

# Alaska

**15 June – 1 July 2005**

**Participants:**

**Bob Bailey**

**Alan Gibson**

**Dave Helliar**

**Paula Reynosa**

**Chris Rose**

**Trevor Weston**



**Tufted Puffins**

**Leader: Vaughan Ashby**

**Day 1:** With no direct flights to Anchorage, we stopped off in Chicago en-route. Never knowing how long US immigration will take, we had allowed a healthy margin before our flight on to Anchorage but in the event everything went very smoothly. There was an earlier internal flight to Anchorage but it was full so we asked if we could go on the standby list. At first there seemed no hope as there were six of us but miraculously we were allowed to board at the last minute and arrived some three hours earlier than scheduled! Our overnight motel was situated in a delightful small town north of Anchorage and our passage through the city was far easier than we had ever experienced in another other major US city even seeing the first of numerous Bald Eagles for the tour en-route! The hotel was to be used as a hub throughout the tour and with free breakfast, internet and laundry, quiet location, friendly staff and Tree Swallows outside, what better way to start the tour? It was somewhat strange to find it still light in the middle of the night however!

**Day 2:** After an early breakfast, we headed towards Seward making a number of stops en-route. Our first was at the delightful Potters Marsh where, despite the close proximity to the road, we found some excellent birds. A singing male Golden-crowned Sparrow vied for attention with Sandhill Cranes, displaying Wilson's Snipe, breeding Red-necked Grebes and Arctic Terns, spinning Red-necked Phalaropes, Lesser Yellowlegs sitting on posts, a Semipalmated Plover on the railway line, Alder Flycatcher, Yellow Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco and Red-winged Blackbird. Waterfowl were also well represent with both Greater and Lesser Scaup, Canvasback and American Wigeon. Wow, what a start! Taking a short detour into a conifer forest, we found the first of many Varied Thrushes as well as Hermit Thrush, American Robin, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and the ubiquitous White-crowned Sparrows. The snow was way up the mountain slopes however so our prospects for Rock and Willow Ptarmigan was remote. The weather, however, was superb and the views stunning. Continuing our journey west we stopped for breeding Great Northern Divers and then saw a lone Trumpeter Swan as we passed another lake. Deciding to return for it was a good plan as within minutes we had also seen Boreal Chickadee and Rusty Blackbird. Continuing our journey we recorded a couple of male Northern Harriers before arriving in Seward where we checked into our nice motel (Violet-green Swallows breeding in the roof!). Heading along the north side of the fjord, we enjoyed remarkable views of a large flock of Harlequin Ducks (mainly breeding-plumage males) as well as numerous Glaucous-winged and Mew Gulls, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Double-crested Cormorants, Pigeon Guillemots, Common Ravens and Northwestern Crows before finding one of the excellent fish and chip restaurants in town!

**Day 3:** After a good night's sleep, we headed to the dock for our Kenai Fjords boat cruise. We were to be blessed with superb weather, clear skies and a flat calm sea (slightly choppy on the way back). As we headed out of the sound, we first encountered Sea Otters shortly followed by Marbled Murrelets, Pigeon Guillemots and Horned and Tufted Puffins. The fog then rolled in so we decided to head straight for Northwest Glacier so settled down to guzzle some free pastries, coffee, tea and other drinks whilst marvelling at the captain's skill in avoiding the flotsam and rocky islands that kept appearing out of the gloom. This turned out to be an excellent decision as we soon broke into clear skies again. As we headed on, Harlequin Ducks, Ancient Murrelets and Parakeet and Rhinoceros Auklets were seen in good numbers at very close range and our captain slowed down on each occasion so that we could enjoy excellent views. Eventually, we reached the glacier and the scenery was to say the least, absolutely breathtaking. We had only one other ship for company (they generously sent over some freshly made cookies!) and so were able to sit back relax and watching pieces of glacier breaking off, all in total silence except for the amazing noise this made. Eventually, we had to start our journey home but not before we had watched Kittlitz's and Marbled Murrelets side-by-side for comparison, Spotted Sandpiper and our only Black Oystercatchers (together with several tiny young scuttling around the rocks) of the trip. Other birds seen on the return journey included Pelagic and Red-faced Cormorants, Short-tailed and Sooty Shearwaters and Brünnich's and Common Guillemots whilst non-birding highlights were superb views of a Humpback Whale breaching and a school of Dall's Porpoise riding the bow. Back on land in the evening, we enjoyed a short drive seeing Gray and Steller's Jays. After dinner (fish and chips again!), we visited a salmon run and enjoyed amazing views of these magnificent fish jumping weirs as they headed towards their spawning grounds. A search for small owls unfortunately drew a blank.

**Day 4:** This was one of only two wet days on the entire trip. We nevertheless, made the best of it by birding from the vehicle for a lot of the time. First we revisited the road alongside the northern edge of the fjord finding more Harlequin Ducks, Bald Eagles at point blank range, a couple of male Rufous Hummingbirds, three second-year Glaucous Gulls, excellent views of Northwestern Crows and Song Sparrows. Our first stop on the way back to Anchorage was at the Trumpeter Swan lake where we enjoyed a flyby of a huge female Northern Goshawk plus Pine Siskin and Rusty Blackbird. A backyard bird feeder at a log cabin gave us superb views of Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pine Grosbeak and Pine Siskin. Further on, with the weather steadily improving, we found a Dall's Sheep high up on a mountain slope but there was no sign of the Beluga Whales at Beluga Point. Back in Anchorage, the weather had improved considerably and we were able to enjoy a late-afternoon visit to a local park where Red-throated Diver, Hudsonian Godwits and Short-billed Dowitchers (all in breeding plumage!), Bonaparte's Gulls and Orange-crowned Warbler were the highlights.

**Day 5:** We made an early start, as we had to make a long diversion for some owls! Our first main stop was alongside the highway where a Pacific Diver gave great views. Whilst looking at it we noticed a couple of White-winged Scoters on the lake and a grouse species was seen briefly in flight. Lesser Yellowlegs 'chipped' from the treetops and we had brief views of three Bohemian Waxwings. Continuing, first a couple of Surf Scoters were found on a small lake alongside the road, then we saw our only American Kestrel of the tour, followed by our first Merlin and Red-tailed Hawk. Our real target however was a very special bird, Northern Hawk-owl, and it wasn't long before we found one right next to the road giving amazing views. As if this were not enough, we found another five during the day! So, on to our next stop, a campground where Great Gray Owl had been reportedly breeding. As it was private property we had to pay a fee to be taken to the site and there it was, a superb Great Gray Owl sitting in the open, in broad daylight, not 15 feet away, not taking the slightest bit of notice of us – amazing! The Gray Jays seemed almost insignificant compared to them! The next part of the journey was relatively uneventful compared to the morning but we arrived in Payson and headed west again along the Denali Highway. As we were in prime Smith's Longspur habitat we decided to make our first attempt for these birds, so off we went into the tundra fully kitted out with every anti-mosquito device known to man! We found plenty of sparrows, American Tree, Savannah and White-crowned, a family group of Tundra (Whistling) Swans, a confiding pair of Willow Ptarmigans with young and Least Sandpipers giving distraction displays but after two hours, no Smith's Longspur. Round one to the longspurs and with 130 miles to go we decided to press on. The excellent tarmac road soon petered out into a dirt road, which, although mainly good, was in places muddy and

greasy and we were pleased to have a four-wheel drive. Eventually we reached the main highway again and after a short time had checked into our extremely comfortable guesthouse.

**Day 6:** Our Denali National Park day and it was raining! We made the short journey north, park and boarded the bus (no private vehicles allowed) for the guided tour. These tours are for general wildlife but the drivers are very helpful and will within reason stop whenever you want them too. With the rain continuing outside however, everyone seemed keen to stay in the bus, clean the condensation off the windows and just enjoy the scenery and look for mammals. At first we saw very little but suddenly there was the animal we had all been hoping for, a Grizzly Bear. As we were watching another smaller animal almost fell down the slope towards it, it was a cub! Plenty of oohs and aahs and then off again adding Caribou and a few Arctic Ground Squirrels before stopping at a Gyr Falcon nest site. Poor views of a couple of chicks from a steamy bus so we resolved to get off the bus on the return journey for better views. By the time we stopped for a lunch break at the furthest point of our tour, the rain had stopped and we enjoyed our second Merlin of the tour. Returning, we saw a Northern (Great Grey) Shrike from the bus before getting out at the Gyr Falcon eyrie. The chicks were still unattended but it didn't take us long to find the female sitting on a nearby rock. She disappeared to hunt but returned again so we were able to enjoy several wonderful views before catching the next bus. This proved to be a very good move as the other passengers on this bus were much more switched on to finding animals and it wasn't long before we were watching a mammal arguably better than the Grizzly Bear, a Wolf. We drove alongside it for some time until it got so close to the road we could see it's glaring yellow eyes with the naked eye, wonderful. So back to our guesthouse and dinner at the in-house café before taking an evening walk in what was now sunshine. Northern (Yellow-shafted) Flicker, Wilson's Warbler, (Red) Fox Sparrow and the first of many Common Redpols were the highlights and although the birdlist was quite short for the day, the mammal list was spectacular!

**Day 7:** After a wonderful breakfast, we heading back east again along the Denali Highway. The first stop of the day produced an extremely local and uncommon species for Alaska, Upland Sandpiper. With the whole day to cover only 140 miles, we made a number of other stops both for scenery and target birds. Another sighting of Northern Hawk-owl meant that we had seen this species on three days during the tour whilst a roadside stop for Blackpoll Warbler also gave us Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes, whilst a Golden Eagle soared overhead. A very wary male Bufflehead and a pair of Horned (Slavonian) Grebes on roadside pools were our only ones of the tour whilst our lunch stop was enlivened by fantastic views of a singing male Arctic Warbler and a large Cliff Swallow colony under a bridge. After lunch, we continued east seeing Green-winged Teal, more Surf and White-winged Scoters and the occasional Long-tailed Skua until we reached a second potential site for Smith's Longspur. We enjoyed a walk of several miles around the tundra seeing many fine American Golden Plovers in breeding plumage, a wonderful Short-eared Owl, Horned Larks, stunning male Lapland Buntings and many America Tree, Fox, Lincolns and Savannah Sparrows but once again no sign of the highly-elusive Smith's Longspur. With our overnight accommodation quite close, we decided to go and check in. The log cabins were delightful and as we had already pre-ordered dinner, we were able to relax although we declined our hosts offer to eat outside in the evening for obvious reasons!

**Day 8:** After breakfast, we backtracked a few miles along the Denali Highway to resume our search for Smith's Longspur. There had been just one uncorroborated report from two out of the 100s of people who had looked for the birds this year but we were not to be put off even though this is right on the edge of their range. So we set off into the tundra again fully kitted with mosquito headnets. After an hour walking round a male flew over our heads and after a further search, we all enjoyed fabulous views of the highly enigmatic bird. For many on the tour, this was their final longspur having seen Chestnut-collared and McCown's on previous Birdfinders' Colorado and Wyoming tours. So we headed to the local town (hamlet better describes it!) for a celebratory lunch at the only restaurant cum garage in town. The afternoon was largely uneventful spent driving back towards Anchorage to stay at our comfortable motel again.

**Day 9:** We had an early flight to Nome via Kotzebue (just within the Arctic Circle) and by just after 10.00, we were already checking into our motel in brilliant sunshine. At these high latitudes, weather can be very unpredictable but we were again blessed with superb weather for our three days. After picking up our hire vehicle,

we headed east along the coast seeing our first Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers, the locally common Yellow Wagtail and the only American Pipit of the tour. Groups of Common (Boreal) Eider and Long-tailed Duck were found around Safety Lagoon along a flock of Black Brants and a Black Guillemot, a major rarity here. A large flock of Whistling (Tundra) Swans was nice for those who missed the Denali Highway birds. At the east end of the lagoon we found a nice group of photogenic Aleutian Terns sitting by the road and whilst inspecting some of our railroad trains, an Arctic Skua flew past. As we looked at the Aleutian Terns again on our return, a Black Turnstone flew over our heads towards the beach and we were able to successfully relocate it despite constant harassment by Arctic Terns! Red-throated Divers were very common and we saw our second Pacific Diver, whilst in a roost of Glaucous Gulls we found our only Vega Gull of the tour.

**Day 10:** After a substantial breakfast, we headed north towards the traditional Bristle-thighed Curlew breeding areas stopping only to look at Bluethroats, a family group of White-fronted Geese and nests of Gyr Falcon and Rough-legged Buzzards en-route. The walk up through the Dwarf Willows then onto the tundra was not too strenuous and it was not long before we were enjoying superb views of at least three male Bristle-thighed Curlews. We stayed a while to enjoy the spectacle before slowly heading south again. Further new birds for the tour on the way back to Nome included Northern Waterthrushes and a Northern Wheatear (rare breeder from Asia) whilst several Short-eared Owls and Golden-crowned Sparrows added to the diversity. With time to spare, we investigated a report of Spectacled Eiders at Cape Nome but all we could find were a single Common Eider, a couple of Harlequin Ducks and nine Long-tailed Ducks. A Peregrine Falcon and Ruddy Turnstone were both new for the tour and compensation was had when sorting through a large gull flock we found no less than three Slaty-backed Gulls (1 first year and 2 second years) alongside an even-rarer first year Thayer's Gull.

**Day 11:** Our final full day around Nome was spent firstly looking for Red-necked Stints and Black-throated Divers (both rare breeder in Alaska) around Safety Lagoon. An initial scan gave us six Bar-tailed Godwits and a flock of Sabine's Gulls in summer plumage and Black Guillemot numbers had increased to three. A small flock of Red-necked Stints were eventually found distantly on the opposite side of the lagoon mouth so we recrossed the bridge where, after a slightly nerve-wracking few minutes, we eventually relocated the flock, which were mostly in breeding plumage with one outstandingly marked bird. Several Dunlin were also seen and not long afterwards we found one of the Black-throated Divers. With Red-throated, Pacific and Great Northern Divers also seen today, this was a four diver day! Whilst still looking out for Spectacled Eiders, we were fortunate enough to see all three species of scoters in a day including our first Black Scoters. Whilst returning to town and looking at an old gold-panning boat, a Surfbird did a flypast but refused to land in sight. In the afternoon, we headed west along an inland route with distinctly different scenery. Our first target was not a bird, it was a mammal; Musk Ox, and it didn't take us long to find a lone bull lying in the snow to cool off (it was amazingly hot in Nome with temperatures reaching the mid to high 60s). An American Dipper was found singing under a bridge and whilst enjoying superb views, we were able to sort through the numerous Common Redpolls eventually finding two well-marked Arctic Redpolls. On the way back, we finally got to grips with a pair of Pacific Golden Plovers and a couple of Willow Ptarmigan were found.

**Day 12:** With only a short time left in Nome and all the speciality birds under our belts, we relaxed this morning before taking the flight back to Anchorage, again via Kotzebue. With clear skies, we were able to enjoy superb views of the Seward Peninsula culminating in distant views of Siberia just before we landed at Kotzebue. During our final leg of the journey it began to cloud over but just at the critical moment, the clouds broke and there it was standing out proud above the other mountains, Mount McKinley, the highest mountain in North America. A brief stop at an Anchorage city park on the way back to our motel gave us even better views of the Hudsonian Godwits together with great views of four Surfbirds and Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs standing side-by-side.

**Day 13:** The final leg of the tour was an extension to St Paul Island, part of the remote Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea. Unfortunately, the flight was delayed but eventually we took off in a small twin-engined light aircraft via Dillingham. The journey was uneventful and, on arrival on the island, we were greeted not only by our local guides but by sunshine, one of only about 10 days like this every year! The weather was so good in fact that we could see the other of the Pribilof Islands, St. George in the distance. After checking into the hotel and taking

dinner, (but not before we had ticked Gray-crowned (Hepburn's) Rosy-finches!), we visited some of the spectacular seabird cliffs and were treated to views of Red-faced Cormorants, Northern Fulmars, Common and Brünnich's Guillemots, Black-legged and Red-legged Kittiwakes, Crested, Least and Parakeet Auklets and Horned and Tufted Puffins, phew what a start! Rock Sandpipers were literally everywhere whilst the Aleutian sub-species of Winter Wren looked significantly different from their Eurasian cousins. Snow Buntings could be found everywhere with rocks from the port to the screes on the hills whilst Lapland Longspurs occupied the tundra niche. A wader on the rocks turned out to be a summer-plumaged Wandering Tattler, which, although at first flighty, eventually gave good views. Finally, a check through the Harlequin Ducks in the harbour was rewarded with a female King Eider and a first year Steller's Eider.

**Day 14:** Our second day started rather foggy but this soon cleared and, although not as sunny as yesterday, gave us yet another good weather day. With a solitary male McKay's Bunting on territory at the far end of the island, this was our first destination after breakfast. We had been told that we might have to put in several hours to get good views because the bird was very flighty but immediately on arrival there it was, both in flight and on the ground. It was breeding with a female Snow Bunting and constantly disputing territory with male Snow Buntings so we settled down to enjoy multiple views of this very special bird. We then revisited a number of seabird colonies both before and after lunch and enjoyed great views and photographic opportunities of all the possible species including amazing views of the diminutive Least Auklet, which makes Little Auk look big! Two Eurasian Teal were a nice bonus and a further visit to the harbour gave us better views of both the King and Steller's Eiders.

**Day 15:** On our last day on St Paul Island, we again revisited many of the seabird cliffs to enjoy the spectacle and photograph them. After lunch, we made the return flight to Anchorage and despite a puncture in the hire vehicle, once again stopped off at the park in Anchorage before checking into our motel for the final night.

**Day 16:** With an evening flight back to the UK via Chicago, we spent the morning at Eagle River nature centre close to our hotel. Several new species were seen from the attractive trails including Belted Kingfisher, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Great Horned Owl and Golden-crowned Kinglet before rain and an emergence of mosquitoes put an end to the birding. We returned to the airport (again via the city park), caught our flight to Chicago and even though we only had a 30-minute connection time, caught on ongoing flight arriving back in London next day 15 minutes early with all our luggage coming off the belt first! We had recorded a total of 175 species in Alaska including all of the speciality birds in the areas we visited together with many mammals and enjoyed incredibly good weather with incredible scenery.