

## Trip Report — Alaska Fall Goldmine: Rarities on the Pribilofs 2024

September 26-October 5, 2024 with Doug Gochfeld



Here we are celebrating the amazing double helping of Eurasian Bullfinch that we had converged upon with the rest of the birders on the island. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Birding the Bering Sea islands during fall is in some ways one of the most unpredictable types of birding in North America. The Bering isn't on the regular flight path for many species of migrants, so there is no migration spectacle that you can bank on. Whether we see far flung vagrants from Asia, interesting seabirds which spend their time over the open ocean far from land, or American species which found their way out to the Bering during their own journeys south depends on a combination of the whims of mother nature and the decisions of individual birds as they choose the next steps on their journey south.

We boarded the Ravn Airlines Dash-8 in Anchorage brimming with optimism due to their recent productive run of Asian birds and the new batch of west winds that were incoming to the island. We hopped off our 4-hour flight (including a re-fueling stop in Bethel) in the mid-afternoon, and

after quickly being shown our rooms and getting into our birding gear, we were off to the races. We made a brief stop to see the Bering Sea specialty Red-legged Kittiwakes coming in to bathe at a lake, and then were quickly off to search for a Baikal Teal which had been seen on the island for the past few days, and after some slogging around one of the larger lakes on the island (Pumphouse Lake, since the aquafer under it is where the town gets its drinking water from), we found this cryptic duck amidst the horde of Green-winged Teals haunting the marshy edges of the lake. We also saw our first Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, and a trio of Long-billed Dowitchers (our best views of the tour), completing an excellent first stop, and getting the tour started with a bang.



Here we have three species of ducks flying by us. The rightmost one is much larger than the two teal-like ducks on the left, and is a Northern Pintail. The other two ducks are indeed teal, and the way we can differentiate them from one another is looking at the finer points of the wing and face patterns. The top bird has an obvious green speculum, bracketed front and back by white lines, with the bar in front of the speculum (the greater coverts) being broad and conspicuous, making this the very common Green-winged Teal. The bird below it has a thinner dark speculum, a broader white trailing edge, and a barely discernible tan edging to the tips of the greater coverts, as well as a more contrasty face with an obvious white spot at the base of the bill - a Baikal Teal!! This Asian rarity had been around for a few days before our arrival, and we were overjoyed that it stayed around long enough for us to have a couple of encounters with it. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

Our next few days went as many on the Pribilofs in the fall go: A combination of driving around to various windbreaks, walking through or around wetlands, seawatching, walking putchkie (a four-letter word for some, but the favorite word in the vocabulary of a St. Paul Island tour guide), and responding to radio transmissions about rare birds that other groups on the island

found. All the while, St. Paul was living up to its reputation for wind, so we did lots of our birding by targeting the aforementioned sheltered locations. On the first of these days, we encountered a rare-for-the-Bering Warbling Vireo, and then were almost immediately called to the opposite end of the island for a Wood Warbler which had just been found. This is an old-world warbler of the genus *Phylloscopus*, which, before 2014 had only been recorded in North America three times (twice on the essentially inaccessible Shemya Island at the end of the Aleutians). In the fall of 2014, St. Paul hosted two or three individuals, which seemed to be the harbinger of more North American records. There have been a couple elsewhere in the ABA area since, and there was another record on St. Paul last fall (which our tour also intersected with!), so St. Paul in the fall seems to be the best spot to hope for this species in the New World. Aside from the lone California record from a couple of years ago, the rest of the occurrences have been seen by very few people. Once we were up at the Northeast point of the island, we enjoyed an excellent spectacle of swarms of Short-tailed Shearwaters migrating south and east, and we estimated 15,000, which could have been a very conservative count. We continued our birding in the afternoon, and in no time were running back to the car to respond to another call - this time about Eurasian Bullfinches in the Quarry. This turned out to be a flock of three roving around the area, as they happily munched on seeds. Excitement was high, and we rounded out our excellent day by tracking down a Common Snipe that had been seen the day before.



Wood Warbler has become something of a St. Paul Island specialty within the ABA area, and we were able to chase down a bird alongside the road at Big Lake, and watch it as it hunkered down out of the wind in the lupine and grass. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

A couple of days after our initial afternoon encounter, we were able to see the cryptic Baikal Teal once more, and much better to boot. On one of our only calm days we saw a couple of distant Marbled Murrelets and a large raft of King Eiders, thanks to the lack of chop on the ocean. Our seawatching exploits on other, windier days, included an adult Yellow-billed Loon and three Laysan Albatrosses. The albatross is scarcely seen from land here on the Pribes, despite the fact that they are common inhabitants of the Bering Sea over the shelf break and undersea canyons, the closest of which are about 65 miles from St. Paul. We encountered adult Slaty-backed Gulls in at least three locations during our trips around the island, and this accounted for perhaps up to 4 individuals. Fleeting views of Brambling eventually gave way to reasonable, and sometimes, great, views of multiple birds on several occasions. A brief encounter with a Song Thrush (fewer than ten North American records at this point, though with a clear uptick in recent years) got our pulses racing. This was an in-flight only view, but it proved to be somewhat fortuitous timing on our part, as it then disappeared, and the other groups were unable to relocate it, despite multiple efforts.

Then the storm came. The remnants of Typhoon Jebi, which had attained major storm strength for just long enough to become a named storm as it passed east of Japan, entered the Bering Sea. The stiff 30 MPH wind that we landed in felt like a light breeze compared to the nearly 60 MPH wind that racked the island by the afternoon. Needless to say no planes landed that day, and we got ready for a couple of “bonus days” on the island, with strong westerlies bearing down upon us, bringing who-knew-what from Asia. The next day saw winds gusting as high as 75 MPH, though mostly in the now pedestrian 35-50 MPH range, and perhaps most impressive were the 30 foot waves that were rolling into the southern side of the island. And somehow, despite the difficult weather, rare birds that were arriving with, and taking shelter from, the storm, were being found. We answered the radio call of a Common Sandpiper in the morning, and shortly afterwards saw a Gray-tailed Tattler a bit farther up the same road. Then, the other birding group on the island came upon a Fieldfare in the road to Marunich, but it proved exceptionally wary, and tricky to pin down for views. We settled for brief in flight views, but it made for a very exciting afternoon and evening in the blustery Bering weather. The next couple of days provided about the best views you could ever hope for of a handsome and tired Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, which had ended up fighting the wind on Big Lake after the storm, as well as a characteristically skulky Bluethroat. Four of our number were able to get onto the next flight off the island on Sunday, via standby, and the rest of us had another two days to stomp St. Paul’s putchkie. The final full day featured a Horned Lark of the Asian subspecies, yet another Eurasian Bullfinch, another Warbling Vireo, and yet another single-flush, unsatisfying flight view of a new Song Thrush – the *Turdus* on St. Paul sure can be difficult to get good looks at! The next day, the rest of us finally extracted ourselves from the fall’s bounty on St. Paul, spending the night in Anchorage, before heading back home the next day.



Normally, our hopes to see Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel on the Pribilofs revolve around seawatching during onshore winds. However, after a big Bering Sea storm, all bets were off. Luis spotted this one fluttering around just off the road along Big Lake, flying into the wind and trying to stop from being blown up onto into the steep shore. Truly the best views you could hope for of this gorgeous north Pacific pelagic species. Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

This autumn's tour of St. Paul gave us the full spectrum of St. Paul experience. We had a big dose of Bering Sea weather, from huge storms to beautiful rainbows, we experienced the unpredictability of transport that the residents of these remote islands live with throughout the year, and foremost, we had some great birding and natural history moments, from a windfall of Asian vagrants to some Killer Whales hunting just off shore.

We had ten write-in additions to our already-generous checklist, of which 7 were from Asia (2 were Bering-dwelling seabirds, and the only American landbird write-in was Warbling Vireo), with highlights from the Eastern Hemisphere being Baikal Teal, Wood Warbler, several Eurasian Bullfinch, two Song Thrush, Fieldfare, Asian Horned Lark (*flava* subspecies), Common Sandpiper, Gray-tailed Tattler, Common Snipe, Yellow-billed Loon, and several each of Slaty-backed Gull and Brambling.



Song Thrush! *Turdus* thrushes are often difficult to wrangle on the island, as they seem to be very wary of people after their long over-water journeys. That proved to be the case with both (!!) of the Song Thrushes that we had brief in-flight views of. We had one during the first half of the tour that gave us a calling flyover, and then during the St. Paul

We saw a few high quality non-birds during our touring around the island, and that list follows:

Pribilof Shrew (*Sorex hydrodromus*)

Killer Whale (*Orcinus Orca*)

Arctic Fox (*Vulpes lagopus*)

Steller's Sea Lion (*Eumetopias jubatas*)

Northern Fur Seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*)

Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina*)

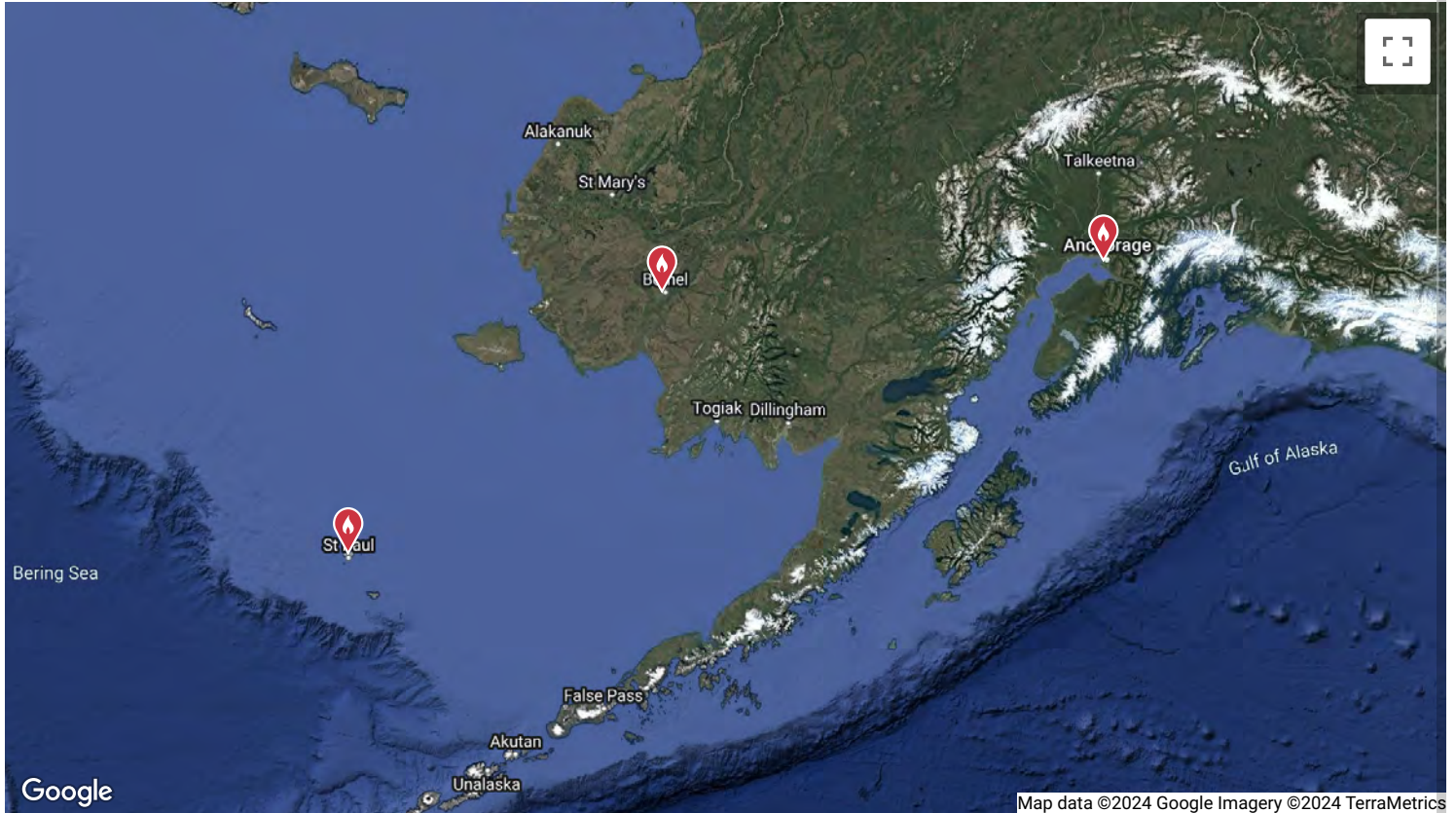
You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/283957>

--Doug Gochfeld (Treeswift)

# Field Guides Birding Tours -- ALASKA FALL GOLDMINE: RARITIES ON THE PRIBILOFS, 2024 (with Doug Gochfeld)



27 Sep – 8 Oct 2024 (12 days) Link-only



📍 Alaska, United States

Aleutians West Census Area | Anchorage Municipality | Bethel Census Area

👤 Doug Gochfeld



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## Species Observed

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11	<b>Brant</b> <i>Branta bernicla</i>	 9
45	<b>Cackling Goose</b> <i>Branta hutchinsii</i>	 2
2	<b>Baikal Teal</b> <i>Sibirionetta formosa</i> 	 2
3	<b>Northern Shoveler</b> <i>Spatula clypeata</i>	 3
21	<b>Eurasian Wigeon</b> <i>Mareca penelope</i>	 6
15	<b>American Wigeon</b> <i>Mareca americana</i>	 2
3	<b>Mallard</b> <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	 3
166	<b>Northern Pintail</b> <i>Anas acuta</i>	 13
451	<b>Green-winged Teal</b> <i>Anas crecca</i>	 14
38	<b>Greater Scaup</b> <i>Aythya marila</i>	 7
114	<b>King Eider</b> <i>Somateria spectabilis</i>	 4
1000	<b>Harlequin Duck</b> <i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	 13
24	<b>White-winged Scoter</b> <i>Melanitta deglandi</i>	 3
29	<b>Black Scoter</b> <i>Melanitta americana</i>	 2
7	<b>Long-tailed Duck</b> <i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	 6
1	<b>Common Goldeneye</b> <i>Bucephala clangula</i>	 1
3	<b>Common Merganser</b> <i>Mergus merganser</i>	 3
35	<b>Pacific Golden-Plover</b> <i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	 12
7	<b>Long-billed Dowitcher</b> <i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>	 4
1	<b>Common Snipe</b> <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	 1



1	<b>Wilson's Snipe</b> <i>Gallinago delicata</i>	▶  1
29	<b>Red Phalarope</b> <i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>	▶  7
1	<b>Common Sandpiper</b> <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	▶  1
1	<b>Gray-tailed Tattler</b> <i>Tringa brevipes</i>	▶  1
1	<b>Wandering Tattler</b> <i>Tringa incana</i>	▶  1
50	<b>Ruddy Turnstone</b> <i>Arenaria interpres</i>	▶  12
16	<b>Sharp-tailed Sandpiper</b> <i>Calidris acuminata</i>	▶  10
1	<b>Sanderling</b> <i>Calidris alba</i>	▶  1
292	<b>Rock Sandpiper</b> <i>Calidris ptilocnemis</i>	▶  14
14	<b>Pectoral Sandpiper</b> <i>Calidris melanotos</i>	▶  8
6	<b>Western Sandpiper</b> <i>Calidris mauri</i>	▶  4
2	<b>Tufted Puffin</b> <i>Fratercula cirrhata</i>	▶  2
32	<b>Horned Puffin</b> <i>Fratercula corniculata</i>	▶  6
2	<b>Marbled Murrelet</b> <i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>	▶  1
7	<b>Pigeon Guillemot</b> <i>Cephus columba</i>	▶  1
1	<b>Ancient Murrelet</b> <i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>	▶  1
4735	<b>Black-legged Kittiwake</b> <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	▶  11
16	<b>Red-legged Kittiwake</b> <i>Rissa brevirostris</i>	▶  4
1	<b>American Herring Gull</b> <i>Larus smithsonianus</i>	▶  1
3	<b>Vega Gull</b> <i>Larus vegae</i>	▶  2
11	<b>Glaucous Gull</b> <i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	▶  7
6200	<b>Glaucous-winged Gull</b> <i>Larus glaucescens</i>	▶  13
7	<b>Slaty-backed Gull</b> <i>Larus schistisagus</i>	▶  5
4	<b>Iceland Gull</b> <i>Larus glaucooides</i>	▶  4

10	<b>Horned Grebe</b> <i>Podiceps auritus</i>	▶  4
6	<b>Red-necked Grebe</b> <i>Podiceps grisegena</i>	▶  1
13	<b>Pacific Loon</b> <i>Gavia pacifica</i>	▶  3
1	<b>Yellow-billed Loon</b> <i>Gavia adamsii</i>	▶  1
3	<b>Laysan Albatross</b> <i>Phoebastria immutabilis</i>	▶  1
1	<b>Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel</b> <i>Hydrobates furcatus</i>	▶  1
370	<b>Northern Fulmar</b> <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	▶  7
15,513	<b>Short-tailed Shearwater</b> <i>Ardenna tenuirostris</i>	▶  7
184	<b>Red-faced Cormorant</b> <i>Urile urile</i>	▶  12
2	<b>Pelagic Cormorant</b> <i>Urile pelagicus</i>	▶  2
7	<b>Bald Eagle</b> <i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	▶  6
1	<b>Peregrine Falcon</b> <i>Falco peregrinus</i>	▶  1
2	<b>Warbling Vireo</b> <i>Vireo gilvus</i>	▶  2
9	<b>Black-billed Magpie</b> <i>Pica hudsonia</i>	▶  1
2	<b>Common Raven</b> <i>Corvus corax</i>	▶  1
1	<b>Horned Lark</b> <i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	▶  1
2	<b>Wood Warbler</b> <i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	▶  2
2	<b>Ruby-crowned Kinglet</b> <i>Corthylio calendula</i>	▶  2
66	<b>Pacific Wren</b> <i>Troglodytes pacificus</i>	▶  10
1	<b>Hermit Thrush</b> <i>Catharus guttatus</i>	▶  1
2	<b>Song Thrush</b> <i>Turdus philomelos</i>	▶  2
2	<b>American Robin</b> <i>Turdus migratorius</i>	▶  2
1	<b>Fieldfare</b> <i>Turdus pilaris</i>	▶  1











1	<b>Bluethroat</b> <i>Luscinia svecica</i>	▶ 1
2	<b>American Pipit</b> <i>Anthus rubescens</i>	▶ 2
18	<b>Brambling</b> <i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	▶ 8
6	<b>Eurasian Bullfinch</b> <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	▶ 3
1472	<b>Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch</b> <i>Leucosticte tephrocotis</i>	▶ 14
21	<b>Redpoll</b> <i>Acanthis flammea</i>	▶ 13
5	<b>Pine Siskin</b> <i>Spinus pinus</i>	▶ 3
251	<b>Lapland Longspur</b> <i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>	▶ 14
717	<b>Snow Bunting</b> <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	▶ 13
2	<b>Fox Sparrow</b> <i>Passerella iliaca</i>	▶ 2
1	<b>Dark-eyed Junco</b> <i>Junco hyemalis</i>	▶ 1
3	<b>White-crowned Sparrow</b> <i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>	▶ 3
1	<b>Golden-crowned Sparrow</b> <i>Zonotrichia atricapilla</i>	▶ 1
2	<b>Savannah Sparrow</b> <i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	▶ 2

## HYBRIDS

1	Eurasian x American Wigeon (hybrid) <i>Mareca penelope x americana</i>	▶ 1
3	American Herring x Glaucous-winged Gull (hybrid) <i>Larus smithsonianus x glaucescens</i>	▶ 3
3	Glaucous x Glaucous-winged Gull (hybrid) <i>Larus hyperboreus x glaucescens</i>	▶ 2

## ADDITIONAL TAXA

51	Eurasian/American Wigeon <i>Mareca penelope/americana</i>	▶ 9
37	duck sp. <i>Anatidae (duck sp.)</i>	▶ 2
2	American/Pacific Golden-Plover (Lesser Golden-Plover) <i>Pluvialis dominica/fulva</i>	▶ 1
1	Gray-tailed/Wandering Tattler <i>Tringa brevipes/incana</i>	▶ 1
15	Sharp-tailed/Pectoral Sandpiper <i>Calidris acuminata/melanotos</i>	▶ 6

1	Parasitic/Pomarine Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus/pomarinus</i>	▶  1
1	Black/Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle/columba</i>	▶  1
2	American Herring/Vega Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus/vegae</i>	▶  2
11	Larus sp.	<i>Larus sp.</i>	▶  2
1400	gull sp.	<i>Larinae sp.</i>	▶  3
4	Common/Yellow-billed Loon	<i>Gavia immer/adamsii</i>	▶  1
1	loon sp.	<i>Gavia sp.</i>	▶  1
61	cormorant sp.	<i>Phalacrocoracidae sp.</i>	▶  5
1	Snow/McKay's Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis/hyperboreus</i>	▶  1
8	passerine sp.	<i>Passeriformes sp.</i>	▶  7