American Birder's Guide to Travel

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10 Best Birds in Colombia

Alaska’s Vagrant Hotspots

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Correspondence

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JEFFREY A. GORDON

From the Editor
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On the cover:
Taken in Brooklyn, this photo shows a flock of Brant flying by the Statue of Liberty. Brooklynite and native son Douglas Gochfeld shares his tips on birding Kings County, New York, in this issue.
Photo © Heather Wolf
We’re more than just birding!

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Photos: Blackburnian Warbler, Tom Dove; Guianan Cock-of-the-rock, David K. Weaver; Tufted Coquette, Mukesh Ramdass; Elephant, Peg Abbott
Though I’ve been fortunate to have some really excellent teachers and classes at various formal schools I’ve attended, I find that travel offers me the most consistently memorable and useful educational experiences. So many events that have been crucial in making me the person I am have happened while traveling, specifically while traveling with a primary goal of birding.

Certainly, not all travel is like this. It’s possible to visit certain resorts or take some cruises and have an experience that seems engineered to avoid any significant challenge to anyone’s notions of anything. And I get that sometimes people want to just get away and bliss out.

But most birding travel—if only because rounding out a list that is anything like comprehensive requires one to visit a variety of places and habitats, many of them far off established tourist routes—is going to come with a good measure of educational experiences built in. And, of course, many of those experiences will have little or nothing to do with birds but will instead happen along the way.

All of us involved in bringing you this Birder’s Guide to Travel hope that you will get a lot of pleasure and excitement from your birding travels near or far. We also hope that you’re going to learn a lot from them and come back at least a better-educated person than when you left. And just like a great teacher helps students learn by really knowing the material cold, we strive to offer you useful, practical information that comes from direct experience. You won’t find the sort of gauzy “puff pieces” here that characterize so many publications about travel and tourism.

We hope that when you come back from a great birding trip, you’ll not only be smiling from the birds you saw and the people you met, but that your mind will be buzzing with new ideas and insights. You’ll have learned a lot, sometimes without realizing it until later. We also hope that you’ll say, “Wow, that piece I read in Birder’s Guide was really helpful!” That’s what we’re working for.

Safe travels, and good birding,

Jeffrey A. Gordon
President, American Birding Association

Travel means different things to different birders. For some, it’s a leisurely weekend drive from Québec City to Tadoussac to enjoy the scenery, whales, and seabirds. Others enjoy going out onto the high seas on pelagic trips. Some like to spend a week visiting exciting locations such as Iceland or Colombia. And some just like to spend a few hours wandering around the local park down the block from their Brooklyn apartment. Then there are the rare adventurous souls among us who will spend a few dozen cold, damp hours looking for Asian vagrants on windswept islands in the Bering Sea.

However you travel, Birder’s Guide wants to help you find your joy. I hope that there is something of use and interest to you in this issue. If there’s not, please let us know what you’d like to see next time. Be sure to tell us what you liked here, as well, so that we can be sure to include similar content in next year’s Birder’s Guide to Travel. And as always, we love to hear from folks who want to offer their own advice in the form of an article. We depend on members’ contributions to make future issues a reality. You can reach me at mretter@aba.org and via discussions linked to aba.org/birdersguide.

Happy travels!

Michael L. P. Retter
Editor, Birder’s Guide
Do you never leave the house without your binoculars? Are birds always on your mind? How would you like to stretch and grow your birding skills under the guidance of some of the most respected birders in North America, have a lot of fun in the process and win some great prizes? If you are age 10 to 18 years old and enjoy any or all aspects of birding, then the ABA Young Birder of the Year Contest is for you!

REGISTRATION OPENS APRIL 15!

For more information, including how to enter, prizes, and deadlines, please visit: youngbirders.aba.org/young-birder-of-the-year-contest

To the right are just a few photo and illustration entries from our 2018 Young Birder of the Year winners Teodolina Martelli and Adam Dhalla.
Samuel Denault is a biologist with a Master of Science degree specializing in avian studies, but he is above all an avid birder and vagrant aficionado. He has participated actively in the soon-to-be-published Québec Breeding Bird Atlas, to which he has contributed fieldwork, data review, and writing. Samuel has been a coauthor of the Québec Region column in North American Birds for almost 20 years. He lives in Montréal.

Douglas Gochfeld is a born-and-bred Brooklynite who has been scouring the urban landscape of New York City for birds since he was seven. After academic training in finance and economics, Doug has spent much of the past decade as a working birder around the globe, be it intensively studying shorebirds in Suriname or Alaska, conducting migration surveys in Israel or Cape May, New Jersey, or guiding in the Bering Sea. He now gets to globetrot as a tour leader for Field Guides Birding Tours, where he gets to cultivate his proclivities for birding, socializing, travel, and logistics all at once. In addition to his soft spot for shorebirds and seabirds, he has strong interests in bird migration, vagrancy, and patterns of distribution, which lend themselves well to his current role on the New York State Avian Records Committee.

Stephan Lorenz has been fortunate to bird on a little slice of each continent, which has enabled him to work on his bird family life list and explore a wide variety of cultures and landscapes. He spent seven seasons in Alaska with a special focus on the remote outposts of the Bering Sea and documented a new bird species for the ABA Area while doing field work in the Aleutian Islands. Currently, he leads tours for Rockjumper Birding Tours, focusing on the Americas and Asia. He greatly enjoys sharing the world of birds with as many people as possible, either by leading tours or writing about traveling and birding. In between, Stephan travels and birds, with a special interest in less-traveled areas, such as the Andaman Islands, which he visited recently. If time permits, he occasionally climbs a mountain or heads to Texas’s Big Bend National Park, one of his favorite birding locations.

Geoff Malosh serves as a technical reviewer for Birder’s Guide. A native of Pittsburgh and birder since the age of eight, he has become a frequent author and speaker on a variety of bird-related topics, as well as a serious (amateur) bird photographer. Geoff has a special interest in bird record-keeping, and for 10 years he was the chief editor of Pennsylvania Birds, the journal of ornithological record for the state of Pennsylvania. He also served two terms on the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee and currently is an eBird reviewer for the state of Pennsylvania. He travels extensively both in the U.S. and abroad, always with camera and binoculars in hand. His photos have appeared in many books, magazines, newspapers, and ABA publications.

Forrest Rowland discovered an interest in birds at age nine during a family trip to Trinidad. Wowed by motmots, bellbirds, trogons, and coquettes, he pursued his passion for birds and wildlife until it became his profession. He has worked on a number of research projects in the Americas, guided several dozen tours to more than 30 countries, and served on various records committees. Currently, Forrest works for Rockjumper Worldwide Birding Expeditions as their New World Products Manager, and he continues to lead tours throughout the Neotropics. He conveys his enthusiasm and love for birds through photography, writing, and shared experiences in the field.
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This is a paid advertisement, so let's get the pitch out of the way. Tropical Birding is a birding and photography tour company that runs hundreds of tours all over the world catering to birders, photographers and wildlife enthusiasts. Now, if you are still reading, let's get to the juicy stuff.

Anyone who has gone out birding recently is sure to have noticed that birders are increasingly using cameras in addition to, and sometimes as a replacement tool for, binoculars. Photographers are also paying more attention to observing birds and wildlife than they used to. Although the circumstantial evidence suggests a shift in focus within the hobby of birding, we at Tropical Birding wanted to get a real empirical feel for the shift, and devise ways of servicing that change. We did this by surveying thousands of people through our mailing lists and Facebook page (facebook.com/TropicalBirding/), and were elated to get several hundred responses detailing people's changing birding/wildlife watching/nature photography habits. The results left us amazed.

Let’s start with a Venn diagram illustrating the interests of birding, wildlife-watching, and outdoor photography. Annotated on the diagram are the ‘types’ of trips that cater for the various interests and their overlap-zones. We immediately noticed that there is no ‘type’ of trip that caters for people with near-equal interests in both birding and photography. Well, none

**OVERLAPPING INTERESTS AND CORRESPONDING TOURS**

*New “Birding with a Camera” Genre*
until now! Tropical Birding has designed a series of trips to cater for the vacant ‘Birding with a camera’ sweet spot!

**Changing interests of Tropical Birding guides**

We also surveyed our guides and trip leaders to see how their relative interests had changed in the last decade. They are all still very keen birders, and enjoy guiding pure birding tours, as well as photography trips and relaxed custom tours. But when they are out enjoying nature on their own dime, you can see in the triangular graph below that their relative interests have mostly converged into the birding/photography sweet spot (the shaded zone). With the new ‘Birding with a Camera’ tours we have designed, the guides can now interact with clients who have the same core passion for both birding and photography.

**It is not just the Tropical Birding guides whose interests are changing**

With responses from over 200 Tropical Birding clients and contacts, we again plotted the 10-year change within the broader birding community. Take a look at the triangular graph below where you can see the main shift in focus for birders: from 2008 in blue (mostly strictly birding), to 2018 in red (a birding/photography hybrid). Again, there has been a shift into the sweet spot.

**There has been a paradigm shift in the way we bird, but we are still birders**

There has been an undeniable shift in focus for at least 40% of birders towards including photography as a vital component in their birding. This is not necessarily an attempt to get publication-quality photos, but rather a way of preserving a birding experience, perhaps to share it on social media, and for many, to aid in the identification of tricky species or to document rarities. Birders are equally happy snapping away with digi-scoping adaptors, point-and-shoots, micro four-thirds and SLRs with whooping great lenses. But the camera is now a vital tool in their arsenal, while seeing and enjoying birds remains the most important element of their enjoyment.
A birder’s increased interest in photography can result in an increasing interest in other wildlife. On tour, we have also noticed that birders now frequently pay more attention to other wildlife than they did in the past. Perhaps this is best illustrated in a country like Madagascar. Our tours here a decade ago focused on the endemic birds. Now, although we still see exactly the same number of bird species on tour, because folks are carrying cameras, they also want to see and photograph as many chameleons, leaf-tailed geckos, and lemurs as possible. The camera seems to have been the catalytic tool in expanding their interest in other wildlife.

It is not only one-way traffic
Could the photography portal be used to grow the birding community? Absolutely! Rather than venting angst at crowds of photographers at popular birding locations, we birders should be reaching out to help photographers who are struggling with identification and birding basics. That lady with a passing interest in the “little birds” she is photographing needs as much encouragement as a budding teen to become a top-rate birder, and is no less deserving of our attention.

Tours that cater for birding with a camera: Is this for you?
Imagine dawn in the Australian bush. You are with a small group on tour. Everyone has binoculars, and is carrying a camera; although they range from point-and-shoots to big-lens SLRs. It is still twilight, but the dawn chorus is amazing and your guide is calling out what is around. The regulars, such as Noisy Friarbird, Pied Butcherbird, and Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike are all singing. But she also hears a distant call of the Painted Honeyeater, so you go after the rare bird immediately and get some great views, and noisy record shots. A mixed flock moves through, you see most things and get a couple of good photos of Rufous Whistler and Jacky Winter. The light improves and a Spotted Pardalote calls nearby; the guide knows that if she works it, all the clients will get fantastic shots of this snappy-looking bird, so the focus of the moment changes immediately. “Guys, this is a tiny bird, but it will probably come in really close when I ‘pish’. It is most likely to settle on these branches at eye-level so get ready for that, and I suggest you set your depth-of-field to be between f5.6 and f8 so you get a good out of focus background”. The bird duly
arrives and everyone gets cracking photos. Meanwhile, the guide has noticed a group of Little Lorikeets high in the tall eucalypts, so she puts the spotting scope on them and explains that the back-litting is so terrible it is best to probably just get good looks at these temperamental little parrots, as we might not see them again on tour. “But be quick guys” she says, “I hear a Crested Shrike-Tit singing nearby and we are going to want to see and photograph that baby” Sound appealing? It certainly does to us.

The hard sell
There will always be pure birders that are not interested in anything other than birding. And our dedicated birding tours will always continue to cater to this core interest group. But we also see a need for a new product line to provide for the many folks whose interest has shifted; not shifted much, but enough to make a difference to the way they want to birdwatch, and the way that they travel. Pure birders can celebrate this development, as it means that camera-toting birders are less likely to sign-up for a strictly birding itinerary, preferring our ‘Birding with a Camera’ products. Other companies resistant to the changing nature of birding will claim that they have been serving the best interests of birders with a photography bent for years. But that is doubtful. Eight years ago Tropical Birding noticed some tension between pure birders and folks that wanted to spend more time photographing while birding. We trained some of our guides in photography, hired some specialist photographer instructors, and started offering photography tours. This also kept the pure birders much happier, as we were able to lure the photographers away from the ‘pure birding’ tours. In doing so we made all participants more satisfied, by giving those with a blossoming interest a new space. We soon realized the need to divide our photography trips into pure photography – for the dedicated bird photographer, where the shot is all that counts, and more opportunistic photography trips, with a greater travel experience component. Now we are again at a juncture where many birders want the very best of both worlds.

Birders that love photography want to be on a trip where they get to see lots of birds. They want a top notch guide who knows the vocalizations, taxonomy and identifying features. But they also want a guide who knows how to photograph birds, understands lighting, camera gear and can teach basic photo processing. If you have found yourself at the back of the line in a birding group, feeling guilty about trying to get that shot or not wanting to hold the group up, then maybe you no longer belong on a pure birding tour (although Tropical Birding will always continue to service that important market), and would do much better surrounded by like minded hybrid birder-photographers.

This new genre of trips is going to be branded ‘Birding with a Camera’ or BwC tours. We will start by offering up to fifteen destinations, and will add more as demand increases for this type of trip. The initial BwC destinations include Southeast Brazil, Northern Peru, Southern Ecuador, Northern Ecuador, Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, South Africa, Northern India, Indonesia, Taiwan, Ethiopia, USA Warbler migration, Upper Texas Coast and Alaska.

When compared to the over 150 pure birding, other photography and natural history trips we run every year, this may not seem like a massive change for Tropical Birding. But we feel that it will result in a significant change in satisfaction for the increasing number of people that love birding with a camera. It is clear to us that many in the bird tourism industry are out of synch with their clients’ interests. We are used to setting trends and having others follow, so why not join us on a BwC tour if your interests in birding have shifted that way?

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The sea of green beneath us is sparsely dotted with flecks of yellow, orange, and the occasional pink. Meandering dark rivers weave their way in intricate shapes for unknown distances, flowing from the Andes into, eventually, the Amazon. We fly low. We fly slow. This is no jet we find ourselves in. We are traveling in a truly historic vessel: the venerable DC-3, the “workhorse” of numerous wars around the world. It was the first mass-produced civil/commercial aircraft to popularize commuter air travel. Pilots around the globe have been heard to say, “The only replacement for a DC-3 is another DC-3.” For us, it is a replacement for our flight to Mitú, Colombia, which was supposed to be aboard a commercial jet. The only company flying this route has lived up to its reputation for being completely unreliable, despite paid-in-full reservations. The DC-3 we are flying in, and the charter company that removed cargo from its innards to install extra seats for us, has proved to be much more reliable. As we fly a mere 2,000 feet above the trees, the Amazonian wilderness, languishing in the heat of one of the most powerful dry seasons on record, stretches out from horizon to horizon. Even though this cargo plane is older than any of us (and it has the D-Day decals to prove it!), we feel very grateful.
Top 10 Birds in Colombia

So began a journey—a quest, of sorts—devised, slowly, over the years prior to this trip in 2013. Colombia’s eco-tourism sector was blossoming. I had had the privilege of traveling to and guiding bird tours in many of the rarely-visited corners of this natural wonderland in search of most of the prized bird and mammal species. Until a decade ago, few people considered traveling to Colombia because of its long civil war. After some two dozen visits, I had finally acquiesced to my boss’s request to plan an itinerary that could net more than 1,000 bird species in less than a month. I should be able to pull off this feat now, or I never would, I told myself.

That’s the very brief backstory of how nine birders found themselves en route from Villavicencio to the mostly uncatalogued backcountry of the Colombian Amazon, at Mitú. What transpired over the subsequent 27 days would become a legend in my mind, a series of events that I can recall only in bits and pieces now, nearly four years later. It was intense, and overwhelming, in the way only a journey seldom undertaken by any one individual can be. The trip spanned from the eastern border shared with Brazil to the west across all three Andean ranges within Colombia, including the two vast river valleys in between and a trek through the coastal and montane habitats of the Santa Marta mountain range and Guajira Peninsula to the north. We had days in sweltering rainforests following ant swarms and staring in awe of Guianan Cocks-of-the-rock on lek. We had days in freezing páramo (alpine “grassland”) staring in awe of a Buffy Helmetcrest feeding on the most beautiful bright purple flowers imaginable, just after enjoying Rufous-fronted Parakeets flying out of the frozen rock crevices they roost in. In between, we had days all over the place, even an afternoon stroll on the beach with flamingos.

Summing up the experience of that first Colombia “mega-tour” would take more words than anyone would care to read—or than I would care to write—and would still utterly fail to convey the sense of wonder and the respect for nature and local culture I felt with each new bird, new forest, and new town we visited. Rather than try to recapture the whole experience, I’ll list the Top 10 sightings of that month. It was frustrating to choose only 10 out of 1,017 species we recorded on the tour, but it was done enthusiastically and with great care. Here are the A-listers:

#1 • Santa Marta Screech-Owl
*Megascops* sp. nov.

There is something satisfying about seeing an “undescribed” species: It creates a great feeling of wonder, accompanied by the quenching of a deep curiosity upon encountering a bird that is so “new”. Such is the case with the Santa Marta Screech-Owl. It was suspected for years...
to be a new species based on recordings made decades earlier, though finding the birds proved difficult enough to thwart discovery efforts until the late 2000s. As luck would have it, a lodge was built right in the middle of the territory of a breeding pair. The rest is, as they say, history.

While the pair breeding near the lodge grounds became fairly well-known and somewhat regularly encountered, the true range of this species is unknown, as are many of its habits. Access to this species’ range is possible only via the one road that travels up onto the San Lorenzo ridge of the Santa Marta range. Moreover, the road is suitable only for four-wheel-drive vehicles with exceptionally high clearance, a heavy suspension, a skilled driver who knows the road well, and a month’s supply of Dramamine. Only 10–20 individuals of this species have ever been observed by humans, all at an elevational range of about 6,000 to 8,500 feet. The sum of what we know about the species can be summed up in a few short paragraphs.

When we enjoyed leisurely views of this lovely, relatively colorful screech-owl on a day roost at the aforementioned lodge, it quickly shot to the top of our list. We had checked known roost sites the two days prior, as well as attempting, in vain, to see it at night. We had nearly given up when one last check of the most visible and most easily accessed roost site proved successful! This was close to the end of our tour, and though not the final highlight (we had some 30+ species to go to reach 1,000), the experience of finally finding the owl felt somehow symbolic of all our efforts in the field during this wonderful month of birding.

#5 • Guianan Cock-of-the-Rock
*Rupicola rupicola*

This is unquestionably one of the most iconic birds of South America and one of the most striking birds on Earth: bright orange, with wings banded in black and white, and the signature, bizarre tuft of feathers on the forehead covering the bill. Mitú has the most impressive lek I’ve ever seen of this species. With, at times, seven lekking males displaying some 20 feet off the trail, our views of this astonishing species and its unique breeding behavior were unrivaled. The trek to get to the lek site was equally memorable, requiring a pre-dawn departure out the only road leaving town, then a transfer to a tractor-drawn flatbed trailer before reaching the community where we disembarked to begin the few kilometers walk through the forest to the lekking arena. Our Chestnut-crested
Antbird experience was the very same day, only minutes after departing the lek. We tallied 146 species in the forest that day. It’s not only the bird itself but also the journey that makes these birds so special. Of course, it doesn’t hurt to be retina-searing orange and possess a vocabulary of sci-fi sound effects to endeavor yourself to visiting birders.

#3 • Chestnut-crested Antbird
*Rhegmatorhina cristata*

Chestnut-crested Antbird belongs to my favorite genus of birds on the planet, and a very odd one: *Rhegmatorhina*. These antbirds are among those that give the family their English name—they are ant swarm “obligates”. Obligate antbirds have a special predilection for following and capitalizing on ant swarms, more so than other antbirds that can survive without a proliferation of army ants to scare up their food. These birds follow ant swarms for days, aggressively defending their positions at the leading edge of the swarm with a number of antics, so that they may eat the choicest of prey items rustled up by the relentless army ants. Over time, these species have evolved to become dependent on ant swarms and are known to abandon nesting territories, temporarily, to follow ants. This also means that a birder is unlikely to see one of these scarce obligate antbirds without finding an ant swarm.

Ant swarms are notoriously ephemeral, dependent on weather, and hard to follow unless you have wings for maneuvering among trees, shrubs, and tangles of vines. Add to that the low density of obligate antbirds, even in the most pristine forest ecosystems, and a visiting birder could easily say that dumb luck plays a huge part in getting to see one of these birds. *Rhegmatorhina* antbirds also happen to be the most handsome and charismatic of the lot, responding to playback with crests fully distended and brightly colored orbital skin accentuating their large eyes. It’s no surprise that this species, which did exactly what I just described, won a top spot among the highlights of our time in Colombia. A family group of four put on an amazing show for us and yet again demonstrated how exciting antbirds can be.

#4 • Azure-naped Jay
*Cyanocorax heilprini*

This species is known from but a handful of locations. Being restricted to depleted soils in the western reaches of the Amazon basin, reasonable access and opportunity to see this beautiful bird are limited to merely two or three options. Mitú is one of those options. Where one is most likely to encounter this highly sought-after bird just happens to involve a short hike up the side of an incredible dome of rock, similar to a small tepui. Reaching over 300 feet above the surrounding rainforest, the viewpoint is utterly humbling, with nothing but vast wilderness stretching out beyond eye’s reach, impeded only by a few, neighboring tepuis jutting up out of the perfect green like stony monolithic mistakes. In
this case, atmosphere and environment had as much to do with this species’s inclusion in the Top 10 as the nature and beauty of the bird itself. The bird is undeniably a beautiful one, with subtle gradients of shock-blue into dusky grey, even white, and a gleaming yellow eye that gives an air of comprehension and curiosity that the bird’s behavior seems to affirm. Our experience with a flock of five individuals cavorting atop a tree just above eye level on the slope below us was a memorable one, with umbrellabirds displaying and parrots coming in to roost as we gazed across the treetops to a sunset horizon.

#5 • White-tipped Quetzal
*Pharomachrus fulgidus*

As we were descending from the highest access in the Santa Marta range, I heard the distinctive “giggle” of a quetzal. While the advertising song of males carries far and typically consists of a series of disyllabic tones repeated at intervals, quetzals utter a litany of less-obvious cackles, giggles, pips, and so forth. It took less than two minutes after stepping out of the vehicles before we were face-to-face with a stunning adult male White-tipped Quetzal. This species is restricted to the few coastal mountain ranges of northeastern Colombia and northwestern Venezuela. A combination of the allure of a range-restricted, rare species and undeniable beauty and charisma secured this species’s position in the Top 5.

#6 • White-capped Tanager
*Sericossypha albocristata*

For decades, the word tanager and the family Thraupidae were used as a catch-all for any bird smallish, colorful, and prone to flocking. Their shapes, colors, and sizes boggle conventional comprehension of closely related species. White-capped Tanager is one of the prime examples of a tanager that defies the idea of a tanager. It’s a large bird—both longer and heavier than other tanagers. It’s loud. Most tanagers have very high-pitched songs and calls that don’t carry great distances, but the vocalizations of White-capped Tanagers are easily detected from hundreds of meters away. White-capped Tanagers don’t join the mixed-species flocks that South America is famous for. Instead, they travel together in family groups. They’re outstanding birds with outstanding iridescent plumage, gleaming snow-white heads, and deep crimson throats. After hearing a distant group calling, I used playback during our last day in promising habitat. True to their curious nature, a flock of White-capped Tanagers flew across the valley and descended upon us in a hail of raucous squawks and outlandish color. A few individuals were no more than 15 feet away! Though it was but one member of a family we had recorded more than 100 species of during our time in Colombia, we
stood agape, glowing, as these scarce, stunning birds paraded about us.

#7 • Black-and-white Owl
_Ciccaba nigrolineata_
When participants pick their Top 10 species of the tour, they tend to go for the rare or range-restricted. Yet Black-and-white Owl is very widespread. It occurs throughout the Neotropics, from Mexico to Peru. It is not particularly uncommon where it occurs, and it is usually cooperative when found. It is also an impressively handsome bird. We enjoyed great looks at a day-roosting pair right above the roadway, and they got probably even better looks at us. It was another intimate, very satisfying encounter with a beautiful species.

#8 • Black Solitaire
_Entomodestes coracinus_
Some species of solitaires are relatively common, widespread, or, at the very least, numerous in appropriate habitats. Most have well-known ranges, habitat preferences, food preferences, and general biology. Although I have seen more than a dozen Black Solitaires in one day (a most extraordinary day!), most encounters with Black Solitaire are with a solitary individual. Often, those encounters are unsatisfyingly brief. This denizen of the wettest montane forests in the western Andes is among the most-anticipated species for any birder visiting the region, for it is as emblematic of the lush Chocó bioregion as it is surprisingly graceful and lovely to behold. Seeing one is far from a guarantee, and so we were all delighted when we found one perched low, right next to our deep forest trail, after it flushed off a nest! Amazing views were had of this dapper bird, right down to its incongruous, staring red eye.

#9 • Crested Ant-Tanager
_Habia cristata_
This species requires far less explanation. It’s red, with a radiant neon pinky-red crest that glows amidst the brown-and-green mossy montane forests it inhabits. It goes in flocks, usually family groups of four or more, and makes incessant squeaks, chirrups, creaks, and buzzes as it makes its way through the middle- and lower-story growth. We had not one but two magnificent run-ins with groups of this dynamic, Colombian-endemic species, and in both instances we enjoyed fabulous, lengthy views.
#10 • Bare-crowned Antbird
*Gimnocichla nudiceps*

Antbirds are famous among Neotropical bird enthusiasts as being impossibly, well, Neotropical. Their cryptic plumages and elusive natures only amplify the elation of a truly intimate encounter. They blend in with the undergrowth and tangles they inhabit. They are heard far more often than seen and reach their epicenter of diversity in the most Neotropical of places: the Amazon Basin. Arguably, Bare-crowned Antbird is the most bizarre of the lot. It might even be one of the most bizarre-looking birds anywhere. It’s a hefty, stout, and loud bird of thick tangles in thick jungles, where the only thing thicker than the layer of DEET applied is the humidity in the air. Patience and a heavy dose of motivation are needed to catch a glimpse of the species. It requires nearly divine intervention to experience what we experienced with this bird: a male, in the company of a female, came up out of a ravine to sit on a bare branch no more than 10 feet from us and sang. And sang! Then he flared the white mantle feathers the species uses in courtship display. Then sang some more. And this is how a member of this relatively dull (though incredibly ornate and complexly-plumaged) family made it into the Top 10—by becoming truly intimate with our company.

I have guided two “mega-tours” since our first one (in 2013), of which I reminisce in this article. They have had varying degrees of success, with my recent attempt barely reaching the mark. To date, I believe our 2014 tour, which tallied 1,044 species, remains the highest tour total of any group. With such a tempting goal looming, new records will surely be set. I hope that those undertaking the endeavor enjoy the amazing journey as much as I have, wherever it may lead them. In terms of birds and birding, Colombia is among the top three countries of the 52 I’ve visited. It’s the culture, the scenic beauty, and the warmth I’ve felt from the Colombian people, however, that make it perhaps my favorite country of all.

¡Viva Colombia!

EDITOR’S NOTE: For more on birding in Colombia, check out Nate Skinner’s article in the August 2013 issue of Birder’s Guide to Travel.
When Jay-Z, the Brooklyn-born disciple of the legendary hip-hop artist Notorious B.I.G. (“Biggie”), rapped the words on the opposite page 20 years ago, he might not have foreseen the popular ascent that Brooklyn was to make over a couple of decades. It was known for much of the 20th century as a thriving hub of immigrant communities and the birthplace of many cultural icons, but not necessarily a must-see location for someone visiting the Big Apple for the first time, and it was in fact actively avoided by many visitors. Nowadays it is a destination for people from all over the world and a pop-culture darling—as well as a flash point in the ongoing debates on the costs and benefits of gentrification. Despite the relatively recent popularity of Brooklyn as a destination to most of the world, there has been one international constituency that has been steadfast in its use of the borough through the centuries: birds.

Close your eyes and think of New York City. What do you see? It is likely to be any number of famous images: one of many landmarks or events, scenes from movies or television, the buzzing energy of a bustling melting pot, pizza, bagels, or maybe just a seething mass of humanity amid canyons of glass and concrete. For most people, nature isn’t one of those images. Even many birders aren’t aware that there are rich reservoirs of avian life beyond Manhattan’s well-known Central Park.

Kings County is known by most in the world simply as Brooklyn, one of the five boroughs of New York City. Many of the attributes that helped New York City grow into the metropolis that it is also make it great for birds. Positioned at the mouths of the Hudson and East rivers, with a massive harbor, and lying at the corner of the north–south shoreline of the Mid-Atlantic to the south, and east–west shoreline of southern New England and the 130-mile-long behemoth of Long Island, it is a geographically unique corner of the country. No borough in the city is better
situated than Brooklyn to take advantage of this geography. Coasts tend to concentrate migrants that don’t want to be blown offshore, and they act as leading lines to keep migrants on track. Being at the confluence of two coasts, and the mouth of a large river (another leading line) with such radically different orientations is a unique attribute. The harbor, back bay, and scarcity of good habitat further concentrate birds. So, unsurprisingly, Brooklyn has one of the most diverse bird lists of any county on the U.S. East Coast, with over 400 species recorded.

While not the geographic center of Brooklyn, Prospect Park is in many ways its epicenter. Planned by the designers of Manhattan’s Central Park, Central’s younger sibling was designed as a refuge from the city, rather than as a showcase for urbanity, as Central was. Walking in Central Park, you will rarely find yourself in a place where some part of the skyline isn’t deliberately visible, even if framed by beautiful parkland; on the other hand, you can be most anywhere in Prospect Park without having an inkling that you’re “Brooklyn...I’m from where the hammers rung, news cameras never come.”

– Jay-Z
in the heart a big city. This dovetails with Prospect Park hosting denser, more natural, unmanicured habitats for birds. Just to the west of Prospect Park is another large urban green space, Green-Wood Cemetery, opened 30 years before the Civil War. Green-Wood is almost as large as Prospect Park, though weekend visits provide very different experiences: Prospect Park brims with human recreation, while you can walk around Green-Wood and seldom see another soul. These two green spaces dominate north–central Brooklyn, not only be-

This map of Brooklyn gives a good sense of how restricted open space is in Kings County and also hints at why what green space does exist is so important and productive. Brooklyn Bridge Park, being isolated from other productive patches of habitat, does not have its own map, but it is accessible by multiple means of public transportation, as well as a small metered parking lot off Furman Street along the east side of the park, under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Map © Rad Smith

Clapper Rails breed in Brooklyn’s saltmarshes, and they are occasionally seen as migrants in Prospect Park! Photo © Douglas Gochfeld
cause of their size but also because of their terrain. In addition to the geographic factors mentioned earlier, much of Brooklyn lies on the terminal moraine of the Wisconsin Ice Sheet, an accumulation of sand and stone deposited by a vast glacier during the last glacial maximum. Decades before the establishments of Green-Wood Cemetery and Prospect Park on these glacial high points, their topography shielded the retreat of George Washington’s continental army during the first major battle of the Revolutionary War. Nowadays, these high points act as wooded beacons for migrants arriving over an otherwise flat, mostly de-forested, coastal plain.

**The Prospect Park Effect**

The first thing you would notice, if given a bird’s-eye view of Brooklyn, is the huge green oasis at its center, amidst a sea of concrete, glass, and noise. Birds migrating at night see this unlit swath of vegetation, comprised of Prospect Park and the adjacent Green-Wood Cemetery, amid the surrounding world of lights as a haven in the otherwise-inhospitable landscape. In spring and fall, Prospect and Green-Wood can be filled with migrants. On exceptional spring days, one can see nearly 30 species of warblers between the two. Almost every species of eastern warbler is recorded here annually, some in staggeringly high numbers.

Green-Wood Cemetery differs from Prospect Park in that it is much more manicured, with many tall trees but limited undergrowth. It really shines during spring songbird migration, though it also concentrates sparrows in the fall. Sometimes thousands of Chipping Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos scatter across the ground, foraging in a way that

- **Prospect Park and Green-Wood Cemetery** are easily accessible by public transportation, with a plethora of nearby subway and bus lines. If you’re looking for some quality food, 5th and 7th avenues in Park Slope are packed with delicious offerings from all over the world. There are plenty of classic New York pizzerias, too, including Luigi’s Pizza just a few blocks north of Green-Wood’s main entrance on 5th Avenue (try one of their to-die-for fresh mozzarella slices—you won’t be disappointed). Make sure to check on Green-Wood Cemetery’s hours before planning your visit there—it usually opens at 8 a.m. and closes at 4 or 5 p.m. Map © Rad Smith
creates the illusion of a mass of fallen leaves alive in the wind. In winter, the high concentration of conifers makes Green-Wood a solid spot for irrupting boreal species, from Red-breasted Nuthatches to crossbills, and American Goldfinches roam the tops of the sweetgum trees, often with a few Pine Siskins in tow. The vegetated slopes surrounding several small ponds are worth a check in any season (a reliable spot for Louisiana Waterthrush in April), and Green-Wood’s hills, among them the highest in Brooklyn, can be excellent promontories for a hawk watch in either migration season.

While Green-Wood is splendid, Prospect Park is a true dynamo, especially during spring and fall migrations (though there are birds to be found at any time of the year). A spring morning’s birding can deliver over a hundred bird species. Among the wide array of charismatic songbirds, the cryptic Bicknell’s Thrush has been documented here multiple times in the spring and is likely annual in small numbers. Prospect Park boasts Brooklyn’s only lake, where even waterbirds like Sora, Virginia Rail, and Solitary Sandpiper, desperate for something resembling appropriate habitat amid the concrete jungle, will drop in. As May comes to an end and the final spring migrants head north, attractive breeding birds take up residence, including Orchard Oriole, Wood Thrush, Warbling Vireo, Great-crested Flycatcher, and Wood Duck. Autumn flushes the park with waves of songbirds—a good migration day from August into November finds the park bursting with birds. In October and November, the days are highlighted by a great diversity of sparrows and sometimes tremendous numbers of common short-distance migrants. Lookout Hill, the Peninsula, and the Midwood and Ravine are some of the forested areas to target, but just about anywhere can be fruitful.

When winter comes, the gravitational center of birding in the park shifts to Prospect Lake. Thousands of gulls, Ring-billed Gulls predominating, use the lake when it has an icy edge, and in this mass are sometimes Iceland, Lesser Black-backed, or Black-headed gulls. Hundreds of waterfowl, predominantly Northern Shoveler and Ruddy Duck but often others as well, use whatever open water is available. A bird feeding station on Breeze Hill, maintained in the winter months by volunteers from the Brooklyn Bird Club, is a great place to view the regular winterers at one’s leisure, including “Red” Fox Sparrow and sometimes Rusty Blackbird. Prospect and Green-Wood also host woodlands sufficiently extensive to support nesting Great Horned Owls, while Northern Saw-whet Owl and Long-eared Owl are occasional fall and winter visitors, though difficult to find. There’s also the distinct possibility of the unexpected: some of the rarities seen in Prospect Park over the years include Townsend’s Warbler, Swainson’s Warbler, Western Tanager, Swallow-tailed Kite, Mississippi Kite, White Ibis, Red-necked Phalarope, Barnacle Goose, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Scissor-
Coney Island and Gravesend Bay

At the southernmost end of Brooklyn lies Coney Island, bordered by Lower New York Bay to its south and Gravesend Bay to its north. Once several islands of sand dunes and marshes, until connected to mainland Brooklyn by landfill, Coney Island is today a land of cultural icons. The south coastal swath of Coney Island hosts the original Nathan’s Famous, an illustrious temple of gluttony home to a notorious annual hotdog-eating contest that by some accounts dates back to 1916. The skyline is dominated by the long-disused and exceptionally conspicuous 250-foot-tall Parachute Jump, formerly a dangerous amusement park ride, today a historical landmark. Its neighboring landmarks, the Wonder Wheel Ferris wheel and the Cyclone, an 80-year-old wooden roller coaster that never gives you the same ride twice, are still in use today. Of course, these urban amusements are clustered here for a reason: the beach. The Coney Island beachfront was historically the only classic sandy beach in Brooklyn.

Coney Island Beach | Since the southern beaches of Coney Island, which look out onto Lower New York Bay, are manicked and maintained for beach-goers, there is no longer any natural dune habitat. Still, it is a good place to find gulls and terns roosting on the beaches and jetties, and it is also a productive seawatching vantage. Black Skimmers can number well over 500 in late summer and fall, and the stone jetties scattered along the beach typically host a few Purple Sandpipers from late fall to early spring. In the winter, a couple thousand gulls can be found here daily, especially in the afternoon. Mixed in may be Lesser Black-backed, Iceland, and Glaucous gulls. The late winter and early spring bring huge numbers of Long-tailed Ducks and Red-breasted Mergansers into the bay, visible looking south. Early spring is also when the Northern Gannet spectacle rolls through town: On a good day you can...
see over a thousand Northern Gannets taking advantage of concentrations of baitfish as the birds head north. The best vantage points for waterbirds here are Coney Island Pier and the very west end of the boardwalk around West 36th Street. Regional rarities including Thick-billed Murre have been recorded, and these are probably the most reliable spots from which to see pelagic species that are rare away from the ocean proper (such as Parasitic Jaeger and shearwaters). While most birders focus on this area in the colder months, the summer proved its worth in July 2011, when an adult Gray-hooded Gull was found by birders taking a midsummer stroll along the crowded beach. Only the second time this species had been seen in the U.S., the promise of a glimpse of this handsome denizen of South America and Africa precipitated a great influx of birders from all over the country during the week in which it was observed.

**Coney Island Creek** | Just northwest of Coney Island lies Coney Island Creek. On the north side of the creek is Calvert Vaux Park, formerly known as Dreier-Offerman Park. It features breeding Indigo Buntings and Orchard Orioles and has Brooklyn’s only recent breeding record of Blue Grosbeak. It is also a great place to find migrants, especially sparrows. One can expect double-digit species of sparrows on a good day of migration in October or November. All this would be enough on its own, but Calvert Vaux Park also has an exciting track record of rarities, its most famous avian visitor being a Western Reef-Heron (the fourth North American record of this African species), which was seen sporadically over the course of a month in summer 2007.

On the south side of Coney Island Creek is a thin line of trees, largely black locusts, and remnants of natural dunes that together form the tiny Coney Island Creek Park. If you come here in winter, you might doubt that birds are ever present, but come on a good migration day in spring or fall, especially one with some overnight precipita-
tion, and you might find the park awash in migrants. It is also one of the only places in Brooklyn to watch a quintessential morning flight of migrating passerines. This phenomenon is mostly restricted to mornings preceded by nights with favorable migration winds, southwest or light west in the spring, west to northwest in the fall. Standing in the dunes at the western edge of the trees, you can see waves of warblers, kinglets, sparrows, flycatchers, and other landbirds flying into the wind, many heading out over New York Bay toward New Jersey or Staten Island. It is also a good vantage point from which to view Gravesend Bay throughout the year, has records of Roseate Tern, Thick-billed Murre, and Black-headed Gull, and annually hosts Glaucous and Iceland gull in the winter. Cave Swallow has been seen here on favorable migration days in November. Before you leave Coney Island, don’t forget to enjoy a quintessential New York pizza pie at the legendary Totonno’s Pizzeria Napolitana (opened in 1924), one of the few coal-fired brick oven pizzerias remaining in the city. This joint may have propelled pizza towards becoming an American food staple!

**Gravesend Bay** | The pedestrian promenade running along the northern rim of Gravesend Bay, alongside the car commuter’s nemesis that is the Belt Parkway, is always worth a check in the cooler months, with many possibilities of waterbirds depending on season. It is the best place in Brooklyn to reliably see large numbers of Bonaparte’s Gulls during migration, and two taxa of Mew Gull, including the European “Common Gull”, have been seen here. This is also a good vantage point for storm birding, which has produced, during hurricanes, a tropicbird of undetermined species, shearwaters, storm-petrels, jaegers,

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**Here is the bird that launched a thousand pairs of binoculars. This eye-popping male Painted Bunting became perhaps the most photographed individual of its species when it spent a bit over a month in Prospect Park from Thanksgiving 2015 into the new year. Pictured is a small sample of people “losing their s--- over this bird”, as the *New York Post* quoted at the time. Photos © Douglas Gochfeld**

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**This part of Brooklyn is not well-serviced by the subway system, but there are many bus lines, and vehicular access is easy. The Q35 bus goes all the way down Flatbush Avenue and stops right in front of Floyd Bennett Field, and the B3, which you can take from Gravesend Bay, stops at Marine Park. The Sheepshead Bay subway station on the B,Q line (B only on weekdays) is proximal to Sheepshead Bay (which can have concentrations of waterfowl in the colder months), and it is a little over a mile from Plumb Beach. You can take the B4 bus to get most of the way from the subway station to Plumb Beach. Floyd Bennett Field is an ideal place for birding by bicycle. Map © Rad Smith**

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**Purple Sandpiper. Photo © Douglas Gochfeld**
Belt Parkway bike path or by car via the Plumb Beach rest stop on the eastbound (eastbound only) Belt Parkway, between exits 9 and 11. The beach and dunes themselves are a nice geographical feature to concentrate birds, but a lot of the appeal comes from the saltmarsh to the north of the beach and the tidal mudflats that run the entire length of beach on the inlet side. It can be worth visiting at any time of year.

The beach is perhaps best known among nature enthusiasts as a spawning site for horseshoe crabs. A visit between mid-May and early June should enable you to experience these remarkable prehistoric creatures, along with the attendant shorebirds and gulls vying for their eggs. For a spectacle of maximum impact, aim for either a full moon or new moon high tide.

As for birds, the marsh hosts multiple pairs of breeding Clapper Rails, and sometimes breeding Seaside Sparrows, among other marsh species. Semipalmated Sandpipers, Sanderlings, and Red Knots are some of the regular migrant shorebirds, but other species seen here include Hudsonian and Marbled godwits; Buff-breasted, Baird’s, White-rumped, and Western sandpipers; Whimbrel; Wilson’s Phalarope; and Ruff. Shorebirds can be plentiful in spring during their northbound passage and again in late summer on their way south, with greater numbers in the spring and greater diversity in late summer. October through early November offers a truly excellent, and rare, opportunity for comparison of marsh sparrows, as the saltmarsh features multiple subspecies of Nelson’s Sparrow, alongside Saltmarsh, Seaside, and apparent hybrid Saltmarsh x Nelson’s sparrows. In winter, Plumb Beach quarters modest numbers of “Ipswich” Savannah Sparrows and has played host to Common Redpoll, Glaucous Gull, and King Eider. Lastly, you can’t talk about Plumb’s birdlife without bringing up its rarity track record, which is exceptional for any site of comparable size in the

Rockaway Inlet and Floyd Bennett Field

Plumb Beach | Rockaway Inlet, which opens into Jamaica Bay, is the westernmost inlet on Long Island and is the body of water between the Queens barrier beach and south Brooklyn. Plumb Beach (formerly spelled Plum) is a tongue of sand jutting eastward inside Rockaway Inlet, just east of the Coney Island land mass. It is accessible via the Belt Parkway bike path or by car via the Plumb Beach rest stop on the eastbound (eastbound only) Belt Parkway, between exits 9 and 11. The beach and dunes themselves are a nice geographical feature to concentrate birds, but a lot of the appeal comes from the saltmarsh to the north of the beach and the tidal mudflats that run the entire length of beach on the inlet side. It can be worth visiting at any time of year.

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region. These have included Franklin’s Gull, LeConte’s Sparrow, Northern Wheatear, and a mind-boggling and unprecedented Eastern Yellow Wagtail, the only record of this species for the East Coast of North America.

**Floyd Bennett Field** | Floyd Bennett Field was created by filling in saltmarsh at the western edge of Jamaica Bay to build New York City’s first municipal airport in 1930. During World War II, it served as a naval air station, and in 1972 the land was transferred to the National Park Service. It consists mostly of open grasslands around the runways bordered by maritime forest and coastal scrub, with several other microhabitats interspersed throughout the grounds. This mix of habitats hosts good numbers of breeding Willow Flycatchers, White-eyed Vireos, and Savannah Sparrows. The grasslands are the only place locally to see high numbers of Bobolinks on the ground (in August), and the entire site is excellent in fall migration for sparrow diversity.

The community garden on the west side of the property is usually a great bet for all kinds of migrant songbirds (and butterflies!), and the second New York State record of Cassin’s Kingbird spent a couple months here in 2014–2015. The boat ramp at the eastern edge of Floyd Bennett hosts a large evening roost of Ring-billed Gulls (often over 2,000) in the winter, and features mudflats at low tide, where Franklin’s Gull, Black-headed Gull, Barrow’s Goldeneye, and Ross’s Goose have occurred. Up to eight (!) Snowy Owls were here during the regional mega-irruption in winter 2013–2014, and it’s the only spot in the borough to semi-reliably see this Arctic species during its winter wanderings.

**Marine Park** | The Salt Marsh Nature Center at Marine Park, which abuts Floyd Bennett Field, features a nice gravel path around the edge of a saltmarsh and through some newly planted upland grassland habitat which has proven great for Bobolink and American Kestrel. It is a phenomenal spot to see breeding Clapper Rail and also very good for nesting Seaside Sparrow, Marsh Wren, and Willow Flycatcher. Rarities found at the marsh include a flock of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and the state’s second record of “Common Gull”. The area can also be great for butterflies, especially in late summer and fall.

**Brooklyn Bridge Park**

At the opposite end of Brooklyn, this wonderful new urban park in the shadow of the iconic Brooklyn Bridge offers one of the great views of the lower Manhattan skyline, while also providing a diverse array of microhabitats that can be fantastic for avian migrants. Construction on the park began in 2008 and is ongoing, but what used to be several unused derelict piers is now a patchwork of good bird habitat and public use areas, including basketball courts, a soccer field, and a picnic area. Because of the small amount of habitat, and the fact that it’s mostly deciduous, this is a place to target during migration (though there is a December record of an Ovenbird from here). Migrants like Connecticut Warbler and an out-of-place Sora have been tallied here amidst the more typical migrants.

A large roost of gulls is a daily spectacle in winter: from 2015 through 2017, there were consistent peaks of over 4,000 Ring-billed Gulls and a few hundred Herring Gulls, and the roost has also featured Iceland and Black-headed gulls. The floating marina docks between Piers 3 and 5 are the main roosting area, and stopping by just before dusk is very productive. Pier 3, which was the last undeveloped pier on the park grounds and which the gulls use as a staging area before roosting, is being improved for public use; it is unclear what this will do to the gull roost in future winters.

If you find yourself birding in this fantastic juxtaposition of habitat and cityscape, swing by one of two rightly famous pizza joints just down the block: Juliana’s and Grimaldi’s.
Jamaica Bay

After Central Park, Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge is probably the most well-known birding location in New York City. Most of the trails at the refuge lie in Queens, so the refuge itself is not addressed in this article. However, much of Jamaica Bay lies in Brooklyn, and several birding sites are accessible along the west side of the bay (one of which, Floyd Bennett Field, is discussed above). One very interesting new development—occurring just as this article was headed to press—was the proposal for a new 400-acre state park on the site of two capped landfills along the Jamaica Bay shoreline. This is a double-edged sword. Right now, these capped landfills contain very good open land habitat, but there is no public access (it is birded once a year during the Christmas Bird Count). If this park is established, it will open public access to a huge swath of habitat in a very geographically interesting area, but the landscaping inherent in the design of a park targeted for the use of all residents in a city of 8 million may also dramatically reduce the size of useful native habitat for wildlife.

Hendrix Creek | The discharge of warm water from a wastewater plant makes this perhaps the best spot around for winter duck diversity (“Eurasian” Green-winged Teal has been seen in the teal flock here), as well as Wilson’s Snipe. The good edge habitat and the warm microclimate allow insectivorous passerines—including Black-throated Green, Blackpoll, and Yellow warblers; Northern Parula; and other “half-hardies”—to persist much later into the fall and winter than they otherwise would. As for regionally scarcer species, the creek has hosted Prothonotary Warbler in the spring and Clay-colored Sparrow in the fall. Given how infrequently the site is birded, this is surely just the tip of the iceberg.

Paerdegat Basin | The saltmarsh edges can be good for *Ammodramus* sparrows or Marsh Wrens, the coastal scrub can be great for passerines in late fall and winter, and there are new parks opening to the public over the next couple years along its eastern and western flanks that should be fruitful for sparrows in the fall. This is also a consistent spot for Barn Owl, though there is no known nest site in the immediate vicinity. Accessing the basin from Bergen Avenue on the south side is the best bet, though the seldomly-birded habitat on the north side of the creek, along Paerdegat Ave., is quite good.

Canarsie Pier | The pier offers a good vantage point for the bay and a decent spot to scan for Red-necked Grebe within the masses of Horned Grebes in the fall and winter, when there is also typically a roving troop of Fish Crows nearby. There have been two “Bro Geese” (Brant x Snow Goose hybrids) wintering in the area for the past decade or so, often just east of the pier; this is a fine place to scan the neighboring landfills for raptors such as Northern Harrier and the occasional Rough-legged Hawk. It is very easy to access by car, as the pier itself is a parking lot and a popular spot for fishing.

Canarsie Park | This rejuvenated park just east of Paerdegat Basin features an impressive variety of habitats jammed into a small area. Prothonotary Warbler,
Louisiana Waterthrush, and Olive-sided Flycatcher have headlined the spring migrants. Nashville and Orange-crowned warblers have overwintered here, and the various athletic fields can host American Pipits and Horned Larks. The interior lagoon has potential for many regionally scarce birds, as well as high densities of migrants. Street parking is available on the north side of the park, but heed the no parking signs to make sure you won’t run afoul of the law.

Birding Brooklyn is a splendid experience, one that will vary with the season of your visit and (especially during the exciting migration periods) with the weather. But regardless of when you come, the juxtaposition of unexpected wild beauty amidst the myriad cultural and historical (and gastronomic!) attractions of one of the world’s great cities is immensely rewarding and unique. Whether you’re visiting New York for work, for play, by car, or by subway, and whether you’ve got a few hours or a few days, avian exploration in the county of Kings is well worth your time. Brooklyn is truly great birding! 

The map shows access points to productive birding locations around Jamaica Bay. The bay is bisected by the Brooklyn/Queens boundary that runs south through Spring Creek. Street parking is available for Canarsie Park, but check signs for street sweeping regulations. For car access to Hendrix Creek, take exit 15 off the Belt Parkway, park in the SW corner of the shopping mall parking lot, and walk across the ballfields towards the creek. It is a fairly safe area, but good judgment should be used, as always, when it comes to the safety of valuables in your vehicle. The landfills where there may be a 400+ acre state park within a few years are located on the south side of the Belt Parkway, one between Fresh Creek and Hendrix Creek, and the other between Hendrix Creek and Spring Creek. Since this is just in the proposal stage as this article goes to print, there is no further information as to access. Map © Rad Smith

![Birds flying over water](image)
Alaska’s Vagrant Hotspots

An Overview and Comparison of Adak Island, St.

Mount Moffett in Adak Island.
Photo © Stephan Lorenz
Birders traveling throughout the ABA Area searching for rare birds or the once-in-a-lifetime vagrant species will eventually set their sights on Alaska, especially the remote outposts of the Aleutian and Bering Sea islands. For the past two decades, birders have increasingly drifted towards St. Paul, St. Lawrence, and Adak islands in search of Asian migrants, rarities, or a first ABA record. Although these far-flung places in western Alaska require some determination to reach and the birding is often done in inclement weather, the potential rewards are well worth the effort.

A few summary statistics outline why ABA birders make the long trek to the remotest corners of the 49th state with many returning annually. Alaska has hosted more than 130 species of Asiatic birds. Of these, 58 have been recorded exclusively in Alaska, 42 have been found mainly in Alaska with few records in other parts of the ABA Area, and 30 species occur regularly in other regions of the ABA Area. These numbers and following summaries do not include trans-Beringian migrants that breed in Alaska (such as Arctic Warbler, Bluethroat, Eastern Yellow Wagtail) or Alaska specialties (for instance, Bristle-thighed Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Arctic Loon). At least 15 new species for the ABA Area have been found since 2000 in western Alaska, and there have been more than a dozen second or third ABA records in that time. Birders visiting Adak Island, St. Paul Island, or Gambell on St. Lawrence Island during the fall stand a reasonable chance of observing a species that is not in the latest *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*!

For several decades, Attu Island at the western end of the Aleutian Island chain drew birders in search of Asiatic vagrants. But during the past 16 years access to Attu has been difficult at best and birders have migrated elsewhere. The three most accessible places that have emerged as vagrant hotspots in past years are Adak Island in the central Aleutians, St. Paul Island in the central Bering Sea, and the Siberian Yupik village.

**Paul Island, and St. Lawrence Island**
of Gambell on St. Lawrence Island just south of the Bering Strait. All three locations provide regular flight service, good accommodations, and reliable access—along with a wide variety of rarities. Each site can be visited in the spring and fall through organized birding trips offered by several tour companies.

This article provides a brief overview of each location, summarizes which vagrant birds are likely to be seen, compares spring and fall visits, and offers basic logistical information. While each island is worth a visit in its own right for the stunning scenery, massive seabird colonies, Alaska specialty birds, and wildflower displays, this article focuses on Asian vagrants, which are best found during spring and fall.

One of the most important things to realize while vagrant hunting in western Alaska is that weather, especially wind direction, is a key factor in terms of how many rarities can be found. Asian vagrants reach these islands for various reasons, including drift vagrancy, overshooting, and misorientation, and wind direction plays an important role in each of these. Because all three locations lie to the east of the Asian mainland, the most favorable winds are southwest or west winds. Low-pressure systems moving across the Bering Sea with significant west winds and associated rain may be the most productive weather to bring Asian vagrants to Adak and St. Paul islands. The most promising conditions occur a day or two after a wind shift...
following prolonged west winds. Due to Gambell’s proximity to the Russian mainland, only a short period of west winds can be productive.

The optimal time to catch spring migration in western Alaska ranges from mid-May to mid-June. Spring migration is more concentrated compared to the fall season, and during May and June it is possible to observe pulses of shorebirds, waterfowl, and passerines heading north to reach their breeding grounds. This allows birders to hope for several Asian strays during a relatively short visit, but I still recommend a minimum one-week stay during the spring season. A longer trip increases the chance to catch a weather system conducive for vagrants. The number of rare birds present depends on wind direction, and birders should not expect more than a handful of vagrants (which would still be considered a very good trip) during a few days.

All three islands host several species of Asian vagrants annually. Some of the more expected waterfowl species include Eurasian Wigeon and Tufted Duck, while regular shorebirds include Wood Sandpiper, Lesser Sand-Plover, Ruff, and Common Snipe. Black-headed and Slaty-backed gulls are often present in the spring. Passerines are generally uncommon; however, White Wagtail (breeds on Gambell), Olive-backed pipits, Eyebrowed Thrush, Brambling, and Hawfinch are annual.

The fall season tends to be more protracted with peak movements of shorebirds, waterfowl, and passerines occurring at different times. Shorebirds visit mainly from mid-August to the beginning of September, whereas waterfowl tend to migrate later, often into October. Sharp-tailed Sandpipers pass through starting in August and can occur in large numbers in the fall, especially on St. Paul Island. Gray-tailed Tattler and Little Stint are also expected fall species, while Common Sandpiper and Temminck’s Stint are less reliable. Among passerines, warblers and flycatchers migrate earlier and are most likely during the last week of August and first week of September, whereas finches and buntings often occur well into the month of October.

In general, the fall season is highly productive, although unpredictable, with rarities occurring almost anytime between August and October. Some of the more expected fall passerines include Brambling, Rustic Bunting, Red-flanked Bluetail, and with luck Common Rosefinch. In addition, fall is the season for mega-rarities and first ABA records, with a total 15 new species for the ABA and North America being found in recent years. These have included such stunners as Eurasian Sparrowhawk on Adak Island, and Northern Boobook, Solitary Snipe, Common Redstart, and Pallas’s Rosefinch on St. Paul Island. In terms of new ABA birds, Gambell takes the crown with no less than nine additions during the past two decades: Willow Warbler, Common Chiffchaff, Pallas’s Leaf Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Sedge Warbler, Blyth’s Reed Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, and Yellow-browed Bunting.

In other words, Gambell is a great place to find Old World warblers in the New World!

With increased coverage during the fall season, several Asiatic vagrants that had been considered extremely rare are now known to be nearly annual, such as...
Jack Snipe, Willow Warbler, and Little Bunting. In addition, all of the first ABA records have occurred in the fall. Due to the prolonged nature of fall migration, I recommend a stay of at least two weeks in any of the three locations, and many birders choose even longer visits to increase their chances for the right weather conditions. If planning on making multiple visits over several spring or fall seasons, I suggest picking a slightly different time of year for each visit; for example, one August visit for shorebirds, one early September visit for passerines, and one October visit for mega-rarities.

For an overview and comparison of each location, we will work our way from south to north, starting with Adak Island and finishing with Gambell on St. Lawrence Island.

**Adak Island**

Adak lies within the Andreanof Islands group in the central Aleutians about 1,200 miles southwest of Anchorage. It is a large island, extending 34 miles in length and 22 miles in width, with elevations reaching nearly 4,000 feet on Mount Moffett. The island housed a large U.S. Naval Air Facility for many decades, but since the closure of the installation, birders can visit the island and take advantage of the remaining infrastructure. A good road system covers the northeastern portion of the island, providing access to the best birding locations. The rest of the island is trackless wilderness accessible only on foot.

Due to its large size and varied topography, Adak Island has a diversity of habitats, including lakes, marshes, lagoons, creeks, cliffs, and ravines. Large bays and extensive beaches offer endless sea-watching opportunities with the impressive Great Sitkin Volcano looming in the background. The extensive wetlands attract vagrant waterfowl and shorebirds, making Adak one of the best places to see Smew, which occurs annually; Eastern Spot-billed Duck has been found more than once. Common Snipe is reliable, possibly breeding, and it is not uncommon to see two or three winnowing above Contractor’s Camp Marsh.

One of the most productive sites includes Clam Lagoon, where tidal mudflats have attracted the largest variety of Asiatic shorebirds. In addition to the expected Asiatic species, other spring rarities recorded here include Tundra and Taiga bean-geese, Common Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper, Far Eastern Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, and Temminck’s Stint, although most of these are very rare.

Adak is situated about 440 miles east of Attu and lies too far from the major migration route to attract large numbers of Asiatic passerines during spring, but diligent birders can still hope to find Brambling and Eyebrowed Thrush. Former residents planted several stands of spruce trees with some forming the “famous” Adak National Forest, and some of these trees attract Hawfinches about every other year. It is also worth
spending time in town or around abandoned building complexes, which have hosted Common Cuckoo.

Birders started visiting Adak during the fall season only in recent years and, despite the difficulties of finding rarities on the large island, several noteworthy birds have been found. The mudflats at Clam Lagoon have hosted Marsh Sandpiper more than once, and other exceptional fall vagrants have included Eurasian Kestrel, Pacific Swift, Taiga Flycatcher, Wood Warbler, and Eurasian Sparrowhawk—a first for the ABA. Adak Island has lots of potential during the fall season but very few birders.

Two direct flights to Adak per week leave Anchorage on Sunday and on Thursday. The flight covers the 1,200 miles in three hours, but if it is cancelled in Anchorage for any reason, it will not be rescheduled until the following Thursday or Sunday, so bring patience and have an alternative plan just in case. Several outfitters rent vehicles in Adak, and fuel is available from a self-service station. Due to the large size of the island and distances between birding locations, renting a vehicle is a must. Accommodations are available in the old officer quarters; these are duplexes with kitchen facilities and living rooms. During most seasons, one or two restaurants are available, but remain flexible and bring some of your own food.

**St. Paul Island**

Remote St. Paul Island, part of the Pribilof Islands, sits amidst one of the richest marine ecosystems in the world, attracting hundreds of thousands of nesting seabirds and northern fur seals, which in turn lure birders and photographers from all around the globe. Its isolated location in the central Bering Sea, 300 miles from the Alaskan mainland and 500 miles from the Siberian coast, makes the island an ideal vagrant trap. More than 300 species of birds have been recorded on the island with about one-third of these Asiatic vagrants.

While St. Paul Island is much smaller than Adak Island and reaches only 665 feet at its highest point, its rugged topography supports a wide variety of habitats. The island harbors a rich array of wetlands with freshwater marshes, ephemeral ponds, swampy sloughs, and deep and shallow lakes sprinkled liberally throughout the island, providing ideal shorebird habitats. A tidal lagoon contains extensive mudflats, and long sandy beaches with kelp wrecks offer additional habitats for plovers and sandpipers. With more than 60 shorebird species (26 Asiatic rarities) on the island’s cumulative list, St. Paul may be one of the most diverse shorebird sites in the Northern Hemisphere.

The island’s lush maritime tundra is interrupted by lava flows, cinder cones, steep ravines, and vast stretches of sand dunes, all of which can harbor migrant birds. Sheltered areas support hip-high growth of wild celery, which are favored areas for vagrant passerines, especially
during the fall. Structures in and around town—like chain-link fences, antennas, and, most famously, tall stacks of crab pots—have also hosted good numbers of Asiatic strays.

During spring, birders can expect to see a good number of Asiatic shorebirds and, with great luck, some passerines. In addition to the aforementioned species that are fairly regular at all three sites, St. Paul Island is an excellent place for Common Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Black-tailed Godwit, and Long-toed Stint.

The best time to look for vagrant passerines is during the last week of May and first two weeks of June. Birders can hope for Eurasian Skylark, Siberian Rubythroat, Eyebrowed Thrush, Gray Wagtail, Brambling, Common Rosefinch, and Hawfinch. Some exceptional species that have been found during that time have included Rufous-tailed Robin and Oriental Greenfinch. It is also possible to encounter Common and Oriental cuckoos. Both species were present simultaneously during a recent spring.

Of the three islands, St. Paul has received the most extensive late spring and summer coverage by birders, and several exceptional rarities have been recorded during the last two weeks of June and even into July when there are usually no birders on Adak or in Gambell. Rare swifts, swallows, and flycatchers are often more likely during late June. It is important to note that this additional coverage adds to the overall numbers of Asiatic vagrants for each spring season, and birders staying longer on Adak or in Gambell would almost certainly add species in those locales, too.

Fall birding has really taken off on St. Paul Island in the past decade and has proven to be very successful, producing four first ABA records. The island’s variety of hotspots offer exciting days of vagrant hunting. In addition to the aforementioned first ABA records, excellent finds have included Brown Shrike, Middendorf’s Grasshopper-Warbler, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Taiga Flycatcher, Red-flanked Bluetail, Siberian Accentor, and many more. The potential on St. Paul Island seems nearly limitless, and each season adds new species to the island’s list.

PenAir has four departures per week from Anchorage to St. Paul Island, a three-hour flight. It is important to note that flights to St. Paul Island have weight restrictions, making it advisable to wear needed layers of clothing on the plane, carry optical equipment in a carry-on, and pack as light as possible. St. Paul Island Tours has been operating birding and photography tours on the island for several decades and is the best option for visiting birders. It is also possible to book a hotel room at the King Eider Inn and rent a vehicle independently. A
well-stocked grocery store is available. The local Trident fish-processing plant has a canteen that doubles as the local restaurant.

**Gambell, St. Lawrence Island**

Gambell is a small Siberian Yupik community on the northwestern tip of St. Lawrence Island in the northern Bering Sea just south of the Bering Strait. Similar to St. Paul Island, an unexpected number of bird species have been recorded in this northern outpost with the current list standing at 278 for the Gambell vicinity. More important for birders trying to increase their ABA lists, nine first ABA records have been documented during the past two decades, predominantly during the fall season. Of all three sites, Gambell is by far the closest to Asia, lying merely 45 miles from the coast of the Chukchi Peninsula. On a clear day, the Russian mountains are clearly visible.

St. Lawrence Island is significantly larger than Adak Island or St. Paul Island, encompassing 2,000 square miles, but birders are limited by a standard land crossing permit to the environs of Gambell, where the farthest accessible birding area lies approximately five miles south of the village. Gambell has no roads or vehicles, so birders cover the hotspots on foot or by rented ATV.

Due to its northern location, the sparse habitats in the immediate vicinity of Gambell are composed of gravel flats and low tundra vegetation on the slopes of Sevuokuk Mountain, the highest point near the village. Other habitats accessible to birders include small marshes, a sizable lake, bays, gravel ponds, and of course the famed “boneyards”. The boneyards are hidden sites that attract most of the vagrant passerines. Although these sites are relatively barren during the spring, once fall arrives, tall wormwood and Arctic sage grow to two feet high, providing shelter for flycatchers, warblers, buntings, and finches. The majority of Asian rarities on Gambell have been found in the boneyards, with smaller numbers discovered among the boulder fields along the mountain slope or in the village itself.

The best weather conditions to carry Asian strays to Gambell are southwest or west winds, but a variety of winds or changes in wind direction can lead to the arrival of a rarity. The island’s close proximity to the Russian mainland means that strong storms are not necessary to carry Asian strays to Gambell. Even light, variable winds are often productive. Due to the limited area accessible to birders, birding in Gambell can be much more repetitive than St. Paul or Adak islands, and dreaded north winds often blow for several days, especially during the fall season, making the arrival of rarities unlikely. It serves birders well to bring time and patience, as it can take a few days (or weeks) before the right wind directions deposit Asian vagrants. The same holds true for St. Paul and Adak islands, of course. Fortunately, the well-known point at Gambell plays host to one of the world’s finest seawatches, with loons, eiders, alcids, jaegers, and gulls passing by at a steady clip during migration.

During the spring season, several Asian migrants that are difficult to see elsewhere in the ABA Area occur regularly at Gambell. During the first week of June, Common Ringed Plovers establish territories adjacent to Semipalmated

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### Table: Asiatic Vagrants Recorded on Adak Island, St. Paul Island, and Gambell, St. Lawrence Island

This table uses eBird data to summarize Asiatic vagrants recorded on Adak Island, St. Paul Island, and Gambell, St. Lawrence Island. These species totals leave out trans-Beringian migrants (such as Northern Wheatear, Bluethroat, Arctic Warbler, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Red-necked Stint) but include Asiatic species widespread as migrants/winterers in the ABA Area and some very localized breeders (e.g., Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Common Ringed Plover, Red-throated Pipit, White Wagtail). The spring season is defined as May through June, although on Adak and in Gambell most birding coverage occurs only between mid-May and mid-June. Fall is defined as August through October, but there is little to no coverage after mid-October. Fall coverage was very limited on St. Paul Island prior to 2007 and has been generally limited on Adak Island, whereas Gambell has been covered extensively during the fall season. St. Paul Island has been covered extensively during the summer, leading to some notable records. The numbers below are absolute numbers; for simplicity, birding effort was not taken into account and was not standardized between seasons or years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Adak (Spring)</th>
<th>St. Paul (Spring)</th>
<th>Gambell (Spring)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>7 (12)</td>
<td>20 (26)</td>
<td>12 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>8 (N/A)</td>
<td>15 (17)</td>
<td>12 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>N/A (4)</td>
<td>17 (12)</td>
<td>16 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>5 (N/A)</td>
<td>8 (12)</td>
<td>17 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>7 (6)</td>
<td>16 (25)</td>
<td>8 (20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
<td>13 (19)</td>
<td>15 (16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>3 (8)</td>
<td>13 (25)</td>
<td>16 (18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>6 (4)</td>
<td>20 (27)</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>14 (7)</td>
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<td>14 (21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>12 (5)</td>
<td>20 (19)</td>
<td>19 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABA firsts (1997-2006)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABA firsts (since 2007)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All-time total species</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alaska’s Vagrant Hotspots

Tufted Puffins, which breed on St. Paul Island, may not be vagrants, but they’re still worth your attention. Photo © Gregory Smith

Plovers, and White Wagtails arrive to nest in and around the village. Red-throated Pips are regular trans-Beringian migrants alongside the expected Northern Wheatears and secretive Bluethroats, and in June Arctic Warblers move through. Shorebird migration is in full swing by the end of May; regular species that may arrive in the corner marsh or the gravel ponds include Wood and Common sandpipers, Common Greenshank, and Common Snipe. Rarities like Green Sandpiper, Eurasian Dotterel, Great Knot, and Pin-tailed and Jack snipes have been recorded once or twice in recent years.

Gambell is rightly famous for vagrant passerines. Some of the hoped-for species in spring include Eurasian Skylark, Dusky Warbler, Siberian Rubythroat, Red-flanked Bluetail, Siberian Stonechat, Eyebrowed Thrush, Olive-backed Pipit, and Hawfinch. In recent spring seasons, Common Chiffchaff, which was first recorded in the ABA Area in 2012, has been seen almost annually, and Common House Martin has made several appearances.

The main season for Asian rarities at Gambell is fall. During the past decades, this seems to be the best location to see Old World warblers and buntings. The fall season starts during the last week of August and continues at least into the middle of October, although daylight and birders thin out towards the end of the fall season. In addition to the aforementioned first ABA records, Gambell has hosted an incredible Eurasian Wryneck, one of the few ABA records of Wood Warbler, the second ABA record of Siberian Blue Robin, and multiple Pallas’s Buntings plus Yellow-browed Bunting. Many birders consider the fall season the true rarity season here.

Gambell can be reached by daily flights from Nome. The Sivuqaq Inn provides accommodation. Due to the increased popularity of birding in Gambell, the inn can fill up quickly during the prime season and it is possible to stay with locals in the village. There are no restaurants in Gambell and the grocery store is limited, so it is best to bring all food and supplies. Once on the island, ATVs can be rented from locals in order to reach birding sites more efficiently.

Final Thoughts

Birding in western Alaska is always exciting, no matter which hotspot birders decide to visit. It is important to keep in mind that weather and chance play major roles, and to encounter a good number of Asiatic vagrants requires patience, time, and sometimes just plain luck. Not every rarity will arrive from the Old World side of the Bering Sea, and this holds especially true for the fall season when many North American strays show up on St. Paul Island and at Gambell. That little brown bird flitting among Gambell’s boneyards may not be a desired Asiatic bunting but a Chipping Sparrow, and the tiny fluttering songbird among St. Paul’s crab pots may turn out to be a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. But in these remote places, birders armed with determination, a sense of adventure, and good humor may very well stumble onto a new ABA bird.
ABA Event

**Thailand Birding with a Camera Tour (BwC)**

When: February 18–March 1, 2019  
Hosts: ABA and Tropical Birding  
Cost: $3,750 (extensions to Cambodia and Malaysia available)

For more details and registration, go to:  
[events.aba.org](http://events.aba.org)  
events@aba.org • info@tropicalbirding.com • 800.850.2473

ABA Events

**Antarctica Cruise**  
Falkland Is. / South Georgia / Antarctica  
When: October 19 – November 6, 2019  
Hosts: ABA and Rockjumper Tours

**Colombia**  
When: July 20 – 29, 2019  
Hosts: ABA and Rockjumper Tours

For more details, go to:  
[events.aba.org](http://events.aba.org)  
events@aba.org • 800.850.2473
Introducing Tadoussac

A HIDDEN GEM OF THE NORTHEAST

Founded in 1600, Tadoussac is the oldest continuously inhabited French-established settlement in the Americas. Despite its venerable age, the village has remained small, with only 850 permanent inhabitants currently. But with more than 300,000 visitors per year, Tadoussac is one of the top destinations in Québec, mainly because of its reputation for whale watching. It’s probably the only location in the world readily reached by road where beluga whales can be easily observed.

Tadoussac is located at the mouth of the Saguenay River and at the head of the marine estuary of the St. Lawrence River. It’s part of La Haute-Côte-Nord County, Québec’s county with the highest bird list (341 species), including many boreal specialties and vagrants. Despite being a region with an overwhelming majority of Francophones, English-speaking visitors are warmly welcomed and will be able to receive service in English pretty much anywhere.

Observatoire d'Oiseaux de Tadoussac (OOT)

Since 1993, L’Observatoire d’Oiseaux de Tadoussac (Tadoussac Bird Observatory) has implemented a migration survey program that includes daily visual counts spanning the end of August to the end of November. Its first goal was to monitor raptor migration, which can be quite impressive on days following a cold front. The program rapidly revealed out-of-this-world diurnal flights of different boreal species, prompting the startled founding team to establish a permanent and rigorous count of all visible migration. Table 1 (on page 49) shows a sample of high counts of certain species exiting the boreal forest. A banding station is also active during the fall season, targeting boreal songbirds during the day and Aegolius owls at night. About once every four years, the observatory witnesses Boreal Owl movements, with a record high number of over 200 captures in 2004.

The daily presence of skilled birders in a migration corridor has produced a good volume of vagrants, usually from the western part of the continent, in the past two decades. Dickcissel, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Lark Sparrow are regular here, but rarer species such as Swainson’s Hawk, Mew Gull, Franklin’s Gull, Townsend’s Solitaire, and even Black-headed Grosbeak have all been recurrent vagrants in Tadoussac. The epitome of them, from the perspective of an easterner, is probably the Hermit Warbler that delighted a bunch of excited observers on 29 October 2013 before getting caught in a mist net. Although not as regular, southern vagrants have popped up more or less regularly, with presences of Prairie Warbler, White-eyed Vireo, Blue Grosbeak, but also of Cave Swallows, and more astonishingly, one Gray Kingbird (again in 2013).

While fall may indeed be the best time of the year to visit L’Observatoire d’Oiseaux de Tadoussac, its potential in spring remains largely unknown to most birders. Massive movements of a magnitude surpassing that known in the fall can occur, although they tend to be less predictable. During the month of May, the immediate coast of the north shore of the St. Lawrence is occasionally host to a unique phenomenon of reverse migration, in which up to tens of thousands of warblers will correct their trajectory, flying northeast to southwest, sometimes all
Clockwise from lower left:
- Spruce Grouse. Photo © Lois Smith
- Black-legged Kittiwake. Photo © Yankech Gary
- Red Crossbill. Photo © Olivier Barden
- Black Guillemot. Photo © Brian Gratwicke
day long. Particular weather conditions must come together for a large event to take place, in all likelihood mainly due to strong southwesterly winds in altitude the night before. In late April, juncos, sparrows, and kinglets will be the most abundant species. Table 2 shows some exceptional daily counts recorded in recent years in the region, mostly from the Tadoussac dunes.

Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park
The recurrent availability of rich krill patches makes the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park a highly attractive area for predators such as small pelagic fishes, whales, and seabirds. Thousands of tons of two species of krill, *Thysanoessa raschi* and *Meganyctiphanes norvegica*, are the basis of the daily feast of minke, fin, humpback, and even blue whales at the head of the Laurentian
Les Bergeronnes

The next municipality after Tadoussac is called Les Bergeronnes. It has good birding potential due to a diversity of habitats. For starters, the Rang Saint-Joseph crosses one of the only important agricultural landscapes of this generally forested region. (Rang means rural road in French.) Sandhill Crane, Clay-colored Sparrow, and (more rarely) LeConte’s Sparrow pretty much reach their eastern limit here during the breeding season. The most coniferous part of the Rang Saint-Joseph should be checked for Gray Jay and Spruce Grouse, though they can be surprisingly hard to find considering their non-migratory nature. The Cap-de-Bon-Désir Interpretation and Observation Centre is another good destination. An underwater cliff just past the cape allows close encounters from the shore with the larger whale species. During rainy days, a protected shelter with a garage-type door provides good seawatching opportunities. Scoters, alcids, kittiwakes, and gannets are common sights, while jaegers usually demand more patience or luck to find. Extreme rarities seen from Cap-de-Bon-Désir include Magnificent Frigatebird and Sandwich Tern. The surprisingly productive short trail between the parking lot and the cape goes through a balsam fir forest where Boreal Chickadee is regularly found. A variety of boreal warblers also breed in these woods; these include Northern Parula, and Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, and Cape May warblers.

Les Escoumins

Les Escoumins is a small village a little less than 25 miles (40 km) east of Tadoussac. The Baie des Escoumins is a unique site for gull watching. With 17 species of gulls tallied throughout the years, this hotspot is certainly among the best in eastern North America for larid channel directly off Tadoussac.

With numerous daily departures for whale-watching cruises at their disposal, visitors also have a unique opportunity to pursue bird observation at sea. Larger boats are preferred to zodiacs, as the former allow better conditions for scanning the water. A large zodiac specifically chartered by birders would be the best option, but the opportunity rarely occurs outside of the Festival des Oiseaux Migrateurs de la Côte-Nord, an annual birding festival hosted during the third weekend of September. Another even cheaper option is to board the ferry between Les Escoumins and Trois-Pistoles. Take the ferry round-trip as a pedestrian for an interesting three hours of seawatching.

At the end of May and the beginning of June, scores of Arctic (mostly) and Common terns along with Parasitic Jaeger and (the less common) Long-tailed Jaeger are regular visitors that can be expected offshore. And even this late, some Long-tailed Ducks still linger. During June and July, the diversity and especially numbers of birds are not as interesting, but Razorbills, Common Murres, and Black Guillemots are relatively common, while numerous non-breeding Northern Gannets will spend time in these cold waters for foraging. August and particularly September are probably the best months of the year to do a pelagic trip, but visitors should keep their expectations low when it comes to tubenoses. Northern Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, and Leach’s Storm-Petrel are the only regular visitors to these waters, and all have been hard to find since an unexplained drop in tubenose numbers in the 1990s. However, the marine park is the only location in the province where Sabine’s Gull is guaranteed each year. It is during the three first weeks of September that they are the most likely to be found offshore, usually among groups of Black-legged Kittiwake (often in the several thousands). Red-necked Phalaropes and Red Phalaropes should also be looked for in kelp lines formed by tides or competing currents.
enthusiasts. Interestingly, Bonaparte’s Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake are the most common and numerous species. By August, Little Gull can be found on a daily basis, with frequent sightings of multiple individuals. Black-headed Gull is also a regular visitor, and this is probably the best site in the province outside the Magdalen Islands, where they breed. For dreamers, both Ross’s Gull and Ivory Gull have visited here in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter. The large cross visible on the rocky point called Pointe-à-la-Croix is worth the detour. Northern Wheatear has visited this spot on numerous occasions in the past (but not simultaneously!), and the latter only in winter.
their long migration to the Southern Hemisphere. Sanderling, White-rumped Sandpiper, and Semipalmated Sandpiper are the most abundant species in August, and daily totals of 15 species of shorebirds are not uncommon. Dunlin arrive in numbers with the advance of fall and cooler temperatures. As such, this site remains productive into early November. Curlew Sandpiper has also been recorded twice, and this is probably the most reliable spot for Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Quebec (usually at the beginning of September). Seawatching from the sandbar also provides interesting birding possibilities. The number of Surf and White-winged scoters, along with molting Common Eiders, is in the tens of thousands. Red-throated Loons and Razorbills are common sights, while Northern Gannets plunge very close to shore. Historically, this has been considered one of the region’s top locations to spot a jaeger from the shore.

La Haute-Côte-Nord County comes to an end a few dozen kilometers past this site, but visitors with a lot of time on their hands could continue driving east on Route 138 for almost a thousand kilometers! Birding opportunities are almost endless along the north shore of the St. Lawrence.

### Table 1. Highest daily counts at Tadoussac Bird Observatory in fall for different boreal species

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Highest daily count</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharp-shinned Hawk</td>
<td>1,778</td>
<td>9 September 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Goshawk</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>4 October 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland Gull</td>
<td>1,168</td>
<td>14 November 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boreal Chickadee</td>
<td>739</td>
<td>10 October 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-Backed Woodpecker</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5 October 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rusty Blackbird</td>
<td>2,931</td>
<td>23 September 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Redpoll</td>
<td>55,110</td>
<td>31 October 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-winged Crossbill</td>
<td>6,509</td>
<td>10 November 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pine Siskin</td>
<td>23,760</td>
<td>24 October 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Highest daily counts in Tadoussac region in spring during episodes of reverse migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Highest daily count</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ruby-crowned Kinglet</td>
<td>4,110</td>
<td>29 April 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cedar Waxwing</td>
<td>6,716</td>
<td>1 June 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape May Warbler</td>
<td>1,730</td>
<td>19 May 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnolia Warbler</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>22 May 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow-rumped Warbler</td>
<td>7,594</td>
<td>23 May 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackpoll Warbler</td>
<td>2,927</td>
<td>2 June 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee Warbler</td>
<td>4,246</td>
<td>1 June 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warbler sp.</td>
<td>43,470</td>
<td>23 May 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark-eyed Junco</td>
<td>19,700</td>
<td>29 April 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PELAGIC DIRECTORY
March 2018 through February 2019

Trips are for 2018 unless otherwise noted. If you would like to participate in next year’s Pelagic Directory, contact Michael Retter no later than 30 November at mretter@aba.org for instructions.

ATLANTIC OCEAN

New England

Port: Bar Harbor, Maine
Destination: Petit Manan, Duck Islands, Mount Desert Rock, and waters off Mount Desert Island
Dates: 2 Jun
Duration: 4 hours
Cost: $85
Target species: Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, Common Murre, Roseate and Arctic terns, Wilson’s and Leach’s storm-petrels, Northern Fulmar, Great, Sooty, and Manx shearwaters, Parasitic and Pomarine jaegers, South Polar Skua.
Organizer: Acadia Birthing Festival. (207) 233-3694; acadiabirthingfestival.com; beckym@acadiabirthingfestival.com

Port: Hyannis, Massachusetts
Destination: Hydrographer, Veatch, and Atlantis canyons area
Dates: 25-26 Aug; 22-23 Sept
Duration: 36 hours
Cost: $335
Target species: White-faced Storm-Petrel plus 3 other storm-petrels, 4 or 5 species of shearwater, South Polar Skua, phalaropes, Long-tailed and Pomarine jaegers, Bridled Tern, Black-capped Petrel, Northern Gannet, phalaropes.
Organizer: Brookline Bird Club. (781) 929-8772; brooklinebirdclub.org; ida8@verizon.net

Port: Brooklyn, New York
Destination: Hudson Canyon and waters off W Long Island
Dates: 20-21 May; 19-20 Aug; 27 Oct; 20 Jan 2019
Duration: 14-22 hours
Target species: Spring: Cory’s, Great, Sooty, and Manx shearwaters, Wilson’s and Leach’s storm-petrels, South Polar Skua, all three jaegers, Arctic Tern, Red and Red-necked phalaropes. Summer: Black-capped Petrel, Cory’s, Great, Audubon’s, and Manx shearwaters, South Polar Skua, Wilson’s, Leach’s, Band-rumped, and White-faced storm-petrels, all three jaegers, Arctic Tern, Red-necked Phalarope. Winter: Northern Fulmar, Dovekie, Razorbill, Common Murre, Atlantic Puffin, Black-legged Kittiwake, Red Phalarope.
Organizer: See Life Paulagics, LLC. (215) 234-6805; paulagics.com; info@paulagics.com

Port: Wilmington canyons and waters off New Jersey and Delaware
Dates: 3-4 Jun; 12-13 Aug; 10 Nov; 26 Jan 2019
Duration: 12-18 hours
Target species: Spring: Cory’s, Great, Sooty, and Manx shearwaters, Wilson’s and Leach’s storm-petrels, South Polar Skua, all three jaegers, Arctic Tern, phalaropes. Summer: Black-capped Petrel, Cory’s, Great, Audubon’s, and Manx shearwaters, South Polar Skua, Wilson’s, Leach’s, Band-rumped, and White-faced storm-petrels, all three jaegers, Arctic Tern, Red-necked Phalarope. Winter: Northern Fulmar, Dovekie, Razorbill, Common Murre, Atlantic Puffin, Black-legged Kittiwake, Red Phalarope.
Organizer: See Life Paulagics, LLC. (215) 234-6805; paulagics.com; info@paulagics.com

Port: Cape May, New Jersey
Destination: New York and slope waters aboard our own boat, Stormy Petrel II
Dates: 19 (20), 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 May; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 Jun; 6, 7, 27, 28 Jul; 3, 4, 17, 18, 24, 25, 26 Aug; 8 (9), 22 (23) Sep; 6 (7), 13 (14), 19, 20 Oct; dates in parentheses are weather dates; winter dates TBA in fall 2018; additional dates may be added throughout the year, and private charters are available year-round.
Duration: 10–12 hours
Cost: most trips $169; discount for multiple trips paid by check; see website for details
Target Species: Winter: Manx Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, Red Phalarope, Great Skua, Little Gull, Dovekie, Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin. Spring & Summer: Black-capped Petrel, Cory’s, Great, Manx, and Audubon’s shearwaters, Wilson’s and Band-rumped storm-petrels, Bridled Tern. Scarce to rare: Trindade, Fea’s, and Bermuda petrels, European Storm-Petrel, Red-billed and White-tailed tropicbirds, Masked Booby. Seasonal: Sooty Shearwater, Leach’s Storm-Petrel, Red-necked Phalarope, all 3 jaegers, Sooty Tern.
Organizer: Brian Patteson, Inc. TA Seabirding, PO Box 772, Hatteras, NC 27943 www.seabirding.com; (252) 986-1363; brian@patteson.com; seabirding.blogspot.com

Mid-Atlantic

Port: Lewes, Delaware
Destination: Baltimore and Wilmington canyons and waters off Delaware and Maryland
Dates: 25-26 Aug, 2 Feb 2019
Duration: 12-18 hours
Target species: Summer: Black-capped Petrel, Cory’s, Great, Audubon’s, and Manx shearwaters, South Polar Skua, Wilson’s, Leach’s, Band-rumped, and White-faced storm-petrels, all three jaegers, Arctic Tern, Red-necked Phalarope. Winter: Northern Fulmar, Dovekie, Razorbill, Common Murre, Atlantic Puffin, Black-legged Kittiwake, Red Phalarope.
Organizer: Wildside Nature Tours. (888) 875-9453; wildsidenaturetours.com; info@wildsidenaturetours.com

Port: Port Aransas, Texas
Destination: 100+ miles offshore to 3,000’ depths, 500 Fathom Hump or other features, Gulf of Mexico
Dates: Aug. Exact date TBD.

Gulf of Mexico

Port: Hatteras, North Carolina
Destination: Gulf Stream, continental shelf, and slope waters aboard our own boat, Stormy Petrel II
Dates: 19 (20), 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31 May; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 Jun; 6, 7, 27, 28 Jul; 3, 4, 17, 18, 24, 25, 26 Aug; 8 (9), 22 (23) Sep; 6 (7), 13 (14), 19, 20 Oct; dates in parentheses are weather dates; winter dates TBA in fall 2018; additional dates may be added throughout the year, and private charters are available year-round.
Duration: 10–12 hours
Cost: most trips $169; discount for multiple trips paid by check; see website for details
Target Species: Winter: Manx Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, Red Phalarope, Great Skua, Little Gull, Dovekie, Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin. Spring & Summer: Black-capped Petrel, Cory’s, Great, Manx, and Audubon’s shearwaters, Wilson’s and Band-rumped storm-petrels, Bridled Tern. Scarce to rare: Trindade, Fea’s, and Bermuda petrels, European Storm-Petrel, Red-billed and White-tailed tropicbirds, Masked Booby. Seasonal: Sooty Shearwater, Leach’s Storm-Petrel, Red-necked Phalarope, all 3 jaegers, Sooty Tern.
Organizer: Brian Patteson, Inc. TA Seabirding, PO Box 772, Hatteras, NC 27943 www.seabirding.com; (252) 986-1363; brian@patteson.com; seabirding.blogspot.com

Continued on page 54
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• Chum for close looks and photo ops
• Trip reports at seabirding.blogspot.com
• Private charters also available year-round
## Pelagic Directory

Continued from page 52

### Alaska

**Port:** St. Paul Island, Alaska  
**Destination:** St. Matthew Island  
**Dates:** 17–22 Jun  
**Duration:** Approximately 96 hours at sea plus land birding on St. Matthew Island, optional birding on St. Paul Island  
**Cost:** $4975  
**Target Species:** Short-tailed, Laysan, and Black-footed albatrosses; Parakeet, Least, and Crested auklets; Horned and Tufted puffins; Red-legged Kittiwake; Fork-tailed and Leach's storm-petrels; Red-faced Cormorant; McKay's Bunting (at St. Matthew).  
**Organizer:** Zugunruhe Birding Tours. (206) 664-1256; tinyurl.com/zpb3qe6; info@zbirdtours.com

**Port:** Adak, Alaska  
**Destination:** Seguam Pass and Little Tanaga Pass  
**Dates:** 3–7 Jun  
**Duration:** 48–72 hours at sea plus land birding at Adak  
**Cost:** $2750  
**Target species:** Short-tailed, Laysan, and Black-footed albatrosses; Whiskered, Parakeet, Least, Whiskered, Crested, and Cassin's auklets; Kittlitz’s, Marbled, and Ancient murrelets; Horned and Tufted puffins; Atelean Tern; Fork-tailed and Leach's storm-petrels; Red-faced Cormorant.  
**Organizer:** Zugunruhe Birding Tours. (206) 664-1256; tinyurl.com/zpb3qe6; info@zbirdtours.com

### PACIFIC OCEAN

#### Washington & Oregon

**Port:** Newport, Oregon  
**Destination:** Perpetua Bank, Stonewall Bank
**Dates:** 3 Feb (weather date 10 Feb); 19 May (6 hour intro); 12, 25 (deepwater) Aug; 15 Sep; 7, 27 Oct; 7 Dec

**Duration:** 6–12 hours (see website)

**Cost:** $120–$175, early sign-up discounts available

**Target species:** Summer and Fall: Black-footed Albatross, Sooty, Pink-footed, Buller’s, and Flesh-footed shearwaters, Hawaiian Petrel (two trips in 2016), Fork-tailed and Leach’s storm-petrels, South Polar Skua, all three jaegers, Sabine’s Gull, Arctic Tern, phalaropes. Winter: Laysan Albatross, Northern Fulmar, Short-tailed Shearwater, Ancient Murrelet, Black-legged Kittiwake, Mottled Petrel (very rare, possible in December).

**Organizer:** Oregon Pelagic Tours. (971) 221-2534; oregonpelagictours.com; tim@oregonpelagictours.com

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**Port:** Garibaldi, Oregon

**Destination:** Offshore Tillamook County

**Dates:** 29, 30 Sep (TBD)

**Duration:** 8 hours

**Cost:** See website

**Target species:** Black-footed Albatross, chance at Laysan Albatross, Sooty, Pink-footed, Buller’s, and Flesh-footed shearwaters, Fork-tailed and Leach’s storm-petrels, South Polar Skua, all three jaegers, Sabine’s Gull, Arctic Tern, phalaropes.

**Organizer:** Oregon Pelagic Tours. (971) 221-2534; oregonpelagictours.com; tim@oregonpelagictours.com

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**Central and Northern California**

**Port:** Bodega Bay, California (Port o’ Bodega)

**Destination:** Cordell Bank

**Dates:** 19 Aug; 7 Oct

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**Duration:** 9–10 hours

**Cost:** $155

**Target species:** Ashy, Fork-tailed, Wilson’s, and Black storm-petrels in warmer-water years. Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses regular. Sooty, Pink-footed, Buller’s, and Flesh-footed shearwaters. Scripp’s Murrelet, Rhinoceros and Cassin’s auklets, Tufted Puffin. All three jaegers, South Polar Skua, phalaropes, Sabine’s Gull, Arctic Tern.

**Organizer:** Alvaro’s Adventures. (650) 504-7779; www.alvarosadventures.com; info@alvarosadventures.com

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**Port:** Sausalito, California

**Destination:** Farallon National Wildlife Refuge (passing under the Golden Gate Bridge)

**Dates:** 5, 12 Aug

**Duration:** 8–10 hours

**Cost:** $175

**Target species:** Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses; Northern Fulmar; Pink-footed, Buller’s, Sooty, and Manx shearwaters; Wilson’s, Fork-tailed, Ashy, and Black storm-petrels; Red-necked and Red phalaropes; South Polar Skua; all three jaegers; Sabine’s Gull; Elegant and Arctic terns; Scripp’s Murrelet, Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets; Tufted Puffin. Great trip for nesting seabirds (100% success rate with Tufted Puffin on Aug. trips) and marine mammals. Landing is not permitted on the islands.

**Organizer:** Shearwater Journeys, Inc. (831) 637-8527; shearwaterjourneys.com; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

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**Port:** Half Moon Bay, California (Pillar Point Harbor)

**Destination:** Pioneer Canyon, waters off continental shelf in San Mateo or San Francisco counties. Four trips to Farallon Islands.
Pelagic Directory

Dates: 14 Apr; 21, 23 Jul; 11, 12, 18, 25 Aug; 1, 15, 16, 29 Sep; 6 Oct
Duration: 9–10 hours
Cost: $140
Target species: Spring: breeding plumage Sabine’s Gull, phalaropes, Rhinoceros Auklet, Marbled Murrelet, Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses, Sooty and Pink-footed shearwaters. Summer and Fall: Sooty, Pink-footed, Buller’s, Black-vented, and Flesh-footed shearwaters; all three jaegers; South Polar Skua; Sabine’s Gull; Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses; Marbled and Scripps’s murrelets; Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets; Tufted Puffin; Red and Red-necked phalaropes; Brown Booby now regular. Consistently good for storm-petrel flocks, including Ashy, Black, Fork-tailed, and Wilson’s. Great rarities have been found at this time. Humpback and blue whales, half a dozen species of porpoise/dolphins, blue shark, ocean sunfish. Farallon Islands (Jul, Aug): breeding Tufted Puffin, Cassin’s Auklet, Pigeon Guillemot, whales, and up to five species of pinniped.
Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures.
(650) 504-7779; alvarosadventures.com; info@alvarosadventures.com

Port: Half Moon Bay, California
Destination: 100 fathom line/Continental Shelf in San Mateo and/or San Francisco counties, Pioneer Canyon and canyons near Farallon Islands
Dates: 11 Aug; 2, 22, 23 Sep; 7 Oct
Duration: 8–10 hours
Cost: $168
Target species: Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses; Northern Fulmar; Pink-footed, Flesh-footed, Buller’s, Sooty, Short-tailed, Black-vented, and Manx shearwaters; Wilson’s, Fork-tailed, Leach’s, Ashy, Black, and Least storm-petrels; phalaropes; South Polar Skua; all three jaegers; Sabine’s Gull; Elegant and Arctic terns; Scripps’s, Marbled, Guadalupe, Craveri’s, and Ancient murrelets; Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets; Tufted Puffin. Whales and up to 5 species of pinniped.
Organizer: Shearwater Journeys, Inc.
(831) 637-8527; shearwaterjourneys.com; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

Port: Monterey, California
Destination: Monterey Submarine Canyon, Ascension Canyon, Carmel Canyon, Soquel Hole
Dates: 3, 31 Aug; 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16, 28, 29, 30 Sep; 6, 13, 21 Oct
Duration: 8 hours (9, 15 Sep are 12 hours targeting warm water species, including Scripp’s & Guadalupe murrelets)
Cost: $140
Target species: Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses; Northern Fulmar; Hawaiian, Great-winged, Bulwer’s, and Cook’s petrels; Streaked, Pink-footed, Flesh-footed, Buller’s, Sooty, Short-tailed, Black-vented, and Manx shearwaters; Wilson’s, Fork-tailed, Leach’s, Ashy, Black, and Least storm-petrels; phalaropes; South Polar Skua; all three jaegers; Sabine’s Gull; Elegant and Arctic terns; Scripp’s, Guadalupe, Craveri’s, and Ancient murrelets; Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets; Horned and Tufted puffins. Whales and dolphins. Excellent opportunities for photographers.

Organizer: Shearwater Journeys, Inc. (831) 637-8527; shearwaterjourneys.com; debi@shearwaterjourneys.com; shearwaterjourneys.blogspot.com

*operated in conjunction with Monterey Bay Birding Festival

Port: Monterey, California (Fisherman’s Wharf)
Destination: Monterey Submarine Canyon, Albacore Grounds.
Dates: 26 Aug; 23 Sep
Duration: 8–10 hours
Cost: $130–$140

Target species: Great numbers of birds from the first hour of birding, amazing abundance of Sooty and Pink-footed shearwaters; great studies possible of all three jaegers, South Polar Skua. Black-vented and Manx shearwaters more likely here than farther north. Great for good views and photography. Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets, Buller’s Shearwater, sometimes Flesh-footed Shearwater, phalaropes, Sabine’s Gull, Black-footed Albatross, and potential for fall storm-petrel flocks. Longer albacore grounds trip good for Scripp’s and perhaps rarer Craveri’s murrelets, beaked whales. World-class spot for humpback and blue whales, Risso’s, short-beaked common, Pacific white-sided, northern right-whale. Sea otter common!

Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures. (650) 504-7779; alvarosadventures.com; info@alvarosadventures.com

Port: Monterey, California (Fisherman’s Wharf)
Destination: Monterey Canyon and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary
Dates: 20 May; 26 Aug; 9, 15*, 16, 21, 22*, 28, 29 Sep; 6, 7*, 14, 21 Oct
Duration: 8 hours (* = 12 hours)
Cost: $130 (* = $160)

Target species: Black-vented, Buller’s, Flesh-footed, Manx, Pink-footed, Short-tailed, & Sooty shearwaters; Black-footed & Laysan albatrosses; all three jaegers; South Polar Skua; Tufted Puffin; Rhinoceros & Cassin’s auklets; Scripp’s, Ancient, and Marbled murrelets; Elegant & Arctic terns; phalaropes; Northern Fulmar; Leach’s, Black, Ashy, and Fork-tailed storm-petrels.

Organizer: Monterey Seabirds. (831) 375-4658; montereyseabirds.com; mbww@gowhales.com

Southern California

Port: Morro Bay, California (Morro Bay Landing)
Destination: Offshore San Luis Obispo County
Dates: 22 Sep
Duration: 8 hours
Cost: $135

Target species: Black-vented Shearwater; Pink-footed, Buller’s, Flesh-footed, and Sooty shearwaters. Black-footed Albatross, Northern Fulmar, Rhinoceros and Cassin’s auklets, Scripp’s Murrelet. All three jaegers, Arctic Tern, Red and Red-necked phalaropes, South Polar Skua.

Large, spacious boat. Great photography trip,
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Organizer: Alvaro’s Adventures.  
(650) 504-7779; alvarosadventures.com; info@alvarosadventures.com

Port: San Pedro, California (22nd Street Landing)  
Destination: Palos Verdes Escarpment and Redondo Canyon  
Dates: 28 Apr; 3 Nov  
Duration: 8 hours  
Cost: $130  
Target species: Brown Booby; Black-vented, Flesh-footed, Manx, Pink-footed, Short-tailed, and Sooty shearwaters; Pomarine & Parasitic jaegers; South Polar Skua; Rhinoceros & Cassin’s auklets; Scripps’s, Guadalupe, and Craveri’s murrelets; Common Murre; Sabine’s Gull; Elegant and Arctic terns; phalaropes; Northern Fulmar; Black and Ashy storm-petrels.
Organizer: Catalina Explorer.  
(949) 500-4755; catalinaexplorer.com; info@catalinaexplorer.com

Port: San Diego, California (Fisherman’s Landing)  
Destination: Offshore deep water, from the extreme SW corner of the ABA Area to Pt. Conception, including Rodriguez Dome, San Juan Seamount, points past the continental shelf, and around the Channel Islands  
Dates: 3–7 Sep  
Duration: 5 days  
Cost: $1395  
Target species: Black-footed Albatross; Northern Fulmar; Cook’s and Hawaiian petrels; Flesh-footed, Buller’s, Pink-footed, Sooty, and Black-vented shearwaters; Least, Leach’s, Ashy, and Black storm-petrels; Red-billed Tropicbird, phalaropes, South Polar Skua; all three jaegers, Sabine’s Gull, Arctic Tern, Pigeon Guillemot, Common Murre, Guadalupe and Craveri’s murrelets; Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets.  
Organizer: Searcher Natural History Tours.  
(619) 226-2403; bajawhale.com; searcher@bajawhale.com

Port: San Diego, California  
Destination: San Diego Co. waters (with brief excursions on some fall trips into Los Angeles Co.)  
Dates: 20 May; 10 Jun; 19 Aug; 23 Sep; 21 Oct  
Duration: 10–12 hours  
Cost: $125–$135  
Target species: Spring and Summer: Brown Booby, Scripps’s Murrelet, Black-vented, Pink-footed, and Sooty shearwaters, Black, Ashy, and Leach’s storm-petrels, Sabine’s Gull, South Polar Skua, Cassin’s and Rhinoceros auklets, Red and Red-necked phalaropes, Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers, Northern Fulmar. Late Summer and early Fall: As above (with the exception of Scripps’s Murrelet), plus Craveri’s Murrelet, Red-billed Tropicbird, Least Storm-Petrel, Townsend’s Storm-Petrel and two subspecies of Leach’s Storm-Petrel.  
Organizer: San Diego Pelagics, sponsored by Buena Vista Audubon. For reservations call H & M Sportfishing at (619) 223-1627; sandiegopelagics.com

Hawaii

Port: Kailua-Kona, Hawaii (Honokahau Marina)  
Destination: Tsunami buoy (~30 miles offshore)  
Dates: 28 Apr  
Duration: 6–8 hours  
Cost: $100  
Target species: Boobies, tropicbirds, terns, storm-petrels, Newell’s Shearwater, Hawaiian, Buller’s, Bulwer’s, Juan Fernández, Cook’s, and Black-winged petrels.
Organizer: Alex Wang. (808) 937-7924; axwang@hawaii.edu

Pelagic Directory
Camp Colorado I • June 23–29, 2018
Camp Colorado II • July 3–9, 2018

YMCA of the Rockies • Estes Park, Colorado
Camp Colorado is back again with two sessions for 2018! Join us as we explore Colorado’s birds from grassland to glaciers. From the shortgrass prairie of northeastern Colorado to the aspen groves and alpine tundra of Rocky Mountain National Park!

Camp Fee: $1395.00 includes all lodging, meals, transportation during camp events, instructional sessions and transportation to and from Denver International Airport.

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The Virden Center • Lewes, Delaware
Now in its sixth year, Camp Avocet is only minutes away from two major National Wildlife Refuges and a short ride to the Delaware Bay. This is beach birding at its best! Are you looking for migrating shorebirds? Thousands of birds? Well, Camp Avocet is THE place to be!!

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QUESTIONS? NEED MORE DETAILS? TO REGISTER:
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Contact us: Bill Stewart, Director of Conservation and Community bstewart@aba.org • 302.838.3654

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• Inspiring field trips led by ABA Staff members and special guest instructors, plus educational and challenging workshops.
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Iceland

Birding in the North Atlantic

Aurora borealis at Mount Kirkjufell.
Photo © Suppalak Klabdee
Iceland is one of those rare places that defies all superlatives. Famous for its rugged beauty, this nation is nonetheless not often at front of mind for most international tourists, birders and non-birders alike. But it should be. It is one of the most scenic places on Earth, like a miniature Antarctica of the north, only far, far more accessible, with less ice and more volcanoes. Iceland sits literally right between North America and Europe. The Mid-Atlantic Ridge runs through the center of the country, splitting the island between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. The country may be considered European in name yet it manages to be neither entirely European or North American in character, but rather a place absolutely and quite its own, strongly independent and entirely unforgettable. Its position along the gap between the two great continental plates is also what gives the island its volcanic punch and what shapes the landscape into a magically unique place.

Birding in Iceland is no less spectacular than the country itself, especially in summer. In the warm months, it becomes a place where Parasitic Jaegers seem as easy to find as harriers are on a drive through the Dakota plains—in some areas, you might find one along the Ring Road every five minutes if you pay attention. It is said that, during the breeding season, the Atlantic Puffins in Iceland outnumber humans three to one. Sometimes it seems like you can’t get out of your car
anywhere within 10 miles of the coast without being harassed by a nesting Common Redshank or dive-bombed by Arctic Terns.

Add in Great Skuas and Black-tailed Godwits, ponds dotted with Red-throated Loons, waterfalls, icebergs, glaciers, geysers, geothermal lagoons, highland roads 75 miles from the nearest town, 24 hours of daylight, great seafood, friendly people, unique culture, and some truly tongue-twisting road names, and you have a very memorable summer adventure.

When to Go

Like many birding destinations in the far north, Iceland is best to visit in the summer months when breeding birds are most active, especially, in Iceland’s case, seabirds and shorebirds. All of the descriptions of birding sites that follow are focused on a summer visit.

Winter birding (near the coast) can be rewarding as well, when many thousands of gulls and waterfowl may be present, as well as all manner of rarities from ei-
ther side of the Atlantic. But note that the dead of winter, from about the middle of November to the end of January, is a very difficult time for birding in Iceland. The weather is at its most challenging, and there is very little daylight. The northern lights are at their finest around this time, however. Waterfowl and shorebird migrations are in full swing in May and again in late summer, and both of those seasons can be quite exciting. All things considered, most birders traveling to Iceland for the first time will want to be there sometime between mid-May and the end of June.

The weather in Iceland is highly variable; however, the national forecasts are surprisingly accurate, at least at a macro level: generally sunny here… raining all day there, etc. The following web page is a reasonable summary of pronunciation. It’s the “other sounds” listed there which tend to tie the tongues of non-native speakers:
tinyurl.com/Icelandicsounds

The latest. At the micro level, the oft-quoted saw “If you don’t like the weather, wait five minutes” is at its most appropriate in Iceland, and birders should be prepared for many different types of conditions at nearly any season.

Winter is cold, but near the coast it’s not often far below freezing, though snow is frequent and many interior roads become blocked in the wintertime. Summer days can be quite mild, or they could bring a strong north wind, rain, and 35 degrees Fahrenheit—or maybe all of that in the span of a few hours. In spring or fall, just about anything short of a tornado is possible. Be ready for anything.

How to Go
Iceland Air offers flights to Iceland from several major airports in the U.S. and Canada. All flights arrive at Keflavik International Airport on the Reykjanes Peninsula, about 40 minutes outside of Reykjavik, the Icelandic capital. A smaller domestic airport in Reykjavik offers flights to destinations within Iceland, but it is much more practical to travel within Iceland by rental car. Iceland is very much a car culture, with

Icelandic Pronunciation
While I am not much of an expert in Icelandic pronunciation, I hope you find the following helpful as you navigate the pronunciation of Icelandic place names. The key thing to highlight is that Icelandic contains three letters that are no longer used in the English alphabet.

The extra letters are:

Ð | ð (called “eth”), pronounced as a voiced th sound as in this, the, and soothe.
Þ | þ (called “thorn”), pronounced as an unvoiced th sound as in thin, Thursday, and beneath.
Æ | æ (called “ash”), pronounced as a long i, as in high and kite.

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Birding in Iceland

Sixteen days is more like it. Many road signs are printed only in Icelandic, so it is a good idea to familiarize oneself with them prior to traveling in the country. A good bit of general caution is also advisable. The Ring Road may be the national “highway”, but outside of Reykjavik, it’s pretty much just a narrow two-lane road with many blind curves and hilltops, and is unpaved for stretches in the remote east. The frequent and sudden changes in weather can make driving difficult or even downright dangerous in a matter of minutes, especially in winter. Many side roads are unpaved, and the transition between paved and unpaved sections of road can be especially dangerous for unsuspecting foreign drivers.

Lodging is widely available even in most of the smallest villages, but in some of the most popular birding areas, like Lake Myvatn and the West Fjords near Latrabjarg, lodgings can book up early. An entire range of accommodations is available, from hostels to bed and breakfasts to full-service hotels. In remote areas these establishments frequently double as the only restaurant for miles. Camping is a good option in many areas and can be much more cost-effective over the course of a long trip.

Wi-fi is widely available at lodgings and restaurants throughout the country, even in very remote areas; credit cards are taken (and preferred) just about everywhere; and more than 95% of Icelanders speak fluent English, as well as their native Icelandic. All of this makes Iceland a very accessible place to travel independently for birders coming from the ABA Area.

A general word about costs. Iceland is an expensive place to visit, no doubt about it. Anyone traveling independently and expecting a full-service, North American-like lodging experience can find it in Iceland, but for a steep price—on the order of U.S. $400 per day, not including food, rental car, and gas (oh, yeah, gas is about U.S. $8/gallon). Tempering one’s expectations and being willing to look into camping, hostels, farm guesthouses, and

most of its infrastructure designed for automobiles, and rental cars are easily obtained at Keflavik. The country has limited options for public transportation, but for birdwatching (and really for most tourism) a rental car is the easiest and most practical way to get around, short of joining a bus tour.

Tourists coming from North America appreciate that Icelanders drive on the right side of the road, and that the traffic laws and customs are mostly familiar. The island is circled by the national highway, Route 1, more commonly known as the Ring Road, which is the main route to most destinations throughout. Beginning and ending in Reykjavik, one could drive the entire Ring Road (non-stop) in about 16 hours, though certainly nobody would actually do this except maybe on a dare, especially on their first trip to the country! Sixteen days is more like it.

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the like, especially away from Reykjavik, will go a long way toward keeping one’s wallet from spontaneously combusting during the trip. It is possible, and really not that difficult, to travel in Iceland on a reasonable budget, but it takes some planning and willingness.

**What You’ll See**

Bird diversity is pretty poor in Iceland. For example, on a two-week trip in summer 2013, I only saw 63 species and probably could have pushed that only to about 75 or 80 if I had tried very hard and had not been so focused on photography. About 385 species have been recorded in the country, and just 76 of those are regular breeders. The lack of diversity is more than made up for by the sheer volume of birds and their beauty.

Can’t-miss birds in summer include such marvels as Red-throated Loon, Northern Fulmar, Eurasian Oystercatcher, European Golden-Plover, Whimbrel, Black-tailed Godwit, Great Skua, Parasitic Jaeger, Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin, Arctic Tern, and many others, all in high breeding plumage. Passerine diversity in Iceland is extremely poor, but the native species that reside there are all flashy birds of the far north: Northern Wheatear, Eurasian Wren, White Wagtail, Meadow Pipit, Snow Bunting, and Common Redpoll. Okay, so Eurasian Wren and Meadow Pipit aren’t flashy, but they’re cool anyway.

Add in 16 species of breeding ducks (the most of any European country), huge colonies of seabirds, or the chance to glimpse the mighty Gyrfalcon or the even-mightier White-tailed Eagle, and there are plenty of reasons to bird Iceland in the summertime, even if running up a big list isn’t one of them.

**Where To Go**

Iceland is an amazing and beautiful country; despite its rather small size (it’s smaller in area than 37 U.S. states—slightly larger than Indiana), one could easily spend an entire year there and still not see all there is to see. Most of the prime birding destinations are close to the coast and easily reached via the Ring Road. The following suggested areas for birding are listed in order as they are reached along the Ring Road heading southeast out of Reykjavik, beginning with Reykjavik itself.

The capital city of Reykjavik offers a few excellent birding sites. One of the nicest areas for birding and photography near the city is the area around Seltjarnarnes (GPS: 64.1586,-22.0130), which lies on a peninsula to the west of the center of downtown. In the summer months, there is an Arctic Tern colony on the golf course, and the park and its small lake and nearby shoreline are good for European Oystercatcher, Common Ringed Plover, Common Eider, Common Redshank, and assorted summering ducks and gulls. Black-headed Gull and...
Lesser Black-backed Gull are ubiquitous there (and in many places near the coast, not just at Reykjavik) with some Great Black-backed and Herring mixed in.

Reykjavik is also probably the best area in Iceland for winter birding. The Iceland Gull, ironically enough, does not breed in Iceland, and is not easily seen in the summer months. But they are common in the winter months, and the coastlines and harbors around Reykjavik are some of the best places to study them closely. Most of the rarities found in the winter are recorded in or near Reykjavik, probably a result of Reykjavik being home to two-thirds of the human population of the country, and thus also the majority of Iceland’s birders. (By the way, the population of Iceland is only about 325,000; with two-thirds of those in Reykjavik, one can imagine just how empty and remote most of the rest of the country really is.)

There are many other areas around Reykjavik to bird, and these are covered in Birding in Reykjavik by Christophe Pampoulie, available in Icelandic bookstores, in eBook format (for iPad), or online at tinyurl.com/BirdingReykjavik

South of the town of Selfoss and about 40 miles (65 km) southeast of Reykjavik is Friðlandið í Flóa, or in English, the Floi Bird Reserve (63.8686,-21.1527). This is a must-see destination for its population of breeding Red-throated Loons and Black-tailed Godwits, the two key species at the site. Both species occur throughout the country, but Floi is one of the easiest places to see and photograph them. Floi also holds several pairs of nesting Parasitic Jaegers and a few Great Skuas may be seen off the coast. Other species there include Whimbrel (which in Iceland are of the nominate, European subspecies), Common Snipe, Dunlin, Red-necked Phalarope, and European Oystercatcher.

First-time visitors to Iceland will already be overwhelmed by the remarkable Icelandic landscape just around Keflavik and Reykjavik. But as the Ring Road heads east past Selloss and out into the true wilds of Iceland, the sheer beauty of the country reaches a whole different level. From green pastures to dramatic waterfalls, and vast plains of lava flows, massive glaciers, and dramatic seaside cliffs, southern Iceland really must be seen to be believed. Aside from the occasional Parasitic Jaeger, and the ubiquitous Common Redshanks, Meadow Pipits, and White Wagtails, the birding can be sparse along long stretches of the Ring Road in this region, but one will hardly notice as every new curve in the road seems to offer yet another picture postcard vista.

There are a number of good birding destinations even in this region of lava plains and goat pasture. The first is Vik (63.4198, -19.0072), a charming, sleepy, Hörgárdalur Valley. Photo © Geoff Malosh
seaside town which has a church on a beautiful hillside famous to photographers, and nearby is Dyrhólaey (63.4082, -19.1136), a large and accessible promontory with associated cliff-dwelling nesters, especially Northern Fulmar. It also has a small population of Atlantic Puffins, some of which can be approached closely. A visit to Dyrhólaey should also produce some confiding Parasitic Jaegers, Whimbrels, and European Golden-Plovers.

Continuing east from Vik, one eventually comes to the glacial lagoon at Jökulsárlón (64.0449, -16.1778), where the Breiðamerkurjökull (a glacier) reaches all the way to sea level. Icebergs that calve from the glacier immediately fall into the lagoon and drift just a few miles from there into the North Atlantic, passing along an outlet under a bridge in the Ring Road. Not only is Jökulsárlón a fascinating place geologically (and a major tourist trap), but the birds there are very cool, with Great Skuas being the primary attraction. A few skuas hang around the lagoon itself and its outlet to the ocean, and are generally quite accustomed to people and therefore very approachable. Sometimes they even hang out in the parking lot at the lagoon’s gift shop, looking for handouts from the many tourists. There are also several nesting pairs of skua in the general area, and these birds around their nests are far less approachable, of course! Jökulsárlón has a breeding population of Barnacle Geese, and is an easily accessible site for Snow Bunting and scads of Common Eider, along with the assorted common birds. One simply should not miss Jökulsárlón’s roadside skuas, or the lagoon and its icebergs.

A bit west of Jökulsárlón is Ingólfshöfði (63.8012, -16.6395), a promontory reachable only by a kind of swamp buggy that can be hired. Ingólfshöfði is famous as perhaps the best place to observe and photograph nesting Great Skuas at all stages of their nesting cycle, and as a side bonus, it offers one of the most spectacular views of the Icelandic coastline imaginable.

In the far southeastern corner of Iceland lies the town of Höfn (64.2496, -15.2044). In the harbor you will be able to see and photograph Northern Fulmar, Common Eider, Black-headed Gull, and (probably) Black-legged Kittiwake, all at extremely close range. Northern Fulmars are abundant breeders in Iceland, but tend to hang out on remote cliffs and can be difficult to see closely, making the harbor an outstanding place to observe the fulmars, which frequently swim around right alongside the docks. Just a few hundred yards south of the harbor on a large peninsula is Ösland, home of a huge Arctic Tern colony, which the road passes right through. It is quite advisable to stay in your car while on the road there, lest you be attacked by dozens of birds! The spec-
Harlequin Ducks breed on the River Laxa, one of the better places to see them in Iceland outside of the remote highlands. Höfn Nature Park, a small preserve on the southeast side of the lake, is a good place for songbirds like Common Redpoll and Eurasian Wren, and features a very uncommon sight in Iceland: trees. On the northwest side of the lake, there is a bird museum, and in mid-summer along the road to the museum one must be careful to dodge little hatching Red-necked Phalaropes that sometimes run out into the road! The Mývatn area is very active volcanically, so there is plenty of interesting geology in the vicinity, too, including steam vents, geysers, an impressive geothermal power plant, great hiking, and an endlessly fascinating landscape.

About 25 miles (40 km) north of Mývatn is the town of Húsavík, a little seaport on the north coast of Iceland. The GPS of the center of Húsavík is 66.04710,-17.34353—within a half degree of the Arctic Circle. It’s a characteristic Nordic seaside town, with colorful little houses, a picturesque church above an equally picturesque harbor, and fabulous seafood. Just outside of town are more areas excellent for nesting Black-tailed Godwits, which do not hesitate to come out to greet human visitors by circling their heads and giving their incessant yapping calls. Other birds in the vicinity of town include a large colony of Black-headed Gulls, Whooper Swan, European Golden-Plover, more Parasitic Jaegers, Red-necked Phalarope, Short-eared Owl, and more. One can also book seabirding trips by boat out of Húsavík, which is known as the whale-watching capital of Iceland. In fact, Húsavík is noted as one of a few places in the world where one has at least a reasonable chance to observe the magnificent blue whale, the largest extant animal on Earth.

There is plenty to see and do between Mývatn and westward to the famous Snæfellsnes Peninsula, including some low-elevation Pink-footed Geese near Varmáhlið (most pink-foots in Iceland breed in the highlands), but many birders make the drive directly to the Snæfellsnes after leaving Mývatn. The Snæfellsnes is yet another scenic wonderland, dominated by the massive Snæfellsjökull, the enormous glacier atop the ancient volcano made famous in Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. The mountain is so large that it is visible from Reykjavík on a clear day. The peninsula has many worthwhile birding destinations, such as the Black-legged Kittiwake colony among the many intricate coves and volcanic formations at Hellnar (which also offers a good chance to see European Shag and Black Guillemot and still more Northern Fulmars), or the wetlands at Rif, which hold another enormous colony of Arctic Terns along with many breeding Red-necked Phalaropes and other gulls and shorebirds. Most birders will eventually arrive in Stykkishólmur (65.0777,-22.7254), where the harbor offers another fine opportunity to study Northern Fulmars at close range. From

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**Barnacle Geese. Photo © Geoff Malosh**
the harbor, a daily ferry shuttles people and cars across the Breidafjörður Bay to
the picturesque West Fjords. (The fjords
can also be reached by turning off the Ring
Road on the way from Mývatn.) Along the
way, the ferry stops at Flatey Island among
the western islands in the Breidafjörður,
home of many nesting Atlantic Puffins,
Black Guillemots, and Snow Buntings, as
well as a small, quiet town that feels like
it has been preserved in a time capsule. It's
a remarkably peaceful place to get away.
The island also offers the best chance of
seeing Red Phalaropes in their striking,
bright breeding plumage. The ferry then
lands at the tiny outpost of Brjanslækur in
the West Fjords.

Like the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, the West
Fjords offer several wonderful birding op-
portunities. Anywhere near the coast in
this region one should be on the lookout
for the amazing White-tailed Eagle, a criti-
cally endangered and protected species in
Iceland. Also in this area, Glaucous Gulls
displace Herring Gulls and become much
more common the farther north one goes
in the fjords. In rocky uplands, Gyrfalcons
hunt Rock Ptarmigan, and small ponds
may hold Red-throated Loons and Long-
tailed Ducks. The West Fjords are indeed
spectacular, but without a doubt the main
attraction in that region is the bird cliffs at
Látrabjárg (65.5023,-24.5296).

Látrabjárg, lying at the westernmost
point in Iceland, is truly “out there” even
by West Fjord standards. The drive up to
the cliffs is interesting, basically taking
a rough dirt road over some rocky and
mostly barren lands, and eventually you
start to wonder where exactly you’re go-
ing all the way out there in the middle
of nowhere. But suddenly you’re at the
end of the road, and the cliffs announce
themselves with the cries (and smell) of
100,000 seabirds. These include masses
of Atlantic Puffins, Razorbills, Common
and Thick-billed murres, Black-legged
Kittiwakes, and Northern Fulmars. The
colossal seabird colony spans about nine
miles (14 km), making it the largest bird
cliff in the North Atlantic and thus also a
critically important one. It holds, for ex-
ample, an estimated 40% of the world’s
population of Razorbills in the summer
months. Fortunately for birders and pho-
tographers, everything you want to see is
within a five-minute walk from the parking
area. The puffins at Látrabjárg, in
particular, are so approachable, and the
area so beautiful, that you simply cannot
help but be overwhelmed by the place.
Razorbills are nearly as accommodating
as the puffins, also very approachable but
most often just a little bit below the top
edge of the cliff. The birds separate them-
selves distinctively, with the puffins often
on the grass right on the top edge of the
cliff, literally within arm’s reach, the ra-
zorbills just below that (and every once in
a while also on the top with the puffins),
and Common and Thick-billed murres
usually far down the cliffs. Fulmars and
Kittiwakes mix in here and there. Different
times in the summer offer different things
to see: in June, adults are courting and
displaying, and by mid-July eggs have
started to hatch and adults are seen fly-
ing to and from the cliffs with mouthfuls
of food. By August, young juveniles are
poking out onto the cliffs, getting ready
for their first flights down to the water. To
describe Látrabjárg as magical would be
a gross understatement, and visiting the
cliffs in the summer months should be on
every birder’s “bucket list”.

This brief and cursory tour around the
Ring Road has only scratched the sur-
face of what Iceland has to offer. Not even
mentioned here are most of the famous
landmarks and geological attractions, like
Þingvellir National Park, site of the Viking
parliament dating back to 930 A.D., and
Landmannalaugar, a famous wilderness of
hot springs and lava fields and mountains
of pure rhyolite, to name just two. Or the
Klojur and Sprengisandur roads, the two
dirt tracks that cross the wild and spec-
tacularly remote Icelandic Highlands of
the island’s interior. Even in winter, one may
catch a glimpse of the Northern Lights
over beautiful snow-covered mountains,
or revel in the wild and powerful weather
of the North Atlantic while bathing in the
geothermal spa of the Blue Lagoon. Even
the air in Iceland, pure and crisp as the
country itself, is almost intoxicating in its
clarity. I can’t wait for my next trip back.

TOP TO BOTTOM:
- Black-tailed Godwit. Photo © Geoff Malosh
- European Shag. Photo © Ron Knight
- European Golden-Plover. Photo © Geoff Malosh
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Dark Roast
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- Spicy
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- Intense

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Every two years, our tour leaders and office team gather at our home base in Austin to reconnect with colleagues, renew acquaintances, and discuss important issues that affect our business.

This year, in addition to our entire Austin-based office staff, our company meeting included two of our longtime business advisors and nineteen tour leaders representing six continents and seven countries. We hosted leaders from Australia, Brazil, Ecuador, South Africa, Spain, the United States, and Venezuela.

The meeting made abundantly clear what a terrific company we have, thanks to our intelligent, dedicated, and hard-working tour leaders and office team. Through the years, Victor Emanuel Nature Tours has evolved into a community, and not by accident. This evolution has occurred as a result of a covenant that exists between VENT’s management and its staff, in which the company does all it can to make it possible for our employees and their families to have good lives, and they in turn do all they can to make VENT successful.

As we gathered at this year’s meeting, I felt a great sense of pride for the company we have all worked so hard for so many years to create. As we embark on our 42nd year, the future of our company is bright, thanks to our wonderful employees and to you, the people who honor us by taking our tours.

- Victor Emanuel

Our annual printed catalogs describe over 140 land-based tours and up to a dozen cruises worldwide. Detailed itineraries, field reports, and photo galleries can be found on our NEW website: www.ventbird.com.