

Alaska Sampler | Trip Report | Species List

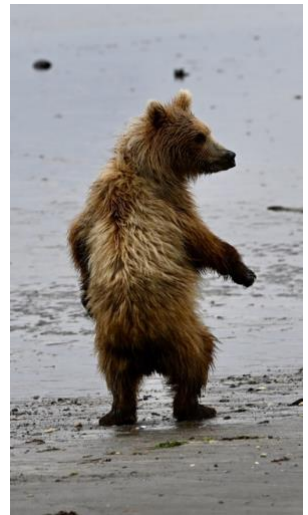
Aug. 8 – 16, 2022 | by David Krueper



With guides David Krueper & Greg Butcher, and participants: Betsy, Bonnie, Connie, Gary, Jon, John, Karen, Les, Linda, Paul, and Suzanne.



The Alaska Sampler Tour was designed to give participants an intimate look at the wonders of much of south-central Alaska, and to experience the representative wildlife and scenery of the vast jewel that is Alaska. We visited in early to mid-August when most of the frenetic avian breeding activity had concluded. While we did not experience the “sound and fury” of spring song, the tour was designed to capture a representative sampling of remaining summer breeders and migrants, and to take advantage of several opportunities for seabird viewing at known colonial nesting sites. Additionally, a huge attraction was the opportunity to visit a coastal brown bear foraging area within Katmai National Park that was not to be missed!



We began the tour in Anchorage with a meet and greet followed by dinner at one of the best restaurants in town. And then things just got better! We visited Potter Marsh for an introduction to south-coastal willow, deciduous and coniferous forest habitats, then made several stops on our way to Seward along Resurrection Bay. A cruise to Northwestern Glacier within Ken ai Fjords National Park provided great views of waterbirds in the bay, marine mammals including humpback whale, seals and sea otters, and calving glacial ice from the huge mass of ice above us. We also visited several spots in the Seward area to view birds that can be difficult to find in Alaska but are more representative of the temperate rainforests of the Pacific Northwest. The Sealife Center was highly educational, and we all enjoyed the exhibits as well as the close views of the birds in the large pond on-site. On to Homer where we settled into our luxurious accommodations at Lands' End on the Homer Spit for several nights, enjoying several great meals as we would throughout this trip. A truly magical day followed when we made the relatively short flight to Hallo Bay within Katmai National Park for a coastal brown bear viewing and photographic experience that will never be forgotten. Immediately upon landing on the beach, a sow and cub approached the group and passed within 50 feet of us. Our hands were shaking in excitement and the camera shutters were whirring madly as the duo continued past us. And then more bears on the beach pouncing on salmon in the shallow waters of the bay. Some of the bruins had eaten so much that they just laid down for a nap on the wet sand as we stood transfixed. And then someone called out "wolves" and sure enough three of the coastal "sea" wolf subspecies were in front of us along the beach! Pinching ourselves to see if this all was really happening, we just soaked it in. Back to Anchorage in the following days, we enjoyed more good meals, birding in the coniferous and deciduous forests and visiting the impressive Anchorage Botanical Gardens. Rounding out the tour was a magnificent farewell dinner as we overlooked Cook Inlet. This was Alaska at its best, and thoroughly enjoyed by all!



AVIAN SPECIES

Trumpeter Swan *Cygnus buccinator* An uncommon summer breeder in south-central Alaska, we found them at two locations (Tern Lake at the junction of the Seward/Sterling hwy. and Beluga Lake in Homer).

Tundra Swan *Cygnus columbianus* Two were seen when we walked the beach at Hallo Bay within Katmai National Park.

Gadwall *Mareca strepera* We found one at Potter Marsh south of Anchorage on the first day.

American Wigeon *Mareca americana* Seen on two days: in Homer at Beluga Lake, and again at Lake Hood/Lake Spenard near the Ted Stevens International Airport.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Common breeder in the areas we found them on three days: Potter Marsh Boardwalk (MP A9.5 Seward Hwy); Katmai NP at Hallo Bay; and in Homer at Beluga Lake.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* Although this is a common breeder throughout Alaska, we only recorded a single post-breeding individual at Potter Marsh south of Anchorage.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca carolinensis* We recorded 21 individuals within Katmai National Park at Hallo Bay and others in Homer at Beluga Lake.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris* Uncommon along the south-central coast of Alaska, we found several at Tern Lake. It's possible these were early migrants that either bred early or failed to pair with a mate.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* We recorded at least 100 individuals at multiple locations including Tern Lake, Beluga Lake, Lake Hood and Lake Spenard (Anchorage Airport).

Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus* One of the most beautiful of the waterfowl, breeding birds had already started to concentrate along the coast. We found 35 individuals at Halibut Cove Lagoon after lunch at The Saltery across the bay from Homer.

Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata* We found one on the Kenai Fjord NP tour near Northwest Glacier.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola* We found a beautiful male at Lake Hood/Lake Spenard (Anc. Int. Airport) on one occasion.

Barrow's Goldeneye *Bucephala islandica* We found one at Lake Hood & Lake Spenard (Anc. Int. Airport) which might have been a local breeder or possibly an early migrant from further north.

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser* We found three at Tern Lake at the intersection of the Seward/Sterling hwy's one day.

Spruce Grouse *Canachites canadensis* A fortunate few were able to see one up close and personal at Kincaid Park while we were all looking for moose. A cell phone photo no less!

Horned Grebe *Podiceps auratus* We found one at Lake Hood/Lake Spenard near the Anchorage International Airport.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* We found several at Lake Hood/Lake Spenard and also at Beluga Lake in Homer.

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* Fairly common resident to towns and small cities from Anchorage south into Southeast Alaska, we found several near Lake Hood/Lake Spenard, Homer and in several places near Seward.

Sandhill Crane *Antigone canadensis* Found in marshlands in central Alaska as well as the Kenai Peninsula and at Katmai National Park, we found several at Potter Marsh to the south of Anchorage on our way south.

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus* We found one at the Homer Spit that was no doubt in "southbound mode" after breeding.

Black Oystercatcher *Haematopus bachmani* Uncommon and apparently declining resident to the Aleutian Islands and south-central Alaska coastlines, we found two at Gull Island in Kachemak Bay on the way to Halibut Cove.

Black Turnstone *Arenaria melanocephala* We found seven southbound migrants at Hallo Bay within Katmai National Park while on the coastal brown bear adventure.

Surfbird *Calidris virgata* Fairly common breeder to inland tundra and mountainous habitats below the Brooks Range. We found four individuals along the shore in Seward near the waterfront Iditarod Memorial.

Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri* Common to abundant breeding species in western Alaska and at several coastal locations along the Beaufort and Chukchi seas in the Arctic Ocean. We found ten individuals at Hallo Bay within Katmai National Park while on bear patrol.

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* We located 15 within Kenai Fjords National Park at Northwestern Fjord.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularius* We found four individuals along the shoreline in Seward near the waterfront Iditarod Memorial.

Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaria* We heard one calling as it flew over the Potter Marsh boardwalk, and another in the marsh feeding along the edge of the shoreline.

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca* We found this species on three occasions: Potter Marsh south of Anchorage, at Hallo Bay in Katmai NP and at Belyga Lake in Homer.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* Even in slight sprinkles and overcast conditions, we found three at Potter Marsh at the beginning of the tour.

Common Murre *Uria aalge* We found dozens on the Kenai Fjords boat trip, and several hundred more on Kachemak Bay at Gull Island outside of Homer.

Thick-billed Murre *Uria lomvia* Fairly common but localized permanent resident to south-central and western Alaska, with steep cliffs affording colonial nesting opportunities, one was found on the Kenai Fjords boat trip near Northwestern Fjord.

Pigeon Guillemot *Cephus columba* We located several on both the Kenai Fjords NP boat trip as well as in Kachemak Bay, near Gull Island outside of Homer.

Marbled Murrelet *Brachyramphus marmoratus* We viewed them on the Kenai Fjords boat trip, in Seward along the waterfront and also in Kachemak Bay, near Gull Island and Halibut Cove.

Kittlitz's Murrelet *Brachyramphus brevirostris* Widely dispersed and nowhere common in south-central and western Alaska, two were located on the Kenai Fjords boat trip near Northwestern Glacier. Remember to always look for the whitish outer tail feathers in flight, and the lighter-colored facial feathering around the eye!

Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus* A striking bird, this species is fairly common but patchily distributed from coastal southeastern Alaska to south-central Alaska and out along the Aleutian Island archipelago. One was located while on the Kenai Fjords boat trip.

Horned Puffin *Fratercula corniculata* A summer breeder favoring steep cliffs for nesting burrows in dense grasses among the rocks. We saw several dozen on the boat trip to Kenai Fjords NP out of Seward and to Halibut Cove near Homer.

Tufted Puffin *Fratercula cirrhata* Dozens were seen on the Kenai Fjords boat trip, and several hundred were located near Gull Island in Kachemak Bay near Homer.

Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* This striking beauty was seen in the hundreds on both the Kenai Fjords boat trip as well as on the Kachemak Bay boat trip to Halibut Cove.

Bonaparte's Gull *Chroicocephalus philadelphia* We found several at Hallo Bay within Katmai NP while on the coastal brown bear adventure.

Short-billed Gull *Larus brachyrhynchus* We found dozens to hundreds along coastal locations and at saline and freshwater marshes and lakes throughout the trip. Formerly known as Mew Gull.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* We found several at Potter Marsh, in Kenai Fjords NP, Seward and several hundred in Katmai NP at Hallo Bay.

Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens* We found 30-50 individuals at most of the coastal locations that we visited.

Pacific Loon *Gavia pacifica* We found several at Lake Hood and Lake Spenard near our hotel, and at the Anchorage International Airport.

Common Loon *Gavia immer* We found one to be elusive while birding in light rain at Tern Lake at the junction of the Seward and Sterling Highways.

Red-faced Cormorant *Urile urile* Uncommon in south-coastal Alaska and the Aleutian Islands west to the Russian mainland and always a challenge to find on this tour, we were fortunate to see two on the boat trip to Kenai Fjords NP.

Pelagic Cormorant *Urile pelagicus* With a similar distribution as the preceding species, we found several dozen of this species at both Kenai Fjords NP and near Gull Island in Kachemak Bay.

Double-crested Cormorant *Nannopterum auritum* Fairly uncommon in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, we found at least 15 individuals on the Kenai Fjords NP boat trip.

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus* Fairly common but widely dispersed summer breeder to most of central and southern Alaska, we were pleased to view one at Beluga Lake in Homer on one day.

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* Uncommon permanent resident to most of Alaska south of the Brooks Range, this rarely viewed raptor can be quite a challenge to locate and so we were thrilled to see one briefly while at Potter Marsh to the south of Anchorage.

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* It was hard to miss this majestic national bird most days. We found one to several on most days and even found a nest near Seward with recently fledged young. Photos were taken and the birds were enjoyed by all.

Belted Kingfisher *Megasceryle alcyon* We located a few on the tour, primarily at Potter Marsh and in Homer at Beluga Lake.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Not common, although a permanent resident in southern Alaska, we were fortunate to see one while at the Potter Marsh boardwalk on one day.

Canada Jay *Perisoreus canadensis* Less common along coastal habitats, we were fortunate and pleased to locate one calling individual at Beluga Lake near Homer.

Steller's Jay *Cyanocitta stelleri* Found only within the coastal forests from Homer south into Southeast AK, we had one calling while we were viewing the Bald Eagle nest outside of Seward on our departure from that area.

Black-billed Magpie *Pica hudsonia* Vocal and fairly common in Alaska, this gaudy species was seen on several occasions in Homer, Seward and Potter Marsh, and was most conspicuous at Kincaid Park on our last day.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos* Formerly known as Northwestern Crow (now merged into one species with American Crow), this species reaches its northernmost limits near Portage along Turnagain Arm. We saw at least half a dozen individuals in Seward on several occasions.

Common Raven *Corvus corax* Common permanent resident throughout Alaska, this species was seemingly present in all habitats throughout the tour.

Black-capped Chickadee *Poecile atricapillus* We found several while in Homer at the Alaska Maritime NWR headquarters, and up to seven individuals while birding Kincaid Park on the last day.

Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor* Due to the late dates of the tour, we were only able to locate six migrants while on the bear viewing excursion at Hallo Bay within Katmai NP.

Bank Swallow *Riparia riparia* A few were seen in Anchorage before the tour officially began, and also one or two were briefly seen in Hallo Bay.

Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis* We located several near Homer at the Alaska Maritime NWR headquarters as well as in Kincaid Park in Anchorage.

American Robin *Turdus migratorius* We observed several while in Homer at Beluga Lake as well as at Kincaid Park.

Common Redpoll *Acanthis flammea* We found an extremely dark individual while at Potter Marsh early in the trip, and another couple at Beluga Lake while in Homer.

Fox Sparrow *Passerella iliaca* One was located at Land's End on the Homer Spit and seen by several people before departure.

Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis* We located a few while at the Alaska Maritime NWR headquarters in Homer.

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia* Two were seen in Seward along the waterfront near the Iditarod Memorial one the day we ventured out in a light rain.

Orange-crowned Warbler *Leiothlypis celata* We found non-breeding migrants throughout the tour, most notably while at Potter Marsh, Beluga Lake in Homer, and in Seward along the waterfront.

Yellow warbler *Setophaga petechia* We found several lingering southbound migrants along the waterfront while in Seward.



Yellow-rumped Warbler *Setophaga coronata* We found several at Beluga Lake in Homer, at the Alaska Maritime NWR headquarters and while birding at Kincaid Park on the last morning.

Wilson's Warbler *Cardellina pusilla* Since fall migration was in full swing, many had already departed, but we found several while birding Beluga Lake in Homer and also in Kincaid Park in south Anchorage.

MAMMAL SPECIES

North American beaver *Castor canadensis* We saw several large dams and lodges as well as distinctive ripples on the water (not muskrats) on several lakes.

North American red squirrel *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus* Several seen (and more often heard) in the coastal coniferous forests while in Seward and Homer.

Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus* Several seen while at Tern Lake.

Snowshoe hare *Lepus americanus* Several seen while on the way to and from Homer and Seward.

Gray wolf *Canis lupus* One of the highlights for most, we observed three on the mudflats while at Hallo Bay within Katmai National Park. Truly a wonderful sighting!

Coastal brown bear *Ursus arctos horribilis*. No doubt a highlight if not THE highlight of the entire tour, we observed over 20 individuals while at Hallo Bay within Katmai National Park. The bears seemed oblivious to our presence and just carried on about their business of hunting salmon in the shallow waters of the bay while we were mesmerized by the proximity of the animals.

Sea otter *Enhydra lutris* We saw several while in Homer and Seward.

Steller's sea lion *Eumetopias jubatus* This large sea carnivore was seen on the boat trip out from Homer to Kenai Fjords NP.

Harbor seal *Phoca vitulina* Several seen near the glaciers while in Kenai Fjords NP.

Mountain goat *Oreamnos americanus* Several observed from the lowlands in the mountains above Seward.

Dall sheep *Ovis dalli* Uncommon resident, several were seen near Turnagain Arm south of Anchorage.

Moose *Alces alces* One of the most common big mammals within Alaska, we finally tracked down a bull, a cow and a calf within Kincaid Park on the last morning in Anchorage.

Dall's porpoise *Phocoenoides dalli* Several seen on the boat trip out of Homer, and in Seward as well.

Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* A magnificent ocean mammal found in oceans and seas around the world, humpback whales typically migrate up to 16,000 km (9,900 mi) each year! They feed in polar waters and migrate to tropical or subtropical waters to breed and give birth. The boat trip to Kenai Fjords is always a good way to see them!

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