



Utqiagvik (Barrow): Ross's Gull Migration

October 10-13, 2022

Leader: Aaron Lang

A Trip Report by Aaron Lang

As is explicitly written in this tour's title, we head to Utqiagvik in early October to hopefully catch a piece of the Ross's Gull migration past the point. Each year is different, but so far our track record is solid and we have seen this beautiful arctic gull on all but one trip. This year the stars aligned and we enjoyed Ross's Gulls each day of the trip. In fact, we saw our first 20 Ross's Gulls within the first five minutes of scanning the coast! By the end of the trip hundreds were streaming by. Unlike some years, the gulls were very close with many of them feeding in the crashing surf within 100 yards of shore. These were some of the best views and photographic conditions that we've ever had!

Last year, we had much higher numbers of Common and King Eiders and Long-tailed Ducks on the move. This year, the notable phenomenon was the astounding push of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Short-tailed Shearwaters moving along the coast. Thousands of kittiwakes were present along the beach every day of the trip and a steady stream of shearwaters were ever-present on the horizon.

In addition to the birding, another first for the trip was seeing polar bears every day of the trip! A mother and her two cubs staked claim to an area near our main seawatch location and on the final morning a fourth bear was here also. A few cheeky foxes were seen daily. On the first and the last day of the trip we watched a walrus cruise through the surf.

A trip to Utqiagvik in early October will usually produce Ross's Gulls (we're 8 out of 9), but it's worth a trip just to observe the arctic in transition and the spectacle of migration at this latitude. A complete white-out blizzard (and a stuck van) added a bit of authenticity to this year's experience.

An eBird trip report with links to the daily checklists and photos is here:
<https://ebird.org/tripreport/80687>

SPECIES LIST:

- 1. Greater White-fronted Goose:** We saw two injured White-fronted Geese near the coast on the 11th. These had been seen by other birders in this area for several days prior.
- 2. Spectacled Eider:** We had nice views of small numbers of Spectacled Eiders each day of the trip. The high count was 12 on 12 October. As in other years, all birds were females or hatch-year males.
- 3. King Eider:** We observed fewer King Eiders than we have on previous trips, but small numbers were seen singly or in small flocks all along the coast throughout the trip and small flocks flew

by offshore. Our high count was 100 birds on 12 October.

4. **Common Eider:** As with King Eiders, there were fewer numbers of migrating Common Eiders seen than on previous trips. We saw the species daily, with a high count of 150 birds on our final morning.
5. **White-winged Scoter:** We saw three White-winged Scoters on the 11th, eight on the 12th and five on the 13th.
6. **Long-tailed Duck:** Long-tailed Ducks were recorded each day of the trip with most birds in small flocks migrating to the south west. Our high count was 200 on 11 October.
7. **Pacific Loon:** We saw two Pacific Loons on the 11th and two on the 13th.
8. **Yellow-billed Loon:** There wasn't a strong movement of loons during our tour, but we did see 6 Yellow-billed Loons on the 11th, two on the 12th, and one on our final morning.
9. **Short-tailed Shearwater:** Just like on our 2021 trip, Short-tailed Shearwaters were seen in high numbers this year. They were a constant presence during the seawatch. Most birds were scope views on the horizon. On 12 October, however, the skies cleared after the morning's raging blizzard and thousands of shearwaters were in close to shore from all vantage points along the shore. Some birds were flying just over the surf with the kittiwake hoard. We didn't do any rigorous counts, but made very conservative estimates of 1,000+ on the 11th, 2,000+ on the 12th and 400 in 90 minutes of seawatch on our final morning.
10. **Red Phalarope:** We saw a few Red Phalaropes each day of the tour, with a high count of 20 on the 11th.
11. **Pomarine Jaeger:** We recorded one Pomarine Jaeger on the 11th and two on the 12th.
12. **Black-legged Kittiwake:** Ross's Gull is the focus of this trip, but the most notable phenomenon this year was the incredible movement of Black-legged Kittiwakes that passed by during our trip. Most years we record just a few kittiwakes and daily high counts are typically in the low double digits. However this year, there were thousands of kittiwakes feeding in the surf and moving to the southwest every day. We did our best to estimate abundance most days the rate was at least 60 birds per minute in a steady flow past the beach. Almost all of the birds were feeding in the crashing surf. Others in Barrow made more rigorous attempts to count the birds and on the 12th when the surf and the birds were peaking they tallied more than 41,000 Black-legged Kittiwakes passing to the southwest. The movement was truly astounding!
13. **Sabine's Gull:** We saw above normal numbers of Sabine's Gulls on this trip and all birds were in the surf associating with the large numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Ross's Gulls. We recorded one on the 10th, 2 on the 11th, and 5 on the 12th. All birds were juveniles.
14. **Ross's Gull:** Ross's Gulls, both in numbers and in quality of views, did not disappoint this year. We saw this beautiful gull each day of the trip, and numbers steadily built. On our first evening

we recorded 21 birds along the beach. On the 11th, we counted 57. The views of the birds were above average with most birds within 100 yards of the beach and feeding in the crashing surf. As they flew into the wind they passed us slowing allowing for great views and excellent photo opportunities! On the 12th, we awoke to a blizzard with near zero visibility and winds of 30+ mph. But by late morning, the skies had cleared and revealed hundreds of Ross's Gulls feeding in the surf with tens of thousands of kittiwakes. The lighting on these birds was perfect as they stalled in the strong winds and passed by us slowly and consistently for most of the afternoon and we tallied nearly 500. On our final morning we counted 275 in a 90-minute seawatch.

- 15. Herring Gull:** We recorded one 2nd cycle Herring Gull on the 11th, a juvenile on the 12th, and 3 juveniles and an adult on the 13th. On the 12th, we also logged 5 Thayeri/Herring Gulls that were flying overhead and not seen well enough to identify to species.
- 16. Iceland Gull:** "Thayer's" Iceland Gulls are regular migrants in small numbers on this trip and we tallied them each day of the tour with a high count of 30 on the 12th. Nearly all birds were juveniles.
- 17. Glaucous Gull:** Large numbers of Glaucous Gulls were present daily with a high count of 1,200 on 12 October.
- 18. Snowy Owl:** We found two Snowy Owls on 12 October and one on our final morning.
- 19. Common Raven:** One to three Ravens were seen on the 11th, 12th, and 13th.