GRAND ALASKA 2012

We had a total of 18 intrepid folks head north to Alaska in search of birds, fun, and scenery. This was the group that enjoyed less than two days of rain, beautiful days for the boat trips, and was never late for any planned event. The only time we left after our scheduled departure time was when I showed up late from a shopping spree. Having everyone on time every time has never happened before. This was a well traveled group with few needs, other than to see the next bird, mountain, Musk Ox, or whatever. This was also the year of the mighty Musk Ox. We saw them in unprecedented numbers and up close in many locations. I drove one van, while Van Truan, Brandon’s uncle, drove the other van, and Brandon Percival located the birds. This was also the year the United nonstop from Houston to Anchorage in fact had a stop.

After three days of scouting and rain the actual tour began in Anchorage under clear blue skies with Boreal Chickadees singing and showing well at Hillside Park, one of many little parks that dot the city landscape. We also had many Black-billed Magpies, Gray Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, and a few Varied Thrushes to go along with Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped Warblers. It was a delight to see the Yellow-rumped Warblers in their breeding plumage, too bad they were the Myrtle’s race and not the more colorful Audubon’s. A stop at Potter Marsh, just south of Anchorage, added Red-necked Grebe, Mew Gull, Greater Scaup, and Ring-necked Duck along with other duck species, Short-billed Dowitcher, and both species of yellowlegs. (These were in the water, not on the tops of trees as we would observe some later in the trip.) While strolling along the raised boardwalk, enjoying the Tree Swallows and other marsh inhabitants, we spotted a very close mother and young moose. We watched as they easily moved through the alder bushes below us. Lunch at Northwood Park gave half the group nice looks at our first Hairy Woodpecker and great looks for all at a Steller’s Jay. Later in the day, at Ship Creek, we watched an American Dipper until it was time to leave. Westchester Lagoon provided us with looks at Hudsonian Godwit, Bald Eagle, Arctic Tern, and Glaucous-winged Gull. We would return later in the trip to view the staked out Franklin’s Gull, though we would miss the Caspian Tern.

After two nights and one full day of birding in Anchorage we started the long drive to Homer, a location that is oftentimes overlooked by other tour groups. At the Girdwood ski resort we were rewarded with nice looks at Varied Thrush and Boreal Chickadee. At Tern Lake, the junction to Homer or Seward, we scoped a pair of Wandering Tattlers, and a breeding plumaged Common Loon. At some of the many state parks between Tern lake and Homer we had nice looks at Townsend’s, Orange-crowned, Yellow, and Wilson’s Warblers, along with Golden-crowned and Lincoln’s Sparrows. This is one of the best stretches of road in Alaska to see moose, and we were not disappointed. A stop at Anchor Point did not produce the Bristle-thighed Curlew that Brandon and I had during scouting but did produce a Bar-tailed Godwit. In the evening from our patios at the Land’s End Hotel we saw thousands of Common Murres heading out to feed, their flocks never seemed to end. We enjoyed a fine dinner of pizza from Starvin Marvin’s, beer and wine on the deck of our hotel. While dining we were treated to Bald Eagles and stunning scenery. The next day it was a boat trip in to the calm waters of Kachemak Bay on the Torega, which was operated by the talented Captain Karl Stoltzfus of Bay Excursion. On the waters of Kachemak Bay we enjoyed Yellow-billed Loon, Tufted Puffin, Black-legged Kittiwake, Common Murre, Marbled Murrelet, Harlequin Duck, Pelagic Cormorant, all three species of scoters, and Surfbird on the rock jetty on the return trip. A few lucky souls were able to get a Kittlitz’s Murrelet while on the bay. It is always a pleasure to ply the waters of Kachemak Bay with Karl.

A return trip to Anchor Point did not get us looks at the Bristle-thighed Curlew but we did see the Bar-tailed Godwit again, Surf and White-winged Scoters, Red-necked Phalarope, shorebirds and numerous Bald Eagles of various ages. After two stunning days in Homer it was off to Seward for two nights. Our first stop in Seward was at the “Bird Lady’s” house for great looks at Pine Groesbeck, Pine Siskin, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Rufous Hummingbird, Fox and Song Sparrow. Our boat trip to the Chiswell Islands and beyond to Northwestern Glacier was on calm seas and under relatively blue skies. For the first time on this trip we had flocks of Ancient Murrelets, this was a special treat. There were plenty of Common Murres, no Thick-billed Murres, plenty of Tufted and Horned Puffins to go along with the many Marbled Murrelets, and Pigeon Guillemots. At the Chiswell Islands we had poor looks at Red-faced Cormorants and a two Parakeet Auklets. A close look at a dark shearwater proved to be a Sooty Shearwater. A lone participant at the back of the boat had nice looks at a pair of Black Oystercatchers. After nine hours on the boat and a fine dinner at the Salmon Bake we all slept well and made our first stop for the next day at the Bird Lady’s house where we were waiting out the Chestnut-backed Chickadees. After a lot of waiting and an impromptu restroom break back to the hotel the chickadee put on a splendid show for all. As we headed back to Anchorage we added a few more species like Common Merganser, Barrow’s Goldeneye, Northwestern Crow, and Belted Kingfisher.

After a night at the Puffin Inn in Anchorage we were off to Nome for four nights at the comfortable Aurora Inn, just outside of Nome but right next to a Subway. A Subway we would visit more than once. Just an aside, the town of Nome was much nicer and cleaner, and more family oriented than in the past. After a quick lunch at the hotel and a Thick-billed Murre sighting from the hotel parking lot we headed out the Kougarok Road to about mile marker 24. Along the side of the road we had nice looks at stunning, breeding plumaged Red-throated and Pacific Loons. We would pass these on several occasions always enjoying nice close looks. Almost as soon as we turned north off the Council Road we had to stop to view the graceful Long-tailed Jaegers that we would see numerous times. A stop at the Nome Landfill produced a Slaty-backed Gull, our first looks at Glaucous Gull, and of course numerous Common Ravens. Further along the Kougarok we encountered both Common and Hoary Redpolls. We had nice comparisons getting to see how light-colored the Hoary Redpolls are compared to the Common Redpolls. A few Willow Ptarmigan flushed from along the side of the road, giving us nice looks at the Alaska State Bird in its intermediate plumage between winter and summer. Later on we noted the Rock Ptarmigan to still be in their full winter plumage. We had our first “taste” of Arctic Warbler and Bluethroat, though not very satisfying looks for everyone. That would occur later, you must pay your dues they say. Of course the Lapland Longspurs were all over singing and displaying and looking quite sharp in their breeding attire.

On our first full day we were up early to make the long drive to mile marker 72 for the hike up the spongy tundra for Bristle-thighed Curlew. Of course we had to make a stop or two for the Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers. We also stopped for the first ten or so Willow Ptarmigan and a lone Rock Ptarmigan. We did view the Slaty-backed Gull once again. The Arctic Warblers were more cooperative this time as were the Bluethroats. We all had nice looks at the Arctic Warbler and very close looks at a Bluethroat that was rather active and not perching for long in one place. The hike for the curlew was not as bad as in years past as there is now a “trail” leading up to the appropriate area. Unfortunately, this year we had to settle for hearing the bird and a single flyby. We did get nice looks at American Golden-Plover in their smart looking breeding plumage. On our return trip we enjoyed the staked out Gyrfalcon and Rough-legged Hawk. Oh, yea, the twenty or so Musk Oxen were pretty nice as well. We did not enjoy the flat tire, though it did allow us the opportunity to locate a Northern Shrike nest and those not directly involved in the tire changing process were able to enjoy the shrikes at close range while listening to the muffled cursing and cussing of the tire changers. There is no triple A and no cell phone service on the wild roads of Nome.

Today we spent quality time along the Council Road going out to mile marker 35 and lunching at the Last Train to Nowhere, after all there was an “enclosed” restroom. Brant, Cackling Goose, Common Eider, Harlequin Duck, White-winged and Surf Scoter, Tundra Swan, and Long-tailed Duck were seen as well. A special effort turned up a cooperative Arctic Loon, giving us our fifth loon species. Red-necked Phalaropes were abundant and a few Bar-tailed Godwits lingered at the Nome River crossing, a good spot for shorebirds and peeps. Here we would later locate and view a Red-necked Stint and Eastern Yellow Wagtail. Since we did not get good looks at Aleutian Terns on the boat trip out of Homer we made a special effort where they tend to loaf at the end of Safety Lagoon, and we were not disappointed. There were about fifteen Aleutian Terns mixed in with many more Arctic Terns. An evening sojourn put us on top of Anvil Mountain just outside of Nome were the Musk Oxen roam and Northern Wheatear can be found. A few in the group ended up with OK looks at the Northern Wheatear.

On our last full day we headed out the Nome-Teller Highway and of course made the obligatory stop at the Penny River for more Arctic Warblers, Yellow, Wilson’s, and Orange-crowned Warbler and a little further on Northern Waterthrush and great looks at Eastern Yellow Wagtails. Once again, Willow Ptarmigan, Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers were vying for our attention. However, we stayed focused and a stop at Wooley Lagoon produced both Pacific Golden-Plover and American Golden-Plover. We enjoyed looks once again at Common and Hoary Redpolls, Fox and Golden-crowned Sparrow. A few Musk Oxen were also encountered during the day.

Our flight back to Anchorage was uneventful and while back in Anchorage we did laundry and checked out the staked out Franklin’s Gull at Westchester Lagoon, but the Western Kingbird eluded us. The next day was the one day it rained on us while we were trying to bird so we headed to Wee Bees for burgers and shelter, thanks Jim Hailey of the TOS for giving up this location. We caught the 4pm flight to Barrow, the land of the land of the midnight sun, and singing Snow Buntings.

Our first full day found us looking at beautiful Red Phalaropes, displaying Pectoral Sandpipers, and some lovely Snowy Owls. The requisite stop at Dry Lake offered great looks at King Eider and Long-tailed Duck, or were they Oldsquaws? Further along Gas Well Road we had fine looks at several Steller’s Eider and a distant look at a male Spectacled Eider. We had all three species of jaegers as well as more Hoary Redpolls and Lapland Longspurs. Barrow is a bustling, alcohol free community with many activities for the nonbirder. On our last day in Barrow we traveled the same roads and saw the same birds as the previous day and got better, though still distant looks at the Spectacled Eider. It was only later on the flight back to Anchorage that we learned of the Common Sandpiper that was in a small pond in Barrow.

After a good night’s rest in Anchorage we headed north to Denali National Park and our hotel in the small town of Healy just north of the park. The Totem Inn was once again comfortable and the 49th State Brewery and Restaurant still proudly displayed the television version of the bus Chris McCandless lived and died in while experiencing the Alaska wilderness. Our bus trip 66 miles into the Eielson Visitor Center proved uneventful, however the lunch was good and the trip back was even better. We had looks at quite a few grizzly bear, caribou, a lone fox, snowshoe hare, and a moose with calf. After two nights in Healy we were off to the Denali Highway and Tangle River Inn.

Along the Denali Highway we enjoyed numerous, cooperative Arctic Warblers along with Grey-cheeked Thrush, numerous warblers and finally nice looks at several different Bohemian Waxwings. The White-winged Crossbills and Northern Hawk-Owls did not cooperate this year. The Denali Highway offers scenery as well as birds and we even took time to enjoy the some mammals. We watched a beaver for about twenty minutes as it “frolicked” in the ditch alongside the road. It eventually crossed under the road through a pipe and disappeared. We spotted a porcupine as well. On our last leg of the trip we made the drive from the Tangle River Inn to Anchorage with a few birding stops and some photography stops. The scenery on the last day was magnificent. We had nice looks at Matanuska Glacier and the powerful, silt filled Matanuska River. Eventually the fun had to end as some folks caught the red eye home that night while others lingered for another day or even two. After a day or two of rest in Houston, several folks headed *south* to see the Black-tailed Godwit at Brazoria NWR, a denizen of the far north.