

GRAND ALASKA: GAMBELL/NOME PRE-TRIP

MAY 27 – JUNE 3, 2006

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GAMBELL/NOME, ALASKA TOUR BIRDLIST

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(LEADER: Kevin Zimmer)

Our 2006 Gambell/Nome tour got off to a roaring start when we scored nice looks at nesting Boreal and Northern Saw-whet owls on the first night in Anchorage. A few short hours later, we were winging our way toward Nome, dreaming of Gambell and wondering about what Siberian vagrants might await us. Unfortunately, dreaming is all we could do for the remainder of the day, because fog at Gambell prevented any inbound flights. So, the day turned in to one of “hurry up and wait,” as we remained on weather delay until the flight was formally canceled that evening. Despite the frustration and inevitable anxiety that this provoked, I told the group to enjoy the chance to rest in Nome, because Gambell was a great place to play catch-up.

My cheerleading proved prophetic the next day. We awoke to good weather and word that the flight to Gambell was a go. Soon we were touching down on the Gambell airstrip, and marveling at the amounts of ice in the nearshore waters. The walk through the boneyards to our lodge produced Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings, but little else. After the usual chaos of sorting out baggage and rooms, we bundled up and began our first birding trek, a march to the marsh at the northeast corner of Troutman Lake. Upon arrival, the first bird we laid glasses on was a Wood Sandpiper, our first Eurasian vagrant. The bird approached us until it was nearly too close to focus on. Next up was a Long-toed Stint in sharp breeding plumage, followed within minutes by a female Ruff. The vagrants were coming in dizzying succession, and we were faced with the enviable dilemma of which rare shorebird to put in the scope! While basking in our good fortune, I heard a series of odd, grating calls and looked up in time to see an incoming shorebird. “Mongolian Plover!” (a.k.a. Lesser Sandplover) I shouted, as the rufous-breasted rocket went hurtling past. My radio call to other nearby birders was in time to get one group on the bird before it disappeared from sight, but no one could get a fix on where it put down. We continued to work along the base of the mountain, and, before long, Wayne Kidder spotted a bird that turned out to be our plover. We stayed on the bird for some time, soaking up its beautiful markings while waiting for other birders to arrive. After making sure that everyone had seen the plover, we headed back to the lodge, with four vagrant shorebirds from Siberia under our belts. So much for our first bird walk on the island!

Prevailing light winds from the west continued to bring us great birds over the next couple of days, and with the numbers of birders present on the island, the radios were constantly crackling with news of new discoveries, followed by the inevitable forced march or ATV-stampede. We were just finishing breakfast the next day when word came from one early riser that a flock of 31 Ruffs had just put down at the airport pond. Within minutes we had scrambled to the spot, and gawked in disbelief at the sight, as multiple breeding-plumaged males, each of a different color morph, paraded before numerous

females who seemed mainly intent on feeding. One male was all black, another was black with a white head, and others were buffy brown with black caps, or streaked brown and black. The variety was stunning, and the birds, with their odd posturing and flared ruffs, were downright bizarre. It was fortunate that we hurried to the scene, for not long afterwards, a persistently curious dog managed to flush the birds, which were not seen again. Later, we caught up with another male and two females at the marshy corner of the lake, and had an opportunity to study them at leisure. Few among us will forget the spectacle of seeing displaying Ruffs on North American soil. Nor will we forget the marches for the Common Greenshank, the Red-throated Pipit, or the five Dovekies on the hillside, each of which ended successfully, with great views of the quest birds. After a number of long hikes, news of a pair of Red-necked Stints at the far end of Troutman Lake merited an ATV ride, and we all took advantage of motorized transport to snag these attractive little shorebirds.

Of course, 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 commute 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. An Arctic Loon, several small groups of Emperor Geese, all four species of eiders, a remarkable single-day count of 2,000+ Long-tailed Ducks, Harlequin Ducks, and most of the Bering Sea alcids—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, and a flock of Hoary Redpolls cavorting in the boatyards, were just a few of the more mundane aspects of birding Gambell. This year we were blessed with unusually warm weather, which made for pleasant birding. On several hikes we felt distinctly overdressed, which is seldom a problem when birding the Bering Sea region.

We achieved symmetry when fog on our scheduled departure day resulted in the cancellation of our flight back to Nome, resulting in an extra night's stay on the island. This not only made up for the missed first day, but it resulted in some additional good birds. A Gray-tailed Tattler at the south end of the lake was the first bonus bird. Then, at 11:00 p.m., after everyone but me had retired to bed, the leaders from another birding group burst into the lodge with news of an odd sandpiper at the south end of the lake that they thought might be a Little Stint. They wanted confirmation, so I alerted leaders of a couple of other groups, and off we went. Soon we were looking at an elegant, breeding-plumaged Little Stint, and the radio call went back to the lodge to wake up everyone. An anxious half-hour passed before the hum of four-wheelers signaled the arriving masses of birders. Before long, a few dozen birders were lined up, ogling the rarest vagrant of the trip. The midnight chase for a Siberian vagrant on the final night of our stay perfectly encapsulated the intrigue of birding this Alaskan outpost.

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?”

Our delayed departure from Gambell had a downside, in that we were left with very little time at Nome. With only a single afternoon/evening and a short time the following morning, a trip to the far reaches of the Kougarok Road was out of the question. This meant that we would not get a shot at the Bristle-thighed Curlew, and resulted in missing several other Nome birds that we normally see. However, we did manage stunning views of a male Bluethroat, Willow Ptarmigan, Bar-tailed Godwit, and Aleutian Tern, not to mention a sow grizzly with four (!) grown cubs, all lazing out after feeding on a moose kill.

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:

- 5/27 - met in Anchorage, with evening owling excursion
- 5/28 - morning flight to Nome, followed by hours on weather stand-by. At 5:00 p.m. our flight to Gambell was cancelled due to fog, and we spent an unplanned night in Nome.
- 5/29 - fog at Gambell lifts, and we make a morning flight. Remainder of day birding Gambell.
- 5/30 - Gambell
- 5/31 - Gambell
- 6/01 - fog at Gambell prevents us from leaving for Nome, so we spend the day and night at Gambell, racking up a couple of good vagrants in the process.
- 6/02 - fog lifts, and we fly to Nome, arriving in mid-day. We birded out the Kougarok to about MP 40, then returned to Nome via the Dexter bypass, detouring for a side trek up Anvil Mountain. We then took the Council Road as far as Safety Sound.
- 6/03 - early morning birding outskirts of Nome; return for late morning flight to Anchorage for some group members; others continued on Grand Alaska Tour

Key:

A = Anchorage (owling excursion)

G = Gambell

N = Nome area

* = heard only

Birds:

Red-throated Loon - G, N

Arctic Loon - G (nice looks at a fly-by at the Point)

Pacific Loon - G, N

Red-necked Grebe - A

Northern Fulmar - G

Pelagic Cormorant - G

Tundra Swan - G, N

Emperor Goose - G (several small groups that flew past the Point)

Cackling Goose - G, 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 - A

Northern Pintail - G, N

Greater Scaup - A, G, N

Common Eider - G, N

King Eider - G

Spectacled Eider - G (a beautiful pair that flew past the Point was our only record)

Steller's Eider - G (four small groups that flew past the Point in the space of a single hour gave close views, and were our only records)

Harlequin Duck - G

Long-tailed Duck - G, N (with a remarkable single-day high of over 2000 individuals!)

White-winged Scoter - G

Common Goldeneye - A

Red-breasted Merganser - G, N

Common Merganser - A

Northern Harrier - N

Willow Ptarmigan - N

Sandhill Crane - G

Pacific Golden-Plover - N

American Golden-Plover - N

Common Ringed-Plover - G (leader only – one went shooting overhead, calling as it flew, while we were walking through the boatyard.)

Semipalmated Plover - G, N

Lesser Sandplover - G (Fantastic studies of this exceptionally attractive plover! Formerly known as “Mongolian Plover”. Our bird was of the nominate group (*mongolus* and *stegmanni*), which are distinguished by a black border to the rufous chest band, and by a white forehead dissected by a black bar. These two forms may be split from the other black-fronted forms, and if so, would likely be renamed “Mongolian Sandplover”.)

Wilson’s Snipe - G*, N*

Long-billed Dowitcher - G

Bar-tailed Godwit - N

Whimbrel - G (the white-rumped subspecies *variegatus*, which is a vagrant from Siberia. The breeding subspecies at Nome is the widespread North American form *hudsonicus*.)

Common Greenshank - G (good looks at this vagrant shorebird)

Wood Sandpiper - G (We saw at least 3 different individuals, including one that was nearly too close for binoculars!)

Gray-tailed Tattler - G (Yet another Eurasian vagrant!)

Wandering Tattler - N

Semipalmated Sandpiper - N

Western Sandpiper - G, N

Red-necked Stint - G (Prolonged studies of a beautiful pair of birds, feeding side-by-side with a Western Sandpiper.)

Little Stint - G (A midnight chase to the far end of Troutman Lake netted us excellent studies of this very rare vagrant – only the second I have seen in North America! We can thank the fog for this one, because it came on the night that we should have been back in Nome. This, and the tattler were bonus birds that we would have missed had the plane been able to make it in as scheduled.)

Long-toed Stint - G (great studies of an immaculate breeding plumaged bird)

Least Sandpiper - G (a rarity here)

Pectoral Sandpiper - G

Dunlin - G, N

Rock Sandpiper - G (subspecies *tschuktschorum*, which is dingier and darker than the nominate form that some of us would later see in the Pribilofs)

Ruff - G (My personal highlight of the trip. We had an estimated 35 birds, 31 of which dropped into the airport pond. This group included 8 breeding-plumaged males, each of a different morph, and the birds were intermittently displaying until flushed by a curious dog. This almost certainly constituted the single largest gathering of this species ever recorded on the North American continent.)

Red-necked Phalarope - G, N

Red Phalarope - N

Pomarine Jaeger - G, N

Parasitic Jaeger - N

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

Mew Gull - A, N

Glaucous Gull - G, N
 Herring Gull - G, N (entirely of the Siberian race *vegae*, treated by some as a distinct species, and then called "Vega Gull" or "Vega Herring Gull".)
Slaty-backed Gull - N
Ivory Gull - A (a distinctly lost bird that showed up in a restaurant parking lot in Anchorage just days before the trip began. It was seen by Carl the day the tour began, and by me the day before, but unfortunately, couldn't be relocated when we all went as a group. The only one seen at Gambell during our stay was one that showed up at the Point while we were chasing the Little Stint. Darn!)
 Black-legged Kittiwake - G
 Arctic Tern - G, N
Aleutian Tern - N
Dovekie - G (nice scope looks at a minimum of 5 birds on the hillside)
 Common Murre - G
 Thick-billed Murre - G
 Pigeon Guillemot - G
Parakeet Auklet - G
Least Auklet - G
Crested Auklet - G
Horned Puffin - G
Tufted Puffin - G
 Rock Pigeon - A
Boreal Owl - A (nice looks at a bird at a nest)
Northern Saw-whet Owl - A (prolonged studies of a bird at a nest)
 Tree Swallow - A, G
 Violet-green Swallow - A, G (where only the 2nd island record)
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 - G, N*
 American Robin - A, N
 Varied Thrush - A (nice looks), N
Bluethroat - G, N (great looks at a stunning male)
 Black-capped Chickadee - A
 Black-billed Magpie - A
 Common Raven - G, N
Brambling - G (an immature male)
Hoary Redpoll - G, N
 Yellow Warbler - N
 Blackpoll Warbler - N
 Northern Waterthrush - N*
 American Tree Sparrow - N
 Savannah Sparrow - N
 Fox Sparrow - N (subspecies *zaboria*; one of the "Red" types)
 White-crowned Sparrow - N, A

Golden-crowned Sparrow - N
Lapland Longspur - G, N
Snow Bunting - G

Total = 102 species

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - G, N
Tundra Vole - G
Red-backed Vole - G
Beaver - N
Porcupine - A
Moose - N
Seal sp. (probably Harbor Seal) - N
Arctic Fox - G
Red Fox - A
Brown Bear (Grizzly) - N (A trip highlight to see a sow with 4 cubs, all of which appeared to be two-year olds. I've never seen a sow with this many cubs before, and with the size of the youngsters, this was as close as you'll ever come to seeing a "herd" of grizzlies!)