

# Alaska Sampler | Trip Report

August 5 – 13, 2019 | Written by Karen Worcester



With Guide Greg Smith and participants Karen, Wendy, Camille, Cathy, Trina, Anne, Margaret, Patty, Kevin, Peggy, Mike, Kathy, Bob.



## Monday, August 5 Arrivals

For those that arrived prior to 3:30 pm, we took a walk along the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail to Westchester Lagoon. And along the way two Sandhill Cranes were foraging in the mudflats as a pair of Green-winged Teal did a little trailside dabbling!

Westchester Lagoon gave us great looks at both species of yellowlegs, two Trumpeter Swans, numerous Red-necked Grebes with mostly grown young and a solitary Hudsonian Godwit. Not a bad start to our wildlife and bird list.

We gathered for our welcome dinner at Simon & Seafort's, where many enjoyed their first meal of halibut cheeks! It was a time to get acquainted with new friends and also time to discuss tomorrow's plans!



## **Tuesday, August 6     Potter's Marsh | Seward | Alaska Sealife Center**

We departed from the Copper Whale Inn at 8:45 am and headed out Highway 1 towards Seward. We lingered at Potter's Marsh, a wetland created by the construction of the adjacent raised railway right-of-way. A well-constructed boardwalk took us past large numbers of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Wilson's Snipe, and a mixed flock of Cackling and Canada Geese, down to Rabbit Creek as it exited the marsh at the highway. There, dozens of salmon waited below the bridge, either to head upstream to spawn or for their impending demise. Many were already showing serious signs of wear and tear, with eroded fins and skin. We saw sockeye, coho, and chum salmon there, as well as a beaver, ambling out of the water and up onto the bank.

On our way back, we saw Pine Siskins, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Myrtle's Yellow-rumped Warbler in the willows adjacent to the walkway. We watched a pair of salmon spawning in a small, clear tributary entering the wetland, near the already decaying bodies of others (part of the important nutrient cycling of these rivers). A young moose was browsing deep in the willows and alders adjacent to the boardwalk while Orange-crowned Warblers bounced around in the underbrush.

The highway paralleled the railroad track along the scenic edge of Turnagain Arm, a marine inlet. Steep

peaks with scant snow, rivers, wetlands, meadows, and forests rolled by as we made our way through the Chugash National Forest. We reached Seward in time for a great lunch at the Resurrection Roadhouse and afterwards, we stopped for a visit at Ava's house and bird feeders (Fox Sparrow, Red Crossbill, Hairy Woodpecker). Then we drove out to Lowell Point for a look at Black-legged Kittiwake, Marbled Murrelet and Wandering Tattler near the shoreline. After checking into our hotel, we walked across the street for a visit to the Alaska Sealife Center, where the seabird display was a great favorite. Dinner was at Ray's on the docks. Excellent seafood yet again, thanks to these rich Alaskan waters.

## **Wednesday, August 7     Boat Trip to NW Glacier**

Today we took the Alaskan Explorer out for a day on Resurrection Bay and beyond to explore Kenai Fjords National Park and the Chiswell Islands National Wildlife Refuge. The day was warm and breezy, the seas were very flats and the wildlife seemed to be in every direction we looked. How lucky for us!

Captain Chris was fantastic, maneuvering the boat while sharing his wealth of information about the wildlife of the area. We headed out towards the mouth of this important ice-free harbor, protected by barrier islands and



ringed by glacially carved mountains on all sides. Cirque (or alpine) glaciers hung high on the mountain sides, far from the water's edge.

We had already encountered the Northern sea otter out towards Lowell Point, but our captain delved into the history of the near extinction of this charismatic mammal. Vitus Bering, along with Georg Wilhelm Steller "discovered" this area. Steller reported home to Russia on the remarkable fur resource found here in the Northern sea otter. Sea otter fur is extraordinary, with up to a million hairs per square inch of pelt. Thus, starting the enormous Russian fur trade in Alaska, resulting in otters hunted to near extinction by the early 1800s. They have now repopulated their entire historic range, though their numbers are still a fraction of the original population estimates.



We also passed a harbor seal haul out, where these speckled and silvery creatures basked in the sun and moved in some awkward form of seal peristalsis to and from the water. Seals cannot rotate their flippers like sea lions can, leaving them ungainly on land. Their high fat content, due to their diet primarily of herring and other fatty fish, made them a favorite and revered prey item of the indigenous people here, who used every part of them for food, clothing, shelter, art, and other purposes. We did get to see Ancient Murrelet and Pigeon Guillemot in this area, along with numerous Horned Puffin.



Our next marine mammal visit was to a Steller's sea lion haul out. These are the giants of the sea lion family, weighing up to a ton. They have been recently listed as endangered due to the precipitous recent declines in their population. Over 80% have been lost in the past forty years. Some scientists are postulating this may be because with increasing sea temperatures, the juveniles are unable to dive deep

enough to reach the cooler waters where large densities of fish may be obtained.

The nesting seabird colonies at the Chiswell Islands were spectacular! At one of them alone, the Beehive, 20,000 Tufted Puffins were nesting. The sky above the island was thick with puffins, many carrying fish—Black-legged Kittiwakes were also nesting. These colonial birds are loyal to their nest locations in spite of lengthy migrations to the south. Alaska plays an enormously important role for sea bird populations in the northern Pacific, with 80% of the 40 million sea birds nesting along this coast.



We passed through the Chiswells and Granite Island and entered into Harris Bay, which terminates at the great Northwestern Glacier. We visited with a humpback whale briefly. Humpbacks here winter in Hawaii. These active and sometimes acrobatic filter feeders eat nothing larger than a grapefruit, pushing 500 gallons of plankton-rich water through their baleen plates in a single mouthful. They can eat a ton of plankton a day, spending their time in these rich Alaskan waters stocking up for the 2500-mile migration to Hawaii. A female will make this migration, give birth to a calf, and nurse it all the way back to Alaska—without eating. She will have lost 50% of her body weight in the process.

The terminal moraine of the Northwestern glacier (the sediment dropped at the glacier's farthest extent) was several miles from the glacier itself, which has been in rapid retreat over the past 120 years. We spent quite a bit of time near the glacier's foot, watching the glacier calve ice into the waters of the Bay. This is still considered a tidewater glacier, because the ice terminates at the water's edge, but if it retreats much further it may become a hanging glacier, as a sheer rock face is visible behind the wall of ice.



As we passed back through the shallow waters of the terminal moraine, we were greeted briefly by a transient pod of orca. Transient orca are stealthy and harder to view, and unlike the fish-eating resident orca, prefer to feed on marine mammals. Transients also roam much larger territories. We wished we'd had more of a view of them but continued on our way with the hopes of seeing more.

As the Captain nosed us straight into Cataract Cove with its waterfalls, we got to see four Kittlitz's Murrelets mixed in with the Marbled Murrelets. We turned out of Harris Bay where we headed farther offshore into the open ocean and found two more orca, who swam directly towards us and gave us good views of their long dorsal fins and white sides.

Back at the Chiswell Islands we visited Horned Puffins, who stood near the cracks in the rock where they made their nests. In this they are unlike Tufted Puffins, who nest in burrows. After fledging, Puffins don't touch land for the first three to five years of their life. Then, they come shore to breed, and take



on their showy plumage and flashy large bills for transporting fish to their youngsters.

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They are powerful swimmers, flying through the water as deep as 300 feet. But this feat pales in comparison to the dives of Thick-billed and Common Murres, who can dive over 600 feet. Murres start life off rough, by stepping off the rock ledges of their nursery areas and tumbling many feet into the ocean below. They actually learn to swim before learning to fly, and the swimming helps strengthen their wings for flight. Parents continue to feed them as they learn, in the water at the foot of their nursery cliffs. Murres lay pear-shaped eggs; the pointy end causes the egg to roll in a circle and helps prevent a pre-hatching cliff tumble!

As we headed back to port, we had a brief glimpse of a fin whale spouting, giving us the whale “trifecta” of orcas, humpbacks and fins for the day’s journey. It was also a fruitful day bird-wise, including sightings of Rhinoceros and Cassin’s Auklet; Pigeon Guillemot; Arctic Tern and others.

Everyone selected the restaurant of their choice for dinner, many opting for a break from seafood, and heading out for pizza and beer.

### **Thursday, August 8 Anchorage Museum**

Today was our return trip to Anchorage. First, we strolled the Seward waterfront in search of Song Sparrows and Townsend’s Warbler. Ava’s bird feeders gave us great looks at baby Song and Fox Sparrows, as well as a male Red Crossbill and the many Pine Siskins there feeding on nyjer seed. We also stopped at Bear Creek, where a fish weir had been installed, and where the corpses of already spawned salmon were plentiful. Steller’s Jay and Brown Creeper flew in and called from the treetops, and by the streamside we looked for Dipper and investigated the variously fruiting Devil’s Club, blueberry, and bunchberry.

The drive back to Anchorage was just as pretty as the drive to Seward, and this time we walked the boardwalk at Bird Point, where we debated about a presumed Alder Flycatcher, and learned about the beluga whale population unique to Turnagain Inlet. During low tides these whales are forced into narrow channels of the bay and historically were hunted in these channels by Inupiaq using spears thrown from placed tree stumps.





We lunched on the outskirts of Anchorage and then returned to the Copper Whale to drop off luggage before leaving for the Anchorage Museum. Dinner was “on your own” tonight, and we all prepared for early nights, in anticipation of an early morning departure for Denali.

## **Friday, August 9            Drive into Denali**

After much luggage shuttling and a morning walk downtown, we caught the 6:30 a.m. bus to Denali. Our beautiful morning drive started on Highway 1, one of the few stretches of multi-lane highway in Alaska. We traveled along tall fencing, installed to reduce moose roadkill and passed a sign tallying the seasonal kill to date (zero since July 1). Our bus driver Brad, regaled in the American flag, claimed to be paid by the word, and kept the stories rolling with the miles. The bus traveled through the major vegetable growing area for Alaska, where the very long days and rich soils produce king-sized vegetables worthy of tall tales (with records including 1400 lb. pumpkins, 135 lb. cauliflowers, and 14 lb. carrots). We also passed the skeletons of trees killed by salt inundation after the tsunami produced by the earthquake and massive ground settling in the 1960’s.

Much of the road to Denali is lined with black spruce, but occasional openings in the trees revealed the majestic mountains in the distance. We passed one intrepid Alaskan’s solution to the tree “problem”; he built a nine story Dr. Seuss house that towered over the treetops, offering a clear view of Denali any day it wasn’t obscured in clouds. We also passed WalMike’s: “If he doesn’t have it, you don’t need it.” We stopped to pick up other passengers at Talkeetna Alaska lodge and several of us enjoyed a quick shopping opportunity there.

We transferred to our North Face Lodge buses at the train station, where the tone of the bus dialogue changed dramatically as knowledgeable Laurie talked to us about the biology, history, and ecology of this beautiful park.

Denali is considered “sub-Arctic”, unlike the temperate rain forest of southern Alaska or the dry tundra of the north. We drove through a mosaic of tundra and taiga. Taiga is boreal forest or “land of little sticks” and is circumpolar in distribution—the largest terrestrial biome on earth. Tundra is a thick vegetative mat that supports no trees—usually because of either temperature or elevation or both, but other factors can also contribute, including soil, drainage, exposure, and permafrost. Because of the high latitude here, the tree line is low, at 2500 - 3000 feet. But because of rising temperatures, the boreal forest is expanding into areas that were once tundra, including in the vicinity of North Face Lodge.

The first large mammal we encountered was a sleek caribou male, sporting an enormous antler rack. We were to see a number of these magnificent animals on our drive in, along with several groups of mother grizzlies with cubs. The grizzlies here are pale with dark legs and mask, as though they had been wading in mud. In places they were scraping blueberries off bushes, elsewhere they were taking in the sun. Because the bears are primarily



omnivores on the vegetarian side of things here (they don't eat salmon), they don't reach the larger stature of the Kodiak bears. Their berry consumption includes blueberries, crow berries, cranberries, and soap berries.

We passed many road workers on our trip into the park. The recent heavy rains had caused serious damage in some areas. Also, in some places the melting permafrost is causing roadway slumping and collapse. We also passed Adolph Murie's cabin and learned about how his studies on Dall sheep and wolves in the ecosystem helped change park policy to provide them enhanced protections, and ultimately to protect this special landscape.

This is a glacial landscape. The wide valleys bear heavy loads of glacial sediment along the braided river channels. Even by the hour, the flow of the river changes, because the rate of melting varies with the daily temperatures. As we advanced into the park, more and more kettle ponds were present, with many of them sporting waterfowl, including Northern Shoveler, Lesser Scaup, and Northern Pintail.

We passed a male Willow Ptarmigan standing deep inside in a willow. These tough little birds winter here in their white plumage, and feed on the willow buds that they also use as cover.

Arctic ground squirrels ran down the road as we approached. In addition to being food for many carnivores, these animals are physiologically amazing. They are able to shut down their heart, brain, and respiratory system, and drop their body temperature in the winter with no ensuing damage to brain or body.

We arrived at beautiful North Face Lodge in time for a buffet dinner and warm welcome. The mountain may be shrouded in clouds, but the smiles here are sunny.

## **Saturday August 10      Denali National Park**

After a lovely breakfast of seafood quiche and fresh greens, we packed our picnic lunches and disappeared in different directions on our various adventures. Part of our group headed out on the bus towards the Eielson Visitor Center and beyond for the "foray". The wildlife was wonderfully cooperative, with mother grizzly and cub on the road feet from the van, porcupine showing off his spines, Golden Eagle mobbed by a Merlin, and all the wonder of the spongy tundra.

The hiking group hiked up the hill past Camp Denali and beyond. The path included stretches of boardwalk and trail through boggy landscape, boreal forest and tundra. We spent a great deal of time eating berries, belly-botanizing the microflora of the tundra, and stopping to smell the Labrador tea. The hike was reasonably challenging, with much elevation gained and spectacular views as a reward.



On return, we all gathered at the lodge for appetizers and then a lovely dinner of prawns and polenta. After dinner, Mallory, one of the staff, gave an interesting talk “Your brain on Nature”, where she described the many scientifically documented health benefits of living near and being exposed to the natural environment.

## **Sunday, August 11      Denali National Park Part Deux**



What a day! We awoke to crystal clear skies and brilliant sunshine. We were all on top of the world anticipating what Denali held in store for us. After a fabulous breakfast of barley, beans, eggs and vegetables in a bowl, we headed out on our various selected expeditions.

Several of us took an air flight around the Mountain. This was extraordinary, better experienced than explained. Denali loomed to one side of the plane, while to the other, mountains pierced the mist and glaciers formed wide corridors extending for miles in the distance. Kettle ponds, ringed with green, reflected the blue sky, and the sunlight lit up the braided rivers in threads of silver.



The “moderate” hiking group had a day filled with large mammal sightings, including bear, caribou, moose, red fox, and Dall sheep(!), and a Golden Eagle for good measure. They also learnt a lot about herbs, mushrooms, and other plant lore from Mallory, and still got to eat their fill of blueberries!

The “foray” group enjoyed a beautiful morning with Scott, starting at Wonder Lake, where loons called, and Denali’s reflection loomed in the still waters. They found Bohemian Waxwing and several White-winged Scoters, and traveled out the road to Kantishna to investigate the western end of Denali Park Road. And of course, they ended their outing browsing for blueberries on the fully- loaded Blueberry Hill.



Dinner tonight was festive, ending with blueberry tart. And yes, those tart blueberries made a heck of a tart. We shared our days’ stories, and then listened to Scott give a talk on expedition behavior, starting with the grim example of a 1967 expedition up Denali that went

terribly awry. He demonstrated the important attributes of a highly functioning team member, via a change in wardrobe he made on the fly. These included: Patience and understanding underwear, listening long johns, positive mental attitude pants, emotional support suspenders, a personal responsibility parka, and finally, empathetic earmuffs!

We ended our evening with more photos of the still breathtakingly clear view of Denali. How lucky we had been today, and throughout the trip, with mostly clear skies, few bugs, great adventures and our amazing guides!

## **Monday, August 12    Back to Anchorage**

Today we said goodbye to North Face Lodge after a lovely breakfast of quiche and greens. It was sparkling clear again, and Denali stayed in clear skies for the entirety of our trip out of the park. Were we lucky or what? Traveling out of the park we saw caribou, a moose and her calf, a sow grizzly and her cub, and Dall sheep traveling the ridge line. The Polychrome mountains were scenic in shades of iron and cinnabar, now that the sun was lighting up their colorful slopes. By mid-day we had boarded the Alaska railway and settled in for the afternoon in our glass viewing car and Gold star service. The miles of fir forest and kettle pond rolled away, and our view of Denali grew more and more distant as we approached Anchorage and our travels back to our respective and various lives starting tomorrow morning.

