



Field Guides Tour Report

Barrow: Search for Ross's Gull 2015

Oct 2, 2015 to Oct 6, 2015

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



Proof positive of the success of our search for the tour's main target: the gorgeous, enigmatic little Ross's Gull. Photo by participant Peter Relson.

In three full days of birding (and some additional time on the bookending days), we came to know the town of Barrow, the US's northernmost community, quite well. From the base of Point Barrow to the gravel mine south of the airport, from the Chukchi Sea to the open country on Cake Eater Road, we got familiar with what was present in early October. The avifauna of the region is admittedly limited, but it makes up for this in its overall quality! Imagine: somewhere in the neighborhood of 15 Snowy Owls were lined up along Cake Eater Road and actively gorging on lemmings (as were local Arctic Foxes!). Flocks of Long-tailed Ducks and three species of eiders winged west past Point Barrow as they headed out of the Arctic Ocean towards the Bering Sea or the Pacific, where open water would persist through the darkness of winter. Loons passed overhead, including the all-too-rare Yellow-billed Loon, which is so rare most places! And, of course, we enjoyed the movement of more than 200 Ross's Gulls as they headed east into the Beaufort Sea to take advantage of some as-yet unknown food source there.

Other birds of interest were present too: our last morning, what is likely Alaska's fourth state record of Great Black-backed Gull was found and we enjoyed views of it. Other gulls mixed with the mass of Glaucous Gulls that crowded the northern end of the community, including a rare Herring, and a hybrid "Nelson's". Black-legged Kittiwakes joined the Ross's Gulls flying past the point, Common and Hoary redpolls descended on the one bird feeding station in town (along with a strangely out of place Pine Siskin on two days) and a few Black Brant, showing signs of being hunting casualties, lingered on the shores of the Beaufort Sea.

Another event was in full swing while we visited Barrow: the annual Bowhead Whale hunt! This traditional hunt, carried out by the Inupiat people, who have survived on the cold, barren wastelands of the Arctic Ocean shores for millennia using this food source, is perhaps hard for those of us from more temperate climates (and well-stocked supermarkets) to understand. Still, it was awe-inspiring to see the Bowheads so close in front of us, and also to see how meticulously the Inupiat remove all useful parts of the carcass and save it for winter. A remarkable scene, to be sure!

The short autumn days and cold temperatures (already hinting at the winter days to come) reminded us that we were north of the Arctic Circle. A month or so after our tour, the number of birds around Barrow will drop considerably as the Arctic Ocean freezes up (and all the gulls move elsewhere) and the days grow ever shorter. It was a treat to see these phenomena in action, and to get to share them with all of you! We hope you enjoyed the tour as much as we did, and that we'll see you with binoculars in hand (and perhaps fewer layers) on another tour!

Good birding! -- Dan and 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)

BRANT (BLACK) (*Branta bernicla nigricans*) – An adult and juv, probably both hunting casualties, were at the base of the point.

SPECTACLED EIDER (*Somateria fischeri*) – A few flybys over the course of the tour, but we did manage to find a male on the water (at half a mile's distance) that we could enjoy in the scope.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – This and the next species were about equal in numbers, but we saw more Kings on the water and up close.

COMMON EIDER (*Somateria mollissima*)

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (*Melanitta fusca*) – Singles and small numbers with eiders.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – One of the most numerous species of the tour, large flocks were passing the point almost any time we looked out.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – One individual first on the water, then taking off.

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – Most of the flyby loons were this species, and we saw a few on the water, as well... some of which appeared to be sporting some breeding plumage.

YELLOW-BILLED LOON (*Gavia adamsii*) – A few flybys.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – Two birds flying low over the water at great distance on the 3rd were only seen by a few, and not well, either.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*) – A smattering, mostly first-year birds, flew past the point. At one point, a small flock landed on the water.

ROSS'S GULL (*Rhodostethia rosea*) – The main target of the tour, and thankfully we saw many! Over 200 individuals passed the point during the tour, although it was interesting to note that the day with no wind was the day we missed the species altogether! Wind, even from the east, is better than no wind.

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – One or two first-winter birds were mixed in with the Glaucous Gull mob that was gathered around the whale butchering area.

THAYER'S GULL (*Larus thayeri*) – We saw at least one adult well as it rested on the pond by the old NORAD center. Some folks may have had additional birds besides.

NELSON'S GULL (GLAUCOUS X HERRING) (*Larus hyperboreus X argentatus*) – In our search for 'dark-winged' gulls among the Glaucous, we spotted many of these, most were first or second-year birds. There were also a few brief or distantly-seen dark-winged gulls that may have been Slaty-backed, but we weren't able to see them well enough to confirm the id.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – The most abundant species of the tour, and we saw every possible winter plumage!

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*) – Thanks to Aaron Lang, we enjoyed an apparent second-winter bird that was mixed up with the Glaucous mob our last morning. Apparently, this is Alaska's fourth record of the species!

Strigidae (Owls)

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*) – Wow, what a show! Many (10-15) were along Cake Eater Road, and we enjoyed their beauty!

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*)

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – A few birds were at the feeders in town (a first for me!).

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – Slightly outnumbered by the following species, but it was nice to have the comparison!

HOARY REDPOLL (*Acanthis hornemanni*) – Many at the feeders and near the airport. Showed the variation in rump streaking and other characters... I am coming around to the idea that the two Redpolls are perhaps not different species after all...

PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*) – A bit of a surprise, a single bird joined the redpolls at the feeders, and we later saw it by the airport.

MAMMALS

NEARCTIC BROWN LEMMING (*Lemmus trimucronatus*) – Although we only saw a few alive, we saw many disappearing down the maw of the Snowy Owls.

BOWHEAD WHALE (*Balaena mysticetus*) – None alive, but it would be difficult to ignore the fact that we saw at least 5 of these large animals brought in by the Inupiat for butchering!

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – One gray-and-white individual playing on an open icy clearing was a nice sighting our last day!

RINGED SEAL (*Phoca hispida*) – We saw several of these both swimming in the sea and hauled up on ice. No bears to bother them!

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 23 bird taxa and 4 mammal taxa