



Utqiagvik (Barrow): Ross's Gull Migration

October 10-13, 2021

Leader: Aaron Lang

A Trip Report by Aaron Lang

The main objective of this tour is to catch the fall migration of Ross's Gulls past the coast of Utqiagvik, Alaska, the northern most town in the United States and to lay eyes on at least one of the near-mythical pink beasts. There is no better place to see this beautiful and highly sought after bird than Utqiagvik in early October. The methods are simple—bundle up and stake out productive seawatch locations on the coast at the right time of year, stay vigilant and focuses, and see what flies by. Some years there is a major push of Ross's Gulls past the point in early October. In other years, the movement of gulls is more protracted and perhaps occurs farther offshore, beyond the range of hopeful birders. This year, our timing was good and we enjoyed views of decent numbers of these pink beauties on three of the four days of the trip. The total number of Ross's Gulls that we saw was lower than in most years, but seeing over 50 Ross's Gulls in three days is still cause for celebration and the views of several of the birds were exceptional. Throw into the mix Spectacled Eider, Yellow-billed Loon, and Snowy Owl and it was a successful quality, not quantity, birding tour.

Aside from the Ross's Gulls, the birding in Utqiagvik at the season is fascinating and different from year to year. This year the most astounding phenomenon that we witnessed was the incredible movement of eiders and Long-tailed Ducks heading southeast during our stay. Common Eiders, King Eiders, and Long-tailed Ducks are mainstays of this tour and we always record good numbers of all three species. This year, however, the numbers were far higher than we've seen in our previous seven tours. There were hundreds of eiders and Long-tailed Ducks around on each day of the tour. On 12 October, however, truly astounding numbers of birds flew by our seawatch all day long. Had someone conducted a rigorous count that day, they may have tallied ten-thousand or more eiders passing by in a near-continuous stream of flocks of 100-200 birds. It was certainly impressive and like nothing we had seen before.

Every year is different on this tour, and in contrast to the eider and Long-tailed Duck numbers, this year we saw lower than usual numbers of Spectacled Eider, Yellow-billed Loon, and Snowy Owl. We did get very nice views of the first two of these species early in the trip and on the last morning we were able to just barely add Snowy Owl to the trip list.

During our four days in Utqiagvik, temperatures were in the high twenties (F), with 20-30 mile per hour winds, and off-and-on snow squalls. So it was an authentic taste of late fall/early winter in the arctic. A highlight for me was our group of hardy birders who diligently scanned the horizons for every last bird. A big thanks to all who joined us on this trip! I'm already looking forward to next year's trip!

SPECIES LIST:

1. **Brant:** A lone Brant was present on the lagoon near the old navy airstrip on October 10.
2. **Northern Shoveler:** A lone female Northern Shoveler was present near our main seawatch site on the first three days of the trip. This is the first time we've recorded Northern Shoveler on this tour.
3. **Spectacled Eider:** On 11 October two female-plumaged Spectacled Eiders were sitting on the water with a small group of King Eiders at the base of Point Barrow. These were the only two that we recorded on the tour, which is lower than on most trips. However, rough sea conditions on 12 and 13 October made it difficult to pick out other Spectacled Eiders.
4. **King Eider:** King Eider numbers this year were far above what we've experienced on previous tours. A large movement of sea ducks past the point on 12 October included no fewer than 1,000 King Eiders.
5. **Common Eider:** Like King Eiders, Common Eider numbers were far greater than what we've experienced on previous tours. The movement of seaducks on 12 October included at least 5,000 Common Eiders (and perhaps many, many more) heading west past the point on 12 October.
6. **White-winged Scoter:** A drake White-winged Scoter flew by in a flock of Common Eiders on 10 October and we saw two more distant fly-bys on 11 October.
7. **Long-tailed Duck:** Long-tailed Duck numbers paralleled eider numbers and were much higher than we've seen on previous tours. On 12 October, we estimated at least 2,000 in multiple and continuous flocks flying past the point.
8. **Red-breasted Merganser:** We enjoyed a close fly-by of a female on the final morning of the trip. This is only the second time we've had Red-breasted Merganser on the tour.
9. **Pacific Loon:** On 11 October a Pacific Loon flew by our main seawatch site and we had another on the water at the base of Point Barrow later that day.
10. **Yellow-billed Loon:** We enjoyed excellent views of a young Yellow-billed Loon on the water on 11 October. On 12 October two flew right overhead at seawatch.
11. **Short-tailed Shearwater:** On most of our previous trips when we do see shearwaters, we record only a few and I believe our previous single day high count for the trip was 35. This year we had a few shearwaters on our first evening at seawatch. On 11 October, however, there was a steady stream of Short-tailed Shearwaters flying east by our seawatch for several hours. We estimated at least 1,000 flew by us that afternoon. Other birders had been tallying them for a bit longer and recorded more than 1,500 that afternoon! The flight seemed to shut off like a switch and on 12 October we only had 5 distant shearwaters. We didn't see any on our final morning.

- 12. Pomarine Jaeger:** One was harassing Glaucous Gulls on 11 October. We had a distant Pomarine Jaeger at our main seawatch site on 12 October.
- 13. Black-legged Kittiwake:** We counted 15 Black-legged Kittiwakes at our seawatch on 11 October, 20 on 12 October, and one on our final morning.
- 14. Ross's Gull:** Ross's Gull is of course the main focus of the tour and while we didn't experience a large movement of Ross's Gulls during our stay, we recorded them on three out of four days, including some excellent views of a group of eight that flew right over us at the seawatch. On 11 October we recorded 13. We had 36 on 12 October, and four on our last morning, making a total of 53 Ross's Gulls for the trip. Not too shabby for one of the most beautiful and sought after birds in North America.
- 15. Herring Gull:** A third-cycle "Vega" Herring Gull was present in the large Glaucous Gull flock at the butchering area on the first three days of our trip. A first-cycle bird that appeared to be an "American" Herring Gull was also present on the first three days of our trip.
- 16. Iceland Gull:** We photographed a first-cycle *thayeri* Iceland Gull along the beach on 11 October.
- 17. Glaucous Gull:** Glaucous Gulls are the default large gull in Utqiagvik and the traditional harvest of bowhead whales each October attracts hundreds to the butchering site near the base of the point. This year our high count was 500 Glaucous Gulls on 12 October.
- 18. Snowy Owl:** We have come to expect Snowy Owls on this trip and often enjoy long and multiple views and excellent photographic opportunities. However, for the first time ever on this tour we had to work for a Snowy Owl and finally found one early in the morning on the last day of the trip at the base of Point Barrow. Whew...that was close!
- 19. Common Raven:** Common Ravens are around Utqiagvik in low numbers in October. We recorded two to three daily on each day of the tour.
- 20. Lincoln's Sparrow:** A few days prior to our arrival, other birders had documented a Lincoln's Sparrow near the Barrow waterfront; quite an exciting find for a species that doesn't normally occur north of the Brooks Range. On 11 October, we picked up a passerine flying down the beach toward us and with our binocular views of it determined it to be a sparrow. Photos taken by Marc Kramer proved that it was a Lincoln's Sparrow, likely the same bird seen earlier in the week. This is the first time we've recorded this species on the tour.
- 21. Common Redpoll:** A bedraggled and bewildered-looking Common Redpoll was lingering at the only bird feeder in Barrow and we recorded it each day of the tour.