ALASKA TOUR 1999

Leaders: David Bradford and Bob Schwartz

The local said, “she had never seen a spring like this one in her forty years in Nome”. Safety Lagoon was frozen over and ice lined the coast behind the Nugget Inn while wind chill dropped temperatures into single digits. Upon our arrival in Anchorage we were met with 45 degrees and rain; this didn’t change much for the first few days. Seward was worse with driving rain and temps in the low forties. Luckily the birds didn’t seem to mind and the birders were well equipped with Gore-Tex. and other high tech equipment. After about 8 days of difficult weather we were treated to splendid weather for the remainder of the trip.

We spent our first two nights in Anchorage, which is dotted with many nice city parks and introduces the visiting birder to some of Alaska’s fine birds. While in Anchorage we visited Potter Marsh, Westchester Lagoon, Hillside Park, Alaska Pacific University, and a few other choice areas and found Red-necked Grebe, various species of ducks including Barrow’s Goldeneye within walking distance of our hotel, a Bald Eagle being chased by an Arctic Tern, Hudsonian Godwit, Surfbird, Mew Gull, Three-toed Woodpecker, Black-billed Magpie, Boreal Chickadee, and other more common species. For a second year in a row a Northern Goshawk was nesting on the Alaska Pacific University campus and we were treated to quite a Northern Goshawk display involving both male and female.

In Seward, we encountered rain, winds, and low temps, however, we bundled up and headed out along the shore of Resurrection Bay and spotted a magnificent breeding plumaged male Steller’s Eider five minutes from our hotel, Bald Eagles and Harlequin Ducks all over, Wandering Tattler, thousands of Glaucous-winged Gulls, and many Black-legged Kittiwakes, stunning looks at a male Varied Thrush, the very dark subspecies of Fox Sparrow, great looks at Golden-crowned Sparrow and a flock of very cooperative Pine Grosbeaks. During our boat trip around Resurrection Bay we found Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot, Marbled Murrelet, and because of poor weather only flybys of the puffins. An evening walk out to Exit Glacier provided a break from birds as we enjoyed viewing Black Bears and walking right up to a glacier to feel the cool, wet ice.

Within minutes of arriving on St. Paul in the Pribilof Islands all twelve of us had a life bird in a staked out Bean Goose that was seen on and off during our stay. Though the weather did not improve for us the birds were remarkable. One could not go more than an hour or two without seeing a few Slaty-backed Gulls; this was a remarkable year for these large gulls on St. Paul. They were everywhere; in 1998 we saw none. We enjoyed the routine birds of the seabird cliffs that make St. Paul so famous. We watched at close range Northern Fulmar, Red-faced Cormorant, Black-legged and Red-legged Kittiwakes, Common and Thick-billed Murres, Parakeet, Least, and Crested Auklets, and Tufted and Horned Puffins. Rock Sandpipers were seen displaying along the shore of Salt Lagoon and while walking to and from dinner we spotted Winter Wren, many Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, and Arctic Fox. The bad weather we were experiencing, which was letting up a little by now had a bright side, storm blown vagrants from the west. Winds from the west dumped many interesting birds onto St. Paul including quite a few Wood Sandpipers, three Common Greenshanks, two nicely seen Gray-tailed Tattlers, and two Ruffs in breeding plumage, a Long-toed Stint, and a lone Common Sandpiper a few meters away. We also enjoyed great looks at a McKay’s Bunting and some female King Eiders.

We spent 4 nights in Nome and loved every minute of our stay on the Seward Peninsula. From our windows of the Nugget Inn or from the cafe we watched sheets of ice packed along the shore of the Bering Sea. On the drive up the Kougarak Road north out of Nome we were treated to a brief, heavy snowstorm, displaying Bristle-thighed Curlews, Gyrfalcons on and around a nest, and a stunning view of a male Bluethroat singing and displaying. Some of the more common birds around Nome included Red-throated Loon, Rough-legged Hawk, Bar-tailed Godwit, Pacific-Golden Plover, Long-tailed Jaeger, Glaucous Gull, Rock and Willow Ptarmigan, Gray-checked Thrush, many Yellow Wagtails, Lapland Longspur, and Common and Hoary Redpolls. Apparently the late spring resulting in so much ice kept the Aleutian Terns out at sea. On an evening outing we watched Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers, of both phases, feeding on a carcass close to shore. Along with the ever-present Long-tailed Jaegers this provided a great opportunity to study and watch these three species almost side by side

On our bus trip to Eielson Visitor Center in the heart of Denali National Park we were treated to warm weather, partial views of Mt. McKinley, Grizzly Bears galore, Dall Sheep, Hoary Marmot, Caribou, Red Fox, Snowshoe Hare, Golden Eagle, Gyrfalcon on the nest and flying around the nest, and two Northern Shrikes. It was also amazing to watch a Grizzly Bear carrying a young Moose in its mouth as the female Moose watched on helplessly, what drama. It wasn’t until driving from Fairbanks back toward Denali N.P. that we were treated to full exposure views of Mount McKinley for about 45 minutes.

Our two days in Barrow were astounding. Temperatures climbed into the high forties and the sun was shining. Our hummer trip to Point Barrow did not produce Polar Bears but we sure had a fun time looking. Red Phalaropes were maybe the most common species; what a great bird to watch just along side the road with displaying Pectoral and Semipalmated Sandpipers. Gas Well Road and the Road to Freshwater Lake yielded about 20 Steller’s Eiders, two pairs of Spectacled Eiders, three male King Eiders, and two Sabine’s Gulls. However, it was difficult to concentrate on the eiders with about 12 Snowy Owls around us, one on a nest and another catching and eating rodents nearby. The many Pomarine Jaegers, Lapland Longspurs, and Snow Buntings also proved a minor distraction. At one point half our group decided to visit the Native Cultural Center, which had a nice bird display, and watched a very interesting program on the culture of Barrow’s natives. They even participated in a blanket toss.

The Denali, Richardson, and Glenn Highways were very scenic and yielded looks at more of the same birds as well a study of both Trumpeter and Tundra Swan, a pair of Pacific Loons on a nest, a Bald Eagle feeding young at a nest, Surf and White-winged Scoter, Oldsquaw, and White-winged Crossbill.