



Utqiagvik (Barrow), Alaska

Top of the World Bird Photography

Tour Leaders: Brian Zwiebel and Jamie Cunningham

June 14-19, 2024

Why Utqiagvik for birds? Utqiagvik is home to many highly sought, specialty bird species found only in the high arctic. It is the best place in North America to photograph many of the high arctic nesting birds. There are few places where one could expect to see all four species of eiders, all three species of jaeger or three species of loons without tallying a Common Loon. At Utqiagvik you have a good chance of doing all three!

General Overview

In addition to the above desired species Utqiagvik is also home to an array of arctic nesting shorebirds, many of which exhibit fascinating breeding displays. You will be blown away by the multitude of amazing behaviors if you have never experienced shorebirds on their breeding grounds. And, if that were not enough, singing Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings, both in full breeding plumage are the most common passerines at Utqiagvik. Throw in the possibility of photographing Sabine's Gulls and the magnificent Snowy Owl and you will be hard pressed to think of a more interesting destination for birds. And, all of this is within reach of a town that has learned to cater to the tourism that comes with being located at the northern most point in the United States. Daily flights with Alaska Airlines from Anchorage via Fairbanks make getting to Utqiagvik a snap.

Once we arrive in Utqiagvik, you can relax knowing that you will have no additional out of pocket expenses on this all-inclusive tour. We will find exceptional modern accommodations at our hotel, good food at a number of restaurants, and a full grocery. We stay at the nicest hotel in town and your meals are taken care of leaving you to enjoy this ultimate arctic experience.

We are intimately familiar with the birds of the arctic tundra from multiple previous trips to Utqiagvik, Alaska where we have witnessed a multitude of fascination behaviors, some of which are not described in the ornithological literature.

Your leader will work extremely hard to get you into the right position to make the best images possible, but you will learn much more than simply how to get close to your subject. You'll also learn how to use the light and wind angles to full advantage to successfully capture images of action and behavior. Your leader will point out opportunities to improve compositions and will warn of any pitfalls that could reduce the success of your images. The small group size and super low student to instructor ratio will insure the best possible opportunities for each participant. Along the way we will share natural history anecdotes and first-hand experiences of many of the species you encounter.

Join us in Utqiagvik and learn to take your photography to the next level!

Equipment

Bring your longest telephoto lens and matching teleconverters. A 500mm or 600mm lens is preferred but a 400mm lenses with a teleconverter and/or one of the small sensor cameras (1.5 or 1.6x crop) will provide ample magnification for a great number of opportunities. If your longest lens is 400mm then you likely are used to having your subject a little smaller in the frame. We will discuss how to make pleasing compositions when the subject is not frame filling. A wider lens will come in handy for fully documenting your trip and taking the required tourist snap shots around town. Chest waders are highly recommended for this tour. We will be happy to provide suggestions as to which style might be best for you.

Environment

Participants should be prepared for a wide range of weather in Utqiagvik from low temperatures in the upper 30s to highs near 80 degrees. Layers should definitely be part of your clothing plan. A heavy waterproof camo jacket is a great option but also pack a light-weight wind breaker/rain jacket for warmer days. Mosquitoes will likely be a nuisance at least some of the time so plan on a head net and gloves at least. I also pack a net shirt but have never needed to use it. Bug repellent with Picardin as the active ingredients is suggested. Deet works fine but can be terribly hard on the plastic parts of your camera and tripod. Picardin is just as effective without doing damage to your gear.

Physical Activity

Walking in waders over soft tundra while carrying heavy camera gear is not your typical walk in the park. Brief periods of strenuous activity should be expected but slow and steady wins the race. A number of previous clients have arrived in Utqiagvik with some nervousness about their physical abilities. Each left proud of their efforts and with new-found confidence in their abilities. Various shorebirds and songbirds as well as some ducks and loons may be photographed quite close to the road. This workshop may not be for you if you have knee or back problems or otherwise have difficulty with off trail walking while carrying your camera gear.

Daily Schedule

The never setting sun presents additional challenges. In short order we will adapt our shooting schedule to "tundra time". Our day will be split into a sometimes short (or non existent) night's sleep with a longer mid-day break in order to take full advantage of the best light. While not easy, the results will be spectacular and there will be time to catch up on sleep when the ice fog rolls in.

Likely species on this tour (species in BOLD are most frequently photographed on the trip):



Red-throated Loon

Pacific Loon

Yellow-billed Loon

Tundra Swan

Greater White-fronted Goose

Brant

Green-winged Teal

Mallard

Northern Pintail

Northern Shoveler

Greater Scaup

King Eider

Spectacled Eider

Steller's Eider

Common Eider

Long-tailed Duck

American Golden-Plover

Semipalmated Plover

Red-necked Stint

Long-billed Dowitcher

Ruff

Semipalmated Sandpiper

Western Sandpiper

Baird's Sandpiper

White-rumped Sandpiper

Buff-breasted Sandpiper

Ruddy Turnstone

Pectoral Sandpiper

Dunlin

Red-necked Phalarope

Red Phalarope

Pomarine Jaeger

Parasitic Jaeger

Long-tailed Jaeger

Glaucous Gull

Herring Gull

Sabine's Gull

Arctic Tern

Black Guillemot

Snowy Owl

Short-eared Owl

Common Redpoll

Hoary Redpoll

Savannah Sparrow

Lapland Longspur

Snow Bunting

Trip Details:

Cost:

Price per person (double occupancy), from Utqiagvik, Alaska: \$4,999

Single Supplement: \$800

Minimum Participants: 3

Maximum Participants: 6

Price Includes:

Expert Guides

Ground Transportation in Alaska

All Lodging

All Meals

Park Entrance Fees

Price Does Not Include:

Airfare to and from Utqiagvik, Alaska

Airport Taxes

Passport and Visa Fees (if applicable)

Alcoholic Beverages

Personal Items

Travel Insurance

Tips

Deposit:

A deposit of \$500 per person is required to hold your spot on this tour. The remaining balance is due no later than 3 months prior to the scheduled start date of the tour (March 16, 2024).

If you have any questions about this tour or would like to sign up for it, please contact us at info@sabrewingnaturetours.com, by phone at 317-324-8505, or register through our website at sabrewingnaturetours.com.

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