

Alaska Birding & Nature | Trip Report

June 2 – 13, 2019 | Written by Greg Smith





Sunday, June 2 | Nome Arrivals

For those that arrived yesterday ahead of the tour start date, they were here to enjoy dinner at a local restaurant. But today was the first time in twelve years that fog closed the airport in Nome. We were eventually caught up by three of the folks the following day, and the remaining fourth two days later...

Monday, June 3 | Nome Teller Road

It was a gorgeous morning as we started our drive west. Musk Ox always seen to be hanging out along this road and today was no exception. Two small, mixed groups were right next to the road offering up close views of these doughy-eyed fables of the far north. Willows are their favorite browse, and with the year's new growth being only days old, there was a lot of eating going down.

Our first stop was Penny River where Northern Waterthrush, Wilson's Warbler, Gray-cheeked Thrush, and Alder Flycatcher were sitting at the tops of willows belting out their favorite territorial tunes. Fox Sparrows weren't shy, and it was a great introduction to some of the more common passerines of the Seward Peninsula.

But the highlight of this stop was the return of the American Dipper! A hard freeze 5-6 years ago had killed most all of the dippers and beaver in this part of the peninsula, and Penny River had been home to a pair of dippers up until that time. Nice to have them back, even with the flooded river...We continued up the road to watch a pair of nesting Rough-legged Hawks looking up at a pair of circling Gyrfalcons – not a bad start to the raptor list!

Just shy of Wolley Lagoon, we had lunch at an off-road, elevated section of the marine terrace where we were traveling. Here, wildflowers were in bloom on the compacted scree with yellows, whites and purples. Not a red to be seen on the Seaward Peninsula, but the abundance and diversity of the species more than made up for that loss of the spectrum.

We drove just a few miles down the road to the junction of Wooley Lagoon. This road is home to all four of the nesting plovers on the peninsula. Our first sighting was of a stunning male American Golden-Plover, the less common of the two goldens. While it was the only one of this species we saw on the road, it gave us great views! This was followed by numbers of showy Pacific Golden Plovers, and then those fine looking alternate-plumaged Black-bellied Plovers, one of which was sitting on a nest! All of this was interspersed by visits from both Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers, with the long tailed being the most confiding.



We had climbed one more off-road terrace, after receiving some cryptic information from a passing birder of something special, on the slopes of snow that remained in the area. We finally found the mystery bird, a Rock Sandpiper. Not an easy bird to find in this part of Alaska unless you get up to snowy, gravel-covered terraces at higher elevations.

Tuesday, June 4 | Council Road

Council Road, with Safety Lagoon, Skookum Pass, and those spruce at the end of the road is probably the most habitat diverse road of the three. Depending on tides, just Safety Lagoon takes a few hours to bird. Regulars on the road include Common Eider, Tundra Swan, and Northern Pintail. We did get looks at both White-winged and Black Scoter, and also at Aleutian Tern down near Bonanza.

At Bonanza, the road turns inland and starts following the river. Here we saw a cow moose with two young that still had vestiges of their umbilical cords. They were still wobbly-legged and unsure of just how to move around in their new world, but they managed.

We took a steady climb in elevation, heading up to Skookum where all the snow at the summit and the surrounding view is enough to make you forget about wildlife and birds. But you do come back to your senses, and when we did, we noticed an Eastern Yellow Wagtail singing overhead and heard a Northern Wheatear singing on a not-to-be-seen part of the hillside. There were grizzly prints coming down the hillside, but they were at least a couple of days old, so no worries.



When you drop down the other side, you start to see spruce trees dotting the hillsides. And it is these spruces further up the road that is of the most interest, as they usually have a whole different complement of birds. And it is the area around the Bear River Station where the density of trees and the adjoining river make for the best chance of finding some of the spruce forest residents. We did get wonderful looks at Boreal Chickadee and Yellow-rumped Warbler, but that was it.

Wednesday, June 5 | Kougorok Road

The Kougorok – this is THE road for some of the peninsula’s most sought after birds. Not that you can’t find some of these species on the other roads, but the setting combined with the species, makes it the highlight of time in Nome. And at the end of the road is Curlew Hill, where everyone searches for the Bristle-thighed Curlew. Our first find was the Gyrfalcon Eyrie, but the cold wind kept the 15-day old chicks hunkered down in the nest – but this is an out and back road, so we would stop again on our return.

We had lots of Willow Ptarmigan lining the road with mostly males on patrol. But a couple of the males did have hens with them, and given all the snow on the ground, it was a safe assumption that nesting hadn’t commenced.



When we got to Salmon Lake it was completely frozen and the road into the campground wasn't open because of snow. But the snow didn't deter the newly-arrived Bluethroats. We did find two males displaying and trying to vocally protect their patch of the shrubby tundra. A number of displays from them, but not everyone got enough of a look, so we would visit this area on our return.

Lunch again where the views were stunning, and off we went to search for the curlew. We spent a couple of hours up on the hill and only had one brief sighting of the bird. Whimbrel was calling and visible up there, but we never did get to find the curlew again. One more stop for the Bluethroat, and there it took five minutes to spot the bird. But this time it was far more cooperative, running along and feeding on the open lichen-covered gravel about forty feet from us. Great views!

And those falcons – the sun was shining on the nest and the three chicks were active. They were even more active when one of the adults circled the eyrie a couple of times and then landed and fed a collared lemming to the young. A fine way to finish our day on the Kougorok!

Thursday, June 6 | Back to Anchorage

Our late morning arrival to the Nome Airport was fog-free, so we knew we would be able to fly out on our flight for the next leg of the trip. Anchorage greeted us with sunny skies, powder-puff cumulus clouds, and just a smattering of showers. This was the perfect set-up to a fine dinner at Simon & Seafort's where halibut cheeks were at the top of the list!

Friday, June 7 | North to Denali

It was an early start to our day as the shuttle bus departed at 06:30 for Denali National Park. Highlight of the drive north was a Harlan's Hawk, as was picking up our brunch at the Talkeetna Lodge with Denali jutting into the sky.

We arrived at the depot at 12:30 and promptly departed forty-five minutes later. It is about a seven-hour drive back to North Face Lodge (including our 45-minute dinner picnic. Along the way we saw a number of Caribou, five Grizzly Bears, Red Fox and about two dozen Dall Sheep. Nice start to long weekend at the lodge. Upon arrival at the NFL, we were treated to dessert, fruit and coffee, along with a discussion on how things would be operated during our stay.





Saturday, June 8 | Eielson

Most of the group decided on the Naturalists' Foray for their outing, and so back onto the bus for a birding and wildlife adventure toward the Eielson VC.

We birded some of the kettle ponds where we had Lesser Scaup, American Wigeon, Mallard, Barrow's Goldeneye, Green-winged Teal, and a few other waterfowl. A couple of us were fortunate enough to not only hear, but get looks, at Arctic Warbler! A grizzly sow and her cub were napping alongside the road, which was definitely a bus stopper. More Caribou were bedded down along the tundra-lined passes, and one solo fox put in a brief appearance.



Another two birds of interest while we were out were an all-white Black-billed Magpie, and a Long-tailed Jaeger that used this afternoon's brisk breeze to hold itself stationary as it hunted lemmings and shrews!

Those that went on the strenuous hike had good looks at Surbird, Rock Ptarmigan, and other birds of the higher elevations. And they also hiked much further than they had anticipated, clocking up a good 10.5 miles!



Sunday, June 9 | Camp Denali Foray

The weather wasn't quite as good as the first two days, with the sky turning moody and the clouds sharing intermittent rain and hail. Made it a bit more challenging for birding, but it also gave us an opportunity to see how the greenhouse operated and visit the Moose Creek Harlequin Ducks. (Later on, in the afternoon after we returned from the foray, some of us birded the creek and saw American Dipper, Wilson's Warbler and Swainson's Thrush.)

After visiting Camp Denali up on the hill, we moved down towards Wonder Lake where we had lunch on Blueberry Hill before visiting the lakeshore. The rains started up again with a bit of a frenzy, so we didn't get out to see if the loons and Canada Jays were about. With the rain continuing as we visited the end of the road; it was time to head back to the lodge. We finished the evening with a talk by one of the lodge's naturalists about her climbing Denali from the north side of the peak, the route the pioneers took (no flying to 7000-feet and starting your climb).



Monday, June 10 | Back to ANC

Today's drive started at 06:45, as we motored back towards the RR Depot. Caribou were still bedded down from the quasi-lit evening as we got to Eielson Bluffs, and then after Stoney Pass, we had a distant view of a Grizzly Sow and cub. While there wasn't much more in the way of wildlife and birds, we did arrive at the depot with a little time to spare before boarding the train for our leisurely train ride to Anchorage.

Tuesday, June 11 | On to Seward

After a great night's sleep, we headed off to Westchester Lagoon for some lite birding. Numerous Red-necked Grebes were in nests, as were Arctic Terns and Mew Gulls. Assorted waterfowl were loafing and taking in the fine, sunny day. Sandhill Crane were out on the mudflats before we decided to head down to Potter Marsh.

Potter had that Falcated Duck, and right after we pulled into a parking area we started looking. And five minutes after that, a woman named Cheryl came over and asked if we would like to see the Falcated Duck? So, we walked down the road with her for about fifty yards, and there in a wide-open space was the duck. It wasn't that easy for most people who had been looking for this bird, but it was our fortunate day.

We headed off to Seward where we checked into our hotel, and then walked across the street to the Alaska Sealife Center. The Center has numerous water tanks filled with different fish species, including salmon. But the big treat was the outdoor aviary and tank with numerous species of sea and shorebirds. This was the perfect setup for getting ready to ID Alcidae out on Resurrection Bay tomorrow.

Wednesday, June 12 | Northwestern Glacier

It was overcast, but it was a high overcast. It was cool, but it wasn't cold. The seas were flat, and by the end of the ride, they were flatter. All that could mean was that we would have a great day: Rhinoceros, Parakeet and



Cassin's Auklets, Kittlitz's, Marbled and Ancient Murrelets, Pigeon Guillemot, Red-eyed Cormorant, three pods of killer whales, seven humpback whales, Dall's Porpoise, Northwestern Glacier putting on a calving show, Mountain goats, Steller's sealion, and Harbor seals! A nice day on the water...

Thursday, June 13 | Seward Birding/Departures

We had two more stops on our drive to the airport in Anchorage. Our first was at Ava's feeders on the outskirts of Seward. Her feeders are always a treat as she gets a number of bird species that are hard to get good views of in the temperate rainforest.

We had a family of Pine Grosbeaks (two parents and a juvenile), a flock of Pine Siskins, both Downy and Hairy Woodpecker, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Song Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Bald Eagle, and Orange-crowned Warbler. And we all got to meet Ava!

Next stop was the salmon weir at Bear Creek. Lots of yet-to-be-colored sockeye salmon in the pools, all of them trying to make the jump to the fish counting station. Probably at least 150 of them, with most looking very healthy and in shape for the move further upstream...

We did hear a Belted Kingfisher in the area and got absolutely wonderful looks at an American Dipper perched above the waiting salmon. Really a great finish to a wonderful trip!

Photo Credits:

Rock Ptarmigan, Greg Smith (GS); Musk Ox, GS; Northern Waterthrush, GS; Western Sandpiper, GS; Bluethroat, GS; Wilsons Warbler, Peg Abbott (PA); Guide Photo, JR; Long-tailed Jaeger, GS; Skookum Pass – Council Road, John Roser (JR); Aleutian Terns, GS; Willow Ptarmigan, PA; Ice on the pond! GS; Bluethroat hunt – salmon lake, JR; Red Fox, GS; Grizzly Bear, GS; Wonder Lake Lunch, JR; View from Camp Ridge Denali (1,2,3), JR; Sandhill Cranes, GS; Steller Sea Lion, PA; Cassin's Auklet flight, GS.