



## Alaska: Gambell (9 days)



Common Ringed Plover Photo Stephan Lorenz

Gambell is a remote Yupik village on the northwestern tip of St. Lawrence Island, lying roughly 40 miles southeast of the Russian mainland which is visible on the horizon on a clear day. The small and welcoming community here still practices a traditional lifestyle that is rare in other parts of the country. It remains one of the most far-flung and fascinating birding locations in all of Alaska, offering the chance to observe millions of nesting seabirds, migrating waterfowl and loons, plus an excellent chance to find several Eurasian migrants and vagrants that are very rare in other regions of the ABA and North America. The seawatch here is incredibly productive, especially during the spring when millions of birds are rushing north from the Bering Sea and points further south to reach their Arctic breeding grounds. Four species of eiders pass by in considerable numbers, including the rare Steller's and Spectacled, small numbers of Emperor Geese are possible, four species of scoters and five species of loons, including good numbers of

Arctic and Yellow-billed – often flying right past the point. All three jaegers move through while Black-legged Kittiwakes are abundant and Sabine’s Gulls frequent, even Red-legged Kittiwake, Ross’s and Ivory Gulls are possible but the latter three are extremely rare. The number of alcids here is truly astounding and counting in the millions. The evening flights include Common and Thick-billed Murres, Black and Pigeon Guillemots, Parakeet, Least and Crested Auklets, and Horned and Tufted Puffins. Northern Fulmars and Pelagic Cormorants are common from the seawatch. The alcid species can also be observed closely on the talus slopes they use for nesting near the village and during most years at least one or two Dovekies are present, a very rare nesting species in Alaska. Other regular spring visitors to Gambell include Brant, Tundra Swan, Harlequin Duck, Pacific Golden-Plover, Rock Sandpiper, Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, Rough-legged Hawk, Short-eared Owl, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting, and the range-restricted McKay’s Bunting. Several species with largely Eurasian distribution occur regularly as passage migrants on Gambell during the spring with a handful remaining to nest, including Common Ringed Plover, Red-necked Stint, Slaty-backed Gull, Arctic Warbler, Bluethroat, Northern Wheatear, Eastern Yellow and White Wagtails, and Red-throated Pipit. Eurasian vagrants and rarities we have observed during spring tours over the past five years include Tundra Bean-Goose, Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Lesser Sand-Plover, Pin-tailed Snipe, Terek, Common, Wood and Green Sandpipers, Gray-tailed Tattler, Common Greenshank, White-tailed Eagle, Common Chiffchaff, Eyebrowed Thrush, Red-flanked Bluetail, Siberian Stonechat, Brambling, Hawfinch, Eurasian Bullfinch, and Pallas’s Bunting (many others are possible). Of course, the number and diversity of Eurasian species and rarities is highly weather and wind dependent, as such it is unpredictable, making each day on Gambell very exciting. The seawatch can also prove exciting for mammals with Gray Whales often observed closely and depending on the amount of sea ice, Walrus, Bearded and Ribbon Seals are possible, while Arctic Foxes occasionally wander about the tundra close to the village.

TOUR AT A GLANCE...

Day 1	Meeting in Anchorage at the Coast Inn at Lake Hood for dinner Night: Anchorage
Day 2	Morning flight to Nome and continuing flight to Gambell Night: Gambell
Days 3-8	All day birding on Gambell: seawatch, boneyards, wetlands, mountainside Nights: Gambell
Day 9	Final birding on Gambell and flights to Nome and then Anchorage where the tour ends

## TOUR IN DETAIL...

**Day 1:** We will meet at the Coast Inn at Lake Hood in Anchorage for a welcome dinner and discuss the plans for the forthcoming days.

**Day 2:** After breakfast, we will make our way to the Anchorage airport for our morning flight to Nome. In Nome, we transfer to the Bering Air terminal for our onward flights to Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. Once we arrive on Gambell, we transfer to the lodge in town either by ATV or walking, it is important to have warm layers handy as the weather can be very cold. We will start with an orientation at the lodge and then become familiar with the ATVs we will be using in the coming days. After a late lunch, we will set out to do some initial exploration of nearby wetlands and boneyards. If a rare species has been sighted recently we will make an effort to locate it. We will continue our initial exploration of Gambell after dinner.

**Day 3-8:** Our days on Gambell will follow a similar routine unless any unusual birds are reported. We cover a limited area around the small community with a maximum distance of about four to five miles from the village. We use ATVs to get around and can thus explore each wetland, sheltered area, and the seawatch easily in one day, although in order to cover the birding hotspots properly we will spend considerable time on foot. After coffee and a snack in the early morning, we set out to the seawatch, which is most active during the early hours of the day. We then return for a full breakfast to warm up and take a break, setting back out soon to return to the seawatch. We have lunch midday (to be coordinated with other groups) and then set out to explore the wetlands and sheltered hotspots on the far end of Troutman Lake. After dinner, we will check wetlands and sheltered hotspots closer to the village or return to the seawatch, depending on bird activity.

Some of the main areas we will cover on a daily basis include the seawatch, various boneyards near town, the mountainside and adjacent tundra, the wetlands fringing Troutman Lake, and the bays south and east of the point. The seawatch is located on the northwestern point of St. Lawrence Island and thus provides a front-row seat to the spectacular migrations of eiders, scoters, loons, geese, jaegers, gulls, terns, shorebirds, and even passerines. The best strategy is to spend considerable time scanning the ocean from here as birds can pass by at any moment and each day can bring different compositions of migrants. Many species pass by close enough for excellent photographic opportunities and top targets here include Emperor Goose, Steller's, King, and Spectacled Eiders, Arctic and Yellow-billed Loons, Ivory Gull (very rare), all three jaegers, and more. Even rare Eurasian shorebirds have been seen flying past the point. On a clear day, the mountains of Russia are clearly visible to the west and Gray Whales often surface very close to the point. The seawatch can be cold and windy and we will have to come prepared.

The village of Gambell is flanked by several ancient midden sites, called boneyards. Locals have been digging in these boneyards for fossilized ivory and have thus created a patchwork of

sheltered gullies, troughs, and ponds. The exposed soil supports slightly taller vegetation than other areas around Gambell, although during spring only remnants from last year's growth remain. Yet, these sheltered areas attract the widest variety of migrating shorebirds and passerines and we will walk through the boneyards carefully to look for passerines. In recent years we have seen Pallas's Bunting, Brambling, Red-throated Pipit, Northern Wheatear, Bluethroat, Hawfinch, Common Sandpiper, and others here, although Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting, Common and Hoary Redpolls are the expected species. In addition, not every small brown bird that pops up in a boneyard is of Eurasian origin and plenty of thrushes, sparrows, and finches from North America show up around Gambell. There are three boneyards found near Gambell. The Near Boneyard lies right on the outskirts of the village and is the largest with plenty of sheltered areas for passerines. The Far Boneyard lies about half a mile from the village right up against the slope of Sevoukak Mountain and although it is relatively small, it has harbored some of the best birds during recent spring seasons. The Circular Boneyard lies nearby, but is quite small and only occasionally attracts birds of interest.

Several productive wetlands and gravel ponds lie close to the village and we will check the Near Marsh and airport ponds frequently. These small wetlands can harbor Wood and Common Sandpipers and Common Ringed Plover alongside nesting Dunlin, Western Sandpiper, and Long-billed Dowitcher. The grassy flats and barren tundra nearby are excellent for Red-throated Pipit and Northern Wheatear. During excursions to the far side of Troutman Lake, we will carefully bird the appropriately named Far Marsh and this rather large wetlands complex takes quite a bit of effort and time to check. Eurasian vagrants that have shown up here in recent years include Common Greenshank and Terek Sandpiper, while Pacific Golden-Plover, Rock Sandpiper, and Red-necked Phalarope are more expected. Further south lie a complex of ponds and lakes that can be excellent for waterfowl and shorebirds. We will also scan the open gravel flats and sparse grasses for McKay's Buntings among flocks of Snow Buntings.

During the early morning, we can visit the base of the alcid cliffs and talus slopes on the northern end of Sevoukak Mountain. Here we get excellent views and photographic opportunities of Crested, Parakeet, and Least Auklets while Horned and Tufted Puffins are usually higher up. We will also carefully scan through the thousands of birds for Dovekies that often sit among hundreds of auklets high up on the cliff. The mountainside also harbors Common Raven, Peregrine Falcon, and Rough-legged Hawk.

**Day 9:** We will finish the last day with a short seawatch or revisit any of the migrant hotspots that have proven productive. After breakfast, we will pack up and ready ourselves for a mid or late-morning flight back to Nome from where we carry on to Anchorage.