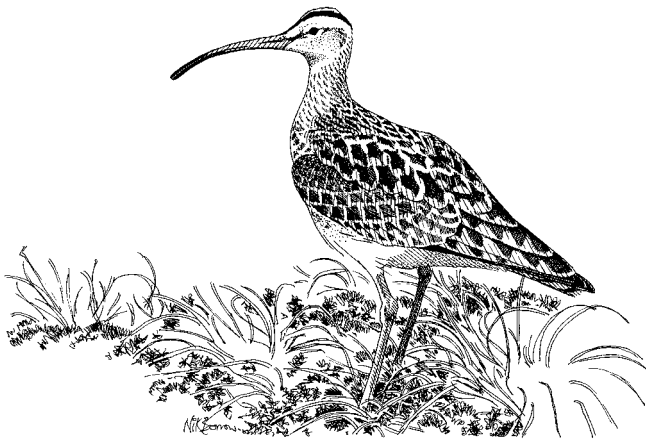


ALASKA

Monday 4th June – Saturday 16th June 2012 (13 days)
Pribilofs Pre-Tour Extension from Thursday 31st May (4 days)
Barrow Post-Tour Extension to Tuesday 19th June (3 days)
Leaders: Pete Morris and assistant
Group Size Limit: 12
Tour Category: Easy at times, but mostly Moderate owing to the long days



Bristle-thighed Curlew (Nik Borrow)

Alaska is the true 'Last Frontier' of North America, an immense peninsula of over 570,000 square miles (over 1,478,000 square kms) that taunted early explorers and still defies modern day researchers. Originally named 'Alyeska' by its first native inhabitants, this literally translates to 'Great White Land', a fair description of this harsh, yet fascinating place.

This remote state is the largest and most northerly of the United States of America. It boasts scenery that is amongst the most spectacular in the world, a challenging climate, a unique culture and some of the richest wildlife to be found anywhere on the globe. Alaska also lays claim to statistics that stretch the imagination. It encompasses four time zones, houses Mt McKinley (20,320ft or 6195m), by far the highest peak in North America, and has almost three million lakes and over five thousand glaciers! During the winter, temperatures of 40 degrees below freezing are

commonplace. The summers are short, the snow remaining until well into May, but the short arctic summer is a busy one as literally millions of birds move north to breed, taking advantage of the abundant food supplies. Alaska is a world of crisp, pure air, snow-capped mountains and icy blue fjords, a true wilderness where it is still possible to tread on ground that has never known a human footprint.

The history of Alaska is short but interesting. After the sealing industry had become unprofitable, the Russians sold this 'worthless land' to the American Congress in 1867 for just 7.2 million dollars (not a lot, even at 1867 values). Shortly afterwards gold was found, attracting gold diggers from all over the United States. Previously uninhabited areas became populated almost overnight, with whole towns rising in some of the most remote corners of the world. The biggest discovery was yet to come, however, as in 1964 oil was found

and the Alaska pipeline was built, changing the face of Alaska forever. At the time Alaska was discovered by Vitus Bering in 1741, native people were well distributed throughout. Although there is still some disagreement about their origins, most people now believe that they migrated across the Bering Strait from Asia. The Aleuts and the Inuit used to live in complete harmony with their wild surroundings in well defined regions, their ways of life dictated by the seasonal abundance of food. Today we can see that the 20th Century has brought many changes to all of the native people. Although some Inuit and Indians still live as their ancestors did, most have adjusted to the 'modern' way of life.

Alaska is a place that has to be one of the wildest and most exciting birding places on earth, yet the wonderful birds and mammals of Arctic North America can all be enjoyed whilst experiencing the level of comfort one would expect when travelling in the United States of America. During our visit we will cover this marvellous state from east to west and south to north in order to try and find as many of the most sought-after

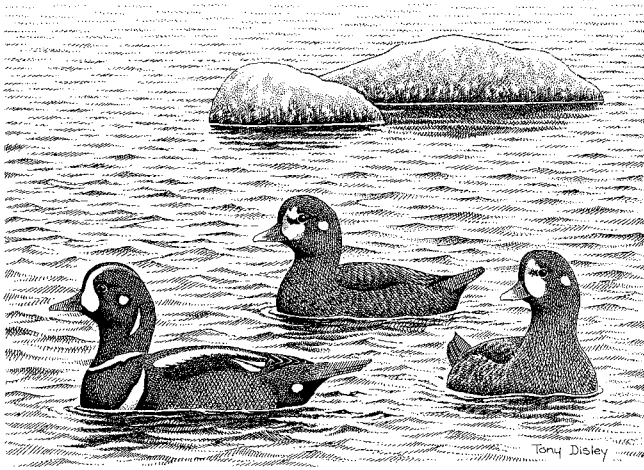
avian specialities (some of which have extremely limited distributions) as possible.

We will begin our journey in Anchorage where our first foray into the field will take us to one of the many wetland areas which surround this modern city.

For a complete contrast to forested southern Alaska, we travel far to the northwest to Nome, a tundra town not far from the Bering Strait that came into being as people flocked to the area in search of gold. It is now well known as the finishing point for the most famous dog sledging race in the world, the Iditarod Trail. The Nome area is one of the best places in the world to see the rare and elusive Bristle-thighed Curlew. We will devote much of our time to looking for these birds and for other specialities such as the uncommon Emperor Goose, Gyr Falcon, Slaty-backed Gull, Aleutian Tern, Sandhill Crane and Golden-crowned Sparrow. At this time of year migration should be in full swing with large numbers of wildfowl and waders heading back north to their breeding grounds.

After returning to Anchorage we will make the scenic drive south to Seward which will be our base for the next couple of



*Harlequin Ducks (Tony Disley)*

days. From here we will take a spectacular cruise into the Kenai Fjords National Park where thousands of seabirds, including Ancient, Marbled and Kittlitz's Murrelets, Parakeet and Rhinoceros Auklets, and Horned and Tufted Puffins breed, whilst the surrounding seas also provide rich feeding grounds for numerous Sea Otters, Steller's Sealions and Humpback Whales.

Next we will visit the spectacular Denali National Park, one of the world's finest bird and wildlife sanctuaries, centred around Mount McKinley, North America's highest peak. Visiting the many different habitats we will be looking for specialities such as Trumpeter Swan, Barrow's Goldeneye and Northern Hawk-Owl. This is also a superb area for mammals and we have an excellent chance of encountering species such as Brown (or 'Grizzly') Bear, Moose, Dall's Sheep and Caribou, whilst American Beavers can sometimes be found.

During the optional pre-tour extension we will visit the remote Pribilof Islands. St Paul Island is home to one of the most outstanding marine wildlife spectacles in North America. Here, far out in the Bering Sea, we will enjoy the excitements of one of the world's greatest seabird gatherings, including the

highly localized Red-legged Kittiwake as well as more widespread North Pacific endemics such as Red-faced Cormorant, Horned and Tufted Puffins, and Crested, Parakeet and Least Auklets. We will also search the rocky tundra of the interior for the extremely rare McKay's Bunting, which sometimes lingers here into late spring.

During the optional post-tour extension a spectacular flight will take us well north of the Arctic Circle to the small settlement of Barrow on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. From here we will explore the arctic tundra which at this time of year should be alive with breeding birds including the rare and highly sought-after Spectacled Eider, Steller's Eider, Baird's and Pectoral Sandpipers, Red Phalarope and the stunning Snowy Owl.

Birdquest has operated tours to Alaska since 1999.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this evening in Anchorage, where we will stay overnight.

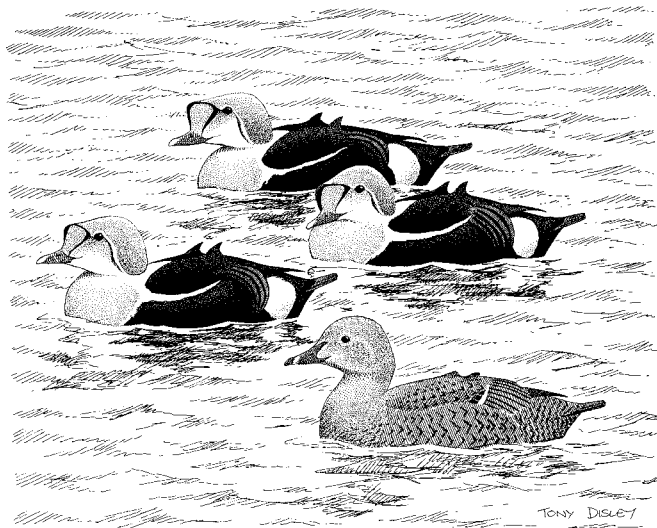
Day 2 Early this morning we will visit Spenard Lake where we will have our first introduction to Alaskan birding. Here we can expect to see Red-necked Grebe, Lesser Canada Goose, Spotted Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Mew and

Bonaparte's Gulls, Violet-green and Tree Swallows, and a variety of ducks including Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Greater and Lesser Scaups and Barrow's Goldeneye, whilst the surrounding scrub holds American Robin, Yellow-rumped Warbler (here of the eastern and northern form, known as Myrtle Warbler), Pine Siskin and Savannah and White-crowned Sparrows. Afterwards a morning flight will take us to far western Alaska and the town of Nome for a three nights stay. We will have the rest of the day to explore the surrounding area.

Days 3-4 Situated on Norton Sound on the Bering Sea coast, Nome is a Mecca for birders in search of arctic specialities. We will use the three roads leading out of the town and explore the varied habitats in search of some of North America's rarest birds. Bounded by tundra on three sides and the Bering Sea coast on the other, the small estuary and lakes at the edge of town attract many waterbirds including the stately Sandhill Crane, Semipalmated and Pacific Golden Plovers, Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Wandering Tattler, Surf-bird, Black Turnstone and sometimes Vega and Slaty-backed Gulls (the latter often amongst the many Glaucous

Gulls). We will drive along the coast towards Safety Lagoon, a real migrant trap, where birds pause whilst the ice further north breaks up. The uncommon Emperor Goose and the dainty Sabine's Gull turn up regularly here on migration and there is always the chance of a real rarity. More commonly encountered birds we can expect to find in this fine area include Red-throated and Pacific Loons (or Red-throated and Pacific Divers), Common Eider, the beautiful Harlequin Duck, Surf Scoter, Black Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Arctic Tern, the elegant and much-sought-after Aleutian Tern and the smart Lapland Longspur (or Lapland Bunting). On one day we will leave early for a drive along the famous Kougarak Highway in search of one of the world's least known birds, the Bristle-thighed Curlew, which is currently under study by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. We will devote much of the day to finding this rare and sometimes difficult species which shares its habitat with the more common and very similar Hudsonian Whimbrel (split from Eurasian). With persistence we should be treated to views of both, allowing us to make direct comparisons between these two closely related species.

*Gyrfalcon and chicks (Tony Disley)*



King Eiders (Tony Disley)

During our drive along the Kougarak Highway we will pass through the scenic Kigluaik Mountains. The many cliffs here provide nesting habitat for a number of raptors including Golden Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk (or Rough-legged Buzzard) and the magnificent Gyr Falcon. Other breeding birds we will look out for are Whistling Swan (often lumped with Bewick's to form Tundra Swan), Peregrine Falcon, Rock and Willow Ptarmigans, American and Pacific Golden Plovers, Bartailed Godwit, Long-tailed and Arctic Skuas (or Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers), Grey-cheeked Thrush, American Tree, Red Fox and Golden-crowned Sparrows, and Hoary (or Arctic) and Common Redpolls. Several primarily Eurasian passerines nest locally in Alaska, including Alaska Wagtail (the local form of the 'Yellow Wagtail' complex), Bluethroat and Northern Wheatear. We should also find the extraordinary Musk Ox, which is sometimes present in good numbers, as well as large numbers of Caribou (or Reindeer).

Day 5 After some final birding in the Nome area we will take an afternoon flight back to Anchorage for an overnight stay.

Day 6 Before breakfast we will have an opportunity to visit Westchester Lagoon in the centre of Anchorage where, with luck, we will see Short-billed Dowitcher and Hudsonian Godwit. Later we will drive south along one of Alaska's most scenic roads to the little town of Seward for a two nights stay. Our first stop as we drive south will be at the famous Potter's Marsh. This wetland area is always teeming with waterbirds and here we can expect to find a number of new species including Ring-necked Duck, Canvasback, Redhead and the impressive Belted Kingfisher. At the marsh, or in the damp scrub and woodland nearby, we should also be able to find Alder Flycatcher, Cliff Swallow, Black-capped Chickadee, Black-billed Magpie (now split from its Eurasian cousin), Wilson's Warbler, Dark-eyed Junco, Song and Lincoln's Sparrows, Red-winged Blackbird and the uncommon Rusty Blackbird. Continuing south we will stop at Beluga Point and scan the waters on the off chance that some stunning white Beluga Whales have come to hunt for salmon in the bay. The surrounding hillsides harbour a healthy population of Dall's Sheep and we will pass some spectacular mountain scenery and stop frequently to explore the surrounding

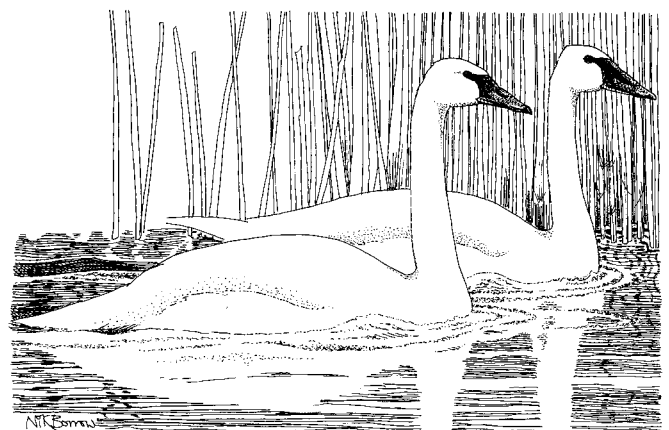
forests, lakes and mountain passes for some of the birds typical of this habitat including Common Loon (or Great Northern Diver), Northern Goshawk, Northern Flicker, the tiny Rufous Hummingbird (the world's most northerly 'hummer', here at the edge of its range), Olive-sided Flycatcher, Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes, the colourful Steller's Jay, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Winter Wren and the restricted-range Northwestern Crow.

Day 7 The highlight of our visit to Seward will undoubtedly be a cruise out into the Kenai Fjords National Park, truly one of Alaska's greatest treasures. High, snow-capped mountains, magnificent glaciers that protrude into the pristine waters like icy fingers and abundant wildlife all make for an enthralling excursion. Glaucous-winged Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes are abundant, and as soon as we leave the dock we will start to look for the superb selection of auks which frequent the area and in particular we will be keeping our eyes peeled for Pigeon Guillemot, Common Murre (or Common Guillemot), Ancient, Marbled and Kittlitz's Murrelets, Parakeet and Rhinoceros Auklets, and Horned and Tufted Puffins. Other species we should encounter include Short-tailed Shearwater, Pelagic and Double-crested

Cormorants, and American Black Oystercatcher. Marine mammals are also well represented and we will keep a constant lookout for huge Humpback Whales, impressive Killer Whales (or Orcas), fast-moving Dall's Porpoises and Steller's Sealions. The superb Sea Otter is often present in large numbers, while Bald Eagles can often be seen resting on the mudflats and cliffs near Seward or lumbering across the bay.

Day 8 Today we will explore the extensive spruce forests that clothe the Kenai Peninsula. By walking some easy trails we can expect to see many of the forest specialities of south-western Alaska. Amongst the species we hope to find are the tame but sometimes elusive Spruce Grouse, American Three-toed Woodpecker (split from Eurasian), Hairy Woodpecker, the strikingly-coloured Varied Thrush, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Chestnut-backed and Boreal Chickadees, the nomadic Bohemian Waxwing (if we are lucky), Grey Jay, Pine Grosbeak and Orange-crowned, Townsend's and Blackpoll Warblers. We will also be keeping a constant lookout for Black Bears, which are quite common, though elusive, in this area. Eventually we will return to Anchorage for an overnight stay.

Day 9 Today we will make



Trumpeter Swans (Nik Borrow)



Smith's Longspur (Nik Borrows)

our way north to the famous Denali National Park for a two nights stay. Along the way we will check several small lakes, some of which teem with wildfowl. We will be keeping a careful lookout for Trumpeter Swan and Bufflehead. Moose are also quite plentiful along this stretch of road and many of them have young (mostly twins) at this time of year. As we approach Denali National Park, given clear weather, we should have breathtaking views of the huge massif of Mount McKinley, which, at an impressive 6195m, is the highest peak in North America.

Day 10 Denali National Park is undoubtedly one of the greatest natural wonders of North America and we will have plenty of time to explore the park as we slowly travel to Eielson, some 70 miles (over 110 kms) inside the

park, using the impressive park bus system. On the way we will see some spectacular scenery and pass some famous places such as Sable Pass and Polychrome Pass. Mammals are unusually common in the park and as well as having another chance to find species such as Caribou, we should see some awesome Grizzly Bears, Red Fox, Hoary Marmot, Snowshoe Hare and, if we are very fortunate, Grey Wolf (which still has a healthy population here). Birds are also well represented and by stopping along different stretches of the road we will look for Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Merlin, Say's Phoebe, American (or Buff-bellied) Pipit, Northern (or Great Grey) Shrike and White-winged (or Two-barred) Crossbill. We will also have another chance to find the impressive Gyr Falcon.

Day 11 This morning we will head out along the Denali Highway, which runs eastwards from near the park entrance, to the town of Paxson for an overnight stay. Boggy forested areas near the beginning of the highway sometimes hold a few Upland Sandpipers, and we will put some effort into finding this strange-looking wader (half plover, half sandpiper) as it may take us some time!

Working our way slowly east, we will check the many ponds and small lakes for a number of species, including Horned (or Slavonian) Grebe, Least Sandpiper and Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. We also have another opportunity to look for Trumpeter Swan and scoters and will witness a landscape literally littered with beaver lodges! This is prime duck-breeding territory, and although we will have seen most of the species already, the scenic beauty along the highway and the abundance of birdlife on the pools will once again have us awestruck! The scrub and forest along the highway hold Yellow Warbler and Northern Waterthrush, as well

as Arctic Warbler, the only *Phylloscopus* warbler to nest in North America. This area is also one of the best in Alaska to search for Northern Hawk Owl, although we may have to check the tops of a lot of spruce trees before we finally find one of these superb diurnal predators! Mammals are also well represented, and we will have another chance to find many of the species present in Denali National Park. In particular, we will have a pretty good chance of seeing an American Beaver.

Day 12 This morning, we will make a concerted effort to find one of Alaska's more elusive inhabitants, the delightful Smith's Longspur. This striking bunting arrives exceptionally late on its breeding grounds and is right at the edge of its range in this area. It also seems to be getting rarer, but nevertheless, we shall diligently search suitable damp grassy areas in the hope of finding one. Later in the day we will head back to Anchorage for an overnight stay, passing some of the most amazing glaciers one could ever hope to see!

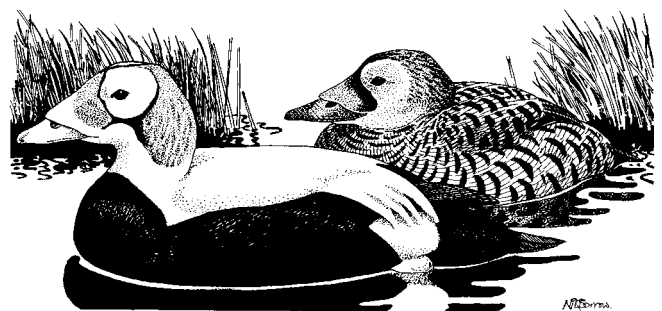
Day 13 The tour ends this morning at Anchorage.

Barrow Post-Tour Extension Itinerary

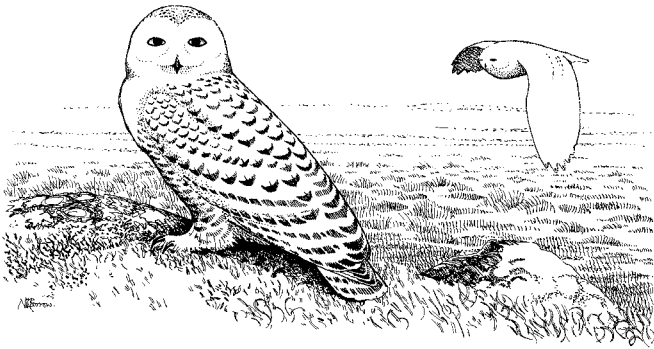
Day 13 This morning we will fly northwards, crossing the Arctic Circle, the impressive Brooks Range and the vast

tundras of Alaska's North Slope en route to the small town of Barrow for a two nights stay beside the Arctic Ocean. If the weather is clear we should enjoy some fantastic views as we fly over vast areas of unspoilt wilderness. As we approach Barrow we will pass over a flat tundra landscape dominated by a honeycomb pattern of huge ice-wedge polygons that have been formed by the endless annual cycle of the thawing and freezing of the permafrost. Here at more than 71°N latitude the sun does not set for nearly three months in summer (although the frequent arctic fog may make us forget that this is the 'Land of the Midnight Sun'!), while in the icy depths of winter it stays below the horizon for just as long. Our programme at Barrow will to a certain degree be determined by the extent of the pack ice, which is likely to be only just starting to break up in mid-June. If conditions are favourable we may spend some time this afternoon scanning open water areas amongst the ice for divers and ducks, and, of course, there is always that slim possibility of a Polar Bear to keep the adrenalin flowing!

Day 14 Today we will explore various places in the Barrow area, taking advantage of the continuous daylight at this time of the year! The tundra at Barrow is particularly rich in breeding wildfowl and shorebirds and by now the



Spectacled Eiders (Nik Borrows)



Snowy Owls (Nik Borrow)

surface ice will have begun to melt, forming pools which lie on top of the permafrost. At this season the tundra is alive with the sights and sounds of displaying ducks and waders whilst menacing skuas patrol back and forth. Our main quarry here will be the gorgeous, though sadly fast-declining, Spectacled Eider and with a modicum of luck we will locate a pair on a tundra pond. We will also be keenly scanning the tundra for that truly arctic predator, the Snowy Owl. The populations of many arctic predators fluctuate enormously in parallel with the cyclic changes in the lemming and vole populations. These small rodents, known for their boom and bust cycles which take place once every four to five years, are the main food source for many of the birds and mammals here in the far north. Amongst the other interesting species we can expect to find during our forays at Barrow are Greater White-fronted Goose, the handsome King Eider, the beautiful Steller's Eider, Baird's and Pectoral Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher, Red (or Grey) Phalarope (here in its splendid red breeding plumage and hopefully displaying), Pomarine Jaeger (or Pomarine Skua) and Black Guillemot. We also have another chance of seeing Sabine's Gull, although this species is sometimes absent until later in the summer. A

number of shorebird species are breeding at the extreme limit of their range in the Barrow area and therefore occur in fluctuating numbers from one year to the next (and so are of unpredictable occurrence). These include Black-bellied (or Grey) Plover, Sanderling, White-rumped Sandpiper, the dainty Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstone. If there are open leads in the ice close inshore while we are at Barrow we will also have a fair chance of seeing the uncommon Yellow-billed Loon (or Yellow-billed Diver).

Day 15 After a final morning at Barrow we take a flight back to Anchorage for an overnight stay.

Day 16 The extension ends this morning at Anchorage.

Pribilofs Pre-Tour Extension Itinerary

Day 1 The extension begins this evening at Anchorage, where we will stay overnight.

Day 2 This morning we will take a flight to St Paul Island, situated some 800 miles (1300 kms) from Anchorage in the Pribilofs, where the largest remaining Aleut population in the world resides. Situated amidst the cold waters of the Bering Sea, these islands are home to some three million seabirds! Upon our arrival in mid-afternoon we will be

transferred to the King Eider Hotel, our base for the next three nights. Later we will set out by bus to begin our explorations.

Days 3-4 The Pribilofs offer a seabird spectacle which has made them world-famous amongst birders. During our stay we will have time to visit most of the best seabird cliffs on St Paul. At Reef Point, not far from the settlement, the cliffs often teem with seabirds. Northern Fulmars, Black-legged Kittiwakes and hordes of puffins, auklets, guillemots and cormorants seem to occupy every available piece of rock. Every inch of space is claimed by nesting birds and by carefully searching the cliffs we should gain fantastic views of all of the nesting auks. Common and Thick-billed Murres (or Common and Brünnich's Guillemots) and diminutive Least Auklets are abundant, whilst bizarre Crested Auklets and Parakeet Auklets are much in evidence and comical Horned and Tufted Puffins are constantly travelling to and from their breeding ledges. A few Pigeon Guillemots breed below the cliffs. Other highlights here will include Red-faced Cormorant and the extremely localized Red-legged Kittiwake (which only breeds here and on a few other islands in the Aleutian and Komandor chain). Arctic Foxes, here of the Pribilof

subspecies which remains largely dark even during the winter, will be keeping a close eye on us from their dens close to the bird cliffs. We will also have the opportunity to visit a large Northern Fur Seal colony where we will be able to admire some large bulls at very close range from behind one of the especially erected hides, their incredible barking calls ringing through the air. Around the edge of the little town we can expect to find Gray-crowned Rosy Finch (here of the distinctive Pribilof race *umbrina*), the handsome Lapland Longspur (or Lapland Bunting) and the Pribilof form of the Winter Wren. Salt Lagoon and the freshwater lakes and marshes are likely to produce various wildfowl and shorebirds, including Long-tailed Duck, Semipalmated Plover and Least Sandpiper. At this time of year there is always the chance of an Asiatic stray, such as a Long-toed Stint, Wood Sandpiper or Gray-tailed Tattler, overshooting from Siberia. Salt Lagoon attracts large numbers of the local Glaucous-winged Gulls and lingering Glaucous Gulls, and we will search amongst them for rarities such as Vega or Slaty-backed Gulls, while the striking King Eider regularly turns up on migration. In the southwestern part of the island we can visit more seabird cliffs where beautiful Harlequin Ducks are



Tufted Puffins (Tony Disley)

commonly seen offshore and Buffleheads are often present. Providing weather conditions are good (fog can be a problem here) we can expect to have close up views of many of the auk species, and enjoy absolutely wonderful photographic opportunities. Another of the speciality birds here is the Pribilof race of the restricted-range Rock Sandpiper, which nests on the dry tundra. In addition, the beautiful McKay's Bunting, a species restricted to just a few islands in the Bering Sea, sometimes winters on St Paul and occasionally lingers until late May. We will make a concerted effort to find this

very rare Bering endemic, although we may have to walk for some hours across the stony terrain while we check out the many Snow Buntings (and even then we may well fail to find any McKay's).

Day 5 After a last morning on St Paul we will take a flight back to Anchorage to join those arriving for the main tour. (This is Day 1 of the main tour.)

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels/motels are of normal Birdquest standard almost throughout. On St Paul Island in the

Pribilofs the hotel is comfortable but bathroom facilities are shared. Road transport is by minibus and roads are mostly good (but unsurfaced and sometimes rough in remote areas).

Walking etc: The walking effort is easy to moderate (with some fairly long walks, sometimes over uneven terrain). The long daylight hours tend to result in regular long days in the field.

Climate: The weather at this season in Alaska is notoriously unpredictable. Conditions may range from warm and sunny particularly in the south to

cool or cold (even very cold) in other areas. Dry and sunny periods will be interspersed with overcast and rainy weather (or even some snow). Fog is also likely, especially in the Pribilofs.

Bird Photography:

Opportunities are good.

Important: The Birdquest Alaska tour is a day longer than most Alaska tours. We also have three nights in the Pribilofs, where fog can be a problem, in order to give a high chance of some good conditions for observing and photographing the amazing seabird colonies.