Full Detailed Itinerary - Alaska: Breeding Birds and Mammals in the Tundra

Day 1: Arrival in Anchorage

After arriving in Alaska’s largest city, a shuttle will transfer you to our local hotel for the night.

Day 2: Anchorage to Seward

After breakfast, we will head south for the 130 mile (205 km) drive to the small town of Seward, situated at the head of Resurrection Bay on the Kenai Peninsula. The exact sites we stop at along the way vary from year to year based on local information, and we often include a visit to sites in or near Anchorage too, especially if we know of a reliable site for Spruce Grouse. Along the way, mammals may feature like ivory-colored Dall’s Sheep at the intriguingly-named Beluga Point, and Hoary Marmot at the lilly-laden Turnagain Pass, the latter of which may have recently emerged from hibernation. Once in Seward, we will drop into some local yard feeders, which can host Red Crossbill in some years, as well as Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pine Grosbeak, Pine Siskin, ‘Sooty’ Fox Sparrow, and the continent’s northernmost breeding hummingbird, the Rufous Hummingbird. Two nights will be spent in the scenic town of Seward, where the harbor is dramatically backed by a chain of snow-dusted peaks, part of the Kenai Mountain Chain.

Day 3: Kenaij Fjords Cruise

Much of the day will be spent on a large boat traveling through Resurrection Bay, and taking in three different glaciers, including the furthest of these from Seward, the magical Northwestern Glacier, the stronghold for the rare and local Kittlitz’s Murrelet. This cruise is likely to provide one of the standout days of the tour early on, for it has everything; dramatic glaciers, large animals like Humpback Whales, Steller’s Sea-Lions and Sea Otters, and a fascinating set of seabirds like Horned and Tufted Puffins, Marbled and Ancient Murrelets, Pigeon Guillemot, Thick-billed and Common Murres, and Rhinoceros Auklet. A second night will be spent in Seward.

Day 4: Seward to Anchorage

We'll begin the morning in the boreal forests between Seward and Anchorage, searching for specialties like Boreal and Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Gray and Steller’s Jays, Brown Creeper, Pacific Wren, Townsend’s Warbler, Varied Thrush, and (if we are lucky), maybe a White-winged Crossbill. Once back in Anchorage we will make several stops too, at Potter Marsh just off the highway for nesting Arctic Terns, Short-billed Gulls, burnt-red Short-billed Dowitchers, singing Lincoln’s Sparrows, and perhaps the odd Moose. Also, we may find time to stop in at Westchester Lagoon, where Red-necked Grebes are usually abundant, and also sometimes hosts Hudsonian Godwit. We will spend another night in our Anchorage hotel.

Day 5: Anchorage to Nome

In the morning we will fly out of Anchorage, journeying northwest to Nome on the Seward Peninsula of western Alaska. Just three roads fan out from Nome (to Teller to the northwest, to the Kougarok River to the

north, and to Council to the northeast); each around 70 miles long, which will be where our birding will be focused. We will arrive in time for our first exploration of the area, with plentiful daylight in the Land of the Midnight Sun after all! Four nights will be spent in Nome.

Days 6-8: Nome

We will have three full days to explore this fascinating birding area, which is rightly a pilgrimage that nearly every North American birder should make, for the rare birds to be able to add to your ABA list. However, it also appeals to all other visitors to, as there is much more besides rare and local North American species. The Council Road is arguably the most widely celebrated of the three roads that span out from town, which passes first the Nome River, often a site of breeding Aleutian Terns, then rapidly reaches Safety Sound, (which is flanked by Norton Sound on the seaward side). This is a hotspot for shorebirds, gulls and loons in particular. Of particular interest will be the seaward side for the chance at the scarce Arctic Loon (one of five species of loon possible on the trip, or simply put, all of the World's species); while any coastal area and inland ponds are packed with shorebirds, which could include Surfbird and Black Turnstone, and is the site for regular (though not guaranteed) early summer sightings of Red-necked Stints, which are thought to breed in the area in very small numbers. Safety Sound is also a regular place for congregations of gulls, largely Glaucous Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes, but the rare Slaty-backed Gull occasionally turns up too. Western Sandpipers in gorgeous breeding plumage are also likely in this area. Spots in the tundra off of this road can also produce a rare American breeder, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, as well as regular sightings of the graceful thief, the Long-tailed Jaeger, which robs local birds of their catch for a living. The Council Road turns north into the hills and crosses a bridge that sometimes hosts a nest of the impressive Gyrfalcon, though some years the next is taken over by a pair of Common Ravens. The Teller Road heads west from Nome into hilly terrain that is often packed with Willow Ptarmigans. It crosses several rivers where Bar-tailed Godwits are sometimes seen before reaching rocky tundra that is home to Rock Ptarmigan, American and Pacific Golden Plovers, and the scarce Northern Wheatear - this population comprises of the longest distance migrant songbird/passerine on the planet; following their breeding cycle in Alaska, the wheatears travel through Siberia and Asia and end up in Africa for the winter, a distance of some 8,700 miles (14,000km)! Checking out a higher ridge may get us some breeding Red Knots, and with a lot of luck a Rock Sandpiper. Lastly, comes the Kougarok Road, which has one of the most revered sites on the itinerary, Coffee Dome, which is home to small numbers of breeding Bristle-thighed Curlew, which requires both a hike and some luck to see. The same site is also home to breeding 'Hudsonian' Whimbrel and American Golden-Plover. This road is also arguably the best of the three to track down other key target species like displaying Bluethroats, which toss themselves in the air off of the bushes in the early mornings, and Arctic Warblers, which can be abundant in the taller scrub along this dirt road. Other birds we will seek in the area will be Golden-crowned and 'Red' Fox Sparrows, while breeding Wilson's Warblers are abundant in the area, as are both species of redpoll (Mealy and Hoary).

Day 9: Nome to Anchorage

After much of the day returning to where we need to, we will take an afternoon flight back to Anchorage, where we will return to our now familiar hotel for another single night. Depending on flight schedules, there may be time for some afternoon birding around Anchorage this afternoon and the following morning.

Day 10: Anchorage to Barrow (Utqia?vik)

Today we will take a long flight north, deep into the Arctic, to the unique town of Barrow (or Utqia?vik in the local Inupiaq language - most residents still call it Barrow and the names can be used interchangeably) right at the Top of the World. The wet tundra and icescapes around town are home to some special breeding

species, so three nights will be spent in Barrow. Keep in mind that Barrow is a dry town. Alcohol is not sold there, and the hotel does not permit you to consume your own alcohol in the rooms.

Days 11-12: Barrow

Two full days will be spent in Barrow, with plentiful extra time on both our arrival and departure days to make the most out of it. Among the most wanted birds in Barrow are ducks, and eiders in particular with Spectacled, Steller's and King Eiders all key targets during our time there. There are plentiful breeding shorebirds here too, which are typically confiding and photogenic, as are many species in Alaska with persistence. Dunlin are numerous, as are Pectoral Sandpiper, perhaps the most impressive of them all. If you think you have seen a Pectoral Sandpiper already, you have probably not really seen one like this. In spring, their plumage is transformed, with bold arrows stitched tightly across their pumped chests, and the males make attention-grabbing, low display flights while uttering a low booming call, which is characteristic of the tundra around Barrow. Phalaropes are also plentiful, with both Red-necked and Red Phalaropes both often seen in numbers of hundreds in a day, and so confiding you can sometimes get the tip of your boot in the same photo! We'll also check for Snowy Owls along the Cakeeater Road, which occasionally hosts Short-eared Owls too. Other birds we are likely to see around Barrow include Hoary Redpoll, large numbers of Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs, and breeding Pacific Loons, in their gorgeous velvety breeding plumage at this time of year. In 2023, a local company began offering 2 hour Polar Bear excursions to Point Barrow. While not included in the tour, many people chose to do this and those who did had great (and in some cases very close) views of Polar Bear. If you wish to do this, bring some extra cash. The 2023 price was $140 per person, and may increase for 2024.

Day 13: Barrow to Anchorage

After a final morning we will fly south back to Anchorage for a final night.

Day 14: Departure from Anchorage

A hotel shuttle will be provided to take you to the airport for whenever you need it for your flights out.

Tour Extension 1

Day 1: Anchorage to St. Paul

A late morning/early afternoon flight (schedules are not yet known) will take us far to the west (750 air miles from Anchorage), out into the Bering Sea and onto some of the most famous islands in all of American birding. Our base will be the tiny island of St. Paul, home to some of the largest seabird nesting colonies on the planet, where we'll spend three nights. Three nights, including two full days, will be spent on the island.

Days 2-3: St. Paul, Pribilofs

Day 4: St. Paul to Anchorage

An afternoon flight will return you to Anchorage. Many flights depart anchorage late evening or very early AM, but you may wish to have a spare day in Anchorage in case of any travel delays between St. Paul and Anchorage.

PLEASE NOTE

*PLEASE NOTE: The extension is run by a local operator on St. Paul Island. The package includes a local bird guide, meals, and ground transport while on St. Paul. As the package already includes a local bird guide, a Tropical Birding tour leader normally does not accompany the group. The flights to St. Paul are on smaller planes with limited baggage capacity, and flights are unreliable and delays/cancellations are common. This affected many visitors in 2023 & 2024, including the Tropical Birding trip. One tour company (fortunately not TB) was stuck on St. Paul for 9 extra days as no flights were getting in or out! Please keep this in mind before booking.

Toll free from the USA & Canada: (800) 348-5941

International number: +1-409-515-9110

Toll free from the UK: +0800-046-5654

Email: info@tropicalbirding.com