

High Lonesome Birdtours

Small-Group Birding Adventures



ALASKA: ADAK

May 2011

Tour Report

Day One

We met before dinner and made a quick trip out to Westchester Lagoon where we encountered mostly the usual suspects, several members of the group had been there earlier in the day. The high numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls was somewhat noteworthy,



numbering in the dozens, and some other great breeding plumage birds, including Eared Grebes, were beautiful to see. But, honestly, it is hard to get excited about some of these regular birds when you are about to be heading out to one of the best rarity hotspots in North America! After filling some time before dinner, we were nearly late for another great dinner at Orso. Tonight, I ordered up fried calamari, crab cakes and caprese appetizers for the table, and I had

the cashew encrusted halibut as my dinner which was absolutely fantastic! Everyone else's meals looked darn good, too!

Day Two

This morning we had a fair amount of time before the flight out to Adak, so we drove up to the trails at the Botanical Garden and did a great walk through the forest. The birds were not that great, the highlights being a Lesser Yellowlegs in a tree and a Varied Thrush. But it was a beautiful morning and the walk was wonderful. Back for check out at the hotel and a quick lunch at Piper's...I have to say that the food at Piper's is pretty good. Nothing special, but they are fast and the quality is good. We all made it

to the airport with plenty of time to spare and met up with the Wilderness Birding group that Aaron Lange was leading. We would be spending the next week exchanging information with Aaron and the three participants out on the island...hopefully in-



formation about all the great birds that we'd all be finding!

Once on the plane, and just before take-off, Aaron came over to sit next to me, and told me that he had gotten a call from Isaac our contact out on the island informing us that power was out on the entire island and it may not get repaired soon! Then, minutes into the flight the captain came on and gave us word that indeed power was out on the

island and it was not looking good that the plane would even be allowed to land at Adak, but he was planning on going for the island anyway!

Well into the flight, the captain gave us the good news that we would be able to land but that the only place in town that had electrical power was the airport! What great news! I was, of course, wondering how the heck I would cook anything for dinner with all electric kitchens, and was all of a sudden happy quite happy that I had bought a bunch of lunch meat for cold sandwiches! Not ten minutes after getting into the airport, the power magically went on all over town and there was much rejoicing! The power was on for most of the week, except for a couple of afternoons when they were working on a more permanent fix to the problem.

We went out for our first bird outing after lasagna and salad. Some people got a lifer with the Tufted Ducks and we had a nice orientation to the in close birding areas. Other bird highlights included a big raft of Black Scoters that we saw diminish in size each day we were there.

While touring around we ran into the Wilderness Birding group and they informed us that they had seen a Smew in Shotgun Lake! We had gone directly to Shotgun Lake after dinner as I was thinking that lightening could strike twice. Forrest Davis had found a Smew in that very lake the previous year, so why not check? But this time,

there was no Smew or any other bird in the Lake. It turns out that the Wilderness group had gone to the lake about 30 minutes before we had. Apparently we were just a bit too late! And so began one of the frustrating chases of the tour! How many times did we take trips up there to look in that lake during the week?!

We also had time for a tour of the “town” this evening, including a pass by the liquor store and noticed that it was closed. Oh well, there is always tomorrow! As we pulled out of the parking lot a native woman came pulling up next to us and asked if we needed to buy booze. I told her that “need” was not exactly the word I would have used. It turns out she was the owner and happy to open the store even though they normally closed at 8 p.m. So in we went to get our brews and potions at what you could call Adak prices. A 12-pack of Rolling Rock beer was \$32!

Day Three

Well, if I had to say it with all honesty, I would have to admit that today was “the day” in Adak. Had I known now that the rest of the week was going to be so hard to get new birds, I would have held off on the Laysan’s Albatross until later! As it was, we had an amazing day, with everyone getting three new life birds and in rather dramatic style.

The first lifer for the group was seen on the Whiskered Auklet boat trip...a trip that is never guaranteed to go since you are at the mercy of conditions served up by the northern Pacific Ocean! Because of this little detail, it is important to get the groups out to see the bird as soon as the weather cooperates because you never know if you will get another chance. Waking up that morning, I figured the weather was good enough, but we needed to wait for Isaac’s call telling us when to go to the harbor. Eventually he called and we were on! Due to the size of the boat, we needed to split our group up in two, so Carol went with the folks from Wilderness Birding while the guys waited and birded around with me. Although the trip is not long, less than two hours in good conditions, waiting seemed like an eternity for me. I was worried that the weather could go bad on us at any minute! On cue the first group returned and we were very happy to hear that they had gotten great close looks at the Auklets and that the weather was holding for the guys, so off they went.



Two hours later, the boat returned once again and once again they were successful and had looks at lots of Whiskered Auklet's. Phew, it felt good to get that out of the way!

In the afternoon we headed out for one of the further afield areas, the old Loran Station positioned on the north coast near the area 14 bombardment zone (I love using those terms in a birding tour write up!) The road had been bad last year, and this year it was a lot worse! Thank god for the trusty old "ghost" (what the rental agency called a "van"), with some sly maneuvering we managed to make it over the bad rocks and on



to the coast. I am so glad that we did!

Right away, I could see that it was "birdy" out at the fog line and it had cleared nicely where we were so the light was great. We took out the scopes and could see lots of Short-tailed Shearwaters coursing over the tops of the waves and we all continued to scan until I found the first Laysan's Albatross, just at the edge of human sight limits.

After some work everyone agreed that they had seen a big Albatross like bird, but they were really far away. We decided to walk over to the cliff edge, a good 300 yards closer, hoping to grab a better view, and it paid off! The birds were much closer; they had actually moved in towards shore and a couple of them even sat on the water for extended periods of time. A slam dunk!

Off we went, back towards town for some chow after some great success out at the coast! As we rolled down the hill into town, I saw Aaron and Isaac parked at the 'pet cemetery' (another great birding area description!) and they were waving madly at us. As we pulled up, we got word that a Hawfinch was sitting in the top of the trees filled to the gills with seed and not moving for anything! Amazingly, the bird was sitting on top of a spruce tree and did not move for several minutes! We all got scope looks at this beautiful bird! Wow, another great bird before dinner...the third lifer of the day!

Days Four, Five and Six

Not surprisingly, my entries for the following days are a bit slim to say the least. Rather than describe every trip to stare into Shotgun Lake, looking for the Smew that never returned, or naming the six Rock Sandpipers that were hanging around the creek out-flow, I will spare you! Sometimes, when one is 'birding on the edge', it can be really good and the rewards of doing it can be huge; at the same time it can challenge the

patience of the most seasoned birders and be frustrating as hell! I think everyone on the tour would agree that things slowed down significantly after the first full day at Adak. But this is not to say that we didn't see some great stuff and certainly added new trip birds every day, but the lack of good vagrants or the appearance of a couple of somewhat expected vagrants just never happened, making for some frustrating times. Let's don't forget about the huge numbers of Ancient Murrelets or the Tattler chase down the sea wall or the seven Arctic Loons bobbing in the bay! Or the Steller's Eider that stayed around the entire week. The tour participants all need to be commended for continuing to work hard for birds up until the very end!

Day Seven

We started off the day with a fresh attitude, but in the end the birds got the best of us again. We chased the hell out of a Common Snipe at three locations and logged some serious miles in the tundra doing so. Never did we get what I would say was definitive look at a snipe that I was willing to call anything but a Wilson's. The big action of the day was finding a Bar-tailed Godwit in Clam Lagoon and then noticing that there was



a little shore bird hanging out next to it. Unfortunately, we saw this from about a mile away and we were unable to ID the little booger from that location. So we packed up and off we went on a 'Peep' chase to what was at that point the extreme opposite side of Clam Lagoon! The good news was that after traveling completely around the lagoon, the bird was still there. The bad news was that it was not a rare shore-

bird at all, it was Ruddy Turnstone. The last dinner was a festive affair with lots of BBQ chicken and veggies galore. I have to admit that I enjoyed very much doing the meals for the group and I hope they all feel the same way!

Day Eight

Our last morning of birding was more of the same with only moments of mild excitement to be had. We did take a nice scenic hike up to Betty Lake which was pretty

neat, but offered nothing in the way of birds. The flight to Anchorage was on time and we were lucky to get the Alaska Airlines 'Tinker Bell' plane that only a man confident of his fortitude would feel comfortable boarding! Certainly, this will not go down as the 'hottest' birding trip to Adak from the standpoint of seeing rare birds, but I sure had a great time with a fine group of committed birders and fun loving people. Even when we were all down due to the lack of birds, the sense of humor rang through, and I want to thank all of you for that!

Until next time... all the best!

David MacKay