

Trip Report — Alaska Fall Goldmine: Ross's Gulls in Barrow 2025

October 9-13, 2025 with Sam Wilson



The pink-bellied gull during a snow squall. Ross's Gull is one of North America's most isolated breeding birds. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

Arctic Alaska would seem to be an unlikely productive birding location in October, but we line it up with the migration of one of the world's rarest and most legendary gull species. Rarities can be hit or miss but the potential for true vagrants is high and indeed we struck gold this trip. We started off our first afternoon in the city of Anchorage, where urban birding at local lakes and lagoons can be quite interesting, especially in the height of waterfowl migration in this part of Alaska. Indeed, we enjoyed comparing Barrow's and Common Goldeneye at the world's largest floatplane base at Lake Hood, and then proceeded to Westchester Lagoon. Shortly after our arrival, a family of eight Trumpeter Swans from a local breeding pair flew in impressively over our heads to utilize the lagoon. We had a few dabblers and diving ducks, including a scarce Red-breasted Merganser and White-winged Scoter. A

Steller's Jay flew in with some raucous calling; Anchorage being the northern-most location for this corvid which is more typically associated with Pacific coast rainforest in Alaska. Our last stop for our casual afternoon birding was at Kincaid Park to walk a few maintained trails (Kincaid is a massive cross-country ski park in the winter). It hosts Spruce Grouse and Three-toed Woodpecker, and although they are more difficult to find in the fall, we did manage some boreal songbirds like Boreal Chickadee, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and scarce (in Anchorage) Canada Jays. Pacific Wren is another Pacific coast bird that is quite scarce in Anchorage and we had nice views of one on one of the ski trails. It was nice to get a suite of birds demonstrating the eco-tone between boreal and rainforest zones in south-central.



Song Sparrow has only been documented a few times on the continent. We were lucky to be among 2 small birding groups that saw it in Utqiagvik. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

The next day we started off at Ship Creek where we found the dark coastal Song Sparrows probably of the *kenaiensis* subspecies that may have bred

locally here in Anchorage, again at the northern limit of the species range. We headed out to the Campbell Creek mouth to hit a massive 33 foot high tide which meant no trekking out on the submerged mudflats! Though it was fairly distant we were able to re-find the Bar-tailed Godwit that had been out on the flats for a few days, a real rarity in Anchorage and great Alaskan bird. A lingering Black-bellied Plover and a flock of Greater Yellowlegs was also on the coastal flats. Another nice surprise was a juvenile American Goshawk swooping in out over the flats in dramatic fashion trying to flush up prey.



Our group and a few other birders enjoyed a few rare passerines near the Naval Arctic Research Lab, including Palm Warbler, Varied Thrush, White-crowned Sparrow, and a Song Thrush. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

After an exciting morning of birding we turned our attention to the Arctic, boarding an Alaskan Airlines flight to the 'top of the world'. Our arrival allowed us just a short time birding before dark.

Our first full day in Utqiagvik (Barrow) was a nice introduction to the Arctic, with relatively good visibility, temperatures mild (right around freezing) and some exciting birds and mammals. One of our first sightings was a completely white Arctic Fox gnawing on what looked like part of a caribou carcass, aware of our presence but allowing for close viewing from the vehicle. At the base of the point near the military runway, we had a number of Common Eiders, King Eiders, 2 Black Guillemots (at a distance), Short-tailed Shearwaters on the horizon, Black-legged Kittiwakes, and our first Yellow-billed Loons. One of the most exciting sightings of the morning were three Polar Bears across the frozen lagoon from the boat launch. One adult on its own and a second adult that appeared to be associating with an immature bear. The young bear and adult seemed to be rooting around and jumping on the ice, being quite active, likely scavenging a frozen food source. In the afternoon we got some tips that there had been some interesting songbird activity near the Naval Arctic Research Lab complex. At this time of year, any passerine is of interest, the two most likely candidates being Snow Buntings or late Lapland Longspurs. Anything else is rare and notable! We did see a single Snow Bunting, Dark-eyed Junco, White-crowned Sparrow, and most impressive, a vagrant Palm Warbler!



Arctic Foxes are in their beautiful thick white coats by October in arctic Alaska. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

The next morning it was out towards the point with a lot of anticipation surrounding changing wind conditions due to the remnants of Typhoon Halong moving into the Arctic ocean via the North Pacific and western Alaska. For our birding purposes, the typhoon made things very interesting, and coastal flooding was limited to nil, however, it should be noted that there were several communities in remote western Alaska directly hit by the typhoon that were heavily impacted, requiring major evacuations due to high winds and extreme flooding. Relief and recovery efforts are logistically extremely challenging, and will continue into 2026 and beyond.

The winds turned east, gusting to 30 mph, and we were able to position the van for cover (while watching for polar bears that had been roaming the duck camp). Impressive numbers of Common Eiders and flocks of Long-tailed Ducks streamed by and we got a quick look at a Ross's Gull heading up the beach but unfortunately turning away and out towards the ocean before

everyone could get on it. We took this as a sign that more may be on the way and after lunch planned on another watch. After a delightful meal at Osaka we headed out to NARL (Naval Arctic Research Lab) with another group to try and relocate another rarity that showed up in the early afternoon. We found a vagrant Varied Thrush and the real prize, a Song Thrush. This was only the second record of this Asian bird from the North Slope, with only a few other records on the Bering Sea and Pribilof Islands in Alaska! We observed these exciting birds well despite declining weather conditions in a pretty substantial snow squall!



This immature Black-legged Kittiwake is another migratory gull that passes by Point Barrow into the Chukchi Sea. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

The afternoon continued to be exciting with our target bird in sight. Over a 2-hour period, a procession of pink-bellied gulls made their way west against the persistent east wind through over heavy surf and snow. Most impressively, the 100+ Ross's gulls we counted moved with ease through the difficult conditions, taking advantage of the churned up sea waters to

pluck prey items that had come near the surface, like salps and other large planktonic critters. Many of the gulls were moving right along the beach, fantastic for photography and close binocular views. Despite its brief appearance, the cherry on top was an Ivory Gull that came out and over the runway, quickly disappearing into the mist over the water. This is what magic birding days are made of!



We watched a parade of Ross's Gulls nearshore dancing in the surf, looking for salp-like creatures and other large plankton in the Arctic Ocean. Photo by guide Sam Wilson.

Our last morning, we held a final seawatch vigil and although the Ross's Gulls seemed to have moved back out to sea, we enjoyed a last watch on the water, followed by a visit to the fascinating Iñupiat Heritage Center and some birding at the local dump (Slaty-backed Gull and Iceland (Thayer's) Gull). It was great to meet some local Iñupiat artists working with cultural materials like whale bone and baleen in a craft shop. We bid goodbye to Barrow and thanked the residents for a unique and incredible natural history and cultural experience at the top of the world.

Mammal List:

Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*)

Moose (*Alces alces*)

Arctic Fox (*Vulpes lagopus*)

Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*)

You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this

link: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/475423>

You can download a combined PDF of this page and the eBird report at this

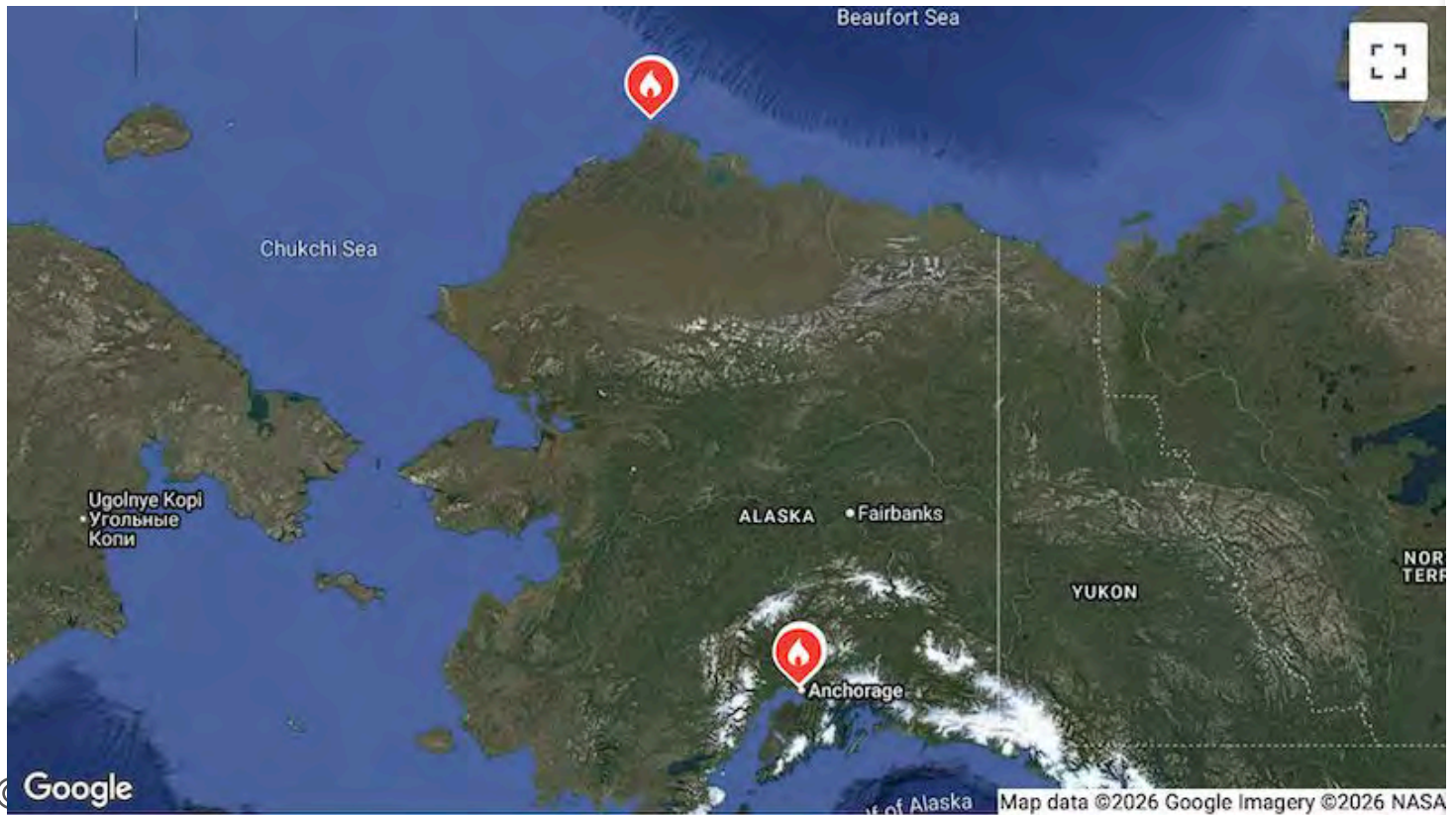
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-- Sam

Field Guides Birding Tours—Alaska Fall Goldmine: Part Two, 2025 (with Sam Wilson)



9 – 12 Oct 2025 (4 days) Link-only



Alaska, United States

Anchorage Municipality | North Slope Borough

Sam Wilson



For a narrative summary of this tour, including a Field Guides photo gallery and additional...

 57

Species Observed

 12

Checklists










 3





















Species with Photos

LIFERS  3  1 

Species Observed

[Show all details](#)

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 1 | Greater White-fronted Goose <i>Anser albifrons</i> |  1 |
| 1 | Brant <i>Branta bernicla</i> |  1 |
| 8 | Trumpeter Swan <i>Cygnus buccinator</i> |  1 |
| 2 | Northern Shoveler <i>Spatula clypeata</i> |  1 |
| 21 | American Wigeon <i>Mareca americana</i> |  3 |
| 41 | Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> |  3 |
| 6 | Northern Pintail <i>Anas acuta</i> |  1 |
| 4 | Green-winged Teal <i>Anas crecca</i> |  1 |
| 1 | Greater Scaup <i>Aythya marila</i> |  1 |

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|------|---|---|
| 4 | Lesser Scaup <i>Aythya affinis</i> | ▶  2 |
| 1 | Spectacled Eider <i>Somateria fischeri</i> | ▶  1 |
| 15 | King Eider <i>Somateria spectabilis</i> | ▶  4 |
| 2809 | Common Eider <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | ▶  4 |
| 1 | Surf Scoter <i>Melanitta perspicillata</i> | ▶  1 |
| 5 | White-winged Scoter <i>Melanitta deglandi</i> | ▶  3 |
| 1042 | Long-tailed Duck <i>Clangula hyemalis</i> | ▶  4 |
| 12 | Bufflehead <i>Bucephala albeola</i> | ▶  2 |
| 3 | Common Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i> | ▶  2 |
| 11 | Barrow's Goldeneye <i>Bucephala islandica</i> | ▶  2 |
| 13 | Common Merganser <i>Mergus merganser</i> | ▶  3 |
| 3 | Red-breasted Merganser <i>Mergus serrator</i> | ▶  3 |
| 1 | Rock Pigeon <i>Columba livia</i> * | ▶  1 |
| 1 | Black-bellied Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i> | ▶  1 |
| 1 | Bar-tailed Godwit <i>Limosa lapponica</i> | ▶  1 |
| 5 | Greater Yellowlegs <i>Tringa melanoleuca</i> | ▶  1 |
| 2 | Pomarine Jaeger <i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i> | ▶  2 |
| 2 | Black Guillemot <i>Cephus grylle</i> | ▶  1 |
| 109 | Ross's Gull <i>Rhodostethia rosea</i> ✓ | ▶  2 |
| 73 | Black-legged Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> | ▶  4 |





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| 1 | Ivory Gull <i>Pagophila eburnea</i> ✓ | ▶ 1 |
| 196 | Short-billed Gull <i>Larus brachyrhynchus</i> | ▶ 4 |
| 519 | Glaucous Gull <i>Larus hyperboreus</i> | ▶ 6 |
| 8 | Horned Grebe <i>Podiceps auritus</i> | ▶ 2 |
| 3 | Pacific Loon <i>Gavia pacifica</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 37 | Yellow-billed Loon <i>Gavia adamsii</i> | ▶ 3 |
| 3 | Short-tailed Shearwater <i>Ardenna tenuirostris</i> | ▶ 2 |
| 1 | American Goshawk <i>Astur atricapillus</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 1 | Bald Eagle <i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 3 | Canada Jay <i>Perisoreus canadensis</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 2 | Steller's Jay <i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i> | ▶ 2 |
| 11 | Black-billed Magpie <i>Pica hudsonia</i> | ▶ 4 |
| 8 | Common Raven <i>Corvus corax</i> | ▶ 6 |
| 11 | Black-capped Chickadee <i>Poecile atricapillus</i> | ▶ 3 |
| 10 | Boreal Chickadee <i>Poecile hudsonicus</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 10 | Golden-crowned Kinglet <i>Regulus satrapa</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 2 | Red-breasted Nuthatch <i>Sitta canadensis</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 2 | Brown Creeper <i>Certhia americana</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 1 | Pacific Wren <i>Troglodytes pacificus</i> | ▶ 1 |
| 42 | European Starling <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> * | ▶ 2 |

- 1 **Varied Thrush** *Ixoreus naevius* ▶  2  1
- 1 **Song Thrush** *Turdus philomelos* ✓  ▶  6  1
- 2 **Lapland Longspur** *Calcarius lapponicus* ▶  1  1
- 2 **Snow Bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis* ▶  2
- 6 **Dark-eyed Junco** *Junco hyemalis* ▶  3
- 1 **White-crowned Sparrow** *Zonotrichia leucophrys* ▶  1
- 2 **Song Sparrow** *Melospiza melodia* ▶  1
- 1 **Palm Warbler** *Setophaga palmarum* ▶  1

HYBRIDS

- 2 **American Herring x Glaucous-winged Gull (hybrid)** ▶  1
Larus smithsonianus x glaucescens

ADDITIONAL TAXA

- 8 **Greater/Lesser Scaup** *Aythya marila/affinis* ▶  1
- 6 **Common/Barrow's Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula/islandica* ▶  1
- 20 **American Herring/Glaucous-winged Gull** *Larus smithsonianus/glaucescens* ▶  2
- 6 **loon sp.** *Gavia sp.* ▶  1