Alaska Tour 2000

In the anchorage area at Potter’s Marsh we quickly began racking up life birds with breeding plumaged Pacific Loons, Red-necked Grebes, and glimpses of Red-necked Phalarope, of which we would see many more. The Mew Gulls and Arctic Terns performed as expected. Later in the day we enjoyed extended looks at a female Black-backed Woodpecker feeding in the pines just a meter off the ground a few meters away. It was the Three-toed Woodpecker that would not come any closer than 30 meters, but it did give nice looks as well. Even later in the day we went out for an evening with the owls and sure had an eyeful. With a local owl expert we visited boxes where Northern Saw-whet and Boreal Owls treated us to wonderful looks. The difficult, lengthy hike was well worth the effort for these small owls of the north.

Newly added to the itinerary this year was two nights in Homer at the splendid Land’s End Hotel, which is indeed at the very end of the Homer Spit, a four mile long stretch of sand that extends out into Cook Inlet. A boat trip onto the calm, protected waters of Kachemak Bay yielded beautiful looks at Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorant, Pigeon Guillemot, all three species of scoters, Common Eider, Harlequin Duck, many Common Murres, numerous Tufted Puffins, and many other more common species. However, the great looks we all had at Kittliz’s Murrelet was a real crowd pleaser. Also, seen by some was a basic plumaged Yellow-billed Loon that had yet to head north. On land we were treated to extended looks at a female Spruce Grouse that was thinking she was invisible as she sat in a tree in plain sight for us. In addition to the birds we enjoyed fantastic scenery and even found time to enjoy the local shops and restaurants.

After Homer it was time for two nights in Seward at the Breeze Inn which is mere minutes from the small boat harbor, shops, and restaurants. The weather for our all day boat trip to the Chiswell Islands and Holgate Glacier was very pleasant. We had calm seas and beautiful skies. From the boat we viewed Wandering Tattler before leaving the harbor, Black Oystercatcher on the Chiswells, plenty of Glaucous- winged Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes, Marbled Murrelet, nice looks at Ancient Murrelet and had Rhinoceros Auklets showing off their “horns” at the base of their bills. The calm seas allowed stunning looks at both Tufted and Horned Puffin which were rather close to the boat offering many fine looks both on the water and as flybys. For mammals we watched humpback whales, a nice pod of orca, Steller’s sea lion, sea otter, and mountain goat.

From Seward we moved on to St. Paul, one of five volcanic islands in the Pribilof archipelago that plays host to thousands of nesting seabirds. Upon our arrival we were told there were no staked out rarities, so we concentrated on the nesting birds. At Ridge Wall and several other cliff overlooks we watched, through rain most of the time, Red-faced Cormorants, and Black-legged and Red-legged Kittiwakes. After a little practice it was easy to see the slightly darker backs of the Red-legged Kittiwakes when compared with their close relatives. Found in large numbers were Common and Thick-billed Murres, Parakeet and Least Auklets, and after searching we located some close by Crested Auklets. The Crested Auklets prove to be everyone’s favorite with their floppy top knots. Soaring over the cliffs and open water where the spectacular Northern Fulmars in all plumage phases.

Inland we had great looks at the many Gray-crowned Rosy Finches that make St. Paul their year-long home. These large finches could be found most anywhere on the island but were easiest to see as we walked from our hotel to where we ate our meals. Along with the finches were many Lapland Longspurs and just a few Winter Wrens. In some of the inland bodies of water we found Rock Sandpiper and Red-necked Phalarope. We finally managed to walk up a Wood Sandpiper for the group and later a Mongolian Plover was spotted that some of our group was able to see.

From St. Paul we moved on to the gold mining town of Nome, which is located on the Seward Peninsula along the shore of the Bering Sea. Here we made the historic Nome Nugget Inn our home for the next four nights. Leading out of Nome are three roads, and we drove them all with much success. Unfortunately the Kougarak Road, the one leading to the nesting site of Bristle-thighed Curlew, was under water and heavy construction preventing us from reaching the curlew. Still along the first twenty five miles of this road we had our first of many looks at Arctic Warbler. This year the Arctic Warblers begged to be seen. Also along this road we found a very close, displaying, make Bluethroat. What a show he and his mate put on for us. Yes, we even studied the red encircled in the blue on the throat.

On the road leading to Teller we watching a Musk Ox lazily graze on short tundra plants, and many caribou. A Short-eared Owl was seen harassing a Rough-legged Hawk and provided about fifteen minutes of fascinating observation for our entire group. Along with magnificent scenery we saw Rock Ptarmigan, dark morph Parasitic Jaeger, many Long-tailed Jaegers, Northern Wheatear, and Hoary Redpoll. In the town of Teller, a small community of Eskimos that mostly subsistence hunt, we had great looks at Black Scoter and Black Guillemot along with other more common birds. The drive to just see Teller and the scenery is worth the time.

On the road leading to Council we had our first looks at Yellow Wagtail and Northern Hawk Owl. Yes, Northern Hawk Owl in Nome. It seems a few birds where a bit out of range and set up shop along the shore of the Bering Sea providing us with incredible views of an awesome predator. Along the road we encountered many Red-throated Loons, a flock of about 400 Tundra Swans, Brant, and Common Eider, Bar-tailed Godwits at the mouth of the Nome River, Pacific Golden-Plover, Hundreds of Arctic Terns and great looks at Aleutian Tern. A short walk onto a spit brought us within 30 meters of about ten Aleutian Terns allowing us to see their distinctive head pattern.

Our next stop was the Top of the World Hotel where we spent two “nights” in constant light. It is hard to describe how incredible it is to be birding in Barrow, but that is just what we did. After we saw our first ten Snow Buntings, which were all over, we could spend time watching the many Red Phalaropes along Gas Well Road, Pomarine Jaeger, Short-eared Owl, Snowy Owl, White-rumped, Baird’s and many displaying Pectoral Sandpipers. The eiders did fine with a nice flock of about 30 male and female King Eiders flying past our group and two Steller’s Eiders in a pond near the airport just before we had to depart.

Finally, it was time for out last Alaska destination, Denali National Park. Here we spent two nights in the Denali National Park Hotel which will remain open just one more year. We took the bus tour into the park to the Eielson Visitor Center mostly for the scenery and mammals. However, a stop at Polychrome Pass added Gyrfalcon to our list and a quick stop at Porcupine Forest added the much needed Northern Shrike. Of course the Golden Eagles and Long-tailed Jaegers put on nice shows as did the Willow Ptarmigan. Having two separate sightings of one female grizzly bear and two cubs, recently emerged from the den, was a thrill for us and a first for our experienced bus driver. We also watched the many caribou, moose, Dall sheep, red fox, snowshoe hare, red-backed vole, hoary marmot, and arctic ground squirrel. We watched more than one fox carrying arctic ground squirrels in their mouths. Our best view of the mountain came from the airplane as we flew from Anchorage to Fairbanks en route to Barrow.