

GRAND ALASKA

JUNE 2 – 17, 2006

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Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

GRAND ALASKA TOUR BIRDLIST

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(LEADERS: Kevin Zimmer & David Wolf)

By any measure, this year's Grand Alaska tour was a huge success. The weather was reasonably cooperative, we did well in finding many of the toughest breeding specialties, and it was a fantastic year for Asiatic vagrants. As always, Nome got things off to a rousing start. On our first day in the area we were treated to a number of uncommon or rare species that could easily be missed on a short trip. Among these were Rock Sandpiper, Emperor Goose, Sabine's Gull, Black Turnstone, and a pair of Red-necked Stints in full breeding plumage. A Franklin's Gull at Safety Sound was a real find, and apparently a first for the Seward Peninsula.

The next day on the Kougarok Road was filled with highlights and adventure. Despite much effort, we dipped on the Bristle-thighed Curlew. However, we were treated to fabulous studies of a singing male Bluethroat, along with great looks at Rock and Willow ptarmigan, Northern Wheatear, Yellow Wagtail, Wandering Tattler, Hoary Redpoll, and all of the rest of the regular breeding species. As good as the birds were, the mammals may have been even better. A herd of musk ox, numerous moose, a short-tailed weasel, and two families of grizzly bears (one sow with four grown cubs, another with three, and all of them feeding on moose kills) made for an exciting day of game-viewing.

Our last day in the Nome area continued to produce highlights, starting with a fly-by of an adult Slaty-backed Gull at Cape Nome, and followed by excellent scope studies of Emperor Goose (one bird in with a flock of Snow Geese) and a stunning pair of Steller's Eiders at Safety Sound. That afternoon, we offered an option of a second try for the curlew (led by David) or a trip out the Teller Road (led by Kevin). Incoming bad weather played a part in the success of both groups. It hindered David's group in their search for the curlew, although they still managed a Northern Shrike and an American Dipper. Meanwhile, the slightly higher elevations of the Teller Road resulted in a veritable blizzard, with horizontal visibility reduced considerably. The snowfall covered all of the high domes of the Teller Road, pushing the birds of the alpine tundra down to the road edges to forage. This worked to our benefit, resulting in numbers of Northern Wheatears, American Pipits, Horned Larks, and Snow Buntings right along the road. The higher elevation shorebirds were also driven down, and we delighted in repeated views of numerous American Golden-Plovers and Baird's Sandpipers, along with a pair of Surfbirds. Woolley Lagoon hosted magnificent breeding-plumaged Black-bellied Plovers, which looked even prettier against a backdrop of snow. A big bull musk ox near the Penny River rounded out our highlights for the day.

Next up were the Pribilofs, where we got off to a fast start with multiple Wood Sandpipers and good views of both Common and Wilson's snipe in the same marsh!

Later that evening, we delighted in scope studies of a pair of “Bewick’s” Swans; these rare Eurasian vagrants with extensively yellow bills are currently treated as a subspecies of the Tundra Swan. A Snowy Owl was an unexpected treat, as was a Common Sandpiper that dropped in for an hour or so, disappeared while we were looking at it, and was not seen again. There were many fewer birds on the cliffs than usual, but we still managed close views of all of the nesting alcids, Red-faced Cormorant, and the range-restricted Red-legged Kittiwake. Vagrants definitely stole the show on this trip to the Pribis, with additional goodies including three Eurasian Wigeon, a Lesser Sandplover, and a *longipennis* Common Tern.

As was the case in 2005, news of a nesting Great Gray Owl on the Glenn Highway caused us to cast aside our usual routine for our day of birding the Anchorage area. Employing the reasoning that nothing we could expect to see in Anchorage could top a Great Gray Owl, we decided to go for it, and the strategy paid off in a big way. On the drive up in the morning, we stopped for a lovely pair of Barrow’s Goldeneyes on a small lake. While we were scoping the ducks, Charlie alertly spotted an owl perched atop a small spruce some distance off. Turning our scopes to the owl, we saw that it was a Short-eared, a good omen of things to come. We had been cautioned that the Great Gray was no sure thing, since the young had recently fledged and were moving farther from the nest site each day. But after a short hike, we came across one of the downy youngsters, perched conspicuously atop a fallen dead spruce. Looking around, we quickly located one of the parent birds, which sat stoically nearby. The next 20 minutes were filled with the sounds of hushed, awed voices and persistent camera shutters, as the photographers among us went into blissful orbit over the frame-filling views we were being afforded. It was only after the birds had been in sight for several minutes that we looked down and saw the second youngster sitting at the base of another dead spruce, less than 15 feet from us! For the second year in a row, the Great Gray Owl was seen as well as you could possibly see it, and was once again voted the #1 bird of the trip.

But our day on the Glenn was not done. Before leaving the area, we were treated to prolonged scope studies of a Northern Hawk Owl, a bird that typically requires persistent searching in the Denali area to find. Brief views of some Bohemian Waxwings whetted our appetites for more, but grumbling stomachs began to take priority. Our lunch stop included a magnificent pair of Common Loons on a nearby lake, and a gas stop added a lovely male Surf Scoter on an adjacent pond. We finished our birding with a stop at Sheep Mountain Lodge where, after a bit of searching, we managed to locate a nesting Boreal Owl that had been on the hotline for the past month. This made it a 4-owl day, with looks at Great Gray Owl, Northern Hawk Owl, and Boreal Owl that would be hard to top!

The next day we were off to Denali, more relaxed than usual, since we had already seen several of the big Denali quest birds. The drive up produced better views of Bohemian Waxwings, as well as a second Northern Hawk Owl. Our timing was excellent for the shuttle bus tour of the park. A male Spruce Grouse strolling across the road brought our bus to an abrupt stop, and we enjoyed good looks as the bird alternately fanned and closed its tail. Soon thereafter, Mount McKinley presented itself and remained largely in

view for the remainder of the morning. Close Dall sheep, several Golden Eagles and Willow Ptarmigan, and a total of nine grizzly bears combined with the Denali scenery and pleasant weather to produce a most enjoyable day. The Denali Highway presented us with Horned Grebes, more Bohemian Waxwings, displaying Least Sandpipers, and a most cooperative Arctic Warbler that had probably just arrived on territory.

We finished, as always, with a trip to Seward and the Kenai Peninsula. The Kenai Fjords boat trip produced excellent views of multiple Kittlitz's Murrelets, a close raft of Short-tailed Shearwaters with a rare Manx Shearwater thrown in for good measure, and some particularly nice views of a pod of killer whales, along with more usual fare. Other Peninsula highlights included scope studies of a male Varied Thrush, multiple stunning Townsend's Warblers, an American Dipper on a nest, close views of nesting Trumpeter Swans, and a stunning scenic backdrop during virtually the entire trip.

All in all, a most congenial group of birders got to see a bunch of great birds and mammals, and we had a lot of fun doing it.

Itinerary:

- 6/02 - night in Anchorage
- 6/03 - fly to Nome, meet with leaders and participants continuing on from the Gambell-Nome Tour; afternoon/evening birding along the Council Road to Solomon & back.
- 6/04 - all day on Kougarok Rd. to MP #73 and back.
- 6/05 - Council Road to MP #28; p.m. options to return to Coffee Dome with Dave to try once more for the curlew, or, to bird the Teller Road with Kevin to Woolley Lagoon.
- 6/06 - morning birding to Nome River mouth & harbor area; flight to Anchorage.
- 6/07 - morning excursion to Westchester Lagoon & Lakes Hood/Spenard in Anchorage, followed by flight to St. Paul (Pribilofs), with an afternoon stomp around the Polovina wetlands, followed by an after dinner excursion to Weather Bureau Lake, Webster Lake & NE Point.
- 6/08 - St. Paul Island: morning to Ridgewall, Antone Lake, Southwest Point & the the quarry; afternoon to North Point; evening back to Webster Lake.
- 6/09 - morning on St. Paul (Reef rookery, Weather Bureau marshes & miscellaneous stops); afternoon flight back to Anchorage
- 6/10 - daytrip out of Anchorage up the Glenn Highway to MP 173 (Tolsona Wilderness Campground) and back, with a major stop at Sheep Mt. Lodge.
- 6/11 - Anchorage to Denali, with various short stops en route, including the first 10 miles of the Denali Highway.
- 6/12 - all-day shuttle bus excursion to Fish Creek, Denali NP; optional post-dinner excursion with Kevin out Denali Highway to Seattle Creek.
- 6/13 - most of day on Denali Hwy. to Susitna River bridge; afternoon/evening drive back to Anchorage.

- 6/14 - early morning birding in Anchorage at Westchester Lagoon and Potter Marsh, followed by drive to Seward, with various short stops en Route, including Summit Lake and Trail River & Ptarmigan Creek Campgrounds.
- 6/15 - all day boat trip through Kenai Fjords NP to Northwest Glacier
- 6/16 - Seward back to Anchorage, with morning birding around Seward and afternoon stops at Summit Lake and Granite Creek Campground.
- 6/17 - flights home or continuing on to Barrow Extension

Key:

- A = Anchorage area (to Girdwood on the Seward Hwy., and to Wasilla on the Parks Hwy.)
- D = Denali region (from Wasilla to Denali NP on the Parks Hwy., the park itself, and the Denali Hwy.)
- GH = Glenn Highway, from Palmer to MP 173 (Tolsona Wilderness Campground)
- K = Kenai Peninsula (from Girdwood to Seward and back, and the Kenai Fjords boat trip)
- N = Nome region
- P = Pribilofs (specifically St. Paul Island)
- * = heard only

Favorite Birds of the Trip (as voted by the group):

1. Great Gray Owl
2. Steller's Eider
3. Bluethroat and Emperor Goose (tied)

Birds:

- Red-throated Loon - N
- Pacific Loon - N, K
- Common Loon - GH, K
- Yellow-billed Loon** - N (leader only - seen by Dave from Fat Freddie's during breakfast)
- Red-necked Grebe - N, P, D, A
- Horned Grebe - D
- Northern Fulmar - P (light and dark morphs)
- Sooty Shearwater - K (leader only: Dave saw at least 1 in with the flock of Short-taileds)
- Short-tailed Shearwater** - K (a nice raft of 50+ birds on the water right next to our boat)
- Manx Shearwater** - K (1 in with the flock of Short-taileds was a big surprise, and a rarity anywhere on the Pacific Coast. This was an Alaska bird for your leaders!)
- Double-crested Cormorant - K
- Pelagic Cormorant - N, P, K

Red-faced Cormorant - P, K (more than usual at Kenai Fjords)
Trumpeter Swan - GH, D, K (multiple occasions, but best was probably the nesting pair on Nash Road in Seward)
 Tundra Swan - N, P
“Bewick’s” Swan - P (This distinctive old world swan, usually treated as a subspecies, *bewickii*, of the Tundra Swan, is distinguished by the extensively yellow base to the bill. It is an exceptionally rare visitor to Alaska, and the two immature birds that we saw probably represent either the 3rd or 4th Alaskan record.)
 Greater White-fronted Goose - N
 Snow Goose - N (47 at Safety Sound on 6/5 was unusual for this late date)
Emperor Goose - N (distant scope views of a single bird at Safety Lagoon on the first day, followed by much closer views of one with Snow Geese at Safety Sound, and of two fly-bys at Cape Nome on 6/5)
 Canada Goose - A
 Cackling Goose - N, P (the breeding birds at Nome were of the large subspecies *taverneri*; the 2 visitors at St. Paul were of one of the small subspecies, probably *minima*. Recently split from Canada Goose.)
 Brant - N (all typical western birds, formerly known as “Black Brant”)
Eurasian Wigeon - P (seen all three days, with at least 3 birds; 2 males & 1 female)
 American Wigeon - N, P, GH, D, A, K
 Gadwall - A, K
 Green-winged Teal - N, P, D, K
Eurasian Teal - P (Formerly treated as a separate subspecies, *nimia*, of Siberia, now subsumed with nominate *crecca* of the western Palearctic. This split {from Green-winged Teal} is still not recognized by the AOU.)
 Mallard - GH, D, A, K
 Northern Pintail - N, P, GH
 Northern Shoveler - N, A, GH, D
 Canvasback - N, A
 Ring-necked Duck - D, GH
 Greater Scaup - N, P, A, D, GH, K
 Lesser Scaup - GH, D
 Common Eider - N
King Eider - N (2 females at Cape Nome on 6/5); P (a couple small flocks, including adult males)
Steller’s Eider - N (4 at Safety Sound on 6/5 were a surprise, and gave nice studies)
 Harlequin Duck - N, P
 Long-tailed Duck - N, P, D
 Black Scoter - N
 Surf Scoter - N (3 males on 6/3), GH (nice studies of a male)
 White-winged Scoter - N, D, K
Barrow’s Goldeneye - GH, D, K
 Bufflehead - D
 Red-breasted Merganser - N, K
 Common Merganser - N (12 past Cape Nome on 6/5), K (great looks)
 Bald Eagle - A, GH, D, K

Northern Harrier - N, D, A
 Red-tailed Hawk - A, GH, D (this form was formerly known as “Harlan’s Hawk”)
 Rough-legged Hawk - N
 Golden Eagle - GH, D
 American Kestrel - D
 Merlin - GH, D
 Peregrine Falcon - N
Spruce Grouse - D (spectacular male seen from the shuttle bus!)
Willow Ptarmigan - N (12/day on 6/4-5), D
Rock Ptarmigan - N (Still rare after last year’s big crash, but we managed 2 birds on the Kougarak on 6/4, and on the Teller Road on 6/5.)
 Sandhill Crane - N, A
 Black Oystercatcher - K
Pacific Golden-Plover - N
 American Golden-Plover - N
 Black-bellied Plover - N (gorgeous in full breeding plumage!)
 Semipalmated Plover - N, P, A, D
Lesser Sandplover - P (Formerly known as “Mongolian Plover”. The birds seen as vagrants in Alaska are of the nominate group, *mongolius* and *stegmanni*, and are distinguished from other populations by having a black border to the rufous breast band, and by having a white forehead dissected by a black bar. There is talk of splitting them from the various black-fronted populations, in which case these birds would probably be renamed “Mongolian Sandplover”. We turned up one on Black Diamond Hill on 6/9, shortly before flying back to Anchorage.)
Common Snipe - P (The true status of this Eurasian species – recently split from Wilson’s Snipe of North America – in Alaska has yet to be determined. All of the snipe on the Alaskan mainland are Wilson’s. Migrant snipe to the Alaskan islands can be either Wilson’s or Commons. It appears that Common Snipe may be the more common of the two species on the outer islands of the Aleutian chain, and possibly also in the Pribilofs. We were treated to nice comparisons of the two species in the same marsh.)
 Wilson’s Snipe - N, P, D, A, K
 Long-billed Dowitcher - N, P
 Hudsonian Godwit - A
Bar-tailed Godwit - N
 Whimbrel - N, D
 Bristle-thighed Curlew - N* (alas, heard only)
 Greater Yellowlegs - GH
 Lesser Yellowlegs - P, GH, D, A
 Solitary Sandpiper - D
Wood Sandpiper - P (Repeated good views, with up to 4 birds seen on 6/7, and 1 on 6/9)
Common Sandpiper - P (1 at the Salt Lagoon on 6/7)
 Spotted Sandpiper - N, A, GH
 Wandering Tattler - N, P
 Ruddy Turnstone - N, P
 Black Turnstone - N

Surfbird - N (Two birds seen at point-blank range as they foraged along the roadside during the snowstorm on the Teller Road on 6/5.)

Red Knot - N

Semipalmated Sandpiper - N

Western Sandpiper - N

Red-necked Stint - N (Great studies of two breeding plumaged birds at Safety Lagoon on 6/3, and one there on 6/5)

Least Sandpiper - N (1 along the Kougarok Road on 6/4), P, D

Baird's Sandpiper - N (30+ along the Teller Road during the snowstorm on 6/5)

Dunlin - N

Rock Sandpiper - N (2 at Safety Lagoon on 6/3 were of the Seward Peninsula breeding race *tschuktschorum*), P (the resident nominate race, *ptilocnemis*)

Red-necked Phalarope - N, P, GH, D, A

Red Phalarope - N (100+ at Safety Lagoon on 6/5), P

Pomarine Jaeger - N (2 past Cape Nome on 6/5)

Parasitic Jaeger - N

Long-tailed Jaeger - N

Mew Gull - N, A, P, GH, D, K

Glaucous-winged Gull - A, P, GH, K

Glaucous Gull - N, P

Herring Gull - N, P, A, GH, D (birds at Nome & Pribilofs were of the subspecies *vegae*, treated by some taxonomists as a distinct species, Vega Gull. Birds seen elsewhere on the trip were of the North American subspecies *smithsonianus*.)

Slaty-backed Gull - N (adult seen at Cape Nome by KJZ on 6/4, and again by the entire group on 6/5), P (2nd-year bird at Webster Lake on 6/7)

Black-headed Gull - P (2 birds at Weather Bureau Lake)

Bonaparte's Gull - A, D

Franklin's Gull - N (an adult flying around Safety Sound on 6/3 was a surprise, and seemingly a first Seward Peninsula record!)

Sabine's Gull - N (high of 4 birds at Safety Lagoon on 6/3)

Red-legged Kittiwake - P

Black-legged Kittiwake - N, P, K

Common Tern - P (1 of the Siberian-breeding subspecies *longipennis*, which is virtually certain to be split as a separate species, "Siberian Tern". Found at the Weather Bureau Lake on 6/9, shortly before we left the Pribilofs.)

Arctic Tern - N, A, GH, D, K

Aleutian Tern - N

Common Murre - N, P, K

Thick-billed Murre - N, P

Pigeon Guillemot - N, P, K

Marbled Murrelet - K

Kittlitz's Murrelet - K (great views; at least 12 birds seen)

Ancient Murrelet - P (2 by KJZ on 6/9), K (8+ from the boat)

Parakeet Auklet - P

Crested Auklet - P

Least Auklet - P

Rhinoceros Auklet - K
Horned Puffin - P, K
Tufted Puffin - N, P, K
 Rock Pigeon - A, K
Great Gray Owl - GH (an adult with two recently fledged chicks studied at point-blank range was the bird of the trip!)
Snowy Owl - P (seeing one here was a nice treat)
Northern Hawk-Owl - GH, D (nice studies at both spots)
Boreal Owl - GH (a bird on a nest represented only the 2nd time that we've seen the species on the Grand Alaska trip. It is regularly seen in the Anchorage area on the first night of our Gambell-Nome Tour.)
 Short-eared Owl - GH (Thanks to good spotting by Charlie! We ended up seeing four species of owls – Short-eared, Great Gray, Northern Hawk-Owl, and Boreal Owl – in our day on the Glenn!)
 Rufous Hummingbird - K
 Belted Kingfisher - A, D
 Downy Woodpecker - A
American Three-toed Woodpecker - K (Unfortunately, not a cooperative individual. It was seen only in flight, 3-4 times as it blasted back-and-forth across the road.)
 Olive-sided Flycatcher - GH
 Western Wood-Pewee - GH
 Alder Flycatcher - A, GH, D
 Horned Lark - N (subspecies *arctica*, with an extensively rufous nape)
 Tree Swallow - N, A, GH, D, K
 Violet-green Swallow - A, D, K
 Bank Swallow - N, A, K
 Cliff Swallow - N, GH, D
Eastern Yellow Wagtail - N
 American Pipit - N
 Golden-crowned Kinglet - K
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet - GH, D, K
Bohemian Waxwing - GH, D
 American Dipper - N, K
 Winter Wren - P*
 Gray-cheeked Thrush - N, D
 Swainson's Thrush - D, K
 Hermit Thrush - GH*, D*, K, A
 American Robin - N, A, GH, D, K
 Varied Thrush - D, K
Arctic Warbler - D (Great views of what was probably one of the first-arriving individuals on the Seward Highway, since there was no sign of the bird in the same spot the evening before!)
Bluethroat - N (dynamite views!)
Northern Wheatear - N (including 8+ along the Teller Road in the snowstorm on 6/5)
 Black-capped Chickadee - A, K
 Chestnut-backed Chickadee - K

Boreal Chickadee - GH, K
 Red-breasted Nuthatch - K
 Brown Creeper - K*
Northern Shrike - N (for the group that made a second try at the curlew)
 Gray Jay - GH, D
 Steller's Jay - K
 Black-billed Magpie - A, GH, D, K
Northwestern Crow - K (including 1 at Girdwood on 6/14, where we've never seen them before)
 Common Raven - N, A, GH, D, K
 European Starling - A, GH (Palmer) (still a rarity in southern Alaska)
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch - P
Pine Grosbeak - K
White-winged Crossbill - GH, D
Common Redpoll - N, D
Hoary Redpoll - N
 Pine Siskin - K
 Orange-crowned Warbler - N, A, GH, D, K
 Yellow Warbler - N, K
 Yellow-rumped Warbler - GH, D, K
 Townsend's Warbler - K
 Blackpoll Warbler - D
 Northern Waterthrush - N, GH, D
 Wilson's Warbler - N, GH, D*, K
 American Tree Sparrow - N, D
 Savannah Sparrow - N, A, GH, D, K
 Fox Sparrow - N, GH, D, K (2 very different types, including very red birds at Nome {subspecies *zaboria*} and very sooty ones at Seward {subspecies *sinuosa*}. Keep your eye on this complex for possible splits.)
 Song Sparrow - K
 Lincoln's Sparrow - A, D*, K
 White-crowned Sparrow - N, GH, A, D, K
 Golden-crowned Sparrow - N, K
 Dark-eyed Junco - A, GH, D, K
 Lapland Longspur - N, P
 Snow Bunting - N, P (more common than usual)
 Red-winged Blackbird - A, K (a singing male on Nash Road on 6/16 was unusual)
 Rusty Blackbird - N, GH, D

Total = 189 species (not including Bewick's Swan, Eurasian Teal and Vega Gull, each of which is considered a separate species by some taxonomists)

Mammals:

Arctic Ground Squirrel - N, D
 Western Red Squirrel - D

Tundra Vole - D
Beaver - N
Muskrat - N
Porcupine - D
Snowshoe Hare - D
Short-tailed Weasel - N
Arctic Fox - P
Brown Bear (Grizzly) - N, D
Sea Otter - K
Steller's Sea Lion - K
Northern Fur Seal - P
Harbor Seal - N, P, K
Dall Sheep - GH, D, A
Mountain Goat - K
Barren Ground Caribou - D
Reindeer - N
Moose - A, N, D
Musk Ox - N
Humpback Whale - K
Killer Whale - K

Total = 22 species