

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.**

**GAMBELL/NOME, ALASKA TOUR BIRDLIST**

**June 4–11, 2005**

**(LEADERS: Kevin Zimmer & David Wolf + Rich Macintosh at Nome)**

Our 2005 Gambell/Nome tour started on a down note, with the news that there were no Boreal or Northern Saw-whet Owls still on nests in Anchorage. In most years, we get our tour off to a roaring start by seeing both species on our first night in Anchorage. Luck was with us the next day, when our flights to Nome and Gambell went off without a hitch (meaning no weather delays). In stark contrast to some trips, the weather that greeted us at Gambell was really pretty mild. However, we also knew from speaking with other groups that had preceded us, that there hadn't been any sustained westerly winds, which didn't bode well for our vagrant chances. In fact, very few Siberian vagrants had been recorded by anyone this spring, a reflection of prevailing weather patterns that had produced mostly north and east winds. We were heartened by reports of a shift to westerly winds that coincided with our arrival, and could only hope that the shift would be sustained long enough to produce some vagrants. On the morning following our arrival, we got off to an auspicious start with a close pair of Common Ringed Plovers at the airport pond. This species is a rare but regular visitor/breeder at Gambell, and one of the most difficult of North American breeding birds to find. We were treated to prolonged close-range studies. While we were watching the plovers, a beautiful Red-throated Pipit in high breeding plumage dropped out of the sky and into the marsh. It proved more elusive, and flew before everyone could get good looks, but we caught up with it again in the marsh at the northeast corner of Troutman Lake, and this time, everyone saw it well. In this same corner of the lake we enjoyed lengthy point-blank views of a Gray-tailed Tattler that was so intent on snatching minnows from a feeder spring at the lake edge that it appeared oblivious to us. The tattler completed a most successful morning, but, alas, the winds shifted again to the northeast, effectively ending our chances at further vagrants.

Fortunately, Gambell is about much more than just Siberian vagrants. Sea watches from Northwest Point are always a high point of birding here, and this year was no different. The daily commutes of hundreds of thousands of alcids past the Point is spectacle enough to justify the trip, but it is accentuated by the excitement that comes with never knowing what will fly by next. Yellow-billed and Arctic Loons, Emperor Goose, all four eiders, all three jaegers, Harlequin Ducks, Sabine's and Slaty-backed Gulls – all came past at one time or another during our watches. Displaying Rock Sandpipers in the boneyards, an elusive White Wagtail that had a habit of popping up suddenly and then disappearing just as quickly, breeding-plumaged Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs that serenaded us on every walk, lengthy scope studies of as many as 9 Dovekies cavorting on the snow fields of the lower mountain slopes, and a most cooperative Emperor Goose that dropped in on our last evening were all part of the excitement of being here.

A trip to Gambell is always memorable, as much for its glimpse into Bering Sea culture and the adventure of birding one of America's few remaining frontiers as for any birds seen. It will be hard to forget late-night views of the snow-capped peaks of the Russian Far East glimmering in the distance, strips of blackened seal and walrus drying on traditional drying racks, ATVs humming across the landscape, seemingly endless treks through soft gravel, stubbing our toes on walrus skulls while birding the boneyards, and, of course, "Ya wanna buy some carvings?"

Nome was a different world, but was equally good to us. We thrilled to repeated close views of such specialties as Bluethroat, Arctic Warbler, Northern Wheatear, Bar-tailed Godwit and Aleutian Tern, sandwiched around spectacular large mammals such as Moose, Reindeer and Musk Ox. A Mink being dive-bombed by everything from Arctic Terns to Hoary Redpolls was one of the highlights of our day on the Kougarok Road, as were our close studies of Bristle-thighed Curlew. Ptarmigan populations had clearly crashed, a regular part of their population fluctuations that was inevitable after the past several years of abundance. We still managed to find a couple of nice Willows, but Rock Ptarmigan eluded us during our short time here.

A trip to this region always highlights the ephemeral, transient nature of birding in the arctic and subarctic regions. Rare birds arrive without warning and leave without notice; conditions are optimal one moment and inhospitable the next. One has to admire the feathered wanderers that return again and again from more hospitable climes to fulfill their reproductive destinies in lands that can be so capriciously unpredictable and unforgiving. Seemingly fragile, always restless, they strike out each spring for this land at the edge of the Bering Sea. And each spring, we wait, anticipating their arrivals, and reveling in our unexpected discoveries. It is a drama that I look forward to repeating, year-after-year, with undiminished anticipation.

#### Itinerary:

- 6/04 - met in Anchorage
- 6/05 - morning flight to Nome and then on to Gambell; afternoon and evening birding at Gambell
- 6/06 - Gambell
- 6/07 - Gambell
- 6/08 - Gambell
- 6/09 - morning birding at Gambell followed by early afternoon flight to Nome; afternoon and early evening birding on Council Road to Safety Sound
- 6/10 - all day on Kougarok Road
- 6/11 - early morning birding outskirts of Nome; return for late morning flight to Anchorage for several group members; others continued on Grand Alaska Tour

Key:

G = Gambell

N = Nome area

\* = heard only

Birds:

Red-throated Loon - G, N

**Arctic Loon** - G (nice looks at a couple of fly-bys at the Point)

Pacific Loon - G, N

**Yellow-billed Loon** - G (fewer than normal, but some nice fly-bys)

Red-necked Grebe - N

Northern Fulmar - G

Pelagic Cormorant - G

Tundra Swan - G, N

Snow Goose - N (1 white morph that flew past on 6/09 was late for this species)

**Emperor Goose** - G (rare on-the-ground looks at this beautiful goose)

Cackling Goose - N (birds in this region belong to the subspecies *taverneri*, which is large compared to other members of this recently split {from Canada Goose} species. They are confusingly like the *parvipes* subspecies of Canada Goose, which does not occur here.)

Brant - G, N (these were all typical western birds, formerly called "Black Brant")

**Eurasian Wigeon** - G

American Wigeon - G, N

Green-winged Teal - G, N (all of the widespread North American race *carolinensis*)

Mallard - N (an uncommon to rare bird here)

Northern Pintail - G, N

Northern Shoveler - N

Greater Scaup - G, N

Lesser Scaup - N (at least 8 birds at Safety Lagoon on 6/9; a rarity in Nome)

Common Eider - G, N

**King Eider** - G

**Spectacled Eider** - G (one group of 5 that flew past the Point was our only record)

**Steller's Eider** - G

Harlequin Duck - G, N

Long-tailed Duck - G, N

Black Scoter - G, N

White-winged Scoter - G, N

Common Goldeneye - G, N (rare at either locality)

Red-breasted Merganser - G, N

Common Merganser - G (rare here)

Northern Harrier - N

Rough-legged Hawk - N

Golden Eagle - N

**Gyrfalcon** - N (on the nest)

**Willow Ptarmigan** - N (very few compared to the last several years. Obviously a down year in their regular cycle.)

Sandhill Crane - G, N

Pacific Golden-Plover - G, N

American Golden-Plover - N

**Common Ringed-Plover** - G (great studies)

Semipalmated Plover - G, N

Wilson's Snipe - G\*, N

Long-billed Dowitcher - G

**Bar-tailed Godwit** - N

Whimbrel - N

**Bristle-thighed Curlew** - N (Excellent views of this often hard-to-find species.)

Spotted Sandpiper - N

**Gray-tailed Tattler** - G (wonderful, prolonged studies)

Wandering Tattler - N

Black Turnstone - N

Semipalmated Sandpiper - N

Western Sandpiper - G

Baird's Sandpiper - G

Dunlin - G

**Rock Sandpiper** - G

Red-necked Phalarope - G, N

Red Phalarope - G, N

Pomarine Jaeger - G

Parasitic Jaeger - G, N

Long-tailed Jaeger - G, N (always one of the treats of birding Nome)

Mew Gull - N

Glaucous Gull - G, N

American Herring Gull - G, N (entirely of the Siberian race *vegae*, treated by some as a distinct species, and then called "Vega Gull".)

**Slaty-backed Gull** - G (scattered birds of different ages)

Sabine's Gull - G, N

Black-legged Kittiwake - G, N

Arctic Tern - N

**Aleutian Tern** - N

**Dovekie** - G (nice scope looks at a minimum of 9 birds on the hillside)

Common Murre - G, N

Thick-billed Murre - G

Black Guillemot - G

Pigeon Guillemot - G, N

**Ancient Murrelet** - G (uncommon to rare here)

**Parakeet Auklet** - G

**Least Auklet** - G

**Crested Auklet** - G

**Horned Puffin** - G

**Tufted Puffin** - G

Short-eared Owl - N  
 Tree Swallow - N  
 Bank Swallow - N  
 Cliff Swallow - N  
**White Wagtail** - G (increasingly difficult in recent years; seems to be a declining species in North America)  
**Eastern Yellow Wagtail** - G, N  
**Red-throated Pipit** - G (excellent views)  
 Gray-cheeked Thrush - N  
 American Robin - N  
 Varied Thrush - N\*  
**Arctic Warbler** - N (nice looks at this colonizer from the Old World)  
**Bluethroat** - G, N (a great show by a skylarking male, that perched at close range on several occasions)  
**Northern Wheatear** - N  
 Common Raven - G, N  
 Common Redpoll - N  
**Hoary Redpoll** - G, N  
 Orange-crowned Warbler - N  
 Yellow Warbler - N  
 Blackpoll Warbler - N  
 Northern Waterthrush - N  
 Wilson's Warbler - N  
 American Tree Sparrow - N  
 Savannah Sparrow - N  
 Fox Sparrow - N (subspecies *zaboria*; one of the "Red" types)  
 White-crowned Sparrow - N  
 Golden-crowned Sparrow - N  
 Lapland Longspur - G, N  
 Snow Bunting - G  
 Rusty Blackbird - N

**Total = 108 species**

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - G, N  
 Brown Lemming or Tundra Vole (identity uncertain) - G  
 Beaver - N  
 Musk Ox - N  
 Moose - N  
 Reindeer - N  
 Minke Whale - G  
 Gray Whale - G  
 Humpback Whale - G

Seal sp. - N  
Walrus - G (Dave & Sharon)  
Arctic Fox - G  
Red Fox - N  
Mink - N (being dive-bombed by several species of birds)