



SUMMER IN ALASKA:

Kenai & Barrow

11–20 June 2014

I first visited Alaska in 1990, in the wake of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound. I was expecting to see environmental devastation, but instead I discovered a land of wonderment. To be sure, the spill was devastating to the local marine wildlife and to the oil-dependent culture of Alaska. However, I spent most of the summer on land, staring at hanging glaciers and skyscraping mountains, and surrounded by nesting Arctic Terns and cacophonous Northwestern Crows. As a fledgling birder and naturalist, I was in awe of the region's wildness.

I returned to Alaska in 2006, exploring regions from the Southeast to the North Slope, and I was again immersed in a world that defied description. Having then become a seasoned birding guide, I knew immediately that Alaska would have to become a part of our tour repertoire: shorebirds and loons in breeding plumage; swarms of breeding seabirds; boreal forest specialties; nesting jaegers and Snowy Owls; bears, moose, caribou, and more. It became imperative for me to share all of this with you! Finally, I am excited to introduce our inaugural tour to Alaska, featuring the Kenai Peninsula and the arctic wonderland of Barrow. This is the perfect introduction to Alaska's amazing scenery and wildlife, with a reasonable itinerary and budget, and an experience you will never forget.

Stephen Shunk, Owner and Lead Guide



Birding Barrow's Chukchi Sea Coast

TOUR SUMMARY

After greeting you at the Anchorage airport, we will enjoy some afternoon and evening birding in the Anchorage area before dinner. We will search wetland habitats for nesting Red-necked Grebe, Mew Gull, and Arctic Tern, and local woodlands may host our first American Three-toed Woodpecker, Alder Flycatcher, and Boreal Chickadee. We'll also scan the shores of Knik and Turnagain arms for late migrant shorebirds, with possible Hudsonian Godwit, and we may head into boreal forest habitat to look for Spruce Grouse and White-winged Crossbill.

Days 2–4: Anchorage to Seward and Kenai Fjords

Our first full day will take us east around the end of Turnagain Arm en route to Seward. On our way out of Anchorage, we will spend some time in the boreal forest at Chugach State Park, where we will search again for woodpeckers and boreal songbirds such as Common Redpoll and Pine Grosbeak, followed by some productive wetland birding.

At Potter Marsh, we will listen for the songs of Northern Waterthrush, “Sooty” Fox Sparrow, and Rusty Blackbird while we scan the wetlands for nesting shorebirds, such as Semipalmated Plover, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Red-necked Phalarope.

As we head toward Seward, we will stop along Turnagain Arm to search for beluga whale and Dall’s sheep. Lakes and ponds on the drive may allow excellent looks at breeding Trumpeter Swans and “Taverner’s” Cackling Goose among the many grebes, ducks, gulls, and terns. After lunch in the old gold-mining town of Hope, we will drive a spur road into the mountains for our easiest vehicle access to the alpine tundra, where, depending on snow levels, we may find nesting ptarmigan (up to 3 species!), Northern Wheatear, American Tree Sparrow, and Common Redpoll.

We will return to the Seward highway and continue southward, stopping at various lakes, ponds, bogs, and muskegs, to enjoy Bald Eagle and Barrow’s Goldeneye, with a chance for nesting American Dipper and Olive-sided Flycatcher along the Snow River. As we enter the Seward area, we may have time to scan Resurrection Bay in search of Common Eider or Harlequin Duck. After dinner (and depending on our stamina!), we may head out toward Exit Glacier for some late evening owling before our first night in Seward.

On our second full day we will embark on our first boat excursion for an all-day seabird extravaganza among the Kenai Fjords and Chiswell Islands. This boat trip is one of the best we have ever taken—anywhere—and it will be one of the grand highlights of our entire Alaska tour. Rocky cliffs will be covered with nesting Black-legged Kittiwakes and Common Murres, with Thick-billed Murres, Pigeon Guillemots, and Red-faced and Pelagic cormorants scattered among them. Horned and Tufted puffins and Marbled Murrelets will be conspicuous on open waters, with good chances for Rhinoceros Auklet, and Kittlitz’s and Ancient murrelets. Other seabirds may include a rare Aleutian Tern or Parakeet Auklet, as well as possible Northern Fulmar or Sooty Shearwater. All the time, we will enjoy a variety of marine mammals, including Sea Otter, Steller’s Sea Lion, and Dall’s Porpoise, with a decent chance for both Humpback Whales and Orcas. And as if that weren’t enough, our backdrop will be a maze of stunning glacial fjords and calving tidewater glaciers. Our boat trip will return us to town for a leisurely dinner and our final night in Seward.

Days 4–7: Seward to Homer

The next day will take us back to the Sterling Highway, as we traverse the northern Kenai Peninsula and head south for Homer. Though the drive to Homer is only about 170 miles, it will take us all day to reach our destination, with many stops to absorb the spectacular scenery and wildlife. We will join the Sterling Highway at Tern Lake, where we may see nesting Greater Yellowlegs, Arctic Tern, and Common Loon. Beetle-killed spruce trees in the area may produce Three-toed and possibly Black-backed woodpeckers, and nesting songbirds may include “Myrtle” Yellow-rumped Warbler and Golden-crowned Sparrow. Much of the Sterling Highway will parallel the Kenai River, famous for its massive salmon runs, with plenty of good birding options. We may encounter singing Northern Waterthrush or Gray-cheeked Thrush along Skilak Lake Road, and both Common and Red-breasted mergansers can be seen cruising the Kenai River itself.

Between the towns of Sterling and Kenai, we will pass through the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, with a broad array of habitats and abundant bird life. Among the nesting waterfowl, we could encounter Greater Scaup and Trumpeter Swan, while Black Turnstone, Hudsonian Godwit, and Short-billed Dowitcher are among the dozen shorebirds that breed on the refuge. Additional waterbirds may include Bonaparte’s Gull and Sandhill Crane. The region’s breeding songbirds include Varied Thrush, Blackpoll Warbler, and American Tree Sparrow. Somewhere in here, we will fit in a lunch break in either Soldotna or Kenai. The final leg of our drive will take us along the eastern shore of the Cook Inlet, with possible birding stops at Ninilchik and Anchor Point and stunning views (weather allowing) of the Redoubt and Iliamna volcanoes across the water. We will arrive in Homer in time for dinner and some evening birding on the Homer Spit before we sleep.

The next two full days will be spent exploring the stunning and diverse habitats of the Homer and Kachemak Bay areas. We will take a half-day boat trip to Gull Island, where we may see Red-faced Cormorant and Thick-billed Murre among the many Black-legged Kittiwakes. The open waters of Kachemak Bay could provide excellent looks at Kittlitz's Murrelet and Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, and a boat trip to Seldovia could produce a wide array of seabirds and marine mammals. We will also explore a variety of upland habitats in the Homer area in search of forest species such as Chestnut-backed and Boreal chickadees, Pacific Wren, and Pine Siskin, with a good chance for nesting Gray Jay and Northern Shrike. We will spend a total of three nights in Homer, giving us an excellent opportunity to fully explore the region.

Days 7–10: Homer to Barrow

After an early breakfast on day seven, we will leave Homer for the four-hour drive back to Anchorage. After lunch, we will board our Alaska Airlines flight to Barrow.

The flight to Barrow may include a brief stop in Prudhoe Bay before we skirt the Arctic Ocean and arrive in Alaska's northernmost town. Upon arrival, we will check into our hotel and enjoy our first dinner in the arctic. After dinner, we will wander around Barrow to take in the local color of this remote Inupiat village. Common birds in town may include Glaucous Gull, Hoary Redpoll, and maybe a Snow Bunting or Lapland Longspur. We will fight the urge to stay awake with the midnight sun to get our first night's sleep in America's northernmost town.

Our schedule will allow us two full days to scour the arctic tundra and shorelines for an amazing array of breeding birds. Snowy Owls and jaegers (3 species possible) will be especially conspicuous, and we will scan every water source for a stunning collection of sea ducks, featuring up to four eider species and Long-tailed Duck, all in their handsomest breeding colors. Dabbling waterfowl will also be well-represented, with Tundra Swan, Greater White-fronted Goose, and Green-winged Teal scattered across the shallow isolated ponds. Barrow also boasts an impressive diversity of breeding shorebirds; just a few of the most common species include American Golden-Plover, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Red Phalarope. We will greet the first arriving Sabine's Gulls and Black Guillemots, but both can be difficult to find until the pack-ice breaks up later in summer.

With the arctic pack ice extending several miles from shore, we also have an excellent chance to view a Polar Bear, and the short "upland" roads out of town may invite a coastal brown bear. If we are lucky, we may also see caribou or arctic fox. In general, our visit to Barrow is about the experience of being in the high arctic and taking in the amazing human culture and wildlife that thrive in this harsh environment.

Day 10: Return to Anchorage

After a leisurely final morning in Barrow we will depart on our southbound flight, returning to Anchorage by about 2 p.m. Some of you may be able to get homebound flights that afternoon or evening, or you may prefer to stay in Anchorage one more night and depart the following morning.