



Barrow: Ross's Gull Migration

October 6-8, 2011

A report by Aaron Lang, tour leader.

Shortly after our morning arrival in Barrow we caught wind of a report of an Ivory Gull on the beach near the end of the road to Point Barrow. After getting our van and quickly checking in at our accommodations (where a Snowy Owl was perched just behind the hotel) we hurried out birding, passing numerous gulls and eiders on the water and in airborne flocks and at least three more Snowy Owls. Just as we arrived at the beach a stunning Yellow-billed Loon flew over the van and a flock of a dozen or so pink-hued Ross's Gulls fluttered over the road. We tried hard to ignore these and quickly walked over to where a group of birders was intently gazing off in the same direction. Ivory Gull! Thirty minutes later we had a female Spectacled Eider on the water in front of us.



This beautiful Ivory Gull was very cooperative on two of our three days in Barrow. *Aaron Lang.*

Thus began the first half hour of birding on our three day trip to Barrow. The rest of the three day trip involved alternating our time at seawatch where we encountered Ross's Gulls on each of the three days (including over 2,000 on the second day), and spending time enjoying the accumulation of Snowy Owls scattered around town and across the adjacent tundra. On the second day we hired a local guide with a four-wheel drive vehicle to take us in two groups out to the end of Point Barrow, the northernmost point of land in the U.S. Both trips to the point were treated with the site of several hundred Ross's Gulls feeding in the froth of the lapping waves. We also relocated the Ivory Gull on these forays and three juvenile Sabine's Gulls making for a nice collection of three of North America's most beautiful gulls.

On our last day of the trip we were present for the first day of the fall whaling season, a subsistence hunt that the local Inupiat Eskimos have conducted for thousands of years. A few hours before we left the whalers landed the season's first bowhead whale and we were fortunate to be on hand to witness this fascinating part of Barrow's cultural heritage.

ANNOTATED BIRD LIST:

1. GREATER SCAUP: on 6 October we found two Greater Scaup bobbing offshore.
2. SPECTACLED EIDER: we encountered Spectacled Eider in small numbers each day. The high count was four on 6 October. All the birds that we saw were in female plumage.
3. KING EIDER: King Eider was by far the most common eider seen on the trip. It was impossible to safely assess the numbers in the numerous flocks, but each day our estimates were in the thousands. High estimate was 3,000-4,000 birds on 6 October.



Ross's Gull flying by Point Barrow. *Aaron Lang.*

4. **COMMON EIDER:** Seen on all three days of the trip, mostly in flocks cutting across the base of Point Barrow and heading west. High count was 150 on 6 October.

5. **WHITE-WINGED SCOTER:** We saw this species in small numbers each day of the trip. High count was 10 on 6 October.

6. **BLACK SCOTER:** On 6 October a female Black Scoter was floating offshore from the end of Stevenson Street with a female Greater Scaup and a Spectacled Eider. This was the only Black Scoter we recorded.

7. **LONG-TAILED DUCK:** This was the most numerous species of waterfowl on the trip. Large flocks of up to 500 birds were seen cutting across the base of Point Barrow and heading west. Our peak daily estimate was of 5000 birds on 6 October.

8. **RED-BREASTED MERGANSER:** On 6 October two female Red-breasted Mergansers flew along Point Barrow heading north. These were the only that we recorded on the trip.

9. **RED-THROATED LOON:** We tallied one Red-throated Loon 6 October and another on 7 October.

10. **PACIFIC LOON:** On 8 October we counted 3 Pacific Loons off the west side of Point Barrow.

11. **YELLOW-BILLED LOON:** We observed Yellow-billed Loon on the first and last day of our trip: 5 on the first and 1 on the last. The final loon was a great view of a immature bird on the water in front of Shooter's Camp. All other observations were of loons in flight.

12. **SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER:** On 6 October we watched a lone Short-tailed Shearwater flying north along the west side of Point Barrow. On 7 October we watched another three take this same course.

13. **RED PHALAROPE:** A single Red Phalarope near the boat launch at the base of Point Barrow on 6 October was exceeded by another 80 at the Point itself the next day.

14. **BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE:** We observed 10 Black-legged Kittiwakes throughout the course of the day on 6 October in various locations along the coast. On 7 October our trip to the Point tallied 30.

15. **IVORY GULL:** A lone immature Ivory Gull near the boat launch at the base of Point Barrow was likely the same bird we saw the next day at the end of the Point. We were very fortunate to find this Arctic nomad on our trip without the presence of whale or seal carcasses.

16. **SABINE'S GULL:** On 7 October we found three immature Sabine's Gulls feeding in the froth at at Point Barrow with a group of Ross's Gulls and an Ivory Gull—what a trio!

17. **ROSS'S GULL:** Obviously THE target for the trip, we were treated to many studies of this delicate pink gull. Our daily estimates were: 500 on 6 October, 1800-2000 birds on 7 October, and only 25 on 8 October. Our trip to the Point offered close very close views of birds feeding in the surf right in front of us. The highlight of the trip for me was hearing for the first time the vocalizations of this high arctic breeder!

18. HERRING GULL: We recorded two Herring Gulls on 6 and 7 October.

19. THAYER'S GULL: On 6 October we found a smart looking 1st cycle Thayer's Gull on the beach in Browerville. The next day we watched two such birds near the boat ramp at the base of the Point.

20. GLAUCOUS GULL: This was the second most numerous gull on the trip. (Ross's Gull wins that title!) Our daily estimates were: 300 on 6 October, 500 on 7 October, and 150 on 8 October.

21. THICK-BILLED MURRE: On 7 October a Thick-billed Murre flew by Point Barrow heading west (leader only).

22. POMARINE JAEGER: A lone dark-morph bird on 6 October was the only for the trip.

23. SNOWY OWL: Snowy Owls were common and conspicuous throughout town itself. Our high count was of 18 birds on 7 October.

24. COMMON RAVEN: We recorded Ravens each day of the trip with a high of three birds on 8 October.

25. AMERICAN ROBIN: On 7 October some members of our group found and photographed an American Robin just outside of Barrow. Robin's are regular spring overshoots to Barrow, but there are scant fall records of this species for anywhere on the north slope of Alaska!

26. SNOW BUNTING: We recorded Snow Buntings each day of the trip, including a high count of seven on 7 October. This species is a common breeding bird in Barrow, but it heads south before the onset of winter. The birds that we saw were some of the last stragglers of the season.

27. WARBLER SP. On 7 October while seawatching near the end of the road to Point Barrow a warbler flew right in front of us, headed toward the point and disappeared. About 20 minutes later the warbler flew by again in a reverse course heading toward town. The bird remains unidentified, but features observed (yellowish belly and breast, white spotting on the two outermost tail feathers, and a distinctly bridled facial pattern) suggest Townsend's Warbler. The flight call note which we heard once, was a short "ssit."

There is one previous fall record of Townsend's Warbler for Barrow.

MAMMALS OBSERVED:

1. Arctic Fox
2. Spotted Seal
3. Bearded Seal



We enjoyed great views of the trip's main target on all three days of the tour. *Aaron Lang.*