

GRAND ALASKA: GAMBELL/NOME PRE-TRIP

JUNE 5 – 13, 2008

LEADERS:

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Our Gambell-Nome adventure started with an evening excursion around Anchorage. Sadly, there were no staked out Boreal Owl nests available, so Dave and Louise improvised by taking the group to Lake Spenard and Westchester Lagoon for a nice array of waterfowl (including superb Barrow's Goldeneyes), and what Dave labeled as the "best looks at Hudsonian Godwits that we've ever had." Meanwhile, I was staking out Bluethroat territories and Gyrfalcon nests in Nome, and awaiting the group's arrival the next day.

I met everyone at the Nome airport late in the morning, and with virtually no delay, we were soon winging our way toward Gambell. By mid-afternoon 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. Once these mundane orders of business were taken care of, we set out on our first hike to the northeast marsh and the far boneyard. Other than acquainting everyone with the infamous Gambell gravel, this hike also resulted in nice comparative studies of Hoary and Common redpolls, and a brief encounter with a White Wagtail. Our first sea watch was more productive, producing nice looks at a subadult male Spectacled Eider, a flock of 30 or more King Eiders, and an impressive nine species of alcids.

We awoke the next morning to find that our good weather of the previous day had changed dramatically. Winds were now blowing hard from the S-SE, visibility had diminished considerably, and it was snowing! Before long, the entire Gambell landscape was blanketed in snow, much of which was blowing horizontally, in big, wet, flakes. A morning stomp through the near boneyards resulted in nice studies of the rare-but-regular (here) Common Ringed-Plover, and we soon caught up with a nice pair of White Wagtails in the boatyard. Snow was still falling in the afternoon, and we switched our plans for a sea watch to a return to northeast marsh and the far boneyard instead. Little did we dream how fortuitous this change in strategy would prove.

A cursory inspection of the marsh revealed virtually no birds—indeed, the marsh was mostly frozen over or covered in snow. We reorganized for a sweep through the boneyard, when Dave Wolf volunteered to take the right wing and make a pass through that corner of the marsh. We had just commenced our sweep when we heard Dave exclaim loudly, "Oh my gosh...JACK SNIPE!" We all wheeled around to see Dave pointing at a plump bird dropping back into the center of the marsh. Jack Snipe is an exceedingly rare vagrant to North America from the Palearctic, with only a handful of North American records, most of which are from the early 1900s. One had been found

and photographed by another birding group at this very spot (and also during a snowstorm) a few days earlier, but subsequent searches by that group and others had failed to relocate the bird in the next few days. Indeed, we had stomped all over the marsh just the previous day, but with no success. Now, we hurriedly assembled the troops, and began slowly advancing on the spot where we saw the bird disappear. Before long, we were nearly on top of the spot, and despite meticulous scanning, we could not locate the bird. Suddenly, it jumped again, and put down some 50+ meters away, near the terminus of one of the few drainages still flowing in the marsh. Again, we crept cautiously forward, and again, the bird seemed to have vanished. I noted one tiny corner of the drainage that we could not see from our vantage, and suggested that the bird had to be there. We swung to the right, and sure enough, there it was, huddled against the shoreline, with snowflakes melting on contact against its back and beading up like so many jewels atop the ornate plumage. The Jack Snipe soon adjusted to our presence and began foraging, all the while doing a slow, deep bob. Our scopes revealed every facet of its plumage, from the streaked flanks to the complex face pattern, to the intricate patterns within every feather of the back and wing coverts. We also noted the surprisingly bright yellow base to the culmen, a feature so different from the more familiar snipes in the genus *Gallinago*. Some 45 minutes and hundreds of photos and digiscoped images later, we all walked away, ecstatic with a bird that was a lifer for everyone (all leaders included), and hands-down, THE bird of the trip.

Other vagrants were to come. Several of us (still on Cloud Nine from the Jack Snipe) opted to bird the base of the mountain south from the marsh. Tantalizing glimpses of a large thrush that we kept flushing (later proving to be a Varied Thrush) drew us farther and farther south, until the only logical course was to check the south end of Troutman Lake. This resulted in prolonged, intimate studies of a Gray-tailed Tattler, catching and devouring one stickleback after another. Frustratingly, a return to this area the next day failed to relocate the tattler, but our efforts were rewarded when we turned up a lovely Lesser Sand-Plover instead, and had spectacular studies of another Common Ringed-Plover. A male Siberian Rubythroat in Old Town led us on a merry chase through the near boneyard before ultimately vanishing (as Rubythroats are prone to do), but not without yielding identifiable views to about half of the group.

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. We were treated to fly-by looks at all four species of eiders, exceptional numbers of Black Guillemots, and a few each of Arctic and Yellow-billed loons, as well as numbers of the more common species.

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, reindeer, and musk ox were all tallied (the latter in increasingly impressive numbers), and birding highlights included displaying male Bluethroats, both Rock and Willow ptarmigan, a Gyrfalcon on the nest, a rare Red-necked Stint and an even rarer Common Ringed-Plover in the same day, distant Emperor Geese, a lovely pair of Bohemian Waxwings at Council, and nesting 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 individual of what is one of the rarest breeding shorebirds on the continent.

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:

- 6/05 - met in Anchorage, with evening excursion to Lake Spenard & Westchester Lagoon
- 6/06 - morning flight to Nome, followed by 1:30 p.m. flight to Gambell, arriving on a nice day, with sunny skies changing to high overcast, and light winds. Our first excursion was a hike to the marsh at the NE corner of Troutman Lake, followed by a check of the far boneyards, and a short sea watch later in the evening.
- 6/07 - Gambell: a.m. check of the airport pond, near boneyard, and boatyard; p.m. hike to marsh at NE corner of Troutman Lake, followed by a check of the far boneyard, circular boneyard and base of the mountain. Several of us continued to the far (south) end of Troutman Lake, making it back just in time for dinner. Post-dinner sea watch. This was our snow day, with falling snow persisting through 4:00 p.m. and strong winds blowing from S to SE in the morning, shifting to N winds in the afternoon.
- 6/08 - Gambell: a.m. extended sea watch; p.m. to the far (south) end of Troutman Lake and back. Nice sunny day with light north winds.
- 6/09 - Gambell: a.m. check of the near boneyard, airport pond, boatyard, NE marsh, far boneyard, mountain base, and circular boneyard; p.m. re-check the near boneyard, followed by sea watch. Stiff winds out of SW, with low cloud ceiling.
- 6/10 - Early morning birding at Gambell, with flight out delayed by low cloud ceiling & fog. Arrived in Nome in late p.m., with group split over two planes and the

- flights staggered. Late arrival of half the group precluded any birding at Nome this evening.
- 6/11 - All day birding on the Kougarok Road, MP 73, and culminating in our very successful Bristle-thighed Curlew hike. Started off with snow on the Nome side of the mountains for the first few hours of the morning, clearing to sunny skies for the rest of the day (temporarily clouded over from ca. 3:00–5:00 p.m. for the duration of the curlew hike).
- 6/12 - All day on the Council Road (all the way to Council). Nice sunny day with light SW breeze and temperatures from 35–50° F.
- 6/13 - Short a.m. trip out Teller Road to Penny River, with morning flights back to Anchorage for those just doing **Gambell-Nome**, while others continued on the **Grand Alaska Tour**.

Key:

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

Birds:

- Greater White-fronted Goose - G
Emperor Goose - N
 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.)
 Canada Goose - A
 Tundra Swan - N
 American Wigeon - A, N
 Northern Shoveler - A, N
 Mallard - A, N (Seems to be increasing in the Nome region, with at least 10 birds {mostly drakes} seen on 6/12.)
 Northern Pintail - G, N
 Green-winged Teal - G, N (All birds seen this year were of the widespread North American race *carolinensis*.)
 Greater Scaup - A, G, N
 Lesser Scaup - A
Steller’s Eider - G (A single flock of 5 birds, 3 of which were males, that flew past the point, were all that we managed this year. This species has been in a freefall decline for several years now.)
Spectacled Eider - G (1 immature male seen nicely on two occasions.)
 Common Eider - G, N

King Eider - G (Lots of fly-bys from the Point, with daily highs of 20–30+ birds.)
 Harlequin Duck - G, N (Lots of good looks at these handsome ducks.)
 White-winged Scoter - G
 Black Scoter - G, N
 Long-tailed Duck - G, N
 Common Goldeneye - A, N (Very uncommon here. We had an adult male at Safety Lagoon on 6/12.)
Barrow's Goldeneye - A
 Red-breasted Merganser - G, N
Willow Ptarmigan - N (Numbers starting to come back up after a couple of down years.)
Rock Ptarmigan - N (Ditto the previous species. However, with the later date, most of the ptarmigan of both species had retreated from the roadsides, and were starting to “brown up”, making them much less conspicuous than they were just a week earlier.)
 Red-throated Loon - G, N
Arctic Loon - G (Nice looks at 3 different fly-bys from the Point.)
 Pacific Loon - G, N
Yellow-billed Loon - G, N (A smaller passage of these big loons than in many years, but we still managed some nice looks, including one particularly close fly-by at Safety Lagoon on 6/12.)
 Red-necked Grebe - A, G, N
 Northern Fulmar - G (Fewer than normal.)
 Pelagic Cormorant - G, N
Osprey - N (1 at Council on 6/12; very uncommon in the Nome area.)
 Northern Harrier - N
Northern Goshawk - N (A bird on a nest with at least 2 chicks in the Pilgrim River drainage was only the 2nd confirmed nesting record for the Seward Peninsula.)
 Rough-legged Hawk - G, N (Including a strikingly pale bird along the mountain at Gambell.)
 Golden Eagle - N
 Merlin - N (1 along the Kougarok Road on 6/11, and 1 along the Solomon River on 6/12)
Gyr Falcon - N (Scope studies of a bird on the nest.)
 Peregrine Falcon - G
 Sandhill Crane - G, N
 American Golden-Plover - N
 Pacific Golden-Plover - G, N
Lesser Sand-Plover - G (A beautiful bird at the south end of Troutman Lake on 6/8 was a nice find. 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 Sand-Plover”.)
Common Ringed-Plover - G (Repeated close studies of this rare shorebird, which is a presumed breeder. Gambell is probably the premier place in North America to

see this species, and we've never seen it so well or so many times as we did this year.), N (Amazingly, we found a male at Safety Lagoon on 6/12, which we were able to document with numerous digiscoped photos {and even heard it call twice}. This is only the 2nd time I have found this bird on the mainland at Nome, and this may represent the only photographically documented record for the species in the Nome area.)

Semipalmated Plover - G, N
 Spotted Sandpiper - N
Gray-tailed Tattler - G (Excellent studies of this Siberian vagrant for those that made the long hike to the south end of Troutman Lake on 6/7. Frustratingly, the bird was not seen the next day, despite the fact that when we last saw him he was contentedly scarfing up one tasty stickleback after another.)
 Greater Yellowlegs - A
 Lesser Yellowlegs - A
 Whimbrel - N (The breeding subspecies at Nome is the widespread North American form *hudsonicus*.)
Bristle-thighed Curlew - N (Sensational, prolonged studies of a single bird. It only took us 48 minutes from the time we started hiking until first contact – not a record, but certainly one of the easier hikes that we've ever made for this bird (which is easily missed). This is one of the rarest and most localized of all North American breeding birds.)
 Hudsonian Godwit - A (Fabulous close studies at Westchester Lagoon.)
Bar-tailed Godwit - N
 Ruddy Turnstone - G, N
Black Turnstone - N (1 at Safety Lagoon on 6/12 – an uncommon migrant here.)
 Semipalmated Sandpiper - N
 Western Sandpiper - G, N
Red-necked Stint - N (1 bird at the mouth of Hastings Creek on 6/12 was a great pick-up, especially since we failed to find any at Gambell. A few of these birds are found each spring/summer in the Nome area, and it is still not known if they represent rare breeders, or simply non-breeding vagrants.)
 Pectoral Sandpiper - G (None at Nome this year, despite the fact that just one week prior they were all over the place!)
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
JACK SNIPE - G (*The bird of the trip!* One of only a handful of North American records {at least 2 of which are from California, and most of which are from more than 50 years ago}, and a lifer for everyone {including the leaders} on the trip. It had been found during a snowstorm by another birding group a few days before we arrived on the island, but was not seen subsequently, despite much searching. We missed it on our first day as well, but it took another snowstorm on 6/7 to flush it out of cover. We enjoyed fabulous scope studies as the bird bobbed and

fed along the margins of the water, with the falling snow melting on contact with its back. MAGICAL!)

Red-necked Phalarope - G, N

Red Phalarope - G, N (A late migrant at Safety Lagoon on 6/12.)

Bonaparte's Gull - A

Mew Gull - A, 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 (One 2nd-year bird on 6/12. Oddly, none were seen at Gambell this year.)

Glaucous-winged Gull - A, N (One 1st-year bird on 6/12)

Glaucous Gull - G, N

Sabine's Gull - G

Black-legged Kittiwake - G, N

Aleutian Tern - N

Arctic Tern - A, N

Pomarine Jaeger - G

Parasitic Jaeger - G, N

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

Dovekie - G (Nice looks at a bird from the Point.)

Common Murre - G, N

Thick-billed Murre - G, N

Black Guillemot - G (Good numbers this year, with 5–12/day. Usually outnumbered by Pigeon Guillemots by at least 20:1.)

Pigeon Guillemot - G

Parakeet Auklet - G

Least Auklet - G

Crested Auklet - G

Horned Puffin - G

Tufted Puffin - G

Rock Pigeon - A

Short-eared Owl - N

Say's Phoebe - N

Northern Shrike - N

Gray Jay - N (2 birds at Council on 6/12)

Black-billed Magpie - A

Common Raven - N, G

Tree Swallow - A, N

Violet-green Swallow - A

Bank Swallow - A, N

Cliff Swallow - A, N

American Dipper - N (Nesting under the Penny River bridge.)

Siberian Rubythroat - G (1 adult male in the Near Boneyard on 6/8 was typically elusive and uncooperative, yielding fleeting views for about half of the group before disappearing for good.)

Bluethroat - G, N (Prolonged studies of multiple stunning males in full display, first at Gambell {where it is only a migrant}, and then at Nome {where expected}. This bird is just too cool!)

Northern Wheatear - G (KJZ only), N (Nice looks at a couple of different birds.)

Gray-cheeked Thrush - G (Uncommon here. We witnessed an impressive movement of these birds on 6/7 {the snowstorm day}, when a minimum of 25 birds were seen – unprecedented numbers for Gambell.), N (Always amazingly common here.)

Hermit Thrush - N* (heard only at Cape Nome)

American Robin - A, N

Varied Thrush - G (A big surprise here. Seen on 6/7-8. We eventually secured 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. Despite this, I'd say that we had more quality views of this often elusive species on this year's trip than any trip in the past ten years!)

American Pipit - G, N (The Gambell bird may have been of the migratory Siberian subspecies *japonicus* {seen too poorly to ascertain}, whereas the birds at Nome were of the subspecies *pacificus*, one of the widespread subspecies that breed in North America.)

Bohemian Waxwing - N (A lovely pair of birds near Council on 6/12 appeared to be quite territorial. This is a rare and sporadic breeder in this largely treeless part of the Seward Peninsula.)

Orange-crowned Warbler - A, N

Yellow Warbler - N

Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler - N (Several near Council on 6/12.)

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 - A, N

Golden-crowned Sparrow - N

Lapland Longspur - G, N

Snow Bunting - G

Common Redpoll - G, N

Hoary Redpoll - N

Total = 129 species

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - G, N

Tundra Vole - G

Red Squirrel - N (What this animal was doing here, right along the seawall at Nome is anyone's guess. I had seen it in essentially the same location earlier in the week.)

Given how far we were beyond the northernmost edge of the forest zone, any tree squirrel would have to be considered out-of-range.)

Snowshoe Hare - N

Beaver - N

Moose - N

Reindeer - N

Musk Ox - N

Arctic Fox - G

Red Fox - N

Short-tailed Weasel - N

Gray Whale - G

Spotted Seal - G

Total = 13 species