



# ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

## Russia's Ring of Fire

**Kamchatka, the Commander & Kuril Islands**

*15<sup>th</sup> June to 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022 (14 days)*



**Zodiac cruise & Auklet flocks by Nathan Russ**

*The Pacific Ring of Fire manifests itself in numerous places on the rim of the Pacific Ocean – but nowhere more dramatically and spectacularly than in the Russian Far East. Here the Pacific plate subducts under the North American plate and the resulting volcanic and geothermal activity has built a unique and amazing landscape. Upwelling from the deep trenches formed by this action and currents around the many islands creates perfect conditions for seabirds and cetaceans.*

*Consequently, this area is one of the richest in the world both in terms of the number of species, which can be seen, and their sheer abundance. For many, the undoubted highlight is the auks, and during this voyage it is possible to see up to 14 species including Tufted and Horned Puffins, Parakeets, Whiskered*

and Rhinoceros Auklets, as well as Spectacled and Pigeon Guillemots. Other seabirds regularly encountered include Laysan Albatross, Mottled Petrel, Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, Red-faced Cormorant, Red-legged Kittiwake and Aleutian Tern. For those keen on cetaceans we can reasonably expect to see Fin, Sperm, Humpback Whales as well as Orca (Killer Whale), Baird's Beaked-Whale and Dall's Porpoise.

The region's human history is equally interesting and fascinating. The original settlers were the Ainu and Itelmen. They were displaced with the arrival of the Cossacks in the 18th Century after the Explorer Vitus Bering put the region on the map. The Soviet empire encompassed the region and at the height of the Cold War, Russia's formidable Pacific Fleet was based here. The secrecy surrounding the fleet resulted in the region being 'closed' even to Russians who were required to get special permits to travel to and within the area. It is only now, three decades since Perestroika, people can travel relatively freely here, although there is still very little in the way of infrastructure for visitors.

The region we explore on this expedition falls into three quite distinct and unique geographical regions: the Kamchatka Peninsula, the Commander Islands (the western extremity of the Aleutian chain of islands), and the Kuril Islands. Each region is very different, has its own story and, in many cases, localised plants and birds. Join us as we go in search of those people, plants, animals and birds that make this part of the Pacific Ring of Fire so special.

### THE TOUR AT A GLANCE...

#### THE ITINERARY

<b>Day 1</b>	<b>Arrival in Otaru, Japan</b>
<b>Day 2</b>	<b>Sahkalin Island, Russia</b>
<b>Day 3</b>	<b>Kunashir Island</b>
<b>Day 4</b>	<b>Iturup Island</b>
<b>Day 5</b>	<b>Simushir and Yankicha Islands</b>
<b>Day 6</b>	<b>Ekarma and Onkotan Islands</b>
<b>Day 7</b>	<b>Atlasova Island, Second Kuril Strait Ptich'i Rocks</b>
<b>Day 8</b>	<b>Bukhta Russkaya, Kamchatka</b>
<b>Day 9</b>	<b>Zhupanova River, Kamchatka</b>
<b>Day 10</b>	<b>Olga Bay</b>
<b>Days 11 &amp; 12</b>	<b>Commander Islands</b>
<b>Day 13</b>	<b>At Sea</b>
<b>Day 14</b>	<b>Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy</b>



**TOUR ROUTE MAP...**



**THE TOUR IN DETAIL...**

Blakiston's Fish Owl by Glen Valentine

**Day 1: Arrival in Otaru, Japan.** Our expedition begins in Otaru, a port city in Hokkaido known for glassworks, music boxes, sake distilleries and picturesque Otaru Canal flanked with shops and cafes built within repurposed 1920s warehouses. Make your way to the designated meeting point for your transfer to Heritage Adventurer (times and meeting point will be confirmed with your voyage documents) where the captain and expedition team will be waiting to welcome you aboard. After clearing Japan Customs and Immigration, join the expedition team in the Observation Lounge or up on the Observation Deck as we set sail for Sakhalin Island. Once clear of the harbour there will be an introduction to the staff and ship, and a series of

briefings. However, we'll aim to keep these as short as possible to allow you ample time to settle into your cabin and get out on deck to look for seabirds.

**Day 2: Sakhalin Island, Russia.** We arrive at the Port of Korsakov on Sakhalin Island where we will clear Russian Customs and Immigration before setting sail for Kunashir Island. If the weather is favourable, we should get great views of Tyatya Volcano, which at almost 1,819 metres dominates the landscape.

**Day 3: Kunashir Island.** Today we have an early morning beach landing planned at Kunashir Island, the largest in the Kuril chain, to explore Kurilsky Reserve alongside local rangers. The reserve covers the northern and southern portions of the island with 70 per cent of it forested. Species we could encounter here include Latham's Snipe, Oriental Turtle Dove, Oriental Cuckoo, Japanese Bush Warbler, Eastern Crowned Warbler, Narcissus and Asian Brown Flycatchers, Siberian Stonechat and Long-tailed Rosefinch. Overhead and along a nearby river, we should also find good numbers of White-tailed Eagle. In addition, we will be on the lookout for two special species that occur in the reserve, namely Blakiston's Fish Owl and Crested Kingfisher.



Japanese Robin by Adam Riley

**Day 4: Iturup Island.** If conditions are suitable, we will offer an early morning





Short-tailed Albatross by Adam Riley

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Bank Swallow (Sand Martin), Brown Dipper, Kamchatka Leaf Warbler, Japanese Robin, Red-flanked Bluetail, Coal Tit, Siberian Nuthatch, Pine Grosbeak, Yellow-breasted and Grey Buntings, Eurasian Siskin and Japanese Accentor if we are lucky.

On our return to Kurilsk, there should be time to either explore the village or to do some further birding. Eurasian Wryneck, Russet Sparrow and Chestnut-cheeked Starling are known to occur here and depending on the state of the tide, we may also find a decent selection of gulls; a regular, good-sized roost here could include Black-tailed, Slaty-backed, Glaucous-winged, Glaucous and Black-headed Gulls. Previous trips have also located Black-throated Loon in this area.

**Day 5: Simushir and Yankicha Islands.** This morning after breakfast, we will board the Zodiacs and cruise into a vast flooded caldera called Brotana Bay at the northern end of Simushir Island. Only a quarter of a century ago, this was the location of a top-secret Soviet Naval Base. This haunting reminder of the Cold War has now been completely abandoned by the Russian military and we can wander around this vast complex which is steadily being reclaimed by nature. It really is quite amazing walking into abandoned halls, dining rooms, hospitals and dormitories seemingly abandoned overnight. Red Foxes now seem to be the only residents in the buildings, although the surrounding patches of tundra do support Tundra Vole. Within the stunning setting of this huge caldera, we can expect to find a good range of bird species with one of the most common birds likely to be the Siberian Rubythroat. Spotted Nutcrackers also breed on the island and other species we should encounter include Winter Wren,



Killer Whales and volcanic scenery by Felicity Riley





Siberian Nuthatch by Adam Riley

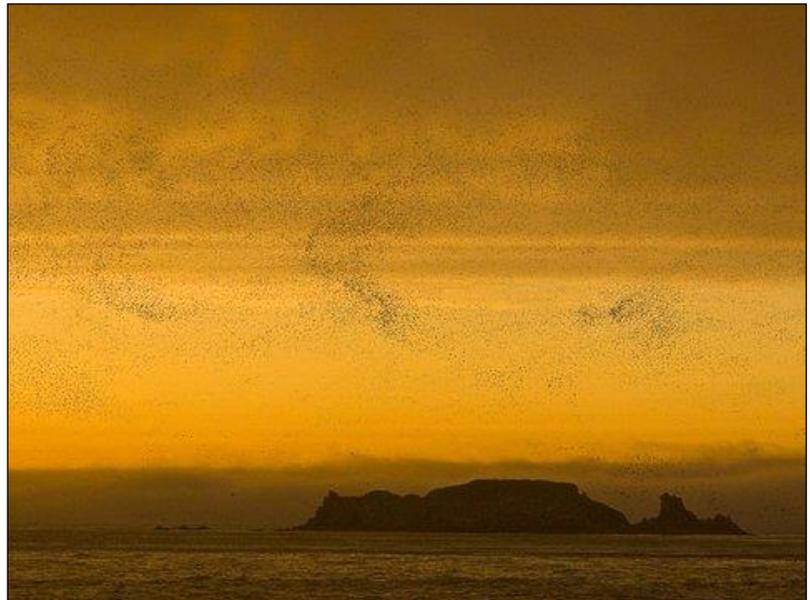
Kamchatka Leaf Warbler, Brown-headed Thrush, Pine Grosbeak, the distinctive *griseiventris* subspecies of Eurasian Bullfinch and the difficult Grey Bunting.

Over lunch we plan to cruise to Yankicha Island, the summit of a submerged volcano. Invariably this is one of the highpoints of the entire voyage as the number of alcids breeding here is truly incredible. Subject to weather and sea conditions, we will use the Zodiacs to circumnavigate part of the coastline and then enter the flooded caldera. The concentrations of Crested and Whiskered Auklets here are simply spectacular and we can also expect to get great views of Thick-billed and Common Guillemots and both Tufted and Horned

Puffins. We should also see the snowy race of Pigeon Guillemot. While inside the caldera we will pass the breeding colonies of Crested and Whiskered Auklets and are likely to also find Harlequin Ducks. We also stand an excellent chance of seeing Arctic Foxes that can be pretty inquisitive as they patrol the auk colonies looking for their next meal. As we return to the ship in the late evening many of the alcids will be returning to their colonies. Being surrounded by clouds of birds darkening the sky is an experience you will never forget.

**Day 6: Ekarma and Onekotan Islands.** This morning we expect to be off Ekarma Island which, like so many of the islands in the Kuril chain, is an active volcano. The island is home to hundreds of thousands of breeding Northern Fulmars and we plan to Zodiac cruise along the coast enjoying the multitude of birds. Other species that breed here include both Tufted and Horned Puffins, we may even see some of the island's resident Peregrines hunting alcids.

This afternoon we plan to make a landing at the northern end of Onekotan Island from where it is a relatively easy walk to Black Lake. Our walk will take us through stunted areas of Siberian Stone Pine, Dwarf Birch and Polar Willow. At the time of our visit conditions should be spring-like and, as we make our way to and from the lake, there should be plenty of wild flowers in bloom including the possibility of some stunning orchids. On the lake a selection of wildfowl can usually be found including Greater Scaup and Goosander, while in the scrub we will be looking out for Buff-bellied Pipit, Brown-headed Thrush,



Auklet flocks at sunset over Yanchika Island by Niels Poul Dreyer





Crested Auklets by Adam Riley

Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Siberian Rubythroat and Pine Grosbeak. On the beach where we land, and throughout the walk, there is extensive evidence of fortifications built by the Japanese during World War II. The Russians defeated the Japanese in the closing days of the war and although the islands have been considered Russian territory ever since, Japan still disputes Russian ownership of some of the Southern Kuril Islands.

**Day 7: Atlasova Island, Second Kuril Strait Ptich'i Rocks.**

As we move further southwards into the Kuril Islands, the coming Spring becomes more evident. This morning we will cruise through Second Strait in the Kuril Islands. This region has one of the highest densities of Sea Otters in the Kurils, and we have a chance to observe these amazing animals that were once in great demand because of their pelts. Today, even though they are totally protected, poaching is still a threat.

Our first landing in the Kuril Islands will be on Atlasova Island, where the tallest volcano in the archipelago can be found (Alaid at 2,340m). Atlasova was the first island to be sighted by Cossack explorers when they reached this region in the 1690's, yet like most other islands in this area, its only inhabitants now are birds and animals. Near our landing site are the remains of a herring processing plant – the herring fishery collapsed in the 1950's and the island was subsequently abandoned. On nearby cliffs, there is a colony of Red-faced Cormorants and out in the bay, there is a chance of finding more Harlequin Duck, Black and White-winged Scoters and Glaucous Gull. This area is also good for Leach's Storm Petrel and we will keep an eye out for them in sections of open water.

We then plan to sail through the Second Kuril Strait between Shumshu and Paramushir Islands on route to Ptich'i or Bird Rocks where Alaid, the tallest volcano in the archipelago with an elevation of 2,340 metres, can be found. The plan is to Zodiac cruise the wildlife rich Ptich'i Rocks where an abundance of birds, seals and Sea Otters reside at these fascinating formations. Sea Otters were hunted to almost extinction in Russia, but now number back to almost two-thirds of their historical range. Harbour and Larga Seals are often seen here as well as a healthy population of Tufted Puffins.

**Day 8: Bukhta Russkaya, Kamchatka.** If the weather is fine, fantastic views of the many snow-covered volcanoes that dominate the southern part of the peninsula greet us as we sail up this fiord. Bukhta Russkaya is an isolated fiord roughly 150 miles north of the southern tip of Kamchatka. We could see at least half a dozen species of alcids during the morning, including Tufted Puffin, Thick-billed Murre (Brunnich's Guillemot) and



Red-faced Cormorant by Adam Riley





Siberian Rubythroat by Adam Riley

Parakeet Auklet. We will also keep a lookout for Long-billed Murrelet and the critically endangered Kittlitz's Murrelet, which have been seen here. Other species we may encounter include more Steller's Sea Eagles, the almost pure white *albidus* subspecies of Northern Goshawk and Eurasian Cuckoo.

We plan to make a landing at the head of the fiord where the birding can be very rewarding with many species singing and Lanceolated Warbler, Brambling, Common Rosefinch, Oriental Greenfinch and Rustic Bunting among the possibilities. We will need to exercise care as Brown Bears are not uncommon here. We also plan to Zodiac cruise the entrance to the

fiord where there is an excellent chance of observing Sea Otters, Larga Seals, Steller Sea Lions and Killer Whales.

**Day 9: Zhupanova River, Kamchatka.** We anchor off the mouth of the Zhupanova River where we will Zodiac cruise up the river for several hours looking for birds and other wildlife. The combination of smoking volcanoes and mile upon mile of untouched forest make this area very special. It is also home to some exceptional wildlife, including a high density of Steller's Sea Eagles. There are several massive stick nests immediately adjacent to the riverbank and consequently, we have an excellent chance of getting some exceptional views of this majestic raptor, arguably the largest of all the world's eagles.

In addition, there should also be plenty of other wildlife, including possibilities for Red-throated Loon (Diver), pairs of attractive Smew, the difficult Falcated Duck, Greater Scaup and other waterfowl, Wood Sandpiper, Aleutian Tern, White Wagtail (distinctive *ocularis* subspecies), Taiga Flycatcher, Dusky Warbler, Willow Tit, Yellow-breasted, Common Reed and Rustic Buntings, Grey-capped Greenfinch and Common Rosefinch. This Zodiac cruise may also produce mammals in the form of Harbour and Spotted (Larga) Seals and even a chance for the aquatic Musk Rat.

At the river mouth, there is a small fish-processing plant as huge numbers of salmon spawn in the river. Here there will be an opportunity to meet the fishermen, sample the fish and see how they are processed (if the salmon have already begun to run), as well as doing some land-based exploring. Both Long-toed Stint and Far Eastern Curlew are possible here and nearby there is usually a flock of scavenging gulls attracted by the processing plant. We should see several species, including the localised "Kamchatka Gull",



Arctic Fox eyeing out Harlequin Ducks by Adam Riley



which is now regarded by some as distinct from Mew (or Common) Gull.



Laysan Albatross by Adam Riley

It is always with genuine reluctance that we leave this area and head back to the ship; however, we could well end our visit with some more views of Steller's Sea Eagle and chances for Long-billed Murrelet as we cruise southwards down the Kamchatka Peninsula.

**Day 10: Olga Bay.** Olga Bay is a part of the very large Kronotskiy Reserve, which also includes the world-famous Valley of the Geysers. The habitat is quite different to what we will have been experiencing before with lush Kamchatka forests coming right down to the beach line. There is a possibility we will see brown bears and other forest fauna, as well as multiple bird species that live in this habitat. The seas around Olga Bay

are frequented by large numbers of Gray Whales that are usually quite friendly to the visiting boats, if the conditions are right, we will take a Zodiac whale-watching cruise. The rising volcanoes in the background here provide a beautiful setting to explore real Kamchatka wilderness.

**Days 11 & 12: Commander Islands.** The Commander Islands form the western extremity of the Aleutian Islands and are the only islands in the chain that belong to Russia. They are named after the legendary Danish explorer Commander Vitus Bering, who discovered the islands when he became the first European to sail between Asia and North America. Unfortunately, Bering's ship was wrecked and he died here along with many of his crew, though little evidence of their time on the island remains except for a simple tombstone that marks Bering's grave. Some of the crew did manage to survive and eventually made it back to Kamchatka, including Georg Steller, the expedition's naturalist. Although Steller also died before getting back to Western Europe, his journals survived and these provided details of the region's wildlife, including the now extinct Steller's Sea Cow and Spectacled Cormorant, which Bering and the crew had found on the Commander Islands. The Sea Cow sadly only survived for a further 27 years as hunters soon arrived in the region and killed off these easily captured giants (up to 30ft in length and weighing an estimated 10 tonnes). A skeleton of this massive creature can be seen in the fascinating museum that we will have a chance to visit during our time on Bering Island. The cormorant was last seen in 1850.



Sea Otter and pup by Adam Riley

During our two days in the Commander Islands we plan to visit both Bering and Medny, but our first stop will be at the





Steller's Sea Eagle by Adam Riley

village of Nikolskoye on Bering Island. While ashore we will have the opportunity to visit the small museum (one of the few places in the world to have a skeleton of the Stellar's Sea Cow). There is also some excellent birding to be enjoyed here. Along the shoreline there are often hundreds of Glaucous-winged Gulls as well as smaller numbers of the far more localised Red-legged Kittiwake. We should also see both Rock Sandpiper and Mongolian Plover (Lesser Sand Plover) here, as well as both Lapland and Snow Bunting which invariably show very well. We should also have an opportunity to explore an area of tundra behind the village where the highly-prized Pechora Pipit is known to breed.

All landing sites in the Commander Islands are weather dependent so our precise itinerary will vary depending on the prevailing conditions. One possibility, for example, is to visit a colony of over 2,000 Northern Fur Seals, where we should also see Steller Sea Lions and as many as 200 Pacific Sea Otters. There are also several sites where Zodiac cruising can be highly productive and it is possible to get close views of Red-legged Kittiwake, Parakeet Auklet, Horned Puffin and Pigeon Guillemot (a very different looking species to the birds in the Kuril Islands); while ashore, we could also encounter Rock Ptarmigan and the endemic subspecies of Arctic Fox.

We also plan to ship cruise along the southern coast of Bering Island as this is a superb area for seabirds and cetaceans. We could potentially see Short-tailed, Black-footed and Laysan Albatrosses, Mottled Petrel, Red-legged Kittiwake, Least, Parakeet and Whiskered Auklets and Horned and Tufted Puffins. This area is also renowned for cetaceans including Sperm, Humpback, Northern Minke, Baird's Beaked and Killer Whales.

**Day 13: At Sea.** We have a day at sea as we cruise across the Kamchatka Trench towards the Commander Islands. The waters we are cruising through are renowned for cetaceans as this is the border between two major tectonic plates and there are deep canyons where these animals feed. Blue, Fin, Humpback, Sperm, Minke and Baird's Beaked Whales have all been recorded here, as have Dall's Porpoise and Killer Whale, so there is real potential to start the voyage with some great cetacean sightings! There will, of course, also be birds to watch and we will look out for good numbers of elegant Laysan Albatross, thousands of Northern Fulmar, Short-tailed Shearwater, Fork-tailed Storm Petrels, elegant Parasitic and



Tufted Puffin by Adam Riley



Long-tailed Jaegers, Pomarine Skua, Glaucous-winged Gull, Arctic and Common Terns, numerous alcids and if we are lucky, Yellow-billed Loon (White-billed Diver).

**Day 14: Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.** This morning we arrive in the historic city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, it will be worthwhile watching from one of the many vantage points as we sail into Avacha Bay. Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is the main city of the Kamchatka Peninsula and the capital and administrative centre of the region. This city and the surrounding areas offer a great amount to see and explore. We encourage you to take a few extra days after the expedition to explore this amazing area, ask us about post travel opportunities here. After a final breakfast, a coach will transfer you to a central city point or the airport.

**Note: During our voyage, circumstances may make it necessary or desirable to deviate from the proposed itinerary. This can include poor weather and/or opportunities for making unplanned excursions. Your Expedition Leader will keep you fully informed.**

### VESSEL INFORMATION:



Heritage Adventurer is a true pioneering expedition vessel of exceptional pedigree often referred to as the ‘Grande Dame of Polar Exploration’. Purpose built for adventure in 1991 at Finland’s Rauma shipyard and specifically designed for Polar exploration, Heritage Adventurer (formerly known as MS Hanseatic) is 124-metres long, boasts the highest passenger ship ice-class rating (1A Super) and an impressive history of Polar and remote region exploration making her perfect for Heritage Expeditions signature experiential expedition travel.

Originally designed to accommodate 184 guests, we now welcome just 140 expeditioners to create a spacious, comfortable on-board experience and continuation of the exceptional, personalised expedition experience synonymous with the company. While a fleet of 14 Zodiacs ensures all guests are able to maximise their expedition experience. On board, enjoy stylish, sophisticated accommodations spanning 4 decks, visit the captain and crew in the Bridge with our Open Bridge Policy and dine on gourmet fare from



leading Australasian chefs. Watch your adventure unfold from numerous spectacular indoor and outdoor viewing locations including Heritage Adventurer's famed Observation Lounge resplendent with 270-degree views and join our world-renowned team of naturalists, botanists, historians and experts as they interpret the natural and human history discovered during each voyage, as well as hosting regular lectures.

And should you require a little R&R, unwind in the library, pool, gym, hot tub, sauna and steam room, indulge in some retail therapy or find a quiet place to enjoy a coffee or cocktail from the café and bar.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:**

Tour dates, cabin prices, single supplement rates, relevant flight costs and spaces available for this cruise are displayed on our website. Please note that cabins have variable prices depending on type and size. Please see under IMPORTANT INFORMATION below.

You are welcome to contact the Rockjumper office for further information and specifics on the cabins variations and booking conditions for this tour.

Please note: The cruise costs are subject to major foreign exchange fluctuations and unforeseen increases in tour related costs (especially the price of fuel) and may have to be adjusted as a result. You will be notified by email if fuel surcharges or other price adjustments need to be implemented. Furthermore, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary due to unforeseen circumstances, but please be aware that we will attempt to stick as close to the original program as possible.

**IMPORTANT NOTES:**

- a) **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we now quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is however fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing.**
- b) **Please also note that a Rockjumper leader may not accompany the expedition unless a minimum of 10 participants are signed up through Rockjumper. In the case that a Rockjumper leader is not on board, the professional expedition staff will take care of all participants signed up through Rockjumper.**
- c) **Furthermore, these costs are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs (especially fuel) and may have to be adjusted as a result. You will be notified by email if fuel surcharges or other price adjustments need to be implemented.**
- d) **Lastly, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary and / or the designated Rockjumper leader/s at short or no notice due to unforeseen circumstances; please be aware that we will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

**Arrival and Departure Details:**

This tour **does not** include ANY airfares. The tour will begin in Otaru, Japan on day 1 and will conclude in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, Russia on day 14 of the trip. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance or advice in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

