

ALASKA PART ONE

June 1, 2003 to June 10, 2003

Guided by
Chris Benesh

This year's Alaska Part One tour was filled with so many highlights, including many which were not even birds! The scenery alone was spectacular, and we were so fortunate in Denali National Park to have views of the mountain on four different days. The Denali Highway day was best, with a cloudless sky revealing McKinley in all its glory. In fact, the weather was cooperative throughout. We found the Pribilofs to have their own charm, with rolling hills and lupine-covered landscapes in stark contrast to the sheer rocky cliffs crowded with busy seabirds. Our visit there was a classic one, with great views of all of the breeding seabirds and regular visitors, along with a sprinkling of rare Asian species. This year's treats included three Hawfinches, a Wood Sandpiper, and a gigantic Bean Goose. We also were treated to a bonus wildflower bloom, a vision not often enjoyed on early June visits. Many flowers were a month ahead of schedule.

In addition to all of the great birds, mammals definitely featured prominently. The bus ride into Denali was a trip we'll never forget. The Red Fox, Toklat Grizzly Bear, Moose, Caribou, Dall's Sheep, Hoary Marmot, and Arctic Ground-Squirrel were all eclipsed by our wonderful sighting of Wolverine. The Black Bear seen on our drive back to Anchorage added to that, along with the pinnipeds at St. Paul made for a wonderful mammal sweep.

As always, the group really makes the trip, and this year we had a wonderful one. Thanks to all of you for coming along and making it so much fun to guide. And thanks for putting up with the wolverine antics! I hope to see all of you again on future trips. Until then, great birding.

List total: 120 bird taxa and 17 mammal taxa

*If marked to left of list, * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic*

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Gaviidae

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*)

Great looks at a pair of these on the big lake along the Denali Highway showing off their red throats.

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*)

Great looks at a pair of these at a traditional Nancy Lake locale. Another basic plumaged bird was seen off Northeast Pt. on St. Paul.

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*)

A pair of these along the drive to Denali on the Parks Highway.

Podicipedidae

RED-NECKED GREBE (*Podiceps grisegena*)

Fine views of several birds at Westchester Lagoon. It is a real treat seeing them in breeding plumage.

Procellariidae

NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

Fantastic views of many of these on the wing and on the seabird cliffs at Ridge Wall.

Phalacrocoracidae

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*)

Good views of an immature bird at the Reef seacliffs on St. Paul.

RED-FACED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax urile*)

We had some great views of this species on St. Paul particularly at the Town Cliffs.

Anatidae

TRUMPETER SWAN (*Cygnus buccinator*)

Good study of a close bird incubating on its roadside nest along the Parks Highway. Most memorable were the two calling birds that flew right past us in the early morning along the Parks Hwy with a full-view Denali backdrop!!

BEAN GOOSE (*Anser fabalis*)

Quite a treat was encountering one of these on our final day on St. Paul. This gigantic bird was first seen flying over Antone Lake in the morning. Late in the afternoon, Tom spotted it again on Webster Lake, where we were able to really study the bill structure and pattern. The bird appeared to be on the very long-billed _middendorfi_ subspecies type, often referred to as the Tundra Bean Goose.

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*)

A few of these seen, mainly in Anchorage.

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis leucopareia*)

Good views of two Aleutian Geese at Webster Lake on St. Paul where this is a rare but regular visitor.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*)

A few of these on scattered ponds on the mainland.

EURASIAN TEAL (*Anas crecca*)

A few of these seen on St. Paul including some that were intermediate between this and the American Green-winged Teal.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (*Anas carolinensis*)

A few seen on ponds along the Denali Hwy.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*)

The most common dabbling duck on St. Paul.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

A pair of these on St. Paul were noteworthy, being seen on Rocky and Pumphouse lakes.

RING-NECKED DUCK (*Aythya collaris*)

A pair of these were on a pond beyond Brushkana on the Denali Hwy.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*)

Good comparisons of this and the next species at Lake Spenard. A pair were also on Webster Lake on St. Paul.

LESSER SCAUP (*Aythya affinis*)

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*)

A female was well seen on Salt Lagoon and a stunning male was at Gorbach Bay near Reef Rookery.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*)

Several pairs of these were seen on Brushkana Creek where they nest. Small numbers were also at St. Paul.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (OLDSQUAW) (*Clangula hyemalis*)

Many of these were present at St. Paul where they are one of the common breeding ducks.

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (*Melanitta fusca*)

A handsome pair of these were at a lake along the Parks Hwy.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*)

A female was present on Little Polovina Lake.

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*)

Great looks at a drake on the drive north to Denali.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*)

Nice looks at a male along a creek on the Denali Hwy.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*)

A female was seen in flight along the Denali Hwy.

Accipitridae

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

Scattered numbers of these were seen on the mainland, particularly on the drive up to Denali.

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*)

The best look was of a male being harrassed by a Bonaparte's Gull and Northern Shrike along the Denali Hwy.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK (*Buteo lagopus*)

One seen very briefly in Denali being mobbed by a Merlin.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

A couple of these were seen in Denali National Park.

Falconidae

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*)

One seen quickly inside Denali.

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*)

One seen harrassing a Rough-legged Hawk inside Denali National Park.

Tetraonidae

WILLOW PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus lagopus*)

Great views of a few of these inside Denali. They were surprisingly advanced to attaining their summer feathering.

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus mutus*)

We had three birds in total, with the first a dirty white-colored male. The next pair consisted of a much darker male and a cryptic female.

Gruidae

SANDHILL CRANE (*Grus canadensis*)

Charlie spotted a couple of these flying over the road on the drive to Denali.

Charadriidae

SEMIPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

A few of these were seen on St. Paul where they breed in small numbers.

Scolopacidae

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago delicata*)

Mostly heard in the Denali region, though Charlie spotted one in flight.

SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus griseus*)

Some nice looks at breeding plumaged birds in Anchorage at Westchester.

HUDSONIAN GODWIT (*Limosa haemastica*)

Some great studies of a small number of birds at Westchester on the first day of the trip.

UPLAND SANDPIPER (*Bartramia longicauda*)

Outstanding looks at one that perched atop a tree right next to the road, and stayed even when our noisy bus backed up to get another view of it. Seldom seen inside the park on the bus tours.

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*)

Good scope view of one along the Denali Hwy.

LESSER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa flavipes*)

Wonderful views of a Lesser Goldenlegs along the Denali Hwy. This bird had the brightest legs I had ever seen on this species.

SOLITARY SANDPIPER (*Tringa solitaria*)

Good looks at the one that was sharing the pond with the goldenlegs.

WOOD SANDPIPER (*Tringa glareola*)

Great scope views of one hanging out at Pumphouse Lake on St. Paul. This rare wader is annual on St. Paul, making St. Paul the most reliable accessible site for seeing this species in the ABA area.

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (*Actitis macularia*)

One seen on one of the small islands on Westchester Lagoon.

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*)

Seen at St. Paul including a bird doing a flight display. It is one of the four species that regularly breeds on St. Paul (8 pairs are known to breed there).

ROCK SANDPIPER (*Calidris ptilocnemis*)

One of the real features of St. Paul, we had numerous, fantastic encounters with this species.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*)

A small number of these were seen on a pond far out on the Denali Hwy near Brushkana. Another two were at Spenard Lake in Anchorage. Small numbers were on many of the small ponds on St. Paul where we had the best views of all.

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicaria*)

Two females at Webster Lake were a nice find, this species being a migrant there.

Stercorariidae

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

Nice flight views of two of these at Rocky Lake where they even perched briefly. There was a dark-morph and a light-morph.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)

Flight views of two distant birds and then a closer one on the tundra of Highway Pass inside Denali National Park.

Laridae

MEW GULL (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus*)

A fair number of these seen all over the mainland. Also known as the Short-billed Gull.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*)

Perhaps 100-200 of these were present on St. Paul which is the most that I have ever seen there.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED X HERRING GULL (HYBRID) (*Larus glaucescens x argentatus*)

A few of these were seen in the Anchorage area where they are relatively common.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*)

On the final day, we finally came upon the first year Glaucous Gull that had been present on the island during our entire stay.

HERRING GULL (*Larus argentatus*)

A couple of these seen along the Denali Hwy.

BONAPARTE'S GULL (*Larus philadelphia*)

A lot of these were out on the mudflats at Westchester, many of which were first summer birds. One incubating in its arboreal nest was a real treat along the Denali Hwy.

RED-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa brevirostris*)

Fantastic views of this Bering Sea specialty bird, with the Pribilofs being the most accessible colony.

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*)

St. Paul is also a fantastic place to get to know this species, though it is typically overshadowed by the rarer Red-legged Kittiwake.

Sternidae

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*)

A few seen working over the mudflats at Westchester, and another well seen along the Denali Hwy.

Alcidae

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*)

This species tends to bunch up in clumps on the cliffs at St. Paul whereas the Thick-billeds tend to line up on narrower ledges.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*)

Good comparisons with preceding species.

PIGEON GUILLEMOT (*Cephus columba*)

We had good but quick flyby of one from the reef cliffs on St. Paul where a few of these are found each June. Our bird was not in full breeding plumage, as is typical of most birds found here.

ANCIENT MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*)

Four birds were seen distantly on Gorbach Bay at St. Paul.

PARAKEET AUKLET (*Aethia psittacula*)

One of the several auklets we saw quite well at various points on St. Paul.

CRESTED AUKLET (*Aethia cristatella*)

One of my favorites with its chihuahua bark and fancy crest.

LEAST AUKLET (*Aethia pusilla*)

HORNED PUFFIN (*Fratercula corniculata*)

The best views we had were the last evening at the Reef Cliffs where there were a few pairs on the cliff doing some courtship behavior, along with some very close flybys.

TUFTED PUFFIN (*Fratercula cirrhata*)

Most of our views were in flight, though we did have a few nice looks at birds perched on breeding cliffs.

Columbidae

I ROCK DOVE (*Columba livia*)

Around the Anchorage area.

Strigidae

SNOWY OWL (*Nyctea scandiaca*)

Good views of one on our first visit to Antone Lake, this species as scarce on St. Paul and very few are found into June.

Alcedinidae

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Ceryle alcyon*)

One was seen briefly at the beginning of the Denali Hwy.

Picidae

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*)

Good looks at a female along the side of the Parks Hwy on the trip back to Anchorage from Denali.

THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (*Picoides tridactylus*)

A male was seen briefly by Charlie but departed before the rest of us could get a look.

Tyrannidae

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus sordidulus*)

One was seen very briefly inside of Denali National Park.

ALDER FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax alnorum*)

Good scope views of a singing bird at Westchester Lagoon. Another was heard at Hillside Park.

Hirundinidae

TREE SWALLOW (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

A few around Anchorage.

VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW (*Tachycineta thalassina*)

Quite a few of these were around the hotel in Anchorage.

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*)

Great views of an active colony along the Denali Hwy. These birds had only been back for a few days. They had returned to Anchorage by the time we got back from Denali. Five of these on St. Paul was also noteworthy.

CLIFF SWALLOW (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*)

A few seen nesting under bridges in the Denali area.

Motacillidae

AMERICAN PIPIT (*Anthus rubescens*)

A few seen in flight song on one of ridges near Eielson Visitor Center inside Denali NP.

Regulidae

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*)

After hearing quite a few, we finally got good looks at Hillside Park in Anchorage.

Bombycillidae

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (*Bombycilla garrulus*)

Maureen was lucky to find one of these near the Grand Denali on an after dinner hike.

Troglodytidae

WINTER WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

We had good audio and a scope view of a singing bird in the tall rocks behind Antone Lake thanks to Gavin. The forms breeding on various Bering Sea islands are somewhat different from mainland birds.

Turdidae

GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH (*Catharus minimus*)

Good views of some singing birds on the Parks Hwy and Denali Hwy.

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (*Catharus ustulatus*)

Great views of several and more heard at Byers Lake. Northern birds are the olive-backed variety.

HERMIT THRUSH (*Catharus guttatus*)

Mostly heard, though we did glimpse them chasing through the understory.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*)

* VARIED THRUSH (*Ixoreus naevius*)

Paridae

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (*Poecile atricapilla*)

Good views of this grayish, contrastingly patterned species at Westchester. Also seen at Hillside Park.

BOREAL CHICKADEE (*Poecile hudsonica*)

We had great looks at a foraging pair of these at Byers lake. Compared with the Black-capped, this is a warmer buffy brown species with indistinct markings. Also heard at Hillside Park.

Sittidae

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*)

Good views of one of these at Byers Lake. Another was well seen at Hillside Park in Anchorage.

Laniidae

NORTHERN SHRIKE (*Lanius excubitor*)

Charlie spotted one along the Denali that did what many do, taking off out of sight before we could really take it all in. The next morning, we fared better, finding a pair at a nest along the Denali Hwy. We even watched the male take off in pursuit of a Northern Harrier that had wandered too close.

Corvidae

GRAY JAY (*Perisoreus canadensis*)

Fairly common along the Denali Hwy and scattered birds seen elsewhere.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (*Pica hudsonia*)

We learned that this species is great at tracking wolverines.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*)

Fringillidae

GRAY-CROWNED ROSY-FINCH (*Leucosticte tephrocotis umbrina*)

Great views of this large form of rosy-finch on St. Paul were it is one of the few breeding passerines.

PINE GROSBEAK (*Pinicola enucleator*)

Great views of at least three female-type birds at Byers Lake.

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL (*Loxia leucoptera*)

We had incredible views of a male ground feeding at Byers Lake. He appeared to be injured on the right side of his face, which may have affected his behavior somewhat. We had another male near the park headquarters and a female at Brushkana CG.

COMMON REDPOLL (*Carduelis flammea*)

Lots of good views. One was seen on St. Paul.

PINE SISKIN (*Carduelis pinus*)

Good studies first right at the hotel in Anchorage, followed by more at Byers Lake.

HAWFINCH (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*)

We were fortunate to arrive on St. Paul during the continuing influx of Hawfinches there. On the first afternoon, we enjoyed a male and female visiting the feeders outside the St. Paul Tours guide house. A great bird! A few were seen almost throughout our stay there.

Parulidae

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER (*Vermivora celata*)

A few seen at scattered locations.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (*Dendroica coronata*)

Many seen on the mainland. One on St. Paul was an island rarity, though no one seemed overly excited by another butter butt.

TOWNSEND'S WARBLER (*Dendroica townsendi*)

We all heard, and Linda saw a singing bird at Hillside Park in Anchorage.

BLACKPOLL WARBLER (*Dendroica striata*)

Some nice looks at this species in the Denali region where it is a very common breeder.

NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH (*Seiurus noveboracensis*)

We certainly heard more than we saw, but we eventually got good views of a couple.

WILSON'S WARBLER (*Wilsonia pusilla*)

Another very common breeding bird in the Denali area, we had numerous fine views of singing birds.

Emberizidae

AMERICAN TREE SPARROW (*Spizella arborea*)

Good views of this species in the Denali area.

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

A few around Anchorage and also in the Denali area.

"RED" FOX SPARROW (*Passerella iliaca zaboria*)

A great song, we had some good views of this form of Fox Sparrow along the Denali Highway.

LINCOLN'S SPARROW (*Melospiza lincolni*)

Good views of a singing bird at Westchester.

WHITE-CROWNED (GAMBEL'S) SPARROW (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*)

This is the common species in interior Alaska.

DARK-EYED JUNCO (*Junco hyemalis hyemalis*)

LAPLAND LONGSPUR (*Calcarius lapponicus*)

Really a stunning species in its breeding finery, and possessing a delightful song. Was an almost constant treat at St. Paul.

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*)

Another very stunning species that we had frequent encounters with on St. Paul.

MCKAY'S BUNTING (*Plectrophenax hyperboreus*)

We saw a striking male that had been seen at Southwest point on St. Paul. There were a couple of features that suggested hybridization with Snow Bunting, such as the presence of a black alula, greater extent of black in the central tail feathers, and a black fleck elsewhere on the folded wing (outermost median wing coverts or anteriormost scapular?). Whether or not these are within the variation of McKay's is unclear.

Icteridae

RUSTY BLACKBIRD (*Euphagus carolinus*)

A pair of these were at the swan pond on the drive to Denali.

MAMMALS

PRIBILOF SHREW (*Sorex hydrodromus*)

Scat only at North Point. There was a lot of board-flipping on the final afternoon, but alas the beast remained undetected.

HOARY MARMOT (*Marmota caligata*)

We managed to see one or more real ones, with the first putting on quite a show for us. This is a big arctic cousin to the Woodchuck (Groundhog).

ARCTIC GROUND SQUIRREL (*Spermophilus parryii*)

A fair number of these seen inside Denali during our bus ride there.

RED SQUIRREL (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*)

Fairly widespread anywhere where there are spruce trees.

BEAVER (*Castor canadensis*)

We had great looks at one at a roadside pond along the Parks Hwy south of Denali.

MUSKRAT (*Ondatra zibethica*)

One seen cruising across a still pond.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*)

Good looks at one that walked right by our van near the Visitor Center at the park entrance.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*)

Quite numerous on St. Paul where they were seen daily.

BLACK BEAR (*Ursus americanus*)

Great views of a big (no huge) male at a roadside bog on the drive south along the Parks Hwy just south of "the Igloo".

BROWN (INCL. GRIZZLY) BEAR (*Ursus arctos*)

We had very good views of a female Toklat Grizzly with her triplets near the Eielson Visitor Center. Triplets are more common in Toklat bears than in other Brown Bear populations, though the reason is unknown.

WOLVERINE (*Gulo gulo*)

"Oh my God! It's a Wolverine!" Everyone on our bus had a laugh at my expense in seeing my excitement over encountering my first wild Wolverine. Having wanted to see this mammal more than any other on Earth since I first learned of it in 1978, I was thrilled that what I had glimpsed to be a Hoary Marmot turned out to be in fact a Wolverine. Then we were able to enjoy it for nearly five minutes as it crossed the road behind us and then bounded through the willows of Caribou Creek on the Park road in Denali National Park. It was our driver's first in 17 years of driving!!

STELLER'S SEA LION (*Eumetopias jubatus*)

A few folks saw the three that were near Northeast Pt. during our seawatch. Perhaps the same three were at North Point the following day.

NORTHERN FUR SEAL (*Callorhinus ursinus*)

St. Paul is the place to really see this species well. We had some interesting observations at Reef where at least one bloody battle ensued between two potential beachmasters. The bloodied challenger did manage to drive off at least one of his adversaries. His injuries had healed up rather quickly as we noted the following day.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*)

One was checking us out from English Bay while we were at the Zapadni seal blind. Perhaps as many as 10 were at North Point.

MOOSE (*Alces alces*)

We saw our first Moose, a bull, on the bus ride in the park. The next day, we saw several more along the Parks Hwy and then the Denali Hwy. What a strange-looking animal. Over the next couple of days, we added several additional moose families.

CARIBOU (*Rangifer caribou*)

Many of these were seen well inside the park. The Denali herd is one of the smaller ones, with just several thousand animals.

DALL'S SHEEP (*Ovis dalli*)

We had some fantastic views of this species all day long on our drive through Denali National Park. Many were rams with impressive horns, some right next to the road!