



Adak Island in November with Nome Extension for McKay's Bunting

November 16-20 with extension November 21-22, 2014

Leaders: Aaron Lang (Adak and Nome) and Lucas DeCicco (Adak)

A Trip Report by Aaron Lang

This is the account of our first winter foray to the westernmost town in North America, and an extension to Nome to search for McKay's Buntings. Our group of hearty adventurers met up on the morning of November 16th and began our trip by birding a few Anchorage neighborhoods. It was a fine and relaxing morning of birding and a great way for the group to get acquainted. This was an exceptionally fun group and I'd traveled and birded with all but one before this trip. It was easy to see early on that we'd have a great time! Our morning of birding lasted from 8:30-11:30 before heading to the airport to check in for our flight to Adak. The flight was just as we all like them, uneventful and a bit early into Adak.

We've been leading trips to Adak in the spring since 2008, but have been intrigued by its fall/early winter potential for several years. This trip was an exploration of the potential for wintering birds. Adak's southern latitude and proximity to Asia makes it a productive wintering area for waterfowl, alcids (which are difficult to see from land in the spring), and the occasional passerine of note. Over the years Whooper Swan has regularly wintered and this was one of our most hoped for birds.

Our birding on Adak was focused mainly on seabirds and waterfowl, but we did spread seed at most of the same feeder locations that we use in the spring, checked the "forests" and rocky hillside for songbirds, and did one sweep through Contractor's Marsh for snipe. While we did not find the much sought after Whooper Swan, we did find a good list of waterfowl, including Emperor Geese, a fine alcid diversity including large numbers of Crested Auklets and a few Whiskered Auklets, three wayward Brambling, and several species which are very rare for the island. We returned to Anchorage on November 20th and most of our party went on to the Nome extension the next day.

On the short two-day extension to Nome our primary objective was finding wintering McKay's Buntings. This Bering Sea specialty is very difficult to find on our spring tours, but it winters on the Seward Peninsula and can regularly be found around Nome, occasionally coming into feeders after the first snows of the winter. In our first 10 minutes of birding in Nome had a flock of about 20 McKay's Buntings swirling above our heads. Over the course of the two day trip we enjoyed several great views of McKay's Buntings along with a few Snow Buntings for comparison. Except for McKay's Buntings, I didn't really have any other expectations for the two days. I really had no idea what else we might see but was pretty sure it wasn't going to be much. However, winter was slow to come to Nome this year and the waterfront was completely ice-free, allowing us to tally a very impressive total of ten species for the extension! (Really, that IS impressive for Nome in November!) Additionally, we enjoyed nice light on a herd of Musk Ox near Anvil Mountain and a confiding Red Fox on the breakwater.

Overall the trip and extension provided a comfortable way for a group of adventurous birders to explore two little birded sites in a completely under-birded season. We were rewarded by several of our targets, good weather, great studies of Aleutian specialties and of course fine camaraderie. Thanks to all of you who joined us on this adventure and helped to make it successful and so enjoyable!

SPECIES LIST: Adak and Anchorage

1. **Emperor Goose:** A flock of 30 gorgeous Emperor Geese was present on Clam Lagoon each day of the trip with the flock growing to 32 on 11/20. We found three near the harbor breakwater on 11/17 and one there on 11/20.
2. **Eurasian Wigeon:** Present in a number of freshwater ponds and lakes each day of the trip. The high count was 21 on 11/20.
3. **American Wigeon:** We observed a female wigeon at the airport ponds on 11/17 that we identified as American based a pale gray head that contrasted with the brownish sides.
4. **Mallard:** Fairly common in freshwater habitats, at Clam Lagoon and even on saltwater. Our high count was 60 birds on 11/17 and 11/18.
5. **Northern Pintail:** We found three in a Mallard flock on Clam Lagoon on 11/17 and two there on 11/18.
6. **Green-winged Teal:** Common throughout freshwater and brackish habitats and also along the shore in Finger Cove. The regularly occurring teal here is *A. c. crecca*, the "Common" Teal which is considered a separate from the "American" Green-winged Teal *A. c. carolinensis* by some authorities. Our high count was 70 on 11/18. On 11/17 we found a drake *carolinensis* at Contractor's Marsh as well as an intergrade *crecca x carolinensis* that lacked both the vertical and the horizontal stripes. All other birds that were identifiable to subspecies (breeding plumage drakes) were of the expected *crecca* subspecies.
7. **Ring-necked Duck:** Three Ring-necked Ducks (a young male and two females) seen daily from 11/16-11/20 were the biggest surprise of the trip. First found on Lake Shirley on the 16th, the birds moved daily and we eventually saw them also on Haven Lake, Lake Andrew, and Airport Ponds. There are perhaps only four or five other records of this species for the central Aleutians.
8. **Greater Scaup:** Common and seen daily with several flocks of 40-80 birds on Clam Lagoon and Lake Andrew and smaller numbers in numerous locations. Our high count was 130 birds on 1/19.
9. **Lesser Scaup:** On 11/17 we found a female Lesser Scaup on Lake Shirley in a large flock of Greater Scaup. On 11/19 a drake Lesser Scaup was with a Greater Scaup flock on Lake Andrew. It's not clear whether a drake seen later in the day on 11/19 with Greater Scaup on Lake Shirley was a second drake.
10. **Common Eider:** A couple flocks of 30-50 birds were present off shore of the Clam Lagoon seawall throughout our trip and smaller numbers were seen at several locations in Kuluk Bay. Our high count was 100 birds on 11/17.
11. **Harlequin Duck:** Common along the entire shoreline and in Clam Lagoon. Our high count was 250 on 11/17.

12. **White-winged Scoter:** We saw small numbers in Kuluk Bay and from the Clam Lagoon Seawall on three days of the trip. Our high count was 8 birds on 11/18.
13. **Black Scoter:** Common in several large flocks in Kuluk Bay seen from Palisades Overlook and from Zeto Point. Our high count was of 650 birds on 11/18. A flock of about 300 was present near Palisades Overlook each day of the trip.
14. **Long-tailed Duck:** We tallied small numbers of Long-tailed Ducks daily in Kuluk Bay and Sitkin Sound and Clam Lagoon. Our high count was 20 birds on 11/18.
15. **Bufflehead:** Common, especially in Clam Lagoon. Our high count was 400 on 11/19 when the viewing conditions in Clam Lagoon were perfect and allowed us to complete a thorough scan of the entire lagoon.
16. **Common Goldeneye:** Common, especially in Clam Lagoon. Our high count was 300 on 11/19 when the viewing conditions in Clam Lagoon were perfect and allowed us to complete a thorough scan of the entire lagoon.
17. **Common Merganser:** A female on Lake Andrew on 11/17 and a drake and two females there on 11/18 were our only observations. The views of the drake were distant flight views and we could not identify the bird to subspecies.
18. **Red-breasted Merganser:** Red-breasted Mergansers were fairly common along the coast and at Clam Lagoon. Our high count was of 200 birds on 11/19.
19. **Rock Ptarmigan:** "Turner's" Rock Ptarmigan *L. mutus atkhensis* is endemic to the Central Aleutians and easy to see on Adak. We encountered flocks of 4 to 14 birds each day of the trip including several birds right in town perching on buildings. Our high count was of 30 ptarmigan on 11/18.
20. **Pacific Loon:** We found two Pacific Loons on 11/17 and eight on 11/18. These included sightings from the breakwater, the head of Sweeper Cove, and from the Clam Lagoon Seawall.
21. **Common Loon:** On 11/17 we observed a Common Loon from the breakwater and on 11/18 we had nice views of a Common Loon in the harbor.
22. **Yellow-billed Loon:** A Yellow-billed Loon in basic plumage was seen near Gannet Rocks in Kuluk Bay on 11/17 and 11/18.
23. **Horned Grebe:** Horned Grebes were fairly common in Kuluk Bay and from the Clam Lagoon Seawall. We noticed that a number of them seemed to associate with the large flocks of Black Scoters in Kuluk Bay. Our high count was 50 on 11/18.
24. **Red-necked Grebe:** On 11/17 we counted six Red-necked Grebes from the Clam Lagoon Seawall.

25. **Northern Fulmar:** We were able to pick out about 10 distant Northern Fulmars from the Clam Lagoon Seawall on 11/17. All birds were dark-morph fulmars.
26. **Pelagic Cormorant:** Common along the shoreline and at Clam Lagoon. Our high count was 175 on 11/19.
27. **Bald Eagle:** Eagles were conspicuous and fairly evenly distributed throughout the entire road system on Adak. We saw them daily and tallied a high of 40 on 11/19.
28. **Black Oystercatcher:** We found small numbers of Black Oystercatchers on the rocks in Kuluk Bay and Zeto Point and once flying into the harbor. Our high count was seven on 11/17 and 11/18.
29. **Sanderling:** On 11/17 a flock of 43 Sanderling was feeding along the spit in Clam Lagoon. Six were resting on rocks near the road on Clam Lagoon on 11/19.
30. **Rock Sandpiper:** We only encountered Rock Sandpipers on three days, with a high count of 15 on 11/17.
31. **Dunlin:** One Dunlin was roosting on Clam Lagoon with six Sanderlings on 11/19.
32. **Glaucous-winged Gull:** Fairly common throughout. We observed Glaucous-winged Gulls daily with a high of 100 on 11/19, which included about 50 on Lake Andrew.
33. **Glaucous Gull:** A first-cycle Glaucous Gull was on the road near Contractor's Marsh on 11/18 and 11/19.
34. **Common Murre:** We found a few Common Murre each day of the trip, mostly viewed from the breakwater. The high count was 12 birds on 11/18.
35. **Thick-billed Murre:** We recorded one Thick-billed Murre from the breakwater on 11/17 and two there on 11/18.
36. **Pigeon Guillemot:** Pigeon Guillemots were fairly common in all saltwater habitats and were especially numerous in Sweeper Cove and Finger Cove. Our high count was 150 on 11/17.
37. **Marbled Murrelet:** Small numbers of Marbled Murrelets were seen daily scattered along the coast and in the north end of Clam Lagoon. Our high count was 20 on 11/19.
38. **Least Auklet:** Least Auklets were observed on three days of the trip, with a high count of three on 11/17 and 11/18. We found singles or pairs near the breakwater, from Baycrest Drive and from Pallisades overlook.
39. **Whiskered Auklet:** Whiskered Auklet was one of our primary targets and we were happy to find it near the end of the Breakwater on two days with diligent searching. On 11/18 we found two birds on the outside of the breakwater and on 11/19 we briefly had one on the inside.

40. **Crested Auklet:** By far the most common alcid that we saw, Crested Auklets clearly move into the inshore Adak area in winter. We found them in all saltwater areas and a few in Clam Lagoon. Our high estimate was of 1,200 on 11/18.
41. **Short-eared Owl:** On 11/16 we observed two Short-eared Owls harassing a perched Bald Eagle near the "National Forest" at dusk. On 11/20 two Short-eared Owls, flushed out of the ravine behind the "State Forest."
42. **Merlin:** On 11/18 a Merlin was perched on the rock cliff along Baycrest Drive. Luke briefly had it in the scope before it flew off and disappeared above town. Merlin is considered casual in fall and winter in the central Aleutians.
43. **Gyrfalcon:** on 11/18 part of our group watched a dark Gyrfalcon stoop on a group of teal on the Airport Ponds, then perch on a power pole above the ponds. The bird perched for about a minute before flying off over town and those present enjoyed great scope views! Later in the day we found it flying over the National Forest and heading toward Lake Andrew where the other half of our group picked it up over the lake.
44. **Peregrine Falcon:** Except for our first afternoon on the island we found Peregrines daily. Most days there was a pair near the breakwater where they seemed to be attracted to the congregating Crested Auklets. Clam Lagoon frequently held a pair as well. On 11/19 we tallied five Peregrines throughout the Adak road system.
45. **Steller's Jay:** Two were found in Anchorage before flying to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
46. **Black-billed Magpie:** Twenty Magpies were counted in Anchorage before flying to Anchorage. Not seen on Adak.
47. **Common Raven:** Ravens were seen singly or in pairs daily on Adak in all areas we birded. We eight to 10 per day. Eight were seen in Anchorage before flying to Adak.
48. **Black-capped Chickadee:** We tallied 40 Black-capped Chickadees in Anchorage before flying to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
49. **Boreal Chickadee:** We found only two Boreal Chickadees in Anchorage before flying to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
50. **Red-breasted Nuthatch:** We found eight Red-breasted Nuthatches in Anchorage before flying to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
51. **Pacific Wren:** Seen daily on Adak in small numbers along the coast. Our high count was six on 11/19. Several cheeky Pacific Wrens gave very nice views on the mornings we spent birding from the breakwater.
52. **American Robin:** We were very excited to find a large group of Robins in Anchorage on the morning of 11/16. The fall and winter have been mild in Anchorage and there has been little cold weather or snow to concentrate the wintering Robins. Our estimate of 150 Robins feeding

in bird cherries in Spenard may have been low, but was still one of the larger congregations reported in Anchorage thus far this winter. We tried hard, but were unable to pull out any rarities or the Dusky Thrush which had spent the last three winters in Anchorage. Not seen on Adak.

53. **European Starling:** We found about 20 in Anchorage before flying to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
54. **Bohemian Waxwing:** We found about 100 in Anchorage before flying to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
55. **Lapland Longspur:** Lapland Longspurs are common nesting birds on Adak, but they do not winter on the island. A bird we sighted multiple times near the end of the airstrip along Bayshore Drive on 11/17 is one of the latest fall records of the species in the central Aleutians.
56. **Snow Bunting:** We spotted Snow Buntings on Adak on three days of our trip. One to three birds were seen along the road at the south end of Lake Andrew and another bird was along Clam Lagoon near Candlestick Bridge. Our high count was four on 11/17.
57. **Song Sparrow:** The *maxima* race of Song Sparrow is a fairly common year-round resident on Adak Island and we found small to moderate numbers daily. It seemed to be in the same habitats that we find it in on our spring trips and was especially conspicuous around Clam Lagoon. Our high count was 20 on 11/18 and 11/19.
58. **White-crowned Sparrow:** Steve spotted one in a junco flock in Anchorage before we flew to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
59. **Dark-eyed Junco:** We found four in a brushy yard in Anchorage before flying to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
60. **Brambling:** On 11/16 while scanning Lake Andrew from the south end of the lake three Brambling flew over us heading north along the lake shore. This added some degree of excitement to our first afternoon on the island! Unfortunately, we did not see the birds again on the trip.
61. **Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch:** Common on the island, especially in town where a growing flock was attracted to the seeds we spread on the "big rock" along the cliff on Bayshore Drive. We estimated a total of 100 birds on 11/20.
62. **White-winged Crossbill:** We counted 30 White-winged Crossbills in Anchorage before flying to Adak. Not seen on Adak.
63. **Redpoll sp.:** We had up to two redpolls on flying over us on 11/18 (near Lake Andrew) and on 11/19 (at Clam Lagoon). The birds were only seen/heard in flight.

SPECIES LIST: Nome Extension

1. **King Eider:** We found female-plumaged King Eiders on both days of the extension, birds were seen along the road to the Nome River mouth and in the harbor. We saw five on 11/21 and 3 on 11/22.
2. **Common Eider:** We found female-plumaged Common Eiders on both days of the extension, and got to study them in direct comparison to nearby King Eiders. We recorded three Common Eiders on both days of the extension.
3. **Common Merganser:** We found a female Common Merganser in the harbor on 11/21 and 11/22.
4. **Long-tailed Duck:** Three Long-tailed Ducks were present in the harbor on 11/21 and one remained on 11/22.
5. **Pelagic Cormorant:** While doing a seawatch from the end of the breakwater on 11/21 we watched Pelagic Cormorant fly past the end of the breakwater heading south.
6. **Glaucous-winged Gull:** Two first-cycle Glaucous-winged Gulls were present with the more numerous Glaucous Gulls along the waterfront on 11/21 and we managed to find one on 11/22.
7. **Glaucous Gull:** We observed what is probably a very high count of Glaucous Gulls for the Nome area given the season. On 11/21 we counted 70 along the waterfront and we tallied 50 on 11/22.
8. **Raven:** It was difficult to exactly count the Ravens in Nome, which were found singly or in pairs and seemed to roam widely. We estimated that we saw at least 12 on 11/21 and 15 on 11/22.
9. **Snow Bunting:** I was surprised by the very few Snow Buntings that we found. We only definitively saw two on 11/21 and 1 on 11/22.
10. **McKay's Bunting:** We found small flocks of McKay's Buntings in the Icy View area on both days of the trip and very conservatively estimated 20 on 11/21 and 15 on 11/22. Local birder Peter Bente said the buntings were slow to arrive this year and as of our tour were in smaller number than average years. Most of the McKay's that we saw were after-hatch year males! Brilliant white things with variable amounts of buff wash on the upperparts. If there was even the hint of a disappointment on the Nome portion of this tour, it was that we had only a few female McKay's to study and compare with the similar looking male Snow Buntings, which were in even shorter supply. I guess that's an acceptable disappointment to incur.