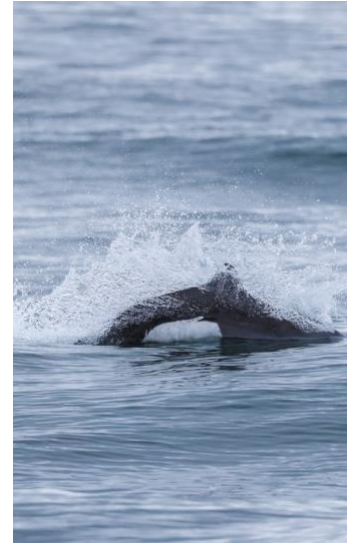


Alaska Sampler | August 7 – 15, 2023

Trip Report | by Greg Smith



With guide Greg Smith, and participants: Meg & Jordan, Diane & Jon, Sharon and Barbara

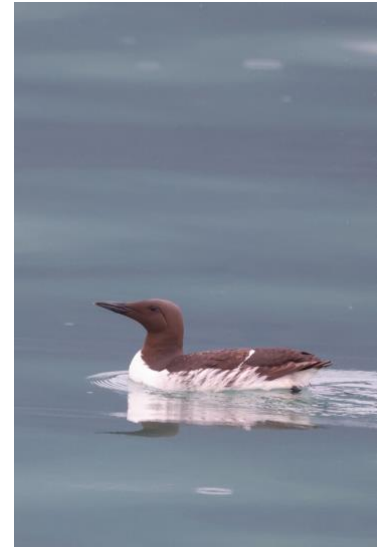


Mon., Aug. 7 Arrivals

Most everyone was in town for today and we celebrated the start of our Alaska Sampler tour with dinner at Orso. A gastronomically astounding restaurant within walking distance of our lodging at the Copper Whale.

Tues., Aug. 8 Westchester Lagoon | Ship Creek | Anchorage Museum | Seward

We departed from the Copper Whale Inn at 8:30 and headed out on a local tour to explore areas of Anchorage and surrounding areas. We visited Westchester Lagoon, a local hangout for various water species that come in



to rest and sometimes forage at the water's edge. Always a serene space that accommodates lots of different birds, with some like the Greater Scaup still tending to young. Ship Creek is where the locals go to fish a stream without having to go too far, to drop a line. Coho or silver salmon runs were ongoing as were chum salmon. And even on a weekday the banks were lined with folks do their best to bring home the salmon. Just a little slice of local Anchorage life for all of us to experience.

We finished up the morning with a visit to the Anchorage Museum. A world class institute on wildlife and cultures of the far north. Unlike the southern climates of cold, the Arctic abounds with significant mammal and avian diversity, thereby supporting cultures that are able to adapt to the challenges of the Arctic. Inuit and Inupiaq traditions, modes of living and adaptations to these harsh climates are all interpreted and on display. After lunch we loaded our luggage and ourselves into the van and headed towards Seward and Kenai Fjords National Park.

AK-1 highway parallels the railroad track along the scenic edge of Turnagain Arm. Steep peaks with scant snow, rivers, wetlands, meadows, and forests rolled by as we made our way through Chugash State Park and National Forest. It drizzled on us as we made our way south, but by the time we had checked into our lodging and headed toward Ray's for dinner, the ground was dry. Dinner at Ray's on the docks yielded another fine meal with Halibut Andaman topping the list of the excellent seafood choices from the rich Alaskan waters.

Wed., Aug. 9 Boat Trip to NW Glacier

Today we took Major Marine's "Finder" out for a day on Resurrection Bay and beyond to explore Kenai Fjords National Park and Chiswell Islands National Wildlife Refuge. The day was cool and overcast, the sea was very, very flat and the avian wildlife was abundant. Resurrection Bay was glaciated a long time ago, and the remaining peaks are the jagged remains of where the ice could not intrude. Cirque (or alpine) glaciers hung high on the mountain sides, far from the water's edge, a reminder of what laid on the tops of the peaks just a little further back, the Harding Ice Field. We had already encountered the Northern Sea otter out towards Lowell Point, when we pushed out to the edge of the bay and its barrier islands. It was here that we saw our only killer whale. A lone female that was feeding on a Steller's Sea Lion. She would swim circling her prey and then go down for or another mouthful before repeating her circling. Our next marine mammal were two fin whales, the second largest animal on our world. Speedy swimmers, these two just seemed to be going from point A to point B at a leisurely speed, much slower than what they are truly capable of doing.



We turned into Harris Bay where the even calmer waters of NW Glacier fjord allowed us to have lunch and take in even more stunning landscapes. We passed over the terminal moraine of the Northwestern glacier (the line of sediment dropped at the glacier's farthest advance) which is several miles from the glacier itself. We stopped at both Anchor and Ojoi glaciers discussing how the difference in size and shape was partially dictated by the amount of loose soil and rock debris in the ice. This is where we saw lots of Marbled Murrelets as well as a pair of Kittlitz's Murrelets that appeared in the milky waters. We spent time near the glacier's foot, watching harbor seals placidly accept the fact that the glacier makes lots of noise as it calves. This is still considered a tidewater glacier because the ice terminates at the water's edge. Just not sure how much longer the ice will have that attachment to the water though. On the return, the Captain nosed us straight into Cataract Cove with its waterfalls. Flocks of Horned Puffins in the bay had some Marbled Murrelets mixed in along with a few confiding Rhinoceros Auklets. A few female sea otters were loafing in the area with half grown babies dozing on their bellies. And then there were all the waterfalls. We turned out of Harris Bay where we headed farther offshore into the open ocean towards the Chiswell Islands, a National Wildlife Refuge.

At the Chiswell Islands we had both Horned and Tufted Puffins. Horned nest in cracks in the rocks while Tufted nest in burrows in the soil. After fledging, puffins won't return to land for at least three to five years of their life. They are powerful swimmers, flying through 300-foot-deep water with their wings chasing fish. But this feat pales in comparison to the dives of Thick-billed and Common Murres that we saw who can dive to over 600 feet. Down covered murres start life off by jumping off the rock ledges of their nesting site and tumbling all the way down to the ocean below. Parents continue to feed them as they in the water at the foot of their nursery cliffs until they are able to fend for themselves. As we headed back to port, we were able to find a lone coastal mountain goat down close to the water's edge.

Thurs., Aug. 10 Seward | Soldotna | Homer

We started the morning off with a drive out to Lowell Point, making sure that there were no landslides before making it out to the point. From a passerine perspective, we saw very few birds. Normally Varied Thrush, Orange-crowned Warblers and Yellow Warblers would have been expected. But given that there were no mosquitoes or black flies, it might have made for an early migration exodus. We did stop at Ada' Place where we had a large flock of both Pine Siskins and Red Crossbills. A small family group of Hairy Woodpeckers, and some Song Sparrows were also using the feeders. Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches didn't seem



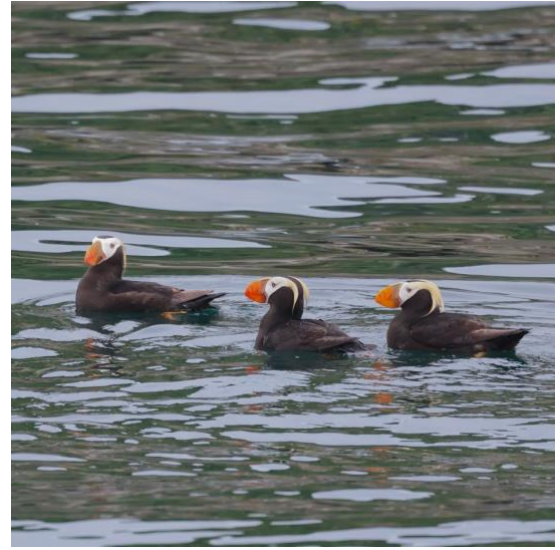
interested in leaving the trees to visit the feeders. It started to drizzle and continued all the way to Homer. We did stop in Soldatna for lunch before heading on to Homer for the next three nights.

Fri., Aug. 11 Wildlife in Homer | Bear Viewing

It was drizzling as we left Land's End and headed up into the hills above Kachemak Bay. The hills are semi-wild places where we usually see moose and have had on occasion Northern Hawk-Owl. No owl today, but we did have a monstrous bull moose that obliged us with great, long-lasting views. That was until a local dog got interested. That was enough for the moose to charge the dog and chase it down a hidden driveway. Again, very little in the way of passerines, and again maybe for the lack of insects. But it was for this afternoon's activity that we were all primed for, a flight out to find and view peninsular grizzly bears. The weather was starting to break and there were holes in those clouds. When we arrived there didn't seem to be any hesitation on the ground crews part to get us prepped for flying so we went through the process of gearing up. Then the pilots walked in and called our names...

As we did our take off we could see showers scattered on the horizon, which our pilots deftly dodged as we headed north and then west to Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. After about forty-five minutes we could see Chilitna Bay laid out in front of us. There was one purse seiner anchored offshore minding its own business as we circled into the wind for a beach landing with a rock outcropping. Our pilots floated down, banked right and then left around the outcropping and let the Cessna kiss the beach with a soft landing. Within minutes we were outside and given directions to stay tight as a group. And when our pilot/guide gave us direction to take a knee or move in a specific direction, that was what we were to do. And off we went around those rock outcrops. We climbed a small knoll above the beach and looked inland to find two boar grizzly foraging on sedges. All of the bear spoor we had seen was loaded with grass and sedge blades as the chum salmon run was three weeks behind on their typical start date of their run up the Chilitna River. As we watched these two on the other side of the river, they both separately decided to come over to this side of the river. Better for viewing and photos and apparently better for the bears to take a seat and watch what was going on around them.

But the highlight of the day was a sow with a single five-month-old cub on the other side of the river. Well they were on the other side for about ten minutes, and then they decided that they want come over to the other side. At first, we weren't sure why, but then we watched the sow catch a male salmon and scarf it down. She did provide the cub with the salmon head for use as a toy, and then immediately caught another, this time a female salmon. That was too was quickly eaten and then she caught a third. Apparently, we landed just as the season's first chum salmon run commenced (as later evidenced by the purse seiner dropping its net...). Both the sow and



her cub seemed to have little interest in those of us that watched their every move. They went up and down the shore and in water in front of us for a good 35 minutes before deciding to head back to the side of the river from which they came. Not sure why, but the sow's belly was now rounded and full. After they left, we headed back to our plane and flew into a gorgeous sky with delicate clouds that provided a base for the shadow of our plane surrounded by a circular rainbow. What an exhilarating experience with all those bears we just had!

Sat., Aug. 12

Gull Rock | The Saltry | Homer Spit

We started the day with drive out to the east side of Homer looking for Sandhill Crane. Although we didn't have any luck with the crane, we did find a cow moose with a solo calf. An amazing size difference comparing the cow with the bull we had seen yesterday. We thought it was going to be a breezy, rainy ride over to The Saltry, but when the Stormbird left the Homer dock, the wind capitulated to the sun and we had a smooth, dry ride to Gull Island. Gull Island is a composed of three small islands that provide nesting habitat for Tufted Puffin, loads of Common Murre, Black-legged Kittiwake and Pelagic Cormorant. And we were close enough to hear all the yakking that was going between neighbors as the heady business of rearing young was taking place. But Halibut Cove and The Saltry were right around the corner, and we were all hungry, very hungry.

Our lunch seating commenced right after the Stormbird docked, so all we had to do was walk up the ramp, sit down and order our meal. Fish tacos were a favorite as was the miso sablefish. There were a few desserts before we finished and then we headed out to take in the community of Halibut Cove. The elevated boardwalk took us out to the dike where we had a flock of 20-25 Harlequin Duck swimming around the point. And before we knew the Stormbird signaled that it was ready to head back to the Homer Marina. Some took the opportunity of our return to walk the beach around the end of the spit. Some invertebrates (maybe a salp of some sort...) was out there creating a feeding frenzy replete with loads of kittiwakes, some Marbled Murrelets, two Ancient Murrelets and a solo Common Loon in alternate plumage. Nice way to cross the finish line before night stamped out what was left of the daylight.



Sun., Aug. 13 **Homer | Kenai | Anchorage**

It is a bit of a drive from Homer back to the big city, almost four hours of driving. We started off with a quick stop at the Alaska Maritime NWR Visitor Center. Then it was onto Soldatna where we arrived around mid-day and stopped at the Kenai Russian Orthodox Church that was constructed in 1892. A fine-looking structure surrounded by sunlight topped with a turquoise-blue onion dome and three tiered cross. Just large enough for a small, extant congregation to continue gathering.

Mon., Aug. 14 **Potter Marsh | Alaska Botanical Gardens**

Our first stop of the morning was out to Potter's Marsh, a wetland created by the construction of the adjacent raised railway right-of-way. An elevated boardwalk took us past a few Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpipers, and a mixed flock of Cackling and Canada Geese. There were some coho and chum salmon working their way upstream to spawn, but there were also dozens of salmon that had already completed that pilgrimage of life feeding the gulls and other birds that inhabited the marsh. The Alaska Botanical Garden was our last stop of the day. A fine, little botanic garden that shared some of the plants that made up some of Alaska's plant communities. It is oh so true that those longer days do make for robust growth of plants and vegetables. But we also saw that the growing season was rapidly growing to the end in this part of the state and that it wouldn't be long before winter fingered its way into the daily life of all living things.

Dinner at Simon & Seafort's is always a treat, and this final meal together was no exception. What was the exception was the perfect table for all of us up against the west windows as the sun set.

Tues., Aug. 15 **Departures**

It is the travel home day for all of us, some earlier than others. But heading home is always the sweetest part of any trip, and we were all headed that way...

Photos by Greg Smith: Northwestern Glacier, Black-legged Kittiwake, Ancient Murre, Peninsular Grizzly Bear, Dall's Porpoise, Anchor Glacier, Common Murre, Northern Sea Otter, Marbled Murrelet, Peninsular Grizzly Bears (3), Homer Boat Sunrise, Lake Clark, Tufted Puffin, Common Loon, Kenai Russian Orthodox Church