



Alaska: Pribilofs

Seabirds and Rarities



Red-legged Kittiwake Photo Stephan Lorenz

The remarkable Pribilof Islands form volcanic outcrops in the middle of the Bering Sea, one of the richest and most productive oceans in the world. Due to its location, 240 miles north of the Aleutian Islands and 500 miles east of the Russian mainland, this speck of land has hosted more than 300 species of birds, although many of these only as rare visitors. The two main islands (St. Paul and St. George) and smaller outlying islands (Otter and Walrus) attract millions of seabirds

that find safe havens for nesting along the volcanic cliffs, talus fields, and steep slopes. St. Paul Island is the most accessible of the two inhabited islands and good infrastructure, comfortable accommodations, and a wide network of roads allow us to explore this remote outpost easily. One of the main attractions is the seabird colony and the Pribilofs are particularly famous for hosting the most accessible nesting areas of the range-restricted Red-legged Kittiwake - we can watch and photograph this elegant gull very closely. The busy cliffs also host nesting Least, Crested, and Parakeet Auklets, Horned and Tufted Puffins, Thick-billed and Common Murres side by side, Black-legged Kittiwakes with smaller numbers of Red-legged Kittiwakes among them, Northern Fulmar, and Red-faced Cormorants. On the open water, we can often find Pigeon Guillemots and Ancient Murrelet. In the interior of the island, the maritime tundra of lower-lying areas gives way to sparse arctic tundra on hilltops and ridgelines. This rugged environment hosts resident Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches and Pacific Wrens while Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings migrate to the island to breed. St. Paul Island harbors extensive wetlands that host numerous breeding and migrating waterfowl and shorebird species. Among ducks, Long-tailed Duck, Green-winged Teal (Eurasian ssp.), and Northern Pintail breed in large numbers, while King and Steller's Eiders and Harlequin Ducks are frequent to abundant visitors. The most common nesting shorebird on the island is the Rock Sandpiper, here a particularly large and colorful subspecies, while Red-necked Phalarope, Least Sandpiper, and Semipalmated Plover also breed. Numerous shorebirds migrate through and, incredibly, St. Paul Island has hosted more than 60 species of shorebirds alone, nearly every Holarctic species. Some of the more regular migrants of interest include Bar-tailed Godwit, Pacific Golden-Plover, Bristle-thighed Curlew, and Common Snipe. There is a wide selection of Eurasian vagrants and migrant shorebirds and during recent tours, we have seen Lesser Sand-Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Ruff, Curlew Sandpiper, Long-toed and Red-necked Stints, Terek and Common Sandpipers, Gray-tailed Tattler, Common Greenshank, and Wood Sandpiper. Spring migration also brings Eurasian waterfowl and passerines and some of the rarities we have seen over the years have included Tundra Bean-Goose, White-tailed Eagle, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Black-headed Gull, Gray-streaked Flycatcher, Oriental Cuckoo, Siberian Rubythroat, Red-flanked Bluetail, Eyebrowed Thrush, Gray Wagtail, Olive-backed Pipit, Brambling, and Hawfinch. The number and diversity of rare Eurasian visitors is highly wind and weather dependent and while the cumulative list is long, we can hope for a handful of rare species during our visit under ideal conditions, yet recent springs have been spectacular with nearly a dozen Eurasian species during our tours. The potential and unpredictability offer some of the most exciting birding in North America. Several Alaska specialties can be found as migrants on St. Paul Island, including all jaegers, Arctic and Yellow-billed Loons, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Northern Wheatear, and more. In addition to the vast numbers of birds, we can observe Northern Fur Seals which are returning to their rookeries, have good chances to observe massive Steller's Sea Lions, and will definitely come close to the approachable Arctic Foxes that roam the island. St. Paul Island is simply one of the most exciting and unique birding experiences in all of North America.

TOUR AT A GLANCE...

Day 1	Arrival in Anchorage and welcome dinner Night: Anchorage
Day 2	Anchorage to St. Paul Island flight Night: St. Paul Island
Day 3	St. Paul Island Night: St. Paul Island
Day 4	St. Paul Island Night: St. Paul Island
Day 5	St. Paul Island Night: St. Paul Island
Day 6	St. Paul Island return flight to Anchorage and tour ends



TOUR IN DETAIL...

Day 1: We will take a mid-morning flight to St. Paul and a journey that takes around three hours. After landing and settling in at the comfortable King Eider, we will begin our initial exploration

of the island. We will follow up on any reports of rare or unusual birds or start by birding some of the lagoons and migrant hotspots.

Day 3-5: We will start with an early breakfast and then spend the entire day in the field with breaks for lunch and dinner. Depending on the weather and bird activity, we usually return to the field after dinner. Each day we cover the island thoroughly, usually starting at one of the seabird cliffs in the morning when they are most active. We will visit Ridge Wall, Reef Wall, and the High Bluffs and certainly enjoy the spectacle of alcids, gulls, fulmars, and cormorants to the fullest and have excellent photographic opportunities. During the late morning and afternoon, we will focus our efforts on the various wetlands sprinkled throughout the island and check several migrant hotspots. Depending on the wind, we can also do some seawatching for eiders, loons, and shearwaters. In the evening, we either return to the seabird colonies or if there was a good movement of migrants, check one or two of the island's hotspots again.

Day 6: We will return to several of the now familiar sites and either spend additional time photographing the rich birdlife or search for more migrants before our flight back to Anchorage. The tour ends upon arrival in Anchorage during the late evening.



Rock Sandpiper Photo Stephan Lorenz