

ALASKA

SPRING 2016



A Birding Trip
Report by
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Alaska: 28th May to 13th June 2016**Introduction:****Where**

Any birder who has ever flicked through the pages of the Sibley Guide is sure to have dreamt of visiting Alaska, a destination of mouth-watering avian possibilities, unrivalled scenery and a heavyweight mammalian backup, which combine to provide one of our planet's iconic wildlife viewing destinations.

Bird species such as Spectacled Eider, Bristle-thighed Curlew, Red-legged Kittiwake, Crested Auklet, Tufted Puffin and Smith's Longspur represent some of the most spectacular and sought-after species in the Holarctic, and are freely available in unforgettable settings of windswept sea-cliffs, never-ending taiga forests, flat, featureless tundra, and bitterly cold pack ice.

Still one of the world's great wildernesses, Alaska is a land where Grizzly Bears and Wolves still roam freely, crossing colourful wildflower meadows against backdrops of rugged snow-capped peaks, and where a Moose, a Porcupine or a Musk Ox can halt one's journey at any moment. Here vast glaciers creak and groan, before depositing the next icebergs into the Bering Sea, Orcas patrol icy-cold waters and Polar Bears pick their way through the shattered, uplifted forms of the frozen Arctic Ocean.

Our action-packed two-and-a-half-week tour of this exceptional State lived up to all expectations and exceeded many, to provide one of my most memorable birding trip ever. The following pages give an insight into what one may expect in this unique environment, which is never short of surprises. They are written to provide an update on where best to search for all of the region's specialities and give tips on how not to get caught out by the many idiosyncrasies of this somewhat non-conformist region.

In terms of the 'where', the first big decision which any potential visitor must make is whether or not to include the Pribilof Islands on the itinerary. Our four days on St Paul effectively doubled the price-tag of the trip, however, our unanimous vote was that the investment was totally justified and our time spent amongst the wondrous seabird colonies rated as an undoubted highlight; anyone wanting to add Red-legged Kittiwake and Crested Auklet to their world list will need to include St Paul on the itinerary, whilst anyone with any level of interest in photography would be crazy to omit this unbeatable location.

The remainder of our tour followed a somewhat tried-and-trusted itinerary, commencing with a road-trip circuit out of Anchorage, south to Seward, then north Denali, east to Paxson, and back to the starting point. A visit to Seward is essential to give access to a Kenai Fjord boat trip, and although we largely made the journey on the strength of Kittlitz's Murrelet alone, it turned out to be a magnificent voyage through an inspirational maritime landscape, teeming with birdlife and cetaceans.

The Denali National Park experience can only be described as something of an acquired taste as, for good reason, vehicular access to this showcase conservation area is limited to park buses. This mode of transport can restrict the wildlife viewing opportunities and take the edge off one's birding pleasure, but it is still hard not to be impressed with the vast wildness, ever-changing vistas and wealth of wildlife; if one is lucky enough to set eyes on the rugged beauty of Mount McKinley, the highest peak in North America, this spectacle alone makes the effort worthwhile.

The Denali Highway, linking the southeastern periphery of the National Park with the tiny hamlet of Paxson, is a 130-mile-long route through a breathtakingly beautiful land of taiga forest, meadows and pools, and should be included on any itinerary. After collecting the prize of Smith's Longspur we made our way back to Anchorage, via Gulkana and Glenallen, to commence the next leg of the trip with a flight to the northwest.

The isolated frontier town of Nome, which owes its existence to a protracted gold rush which began a century ago and still continues today, was to be our home for three days. Here we enjoyed birding the beaches,

coastal lagoons and barren hillsides which support an incredible cast of breeding birds including Aleutian Tern, Gyr Falcon and Bristle-thighed Curlew.

A return to Anchorage was then required, before we journeyed to the most northerly town in the USA, the unique Iñupiat settlement of Barrow. At a latitude of 71 degrees, this environment is far removed from any others visited on the trip, with twenty-four-hour daylight in which to enjoy the plethora of breeding birds which descend on the tundra pools to nest during the short summer period.

Alongside King, Steller's and Spectacled Eiders, Snowy Owl, dazzling Red Phalaropes and 'booming' Pectoral Sandpipers, we were also incredibly lucky to be blessed with the presence of three Polar Bears, which roamed the offshore pack ice for the three-day duration of our stay. A return flight to Anchorage concluded the trip.

Aside from the notes in the 'when' section below, making reference to Emperor Goose and McKay's Bunting, the only Alaskan speciality which this circuit omits is Grey-headed Chickadee. Obviously a must for all ABA listers, seeing this extremely localised species requires what can only be described as a specialist expedition to the north Alaskan interior; thankfully us Western Palearctic birders can look back on our encounters with Siberian Tit and be thankful that, for now at least, the two birds are one-and-the-same.



Gas Well Road, Barrow

Cover image: Polar Bear, on pack ice off Barrow Point

Our complete itinerary was as follows:

Day 1 Flights from London/Singapore to Anchorage, via various connections. Afternoon/evening at Potter Marsh and Westchester Lagoon depending upon time of arrival. Accom: [Motel 6](#), Anchorage.

Day 2 Early morning Hillside Park, then flight from Anchorage to St Paul, via Dillingham. Birding on St Paul, focussing on the Reef Seacliffs. Accom: [King Eider Hotel](#), St Paul

Day 3 St Paul, visiting Ridge Wall, Southwest Point, Reef Seacliffs, Harbour and the Airport Marsh. Accom: [King Eider Hotel](#), St Paul

Day 4 St Paul, visiting Reef, Zolotoi Bay, Antone Lake and Northeast Point. Accom: [King Eider Hotel](#), St Paul

Day 5 St Paul, visiting Reef Seacliffs and Antone Lake. Flight from St Paul to Anchorage, via St George. Accom: [Motel 6](#), Anchorage

Day 6 Drive from Anchorage to Seward via Beluga Point and Turnagain Pass. Seward Harbour and Lowell Point. Accom: [Harbourview Inn](#), Seward

Day 7 Kenai Fjord boat trip, as far west as the Aialik Glacier. Drive north to Cantwell, via Anchorage. Accom: [Denali Cabins](#), Cantwell

Day 8 Early morning on Denali NP access road as far as Savage River Campground. Bus trip into Denali NP as far as Polychrome Pass, and return. Dinner at Cantwell, then Denali Highway to Paxson. Accom: [Denali Highway Cabins](#), Paxson

Day 9 Denali Highway between Paxson and MP 40. Accom: [Denali Highway Cabins](#), Paxson

Day 10 Drive Paxson to Gulkana Airfield, on to Tolsona Campground and back to Anchorage. Accom: [Motel 6](#), Anchorage

Day 11 Early flight Anchorage to Nome. Nome Council Road as far east as MP49, and Safety Sound. Accom: [Aurora Motel](#), Nome

Day 12 Kougark Highway as far north as MP 72. Coffee Dome and Salmon Lake area. Back to Nome for dinner, then Council Road to Safety Sound. Accom: [Aurora Motel](#), Nome

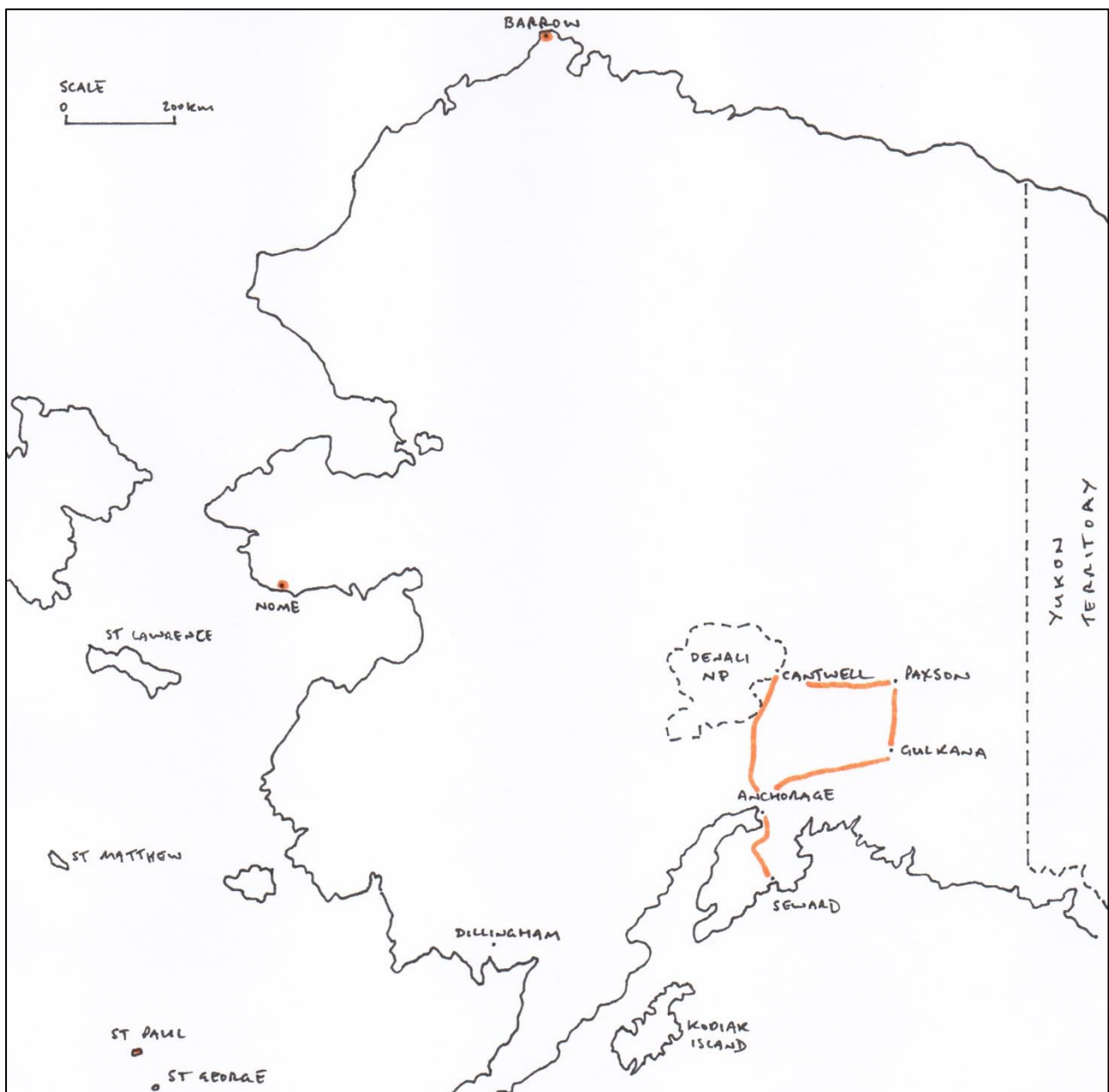
Day 13 Council Road to MP53 and Safety Sound. Back to Nome for dinner, then Council Road to Safety Sound again. Accom: [Aurora Motel](#), Nome

Day 14 Council Road to Cape Nome, then back to town for flight to Anchorage. Connecting flight to Barrow. Birding along Gas Well Road until early hours. Accom: [Airport Inn](#), Barrow

Day 15 Barrow Point, Freshwater Lake area, back to town for dinner. Cake Eater Road and Gas Well Road until early hours. [Airport Inn](#), Barrow

Day 16 Cake Eater Road Lagoons and Gas Well Road. Back to town for dinner. Barrow Point for evening/night-time session. [Airport Inn](#), Barrow

Day 17 Barrow Point, then back to airport for flight to Anchorage via Fairbanks. Westchester Lagoons, then various flights home.



When

A spring trip to Alaska, during the June breeding season, makes the ideal choice of travel time. Some have left their trips as late as July, but this means that there is less chance of encountering unusual migrants and results in some species being less vocal. Conversely, the seabird breeding season on the Pribilofs will be in full swing, whereas it was only just getting underway when we visited St Paul.

Travelling any earlier than June runs the risk that some later migrant species, for example Bristle-thighed Curlew and Smith's Longspur, may not yet be on their breeding grounds; in fact both of the former species appeared to be very recently arrived at the time of our early June visit.

In order to avoid disappointment it is worth noting that both Emperor Goose and McKay's Bunting should not be considered guaranteed on a spring trip to Alaska. Emperor Geese are already dispersing to their remote breeding grounds and although an odd bird can often be seen at either St Paul or Safety Sound, Nome, this species can easily be missed entirely. With regard to McKay's Bunting, it is probably safest to assume that there is pretty much zero chance of seeing this bird in the spring. Although St Paul had a run of breeding records in the 1980s, it is now a genuine vagrant on the island in the spring, and the remote St Matthew Island is now the only breeding locality.

Consolation is at hand, however, as both Emperor Goose and McKay's Bunting should prove easy to find on a winter trip to Alaska. Many hundreds of Emperor Geese winter on Kodiak Island, just a short flight from Anchorage, and McKay's Buntings come to feeders in Nome during the icy winter months. Combine this with some tasty owls and gamebirds, plus excellent opportunities to experience the Aurora Borealis, and the lure of Alaska in the winter is very strong.



Kougarak Highway, Nome

How

Different members of our team utilised different long-haul carriers and I would certainly not recommend my choice, United Airlines, on grounds of either comfort or economy! [Alaska Airlines](#) on the other hand, who we

utilised for all internal flights with the exception of St Paul, offer a great schedule, good service and sensible prices.

If you choose to visit St Paul, you will be in the hands of [Pen Air](#). Personally, I was very happy with their service, though many others have experienced major problems with bags going astray and it is a fact that their small aircraft are finely tuned to a critical weight limit and cargo is frequently abandoned at the last minute. On our return to Anchorage two of our bags were delivered on a later flight and had to be collected four hours after our arrival; with this fact in mind it is certainly worth travelling with everything one needs, for at least the first day on the island, contained within hand luggage. When pricing a trip to the Pribilofs, it will also be apparent that the short hop from Anchorage to St Paul will cost a similar amount to a long haul flight to Anchorage from Europe!

A major consideration when planning a birding trip to Alaska is that there is limited accommodation and car hire capacity away from Anchorage. Flights, hotels and rental cars should be booked many months in advance. We booked internal flights seven months before the trip, but when we later started to source accommodation and cars in both Nome and Barrow we experienced a struggle, even six months in advance of our proposed travels.

All arrangements for our trip to St Paul were made through Scott Schuette of [TDX St Paul Island Tours](#) (email: sschuette@stpaultour.com), for the simple reason that the TDX Corporation has the monopoly on accommodation and travel in the Pribilof Islands. St Paul in the spring is an extremely popular destination for American rarity hunters, and also various tour groups, so again the advice is to book as far in advance as possible. Scott is extremely helpful, and will make all arrangements for the trip, so much so that all you really have to do is show up on time for your outbound flight.

It is worthwhile explaining at this point that the 'Corporations' encountered in the course of our travels are the Alaska Native Regional Corporations which were established in 1971. In this year the United States Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, which settled land and financial claims made by the Alaska Natives and provided for the establishment of 13 regional Corporations to administer those claims. The system seems to be working well, and clearly addresses the rights and needs of native populations in a much fairer manner than in many other parts of the globe.



Midnight sun at Safety Sound, Nome

There is just one place to stay on St Paul, the [King Eider Hotel](#), a large dormitory attached to the airport complex, and there are no cars to hire. Transport is via the TDX minibuses, which effectively ferry birders between the birds and birding sites, using the dirt roads which access the island. There is also just one place to eat out, the Trident Cannery canteen, where three meals a day are served. During our visit the driving/guiding duties were shared by Scott, Alison and Claudia, all very competent, knowledgeable and also great company during long days in the field.

All the major car rental firms have desks at Anchorage airport, and accommodation on the Anchorage/Seward/Denali circuit was relatively easy to source. Particular mention should be made of the [Denali Cabins](#) at Cantwell and the confusingly similarly named [Denali Highway Cabins](#) at Paxson. The former is highly recommended if visiting Denali National Park, whilst Audi and Jenny's set-up at Paxson is magnificent and is also well located for the only accessible sites on the circuit at which Smith's Longspur can be found.

Our excellent Kenai Fjord boat trip was booked in advance with Jim Barkley, who operates the [Alaska Saltwater Lodge](#). This option worked out brilliantly, as our five-man team made it cost-effective to take out a private boat charter and hence enjoy total flexibility around timings, duration and targets.

As soon as one reaches Nome, it's a very different world! Accommodation choices are extremely limited and bookings should be made well in advance, as the town is very popular with visiting birders. Although we had made reservations at the Polaris Hotel, we were able to swap to the much more comfortable [Aurora Hotel](#) when we were told that they had a couple of rooms free; the Aurora is highly recommended and also supplied our hire car, which was also booked well in advance of the trip.

Barrow is similarly limited in terms of choices of accommodation and car rental. We stayed at the [Airport Inn](#), which we would recommend highly, and our car was sourced from [UIC](#). To go birding out on the tundra at Barrow a permit is required, at a cost of \$150 per person, obtainable from Miriam Aiken, Lands Technical Manager of the [Ukpeagvik Iñupiat Corporation](#). It seems that some birders roam freely without purchasing a permit, but this is clearly disrespectful of the local community who own the land and is also counter-productive in terms of incentivising the conservation value of this unique and fragile environment.



Zapadni Point, St Paul

Prior to our trip we had debated clothing requirements long and hard, all taking multiple layers of thermals/fleeces, wellington boots and mosquito head-nets. In the course of our trip the temperatures varied widely, from short-sleeve outdoor dining in Anchorage, to eight layers of thermals on a dull and windy day in Barrow; the moral of the story is to take plenty of layers. Wellington boots are essential for tundra walking at Barrow, but good walking boots will suffice for the remainder of the trip. Mosquito issues never really materialised, save a rather uncomfortable hour at the Tolsona Campground on the Glen Highway, and hence our headgear could be considered overkill.

Pre-trip information was gleaned from a mixture of some excellent trip reports available on the [Cloudbirders](#) website, plus the invaluable [eBird](#) range map resource. A big personal thank you also goes out to Andrew Spencer, Aaron Lang, Scott Schuette, Nigel Voaden, David Willis, Gavin Bieber, Rob Tizard, and Libby Graves, all of whom provided invaluable information in advance of, or during, our trip.



Mount McKinley, Denali NP

Daily Diary:

Saturday 28th May

United Airlines are certainly not my carrier of choice, and their service from London Heathrow to Anchorage is not even particularly cheap. They do, however, offer the flexibility to allow Andy Bunting, Barry Wright and myself to arrive in the 49th State on the same calendar day that we leave the UK, with enough time for a little evening birding. And we have not been waiting outside the modern Ted Stevens Airport terminal for long when Martin Kennewell and Simon Colenutt appear, in a huge Chevrolet Suburban, to complete our team for 'Alaska 2016'.

The early arrivers have already visited Potter's Marsh, to the south Anchorage, so we head straight to Westchester Lagoon, just half-an-hour's drive away, via some very affluent, leafy suburbs of this modern, prosperous city. A theme set to continue for a large proportion of the next two-and-a-half-weeks is the constant presence of a spectacular mountain backdrop, and at Westchester we start as we mean to go on, enjoying the snowy crags which frame the extensive lagoon.

The site provides a great introduction to Alaskan birding, in weather that can only be described as unexpected, as we roll up our sleeves to bask in warm sunshine and balmy twenty-degree-C heat. With float-planes buzzing overhead we set off on the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, which runs along the western edge of the lagoon, to record Bufflehead, American Wigeon, Lesser Scaup, Dusky Canada Geese, Sandhill Cranes,

Bonaparte's and numerous Mew Gulls, Short-billed Dowitchers, Hudsonian Godwits, an impressive fourteen summer-plumaged Red-necked Grebes and a couple of lively Muskrats.

Leaving the lagoon to the many joggers, cyclists, dog walkers and courting couples who frequent its well-manicured shores, we set off to find an eatery and by pure chance drop onto the [Rustic Goat](#), which proves to be a wonderful spot at which to enjoy our first draft Alaskan IPA beer. And our excellent meal is actually taken on the outside balcony, soaking up the last of the late-evening sunshine; alfresco dining had been the last thing to feature on our list of anticipated Alaskan experiences!

The [Motel 6](#) proves to be an excellent economical choice for our base in Anchorage, and we are set to return another three times in the course of our trip. Tonight however, is devoted to a quick check of kit and a much-needed catch-up on sleep, in a very welcome bed.

Sunday 29th May

A 05.00 alarm gives us ample time for some forest birding at Hillside Park, before our mid-day flight to the Pribilof Islands, and it takes just thirty minutes to drive across town to the roadside car park where we begin our walk. It is rather chilly first thing and the bird activity is decidedly slow, but as the sun warms the trees, birdsong and movement commence in earnest.

Well maintained trails lead us amongst the conifer-dominated forest, where a very enjoyable stroll in the early morning sunshine produces Black-capped and Boreal Chickadees, which are vastly more easy to distinguish than the field guide would suggest, American Robins, Dark-eyed Juncos, several gorgeous Varied Thrushes and a handful of characterful Grey Jays.

A male American Three-toed Woodpecker and several small flocks of bright-plumaged White-winged Crossbills are real highlights, as the woodland glades echo to the voices of Myrtle, Orange-crowned, Wilson's and Townsend's Warblers, plus Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes. Three hours fly past, then it is time to return to the car park, via several signs instructing us on how to best confront a bear, and plot a course back to the airport.

Our 11.45 Penair flight to St Paul is delayed for a short time, then we board the thirty-seat Saab turboprop aircraft, along with a Birdquest tour group, several independent American birders and a couple of local residents. After a relatively short flight over mountain ranges and lush green lowlands, our first stop is at Dillingham, where we refuel before our little jaunt across the Bering Sea.

Around three hours after leaving Anchorage, we land with a bump on the tarmac runway of the barren, windswept island which will be our home for the next three days. Bags collected in the terminal building, we make our way into the adjoining dormitory of the '[King Eider Hotel](#)', effectively an annex of the main airport building and capable of handling the forty-or-so visitors which is the island's full tourist capacity. Rooms are quite small and a little 'lived in', with shared bathroom facilities, but we are not planning on spending too much time here and they prove perfectly fit-for-purpose.

Keen to get some birding under the belt in this unique environment, and under unexpectedly sunny skies, we rapidly sort out kit and head for our allotted van, one of three which service the newly arrived birding contingent. Our little group are with Scott today, who relays the visiting birders' protocol as we head towards the first birding site. It seems that we will be allotted different driver/guides on the three days of our stay, take breakfast, lunch and dinner in the Trident Cannery canteen, and generally cram in as much birding as we can cope with during the intervening periods.

There are no tarmac roads on St Paul, though the gravel tracks are generally well-graded and soon we are making our way through the rather drab and run-down bare-timber houses of St Paul town, en route to the southernmost point of the island. Just short of the Reef Fur Seal Rookery we make a stop beside the low, dark volcanic cliffs, to take our first views of the seabird colonies for which this isolated rock is famed.

Below us is a scene of frantic avian activity, as seabirds fly in and out of nesting ledges and crevices, to land in small rafts on the dark water of the Bering Sea, or head out towards the horizon in search of food. Parakeet Auklets are amongst the most numerous inhabitants of the sea cliffs at this time, with many displaying their bulbous plastic-effect bills and elegant white head plumes, immediately below our vantage points. Thick-billed Murres, or Brunnich's Guillemots to us tourists, whiz in-and-out of favoured ledges, along with much lesser numbers of Common Murres.

The puffins are the star performers here, with several Horned Puffins peeking out from lower overhangs, while their outrageously adorned Tufted cousins are much more confident in front of the assembled lenses, and proudly display their magnificent blonde locks from many eye-level ledges. Least Auklets occasionally pass in-and-out, though on this visit our only encounter with the eye-catching Crested Auklets is rather distantly, on the sea below.



Horned Puffin and Tufted Puffin, St Paul

After admiring the monstrously proportioned *umbrina* race of Grey-crowned Rosy Finch, the *alascensis* race of Pacific Wren, Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings, it's time for our first encounter with the Trident canteen. The huge Trident Cannery provides the only real industry on the island and its operation is seasonal, with a focus on crab meat. This is the quiet time of year for the crab fishery and hence we join just a handful of staff in the cavernous eatery, to take our pick of local delicacies, which prove to vary quite widely in their levels of palatability.

Post-dining, we move to the harbour area, where low tide has brought dozens of wonderful Rock Sandpipers to congregate on the muddy margins. The *ptilocnemis* race of Rock Sandpiper sports a gold-spangled back and pale face with distinctive dark check-patch, as well as the trade-mark black belly, and we delight in photographing these scarce waders which occur in surprisingly large numbers on St Paul.

Another major focus of a visit to the Pribilofs is to encounter 'the other kittiwake'. Unlike its widespread Black-legged cousin, the Red-legged Kittiwake has a tiny world range and chooses to nest on the cliffs of St Paul. At this stage of the nesting season most birds are not at their precipitous nest-sites, however, and therefore we next visit a large tidal lagoon, which always seems to hold a large group of roosting birds.

It isn't easy for five hefty birders to sneak up on a group of birds roosting on the open sand, but we manage to get surprisingly close to the massed ranks of around fifty Red-legged Kittiwakes, which are mixed with Black-legged Kittiwakes and an assortment of hulking Glaucous-winged Gulls. As we snap away we marvel at the bright red legs and feet, plus narrow red-eye-ring, of these dainty little stars of the gull world. Upperparts are slightly darker than the accompanying black-legged birds, with bills being a little shorter and deeper, whilst a larger black eye hints at their nocturnal feeding habits.

It's a great note on which to end an amazing day, and we return to the King Eider Hotel, via several Arctic Foxes and many more Grey-crowned Rosy Finches, already in awe of this totally unique environment. It is rather odd to draw the curtain of my window, which looks out at the island's three huge wind turbines, with daylight still teeming in and Rock Sandpipers still displaying outside, but we all need to get at least a little sleep.



Rock Sandpiper, St Paul

Monday 30th May

Today our minibus is driven by the lovely Claudia, who at the allotted 07.30 transports us first to the Trident canteen for a hearty breakfast, then we set off under a cold grey sky to the Ridge Wall seabird cliffs. These are much higher than those at Reef, with a slightly different assemblage of birds, and both Black-legged Kittiwake and Red-faced Cormorant have a greater presence on the black basalt ledges below us. A few Red-legged Kittiwakes come-and-go, along with the now-familiar fare of Parakeet, Least and a couple of Crested Auklets, Tufted and Horned Puffins, and many ledge-hugging Thick-billed Murres.

On the flat wind-swept tops, pairs of Snow Buntings chase around territories, Lapland Longspurs rise in song-flight and Rock Sandpipers display. The numerous Grey-crowned Rosy Finches seem to prefer the uppermost cliff faces on which to feed, where Arctic Foxes test their agility in trying to access the abundant seabird food sources below.

Seabird photography complete, a visit to the nearby, and unimaginatively-named, Southwest Point takes us to a different environment, where the Bering Sea breakers crash on a low headland and gorgeous Harlequin

Ducks gather offshore. Rock Sandpipers pick over seaweed and around rock-pools, and a small gathering of roosting gulls allows us close access to some more striking Red-legged Kittiwakes.

Least Auklets actually prefer a very different habitat in which to breed, one of boulder fields, where they nest in the crevices below the rocks. Our next stop is at such a location, where a bar of large, sea-rounded boulders separates Antone Lake from the sea. Here, small groups of Least Auklets gather on prominent lichen-covered boulders to jostle for the premier vantage-point, constantly chattering and forever turning heads. No larger than a House Sparrow, these endearing little *Alcids* are packed with character and soon take a place as one of our favourite residents of this enchanted island.

After the now-familiar lunchtime Trident routine, we revisit the Reef seabird cliffs in vain hope of some up-close Crested Auklets, then venture north, first to photograph a small group of migratory Red-necked Phalaropes which feed at the edge of a lagoon and display their wonderful colouration, plus insect-plucking dexterity, just feet away from our camera lenses. Close to the airport we visit a marsh where, with a little effort, we track down a vagrant Wood Sandpiper, along with several displaying Least Sandpipers, amidst the expected throngs of Rock Sandpipers.

A report of Ancient Murrelets has us making a trip south to St Paul town, but by the time we arrive at the large sheltered inlet the murrelets have turned into either a White-billed Diver or White-winged Scoter, both of which are now feeding offshore. Before dinner we take the opportunity to purchase a couple of crates of beer to see us through the next two evenings in our 'dry' hotel, from the cavernous wholesale liquor store, which seems to be a focal point of the town.

By the time we have consumed our Trident offerings the weather has turned decidedly cooler and greyer, and the only sighting of note during the last birding session is a lone Aleutian Cackling Goose, a rare bird on St Paul. But we do now have some beer to help along our King Eider Hotel evening bird log!



Red-legged Kittiwakes, St Paul

Tuesday 31st May

St Paul is renowned for its fickle weather, and it would be disappointing not to experience some of the island's infamous rain and mist! Today we rotate to Alison, our new driver/guide, and she proves to be a star, being both a very sharp birder and a real character too. Wind buffets the van as she chauffeurs us to our Trident breakfast stop, and sporadic rain peppers the windscreen. The team decision is that seawatching from a suitably sheltered position is the order of the morning, and we take up a spot behind the rocks close to the Reef Rookery.

The usual set of *Alcids*, kittiwakes and cormorants whiz past us in the wind, but Short-tailed Shearwater and Pomarine Skua are the only additions to our list, and the hoped-for Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel fails to materialise. Again we try to find Ancient Murrelets in the sheltered bay to the west of the town, and although they are notable in their absence, the local White-billed Diver puts on a particularly welcome close-range performance.



Least Auklet, St Paul

On St Paul, bashing the crab pots is not a euphemism, it's a popular pastime for ornithological rarity hunters. So our next stop is the huge stockpile of crab-catching apparatus, unused at this season and, on an island largely devoid of cover, a real magnet for any migrant birds. As we walk up and down the rows, thrashing the rusting steel frames with a big stick, Alison reels of the list of rarities which have been found here, with Brown Hawk Owl topping the tally of unlikely finds.

We draw a blank on rarities this time, however, and decide to spend some time with our favourite Least Auklets, at the Antone Lake boulder field. Here, a stealthy approach allows some great images of these fascinating little birds to be secured, and we also marvel at the large rafts of Harlequin Duck which have congregated in the bay.

After lunch Alison announces that her plan is to expose us to a total change of scenery and head up to Northeast Point at the very top of the island. Birding our way up via various lakes and ponds we note Ring-necked Duck, Pacific Golden Plovers and our first summer-plumaged Red Phalaropes, though we will have to wait until later in the trip for proper close-up views of the latter.

The scenery at Northeast Point is undoubtedly the finest on the island, with many wildflowers softening the barren beauty of windswept rocks and driftwood, set against a backdrop of north pacific breakers whipped up by the storm. Huge Northern Fur Seal beachmasters grunt their deep territorial rumblings to their neighbours, as we view from a raised promontory that affords a fantastic three-hundred-and-sixty-degree panorama of the rest of the island.

Returning to St Paul town for a final crack at the Ancient Murrelets before dinner, it is Alison's skilled eye which plucks out the two tiny forms of these scarce birds amongst the heavy swell. Suitably well-fed, we spend time photographing close-range Rock Sandpipers in the harbour and end the day at Reef Point, another location of barren scenic splendour. This is the final day of the spring upon which access to the point

will be allowed, as the area is left to the Fur Seals to breed in peace come June, and we soak up the atmosphere of this memorable setting in the best light of the day.



Parakeet Auklet and Crested Auklet, St Paul

Wednesday 1st June

For our little team at least, the whole reason to visit St Paul is to revel in the seabird extravaganza, so after our final Trident breakfast we ask Scott to drive us down to the Reef Rookery sea cliffs for another opportunity to immerse ourselves in *Alcid* heaven. For the first time in our stay, the wind is virtually absent, and although the morning begins with a little dampness and drizzle, the light rapidly begins to improve.

With some further exploration along the clifftops, a little patience and an occasional brave balancing act, we obtain truly definitive images of not just Parakeet and Least Auklet, but also the bizarre form of the Crested Auklet, which has eluded us thus far. Tufted and Horned Puffins, plus Thick-billed and Common Murres are, of course, also on hand for a stunning finale to our time on St Paul, which soaks up the entire morning and countless gigabytes of camera memory-card space.

Today's schedule has us taking lunch, checking in for our Pen Air flight back to the mainland, then allows time for a brief return visit to the Least Auklet boulder fields at Antone Lake, this time experienced in warm sunshine and under a clear blue sky. Returning to the airport we say our thanks yous and farewells to Scott, Alison and Claudia, whose birding skills, knowledge of the island and great humour have added greatly to our thorough enjoyment of this very special corner of the world.

The Pen Air schedule for the return leg includes a brief refuelling stop at St Paul's Pribilof sister-island of St George, where we are allowed off the aeroplane for long enough to take our final looks at Rock Sandpiper,

Grey-crowned Rosy Finch and Red-legged Kittiwake, all of which are seen in the vicinity of the large shed that acts as the airport terminal.

To the west of Anchorage the mountains of the Alaska Range form a high snow-topped ridge, which extends up to Denali National Park, and our descent affords spectacular views of these icy giants. It is not a huge surprise when the Pan Air ground staff inform us that our bags are due to be delivered on the next flight, landing at 23.00, and luckily we are spending the night in Anchorage so it's not a major inconvenience.

For the next leg of the tour, our big Denali road trip, we have hired a Ford Expedition, a super-sized SUV with high ground clearance and a cavernous boot, which is soon loaded and ready to hit the road. Our Dutch friend and Alaska guru, Volkert van der Willigen, has informed us that a visit to the [Moose's Tooth Restaurant](#) is a must on any Anchorage itinerary, and it is now time to pay homage to this fine eatery. The choice of locally brewed draft beers is immense and there is an even longer list of exquisite pizza toppings.

A couple of hours later we are stuffed to the brim, have reclaimed our bags and are checked back into the [Motel 6](#) for a little recuperation before the next exciting leg of the trip commences.



Grey-crowned Rosy Finch, St Paul

Thursday 2nd June

It's sunny, but a little cooler this morning, and before we commence the one-hundred-and-thirty mile drive south to Seward it makes sense to stock up on supplies, to keep us fed and watered during our next four days in the field. And this act proves that supermarket shopping in Alaska is by no means cheap!

Heading south on the Seward Highway, we soon make a stop at Beluga Point, for a cold pizza breakfast and a little telescope scanning. Beluga Whales are seasonal creatures and apparently an autumnal phenomenon, however, we do locate the pale forms of a couple of groups of Dall's Sheep, feeding high up on the steep hillside which rises abruptly from the road.

As ever, the scenery which greets one at every change in direction is outstanding, as our journey takes us past forests, meadows and lakes, with spectacular mountain tops forever in view. A roadside pool at Mile Post 77 provides an introduction to the elegant Trumpeter Swan, which is accompanied by singing Sooty Fox Sparrow and the first of many Common Redpolls.

As we cross the high point of Turnagain Pass, a quick toilet stop soon extends to a full birding session, as the bushes surrounding the viewpoint car park deliver a succession of exciting birds. Golden-crowned and Sooty Fox Sparrows vocally proclaim their territories, Northern Goshawk soars overhead, and several Hoary Marmots survey their surroundings from vantage points on the adjacent grassland.

A detour along the Palmer Creek Road is less birdy than we had hoped, but does produce the only Pine Grosbeak of the trip, plus more Varied Thrushes, sparrows and warblers. And the scenery just gets more and more exhilarating, with all of the high peaks topped off in an icing of white snow, which at this season contrasts with the lush greenery of the intervening valleys, now bursting with the fresh green foliage of spring.

The small town of Seward is clearly a tourist magnet, its main street being lined with various eateries and souvenir shops, and with a huge cruise ship dominating the harbour beyond. We grab a sandwich and head for the quayside, where a family of extremely endearing Sea Otters is observed at point-blank range, loafing, grooming, squabbling and playing in the crystal clear waters.



Sea Otter, Seward Harbour

Close by, we spend a little time with an obliging group of Northwestern Crows, which feed amongst the rocks and seaweed of the tideline, competing with the local Glaucous-winged Gulls for the tastiest morsels. The crows, one of the major target birds in the Seward area, prove to be common in this fjordland environment, but this is the very limit of their northerly range and they are not encountered elsewhere on the trip.

South of Seward, an unpaved road leads to Lowell Point, our final destination of the day. Looking out into the fjord we scope Surf Scoters, Harlequin Ducks, Barrow's Goldeneyes, Pigeon Guillemots and a number of Marbled Murrelets, the latter of which serve well in setting us up for tomorrow's *Alcid* identification challenge. An American Dipper is nesting on an adjacent stream, which is also the hunting ground for a huge, raucous, Belted Kingfisher.

Moving into the forest which surrounds the car park at the end of the road, Steller's Jay, Red-breasted Nuthatch and the handsome Chestnut-backed Chickadee are all new to the trip list, then it's time to locate our hotel and find a suitable spot to dine. The [Harbourview Inn](#) is easily found, as the town of Seward is very compact, and the large apartment we are allocated proves to be ideal. On the recommendation of the

Harbourview staff we single out [Chinooks Restaurant](#) as our evening eatery, which is a good choice, if some way behind the Rustic Goat in terms of menu and value-for-money.



Northwestern Crow, Seward

Friday 3rd June

A trip to Alaska quite literally presents one with a succession of high points, and immediately after our St Paul Island experience we are scheduled to embark on a Kenai Fjord cruise, billed in many trip reports as another climactic point of any visit to the northernmost State. At 06.00 under low cloud and dark grey skies, Seward quay doesn't look particularly idyllic, however, as we rendezvous with Jim Barkley, our pilot and guide for the day. Our trip has been booked several months in advance, after study of the various options, which have led us to charter the [Alaska Saltwater Lodge](#) boat in its entirety, allowing total flexibility of timings and a real birding focus.

Laden with cameras and many layers of warm clothing, we board Jim's sturdy thirty-foot aluminium craft, which comes complete with toilet and coffee-making facilities. The twin outboard engines rapidly propel us to the southern end of the fjord in which Seward is situated, where our first success is realised as a pod of three or four superb Dall's Porpoise begin to bow-ride our craft. Looking like mini-Orcas, these tiny black-and-white cetaceans criss-cross our path for the next ten minutes, giving a magical display of speed and agility.

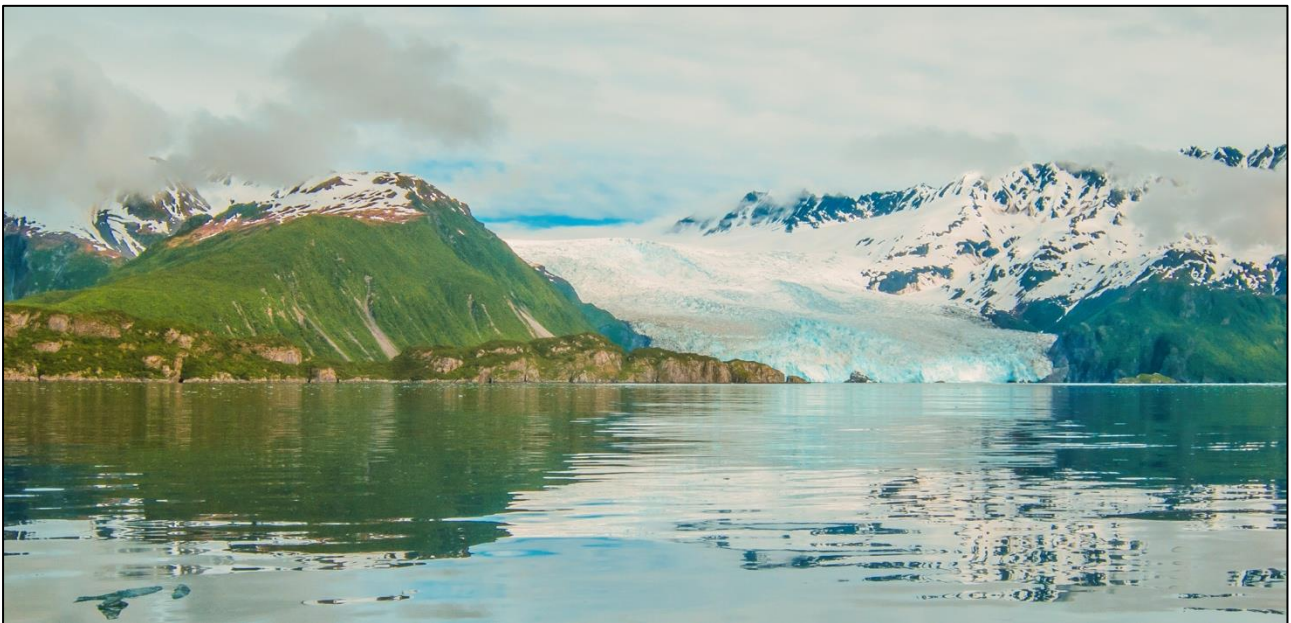
At the mouth of the fjord we head west, into the open ocean, though the many offshore islands provide enough shelter to make the ride a relatively smooth one. Common Murres, Tufted and Horned Puffins now begin to materialise, invariably hurtling past at high speed, with Northwestern Crow making regular appearances closer to the shore. The birds are great, and the scenery is just jaw-dropping. Steep, pine-dad, slopes descend to the deep blue waters of the Gulf of Alaska, with snow-capped peaks and vast, winding glaciers as a backdrop. Atmospheric wisps of low, white cloud drift in and out of the lofty peaks, contrasting

with the moody grey sky beyond, and make it difficult to put the camera down for more than a few minutes at a time.

We pass numerous rock-basking Harbour Seals, before hitting the real mammalian jackpot, when a tall dark fin breaks the surface to reveal the presence of the ocean's supreme predator. For the next half-hour we track a pair of Orca, which is actually no mean feat as they constantly dive and change direction, testing the skills of our pilot to the limit. When we have secured some worthy images of the incredible monochrome cetaceans we move on, taking a route close inshore to view a pair of American Black Oystercatchers on a rocky headland.

Several bays hold congregations of breeding *Alcids*, with gatherings of several hundred Tufted and Horned Puffins, Parakeet Auklets and a single Rhinoceros Auklet, all of which wheel around our small craft in rapidly improving weather. When a Humpback Whale blows close to the boat it is actually hard to know where to point the camera next, amidst our maritime frenzy of bird and cetacean activity, which serves to demonstrate just how rich these waters must be.

After the Humpback descends on a long dive we plot a course inland, following another beautiful fjord, to enjoy more gob-smacking scenery under a sky which is now largely blue. At the head of the fjord we can see the turquoise-spangled form of the mighty Aialik Glacier, and as we head towards this natural wonder the surface of the flat-calm sea becomes littered with the tiny icebergs which have been shed from the face of the huge ice wall which greets us.



Aialik Glacier

Jim tells us that this is the realm of our main target bird for the morning, the tiny Kittlitz's Murrelet. The engines are throttled back and we scan intently, until the first of half-a-dozen murrelets are spotted. They vary from full winter to full breeding plumage, through various intermediate stages, and are clearly attracted to the glacial meltwater as no others are seen outside the range of this mini-icefield. After some intimate photographic approaches of our final *Alcid* quarry of the trip, we venture closer to the face of the Aialik Glacier and soak up the unforgettable sights and sounds of this landscape-forming monster at work. Various creaks, groans and crashes echo over the mirror-still water, along with periodic calamitous thunder as another section of the slowly-moving river-of-ice drops into the fjord.

As we turn the boat and head south it is hard to pick out a highlight of what has been a totally unforgettable morning at sea. Lunch is broken out, as we strip off layers of clothing and dine in the warming sunshine on

the long journey back to Seward. The much improved weather gives yet another perspective on the incomparable landscape, as Sea Otters regularly bob past the boat and another pair of Humpback Whales put on a magnificent performance, tight in to a rocky headland, which gives an incredible feel to the images secured. A single Mountain Goat and some close approaches to a number of Marbled Murrelets see us to the end of the trip, and back at Seaward we warmly thank our skipper, Jim, for guiding us through one of the most inspiring boat trips that the planet can offer.

With the birding largely over for the day, we load up the car and commence what pans out into a seven-hour drive north, all the way to Cantwell. Few stops are made, as we push onwards through alternating showers and bright sunshine, retracing our mountainous route to Anchorage and an encounter with some rush-hour congestion. North of the city the traffic thins, the land flattens out and we cut a route first through deciduous forests and then the conifers of the Boreal zone.

It is 21.00 when we finally check into the [Denali Cabins](#) at Cantwell, where we are given keys to two excellently appointed log cabins, set in natural coniferous forest. Then it's time for the log-call, celebratory beers and a fine supper at the highly-recommended on-site restaurant.



Humpback Whale, Kenai Fjords

Saturday 4th June

Another day in Alaska, and another epic journey is set to unfold before us. This time our focus will be Denali National Park, and after enjoying Grey Jays, Boreal Chickadees, American Red Squirrel and Snowshoe Hare, plus a quick breakfast, around the cabins, we set off on the ten-minute drive to the park entrance.

A roadside Moose, with two tiny calves, halts the journey for a short while, then we head along the park access road amidst the next array of astounding scenery, which culminates in the appearance of Mount McKinley, a vast icy apparition on the western horizon, which at 20,156 feet is the highest peak in North America. Rising above the rolling green lowlands and framed by dark clouds above, it is a remarkable natural monument, and in recent times has been revelling in some controversy as to whether it should be called

Mount McKinley and whether its native Koyukon name of Denali should be reinstated; either way it is a breath-taking spectacle.

In the vicinity of the Savage River Camp Ground we enjoy our first American Tree Sparrows and various singing wood warblers, but a quick circuit of the woodland trails reveals only the droppings of the elusive Spruce Grouse.

Denali National Park is one of Alaska's premier tourist attractions and acts as a huge focal point for sightseers. In order to manage the interface between thousands of daily visitors and the fragile natural environment, access by private vehicles is not allowed beyond the Savage River and all who want to visit the park must book a space on one of the park buses. We have booked a slot by telephone the day before, but due to the enthusiasm of visitors to enter the park in the early morning we cannot be given five seats any earlier than 10.00.

So after our early morning birding on the access road and a quick lap of the visitors' centre, we collect our tickets, line up with everything we need for a day in the park and await our transport. The vehicles used seem identical to the yellow American school buses, but painted in a subtle green hue, with high ground clearance, lots of seats and somewhat limited window-opening opportunities. Ours also comes with a driver whose constant commentary can only be described as progressively more annoying, during the two-hour journey to Polychrome Pass.

The scenery is predictably superb, however, and occasional stops are made for the Moose, Caribou and some very distant Dall's Sheep, which are spotted from the windows of the vehicle, with passengers being actively encouraged to shout out their sightings as we progress. Although this mode of transport is very restrictive of birding, one huge bonus is that visitors to the park are largely permitted to wander freely once they leave the bus, and with this in mind we bid farewell to the grating commentary when we reach Polychrome Pass.



Alaska Range, viewed from Polychrome Pass, Denali NP

Leaving the bus's confines is a huge relief and the panorama which awaits at the summit of the pass is one of staggering beauty. The colourful rocks and scree, from which the name of Polychrome Mountain is derived, are dotted with wild flowers, now in vivid full bloom. The land rapidly drops away to the south, to a

flat green valley floor, through which several braided rivers snake, and beyond the flat plain rises the ridge of mighty snow-capped peaks of the Alaska Range, which stretch from one horizon all the way to the other. Above us is a blue sky, punctuated by towering white clouds, to complete a natural setting which is as impressive as any we encounter on the whole trip.

Within minutes of our arrival the first of two Grizzly Bears is spotted, way out on the plain below, and although quite impressive through a telescope, they are well over a mile away from our vantage point. The resident Alaskan Ground Squirrels are infinitely more obliging, however, and prove to be highly photogenic as they survey the landscape raised up on hind legs, and harvest grasses to stash in their wintering burrows.

Birds noted in the area include several Golden Eagles and Northern Harriers, singing White-crowned and American Tree Sparrows, and a huge Gyr Falcon which surveys his spectacular territory from a roadside pinnacle. More Caribou and some closer Dall's Sheep complete the roll-call for Polychrome Pass, and a walk for around a mile to the west, before we flag down a bus for our return ride to the visitors' centre as the sky begins to blacken.

The route back to our starting point, in intermittent rain, is uneventful and soon we are at the Denali Cabins for our evening meal. The plan is to eat early, fill the fuel tank, then factor in lots of time for the long drive east along the Denali Highway, the 130-mile dirt road which leads all the way to Paxson; the route is renowned for being very birdy, so we count on a very late arrival at our next accommodation.



Denali Highway

The route of the Denali Highway largely follows lowlands running parallel with the continuation of the Alaska Range, leading through a landscape of Boreal forests, grasslands, rivers and bogs, through constantly-changing scenery and with snow-capped mountains always in sight. Our first stop, in a mixture of coniferous forest and willow scrub at Mile Post (MP) 129, produces Red Fox and Savannah Sparrows, Blackpoll warbler, Olive-sided Flycatcher and a colony of culvert-nesting Cliff Swallows.

At MP 111 the sighting of a roadside Northern Shrike brings us to a screeching halt, and we watch this striking predator chase a sparrow, that is almost as large as the shrike itself, off into the distance. A mile further on and another emergency stop has us running down the road in pursuit of an American Porcupine. The Porcupine hastily scales a small spruce tree, from which he seems to contentedly look down on us, happy that he is out of harm's way.

A Merlin is located on a roadside treetop in a similar area, and at the next wetland we find the first of a number of American Beaver, which seem happy to go about their beaver-business oblivious to our presence. Another Moose is next on the list, in an area of forest pools which support Slavonian Grebe and several Red-necked Phalaropes.

Further east, the weather begins to deteriorate and the latter stages of the journey are completed in drizzle. Either the rain or the late hour seems to have pushed Willow Ptarmigan onto the road, and we pass a succession of these striking rusty-red and white gamebirds. Last notebook entries of the day are Snowshoe Hare and a pair of Trumpeter Swan, before we arrive at the [Denali Highway Cabins](#). Audi, the proprietor, has left us a note and keys to our wonderfully equipped and well-heated wooden cabins, which are soon echoing to our loud snores.

Sunday 5th June

It is actually something of an effort to vacate our warm, cosy cabins in favour of the overcast scene outside, but we soon start to find new birds in the mixed woodland surrounding the cabins and adjacent fast-flowing stream. Alder Flycatcher and Northern Waterthrushes sing from the willows, while Spotted Sandpiper and American Dipper feed at the water's edge.

Venturing up to the main buildings at the end of the drive, we find Audi and Jenny preparing our breakfast in their beautifully designed upstairs apartment, where we receive a very warm welcome. Over the most scrumptious home-cooked breakfast, Audi gives us advice on where best to focus our birding time in the area, which is primarily focussed around finding the highly-prized Smith's Longspur. This enigmatic species has already led us a merry dance in our pre-trip study, as we know that it is on the very edge of its breeding range here and so very thinly spread. We have conflicting information as to their preferred breeding habitat, and precise locations of previous sightings seem nigh-on impossible to source; it's going to be a tough day ahead!

Following Audi's advice, we track back along the Denali Highway to MP 13, where a low ridge runs both north and south of the road. Audi has specifically told us to head south, so we don our wellington boots and head off across the open tundra landscape. Spreading out, the five of us cover a huge amount of ground over the next couple of hours, and also amass a fine list of birds including American Tree and Savannah Sparrows, displaying Short-eared Owls and several territorial Hudsonian Whimbrel and American Golden Plover, the latter in gorgeous full-summer attire.

But we draw a total blank on anything resembling a longspur. With a gut-feeling that we are actually in the wrong habitat, we retire to the nearby Tangle Lake Inn for a revitalising coffee and a review of available longspur-hunting options, as a heavy shower pours down outside. Deciding that it may be best to ignore Audi's local advice, we follow a lead we have gleaned from a birder who has visited the previous year and head back to MP 17.

Several observers have noted that Smith's Longspur has a preference for open, low-lying areas, dominated by Bog Cotton, so we set out to the north of the highway in search of the wispy-white heads of this plant. Around an hour later, after more rigorous tundra-bashing, we enter an area where Bog Cotton covers an entire valley-bottom and within minutes a shout of 'longspur!' echoes across the valley. We have clearly hit the Smith's Longspur jackpot, as we track down four singing males and an accompanying female in the immediate area.

And what stunning birds they are, with warm peachy-orange underparts and nape contrasting with a humbug-striped black-and-white head. It seems that the Longspurs are newly arrived, and they sing relentlessly from low perches on the open ground, frequently chasing rivals around-and-around as they compete for the best spot amidst the Bog Cotton. We are now basking in warm sunshine, and to sit in this sheltered valley, surrounded by stunning scenery and in the presence of such scarce and beautiful birds, is a yet another real trip highlight.

A couple of hours later, with camera memory-cards bulging, we set a course back to the Tangle Lake Inn, for a celebratory drink and another chat to the somewhat interesting bunch of local characters who frequent this isolated establishment. The remainder of the afternoon is spent in a drive twenty miles -or-so back west on the Denali Highway, for some relaxed roadside birding in the warm, sunny weather.

Barrow's Goldeneye, Least Sandpiper, Tundra Swans and a single Long-tailed Skua feature in our notebooks lists, though Arctic Warbler is a notable absentee, in spite of some concerted effort. After more Hudsonian Whimbrel, Short-eared Owls, sparrows and warblers, we head back to the cabins, where we have arranged for a barbeque to be laid on, which we cook ourselves in Audi's ingenious mosquito-proof dining area. The remainder of the beautiful sunny evening is spent in a futile search for Spruce Grouse in some neighbouring woodland, then sitting outside the cabins to write-up notes and savour the beer we secured from the Tangle Lake Inn.



Smith's Longspur, Tangle Lake, Denali Highway

Monday 6th June

After a little soul-searching we decide to miss out on Jenny's wonderful breakfast in favour of a 05.00 departure and some birding time a little further to the south. It is pouring with rain when we set off, demonstrating how lucky we were to enjoy our longspurs in the sunshine on the previous day, and the rain continues as we head south on the Richardson Highway, passing the huge Paxson Lake as we go.

As we travel to the south the landscape rapidly transforms from high peaks to flat lands cloaked in Boreal forest. With the rain now abating, we stop to study our first showy Harlan's Hawk, the very distinctive Alaskan race of Red-tailed Hawk which lacks any hint of rufous tones in its plumage; at the same spot we enjoy a couple of small flyover flocks of Bohemian Waxwings, the only birds of the trip.

Our first birding site is Gulkana Airfield, which eBird tells us has a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek, but the lack of precise information and the fact that the airfield is in the midst of a major construction project combine to nullify our chances of seeing this bird. The ponds and bogs just to the east of the airfield are superb, however, with nesting Tundra Swan and ultra-confiding Slavonian Grebes, plus Alder Flycatcher, Northern Waterthrush, Lesser Yellowlegs and, best of all, a nesting pair of Rusty Blackbirds.

After a quick puncture repair and coffee at Glennallen, we turn west on the Glenn Highway, to stop at the Tolsona Campground, which regularly plays host to a nesting pair of Great Grey Owls. Not today it doesn't, however, and our hour on the trails which lead through the spruce trees produces just Boreal Chickadee and a large number of mosquito bites.

The next species which we fail to find, in a supposedly productive stretch of Boreal forest, is Hawk Owl, and we achieve our hat-trick of owl dips at Sheep Mountain Lodge, where the box-nesting Boreal Owl has failed to show this year; that's quite an impressive morning's work!

Following brunch at Sheep Mountain Lodge, we take a steady drive back to Anchorage as the rain recommences in earnest. And the downpour doesn't stop, so we end the day sorting out our kit at the Motel 6 and then hitting the Rustic Goat for a few beers, to celebrate a very successful and highly enjoyable second leg of the tour.



Boreal Chickadee, Tolsona Campground

Tuesday 7th June

At 06.45 Alaska Airlines have us airborne and an-hour-and-a-quarter later we are touching down at the isolated west-coast town of Nome. The tiny airport building crams both arrivals and departures into the same chaotic space, where we rescue our bags and jump into a battered taxi van outside. We follow a grid of streets through the dusty and rather run-down frontier town, and when we tell a fellow passenger that we are staying at the Polaris Hotel she gives a look of horror!

Our hire car is actually booked from the [Aurora Hotel](#), and when we arrive at this establishment we take the opportunity to enquire about vacancies within. Thanks to a cancelled flight we are in luck, so we rescind the Polaris reservation and take the offer of rooms at what is, undoubtedly, the best hotel in town. With accommodation and hire car sorted, we grab a Subway plus a few other essential provisions, then head out birding in the unexpectedly warm sunshine.

The Council Road follows the coastline to the east of the town, where it soon changes from tarmac to dirt. And the birding is phenomenal! Close to the Nome River Mouth the road doglegs inland, where a quick halt to scan the tundra produces Taverner's Cackling Goose, Northern Shrike, plus the first of many Long-tailed Skuas, Short-eared Owls and Lapland Longspurs.

At the river mouth itself we view the lagoon from the high bridge deck, and soon find our first big target bird in the form of the very smart Aleutian Terns, which are nesting on an island amongst their Arctic Tern cousins. The tide is high so waders are few in number, and it is interesting to note how our travel to the north has turned the gull-of-choice from Glaucous-winged to Glaucous.

East of the Point Nome headland the vast expanse of the Safety Sound lagoon opens up in front of us, divided from the sea by a narrow stretch of low dunes and flat tundra, on which various seasonal timber huts and the Council Road lie. In the fine sunny weather we actually find that heat haze severely hampers the viewing, but birds are certainly present in great numbers and we rapidly clock up Sandhill Cranes, Long-tailed Skuas, Bairds, Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Black Brants, Short-eared Owls and the very attractive *v-nigrum* race of Common Eider, with its bright yellow bill.

Towards the centre of Safety Sound, the road is lifted high above the main inlet by an arching road bridge, and we stop here to eat some lunch and scan the waders which congregate in the area. Black Turnstones and Surfbirds are plentiful, along with Sanderlings, and the very distinctive *pacifica* race of Dunlin, with ghostly pale head and rich rufous mantle.

And we also pull out something a little special, a group of no less than three summer plumaged Great Knot, quite a sizeable ABA rarity and something which has the locals buzzing for days to come! Summer plumaged Black Guillemots complete the list at Safety Sound Bridge, then we continue to Bonanza Creek, which marks the eastern limit of the lagoon.

Another modern road bridge spans the wide creek, and just beyond is the atmospheric rusting remains of several gold-rush steam locomotives, brought to Nome at the turn of the 20th Century and now left to decay at the edge of a vast green saltmarsh. In this area we note more Dunlins, Least Sandpipers, Red Fox Sparrows, another Northern Shrike, plus our first Arctic Redpolls and Eastern Yellow Wagtails.



Safety Sound, Nome

Beyond Bonanza Creek, the Council Road sets a course inland, to rise through a landscape of rounded hills and willow-lined valleys. At the allotted MP 49 we park up to scan an adjacent cliff face and soon locate the nesting pair of Gyr Falcons, which have been regular at this locality in recent years. Not only does the site host the king of the falcons, but also Rough-legged Hawk, which we later discover is also nesting on the same cliff face.

Having taken our fill of raptors, we travel a little further inland until a herd of Musk Ox are located, feeding on the river-side willows. These bizarre shaggy *bovids* actually have a range covering Arctic Canada and Greenland, and hence these animals are part of an introduced population, but we still take time to marvel at these unique high latitude ungulates, which look very much at-home in spite of their origins.

The remainder of the evening is spent working our way back along Safety Sound, where we diligently scan for our Emperor Goose target in much improved light. The goose fails to materialise, but we do notch up some handsome summer plumaged Pacific Golden Plovers and a welcome Slaty-backed Gull, in a truly amazing birding environment, upon which the sun never really wants to set. In fact it is 00.00 when we get back to the hotel, and still broad daylight, however our intended 03.30 departure means that we are keen to get at least a few hours shut-eye before the alarm bell rings.

Wednesday 8th June

With yet another headline day ahead of us, we are up and out at the allotted 03.30, heading straight for the Kougerok Road. The weather has changed quite dramatically, and we head inland to climb into the hills and mountains under a cold grey sky. We are on a focussed mission this morning, and try to avoid distractions en route, but when an American Porcupine and then a Wolf materialise at the roadside, a couple of emergency stops are inevitable.

Ignoring a pair of fly-past Rusty Blackbirds, we finally arrive at MP 72 at 06.00, to find that a light dusting of powdery snow has been laid on the hillsides the night before. We are in a vast, wild landscape of snow-painted rocky peaks, high, rounded hills and low green valleys, with the famed birding landmark of the Coffee Dome rising immediately from the dirt road on which we are parked.

Stepping out of the car, the very first thing that we hear is the plaintive bubbling call of a Bristle-thighed Curlew, as a pair of one of the world's most enigmatic shorebirds proceed to fly over our heads! Now we could get into the car and head back for breakfast at this point, but masochists that we are, we put on various layers of warm clothing and set off up the steep hillside for a little bracing early-morning exercise.

It really is cold, with a biting wind, but the steep walk soon gets the circulation going and some close views of both American Golden Plover and Hudsonian Whimbrel serve to warm the cockles of the heart. The Bristle-thighed Curlews had appeared to fly towards the top of the Coffee Dome, but an extensive search of the bleak and windswept peak draws a blank. After an hour of trudging through the low willow scrub and uneven grassy tussocks, we are actually considering calling it a day, when we finally locate the pair of Bristle-thighed Curlews on the ground, and for the next hour soak up the exquisite detail of one of the rarest birds on the planet.



American Golden Plover, Coffee Dome, Nome

Mission accomplished, we head steadily back towards Nome, making our first stop at MP 44 where we finally get to grips with an Arctic Warbler, a species which has eluded us so far but in typical fashion is seen quite

frequently in suitable habitat from this point forth. At MP 39 it is the Bluethroat which is the star, when we hit on an area where several of these gorgeous birds are singing from bush-tops in the low scrub.



Hudsonian Whimbrel, Coffee Dome, Nome

Back in town, we find time for a couple of hours catch-up on our sleep, before investigating the harbour area of Nome. As we make our way to the quay, we are amazed at the weird and wonderful ocean-going contraptions that are being welded, bolted and lashed together in order to take their portion of the ongoing 'gold rush' which still lures adventurers to the town.

The Nome gold rush commenced in the summer of 1898, when the 'Three Lucky Swedes' found gold in Anvil Creek. News of the discovery reached the outside world that winter and, by 1899, Nome suddenly had a population of 10,000. In that year, gold was found in the beach sands for dozens of miles along the coast, which spurred the stampede to new heights. Today around 4,000 live in Nome, and the incredibly dangerous practice of offshore recovery of gold-bearing gravels continues year-round, with divers in heated wetsuits venturing below the pack ice in winter months.

Thankfully it only takes a few birds to keep us happy, though the handful of Aleutian Terns and single adult Thayer's Gull which we find in the harbour are decidedly unapproachable. Dining out in Nome does not present one with an endless list of possibilities, in fact [The Pingo Bakery](#), is pretty much the only place worth considering. And our excellent three-course meal sets us up perfectly for an evening in the field, with a return visit to Safety Sound.

Bright, summer plumaged Bar-tailed Godwits and Black-bellied Plover are noted at Nome River Mouth, and at the western end of the Sound we are very pleased to discover a gorgeous little Red-necked Stint feeding with a mixed flock of Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers. The stint is a real Alaskan speciality and, like

so many of the birds up here, it is a real privilege to see birds, familiar from their wintering or passage quarters, at their nesting grounds and in full breeding attire.

At the Safety Sound Bridge, a *schuktschorum* Rock Sandpiper is new to the trip, and in the area we also enjoy many more Short-eared Owls and Long-tailed Skuas, causing us to assume that it must be something of a plentiful lemming year in these parts. Last birds of the day are a group of thirteen exquisitely beautiful summer-plumaged Sabine's Gulls, which fly in to roost on the beach as the sun finally nears the horizon. Our close approach to what is surely one of the most impressive gulls in the world, on a carpet of swirling, wind-blown sand, is certainly a memorable way to end yet another rather amazing day.



Sabine's Gulls, Safety Sound, Nome

Thursday 9th June

After a little head-scratching, we conclude that all of our remaining target species can potentially be seen to the east of town, so once again we take the Council Road at 06.00. Nome River Mouth, this time viewed at low tide, starts us off well, with Ruddy Turnstone, another Red-necked Stint and plenty of Aleutian Terns. Moving on to Safety Sound, under a blue sky but being battered by a bitterly cold wind, a couple of drake Eurasian Wigeon and a group of Redhead are both notable finds.

Passing Long-tailed Skuas and Short-eared Owls, we head inland again at Bonanza Creek, this time continuing as far as MP 53, via a couple of herds of Musk Ox, and our nesting Gyr Falcon. MP 53 is at the summit of the ridge of coastal hills and gives access to a very different landscape of high, domed peaks, vast rocky hillsides and deep-cut green valleys.

This is the Alaskan home of the Northern Wheatear, a bird which we are keen to see due to its affinities with our UK homes, and also in homage of the fact that these tiny passerines have migrated all the way from Africa to northern-most North America! In a couple of hours of wandering the slopes, we find several Northern Wheatear, plus Horned Larks, Bluethroat and Rock Ptarmigan.

With our daily exercise complete, we take a steady run back to town, via more stops at Safety Sound, which notch-up Common Murre, Tufted and Horned Puffins offshore, a nice group of seven Sabine's Gulls over the lagoon, and a second-summer Vega Gull on the beach. Post-siesta we visit the town's sewage works and enjoy a large flock of spinning Red-necked Phalaropes, though it comes as a great disappointment to find that the tiny Pingo Bakery is already full by the time we arrive. The second choice of Marino's is decidedly second-rate, but does fill us in anticipation of an evening in the field.

Returning to Safety Sound, a couple of Eurasian Wigeon and a Merlin are the highlights, until a pair of Bristle-thighed Curlew fly in off the sea, calling as they pass low overhead. And then a conversation with a couple of

American birders, who have just had an Emperor Goose fly past on the sea, serves to end the day on something of a sour note.



Safety Sound, Nome

Friday 10th June

In a last-ditch effort to pull back our missing Emperor Goose, we spend the three birding hours we have at our disposal scanning the Bering Sea from Point Nome, the headland just west of Safety Sound. We note Tufted Puffin, Black Guillemot, Pacific Diver, Vega Gull and Harbour Porpoise, but sadly no goose, and we depart consoling ourselves with thoughts of close encounters of the Emperor kind on a return winter trip to Kodiak Island.

And Nome is left to seek its precious-metal fortune as we head for Anchorage, where three hours is killed at the airport before an onward flight to Barrow, the final and potentially most exciting instalment in our incredible trip-of-many-highlights. An hour-and-a-half after leaving Anchorage, we are descending over the most amazing landscape of still-frozen tundra, strewn with hundreds of circular pools, each capped in ice and punctuating a never-ending, table-flat, brown landscape.

Barrow airport operates in a similar manner to Nome, with one small building in which dozens of people jostle to either check in their huge bags, or retrieve them from the luggage chute. Escaping the chaos, to the very fresh air outside, we find ourselves beside a dusty dirt street in a rather untidy and somewhat ramshackle town. Just down the road is the [UIC Car Rental](#) outlet, where we are given a huge white van, as it seems that all the SUVs are accounted for; thankfully it has high ground clearance and a hefty set of tyres, so is well suited to the local terrain.

We find the [Airport Inn](#) just a few blocks away, where we receive a particularly warm welcome from the proprietors, Nancy and Andrew, who unveil our spacious, well-heated rooms and ample breakfast facilities. Interestingly, there are electrical supply cables set up in front of each parking spot outside the hotel and we can't help but ask about their origin. It seems that in the winter, when the temperature regularly dips to -30 Degrees Centigrade, the connections are used to power under-car heaters which warm up engine and transmission oil. Apparently it is very easy to damage one's engine in such extreme climates and Andrew even tells us how tyres freeze with a 'flat' at the bottom, making for a very bumpy first few miles of a winter journey in Barrow!

Thankfully today is not quite so cold, but we still don numerous thermal layers before setting out to find the evocatively-named Gas Well Road. The houses which we pass en route seem to be in varying degrees of neglect and a tidy back-yard is clearly not a priority, as many sport a mountain of junk. The permafrost, which freezes the ground just below the surface all-year-round, means that paved roads would shatter and hence there is no tarmac in Barrow. The lack of a sealed road surface means that dust is a real issue here, and the whole town appears to be bathed in the fine grey powder which stifles colours and adds to the feel of neglect.

After calling briefly at the supermarket for provisions, and again being shocked by the high check-out prices, we leave the main conurbation and head inland along the oddly named Cake Eater Road. Soon we see a large rusting pipe running parallel with the road, and realise that we must have found Gas Well Road. And we also begin to see lots and lots of birds.

Although there are still large mounds of winter-ploughed snow at the roadside, evidencing the heavy precipitation of the previous months, the tundra beyond is already free of snow and the numerous pools are free of ice. Breeding birds are already present in force, with Red-necked and Red Phalaropes feeding in the pools, Pectoral Sandpipers displaying from prominent tussocks and the occasional larger form of a goose or duck breaking up the otherwise flat expanse.



Pectoral Sandpiper, Gas Well Road, Barrow

We have not driven far when a pair of dark blobs, not far from the road, materialise into our final big target bird of the trip, Spectacled Eider. We spill from the van to take up photographic positions and soak in the finery of this unique and highly range-restricted marvel of the avian world, which breeds in just a few spots on the Alaskan tundra and winters in large flocks on openings out in the Bering Sea pack ice; to sit and enjoy the detail of the black, white and green head pattern of this bespectacled wonder, in such a remote and beautiful environment, is yet another highlight of a trip to this unparalleled destination.

Following a drive to the end of Gas Well Road, where the sighting of a Stoat is quite a surprise, we park up back at the 'eider pools' and all wander off in different directions, in search of further photogenic delights. Perhaps the most numerous species out on the flat, brown expanse of tundra, is the Pectoral Sandpiper, and what a different bird they become on their breeding grounds. Males pick out an area of slight elevation, on which to stand and inflate their chests, until the entire heavily-streaked breast stands up, pompom-like. The display call is a weird croaking, repeated from the song post and then in a low circuit of the territory, carried out with breast still in the inflated position; amazing!

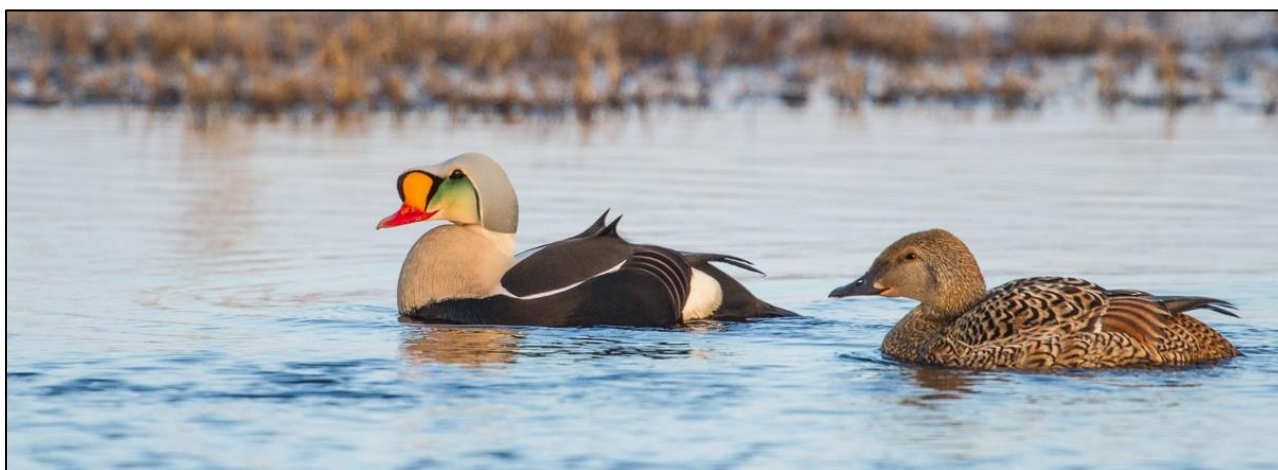
Red-necked Phalaropes are commonplace out on the tundra pools, as are their more bulky cousins, the dazzling Red Phalaropes. Both are extremely approachable, as they pick insects from the flat-calm waters of the tundra pools, and the brick-red breasts, boldly contrasting back-and-white faces and bright yellow bills of the latter species places it right at the top of anyone's list of Alaska's most impressive birds.

Smaller numbers of Dunlin, Long-billed Dowitcher and American Golden Plover are encountered, all in immaculate breeding plumage, with Lapland Longspur again being extremely numerous. Pairs of White-fronted Geese stand out in this featureless environment, alongside lesser numbers of Black Brant, both of which species appear newly arrived on their breeding grounds.

The discovery of an obliging pair of King Eider, on an isolated tundra pool and as light takes on a golden hue, is another real highlight; it has to be said that although Spectacled Eider takes the rarity award, the subtly blended orange, greens and greys of the King Eider's face pattern really does leave him with the winning crown of this duck beauty-contest.

Pomarine Skuas on their tundra territories are another impressive site, although this evening fails to provide the definitive images of eider-number-four and we will have to return to this locality in order to pin down the mouth-watering Steller's Eider in its full glory.

With watches now showing 02.00 in the morning we realise that we have to prise ourselves away from this most incredible of birding venues, and take a yawning drive back to the Airport Inn. In the warmth we catch up on a few hours sleep, as the midnight sun continues to illuminate this northerly bird-paradise, beyond our thick blackout curtains.



King Eider, Gas Well Road, Barrow

Saturday 11th June

After taking an 08.00 breakfast, we venture out into the cold and head straight for the Barrow coastline, where another remarkable landscape awaits. Even in early June, the sea remains totally frozen for as far as we can see in all directions, however, movement of the pack ice has thrown up huge slabs of frozen saltwater, to form a haphazard mosaic of jagged peaks and splinters. With age, the pack ice has also taken on a diverse palette of cold colouration, and as we scan across the bleak expanse we pick out various dirty greys, deep turquoise blues, pure whites, and all shades in-between.

Following the coast road to the northeast, we make regular stops to scan the ice flows, picking out a couple of distant Spotted Seals hauled-out in the open. Although Barrow in June has been a good place and time to search for Polar Bears in the past, our research has revealed that it is many years since a birding group has been lucky enough to encounter the planet's supreme predator; it seems that the Iñupiat community quota

of Bowhead Whales has been reduced, hence fewer whale carcasses are available to tempt in the hungry carnivores.

We have, however, received a tip-off that Polar Bears have been seen off Barrow Point in recent days, and hence carry out our scanning with suitably high levels of diligence. In spite of the advanced warning, it is still a shock to hear the call of 'Polar Bear', which heralds the commencement of a prolonged encounter with the mammal at the very top of everyone's most-wanted list.

Although perhaps a full mile away on the pack ice, it is still an immense adrenaline rush to first glimpse the yellow-tinged coat of this huge mammal, as it picks a route between the slabs of uplifted sea ice. Even from a mile distance the methodical lumbering gait conveys the great size of the bear, and we continue to intently study his every action until he moves out of view.



Polar Bear, off Barrow point

The dirt road does not lead all the way to the point and, instead, finishes several miles short of the spit which represents the most northerly extent of mainland USA. From this point onwards a serious 4WD and a permit is required, so we satisfy ourselves by scanning the large expanse of open-ocean which is visible from the beach. All four eider species can be seen on the sea, albeit distantly, and we also note a small group of offshore Sabine's Gulls, plus several loafing Spotted Seals.

Again the excitement mounts as a second Polar Bear is spotted out on the ice, this time close to the far edge of the open water. After picking his way amongst the pack ice, this bear decides that it would be easier by water, drops into the ocean and proceeds to swim for about half a mile back towards the town. For the next four hours we study the bears, which gradually move closer to our roadside vantage points, until our separating distance is narrowed to around three hundred metres; we consider this fairly well within the safety zone, bearing in mind that this 700kg predator can run as fast as a horse!

At this range, through telescopes, the views really are devastating and it feels as if we have a privileged place on the set of a top-class wildlife documentary as we view the bears making their way amongst this bitterly stark, yet incredibly fragile environment; it goes without saying that our time in the company of these foodchain-topping predators is an unforgettable trip highlight, which knocks any birds into a distant second-place for the remainder of the morning.

In the early afternoon sunshine we make our way back through the town and then south a short distance on a different dirt road to Emaiksoun Lake. Viewed on a map or from the air it is apparent that all of the larger lakes have an odd north-south orientation, which has been caused by millennia of prevailing northerly winds, however, today is thankfully calm.

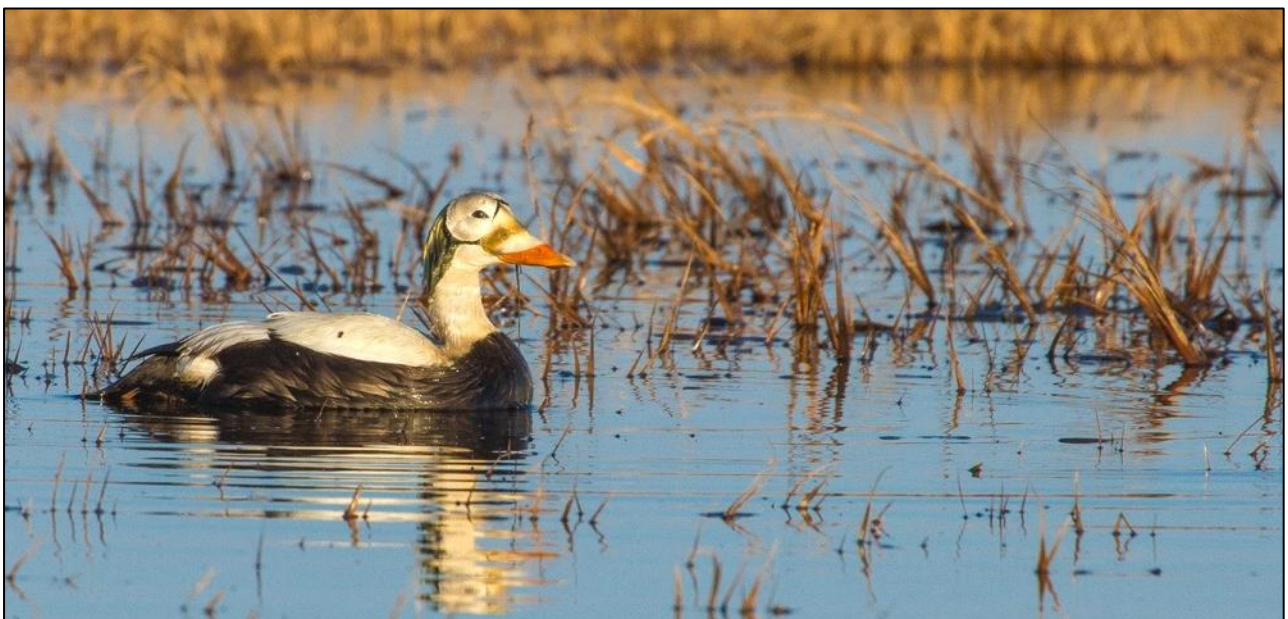
The lake itself is still frozen, however, the surrounding tundra is of more interest to us, as we spread out and indulge in another photographic hunt for more definitive shots of the local specialities. Nesting Red-throated and Pacific Divers, plus several more pairs of Spectacled Eiders are good crowd pleasers here, though for me the phalaropes are the star performers at this site. Settling down beside a flat-calm tundra pool, a succession of Red-necked and stunningly bright Red Phalaropes make circuits of the weedy margins, spinning and fly-catching as they go. Having spent a birding-lifetime knowing these species only as dull and distant winter-plumaged individuals, this intimate experience of these elegant little beauties instantly elevates them to a position as some of my all-time favourite bird species.

Returning to the Airport Inn for our late afternoon siesta, we note that the thermometer on the lamp post outside reads an unfeasible 21 Degrees-C, a figure beyond our wildest dreams at this latitude! After a couple of hours of shut-eye we dine at the highly-rated Northern Lights Restaurant, whose Korean culinary delights set us up for a long evening out on the tundra.

A large white blob, atop a pylon at the start of Cake Eater Road, has us screeching to a stop to watch a Snowy Owl on his favoured perch. After soaking up the owl, in all his pure-white glory, we turn our attentions to the waders feeding on the edge of the adjacent lagoons where, amidst the Western, Semipalmated, Baird's and White-rumped Sandpipers, we pull out a Common Ringed Plover; the latter is a familiar sight and sound to us UK birders, but quite a rarity in this part of the world.

Continuing to Gas Well Road, we disperse in the vicinity of the 'eider pools' to try our photographic fortune with the ducks, geese and wading birds, now bathed in beautiful evening light. Steller's Eiders are something of a focus for this session, and with a little patience some mouth-wateringly close approaches are made. Spectacled and King Eiders do not disappoint either, nor do Pectoral Sandpipers, Long-tailed Ducks, Pomarine Skuas, Lapland Longspurs and a host of other tundra-breeding stars.

It is very hard to abandon such a unique, beautiful and stimulating environment to head for a hotel room, but at 02.00 we figure that we have earned ourselves at least a little sleep.



Spectacled Eider, Gas Well Road, Barrow



Red Phalarope, Emaiksoun Lake, Barrow

Sunday 12th June

With the weather having taken a turn for the worse, and a rather foggy scene on view from the hotel window, breakfast is a more leisurely affair this morning. By the time we bail out of the warmth, the fog is already beginning to lift, and we head to the Cake Eater Road lagoons in improving light.

Our friend the Snowy Owl is still on his rather distant perch, but the waders are much more obliging. There is no sign of yesterday's Common Ringed Plover, but the peeps entertain us and amongst their number we pluck out a spanking little Red-necked Stint, again in brick-red breeding finery. The stint appears to have established a territory adjacent to the lagoons, and rigorously defends his patch against any intruding Semipalmated Sandpipers.

The remainder of the morning session is again spent on Gas Well Road, with a similar fare to previous visits, but does include our closest Spectacled Eider encounter thus far. The afternoon siesta and Northern Lights meal routine are repeated, then we return to Barrow Point to end the day.

At the base of the point is an abandoned Iñupiat hunting village, which sports some fascinating local artefacts including various piles of Bowhead Whale bones and a couple of 'palm trees', whose trunks are pieces of driftwood and whose fronds are strips of Bowhead baleen; ingenious artistry!

The local population are extremely friendly towards us visitors, regularly stopping to chat in their huge 4WDs. They are clearly proud of their culture, and a tough existence etched in one of the most extreme climates imaginable. We are shown images of how the Bowhead whale hunt is carried out, from a tiny wooden boat and with a simple harpoon tethered to a coil of rope. And how the whales are brought ashore to be butchered as part of a community festival, with all sharing in the bounty, as every last part of the whale is utilised in some way. It is clearly a unique and fascinating way of life, but we politely decline the offer to call around later and share some whale blubber!

It is directly offshore from the village that the Polar Bears have been loitering, and today we find no less than three individuals, which have located a whale carcass and are taking their fill of meat and blubber. All the eating is clearly hard work, as the bears alternate between bouts of tearing meat, with their cream-coloured faces bloodied red, and then snoozing, flat-out on the ice.

Leaving the bears to slumber, we continue to the area of open sea, where a couple of Spotted Seals are found, no doubt celebrating the fact that the Polar Bears have had their fill of whale blubber. Out on the water we count four White-billed Divers, and thirty-five Spectacled Eiders amongst many more Common Eiders and a handful of Kings.

After a group of a dozen Pomarine Skuas make a magnificent fly-past, we return to the Polar Bears for another viewing. When the drizzle sets in, however, we concede that a relatively early night is in order, and head back to the warmth and comfort of the Airport Inn.



Steller's Eider, Gas Well Road, Barrow

Monday 13th June

With a day of travel ahead and precious little time remaining in Barrow, we cut sleep to a minimum and head out at 06.00, under largely clear skies and into a biting cold wind. En route to Barrow Point we bump into our Snowy Owl friend on the edge of town, and with a little stealthy groundwork between the cover of some shipping containers, we finally secure some worthwhile images of this highly impressive bird.

Moving on to the next wondrous white predator, the remainder of the time we have at Barrow is spent with the Polar Bears, still in the same spot and still dividing their time between blubber-tearing and pack ice slumber. And this memorable encounter brings to an end our time above the Arctic Circle. An 11.30 flight takes us south to Fairbanks and then on to Anchorage, where the final hire car of the trip is collected.

The weather is glorious, in fact decidedly 'tropical' after our time on the north coast, so we head for Westchester Lagoon and a final couple of hours of Alaskan birding. Alder Flycatcher seems to have arrived since our previous visit, but many of the other birds are similar to those encountered just over two weeks previously. Red-necked Grebes are now mounding-up their floating nests, while the Hudsonian Godwit flock has now reached an impressive forty-four birds, which huddle on an island alongside similar numbers of Short-billed Dowitchers. And, after numerous failed attempts, I finally get my definitive Dusky Canada Goose image, this time so close that just its head fills the frame!

After a brush-up in the Motel 6 we make for the Moose's Tooth and a final celebratory meal, where we raise glasses to one of the most stimulating and rewarding destinations on the planet. It has been a totally amazing trip, with an endless succession of highlights and corresponding set of incredible memories which will last a lifetime; Alaska might just be my favourite place ever.

Notes on Key Target Species, Local Specialities and Endemic Races:**Snow Goose** *Chen caerulescens*

Only recorded in the vicinity of Barrow, with approximately 100 on 11/06/16 and 50 on 12/06/16; all were seen in flight.

Brant Goose *Branta bernicla nigricans*

Seen daily during our time at both Nome and Barrow.

'Aleutian' Cackling Goose *Branta hutchinsii leucopareia*

A single bird seen on St Paul, frequenting lagoons close to the airport, on 30 and 31/05/16.

'Taverner's' Cackling Goose *Branta hutchinsii taverneri*

The cackling goose of choice around Nome, though only encountered in very small numbers, with just one or two pairs per day seen in widespread locations.

'Dusky' Canada Goose *Branta canadensis occidentalis*

Quite commonly seen in the vicinity of Anchorage, being particularly numerous at Westchester Lagoon.

Trumpeter Swan *Cygnus buccinator*

Only seen during the Anchorage/Seward/Denali/Paxson circuit, where a handful of pairs were encountered on suitable breeding pools.



Trumpeter Swans, Seward Highway, Anchorage

Tundra Swan *Cygnus columbianus*

Several seen in the vicinity of Paxson, then commonly encountered around both Nome and Barrow.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas Penelope*

Four individuals recorded at Safety Sound, Nome on 09/06/16.

Common Teal *Anas crecca*

Up to ten birds recorded daily during our stay on St Paul.

Steller's Eider *Polysticta stelleri*

Only recorded on tundra pools adjacent to Gas Well Road. A drake on 10/06/16 and four on 11/06/16; undoubtedly the scarcest of the eider ducks. (N71°15'11.7", W156°32'11.5").

Spectacled Eider *Somateria fischeri*

Five recorded on tundra pools adjacent to Gas Well Road on 10/06/16. Four at the same site on 11/06/16, a similar number at Emaiksoun Lake and a double-figure count on the ocean off Barrow Point. On 12/06/16 four were seen on Gas Well Road and thirty-five counted on the ocean off Barrow Point.

King Eider *Somateria spectabilis*

Three on tundra pools adjacent to Gas Well Road on 10/06/16. Several hundred on the ocean off Barrow Point on 11/06/16.

Willow Ptarmigan *Lagopus lagopus*

Three on the Denali Highway on 04/06/16 and two from Council Road, Nome, on 08/06/16.

Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus muta*

A pair at MP53 on the Council Road, Nome, on 09/06/16.

Pacific Loon *Gavia pacifica*

Up to ten birds recorded daily throughout our time in both Nome and Barrow.



Pacific Loon, Barrow

Yellow-billed Loon *Gavia adamsii*

A single seen daily in the sheltered bay close to St Paul Town, and a maximum of four birds counted on the vast open water 'lake' in the sea ice off Barrow Point.

Red-faced Cormorant *Phalacrocorax urile*

Up to twenty recorded daily on and around the St Paul seabird cliffs.

Harlan's (Red-tailed) Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis harlani*

A single recorded between Anchorage and Seward, then several more on the journey from Paxson back to Anchorage.

Rough-legged Hawk *Buteo lagopus*

A pair was seen in the vicinity of a known cliff face nest site at KM49 on 07 and 08/06/16. (N64°41'42.7", W164°09'46.5").

Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis tabida*

Three seen in Anchorage, on the sea shore close to Westchester Lagoon on 28/05/16. Common in the vicinity of Safety Sound, Nome, throughout our stay, with three figure counts made.

American Golden-Plover *Pluvialis dominica*

A single close to Paxson on 05/06/16, a couple of records in the vicinity of Nome, and double-figure counts daily on the tundra breeding grounds of Barrow; all were gorgeous summer-plumaged birds.

Pacific Golden-Plover *Pluvialis fulva*

Two on St Paul on 31/06/16, then a couple of records daily around Safety Sound, Nome.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

A single identified on call by SC, at the Cake Eater Road lagoons, on 11/06/16.

Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis*

A pair at The Coffee Dome, Kougerok Road, Nome on 08/06/16. First seen in flight display, over the road, then later relocated feeding on the hillside. Park at MP72 and walk up the hillside to the west. Pair in off the sea, charismatically calling, over Bonanza Creek, Nome, on 09/06/16.



Bristle-thighed Curlew, Coffee Dome, Nome and Red-necked Stint, Cake Eater Road, Barrow

Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*

Only recorded at Westchester Lagoon, Anchorage, numbering c20 on 28/05/16 and 44 on 13/06/16.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica baueri*

A single bird present on mudflats adjacent to St Paul Town throughout our stay on the island, then seen daily in the vicinity of Nome, though numbers recorded never exceeded four birds.

Black Turnstone *Arenaria melanocephala*

Up to six birds seen daily at Nome, most often recorded on the stone sea defences around the Safety Sound Bridge, Nome.

Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*

Three summer-plumaged birds discovered by SC, adjacent to Safety Sound Bridge, Nome, On 07/06/15; apparently the first multiple occurrence on mainland USA! Sadly, they only lingered for fifteen minutes, but were photographed for posterity.

Surfbird *Calidris virgate*

Up to thirty birds seen daily at Nome, most often recorded on the stone sea defences around the Safety Sound Bridge.

Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*

Singles recorded beside Safety Sound, Nome on 08/06/15, at Nome River Mouth on 09/06/16 and at the Cake Eater Road lagoons on 12/06/15; all were in glowing summer-plumage and the latter bird was vigorously defending a territory against rival peeps (N71°17'55.8", W156°40'48.2").

Rock Sandpiper *Calidris ptilocnemis*

The *ptilocnemis* race was probably the most common wading bird on St Paul, seen displaying over most areas of open tundra and feeding on both mud and rocky seashore; several hundred recorded daily. One of the *tschuktschorum* race was seen at Safety Sound Bridge, Nome, on 09/06/16.

Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*

A flock of seven on St Paul on 31/05/16. Hundreds recorded daily on the tundra breeding sites around Barrow; one of the most spectacular birds of the trip.

Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus*

A single from the Denali Highway on 05/06/16, and up to twenty daily around Nome.

Thick-billed Murre *Uria lomvia*

Hundreds seen daily on the St Paul seabird cliffs.



Thick-billed Murre and Tufted Puffin, St Paul

Black Guillemot *Cepphus grylle mandtii*

Mooted as a potential future split, a single was seen on the sea off Nome and several were seen daily on the sea off Barrow.

Pigeon Guillemot *Cepphus columba*

A handful around St Paul and c40 from the Kenai Fjord boat trip on 03/06/16.

Marbled Murrelet *Brachyramphus marmoratus*

Only recorded in the fjords south of Seward, with c10 noted from shore on 02/06/16 and c20 from the Kenai Fjord boat trip on 03/06/16.

Kittlitz's Murrelet *Brachyramphus brevirostris*

Seven were counted in the ice flows in the immediate vicinity of the Aialik Glacier, from the Kenai Fjord boat trip on 03/06/16.

Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*

After much effort, a single pair was seen in the sheltered bay south of St Paul Town on 31/05/16.

Parakeet Auklet *Aethia psittacula*

Many hundreds seen daily on the St Paul seabird cliffs and c100 from the Kenai Fjord boat trip on 03/06/16.

Least Auklet *Aethia pusilla*

Many hundreds seen daily on the St Paul seabird cliffs, with the greatest and most charismatic congregations being on the upper beach boulder breeding sites beside Antone Lake.

Crested Auklet *Aethia cristatella*

The least numerous of the St Paul *alcids*, with daily counts scarcely reaching three figures.

Rhinoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*

Just a single record, from the Kenai Fjord boat trip on 03/06/16.

Horned Puffin *Fratercula corniculata*

Much less common around the St Paul seabird cliffs than the following species, with no more than fifty birds per day being recorded. c100 from the Kenai Fjord boat trip on 03/06/16.

Tufted Puffin *Fratercula cirrhata*

Maximum counts of a couple of hundred seen daily on the St Paul seabird cliffs and c100 from the Kenai Fjord boat trip on 03/06/16.

Red-legged Kittiwake *Rissa brevirostris*

A real Pribilof speciality, with up to fifty per day being seen on St Paul and also several dozen fly-overs during our brief touch-down on St George.



Red-legged Kittiwake, St Paul and Long-tailed Skua, Safety Sound, Nome

Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini*

Thirteen recorded at Safety Sound, Nome, on 08/06/16, and nine more the next day. Two over the Barrow pack ice on 11/06/16; all were spectacular summer-plumaged birds.

Mew Gull *Larus canus brachyrhynchus*

Commonly recorded throughout our visit, other than on St Paul and at Barrow.

Vega Gull *Larus vegae*

A second summer bird was at Safety Sound, Nome, on 09/06/16 and two first winters were seen off Nome Point on 10/06/16.

Thayer's Gull *Larus thayeri*

An adult was seen at Nome Town on 07 and 08/06/16 and a first winter at Barrow on 12/06/16.

Slaty-backed Gull *Larus schistisagus*

A single record of a third winter bird at Safety Sound, Nome, on 07/06/16.

Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens*

The common 'white-winged' gull on St Paul and on the Anchorage circuit, with several hundred seen on a number of days.

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*

The common white-winged gull at Nome and Barrow, with several hundred per day recorded.

Aleutian Tern *Onychoprion aleuticus*

Up to forty recorded daily at Nome, with highest counts at Nome River Mouth.

Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*

A single male bird recorded on 11-13/06/16, at various sites between Cake Eater Road and Barrow Town.



Snowy Owl, Barrow

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*

A single on the Denali Highway on 05/06/16 and up to twenty birds seen daily on the Nome leg of the trip.

American Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides dorsalis*

A male at Hillside Park, Anchorage, on 29/05/16.

Merlin *Falco columbarius columbarius*

A single on the Denali Highway on 04/06/16 and singles at Nome on 08 and 09/06/16.

Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus*

A single perched bird close to Polychrome Pass, Denali NP, on 04/06/16 and a pair with at least two small nestlings at a known cliff face nest site at KM49 on 07 and 08/06/16. (N64°41'42.7", W164°09'46.5").

Alder Flycatcher *Empidonax alnorum*

Recorded at Paxson, Gulkana Airport and Westchester Lagoons, each time in waterside willows.

Northern Shrike *Lanius excubitor invictus*

Singles at the Denali Highway MP111 on 04/06/16, then seen at Nome River Mouth and another just inland of Bonanza Creek on 07/06/16; the latter bird was recorded again on 08/06/16.



Bluethroat, Kougerok Road, Nome and Northern Wheatear, Council Road, Nome

Gray Jay *Perisoreus canadensis*

Groups of four to six recorded at Hillside Park, Anchorage, on 29/05/16, Denali Cabins, Cantwell, on 04/06/16 and Tolsona Campground on 06/06/16.

Northwestern Crow *Corvus caurinus*

Only recorded around Seward and various points to the south, always on the coast. c10 seen on 02/06/16 between Seward Harbour and Lowell Point. c20 seen on 03/06/16, from the Kenai Fjord boat trip.

Boreal Chickadee *Poecile hudsonicus*

Four at Hillside Park, Anchorage, on 29/05/16 and two at Tolsona Campground on 06/06/16.

Pacific Wren *Troglodytes pacificus*

Several of the large *alascensis* race seen daily during our time on St Paul. The mainland *stevensoni* race was heard at Lowell Point on 02/06/16.

Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*

Only recorded at MP44 on the Kougerok Road, Nome on 08/06/16.

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*

Two singing males in low willow scrub at MP39 on the Kougerok Road, Nome on 08/06/16.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Three recorded on the rocky hillsides above MP53 on the Council Road, Nome, on 09/06/16.

Varied Thrush *Ixoreus naevius*

A couple were recorded at Hillside Park, Anchorage, on 29/05/16, and several more at both Palmer Creek Road and Lowell Point on 02/06/16.

Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla tschutschensis tschutschensis*

Only recorded during our stay at Nome, with a couple of birds seen/heard daily at various locations along the Council Road

Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulous*

A chance encounter of a dozen birds just north of Gulkana on 06/06/16 was the only record.

Lapland Longspur *Calcarius lapponicus*

This attractive species was our constant companion during our time in the Pribilofs, Nome and Barrow; the most commonly encountered passerine in Alaska.



Lapland Longspur, Nome

Smith's Longspur *Calcarius pictus*

A species which is clearly on the edge of its range in the Denali Highway hillsides. After considerable effort we located a small population in a sheltered valley just north of MP17 on the Denali Highway, close to Tangle Lake Lodge. Four males appeared newly arrived on the summer breeding grounds and were singing constantly, with a single female also seen. The birds were restricted to an area where Bog Cotton predominated, on a fairly flat valley bottom containing occasional marshy areas. (N63°03'32.7", W145°57'09.5").

American Tree Sparrow *Spizella arborea*

Several recorded in and around Denali NP on 04/06/16 and subsequently along the Denali Highway on the same day, where more were noted on 05/06/16. Also recorded along the Kougerok Road, Nome on 08/06/16.

Red Fox Sparrow *Passerella iliaca*

Recorded in small numbers along the Denali Highway on 04 and 05/06/16, and again in small numbers during our stay in Nome.

Sooty Fox Sparrow *Passerella unalaschcensis*

Singing birds recorded at KM77 on the Route 1 south of Portage and at Turnagain Pass, both on 02/06/16.

Golden-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia atricapilla*

A couple of singing birds at Turnagain Pass on 02/06/16 and similar encounters along the Kougerok Road, Nome on 08/06/16.



Golden-crowned Sparrow, Turnagain Pass and Grey-crowned Rosy Finch, Nome

Rusty Blackbird *Euphagus carolinus*

Two seen in flight along the Kougerok Road, Nome on 08/06/16. Wonderful encounters with a pair feeding nestlings on the small marsh east of Gulkana Airstrip on 08/06/16. (N62°09'25.6", W145°26'30.4").

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch *Leucosticte tephrocotis umbrina*

The huge birds of the Pribilof Islands race were a common sight during our stay on St Paul, with up to fifty birds noted daily.

White-winged Crossbill *Loxia leucoptera*

Only recorded at Hillside Park, Anchorage, on 29/05/16, when c20 birds were seen.

Hoary Redpoll *Acanthis hornemanni*

Recorded daily in small numbers throughout our time in both Nome and Barrow.

Mammal Species Recorded:**American Red Squirrel** *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*

One or two daily during 02-06/06/16, on 'Anchorage Circuit'.

Arctic Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus parryi*

Numerous in Denali NP, where c20 were noted, and also seen at various locations along the Denali Highway. Several also seen on the Nome leg of the trip.



Arctic Ground Squirrel, Denali NP and American Porcupine, Denali Highway

Hoary Marmot *Marmota caligata*

Only encountered at Turnagain Pass on 02/06/16, where several were in residence on the grassy plain south of the parking area.

American Beaver *Castor canadensis*

A total of eight individuals were noted at several active lodges along the Denali Highway on 04/06/16. Another was seen in the same area the next day and two were seen from the Council Road, Nome, on 07/06/16.

Tundra Vole *Microtus oeconomus*

One at Bonanza Creek on 07/06/15.

Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus*

Two seen at Westchester lagoon on 28/05/16.

North American Porcupine *Erethizon dorsatum*

One on the Denali Highway on 04/06/16, which promptly ascended a spruce tree when approached. Another crossing the Kougerok Road, Nome on 08/06/16.

Snowshoe Hare *Lepus americanus*

On 04/06/16 one was seen in the vicinity of the Denali Cabins and another within Denali NP.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes alascensis*

Two seen from the Council Road, Nome, on 09/06/16.

Arctic Fox *Alopex lagopus*

Double figure counts daily on St Paul, with another single whilst at Barrow.



Arctic Fox, St Paul

Coyote *Canis latrans*

One near Paxson on 06/06/16.

Grey Wolf *Canis lupus*

A single sighting from the Kougerok Road, Nome on 08/06/16.

Harbour Seal *Phoca vitulina*

c50 seen on 03/06/16, on the Kenai Fjord boat trip, plus a single from land the previous day.

Spotted Seal *Phoca largha*

Two on both 11/06/16 and 13/06/16, on the pack ice off Barrow.

Ermine (Stoat) *Mustela ermine*

One on the Gas Well Road on 10/06/16 was a surprise.

Sea Otter *Enhydra lutris*

A family party within Seward Marina put on a remarkable performance, with several more being seen in the open water of the fjord. c20 seen on the Kenai Fjord boat trip.

Grizzly Bear *Ursus arctos horribilis*

Two seen in the open valley below Polychrome Pass, Denali NP, on 04/06/16; sadly, they were both a good kilometre from our vantage point.

Polar Bear *Ursus maritimus*

Arguably the highlight of the entire trip was prolonged views of three of these magnificent creatures, on the pack ice off Barrow Point, on 11 and 13/06/16.

Northern Fur Seal *Callorhinus ursinus*

Seen at various points around the St Paul coastline, with up to 100 daily throughout our stay.

Steller's Sea Lion *Eumetopias jubatus*

Noted in much smaller numbers than the preceding species during our stay on St Paul, often on the smaller off-islands. c20 noted daily.

Mountain Goat *Oreamnos americanus*

One seen on 03/06/16, from the Kenai Fjord boat trip.

Muskox *Ovibos moschatus*

Only seen on the Council Road, Nome, between MP50 and MP55, where up to 60 were noted. Introduced at this location.

Dall's Sheep *Ovis dalli*

c10 on the hillsides high above Beluga Point, south of Anchorage, on 02/06/16, and a similar number seen within Denali NP on 04/06/16; sadly, all rather distant.

Moose *Alces alces*

A handful seen at various locations on the Anchorage/Seward/Denali/Paxson circuit and two more at Nome.

Caribou *Rangifer tarandus*

c20 seen within Denali NP on 04/06/16 and a couple more from the Denali Highway the next day.

Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Three seen on 03/06/16, from the Kenai Fjord boat trip.

Killer Whale *Orcinus orca*

Two seen on 03/06/16, from the Kenai Fjord boat trip.

Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena*

One seen on 03/06/16, from the Kenai Fjord boat trip.

Dall's Porpoise *Phocoenoides dalli*

Four seen on 03/06/16, from the Kenai Fjord boat trip.



Red Phalarope, Red-necked Phalarope and Long-billed Dowitcher, Barrow; Rock Sandpiper, St Paul; Pectoral Sandpiper, Barrow; Hudsonian Whimbrel, Denali Highway



Least, Tufted and Parakeet Auklet, Horned and Tufted Puffin and Thick-billed Murre, St Paul