

# First North American record of Pallas's Warbler (*Phylloscopus proregulus*) at Gambell, Alaska

PAUL E. LEHMAN • P.O. BOX 379 • CAPE MAY, NEW JERSEY 08204 • (EMAIL: lehman.paul@verizon.net)

GARY H. ROSENBERG • P.O. BOX 91856 • TUCSON, ARIZONA 85752 • (EMAIL: ghrosenberg@comcast.net)

## Abstract

The first record of Pallas's Warbler (*Phylloscopus proregulus*) for North America was documented at Gambell, Saint Lawrence Island, Alaska, on 25-26 September 2006. The identification and evidence supporting the record are presented here and put into context with records of other landbird vagrants found in autumn at Gambell since the 1990s.

## Introduction

The Aleutians and islands of the Bering Sea in western Alaska are well known to North American birders as places where Asian migrants and vagrants occur regularly. Attu, Shemya, Buldir, and Adak Islands in the western and central Aleutians, St. Paul (and to a lesser extent St. George) Island in the Pribilofs (southern Bering Sea), and the village of Gambell at the northwestern tip of Saint Lawrence Island (northern Bering Sea) (Figure 4) are all sites that have produced many documented records of Asian waterbirds and landbirds—some of which have turned out to be regular migrants and some of which have been determined to be true vagrants with few North American records.

Gambell, a village of some 660 Yupik people located at the northwestern tip of St. Lawrence Island, lies 315 km (195 mi) west-southwest of Nome and 74 km (46 mi) from the closest point on Russia's Chukotskiy Peninsula (Figure 4). Continuous human occupation of the Gambell area dates back some 2000 years. Midden deposits (burial sites for discarded marine mammal and bird carcasses)

from at least the past two centuries have revealed important records involving bird bones (Friedmann 1934, Murie 1936). Today, these same midden sites (known collectively as "the boneyards")—as well as other areas of disturbed ground—are characterized in late summer and early fall by relatively lush vegetation dominated by Northern or Tall Wormwood (*Artemisia tilesii*) and Arctic Sage or Wormwood (*A. arctica*), which grows to a maximum height of slightly more than a half meter. The rich soil and vegetative growth, combined with the vertical relief and protection from the wind provided by the digging pits, are magnets for passerines in autumn. The list of regularly occurring avian species found here includes a number with primarily Old World distributions that also nest on mainland Alaska (with a few breeding in small numbers on St. Lawrence Island as well), but which then return westward in late summer and early fall to winter in southeastern Asia or Africa. These "trans-Beringian" species include Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*), Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica*), Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), Eastern Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla tschutschensis*), White Wagtail (*M. alba*), and Red-throated Pipit (*Anthus cervinus*). Another trans-Beringian migrant, Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*), has nesting populations in northeastern Russia that in autumn head eastward, back into North America. The boneyards are also attractive to most of the vagrant landbirds from both Asia and mainland North America.

Two of the three boneyards are located near the base of 187-m Sevuokuk Mountain (Figure 5), which probably acts as a barrier to some low-flying landbirds that might otherwise continue moving farther eastward. Other migrants probably arrive elsewhere on the island and work their way to the northwestern tip at Gambell. Many passerines are not discovered in the boneyards until the afternoon or early evening, which suggests that they are new arrivals.

## Field encounter

The autumn of 2006 at Gambell was poor for vagrant Asian passerines through early September, with none found until 10 September, when three Bramblings (*Fringilla montifringilla*) put in a brief appearance. In contrast, the last several days of August and first ten days of September were good to excellent for Asian landbird strays each year from 2002 through 2005. The Bramblings were followed, however, by a Siberian Rubythroat (*Luscinia calliope*) and a Pechora Pipit (*Anthus gustavi*) on 14 September. But then moderate-to-strong north winds set in for the following eight days—through 22 September—and again no Asian passerines were found (although Alaska's fourth and the Bering Sea region's first Philadelphia Vireo [*Vireo philadelphicus*] appeared on 18 September). The winds slackened to light southwesterly and then light northeasterly over the ensuing several days, with partly cloudy to overcast skies on 23-24 September, and overcast with light rain on 25 September. We discovered a

Pallas's Bunting (*Emberiza pallasi*) on 24 September in Gambell's "Near Boneyard," where it remained through 26 September.

During the early afternoon of 25 September, we arrived at the "Circular Boneyard," where Lehman promptly flushed a very small passerine which flew off, low, and dropped back into cover. He told Rosenberg that it looked interesting and that they should try to re-find it. After some time, Rosenberg relocated the bird, got a brief look at it on the ground and, based on partial views, yelled, "Yellow-browed Warbler!" The bird then flushed and both observers were able to see its yellow rump, at which point Lehman yelled, "Pallas's Warbler!!" Panic quickly ensued, as Rosenberg was scheduled to leave the island in just two hours time and still needed to do some packing. Both observers were well aware that this bird would constitute a first North American sighting and that recognizable photographs would be needed to document the record. So, with a high level of urgency and nervousness, Rosenberg and Lehman began the task of trying to obtain the needed documentation, with digital photography and video, respectively.

The bird remained faithful to the Circular Boneyard for two days—through 26 September—but, like many migrant passerines occurring at Gambell in autumn, it was very furtive, could easily hide in the relatively thick boneyard vegetation, and proved difficult to see well or for long periods of time. Despite these difficulties, excellent photographs (e.g., Figures 1-3) and video were obtained.

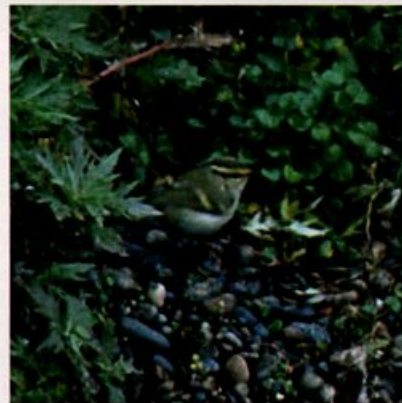
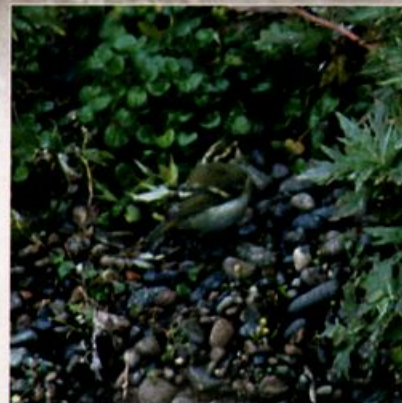
The bird was the size of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*). It showed a thin but sharp and distinct pale yellow central crown stripe, set off by dark (very dark olive) sides to the crown,

which in turn contrasted with a bold supercilium that was strongly tinged with deep yellow in front of the eye, paling to an off-whitish behind the eye, and which in turn contrasted with a distinct dark eye line. In all, the head pattern was very bold and distinct. The upperparts were unmarked olive green, except for a bold medium yellow rump patch that was usually covered by the folded wings when the bird was at rest but which became obvious when the bird flicked its wings or took flight. The wings showed two bold pale yellow wing bars, pale yellowish edgings to the secondaries, and distinct whitish edges to the tertials. [The bird's overall small size, distinct pale supercilium, and white tertial edges are all characters shared by Yellow-browed Warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus*).] The underparts were off-whitish and appeared unmarked. The tail was short and showed no pale patches or spots. The legs were dusky, not obviously pale or very dark. The bird acted nervous, giving regular wing-flicks, much as a Ruby-crowned Kinglet does. Several times it hover-gleaned food from plants, one to two feet off the ground for about one or two seconds each time, but then quickly returned to cover out of view. It called at least once, and gave a clear, up-slurred *su-wee*.

The combination of small overall size, distinct pale median crown stripe, bold supercilium with strongly yellow supraloral area, distinct dark eye line, olive-green upperparts, off-whitish underparts, dark tertials with distinct whitish edges, medium yellow rump patch, *su-wee* call, and wing-flicking and hover-gleaning behavior clinch the identification as Pallas's Warbler.

### Discussion

Pallas's Warbler, also known as "Pallas's



**Figures 1-3.** These photographs of the Gambell Pallas's Warbler were taken 25 September 2006. Together they show almost all the important field marks of this species, including the distinct pale median crown stripe, bold supercilium with bright medium yellow supraloral area, distinct dark eye line, olive-green upperparts and off-whitish underparts, dark tertials with distinct whitish edges, and a light-to-medium-yellow rump patch. Photographs by Gary H. Rosenberg.



**Figure 4.** Map showing the Bering Sea region, western Alaska, and eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. Gambell is located at the northwestern tip of St. Lawrence Island and is only 74 km (46 mi) from the closest point on Russia's Chukotskiy Peninsula. Many of the vagrant Asian passerines that turn up at Gambell in the fall breed northeast to the Koryak Highlands or Anadyr River basin ("Anadyrland"). Some individuals have originated from even much farther away. Pallas's Warbler is not known to breed any closer than the Magadan area bordering the north-central Sea of Okhotsk. Map by Virginia Maynard.

Leaf-Warbler" and (formerly) "Lemon-rumped Warbler," is a distinctive species and one that is a regular autumn vagrant to western Europe. Some authorities recommend splitting this species—which currently is made up of four or five subspecies—into at least two, and possibly four, separate species (Baker 1997, Rheindt 2006). Nominate *proregulus* breeds widely in coniferous and mixed taiga forests from central and southern Siberia eastward to Amurland, the Stanovoi Range, Maya River, the mouth of the Amur River, Ussuriland, Sakhalin, northeastern China, and North Korea (Vaurie 1959, Cramp et al. 1992, Baker 1997; Brazil, in press; Figure 6). The northeasternmost extent of the summer range is thought to reach immediately north of the Sea of Okhotsk, just east of the city of Magadan (Andreev et al. 2005, del Hoyo et al. 2006), some 1900 km (1200 mi) southwest of Gambell (Figures 4, 6). This taxon winters in tropical Asia, from southeastern China (south of the Yangtse River) to northern Indochina

(south to northern Thailand, northern Laos, and northern Vietnam) and Hainan (Cramp et al. 1992, Baker 1997, del Hoyo et al. 2006; Figure 6). It is a rare but annual migrant to offshore Japan (Brazil, in press) and has occurred many times as an autumn vagrant in Europe (Mullarney et al. 1999).

During the past 15 or so years, leaf-warbler taxonomy throughout Asia and Europe has been going through something of a revolution, with many recent and ongoing studies there focusing on important differences in vocalizations, plumage (some quite subtle), and genetics. Many taxa once thought to be members of the same species-complexes are now being split into separate species. The "final" taxonomic arrangements—even the agreed-upon English names—are still very much a work in progress (Rheindt 2006). Other taxa currently included in the Pallas's Warbler complex are *kansuensis*, *chloronotus/simlaensis*, and *forresti*, which nest from central China to the Himalayas and the border of Af-

ghanistan (Cramp et al. 1992, Baker 1997, del Hoyo et al. 2006). Several authorities—including Alström and Olsson (1990) and Martens et al. (2004)—have split these taxa from nominate Pallas's Warbler into at least one new species (Lemon-rumped Warbler, *P. chloronotus*) and possibly up to three new species (Rheindt 2006): Gansu Leaf-Warbler (*P. p. kansuensis*), Simla Leaf-Warbler (*P. p. chloronotus/simlaensis*), and Sichuan Leaf-Warbler (*P. p. forresti*). Seasonal movements within these taxa are primarily altitudinal, although some birds move farther southward to the Himalayan foothills, Bangladesh, Burma, southeastern China, and northern Indochina (Cramp et al. 1992, Baker 1997). Another taxon—Chinese (or "La Touche's") Leaf-Warbler (*P. yunnanensis*)—has already been split from Pallas's Warbler by several authorities (e.g., Alström and Olsson 1990, Martens et al. 2004, del Hoyo et al. 2006); it breeds in central and eastern China and winters "apparently" in Southeast Asia (del Hoyo

et al. 2006).

All of these more southerly breeding members or former members of the Pallas's Warbler complex are unlikely to occur in Alaska based on geographic distribution and somewhat limited migratory behavior. They also have slightly duller plumage overall than nominate *proregulus* (and than the Gambell bird), with more washed out greens and yellows, slightly duller (more grayish) underparts, and particularly duller head patterns (duller median and lateral crown stripes and much duller yellow in the supercilium in front of the eye) (Baker 1997, del Hoyo et al. 2006). Call-notes differ markedly (Alström and Olsson 1990, Baker 1997, Martens et al. 2004): the Gambell bird's *su-wee* call matches that of nominate *proregulus* but not those of the other taxa in the complex (Baker 1997, del Hoyo et al. 2006). Based on its widespread breeding range in Russia, long-distance migration, and regular occurrence as a fall vagrant in Europe, Pallas's Warbler of the nominate subspecies has been anticipated to occur in western Alaska by some authorities (Tobisch 2000).

All documentation involving the Gambell bird, including photographs and videotape, has been deposited with the Alaska Checklist Committee. Following its receipt, that committee in January 2007 voted unanimously to accept Pallas's Warbler to the Alaska List.

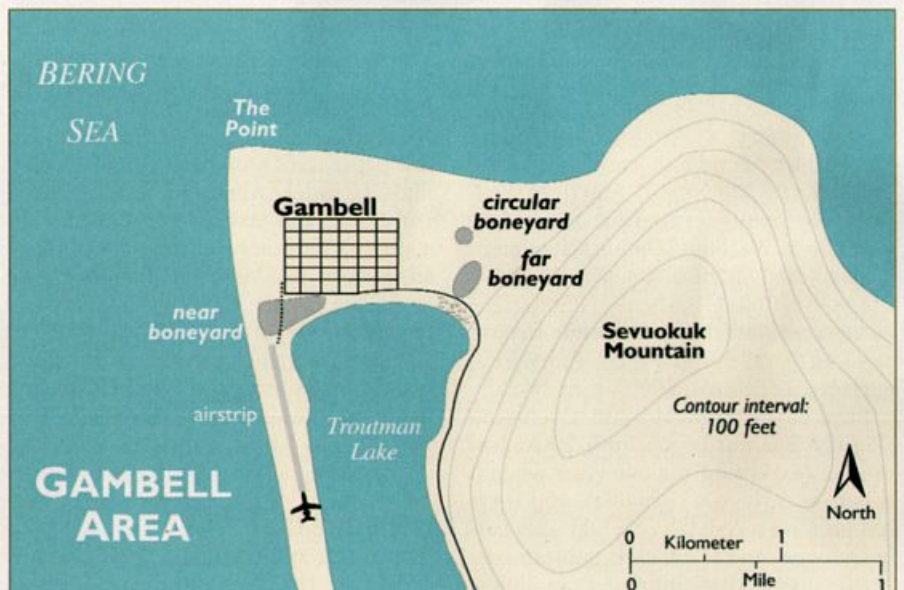
### Autumn vagrants at Gambell

Annual coverage in spring of several of the islands in western Alaska began back in the 1970s but ended in the western Aleutians for most birders in 2000, when Attu Island birding operations ceased. Regular spring visits to Adak Island in the central Aleutians, to St. Paul, and to Gambell farther to the north, have continued, and coverage has increased in some cases. By contrast, fall birding coverage did not blossom until relatively recently, beginning in the early 1990s or later, though birding records date back to the early 1970s and even earlier. This increase in coverage, combined with the excellent autumn potential for vagrants from the large pool of long-distance migrant species breeding in Russia and wintering in Southeast Asia, has led to the recent discovery of a substantial number of Asian birds, for many of which there existed fewer than ten North American records. Some of

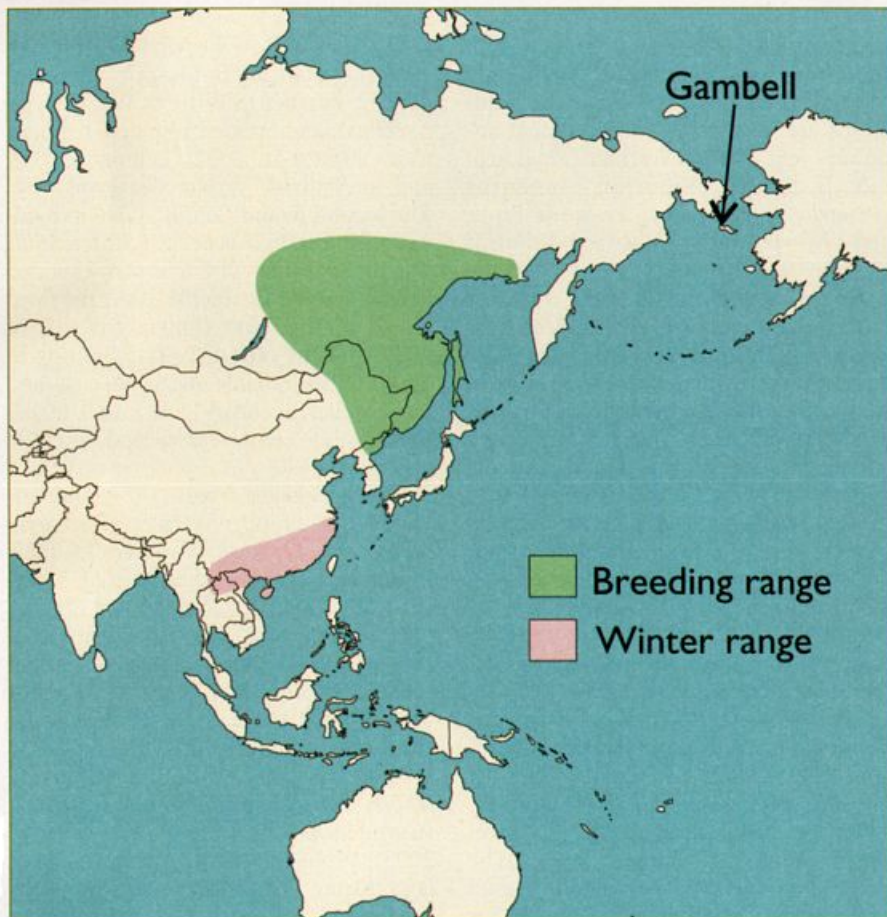
these species are largely unknown from the spring season, and several with only a handful of records before the mid-1990s are now being found almost annually—e.g., Dusky Warbler (*Phylloscopus fuscatus*), Siberian Accentor (*Prunella montanella*), Pechora Pipit, and Little Bunting (*Emberiza pusilla*). It also appears that the fall season in the Bering Sea region is a rich time for North American mainland strays. Species that until very recently were largely unknown in this area—even in Alaska overall—are being found in surprising numbers.

Following very limited and sporadic autumn fieldwork on St. Lawrence Island through the late 1980s, Lehman initiated more regular tour-leading and independent surveys at Gambell beginning in 1992, with lengthy visits between mid- or late August and early October annually from 1999 through the present (2006). Increased coverage at this season by other observers—both as part of organized birding tours and as independent birders—has followed. A paper detailing the autumn birdlife at Gambell and St. Lawrence Island through 2004 was recently published (Lehman 2005). The richness of the autumn vagrant season can be seen in a partial listing of what has been found at Gambell between 1999 and 2006. There were first North American

records of Yellow-browed Warbler in 1999 (Lehman 2000); Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*), Willow Warbler (*P. trochilus*), and Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*) in 2002 (Lehman 2003); and the Pallas's Warbler discussed here. The second record (and first live individual) of Eurasian Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*) was discovered in 2003, as was a second Yellow-browed Warbler in 2002, the third record of Tree Pipit (*Anthus trivialis*) in 2002, and the fifth of Pallas's Bunting in 2006. Other notable Asian species, and the number of individuals found in fall during this eight-year period, include Oriental Cuckoo (*Cuculus optatus*) (2), Sky Lark (*Alauda arvensis*) (3), Middendorff's Grasshopper-Warbler (*Locustella ochotensis*) (3), Dusky Warbler (7), Taiga Flycatcher (*Ficedula albicilla*) (1), Siberian Rubythroat (2), Red-flanked Bluetail (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) (1), Stonechat (*Saxicola torquatus*) (1), Eyebrowed Thrush (*Turdus obscurus*) (1), Siberian Accentor (10), Olive-backed Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*) (1), Pechora Pipit (9), Little Bunting (8), Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) (1), and Common Rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*) (2) (Lehman 2005). From the North American mainland during this same period came such far-flung vagrants as Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*), Pacific-



**Figure 5.** Map of the Gambell village area, showing three of the principal sites for migrant passerines: the "Near," "Far," and "Circular" Boneyards (middens). (The Pallas's Warbler in September 2006 frequented the Circular Boneyard.) Sevuokuk Mountain, lying immediately to the east, may act to impede the dispersal of some landbird transients. This barrier, combined with the otherwise sparse vegetation and extensive gravel that characterize the village area, helps to further concentrate migrants and vagrants in the boneyards. Map by Cindy Lippincott and Virginia Maynard.



**Figure 6.** Breeding and winter distribution of the Pallas's Warbler. The closest point in the summer range extends eastward to just east of the city of Magadan, some 1900 km (1200 mi) southwest of Gambell. Map by Virginia Maynard.

slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher (*E. difficilis/occidentalis*) (2), Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus*) (4), Philadelphia Vireo, Tennessee Warbler (*Vermivora peregrina*), Nashville Warbler (*V. ruficapilla*), Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*), Palm Warbler (*D. palmarum*), American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*) (2), MacGillivray's Warbler (*Oporornis tolmei*), Clay-colored Sparrow (*Emberiza pallida*), Black-headed Grosbeak (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*), Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*), and Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*) (Lehman 2005).

Most of the recent autumn coverage at Gambell has not begun until 20 August or later (except during two years when it began as early as 11 August), and there has been no recent fall coverage after early October. And Gambell is substantially better surveyed in autumn than almost any other site in western Alaska! Thus, the late-autumn migration remains poorly studied overall, accurate departure dates for a good number of species (particularly waterbirds) are not known, and

late-fall lingerers and vagrants remain largely undiscovered.

### Acknowledgments

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