

# **ALASKA MAINLAND**

**JUNE 15 – 26, 2011**

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On our second full day in Nome we ventured north out the Kougarok Road. It was yet another glorious weather day with sunny skies and temperatures in the low 60s. We stopped about 18 miles out as an Arctic Warbler was singing right next to the road. The warbler, a real Alaskan specialty, responded quickly, offering superb views, as did a nearby Fox Sparrow and an Orange-crowned Warbler. Just as we were about to load up again, someone in the group spotted three grizzly bears on a distant hillside. We had nice scope views of a mother and two nearly grown young ambling up an open slope for about ten minutes.

Continuing on, we had, in quick succession: three moose, two stunning pairs of Harlequin Ducks, and a male Willow Ptarmigan that put on a show in the middle of the road. A short distance farther on we had a planned stop at a known Golden Eagle nest site. Just as we came to a stop, I heard the wonderful skylarking song of a male Bluethroat on the left side of the road. We quickly piled out of the vans and almost immediately had very close scope views of this incredible bird. Time after time he ascended up against a backdrop of snowy peaks and then floated down to a willow top for all to admire. The stunning blue and red throat shone brightly in the morning sun, like a brilliantly colored Indian blanket. Another Arctic Warbler perched up just feet away from the Bluethroat. I finally took a moment to look at the eagle nest up to our right and noticed that the adult bird was sitting up nicely in full view. We had one scope on a Bluethroat and the other on a Golden Eagle. Someone noticed a Northern Wheatear on the rocks above the eagle. It was hard to know where to look first!

We finally dragged ourselves away from this embarrassment of riches and within ten minutes had come across a bull muskox right next to the road. A pair of Northern Shrikes feeding young followed, then a close pair of Northern Wheatears at our lunch stop, a dizzying array of tundra flowers, a large herd of muskox with babies and, finally, walkaway scope views of three Bristle-thighed Curlews. Welcome to Alaska!

This year's Alaska Mainland tour was certainly one of our most successful ever. Other highlights in Nome included all five loon species in one day, a pair of Gyrfalcons at a close nest site, stunning Rock Ptarmigans almost at our feet, a Rock Sandpiper that walked right up to the group, and great views of Bar-tailed Godwits, Aleutian Terns, Long-tailed Jaegers, Yellow Wagtails, Snow Buntings, and more.

Seward and the Kenai Peninsula were next on the itinerary. Spruce forests en route yielded Three-toed Woodpecker, Chestnut-backed and Boreal chickadees, Varied Thrush, Townsend's Warbler, and Pine Grosbeak among others. A family of Dippers entertained at a salmon weir, and a mother black bear and cubs gave good views on a high slope. An all-day boat trip to Kenai Fjords National Park produced incredible

seabirds including Red-faced Cormorant; Tufted and Horned puffins; Kittlitz's, Marbled, and Ancient murrelets; Parakeet and Rhinoceros auklets; Thick-billed and Common murre; and Pigeon Guillemot. Fourteen humpback whales, nine orcas, Dall's porpoises, sea otters, and Steller's sea lions added to the excitement. But the unbelievable scenery (including a calving tidewater glacier) nearly stole the show on this wonderfully sunny day.

In and around Anchorage, we added two male Barrow's Goldeneyes, a breeding-plumaged Horned Grebe from ten feet away (!), a close displaying pair of Common Loons, a flock of Hudsonian Godwits, and three White-winged Crossbills. A herd of Dall sheep right next to the road was a treat.

Our tour concluded with a visit to the Denali region. On the way up we had 30 minutes of Mount McKinley (Denali) in full view from the Parks Highway. Fantastic! A pair of Bohemian Waxwings perched right overhead near Cantwell, but the prolonged scope view of a Northern Hawk Owl being dive-bombed by robins was the real show-stopper. In the park itself, we saw five more grizzlies, numerous caribou, more moose, and a red fox. A pair of Trumpeter Swans, another black bear, and quick views of two gray wolves crossing the road the next morning were the icing on the cake.

In all we tallied 158 species of birds (seeing nearly all the targeted Alaskan specialties), 26 species of mammals (who will ever forget the fabulous shrew!), 18 species of butterflies (a tour record thanks to the great weather), and wonderful wildflower displays. We enjoyed, without doubt, the greatest weather ever on an Alaskan tour—twelve consecutive sunny, warm days with a cumulative total of about 30 minutes of rain for the entire trip. This was Alaska at its best!

### **Itinerary:**

June 15 - arrival in Anchorage

June 16 - Westchester Lagoon, flight to Nome; Teller Road to MP 35 (66 species; 66 total)

June 17 - Council Road to MP 56 (Skookum Pass) (63 species; 90 total)

June 18 - Kougarak Road to MP 72 (and beyond to end of road for some) (47 species; 97 total)

June 19 - Council Road to MP 26; return to Anchorage via Kotzebue (37 species; 101 total)

June 20 - Westchester Lagoon, Anchorage to Seward with stops at Potter Marsh, Turnagin Arm, Granite Creek Campground, Summit Lake, Trail River Campground, Bear Creek (57 species; 125 total)

June 21 - all day boat trip to Kenai Fjords National Park (35 species; 139 total)

June 22 - Nash Woods, Benny Benson Park, Bear Lake, Trail River Campground, Granite Creek Campground, Girdwood, drive to Anchorage (41 species; 145 total)

June 23 - drive to Denali with some roadside birding, Denali Hwy to MP 123 (45 species; 154 total)

June 24 - bus ride into Denali National Park to Eielson Visitor Center, evening option to Otto Lake (14 species; 154 total)

June 25 - Denali Hwy to MP 119; return to Anchorage with some roadside birding; secret pewee park (38 species; 158 total)

June 26 - departures home or on to Barrow extension (158 total species)

### **Key:**

N = Nome and surrounding Seward Peninsula

A = Anchorage and surrounding areas (Potter Marsh, Turnagin Arm, Girdwood, etc.)

S = Seward, Kenai Fjords, Summit Lake, Granite Creek (Kenai Peninsula)

D = Denali National Park, Denali Hwy, and Parks Hwy north of Wasilla

**bold-faced species** indicate birds of rare, casual or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur regularly but in such low densities as to be easily missed

# - indicates birds seen with babies or on nests

### **Birds:**

Greater White-fronted Goose N--- uncommon

Brant N---the western race *nigricans* (a possible future resplit)

Cackling Goose N---although very difficult to separate from *parvipes* type Canadas, all "white-faced" geese on the Seward Peninsula are of the large Cackling Goose group *taverneri*

Canada Goose A---presumed to be of the small "Lesser Canada Goose" group *parvipes*; #

Trumpeter Swan D

Tundra Swan N,D---up to 120 in one day

Gadwall A---pair at Potter Marsh; very uncommon

Mallard A,S---#

**Eurasian Wigeon** N---three males within a couple hundreds yards of each other; rare  
 American Wigeon A,N,D---#  
 Northern Pintail N,A  
 Green-winged Teal A,N  
Canvasback A---female with chicks at Potter March; very uncommon; #  
Ring-necked Duck D---uncommon  
 Greater Scaup A,N,D  
 Lesser Scaup A,D  
 Common Eider N---nice studies of y-nigra subspecies along Safety Lagoon  
 Harlequin Duck N,S---always spectacular; many great views  
 Surf Scoter S---flock of 25 from boat  
 White-winged Scoter N,S  
 Black Scoter N,S  
 Long-tailed Duck N  
 Bufflehead D---uncommon  
 Common Goldeneye N,D---female with chicks on Parks Hwy; #  
Barrow's Goldeneye A,D---two males at Westchester and a couple of females along the Parks Hwy  
 Red-breasted Merganser N  
 Willow Ptarmigan N,D---superb studies of one on the Kougarak Road (thanks to Maggie) and another seen by some on the Denali Hwy  
Rock Ptarmigan N--- great views of two males and a female on the Teller Road (thanks to Bob & Joe)  
 Red-throated Loon N---nice breeding-plumaged birds; up to 30 in a day; #  
**Arctic Loon** N---pair spotted by Dave just before Safety Sound provided good views; rare US visitor  
 Pacific Loon A,N,S---spectacular breeding-plumaged birds; our first bird of the tour from the dinner table at The Flying Machine!  
 Common Loon A,N,S,D  
**Yellow-billed Loon** N---one distant bird off Safety Lagoon was a real treat!  
Horned Grebe A---one at Potter Marsh was spectacular; uncommon  
 Red-necked Grebe A,N,D---fantastic views including birds on nests; #  
Short-tailed Shearwater N---two from shore at Safety Lagoon were a real surprise!; thanks to Dave  
 Sooty Shearwater S---three from the boat on Kenai Fjords  
 Double-crested Cormorant S  
 Red-faced Cormorant S---nice views at Spire Cove; #  
 Pelagic Cormorant N,S---#  
 Bald Eagle A,S,D---30 in one day!  
 Northern Harrier N,D  
 Red-tailed Hawk S,D---the "Harlan's" subspecies  
 Rough-legged Hawk N---four seen; our first thanks to Nancy; #  
 Golden Eagle N,D--- nine total; #  
 Merlin S---one spotted by Dave near Primrose Campground

Gyr Falcon N---nice scope study of gray morph pair at nesting cliff past Solomon and another more distant pair with one very pale bird on the Kougarok Road; #  
 Peregrine Falcon N---great scope study of adult on nest near Solomon; #  
 Sandhill Crane N,A  
 Pacific Golden-Plover N---gorgeous breeding-plumaged birds; four total  
 American Golden-Plover N---also in stunning breeding plumage  
 Semipalmated Plover N  
 Black Oystercatcher S---quick fly-by views of four from the boat thanks to Beth  
 Spotted Sandpiper N---only two  
 Solitary Sandpiper D---calling from trees!  
 Wandering Tattler N---superb study  
 Greater Yellowlegs D---right overhead in trees!  
 Lesser Yellowlegs A,D---also in trees!  
**Bristle-thighed Curlew** N---after a lengthy, arduous hike we had superb close studies of three birds on the ground showing off their cinnamon tails and rumps; voted the third favorite bird of the tour; thanks Chris!  
 Hudsonian Godwit A---16 in one group  
 Bar-tailed Godwit N---*baueri*; 32 total seen including several good views; more numerous than usual  
 Ruddy Turnstone N---only two seen  
Black Turnstone N---two pairs on Safety Lagoon; uncommon  
 Semipalmated Sandpiper N---including the adorable upside down baby in the road!;  
 #  
 Western Sandpiper N  
**Rock Sandpiper** N---incredible studies of one that walked right up to the group; very uncommon to rare and localized here  
 Dunlin N---just one  
 Short-billed Dowitcher A---subspecies *caurinus*  
 Wilson's Snipe N,A,D  
 Red-necked Phalarope N---beautiful breeding-plumaged birds  
 Black-legged Kittiwake N,S---thousands in Kenai Fjords  
 Bonaparte's Gull A,D  
 Mew Gull seen daily in numbers; #  
 Herring Gull N,A---"Vega" Gull at Nome (3 total) and "American" Herring Gull (*smithsonianus*) around Anchorage; could be a future split by the AOU  
**Thayer's Gull** N---a worn second year bird the last morning in Nome was a super rarity and a tour first!  
**Slaty-backed Gull** N---first year bird the last morning in Nome; rare but somewhat regular  
 Glaucous-winged Gull S---common around Seward  
 Glaucous Gull N---very common  
 Aleutian Tern N---great studies of about 6 total  
 Arctic Tern A,N,S---repeated spectacular views; #  
Pomarine Jaeger N---one bird seen by a few in the hotel parking lot; very uncommon  
 Parasitic Jaeger N

Long-tailed Jaeger      N---common and conspicuous birds around Nome  
 Common Murre      S---very common  
Thick-billed Murre      S--- three on the Chiswells  
 Pigeon Guillemot      S---great studies from shore and on the boat  
 Marbled Murrelet      S---about 40 from the boat and a few from shore  
Kittlitz's Murrelet      S---four near Northwest Glacier; less numerous than usual  
Ancient Murrelet      S--27 total with a couple of good views of birds on the water;  
 always tough and scarce  
Parakeet Auklet      S---great views of nine near Cecil's Cove; often missed entirely  
 Rhinoceros Auklet      S---about 20 total  
 Horned Puffin      S---about 500 seen; superb views  
 Tufted Puffin      S---about 300 seen; superb views  
 Rock Pigeon      A,S---increasingly common  
 Great Horned Owl      D---one perched on pole along Denali Hwy  
Northern Hawk-Owl      D---we had fantastic prolonged views of one along the Denali  
 Hwy being dive-bombed by American Robins; we watched the bird for about 20  
 minutes; voted the second favorite bird of the tour!  
 Rufous Hummingbird      S  
 Belted Kingfisher      A,D  
 Downy Woodpecker      A  
 Hairy Woodpecker      A---at the secret pewee spot; our last new bird  
American Three-toed Woodpecker      S---good views of this uncommon & easily  
 missed species  
 Northern Flicker      A,D---"Yellow-shafted"; wonderful views  
 Western Wood-Pewee      A---at the secret spot the last afternoon  
 Alder Flycatcher      A,S,D  
Northern Shrike      N---pair feeding young out the Kougarak Road, another lone bird  
 on the Teller Road; prolonged scope study  
 Gray Jay      S,D---including interesting juvenile plumaged birds  
 Steller's Jay      S---darker, shorter crested race with dark blue spots on crest  
 Black-billed Magpie      A,S,D  
 Northwestern Crow      S---right in our hotel parking lot  
 Common Raven      daily; #  
 Tree Swallow      A,S,N,D  
 Violet-green Swallow      A,S,D---excellent views of this beauty; #  
 Bank Swallow      A,N  
 Cliff Swallow      N,D  
 Black-capped Chickadee      A  
 Chestnut-backed Chickadee      S---the chestnut-sided subspecies *rufescens*  
Boreal Chickadee      S,D---uncommon; great views of fledged baby being fed by  
 adults thanks to Beth and Barb; #  
 Red-breasted Nuthatch      S  
 Brown Creeper      S  
Pacific Wren      S---seen by some while we retrieved the vans; very uncommon  
 American Dipper      S---great studies of adult with fledged young; #  
 Golden-crowned Kinglet      S---nice studies

Ruby-crowned Kinglet S,D  
 Arctic Warbler N---superb views of this specialty; side-by-side with a Bluethroat at one point!  
Bluethroat N---gorgeous male performed well on the Kougarok Road; voted the favorite bird of the tour!  
Northern Wheatear N---maybe the best luck ever with this often difficult species; we had great views of two pairs near Skookum and another at the lunch spot the next day  
 Gray-cheeked Thrush N,D  
 Swainson's Thrush D  
 Hermit Thrush S,A---perhaps the best song in North America  
 American Robin almost daily; #  
 Varied Thrush S,A---great views; another top song contender  
European Starling A---very uncommon, but increasing in Alaska  
 Eastern Yellow Wagtail N---subspecies *tschutschensis*; several nice views  
American Pipit N---uncommon; spotted by Dave  
Bohemian Waxwing D---wonderful pair along the Parks Hwy en route to Denali; always tough  
 Lapland Longspur N---spectacular in breeding plumage; up to 30 in a day  
Snow Bunting N---stunning!  
 Orange-crowned Warbler A,N,S  
 Yellow Warbler N,S,A  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler A,S,D---Myrtle types  
 Townsend's Warbler S---superb view of this striking species; oddly only one  
 Blackpoll Warbler D---excellent views  
 Northern Waterthrush N,D  
 Wilson's Warbler N,A,S,D  
 American Tree Sparrow N,D  
 Savannah Sparrow N,A,D  
 Fox Sparrow N,S---"Red" birds (*zaboria*) in Nome, "Sooty" (*unalaschensis*) birds around Seward  
 Song Sparrow S---fantastic study of the big, dark coastal race *kenaiensis*  
 Lincoln's Sparrow S,A,D  
 White-crowned Sparrow N,A,D  
 Golden-crowned Sparrow N,S,A  
 Dark-eyed Junco A,S,D---Slate-colored types  
Red-winged Blackbird A---one at Potter Marsh; uncommon & local  
 Pine Grosbeak S---wonderful views at Kathy's; can be tough  
White-winged Crossbill A---thanks to a tip from Victor we had three near the Alyeska Hotel; a down year despite lots of cones  
 Common Redpoll A,N,S,D  
 Hoary Redpoll N---good views of several  
 Pine Siskin A,S

total species - 158

**Leader only birds:**



American Kestrel  
Rusty Blackbird

### **Mammals:**

Arctic Ground Squirrel---common in Nome & Denali

Red Squirrel---about a dozen seen

vole species---possibly red-backed vole at Karthy's house

**Cinereus Shrew**---two, very small, live shrews ran across the road in front of us but remained unidentified; one dead one found roadside at Nash Woods was carefully identified as being this species; voted the favorite "bird" of the tour by several!!!!

Snowshoe Hare---fairly common in the Denali region again this year, but reduced from past three years; about nine total

Common Muskrat---one at Potter Marsh

Beaver---one along the Kougarak Road in broad daylight

**Gray Wolf**---two gray individuals briefly bolted across the road on the Denali Highway the last morning; seen on about 20% of trips only

Red Fox---one right in front of the bus in Denali

Mountain Goat---four total; three along the highway to Seward and one from the boat

Moose---a total of 25 including several cute calves and one distant bull

Caribou---"Barren Ground" Caribou in Denali and "Reindeer" in Nome

Dall's Sheep---very close ewes & babies along Turnagin Arm; more in Denali; 22 total

Musk Ox---many superb views including babies!; about 73 seen

Grizzly Bear---three in Nome thanks to Bob and three more in the park

Black Bear---family of three near Turnagin Pass thanks to Jackie and another adult from the boat

Dall's Porpoise---eight from the boat; less conspicuous than usual

Harbor Porpoise---two not seen by most

Orca (Killer Whale)---nine of these feeding on salmon and blasting right by the bow of the boat; WOW!

Humpback Whale-----fourteen from the boat including one that breached (great show!) ahead of the boat for some

Gray Whale---one seen from shore in Bering Sea along Safety Lagoon

Sea Otter---great views of these cute critters in Kenai Fjords and from shore in Seward (the best one ever!); 41 total individuals

Steller's Sea Lion---declining at a ridiculous pace; maybe a hundred total

Harbor Seal---particularly numerous around the glacier; at least twenty seen

Spotted Seal---one hauled out along the beach at Safety Sound provided great views

Ringed Seal---one in Nome

total species - 26

### **Butterflies:**

Canadian Tiger Swallowtail

Old World Swallowtail  
Mustard White  
Large Marble---BZ only near Eielson Visitor Center  
Northern Marble  
Clouded Sulphur  
Palidne Sulphur---Denali by BZ only  
Palaeno Sulphur---DW only near Denali hotel  
Hecla Sulphur---DW only in Denali  
Western Tailed Blue  
Silvery Blue  
Greenish Blue---DW only  
Northern Blue---DW only  
Cranberry Blue  
Freija Fritillary---Nome  
Purplish Fritillary  
Milbert's Tortoise Shell---at Summit Lake Lodge  
Common Ringlet  
Common Alpine  
Magdalena Alpine  
Red-disked (?) Alpine  
Theano Alpine  
Jutta Arctic---DW only near Denali hotel  
Arctic Skipper---DW only

total species - **24** (smashing previous tour record!; unusual number of warm, sunny days no doubt contributed to this success along with a lot of searching, especially by Dave!)

**Significant others:**

king crab & salmon dinners  
blackberry & fruits of the forest pie at Summit Lake  
sockeye (red) salmon at Bear Creek  
Kathy's hospitality at Bear Creek  
on time flights with no fog delays!  
great wildflowers including the likes of Alpine Azalea, Purple Oxytrope, Mountain Avens, Woolly Lousewort, Mooseberry, Lapland Rosebay, Lapland Cassiope, Cow Parsnip, lupines, and many others left unidentified  
Mount McKinley (Denali) in full view for about thirty minutes on our drive up to the park!  
junkyard bunnies in Seward  
the great Nome banana fallout  
Vlad the Vampire  
VENT dudes  
shrews in any form