



Alaska: Utqiagvik (Barrow) the High Arctic (3 days)



Spectacled Eider Photo Stephan Lorenz

Utqiagvik (formerly known as Barrow) is the northernmost city in the United States. The sizable town sits right along the shores of the Arctic Ocean well north of the Arctic Circle at 71 degrees latitude. The infrastructure and fairly extensive road system offer some of the best access to High Arctic tundra and the coastline here forms a migration corridor for thousands of waterfowl, loons, shorebirds, gulls, alcids, jaegers, and even whales with the environs around Point Barrow and Elson Lagoon being particularly productive. During the summer months, the tundra here experiences twenty-four hours of daylight and migrating and breeding bird species arrive en masse. The vast tundra, extensive wetlands, and coastline around Utqiagvik are one of the best

places in Alaska to see and photograph eiders with King, Steller's and the rare Spectacled all readily seen in ponds and lakes while Common Eiders frequent coastal areas. The water-logged tundra harbors hundreds of waterfowl that range from Tundra Swans, Brant, and Greater White-fronted Geese to Long-tailed Ducks, Greater Scaup, and more. In addition, Utqiagvik is a reliable location for Yellow-billed and Pacific Loons, up to three species of jaeger, hundreds of Glaucous Gulls, and occasionally Gyrfalcon. Lemmings and thousands of waterfowl attract Snowy Owls which nest on the tundra each year in varying numbers. The shorebird spectacle here is impressive with Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, American Golden-Plovers, Pectoral Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, Dunlin, and Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers nesting in large numbers. Shorebird species breeding in smaller numbers include Baird's and White-rumped Sandpipers and in some years it is possible to observe displaying Buff-breasted Sandpiper, a memorable spectacle. Rarer but regular visitors include Ruff, Red-necked and Little Stints, and Curlew Sandpiper. The tundra is also home to a few passerines and the cheerful songs of Snow Buntings can be heard throughout while Lapland Longspurs, Savanna Sparrows, and Common and Hoary Redpolls are frequent. Utqiagvik regularly turns up surprises and during spring the rare Ross's and Ivory Gulls are possible. In addition to the abundance of birds, several mammals can be seen including Bearded, Ringed and Spotted Seals, Arctic Foxes, Short-tailed Weasel, and good chances for Polar Bear.

TOUR AT A GLANCE...

Day 1	Meeting at Anchorage Airport for flight to Utqiagvik (Barrow) Night: Utqiagvik
Day 2	Birding road system, seahorse and base of Point Barrow Night: Utqiagvik
Day 3	Morning birding around Utqiagvik, return flight to Anchorage where the tour ends

TOUR IN DETAIL...

Day 1: We will meet at the Anchorage Airport from where we will take a late morning or midday flight to Utqiagvik (Barrow). After settling in at our comfortable accommodations that overlook the Arctic Ocean, we will begin our initial exploration of the productive tundra around Barrow. The longest section of road leading north along several gas wells is often the most productive for eiders and we can find good numbers of King, Steller's and Spectacled among scores of other waterfowl species. Phalaropes of two species occupy every puddle and Pectoral Sandpipers perform circular display flights above the tundra all the while American Golden-Plovers, peeps, and dowitchers frantically set up nesting territories. The airspace is patrolled by jaegers, Pomarine and Parasitic being the most frequent, and with luck, we may already find our first Snowy Owl sitting still on an elevated perch. Near town lie a set of productive gravel ponds and we check these frequently for scarcer shorebirds as Red-necked and Little Stints have been seen here in the past and some of the larger lakes may hold a

Yellow-billed Loon. A quick stop at a feeder station in town will get us good views of Snow Buntings, and Common and Hoary Redpolls.

Day 2: We start our first full morning in Utqiagvik near the base of Point Barrow, a narrow spit of land sitting right at the meeting point of the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. During June, shore-fast ice extends for several miles out and we will scan through leads for eiders and seabirds (and with great luck, Polar Bear). Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Tufted Puffin, Black-legged Kittiwake, and Sabine's Gull can be seen passing by and with exceptional luck Ross's and Ivory Gulls are possible. The Elson Lagoon to the southeast often remains frozen during June but loons, including Yellow-billed, are often seen flying directly overhead. The gravel banks nearby are also an excellent location for nesting Baird's Sandpiper while the buildings around traditional hunting camps and the northeastern end of town occasionally attract rarities. We will spend the remainder of the day exploring the tundra and head out along Freshwater Lake Road which can be excellent for Snowy Owls, eiders, and during some years Buff-breasted Sandpipers appear in temporary leks. During the late afternoon and after dinner (taking advantage of the midnight sun), we return to the Gaswell Road to check for scarcer shorebirds and waterfowl and have additional photographic opportunities of eiders and more.

Day 3: We begin our day again with some seawatching near Point Barrow or from town and then complete a final loop through the tundra hotspots to look for any species we may still be missing. After checking out and packing up, we will do some last-minute birding or have the option to visit the Iñupiat Heritage Center to learn more about the local culture. We will take a late afternoon flight back to Anchorage where the tour ends.



Red-necked Stint Photo Stephan Lorenz