



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**Alaska II - Part One (Pribilofs & Denali) 2016**

Jun 2, 2016 to Jun 10, 2016  
Dave Stejskal & Tom Johnson

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



*The Ridge Wall vantage point on St. Paul Island makes for some spectacular eye-level viewing of seabirds like this Northern Fulmar. Check out its double-barrelled nasal tube! Photo by guide Tom Johnson.*

The first half of our two Alaska tours took us to some of the Last Frontier's most scenic and unique places with the company of mostly good weather (some rain, but we birded on through it!) and some truly fantastic birds and beasts.

We began with a bit of birding across the street from our airport hotel in Anchorage, finding Barrow's Goldeneye, Pacific and Common loons, and Bonaparte's Gulls on Lake Spenard. After flying out to St. Paul Island in the Pribilof Islands in the middle of the Bering Sea, we stashed our luggage at the hotel and headed straight out into the field. Conditions were lovely and we found our first Red-legged Kittiwakes and some Eurasian migrants with an Eastern Yellow Wagtail, a Wood Sandpiper, and a Common Snipe. The Common Snipe was actually in the same patch at Antone Slough as a Wilson's Snipe, and we even got to see them in flight in the same binocular view, allowing for nice comparison of these two very similar species.

Conditions weren't favorable for more Asian vagrants to arrive after our first evening on the island, but the nice weather meant that we spent the remainder of our Pribilof visit enjoying repeated experiences with the phenomenal numbers of breeding seabirds and mammals that call the island home. Our daily visits to the seabird cliffs found us eye-to-eye with Tufted and Horned puffins, Common and Thick-billed murres, and Crested, Parakeet, and Least auklets, as well as Red-faced Cormorants, Northern Fulmars, and kittiwakes of both species. Northern Fur Seals were around in numbers on the beaches and seal-eating Orcas patrolled just offshore. Island-endemic forms of Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, Rock Sandpiper, and Pacific Wren kept us busy, too.

Flying back to Anchorage, we boarded vans and headed into Alaska's montane interior for some time around the famous Denali (officially renamed Denali from Mt. McKinley in 2015, though Alaskans have always preferred "Denali"). On the Denali Highway east of the national park, we found Bohemian Waxwings, Northern Hawk-Owl, Trumpeter Swans, and several Moose. Our day trip into Denali National Park was a bit rainy, but we still had some amazing, close encounters with Caribou and Grizzly Bears, including a female with two small cubs that had plopped down in the tundra right next to the road. Nesting Golden Eagles and Gyrfalcons made the birding pretty sweet as well!

On the drive back to Anchorage, Denali itself decided to peek (peak?) out from behind the shroud of dense clouds that it had been wrapped in for several days, and we pulled over to enjoy its splendor. While scanning the mountain and its 20,310 feet of vertical awesomeness, we spotted a Sandhill Crane flying past just over the mountain's summit in our view. Back in Anchorage, we stopped in for some shorebirding at Westchester Lagoon, finding 76 breeding plumage Hudsonian Godwits among breeding Arctic Terns and Red-necked Grebes.

Thanks to everyone for making this a fun and enjoyable tour -- we certainly had a great time exploring a lovely part of North America with you! Also, big thanks to Karen Turner in our Austin office for all of her organizational work behind the scenes.

Good birding!

-- Tom & Dave

## 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)

**CANADA GOOSE** (*Branta canadensis*) – Common at Westchester Lagoon in Anchorage.

**TRUMPETER SWAN** (*Cygnus buccinator*) – We found a few pairs along the side of the road on the Denali Highway and along the Parks Highway.

**TUNDRA SWAN (WHISTLING)** (*Cygnus columbianus columbianus*) – One in a pond on the Denali Highway was a bit of a surprise for this area and date.

**AMERICAN WIGEON** (*Anas americana*) – Fairly common in ponds on the Pribilofs and in the Denali area.

**MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – We found a few around Anchorage and on the way to and from Denali.

**NORTHERN SHOVELER** (*Anas clypeata*) – Scattered along the Denali portion of the trip.

**NORTHERN PINTAIL** (*Anas acuta*) – Common, both out at St. Paul and around Anchorage-Denali.

**GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN)** (*Anas crecca nimia*) – A few males with horizontal white stripes gave us nice views on St. Paul., and we even saw a few American x Eurasian intergrade birds with both vertical and horizontal white stripes (also St. Paul). This western Alaskan zone of intergradation is one of the factors that has so far prevented "American Green-winged Teal" and "Eurasian Teal" from being recognized as separate species, at least in North America.

**GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN)** (*Anas crecca carolinensis*) – Common throughout the trip.

**RING-NECKED DUCK** (*Aythya collaris*) – One on St. Paul was a surprise; two others were in a roadside marsh during our drive back to Anchorage from Denali.

**GREATER SCAUP** (*Aythya marila*) – The common scaup on the Pribilofs; we also saw them around Anchorage.

**LESSER SCAUP** (*Aythya affinis*) – Around Anchorage, often in comparison with larger Greater Scaup.

**HARLEQUIN DUCK** (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Common around the rocky coastline of St. Paul Island.

**SURF SCOTER** (*Melanitta perspicillata*) – Six were a nice surprise at Byers Lake near Denali.

**WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (NORTH AMERICAN)** (*Melanitta fusca deglandi*) – We saw the same bird at least twice on St. Paul Island.

**LONG-TAILED DUCK** (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Common around St. Paul Island.

**BUFFLEHEAD** (*Bucephala albeola*) – One was along the west end of the Denali Highway.

**BARROW'S GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala islandica*) – A few were along the edges of Lake Spenard near our hotel in Anchorage.

**RED-BREASTED MERGANSER** (*Mergus serrator*) – Two were flybys on St. Paul Island.

### Gaviidae (Loons)

**PACIFIC LOON** (*Gavia pacifica*) – Nice views at Lake Spenard in Anchorage.

**COMMON LOON** (*Gavia immer*) – Lake Spenard in Anchorage and Byers Lake near Denali.

### Podicipedidae (Grebes)

**HORNED GREBE** (*Podiceps auritus*) – These lovely, breeding plumage grebes were along the Denali Highway.

**RED-NECKED GREBE** (*Podiceps grisegena*) – A single bird was at St. Paul Island. Close individuals were calling and attending nests on Westchester Lagoon in Anchorage.

### Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

**NORTHERN FULMAR** (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – We saw moderate variation in color morphs including medium gray and dark brownish-gray birds at St. Paul Island. Their habit of wheeling in the wind right past our faces made them particularly appealing!

### Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

**RED-FACED CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax urile*) – Fairly common at St. Paul Island, including some excellent views near town.

**PELAGIC CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – A few of these slender, dull, immature cormorants were mixed in with the Red-faced Cormorants on St. Paul.

### Pandionidae (Osprey)

**OSPREY** (*Pandion haliaetus*) – Two were along the western end of the Denali Highway.

### Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

**GOLDEN EAGLE** (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Great views of soaring birds along the Denali Highway and in Denali National Park. One adult was on a huge stick nest in Denali NP. [N]

**NORTHERN HARRIER** (*Circus cyaneus*) – Encountered regularly in the Anchorage-Denali corridor, especially around Denali.

**SHARP-SHINNED HAWK** (*Accipiter striatus*) – One flew over us during our drive from Denali back to Anchorage.

**BALD EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Seen regularly on the mainland.

### Gruidae (Cranes)

**SANDHILL CRANE** (*Antigone canadensis*) – One was flying over the peak of Denali as seen from a roadside viewpoint on our drive back to Anchorage.

### Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

**SEMPALMATED PLOVER** (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – Seen frequently at St. Paul Island.

### Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

**WHIMBREL** (*Numenius phaeopus*) – One was heard calling in flight near the northeastern tip of St. Paul Island. [\*]

**HUDSONIAN GODWIT** (*Limosa haemastica*) – Wow! 76 came in to roost at Westchester Lagoon while we watched. Large groups of these striking godwits were mixed with dowitchers and other shorebirds and dropped in like fighter planes to land on the island right in front of us. Spectacular! These large shorebirds breed in the taiga flats along Cook Inlet near Anchorage.

**RUDDY TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria interpres*) – One was on St. Paul Island.

**ROCK SANDPIPER (PTILOCNEMIS)** (*Calidris ptilocnemis ptilocnemis*) – The pale, resident St. Paul Island subspecies was one of the most common birds that we encountered during our stay on the island.

**LEAST SANDPIPER** (*Calidris minutilla*) – A few were on St. Paul in marshy wetlands.

**SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER** (*Limnodromus griseus*) – At Westchester Lagoon with the godwits.

**WILSON'S SNIBE** (*Gallinago delicata*) – The comparison views of this cryptic sandpiper with a Common Snipe on St. Paul were pretty exciting.

**COMMON SNIBE** (*Gallinago gallinago*) – This Eurasian species is roughly as regular as Wilson's Snipe on the Pribilof Islands in the spring, but it's a real treasure for most North American birders. We had very good flight views at Antone Slough (check out the photo below).

**RED-NECKED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – Common on St. Paul Island, but we also saw a few along the Denali Highway.

**RED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – One was a nice find at St. Paul Island.

**GREATER YELLOWLEGS** (*Tringa melanoleuca*) – A few of these loud shorebirds were along the Denali Highway.

**LESSER YELLOWLEGS** (*Tringa flavipes*) – A few territorial birds were perched in trees on the Denali Highway.

**WOOD SANDPIPER** (*Tringa glareola*) – One of these Eurasian migrants flushed up in front of us at Antone Slough. Its distinctive whistled calls and compact shape allowed us to identify it as it circled overhead and then left the area.

#### *Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)*

**COMMON MURRE** (*Uria aalge*) – Up-close and personal views at St. Paul Island. These were the pale chocolate-colored murres that we saw.

**THICK-BILLED MURRE** (*Uria lomvia*) – Common and easy to view at St. Paul. Compared to Common Murres, these are stockier and darker - most have a striking pale blaze along the base of the bill.

**PARAKEET AUKLET** (*Aethia psittacula*) – On the cliffs at St. Paul, we were often within 15 feet of these little clowns. Amazing!

**LEAST AUKLET** (*Aethia pusilla*) – It's hard to imagine these tiny alcids bobbing around in the rough waters of the Bering Sea, but we didn't have to - they were sitting on the ledges in front of us, calling away and showing off their pink eyes.

**CRESTED AUKLET** (*Aethia cristatella*) – Perhaps the most stunning of St. Paul Island's small alcids, we had a front row seat for some interesting courtship behavior. These handsome birds give off a mysterious tangerine scent from "wick feathers" located at the base of the neck; we saw pairs of birds that appeared to be sniffing each other on multiple occasions.

**HORNED PUFFIN** (*Fratercula corniculata*) – The cliff-side views of these beautiful seabirds allowed us to see their small ornamental facial "horns".

**TUFTED PUFFIN** (*Fratercula cirrhata*) – For sheer looks alone, this fancy alcid might be the star of the show of the cliffs at St. Paul Island. Next year, we'll take some hair gel out to the island to help tame their tufts on breezy days.

#### *Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)*

**BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE** (*Rissa tridactyla*) – Abundant at St. Paul Island.

**RED-LEGGED KITTIWAKE** (*Rissa brevirostris*) – We found plenty of these fine, large-headed gulls mixed in with huge numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes at St. Paul. The dark upperparts, blocky structure, and, of course, red legs helped us with the identification. St. Paul is perhaps the easiest place in the world to see this beautiful, range-restricted seabird.

**BONAPARTE'S GULL** (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) – Four were flying around Lake Spenard in Anchorage on our first birding outing.

**MEW GULL (AMERICAN)** (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus*) – Common during the mainland portion of our trip. Sometimes called "Short-billed Gull".

**HERRING GULL (AMERICAN)** (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – Common in the inland portions of our mainland travels.

**GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL** (*Larus glaucescens*) – Glaucous-winged Gulls and many sundry hybrids (mostly with Herring) filled out the large gull list for the coastal portions of Part 1.

**ARCTIC TERN** (*Sterna paradisaea*) – On our return to Anchorage after Denali, we were greeted by quite a few of these handsome long-distance migrants nesting at Westchester Lagoon. [N]

#### *Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)*

**ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) – Common only in the Anchorage area during our travels. [I]

#### *Strigidae (Owls)*

**NORTHERN HAWK OWL** (*Surnia ulula*) – Dave picked out a distant individual along the Denali Highway. We enjoyed watching this scarce breeder through our scopes.

#### *Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)*

**BELTED KINGFISHER** (*Megasceryle alcyon*) – We heard one individual calling during our travel day back to Anchorage at the end of the tour. [\*]

#### *Picidae (Woodpeckers)*

**DOWNY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides pubescens*) – At a picnic lunch stop at Montana Creek, we found several species of woodpeckers including these little guys.

**HAIRY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides villosus*) – Sharp "peek" calls gave away these widespread, long-billed woodpeckers.

**AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER** (*Picoides dorsalis*) – The Sockeye burn made it possible for us to find a nest of this scarce species, and we watched both adults at the eye-level nest hole. [N]

**BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER** (*Picoides arcticus*) – Typically, this species is much less expected than Am. Three-toed Woodpecker anywhere in Alaska, so we were elated to find a nest in the Sockeye Burn and watched adults bring food to the nest a few times. The babies were noisy! [N]

**NORTHERN FLICKER** (*Colaptes auratus*) – One was seen along the Denali Highway. The flickers here are "Yellow-shafted" Northern Flickers.

#### *Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)*

**MERLIN** (*Falco columbarius*) – One flew by during the final leg of our Denali NP bus trip.

**GYRFALCON** (*Falco rusticolus*) – We scoped one at fairly close distance from an overlook along the road through Denali National Park. On the return trip, either the same bird or its mate flew right over the bus, giving us a memorable naked-eye experience.



Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

**OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER** (*Contopus cooperi*) – One sang and posed nicely for us in the Sockeye Burn.

**ALDER FLYCATCHER** (*Empidonax alnorum*) – One sang and showed pretty well in the streamside thickets at Montana Creek during our drive to Denali.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

**GRAY JAY** (*Perisoreus canadensis*) – Fairly common at various stops between the Sockeye Burn and Denali.

**BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE** (*Pica hudsonia*) – Common on the mainland portion of the trip.

**COMMON RAVEN** (*Corvus corax*) – Common on the mainland.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

**TREE SWALLOW** (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – Several were seen around Anchorage mixed in with Violet-green Swallows.

**VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW** (*Tachycineta thalassina*) – Good looks near our hotel in Anchorage and at least one or two other spots along the journey.

**BANK SWALLOW** (*Riparia riparia*) – A few showed for us along the Denali Highway.

**CLIFF SWALLOW** (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) – Nesting along a few streams that we crossed on the Denali Highway.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

**BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE** (*Poecile atricapillus*) – Found nesting in Anchorage and during our drive to Denali.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

**PACIFIC WREN (ALASCENSIS GROUP)** (*Troglodytes pacificus alascensis*) – These long-billed, large-footed Pacific Wrens were in several spots on St. Paul Island during our visit.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

**AMERICAN DIPPER** (*Cinclus mexicanus*) – One pair was nesting under a Denali Highway bridge; we got to see the birds posing on rocks, foraging underwater, and bringing material back to the bridge.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

**RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET** (*Regulus calendula*) – Heard singing at several riparian stops in the Anchorage-Denali corridor. [\*]

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

**ARCTIC WARBLER** (*Phylloscopus borealis*) – A singer caught Dave's ear along the Denali Highway, and we pulled over and got out for some fantastic views. This bird must have just arrived after flying across the Bering Sea from wintering grounds in southern Asia.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

**GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH** (*Catharus minimus*) – Good views, especially along the Denali Highway.

**SWAINSON'S THRUSH** (*Catharus ustulatus*) – Heard singing frequently in riparian areas en route to Denali. [\*]

**AMERICAN ROBIN** (*Turdus migratorius*) – Fairly common and widespread on the mainland.

**VARIED THRUSH** (*Ixoreus naevius*) – Great views at the Byers Lake parking area.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

**EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Common only in the Anchorage-Wasilla portion of our tour.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

**EASTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL** (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) – One of these Trans-Beringian migrants flushed up in front of us repeatedly at Antone Slough on St. Paul Island, showing off its long tail and giving its squealing flight call several times.

**AMERICAN PIPIT** (*Anthus rubescens*) – One showed nicely on St. Paul Island.

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

**BOHEMIAN WAXWING** (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – Three were flycatching from dead trees at a scenic vista along the Denali Highway.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

**LAPLAND LONGSPUR** (*Calcarius lapponicus*) – Quite common on St. Paul Island.

**SNOW BUNTING** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – Also common on St. Paul.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

**NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH** (*Parkesia noveboracensis*) – Rather common in wetter areas that we visited on the mainland portion of the tour.

**ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER** (*Oreothlypis celata*) – Commonly heard and sometimes seen in the Anchorage-Denali corridor. Good looks on the Denali Highway.

**YELLOW WARBLER** (*Setophaga petechia*) – We heard these widespread warblers on several occasions, including on the Denali Highway. [\*]

**BLACKPOLL WARBLER** (*Setophaga striata*) – Common and widespread on the mainland.

**YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE)** (*Setophaga coronata coronata*) – One of the most common warblers on our route.

**WILSON'S WARBLER** (*Cardellina pusilla*) – Heard frequently, and seen a few times, especially in the willows along the Denali Highway.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

**AMERICAN TREE SPARROW** (*Spizelloides arborea*) – One showed at very close range along the Denali Highway.

**FOX SPARROW (RED)** (*Passerella iliaca zaboria*) – Common in the Denali area.

**DARK-EYED JUNCO** (*Junco hyemalis*) – Common in forest and edge habitat around Denali.

**WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (GAMBEL'S)** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*) – Very common on the mainland.

**GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW** (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*) – Close views at the Denali South Viewpoint on our drive back to Anchorage.

**SAVANNAH SPARROW** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – Fairly common in open areas along the Denali and Parks highways.

*Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)*

**GRAY-CROWNED ROSY-FINCH (PRIBILOF IS.)** (*Leucosticte tephrocotis umbrina*) – This huge finch fills the "House Sparrow niche" on St. Paul Island - they are common and approachable in town and often nest under the eaves of buildings there.

**WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL** (*Loxia leucoptera*) – Several of these fine finches were hanging around one patch of spruce forest along the Parks Highway where we searched for Spruce Grouse.

**COMMON REDPOLL** (*Acanthis flammea*) – Common between Anchorage and Denali.

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## **MAMMALS**

**SNOWSHOE HARE** (*Lepus americanus*) – One was seen from the bus in Denali NP.

**ARCTIC GROUND SQUIRREL** (*Spermophilus parryii*) – Several were loafing in open areas along the Denali Highway.

**RED SQUIRREL** (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – Common in spruce forest on the mainland.

**MUSKRAT** (*Ondatra zibethica*) – One was seen in a roadside marsh on the outskirts of Anchorage.

**KILLER WHALE** (*Orcinus orca*) – We scoped a small group off of Ridge Wall on St. Paul Island on a few occasions. These mammal-eaters are impressive beasts at any distance!

**ARCTIC FOX** (*Alopex lagopus*) – Several sightings on St. Paul Island.

**BROWN (INCL. GRIZZLY) BEAR** (*Ursus arctos*) – Our bus trip in Denali NP produced close sightings of four individuals. Memorable were the two cubs playing around their sleepy mother as well as the larger bear that was foraging just below the road near the Eielson Visitor Center. These interior Alaskan bears are also called "Toklat" Grizzlies.

**NORTHERN FUR SEAL** (*Callorhinus ursinus*) – These iconic pinnipeds are still common on St. Paul Island, though they have declined significantly.

**HARBOR SEAL** (*Phoca vitulina*) – Seen several times at St. Paul Island.

**MOOSE** (*Alces alces*) – We had daily sightings of these big, goofy deer between Anchorage and Denali, including some nicely appointed males on the Denali NP bus ride.

**CARIBOU** (*Rangifer tarandus granti*) – A few herds were close to the road in Denali NP. We even had them in the same scope view with a Grizzly Bear and a few humans at one point!

**REINDEER** (*Rangifer tarandus sibiricus*) – The huge herd on St. Paul Island was close to the SW Point Road during one of our drives out there, and we stopped to scope them and take some photos. They are introduced to the island (from the Old World). [I]

**DALL'S SHEEP** (*Ovis dalli*) – A few were clinging to the rocky slopes along the road through Denali NP.

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## **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

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**Totals for the tour: 109 bird taxa and 13 mammal taxa**