



## Early Spring in Kodiak Island and Nome: Emperor Geese, Steller's Eiders, and McKay's Buntings

March 23–25, 2017 (Kodiak)  
March 25–27, 2017 (Anchorage)  
March 27–28, 2017 (Nome)

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### A Trip Report by Lucas DeCicco

2017 was our first year running this tour. Early spring (March) in Alaska may not be the time most people think about heading north to look for birds, and not without reason. Bird diversity over most of the state at this time of year is very low; however, certain productive coastal areas host large numbers of wintering waterfowl and seabirds. And, for a certain handful of species, this may be the best time to see them in North America. It was this small cohort of species for which we designed this tour. Explicitly, our goal was to see, and see well, Emperor Geese, Steller's Eiders, and McKay's Buntings. One thing to consider about this time of year is that the looks one may get of these species should be exceptional (i.e. close roosting flocks of hundreds of Emperor Geese, good scope views of flocks of displaying Steller's Eiders, and hopefully prolonged views of flocks of McKay's Buntings including singing males). We also scheduled a day in Anchorage in hopes of tracking down any boreal specialties that tour participants wanted to see or, if the option was available, chasing a rare bird frequenting a feeder. March is a good time to be in south-central Alaska as most of the winter birds that may have been found during months earlier will still be visiting feeders, the days are becoming longer, and many of the local boreal species will become more and more active as the breeding season approaches.

We began our tour in Kodiak where I met our tour participants at the airport on the morning of 23 March after a day of scouting with local bird guru Rich MacIntosh. We had three days of birding the Kodiak road system (23, 24, and 25 March), before our departing flight for Anchorage on the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup>. We made it a tradition to start each day with a stop near the Coast Guard base to observe at close range a roosting flock of 200–400 Emperor Geese, a tradition no one voiced complaints about. Each day was already a success when we started it off that way! During our three days of birding the Kodiak road system, most of our time was spent stopping and scanning the nearshore marine waters. Impressive numbers of wintering waterfowl and seabirds were seen at every stop. We also found a few nice places to watch small groups of Steller's Eiders. We experienced a couple memorable calm evenings of watching male Steller's Eiders displaying, something that will not be easily forgotten. Other highlights included two afternoons observing a nesting pair of Northern Hawk Owls as they courted each

other, delivered food items, and hunted the nearby fields. Passerine birding on Kodiak at this time of year was not exactly a focus of the trip, but we dipped into a few neighborhoods to check feeders to pad the trip list. We lucked out on weather this trip, with calm and sunny conditions every day. Our time in Kodiak was very pleasant and productive with fantastic views of our target species and myriad other wintering waterbirds.

Our strategy to hope for a wintering vagrant in Anchorage or nearby paid off well with a continuing Hawfinch that we managed good views of after a long wait. After this success we spent a frustrating rest of the day trying to track down American Three-toed Woodpeckers, which we were not successful at seeing. This frustrating effort was punctuated with good views of some other boreal species (Boreal Chickadee, White-winged Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, etc.). A similarly frustrating bout of owling was had that evening with multiple Great Horned and Boreal owls heard, but all *very* distantly.

After a long day in Anchorage, we were off to Nome the next morning. Quality over quantity was the type of birding that Nome in late March offered. We detected a whopping seven species of birds over two days of birding, but these five included Gyrfalcon, two ptarmigan species, McKay's Bunting, and Hoary Redpoll. Again, not only were these fantastic birds to see, but we were able to spend prolonged periods of time observing them. We found that the flock of McKay's Buntings, numbering up to 50 individuals (and only three Snow Buntings), frequented the recently cleared Iditarod dog lot between downtown Nome and the boat harbor. This allowed for fantastic views, time and time again. On the morning of 28 March we spent a memorable couple hours from sunrise on, viewing and listening to male McKay's Buntings serenading from their perches atop snow banks. This was a "once in a lifetime" type of experience as the song of this species had only once previously been recorded, and unless one is able to make their way to St. Matthew Island in the Bering Sea (an exceedingly difficult task to manage) it is unlikely that a person will ever have the chance to listen to these birds sing. Therefore, spending hours as the sun rose over the frozen Bering Sea listening to these birds singing atop snow banks was a definite highlight of the trip. With that, we wrapped up our Nome portion of the trip and it was back to Anchorage where the tour ended.

#### **SPECIES LIST: Kodiak & Anchorage, 23–27 March 2017**

1. EMPEROR GOOSE: Roosting and foraging flocks of up to 800 individuals were seen daily in Kodiak, primarily near the Coast Guard base and the head of Womens Bay. Roosting flocks were *very* confiding and were easily approached for excellent photo opportunities.
2. CANADA GOOSE: Multiple taxa of Canada Geese have been introduced to Kodiak, an unusual circumstance in Alaska. We saw small flocks, up to 60 individuals, on 23, 24, and 25 March, comprising both the dark-breasted birds introduced from southeastern Alaska (subspecies *fulva*) and large light-breasted birds introduced from outside of Alaska (subspecies *moffitii/maxima*).

3. TRUMPETER SWAN: We saw a large group (50+) of swans in the open water of the Pasagshak River near its mouth on 24 March, these birds were almost exclusively Trumpeter Swans. We saw an additional four individuals on the 25<sup>th</sup> on Kalsin Bay.
4. TUNDRA SWAN: We identified two individuals of this species in the large flock of Trumpeter Swans on 24 March at Lake Rose Tead.
5. GADWALL: Between 50 and 150 individuals were seen daily in Kodiak (23–25 March) in the intertidal heads of Womens, Middle, and Kalsin bays.
6. EURASIAN WIGEON: We saw a single male Eurasian Wigeon twice at the head of Womens Bay (24 and 25 March).
7. AMERICAN WIGEON: Single individuals were observed at the head of Womens Bay on 23 and 24 March.
8. MALLARD: We noted up to 200 individuals daily while in Kodiak, most birds foraged at the heads of Womens, Middle, and Kalsin bays.
9. NORTHERN SHOVELER: Up to two individuals were noted daily at the head of Womens Bay.
10. NORTHERN PINTAIL: We saw 10 to 50 individuals daily while in Kodiak, most, along with other dabbling ducks, foraged in the intertidal areas of Womens, Middle, and Kalsin bays.
11. GREEN-WINGED TEAL: Up to 100 individuals were seen daily intermixed with other dabbling ducks at the heads of Womens, Middleton, and Kalsin bays. A single COMMON TEAL (the Eurasian subspecies) was seen on 24 March at the head of Womens Bay.
12. REDHEAD: We found two males associated with large Greater Scaup flocks on Womens Bay on 24 and 25 March.
13. GREATER SCAUP: A very large flock, estimated about 2000 individuals was present on Womens Bay throughout our visit.
14. LESSER SCAUP: We noted small numbers (1–8 individuals) scattered around the boat harbors and Buskin Lake.
15. STELLER'S EIDER: Another highlight, and target, of the trip was to obtain prolonged and good views of this species. We succeeded and noted up to 200 individuals daily while in Kodiak, including a very confiding flock that would forage in Gibson Harbor. Prolonged (drive-away type) views of this flock foraging and displaying in low-level warm evening light was a highlight of the trip for all involved.
16. KING EIDER: We saw a single, and distant, female-plumaged bird in with Common Eiders on 25 March.
17. COMMON EIDER: Up to 50 individuals per day were seen far offshore from multiple coastal locations along the Kodiak road system.
18. HARLEQUIN DUCK: Daily, 20–40 birds were noted in coastal waters.
19. SURF SCOTER: We saw up to 200 individuals daily in nearshore marine waters along the Kodiak road system.
20. WHITE-WINGED SCOTER: Up to 400 birds were seen daily, often associated with other scoters, on the major bays and nearshore marine waters.

21. BLACK SCOTER: 20 to 200 individuals were seen daily associated with other scoters. The whistling calls of this species could be heard from nearly every stop in appropriate habitat.
22. LONG-TAILED DUCK: Large congregations of this species, up to 1000 individuals, were noted daily in the major bays.
23. BUFFLEHEAD: 20 to 75 birds were seen daily in association with other marine diving ducks.
24. COMMON GOLDENEYE: 20 to 100 individuals were seen daily associated with scoters and other sea ducks in the bays and nearshore coastal waters.
25. BARROW'S GOLDENEYE: This species was restricted to the protected waters around the Coast Guard base where we saw up to 25 daily.
26. HOODED MERGANSER: We saw a single female-plumaged bird at Buskin Lake on 23 March.
27. COMMON MERGANSER: Impressively large foraging flocks were seen daily in Womens Bay, numbering up to an estimated 1000 individuals.
28. RED-BREASTED MERGANSER: Up to 50 individuals were seen daily, foraging in protected marine waters.
29. RED-THROATED LOON: Small numbers, <10, were seen almost daily in Womens, Middle, and Kalsin bays.
30. PACIFIC LOON: We noted up to 10 individuals daily, again in the protected and productive waters of Womens, Middle, and Kalsin bays.
31. COMMON LOON: Similar numbers to Pacific Loons were seen, also in Womens and Kalsin bays.
32. YELLOW-BILLED LOON: A single individual was seen in Womens Bay on both 23 and 25 March.
33. HORNED GREBE: Up to 50 individuals were noted daily in nearshore marine waters.
34. RED-NECKED GREBE: Around 10 individuals were seen daily, primarily in Womens and Kalsin bays.
35. DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT: Up to 30 individuals were noted daily primarily foraging in the protected waters of Womens, Middle, and Kalsin bays.
36. RED-FACED CORMORANT: We found a few individuals consistently roosting on rocks off of Fort Ambercrombie. At this time of year these birds were in the height for their breeding plumage with odd white filamentous plumes speckling their neck and head.
37. PELAGIC CORMORANT: Up to 200 individuals of this species were seen daily.
38. GREAT BLUE HERON: Three individuals were noted on 24 March.
39. BALD EAGLE: Flocks of eagles, numbering up to 300 individuals, were seen daily scattered along the coast and congregated around fish processing plants.
40. SHARP-SHINNED HAWK: A single individual was seen in Anchorage on 26 March as we listened intently for non-existent woodpeckers.
41. NORTHERN GOSHAWK: We saw two individuals on 24 March.
42. GOLDEN EAGLE: On the drive to Kalsin Bay we had nice views of two Golden Eagles on both 24 and 25 March.

43. BLACK OYSTERCATCHER: Up to 40 individuals were noted daily at various rocky coastal locations along the Kodiak road system.
44. BLACK TURNSTONE: Ten on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and a single individual on the 25<sup>th</sup> were noted, most in town along the rocky shoreline.
45. SURFBIRD: Up to five were noted in association with the above-mentioned Black Turnstones.
46. DUNLIN: We saw 10 individuals on 24 March foraging at the head of Kalsin Bay.
47. ROCK SANDPIPER: Up to 100 individuals were noted daily, in association with the turnstones and Surfbirds and also foraging in muddy areas at the heads of Womens and Kalsin bays.
48. WILSON'S SNIPE: We saw five individuals at Buskin Lake on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and a single on the 24<sup>th</sup>.
49. COMMON MURRE: Up to 200 individuals were seen daily in the protected waters of Womens, Middle, and Kalsin bays as well as nearshore exposed marine waters.
50. PIGEON GUILLEMOT: Daily, 50 to 75 individuals were noted in nearshore marine waters.
51. MARBLE MURRELET: We saw up to 150 individuals daily, primarily in Womens Bay.
52. BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE: Small numbers, up to 10 birds, were seen daily.
53. MEW GULL: An abundant species around Kodiak, we estimated up to 2000 individuals daily.
54. THAYER'S GULL: We found a single individual of this species near town on 25 March.
55. SLATY-BACKED GULL: A single third-winter bird was found at the head of Womens Bay on 25 March, unfortunately we were unable to relocate this bird later on.
56. GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL: Up to 2000 individuals were noted daily, mostly around town where fish processing plants attracted large numbers of foraging gulls.
57. GLAUCOUS GULL: We noted up to three individuals daily, mostly along the town's waterfront.
58. GREAT HORNED OWL: We heard two individuals during our owling outing outside of Anchorage on the evening of the 26<sup>th</sup>.
59. NORTHERN HAWK OWL: One of the treats of Kodiak at this time was a cooperative pair of nesting hawk owls in the poplars at the head of Kalsin Bay. We spent portions of two afternoons (24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>) watching this pair sing, court, and hunt in this area.
60. BOREAL OWL: A "heard only" species, and distant at that. A single individual sang once in Kodiak on the evening of 24 March and four were heard, again distantly, during our owling outing from Anchorage on the night of the 26<sup>th</sup>.
61. BELTED KINGFISHER: Up to five individuals were noted daily in coastal areas around Kodiak.
62. DOWNY WOODPECKER: Up to two were seen in Kodiak and two were also noted while searching for other woodpeckers around Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
63. HAIRY WOODPECKER: A single individual was seen around Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

64. NORTHERN SHRIKE: We saw four individuals around Kodiak on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March.
65. STELLER'S JAY: Two individuals were noted around Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March.
66. BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE: This species was very common around Kodiak with up to 100 individuals daily. Also seen around Anchorage.
67. NORTHWESTERN CROW: We estimated up to 200 individuals daily around Kodiak.
68. COMMON RAVEN. We estimated 20 to 30 individuals daily in Kodiak, and 80 in Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
69. BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE: 10 to 20 individuals were seen daily in Kodiak. We also detected this species in Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
70. BOREAL CHICKADEE: We obtained close and prolonged views of up to 10 individuals while in Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
71. RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH: A single individual was seen in Kodiak on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and we saw up to five birds in Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
72. BROWN CREEPER: A single individual was noted on the 23<sup>rd</sup> around Kodiak.
73. PACIFIC WREN: Up to 10 individuals were seen daily while in Kodiak.
74. AMERICAN DIPPER: We noted up to five birds daily in Kodiak.
75. GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET: We saw five individuals of this species in Kodiak on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 10 in Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
76. VARIED THRUSH: Up to six individuals were seen daily while in Kodiak.
77. EUROPEAN STARLING: We estimated 30 during our day around Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
78. BOHEMIAN WAXWING: An estimated 100 were noted around Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
79. SONG SPARROW: Up to five were seen daily in Kodiak.
80. WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW: We found a single individual at a feeder in Kodiak on the 25<sup>th</sup>.
81. PINE GROSBEAK: Five to 10 were noted daily in Kodiak, we also estimated 10 on the 26<sup>th</sup> in Anchorage.
82. RED CROSSBILL: 10 to 15 were detected daily in Kodiak, most were flying over.
83. WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL: An estimated 30 individuals were seen in Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>, many of which were beginning to sing.
84. COMMON REDPOLL: Up to 20 were seen daily in Kodiak and an estimated 200 were noted in Anchorage on the 26<sup>th</sup>.
85. PINE SISKIN: We saw this species in both Kodiak and Anchorage with daily counts of less than 15 individuals.
86. HAWFINCH: The timing of this trip offers a chance at chasing rarities around south-central Alaska that may have been found visiting feeders earlier in the winter. We succeeded in obtaining good views of the Hawfinch that had been frequenting a feeder in Anchorage for a month or more. This was a definite highlight of the tour.

## **SPECIES LIST: Nome, 27–28 March 2017**

1. GYRFALCON: We had prolonged scope views of a pair of Gyrfalcons in Nome on the 27<sup>th</sup>, one of this pair was also seen on the 28<sup>th</sup>.
2. WILLOW PTARMIGAN: Multiple impressively large flocks number of 500 individuals were seen while driving the roads outside of Nome on the 28<sup>th</sup>.
3. ROCK PTARMIGAN: A small flock of 10 individuals was seen near Nome on the 27<sup>th</sup>.
4. COMMON RAVEN: Up to 80 individuals were noted in and around Nome, mostly at the dump.
5. SNOW BUNTING: We found it a challenge to pick out Snow Buntings from the McKay's flock in Nome, a good problem to have. We succeeded in identifying one on the 27<sup>th</sup> and three on the 28<sup>th</sup>.
6. MCKAY'S BUNTING: We succeeding in spending a significant amount of time watching a flock of this Beringian endemic, numbering up to 50 individuals, foraging in a cleared lot along the coast between downtown Nome and the boat harbor. At this time of year males were singing readily. Fantastic views were had by all, a definite highlight for all and a "once-in-a-lifetime" type of experience.
7. HOARY REDPOLL: Although we had to work for them, we did manage to see 10 individuals of this species along the Kougarok Road on the 28<sup>th</sup>.