



BARROW: SEARCH FOR ROSS'S GULL 2013

Oct 4, 2013 to Oct 8, 2013
Dave Stejskal & Pepe Rojas

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.

I'd say this first run of the Barrow: Search for Ross's Gull tour could be termed an "overwhelming success"! Despite knowing the lay of the land very well from my past June tours here over many years, I still really didn't know what to expect at this season. And all the while searching for a bird that I thought would be there, but wasn't certain would be there!

Our favorite restaurant in town, Pepe's North of the Border, burning to the ground in August proved to be a bigger monkey wrench than I anticipated, since it also forced the closure of the Top of the World Hotel next door. A mad scramble at our office ensued after we got word of this, but, thanks to tour manager Maggie Burnett, we were able to secure enough beds in enough hotels to make this tour run for all who signed up. A little inconvenient for us on the ground once we got there, but we managed well. Sam & Lee's Restaurant and Arctic Pizza got more of our business than I thought they would, but I'm sure they were thankful for the unanticipated patronage.

I didn't think that there would be all that many birds in and around Barrow before this tour commenced, and I was mostly right. The one bird that we did come to see, the fabulous Ross's Gull, was, thankfully, present in dizzying numbers during our stay. I had seen a grand total of nine Ross's Gulls up to that point in the world over nearly thirty years of guiding tours (the Pribilofs, Nome, Barrow, and Churchill), and we blew by that number in the first 30 minutes out at the base of the Pt. Barrow spit! By the time we left Barrow on Day 4 of this tour, we had tallied well over 1200 individuals, most of them streaming by in small to medium-sized flocks from the Chukchi Sea to the Beaufort Sea, or feeding in the surf at Pt. Barrow itself. This spectacle was a dream that I think we all shared going into this trip, and I'd have to say we all left completely sated.



Not one, not two... but 1200 Ross's Gulls! Our quest was wildly successful. (Photo by participant Bernie Grossman)

Besides the Ross's Gulls, it was thrilling to see several Polar Bears out on the ice of the Elson Lagoon on the Beaufort Sea! I wasn't really anticipating seeing these at this season, but I was happily proved wrong. Several Snowy Owls were crowd-pleasers, as were the many Yellow-billed Loons that we saw on the Chukchi Sea. Flocks of eiders, all in winter plumage, streamed by on a regular basis, and we even spied a few distant Short-tailed Shearwaters on the horizon during a windy spell -- an unexpected 'lifer' for several folks.

Pepe and I had an absolute blast sharing this adventure with each of you! It was a great way to tick this one off your 'most-wanted' lists! We hope that our paths cross again on another tour somewhere soon. Have a wonderful Holiday Season!

--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)

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – A single lingering female out at the Point for some of us. Any duck here at this season, other than an eider or a scoter, ought to be long gone by now!

STELLER'S EIDER (*Polysticta stelleri*) – A single female out at the point was the only one found. Like the above Greater Scaup, this species should be long gone by now.

SPECTACLED EIDER (*Somateria fischeri*) – I'm not sure if it was just a few birds among lots of Commons & Kings, or if it was indeed a flock of mostly Specs, but the few I got on before they became mere specs over the water were this species. Far outnumbered by the next two species.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – It seemed like most of the eiders that we saw on the water on the Chukchi Sea were this species, while the majority of the big flocks that we saw flying by were the next species.

COMMON EIDER (*Somateria mollissima*) – I saw more Common Eiders on this short October trip here than I've ever seen at Barrow during all of my past June tours.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – We didn't see huge numbers of these sea ducks, but we did have decent numbers on the water and flying by on a daily basis.

Gaviidae (Loons)

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – This species was outnumbered every day by the much larger Yellow-billed Loon (which has never been the case in my June experience here over 25 years!)

YELLOW-BILLED LOON (*Gavia adamsii*) – Surprisingly common and easy to see off the coast in the Chukchi Sea during our visit. This one is actually a tough bird on our June tours here, so it looks like this Ross's Gull tour is going to be the best tour for this species as well.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) – We had several of these off the coast, especially on the day that we had strong winds out of the north. This tour may end up being a good one for this species as well going forward. It's always a problematic species on our June Alaska tours.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – Several birds feeding in the surf during our visit were late for this locale.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*) – Most folks saw a smartly-patterned juvenile bird (first thought to be a Sabine's Gull) off Point Barrow with the hundreds of Ross's Gulls feeding in the surf during our runs to the Point with Mike.

ROSS'S GULL (*Rhodostethia rosea*) – We ended up seeing this fabulous bird pretty much just like it was billed - but I have to tell you that I was pretty nervous going into this trip! I left Barrow relatively convinced that you'll see a Ross's Gull during this stretch of dates, if you're vigilant with the scopes and you manage to get out to the point. This Fall migration is documented quite well, but, if you look at the reports on a daily basis, there are a few days where the observers didn't note this stunner at all - but I don't think you can spend three days in Barrow in early Oct. and not see it. And man, did we ever see it!! Seventy-five birds on our first day was mighty fine, but 1200+ on our third day? Are you kidding me?!? Seeing numbers like that has been a dream of mine for many, many years, and I'm sure glad it came to fruition with all of you standing on the beach with me!

THAYER'S GULL (*Larus thayeri*) – We had a couple of fresh juvenile birds and at least one 2nd-cycle bird out at the whale blubber pile at the base of the point. They're awfully scarce here during June (I've only seen here once before), but they're really not all that rare here at this season.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – One winter-plumaged adult with the abundant Glaucous Gulls was a vagrant here.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – I think this was the second-most common gull species at Barrow during our trip.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

BLACK GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus grylle*) – A few basic-plumaged birds (= essentially all white) were seen from shore on the water and as flybys.

Strigidae (Owls)

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*) – This was our first bird of the tour as we were sitting down for dinner on the 2nd floor of the restaurant on the day we all arrived. We got much better looks when we ventured inland along the Cakeeater Rd., finding a male and female a couple of miles from the coast. We eventually found yet another bird perched on a building on the north end of town for a total of four for the tour. Great looks!

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – A couple of birds were making the rounds through town during our stay. This is typically the only passerine that stays in town throughout the winter months.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – Marshall spied a small flock of these near our favorite restaurant in town.

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – We were finally able to track down where the redpolls were hanging out, and it turned out that most of the flock of 15 that we first saw were this species, and not Hoary.

HOARY REDPOLL (*Acanthis hornemanni*) – At least one adult male in with the more common Commons at the feeders in town.

MAMMALS

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – We saw a very distant animal out on the ice of the Beaufort Sea. The backlighting made it impossible to see anything other than a distinctive shape.

POLAR BEAR (*Ursus maritimus*) – I actually didn't have much hope of seeing this magnificent mammal at all on our tour, thinking that there wouldn't be enough sea ice in the area to support them. I'm sure glad I was wrong! We ended up seeing five bears in the distance from the base of the point at once, and who knows if that bear on the ice at the point was one of our original five? The only thing that could have been better was if they had been a little closer, but the looks were still terrific in that clear Arctic air.

SPOTTED SEAL (*Phoca largha*) – Seen by a few folks on the trip out to the Point.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 21 bird taxa and 3 mammal taxa