

GRAND ALASKA

JUNE 12 – 27, 2008

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If I had to sum up our 2008 Grand Alaska trip in a single word, it would probably be “fog.” Within the course of a single trip, we equaled the previous 23-year total of days spent fogged-in at a location due to flights canceled by fog. The trouble started at Nome, where for two days prior to our planned departure, no Alaska Airlines flights made it in or out. Of course, we were paying only minimal attention, because we were too busy enjoying superb birding in what is my single favorite place in all of North America to bird.

We began our Grand Alaska adventure with an afternoon drive out the Teller Road to Woolley Lagoon. The real fun began just beyond the Sinuk River, when I spotted a Bar-tailed Godwit sailing over the road. As I hit the brakes I noticed a second godwit disappearing over the van and out of my view. As we scrambled out of the van, we quickly became aware that the godwits were coming back towards us at warp speed, but they couldn't have cared less about our presence. Instead, they were bent on strafing a Parasitic Jaeger that clearly seemed to be intent on predation, either on eggs, or, more likely, on some unseen godwit chicks. Again and again the pair of godwits came at the jaeger, like fighter jets taking on a bigger plane. The jaeger was not to be deterred, and soon a Mew Gull entered the dogfight. Now there were three birds dive-bombing the jaeger and harassing it through an impressive series of dives, barrel rolls, and maneuvers that would make any Top Gun envious. But still the jaeger persisted. Then a seemingly unlikely combatant entered the conflict, when a Long-tailed Jaeger piled on and started attacking the Parasitic as well! The Parasitic Jaeger was now the focus of one of the most determined and impressive avian counterattacks that I have ever witnessed, but still, he kept coming back. Meanwhile, two vans full of birders, as well as their leaders, were going out of their collective minds, and several cameras were burning up flash card pixels at obscene rates. Finally, after the battle had been waged without letup for more than 15 minutes, the Mew Gull got down and dirty and went after the Parasitic with ferocious tenacity, driving it completely out of the area. It was an auspicious start to the tour!

The remainder of that first afternoon included gorgeous Red Knots and Black-bellied Plovers in high breeding plumage, Rock Sandpipers, Snow Buntings, and both Rock and Willow ptarmigan. The next day was spent on the Kougarok Road, a day of fabulous scenery, exceptional birding, and magnificent big game. We thrilled to moose and musk ox, delighted in nesting Gyrfalcon and Golden Eagle, and high-fived over Arctic Warblers and a male Bluethroat, all the while trying not to stop too often for a continuous parade of thicket birds, ranging from Wilson's Warblers and Gray-cheeked Thrushes to Yellow Wagtails, Hoary Redpolls, and Golden-crowned Sparrows. Our picnic lunch in the Pilgrim River drainage was enlivened by a locally rare Black-capped Chickadee and singing Blackpoll Warblers, and topped off by a Northern Goshawk on a nest. Then it

was off to Coffee Dome, where we split the group. Dave took the folks who had carried over from our Gambell-Nome tour (and who had successfully hiked for the Bristle-thighed Curlew a few days earlier) on a further exploration to the end of the Kougarok Road, while I took everyone else on a hike in search of the Bristle-thighed Curlew. We duplicated the success of the earlier group, making first contact with the curlew in a mere 42 minutes, and eventually working our way to exceptional close studies of one of the rarest and most localized breeding birds in all of North America. On the way back into town, we stopped for a close pair of Rusty Blackbirds, and again for a pair of Northern Shrikes, the male of which put on an exceptional display of hovering and mandible-clacking in response to playback.

The next day found us exploring the Council Road, particularly the fabulous Safety Lagoon area, where Aleutian Terns competed for our attention with a pair of rare Arctic Loons and a close fly-by Yellow-billed Loon. Abundant Common Eiders, mystical Short-eared Owls, perky Northern Wheatears, and a plethora of shorebirds, waterfowl, gulls, and jaegers kept us occupied for the rest of the day.

Then the fun started. For our Monday flight to Anchorage, we got as far as security screening. The incoming flight made two attempts at finding the runway, and then turned around and headed back to Nome. When the afternoon and evening flights canceled as well, we were officially stuck. To make matters worse, the soonest we could re-book for was Wednesday morning, because there was already an unbelievable backlog of passengers who had been trying to get out of Nome for the past three days. And we were not alone. At least three other birding groups were in the same boat, while others were stuck in Anchorage, still trying to get to Nome. So, we bided our time, and continued birding the Nome area through the fog, even scoring some real treats, such as Slaty-backed Gull, Sabine's Gull, a rare (here) Common Loon, and a completely lost pair of Barn Swallows, as well as a nesting pair of American Dippers. By the time our flight arrived on Wednesday morning, we had the menus of every restaurant in Nome committed to memory! As it turned out, we were the lucky ones—other groups originally scheduled for our same flight didn't make it out until Thursday night or Friday morning, having already lost whole chunks of their Alaska itineraries in the process.

Upon arrival in Anchorage, we hit the ground running, trying to make up for lost time. We had already lost one day off the Denali Highway portion of our tour, and we were facing a long drive starting in early afternoon just to get to our lodge. The scenery along the Glenn and Richardson Highways was spectacular, and we made some select stops for photo-ops and special birds, among the former the spectacular Matanuska Glacier, and among the latter, Trumpeter Swans and Barrow's Goldeneyes. No stop was more special than when eagle-eyed Cheryl spotted a Northern Hawk Owl atop a telephone pole, resulting in scope-filling views for all of this classic taiga bird. We pulled into the Tangle River Inn in time for a fashionably late salmon dinner, and then hit the sack with visions of Smith's Longspurs dancing in our heads. Those visions became reality the next morning, when we delighted in no less than four males and one female of these handsome and localized breeders. Our hike across the alpine tundra for the longspurs was truly magical, and a true trip highlight. Further exploration of the Denali Highway provided us

with spectacular views of multiple Trumpeter Swans, point-blank studies of Arctic Warblers, a most inquisitive red fox, caribou, and some of the most dazzling views of the Alaska Range that anyone could ask for. All too soon it was time to leave and head back to Anchorage.

Next up was St. Paul Island (the Pribilofs). Our flight out was uneventful, and we were barely on the ground before we had tallied our first Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches, one of the few landbird species on the island. But we had not come to this tiny island in the middle of the Bering Sea for landbirds. We were here for the fabulous bird cliffs, where thousands of alcids, cormorants, kittiwakes, and fulmars breed cheek-to-jowl, and offer up intimate studies and countless photo-ops for camera-carrying birders. We reveled in scope-filling comparisons of Common and Thick-billed murres, Black-legged and Red-legged kittiwakes, Horned and Tufted puffins, and more cute little auklets than you could shake a stick at. In between visits to the cliffs, we tallied a male Eurasian Wigeon, a pair of dandy Red-necked Stints, a spectacular female Red Phalarope and an even more spectacular drake King Eider, some frustratingly elusive Ancient Murrelets, hundreds of dapper Harlequin Ducks, a cooperative Slaty-backed Gull, a spectacular feeding concentration of several hundred Northern Fulmars just off the beach, and crippling views of a most obliging Winter Wren. And then, just to keep us from going into orbit, the fog set in. Yep, another canceled flight and another day of retracing familiar routes, but hey—at least we got to eat more delicious fresh halibut! Fortunately, we were only delayed one extra day, and the delay only cost us our flex day in Anchorage. We made it out the following day, and we were all happy to be through with internal flights for the duration of the main tour.

Our final leg saw us driving to Seward, and birding en route. A stop at Westchester Lagoon yielded Hudsonian Godwits and Alder Flycatcher, and various stops along the scenic Seward Highway produced a pair of Pine Grosbeaks and a pair of nesting Three-toed Woodpeckers. The weather gods had one last, cruel trick in store for us, whipping up the seas so much that our boat trip to Kenai Fjords on the following day couldn't make it out of Resurrection Bay. This cost us a few species, as well as our planned viewing of Northwest Glacier, but we salvaged the day with a spectacular pod of orcas, close humpback whales, bunches of Marbled Murrelets, close Black Oystercatchers, and some pretty entertaining sea otters and Steller's sea lions. Land-based birding around Seward allowed us to clean up a number of missing passerines, among them Boreal and Chestnut-backed chickadees. On the drive back to Anchorage we hit paydirt when I spotted an elegant male Spruce Grouse just off the side of a campground road. We had beat the bushes in vain for this bird just 48 hours earlier, and now we had one at our feet without any effort whatsoever. It was truly an exceptional end to a most successful tour, in spite of some exceptionally difficult weather.

All in all, a most congenial group of birders got to see a bunch of great birds and mammals, and we had a lot of fun doing it. You all were great sports about dealing with the frustrations that were simply out of our control. Dave and I are already looking forward to next year's trip, but this time, without the fog!

Itinerary:

- 6/12 - night in Anchorage
6/13 - fly to Nome, meet with leaders and participants continuing on from the Gambell-Nome Tour; afternoon/evening birding along the Teller Road to Woolley Lagoon
6/14 - All day birding on the Kougarok Road.
6/15 - All day birding on the Council Road, to about MP 50.
6/16 - morning wasted attempting to fly back to Anchorage; p.m. excursion to Penny River to see American Dippers. No flights out today.
6/17 - No flights out today. Birding out Council Road to East Fork of Solomon River, and Kougarok road as far as the dump.
6/18 - Escape from Nome on 0958 flight to Anchorage; left Anchorage at ca. 1400 hours to drive up Glenn Hwy. to Glenallen, and then up Richardson Hwy. to Paxson, and then out the Denali Hwy. 20 miles to Tangle River Inn; opportunistic birding en route.
6/19 - morning birding on east end of Denali Hwy.; late afternoon drive back to Anchorage
6/20 - Noon flight to St. Paul Island (the Pribilofs), arriving at about 1600 hours. Birded Weather Bureau Lake, East Landing, the harbor area, and Ridgewall rookery.
6/21 - all day on St. Paul
6/22 - No flights in or out of St. Paul due to fog. All day birding on St. Paul
6/23 - More morning birding on St. Paul, with afternoon flight back to Anchorage.
6/24 - early morning birding in Anchorage at Westchester Lagoon, followed by drive to Seward, with various short stops en route, including Granite Creek Campground and Summit Lake.
6/25 - morning boat trip through Resurrection Bay; afternoon birding around Seward
6/26 - Seward back to Anchorage, with morning birding around Seward and Trail River Campground.
6/27 - flights home or continuing on to Barrow Extension

Key:

- A = Anchorage area (to Girdwood on the Seward Hwy., and to Palmer on the Glenn Hwy.)
D = Denali region (from Palmer to Glenallen on the Glenn Hwy., from Glenallen to Paxson on the Richardson Hwy., and all along the Denali Hwy., including Tangle River Inn and vicinity)
K = Kenai Peninsula (from Girdwood to Seward and back, and the Kenai Fjords boat trip)
N = Nome region
P = Pribilofs (specifically St. Paul Island)
* = heard only

Birds:

- Snow Goose - N
Brant - N (all typical western birds, formerly known as “Black Brant”)

Cackling Goose - N, P (the breeding birds at Nome were of the large subspecies *taverneri*; the 8 visitors at St. Paul were of the small, Aleutian-breeding subspecies, *leucopareia*. Recently split from Canada Goose.)
Canada Goose - A
Trumpeter Swan - D
Tundra Swan - N
Gadwall - A (1 male at Potter Marsh)
Eurasian Wigeon - P (a male at Pumphouse Lake)
American Wigeon - N, D, A
Northern Shoveler - N, D, A
Mallard - N, D, A
Northern Pintail - N, D, P, A
Green-winged Teal - N, D, P, A (subspecies *carolinensis*, the widespread North American form)
“Eurasian Teal” - P (Formerly treated as a separate subspecies, *nimia*, of Siberia, now subsumed with nominate *crecca* of the western Palearctic. This split {from Green-winged Teal} is still not recognized by the AOU.)
Ring-necked Duck - N (Rare here. We had a nice male near the Snake River.), D
Greater Scaup - N, D, P, A
Lesser Scaup - A, D
King Eider - P (A beautiful adult male off North Point.)
Common Eider - N
Harlequin Duck - N, D, P, K (Including some rather large flocks of 100+ birds.)
Surf Scoter - D, K
Black Scoter - N
Long-tailed Duck - N, D, P
Barrow’s Goldeneye - D, A, K (Including several elegant males.)
Common Merganser - N, K
Red-breasted Merganser - N
Spruce Grouse - K (A fabulous male on our last day was a fitting finale!)
Willow Ptarmigan - N
Rock Ptarmigan - N
Red-throated Loon - N
Arctic Loon - N (A pair of birds seen nicely at Safety Lagoon, in the same general area where a pair has been most springs for many years. A rare and localized presumed breeder in this part of western Alaska.)
Pacific Loon - N, K
Common Loon - N (a rarity here), K
Yellow-billed Loon - N
Horned Grebe - D
Red-necked Grebe - N, D, A
Northern Fulmar - P (Hard to forget that amazing feeding frenzy at the outflow area, where we counted a minimum of 48 dark morph birds, which, in turn, were outnumbered by light morph birds by at least a 9:1 ratio.)
Double-crested Cormorant - K
Red-faced Cormorant - P, K

Pelagic Cormorant - N, P, K
 Bald Eagle - D, K
 Northern Harrier - N, D
Northern Goshawk - N (A bird on a nest, with at least 2 chicks. This is only the 2nd documented nesting record for the entire Seward Peninsula.)
 Red-tailed Hawk - D (this form was formerly known as “Harlan’s Hawk”)
 Rough-legged Hawk - N
 Golden Eagle - N, D
 Merlin - A (Leaders only. A bird that shot over the hotel and landed in a tree near the parking lot while we were unloading the vans on the last day.)
Gyrfalcon - N (Scope studies of a bird on the nest.)
 Peregrine Falcon - N
 Sandhill Crane - N, P (A flock of 8 was a surprise here.)
 Black-bellied Plover - N (Gorgeous in full breeding plumage!)
 American Golden-Plover - N, D
Pacific Golden-Plover - N
 Semipalmated Plover - N
 Black Oystercatcher - K
 Spotted Sandpiper - N
 Solitary Sandpiper - D (Excellent studies of a pair, perched in spruce trees!)
 Wandering Tattler - N, P
 Greater Yellowlegs - A
 Lesser Yellowlegs - N, D, A
 Whimbrel - N, D
Bristle-thighed Curlew - N (Excellent studies of this localized specialty.)
 Hudsonian Godwit - A
Bar-tailed Godwit - N (Watching the aerial dogfight between the nesting pair and the Parasitic Jaeger was one of the trip highlights!)
 Ruddy Turnstone - N
 Red Knot - N (Beautiful studies of breeding plumaged birds.)
 Semipalmated Sandpiper - N
 Western Sandpiper - N
Red-necked Stint - P (2 birds in high breeding plumage were an unexpected treat.)
Rock Sandpiper - N (2 on territory along the Teller Road on 6/4 were of the Seward Peninsula breeding race *tschuktschorum*), P (the resident nominate race, *ptilocnemis*)
 Dunlin - N
 Short-billed Dowitcher - A
 Wilson’s Snipe - N, A
 Red-necked Phalarope - N, D, P
Red Phalarope - P (A migrant everywhere on our itinerary, and not usually present this late in spring.)
 Bonaparte’s Gull - D
 Mew Gull - N, D, A, K
 Herring Gull - N, D, P (Birds at Nome and St. Paul were of the subspecies *vegae*, treated by some taxonomists as a distinct species, Vega Gull. 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.)

Slaty-backed Gull - N, P (One adult and one 2nd-year bird at Nome, plus a well-behaved adult at St. Paul.)

Glaucous-winged Gull - P, K

Glaucous Gull - N

Sabine's Gull - N (high of 15+ birds on 6/17)

Black-legged Kittiwake - N, P, K

Red-legged Kittiwake - P (The best studies of the most individuals that we've ever had!)

Aleutian Tern - N

Arctic Tern - N, D, K, A

Pomarine Jaeger - N (A migrant here.)

Parasitic Jaeger - N, P

Long-tailed Jaeger - N, D

Common Murre - N, P, K

Thick-billed Murre - N, P

Pigeon Guillemot - K

Marbled Murrelet - K

Ancient Murrelet - P

Parakeet Auklet - P

Least Auklet - P

Crested Auklet - P

Horned Puffin - P, K

Tufted Puffin - P, K

Rock Pigeon - A, K

Short-eared Owl - N (Nice studies.)

Downy Woodpecker - A

American Three-toed Woodpecker - K (Feeding young at the nest.)

Northern Flicker - D, K

Olive-sided Flycatcher - K

Western Wood-Pewee - D, K

Alder Flycatcher - N, D, A

Say's Phoebe - N

Northern Shrike - N (A fabulous performance by a very territorial pair.)

Gray Jay - D

Steller's Jay - K

Black-billed Magpie - A, D, K

Northwestern Crow - K (Including 2 birds at Girdwood, where we also saw them the past two years.)

Common Raven - N, D, K

Horned Lark - N (subspecies *arctica*, with an extensively rufous nape)

Tree Swallow - N, D, K

Violet-green Swallow - A, K

Bank Swallow - N, D, A

Cliff Swallow - N, D

Barn Swallow - N (A pair at Solomon on 6/17 was an unexpected find.)
 Black-capped Chickadee - N (Rare here.), A
 Chestnut-backed Chickadee - K (Spotted first by Judy.)
Boreal Chickadee - K (Good spotting Phil!)
 Red-breasted Nuthatch - K
 Brown Creeper - K*
 Winter Wren - P, K
 American Dipper - N
 Golden-crowned Kinglet - K
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet - K
Arctic Warbler - N, D (It was great fun to be here after the bulk of the Alaskan population was already on territory!)
Bluethroat - N (Nice views!)
Northern Wheatear - N (Multiple birds this year)
 Gray-cheeked Thrush - N, D
 Swainson's Thrush - D
 Hermit Thrush - K
 American Robin - N, A, D, K
 Varied Thrush - K
 European Starling - A (Still a rarity in southern Alaska.)
Eastern Yellow Wagtail - N
 American Pipit - N (subspecies *pacificus*)
 Orange-crowned Warbler - N, A, D, K
 Yellow Warbler - N, D, K
 Yellow-rumped Warbler - D, K
 Townsend's Warbler - K
 Blackpoll Warbler - N, D
 Northern Waterthrush - N
 Wilson's Warbler - N, D, K
 American Tree Sparrow - N, D
 Savannah Sparrow - N, D
 Fox Sparrow - N, D, K (2 very different types, including very red birds at Nome {subspecies *zaboria*} and very sooty ones at Seward {subspecies *sinuosa*}. Keep your eye on this complex for possible splits.)
 Song Sparrow - K
 Lincoln's Sparrow - K
 White-crowned Sparrow - N, D, A
 Golden-crowned Sparrow - N, K
 Dark-eyed Junco - D, K
 Lapland Longspur - N, D, P
Smith's Longspur - D (At least 4 males and 1 female – sensational studies!)
 Snow Bunting - N, P (more common than usual)
 Red-winged Blackbird - A
 Rusty Blackbird - N
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch - P
Pine Grosbeak - K

Common Redpoll - D
Hoary Redpoll - N
Pine Siskin - K

Total = 164 species (Not including Eurasian Teal and Vega Gull, each of which is considered a separate species by some taxonomists. This total is probably 10-20 birds shy of what we would normally expect, due entirely to the myriad weather problems that caused us to miss half of our time in the Denali region, our birding day out of Anchorage, and half of our boat trip out of Seward. All things considered, it was a very respectable species count.)

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - N, D
Western Red Squirrel - D, K
Tundra Vole - N
Beaver - N, D
Snowshoe Hare - N, D
Least Weasel - N (leader only)
Arctic Fox - P
Red Fox - N, D
Sea Otter - K
Steller's Sea Lion - P, K
Northern Fur Seal - P
Harbor Seal - P
Dall Sheep - A
Barren Ground Caribou - D
Reindeer - N
Moose - N, D
Musk Ox - N
Humpback Whale - K
Orca (Killer Whale) - K

Total = 19 species