

Alaska day trip (Barrow and Anchorage Airport), October 22-23, 2016

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Polar bear and glaucous gulls at a bowhead whale carcass

Barrow, the northernmost town in the US, is a perfect destination for a day trip. It is served by Alaska Airlines, which means cheap tickets (I flew from NYC for \$800+); the total length of its road system (not counting town streets) is 20-30 miles (depending on the time of the year); there's always some interesting wildlife to choose from. The most difficult problem is picking the right time. In early May you can walk to the edge of fast ice to look for bowhead whales, belugas, ringed and bearded seals and walrus; it's also whaling season and that means polar bears. June is peak birding time, with 24-hour daylight and sometimes a few bears still around. In July fast ice is breaking up and you can sometimes see bearded, ringed, ribbon, harbor and ribbon seals as well as walrus and belugas from the shore. Late September-early October is the second whaling season; bowheads are sometimes seen from shore at that time, although the main draw is the migration of thousands of Ross's gulls. In early November the sea is usually at least partially frozen, so you can try for more seals, walrus and bears, as well as for ivory gulls. By late November there are no birds left and pretty much no daylight.

We decided to go in late October; that was risky because nobody usually does that (so there's no info) and the weather is unpredictable. The first three weeks of October were unusually warm, with strong S winds, so when we arrived on the evening of October 21 we found the sea ice-free and very stormy; the air temperature was just below freezing. The storm soon subsided, leaving the beach covered with jellyfish and penis worms, and the temperature dropped to normal for that time of year. There was a lot of westward seabird movement in the morning but much less in the afternoon. There was only about an inch of snow on the frozen tundra, perfect for hiking and driving. We could even drive our rental car to Point Barrow, which is usually impossible. Tracking small mammals worked great as they couldn't move under snow and their tracks were perfectly visible. A friend of mine who visited in early November found the sea still ice-free, which is a bit unusual.



Only one river still wasn't frozen

On the way back we had three hours between planes in Anchorage, so we walked around the bogs and forests near the airport, spotlighting for small mammals. The weather was pretty much the same, but the snow was so soft that rodents made little ditches rather than footprints. We saw nice auroras while flying back over Canada.



Flying over Alaska is always fun

Our trip total was 9 spp. of mammals and 16 spp. of birds. Visiting in late October paid out, as we saw more stuff than people who came earlier, and probably more than those who will come later. But, as always in the Arctic, there was a lot of luck required. We could've easily missed almost everything.



Arctic fox

Mammals

Barren grounds shrew. We spent the long night in our car at the end of Gaswell Rd (71.233N, 156.34W). I periodically scanned the tundra with a flashlight looking for Arctic foxes, and once saw a tiny dot moving across a snow patch. It took us ten minutes to get out of sleeping bags and into boots; by that time the shrew was gone and its faint tracks were being rapidly covered with drifting snow. We tracked it for almost half an hour, losing the trail a few times, and eventually caught up with it just as it was about to disappear in a crack in the ground. It was very light-colored.

Tundra shrew. I found fresh tracks at first light on one of dry ridges below the hospital (71.295N, 156.7265W), and we saw the animal after a few minutes of scanning the area. It was the most beautiful northern shrew I've ever seen: fluffy, white with pale chestnut back stripe. It was very shy; we only got binocular views.

Pygmy shrew. We saw one running along a ditch left in the snow by a northern red-backed vole while looking for the latter in a spruce bog near Anchorage Airport (61.1932N, 149.9877W). It didn't mind light pollution from the airport, but ran away as soon as we turned on our flashlights.

Polar bear. A huge old male was feasting on a whale carcass at Point Barrow. It ignored our presence until we got to within thirty feet. With some patience we would probably be able to pet it after a while. My friend who visited in early November saw 16 bears: lack of sea ice seems to be turning the place into another Churchill.



Polar bear and glaucous gulls

Arctic fox. We saw three while spotlighting (two along Gaswell Rd. and one near the end of Stevens Rd.), then re-found one in the morning as it was sleeping near the end of Gaswell Rd., and later re-found the same individual again as it was hunting later in the day. All were in winter coats, but some had a few shades of grey left. Judging by the number of tracks we saw, the population was still high following the lemming peak the previous year.



Arctic foxes



Arctic fox tracks

Ermine. We saw some fresh tracks around the rental car office in Barrow as soon as we arrived there, and spent half an hour following the tracks in circles until they disappeared under the house behind the office. Next evening we found more fresh tracks at the same place, spent another half hour walking around the area, and eventually caught a glimpse of the animal as it darted into a pipe. We couldn't wait for it to emerge because our plane was about to leave.



Ermine tracks

Ringed seal. We saw a few as they surfaced periodically near the beach leading to Pt. Barrow. There were a few gulls around for scale, so the small size was obvious.

Ribbon seal. One female's head was briefly seen twice among ringed seals. Locals said it was an unusually late sighting: hunters occasionally kill them in May and July, but never in winter.

Bowhead whale. None seen. The locals killed one two weeks earlier and declared the season closed; the bear we saw was at that whale's carcass.

Northern red-backed vole. Lots of tracks around Anchorage Airport, but we didn't see any voles in half an hour of watching their runways (got a pygmy shrew instead). Also a couple tracks in Barrow below the hospital (where they were also common in July 2010), near the cemetery and around the rental car office; that's what the ermine was apparently feeding on.

Brown lemming. None seen. 2015 was a lemming year; the population reportedly crashed by April 2016. We found only two tracks (one adult and one small juvenile) along the research station boardwalk off Cake Eater Rd (71.2762N, 156.63W). No tracks at the cemetery near Barrow Airport where they are usually abundant.



Tracks of juvenile (left) and adult brown lemmings

Nearctic collared lemming. One animal in white winter coat ran across the unnamed road leading W along the coast, just before the place where it descends from coastal bluffs and ends at a beach (71.2554N, 156.8637W). We searched the area and found tracks of two others, both adult size. I've never seen them in Barrow before despite much searching, even in June 2015 when brown lemmings were everywhere. The top of the bluffs might be the only place in the area dry enough for this upland species.

Northern bog lemming. No animals and no tracks around Anchorage Airport where I saw them in 2015.

Birds

Pacific loon. One seen flying W far offshore at the end of Stevens Rd (71.357N, 156.537W). ID uncertain.

Eiders. There were a few small groups offshore. We stopped paying attention after identifying all four species; not much fun since drakes were in eclipse. Most were king eiders.

Long-tailed duck. Dozens along the shore.

Red phalarope. A dozen seen off the beach leading to Pt. Barrow in groups of 1-4.

Glaucous gull. Hundreds along the coast, particularly on both sides of Pt. Barrow gravel spit. Only 5-6 at the main garbage dump off Gaswell Rd. (71.243N, 156.562W).

Thayer's gull. A few (mostly juveniles) were hanging out with glaucous gulls at Pt. Barrow.

Black-legged kittiwake. Two juveniles seen flying W near Pt. Barrow.

Sabine's gull. One seen off the end of Stevens Rd., flying W. It was an unusually late sighting.

Ross's gull. 2016 was the worst year on record for this species: instead of thousands, only a few dozen were seen in late September and then after a gap in mid-October. We saw two juveniles and one adult flying W in the

morning off Pt. Barrow. A few birders spend the entire weekend looking for them along Stevenson Rd., but saw none. Everybody said the migration was just late due to warm weather, but more likely it was already over: the birds migrated far offshore rather than along the coast (we also thought there could have been a major population crash, but according to Russian ornithologists 2016' breeding season was a perfectly normal one).

Ivory gull. None seen by us or anybody else this year; usually shows up when the sea partially freezes over.

Snowy owl. One young bird near the collared lemming site (see above), probably hunting collared lemmings.



Snowy owl

Raven. One pair in Barrow near the hospital; another pair along Cake Eater Rd. They are reportedly present until mid-November.

Redpoll. Two birds of “hoary redpoll” ecotype near the house with whalebone palms at Egasak St. in Barrow (71.29N, 156.7954W). That house used to have feeders, but this time there was only a Trump sign.



Redpolls

Other places that are served by Alaska Airlines and thus can be (relatively) cheaply visited for a weekend include Bethel (reportedly good for Alaska hares and many smaller species), Nome (which I'd love to visit in early march to see McKay's buntings in breeding plumage and Alaska hares in winter coats, as well as to try for ribbon seals on the ice), Dillingham (the starting point for boat trips to walrus haulout at Round Island), and Dutch Harbor (to look for Unalaska collared lemmings etc.). Email me if you'd like a personal tour; I'll charge only for the expenses unless there's more than one person.

