

Alaska – 2-8 June 2012



Some colleagues of mine have a long-term study looking at how birds respond to oil exploration on Alaska's North Slope. Their primary study site is on the Prudhoe Bay oilfields near Deadhorse, and I was invited to visit the site in early June 2012 to assist with some aspects of study design and will eventually help with some of the analyses. I had not previously been to the North Slope, and as a shorebird enthusiast I was especially excited at the prospect of seeing many Arctic nesting shorebirds on their breeding grounds. I was not disappointed! This particular site is operated by British Petroleum, Inc. (BP), is the largest oilfield in North America, and I had received prior security clearance to be on the oilfields. I stayed in the main building (called PBOC, short for Prudhoe Bay Operations Center), an all-inclusive facility with single-bed rooms with a shared bath, a large dining area, exercise rooms, several lounges with Internet access, a basketball court, and much more. I'm guessing this facility housed several hundred BP employees and contractors, although I saw very few of them because most people work long days (the normal shift is 12 days on and 12 days off) and spend their down time sleeping. The accommodations and food were very good. Below I summarize my daily activities and any sightings of interest.

2 June

This was my travel day to Alaska. I departed Great Falls, Montana on a 7:15 a.m. flight with stops in Seattle and Anchorage; I arrived in Deadhorse, Alaska at 4:30 p.m. Upon my arrival we had to go through security and get my room assignment before meeting the rest of the crews for dinner at 6 p.m. On the drive from Deadhorse to PBOC we saw lots of waterfowl, 2 Pacific

Loons, and some Semipalmated Sandpipers and Red-necked Phalaropes in the open ponds along the road. Snow Buntings were singing in the parking lot of the PBOC. The ground was still mostly snow-covered (~75%), in stark contrast to the conditions at the end of my visit when most of the snow had melted. [overcast with fog, temperature 28-32°F, wind E 5-10 mph]

3 June

Jonathan, one of the technicians working on the project, met me at 7 a.m. for a short hike east of the PBOC before breakfast. Most of the ponds were still frozen, but in the few open leads we saw Spectacled and King eiders, all three species of jaegers, and a few Savannah Sparrows and Snow Buntings. We spent most of the rest of the morning dealing with some logistical issues and making arrangements for part of the crew to fly to a remote site at Techekpek Lake. Just before noon we were ready to take a drive south along the Dalton Highway (a.k.a. Hall Road). For the first 20 miles we drove through intermittent fog with temperatures near freezing; after the fog dissipated the temperature rose to 61 degrees at our southernmost point. Most of the birds occurred during the first 20 miles, which is also where most of the wetlands were located. In addition to the expected waterfowl, shorebirds, and jaegers we also saw many Willow Ptarmigan and one Rock Ptarmigan, a Gyrfalcon nest with young, 2 Sandhill Cranes, 11 Snowy Owls, 10 Short-eared Owls, 2 Say's Phoebes, Bank Swallows, 3 Bluethroats, Yellow Wagtails, a Wilson's Warbler, and displaying Smith's Longspurs. Mammals were also common and included a Grizzly Bear, Arctic and Red fox, 2 small groups of Muskox, many Caribou, and Arctic Ground Squirrels. We were back in Deadhorse by 8:30 p.m. [overcast with intermittent fog, temperature 29-33°F, wind NE 5-15 mph]

4 June

Today was the first full day of fieldwork. After breakfast at PBOC, we moved to the Prudhoe Bay Hotel where I gave a short presentation on my work with Mountain Plovers and other birds to the crews. We then spent until 5 p.m. setting up four shorebird nest monitoring plots in the oilfields. This involved a lot of hiking across the tundra where we saw 54 King and 8 Spectacled eiders, a flyover flock of Surf Scoters, a Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin, Stilt Sandpipers, many Red Phalaropes, a Snowy Owl, and several pairs of Snow Buntings.. There was a steady trickle of birds, mostly flocks of ducks and a few Pacific Loons, flying NNE towards the sea. After setting up the plots we took a short drive north along the coast of the Beaufort Sea to the West Dock area and stopped for photos. The ocean was still frozen, which explains the fog and cool temperatures along the coastal plain. [partly cloudy with intermittent fog, temperature 30-33°F, wind NE 10-15 mph]

5 June

After a good night's sleep we met for breakfast at 7:15 a.m. and then met for an hour at the Prudhoe Bay Hotel to discuss several aspects of the study. After packing a lunch we headed to the northwest part of the oil field to set up bird transects on rehabilitated pads. The wind, cool

temperatures, and extensive snow cover made the work more difficult, but we managed to set up three transects and visited a fourth. Some of the notable birds seen today included a few King and Spectacled eiders, good numbers of Willow and Rock ptarmigan, many shorebirds including good numbers of American Golden- and Black-bellied plovers, a Sabine's Gull, and a Snowy Owl. We stopped for dinner at a different facility at 6:45 p.m. and were back at PBOC by 7:45 p.m. [overcast, temperature 31-34°F, winds E 20-30 mph]

6 June

This was a long day on the tundra! We met for breakfast at 7:15 a.m., spent an hour discussing the artificial nest study, and then left for the field at 9 a.m. We again drove to the western part of the oil field and set up points on three more transects for the pad rehabilitation study. We stopped in Deadhorse on our way back to the PBOC to buy supplies in the general store and check in with the bush pilot about future flights to Teshekpuk Lake. Then we got down to business and divided into two groups to set out a total of four artificial nest transects on the tundra. Some of the interesting birds seen today included Red-throated Loon, many Willow and Rock ptarmigan, an adult Herring Gull, and Sabine's Gulls. [overcast, temperature 31-34°F, wind E 20-30 mph, intermittent light drizzle all day]

7 June

This was my final full day in Alaska, and it was a busy one! We met for breakfast at 7:15 a.m. and then promptly left at 8 a.m. for the field. Our goal was to set up two pairs of artificial nest transects, one pair at each of two sites. The first pair of transects took more than 5 hours to complete, but the second set went faster and we were all done by 8 p.m. We then returned to the PBOC for a late dinner. Some of the interesting wildlife seen today included very close looks at a pair of Spectacled Eiders, close looks at many displaying shorebirds, including my favorite, the Pectoral Sandpiper (their eerie "whoop-whoop-whoop" call is really cool!), a Bar-tailed Godwit mobbing a Peregrine Falcon, another Snowy Owl, and quite a few lemmings of both species. Finally, we enjoyed a traffic jam in Deadhorse that was caused by a herd of 30+ Muskox crossing on the road! After dinner a few of us drove to a nearby Buff-breasted Sandpiper lek where we saw 2-3 displaying males. At 10:30 p.m. we returned to the PBOC and were ready for some much needed rest. [overcast with intermittent fog, temperature 30-37°F, wind E 10-20 mph]

8 June

Today was my travel day back to Montana. I departed Deadhorse on a 9:40 a.m. flight that stopped for about an hour in Barrow, Alaska before returning to Anchorage; I then caught connecting flights through Seattle to arrive in Great Falls at 11:15 p.m.

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Birds (62 species)

Greater White-fronted
Goose
Snow Goose
Cackling Goose
Brant
Tundra Swan
American Wigeon
Mallard
Northern Shoveler
Northern Pintail
Green-winged Teal
Greater Scaup
King Eider
Common Eider
Spectacled Eider
Surf Scoter
Long-tailed Duck
Willow Ptarmigan
Rock Ptarmigan
Red-throated Loon
Pacific Loon
Northern Harrier
Rough-legged Hawk
Gyr Falcon
Peregrine Falcon
Sandhill Crane
Black-bellied Plover
American Golden-Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Bar-tailed Godwit
Ruddy Turnstone
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Baird's Sandpiper

Pectoral Sandpiper
Dunlin
Stilt Sandpiper
Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Long-billed Dowitcher
Red-necked Phalarope
Red Phalarope
Pomarine Jaeger
Parasitic Jaeger
Long-tailed Jaeger
Sabine's Gull
Herring Gull
Glaucous Gull
Arctic Tern
Snowy Owl
Short-eared Owl
Say's Phoebe
Bank Swallow
Common Raven
Bluethroat
Lapland Longspur
Smith's Longspur
Snow Bunting
Wilson's Warbler
American Tree Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Common Redpoll
Hoary Redpoll

Mammals (7 species)

Arctic Ground Squirrel
Muskox
Red Fox
Arctic Fox

Collared Lemming
Brown Lemming
Caribou