



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

March 23–25, 2018 (Kodiak)

March 25–27, 2018 (Anchorage)

March 27–28, 2018 (Nome)

Leader: Aaron Lang

### A Trip Report by Aaron Lang

For the second year in a row, we kicked off our season of Alaska birding tours with a short tour to Kodiak Island in early spring and an extension to Nome. While not commonly thought of as a prime time to make a birding trip to Alaska, late March in these excellent locations may be one of Alaska's best-kept birding secrets. For most species migration hasn't yet begun, but the focus of this tour is to observe a number of exciting birds on their wintering grounds, specifically, Emperor Goose, Steller's Eider, Red-faced Cormorant, and McKay's Bunting.

Our tour began at the Anchorage airport on the morning of March 23<sup>rd</sup> with a short and scenic flight over the Kenai Peninsula and down to Kodiak Island. We arrived to clear skies and light breezes. We picked up our rental vehicle and met with local birding legend, Rich MacIntosh, for a run-down of recent sightings. After a brief stop at the hotel, we were out to Womens Bay where we enjoyed jaw-dropping views of more than 400 Emperor Geese, several dozen Steller's Eiders, and long list of other waterfowl and seabirds. Nearly 1,000 Emperor Geese winter along the road system on Kodiak Island. They're relatively confiding and feed on barnacles, mussels, and vegetation near shore—a perfect situation for leisurely viewing and photography of this beautiful bird. Our afternoon was spent birding the waterfront around town where we filled out our waterfowl list with species like Barrow's Goldeneye, Harlequin Duck, Long-tailed Duck, and all three species of scoter. We took a nice walk through a mature spruce forest at Fort Abercrombie State Park where we tried for American Three-toed Woodpecker. Scanning off-shore here produced an adult Red-faced Cormorant roosting with Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants.

After dinner, we again met up with Rich and drove to his daughter's property, about 30 minutes from town, where she had reported hearing a Boreal Owl on calm nights. This species is a rarely seen breeding bird on Kodiak Island. Conditions for owling were perfect with clear skies and mostly calm conditions. We arrived at the site at dusk, with the hope of all hopes that we might glimpse an owl in the waning twilight. Sometimes things actually go as planned. Within ten minutes of getting out of the van, we had a Boreal Owl perched in the open about 15 yards from us! There was just enough light for photos and great views. The bird perched in the open for about 15 minutes before another Boreal Owl flew in and chased it up to more distant, but still visible perch. As it did so, both birds called. It was one of the most amazing encounters I've ever had with Boreal Owls!

Our second day in Kodiak greeted us with more sunshine and light winds. We grabbed sandwiches in the morning for a picnic lunch and spent the entire day birding the road system from Kodiak to Narrow Cape, about 40 miles. Our first stop was again at Womens Bay where several hundred Emperor Geese

were roosting along the shoreline in great light. It was hard to pull ourselves away! Farther out the road we found Tundra Swans with a lone Trumpeter Swan at Kalsin Pond and watched a Northern Hawk Owl hunt near the head of Kalsin Bay. During our picnic stop at Pasagshak Bay, we scoped hundreds of ducks and seabirds. While views were distant, here we found four species of loon, including our only Yellow-billed Loon of the trip. We also picked up our only (surprisingly!) Marbled Murrelet of the trip. At least three Humpback Whales at Surfers Beach were a nice finish to the day.

Our final day in Kodiak brought our first and only raindrops of the trip. The rain was light and intermittent and didn't stop us at all from enjoying our last day on the island. We spent some time in the morning again enjoying Emperor Geese at Womens Bay and were treated to a close encounter with a Northern Hawk Owl. From close range, we watched it successfully dive on a vole. What a sight! We added a few trip birds around town before catching a late afternoon flight back to Anchorage. After dinner at our hotel in Anchorage, we made a brief trip to the "airport fence" to look for several species of owls which had recently been reported and we found a pair of Great Horned Owls.

The 26<sup>th</sup> was planned as a buffer day between Kodiak and Nome. We birded the Anchorage area looking for a few boreal targets and spent a little time in the higher elevations areas around town. The highlight of the day was a displaying Spruce Grouse and five of his friends on the road to Arctic Valley. A flock of Willow Ptarmigan at the end of the road made it a two chicken morning. Despite our best efforts, we weren't able to connect with American Three-toed Woodpecker, but in trying to do so we did find Pine Grosbeak, Boreal Chickadee, and Gray Jay.

#### **Nome Extension:**

On the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup>, we said goodbye to one participant and welcomed two others who were joining just the Nome extension. Our early morning flight to Nome got us in just in time to catch the sunrise over the frozen tundra. While the calendar told us it was officially spring, it felt quite wintery in Nome and we weren't expecting to add a long list of birds to our short trip. Only a few birds winter on the Seward Peninsula and we were here to find one of these very special wintering birds, the McKay's Bunting.

After getting our rental vehicle and a quick breakfast we began birding and soon had our first views of our the whitest passerine on the continent. Our two days in Nome were spent enjoying several small flocks of both Snow and McKay's Buntings, searching the tundra for ptarmigan, and enjoying a stellar encounter with a pair of Gyrfalcons. We also took some time to visit local birders Carol and Jim and to check out their locally rare Black-capped and Boreal Chickadees.

Photos are available on our website: <https://www.wildernessbirding.com/portfolio/early-spring-in-kodiak-and-nome/>

## Species Seen on the Tour Plus Extension

1. Emperor Goose
2. Canada Goose
3. Trumpeter Swan
4. Tundra Swan
5. Northern Shoveler
6. Gadwall
7. American Wigeon
8. Mallard
9. Northern Pintail
10. Green-winged Teal
11. Redhead
12. Greater Scaup
13. Lesser Scaup
14. Steller's Eider
15. Common Eider
16. Harlequin Duck
17. Surf Scoter
18. White-winged Scoer
19. Black Scoter
20. Long-tailed Duck
21. Bufflehead
22. Common Goldeneye
23. Barrow's Goldeneye
24. Common Merganser
25. Red-breasted Merganser
26. Spruce Grouse
27. Willow Ptarmigan
28. Red-throated Loon
29. Pacific Loon
30. Common Loon
31. Yellow-billed Loon
32. Horned Grebe
33. Red-necked Grebe
34. Red-faced Cormorant
35. Pelagic Cormorant
36. Double-crested Cormorant
37. Great Blue Heron
38. Golden Eagle
39. Bald Eagle
40. Rough-legged Hawk
41. Black Oystercatcher
42. Black Turnstone
43. Dunlin
44. Rock Sandpiper
45. Pigeon Guillemot
46. Marbled Murrelet
47. Black-legged Kittiwake
48. Mew Gull
49. Iceland Gull
50. Glaucous-winged Gull
51. Glaucous Gull
52. Rock Pigeon
53. Great-horned Owl
54. Northern Hawk Owl
55. Boreal Owl
56. Belted Kingfisher
57. Gyrfalcon
58. Northern Shrike
59. Gray Jay
60. Steller's Jay
61. Black-billed Magpie
62. Northwestern Crow
63. Common Raven
64. Black-capped Chickadee
65. Boreal Chickacee
66. Red-breasted Nuthatch
67. Brown Creeper
68. Pacific Wren
69. American Dipper
70. Golden-crowned Kinglet
71. American Robin
72. European Starling
73. Bohemian Waxwing
74. Snow Bunting
75. McKay's Bunting
76. Dark-eyed Junco
77. Song Sparrow
78. Pine Grosbeak
79. Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch
80. Common Redpoll
81. Red Crossbill
82. Pine Siskin