



Field Guides Tour Report

Barrow: Search for Ross's Gull 2014

Oct 3, 2014 to Oct 7, 2014

Eric Hynes & Tom Reed

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



Anyone who says there are no sexy gulls has never seen a Ross's Gull like we did! (Photo by guide Eric Hynes)

From a guide's perspective, a tour principally targeting one species is as scary as it gets, especially when the likelihood of encountering the species hinges on the weather! Much to my relief, predominantly strong northerly onshore winds blew during our stay in Barrow and we were spectacularly successful.

This tour was less about quantity and more about quality. Our trip list is brief, but the species we tallied and the looks we enjoyed of each were marvelous. Little did we know when we all scrambled to get bins on that first Ross's Gull that we would spot them at almost all of our stops along the coast.

A significant surf with waves breaking right on the beach really churned up the zooplankton and generated a phalarope and gull feeding frenzy literally at the water's edge. Red Phalaropes, Glaucous Gulls, and Black-legged Kittiwakes were numerous and cooperative. Present in lower numbers but no less cooperative were the beautiful Ross's Gulls and first winter Thayer's Gulls. What made our views of these birds so memorable was the glorious light. How could you ever forget those pink bellies?

The number of Snowy Owl encounters exceeded my wildest expectations. Clearly the lemming population around Barrow is high right now. It was a wonderful study in the variability of dark markings on Snowy Owls. We observed nearly white birds and some individuals that only showed clean white on the facial disk.

Witnessing the Inupiat people sustainably harvest Bowhead Whales was a profound cultural event, enhancing our overall experience immensely. Other highlights included the first winter Sabine's Gull, Hoary Redpoll study at Mike's feeders, good looks at Yellow-billed Loons, seeing Glaucous Gull and all its variability so well, the white Arctic Fox dashing across the ice, and the bonus Polar Bear on our last morning!

Thanks so much for choosing Field Guides for your Ross's Gull adventure. Tom and I had a blast and really enjoyed birding with all of you. Hopefully we will be raising bins together again somewhere down the road.

Peace, Love, Pink, and Polar Bears,

--Eric

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 WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (WESTERN) (*Anser albifrons frontalis*) – This goose is a common breeder in the Barrow area in summer. One of them had to be the last to leave. Thank goodness we went back to see this goose after the jaeger or else we would have missed our best look at Arctic Fox.

BRANT (BLACK) (*Branta bernicla nigricans*) – Apparently nobody told the two individuals on the pond near hunt camp they were supposed to migrate awhile ago.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – Our first view was of a hen in flight leaving Elson Lagoon and headed out to the Chukchi Sea. Few people saw that bird. Thankfully we caught up to it again in the company of a hen King Eider on the Chukchi Sea.

SPECTACLED EIDER (*Somateria fischeri*) – We scrutinized every eider flock that flew by trying to spot one of these. Sadly, we didn't catch up to a Spectacled Eider until after most of you had left. Walt and Larry were the only ones who got to see this uncommon and range restricted duck.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – We never had huge numbers but it was the default duck on the water. More hens appeared to be around than drakes but a few orange-billed eclipse males were in the lagoon.

COMMON EIDER (PACIFIC) (*Somateria mollissima v-nigrum*) – Substantial flocks were frequently spotted leaving Elson Lagoon for the Chukchi Sea. Unfortunately we never enjoyed a good study of this Pacific subspecies on the water.

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (*Melanitta fusca*) – We spotted a single drake on the Chukchi Sea and eventually got great looks at it on Elson Lagoon.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Numerous small flocks flew by still in breeding plumage. A scattering of individuals were on the lakes and lagoons.

Gaviidae (Loons)

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – Sightings of this elegant loon were a daily occurrence, predominately in flight and some adults still in breeding plumage. The typical spotting was of several birds overhead coming from Elson Lagoon and headed out over the Chukchi Sea.

YELLOW-BILLED LOON (*Gavia adamsii*) – This is the largest loon and a cherished lifer for many in the group. We enjoyed three or four individuals each day with scope views of juvenile birds on the water.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – Wow, have you ever seen so many? Flocks and flocks worked the raging surf by the hundreds. We enjoyed our closest views of this hardy pelagic shorebird along the edge of Elson Lagoon.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

POMARINE JAEGER (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) – Jaeger ID is notoriously tricky and our bird proved to be a great learning experience. We settled on Parasitic for an ID of "the" jaeger in the field based on the warmer tones but after analyzing the photos, the correct ID is clearly Pomarine. The scaling on the upper side makes this a juvenile bird. This young Pomarine Jaeger blew up the feeding frenzy in front of us while we stood on the beach that first morning. We later caught up to it tugging on a dead gull. Key field marks noted in the photos were: blunt, barely projecting central rectrices; wide, bold barring on the undertail coverts; hefty body and substantial bill; broad wings including the "hand," and blunt tips to the outer primaries lacking any pale tips. One more clincher is the "double flash" -- notice the pale base to the primary coverts on the underwing. Juvenile Pomarine Jaegers are known to linger and the expected jaeger last to leave on migration.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*) – Given how few the tour had last year, I was pleasantly surprised to see hundreds each day. Particularly appealing were the crisp first winter birds with that striking plumage.

SABINE'S GULL (*Xema sabini*) – After hearing reports from other birders of one or two being around, it was a relief to catch up to our own bird on the third day. It was a highlight for many, including the guides. We enjoyed a great scope view of a juvenile bird on the water at the end of the road. Its small size and elegant structure were noted. Too bad it flew off while we turned our backs in the snow squall, missing the bold pattern on the wings in flight.

ROSS'S GULL (*Rhodostethia rosea*) – "I see pink, hot pink!" Wow, words will not do justice to the experience we enjoyed with the target species. Ross's Gull is SO worth the effort to see it under these circumstances. Adult birds, first winter birds, close birds, birds on the beach and in flight... we had it all. The low angle afternoon sunlight illuminating those pink beauties was magical. I think we can thank the substantial surf for the gulls working the shoreline -- no scope needed.

THAYER'S GULL (*Larus thayeri*) – The Thayer's - Kumlien's - Iceland gull complex is a challenging and highly debated taxonomic conundrum. We were lucky to have such great looks at "classic" first winter birds in fresh plumage. It made some people feel more comfortable about having the species on their life list.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – By far the most common gull in the region at this time of year. More than a thousand individuals were tallied each day. The variation in plumage and structure, particularly among the first winter birds, was noteworthy. Everything from whitish, to buffy, to brownish, a few birds even approaching sooty.

Strigidae (Owls)

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*) – We were expecting to see this magnificent beast but I think we were all blown away by their near constant presence. What a treat it was to see how remarkably variable they can be in terms of the dark markings. We studied dark birds with the only noticeable white restricted to the facial disk, contrasting with a few individuals that were nearly all white, and everything in between. Remember that one Snowy Owl that gulped down two lemmings in less than ten minutes?!

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – A couple of individuals primarily stuck around town.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – One individual liked to sneak in and out at the feeding station but eventually we all got reasonable looks at

it.

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – Some birders reported some at the feeders but we never saw any there with certainty. This species didn't make the list until the day of the departure when a few of us flushed three birds off the road in a snow squall. They flew alongside the van long enough to note their dark, streaky rumps.

HOARY REDPOLL (*Acanthis hornemanni*) – The amount of variability among the individuals at Mike's feeders was noteworthy with some birds surprisingly dark but still showing clear rumps and tiny bills.

MAMMALS

NEARCTIC BROWN LEMMING (*Lemmus trimucronatus*) – This was the fluffy rodent running around under the feeders at Mike's place and the creature we watched multiple Snowy Owls catch and consume.

BOWHEAD WHALE (*Balaena mysticetus*) – This species makes the list as a dead upon arrival beast. Seeing the Inupiat people sustainably harvest six massive creatures was fascinating, emotional, profoundly sad, and exciting all at once. What an amazing cultural experience.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – We lucked into three sightings of this hardy little canine. Our first look dashing across the ice in front of us was the best view.

POLAR BEAR (*Ursus maritimus*) – Wow, a dream come true for many of us and the icing on the cake on the day of departure. We saw one well near hunt camp and a second very distant animal at the scraps pile near the point.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 22 bird taxa and 4 mammal taxa