

Classic Alaska: Birding & Wildlife | Jun. 10 – 20, 2022 | Trip Report | by Dan Donaldson



With guides Greg Smith and Dan Donaldson and participants: Carol, David, Husam, Janet, Jim, Karen, Sid, Sue C., Sue M., and Susan P.



Fri., Jun. 10

Nome River Mouth | Cape Nome | Nome Teller Road

It's a bright, beautiful morning with crisp blue skies. In June there are nearly 20 hours of daylight this far north, with sunset at 2:00 a.m. and sunrise at 4:40 a.m. That means we still get a morning effect from a birding perspective. We started our first full day of birding as we would most days in Nome, by driving southeast out of town along the Nome-Council Rd. to Cape Nome where the Nome River meets the Bering Sea. This is one of the best shorebird sites in Nome, great stopover habitat for birds migrating up the coast.

Standing on the bridge, we have a great view of the small estuary below that held many dabbling ducks and shorebirds. The star of the morning was a small group of Bar-tailed Godwits, a local specialty and one of our top targets for the trip. Nearby Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers allowed for a quick clinic on the differentiation between the species. Arctic Terns were actively patrolling the flat water and were soon joined by



a few Aleutian Terns, easily identified by their beautiful trill calls. Ducks included Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, and Greater Scaup. From the estuary we continued down Nome-Council Road to the rock quarry with its jutting pier that provides great viewing opportunities to view flyby seabirds. We were pleasantly surprised to have Harlequin Ducks in breeding plumage working the shoreline in perfect light, wonderful for viewing and photography. Then we discovered an eight-inch spike sticking out of a tire on Dan's vehicle. Somehow the tire was still holding air, so we dashed back to town for a quick repair as the group had lunch. We did pause to watch a Red Fox and a Short-eared Owl hunt the grassy meadows along the shoreline. Things worked out great with the tire repair and we were back on our regular schedule after lunch.

We drove portions of the Nome-Teller Road after lunch, with most of our time spent exploring the near-town habitats. We again found many dabbling ducks in the numerous kettle ponds along the route along with Red-necked Phalaropes and Red-throated loons. Red-necked Grebes also breed here, and we found them in ponds that had the preferred aquatic vegetation. Finding a herd of Muskox on the outskirts of town was a thrill, and the group took time to watch them slowly work their way across the landscape, their long wispy fur highlighted against the sunny skies. This day they were feeding in the willow meadows near town, but on other days of the trip we found them in wide ranging habitats and elevations in the tundra. Searching the willow patches along our route, we finally located another of our targets: two Willow Ptarmigan that darted across the road, then dipped down in the willow thicket. A great sighting!

As we continued along Teller Road, we gained elevation and the willow habitats soon gave way to the treeless and expansive tundra: shorebird breeding country. Mostly barren and rocky hilltops appeared to be the favorite habitat for most of the shorebirds that were by this time paired up, quite active and vocal, with some performing aerial displays. Both American and Pacific Golden-Plovers called constantly alongside Semipalmated Sandpipers giving their amazing calls and flight displays. We also got our first look at Whimbrels as they flew by us, presumably commuting from their feeding areas to breeding territories high on the top of the domed hills surrounding us. Long-tailed Jaegers are a constant presence in these parts, as they would be throughout our time in Nome.



Descending back into Nome, we again stopped at the willow thickets and got our first look at a moose, a lone cow laying down in a clearing near the road. Gray-cheeked Thrushes on staked-out territories performed their beautiful breeding calls seldom heard in migration in the lower 48. Golden-crowned Sparrows had territories in the same shrub lots. With such a short nesting season and limited space, they'll all need to share the habitat. An incredible first day of birding and exploring Nome by all accounts, even a spiked tire couldn't slow us down! We ended our first day with 42 species and many more to come.

Sat., Jun. 11 Nome River Mouth | Cape Nome | Nome Council Road to Mile Post 78

In-room breakfast today (using supplies purchased at the grocery store yesterday) to facilitate an early start. Another bright and cloudless day found us back at the mouth of the Nome River where new arrivals in the estuary included Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Merganser and Least Sandpiper. The Bar-tailed Godwits remained but were further back from the road this day. At the Quarry Pier, we again located the Harlequins, but flyby Pacific Loons were new, and much to our surprise, a young Beluga Whale was found feeding alone in the shallows! Short-billed (Mew) gulls were here as well, along with the ever-present Glaucous Gulls, and Arctic Terns were actively feeding. We drove the Nome-Council Road all the way to the end, Mile Post 78. It's a long drive on a dirt road that took us through several wetland complexes where we found our first Snow Geese of the trip. In the tall vegetation nearby, we spotted a pair of Sandhill Cranes, alternately feeding and performing their delicate pair bonding dance. We found our first Lapland Longspurs here as well, their tawny hues blending seamlessly with the tundra landscape. Long-tailed Jaegers patrolled the tundra, harassing nesting birds. We used a flatbed trailer on the side of the road as a picnic table to enjoy our packed subway lunches. The truck had been there long enough for Say's Phoebes to build their nest in its frame!

Our next stop was the ghost gold mining town of Solomon, site of the famous "train to nowhere." Old steam locomotives, carts and train wheels have been rusting away on the tundra for decades. It's a wonderful historic site and we enjoyed photographing and exploring. It's also a great birding site as its surrounded by wetlands, and we found cooperative Savanna Sparrows, Lapland Longspurs and even nesting Red-necked Phalaropes just



off the water's edge. Continuing our long, slow climb to mile post 78, the tundra became dryer and we had unobstructed views of the incredibly vast and remote landscape. Only the long, diagonal lines on the nearby hillsides hinted at human activity, marking the water capture systems dug over a hundred years ago. Mile post 78 isn't particularly notable. A small spruce woodlot surrounds a road maintenance building and often attracts woodland bird species. We found Canada Jay, Boreal Chickadee and several Blackpoll Warblers here. On our way back to Nome, we stopped at several locations to search for Bluethroats, without luck, but we did locate many Arctic Warblers on territory. Stopping at the bridge, we were pleased to learn that the Gyrfalcon nest was active, occupied by three chicks, still covered in downy feathers. Later we observed the parents in flight high along the rocky cliffs. We returned to Nome for dinner and reviewed the bird list, then turned in for the evening with the sun still high in the sky.

Sun., Jun. 12

Nome River Mouth | Brambling at the Quarry | Cape Nome | Kougarak Road | Coffee Dome

Up early again and back at the Nome River Mouth. With no new arrivals, we headed to the quarry area again, but this time to look for a reported Brambling, a vibrant black and orange finch that breeds in Asia. We did manage to briefly locate it, but only half the group was able to see it. Additional attempts to locate the bird were to no avail. Our main objective on this day was to hike Coffee Dome in search of Bristle-thighed Curlew. It's a long drive up Kougarak Road, high in the rounded tundra hills, until we reached one of the highest where the curlews have been known to nest. This was an optional hike as it can be a strenuous slog to get to the top, walking on the peaty tundra. The reward for our efforts was a stunning view of this remote and desolate landscape. Many shorebirds nest here, and we found several pairs of Whimbrels, which can easily be mistaken for curlews. After spending 90 minutes searching it was time to return to the van. While we didn't locate Bristle-thighed Curlews, we did have a wonderful experience that was a highlight of the trip for some. When we returned to the van, we learned that the folks who stayed behind had seen a Snowy Owl fly through the valley. Everyone's a winner!



Returning to Nome, we stopped at a kettle pond that had a gaggle of 10 Greater White-fronted Geese, and bit further down the road, a pair of Arctic Loons had staked a breeding territory. The road itself provided some wildlife viewing as well as several Muskox ambled ahead of us, refusing to let us pass! We also observed Snowshoe Hares exhibiting the same behavior. In Nome, wildlife has the right of way!

Mon., Jun. 13 Nome Harbor Area | Nome Teller Road, 0-24

This was our last day in Nome, and we stayed a little closer to town to give the group a chance to explore the town on their own in the afternoon. In the morning we explored the first 20 miles of the Nome-Teller Road, taking our time to thoroughly scan the many creeks and tundra hilltops along the way. At the Penny River bridge, a pair of American Dippers were actively feeding along the creek and returning to the nest to feed recently hatched young. We had a great time observing and photographing them doing their dipper thing. We even observed pair bonding behavior as the male passed food to the female who then delivered the tiny fish to the nest. They appeared to be feeding exclusively on fish as no macro invertebrates were observed. We also had small flock of Tundra Swans fly by while we were in this area. We ate lunch on a tundra hilltop and spent a wonderful couple of hours photographing nesting American Golden-Plovers and Semipalmated Plovers. We even did some “belly botany,” exploring the tundra’s wonderfully complex plant life. Woolly Lousewort, Labrador Tea, Willows and Blueberry, all growing no more than six inches tall on the tundra. Beetles and a few species of butterflies were also found as well as a pair of Sandhill Cranes foraging in the wetter depressions. Several Wilson’s Snipe were conspicuous on the tundra as well. This species tends to perch on the highest point in its breeding territory, even if it’s just a one-foot knoll in the otherwise flat tundra. In the late afternoon we were back in town for some free time. Some of us walked down to an old gold dredge that ended its career very near town and is now part of a small park and interpretive stop. This one was the size a house, but there are several dredges in the area that are the size of large apartment buildings. We walked by 19th century engines and mechanical graveyards with everything from locomotives and tractors, to pumps and single-piston engines, all reminders of the gold rush that briefly made Nome famous. We ended our evening by visiting the very large ATT satellite dish that hosts a Common Raven nest. Then we enjoyed an Italian dinner and a quick update of our birding checklists. Off to bed with the sun high in the sky to rest up before our early flight to Anchorage in the morning.



Tues., Jun. 14 Fly to Anchorage | Drive to Seward | Dinner on our own

After arriving in Anchorage, we had just enough time to pick up our rental vans and drive to Seward in time for dinner. It was a beautiful, sunny day and the drive south along the northern shore of Turnagain Arm, through portions of Chugach State Park and across the Kenai Peninsula. Ironically, our hotel was located right at the start of the Iditarod Trail!

Wed., Jun. 15 Resurrection Bay & Chiswell Islands | North Western Glacier & Fjord Tour

The next morning, we rose early and had a quick breakfast at the hotel before catching our Northwestern Fjord tour aboard the Arctic Voyager, a large, double decker tour boat. We started seeing wildlife as soon as we pulled out of the marina. Glaucous-winged Gulls outnumbered the more delicate Black-Legged Kittiwakes as we passed through Resurrection Bay. Further out, we started to see Parakeet Auklets beside the boat with a comical feeding technique of diving at a very shallow angle, then popping back up and taking off only to repeat the action 10 feet further along. As we got out to the Pacific Ocean and the Chiswell lands, we saw large groups of Steller's Sea Lions hauled out onto the rocks. The vertical cliffs of the larger islands had nesting pairs of Tufted and Horned Puffins, although not quite in the numbers we expected. It's an unusually warm and sunny day and the captain of the boat suggested that the puffins might be out to see to escape the heat. We still see, and photograph, good numbers of puffins while rounding the corner to enter the glacial fjords. Other alcids including murrelets, auklets and guillemots, were found in great numbers, especially in the fjords. We got wonderful looks at Common Murres, Pigeon Guillemots, and Marbled and Ancient Murrelets. Once deep inside the fjords, everything changed. The water was dead calm, and the air was cooler. We soon saw ice in the water, so we knew the glaciers weren't far ahead. Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants were nearby, feeding in the calm waters or basking on the nearly vertical cliffs.

As we approached the glaciers, harbor seals came into view, many with young resting on the larger chunks of ice while Glaucous-winged Gulls occupied smaller pieces of ice. The Harding Ice Field extended high above us on the cliff tops. It feeds 40 glaciers on the Kenai Peninsula covering a land area of more than 1,000 square miles and is hundreds of feet thick. We kept motoring until we reached the Northwestern Glacier, a stunning blue and white wall of ice. The glacier is actively calving, and we see several large ice falls. First we'd hear a loud crack, then a trickle of ice, and then a whole section would crash into the water, generating waves that gently rocked the boat and the many bergs hosting seals and gulls. A bonus sighting was Mountain Goats high on the cliffs above us. We



stayed at the Northwestern Glacier for 30 minutes or so, observing several calvings before heading back down the fjord. Our captain knew we were birders and made a few extra stops at cliff roosting sites to give us close-up looks at murres and auklets. A special treat on the way back was a humpback whale cow and calf feeding at the mouth of Resurrection Bay, which we watched for quite a while. We did have a bit of a scare when we came upon pod of Orca whales not far from the humpbacks. These were a transient pod, which often feed on whales and seals, whereas the local orca pods are typically fish eaters. The crew was concerned when the pod turned toward the humpback with her calf, but then the orcas turned off and headed out to deeper waters. Phew! We also saw a nice pod of Dall's Porpoise that looked like tiny orcas. We returned to Seward a bit late, so we did a quick turnaround at the hotel and headed out to Ray's Seafood and Steaks for their famous Halibut Cheeks. It was a long day, so we all turned in after our late dinner.

Thurs., Jun. 16 Breakfast | Ava Feeders, Bear Creek | Airport Pond | Drive to Anchorage | Sheep

Today we spent the morning exploring the Seward area. Our first stop was at Ava's place, just outside of town. Ava has been feeding the birds for years and her feeders often attract Pine Grosbeaks that are difficult to find elsewhere in Seward. A very cooperative pair obliged the group long enough for everyone to get photographs. An Alder Flycatcher was actively calling and hawking insects the entire time, and Fox Sparrows were feeding on the ground beneath the feeders. Our first Hairy Woodpecker of the trip showed up here as well. Our next stop was the Bear Creek Weir, a salmon management facility for Bear Lake. We saw hundreds of Sockeye Salmon in Bear Creek working their way to the weir where they are collected and tagged, or allowed to pass through, depending on the management goal. This was another great spot for American Dippers, which we saw hanging out at the weir and flying along the creek. Our last stop in the Seward area was a marshy pond near the Seward Airfield where we found a Trumpeter Swan family and a nice flock of stunning Violet-green Swallows. We then headed back toward Anchorage in the afternoon, stopping in Girdwood for lunch.

Fri., June 17 Flight to Barrow | AM Westchester Lagoon | Tony Knowles Coastal Trail | Fly to Utqiagvik and Back

We had some time early this morning to bird before our flights to Utqiagvik, so we walked down the Coastal Trail to Westchester Lagoon. Soon after arriving we spotted a pair of Short-billed Dowitchers resting on the



shoreline of a small island not far from us. Short-billed Gulls and Arctic Terns were loafing there as well. Paying a bit more attention, we spotted an Arctic Tern chick not far from the dowitchers, and watched as the adults took turns feeding the downy chick. Continuing our walk around the island we were fortunate to find a Red-necked Grebe nest containing three recently hatched chicks in their striking cryptic pattern. In the afternoon we flew to Utqiagvik, the northern-most town in North America. We crossed Alaska's vast Boreal Forest during the two-hour flight. Nearing Utqiagvik it became cloudy and, long-story-short, as we were about to land, they closed the airport due to coastal ice fog conditions. We briefly circled the airport but were informed that the airport was shut down for the day, so we returned to Anchorage. Once back at Anchorage airport, Greg and Dan were able to get us accommodations for the night and find a reservation for dinner. We were fortunate our vans were still available since, sadly, there were no flights available the next day to Utqiagvik. We spent that afternoon at Potter Marsh for some quality birding time before dinner.

Sat., Jun. 18

Eagle River Nature Center | Palmer Hay flats

Just outside of Anchorage is the Eagle River Nature Center with extensive trails through Chugach State Park. Both black bears and grizzly bears occur in the area, so we keep our eyes out for any signs as we explored this gorgeous site. The loop trail here is quite possibly the most beautiful one-mile hike in all of America. In no time we came upon Varied Thrushes feeding in the pine needle duff along the footpath. Further down, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, our first for the trip, were found in stands of Black Spruce. We descended further down into the Eagle River valley and emerged with breathtaking views of the beautiful, bright green valley framed by towering 7,000-foot, snow-capped peaks. The wetlands served as perfect reflecting pools for photography, and we took time to enjoy this unexpected scene. Alder Flycatchers, Yellow-rumped and Wilson's Warblers and of course, a majestic pair of Bald Eagles completed the picture.

We hiked through the floodplain forest on our return to the nature center spotting Swainson's Thrushes, American Robins, Dark-eyed Juncos, White-crowned and Savannah Sparrows, Red-breasted Nuthatches and, new for the trip, Pine Siskins. We ate lunch in the town of Wasilla (no, we couldn't see Russia from here) at the Bearpaw River Brewing Company. After lunch we explored the north side of the Knik Arm Bay where a vast, 28,000-acre coastal wetland complex, Palmer Hayflats, is a known migrant trap for early spring waterfowl. We found hundreds of Cackling Geese and many Sandhill Cranes, paired up and likely breeding here. Mallards and Green-winged Teal were seen in good numbers as well as Ravens, American Crows, Common Loon and perhaps

our best looks at Black-billed Magpies. Then we returned to Anchorage for dinner and checklist review before bed.



Sun., Jun. 19

Eagle River Hike & Kincaid Park | Botanical Gardens

With an extra day in Anchorage, we had a choice of destinations. Half the group chose to return to Eagle River for more extensive hiking and exploration (approximately five miles). The rest of the group opted to explore some local birding hotspots around Anchorage seldom visited by tour group such as Kincaid Park, a converted military base on the eastern most point of Anchorage.

The Eagle River hike was again spectacular. We went deep into the valley wetland areas where we walked on boardwalks through several sections of wetlands, including active beaver wetlands that had flooded out sections of the trail. We encountered mixed flocks of Red-breasted Nuthatches, Alder Flycatchers, Brown Creepers and more. But the highlight of the day was the discovery of a newly excavated hole in a tree along the trail. Careful inspection revealed that it was medium sized with fresh woodchips on the ground below. Then we heard the squeaking of chicks! We quickly backed off and within 10 minutes, a pair of AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKERS flew to the tree, beaks full of grubs. First the male entered the cavity and then flew off, and then the female took her turn. It was one of those wonderful, natural experiences when all you can do is look at each other and say wow! On top of that, it was also a life bird for many in the group. We met up with the rest of the group in Alyeska where we enjoyed lunch at the ski resort as mountain bikers zoomed down the slopes. Afterwards we did some higher elevation hiking in hopes of finding an elusive White-tailed Ptarmigan, but that was not to be. Passing through Turnagain Arm on our return to Anchorage, we spotted several Dall sheep on the cliffs above the road. We pulled over hoping for better views and boy did we have them! There were over a dozen sheep including several females with young, quite the spectacle! We returned to Potter Marsh, which was a bit more active with a banded Lesser Yellowlegs putting on quite a show for us, often standing and calling just feet away from us.



Mon., Jun. 20 Departures

Departure day. Most of us had early flights, but some were extending their AK vacations and visiting friends or going on fishing expeditions. We all said our goodbyes and exchanged contact information. After breakfast we were all on our way. This was a great trip with wonderful weather, and while missing Utqiagvik was a disappointment, we certainly had some wonderful experiences to make up for it.

Photos by Dan Donaldson: Alaska Scenic, Group Birding, Muskox, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Short-billed (Mew) Gull, Mountain Goat, Lesser Yellowlegs, Willow Ptarmigan, Arctic Ground Squirrel, Savannah Sparrow on Alaska sign, White Flowers, Ruddy Turnstone, Wilson's Snipe, Harlequin Ducks, Long-tailed Jaeger, North American Moose, Savanna Sparrow, Purple Flowers, Statue, Short-eared Owl, North American Moose, Lapland Longspur, Scenic, Rusted Train, Long-tailed Jaeger, Juvenile Muskox, Group Hiking, Alaska Wetlands, Boat Tour, Cooper Whale Inn, Trumpeter Swan, Reduce Speed Sign, Bear Creek, Wild Fauna, Group at Eagle River, Eagle River Scenic, Mountain Goats, Tree Swallow, Dragonfly, ACWR, Juvenile Mountain Goat, Sandhill Cranes, American Three-toed Woodpecker