

Notes on Mammal Sightings in Alaska
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In April 2022 with Chris Biles, I visited Alaska on a long-anticipated trip, postponed by Covid from 2021. It was worth the wait; iconic wildlife watching experiences amid truly dramatic landscapes.

Given a plethora of on-line resources, especially Alaska.org <https://www.alaska.org/> and a number of excellent reports available on Mammalwatching.com, I didn't immediately write up my notes. However, now that I'm several months older, and possibly wiser, I have realised that things *have* changed in Alaska since some older trip reports were published. Most noticeably, the impact of Covid, and, especially, its aftermath. As elsewhere, Alaska is suffering supply chain issues, labour shortage and reduced services, especially in remoter areas. For the visitor, this means less choice.

Things will doubtless bounce back, and possibly relatively quickly, but in areas we travelled several well-established businesses did not look likely to re-open anytime soon, if at all. I have therefore included details of (good value) places we stayed in and noted a few decent restaurants, which are particularly thin on the ground, (accordingly, expect some long seating times – of up to an hour!).

Our visit began in **Anchorage**, prior to heading south to **Seward** and on to **Homer**, subsequently returning to Anchorage as a stopover to connect with flights to **Nome** and our final stop, **Barrow**. Most notably, we didn't include **Denali**. The issue of access, due to the Pretty Rocks mudslide, meant a change of plan. I understand that the situation at Denali will likely persist into the Summer of 2024, when construction of a new road bridge is due to be completed. Until then, access will be limited to mile 43 of the park (the half way point). As a number of the most spectacular sights in Denali are currently off-limits local advice is, ideally, book one's trip once full access is resumed.

The following notes summarise briefly what we saw and details of location (given our no-show at Denali we substituted this with more time exploring the Kenai Peninsula). As I tend to look at and record *anything* that moves, a list of the non-mammalian life recorded is at the end of these notes.

We arrived during a long, dry spell in Alaska. Perhaps, because of these conditions, we were lucky to encounter very few biting insects, and only in one or two southern localities. Our visit also coincided with several salmon runs, with evidence of bear activity plain to see on many riverbanks.



ANCHORAGE

A reliable site for **black bear** lies just north of Anchorage, at **Eagle River Nature Centre** half an hour out of the city (take the Glenn Hwy). We missed a mother and cub, frequenting a small meadow 800 meters from the reception building by a few, frustrating minutes. Three **North American red squirrels** were the only mammals seen. Two were also at **Westchester Lagoon** earlier in the day.

Just south of Anchorage, on the New Seward Hwy is **Potter Marsh**. We had a female **moose** here. The site was very dry when we visited. There are several bat boxes here. If visiting late in the evening, with the car park is closed, there is another pull-in further south alongside the highway.

Beluga Point is at milepost 110.5 on the Seward Highway and 6.5 miles south of the Anchorage on the spectacular Turnagain Arm. The movements of **beluga** appear to be seasonally-biased with late Summer offering a slightly better chance (coinciding with the Chinook salmon run). Numbers of both species are most likely declining. Beluga are best looked for on an incoming tide along the far edge of the Arm, where the waters are deeper. If beluga proves elusive, as it was for us, turn 180 degrees and scan the cliffs. We saw a herd of **Dall's sheep** carefully treading their way along the grassy cliffs. If not present, try the next pull-in along Turnagain Arm, at **Windy Corner**, Mile 106.

Many of the accommodation options in Anchorage proved expensive so we used the Merrill Field Motel. [Address](#): 420 Sitka St, Anchorage, AK 99501 [Phone](#): [+1 907-276-4547](tel:+1907-276-4547). It is a no-frills establishment and to prolong one's life do check the electrics before use. However, the staff are friendly and obliging and the Inn runs a free shuttle to and from Ted Stevens International. On several occasions when we were without a rental car that saved us a number of \$30USD taxi trips. The [Rustic Goat](#), junction of Northern Lights and Turnagain looked good. Book ahead. We didn't!

SEWARD

Much emphasis, rightly, is placed on Seward for its access to Kenai Fjords and the pelagic options it affords, but, if you've time, and the weather is good, take the strenuous four-to-six-hour mountain hike to the Harding Ice Field, accessed from Exit Glacier National Park. It's a fantastic experience. The Park entrance is on Exit Glacier Road (on the right as you enter Seward from the north). We stayed just off this road at Resurrection River Rentals [Address](#): 31776 Bronze Ave, Seward (907) 491-0432. Highly recommended self-catering units with a **moose** family in the garden, common **North American red squirrels** and (distant) views of **mountain goats** browsing the mountainsides.

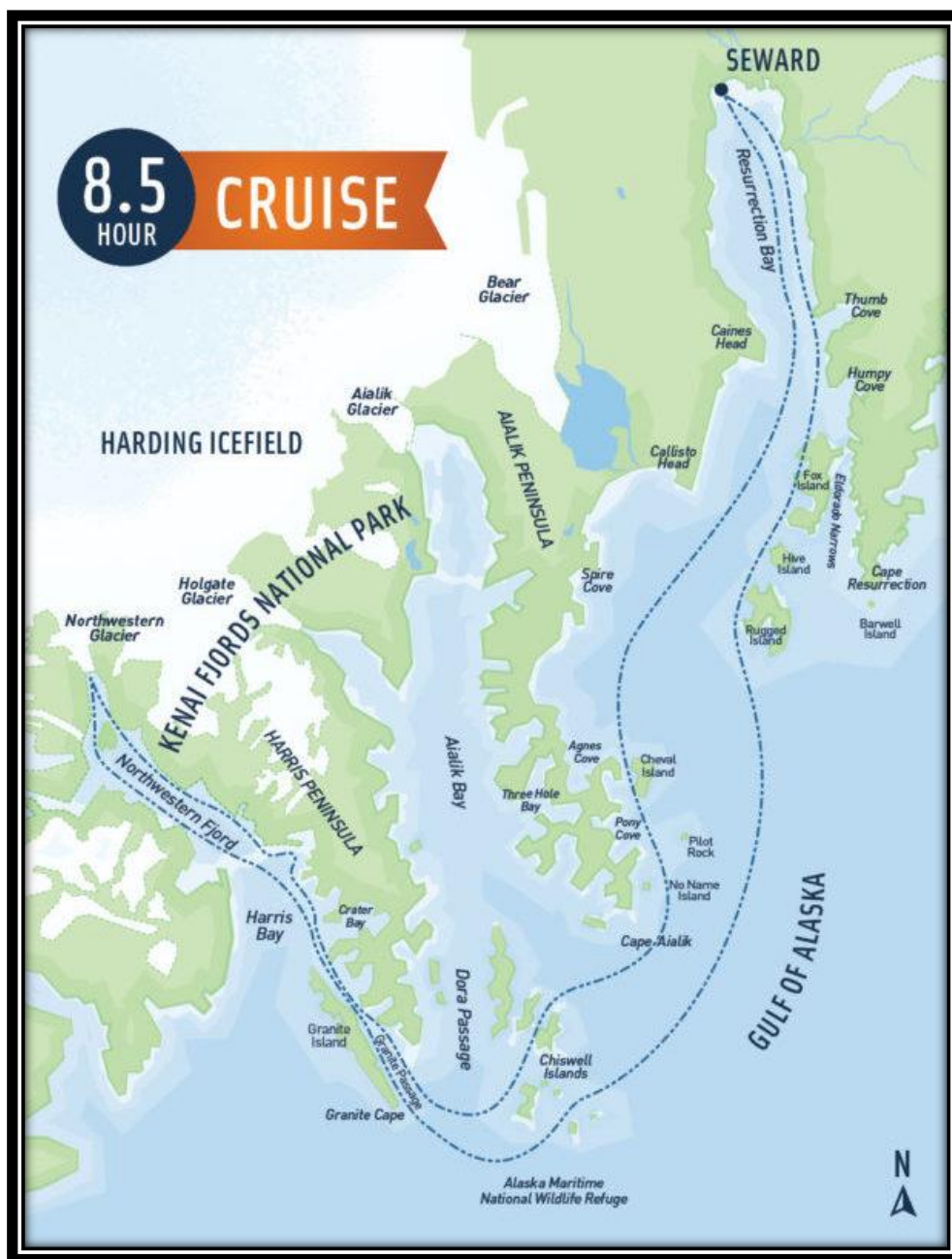
Mammal activity was quiet during the initial ascent to the **Harding Ice Field** but at about the half-way point there is an obvious flat, rocky viewpoint overlooking **Exit Glacier**. Totally unfazed by a throng of hikers, **hoary marmots** were evident from this point onward. Someone saw me looking excitedly at them (c'mon it was my first ever marmot!) and told me a **black bear** had been seen on the ridge above the icefield. An adrenaline-fuelled ascent found me, shortly thereafter scanning the ridge, literally praying, when a young black bear hove into view. Wow! It descended to the valley, which should have crossed precisely with Chris' arrival, but he never saw it, only two small, unidentified **rodents**. I understand that the hike is a regular spotting point for **mountain goat** too.

We booked a cruise in Kenai Fjords National Park with Major Marine Tours [\(907\) 224-8030](tel:9072248030). I had booked with them for the erstwhile 2021 trip and they'd been quick to process a full refund. They run a Northwest Fjords 8.5hr Wildlife Cruise that travels the furthest into Kenai Fjords and they use a small boat. There were perhaps fifteen of us on board. We saw **sea otter**, up to four **humpback whales**, **harbour seals** and **Steller's sea-lion**, the latter only at haul outs on the Chiswell Islands, on the return leg. The captain and crew were knowledgeable and made a concerted effort to locate requested species (OK, I admit, I was looking for birds). Despite 'Orca' being the name of the boat

encounters with this species are becoming less frequent and we saw none. Mid-May to mid-June offers the best chance, when the resident population is bolstered by the arrival of transient **orcas**.

I had pre-booked a second cruise, for the following day, which was sunny and calm, but nine hours at sea is not for everyone and you have to respect that. However, if your time allows, I would opt for a second outing, as an insurance against bad weather and/or for those missing species. As well as orca, **harbour and Dall's porpoise** and **Pacific white-sided dolphins** are all realistic possibilities.

Chinooks Seafood and Grill is a *very* popular place to eat. If lucky enough to be seated overlooking the harbour, mammal watching may continue well beyond one's entrée. **Sea otter** and **harbour seal** pop up close to the harbour wall and one evening a family of four **North American river otters** glided past, presumably from the lake in the **Benny Benson Memorial Park** across the road.



Cruise Route Kenai Fjords

HOMER

We stayed at the Land's End Resort [Address: 4786 Homer Spit Rd, Phone: +1 907-235-0400](#). Request a room with a balcony view of Kachemak Bay and Kachemak Bay State Park. We visited **The Carl E. Wynn Nature Centre**, a 140-acre preserve on a bluff 1,200 feet above the bay. Here we saw more **North American red squirrels**, a **North American porcupine** and, thanks to Chris's heat scope, a **red-backed vole**, which, once spotted, kindly scurried across the path. Later, I was drawn to an area of thick brush and the loud alarm calls of various songbirds. I arrived too late to identify the cause, only the long grasses being parted by a mammal, running quickly away from the scene.

Often cited as the best place to eat in Homer, Fat Olives is located in a former garage on Ohlson Lane. If staying on Homer Spit, La Beleine at the end of Homer Spit Road enjoys very good reviews.

We chose Homer because of its relative proximity to Soldotna. This town has an airfield where we boarded a Cessna for a flight across lower Cook Inlet, which has the world's highest concentration of **grizzly bear**. After a twenty-minute flight we descended to a beach (where several light aircraft were already present). Seven grizzly bears could be seen spread out along the shoreline and after landing we spent time with a mother and her cub. It's not unreasonable to consider these fly-in encounters tantamount to, 'canned bear' viewing. However, despite the expense, \$450USD, with Natron Air [Address 619 Funny River Rd, Soldotna Phone: +1 907-262-8440](#) to have come to Alaska and not to have seen one doesn't - quite literally - bear thinking about. Moreover, to be within feet of such a powerfully impressive animal (and not to have my life flash before me!) was incredible.

NOME

Two degrees off the Arctic Circle, we were met in Nome with surprisingly warm, sunny weather. There were even sunbathers on Nome beach. Only when a storm rolled in on the final day in Nome did we get a taster for what could have been! Airport Pizza, 406 Bering St, has good value food but is not open every day. Then it was a case of Subway, opposite our very good Hotel, **Aurora Hotel & Suites**, [Address: 302 Front St Phone: +1 907-443-3838](#). I had also pre-booked a hire car through the hotel to travel Nome's three-pronged road system, namely the **Teller, Kougarak and Council** roads, which are in good condition and sealed nearer town. Ensure a full tank before setting off.

I highly recommend the Alaska Dept of Fish and Game free downloadable guide to wildlife viewing in and around Nome: https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/viewing/pdfs/nome_guidebook.pdf

The Kougarak Road begins at the edge of the Bering Sea and heads north for 86 miles. We didn't get nearly that far, stopping at the **Golden Gate Pass** at Mile 53, there being far too much to see, albeit mostly avian. The route bisects the impressive Kigluaik Range with many river crossings and glacially-carved valleys. Mammals seen: **muskox**, (on the mountain at the dividing range, Mile 53) and, at the start of the journey a **least weasel** ran across the road.

Council Road traverses several types of habitats along the Seward Peninsula, from beaches and wetlands, tundra meadows and, ultimately boreal forest. It runs for 72 miles but reflecting many attractions along the route, we drove to a point just beyond **Solomon** before retracing our steps. Mammals seen: **muskox** (especially at Hastings Creek, Mile 9.4 where there is a broad, grassy valley bottom), a **moose and her calf** and (you couldn't script it) a **grizzly bear**. These animals seen along the **Solomon River**, c. Mile 39. The bear was seen again, very close to the road on our return leg, having crossed the river. With the sudden appearance of our vehicle, it disappeared into cover. **Arctic ground squirrel** was present at the **Trains to Nowhere**, but I regret no sign of **singing vole**.



Teller Road also runs for 72 miles, NW from Nome to the Inupiat village of Teller through rolling upland tundra meadows. It was the only one of the three routes we completed. Mammals seen: **Arctic ground squirrel** and **North American beaver** (both from the **Sinuk River Bridge**, Mile 26). Watching a pair of gyrfalcons (a *really* good bird) at Mile 56.9 **Bluestone River Bridge**, I turned to find an **Arctic fox** watching me from just ten feet away. I was so captivated I forgot to take out my camera! At **Teller** we drove onto the shingle spit where several **spotted seals** showed well. A local arrived on his ATV to check us out, but seeing us seal watching, he waved and drove back to town.

Barrow

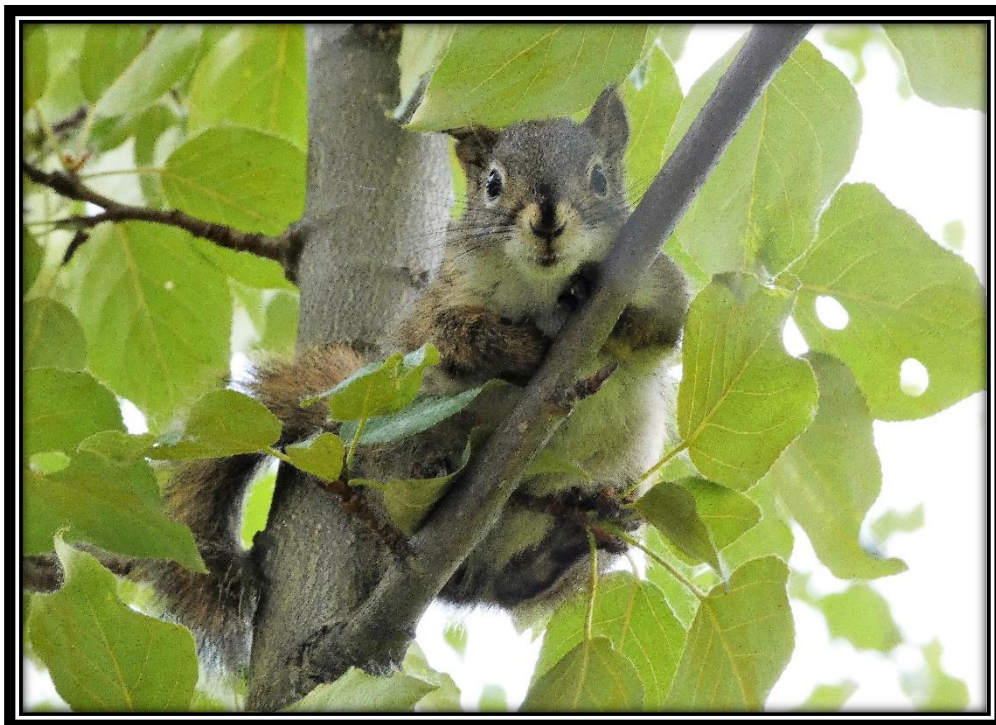
220 miles inside the Arctic Circle, Barrow, or more correctly, Utqiagvik's decidedly post-apocalyptic look was tempered by yet more sunny, still weather. There was no remnant ice or snow on the tundra, (just disconcerted-looking snowy owls). Only with the aid of binoculars could distant sea ice be seen. One afternoon, the temperature reached 18 degrees centigrade. We stayed at the King Eider Inn [Address: 1752 Ahkovak St](#) [Phone: +1 907-852-4700](#) just opposite the airport, which was very good and through which I had pre-booked a hire car. We ate at the homely Osaka Restaurant, 980 Stevenson St. I didn't expect too many new mammals but I did add **brown lemming**, seen well crossing Ahkovak St from **Barrow Cemetery** and our final animal of the trip, a **ringed seal** that popped up to get a closer look at us off **Arigllvik Beach**, where they are regular.



Chukchi Sea from Barrow



Moose Calf, Resurrection River Rentals, Seward



North American Red Squirrel, Anchorage



Sea Otter, Seward Harbour



Hoary Marmot, Harding Ice Field Trail, Seward



Harbour Seals, Kenai Fiords NW Fjords Cruise



Steller's Sea Lion, Kenai Fiords NW Fjords Cruise



Grizzly Bear and Cub, Cook Inlet



Adult Male Grizzly Bear, Cook Inlet



Muskox, Council Road, Nome



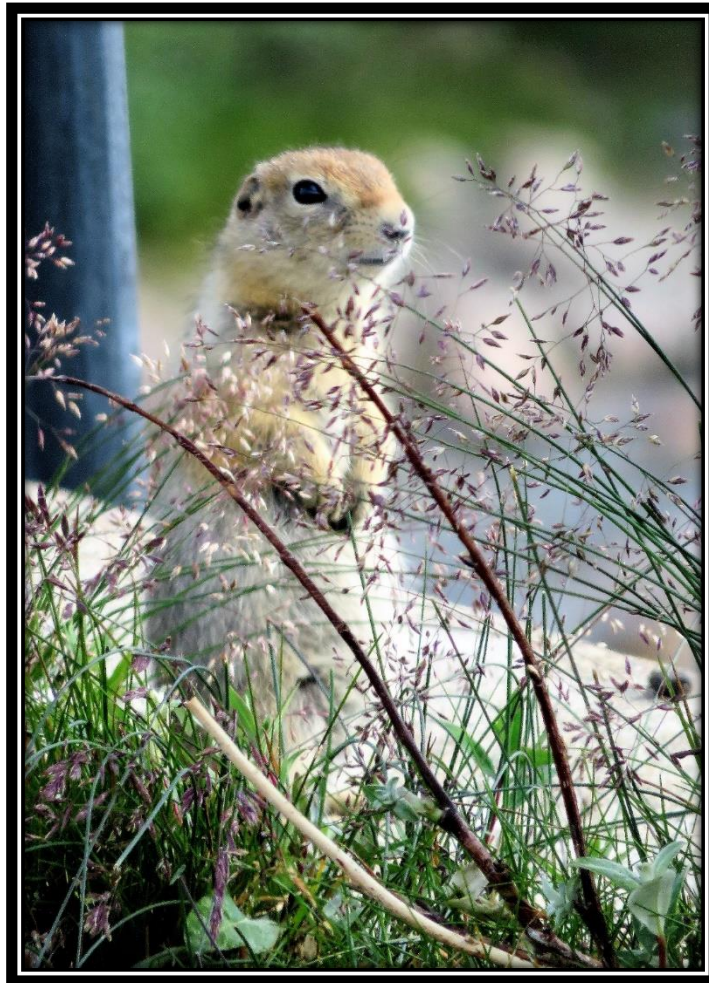
Muskox, Hastings Creek, Council Road, Nome



North American Porcupine, the Carl E. Wynn Nature Centre, Homer



North American Beaver, Sinuk River Bridge, Teller Hwy, Nome



Arctic Ground Squirrel, Sinuk River Bridge, Teller Hwy, Nome



Spotted or Larga Seal, Teller Spit, Teller



Beluga Point, Turnagain Arm



Harding Ice Field, Seward



Exit Glacier, Seward



Mt. Osborn, Kougatok Road from Grand Central River Bridge

MAMMAL LIST

22 species seen

Northern Red-backed Vole
 North American Brown Lemming
 American Red Squirrel
 Arctic Ground Squirrel
 Hoary Marmot
 American Beaver
 North American Porcupine
 Arctic Fox
 North American River Otter
 Sea Otter
 Least Weasel
 Black Bear
 Grizzly Bear
 Mountain Goat
 Muskox
 Dall's Sheep
 Moose
 Harbour Seal
 Spotted Seal
 Ringed Seal
 Steller's Sea Lion
 Humpback Whale

BIRD LIST

Ducks, Geese and Waterfowl – Greater White-fronted, Brent, Cackling and Canada Goose. Trumpeter and Tundra Swan. Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked, Greater Scaup, Common Eider, Harlequin Duck, Surf and Black Scoter, Long-tailed, Barrow's and Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser.

Grouse, pheasants and allies – Willow, Rock

Grebes – Red-necked

Cranes – Sandhill

Lapwings and Plovers – American Golden, Semipalmated

Sandpipers and allies – Hudsonian Godwit, Black Turnstone, Dunlin. Baird's, White-rumped, Pectoral, Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers. Short and Long-billed Dowitchers. Wilson's Snipe, Greater Yellowlegs. Red-necked and Grey Phalarope.

Skuas – Pomarine, Arctic, Long-tailed

Auks, Guillemots and Puffins – Common, Thick-billed and Pigeon Guillemot. Marbled, Kittlitz's and Ancient Murrelet. Parakeet, Rhinoceros and Crested Auklet.

Gulls, Terns and Skimmers – Black-legged Kittiwake. Bonaparte's, Short-billed Mew, North American Herring, Slaty-backed, Glaucous-winged, Glaucous and Thayer's Gull. Arctic Tern

Divers – Red-throated, Pacific, Yellow-billed

Northern Storm-petrels – Leach's

Shearwaters and Petrels – Sooty

Cormorants and Shags – Double-crested, Red-faced and Pelagic
Hawks, Eagles and Kites – Bald Eagle, Rough-legged Buzzard
Owls – Snowy, Short-eared
Kingfishers – Belted
Woodpeckers – American Three-toed, Downy
Falcons and Caracaras – Gyrfalcon
Tyrant Flycatchers – Olive-sided, Alder, Say’s Phoebe
Shrikes – Northern
Crows, Jays and Magpies – Canada and Steller’s Jay. Black-billed Magpie. North-western Crow.
Common Raven
Tits, Chickadees and Titmice – Black-capped, Chestnut-backed and Boreal
Swallows – Tree, Violet-green, Cliff
Leaf Warblers – Arctic
Kinglets – Ruby-crowned
Nuthatches – Red-breasted
Dippers – American
Thrushes and allies – Gray-cheeked, Swanson’s, Hermit and Varied. American Robin.
Wagtails and Pipits – Red-throated, American
Finches, Euphonias and allies – Common Redpoll, Pine Siskin
Longspurs and Snow Buntings – Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting
New World Sparrows – Fox, American Tree, White-crowned, Golden Crowned, Savanna, Song and Lincoln’s Sparrow. Dark-eyed Junco
Troupials and allies – Rusty Blackbird
New World Warblers – Northern Waterthrush. Orange-crowned, Yellow, Blackpoll, Yellow-rumped and Wilson’s Warbler



Bald Eagle, Homer Spit

Other Notable Species

Fish - Sockeye, Coho, Chum and Pink Salmon. Arctic Grayling, Dolly Varden

Odonata - Lake Darner, Sedge Darner (Common Hawker), Northern Bluet (Common Blue Damsel)

Lepidoptera – Arctic and Mormon Fritillary. Western and Arctic White. Palaeno and Hecla Sulphur. Small Apollo. Pale Beauty, Dingy Culworm, Wood Tiger, Double-banded and Variable Carpet, Fernald's helcystogramma, Triangle Plume, Spotted Tussock, Satin Grass Veneer



Arctic Fritillary, Harding Ice Field



Lake Darner, Potter Marsh