



Alaska: Pribilofs, Gambell & Nome (17 days)



Red-legged Kittiwake Photo Stephan Lorenz

The remarkable Pribilof Islands form volcanic outcrops in the middle of the Bering Sea, one of the richest and most productive oceans in the world. Due to its location, 240 miles north of the Aleutian Islands and 500 miles east of the Russian mainland, this speck of land has hosted more than 300 species of birds, although many of these only as rare visitors. The two main islands (St. Paul and St. George) and smaller outlying islands (Otter and Walrus) attract millions of seabirds

that find safe havens for nesting along volcanic cliffs, talus fields, and steep slopes. St. Paul Island is the most accessible of the two inhabited islands and good infrastructure, comfortable accommodations, and a wide network of roads allow us to explore this remote outpost easily. One of the main attractions is the seabird colony and the Pribilofs are particularly famous for hosting the most accessible nesting areas of the range-restricted Red-legged Kittiwake - we can watch and photograph this elegant gull very closely. The busy cliffs also host nesting Least, Crested, and Parakeet Auklets, Horned and Tufted Puffins, Thick-billed and Common Murres side by side, Black-legged Kittiwakes with smaller numbers of Red-legged Kittiwakes among them, Northern Fulmar, and Red-faced Cormorants. On the open water, we can often find Pigeon Guillemots and Ancient Murrelet. In the interior of the island, the maritime tundra of lower-lying areas gives way to sparse arctic tundra on hilltops and ridgelines. This rugged environment hosts resident Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches and Pacific Wrens while Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings migrate to the island to breed. St. Paul Island harbors extensive wetlands that host numerous breeding and migrating waterfowl and shorebird species. Among ducks, Long-tailed Duck, Green-winged Teal (Eurasian ssp.), and Northern Pintail breed in large numbers, while King and Steller's Eiders and Harlequin Ducks are frequent to abundant visitors. The most common nesting shorebird on the island is the Rock Sandpiper, here a particularly large and colorful subspecies, while Red-necked Phalarope, Least Sandpiper, and Semipalmated Plover also breed. Numerous shorebirds migrate through and, incredibly, St. Paul Island has hosted more than 60 species of shorebirds alone, nearly every Holarctic species. Some of the more regular migrants of interest include Bar-tailed Godwit, Pacific Golden-Plover, Bristle-thighed Curlew, and Common Snipe. There is a wide selection of Eurasian vagrants and migrant shorebirds and during recent tours, we have seen Lesser Sand-Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Curlew Sandpiper, Long-toed and Red-necked Stints, Terek and Common Sandpipers, Gray-tailed Tattler, Common Greenshank, and Wood Sandpiper. Spring migration also brings Eurasian waterfowl and passerines and some of the rarities we have seen over the years have included Tundra Bean-Goose, White-tailed Eagle, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Black-headed Gull, Gray-streaked Flycatcher, Oriental Cuckoo, Siberian Rubythroat, Red-flanked Bluetail, Eyebrowed Thrush, Gray Wagtail, Olive-backed Pipit, Brambling, and Hawfinch. The number and diversity of rare Eurasian visitors are highly wind and weather dependent and while the cumulative list is long, we can hope for a handful of rare species during our visit under ideal conditions, yet recent springs have been spectacular with nearly a dozen Eurasian species during our tours. The potential and unpredictability offer some of the most exciting birding in North America. Several Alaska specialties can be found as migrants on St. Paul Island, including all jaegers, Arctic and Yellow-billed Loons, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Northern Wheatear, and more. In addition to the vast numbers of birds, we can observe Northern Fur Seals which are returning to their rookeries, have good chances to observe massive Steller's Sea Lions, and will definitely come close to the approachable Arctic Foxes that roam the island. St. Paul Island is simply one of the most exciting and unique birding experiences in all of North America.

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.

Nome is a frontier town along the southwestern corner of the massive Seward Peninsula. The town is exceptionally remote and only accessible by air. The Seward Peninsula itself is dominated by vast areas of trackless wilderness, containing mountains, tundra, wetlands, lagoons, rivers, alder thickets, and small areas of boreal forest. This variety of habitats harbors

some of the densest and most diverse birdlife in all of Alaska, a spectacle of waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, warblers, sparrows, thrushes, and more that has to be experienced to be believed. The days of the gold rush have faded, although a few small mining operations remain active, and Nome now offers unparalleled access to the Alaskan wilderness. In addition to comfortable accommodations, plenty of restaurants and stores, and more than 200 miles of maintained gravel roads offer relatively easy access to all habitats, including far-flung tundra locations. Several species with limited nesting ranges in Alaska and North America can be readily found in Nome, most notably Arctic Loon, Bristle-thighed Curlew, Red-necked Stint, Bar-tailed Godwit, Slaty-backed Gull, Bluethroat, Eastern Yellow and White Wagtails, Northern Wheatear, and Arctic Warbler. Nome also supports vast numbers of migrating and nesting shorebirds with highlights including American and Pacific Golden-Plovers, Black-bellied Plover, Rock Sandpiper, Wandering Tattler, Black Turnstone, Surfbird, Red Knot, Whimbrel, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. In recent years our tours have recorded a fine selection of Eurasian shorebird rarities including Great Knot, Gray-tailed Tattler, Lesser Sand-Plover, Ruff, and Wood and Common Sandpipers. The offshore waters, bays, and lagoons also offer great chances for waterfowl and all four species of eiders are possible alongside Harlequin and Long-tailed Ducks, and four species of scoter, including the rare Stejneger's Scoter. Nome is also one of the best places for loons with all five species possible: Red-throated and Pacific are common while Yellow-billed and Arctic Loons occur in small numbers. In the interior, cliffs and rugged mountains support excellent raptor populations with Golden Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk, Short-eared Owl, Gyrfalcon, and Peregrine Falcon all nesting. Lower lying tundra holds plenty of Willow Ptarmigans, while upland areas hold the scarcer Rock Ptarmigan. Away from the coastline, alder thickets are filled with warblers, sparrows, finches, and thrushes including Varied and Gray-cheeked Thrushes, Northern Waterthrush, Orange-crowned, Yellow, Blackpoll, Yellow-rumped and Wilson's Warblers, American Tree, Fox, White-crowned, Golden-crowned and Savannah Sparrows, and Common and Hoary Redpolls. Add to that Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting plus chances for Pine Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill, Bohemian Waxwing, and even Spruce Grouse for a full Alaskan birding experience. Of course, this vast wilderness supports good numbers of large mammals with Muskox, Moose, Reindeer, Brown "Grizzly" Bear all regularly seen (even Wolf and Lynx are possible) while some of the smaller mammals include American Beaver, North American Otter, and more.

TOUR AT A GLANCE...

Day 1	Arrival in Anchorage and welcome dinner Night: Anchorage
Day 2	Anchorage to St. Paul Island flight Night: St. Paul Island
Day 3	St. Paul Island Night: St. Paul Island*
Day 4	St. Paul Island Night: St. Paul Island*
Day 5	St. Paul Island return flight to Anchorage Night: Anchorage
Day 6	Depart for Nome and then Gambell Night: Gambell
Day 7	Full day of birding Gambell Night: Gambell
Day 8	Full day of birding Gambell Night: Gambell
Day 9	Full day of birding Gambell Night: Gambell
Day 10	Full day of birding Gambell Night: Gambell
Day 11	Full day of birding Gambell Night: Gambell
Day 12	Full day of birding Gambell Night: Gambell
Day 13	Depart for Nome Night: Nome
Day 14	Kougarok Road Night: Nome
Day 15	Teller Road Night: Nome
Day 16	Council Road Night: Nome
Day 17	Safety Sound and flights back to Anchorage where tour ends

*number of nights for the tour and on St. Paul Island can vary due to local flight schedule

TOUR IN DETAIL...

Day 1: We will take a mid-morning flight to St. Paul and a journey that takes around three hours. After landing and settling in at the comfortable King Eider, we will begin our initial exploration of the island. We will follow up on any reports of rare or unusual birds or start by birding some of the lagoons and migrant hotspots.

Day 3-4: We will start with an early breakfast and then spend the entire day in the field with breaks for lunch and dinner. Depending on the weather and bird activity, we usually return to the field after dinner. Each day we cover the island thoroughly, usually starting at one of the seabird

cliffs in the morning when they are most active. We will visit Ridge Wall, Reef Wall, and the High Bluffs and certainly enjoy the spectacle of alcids, gulls, fulmars, and cormorants to the fullest and have excellent photographic opportunities. During the late morning and afternoon, we will focus our efforts on the various wetlands sprinkled throughout the island and check several migrant hotspots. Depending on the wind, we can also do some seawatching for eiders, loons, and shearwaters. In the evening, we either return to the seabird colonies or if there was a good movement of migrants, check one or two of the island's hotspots again.

Day 5: We will return to several of the now familiar sites and either spend additional time photographing the rich birdlife or searching for more migrants before our flight back to Anchorage. We will stay at the Coast Inn at Lake Hood in Anchorage.

Day 6: 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 7-12: 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 13: 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. After lunch and checking into our comfortable accommodations in Nome, we will set out on our first foray towards the Nome River mouth and Safety Sound lying towards the east of town. The lagoon and mudflats fringing the Nome River mouth form one of the most productive birding areas close to Nome and this spot has hosted a number of rarities over the years. In recent years we have lucked into Red-necked Stint, Great Knot, Ross's Gull, and others here, but even without the presence of a rarity, this location is always busy with waterfowl and shorebirds. After a fine introduction to the birds of Nome, we will have dinner and prepare for the following full day.

Day 14: We will leave Nome after an early breakfast and drive north into the interior of the Seward Peninsula. The scenic Kougarok Road follows the Nome River Valley before reaching the stunning Salmon Lakes area and crossing the Kougarok Mountains. Our main goal for the day is to reach the nesting grounds of the scarce Bristle-thighed Curlew, which will require a 140-mile round-trip through the beautiful wilderness. We will make many stops along the way and the Kougarok Road is excellent for raptors, including nesting Golden Eagle and sometimes Gyrfalcon, plus Merlin and Rough-legged Hawk. The alder thickets and dense shrubs along sheltered slopes support Arctic Warbler and Bluethroat alongside every possible nesting species of warbler, sparrow, and thrush in the Nome area. Before reaching the curlew area we will make a stop at the Pilgrim River where we have chances for Rusty Blackbirds and Northern Goshawks. We have to complete at least a one-hour hike to reach the best area for the Bristle-thighed Curlew and the search for this rare bird can range from an hour to several, depending on where the birds are setting up territories. During the journey back to Nome, we will keep an eye out for any mammals.

Day 15: After another early breakfast, we will drive northwest towards the small community of Teller, another 140-mile round trip. The alder thickets and stream crossings not far from Nome are excellent for Northern Shrike and American Dipper. Halfway towards Teller, we will carefully search an area of upland tundra where we can often find nesting Rock Sandpipers and Red Knots. Rock Ptarmigans are more prevalent here, replacing the widespread and common Willow Ptarmigans. This area is also excellent for Northern Wheatear, Snow Bunting, and American Pipit while nearby we can find Pacific and American Golden-Plovers and a small population breeding Black-bellied Plovers. After winding its way through rugged, remote hills, the road ends in the small community of Teller where White Wagtails breed in some years and the nearby spit that juts into the bay is an excellent place for gulls and seabirds with loons, eiders, Horned Puffin, Pigeon Guillemot, and Thick-billed Murre likely. If there is still ice in the bay we have a good chance to observe seals. During the return journey, we will again keep our eyes open for mammals and the wild tundra along the Teller road is a great place to spot Brown "Grizzly" Bears, Red Fox, and herds of introduced Reindeer.

Day 16: Today we set out east and then northeast as we explore the Council Road thoroughly. This road traverses the greatest diversity of habitats in Nome, including the wetlands and lagoons of Safety Sound, bare, alpine tundra as the road crosses a low mountain pass, wet low-lying tundra, alder thickets along the Solomon River, and even a slice of boreal forest. Starting the day along the Nome River mouth and Safety Sound we will scan the open water for eiders and scoters while scouring the mudflats and shoreline for shorebirds. The highest diversity of both can be found along the shore of the large Safety Lagoon which can hold Lesser Sand-Plover among the more expected shorebirds. During the right wind direction, Sabine's Gulls can be present in good numbers along with Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, Surf-bird, Black Turnstone, and Rock Sandpiper. The lagoon is a haven for Brant and we will carefully search for Emperor Geese, although this species has been scarce in Nome in recent years. The far eastern end of the lagoon is filled with Tundra Swans and this is a good area to search for Arctic Loon, a rare nesting species here. Once we leave the lagoon area we again head into tundra where Gyrfalcon is possible and Northern Wheatear and Snow Bunting occur along a high pass in the road. If time permits we will reach the end of the road where a small stand of boreal forest is accessible. During recent tours, we have found Spruce Grouse, Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, and White-winged Crossbill here, but these species are unpredictable and Boreal Chickadee and Rusty Blackbird are more likely. During the journey back to Nome, we will take our time to scan for mammals and any bird species still missing.

Day 17: After some final birding at the Nome River mouth and at Cape Nome we head back to town to pack up, taking an early afternoon flight back to Anchorage where the tour ends.