



Field Guides Tour Report

Alaska II - Part One (Pribilofs & Denali) 2018

Jun 7, 2018 to Jun 15, 2018
Tom Johnson & Cory Gregory

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



This adult gray morph Gyrfalcon saluted the group with a flyover in Denali National Park. Photo by participant Pete Peterman.

This spring's Alaska Part I tour had a few unexpected twists and turns, including some excellent vagrant birds from Asia. Despite transportation issues that can be the reality of travel in remote regions, we had a great trip covering St. Paul Island in the Bering Sea and the Anchorage-Denali corridor on the mainland.

Flying out to St. Paul, we got right into the birding with Lapland Longspurs and Rock Sandpipers greeting us from the moment we stepped off the plane. During our survey of this fabulous, isolated island, we found the full suite of nesting seabirds that brings us here each spring - scores of puffins, auklets, and murres, and local specialties like Red-legged Kittiwake and Red-faced Cormorant. Our visit was timed with favorable conditions for migrants from Asia, and we were very lucky to catch up to a Terek Sandpiper and an Oriental Cuckoo in addition to more regular Asian migrants like Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Bar-tailed Godwit (perhaps heading to Alaskan breeding grounds) and Black-headed Gull. When it came time to leave the island, the group faced some unplanned weather and airport equipment delays, and we spent an extra night on St. Paul before leaving on a charter flight, with guides following later on a commercial flight. Fortunately, the contingency canoes that we keep stashed in the tundra at St. Paul were not required for our return to the mainland.

After riding north from Anchorage, the group took a day trip into Denali National Park, finding Long-tailed Jaegers, Willow Ptarmigan, Gyrfalcon, and Northern Hawk Owl in addition to fantastic beasts such as Moose, Caribou, and some up-close and personal Brown Bears (Toklat Grizzlies) that were hanging out along the road. On our final day, we birded a bit near Cantwell, finding boreal breeders such as Blackpoll and Wilson's warblers, a few close Bohemian Waxwings, and a displaying Wilson's Snipe. We stopped and explored the Sockeye Burn outside of Willow, and were fortunate to see an American Three-toed Woodpecker nest cavity (adult feeding chicks) and a territorial pair of Black-backed Woodpeckers. It was really special to see both of these scarce species of "six-toed" woodpeckers within a mile or so of each other. Continuing on back to Anchorage, we wrapped things up with a final dinner and met the folks who joined us for Part II in Nome, Seward, and Barrow (Utqiagvik).

Cory and I want to thank you for joining us on this adventure through some of Alaska's wild places. We appreciated your flexibility and understanding as we dealt with our travel "extension" on St. Paul Island, and we're glad that we still saw so much during the tour. Special thanks also to Karen Turner, Peggy Watson, Jan Pierson, and the whole Field Guides crew for their outstanding logistical support from Texas and Maine.

Until next time,

Tom

SNP = St. Paul Island

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).

SNOW GOOSE (*Anser caerulescens*) – Two immatures were at Webster Lake on SNP. The species is rare in the Pribilofs.

ACKLING GOOSE (ALEUTIAN) (*Branta hutchinsii leucopareia*) – We saw a flock of 16 in different spots around SNP during our visit.

TUNDRA SWAN (WHISTLING) (*Cygnus columbianus columbianus*) – We scrutinized one closely on Pumphouse Lake at SNP, where the species is a rare migrant.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Mareca penelope*) – An adult male was with other ducks on Webster Lake, SNP.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Mareca americana*) – One was with the Eurasian Wigeon at Webster Lake, SNP.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Common at SNP.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca nimia*) – We saw several pure-looking Eurasian individuals at SNP, where Eurasians and intergrades outnumber pure-looking American males.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN) (*Anas crecca carolinensis*) – We saw a few pure-looking males during our time at SNP. The Pribilofs are a contact zone between the American carolinensis and Asian nimia subspecies.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – A pair swam on Salt Lagoon and Antone Lake at SNP.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – Seen each day at SNP and on our first morning at Lake Hood/ Spenard in Anchorage.

LESSER SCAUP (*Aythya affinis*) – At least 3 were at Lake Hood/ Spenard in Anchorage.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – We saw flocks of these big seaducks in the surf just offshore from SNP.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Though the species does not breed at SNP, these fine ducks are rather common here during the spring months.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Common at SNP.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies).

WILLOW PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus lagopus*) – The group saw these fancy chickens in their summer plumage during the bus trip into Denali National Park.

Podicipedidae (Grebes).

RED-NECKED GREBE (*Podiceps grisegena*) – Lovely views of nesting birds on Lake Hood/ Spenard near our Anchorage hotel.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels).

NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – These stocky, gray petrels nest on the cliffs at SNP. We had particularly close views during our visit to Ridge Wall.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags).

RED-FACED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax urile*) – This species is almost entirely restricted to the Bering Sea. We had close views of birds in high breeding color at SNP - the adults at Marunich were particularly memorable with their blue and red ornamentation.

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – Only a few of these slim cormorants were mixed in with Red-faced Cormorants at SNP.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites).

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – The group saw these massive raptors during the trip into Denali NP.

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus hudsonius*) – A few in the Denali region.

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Scattered sightings between Anchorage and Denali.

RED-TAILED HAWK (HARLAN'S) (*Buteo jamaicensis harlani*) – A few folks saw one of these local-breeding Red-tailed Hawks during the trip into Denali NP.

Gruidae (Cranes).

SANDHILL CRANE (*Antigone canadensis*) – A few were along the side of the Parks Highway when we stopped for road construction on the drive back to Anchorage from Denali.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings).

SEMIPALMATED PLOVER (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – Good views of these "American ringed plovers" during our visit to SNP. We even got to see a breeding display flight at Pumphouse Lake.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies).

WHIMBREL (SIBERIAN) (*Numenius phaeopus variegatus*) – One was an excellent sighting in Cup Pond on SNP. We had a great look at this bird in flight as it whizzed past us, whistling - the white lower back was particularly obvious.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa lapponica*) – One migrant was at Salt Lagoon on SNP on our first evening on the island. This was of the subspecies baueri that breeds in western Alaska.

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres morinella*) – Repeated sightings on SNP.

ROCK SANDPIPER (PTILOCNEMIS) (*Calidris ptilocnemis ptilocnemis*) – This is the endemic breeding subspecies of Rock Sandpiper that nests on the Pribilof Islands. We had countless excellent views of these "Pribil-pipers."

LEAST SANDPIPER (*Calidris minutilla*) – We studied one at Pumphouse Lake on SNP.

WILSON'S SNIPE (*Gallinago delicata*) – A few of these funny-looking shorebirds were displaying at the western end of the Denali Highway on our final full day. We enjoyed nice views of one teed up atop a spruce tree.

TEREK SANDPIPER (*Xenus cinereus*) – This Asian vagrant shorebird gave us a brief show along the northern shore of SNP at Marunich, where it was foraging with Ruddy Turnstones and Rock Sandpipers.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – Repeated experiences with close individuals on SNP. The ones at the Hutch Cut seemed a bit out of their element.

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – A few were mixed in with Red-necked Phalaropes on SNP.

GREATER YELLOWLEGS (*Tringa melanoleuca*) – One was displaying along the western end of the Denali Highway.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers).

POMARINE JAEGER (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) – One flew by at medium distance during our walk at Marunich on SNP. Fortunately, it showed off its spoon-like tail projections that allowed us to easily identify this brute.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – We had two flybys at SNP.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – One flew by in the foggy conditions at Marunich on SNP, but the pair at Denali right outside the bus were particularly spectacular!

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – Though numbers of breeders have dropped significantly at SNP, we still had some great looks on the cliffs in direct comparison with Thick-billed Murres.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – These stocky murres outnumbered Common Murres at SNP, though their population has crashed in recent years here.

PIGEON GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus columba*) – One flew by at SNP.

PARAKEET AUKLET (*Aethia psittacula*) – We had spectacular views of these strange alcids on the cliffs at SNP.

LEAST AUKLET (*Aethia pusilla*) – Dozens of these tiny seabirds whirled past us and landed nearby on rocks at SNP. We got to see their funny courtship behavior and even their pink-tinged eyes.

CRESTED AUKLET (*Aethia cristatella*) – Though they weren't showing well on cliffs, we had good looks at this awesome auklet on the water and in flight at SNP.

HORNED PUFFIN (*Fratercula corniculata*) – Close views on the cliffs at SNP. One was about 10 feet away from us as it preened and relaxed.

TUFTED PUFFIN (*Fratercula cirrhata*) – This big, black puffin with the blonde ponytails perched up on the rocks at Reef Point and gave us some great views.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*) – This was the common mid-sized gull that we saw at SNP.

RED-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa brevirostris*) – This Bering Sea specialty was around in good numbers at SNP. We had some close flybys and nice views of birds splashing around at Weather Bureau Lake, showing off their red legs and feet.

SABINE'S GULL (*Xema sabini*) – Two lovely adults fed in the surfline at Marunich on SNP and moved past us at very close range.

BONAPARTE'S GULL (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) – We saw this small gull during the drive back from Denali to Anchorage.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – An immature was on the beach at Gorbach Bay on SNP. This is a scarce but regular visitor from Asia.

MEW GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus*) – We saw one on the runway at SNP airport as the group boarded the charter flight. Mew Gulls are rare at SNP; we saw many more in Anchorage, where they are common.

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – We saw these big gulls while driving in the Denali area and at the western end of the Denali Highway. At least one was out on SNP.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*) – We had a nice study of a ratty immature bird on the beach at Marunich on SNP. It showed the classic "goose-bodied" structure of the species and also had some tell-tale dark feathers coming in on the back.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – Common at SNP; in Anchorage, we saw hybrids between this species and Herring Gull.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – One crisp adult was a fixture at the edge of the harbor on SNP.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – We saw a few during the drive back to Anchorage from Denali.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Ours were in the Anchorage-Wasilla corridor. [H]

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

ORIENTAL CUCKOO (*Cuculus optatus*) – This amazing rarity put on a good show for us in the Main Quarry at SNP. It was a hepatic morph female with a strongly barred back, and it seemed to be rather weak (probably from its long Bering Sea crossing).

Strigidae (Owls)

NORTHERN HAWK OWL (*Surnia ulula*) – One of these rare nomads was perched up alongside the road during the bus trip into Denali National Park.

SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*) – Charm and Tom glimpsed one at SNP while scanning from Polovina Hill.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle alcyon*) – We saw one on the drive from Denali back to Anchorage.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*) – A few were in the Sockeye Burn near Willow.

AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (*Picoides dorsalis*) – We visited a nest hole and got to see a few visits by an adult bird to feed the begging chicks.

BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Picoides arcticus*) – A pair performed really nicely along the road at the Sockeye Burn - great looks at this fantastic woodpecker.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – Seen during the bus ride in Denali National Park

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*) – A gray morph adult was near Polychrome Pass in Denali National Park.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE (*Contopus sordidulus*) – Two were singing in the Sockeye Burn near Willow.

ALDER FLYCATCHER (*Empidonax alnorum*) – Several of these small flycatchers were offering "Free beer!" in the Sockeye Burn.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

GRAY JAY (*Perisoreus canadensis*) – The group had good views around the Denali Bluffs Hotel; we saw the species again in the Sockeye Burn.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (*Pica hudsonia*) – Common and widespread on the mainland.

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

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW (*Tachycineta thalassina*) – A male circled overhead, calling, at Lake Hood/ Spenard.

BANK SWALLOW (*Riparia riparia*) – We saw a tired migrant on a few occasions on SNP. When Cory first found it, it was flying around and then sheltering under a bank along Gorbach Bay.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (*Poecile atricapillus*) – A family group was along the edge of Lake Hood/ Spenard in Anchorage.

BOREAL CHICKADEE (*Poecile hudsonicus*) – A few of these brown-capped chickadees were at the Denali Bluffs Hotel.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

PACIFIC WREN (ALASCENSIS GROUP) (*Troglodytes pacificus alascensis*) – This is the stout subspecies that we observed a few times during our visit to SNP. Good views along Reef Point cliffs and in the Main Quarry.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*) – Common in the Sockeye Burn.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH (*Catharus minimus*) – One was teed up and singing near the western end of the Denali Highway.

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (*Catharus ustulatus*) – We found this buff-spectacled thrush singing its ethereal sonic spiral along the Denali Highway.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – Scattered sightings on the mainland portion of the trip.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Only in the Anchorage-Wasilla area, in urban/ suburban areas. [I]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – One of these Asian vagrants flushed up in front of us at the Polovina Cut on SNP. It flew up the hill and quickly disappeared from view.

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – Three perched up at close range along the side of the Parks Highway on our return drive from Denali. It was awesome to see this low-density forest species so well.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

LAPLAND LONGSPUR (*Calcarius lapponicus*) – These lovely songbirds were common on SNP. Their songs filled the air at almost every turn on the island.

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – Fairly common on SNP, especially in rocky areas. We found several breeding pairs in the quarries on the island.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH (*Parkesia noveboracensis*) – We heard a few singing birds during our birding stops between Denali and Anchorage.

ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER (*Oreothlypis celata*) – Seen in the Denali area.

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*) – A few were along the western end of the Denali Highway.

BLACKPOLL WARBLER (*Setophaga striata*) – This handsome warbler perched up and sang from atop a spruce along the western end of the Denali Highway.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE) (*Setophaga coronata coronata*) – Common in mainland forests.

WILSON'S WARBLER (*Cardellina pusilla*) – Excellent looks along the Denali Highway.

Passerellidae (New World Buntings and Sparrows)

AMERICAN TREE SPARROW (*Spizelloides arborea*) – These handsome red-capped sparrows were singing along the western end of the Denali Highway.

FOX SPARROW (RED) (*Passerella iliaca zaboria*) – A few were singing along the Denali Highway.

DARK-EYED JUNCO (*Junco hyemalis*) – A few sightings in the Denali region.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (GAMBEL'S) (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*) – Fairly common around Denali.

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – One was singing outside our Anchorage hotel along the edge of Lake Hood/ Spenard.

LINCOLN'S SPARROW (*Melospiza lincolni*) – A few popped up briefly along the Parks Highway during one of our birding stops on the drive back to Anchorage.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

BRAMBLING (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – A few group members saw one of these Asian finches just outside the airport/ hotel at SNP. It didn't stick around for everyone to get a good look.

GRAY-CROWNED ROSY-FINCH (PRIBILOF IS.) (*Leucosticte tephrocotis umbrina*) – These big, beautiful finches are common and gregarious on SNP. They seem to fill the House Sparrow niche on the island, nesting under eaves and flocking in town.

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – These well-streaked redpolls showed in Anchorage and in the Denali region.

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL (*Loxia leucoptera*) – These boreal finches called and flew over us at several locations between Willow and Denali, but good views eluded us this time.

MAMMALS

SNOWSHOE HARE (*Lepus americanus*) – These large-footed bunnies were along the road in Denali National Park.

HOARY MARMOT (*Marmota caligata*) – Good sightings during the Denali bus trip.

ARCTIC GROUND SQUIRREL (*Spermophilus parryii*) – Common at Denali.

RED SQUIRREL (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – This is the small squirrel of the mainland conifer forests.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – We saw these fluffy canids daily on SNP. Most were mottled gray.

BROWN (INCL. GRIZZLY) BEAR (*Ursus arctos*) – Do you remember the bears walking down the road past the bus in Denali National Park? Of course you do - they couldn't have been much closer!

STELLER'S SEA LION (*Eumetopias jubatus*) – A few were swimming along the coastline of SNP. One was eating a fish below us at Reef Point while kittiwakes dove in to pick up the scraps.

NORTHERN FUR SEAL (*Callorhinus ursinus*) – These dark pinnipeds with the long whiskers have declined precipitously on SNP in recent years, but we still saw (and heard!) plenty of them during our visit.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – A few were swimming and hauled out along the SNP coastline. These are "true seals" without external ear flaps.

MOOSE (*Alces alces*) – These massive deer were a highlight of the Anchorage to Denali section of the tour.

CARIBOU (*Rangifer tarandus granti*) – Herds were dotted through the vast valleys of Denali National Park.

REINDEER (*Rangifer tarandus sibiricus*) – On one day at SNP, we saw the large herd of these introduced reindeer on the road to Southwest Point. [I]

DALL'S SHEEP (*Ovis dalli*) – These whitish sheep were on the rocky slopes at Denali National Park.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 102 bird taxa and 13 mammal taxa