Birding the "Other" Aleutians

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Mount Moffet and the Andrew Bay area, Adak Island, Alaska, on one of those relatively rare days when taking such a photograph is even possible. Birding in the Central Aleutians is characterized by sifting through large numbers of a few species trying to find the unexpected. Photographed in October 1989.

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Another gust of raw, chill wind blew in off the Bering Sea. The blast shook the Celestron and made my eyes tear up, once again obscuring my view. But I had already made out the monochrome bill of the first-winter gull I was trying to identify.

"Darn; another faded Glaucous-winged. I thought for sure it was a Glaucous."

If the island of Adak has anything, it's plenty of Glaucous-winged Gulls. I swung my scope through the remainder of the resting flock, nearly all adults, mentally sorting them by the color of their primaries.

"Gray, gray, gray, black, gray, gray. Black? *Black?!*"

I jerked the scope back to the dark-tipped wing of the gull, and felt a surge of excitement that took the edge off the cold. As I watched the bird, I mentally recorded its field marks.

"Dark gray to black primaries; small, white primary tips in a neat row; mantle gray, and head mottled like any self-respecting winter adult. Could it be a Herring? Nah, the head's

too round, and the bill's too slight for a Herring. And to top it off, the eye is dark. Eye is dark?! It's a Thayer's. Its a *Thayer's!"*

This is birding on Adak, in the Andreanof Group, the centralmost of the Central Aleutians. The nature of this game is the constant sifting through the common species for that adrenaline-pumping rarity.

When I learned that the Navy was sending me to Adak, I began to suffer that common birder malady, the dreaded National Geographic Society Field Guide Fever, hereinafter known as NGSFGF. I began to dream of mixed calidrid flocks with tempting names like Temminck's, Long-toed, and Little. I begged for Bramblings and wagered on wagtails. Larry Balch's article on Attu Island (*Birding* 1988, 20: 290–303) is a good dose of reality, however. But his analysis is primarily for Attu and the Near Islands, those political aberrations of zoogeography. Birding the rest of the Aleutians is really quite different; and Asian species are scarcer there still.

The military base on Adak was originally constructed in 1942 to counter the Japanese forces on Kiska and Attu. Today, the population of military, their families, civil servants, and contractors numbers nearly 6500. This makes Adak the sixth largest city in Alaska, but certainly one of the least accessible. The island is served by two daily airline flights, but the traveling birder would need permission from the Naval Air Station to come to Adak, and there is no place to stay, anyway. The military reservation occupies the northeast quarter of the island, whereas the whole island is part of the Aleutian Islands Unit of the Alaskan Maritime National Wildlife Refuge—the headquarters of which is located on Adak.

Birding on Adak is a study in extremes. I would characterize the avian population as large numbers of few species. My first day on Adak resulted in five life birds, and plenty of each. The shoreline is thick with Glaucous-winged Gulls, and both Arctic and Aleutian terns nest near a large tidal lagoon. Back near my home grounds in the northeast U.S., a summer's drive down a gravel road would flush up countless grasshoppers. Here on Adak, you flush Lapland Longspurs in nearly equal numbers, and the flock of birds scratching in the dirt at the end of my driveway is the Aleutian subspecies of the Rosy Finch.

Common Ravens are too numerous to count, and their

antics provide hours of entertainment. On the other hand, the Bald Eagles, nearly as numerous, find the ravens to be nothing but a torment. They are always having their food stolen or are being mobbed by the ravens. Out in the bays and coves both Horned and Tufted puffins can be routinely found, their flight appearing to be barely controlled. They feed with numerous Pigeon Guillemots, and only slightly farther offshore Ancient and Marbled murrelets pop to the surface, only to dive immediately in search of more prey.

Winter brings northern visitors to Adak's balmy (for Alaska) shores. And once again, it is their numbers that are so impressive. Oldsquaw gather in large flocks, scolding each other so loudly that you invariably hear them before you see them. Harlequin Ducks are even more numerous—nearly a thousand on a recent Christmas Bird Count. But for me, the real joy of winter is the Emperor Geese. These small, elegant geese arrive by the hundreds from their mainland breeding grounds in early winter and lend a touch of class to the drab, winter Aleutian landscape.

Yet these large numbers of few species can lull you into a sense of complacency. To be ready for those mouth-watering torments of NGSFGF, be ready to expect the unexpected. I learned this difficult lesson soon after arriving on Adak and identifying a small flock of peeps as Semipalmated Sandpipers, only to discover that Semipals had never been recorded on Adak! My lack of field notes meant that not only was the record unacceptable, but also that it was highly likely that those calidrids were of Asian origin! NGSFGF struck more deeply, emphasizing the symptoms that clinch the diagnosis: copious note-taking and the taking of photographs.

The Aleutians look as if they would be an excellent migrant trap, and indeed the rare, storm-tossed vagrant does occur. But here on Adak, in the Central Aleutians, we are not on anybody's route. There has been one sighting of the Bristle-thighed Curlew, and I have seen large flocks of Lesser (Pacific) Golden-Plovers, probably on their way to Hawaii. But the other records of rare migrants and vagrants are probably of birds blown in, and are just as likely to come from the east as from the west. Whooper Swans are more likely than Tundras, and the probability of a Common

Pochard is just as high (or low) as that of a Canvasback. The possibility of seeing a Hoary Redpoll is as great as that of a Hawfinch, and—still my favorite—the Long-toed Stint is just as mouth-wateringly possible as a Least Sandpiper.

Some nights I toss and turn in the throes of NGSFGF, dreaming of what great rarities I might be missing because I live at one end of this island, and, most assuredly, they are all at the other end. I wonder how an island of this size can be adequately covered when the interior is penetrated by only a few backpackers and caribou-hunters. This is what makes birding on Adak so very exciting: the unexplored land, the limitless possibilities.

In 1944, some wag planted a grove of Sitka Spruce that has managed to survive the windy onslaughts this island has to offer. They are probably the only trees in existence for a radius of 500 miles. Some have now reached a height of 8 feet, and this cluster is known locally as the "Adak National Forest." Because it has yielded a few vagrant records, birders also know it as a place to check routinely. I had never found it profitable, as I had yet to see even a local bird, much less a rarity, in this "forest." But in the highest of hopes, I continue to check it for anything avian. After one of my recent, seemingly fruitless inspections, I was returning to my car when my wife excitedly pointed out a small passerine perched on the very highest spruce bough. NGSFGF pumped adrenaline into my system, and my mind raced feverishly on, considering the luscious possibilities.

"Let's see, Oriental Greenfinch? Maybe a Gray Bunting? No; how about a Siberian Accentor?"

I crept forward with binoculars at the ready, uttering an occasional *pish* just to keep the bird curious and in sight. It proclaimed a harsh *jhreee-ee* in response, and I started to mentally record its fieldmarks.

"Buff-gray lower breast and flanks, darker on the back. Heavily streaked overall. Two bold, white wing-bars, with yellow edging to the folded primaries. Yellow also at the side of the tail-base. . . . It's a Siskin. . . . A *Pine Siskin!*"

This species, 500 miles out of range, had never been seen west of Unimak Pass. A first record for Adak, and for the Central and Western Aleutians. But an *eastern* bird!

I have learned that west winds are what you hope and pray for. If they occur at just the right time, when migrants are moving up the Kuril Islands and the Kamchatka

Peninsula, then some birds may just get blown to the Central Aleutians. One spring had had its share of westerlies, and the numbers of Eurasian Wigeon and Tufted Ducks had grown beyond normal. And once again, that fevered excitement grew when a small, light-colored duck showed up with the Tufteds one day. A female Smew, and she was joined by another the next day. Appropriately enough, they were located in some drainage ponds known to birders here as the Smew Ponds.

Living in a small, insular (pun intended) community, you get to know most people, and they come to know you and your habits. So it is not surprising that I get many phone calls, or people stop me on the street to ask me about a strange or not-so-strange bird they may have seen. But the best call was in the middle of May when I was told of this large, tan bird with dark wings that was chasing the Rosy Finches from the caller's feeder. Driving up to within ten feet of the feeder, I was presented with an absolutely gorgeous view of a Hawfinch. No painting or photograph can do justice to the burnished-steel appearance of the Hawfinch's bill.

My excitement over the Hawfinch soon overcame me, and I had to leave to tell other birders. When several congregated, we flushed the bird into another yard. As we set up scopes so everyone could have a view, we noticed a smaller, dark bird with russet in the wings. A glance in the scope revealed a Brambling sitting next to the Hawfinch. Now that's a scope-full.

The 1990 nesting season brought its own set of interesting sights and sounds. Pelagic and Red-faced cormorants growing crests and white flank-patches; the sudden arrival of hundreds of delicate, spinning Red-necked Phalaropes; the equally sudden appearance of Arctic and Aleutian terns following the herring; the trills and wing-flagging of the male Rock Sandpiper as he pursues his prospective mate; the musical warble of the Snow Bunting—startling because I had never heard it before; the tinkling song of the Lapland Longspur given in flight or from the dried husk of last

year's Cow Parsnip; and the croaking, quivering display flight of the Rock Ptarmigan.

This is a glimpse at birding in the Central Aleutians. And I get 365 days a year at it. Will I ever get to see my dream flock of stints and finally cure NGSFGF? Absolutely! I'll just have to work a little longer and harder at it.