

GRAND ALASKA

JUNE 3 – 18, 2007

LEADERS: KEVIN ZIMMER & DAVID WOLF

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Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

GRAND ALASKA TOUR BIRDLIST

June 4–18, 2007

(LEADERS: Kevin Zimmer & David Wolf)

By any measure, this year's Grand Alaska tour was a huge success. The weather was mostly cooperative, we did well in finding many of the toughest breeding specialties, and we were treated to some exciting Asiatic vagrants.

As always, Nome got things off to a rousing start. A trip out the Teller Road on our first afternoon gave us a nice introduction to birds of the alpine tundra, with stunning views of breeding-plumaged Red Knots and Rock Sandpipers, not to mention Rock Ptarmigan, Northern Wheatear, and Snow Buntings. Elegant Black-bellied, Pacific Golden, and American Golden plovers in high breeding plumage were also a treat, as were a close herd of musk ox.

The next day found us on the Council Road, where Bar-tailed Godwits, a stunning Peregrine Falcon, numerous Aleutian Terns, an eerie Short-eared Owl, and a wonderful array of waterfowl that included a male Eurasian Wigeon were just a few of the many highlights. A hike across a flower-blanketed, alpine dome produced a group of Surfbirds and another herd of musk ox. This herd, upon becoming aware of our presence, went into the classic "circle the wagons" defensive posture, which wasn't enough to prevent one feisty little baby from getting out front and center. A pair of Gyrfalcons, the female impressively larger than the male, provided the proverbial icing on the cake.

On our final full day in the Nome area, we split the group. My co-leader, David Wolf, took half of the group up the Kougarok Road, which is hands-down my favorite birding road in North America. Predictably, they were treated to spectacular scenery as well as stellar views of such specialty birds as Bluethroat, Bristle-thighed Curlew, and Yellow Wagtail, and even picked up a Slaty-backed Gull at the landfill as a major bonus. Since the other half of our participants were carrying over from the Gambell-Nome tour and had already spent a full and very successful day on the Kougarok Road, we offered them an option of going farther out the Council Road than we had previously been on either tour, just to cover some new ground. In going all the way to Council, we ended up visiting the only spruce forest in the Nome region, with nice looks at Boreal Chickadees and Varied Thrushes as our reward. Along the way, we were treated to a dazzling male Bluethroat engaged in repeated skylarking bouts, as well as another obliging Northern Wheatear, close walk-up views of a number of Sabine's Gulls along the coast, and a singing Arctic Warbler.

The Pribilofs were next in line, and we hit the ground running. An Eyebrowed Thrush had blown in on a west wind just hours before our arrival, and our first excursion became a surgical strike directed at seeing this rare vagrant. The bird cooperated, and in no time

all of us had secured scope views. A male Tufted Duck, a Black-headed Gull, and a Common Snipe were all good pick-ups, and we braced ourselves for the always-hoped-for “Siberian Express” to drop more vagrants into our laps. Unfortunately, the Siberian Express must have been derailed, for despite three consecutive days of strong winds out of the west, the only additional vagrant to show was a Whimbrel of the Asiatic subspecies *variegatus*. In spite of this, we contented ourselves with a spectacular show of Ancient Murrelets (some 40+ of which were concentrated in the harbor), a male Steller’s Eider, and the usual extravaganza of cliff-nesting alcids, Red-legged Kittiwakes, and Red-faced Cormorants, not to mention hundreds of Harlequin Ducks.

A day-trip up the Glenn Highway from Anchorage yielded perched Bohemian Waxwings, a most responsive American Three-toed Woodpecker, and a very vocal pair of Trumpeter Swans, among other gems. Our subsequent foray into the Denali region was as notable for mammals as for birds. From a rarity standpoint, the distant wolverine seen from the shuttle bus was tops, but, for most people, the spectacle of a lone black wolf in hot pursuit of a female caribou and calf for hundreds of meters was the show-stealer. We were denied (some would say spared) the sight of the actual kill, but we can be pretty sure of the outcome. On our return drive, we spotted the wolf calmly feeding on something in the same valley where we had previously seen it gaining on the calf. Five grizzlies rounded out our list of spectacular predatory mammals for the day. There were birds to be seen as well. A Gyrfalcon perched atop Marmot Rock on Polychrome Pass was most satisfying, whereas a male Spruce Grouse that scampered across the road before most of our group could see it was not. The Denali Highway yielded nice scope views of White-winged Crossbills and a very territorial Arctic Warbler, which caught up everyone in the group on this Alaskan specialty.

As always, we ended our tour by birding the Kenai Peninsula from Anchorage to Seward. Anchorage treated us to nice looks at a number of typical boreal forest birds, from Olive-sided Flycatchers and Boreal Chickadees to Swainson’s Thrush, as well as a nice variety of breeding waterfowl, from both species of goldeneyes to Canvasbacks with downy ducklings. We also enjoyed nice studies of a black bear. Seward produced great views of Pine Grosbeak, Townsend’s Warbler, Varied Thrush, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, and Red Crossbill. We also enjoyed the antics of a vocal pair of Bald Eagles, one of which was seen carrying a Black-legged Kittiwake to its nest! A stunning male Barrow’s Goldeneye feeding placidly on a quiet pond and a female Common Merganser frantically escorting an adorable brood to safety along a rushing stream were equally memorable. Our visit to this region was capped by a boat trip to magnificent Kenai Fjords National Park, which, in addition to magnificent scenery, an actively calving tidewater glacier, a pod of orcas and multiple humpback whales, comical sea otters, and bow-riding Dall’s porpoises, yielded good views of Kittlitz’s and Marbled murrelets, a large raft of Short-tailed Shearwaters, and good numbers of Rhinoceros Auklets. Throw in a couple of excellent seafood dinners at Ray’s, and it was the perfect conclusion to our Grand Alaskan adventure.

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. Dave and I are already looking forward to next year's trip!

Itinerary:

- 6/03 - night in Anchorage
- 6/04 - 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
- 6/05 - all day on Council Rd. to MP #57 and back.
- 6/06 - Split the group: Dave took new Grand Alaska participants out the Kougarok Road for the Bristle-thighed Curlew and other Kougarok specialties; Kevin took the half of the group that were continuing on from the Gambell-Nome Tour {who had already birded the Kougarok} all the way to Council and back.
- 6/07 - morning flight to Anchorage, with late afternoon birding at Westchester Lagoon
- 6/08 - late morning flight to St. Paul (Pribilofs), with afternoon & evening birding
- 6/09 - all day birding on St. Paul
- 6/10 - morning on St. Paul; late afternoon flight back to Anchorage
- 6/11 - daytrip out of Anchorage up the Glenn Highway to MP 173 (Tolsona Wilderness Campground) and back.
- 6/12 - Anchorage to Denali, with various short stops en route.
- 6/13 - all-day shuttle bus excursion to Fish Creek, Denali NP; optional post-dinner excursion out Denali Highway to Seattle Creek.
- 6/14 - all morning birding on the Denali Hwy.; afternoon/evening drive back to Anchorage.
- 6/15 - early morning birding in Anchorage at Kincaid Park and Potter Marsh, followed by drive to Seward, with various short stops en Route, including Tern Lake, Summit Lake and Trail River Campground.
- 6/16 - all day boat trip through Kenai Fjords NP to Northwest Glacier
- 6/17 - Seward back to Anchorage, with morning birding around Seward and afternoon stops at Summit Lake and Granite Creek Campground.
- 6/18 - flights home or continuing on to Barrow Extension

Key:

- A = Anchorage area (to Girdwood on the Seward Hwy., and to Wasilla on the Parks Hwy.)
- D = Denali region (from Wasilla to Denali NP on the Parks Hwy., the park itself, and the Denali Hwy.)
- GH = Glenn Highway, from Palmer to MP 173 (Tolsona Wilderness Campground)
- 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:

Greater White-fronted Goose - N

Snow Goose - N (2 at Safety Sound on 6/5 were somewhat unusual for this late date)

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 2 visitors at St. Paul were of one of the small subspecies, probably *minima*. Recently split from Canada Goose.)

Canada Goose - A

Trumpeter Swan - GH, D (Multiple occasions, but best was the vocal pair on Tolsona Lake off the Glenn Highway.)

Tundra Swan - N

Gadwall - N, A (A minor rarity in the Nome area.)

Eurasian Wigeon - N (A male bird at Safety Lagoon)

American Wigeon - N, GH, D, A

Northern Shoveler - N, A, GH, D

Mallard - N, A, D, GH

Northern Pintail - N, P, A, D, GH

Green-winged Teal - N (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.)

Canvasback - N, A

Redhead - A

Ring-necked Duck - GH, A, D, K

Tufted Duck - P

Greater Scaup - N, A, GH, D

Lesser Scaup - N, GH, D

Steller’s Eider - P (a nice adult male; not expected here)

King Eider - N (beautiful adult male), P (females)

Common Eider - N

Harlequin Duck - N, P, K

Surf Scoter - N, GH, K

White-winged Scoter - N, D, GH

Black Scoter - N

Long-tailed Duck - N, P, D, K

Common Goldeneye - P, A

Barrow’s Goldeneye - A, D, K (including a beautiful male at Seward)

Common Merganser - N, D, K

Red-breasted Merganser - N, P

Spruce Grouse - D (A male seen by 4-5 people from the front of the shuttle bus.

Unfortunately, we couldn’t get the bus stopped in time, and the bird disappeared into the brush. Our best efforts to find this species on the Kenai Peninsula went for naught.)

Willow Ptarmigan - N, D

Rock Ptarmigan - N (Still rare after last year’s big crash, but we managed 2 males on the Teller Road on 6/4.)

Red-throated Loon - N
 Pacific Loon - N, A, GH, K
 Common Loon - GH, A, K
Yellow-billed Loon - N (still small numbers moving by offshore)
 Horned Grebe - N
 Red-necked Grebe - N, A, GH, K
 Northern Fulmar - P (light and dark morphs)
Short-tailed Shearwater - K (a nice raft of 50+ birds on the water right next to our boat)
 Double-crested Cormorant - K
Red-faced Cormorant - P, K
 Pelagic Cormorant - N, P, K
 Osprey - N
 Bald Eagle - GH, Dillingham, D, P, A, K
 Northern Harrier - N, D, GH
 Sharp-shinned Hawk - D
 Red-tailed Hawk - GH (this form was formerly known as "Harlan's Hawk")
 Rough-legged Hawk - N
 Golden Eagle - N, D, GH, K
 American Kestrel - GH
 Merlin - D
Gyr Falcon - N, D (Nice looks, particularly of the bird at Marmot Rock, Denali.)
 Peregrine Falcon - N
 Sandhill Crane - N, A
 Black-bellied Plover - N (gorgeous in full breeding plumage!)
 American Golden-Plover - N
Pacific Golden-Plover - N
 Semipalmated Plover - N, P, A
 Black Oystercatcher - K
 Spotted Sandpiper - N, A, D, GH
 Wandering Tattler - N, K
 Greater Yellowlegs - D
 Lesser Yellowlegs - D, GH
 Whimbrel - N
Bristle-thighed Curlew - N (nice views)
 Hudsonian Godwit - A
Bar-tailed Godwit - N, P
 Ruddy Turnstone - N, P
 Surfbird - N (A group of 5 birds that we kicked up on our hike across the dome on the Council Road)
 Red Knot - N (beautiful studies of breeding plumaged birds)
 Sanderling - N (1 at the Nome River Mouth on 6/5)
 Semipalmated Sandpiper - N
 Western Sandpiper - N
 Least Sandpiper - P
 Baird's Sandpiper - N

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

Long-billed Dowitcher - N

Common Snipe - P (The true status of this Eurasian species – recently split from Wilson’s Snipe of North America – in Alaska has yet to be determined. All of the snipe on the Alaskan mainland are Wilson’s. Migrant snipe to the Alaskan islands can be either Wilson’s or Commons. It appears that Common Snipe may be the more common of the two species on the outer islands of the Aleutian chain, and possibly also in the Pribilofs.)

Wilson’s Snipe - N, D, A, K

Red-necked Phalarope - N, GH, P, A, D

Red Phalarope - P, K

Black-headed Gull - P

Bonaparte’s Gull - A, D, GH

Mew Gull - N, A, GH, D, K

Herring Gull - N, GH (birds at Nome were of the subspecies *vegae*, treated by some taxonomists as a distinct species, Vega Gull. Birds seen along the GH 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 (a 2nd-year bird seen by Dave and half of the group at the landfill on the Kougarok Road)

Glaucous-winged Gull - A, P, K

Glaucous Gull - N, P

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

Black-legged Kittiwake - N, P, K

Red-legged Kittiwake - P

Aleutian Tern - N

Arctic Tern - N, A, GH, K

Parasitic Jaeger - N, P, K

Long-tailed Jaeger - N, P

Common Murre - N, P, K

Thick-billed Murre - N, P

Pigeon Guillemot - N, P, K

Marbled Murrelet - K

Kittlitz’s Murrelet - K (great views)

Ancient Murrelet - P (40–50 birds in the harbor were unprecedented, and gave spectacular views!), K

Parakeet Auklet - P

Least Auklet - P

Crested Auklet - P

Rhinoceros Auklet - K

Horned Puffin - P, K

Tufted Puffin - P, K

Rock Pigeon - A

Great Horned Owl - D (good spotting Ellen!)
 Short-eared Owl - N
 Rufous Hummingbird - K
 Belted Kingfisher - A
 Hairy Woodpecker - A, D
American Three-toed Woodpecker - GH, K, D* (great looks for all)
 Northern Flicker - GH, D
 Olive-sided Flycatcher - GH, A
 Western Wood-Pewee - GH, A
 Alder Flycatcher - A, GH, D, K*
 Say's Phoebe - N
 Gray Jay - D
 Steller's Jay - K
 Black-billed Magpie - A, GH, D, K
Northwestern Crow - K (including 1–2 birds at Girdwood, where we also saw them last year)
 Common Raven - N, P, A, GH, D, K
 Horned Lark - N (subspecies *arctica*, with an extensively rufous nape)
 Tree Swallow - N, A, GH, K
 Violet-green Swallow - A, K
 Bank Swallow - N, P, A, K
 Cliff Swallow - N, GH, D, K
 Black-capped Chickadee - A
 Chestnut-backed Chickadee - K
Boreal Chickadee - N, GH, A (repeated great looks)
 Red-breasted Nuthatch - K
 Brown Creeper - K*
 Winter Wren - P*
 American Dipper - N
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet - N*, A, GH, D
Arctic Warbler - N, D (Great views of what was probably one of the first-arriving individuals on the Seward Highway, since there was no sign of the bird in the same spot the evening before!)
Bluethroat - N (dynamite views!)
Northern Wheatear - N (multiple birds this year)
 Gray-cheeked Thrush - N, D, GH
 Swainson's Thrush - A, D*
 Hermit Thrush - GH, K
Eye-browed Thrush - P (nice studies of this vagrant)
 American Robin - N, A, GH, D, K
 Varied Thrush - N, D, K
 European Starling - GH (Palmer) (still a rarity in southern Alaska)
Eastern Yellow Wagtail - N
 American Pipit - N (subspecies *pacificus*)
Bohemian Waxwing - GH
 Orange-crowned Warbler - N, A, GH, D, K

Yellow Warbler - N, GH, D*, K
 Yellow-rumped Warbler - N, GH, A, D, K
 Townsend's Warbler - K
 Blackpoll Warbler - N, D, GH
 Northern Waterthrush - N, A, D*
 Wilson's Warbler - N, GH, D, A, K
 American Tree Sparrow - N, D, GH
 Savannah Sparrow - N, A, GH, 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 - A, K
 White-crowned Sparrow - N, GH, A, D, K
 Golden-crowned Sparrow - N, K
 Dark-eyed Junco - N*, A, GH, D, K
 Lapland Longspur - N, P
 Snow Bunting - N, P (more common than usual)
 Red-winged Blackbird - A
 Rusty Blackbird - N
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch - P
Pine Grosbeak - K
 Red Crossbill - K (Several birds coming to feeders in Seward were an unexpected treat.)
White-winged Crossbill - D
Common Redpoll - N, D, A, G
Hoary Redpoll - N
 Pine Siskin - K

Total = 182 species (not including Eurasian Teal and Vega Gull, each of which is considered a separate species by some taxonomists)

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - N, D
 Western Red Squirrel - D, K
 Beaver - D
 Porcupine - D
 Snowshoe Hare - D
 Arctic Fox - P
 Red Fox - N, D
 Wolf - D (a lone melanistic individual chasing a caribou cow and calf)
 Wolverine - D (distant, but identifiable)
 Black Bear - A
 Brown Bear (Grizzly) - N, D
 Sea Otter - K
 Steller's Sea Lion - K

Northern Fur Seal - P
Harbor Seal - K
Dall Sheep - D
Mountain Goat - K
Barren Ground Caribou - D
Reindeer - N
Moose - N, D
Musk Ox - N
Dall Porpoise - K
Humpback Whale - K
Orca (Killer Whale) - K

Total = 24 species