High Lonesome BirdTours

Gambell/Nome 2: May 26 – June 3, 2015

Trip Report: Dave MacKay

The beauty and the beast of Birding Gambell Alaska may have never presented itself so clearly as it did on this spring;s late May / Early June tour.

The beauty being the stark contrasts of the near desert Arctic environment with the enormous vitality of the millions of birds that nest and or pass by this remote location. The Beast being the luck of the draw with the weather that has the ability to change rapidly from bad to good or good to worse with no warning, and leave birders wondering just what the heck they are doing looking for birds in such a god fore saking place! It is an island of contrast and deep beauty with a certain seduction that has kept me going back for a long time.

Arriving on the island optimism abounded with a light west wind and almost an immediate sighting of a Green Shank in the Northeast corner marsh. Our Asian luck continued on the second and third days with two more great Asian shorebirds, Wood and Common Sandpiper in the sewage pond and near boneyard respectively.

Our second morning we took advantage of the somewhat clearer skies to speed over to the mountain side and look at the Dovekies which we quickly found and then lost! Fortunately James Huntington and his group found a second little flock on a different location that we all eventually got great looks at! We also took some time to head closer to the cove where we had a great time communing with the Crested, Least and Parakeet Auklets who had come right down to the edge of the gravel field to get to know us better.

The sea watch offered up some other goodies over those first few days. Hundreds of King Eiders were passing by at almost anytime and Steller’s Eiders also passed in very good numbers. The Jaeger show was a good as it ever gets and Yellow-billed Loons were the second most common of the Loon species to pass, and great looks too! One afternoon we were treated to quick looks at a small pod of Orca’s along with the nearly endless views of blowing Gray whales, sometimes coming within a few meters of the beach!

The second day found the winds to be pretty good, but the rain was coming down. Fortunately I was able to convince the group that a drive down to the end of the lake could produce a new bird or two. This was only possible because they had no idea how far we would go or how horrible the return trip into the wind might be! At the bottom of the lake we were rewarded indeed. Marion pointed out a large bird at the far end of the south lake that indeed was an Emperor Goose, and one that was cooperative enough to stick around for fantastic scope looks for everyone! Once it flew we continued on down to the south point and had a fantastic seawatch, seeing several species that a few would not see again on the tour, plus great looks at our first Rock Sandpipers.

Waking the fourth morning to the reality that the forecast was becoming accurate with strong to very strong NE winds for the fore seeable future certainly brought the enthusiasm into check. However, as was the case with this group for the entire tour, we forged on, spending far more time in the field than any other group turning over every boneyard, marsh and seawatch in hopes of finding any wayward bird that was hell bent on going the wrong direction into the wind. Indeed this tenacity put us in the right place at the right time when a McKay’s bunting was originally located by the Wilderness Birding Adventures group and a second time when the bird was rediscovered at the south end of Troutman lake the same afternoon by the WINGS group.

Day five dawned with the wind even stronger from the northeast, but with us out and looking hard! I think this was the day I quit calling the weather service to see what the wind forecast might be. We all new it was bad. The good part was that we had beautiful clear skies and good seawatches when the wind did give us a couple of respites.

Even with the unfavorable winds lashing us for several days the durability of the group and the birds that we continued to see for the fifth and sixth times, made for a fantastic tour! Everyone rose to the occasion in the face of a difficult situation and made far more than the best of it, thank you all for a great trip and I hope to run into all of you again somewhere down the birding trail.

Nome

Well since most of the Gambell group went on with me to spend parts of five days in Nome, It seems fitting to write a thing or two about that trip along side.

After landing back on the mainland from Gambell and getting everyone fed, watered and into their rooms, we were off for a few hours of birding before three of our Gambell participants had to fly out. It was a beautiful afternoon with some great birds!

Our first stop was the Nome river bridge with its attendant big numbers of shorebirds, mostly Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers, but after some searching we were able to locate at least one Red-necked Stint! A lifer for just about everyone!

The remainder of the afternoon was spent at Cape Nome and then a quick run to the safety bridge which gave us great looks at Aleutian Terns, thousands of Brant’s and good assortment of shorebirds. Birding was made challenging for the same reason it was in Gambell; a stiff 30 mile per hour north wind was not only cold, but made scoping birds without some sort of wind break very difficult.

Our first full day of the Nome tour we took advantage of the nice weather to head out the Taylor Road or Kougarok road to find the Bristle-thighed Curlew on its nesting grounds.

As is typically the case with my outings to see the Curlew, unlike some tour groups, I do not leave at the crack of dawn, nor do I rush the 72 miles from town out to the spot. Honestly it is just impossible for me to pass all the great spots and great birds that you are bound to run into on the drive out there! We did however manage to make it to the Curlew trail head at about noon. After a quick lunch we started the trek up the hill under a bright sun and most importantly a much diminished wind velocity!

We crested the top of the hill with nothing but looks at a Whimbrel; typically I would have at least had a distant view of a Curlew by now. Fortunately a visit by a curious Raven did wonders to get the Curlews up and agitated and we were treated to nice flight views of 5 different birds, all giving the Raven the business.

We wandered around up top for a while longer running into a couple more Whimbrel’s and a few American Golden Plovers. However the big treat was finding a male Rock Ptarmigan and eventually his girlfriend! Nice and protracted views.

We made our way back slowly stopping for looks at Eastern Yellow Wagtail and to check a number of different nest locations to see who might be taking up residence this year. Our best find was the Gyrfalcon on a nest at mile 26, happy to let us scope her for a long time.

Our second day was a full morning slowly making our way down safety lagoon. We had lots of great waterfowl and shorebirds before hauling the mail inland and up to the spruce forest near Council. Some of the goodies included Varied Thrush, Merlin, Blackpolled Warbler and Boreal Chickadee, there were also Crippling views of a Black Hawk (Helicopter that is). On the drive back to Nome we stopped at yet another Gyrfalcon nest and finally a Peregrine Falcon nest making this a 3 falcon day in Nome!

We woke to rain and cold, coldest temperatures of tour. We blasted out the Teller road stopping at a couple of spots looking for Bluethroats, which up until that day had not been that easy to find in Nome. Eventually we saw 7 Bluethroats and some very cooperative ones at that! We got as far as Woolly lagoon in hopes of getting better looks at Wheatear’s. We had all “seen” them but no one had gotten a great look. After wandering around in the short tundra and rocks for quite sometime, we did find a nice pair of Wheatears that eventually came in close for photos.

The afternoon was dedicated to finding Arctic Warblers that still had not been seen by anyone in the Nome area. It was the 6th of June so certainly time for them to be there; my guess is that the horrible wind conditions in the Bering sea had kept birds from migrating. We got some “intelligence” that an Arctic Warbler was up and singing out the Taylor road close to town, so off we went. Alas all we found was a singing Orange-crowned Warbler after much debate about a song that we were hearing! We worked hard to find one, but Arctic Warbler was just not in the cards this year. Even groups that were there two days longer than us dipped on the bird this year.

The final morning was short due to our flight to Anchorage, but we made the most of it and once again went out the Taylor road and then out to Penny River in hopes that the birds might have come in that night. Once again it was not to be.

Once again thanks to everyone in the group, it was a good one for sure with lots of laughs and some really awesome birding to be sure! See you next time!