

pictorial highlights: special supplement

Fall 1999 Birding Highlights in the Bering Sea Region, Alaska

The most unusual species found during autumn 1999 was North America's first Yellow-browed Warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus*), present 23–24 September. The bird frequented two of Gambell's three "boneyards," a habitat characterized by disturbed nutrient-rich ground supporting a lush growth of a mint-like vegetation (*Umbelliferae*), which, by late summer, grows to a height of ± 3 dm. In contrast to short tundra vegetation and extensive gravel found elsewhere around Gambell, this boneyard (midden) vegetation acts as a magnet to many passerines—both regular migrants and vagrants—at this time of year. This bird was a small *Phylloscopus*, approximately the same size or barely larger than a kinglet. It is separated from similar species by a combination of blackish-centered tertials with bold whitish edges, moss-green upperparts, distinct upper wingbar, and pale yellow supercilium. Full details were published elsewhere (Lehman 2000). For the past 20 years the Yellow-browed Warbler has been predicted to occur in western Alaska (Balch 1980, Roberson 1988), with a number of people considering it *the* most overdue Asian vagrant. It is a common and widespread species, breeding in Siberia as far northeast as the western Anadyr Basin and wintering in Southeast Asia. That this species had not been found previously in Alaska may be partly the result of limited autumn coverage of islands in the Bering Sea. Some vagrant species are more likely to occur in Alaska during fall than spring, such as the Middendorff's Grasshopper-Warbler and Little Bunting. Photograph/Paul Lehman

Much of the allure of birding the Bering Sea region of western Alaska derives from wayward Asian vagrants, Alaska specialties, and spectacular seabird concentrations. Most birders visit the well-known destinations of Attu Island (western Aleutian Islands), St. Paul Island (Pribilofs), and Gambell (northwest corner of Saint Lawrence Island) in late spring and early summer, with each site receiving annual coverage from mid-to late May through early June since the mid-1970s. Many first records of Asian strays for North

America have been found on these islands during this period. In contrast, coverage of Alaskan outposts during fall has been relatively sparse. A likely reason for this limited coverage is the protracted nature of fall migration compared to the more concentrated, shorter "pulse" in spring. Thus, to be assured of seeing a number of Asian strays during a single visit, a birder typically must make a longer time commitment in autumn. Also, spring vagrant seasons for waterfowl, shorebirds, and passerines substantially overlap, but peak south-

pictorial highlights



Common Ringed Plovers are found almost annually at Gambell in late spring, and the species may breed sparingly on Saint Lawrence Island (Sealy et al. 1971). Two juveniles there during late August 1999 were the first locally for fall. The first bird (left) was seen 20 August, the second (right) 25 August. Aging of these birds as juveniles is based partly on the distinct tan-white edgings to the back and wing-coverts. Their identification as Common Ringed rather than Semipalmated Plovers is based on the slightly longer and thinner bill of even width (the Semipalmated typically shows more thickening toward the base), lack of a pale orbital ring, and the exact pattern of dark through and below the lores. In juvenile Semipalmated Plovers the lower edge of dark facial color typically meets the bill above the gape (allowing for a small wedge of white running from the side of the throat to above the gape), whereas in juvenile Common Ringed the dark color meets the base of the bill at the gape or just slightly below (Mullarney et al. 1999). Call-note differences are the best means of separating the two species in the field. These birds were heard giving notes typical of Common Ringed, most notably a soft, plaintive, whistled *poo-eee*. Photographs/Paul Lehman



During recent years, Mongolian Plovers have been annual fall visitors in small numbers to the Bering Sea region during August and early September. This bird was photographed at Gambell 24 August 1999. It is a juvenile, with pale brown upperparts with fine light edgings and a pale peachy-buff wash across the breast contrasting with a white throat. Photograph/Paul Lehman

bound migration of shorebirds (between July and early September) is largely over before vagrant passerines occur (late August to mid-October), which in turn is earlier than the period for many rare waterfowl. Another factor may be increased difficulty in finding low-density migrants and vagrants in the relatively lush vegetation of early fall relative to the sparse cover characteristic of spring.

There have been only three organized autumn trips to Attu Island (a fourth and "final" trip is scheduled for September 2000). Scheduled tours of St. Paul Island cease after the end of August. And Gambell began to receive limited early autumn birder coverage beginning only in 1991, although there had been limited census work carried out there by ornithologists at that season during the 1950s and 1960s (Fay and Cade 1959, Sealy et al. 1971). In addition several researchers have made sporadic autumn visits to a number of off-shore islands, including Attu, Shemya (western Aleutians), Adak (central Aleutians), St. Paul (Pribilofs), Nunivak (eastern Bering Sea), and Middleton (northern Gulf of Alaska). Fall birding in coastal Alaska is still a pioneering effort, with still much to be learned. Despite difficult logistics and high costs, an extended autumn trip provides the potential for the thrill of discovery and may well produce as many or more rarities than a comparable spring visit. Prior early autumn visits to the northern Bering Sea islands during the 1990s produced records of such Asian landbirds as Middendorff's Grasshopper-Warbler, Dusky Warbler, Little Bunting, and Common Rosefinch at Gambell, and *Cuculus* cuckoo, Eyebrowed Thrush, and Siberian Accentor at Nunivak Island (see Gibson and Kessel 1992). Nunivak also has older fall records of Middendorff's Grasshopper-



Two views of a *Cuculus* cuckoo present at Gambell 23 August 1999 that was identified at the time as a probable Oriental Cuckoo. Although most previous Alaska records have been of Common Cuckoos, all such birds need to be closely scrutinized. Fall cuckoo records are few, with only two previous Alaska sightings of undifferentiated individuals. In the field it was noted that the Gambell bird's undertail coverts were pale buff (in strong light) or deeper peachy-buff (in shade) and were largely unmarked, with just a few short dark bars. This buff color has been suggested by some—but not all—authors (e.g., Parkes 1990) as being indicative of the Oriental Cuckoo. Underwing pattern is also an important difference between the species, although it is difficult to get satisfactory views of the underwing in the field. Luckily, Tony Leukering obtained several photos of it in flight that show a pattern more typical of the Oriental Cuckoo. Specifically, the Oriental shows clean white foremost lesser coverts to the underwing. The rearmost lesser coverts and the median coverts are partly dark gray, partly distinctly barred. At the center of the underwing there is a broad whitish band, formed by dirty white axillars and greater coverts, that continues along whitish bases of the primaries to the third or fourth outermost primary (Kennerley and Leader 1991, Vasamies 1998). In the Common the lesser coverts on the underwing are usually strongly barred and the band on the underwing is shorter and narrower, reaching only the fifth or sixth outermost primary. In general, the white band contrasts more sharply with the gray secondaries and lesser and median underwing coverts in the Oriental. In sum, the Common Cuckoo shows a more uniform underwing compared to that of the Oriental, which is (partly) darker and with an obvious contrasting pale band across the center. Characters visible in the photo of the perched bird include a pale gray head that contrasted with darker, slate-gray lower back, rump, and uppertail coverts; moderately wide and relatively well-spaced ventral barring, and a single unmarked white feather near the leading or "carpal" edge of the wing. Although Oriental Cuckoos tend to have broader and wider-spaced barring than Commons, there is substantial variation and overlap with this character and a number of others oft-used to identify the species (Cramp and Simmons 1985). The white feather may possibly represent the "marginal coverts at wrist of wing" which are unmarked white in Oriental Cuckoo but are white with black barring in Common Cuckoo (King et al. 1975, Flint et al. 1984). Of the approximately eight previous Alaska records of Oriental Cuckoo, two come from Gambell, in July 1930 and July 1935 (ABA 1996). Photographs/Tony Leukering and Paul Lehman

Vega Gulls, *Larus argentatus vegae*, the distinctive Siberian subspecies of the Herring Gull, occur in large numbers in late summer and early fall at Nome and Gambell, with counts of up to 45 per day at the former and 35 per day at the latter. Sixty were tallied on one day at Gambell in fall 1999, setting a record count (Tobish 2000). This one-year old bird is differs from a typical *L. a. smithsonianus*, the Herring Gull of North America, in its darker scapular markings and more distinctively marked underparts.
Photograph/Tony Leukering





Gulls provide one of the most difficult identification challenges, and worn, faded immatures in late summer/early fall make a bad situation worse. This gull was photographed on the Bering Sea coast at Nome 19 August 1999. We identified it as a Slaty-backed Gull. (This bird's flight feathers and coverts appear abnormally pale, as they are clearly worn and faded.) It shows some characters of a bird that is just over one year old, such as the bill pattern, dark ventral region, and dark eye. Note the dark gray appearing on the back and scapulars, typical of second-winter and older Slaty-backed. The deep pinkish legs are typical of the species, although leg color is variable. The gull in the far rear corner of the photo is a Herring of uncertain subspecies. Slaty-backed Gulls occur in small-to-moderate numbers along the northern Bering Sea coasts. Maximum counts have come from late summer and early fall: as many as 22 individuals (mostly third-year and adult birds) have been seen in a day around Nome in late August. Maximum daily counts at Gambell at this season have been about seven individuals. Photograph/Tony Leukering

Warbler, Siberian Accentor, and multiple Eurasian Bullfinches. The only North American record of the Eurasian Hoopoe comes from the nearby mainland Bering Sea coast at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in early September 1975 (Kessel and Gibson 1978).

Farther south in the Bering Sea, St. Paul Island remains largely unchecked in fall after the beginning of September. Relatively good coverage during the past decade in late July and August has proven to be good for Asian shorebirds and other vagrants, with 1990s records of the Chinese Pond-Heron (Hoyer and Smith 1997) and Eurasian Hobby. Recent brief visits to St. Paul later in fall have produced the Red-flanked Bluetail and good numbers of Bramblings, and there are older fall records of the Baikal Teal and Eurasian Coot (Kessel and Gibson 1978).

Excitement and discovery are not limited to the finding of Asian strays. Apparently a good number of mainland North American breeding species wander west out to the offshore islands in fall. Also, a good understanding of the sizable fall seabird movements through the Bering Sea is still in the fledgling stage. Some autumn totals at Gambell in 1999 included single-day counts of 550,000 Short-tailed Shearwaters, 26 Yellow-billed Loons, and 500 Pomarine Jaegers. Autumn visits to western Alaska also provide the opportunity to study and photograph a number of species in plumages not normally seen by many North American birders. Presented here is a selection of such photographs taken in 1999, on my fourth autumn visit to Nome and Gambell, during which I remained at the latter for 45 days between late August and the beginning of October. Many highlights from this trip are summarized in the regional report for Alaska in this issue (see pp. 89–92).

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