

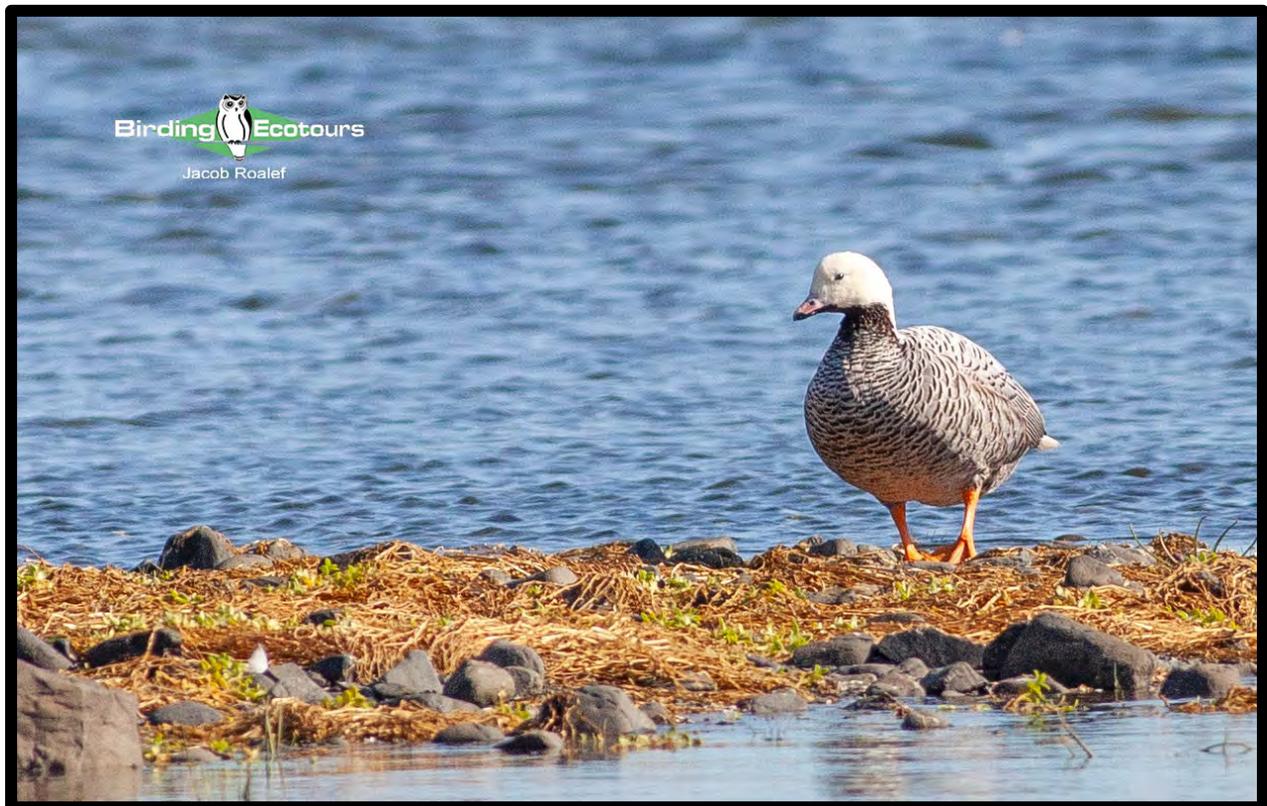
Birding Ecotours



MAINLAND ALASKA: SCOUTING TRIP REPORT

6 - 14 SEPTEMBER 2019

By Jacob Roalef



We enjoyed an impressive flock of 111 Emperor Geese on their wintering grounds.

Overview

Alaska is the perfect combination of amazing birds, large mammals, quiet wilderness, and breathtaking landscapes and scenery. On this scouting trip, Jacob and his four brilliant clients (Mike, Barry, Bob, and Grace) covered sections of mainland Alaska and Kodiak Island to learn as much as possible about the area for our future tours. This trip was faster-paced than a standard tour and covered a tremendous amount of ground in a short time, scouting out places such as Anchorage, Denali National Park, Seward, Homer, and Kodiak Island.

The tour managed an impressive number of fall bird species plus some amazing mammal encounters and spectacular scenic views. Bird highlights for the group included **Emperor Goose, Horned Puffin, Tufted Puffin, Marbled Murrelet, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Willow Ptarmigan, Spruce Grouse, Surfbird, Varied Thrush, Pacific Wren, Slaty-backed Gull, Tundra Swan, Trumpeter Swan, Northwestern Crow, Wandering Tattler, and Pigeon Guillemot**. In addition to birds this trip was packed full of amazing mammal sightings, including Grizzly and Kodiak Bears (two subspecies of **Brown Bear**), **Moose, Orca, Sea Otter**, and even a rare **Canada Lynx!**

A total of 99 species of birds were seen during the trip (a great number for the fall in this region) as well as an impressive 17 different mammals and amazing scenes including a fantastic view of Mount Denali. Full species lists can be found at the end of the report.



A typical fall scene across the gorgeous Alaskan landscape.

Detailed Report

Day 1, 6 September 2019. Anchorage – Tour Begins

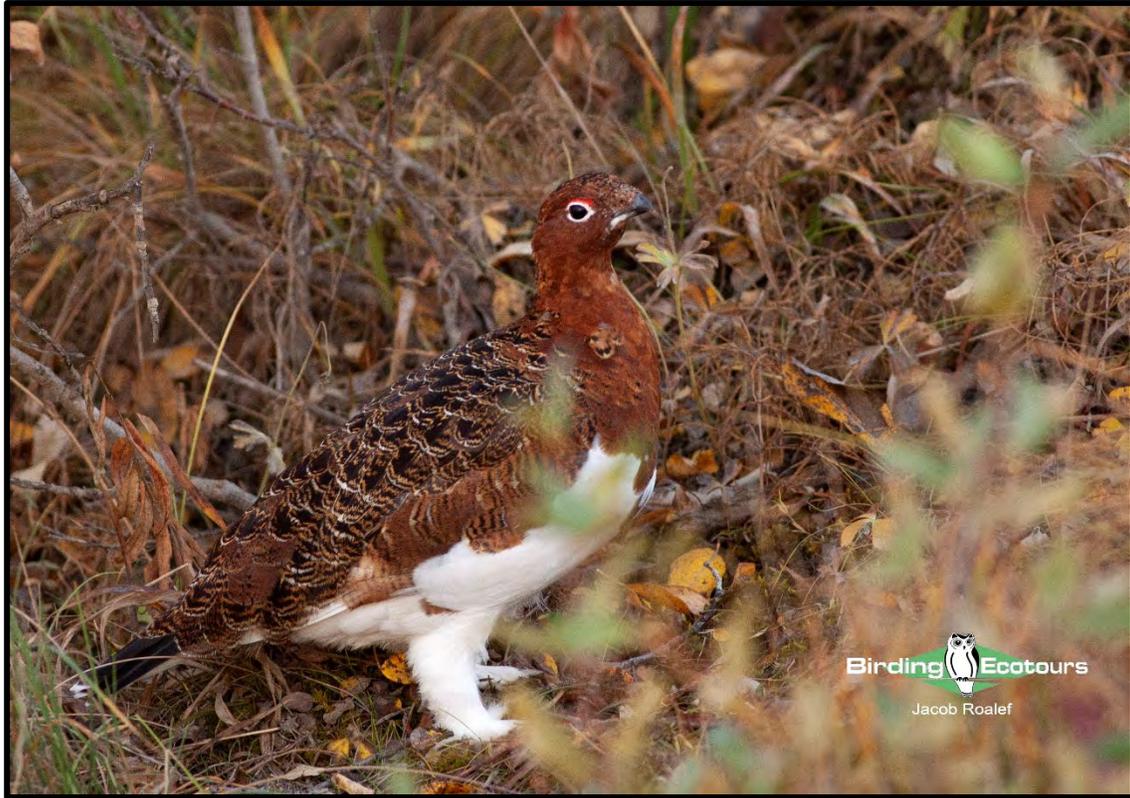
The tour began around 8:00 a.m. with just Mike and Barry, who had arrived the evening before. We started with breakfast and then headed for a few local Anchorage parks while we waited for the rest of the group to arrive. Our first stop was at the MLK fire area, which held a few nice boreal species like **American Three-toed Woodpecker**, **Two-barred Crossbill**, and **Boreal Chickadee**. From here we went to Potter Marsh in southern Anchorage. What a beautiful scene of pristine wetlands with a mountain landscape in the background! A few nice birds were hiding inside, like **Wilson's Snipe** and **Green-winged Teal**. We also caught up with a distant Harlan's Hawk, a northern subspecies of **Red-tailed Hawk** that has a white tail. We had a quick stop back at the hotel for lunch and a short break before heading back out to pick up Bob and Grace. Now we finally had the whole group together, so we headed to Westchester Lagoon for a quick evening scan, which provided scores of ducks and other waterbirds, including both **Common** and **Barrow's Goldeneyes**, **Red-necked Grebe**, **Horned Grebe**, **Black-legged Kittiwake**, **Lesser Scaup**, and many others. A great finish to a pleasant first day in Alaska!

Day 2, 7 September 2019. Anchorage area and drive to Denali National Park

We started the day with some quick checks at MLK fire area and Westchester Lagoon again and found many of the same species from the previous day like **Black-billed Magpie**, **Steller's Jay** and **Trumpeter Swan**. We did manage a few new species, including **Cackling Goose**. After a brief stop for groceries we were off for the long drive north toward Denali National Park. We stopped at the Eagle River Nature Center for lunch and a small hike around this beautiful wilderness. Things were quiet as far as the birds went, but we did manage to see some incredibly distant **Thinhorn Sheep** (Dall Sheep) on the mountainside. The afternoon brought a lot of rain, so we spent most of the time just finishing the drive to Healy, where we would stay in cabins for the night.

Day 3, 8 September 2019. Denali National Park

We were up early to catch our bus into Denali National Park. Luck was on our side today with clear, perfect weather conditions and amazing large mammal sightings. As soon as the bus started down the road Barry spotted a **Northern Hawk-Owl** perched on a spruce in the early-morning hours. Not long after that we scored our first mammals sighting of a **Moose** casually walking through the tundra landscape. Things didn't slow down much as highlights just kept coming. A **Grizzly Bear** was still peacefully sleeping under a tree from the night before. A gorgeous **Golden Eagle** was soaring on the warm thermals, while a group of **Thinhorn Sheep** were trekking along the mountain in the background. Suddenly a **Canada Lynx** appeared in the middle of the road and walked back and forth across it for several minutes before finally disappearing into the brush. Wow is all that can be said! Other highlights from the day included an incredibly accommodating **Willow Ptarmigan**, a pair of **Caribou** (Reindeer), and incredibly clear views of Mount Denali. This mountain peak is the largest in North American and is so large that it normally creates its own weather conditions and is often surrounded by clouds, so having a clear view the entire day was an amazing experience. We decided to have an earlier dinner and visit a few local shops to relax after an incredible day inside the amazing Denali National Park.



This Willow Ptarmigan along the side of the road in Denali even gave us a little call!

Day 4, 9 September 2019. Drive to Anchorage and Hatcher's Pass

After a quick stop at a local café for breakfast we headed to Byers Lake for a morning hike while attempting to avoid the rain. We were treated right away to a nice pocket of birds including **Varied Thrush**, **Dark-eyed Junco** and **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**. A few **Common Loons** were out on the lake along with a family of **Trumpeter Swans**. As we made it back to the car to start preparing lunch a **Spruce Grouse** was quietly sitting in the middle of the trail, pecking at seeds in the rocks. The remainder of the day was spent along Hatcher Pass, a long scenic drive through a wide variety of habitats. In addition to the amazing scenery we were treated to a few breeding-plumaged **Pacific Loons**, a fly-over **Western Osprey**, and an **American Dipper** foraging in the rushing waters of a cold glacial stream. We finally made it back to Anchorage for dinner and then to the hotel for the evening. Another awe-inspiring day in Alaska!

Day 5, 10 September 2019. Whittier and Seward

Today we started toward Seward with a brief stop in the small town of Whittier. In order to get to Whittier we had to travel through the longest tunnel in America (2.6 miles according to the car odometer). This tiny port town was loaded with seabirds like **Glaucous-winged Gull**, **Black-legged Kittiwake**, **Harlequin Duck**, **Marbled Murrelet**, **Pelagic Cormorant**, and more. We enjoyed lunch with some **Northwestern Crows** while watching a few local fishermen catch **Coho Salmon**. Then we continued to Seward, another small town sitting on the shore of Resurrection Bay. A bit of evening birding produced some goodies like a small local population of **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** and our first **Sea Otters** of the tour. After a tasty dinner it was time to call it a night before our fun-filled boat trip coming up tomorrow.

Day 6, 11 September 2019. Seward Pelagic Trip

We had more luck with the weather today, as we had perfect conditions for our boat trip on Resurrection Bay, one of the top highlights of the trip! We started with a few **Marbled Murrelets** close to shore, but it wasn't long before some excitement came through on the radio. Another boat out on the water came across a pod of **Orcas** (Killer Whales), so we turned in that direction and hit the gas, hoping to make it in time before they moved on. Luckily we managed to arrive quickly and enjoyed about six to eight of these amazing animals for over 20 minutes. Next we made our way over to Holgate Glacier, which stands over 400 feet (122 meters) tall and created a maze of ice chunks floating as we approached. Every so often we could hear a large chunk of ice crack, break, and crash into the water below. To wrap up the trip we caught up with a bait ball feeding frenzy that was loaded with birds, both **Horned** and **Tufted Puffins**, **Pelagic Cormorants**, **Black-legged Kittiwakes**, and a lone **Red-necked Grebe**. After this we made our way back to shore to conclude an amazing day out on the water. We then started the long drive to Homer, where we would spend the evening and were greeted by some fly-over **Sandhill Cranes** at the hotel.



An Orca breached the water for a moment, a true highlight of the tour.

Day 7, 12 September 2019. Homer and Anchor Point

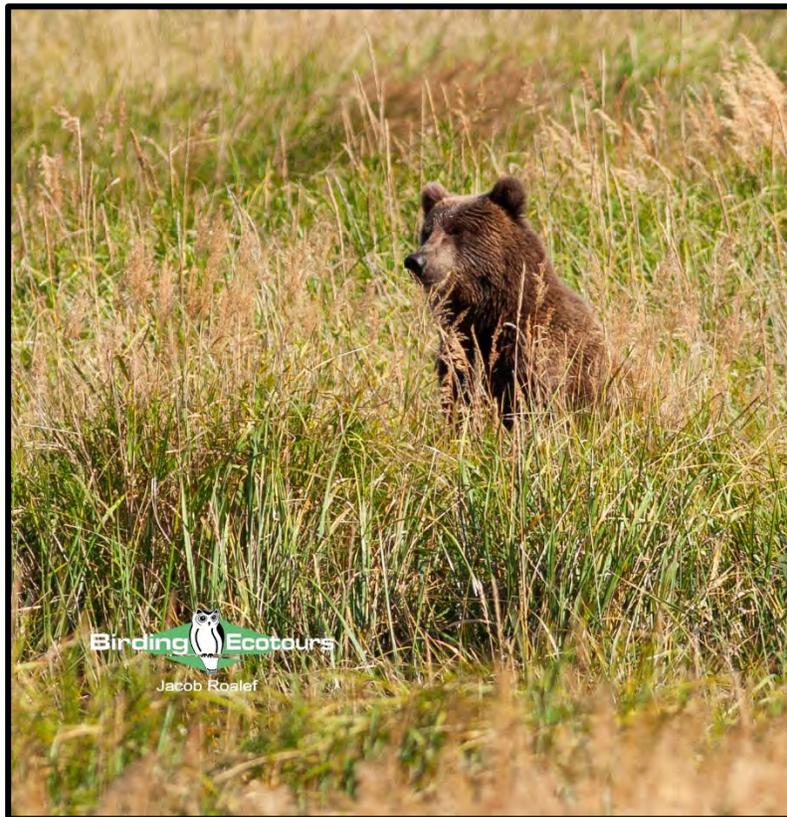
Today we were unfortunately greeted by rain and wind for most of the day from an incoming storm front. Despite the poor weather we made the most out of the day and added several new species to our trip list. Some sea watching and scanning from the Homer Spit area scored us **White-winged Scoter**, **Wandering Tattler**, and several more **Sea Otters**, which are always a treat to see. From here we continued to Anchor Point, where we had a close encounter with a mother **Moose** with three young. What an experience! After a nice lunch we had to make the long drive back to Anchorage, where we would turn in early before our flights the next day.

Day 8, 13 September 2019. Kodiak Island

We were up at 3:00 a.m. this morning to catch our flight to Kodiak Island, the second-largest island in the United States. We were hopeful that the maritime climate here would produce some new interesting species for us. Our first stop was the end of Womens Bay, the first of three bays on Kodiak Island. It wasn't long before we spotted the top target of this island excursion, **Emperor Goose**, not just one but 111 of them, as the first flocks were arriving here to spend the winter! We added **Black Oystercatcher** and several singing **Pacific Wrens** to our trip list as well. From here we traveled back into town to explore the marinas and break walls. There was a large group of **Surfbirds** with several **Black Turnstones** scattered among them, camouflaged along the dark rocks of the wall. After lunch we explored the rest of the island and the other two bays. Highlights included **Tundra Swan**, **Slaty-backed Gull**, and **Pectoral Sandpiper** – several good birds to finish our last full day of the trip.

Day 9, 14 September 2019. Tour conclusion

On the final morning of the trip we had to drop off Mike and Grace at the airport for their earlier flights home. The rest of us were lucky enough to tour around the marina with a local and his boat, getting close-up views of **Surfbird**, **Sea Otter**, and a whole colony of smelly **Steller Sea Lions**! Afterwards we decided to head back to see the flock of **Emperor Geese** one last time before catching our afternoon flights back to Anchorage and then home. We also lucked into an amazing surprise encounter with a **Kodiak Bear**, the largest bear in the world! We watched as it raced through tall wetland grasses, crossed the road, and vanished into the wilderness. What an amazing way to conclude such a fantastic trip!



*This young **Kodiak Bear** was the cherry on top of an amazing tour.*

Bird List - Following IOC (9.2)

(Common names following Clements/eBird are listed in parentheses after the IOC name where applicable.)

The following notation after the common names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: VU = Vulnerable, NT = Near-threatened.

Common name	Scientific name
Pheasants & Allies (Phasianidae)	
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>
Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcapennis canadensis</i>
Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>
Ducks, Geese, Swans (Anatidae)	
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Cackling Goose	<i>Branta hutchinsii</i>
Emperor Goose - NT	<i>Anser canagicus</i>
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>
Trumpeter Swan	<i>Cygnus buccinator</i>
Tundra Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>
White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi</i>
Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove (Rock Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>
Cranes (Gruidae)	
Sandhill Crane	<i>Antigone canadensis</i>
Grebes (Podicipedidae)	
Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
Horned Grebe - VU	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Oystercatchers (Haematopodidae)	
Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>
Plovers (Charadriidae)	
Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>
Sandpipers, Snipes (Scolopacidae)	
Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>
Surfbird	<i>Calidris virgata</i>
Pectoral Sandpiper	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>
Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>
Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>
Wandering Tattler	<i>Tringa incana</i>
Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>
Gulls, Terns, Skimmers (Laridae)	
Black-legged Kittiwake - VU	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>
American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>
Slaty-backed Gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>
Auks (Alcidae)	
Common Murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cephus columba</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Marbled Murrelet - EN	<i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>
Horned Puffin	<i>Fratercula corniculata</i>
Tufted Puffin	<i>Fratercula cirrhata</i>
Loons (Gaviidae)	
Pacific Loon	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>
Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Cormorants, Shags (Phalacrocoracidae)	
Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>
Hérons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Ospreys (Pandionidae)	
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Kites, Hawks, Eagles (Accipitridae)	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>
Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard (Rough-legged Hawk)	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Northern Hawk-Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>
Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)	
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates pubescens</i>
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Caracaras, Falcons (Falconidae)	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Shrikes (Laniidae)	
Northern Shrike	<i>Lanius borealis</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>
Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>
Northwestern Crow	<i>Corvus caurinus</i>
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Tits, Chickadees (Paridae)	
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	<i>Poecile rufescens</i>
Goldcrests, Kinglets (Regulidae)	
Golden-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus satrapa</i>
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>
Wrens (Troglodytidae)	
Pacific Wren	<i>Troglodytes pacificus</i>
Nuthatches (Sittidae)	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>
Treecreepers (Certhiidae)	
Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>
Starlings, Rhabdornis (Sturnidae)	
Common Starling (European Starling)	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Thrushes (Turdidae)	
Varied Thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Hermit Thrush	<i>Catharus guttatus</i>
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>
Dippers (Cinclidae)	
American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>
Wagtails, Pipits (Motacillidae)	
Buff-bellied Pipit (American Pipit)	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>
Finches, Euphonias (Fringillidae)	
Two-barred Crossbill (White-winged Crossbill)	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>
Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>
New World Sparrows (Passerellidae)	
Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>
Lincoln's Sparrow	<i>Melospiza lincolni</i>
Golden-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia atricapilla</i>
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>
Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>
New World Warblers (Parulidae)	
American Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga aestiva</i>
Myrtle Warbler (Yellow-rumped Warbler)	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>
Total seen	99

Mammal List

Common name	Scientific name
Squirrels and Allies (Sciuridae)	
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>
Arctic Ground Squirrel	<i>Urocitellus parryii</i>
Rabbits and Hares (Leporidae)	
Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Cats (Felidae)	
Canada Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>
Bears (Ursidae)	
American Black Bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>
Grizzly Bear	<i>Ursus arctos horribilis</i>
Kodiak Bear	<i>Ursus arctos middendorffi</i>
Sea Lions and Fur Seals (Otariidae)	
Steller Sea Lion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>
True Seals (Phocidae)	
Harbor Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Weasels and Allies (Mustelidae)	
Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>
North American River Otter	<i>Lontra canadensis</i>
Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>
Deer (Cervidae)	
Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>
Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>
Reindeer (Caribou)	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>
Cloven-hoofed (Bovidae)	
Mountain Goat	<i>Oreamnos americanus</i>
Thinhorn Sheep (Dall Sheep)	<i>Ovis dalli</i>
Oceanic Dolphins (Delphinidae)	
Killer Whale (Orca)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
Total seen	17