

Part Two. The Great Route North, Alaska.

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From the fjords of south-east Alaska to the tundra of the Arctic coast, this leg of the journey took me a total of 6640 km and encompassed an amazing variety of wildlife from pods of Killer Whales and delights such as Aleutian Tern and Ancient Murrelet to Grizzly Bears, Musk Ox and the speciality birds of the Arctic.

In short, my route began with five days travelling through productive oceanic waters on the Alaska Marine Highway and thereafter continued with an overland journey through the boreal forests of the vast interior of Alaska, stopping for a few days at the excellent Denali National Park, before heading yet further north, crossing the Arctic Circle and voyaging onto the epic Dalton Highway, highlight of the entire trip and route to journey's end, the remote outpost of Deadhorse, end of the American road network high on the tundra of the Arctic Ocean coastline. Daily Log 6-11 July. Alaska Marine Highway. There are certainly worse ways to spend five days than to ride the ferry boat to Alaska – via fjords, open bays and the Gulf of Alaska, the journey from Washington State to Alaska is 2600 km of scenic waterways, punctuated by Humpback Whales surfacing around the boat and sudden moments of birding frenzy as flocks of murrelets or auklets gather in numbers. Home for the duration was the MV Kennicott, pride of the Alaska Marine Highway.

In unbelievably good weather, mostly blazing sunshine bar one brief period of drizzle on day three, this trip was one of two distinct halves:

a. The Inside Passage: Bellingham to Juneau, the fjords and sheltered waters of south-east Alaska and British Columbia in Canada. Characterised by superb landscapes, good numbers of whales and a complete mixed bag of birding, good numbers of murrelets, auklets and murrelets in some areas, totally birdless in others.

b. The Gulf of Alaska: Juneau to Whittier, crossing the open North Pacific, stopping only at the remote settlement of Yakutat. Pelagic birding, a good number of albatrosses, shearwaters and petrels all seen, along with assorted alcids and a number of cetaceans. Day One (6 July)

A 6.00 pm boarding (immediately becoming 5.00 pm as the boat operates on Alaskan time) and plenty of time to explore the boat and establish the best places to base myself for the next days, where the restaurants were and where to camp, I forgoing the cabins and choosing the upper deck solarium where the ferry operators welcome travellers to camp out on sunbeds or even put tents. As the horns of the ferry blasted away and we began to edge away from the port, a mass of Glaucous-winged Gulls poured off the dock, Northwestern Crows milled around and a few Pigeon Guillemots fluttered away across the bay. Passengers basked in the warm sunshine, a pod of Harbour Porpoises came springing through the surf and we were on the move, the long journey north underway.

Into the strait between Vancouver Island and the Canadian coast we chugged, a mere three hours remaining till dark, but still time for some birds – Brandt's Cormorants lined up on rocks, Pelagic Cormorants too, plus a couple of Great Blue Herons, a few more Pigeon Guillemots and the first Bald Eagle of the journey, a bird which was to become exceptionally common as we progressed. Amongst the other passengers, a couple of birders from Las Vegas, an fun couple from Seattle, whale enthusiasts from Germany and Switzerland, together we would sit out on the front of this boat from dawn to dusk over the next few days. Much anticipation of the riches to come.

A fantastic sunset that evening, deep reds and oranges painting the skies to the north and west. Day Two (7 July)
Excellent weather, 15 hours on deck from 5.00 am., the whole day in the waters of British Columbia, Canada. Four main phases:

0500-8.30. Narrow Fjord.

A Bald Eagle atop a pine, forested slopes to the left and right, mysterious little dots zooming past. It was dawn on the first full day at sea, we were passing through a picturesque fjord and I needed to get my eye in – what were these small birds?! Common Murres here and there, pods on the water or flying past, then a line of Black Scoters, but one of the most numerous of the birds was the 'little dot'! Clearly an auk of some sort, gradually the identity became clear, some birds flying closer, some appearing on the water to the side of the boat. Marbled Murrelets, dozens of them! A species that breeds in coniferous forests, the birds were clearly homeward bound, my count rising to near 80 by 8.00 a.m. Also quite a number of Pelagic Cormorants, a few Pigeon Guillemots and a single Barrow's Goldeneye.

8.30-10.30. Opening of Fjord.

An amazing experience. Leaving the confines of the narrow fjord, a few rocky islands signalled a sudden widening of the channel, open waters visible beyond the islands. And with the change, a surge in the number of birds, initially a few Rhinoceros Auklets and more Common Murres, then just as the cry of 'whale ahead' sounded from the deck, the number of Rhinoceros Auklets mushroomed, the sea literally full of them. An impressive hour or so, no less than seven Humpback Whales, an estimated 3500 Rhinoceros Auklets, a couple of dozen Bald Eagles and a sprinkle of added extras, including White-winged Scoter, more Marbled Murrelets and masses of Mew Gulls. Also Glaucous-winged Gulls and Herring Gulls in lesser numbers, 22 Harbour Seals hauled out on an island, a pod of Common Dolphins and a couple of Sea Otters.

10.30-13.00. Open Water.

As the bay opened and islands fell back, it was time for our first open water crossing, a gentle swell confirming the influence of the Pacific Ocean. Rhinoceros Auklets dwindled to a trickle, occasional Marbled Murrelets continued to pass, but overall the birding was relatively scant. The hour and a half through this stretch did however produce the first Sooty Shearwaters of the trip, a total of 35 cutting through the waves, along with four splendid Ancient Murrelets, a few Arctic

Terns and a flock of about 80 Red-necked Phalaropes. A single pod of Pacific White-sided Dolphins was also seen. 13.00-20.00. Narrow Fjords. Very scenic, the ferry weaving through a maze of very narrow channels all afternoon. Many people on deck enjoying the sun and occasional Humpback Whales that were either breaching or spouting ahead of the boat. One pod of Dall's Porpoises too, but few birds of note, bar the very numerous Bald Eagles, the day's tally rising to 98, a good chunk of them around a single small fishing village that we passed mid-afternoon.

At 8 p.m., with relatively little happening on the waters around, I decided to call it a day, retiring to the restaurant for the first time on this voyage. Day Three (8 July)

Changeable weather, active birding from 4.00 a.m. to 9.30 p.m., entering the waters of south-east Alaska at dawn. Four main phases: 04.00-0830. Dixon Entrance.

Rising early, I was on deck from 4.00 a.m., enjoying the last chunk of an open water crossing, the hours of darkness passing through waters that almost certainly had been full of birds. As it was, dotted islands were already adjacent, the wide gaping mouth of the Dixon Entrance directly ahead …and with it, the end of Canadian waters and the beginning of the fjords of south-east Alaska. Marbled Murrelets were scurrying past, a few Rhinoceros Auklets, Pigeon Guillemots and Common Murres too, but the highlight of this section were two Fork-tailed Petrels hawking past, ash grey bodies skimming the waves, the first of the trip. Also one Common Loon the full trio of Surf, White-winged and Black Scoters.

Ahead, a bank of heavy grey skies sat to welcome us in, south-east Alaska was looking to live up to its reputation! 08.30-11.30. Ketchikan.

On the five-day journey to Whittier, the Kennicott makes just three stops, all at settlements unreachable by road and the first being the small town of Ketchikan. Ketchikan has the unenviable boast of being the wettest place in North America, the town raining on average 230 days each year and receiving a staggering 400 cm of precipitation per annum!

Needless to say, it was raining when we docked! It was quite amazing actually – the drizzle and rain began a couple of miles prior to docking and within a mile or two of leaving we broke out of the cloud and sailed back into sunny waters. I am sure happy I don't live in Ketchikan! Hoping to make the best of our short time ashore, I donned my waterproofs and walked through the leafy suburbs of the town, a couple of Townsend's Warblers about the best of the birds seen, American Robins, Swainson's Thrushes, Violet-green Swallows, Yellow Warbler and Orange-crowned Warbler also noted, along with such crackers as House Sparrow, Collared Dove and European Starling (none of which are very common further north on Alaska). 11.30-18.00. Narrow Fjords. Superb weather, enjoyable scenery but almost totally devoid of birds, the occasional Bald Eagle the only relief. Not bad for sea mammals however, several Humpback Whales noted, plus eight Steller's Sea Lions on a buoy, 15 Harbour Seals and a couple of Sea Otters. 18.00-21.30. Sumner Strait & Chatham Strait. The planned route from Ketchikan to Juneau should have taken us through narrow fjords all the way, the latter part of day three apparently passing through some of the most scenic portions of south-east Alaska, the channels just wide enough to accommodate the boat. Fortunately for the birders aboard, perhaps less so for other tourists, the captain took a strange route from 6 p.m. onwards, turning the boat to the south-west and making a long detour through Sumner Strait to the open waters surrounding Cape Decision. From here, many miles west of the planned route, the ship sailed into the night through the broad Chatham Strait.

Whilst this deprived many tourists of some nice scenery, it was bliss for those hoping for birds – virtually all in the latter stages of the journey, as the boat began to rise on the swell of the open ocean, the waters became alive with birds. Top billing for the alcids with Common Murres numbering at least 800 and Rhinoceros Auklets about 240, but also several Pigeon Guillemots, single fly-by Horned Puffin and some moments later a fly-by dumpling, one Tufted Puffin, a most welcome addition to the list. Humpback Whales too, plus several large rafts of Red-necked Phalaropes and, as we rounded the point, a taste of the pelagic delights that might await in coming days, with three Fork-tailed Petrels, four Sooty Shearwaters and a lone Black-footed Albatross, the latter trailing the boat till dusk. Day Four (9 July)

A simply amazing day. After a stop in Juneau, the boat passed through Icy Strait and emerged into the open Gulf of Alaska, the concentration of birds and cetaceans in the transition zone incredible. Three main phases: 08.00-12.00.

Juneau. Taking a slight gamble with time, I decided to utilize the four-hour stop in Juneau by hitch-hiking the few miles down to the Mendenhall River. Ignoring the glowing blues of the Mendenhall Glacier to my rear, I took the trails that led through the grasslands and pools to the rivermouth in the opposite direction. Peppered with Bald Eagles, the grassy flats were a sight indeed, the raptors perched on virtually every snag of driftwood and on every broken trunk in view. Pretty incredible, sitting to scan the area, I could see no less than 68 Bald Eagles from my single viewpoint! Also one Belted Kingfisher, a few Common Mergansers and a posse of waders, including Lesser Yellowlegs and Short-billed Dowitcher. A short walk along an embankment was also quite productive with a dozen or so Rufous Hummingbirds zipping about, a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches feeding fledged youngsters and lots of Ruby-crowned Kinglets in the better vegetated areas, along with many Savannah Sparrows, Song Sparrows and Lincoln's Sparrows in the grassland. Also a range of hirundines, headed by Violet-green Swallows, plus a flock of Red Crossbills, a couple of Yellow Warblers and, my first land mammal in Alaska, one American Red Squirrel.

A mad dash back to the ferry, managed to hitch a lift half way, then had to run the last mile or so to ensure I didn't miss departure! 12.00-18.00. Icy Strait.

The six-hour passage of Icy Strait was just bliss, a slowly evolving journey growing ever more productive as we travelled westward, passing the junction with Glacier Bay and eventually emerging for the first time into the open ocean. From Juneau, the first hour or so were through gentle landscapes of forested slopes and dotted islands, Steller's Sea Lions and Harbour Seals hauled out on rocks, a couple of Sea Otters played in the shallows and a total of 36 Bald Eagles decorated tree tops and rocky peninsulas. Also, all three scoters were noted, including 110 Surf Scoters, plus four Harlequin Ducks and a Common Loon. Chugging onward, Black-legged Kittiwakes began to appear in numbers, soon becoming the most numerous gull, and much to the delight of passengers on board, whales became rather

common, the spouts of Humpback Whales breaking the still waters, at least a couple of Pilot Whales too. By mid-afternoon, we were approaching the junction of Icy Strait and Glacier Bay – a point I had eagerly been awaiting. It certainly did not disappoint, it was simply phenomenal! As other passengers were darting from side to side to admire more Humpback Whales and Pacific White-sided Dolphins, the birders on board could hardly keep up – birds were pouring past on both sides and the waters were thick with yet more birds fluttering away as the ferry approached.

Amongst masses of Black-legged Kittiwakes, Mew Gulls and Glaucous-winged Gulls, there were Marbled Murrelets absolutely everywhere, hundreds and hundreds flying into the bay in a constant stream. Crude calculations numbered them at an absolute minimum of 4500, truly a magnificent sight. Surprisingly however, there were few other auks in their midst, a mere four Common Murres noted and six Ancient Murrelets. Also, two Parasitic Jaegers, raft after raft of Red-necked Phalaropes amongst floating seaweed (at least 350 birds on all) and three Fork-tailed Petrels.

As we edged beyond Glacier Bay, the flocks of birds gave way to serene waters, the Marbled Murrelets now in just occasional flocks, other birds just here and there. On board, we contemplated the marvels of the sights just seen and looked forward to the open Pacific just ahead. I had just one minor grievance – our days in the fjords were about to end and we had missed one of the key species that I had hoped to see, indeed one of the species that had first given me the idea of taking this trip! The species in question was Killer Whale, aka Orca. I had expected several pods of this charismatic cetacean, but here we were, the fjords over and not a single one. As I discussed this with a couple on board, the call went up, ’whale ahead’. And indeed it was, another Humpback Whale slightly to our right. No loss of enthusiasm on board, many persons were excited by this latest sighting, the animal even breaching to a degree to please the grateful onlookers. I scanned the waters around … ahead the surf of the Pacific Ocean visible in the distance, … to the right, I shuddered to a gasping stop. An absolutely magical sight – a tranquil bay, a slight hint of mist rising off placid waters, a silvery silk surface with barely a ripple reflecting the skies beyond. And there, three fins cruising through the water, an impressive monster of a fin followed by two lesser fins – one adult male and two females, Killer Whales in all their glory, amazing. Down the bay they continued, surfacing in the evening sunshine, views just perfect, a splendid finale to four days in the fjords. 18.00-22.00. The Gulf of Alaska.

As the ferry rose to meet the swell of the Pacific, the next segment of our journey promised to be very good – a day and a half in the open waters of the Gulf of Alaska, the potential existing for virtually any of the seabirds that occur in the waters of the northern Pacific.

The change in the tempo was immediate – the headlands not even passed and already Sooty Shearwaters were skimming over the sea, Fork-tailed Petrels zipping back and fro and Northern Fulmars appearing in numbers, the omens were good. As we cruised out to sea, the glaciers and snow-capped peaks dappled in wisps of cloud on our northern horizon, it was a purple patch indeed for the next hour or so. In this transition zone between fjord and open ocean, amongst occasional Arctic Terns, the highlights included at least 600 Marbled Murrelets, a minimum of three Kittlitz’s Murrelets, a couple of Ancient Murrelets and eight of the dumpy super stars, Tufted Puffins. Also, Sooty Shearwaters almost non-stop, one Pink-footed Shearwater (rare so far north), approximately 180 Red-necked Phalaropes and lesser goodies such as Pacific Loon, Pelagic Cormorant and Common Murre. Two surprise visitors to the ferry, first a Rufous Hummingbird looking most odd far out to sea, then a Least Sandpiper buzzing around for a while. At 10 p.m., things had quietened down a little and, though the evenings were becoming ever longer as we journeyed further and further north, I called it quits for the day, returning beneath deck to write my notes. Day Five (10 July)

The big day, the day of the open water pelagic. This was the day I had been waiting for. After a brief stop in Yukutat, the entire day would be spent at sea, crossing the Gulf of Alaska in high hopes.

04.00-08.00. Yukutat & the Approach.

It is a bit of an understatement to say that Yukutat is a bit of a backwater – sitting beneath some of the most extensive glaciers in Alaska, this small town has no road connections to the outside world, the ferry visits a mere one time a month and the small airport is not exacting buzzing. It is however a fantastic place, a cluster of ramshackle houses set around quay on a bay choc’a’bloc with birds, rolling sand dunes extending off into the distance to the east, a river full of wildlife flowing from the north. For the birder, the town has two main attractions – the Situk River and its estuary some miles to the east, one of the most important localities for migratory birds in North America, and secondly, the Yukutat area also supports one of the largest colonies of Aleutian Tern in the world, the birds favouring the beaches to the east of town.

Our ferry docked for a mere two hours, no hope of venturing towards the Sikut River or even exploring the beaches, but I did have hopes of finding an Aleutian Tern. With dawn at some stupid hour, I was already on deck by 4.00 a.m., the ferry coming in parallel to the beaches for a good hour or so before docking. The area looked simply fantastic, clouds of terns and gulls over the extensive Canon Beach, Bald Eagles lumbering into the sky. As good as it was though, we were still too far out, hopes of identifying an Aleutian Tern from that range were simply fanciful.

As we neared the mouth of Yakutat Bay, most of the extensive beaches were already behind us, but still the area was packed out with birds on the beaches and sand bars, all of which were now close enough to identify – Arctic Terns in massive numbers, Mew Gulls, Herring Gulls and Glaucous-winged Gulls almost equally so. Incredible numbers of birds to sift through the flocks as we passed – I failed to locate any Aleutian Terns, but a Caspian Tern and 150 or so Bonaparte’s Gulls were nice and 12 stonking Sabine’s Gulls in full summer plumage were most welcome indeed. Perhaps even more impressive were the Bald Eagles, a full 130 sat in a line along the beach!

At the dock, one Belted Kingfisher aside, there were relatively few birds, so with telescope in hand, I jogged a kilometre or so out to a small headland and there I sat for an hour, assorted sandbanks and islands in view. Now at low tide, it was

a most pleasant setting – Northwestern Crows picking over the pebbles, single Black Oystercatchers and Ruddy Turnstones too, but my eyes were for the islands offshore. Despite one or two of the Arctic Terns already losing their black forecrowns and making me give them a second glance, there were sadly no Aleutian Terns to be seen, Surf Scoters drifted by on the tide, a group of Black Brant fed on an island opposite. Missing the ferry out was not an option, so with some regret I returned to the boat, Yakutat would certainly have been excellent for a stop-over of a couple of days. On board, I teamed up with the Las Vegas birders again, our last chance for Aleutian Tern would be on the passage out. Sabine's Gulls swirling around, quite a number of Marbled Murrelets in and out of the bay, then one super Kittlitz's Murrelet on the water, but as for the tern, no joy, I had missed one of my main targets of the trip! 08.00-23.30. The Gulf of Alaska.

As Yakutat disappeared behind us, snowy peaks and snaking glaciers visible beyond, the weather was absolutely glorious and still quite a buzz of birds were around the bird, Long-tailed Jaegers in some numbers, Marbled Murrelets still zipping past, quite a number of Black-legged Kittiwakes and other gulls. Two Caspian Terns passed over the boat, quite a few Arctic Terns too, but the next bird was the cause for a sharp intake of breathe – flying directly in front of the boat, there was a sudden realisation and check of the features, the shade of the upperparts, a nice bar on the trailing edge of the underwing …stone me, it was an Aleutian Tern! Though chuffed indeed to find this key bird, it was sadly flying directly away from us and not giving the best views in the world – as one of my main targets, I still felt a little cheated and wanted to much better views! Pigeon Guillemots bobbed about on the water, more Long-tailed Jaegers passed by, the first Tufted Puffin of the day circled around the bird for a while, zooming in close to allow admiration of this spectacular bird. And then it was the open water, hours and hours out to sea. Imagining the Pacific Ocean off Alaska and pictures of violent seas and lashing rain come to mind, boats being tossed about and folk clinging on for dear life. Whilst I had expectations of something a little less than that, I was not expecting the superb conditions that did prevail – positively warm and sunny throughout and the Pacific as calm as a millpond!

From a birding angle, the crossing certainly lived up to my hopes, occasional patches quiet, but overall an exciting day with action throughout. From the outset, Northern Fulmars were thick on the water, birds cruising past, birds resting on the sea, virtually all dark phase, impressive they were. Many Fork-tailed Petrels too, swooping across the placid waters, plus small flocks of Long-tailed Jaegers from time to time, at least 60 in total during the day. Aside the birds, Dall's Porpoises appeared in the ship's wake with regularity, dainty little cetaceans indeed, as well as Humpback Whales a little further off and, rather unexpected in the open ocean, two pods of Killer Whales, one family giving a splendid show, jumping right out of the water to land with a splash.

Aboard the Kennicott, there are several screens that plot the ferry's route on a chart showing coastal features and water depths – this is most useful as midway across the Gulf of Alaska, the ferry passes over the Pamplona Spur, the charts allowing you to understand when. At the spur, the ocean suddenly shallows from almost a kilometre deep to a mere 90 metres, the resultant upwelling producing exceptionally rich waters, both for fish and for birds. With the currents, the bonanza began some distance to the east, especially over a lesser plateau of shallower water close to the spur. It was incredible! An electric atmosphere, an estimated 1600 Northern Fulmars dominated this mega concentration, along with 170 Black-footed Albatrosses, 80 Fork-tailed Petrels and 45 Sooty Shearwaters. Also at least 120 Ancient Murrelets, several Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers, a few Tufted Puffins and a single Leach's Petrel. Laysan Albatross and even Short-tailed Albatross is always a possibility at this spot too, but sadly not on this passage. As the ferry continued its westerly route, over the lip of the spur we went, the waters returning to a kilometre in depth and with an abruptness that surprised me, the bird fiesta was over, the sea suddenly totally devoid of birds. In tee-shirt and enjoying the sun, the afternoon was a most peaceful affair, Dall's Porpoises in the wake, plus occasional birds including more Black-footed Albatrosses, a Thick-billed Murre flying close circuits of the boat, several more Tufted Puffins and quite a number of Ancient Murrelets, many in close proximity. Later on, passing Kayak Island, hopes for another bonanza of birds fell a little flat – while specks of birds, presumable Black-legged Kittiwakes, could be seen flocking around the cliffs, we were unfortunately too distant to lap up any of the birds that breed on the island. The only birds of note here were several Common Murres, our second Thick-billed Murre of the day and a fly-by Black Turnstone. Afternoon gradually settled into evening, the doors to Prince William Sound lay on the horizon, but the birding tailed off, the sea basically quiet. Aside that is, a couple of very nice additions, the first being a flock of about 35 shearwaters, all of which appeared to be Short-tailed Shearwaters and the second, really unexpected were a few terns settled on pieces of driftwood. Passing the first piece of wood, I was a little puzzled – viewed into the sun, the two birds appeared to be a rather dark shade on the mantle. Hmm, maybe. Passing the second pair, at the unseemly hour of 11.30 p.m. with the sun still shining and showing no indication of going down, there was no doubt – Aleutian Tern!!! Absolutely not where I was expecting to see this bird, but here it was, cracking views of an adult feeding a juvenile. This was also a little confusing, we were far out to sea and the juvenile was still a gingery little thing and did not seem to be at the flying stage. Do Aleutian Terns take their chicks out to sea on driftwood?

And with that, the final bird of the day, I retired to below deck. It had been a good day, time to do my notes and grab a little sleep. Day Six (11 July)

My ferry boat journey was reaching its end, at 6.00 a.m. we would dock in Whittier. I was still pondering the option of staying aboard for an extra two days to travel through the waters around Kodiak Island and later disembark at Homer, but finally the dry land option won the day. I probably missed a treat, the sea around Kodiak Island simply churns with birds, it is amongst the most productive of areas in all Alaska, but I wanted to get up to Denali a couple of days later and this extension would have severely compromised my chances of getting there. So, as it was, on another fine sunny morning, we sailed into the narrow channel leading to Whittier, masses of Kittiwakes and Glaucous-winged Gulls to greet us in, but little else. I scanned in vain the rocky slopes above for Mountain Goats, I saw plenty of patches of snow, many a white rock, but not a blob in sight that I could turn into an animal! And then we docked, my adventures of the Alaska

Marine Highway were over. Ahead, the next segment of my journey, Alaska overland.

11-12 July. Kenai Peninsula and Anchorage.

In my initial planning, I had set these days aside as ‘floaters’, days that I would either spend at sea if the ferry journey had not been so productive or possibly on one of the trips to the bird colonies in the fjords south of Seward. This latter option, cruising into the Northwestern Fjord or around the Chiswell Islands, would have been absolutely phenomenal, but given the best options cost over US \$220 and that I was still high on my experiences, I decided I would instead hitch-hike around the Kenai Peninsula, exploring the forests and lakes.

Day One.

Off the boat at 6.00 a.m. and an immediate half hour wait to get through the Whittier Tunnel. One Bald Eagle alongside and my first new bird on Alaskan soil, a splendid Golden-crowned Sparrow. Through the tunnel, the kind folk from Seattle gave me a lift, dropping me off after about half an hour. From there, I hitch-hiked south to spend the day on the slopes around Exit Glacier, seeing on route both a male Pine Grosbeak and a flock of Red Crossbills. My real target at Exit Glacier was again Mountain Goat and Hoary Marmot, both of which I failed to see, largely due to my overly optimistic expectations that it would be a doodle to hike to the mountain tops. It was not, the sun was beating down, the temperature was an unexpected 26 C and I was fairly fatigued from a lack of sleep borne of long hours birding from the ferry. Still, I was not complaining, the glacier was a treat and the lower slopes offered some pleasant forest birding – Hermit Thrushes and Swainson’s Thrushes, Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Black-capped Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Wilson’s Warblers and Townsend’s Warblers, as well as a bunch of other birds, including Downy Woodpeckers, Violet-green Swallows and Black-billed Magpies. Finding a nice grassy slope, and hoping no bears would amble by, I then took a nice snooze in the sun. Waking some time later, I then popped down to Seward, pondered again the idea of booking a boat to the seabird colonies, but instead just took an amble around the town for a while. Nothing of particular note, the best birds seen including plenty of Glaucous-winged Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes, a bunch of sparrows including Fox Sparrow and Song Sparrow and a few Marbled Murrelets just offshore. Also added a Sea Otter and a pair of nesting Bald Eagles.

And then I hitched-hiked half way back to Anchorage, stopping to camp overnight at Tern Lake, a very scenic spot at the junction of the Homer road. With the salmon runs just beginning and bears congregating in this valley, I had serious concerns that I might receive some visitors whilst sleeping. Aroma-laden peanut butter was banished from my tent!

Day Two. Not a hint of a bear during the night, I woke to another day of blazing sun and high temperatures. Chestnut-backed Chickadees around the tent, Orange-crowned Warblers nearby. Walking a track through the forest, still remaining alert for bears, I soon added Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Townsend’s Warblers and a female Pine Grosbeak, this one feeding on the ground. Highlight of the morning however, and one of the highlights of the entire trip, was a young owl that I encountered a little further along. Sitting almost on the ground, a tasty morsel for the first passing predator, two bright yellow eyes peering at me, complete with prominent white eyebrows set to a dark brown head, all contrasting nicely with a buffy orange belly and chest. Oo, some years back, I had a memorable Christmas Day on Amherst Island in Canada, a mega encounter with more than 30 owls, most at roost, including a Boreal Owl tucked up again the trunk of a pine and a couple of Snowy Owls in meadows nearby. What I hadn’t found however, despite spending several hours searching, was a Saw-whet Owl that had been reported. And now, here I was and what was at my feet, a superb juvenile Saw-whet Owl!

This small owl though did not appear to have a high life expectancy – sitting on the ground in a forest full of foxes, raccoons and bears didn’t seem to be the best way to see the summer out. On the tree adjacent, a nestbox hung suspiciously, I supposed this owl had been a little too enthusiastic and had tumbled from the box a few days too early. Using a makeshift ladder of dead branches, I returned the little fellow to his home, opening the box to find another three pairs of yellow eyes staring at me! Four little Saw-whet Owls sitting in a box, most cute it has to be said. I closed the box and clambered down, a quick scan for mama fruitless. Back at my tent, I added a Singing Vole to the mammal list and then walked around Tern Lake itself. Echoing through the forest from early morning, the eerie wails of Common Loons had been a feature, so it was not a surprise to find a pair and a chick floating just off an island of grass, a pair of Green-winged Teals with chicks also present. Also quite a few breeding Arctic Terns and Mew Gulls, as well as one Bald Eagle. Predictably, my half hour scan of rocky slopes in all directions failed to conjure up any Mountain Goats, I began to think they were perhaps mystical beasts of people’s imaginations!

From Tern Lake, I hitched a lift to Anchorage, the gleaming tower blocks of downtown a rather stark contrast to the rest of Alaska. My plan was a one-night stay in the city, departing very early the next morning to begin the long hitch-hike north, a voyage that would ultimately take me almost 1700 km. In the meantime, however, Anchorage itself does have a number of birding hotspots – situated on the Cook Inlet, extensive mudflats are a major pull in the migration periods, whilst forested belts and parks around the city hold virtually all of the woodland birds that occur in southern Alaska, as well as critters such as Moose and Black Bear. With my relatively limited time, I decided to walk the coastal trail from the north down as far as Wintchester Lagoon. The coastal trail, whilst pleasant enough in the hot sun, turned out to be a waste of time from a birding angle as the tide was out and any waders present were hidden beneath a lip in the mudflats far off in the distance. Wintchester Lagoon was rather better – though surrounded by walking paths and picnic tables, and quite a number of people relaxing and/or riding bicycles, birds on the pool were basically undisturbed. Several dozen Short-billed Dowitchers and Greater Yellowlegs crowded onto a small island, Mew Gulls and Herring Gulls also breeding there, with the open water populated by plentiful Red-necked Grebes and even more plentiful Canada Geese and Mallards. One Muskrat went paddling by and on the edge of a wooded garden, a pair of Merlins were very active and calling, I presume breeding very close by. From the main lagoon, a path led under a highway to another pool, a little more natural in appearance and not surrounded by paths. The main additions here were Greater Scaups and American Wigeons, though the vegetated surrounds also produced Downy Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadee, Black-billed Magpie and Violet-green Swallows. Back in the city centre, two

European Starlings flew over, the only ones I noted in Alaska barring the far south-east. No House Sparrows.

13 July. North to Denali National Park. Hitch-hiking out of Anchorage would be difficult I had supposed, but the reality was far from that – walking out to a major intersection just east of downtown at 6.00 a.m., I put out a sign for ‘Eagle River’ and minutes later was sitting in a car heading out of the city. Hitching was easy as far as Wasilla, rather slower thereafter, but by midday I was approaching Denali, the most notable events on route being stunning views of Mount McKinley untouched by clouds and the rather spectacular explosion of the engine of the car I was travelling in, our car coming to a stop in a vast cloud of steam! An empty tourist bus stopped and gave me a lift the rest of the way to Denali National Park, the car driver remaining behind to await help for his stranded car.

Denali National Park is amazing – in the shadows of the mighty Mount McKinley and its glaciers, the wilderness is 25,000 square kilometres of forest and alpine tundra dissected by braided rivers and dotted with pools. And in this, an estimated 300 Grizzly Bears, an unknown number of Black Bears, a variable number of Wolf packs and a mouth-watering collection of added extras, including Canada Lynx and Wolverine, not to forget healthy populations of Moose, Caribou and an array of smaller species such as Arctic Ground Squirrel, Hoary Marmot and Collared Pika. No private cars are permitted and only a single gravel road traverses the park, the only transport being a system of national park shuttle buses that ply the road, allowing you to jump on off as you want throughout the day to explore the wilds. I was staying at Teklanika, a fairly small campsite an hour or so inside the park and one that it is more or less essential to possess advance reservations for. On route to the campsite, a pair of Willow Ptarmigan on the road and a Northern Harrier over tundra. Arriving, I selected a quiet spot on the edge on the campsite, put up my tent and then off to explore. A small stream behind my tent showed signs of recent bear activity, shingle and sand banks aside the Teklanika River revealed the tracks of a passing Wolf, but not a single mammal did I see on this day.

Taking it fairly easy that first evening, I settled outside my tent, batted off a few mosquitoes, made coffee and plotted my strategy for the coming days, primary targets being Arctic Ground Squirrel, Collared Pika and Hoary Marmot, plus of course a healthy serving of Grizzly Bears and, to fantasize for a moment, Canada Lynx (this latter animal had been quite easy at Denali three years earlier during a period of high Snowshoe Hare population). Adjacent, Boreal Chickadees and Grey Jays worked the pines, Swainson’s Thrushes and American Robins were fairly common and, amongst the small passerines, one Blackpoll Warbler, a couple of Orange-crowned Warblers, several Yellow-rumped Warblers and White-crowned Sparrows by the bucketload.

14 July. Denali National Park. First mammal of the day was Taiga Vole, a single individual in my campsite. One of the first birds of the day was Spruce Grouse, a strutting male on the gravel road adjacent to the campsite. With ideas to hike on the high tundra, my destination for the day was Polychrome Pass, a scenic area of colourful metamorphic rock formations a couple of hours to the west. Taking the first shuttle bus of the morning, soon I was rolling along through the boreal forests, thereafter up the narrow Igloo Canyon and out onto the open tundra of Sable Pass, an excellent looking area. And it was here that the bus ground to a stop with the sighting of the first large mammals of the day, first a Caribou and then, rather more impressive, a Grizzly Bear munching its way through a flower meadow. At Polychrome Pass, I exited the bus to begin my wanders, hordes of Arctic Ground Squirrels, some lapping up minerals from the gravel road, more on embankments in the tundra. A magnificent view from this point, a vast open valley extending far to the north and east, scree and tundra slopes rising to the south.

Somewhere down in that valley, Wolves had made a kill in previous days, a Grizzly Bear then coming in to steal the booty. My targets however were on the high slopes, more specifically Collared Pika on scree and Hoary Marmot in areas of rock with open grazing adjacent. A Golden Eagle soaring, a Merlin cutting across the tundra, one Long-tailed Jaeger hovering over the slopes, a long hike up it was, but most enjoyable, the glorious sun and plentiful flowers making it even more so. Typical of the habitat however, birds were fairly sparse overall, White-crowned Sparrows essentially the only species in abundance, with vegetated gullies also holding American Tree Sparrows, Lincoln’s Sparrows, Common Redpoll and Black-billed Magpie. I also encountered several Red-necked Phalaropes and a Mew Gull on a pool in one of the valleys. As for my mammal targets, they were hard work! In reflection, it is quite probable that the high temperature on this day, perhaps exceeding 25 C, was not working in my favour. I failed to find any Collared Pika on the scree nearer the road and thought I was going to on the higher slopes too, but then as I scrambled across a bed of loose stone and rocks, a distinctive whistle sounded from ridge just above. I settled and scanned, and there was the little fellow, round body and big ears, one Collared Pika peeking over a rock. A curious individual, he kept disappearing into the maze of underground gaps in the scree, reappearing ever closer to check me out. A second Collared Pika was rather less keen to play ball, one quick look and then off up the slope he zipped. Over the next two or three hours, I found another three Collared Pikas, as well as colony after colony of Arctic Ground Squirrel, but not a single sign of any Hoary Marmots whatsoever. On one high ridge, I met three hikers, they too had not seen any marmots, but did inform me of a Grizzly Bear that had just ambled down the adjacent slope. Finally giving up on the marmots, I found a sunny slope and sat munching the blueberries for a while, then wandered back to the road, it was now late afternoon. Jumping on the first bus to pass, I travelled a little further west to explore another area of open tundra. Highlights here were two Willow Ptarmigan near the road and, even better, a female White-tailed Ptarmigan with at least one chick. Other than these however, and a couple of Caribou cantering across the tundra, the area seemed pretty devoid of life. Time to call it a day, I decided. Along came a shuttle bus, back to Teklanika I went. After a coffee and a pot noodle, I took a walk along the river, then a rather longer hike through the forests. Standard fare for the zone, Boreal Chickadees and Grey Jays, American Robins and Yellow-rumped Warblers, but one nice addition, a female Barrow’s Goldeneye. After notes and a final quick stroll around the campsite, I finally went to bed just before midnight, the sun was still up, quite a few mozzies were dancing around the tent. 15 July. Denali National Park. A shade cooler than the day before, but once again dominated by

sun and blue sky. Still with ideas of finding Hoary Marmot, my plans this day would take me to Sable Pass and then later to Eielson, both localities offering access to tundra tops. The Sable Pass area is one of the few areas in Denali where off-road hiking is restricted, the zone set aside as sanctuary for the abundant Grizzly Bears that inhabit the rolling slopes and valleys. Walking along the gravel road is permitted however, and given the lack of traffic, this is both a pleasant option and a productive one. I arrived on the first shuttle bus of the morning, jumping off near the highest point on the road with idea of hiking a few kilometres before stopping another bus. Within minutes, I had a feast for the eyes – on the slope to my right, all lying on their backs and rolling around quite content, a mama Grizzly Bear and two cubs. Far enough away to be no threat, I sat myself down to watch their antics, the next half an hour pure pleasure. Not only the bears, but also a family of Northern Shrikes adjacent, Long-tailed Jaegers hawking the tundra and a couple of Caribou trotting past. Swivelling to scan the hills behind me, the whole event became yet more impressive – first another Grizzly Bear ambling along, then another in the next hill, then two play fighting on the next! Stone me, surrounded by Grizzly Bears, seven in total on all sides! I comforted myself in the snug knowledge that there had never been a fatal Grizzly Bear attack in the 95 year history of Denali National Park. Only later did I discover that it is no longer true – a hiker was killed and devoured in August 2012 at Toklat River. Adding to the drama, two Moose too, plus another Caribou. Some time later, I continued westward, stopping first at Toklat River, where yet another two Grizzly Bears were seen, as well as a couple of Dall's Sheep high on a slope, then onward to Eielson for my main hike of the day, another scramble to the high tundra tops to seek Hoary Marmot. Stunning views from this locality, Mount McKinley bathed in sunshine, vast glacial valleys stretching below and slopes covered in flowers all around. An hour or so of hard upward drudging and I reached a plateau, ideal marmot habitat I supposed. Numerous Arctic Ground Squirrels here, plus one Golden Eagle, plentiful White-crowned Sparrows and a single Horned Lark. Exploring the plateau, the Arctic Ground Squirrels were simply everywhere, but not a marmot was to be seen anywhere. Then however, a strange call alerted me, familiar but unfamiliar, I wondered a while, then thought it could even be a marmot. Off I went to investigate …and what a stunning discovery was awaiting – not a marmot at all, but a stonking pair of breeding Surfbirds, the call emanating from an adult standing atop a low ridge watching my progress. Initially I presumed it was just this single bird, but as I continued round the slope, a second adult and three lanky chicks appeared, the latters not very clued up in predator avoidance, simply walking along bleating as I passed through the area! Well, that was an unexpected bonus. Still no marmots however. After another hour, almost at the point of giving up, I paused to photograph the assorted flowers catching the breeze. A movement far below caught my eye. And there they were, on a turf of grass aside a rocky stream, two resplendent Hoary Marmots chasing each other around. Creamy whites and chocolate browns, superb. Given there was a slope not far off vertical between us, I contented to watch them from my current position, no hope of photographs, but corkers they were. And with that, back down the slope to Eielson I went. On the long trundle back towards Teklanika, one presumed Taiga Vole darted across the road, a smart Coyote posed for photographs and, on the spur of the moment, I decided to again hike in the Sable Pass area. Rather hotter now, I encountered no bears this time, I presume all were now lying in shaded gullies or vegetation, but I did find a couple of very approachable Willow Ptarmigan. Down the length of Igloo Canyon I walked, an excellent locality for Arctic Warbler, but I saw virtually nothing, a couple of Lincoln's Sparrows and several Black-billed Magpies about all. Eventually, I decided to call it a day and waited for a shuttle bus to appear. An excellent day it had been, a well-deserved cup of tea was savoured back at my tent in Teklanika. Evening strolls added little, not a single animal had wandered past my trip camera. 16 July. Denali National Park. With the Snowshoe Hare population at the absolute minimum of its seven or eight year cycle, chances of encountering a Canada Lynx at Denali were virtually zero, so with all my realistic targets seen, I decided to make the best of the continuing good weather and push north. So, after sharing breakfast with Grey Jays and American Red Squirrels and doing a little birding in the forests around Teklanika (Boreal Chickadees, Blackpoll Warbler, etc), I left the national park and hitch-hiked north to Fairbanks and thereafter to the small junction town of Fox, ready for the start of my Dalton adventures the next day. 17-18 July. The Dalton Highway. The Dalton Highway is a daunting prospect for the hitchhiker. Mostly gravel and traversing boreal forests, the mountains of the Brooks Range and endless tundra atop permafrost, all inhabited by roaming bears and wolves, the road essentially goes nowhere, merely proving access to the oilfields of Prudhoe Bay. Leaving Fairbanks, it is 800 km to the Arctic Ocean, one truck stop and fuel station midway, but otherwise no habitations and no facilities. And very little traffic! Day One Day one started pretty dire – a one-hour wait to go 15 km, then a five-hour wait to go 80! Ah well, at least it was sunny! At the long wait, fortunately beside a small river, there were a few attractions to while away the time – a Bald Eagle circling around, an American Kestrel on a dead tree, a Belted Kingfisher several times, one Alder Flycatcher, plus Grey Jays and other common birds, and an American Red Squirrel. I would have traded them all for a lift however! As the five-hour marker approached, a cracking of little branches in the undergrowth, a rustling in the bushes, a Black Bear was ambling past …eeks! Fortunately, that was the precise moment that a car finally stopped and gave me a lift! Thereafter things looked up. After being dropped off at a totally nondescript patch of boreal forest, the guy turning off to venture into the wilds, I thought I was going to be stuck forever. Not so, the next car stopped within 15 minutes and my luck was in, the guy was a native Alaskan and was going all the way to the mighty Yukon River, his homestead a few hours downriver by boat. It was now early evening and I was now only an hour or so south of the Arctic Circle, I thought about calling it a day and began to eye possible camping spots aside the river. Na, thought I, let's try to get a little bit further north. I perched myself back on the side of the dusty road and a mere ten minutes later a car came trundling along and stopped. 'Construction Camp 5, wanna lift?' Sure, I jumped in, 'Er, where's Construction Camp 5?' I enquired, expecting it to be just around the next corner. But jeepers, my luck had really changed – Camp 5 was a small base for road maintenance crews situated a staggering 340 km north! Hurling north at a great rate of knots, a cloud of dust in our wake …didn't see many birds, but it was bye bye to the boreal forests, straight over the Arctic Circle, stunted spruces becoming ever smaller, then up and over

the impressive Brooks Range. Patches of snow and the promise of the North Slope ahead persuaded me not to abandon my lift to explore, so onward we ploughed, the landscapes now devoid of trees, pure tundra sitting atop permafrost. About 30 km short of Construction Camp 5, I decided to hop out. Adjacent, the waters of Toolik Lake looked most inviting, I would investigate them in the morning. Now in the land of the 24-hour sun, I set up camp on the open tundra, mozzie swarms pretty impressive, Long-tailed Jaegers quartering, a pair of Glaucous Gulls on a small pool, Arctic Ground Squirrels calling. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself, almost 600 km travelled on the day, just 225 to go! Midnight on the tundra, Toolik Lake...

Day Two I woke to a pitter-patter on my tent, I thought it was raining …it wasn't, just half a million mosquitoes banging into my tent instead! The sun was shining yet again, so donning long sleeves and squirting a little repellent, I took a wander down to the shores of the nearby Lake Toolik. American Tree Sparrows and Common Redpolls in dwarf willows and Arctic Ground Squirrels barking alarms from drier patches of tundra. It was, however, Toolik that held the glories this morning – looking most resplendent in the morning sun, one magnificent pair of breeding Yellow-billed Loons complete with chick. These were certainly one of the highlights of the Dalton, nicely complemented by a pair of Tundra Swans, several Glaucous Gulls and a Greater Scaup. And then it was back to the highway, time to resume my trek northbound, Deadhorse a mere 225 km distant. The road a lonely affair this far north, I sat upon a rock and waited. Long-tailed Jaegers hunted on hillsides around, a Northern Harrier and two Rough-legged Hawks spooked the ground squirrels, a Peregrine arrived to annoy the jaegers. Many butterflies too – clouded yellow types, fritillaries, swallowtail, skippers, blues, heaths, browns, an amazing assortment for the Arctic I thought. And there I waited …all day long, ten mind-blowing hours going nowhere! I was stranded, how frustrating. And then it looked like it was about to get even worse – a lone thunderstorm that had been parked on the slopes of the Brooks Mountain to my south seemed to be trundling my way, a drenching would certainly have changed my mood! To my north, the sun remained gloriously in control, blue skies untouched by clouds. The storm edged in, a rainbow bright in the sky, but the first heavy drops already falling my way, a bank of rain looking most imminent. Oo er, this was not going to be pleasant, I thought. And then, out from the rain rolled a car, a guy going just 30 km to construction camp 5! Only 30 km, and to the same location as my lift had been going the day before, but hey a lift is a lift and I was on the move again. Thirty kilometres also took me way beyond the rain, the drop off point a most pleasant vale in the tundra, a marsh to the one side and the Trans-Alaskan Pipeline just beyond. And the good news, the gent who had stopped said if I was ready at 6.30 a.m. next morning, he was going the rest of the way to Deadhorse! Though gone 11 p.m. by the time I'd put my tent up, the sun was still high and the evening warm. I took a walk along the pipeline, two American Robins perching on its struts, a couple of rather beautiful Short-eared Owls quartering the adjacent wetland. Around midnight, I retired to my tent, a Dall's Sheep visible high on a slope opposite, a male Smith's Longspur in rushes adjacent. 19 July. Deadhorse.

Yippee, journey's end, Deadhorse directly ahead, I had made it! True to his word, my guy had picked me up at 6.30 a.m. and here we were, less than two hours later approaching the end of the road. A lone Musk Ox had welcomed us in, one Rough-legged Hawk too. Deadhorse is not exactly a conventional birding locality – a semi-industrial complex of storage tanks, pipelines, porta cabins and heavy machinery interspersed by tundra carved out into glacial polygons and pools heaving with birds. Gaggles of geese traipsing along with masses of goslings, phalaropes oblivious to trucks rumbling past and Snow Buntings flitting down from assorted constructions, oh yes, this is Deadhorse! But would the town reveal the jewel in the crown, the enigmatic Spectacled Eider? After giving me a quick tour of the town and associated pools, my guy dropped me aside the Sag River, a soft patch of tundra soil the perfect location for my tent. One Red Fox trotting past, Long-tailed Jaeger cruising overhead, Arctic Ground Squirrels in the embankment adjacent, a quick scan around revealing no sign of the plentiful Grizzly Bears that wander this wilderness, nor (I guess fortunately) Polar Bears that occur from time to time. With tent up, it was time to begin the search, 12,000 km on the road and just one bird to go. I confess to being a little apprehensive, Spectacled Eiders traditionally depart these waters by early July, most returning to the open seas to moult, the breeders inland on inaccessible pools. Past the first lake, a pair of Tundra Swans on the far bank, Pacific Loons off to the side, a posse of Red-necked Phalaropes spinning away, and on I wandered. I paused to photograph an obliging Lapland Longspur and, as I did, a car pulled up. A birder! And a British birder at that - Richard Crossley, now based in the US. Well, he'd been in the area for a couple of days, so after pleasantries, the obvious question arose ‘Any eiders lingering?’ Affirmative was the answer, quite good news. I ventured a second question, 'Er, any Spectacled Eiders?' A wry smile, then ...another affirmative! Four Spectacled Eiders had been on a pool the day before, but a little mobile. I didn't care …if they were still in the area, I'd stay for however many days it took to find them! Now this was one kind gent, he offered to drive me to the relevant pool, an offer I wasn't about to turn down. Five minutes later, we were there. A treat for the eyes, perhaps 80 Red-necked Phalaropes were zipping about, a handful of Semi-palmated Sandpipers and Pectoral Sandpipers on the far bank and quite a number of White-fronted Geese and Pintail gathered too. Parasitic Jaegers zoomed over, Glaucous Gulls roamed with intent, and then a dark duck suddenly floated out into the pool – a female King Eider, neat. A few minutes later, while still admiring the first bird, round circled four more birds and plopped down aside. Spectacled Eiders!!! Oh yoy yoy, a king and the crown jewels, pretty amazing. No males, they'd long departed for the waters of the Arctic Ocean, but a couple of the females were almost ghosts of the males, the head pattern most pronounced. I settled down to see if I could get a photograph or two and, what nice birds they were, they paddled up through a channel and sailed right past me. Couldn't get much better than that, Greater Roadrunner to Spectacled Eider, trip effectively over. A stop on a larger pool nearby was also a treat – hordes of Long-tailed Ducks in fine plumage, rafts of Greater Scaups and several hundred White-fronted Geese and Cackling Geese, all trailing goslings by the dozen. Also another dozen King Eiders! In this highly sensitive oil town, security is a constant

issue for the guards and it was not long before they were spotting us – in town, you tend to get kicked off any site away from the roads, but even on the roads we received ‘special attention’, with luminous jackets offered to ensure the numerous trucks didn’t plough us down and personal traffic cones to set up behind us while birding! Ho ho, Snow Buntings feeding fledged youngsters, more Lapland Longspurs, I’d been in town a mere few hours and I’d seen my main target. Having seen the eiders however, my next appointment was with the airline office – not a masochist for a return trip on the Dalton Highway, a gamble that would almost certainly have left me missing my flight back to Europe, out came my plastic friend and I duly booked a flight back to Anchorage for the next day …a whopping \$460, Alaskan Airlines you are a rip off! With business conducted and the surprise find of another three Spectacled Eiders on a pool next to the airport, I again teamed up with Richard for afternoon activities – an attempt to find Rock Ptarmigan on the tundra a few miles south of town. Didn’t find any, but a corking afternoon and evening it turned out to be. Pleasant sunshine, a riot of Arctic flowers, butterflies fluttering past and wildlife plentiful - Buff-breasted Sandpipers breeding on a gravel island, Stilt Sandpiper in a damp patch, a fantastic herd of Musk Ox gathered on a ridge with a lone Wolf loping along far beyond, highlight after highlight. Also Long-billed Dowitcher, Short-eared Owl and, while studying the fresh tracks of the Musk Ox, very fresh tracks of two other rather big beasties …Wolf and Grizzly Bear.

In the undulating tundra, pockmarked by ditches and channels, a careful eye was kept to avoid any potentially problematic encounters, but nothing to mar the day, all critters perfectly behaved. By evening’s end, 10 p.m. and the sun still high (it was never going to set), I retired to my tent and pondered, the long journey north certainly had been worthwhile. I presume the same individual, a Red Fox trotted by again, Arctic Ground Squirrels chirped their alarms, I downed the zipper on my tent, I had earned an early night. 20 July. Deadhorse. Musk Ox had appeared during the night, two of the shaggy beasties standing across the river when I woke. Distinctively cool at dawn, a mere 4 C, but another sunny day in prospect, so donning my jumper for the first time on this trip, off I went for my morning’s explorations. A bunch of cute Baird’s Sandpiper chicks started things off, one concerned mother bird appearing in no time at all to shoo me off. Next came Spectacled Eiders, a splendid flock of seven being almost certainly the two smaller groups of the day before. Two King Eiders too, plus several Brants with chicks. Otherwise, not much new this morning, sat a while admiring Long-tailed Jaegers hovering above the tundra, enjoyed the Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs playing their role as Deadhorse sparrows and listened as Pacific Loons yodelled their mournful calls from pools surrounded by the juggernauts of the oil business. Deadhorse had been good, but by early afternoon, it was time for me to take down my tent. Two Caribou strolled past, Arctic Ground Squirrels sounded their alarms as I packed up and, as I walked to the airport, it was Red-necked Phalaropes all the way, Glaucous Gulls floating through the skies and Tundra Swans on a pool opposite. At 5.00 p.m., we took to the skies, circling out over the broken ice-pack of the Arctic Ocean for a short flight up to Barrow, the northern most tip of Alaska. I did originally have ideas of stopping here for a couple of days, Spectacled Eider being fairly reliable at this locality too, as well as Snowy Owls and Yellow-billed Loons, but instead I had a mere 30 minutes. It was then back into the air for the two-hour flight to Anchorage, the major part of my trip now over. 21-22 July. Kenai Peninsula. Though my return from Deadhorse essentially marked the end of my trip, I still had a couple of things I wanted to do before I departed Alaska – firstly, to find a Varied Thrush (a supposedly common species that I had somehow failed to see) and secondly have a last look at a few seabirds. Day One. Kenai River. With this in mind, after a relatively lazy morning in Anchorage, I decided to hitch-hike down to the Homer region, a round trip of 440 miles. With the Sockeye Salmon run reaching a peak (an estimated quarter a million fish entering the Kenai River on each of the previous three days), hundreds of fishermen were also making the journey, so too quite a few Grizzly Bears! The presence of the fishermen made the hitch-hiking easier, the presence of the bears make for a rather alert state of affairs when I hopped out to begin looking for Varied Thrush! Walking a quiet trail aside the river, almost the first thing I noticed was the abundance of bear scats. Oo er, thought I. The next thing I noticed were two large chunky birds on the ground taking grit …two very nice Pine Grosbeaks. Also Black-capped Chickadees, three Barrow’s Goldeneyes on the river, a few Grey Jays and, on mountain slopes above, a loose gathering of 22 Dall’s Sheep. Seriously concerned by a bear encounter in the thick cover of the riverine woodland, I eventually decided to retrace my footsteps, still at that point my walk devoid of any Varied Thrushes. A Trumpeter Swan on one lake and then, almost as I reached the road, a clearly thrush-like call attracted my attention to a fairly dense patch of cover in a dark vegetated gully. Slowly edging in, up popped a bird onto a partly concealed branch ….flashes of orange and ginger, yo ho ho! The identity was clear and with a little manoeuvring I had the bird in clear sight, one adult Varied Thrush, what a smart bird! With that, I continued my hitch-hike, the traffic thinning out rapidly as evening approached and I travelled beyond Soldotna, the last town to attract the fishermen. I thought I was going to get stuck, but luckily some kind gent stopped just as I was contemplating giving up for the night and pitching my tent. All the way to Anchor Point he took me, I arrived at 11.00 p.m. and (now south of the Arctic Circle again), I settled to watch the sun set over the Cook Inlet. Shearwaters cruised against the dying sun, loons too, a Sea Otter floated lazily past on his back, legs flopping about in the air. I put up my tent, time for bed. Day Two. Anchor Point & Homer. Dawn, the sun rising behind me, the waters of the Cook Inlet lit a treat with the snow-capped mountains and glaciers sparkling beyond. Glaucous-winged Gulls, Black-legged Kittiwakes and Mew Gulls lined the beaches, a steady procession of birds were skimming over the water just beyond. Horned Puffins zooming past at close quarters, a Kittlitz’s Murrelet too, plus a string of Surf Scoters followed shortly after by White-winged Scoters. As I made my morning coffee, with a Bald Eagle in a pine above, I added yet more birds to the tally – Common Loons on the water, a fly-by pair of Red-throated Loons and, seemingly attracted by a shoal of fish at the surface, a mass of Black-legged Kittiwakes packing into an area of minor turbulence long with a loose flock of shearwaters, perhaps 35, all appearing to be Short-tailed Shearwaters. Six Sea Otters and a Harbour Seal here too. After a while, I packed up my tent and walked back to the Homer road, a distance of

about 2 miles, picking up on route three rather vivid Golden-crowned Sparrows. Homer portrays itself as a laid back town centred on a sand spit pushing out into Kachemak Bay, home to artisans on the one hand and fishermen on the other. Halibut the size of cars seem to inhabit the waters off this region, so little surprise the density of fishing charter companies and boats squeezed onto the end of the two-mile spit. For the birder, Homer is also a hotspot, excellent intertidal mudflats particularly productive at migration times and a few seabird colonies just a stone's throw away, most notably Gull Island, full of Common Murres and both Horned and Tufted Puffins. I was not visiting at a peak time for migration, but still most pleasant it was to walk the beaches – a family of Sandhill Cranes as company and a select bunch of waders also present including Surf-birds, Black Turnstones and Whimbrel. Far more numerous however were the gulls – oodles of Black-legged Kittiwakes mingling with Mew Gulls and Glaucous-winged Gulls, all mixed up with Northwestern Crows and the occasional Arctic Tern hawking through. Offshore, quite a number of Surf and White-winged Scoters, along with two Harlequin Ducks, three Long-tailed Ducks and quite a few rafts of Common Murres. As the tide began to push in, I rounded off my trip with a walk along to the end of the spit itself – fish'n'chip shops, fish processing plants, tourist shops …and great gatherings of Glaucous-winged Gulls squabbling to get offcuts of fish as the fishermen processed their catches. A swoosh of wings and in dropped a Bald Eagle, snatching a fine slab of salmon. Up onto a telegraph pole he went, a tasty lunch much enjoyed. Also added Lapland Longspur, a few more Golden-crowned Sparrows, then lazed a while in the stonking hot sun, the mercury hitting an impressive 26 C. On the spur of the moment, I then opted for return to Anchorage. Left late afternoon and didn't really expect to be able to hitch back to Anchorage the same evening, but after a rather long wait, I hit it lucky again and got door to door service, being dropped off at my accommodation at 11.30 p.m.

23 July. Anchorage. My last day in Alaska, boo hoo. Spent the morning downtown, shopping and the like, then took an amble along the coastal trail. As on every other day of my trip to Alaska, it was a fine warm sunny day to round things off. Didn't see a whole lot of birds, largely due to the tide being out, but did manage another pair of Sandhill Cranes, as well as flock of about 250 Bonaparte's Gulls, a few Short-billed Dowitchers and, the only ones I recorded on the trip, both Canvasback and Hudsonian Godwit. Also ever present Glaucous-winged Gulls, a dozen Red-necked Grebes and several Greater Scaup. And with that, I packed my back for the last time and, as evening approached, headed for the airport. 24 July. Homeward Bound.

It is a long way from Alaska to Eastern Europe – eleven time zones, four planes and a total of 19 hours in the air, plus several more in airports in Seattle, New York and Helsinki. Add on the time differences, I left Anchorage at 00.30 on the 24th and arrived in Vilnius at 11.30 on the 25th, almost 24 hours to the dot. Trip Over. For full list of mammals seen on the journey (California to Alaska), ... [CLICK HERE](#) ... Road Trip USA, Mammals