

# **ALASKA MAINLAND**

**JUNE 13-24, 2006**

**LEADERS: BARRY ZIMMER & MARSHALL ILIFF**

**COMPILED BY: BARRY ZIMMER**

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

*Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.*

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I often tell people that the Nome area is my single favorite birding spot in North America. A quick summary of highlights from our 2006 Alaska Mainland tour should provide ample evidence of why this is the case. We arrived in Nome at around 11 a.m. on the first full day of our tour, and wanted to have an early lunch to allow as much time as possible on the Teller Road in the afternoon. We made two quick stops at roadside ponds en route to the restaurant and were treated to a female Bar-tailed Godwit, numerous Red-necked Phalaropes, breeding-plumaged Red-throated Loons and Red-necked Grebes, fabulous Long-tailed Jaegers sailing overhead, and a Northern Shrike—all in about 15 minutes!

After lunch we spent the remainder of the day on the Teller Road. We saw over 50 musk oxen in this time, some right next to the road. Avian highlights were almost too numerous to mention. At one spot along the road we had Rock Ptarmigan, Northern Wheatear, Rock Sandpiper, Red Knot, Snow Bunting, and stunning American Golden-Plovers all in view practically at once! Talk about overload. In addition we tallied gorgeous breeding-plumaged Pacific Golden and Black-bellied plovers, walk-away scope views of American Dipper, a very responsive Arctic Warbler, Yellow Wagtails, several Hoary Redpolls, and a handsome red fox. Generally speaking this road is considered the least birdy of the three roads that lead out of Nome!

The next day we ventured north from town on the Kougarak Road where our prime target was the incomparable Bluethroat. We made several “unsuccessful” stops searching for the Bluethroat and had to “settle” for nesting Golden Eagle; Wandering Tattler; stunning Harlequin Ducks; another Northern Shrike; numerous Gray-cheeked Thrushes; Golden-crowned, Fox, and American Tree sparrows; both species of redpolls; a gray wolf in the road; and several moose (we would finish with 22 moose for the day). Finally we caught up with two territorial male Bluethroats that performed nicely with their wonderful skylarking displays and magnificent blue throats with red bull’s-eyes. The remainder of the day yielded three Willow Ptarmigan, a pair of Gyrfalcons, and, for those who made the hike at Coffee Dome, great studies of a Bristle-thighed Curlew and a very unexpected Buff-breasted Sandpiper. On our way into town a late Red Phalarope (arguably the prettiest shorebird of all) was found on a small pond near our hotel.

The birdiest road—the Council Road—lay ahead for our last full day. Skirting along the edge of famous Safety Lagoon and eventually climbing up into high tundra, this road offers a variety of habitats and the best chance for rarities. Unfortunately, once we rounded Cape Nome, strong winds greeted us and lingered throughout most of the day. Despite this we had fantastic Pacific Loons, two Emperor Geese right next to the road, male Eurasian Wigeon, two Steller’s Eiders, a sub-adult male King Eider, Rough-legged Hawk, countless Long-tailed Jaegers, Aleutian Tern at point blank range, more Bar-tailed Godwits, three Slaty-backed Gulls, a Sabine’s Gull, and repeated great views of Yellow Wagtails and Lapland Longspurs. Hoping for an Arctic Loon (rare, but increasingly regular along this road), we offered a post-dinner return to Safety Lagoon. No sign of the loon, but as we scanned the lagoon we found a Whooper Swan—a superb Asiatic vagrant and unrecorded from Nome for about 15 years! We had only a portion of the group with us, so we returned to town for the others. By the time we got back to where the swan had been we could not relocate it. We did have two full adult King Eiders up on the beach providing amazing views as consolation. The next morning we had two hours to bird before departing for Anchorage. We desperately wanted everyone to see the swan, and luck was on our side; with

nine minutes to go before we had to head to the airport, we refound the bird and had wonderful views. In addition we also had great views of Arctic Loon right along the beach nearby. I think you can see why I like Nome so much!

Of course our Alaska Mainland tour offers so much more than just Nome. There is the Seward/Kenai Fjords National Park area where highlights included Trumpeter Swans on a nest, Barrow's Goldeneye, Spruce Grouse, myriad alcids including hundreds of both Horned and Tufted puffins, Thick-billed Murre, and very close views of Kittlitz's and Ancient murrelets, Red-faced Cormorant, nesting Three-toed Woodpeckers, Varied Thrush, and Pine Grosbeak. Mammals were equally well represented with black bear, grizzly bear, mountain goat, Dall sheep, Dall porpoise, orca, humpback whale, sea otter, and river otter among the more memorable.

Finally there is the Denali portion of the tour. We had Mount McKinley in full view for an entire morning on our way up to the park. In addition we had great views of a Northern Hawk Owl (at one point being mobbed by both Bohemian Waxwings and White-winged Crossbills!) along the Denali Highway. The park itself yielded five more grizzlies, numerous caribou, yet another Northern Shrike, and more Willow Ptarmigan.

In all we totaled 170 species of birds (a record-setting effort for this tour), 23 species of mammals, and countless breathtaking vistas in the Last Frontier.

### **Itinerary:**

June 13 - arrival in Anchorage

June 14 - morning flight to Nome; Teller Road to MP 40, Woolly Lagoon (70 species)

June 15 - Kougarak Road to MP 86 including the Coffee Dome curlew hike for half of group (64 species; 82 total)

June 16 - Council Road to MP 54 (69 species; 103 total)

June 17 - Council Road to MP 28; return to Anchorage with afternoon birding at Westchester Lagoon (51 species; 118 total)

June 18 - Anchorage to Seward with stops at Potter Marsh, Turnagain Arm, Granite Creek & Trail River campgrounds, Summit Lake, Tern Lake, Nash Road, Resurrection Bay (61 species; 142 total)

June 19 - Nash Road, Granite Creek Campground, Bear Lake, Seward (50 species; 151 total)

June 20 - all day boat trip to Kenai Fjords National Park, drive to Anchorage (44 species; 151 total)

June 21 - drive to Denali with some roadside birding, Denali Hwy to MP 122 (38 species; 156 total)

June 22 - bus ride into Denali National Park to Fish Creek, evening option to Otto Lake (44 species; 160 total)

June 23 - Denali Hwy to MP 125; return to Anchorage with some afternoon birding at the Eagle river Nature Center and along Ship Creek (53 species; 165 total)

June 24 - departures home or on to Barrow extension

## Key:

N = Nome and surrounding Seward Peninsula  
A = Anchorage and surrounding areas (Eagle River, Turnagain Arm, Girdwood, etc.)  
S = Seward, Kenai Fjords, Summit Lake, Granite Creek & Trail River  
D = Denali National Park & Denali Hwy

**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

## Birds:

Red-throated Loon N,D---nice breeding-plumaged birds

**Arctic Loon** N---great studies of a one beyond Safety Sound; rare US visitor

Pacific Loon N,S---spectacular breeding-plumaged birds

Common Loon S,D

Red-necked Grebe N,A,S

Horned Grebe A,D---pair with young on backs!

Sooty Shearwater S---a couple of dark shearwaters on our boat trip believed to be this species

Double-crested Cormorant S

Pelagic Cormorant N,S

Red-faced Cormorant S---about 15 on our boat trip

Trumpeter Swan S,D---exceptional study near Seward on nest

**Whooper Swan** N---first documented Nome record in 15 years and an ABA lifer for everyone including the leaders!!!!; tied for second favorite bird of the tour

Tundra Swan N---up to 1500 in one day

Greater White-fronted Goose N---very uncommon

**Emperor Goose** N---only the third time ever for this trip; spectacular views of two within 30 yards of the road thanks to Barb and Russ

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

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*

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

**Eurasian Wigeon** N--- nice male in Safety Lagoon

American Wigeon N,A,S,D

Gadwall A,S---uncommon

Green-winged Teal N,A,D

Mallard N,A,S,D---a couple in Nome where very uncommon

Northern Pintail N,D

Northern Shoveler N

Canvasback N---very uncommon

Ring-necked Duck N---rare on Seward Peninsula

Greater Scaup N,A,G,D

Lesser Scaup N,A,D---generally less numerous than preceding species

Common Eider N---nice studies of *v-nigra* subspecies along Safety Lagoon

**King Eider** N---two spectacular adult males and one sub-adult male at Safety Lagoon

**Steller's Eider** N---sub-adult male and female at Safety Sound; unexpected on this tour

Harlequin Duck N,S,D---always spectacular

Long-tailed Duck N---common

Black Scoter N

Surf Scoter N,D

White-winged Scoter N,D---great studies on the Denali Hwy

Common Goldeneye N

Barrow's Goldeneye S---male and four females on Summit Lake; stunning

Bufflehead D---one of our last new birds  
 Red-breasted Merganser N  
 Common Merganser N,S,D  
 Bald Eagle A,S,D  
 Northern Harrier N,S,D  
Northern Goshawk A---by Marshall's van near Girdwood  
 Red-tailed Hawk A,S,D---the "Harlan's" subspecies  
 Rough-legged Hawk N  
 Golden Eagle N,D---one on a nest in Nome and a young bird from about 30 feet on our Denali shuttle trip  
 Merlin D  
Gyrfalcon N---nice spotting by Marshall  
Peregrine Falcon N  
Spruce Grouse S---attack hen (Marshall risked his life finding this one); walk away views of this always very tough species; tied for second favorite bird of the tour  
 Willow Ptarmigan N,D---the second consecutive down year for ptarmigan with only four seen in Nome and two more in Denali; however we had great views and this species was voted the favorite bird of the tour!  
 Rock Ptarmigan N---as with Willow, numbers of this species were way down in Nome, but we did manage four individuals with some excellent views  
 Sandhill Crane N,A  
 Black Oystercatcher S---bird on nest  
 Pacific Golden-Plover N---gorgeous breeding-plumaged birds  
 American Golden-Plover N---ditto  
 Black-bellied Plover N---perhaps the most beautiful of the three  
 Semipalmated Plover N,A  
 Wilson's Snipe N,A  
 Short-billed Dowitcher A---subspecies *caurinus*  
 Hudsonian Godwit A---after a long hike at Westchester  
 Bar-tailed Godwit N---*baueri*  
 Whimbrel N  
**Bristle-thighed Curlew** N---great views for the seven who made the rugged hike up the dome; this species is less than 50 - 50 on any given tour  
 Greater Yellowlegs A,S  
 Lesser Yellowlegs A,S,D---in trees  
 Spotted Sandpiper N,A  
 Wandering Tattler N,S  
 Ruddy Turnstone N  
Black Turnstone N---one pair along Safety Lagoon; very uncommon  
Red Knot N---a nice find along the Teller Road  
 Semipalmated Sandpiper N  
 Western Sandpiper N  
 Least Sandpiper N---where very uncommon  
 Dunlin N  
Rock Sandpiper N---subspecies *tschuktschorum*; very uncommon and local  
**Buff-breasted Sandpiper** N---by the curlew hikers; rare  
 Red-necked Phalarope N,A  
**Red Phalarope** N---gorgeous female near Nome; rare this late  
 Parasitic Jaeger N---great study of one on the road right in Nome  
 Long-tailed Jaeger N---one of the most common and conspicuous birds around Nome  
 Mew Gull seen daily in numbers  
 Glaucous-winged Gull N,S  
 Glaucous Gull N  
 Herring Gull N,A---"Vega" Gull at Nome and "American" Herring Gull around Anchorage' already split by Clements and could be a future split by the AOU

**Slaty-backed Gull** N,A---an increasingly regular visitor to Nome (we had an adult and two second year birds from Safety Sound); very rare was a first year bird at Anchorage  
 Bonaparte's Gull A,D  
Sabine's Gull N---very uncommon this late  
 Black-legged Kittiwake N,S---by the thousands in Kenai Fjords  
 Arctic Tern almost daily  
**Caspian Tern** S---by some on the optional trip to the Seward shipyard flats; rare  
 Aleutian Tern N---great studies  
 Common Murre N,S  
Thick-billed Murre N,S---one seen distantly from Cape Nome; about 20 on the Chiswells  
 Pigeon Guillemot S---fantastic views from shore  
 Marbled Murrelet S---about 30 from the boat, one from shore  
Kittlitz's Murrelet S---after some searching we had a three near Northwest Glacier, one of which provided the best views ever on the water!; tied for second favorite bird of the tour  
Ancient Murrelet S---as with the preceding species, our best views ever for this trip; easily missed  
 Rhinoceros Auklet S---great studies; seems to be increasing; about 250 seen  
 Horned Puffin S---about 800 seen  
 Tufted Puffin S---about 1000 seen  
 Rock Pigeon A,S---two in Seward were a surprise  
Great Horned Owl D---roosting on a pole  
Northern Hawk-Owl D---great scope studies along the Denali Hwy in somewhat of a down year for this species  
 Rufous Hummingbird S---less conspicuous than usual  
 Belted Kingfisher S,D  
 Downy Woodpecker A---heard only in Anchorage  
 Hairy Woodpecker A  
Three-toed Woodpecker S,A---nest with young, plus at least four others; a good year for this often tough species  
 Northern Flicker D---"Yellow-shafted"  
 Olive-sided Flycatcher S  
 Western Wood-Pewee S---heard only  
 Alder Flycatcher N,A,S,D  
Say's Phoebe N---very uncommon  
 Horned Lark N  
 Tree Swallow daily, including in Nome where there are basically no trees!  
 Violet-green Swallow A,S,D  
 Bank Swallow N,A,S,D  
 Cliff Swallow N,D  
 Yellow Wagtail N---subspecies *tschutschensis*  
 American Pipit N---heard only  
 Golden-crowned Kinglet S---nice views of agitated bird  
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet S,A,D  
 Bohemian Waxwing D---one flycatching along the Parks Hwy and four more mobbing the hawk-owl!  
 American Dipper N,S---great studies  
 Gray-cheeked Thrush N,D  
 Swainson's Thrush D---heard only  
 Hermit Thrush N,A,S,D---perhaps the best song in North America  
 American Robin daily  
 Varied Thrush N,S,A,D---great scope views; another top song contender  
 Arctic Warbler N,D---superb views of this specialty  
Bluethroat N---two males in one spot put on a great show  
Northern Wheatear N---nice views of this uncommon and local species  
 Black-capped Chickadee A  
 Chestnut-backed Chickadee S---the chestnut-sided subspecies *rufescens*

Boreal Chickadee S---uncommon  
 Red-breasted Nuthatch S  
 Brown Creeper S---family group at Trail River  
 Northern Shrike N,D---two in Nome and three in the Denali area; always uncommon  
 Gray Jay D  
 Steller's Jay S---dark race lacking white spots on crest and around eye  
 Black-billed Magpie A,S,D  
 Northwestern Crow S---including one at Girdwood where rare  
 Common Raven seen daily  
 Pine Grosbeak S  
 White-winged Crossbill D---somewhat scarce this year, but still a few flocks in the Denali area, including one group mobbing the hawk-owl  
 Common Redpoll N,D  
 Hoary Redpoll N  
 Pine Siskin S  
 Orange-crowned Warbler N,S  
 Yellow Warbler N  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler A,S,D---Myrtle types  
 Townsend's Warbler S---superb views of this striking species  
 Blackpoll Warbler N,D  
 Northern Waterthrush N,S,D  
 Wilson's Warbler N,A,S,D  
 American Tree Sparrow N,D  
 Savannah Sparrow N,A,D  
 Fox Sparrow N,S,D---"Red" birds (*zaboria*) in Nome & Denali, "Sooty" (*unalaschensis*) birds between Anchorage and Seward  
 Song Sparrow S---big, dark coastal race *kenaiensis*  
 Lincoln's Sparrow S,A,D  
 White-crowned Sparrow almost daily  
 Golden-crowned Sparrow N,A,S  
 Dark-eyed Junco A,S,D---Slate-colored types  
 Lapland Longspur N---spectacular in breeding plumage  
 Snow Bunting N---ditto  
 Red-winged Blackbird A,S---uncommon; Marshall's favorite bird  
 Rusty Blackbird N

total species - **170** (a new Alaska Mainland tour record beating the previous high of 166)

**Leader only birds:**

Snow Goose

**Mammals:**

Arctic Ground Squirrel  
 Red Squirrel  
 Hoary Marmot---the tundra possum  
 Snowshoe Hare  
 vole species  
 Common Muskrat  
 Red Fox---great views of a few in Nome  
**Gray Wolf**---a white individual along the Kougarak Road seen by about half the group  
**Coyote**---one in Denali chasing Caribou was an unusual sight  
 Mountain Goat  
 Moose---a total of 29 seen for the trip including a few bulls  
 Caribou---"Barren Ground" Caribou in Denali and "Reindeer" in Nome

Dall's Sheep---close herd of rams at Polychrome  
Musk Ox---roughly fifty out the Teller Road and another hundred or more way out the Council Road; more numerous than I have ever seen them  
Grizzly Bear---one at Tern Lake raiding a Mew Gull nesting colony and five on our Denali shuttle tour; great views  
Black Bear---one from the gas stop in Girdwood; uncommonly seen  
Dall's Porpoise---speedy "mini-Orcas" bow-riding our boat  
Orca---two right next to the boat including an incredible male  
Humpback Whale-----at least three seen from the boat  
Sea Otter---great views of these cute critters in Kenai Fjords  
River Otter---family group behind the breeze Inn; very uncommon  
Steller's Sea Lion  
Harbor Seal

total species - 23

**Butterflies:**

Old World Swallowtail  
Canadian Tiger Swallowtail  
Mustard White  
Spring Azure  
Silvery Blue  
Mourning Cloak  
Milbert's Tortoiseshell  
Arctic Skipper

total species - 8

**Significant others:**

Denali (Mount McKinley) in full view for an entire morning on our ride up from Anchorage!  
viewing the midnight sun for some in Nome (and watching it set at 1:18 am)  
king crab & salmon dinners  
blackberry pi at Summit Lake  
RJ from the WAC (near the DVC) driving our bus and not a POV  
grayling at Fish Creek  
salmon at Bear Lake