

# ALASKA

25 MAY – 14 JUNE 2006

## TOUR REPORT

**LEADER:** PETE MORRIS

With a grand total of 200 species of birds, and 25 species of mammals, this, our fifth tour to Alaska, was once again a huge success. We were largely blessed with good weather (at times positively hot!) and as a result, were able to complete the tour circuit without a hitch. Avian highlights were many and the following is just a taster: great views of all five species of diver (loon) in breeding plumage; stupendous views of all four species of eider; several stunning Emperor Geese; thirteen species of alcids (including fabulous Crested Auklets and Tufted Puffins); a fantastic array of breeding waders including Buff-breasted and White-rumped Sandpipers, delightful Red and Red-necked Phalaropes and the rare Bristle-thighed Curlew; an Ivory Gull, numerous dainty Sabine's Gulls, Red-legged Kittiwakes, Aleutian Terns and graceful Long-tailed Jaegers; an intimate encounter with a tame Spruce Grouse; six fabulous species of owl including several stunning Snowy Owls (yes, it was a good lemming year!), four brilliant Northern Hawk Owls, an amazing Great Grey Owl and Northern Saw-whet and Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owls; a fine selection of spruce forest species including gorgeous Varied Thrushes, Pine Grosbeaks and an American Three-toed Woodpecker, and, last but not least, two fine male Smith's Longspurs. Grizzly and American Black Bears, Musk Ox and Killer Whales were the pick of the mammals, the scenery was awesome and the near 24 hour daylight, at times, challenging! Watching the Arctic Ocean pack-ice in the midnight sun at Barrow is an experience not to be missed!

Flying into Anchorage is always an exciting experience. The relatively small city of barely 250,000 inhabitants sits at the northern end of Cook Inlet, nestled among the dramatic snow-capped peaks and glaciers of the Chugach Mountains. As we descended to the airport we gained our first views of glaciers and got our first impressions of what lay ahead. We made our way to our hotel close to the airport (a hotel we were to become very familiar with during the course of the tour) and sat outside in the beer garden in the barmy evening sun. Were we really in Alaska?!

The plan was to have a wander around the lake by the hotel the following morning but I was up early and restless. The early dawn, jet lag, and knowledge that there may be a surprise just down the road (gained from a late night phone call) had woken me early and so the group were surprised to find me arrive at the hotel with two taxis at the agreed meeting time. We loaded quickly and ten minutes later we were all peering incredulously at a 1st summer Ivory Gull, a true vagrant in Anchorage! To make it even more bizarre, it was sitting on top of a large red sign! None of us could have dreamt up this

start and we returned to the hotel where we saw more run of the mill fare such as displaying Red-necked Grebes, Greater and Lesser Scaup, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead and superb Barrow's Goldeneyes! Things were looking good!

After breakfast, we returned to the airport and took a flight to St Paul in the Pribilofs. We headed west over vast areas of wilderness before leaving the continent behind us and flying over the Bering Sea. As we neared St Paul, the anticipation rose and quite incredibly we arrived (after all the worries about low cloud and fog) to crystal clear blue skies that were to remain with us for more or less for the duration of our stay, though it was still pretty chilly thanks to the icy influence of the ocean!

Due to the flight timings, we were able to spend the best part of three and a half days on St Paul, allowing us to fully explore the whole island. On each day we took a morning, afternoon and evening excursion and in between were fed and looked after very well! Things were changing however. The King Eider Hotel was closed for renovation and we stayed in a comfortable house in town and took our meals at the airport where they were also frantically building a new hotel! Our prime targets here were the seabirds and we spent many hours on various cliff tops, marvelling at the antics of the various cormorants, auks, fulmars and kittiwakes. At this time of year, the birds are just arriving and finding their space on the cliffs and as a result, two visits to the same cliff could result in quite different experiences. Indeed, possibly due to the good weather, the cliffs were at times devoid of birds and it took several attempts to accumulate the experiences we were looking for. Perhaps pride of place went to the Red-legged Kittiwakes that were seen daily in small numbers among the commoner Black-leggeds and we were soon able to recognize them not just by their red legs but by their large eyes and short bills (an adaptation for their nocturnal pelagic foraging) and dark upperparts. Thousands of delightful Least Auklets squabbled around the bases of the cliffs whilst higher up, Parakeet and comical Crested Auklets were mostly seen on the sea, though both species were admired on the cliffs. Perhaps the most striking alcid, the bizarre Tufted Puffin was also much appreciated and could sometimes be seen along with stocky Horned Puffins. Striking Red-faced Cormorants were already nesting, some of them very close to the view points, and small numbers of Thick-billed Murres (or Brünnich's Guillemots) were joined by numbers of Common Murres. Numerous Arctic Foxes scavenged around the edges, waiting for a meal and we also visited a couple of colonies of Northern Fur Seals where the aggressive males proudly defended their territories with some impressive roars. On one evening we even managed good scope views of a couple of Grey Whales!

We also had plenty of time to explore the rest of the coastline and the interior of this fascinating island, including the many wetlands. During our many wanderings we were constantly surrounded by Lapland Longspurs, Snow Buntings and delightful Grey-crowned Rosy Finches, the only common passerines on the island. A couple of Winter Wrens (of the endemic Pribilofs subspecies) were sought out in the quarry (they had suffered a big population reduction due to the harsh winter), we had a couple of sightings of American Pipit and found a few St Paul rarities such as Hermit Thrush, Yellow-rumped Warbler and a wood-pewee sp. (a first for the island!). Rock Sandpipers were pleasingly common, often waving a wing at us in display, and other shorebirds here included Least Sandpipers, Wandering Tattlers, our only Black-bellied Plover of the tour, Pacific Golden Plovers, a Semipalmated Sandpiper and diminutive Red-necked Phalaropes, and we also saw a few excellent Long-tailed Jaegers drifting over. A good variety of waterfowl included another of the highlights of our visit in the shape of three wonderfully obliging Emperor Geese. King Eiders were numerous this year though good drakes were in short supply, a group of Steller's Eiders flew by, numerous exquisite Harlequin Ducks were found along the shoreline, Eurasian and Green-winged Teals (were seen more or less side by side), and we found a group of three 'Canada Geese', one of which appeared to be a classic Aleutian Canada Goose, the other two being a little more difficult to pigeon hole. Glaucous-

winged and Glaucous Gulls were common (as well as a few apparent hybrids) and a fine Sabine's Gull showed offshore along with a Red Phalarope, Pacific Loon, elusive Ancient Murrelets, a Short-tailed Shearwater and a vagrant Black Guillemot. We also saw some other species that had the North American birders rather more excited than us such as Wood Sandpipers and Tufted Ducks! Our only disappointment was not finding a MacKay's Bunting despite much effort. However this species is essentially a vagrant to the island and is not to be expected. Whilst looking we did however have some excellent encounters with Snowy Owls for compensation!

We left St Paul pretty content and headed back on a spectacularly scenic flight to the warmth and comfort of Anchorage. It was a quick turnaround though as first thing the following morning we were back at the airport and boarding another flight, this time heading north to Nome on the Seward Peninsula. Immediately on arrival it was very clear that it had been a hard winter as there was still plenty of sea ice – more than I've seen here before. However, it was a bright and sunny day and we headed out to explore the nearby bird-filled safety lagoon. There were more birds than ever on the lagoon! Thousands of Black Brants and hundreds of Whistling Swans were joined by a few Snow and Emperor Geese. Stately Sandhill Cranes stalked along the edges and ducks were abundant and included some fine Surf Scoters, our first Common Eiders and unusual species for Nome such as Lesser Scaup, Eurasian Wigeon and Tufted Duck! Waders included some gorgeous Western and less ornate Semipalmated Sandpipers, boldly marked Black Turnstones, a few Red Knot and delightful Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, and elegant Sabine's Gulls hawked over the lagoon. It really was difficult to know which way to look! Out on the beach we found some wonderful Aleutian Terns and a distant Yellow-billed Loon, and amongst the hordes of newly arrived Alaska Wagtails (the *tschutschensis* form of Yellow Wagtail), we managed to find a rare Red-throated Pipit.

The bird to look for at Nome is the rare and little-known Bristle-thighed Curlew and, once we had established that the Kougark Highway was fully open, an early start was required to ensure our best chance. We vowed not to stop en route but the temptations were great and a few stops were inevitably made for goodies such as Willow and Rock Ptarmigans and Golden-crowned Sparrow. However, our hearts sank as after 30 miles we suddenly encountered a deeply cut stream flowing across the road. That was it, or so we thought. We then noticed from the tyre tracks that at least one vehicle had got across, so in for a penny, in for a pound, I gave it a go and beached the van in the middle of the stream! Some thought was required and some worried faces looked on! Fortunately, by removing a few large boulders by hand from the icy stream, we got going again, not wanting to think about how we would get back on the way home!! It was still fairly early when we arrived at our destination, and we slowly made our way the short distance over the rough terrain up towards the plateau. Some smart American Tree Sparrows delayed us briefly but soon the eyrie song of a Bristle-thighed Curlew filled the air and within seconds we'd spotted him in his display flight. We only needed to go a little further to secure excellent views of a pair of Bristle-thighed Curlews in the scope and we enjoyed American Golden Plovers and a fine male Bar-tailed Godwit in the same area. We returned to the road very happy and duly showed the curlews in the scope to Anne who had not fancied the walk over the rather rough terrain. Our journey back was a somewhat more leisurely, with time to enjoy both the spectacular scenery and the birds. Our numerous stops produced an excellent array of birds including a few Taverner's Canada Geese (much enjoyed by all!?!), Greater White-fronted Geese, several Northern Harriers, a pair of Golden Eagles and a pair of Rough-legged Buzzards, our only Gyr Falcon of the trip, smart Cliff Swallows, a stunning male Bluethroat, Red Fox and Golden-crowned Sparrows, Northern Waterthrushes and some attractive though flighty pallid Hoary Redpolls. We were amazed to see other vehicles heading up the highway, but discovered that the road had been repaired that morning, which was a bit of a relief! That evening we took a short excursion along the Teller road where we enjoyed some fantastic encounters with the incomparable Musk Ox and enjoyed some roadside Red-throated and Pacific Loons.

The following day we explored the road out beyond Safety Lagoon and on towards Council, though after about 44 miles we found that the road was still closed by deep snow drifts and was in the process of being re-opened. Nevertheless we had a great morning. Highlights included a (the same?) superb summer-plumaged Yellow-billed Loon, this time closer in and without the heat-haze, an Arctic Loon (or Black-throated Diver), a fine breeding-plumaged Red-necked Stint, another herd of Musk Ox and a breeding pair of Rough-legged Buzzards at their eyrie. We also had plenty of time to enjoy all the other waterbirds at Safety Lagoon and found both Vega and Slaty-backed Gulls whilst looking. After a hearty lunch we were ready for more, but, as if from nowhere, the fog rolled in, and we decided to put our feet up for the afternoon!

The following morning the fog was still lingering. Our half-hearted attempts to do some birding produced a confiding pair of American Dippers and a male Rusty Blackbird, but by now, our eyes were on the skies and our thoughts on rather bigger things that fly! We knew that the first flight into Nome had failed to land, and that our flight was delayed, but would the fog lift enough in time?! Fortunately it did and although we were about an hour late, we made it back to Anchorage for lunch. That afternoon we made a very special excursion and were extremely privileged to see both Boreal (Tengmalm's) and Northern Saw-whet Owls at the nest. Two cuter faces, one could not hope to see!

The following morning we headed up to the Chugach State Park above Anchorage and, as with my last tour here, we were greeted by our target bird, a fine drumming American Three-toed Woodpecker. We also enjoyed Lincoln's Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, an obliging Boreal Chickadees, our first Grey Jay and several Ruby-crowned Kinglets. We then made our way slowly south towards Seward, stopping at various sites en route. Potter Marsh yielded some tame waterbirds but little new. Turnagain Arm produced several Bald Eagles and at a drinks stop, I commented that Black Bears feed on hillsides like that, only to be told that there was one there! Having enjoyed distant scope views of this exciting creature we headed to some nearby spruce forest and were confronted with another Black Bear on the road! Amazing stuff! The forest also produced a fine Merlin, Townsend's Warblers, Golden-crowned Kinglet and our first gorgeous Varied Thrush. Further on, some wonderful Great Northern Divers (or Common Loons) entertained, our first pair of Trumpeter Swans upended in a pond by the side of the road, and other species added included the localized though unremarkable Northwestern Crow, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes, Steller's Jays and both Song and Sooty Fox Sparrows. We were also invited to a hospitable couple's house where we watched Rufous Hummingbirds at a feeder and some more gorgeous Varied Thrushes.

We had an hour or two to explore the coniferous forests and lakes in the vicinity of Seward the following morning and here we found Chestnut-backed Chickadees and a Red-breasted Nuthatch at our first stop, and nearby we found many Pine Siskins and were delighted to find both Pine Grosbeak and White-winged Crossbill. We then boarded our vessel for a full day excursion into the incredible Kenai Fjords, a voyage that is without doubt worthwhile for the scenery alone! The incredible glaciers here are retreating at an alarming rate, and it is sad to think that the icefields that feed them may not be there for much longer (try and see Al Gore's excellent film, "An Inconvenient Truth"). Cetaceans were prominent with first class views of a pod of about 20 Orcas which included a huge bull and we saw about ten Humpback Whales, including a couple of breaching individuals. Sea Otters frequently entertained, including a female clutching her youngster and shy Steller's Sea Lions and Harbour Seals were also seen in good numbers. On the land, we watched nimble Mountain Goats tip-toeing over the cliffs. We also saw a few birds! Top of the bill were the diminutive Kittlitz's Murrelets which showed so well in the cloudy glacial waters thanks to the patient persistence of our skipper. We were able to compare them with the similar and more common Marbled Murrelets and also enjoyed

Pigeon Guillemots, Rhinoceros Auklets and, eventually, Ancient Murrelets. Good numbers of both puffins added to the fun and other goodies seen during our adventure included Black Oystercatcher, numerous Bald Eagles and an unexpected drake Barrow's Goldeneye.

By now we had seen most of the boreal forest birds that we had hoped to find, with one obvious exception – the elusive Spruce Grouse. Our only constraint was that we had to be back in Anchorage by the evening and so we set off from Seward with high hopes. We spent much of the day in the Skilak Lake area, but sadly failed in our quest. We did however have ample compensation, mainly in the form of a sow Black Bear with three cute cubs that fed on dandelions just outside our van. We watched them for about half an hour and on a couple of occasions saw the cubs agilely climb high into the trees to avoid danger. It really was a remarkable experience. The other great highlight was watching Pine Siskins, Pine Grosbeaks and White-winged Crossbills taking grit from the road right in front of us. Other species seen included a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers, Alder Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee and our first Bohemian Waxwings and Black-capped Chickadees, but the grouse would just have to wait!

We decided on a lie-in the following morning and after breakfast headed to the Palmer area where we found our only Harlan's Hawk (a dark form of Red-tailed Hawk) of the tour. Belted Kingfisher and Red-winged Blackbirds were present in roadside swamps and a Great Grey (or Northern) Shrike virtually in the town was a great surprise! Leaving Palmer we continued our journey north towards Denali National Park, and for a while were able to view North America's loftiest peak, Mt McKinley. We took a detour from Trapper's Creek, still looking unsuccessfully for our grouse. Here we found more Bohemian Waxwings and our first Blackpoll Warbler. Further stops yielded more Boreal Chickadees and other forest birds but still no grouse by the time we had checked into our hotel at Denali.

The following day an excursion near to the hotel was largely uneventful though we did find our only Short-eared Owl of the trip. After breakfast we headed down to the Denali National Park and boarded our bus for our day in this extraordinary wilderness area. Although the weather was on and off, and the main star, Mt McKinley, played hide and seek with us in the clouds, we still enjoyed some wonderful scenery. The bus system here is a little 'clumsy' but generally works well and we began our day being entertained by a rather amusing lady – "We're travelling!!". However, after seeing a Moose, a shout of grouse from Judith meant that we had no option but to leap off the bus! It was a good decision as we enjoyed fantastic views of a female Spruce Grouse for as long as we wanted before boarding the next bus. That saga was finally over! For the rest of the day, mammals dominated and we enjoyed fabulous sightings of no fewer than six Grizzly Bears, a very pale Grey Wolf and a number of Dall Sheep, Caribou and Snowshoe Hares. Golden Eagles were frequently visible and we reacquainted ourselves with a number of other species we had already seen.

The following morning saw us travelling the length of the scenic Denali Highway taking us past miles and miles of spruce forest and past some of the richest wetland areas that we saw on the whole tour, all with a spectacular mountainous backdrop. Soon after beginning our journey, we were watching the star of the day, a majestic Northern Hawk Owl that came and peered at us from only a few yards, providing another of the trip highlights. A little further on, three drake Blue-winged Teals were a surprise and other wetlands, as well as holding good numbers of a variety of wildfowl, held our only Slavonian (or Horned) Grebe of the trip (apart from a brief sighting on St Paul). It was certainly beaver country as dams and lodges could be seen everywhere though sadly their occupants remained unseen. At the eastern end of the highway we found a singing Arctic Warbler and flogged over some tundra where Long-tailed Skuas, American Golden Plovers and Horned Larks entertained, but where we could find no sign of the elusive Smith's Longspur. To make things worse, we later discovered that

there had been no sightings this year! We arrived at our overnight base at the eastern end of the highway and met all of the residents of Paxson and its suburbs – a highly entertaining affair!

After a good rest, we headed out with renewed enthusiasm, and were soon enjoying more Barrow's Goldeneyes by the road. We then donned the boots, and went on another bout of bog-stomping, this time with great success as we found two singing male Smith's Longspurs that gave simply stunning views! A hearty breakfast followed and we then embarked upon the long journey to Anchorage. Excitement was in the air as the prospect of seeing a Great Grey Owl was on the agenda. We arrived at the site and were led to the owls by a young lad (seven or eight?) called Tony. Tony did not inspire confidence but ensured me he knew where the owls were. What followed would not have been out of place on a birding sitcom! Tony did lead us to the owls, and we were soon watching some fluffy, begging youngsters. The problem was, they were not very big, and the adult on the nearby tree was a Northern Hawk Owl!! Yes, Tony had led us to the wrong owls – we had no idea both were present! Thankfully, help was at hand, and we were soon back on track and watching the real thing, a huge and impressive Great Grey Owl, a most unexpected bonus for the tour! We also watched some fine Pine Grosbeaks as we ate lunch, and elated, we headed back to Anchorage, the only further excitement being the gale force winds and dust storms as we headed through Palmer!!

We were off early the following day, flying first to Fairbanks then on to the North Slope and the Arctic Ocean at Barrow. We had a couple of days to explore Barrow (and with 24 hour daylight, that's long enough!!). Pack-ice still hugged the coastline making the sea an unproductive birding location but the tundra and meltwater pools surrounding the rather unattractive town were alive with shorebirds and ducks that had just arrived to take advantage of the short arctic summer. It was chilly – the winter gear was once again required, and despite sub-zero (or close to) air temperatures a strong heat haze prevailed over the tundra during the hottest(!) parts of the day. It was, without doubt, a fantastic year to visit Barrow. Spectacled, Steller's and King Eiders all showed brilliantly at close range and it was a good lemming year (Brown Lemmings). Consequently, not only did we have numerous encounters with these much misunderstood creatures (we witnessed no suicide), but also saw large numbers of the predators that rely upon them, namely Pomarine Jaegers and Snowy Owls. It was also a good year for waders. The tundra was alive with spectacular Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, comical Pectoral Sandpipers puffed out their pecs, Baird's Sandpipers displayed, Long-billed Dowitchers showed well and a small number of delightful Buff-breasted and White-rumped Sandpipers were also seen. A fine pair of Sabine's Gulls showed well and extra interest was added by a most unexpected variety of vagrant North American passerines including Hermit and Varied Thrushes and even an Orange-crowned Warbler!

Having enjoyed our final morning in the Arctic watching Snowy Owls, Spectacled Eiders and Arctic Redpolls (what else!), we took a flight back to Anchorage via Prudhoe Bay and Fairbanks, leaving us just one last afternoon to add to our tally. We chose to visit the nearby Westchester Lagoon, situated on the Cook Inlet just a few minutes from our hotel. Here we enjoyed some great looks at Red-necked Grebes, several Lesser Canada Geese and other wildfowl and a couple of Musk Rats! Of greater interest however were the numerous smart Bonaparte's Gulls on the island which were resting alongside a fine group of chestnut-hued Hudsonian Godwits. Careful scrutiny of the godwits revealed that they were concealing a smart Short-billed Dowitcher and an unexpected Surfbird in their ranks, our last two new birds for the trip!

Returning to our hotel, we tucked into our final lavish meal (washed down with fine Californian wines), and reflected on what had been a highly successful adventure across a land of unparalleled natural beauty, where true wilderness still reigns supreme. Surely one of the most exciting birding and mammal watching destinations on the North American continent if not anywhere in the world?!

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/index.html>

### GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Loon (R-t Diver) *Gavia stellata*: A common bird at Nome where up to 20 were seen in a day. A single seen along the Denali Highway and also a few seen at Barrow.

Arctic Loon (Black-throated Diver) *Gavia arctica*: A single seen on the sea off Nome where this species appears to be regular in very small numbers.

Pacific Loon (P Diver) *Gavia pacifica*: This rather beautiful diver was most common around Nome where we got numerous excellent views. A few others were at other locations and they were reasonably numerous around Barrow.

Common Loon (Great Northern Diver) *Gavia immer*: A pair that came to investigate us near to Tern Lake were perhaps the most memorable, with a few other pairs seen at other inland locations. They are simply stunning in breeding plumage.

Yellow-billed Loon (White-billed Diver) *Gavia adamsii*: After a rather distant and heat-haze distorted view of one off Nome, we were delighted to find probably the same individual a couple of days. It was in full summer plumage and showed much better as we watched it actively fishing. They typically breed on inaccessible lakes inland from the Arctic coast and are difficult to see well.

### PODICIPEDIDAE

Horned Grebe (Slavonian G) *Podiceps auritus*: One seen briefly off St Paul by some, and we saw another in gorgeous breeding plumage along the Denali Highway.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*: The most numerous and widespread grebe, we had our best views at various lakes around Anchorage where several pairs were nesting and engaging in their fabulous displays. All were in fine breeding plumage.

### PROCELLARIIDAE

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*: Less common than usual on St Paul where we only saw up to 30 in a day, with just a few already nesting on the cliffs. Several unfamiliar-looking dark morph birds were also seen. The race here is *rodgersii* which always has a darkish tail even in pale morph birds.

Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*: Just a single off St Paul which was a little distant and not easy to see.

### PHALACROCORACIDAE

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus*: About 20 in Resurrection Bay off Seward, mostly during the boat trip in the Kenai Fjords where many were in full breeding plumage complete with their white filoplumes.

Red-faced Cormorant *Phalacrocorax urile*: Common on St Paul where up to 100 were seen daily, often attending their nests, many of which were very close this year. It was also great to see them frequently cruising along the cliffs at eye-level. We also saw at least 30 in the Chiswell Islands during the Kenai Fjords boat trip but the views were nowhere near as good.

Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*: First seen on St Paul where we saw a few non-breeding birds. A dozen or so also seen at Nome and at least 20 seen around the Chiswell Islands.

#### ARDEIDAE

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* (NL): Phil saw one flying over Seward early in the morning before the boat trip.

#### ANATIDAE

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*: A single first summer bird was seen on St Paul, five were seen along the Kougarok Highway at Nome and up to 20 were seen each day at Barrow. The subspecific identity of these birds is not straightforward. The one on St Paul and those at Barrow were probably *frontalis* whilst those at Nome may well have been *gambelli*.

Snow Goose *Chen caerulescens*: Small numbers had joined the vast numbers of waterbirds on Safety Lagoon. On our first day at Safety Lagoon we saw a scattered flock of 11 and two days later we logged a total of 39 including a couple of flocks on the move.

Emperor Goose *Chen canagica*: We did well for this species this year with an excellent group of three at St Paul which showed brilliantly and then another six yellow-headed birds (by staining) at Safety Lagoon, Nome. Classified as Near Threatened by BirdLife International, it is restricted to the Bering Sea, breeding in coastal saltmarshes in Arctic and Subarctic Alaska, and extreme north-east coastal Russia, and wintering principally along ice-free coasts of the Aleutian Islands and, in smaller numbers, in Canada and the Alaska Peninsula, with very few reaching as far south as California. Its population in Alaska declined precipitously from 139,000 in 1964 to 42,000 in 1986, but was recently estimated at c.84,500 in 2002. Factors affecting its population fluctuations are poorly understood, but subsistence hunting in Alaska and coastal oil pollution are considered to be contributory. Climate change and associated habitat shifts are expected to impact negatively on this species and others dependent on tundra habitat for breeding. Modelling indicates that 54% of the habitat for this species could be lost by 2070.

[Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*: **General note:** The taxonomy of the Canada Goose complex is extremely complicated and remains unresolved. In their 45th supplement, the AOU have decided to split Canada Goose into two species as follows: **Canada Goose *B. canadensis*** (including the subspecies *canadensis* [Atlantic], *interior* [Interior or Todd's], *maxima* [Giant], *moffitti* [Moffit's], *parvipes* [Lesser], *fulva* [Vancouver], and *occidentalis* [Dusky]) and **Cackling Goose *B. hutchinsii*** (including the subspecies *hutchinsii* [Richardson's], *asiatica* [Bering (extinct)], *leucopareia* [Aleutian], *taverneri* [Taverner's], and *minima* [Cackling]). However, the issue seems far from resolved and more species may well be accepted. It seems highly illogical that *taverneri* and *parvipes*, formerly known as the 'Lesser Canada Goose complex' are not treated as part of the same species. To simplify matters, I have treated each of the forms seen as 'allospecies'. Each allospecies has a distinct English name (all of which were already in widespread colloquial use) and is identified in its scientific name by a trinomial with the redefined species name as above preceding it in square brackets.]

Lesser Canada Goose *Branta [canadensis] parvipes*: The common Canada Goose in Anchorage where we had good looks at them around Westchester Lagoon in particular. Typically small to medium-sized and relatively pale-breasted, some of the birds however approach Dusky Canada Goose in appearance. If the AOU recommendation is adopted, these remain part of Canada Goose.

- Aleutian Canada Goose *Branta [canadensis] leucopareia*: We were fortunate to see a flock of three 'Canada Geese' on St Paul, at least one of which showed the characteristics of this form. The other two may have been larger examples of this form or perhaps Taverner's Canada Geese. Formerly highly endangered, they have now recovered well and have been taken off the endangered list. They are characterised by their small size and prominent white neck collar on the upper breast. If the AOU recommendation is adopted, these become part of Cackling Goose.
- Taverner's Canada Goose *Branta [canadensis] taverneri*: Most, if not all, of the Canada Geese in the Nome area were referable to this form (though some of the more distant individuals were not identified to subspecies). One pair seen there had a small dark individual and a larger pale individual. Whether this is down to variation within the races or mixing of the races is hard to assess! Characterized by their small-medium size, relatively dark plumage and dusky throat line, this form is often grouped with *parvipes* as Lesser Canada Goose, but if the AOU recommendation is adopted, they become part of Cackling Goose! I hope that's all clear now!!
- Black Brant *Branta [bernicla] nigricans*: As with the Canada Geese, I have used the trinomial and colloquial name to distinguish the birds from the other Brent Geese. All of our sightings were in the Nome area where huge numbers were present with up to 1,000 seen daily on Safety Lagoon.
- Trumpeter Swan *Cygnus buccinator*: Our first views of a pair on a roadside pond in Seward were perhaps our best, though we also enjoyed some very good views elsewhere there (where there were a pair nesting) and in the Denali area where we saw up to six in a day and were able to compare them side by side with the following species.
- Whistling Swan *Cygnus columbianus*: A single on St Paul was a surprise. We then saw large numbers on Safety Lagoon, Nome (up to an estimated 600) with a few along the Denali Highway and at Barrow. One of the individuals along the Denali Highway showed fairly extensive yellow at the base of the bill, approaching that shown by Bewick's Swan *C. bewickii*.
- Gadwall *Anas strepera*: A couple at Safety Lagoon, Nome and a single at Potter Marsh were the only ones of the tour.
- Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: A drake at Safety Lagoon, Nome, was a surprise find amongst all the wildfowl there. It was present with at least one hybrid drake Eurasian x American Wigeon, a common hybrid form in Northeast Asia.
- American Wigeon *Anas americana*: Common and widespread in small numbers throughout the tour.
- Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Small numbers at scattered locations.
- Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*: Three drakes along the Denali Highway were a surprise as this species is scarce this far north.
- Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: Small numbers on St Paul, at Nome, along the Denali Highway and at Barrow
- Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: One of the most numerous wildfowl, particularly so at Nome and Barrow.
- Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis*: Scattered sightings throughout, though scarce on St Paul where most teals are Eurasian.
- Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*: Only seen on St Paul, particularly on Webster Lake, where there were up to 10 birds. These are usually assigned to the race *nimia*, which is larger than the nominate. Some authorities however do not recognise this subspecies.
- Canvasback *Aythya valisineria*: A drake on Lake Spenard in Anchorage (with a broken lower mandible) was the only one seen.
- Redhead *Aythya americana*: A drake at Safety Lagoon, Nome, was the only one seen and was a surprise as it is rare that far north.

- Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*: A couple of drakes at Lake Spenard were followed by a couple at Nome (where they are not usually present) and several groups in the Denali area, where we saw some nice flocks along the Denali Highway.
- Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: It must have been a good year for stray wildfowl in Alaska as we saw at least eight of this species on St Paul and a couple of surprise drakes on Safety Lagoon, Nome.
- Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*: By far and away the commoner of the two scaup with up to 100 being seen in a day. Separating them from the next species is always great fun. It's relatively easy given good views but can be more problematic with more distant birds!
- Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*: Far less common than the preceding species. Up to 10 seen on Lake Spenard at the beginning of the trip, a drake on Safety Lagoon and a scatter in the Seward and Denali legs of the tour.
- Steller's Eider *Polysticta stelleri*: A group of 18 females flew by at St Paul, but we needed better! We got far better at Barrow where we saw eight one day and six the next, including some unusually approachable birds. More like a dabbling-duck than an eider in many ways, the species has been in serious decline. This species is classified as Vulnerable by BirdLife International. Its population is estimated at between 110,000 and 125,000 and is declining. Subsistence hunting has been ongoing in Alaska since the late 19th century, and may have affected breeding populations here. Studies at Barrow indicate that the species is subject to lead poisoning from the historic (and probably ongoing) use of lead shot. Although lead shot is illegal for use on waterfowl there, it is still likely to be used. Disease and water pollution may impact eiders in their wintering area in south-west Alaska. Eiders breeding in Russia are subject to human subsistence harvest and exposure to lead shot. However, it is not clear whether these factors are driving the decline.
- Spectacled Eider *Somateria fischeri*: A brilliant showing at Barrow where we saw up to nine in a day including some very confiding individuals (one of which seemed a little unwell!). One of the supreme highlights of the tour and voted number three in the top ten!
- King Eider *Somateria spectabilis*: The late hard winter meant that good numbers were still present on St Paul where we saw up to 100 a day, though adult drakes were in short supply and many of the birds were distant. Small numbers were then found at Barrow, including a very showy drake. This wonderful display led to it being top bird for Rosemary, Neil and Anne, and was our bird-of-the-trip!
- Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*: Seen very well at Nome where we saw up to 20 daily and at least 12 seen at Barrow. The race concerned is *v-nigrum* in which the male shows a bright orange bill and a thin black "V" on the chin.
- Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*: This exquisite duck is quite common in Alaska and we were fortunate to get brilliant views on a number of occasions. Most common on St Paul where we recorded up to 100 in a day. They actually breed on rivers and are not known to breed on St Paul!
- Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata*: Great views of some smart flocks at Nome (including some confiding birds on Safety Lagoon) and another eight seen in the Skilak Lake area. The drakes are real crackers.
- White-winged Scoter *Melanitta deglandi*: A couple of pairs offshore at St Paul were followed by up to 50 on Norton Sound at Nome. This North American and East Asian species is often lumped in Velvet Scoter *M. fusca*.
- Black Scoter *Melanitta americana*: All of our sightings were at Nome where we saw up to 200 daily on Norton Sound and on Safety Lagoon. The male's swollen yellow bill base (a feature that separates them from Common Scoter) was often apparent. This North American and East Asian species is often lumped in Common Scoter *M. nigra*.

- Long-tailed Duck (Oldsquaw) *Clangula hyemalis*: Another delightful duck that was seen commonly at St Paul, Nome and at Barrow. Its call is a characteristic sound of the tundra!
- Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*: The first was a female at Spenard Lake in Anchorage, a female and then a pair were seen on St Paul, and a few more seen along the Denali Highway.
- Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*: Just a few seen in Anchorage and on St Paul.
- Barrow's Goldeneye *Bucephala islandica*: We had some wonderful views of this smart duck in Anchorage and in the Denali/Denali Highway area where we spent some time watching a displaying pair. A drake on the sea during the Kenai Fjords boat trip was a surprise.
- Common Merganser (Goosander) *Mergus merganser*: Good views of small numbers on the way to and back from Seward. All would be referable to the North American form *americanus* which differs subtly from nominate European birds.
- Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: Most common at Nome where up to 30 were seen daily.

#### ACCIPITRIDAE

- Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*: This species is more numerous in Alaska than anywhere else in its range. Although we had numerous scattered sightings, this species was most numerous in the Seward area and we enjoyed some great looks during the Kenai Fjords boat trip.
- Northern Harrier (Hudsonian H, Marsh Hawk) *Circus hudsonius*: Several sightings at Nome and a few in the Denali area. We enjoyed several spectacular views of fine hunting males. This North American species is morphologically distinct, though is more commonly lumped in Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus*.
- Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus*: A single flashed across the road as we were driving to Seward.
- Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*: Just a single sighting from the bridge at Palmer of the dark, pale-tailed race *harlani*, which is usually referred to as Harlan's Hawk.
- Rough-legged Hawk (R-I Buzzard) *Buteo lagopus*: A couple of pairs seen well in the Nome area including a pair at a nest. An attractive raptor, the subspecies concerned is *sanctijohannis*. This race is smaller than the Eurasian races and is unique in having a dark morph. Another potential split!
- Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*: We had some great views of a pair along the Kougarak Highway in Nome and also enjoyed some great sightings in Denali National Park (about six individuals seen) and saw another along the Denali Highway. The subspecies is *canadensis*.

#### FALCONIDAE

- Merlin *Falco columbarius*: Our best sighting by far was the showy male on top of a conifer along Crow Creek Road on our journey to Seward. A couple of others were seen rather more briefly. Another species where the North American forms differ significantly from the Eurasian ones. The form we saw was *suckleyi*.
- Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus*: After a record showing on my last tour to Alaska, we had to work hard this year and eventually got good views of a single pale bird both perched and in flight along the Kougarak Highway near Nome.

#### PHASIANIDAE

- Spruce Grouse *Falcipennis canadensis*: We spent a long time attempting to track down this elusive species and eventually struck gold thanks to Judith's sharp eyes in Denali National Park. The bus driver refused to back-up a few metres so we had to abandon the bus but then had the most amazing experience with a very tame female. Pete's favourite, it was worth the wait for the next bus!

Willow Ptarmigan (W Grouse) *Lagopus lagopus*: We saw relatively few this year in what must have been a mediocre year for this species. Nevertheless, we had some excellent views of several in the Nome (10 on the day we went along the Kougarak Highway) and saw a few more in the Denali area.

Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus*: Seven seen at Nome including a few which allowed a close approach and another seen on the Denali Highway. They moult later than the preceding species so the males were still in largely white (except for the black lores and tail) winter plumage with just a few darker feathers moulting in. The females are tough to tell apart. The bill size is perhaps the best feature.

#### GRUIDAE

Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*: Most of our sightings were around Nome with a maximum count of just eight in one day. We were also surprised to see a single up at Barrow!

#### CHARADRIIDAE

Black-bellied Plover (Grey P) *Pluvialis squatarola*: A single bird was found on St Paul where it is pretty uncommon at this time.

American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*: Half a dozen or so birds seen at Nome where this species breeds virtually alongside the next (this species tends to prefer drier, higher areas). A few also seen at the eastern end of the Denali Highway and on the tundra at Barrow. A superb sight in full breeding plumage, especially the males.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*: Fabulous views on St Paul where we saw up to 11 individuals and about six seen in the Nome area. In general this species prefers the lower coastal tundra at Nome.

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*: First seen on St Paul, a few others in the Nome area where we found them on territory along gravelly rivers. Also seen in Anchorage, along the Denali Highway and at Barrow.

#### HAEMATOPODIDAE

Black Oystercatcher (American B O) *Haematopus bachmani*: Good views of a pair during the Kenai Fjords boat trip, here at the northern edge of their range.

#### SCOLOPACIDAE

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca*: Just three singles seen, but some good views.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*: Considerably more numerous than the preceding species with a total of just over 20 logged during the tour.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*: A total of five seen on St Paul, where they are much prized by the American birders!

Wandering Tattler *Heteroscelus incanus*: Only a handful of sightings with good views of a few on St Paul and a pair in the Nome area.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*: Small numbers seen at several sites, all of which were nicely spotted. Best perhaps were those near to the hotel in Anchorage.

Hudsonian Whimbrel *Numenius hudsonicus*: Very few seen with just five seen in the Nome area and three more along the Denali Highway. This dark-rumped form is often lumped in Eurasian Whimbrel *N. phaeopus*.

Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis*: Once again, we wasted no time at all finding this rare and little-known species and we even scoped it from the road so that Anne didn't miss out! It was great to hear its atmospheric song and watch it displaying and also fabulous to scope it at close range. Surprisingly similar to the previous species at first glance, in flight, the bright golden-buff rump and tail were apparent. Classified as Vulnerable by BirdLife International, its population is estimated to be around 7,000 and decreasing. Introduced cats, dogs and possibly pigs heavily predate flightless birds on wintering grounds. Hunting for food is localized (particularly previously in the Tuamotus). Breeding birds are predated by several species of raptor, Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*, Common Raven *Corvus corax* and foxes. Gold mining is a potential future threat in Alaska and Ingestion of lead paint on Midway Island needs to be investigated (it was recently identified as a problem in seabirds). I was recently in Polynesia where at one site we saw over 40 together!

Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*: Up to 80 seen very well at Westchester Lagoon and the nearby mudflats including some fabulous males in full breeding plumage.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*: Around 40 seen at St Paul (many of which were flying by) and at Nome we saw up to twenty daily. The adult male in full breeding plumage near to the Bristle-thighed Curlews was particularly attractive. The race concerned is *baueri* which has a heavily barred rump.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: A handful seen at St Paul, a single at Nome and two or three at Barrow. Another species that is smart in breeding plumage.

Black Turnstone *Arenaria melanocephala*: We saw a few of these smart birds at Safety Lagoon, Nome, where we particularly enjoyed a confiding pair feeding on dead fish.

Surfbird *Aphriza virgata*: The only one seen was a fine breeding-plumaged adult with the godwits at Westchester Lagoon in Anchorage. This species has a very restricted range and is not really that common.

Red Knot *Calidris canutus*: Up to 10 feeding on the islands in Safety Lagoon, not a common bird on this tour.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*: Three breeding plumaged adults at Barrow were a bit of a surprise.

Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*: The first was a single at St Paul. It was the most numerous breeding shorebird at Nome, especially along the coastal strip and good numbers were seen at Barrow where many were seen in display flight.

Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*: Some fabulous breeding plumaged birds at Nome where we were able to watch them side-by-side with the previous species. It was interesting to see the variation in bill length. They don't breed around Nome and are in actual fact a North Slope nester.

Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis*: Some great looks at a super breeding plumaged bird along the shore of Safety Lagoon at Nome. This North American rarity apparently breeds in this area in very small numbers.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla*: First seen on St Paul where we saw just three but got some great looks. We also saw a few along the Denali Highway.

White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*: A few seen at Barrow where we all enjoyed a very confiding bird while we were watching our first Spectacled Eider and saw a few others including a pair displaying on the road. This is an uncommon and erratic breeder at Barrow, here at the western edge of its range.

Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*: A few seen very well at Barrow.

Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*: A couple in Anchorage on our first morning and then good numbers on the tundra at Barrow at the end of the trip where we logged up to 100 in a day. The territorial males inflating their breasts and flying around us making deep booming sounds were excellent value.

- Rock Sandpiper *Calidris ptilocnemis*: The large, pale nominate race was a common breeding species on St Paul where we had repeated views and saw the wing waving display a number of times. We also saw one or two individuals there which may have been migrants?
- Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: Small numbers on St Paul, at Nome and at Barrow. The race concerned is the large and particularly brightly coloured *sakhalina*.
- Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*: This species does not seem to be present at Barrow every year but we struck lucky this year with up to four individuals being seen on the short coastal tundra. Classified as Near Threatened by BirdLife International. Originally numbering in the hundreds of thousands to millions (1890s-1900s), the species was brought to near extinction in the early 1920s by hunting. It has not recovered, with the current population estimated at 15,000 individuals. It is difficult to monitor, as it is not faithful to breeding sites (and possibly not to wintering sites), but data from North American migration sites suggests that declines are continuing. Immediate threats are the matter of some conjecture. The breeding grounds may be affected by habitat loss and degradation and environmental contaminants. Previously, ongoing declines were attributed to widespread and continuing destruction of grasslands in the wintering range, but there seems little evidence to support this, although environmental contaminants may be playing a part there. It appears to depend heavily upon intensive grazing by livestock.
- Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*: A single breeding plumaged adult at Westchester Lagoon on our last afternoon was the only one of the tour. The race concerned is *caurinus*.
- Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*: Some great looks at Barrow where we saw up to 20 in a day, all of which were in superb breeding plumage.
- Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*: The drumming display (distinctly different from the European Common Snipe) was frequently heard and we also got some excellent views of this recent split, including a few around Nome and even right up at Barrow!
- Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*: First seen on St Paul where this species is one of only four breeding shorebird species. This delightful species was then common at wetlands almost throughout and we spent some marvellous time watching their antics.
- Red Phalarope (Grey P) *Phalaropus fulicarius*: A couple of birds on the sea at St Paul gave us a taste for this fantastic species and then we saw a few at Nome and up to 100 a day at Barrow where we spent many hours drooling over these stunning birds. Surely one of the most spectacular shorebirds in breeding plumage.

#### STERCORARIIDAE

[This family is sometimes lumped in with the gulls, Laridae.]

- Pomarine Jaeger (P Skua) *Stercorarius pomarinus*: It was an excellent lemming year at Barrow and therefore an excellent year for this species. It was great to see them roaming around all over the tundra. Most were light phase adults though a few dark phase birds were also seen. We logged up to 75 in a day in a relatively small area!
- Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua) *Stercorarius parasiticus*: A single seen at St Paul, and up to four seen daily at Nome, mainly in coastal tundra areas and around Safety Sound. Most were pale phase but a few intermediate phase birds were also encountered. We also saw up to six in a day at Barrow.
- Long-tailed Jaeger (L-t Skua) *Stercorarius longicaudus*: Some graceful adults were watched drifting over on St Paul and we went on to see small numbers around Nome and a few along the Denali Highway. Always one of my favourites, the form seen, *pallescens*, shows a pale belly.

## LARIDAE

- Bonaparte's Gull *Larus philadelphia*: The Cook Inlet, off Westchester Lagoon, was the best place with up to 100 birds there on our last afternoon. We also saw singles between Anchorage and Seward and along the Denali Highway.
- Mew Gull *Larus brachyrhynchus*: The most widespread gull species on the tour with good numbers just about everywhere. This form is often lumped in Common Gull *L. canus* but varies in a number of plumage characteristics especially in immature plumages. It was however split in the recent 'Gulls' book.
- Vega Gull *Larus vegae*: A single seen at Nome. Darker backed and darker eyed than American Herring Gull. This species is often lumped in Herring Gull and is sometimes referred to as Siberian Herring Gull.
- American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus*: A few at Westchester Lagoon and Potter Marsh, and very small numbers at Denali. There is widespread hybridization between this species and Glaucous-winged Gull in southern Alaska, and some of the birds seen may well have had hybrid genes! Some birds at Potter Marsh certainly appeared to show mixed characters.
- Slaty-backed Gull *Larus schistisagus*: Good looks at a near adult (probably 3rd summer) at Nome.
- Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens*: Up to 20 a day (mostly tatty immatures) at St Paul, the odd single around Nome and common at Seward with hundreds seen during the boat trip to Kenai Fjords.
- Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*: More common than usual on St Paul (presumably due to the hard winter) where we saw up to 20 per day. A common bird at Nome and Barrow with many seen at both places. The smaller and slightly darker subspecies in Alaska is *barrovianus*.
- Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini*: A single adult showed very well on the sea at St Paul and we got great views of many at Nome, where up to 15 were seen in a day. We were then treated to great views of a lovely pair at the Freshwater Lake at Barrow.
- Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*: Very common on St Paul and in the Seward area, especially on the boat trip to Kenai Fjords, where many thousands were seen. We also saw small numbers over the Norton Sound at Nome. The subspecies seen, *pollicaris*, is restricted to the Pacific and may be another one that is ripe for splitting.
- Red-legged Kittiwake *Rissa brevirostris*: Although outnumbered by the preceding species we saw up to 30 daily on St Paul where they gave fantastic views. Surprisingly, only made it into Richard's top six. This is a nocturnal feeder preying on just a couple of species of fish and squid out in the Bering Sea. It is therefore not seen in feeding flocks of Black-legged Kittiwakes close inshore on St Paul. Classified as Vulnerable by BirdLife International, the population is estimated at between 291,000 and 321,000 and is declining. The reasons for the population decline remain unclear, but it has been attributed to a reduction in food supply resulting from excessive commercial fishing. The recent construction of a harbour in the Pribilof Islands considerably increases the chances of the accidental introduction of rats which would pose a serious threat. The Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge protects many of the breeding colonies. A rat prevention programme is underway in the Pribilof Islands.

Ivory Gull *Pagophila eburnea*: A quite remarkable start to the tour as we watched a first summer bird sitting on a bright red sign in the middle of Anchorage!! Virtually the first bird seen!! It gave great views and scraped into Pete C's top six. Classified as Near Threatened by BirdLife International. There are 4,500-22,000 individuals in the Russian Arctic, with 2,500-10,000 in European Russia, 4,000 on Severnaya Zemliya, and 8,000 on Franz Josef Land and Victoria Island; plus 500-700 in northeast Canada in 2002-2003, 500-1,000 in Greenland, and 50-200 in Svalbard, giving a total population of 15,550-23,900 individuals, perhaps best placed in the band 15,000-25,000 individuals. The population is possibly larger: aerial estimates of up to 35,000+ between Canada and Greenland were made in 1978-1979. The Spitsbergen population is probably decreasing, but on Victoria Island and Severnaya Zemlya no decrease has been detected. However, recent surveys have revealed that the Canadian populations have declined from 2,400 birds in 1987 to 500-700 birds in 2002-2003, representing an 80% decline in that period across the Canadian breeding range in all three known nesting habitat types. Birds have disappeared from 13 known and three suspected breeding colony sites. Declines may be linked to the decrease in Arctic sea ice cover (which declined 3% per decade from 1978 to 1998, and continues to shrink). For these reasons, the species has been placed in the Near Threatened category as a precautionary measure, and further information is needed from the rest of the range, particularly from populations in the Russian Arctic.

#### STERNIDAE

[This family is sometimes lumped in with the gulls, Laridae.]

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*: Widespread but most common at Nome where up to 30 were seen in a day.

Aleutian Tern *Sterna aleutica*: Great views of up to 10 at Safety Sound where we were able to watch these lovely birds at close range and listen to their strange and distinctive chattering calls.

#### ALCIDAE

Common Murre (C Guillemot) *Uria aalge*: Surprisingly, we saw many more of this species than the following species on St Paul, where we logged up to 300 each day and many hundreds during the boat trip to Kenai Fjords, especially on the Chiswell Islands.

Thick-billed Murre (Brünnich's Guillemot) *Uria lomvia*: A handful on St Paul where this species often greatly outnumbers the Common Murre on the breeding cliffs. We also saw a couple offshore at Nome. Pacific birds (*arra*) are longer billed than nominate birds from the Atlantic.

Black Guillemot *Cephus grylle*: A single non-breeding plumaged bird was found on the sea off St Paul where the distinctive gleaming white underwings were the giveaway. A real rarity here!

Pigeon Guillemot *Cephus columba*: A few distant birds on St Paul and then much better views of at least 50 during the boat trip to Kenai Fjords. Best separated from the previous species by their dusky wing linings.

Marbled Murrelet *Brachyramphus marmoratus*: At least 20, some of which showed very well, during the boat trip to Kenai Fjords. This species is classified as Endangered by BirdLife International. The population is estimated at 475,000 – 760,000 and declining. Most remaining old-growth forest (which it is dependant on for breeding) is slated for logging. Prey-base reductions perhaps explain declines where logging has been limited. Nylon, monofilament gill-nets in shallow waters and oil-spills (e.g. Exxon Valdez and Nestucca) cause considerable mortality

- Kittlitz's Murrelet *Brachyramphus brevirostris*: At least 10 during the boat trip to Kenai Fjords, all around the entrance to, and in, Northwestern Fjord. Thanks must go to our skipper who persevered for us and ensured that we got some great views as they showed incredibly well, allowing repeated close approaches. Compared to the previous species, we were able to see the obvious contrasting dark eye, the overall paler plumage, and shorter bill of this subtle and localized species. We also noted the white tail feathers in flight (see the photo on the CD!)
- Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*: A few sightings on St Paul always left us wanting more! Seven on the boat trip to Kenai Fjords gave rather better views but were still a little skittish and elusive, especially the first few!
- Parakeet Auklet *Aethia psittacula*: Fabulous views of hundreds of birds on St Paul. They were still in the process of establishing nest sites and a cliff that was alive with birds one day could be devoid the next! We also saw a couple in the Chiswell Islands.
- Least Auklet *Aethia pusilla*: This diminutive alcid was abundant on St Paul where we saw up to 1,000+ daily. Although they nest largely in boulder fields on the shore they would come right up on the cliffs like all the other alcids.
- Crested Auklet *Aethia cristata*: Less common than the preceding two species on St Paul, we only saw up to 70 of these comical creatures in a day and they seemed more skittish than the other species. We eventually managed good views of a few on the cliffs, and it was Richard's top bird.
- Rhinoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*: About 20 of these strange-looking dumpy auks were seen during the boat trip to Kenai Fjords, a few of which allowed really great views.
- Horned Puffin *Fratercula corniculata*: Small numbers on the cliffs at St Paul where some confiding individuals allowed a close approach. Also very common during the boat trip to Kenai Fjords where at least 300 were seen.
- Tufted Puffin *Lunda cirrhata*: Much time was spent watching these comical-looking, fantastic birds along the cliffs at St Paul. Also very common off the Chiswell Islands where we saw probably more than a thousand! Rated as our top alcid in the post trip bird of the trip vote.

#### COLUMBIDAE

Rock Dove (feral) *Columba livia*: Just small numbers thankfully.

#### STRIGIDAE

- Snowy Owl *Nyctea scandiaca*: Back on form this year! We started with at least three or four on St Paul which showed well but were a little shy, and up to eight a day on Barrow, some of which showed brilliantly. Judith's top bird.
- Northern Hawk-Owl *Surnia ulula*: We had only just begun our search when one showed brilliantly along the Denali Highway and the views were simply staggering! Also appreciated by our friends from Field Guides! Then seen again in bizarre circumstances at Glenallen where we saw an adult and two newly fledged juveniles!
- Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*: A fantastic bonus seeing an adult of this huge and impressive owl at Glenallen. We enjoyed close-up scope views for as long as we wanted! Fourth overall in our top six vote.
- Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*: A single at Denali was our only sighting!
- Boreal Owl (Tengmalm's O) *Aegolius funereus*: We were most fortunate to see a fantastic adult peering down at us.
- Northern Saw-whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus*: As with the above species, we got stupendous views as a lovely orange-eyed adult looked down on us. It was an excellent tour for owls this year!

## TROCHILIDAE

Rufous Hummingbird *Selasphorus rufus*: We saw plenty of feeders but little sign of hummingbirds! We eventually saw a couple of females near to Seward. It really does not seem right that they can survive so far north!

## ALCEDINIDAE

Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon*: A single seen in flight by some on our first morning in Anchorage and a pair seen at Palmer.

## PICIDAE

Hairy Woodpecker *Picoides villosus*: Great views of a male and female close to their nest at Skilak Lake. The race here is *septentrionalis*.

American Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides dorsalis*: An after breakfast sortie in the outskirts of Anchorage reaped immediate rewards as we found a drumming bird that gave terrific views almost as soon as we had locked the vehicle! This species was formerly lumped in Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker *P. tridactylus*. The race here is *fasciatus*.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*: A couple of fairly brief singles seen, one by Pete at Denali and another along the Denali Highway.

## TYRANNIDAE

Olive-sided Flycatcher *Contopus cooperi*: We had good scope views of this declining tree top species near to Tern Lake, and heard a couple of others. Classified as Near Threatened by BirdLife International. Habitat loss and alteration of forest management practices may limit breeding success. However, numerous studies suggest that several types of harvested forest are beneficial to the species (possibly recreating preferred post-forest fire habitat mosaics). Despite this, population declines are occurring throughout the range of this species, which may suggest that populations are affected by loss or alteration of habitat in wintering grounds.

Western Wood-Pewee *Contopus sordidulus*: A single wood-pewee on St Paul was a first for the island. It was not heard to call, and plumage wise, may be closer to Eastern Wood-Pewee than Western. It is not safe to identify a vagrant purely on range/likelihood, so it is probably best left as pewee sp. We did however see a definite Western Wood-Pewee that was singing away at Skilak Lake!

Alder Flycatcher *Empidonax alnorum*: We saw one very well near to Skilak Lake and Phil heard another in Anchorage.

Say's Phoebe *Sayornis saya*: A couple seen very well at Nome and also seen along the Denali Highway.

## LANIIDAE

Northern Shrike (Great Grey S) *Lanius excubitor*: Just a single on the outskirts of Palmer. Well spotted from the bus by Judith, the sceptical leader turned back and was surprised to find a shrike in such an unlikely spot! The subspecies concerned is *invictus*.

## CORVIDAE

Grey Jay *Perisoreus canadensis*: Our first encounter was with a single in Chugach State Park in Anchorage. We later had excellent views in a number of other locations including in the Denali area, especially when scanning for Northern Hawk Owls and then when watching one, as this species is an aggressive mobber!

Steller's Jay *Cyanocitta stelleri*: Seen very well on a couple of occasions in the Seward area.

Black-billed Magpie *Pica hudsonia*: Common in the Anchorage area, around Denali and especially on the Kenai Peninsula.  
Northwestern Crow *Corvus caurinus*: Good views of several around Seward and during the Kenai Fjords boat trip. Not the most impressive 'diamond bird'!  
Common Raven *Corvus corax*: Another fairly common species around Anchorage, Denali and on the Kenai Peninsula and very common at Nome where up to 50 were seen daily where they were especially common around the dump. We also heard some excellent vocalizations from them there.

#### ALAUDIDAE

Horned Lark (Shore L) *Eremophila alpestris*: At least four seen at the eastern end of the Denali Highway during our first unsuccessful search for Smith's Longspur.

#### HIRUNDINIDAE

Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*: First seen well by our hotel in Anchorage, and pretty common for much of the trip. We even saw a stray in Barrow!  
Violet-green Swallow *Tachycineta thalassina*: Small numbers in Anchorage where we first saw them well by our hotel and also common on the Kenai Peninsula.  
Bank Swallow (Sand Martin) *Riparia riparia*: Scattered sightings with small numbers at several sites. The largest concentration was at the east end of the Denali Highway.  
Cliff Swallow *Hirundo pyrrhonota*: Small numbers at Nome where we watched several visiting their nests under a bridge. Most common in the Denali area where we saw hundreds.

#### PARIDAE

Black-capped Chickadee *Poecile atricapillus*: First seen at Skilak Lake, we went on to see small numbers at several sites.  
Chestnut-backed Chickadee *Poecile rufescens*: Three of these charming birds were seen in Seward a couple of which gave some fabulous views.  
Boreal Chickadee *Poecile hudsonicus*: First seen well in the Chugach State Park, Anchorage, and four further individuals logged including three at Byers Lake campground.

#### SITTIDAE

Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*: Great looks at a single male in Seward that was giving its typical trumpeting call and seen by some at Byers Lake campground.

#### CERTHIIDAE

Brown Creeper *Certhia americana* (NL): Richard saw a single at Byers Lake campground.

#### TROGLODYTIDAE

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: The very hard winter had taken its toll on the resident population on St Paul, though we still managed excellent views of a couple at the quarry. These belong to the large, pale, endemic race *alascensis*. At Seward, we saw a singing bird which I believe would belong to the subspecies *pacificus*.

#### CINCLIDAE

American Dipper *Cinclus mexicanus*: Brilliant views of a pair on a river near to Nome.

## REGULIDAE

Golden-crowned Kinglet *Regulus satrapa*: After a brief sighting for Phil in Chugach State Forest, we saw a singing male of this very Firecrest-like species lured in during one of our stops between Anchorage and Seward, and we went on to see a couple of others.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Regulus calendula*: A common bird around Anchorage, and down towards Seward. Although some were seen well, including one displaying his ruby crown, we heard far more than we saw! It has a surprisingly loud and strong song for such a tiny bird.

## SYLVIIDAE

Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*: Good looks at one along the Denali Highway, which was probably one of the first to arrive. Just about the last summer visitor to arrive in Alaska, having made their way from their southeast Asian wintering grounds through Siberia and on to Alaska! It was one of the species to be targeted by the bird flu research teams!

## TURDIDAE

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica*: Superb views of a pair, including a spectacular singing male, along the Kougarak Road at Nome.

Grey-cheeked Thrush *Catharus minimus*: A common bird at Nome where several showed well. We also saw and heard and saw a few in the Denali area.

Swainson's Thrush *Catharus ustulatus*: A few seen and more heard, mostly during our voyage to Seward and back.

Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus*: A couple of migrants on St Paul were rather wary. We went on to see good numbers in the Seward area and even saw a vagrant up at Barrow!

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*: Seen in small numbers virtually everywhere except Barrow and St Paul.

Varied Thrush *Ixoreus naevius*: We had a number of superb encounters with this splendid ventriloquist, with our best views being in the Seward area. It was very surprising to see several in Barrow.

## STURNIDAE

European Starling (introduced) *Sturnus vulgaris*: Sadly this 'write-in' has now spread this far, perhaps with the help of global warming? Seen in Anchorage and Palmer.

## MOTACILLIDAE

Alaska Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] tschutschensis*: Quite a common breeding bird at Nome where we saw a number of individuals. On the first day there seemed to have been quite a fall, and we saw hundreds on the way out to and around Safety Lagoon. The race here is *tschutschensis*, which is essentially similar to Blue-headed Wagtail (*flava*) but the sides of the breast are spotted with grey.

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus*: We saw a single calling individual which was caught up with the wagtails at Nome.

American Pipit *Anthus rubescens*: A couple of sightings of migrants on St Paul, a single at Nome and another single along the Denali Highway.

## BOMBYCILLIDAE

Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*: A couple were seen well but briefly near to Skilak Lake and we then all had lovely views of a flock of at least six when we took a detour during our drive up to Denali. An elusive and erratic breeding species in this part of the world.

## PARULIDAE

Orange-crowned Warbler *Vermivora celata*: A fairly common bird with small numbers being seen or heard in most areas except St Paul. It typically breeds in low willow scrub and mixed spruce forest. Amazingly, we even saw a vagrant up at Barrow!

Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia*: Thinly spread with a total of just eight logged, the first being a fine male near Nome.

Yellow-rumped Warbler *Dendroica coronata*: A common breeding species in the Anchorage area, on the Kenai Peninsula and around Denali. These are of the nominate race, often referred to as Myrtle Warbler.

Townsend's Warbler *Dendroica townsendi*: Several stunning males seen in the forests between Anchorage and Seward.

Blackpoll Warbler *Dendroica striata*: First seen (a stunning male) en route to Denali and a few more seen along the Denali Highway. They give away their presence with their insect-like song.

Northern Waterthrush *Seiurus noveboracensis*: We saw several in the stream-side willow scrub at Nome, where one or two gave extremely good views, saw one along the Denali Highway, and heard a few others.

Wilson's Warbler *Wilsonia pusilla*: A few seen around Nome where we saw some fine males, with several more in the Seward area, at Denali National Park and along the Denali Highway.

## EMBERIZIDAE

American Tree Sparrow *Spizella arborea*: This attractive sparrow was common at Nome and along the Denali Highway. Several confiding individuals of this northern breeder were seen at close range.

Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*: Common around Anchorage where we saw them the first morning and for much of the tour (by voice at least).

Red Fox Sparrow *Passerella iliaca*: Fairly common around Nome and in the Denali area. The race concerned is *zaboria* (one of three races included in Red Fox Sparrow). Often referred to simply as Fox Sparrow but a four way split is now being followed by some authors.

Sooty Fox Sparrow *Passerella unalaschensis*: Great views of three individuals near to Seward. Often included in the above species, but, considering they occur virtually sympatrically, they are pretty different!

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*: Our best views were at the small marsh on the outskirts of Seward.

Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolni*: Our best views were those scoped up near to the car park in Chugach State Forest. A few others were seen and heard.

White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*: A relatively common and widespread bird in Alaska. The race concerned is the pale lored *gambelii*, often referred to as Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow.

Golden-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia atricapilla*: First seen near to Nome where this smart sparrow was quite a common bird with at least eight individuals being seen in a day and others heard. Also seen well at Summit Lake on the way down to Seward and heard in the Denali area.

Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*: Seen in the Anchorage area, around Denali and on the Kenai Peninsula. These are of the nominate race, often referred to as Slate-coloured Junco.

Lapland Longspur (L Bunting) *Calcarius lapponicus*: An abundant bird everywhere on St Paul Nome and Barrow. The song flighting males are really gorgeous birds.

Smith's Longspur *Calcarius pictus*: Our decision to search for this handsome species along the eastern end of the Denali Highway reaped great rewards when we found two fabulous males in a large bog and heard another. These allowed fantastic views as they sang from the tops of shrubs and fed on the ground in front of us. Top bird for Phil and second in the bird of the trip vote.

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*: A very common bird on St Paul and at Barrow where they can be heard singing everywhere, even in the towns. On St Paul, we also saw a couple of birds which appeared to be hybrids between this species and McKay's Bunting *P. hyperboreus* though sadly no pure individuals of the latter were known to be present during our visit.

#### ICTERIDAE

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*: Just a few seen flying about over the marshes at Palmer.

Rusty Blackbird *Euphagus carolinus*: White-eyed males were seen well near to Nome on a couple of occasions and a pair were also seen at Skilak Lake.

#### FRINGILLIDAE

Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch *Leucosticte tephrocotis*: A very common, attractive and tame bird on St Paul where they are one of the very few passerine species! The race here is the large *umbrina*.

Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator*: Smashing views of a pair close to Seward and then a fantastic experience with about a dozen coming down to the road to take grit at Cooper Landing. Both of these sightings were of the *flammulus* subspecies whereas those seen at Glenallen (where the Great Grey Owl was) were of the *alascensis* subspecies and are part of the 'Taiga' group. The forms differ in voice and plumage and more than one species may be involved.

White-winged Crossbill (Two-barred C) *Loxia leucoptera*: A pair showed well close to Seward and we then had great views of at least three coming down to take grit with the above species.

Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*: A single on St Paul and small numbers around Anchorage, in the Denali area and at Barrow. Not always straightforward to identify from the next species.

Hoary Redpoll (Arctic R) *Carduelis hornemanni*: A common bird at Nome where we had several memorable encounters and also some smart individuals, including a flock of 15, at Barrow. The delicately pink-hued males were particularly smart. The race concerned is *exilipes*.

Pine Siskin *Carduelis pinus*: Best views of this somewhat drab finch were those joining the grosbeaks and crossbills to pick up grit at Cooper Landing.

## MAMMALS

- Snowshoe Hare *Lepus americanus*: Several around Lake Skilak and in the Denali area. An important prey species.
- Arctic Ground Squirrel (A Souslik) *Spermophilus parryii*: A few seen in the Nome Area and common in Denali National Park and along the Denali Highway where some inquisitive individuals joined us for lunch! It is another staple prey item for many predators
- American Red Squirrel (Red S) *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*: A few in the Anchorage, Seward and Denali areas.
- Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus*: We saw at least three of these 'mini-beavers' at Westchester Lagoon. Sadly, although we saw much evidence of the real thing, the beavers remained hidden.
- Brown Lemming *Lemmus trimucronatus*: Common on the tundra at Barrow this year and the reason for all of the Snowy Owls and Pomarine Skuas.
- North American Porcupine *Erithizon dorsatum*: A couple of sightings of roadside animals. An impressive if slightly unkempt looking species.
- Arctic Fox *Vulpes lagopus*: Numerous on St Paul where they were an almost constant sight especially around the village. Most were dark but a single white one was seen.
- Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: A total of six were seen around Nome. Lovely and fluffy looking here.
- Grey Wolf (Wolf) *Canis lupus*: We had got off the bus to watch a couple of Grizzly Bears and while watching them were extremely lucky to see a very pale female wolf in Denali National Park. She was the alpha female from the group and was almost white. The only slight disappointment was that she was wearing a radio collar.
- American Black Bear (Black B) *Ursus americanus*: Well, what can I say! After a distant animal south of Anchorage, we were confronted with one on the road along Crow Creek Road! Chuffed with this sighting, we then had an incredible encounter with a mother and her three cubs feeding on dandelions right by our van near to Skilak Lake. Without a doubt, one of the most exciting 30 minutes of the trip, it was incredible to see how quickly the youngsters shinned up trees when spooked!
- Brown Bear (Grizzly B) *Ursus arctos*: Definitely another mammalian highlights of the tour with no less than six being seen on our day in Denali National Park, first a pair on a hillside and then a sow with three cubs rooting about in a river bed. Magic stuff!
- Northern Fur Seal *Callorhinus ursinus*: Hundreds hauled out on the shores of St Paul. The males territorial roar is an impressive noise!
- Northern Sea-Lion (Steller's S) *Eumetopias jubatus*: A few distant blond animals hauled out off St Paul and about 25 during the boat trip in Kenai Fjords National Park. This animal is gravely threatened (probably by over fishing) and numbers have declined alarmingly in recent decades.
- Largha Seal (Spotted S) *Phoca largha*: Good numbers hauled out on the larger than usual areas of ice off Safety Lagoon!
- Harbour Seal (Common S) *Phoca vitulina*: c100 hauled out on the glacial ice during the Kenai Fjords boat trip. They were pretty shy but a few chose to swim up and have a close look at us.
- Sea Otter *Enhydra lutris*: At least ten of these endearing animals seen during the boat trip in Kenai Fjords National Park.
- Stoat (Short-tailed Weasel) *Mustela erminea*: A couple of brief sightings of Mustelids seem most likely to have been this species.
- Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*: Great looks at about 10 during our boat trip in the Kenai Fjords including animals breaching and lunge-fishing!!
- Grey Whale *Eschrichtius robustus*: A couple scoped up off St Paul were a nice surprise.
- Killer Whale (Orca) *Orcinus orca*: We were delighted to see a pod of around twenty animals during the Kenai Fjords boat trip including a particularly impressive bull and several younger animals.

- Moose (Elk) *Alces alces*: An incredible total of more than 25 were logged from various locations. Perhaps most memorable were the drinking animal along the Kougarak Highway and the female with twins, both at Nome, and the impressive stag in Anchorage.
- Reindeer (Caribou) *Rangifer tarandus*: Just a couple on St Paul where they are introduced and small numbers in Denali National Park and along the Denali Highway.
- Dall Sheep *Ovis dalli*: Common in Denali National Park where we saw at least 30 animals in scattered groups, some of which showed very well.
- Mountain Goat *Oreamnos americanus*: A few distant animals on the drive down to Seward and then good views of four on cliff faces near Northwestern Glacier.
- Musk Ox *Ovibos moschatus*: We had a couple of encounters with this really impressive animal in the Nome area. Two groups totalling around 28 were seen and we saw a very approachable individual (by car at least!) along the Teller road that was very close to the road indeed.

Top Ten Birds – all photos taken on the tour by Pete Morris



1st King Eider



2nd Smith's Longspur



3rd Spectacled Eider



4th Great Grey Owl



5th Crested Auklet



6th Emperor Goose



7th Snowy Owl



8th Tufted Puffin



9th Red Phalarope



10th Spruce Grouse

And a couple of the top mammals...



American Black Bear



Orcas