



# Gambell: The Siberian Express 2021

May 26th - June 3rd, 2021 (9 days)



Ivory Gull by Stephan Lorenz

**Trip report compiled by Tour Leader: Stephan Lorenz**

## Tour Summary

*Our Gambell Tour was a success all around. Although we did have to weather some very cold conditions with extensive sea ice, we were rewarded with one of the most magical species of the high Arctic, the empyreal Ivory Gull. Not only did we glimpse one of these rare birds, but we studied a total of four individuals, including two alabaster adult birds. The freezing northerly winds and icy conditions also resulted in a record loon flight with more than a dozen Yellow-billed and Arctic Loons seen among hundreds of Pacific and scores of Red-throated Loons. Waterfowl numbers were lower than usual, but we still saw good numbers of King and Common Eiders and scoped a single Stejneger's Scoter among dozens of White-winged Scoters. A very cooperative Wood Sandpiper was present throughout our stay, but a Lesser Sand Plover was unfortunately only glimpsed by the leader. We were also lucky with excellent studies of a Common Ringed Plover. Offshore, large numbers of Red and Red-necked Phalaropes were present, building in numbers due to the persistent north winds and record numbers of Arctic Terns mixed with Sabine's Gulls. All three jaegers showed well and we located a single Dovekie among the expected alcids on the mountainside. We also lucked out one day when trans-Beringian migrants moved through in numbers, resulting in Bluethroats, Northern Wheatears, and a Red-throated Pipit. The rarity highlight from Eurasia was a Pallas's Bunting that was present for two days in the Far Boneyard, representing only the 2nd spring record for Gambell, and a Rusty Blackbird was the rarest find from the Alaskan mainland. Let's not forget our last-minute birding in Nome during our long layover that netted us a Ross's Gull!*

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**Semipalmated (left) and Common Ringed Plover (right) by Stephan Lorenz**

## Tour in Detail

Our tour began with dinner in Anchorage where we chatted about the upcoming days, went over the necessary equipment, and prepared everyone for the experience on remote Gambell. Our flight to Nome the next morning went without any delays, but once we reached the terminal of Bering Air for our onward flight to Gambell we received news that Gambell was foggy and we could not take off at the moment. We had to wait several hours, spending time birding outside the terminal and making a short excursion to the store, before we finally received the go-ahead at the last possible moment. We were finally in the air around 6 pm and quickly covered the forty-five minutes to Gambell, which was clear by the time we landed. After a delicious first dinner on the island, we set out to familiarize ourselves with the ATVs and then set out to explore the Near Marsh and Near Boneyard close to the village. We were able to study some of the breeding shorebirds on Gambell that we would encounter daily over the coming days, including Semipalmated Plover, Dunlin, Western Sandpiper, and Long-billed Dowitcher. A pair of White Wagtails was a welcome Gambell specialty as this is the most reliable place in the ABA area to encounter this widespread Eurasian species. Each year 2-3 pairs of White Wagtails nest in and around the village of Gambell. The most unusual find in the Near Boneyard was a single Dark-eyed Junco, a rare but regular spring overshoot from the Alaskan mainland.



Wood Sandpiper by Stephan Lorenz

During our first full day on Gambell, we got acquainted with our first seawatch and then explored all the main spots, including the boneyards and marshes, settling into a routine we would follow for the coming days. From the seawatch we enjoyed our first King and Common Eiders and had plenty of colorful Harlequin Ducks. The most common species of waterfowl on the water and passing by the point proved to be Long-tailed Ducks. Loons also showed well and we got excellent views of four species, including Arctic and Yellow-billed Loons. A quick foray to the Near Marsh revealed a Rusty Blackbird, only the second spring record for Gambell of this species. After a delicious lunch and short break, we headed towards the southern end of Troutman Lake to explore the Far Marsh and ponds. Here we found a cooperative Wood Sandpiper among the regular shorebirds and we enjoyed great studies of this mainly Eurasian species which regularly occurs in western Alaska during spring migration. In the evening, we added good views of most of the alcids species of Gambell.



**Pectoral Sandpiper by Stephan Lorenz**

We started the morning again at the point enjoying the seawatch where we added Brant, White-winged and Black Scoters to our waterfowl tally, and while exploring south along the beach and Troutman Lake in the afternoon we also found a pair of locally scarce Buffleheads and an American Wigeon. We returned for a warm breakfast and to take a break at the lodge before heading back to the point. Amazingly, before we even parked the ATVs we spotted an immature Ivory Gull that showed well in flight. We settled in on the gravel beach for the seawatch and the Ivory Gull quickly reappeared,

foraging in front of us and landing on the ice floes. A few minutes later, a second bird appeared and they both eventually landed on the beach right near the point where we could study them at length from less than ten feet away. Ivory Gulls are famously tame and these birds roosted and fed contently right in front of us. The loon flight was also spectacular today with eight Arctic Loons offering repeated studies (we could really appreciate the size differences between Arctic and Pacific) and more than a dozen Yellow-billed Loons, all in breeding plumage. We also found all three species of jaegers with many showing very well. Checking the shorebirds in the Far Marsh, we added Pectoral Sandpipers and the Wood Sandpiper was still present (in fact, it remained throughout our stay), but best of all we discovered a Common Ringed Plover on the gravel flats. The Common Ringed Plover was hunkered down right next to a Semipalmated Plover and we could study both birds at length, really getting to appreciate the subtle differences between these similar species. Among passerines, we added a small flock of Hoary Redpolls.



**Rusty Blackbird Photo Stephan Lorenz**

A Red-necked Grebe was new at the morning seawatch and the impressive loon flight continued with multiple Arctic and Yellow-billed Loons. Sandhill Cranes appeared in the distance and shorebirds remained the same with another sighting of the Common Ringed Plover. Alcid, phalarope, jaeger, and kittiwake numbers were building and these birds were likely seeking shelter from the persistent north winds. Three Eastern Yellow Wagtails were seen at the seawatch as they flew right over us, heading inland and raising hopes that passerines were starting to move.

We again set out to do a seawatch before and after breakfast, adding a Snow Goose to the waterfowl tally. The strong north winds continued increasing the numbers of Red Phalaropes that fed just off the

beach and all three species of jaegers rested on the tundra allowing great views and photo opportunities. Among the gulls, we found Sabine's Gull, and this elegant species showed well feeding just offshore while loon numbers continued to increase and Arctic Terns made an appearance, many birds resting on the beaches to avoid the freezing and strong winds. Among the shorebirds, we added Pacific Golden Plover and Rock Sandpiper on the tundra south of Troutman Lake while a Lesser Sand Plover was unfortunately only glimpsed briefly as it hurtled off the north beach into the winds. A check of the Far Boneyard in the evening revealed a Hermit Thrush.



**Sabine's Gull and Red Phalarope by Stephan Lorenz**

It was the beginning of June, but the increasing winds, gusting up to 40 mph, made conditions very difficult and extremely cold. Despite the weather, we still settled in for our morning's seawatch (although breakfast was highly anticipated). Red Phalaropes continued to build in numbers but waterfowl numbers and loons were overall down since not many birds were willing to tackle the direct blast from the north. Midmorning, we checked the alcid cliffs on the mountain and found a single Dovekie after carefully scanning, but the bird flew off quickly when a Common Raven swooped past. We took most of the afternoon and evening off due to the extreme conditions, but a short (and freezing) foray along the south beach revealed an adult Ivory Gull that slowly flapped north just offshore.

Fortunately, the winds had calmed by the morning and we were able to resume our seawatch where a pair of distant Tundra Swans was a new addition and two more Buffleheads and Common Mergansers were also of interest. Red and Red-necked Phalaropes were foraging just offshore by the hundreds and many were present resting along the edges of tundra ponds. Another adult Ivory Gull at the seawatch

was a highlight and Sabine's Gulls and Arctic Terns continued in increasing numbers. On the side of the mountain, we found two Northern Wheatears, a good sign that passerines were finally on the move. After lunch, we made a foray to the southern end of Troutman Lake where the Wood Sandpiper continued in the Far Marsh and we all ended up with great views of the Rock Sandpiper. Then we found two or three Bluethroats on the tundra and another Eastern Yellow Wagtail. A radio call about a possible Olive-backed Pipit alerted us and we raced over to the Near Marsh, where we found at least one Red-throated Pipit that unfortunately took off quickly and flew over the mountain. Yet, the Near Boneyard seemed to hold some birds and we made a careful sweep, finding Hermit and Gray-cheeked Thrushes and a mystery bird that was definitely worth chasing after. It took some time as the bird proved secretive, but eventually, our suspicions were confirmed, a Pallas's Bunting. This was only the second spring record for Gambell, the first also found by our group in 2017. It took some maneuvering, but after some effort, everyone managed good views of the Pallas's Bunting as it flushed and even sat up momentarily. This proved the definite highlight in terms of vagrant species for the tour. Another radio call saw us return to the Near Marsh where we scoped a Wandering Tattler. During the late evening, some of us headed back out and obtained additional views of the bunting and another Common Ringed Plover. We then headed north along the beach and scoped carefully through the flocks of scoters, finding a single male Stejneger's Scoter among the two dozen White-winged Scoters. We finished the day with a respectable 63 species.



**Pallas's Bunting by Stephan Lorenz**

For the final morning, we obtained good views of the Dovekie for everyone and did a short stint at the seawatch. A final check of the Far Boneyard revealed that the Pallas's Bunting was still present. We packed up soon after breakfast and walked the Near Boneyard one last time on our way to the airstrip. The flight back to Nome was right on time. Since we had a long layover in Nome, we managed to go out birding for two to three hours and headed for the Nome River Bridge. Incredibly, right when we arrived at the spot David Sibley had just found a Ross's Gull. After ten tense minutes of waiting and

seeing if the bird would reappear, it finally did. The Ross's Gull flew right in front of us and settled on the beach for several minutes, what a way to finish the tour and a first for any group to see Ivory and Ross's Gulls during the same trip.



**Ivory Gulls by Stephan Lorenz**



**Long-tailed Jaeger by Stephan Lorenz**



**Arctic Loon by Stephan Lorenz**



**King Eider by Stephan Lorenz**

**Alaska - Gambell: The Siberian Express 2021 Trip List:**

1. Brant Goose (*Branta bernicla*) - seen in small numbers flying past the point
2. Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*) - a single bird noted
3. Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) - a single bird seen
4. Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) - seen in flight at a distance
5. Northern Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*) - a single bird seen during the beginning of our stay
6. American Wigeon (*Mareca americana*) - a female seen in ponds near the Far Marsh one day
7. Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) - frequently seen
8. Eurasian Teal (*Anas crecca*) - one seen well
9. Green-winged Teal (*Anas carolinensis*) - the prominent teal species present
10. Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) - numbers built up on Troutman Lake to a dozen birds towards the end of our stay
11. King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*) - we were treated to several close flybys of pairs and a female bird hung around the point for nearly the entire stay and later we saw a larger flock
12. Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*) - low numbers but good views of a few
13. Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) - common with many close studies
14. White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta deglandi*) - large numbers present off the beach and several seen in flight at the seawatch
15. Stejneger's Scoter (*Melanitta stejnegeri*) - one male picked out during the final evening among a large flock of White-winged Scoters

16. Black Scoter (*Melanitta americana*) - up to a dozen present mainly along the beach south of the point
17. Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) - the most common species of waterfowl
18. Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) - a pair seen at the beginning of our stay and two female birds a bit later
19. Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) - a half dozen males seen in flight
20. Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) - fairly common from the seawatch
21. Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) - record counts with dozens seen for several days from the seawatch
22. Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*) - unusually high numbers with up to eight per morning from the seawatch, we enjoyed many studies of many individuals
23. Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) - more than 200 seen during one particular day at the seawatch, one of the most impressive loon flights ever seen at Gambell
24. Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*) - recorded nearly every day with up to a dozen breeding plumaged birds seen from the point, also a record flight for this species
25. Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) - regularly present in good numbers off the point
26. Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*) - up to two birds present off the seawatch for two to three days
27. Pelagic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) - numerous offshore
28. Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis*) - five in flight one day
29. Pacific Golden Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) - good views on the tundra past the Far Marsh
30. Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) - great views of one at the far end of Troutman Lake right next to a Semipalmated Plover and another in the Near Marsh the final evening

31. Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) - common with several pairs setting up nesting territories throughout
32. Lesser Sand Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*) - unfortunately only seen briefly by the leader as it flew off the north beach
33. Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) - one seen briefly at the beginning of our stay as it landed on the beach at the seawatch
34. Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) - a fairly common nesting species
35. Rock Sandpiper (*Calidris ptilocnemis*) - a displaying bird spotted on the tundra beyond the Far Marsh
36. Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*) - small numbers present
37. Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) - a common nesting species on Gambell
38. Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) - a fairly common nesting species on Gambell
39. Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) - dozens present and building in numbers along the beach due to strong north winds
40. Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) - hundreds present and building in numbers along the beach due to strong north winds
41. Wandering Tattler (*Tringa incana*) - one seen in the Near Marsh
42. Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*) - one cooperative individual was present throughout our stay in the Far Marsh, allowing for many excellent photo opportunities
43. Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) - common off the point
44. Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*) - the highlight species of the entire tour, we first saw two immature birds that even landed on the beach and then saw a further two adults well from the seawatch
45. Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*) - great views of several including some individuals foraging right off the beach

46. Ross's Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*) - we didn't actually see this very rare species during our stay on Gambell, but lucked into one during a short excursion to take advantage of our layover in Nome and had great views of it at the Nome River Mouth
47. Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*) - a few immature birds noted
48. Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) - the common large gull on Gambell
49. Vega Gull (*Larus vegae*) - the second most common large gull on Gambell, still considered a subspecies by Clement's
50. Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) - unusually high numbers just offshore and in the Far Marsh with up to 40 birds present, likely due to continued strong north winds
51. Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) - good numbers seen off the point and several resting on the tundra
52. Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) - good numbers seen migrating past the point and a few on the tundra
53. Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) - this elegant jaeger was seen in small numbers from the point and in good numbers on the tundra
54. Dovekie (*Alle alle*) - after careful scanning of the talus slopes on a clear morning, we finally located a single bird at a distance, amazingly one of us got a record shot
55. Thick-billed Murre (*Uria lomvia*) - common, especially during the first few days, off the point
56. Common Murre (*Uria aalge*) - more numerous off the point during the latter part of our stay
57. Black Guillemot (*Cephus grylle*) - unusually high numbers present, most likely due to the large amounts of sea ice and strong northerly winds
58. Pigeon Guillemot (*Cephus columba*) - seen in large numbers off the point and offshore near the nesting cliffs, more numerous than previous species

59. Parakeet Auklet (*Aethia psittacula*) - present in large numbers off the point and seen well resting on rocks in the auklet colony
60. Least Auklet (*Aethia pusilla*) - thousands seen from the point and hundreds resting on rocks and snow on the side of the mountain
61. Crested Auklet (*Aethia cristatella*) - thousands seen from the point and hundreds resting on rocks and snow on the side of the mountain where we enjoyed great views of this distinctive auklet
62. Horned Puffin (*Fratercula corniculata*) - dozens seen from the point
63. Tufted Puffin (*Fratercula cirrhata*) - dozens seen from the point
64. Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) - a single bird seen twice, once racing across the tundra and the second time near the cliffs on the mountainside
65. Northern Raven (*Corvus corax*) - common, especially around the dump area
66. Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*) - we noted only one of these trans-Beringian migrants, the species has a small breeding population in far eastern Russia
67. Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*) - one seen well in the Far Boneyard
68. Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*) - at the end of our stay several appeared and some even displayed on the tundra, all of us ended up with pretty good views
69. Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) - this trans-Beringian migrant also appeared towards the end of our stay and offered good views on the side of the mountain and in the Near Boneyard
70. Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) - seen flying in off the ocean at the point and again on the south end of Troutman Lake
71. White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) - at least two pairs present, one in town and another at the far end of Troutman Lake
72. Red-throated Pipit (*Anthus cervinus*) - at least one of these trans-Beringian migrants seen briefly in the Near Marsh

73. Arctic Redpoll (*Acanthis hornemanni*) - all redpolls we saw well were Arctic (Hoary) Redpolls with good numbers present and easily seen in the Boneyards

74. Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) - a common breeding passerine

75. Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) - an abundant breeding passerine

76. Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) - one seen on the edge of the Near Boneyard for two days, a rare spring overshoot from the Alaskan mainland

77. Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) - two noted

78. Pallas's Bunting (*Emberiza pallasii*) - the rarity highlight of the tour, found during the next to last day in the Far Boneyard where everyone had great views of a female plumaged bird and it was seen again in the same area the following morning, this marked only the second spring record for Gambell with the first also found by our group in 2017

79. Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*) - only the second spring record for Gambell was present one day at the Near Marsh, an overshoot from the Alaska mainland



Yellow-billed Loons by Stephan Lorenz