



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

March 23–25, 2019 (Kodiak)
March 25–26, 2019 (Anchorage)
March 27–28, 2019 (Nome)

Leader: Aaron Lang

A Trip Report by Aaron Lang

We again started our season of Alaskan tours with an early spring trip to Kodiak Island. Specialties like Emperor Goose, Red-faced Cormorant, and Steller's Eider can be difficult to find on many of our spring tours. However, in Kodiak, these species are expected, as are a number of other great birds! This trip is a great way to kick off the spring birding season in Alaska!

Day 1: Anchorage to Kodiak

After meeting at the airport in Anchorage, our small group (five participants and me) took a short flight to Kodiak Island, the second largest island in the United States. We arrived on the heels of a prolonged stretch of very rainy and windy conditions in the region. Unlike the weather for the previous 10 days, we enjoyed mostly dry and overcast conditions with only about an hour of rain on the second day of our trip. The rest of the time, conditions were excellent for birding and photography! After checking into our hotel we set out for Womens Bay and immediately began amassing a nice list of water birds, which was highlighted by a few hundred Emperor Geese. We also picked up Harlequin Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye, and all three species of scoters. At the mouth of the Buskin River, we found a flock of Common Eiders and a few distant Steller's Eiders.

After lunch, we spent much of the afternoon birding the Kodiak waterfront where we found a large flock of roosting Sufbirds and Rock Sandpipers and a few dozen Black Oystercatchers. In Kodiak, Bald Eagles are everywhere and the spruce trees overlooking the harbor are dotted with their white heads, making it look like Christmas bulbs strung through the trees. There are literally hundreds of eagles in Kodiak! In the late afternoon, we took a walk through the beautiful old growth Sitka spruce forest at Abercrombie State Park. Pacific Wrens and Red Crossbills were common, but we failed to connect with Three-toed Woodpecker.

The conditions on the first evening of the tour were calm and mostly clear—perfect for owling! After dinner, we met up with local birding master Rich MacIntosh to try to find Boreal Owl, which had been calling regularly near the Buskin River. Our luck was holding strong and the owl was calling when we arrived around 9 PM. It didn't take us long at all to get great close-up views of this fantastic bird. For the second year in a row, we've experienced close encounters of the Boreal Owl kind on Kodiak Island.

Day 2: Kodiak Island

For our second day in Kodiak, we started the day at Womens Bay. The tide was higher than at our visit yesterday and with little effort we found a cooperative group of Emperor Geese at very close range. One of the highlights of a trip to Kodiak in March is the quality of the looks we get at the geese. It's a

great trip for photography and most of us got very nice shots of the geese this morning.

As we were leaving the geese we got our only significant rain of the trip. The timing was perfect, however, as it coincided with an invitation that we got from local birders to visit their very active bird feeder. Our generous hosts even invited us into their living room to watch the feeders during the rain! This very active feeder provided great views of Red Crossbill and Pine Siskins. We also watched a locally rare White-throated Sparrow. It's also a great bird to see anywhere in Alaska and those in our group keen on building their state lists were especially excited.

We spent the rest of the day exploring the road system to Pasagshak Bay. Highlights from the afternoon were a very close pair of calling Northern Hawk Owls (again offering great photo opportunities), three Northern Shrikes, great looks at least three Northern Goshawks, Eurasian Wigeon, Trumpeter Swan, and Golden Eagle.

Day 3: Kodiak with a late afternoon flight back to Anchorage. Owling after dinner.

We spent our final day in Kodiak picking up odds and ends and enjoying our final views of Emperor Geese and our closest views of male Steller's Eiders. We made another trip to Abercrombie State Park. This time the tide was lower here and our walk through the old growth and out to a rocky outcrop rewarded us with fantastic views in great light of a breeding plumage Red-faced Cormorant keeping company with Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants.

Our late afternoon flight to Anchorage got us to the hotel in time for dinner. After dinner, we ventured into Far North Bicentennial Park in South Anchorage where we had a remarkable experience with a very cooperative Northern Saw-whet Owl! We're considering renaming this the "Northern Owls Tour!"

Day 4: Anchorage Area Boreal Birding

Our objectives for today were to track down a number of boreal specialties in the Anchorage area. Our first target of the day, Spruce Grouse, proved elusive and unlike last year we came up short. However, we did have great luck today with woodpeckers, finding four species including two Black-backed Woodpeckers and two American Three-toed Woodpeckers. We also picked up a few flocks of Bohemian Waxwings, Boreal Chickadees here and there, and several Canada (Gray) Jays. We briefly had a pair of White-winged Crossbills, which was quite lucky as this irruptive species has been rare in the area this winter. A surprise highlight of the day was the crystal clear skies which allowed us stunning views of Denali on our drive north of Anchorage. Our day ended with dinner at the hotel. The main tour finished this evening and we said farewell to one of our group who was not continuing on to Nome with us in the morning.

Day 5 and 6: Nome

The goal of this quick two-day extension to Nome was to find McKay's Bunting. This species breeds only on uninhabited St. Matthew and Hall Island in the Bering Sea and winters along the west coast of Alaska in places like Nome and Bethel. By May and June, when most birders visit Nome, McKay's Buntings have already left for their breeding grounds. Because of this, it is one of North America's most sought after birds. This year reports from birders in Nome indicated that there were far fewer McKay's Buntings around than in most years. While we didn't see the numbers we often do, we did enjoy fantastic views of two striking male McKay's Buntings just outside of Nome keeping our streak alive of five for five on this trip.

While it had been a big snow winter in Nome, temperatures were warm and the sea ice in the Bering was at record low levels for March. For the first time on this tour, we observed open water in March! We spent a lot of time scanning the ice hoping for any unexpected birds that might associate with this open water. We found none, however, we did see three species of seal: spotted, ringed and bearded seal! Other mammals that we recorded included red fox and snowshoe hare.

The birds, the quality looks, the awesome setting, the relaxed pace--it was a great trip once again and one that I look forward to leading again next year!

Wilderness Birding Adventures

Cumulative Trip List for Kodiak and the Nome/McKay's Bunting Extension

| | March 23-28, 2017 | March 23-28, 2018 | March 23-28, 2019 |
|---------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Number of Days | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Year | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
| 1 Emperor Goose | X | X | X |
| 2 Canada Goose | X | X | X |
| 3 Trumpeter Swan | X | X | X |
| 4 Tundra Swan | X | X | X |
| 5 Gadwall | X | X | X |
| 6 Eurasian Wigeon | X | | X |
| 7 American Wigeon | X | X | X |
| 8 Mallard | X | X | X |
| 9 Northern Shoveler | X | X | X |
| 10 Northern Pintail | X | X | X |
| 11 Green-winged Teal | X | X | X |
| 12 Redhead | X | X | |
| 13 Greater Scaup | X | X | X |
| 14 Lesser Scaup | X | X | X |
| 15 Steller's Eider | X | X | X |
| 16 King Eider | X | | |
| 17 Common Eider | X | X | X |
| 18 Harlequin Duck | X | X | X |
| 19 Surf Scoter | X | X | X |
| 20 White-winged Scoter | X | X | X |
| 21 Black Scoter | X | X | X |
| 22 Long-tailed Duck | X | X | X |
| 23 Bufflehead | X | X | X |
| 24 Common Goldeneye | X | X | X |
| 25 Barrow's Goldeneye | X | X | X |
| 26 Hooded Merganser | X | | |
| 27 Common Merganser | X | X | X |
| 28 Red-breasted Merganser | X | X | X |
| 29 Spruce Grouse | | X | |
| 30 Willow Ptarmigan | N | X, N | |
| 31 Rock Ptarmigan | N | | |
| 32 Red-throated Loon | X | X | X |
| 33 Pacific Loon | X | X | |
| 34 Common Loon | X | X | X |

| | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|------|------|------|
| 35 | Yellow-billed Loon | X | X | |
| 36 | Horned Grebe | X | X | X |
| 37 | Red-necked Grebe | X | X | X |
| 38 | Double-crested Cormorant | X | X | X |
| 39 | Red-faced Cormorant | X | X | X |
| 40 | Pelagic Cormorant | X | X | X |
| 41 | Great Blue Heron | X | X | X |
| 42 | Bald Eagle | X | X | X |
| 43 | Sharp-shinned Hawk | X | | |
| 44 | Northern Goshawk | X | | X |
| 45 | Rough-legged Hawk | | X | |
| 46 | Golden Eagle | X | X | X |
| 47 | Black Oystercatcher | X | X | X |
| 48 | Black Turnstone | X | X | X |
| 49 | Surfbird | X | | X |
| 50 | Dunlin | X | X | |
| 51 | Rock Sandpiper | X | X | X |
| 52 | Wilson's Snipe | X | | |
| 53 | Common Murre | X | | |
| 54 | Pigeon Guillemot | X | X | X |
| 55 | Marbled Murrelet | X | X | |
| 56 | Black-legged Kittiwake | X | X | X |
| 57 | Mew Gull | X | X | X |
| 58 | Iceland Gull | X | X | X |
| 59 | Slaty-backed Gull | X | | |
| 60 | Glaucous-winged Gull | X | X | X |
| 61 | Glaucous Gull | X | X | |
| 62 | Great Horned Owl | X | X | |
| 63 | Northern Hawk Owl | X | X | X |
| 64 | Boreal Owl | H | X | X |
| 65 | Northern Saw-whet Owl | | | X |
| 66 | Belted Kingfisher | X | X | X |
| 67 | Downy Woodpecker | X | | X |
| 68 | Hairy Woodpecker | X | | X |
| 69 | American Three-toed Woodpecker | | | X |
| 70 | Black-backed Woodpecker | | | X |
| 71 | Gyr Falcon | N | N | |
| 72 | Northern Shrike | X | X | X |
| 73 | Gray Jay | | X | X |
| 74 | Steller's Jay | X | X | |
| 75 | Black-billed Magpie | X | X | X |
| 76 | Northwestern Crow | X | X | X |
| 77 | Common Raven | X, N | X, N | X, N |
| 78 | Black-capped Chickadee | X | X, N | X |
| 79 | Boreal Chickadee | X | X, N | X |
| 80 | Red-breasted Nuthatch | X | X | X |
| 81 | Brown Creeper | X | X | X |

| | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 82 | Pacific Wren | X | X | X |
| 83 | American Dipper | X | X | |
| 84 | Golden-crowned Kinglet | X | X | X |
| 85 | American Robin | | X | X |
| 86 | Varied Thrush | X | | |
| 87 | European Starling | X | X | X |
| 88 | Bohemian Waxwing | X | X | X |
| 89 | Snow Bunting | N | N | N |
| 90 | McKay's Bunting | N | N | N |
| 91 | American Tree Sparrow | | | X |
| 92 | Song Sparrow | X | X | X |
| 93 | White-throated Sparrow | | | X |
| 94 | White-crowned Sparrow | X | | |
| 95 | Golden-crowned Sparrow | | | X |
| 96 | Dark-eyed Junco | | X | X |
| 97 | Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch | | X | |
| 98 | Pine Grosbeak | X | X | |
| 99 | Red Crossbill | X | X | X |
| 100 | White-winged Crossbill | X | | X |
| 101 | Common Redpoll | X | X | X |
| 102 | Hoary Redpoll | N | | |
| 103 | Pine Siskin | X | X | X |
| 104 | Hawfinch | X | | |
| | | 91 | 81 | 78 |

X = Species seen on the main tour

N = Species seen on the Nome Extension