Tufted Puffins were plentiful during our boat trip around Kenai Fjords

Alaska
Specialties of the Far North

Tour Leaders: Tyler Ficker and Eric Ripma
June 5-19, 2023
June 5, 2023 – Anchorage

Once the entire group had arrived in Anchorage, we were eager to get birding. We started out birding around Northwood Park and Lake Spenard, two locations within walking distance of the hotel. Our short time in these locations started the trip off strong with highlights including a Boreal Chickadee visiting a nesting cavity, a point-blank American Three-toed Woodpecker, Barrow’s Goldeneyes, Red-necked Grebes, and a Eurasian subspecies Green-winged Teal!

June 6, 2023 – Travel to Nome

Our first morning gave us the opportunity to revisit Northwood Park and enjoy many of the common species around Anchorage for a little while before heading to the airport to start the first part of our trip with a flight to Nome. Upon arrival in Nome, we birded several of the locations right near town. At the Nome River mouth, we enjoyed watching Red-throated Loons on a nest, Bar-tailed Godwit, Aleutian and Arctic Terns, Long-tailed Jaegers, and a distant Stejneger’s Scoter, a bird formerly classified under White-winged Scoter but now a separate species. At the Cape Nome Jetty, we watched Red-throated and Pacific Loons fly past us while Harlequin Ducks lined the rocks below. The group got an early night of rest, ready for the next few days of Nome birding!
June 7, 2023 – Nome-Teller Highway, Cape Nome Jetty

With three long roads running out of the town, Nome provides great access to large expanses of habitats full of breeding birds. Our first full day was spent birding the Nome-Teller Highway, connecting Nome to the town of Teller roughly 70 miles to the northwest. It did not take long into the road to realize we were going to have a great day ahead of us. Within the first few miles, we had watched a group of Muskox with their young, a Moose, our first of nearly 80 Willow Ptarmigans for the day, and a chorus of breeding songbirds including Gray-cheeked Thrush, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Northern Waterthrush, Orange-crowned Warbler and more! One of the river crossings gave us excellent views of two American Dippers building a nest right under the bridge. We were able to watch the aquatic songbirds at very close range and have some great photo opportunities.

When we arrived at the location for lunch, we were very excited with quite a few highlights. A Long-tailed Jaeger sat on a nest with great views through the scope. We watched a striking male Bluethroat perform multiple of its aerial displays before landing and showing off the beautiful namesake blue throat. Perhaps the most memorable experience here was a Red Fox that we watch pouncing and diving into the snow looking for prey. After a few unsuccessful plunges, we watched the fox cross the road right next to us and dig up an old Willow Ptarmigan that it had stored away and eat it. The whole experience left us amazed as we carried on down the road.

The rest of our drive down the Nome-Teller highway was full of great birds. All three jaeger species hunted around us, multiple Eastern Yellow Wagtails were displaying nearby, Rock Ptarmigans were visible on some of the cliff faces, and we had a great comparison of Pacific and American Golden-Plovers.
June 8, 2023 – Kougarok Road

Our second full day in Nome was spent birding Kougarok Road to the north of town. A short detour to the airport for the nesting White Wagtails added yet another specialty to our trip list! Shortly after starting down Kougarok road, we had already found one of our main targets for the day. We were fortunate enough to watch a newly arrived Arctic Warbler establishing its territory right along the roadside, allowing for great looks! A few miles further down the road, we stopped to watch a Golden Eagle on a nest and found a distant Brown Bear sleeping along the same ridge!

As we made our way further down the road, we continued to see Willow Ptarmigan along the road at almost every mile. Along a stretch of road with almost all the habitat covered in snow, we noticed a shorebird sitting in one of the only exposed rock piles exposed. We were very excited to see that it was a Surfbird likely establishing a territory in the area. Shortly after this, we found another Brown Bear and watched it for a long time as it wandered around eating the buds off the willows growing in the distance. One area with taller vegetation made for a great perch for a pair of Bohemian Waxwings right along the road. Just before making a stop for lunch, we stopped to watch a few Alaskan (or Tundra) Hares that were sitting along the edge of the road. Over the next few miles, we would find nearly 40 of them!
June 8 – Continued

After sharing our lunch spot with a group of Muskox, it was time to continue to our final location of the day. Located over 70 miles from Nome, the Coffee Dome trail provides birders with access to a hillside that is home to Bristle-thighed Curlew along with many Whimbrels. Very shortly after starting the hike, we located one of the curlews. Distant scope views allowed us to see the identifying features. We continued up the hill in hopes of getting better looks at the bird. After finding a Western Sandpiper nest, Pacific Golden-Plovers, and many more Whimbrels, we were rewarded for our efforts and had an amazing encounter with the highly sought-after Bristle-thighed Curlew.

June 9, 2023 – Nome Council Road, Travel to Anchorage

On our final morning in Nome, we birded the Nome-Council Road to the east of Nome. Once again, our day started off great very quickly as we were watching a point-blank Common Ringed Plover at our first stop of the day! We spent some time sea-watching at the Cape Nome Jetty with both a Yellow-billed Loon and a Common Raven nest as the highlights. Several stops between the Cape Nome Jetty and Safety Sound gave us great opportunities to enjoy more Harlequin Ducks, Common Eiders, and our first Red Phalaropes of the trip. While birding Safety Sound, a stop to scan the gulls gave us a Slaty-backed Gull mixed in with the Glaucous and Short-billed Gulls. Since we were already out of the van, we searched the sound from that vantage point and turned up four Emperor Geese! Both new species were great additions to an already excellent morning! As we headed back to Nome, we added Black Turnstone to the trip list. After a few great days of birding around Nome, it was time to head back to Anchorage after a quick layover in Kotzebue.
Aleutian Tern

Muskox

Red Fox

Alaskan Hare

Common Ringed Plover
June 10, 2023 – Travel to Seward, Kenai Fjords Boat Trip

Weather conditions changed our original plans, causing our boat tour to be moved a day earlier to ensure we could get out on the water still. The change in itinerary led to an early start from Anchorage but proved to be well worth it. Almost immediately upon leaving the dock, we added Glaucous-winged Gull, Pigeon Guillemot, and Marbled Murrelet to our trip list. As we continued out further and left Resurrection Bay, we added both Horned Puffin and Kittlitz’s Murrelet. The boat trip took us out towards the Chiswell and Beehive Islands. We made a detour along the way and tracked down a lead the captain received of a few Orcas! They put on quite the show, ultimately swimming right under our boat. At the same time, Tufted Puffins swarmed overhead, Ancient Murrelets zipped by, and an unexpected Manx Shearwater made a brief appearance! By the time we arrived at the islands, we were amazed by the swarm of Black-legged Kittiwakes nesting along the cliffsides. As we scanned the cliffs further, we turned up more Tufted and Horned Puffins, Thick-billed and Common Murres, and a Red-faced Cormorant! Just before we went inside the boat for lunch to be served, several more Red-faced Cormorants flew by, and a Parakeet Auklet flew in front of the bow briefly.
June 10 - Continued

Following lunch, we spent time around the Aialik Glacier and Kenai Fjords National Park. This enormous glacier was not only a beautiful and impressive sight, but we also enjoyed watching Kittlitz's Murrelets, Black Oystercatchers, Sea Otter, Harbor Seals, and Mountain Goats from there as well! On our way back into Seward, we had the amazing opportunity to watch Humpback Whales near the boat in one of the coves of the Aialik Bay. While watching the whales, several groups of Rhinoceros Auklets were sitting on the water nearby. Just when we thought the day couldn’t get any better, a small group of Dall’s Porpoises became intrigued by the boat and decided to play in the wake of the boat and raced right off the bow of the boat. Everyone had the chance to watch them at a super close distance! It was an amazing way to end an already very successful boat trip.
June 11, 2023 – Seward and Surrounding Area

The rainy weather that had caused our plans to change to an earlier boat trip ended up providing us with the perfect opportunity to take it easy and rest following several days of intense birding between Nome and the boat. We still found quite a few new trip birds around the lodge and nearby roads. We added species such as Townsend's Warbler, Pine Grosbeak, Brown Creeper, Steller's Jay, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, and Hermit Thrush. After lunch, we went and visited a location along one of the creeks where we got to witness one of the most iconic Alaskan spectacles, the migration of the Sockeye Salmon. Watching these fish jump up the falls and pack into the creeks in such a high density was incredible to see.
June 12, 2023 – Travel to Anchorage, Travel to Utqiaġvik

After a drive back to Anchorage and a two-hour flight, it was time for the group to bird Utqiaġvik, the northernmost city in the United States. Sitting nearly 350 miles into the Arctic Circle, the group was ready to add some new birds for the trip. We quickly added new species to the trip including Snow Bunting, Snow Goose, as well as Baird’s, White-rumped, Pectoral, and Least Sandpipers. What Utqiaġvik is best known for is the ability to see the remaining three eider species we had not seen yet. One last stop for the day allowed us to get excellent views of both Steller’s and King Eiders at close range! In addition to this, multiple species of shorebirds displayed on the vast expanse of tundra around us.

June 13, 2023 - Utqiaġvik

Having picked up quite a few new species in our short amount of time in Utqiaġvik, the search was on for Spectacled Eider, our last big target of the area. We cruised several of the roads that lead out of town in search of the eider. Although we hadn’t located a Spectacled Eider yet, we came across multiple other cool sightings including a Pomarine Jaeger that caught a Lapland Longspur, and more Steller’s and King Eiders. After searching for a while and watching Dunlin, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and both Red and Red-necked Phalaropes displaying around the nearby ponds, we finally located a pair of Spectacled Eiders! The male swam with his head tucked for a while but eventually perked up and gave us all great looks! In the evening, we set out for the base of the point on the north side of Utqiaġvik hoping to find Polar Bears out on the ice. Unfortunately, we were unable to locate any bears but did get to watch migrating Long-tailed Ducks, Red Phalaropes, and a Bar-tailed Godwit zip past the base of the point.
June 14, 2023 – Utqiaġvik, Return to Anchorage

Before the return flight to Anchorage to end the main tour, we still had time to spend looking for a Snowy Owl. Not long after starting down our first road of the day, we located a striking adult male sporting a nearly solid white plumage. As we enjoyed great scope views of the owl, two Parasitic Jaegers, one dark and one light morph, flew overhead in a synchronized display flight. This continued as they vocalized for the entire time we were watching the owl, adding to the chorus of shorebirds displaying nearby. It was a great morning and an excellent way to end our time in Utqiaġvik as well as end the main tour! We returned to Anchorage that evening. The group was ready for the extension and final segment of the trip, Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands!

Our main tour concluded with 152 species of birds and 19 mammal species.
June 15, 2023 – Travel to Dutch Harbor

We had an afternoon flight to Dutch Harbor, so we spent the early morning birding around Anchorage before heading to the airport. We started out at Northwoods Park, right outside the back door of our hotel. We picked up several new species for the trip including Western Wood-Pewee, White-winged Crossbill, and a heard only Canada Jay. Afterwards, we did a quick check of Lake Spenard where we added our only Redheads of the trip and enjoyed good looks at Red-necked Grebes. Soon, we were headed to the airport where we had lunch before boarding our flight to Dutch Harbor. The views as we were landing in Cold Bay (a quick stop for gas) and then Dutch Harbor were stunning! As soon as we headed out of the airport we had our first new trip bird, a Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch.
June 16, 2023 – Unalaska Island

The weather looked better for our boat trip the following day, so we spent this day birding around Unalaska Island. A quick scan across from our hotel resulted in good looks at Black Oystercatchers and Kittlitz’s Murrelets. However, we spent most of the morning birding along Summer Bay Road. The views were spectacular, and the birding was great. The waters off the shore provided good looks at Pigeon Guillemots, Marbled and Ancient Murrelets, and Horned Puffins. Along the shoreline we enjoyed good looks at Green-winged Teal (Eurasian), our first Rock Sandpipers, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, American Pipit, and nesting Bald Eagles. We also had another great encounter with a Red Fox as it hunted along the road, right next to us! After lunch, we headed inland and into the mountains. The views were beautiful, and we had nice views of several species including Lapland Longspurs and Snow Bunting.

June 17, 2023 – Unalaska Island, Baby Islands, Chelan Bank

After breakfast, we met Jimmer of the Miss Alyssa to head out to the Baby Islands and Chelan Bank. Unfortunately, due to a last-minute boat cancellation, I (Eric) wasn’t able to join, but the group had a great day out on the water. Whiskered Auklets and Laysan Albatrosses were a couple of the favorites of the day. On the way out to the Baby Islands, a stop for Red-faced Cormorants was successful and provided the best looks at this species of the trip. Plenty of Tufted and Horned Puffins were also seen. Once the group arrived at the Baby Islands, Whiskered Auklets (the main reason for the extension) were seen. Good numbers of Ancient Murrelets and a couple of Cassin’s Auklets were also seen. Next up was the Chelan Bank and albatrosses! 11 Laysan Albatrosses were brought in by the chum and hundreds of Northern Fulmars and thousands of Short-tailed Shearwaters were also seen! At dinner at the Norwegian Rat Saloon, we watched a Lapland Longspur outside the window throughout dinner, a nice way to end a successful day.
June 18, 2023 – Return to Anchorage

Our flights back to Anchorage were set for the late morning, so we only had a short time to bird. Despite the rain, we were able to watch a pair of Pacific Wrens feeding nestlings in their nest on a large cliff face. Just off the shore there were also Horned Puffins and Pigeon Guillemots. The pair of Pacific Wrens were a great way to end our Alaska tour! After our flight back to Anchorage, we had lunch and headed to the hotel, before ending our trip with a farewell dinner in Anchorage. All in all we had seen 166 species of birds, many species of mammals, and plenty of breathtaking scenery!