

**ADAK: A SPECIAL TOUR
TO ONE OF ALASKA'S OUTERMOST
ISLANDS**

MAY 14 – 22, 2008

LEADER: MICHAEL O'BRIEN

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Adak is a remote island in the central part of the Aleutian chain, part of the so-called Andenof Islands. But unlike most other islands in this region, Adak has an extensive infrastructure due to military operations here between 1940 and 1997. During our visit here, we enjoyed the various amenities from an extensive road system, to a comfortable house, to a convenient restaurant where we could always count on a hot meal (Violet was just great!). Our van had seen better days but served us well throughout, suffering only one flat tire. And we were not alone on the island. Three other birding groups were there with us, all friendly folks (and indeed, several good friends) who freely shared their sightings with us. With so many eyes looking, whatever was out there—we were all going to see it!

Being situated roughly halfway between mainland Alaska and Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula, Adak, of course, is a place where American birders hope to see stray migrants from Asia that find themselves off course over the Pacific. The key ingredient that causes these migrants to drift toward Adak is wind from the southwest. As spring migrants push northward along the coast through Japan and the Kuril Islands, a southwesterly wind will drift some birds offshore, with the next landfall being the Aleutian Islands. As luck would have it, during our entire stay at Adak, the wind blew out of the northeast. It was therefore no big surprise that we didn't see a flood of Asian strays. The good news is that Adak hosts a wonderful selection of breeding and migratory birds, so our cheery group always had something interesting to look at.

Waterfowl accounted for about 30% of our species total on Adak, and the mix we saw had a decidedly Asian flavor. The highlight by far (and our only true Asian stray of the week) was the female Smew that we saw at Clam Lagoon. This bird proved most difficult to find, due largely to its highly skittish nature. It also changed companions constantly. Some people saw it with goldeneye; others saw it with scaup. We eventually saw it twice—once by itself and once with Red-breasted Mergansers! Another highlight was the group of two male and one female Tufted Ducks that hung around for much of the week at the Airport Ponds and Contractor's Marsh. Although regular in the Aleutians, there are few other places in North America where one can expect to see this species.

One of the most common waterfowl species we encountered was the Eurasian form of Green-winged Teal, regarded as a separate species by some European authorities. Every little wetland had a few, and most days we saw dozens. Picking through them regularly, we found only one "American" Green-winged Teal. Along the same lines, we also had good numbers of Eurasian Wigeon, but only a handful of Americans. Among the more commonplace waterfowl, it was wonderful to see such lovely species as Harlequin Duck, Common Eider, and Red-breasted Merganser, all quite numerous at Adak. We also

enjoyed sifting through the Greater Scaup flocks and finally picking out a Lesser, and likewise, picking out a female Barrow's Goldeneye among the Commons. In both cases these are rarities from the mainland, perhaps attributable to easterly winds.

There were many other highlights at Adak. Some Alaska specialties we found included Arctic Loon, Red-faced Cormorant, Pacific Golden-Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, and Aleutian Tern. Our rarest shorebird of the week was a Common Snipe, which obliged us by perching on a post and raising its wing so we could see its diagnostic underwing pattern. This species is a regular migrant and rare breeder in the Aleutians. Marbled, Kittlitz's, and Ancient murrelets were each numerous and frequently offered wonderful views. Rock Ptarmigans seemed to pop up at every corner and were especially conspicuous as they performed their aerial displays. Rock Sandpipers were also numerous and we often saw them doing their wing-flash display. Bald Eagles were just everywhere and were amazingly tame; we saw every plumage imaginable (but as hard as we tried, couldn't turn any into a White-tailed Eagle!). And, on those quiet drives back in the hills, it was nice to have abundant Lapland Longspurs and the occasional Snow Bunting or Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch to keep us company.

Without a doubt, everyone's favorite part of the Adak tour was our boat trip to Little Tanaga Strait. Despite a forecast of moderately rough seas, we had a wonderfully calm trip with excellent viewing conditions. This allowed us to access the tidal rips near Silak Island where Whiskered Auklets feed. Captain Al Giddings expertly maneuvered his boat so it would drift through a feeding frenzy of these little alcids, and the views we had were spectacular! Thousands of these birds, whose range is virtually restricted to the Aleutian Islands, surrounded us, some flying by in tight flocks and others diving and popping up right next to the boat. Among them, we saw smaller numbers of Common and Thick-billed murrelets, Pigeon Guillemots, Ancient Murrelets, Parakeet and Crested auklets, and Horned and Tufted puffins. What a show! Along the way, we passed an impressive colony of Steller's sea lions and even watched a Peregrine Falcon pick off an auklet! To cap things off, before heading back we ventured a little farther offshore where we had nice views of a Laysan Albatross—a major improvement over the very distant views we had of this species from the Loran Station. And the only thing that could have made that day any better happened—we finally saw the Smew that afternoon!

Itinerary:

5/14 – Arrivals; night in Anchorage

5/15 – 3 pm flight from Anchorage to Adak; brief birding (7:00-8:45 pm) around airport and Sweeper Cove.

5/16 – Adak north to Clam Lagoon and the Loran Station.

5/17 – Adak south to Finger Bay and north to Clam Lagoon.

5/18 – Adak north to Clam Lagoon and west to Happy Valley Road.

5/19 – Adak north to Clam Lagoon.

5/20 – 9 am-2 pm boat trip to Little Tanaga Strait (Silak Island) aboard “Homeward Bound” w/Capt. Al Giddings; Adak north to Clam Lagoon.

5/21 – Adak north to Clam Lagoon and Andrews Lake.

5/22 –Adak south to Finger Bay, west to Happy Valley Road, and north to Clam Lagoon;
6 pm flight from Adak to Anchorage.

Birds:

Cackling Goose – small flocks seen on 5/16 and 5/18 at the airport; these were of the Aleutian subspecies, *B. h. leucopareia*

Eurasian Wigeon – seen on six days with a peak count of 18 on 5/16; It was nice to see so many of these birds and have a chance to study ID features of the females.

American Wigeon – seen on three days with a max of three (two males and a female) on 5/21; It was interesting to have this species as the “rare” wigeon!

Mallard – seen daily, including several broods of recently hatched young at the Airport Ponds and Contractor’s Marsh.

Northern Pintail – seen daily, mostly at Clam Lagoon

Green-winged Teal – seen daily with a max of 50 on 5/19. One male on 5/16 was of the American subspecies, *A. c. carolinensis*. All the others (at least all the males) were of the nominate subspecies, *A. c. crecca*, the Eurasian Green-winged Teal, which is considered a subspecies by AOU and ABA, but split by European authorities. Seeing so many of this subspecies was one of the highlights of the trip. It was fun to ponder ways in which the females differ from female *carolinensis* but nothing concrete popped up.

Tufted Duck – 2-3 birds (2 males and a female) were seen on six days at the Airport Ponds and Contractor’s Marsh.

Greater Scaup – seen daily with a max count of 80 on 5/19

Lesser Scaup – one male was seen with the Greater in the small roadside pools along the east side of Clam Lagoon on 5/20-21; This bird, which is a rarity in the Aleutians (those northeast winds had to bring us something!), provided a nice lesson on scaup ID.

Common Eider – seen almost daily with a max of 45 on 5/18 at Adak and of 70 on our 5/20 boat trip. These were all of the Alaskan subspecies, *S. m. v-nigrum*, which has a bright orange bill and a thin black “V” on the throat. The latter was tough to see except when the birds were preening or flipping up their heads in display.

Harlequin Duck – seen daily in good numbers with a max of 200 on 5/18. It was delightful to see so many of these little guys.

White-winged Scoter – seen on four days with a max of 150 on 5/18

Black Scoter – seen on four days with a max of 150 on 5/18

Long-tailed Duck – 1-2 birds were seen on five days, always in the surf offshore from Clam Lagoon

Bufflehead – seen almost daily with a max of 60 on 5/19

Common Goldeneye – seen almost daily with a max of 40 on 5/19

Barrow’s Goldeneye – one female seen at Shotgun Lake on 5/19; a rarity in the Aleutians.

Smew – one female seen at Clam Lagoon on 5/20-21 was certainly our best rarity of the trip. We worked hard for this bird, which proved to be very skittish and would typically flee at the sight of a white van!

Red-breasted Merganser – seen almost daily with a max of 70 on 5/19

Rock Ptarmigan – seen almost daily with a max of 30 on 5/17 (they were much more active in sunny weather); these birds belonged to the subspecies *L. m. atkhensis* (Turner’s

Rock Ptarmigan), which is endemic to the Central Aleutians. It was fun seeing these lovely birds all the time and watching their flight displays. Their strange croaking vocalizations proved difficult to imitate, except by Beverly who could summon them from 50+ meters!

Arctic Loon – up to three birds (both adults and immatures) seen on three days in Kuluk Bay. We had nice comparisons of these and Pacific Loon.

Pacific Loon – single birds seen on three days

Horned Grebe – 18 feeding in the surf offshore from Clam Lagoon on 5/16

Red-necked Grebe – up to 10 seen almost daily

Laysan Albatross – 8 seen at a great distance off the Loran Station on 5/16 and one seen more closely on our boat trip on 5/20

Red-faced Cormorant – up to six seen almost daily, mostly birds feeding in the surf

Pelagic Cormorant – seen daily with a max of 50 on 5/20

Bald Eagle – seen daily with a max of 40 on 5/16-17; not only were eagles abundant at Adak, but they were also downright tame!

Peregrine Falcon – two seen from our boat trip on 5/20 and one seen near the airport on 5/22; these were of the very large and dark subspecies, *F. p. pealei*, which is resident along the coast from the Pacific Northwest through the Aleutians. On 5/20, one adult was seen catching and dispatching a Whiskered Auklet at Silak Island!

Sandhill Crane – seen around the airport on five days with a max of 32 on 5/20

Pacific Golden-Plover – one fly-over at Clam Lagoon on 5/18 and eight at Contractor's Marsh on 5/21; the latter provided superb studies of birds in a variety of plumages.

Semipalmated Plover – up to five seen almost daily

Black Oystercatcher – up to eight seen almost daily; It was fun watching one bird at Clam Lagoon chiseling limpets off the rocks.

Wandering Tattler – one seen and heard briefly in flight at Sweeper Cove on 5/17

Bar-tailed Godwit – one bird at Clam Lagoon from 5/17-20 was joined by another on 5/20 before they both left

Rock Sandpiper – up to 14 seen almost daily; these were of the Aleutian subspecies *C. p. couesi*.

Wilson's Snipe – up to three seen on three days; these were displaying birds at Contractor's Marsh and the Airport Ponds.

Common Snipe – one seen well at Contractor's Marsh on 5/16; this bird was displaying and landed on a pole where it flashed its mostly white underwing. It is not clear which species of snipe is more common at Adak. Each is at the edge of its range so populations may vary from year to year.

Red-necked Phalarope – singles seen on three days

Glaucous-winged Gull – seen daily with a max of 400 on 5/20; This was perhaps the most numerous water bird at Adak, and certainly the most variable. In studying Glaucous-winged Gull variation, we found two birds that appeared to be hybrids. One first year bird with dark outer primaries may have been a Glaucous-winged x Herring or a Glaucous-winged x Slaty-backed. Another very pale first year bird with a sharply bicolored bill appeared to be a Glaucous-winged x Glaucous hybrid.

Thayer's Gull – one faded first year bird at Clam Lagoon on 5/20 appeared to be a member of this taxon (whatever it is!).

Aleutian Tern – seen on three days at Clam Lagoon, with a max of 40 on 5/21.

Arctic Tern – seen almost daily, especially at Clam Lagoon, with a max of 12 on 5/20.
Parasitic Jaeger – up to six seen daily around Clam Lagoon; all were dark morph adults.
Common Murre – about 35 seen from the boat on 5/20
Thick-billed Murre – ten seen from the boat on 5/20 and one seen at Sweeper Cove on 5/18
Pigeon Guillemot – seen daily with a max of 75 around Adak on 5/18 and 100 on the boat trip on 5/20
Marbled Murrelet – seen daily with a max of 90 on 5/16; All areas of sheltered water such as Sweeper Cove, Clam Lagoon, and Finger Bay were favored sites.
Kittlitz's Murrelet – seen on four days with a max of 40 on 5/18, all at Clam Lagoon. These bird showed an interesting mix of plumages from full breeding to full nonbreeding.
Ancient Murrelet – seen in good numbers daily with a max of 200 on 5/18 when there were large rafts offshore. We had particularly nice views of this species at Finger Bay one morning.
Parakeet Auklet – about 15 on the boat trip
Least Auklet – none of us identified this species at sea but photos revealed two in a flock of Whiskered Auklets on our 5/20 boat trip.
Whiskered Auklet – We encountered a spectacular concentration of 5000-10,000 of these birds at Little Tanaga Strait on our 5/20 boat trip. Officially then, this was the most common bird of the trip but it was also everyone's highlight!
Crested Auklet – seven seen on the 5/20 boat trip
Horned Puffin – 18 on the 5/20 boat trip and one seen at Finger Bay on 5/22
Tufted Puffin – seen on five days with a max of 30 seen at Adak on 5/18 and about 250 seen on the 5/20 boat trip.
Short-eared Owl – one seen at Clam Lagoon on our last outing of the trip on 5/22 – a great way to end the tour!
Common Raven – seen daily with a max of 60 on 5/17; These birds belong to the very large Aleutian and Siberian subspecies, *C. c. kamtschaticus*.
Winter Wren – seen on two days with a max of three on 5/16. These birds were of the very large central and eastern Aleutian subspecies, *T. t. kiskensis*.
Song Sparrow – seen daily with a max of 8 on 5/17; These huge dark birds of the subspecies *M. m. maxima* bear little resemblance to mainland birds.
Lapland Longspur – seen daily with a max of 200 on 5/18-19; It was a pleasure to have these energetic little birds keep us company wherever we went.
Snow Bunting – seen on six days with a max of 15 on 5/18
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch – seen daily with a max of 15 on 5/16; these very large birds belong to the Aleutian subspecies *L. t. griseonucha*.

Mammals:

Harbor Seal – seen daily in small numbers, mostly at Clam Lagoon
Sea Otter – good numbers seen daily at Clam Lagoon
Steller's Sea Lion – colony seen from our boat trip on 5/20.