

The Last Frontier of the Last Frontier: Outer Alaska, May-June 2017

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Islands off Alaska have a few small endemic mammals, plus distinctive subspecies and genetic lineages of some larger ones. In 2017 I conducted an ornithological study in western and southern Alaska, and partially financed it by guiding bird- and mammalwatchers. This allowed me to visit remote locations I couldn't afford to reach earlier. It was my sixth trip to Alaska, so I seldom looked for more widespread mammals unless my volunteer assistants/sponsors asked me to.

Some of the locations listed below are very remote and tend to have crappy weather. Don't plan a tight schedule, as flight delays are common. If desperate, try hitchhiking on private planes. Pack everything essential in your hand luggage in case the rest gets lost. Book as many flights as possible as a single itinerary with Alaska Airlines and its partners; this makes it easier to change the later flights if one is delayed or canceled. But avoid PenAir flights if possible: they are ridiculously unreliable and regularly deliver less than half of checked luggage. Bring wads of cash as it's often the only accepted form of payment. Hotels and car rentals tend to be ridiculously overpriced; try talking to locals and you might find someone willing to put you up or to let you use their ride. You might also run into people about to fly or sail to some wonderful place you'd never reach on your own. Freezing temperatures are possible even in summer in many parts of Alaska; gale-force winds, heavy fog and prolonged rain are a norm. If this is your first trip to the North, consider joining a guided tour, taking a cruise, or going to more civilized parts of the state, such as Juneau, Kenai Peninsula, or the Anchorage-Tok-Fairbanks road loop. Previously tested rubber boots and mosquito repellent with 98% DEET content are essential; don't forget good sunblock and sunglasses (when driving, you sometimes have to stare into the setting sun for hours).

I had four Sherman traps (two very small), and baited them with a mix of oats, peeled sunflower seeds, peanut butter, and dry mealworms (moistened before use). On St. Lawrence and St. Paul Islands I used just the mealworms. Tundra rodents and shrews are usually difficult to catch, and this time was no exception. If setting traps, always put some cotton inside.

Seward Peninsula and its capital Nome are mostly covered in my book *Finding Mammals* and various trip reports. This time I was there for ten days, but it was a very bad year for small mammals, I was busy searching for bird nests, and our camp was near Teller which is the worst possible place, so I didn't see much to report here: a few very skinny **red foxes**, a distant **Arctic fox**, and a glimpse of an **ermine** in the village. I trapped nothing in 8 nights. We made a side trip (by plane) to Serpentine Hot Springs in Bering Land Bridge National Preserve and saw a white **wolf** on a hill about three miles N of the springs. We also made three day visits to Wales, the westernmost settlement in continental North America. It is a great place to see whale migration in April-May and August-October, when large portions of the global populations of **grey** and **bowhead whales** plus some **fin whales**, **humpbacks**, **minkes**, **belugas** and **killer whales** pass offshore. But we were there in June and saw only a few **grey whale** spouts, plus some **seals** (mostly **spotted**, but also **ringed** and **bearded**) and **walrus**. **Polar bears** used to be regular winter visitors, but not so much in recent years. We looked for land mammals along the 10-km ATV track to Tin City, but there were remarkably few of those: just one **Nelson's collared lemming** and one **tundra shrew**. From the village you can see Diomed Islands (one American, one Russian) and the Siberian shore of the Bering Strait; I remember looking from there towards Alaska in 1991 and wondering if I'll ever get a chance to look in the opposite direction. Little Diomed (the American one) is probably an even better place to see marine mammals.

St. Lawrence Island is huge and poorly explored by biologists. It is owned by a native corporation and roaming on your own is prohibited. In Gambell, the most visited village, this rule is strictly enforced, which is extremely frustrating for bird- and mammalwatchers. Savoonga, the other village on the island, is surrounded by better and more diverse habitat; its residents are much friendlier and don't really care where you go. Both villages are rather depressive (Savoonga is the suicide capital of the world: 11 of ~600 residents killed themselves in 2016). The strikingly bicolored **St. Lawrence Island shrew** is more common around Savoonga. In summer, when the tundra is patrolled by hungry jaegers, gulls and ravens, it is most active around midnight. In 48 hours in Savoonga I found two **shrews**: one was feeding in a dense patch of dwarf willows at 01:35 am, the other was under a pile of whale bones at the edge of the village. They are also said to be common in boulder piles on the shore a few miles W of Savoonga where least auklets nest in great numbers. **Walrus**, **grey whale**, **Steller's sea lion**, and **spotted seal** are common just offshore in summer; **bowhead whale** and **ribbon seal** are possible in the fall; **ringed** and **bearded seals** and occasionally **polar bear** occur in winter. **Northern red-backed vole** lives in many houses and can be found under oil barrels and other litter on the outskirts of the villages, but is said to be absent from the rest of the island. **Tundra vole** is common in some years, but 2017 was a bad year for them and I saw only one, in grassy tundra near the end of the 5 mile-long road to nowhere that goes SW past the airport.

St. Matthew Island, spectacularly rugged and mosquito-free, has two vertebrate endemics: **insular vole** (possibly a subspecies of **singing vole**) and McKay's bunting. I tried to co-organize a boat trip to the island, but there wasn't enough interest, which is a shame because it's a remarkable wilderness very much worth seeing. Luckily, I managed to get to the island by a private floatplane (the landing strip is no longer usable); it gave me less than an hour there but that was enough

to see a few voles and buntings. The **voles** are easy to see in most years: they are diurnal, rather tame, and give alarm calls apparently identical to calls of singing voles. Arctic foxes have been recently replaced by **red foxes**, and I don't know if there are any left (I didn't see either). Marine mammals should be interesting; **ribbon seal** is reportedly common in early winter, and summer **walrus** haulouts form in some years. Nearby Hall Island has a huge **Steller's sea lion** rookery.

St. Paul Island has **Pribilof Islands shrew**, brown-morph **Arctic fox**, and the world's largest **northern fur seal** rookeries (once 3,000,000 strong, the population is now down to ~500,000). The volcanic island is owned by a native corporation, but you are free to roam on your own (the rookeries are closed June 1-September 30, but anyone with a permit can walk you there). Virtually all visitors arrive on organized tours. The only place to stay, King Eider Inn (at the airport, \$150, 907-546-2477) can be full during the vagrant bird season (May-early June). The town with unmarked cafeteria and grocery store is 3 miles away, a pleasant walk (on weekdays a lot of people will stop and offer you a ride). You can easily find someone to rent a car from, or take a birding tour (\$75 for ½ day), but there are rookeries and seabird colonies within walking distance from the town. **Arctic foxes** are common along the coast and particularly in the area between the town and the nearby Reef Rookery. Early June is a good time to see them because some are still in winter coats and some have already shed them. They are mostly wary of people, but those living above seabird cliffs would sometimes bark at you instead of running away. The area SE from the town is also one of the best places to look for the **shrew**. In some years it is abundant in coastal lowlands with dense vegetation and occurs all the way to the mountaintops, but in 2017 it was very difficult to find: I flipped 300+ pieces of driftwood and various junk before finally seeing one near the airport. Male **fur seals** begin to appear at the rookeries in late May; in early June females begin to arrive, and in July-August the rookeries are at their best. **Steller's sea lions** and **harbor seals** breed on offshore islets and are often seen from the shore; look for the former around the harbor entrance, and for the latter off the beach near the airport. In August, when young fur seals disperse, **killer whales** are often seen off the rookeries. Single **ribbon seals** sometimes visit in winter, mostly when there is sea ice (an increasingly rare event). A few hundred **reindeer** (of domestic Siberian stock) roam the interior.

St. George Island is similar to St. Paul, but the island plateau is higher and the weather even worse. Both islands are served by the same flight, so adding St. George to your itinerary doesn't cost much, but only one out of five scheduled flights actually lands there, so you can get stuck on the island for weeks. St. George has about 300,000 **northern fur seals**, millions of seabirds, lots of **Arctic foxes** (considered the same subspecies as those on St. Paul, but tending to be slightly darker), another herd of **reindeer**, and a local subspecies of **brown lemming**, but no shrews. One **fur seal** rookery is near the airport and can be seen from approaching planes. The main village is on the other side of the island from the airport and the harbor, but there is a cluster of dwellings near the airport where the **lemming** was common and easy to see during the two hours I had there between flights. St. George was apparently the only place in Alaska where 2017 was a lemming year. The lemming looks very different from those on the mainland; I wouldn't be surprised if it gets split someday. I also saw an **Arctic fox** perched on a hilltop near the runway, and another one under one of seabird cliffs.

Unalaska Island (pronounced oo-nah-lAhsh-kah) has a relatively large town (often called Dutch Harbor by the locals), but flights are expensive even by Alaskan standards, and can be sold out months in advance. If you have time, go by ferry. I couldn't get tickets, but ended up spending a night for free on the way from the Pribilofs thanks to PenAir's scheduling quirks. There are good hiking trails (see www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/viewing/pdfs/unalaska.pdf). **Unalaska collared lemming** occurs in the uplands; you can easily access them from the promptly named Ptarmigan Rd. or from Overland Dr. Walking above the upper end of Ptarmigan Rd., I saw three **lemmings** in as many hours; no idea if it was better or worse than average. Watch also for **red foxes** and **tundra voles**. **Steller's sea lions**, **harbor seals**, and **sea otters** live in the harbor; **grey** and **humpback whales** and **harbor porpoises** visit occasionally. Whalewatching is reportedly good in surrounding waters. It is even better around the Outer Aleutians, but I'm yet to find a budget way to get there.

Bethel is located in the middle of the giant Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, the main breeding area of Alaska's unofficial state bird, the mighty mosquito. Unless you are a trophy fisherman or hunter, the only reason to visit Bethel is that flights from Anchorage sometimes cost just \$100-200 return. But it is often used as a refueling stop, so you might end up there anyway, as happened to us. Bethel is mostly surrounded by water, swampy tundra, and dense willow thickets, but you can arrange boat trips to coastal hills and forested uplands with more mammal-friendly habitats. **Caribou** often migrate nearby, followed by **wolves**. **Beaver** and **muskrat** populations are enormous, and both species are hard to miss even around the airport. I briefly saw a **least weasel** on a streambank there. Interestingly, the "house mouse" in Bethel is apparently **tundra vole** rather than northern red-backed vole as in most local settlements, or brown lemming as in Barrow. A few of these voles lived under the airport building and were easy to see. **Ermine** and **mink** reportedly live in the town. **Walrus** haulouts form on the coast of the refuge in summer; the locations are unpredictable and may be accessible or not.

Dillingham is a small town served by relatively cheap PenAir flights notorious for leaving luggage behind. My backpack never arrived, so I didn't trap here. You can rent a car from D&J rentals (907-842-2222, advance reservations essential

but unreliable); this allows you to avoid paying \$200/night for a crappy hotel with no internet. The town is surrounded by spruce-birch taiga, marshy tundra, and black spruce muskegs. Rodent populations were down in 2017: even **tundra vole** burrows were difficult to find. But shrew numbers were very high: I saw 2-3 **masked shrews** per hour by sitting quietly at dusk in dense clumps of willows at the edges of large tundra patches along the 6 mile-long Kanakanak Rd. Aleknagik Rd. branches off from it just past the airport and goes inland for 22 miles, all of it through taiga. Locals list pretty much all larger land mammals of the region when asked what can be seen from that road, but the chances are slim because there is hardly a mile without roadside houses; the only mammals I saw on night drives were **porcupines**. When you come to N Shore/S Shore junction, turn towards the N shore (right). Just before Wood River Bridge there is a large tundra patch on the right where I saw a **northern bog lemming** (at dusk) and a juvenile **pygmy shrew** (an hour before sunset) while watching birds from a parked car. The shrew kept running along the ditch separating the road shoulder from the tundra, and I eventually hand-caught it. Dillingham is slightly outside published range maps for this species. After the bridge, look for Bog Mountain Rd. on the right (4wd recommended); it climbs to within easy hiking distance of nice subalpine habitat. Aleknagik Lake provides access to the beautiful Wood-Tikchik State Park, said to be the best place in Alaska to see **wolverine**; you can easily get there if you get hold of a motorboat (in summer) or a snowmobile (in winter).

Togiak is a friendly Yupik village accessible by a short, scenic low-elevation flight from Dillingham. Look for **beluga whales** in the first river you cross (I saw three), for **moose** in lakes (I saw one), and for **caribou** and **brown bears** in the mountains (I didn't see any, but locals said they are seen often). The flight is cheap (\$120-140 each way) but difficult to book in advance; try Tucker Aviation (907-842-10-23) or, better, Grant Aviation (888-359-4726). The only place to stay is the nice Togiak Airport Inn (907-493-2816, \$200; discounts on cash payments if the credit card machine isn't working). The village is surrounded by huge Togiak National Wildlife Refuge. **Moose, caribou, wolverine, wolf, and Arctic fox** are said to be very common in winter. If you'd like to come in winter, call the inn to check if there's enough snow to use a snowmobile: the climate here has changed so much that it's only possible once every 3-4 years. The road network is very short, but ATV trails go on forever. Two mile-long Togiak Heights Rd. goes inland to an outlying cluster of houses on a hill that is reportedly an excellent place to see **Nelson's collared lemmings** in some years (but not in 2017), and continues to a landfill. From there you can hike into picturesque tundra-covered hills along ATV trails; I saw a **Holarctic least shrew** there (only the second one I've seen in Alaska, but I think nobody else has seen them in North America at all, except when trapped). The coastal part of the village is inhabited by **northern red-backed voles** and, in some years, **brown lemmings**. **Muskkrats** live in nearby lakes. Bay Street goes past the airfield and along the beach where old **wolf, brown bear, and moose** tracks were present; it ends after about two miles, but you can walk on the beach for another mile (easier at low tide) before having to cross a small river called First Creek. Numerous ATV tracks lead from the beach into willow-covered hills and then into the mountains. I spent an evening in that area and saw a **montane shrew**, a **brown bear** (here they are intermediate between the large coastal form and the small grizzlies of the interior) hunting **Arctic ground squirrels**, and two very tame **beavers**. Locals said that in most years the willows are teeming with **Alaska hares**.

Round Island (commonly called Walrus Island) has the most accessible **walrus** haulout in North America (reliable in May-September). Boat trips from Togiak to the island are run by Paul Markoff (907-764-2428, \$800 pp). The crossing takes from less than an hour to three hours, depending on the weather; you need to plan at least 3-4 days to wait for good sea conditions. Landing is by a tiny inflatable boat and you row; rubber boots are required to reach the mainland shore if you return at low tide. The main **walrus** haulout is viewed from more than 100 m away across some seabird cliffs, but there are usually small groups very close to the landing site. The island also has a few **Steller's sea lions** (on the far side not seen on day trips), very tame **red foxes**, abundant **tundra voles**, and a few **montane shrews**. You can camp there, but that means paying for two boat trips, and camping permits must be obtained from Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game at least a few weeks in advance. **Grey whales** are often seen during the crossing, mostly in early May and September.

Kodiak Island is cheap and easy to get to, but the island's main draw, the largest subspecies of **brown bear**, is difficult to see on your own as it is now mostly confined to remote parts of the island with no road access. We weren't planning to go there, but a local resident we met in Anchorage Airport told us that an exceptionally large bear was fishing daily in a small creek near his home. We had an extra day and one of my volunteers hadn't seen a bear before, so we flew to Kodiak and spent a day waiting for the beast to show up. It never did, but as the guy who invited us was driving us back to the airport, a satisfactory humongous **brown bear** crossed the road ahead. The only other native mammals are **red fox, ermine, river otter, meadow vole, and little brown myotis**. Introduced **black-tailed deer** are common on the island; there are also introduced herds of **Plains bison, Roosevelt elk, and mountain goat** somewhere, and smaller non-natives: **snowshoe hare, beaver, muskrat, Arctic ground squirrel and pine squirrel**. Traveling to Kodiak by ferry is reportedly a good way to see **Steller's sea lions, sea otters, humpbacks, harbor seals**, and occasionally other marine mammals.

Sitka is the largest town on Baranof Island, one of the three islands where a genetically distinctive race of **brown bear** occurs. I was planning a bird-studying visit, but my research arrangements didn't work out and I saw a **bear** family on a

slope from the air while approaching Sitka, so I moved on. The island also has **masked shrew**, **little brown** and **Keen's myotis**, **mink**, **ermine**, **river otter**, **Sitka black-tailed deer**, **tundra vole**, **beaver**, and **Keen's mouse**. Nearby Admiralty Island has an isolated, distinctive population of **Pacific marten**, as well as **montane shrew**, both **myotis** bats, **mink**, **river otter**, **deer**, **meadow** and **long-tailed voles**, **beaver**, **muskrat**, and **Keen's mouse**; the entire island is a national monument with just one Tlingit village, lots of old-growth forest, and the highest **brown bear** density in North America.

Ketchikan on Revillagigedo Island is the best place to see Tlingit art; in summer it gets overcrowded because all cruise ships sailing the Inside Passage stop there. It is so civilized that you can rent a car through Expedia. A convenient way to visit is to make a stopover if you fly home from Anchorage via Seattle. N. Tongass Ave. (16 miles) ends in Settlers Cove State Park with trails through gorgeous rainforest where **pine squirrel** is abundant during the day and **Keen's mouse** at night, but other mammals are sparse; I searched through a lot of tree hollows and found one **masked shrew** and not a single bat dropping. S Tongass Ave. (15 miles) passes by Herring Cove (reportedly a good place to see **black bears** in late summer) and ends at Silvis Lakes Trailhead; the trail goes through open forest where I saw a **northern flying squirrel** and **meadow jumping mice** just before dark. From the lakes you can scan alpine slopes for **mountain goats** and **bears**. Revilla Rd. (9 miles) goes inland; at mile 6 you can turn onto unmarked Brown Mountain Rd. which ends at Dude Mt. Trailhead. That scenic trail is the shortest way to alpine habitats (about an hour's hike). **Mountain goats** and **Sitka mule deer** were often visible with binoculars from the trailhead; I met a **black bear** with cubs along the trail and an **American marten** on the road. Lush peat bogs with giant mountain hemlocks along the trail had **montane shrews** and **southern red-backed voles** (of a subspecies endemic to the island); I saw a few of each while looking for bird nests there. Revilla Rd. is currently being extended to Shelter Cove, 30 miles away; once completed, Shelter Cove Rd. should be good for night drives (there are still **wolf** and **wolverine** on the island, plus **river otter**, **mink**, **moose**, **porcupine**, **beaver** and **muskrat**). Traps set anywhere on the island invariably got 100% **Keen's mice**, even though I tried to avoid their typical habitats. Hundreds of **humpbacks** pass by the island in May and October. Ketchikan Airport is located on Gravina Island where a genetically distinctive race of **Keen's mouse** is abundant; these mice are sometimes slightly darker in color.

Misty Fjords National Monument can be visited by boat from Ketchikan (Allen Marine Tours, 877-686-8100, 4 hours, \$200 pp). The day I took the trip (June 8) was the fourth sunny day in 2017; usually you need radio wavelength vision to see the scenery. I got distant views of **harbor seals**, **Dall's porpoises**, and a **minke whale**. **Mountain goats**, **humpback** and **killer whales**, and **brown** and **black bears** are seen sometimes. Misty Fjords can also be accessed by road from Canada, but few people do so, and the road is really scary due to extreme avalanche danger. Hyder (where the road ends) has few transportation options, but the long, narrow fjord leading to it is the best place in Alaska to see **harbor porpoises**. There is an observation platform near Hyder where **brown** and **black bears** and sometimes **wolves** can be seen in August. Abandoned houses in Hyder are the only known roosting sites (summer) of **Yuma** and **California myotis** in Alaska.

Prince of Wales Island (locally called POW), accessible by car ferry from Ketchikan (watch for **Steller's sea lion** haulout when approaching the island, and for lunge-feeding **humpbacks** anywhere), has no brown bears. In their absence, **black bears** (also represented on Alexander Archipelago by a genetically distinctive lineage) grow to an enormous size. A bruin I saw at dusk near Totem Trail in Kasaan looked larger than an inland grizzly. Uniquely among Alaska Panhandle islands, POW has an extensive road network, excellent for night drives. I saw over a hundred **Sitka black-tailed deer** in one night; they are small, fluffy and look like roe deer. Many does had tiny fawns, and two had twins. I also saw two seaweed-colored **minks** (both in daytime near the coast), a **Keen's mouse**, and a dark **Alexander Archipelago wolf** (near Luck Lake); the latter is very rare on POW (less than 100 as of 2016). I was actually glad there were no brown bears because I had to spend a lot of time searching for bird nests in dense shrubbery where **long-tailed voles** could often be heard but rarely seen. **Northern flying squirrels** (of endemic POW subspecies with ashy head) can be found at dusk where forest is tall but open; I saw one at Beaver Falls Trail. That trail crosses muskegs worth checking for **shrews**; I tried trapping and caught nothing, but saw an **ermine** in one of the sinkholes at the end of the trail. There are hundreds of caves on the island. El Capitan Cave is very long but is gated after about 50 m; Forest Service (907-828-3304) runs free tours that go for another 100 m. In winter the cave has **Keen's** and **little brown myotis**, but that part is off-limits. I saw one **Keen's myotis** roosting at the entrance at night. **River otters** are said to enter the cave sometimes, but I find it hard to believe because the cave is high on a steep slope with no water anywhere. Interestingly, subfossil evidence from the cave shows that brown bear and wolverine were present on the island just a few thousand years ago. Cavern Lake Cave is not gated, but you need rubber boots to enter; the chamber to the right from the entrance had night-roosting **little brown myotis**. **Humpbacks**, **harbor seals** and **sea otters** are reportedly easy to see around Craig. More info on wildlife viewing on the island (particularly on good places to see **black bears** hunting salmon in late summer) can be found in free booklets available at the ferry, or at www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/viewing/pdfs/pow.pdf.

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