

GRAND ALASKA

GAMBELL/NOME PRE-TRIP: JUNE 2 – 10, 2009

GRAND ALASKA: JUNE 9 – 24, 2009

BARROW EXTENSION: JUNE 24 – 26, 2009

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Our Grand Alaska tour offers participants the option of taking any combination of three individual sections. Those taking the entire package will have a 25-day tour that is truly comprehensive in scope. Those desiring excellent birding, but a less rigorous tour, may select one or two of the tours and in this way can enjoy a more relaxed visit to some of the most beautiful areas in North America.

When spring suddenly arrives on the adjacent shores of Alaska and Siberia, and thousands of birds rush northwards to claim their nesting territories, some of these small navigators make big mistakes. Because of this, every year a number of Asian migrants wind up on North American soil, and a few have even colonized Alaska as breeding birds. Birders have learned that they can intercept some of these strays by positioning themselves at strategic points in western Alaska. The Gambell/Nome tour is designed to do exactly that, and at the same time it will familiarize us with the multitude of Bering Sea and northern mainland (Arctic) breeding specialties.

With a slightly more relaxed pace and comfortable accommodations throughout, the Grand Alaska tour will enjoy the varied birdlife, large mammals, and incomparable scenery of Alaska.

A visit to Barrow will take us to the northernmost town on the North American continent. In a setting of 24-hour sunlight, the birdlife is unmistakably High Arctic. All four eiders use the lakes here, and displaying sandpipers are everywhere. Every pond is alive with gorgeous Red Phalaropes, and we should be treated to the sight of Snowy Owls cruising over the tundra.

Those interested in taking only the Barrow Extension will need to be in Anchorage before June 24 in order to assure meeting the group for the flight to Barrow.

Gambell/Nome Pre-Trip JUNE 2 – 10, 2009

June 2, Day 1: Anchorage. Participants will arrive in Anchorage today and take the complementary shuttle to our hotel, where a room will be reserved in each person's name. We'll meet in the hotel lobby at 6:30 p.m. for a get-acquainted dinner and to discuss plans for tomorrow. If conditions are favorable, we may offer an optional expedition in search of Boreal and/or Northern Saw-whet Owls.

NIGHT: The Coast International Inn, Anchorage

June 3, Day 2: Anchorage to Gambell. This morning we'll fly from Anchorage to Nome and transfer to a smaller plane for our flight to the Yupik village of Gambell, at the northwestern tip of St. Lawrence Island. Please note that we may experience weather delays in getting out to Gambell.

NIGHT: Sivuqaq Inn, Gambell

June 4–6, Days 3-5: Gambell. A visit to Gambell can rightly be considered an adventure. The friendly villagers are subsistence hunters and wonderful workers of ivory. The opportunity to stay amongst these Bering Sea people provides a unique glimpse into an ancient culture that few outsiders ever experience. Our accommodations are in a community-owned facility with simple double-occupancy rooms. The building is heated and has plumbing (unlike pre-1996 tours) with four shared bathrooms complete with flush toilets and hot showers. Self-service laundry facilities are available (at no charge) within our building. Our birding here is done on foot (average hikes of about two miles roundtrip) over slush and loose gravel, but always over flat terrain. For longer hikes, rare bird chases (where speed may be of the essence), or for occasions when someone simply wants a break from hiking, it is an easy matter to arrange “taxi” rides on ATVs. These rides are provided by villagers who are accustomed to driving the ATVs, and who are responsible for maintaining their own vehicles. A typical one-way ride to most birding locations is \$5–10, and is solely at the discretion of the individual participant. Your VENT leaders will be happy to facilitate contacts with the taxi drivers, most of whom post their telephone numbers on the lodge bulletin board. Rides can usually be arranged on very short notice, and the drivers routinely arrange to drop people off at a birding site and return at a specified time to pick them up. We also carry radios in the field, further facilitating rides on demand. We have found this system to work very well, and it allows participants the option of hiking or riding depending on conditions at the moment. At the same time, it is much less expensive than charging each participant for full-day ATV rental (going rate of \$75/day, or more than double what you would expect to pay for three roundtrip taxi rides), and avoids the inevitable frustration and inconvenience of having to swap out or repair rented ATVs that develop mechanical problems or break down (a regular occurrence).

The weather conditions are often harsh—temperatures are just above freezing, with frequent fog, drizzle, or even occasional snow. In spite of this, the birding can be fabulous! Remarkable strays that have occurred here include Black-tailed Gull, Oriental Pratincole, Green Sandpiper, Great Knot, Eurasian Dotterel, Jack Snipe, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Dusky Warbler, Stonechat, Dusky Thrush, Pechora Pipit, Eurasian Bullfinch, Common Rosefinch, and many others. The 1989 VENT group discovered a Little Curlew here—the first for Alaska and only the third ever found on the North American continent! The 1995 VENT group discovered a Tree Pipit—only the second ever found in North America. Common Ringed Plover, Red-necked Stint, Bluethroat, Red-throated Pipit and McKay's Bunting occur with varying degrees of regularity. Of course, the ultra-rarities are never to be expected, and one cannot count on seeing Siberian vagrants on any single visit. Nonetheless, our daily checks of the marshy ponds south of the village, the boneyards, and the lower slopes of Sevuokuk Mountain will be tinged with excitement and anticipation—practically anything is possible.

Even on days when no vagrants turn up, the birding is not dull. Tens of thousands of murre, puffins, auklets, and kittiwakes nest on the cliffs just east of the village, and flocks are constantly passing very close to shore at the Northwest Point. Other “normal” birds often seen at Gambell include Yellow-billed and Arctic loon, Emperor Goose, all four species of eiders, Rock Sandpiper, Slaty-backed Gull, Dovekie, White Wagtail and Snow Bunting. In years when the concentrations of pack ice offshore are especially heavy, occasional Ross's Gulls and Ivory Gulls may be present near the village.

NIGHTS: Sivuqaq Inn, Gambell

June 7, Day 6: Gambell to Nome. After a final morning at Gambell we'll fly back to the relative comfort and civilization of Nome, on the Seward Peninsula in western Alaska. During the afternoon we should have time to check the mouth of the Nome River (where Slaty-backed Gull is often present and where other strays have been seen on occasion) and Safety Lagoon, a dynamic spot for waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, terns, and jaegers.

NIGHT: Aurora Inn, Nome

June 8-9, Days 7-8: Nome. We will have two full days to explore the area around Nome, the ivory capital of Alaska and once its gold capital as well. Increased coverage in recent years has yielded a number of discoveries from this region, including the presence of breeding Bristle-thighed Curlews and Bluethroats, as well as such vagrants as Eurasian Wigeon, Lesser Sand-Plover, Great Knot, Gray-tailed Tattler, and Black-headed Gull. Red-necked Stint, Emperor Goose, and Slaty-backed Gull are seen with some regularity, and it's a rare stay here that doesn't produce something unexpected. In the absence of "staked-out" rarities, we will search such standard hot-spots as Safety Lagoon and the Nome River mouth, or devote more time to the exploration of the outer reaches of the area's three roads. Road conditions permitting, we'll spend one of our days working the Kougarok Road. Although our biggest "quest" bird out here is the Bristle-thighed Curlew (which typically requires a roundtrip hike of at least a few hours over some difficult terrain, with no guarantee of success), there is much more to this day. The Kougarok Road is arguably one of the best birding roads in North America! Harlequin Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Rock and Willow ptarmigan, Gyrfalcon, Rough-legged Hawk, Golden Eagle, Wandering Tattler, Yellow Wagtail, Bluethroat, Northern Wheatear, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Hoary Redpoll are just a few of the many birds that we regularly see on this road. Additionally, mammal-viewing opportunities abound (Moose, Grizzly, Reindeer, and Musk Ox are all regularly seen), and the scenery is exceptional. Regardless of our exact course of action over the two days, we're certain to see a number of typical breeding birds of the region, usually including Pacific and Red-throated loons, Brant, Common Eider, Bar-tailed Godwit, Long-tailed and Parasitic jaegers, Aleutian Tern, Willow and Rock ptarmigans, Gyrfalcon, Yellow Wagtail, Bluethroat, Northern Wheatear, Gray-cheeked Thrush, American Tree Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Hoary Redpoll. Some years, White Wagtails or early arriving Arctic Warblers may be present.

NIGHTS: Aurora Inn, Nome

June 10, Day 9: Departure for Home or Begin Grand Alaska Tour. Depending on actual flight schedules, we'll spend the morning in continued exploration of the avian riches of the Nome region. Participants not continuing on the Grand Alaska section will depart for Anchorage mid-day (subject to change). Some participants may find it necessary to overnight in Anchorage and depart the following day. A hotel room for the night of June 10 is not included in the Gambell/Nome tour fee. However, upon request, VENT will be happy to arrange pre-paid reservations at The Coast International Inn in Anchorage.

Grand Alaska

JUNE 9 – 24, 2009

June 9, Day 1: Arrival in Anchorage. Participants should plan to arrive in Anchorage sometime today. One or both tour leaders will be in Nome, finishing up with the Gambell/Nome tour. Therefore, participants will be responsible for getting themselves to the hotel and then back to the airport for the flight to Nome the next morning. The hotel provides a courtesy shuttle, as well as storage facilities for any items not needed during the three-night stay in Nome. Our hotel is immediately adjacent to Lake Spenard, and short walks to the lake have often produced such treats as Pacific Loon and Barrow's Goldeneyes amidst the more common waterfowl.

NIGHT: The Coast International Inn, Anchorage

June 10, Day 2: Anchorage to Nome. Participants will depart Anchorage for Nome in the morning (subject to change) and take a short taxi ride to the Aurora Inn, where a room will be reserved in each person's name.

After meeting for lunch, we'll begin birding along the Council Road, which hugs the coastline south and east of town. Nome is the ivory capital of Alaska and was its gold capital in years gone by. Today the town is a major center for the native people of the region. Once a part of the Bering land bridge, the Seward Peninsula has been

colonized by several Old World species. Our first afternoon in this rich area will provide an introduction to some of these Siberian colonizers, as well as to some familiar birds in decidedly unfamiliar settings.

Here, pairs of colorful Yellow Wagtails and Lapland Longspurs enliven the brown tundra, while Fox Sparrows and Gray-cheeked Thrushes sing from the willow thickets. Long-tailed Jaegers cruise tirelessly over the tundra, their approach noisily protested by pairs of Whimbrels or Pacific Golden-Plovers. The edges of the vast Safety Lagoon complex are a gathering spot for hordes of shorebirds, often including numbers of bickering Bar-tailed Godwits. Farther out, at Safety Sound, are masses of resting gulls (mostly Glaucous, Mew, and Black-legged Kittiwakes), which we will check carefully for the occasional Slaty-backed, Sabine's, or Black-headed gull. Flocks of Brant and Common Eiders are scattered liberally across the Sound, and jaegers of all three species can be seen harassing the Arctic and Aleutian terns. Red-throated and Pacific loons are frequent sights, as are groups of Tundra Swans and Sandhill Cranes. There is more than enough to keep us busy this first day, and we will undoubtedly return to this area on another of our days in the Nome region.

NIGHT: Aurora Inn, Nome

June 11-12, Days 3-4: Nome Area. One of these days will be devoted to exploration of the Kougarok Road, which runs north into the interior of the peninsula. In contrast to the low coastal tundra and beaches that border the Council Road, the landscape here is mountainous, with high, rocky domes overlooking the river valleys below. The dense willow thickets along the river are home to another Siberian colonizer, the late-arriving Arctic Warbler, whose hammering trills reverberate through the countryside. Here too are Gray-cheeked Thrush; Wilson's, Orange-crowned, and Yellow warblers; Northern Waterthrush; Fox, Golden-crowned, and American Tree sparrows; and Common and Hoary redpolls. Rapidly flowing rivers and ambient gravel bars are the preferred habitat of Harlequin Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, Wandering Tattlers, and Ruddy Turnstones. In good years, both Willow and Rock ptarmigan are frequently seen in willow thickets or rocks along the road. Large mammals are also frequently encountered. In addition to herds of semi-domesticated reindeer, our groups have been treated to regular sightings of moose, grizzly, and even musk ox!

A special quest bird is the Bluethroat, a beautiful little Eurasian thrush with a wonderful skylarking song. In years past this was considered one of the most difficult-to-find of all North American breeding birds, with known sites being reached only by special chartered bush flights. In 1987, remarkably, a VENT tour discovered a pair of Bluethroats nesting along the Kougarok Road, farther from Nome than most birders had previously ventured. These gorgeous birds have been found on every VENT Alaska tour since then, and seem to have become a fixture as well as a true highlight of our annual trips. Conditions permitting, we will offer an optional hike to search for the Bristle-thighed Curlew. This rare bird breeds in small numbers in the Nome area. In a typical year, there are 1–2 pairs breeding on a large dome about 73 miles out of Nome. At the time of our annual visits, the females are often on eggs and remaining inconspicuous. The pairs have ranges that cover large sections of the mountain (we have seen these birds pick up and fly two miles to an opposite ridge without stopping), and hence, are not easy to find. To make matters more difficult, Whimbrel, which is quite similar to the Bristle-thighed in appearance, is more common on the mountain, and is routinely mistaken for the Bristle-thighed by inexperienced or overly enthusiastic birders. Despite this, we have had pretty fair success in showing this rare bird to groups, recording it on approximately 70% of our attempts. The hike for the curlew typically involves a minimum of two hours (often twice that) of walking, much of it uphill (gentle slope) and over tussock grass formations that range from merely annoying to mildly treacherous in spots. Whether or not you opt to hike for the curlew, a day's birding on the Kougarok Road is not to be missed. Participants routinely rave about this day, and many have rated it as among their lifetime birding highlights.

Note: Our day on the Kougarok Road is likely to be a long one. After breakfast in Nome, we will be gone for the remainder of the day with lunch in the field. Depending on birding conditions, our return could be delayed until late evening with a very late dinner to follow. On rare occasions, birding conditions have even warranted a picnic dinner in the field.

Our third day in the Nome region will be left somewhat open. There are always surprises here, and it pays to be flexible with our schedule. Past groups have discovered such unexpected treats as territorial Red-throated Pipits, pairs of Red-necked Stints, Gray-tailed Tattler, Great Knot, and Arctic Loons. In addition to unexpected vagrants, there are also a few resident birds such as Gyrfalcon, Northern Shrike, and Northern Wheatear that frequently require special efforts to find. Regardless of our exact course of action, there will always be plenty of excitement in birding this beautiful and remote outpost.

NIGHTS: Aurora Inn, Nome

June 13, Day 5: Nome to Anchorage. Depending on our actual flight departure time, this morning we'll check vantage points along the Nome coastline before returning to Anchorage. Migrants like Brant, sea ducks, and jaegers may still be moving offshore, and there's always a chance for a rare migrant like Emperor Goose, King Eider, or Sabine's Gull.

NIGHT: The Coast International Inn, Anchorage

June 14, Day 6: Anchorage to Tangle Lakes. Today we'll head up the Glenn and Richardson Highways toward Paxson, birding en route. These two highways traverse some truly grand country, and a great variety of habitats that typify the interior of central Alaska. In the early going we'll be bordering the Matanuska River Valley and afforded wonderful views of the spectacular Matanuska Glacier. The highway ascends to subalpine zones before dropping into a vast taiga belt of spruce forest dotted with small lakes and barrens of wet muskeg. These habitats are particularly good for such special birds as Merlin, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Bohemian Waxwing, Northern Shrike, Blackpoll Warbler, White-winged Crossbill, and, in some years, Northern Hawk-Owl. The many lakes provide breeding habitat and feeding areas for a variety of waterfowl species, including Trumpeter Swan, Barrow's Goldeneye, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Greater and Lesser Scaup, Surf and White-winged scoters and many others. Horned Grebe, Solitary Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs and dainty Bonaparte's Gulls are just a few of the other species regularly found around these taiga lakes. Stops in areas of bigger timber may yield such prizes as American Three-toed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Pine Grosbeak and others. On a couple of occasions, we have even seen Great Gray Owls. Eventually, we will reach the tiny settlement of Paxson, at the east end of the famed Denali Highway. This 135.5-mile road, most of which is gravel, runs basically east-west, and connects the Richardson Highway with the George Parks Highway. Completed in 1957, the Denali Highway provided the first access for motorists wishing to visit Mount McKinley (now Denali) National Park. The George Parks Highway, running between Anchorage and Fairbanks, was completed in 1972, and offered a paved alternative route to Denali that has since become the standard. The Denali Highway reverted to being a backcountry road for hunters, fisherman and other wilderness travelers that were willing to deal with the gravel road, lack of facilities and general isolation. To this day it offers some of the most accessible, quintessentially Alaskan birding, wildlife viewing and sightseeing opportunities in all of interior Alaska.

The eastern end of the highway is paved for the first 21 miles. Starting at Paxson, where tall spruce forest and adjacent alder thickets are home to Merlin, Spruce Grouse, American Three-toed (and occasionally Black-backed) Woodpecker, Alder Flycatcher, Gray Jay, Bohemian Waxwing, Northern Shrike, Varied Thrush, Blackpoll Warbler and Pine Grosbeak, the road quickly ascends into alpine habitats patrolled by Golden Eagles, Northern Harriers, Long-tailed Jaegers and even Gyrfalcons. Willow and Rock ptarmigan replace the Spruce Grouse, and American Golden-Plovers and Whimbrels are to be seen in open expanses of tundra. Rushing streams are home to Harlequin Ducks, Wandering Tattlers and American Dippers, whereas shrubby thickets of willow, alder and dwarf birch are the abode of Gray-cheeked Thrush, Wilson's Warbler, American Tree Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow and Golden-crowned Sparrow. By mid-June, many of the taller thickets reverberate with the hammering trills of Arctic Warbler, the latest of the breeding species to arrive each spring.

Just before the pavement ends, we'll reach our lodge, situated amidst a picturesque mosaic of tundra lakes whose still waters reflect the images of snow-capped mountains. The Tangle River Inn offers a true Alaskan experience, surrounded by the natural beauty that typifies the Denali region, but without the congestion of cruise

line tour buses and rampant commercialization that is coming to dominate the National Park itself. It will also allow us more birding time and greater flexibility than previous itineraries that visited the park. This will serve as our base for the next two days.

NIGHT: Tangle River Inn, MP 20 Denali Highway

June 15, Day 7: Denali Highway Wilderness. Emerging from our cabins in the morning, we'll be greeted by the dreamy songs of American Tree Sparrows and White-crowned Sparrows, while the staccato chipping of Wilson's Warblers emanates from nearby thickets. To the north, the magnificent Alaska Range spans the horizon, with many of the visible peaks topping 12,000' in elevation. Arctic Terns wheel and hover above the many small lakes and ponds, each seemingly decorated with a Barrow's Goldeneye, Long-tailed Duck or pair of Red-necked Phalarope. This will be a day of great adventure, as our exploration of the Denali Highway wilderness begins in earnest. We will concentrate on the eastern end of the highway, which provides some of the best examples of glacial geomorphologic features in Alaska. The Gulkana Glacier is visible from the road several miles to the east of our lodge. Turnouts along the higher portions of the highway provide magnificent vistas of broad, U-shaped valleys carved by glaciers and dotted with kettle ponds and lakes formed by melting chunks of ice left behind during glacial retreat. The skyline of the imposing Wrangell Mountains to the southeast is dominated by Mount Sanford (16,237'), and by Mount Wrangell (14,163'), the northernmost active volcano on the Pacific Rim. The area immediately to the east of the lodge has been designated as the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District, which has some of the densest concentrations of archaeological sites (more than 500) in the North American subarctic, some dating back more than 10,000 years.

Tundra-covered ridges along this end of the highway are home to a small breeding population of Smith's Longspurs. In Alaska, these attractive and enigmatic birds breed primarily in the eastern Brooks Range, from Anaktuvak Pass east into Canada. A disjunct population breeds in south-central Alaska, centered along the Denali Highway. This population is fragmented, and somewhat ephemeral, with many breeding pairs present in some years, and seemingly none in others. Several patches of good longspur habitat are to be found within a few miles of our lodge, and we will make a point of checking these. Farther west, the road climbs to MacLaren (4,086'), the second highest highway summit in Alaska. The alpine tundra here is often alive with wildflowers of stunning beauty and variety. Abundant arctic ground squirrels provide prey for Golden Eagles, whereas Rock and Willow Ptarmigan are hunted by the rarer Gyrfalcon. This is also breeding habitat for American Golden-Plover, Long-tailed Jaeger, American Pipit, Northern Wheatear and Golden-crowned Sparrow. Down below, the many lakes are excellent places to see Trumpeter and Tundra swans, Common and Red-throated loons, Horned Grebes, and an amazing diversity of ducks. Open flats are patrolled by Northern Harriers, Short-eared Owls and Northern Shrikes, and the thickets are alive with a variety of passerines, including Gray-cheeked Thrush and Arctic Warbler.

Wildlife viewing opportunities abound, particularly on our evening drives. Moose, caribou, grizzly, red fox, beaver, porcupine—all have been seen by us on previous visits to the Denali Highway. The Nelchina caribou herd still migrates through the region at the east end of the highway, and it is not uncommon to see them right from the lodge.

NIGHT: Tangle River Inn, MP 20 Denali Highway

June 16, Day 8: Tangle River to Anchorage. After leaving the lodge this morning, we'll begin making our way back to Anchorage. Our return route will be dictated largely by weather and by what we have or have not seen. We may simply retrace our route along the Richardson and Glenn Highways. Or, we may drive the length of the Denali Highway, west to Cantwell, and return to Anchorage via the George Parks Highway. The western end of the Denali Highway is lower in elevation than much of the eastern end, and is dominated by taiga formations similar to what we experienced in driving up the Glenn and Richardson Highways. It does offer additional possibilities for finding Northern Hawk-Owl, Bohemian Waxwing and Northern Shrike, and, in clear weather, exceptional views of Mt. McKinley (20,320').

NIGHT: The Coast International Inn, Anchorage

June 17, Day 9: Anchorage to St. Paul. After breakfast today we will fly southwest along the Alaska Peninsula toward St. Paul in the Pribilof Islands. As seen from the air, the peninsula is one of Western Alaska's most scenic areas, with remnant volcanic peaks rising 6,000 feet from the coastline. We may stop briefly at Dillingham before continuing northwestward over the Bering Sea. There should be time for birding this afternoon and an after-dinner excursion as well.

NIGHT: King Eider Hotel, St. Paul

June 18, Day 10: St. Paul. Largest of the Pribilof Islands, St. Paul offers an incomparable seabird experience. At various vantage points along its cliffs, thousands of birds are constantly visible, some practically within touching distance: Least, Crested, and Parakeet auklets; Common and Thick-billed murres; Northern Fulmars; Horned and Tufted puffins; and more. The colorful Red-faced Cormorants and Red-legged Kittiwakes, easily observed here, are local specialties practically restricted to the Bering Sea. Flocks of Harlequin Ducks offshore are sometimes accompanied by a King Eider or Steller's Eider. Among the few landbirds, Gray-crowned Rosy Finch and Snow Bunting are conspicuous, and Rock Sandpipers are common on the grassy interior of the island. In addition, our mid-June visits have often turned up one or two odd strays from Asia. Examples of such bonus birds from past trips include Bean Goose, Tufted Duck, Gray-tailed Tattler, Lesser Sand-Plover, Little Stint, Long-toed Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Ross's Gull, Black-headed Gull, Common Cuckoo, Eurasian Skylark, Siberian Rubythroat, Black-backed Wagtail, Hawfinch, and Brambling and Rustic Bunting. Between stretches of sea cliffs, huge herds of Northern fur seals come ashore each summer to raise their pups on the beaches. The neat and brightly-painted Aleut village of St. Paul makes a picturesque base for exploring these islands.

NIGHT: King Eider Hotel, St. Paul

June 19, Day 11: St. Paul to Anchorage. After a final morning on St. Paul, we'll return to Anchorage. Near our hotel we will visit Lake Spenard, which is perhaps the float-plane capital of the world as well as being very popular with birds such as Pacific Loon, Greater Scaup, Common Goldeneye, and Red-necked Phalarope.

NIGHT: The Coast International Inn, Anchorage

June 20, Day 12: Anchorage Area. Surprisingly good birding can be found in the surroundings of the thoroughly modern city of Anchorage, and this will be one of the most diverse days of the trip. Birds such as Red-necked Grebe, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Spruce Grouse, Alder Flycatcher, Boreal Chickadee and White-winged Crossbill are often found here, even inside the city limits, giving us the opportunity to search for any species missed up to this point. We will also visit the mud-flats along Turnagain Arm to seek Surf-bird, Hudsonian Godwits, and other shorebirds, and take a look at Potter Marsh, the nesting site for many species of waterfowl.

NIGHT: The Coast International Inn, Anchorage

June 21, Day 13: Anchorage to Seward. Today we bird our way to Seward, enjoying fabulous scenery en route. With special permission from the Seward Ranger District, we'll have access to a variety of areas in the Chugach National Forest.

The Kenai Peninsula has much to offer—perhaps an American Dipper bobbing along a rushing, glacier-fed stream, a Barrow's Goldeneye in the reflection of a snow-capped peak on a glass-smooth lake, a Spruce Grouse nervously leading her downy charges safely through the forest, or an American Three-toed Woodpecker quietly flaking bark from a dead spruce. Frequent stops are inevitable, perhaps to appreciate the majesty of a close Bald Eagle, to scope a distant slope for mountain goats, or simply to snap a picture of some dazzling alpine backdrop.

NIGHT: Breeze Inn Motel, Seward

June 22, Day 14: Boat Trip to Kenai Fjords National Park. This will be a day of great adventure as we embark on an all-day boat trip through protected waters to Kenai Fjords National Park. The breathtaking scenery alone would validate the trip, as our boat navigates past massive headlands, fog-drenched spruce forest, icy fjords, and scores of snow-covered mountains. However, this area is teeming with birds and mammals as well. Low rocks are adorned with harbor seals, comical sea otters backstroke nearby, and our chances of seeing whales are excellent. We'll visit an island where more than 20,000 Horned and Tufted puffins nest, and these colorful alcids should be frequently encountered throughout the day. At the mid-point of our trip, we will experience a calving tidewater glacier—a sight and sound extravaganza never to be forgotten.

Then it's on to the Chiswell Islands, a naturalists' paradise. Craggy sea-stacks are draped in white by thousands of nesting Black-legged Kittiwakes. The rocky shores below are covered by the huge brown forms of scores of endangered Steller's sea lions, and the waters about the boat are liberally sprinkled with rafts of Horned and Tufted puffins; Common and Thick-billed murres; lesser numbers of Pigeon Guillemots; Ancient, Kittlitz's, and Marbled murrelets; and Rhinoceros Auklets. Even some of the truly pelagic species (Short-tailed Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, and Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel) are occasionally seen. Birders and non-birders alike have raved about this trip, and many Alaskan residents have labeled it the finest trip of its kind in the state.

NIGHT: Breeze Inn Motel, Seward

June 23, Day 15: Seward Area and Return to Anchorage. The moist Sitka spruce forest that hugs the coast near Seward shelters birds like Spruce Grouse, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Rufous Hummingbird, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Steller's Jay, Chestnut-backed and Boreal chickadees, Varied and Hermit thrushes, Townsend's Warbler, White-winged Crossbill, and Fox Sparrow. We will bird in the morning before returning through the scenic coastal mountains to Anchorage.

NIGHT: The Coast International Inn, Anchorage

June 24, Day 16: Departure for Home or Continue on to the Barrow Extension. Participants not continuing on the Barrow Extension may depart Anchorage any time on June 24 or, depending on flight schedules, may take overnight flights departing after our farewell dinner on June 23.

Barrow Extension

JUNE 24 – 26, 2009

June 24-25, Days 1-2: Barrow Area. After a morning of rest, an afternoon flight (subject to change) will take us from Anchorage up to Barrow. Lying well above the Arctic Circle, with sunlight 24 hours a day in summer, Barrow is High Arctic—quite different from other areas we will have visited in Alaska. The remarkably flat coastal tundra here is pockmarked with shallow surface lakes and puddles (the melt water cannot penetrate the underlying permafrost) and supports a different set of breeding shorebirds. Baird's Sandpipers and Red Phalaropes are common, and Pectoral Sandpipers are everywhere, performing their odd hooting flight displays. In some years, one or more Buff-breasted Sandpipers, White-rumped Sandpipers, or Red-necked Stints have also been present and occasional rare migrants like Gray-tailed Tattler have sometimes been found. This is our best stop on the mainland for eiders. We should see flocks of Kings migrating along the coast, Steller's (declining remarkably in the past decade) on the inland lakes, and hopefully the bizarre and endangered Spectacled Eider, all in their finest breeding dress. Although the numbers of predators here vary (along with the local population cycles of lemmings), we are almost certain to see at least a few Snowy Owls. Our stay at Barrow will allow us time to explore all the roads out of town as well as the Point itself, a long gravel peninsula extending north into the ice-choked Arctic Ocean.

Time will also be available for participants wishing to make an optional excursion to the end of the point to search for Polar Bears. These excursions (roughly 2.5 hours in length) are locally operated and are not officially included in the tour. (Rates for 2008 were \$60 per person.) Polar Bear sightings are not guaranteed, although our groups have enjoyed roughly a 25% success rate over the past few years. Your leaders will make on-site arrangements for those participants wishing to take part.

NIGHTS: Top of the World Hotel, Barrow

June 26, Day 3: Final Day in Barrow; Evening Flight to Anchorage. After a second full day in Barrow, our flight should depart for Anchorage in the early evening (subject to change). Depending upon actual flight schedules, most participants will find it necessary to overnight in Anchorage and depart the following day. A hotel room for this evening is not covered by the Barrow Extension tour fee. However, upon request, VENT will be happy to arrange pre-paid reservations at The Coast International Inn in Anchorage.

TOUR SIZES: The **Grand Alaska: Gambell/Nome Pre-Trip** will be limited to 16 participants. **Grand Alaska** and the **Barrow Extension** will each be limited to 14 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: **Gambell/Nome & Grand Alaska** will be lead by Kevin Zimmer and David Wolf. The **Barrow Extension** will be lead by Kevin Zimmer and Barry Zimmer.

Kevin Zimmer has authored three books and numerous papers dealing with field identification and bird-finding in North America. His book, *Birding in the American West: A Handbook*, deals with finding and identifying birds in the western United States. Living in Alaska contributed to his affection for the Far North, where he has anchored VENT's tour program since 1986. For the past 18 years he has concentrated his attention on the Neotropics, particularly on Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. He has directed VENT's Brazil program since 1991. Kevin has a PhD in biology (research emphasis in Avian Evolutionary Ecology) from New Mexico State University, and is currently a field associate of Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology and a Research Associate of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. He has authored numerous technical papers on the taxonomy, distribution, and behavior of Neotropical birds, particularly those of the Amazon basin. He recently completed (with co-author Mort Isler) the major chapter on the *Thamnophilidae* (antbirds) for the prestigious *Handbook of Birds of the World* series. He and Andrew Whittaker are currently at work on a comprehensive field guide to the birds of Brazil, to be published by Princeton University Press. Kevin lives in Atascadero, California with his wife Susan. Their daughter Marina is in graduate school at Dominican University in San Rafael, California.

David Wolf is a senior member of the VENT staff and one of our most experienced tour leaders. After birding the U.S. and Mexico for over a decade, an interest in the wildlife of Africa led him to Kenya in 1975, where he spent over a year studying the birds and other wildlife of the African continent. Soon after his return to Texas he began leading Rockport Wildlife Weekends for VENT, at that time a new company, and he hasn't looked back since. In addition to Africa, David has extensive birding and tour-leading experience in North America and the Neotropics, and has birded widely on all of the continents. He unites great birding skills with a wide-ranging interest in all aspects of natural history, which he shares readily with tour participants. David and his wife, Mimi, live on a small farm in Nacogdoches, Texas, with assorted horses, cats, and dogs. They have two grown children, Matt and Elena, and are now happy grandparents.

Barry Zimmer has been birding since the age of eight. His main areas of expertise lie in North and Central America, but his travels have taken him throughout much of the world, including such exotic locales as Japan, Russia, Madagascar, Africa, and New Zealand. Barry is a longtime member of the New Mexico Bird Records Committee, and served on the Texas Bird Records Committee for 12 years. He has co-authored three books: *Birds of the Trans-Pecos*, *A Birder's Guide to the Rio Grande Valley*, and *Birds and Birdfinding in the El Paso Area*. Barry has a keen interest in nature photography, having captured over 1,000 species of birds on film. His other interests include sports (a diehard Red Sox fan), cooking, and movies. He received his degree in psycholo-

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gy at the University of Texas in El Paso. Barry resides in El Paso with his wife, Yvonne, and their daughter, Alexandra.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the **Gambell/Nome Pre-Trip** is **\$4295** per person in double occupancy from Anchorage, Alaska. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 9, all lodging as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation, the flights between Anchorage and Nome, the flights between Nome and Gambell, and guide services provided by your tour leaders. The tour fee does not include airfare from your home to Anchorage and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for the **Gambell/Nome Pre-Trip** is **\$445**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

Rooms are limited at the Sivuqaq Inn in Gambell and you may be asked to share. If so, you will be credited appropriately.

The **Gambell/Nome Pre-Trip** is an exception to VENT's guaranteed domestic departure policy. VENT reserves the right to charge a small-party supplement or cancel the tour due to low enrollment.

The fee for **Grand Alaska** is **\$8195** (early booking discount available-see below) per person in double occupancy from Anchorage, Alaska. This includes all meals from lunch on Day 2 to dinner on Day 15, all lodging as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation, the flights between Anchorage and Nome, the flights between Anchorage and St. Paul Island (see below), and guide services provided by your leaders. The tour fee does not include airfare from your home to Anchorage and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

Participants registering prior to March 1, 2009 will receive an early booking discount of \$500 as long as the total number of tour participants exceeds 4.

The cost of the flights between Anchorage and St. Paul Island is subject to change. Should this happen, VENT reserves the right to adjust the tour fee accordingly.

The single supplement for **Grand Alaska** is **\$1295**. You will be charged a single supplement if our desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

Participants combining the **Gambell/Nome Pre-Trip** with **Grand Alaska** in double occupancy will receive a discount of **\$500**.

Participants combining the **Gambell/Nome Pre-Trip** with **Grand Alaska** in single occupancy will receive a discount of **\$750**.

The fee for the **Barrow Extension** is **\$1995** per person in double occupancy from Anchorage, Alaska. This includes all meals from lunch on Day 1 to lunch on Day 3, all lodging as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation, flights between Anchorage and Barrow, and guide services provided by your tour leaders. This fee does not include airfare from your home to Anchorage and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for the **Barrow Extension** is **\$200**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

IMPORTANT: Grand Alaska and Barrow Extension are exceptions to VENT's guaranteed domestic departure policy. VENT reserves the right to charge a small-party supplement or cancel the tour due to low enrollment.

On all three tours, participants will be responsible for any extra expenses incurred during the tour (extra hotel nights, additional transportation, etc.) which directly result from events out of VENT's control (weather delays, flight cancellations, strikes, acts of God, etc.) For more information, please see the enclosed letter from Victor Emanuel and the RESPONSIBILITY section at the end of this itinerary.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person per tour part. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Cancellation Penalties and Refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less \$300 per person is refundable. If cancellation is made fewer than 120 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions, as well as any transfers from one tour to another. *We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.*

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$300.
Fewer than 120 days before departure date	No refund available.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TRIP CANCELLATION INSURANCE: Application forms for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. We **strongly recommend** that you purchase trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **A waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering. Contact the VENT office prior to registration for details.**

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

BAGGAGE: In case your checked luggage is delayed, it's recommended that you pack all documents, medications, a change of clothes, your binoculars, and toiletry items in a carry-on bag. All baggage will be weighed prior to our flights between Nome and Gambell. Participants will be charged excess baggage fees for each pound over the 50-pound limit, including carry-on items. Limiting the size of your luggage is the best way to insure that it arrives on the same flight to Gambell as we do. Gear not needed for

Gambell or Nome can be stored at the hotel in Anchorage. Gear required for Nome but not for Gambell can be stored with Bering Air at the Nome airport. Please use the VENT luggage tags provided in your participant packet to aid leaders in recognizing your baggage during our airport and hotel transfers. A small duffel bag can come in handy, either for storing items in Anchorage or Nome or for use as your main piece of luggage during one of our short three-day jaunts away from Anchorage (allowing you to store your large bag).

WEATHER: Normally it is 25 to 40 degrees at Gambell and Barrow, and anywhere from the 30s to 50s at Nome and the Pribilofs; however, both places are often windy with drizzle and fog. Elsewhere on the mainland, temperatures tend to be warmer and may reach the upper 60s or higher.

CLOTHING: The weather in Alaska in May and June is notoriously unpredictable and can still be quite cold. The “layered” technique is your best defense against the variable weather. We suggest you combine a thermal undershirt, shirt, sweater, and coat or jacket. Medium-weight wool or synthetic equivalent for shirts, slacks, and sweaters is ideal. Cold-weather gear is essential and should include a warm coat or down jacket, warm hat, gloves, thermal underwear (both tops and bottoms), wool or synthetic equivalent socks, and warm shirts. A rain jacket or poncho is also essential for times when the weather turns misty. Since it can be surprisingly warm, too, you should bring some lighter field clothing as well.

FOOTWEAR: Insulated waterproof boots, N.E.O.S. Overshoes or walking shoes are recommended for foot gear. Barrow Extension participants should bring rubber boots or waterproof boots that extend to knee height for walking off-road on the wet tundra.

ALCOHOL: Gambell is officially a “dry” village, meaning that not only is alcohol not available, but that it is a crime to bring alcohol to the village. Please respect local laws, and do not carry alcohol to Gambell. At the time of this writing, Barrow was also a dry community—the alcohol laws there have changed back and forth over the years.

OTHER ITEMS: We recommend you bring insect repellent, alarm clock, sunglasses, seasickness medication (if necessary, for the Kenai Fjords boat trip) and sunscreen. The leaders will have a spotting scope and reference books, but you may wish to bring your own.

For Gambell, participants should bring a bar of soap and also may wish to bring ample cash (preferably in small, \$5 or \$10 denominations) to pay for ATV rides and/or native crafts, such as ivory carvings. Credit cards are not accepted for these activities/items which usually cost \$10 one-way. Participants may find it helpful to carry 2-way Walkabout radios to increase communication in the field as well as their own scopes for sea watching.

LAUNDRY: There is a self-serve laundry at Sivuqaq Inn in Gambell and at the Aurora Inn in Nome. The Coast International Inn in Anchorage has both self-service and send-out laundry service.

HEALTH: If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line (877) FYI-TRIP. You can check the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING: Our website at www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from the store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You might also want to visit such other online stores as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print and hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com, or www.buteobooks.com, which specializes in ornithology books. Also see the note about the Alaska Geographic Society at the end of the reading list.

Field Guides—Birds:

Armstrong, Robert H. *Guide to the Birds of Alaska*. 4th edition. Bothwell, WA: Alaska Northwest Books, 1995.
Dunn, Jon and Jonathan Alderfer. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Fifth edition. Washington, D. C.: National Geographic Society, 2006. The recommended field guide.
Peterson, Roger Tory. *A Field Guide to Western Birds*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1998.
Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. New York: Alfred a. Knopf, 2000.
Wild Bird Society of Japan. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan*. Japan: Kodansha International, 1991. Offers additional illustrations of the Asian strays. Difficult book to find, however!

Reference—Birds:

Gabrielson, I. N. & F. E. Lincoln. *The Birds of Alaska*. Harrisburg PA: Stackpole, 1959. Outdated now, but has a lot of information on the life histories of Alaskan birds. Try www.abebooks.com.
Grant, Peter J. *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*. Academic Press, 1997.
Harrison, Peter. *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991 (reprint).
Hayman, Peter, John Marchant & Tony Prater. *Shorebirds: An Identification Guide to the Waders of the World*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991 (reprint).
Kessel, Brina. *Birds of the Seward Peninsula, Alaska: Their Biogeography, Seasonality and Natural History*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1996.
Kessel, Brina & Daniel D. Gibson. *Status and Distribution of Alaska Birds*. Studies in Avian Biology No. 1, 1978. Try www.abebooks.com.
Zimmer, K. J. *Birding in the American West: A Handbook*. Cornell University Press, 2000.

General Background Reading:

Freuchen, Peter. *Book of the Eskimos*. Fawcett Books, 1981. An easy-to-read classic account of Eskimo life, written in 1931. Out of Print, but appears on www.Amazon.com. Other Freuchen titles are available as well: *Arctic Adventure* (AMS Press, 1995) and *Ivalu, the Eskimo Wife* (AMS Press, 1935).
Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. Vintage Books, 2001.
McGinniss, Joe. *Going to Extremes*. Plume, 1989 (reissue edition). Raw non-fiction about the people and places of America's last frontier.
McPhee, John. *Coming into the Country*. Noonday Press, 1991 (reissue). Published in 1976, this chronicles a remarkable journey by kayak into the last frontier.
Audubon (May 1988). The entire issue is devoted to Alaska. Especially worthwhile is "Exploring Literature of the Far North," a great bibliography of interesting books on the region.
National Geographic (October 1982). "A New Day for Alaska's Pribilofs."

Alaska Guidebooks:

Rennick, Penny (ed.) *Mammals of Alaska*. Alaska Geographic Guides. Alaska Geographic Society, 1996.

A variety of books on Alaska are available through the Alaska Geographic Society: (907) 274-0521. Alaska Geographic Online is found at www.akgeo.com. Some of these resources include: Alaskan Native Peoples, Mammals of Alaska, and National Parks and Monuments of Alaska. On the tour a number of local guide books and pamphlets can be picked up at local gift shops, including: Louise Potter's *Wild Flowers Along Mt. McKinley Park Road* (Camp Denali Publishers, n.d.). Although out of print, Potter's book is possibly available in Denali National Park; it is also found on www.amazon.com.

TIPPING: Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, and local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its Agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on October 8, 2008 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.