipe were winnowing overhead, the American Dipper was home, and we spied four Pomarine Jaeger flying up the ridgeline purposefully, great views of their plumage and proportions.



From here we continued, stopping at several of the river crossings, the most notable the Sinuk River. Here we had more Bar-tailed Godwit, a good variety of shorebirds including Lesser Yellowlegs and a Pacific Golden Plover at close range, and two Cackling Goose. The country was grand in scale and made us feel small. The wind was also kicking up, bringing a real Arctic chill with it. Not to be deterred, we headed up a steep road to a former ocean terrace, now a rocky terrain filled with colorful flowers. Two Muskox posed against snow-capped peaks—a classic Arctic scene. The wind was howling so we did not get out but viewed from the van as best as we could. We spied a single Red Knot on a bald hill as we descended, feeding in abundant flowers.

Greg had a favorite lunch spot picked out, another spot he'd had luck with Red Knot before. A few brave souls got out to hug the ground and study the flowers, most ate in the vehicles as it was difficult to even stand when the gusts came through. Greg and Peg made a short foray out to bird and turned up a Rock Ptarmigan, that drew almost all out to view it, though scope use was impossible. There were Woolly Lousewort, Windflower Anemones, several species of Dryas, Alpine Azalea, and more. Arctic and Net-veined Willow gave some structure and height to the vegetation, all still under a foot.

Back on the main road we had two bull Muskox very close to the road, they had been feeding on a patch of willow that grew high from extra water coming off the road. They moved off a bit but stayed close, their long guard hairs blew in the wind as they browsed. These were two massive animals, perfectly at home in the Arctic, hair all the way down their legs to cover their feet. They had been shedding their inner fur, known as qiviut, it decorated branches like ornaments wherever they had traveled. On the road to Wooley Lagoon, we found three species of plovers, all in bright plumage—American and Pacific Golden-plovers and Black-bellied Plover. Ruddy Turnstone were feeding in flowers, bright in breeding plumage, and we marveled at the acrobatics of several Long-tailed Jaegers mobbing one with prey. Greg's van got views of our first Northern Wheatear at the start and coming back, a Rough-legged Hawk swooping in over the van. This village is perched on the edge of the sea, we turned around before reaching it to respect their privacy, but their tenacity to call this place home will remain in our minds, so cold was the wind, and so bleak was this spring Arctic day, other than bright birds and flowers of spring.

We decided to head back rather than continue another 30 miles or so to Teller, happy with our bird finds despite the challenges. Long-tailed Jaeger were common, a pair of Tundra Swan were elegant, and back towards town where it seemed downright balmy, two stately Sandhill Crane appeared to have staked out a small wetland for their nest site.



Dinner tonight was at Milano's where we had the backroom again to ourselves and got caught up on our bird list in addition to enjoying our meal. The staff here could not have been more gracious, most welcome after a full day of field time.

Wed., June 2 Nome | Council Road

We started at the Nome River Mouth where Bar-tailed Godwit was a life bird for almost the full group. A lone Snow Goose joined the 150+ Arctic Terns, numerous Mew and Glaucous Gulls, over a 100 Dunlin and numerous Western Sandpiper, six Long-billed Dowitcher and other species.

We continued out to Safety Lagoon where we could have stopped time and time again. It was a stellar day, calm, sunny, wonderful reflections on the water. All along the way native Alaskans have their summer homes, decorated with antlers, fishing gear, and housing boats and snowmobiles. A flag was out on the Safety Roadhouse, open probably for the first time of the season on this holiday weekend. There were scores of ducks at a distance, Greater Scaup the most numerous, but today joined by Brant, many Northern Pintail and Shoveler, and a few Green-winged Teal.

At the bridge, we spied two Glaucous Gulls on the carcass of a Ribbon Seal washed ashore. Across the bridge in the ocean-lagoon channel area we encountered turbulent current which drew hundreds of Arctic Tern, it was great fun watching them feed. There was one Bonaparte's Gull on the wing feeding with them, it obliged us by resting on the sand across the channel so we could study it in more detail. Peg heard and called out two Aleutian Terns close to the van that continued to the bridge. A pair of Common Raven had their nest on the pilings. Ken had his scope out and in scanning found a Red Fox digging in soft sands, coming in and out of site. It had beautiful pelage with a fancy, white-tipped tail. Over it flew a Parasitic Jaeger, giving us good views.

We wanted to stretch our legs a bit, so we walked down to a viewing platform where Kathy had a Least Sandpiper fluttering its display right at her feet. We all enjoyed the moments to scan good numbers of Brant, various waterfowl, and then to heed a sudden call, Parasitic Jaeger, our second of the morning, this one a light phase bird that gave us excellent views.

At the far end of the sound, the beauty of Tundra Swans in big number, 300+ against blue waves and blue sky was mesmerizing. Behind them snow-capped peaks on this perfect day, wow! Three Red Phalaropes, lingering earlier migrants, were a bonus in the foreground.

We got back later than expected, so much to see, so we went right to dinner back to Airport Pizza. Tonight, we sat in the bar, and the waitress brought us our favorite cold Denali IPA's, a variety of dishes (wedge salad with blue cheese in Nome, really?) and then we headed home, as those birding early in the morning had packing on their mind.



Thurs., June 3 Cape Nome | Nome River | Flight to Anchorage

One last round of birding, we went out to Cape Nome to look for sea ducks arriving. A line of five Tundra Swan winging in just over the water was lovely. A head popped up and we were thrilled to see a Ribbon Seal, just off the pier. It was windy, so most of what we saw was a quick look and flying by, Pelagic Cormorant, several Surf Scoter and the little raft of Harlequin Duck that had been there the days previous.

We stopped for all to admire the Varied Thrush, another birding group parked and joined us, there were two singing males here that perched up for inspection, a treat. At the Nome River Mouth, we watched the regular cast of characters we'd seen, and a couple of Aleutian Tern called as they flew overhead, but we just missed a Ross's Gull encountered by David Sibley. At these big river mouths the birds come in, land and often soon go on, which makes for always-exciting birding.

Our last effort was for two early-arriving Arctic Warbler that had been described, but they also must have landed and then dispersed, not in the area described today. At the Harbor little flotillas of Long-tailed Duck were memorable.

We packed up gear and at 11 a.m., went to Pingo's where the owner had made us some of her specialty pizzas with salmon, halibut, crab, and asparagus combined with pesto and some lovely subtle flavors. Fortified, we headed to the airport where check-in went smoothly and once through security you continue right on to the plane. The flight was smooth, and views of the Chugach Mountains greeted us at Anchorage.

We settled into our lodgings, the wonderful Copper Whale B & B in Anchorage. Some relaxed on their porches soaking in the sun, some went for a walk, and others did a bit of shopping.

Dinner tonight was at a long-time Anchorage top restaurant, Simon and Seafort's, handily right next door to our hotel. We enjoyed weather that allowed us to wear "street clothes" and a chance to relax with appetizers, a good meal and desserts. The view of Cooke Inlet is exceptional from the large glass windows of the restaurant. Five of the group tried Halibut cheeks on Greg's recommendation, these are rare to find on a menu but rich and delicious. Others had fresh salmon, halibut, and crab—yum. Asparagus was in season here and fresh spears made for a treat. The light after dinner was aglow, not as bright as in Nome, but certainly a June Alaska well-lit "night".

Fri., June 4 Anchorage to Camp Denali

Some foreboding clouds accompanied our ride north, making for dramatic views of the Chugach Mountains as we left Anchorage. We passed Willow, where the Iditarod Race restarts in earnest after a ceremonial start in Anchorage, fun to see as our driver described how the event was run. By our break in Talkeetna there were good views of the Alaska range and peeks at Foraker, Hunter and finally—Denali! It truly is the Great One, looming



over the 14000 ft. peaks below it at a staggering 20,000+ feet. We enjoyed flute like tones of Swainson's Thrush, and watched Black-billed Magpie, Black-capped Chickadee and Tree Swallow before heading on. Scenery only got better and better, and by 2/3's of the way in we had full sun and blue sky. This gave us hopes for a great ride into the park!

The Park Road is a full 90 miles and it's a winding dirt road, we cross major river drainages of the Savage River, Sanctuary, Teklanika, Tolklut and we cross four passes, Sable, Polychrome, Highway and Thorofare. The rivers are tree-lined and good spots to look for Moose while the passes are open, alpine tundra grand for vistas and finding Caribou, Dall Sheep, and Grizzly Bear. We saw them all, the first Grizzly was busy pulling up Eskimo Potato alongside her yearling cub—it was amazing to watch how powerful her digging was. Dall Sheep were very high, way up on the ridgelines, and we saw several groups of males. The females are bearing young and secretive, but we caught a glimpse of some, though no tiny young yet. We saw Black-billed Magpie and Golden Eagles. David Sibley was with us and set his scope up on the eagles during one rest room break. The colors on Polychrome Pass were breathtaking. The high country still held a lot of snow, making all the views magnificent. Numbers of Caribou were high, nursery groups of 40+ were seen in several areas.

We nibbled along the way. Peg had picked us up a full lunch in Talkeetna, but wanting us to be well-cared for, the staff at Camp Denali had Bento boxes for us mid-trip, full of Alaska treats—dried strawberries, carrots from the greenhouse, a smoked salmon dip, and nuts.

Once past Eielson the country changes, and there were numerous species of waterfowl on the ponds, including Ring-necked Duck and Bufflehead, and Greater White-fronted Geese. Lesser Scaup were probably the most common. In one pond we saw Beaver swimming, and then a very tiny, small Beaver we at first thought might be a lemming.

Big news causing great excitement this year was the surge, going on right now having started in January, of the Muldrow Glacier. While television channels were showing aerial views of it at our homes, we were seeing it firsthand. Ice was crunched and stacked 200 feet high in a gray, black and white jumble raised several hundred feet over where it had been last year, all the pressure of the glacier behind showing and pushing this material at its forefront. Our driver Drew had studied geology and he was just seeing it too, he could hardly contain himself! It had been some 60 years since it last surged. Wow!

And we certainly did luck out on seeing the mountain. Denali views can be very fickle, and some trips get only a peek, but today it shone well by the time we got past Eielson Visitor Center, winding then through tundra ponds and past Wonder Lake. The causeway at the end of Wonder Lake gave us a full view of its glorious reaches.

We arrived at Camp about 7 p.m., settled into our cabins, then joined together in Potlatch, the large dining room with big windows aimed out at the mountains, to enjoy a salad of fresh organic greens from the Camp





greenhouse and a lush and filling tortilla soup. We had introductions to the staff and enjoyed some crisp air as we walked back to our cabins.

Sat., June 5 Camp Denali | Naturalist Foray into the park | Stony Dome & Highway Pass | Local Hikes

Two of our group, Kathy and Steve, elected the strenuous hike, getting up on the ridge 1000 ft. above the Camp for vast views, great natural history, sighting of a Merlin, and some good exercise. Mark joined the moderate group, and the rest of us accompanied David Sibley on the Naturalist Foray. It was an excellent day, with good mammal sightings taking top billing but some pretty good birding as well.

Right out of Camp, we got super views of singing Fox Sparrow, Wilson's Warbler, nesting Cliff Swallows at the ranger station, Common Redpoll, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and a noisy Gray Jay. A surprise showed up in the form of a Rusty Blackbird, not common here, that teed up for scope views along the road. The ducks were in sublime plumage—so fresh, and we saw pairs and groups of males, perhaps already done with breeding and ready to feed up and then go to safe places to molt. We had Greater and Lesser Scaup side by side in good light for comparison. Green-winged Teal and American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail all were in prime form. Down the road looking back at Wonder Lake a pair of Trumpeter Swans flew by in beautiful, synchronized flight, calling. The flowers in this road section were lovely, anemones, bluebells, drabas, cinquefoil, nangoon berry and more.

Further down the road we watched a young beaver (we thought at first was a lemming) swim in the “best dam pond” where we'd observed the adult Beaver coming in—they've obviously made a successful return to this area after populations dropped from a severe winter freeze in years previous. We stopped at Eielson Visitor Center to use the facilities (it is otherwise closed for the season due to Covid, but a ranger is on duty there) and took a scan, finding a large nursery herd of Caribou both bedded down and feeding between snowfields.

Continuing, a bus pulled over on Thorofare Pass with a turn signal on left alerted us to a big female grizzly upslope, digging with purpose on a cutbank of a small cutout area of tundra. After several minutes of watching Peg called out that there were two cubs, tiny springs cubs of the year, quite small, playful, and sticking tight to the sow. She was all business for feeding, but as this trio was close, we kept quiet and watching in wonder, so much ahead for these small cubs.

Drew served up some hot coffee, tea, or cider at a break along Big Stony Creek, where we spotted some songbirds in the willows. Several magpies were noisy and flying here, one appeared to be almost white. It landed on a hillside and in the scope, we could see that the black feather tracks were the palest of browns, a crazy looking bird!

There were some lovely tundra flowers in the high country, including azalea and Lapland rosebay. Drew our guide was familiar with them all and offered up a taste of one edible type of greens. We spied a Rock Ptarmigan,



still dressed in winter white upslope. A second mother grizzly and yearling, the same duo we had the day previous were in much the same area going up Stony Dome. We passed her to a safe distance and got in a wander out along a stream to search for Wandering Tattler, no go today but good views of American Pipit and Golden-crowned Sparrow.

We were out to look at flowers more closely, passing a colony of Arctic Ground Squirrel when someone caught view of a Red Fox. It pounced on prey, just out of clear view, and we thought to hop in to try to follow it. Instead, we held tight as it turned and started trotting down the road in our direction. It stopped now aware of us, but unalarmed, just veered off the road crossing below us through some willows and across a snowfield, first licking its lips and then taking several big yawns, perhaps to adjust a just-swallowed ground squirrel. We were treated to fine views and its pelage was in top form, a rich red with gold highlights still thick from winter. Wow!

It was a full day, and we enjoyed catching back up to our hikers at dinner, and a feast of corn chowder, salmon, tender fiddleheads, and for dessert, lemon tart. Yum! The evening program by David Sibley was very well received, he shared some secrets on how he draws birds, teaching us to look at feathers and all their detail, for this is what we see. Before our eyes, he drew a Yellow-rumped Warbler, and we learned a LOT about feathers. It was very insightful and certainly delightful. Rain fell hard as we made a dash back to our cozy cabins.

Sun., June 6 Camp Denali | Hiking and a Foray with David Sibley

Today a few of our group chose to hike, Cathy on the strenuous hike was rewarded with views of a perched Gyrfalcon, a Wandering Tattler in the stream, and once back to the bus our first woodpecker of the trip, a Northern Flicker on the road.

Two of the staff shared with us that a Common Redpoll nest was just off the porch, and we took turns quietly watching it. Those at the start also saw Varied Thrush, a familiar sound we heard walking to and from our lodgings.

Most of our group went with David Sibley on another foray, first stopped by the Moose Creek Bridge. They then headed out past the tundra ponds where they scoped Common and Barrow's Goldeneye for comparison and noted a good number of species. At Ranger Pond Bog Rosemary was in bloom, and Gadwall was added to our list. An Alder Flycatcher was new, and a surprise in the Mile 81 pond, a lone Pacific Loon. This is not a common bird in Denali so a treat. At the campground for Wonder Lake, a scan of the shoreline revealed a Moose winter



kill and those there at the start got a glimpse of a large Grizzly Bear on it, it left quickly, and a Herring Gull moved in. Also present was an early brood of Gray Jay with their dark plumage. An Olive-sided Flycatcher was singing throughout the time, and a group of White-winged Sparrow came through. Driving out a female Merlin crossed in front of the bus and a Northern Harrier.

Peg, Val, and Karen were in the sprinter van with some other guests and Rob, and we had a lot of fun exploring. We found the American Dipper by a probable nest, and at the lakeshore the same Moose Carcass, plus a pair of Beaver that came very close, one getting up on shore. Two Common Loon swam close, and the water was so clear you could see them swim under water. The day was fine, and we found a few bees and butterflies. Five calling waterfowl (White-fronted Goose) overhead were identified as Red Bubbas (the group misheard Rob's "above us") and this became the cause for jokes and some general hilarity. Moving on down the road, we walked a bit along the road, checking out tundra ponds, and on a knoll, we stopped for lunch and hot drinks. Peg scanned relentlessly and found a Gray Wolf, perhaps a half-mile away and totally unaware of us. It was a quick view, and with so much landscape to view no one else got on it before it went down into a gully. It was a healthy adult, with lush pelage, a white ruff, neck band, and gorgeous tail. There is so much wildlife here, but against the backdrop of SO much landscape even they seem small!

Dinner was a roasted pork loin stuffed with mushrooms, mashed potatoes and accompanying sourdough bread and greens. Desert literally melted in your mouth—a dark chocolate lava cake. David Sibley obliged us with a group photo, taken by his son Joel who is working at the Camp this summer. We laughed as by now so many of us had bought the same Copper River Fleece vests patterned with birds that we looked like an ad for the Camp Store...

But the night was still young, and at 8:30 p.m., David Sibley shared with us his discoveries made while writing his latest book, *What It's Like to Be a Bird*. He is so skilled at sharing abundant information in a quiet, relaxed way, we learned a lot and felt the same joy he did at finding details by reviewing so much literature from various research studies. For a second evening rain seemed to come with evening, a loud triple series of thunder booms sent all to their cabins, where they could cozy up to listen to rooftop raindrops.



Mon., June 7 Denali National Park | Return by Train to Anchorage

Today demanded an early morning, breakfast at 6 a.m. Those up early had a fine look at two bull Moose right there at the pond by the dining hall. Discussion was on seeing the alpine glow on Denali, which was out in its full glory for several hours of clear skies around mid-night, bathed in soft pink and yellow light. By morning there were dramatic clouds but parts of the mountain—a rugged side or a lofty peak—continued to peek out for us and cameras were clicking.

We left with Blueberry muffins and homemade granola bars to accompany us on the drive out. Right off the bat we called out birds as we passed tundra ponds, but a bus-stopper was a Spruce Grouse in the road. It cooperatively hopped up into a spruce. We had a couple of Willow Ptarmigan, a Snowshoe Hare (not common this year), numerous Caribou, a Northern Harrier, and some of our best Grizzly sightings of the trip, mainly as the bears were quite close to the road. Another adult bear, digging Eskimo Potato paid us little attention, digging its way along a drainage, then crossing the road to continue uphill. Going up Polychrome Pass we were lucky to spy a Collared Pika, it crossed the road and then disappeared into a rocky lair, only to keep peeking out to check us out—precious! At Teklanika rest stop we had both Varied and Gray-cheeked Thrush, and Val spotted two White-winged Crossbill down on the ground, getting a drink—and providing us with fabulous views.

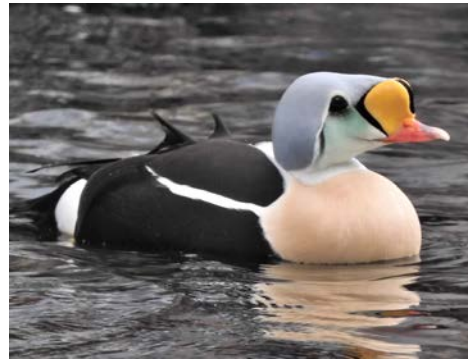
We made good time, the train station was not crowded (a fine summer to visit without the crowds that come in from cruise ships...) and soon we were on the dome cars in Gold Star class of the train. The first part of the trip through Denali State Park is drop-dead gorgeous, with snow-capped peaks on both sides, and greenery between. They called out several Moose and a Black Bear. Lois and Mark scored a Belted Kingfisher while outside along the Nenana River.

It is a long way in and then out to get to Denali, and over the years we've found the train to be the most relaxing way to return. We could get up and go outside, enjoy some of the glorious sunshine. They served us free drinks, people enjoyed time to visit, compare notes with other travelers, and look through photos. Time passed quickly, six Moose were called out and two Black Bear. Mountain glory could have been the theme for fine views, raging full rivers were impressive too. Coming into Anchorage along Knik Arm we saw an Osprey in a nest, a mature Bald Eagle, and Lois and Mark picked up a Belted Kingfisher from the open deck at the end of our dome car.

It was great to see Raymond Van Buskirk, our guide for the Seward days, and the Lakefront van waiting for us in the wild scene that characterizes the train arrival and getting luggage in Anchorage. We got it sorted out and he had the room keys, so check-in was painless. It was a lovely Alaska night, and a few ventured out to the patio to unwind and soak in the view of the float plane lake.

Tues., June 8 Anchorage to Seward

We had a stunning day to follow the scenic route down the Cooke Inlet from Anchorage. We made a stop at Westchester Lagoon not far from the Copper Whale to scope Red-necked Grebes, to learn the difference



between Greater and Lesser Scaup, and study up on a few shorebirds. After a pit stop with some shopping at the Wild Berry store, our next stop was Potter Marsh.

The boardwalk gave us a chance to see a Moose up close and personal with no worry. This individual was so acclimated it fed for a while, then simply laid down to rest, all before the admiring crowd. Wow! This charismatic mammal overshadowed the Alder Flycatcher we got good views of and even the pair of Bald Eagle.

Clouds were building as we stopped at several scenic viewpoints, where tall mountains clad with waterfalls came right down to the sea—we all posed for pictures as it was all so grand. A Fox Sparrow serenaded us as we went out to take in the wide spanning view.

Lunch was at the Bake Shop in Girdwood, but by the time we reached there it was starting to drizzle and we made a run for it. Patience was needed to spy the Rufous Hummingbird that came and went to flowers hanging just above the door. We tanked up on homemade soups and bread and enjoyed a bit of time in the gallery featuring local Alaskan artists next door.

We found a lone but impressive Trumpeter Swan at the end of the Inlet in a large freshwater pool. Likely its mate was on a nest we could not see from our angle. We then drank in the scenery crossing a mountain pass to Tern Lake, junction of the road to Homer or Seward. There were a few Arctic Terns flying about, but nesting had yet to commence. We did see a Common Loon on a nest, and eagle-eyed Steve picked up Mountain Goat high on the cliffs, our first of the trip.

We had an early dinner at Ray's Seafood Restaurant, our favorite with its fine selection of entrees, and some enjoyed a walk back to our hotel to stretch their legs. Long summer nights in June mean plenty of daylight and evening becomes a sublime part of each day.



Wed., June 9 Kenai Fjords National Park | Northwestern Glacier

Well, our good weather chits had all been used up today. What is normally a highlight of the trip was a bit of an endurance test. We got to our destination, Northwestern Fjord, but not without some turbulent seas and lashing rains that drove us inside more than we'd like. Going out Resurrection Bay we were lucky to see both Orca and Humpback Whale. Had we known the conditions farther out we might have lingered with them longer. We saw loads of Black-legged Kittiwakes as we passed around Cape Aialik and had some luck with alcids, both Kittlitz and Ancient Murrelets heading into the quieter waters of the fjord.

The best part of the day was time next to the glacier, with its blue ice shining despite the mist and rain. It gave off a few icefalls, great to hear and see and just the immensity of it was something to behold. You could feel the cold and imagine what it was like for the many Harbor Seal pups all around us, hauled out on the ice. This far up the fjord and safe on the flows of ice they could avoid predation by Orca. Our captain was very careful not to scare them, ours being one of the first voyages in here this year.

Going back, we made a beeline to the Chiswell Islands, the few we could get to safely, and both Horned and Tufted Puffins were recorded as flybys. We got halfway decent looks, but this was no weather for photographs! The captain wisely called it time to go, and we choose the safest passage back, not choosing to mess with the daunting seas. Sigh!

We got back early enough to enjoy showers and pack a bit, and then headed up the main street to Apollo Restaurant. We did not have to wait long, and we were pleasantly surprised at just how good our meals were. Most chose salmon or halibut, foods we would miss once leaving here.

We met in the lobby area of our hotel to do the final bird checklist with a few libations. There were so many highlights, memories to recount—from Nome to Denali to Anchorage and Seward we had so many wonderful moments with scenery and wildlife and saw a good number of birds one must come this far north to observe.

Thurs., June 10 Return to Anchorage

It was time to disperse. The airlines were changing flight times right and left, so Peg left early with four that needed to get straight to the airport for flights early afternoon. They made good time, enjoyed good conversation – all too soon it was the time for good-byes. Raymond returned at a more leisurely pace, birding along the way at a local feeder and a few other hotspots.

Bon Voyage, we will now watch for each other's smiles in adventures to come!

Photo Credits:

Sea Otter, Peg Abbott (PA); Red Fox, PA; Willow Ptarmigan, PA; Group w David Sibley, PA; Denali Rhododendron, PA; Common Redpoll, PA; Denali Camp bus, PA; Grizzly Bear, PA; Red Knot, PA; Nome Penny Bridge Birding, PA; Muskoxen, Ken Copenhaver (KC); Moose & Mallards, Ruth Kaufman (RK); Exploring Nome, PA; Hoary Redpoll, PA; Nome Train to Nowhere Greg Smith, PA; Nome Safety Lagoon, PA; Nome Dinner, PA; Nome Exploring, PA; Moose Teller Rd., PA; Group Council Rd, PA; Val & Karen, PA; Westchester Lesser Yellow Legs, RK; Anchorage dinner, PA; Tundra Swans, PA; Denali river road, PA; Harlequin Ducks, PA; Grizzly w Cubs, PA; Denali Birding, PA; Denali Outhouse, PA; Canada Jay, Steven Koebrich (SK); Caribou, KC; Wilson's Warbler, SK; Beaver, PA; Denali group w David Sibley, PA; Yellow-rumped Warbler drawing, PA; Denali Snow Patterns, PA; Denali group dinner, PA; Denali outhouse window, PA; Sibley presentation, PA; Denali scenery from train, PA; Riding the Denali Star, PA; Group at Potters Marsh, PA; Road to Seward, PA; Moose, KC; King Eider, KC; dinner @ Rays, PA; Harbor Seals, PA.