ALASKA TOUR 1998

29 May-14 June

Leader: David Bradford

After the 5 minute ride to our hotel from the Anchorage Airport we unpacked as quickly as possible and made a short visit to Potter Marsh. Here we were provided views of a magnificent alternate plumaged Pacific Loon as well as Red-necked Grebe, Mew Gull, Arctic Tern and a singing Northern Waterthrush atop a tree. Later in the evening we enjoyed close up looks of a Northern Saw-whet Owl in a nest box, the Boreal Owl nest failed two days before our arrival. The following morning a brief visit to Hillside Park in Anchorage provided White-winged Crossbill, Varied Thrush, Boreal Chickadee, and great looks at Black-backed Woodpeckers at their nest, a species we would see several times in the park. During subsequent visits to Hillside Park we enjoyed watching male and female Three-toed Woodpeckers feeding young at their nest.

We spent the next three nights in the King Eider Inn on the island of St. Paul in the Pribilofs. On these remote rocky islands we quickly found several vagrants, then settled in to enjoy the nesting seabird colonies. A Wood Sandpiper, a Common Greenshank, and female Smew were the vagrants we enjoyed. The seabird colonies allowed close looks at both Tufted and Horned Puffins, Common and Thick-billed Murres, Least, Parakeet and Crested Auklets, crested was the least common of the alcids. Along with the alcids were stunning views of light and dark morph Northern Fulmar, many Black-legged Kittiwakes and some of the highly sought Red-legged Kittiwakes.

As we were driven around the island in large vans under the supervision of Sean Smith we could not help but see Gray-crowned Rosy Finch and Lapland Longspur. Red and Red-necked Phalaropes were present offshore in good numbers along with many Harlequin ducks, Oldsquaw and King Eider. On the tundra were Short-eared and a single Snowy Owl, Rock Sandpiper, Eurasian Skylark, and Snow Bunting. A difficult hike was made searching for the McKay’s Bunting which was seen by a member of another group, but not by our group.

After another night in Anchorage the drive to Seward was scenic but added little to our growing list of birds. A Belted Kingfisher at its tunnel was interesting as were the Moose and Mountain Goats. Around the beautiful town of Seward we found Wandering Tattler, Black-billed Magpie, Steller’s Jay, Black-capped and Chestnut-backed Chickadee, American Dipper on a nest, Northwestern Crow, Varied Thrush, and fantastic views of Townsend’s Warbler. Our private charter with Mariah Tours allowed the freedom to direct the boat as we saw fit. We were joined by local guide Bull Shuster and his friend, Greg Miller, from Maryland who was doing a big year. Our destination on the boat trip was the incredible Holgate Glacier, one of Alaska’s many tidewater glaciers. Before leaving Resurrection Bay we spotted both puffins and Pigeon Guillemot. En route to the famous Chiswell Islands we spotted many Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwaters, Bald Eagle, Black Oystercatcher, Pomarine Jaeger, Marbled Murrelet, one Ancient Murrelet, and a few Rhinoceros Auklets. A surprise find on the cliffs of the Chiswell Islands was an Alder Flycatcher and a large, dark race Song Sparrow. During the boat trip we enjoyed Sea Otters, Fin, Humpback, and Killer Whales.

The next 4 nights would be spent in the comfort of the Nugget Inn in Nome on the Seward Peninsula just south of the Arctic Circle. Nome was fantastic. On the road to Council we spotted many Red-throated and several Pacific Loons, Brant, a raft of Black Scoter, Glaucous Gull, Yellow Wagtail, Common Eider, and Arctic Tern. Where the bridge crosses Safety Sound we watched Parasitic Jaeger, Sabine’s Gull, and Aleutian Tern.

The drive up the Kougarok Road leading to Taylor was memorable as we watched grizzly bear and hoped for Musk Oxen. At mile marker 72, we meet John Dunn and his WINGS tour and we made the difficult hike up the wet, spongy, tundra to witness the display song and behavior of the Bristle-thighed Curlew. We were not disappointed. As we slowly worked our way back toward Nome, we saw many Rock and Willow Ptarmigan, Rough-legged Hawk, American Golden-Plover, many, many Long-tailed Jaegers, Northern Wheatear, Yellow Wagtail, Blackpoll Warbler, American Tree Sparrow, and finally a displaying male Bluethroat.

On our drive to Teller we encountered Musk Oxen, incredibly dense fog, and a Gyrfalcon nest, with adults and chicks present. At Teller, a small village where Caribou meat and Musk Ox pelts hung from porches, we had great looks at a pair of White Wagtails. On our return trip we also had our first looks at Pacific Golden-Plover, and if possible we saw more Long-tailed Jaegers than on the Kougarok Road. After four and a half days in Nome it was time to return to Anchorage where we were surprised to hear about a Goshawk nest right in town. A quick visit to the nest site yielded sounds and sights we will not soon forget.

From Anchorage we headed north to Denali National Park with all eyes on the spruce tree tops hoping for a Northern Hawk Owl. Here we enjoyed the comfort of the Denali Park Hotel right within the park national park, how convenient. The following day on the bus trip into Eielson Visitor Center we saw many Caribou, Dall Sheep, Red Fox, and our only Northern Shrike of the trip. Even the non-birding people on the bus enjoyed the shrike and Golden Eagles we pointed out. After the bus trip we loaded up what we needed for a “one night stand” in Barrow. We drove to Fairbanks and boarded Alaska Airlines for the short flight to Barrow. Unfortunately Barrow was having a late thaw and pack ice came right up to the shore and almost all inland bodies of water were frozen solid. We had plenty of Common and King Eiders. We spent a lot of time looking for Steller’s and Spectacled Eiders with no success. We did manage 2 Black Guillemots, more Red Phalaropes, displaying Pectoral Sandpipers, and just before our plane was scheduled to depart we made a mad run out to see a singing and displaying Temminck’s Stint.

The Denali Highway is said to be one of the most scenic drives in the state, and we stopped many times along this scenic “highway”, dirt road, as we made our way to Tangle Lakes Lodge where we spent our last night of the trip. During the day we spotted Red-necked Grebe, many Trumpeter Swans, male Barrow’s Goldeneye, Gray Jay, Bank Swallow, and Boreal Chickadee. Some members of the group glimpsed an Arctic Warbler very near our lodge. On the drive to Anchorage the following day we made a stop at an area that held Smith’s Longspur and sure enough, after some hard work we flushed a male that we were able to approach within several feet. As the mile markers clicked down en route to Anchorage our hopes of Northern Hawk Owl diminished. However, this is one of the best areas in the state for Northern Hawk Owl and after searching many spruce tree tops we were treated to extended, close up views of two birds. This was a fitting end to a wonderful trip.