

# Tropical Birding Tours

*Alaska: Arctic Breeding Birds and Mammals Photo Tour*



## Tour Guide: Ben Knoot

The photos in this report were photographed by guide Ben Knoot unless otherwise stated.

## *Tour Introduction*

Alaska is a vast and beautiful state with an incredible array of photographic opportunities, especially when it comes to breeding birds in the summer months. Though the actual species quantity isn't all that high, the quality is far beyond measure. Breeding shorebirds like Pacific Golden Plover, breeding waterfowl like King Eider and passerines like Bluethroat more than make up for the lower number of species. And those birds are just the tip of the iceberg. There is an amazing diversity and this tour aims to photograph as much as possible but looking for great quality.

We started the tour with a few days exploring spruce and boreal forests around Anchorage and Seward. Here we aimed to photograph some small passerine birds like warblers, chickadees, kinglets and sparrows. The main target for this area is the bird gracing the cover of this report, the stunning Spruce Grouse. And our highlight for this section of the tour is the Northwestern Fjord boat tour out of Seward where we saw just about every target possible, bird and mammal. Photo opportunities were scarce on the boat but wow, what an experience!

The second portion of the tour had us based in Nome. Here, the rocky and grass tussock tundra gave us great opportunities at a variety of shorebirds while small tundra ponds allowed us to photograph the handsome Red-throated Loon and Red-necked Grebe. Nome is also full of a variety of small clumps of vegetation that allows small northern breeders like Bluethroat, Blackpoll Warbler and Gray-cheeked Thrush to breed and feel safe while they raise their young. Nome is quite far north so we had shootable light for about 20hrs of the day, though for the most part we were shooting during the "sweet" light which, happily, is the most active time for the birds anyway. Nome treated us well, next stop Utqiagvik.

Well...a little bit of drama here...On our first scheduled day to travel to Utqiagvik, our plane was met with heavy fog and with a runway under construction and radar disallowed for use in landing, the pilot had to abort our landing. So we spent the next few hours refueling and traveling back to our starting point in Anchorage...very disappointing but with rebooked flights, we still had 2 full days in Utqiagvik to look forward too. On the next day, we began our approach and to all of our disbelief, the captain again aborted the landing. We staged, tried again, and again, an aborted landing. After returning to Anchorage and with the very real potential of having to go through that all again the next day and for only for one full day in Utqiagvik, the guests for this tour decided to advance their departure dates and ended up flying home that very evening. This was a very unfortunate situation that has never happened before and will hopefully never happen again. Not the way I would ever like to end a tour.

I did try to go up to Utqiagvik the next day and did eventually land. I had about 26hrs (6hrs of which were raining and too dark for photography) to photograph as much as possible without any recon. There will be a few photos in this report from Utqiagvik but most are from Anchorage, Seward and Nome. This report is going to be broken down by section with a short description about the section.



*Itinerary*

June 3rd.....Arrival/Kincaid Park  
June 4th.....Anchorage to Seward  
June 5th.....Northwestern Fjords Cruise  
June 6th.....Seward to Anchorage  
June 7th.....Anchorage to Nome  
June 8th.....Nome  
June 9th.....Nome  
June 10th.....Nome  
June 11th.....Nome to Anchorage  
June 12th.....Anchorage to Utqiagvik (aborted)  
June 13th.....Anchorage to Utqiagvik (aborted)  
June 14th.....Anchorage to Utqiagvik (landed)  
June 15th.....Utqiagvik (guide only)  
June 16th.....Utqiagvik to Anchorage/Departure

## *Tour Summary by General Location*

### *Anchorage*

Anchorage is actually quite a lovely city. I didn't find it that busy and yet it still had a modern and lively feel to it. Wonderful restaurants, fun people and most importantly, beautiful parks, lakes and wild areas where bird photographers can go to take some great photographs. We didn't have too much time in Anchorage but we still managed some fun photos of birds like; **Arctic Tern**, **Spruce Grouse**, **Trumpeter Swan**, **American Three-toed Woodpecker** and we had several great encounters with **Moose**.



Spruce Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot





Spruce Grouse - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Arctic Tern - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

### Seward

Our time in Seward was split between the Northwestern Fjords cruise and various forests, parks and lakes around the town of Seward. The cruise was a great success as we were able to see all of the targets and photograph many. Here is a list of the things we saw and there are a few photographs to follow. This cruise is not designed specifically for photographers so photography isn't easy but there are a few opportunities. We saw; **Thick-billed and Common Murre, Horned and Tufted Puffin, Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorant, Harlequin Duck, Bald Eagle, Black-legged Kittiwake, Pigeon Guillemot and Rhinoceros Auklet**. And there were a good variety of mammals as well. Mammals like **Sea Otter, Humpback Whale, Orca, Dall's Porpoise and Steller's Sea Lion** were quite photogenic but for the most part, the animals were overshadowed by the sheer size and awe of the glaciers, jagged coastlines and the stunning sea.

The other portion of our time in Seward was spent looking for more forest dwelling birds like **Pine Grosbeak, American-three Toed Woodpecker, Townsend's Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Wilson's Warbler**. We were quite successful here as well making Seward an overwhelming success!



Sea Otter - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Humpback Whale - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot

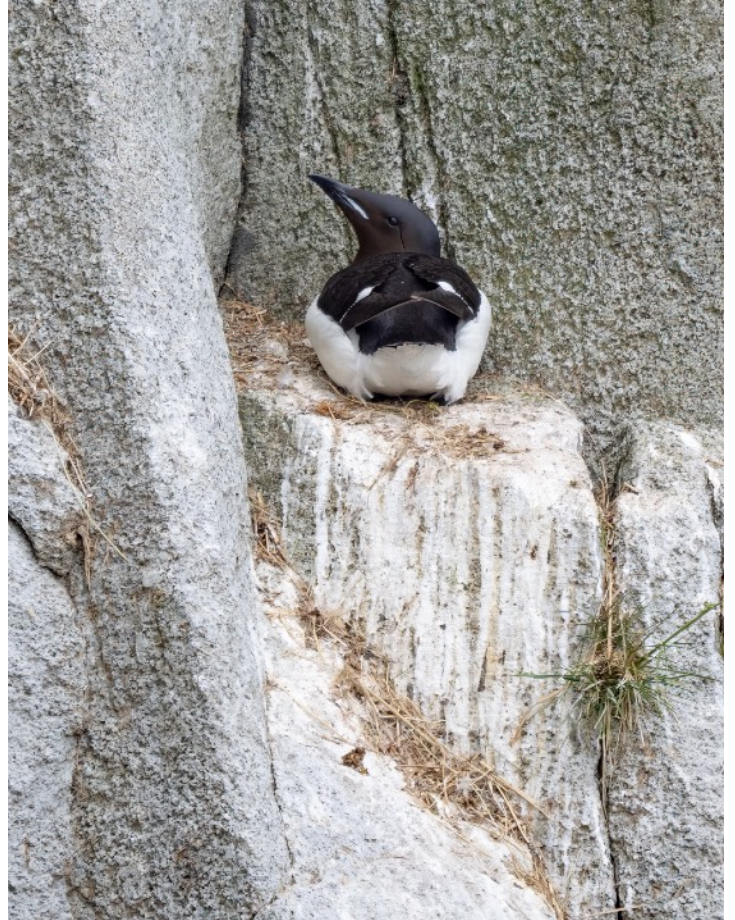


Harlequin Duck - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot





Red-faced Cormorant - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot



Thick-billed Murre - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot



Harbor Seal - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot





Townsend's Warbler - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Orange-crowned Warbler - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



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



Ruby-crowned Kinglet - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Short-billed Gull - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



## Nome

Now it was time for Nome. With 20hrs of daylight, Nome is one of the many photography paradises in the United States. Nome is comprised mostly of Rocky Tundra and a grassy tussock like ground cover. It can be a little tricky to walk in but the shorebirds love it. We photographed a variety of breeding shorebirds like; **Pacific and American Golden Plover, Surfbird, Red Knot, Whimbrel, Semi-palmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Semi-palmated Plover, Black-bellied Plover and Red-necked Phalarope.**

Nome also hosts a variety of passerines in its willow stretches and patches of small vegetation. The strategy for Nome is quite simple. There are four main roads with a host of little side roads and pullouts. Search those for your intended target, photograph it, repeat, that's it! So, during our three full days we drove the roads and we were able to photograph; **Willow and Rock Ptarmigan, Bluethroat, Arctic, Blackpoll, Yellow, and Wilson's Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Fox, White-crowned, Golden-crowned and American Tree Sparrows, Gray-cheeked Thrush, Northern Wheatear, Lapland Longspur, Hoary and Common Redpoll, Rough-legged Hawk, Long-tailed Jaeger, Aleutian Tern, Red-throated Loon and Eastern Yellow Wagtail.** Photos below are some of the highlights from Nome, including the very epic **Musk Ox.**



Long-tailed Jaeger - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Rough-legged Hawk - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Musk Ox - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Arctic Warbler - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Northern Waterthrush - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Yellow Warbler - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Bluethroat - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Blackpoll Warbler - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Golden-crowned Sparrow - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





White-crowned Sparrow - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Fox Sparrow - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Rusty Blackbird - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Hoary Redpoll - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Eastern Yellow Wagtail - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Common Redpoll - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Red-throated Loon - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Red-throated Loon - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Lapland Longspur - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Aleutian Tern - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Whimbrel - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Western Sandpiper - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Pacific Golden Plover - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

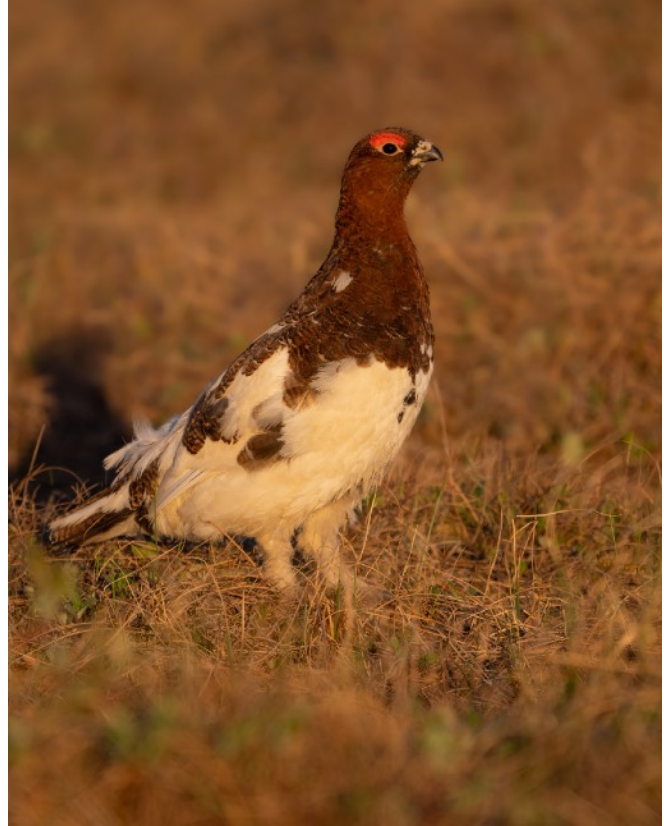


American Golden Plover - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Gray-cheeked Thrush - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Willow Ptarmigan - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Northern Wheatear - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Surfbird - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Semi-palmated Plover - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





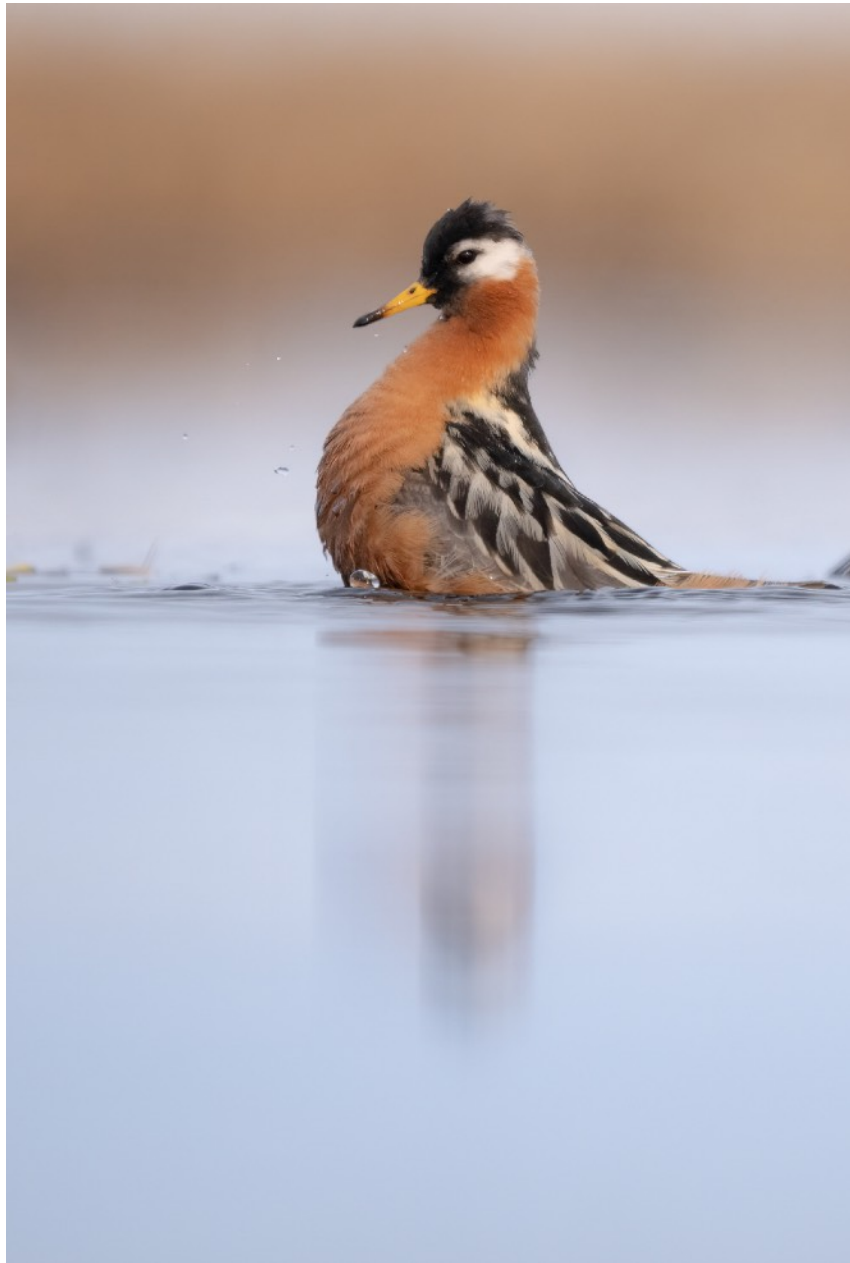
Rock Ptarmigan - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Rock Ptarmigan - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot

### Utqiagvik

WHEW! Wasn't that a lot of photos?? Nome is certainly a special place, as is Utqiagvik. This is the northern most city in the U.S. and North America. It is more than 300miles inside of the Arctic Circle and a massive breeding ground for special ducks, shorebirds, and other assorted water birds. As you are already aware we had trouble getting to Utqiagvik and ultimately, I was the only one to arrive and only had about 20hrs of photography. What follows are the few photos I managed while I was up there. While I was able to see a lot of great species, my limited time didn't allow me to photograph every species as best as I would have liked. So here is a small sample.



Red Phalarope - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Red Phalarope - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Hudsonian Godwit - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Steller's Eider - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Steller's Eider - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Long-tailed Duck - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot



King Eider - Photo by Guide: Ben Knot



King Eider - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot



Pacific Loon - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot





Pacific Loon - Photo by Guide: Ben Knoot