

We had no schedule, no obligations, and no greater ambition than to savor everything.

DAY 1—WE DIDN'T wait for the plane to disappear before starting to portage our gear down to the river. The denizens of this unnamed (and probably unmapped) tundra pond—Oldsquaw, Glaucous Gulls, Greater Scaup, and Red-throated Loons—didn't waste time getting back to the business of nesting, either. In summer, days may be endless on Alaska's North Slope, but seasons are short.

"Looks like we beat the mosquitoes," I said to Bob Dittrick, friend, companion, and co-founder of a birding travel business.

"Looks like the Weather God isn't going to hammer us today, either," he added, grinning.

Yes, we were pretty lucky; privileged, actually. Here we were in one of the planet's last great wildernesses, poised for a nine-day trip down the Colville, one of the grandest rivers in the Arctic. We

had no schedule, no obligations, and no greater ambition than to savor everything.

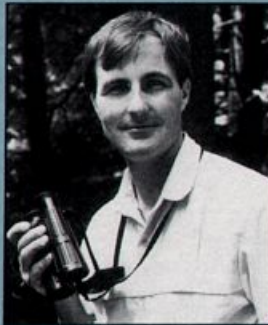
"Arctic Warbler," Bob said, nodding toward a nearby willow thicket. "Got it," I said, completing the litany, training my binoculars on the only life bird the trip was likely to produce.

"Nice," I said, when my appraisal was over. "Now I can enjoy myself."

Day 2—We rose late, 8 a.m. or so, and left later. Gray-cheeked Thrushes were *everywhere*. I mean, EH-VREE-WHERE (almost as common as Arctic Warblers). I decided to test the con-

Pete Dunne

AMERICAN BIRDING



Colville Diary

ventional wisdom that once you see a life bird, they become commonplace: I would keep a running tab of the Arctic Warblers encountered on the trip.

Breakfast was cold cereal and French roast coffee. We shared it with Bluethroats, Yellow Wagtails, and four species of sparrow—all the while enjoying a duet offered by winnowing snipe and gargling Oldsquaws. Hunting Rough-legged Hawks were a visual blight.

It took no more than an hour to put our canoe together: a folding fabric canoe of Norwegian make and design. Fully loaded, it rode like a grebe.

Our put-in point was the Ipnarik—a merry little river that writhes like an eel and nips at riverside bluffs. The bluffs are the key. They host the nesting raptors that make the Colville and its tributaries one of the greatest raptor factories in the world.

As a graduate student, ornithologist Tom Cade navigated the Colville and mapped its bluffs. We served up lunch at one of his single digit sites, within easy scoping distance of a pair of tundra Peregrine Falcons. Dinner—spaghetti, garlic bread, and salad with vinaigrette dressing—was prepared at the site that served up a white Gyrfalcon.

"Only the second white one I've seen here," said Bob.

"Pass the sauce, please," I replied.

"I figured we did 31 miles today," Bob estimated.

"Good job on the dressing," I answered. "Any bread left?"

Day 3—You may want to know the dates of our trip. There are no dates. You may want to know what time we rose. There is no time. There is nothing but the day which is at once as long and short as an Arctic summer. If the questions had been raised earlier in this accounting, I might have had an answer. But by Day 3, I had put the outside world behind. This was the day I took my wallet out of my pocket and put it in the bottom of my duffel bag. My watch went with it.



Arctic Warbler

We got up when we got up. We left when the last of the coffee was gone. The rhythm of the day was set by the stroke of paddles, the hiss of sand in the river, and the electric *zinging* of riverside Common Redpolls. Intervals were marked by lunch (hummus, cheese, and rye crisps) and dinner (chili and red wine). We found three Peregrine nests, 10 nesting Rough-legs...and added 10 more Arctic Warblers to the 57! tallied the day before.

Yes, it's true. Empirical evidence supports the premise that once you see a life bird, they become dirt common.

Day 4—Still no mosquitoes and still no retribution from the Weather God. The lenticular clouds that appeared last evening were probably a ruse.

It's warm, too—50–60° F. and the heat building in our tent is the prod that drives us out in the morning. There's little reason to hurry. Birds are everywhere and our camp sites are chosen to be within easy sight of any Peregrine nest worth viewing. Today's birds are on a bluff across from a gravel bar the size of Key West.

After a cheese omelet, hash browns, and coffee, we climbed a nearby cliff, and took stock of the world from the eroded saddle of the ridge—between the severed ends of a petrified log. We ate a candy bar, picked through assorted fossils, sa-

vored a Grizzly Bear and her two cubs, and watched while the male Peregrine harassed the rectrices of the neighboring Rough-legged Hawk.

Twenty-three miles and 23 Arctic Warblers later we parked for the night on a sandbar that was a mosaic of wolf tracks and, you guessed it, across from a Peregrine nest.

"What's for dinner?" I inquired.

"Jambalaya," Bob said, enunciating with relish. "Cheesecake for dessert. The Weather God," he added, "loves cheesecake."

Day 5—Woke to fog in the distance and the whine of a mosquito in camp.

Uh, oh.

"That fog is associated with 8° Centigrade," Bob confided. "We don't want to see too much of that!" Of course we had a more immediate problem—an impending insect invasion. So we went to check the status of the hatch. The tundra pools were a wriggling mass of mosquito larvae—but at least they were still larvae.

There were pancakes for breakfast, along with the sighting of a Golden Eagle—first time for both on the trip. The eagle, a subadult, was intent on catching one of the local flock of Greater White-fronted Geese. A territorial Rough-legged Hawk finally drove the eagle out of the area.

We put 22 hard miles on the ca-

noe, into headwinds most of the way. Then, rushing to put up the tent before a shower caught us, I snapped a pole.

"What about just sleeping out?" I asked.

"That," said my veteran Arctic guide as he calmly repaired the pole, "is like dropping your drawers to the Weather God with your hands manacled."

Day 6—It rained overnight and we woke to the sound of...*a mosquito in the tent!!!*

"GET IT!" Bob commanded.

I made a one-handed grab and missed.

"It's real bad luck to let the first one get away," Bob said. "That's our last night with the door open."

It became abundantly clear that we falling out of favor with the Weather God, as well as the Keeper of the Hatch. A squadron of thunderheads stalked us all day and we had to play cat-and-mouse with one particularly tenacious cloud (probably their captain). We finally gave our shadow the slip by hiding out in an old river channel. That's where Bob spotted the cave with the pyramid of whitewash projecting from the floor—a pyramid surrounded by a two foot pile of ptarmigan come back to earth in the form of Gyrfalcon pellets.

That evening, we set up camp on a gravel bar across from...well, you guess.

Day 7—Zero miles by canoe. After a bear/mush breakfast, we decided to hike up the Oolamnavigovik river, a Colville tributary. The status of the river and surrounding 63 million acres, currently under the jurisdiction of the federal Bureau of Land Management, is in dispute. Bob was due to testify on behalf of wilderness designation and he wanted fresh observations.

The first part of the hike cut through willow thickets boasting bushes 15 feet high *and* a trio of Gray Jays, a bird whose established range (according to published range maps) stops south of the North Slope. Not at all unexpected, but just as interesting, we stumbled upon a redpoll nest with five brown-spotted blue eggs. Gorgeous!

Atop a bluff that looked like a slag heap worked over with a blow torch, we dined on reindeer sausage, cheese and pilot bread, and watched grizzly bears and caribou moving across the tundra. The wind was cool! The sun was warm. We stretched out like lizards, watching the sun through molten eyelids until the clouds came up and the world got colder.

Day 8—The world got real cold. And wet! The Weather God was closing in, but he'd made a strategic error. He'd waited until we were in our tent.

Our arrangement with the pilot was "come look for us." Not having a

rendezvous site, we weren't in any hurry to get wet. Instead, we enjoyed some down time in the tent—reading, sleeping, writing, sleeping, watching the local Common Raven kids cutting up and the Peregrine couple arguing over meal times.

About mid-afternoon the female Peregrine set up a ruckus—a harangue that turned out to be directed at a dark brown critter the size and shape of coffee table.

"Wolverine!" Bob shouted. We watched from the tent as the Arctic weasel tried to avoid the Peregrine's efforts to cut him down to the dimensions of a foot stool. It was clear that the wolverine wanted the eggs—but maybe not at the asking price: getting flayed. The dispute was finally settle by outside arbitration. A Canada Goose, nesting below the Peregrine's ledge, flushed, exposing her clutch of eggs (and offering the wolverine an alternative he could live with).

"How about breakfast...or din-

ner?" Bob invited.

I moved for dinner. Spaghetti, mushroom sauce, and the last of the wine. A fine way to celebrate life mammals—and the longest night of the year. Even the rain stopped.

After dinner we loaded up and traveled four miles down river—away from the Peregrine nest and astride a stretch of river that would take the plane easily. Around midnight a sucker hole opened in the overcast, giving us a glimpse of the midnight sun on the longest day of the year. From the thicket, an Arctic Warbler broke into song—No. 185.

Not a bad day.

Day 9—We couldn't sleep in, not on pickup day. Bush pilots keep loose hours, but when they arrive is when you are supposed to be ready. It wasn't even noon when Bob said "I hear a plane." Then I heard it, too. A distant hum that sounded like dread. The sky was clearing. Sunlight was playing across rain spattered hills and reaching for the river.

"Looks like it's going to be a nice day," I observed.

"Does," Bob agreed, sadly.

During our nine days in the Arctic, we had heard several planes—but none that had intruded upon us. This one was different. And though there are many ugly sounds in the world, one of the worst is the sound of the bush plane that is coming to pick you up.

In fact, I can only think of one sound worse. That is sound of the Weather God laughing. ➤

—Peter Dunne is the author of *Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, coauthor of *Hawks in Flight*, and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society.

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