

The Attu Experience

Roger Tory Peterson

As one cynic commented, "You pay for the privilege of suffering [the horrible weather] for three weeks in a place nobody has even heard of"... but the "Attu-class" birders see it all very differently.

EXAMINE A WORLD MAP OR A globe. You will note that the International Date Line, the arbitrary line that separates one day from the next—the Old World from the New—takes a triangular jog west of Alaska. This was contrived so that Attu and the nearby islands, which belong to the United States politically, would be in the same time frame as the rest of North America.

However, Attu, far-flung off the tip of the Aleutian chain, is much closer to Siberia than it is to mainland Alaska. Logically then, shouldn't it be regarded as Asia? The birds seem to point this out. Only one resident passerine, the dark, oversized race of the Song Sparrow, can be called strictly North American. A number of others, such as the Winter Wren, Common Redpoll, Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur and Rosy Finch, are circumpolar or "holarctic;" widespread in both the New World and the Old.

However, the magnet that pulls so many hardcore listchasers to Attu is the fact that Asian migrants, traveling from Japan to Siberia, are often caught in westerly winds during foul weather and make a landfall on the barren shores and slopes of Attu. For the birder, these are legitimate additions to their North American list. In fact, the only sure way for a birder to pass the 700 mark is to spend at least one or two May migrations on Attu.

Because of the initiative of one man, Larry Balch, membership in the "700 Club" has been growing year by year. Before Larry organized his special tours, about the only way the average civilian could visit these far-flung islands was to charter a small

plane from Anchorage (about \$25,000 roundtrip) or sail his own ocean-going vessel.

Larry Balch's campouts (under the insignia *Attour*) were started in 1978 and have piled up an impressive record of "firsts" during these twelve years. I joined the group in May, 1982, for what proved to be the best season they had experienced up to that point.

One might contend that it would have been less expensive for me to fly to Japan where I could see those same birds more easily and in larger numbers, but I had already done that two or three times. I wanted the Attu experience so as to handle the Asian strays more judiciously in the new western *Field Guide*. Most of these special birds from Asia were not illustrated or even described in the previous edition (1961). A lot can happen in 30 years. Birds have wings, and so do some bird watchers.

My field guides are designed to be "user friendly." They are not arranged in the rigid systematic order of the moment. The checklist in the back of the book takes care of that, and can easily be modified when changes in taxonomy dictate. With ease of use in mind, I have not integrated most of the strays from Asia into the main run of color plates that show the species that are widespread in western North America. They are on separate plates such as the three shown here. The Asian "peeps" or "stints" are also segregated, as are the stray pipits, wag-tails, and a few others.

Whenever I look at these three plates with their smorgasbord of rarities I have many fond flashbacks of

Attu. Forty-five of us flew nonstop from Anchorage to Attu, a distance of nearly 1,560 miles, in a big Lockheed-Electra chartered from Reeve-Aleutian Airlines. We landed in a miserable drizzle at the loran station operated by the United States Coast Guard. While our 8,000 pounds of luggage were transported by truck, we all walked the three miles in the wind and wetness to two ramshackle buildings which would become our bed and board for the next three weeks.

In the nearby bicycle shed there was a bike for everyone, more than 50 of them, because pedaling would be the most time-saving way of getting to some of the good spots. But basically we would walk and walk and walk—or even run, or climb hills—if there was something really good.

Although there was an efficient crew in the kitchen, each of us was assigned a special duty, such as washing or drying the dishes, fixing nuts and bolts on the bikes, tidying the shower or the latrine. My own assignment was to slice the bacon in the morning.

After our meals we did not go afield enmasse; we would split up and take different directions. Whenever a great rarity turned up—a Red-flanked Bluetail, a Pechora Pipit, or a Hawfinch—its discovery was broadcast by walkie-talkie. Even if the bird was miles away, everyone, no matter where they were, hopped on their bikes or started walking fast. "Death Marches," we called them.

Because the roads were rocky and the airstrips limited, bikes could be used for little more than six or seven miles; the rest of the way was hard walking. Some of us covered as much as 20 or even 30 miles in a day, which did my legs no good. Not having ridden a bike since I was a teenager, I suffered several nasty spills. My right leg below the knee swelled to twice its normal size, or so it seemed, and three of the medical men in our group, after poking it a bit, ventured the opinion that I had developed some sort of deep-vein phlebitis.

How the others took all this punishment was remarkable. Except for two or three of our young leaders, few were under 40. To afford the time and expense of all this, most of them were retirees in the 50s or 60s, toughened by a lifetime of birding.

Foul weather days were the best for

birds, lost waifs far from home. Blue sky days, fair weather days, were the poorest. Then Noble Proctor, whom Larry has called the "world's best tour leader," kept everyone from being bored by botanizing. Getting down on his knees he became rapturous about moonworts, equisetums, and other ground-hugging goodies. Although bird listing may be a game or a sport, it inevitably leads to ecological sensitivity and environmental awareness.

One day two boat people, a man from France and his young wife from Tennessee, who had built a small sloop in Australia and were sailing around the world, limped into our landing, having been struck and disabled in the night, two weeks earlier, by a ship somewhere off Japan. Not knowing whether the natives at Attu would be friendly or not, they found themselves amongst this weird lot who could talk of nothing but birds. After a couple of welcome meals they reciprocated by taking a select group of us well offshore where Laysan Albatrosses and petrels were added to the list.

As for my own North American list, I added about 27, although only seven were new for my World list. Among

the best were Bean Goose, Falcated Teal, Garganey, Common Pochard, Smew, White-tailed Eagle (which was nesting), Mongolian Plover, Spotted Redshank, Common Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint, Long-toed Stint, Slaty-backed Gull, Eyebrowed Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, Gray-spotted Flycatcher, Black-backed Wagtail, Gray Wagtail, Pechora Pipit, Olive Tree-Pipit, Brambling, Hawfinch, Common Rosefinch, Oriental Greenfinch, Rustic Bunting, Common Reed-Bunting, and a number of others, all of which are now shown in color in the new western *Field Guide*. Although Attu is the Number One hotspot for Asian strays, they should also be looked for elsewhere in the Bering Sea area (Pribilofs, St. Lawrence Island, the western flank of Alaska, *etc.*), and very rarely southward along the coast.

Attu, originally pristine, was the scene of one of the most vicious and indeed needless battles of World War II. Place names hint of past violence going back to Russian days: Murder Point, Massacre Bay, Massacre Valley (there is also a Peaceful Valley), Terrible Mountain, Devil Mountain, *etc.*

In more recent years the birders have added a few names of their own: Bullfinch Pass, Funny Duck Marsh, Kingfisher Creek, and Tattler Creek.

Much of our birding amidst the rusted bunkers and Quonset huts near camp reminded us of the death throes of the Japanese and American conflict: remains of small aircraft, disabled landing craft, skeletons of vehicles, collapsed oil tanks. Slit trenches, all but concealed, made walking treacherous. Snow Buntings sang atop vast heaps of rusty steel drums and probably nested amongst them.

One cynic commented (with tongue in cheek): "Anybody has to be a masochist to brave the horrible Attu weather just to see some fool bird. There are just millions of birds in the lower 48 for anyone to see. Why spend a great deal of money to come all the way up here just to torture yourself in the most grueling, miserable living conditions. These freaks actually pay for the privilege of suffering for three whole weeks in a place nobody has even heard of. Unbelievable!"

But the "Attu-class" birders see it all very differently. ■

■ **ALASKAN STRAYS FROM ASIA.** On the next three plates a number of rarities from Asia are shown. Whereas the shores and islands of the Bering Sea have produced most records, a very few have occurred south along the Pacific Coast. A few other Alaskan strays have been shown on previous plates: waterfowl, sandpipers, wagtails, pipits, and swifts. For further information, *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*. For other possibilities, see *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan* (Wild Bird Society of Japan).

PLATE 353

COMMON HOUSE MARTIN *Delichon urbica* 8" (20 cm). Like a Tree Swallow with a white patch completely across the rump. **West:** Accidental, Bering Sea area (Nome, St. Paul I., St. Matthew I.).

EYEBROWED THRUSH *Turdus obscurus* 7½" (19 cm). Robin-like; smaller, with reddish confined to the sides. Gray back and breast; white eyebrow, chin and belly. **West:** rare in spring, w. Aleutians; casual, Pribilofs, w. and n. Alaska.

FIELDFARE *Turdus pilaris* 10" (25 cm). Robin-like, with a heavily striped tawny breast. Back rusty; head, rump gray. **West:** Accidental, n. Alaska, St. Lawrence I.

DUSKY THRUSH *Turdus naumanni* 9" (23 cm). Robin-like. Head and underparts dusky; heavily scaled. Rufous wings. **West:** Casual w. Aleutians and St. Lawrence I.; accidental, n. Alaska (Pt. Barrow).

BROWN SHRIKE *Lanius cristatus* 8" (20 cm). A small shrike, brown above, white below, with a dark mask. **West:** Accidental w. Aleutians, St. Lawrence I., Anchorage, Alaska; also California (Farallons).

STONECHAT *Saxicola torquata* 5" (13 cm). Small, plump, upright. Male has a black head and throat, white half-collar, rusty breast. **West:** Accidental, St. Lawrence I.

EURASIAN WRYNECK *Jynx torquilla* 6½" (16 cm). Woodpecker-like; mottled gray-brown, underparts finely barred. **West:** Accidental, nw. Alaska (Seward Peninsula).

HOOPOE *Upupa epops* 11" (28 cm). Pinkish brown with boldly barred, black and white wings and tail and a long erectile crest (usually depressed). **West:** Accidental, w. Alaska (Old Chevak).

RUFIOUS TURTLE-DOVE *Streptopelia orientalis* 13" (33 cm). Striped patch on neck; rufous in wings. **West:** Accidental, Attu, Pribilofs.

COMMON CUCKOO *Cuculus canorus* 13" (33 cm). Slender; looks falconlike. Gray, with barred underparts. Rufous morph of female (rare) is barred except on rump. **West:** Rare overshoot in outer Aleutians, Pribilofs. Accidental, mainland of w. Alaska.

ORIENTAL CUCKOO *Cuculus saturatus* 13" (33 cm). Darker than the Common Cuckoo, with a shorter bill and wider bars on the belly. Rufous morph of the female has heavier barring; has strong barring on the rump. **West:** Very rare vagrant (June-July) in outer Aleutians.

PLATE 355

- LANCEOLATED WARBLER** *Lucostella lanceolata* 4½" (11 cm). Small, skulking. Streaked brown upperparts, band of fine streaks on whitish breast. Light eyebrow stripe, white throat. **West:** Casual or accidental, outer Aleutians (Attu).
- MIDDENDORFF'S GRASSHOPPER-WARBLER** *Locustella ochotensis* 6½" (16 cm). A rather large Old World warbler; brown above, white below, with tan sides and a tapered white-tipped tail. Light eyebrow. **West:** Summer and fall vagrant to Bering Sea islands (Attu, Nunivak, Pribilofs, St. Lawrence I.).
- DUSKY WARBLER** *Phylloscopus fuscatus* 4½" (11 cm). A small, very plain Old World warbler; dusky-brown above, no wing bars, whitish below, with buffy eyebrows, sides, and undertail coverts. **West:** Casual or accidental in fall, Gambell, outer Aleutians; accidental, California.
- SIBERIAN BLUE ROBIN** *Luscinia cyane* 5½" (14 cm). Dull blue above, pure white below, separated by black on the sides of the face and neck. Female: Brown above, mottled buff below, tail bluish. **West:** Accidental, outer Aleutians (Attu).
- SIBERIAN RUBYTHROAT** *Luscinia calliope* 6" (15 cm). Small and dark; note the ruby-red throat, gray breast. White eyebrows and whiskers. Female has a white throat. **West:** Rare but regular migrant, w. Aleutians; casual, Pribilofs, St. Lawrence I.
- RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL** *Tarsiger cyanurus* 5½" (14 c). Male: Deep blue above with bright orange-red flanks, white throat. Female: Dusky brown, with a dark chest, white throat, orange flanks. **West:** Accidental, outer Aleutians (Attu).
- RED-BREASTED FLYCATCHER** *Ficedula parva* 4½" (11 cm). A tiny flycatcher. Male: Orange throat, gray cheeks, narrow eye-ring, white tail patches. Female: Browner, without the orange throat. **West:** Casual, w. Aleutians; accidental St. Lawrence I.
- GRAY-SPOTTED FLYCATCHER** *Muscicapa griseisticta* 5½" (14 cm). Empidonax-like. Strongly streaked breast and flanks. **West:** Rare, irregular, perhaps regular (May-June), w. Aleutians.
- SIBERIAN FLYCATCHER** *Muscicapa sibirica* (Sooty Flycatcher) 5" (13 cm). Suggests a sooty Empidonax flycatcher (eye-ring, wing bar, etc.). Note the broad dark band across the breast. **West:** Accidental, w. Aleutians.
- ASIAN BROWN FLYCATCHER** *Muscicapa latirostris* 5" (13 cm). Similar to Siberian Flycatcher, but smaller, and much paler on the breast. **West:** Accidental, w. Aleutians (Attu).
- NARCISSUS FLYCATCHER** *Ficedula narcissina* 5" (13 cm). Black back, orange throat (male), yellow rump and eyebrow, white wing patch. **West:** Accidental, w. Aleutians (Attu).
- GREAT TIT** *Parus major* 5½" (14 cm). A large "chickadee" with a black stripe extending from its black throat through its whitish underparts. **West:** Accidental, Little Diomed I. (at a feeder).

PLATE 357

- SIBERIAN ACCENTOR** *Prunella montanella* (Family Prunellidae) 5½" (14 cm). Dark cheeks separate ochre eyebrows from the bright ochre-buff throat and underparts. Sides striped; bill warbler-like. **West:** Casual fall visitor, Nunivak I., St. Lawrence I. and mainland Alaska. Accidental, Washington.
- YELLOW-BREASTED BUNTING** *Emberiza aureola* 5½" (14 cm). Male has a black head, chestnut band across its yellow breast. **West:** Accidental, Attu, Buldir, St. Lawrence I.
- RUSTIC BUNTING** *Emberiza rustica* 5¾" (15 cm). A rusty, sparrow-like bird with a rusty breast band, black crown, and black cheek outlined in white. Female has a light spot on its brown cheek patch. Regular but scarce; mainly in spring, outer Aleutians. **West:** Casual, St. Lawrence I. Accidental, British Columbia, Oregon, California.
- LITTLE BUNTING** *Emberiza pusilla* 5" (13 cm). Suggests a Savannah Sparrow, but the rufous crown and rufous cheek patches are outlined with black. **West:** Accidental, outer Aleutians, Chukchi Sea.
- COMMON REED-BUNTING** *Emberiza schoeniclus* 6" (15 cm). Male has a black head and bib, white collar and malar strip in summer. Rusty wings. **West:** Casual or accidental in spring in outer Aleutians.
- PALLAS'S REED-BUNTING** *Emberiza pallasi* 5½" (14 cm). Similar to Common Reed-Bunting, but smaller. Shoulders blue-gray, lacking the bright rusty tone. Upper ridge of bill straight. Rump paler. **West:** Accidental, n. Alaska (St. Lawrence I., Barrow).
- GRAY BUNTING** *Emberiza variabilis* 6" (15 cm). Male: Dark slate gray above and below. Female: Dark brown, paler below; chestnut rump, no white in tail. **West:** Accidental, outer Aleutians.
- HAWFINCH** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* 7" (18 cm). A chunky finch with a massive bill and a short tail. Bold white patches high on black wings. Female paler; less rufous on crown. **West:** A rare stray, mainly in spring, Bering Sea area (Aleutians, Pribilofs, St. Lawrence I.).
- EURASIAN BULLFINCH** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* 5¾" (15 cm). A stubby-billed finch with a black cap and a white rump. Male: Rose-red breast and cheeks. Female: Similar pattern, but breast is warm pinkish brown. **West:** Casual stray in Bering Sea islands (outer Aleutians, Nunivak I., St. Lawrence I.). Accidental in winter on mainland Alaska.
- ORIENTAL GREENFINCH** *Carduelis sinica* 6" (15 cm). An olive and brown, siskin-like bird without striping. Large yellow patches on wings and tail. Female browner than male. **West:** Rare vagrant, outer Aleutians. Accidental, California.
- BRAMBLING** *Fringilla montifringilla* 5¾" (15 cm). Tawny breast and shoulders, white rump. Male in summer has black head and back. **West:** Rare stray, Bering Sea area (Aleutians, Pribilofs, St. Lawrence I.), and various points in Alaska. Accidental, British Columbia, Manitoba, Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado.
- COMMON ROSEFINCH** *Carpodacus erythrurus* 5¾" (15 cm). Resembles Purple Finch, but without the facial striping. Upper ridge of bill more curved. **West:** Rare in spring in outer Aleutians (Purple Finch does not occur within 2,000 miles). Casual, St. Paul, Gambell. Accidental on mainland Alaska.





