



HILLSTAR
NATURE

Alaska

Bering Sea Outposts:
St. Paul Island & Nome

5 – 15 June, 2024

With George Armistead & Alvaro Jaramillo

Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow) extension: 16 - 19 June



Coffee Dome in the remote outpost village of Nome is famous as a location where birders can see Bristle-thighed Curlew. It is also intensely scenic, with blooming lousewort, Arctic cottongrass. It often holds breeding American Golden-Plovers, hunting Long-tailed Jaegers and the state bird Willow Ptarmigan, pictured here. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead).

Majestic Alaska conjures images of grand scenery, salmon runs, grizzly bears, and for birders it holds a bevy of special birds.

Based at two legendary birding outposts, this tour offers chances for a broad range of birds and wildlife including nesting colonies of seldom-seen seabirds, the wonderous landscapes of Nome, and a lottery for oddball vagrants from across the turbulent Bering Sea. On remote St. Paul Island, the steep and winding cliff faces hold nesting Red-legged Kittiwakes, Red-faced Cormorants, and thousands of alcids (auks) including Least, Parakeet, and Crested Auklets, as well as Horned and Tufted Puffins. Nome is unlike any other spot in North America. Intensely scenic, it offers a chance at rare breeding birds on this continent such as Bristle-thighed Curlew, Bluethroat, Northern Wheatear, Arctic Loon, Gyrfalcon, and still others. It also offers chances for mammals like Muskox and Grizzly Bear, and even others more mythical in nature. Though very rarely seen, the fact that Wolf, Lynx and even Wolverine are encountered here on occasion is an indicator of the quality of the wilderness that we will access. Both locations, St. Paul Island and Nome, offer good chances at scarce visitors from Eurasia as well, adding an element of 'jackpot birding' to each day.

Join us for an incomparable adventure to Alaska's very best birding hotspots.

Itinerary

Day 1, June 5th: Arrival into Anchorage

Welcome to Alaska. Please schedule your flight to arrive before dinner. We will plan to meet for the first time in the lobby of the hotel at 615pm and then head to dinner. Upon arrival into Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport (ANC), after collecting any checked luggage, please call the front desk at the Coast Inn at Lake Hood (907-243-2233), and let them know you are ready to be picked up. They have a free shuttle to/from the airport. Night in Anchorage.

Day 2, June 6th: Flight to St. Paul Island

Today we plan to depart from Anchorage and to fly to the archipelago of the Pribilof Islands, landing in St. Paul Island. Smack in the middle of the Bering Sea, these volcanic islands provide cliff faces for nesting seabirds with nearby rich waters nearby for provisioning their nestlings. The same waters provide similar sustenance for the large (albeit declining) colony of Northern Fur Seals here. These are at times joined by the endangered Steller's Sea Lion.

Weather is a factor always in Alaska, but typically upon departing from Anchorage, our flight should reach the island after



*Least Auklets and a Crested Auklet at St. Paul.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)*

about 4 hours of flying time, touching down sometime mid-late afternoon. This should leave us at least a couple hours to bird our first day here. Night at the King Eider Hotel, on St. Paul Island.

Day 3 & 4, June 7th & 8th: Exploring St. Paul.

Though it looks just a speck of land on the map, we have some 42 square miles to cover as we seek our target birds here on St. Paul. Much of the island is accessible by two-track or dirt road, and we'll have vehicles by which to explore this amazing place. Well known hotspots include the salt lagoon right in the town of St. Paul, Ridge Wall and the other sea cliffs, the quarry, Northeast Point, Reef Point, and there are a series of lakes and ponds that dot the southern and eastern side of the island. We'll see what the weather serves up and plot a plan based in part on that, and also in part on what is being seen around the island. Reliably, the rocky shores are good for seeing large numbers of Least Auklets, while the cliffs provide nesting areas for other auks like Parakeet Auklet, Crested Auklet, the two murre, and the two puffins, along with Red-faced Cormorants, and the real speciality of St. Paul, the Red-legged Kittiwake. Though ranging through much of the Bering Sea, over 75% of the population breeds here in the Pribilofs, and this unique, large-eyed, stout-billed gull is seldom seen elsewhere by birders. Between enjoying the cliff-nesting birds we'll check ponds and ravines for migrant and vagrants and see what we can turn up here, at the top eBird hotspot in Alaska. Nights at the King Eider Hotel on St. Paul Island.

Day 5, June 9th: Flight back to Anchorage.

We'll enjoy a final morning out in the field trying to mop up any last birds we might like to see, and then we are headed back to Anchorage. Night in Anchorage.

Day 6, June 10th: Flight to Nome.

Today we set off for the Seward Peninsula. We'll look to catch our flight to Nome and after about 3.5



Bristle-thighed Curlew is a scarce breeder and regular transient at Nome.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

hours of flying should touch down in Nome either mid-day or in the afternoon sometime. After getting settled at our hotel, we'll head out in search of birds.



*Arctic Warbler is a common breeding bird outside of Nome.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)*

Nome is truly a unique place. Situated on the southernmost point of the Seward Peninsula, it faces south out into the Bering Sea. Currently the population of the town is under 4000 people, but it is famous as the finish line for the Iditarod, as a gold rush town (esp. late 1800s), and also as a place where pilot Jimmy Doolittle spent a chunk of his youth. All of that provides an interesting backdrop, but we will aim to spend most of our time outside of town. Typically we begin our time here with a look around the Nome River mouth, and peeking out to sea from Cape Nome. Night in Nome.

Day 7-10, June 11th - 14th: Exploring Nome.

Every day is adventure in Nome. You never know what you might see. As always weather is a big factor, and can be quite changeable even within minutes or hours. We'll hope for good birding conditions, and search for birds and wildlife along the three main roads that run off and away from town.

The Teller Road runs northwest from Nome, ending in the tiny town of Teller. Along this road we could encounter Gyrfalcon, Northern Wheatear, Rock Ptarmigan, Bluethroat, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, and even nesting Black-bellied Plovers or other shorebirds, such as Bar-tailed Godwit, Pacific Golden-Plover, and more. This is also one of the best roads for encountering Muskox.

The gravel Kougarok Road is perhaps the most famous one in the Nome area among birders. If you venture out about 70 miles you might reach Coffee Dome where there is a decent change to find Bristle-thighed Curlew. Along the way there are many other birds and animals that can keep us occupied too. We'll pass through habitats that host the two redpolls, Arctic Warblers, Bluethroats, and Golden-crowned Sparrows, and the skies and tundra that may yield Long-tailed Jaegers, Golden Eagles, Rough-



Northern Wheatear is one of few species that barely spills across the Bering Strait from Asia, to breed in western Alaska. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

legged Hawks, and more. This road can be good for mammals too. Keep alert and always be checking the road ahead and behind.

The Council Road, runs east from town towards the town of Council. We seldom make it all the way to Council and spend our time along the coast especially, birding Safety Lagoon. This is probably the best area on the continent for detecting Arctic Loon. We'll need some luck and some persistence probably. As we search and pick our way through the loons (on occasion all 5 loon species are seen here), we see abundant Lapland Longspurs, nesting Semipalmated Sandpipers, Tundra Swans, Common ("Pacific") Eiders, and the coast and shorelines can host specials like Aleutian Tern, Slaty-backed Gull, and even rare waterfowl species and odd shorebirds.



The Aleutian Tern is the only member of the genus Onychoprion to breed outside of the tropics. The bridle and dark secondary bar are useful ID characters. Most years there are a few colonies along the coast near Nome. They are often first detected by voice. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

Nights in Nome.

Day 11, June 15th: Flight to Anchorage.

After a final morning birding the outskirts of town, we'll board our flight back to Anchorage. The tour concludes upon arrival at the Anchorage airport; unless you continue on to the extension to Utqiagvik.

Smooth Sailing! Thank you for joining this Hillstar Nature experience.

Tour Price/person*: \$8100

Deposit: \$1000

Single supplement: \$1600

Final Payment Due: 1 February 2024, or at registration if after.

Group size: 6 to 14 guests

*Based on double occupancy at lodgings, with a group size of 6 to 14 registrants. Maximum groups size is 14 registrants, plus guide(s) and driver(s). If there are fewer than 6 registrants, this tour may be cancelled or re-negotiated. Note that if you want a roommate we can try to find you one, but we cannot guarantee all guests a roommate. If none is available, you will be charged the single supplement. Deposit is made via WeTravel. Final tour payment is by check or ACH transfer. Final tour price is subject to change should flights within Alaska, fuel, or other required goods/services increase in cost significantly between now and departure.

The tour price (fee) includes services from upon arrival on Day 1 into Anchorage (ANC) until our return to ANC on Day 5, including:

- All meals from dinner on Day 1 through dinner on Day 11.

- All accommodations from Day 1 (June 5th) through and including night of Day 11 (June 15th). Tour finishes after dinner on Day 11.
- All transport from dinner on Day 1 through our return flight to ANC on Day 11.
- All guiding services, access permits and entrance fees to birding areas.
- Flights within Alaska to/from St. Paul Island and Nome.

Excluded from your tour fee are:

- Arrival flight to and departure flights from Anchorage to your home destination.
- Alcoholic beverages, laundry services, charges to your hotel room, or other items of a personal nature.
- Visa fees, airport taxes, airline baggage fees, etc.

Documents

All non-U.S. citizens should have a current passport, valid for six months beyond the start date of this tour, with at least 1 blank page for stamps.

ALL GUESTS/REGISTRANTS MUST:

- Review Travel Documents. For international travel, guests must have a current passport valid for six months beyond the end date of this tour, with at least 1 blank page for stamps.
- Review COVID-19 and other health requirements required to travel into or around the destination.
- Review Hillstar Nature's Code of Conduct.
- Consider obtaining travel and medical insurance to cover incidents over the duration of this tour.
- Sign the Hillstar Nature Terms & Conditions, which includes the assumption of risk/liability waiver.

Cancellation Policy

If a guest/participant cancels registration:

- 120 days or more prior to the start of the tour, a refund is issued minus a \$500/person processing fee.
- Between 119 and 90 days prior to the start of the tour, half of the tour fee will be returned to the registrant.
- 89 days or less prior to departure, no refund of payments or deposits are issued.

Pace, Rigor, Climate & Pests

- Moderate pace but with early mornings and possibly evening outings after dinner.
- Comfortable accommodations near to most of the birding sites.
- One rigorous hike to go for the Bristle-thighed Curlew, that is optional.
- Some prolonged periods of time on foot in potentially very cold conditions.
- Expect cold or very cold weather, with a good chance of high winds.

Fairly long days in search of birds and other wildlife. Nearly all meals are at restaurants. It's possible that weather or that success with our birds may allow for a break, but typically we plan to be out from after breakfast and again after lunch, with perhaps an additional shorter outing after dinner.

All birding is along or near roadsides, and walking is at a slow pace so as not to startle wildlife and see as much as possible. Weather is cold and possibly windy or with precipitation.

We strongly urge guests to consult a doctor about vaccinations and medications prior to travel. All participants are recommended to receive COVID-19 vaccinations. If any guest becomes sick and appears contagious during the tour, the guest may be no longer permitted to continue with the group. This is at the judgement of the guide(s).

Photography is welcome on this tour, but note that this is not in essence, a "photography tour". We will always try and allow some time for obtaining images of desirable subjects, but time is a factor in achieving each of the day's goals, and it will be up to the tour leader when we move on from birds and other photography subjects.

Packing

Please limit yourself to one mid-size suitcase/duffel and another smaller bag for daily use on outings. Group travel dictates we consider our fellow traveler's comfort, and this includes not over-packing. Warm waterproof footwear is recommended. Weather proof pants and a good winter coat, and a hat and gloves, and long underwear are recommended to protect from the cold.

As mentioned, a daypack (small backpack or the like) for your belongings for daily field outings is useful, and some



By the mid 1800s the Muskox had vanished from Alaska. In 1935 several dozen were re-introduced, and today the population in the state stands at over 5000 individuals. The bulk of these reside on the Seward Peninsula. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

folks find that having a walking stick for balance is nice or having a foldable stool/chair is nice for times when we sit and wait in an area for a bird(s) to show.

Your leaders will have spotting scopes for group use. If you plan to bring your own, and/or intend to bring a tripod keep in mind there is some space in the vehicles, but also that this space is limited. Generally we recommend sharing group scopes or being prepared to keep your scope or tripod on your person as we travel.