Alaska: Denali and Kenai (9 days)



Northern Hawk Owl Photo Stephan Lorenz

Our trip to magnificent Denali National Park and the wilderness surrounding is as much about large mammals, and a big (!) mountain, as it is about birds. With the blessing of the weather, the scenery can be beyond marvelous, and we expect to see such stellar species as Trumpeter Swan, Barrow's Goldeneye, Pacific and Red-throated Loons, Hudsonian Godwit, Willow and Rock Ptarmigan, Gyrfalcon, Long-tailed Jaeger, Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers, Northern Hawk-Owl, Boreal Owl (very rare), American Dipper, and Smith's

Longspur, plus many species of warblers, thrushes, and sparrows in full song. Typically we also see a number of Brown "Grizzly" Bears (often sows with cubs), Caribou scattered about, some Dall Sheep, Moose, and if we are very lucky, perhaps even Wolf or Canada Lynx. We'll also travel the Denali Highway that parallels the stunning Alaska Range for 135 miles in our quest to see as many of the region's special birds as possible.

We head back to Anchorage and after a night there we make our way south along scenic Turnagain Arm and Cook Inlet, before arriving in the town of Seward. From here we'll take a boat trip through the majestic Kenai Fjords National Park, one of the most spectacular parks in North America. Even just right in town, Bald Eagles are plentiful, and Sea Otters are seen swimming about playfully. Once out in Resurrection Bay and then amid glacial waters, highlights will no doubt be the thousands of alcids, including many murres, Tufted and Horned Puffins, Parakeet and Rhinoceros Auklets, Ancient and Marbled Murrelets, and with luck the sneaky Kittlitz's Murrelets. We also shall enjoy good chances for Humpback Whales, Killer Whales, Steller's Sea Lions, and other sea mammals and still other seabirds. We will also bird sections of the temperate, coniferous forests here with Steller's Jays, Townsend's Warblers, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Pacific Wrens, Fox Sparrows, and more.

TOUR AT A GLANCE...

Day 1	Meeting in Anchorage at the Coast Inn at Lake Hood for dinner Night: Anchorage
Day 2	Travel to the Denali National Park area, birding boreal forests
Day 3	Full day in Denali National Park via shuttle
Day 4	Travel along Denali Highway birding boreal forest, wetlands, tundra
Day 5	Birding along the Denali Highway for tundra species
Day 6	Travel back to Anchorage birding Hatcher Pass area
Day 7	Travel from Anchorage to Seward birding Cook Inlet area
Day 8	Boat tour into Kenai Fjords National Park
Day 9	Birding Seward area and travel back to Anchorage

Day 1: Arrival day in Anchorage and meet in the hotel lobby for a welcome dinner.

Day 2: Drive to Denali. We'll start the day at 6:30 with a Continental breakfast at the hotel, after which we'll depart for the Denali National Park area. A recent development on today's route was

the massive wildfire locally known as the “Sockeye Burn”. We will see how the forest regenerates, but if conditions are suitable we will make time to seek two recent-burn opportunists that are seldom encountered outside of such areas: American Three-toed Woodpecker and Black-backed Woodpecker. Last year’s tour was very successful at this site indeed, finding cooperative breeding pairs of both scarce species! Eventually arriving near the town of Talkeetna, we’ll break for lunch. We should arrive at our lodging outside the park in the late afternoon. Once we’ve checked in and had a bit of a break, we’ll enjoy dinner in the little village outside of the park.



Spruce Grouse Photo Stephan Lorenz

Day 3: Exploring Denali Park. After a very early continental breakfast, we head to the park headquarters and transfer to a park shuttle. We’ll be taking the shuttle, a 5-hour journey affording outstanding views of the park and its surroundings, not to mention the local birds and wildlife. Not that we are bound to the shuttle, since it’s permissible for riders to get off the bus and walk if they wish. The situation at the park is such that today's trip leader(s) must function rather as a friend and traveling companion, and not a “guide” or tour leader. The park does not permit anyone other than their concessionaires out of the shuttle, so today we bird together as friends who enjoy birds and wildlife. Some of the birds one might see include Long-tailed Jaeger,

Golden Eagle, Gyrfalcon, Willow Ptarmigan, Northern Hawk-Owl, and Northern Wheatear. Every year is different, but mammals can be abundant and possibilities include Brown "Grizzly" Bear, Wolf, Moose, Canada Lynx, Caribou, Red Fox, Coyote, and Hoary Marmot. Out all day, we expect to return in the late afternoon.

Day 4: Depart for Denali Highway. Following another early breakfast, we'll hit the road for the spectacular Denali Highway. This is a great place for viewing the region's wildlife, and we'll make numerous stops along this 135-mile dirt road that parallels the Alaska Range. We should see Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, Surf Scoters, Red-throated and Common Loons, Barrow's and Common Goldeneyes, Red-necked Phalarope, Wilson's Snipe, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitcher, Bohemian Waxwing, Boreal Chickadee and White-winged Crossbill. We'll have a packed lunch along the way, eventually arriving at our lodge in the late afternoon where we will check in prior to enjoying dinner.



American Three-toed Woodpecker Photo Stephan Lorenz

Day 5: Full-day birding Denali Highway. Following breakfast this morning, we will then commence our explorations of the area. First, we'll search for Smith's Longspur, after which we'll drive back along Denali Highway in order to access some high country for several birds that are more likely to be seen here. Rock Ptarmigan, Whimbrel, American Golden Plover,

Long-tailed Jaeger, Northern Wheatear, American Pipit, Lapland Longspur, and Arctic Warbler are among the birds we might see. The same mammals from Denali Park can also be seen along the road here, but they are much wearier. In addition, this is the only place we have seen Wolverine in our 16 years of coming to the park, so be alert and keep a sharp eye out. After a final evening at the lodge and a final dinner together, we'll retire for the night to rest up for the journey back to Anchorage.



Willow Ptarmigan Photo Stephan Lorenz

Day 6: Depart for Anchorage. After breakfast this morning, we will depart for our return journey to Anchorage. We'll also keep our eyes peeled for other birds along the way as well as a break for lunch en route. Time permitting, we might even make a quick run up Hatcher's Pass, near Anchorage. Last year's group made time for a brief search for White-tailed Ptarmigan at this site and were successful. Arriving in Anchorage in the late afternoon, we will rest up before dinner or possibly do some local birding for species we still need. After another delicious dinner, we will get a good rest in preparation for the journey to the Kenai Peninsula.

Day 7: Depart for Seward. We depart this morning after breakfast for Seward. We might make stops at Westchester Lagoon or Potter's Marsh to look for Horned Grebe and Rusty Blackbirds,

or along Turnagain Arm to search for Beluga Whales and Mountain Goats. Other birds that can be found en route include an incredible array of species particular to what is considered Pacific Northwest Rain Forest. Species possible include Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes, Pine Grosbeak, Townsend's Warbler, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Sooty Fox Sparrow, and the stunning Steller's Jay. We will check into our accommodations near Seward's quaint harbor area. We'll round off the day with another great dinner.

Day 8: Full-day boat trip into Kenai Fjords NP. After a quick breakfast in town, we will head to Seward Boat Harbor to board our boat. The only rough water we could experience might be a stretch of about 45 minutes into the Gulf of Alaska as we head to the Chiswell Islands, so if you think you need it, you should take motion sickness pills just after we board. The seas are usually moderate at most, but it's best to be prepared. We'll spend about 7-8 hours on the boat, with lunch on board. Birds we hope to see include nesting Bald Eagles, Horned and Tufted Puffins, Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorants, Parakeet and Rhinoceros Auklets, Marbled, Ancient and Kittlitz's Murrelets, and Black Oystercatcher. If lucky, we might also see Sooty Shearwaters. Marine mammals are abundant and we hope for sightings of Humpback and Killer Whales (Orca), Steller's Sea Lions, and Dall Porpoise. Following what should be an exciting and rewarding day, we'll then enjoy dinner at Ray's.



Bohemian Waxwing Photo Stephan Lorenz

Day 9: Depart for Anchorage where the tour will conclude. After an early morning check out of our lodge, we will do a bit of final birding around Seward for Rufous Hummingbirds and Pacific Wren. Or if time permits we may whisk into Westchester Lagoon, back in Anchorage. Here one often finds Hudsonian Godwits and Short-billed Dowitchers in breeding plumage along with nesting Red-necked Grebes. Other expected species could include Arctic Tern, Short-billed and Bonaparte's Gulls, Greater Scaup and many others, and nesting Pacific Loons can be found in the Anchorage area too. Upon our arrival back to Anchorage, our tour concludes and we will bid a fond farewell to one another, and perhaps even begin to plan our next birding adventure together.