ALASKA TOUR 2001

Bradford/Schwartz

We were dancing in the streets of Barrow. After missing the few Yellow-billed Loons that had been reported near Nome we finally watched one on Gas Well Road in Barrow, Alaska, the land of the midnight sun, feeding in a nearby pond and we were indeed dancing.

Our tour began in Anchorage with a visit to Potter Marsh where many folks began racking up life birds immediately. For most it was the Mew Gulls or Arctic Terns sitting on their nests or searching for food. Potter Marsh is a large wetlands right in the heart of Anchorage that during spring has many species of nesting birds. With a little looking Pacific Loon and Red-necked Grebe nests were found. We also spotted a stunning Red-throated Loon, a few Bald Eagles flying overhead, Greater Scaup, and Gluacous-winged Gull. The C Street Ponds held a stunning staked out drake Eurasian Wigeon for our group and a very out of range Cassin’s Vireo was located on BLM property in Anchorage.

Right in Anchorage proper is Hillside Park, a medium size park used for hiking during the spring and summer and for snow skiing in the fall and winter. It is along these easy to negotiate trails where we had our first looks at Black-capped and Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay, Black-billed Magpie, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and a few Common Redpolls. After Hillside Park a walk along Knik Arm produced Wandering Tattler, Spotted Sandpiper and Hudsonian Godwits galore.

Our next two nights were spent in the splendor of the Land’s End Hotel in Homer on the very tip of the Homer Spit. Here some folks took advantage of the many shops in town and added many items to their already full luggage. However, the main focus here was the birds. A four hour boat trip in the calm waters of Kachemak Bay produced Harlequin Duck, Barrow’s Goldeneye, Black Oystercatcher, Black-legged Kittiwake, beautiful looks at Aleutian Terns sitting on floating debris, and Marbled Murrelet. Time at Gull Rock provided easy, close up looks at over 5,000 Common Murres, Red-faced Cormorant, Pigeon Guillemot, Tufted Puffin, a single Horned Puffin, and thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes.

Our next two nights were spent in the Breeze Inn in Seward at the head of Resurrection Bay. On our boat, the Misty, filled with just our group, we traveled out to the Chiswell Islands and beyond to Aialik Glacier where we enjoyed the sights and sounds of a calving tidewater glacier. A side trip into Coleman Bay produced nice, close up, looks at several Kittlitz’s Murrelet. Along with the murrelets we watched a lot of Rhinoceros Auklets, hundreds of Horned and Tufted Puffin, Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorant, Pigeon Guillemot and much more. As for mammals, we watched a superpod of over 50 Orcas as they surrounded our small boat, humpback whale, Steller’s sea lion, black bear, mountain goat, harbor seal, and sea otter. On land in Seward we visited the salmon weir where we were able to watch American Dipper and Varied Thrush. A little past the weir we watched Trumpeter Swan, Rufous Hummingbird, Steller’s Jay, Chestnut-backed Chickadee at a nest box, and Pine Grosbeaks feeding on grit along the road side.

The trip from Seward to Anchorage proved rather productive. A nest box held for us a very attentive Northern Saw-whet Owl. After viewing the owl we were pleased to find a Three-toed Woodpecker feeding on dead logs on the ground just a few feet away, a Merlin attending a nest, a very cooperative American Dipper along the Cooper River, and a pair of Northern Hawk Owls on a nest with young.

It was finally time to fly to St. Paul. Unfortunately, the only rarity present on the island while we were there was a very distant Bean Goose. Sunshine and no wind equals no rarities. However, even with no rarities St. Paul provides great birding. St. Paul is one of five islands that make up the Pribilof Island archipelago, home to many nesting seabirds. As always we stayed in the King Eider Hotel and traveled around by bus to the many birding sights and seal watching sights. A few of the larger beachmaster Northern fur seals had arrived and were staking out their territories in anticipation of the soon to arrive females. The sly Arctic foxes were shedding their white fur coats for their brownish summer attire, and a few early wildflowers dotted the tundra with yellow, blue, and red. On the tundra numerous Lapland Longspurs were “skylarking” and the robust

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches were present. A stop at the crab pots near our cafeteria was good for another passerine, the Winter Wren.

Along the sea cliffs our group watched, at close range, the many Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorants, Northern Fulmars of all plumages, Black-legged and Red-legged Kittiwakes, and Thick-billed and Common Murres that all actually nest on the rock cliffs. The other birds seen on the cliffs were just loafing and nest in cracks, crevices, or tunnels on top of the cliffs in soil. We marveled at the many alcids including Parakeet, Least, and Crested Auklet, and Tufted and Horned Puffins.

From St. Paul we were off to Nome for four nights at the historic Nome Nugget Inn and historic gold beaches where active mining operations can still be seen. While on the way to the hotel I was informed of a few good birds already being seen, and within a few hours of our arrival we were all enjoying stunning, scope views of a Red-necked Stint among the Black Turnstones, Semipalmated and Western Sanpipers, and Dunlin just before Safety Lagoon. Another great find this same evening was a couple of Emperor Geese on Safety Sound.

Our trips out to Safety Sound and beyond produced many great looks at breeding plumaged Red-throated and Pacific Loons along the sound, and a pair of Arctic Loons on the Bering Sea side. It was fascinating to watch the conspicuous white flank patch of the Arctic Loons as the pair fed and rested. A few Bar-tailed Godwits were seen along the sound as were numerous Long-tailed Jaegers and a few Parasitic Jaeger, Brant, Tundra Swan, and Common Eider. What a thrill it was to see dark morph Parasitic Jaegers cruising with the more common light morphs. Past Safety Sound we were thrilled to watch a pair of White Wagtails playing along a creek in plain sight with the more common Yellow Wagtails.

A drive north out of Nome along the Kougarok Road is always fascinating; early one morning we marveled at a lone Musk Ox that was no more than 50 feet from our van. Seeing the hair of this odd animal blowing in the cool arctic air and watching the animal finally run was a sight not to be forgotten. Along the Kougorak we watched several Arctic Warblers and had three separate sightings of Bluethroat. Of course the Bluethroat was quite the crowd pleaser. After traveling about 30 miles the Rock and Willow Ptarmigan became roadside and roadmiddle pests, we would have to slow as these birds eventually moved off the dirt road. Along one of the many rocky out crops we watched a distant Gyrfalcon, a bird we would see well in Denali National Park at Marmot Rock later in the trip.

The third road leading out of Nome is the Nome-Teller Road. This 70 mile long road parallels the coast for some miles then moves inland and then drops down to the tiny Eskimo village of Teller. Along the spit in Teller we watched Black Guillemot, Pacific Loon, Common Eider, Harlequin Duck, Oldsquaw, Black Scoter, and Greater Scaup. While driving to Teller we took our time to enjoy the fine scenery along with a pair of very cooperative Northern Shrikes near a nest. We also found Rough-legged Hawk, many more of both ptarmigan species, American Golden and Pacific Golden Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, many more jaegers, Short-eared Owl, Arctic Warbler, American Tree Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Hoary Redpoll, and of course the many Lapland Longspurs.

We then spent two nights in Barrow, the land of the midnight sun and eiders. A trip with all four species is always nice and we did it again this year. Common Eiders were indeed quite common on the trip; we had a few King Eiders on St. Paul. So in Barrow we needed Steller’s and Spectacled Eider. Our first of the two was a pair of Steller’s right along the side of the road that we watched from the van for a very long time. Later on it was a very cooperative female Spectacled Eider that pleased all. Fortunately, this year the Lemmings had a pretty good year and Snowy Owls were present giving us nice looks. Throughout town Snow Buntings could be constantly heard and seen, however, it was the little patch of tundra in town with displaying Buff-breasted Sandpipers that we all found truly fascinating. Another nice find was the lone Sabine’s Gull loafing on an ice floe in Freshwater Pond. Because of a delayed flight we were forced to spend a few extra hours birding. It was on one of the ponds we had checked before that Bob spotted a large loon with a yellow bill. The call for Yellow-billed Loon was sent out and all present “flew” from the van and enjoyed scope looks at a great bird.

Our two days in Barrow went by quickly and we were soon off for two nights in Denali National Park. The highlight of our stay was the bus drive to the Eielson Visitor Center where we observed many large mammals. Grizzly bears were present in good numbers and showing well, as were caribou, moose, Dall sheep, red fox, coyote, arctic hare, and arctic ground squirrel. A special treat was watching a grey wolf lope along and across the road in front of our bus. The wolf then picked up the scent or sight of two caribou and began to slowly, but purposefully pursue the two. Another amazing sight was watching a mother Grizzly bear sprawled out on a patch of snow nursing her two rather large cubs. A short distance from the Visitor Center we watched Northern Wheatears playing just off the road and a bit up slope. We then stopped at Polychrome Pass and made the short walk to Marmot Rock to watch a pair of grey morph Gyrfalcons near a nest. Finally after about 45 minutes of observation we caught the next bus to the hotel that was within in the park boundaries, after this year the hotel would no longer be used as a guest hotel.

On our drive along the Denali Highway we marveled at magnificent scenery and Olive-sided Flycatchers. A little further down the road we encounter several Arctic Warblers with one putting on quite a show. After a night at Tangle Lakes Lodge we took an early morning hike to locate Smith’s Longspur. Within a short time we all watched a female feeding on the ground in front of us. As we continued to Anchorage we made a few final stops. Our first stop was for a pair of Bohemian Waxwings that were putting on quite the show. It was while watching the pair of waxwings that a distant pair of White-winged Crossbills stopped by offering us a look. Our final stop, before arriving in Anchorage for flights home, was for a pair of very close Northern Hawk Owls, and even though we all had seen this species earlier during the trip we all jumped from the van and enjoyed extended views of a magnificent raptor.

During our 21 days in Alaska we encountered rain on less than two days, and even had sun on St. Paul. We ended with a total species count of 183 species.