

# **GRAND ALASKA PART II**

## **ANCHORAGE, DENALI HIGHWAY & KENAI PENINSULA**

**JUNE 10–18, 2011**

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This year's tour was anything but normal, thanks to the pairing of the Alaskan weather gods with good-old human incompetence. An instrument breakdown, combined with Bering Sea weather that produced a fog ceiling below FAA-mandated visual landing minimums, stranded Kevin and two participants on the Pribilofs on the day that our Denali/Seward trip was set to begin. This stranding ultimately lasted for two days, meaning that Brad and the rest of the group had to soldier it alone for the day of birding in Anchorage (with a nice Spruce Grouse as the reward), as well as the next day's drive up the Glenn and Richardson Highways to Tangle River. Kevin, Mike, and Ann followed a day later, trying to catch up on as many birds as possible en route (and scoring nicely with some spiffy pick-ups such as Northern Hawk Owl, Surf Scoter, Bohemian Waxwing, and Townsend's Solitaire), while Brad & Company spent the day birding the east end of the famed Denali Highway. In the process, they netted such alpine tundra species as Rock Ptarmigan, Long-tailed Jaeger, Whimbrel, and Lapland Longspur, as well as a just-arriving Arctic Warbler. Sadly, it appeared to be a down year for Smith's Longspur, which could not be found.

By evening of the third day, the two leaders and the whole group were united at last, in time for our crossing of the entire Denali Highway, and subsequent drive to Anchorage. We made a second unsuccessful stab at the Smith's Longspur before heading west. The Denali Highway really does provide a magnificent transect of central Alaskan habitats, starting in taiga at Paxson, climbing into alpine tundra for much of the eastern end all the way to MacLaren Summit, and then dropping into lower elevation muskeg and taiga for the western leg. Along the way, we had some staggering, walk-up studies of a male Rock Ptarmigan, and got Mike and Ann caught up on Arctic Warbler. Various stops produced nice studies of both Trumpeter and Tundra swans, lots of Barrow's Goldeneyes, an obliging Say's Phoebe, close views of American Tree Sparrows and Blackpoll Warblers, and a fly-by of a calling Upland Sandpiper among others.

I wanted desperately to find a hawk owl for the entire group, especially since three of us had seen one so well the previous day. Unfortunately, time was working against us. The second try for the longspur, coupled with the need to try to re-find several species seen by part of the previously split group but not by the other, had us running behind schedule, which was not a good thing on a day that we had to bird our way along 135 miles of gravel road and still drive 4 more hours to Anchorage! Mile after mile we scanned the spruce tops, but every suspicious blob resolved into either a Gray Jay, Merlin, or a tuft of spruce needles. Finally, I decided to stop in an area that just looked good and play some tape. My playback brought an immediate response, not from an owl, but from a bunch of fired-up American Robins and smaller birds, all of which started alarming and scolding in response to the perceived presence of a predator. I remarked to Brad, "With a hot-button response like this from the small birds, I bet anything there's a hawk owl around here

somewhere.” But continued playback brought only more mobbing behavior and no owl. I told Brad that I was going to drive up the road a short distance and try again. I drove slightly more than a quarter-mile, told folks to wait in the van, and then tried the tape again. Immediately, the robins and Gray Jays started alarming, but this time their alarms heralded a long-tailed, gray ghost of a bird, flying toward me at eye level. “Hawk owl, hawk owl—everyone out of the van!” I shouted. I grabbed for the radio and signaled the others while racing back for the scope. As it turned out, I needn’t have hurried. The hawk owl swooped up to the top of a spruce at the edge of the road and sat there clucking with indignation as Brad pulled his van in behind ours. Over the next 45 minutes we took turns enjoying the scope-filling views and attempting to photograph the repeated attempts of the robins to dive-bomb the owl. The owl flinched with each pass by the robins, but did not look overly concerned. But suddenly, the owl’s reaction changed markedly, when a strafing bird actually made contact, eliciting a dramatic crouch and some very agitated vocalizations. That strafing bird turned out to be a Northern Shrike, which, in a perverse game of “tag” decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and very quickly got out of Dodge before the hawk owl could retaliate. I can honestly say that was the first time I’ve watched a Northern Hawk Owl attacked by a Northern Shrike! Eventually, the robins tired of their sport, the owl was preening and otherwise preoccupied, and we felt the pull of the ticking clock. It’s not easy to turn your back and drive away from a close Northern Hawk Owl, but we did it.

Our final leg saw us driving to Seward, and birding en route. A stop at Potter Marsh yielded a gorgeous and confiding Horned Grebe, and various stops along the scenic Seward Highway produced below eye level views of Golden-crowned Kinglets, male and female Pine Grosbeaks jump-snatching dandelion seeds practically at our feet (photographers were literally backing up to focus!), crippling views of Golden-crowned Sparrow, and adult American Dippers feeding two recently fledged youngsters. The Dipper spot yielded some extra excitement in the form of a very large brown bear (grizzly) that walked out of the thicket on the opposite side of the tiny creek not 30 yards from us. Fortunately, the massive ursine took one look and fled the scene.

The weather gods were good to us at Seward, where sunny skies and calm seas resulted in a most pleasant boat trip through Resurrection Bay and Kenai Fjords National Park. Northwest Glacier calved plenty, Kittlitz’s Murrelets allowed close approaches and gave us exceptional looks (both on the water and in flight), Rhinoceros Auklets were present in numbers and were relatively confiding, and some of the less common species such as Thick-billed Murre and Sooty and Short-tailed shearwaters showed nicely. We also enjoyed a spectacular pod of resident orcas, close humpback whales, a beach-combing black bear, sure-footed mountain goats and some pretty entertaining sea otters and Steller’s sea lions. Land-based birding around Seward allowed us to clean up a few missing targets, among them Chestnut-backed Chickadee and Townsend’s Warbler.

All in all, in spite of some logistical glitches beyond our control, a most congenial group of birders got to see a bunch of great birds and mammals and some of the most spectacular scenery that Alaska has to offer, and, we had a lot of fun doing it!

### Itinerary:

6/10 - Brad and most of the group arrived in Anchorage. Kevin and two group members were stuck with the rest of the Pribilofs Extension/Pre-Trip group in the Pribilofs (long story) due to the combination of fog and a disabled ILS (Instrument Landing System) at the St. Paul Island airport.

6/11 - Brad meets the group for a day of birding in Anchorage, with the news that Kevin, Ann and Mike will be at least one day late catching up. Birding in Anchorage at DeLong Lake Park, Kincaid Park, Campbell Airstrip Road and Westchester Lagoon. By evening, Brad learns that Kevin, Ann & Mike will be spending at least one more night on the Pribilofs. Will they ever get out???

6/12 - Brad and the 10 group members in Anchorage head up the Glenn Hwy. out of Anchorage to Palmer and on to Glennallen, with opportunistic stops en route. From Glennallen they took the Richardson Hwy. north to Paxson, connecting to the Denali Hwy., which they then took west to Tangle River Inn at MP 20, arriving in time for dinner. Meanwhile, Kevin, Mike and Ann awake to an improved ceiling at St. Paul, which gradually lifts to produce (gasp) blue skies and sunshine. They enjoy a fabulous morning on the bird cliffs, then score big with not one but two Pribilof Island Shrews on the afternoon excursion. The weather threatens to worsen during dinner, but holds off long enough for planes to land. The VENT castaways flee the island, and arrive back in Anchorage at midnight. A short night ensues...

6/13 - Brad and most of the group spend all-day birding the east end of Denali Hwy., as far west at McLaren Ridge, and as far east as Paxson, with optional post-dinner cruise several miles east of the lodge. Meanwhile, Kevin, Mike & Ann retrace the route taken by Brad & Company the day before, up the Glenn and Richardson highways, birding en route, and arrive at Tangle River Inn in time for a late dinner, just as the others are headed out on their post-dinner drive.

6/14 - Both leaders and the entire group are united at last! After breakfast at Tangle River, we make a second unsuccessful try at Smith's Longspur, and then begin working our way the length of the Denali Hwy. The weather is not particularly cooperative for much of the day, with cold temps and steady drizzle. But it improves just enough for us to find a Northern Hawk-Owl for the entire group. We rejoin the pavement at Cantwell and head south on the George Parks Hwy. toward Anchorage, stopping en route for dinner at the McKinley View Restaurant. Well-fed, we arrive late into Anchorage and head straight to bed. Kevin, Mike and Ann have covered about 700 miles since leaving Anchorage yesterday morning!

6/15 - Anchorage to Seward, via the Seward Hwy., with stops at Westchester Lagoon, Potter Marsh and Girdwood before continuing on to Summit Lake for lunch. After some birding around Summit Lake, rain forces us to quit birding and head for Seward, with one important stop along Bear Lake Road en route.

6/16 - Beautiful clear skies for our all-day boat trip to Kenai Fjords National Park, through Resurrection Bay to Northwest Fjord and the Chiswell Islands. Night in Seward.

6/17 - Seward back to Anchorage, with birding stops at Benny Benson Park, Lowell Point Road, Bear Lake Road, and Nash Road in Seward, and at Trail River Campground, Summit Lake and Granite Creek Campground en route to Anchorage. **Part II of Grand Alaska** concludes with farewell dinner in Anchorage.

6/18 - flights home or continuing on to **Barrow Extension**

## Key:

A = Anchorage area (including to Girdwood on the Seward Hwy., and to Palmer on the Glenn Hwy., with particular emphasis on Potter Marsh, Westchester Lagoon, Kincaid Park, Lakes Hood & Spenard, and the Campbell Airstrip Road)

D = Denali region (from Palmer to Glennallen on the Glenn Hwy., from Glennallen to Paxson on the Richardson Hwy., the entire Denali Hwy., including Tangle River Inn and vicinity, and the return drive to Anchorage along the George Parks Hwy., from Cantwell back to Wasilla.)

K = Kenai Peninsula (from Girdwood to Seward and back, and the Kenai Fjords boat trip)

\* = heard only

## Birds:

**Canada Goose** (*Branta Canadensis*) - A

**Trumpeter Swan** (*Cygnus buccinator*) - D {Several nice pairs along the Glenn & Denali Hwys.}

**Tundra Swan** (*Cygnus columbianus*) - D (15+ along the Denali Hwy. on Day 4)

**Mallard** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) - A, D

**American Wigeon** (*Anas americana*) - A, D

**Northern Shoveler** (*Anas clypeata*) - D

**Northern Pintail** (*Anas acuta*) - D

**Green-winged Teal** (*Anas crecca carolinensis*) - A, D

**Ring-necked Duck** (*Aythya collaris*) - D (1 male on the Denali Hwy.), A (2 males at Potter Marsh)

**Greater Scaup** (*Aythya marila*) - A, D

**Lesser Scaup** (*Aythya affinis*) - D (Several along the Glenn Hwy. and the Denali Hwy.)

**Harlequin Duck** (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) - D

**Surf Scoter** (*Melanitta perspicillata*) - D (2 different pairs seen along the Glenn Hwy. by KJZ, Ann & Mike)

**Long-tailed Duck** (*Clangula hyemalis*) - D

**Bufflehead** (*Bucephala albeola*) - D

**Common Goldeneye** (*Bucephala clangula*) - A, K

**Barrow's Goldeneye** (*Bucephala islandica*) - D (Numerous this year, with 20+ along the Denali Hwy. on 6/14. Lots of elegant adult males seen.)

**Common Merganser** (*Mergus merganser*) - K (5 seen from the boat at Northwest Fjord.)

**Red-breasted Merganser** (*Mergus serrator*) - D

**Spruce Grouse** (*Falcapennis canadensis*) - A (This was a good pickup at Kincaid Park.)

**Rock Ptarmigan** (*Lagopus muta*) - D (Seen on 2 days, including the wonderful male that allowed a close approach on Maclaren Summit.)

**Red-throated Loon** (*Gavia stellata*) - D

**Pacific Loon** (*Gavia pacifica*) - D (Pair seen by KJZ, Mike & Ann along the Glenn Hwy.)

**Common Loon** (*Gavia immer*) - A, D, K  
**Horned Grebe** (*Podiceps auritus*) - A (A beautiful bird at Potter Marsh.)  
**Red-necked Grebe** (*Podiceps grisegena*) - A (common), D  
**Sooty Shearwater** (*Puffinus griseus*) - K (The bulk of the shearwaters seen on our boat trip were of this species.)  
**Short-tailed Shearwater** (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) - K (Smaller numbers of these were seen from the boat.)  
**Double-crested Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) - K  
**Red-faced Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax urile*) - K (Many fewer than normal from the boat.)  
**Pelagic Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) - K  
**Bald Eagle** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) - A, D, K (Including some amazingly close studies at Summit Lake and along the Bear Lake Road.)  
**Northern Harrier** (*Circus cyaneus*) - D  
**Sharp-shinned Hawk** (*Accipiter striatus*) - K (An accipiter seen by Amy {and others?} at Granite Creek Campground was almost certainly this species.)  
**“Harlan’s” Red-tailed Hawk** (*Buteo jamaicensis harlani*) - D (Seen by KJZ, Mike & Ann along the Glenn Hwy.)  
**Golden Eagle** (*Aquila chrysaetos*) - D (1 near Sheep Mountain by KJZ, Ann & Mike)  
**Merlin** (*Falco columbarius*) - A, D  
**Sandhill Crane** (*Grus canadensis*) - A, D  
**American Golden-Plover** (*Pluvialis dominica*) - D  
**Semipalmated Plover** (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) - A  
**Black Oystercatcher** (*Haematopus bachmani*) - K (Seen nicely from the boat.)  
**Spotted Sandpiper** (*Actitis macularius*) - D, K  
**Greater Yellowlegs** (*Tringa melanoleuca*) - A  
**Lesser Yellowlegs** (*Tringa flavipes*) - A, D (One of the common breeding shorebirds of the taiga muskeg zone.)  
**Upland Sandpiper** (*Bartramia longicauda*) - D (1 vocal bird along the Denali Hwy.)  
**Whimbrel** (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*) - D (A treat to see displaying birds along the Denali Hwy.)  
**Hudsonian Godwit** (*Limosa haemasticta*) - A (The mudflats near Westchester Lagoon.)  
**Wilson’s Snipe** (*Gallinago delicata*)\* - D\*, K\*  
**Red-necked Phalarope** (*Phalaropus lobatus*) - A, D  
**Black-legged Kittiwake** (*Rissa tridactyla*) - K  
**Bonaparte’s Gull** (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) - A, K  
**Mew Gull** (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus*) - A, D, K  
**Herring Gull** (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) - A, D {Birds seen along the Glenn and Denali Highways were of the North American subspecies *smithsonianus*. Most of the large gulls seen around Anchorage were Herring X Glaucous-winged hybrids.}  
**Glaucous-winged Gull** (*Larus glaucescens*) - K  
**Arctic Tern** (*Sterna paradisaea*) - A, D, K  
**Long-tailed Jaeger** (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) - D  
**Common Murre** (*Uria aalge*) - K  
**Thick-billed Murre** (*Uria lomvia*) - K

**Pigeon Guillemot** (*Cephus columba*) - K  
**Marbled Murrelet** (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) - K  
**Kittlitz's Murrelet** (*Brachyramphus brevirostris*) - K {Excellent studies of birds on the water and in flight.}  
**Rhinoceros Auklet** (*Cerorhinca monocerata*) - K  
**Horned Puffin** (*Fratercula corniculata*) - K  
**Tufted Puffin** (*Fratercula cirrhata*) - K  
**Rock Pigeon** (*Columba livia*) - K  
**Northern Hawk-Owl** (*Surnia ulula*) - D (Spectacular views of one bird along the Glenn Hwy. for KJZ, Ann & Mike one day, and of another individual along the Denali Hwy. for everyone the next.)  
**Rufous Hummingbird** (*Selasphorus rufus*) - K  
**Belted Kingfisher** (*Megaceryle alcyon*) - K  
**Northern Flicker** (*Colaptes auratus*) - D (At Tolsona Lake by KJZ, Ann & Mike.)  
**Alder Flycatcher** (*Empidonax alnorum*) - A, D\*, K\*  
**Say's Phoebe** (*Sayornis saya*) - D  
**Northern Shrike** (*Lanius excubitor*) - D (Our only one was seen attacking the Hawk-Owl [actually striking it!], and it didn't stick around for long!)  
**Gray Jay** (*Perisoreus canadensis*) - D, K  
**Steller's Jay** (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) - A, K  
**Black-billed Magpie** (*Pica hudsonia*) - A, D, K  
**Northwestern Crow** (*Corvus caurinus*) - K  
**Common Raven** (*Corvus corax*) - A, D, K  
**Tree Swallow** (*Tachycineta bicolor*) - A, D, K  
**Violet-green Swallow** (*Tachycineta thalassina*) - K  
**Bank Swallow** (*Riparia riparia*) - A, D  
**Cliff Swallow** (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) - A, D  
**Black-capped Chickadee** (*Poecile atricapillus*) - A, D  
**Chestnut-backed Chickadee** (*Poecile rufescens*) - K  
**Boreal Chickadee** (*Poecile hudsonicus*) - A, D, K  
**Red-breasted Nuthatch** (*Sitta canadensis*) - A, K  
**Brown Creeper** (*Certhia americana*) - K  
**Pacific Wren** (*Troglodytes pacificus*)\* - K\* {A recent Supplement to the AOU Checklist [July 2010] splits what was called "Winter Wren" into three species: Eurasian Wren, Winter Wren, and Pacific Wren. There are three readily diagnosable subspecies groups of "Winter Wrens" occurring in North America: the eastern *hiemalis* group; the western *pacificus* group; and the Aleutian *alascensis* group. Of these, the western birds differ from the eastern ones in being much more richly buff-colored on the supercilium and underparts, whereas the Aleutian birds differ from all others in being distinctly longer billed and larger. Recently published molecular and vocal evidence shows that the *pacificus* and *alascensis* groups comprise a separate species (= Pacific Wren) that should be treated as distinct from the eastern *hiemalis* group (= Winter Wren), which is apparently more closely related to Eurasian "Winter Wrens" (= Eurasian Wren). The two North American species even contact one another in the Canadian Rockies without evidence of interbreeding. The island populations from the Bering Sea & Aleutians, although even more distinct morphologically, are genetically close to *pacificus*, and will,

at least for the present, be included with that group. There are lots of different subspecies involved, and it is still unclear how the taxonomic dust will settle, but Ann & Mike, you should tuck that Pribilof's bird away – it could eventually be treated (along with the Aleutian populations) as yet another species distinct from *pacificus*.}

**American Dipper** (*Cinclus mexicanus*) - D, K

**Golden-crowned Kinglet** (*Regulus satrapa*) - K

**Ruby-crowned Kinglet** (*Regulus calendula*) - D, K

**Arctic Warbler** (*Phylloscopus borealis*) - D (Nice looks at a couple of birds along the Denali Hwy. These are always among the latest arriving migrants each spring.)

**Townsend's Solitaire** (*Myadestes townsendi*) - D (1 calling bird seen nicely by KJZ, Mike & Ann along the Glenn Hwy. This may have been the first time we've recorded this species on this tour. It breeds on alpine slopes in interior Alaska – not a habitat that most birding tours spend much time in.)

**Gray-cheeked Thrush** (*Catharus minimus*) - D

**Swainson's Thrush** (*Catharus ustulatus*) - A, D

**Hermit Thrush** (*Catharus guttatus*) - K

**American Robin** (*Turdus migratorius*) - A, D, K

**Varied Thrush** (*Ixoreus naevius*) - D (leader only), K

**European Starling** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) - A, D (Palmer)

**American Pipit** (*Anthus rubescens pacificus*) - D (A pair feeding young at Maclaren Summit on the Denali Hwy.)

**Bohemian Waxwing** (*Bombycilla garrulus*) - D (A lone bird that perched nicely along the Glenn Hwy. for KJZ, Mike & Ann. This species is easily missed in a short trip through the interior.)

**Lapland Longspur** (*Calcarius lapponicus*) - D (Strangely absent this year along the Denali Hwy., where it is usually common in appropriate habitat. Brad & most of the group saw one while hiking for Smith's Longspur [also missing in action this year], and that was it.)

**Orange-crowned Warbler** (*Oreothlypis celata*) - A, D, K

**Yellow Warbler** (*Dendroica petechia*) - A, D, K

**Yellow-rumped Warbler** (*Dendroica coronata*) - A, D, K

**Townsend's Warbler** (*Dendroica townsendi*) - K (That one male was a stunner!)

**Blackpoll Warbler** (*Dendroica striata*) - D

**Northern Waterthrush** (*Parkesia noveboracensis*) - D

**Wilson's Warbler** (*Wilsonia pusilla*) - A, D

**American Tree Sparrow** (*Spizella arborea*) - D

**Savannah Sparrow** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) - D

**“Red Fox-Sparrow”** (*Passerella iliaca zaboria*) - D {We saw two very different types of Fox Sparrows, including very red birds at Denali {subspecies *zaboria* which is very similar to eastern *iliaca*} and very sooty ones at Anchorage and Seward {subspecies *sinuosa*, which is part of the *fuliginosa* group}. Published molecular studies have advocated the splitting of the Fox Sparrow into as many as four separate species, and there are certainly substantial differences in morphology and voice (both songs and calls) between the various populations. So far, the A.O.U. checklist committee remains unconvinced, but keep your eye on this complex for possible splits.}

**“Sooty Fox-Sparrow”** (*Passerella [i.] fuliginosa sinuosa*) - A, K

**Song Sparrow** (*Melospiza melodia*) - A, K  
**Lincoln's Sparrow** (*Melospiza lincolni*) - K  
**White-crowned Sparrow** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) - A, D, K  
**Golden-crowned Sparrow** (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*) - K  
**Dark-eyed Junco** (*Junco hyemalis*) - A, D, K  
**Red-winged Blackbird** (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) - A  
**Rusty Blackbird** (*Euphagus carolinus*) - D (1 male along the Glenn Hwy. by KJZ, Mike & Ann), A (3 at Potter Marsh)  
**Pine Grosbeak** (*Pinicola enucleator*) - K (Close enough to grab at Summit Lake! Literally a traffic stopper!)  
**Common Redpoll** (*Spinus [Carduelis] flammea*) - A, D  
**Pine Siskin** (*Spinus [Carduelis] pinus*) - K

### Mammals:

**Arctic Ground Squirrel** (*Spermophilus parryii*) - D (aka. "Lowbush Grizzly")  
**Red Squirrel** (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) - D, K  
**American Beaver** (*Castor canadensis*) - D  
**Muskrat** (*Ondatra zibethica*) - A  
**Snowshoe Hare** (*Lepus americanus*) - D, K  
**Brown Bear** (*Ursus arctos*) - K  
**Black Bear** (*Ursus americanus*) - K  
**Sea Otter** (*Enhydra lutris*) - K  
**Steller's Sea Lion** (*Eumetopias jubatus*) - K  
**Harbor Seal** (*Phoca vitulina*) - K  
**Mountain Goat** (*Oreamnos americanus*) - K  
**Caribou (Reindeer)** (*Rangifer tarandus*) - D  
**Moose** (*Alces alces*) - D  
**Dall's Porpoise** (*Phocoenoides dalli*) - K  
**Humpback Whale** (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)- K  
**Orca (Killer Whale)** (*Orcinus orca*) - K