



Barrow: Ross's Gull Migration

October 9-12, 2018

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A Trip Report by Aaron Lang

We travel to Barrow in the fall hoping to catch the Ross's Gull migration. Each year in early October, thousands of Ross's Gulls travel east into the Beaufort Sea to feed before the advancing sea ice pushes them back into the Chuckchi and Bering Seas. This eastward migration passes right by Point Barrow and some years the numbers of Ross's Gulls flying by can be staggering. The magnitude of this movement appears to be partly wind and weather dependant, with the larger movements occurring with strong winds. This year our tour aligned perfectly with a strong wind system that brought huge numbers of Ross's Gulls inshore. We arrived in Barrow on October 9 to light to moderate north winds and fair weather. The winds shifted to the east overnight and built throughout October 10 and 11 to strong 30 mile per hour winds. This wind shift and intensification appeared to be the ticket! What resulted was a three-day parade of thousands of pink beauties, the best show that we've had in six fall tours to Barrow.

Other highlights of the trip included excellent views of Yellow-billed Loon, Spectacled Eider, Snowy Owl, and Gyrfalcon, as well as an impressive flight of Common Eiders. No polar bears were seen during our stay this year, but we did enjoy arctic fox, bearded seal and a very unusual sighting of a baby walrus near the beach.

It was indeed a memorable tour!

SPECIES LIST:

1. **Brant:** A lone Brant was present on the lagoon near the old navy airstrip on October 9 and 10.
2. **Spectacled Eider:** We saw one to four female-plumaged Spectacled Eiders each day of the tour. Most were sitting on the water, some very near shore and we had very nice views each day of the trip.
3. **King Eider:** Unlike other years when we have seen large flocks of King Eiders fly over the point, this year we only saw small groups and individuals. Many of these were sitting on the water near shore. We tallied up to 30 per day.
4. **Common Eider:** Large flocks of Common Eiders flew across the point throughout the tour. Many of these flocks, which commonly numbered between 50 and 100 birds, crossed over the spit at the old Navy airstrip. Most days we tallied over 1,000 birds.
5. **Harlequin Duck:** A lone female-plumaged bird was present on the west side of the point, near

the north end of Stevenson Street each day of the tour.

6. **Long-tailed Duck:** Long-tailed ducks were common throughout the tour with large flocks flying past and over the point frequently. Daily totals approached 500.
7. **Pacific Loon:** We found Pacific Loons on October 9 and 10 with a high count of 5 on October 10.
8. **Yellow-billed Loon:** We saw Yellow-billed Loons on the first three days of the tour with a high count of six on 10 October. All were basic plumaged birds. Several were sitting on the water at close range.
9. **Northern Fulmar:** On 11 October we found three distant Northern Fulmars far offshore on the east side of the point.
10. **Short-tailed Shearwater:** Nine Short-tailed Shearwaters were present offshore on October 9 and we tallied 36 on October 11. These are higher numbers than we typically get on fall tours.
11. **Red Phalarope:** Red Phalaropes were present along the beach each day of the tour on the very windy days of October 10 and 11 the numbers were high. On the October 10 there were hundreds along the waterfront, but on October 12 we only observed three.
12. **Jaeger sp.:** We recorded a distant jaeger harrassing gulls on October 9 and again on October 11. Other birders present had two Pomarine Jaegers on October 11.
13. **Black-legged Kittiwake:** On October 9, we recorded several dozen Black-legged Kittiwakes, mostly far offshore. As the winds built, the numbers increased, and on the 10 there were at least 100 present. These are much higher numbers than we've typically seen on tours.
14. **Ross's Gull:** The reason for our tour made a very strong showing this year and thrilled us daily with exceptionally close encounters of many hundreds of birds. The migration was slow to develop this year and prior to our arrival only one bird had been seen all season! On the first day of our tour, we glimpsed a quick look at a flock of 19 birds as they passed over point. Beginning at about noon on October 10, the flood gates flung open and Ross's Gulls streamed by constantly for the rest of our tour. Peak counts were over 500 birds in 45 minutes on the 10th and more than 700 in an hour on the our last morning. We easily saw over 1,000 daily on the 10th, 11th, and 12th. Many of these birds flew by exceptionally close, and many very nice photos were taken. This was certainly the best show that we've had in our six fall trips to Barrow to witness the migration!
15. **Iceland Gull (*thayeri*):** On 11 October, we found a first-cycle "Thayer's" Gull with the flock of Glaucous Gulls at the old Navy airstrip.
16. **Glaucous-winged Gull:** A third-cycle Glaucous-winged Gull was with the Glaucous Gull flock throughout our trip.
17. **Glaucous Gull:** Glaucous Gulls were a constant presence at each birding site on this trip. Large

flocks congregated at the whale butchering site at the old Navy airstrip and at the bone pile at the point. The flock at the butchering site was around 400 gulls most days, but on our last day the flock had dwindled dramatically to only about 150 gulls.

18. **Snowy Owl:** Snowy Owl numbers were lower than in some years, but we managed to see the two or three each day of the tour except the last day.
19. **Gyrfalcon:** On October 9, a Gyrfalcon flew past us at the north end of Stevenson Street and landed on some driftwood along the beach. This is the first time we've recorded Gyrfalcon on the tour.
20. **Common Raven:** We found two to three Ravens around town each day of the tour.
21. **Snow Bunting:** We found up to two Snow Buntings at a feeder on October 10, 11 and 12. One Snow Bunting was along Stevenson Street near the post office on 12 October. This is a common breeding bird in Barrow, but we typically only see a few on our fall trip.
22. and 23. **Common Redpoll and Hoary Redpoll:** Up to 10 redpolls were at a feeder on throughout the tour. Many of these appeared to be Hoary Redpolls with a couple of clear-cut Common Redpolls. We were content to leave several individuals unidentified.