

# **GRAND ALASKA: BARROW EXTENSION**

**JUNE 17 – 19, 2006**

**LEADER: KEVIN ZIMMER, with an assist from visiting VENT leader  
Dion Hobcoft**

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**ALASKA: BARROW EXTENSION BIRDLIST**

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This year's Barrow Extension was like a blast from the past, and hopefully, a harbinger of visits to come. For the first time in years, all four species of eiders were easy. We thrilled to walk-away crippling views of breeding-plumaged male Steller's and Spectacled eiders, two species that have undergone precipitous population declines over the past few decades. On the first morning we enjoyed prolonged studies of three male Spectacled Eiders with a single female, and a pair of King Eiders thrown in for good measure! A mixed flock of King and Common eiders loafed on the ice just down the street from our hotel, and could be scoped at leisure any time we passed. As spectacular as the Spectacleds and Kings were, they may have been trumped by the elegant pair of Steller's Eiders along the Zigzag Road on the second day that allowed us such close approach. In general, the eiders seemed tamer than in the past, which may indicate that campaigns to get the local subsistence hunters to stop hunting both Spectacled and Steller's eiders are having an impact. At any rate, our repeated close studies of each of the eider species were the best we have enjoyed in years. Our biggest problem with eiders was in trying to decide which of the fancy males was the most attractive!

This was also a big lemming year, which meant that Pomarine Jaegers were everywhere, and Snowy Owls were also present in decent numbers. It also meant that lemmings were scooting out from underneath our feet every time we walked on the tundra. As always, the extravaganza of breeding shorebirds, from booming Pectoral Sandpipers to spinning Red Phalaropes, was in full gear. This year we were treated to some of the less common high arctic breeders such as Buff-breasted Sandpiper (displaying), Sanderling, and Stilt Sandpiper, all of which are much more common in Arctic Canada and the eastern portions of Alaska's North Slope. A Lesser Sandplover (Mongolian Plover) was an unexpected bonus bird, as was an Olive-sided Flycatcher that was clearly lost.

Our rarest find by far was the *Ardea* heron that came winging its way along the coast of the Chukchi Sea (escorted by Glaucous Gulls!) as we stood looking at eiders. Any heron is a major rarity at Barrow, and the second I spotted this one I realized that we needed to make sure that it wasn't a Gray Heron, a bird whose nearest breeding populations in Siberia might be closer to Barrow than are the nearest breeding populations of Great Blue Heron. I started screaming "Heron, heron, get on this heron, and check the color of the thighs!" We scrambled for the scopes, and were able to track the bird in flight until it disappeared from view far to the north. Subsequent attempts to find the bird on the ground netted nothing. All of us perceived the color of the thighs to be grayish-white (those of Great Blue Heron are rusty or chestnut), and the bird showed a highly

contrasting, continuous black stripe along the sides of the belly (the stripe in Great Blue is usually somewhat broken and less bold). Also, the bird appeared somewhat stockier, less elongate than a typical Great Blue Heron (lending an in-flight configuration that was almost more night-heron like). However, the bird also appeared somewhat darker gray than Gray Herons that I have seen in Africa, and it did not show white marginal coverts on the leading edge of the wing, which would have been typical for Gray Heron. Photos of the bird have been circulated to a number of people, and the reaction has been mixed (some favoring Gray Heron, more favoring Great Blue, with most unwilling to put a name on it), but decidedly inconclusive. Either way, it was a mega-rarity for Barrow! Stay tuned...

Our trip ended with a bang, when breaking news of a polar bear on the beach across the street from our hotel completely interrupted breakfast. Everyone piled out of Pepe's right after ordering, and when it became apparent that the bear was no longer in the immediate vicinity, we loaded into the van and started checking likely overlooks. News of a second bear over at Browerville prompted me to drive north, and at the first possible overlook we struck pay dirt! Dion spotted the polar bear, 300 meters out on the ice, busily engaged in eating something. We hopped out for scope studies and digiscope photos, then piled back in the van and returned to the restaurant just in time for them to serve our still-hot meals. Forty-five minutes later we were at the airport, checking in for our flight to Anchorage! Talk about a wild finish!

### **Itinerary:**

6/17 - morning flight to Barrow, late morning birding on Freshwater Lake Road; afternoon birding on Gaswell Road and out to the base of the Point.

6/18 - morning and afternoon check of all three roads; optional post-dinner Polar Bear search to Point.

6/19 - morning flight back to Anchorage, with connections home or overnight in Anchorage.

### **Birds:**

Red-throated Loon - 4–10 birds both days

Pacific Loon - 8–10 birds both days

***Ardea* sp.** – 1 bird that flew past us in good light as we stood on the beach at ca. 3:00 p.m. on 6/17 was either a Great Blue Heron or a Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*). There are no confirmed records of the latter for the ABA checklist area, although its breeding range in Siberia is probably closer than that of the nearest breeding Great Blue Herons. The two species are very similar in appearance, and photographs that were taken of our bird may be inconclusive. The bird appeared to have grayish-white thighs (Great Blue has chestnut thighs), and an unbroken, bold, black stripe along the edge of the belly (this usually broken and less contrasting in Great Blue), both of which point toward it being a

Gray Heron. However, it also appeared somewhat darker gray overall than is typical of Gray Heron, and, it lacked the white marginal coverts to the upperwing that usually form white “headlights” on the leading edge of the wing of Gray Heron. People to whom the photos have been distributed are split in their opinion of the identity. Most have felt that the photographs were inconclusive, or favored Great Blue Heron. Others lean toward an ID of Gray Heron. Either way, it would be a mega-rarity for Barrow. Stay tuned for further developments...

Tundra Swan - 4–12 birds both days

Greater White-fronted Goose - both days, with a high of 50+ on 6/17

Brant - 1 on 6/17; 2 on 6/18 (both on the big muddy lagoon at the start of the Gaswell Road)

American Wigeon - 1 on 6/17

Green-winged Teal - 2 on 6/17, 4 on 6/18

Northern Pintail - common

Greater Scaup - 1 on 6/18

**Common Eider** - typically the least-common eider at Barrow. We saw 3 one day and 4 the next, each time mixed in with a flock of Kings.

**King Eider** - 8 one day and 12 the next, including excellent scope views of multiple males in full breeding plumage.

**Spectacled Eider** - Walk-away fabulous studies of males in full breeding plumage! We saw 3 males and a female before lunch on the first day, with totals of 5 on 6/17, and 4 on 6/18.

**Steller’s Eider** - Our best experience with this elegant bird in several years. We had 4 the first day and 6 the second, but it was the quality of our views (particularly of one pair that allowed us to approach quite closely for crippling looks) that stood out over the numbers.

Long-tailed Duck - common

Peregrine Falcon - 2 on 6/18 (1 on the Freshwater Lake road, another at the Point)

American Golden-Plover - 3 on 6/17, 15+ on 6/18.

Semipalmated Plover - 2 both days

**Lesser Sandplover** - 1 at the large muddy lagoon on the Gaswell Road was a good find. This species was formerly called “Mongolian Plover”. The birds that show up as vagrants in Alaska are of the nominate group (*mongolius* and *stegmanni*), which is distinguished by a black border to the rufous breast band, and by a white forehead dissected by a black bar. These birds may be split from the black-fronted populations, and would then likely be renamed “Mongolian Sandplover”.

Wilson’s Snipe - 1 on 6/18 was vocalizing and winnowing

Long-billed Dowitcher - 5–10/day

Ruddy Turnstone - 5–8/day

**Sanderling** - 1 at the base of the Point on 6/17 was unusual

Semipalmated Sandpiper - common

Western Sandpiper - leader only

Baird’s Sandpiper - nice studies (ca. 10/day)

Pectoral Sandpiper - lots of displaying birds (abundant)

Dunlin - 15–20/day

**Stilt Sandpiper** - A rarity here. We had 1 at the big muddy lagoon near the beginning of the Gaswell Road (seen both days).

**Buff-breasted Sandpiper** - 1 by Kevin at the end of the Gaswell Road on 6/17, and a displaying bird for everyone on the Freshwater Lake Road on 6/18.

Red-necked Phalarope - 30+/day

**Red Phalarope** - Abundant. Seeing these elegant birds in full breeding plumage is always a highlight

**Pomarine Jaeger** - 50+/day, in what was obviously a big lemming year.

Parasitic Jaeger - 1 on 6/17, and 5 on 6/18

Glaucous Gull - common

Herring Gull - 1 1<sup>st</sup>-yr bird of the Siberian subspecies *vegae*, treated as a separate species from North American Herring Gulls by the Europeans (and then usually called "Vega Gull").

**Sabine's Gull** - 2 at Freshwater Lake on 6/17-18. Also seen by some people at the Point during one of the Polar Bear excursions.

Arctic Tern - 5 on 6/17 and 10 on 6/18.

**Black Guillemot** - 9 in one group on a small pond near the base of the Point on 6/18.

**Snowy Owl** - 12+ on 6/17, and 6 on 6/18. This was a good lemming year, so lots of owls around, but with all of the snow melted, the owls weren't hanging as close to the road as they often do. Nonetheless, we had good looks.

**Olive-sided Flycatcher** - 1 on 6/18 had apparently been hanging around for at least a few days. This was one lost bird!

**Tree Swallow** - 2 over the big muddy lagoon at the beginning of the Gaswell Road on 6/17 were a surprise.

Common Raven - 1 on 6/17

**Hoary Redpoll** - scattered redpolls were seen on both days. Most were not seen well enough to identify to species, but those that were identified were all Hoaries.

Savannah Sparrow - 1 heard on 6/17, 2 seen on 6/18

Lapland Longspur - abundant

Snow Bunting - common

### **Mammals:**

Arctic Fox - 1 freshly killed animal on the beach

**Polar Bear** - 1 on the last morning was a spectacular interruption to our breakfast, and made for an exciting finish!

Bearded Seal - at least 5 of the seals seen on the ice could be identified as this species

Brown Lemming - common this year