

Alaska trip, 8-20 June 2000

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This is a brief account of our recent trip to Alaska. The trip went smoothly with superb weather and no major logistical problems, except that Jim was a day late arriving to Nome because of weather delays at the San Francisco airport. The only bugs we encountered were a handful of mosquitoes near Denali, and they weren't really a bother. We managed to find most of our target birds and saw a total of 164 species for the trip. And we somehow managed to miss species like European Starling and House Sparrow. Here is a detailed account of the trip.

8 June

This was a travel day. Everyone but Jim arrived in Anchorage by 8 p.m. We had a rental car and reservations at Super 8. Jim was delayed in San Francisco and followed us to Nome a day late.

9 June (62 miles by car, partly cloudy, temperature 41-55°F, wind N 10-15 mph)

Everyone but Jim left for Nome at 9:30 a.m. The plane stopped in Kotzebue for about a half an hour. There was heavy fog and the pilot managed to find the landing strip on the second try, after a last second abort on his first attempt. We couldn't leave the plane, but saw quite a few ducks on the ponds by the runway, including a few Long-tailed Ducks. We finally arrived in Nome at 1 p.m. We picked up our rental vehicle (a nice 4x4 Suburban from Alaska Cab Garage for \$85 a day) and then headed to the Oceanview Manor Bed and Breakfast (\$75 a night for a room with two beds) where we spent the next 5 nights. After a quick lunch at Fat Freddy's (our dining locale for most meals), we started birding at 2 p.m. We headed east along the Council Road and birded the Cape Nome and Safety Lagoon area for the remainder of the day. Some of the more interesting finds were an adult male King Eider (ocean at mile 13.4), a Bar-tailed Godwit, a Sabine's Gull, 32 Aleutian Terns, 3 Northern Hawk-Owls (miles 11, 18, and 28), and 6 Yellow Wagtails. We also saw a Short-tailed Weasel at Cape Nome carrying a lemming it had just caught. We were back in Nome by 8:30 p.m.

10 June (90 miles by car, partly cloudy, temperature 40-58°F, wind SW 5-15 mph)

We left the B&B at 6:30 a.m. and made a quick stop at the jetty in Nome where we saw 6 Harlequin Ducks and not much else. We then birded the first 18 miles of the Teller Road. We saw lots of birds, including a Northern Shrike (mile 17.9), a Northern Wheatear (top of crag north of mile 17.8), and an Arctic Warbler. The mammals weren't bad either—4 Muskox and 4 Moose. We were back in Nome at noon to pick up Jim. After a quick lunch, we birded the lower Council Road/Safety Lagoon area again. This area was birdier than on the 9th, and we saw a number of good birds including an adult Yellow-billed Loon (on the ocean at mile 24.2), no fewer than 5 Arctic Loons (2 pairs and a single bird on the ocean in the vicinity of mile 23.9), 4 Red-necked Grebes, 2 male Eurasian Wigeon (miles 30.9 and 32.1), a Merlin, a Peregrine Falcon, 73 Bar-tailed Godwits, 2 adult Slaty-backed Gulls, 6 Sabine's Gulls, a Snowy Owl (mile 5.2), a Northern Hawk-Owl (mile 30.4), and an Arctic Warbler. We were back in Nome by 7 p.m.

11 June (170 miles by car, partly to mostly cloudy, temperature 42-54°F, wind E 5-15 mph, light rain shower in late afternoon)

We left the B&B at 6:30 a.m. and headed up the Teller Road, where we spent the entire day birding. Some of the highlights were 31 Horned Puffins (in the bay at Teller), 1 Red Phalarope (a female at Woolly Lagoon), 1 Northern Hawk-Owl (mile 14.2), 6 Short-eared Owls, 1 Say's Phoebe, 7 Northern Wheatears, 4 Arctic Warblers, and 4 Snow Buntings. The road was loaded with ptarmigan in the early morning hours: 36 Willow Ptarmigan and 27 Rock Ptarmigan. Just outside of Nome, we found a Parasitic Jaeger nest with 2 eggs, and the adult tending the nest was a beautiful dark morph individual. In Teller, we waited unsuccessfully for more than an hour for a White Wagtail to appear. Mammals included 28 Muskox, 309 Caribou, 1 Moose, and 1 very tame Red Fox. We were back in Nome by 8:45 p.m.

12 June (185 miles by car, clear, temperature 46-72°F, wind E 0-15 mph, light shower in evening)

We left the B&B at 6:30 a.m. and headed north up the Kougarok Road. The road had been washed out by spring melt at mile 55, but we were told it would probably be open by midday. Alas, the road was still closed and we were unable to reach the area where Bristle-thighed Curlews nest. But the birding along the lower portion of the road was excellent. The highlight was finding at least three cooperative singing Bluethroats in the vicinity of mile 25. We all enjoyed close looks at these incredible looking birds. Other birds included Willow and Rock ptarmigan, Wandering Tattler (a very tame pair that allowed us to approach within ten feet), and all of the commoner tundra passerines. Mammals included 9 Moose and an Arctic Hare. We were back in Nome by 11 a.m. for lunch.

After lunch we birded the Safety Lagoon area all afternoon and evening. Once again, the lagoon was very birdy, although the extremely warm temperatures created awful heat waves and the visibility was generally poor. Interesting birds included a Greater White-fronted Goose, a male Eurasian Wigeon (mile 26.5), a Ring-necked Duck, an adult male King Eider (on the sound side of Safety Inlet), Ruddy and Black turnstones, 2 adult Sabine's Gulls, 4 Horned Puffins (fly-by's at Cape Nome), a Tufted Puffin (fly-by at Cape Nome), and 2 Short-eared Owls. We returned to Nome by 10:45 p.m.

13 June (270 miles by car, partly cloudy, temperature 57-74°F, wind N 5-15 mph)

This was our last full day of birding at Nome. We left the B&B at 6:30 a.m. and headed up the Teller Road. On the way to Teller, we saw 32 Willow and 8 Rock ptarmigan, 1 Northern Hawk-Owl (mile 21), and 1 Short-eared Owl. Mammals included 61 Muskox, 131 Caribou, and a sprinting Grizzly Bear (mile 47). Our reason for returning to Teller was to try to relocate the White Wagtails that had been seen gathering nesting material at a sled-dog compound. The day before, the wagtail had been seen flying southeast towards some cliffs along the edge of the frozen Bering Sea, presumably towards a nesting location. With time running out (we needed to swap rental cars at noon), Gordon and Steve made the long hike to the cliffs. We split up to better cover the area, and Steve briefly watched a White Wagtail fly along the cliff edge and head back towards town. We never relocated the bird. While waiting in Teller a short time later, we saw perhaps the best bird of the trip, a Barn Swallow. We were back in Nome by noon, only to learn that they really didn't need the Suburban back until the 15th. We then decided to make another attempt at reaching the Bristle-thighed Curlew nesting area, instead of returning to Teller. Much to our disappointment, the Kougarok Road was still closed. Our consolation prize was seeing a pair of gray morph Gyrfalcons at a nest containing two young. Nearby, we found a pair of Northern Wheatears and another Bluethroat. We were back in Nome by 8:15 p.m.

14 June (345 miles by car, partly cloudy, temperature 46-61°F, wind SE 5-10 mph)

This was our last day in Nome. We left the B&B at 6 a.m. and birded for four hours along the Council Road and at Safety Lagoon. Birds of note included 1 Arctic Loon (mile 28), 1 Common Loon (Cape Nome, completed the loon "slam"), 1 Yellow-billed Loon (mile 28), 2 Redhead, Spectacled Eider (1 fly-by adult male at Cape Nome), 2 adult Sabine's Gulls, 8 Horned and 3 Tufted puffins (fly-by's at Cape Nome), and 4 Short-eared Owls. We were back in Nome by 11 a.m. to check out of the B&B, return the Suburban, and catch our 1 p.m. flight to Anchorage. In Anchorage, we picked up our rental vehicle (an Isuzu Rodeo) and began the 270-mile drive to Healy, where we had reservations at A Touch of Wilderness Bed & Breakfast.

15 June (40 miles by car, overcast to partly cloudy, temperature 45-63°F, wind light and variable)

This was our day in Denali National Park. We had reservations for the 6:30 a.m. shuttle to Eielson-Tolklat (\$22 per person). The park is accessible only by shuttle buses, and we found them to be cramped and filled with mostly annoying tourists. The park scenery was spectacular, and so were the mammals: 3 Grizzly Bears, 120 Caribou, 6 Moose, 85 Dall's Sheep, and 4 Hoary Marmots. But the birding was very slow. We did a short hike on the tundra east of Eielson, but otherwise birded from the bus. Some of the more interesting birds included 2 Golden Eagles, Willow Ptarmigan, single American Golden- and Semipalmated plovers, Long-tailed Jaeger, and a Northern Wheatear. The skies were overcast all day, so Mount McKinley wasn't visible.

16 June (303 miles by car, partly cloudy, temperature 47-67°F, wind light and variable)

The day began on a sad note. While we were loading our vehicle in the morning, we noticed two moose calves hanging around the B&B. We began to get a little nervous when we couldn't locate the mother, but soon discovered why-she was dead. We found the carcass a short distance from the building. She had probably died naturally. A little birding around the B&B and along the entrance road produced a Whimbrel, several Alder Flycatchers, 4 Gray Jays, and several Varied Thrushes.

After our experiences in Denali the day before, we decided to give up our passes for a second day in the park. Instead, we birded the Denali Highway for the first 58 miles east of Highway 3. Some of the more interesting birds included Trumpeter Swan (2 at mile 51.2 and 4 at mile 57), 3 Barrow's Goldeneyes, an Olive-sided Flycatcher, 2 Boreal Chickadees, and an Arctic Warbler (mile 25.2). Despite diligent searching, we were unable to locate any Smith's Longspurs at several supposedly regular locales. Their preferred habitat, which consists of flat, open areas with large tussocks of grass, was surprisingly difficult to walk on and left us tired at the end of the day. The mammals were also pretty decent and included 1 Porcupine and 4 Moose.

In mid-afternoon, we headed for Talkeetna where we spent the night at the Talkeetna Lodge. Along the way, the only highlight was a Northern Hawk-Owl perched on a power pole at mile 149.9 of Highway 3 (the George Parks Highway). That evening, the skies cleared and we finally got a good look at Mount McKinley from the lodge.

17 June (322 miles by car, partly cloudy, temperature 45-66°F, wind S 5-10 mph, light shower in late afternoon)

We left Talkeetna early and drove the Willow Fishhook Road for several miles east of Willow. There were a lot of birds along the road including Bonaparte's Gull (a nesting pair perched in trees), many Alder Flycatchers and Varied Thrushes, and a Boreal Chickadee. Mammals included a Moose and a Short-tailed Weasel.

We then headed for Anchorage where we hoped to track down a couple of target species-Boreal Owl and Black-backed Woodpecker. The traffic in town was horrible because of a big marathon run in town. Finding the owl was almost too easy. We had received crude directions to an active nest-box from a local birder. We quickly managed to locate the box, the entrance to which was occupied by a sleeping Boreal Owl! We enjoyed a few minutes of terrific, close range looks before leaving to avoid further disturbing the bird. We were not so fortunate with the woodpecker. A nest on the south side of town was no longer active, and we were unable to locate any of the birds nearby. After hanging around for half an hour, we headed south out of town. We made a quick stop at Potter Marsh, but didn't see anything of note. We then made a beeline for Seward, where we had reservations at the Seward Windsong Lodge. After checking in, we did some birding along the north side of Resurrection Bay. There weren't many birds on the bay, but we did manage to find Pelagic Cormorant, 31 Harlequin Ducks, 24 Marbled Murrelets, 2 Northwestern Crows, and an American Dipper. We also saw a lone Sea Otter.

18 June (17 miles by car, 110 miles by boat, clear becoming overcast, temperature 43-54°F, wind SE 0-25 mph, light intermittent rain)

This was Father's Day, and we celebrated with a boat trip to Resurrection Bay and the Chiswell Islands (Kenai Fjord Tours, we took the Captain's Choice tour for \$129 per person, 8:30 a.m.-6 p.m.). The trip was superb with lots of wildlife and spectacular scenery. We all agreed that the birding was great with lots of birds in the air all day long. The most abundant species were Black-legged Kittiwake, Common Murre, and Horned and Tufted puffins. Red-faced Cormorant, Pigeon Guillemot, Marbled Murrelet, and Rhinoceros and Parakeet auklets were less numerous. Other birds included a Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, 13 Brant, 2 Black Oystercatchers, 4 Parasitic Jaegers, 3 Thick-billed Murres, and 34 Marbled and 2 Ancient murrelets. We saw quite a few mammals including a pod of 13 Killer Whales, 4 Humpback Whales, 3 Dall's Porpoises, 5 Sea Otters, 40 Steller's Sea Lions, a Black Bear, and a Mountain Goat with a kid. We also paused for 15 minutes of silence at Holgate Glacier, where we saw and heard several large chunks of ice drop into the sea ahead of this rapidly moving glacier.

19 June (379 miles by car, mostly cloudy, temperature 47-55°F, wind E 5-10 mph, scattered light showers)

This was the day we were hoping to make it to Homer, but we just didn't have enough time. We birded a couple of secondary roads (Swanson River Road and Swan Creek Road) in the Kenai NWR in the early morning hours. The highlight was a female Spruce Grouse with 9 young walking on the road. The only other birds of note were 3 Olive-sided Flycatchers and 3 Boreal Chickadees. We then continued west towards Soldotna and birded along Kalifornsky Beach Road, hoping for Black-backed Woodpecker. We missed the woodpecker again, but did see a Steller's Jay, 9 Boreal Chickadees, and a Pine Grosbeak. It was now early afternoon, so we began the four-hour drive back to Anchorage. We arrived in Anchorage by 5 p.m. We had reservations at the Fernbrook Bed and Breakfast on the south side of Anchorage. The accommodations were rustic, but the price was very reasonable (\$100 for all four of us).

20 June

This was the last day. After a breakfast that included fresh smoked salmon, Steve and Jim headed for home. The Browns stayed and birded most of the day before departing in the early evening. They birded a number of local spots around Anchorage and added seven species to the trip list: Snow Goose, Gadwall, Hudsonian Godwit, Short-billed Dowitcher, Three-toed Woodpecker, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and White-winged Crossbill.