



High Lonesome BirdTours Barrow, Alaska Trip Report

June 16th-18th, 2017
Leader and Photos: Stephan Lorenz



King Eider takes flight from one of the many tundra ponds in Barrow.

Eiders, Snowy Owls, and shorebirds in all their breeding finery and territorial displays are Barrow's specialty and we had all of them aplenty. During our three-day exploration of the tundra around Barrow we observed breeding plumaged males of Steller's, King, and best of all Spectacled eiders with some of them at very close range. Common Eiders were seen at a distance migrating in an open lead to round out all four species of eiders. It also proved to be a good year for Snowy Owls and we found two during our first evening with an all white male perched on a telephone pole and a female feeding on a lemming.

The shorebirds were in full swing and we managed to find a locally uncommon White-rumped Sandpiper among the throngs of Semipalmated and Pectoral sandpipers. Stunning American Golden-Plovers were lining the roadside and Long-billed Dowitchers called from above. As usual every tundra pond and puddle held several Red-necked and Red phalaropes. But it took until the final morning to locate Baird's Sandpipers and then we found three, the birds had apparently just arrived. We also discovered an unusual number of southern overshoots with Varied Thrush, Wilson's and Yellow warblers, and a somewhat less unusual White-crowned Sparrow seen. The show of Common and Hoary redpolls on the feeders was also fun to watch. The weather generally was cold with heavy overcast, but light winds.



Spectacled Eiders were present in good numbers.

Day 1: June 16th Flight from Anchorage to Barrow, birding along Gaswell Rd. in the evening

Our evening flight from Anchorage left on time and we arrived in Barrow just after 7 pm. We transferred to our comfortable accommodations and checked in. The first evening saw us exploring Gaswell Rd. offering the longest stretch of access to the productive tundra around Barrow. There was still quite a bit of snow on the ground, but many pools and wetlands held shorebirds and waterfowl. The ever-present Lapland Longspurs were displaying and Snow Buntings flew everywhere. The most welcome birds of the first evening were a pair of Steller's Eiders that flew in right on cue, offering great scope studies before taking off.

An odd bird flushing into a low shrub drew our attention and we discovered a bedraggled looking Varied Thrush, a fairly uncommon southern overshoot. During the drive back we finally located a Snowy Owl, a main target for most participants on the trip, and this one was a fine all white male that first sat on the tundra before flying to a telephone post. It would only get better as we found another Snowy Owl five minutes later, a female that was tearing apart a lemming on the tundra, what a fantastic start to the tour.



A male Snowy Owl eyes us carefully in Barrow.

Day 2: June 17th Birding around Barrow all day, including Gaswell Rd., Freshwater Lake Rd. and base of Point Barrow

During our full day in Barrow we travelled all accessible roads, tried some seawatching, although the extensive ice made it difficult, and checked the entire length of Gaswell Rd. again after dinner. Snowy Owls were present and in good numbers this time with five tallied for the whole day. Jaegers patrolled the tundra and while we saw several Pomarine during our stay, Parasitic Jaegers were much more numerous than their larger cousins. The small ponds along the New Dump Rd. held three species of eiders with males of Steller's, King, and Spectacled all accounted for. A brief view of a Herring Gull here was the only new large gull species besides hordes of Glaucous Gulls.

Gorgeous Red-throated and Pacific Loons were calling on some of the smaller lakes and we enjoyed long, close studies of both species. After lunch we headed to Freshwater Lake, which was still completely frozen, but Arctic Terns were foraging along some thawed sections along the edge. Best of all was a confiding Sabine's Gull that was feeding along the roadside and let us approach fairly closely for great photo opportunities. An out of place Wilson's Warbler made an appearance too. We checked the usually productive gravel ponds along Stevenson's Rd. once more and found a White-rumped Sandpiper, a locally very rare breeder.



White-rumped Sandpiper stretches its wings.

Day 3: June 18th Revisiting birding sites around Barrow and evening flights to Anchorage

During our final morning we found no less than three Baird's Sandpiper and since this species appeared completely absent during the first two days we concluded the birds were just arriving. Snow Geese were moving through in larger flocks with Greater White-fronted Geese still squabbling on the tundra.

We did some seawatching and while the lead of open water was very far out we could make out good numbers of birds moving. Although distant we picked out flocks of Common Eiders, plenty of White-winged Scoters, a Black Guillemot here and there, and murrelets that were most likely Thick-billed. A short stop in town revealed a singing White-crowned Sparrow, the last new bird for the trip list. We returned to the hotel to pack up and organize our gear. Our flight back to Anchorage left on time where the trip concluded with a bag full of high arctic birding memories.





Sabine's Gull on the tundra.

Bird List:

1. Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) - daily sightings, the most common goose in Barrow
2. Snow Goose (*Chen caerulescens*) - we saw several flocks of two dozen
3. Brant (*Branta bernicla*) - daily in small numbers
4. Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) - daily sightings of pairs all over the tundra
5. Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) - a pair along Gaswell Rd.
6. Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) - daily, the most common breeding duck on the tundra
7. Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) - daily but uncommon
8. Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) - common
9. Steller's Eider (*Polysticta stelleri*) - one the main targets seen exceptionally well along Gaswell and the New Dump road
10. Spectacled Eider (*Somateria fischeri*) - spectacular with pairs along Gaswell Rd. and off Cakeeater
11. King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*) - a very close pair along road to New Dump and up to 10 in same area
12. Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*) - very distant views flying in open lead, this is the orange-billed subspecies *v-nigrum*
13. White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*) - seen flying in the distance
14. Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) - abundant
15. Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) - seen displaying in tundra ponds and many foraging close to shore

16. Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) - pairs on the tundra and many seen in flight
17. Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) - a single seen in flight
18. Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) - three on the tundra along Gaswell Rd.
19. American Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) - very common with stunning breeding plumaged males
20. Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) - uncommon, one color-banded individual seen
21. Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) - up to three in gravel ponds off Cakeeater Rd.
22. Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) - close views in gravel ponds
23. Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) - uncommon but seen daily
24. Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) - three during the final morning
25. White-rumped Sandpiper (*Calidris fuscicollis*) - a single seen exceptionally well in gravel ponds
26. Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*) - abundant and it was so much fun watching the males in display flight and hooting all over the tundra
27. Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*) - common
28. Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) - uncommon
29. Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) - uncommon but many great views
30. Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*) - one seen others heard
31. Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) - common
32. Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) - common
33. Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) - uncommon this year with pale morphs seen
34. Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) - fairly common with pale and dark morphs
35. Thick-billed Murre (*Uria lomvia*) - the murrees seen flying in the distance were likely this species
36. Black Guillemot (*Cephus grylle*) - distant flyby
37. Horned Puffin (*Fratercula corniculata*) - one seen flying distantly in lead of open water
38. Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*) - excellent views of one feeding along road near Freshwater Lake
39. Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) - brief views of one along New Dump Rd.
40. Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) - abundant
41. Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) - a few feeding at thawed edge of Freshwater Lake
42. Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*) - a good year with up to five seen in a day, great views of all white males and a female feeding on a lemming on the tundra
43. Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) - a distant falcon was likely this species
44. Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) - uncommon actually
45. Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*) - one seen in tundra along Gaswell Rd.
46. Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) - abundant
47. Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) - abundant, the "Barrow Sparrow" we even saw some of them nesting in bird houses
48. Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*) - seen at New Dump, rare overshoot
49. Wilson's Warbler (*Cardellina pusilla*) - seen along Freshwater lake Rd., rare overshoot
50. White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) - one singing in town
51. Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) - uncommon this year
52. Common Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*) - common at the bird feeders in town
53. Hoary Redpoll (*Acanthis hornemanni*) - common on the tundra with great views at the feeders in town

Mammals Trip List:

Ringed Seal



Ringed Seal on the ice



Sanderling