

# **ALASKA MAINLAND**

**JUNE 16 – 27, 2008**

**LEADERS: BARRY ZIMMER & KIM ECKERT**

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# Alaska Mainland

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Our 2008 Alaska Mainland tour faced some difficult challenges with the loss of nearly two full days in Nome due to heavy fog in the area. Despite this we had a superb tour with myriad highlights from most of the Alaskan specialty birds to fantastic mammal viewing, to having Denali (Mount McKinley) in full view for two consecutive days!

The Nome section was condensed into a little over a 24-hour period, so we had to maximize our time. Arriving in late morning, we made a brief check of the Teller Road before lunch. A Willow Ptarmigan greeted us roadside—and nearly climbed into our van! Spectacular Long-tailed Jaegers cruised about the tundra, a Short-eared Owl glided about like a giant moth, and both species of redpolls foraged in the snowbanks. A cooperative Dipper put on a show along the Penny River.

After lunch we headed down to world-famous Safety Lagoon. Every stop along the way seemed to produce another highlight. Stunning Common Eiders lounged along the shore, while large flocks of Brant and Tundra Swans rested on the lagoon. Aleutian Terns gave several close fly-bys, and Pacific and Red-throated loons in full breeding plumage graced the tundra ponds. A pair of Yellow Wagtails posed in the scope, while a small group of reindeer sauntered by. A rarely seen Arctic Loon was spotted and was followed by Harlequin Ducks, Black Scoter, Black Turnstones, Red-necked Phalarope, Sabine's Gull, and Lapland Longspurs—a dazzling parade of birds. It was hard to know where to look first. We closed the afternoon with very close views of Rough-legged Hawk and a territorial Arctic Warbler which had probably just arrived from Siberia. A post-dinner option netted a Bar-tailed Godwit at the Nome River mouth.

The next morning we headed inland up the Kougarak Road. Our main target was the spectacular Bluethroat. En route we had a bull musk ox right next to the road, stopped for two different Golden Eagles on nests, and studied a Gyrfalcon on its nest as well. Then Kim heard a Bluethroat calling behind his van. We tracked it down and enjoyed prolonged views of this gem in full skylarking display. This is certainly one of the most special birds of Alaska, and was voted as the favorite bird of the tour by our group! Other highlights along this road included both American and Pacific golden-plovers in breeding plumage, a grizzly bear on a kill, and huge herds of reindeer. Then it was time to head back to Anchorage.

Our next stop was the Kenai Peninsula south of Anchorage. Spruce forest along the way yielded a hen Spruce Grouse with chicks, Three-toed Woodpeckers at a nest, scope studies of singing Varied Thrush, ten Pine Grosbeaks in view at once, and nice views of Dall's sheep and mountain goats. The scenery along the way was nothing short of breathtaking. Our full-day boat trip out of Seward was much rougher than usual,

but still produced a great list of birds with hundreds of Tufted and Horned puffins, Rhinoceros Auklets right next to the boat, good views of both Marbled and Kittlitz's murrelets, stunning Red-faced Cormorants, humpback whales, Dall's porpoises, sea otters, and a calving glacier! We also had nice looks at White-winged Crossbills, Northwestern Crow, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, and Steller's Jay in the Seward area. A Bald Eagle pair was nesting right behind our hotel!

The Anchorage area produced Horned and Red-necked grebes, Hudsonian Godwits, incredible looks at Boreal Chickadee, and several Barrow's Goldeneyes among others.

The final leg of our journey was the Denali region. Low-lying clouds obscured our view of the majestic mountain on our ride up from Anchorage, but a pair of Bohemian Waxwings that afternoon provided nice consolation. Late that night the skies began to clear and I was hopeful for the next day's shuttle ride into the park. We were greeted by completely blue skies the next morning, and had fabulous views of the mountain with only a few low, wispy clouds around the base. Mammals were out in force with a very impressive total of 15 grizzly bears, 5 red foxes, countless snowshoe hares, and a sprinkling of caribou seen. The real highlights, however, were two lynx (a rarely seen species), the second of which was right on the road affording superb studies. This was a life mammal even for me!

That evening we had an option to go out the Denali Highway to look for Northern Hawk Owl. After some effort we were rewarded with excellent close views. The next day (our last), we saw another, more distant hawk owl, more waxwings and crossbills, a close porcupine, and a pair of Trumpeter Swans. Mount McKinley remained in full view the entire day!

In all we tallied over 150 species of birds, had one of our best mammal trips ever, and experienced the best luck with viewing Mount McKinley of any Alaska tour I have led. Another wildly successful visit to the Last Frontier!

### **Itinerary:**

June 16 - arrival in Anchorage

June 17 - flight to Nome canceled due to fog; Westchester Lagoon, Potter Marsh, Hillside Park, (45 species)

June 18 - still unable to get to Nome due to weather; Gwennie's, Westchester Lagoon, Hillside Park, Upper Huffman Road, Conner Lake, Lake Spenard/ Hood (40 species; 51 total)

June 19 - morning flight to Nome via Kotzebue, Teller Road to MP 13 (Penny River), Council Road to MP 50 (66 species; 97 total)

June 20 - Kougarak Road to MP 35; return to Anchorage (38 species; 103 total)

June 21 - Anchorage to Seward with stops at Turnagin Arm, Granite Creek Campground, Summit Lake, Nash Road (42 species; 118 total)

June 22 - all day boat trip to Kenai Fjords National Park (32 species; 133 total)

June 23 - Nash Woods, Grouse Creek Road, Bear Lake, Granite Creek Campground, drive to Anchorage, Westchester Lagoon in evening (50 species; 138 total)

June 24 - Westchester Lagoon, drive to Denali with some roadside birding, Denali Hwy to MP 120 (56 species; 146 total)

June 25 - bus ride into Denali National Park to Eielson Visitor Center, evening option to Denali Hwy to MP 118 (24 species; 149 total)

June 26 - Denali Hwy to MP 122; return to Anchorage with some roadside birding (37 species; 151 total)

June 27 - departures home or on to Barrow extension (151 total species)

### **Key:**

N = Nome and surrounding Seward Peninsula

A = Anchorage and surrounding areas (Potter Marsh, Turnagin Arm, Girdwood, etc.)

S = Seward, Kenai Fjords, Summit Lake, Granite Creek

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:**

Greater White-fronted Goose N---very uncommon

Brant N---the western race *nigricans* (a possible future resplit); about 500 in one day

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*

Trumpeter Swan A,D---good views near Talkeetna on our return from Denali

Tundra Swan N

Gadwall A---uncommon

American Wigeon N,A,D

**Blue-winged Teal** A---male for some in Anchorage on late night visit to Westchester;  
rare

Northern Shoveler A,N,D

Northern Pintail N,A,D

Green-winged Teal N,A,D

Mallard A,S,D

Canvasback A---female with chicks at Potter Marsh; uncommon

Ring-necked Duck A,D---three on Lake Spenard and five near Talkeetna

Greater Scaup A,N,S,D---almost daily

Lesser Scaup A,D---great side-by-side comparisons with Greaters

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

Harlequin Duck N,S---always spectacular

Surf Scoter S---about 15 from boat trip

White-winged Scoter S,D

Black Scoter N,S---big flock from boat

Long-tailed Duck N

Bufflehead D---one of our last new birds

Common Goldeneye D---one female along Parks Hwy

Barrow's Goldeneye A---five or six females on Lake Spenard by hotel

Common Merganser N,S---uncommon in Nome

Red-breasted Merganser N

Spruce Grouse S---thanks to Craig we had walk away views of hen with chicks;  
always very tough; tied for third favorite bird of the tour

Willow Ptarmigan N---superb studies of three, including one near the Penny River  
that was almost in our van

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

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

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

Common Loon N,S,D---two pairs with chicks; very uncommon in Nome

Red-necked Grebe A---fantastic views including birds on nests

Horned Grebe A,D---one at Potter Marsh was spectacular; uncommon

Double-crested Cormorant S

Red-faced Cormorant S---about 20 at small nesting colony on the Chiswells;  
excellent views

Pelagic Cormorant N,S

Bald Eagle A,S,D---25 or more on some days

Northern Harrier D

Sharp-shinned Hawk D---by some in Kim's van

Northern Goshawk S---high flyover at Granite Creek

Red-tailed Hawk A---the "Harlan's" subspecies; good views over Upper Huffman  
Road

Rough-legged Hawk N---one at nest site

Golden Eagle N,D--an unprecedented ten for the trip with many great views, including  
birds on nests and one being chased by a Merlin; in Denali populations seemed  
especially high probably coinciding with large numbers of hares; voted the second  
favorite bird of the tour

Merlin D  
Gyrfalcon N---one gray morph on nest  
 Sandhill Crane N,A  
 Black-bellied Plover N---lucky to see a migrant at Safety Lagoon  
 Pacific Golden-Plover N---gorgeous breeding-plumaged bird on the road  
 American Golden-Plover N,A---also in great breeding plumage  
 Semipalmated Plover N  
 Black Oystercatcher S---quick views near Northwest Glacier  
 Spotted Sandpiper A  
 Wandering Tattler N,S  
 Greater Yellowlegs A---nice comparisons with Lessers at Westchester  
 Lesser Yellowlegs A,S,D---in trees  
 Whimbrel N  
 Hudsonian Godwit A---after four trips to Westchester (!) we all had great looks; Kim's favorite bird?  
 Bar-tailed Godwit N---*baueri*; seen only on post dinner drive by a few  
Black Turnstone N---three along Safety Lagoon; very uncommon  
 Semipalmated Sandpiper N  
 Western Sandpiper N  
 Short-billed Dowitcher A---subspecies *caurinus*  
 Wilson's Snipe N,A,D  
 Red-necked Phalarope N,A  
 Bonaparte's Gull A,D  
 Mew Gull seen daily in numbers  
 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  
 Glaucous-winged Gull A,S  
 Glaucous Gull N  
Sabine's Gull N---very uncommon this late  
 Black-legged Kittiwake N,S---by the thousands in Kenai Fjords  
 Aleutian Tern N---great studies of about 20 total  
 Arctic Tern seen daily with some spectacularly close  
 Parasitic Jaeger N  
 Long-tailed Jaeger N---one of the most common and conspicuous birds around Nome  
 Common Murre S  
Thick-billed Murre S--- about 25 on the Chiswells; nice views  
 Pigeon Guillemot S---great studies from the boat  
 Marbled Murrelet S---about 30 from the boat, one from shore  
Kittlitz's Murrelet S---about 15 near Northwest Glacier; several good views of birds in flight and on the water  
Ancient Murrelet S---missed entirely by most, seen briefly by a few  
Parakeet Auklet S---very brief flight views of two; not seen by all  
 Rhinoceros Auklet S---best studies ever; about 40 seen  
 Horned Puffin S---about 500 seen  
 Tufted Puffin S---about 500 seen  
 Rock Pigeon A,S---increasingly common in Seward now

Northern Hawk-Owl D---superb views on post dinner option for some; distant scope views of another the next morning for all  
Short-eared Owl N---nice views of two in Nome  
Rufous Hummingbird S---less conspicuous than usual  
Belted Kingfisher A,D  
Downy Woodpecker A  
Three-toed Woodpecker S---nest with young, plus another responsive female bird  
Northern Flicker D---"Yellow-shafted"; only seen on post dinner option on Denali Hwy  
Olive-sided Flycatcher D---mostly heard, but seen briefly by some  
Alder Flycatcher A,S,D  
Say's Phoebe N---very uncommon  
Gray Jay S,D---more numerous than usual; our first spotted by John W.  
Steller's Jay S---darker, shorter crested race with dark blue spots on crest  
Black-billed Magpie A,S,D  
Northwestern Crow S  
Common Raven seen daily  
Tree Swallow A,S,N,D  
Violet-green Swallow A,S,D---repeated excellent views of this beauty  
Bank Swallow N,A,D  
Cliff Swallow N,D  
**Barn Swallow** D---one over Parks Hwy for some; rare  
Black-capped Chickadee A  
Chestnut-backed Chickadee S---by far our best views ever; the chestnut-sided subspecies *rufescens*  
Boreal Chickadee A,S---uncommon; on a truck antenna!!!!!!  
Red-breasted Nuthatch A---only one seen the entire trip  
Brown Creeper S---Granite Creek  
American Dipper N,S---great studies  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet A,S  
Arctic Warbler N,D---superb views of this specialty  
Bluethroat N---gorgeous male performed well on the Kougarak; voted the favorite bird of the tour!  
Gray-cheeked Thrush N,D---great scope views  
Swainson's Thrush A,S,D---nice studies  
Hermit Thrush S---perhaps the best song in North America  
American Robin daily  
Varied Thrush S,A,D---great scope views of several; another top song contender  
**European Starling** A---one at Westchester and one at Gwennie's; rare but increasing in Alaska  
Yellow Wagtail N---subspecies *tschutschensis*; great scope views  
American Pipit N---one along roadside at Cape Nome  
Bohemian Waxwing D---great views of a pair on two visits to same spot along Denali Hwy; tied for third favorite bird of the tour; easily missed  
Orange-crowned Warbler A,N,S,D  
Yellow Warbler N,S,D  
Yellow-rumped Warbler A,S,D---Myrtle types

Townsend's Warbler S---superb views of this striking species  
 Blackpoll Warbler D  
 Northern Waterthrush N,S,D---heard more often than seen  
 Wilson's Warbler N,A,S,D  
 American Tree Sparrow N,D  
 Savannah Sparrow N,A,D  
 Fox Sparrow A,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  
 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  
Red-winged Blackbird A---one male at Potter Marsh; uncommon & local  
Rusty Blackbird D---responsive male en route to Denali; uncommon  
 Pine Grosbeak S---an impressive ten in view at once near Granite Creek; can be  
 tough  
**Red Crossbill** S---heard only over Nash Woods; generally rarer than White-winged  
White-winged Crossbill S,D---apparently a decent year for this invader; we had flocks  
 near Seward and along the Denali Hwy; scope views of several  
 Common Redpoll A,N,D---Marilee's 500th bird!  
 Hoary Redpoll N---good views; about a dozen total  
 Pine Siskin S

total species - 151

### **Leader only birds:**

Solitary Sandpiper  
 Upland Sandpiper---heard only  
 Least Sandpiper  
 Great Horned Owl---on late night scouting run near Denali

### **Mammals:**

Arctic Ground Squirrel  
 Red Squirrel  
 Snowshoe Hare---abundant in the Denali region this year  
 Red-backed Vole  
 Common Muskrat---one distantly in Seward  
 Porcupine---excellent studies of two along the Denali Hwy  
 Red Fox---several in Nome and Denali, including a couple of pups  
**Lynx**---two on our shuttle ride in Denali were completely unexpected; this was a life  
 mammal for me; the increase in hares have probably resulted in an increase in the

rarely seen lynx; one of the two was seen for a couple of minutes in full view near Igloo Creek

Mountain Goat

Moose---a total of about a dozen including some cute calves

Caribou---"Barren Ground" Caribou in Denali and "Reindeer" in Nome

Dall's Sheep---close ewes along Turnagain Arm; distant rams in Denali

Musk Ox---one old bull along the Kougarak Road from about 15 feet!

Grizzly Bear---one on a kill out the Kougarak Road and an amazing 15 on our park shuttle drive; some cubs; some very close to bus!!!

Dall's Porpoise---speedy "mini-Orcas" bow-riding our boat

Humpback Whale-----at least five seen from the boat; great, close views

whale species---either a minke or a beaked whale species seen briefly in Resurrection Bay

Sea Otter---great views of these cute critters in Kenai Fjords

Steller's Sea Lion

Harbor Seal

total species - 20

### **Butterflies:**

Old World Swallowtail

Canadian Tiger Swallowtail

Mustard White

Milbert's Tortoiseshell

total species - 4

### **Significant others:**

Denali (Mount McKinley) in full view for our last two days (seen from within the park with a few clouds around the base and even better from the Denali Hwy with no clouds)---the best mountain showing in the fifteen plus years I have done this trip

king crab & salmon dinners

blackberry pie at Summit Lake

salmon at Bear Lake

stressful fog delays