



Barrow: Ross's Gull-less Migration

October 10-13, 2019

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A Trip Report by Aaron Lang

The primary goal of our fall trip to Barrow is to catch at least a part of the migration of Ross's Gulls along the north coast of Alaska. Each year in early October, Ross's Gulls travel east into the Beaufort Sea, presumably to feed in the rich waters over the shelf, before returning back into the Chuckchi and Bering Seas. This eastward migration passes by Point Barrow, making it THE place to intercept these migrants. Away from this migration path, finding a Ross's Gull is incredibly difficult, and mostly left to chance, with no reliable Alaskan locations for finding the birds in the spring and summer months. The wintering habits of the birds are still largely a mystery.

This was our seventh trip to Barrow in early October, and sadly, it was our first trip where we did not find any Ross's Gulls. Actually, despite concerted effort during the week prior to our arrival by other birders, and a considerable amount of effort during our tour, only a total of three distant Ross's Gulls were spotted all season by the time we left on the 13th.

Despite missing our main target, Barrow in October is home to several other wonderful birds and the trip was not without some serious highlights. The largest of which was the Ivory Gull show we witnessed. Ivory Gulls usually don't become reliable in Barrow until late October and early November and are not expected on our tour. On the first day of our tour, we had distant but good scope views of an adult Ivory Gull. And on the second day we had a very brief fly-by. So we were quite pleased to add this ghostly bird to our trip. On our last day, however, it was show time. An adult Ivory Gull set up shop right in front of our seawatch and for nearly the entire day it flew back and forth, fed in the surf, and landed on the water in front of us. The light was perfect and the photo opportunities were excellent! There were actually three adult Ivory Gulls around on the last day and our group saw two of them. Other highlights included several Spectacled Eiders early in the trip, good numbers of King Eiders, and an impressive flight of Common Eiders and Long-tailed Ducks. Yellow-billed Loon, Snowy Owl, and Short-tailed Shearwater were also stand-out birds. The "rarest" bird of our trip was a Greater Yellowlegs that was around for the last three days of the trip.

I'll most remember two things about this trip. 1.) First the obvious: this was a trip in which we clearly missed our main target. 2.) But also, this was remarkable group of birders, clearly driven to find a Ross's Gull, but a group also intent on enjoying themselves and the other wonders of Barrow in October. This was truly one of the most congenial and fun groups I can recall on any tour.

SPECIES LIST:

1. **Brant:** On 10 October three juvenile Brant were on the ponds near the base of Point Barrow. Two were present there 11-12 October.
2. **Greater White-fronted Goose:** A Greater White-fronted Goose was present on ponds on the edge of Barrow 11-12 October.
3. **Spectacled Eider:** On 10 October two female-plumaged Spectacled Eiders were in an open pond near the base of Point Barrow. Another flew by the seawatch that day. These were the only birds that saw during our trip. We saw fewer than normal Spectacled Eiders this year. This was likely due to the very rough ocean conditions during our trip which made spotting birds on the water very difficult.
4. **King Eider:** Small numbers of King Eiders were seen on our seawatch and in the open water throughout the trip. Our high count was 50 on 10 October.
5. **Common Eider:** We watched large flocks of Common Eiders fly across the base of Point Barrow to the southwest all days of the tour. Our high count was 450 on 12 October.
6. **Surf Scoter:** An immature male Surf Scoter flew by our seawatch on 12 October. This if the first time we've had Surf Scoter on this tour.
7. **Long-tailed Duck:** Long-tailed Ducks were a constant fixture at the seawatch with large flocks flying by everyday. Our hight count was 1,100 on 12 October.
8. **Red-throated Loon:** One flew by on 11 October.
9. **Pacific Loon:** We counted Pacific Loons on the first three days of the trip. The high count was six on 10 October.
10. **Yellow-billed Loon:** A juvenile Yellow-billed Loon flew by our seawatch on 11 October and nine flew by on 13 October. Of these nine, two were in alternate plumage and seven were in basic/juvenile plumage.
11. **Short-tailed Shearwater:** We watched Short-tailed Shearwaters on all but the final day of the trip. Most were distant birds on the horizon, but a few came very close. Our high count was 35 on 11 October.
12. **Greater Yellowlegs:** Other than Red Phalarope, ANY shorebird in Barrow in October is a surprise. So a *Tringa* in a pond along the side of the road late on 11 October stopped us in our tracks! Greater Yellowlegs nest in southcoastal Alaska and are casual at any season to northern Alaska. This is one of only a few fall records for the region and is likely the latest. The bird was still present on the 13th when we left.

13. **Red Phalarope:** We recorded two in the crashing surf on 11 October.
14. **Thick-billed Murre:** One flew by our seawatch on 13 October.
15. **Black Guillemot:** A basic plumaged Black Guillemot flew by our seawatch on 13 October.
16. **Black-legged Kittiwake:** For the second year in a row, Black-legged Kittiwakes were in good numbers during our trip. Most years we only see a few fly by. However, this year there were small flocks flying by throughout much of the trip. We recorded around 50 each day with a high count of 55 on 13 October. Most birds were flying to the south west along the coast.
17. **Ivory Gull:** The consolation prize for missing Ross's Gull was an incredible THREE adult Ivory Gulls there were present during our tour! We saw Ivory Gull on three days of the trip with the real show coming on the last day when one bird performed in the surf in front of us for the entire day! This is only third trip in which we found Ivory Gull and the first since 2011.
18. **Sabine's Gull:** Four hatch-year Sabine's Gulls flew by our seawatch on 10 October.
19. **Herring Gull:** On 12 October a first-cycle Herring Gull was on the beach near town.
20. **Glaucous Gull:** The everpresent Glaucous Gull is the default gull of Barrow. We tallied between 250 and 500 each day of the tour.
21. **Snowy Owl:** A non-gull highlight of this trip is always the presence of Snowy Owls around town. We didn't spend as much time with the owls this trip as seawatching took more of our time, but we did see them on each day of the trip. Our high count was six on 10 October. However, another group of birders drove all the interior roads on 12 October and counted 29 different Snowy Owls!
22. **Common Raven:** We had one to four Common Ravens on each day of the trip.
23. **Snow Bunting:** We found one or two Snow Buntings on three of the four days of our trip.
24. **Common Redpoll:** A ragged Common Redpoll was at the feeder in town throughout the trip.
25. **Hoary Redpoll:** A well marked Hoary Redpoll accompanied the aforementioned ragged Common on each of the trips we made to the bird feeder along the coast near Stevenson Street.