



Field Guides Tour Report

Alaska Fall Goldmine: Ross's Gulls in Barrow & Rarities on St. Paul 2017

Sep 30, 2017 to Oct 8, 2017

Tom Johnson

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



Our group (flanked by St. Paul Island Tour guides Phil Chaon and Cameron Cox) celebrates the remarkable sighting of a Short-tailed Albatross circling Killer Whales. Happy birders! Photo by guide Tom Johnson.

The call of the far north led us back to Alaska for this adventurous fall tour. For the first time, we combined our tried-and-true Barrow Ross's Gull tour with a fall migration trip to St. Paul Island in the Bering Sea.

After meeting in Anchorage, we went to bed and then woke up a short time later to enjoy a show from the Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights! After returning to bed and getting some aurora-induced sleep, we flew to St. Paul Island where we spent three nights. Birding here in fall entails a combination of seawatching and methodically checking sheltered sites like rock quarries and patches of summer-nourished vegetation called "putchkie". We came here to search for migrants, and with some effort, we ended up with an excellent haul. The Asian birds that we found included Eurasian Wigeon, Gray-tailed Tattler, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Eurasian Skylark, Dusky Thrush, and Red-flanked Bluetail - the latter two are particularly rare. Additionally, we had daily sightings of a roving Gyrfalcon, and also spotted a female Steller's Eider mixed in with Harlequin Ducks. One sighting in particular stood out and needs to be explained a bit further: one afternoon, as we were about to leave Reef Point after viewing Northern Fur Seals up close, we turned around and saw Killer Whales splashing around in the distance offshore. The whales (large, ocean dolphins, actually!) had just made a kill of a fur seal and they were tearing it apart. Focusing on the animals in our scopes, we then noticed a huge dark bird circling the mayhem; with some study, it became clear that this was not only an albatross, but the rare and highly prized SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS! We spent a while watching this immature bird fly around and occasionally settle on the water, and some frantic cell phone messages allowed the other birders on the island to gather to share the find. We were extremely lucky to witness this rare interaction from shore.

After our great time on St. Paul, we had a day back in Anchorage before flying north to Barrow. Though rainy conditions prevailed for much of the day, we had close views of a Spruce Grouse, an American Three-toed Woodpecker, and Trumpeter Swans, among others. We ended the day with a tasty dinner at an Anchorage restaurant called "Fat Ptarmigan".

Barrow was our final destination on the tour, and we spent our time in this amazing northern outpost combining birding with an extraordinary cultural experience. Not only did we see ~800 migrating Ross's Gulls (seen on each day of our stay!), but Spectacled Eiders, Yellow-billed Loons, and a Gyrfalcon also livened up the party. The flocks of fast but delicate and oh-so-pink Ross's Gulls were the main draw for most people on this tour, and we were able to spend hours watching them. The breezy conditions created a fury of waves breaking on Barrow's beaches, and the Ross's Gulls would occasionally take a break from migrating and pause to forage along the beaches, giving us some jaw-dropping views.

While the birding was amazing at Barrow, we also bore witness to a few memorable cultural events during our stay. First, we watched part of a high school football game on America's northernmost football field - Barrow defeated Nikiski in the Alaska small-school state semifinals while half the town showed up to cheer them on, bundled up in winter clothing. Later, the team would go on to win the state championship! Additionally, our visit overlapped with the fall whaling season for Barrow's native community, and Inupiat whaling crews brought in three Bowhead Whales one day. We were

in a position to see the whole process as the community gathered to celebrate the whale and divide up their sustainable harvest. It was astonishing to see Ross's Gulls and Yellow-billed Loons flying over the whale butchering site!

Our journey was a true adventure in some of Alaska's most remote outposts, with some really excellent birding along the way. Thank you for joining me, and I hope you'll always remember this amazing trip.

Tom

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 WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE (*Anser albifrons*) – One was on Webster Lake on St. Paul Island each day during our visit there.

BRANT (BLACK) (*Branta bernicla nigricans*) – One was lingering quite late near the duck camp near Barrow.

TRUMPETER SWAN (*Cygnus buccinator*) – Six individuals were at Spenard Crossing in Anchorage.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*) – Up to four individuals were on Antone Lake at St. Paul Island, where they outnumbered American Wigeon.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*) – Two were with the Eurasian Wigeon on Antone Lake, St. Paul Island, and one more was at Spenard Crossing in Anchorage.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Six were on St. Paul Island (where scarce), and we saw up to 55 at various locations in Anchorage.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – One was on St. Paul, and we saw small flocks around Anchorage.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN) (*Anas crecca carolinensis*) – The one teal we saw in Anchorage was most likely the American subspecies.

We saw up to 35 Green-winged Teal on St. Paul Island where both Eurasian and American birds occur, but since the birds were either females or in eclipse plumage, their subspecies-defining features were not visible.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – Small numbers in Anchorage and on St. Paul.

LESSER SCAUP (*Aythya affinis*) – A small flock was mixed with other ducks in Anchorage.

STELLER'S EIDER (*Polysticta stelleri*) – One female was mixed with Harlequin Ducks off Marunich on the north side of St. Paul Island.

SPECTACLED EIDER (*Somateria fischeri*) – In singles and small groups, about a dozen birds passed us at fairly close range along the Navy airstrip in Barrow. These were all females and juveniles.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – We saw a flock of ~25 on St. Paul Island and then saw them daily in Barrow, with up to 60 per day.

COMMON EIDER (PACIFIC) (*Somateria mollissima v-nigrum*) – A common migrant in Barrow. Large flocks were migrating to the southwest during our visit, with up to 2000 in one day.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Fairly common as a non-breeder on St. Paul Island, with up to 65 birds per day.

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER (NORTH AMERICAN) (*Melanitta fusca deglandi*) – Three widely scattered sightings - 1 at Lake Hood, Anchorage, 1 at St. Paul Island, and 1 flyby at Barrow.

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta americana*) – 30 were in one flock at Marunich on St. Paul Island.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Small numbers on St. Paul Island. We then saw up to 400 per day at Barrow where this species was migrating past in mid-sized flocks.

BUFFLEHEAD (*Bucephala albeola*) – At least one was spotted during our day around the Anchorage area in the middle of the tour.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – In Anchorage, two were at Lake Hood, and four more were at Spenard Crossing.

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*) – Five were in direct comparison with Common Goldeneye on Lake Hood in Anchorage.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – Ten of these striking divers were at Spenard Crossing in Anchorage.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

SPRUCE GROUSE (*Falcapipennis canadensis*) – From the back of the van, Mary spotted a female along the road edge during our second cruise of a productive stretch of road near Arctic Valley. We then enjoyed close views of this scarce and fancy chicken.

Gaviidae (Loons)

PACIFIC LOON (*Gavia pacifica*) – Two were distant at St. Paul Island, but we had nice scope views of a breeding plumage bird in Wasilla and then saw up to 20 migrants per day in Barrow.

YELLOW-BILLED LOON (*Gavia adamsii*) – Migrants flew over regularly at the Navy airstrip near the base of Point Barrow. This was a mix of breeding adults and a few juvenile birds.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus*) – Two were on Lake Hood on our first birding outing near our Anchorage hotel.

Diomedidae (Albatrosses)

SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS (*Phoebastria albatrus*) – This mega-rarity that we saw while seawatching on St. Paul Island was one of the biggest highlights of the entire tour. As we watched a pod of Killer Whales splashing around a Northern Fur Seal kill, a huge, long-winged seabird started circling the action. With extended scope views, we were able to see the chocolate brown plumage and huge pink bill of this immature Short-tailed Albatross, a world rarity! We had this astonishing bird in sight for about an hour and a half and all the birders present on the island got to enjoy it.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (RODGERSII) (*Fulmarus glacialis rogersii*) – Both dark and light morph individuals passed by offshore regularly during our stay on St. Paul Island.

SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER (*Ardenna tenuirostris*) – We had a few distant individuals during our seawatches on St. Paul Island.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

RED-FACED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax urile*) – Fairly common at St. Paul Island, where this specialty species is found year-round. Up to 100 per day.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus washingtoniensis*) – At least one sighting during our day birding around the Anchorage area.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

PACIFIC GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis fulva*) – 2-5 juveniles daily at St. Paul Island, where they liked to forage in the roads.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*) – Up to 25 per day on St. Paul Island.

SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER (*Calidris acuminata*) – Up to 4 per day on St. Paul Island. Juveniles of this Asian-breeding species are regular fall migrants in the Bering Sea.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – A few were mixed with Rock Sandpipers at St. Paul Island. The one that we saw in Barrow was very late for the site.

ROCK SANDPIPER (*Calidris ptilocnemis*) – The dark individuals that we saw mixed with large, pale ptilocnemis Rock Sandpipers were one of the mainland-breeding subspecies, but it isn't clear exactly which one.

ROCK SANDPIPER (PTILOCNEMIS) (*Calidris ptilocnemis ptilocnemis*) – These local breeders made up the vast majority of the Rock Sandpipers that we saw on St. Paul Island. Quite pale gray overall.

PECTORAL SANDPIPER (*Calidris melanotos*) – Multiple individuals were at Pumphouse Lake on St. Paul Island.

WESTERN SANDPIPER (*Calidris mauri*) – One was at Pumphouse Lake on St. Paul Island.

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – One was along Salt Lagoon on St. Paul Island. Then we found up to 100 per day in Barrow, where we had close views near the boat ramp at the duck camp.

GRAY-TAILED TATTLER (*Tringa brevipes*) – A calling juvenile was a wonderful find at Marunich on St. Paul Island. In North America, western Alaska is the only place to find this Asian breeder with any regularity.

WANDERING TATTLER (*Tringa incana*) – Two on St. Paul Island - a juvenile and a barred adult.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – A distant flyby was all we had to work with on St. Paul Island.

BLACK GUILLEMOT (MANDTII) (*Cepphus grylle mandtii*) – One made a nice, close flyby at the Navy airstrip in Barrow.

LEAST AUKLET (*Aethia pusilla*) – A few buzzing flocks of these small alcids moved back and forth just offshore from St. Paul Island, but we didn't have particularly good views.

HORNED PUFFIN (*Fratercula corniculata*) – A few distant flybys on St. Paul Island.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (POLLICARIS) (*Rissa tridactyla pollicaris*) – Common on St. Paul Island and at Barrow.

ROSS'S GULL (*Rhodostethia rosea*) – The main goal of this tour was to see the migration of this wonderful pink gull, and we succeeded! During each of our days in Barrow, we were fortunate to find dozens of individuals, with about 800 total. While many were migrating past quickly along the shoreline, we did catch up to small groups that stopped to feed in the crashing surf at close range to us.

MEW GULL (*Larus canus*) – Five were at Spenard Crossing in Anchorage.

HERRING GULL (AMERICAN) (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – One was at St. Paul Island. We didn't find any candidates for Vega Gull (the Siberian form of Herring Gull) during our trip.

ICELAND GULL (THAYER'S) (*Larus glaucoides thayeri*) – Up to 3 mocha-toned juveniles and an adult were present with Glaucous Gulls. This was the first tour on which I've seen this taxon since Thayer's Gull was lumped with Iceland Gull in the summer of 2017.

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*) – Common at St. Paul Island. Along Cook Inlet near Anchorage, the common large gulls that we saw were Herring x Glaucous-winged Gull hybrids.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Abundant at Barrow.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Flocks were in Anchorage and Wasilla. [I]

Strigidae (Owls)

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*) – One allowed some good scope views along the Gaswell Road outside Barrow.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*) – One called and popped up in front of us in the Sockeye Burn near Willow.

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*) – Three called sharply and showed nicely in the Sockeye Burn.

AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (*Picoides dorsalis*) – Despite the light rain, we enjoyed good, point-blank views of this uncommon woodpecker in the Sockeye Burn near Willow.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*) – We were certainly spoiled with Gyrfalcon sightings on this tour. One individual visited us daily on St. Paul Island. Then, while we were watching for flocks of Ross's Gulls at Barrow, another gray-brown juvenile Gyr flew in close and playfully chased a few startled Glaucous Gulls, at one time passing right between our group and another nearby birding group!

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

GRAY JAY (*Perisoreus canadensis*) – Several curious birds showed up and watched us at the edge of the forest in the Sockeye Burn.

STELLER'S JAY (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) – One was seen from the van while we drove through Anchorage.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (*Pica hudsonia*) – Common in the Anchorage area.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Common in Anchorage, and least two were in Barrow, too.

Alaudidae (Larks)

EURASIAN SKYLARK (ASIAN) (*Alauda arvensis pekinensis*) – We saw two individuals on St. Paul Island. The bulk of these large larks helped us spot them as they flushed off the ground, and the flashes of white in their outer tail feathers and the white trailing edge of the wing helped us confirm the ID.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (*Poecile atricapillus*) – Common around Anchorage.

BOREAL CHICKADEE (*Poecile hudsonicus*) – About 5 individuals were mixed with Black-capped Chickadees and other songbirds at the Sockeye Burn near Willow.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) – The first bird of the tour! During our first dinner together in Anchorage, this little guy perched just outside the window behind us.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

BROWN CREEPER (*Certhia americana*) – We found at least one during our day around the Anchorage area.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

PACIFIC WREN (ALASCENSIS GROUP) (*Troglodytes pacificus alascensis*) – This distinctive form of Pacific Wren showed nicely for us on St. Paul Island, especially in the rocks of the upper quarry cut.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

AMERICAN DIPPER (*Cinclus mexicanus*) – A visit to the Elmendorf fish hatchery in Anchorage turned up a few of these amazingly hardy riverine songbirds. One even caught a small fish while we watched.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus satrapa*) – We were surprised to find two of these sprites on St. Paul Island, where they are quite rare. More typical were the ones we saw at the Sockeye Burn.

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus calendula*) – A few sightings of migrants at St. Paul Island.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – One of the big rarities of our visit to St. Paul Island was this tiny Asian songbird migrant that did its best to hide in the patch along the edge of Webster Lake. We had a few moments to enjoy the blue tail, quickly-flicking wings, and surprised-looking eyering before this waif disappeared back into the dense vegetation.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (*Catharus ustulatus*) – One that put in a brief appearance at Northeast Point on St. Paul Island was a scarce migrant there.

HERMIT THRUSH (*Catharus guttatus*) – A migrant on St. Paul Island was in the same patch as the Red-flanked Bluetail.

DUSKY THRUSH (*Turdus eunomus*) – Another Asian surprise during our stay on St. Paul Island. Though it had been seen by others before our arrival on the island, this rarity had been quite skittish and was difficult to pin down in the island's main quarry. We were fortunate to have a stupendous, open view in the scope as this intricately patterned thrush perched atop a large boulder.

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – One was near our Anchorage hotel on our first morning of birding.

VARIED THRUSH (*Ixoreus naevius*) – We had one fly over us in the quarry on St. Paul Island (where rare). The one that fed on the Arctic Valley road near Anchorage gave us a better view.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Only a few were along the roadside in the Anchorage area. [H]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

AMERICAN PIPIT (RUBESCENS/PACIFICUS) (*Anthus rubescens pacificus*) – Four migrants were on St. Paul Island.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

LAPLAND LONGSPUR (*Calcarius lapponicus*) – Less common on St. Paul than in the spring, but we still saw up to 15 per day.

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – Up to 150 on St. Paul Island during our stay. No McKay's Buntings during this visit.

Parulidae (New World Warblers)

YELLOW WARBLER (*Setophaga petechia*) – One at St. Paul Island skulked in the roadside vegetation, raising our alarm bells for a while until it popped out and revealed its true identity.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE) (*Setophaga coronata coronata*) – One migrant was on St. Paul Island.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

FOX SPARROW (SOOTY) (*Passerella iliaca chilcatensis*) – One migrant showed poorly in the road on St. Paul Island early one morning.

FOX SPARROW (RED) (*Passerella iliaca zaboria*) – One was with other American sparrows at Reef Point on St. Paul Island.

DARK-EYED JUNCO (SLATE-COLORED) (*Junco hyemalis hyemalis*) – Several of these American migrants were on St. Paul Island during our visit. Up to 5 per day.

DARK-EYED JUNCO (OREGON) (*Junco hyemalis oregonus*) – This subspecies group is less common on St. Paul Island than Slate-colored. We saw two there, one with some Pine Siskins at the Blubber Dump and another at Polovina Lake.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (GAMBEL'S) (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*) – Two immature birds on St. Paul Island.

SAVANNAH SPARROW (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – We found singles on St. Paul Island on three different days.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

GRAY-CROWNED ROSY-FINCH (PRIBILOF IS.) (*Leucosticte tephrocotis umbrina*) – These huge, bold finches are common and conspicuous at St. Paul Island.

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – Common on St. Paul Island during our visit, with flocks of 15-25, mixed with small numbers of paler Hoary Redpolls. A few were at the Sockeye Burn near Willow, too.

HOARY REDPOLL (*Acanthis hornemanni*) – Small numbers mixed with Common Redpoll at St. Paul Island, and we saw a few more at feeders in Barrow.

PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*) – Four were at the Blubber Dump on St. Paul Island. A few more were in the Anchorage area.

MAMMALS

PRIBILOF SHREW (*Sorex hydrodromus*) – We had a great view of this rare and range-restricted animal scooting around on the tundra at Southwest Point on St. Paul Island. Absent from the other Pribilof islands, this species is found only on St. Paul.

RED SQUIRREL (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – We heard one at the Sockeye Burn near Willow. [*]

NEARCTIC BROWN LEMMING (*Lemmus trimucronatus*) – The white Arctic Fox in Barrow caught one of these meaty rodents.

ORCA (*Orcinus orca*) – A group of five of these iconic marine mammals killed and tore apart an unlucky Northern Fur Seal off Reef Point on St. Paul Island while we watched through scopes. Then they were joined by the Short-tailed Albatross... a magical experience.

BELUGA (*Delphinapterus leucas*) – A few folks saw these small white cetaceans in Cook Inlet as our plane took off from Anchorage.

BOWHEAD WHALE (*Balaena mysticetus*) – Though we didn't see them alive, we did see three animals harvested, brought to shore, celebrated, and butchered by the native community in Barrow. Impressive, sad, and fascinating all at the same time.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – We saw marbled gray animals on St. Paul Island and a beautiful white one on the tundra near Barrow. The latter animal was actively hunting, and we watched it come up with a stout lemming.

NORTHERN FUR SEAL (*Callorhinus ursinus*) – These thick-furred pinnipeds are common on St. Paul Island, though their numbers have been declining. Excellent views, especially at the seal blind at Reef Point where the animals were just a few feet away from us.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – During our walk at Southwest Point on St. Paul Island, we saw a group of these nicely marbled animals hauled out on a rock ledge.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 94 bird taxa and 9 mammal taxa