



Barrow: Ross's Gull Migration

October 4-6, 2015

A report by Aaron Lang, leader

Ross's Gull is one of the most sought after birds in North America, with birders dreaming of the opportunity to glimpse just one in their lifetime. Each fall this dainty pink gull migrates past point Barrow, the northernmost point in America, and this location has now become known as THE spot to see this nearly mythical bird, and on occasion, to see it in impressive numbers!

This year our small group of five participants and two leaders enjoyed nice weather and generally pleasant conditions at Barrow for our short trip to catch the Ross's Gull migration. Winds were light to moderate with temperatures in the upper 20s and low 30s Fahrenheit. Gusty conditions are usually favorable to bring in numbers of Ross's Gulls close to shore, and without these we didn't see particularly large numbers of Ross's Gulls as we have on past trips, nor did we see them as close. However, we did see over 60 Ross's Gulls on our second day and 50, including excellent views of a small flock flying right over us, on our final day. Yes, they really are pink!

During our stay the locals harvested several bowhead whales, a part of their traditional subsistence harvest. Watching them return from the sea with their catch and witnessing the butchering, an activity the whole community takes part in, is an experience that gives a unique insight into the past and present lives of the hearty people of the region. In addition to learning about local traditions and culture, the butchering site attracts large numbers of Glaucous Gulls and occasionally small numbers of other species join the mix. This year the rarity of the trip was a Great Black-backed Gull that we found in the flock near the butchering site, only the fourth record of this species for Alaska, with three of these coming from the north slope of Alaska since 2011. Some years, as on our 2013 and 2014 trips, polar bears are also attracted to the harvest site. This year, however, no bears were reported during our stay.

Our time in Barrow was a leisurely mix of going from various coastal vantages to sea watch and scan for gulls, eiders and loons, cruising tundra roads to look for Snowy Owls, and checking out an active feeder in town. It's a very pleasant way to spend a few days at the northernmost town in America!

ANNOTATED BIRD LIST

- 1. Brant:** Two were sitting on shore near the end of the road to Point Barrow on 5 October. One of these birds clearly had an injured right wing. This injured bird was still present on 6 October.
- 2. Spectacled Eider:** On 4 and 6 October we enjoyed long views of a female Spectacled Eider at close range on the water. On 6 October another female-type Spectacled Eider flew by in a flock of King Eiders.
- 3. King Eider:** A few King Eiders sat on the water throughout the entire Barrow waterfront. We estimated up to 200 each day flying across the base of the point, although these estimates are likely quite low. Large flocks of unidentified eiders could be seen on the horizon throughout the trip.

4. Common Eider: Common Eiders were less commonly seen on the water than King Eiders, but flocks flew across the base of the point throughout the trip. Our high count was 200 on 5 October.

5. White-winged Scoter: One White-winged Scoter was sitting on the water in a group of King Eiders near the end of the road to the point on 4 October. It was again there on 5 October and two others flew by that morning.

6. Long-tailed Duck: Large flocks of Long-tailed Ducks flew along the coast and crossed the base of the point throughout the trip. A few sat on the water along the beach as well. Our high estimate was 1,400 on 4 October.

7. Pacific Loon: A total of nine Pacific Loons were tallied on 4 October and another four on 5 October. All were in basic plumage.

8. Yellow-billed Loon: On 5 October we counted eight Yellow-billed Loons. Three were singles sitting on the water along Point Barrow, all in juvenile plumage, and a group of five alternate plumage birds flew directly overhead flying east to west.

9. Thick-billed Murre: A hatch-year Thick-billed Murre was on the water near at the base of the point on 6 October.

10. Black Guillemot: Two basic plumage Black Guillemots flew by our group on 5 October.

11. Black-legged Kittiwake: On 5 October we recorded three Black-legged Kittiwakes along the coast. The winds picked up a bit the next day and that probably helped increase our count on 6 October to 25.

12. Ross's Gull: A few Ross's Gulls were spotted by other birders on the morning we arrived, but we didn't see any until our second day. On 5 October we had 62 fly by at various spots along the coast. A few were relatively close, but most were distant. On 6 October we counted 50 throughout the course of the day. On this day, however, our views were much better with a couple of small flocks flying right over the road! Photographic opportunities were not as good on this tour as they have been in past years, and this is the fewest number of Ross's that we've seen on a tour. However, seeing over 100 Ross's Gulls in two days is still quite thrilling!

13. Herring Gull: We picked out a first-cycle Herring Gull in the Glaucous Gull flock on 5 October.

14. Thayer's Gull: On 5 October a first-cycle Thayer's Gull was hanging out near the base of Point Barrow.

15. Glaucous-winged Gull: on 5 October a first-cycle Glaucous-winged Gull was in the large Glaucous Gull flock near the whale butchering site. Of the large gulls that we recorded this species is not to be expected and is the second rarest gull on our trip list (see Great Black-backed Gull for the cake winner in that category.)

16. Glaucous Gull: The most common bird on the trip there were at least 500 on each day of the trip in the vicinity of the whale butchering site, and many others flying along the coast throughout the tour.

17. Great Black-backed Gull: On 6 October Scott picked out a second-cycle Great Black-backed Gull as it flew in and landed in a large flock of Glaucous Gulls near the old airstrip at the base of Point Barrow. This sharply checkered, dark-backed gull with a very pale head stood out like a sore thumb amongst the several hundred pallid Glaucous Gulls. There are three previous records of this species for Alaska!

18. Snowy Owl: A nice diversion from gulling, and a way to warm up after a seawatch, is to cruise the tundra roads around Barrow and look for Snowy Owls. On 5 October we had very nice looks and photographic opportunities of five Snowy Owls on Cakeeater and Gaswell Roads. We found two more west of town near the gravel pit on 6 October.

19. Common Raven: On the first and last day of the trip we had a pair of Ravens and we racked up five on 5 October.

20. Snow Bunting: There were two Snow Buntings at a birder feeder on Stevenson Street on 4 October and six there on 5 October.

21 and 22. Common Redpoll and Hoary Redpoll: A flock of up to 16 redpolls was at a feeder along Stevenson Street on each day of our trip. Most appeared to be Hoary Redpolls. While we found several clear cut examples of both species, we were content to leave a number of the birds unidentified to species.

23. Pine Siskin: A Pine Siskin was with a group of redpolls at a feeder on Stevenson Street on 5 and 6 October. The home owners reported that this bird has been present at the feeder throughout the summer. This species is an extremely rare overshoot to the north side of the Brooks Range and may represent the first record for Barrow!