



Field Guides Tour Report

Alaska Fall Goldmine: Ross's Gulls in Barrow 2019

Oct 5, 2019 to Oct 9, 2019

Doug Gochfeld

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, [please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.](#)



Ivory Gull! We traded out one mystique-laden arctic gull for another, and pink for white, in Utqiagvik this year. This Ivory Gull took a while for us to track down, with ephemeral sightings over the course of our stay, and we finally caught up to it, and spectacularly at that! Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.

A journey to the farthest north reaches of mainland North America is always fascinating, and heading to Utqiagvik (also widely known as Barrow) in October has an extra layer of mystique. Between the shortening days, the whitening ground, the solidifying water, and the promise of rarely seen avian spectacles, it has an ambiance as unique as the place is remote.

This year, it had been much warmer than usual in the lead-up to the tour, and we arrived as the first snow of the autumn to stick to the ground was falling. This snow was accompanied by strong Northeasterly winds, and we rushed to get out into the field as quickly as possible, even pushing off lunch until later, to try and take advantage of these winds that are often advantageous for bringing Ross's Gulls close to shore. While this first day of seawatching didn't return any pink gulls to us, it did give us our first experiences with the one-of-a-kind Point Barrow seawatch. Almost as soon as we began, a mixed flock of Pacific and Yellow-billed Loons flew over, and we had a good showing of Yellow-billed Loons, with around a half dozen individuals, most of which were adults in breeding plumage! We also spied dozens of Common Eiders and hundreds of Long-tailed Ducks, which was but a faint shadow of what was to come over the next few days. We also found time to wrest our eyes away from the sea and scope the southwestern-most part of Elson Lagoon, where we found a couple of Spectacled Eider mixed into the liberal sprinkling of King Eiders and Long-tailed Ducks. There was also tantalizing word of an Ivory Gull south of town, but by the time we got directions and got over there a while later, it had gone MIA. We missed it this time, but we now had another great target to shoot for.

The next two days of birding saw us spending plenty of time at multiple vantage points around the base of Point Barrow, watching the Chukchi Sea in front of us and Elson Lagoon behind us to the east. The numbers of sea-ducks flying by went from hundreds (of both Common Eider and Long-tailed Duck) on the 7th to several thousand on the 8th. The flocks of Common Eider, some several hundred strong, flying along the south side of the lagoon, then over our heads and out to sea, were especially impressive. Mixed into these eiders we were able to pick out quite a few King Eiders and the odd Spectacled Eider here and there, and we were again awash in loons. In the meantime, we scrutinized every single small gull that appeared on the playing field, and while we ended up with a seasonally high number of Black-legged Kittiwakes, we still didn't connect with anything pink.

During a brief respite from the cold at the Department of Wildlife Conservation we talked to some of the scientists working in the area, and it turned out that not only was the water temperature eleven (!!) degrees (F) above normal for the date, but the sea ice was 300 miles from shore, and no Bowhead Whales had yet been seen anywhere near shore. Against the backdrop of this knowledge we were more than pleasantly surprised to still connect with

several rarely seen ice-dependent animals on our second day full day. The first was a seal that was bobbing off shore, occasionally sticking its head out of the water between dives. Assuming it was going to be a more expected Spotted Seal or Ringed Seal, we didn't pay it terribly close attention at first. Then on one of its prolonged periods above water (a few seconds) we saw the small head and prodigious whiskers of a Bearded Seal! This ice seal is one of the most important seals for the native Inupiat people, but it's very rare to see them away from ice.

As unexpected as the Bearded Seal was, it would soon be eclipsed (and then re-eclipsed). Later in the afternoon, another seal was spotted, but its size as it disappeared underwater made it look very suspiciously NOT like a seal. After some tense waiting, it resurfaced...tusks first! A Walrus was completely unexpected given the lack of ice, and we had not one, not two, but three Pacific Walrus making their way slowly to the southwest off shore. Amazing, and a huge highlight for all!

We also spent some time exploring the rest of the open road system of Barrow, racking up an impressive tally of Snowy Owls of all plumages (from ones that were more black than white to ones which were entirely white), even getting to see one ambush a lemming through a foot of snow and then swallow said lemming whole in one gulp. Then, after our last eider-filled seawatch (but continuing the theme of a lack of pink) at the base of the point, we headed towards town to try and track down the Ivory Gull, as we had found out that someone had had it earlier in the day. As we were wrapping up a brief comfort stop at the hotel, some fresh news came to me hot off the presses, another visiting birder who we had been crossing paths and sharing sightings with over the past couple of days was looking at the Ivory Gull! We sped over to the spot, and sure enough, there it was: the whitest of white gulls. We watched this Ivory Gull as it stalked around the now snow-covered tundra, occasionally picking at the remains of something that was out in the grass adjacent to the side road from which we were viewing. Thanks, Herb!

We checked into the airport around sunrise on our final morning, and then headed back once more unto the breach to look for Ross's Gulls from the beach. Alas, the placid seas and calm winds, while an excellent recipe for our flight out of Utqiagvik to be on time, did not produce the pink pixies, and our snow white gull of the arctic would remain alone atop the pedestal of gulls for the trip.

It was an exciting adventure to the arctic with this group, and it was a genuine pleasure to travel with each and every one of you. Walruses, Snowy Owls, battalions of Common Eiders filling the sky below big Yellow-billed Loons and with Spectacled Eiders mixed in amongst their ranks, Arctic Foxes, even more Snowy Owls, and with the white chocolate cherry of an adult Ivory Gull on top--what a trip it was! Be well, and I hope to run into you again somewhere on this big bird-full globe of ours.

-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*) – A few of these were scattered about in ones and twos, mostly along the fresh water bodies just off the coast.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – We found a young male lingering in the close company of two King Eider on our first excursion, and it remained faithful to that area and those King Eider for the duration of our stay.

SPECTACLED EIDER (*Somateria fischeri*) – A great bird, and we managed to connect with it on every day of the tour. All of our Specs were in juvenile/female-type plumage, but the goggles really stood out! We had a nice sighting of a couple of juveniles on a lake at the base of Elson Lagoon which we were able to study in scopes for a while, and then we had a few flying by in various contexts over the next few days.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – Good numbers of Kings mixed into the flocks of Common Eiders, and also a handful on the water at various points around town.

COMMON EIDER (*Somateria mollissima*) – Tremendous numbers flying west over the base of the point, especially on the afternoon of our final full day. It was a great spectacle to simply watch, and for those inclined presented a fun opportunity to try and pick through the flocks for something smaller and odder.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Very large numbers of these fashionable fast flyers both over the ocean and on the still-open water bodies.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

RED-NECKED GREBE (*Podiceps grisegena*) – We had one or two of these floating off shore on our second full day, when the sea was calm enough to allow us to see most of what was on the Chukchi's surface.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – We had a couple of these on our first day, one in flight and then a couple perched and floating around the Air Force pools.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (POLLICARIS) (*Rissa tridactyla pollicaris*) – The most common gull off shore during our seawatches, we got very familiar with their flight styles and plumages at all ranges and in all different lightings as we scrutinized every last one for smaller interlopers.

IVORY GULL (*Pagophila eburnea*) – Certainly among the most desirable gull species to see on the planet, there were a couple of tantalizing reports of briefly seen Ivory Gulls by others over our first couple of days at Utqiagvik, but it took a while for us to connect. Finally, on our final afternoon, we got a hot tip of one in the snow near town, and we were able to rush over there and get a phenomenal point-blank viewing experience of this ghost of the arctic as it tended to some carrion out on the snowy tundra. Awesome!

ICELAND GULL (THAYER'S) (*Larus glaucoides thayeri*) – A couple of smooth-looking, intricately patterned juveniles were at various points around Utqiagvik, including one just before we got on the plane which was eating the remains of whatever the Ivory Gull had been gnawing on.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – The overwhelmingly abundant gull in Barrow at this time of year is this far northern specialist. We saw them everywhere and in just about all plumages. Their abundance didn't take away from our enjoyment of their subtle beauty, from the bright orbital rings and snowy white primaries of the adults to the intricate patterning on each feather of the juveniles.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – We had but a handful of these slender-necked loons, most of which were seen floating on the Chukchi Sea during our seawatches, including at least one which was hanging out fairly close to shore.

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – The most numerous loon species, with groups of up to a half dozen at a time occasionally flying over.

YELLOW-BILLED LOON (*Gavia adamsii*) – Wow, some really nice views of this scarce northern species. They were mostly adults in breeding plumage, and everyone was able to get on multiples over the course of our stay. We saw ten or more of these largest of the world's loons during our time in Utqiagvik.

Strigidae (Owls)

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*) – We had at least 15 (!) individuals of this iconic species, including double digits in a single day. They were simply everywhere, and we even got to see one dive into the snow and come out holding a lemming, which it proceeded to gulp down whole in about two seconds.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – A handful of ravens were around town during our sojourn.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – A couple around the feeders in town with their northern brethren.

HOARY REDPOLL (*Acanthis hornemanni*) – The majority of the handful of redpolls we were able to identify seemed to be Hoary, which would be the expected of the two redpoll species to hang around at this latitude the latest.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – Still a couple of these abundant area breeders hanging in there, both near the feeders and just on the outskirts of town.

Passerellidae (New World Sparrows)

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – These are common breeders in the Barrow area, but are mostly gone by this cold date. We were surprised to see a couple around the feeders in town.

MAMMALS

NEARCTIC BROWN LEMMING (*Lemmus trimucronatus*) – We only saw one, and it was in its death throes after we watched a Snowy Owl exhume it from under the snow.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – These fancy foxes were already wearing their lovely white winter coats, and we saw a couple of these beauties sashaying across the frozen tundra on various days.

WALRUS (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – WOW! This was a big surprise during one of our final seawatches near the base of Point Barrow. A "large-headed seal" turned out to be not just one, but three Walruses swimming by not too far off shore, slowly making their way south. It was a great treat to see these massive denizens of the north floating unexpectedly by.

BEARDED SEAL (*Erignathus barbatus*) – This is one of the most scarcely seen of the pinnipeds you can potentially see from shore in Utqiagvik, and we had a great view of one popping its small head and big whiskers out of the water just off shore several times.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 21 bird taxa and 4 mammal taxa