

# **ALASKA MAINLAND**

**JUNE 15 – 26, 2012**

**LEADER: BARRY ZIMMER**

**COMPILED BY: BARRY ZIMMER**

**VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS, INC.  
2525 WALLINGWOOD DRIVE, SUITE 1003  
AUSTIN, TX 78746  
[WWW.VENTBIRD.COM](http://WWW.VENTBIRD.COM)**

# Alaska Mainland

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Once again our Alaska Mainland tour was filled with wonderful birds, interesting mammals, great food, and spectacular scenery. We began our trip in Nome, my personal favorite destination in North America, and met with immediate success along the Teller Road. A herd of musk oxen, including babies, were right along the roadside just outside of the town limits. In quick succession we tallied stunning Pacific Loons, Long-tailed Jaegers everywhere, Willow Ptarmigan, Harlequin Ducks, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Lapland Longspur, Common and Hoary redpolls, Northern Shrike, a Rock Sandpiper (very scarce here) that landed right in the middle of our group, a striking breeding-plumaged Snow Bunting, and gorgeous breeding-plumaged Pacific and American golden-plovers, Black-bellied Plover, and Ruddy Turnstone. A post-dinner excursion to Safety Lagoon netted several Bar-tailed Godwits, an Arctic Loon, several Short-eared Owls, and a second year Slaty-backed Gull among others.

The next day we ventured out the Council Road where highlights included another Arctic Loon, many Red-throated Loons, late Sabine's Gulls, Aleutian Terns, more Bar-tailed Godwits, Common Eider, too many Tundra Swans to count, Brant, and a locally rare Barrow's Goldeneye. A pair of Gyrfalcons had a nest near the road and we watched the mother attending to her four young for quite some time. We also had active nests of Rough-legged Hawk and Peregrine Falcon not far away. Two grizzly bears were spotted on an open slope to the left, and while we watched them feeding, we were serenaded by an Arctic Warbler in a nearby thicket, and then distracted by a Wandering Tattler on the river below us. A pair of Northern Wheatears near Skookum Pass were the icing on the cake that day.

We followed that success with even greater rewards along the Kougarok Road the next day. An adult Slaty-backed Gull at the dump started the day off and was followed by more Arctic Warblers, two more Northern Shrikes, a male Bluethroat, a Golden Eagle feeding young, and three Bristle-thighed Curlews less than forty feet away! The curlews were the most cooperative I have found there, and we were able to study and photograph them at leisure.

On our final morning in Nome, we finally tracked down the previously elusive Rock Ptarmigan along the Teller Road despite some serious fog. We also watched a pair of Pacific Loons at nest, tallied nine more Willow Ptarmigan, and added another grizzly bear before catching our flight to Anchorage. After enjoying a sumptuous dinner of salmon and halibut, we briefly birded a local park where Red-necked Grebes, Hudsonian Godwit, and White-winged Scoter were among the fare.

The next portion of our tour was a visit to Seward and the surrounding Kenai Peninsula. Stunning breeding-plumaged Horned Grebe, American Dipper, Varied Thrush, Northwestern Crow, Boreal Chickadee, and Gray Jay were among the avian highlights

on the way down. We also had wonderfully close moose and some distant mountain goats. In Seward, we added Marbled Murrelet, Pigeon Guillemot, and 65 Harlequin Ducks on a short post-dinner excursion. The next day we took an all-day boat trip out to Kenai Fjords National Park where the scenery and mammals almost stole the show from the birds. Seventeen humpback whales, a finback whale, forty or more Dall's porpoise, two mountain goats, Steller's sea lions, sea otters, and harbor seals topped the mammal list, while Kittlitz's and Ancient murrelets, Parakeet and Rhinoceros auklets, Tufted and Horned puffins (by the hundreds), Common and Thick-billed murre, Black-legged Kittiwakes, and Black Oystercatcher were among the avian highlights. On the return trip to Anchorage the following day we added Rufous Hummingbird, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Steller's Jay, Pine Grosbeak, and White-winged Crossbill to our rapidly expanding list.

The final leg of our tour was a visit to Denali National Park and surrounding areas to the north of Anchorage. We had fantastic views of Denali (Mount McKinley) on our drive up the Parks Highway, as well as within the park the next day. Mammals continued to vie for our attention with a spectacular lynx right next to the road (only my second ever), two more grizzly bears, lots of caribou, a porcupine, and close Dall's sheep. Although we missed the Northern Hawk Owl for the first time in years, we did add Trumpeter Swan and Bohemian Waxwing to the bird list.

In all we tallied over 150 species of birds and 22 species of mammals, and enjoyed wonderful scenery virtually throughout the trip, very nice weather (only one afternoon with rain), and fantastic food including king crab, salmon, halibut, blackberry pie, and more!

### **Itinerary:**

June 15 - arrival in Anchorage

June 16 - Westchester Lagoon, Lake Hood, flight to Nome; Teller Road to MP 40, Woolley Lagoon Road; evening option to Safety Lagoon (74 species; 74 total)

June 17 - Council Road to MP 54 (Skookum Pass) (68 species; 99 total)

June 18 - Kougarak Road to MP 72; evening option to Teller Road (MP 34) (50 species; 106 total)

June 19 - Teller Road to MP 35; return to Anchorage via Kotzebue; Lagoon after dinner (39 species; 106 total)

June 20 - Lions Club Park, Anchorage to Seward with stops at Potter Marsh, Turnagin Arm, Williwaw, Granite Creek Campground, Summit Lake, Trail River Campground, Bear Creek; post dinner excursion to Lowell Point (50 species; 126 total)

June 21 - all day boat trip to Kenai Fjords National Park & Chiswell Islands (27 species; 136 total)

June 22 - Nash Woods, Benny Benson Park, Ava's house, Primrose Campground, drive to Anchorage (40 species; 144 total)

June 23 - drive to Denali along Parks Hwy with some roadside birding, Denali Hwy to MP 120; evening option on Denali Hwy to MP 119 (43 species; 152 total)

June 24 - bus ride into Denali National Park to Eielson Visitor Center, evening option to Denali Hwy MP 102 (27 species; 152 total)

June 25 - Denali Hwy to MP 100; return to Anchorage with some roadside birding (23 species; 153 total)

June 26 - departures home or on to Barrow extension (153 total species)

### **Key:**

N = Nome and surrounding Seward Peninsula

A = Anchorage and surrounding areas (Potter Marsh, Turnagin Arm, Williwaw, etc.)

S = Seward, Kenai Fjords, Summit Lake, Granite Creek (Kenai Peninsula)

D = Denali National Park, Denali Hwy, and Parks Hwy north of Wasilla

**bold-faced species** indicate birds of rare, casual or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur regularly but in such low densities as to be easily missed

# - indicates birds seen with babies or on nests

### **Birds:**

Greater White-fronted Goose N--- uncommon; three on lake off the Kougarok Road

Brant N---the western race *nigricans* (a possible future resplit)

Cackling Goose N---although very difficult to separate from *parvipes* type Canadas, all "white-faced" geese on the Seward Peninsula are of the large Cackling Goose group *taverneri*

Canada Goose A---presumed to be of the small "Lesser Canada Goose" group *parvipes*; #

Trumpeter Swan D---great views, especially on evening drive on Denali Hwy; our first spotted by Dan; 3

Tundra Swan N---up to 150 in one day

Gadwall A---one at Westchester and three at Potter Marsh; very uncommon

American Wigeon A,N

Mallard A,N,S,D---#

Northern Shoveler      A,N  
 Northern Pintail      N,A  
 Green-winged Teal      A,N,D  
Redhead      A---two males at Westchester Lagoon; very uncommon  
Ring-necked Duck      A---uncommon; male at Potter Marsh  
 Greater Scaup      A,N,D  
 Lesser Scaup      A---side-by-side comparisons with Greaters  
**King Eider**      N---very distant male off Cape Nome on night drive; rare migrant this late  
 Common Eider      N---nice studies of y-nigra subspecies along Safety Lagoon  
 Harlequin Duck      A,N,S---always spectacular; many great views including an amazing flock of 65 on Lowell Point  
 Surf Scoter      D---one male on float plane lake on Denali Hwy on evening option  
 White-winged Scoter      N,S  
 Black Scoter      N---about a dozen total  
 Long-tailed Duck      N  
Bufflehead      D---uncommon  
 Common Goldeneye      A,N  
Barrow's Goldeneye      N,S,D---male on Safety Lagoon was especially noteworthy  
 Common Merganser      N---uncommon  
 Red-breasted Merganser      N  
 Willow Ptarmigan      N,D---superb studies in Nome and in Denali; a total of fifteen seen ( a good count for a species whose numbers rise and fall cyclically)  
Rock Ptarmigan      N---after much searching we had five our last morning in Nome along the Teller Road; voted the third favorite bird of the tour  
 Red-throated Loon      N---nice breeding-plumaged birds; up to 20 in a day  
**Arctic Loon**      N---one on evening option on Bering Sea side of Safety Lagoon and another a couple further up in Safety Lagoon in daytime; rare U.S. visitor  
 Pacific Loon      N---spectacular breeding-plumaged birds, including pair with nest right next to the road; 3  
 Common Loon      S,D  
Horned Grebe      A---one at Potter Marsh was spectacular; uncommon  
 Red-necked Grebe      A---fantastic views including birds on nests; #  
 Double-crested Cormorant      S---including one on Trail River Lake  
 Pelagic Cormorant      N,S  
 Bald Eagle      A,S,D---18 in one day!  
 Northern Harrier      N,D---mostly males  
 Red-tailed Hawk      D---the "Harlan's" subspecies  
 Rough-legged Hawk      N---two seen; #  
 Golden Eagle      N,S,D---twelve total; scope views of babies on nest; #  
Gyr Falcon      N---nice scope study of gray morph bird with four young at nesting cliff past Solomon; #  
 Peregrine Falcon      N---adult on nest near Solomon; #  
 Sandhill Crane      N,A  
 Black-bellied Plover      N---localized  
 American Golden-Plover      N---in stunning breeding plumage

Pacific Golden-Plover N---gorgeous breeding-plumaged birds; three total  
 Semipalmated Plover N  
 Black Oystercatcher S---quick fly-by views of one from the boat  
 Spotted Sandpiper N,D  
 Solitary Sandpiper D---calling from trees!  
 Wandering Tattler N---only one  
 Greater Yellowlegs D---spotted by Jenny  
 Lesser Yellowlegs A,D---also in trees!  
**Bristle-thighed Curlew** N---after a lengthy, arduous hike we had superb close studies of three birds on the ground showing off their cinnamon tails and rumps; voted the favorite favorite bird of the tour  
 Hudsonian Godwit A  
 Bar-tailed Godwit N---*baueri*; 28 total seen including several good views  
 Ruddy Turnstone N---only one seen; thanks to Jenny  
 Semipalmated Sandpiper N  
 Western Sandpiper N  
 Least Sandpiper N---uncommon  
**Rock Sandpiper** N---incredible studies of one that flew right into the middle of the group; very uncommon to rare and localized here  
 Dunlin N---a few on one evening option  
 Short-billed Dowitcher A---subspecies *caurinus*  
 Wilson's Snipe N,D  
 Red-necked Phalarope N,D---beautiful breeding-plumaged birds  
 Black-legged Kittiwake N,S---thousands in Kenai Fjords; #  
Sabine's Gull N---two at Nome River mouth spotted by Jenny; late  
 Bonaparte's Gull A,D  
 Mew Gull seen daily in numbers; #  
 Herring Gull N,A---"Vega" Gull at Nome (one only) and "American " Herring Gull (*smithsonianus*) around Anchorage; could be a future split by the AOU  
**Slaty-backed Gull** N---adult at Nome Dump and second year bird on Safety Lagoon; rare but somewhat regular  
 Glaucous-winged Gull S---common around Seward  
 Glaucous Gull N---very common  
 Aleutian Tern N---eight total  
 Arctic Tern A,N,S---repeated spectacular views; #  
 Parasitic Jaeger N  
 Long-tailed Jaeger N---common and conspicuous birds around Nome; #  
 Common Murre N,S---very common  
Thick-billed Murre S--- about 25 on the Chiswells; uncommon here  
 Pigeon Guillemot S---great studies from shore and on the boat  
 Marbled Murrelet S---about 12 from the boat and a few from shore  
Kittlitz's Murrelet S---three near Northwest Glacier; less numerous than usual  
Ancient Murrelet S---40 total with really good views of birds on the water; generally tough and scarce  
Parakeet Auklet S---great views of twelve near False Pete's Pass; often missed entirely

Rhinoceros Auklet      S---about 50 total  
 Horned Puffin      S---about 400 seen; superb views  
 Tufted Puffin      S---about 400 seen  
 Rock Pigeon      A,N,S---increasingly common; released birds in Nome????  
 Great Horned Owl      D---pair along Denali Hwy  
 Short-eared Owl      N---about a dozen scattered around Nome; irregular  
 Rufous Hummingbird      S---nice adult male  
 Belted Kingfisher      D  
 Downy Woodpecker      A,S  
 Hairy Woodpecker      S  
 Northern Flicker      D---"Yellow-shafted"  
 Western Wood-Pewee      A---at the secret spot  
 Alder Flycatcher      A,S,D  
Northern Shrike      N---an exceptionally good year for this species with four seen over  
 three days in Nome; can be very hard to find  
 Gray Jay      S,D---including interesting juvenile plumaged birds; our first thanks to  
 Donna  
 Steller's Jay      S---darker, shorter crested race with dark blue spots on crest  
 Black-billed Magpie      A,S,D  
 Northwestern Crow      A,S---one in Girdwood bakery parking lot!  
 Common Raven      daily; #  
 Horned Lark      N  
 Tree Swallow      A,N,S,D  
 Violet-green Swallow      A,S,D---excellent views of this beauty; #  
 Bank Swallow      A,D  
 Cliff Swallow      N,D  
 Black-capped Chickadee      AS  
 Chestnut-backed Chickadee      S---the chestnut-sided subspecies *rufescens*  
Boreal Chickadee      S,D---uncommon; great views  
 Red-breasted Nuthatch      S  
 American Dipper      A,S---great studies of adult with fledged young; #  
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet      S,D  
 Arctic Warbler      N---superb views of this specialty; nine total  
Bluethroat      N---harder than usual with only one seen; scope views of male in profile  
Northern Wheatear      N---pair near Skookum Pass and another along the Teller Road  
 Gray-cheeked Thrush      N,D  
 Swainson's Thrush      S  
 Hermit Thrush      N,S,A---perhaps the best song in North America  
 American Robin      almost daily; #  
 Varied Thrush      S---another top song contender  
European Starling      A---very uncommon, but increasing in Alaska  
 Eastern Yellow Wagtail      N---subspecies *tshutschensis*; several nice views  
American Pipit      N---uncommon; spotted by Sue  
Bohemian Waxwing      D---four seen along Denali Hwy on evening option and a pair in  
 the same spot the next day; always tough  
 Lapland Longspur      N---spectacular in breeding plumage; up to 40 in a day

Snow Bunting N---stunning male distantly along Teller Road  
 Northern Waterthrush N,D---nice views  
 Orange-crowned Warbler A,N,S  
 Yellow Warbler N,S,A  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler A,S,D---Myrtle types  
 Townsend's Warbler S---superb view of this striking species; five total  
 Blackpoll Warbler N,D---excellent scope views  
 Wilson's Warbler N,A,S,D  
 American Tree Sparrow N,D  
 Savannah Sparrow N,A,D  
 Fox Sparrow N,S---"Red" birds (*zaboria*) in Nome, "Sooty" (*unalaschensis*) birds around Seward  
 Song Sparrow S---fantastic study of the big, dark coastal race *kenaiensis*  
 Lincoln's Sparrow A,S  
 White-crowned Sparrow N,A,D  
 Golden-crowned Sparrow N,S,A  
 Dark-eyed Junco A,S,D---Slate-colored types  
Red-winged Blackbird A---one near Girdwood spotted by Jenny; uncommon & local  
 Rusty Blackbird seen only by Jenny in Kotzebue  
 Pine Grosbeak S---wonderful views at Ava's  
White-winged Crossbill S---in what had been a down year for this nomadic species, a few suddenly appeared on the Kenai as we arrived; we had excellent views of several  
 Common Redpoll A,N,S,D  
 Hoary Redpoll N---good views of several  
 Pine Siskin A,S

total species - **153**

### **Leader only birds:**

Merlin

### **Mammals:**

Arctic Ground Squirrel---common in Nome & Denali  
 Red Squirrel---about four seen  
 vole species---possibly red-backed vole  
 Snowshoe Hare---scarce in the Denali region this year, with only three seen  
 Common Muskrat---one at Potter Marsh  
 Beaver---one along Parks Hwy on evening drive  
 Porcupine---one on night drive along Denali Hwy seen very close  
**Lynx**---fantastic study of this rarely seen mammal on our bus ride; only my second time ever!!!  
 Red Fox---four total  
 Mountain Goat---three total  
 Moose---a total of 18 including cute calves and two bulls



Caribou---seventeen "Barren Ground" Caribou in Denali  
Dall's Sheep---very close rams in Denali; about 35 total  
Musk Ox--- superb views including babies!; about 15 seen  
Grizzly Bear---three in Nome (one spotted by Donna) and two more in the park  
Dall's Porpoise---common (about 40) on boat trip including bow-riding  
Humpback Whale-----seventeen from the boat; good show  
Finback Whale---one on boat trip  
Sea Otter---great views of these cute critters in Kenai Fjords; 25 total individuals  
Steller's Sea Lion---declining at a ridiculous pace; maybe 50 total  
Harbor Seal---particularly numerous around the glacier; at least 100 seen  
Ringed Seal---one in Nome

total species - 22

### **Butterflies:**

Canadian Tiger Swallowtail  
Old World Swallowtail  
Mustard White  
Northern Marble  
sulphur species (probably Clouded)  
fritillary species  
alpine species  
arctic species

total species - 8

### **Significant others:**

king crab & salmon dinners  
blackberry & fruits of the forest pie at Summit Lake  
the garbage grinder  
all food at Jen's  
on time flights with no fog delays!  
great wildflowers including the likes of Alpine Azalea, Purple Oxytrope, Mountain Avens,  
Woolly Lousewort, Mooseberry, Lapland Rosebay, Cow Parsnip, lupines, and many  
others left unidentified  
Mount McKinley (Denali) in full view for about an hour on our drive up to the park and  
about 80% in view from near Eielson; stunning!