

ALASKA: BARROW EXTENSION

JUNE 18 – 20, 2011

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GRAND ALASKA: BARROW EXTENSION

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This year's Barrow Extension to our Grand Alaska tour was simultaneously unremarkable and remarkable. The few rarities that had turned up earlier in the month were no longer around, and our short stay yielded no additional oddities. What's more, there was very little evidence of continued migration of even common/regular migrants, and, to top it all off, it was clearly a "down" year for lemmings and their major predators (Snowy Owls and Pomarine Jaegers).

Enough said for the unremarkable part. Despite a lack of the unexpected, we were treated to so much of what makes this High Arctic location truly remarkable, and given persistent sunshine and temperatures in the mid-high 40s, we had the nice weather that allowed us to enjoy our time out of the bus, including a few lovely stomps across the wet tundra. Most importantly, we scored breeding plumaged males of all four species of eiders, with spectacular, prolonged studies of each of the "Big 3" (Spectacled, Steller's, and King).

We were also treated to a barrage of breeding and displaying shorebirds, ranging from bizarre Pectoral Sandpipers and their otherworldly hooting, to dressy American Golden-Plovers, stunning Red Phalaropes, and singing Long-billed Dowitchers. Red-throated and Pacific loons in full breeding dress were also a treat, and the jaegers and Snowy Owls, although few in number, were much appreciated, as was the snappy Sabine's Gull that graced Freshwater Lake that first evening. All the while, we marveled at the spectacle of near shore ice (in this, the third week of June), midnight sun that never set, skeletal remains of multiple massive bowhead whales, the farthest north football field on the continent (and with blue artificial turf at that), and marshy tundra that swarmed with shorebirds and waterfowl for as far as we could see.

In summation, Barrow was simply Barrow, and you really do have to see it to believe it.

Itinerary:

6/18 - Met for lunch at the hotel in Anchorage, after which, we shuttled to the airport in time for our 4 p.m. flight to Barrow. Upon arrival, we secured our bus, checked in at the hotel and had the first of many meals at Pepe's. After dinner, we had an evening excursion of a couple hours out to the end of the Freshwater Lake Road. Night at Barrow.

6/19 - All day birding at Barrow, covering each of the three major roads out of town (Freshwater Lake Road, Gaswell & Cakeater Road, and the road to the Point). Night at Barrow.

6/20 - All day birding at Barrow (again covering each of the three major roads to the end), finishing in time for one last dinner at Pepe's before heading to the airport for our 8:10 p.m. flight back to Anchorage (arriving about 11:00 p.m.). Most folks chose to overnight at Anchorage, but at least one headed out on a red-eye.

6/21 - flights home

Birds:

Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) - Several seen each day (up to 15–20).

Brant (*Branta bernicla*) - Only 1 this year. {Subspecies *nigricans*, formerly known as "Black Brant."}

Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) - A few seen each day.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) - 2 (male & female); rare this far north.

Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) - Common, although fewer seen than on previous trips.

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca carolinensis*) - Small numbers.

Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) - Small numbers.

Steller's Eider (*Polysticta stelleri*) - Only two encounters, involving a lone male, followed later by a mated pair (probably involving the same male) in the same general vicinity along the Freshwater Lake Road. We enjoyed great studies on both occasions, but the views of the pair that resulted from our hike across the tundra were nothing short of, well, stellar.

Spectacled Eider (*Somateria fischeri*) - We scored a couple of birds on the first evening, and then, with the pressure off, found multiple birds (mostly adult males) on each of the other days as well, including some fabulous walk-off views of a couple of birds near the end of the Freshwater Lake Road, and a nice pair along the Gaswell Road. At least 8–10 different birds seen in total, taking into account that some individuals were undoubtedly seen on more than one occasion.

King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*) - Seen daily in small numbers, including fabulous studies of adult males.

Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima v-nigrum*) - This, the least common eider at Barrow, was seen only in the form of a small group that flew past us along the coast on the last day. {This subspecies, males of which have a bright orange-yellow bill, is quite different in appearance from eastern birds with their dull greenish bills. The Latin name is derived from a thin, black "V" framing the chin and throat of males (not easy to see in the field).}

Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) - Small numbers seen daily.

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) - Several pairs; seen daily.

Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) - A couple of pairs and some scattered individuals along the coast.

Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*) - 1 at the big lagoon near the beginning of the Gaswell Road.

American Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) - Fairly common.

Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) - 1 seen briefly along the coast road was our only one.

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) - 2 at the big muddy lagoon near the beginning of the Gaswell Road on 6/20 were our only ones.

Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*) - Common.

Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) - Several each day.

Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*) - Abundant.

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) - Fairly common.

Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) - Fairly common.

Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) - Common.

Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) - Common.

Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*) - Seen only at Freshwater Lake.

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) - Common.

Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) - Small numbers; mostly at Freshwater Lake.

Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) - A “down” year for lemmings also means a “down” year for Poms, but we still saw a few birds each day.

Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) - We saw perhaps 5 in total, mostly along the Gaswell Road.

Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) - In what was obviously a “down” year for both lemmings and owls, we had only 3 Snowies, including a pair at the nest, and another male farther out the Gaswell Road.

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) - Less conspicuous than usual, with only a single bird seen on one day.

Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*) - 1 seen (and photographed) by Wayne & Elizabeth at the Heritage Center on 6/20.

Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) - Common.

Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) - Common. We watched one bird putting the finishing touches on a nest near the base of the Point one day, and then saw the first egg the next!

Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) - Several heard and a couple seen over the three days.

Hoary Redpoll (*Spinus [Carduelis] hornemanni*) - Small numbers seen over the three days.

Mammals:

Ringed Seal (*Pusa hispida*) - This is probably what the scattered seals that we saw hauled out on the ice were, although given the distance, we could not rule out Spotted Seal. Depending on who you talk to among the locals, they are one or the other.