



High Lonesome BirdTours

Dutch Harbor Trip June 14th - 17th, 2015

Leader: Stephan Lorenz and Photos: Stephan Lorenz

Dutch Harbor and Unalaska Island offer a unique birding experience even by Alaskan standards. Forming one of most easterly Aleutian Islands, Unalaska offers an interesting mix of resident shorebirds, tundra species, and a few songbirds that trickle in from the mainland. Occasionally rarities show up from further afield, making every day interesting. One of the highlights of the trip is the pelagic outing to the Baby Islands, a small group of islands to the east of Unalaska. Here riptides in the narrow passes offer the ideal foraging habitat for the rare Whiskered Auklet and during our outing with great weather we saw at least 2,000 of these small alcids. The pelagic trip also visited the Chelan Banks where an area of upwelling held many Laysan Albatross, Short-tailed Shearwaters, and a single Black-footed Albatross.



The rest of our stay was dominated by clear, sunny weather, which allowed us to track down the resident Rock Ptarmigan, a dapper American Dipper, and finally a

Rock Sandpiper. The backdrop was always beautiful with vertical cliffs dropping straight to the Bering Sea, empty tundra, and green hills full of wildflowers. We also enjoyed learning about the interesting history of the Aleutian Islands at the Veterans Museum and Museum of the Aleutians and visiting the various remnants of WWII installations. Overall it was a fantastic trip with close and clear views of all target species. Thank you Dan and Cheryl, I hope to see you on a future High Lonesome trip. Sincerely, Stephan Lorenz.



Day 1: June 14th Flight from Anchorage to Dutch Harbor

Our flight from Anchorage left just after noon and our direct flight got us there on time. We took the van to the Grand Aleutian, our scenic and comfortable home for the next three nights. We called the captain of the Miss Alyssa and he advised us to make our final decision for the boat trip the following morning.

We headed to the Sitka Spruce Park to see whether any unusual bird hung around. We noted that Song Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, Lapland Longspurs, and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches were all very common. A Pacific Wren perched atop a spruce and sang and we found wrens at nearly every stop, clearly a good year for the species. A single White-winged Crossbill was the only unusual bird, but we got close views of at least two birds during the following days, always a fun species to see well.



White-winged Crossbill

A stop at Unalaska Lake yielded some ducks, including Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, Greater Scaup, and a locally rare Ring-necked Duck. After a delicious dinner of salmon and other seafood at the Grand Aleutian we headed across the street to scope the bay. We found an incredible number of Marbled Murrelets with 200 a conservative estimate and even more exciting were two-dozen Kittlitz's Murrelets mixed in. One was very close to shore allowing us to study its subtle plumage and structural features. With that it was to bed.



Kittlitz's Murrelet

Day 2: June 15th Pelagic Boat Trip to the Baby Islands

After talking to the captain in the morning we got the ok for the boat trip and conditions seemed to be ideal with glassy waters in the harbor and high clouds without fog. We boarded the Miss Alyssa with high expectations and eager anticipation. Our captain, Jimmer, showed us some fresh crab he was going to prepare for lunch (and what a delicious meal it turned out to be, very fitting in the Bering Sea).

The bay was full of murrelets and Horned Puffins and once we reached more open water we started seeing good numbers of Tufted Puffins and eventually one of the targets for the day, Ancient Murrelet. We ended the day with at least 50-70 of the smartly patterned Ancient Murrelets. Another great bird was a very close pair of Cassin's Auklets that offered clear views.



Tufted Puffin

The seabird show began in earnest as we approached the Baby Islands our destination for the morning. Northern Fulmars, mostly dark morphs with a few light morphs, followed the boat and on the horizon we saw Short-tailed Shearwaters arcing above the waves by the hundreds. Many flocks of sheartwaters were also sitting on the water allowing close study.

We started seeing small flocks of Whiskered Auklets hurtling towards the passes and by the time we reached the beginning of the pass they were everywhere, offering fantastic close views right from the beginning. Every bird we looked at was a Whiskered Auklet and as the captain let the boat drift we got solid, close views, occasionally down to ten feet off the bow, wow! We estimated at least

2,000 birds and that was likely a gross underestimate. We enjoyed at least an hour in the company of so many Whiskered Auklets and a few Crested Auklets mixed in here and there. Turning back towards open water we slowed for a delicious lunch before reaching the Chelan Banks. Immediately we had great, close views of Laysan Albatross that flew in to the chum with up to six birds following the boat at once. A single Black-footed Albatross was seen briefly while returning to Dutch Harbor, rounding out our albatross list for the trip. A Long-tailed Jaeger checked out the commotion of shearwaters, albatross, and fulmars, for great studies of this sleek jaeger.



Day 3: June 16th Birding the Overland Road and rest of Unalaska Island

We had the entire day to leisurely bird our way across the scenic Unalaska Island and explored all the major roads. In the morning we checked the spruces again and located our first “Sooty” Fox Sparrow, a pretty cool and distinct subspecies. We drove along Summer Bay road all the way to Morris Cove and found Harlequin Ducks, Black Oystercatchers, and had great views of the locally common and large subspecies of Song Sparrow. A quick stop in town to photograph the Russian Orthodox Church with the requisite Bald Eagle perched atop also yielded fun views of the large, resident Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches feeding on dandelion seeds.

A short excursion along the spit in the harbor added a few shorebirds in the form of Ruddy Turnstone and Western Sandpiper. A Savannah Sparrow singing atop the blooming lupines was quite a sight compared to them rummaging across fields during the winter season.



Savannah Sparrow

We stopped at the Grand Aleutian Inn for another delicious lunch and afterwards the weather had cleared as we had hoped, making a trip up to higher elevations along the Overland Road ideal. Leaving Unalaska City, the road wound towards higher tundra and we took a short hike where we added American Pipit and Snow Bunting to the list. Looping around and driving back down towards Summer Bay, Rock Ptarmigans were evident, and along a small stream we found an American Dipper and finally a Rock Sandpiper probing in the streamside moss.



Rock Sandpiper

After dinner, we explored the valleys beyond town and added a few expected species plus enjoying Unalaska's unrivalled scenery. We all went to bed without complaints.



Gray-crowned Rosy Finch

Day 4: June 17th Birding near town in the morning, visiting Museum of the Aleutians and Veterans Museum early afternoon, flight back to Anchorage

We checked the spruce trees again and then took an early lunch and checked out. We spent the afternoon visiting the informative Museum of the Aleutians and unique Veterans Museum. The Aleutian Islands have a fascinating history and we greatly enjoyed learning about a small slice of it. After checking in for our flight at 4 pm, but before dropping off the car we were able to drive to the top of Mt. Ballyhoo where bunkers and gun placements offer stark reminders of the WWII activity on the islands. The standard Rock Ptarmigan was lurking about. We returned on time to Anchorage after a refueling stop in King Salmon. The following evening we spent one last dinner enjoying a delicious seafood feast at Orso in Anchorage. Great food, great birds, unique landscapes and culture, lets do it all again.

Bird List:

1. Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) - 06/16 4 birds seen in Unalaska Lake
2. Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) - seen on two days on Unalaska Lake were mainly Common Teal (*Anas crecca crecca*) with one bird showing traits of an intergrade
3. Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*) - locally rare, a single drake was seen on Unalaska Lake
4. Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) - seen on Unalaska Lake with up to 4 birds

5. Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) - one bird seen on Unalaska Lake 06/14, locally rare
6. King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*) - 06/15 one bird seen in flight during the pelagic near the Baby Islands
7. Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) - 06/16 a total of 5 bird seen in the bay and loafing on rocks, a beautiful duck
8. Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) - 06/14 two birds seen on Unalaska Island
9. Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) - common and seen every day
10. Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*) - 06/16 seen in various places with 7 birds total one day especially along the Overland Road
11. Laysan Albatross (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) - 06/15 we recorded a total of 8 birds with some of them coming very close to the boat
12. Black-footed Albatross (*Phoebastria nigripes*) - 06/15 a single bird seen briefly as we were steaming back towards Dutch Harbor
13. Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) - 06/15 seen in the hundreds during the pelagic trip
14. Short-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) - 06/15 huge flocks with one numbering in the hundreds during the pelagic
15. Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) - 06/15 3 birds in total during the pelagic trip
16. Pelagic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) - common and seen daily
17. Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) - abundant, everywhere we looked
18. Black Oystercatcher (*Haematopus bachmani*) - seen on rocky shorelines with up to a dozen birds on the 06/16
19. Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) - up to four birds especially along the spit in Iliuliuk Bay
20. Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) - 06/16 a single bird along the spit
21. Rock Sandpiper (*Calidris ptilocnemis*) - surprisingly hard to find with only one bird along a stream on the Overland Road 06/16
22. Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*) - one or two birds seen in various locations
23. Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) - 06/16 a single bird along the spit
24. Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*) - 06/16 two birds heard in the valley
25. Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) - 06/15 a single bird cruised close to the boat during the pelagic trip as we chummed for albatross, incredible views
26. Common Murre (*Uria aalge*) - common and seen daily a good numbers
27. Pigeon Guillemot (*Cephus columba*) - common and seen daily
28. Marbled Murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) - common and seen daily with up to 200 birds in one day, great studies
29. Kittlitz's Murrelet (*Brachyramphus brevirostris*) - Wow! incredibly close views from shore of this species with a total of 25 06/14 and again seen well as we left the harbor for the pelagic, Unalaska is a great place to closely study the differences between the two murrelet species

30. Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) - 06/15 dozens seen during the pelagic trip and some from shore in Iliuliuk Bay
31. Cassin's Auklet (*Ptychoramphus aleuticus*) - 06/15 three birds seen during the pelagic trip with two birds especially close
32. Whiskered Auklet (*Aethia pygmaea*) - 06/15 the bird of the trip, we saw 2000+ birds near the Baby Islands with dozens very close to the boat during calm and ideal conditions, we were able to enjoy great views for over an hour
33. Crested Auklet (*Aethia cristatella*) - 06/15 singles among the preceding species with just 3 birds recorded during the pelagic
34. Horned Puffin (*Fratercula corniculata*) - seen in great numbers during the pelagic and daily from shore
35. Tufted Puffin (*Fratercula cirrhata*) - very common, seen daily with a total of 500 during the pelagic
36. Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) - common
37. Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*) - common
38. Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) - common, incredibly large in Alaska
39. Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) - 06/15 one seen during the pelagic trip
40. Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*) - Pacific Wren (*Troglodytes pacificus*) - common
41. American Dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*) - 06/16 one seen in stream along Overland Road
42. American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) - 06/16 seen in the higher tundra along the Overland Drive
43. Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) - abundant
44. Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) - 06/16 several seen in higher tundra along Overland Road
45. Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) - common
46. Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*) - up to two birds seen in the Sitka Spruce Park
47. Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) - common
48. Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*) - very common, a large and colorful subspecies
49. White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*) - local rarity seen daily in the Strawberry Hill spruces
50. Common Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*) - common
51. Hoary Redpoll (*Acanthis hornemanni*) - one bird seen during the last morning 06/17 on Bunker Hill showed typical white rump of Hoary, but was apparently paired to a Common Redpoll



Rock Ptarmigan



Alaska scenery