



Winging It

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Birding Next to the Edge

BY MICHAEL T. SCHWITTERS

For twenty remarkable years, birders were able to gain access to one of North America's most remote and often excitingly productive destinations—Attu, in the outer Aleutian Islands. The enterprise that made this possible was Attour, a private tour company. The adventure, camaraderie, and birds are well chronicled in *Attou: Birding on the Edge*, published by the ABA and available through ABA Sales.

So it was at the beginning of 1995 that I, newly retired, and with a retirement goal of seeing 700 ABA-area birds (I had about 500), signed up for the Attour spring trip. It was a unique adventure. The group never arrived on Attu. Aleutian weather and aircraft availability conspired to divert the Attuvians, including me, into Cold Bay, Alaska. There we found some good birds and lamented our dreams of Asian vagrants. Remarkably, 1995 was the only year that Attour failed to visit Attu. It completed its long and successful run in fall 2000. I was left thinking, "There must be another way to gain access to the birds of the outer Aleutians." What followed was four years of trading my time with several federal agencies for opportunities to visit the Aleutians and the Bering Sea, opportunities that would eventually take me not to Attu, but to the Air Force island of Shemya, just 30 miles east of Attu, next to the "edge."

In 1996 I applied to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for a summer volunteer position with the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. I was accepted, and spent June and July on St. George Island in the Pribilofs doing seabird studies. The Red-legged Kittiwake and three of the Bering Sea alcids plus a few other species were added to my lifelist. My 1997 summer adventure took me to Hall Island in the northern Bering Sea (just north of St. Mathew Island) to do seabird censuses, and, of course, to add breeding McKay's Bunting to my lifelist. That year I was fortunate to be asked to continue the adventure with a month of volunteering aboard the USFWS's MV *Tiglox*. *Tiglox* spent the August field season in the Aleutian chain ... not quite to Attu during migration (we got as far west as Buldir Island), but some high adventure and more great pelagics.

My next try for Attu was in 1999, when I was accepted to a team of USFWS archaeologists for a June expedition to study the earliest Attuvians on the island's north shore. The team's travel plans called for it to fly to the Air Force base on Shemya and then travel aboard the *Tiglox* thirty miles to Attu. As we left our aircraft on Shemya, we were met by a gentleman with binoculars around his neck.

Dan Gibson, the Bird Collection Manager at the University of Alaska Museum, was visiting Shemya Island to perform wildlife surveys that were part of an Air Force study (working with the resources of USFWS and the US Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services) to assess the bird-aircraft strike hazard (BASH). The BASH had

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become potentially more acute as Aleutian Cackling (then Canada) Geese were becoming much more numerous in the outer Aleutians. Between Dan's surveys and my early lessons in the science and art of archaeology, we managed to squeeze in some birding, and I added a number of lifers. As the day to meet the boat approached, our team got the word that the *Tiglax* had suffered some damage and would have to return to the mainland. Attu was a no-go, again! But, I had found an intriguing alternative: Shemya Island and a multiyear wildlife study that was just beginning.

The alternative came to pass sooner than I could have hoped, as I was asked to carry on the studies that summer...still not the migration season, but perhaps next year. That Aleutian summer did yield observations of breeding Sky Lark and Wood Sandpiper on Shemya Island *and* an invitation to continue the surveys in the spring. I had found "another way." But could this small island yield the birds that Attu had presented to Attour veterans?

Access to Shemya Island is restricted; only visitors on official business are permitted, and therefore birding is limited to but a few. Relatively flat and small (1.5 x 3.5 miles), Shemya Island is Eareckson Air Station, an Air Force installation with an active runway. An Aleutian outpost since World War II, and a busy location during the cold war, it still hosts several missions important to our nation's defense. The sensitivity of the installation's mission and relatively sparse support resources for activities other than official business prompt the Air Force to restrict access. Accommodations are more comfortable than those of Attour. There are roads throughout the island, but vehicles are for official use only.

Wildlife habitat is less diverse and more limited on Shemya than Attu. Nonetheless, there is a good variety of intertidal environments and good views of the North Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea. There are a number of lakes, both freshwater and tidally influenced. The north side has 200-foot bluffs, and the south beach is broad and sandy. There is little of the debris of 60 years of occupation on the island, as the Air Force has cleaned and continues to clean it well; in general, the island is tidy and well managed by its civilian contractor caretakers. There does remain disturbed habitat among the Aleutian grasses and heath. The Arctic fox still seeks a meager living on the island, as this introduced mammal has been retained to prevent the Cackling Goose and gulls from pioneering as nesters. Nesting birds would become an additional hazard to aircraft operations. Nighttime lighting attracts lost migrant birds to this small speck of land.

In spring 2000, with the blessing of an understanding wife (she joined me to assist in



A Terek Sandpiper on Shemya's south beach in August of 2005. This species is a casual but regular visitor to the island. Photo © M. Schwitters.

several subsequent years), I arrived on Shemya in mid-April to continue the wildlife surveys and experiments that would quantify the bird-aircraft strike hazard. This visit of two months was to be the first of eleven (as of spring 2007). The birds of the outer Aleutians, for me, have become an obsession, as the leaders of Attour likely discovered. And what wonderful birds!

Like Attu, the drama of birding on Shemya is the search for rare Asian migrants and vagrants. The search is set against a background of resident and seasonally abundant species. Among the common waterfowl are Aleutian Cackling Goose, Common Teal, Mallard, and Northern Pintail; several hundred Emperor Geese winter. Common Eiders and Harlequin

Ducks forage in the intertidal zone, and Pelagic and Red-faced Cormorants decorate the rocks. A spotting scope will often find Laysan Albatross, Short-tailed Shearwaters, and Tufted Puffins off shore. Glaucous-winged Gull and, seasonally, Black-legged Kittiwake are the common gulls. On the island, Rock Sandpipers, Song Sparrows, Lapland Longspurs, Snow Buntings, and Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches are resident or common breeders/visitors, all watched over by a small resident population of Common Ravens.

During spring and fall migration, the waterfowl are constantly changing and require careful monitoring for rare or casual species. In April, Whooper Swans can stop briefly (twice in the past seven years). Bean Geese are possible, but not regular, in the spring. Tufted Ducks and Eurasian Wigeon are common migrants both spring and fall. Smew are annual spring visitors on the lakes, white males found in about two out of three springs. Falcated Ducks and Garganey are often spring highlights. Drab Baikal Teal have been found every autumn I have been present.

In the lakes and near-shore waters, all five loon species are usually found in spring; Arctic Loon is a regular, with up to ten individuals found in a spring. Birds of prey are possible almost anytime. Peregrine Falcons and Snowy Owls often visit. Other good raptors might include Eurasian Hobby, Eurasian Kestrel, and Rough-legged Hawk. The Bald Eagle normally does not occur in the outer Aleutians, but immature White-tailed Eagles have been seen in two springs, and an adult Steller's Sea Eagle was found by

a USFWS volunteer in January 2002. September 2001 produced a white-morph Northern Goshawk, like about half of the goshawks on the Kamchatka Peninsula. In spring 2000 I was surprised to find a Great Egret that remained for weeks.

Shorebird variety on the island is usually excellent. The species found are a who's-who of Northern Hemisphere waders, with a strong leaning to the Old



Looking for shorebirds on Shemya's south beach. Photo © Robert Martinka.

World. May is the month for shorebirds in spring; in fall, shorebird migration has usually begun when I arrive in mid-August and continues well into October. This past fall brought a Northern Lapwing. Other plovers include Pacific Golden-Plover (tens in spring, often hundreds in fall), a sprinkling of Lesser Sand-Plovers both spring and fall, and in fall 2005, two Eurasian Dotterels. Among the usual shorebirds are Common Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, both tattlers (mostly Wandering in spring, Gray-tailed in fall), Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin, Common Sandpiper, and Common Snipe. Uncommon in spring are Far Eastern Curlew (twice during my watch); Bar-tailed and, rarely, Black-tailed Godwits; Bristle-thighed Curlew (twice); and adult Ruffs. Fall migrants have included Spotted Redshank, the Asian subspecies of Whimbrel, Buff-breasted and Pectoral Sandpiper, Broad-billed Sandpiper (twice in my five autumns), and juvenile Sharp-tailed Sandpiper; juvenile Ruffs are usually a sure thing. Terek Sandpiper and Red-necked, Long-toed, and Temminck's Sints should be looked for in both spring and fall.

A nice variety of uncommon gulls features Black-headed, Slaty-backed, Kamchatka Mew, vega Herring, and Black-tailed Gull (three in five years); in fall 2005, a Heuglin's (Lesser Black-backed) Gull provided a likely first North American record.

The search for migrating landbirds will often set the heart pounding. Common Cuckoos were seen in two of the five springs, and 2006 and 2007 produced Oriental Cuckoos. Shemya has one of

the sparse North American records for White-throated Needletail, and I have found two Fork-tailed Swifts. The Great Spotted Woodpecker is a sought-after Aleutian specialty; my five years of visits have produced three. As spring proceeds, Eyebrowed Thrushes; White, Yellow and occasionally Gray Wagtails; and Asian pipits come through. Bramblings become common, as many as a hundred on some spring days. As May turns into June, mega-rarities can turn up: Taiga Flycatcher, Gray-streaked Flycatcher, Siberian Rubythroat, and Red-flanked Bluetail perch on last summer's cow parsnip stalks. Rustic and Gray (once) Buntings, Eurasian Bullfinches (eight individuals in five years), and Hawfinches are sometimes found in disturbed habitats. Spring 2007 produced a Brown Shrike.

These are but a sampling of the 203 species of birds on the current Shemya Island list. I have been very fortunate to see many of them. Back in 1994 (as I prepared for my Attu trip), the Attou list was also just over 200. Truly, I have found another way to access the birds of the outer Aleutians.

Regrettably, Eareckson Air Station is not a destination for many birders; our nation's defense takes priority. I have traded nearly three years, in two-month pieces, of my retirement for the opportunity to experience some of the ABA Area's rarest birds. Is this a route for you? Perhaps not to the outer Aleutians, but there are many wonderful birding destinations whose managing agencies eagerly accept volunteers. I recommend it.

The Best Feeders in the World: Ecuador

In the Jan/Feb 2007 edition of *Winging It*, Terry Rich and Janet Bair proposed a new, informal competition to identify the very best bird feeders in the world, measured in terms of species and family diversity. This month, Scott Olmstead shares two lists from Ecuador's famous Tandayapa Bird Lodge (www.tandayapa.com). Where are your favorites? Send your lists and comments to winging@aba.org.

These two lists are from the same location on two different dates. The species total was the same on each date; the first count, though, has more hummingbirds (20 species), while the second offers better family diversity (3 versus 2). I hope to beat these counts when I return to Tandayapa this summer.

List #1

• LOCATION: Tandayapa Bird Lodge, Pichincha Province, Ecuador. • DATE: May 22, 2007. • SURROUNDING HABITAT: Subtropical cloud forest and regenerating second growth. • FEEDER TYPES: Hummingbird feeders, fruit feeders. • COMFORTS: Lodge dining room and patio. • SPECIES/FAMILIES OBSERVED: 21/2

- Tawny-bellied Hermit *Phaethornis symratorphorus*
- Brown Violet-ear *Colibri delphinae*
- Green Violet-ear *Colibri thalassinus*
- Sparkling Violet-ear *Colibri coruscans*
- Western (Blue-tailed) Emerald *Chlorostilbon (mellisugus) melanorhynchus*
- Green-crowned Woodnymph *Thalurania fannyi*
- Rufous-tailed Hummingbird *Amazilia tzacatl*

- Andean Emerald *Agyrtia franciae*
- Speckled Hummingbird *Adelomyia melanogenys*
- Purple-bibbed Whitetip *Urostitte benjamini*
- Empress Brilliant *Heliodoxa imperatrix*
- Fawn-breasted Brilliant *Heliodoxa rubinoides*
- Brown Inca *Coeligena wilsoni*
- Buff-tailed Coronet *Boissonneaua flavescens*
- Velvet-purple Coronet *Boissonneaua jardini*
- Gorgeted Sunangel *Heliangelus strophianus*
- Booted Racket-tail *Ocreatus underwoodii*
- Violet-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus coelestis*
- Purple-throated Woodstar *Calliphlox mitchellii*
- White-bellied Woodstar *Chaetocercus mulsant*
- Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager *Anisognathus somptuosus*

List #2

• LOCATION: Tandayapa Bird Lodge, Pichincha Province, Ecuador. • DATE: May 24, 2007. • SPECIES/FAMILIES OBSERVED: 21/3

- Tawny-bellied Hermit *Phaethornis symratorphorus*
- Brown Violet-ear *Colibri delphinae*

- Green Violet-ear *Colibri thalassinus*
- Sparkling Violet-ear *Colibri coruscans*
- Western (Blue-tailed) Emerald *Chlorostilbon (mellisugus) melanorhynchus*
- Rufous-tailed Hummingbird *Amazilia tzacatl*
- Andean Emerald *Agyrtia franciae*
- Speckled Hummingbird *Adelomyia melanogenys*
- Purple-bibbed Whitetip *Urostitte benjamini*
- Empress Brilliant *Heliodoxa imperatrix*
- Fawn-breasted Brilliant *Heliodoxa rubinoides*
- Brown Inca *Coeligena wilsoni*
- Buff-tailed Coronet *Boissonneaua flavescens*
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- Gorgeted Sunangel *Heliangelus strophianus*
- Booted Racket-tail *Ocreatus underwoodii*
- Violet-tailed Sylph *Agelaiocercus coelestis*
- Purple-throated Woodstar *Calliphlox mitchellii*
- Blue-winged Mountain-Tanager *Anisognathus somptuosus*
- White-winged Brush-Finch *Atlipetes leucopterus*
- Rufous-collared Sparrow *Zonotrichia capensis*

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