

Tropical Birding Tours

Alaska: Photo Tour



Tour Guide: Ben Knoot

*All photos in this report were captured by the guide Ben Knoot unless otherwise stated.



Tour Itinerary

June 7th.....	Anchorage to Seward
June 8th.....	Northwest Fjords Boat Tour
June 9th.....	Seward to Anchorage/Arrival
June 10th.....	Anchorage to Nome
June 11th.....	Nome
June 12th.....	Nome
June 13th.....	Nome
June 14th.....	Nome
June 15th.....	Nome to Anchorage
June 16th.....	Anchorage to Barrow
June 17th.....	Barrow
June 18th.....	Barrow
June 19th.....	Barrow
June 20th.....	Barrow
June 21st.....	Barrow to Anchorage
June 22nd.....	Anchorage to St. Paul
June 23rd.....	St. Paul Island
June 24th.....	St. Paul Island
June 25th.....	St. Paul/Anchorage/Departure

Tour Introduction

Alaska, the “Last Frontier”. This tour focuses primarily on photographing breeding tundra birds and mammals. To accomplish a wide breadth of species, this tour covers ***FOUR*** major areas. Over the course of two-and-a-half weeks we visit Boreal Conifer Forests, Lake Parks, three types of Tundra (Rocky, Boggy and Maritime), stunning Aleutian Cliffs and for one guest on the pre-tour, a trip out of Seward for some whale-watching.

The pre-tour to the Northwestern Fjords was first. At first the bay was relatively calm and the animals were out in spades. We snagged some great photos of Humpback Whale and Sea Otter. Unfortunately, as we ventured further out, the seas became so rough that I got a bit sick. I went inside to put my head down on the table and then heard over the intercom that we were abandoning our journey and headed back to the bay. Too bad but the captain said “for your safety” so, we’ll go with that! One last night in Seward and then back up to Anchorage to meet the rest of the group.

The first section of the main tour is Anchorage. It contains mostly Boreal Conifer Forests, Lakes, Ponds, and Marshlands that we visit for some great birds like; American Three-toed Woodpecker, White-winged Crossbill, Red-necked Grebe, Spruce Grouse, and Varied Thrush... just to name a few!

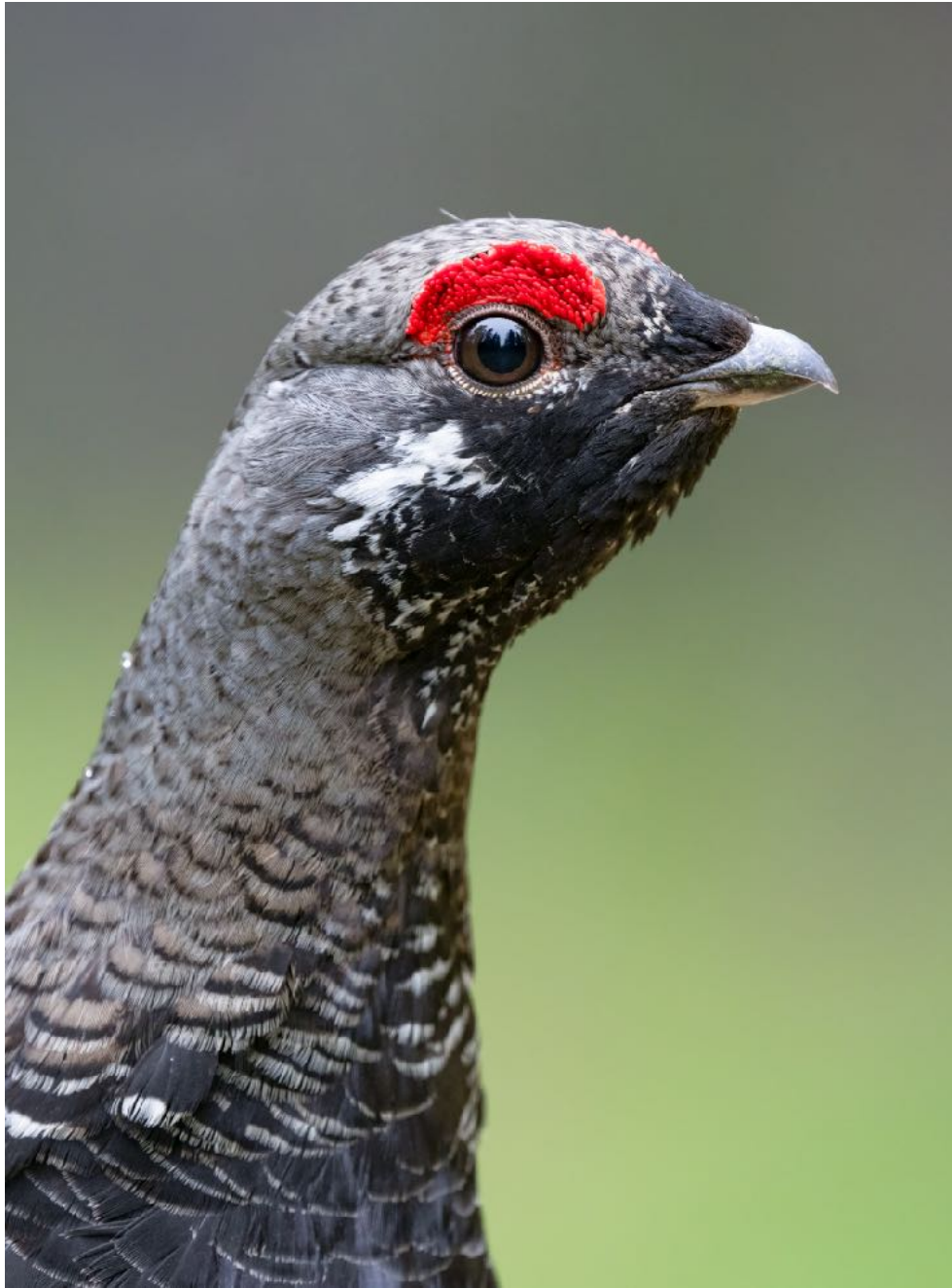
Our first stop from Anchorage was Nome. Nome sits right on the coast and has just four main roads to drive. Comprised mostly of rocky tundra, there is also some areas of scree, cryptic tundra, and of course, tundra ponds close to the coastal shoreline. Nome hosts a variety of terrific shorebirds in its tundra like; Pacific Golden Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit and Western Sandpiper. In the more shrubby areas we can find; Bluethroat, Arctic Warbler and two kinds of redpoll. The pools offer a few waterfowl but nothing that can’t generally be found and photographed better in Barrow. And of course, two types of ptarmigan are the icing on this wonderful cake!

After a brief stop in Anchorage, we travel to Barrow for Boggy Tundra. There really isn’t much else here habitat wise so this is primarily for water loving tundra breeders like all three eiders, Pacific and Red-throated Loon, and this is our best area for breeding Snowy Owl.

Our final stop of this tour is a tiny Aleutian Island in the Bering Sea, St. Paul. After a failed first attempt due to weather, we finally landed and got straight to work. The stunning cliffside scenery hosts a variety of auk species that filled our memory cards. We also photographed some curious little Arctic Fox, fighting Northern Fur Seal and the islands four terrestrial birds; Pacific Wren, Snow Bunting, Gray-crowned Rosy Finch and Lapland Longspur. A smooth ride home and the guests departed that evening or the next day at their leisure. A big thanks to the guests for such a fun and successful trip!

Area #1 (Pre Tour Extension) - Seward/Northwestern Fjord Boat Tour

For this trip, only one guest chose to participate in the pre-tour extension to the Northwestern Fjords. We met during the afternoon in Anchorage for a one specific bird and after a successful scout by myself the day before, we were able to find it within a matter of minutes. A stunning male **Spruce Grouse**. We really didn't need to do much more today and with it being so windy and threatening rain, we decided that 1/1 was good enough and we called it a night.



Spruce Grouse - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Spruce Grouse - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Spruce Grouse - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot

When we made it down to Seward, the weather wasn't looking all that great but nonetheless, we hit some parks, forests, shoreline, lakes and marshland to see what we could find. Overall, the photography is tougher in Seward than the rest of the tour but we still managed some cool birds like; **Varied Thrush, Wandering Tattler, Townsend's Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Marbled Murrelet, Red-necked Phalarope, Arctic Tern, American Dipper, Steller's Jay**, and the 'sooty' version of **Fox Sparrow**. We also had a fun treat when upon arrival at my American Dipper location, I noticed the **Coho Salmon** were actively climbing the salmon ladders researchers put in place to study them so we also spent a few minutes trying to get some fun 'flying fish' photos!



Fox Sparrow - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Steller's Jay - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Arctic Tern - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Varied Thrush - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red-necked Phalarope - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Townsend's Warbler- Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Orange-crowned Warbler - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Coho Salmon - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot

When our boat day rolled around, the weather looked a bit ominous. My suspicions were confirmed when before we even boarded the boat, the captain addressed anyone and said, “Listen folks, the sea is really rough today, if you get sea-sick, we recommend you consider staying on land...” Of course me hearing this I am instantly thinking, “Well, I’m definitely in trouble!” - haha. I unfortunately get very sea-sick but nonetheless, we stepped on board and for the few first hours, everything was totally fine. We had some stunning scenic views and a few amazing Sea Otter sightings. The bay was calm, it wasn’t rainy or anything like that so I thought our odds were good...and then the captain came on the intercom...

“Folks, we have a breaching Humpback Whale in front of us...”

And indeed we did. Not once, not twice, not even five times but TWELVE breaches were seen and photographed while we bobbed around the roiling seas with this energetic Humpback Whale. And this was my personal downfall. I had been doing so well and then over 45min of bobbing in rough seas sent me over the edge. I went inside, told my guest I am really sorry (he had been told this might happen before hand) and put my head down. Not long after, the captain came on the intercom again and said it was too rough and for ship and personal safety, we'd be turning around and going back. Really too bad but if it really was for the safety of the ship and everyone on board...good call captain. As a result, not too many birds were photographed, in fact, I got zero keepers except for the scenery, whale and otter which I am not complaining about one bit! A pretty excellent extension all things considered.



Sea Otter - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Mountains in the Clouds - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Forest in the Clouds - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Humpback Whale - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot

Area #2 (Main Tour) - Nome

Nome is essentially three, maybe four main roads that are excellent for a variety of photographic opportunities. Rocky and grass tussock style tundra and riverside shrubbery is mixed with rocky hillsides which is great for us as it provides us with plenty of birds to photograph. The shrubby stuff holds birds like; **Hoary and Commonly Redpoll, Bluethroat, Blackpoll, Wilson's and Arctic Warbler, Fox Sparrow, Northern Shrike and Rusty Blackbird**. These birds are some of our smallest targets on the entire tour and some of our only passerines believe it or not.

The 'typical tundra' that we go through in Nome gives us some great opportunities to photograph a variety of breeding shorebirds. Some of these birds can be found in Barrow as well but most are more easily photographed here. Birds like; **American and Pacific Golden Plover, Whimbrel, Western Sandpiper, Bar-tailed Godwit, Wilson's Snipe, Willow Ptarmigan, Lapland Longspur, Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaeger**. A few other randomly photographed species were **Aleutian Tern, Rough-legged Hawk and Rock Ptarmigan**. And of course, can't forget about the lumbering **Musk Ox!**



Blackpoll Warbler - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Arctic Warbler - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Wilson's Warbler - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Common Redpoll - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Northern Shrike - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Hoary Redpoll - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Parasitic Jaeger - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Bar-tailed Godwit - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



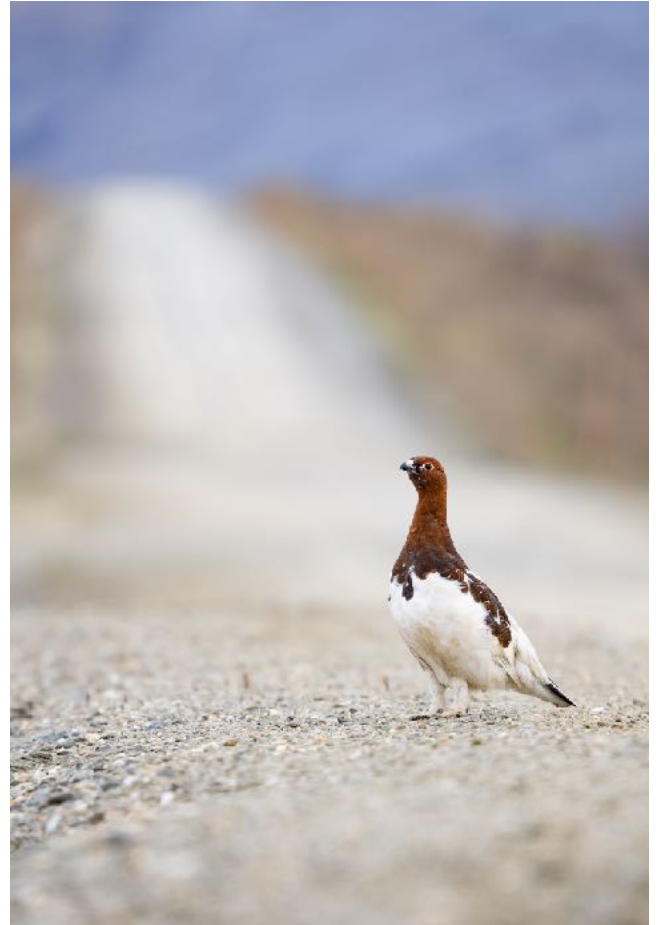
Fox Sparrow - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Rusty Blackbird - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Pacific Golden Plover - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Willow Ptarmigan - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Rock Ptarmigan - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Lapland Longspur - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Aleutian Tern - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Western Sandpiper - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Whimbrel - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Bluethroat (All) - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Area #3 (Main Tour) - Lake Parks and Trails around Anchorage

We have more than a full day around Anchorage in between coming back from Nome and leaving for Barrow as well as a few hours just before the tour begins. We typically visit a few parks, maybe a lake or two and during our time at these locations, we were able to find: **Spruce Grouse, Red-necked Grebe, White-winged Crossbill, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Black-billed Magpie, Green-winged Teal, Oregon Junco, Black-capped and Boreal Chickadee.**



American Three-toed Woodpecker - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



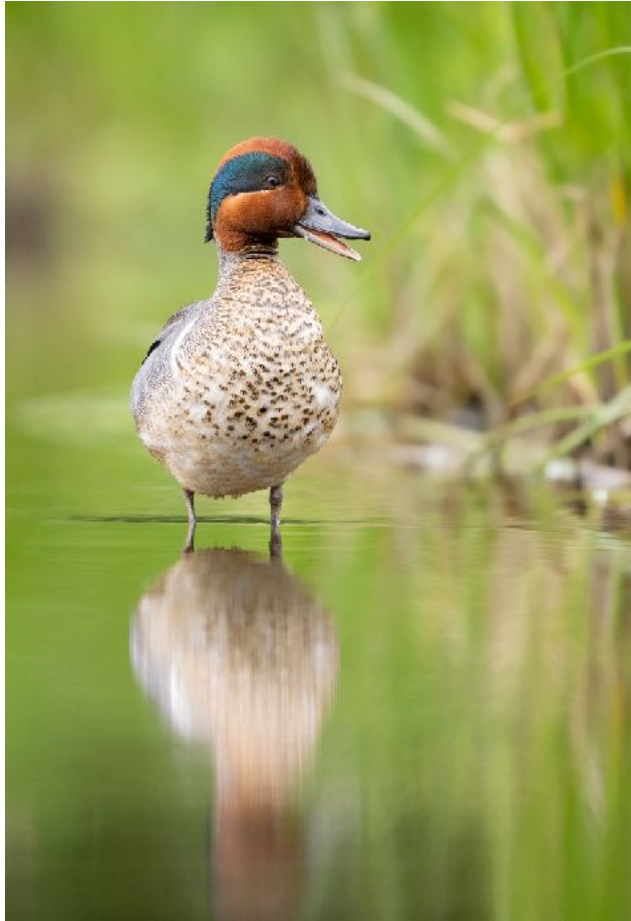
Red-breasted Nuthatch - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Black-billed Magpie - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



White-winged Crossbill - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Green-winged Teal - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Dark-eyed Junco - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red-necked Grebe - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot

Area #4 (Main Tour) - Barrow

Barrow is nick-named ‘the top of the world’ and even though that isn’t quite accurate, it certainly feels like it when you arrive. Barrow is cold, mostly cloudy and spits rain just about every other day. Almost entirely Boggy Tundra with thousands upon thousands, maybe even millions of tundra pools and coastal floating ice, Barrow or as it is known now ‘Utqiagvik’, is a photographers paradise, especially for any sort of water related tundra breeder. Over the course of our time here we managed; **Spectacled, Steller’s and King Eider, Pacific and Red-throated Loon, Snowy Owl, Dunlin, Pectoral, Baird’s and Semi-palmated Sandpiper**, our third and final jaeger, the **Pomarine Jaeger, Tundra Swan, Long-tailed Duck, Black Guillemot, Brandt, Snow Bunting, Sabine’s Gull, Red and Red-necked Phalarope, Greater White-fronted Goose**, and one very special bird, a **Red-necked Stint**. We also tried our luck with a Polar Bear tour. We were able to see one but quite distant and covered by fog. During one of the long breaks, I went out with a few of the guests for another try at the **Polar Bears** and we got a bit better views and some distant photos but the real highlight came via a pair of **Yellow-billed Loons**. These are incredibly difficult to photograph here, we got very lucky. We also got lucky but not really anything of great quality from an **Arctic Fox**.



Snowy Owl - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red-necked Phalarope - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red-necked Stint - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Long-tailed Duck - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



King Eider - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Spectacled Eider - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Steller's Eider - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red-throated Loon - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Tundra Swan - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Greater White-throated Goose - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Pacific Loon - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Yellow-billed Loon - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Black Guillemot - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Pomarine Jaeger - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Sabine's Gull - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Snow Bunting - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Dunlin - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Pectoral Sandpiper - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red Phalarope - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Semi-palmated Sandpiper - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot

Area #5 (Post Tour Extension) - St. Paul Island

One of my personal highlights of this trip was the trip to St. Paul, chiefly because it was my FIRST TIME! I was so excited to get to go and after the drama of missing our first flight due to weather, I was relieved to finally land on this iconic island. Seaside cliffs and maritime tundra don't actually provide a ton of species but they are some truly special ones! We photographed; Tufted and Horned Puffin, Common and Thick-billed Murre, Crested, Least and Parakeet Auklet, Red-legged and Black-legged Kittiwake, Ancient Murrelet, Pacific Wren, Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur, Gray-crowned Rosy Finch, Red-faced Cormorant, Northern Fulmar, Rock Sandpiper and loads of adorable Arctic Fox. A pretty amazing place once you get used to constant clouds, a little bit of mist and some pretty chilly wind! St. Paul island also contains the worlds largest population of breeding Northern Fur Seal so it was a place to photograph some interesting animal behavior.



Crested Auklet - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Parakeet Auklet - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Crested Auklet - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Ancient Murrelet - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



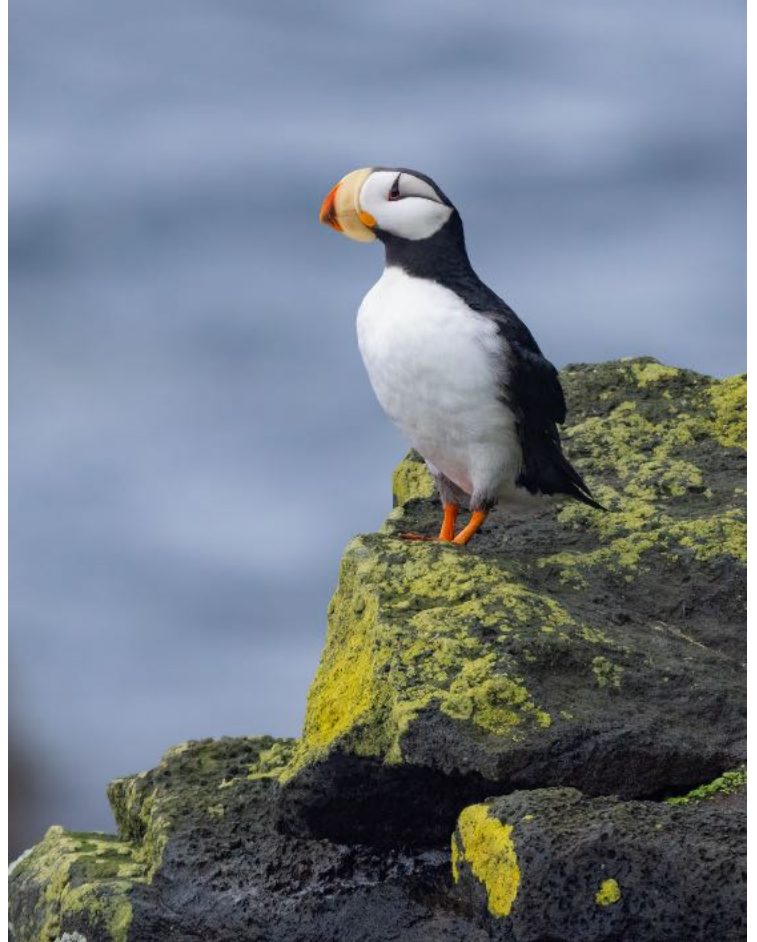
Tufted Puffin - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Horned Puffin - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Tufted Puffin - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



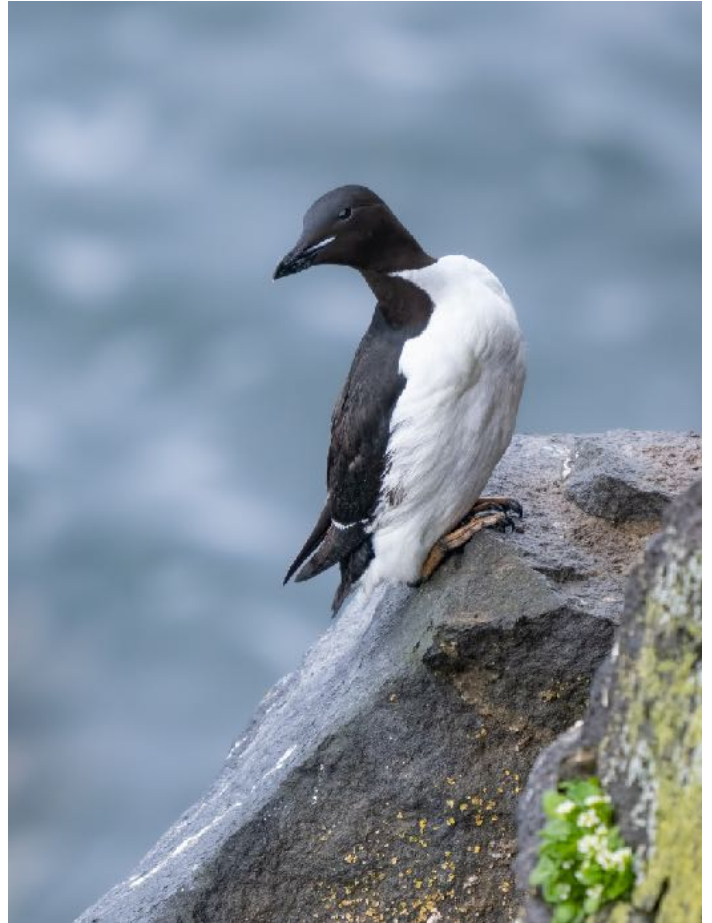
Horned Puffin - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Ancient Murrelet - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Crested Auklet - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Thick-billed Murre - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red-faced Cormorant - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Lapland Longspur - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Snow Bunting - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Least Auklet - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Horned Puffin - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Least Auklet - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red-faced Cormorant - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Gray-crowned Rosy Finch - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Pacific Wren - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Rock Sandpiper - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Red-legged Kittiwake - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Northern Fur Seal - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot



Arctic Fox Kits - Photo by guide: Ben Knoot

Guests Top 5 Favorites

