

GRAND ALASKA: GAMBELL/NOME PRE-TRIP

JUNE 2 – 10, 2009

LEADERS:

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GAMBELL/NOME, ALASKA TOUR BIRDLIST

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(LEADERS: Kevin Zimmer, Dave Wolf & Louise Zemaitis)

Our Gambell-Nome adventure started with an evening excursion around Anchorage. Sadly, there were no staked-out Boreal Owl nests available, but we were treated to a most cooperative Northern Saw-whet Owl, as well as stellar views of a roadside porcupine and moose. Late the next morning we were off to Nome, and with virtually no delay, we were soon winging our way toward St. Lawrence Island. By mid-afternoon our Bering Air flight was touching down on the airstrip at Gambell. The short hike from the airstrip to the lodge produced the usual Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings in the near boneyard, and then it was time to get down to the business of baggage distribution and getting settled into our rooms. Once these mundane orders of business were taken care of, we set out on our first hike to the northeast marsh and the far boneyard. Other than acquainting everyone with the infamous Gambell gravel, this hike also resulted in nice studies of Pectoral Sandpiper and White Wagtail, scope views of a Rough-legged Hawk that was nesting on the side of the mountain, and good fly-by views of Pomarine Jaeger and a 2nd-cycle Slaty-backed Gull. A hike along the base of the mountain eventually produced an elusive, but brightly-colored Eyebrowed Thrush which had been found by other birders prior to our arrival. Unfortunately, the thrush gave us the slip before everyone could secure good views.

This was just the first of our many excursions, and over the next four days we settled into a routine of daily checks of the near and far boneyards, the base of the mountain, the northeast marsh, the airport pond, and the boatyards, punctuated by numerous sea watches of varying duration. On Day 2 we discovered a vagrant Black-headed Gull and our only Common Ringed-Plover of the trip in the northeast marsh. Day 3 started with a thrush that we jumped in the near boneyard. After flushing it a few times, we finally got it to sit still long enough to confirm that it was another Eyebrowed Thrush (distinctly duller in plumage than the one we had seen the first day). This time, after some work, we all secured great views. Not long after, we turned up a male Bar-tailed Godwit in the boatyard (joined later in the day by two more males), and this beautiful bird was more than cooperative. We had shared our gull, godwit, and thrush discoveries with the other birders on the island, and so it was fitting when, late in the afternoon on Day 3, we were on the receiving end of a radio call from the WINGS group alerting us that a female Rustic Bunting (found days before our arrival, but missing in action ever since) had been refound in the far boneyard. Jon and his group helped keep an eye on the bird until everyone from our group had arrived, which was a great help. The sharply-patterned little stray from Asia cooperated by methodically working the same small patch of real estate as a more conspicuous pair of Snow Buntings, and soon the assembled masses of birders were all treated to scope-filling views. The bunting was even a lifer for Louise and a North American lifer for Dave!

After soaking in the bunting, we walked over to the northeast marsh and started our search for a Red-throated Pipit that had been reported. An initial scan failed to reveal the bird, so I tried walking the grassy slopes above the marsh. Almost immediately, a pipit flushed from the grass and lit on a rock some 50 meters away. It was the Red-throated, a somewhat dull-plumaged female, but a good bird nonetheless. Just as I signaled the group to join me, the bird flew again, but this time back into the main marsh. After this scenario was repeated a few more times, we were finally rewarded with good looks for all. Our final Asiatic vagrant came in the form of at least 2 male White-winged Scoters of the northeast-Asian subspecies *stejnegeri*. They were part of a group of 15–20 White-winged Scoters that were hanging together off the south beach all week. We made the long ATV-excursion down there on our last full day, and were lucky to have a couple of the scoters come close enough for certain identification.

Of course, Gambell is about much more than just Siberian vagrants. Sea watches from Northwest Point are always a high point of birding here, and this year was no different. The daily commute of hundreds of thousands of alcids past the Point is spectacle enough to justify the trip, but it is accentuated by the excitement that comes with never knowing what will fly by next. Migrant waterfowl, loons, and shorebirds were uncharacteristically absent this year, although we did see multiple groups of King Eiders, more Black Guillemots than usual, and a sprinkling of all three jaegers along with some Pacific, Red-throated, and Yellow-billed loons. The sheer numbers of Crested Auklets, Least Auklets, and murrelets of both species was, as always, staggering, and we never ceased to be amused by the fact that nearly every flock of murrelets seemed to be led by a single Horned or Tufted puffin. We also witnessed plenty of whale activity this year—mostly a succession of gray whales, but with a few humpbacks thrown in for good measure. As always, Dovekie proved to be our toughest alcid to get, in large part because persistent fog obscured the mountain slopes during the early morning periods when the relatively few breeding Dovekies sit out on the rocks amidst thousands of more common auklets. Thanks to some excellent spotting from participant Al Mercer, who picked two of these needles out of the haystack of Crested, Least, and Parakeet auklets (not to mention the fog and light drizzle of rain), we were treated to prolonged scope studies of a pair of Dovekies.

A trip to Gambell is always memorable, as much for its glimpse into Bering Sea culture and the adventure of birding one of America's few remaining frontiers as for any birds seen. Although overcast skies and fog combined to prevent the usual views of the snow-capped peaks of the Russian Far East glimmering in the distance, just knowing that we were some 40-odd miles from mainland Asia lent an exotic quality to our experience. It will also be hard to forget the strips of blackened seal and walrus drying on traditional drying racks, ATVs humming across the landscape, seemingly endless treks through soft gravel, stubbing our toes on walrus skulls while birding the boneyards, and, of course, "Ya wanna buy some carvings?"

Nome was a different world, with its bustling, frontier atmosphere, and a network of fabulous roads penetrating a variety of tundra habitats. Bird diversity was much higher here, and mammals were much more in evidence. This latter fact was highlighted by our

first birding drive out the Council Road, which treated us to a fantastic grizzly bear experience. The bear, which appeared to be a three-year-old (adult sized, but seemingly out on his own for the first time), was less concerned with our presence than it was interested in an unoccupied home near Cape Nome. We watched as the bear alternately foraged, groomed, scratched, performed a pole dance on a telephone pole next to the house, played with a board while rolling on its back, and attempted to tear a utility box off the side of the house! Moose, reindeer and musk ox were also tallied (the latter in increasingly impressive numbers) during our days here, as was a particularly fearless red-backed vole that repeatedly foraged in front of us before ultimately darting right between Dave's feet on its way to cover. Our birding at Nome was equally noteworthy, and included 4 lovely Emperor Geese at Safety Lagoon (a relief after missing the species at Gambell); a displaying male Bluethroat; both Rock and Willow ptarmigan; a Gyrfalcon watching us as we scoped the downy chicks in its nest; gorgeous Black-bellied, American Golden, and Pacific Golden plovers in high breeding plumage; Aleutian Terns; Northern Shrike; Rusty Blackbird; abundant Arctic Warblers; and a couple of lively Northern Wheatears. Best of all, our trek for the Bristle-thighed Curlew paid off with scope views of a pair of what is one of the rarest breeding shorebirds on the continent.

A trip to this region always highlights the ephemeral, transient nature of birding in the arctic and subarctic regions. Rare birds arrive without warning and leave without notice; conditions are optimal one moment and inhospitable the next. One has to admire the feathered wanderers that return again and again from more hospitable climes to fulfill their reproductive destinies in lands that can be so capriciously unpredictable and unforgiving. Seemingly fragile, always restless, they strike out each spring for this land at the edge of the Bering Sea. And each spring, we wait, anticipating their arrivals, and reveling in our unexpected discoveries. It is a drama that I look forward to repeating, year after year, with undiminished anticipation.

Itinerary:

- 6/02 - met in Anchorage, with evening owling excursion to Eagle River
- 6/03 - late morning flight to Nome, followed by flight to Gambell (arriving ca. 2:00 p.m.). Our first excursion was a hike to the marsh at the NE corner of Troutman Lake, followed by a check of the far boneyards, the base of the mountain to the north, and the circular boneyard.
- 6/04 - Gambell
- 6/05 - Gambell
- 6/06 - Gambell
- 6/07 - Morning birding at Gambell, followed by lunch and return flight to Nome (entire group & bags on same plane). Following check-in at the hotel, we had a late afternoon excursion out the Council Road to Safety Lagoon and Safety Sound.
- 6/08 - Morning until mid-afternoon birding along the Teller Road to Woolley Lagoon (MP 40), where we had our picnic lunch. Late afternoon to mid-evening along the Council Road as far as the East Fork of the Solomon River.

- 6/09 - All day on the Kougarok Road, including a successful hike for the Bristle-thighed Curlew.
- 6/10 - Short a.m. trip out Council Road to the Nome River Mouth and Hastings Creek, returning to hotel by 10:30 in time to pack, check out of hotel, check in for the flight to Anchorage, and eat lunch. Flight to Anchorage left at 1:17 p.m.

Key:

- A = Anchorage (first evening excursion)
 G = Gambell
 N = Nome area
 * = heard only

Birds:

- Greater White-fronted Goose - N
Emperor Goose - N (Nice views of 4 birds at Safety Lagoon were a welcome pick-up after uncharacteristically missing them at Gambell.)
 Brant - G, N (These were all typical western birds, formerly called "Black Brant".)
 Cackling Goose - N (Birds in this region belong to the subspecies *taverneri*, which is large compared to other members of this recently split {from Canada Goose} species. They are confusingly like the *parvipes* subspecies of Canada Goose, which is not known to occur here.)
 Tundra Swan - G, N
 American Wigeon - N
 Northern Shoveler - N
 Mallard - N (Seems to be increasing in the Nome region.)
 Northern Pintail - G, N
 Green-winged Teal - N (All birds seen this year were of the widespread North American race *carolinensis*.)
 Greater Scaup - G, N
Spectacled Eider - G (1 immature male seen only by Spike.)
 Common Eider - G, N (Males of this subspecies, *v-nigrum*, differ from populations in northeastern North America by their orange [as opposed to greenish] bill.)
King Eider - G (Several small groups flying by the Point, although decidedly fewer than normal.)
 Harlequin Duck - G, N (Lots of good looks at these handsome ducks.)
 Surf Scoter - N (This is the least regular of the three scoters occurring at Nome.)
White-winged Scoter - G (We saw two subspecies: the North American breeding *deglandi*, males of which have brown flanks, an evenly sloping profile, and restricted white behind the eye; and, the northeast Asian-breeding subspecies *stejnegeri*, males of which are distinguished by black flanks, a stepped-profile to the head/bill with a prominent knob or hook at the mid point of the culmen, and more prominent white post-ocular streak.)
 Black Scoter - N

Long-tailed Duck - G, N
 Bufflehead - N (Two females at the gold dredge pond just outside of town on 6/8 were a good find. The species is very uncommon in this region.)
 Common Goldeneye - N (Very uncommon here. We had 2 males and 2 females at Safety Lagoon on 6/8.)
 Common Merganser - N (Uncommon and localized here. We had a group of 6 males and 1 female (along with a Red-breasted Merg pair for nice comparison) along the Council River on 6/8.)
 Red-breasted Merganser - G, N
Willow Ptarmigan - N (Numbers starting to come back up after a couple of down years. We had 25 on 6/8, and 15 on 6/9.)
Rock Ptarmigan - N (Ditto the previous species. We had 3+ on two different days.)
 Red-throated Loon - G, N
 Pacific Loon - G, N (Many fewer loons passing through than at this same time last year.)
Yellow-billed Loon - G, N
 Red-necked Grebe - N
 Northern Fulmar - G
 Pelagic Cormorant - G, N
 Northern Harrier - N
 Rough-legged Hawk - G, N (Including a nest-building bird along the mountain at Gambell.)
 Golden Eagle - N
 Merlin - N (1 along the Council Road on 6/7)
Gyrfalcon - N (Scope studies of 3 downy chicks in the nest, and of one of the parents perched on a nearby cliff.)
 Peregrine Falcon - G
 Sandhill Crane - N
 Black-bellied Plover - N (4 at the only known breeding area in the Nome vicinity, and another migrant at Safety Lagoon, all on 6/8.)
 American Golden-Plover - N
 Pacific Golden-Plover - G, N
Common Ringed-Plover - G (Less evident than in past years.)
 Semipalmated Plover - G, N
 Spotted Sandpiper - N
 Wandering Tattler - N
 Whimbrel - N (The breeding subspecies at Nome is the widespread North American form *hudsonicus*.)
Bristle-thighed Curlew - N (Good studies of a pair, first seen (and heard) distantly in flight just 12 minutes into our hike! At the 25-minute mark we were all studying the birds on the ground through our scopes, right up to the point where a scuffle broke out between one of the curlews and a nearby Whimbrel. The Whimbrel won out, and both Bristle-thigheds ended up flying hundreds of meters away, but not without showing off their highly contrasting buffy rumps and tails. We were back at the vans in 69 minutes and change, probably a record! This is one of the

rarest and most localized of all North American breeding birds, and one that is easily missed.)

Bar-tailed Godwit - G

Ruddy Turnstone - N

Red Knot - N (1 at Safety Lagoon on 6/8)

Semipalmated Sandpiper - N

Western Sandpiper - G, N

Pectoral Sandpiper - G

Rock Sandpiper - G (Subspecies *tschuktschorum*, which is dingier and darker than the nominate form that breeds in the Pribilofs.)

Dunlin - G, N

Long-billed Dowitcher - G, N

Wilson's Snipe - N

Red-necked Phalarope - G, N

Red Phalarope - G (Only a single group of 3 that flew past during one of our seawatches. As with loons and waterfowl, there were very few migrant shorebirds moving through this year.)

Black-headed Gull - G (A 1st-cycle bird that we first found at the northeast corner of Troutman Lake on 6/4 was still present on 6/5.)

Mew Gull - A, N

Herring Gull - G, N (Entirely of the Siberian race *vegae*, treated by some as a distinct species, and then called "Vega Gull" or "Vega Herring Gull".)

Slaty-backed Gull - G (One 2nd-cycle bird over Troutman Lake on 6/3, with 2 adults and another [or the same] 2nd-cycle bird and a possible 1st-cycle bird at the Point on 6/6.)

Glaucous Gull - G, N

Black-legged Kittiwake - G

Aleutian Tern - N (Nearly missing in action this year. They finally settled in at traditional nesting sites the day after the tour concluded, but we at least managed a few birds between Solomon and the Nome River Mouth. Spike's #700 – I tried to warn you Spike...

Arctic Tern - N

Pomarine Jaeger - G

Parasitic Jaeger - G, N

Long-tailed Jaeger - G, N (always one of the treats of birding Nome)

Dovekie - G (Thanks to a great spot by Al, who managed to pick out that pair on the mountain slope despite the fog and drizzle. We enjoyed nice studies for several minutes.)

Common Murre - G

Thick-billed Murre - G

Black Guillemot - G (More than usual. Typically outnumbered by Pigeon Guillemots here by at least a 20:1 ratio.)

Pigeon Guillemot - G (Fewer than normal.)

Parakeet Auklet - G

Least Auklet - G

Crested Auklet - G

Horned Puffin - G
Tufted Puffin - G
 Rock Pigeon - A
 Short-eared Owl - G, N (It was a big year for these birds at Nome, with at least 12 birds seen on 6/8.)
Northern Saw-whet Owl - A (Wonderful studies of an obliging bird peering out of its' nest at Eagle River.)
 Say's Phoebe - N
Northern Shrike - N
 Common Raven - G, N
 Tree Swallow - N
 Bank Swallow - N
 Cliff Swallow - N
Bluethroat - N (Prolonged studies of a stunning males along the Kougarok Road. This bird is just too cool!)
Northern Wheatear - G, N (Nice looks at a couple of different birds.)
 Gray-cheeked Thrush - N (Always amazingly common here.)
Swainson's Thrush - G (A rarity here [and only the 2nd our group has recorded]. We had nice studies in the near boneyard on 6/6.)
Eye-browed Thrush - G (We saw 2 birds: the first was a very bright male along the base of the mountain on 6/3. This bird was known to be present prior to our arrival. We discovered a second, much duller bird in the near boneyard on 6/5 that we saw again on 6/7. Everyone had nice studies of this bird.)
 American Robin - N
Eastern Yellow Wagtail - N
White Wagtail - G (Increasingly difficult in recent years; seems to be a declining species in North America. Despite this, I'd say that we had more quality views of this often elusive species on this year's trip than any trip in the past ten years!), N (A single bird flying past the hotel along the waterfront on 6/7 was the first we've seen in Nome [not including Teller] in several years.)
Red-throated Pipit - G (A female in the northeast marsh was seen nicely.)
 American Pipit - G*, N (The Gambell bird was unseen, but sounded like mainland *pacificus*; the birds at Nome were definitely of the subspecies *pacificus*, one of the widespread subspecies that breed in North America.)
 Orange-crowned Warbler - N
 Yellow Warbler - N
 Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler - N (1 or 2 birds seen near the Kuzitrin River on 6/9 – uncommon and local breeders in the Nome area.)
 Blackpoll Warbler - N
 Northern Waterthrush - N
 Wilson's Warbler - N
 American Tree Sparrow - N
 Savannah Sparrow - N
 Fox Sparrow - G (Looked to be subspecies *unalaschensis*, which breeds in sw Alaska, and which is part of the "Sooty Fox Sparrow" group), N (Subspecies *zaboria*; one of the "Red Fox Sparrow" types.)

White-crowned Sparrow - N

Golden-crowned Sparrow - N

Lapland Longspur - G, N

Rustic Bunting - G (A lovely female studied at length in the far boneyard on 6/5. It was first found days before our arrival, but then disappeared and was thought to have left. A North American lifer for Dave and Louise!)

Snow Bunting - G

Common Redpoll - G, N

Hoary Redpoll - G, N

Rusty Blackbird - N (Nice looks at this declining species.)

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - G, N

Tundra Vole - G, N

Red-backed Vole - N

Porcupine - A

Beaver - N

Moose - A, N

Reindeer - N

Musk Ox - N

Arctic Fox - G*

Red Fox - N

Grizzly (Brown Bear) - N

Gray Whale - G

Humpback Whale - G

Ringed Seal - G

Total = 14 species