

Adak Island

Excerpt from the revised: *ABA BIRDFINDING GUIDE, A BIRDER'S GUIDE TO ALASKA* by George C. West

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Adak Island, in the Andreanof Islands of the central Aleutians, was the site of a U.S. Naval Air Station dating back to World War II until its closure in March 1997. Access to the island had been restricted, but it is now open to birders who can take advantage of the infrastructure left behind by the military. This includes rental two-bedroom townhouses, a good road system on the northeastern portion of the island, and an airport that is North America's westernmost destination for regular commercial jet service. With Attu Island no longer easily accessible, Adak has become an increasingly important Aleutian site for visiting birders.

Although Adak lies far outside the migratory pathways of most species, Asian accidentals still occur regularly, but not in the numbers that are experienced on Attu. Still, with multiple records of Spot-billed Duck and Marsh Sandpiper, Adak appears to be the most likely place in North America for a chance to see these species. Other Asian species found on Adak since 2003 include Taiga and Tundra Bean-Geese, Garganey, Far Eastern Curlew, Common Greenshank, Wood, Terek, and Common Sandpipers, Little and Temminck's Stints, Long-billed Murrelet, Oriental Cuckoo, Fork-tailed Swift, Gray Wagtail, Olive-backed Pipit, Eyebrowed Thrush, Gray-streaked Flycatcher, Siberian Rubythroat, Brambling, Oriental Greenfinch, and Hawfinch. Another major draw is Whiskered Auklet that is seen from the island on rare occasions or, more reliably, from an Adak-based charter boat. (See Logistics.) (There are no seabird cliffs on Adak such as those on the Pribilof Islands or at Gambell.) A subspecies of Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus chamberlaini*) endemic to the Andreanof Islands is widespread.

The expected species vary somewhat between spring and fall. If Whiskered Auklet is a target or if it is your first trip to the Bering Sea region, plan to visit in spring (mid-May to early-June). The auklets are reliably found at this time of year, sometimes in large numbers, around the east side of Sitkin Sound, particularly in Little Tanaga Strait.

Migration is more concentrated in spring, increasing the number of species you're likely to see. Some accidentals more likely to be found in spring than fall include both bean-geese, Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Smew, Far Eastern Curlew, Wood and Common Sandpipers, and Hawfinch. In fall (late August to late September), migration is spread out over a longer period, so the number of species seen during a visit is likely to be lower. However, your chances of finding rarities, such as Marsh Sandpiper, Oriental Cuckoo, Fork-tailed Swift, and Gray Wagtail, tend to be greater than in the spring.

While there are no real hotspots for landbirds, it pays to check as many places as possible every day. Rarities may be found anywhere, particularly at the lower elevations, and including areas not detailed below. Many vagrants have been found when they were flushed from the roads. You'll see hundreds of Lapland Longspurs while driving, but stay alert for something different.

It is recommended that birders stay near the road system and not venture far into the wilderness area that covers the majority of the island. Not only are there additional safety issues associated with exploring the wilderness areas, but also your odds of encountering rarities are extremely small. Even when birding on the road system, be careful, espe-

cially if you or your group has only one vehicle. You are unlikely to encounter other people except perhaps around Clam Lagoon, so if you have problems with your vehicle, you may be faced with a long walk back to town to get help. Do not drive your vehicle off the road beds, such as when turning around, because the ground may be soft and you may get stuck. Plan ahead and make sure you have enough fuel. The gas station is open for a two-hour period on only three days a week.

BIRDING LOCATIONS ALONG THE ROAD SYSTEM

CLAM LAGOON, PALISADES OVERLOOK,
LAKE SHIRLEY, AND SITKIN SOUND

Clam Lagoon is the best birding location and should be checked at least once every day. The greatest diversity of species on the island occurs here and the majority of vagrants have been found at this site. On the way to the lagoon, you'll pass the Palisades Overlook—stop here to scan Kuluk Bay, although all the birds will be far away. Watch for Common Eider, Ancient Murrelet, and other alcids and loons, particularly Arctic. The loons will usually be to the east of the overlook in the outflow of Clam Lagoon.

As you approach the lagoon, you'll first encounter a large area of exposed sand that is completely covered with water only at high tide. Three Spot-billed Ducks, including North America's first record, as well as five of North America's seven recorded Marsh Sandpipers have been found in this area. Other accidentals seen here include Temminck's and Little Stints, Common Greenshank, Wood and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, and Ruff. As a rule, however, there are usually no shorebirds around despite the extensive habitat.

As you near the lagoon, the road splits. Go right about 0.3 mile to scan the lagoon. Pay attention to the grassy edges to the left. Some of the shorebirds, particularly Marsh and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (both have occurred only in fall), stick to this area. There is often a flock of Green-winged (Common) Teal (*Anas crecca crecca*) here and perhaps other ducks as well, particularly where the creek enters the lagoon. The road continues on to Candlestick Bridge, but the bridge was closed to vehicular traffic in 2007, so turn around and follow the road around the lagoon in a clockwise direction. You'll soon reach the other side of the flats. Scan again. The best vantage point is from the road just before the observation platform. This is also the best place to park to walk out onto the flats. Walking is generally easy as the flats are mostly hard-packed sand, although there are a few spots of mud near the road in this location.

Continuing on, you will immediately encounter a small bay that often holds a flock of Greater Scaup and other ducks. The road then bends to the left, then right, and left again. Marbled and Kittlitz's Murrelets can be found from here on to the north end of the lagoon, particularly in spring. Sea Otters are common in this area year round and the occasional Black Oystercatcher is found along this shoreline. In fall watch for Gray-tailed Tattler.

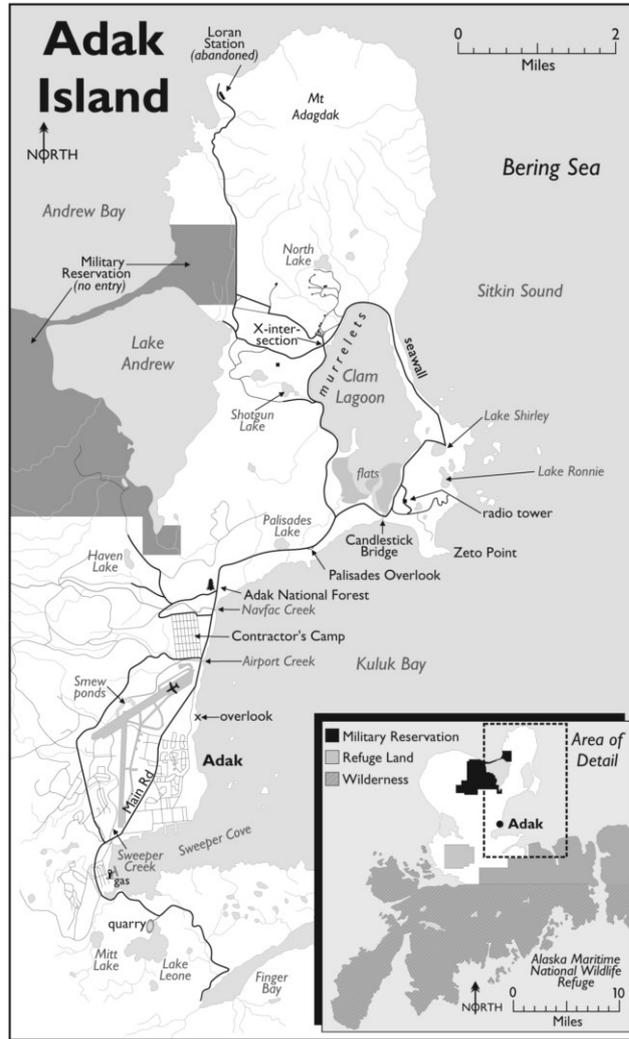
After the second bend to the left, you will see a cut in the hillside and then a small road that branches off to the left. Turn here to go to Shotgun Lake, which often has puddle ducks and occasionally Common Mergansers. Garganey and Spot-billed Duck have been seen here. The lake is to the right of the road less than 0.2 mile after the turn. After scanning

the lake, go forward 200 yards to an even smaller road on the left, a convenient turn-around spot for your return to Clam Lagoon. If you continue ahead (west) rather than turning back you will reach the east side of Lake Andrew (see chapter map). Back on the main road, you will come to a cluster of abandoned buildings on the hillside at the northwest side of Clam Lagoon. Gyrfalcons sometimes perch on these buildings, and on the several spruce trees around a building to the right of the main group, you might find Hawfinch, Brambling, or Eyebrowed Thrush.

The road passes a series of small, generally birdless ponds on the northeast side of the lagoon before reaching the seawall overlooking Sitkin Sound, the best place on Adak to find Red-faced Cormorant. In fall, many roost on the rocks offshore. In May 2006 a Long-billed Murrelet was found here. Scope for loons (including Arctic and Yellow-billed), grebes, gulls, and alcids, and check the shoreline for shorebirds. On a clear day, you may be able to spot Short-tailed Shearwaters and albatrosses far offshore, but these pelagic species are more easily seen from the Loran Station.

The road eventually returns to the shore of Clam Lagoon, passing Lake Shirley on the left along the way. Approach this small body of water carefully—Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Smew, Common Greenshank, and Ruff have all been found here. Farther along, as you pass close to a bluff on the left where the road reaches the lagoon, check for Siberian Rubythroat—one was seen here in September 2007. As you approach the south end of the lagoon, you'll again be passing large sand flats. This area is generally not as productive for rarities as the flats to the west of the bridge, but Far Eastern Curlew, Lesser Sand-Plover, and Marsh Sandpipers have been spotted here. Also, once Aleutian Terns arrive in numbers in late May, they roost here near the water's edge. Harbor Seals haul out on an isolated flat near the lagoon's mouth. Pacific and Arctic Loons on Kuluk Bay can often be seen from the end of the road at Candlestick Bridge.

You will need to retrace your route around Clam Lagoon to reach the next birding site, but if you have time you might want to bird the area out toward Zeto Point, east of Candlestick Bridge, before moving on. A road at the top of the hill above the bridge heads this direction, but the beginning of it is a little rough and steep. Alternatively, you can drive a quarter-mile farther and make a sharp right turn onto the road that heads to the radio tower. Either track will eventually bring you to a small pond that sometimes holds a few ducks. An Eyebrowed Thrush was frequent-



ing the road in this area in June 2006. You will then come to an overlook of the mouth of Kuluk Bay and Sitkin Sound, but sea-watching from this vantage point is generally unproductive.

LORAN STATION AND THE EAST SIDE OF LAKE ANDREW

The easiest route to the Loran Station begins on the northwest side of Clam Lagoon. From the paved X-intersection, take the road that heads uphill toward the abandoned buildings. Stay to the left of the buildings, and you will see a gravel road continuing uphill as it follows a row of utility poles. This road crosses a plateau between the lagoon and Lake Andrew, making 90-degree right and left turns in the process. A flock of at least 23 Fork-tailed Swifts was in this area in September 2004 and Gyrfalcons are occasionally seen here, but usually only longspurs are present. At a T-intersection, with a barbed-wire fence straight ahead, turn right. Caribou (introduced) are occasionally seen in the pass ahead.

The road comes out of the pass to one of the most picturesque spots on the island. Cliffs are visible to the left and the Bering Sea spreads out before you to the north and west. Vagrants are occasionally spotted in this area. Stop at the pullout at the beginning of the guardrail to check the rocky cliffs along the road beyond this point for

Winter Wren. Although the road continues to the abandoned Loran Station, fallen rocks and mud might make it difficult to drive the entire way. Take care not to get stuck—you're a long way from town.

You can scope the ocean from the Loran station itself or walk to the edge of the hill. Seawatching is best under windy conditions, but winds from the north don't seem to bring the birds any closer to shore than those from other directions, so winds from southerly directions may actually be preferable. Under these conditions, you can sit just below the crest of the hill out of the wind, but be very careful not to fall. Just like driving off a cliff, it would probably ruin the rest of your day. On a good day, you can see tens of thousands of Short-tailed Shearwaters, hundreds of Northern Fulmars, and a hundred or more albatrosses (Laysan in spring and fall, Black-footed in fall), though you'll usually see many fewer of those. Kittiwakes, alcids, and other pelagic species will be seen flying by, but all will be far offshore, so a spotting scope is necessary. Even with a scope, views of the smaller birds, such as Crested Auklet, are unsatisfying. Sightings of Whiskered Auklet are extremely rare from land, so do not plan on seeing them without a boat trip.

When returning from the Loran station, you can continue to follow the road that parallels the barbed-wire fence beyond the T-intersection. It will bring you to the east side of Lake Andrew. Although generally unproductive, Common Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, Fork-tailed Swift, and Gray-streaked Flycatcher all have been seen in this area. The road back to Clam Lagoon passes a wet area where the paved section begins. This spot sometimes has displaying Common and Wilson's Snipes.

CONTRACTOR'S CAMP, ADAK NATIONAL FOREST, AND SMEW PONDS Contractor's Camp, recognized by the concrete foundations littered with abandoned vehicles and machinery, is located north of the airport. Portions of the site's original marsh have been filled in, but the remaining habitat is the best place on Adak for Wood Sandpiper (primarily spring) and Common Snipe. Walk the roads through the marshy areas. Most birds will be found by flushing them. Snipe are extremely difficult to see on the ground and usually will be seen only in display flight. Both Common and Wilson's occur here. The winnowing of the Common is about an octave lower than that of the Wilson's, and it sounds more like someone rapidly blowing over a bottle mouth. The small lake on the west side of Contractor's Camp usually has some ducks and a few Red-necked Phalaropes beginning in late May.

You will see a small clump of trees on the hillside to the north of Contractor's Camp—Adak National Forest. Dusky Thrush, Oriental Greenfinch, and a few other rarities have been found here. Gyrfalcons

sometimes perch on the utility poles uphill from here. Downhill, pause to quickly check a clump of stunted spruce trees in a depression alongside the road. If traveling the main road between the national forest and town, stop also to check the mouths of Navfac and Airport creeks.

To the south of Contractor's Camp, a road leads between the camp and the airport, passes an installation of fortified bunkers (a former depot for nuclear warheads), and continues on to the west side of the airport where the Smew Ponds are located. As the name suggests, Smew may be seen here in late fall, winter, and spring, sometimes into early June. This is also an excellent location for Tufted Ducks during May.

South of Smew Ponds, a good gravel road goes uphill to the west. You can take this to a flat-topped hill. The birding here is usually uninteresting except for Snow Buntings, but on a clear day, the view is incredible. A road circles the hilltop. On the south side, you can hike down to Shagak Bay from a small parking area. Although there isn't anything unique about this area compared to the rest of the island, it's a nice hike.

TOWN, KULUK BAY, SWEEPER COVE, AND SWEEPER CREEK

Interesting birds are often found within the town itself, particularly in the abandoned areas. Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches are common. Watch for Peregrine Falcons and Gyrfalcons soaring on updrafts over the cliff just east of the Sandy Cove housing area (the more-or-less-occupied part of town). Brambling and Hawfinch have been found coming to feeders in Sandy Cove, and the latter have been seen in the abandoned neighborhood to the north. Bayshore Drive just north of town is a good location from which to scan Kuluk Bay. Watch for Least Auklet and other rare alcids in fall.

Sweeper Cove is on the south end of town. Pigeon Guillemot and Ancient and Marbled Murrelets are common here. The jetty at the mouth of the cove is a great place to look for these, other alcids, and Pelagic Cormorant. At the base of the jetty, gulls congregate at an outflow pipe from the fish processing plant when the plant is dumping waste into Kuluk Bay. Glaucous-winged Gull is the only common species, but watch for Slaty-backed and others.

Sweeper Creek flows into Sweeper Cove at the south end of the airport. Rock Sandpipers are fairly easy to find at this spot, and Terek Sandpiper and Gray-tailed Tattler have occurred here. After scanning the creek, drive across the bridge that heads west, then turn right. From here, you can drive farther north along Sweeper Creek. Common Green-shank, Oriental Cuckoo, and Brambling have been seen in this area.

QUARRY AND FINGER BAY

From the mouth of Sweeper Creek, drive south around the small boat

harbor at the southwest corner of Sweeper Cove and continue uphill. The road will turn to the right, go downhill slightly, cross a small creek, and then bend left. At this bend, turn right onto another road and you'll quickly arrive at an abandoned quarry, a good spot for Winter Wren, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, and Snow Bunting. A Brambling was found here in September 2007. A metal post with a U-shaped top on the south side of the road is the favored singing perch of a Winter Wren. This spot also provides an overlook of Lake Leone, but few ducks use this lake.

Return to the road from Sweeper Cove and turn right. After passing a small pond and cresting a hill, you descend to Finger Bay. The bay usually has a few Pelagic Cormorants and Harlequin Ducks. The road ends at the head of Finger Bay. From here a trail follows a creek up to Lake Betty. Several Bramblings and Common Sandpipers have been seen here in the spring. In fall, a run of Pink Salmon fills the creek with fish, attracting gulls and Bald Eagles.

LAKE ANDREW WEST SIDE

The west side of Lake Andrew is accessed by a road that begins north of Contractor's Camp and west of the Adak National Forest. However, in the summer of 2007, signs were installed marking this as an off-limits area. These signs were placed in incorrect areas compared to published maps showing the new restricted area. According to the map, Haven Lake, a good spot for Eurasian Wigeon, is accessible, but according to the signs, it is restricted. In either case, it can still be observed from its south end. With luck, access to the western shoreline of Lake Andrew will be restored. Small ponds in this area can be good for waterfowl.

LOGISTICS

Alaska Airlines has two regularly-scheduled flights to Adak—on Sundays and Thursdays. If a flight is canceled due to weather or mechanical problems, additional flights are not offered. One must wait for the next scheduled flight.

Land-use permits are required to bird the areas discussed in this chapter. Permits can be obtained from the Harbormaster's Office (located in the small blue building at the base of the western large pier on the north side of Sweeper Cove) or from the Aleut Enterprise Corporation LLC (562-5444, adak@adakisland.com).

Lodging, in the form of two-bedroom townhouses, is available from the Adak Island Inn (592-2325, adakhotel@gmail.com), Rick Koso (248-0109 or 244-9451, rictex@attalasc.com); Doug Newman (592-2142, jdgreenable@yahoo.com), and Violet Poe (592-2332).

Meals are available from: Aleutian Sports Bar and Grill (592-2222), Cold Rock Café (592-0632), and possibly Bake and Tackle (592-2332) and Doug Newman (see above). Groceries can be purchased at the Adak General Store (592-8403) and the Bake and Tackle (592-2332). Rick's Liquors (592-8240) offers alcoholic beverages.

Vehicles can be rented from ADAC, Inc. (592-3865, wtdillionsr@yahoo.com), Doug Newman, and Rick Koso (see above for contact information). The gas station, open only 8–9 AM and 1–2 PM on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, is located on the west end of Sweeper Cove south of the Aleutian Sports Bar and Grill.

Homeward Bound Charters (homewardbound_adak@yahoo.com, 592-2340) can take birders offshore for Whiskered Auklets and other seabirds.

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