



Kenai Peninsular

Potter Marsh

A trip to South Central Alaska 18-5-11 to 04-06-11

I had for some years been excited by the prospect of a trip to Alaska. The dates chosen were partly financially driven and to some extent geared to have a chance of Kodiak bear and winter seabirds / waders – in the event we missed both. Steller's Eiders, Western and Rock Sandpipers had all gone north by the time we arrived and just as bad no trips to the Katmai Peninsular were running – Bears were slow. However there was still plenty to savour.

Early reports regarding Denali were not favourable (snow) and I decided quite early on in the planning to give it a miss deciding instead to go south from Anchorage to Homer, Kachemak Bay and then to Seward and the Kenai Fjords.

The route out was tiring Cardiff – Amsterdam – Minneapolis – Anchorage: in total, with stops, about 24 hours. Minneapolis to Anchorage alone was about 5 hours!

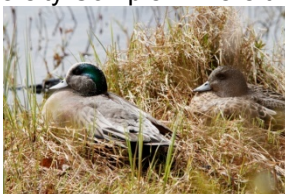
Weather conditions were similar to what would be expected of coastal Norway – rarely approaching 60 degrees F and occasional rain especially near the glaciers. It did get progressively warmer however with some days at the end above 60.

18/05/11

The day dawned cold and after a lazy start from the Microtel at Anchorage Airport we set off to the nearby Lake Hood seaplane base to check out ducks etc. Hardly had we got there when we were told that a Black Bear had been found up a tree on the airport access road. So a detour was arranged to see it whilst also checking out the ducks. A wrong turn had me face with an aircraft coming down the middle of the road! – You need to be careful around here.

Adventures over we set off for Westchester Lagoon (a favourite place for birding in Anchorage) getting **Greater and Lesser Scaup, Red necked Grebe, Hudsonian Godwit, Shoveler, Mallard, Bufflehead, Tree Swallows, Solitary Sandpiper, Magpies, Mew Gulls, Bonaparte's Gulls and Arctic Terns.**

Next to Goose Lake in the University Complex where the hardy types were sunbathing!



American Wigeon

Here we had **American Wigeon and a breeding pair of Pacific Diver, Myrtle Warbler, American Robin.**

From there we went south of the City on the Seward Highway to Potters Marsh. This is a large area impounded by the railway/road embankment and it is the best place by far in Anchorage.

Arctic Terns, Mew Gulls, 'small dark' Canada Geese (probably minima), Ring necked duck, Gadwall, Short billed Dowitcher, Bald Eagle, Green winged Teal, Red necked Grebe, Canvasback, American Coot, Glaucous winged Gull, Greater Yellowlegs, Sandhill Crane and 6 Myrtle Warbler, Raven and Rusty Blackbird.

19/05/11

Again starting at Lake Hood

Least Sandpiper, Goldeneye, Barrow's Goldeneye, Myrtle Warbler, White crowned Sparrow

Then to Eagle River Nature Center 14 miles north of Anchorage another superb spot.

Pine Grosbeak

Pine Grosbeak (2f +1m), Displaying Wilson's Snipe, 2 Black capped Chickadees, American Robin, Dark eyed Juncos, Tree Swallows, Hermit Thrush and Raven.

Then we drove north to the Glen Highway in search of Hawk Owl at mile 118. This trip was freezing cold with fine views of the Matanuska Glacier and several frozen over lakes but also rainy and a long drive **for just 2 Moose 5 Glaucous winged Gulls a pair of Belted Kingfishers and a Harlan's**

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Hawk the latter two being at an iced over Long Lake.

Back at Palmer there was Raven and we stayed the night at Wasilla in the excellent Best Western on Lake Lucille. Here again we had **Osprey, Red necked Grebe and Arctic Terns**.

20/05/11

Drove North to Talkeetna to 'see' Mount McKinley (we saw the bottom half – top half in cloud on a beautiful sunny day almost 20 degrees C. There were lots of **Violet green Swallows** at the Talkeetna Lodge from where there are the best views of the Denali Mountains.

On our return we stopped at a Bush Floatplane dock in Talkeetna that had a pair of **Great Northern Divers and our first Redpoll**.

We called in to Eagle River NC and stayed in the town that night. Same birds as before with the addition of **Downy Woodpecker**. This is a regular spot for **Pine Grosbeak** around 1700 hrs when the office closes!

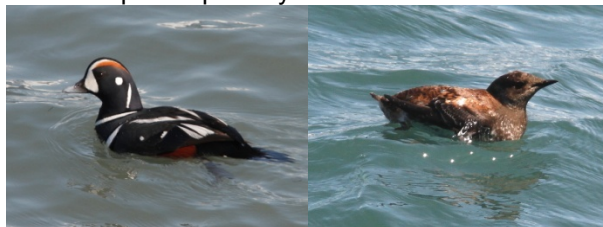
21/05/11

The day started well with **2 Wild Turkey**. Today's route aimed for Girdwood with a stop at Potter's Marsh where we had **Canvasback, 4-6 Greater Scaup, Gadwall, Mew Gulls, Arctic Terns etc**. This was a rainy day and we decided to see the Portage Glacier. From the boat we had **Bald Eagle and Merganser**.

Around the Alyesca Resort in Girdwood we had lots of **Pine Siskin and a few Redpoll**

22/05/11

The rain continued as we boarded the boat excursion to Prince William Sound at Whittier. Whittier is a strange and hugely unattractive port especially in torrential rain.



Harlequin

Marbled Murrelet

However the trip of 5/6 hours visits "26 glaciers" and produced a hatful of birds. In Whittier there were **North Western Crows, Magpies, Kittiwakes and Pigeon Guillemots and Marbled Murrelets**. There is a Kittiwake colony on the far side of the inlet and **Bald Eagles** nested in the town.

When the boat got going we had **Pomarine & Long tailed Skuas, flocks of Red necked Phalaropes and Murres / Murrelets, Harlequin Ducks, Mergansers, Mew Gulls, Barrow's Goldeneye, Glaucous x Western Gulls** roosting on ice flows, **Bald Eagle, Crows** and some mammals – a lunge feeding **Hump back Whale** numerous **Sea Otter, Dall's Porpoises and Mountain Goat (6)**.

23/05/11

The rain held off for our drive to Homer. On the way we stopped off at Tern Lake –well named – **Arctic Terns, Trumpeter Swan, Great Northern Diver, Red necked Grebe** and a petrol stop at Cooper Landing gave us **Bald Eagle** and a colony of superb **Violet green Swallows**. Further along we stopped to investigate a raptor on a post **Harlan's Hawk** and at the pull-in a **Pine Grosbeak** and then a **Merlin** and a **Great Northern Diver** at a barely unfrozen lake. We also did the northern loop route to Skilak Lake. We created a lot of dust and saw **Golden crowned Kinglet & Myrtle warbler**. At Homer we had plenty of time for some birding over the next two days.

24&25/05/11

Homer

Homer is a major attraction for Alaskan and USA birders. The local wildlife group (The Kachemak Bay Birders) has sign-posted c.26 local sites of birding interest around the town and adjacent villages and all the info can be gleaned at the superb Islands and Oceans facility on the road into town – this is well worth a visit to see the local stuffed birds on display.



Franklin's Gull

Greater Yellowlegs

It is next to the entrance to Beluga Slough where we saw **Starling(?)**, **Hermit Thrush, Sandhill**

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Cranes, Fox, Lincolns and Savannah Sparrows, Black Capped Chickadee, Pheasant with chicks!, US Crow, Greater Yellowlegs, Short billed Dowitcher & Green winged Teal.

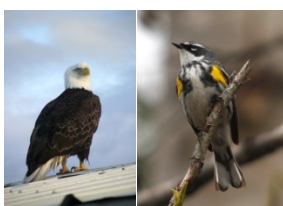
Further down on the famous Homer Spit – a 2mile long flat finger of land stretching out across half the Kachemak Bay – we found **Glaucous Gull and Franklins Gull in the Kittiwake** flock at the point. Someone counted the **Bald Eagles** and gave up after 26. Sea watching especially in the evening revealed thousands of **Common Murres (Guillemots), Pigeon Guillemots, Tufted Puffins, Marbled Murrelets, Black and White winged Scoter and four Divers sp. White billed, Great Northern, Red throated and Pacific.** The smaller murrelets were not really identifiable to species at distance.

At the base of the spit there is an area called Mud Bay (well named). In April this area holds huge numbers (10k+) of first Rock Sandpipers and later Western Sandpipers that stop here on northward migration. None was present when I was there in May – neither were the Steller's Eiders!

Mud bay attracted ducks and geese including **Brant, Mallard, Pintail, Shoveler, Wigeon, Green winged Teal, Gtr and Lsr. Scaup.**

Further east along the northern edge of the bay at Step Stone Lake there is a breeding colony of Aleutian Terns – these had not yet arrived but there we saw **Orange crowned Warbler.** We continued to see these regularly for the rest of the trip.

25/05/11



Bald Eagle

Yellow rumped "Myrtle" Warbler

On this day we drove back up the Sterling Highway to Anchor Point via the 'Old Sterling Highway' as suggested by the guide. We also took the road adjacent to the river down to the seashore. On this run we saw many more **Bald Eagles and Hermit Thrush, Wilsons Warbler, Gray Jay, Myrtle Warbler, Barrow's Goldeneye, Red breasted Nuthatch, Golden Crowned Sparrow, Herring & Mew Gulls, Orange crowned Warbler and Snowshoe Hares everywhere.** We returned to Homer via the Ridgeway checking the river crossings for signs of Bear – this being King Salmon season – plenty of tracks were found. **Ravens** were also quite common.

26/05/11

Today I had booked a trip out into the bay with Karl of Bay excursions – meeting at 0800 at the small boat dock. Karl has been running these trips around Kachemak Bay for some years. He knows his birds and he knows where to find them – trips last about 4 hours and visit Gull Island where 15k birds apparently breed.



Red faced Cormorant

Tufted Puffin at Gull Island

White billed Diver, Great Northern Diver, Pacific Diver, Pigeon Guillemot, Guillemot, Marbled Murrelets, Kittlitz' Murrelet, Red faced Cormorant, Pelagic Cormorant, Harlequin Duck, White winged Scoter, Common Scoter, Kittiwakes and usual gulls, Black Oystercatcher, Surfbird, Aleutian Terns, Tufted Puffin, Sea Otters, California Sealions,

In the evening we visited the birding spot adjacent to the Airport Terminal. Here we had **Gray Jay, Wilson's Snipe** in display, **Robin, Dark eyed Junco, Olive sided Flycatcher, Greater Yellowlegs, Pintail, Shoveler, Green winged Teal, Trumpeter Swans, Orange crowned Warbler, Ruby crowned Kinglet, Boreal Chickadee, Magpie** and a surprise **Golden crowned Warbler** heard adjacent to the fish and chips take away! There were also 6 **Aleutian Terns** at the base of the Spit.

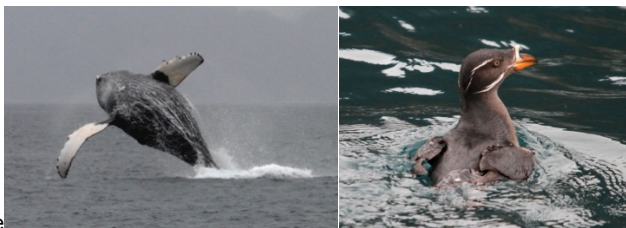
27/05/11

Set off early to drive to Seward, stopping off to see the **Aleutian Terns** again at the base of the spit.

We stopped again at Tern Lake to see the same birds as before. On arrival at Seward we booked a Kenai Fjords trip and had a stroll around the small boat harbour **Wandering Tattler, Surfbird, Lincoln's Sparrow.**

28/05/11

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Humpback Whale

Rhinoceros Auklet

The 6 hour Kenai Fjords Trip was incredible. The boat was steering close in to the seabird action and great views were had. There is another boat trip limited to 20 people on a smaller boat that visits the Chiswell Islands – this is the best trip for birders but as this was the first trip of the year it had been fully booked for not only today but several days/weeks beyond.

Kittiwakes, Short tailed Shearwater (10), Guillemot, Tufted Puffin , Horned Puffin, Pigeon Gull, Marbled Murrelets, Rhinoceros Auklets, Kittlitz' Murrelets (Aialik Glacier), Glaucous winged Gulls, Arctic Terns, Pelagic Cormorant, Red faced Cormorant, Black Oystercatcher, Bald Eagles, 20 Hump back Whales, 2 Fin Whale, 10 Dall's Porpoise, 20+ Orca, Steller's Sea Lions, Harbor Seals, Black Bear, Mountain Goats, Sea Otters.

29/05/11

Around Seward

Kittiwakes, Glaucous winged Gulls, Raven, Bald eagles, Marbled Murrelets, Harlequin Ducks, Crow.
Bear Lake Woods – **Steller's Jay, Pine Siskins, Robin.**

30/05/11

Seward to Girdwood via Hope - **Raven, Hermit Thrush, Myrtle Warbler, Spotted Sandpiper (Hope Rd).**
Alyesca Cable Car – **Violet green Swallows, Golden Eagle, Redpolls, Pine Siskin & Varied Thrush (3).**

31/05/11

Crow Creek Road – Girdwood - **Wilson's Warbler (3)** at River crossing. Winner creek parking – **Hermit Thrush, Pine Siskins, Townsend's Warbler (2).**

Potter Marsh – **Bald Eagle took a Canada Goose! Arctic Terns & Mew Gulls** breeding. **Red necked Grebes, Blue winged Teal, Green winged Teal, Magpie, Raven, Crow, Lsr & Gtr Scaup, Canvasback, American Wigeon, Short-billed Dowitcher, Rusty Blackbird, pr. Red necked Phalarope, 100s Violet green Swallow & Tree Swallows, Blackpoll Warbler, Sandhill Crane (2), Bank Swallows.**

01/06/11 & 02/06/11- Potter Marsh as yesterday but also **Muskrat, Savannah Sparrow** in heavy rain.

Richard Smith 16/06/11