



Birds of Alaska

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Our trip to Alaska was the first ever undertaken with Birdquest – a well-known UK company- we found to be rather like the curate’s egg- good in parts. They had an excellent guide, were generous in their help when things went wrong- they paid for another night in Barrow, but their back-office support left much to be desired.

Alaska up in those arctic climes does not have a high bird count- we saw just over 180 species and I came home with 25 new birds. I know people who would never dream of travelling that far for such a low bird count but you go to Alaska for quality not quantity and that we found in spades. What makes it even better, especially if you are a photographer, is that all the birds are in full breeding plumage and look absolutely magnificent.

The trip was divided into 3 roughly equal parts. On arrival we flew straight up to Nome where we had 4 nights before returning to Anchorage. We travelled down to Seward where we spent a full day exploring the Kenai Fjord- for us the highlight of the trip- we saw just about everything to be seen- from Humpbacks and Orcas to Sea Otters and swimming Black Bears. We found all the auks available to us – the puffins being a major highlight.



We then explored the coniferous forests alongside the road up to Denali before looping round to Paxson and returning to Anchorage.

Finally, we flew to Barrow, a place like no other on earth. The sea ice from the shoreline stretched out for over a kilometer before you found clear water- still good for polar bears but despite looking hard we never managed to find one.

They cancelled our flight out of Barrow because of fog; the next days’ flight was fully booked and we could only get on board the following day. All our return flights home were in jeopardy and being the weekend no one was available. We returned to the airport the next day to put ourselves on the wait list. No chance they said- the flight is fully booked but right at the death six seats became available so six of us got back to Anchorage with only a couple of people having to change their travel plans.

In Nome there were four mega ticks waiting for us- Emperor Goose, Aleutian Tern, Gyrfalcon and Bristle-thighed Curlew. The gods were with us and we had good views of them all. The pair of Emperor Geese we saw were the other side of a wide stretch of water from us - a 100 meters away - too far for a really good photo and like all geese in Alaska (the Inuit think they all make good eating) were fairly cautious.

Aleutian terns were relatively common and we saw them every day while the Curlew required a special trip 70 miles inland where they can be found often just a couple of hundred meters from the road. You need to ID this bird with care as the Hudsonian Whimbrel occupies the same habitat, But the Bristle-thighed shares the same beautiful flutey call other Curlews have – very different from the sharp staccato call of the Whimbrel.





The pale rump and lighter buff coloured flanks are also diagnostic. We were fortunate to learn that a pair of Gyrfalcon had built a nest under a road bridge some way inland. We found the bridge and then had to detour round the side of a hill to get a position where we could photograph the birds without disturbing them. Two fluffy white chicks were visible on the nest.

There are just 3 roads out of Nome- one along the coast and two travelling further inland and we travelled them all. The Kougarok Rd runs out to the Curlew site and is also good for Willow Ptarmigan which as its name suggests is found in willow scrub along the road. We found an obliging pair on a couple of occasions.

The Teller Rd also runs inland and on the rocky hillsides as its name suggests Rock Ptarmigan can be found. This was another bird which proved to be incredibly tame; I almost stood on one and it only moved a few meters away. It was a male with no nest around so I felt comfortable taking a few photos. We spent a couple of hours searching for Rock Sandpiper and Surfbird on these slopes as they are known to breed here. Their nests are incredibly well camouflaged so it is not surprising we had no luck. You can literally walk on top of the nest if the bird does not fly. We did however find a Red Knot which breeds in the same area and was moving along the side of one of the many small ponds formed by melting snow.

The Council Road runs along the shore line and as the ice melts it creates large tracts of water on the land side of the road which often stretch for a kilometer or more.



These waters appeared to be a mixture of salt and fresh water, not that it bothered the dozens of Swans, Geese, Ducks, Gulls and Terns we found there. Many were too distant to see well but good views were had of most species. Tundra swan is the only swan this far north, while Greater white-fronted, Snow and Brant geese can all be found. Long-tailed Ducks were common but there were a few Harlequin and Greater Scaup around along with Red-throated and

Pacific Loons and the odd Merganser. The Eiders would have to wait for Barrow although we did see one very distant King Eider along with the more common Common Eider.

We had a great time in Nome along with a whole hotel full of other birders who arrive for these few weeks of summer and book out all the hotels and rental cars. We were sorry to leave.

We flew back to Anchorage and after some local birding headed out along the peninsula down to the small town of Seward where our boat trip awaited us.

We planned to be out for the entire day- a good eight hours on the water which hopefully would give us time to see everything we were looking for. We had a great captain. He knew he had 10 keen birders on board (there were another 25 or so people on board) and he tried hard to find what we were looking for and to give us time to photograph it once we had found it. He was a very a very knowledgeable man and we learned a lot about the fjord and the glacial systems within it.

There was action all day long and it did not take long to start as we found a couple of sea otters just as we left our berth. Humpback whales were next- we did not see a breaching but lots of water slapping with those long fins and flippers. Next up were a pair of mountain goats up on the rocky cliffs with



their baby in tow, and just as we thought it could not get any better we found a black bear swimming across the fjord. We watched as he climbed out on to a near vertical slope and managed to haul himself up and into the trees.



The birding was absolutely brilliant. We had great views of Rhinoceros Auklet, Kittlitz's, Marbled and Ancient Murrelets, and a briefer sighting of a pair of Parakeet Auklet which flew as soon as we approached them. Thick-billed and Common Murre and Pigeon Guillemots along with the Black-legged Kittiwakes were nesting up on the cliffs and the Horned and Tufted Puffins were up there on the rocks as well as fishing in the water around the boat. Pelagic, Double-crested and Red-faced Cormorants flew past at different times during the day.

Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls were around along with the odd Short-billed Gull and Arctic Tern, while a Bald Eagle followed the goings-on with interest.

A Bevy of Dall's Porpoises passed the ship while in the glacier Common (Harbour) seals were hauled out on the small ice flows. We passed the Steller Sea Lion colony on the way home and were lucky to run into a pod of Killer Whales close to Seward.

On our return a wandering Tattler pattered along the shore line as we disembarked. A great end to a superb day.



Alaska is a huge state- there are literally thousands of square kilometers of forest. Taiga or boreal forest consists mainly of pine, spruce, and poplar and stretches from Anchorage all the way to the Arctic circle, where trees die out and the tundra takes over.

We had a full four days driving through these forests. Leaving Seward, we headed back to Anchorage checking a few sites for Spruce Grouse but with no luck. We were up at 4.am the following morning for the long drive to Denali, detouring to Hatcher Pass along the way to look for the White-tailed Ptarmigan. This bird lives on the snow line and we drove as far as the road would take us. The higher reaches had still not been opened for summer and we had to walk the last two kilometers where we found the bird on exactly the same rock it was seen on four years ago so our guide told us. Another really tame ptarmigan which allowed four of us to climb close for photos while the rest watched from the road. In the photo check out the colour of the neck of the Ptarmigan and the colour of the rock from which it has just flown.

Heading back down to lower altitudes what should we find in the road- the bird we had spent the early morning the day before looking for in Seward and en -route to Anchorage- a nice male Spruce Grouse. We had now seen four of the Alaskan grouse. The fifth -Ruffed Grouse's range does extend to Alaska but it is not common here and had not been seen on any Birdquest trip- they are much easier to see further south in Canada.

We spent the night at Carlo Creek Lodge the oldest road house in Alaska used as a staging post for travelers making their way to Fairbanks and beyond.

Our first target bird was Black-backed Woodpecker one of five woodpeckers we found on the trip- the remainder were Hairy, Downy, American Three-toed and Northern Flicker. We found the Black-backed at our first stop and then proceeded along the Denali





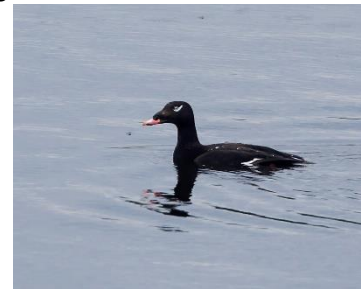
highway which heads east to Paxson. We had now started our search for Northern Hawk Owl but it was only the following day having scanned the tops of tens of thousands of conifers that we found one over a kilometer away- far too far for a reasonable photograph. However, each stop in search of the owl often proved productive in other ways. We found a couple of Bohemian Waxwings at one such

stop- an irruptive species which has long migratory movements so you just have to be lucky to find this bird. The same is true of the Two-barred Crossbill which turned out to be the one major bird for me we dipped on.

They are many ponds and small lakes in this area, some with beaver lodges but most with wildfowl in their finest breeding plumage. Barrow's Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Green-winged Teal, Greater Scaup, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Common Loon (I much prefer its European name- Great Northern Diver), Trumpeter Swan and White-winged and Surf Scoter although the latter we saw just once at great distance. White-winged Scoter which I had only seen once before as a vagrant in Japan, I thought was a palearctic species but it is common in northern North America and we found it on several lakes around Denali.

Late afternoon birding around the lodge gave us American Three-toed Woodpecker, Dark-eyed Junco, Swainson's and Varied Thrushes and American Robin.

The following day we headed down the same Denali Highway travelling the 130 kilometers to Paxson and on to Gakona. We had another Important bird to find today- Smith's Longspur found in a habitat known as blanket bog. It involved 40 minutes of difficult trekking round snow edged lakes and sodden meadows to a spot where it appeared like magic in response to its call. Not much else new that day- just the Longspur and the Hawk owl being the main two additions to the list



Our final day in the forests saw us heading back to Anchorage but a stop at Tolsona Lake proved very productive for wildfowl, some breeding Short-billed Gulls and a number of Lesser Yellowlegs displaying along the shoreline.

In the morning we would fly to Barrow.

Barrow is a place like no other. Situated well inside the Arctic circle, temperatures here were colder than elsewhere in Alaska. Around 2 degrees during the day dropping to minus two later in the day- There is no night- just 24 hours of daylight. The locals told us the best time to go birding is between midnight and 5.00am- not that we tried it. The US army/air force is up there manning the many radar stations. scanning out over the Bering Sea- Russia is just a couple of hundred kilometers away. What surprised me was the amount of derelict infrastructure up there -abandoned warehouses and factories by the dozen. There is no junkyard there so the whole place has become one great junk yard- scrapped cars lie outside homes alongside their one usable car. Scrapped fridges and freezers lie alongside old snowmobiles and even scrapped boats.



When the ice starts to melt the place becomes one wet mushy mess, but the Inuit kids get on with their games and ride around town on their quad bikes as they probably do for the rest of the brief summer season.



We arrived at seven in the evening and went out birding straight away finding the major birds I needed – the three Eiders within a couple of hours. None were really close to shore but were fifty to a hundred meters out on the lakes created by the melting ice. Just one Steller's Eider came in close to have his photograph taken. All three male Eiders are incredibly attractive birds- it was hard to choose but my favorite was probably the King Eider.

While we had brief glimpses of Arctic Redpoll in Nome someone had a feeder here in Barrow where the Redpolls were regular visitors along with the Snow Buntings.

The fourth big target for me here in Barrow was the Snowy Owl. There were quite a few lemmings around – we saw them every day in the tundra but we only found one pair of Snowy Owls. Unfortunately, they were breeding in a corner of the airfield far behind the fence and even the scope views were just ok. I have posted my best shot and another showing just how far away they were even with a 560mm lens. A great tick but it is not the same without a good photograph. We went back each day to the same spot but they seemed to move further away each time we saw them.

Having found all our major targets in the first day and half we devoted much of the rest of the time to looking for vagrant waders. I will cover the waders below but we had good views of White-rumped and Baird's and even a Little Stint looking quite different in breeding plumage. We also found a solitary Black Guillemot resting on the shore of one stretch of water which then took off as we approached for a closer look.

The Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers we had seen Nome had largely disappeared and were replaced with Pomarine Skua in Barrow as we moved further east towards the Palearctic regions of Russia.



Another bird which was far more common in Barrow than Nome was Red Phalarope although Red necked Phalarope was extremely common in both places. So too were the Glaucous and Sabine Gulls. We waited ages for the Sabine Gull to wake up and start moving from his resting spot on a small patch of ice

We saw three species of plover in Alaska- American and Pacific Golden and Semipalmated. Generally, the American and Golden Plovers are not too difficult to separate but we did find a couple of birds over which there was some debate. In general Pacific has less extensive white on the neck (seems variable to me) than American and the white continues down the sides and flanks of Pacific (usually easy to see). The photos show the difference quite clearly.

Sandpipers- you either love em or hate em. We saw twenty-two species in the scolopacidae family which includes the Curlews, Godwits, Snipes, and Phalaropes. Some were purely Northern American species which have not yet found their way to Southern Africa- like Semipalmated, Western, Least, Spotted, Solitary, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wandering Tattler and Black Turnstone. Others have arrived here like Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs along with the Palearctic species which turn up here on either a casual or regular basis like Dunlin, White-





rumped, Baird's, Pectoral, Red Knot, Sanderling, and even little Stint.

I found it interesting to note that some birds are easier to identify in breeding plumage- birds like Spotted Sandpiper which could be confused with Common or Green Sandpiper in non-breeding plumage and Dunlin, which with its black belly patch is unmistakable in breeding plumage. Other species are easier to ID in non-breeding plumage Little Stint in breeding plumage looks very different from the grey rather drab bird we see on our shorelines and Sanderling which is easy to id in non-breeding plumage looks very different in its

somewhat variable breeding plumage. Our guide Craig used to say- if you see a confusing looking wader and eliminate all other likely species then you are probably left with a Sanderling.

I don't profess to be in any way expert in wader identification, I see far too few of them to become that competent, but I did find the more frequently you saw a bird the more quickly you were able to identify it. I also learned that you can identify waders by their call. You rarely hear waders call in the Southern hemisphere but on their breeding grounds they all call frequently. Semipalmated Sandpipers which was the most common sandpiper we saw, calls almost continuously as they chase each other in courtship displays. We quickly learned to ID Semipalmated by call. Craig identified Baird's by call. We only found one Baird's Sandpiper in Barrow but by playing its call we soon had it making display flights above us while calling continuously.

We saw White-rumped Sandpiper in both Nome and Barrow. The white rump is obviously diagnostic but it can be tricky to identify if seen only on the ground. The red coloration on the lower mandible is also diagnostic-something I never knew before. I never got a shot in flight.



I have included a (not so great) shot of two Sanderling to show the variation in breeding plumages and another where the pure white belly and flanks help in identification.

Pectoral Sandpiper is an interesting bird in breeding plumage. It has this habit of puffing out its chest feathers which gives it this pot-bellied, lop-sided sort of look.

We saw both the Yellowlegs Greater in Anchorage and Lesser at Tolsona Lake in central Alaska. Both look a little different in breeding plumage to the way we would see them over here.

And so our Alaska trip came to quiet end with nothing major left to chase -just that horrendous experience waiting for us at the airport.

