



VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

ITINERARY

## GRAND ALASKA

**PRIBILOFS & ANCHORAGE PRE-TRIP:**

**MAY 29–JUNE 7, 2024**

**NOME & GAMBELL PRE-TRIP: MAY 29–JUNE 8, 2024**

**PART I: NOME & UTQIAGVIK JUNE 7–16, 2024**

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View from near Eureka Pass, Glenn Highway © Barry Zimmer

*Our Grand Alaska program offers participants the option of taking any combination of several individual sections. Those taking either pre-trip plus Parts I and II will have a 28-day tour that is truly comprehensive in scope. Those desiring a shorter trip may select one or more of the tours and still enjoy excellent birding in a more relaxed visit to some of the most beautiful and remote areas in North America. This itinerary covers the Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip, Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip and*

*Grand Alaska Part I: Nome and Utqiagvik. Grand Alaska Part II: Anchorage, Denali & Kenai Peninsula, along with an optional Nome Pre-Trip, is covered in a separate itinerary.*

*The Bering Sea is considered to be the center of the adaptive radiation of the Alcid family. Nowhere is that diversity on better display than in the Pribilof Islands, where visitors can expect to see at least seven nesting species of puffins, auklets and murre. The sight-and-sound spectacle of the bird cliffs, with thousands of alcids, fulmars, kittiwakes and cormorants, many of them at close range, has to be experienced to be appreciated. Participants can expect all of the special breeding birds (including, in addition to the alcids, Red-legged Kittiwake, Red-faced Cormorant, Rock Sandpiper, Pacific Wren, Lapland Longspur, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch and Snow Bunting) and abundant photographic opportunities. St. Paul is also a justly renowned outpost for finding Asiatic vagrants, and our trip is timed to coincide with what is typically the best time in spring for finding such rarities, which appear, on average, earlier here than they do at more northern locales such as Gambell and Nome. Three days of birding out of Anchorage at the end of the Pre-trip will offer chances for a number of boreal forest breeders, possibly including Barrow's Goldeneye, Spruce Grouse, Hudsonian Godwit, American Three-toed and Black-backed woodpeckers, Boreal Chickadee, Bohemian Waxwing, White-winged Crossbill and more, with additional emphasis on searching for Northern Hawk Owl if any are known to be around. This Pre-Trip provides a host of boreal forest possibilities as well as chances for Asiatic vagrants and for seeing and photographing many seabirds at close range.*

*When spring suddenly arrives on the adjacent shores of Alaska and Siberia, and thousands of birds rush northwards to claim nesting territories, some of these small navigators make big mistakes. Because of this, every year a number of Asian migrants wind up on North American soil, and a few have even colonized Alaska as breeding birds. Birders have learned that they can intercept some of these strays by positioning themselves at strategic points in western Alaska. The Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip is designed to do exactly that, and at the same time it will familiarize us with the multitude of Bering Sea and northern mainland (sub-Arctic) breeding specialties.*

*Gambell birding can be quite fabulous; remarkable strays that have occurred here include White-tailed Eagle, Black-tailed Gull, Oriental Pratincole, Green Sandpiper, Jack Snipe, Taiga Flycatcher, Siberian Stonechat, Siberian Rubythroat, Dusky Thrush, Eurasian Bullfinch, and many others. Our 2012 tour discovered and documented a Common ("Siberian") Chiffchaff, a first record for North America at the time, and one that has now been seen by three of our last ten groups to visit Gambell! Our 1989 tour discovered a Little Curlew here—a first record for Alaska and only the third ever for North America—and our 1995 tour found a Tree Pipit, only the second ever to that point for North America. Regular here are Common Ringed Plover and Dovekie (both of which annually nest in small numbers), while Red-necked Stint, Slaty-backed Gull and Red-throated Pipit are nearly annual in occurrence. Even on days when no vagrants show up, the birding is exceptional. Tens of thousands of murre, puffins, guillemots and auklets that nest east of the village or on other cliffs on the island, are constantly moving just offshore, as are smaller flocks of scoters, eiders, and Harlequin Ducks. Migrants passing the point often include Arctic, Pacific, and Yellow-billed loons; Emperor Goose; King, Common, Steller's and Spectacled eiders; all three jaegers; and Ivory Gull (now very rare).*

*Both the Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip and Part I: Nome & Utqiagvik will allow participants the opportunity to explore the varied habitats to be found in the Nome region. Nome, the old gold-rush capital of Alaska, still retains much of the frontier character that typifies the Alaskan bush. Here, amidst wonderful examples of alpine and coastal tundra, we will search for some of the most special of Alaska's breeding birds including Arctic Loon, Rock and Willow ptarmigan, Gyrfalcon, Bristle-thighed Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Rock Sandpiper, Aleutian Tern, Bluethroat, Northern Wheatear,*



*Eastern Yellow Wagtail and others. We can also expect a nice cross-section of large mammals with Muskox, Moose, Grizzly (Brown Bear) and Reindeer (Caribou) among the possibilities. Late May and very early June is also the prime time for many migrants that do not normally breed around Nome, including Emperor Goose, Black Turnstone, Red Phalarope, Pomarine Jaeger, Sabine's Gull and a variety of other waterfowl and shorebirds. There are usually a few Red-necked Stints and Slaty-backed Gulls hanging around, and, in past years, this has proven the best time for occasional Asiatic vagrants, particularly shorebirds (among them, Lesser Sand-Plover, Great Knot, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper and Gray-tailed Tattler).*

*Utqiagvik (formerly known as Barrow) is an entirely different world! In a setting of 24-hour sunlight, the bird life is unmistakably High Arctic. Three species of eiders nest here (the magnificent King, the beautiful Steller's, and the bizarre Spectacled), with the males resplendent in their breeding dress, and there is no more accessible place in all of North America to see them. Displaying sandpipers are everywhere—Pectorals with their ruffs distended as they perform their strange hooting flights, dressy Dunlins singing shrill "songs" from atop moss-covered hummocks, and ponds alive with gorgeous Red and Red-necked phalaropes. Brilliant Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs are the common passerines! Yellow-billed Loon and Sabine's Gull are regular migrants that are seen in most years by our groups, Buff-breasted Sandpipers are present and displaying in some years, and there is always the very real chance of some Asiatic vagrant showing up (vagrants seen on our past visits have included Red-necked and Temminck's stints, Gray-tailed Tattler, and Spoon-billed Sandpiper). If the lemming population is not in a crash year, we should be treated to the sight of Snowy Owls and Pomarine Jaegers cruising over the tundra. Even Polar Bear (seen by several of our past tours) is a possibility here!*



# PRIBILOFS & ANCHORAGE PRE-TRIP

## MAY 29-JUNE 7, 2024



Tufted Puffins, St. Paul Island, Pribilofs © Kevin J. Zimmer

**May 29, Day 1: Arrival into Anchorage.** Participants will arrive in Anchorage today and take the complementary shuttle to our hotel, where a room will be reserved in each person's name. We'll meet in the hotel lobby at 6:30 p.m. for a get-acquainted dinner and to discuss plans for tomorrow.

NIGHT: Coast Inn at Lake Hood, Anchorage

**May 30, Day 2: Anchorage to St. Paul (the Pribilofs).** After breakfast today, we will fly southwest along the Alaska Peninsula toward St. Paul in the Pribilof Islands. As seen from the air, the peninsula is one of Western Alaska's most scenic areas, with remnant volcanic peaks rising 6,000 feet from the coastline. We will probably stop briefly at Bethel for refueling before continuing northwestward over the Bering Sea. There should be time for birding this afternoon (subject to flight schedules) and an after-dinner excursion as well. Please note that in most years, only one VENT leader will be accompanying the group to the Pribilofs. There are excellent resident guides on the Pribilofs who will assist the VENT leader with driving and guiding.

NIGHT: King Eider Hotel, St. Paul

**May 31-June 1, Days 3-4: St. Paul Island.** Largest of the Pribilof Islands, St. Paul offers an incomparable seabird experience. At various vantage points along its cliffs, hundreds, or occasionally thousands of birds are visible at once, many of them packed cheek-to-jowl on narrow ledges: Least, Crested, and Parakeet auklets; Common and Thick-billed murres; Northern Fulmars; Horned and Tufted puffins; and more. The colorful Red-faced Cormorants and Red-legged Kittiwakes are easily observed here, and the latter species is a true specialty that is difficult to find elsewhere in Alaska. Flocks of non-breeding Harlequin Ducks along the shorelines and in the harbor are sometimes accompanied by small numbers of King or Steller's eiders. Among the few land birds, Gray-crowned



Rosy Finch and Snow Bunting are conspicuous, while more searching is often required to find the Pacific Wren. Rock Sandpipers are common on the grassy interior of the island. In addition, our late-May to mid-June visits have often turned up one or two (or more) odd strays from Asia. Examples of such bonus birds from past trips include Taiga Bean Goose, Tufted Duck, Black-tailed Godwit, Gray-tailed Tattler, Lesser Sand-Plover, Little Stint, Long-toed Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Common Snipe, Ross's Gull, Black-headed Gull, Common and Oriental cuckoo, Eurasian Skylark, Siberian Rubythroat, "Black-backed" Wagtail, Hawfinch, Brambling, and Rustic Bunting. Between stretches of sea cliffs, huge herds of Northern fur seals come ashore each summer to raise their pups on the beaches, although our May visit will precede the arrival of most of the "beachmasters" and all of the females on shore. The neat and brightly-painted Aleut village of St. Paul makes a picturesque base for exploring these islands.

NIGHTS: King Eider Hotel, St. Paul

**June 2, Day 5: St. Paul to Anchorage.** We'll have the entire morning and a little time in the afternoon for birding on St. Paul, after which, we'll return to Anchorage. Flight schedules are always subject to change, but these flights typically depart St. Paul in the late afternoon, arriving in Anchorage sometime after 8:00 p.m. We'll plan on a late dinner at the hotel shortly after arrival.

NIGHT: Coast Inn at Lake Hood, Anchorage

**June 3-6, Days 6-9: Day Trips out of Anchorage.** We'll keep our exact schedule over these days as flexible as possible, to better take advantage of conditions on the ground (weather, tidal schedules, presence of unusual birds, etc.). On one of these days, we'll probably head up the Glenn Highway toward Glennallen and back, birding en route. This highway traverses some truly grand country and a great variety of habitats that typify the interior of central Alaska. In the early going we'll be bordering the Matanuska River valley and afforded wonderful views of the spectacular Matanuska Glacier. The highway ascends to subalpine zones before dropping into a vast taiga belt of spruce forest dotted with small lakes and barrens of wet muskeg. These habitats are particularly good for such special birds as Red-tailed ("Harlan's" subspecies) Hawk, Merlin, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Bohemian Waxwing, Northern Shrike, Blackpoll Warbler, White-winged Crossbill, and, in some years, Northern Hawk Owl, a search for which will be a special point of emphasis. The many lakes provide breeding habitat and feeding areas for a variety of waterfowl species including Trumpeter Swan, Barrow's Goldeneye, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Greater and Lesser scaup, Surf and White-winged scoters, and many others. Common, Pacific, and Red-throated loons; Solitary Sandpiper; Lesser Yellowlegs; and dainty Bonaparte's Gulls are just a few of the other species regularly found around these taiga lakes. Stops in areas of bigger timber may yield such prizes as American Three-toed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Pine Grosbeak and others, whereas the subalpine zones that we skirt en route are good for finding Golden Eagle and Townsend's Solitaire. This day will be a long one, with lots of driving but the potential birding payoff is great, and the scenery is guaranteed to delight. We'll return to Anchorage each night in time for dinner.



Northern Hawk Owl © Kevin J. Zimmer

In recent tours, we used days designated for birding Anchorage to visit the Sockeye Burn area north of Willow, which had only recently been colonized by unusual numbers of Black-backed and American Three-toed woodpeckers following the big Sockeye Fire of 2015. Our visits to this site over recent years have yielded a number of other birds, among them, Spruce Grouse; Sandhill Crane; Northern Goshawk; Merlin, Hairy and Downy woodpeckers; Olive-sided and Alder flycatchers; Western Wood-Pewee; Boreal Chickadee; Varied Thrush; Lincoln's Sparrow; and White-winged Crossbill. However, note that with each passing year since the original burn, this site becomes less attractive to the woodpeckers, and, indeed, the woodpeckers have been harder to locate at this spot the last few years.

Alternatively, we may opt to bird our way south along a portion of the exceptionally scenic Seward Highway towards Seward. This part of the Kenai Peninsula has much to offer—perhaps an American Dipper bobbing along a rushing, glacier-fed stream; a Barrow's Goldeneye in the reflection of a snow-capped peak on a glass-smooth lake; a Spruce Grouse nervously leading her downy charges safely through the forest; or an American Three-toed Woodpecker quietly flaking bark from a dead spruce. Frequent stops are inevitable, perhaps to appreciate the majesty of a close Bald Eagle, to scope a distant slope for Mountain Goats, or simply to snap a picture of some dazzling alpine backdrop. The moist Sitka spruce forest that hugs the coast near Seward shelters birds like Rufous Hummingbird, Steller's Jay, Chestnut-backed and Boreal chickadees, Pacific Wren, Varied and Hermit thrushes, Townsend's Warbler, Pine Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill (in some years), and "Sooty" Fox Sparrow. Regardless of our exact course of action, these will be days of great adventure, producing spectacular scenery as well as a diverse cross-section of boreal forest and coastal birds, with chances for mammals ranging from Black Bear to Beluga, and from Mountain Goat to Dall's Sheep.

NIGHTS: Coast Inn at Lake Hood, Anchorage

**June 7, Day 10: Optional Day in Anchorage or Departure for Home.** Participants continuing on Part I will have the option of another day of relaxed birding of the boreal forest, lakes and coastal mudflats and lagoons in and around Anchorage, but, as always when we are in Anchorage, we will have our ears tuned to the local birding grapevine, and will be prepared to make last-minute adjustments to take full advantage of any unusual birding opportunity that might present itself.



Spruce Grouse (male), Anchorage, Alaska © Kevin J. Zimmer

Participants not continuing on Part I can depart for home any time today or on evening overnight flights on June 6.

# NOME & GAMBELL PRE-TRIP

## MAY 29-JUNE 8, 2024



Bluethroat (male), Nome, Alaska, © Kevin J. Zimmer

**May 29, Day 1: Anchorage.** Participants should arrange to arrive in Anchorage this afternoon and take the complementary shuttle to our hotel, where a room will be reserved in each person's name. We'll meet in the hotel lobby at 6:30 p.m. for a get-acquainted dinner and to discuss plans for tomorrow.

NIGHT: Coast Inn at Lake Hood, Anchorage

**May 30, Day 2: Anchorage to Nome.** This morning we'll fly from Anchorage to Nome, arriving in late morning. We'll head straight to our hotel, get checked in, and then head to lunch. After lunch, we'll begin birding along the Council Road, which hugs the coastline south and east of town. Nome is the ivory capital of Alaska and was its gold capital in years gone by. Today the town is a major center for the native people of the region. Once a part of the Bering land bridge, the Seward Peninsula has been colonized by several Old-World species. Our first afternoon in this rich area will introduce us to some of these Siberian colonizers, as well as to some familiar birds in decidedly unfamiliar settings.

Here, pairs of colorful Eastern Yellow Wagtails (formerly common, but scarce in recent years) and Lapland Longspurs enliven the brown tundra, while Fox Sparrows and Gray-cheeked Thrushes sing from the willow thickets. Long-tailed Jaegers cruise tirelessly over the tundra, their approach noisily protested by pairs of Whimbrels or Pacific Golden-Plovers. The edges of the vast Safety Lagoon complex are a gathering spot for hordes of shorebirds, sometimes including numbers of bickering Bar-tailed Godwits. Farther out, at Safety Sound, are masses of resting gulls (mostly Glaucous, Short-billed, and Black-legged Kittiwakes), which we will check carefully for the occasional Slaty-backed, Sabine's, or Black-headed gull. Flocks of Brant and smaller clusters of



Common Eiders are scattered liberally across the Sound, and jaegers of all three species can be seen harassing the Arctic and Aleutian terns. Red-throated and Pacific loons are frequent sights, as are groups of Tundra Swans and Sandhill Cranes. One or two pairs of Arctic Loons are typically present (and presumably nest) in the coastal lagoon complex between Safety Sound and Solomon, and seeing these rare birds will definitely be among our top priorities. There is more than enough to keep us busy this first day, and we will be sure to return to this dynamic area on one or more of our days in the Nome region.

NIGHT: Aurora Inn, Nome

**May 31-June 2, Days 3-5: Nome.** We will have three full days to explore the area around Nome. Increased coverage over the past three decades has yielded a number of discoveries from this region, including the presence of breeding Bristle-thighed Curlews and Bluethroats, as well as such vagrants as Eurasian Wigeon, Lesser Sand-Plover, Great Knot, Gray-tailed Tattler, and Black-headed Gull. Red-necked Stint, Emperor Goose, and Slaty-backed Gull are seen with some regularity, and it's a rare stay here that doesn't produce something unexpected. In the absence of "staked-out" rarities, we will search such standard hotspots as Safety Lagoon and the Nome River mouth, or devote more time to the exploration of the outer reaches of the area's three roads. Road conditions permitting, we'll spend one of our full days working the Kougarok Road. Although our biggest "quest" bird out here is the Bristle-thighed Curlew (which typically requires a round trip hike of at least a few hours over some difficult terrain, with no guarantee of success), there is much more to this day. The Kougarok Road is arguably one of the best birding roads in North America! Harlequin Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Rock and Willow ptarmigan, Gyrfalcon, Rough-legged Hawk, Golden Eagle, Wandering Tattler, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Bluethroat, Northern Wheatear, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Hoary Redpoll are just a few of the many birds that we regularly see on this road. Additionally, mammal-viewing opportunities abound (Moose, Grizzly and Muskox are all regularly seen), and the scenery is exceptional. Regardless of our exact course of action over the three days, we're certain to see a number of typical breeding birds of the region, usually including Pacific and Red-throated loons, Brant, Common Eider, Bar-tailed Godwit, Long-tailed and Parasitic jaegers, Aleutian Tern, Willow and Rock ptarmigan, Gyrfalcon, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Bluethroat, Northern Wheatear, Gray-cheeked Thrush, American Tree Sparrow, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Hoary Redpoll. In some years, White Wagtails or early arriving Arctic Warblers may be present.



Muskox, Nome, Alaska © Kevin J. Zimmer



NIGHTS: Aurora Inn, Nome

**June 3, Day 6: Nome to Gambell.** This morning we'll fly from Nome to the Yupik village of Gambell (flying time about one hour), at the northwestern tip of St. Lawrence Island. Regardless of the scheduled flight time, please note that we may experience weather delays in getting out to Gambell. Accordingly, this is a day when we need to remain particularly flexible in our plans. If the weather cooperates, we should be on the ground at Gambell by mid-day, ready to take on a whole new set of birds and birding experiences!

NIGHT: Sivuqaq Inn, Gambell

**June 4-6, Days 7-9: Gambell.** A visit to Gambell can rightly be considered an adventure. The friendly villagers are subsistence hunters and wonderful workers of ivory. The opportunity to stay amongst these Bering Sea people provides a unique glimpse into an ancient culture that few outsiders ever experience. Our accommodations are in a community-owned facility with simple double-occupancy rooms. The building is heated and has plumbing with five shared bathrooms complete with flush toilets and hot showers (in 4 of the 5 bathrooms). Self-service, coin-operated laundry facilities are available within the building. Our birding here is done on foot (average hikes of about three miles round trip), often over slush and loose gravel, but generally over flat terrain. **A recently added network of hard-packed gravel roads through the village eliminated much of the need for slogging through loose gravel, allowing us to reach most of the closer birding sites within 20-30 minutes of easy walking. For more distant locales (e.g. North Beach or the south end of Troutman Lake and beyond), or for rare bird chases (where speed may be of the essence), your leaders will arrange and pay for group "taxi" rides in carts towed by ATVs. These rides are provided by villagers who are accustomed to driving the ATVs, and who are responsible for maintaining their own vehicles.** Participants, at their own discretion, may also opt to utilize this "taxi" service, in lieu of hiking, at any time for one-way or roundtrip rides to and from closer birding sites (Northwest Point, the boatyards, airstrip, near and far boneyards, marsh at the northeast corner of Troutman Lake). A typical one-way ride to most birding locations is \$10, and is solely at the discretion of the individual participant, who will be responsible for paying directly for these services. Your leaders will be happy to facilitate contacts with the taxi drivers, most of whom post their telephone numbers on the lodge bulletin board, and some of whom we've known for many years. Rides can usually be arranged on very short notice, and the drivers routinely arrange to drop people off at a birding site and return at a specified time to pick them up. We also carry radios in the field, further facilitating rides on demand. We have found this system to work very well, and it allows participants the option of hiking or riding depending on conditions at the moment. At the same time, it is much less expensive than charging each participant for full-day ATV rental (going rate of \$85/day, or more than double what you would expect to pay for three round trip taxi rides), and avoids the inevitable frustration and inconvenience of having to swap out or repair rented ATVs that develop mechanical problems or break down (a regular occurrence).

The weather conditions are often harsh—temperatures are often just above freezing, with frequent fog, drizzle, or even occasional snow. In spite of this, the birding can be fabulous! Remarkable spring strays that have occurred here include White-tailed Eagle, Black-tailed Gull, Oriental Pratincole, Green Sandpiper, Great Knot, Eurasian Dotterel, Jack Snipe, Siberian House-Martin, Taiga Flycatcher, Dusky Warbler, Siberian Stonechat, Dusky Thrush, Eurasian Bullfinch, Common Rosefinch, Pallas's Bunting and many others. The 1989 VENT group discovered a Little Curlew here—the first for Alaska and only the third ever found on the North American continent! The 1995 VENT group discovered a Tree Pipit—only the second found in North America. Our 2011 group found a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, which represented not only a first island record, but a first record for the entire Bering Sea region of that North American breeder. Our 2012 group turned up a Common ("Siberian") Chiffchaff, which represented the first confirmed (photographically documented) record of that species for North America! Amazingly, we have now seen this species on three of our last ten visits! Our 2013 tour enjoyed a number of vagrants, topped by a Little Curlew (only the second Alaskan record) that we found on our last morning on the island. Common Ringed Plover, Red-necked Stint, Bluethroat, Red-throated Pipit and McKay's Bunting (exceedingly rare in recent years) occur with varying degrees of regularity. **Of course, the ultra-rarities are never to be expected, and one cannot count on seeing Siberian vagrants on any single visit.** Nonetheless, our

daily checks of the marshy ponds south of the village, the boneyards, and the lower slopes of Sivuqaq Mountain will be tinged with excitement and anticipation—practically anything is possible.

Even on days when no vagrants turn up, the birding is exciting. Tens of thousands of alcids nest on the cliffs just east of the village, and flocks are constantly passing very close to shore at Northwest Cape. Alcid diversity reaches its zenith in the Bering Sea, and we can expect to see as many as 10 species. Eight of these (Crested, Least and Parakeet auklets; Horned and Tufted puffins; Common and Thick-billed murres; and Pigeon Guillemot) should be present in numbers, whereas some searching may be required to find the Black Guillemot and Dovekie. Each year, small numbers of Dovekies are found (and are presumed to nest) on the mountain slopes above the village. Regular migrants often seen at Gambell include Yellow-billed and Arctic loon, Emperor Goose, all four species of eiders, Red Phalarope, Slaty-backed Gull, Sabine's Gull, and all three species of jaegers. There are typically a few scattered nesting pairs of Rock Sandpipers and White Wagtails in the area as well. Snow Bunting and Lapland Longspur are the two common breeding passerines at Gambell! In years when the concentrations of sea ice offshore are still present (sadly, an increasingly rare occurrence over the past 20 years), occasional Ross's Gulls and Ivory Gulls may be seen moving past Northwest Cape.



Lesser Sand-Plover, Gambell, Alaska © Kevin J. Zimmer

NIGHTS: Sivuqaq Inn, Gambell

**June 7, Day 10: Gambell to Nome.** Sometime today, we'll fly back to the relative comfort and civilization of Nome. During the afternoon or evening we should have time to check the mouth of the Nome River (where Slaty-backed Gull is often present and where other strays have been seen on occasion) and explore the Council Road at least to Safety Lagoon, the two most dynamic spots for waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, terns, and jaegers, and the best locales in the Nome area for potential vagrants.

NIGHT: Aurora Inn, Nome

**June 8, Day 11: Departure for Home or Day at Leisure Prior to Beginning Grand Alaska Part I Tour.** Participants not continuing on Part I will depart for Anchorage at roughly mid-day (subject to change). Some participants may find it necessary to overnight in Anchorage and depart the following day. A hotel room for the

night of June 8 is not included in the Nome & Gambell tour fee. However, upon request, VENT will be happy to arrange prepaid reservations at the Coast Inn at Lake Hood in Anchorage.

## **PART I: NOME & UTQIAGVIK**

### **JUNE 7-16, 2024**



**Bristle-thighed Curlew, Nome, Alaska © Kevin J. Zimmer**

**June 7, Day 1: Arrival in Anchorage.** Participants not continuing from the Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip should plan to arrive in Anchorage sometime today. One or both tour leaders will be in Nome, finishing up with the Nome & Gambell tour. Therefore, participants will be responsible for getting themselves to the hotel and then back to the airport for the flight to Nome the next morning. The hotel provides a courtesy shuttle, as well as storage facilities for any items not needed during the four-night stay in Nome. Our hotel is immediately adjacent to Lake Hood and Lake Spenard, and short walks to the lake have often produced such treats as Pacific Loon and Barrow's Goldeneye amidst the more common waterfowl.

NIGHT: Coast Inn at Lake Hood, Anchorage

**June 8, Day 2: Anchorage to Nome.** Participants will depart Anchorage for Nome in the morning (subject to change) and be met by the leaders and participants continuing from Nome & Gambell upon arrival.

After lunch, we'll begin birding along the Council Road, which hugs the coastline south and east of town. Nome is the ivory capital of Alaska and was its gold capital in years gone by. Today the town is a major center for the native people of the region. Once a part of the Bering land bridge, the Seward Peninsula has been colonized by several Old-World species. Our first afternoon in this rich area will introduce some of these Siberian colonizers, as well as some familiar birds in decidedly unfamiliar settings.

Here, pairs of colorful Eastern Yellow Wagtails and Lapland Longspurs enliven the brown tundra, while Fox Sparrows and Gray-cheeked Thrushes sing from the willow thickets. Long-tailed Jaegers cruise tirelessly over the



tundra, their approach noisily protested by pairs of Whimbrels or Pacific Golden-Plovers. The edges of the vast Safety Lagoon complex are a gathering spots for hordes of shorebirds, sometimes including numbers of bickering Bar-tailed Godwits. Farther out, at Safety Sound, are masses of resting gulls (mostly Glaucous and Short-billed gulls, and Black-legged Kittiwakes), which we will check carefully for the occasional Slaty-backed, Sabine's, or Black-headed gull. Flocks of Brant and Common Eiders are scattered liberally across the Sound, and jaegers of all three species can be seen harassing the Arctic and Aleutian terns. Red-throated and Pacific loons are frequent sights, as are groups of Tundra Swans and Sandhill Cranes. One or two pairs of Arctic Loons are typically present (and presumably nest) in the coastal lagoon complex between Safety Sound and Solomon, and seeing these rare birds will definitely be among our top priorities. There is more than enough to keep us busy this first day, and we will undoubtedly return to this area on another of our days in the Nome region.



NIGHT: Aurora Inn, Nome

**June 9-11, Days 3-5: Nome Area.** One of these days will be devoted to exploration of the Kougarok Road, which runs north into the interior of the peninsula. In contrast to the low coastal tundra and beaches that border the first 30 miles of the Council Road, the landscape here is mountainous, with high, rocky domes overlooking the river valleys below. The dense willow thickets along the river are home to another Siberian colonizer, the late-arriving Arctic Warbler, whose hammering trills reverberate through the countryside. Here too are Gray-cheeked Thrush; Wilson's, Orange-crowned, and Yellow warblers; Northern Waterthrush; Fox, Golden-crowned, and American Tree sparrows; and Common and Hoary redpolls. Rapidly flowing rivers and ambient gravel bars are the preferred habitat of Harlequin Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, Wandering Tattlers, and Ruddy Turnstones. In good years, both Willow and Rock ptarmigan are frequently seen in willow thickets or rocks along the road. Large mammals are also frequently encountered. In addition to herds of semi-domesticated Reindeer (rare in recent years), our groups have been treated to regular sightings of Moose, Grizzly (Brown Bear), and Muskox!

A special quest bird is the Bluethroat, a beautiful little Eurasian Muscicapid (Old-World flycatcher) with a wonderful skylarking song. In years past this was considered one of the most difficult-to-find of all North American breeding birds, with known sites being reached only by special chartered bush flights. In 1987, during a VENT tour, Kevin Zimmer discovered a pair of Bluethroats constructing a nest along the Kougarok Road, farther from Nome than most birders had regularly ventured. These gorgeous birds have been found on every VENT Alaska tour since then, and seem to have become a fixture as well as a true highlight of our annual trips. Conditions permitting, we will offer an optional hike to search for the Bristle-thighed Curlew. This rare bird breeds in small numbers in the Nome area. In a typical year, one to three pairs breed on a large dome about 73 miles out of Nome. At the time of our annual visits, the curlews are often incubating eggs and remaining inconspicuous. The pairs have ranges that cover large sections of the mountain (we have seen these birds pick up and fly two miles to an opposite ridge without stopping), and hence, are not easy to find. To make matters more difficult, Whimbrels, which are quite similar to the Bristle-thighed in appearance (although not in voice), also breed on the mountain,

and are routinely mistaken for the Bristle-thighed by inexperienced or overly enthusiastic birders. Despite this, we have had pretty fair success in showing this rare bird to groups, recording it on approximately 75% of our attempts. The hike for the curlew typically involves a minimum of two hours (often twice that) of walking, much of it uphill (moderate slope) and over tussock grass formations that range from merely annoying to mildly treacherous in spots. **Whether or not you opt to hike for the curlew, a day's birding on the Kougarok Road is not to be missed.** Participants routinely rave about this day, and many have rated it as among their lifetime birding highlights.

Note: Our day on the Kougarok Road is likely to be a long one. After breakfast in Nome, we will be gone for the remainder of the day with lunch in the field. Depending on birding conditions, our return could be delayed until late evening with a very late dinner to follow.

The rest of our time in the Nome region will be left somewhat open, with our precise plans no doubt dictated by current road, weather and birding conditions. Most likely, we will devote one full day to further exploration of the Council Road, which, in addition to having the most dynamic spot for migrants (Safety Lagoon complex), can also boast of easily accessible alpine tundra on either side of Skookum Pass, and of the Nome region's only accessible spruce forest near Council itself. The Teller Road will likely occupy us for a day as well. This road is particularly good for alpine-breeding shorebirds, raptors, and Rock Ptarmigan, and has been the most regular road for seeing White Wagtail in recent years. There are always surprises in the Nome region, and it pays to be flexible with our schedule. Past groups have discovered such unexpected treats as territorial Red-throated Pipits, pairs of Red-necked Stints, and true vagrants including Lesser Sand-Plover, Gray-tailed Tattler, Common Sandpiper, Great Knot, Brambling and Gray Wagtail. In addition to such unexpected vagrants, there are also a few resident birds such as Gyrfalcon, Northern Shrike, and Northern Wheatear that frequently require special efforts to find. Regardless of our exact course of action, there will always be plenty of excitement in birding this beautiful and remote outpost.

NIGHTS: Aurora Inn, Nome

**June 12, Day 6: Nome to Anchorage.** Depending on our actual flight departure time, we may have time this morning to check vantage points along the Nome coastline before returning to Anchorage. Migrants like Brant, sea ducks, and jaegers may still be moving offshore, and there's always a chance for a rare migrant like Emperor Goose, King Eider, or Sabine's Gull. At some point in the day we will fly back to the bustling big city of Anchorage and prepare for the next stage of our tour. Depending on flight schedules, we should have time for a late afternoon or post-dinner visit to nearby Westchester Lagoon, where water birds abound. Westchester Lagoon is typically dotted with nesting pairs of Red-necked Grebes, and the adjacent tidal mudflats offer foraging sites for Hudsonian Godwits, Short-billed Dowitchers, Surf-birds and a variety of other shorebirds, some of which regularly roost on islands in the lagoon during high tides. Both Greater and Lesser scaup are typically present on the lagoon, which also frequently hosts scoters, goldeneyes, Common Loons and Bonaparte's Gulls.

NIGHT: Coast Inn at Lake Hood, Anchorage

**June 13-14, Days 7-8: Anchorage to Utqiagvik (Barrow).** On June 13, some participants may wish to take advantage of a rare chance to sleep-in, prior to our late morning flight to Utqiagvik (Barrow). For those not inclined, we'll offer an optional pre-breakfast birding excursion in Anchorage (depending on flight schedules). We'll likely focus our limited time on one of the nearby parks with such boreal forest birds as Spruce Grouse, Merlin, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Alder Flycatcher, Boreal Chickadee, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Swainson's and Varied thrush, Townsend's and Orange-crowned warblers, Pine Grosbeak and White-winged Crossbill among the many possibilities.

A mid-day flight (subject to change) will take us from Anchorage up to Barrow (now renamed Utqiagvik, the Inupiat name, following a city-wide vote a few years ago). Lying well above the Arctic Circle, with sunlight 24 hours a day in summer, Utqiagvik is High Arctic—quite different from other areas we will have visited in Alaska.





**King Eiders (males), Utqiagvik, Alaska © Kevin J. Zimmer**

The remarkably flat coastal tundra here is pockmarked with shallow surface lakes and puddles and supports a different set of breeding shorebirds. Baird's Sandpipers are regular, Red Phalaropes are common, and Pectoral Sandpipers are everywhere, performing their odd hooting flight displays. In some years, one or more Buff-breasted Sandpipers, White-rumped Sandpipers, or Red-necked Stints have also been present and occasional rare vagrants



**Spectacled Eiders, Barrow, Alaska © Kevin J. Zimmer**



like Gray-tailed Tattler have sometimes been found. Utqiagvik is *the* place to see eiders in full breeding plumage. We should see flocks of Kings and lesser numbers of Commons migrating along the coast, and pairs of spectacular Kings, elegant Steller's (declining remarkably in the past few decades) and bizarre Spectacleds (also declining and considered threatened) on the inland lakes. Although the numbers of predators here vary (in concert with the local population cycles of lemmings), we are almost certain to see at least a few Snowy Owls, and perhaps some Short-eared Owls. In good lemming years, Snowy Owls are common, and Pomarine Jaegers can be downright abundant (although it must be said that we haven't experienced a good lemming year for several years now)! Our stay at Utqiagvik will allow us ample time to explore all the roads out of town as well as the base of the Point itself, a long gravel peninsula extending north into the ice-choked Arctic Ocean.



Snowy Owl (female), Barrow, Alaska © Kevin J. Zimmer

Other regular species around Utqiagvik include the likes of Pacific Loon, Tundra Swan, Brant (the western subspecies *nigricans*), Greater White-fronted Goose, Long-tailed Duck, American Golden-Plover, Dunlin, Red-necked Phalarope, Glaucous Gull, Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur, and both redpolls. We might encounter migrant Sabine's Gulls on the tundra ponds or fly-by or resting Yellow-billed Loons along the coast. With real luck, we could even see a Ross's Gull or a Polar Bear!

NIGHTS: Top of the World Hotel, Barrow (Utqiagvik)

**June 15, Day 9: Day in Utqiagvik (Barrow): Return to Anchorage.** After a second full day in Utqiagvik, our flight will depart for Anchorage in the afternoon or early evening (subject to change). Our tour will conclude in Anchorage with a farewell dinner and final checklist session.

NIGHT: Coast Inn at Lake Hood, Anchorage

**June 16, Day 10: Anchorage.** Participants not continuing on Part II can depart Anchorage anytime today.

This will serve as a transition day between tours for Part I participants continuing on Part II, providing what will no doubt be a welcome "sleep-in" morning (after a week or more of long days in the field) and opportunity for relaxation or sightseeing around Anchorage.

**TOUR SIZES:** The Pribilof & Anchorage Pre-Trip will be limited to 7 participants. The Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip and Part I will each be limited to 14 participants.

**TOUR LEADERS:** Michelle Sopoliga will lead the Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip. Kevin Zimmer and Brian Gibbons will lead the Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip and Grand Alaska Part I: Nome & Utqiagvik.



**Kevin Zimmer** has authored three books and numerous papers dealing with field identification and bird-finding in North America. His book, *Birding in the American West: A Handbook*, deals with finding and identifying birds in the western United States. Living in Alaska contributed to his affection for the Far North, where he has anchored VENT's tour program since 1986. For the past 30 years he has concentrated his attention on the Neotropics, particularly on Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. He has directed VENT's Brazil program since 1991. Kevin has a PhD in biology (research emphasis in Avian Evolutionary Ecology) from New Mexico State University, and is a Research Associate of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, an elective member of the American Ornithologists' Union, a longtime member of the A.O.U. South American Classification Committee (SACC),

and a former two-term member of the American Birding Association (ABA) Check-list Committee. He is a regular contributor to Cornell's Macaulay Library of Natural Sounds. He has authored numerous technical papers on the taxonomy, distribution, and behavior of Neotropical birds, particularly those of the Amazon Basin. In 2003 he completed (with co-author Mort Isler) the major chapter on the *Thamnophilidae* (antbirds) for the prestigious *Handbook of Birds of the World* series. In 2006, he and Curtis Marantz coauthored a six-CD compilation of *Bird Voices of Alta Floresta and Southeastern Amazonian Brazil* (produced by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Macaulay Library of Natural Sounds) that represents the most comprehensive set of commercially available bird recordings for any part of the Amazon Basin. He and Andrew Whittaker are currently at work on a comprehensive field guide to the birds of Brazil, to be published by Princeton University Press. Kevin lives in Atascadero, California with his wife, Susan. Their daughter, Marina, is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT). She and her husband, Ryan, and their daughter, Brinn, are now living in Napa, California.



**Brian Gibbons** grew up in suburban Dallas where he began exploring the wild world in local creeks and parks. Chasing butterflies and any animal that was unfortunate enough to cross paths with the Gibbons boys occupied his childhood. A wooden bird feeder kit sparked a flame that was stoked by a gift of the *Golden Guide* and family camping trips to Texas state parks. Twenty-five years ago Brian attended two VENT camps for young birders. Birds are now his primary interest, but all things wild continue to captivate him. After college, Brian undertook a variety of field biology research jobs that have taken him to the Caribbean, the Bering Sea, and the land of the midnight sun, arctic Alaska. He enjoys working with kids, hoping to spark environmental awareness through birds. For many years Brian's field research has involved bird banding. His most amazing recoveries were a female Wilson's Warbler that had been banded in Alaska and was captured by Brian in

Colorado, and a Sooty Tern that perished after a hurricane on the Texas coast; it had plied the Gulf of Mexico and the oceans of the world for 24 years. Brian's recreational bird-seeking has taken him to Machu Picchu in Peru, the Great Wall in China, the plains of East Africa, and the Himalayas in Nepal. Brian leads birding trips in the United States, Central America, the Caribbean, and Europe. As well as being a fanatical birder, he loves capturing birds with photography. He lives in Tucson, Arizona with his wife, Lacreia Johnson, and their son, Grayson.



**Michelle Sopoliga** grew up in Camarillo, California, and has been birding since 2002 when she took a Field Biology class at California State University, Chico. She earned her B.A. in Liberal Studies, B.S. in Biological Sciences/Ecology, and a Teaching Credential from CSU, Chico and has since been teaching high school science. The first five years of her teaching career were spent in Manteca Unified School District, California, where a highlight was the opportunity to take students on overnight camping trips to Yosemite, Mono Lake, Pinnacles National Monument, and Point Reyes National Seashore. She valued showing students the birds, wildlife, and geological features that she spoke of in class. Michelle began her love affair with Alaska in 2005, where she spent the summer greeting visitors to Yukon-Charley Rivers National Wildlife Preserve in Eagle.

She also worked for the National Park Service studying Peregrine Falcons nesting on the Yukon River. She returned to Alaska in 2007 to study eiders and Emperor Geese on Kigigak Island as a USFWS technician out of Bethel on the Yukon-Delta National Wildlife Refuge. She was back in 2012 with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service studying Steller's Eiders in Utqiagvik (Barrow). She moved full-time to Alaska in 2013, where she teaches at Effie Kokrine Charter School in Fairbanks. There, she has focused on bringing indigenous culture into the science classroom and coaching the cross-country running team.

While Michelle has birded Central America, South America, and Africa, she spends much of her available time birding extensively throughout Alaska. She manages two breeding bird surveys on the Taylor Highway, has helped conduct duck brood surveys on the Yukon Flats with USFWS, and regularly participates in the Christmas Bird Count. She was in the group that documented the first nest for Timberline Sparrow in the state of Alaska. She enjoys birding everywhere she goes and is rarely seen without her binoculars in hand. She is excited about sharing her enthusiasm, knowledge, and thirst to learn more about birds as a guide with VENT.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for the **Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip** is **\$8,545** per person in double occupancy from Anchorage, Alaska. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 9, all lodging as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation, the flights between Anchorage and St. Paul Island (see below), and guide services provided by your tour leaders. The tour fee does not include airfare from your home to Anchorage and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for the **Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip** is **\$1,130**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

**IMPORTANT:** The **Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip** is an exception to VENT's guaranteed domestic departure policy. VENT reserves the right to cancel or charge a small-party-supplement if this is under subscribed.

Rooms are limited at the King Eider Hotel in St. Paul and you may be asked to share. If so, you will be credited appropriately. The cost of the flights between Anchorage and St. Paul Island is subject to change. Should this happen, VENT reserves the right to adjust the tour fee accordingly.

The fee for the **Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip** is **\$8,995** per person in double occupancy from Anchorage. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 11, all lodging as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation, the flights between Anchorage and Nome, the flights between Nome and Gambell, and guide services provided by your tour leaders. The tour fee does not include airfare from your home to Anchorage and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for **Nome & Gambell** is **\$1,270**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

Rooms are limited at the Sivuqaq Inn in Gambell and you may be asked to share. If so, you will be credited appropriately.

The fee for **Grand Alaska Part I** is **\$7,245** per person in double occupancy from Anchorage. This includes all meals from lunch on Day 2 to dinner on Day 9, all lodging as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation, the flights between Anchorage and Nome, the flights between Anchorage and Utqiagvik (Barrow), and guide services provided by your leaders. The tour fee does not include airfare from your home to Anchorage and return, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for **Grand Alaska Part I** is **\$1,645**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.



Participants combining **Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip** with **Grand Alaska Part I** in double occupancy will receive a discount of **\$500**.

Participants combining **Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip** with **Grand Alaska Part I** in single occupancy will receive a discount of **\$750**.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$1,000** per person per section. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at <https://ventbird.com>) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

**PAYMENTS:** All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days prior to the tour departure dates (December 31, 2023 for Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip; December 31, 2023 for Nome & Gambell Pre-Trip; January 9, 2024 for Part I).

**BAD WEATHER/ADDITIONAL EXPENSE RESPONSIBILITY:** Our Alaska tours operate in the late spring/early summer period. The weather is highly changeable at this time of year and our tours typically experience a range of conditions, from sunny and clear to overcast and rainy. From time to time, dense fog is a problem at the coastal outpost locations of St. Paul (Pribilof Islands), Nome, and Gambell (St. Lawrence Island), all places visited by our tours. Exceedingly foggy conditions occasionally lead to flight cancellations. Under such circumstances, tour participants will be responsible for any additional expenses that result, principally additional hotel nights. If a flight is cancelled due to bad weather, there will be no refund available for the unused rooms at the intended destination. Most hotels used on this tour have a 30-day cancellation policy for group bookings during the high season. In case of flight cancellation, the VENT office or your tour leaders will make arrangements for additional room nights at the location at which your departure is delayed. Tour participants will either need to pay for the additional nights directly, at the time reservations are made, or, depending on the location, upon receipt of invoice from our office after the tour. VENT cannot be responsible for delays or changes in the itinerary due to weather-related problems.

**CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:**

**Cancellation by Participant:**

Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person per section will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

If participant cancels:

180 days or more before departure date

179 to 151 days before departure date

150 days or less before departure date

Participant's refund will be:

Participant's deposit minus \$500\*

No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded

No refund available

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

### **Cancellation by VENT:**

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A “**Force Majeure**” event means any act beyond VENT’s control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.**

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend its **Ripcord** plan. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most comprehensive travel protection programs available.

Critical benefits of Ripcord include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice**; comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, primary medical expense coverage, death of pet, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or political or security reasons, waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.\*

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: <https://ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird>; or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

\*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 15 days of making your first trip payment. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately

50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, mid-payment, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 15 days, and insure all non-refundable trip cost in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

### **Coronavirus (COVID-19):**

In line with the decision made by the federal government (including the CDC), Redpoint considers COVID-19 illness as any other seasonal respiratory illness. Providing only a positive Covid-19 test result will likely not be considered a covered event per the terms and conditions of the company's policy. Redpoint maintains a **Coronavirus FAQ** page on its website that addresses questions and concerns travelers may have regarding COVID-19 and Redpoint's policy. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of relevant topics. Please visit the **Coronavirus FAQ** page at the following link: [https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid\\_19\\_faq/](https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid_19_faq/).

**AIR INFORMATION:** Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per-person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: \$50 domestic; \$75 international.\* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

\*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler's consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

**INTERNET ACCESS & CELLULAR SERVICE:** Expect Wi-Fi to be available in all locations except the Sivuqaq Inn (Gambell.) Wi-Fi is typically excellent at the hotel in Anchorage; reliable, but perhaps slow at St. Paul; and available, but less reliable without purchasing a special plan, at both Nome and Utqiagvik (Barrow). Participants with AT&T as their cellular provider can expect to have cellular service everywhere except Gambell; those with Verizon as their carrier cannot expect service in Nome or Utqiagvik (Barrow). For cellular service at Gambell, you will need to purchase a GCI sim card (available in Nome, possibly also in Anchorage, for \$40 for a month with 2GB data). Verizon customers will need a GCI card for cellular service in Nome and Utqiagvik also.

**BAGGAGE:** In case your checked luggage is delayed, it's recommended that you pack all documents, medications, a change of clothes, your binoculars, and toiletry items in a carry-on bag. **Flights between Anchorage and Nome, and between Anchorage and Utqiagvik (Barrow) are on large jets, with industry standard baggage regulations.** The smaller planes used to fly to and from the Pribilofs and between Nome and Gambell have more restrictive baggage regulations (see below). Please use a VENT luggage tag (which will be mailed to all participants a few months prior to departure) to aid leaders in recognizing your baggage during our airport and hotel transfers.

**An additional small duffel bag is recommended, either for storing items in Anchorage or Nome, or for use as your main piece of luggage during one of our jaunts away from Anchorage (allowing you to store your large bag). This would be especially recommended for participants on the Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip, where space on the flight to and from the Pribilofs is limited.**

As of 2023, Ravn Alaska flights operating between Anchorage and St. Paul allowed each passenger a single free checked bag weighing up to 50 pounds. Additional checked bags or bags exceeding 50 pounds are subject to fees, and are also treated under voluntary separation rules, meaning that such bags are subject to being bumped due to



weight restrictions. It is important to remember that flights operating to the Pribilofs are under strict weight restrictions, and that other carriers that previously operated flights to St. Paul had a history of prioritizing freight over checked bags. We have not had that experience in the short time that Ravn Alaska has been operating the flights to St. Paul, but, there is always a slight possibility that any bags checked at the ticket counter (**but particularly those that are large in dimensions and/or overweight**) will be bumped in favor of revenue-generating freight, and thus will be left in Anchorage. For that reason, we strongly recommend that participants flying to the Pribilofs wear their cold-weather field clothing on the plane, and have all of their essential items (including prescription medicines, essential toiletries, optics, and waterproof outer wear and footwear) packed within the 20-lb carry-on bag that is guaranteed to make it on the flight. Ravn Alaska limits passengers to one small carry-on bag with a maximum weight limit of 20 lbs., and a maximum size of 18 inches long by 14 inches wide by 10 inches deep. Additionally, you are allowed to carry on a small personal item such as a purse or laptop. Remember, you will only be in the Pribilofs for 2-3 nights and parts of 3-4 days, so you don't need a lot of clothing, particularly if you wear your warm jacket (with hat and gloves) onto the plane, and your waterproof outer layer is in your carry-on. Throughout the various segments of the Alaska tour season, we routinely store excess bags at the hotel in Anchorage, to avoid dragging everything with us on each 3-or-4-day leg of the trip.

All baggage will also be weighed prior to our flights between Nome and Gambell. Participants will be charged excess baggage fees for each pound over the 100-pound limit (includes what you carry on the plane). As of 2022, Bering Air does not technically allow carry-on luggage, because there are no overhead baggage compartments, and the space beneath the seats is extremely minimal. Passengers are allowed to carry binoculars and limited camera gear onto the plane, but no large gear bags are permitted. Traditional carry-on bags will need to be checked, along with other checked baggage, and will count toward your 100-pound limit. Gear not needed for Gambell or Nome can be stored at the hotel in Anchorage. Gear required for Nome but not for Gambell can be stored in Nome.

**WEATHER:** Normally it is 25 to 45 degrees Fahrenheit at Gambell and Utqiagvik, and anywhere from the 30s to 50s at Nome and the Pribilofs; however, each of these places are often windy with drizzle and fog. Elsewhere on the mainland, temperatures tend to be warmer and may reach the upper 60s or higher.

**CLOTHING:** The weather in Alaska in May and June is notoriously unpredictable and can still be quite cold. The “layered” technique is your best defense against the variable weather. We suggest you combine a thermal undershirt, shirt, sweater, and coat or jacket. Medium-weight wool or synthetic equivalent for shirts, pants, and sweaters is ideal. Cold-weather gear is essential and should include a warm coat or down jacket, warm hat, gloves, thermal underwear (both tops and bottoms), wool or synthetic equivalent socks, and warm shirts. A rain jacket or poncho is also essential for times when the weather turns misty. Since it can be surprisingly warm too, you should bring some lighter field clothing as well.

**FOOTWEAR:** Insulated waterproof boots, N.E.O.S. Overshoes or walking shoes are recommended for foot gear. **Waterproof footwear of some kind is essential for the Pribilofs and Utqiagvik. Grand Alaska Part I and Pribilofs & Anchorage Pre-Trip participants should bring rubber boots, waterproof boots, or N.E.O.S. Overshoes that extend to calf height for walking off-road on the wet tundra at Utqiagvik and the Pribilofs. Birding around Nome and on day-trips in and around Anchorage does not require such footwear, because most walking in these locations will be along gravel roads or well-maintained trails, where comfortable hiking shoes should suffice. The one possible exception is the hike for Bristle-thighed Curlews in Nome, where we will be hiking off-road without benefit of trails, and where the tundra can vary from reasonably dry to fairly wet or muddy in spots, depending on local variations in weather.**

**ALCOHOL:** Gambell is officially a “dry” village, meaning that not only is alcohol not available, but that it is a crime to bring alcohol to the village. Please respect local laws, and do not carry alcohol to Gambell. At the time of this writing, Utqiagvik was also a dry community—the alcohol laws there have changed back and forth over the years.

**OTHER ITEMS:** We recommend you bring insect repellent, an alarm clock, sunglasses and sunscreen. The leaders will have a spotting scope and some reference books, but you may wish to bring your own. **Having your own spotting scope is particularly useful at Gambell, where we spend much time sea watching from shore. Most of the birds seen in any given sea watch are seen only in flight, making it difficult to share the “group” scopes to any meaningful extent. You should also bring your own spotting scope if you are planning on doing digiscope photography, both to avoid monopolizing the group scope(s), and to avoid any chance of scratching the eyepiece of the group scope(s) due to a mismatch in diameter of your camera lens versus the scope eyepiece.** A good North American field guide to the birds is the one reference that each participant should plan on carrying for their own personal use.

For Gambell, participants should bring a bar of soap and a towel (these items are usually provided by the lodge, but we have been unpleasantly surprised from time to time) and also may wish to bring ample cash (preferably in small, \$5, \$10, and \$20 denominations) to pay for ATV rides and/or native crafts, such as ivory carvings. Credit cards are not accepted for these activities/items. Individual ATV rides at Gambell typically cost \$15-20 round trip. Participants may find it helpful to carry two-way Walkabout radios to increase communication in the field as well as their own scopes for sea watching.

**LAUNDRY:** There is a self-serve laundry in Gambell, Nome and St. Paul Island. The Coast Inn at Lake Hood in Anchorage has both self-service and send-out laundry service.

**HEALTH:** VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

**COVID-19:** We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying “Up to Date” with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19. Please visit the **Coronavirus Travel Update** page of our website <https://ventbird.com/covid-19> for our official statement regarding COVID-19 and the operation of our tours. Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>.

**Insect Repellents** – There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations including sprays, lotions, time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.
- Picaridin: A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.

- Herbal insect repellents: Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

An insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- Permanone® (Permethrin) is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for **pre-treatment** of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment has to be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.
- Insect Shield® apparel: Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you>

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

**SUGGESTED READING:** A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com) which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

### ***Field Guides—Birds:***

Armstrong, Robert H. *Guide to the Birds of Alaska*. 4th edition. Bothwell, WA: Alaska Northwest Books, 1995.

Brazil, Mark. *Birds of East Asia*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009. This is the best field guide for illustrating any of the possible Siberian vagrants that could turn up at Gambell, St. Paul or elsewhere.

Dunn, Jon L. and Jonathan Alderfer. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Seventh edition. Washington, D. C.: National Geographic Society, 2017. The recommended field guide.

Sibley, David Allen. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. This classic field guide has been greatly expanded to cover many of the Eurasian vagrants that we could encounter at Gambell, St. Paul or elsewhere.

### ***Reference—Birds:***

Gabrielson, I. N. & F. E. Lincoln. *The Birds of Alaska*. Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1959. Outdated now, but has a lot of information on the life histories of Alaskan birds. Try [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com).

Grant, Peter J. *Gulls: A Guide to Identification*. Academic Press, 1997.

Harrison, Peter. *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991 (reprint).

Hayman, Peter, John Marchant & Tony Prater. *Shorebirds: An Identification Guide to the Waders of the World*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991 (reprint).



Kessel, Brina. *Birds of the Seward Peninsula, Alaska: Their Biogeography, Seasonality and Natural History*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1996.

Kessel, Brina & Daniel D. Gibson. *Status and Distribution of Alaska Birds*. Studies in Avian Biology No. 1, 1978. Try [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com).

Zimmer, K. J. *Birding in the American West: A Handbook*. Cornell University Press, 2000.

### **General Background Reading:**

Freuchen, Peter. *Book of the Eskimos*. Fawcett Books, 1981. An easy-to-read classic account of Eskimo life, written in 1931. Out of Print, but appears on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Other Freuchen titles are available as well: *Arctic Adventure* (AMS Press, 1995) and *Ivalu, the Eskimo Wife* (AMS Press, 1935).

Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. Vintage Books, 2001.

McGinniss, Joe. *Going to Extremes*. Plume, 1989 (reissue edition). Raw non-fiction about the people and places of America's last frontier.

McPhee, John. *Coming into the Country*. Noonday Press, 1991 (reissue). Published in 1976, this chronicles a remarkable journey by kayak into the last frontier.

*Audubon* (May 1988). The entire issue is devoted to Alaska. Especially worthwhile is "Exploring Literature of the Far North," a great bibliography of interesting books on the region.

*National Geographic* (October 1982). "A New Day for Alaska's Pribilofs."

### **Alaska Guidebooks:**

Rennick, Penny (ed.) *Mammals of Alaska*. Alaska Geographic Guides. Alaska Geographic Society, 1996.

A variety of books on Alaska are available through the Alaska Geographic Society: (907) 274-0521. Alaska Geographic Online is found at [www.akgeo.com](http://www.akgeo.com). Some of these resources include: Alaskan Native Peoples, Mammals of Alaska, and National Parks and Monuments of Alaska. On the tour a number of local guide books and pamphlets can be picked up at local gift shops, including: Louise Potter's *Wild Flowers Along Mt. McKinley Park Road* (Camp Denali Publishers, n.d.). Although out of print, Potter's book is possibly available in Denali National Park; it is also found on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

**RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, "**VENT**") act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed

necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure. If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant. Notwithstanding the foregoing, VENT will not provide any participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to any participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement, when and to the extent such failure or delay is caused by or results from acts beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following force majeure events: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades in effect on or after the date of the scheduled tour; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

If a participant cancels any tour or any portion of a tour, VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by any participant (see VENT Registration & Deposit policy and Cancellation & Refunds policy contained in the itinerary). Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on September 18, 2023 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. If a participant is removed from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant's risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the "**Airline**") is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline's aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

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