ALASKA TOUR 2008

Bradford/Percival/Schwartz

May 30 – June 19, 2008

Spending two nights on the shore of Lake Hood in Anchorage allowed us many opportunities to bird the lake and adjacent Lake Spenard. On our first morning we birded both lakes and enjoyed close up looks at Red-necked Grebe, Greater Scaup, Barrow’s Goldeneye, an actively feeding White-winged Scoter, and many other duck species. The woods around the lake held Black-billed Magpie, Downy Woodpecker, Yellow-rumped Warbler and singing Western Wood-Pewee.

After breakfast a stop at Westchester Lagoon provided a surprise Bar-tailed Godwit along with the more expected Mew and Herring Gull, and Lesser Yellowlegs, along the shore of Turnagain Arm we scoped our only Hudsonian Godwits. Later in the day a stop at Hillside Park produced a soaring Northern Goshawk, Gray Jay, Black-capped and Boreal Chickadee, and Varied Thrush giving its unique “song” allowing us all great looks.

After two nights in Anchorage we were off to Homer and the luxurious Land’s End Hotel at the very end of the Homer Spit. However before leaving Anchorage we worked over the swallows at Lake Hood finding Violet-green, Tree, Bank, and Cliff. On the way to Homer we noted snow on the mountain slopes that reached almost to the road in some places, a result of heavy snows in May. Moose were present and giving nice looks, and not just of their butts. At Tern Lake we watched a Black Bear and Mountain Goats on a nearby slope. The lake held many Arctic Terns and nesting Common Loons. Once in Homer, from the comfort of our hotel patios or hotel deck, we watched several very distant Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels, hundreds of Common Murre, Glaucous-winged Gull, Arctic Tern, Black-legged Kittiwake, Marbled Murrelet, and Pelagic Comorants flying by.

In the morning a boat trip in the calm, cold waters of Kachemak Bay allowed us stunning looks at Aleutian Terns on flotsam, Surf and White-winged Scoter, many Marbled Murrelets and finally fine looks at two Kittlitz’s Murrelets. We even saw the white on the outer tail feathers. En route to these fine birds we enjoyed watching the comical antics of many sea otters. At Gull Island we watched over 7,000 Black-legged Kittiwakes, 4,000 Common Murre, a few Tufted Puffins, and Pigeon Guillemots. After a sack lunch on the deck of the Land’s End Hotel we took a hike along the Diamond Ridge Alaska Trail where we kept a constant eye out for Grizzly Bears, some had been reported the night before. After about only 100 meters the group spent quality time with a female Spruce Grouse, and luckily no bears and few mosquitoes.

After two nights in Homer, and numerous Bald Eagles, we headed off to Seward, enjoying along the way what some consider being the finest scenery in Alaska. While in Seward we stayed at the Breeze Inn at the head of Resurrection Bay with an easy walk to the harbor for our long boat trip to Northwestern Glacier. We were on a rather large and stable boat designed for viewing whales and birds, and though the whale sightings were not all that impressive, we did see many humpbacked whales and a small pod of orca, however, the birds certainly were impressive. In the calm of the bay we watched Pigeon Guillemot, Marbled Murrelet, Common Eider, and Harlequin Duck. While crossing some open water we had nice looks at Pomarine Jaeger and a small flock of eight Long-tailed Jaegers. We also had good looks Rhinoceros Auklet, fleeting glimpses of Parakeet Auklet, and a few lucky folks saw a lone Ancient Murrelet. As we headed into the bay formed by the glacier we all studied a pair of Black Oystercatchers, but it was a stop at the Chiswell Islands on our return trip that provided stunning looks at Red-faced Cormorant, some close up views of Thick-billed Murres along with the numerous Common Murres, and great looks at both Tufted and Horned Puffin. We also were able to get fine looks at Steller’s Sea Lion and Harbor seals as they lounged on the slopes of some cliffs.

Before leaving Seward we visited several different private residences with seed and liquid feeders allowing us nice looks at Pine Grosbeak, Red Crossbill, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Steller’s Jay, Rufous Hummingbird, Pine Siskin and more. On the drive to Anchorage we had nice looks at Townsend’s Warbler and American Three-toed Woodpecker. We would later have more looks at this fine woodpecker at ground level at the Denali NP Visitor Center.

After a night in Anchorage we were off to Nome on the Seward Peninsula and many, many life birds. For our first full day of birding we drove the Teller Road, a 70 mile long dirt road that runs from Nome to the tiny fishing village of Teller. It was on this road that we observed a herd of about 20 musk oxen with young. We were able to watch this spectacle for about five minutes as the herd was slowly crossing a small stream. Along the road to Teller we spent time studying the American Golden-Plover and Pacific Golden-Plover as they fed on the tundra. Both Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers were present along with a few Short-eared Owls and Rough-legged Hawks. A lone pair of Rock Ptarmigan was mixed in with the Willow. From the road we had nice scope and binocular views of nearby Northern Wheatear on a rocky slope. From the base of the spit in Teller we observed a few distant Black Guillemots and Black Scoters.

The following day found us venturing up the Kougarok Road heading 75 miles north out of Nome. At the town dump a Slaty-backed Gull was easily found among many Glaucous Gulls. As we ascended into the mountains we heard Bluethroat but the falling snow was too thick to allow us views of the very vocal bird. After retreating to lower elevations and a views of a few Arctic Warblers, we returned to the Bluethroat location to enjoy about 30 minutes of scope views of this magnificent old world thrush.

The next morning found us departing early for the 72.5 mile marker on the Kougarok Road for the difficult hike up to the location of Bristle-thighed Curlew. The lone bird we spotted gave great looks and eventually flew showing the contrasting orangey rump indicating Bristle-thighed Curlew, not Whimbrel. The bird flew down slope and as we hiked down toward the van we had another great look at the curlew. Along the Kougarok Road we watched a small flock of Black Scoters on a pond, a Goshawk on the nest, a Gyrfalcon on the nest, more Arctic Warblers, and Common and Hoary Redpolls.

During our several visits to Safety Sound, and beyond, on the Council Road we had excellent looks at Red-throated, Pacific, and Arctic Loons, Red-necked Phalarope, Black Turnstone, Sabine’s Gull, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, and the ever present Lapland Longspurs in their flight display. We devoted some time to looking for, and eventually seeing, Red-necked Stint among the many Semipalmated Sandpipers. A flyby of 4four Emperor Geese added to the enjoyment of the lagoon. After four nights in Nome it was time to return to Anchorage and get ready for an early morning flight the next day to Barrow.

Barrow, the land of the Midnight Sun, was loaded with lemmings, and when lemmings are present in big numbers so are the Snowy Owls and Pomarine Jaegers. One day on Gas Well Road we counted over 12 Snowy Owls and at least 50 or 60 Pomarine Jaegers, we were able to watch both birds consume lemmings. The Red Phalaropes and Snow Buntings were everywhere giving fantastic looks. Trying to sleep while the Snow Buntings were singing proved to be a challenge. On Gas Well Road we were pleased to see signs showing the locals were trying to preserve the tundra for nesting Steller’s Eiders and other tundra nesting birds.

After our first 10 or 12 Steller’s Eiders we came across a pair of Spectacled Eiders right next to the road allowing us stunning views of an incredible bird. We would later see this same pair at the same location as well as others near Freshwater Pond. With one eider left for the a clean sweep we headed out a dead end road and was treated to three pairs of King Eiders casually feeding in a pond along the road.

After two nights in Barrow it was once again back to Anchorage for a night to prepare for the long drive to Denali National Park. A sack lunch along the way allowed us the opportunity to view Alder Flycatcher and other fine birds. The long bus trip in the park to the newly renovated Eielson Visitor Center the following day allowed us views of Grizzly Bear, Moose, Caribou, Dall sheep and fantastic scenery. The highlight of the park was actually after the bus trip when we drove back in a few miles and had awesome looks at a Northern Hawk-Owl.

All that was left was to bird the Denali Highway and head back to Anchorage for our last time on this trip. The Denali Highway is about 135 miles long and connects Cantwell on the west, with Paxson on the east. A few well planned stops allowed us fine looks at Trumpeter Swan, Northern Goshawk, American Dipper, Gray Jay, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Arctic Warbler, and great looks at Bohemian Waxwing in three separate locations. An impromptu stoop at Gracious House near mile marker 82 allowed us to enjoy ice cream and some fine gift shopping.

On our last morning, and still needing Northern Shrike, Black-backed Woodpecker and White-winged Crossbill, we set off with eyes on the trees. Of the three we ended up with great looks at White-winged Crossbill and ended up missing the other two. After 20 days of birding it was time to head to Anchorage and catch our late night flights home. For some it meant another night in Anchorage with a little birding on their own before flights home.