

## Island Birding for Vagrants (and the Islands of the Bering Sea)

PAUL LEHMAN

My favorite birding is checking “oases” of habitat for migrants and far-flung oddball vagrants. One of my favorite types of “island birding” is checking desert oases. A patch of trees at a small pond or ranch house in the desert, a very small, nicely vegetated town in the western Great Plains, or an isolated lake, sewage pond, or dairy sludge pond in the arid interior West are great. String five, six, or seven such places together into a day’s birding. Each time you get out at the next stop the slate is wiped clean and you just never really know what you are going to find.

An honorable mention goes to many of those long peninsula tips sticking out well into the ocean, or into one of the Great Lakes. They are three-sided oceanic islands, and many of the world’s best migrant and vagrant traps are geographically these sorts of sites.

But, if I had to choose my true favorite, it would have to be several of the true islands off the western coast of Alaska. I have been lucky to be able to visit on multiple occasions Gambell (St. Lawrence Island), Attu Island, and St. Paul Island. They are all great. For whatever reason, back in the 1990s I settled in to making Gambell my sort-of second-home. (I’ve now been there a little over 475 days of my life [yes, I can see some of you shaking your heads in disbelief...].) The allure: I just LOVE kicking around a place where with virtually every step you wonder what avian surprise might be behind the next bone or tundra-tussock. It’s that feeling of just never knowing what you might find. Sure, the amazing seabird spectacles at these Bering Sea islands aren’t bad, either; nor are all the Arctic and Alaskan specialties, some of which are really fancy birds—such as Ivory Gulls and Spectacled Eiders on an ice-floe, or perhaps watching a white Gyrfalcon hurtle by.

But, I usually get the most excited about the unexpected. And perhaps that’s why I have spent even more time on these islands in autumn than in spring. The unknown factor is greater, and the pool of possible vagrant species is greater as well. This potential bonanza is countered somewhat by the more protracted nature of

autumn migration, and by the lush vegetation at that season making it harder to kick out skulking Asian passerines in to view so that you can actually identify them. It is that extra effort that adds a bit to the fun (and frustration) of it all. And, I really just like the Asian avifauna and the challenges posed by groups like the Old World flycatchers, buntings, and warblers.

There have been lots of great days (and a fair share of slow ones as well). A laundry list of many of the rarities I’ve seen at Gambell would be boring and not capture the point. Obviously, a number of the best birds have involved a number of first North American records. Such situations combine the sheer thrill of finding such a first with the sheer panic of quickly realizing that one needs to adequately photograph the bird so it will be accepted to the North American list—and more often than not the bird is as furtive as the worst-behaving Le Conte’s Sparrow you’ve ever tried to see...

Some of my favorite birds have been those found at the *very end* of a long, *slow* day. You stomped and stomped. You’re tired. All hope is about to fade (until tomorrow!). This happened with my first Middendorff’s Grasshopper-Warbler and with the first North American Sedge Warbler. Great examples of the famous quotation, “from the agony to the ecstasy” occur in this type of birding. Some of the most exciting birds, spotted with naked eye and thinking they were going to be something common, and then after a binocular view, were something totally, and I mean totally, unexpected—such as the Eurasian Wryneck in 2003 sitting on a maggot-infested whalebone. That first image of the bird in your binocular as you get it in focus is, well... startling!

It doesn’t matter which direction the unexpected bird comes from. In fact, some of the many mainland North American strays that have wandered thousands of miles out to the Bering Sea are as exciting—or sometimes even more so—than are many of the Asian vagrants. Many of these Nearctic species were even less anticipated, and much farther out of range, than those from the Palearctic. Some of my friends have muttered more than once, “Oh no, there goes Paul off to track down some American Redstart...” Yep, and I got a birding “high” and just started laughing when I found my first Brown-headed Cowbird out there.

You just never know what will turn up.

*Paul Lehman’s extensive travels have taken him to just about every avian nook and cranny in the ABA Area. He has led tours throughout North America for WINGS, Inc., is the range-map maker for most of the North American field guides sold today, and was a past editor of Birding magazine (1989-1997).*

ABOVE: Certainly one of the snazziest and charismatic of Asian landbird visitors to Alaska’s Bering Sea islands is Siberian Accentor. Increased coverage of these sites has shown this species is an annual autumn (only) visitor, with fourteen records at Gambell in fall since 1999, including this bird on 15 Sept ‘08. © Alan Schmierer

BELOW: One of life’s great joys: a group of birders in early autumn “sweeping” one of several “boneyards” at Gambell, Alaska, for migrant landbirds. With luck, a surprise mega-rarity will flush up ahead, perhaps a first North American Yellow-browed Bunting (2007) or Pallas’s Warbler (2006), or maybe a Brown-headed Cowbird! Early September 2004. © Brian Sullivan

