

# **ALASKA: BARROW EXTENSION**

**JUNE 27 – 29, 2008**

**LEADER: KEVIN ZIMMER**

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Once again, Barrow provided a fitting exclamation point to our Alaska tour season. The weather was good; make that ideal, with persistently sunny skies (around the clock), and temperatures that climbed into the 50–60° F range. In fact, it got so balmy that we witnessed some mosquito emergence on our last day, which is only the second time in more than 20 years of Barrow trips that I've even seen a mosquito there. The shore ice was more broken up than I've ever seen it, which diminished our chances for polar bears, and which also meant that any migrant seabirds would not be concentrated in leads along the shoreline.

This was a big lemming year, with lemmings squirting out from underfoot every time we walked across the tundra. That meant numbers of Snowy Owls, and despite the fact that the owls retreated from the roadsides along with the receding snow, we still enjoyed multiple scope-filling views, and found at least eight different nests. Pomarine Jaegers, the other great lemming predators of these parts, were thick as flies, and stirring up trouble with practically every other bird species in the area. Aggressive by nature, these feathered pirates harassed Snowy Owls, gulls, shorebirds, waterfowl, and even one another—it seemed as if everywhere we looked, there was a jaeger mixing it up with some other bird. As usual, the breeding cycles of the many shorebirds were in full gear, from spinning Red Phalaropes and dressy Dunlins to booming Pectoral Sandpipers and probing Long-billed Dowitchers—seldom were we out of sight of some smartly-plumaged shorebird.

For all of this, when I think of Barrow, the first things I think of are breeding plumaged eiders. There is probably no more readily accessible location for seeing all of the eiders in full breeding plumage, and on the tundra (as opposed to only in flight). Each eider is spectacular in its own right, so much so that my choice for “favorite eider” often boils down to which one I've seen last. Steller's Eider and Spectacled Eider, by virtue of their relatively small ranges and rapidly declining global populations, are, arguably, the two most special and sought after of the four species, and they were certainly a focal point of our visit. We were not to be disappointed. Steller's Eiders were present in the largest numbers that I have ever encountered at Barrow (my visits dating back to 1987). With a minimum of 40 individuals encountered, we had exceeded the combined trip totals of the past several years. It was especially gratifying that all of the birds encountered were either mated pairs or individual males out on the tundra, indicating that these were all summer residents (transients would most likely be seen in small groups moving along the immediate shoreline). The local abundance of this near-threatened species, combined with the generally tame demeanor of most of the individuals encountered, suggests that recent campaigns to get the local subsistence hunters to stop hunting both Steller's and Spectacled eiders may be having an impact. We sweated Spectacled Eider for the first day, but found a magnificent drake on the second day that allowed us a very close

approach. That was to be our only male Spec, but he provided prolonged close-range studies, and in the end, we walked away from him. King Eiders were less conspicuous than in most years, probably in large part because we were here somewhat later than usual, and most of the migrants had already moved on through. We were treated to fabulous studies of a mated pair near Freshwater Lake, as well as a second stunning drake on Stint Pond, and a few scattered females.

Barrow always manages to produce at least a few surprises, and this year was no different. Top honors for rarest birds went not to some exotic Siberian vagrant, but to a very lost Swainson's Hawk, and a nearly as out-of-place Killdeer. Our optional excursion to Point Barrow did not produce a polar bear, but it did provide the chance to pose for photos at the northernmost spot in the United States (if not the "top of the world," at least the closest thing that one can drive to). And we were the first VENT group ever to lay witness to the brand new, synthetic, blue-turf football field (featured in several recent documentaries and news stories), which is surely the northernmost football field in the world!

Thanks to all of you for making this Barrow Extension extra special and a whole bunch of fun!

### **Itinerary:**

6/27 - late afternoon flight to Barrow, evening birding on Freshwater Lake Road and the Gas Well Road.

6/28 - morning, afternoon, and evening checks of all three roads.

6/29 - We started with the optional Polar Bear Excursion out to Point Barrow, the farthest north point in the United States. Afterwards, we birded Gas Well and Freshwater Lake roads throughout the remainder of the day, until it was time to check in for our evening flight back to Anchorage.

6/30 - flights home from Anchorage.

### **Birds:**

Greater White-fronted Goose - Unusually common and conspicuous this year, including 1 bird on a nest.

Brant - Several small groups seen out on the tundra, which was unusual. Typically, we see this species only as flocks moving along the immediate coastline.

Tundra Swan - More common than usual.

Northern Shoveler - a few

Green-winged Teal - a few

Northern Pintail - abundant

**Steller's Eider** - Following a precipitous decline in the late 1990s, this species had actually displaced Spectacled Eider as the most difficult eider to find in several recent

years. Last year we had 3 pairs, which was the best showing in the last 3-4 years. This year was fabulous, with at least 40 birds seen over our short stay – virtually all of them paired up and out on the tundra (not moving along the coast), which indicated a locally healthy breeding population. These elegant ducks are always a treat to see well, and we were treated to many outstanding studies.

**Spectacled Eider** - We managed to find a fabulous drake about mid-day on 6/28, halfway out the Gaswell Road. It allowed close approach and prolonged studies. A distant female seen later was less exciting.

**King Eider** - Fewer than usual, probably as a result of our later dates. There did not appear to be flocks of eiders still moving along the coast. We did find a couple of lone females out on the tundra, followed by a mated pair at the end of the Freshwater Lake road on 6/27 that allowed a close approach. The male of that pair was simply spectacular in the low-angle evening sun. Then, for good measure, we had a lone drake on “Stint Pond” the next morning that allowed even closer views.

Long-tailed Duck - common

Red-throated Loon - several each day

Pacific Loon - several each day

**Red-necked Grebe** - 2 at the end of the Freshwater Lake road on 6/27-28 appeared to be paired. I can't remember ever seeing this species at Barrow before.

**Swainson's Hawk** - Our rarest bird at Barrow! This would have been a rarity even as far south as Anchorage; at Barrow it is utterly bizarre! Apparently, it had been hanging around for at least a week or two.

Peregrine Falcon - 1 along the Gaswell Road on 6/27, and a pair there on 6/28.

American Golden-Plover - Fairly common this year.

Semipalmated Plover - 1 on 6/29 at “Stint Pond” was the only one seen.

**Killdeer** - 1 photographed at “Stint Pond” on 6/28 was a surprise, and decidedly out of range.

Ruddy Turnstone - A few at the big muddy lake at the beginning of Cakeater Road (= beginning of the Gaswell Road).

Semipalmated Sandpiper - common

Western Sandpiper - A couple on the last day were the only ones seen.

Baird's Sandpiper - Scattered singles/pairs.

Pectoral Sandpiper - Common. We were treated to various individuals doing their odd, hooting display flights.

Dunlin - several each day.

Long-billed Dowitcher - Good numbers of these around this year.

Red-necked Phalarope - Common.

**Red Phalarope** – Common. It is always a treat to see these elegant shorebirds in full breeding colors.

**Pomarine Jaeger** - 50+/day, in what was obviously a big lemming year. These guys were always causing trouble – chasing Snowy Owls, gulls, other species of jaegers, even themselves!

Parasitic Jaeger - Greatly outnumbered by Pomarines, but we did see multiple birds each day.

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").

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

**Snowy Owl** - 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. Still, we found at least 8 nests, and had repeated excellent scope views.

Common Raven - a few individuals

Savannah Sparrow - a few scattered individuals

Lapland Longspur - abundant

Snow Bunting - common

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

Common Redpoll - a very few of these actually identified to species.

### **Mammals:**

Spotted Seal - lots of these out on the ice this year

Brown Lemming - common this year