ALASKA 2014

After two days of scouting, a quality breakfast at the Puffin Inn, and a stop at Hillside Park in Anchorage, the Penfeathers 2014 tour was underway. Hillside Park, one of many parks scattered throughout the city, is filled with bike and snowmobile trails, and a few moose, some with young. Our first major encounter in the park was indeed a moose, not a bird. The birds would come later, though reluctantly at first. Once a jogger, obviously a native, shooed the moose out of the path for us we were able to get good looks at Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee and Townsend’s Warbler. With our newly acquired moose handling skills we were later able to deal with a cow moose and her young on our own. The nearby Black-billed Magpies were interesting with their long tails, tails that are longer than their body. There is only one other US bird can claim that about its tail. After Hillside Park a stop at Glenn Alps offered up excellent views of Anchorage, a city that was rocked by the Good Friday earthquake March 27, 1964. Here we encountered Hermit and Swainson’s Thrush, Orange-crowned Warbler, Golden-crowned Sparrow and a few other species. Later in the day a stop at Elmendorf Fish hatchery produced an American Dipper at the nest and eight beautiful Harlequin Ducks that were too close for scope use. A hot tip during scouting had the group departing Anchorage for Sheep Mountain Lodge to hopefully view a Boreal Owl in a nest box, an iffy proposition this late in the nesting season. Upon our arrival we were led to the aforementioned nest box, but no owl. After dinner we gave it another try and sure enough, the head and upper body of a Boreal Owl emerged from the box. The scenic drive back to Anchorage was filled with talk of fine food and owl.

In the morning we started the long drive to Homer, a tourist town on the very end of the Homer Spit. A stop at Potter Marsh yielded Tree Swallows gliding over the marsh hawking insects and an easy walk along the boardwalk for several species of ducks. There were easy to spot nests of Mew Gulls and Arctic Terns, those acrobats of the air that will not hesitate to draw blood from the scalp of a person that wanders too close to their nest. Red-necked Grebes in their splendid alternate plumage were on display and at the nest as well. The picnic tables at the Alyeska Ski Lodge allowed for lunch among the numerous and quite tame Varied Thrushes, soaring Violet-green Swallows and Yellow Warblers singing like mad. Once in Homer the Northwestern Crows were obvious and easy to spot, though I am not sure if we saw more Bald Eagles or more crows. Here we stayed in the lovely Land’s End Hotel overlooking the calm waters of the Kachemak Bay where from the balconies of our rooms we watched thousands of Common Murres pass by along with Pigeon Guillemont, Marbled Murrelet, Glaucous-winged Gull, and Black-legged Kittiwake. Though not birds, watching the comical antics of the many nearby sea otters from our balconies was fascinating. Our boat trip into the calm waters of Kachemak Bay proved rewarding with winter plumaged Yellow-billed Loon, Brant, Horned and Tufted Puffins, Surf and White-winged Scoters, and stunning looks at an Aleutian Tern sitting on a stick floating in the water. What a treat it was to see this rarity so close and under such ideal weather conditions.

As we made our way from Homer to Seward we enjoyed a Common Loon in breeding plumage sitting on a nest at Tern Lake, along with the Arctic Terns and Mew Gulls. A stop at feeders in Seward allowed smashing looks at Pine Grosbeak, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Pine Siskin, Black-capped Chickadee, Fox and Golden-crowned Sparrows, and an elusive Rufous Hummingbird. Our boat trip the following day to Aialik Glacier, a large tidewater glacier originating in the massive Harding icefield, was spectacular. We had close encounters with playful sea otters and their young, humpback whale, orca, Steller’s sea lion, Dall porpoise, and harbor seal. It was very interesting watching the colorful Dall porpoise swim along with the boat just a few feet from the bow. The birds were even better, with Kittlitz’s Murrelet mixed in with the Marbled Murrelets as we watched Aialek Glacier calve large pieces of ice into the bay. Small flocks of Rhinoceros Auklets and Ancient Murrelets kept us busy, as did the numerous Tufted and Horned Puffins on and around the Chiswell Islands. A fine buffet dinner and a close at hand Barrow’s Goldeneye at Fox Island was a great conclusion to a great day.

The following day, our last in Seward, allowed for a little exploration, sightseeing, and exercise. The Common Merganser was still floating on the small pond behind the hotel. After another stop at the feeders for a rendezvous with the Pine Grosbeaks and Hairy Woodpeckers we set off on the easy hike to Exit Glacier, the body of ice early explorers used to get off or exit the Harding Icefield. It was very interesting to see how far the front of the glacier had retreated over the many years. We agreed, if we had been there 75 or 80 years ago our hike would not have been a hike at all, merely a short walk. In Anchorage we took the obligatory drive around Hood Lake and enjoyed our first looks at Bonaparte’s Gull. We were offered a fine study of swallows as we had Tree, Violet-green, Bank, and Cliff present all at one time. The Barn Swallow that was reported a few days earlier had probably moved on. After another nice meal at Gwennies we packed for our morning flight to Nome where we would spend the next four nights in the Aurora Inn on the shore of the Bering Sea, a sea that held for us Spectacled Eider and Arctic Loon.

Once in Nome our first birding stop was the Nome Harbor to ogle the staked out male Spectacled Eider. We felt kind of bad since the bird was so easy to find, though many still ticked yet again another life bird. A drive to Safety Lagoon was productive as we stopped for the many Red-throated Loon pairs right along the roadside. Long-tailed Jaegers and Glaucous Gulls competed for our attention, as did the many Common Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks, Bar-tailed Godwits, and Red-necked Phalaropes. A soaring Rough-legged Hawk was cooperative and gave good looks as did a few Parasitic Jaegers.

The next day we were up and out quasi early heading to milepost 72 for the hike up the spongy tundra to search for Bristle-thighed Curlew, one of those Asiatic birds that reach Nome to breed. Along the Kougarok Road we stopped for the first few Willow Ptarmigan, the state bird of Alaska, later we would spot a lone Rock Ptarmigan as we trudged onward for the curlew. A kind birder put us onto a displaying Bluethroat that we watched for a while. A stop at Salmon Lake Campground was a welcomed relief, because of the restroom with walls and the Arctic Warbler, a species we would see often and well. We eventually started the hike up the tundra on the well-trod trail where we spotted a lone Rock Ptarmigan and lone Pacific Golden-Plover. And after an extremely long hike, out of view of Coffee Dome, we spotted two distant Bristle-thighed Curlews. The hike down was difficult, however, the pull of lunch along the Kougarok Road was strong and we all made it down for our first Subway lunch in the Nome area.

There are three main roads out of this frontier town and we covered them all, the Kougarok, the road to Teller, and the road out past Safety Lagoon. Today we were making the long, productive drive to the small Eskimo village of Teller. While still in Nome we had to make a ten minute stop to view the numerous Musk Ox in a resident’s front yard. Just getting to milepost 20 took well over an hour, as we needed to stop to study a nearby pair of Pacific Loons, Cackling Goose, Arctic Warbler, another Bluethroat for some, and finally a close encounter with a red fox. A quick drive up to the high arctic tundra produced a surprise Rock Sandpiper, Northern Wheatear, Red Knot, and Snow Buntings. At the Bluestone River crossing the cliff that in the past held a nest for Gyrfalcons produced a nest sight for a pair of Rough-legged Hawks. At Teller we spent time on the spit scoping birds like Horned Puffin and Pelagic Cormorants and later driving through town we gained a better understanding of the rigors involved in living in a small, remote village in Alaska.

One more drive to Safety Lagoon and beyond netted us a pair of nearby Spectacled Eiders and after sifting through many Pacific Loons we hit the jackpot, two pairs of Arctic Loons floating in the Bering Sea. The staked out Eurasian Wigeon was right where it was supposed to be, but the Red-necked Stint was not.

Once we returned to Anchorage it was off to the Laundromat and packing for our two “nights” in Barrow. Staying at the King Eider Inn this year was a good choice. The hotel is located within walking distance from the airport, which is named after Wiley Post and Roy Rogers, the two who died in a plane crash just miles from the Barrow Airport on August 15, 1935. Here we had Snow Buntings singing constantly and a cooperative Snowy Owl that perched for two evenings on telephone poles near the road. On the road to Dry Lake we located nearby Steller’s and King Eiders, each species offered nice looks and good photographs. The Sabine’s Gulls at Freshwater Pond, which was mostly ice, were very photogenic and beautiful. Though we missed the Red-necked Stint in Nome we scored big in Barrow alongside Cake Eater Road where we saw Baird’s and White-rumped Sandpipers as well. There were plenty of Pomarine Jaegers and numerous Red and Red-necked Phalaropes to see along with the many Pectoral Sandpipers that demanded our attention as they puffed out their pectoral feathers and made interesting sounds. Of course one evening was spent enjoying the fine cuisine at Arctic Pizza and on several occasions during the day we spent time visiting the various gifts shops.

With most of the tour behind us we had just Denali National Park and the Denali Highway to explore, and explore we did. Our time at Denali NP was beautiful. We took the 66 mile bus ride to the Eielson Visitor Center into the heart of Denali National Park. While on the bus we were able to view numerous grizzly bears, one walking in the road oblivious to us and the few other buses that were on hand for the showing. Looks at caribou and moose were nice as was the look at a Rock Ptarmigan. Several Golden Eagles were circling high at one of the scheduled bus stops along the way. With time running out the clouds lifted, sort of, giving us a view of about 7/8 of the mountain.

After two nights in Healy we were off on our final leg of the tour, the magnificent Denali Highway, and for the first time on the tour the weather was against us. At the start of the day all we had to deal with was low cloud cover, however, during that time we managed good looks at Bohemian Waxwing and a small flock of young White-winged Crossbills, then the rain started. We persevered and were able to get good looks at a Northern Shrike and enjoyed a fine sack lunch at Brushkana Campground. Eventually the rain let up and as we made our way through remarkable scenery we had more looks at Arctic Warbler along with Blackpoll Warbler, Hoary and Common Redpoll and a few others. We spent the night 20 miles west of Paxson on the Denali Highway at the Tangle River Inn where we were treated to fine dining and a Say’s Phoebe nest.

Our last day in Alaska found us working the small ponds along the Richardson Highway with some success. The first pond produced more Bohemian Waxwing, Lesser Yellowlegs singing from the tops of spruce trees, and Solitary Sandpipers quietly moving through the lily pads. On one occasion we had a Lesser Yellowlegs and Bohemian Waxwing in the same spruce treetop. A stop at Meier’s Lake Lodge was a surprise treat. We spent half an hour looking through the small museum and being shown around by one of the owners. With time running short it was time to move on. We still had not seen Northern Hawk-Owl and we wanted to hit a few places along the Glenn Highway to search for this owl of the spruce forest. Well our spots did not produce any results, but an impromptu stop at Sheep Mountain Lodge did. Here we were informed that a group had just seen the owl 13 miles back, the wrong direction for those headed to flights home from Anchorage. The decision was made to turn around and try, try again. This time the bird was spotted and with all scopes trained on the bird there were silent and vocal celebrations. After the owl all that was left was to get to a DQ to celebrate another successful Alaska tour and catch our flights home.