Alaska – America's Last Frontier

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 26 June 2016





American Beaver







Pectoral Sandpiper

Tufted Puffin

Report and images by Gerald Broddelez



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Summary

Alaska never ceases to delight and amaze me, and our latest adventure there was no exception. During this first Naturetrek trip to Alaska, we were blessed with exceptionally good weather almost everywhere.

The highlights were too numerous to mention, but included: Bald Eagle, Spruce Grouse, Spectacled Eiders, Steller's and King Eiders, Yellow-billed Diver, a fantastic array of breeding waders including delightful Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, Hudsonian Godwit, Sabine's Gulls, Marbled, Kittlitz's and Ancient Murrelets, Parakeet, and Rhinoceros Auklets, Horned and Tufted Puffins, Snowy Owl, Varied Thrush, Sooty Fox Sparrow, Two-barred Crossbills and Pine Grosbeaks.

We also found a good number of mammals: Brown Bear (11 seen, including a female with 3 cubs!), Sea Otter at close range, Humpback and Killer Whales next to the boat, Moose, Caribou and a couple of Beavers feeding only metres away!

Day 1

Tuesday 14th June

After a long but uneventful flight from London Heathrow, we finally arrived in Anchorage at 10.18pm. Here we met our tour leader Gerald Broddelez.

Our shuttle to the Hotel only took a few minutes and, after checking in, we tried to get some sleep.

Day 2

Wednesday 15th June

After a great breakfast, we left the Hotel, driving south to Seward. On the way we visited the Potters Marsh where we saw our first Alaskan birds: Tree Swallow, American Wigeon, Red-necked Grebe, Arctic Tern and the local Rusty Blackbird. We also made some other stops along the road by the Turnagain Arm. At Beluga Point, high on the cliffs we found a small party of Dall Sheep.

We then drove for lunch along the Crook Creek Road in the company of Mountain Goat, Northwestern Crow and Golden Eagle.

On route to Seward we made a few further stops and had great views of Great Northern Divers in summer plumage, Barrow's Goldeneye, Lincoln's Sparrow and amazing scenery all around!

After our dinner in Seward, we drove to Lowell Point, where we had our first close views of Sea Otters, Bald eagles and many Harlequin Ducks in the warm evening light.

Day 3

Thursday 16th June

Today was a perfect day for our cruise in the waters of the Kenai Fjords National Park; sunshine and a flat sea were excellent conditions to discover the wildlife of the Resurrection Bay and the Northwestern Fjord.

After breakfast we went on board the cruise boat of Kenai Fjords Tours. Even before the boat left, we saw a female Black Bear with three cubs on the mountain slope above the harbour! A good omen!

On the way to Fox Island, we saw our first Marbled Murrelet, Pelagic Cormorant, Harbour Seals and Sea Otter. Then the first of the nearly 20 Humpback Whales we were to see today made his appearance and kept us entertained for the next half hour.

After Fox Island, we came into the Gulf of Alaska, with a lot of Common Murres (Common Guillemots), Horned and Tufted Puffins. Here we also saw three Dall's Porpoises. Around the Chiswell Islands, we observed the rare Steller Sea Lion, Parakeet and Rhinoceros Auklets, together with a few Ancient Murrelets.

Then we finally arrived at the Northwestern Glacier. Here a lot of pictures were taken, both of the glacier and of the many Harbour Seals sunning themselves on the small ice floes in the bay. The scenery was amazing, especially with the sunny and windless conditions we were experiencing.

On the way back to Seward, we saw Kittlitz's Murrelets, and again a lot of Puffins and Common Murres. A group of six Orcas gave a wonderful show around the boat with a couple even swimming under the boat and a young mammal breaching continuously!

We finally had also good sightings of the very rare Red-faced Cormorant breeding on the steep cliffs, before returning to Seward where we enjoyed a great dinner.

Day 4 Friday 17th June

After breakfast we visited the Exit Glacier area. At the start of the trail to the glacier, we saw Orange-crowned Warbler and Sooty Fox Sparrow. Above the slowly retreating glacier were Mountain Goats and Hermit Thrush. After collecting our luggage from the hotel, we made a stop at a house outside town with feeders, where we could easily observe some birds of the spruce forests. Pine Grosbeak, Red Crossbill, Pine Siskin, Hairy Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadee, Song Sparrow and of course the Rufous Hummingbird were all seen and photographed exceptionally well. It was a rare opportunity to see some of these normally very shy birds at very close range for as long as we wanted!

On the way back to Anchorage, we had our lunch along the road near a river. Here we observed the Alaska race of Steller's jay and the smart Varied Thrush. We also made a second stop at Potters Marsh and here we had very close views of Arctic terns, found a couple of rare Blue-winged Teal, Rusty Blackbird, American Wigeon and Green-winged Teal.

Day 5 Saturday 18th June

Today we flew from Anchorage to Barrow, with a stop a Prudhoe Bay. Barrow is the most northerly point of Alaska and lies 330miles above the Arctic Circle. After dropping our luggage at the hotel, we drove along the ice-dotted waters of the Beaufort Sea where we saw our first King Eider, many Long-tailed Ducks and Snow Buntings (breeding in the skull of a Bowhead whale!).

We had our lunch at the local restaurant. During the afternoon we visited Freshwater Lake. Slowly driving along the gravel roads, we had close sightings, with plenty of photo opportunities, of smart Grey and Red-necked Phalaropes, Long-billed Dowitchers, and Pectoral and Semi-palmated Sandpipers. At the lake itself we found a pair of Pacific Loon and a couple of smart Sabine's Gulls allowing scope views.

Watching the Arctic Ocean pack ice in the warm evening light, on our way back to the hotel, was another highlight and an experience not to be missed.

Day 6

Sunday 19th June

During breakfast we suddenly saw a Snowy Owl flying overhead in the village and landing on one of the lamp posts further up the street. Everybody ran outside, abandoning coffee and breakfast, to get good views and /or pictures of this magnificent bird. Another highlight of the tour.

This morning we took the road to the Spit where we saw a nice group of King Eiders on the ice and at least four different Yellow-billed Loons(Divers).

We then took the road inland and, by checking the many small pools, quickly found our quarry. We had excellent scope views of both male and female Steller's and Spectacled Eider (both can be quite rare and hard to find some years), closely watched by both Pomarine and Arctic Skua and a lone Peregrine Falcon.

We had a late soup lunch in town, and then visited the Freshwater Lake area again. The many waders and especially the Phalaropes kept us entertained and let us get close for photographs.

With the sun never setting, some of us went for a stroll into town after dinner (it has to be seen to be believed)!

Day 7

Monday 20th June

In the morning we drove along the Gaswell Road again, where we found more Spectacled and Steller's Eider and an off-route Osprey. On the way back we stopped along the Arctic Ocean again, and were rewarded with our last sightings of three Eider species (Common, Spectacled and King), together in an open lead, watched by some Ringed Seals swimming nearby.

During the afternoon we visited the Native Museum where we could learn a lot about the life and culture of the Inuit people and the important role of the whales and seals in their life.

In the late afternoon we flew back to Anchorage.

Day 8

Tuesday 21st June

After breakfast we visited the West Chester Lagoon where we saw a small group of seldom-seen Hudsonian Godwit, accompanied by Short-billed Dowitcher, Lesser Scaup and many Red-necked Grebes on the nest.

On the drive to the Denali National Park we found our first Moose grazing along the road. We stopped at one of the viewpoints for lunch where we also had a short look at Mount Denali, at 6,190 metres it is the highest mountain of North America. Denali is the Athabascan name for this mountain and means 'the great one'.

After checking into our hotel, we drove along the entrance road of the National Park where we had a close encounter with a female Moose and her three calves, cameras clicking away... From the viewpoint we also saw our first Blackpoll Warbler, White-crowned Sparrow and a lone Caribou.

Day 9

Wednesday 22nd June

This morning we had breakfast at 5.30am, because we needed to be in time for our bus ride through the National Park. Our bus driver, aptly named "Bear", welcomed us with a very loud 'Are You ready?'

The bus took us inside the park to Eielson Visitor Center, some 66 miles from the park entrance. Along the way we had a few stops. Besides the spectacular landscapes, we had good viewings of Grizzly Bears (a total of 15, including five cubs), nearly 300 Caribou, Moose and Arctic Ground Squirrel.

By mid-afternoon we were back and, after a coffee in the Denali Visitor Centre, we went to the Horseshoe Lake area. Here we did a walk and had prolonged and excellent views of a Moose feeding on the juicy water plants and two Beavers, eating from the Chiming Bluebells only a couple of metres away! What a sighting!

We also telescoped some pretty male Two-barred Crossbill, Boreal Chickadee and Myrtle Warbler. The flora was also abundant, with Monkshood, Canadian Dwarf Dogwood, Prickly Rose, Tall Jacob's-ladder and Hairy Arctic Milk Vetch, amongst others species.

Day 10

Thursday 23rd June

As a compensation for yesterday we had a late breakfast and then we left for a drive along the Denali Highway. The Highway was once the original travel route to Denali National Park and runs parallel to the south side of the Alaska Range for its entire 135-mile length between Paxson and Cantwell. It always rewards the traveller with outstanding scenery, good opportunities to view wildlife, and best of all, wilderness in all directions.

Along the road, we observed Moose, Sooty Fox Sparrow, Wilson's, Blackpoll and Myrtle Warbler, Hermit and Gray-cheeked Thrush and a family of Trumpeter Swans. An American Dipper was breeding under a bridge.

Day 11

Friday 24th June

Today we were driving to Fairbanks. We had a special coffee stop at Skinny Dick's Halfway Inn, and lunch in Fairbanks.

After lunch we paid a visit to the famous Natural Museum. The museum's research collections – numbering 1.4 million artefacts and specimens – represent millions of years of biological diversity and thousands of years of Alaska's cultural traditions, and serves as a valuable resource for research on climate change, genetics, contaminants and other issues facing Alaska and the circumpolar north.

Late afternoon saw us visiting the forest nearby, and Smith's Lake. During our walk we found a very tame American Red Squirrel, Bohemian Waxwings displaying overhead, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet actually showing its ruby crest, Swainson's Thrush, Spotted Sandpiper and Bonaparte's Gull.

Two Beaver were spotted swimming along the lake edge and several smart Buffleheads were seen nearby, on the adventurous way back.

Day 12

Saturday 25th June

During the morning we visited the Creamer's Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, and had good sightings of dancing Sandhill Cranes, rare Hammond's Flycatcher and Yellow Warbler. Nesting American Cliff Swallows gave us very good opportunities to take pictures.

We then went to the Pipeline View Point and learned a lot about the famous Alaska pipeline built between 1974 and 1977; it connects PrudhoeBay on the Arctic Ocean with Valdez, about 800 miles away through tundra and taiga!

On the way back to Fairbanks we saw a rare Woodchuck along the Road.

For lunch we drove to the Chena Lake Recreation Area. On our walk in the afternoon, we saw Hammond's Flycatcher again and, new for the trip, Three-toed Woodpecker. Several species of Dragonflies were spotted by the river and small lakes and traces of Moose were everywhere.

We had a rather early dinner and retired to bed because of the early start tomorrow.

Day 13

Sunday 26th June

Today we had to leave the hotel at 4.30am, for our flight back to Seattle with connection to London, after an amazing experience of Alaska – America's Last Frontier.

Day 14

Monday 27th June

Arrival in London.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The Naturetrek Facebook page is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Tour Report Alaska – America's Last Frontier

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

									June						
	Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Greater White-fronted Goose	Anser albifrons				✓	✓	✓							
2	Canada Goose	Branta canadensis	✓		✓				✓						
3	Brant Goose	Branta bernicla					✓	✓							
4	Trumpeter Swan	Cygnus buccinator									✓				
5	Tundra Swan	Cygnus columbianus	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓							
6	American Wigeon	Anas americana	✓		✓				✓				✓	✓	
7	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓		✓				✓						
8	Blue-winged Teal	Anas discors			✓										
9	Northern Shoveler	Anas clypeata	✓		✓	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	
10	Northern Pintail	Anas acuta				✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	
11	Green-winged Teal	Anas carolinensis	✓		✓			✓					✓	✓	
12	Ring-necked Duck	Aythya collaris										✓			
13	Greater Scaup	Aythya marila	✓								✓				
14	Lesser Scaup	Aythya affinis							✓			✓			
15	Steller's Eider	Polysticta stelleri					✓	✓							
16	Spectacled Eider	Somateria fischeri					✓	✓							
17	King Eider	Somateria spectabilis				✓	✓	✓							
18	Common Eider	Somateria mollissima				✓	✓	✓							
19	Harlequin Duck	Histrionicus histrionicus	✓												
20	Surf Scoter	Melanitta perspicillata							✓						
21	White-winged Scoter	Melanitta deglandi		✓											
22	Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis				✓	✓	✓							
23	Bufflehead	Bucephala albeola									✓				
24	Barrow's Goldeneye	Bucephala islandica	✓												
25	Common Merganser (Goosander)	Mergus merganser			✓										
26	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator					✓								
27	Spruce Grouse	Falcipennis canadensis							✓		✓				
28	Pacific Loon	Gavia pacifica	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓							

									June						
	Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
29	Great Northern Diver (Loon)	Gavia immer	✓		✓										
30	White-billed Diver (Loon)	Gavia adamsii				✓	✓	✓							
31	Red-necked Grebe	Podiceps grisegena	✓		✓				✓			✓			
32	Pelagic Cormorant	Phalacrocorax pelagicus	✓	✓											
33	Red-faced Cormorant	Phalacrocorax urile		✓											
34	Double-crested Cormorant	Phalacrocorax auritus		✓											
35	Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus						✓	✓						
36	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos	✓							✓	✓				
37	Bald Eagle	Haliaeetus leucocephalus	✓	✓	✓				✓						
38	Red-tailed Hawk	Buteo jamaicensis	✓	✓								✓			
39	Sandhill Crane	Grus canadensis										✓	✓		
40	Black Oystercatcher	Haematopus bachmani		✓											
41	American Golden Plover	Pluvialis dominica				✓	✓	✓							
42	Wilson's Snipe	Gallinago delicata					✓								
43	Short-billed Dowitcher	Limnodromus griseus							✓						
44	Long-billed Dowitcher	Limnodromus scolopaceus				✓	✓	✓							
45	Hudsonian Godwit	Limosa haemastica							✓						
46	Lesser Yellowlegs	Tringa flavipes	✓						✓		✓	✓	✓		
47	Solitary Sandpiper	Tringa solitaria											✓		
48	Wandering Tattler	Tringa incana													
49	Spotted Sandpiper	Actitis macularius										✓			
50	Semipalmated Sandpiper	Calidris pusilla				✓	✓	✓							
51	Western Sandpiper	Calidris mauri				✓	✓								
52	Baird's Sandpiper	Calidris bairdii				✓									
53	Pectoral Sandpiper	Calidris melanotos				✓	✓	✓							
54	Dunlin	Calidris alpina				✓	✓								
55	Red-necked Phalarope	Phalaropus lobatus				✓	✓	✓							
56	Red Phalarope	Phalaropus fulicarius				✓	✓	✓							
57	Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla		✓											
58	Sabine's Gull	Xema sabini				✓									
59	Bonaparte's Gull	Chroicocephalus philadelphia										✓			
60	Mew (Common) Gull	Larus canus	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

	Common name		June													
(Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
61	Glaucous-winged Gull	Larus glaucescens	✓	✓												
62	Glaucous Gull	Larus hyperboreus	✓			✓	✓	✓								
63	American Herring Gull	Larus smithsonianus	✓									✓				
64	Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisaea	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
65	Pomarine Skua	Stercorarius pomarinus					✓	✓								
66	Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger)	Stercorarius parasiticus				✓	✓	✓								
67	Long-tailed Skua (Jaeger)	Stercorarius longicaudus						✓								
68	Brunnich's Guillemot	Uria lomvia		✓												
69	Common Guillemot (Murre)	Uria aalge		✓												
70	Pigeon Guillemot	Cepphus columba		✓												
71	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle					✓									
72	Marbled Murrelet	Brachyramphus marmoratus		✓												
73	Kittlitz's Murrelet	Brachyramphus brevirostris		✓												
74	Ancient Murrelet	Synthliboramphus antiquus		✓												
75	Parakeet Auklet	Ptychoramphus aleuticus		✓												
76	Rhinoceros Auklet	Cerorhinca monocerata		✓												
77	Horned Puffin	Fratercula corniculata		✓												
78	Tufted Puffin	Fratercula cirrhata		✓												
79	Snowy Owl	Bubo scandiacus					✓	✓								
80	Rufous Hummingbird	Selasphorus rufus			✓											
81	Belted Kingfisher	Megaceryle alcyon								✓						
82	Downy Woodpecker	Picoides pubescens	✓													
83	Hairy Woodpecker	Picoides villosus			✓											
84	American Three-toed Woodpecker	Picoides dorsalis										✓	✓			
85	Northern Flicker	Colaptes auratus							✓							
86	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus		✓			✓									
87	Alder Flycatcher	Empidonax alnorum	✓						✓		✓		✓			
88	Hammond's Flycatcher	Empidonax hammondii											✓			
89	Grey Jay	Perisoreus canadensis								✓	✓			✓		
90	Steller's Jay	Cyanocitta stelleri			✓											
91	Black-billed Magpie	Pica hudsonia	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
92	Northwestern Crow	Corvus caurinus	✓	✓												

									June						
	Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
93	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
94	Bohemian Waxwing	Bombycilla garrulus									✓	✓			
95	Black-capped Chickadee	Poecile atricapillus			✓								✓		
96	Boreal Chickadee	Poecile hudsonicus								✓	✓				
97	Tree Swallow	Tachycineta bicolor	✓		✓							✓	✓		
98	Violet-green Swallow	Tachycineta thalassina	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
99	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica erythrogaster													
100	American Cliff Swallow	Petrochelidon pyrrhonota									✓	✓	✓		
101	Golden-crowned Kinglet	Regulus satrapa			✓										
102	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	Regulus calendula			✓							✓			
103	Red-breasted Nuthatch	Sitta canadensis			✓										
104	Varied Thrush	Ixoreus naevius			✓						✓				
105	Grey-cheeked Thrush	Catharus minimus									w				
106	Swainson's Thrush	Catharus ustulatus								✓		✓			
107	Hermit Thrush	Catharus guttatus	✓		✓						✓				
108	American Robin	Turdus migratorius	✓		✓				✓		✓	✓	✓		
109	American Dipper	Cinclus mexicanus									✓				
110	Pine Grosbeak	Pinicola enucleator			✓										
111	Common Redpoll	Acanthis flammea			✓						✓				
112	Arctic Redpoll	Acanthis hornemanni				✓	✓	✓							
113	Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra			✓										
114	Two-barred Crossbill	Loxia leucoptera								✓	✓				
115	Pine Siskin	Spinus pinus			✓										
116	Northern Waterthrush	Parkesia noveboracensis			✓								✓		
117	Orange-crowned Warbler	Leiothlypis celata	✓		✓										
118	American Yellow Warbler	Setophaga aestiva	✓		✓								✓		
119	Blackpoll Warbler	Setophaga striata							✓		✓				
120	Myrtle Warbler	Setophaga coronata	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓			
121	Wilson's Warbler	Cardellina pusilla	✓							✓					
122	Rusty Blackbird	Euphagus carolinus	✓		✓						✓				
123	Red Fox Sparrow	Passerella iliaca								✓					
124	Sooty Fox Sparrow	Passerella unalaschcensis			✓										

			June														
	Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27		
125	Song Sparrow	Melospiza melodia		✓	✓												
126	Lincoln's Sparrow	Melospiza lincolnii	✓										✓				
127	White-crowned Sparrow	Zonotrichia leucophrys	✓						✓	✓	✓		✓				
128	Golden-crowned Sparrow	Zonotrichia atricapilla	✓														
129	Dark-eyed Junco	Junco hyemalis	✓		✓					✓	✓	✓	✓				
130	Savannah Sparrow	Passerculus sandwichensis				✓	✓				✓						
131	American Tree Sparrow	Spizelloides arborea									✓						
132	Lapland Longspur (Bunting)	Calcarius lapponicus				✓	✓	✓									
133	Snow Bunting	Plectrophenax nivalis				✓	✓	✓									

Mammals

1	American Red Squirrel	Tamiasciurus hudsonicus								1		1			
2	Arctic Ground Squirrel	Spermophilus parryii								10+					
3	American Beaver	Castor canadensis								2		2			
4	N Red-backed Vole	Myodes rutilus							1						
5	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes												1	
6	American Black Bear	Ursus americanus		4											
7	Brown Bear	Ursus arctos								11					
8	Harbour Seal	Phoca vitulina	5	100+											
9	Sea Otter	Enhydra lutris	3	10+											
10	Steller's Sea Lion	Eumetopias jubatus		50+											
11	Moose	Alces americanus							7	5	3	2			
12	Reindeer (Caribou)	Rangifer tarandus							1	250+					
13	Mountain Goat	Oreamnos americanus	3		3										
14	Dall's Sheep	Ovis dalli	15		1										
15	Humpback Whale	Megaptera novaeangliae		20+											
16	Killer Whale	Orcinus orca		6											
17	Dall's Porpoise	Phocoenoides dalli		5											
18	Snowshoe Hare	Lepus americanus												1	
19	Ringed Seal	Pusa hispida				1	5	3							
20	Muskrat	Ondatra zibethicus	2		1										
21	Woodchuck	Marmota monax											1		

Other Taxa

Swallowtail sp. Canadian Swallowtail Western White Western tailed Blue

Clouded Sulphur White Admiral

Northern Bluet Four-spotted Chaser White-faced Dragonfly Darner Dragonfly sp.

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Moose

Steller's Eider