

Field Guides Tour Report

Alaska Fall Goldmine: Rarities on the Pribilofs 2019

Sep 28, 2019 to Oct 6, 2019 Doug Gochfeld

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.



The sun shining down through the cloudy Bering Sea sky on one of our afternoons on St. Paul. What passing vagrant looked down through the hole and saw a refuge amid the endless sea? Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

This year's fall migration trip to St. Paul Island in the Pribilof Islands was a fun combination of treasure hunting, rarity chasing, and enjoying an unparalleled landscape in the middle of the windswept Bering Sea.

We arrived at the island just in time for an early dinner at the Trident fish processing plant. It may not sound glamorous, but the galley there has a delicious selection of food, and fresh Halibut was up for offer on several nights. We then went out and immediately went searching for a Jack Snipe which had been present intermittently for the past week or so. We had good luck with this quest at Pumphouse Lake- after seeing about eight (!!) Sharptailed Sandpipers in the marsh grass of Pumphouse Lake we flushed the Jack Snipe, giving us a great start to our expedition.

The next few days on the island were spent exploring the various nooks and crannies of St. Paul looking for migrants taking shelter in the accessible migrant traps around the island. Despite it being past the peak of shorebirding on the island, some marsh stomping produced more Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and a Common Snipe. The sheltered boulder-lined ravines of the quarry were a hotspot during our time there, producing a couple of Rustic Buntings, a flightly and uncooperative Hawfinch, a few Brambling, and a flyover of a mystery bird that we would have loved to get a good long look at. The roadside at Big Lake produced a Eurasian Skylark of the Asian subspecies (NOT the subspecies introduced to British Columbia from Britain), which cooperated pretty well. Seawatching gave us an impressive number of Ancient Murrelets and Short-tailed Shearwaters, a Marbled Murrelet, Northern (Pacific) Fulmars, Horned and Tufted Puffins, and a few flyby Parakeet Auklets, the latter few species giving us a hint of the cliff inhabitants of the summer season on St. Paul.

We saw a couple of the Bering Sea breeding endemic Red-legged Kittiwakes lingering with the large numbers of their black-legged congeners, got great views of the regional specialty Red-faced Cormorants, and cleaned up the other island breeding endemics with Pribilof (Pacific) Wren, the massive island version of Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, and the nominate subspecies of Rock Sandpiper, all of which have varying likelihoods of being recognized as their own species down the road. The duckage was interesting too, with a flock of anywhere from a dozen to twenty five (!) Eurasian Wigeons hanging out on Antone Lake, and a few Aleutian Cackling Geese around the island.

On the mammal front, we watched the amusing antics of the multiple litters of Arctic Fox pups (now aging into fox adolescence), experienced awe at the power of a pair of male Orcas hunting the seal colonies, and had multiple encounters with the endemic Pribilof Shrew as it scurried around hoovering up any and all insects it could find. The Northern Fur Seals, of course, are in their own category, and the din of their bustling colonies could be heard from miles away, audible even over the crashing waves and breezy winds.

We departed St. Paul for some final birding around Anchorage. Despite rain for our full day of birding, we managed some wonderfully intimate experiences with Spruce Grouse, American Three-toed Woodpecker, and Boreal Chickadee, and also had some fun with Golden Eagles and White-winged Crossbills. It was a nice way to tie a bow on the trip.

Thank you all for your great camaraderie as we gallivanted through the putchkie patches, marshes, fern gullies, lupine-covered dunes, and crowberry-carpeted volcanos of a place which is really special to me personally. It was a really enjoyable return to birding St. Paul Island in the fall for me, and I'm glad I was able to share it with each and every one of you. Until we next meet, somewhere in this great big bird-verse, good birding!

-Doug

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

BRANT (BLACK) (Branta bernicla nigricans) - On St. Paul, we had a family group on Antone Lake and a lone bird on Webster Lake.

CACKLING GOOSE (ALEUTIAN) (Branta hutchinsii leucopareia) – A couple of sightings of small flocks of this now-regular migrant over the course of our stay. This taxon was greatly imperiled just a couple of decades ago, but conservation measures have been very successful and the breeding population in the Aleutians is booming these days.

CANADA GOOSE (Branta canadensis) - Good numbers around Anchorage of the small parvipes subspecies of Canada Goose.

TRUMPETER SWAN (Cygnus buccinator) – A few were on Spenard Crossing every time we drove past there.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (Spatula clypeata) – A trio were on Webster Lake on the Pribs, and then we had several scattered around our Anchorage area birding locations.

EURASIAN WIGEON (Mareca penelope) – A big flock of wigeon on Antone Lake in the Pribs was largely this species, and they came in just about every plumage possible for a Eurasian Wigeon!

AMERICAN WIGEON (Mareca americana) – There were a few of these mixed into the wigeons on Antone Lake.

MALLARD (Anas platyrhynchos) - One male was around Antone Lake on the Pribs, and was the most out of place of all the Mallards we saw on tour.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (Anas acuta) - This breeder was still common on St. Paul during our visit.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (Anas crecca nimia) – Green-winged Teal were abundant on St. Paul, but since they were all in brown plumages it was impossible to figure out for certain which taxon any one should be referred to. That said, most were undoubtedly either Eurasian or intergrades, as is the case through most of the summer on the Pribilofs, which are a hotbed for interbreeding between the teal subspecies.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN) (Anas crecca carolinensis) – One Green-winged Teal was at Potter Marsh, and was presumably this subspecies.

CANVASBACK (Aythya valisineria) - Two were on Westchester Lagoon in Anchorage.

GREATER SCAUP (Aythya marila) – A flock of four were on Weather Bureau Lake on the Pribs, and they were scattered around Anchorage water bodies as well.

LESSER SCAUP (Aythya affinis) - The abundant scaup on Anchorage, including on the lake at the hotel.

KING EIDER (Somateria spectabilis) – Seen several times on St. Paul, our best views by far were of a couple of young males that were spending time in the harbor.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (Histrionicus histrionicus) - Abundant around St. Paul, including plenty of individuals in knock-your-socks-off plumage.

SURF SCOTER (Melanitta perspicillata) – A couple of female/immature-types were on the lake in front of the hotel in Anchorage before we went to St. Paul.

BLACK SCOTER (Melanitta americana) - A nice raft of all adult males off Marunich showed well for us.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (Clangula hyemalis) – Most of these, which are abundant breeders on St. Paul, had moved on by time of our visit. We did see the species on Webster Lake a couple of times though, but never more than two individuals.

BUFFLEHEAD (Bucephala albeola) - Plenty on Westchester Lagoon and a couple on Lake Hood as well.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (Bucephala clangula) – Just a handful mixed in with the more plentiful Barrow's around Anchorage.

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (Bucephala islandica) – Perhaps the most common diving duck during our time in Anchorage (on par with Lesser Scaup). Large numbers on Westchester Lagoon and Lake Hood. We even saw a couple of males that were just getting back into nice looking breeding plumage.

HOODED MERGANSER (Lophodytes cucullatus) – A surprise rarity was this female on our final afternoon in Anchorage. This species doesn't breed particularly close, but singles have begun to show up almost annually in the Anchorage area in the past few years.

COMMON MERGANSER (Mergus merganser) – A couple around Anchorage, but the rare one was the bird we saw on our final excursion on St. Paul. Unfortunately the flight views precluded us being able figure out whether it was a Goosander (the old world subspecies of Common Merganser).

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

SPRUCE GROUSE (Falcipennis canadensis) – Wow! Excellent views of a couple of males on our day in Anchorage, right alongside us in the road. They were both fantastically cooperative, allowing for many shutter clicks and oohs and aahs.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

HORNED GREBE (Podiceps auritus) - One was on Salt Lagoon on St. Paul, and another was on Westchester Lagoon in Anchorage.

RED-NECKED GREBE (Podiceps grisegena) – One seen on Lake Hood, and a couple off shore on St. Paul.

<u>Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)</u>

ROCK PIGEON (Columba livia) - Some introduced Feral Pigeons at various spots around Anchorage. [1]

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

PACIFIC GOLDEN-PLOVER (Pluvialis fulva) – A handful of juveniles were still hanging around on St. Paul, and on our first evening there we had one in the road right in front of the van for us to study at length.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RUDDY TURNSTONE (Arenaria interpres) – The most common shorebird on St. Paul at this time of year. In addition to plenty in the coastal kelp mats, they were on the roads, among the rocks, in even on the grassy slopes.

SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER (Calidris acuminata) – One of the great things about St. Paul in the fall is the number of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers around the island. We saw probably around 20 different individuals during our time in the Pribilofs, and this is almost certainly the best time & place combination to access the species in North America.

ROCK SANDPIPER (PTILOCNEMIS) (Calidris ptilocnemis ptilocnemis) – The endemic subspecies (and potential future split) was still around in small numbers, almost entirely at Salt Lagoon and Marunich.

PECTORAL SANDPIPER (Calidris melanotos) - A handful, including a couple each at Pumphouse Lake and Northeast Point.

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER (Limnodromus scolopaceus) – A triad of these were flying around Pumphouse Lake on our visit there on day one.

JACK SNIPE (Lymnocryptes minimus) – Excellent! Maybe the species headliner of the tour. This tiny snipe has been recorded in North American fewer than twenty times, but more than half of those records are from St. Paul Island, with almost all being since 2011. It is distinctive among the snipe by its size, plumage, and behavior. We got the real Jack Snipe experience when we flushed it at close range (while looking specifically for this known-to-be-present individual) and watched this strikingly patterned miniature football fly low across the pond and drop into a place where regardless of how much we walked the area, we couldn't re-find the bird.

COMMON SNIPE (Gallinago gallinago) – We flushed a known individual from Antone Slough, and then a while later saw the same bird again as it flew back overhead.

WANDERING TATTLER (Tringa incana) – We had this at Marunich on both of our visits there.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

POMARINE JAEGER (Stercorarius pomarinus) - One was harassing a Black-legged Kittiwake off shore during our second visit to Marunich.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

THICK-BILLED MURRE (Uria lomvia) – A handful offshore here and there, mostly in association with feeding flocks of Black-legged Kittiwakes. **PIGEON GUILLEMOT** (Cepphus columba) – A couple of flybys off Marunich.

MARBLED MURRELET (Brachyramphus marmoratus) – One sitting on the water off Marunich. This was perhaps only the ninth or so record of this species for the Pribilofs.

ANCIENT MURRELET (Synthliboramphus antiquus) – Very high numbers around off shore during our stay, including ~45 on our second visit to Marunich.

PARAKEET AUKLET (Aethia psittacula) – A few distant flybys off shore here and there.

HORNED PUFFIN (Fratercula corniculata) – The most common of the cliff-nesting alcids during our time, and a common sight during our seawatches.

TUFTED PUFFIN (Fratercula cirrhata) – Just a couple of flybys during our seawatching. A bit surprising to have so few around, but the species has experienced a couple of die-offs in the Bering Sea in the last couple of years, and that could be the reason.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (POLLICARIS) (Rissa tridactyla pollicaris) – The most abundant sea gull on St. Paul during our time there. They are abundant breeders, and there were still plenty during our stay.

RED-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (Rissa brevirostris) – A couple of these Bering Sea breeding endemics were mixed into the flock on Weather Bureau Lake.

BONAPARTE'S GULL (Chroicocephalus philadelphia) - Marc spotted one way on the other side of Westchester Lagoon during our final afternoon in Anchorage.

MEW GULL (Larus canus) – Mew Gulls were the most common species of gull around Anchorage during our time there. This is in part because most of the large gulls aren't assignable to any one species, being a hybrid swarm of Herring x Glaucous-winged Gulls.

HERRING GULL (VEGA) (Larus argentatus vegae) – A nice flyby of an adult spotted by Kurt as we were pulled over alongside Antone Lake looking at ducks.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (Larus schistisagus) – We rewarded for our larophilia when we found this crisp and clean adult standing amidst a roosting flock of large gulls on Big Lake.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (Larus glaucescens) – The abundant large gull on St. Paul Island.

GLAUCOUS GULL (Larus hyperboreus) - A dusky looking juvenile was on Salt Lagoon one day.

ARCTIC TERN (Sterna paradisaea) – One flew by Sea Lion Neck while we were watching Orcas. Not only is this uncommon in the Pribilofs (no terns breed on the island), but it was an exceptionally late date.

Gaviidae (Loons)

PACIFIC LOON (Gavia pacifica) – A couple were on the ocean off St. Paul at different locations. The one off SW Point was still mostly in breeding plumage, and showed an incredibly silver back of the head and nape, which everyone was able to see in the scope.

COMMON LOON (Gavia immer) – One youngster was actively foraging on the lake in the Willow area, giving scope views which were so rare on that rainy day.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (RODGERSII) (Fulmarus glacialis rodgersii) – Northern Fulmars were in short supply off shore on St. Paul, which was disconcerting given how prevalent they usually are at all times of year here. We did see a few, but perhaps only a couple of dozen individuals over the

course of four days (I would normally have expected to see at least hundreds over that duration of stay).

SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER (Ardenna tenuirostris) – Reasonable numbers of these visible from several vantage points around the island during our time there, including several that were close enough for nice looks!

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

RED-FACED CORMORANT (Phalacrocorax urile) – Excellent view of many of these regional endemics, including both iridescent adults and plenty of fresh juveniles.

PELAGIC CORMORANT (Phalacrocorax pelagicus) – Several in with more numerous Red-faceds around the island.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

GOLDEN EAGLE (Aquila chrysaetos) – A fantastic experience with at least two individuals at Arctic Valley, including one that we got to view through a scope as it perched on various hillsides, perhaps looking for a ptarmigan breakfast.

NORTHERN HARRIER (Circus hudsonius) - A couple in apparent migration through the rain around the Willow area were a nice surprise.

BALD EAGLE (Haliaeetus leucocephalus washingtoniensis) – An immature bird hanging around the Antone area of St. Paul was a scarcity there, while the couple we saw in the Anchorage area were very much in the vein of the expected.

RED-TAILED HAWK (HARLAN'S) (Buteo jamaicensis harlani) – One briefly flying over a ridge as we were birding the road at Arctic Valley.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK (Buteo lagopus)

<u>Picidae (Woodpeckers)</u>

AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (Picoides dorsalis) – A truly magical experience with a quartet of individuals around this year's small burn in Anchorage! We watched these birds at close range as they pecked, peeled, called, and cavorted all around us on our final afternoon of the tour.

BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER (Picoides arcticus) – A pair of these were interacting while flying away from the Anchorage burn as we arrived. We then heard their continued chatter for a bit, but didn't see them again.

DOWNY WOODPECKER (Dryobates pubescens) – We had singles at Willow, Arctic Valley, and Campbell Park.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

PEREGRINE FALCON (Falco peregrinus) – A couple of these were flying around the airport at St. Paul, and at least one was exceptionally dark, and likely of the "Peale's" subspecies.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

CANADA JAY (Perisoreus canadensis) – A couple of good sightings during our Anchorage excursions.

STELLER'S JAY (Cyanocitta stelleri) – One came in to briefly check us out at Campbell Park.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (Pica hudsonia) – Abundant on the mainland (absent on St. Paul).

COMMON RAVEN (Corvus corax) – Here and there in Anchorage, Willow, and points in between.

<u>Alaudidae (Larks)</u>

EURASIAN SKYLARK (ASIAN) (Alauda arvensis pekinensis) – A great pickup of one in the road near Big Lake, where it was cooperative for scope views on our second time through the area. This was of the Asian subspecies, different from the ones that are "established" in the ABA area in British Columbia, which were introduced from Britain (and are of the European subspecies).

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (Poecile atricapillus) - Plenty at our stops around Anchorage.

BOREAL CHICKADEE (Poecile hudsonicus) – A couple in Willow, and then a couple of phenomenal experiences with very confiding individuals around the burn area. Fantastic!

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (Sitta canadensis) – Excellent views at Campbell Park.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

BROWN CREEPER (Certhia americana) – Views for some folks at Campbell Park, we we heard a couple of very vociferous ones that weren't all that cooperative when it came to letting themselves be seen.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

PACIFIC WREN (ALASCENSIS GROUP) (Troglodytes pacificus alascensis) – Recent warm winters have meant bumper crops for the endemic Pribilof Wren (a subspecies of Pacific Wren) on the Pribs, and we encountered double digits on multiple days.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET (Regulus satrapa)

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (Regulus calendula)

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

AMERICAN ROBIN (Turdus migratorius) – A couple around Anchorage.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (Sturnus vulgaris) – Here and there during our drives around Anchorage, and around Lake Hood as well. [I]

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (Bombycilla garrulus) – A flyover flock of five were only seen by Marc as they headed up the valley along the road at Arctic Valley.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

BRAMBLING (Fringilla montifringilla) – We encountered a handful of these around the quarry on St. Paul, though they were uncharacteristically flighty, and our best views were as they circled around us multiple times at close range before flying off.

- **HAWFINCH** (Coccothraustes coccothraustes) A very frustrating bird! We chased down a Hawfinch that Alex's group found in the Quarry, but it proved very flighty and mobile, and only the guides and John saw it in the end. We came very close to joy for all, but we missed having the whole group see it by seconds on a couple of occasions.
- **GRAY-CROWNED ROSY-FINCH (PRIBILOF IS.)** (Leucosticte tephrocotis umbrina) This monster of a Rosy-Finch is endemic to the Pribilofs, and along with the large Aleutian subspecies, could eventually be recognized as a separate species from the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches of the mainland. We got plenty of exposure to these cool birds while on island.
- COMMON REDPOLL (Acanthis flammea) Reasonable numbers scattered around St. Paul, and then some flyovers around Anchorage.
- **HOARY REDPOLL** (Acanthis hornemanni) We saw a couple of these well on St. Paul, mixed in with their darker and more numerous congeners above. Some years they are the more numerous redpoll species on the Pribilofs, but not this year.
- WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL (Loxia leucoptera) Great views along the road up to Arctic Valley, and then many flyovers throughout the rest of the day around Anchorage.
- **PINE SISKIN** (Spinus pinus) A few of these scattered through our Anchorage birding days.

<u>Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)</u>

LAPLAND LONGSPUR (Calcarius lapponicus) – Still a couple of dozen each day on St. Paul, though numbers are dwindling fast at this time of year. **SNOW BUNTING** (Plectrophenax nivalis) – Hundreds upon hundreds on St. Paul.

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

RUSTIC BUNTING (Emberiza rustica) – We chased one around the crowberry carpeted boulder field above the quarry for a while, getting several good in flight views of this skulky bird (and brief perched views for some). Then, once back in the easier-to-walk upper cut of the quarry, Kurt spotted a DIFFERENT Rustic Bunting, that proved more cooperative only briefly, but eventually also disappeared.

Passerellidae (New World Sparrows)

FOX SPARROW (SOOTY) (Passerella iliaca chilcatensis) – We encountered a couple of individuals of this dusky Northwestern taxon on St. Paul.

DARK-EYED JUNCO (SLATE-COLORED) (Junco hyemalis hyemalis) – A couple around Anchorage (though surprisingly few).

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (GAMBEL'S) (Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii) - At least one of these was on St. Paul.

GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW (Zonotrichia atricapilla) – Several scattered around St. Paul. This is perhaps the most common North American passerine migrant on St. Paul in the fall, though numbers fluctuate greatly from year to year.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

YELLOW WARBLER (Setophaga petechia) – Two late individuals in the Webster celery patch. One was exceptionally dull and streaky, and one was a more typical looking bird.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE) (Setophaga coronata coronata) — We had one during our first walk in the quarry's upper cut on St. Paul. TOWNSEND'S WARBLER (Setophaga townsendi) — Another one seen only by a couple of folks in the quarry, though we didn't give it much attention as we were trying to re-find the Hawfinch at that point.

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

WESTERN TANAGER (Piranga ludoviciana) – A surprise was this dull female a few folks saw very briefly at Marunich on our arrival day. It was just the 3rd record for the Pribilofs (and 2nd for St. Paul), though it was followed by another record about ten days later. The species is expanding its range to the northwest, and could become a slightly more regular vagrant up here going forward.

MAMMALS

PRIBILOF SHREW (Sorex hydrodromus) – We had a fantastic trip for this endemic shrew, which lives only on St. Paul Island (it could potentially be on Otter Island as well, though this isn't confirmed). Most folks who visit the island in the spring go home shrew-less, as the best time to find these great critters is in the fall. 2019 seems to have been a banner year for them, as we encountered them almost every day, and had about a half dozen sightings all told. The one that Kurt found at Southwest Point was our most enjoyable experience, as we got to watch it forage around in the Crowberry for a couple of minutes- a rarity when it comes to shrews, who are usually running around quickly in dense vegetation where they are effectively invisible.

RED SOUIRREL (Tamiasciurus hudsonicus) – Several of these around the Anchorage area.

- **ORCA** (Orcinus orca) There were a couple of males hanging out around NE Point for the duration of our stay. One evening we even got to see them lunging around as the hunted seals off Sea Lion Neck, and then during our final on-island birding we saw them fully breaching out of the water as we surveyed the area from atop Hutchinson Hill.
- **ARCTIC FOX** (Alopex lagopus) The "Blue Foxes" on the Pribilofs were in their dark chocolatey summer garb, and a couple of families were being fed by a native elder, so they were very conspicuous and curious and easy to see during this visit.
- STELLER'S SEA LION (Eumetopias jubatus) We surprisingly had only a couple of these big-headed pinnipeds this trip, swimming just off shore at Marunich
- **NORTHERN FUR SEAL** (Callorhinus ursinus) The population of Fur Seals on St. Paul is now down to the 350,000 range, from a couple of million a couple decades ago. That said, it's still an impressive number in life, and we got the full spectrum of experience of the mother and pup season out on the Pribs.
- HARBOR SEAL (Phoca vitulina) A few bobbing their heads at the surface around the coast of St. Paul.

MOOSE (Alces alces) – There were a few scattered sightings of these on the Anchorage leg of our voyage, with the best views being the couple that the group saw during our rainy day in the Willow area.

REINDEER (Rangifer tarandus sibiricus) – We connected with the introduced herd on our final day on St. Paul Island. [I]

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 102 bird taxa and 9 mammal taxa