

GRAND ALASKA: GAMBELL/NOME PRE-TRIP

MAY 27 – JUNE 4, 2007

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GAMBELL/NOME, ALASKA TOUR BIRDLIST

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(LEADERS: Kevin Zimmer & Dave Wolf)

As usual, our Gambell-Nome adventure started with an evening owling excursion out of Anchorage. Sadly, there were no staked-out Boreal Owl nests within range, but the feisty little Northern Saw-whet Owl peering out of its cavity provided nice compensation, and was the perfect start to our tour.

The next day saw us flying to Nome, and then later, to Gambell. A delay of a few hours in Nome allowed for an impromptu sea-watch behind Fat Freddie's restaurant, where the after-lunch special included fly-by Yellow-billed Loons and Black Scoters, as well as numbers of Red-throated Loons, Glaucous Gulls, and Arctic Terns. By mid-afternoon we were off, and in no time we were looking down on St. Lawrence Island, with the snow-covered mountains of Siberia gleaming in the distance, some 40+ miles away. The short hike from the airstrip to the lodge produced the usual Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings in the boneyard, and then it was time to get down to the business of baggage distribution and getting settled into our rooms. Just as we were getting this necessary business sorted out, word came of a Wood Sandpiper in the marsh at the northeast corner of Troutman Lake. And with that, our first chase was on! After getting introduced to the infamous Gambell gravel, we arrived at the marsh and began our hunt for the sandpiper. It took some searching, but eventually the bird turned up and we all enjoyed prolonged studies of our first vagrant of the trip.

There were more vagrants to follow, the rarest of which was a Hawfinch that led us on a merry chase along the base of the mountain before we finally pinned it down as it fed in a snowfield below the road. Common Ringed-Plovers and a Red-necked Stint in the boneyards, a white-bellied Barn Swallow (representing one of the Eurasian subspecies) frantically hawking insects above the snowfields on the mountainside, a Gray-tailed Tattler efficiently catching one stickleback after another from a stream outflow at the south end of the lake, a Black-headed Gull alternately drifting and feeding along the shoreline, and a gorgeous Red-throated Pipit feeding in the grassy hollow near the radio antennas rounded out our vagrant list.

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. A couple of ghostly Ivory Gulls took top honors this year, but our watches were also enlivened by a good passage of Yellow-billed and Pacific loons,

punctuated by the appearance of an occasional Arctic Loon; several small groups of Emperor Geese; three species of eiders (including several beautiful male Steller's); a Slaty-backed Gull; and nine species of Bering Sea alcids. An immaculate Snowy Owl at the south end of the lake, flocks of Sandhill Cranes kettling and calling overhead, 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 few sitting Dovekies amongst the vast throngs of other alcids along the boulder-strewn mountainside 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.

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?"

Nome was a different world, with its bustling, frontier atmosphere, and a network of fabulous roads penetrating a variety of tundra habitats. Bird diversity was much higher here, and mammals were much more in evidence. Moose, musk ox, and grizzly bears were all tallied, and birding highlights included displaying male Bluethroats, both Rock and Willow ptarmigan, a Gyrfalcon on the nest, a displaying Black Turnstone, and pairs of Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Wheatears. Best of all, our trek for the Bristle-thighed Curlew paid off with prolonged close range observations of a fabulous pair of those rare shorebirds.

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 afternoon flight to Gambell. Our time in Nome included a brief seawatch behind Fat Freddie's
- 5/29 - Gambell
- 5/30 - Gambell

- 5/31 - Gambell
 6/01 - early morning birding at Gambell, followed by late-morning flight to Nome, with afternoon and early evening birding on the Council Road to Safety Sound
 6/02 - all day birding on the Kougarok Road (to the end of the road, and including our successful hike for the Bristle-thighed Curlew).
 6/03 - early morning birding on the Teller Road (to Penny River), followed by remainder of the day on the Council Road to beyond Solomon.
 6/04 - tour concludes after breakfast, with morning flights back to Anchorage for those just doing **Gambell-Nome**, while others continued on the **Grand Alaska Tour**

Key:

- A = Anchorage (owling excursion)
 G = Gambell
 N = Nome area
 * = heard only

Birds:

- Greater White-fronted Goose - N
Emperor Goose - G (several small groups that flew past the Point)
 Brant - G, N (these were all typical western birds, formerly called “Black Brant”)
 Cackling Goose - 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.)
 Tundra Swan - N
 American Wigeon - G, N
 Northern Shoveler - G, N
 Green-winged Teal - G, N (both the widespread North American race *carolinensis* at G & N, and 1 male *crecca* {treated by some authorities as a distinct species, “Eurasian Teal”} at G)
 Mallard - N
 Northern Pintail - N
 Greater Scaup - A, G, N
 Lesser Scaup - A
Steller’s Eider - G (Several nice sightings this year.)
 Common Eider - G, N
King Eider - G
 Harlequin Duck - G, N
 Surf Scoter - N
 White-winged Scoter - G
 Black Scoter - N, G
 Long-tailed Duck - G, N
 Barrow’s Goldeneye - A
 Common Merganser - G, N

Red-breasted Merganser - G, N
Willow Ptarmigan - N (numbers starting to come back up after a couple of down years)
Rock Ptarmigan - N
 Red-throated Loon - N, G
Arctic Loon - G (nice looks at a fly-by at the Point)
 Pacific Loon - G, N
 Common Loon - N (the uncommon loon here)
Yellow-billed Loon - N, G (a good passage of this species this year)
 Red-necked Grebe - A, N
 Northern Fulmar - G
 Pelagic Cormorant - G, N
 Northern Harrier - N
 Rough-legged Hawk - G, N
 Golden Eagle - N
 Merlin - G (seen only by Shelia)
Gyr Falcon - N
 Sandhill Crane - G, N
 American Golden-Plover - N
 Pacific Golden-Plover - G, N
Common Ringed-Plover - G (close studies)
 Semipalmated Plover - G, N
 Spotted Sandpiper - N
Gray-tailed Tattler - G (Nice looks at this Siberian vagrant.)
 Wandering Tattler - N
Wood Sandpiper - G (good studies)
 Whimbrel - N (The breeding subspecies at Nome is the widespread North American form *hudsonicus*.)
Bristle-thighed Curlew - N (Sensational, prolonged studies of a mated pair, with a third bird heard calling and seen by Andy. This is one of the rarest and most localized of all North American breeding birds.)
Bar-tailed Godwit - N
 Ruddy Turnstone - G
Black Turnstone - N
 Sanderling - N
 Semipalmated Sandpiper - N
 Western Sandpiper - G, N
Red-necked Stint - G (Prolonged studies of a single bird in the near boneyard.)
 Baird's Sandpiper - 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)
 Dunlin - G, N
 Long-billed Dowitcher - G, N
 Wilson's Snipe - N
 Red-necked Phalarope - A, G, N
 Red Phalarope - G

Black-headed Gull - G

Mew Gull - 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 - G

Glaucous Gull - G, N

Sabine’s Gull - N

Black-legged Kittiwake - N, G

Ivory Gull - G (Nice studies of this quintessentially Arctic gull. This species has become increasingly difficult to find in recent years, following a recent drastic decline in numbers. This may be one of the more likely casualties of global climate change.)

Aleutian Tern - N

Arctic Tern - N

Pomarine Jaeger - G

Parasitic Jaeger - G, N

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

Dovekie - G (nice scope looks at a multiple birds on the hillside)

Common Murre - G

Thick-billed Murre - G, N

Black Guillemot - G

Pigeon Guillemot - G, N

Parakeet Auklet - G

Least Auklet - G

Crested Auklet - G

Horned Puffin - G

Tufted Puffin - G

Rock Pigeon - A

Snowy Owl - G (nice looks!)

Northern Saw-whet Owl - A (prolonged studies of a bird at a nest)

Say’s Phoebe - N

Black-billed Magpie - A

Common Raven - A, N, G

Tree Swallow - G, N

Violet-green Swallow - A

Bank Swallow - N

Cliff Swallow - N

Barn Swallow - G (This was an unexpected surprise! Clearly one of the white-bellied, Eurasian subspecies of this widespread species.)

American Dipper - N

Bluethroat - N (Prolonged studies of a stunning male in full display.)

Northern Wheatear - G, N

Gray-cheeked Thrush - N

Swainson’s Thrush - G (only the 2nd or 3rd spring record for Gambell)

American Robin - A, N

Varied Thrush - A (nice looks), N*

Eastern Yellow Wagtail - G, N

White Wagtail - G (increasingly difficult in recent years; seems to be a declining species in North America)

Red-throated Pipit - G (excellent views)

American Pipit - G, N (The Gambell bird was of the migratory Siberian subspecies *japonicus*, whereas the birds at Nome were of the subspecies *pacificus*, one of the widespread subspecies that breed in North America.)

Orange-crowned Warbler - N

Yellow Warbler - N

Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler - A*

Blackpoll Warbler - N

Northern Waterthrush - N

Wilson's Warbler - 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

Rusty Blackbird - N

Common Redpoll - A, G, N

Hoary Redpoll - N

Hawfinch - G (Our rarest bird of the trip, and seen nicely {after some effort} by everyone!)

Total = 125 species

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - G, N

Tundra Vole - G

Snowshoe Hare - N

Beaver - N

Moose - N

Reindeer - N

Musk Ox - N

Arctic Fox - G

Red Fox - N

Short-tailed Weasel - N

Brown Bear (Grizzly) - N

Gray Whale - G

Humpback Whale - G

Total = 13 species