

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

GRAND ALASKA TOUR BIRDLIST

June 10–25, 2005

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

By any measure, this year's Grand Alaska Tour was a huge success. We enjoyed some of the best weather of any Alaska tour in memory, and although it was a slow year for Siberian vagrants, we had exceptional success with the breeding specialties. As always, Nome got things off to a rousing start. Our first day on the Teller Road produced a herd of Musk Ox, scope views of a Gyrfalcon on a nest, a cryptic Rock Ptarmigan (in what was obviously a "crash" year for ptarmigan, this proved to be our only Rock Ptarmigan of the trip), nesting Dippers, and stunningly beautiful Black-bellied Plovers in full breeding dress. Safety Lagoon treated us to point-blank studies of Aleutian Terns right next to the road, a pair of Eurasian Wigeon, and a magnificent pair of Arctic Loons. Farther out the Council Road we saw still more Gyrfalcons, Northern Wheatears, nesting Rough-legged Hawks, and, in the spruce forests near Council, a most cooperative pair of Pine Grosbeaks and a family of Gray Jays, both good birds for the Nome area. The Kougarok Road served up its usual mix of stunning scenery, big mammals (still more close views of Musk Ox to go with multiple Moose and huge herds of Reindeer) and great birds. Among the many highlights were a dazzling male Bluethroat, multiple Arctic Warblers, and an exceptionally close pair of Black Scoters. After having performed well for the Gambell/Nome group just three days earlier, the Bristle-thighed Curlew did not cooperate, and hordes of emerging mosquitoes eroded our resolve to continue the search. We ended our time at Nome with close studies of a pair of first-summer Black Guillemots at Cape Nome, an unexpected rarity.

Next up were the Pribilofs, where a lack of westerly winds meant a lack of Siberian vagrants. Our vagrant luck this year was limited to an exceptionally elusive Hawfinch that played hide-and-seek with us for hours at Hutchinson Hill, and a *longipennis* Common Tern at the Salt Lagoon that was far more cooperative. But, you don't visit the Pribilofs for vagrants; you go for nesting seabirds, and once again we were treated to a true spectacle of breeding alcids, fulmars, kittiwakes and cormorants on the bird cliffs. What's more, rare sunny skies and a general lack of wind combined for ideal conditions for enjoying the spectacle to its fullest. A stunningly immaculate male McKay's Bunting was well worth the hike needed to find it, and represented one of the most difficult-to-find of North America's breeding birds.

News of a nesting Great Gray Owl on the Glenn Highway caused us to cast aside our usual routine for our day of birding the Anchorage area. Employing the reasoning that nothing we could expect to see in Anchorage could top a Great Gray Owl, we decided to go for it, and the strategy paid off in a big way. En route we stumbled onto an unexpected bonanza of Northern Hawk-Owls, seeing a minimum of 9 different individuals in a 23-mile stretch! The day also produced Trumpeter Swans, scope views

of singing Varied Thrush and crippling studies of American Three-toed Woodpecker. But the Great Gray was the show-stopper. We had been cautioned that the bird was no sure thing, since the young had recently fledged and were moving farther from the nest site each day. But after a bit of a hike, persistent deep “WHOOP” notes signaled the presence of an adult owl, and suddenly, like a huge gray ghost, it was upon us. The bird swooped in and landed in a spruce, allowing prolonged, binocular-filling views for everyone. It was only after the bird had been in sight for several minutes that we looked up and saw the perched fledgling with the pink eyelids that was sitting just above our heads!

The next day we were off to Denali, more relaxed than usual, since we had already scored most of the big Denali quest birds. The drive up produced a magnificent family of Trumpeter Swans right next to the road, as well as perched Bohemian Waxwings and skylarking White-winged Crossbills. Our day in the park was diminished by dreary, rainy weather, but still produced nice views of a Northern Shrike, a Wolf, and more distant views of a couple of Grizzlies. The Denali Highway presented us with Upland Sandpipers, Willow Ptarmigan with downy chicks, nesting Horned Grebes, and still more Northern Shrikes and Gyrfalcons.

We finished, as always, with a trip to Seward and the Kenai Peninsula. But on our way out of Anchorage, we decided to make a brief stop to mop up some of the common Anchorage birds that we had missed as a result of switching our day of local birding to the Great Gray Owl chase. This turned out to be a great move, when, in addition to nice studies of Boreal Chickadees, we were rewarded with crippling views of a male Spruce Grouse! The Kenai Fjords boat trip produced excellent views of multiple Kittlitz’s Murrelets, in addition to all of the more usual fare, and our return drive to Anchorage netted us yet another Spruce Grouse, this time a hen with two chicks.

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.

Itinerary:

- 6/10 - night in Anchorage
- 6/11 - 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 & back.
- 6/12 - all day birding on Council Road, to Council and back, including Safety Lagoon
- 6/13 - all day on Kougarak Rd. to Coffee Dome, and beyond, to the end of the road
- 6/14 - morning birding to Cape Nome; flight to Anchorage with afternoon excursion to Westchester Lagoon and Ship Creek Fish Hatchery.
- 6/15 - Anchorage to St. Paul Island (Pribilofs); arrived St. Paul at 4:30 p.m., with evening excursion out to NE Point, Webster Lake and Hutchinson Hill.
- 6/16 - St. Paul Island: morning to Reef Rookery and hike for McKay’s Bunting, followed by North Point; p.m. to Ridgewall and Southwest Point; evening excursion to Hutchinson Hill at Northeast Point.

- 6/17 - morning on St. Paul (Reef and Ridgewall); afternoon flight to Anchorage.
- 6/18 - daytrip out of Anchorage up the Glenn Highway to MP 173 (Tolsona Wilderness Campground) and back.
- 6/19 - Anchorage to Denali, with various short stops en route, including Westchester Lagoon before leaving Anchorage.
- 6/20 - all-day shuttle bus excursion to Fish Creek, Denali NP; post-dinner excursion out Denali Highway.
- 6/21 - most of day on Denali Hwy.; afternoon/evening drive back to Anchorage; Westchester Lagoon on way back into Anchorage.
- 6/22 - early morning birding in Anchorage at DeLong Park, Kincaid Park and Potter Marsh, followed by drive to Seward, with various short stops en Route, including Summit Lake and Trail River Campground.
- 6/23 - all day boat trip through Kenai Fjords NP
- 6/24 - Seward back to Anchorage, with morning birding around Seward and afternoon stops at Summit Lake and Granite Creek Campground.
- 6/25 - 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:

- Red-throated Loon - N, P, K
- Arctic Loon** - N (fabulous pair on Safety Lagoon at MP 26.5)
- Pacific Loon - N, A, D, K
- Common Loon - A, K, GH
- Red-necked Grebe - N, A, D, K, GH
- Horned Grebe - P, D, A (more than any year that I can remember, including a nest
Along the Denali Hwy.)
- Northern Fulmar - P (light and dark morphs)
- Sooty Shearwater - K
- Double-crested Cormorant - K
- Red-faced Cormorant** - P, K (more than usual at Kenai Fjords)
- Pelagic Cormorant - N, P, K

Trumpeter Swan - GH, D, K (multiple occasions, but best was the close family group on the Parks Hwy.)
 Tundra Swan - N, D
 Greater White-fronted Goose - N (leader only)
 Canada Goose - A
 Cackling Goose - N, P (the birds at Nome were of the large subspecies *taverneri*; those at St. Paul were of one of the small subspecies, probably *minima*. Recently split from Canada Goose.)
 Brant - N (all typical western birds, formerly known as “Black Brant”)
Eurasian Wigeon - N (pair at Safety Lagoon)
 American Wigeon - N, A, GH, D
 Gadwall - N
 Green-winged Teal - N, P, D
Eurasian Teal - P (subspecies *nimia*. This split {from Green-winged Teal} is still not recognized by the AOU.)
 Mallard - N, A, D, K
 Northern Pintail - N, P, A, D
 Northern Shoveler - N, GH, D
 Canvasback - A
 Greater Scaup - N, P, A, D, GH, K
 Lesser Scaup - N, A, GH, D
 Common Eider - N
 Harlequin Duck - N, P, GH, K
 Long-tailed Duck - N, P, D
 Black Scoter - N
 Surf Scoter - GH, D
 White-winged Scoter - N, D
 Common Goldeneye - N (rare here)
Barrow’s Goldeneye - A, GH, D, K
 Bufflehead - N, GH, D
 Red-breasted Merganser - N
 Common Merganser - K (a most cooperative female at Summit Lake)
 Osprey - N (a rarity here, and seldom recorded anywhere on our Alaska trips), D
 Bald Eagle - N, GH, A, D, K
 Northern Harrier - N
 Red-tailed Hawk - GH, A (this form was formerly known as “Harlan’s Hawk”)
 Rough-legged Hawk - N (spectacular views of a bird on a nest)
 Golden Eagle - N, D
 Merlin - N, D
Gyrfalcon - N, D (more encounters than usual)
 Peregrine Falcon - N
Spruce Grouse - A (spectacular male), K (female with 2 chicks)
Willow Ptarmigan - N, D (very few this year)
Rock Ptarmigan - N (rare this year; we managed only a single male, thanks to some good spotting by Rich.)
 Sandhill Crane - N

Black Oystercatcher - K
Pacific Golden-Plover - N
 American Golden-Plover - N
 Black-bellied Plover - N
 Semipalmated Plover - N, P, A
 Wilson's Snipe - N, D
 Short-billed Dowitcher - A
 Long-billed Dowitcher - N (leader only)
 Hudsonian Godwit - A
Bar-tailed Godwit - N
 Whimbrel - N, D
 Bristle-thighed Curlew - N* (alas, heard only)
 Upland Sandpiper - D
 Lesser Yellowlegs - A, GH, D
 Solitary Sandpiper - D
 Spotted Sandpiper - N, A
 Wandering Tattler - N, P
 Ruddy Turnstone - N
 Black Turnstone - N
 Red Knot - N
 Semipalmated Sandpiper - N
 Western Sandpiper - N
 Least Sandpiper - N, D
 Baird's Sandpiper - N
 Dunlin - N
Rock Sandpiper - P (the nominate race, *ptilocnemis*)
 Red-necked Phalarope - N, P
 Parasitic Jaeger - N
Long-tailed Jaeger - N
 Mew Gull - N, A, GH, D, K
 Glaucous-winged Gull - P, A, GH, K
 Glaucous Gull - N, P
 American Herring Gull - N, P, A, GH, D (birds at Nome were of the subspecies *vegae*, treated by some taxonomists as a distinct species, Vega Gull. Birds seen elsewhere on the trip were the North American subspecies *smithsonianus*.)
Slaty-backed Gull - N (nice adult plus a second-year bird)
 Bonaparte's Gull - A, GH, D
Sabine's Gull - N
Red-legged Kittiwake - P
 Black-legged Kittiwake - N, P, K
 Arctic Tern - N, A, GH, D, K
Aleutian Tern - N (spectacular studies)
 Common Murre - N, P, K
 Thick-billed Murre - N, P
Black Guillemot - N (2 first-year birds at Cape Nome were a major surprise)
 Pigeon Guillemot - N, P, K

Marbled Murrelet - K
Kittlitz's Murrelet - K (great views; ca. 20 birds seen)
Ancient Murrelet - P (4 total), K (15+)
Parakeet Auklet - P
Crested Auklet - P
Least Auklet - P
 Rhinoceros Auklet - P (a recent colonizer here), K (better than normal numbers)
Horned Puffin - N, P, K
Tufted Puffin - P, K
 Rock Pigeon - A
Great Gray Owl - GH (an adult with a recently fledged chick studied at point-blank range was the bird of the trip!)
Northern Hawk-Owl - GH (at least 9 in one day, a nearly unprecedented event exceeded only by the wild invasion spring at Nome a few years back. We had numerous close studies.)
 Short-eared Owl - N, D
 Rufous Hummingbird - K
 Belted Kingfisher - K
 Downy Woodpecker - K
 Hairy Woodpecker - A
American Three-toed Woodpecker - GH
 Olive-sided Flycatcher - GH
 Western Wood-Pewee - A, GH
 Alder Flycatcher - N, A, GH, D
 Say's Phoebe - N
 Tree Swallow - N, A, GH, D
 Violet-green Swallow - A, GH, D, K
 Bank Swallow - N, A, D
 Cliff Swallow - N, D, A
Eastern Yellow Wagtail - N
 American Pipit - N
 Golden-crowned Kinglet - A, K
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet - A, K
Bohemian Waxwing - GH, D
 American Dipper - N, K
 Winter Wren - P
 Gray-cheeked Thrush - N, D
 Swainson's Thrush - A, D
 Hermit Thrush - D*, K
 American Robin - N, A, GH, D, K
 Varied Thrush - N*, GH, D, K
Arctic Warbler - N, D (great views)
Bluethroat - N (dynamite views!)
Northern Wheatear - N
 Black-caped Chickadee - A
 Chestnut-backed Chickadee - K

Boreal Chickadee - A, D
 Red-breasted Nuthatch - A, K
 Brown Creeper - K
Northern Shrike - N, GH, D (more than usual this year)
 Gray Jay - N (Council), GH, D
 Steller's Jay - K
 Black-billed Magpie - A, D, GH, K
Northwestern Crow - K
 Common Raven - N, A, GH, D, K
 European Starling - A (still a rarity here)
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch - P
Pine Grosbeak - N (at Council), K
White-winged Crossbill - D (great studies of skylarking males)
Common Redpoll - N, A, GH, D
Hoary Redpoll - N
 Pine Siskin - D, K
Hawfinch - P (a most elusive vagrant, despite much work it was seen well by only a few)
 Orange-crowned Warbler - N, A, GH, D, K
 Yellow Warbler - N, A, D
 Yellow-rumped Warbler - A, GH, D, K
 Townsend's Warbler - K
 Blackpoll Warbler - N, GH, D
 Northern Waterthrush - N, A, GH, D
 Wilson's Warbler - N, GH, K
 American Tree Sparrow - N, D
 Savannah Sparrow - N, A, 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, D, K
 White-crowned Sparrow - N, GH, A, D, K
 Golden-crowned Sparrow - N, D, K
 Dark-eyed Junco - A, GH, D, K
 Lapland Longspur - N, P
 Snow Bunting - N, P
McKay's Bunting - P
 Red-winged Blackbird - A
 Rusty Blackbird - N, A

Total = 176 species

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - N, D

Western Red Squirrel - D, K
Red-backed Vole - K
Beaver - N
Muskrat - A
Porcupine - D
Snowshoe Hare - D, K
Arctic Fox - P
Red Fox - N, D
Wolf - D (a black-colored individual seen quite well)
Brown Bear (Grizzly) - D
Sea Otter - K
Steller's Sea Lion - K
Northern Fur Seal - P
Harbor Seal - N, P, K
Dall Sheep - D
Barren Ground Caribou - D
Reindeer - N
Moose - A, N, D
Musk Ox - N
Humpback Whale - K
Killer Whale - K
Dall Porpoise - K

Total = 23 species