

A family event took me to Anchorage in late July so I used that as an excuse for an excursion to a part of the state I had never visited while growing up in Fairbanks. Musk Ox has been near the top of my target list for a few years so I picked Nome over other side trips like Brooks Falls or a trip to the Southwest Coast to see Walrus. Those remain on my list so I'm sure I'll be back to Alaska in the future. From Anchorage there are twice daily direct hour and 20 minute flights to Nome on Alaska Airlines.

It felt almost like seeing a Giraffe on the descent into the Serengeti when I saw a couple of Musk Ox from the air as we neared the Nome airport. My mother and 14-year-old daughter joined me and were good sports for my long hours in the car as we drove the extent of all three roads out of Nome to Teller, Kougarak, and Council. The trip reports previously posted on mammalwatching cover the pertinent details pretty well so I'll keep this brief. After Musk Ox, my primary targets were Arctic Fox, Spotted Seal, and Bearded Seal which there was a chance of seeing juveniles who don't yet spend the summer on the pack ice.

I stayed at the Aurora Inn which claimed to be the premier hotel in town and I wouldn't dispute that from what I saw driving through town. It felt just a bit nicer than a Motel 6 and was clean and functional. They also offer car rentals—SUV's with AWD and off-road tires which are a good fit for the rough dirt roads of the Seward Peninsula. I made a half-hearted effort to catch an Uber or Lyft but either no one drives for those services or my cell data was not functioning, or maybe both! I was about to walk to get the car and then come back for my family when a very old, barely functioning van showed up that was the local Checker Cab Co. (in case you find yourself struggling to look up a cab at the airport their number is 907-443-5211). A bit dusty but they got me to the hotel and later back to the airport for \$10/person.

With the freedom of a vehicle we stocked up at perhaps the most expensive grocery store I've been to with snacks and food that would leave us flexible to not come back to Nome for lunch or dinner. The visitor center on front street was staffed by a 49 year resident of Nome who was ecstatic for visitors and a great ambassador for the town. He provided us maps, a printed wildlife guidebook that I had read online https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/viewing/pdfs/nome_guidebook.pdf previously and samples of Musk Ox wool known as Qiviut to take home. To cross an item off my mom and I's bucket list we decided to take a helicopter flight tour at noon that first day. On our way back to the airport we found the Musk Ox I had seen from the air within half a mile of the airport so stopped for our first of several photo sessions with this particular herd. The pilot was chatty and knowledgeable and most importantly an able pilot who took us safely up river valleys to Glacial Lake where we landed for a few minutes to stretch our legs and talk. He returned us to the airport about 75 minutes after we had departed. From the air we were afforded stunning views of glacier valleys, dozens of beaver dams and lodges. It was clear that the resurgence in beaver population is reshaping the water flow and landscape of the peninsula. Michael said that the growing beaver ponds are accelerating the permafrost thaw causing real change or damage. In addition to the wreckage of abandoned gold dredges we saw two herds of Musk Ox from the air and a lone cow moose that I spotted along a river. Was it worth \$450 per person? Well I had to do it once in my life and the aerial views made me appreciate the later views of the mountains and valleys from the road all the more.

We set out that afternoon on the Kougarak Road, the longest of the 3 at 86 miles. With Alaska's midnight sun we were able to navigate the entire route and back with daylight to spare despite not leaving until nearly 2:00 PM. Most of the Musk Ox we saw over the 3 days were within 20 miles of

Nome. Our pilot said they have become a bit of a nuisance in the communities and research on what's drawing them in has indicated that they like the vegetation that grows in the soils disturbed by construction. About 20 miles up the road we found a cow moose wading in a shallow pond immediately off the road to the right. She was unperturbed by our presence and at a great distance for photographing. The scenery was the primary highlight for the next stretch until we spotted a cow with twin calves running across the tundra. Despite the distance they can't really hide when moving in the open terrain. I had hoped to see Alaska or Tundra Hare but was only having luck with roadkill between miles 45-50. Ptarmigan were common along the road but we couldn't even find an Arctic Ground Squirrel. We stopped near some rock outcroppings that looked like good rodent territory and were rewarded with some very skittish Arctic Ground Squirrels.



The road was a bit better than I had expected until about milepost 60 after which it was pretty rough. On the drive back we saw our first hare around mile 47 or 48. It appeared too small to be a Tundra Hare and as we drove on and their number increased I assumed they were Showshoe Hares based on size and the guide info that Tundra Hares are mostly solitary. Between mile 48 and 45 we probably saw 50 hares with 20 or more visible at once. Only one held still long enough for a good picture even when we approached slowly. We hoped for some predator activity due to the available prey but had no luck. The lone cow moose was in the same pond with better lighting this time so we stopped again. Our last mammal of the day was a beaver in a roadside pond a few miles out of Nome.



Sunday we were on the road by 8:30 taking the Teller Road NW out of Nome to the coastal native village of Teller 72 miles away. This landscape was more open, not quite as green with more rolling hills and fewer jagged ridges. We took a detour of Glacial Creek Road and ended up at some wind turbines with a commanding view of Nome below. All of the community's electrical power comes from wind, solar, and some large gas powered generators. We encountered a large musk ox bull on the road and later descending from a pass my heart jumped as I saw a fox but was bummed to realize it was a red fox, not the arctic fox I had been hoping for. We stopped at a number of bridges to watch the spawning salmon. Some rivers had only a few, but others were crowded with fish struggling to make it upstream to their birthplaces. Climbing a hill after one such river we saw what proved to be a bull moose on the road ahead. When we got closer we noticed two other cow moose a hundred yards behind him. We watched them for several minutes trotting over the undulating tundra which is so difficult for us to navigate on foot.



For many years Teller has been a true subsistence village but that is changing now and it is hard to know if that is for the better or not. The guidebook directed us not to turn off the main road or to take pictures of the people and town. We went directly to the spit that jutted into the sea only 55 miles from Russian soil. We were there to see seals and were pleasantly surprised when Emily found a spotted seal pup on the beach that patiently let us take its picture, but we never sighted any in the water. It was so cold and windy that when we dipped our fingers into the Bering Sea it didn't feel that cold!



A few miles out of town a large brown spot caught my eye on a patch of snow. Apparently the musk ox wool works so well they have to cool themselves off on 50 degree days by napping in the snow. We reached Nome before 7:00 and hit the grocery store for microwaveable dinners that don't merit comment. After eating, we made the most of the remaining daylight by driving 37 miles down the Council Road. Most of that stretch follows the coast along Safety Sound where water is on both sides of the road and the narrow strip of land is lined with scattered homes. It is supposed to be great range for arctic fox but despite cruising that stretch 4 times during our stay we struck out. We did see three more moose just as we were leaving town that evening—the third time in two days we had seen a group of three.



At the Safety Sound bridge we saw what was presumably a spotted seal surface, but he wouldn't hold still long enough for a picture. We stopped at mile 30 to see the Train to Nowhere exhibit which was pretty cool—the rusted out remains of a few locomotives for a train line never completed to Council a century ago. We didn't see voles or ground squirrels as others have reported.

We were up early again on our last morning in Nome to explore the full length of the Council Road. The only mammals for the first 30 miles were a herd of 25-30 musk ox that had been down on the beach the night before but were up on a ridge on the other side of the road this morning. The weather had turned against us the last morning and the temperature was in the mid 40's with a biting wind and incessant light rain. We crossed the bridge at the end of the sound over to the community of Solomon which I think had two deserted decaying homes and 3 more modern ones including one with its own solar panels on the roof. As we followed the river inland my daughter spotted a beaver swimming upstream and a couple miles later I noted a grizzly sow with twins on the other side of the river. They were in no mood for pictures and took off quickly into the brush. The second half of the council road may have been my favorite section of the Nome road system. We rose thousands of feet into the clouds as the road gave endless views that begged for something like a wolverine. I was surprised to find a lone bull caribou in one of the river bottoms. We had expected to see some domesticated reindeer on one of the other roads but caribou are very rare in the summer.



Coming down from the pass we moved on into the Taiga or Boreal Forest and the road ended at a salmon filled river with the village of Council only accessible by boat or jacked up vehicles. We watched the salmon, killed mosquitos, and were thoroughly entertained watching a jacked up old van navigate the crossing. After a couple of days with seeing just a handful of trees other than those planted in Nome, we were appreciative even of scrawny black spruce forests. Our drive back yielded a bald eagle and a curious spotted seal poking its head up at Safety Sound.



Mammal Species List: (10 total—2 lifers)

Arctic Ground Squirrel (10+)

Red Squirrel (Kincaid Park in Anchorage)

Snowshoe Hare (40-50)

American Beaver (2)

Moose (12)

Caribou (1)

Musk Ox (60-80)

Red Fox (1)

Grizzly Bear (3)

Spotted Seal (2)

Birds of Note:

Bald Eagle (3)

Sandhill Crane (14)

Tundra Swan (2)

Willow Ptarmigan (30+)

Many others...