

# **ALASKA: BARROW EXTENSION**

**JUNE 24 – 27, 2010**

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**TOUR REPORT**  
**ALASKA: BARROW EXTENSION**  
**June 24–27, 2010**

**By Kevin Zimmer**

Once again, Barrow provided a fitting exclamation point to our Alaska tour season. The weather was about average, with daily temperatures ranging from 34–40° F, light winds, and only occasional light precipitation. Persistent fog did limit horizontal visibility, rendering sea-watching impossible, and making it hard to pick out any rarities amongst the common shorebirds on distant mudflats. The shore ice was still in when we went to bed the first (late) evening, but with a shift in winds, was nowhere to be seen when we awoke a few hours later! By afternoon of our first full day, the shore ice was back, although in a narrower band and more broken up than usual for this date, which diminished our chances for polar bears, and which also meant that any migrant seabirds would not be concentrated in leads along the shoreline.

This was a poor lemming year (following last year's "crash"), as was immediately apparent from the general lack of Pomarine Jaegers. Although we saw a few Poms on each of our three days, their abundance or lack thereof provides an excellent barometer of the local lemming population. Snowy Owls were hard to come by in 2009, and I anticipated problems this year, but in spite of the dearth of lemmings, Snowy Owls were present in reasonable numbers (at least 10 seen, with multiple encounters all three days and at least two active nests). As usual, the breeding cycles of the many shorebirds were in full gear, from spinning Red Phalaropes and dressy Dunlins to booming Pectoral Sandpipers and probing Long-billed Dowitchers—seldom were we out of sight of some smartly plumaged shorebird. This year there were a few elegant Sabine's Gulls and a handsome pair of Pacific Loons hanging around along the shoreline of Freshwater Lake. They all seemed to be feeding on sticklebacks that were apparently concentrated in the shallows at the edge of the ice melt. Foraging opportunities were so good that the birds appeared oblivious, or at least indifferent, to our presence, and it was hard to know which of these stunning (in full breeding plumage) species to focus on.

For all of this, when I think of Barrow, the first thing I think of is breeding-plumaged eiders. There is probably no more readily accessible location for seeing all of the eiders in full breeding plumage, and on the tundra (as opposed to only in flight) than Barrow. Each eider is spectacular in its own right, so much so that my choice for "favorite eider" often boils down to which one I've seen last. Steller's Eider and Spectacled Eider, by virtue of their relatively small ranges and rapidly declining global populations, are, arguably, the two most special and sought after of the four species, and they were certainly a focal point of our visit. We were not to be disappointed. We started off with 4 fly-by Spectacled Eiders that blasted across the Freshwater Lake road on our initial excursion. Our disappointment over this not-good-enough-to-count look soon yielded to joy when I found a pair on the ground some distance from the road. We walked close enough for good and prolonged scope studies, which meant that I slept much better that first night, just knowing that the premier glamour bird of Barrow was under our belts! While

scouting later that night, I found 3 pairs of Spectacled Eiders hanging together in the same area, as well as an adult male that seemed to be off on his own. Over the next two days, we were treated to numerous excellent views of scattered Specs along this same road, which may have represented repeat encounters with the same 7 individuals, or else, a steady turnover of new birds moving across the tundra. Regardless, we had more quality views of both males and females than in any year in recent memory, culminating in a successful stalk on our last afternoon of 3 adult males hanging together on a small pond.

It was no surprise that Spectacled Eider was voted “Favorite Bird” of the trip, although King Eider gave it a run for its money. We had individual Kings and pairs of Kings scattered across the tundra throughout our stay, and several groups of 20–50 birds moving north along the coast on our final day. But one particular male (with his largely ignored [at least by us] mate in tow) along the Gaswell Road on the morning of Day 2 was the ultimate showstopper. We had nice scope views from the road, but about half of our group patiently and successfully stalked the birds. We were rewarded with mind-blowing, walkaway studies, with the eiders still feeding after we turned and headed back to the road. The Spectacled Eider has the clear edge on rarity, novelty, and mystique, but it’s pretty hard to beat a fully adult male King Eider in all its glory! That bird has 7 colors to it, and we were close enough to see all 7 with binoculars alone!

Steller’s Eider was the last holdout of the breeding eiders (we often see Common Eiders as well, but only as migrants moving along the coast). For most of the past decade it has been the hardest eider to find on our June visits, although that disturbing trend was reversed in 2008 when we found at least 40 birds in a few days, most of them in clearly mated pairs scattered across the tundra. That population boom appears to have been only temporary, with only 3 pairs found by our 2009 group, and only 2 pairs found this year (and even then, only after much searching). Nonetheless, the pairs that we found were very cooperative, and yielded excellent scope views, allowing us to once again achieve the eider hat trick! The relative abundance of Spectacled Eiders over the past few years, and of Steller’s Eiders in 2008, combined with the generally tame demeanor of most of the individuals encountered, suggests that recent campaigns to get the local subsistence hunters to stop hunting these near-threatened birds may be having an impact.

Our optional excursion to Point Barrow did not produce a polar bear (the fog was a huge obstacle), but it did provide some fascinating insights into the whaling culture of the Inupiat people and ice-road trucking (thanks to Nathaniel for his very informative and entertaining discussions of each), as well as nice studies of Black Guillemots and the chance to pose for photos at the northernmost spot in the United States (if not the “top of the world,” at least the closest thing that one can drive to). Along the way, we enjoyed numerous hearty meals at Pepe’s (tacos on the tundra!) served up with Fran’s remembrances of Johnny Carson, and witnessed such novelties as a toilet-topped totem pole; a synthetic, blue-turf football field (featured in several recent documentaries and news stories and surely the northernmost “American football” field in the world); and an unexpected mileage post for Wall Drug!

Thanks to all of you for making this Barrow Extension extra special and a whole bunch of fun!

**Favorite Bird (as voted by the group):**

1. **Spectacled Eider**
2. **King Eider and Red Phalarope (tied)**
3. **Steller's Eider**

**Itinerary:**

6/24 - Late afternoon flight to Barrow, late evening birding on Freshwater Lake Road and the road to the Point.

6/28 - Morning, afternoon, and evening checks of all three roads, with an optional late evening Polar Bear excursion out to Point Barrow, the farthest north point in the United States.

6/29 - We birded throughout the day, taking the Freshwater Lake and Point roads to the end, and checking multiple spots at the beginning portion of the Gaswell Road. Evening flight back to Anchorage.

6/30 - flights home from Anchorage.

**Birds:**

**Greater White-fronted Goose** (*Anser albifrons*) - Unusually common and conspicuous this year (daily) including 1 bird on a nest.

**Brant** (*Branta bernicla*) - One small group feeding with Greater White-fronted Geese on Stint Pond on Day 2 was our only record. Typically, we see this species only as flocks moving along the immediate coastline.

**Tundra Swan** (*Cygnus columbianus*) - Scattered individuals and pairs seen on two of our three days.

**Green-winged Teal** (*Anas crecca carolinensis*) - 4 birds of the North American subspecies *carolinensis*, seen on the big muddy lagoon at the beginning of the Gaswell Road on Day 1 represented our only record.

**Northern Pintail** (*Anas acuta*) - Common, and seen daily, but numbers were much lower than usual.

**Greater Scaup** (*Aythya marila*) - 1 male on Day 3 was our only record.

**Steller's Eider** (*Polysticta stelleri*) - After the big resurgence in 2008 (when we saw 40+ birds), this species was once again less common than in past decades, but about par for the course compared to most recent years. We had excellent studies of two pairs, the first on the Gaswell Road, and the second on the Nunivak Road.

**Spectacled Eider** (*Somateria fischeri*) - The best year for seeing these fine birds in recent memory. We know with certainty that there were at least 7 birds seen (a lone male and 3 pairs), all on Freshwater Lake Road. We encountered several birds along that road

on each of our three days, and had multiple close approaches, including a successful stalk of three stunning adult males on our last day.

**King Eider** (*Somateria spectabilis*) - Multiple large groups moving north along the coast on Day 3 pushed our total count to over 200 seen, but the ones that we'll remember were the breeding pairs scattered over the inland ponds, particularly the elegant pair on the Gaswell Road that allowed several of us a very close approach. Spectacular!

**Long-tailed Duck** (*Clangula hyemalis*) - Seen in numbers along the coast all three days, with scattered pairs and individuals seen inland.

**Red-throated Loon** (*Gavia stellata*) - Fewer than normal; still seen on two of three days, including 20+ scattered around Plover Point on our Polar Bear excursion.

**Pacific Loon** (*Gavia pacifica*) - Seen daily in small numbers, including a bird on a nest and another pair at Freshwater Lake that allowed spectacular close studies.

**Yellow-billed Loon** (*Gavia adamsii*) - 1 close fly-by (good spotting by Bert!) along the coast on our last afternoon was our only record (and about the only time that the fog cleared enough for decent sea-watching!).

**American Golden-Plover** (*Pluvialis dominica*) - Daily in small numbers.

**Semipalmated Plover** (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) - A pair displaying over the college during Nathaniel's whaling talk were the only ones seen.

**Semipalmated Sandpiper** (*Calidris pusilla*) - Common; numbers seen daily.

**Western Sandpiper** (*Calidris mauri*) - Scattered singles seen on two of three days; fewer than usual.

**White-rumped Sandpiper** (*Calidris fuscicollis*) - 1 seen by Sue along the Dewline Road couldn't be relocated after it flushed. This is a place where we have had nesting pairs in the past.

**Baird's Sandpiper** (*Calidris bairdii*) - Scattered singles/pairs seen on two of three days; fewer than usual.

**Pectoral Sandpiper** (*Calidris melanotos*) - Abundant. We were treated to many individuals doing their odd, hooting display flights.

**Dunlin** (*Calidris alpina*) - Seen daily in small numbers.

**Long-billed Dowitcher** (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) - Seen daily in small numbers. Nice to see these birds in full breeding plumage.

**Wilson's Snipe** (*Gallinago delicata*) - One calling bird was studied on the ground along the Nunivak Road, thanks to good spotting by Jan.

**Red-necked Phalarope** (*Phalaropus lobatus*) - Common.

**Red Phalarope** (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) - Common. It is always a treat to see these elegant shorebirds in full breeding colors.

**Black-legged Kittiwake** (*Rissa tridactyla*) - 2 birds seen moving offshore along the coast on Day 3.

**Sabine's Gull** (*Xema sabini*) - At least 3 individuals seen at Freshwater Lake, with 1–2 birds seen there all three days. These elegant birds allowed very close approach, and provided us with spectacular studies.

**Herring Gull** (*Larus argentatus vegae*) - 1 2<sup>nd</sup>-year bird of the Siberian subspecies *vegae*, treated as a separate species from North American Herring Gulls by the Europeans (and then usually called "Vega Gull").

**Glaucous Gull** (*Larus hyperboreus*) - Abundant.

**Arctic Tern** (*Sterna paradisaea*) - Small numbers seen daily, mostly at Freshwater Lake or along the coast.

**Pomarine Jaeger** (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) - A few individuals seen daily, but numbers much reduced compared to most years. This high Arctic breeder feeds mostly on lemmings and voles, numbers of which were clearly way down this year. In lemming “crash” years (such as this one), the Poms disperse.

**Parasitic Jaeger** (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) - 1–3 individuals (including at least one dark morph bird) seen all three days. Typically much less common here than Pomarine Jaeger, but Parasitics seem to prey more on small birds, and are therefore less affected by cyclic fluctuations in the lemming population.

**Long-tailed Jaeger** (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) - 1 seen on Day 3 was our only one. Always the least common of the three jaegers found here.

**Black Guillemot** (*Cephus grylle*) - Nice studies of 4 birds seen on the Polar Bear excursion to the Point, including a pair that was nesting in the gravel under a piece of old plywood.

**Snowy Owl** (*Bubo scandiacus*) - We saw at least 10 different birds, which is more than I would have predicted given the obvious shortage of lemmings. Lemming numbers crashed in 2009, and the owls were very hard to come by last year, so they seem to be building back up. The next few years should be very good for them. We had repeated good views of that one bird on his favorite perch, but also enjoyed nice scope views of some other individuals. At least 2 birds were clearly on nests.

**Short-eared Owl** (*Asio flammeus*) - 1 seen over the beginning of the Gaswell Road on Day 2 was our only record.

**Savannah Sparrow** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) - Scattered individuals seen/heard daily.

**Lapland Longspur** (*Calcarius lapponicus*) - Common.

**Snow Bunting** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) - Common.

**Hoary Redpoll** (*Spinus [Carduelis] hornemanni*)- Scattered redpolls were seen on all three days. Most were not seen well enough to identify to species, but most that were identified were Hoaries. We had some particularly nice studies of adult males along the Dewline Road on Day 2.

**Common Redpoll** (*Spinus [Carduelis] flammea*)- 1 seen along the Dewline Road on Day 2 was the only one identified with certainty.

**Total = 41 species**

### **Mammals:**

**Spotted Seal** (*Phoca largha*) or **Ringed Seal** (*Phoca hispida*) {Depending on who you listen to!} - Several seen out on the ice on our last day. Range maps indicate these animals should be Ringed Seals, but the local Inupriats (who after all, do hunt these things) call them Spotted Seals (and that is actually what most of them looked like to me, although they were distant.)

**Brown Lemming** (*Lemmus sibiricus*) - Seen by a couple of folks, but this was obviously a “down” year for lemmings. In good years, they are constantly shooting out from under foot every time you step onto the tundra.