

FIELD REPORT

GRAND ALASKA: NOME PRE-TRIP

JUNE 11–16, 2021



Bluethroat, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 12, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

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Our Nome Pre-Trip got off to a nice start before we even boarded our flight from Anchorage to Nome! Taking advantage of the hour or so we had before we needed to be at the airport for our morning flight, we ventured out to Westchester Lagoon right in the middle of Anchorage. There we encountered a flock of eleven Hudsonian Godwits, many close Red-necked Grebes (nest building), Greater Scaup and Arctic Terns, a Bald Eagle, and four rare Redheads among others. Back at our hotel, a responsive Boreal Chickadee was a nice find while loading up our vans to head to the airport!

Arriving in Nome at midday, we hit the ground running. Following a quick lunch, we headed out for a brief stop at the Nome River mouth just east of town. Aleutian Terns were numerous, flying back-and-forth to their nesting island. A stunning Sabine's Gull (uncommon this late) was spotted feeding in the current. En route, we also enjoyed a wonderful pair of breeding-plumaged Red-throated Loons and some Red-necked Phalaropes on the roadside ponds.



Red-throated Loon, Council Road, Nome, Alaska, June 13, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Then it was on to the Teller Road for the remainder of the afternoon. A herd of very close Musk Oxen was encountered before we even got out of town, followed quickly by our first Long-tailed Jaegers and a brilliant male Lapland Longspur. At the Penny River we added an American Dipper, Wandering Tattler, and a Rusty Blackbird among others. Then a little more than 14 miles out, and following a tip from our Grand Alaska Part I group, we found the iconic bird of Nome (and perhaps all of Alaska), a singing male Bluethroat! We enjoyed multiple, prolonged studies of this beauty as it moved from song

perch to song perch near the roadside. It was a great relief to get this highly-sought species so quickly on our trip. Highlights for the rest of the day included a super-responsive Willow Ptarmigan that nearly attacked our van, two Northern Shrikes, Hoary Redpoll, and a newly arrived Arctic Warbler. Finally, a post-dinner option back to the Nome River mouth produced four Bar-tailed Godwits, as well as a “shish kabob” of over 30 Long-tailed Jaegers at one spot! All of these highlights on the first day of our tour! Nome is truly the mecca for Alaskan birding.



Willow Ptarmigan, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 12, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Day Two had us heading out the Council Road all the way to its end at MP 74. At Cape Nome, about 13 miles out, we enjoyed great success with a close Black Guillemot (rare), four Kittlitz's Murrelets (rarer still), two Short-tailed Shearwaters, and a few Common Murres. None of these species are really expected in Nome. Traversing along famous Safety Lagoon, we tallied all five species of loons in the same day (including a rare Yellow-billed and a rare Arctic, the ID of which was clinched by Allan's photos after the fact), Brant, a tour first (and lifer for everyone, including both leaders!) Stejneger's Scoter, Common Eider, Black Turnstone, and an amazing 17 Sabine's Gulls at once. Beyond Solomon, as the road turned inland, we tallied brilliant Harlequin Ducks, three Surfbirds (very uncommon here), quick glimpses of an Eastern Yellow Wagtail, and more close studies of Arctic Warblers.



Arctic Warbler, Council Road, Nome, Alaska, June 13, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

On our third day we opted to bird the Kougarok Road all the way to “Curlew Mountain” at MP 72.5. This road goes north and inland from Nome. At the dump, just outside of town, we found a rare adult Slaty-backed Gull, followed quickly by close studies of another Northern Shrike (we would see an unprecedented eight for the tour). Scope views of a Golden Eagle on its nest, a cow and calf Moose along the Nome River, another Willow Ptarmigan, an extremely close Wilson’s Snipe, several Surf Scoters on Salmon Lake, and a female Merlin dust-bathing between our vans (!) were next in line as our day continued. We arrived at Coffee Dome (where the hike for the Bristle-thighed Curlew begins) in the midafternoon. We had allotted about four hours of total time for this rigorous hike that usually has only about a 50% success rate in locating the curlews regardless of the amount of time one puts in. Incredibly, just about fifteen minutes into our walk (with the vans still in sight), a pair of curlews flew right over us with the female calling and the male singing. The female landed a couple hundred yards up to our left and allowed lengthy scope studies. We were back at the van after a total of 37 minutes—surely an all-time record for this hard to see species! This was another day filled with great successes!



Bristle-thighed Curlew, Kougarok Road, Alaska, June 14, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Our last full day was spent back on the Teller Road. On a high rocky dome about 34 miles out, we located a male Rock Ptarmigan in the fog, along with both American and Pacific golden-plovers in stunning breeding plumage. Other highlights for the day included six more Willow Ptarmigan, another Rock Ptarmigan (scope views from 30 feet away), a pair of Northern Wheatears, a Northern Shrike on a nest, a very close Red Fox, 35+ Musk Ox (with many adorable babies), and five Moose.

We had a few hours to bird the next morning before our return flight to Anchorage, and we returned to the Council Road. Incredibly, at Hastings Creek, we found a male Spectacled Eider resting on a sand spit; we enjoyed prolonged scope views of this rarity. Such are the amazing possibilities in Nome! Our trip ended all too quickly. In all, we tallied 107 species of birds (including many found nowhere else in the United States except Western Alaska) and eight species of mammals. Some folks headed home and others onto a new adventure on Grand Alaska Part III!



Rock Ptarmigan, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 15, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

ITINERARY

June 11 - arrival in Anchorage

June 12 – Holiday Inn, Westchester Lagoon, morning flight to Nome; Council Road to Nome River mouth, Teller Road to MP 18; post-dinner excursion to Council Road MP 13 (Cape Nome) (63 species; 63 total)

June 13 – Council Road to MP 74 (Council) (66 species; 91 total)

June 14 – Kougarok Road to MP 72.5 (Curlew Mountain) (48 species; 98 total)

June 15 – Teller Road to MP 57 (Bluestone River); post-dinner option to Council Road MP 30 (52 species; 106 total)

June 16 – Council Road to MP 24 (Safety Sound); midday flight from Nome to Anchorage (37 species; 107 total)

KEY

A = Anchorage, Westchester Lagoon

N = Nome and surrounding Seward Peninsula

bold-faced species indicate birds of rare, casual or accidental occurrence

underlined species indicate birds of very uncommon occurrence or species which occur regularly but in such low densities as to be easily missed

- indicates birds seen with babies or on nests

BIRDS

Waterfowl:

Snow Goose (*Anser caerulescens*) N---48 birds divided into three flocks on Safety Lagoon on a post dinner option; rare here at this date

Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) N---two on Safety Lagoon on post dinner option; uncommon

Brant (*Branta bernicula*) N---the western race *nigricans* (a possible future resplit); up to 80 in a day

Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*) N---although very difficult to separate from *parvipes* type Canadas, all “white-faced” geese on the Seward Peninsula are of the large Cackling Goose group *taverneri*

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) A---presumed to be of the small “Lesser Canada Goose” group *parvipes* ; #

Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) N---up to 80 in one day

Northern Shoveler (*Spatula clypeata*) N---three total

Gadwall (*Mareca strepera*) A,N---two at Westchester Lagoon and a three more at Safety Lagoon (where fairly rare); generally uncommon in Alaska

American Wigeon (*Mareca americana*) A,N---seemed less numerous than usual in Nome

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) A

Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) N

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) A,N

Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*) N---six on Safety Lagoon; very uncommon to rare

Redhead (*Aythya americana*) A----four drakes at Westchester Lagoon; rare

Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) A,N---common

Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) A---two at Westchester Lagoon

Spectacled Eider (*Somateria fischeri*) N---scope studies of lone male found on the Hastings Creek lagoon the last morning; rare here and always a bonus!



Spectacled Eider, Council Road, Nome, Alaska, June 16, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Common Eider (*Somateria molissima*) N--- v-nigra subspecies along Safety Lagoon; up to 50 in one day

Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) N---always spectacular; 42 total birds with several excellent views

Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*) N

White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*) N---generally uncommon here by this date, but this year was exceptional with flocks totaling up to 500 birds in one day!

Stejneger's Scoter (*Melanitta stejnegeri*) N---this rare Siberian visitor was being seen somewhat regularly prior to arrival; we managed to find one male in the large flocks of White-wingeds near Cape Nome; a lifer for everyone including both leaders!; tied for fourth favorite bird of the tour!

Black Scoter (*Melanitta americana*) N---thirteen total; uncommon

Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) N---up to 300 in one day (many migrant flocks of the coast); much more numerous than usual

Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) N---one female at Salmon Lake; uncommon in Nome

Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) N---up to 35 in a day

Pheasants, Grouse and Allies:

Willow Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*) N---superb studies; eight total birds seen; voted the second favorite bird of the tour!

Rock Ptarmigan (*Lapogus muta*) N---we had wonderful views of two males along the Teller Road; always difficult & easily missed

Grebes:

Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*) A,N---close views of many a Westchester Lagoon; additionally one in Nome; #

Pigeons and Doves:

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*) A,N---the ones in Nome being around one house on the Teller Road where they are being raised apparently

Cranes:

Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis*) N

Plovers and Lapwings:

American Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) N---in stunning breeding plumage; all on the Teller Road; four total



American Golden-Plover, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 15, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Pacific Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) N---gorgeous breeding-plumaged birds; three total

Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) N---five total

Sandpipers and Allies:

Bristle-thighed Curlew (*Numenius tahitiensis*) N---a pair flew right over our heads calling & singing just fifteen minutes into our hike; the female landed a couple hundred yards away and allowed lengthy scope views; the whole walk from start to finish lasted only 37 minutes (certainly a record; seen on about 50% of the trips; voted the third favorite bird of the tour!

Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) N---fourteen total

Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limnosa lapponica*) N---*baueri*; ten total this year; best at the Nome river Mouth on post dinner option

Hudsonian Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*) A---flock of eleven birds at Westchester Lagoon the first morning

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) N---pair on the Sinuk River on Day 4; seemingly declining here

Black Turnstone (*Arenaria melanocephala*) N---two at Safety Sound on Day Two; uncommon

Surfbird (*Calidris virgata*) N---three birds in the cold & fog of Skookum Pass; seen on only about 25% of the tours here

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) N---one for a few just past Safety Sound; unusually scarce

Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) N---a migrant near Woolly Lagoon; very uncommon here

Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*) N---common and in breeding display flight all around Safety Lagoon

Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) N---fairly common & widespread

Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*) A---one for some at Westchester

Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*) N---some great views, especially on the Kougatok Ro16

Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) N---beautiful breeding-plumaged birds; up to 20 in a day

Wandering Tattler (*Tringa incana*) N---three total; excellent studies at the Penny river in particular

Skuas and Jaegers:

Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) N---seven total

Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius lomngicaudus*) N---common and conspicuous birds around Nome; 32 in one day (a full shish kabob)!; #



Long-tailed Jaeger, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 12, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Auks, Murres and Puffins:

Common Murre (*Uria aalge*) N---four off of Cape Nome

Black Guillemot (*Cephus grylle*) N---winter plumaged bird very close off Cape Nome; rare

Kittlitz's Murrelet (*Brachyramphus brevirostris*) N---scope views of two pairs distantly off of Cape Nome; very rare here; a tour first!

Gulls and Terns:

Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) N---up to 75 in a day

Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*) N---one at the Nome River Mouth the first day and then an amazing seventeen at Safety Sound on Day Two; uncommon migrant here this late

Bonaparte's Gull (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) A---one bird at Westchester Lagoon the first morning

Mew Gull (*Larus canus*) A,N---seen daily in numbers; #

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) A,N,---“American “ Herring Gull (*smithsonianus*) around Anchorage and one or two “Vega” Gulls (the Siberian subspecies *vega*) in Nome

Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistagus*) N---one adult bird at the Nome dump, plus a probably first cycle bird near Safety Lagoon; rare



Slaty-backed Gull, Kougarok Road, Nome, Alaska, June 14, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) N---very common

Aleutian Tern (*Onychoprion aleuticus*) N---many birds nesting on an island at the river mouth; a minimum of 12 seen; #

Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) A,N---repeated spectacular views; #

Loons:

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) N---very common; close, gorgeous breeding-plumaged birds; up to 20 in a day; tied for fourth favorite bird of the tour!

Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*) N---one seen briefly at MP 30 that was suspected to be an Arctic, but not confirmed until we saw Allan's photos days later

Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) N---spectacular breeding-plumaged birds; eleven total

Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) N---two seen; uncommon in Nome

Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*) N---one quite distantly in Safety Lagoon allowed scope views; generally a rare migrant here; thanks to Tom!

Shearwaters & Petrels:

Short-tailed Shearwater (*Ardenna tenuirostris*) N---two off Cape Nome; unexpected from shore

Cormorants:

Pelagic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) N

Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) N----quite rare on the Seward Peninsula

Hawks and Eagles:

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) N----scope study of one on nest along the Kougarok Road in the fog; feeding young; #

Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*) N---five total (two males)

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) A---adult at Potter Marsh

Falcons:

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) N----female dust-bathing right in-between our two vans for several minutes!

Large falcon species (*Falco sp.*) N---a large falcon cruised rapidly over the Pilgrim River and was seen by a few; it was likely a Gyrfalcon, but ID could not be confirmed

Shrikes:

Northern Shrike (*Lanius borealis*) N—an unprecedented eight birds seen, including one on a nest; ; #very uncommon and easily missed



Northern Shrike, Kougatok Road, Nome, Alaska, June 14, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Crows, Jays and Magpies:

Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*) A---several around Anchorage

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) A,N---daily; #

Tits, Chickadees & Titmice:

Boreal Chickadee (*Poecile hudsonicus*) A----one in our hotel parking lot!

Swallows:

Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*) N

Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) A,N---#

Violet-green Swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina*) A---at Anchorage hotel and Potter Marsh; our first bird of the tour!

Cliff Swallow (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*) N---nesting under the bridges at the Sinuk and Pilgrim Rivers; #

Leaf Warblers:

Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*) N---many nice views of this specialty; including heard birds, we had 17 in one day along the Kougarok Road!

Dippers:

American Dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*) N---close scope views at the Penny River; uncommon in Nome

Starlings:

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) A---this species has increased dramatically in Anchorage over the past several years, but I have never seen them more numerous here than this year; #

Thrushes and Allies:

Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*) N---common around Nome

American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) A,N---daily in numbers

Old World Flycatchers:

Bluethroat (*Cyanecula svecica*) N---repeated, close scope studies of singing male on the Teller Road; a highlight of any trip to Alaska; voted the favorite bird of the tour!

Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) N---pair near Woolly Lagoon; uncommon

Wagtails and Pipits:

Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*) N---subspecies *tschutschensis*; seemingly declining here---we had one briefly near Solomon and then a wonderfully responsive pair out the Teller Road

American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) N---generally uncommon; three total



Bluethroat, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 12, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Finches and Allies:

Common Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*) N---although we saw many in flight, we never really had good views of a perched bird this year

Hoary Redpoll (*Acanthis hornemanni*) N---27 total with many great views; likely to be lumped in the future with Common Redpoll

Longspurs and Snow Buntings:

Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) N---spectacular in breeding plumage; common around Nome with up to 20 in one day

New World Sparrows:

Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*) N---"Red" birds (*zaboria*) fairly common around Nome

American Tree Sparrow (*Spizelloides arborea*) N---six total

White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) N

Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*)
plumaged birds

N---beautiful breeding-

Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)
Lagoon

N---common around Safety



Lapland Longspur, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 12, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Icterids:

Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*) N---three total; perhaps best around the Penny River; generally uncommon & low density

New World Warblers:

Northern Waterthrush (*Parkesia noveboracensis*) N---heard more often than seen, but we had nice views on a couple of occasions

Orange-crowned Warbler (*Oreothlypis celata*) N

Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*) N---daily

Blackpoll Warbler (*Setophaga striata*) N---heard only

Wilson's Warbler (*Cardellina pusilla*) N

total species – **107**



Musk Ox, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 12, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

FAVORITE BIRDS OF THE TOUR

1. Bluethroat
2. Willow Ptarmigan
3. Bristle-thighed Curlew
4. Stejneger's Scoter—tied
4. Red-throated Loon—tied

MAMMALS

Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) two along the Council Road past Solomon; I believe this species to be quite rare on the Seward Peninsula

Arctic Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus parryii*)---only four total in this cold year

Alaskan Hare (*Lepus othus*)-----one in Nome for my van; uncommon

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) three total; great views of one; two by Andy

Spotted Seal (*Phoca largha*)

Moose (*Alces alces*)---a total of 9 with several excellent views

Musk Ox (*Ovibos moscatus*)--- superb views; 92 or more total including many adorable babies



baby Musk Ox, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 12, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer

Harbor Porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*)----a few off the Cape Nome area

total species - 8

BUTTERFLIES

Old World Swallowtail
Mustard White

total species – 2

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

The indescribable Jodeen

Crispy bacon

Subway pre-order forms

The midnight sun for a few of us

The upcoming, sure-to-be-a-hit movie “The Massacre at Pilgrim Hot Springs” featuring Barry Zimmer as himself, Scarlett Johansson as the leading lady, Erik Bruhnke as the Giant Beaver, Jodeen as herself, Mark as crispy bacon guy, plus many others



Bluethroat, Teller Road, Nome, Alaska, June 12, 2021 ©Barry Zimmer