Alaska: Puffins, Grizzlies, and the Beauty of the North
June 9 - 20, 2018
Leaders: Mark Garland & Tom Reed

Alaska is a land of extraordinary scenic beauty and rich wildlife communities. Our Alaska travel program visits a wide variety of habitats including marine fjords, coastal and boreal forests, freshwater marshes and lakes, and the alpine tundra. We will search for birds and other wildlife while enjoying spectacular scenery, learning many plants, and discussing the ecology and conservation.

The following day-to-day itinerary represents an outline of our plans. Details may be modified by the leaders for any reason that they deem to be in the best interest of the group.

**Saturday, June 9:** Our journey begins with the arrival of flights into Anchorage. We’ll offer a relaxed field trip this afternoon for those arriving by midday, visiting the Westchester Lagoon and nearby natural areas within the city limits. Here we can see nesting Arctic Terns and Mew Gulls, and perhaps Common Loon, Hudsonian Godwit, and a variety of ducks. We’ll gather in the evening for a short round of introductions and an overview to the trip.

**Sunday, June 10:** We head south this day, with our first stop at Potter Marsh, where an extensive boardwalk system takes us over part of this vibrant wetland. We’re likely to see waterfowl, Arctic Terns, Mew Gulls, and a mixture of northern songbirds. There are good chances for seeing moose and Bald Eagle, as well. Next we’ll stop along the scenic Turnagain Arm of Cook Inlet, where if we’re lucky we might see Beluga Whales. Our journey then takes us onto the Kenai Peninsula and to Tern Lake, named for the Arctic Terns that nest here each year. We’ll scan the surrounding mountains for wildlife – this is one of the few places in Alaska where both Dall Sheep and Mountain Goats might be seen from the same location. Our day ends at the port town of Seward.

**Monday, June 11:** We head out onto the water for a cruise through Kenai Fjords National Park. We will travel to one of the park’s fjords and visit the face of a tidewater glacier. We will watch for humpback whales, orcas, Steller’s sea lions, harbor seals, Dall’s porpoises, sea otters, and a great variety of sea birds, likely to include two species of puffins plus murrelets, murres, kittiwakes, cormorants, and more. We’re on a large boat, whose capacity is 150 passengers, and whose ride is quite stable. Overnight at or near Seward.
**Tuesday, June 12:** We have a full day to explore areas near Seward. While boreal forest dominates the landscape for much of our trip, Seward marks the northwestern end of the great temperate rainforest that extends from here to the redwood belt of the central California coast. There are no redwoods in Alaska, but we will see impressive Sitka spruce, western red cedar, and Douglas-fir trees. Douglas squirrels and a variety of birds live in the forest, including Varied Thrush, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, and Townsend’s Warbler. We will also walk the short trail that leads up to the Exit Glacier and visit Bear Creek, where sockeye salmon should be moving upstream to spawning areas at Bear Lake. We may choose to visit the Alaska Sea Life Center to its outstanding displays. Overnight at or near Seward.

**Wednesday, June 13:** We travel north this morning, making a few stops en route to Whittier. This isolated town is only accessed over land by one tunnel, which alternates between eastbound car travel, westbound car travel, and train traffic. At the end of the tunnel we’ll find ourselves in the middle of a dramatically scenic locale on the shore of Prince William Sound. In the afternoon we board the Alaska Ferry for an extremely scenic trip across the Sound, watching for wildlife along the way. The Alaska Ferry System is an integral part of the state’s transportation system and culture, and Alaskans take great pride in these efficient vessels. We end the day at the port city of Valdez, southern terminus of the Alaska pipeline. Valdez is a very active port, and we’re likely to see big tankers filling up with oil transported down from Prudhoe Bay. Overnight in or near Valdez.

**Thursday, June 14:** We head over Thompson Pass this morning and continue north along the Richardson Highway, which parallels the Copper River and the western edge of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. We’ll stop at the park visitor center and enjoy a short nature walk through the forest here. We continue north and follow the Gulkana River upstream through seemingly endless boreal forest to the tiny settlement of Paxson, where we settle into our new home, Denali Highway Cabins. We’ll have time to explore the surroundings, watching bird feeders where Pine Grosbeaks are often common, and learning about recent natural history highlights from the lodge’s owners, who are excellent naturalists. Overnight at Denali Highway Cabins.

**Friday, June 15:** The settlement of Paxson is located at the eastern terminus of the Denali Highway, the original road access to Denali National Park. While North America’s highest mountain, Denali, is over a hundred miles away, this part of the Alaska Range is home to many high, glacier-clad mountains, and the road provides easy access to alpine tundra habitat. We’ll explore the high country, hoping to find Long-tailed Jaeger, Arctic Warbler, Willow Ptarmigan, and if we’re lucky, Smith’s Longspur. Moose are frequent in this area, and there’s a good chance to see porcupine. Overnight at Denali Highway Cabins.

**Saturday, June 16:** We travel the length of the Denali Highway this day, making stops all along the way. In the high tundra we might find nesting Whimbrel and American Golden-Plover. Roadside rockslides are home to pikas, small rabbit relatives. There are extensive wetlands along the route, and we’re sure to see a variety of nesting waterfowl. At the Maclaren River Lodge we can enjoy lunch and watch Cliff Swallows gather mud for their nests. Along the forested western side of the Denali Highway we’ll watch for
Northern Hawk-Owls in the treetops. We end the day near the entrance to Denali National Park.

**Sunday, June 17:** There’s one road that leads deep into Denali National Park, and private vehicles aren’t permitted, so we’ll ride along on one of the Park Service buses. Our destination is the Eielson Visitor Center, an 8-hour round trip that covers 66 miles each way. Most of the ride goes through alpine tundra habitat, with great scenery and opportunities to search for a lot of wildlife. With luck we could see grizzly bear, moose, caribou, Dall sheep, and arctic ground squirrel; if we’re really lucky we might see wolf or lynx. Birding can be very good as well, with Willow Ptarmigan, Golden Eagle, and Long-tailed Jaeger among the possibilities. The bus system allows visitors to disembark at any point, walk for a while, and then catch a later bus back to the park entrance area. We’ll go over the possibilities. Overnight near Denali.

**Monday, June 18:** We have planned another morning around Denali. The group will explore areas outside the park and near the entrance, but any individual who wishes can take another bus into the park (cost of a second bus trip is not included, though the price is very reasonable). There’s a lot of great habitat outside the park in this region, where boreal forests, wetlands, and alpine tundra all mix in a dynamic and diverse subarctic ecosystem. Northern Hawk-Owl populations are notoriously cyclical, but if it’s a good year we should be able to find one or more of these unique raptors. The tundra should be bursting with wildflowers, and if it’s a sunny day we’ll see many butterflies amidst the flowers. After lunch we head south along the Parks Highway, which actually gets closer to the great peak at Denali State Park, where views are spectacular when the weather permits. Overnight at Wasilla.

**Tuesday, June 19:** We offer an optional morning visit to the valley of the Little Susitna River, where a good road takes us through transitional forest and into alpine tundra habitat near Hatcher Pass. We’ll visit the Iditarod Museum in Wasilla to learn about this iconic dogsled race, and then head to Anchorage for an afternoon visit to the Alaska Native Heritage Center, whose exhibits give us an understanding of the rich and diverse cultures of Alaska’s native communities. We’ll gather in the evening to review the sightings from the trip and to share favorite memories. Overnight at Anchorage.

**Wednesday, June 20:** Our program concludes with transfer to the airport for flights home.

**Leaders:** **Mark Garland** formerly worked as Travel Program Coordinator and Senior Naturalist for the Audubon Naturalist Society. He has led over a dozen trips to Alaska over the last 20 years, and over 200 tours to various parts of the world. He currently lives in West Cape May, NJ.

**Tom Reed** is Editor of North American Birds, Founder of the Cape May Spring Watch migration study, and former Migration Count Coordinator for the New Jersey Audubon Cape May Bird Observatory. He has led tours for Wildside Nature Tours and for Field Guides.