

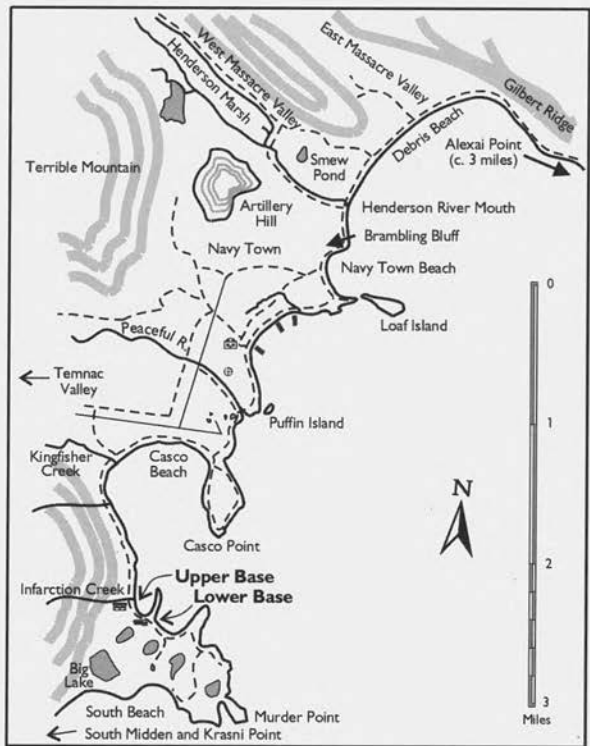
# The Murrelets

Brooke Stevens

*Postcard from Attu: "Arrived. Infested with rats, vandalized, snowing. Having a wonderful time."*

A little more than a year ago, in April of 2000, three New Englanders — Carol Ralph, Linda Ferraresso, and I — were sorting through our accumulated stash of Gortex, fleece, Japanese fisherman's gloves, "extra tuffs" and pacboots, waterproof optics, and the like in preparation for one of the last spring trips to Attu. We traveled to this "island at the end of time" in search of Asian vagrants that were countable on our North American life lists. Organized by Attour's Larry and Donna Balch, Trip A from May 12 (unintentionally extended) to June 1, 2000, was one of the last birding trips to this remote outpost in the Near Islands of the Aleutian chain, 1500 miles west of Anchorage.

Attu is many things. About forty miles long and twelve miles wide, it is part of the Aleutian Islands Unit of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. The island, which is located in the eastern hemisphere, its longitude about that of New Zealand, is the back door to two continents, and one can find Asian lilies and thistles pushing up through the rusted wartime Marsden matting and brown rye grass. Paralleling the period of our adventure, the island was the bleak site of the Battle of Attu (May 11-31, 1943), the only WWII land battle fought on North American soil and "in proportion to the numbers of opposing troops, the second most costly battle of the war in the Pacific" (Garfield, p. 272). Today, the sole military presence is the U.S. Coast Guard who tends the Loran Navigation Station. Because of the island's location, 300 miles from the Russian Komandorskie Islands and 700



Casco Cove, Attu — map by Bob Berman

miles from Siberia's Kamchatka Peninsula, we were hoping for storms with strong west winds that would bring migrating Asian birds, blown off course, to the island.

The southeastern corner, where we hiked over tundra and rode bikes in pursuit of birds, is a national battlefield park and provided the infrastructure for our tour: an airstrip, dirt roads, and concrete bunkers set amid the detritus of war in a landscape of astonishing beauty. We explored the same sites regularly, often seeing the same birds but sometimes finding one that was different, which was when the radios sizzled and we chased. On our daily excursions, groups led by Paul Baicich, Steve Heinel, Mike Toochin, James Huntington, or Paul Sykes set out by foot or by bicycle to various destinations: Murder Point and South Beach; Kingfisher Creek, Casco Beach and Puffin Island; Coast Guard and Navytown Beaches; Henderson Marsh (East and West Massacre Valley); or Gilbert Ridge and Alexai Point. Covering as many as twenty miles a day in all kinds of weather, carrying bikes over snow bridges and through rushing streams, tromping over tussocks and tundra, we became lean and fit, and had no problem sleeping at night!

Local nesters were everywhere: the super-sized Aleutian races of Winter Wren belted out a harsh, raspy song from the top of the ridgeline, and dark Song Sparrows darted through the rye grass by the water's edge where they somehow survive the harshest of winters; Rock Sandpipers trilled, so tame you could walk right up to them; Rock Ptarmigan exploded from under our feet with *grok*-like rattles; young Common Ravens fledged just as the Glaucous-winged Gulls and the Western Arctic orange-billed Common Eiders were laying their eggs (an arrangement most favorable to the ravens). Tufted and Horned puffins, Pelagic and Red-faced cormorants, Mallards (imagine wild and wary puddleducks flying against snowcapped mountains!), Harlequins, Lapland Longspurs skylarking everywhere from dawn to dusk, and Snow Buntings.

Of my companions, Carol was the instigator who saw a Brookline Bird Club presentation on Attu, and it became her life's dream to go there. In 1998, a strong la Nina year, she did. Two years later, after a tour of mainland Alaska, I mustered the courage to join her before Attou's time ran out. Linda planned her own trip, and here's what I love about Linda: A group of us out on Alexai Point picked up a beautiful female Mongolian Plover in breeding plumage, and called it in. Linda was seven miles away by bike and by foot, and it would be another ten miles back to camp by the same difficult route. But when the call came over the radio while she was standing in Henderson Marsh, Paul Baicich said "that's your bird!" (see *Bird Observer*, February 2000, pp. 18-21). And she was on her way. On another occasion, after we had been chasing all day, Linda and I were hiking over steep tundra, trying to remember where she left her bike; birds flushed ahead of us, and someone called "redpolls!" I was so tired I saw only fleeting shapes. "There were four of them," said Linda who turned, waved a cheery goodbye, and headed off to see a Common Sandpiper that had just been relocated. When an Olive-backed Pipit was found on South Beach, I rode like mad for six miles and hiked another two miles to find that Linda had been working the bird for several hours. She knew where it was as we arrived and what it would do when flushed. It was terribly skittish, but we got it for

tour-member Mike Austin's 800<sup>th</sup> life bird. He raised both arms, then sat down abruptly on a log and smiled.



*The Murrelets ready to leap into action (l-r: Brooke Stevens, Carol Ralph, and Linda Ferraresso)*

Chasing birds anywhere brings out both the best and the worst in people. It showcases the inner child in some, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies in others, while the truly blessed are able to strike a zenlike balance that is enviable. For me it is pure love-hate. What I admired on Attu was the professionalism of the leaders in handling our different chase styles and in keeping order in the field. Of course, there were instances with so many people (there were over seventy of us in camp) when someone flushed a bird or got ahead of the group, but that was the exception, not the rule. There was also a downside to the toss of the dice each day we were on Attu. The birds that are blown off course are often exhausted and never reach their breeding grounds; some are collected for the record. Also, following early Russian rule of the area and the subsequent enslavement and slaughter of the Aleuts, the places where we find birds (Murder Point, Alexai Point, Krasni Point, Massacre Valley) have borne witness to much human suffering and death. While I don't dwell on these thoughts, they are an important layer of the Attu experience.

During the time we were on Attu, people at home were keeping track of our trip. An e-mail correspondence between Joan Weinmayr and Michael Tarachow, who was part of the second spring group, revealed that our unbirdy weather resulted from the fact the main jet stream was parked far south of Attu, and that a split was developing over China and Siberia that created two different flows. The northern one over Kamchatka and Attu fueled storms that brought a bird bonanza to Group B.

Below are excerpts from my daily record of our trip:

**May 13** Carol, who is a blue-badge veteran of spring 1998 (41 life birds!) joins the volunteers going to set up camp, about a mile away. With sleet and snow blowing sideways, the rest of us white-badge first-timers head off on foot, lunches in our backpacks, to bird with Paul Baicich and Steve Heintl. The island is covered in snow. We are out for six hours.

Back at camp the buildings have been broken into and trashed. Rats have eaten stored food and destroyed mattresses on the leader's bunks in the Fish and Wildlife building (upper base) where we take our meals. The room is walled off. Dinner is served in the former Loran station (lower base) where we sleep, shower, and hang out. We pick up our plates and eat our first Attu supper of chili, three-bean salad, and chocolate pudding while sitting on our bunk beds.

Our room is a semidetached concrete unit next to the workshop and away from the main building. It is spacious for the eight of us: myself, Carol, and Linda from Cambridge, Waltham, and Watertown, respectively; Anna Scarbrough and Elizabeth (Betty) Hardesty from Findlay, OH; Lena Galitano from Raleigh, NC, Lynn Barber from Forth Worth, TX, and Sandra Escala, from Bridgewater, NJ. Lena has tacked plastic sheeting to the inside top of the door to keep out the draft and fashioned a pull (there is no knob) of green nylon rope wrapped with duct tape. It is excellent. We decide to call our room Murrelet Manor, and refer to ourselves as the Murrelets. (It is a tradition at Attu to write your lifelist total on the wall at the end of the tour, and I notice that ours is the only group of women "listers" in the Manor.)



*The author and a bunkie*

**May 15** "Rat, the other white meat," says Joe Swertinski our bike man. Our cook, Walter Chuck (his real name!) and staff are killing dozens of rats, sleeping with rats. Arctic Foxes were eliminated from the island last year, which is a boon for the ptarmigan, and the rats.

The laundry is set up, and chore list posted. I do breakfast prep. Carol is a pot scrubber, and Linda does laundry. Our walls in the Manor have been dried by Al "Attu Power & Light" Driscoll, using an industrial strength kerosene heater. Generators hum, bikes are new and easy to ride on the rough roads, food is hot and plentiful. After dinner, we have fabulous views of a Yellow-billed Loon just outside of Casco Cove.

Lena to Al: "This is just like home." Al to Lena: "Then I'll fix it."

**May 16** A glorious day, clearing, calm, sun, the snow-covered mountains shining. Not what I expected on Attu! We admire five Pacific Golden Plovers along the road and a flock of pintail flying against the peaks. Harlequins are murmuring in the bay. We go on to Gilbert Ridge, 6.5 miles from camp, along Massacre Bay which is calm, with a black gravel beach. Gray-crowned Rosy Finches on the cliffs, Snow Buntings chasing and scolding. Male Tufted Duck with tuft flying. As we are admiring the small Aleutian Canada Geese on the slopes, a male Rustic Bunting flies up the cliff face. Perfect views in clear light.

**May 17** The bay is flat, and the pipes have frozen. Sandra has lost her toothbrush. Betty has a sore knee from falling off her bike several times. Anna is working on a crossword puzzle, and Carol is reading a romance novel.

**May 18** While we are having lunch at Puffin Island, Steve reports a Smew at Alexai. Linda, Jane Kostenko, Tyler Bell, and I take off. Forty minutes of hard riding. Paul Baicich is coordinating arrivals and waves us on. He knows, via radio, who is coming and from where. He makes sure that we are all collected, far from the birds. Steve Heinel then forms a scope line, still far from the pond, where we get our first looks at two of these dressy little mergansers: a female and a first-year male. Steve then moves us quietly closer, calling a few at a time for scope looks. He repeats this maneuver until we have excellent views of the two birds. He and Paul have managed to get thirty birders across a field and in full view of the birds without spooking them. Everyone gets good looks.

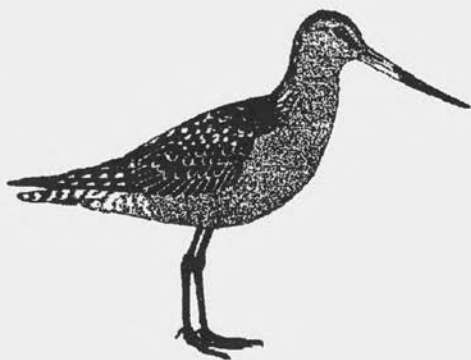
**May 19** Sandra: "If I'm alive at the Bunting, I'm going for the Smew."

Botanizing the Aleut middens with Paul Baicich: kakalia (leaves like plates), angelica, cow parsnip, Kamchatka thistle, Kamchatka lily, lupine, rye grass, blooming willow, false hellebore. The island is becoming greener each day.

**May 20** While we are at Casco Bay, we hear that Mike Toochin's group on Gilbert Ridge has a Dusky Thrush, and he is calling for several field guides (Japan, Taiwan) to be brought from base because the bird may be the Japanese race, which has only been seen once before, on Adak in 1982. Carol and I leave for the ridge. Everyone is gathered around the foxholes and trenches. No bird. Agonizing. (This is the part of chasing that makes me crazy.) Lunch discussion of the bird's race. Mike takes those of us who haven't seen it to sweep along the road. No bird. Then we get a wave from the group up on the ridge, and back we trudge, up the snowfield, and get wonderful looks at the thrush feeding along the willows at the edge of a snowbank.

**May 21** Birds at last. A strong west wind during the night (which chilled us in our concrete bunkroom and which was measured at up to 80 knots at the Coast Guard Station). At Navytown Beach an excited radio message comes in from Brad Carlson: "curlew, curlew, flying your way!" And indeed it was — a Far-eastern Curlew calling *curleeee, curleee*. Right past our heads, landing on the beach in front of a *vega* Herring Gull. Brown bird on black sand, with an impossibly long decurved bill, foraging.

While we are sweeping Henderson marsh, things start to pick up. We get calls: Yellow Wagtails are flying all around Brad in the Coast Guard area; Mike is looking at a Bar-tailed Godwit



at Casco; James is on a Common Greenshank in a pond near Murder Point; others have spotted a Common Sandpiper on South Beach where an Eye-browed Thrush has just flown in off the ocean. I ride from Henderson at full throttle to base, by Pratincole Cove, and up the hill to see the greenshank, bypassing a breeding-plumaged Godwit (hard to believe!). Walked over to South Beach to see the tired and spooked thrush, a male.

In the evening a Snowy Owl lands on the slope above upper base, harassed by Glaucous-winged Gulls which are nesting on the mountain. Ravens are carrying gull eggs over camp (and carrying rats away from camp).

**May 23** Northeast wind, 38 degrees. Dolly Varden (Aleutian trout, a char) for breakfast. Bill Grossi has caught 26 pounds of fish at the mouth of the Peaceful River. Sweet and firm, the fish is great with pancakes and bacon.

Ride to Gilbert Ridge. Started out in sleet and snow. Dry by the time we reach the end of the runway. Just six of us. At the pyramids we turn up a gorgeous male Siberian Rubythroat in the willows. He pops up and sings. Whimbrel are reported from Navytown Beach; a Wandering Tattler at Casco. We go on to Alexai after Paul takes over the incoming crowd at the Rubythroat. Out on the east tip of Alexai three plovers fly by calling. Two are Pacific Goldeneyes, but the other is a Mongolian Plover which Mike picks out instantly by its call. A Common Greenshank flies over. The ride home is tiring. Carol falls in the mud. I am on breakfast prep after dinner: crack 120 eggs and make 2 gallons of orange juice.

**May 24** Rode to Pratincole Cove after breakfast and was surprised to see two Orcas fill my scope as they slid by. An adult and a calf. A long, slow day, but nice looks at the five *variagatus* Whimbrel whose rumps are paler and browner than our *hudsonicus* race.

**May 25** Six hours of walking, no new birds.

**May 26** Weather from the west. Colder, windier, wetter. Dramatic red and pink sunrise mixed with gray and white tumbled low clouds. We ride to Gilbert Ridge in blowing rain. No new birds. I have long ago adjusted my expectations, taking out all the tabs I had put in my *National Geo*. My revised goal is now ten new birds, which seems reasonable for a second Alaskan trip. Species notably absent and always seen are Wood Sandpiper and Long-toed Stint. A Whooper Swan was found dead on the beach. Mike radios that he is seeing Laysan Albatrosses near shore, and I head back, riding in first gear most of the way against a formidable wind. I am almost blown to a standstill on the runway, where Aleutian Terns have been flying around, seen occasionally. They nest near the runway and land when the ceiling is low and weather wet. At Murder Point I have excellent looks at the albatross, plus Pomerine Jaegers in a large flock. Cold and wet, we ride back to camp for a hot shower and tea. After dinner, The Murrelets surprise the camp with a musical performance, orchestrated by Linda, with lyrics to the tune of Camp Granada.:

*Every day we go biking  
Otherwise it's tundra hiking*

*Every night we yearn to turn in  
After all day sloggin' birdin.'*

*We have Wagtails, we have Pipits  
Should we chase or should we skip it?*

.....

*And the weather, it's been sunny  
Each bird's costing lots of money  
But they tell us "Stop complaining"  
And they say we'll have more birds when it starts raining!*

**May 27** Departure day. We had champagne last night and toasted Larry. Today the weather has closed in. Rain, fog, cold. Our bags are taken to the runway, and we are walking after them when we are called back. The ceiling is too low for Reeve to land. The plane returns to Anchorage with most of the second group aboard. To keep everyone's spirits up, there is an encore performance by the Murrelets:

*Our leader Larry, is faring well  
His well-laid plans are shot to hell  
He's been through this many times before  
But now we know why he says "I'll do this no more!"*


**May 29** Memorial Day. Three people hike to the Japanese monument above east Massacre Valley. Clouds come down, and it starts raining, from the east. We are working Casco Point and the runway ponds. Nothing turns up. But Aleutian Terns have been fishing in the bay, and one flies over with its catch, shivering its wings and calling. Several more terns materialize out of the fog. For more than an hour small groups of terns fly in and out of the fog, up and down the taxiways and over the bay. The terns start landing on the taxiway. There are at least thirty birds. They court — a little dance, raising both wings akimbo, bowing heads, and moving in little stiff steps clockwise. Then a pair copulates. On some you can see a hint of deep lavender gray on the breast.

Along a creek Steve points out a Wandering Tattler. I want a closer look. A small white eyeline and all dark bill are among the features that distinguish it from Gray-tailed Tattler. The ride home is very wet. The day room is full, including the new arrivals, one of whom collects seaweeds — there are 300 species here (and indeed, I have never seen such colors and variety); this is his third trip, and he brings his own plant press. Activities include rousing games of Scrabble, quieter chess, and intricate jigsaw puzzles.

**May 30** Had lunch with Carol and Linda at Puffin Island when two shorebirds dropped out of the fog, calling. Wood Sandpiper and Long-toed Stint! We rushed over to where they landed. Had good looks at the Wood, but the Stint (a life bird) flew almost immediately high and out of sight. A frustrating miss.

**May 31** Storm from the southwest. Winds too strong for bike riding. Walk to Murder Point. We are blowing all over the place, hanging on to each other's scope legs. The seas are wild. Sea Otter holding her young on her stomach, eiders, murrelets, murre, cormorants. Fish and wildlife boat anchored in Casco Bay waiting to go out tomorrow to Buldir Island. Wind blows drying tent down. Al puts heavier weights on the front door. Murrelets perform for the third time.

**June 1** We are now delayed five days, but a plane is due. We are about to ride our bikes to Casco Bay with Steve when a group at upper base spots five Hawfinches. They fly between bicycles. One lands by a small willow, and we have marvelous close scope looks. Then a second Hawfinch flies in. They call. Lovely pewtery-blue bill; a female and a first-year male. On to the runway ponds. Steve's group is looking at something on the beach. Carol's arms go up in the BBC "we are looking at the bird" salute. I know she has a life bird, which is her first for this trip. A Gray-tailed Tattler. We have superb views: light belly and fine breast streaking; overall dun-colored versus blue-grey of Wandering Tattler; white eyebrow line meets in front and flares behind; part of lower mandible appears yellow. The runway lights go on, and we ride to the gathering spot. Two great new bonus birds.

*Postscript:* Back home at dinner one evening, Linda remarks, without rancor: "You know, I was on the second spring trip, but moved to the first when a place opened up. If I hadn't changed places I would have had ten more life birds." Meanwhile, Carol traveled a third time to Attu, joining the last fall tour and getting four new birds, including Baillon's Crake and a Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel that landed in the grass next to the hot tub (but that is another story). Since then, Reeve Aleutian Airways has declared bankruptcy, and their three workhorse Lockheed Electras may be found in Canada (for use in fire-fighting), South America (for charter and cargo service), and South Africa (for sightseeing tours in the Cape area). A good summary of the Attu era can be found in the December 2000 issue of *Birding* magazine (Baicich 2000a,b). 

## References

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- Ode to Camp Attu, Sung to the tune of Camp Granada, by Allan Sherman. Excerpts by permission of A.L.C.I.D. (Alliance of Lady Carolers for Intermittent Disasters).

*Brooke Stevens lives in Cambridge with her forbearing husband, Tom McCorkle. As Editor of Bird Observer, she would like to thank her colleagues for encouraging these notes from so far afield.*