

Top-of-the-world Alaska 2015

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CHAPTER 1. DAWSON CITY TO FAIRBANKS

Day 0. July 5 – Dawson City

(Bert) On the same day, we say farewell to eight of our Northwest Territories travelers and hello to ten that are joining the rest of us for the tour we call Top-of-the-World Alaska. I coined that name, borrowing from the familiar highway name, to describe a trip across the roads north of Fairbanks. The city is for most Alaska visitors as far north as they drive. Instead, we plan to travel the Taylor Highway to Eagle, the Steese Highway to Circle, the Elliott Highway to Manley Hot Springs, and the Dalton Highway to Prudhoe Bay and the Arctic Ocean.

Larry has been carefully checking out the newcomers RV rigs, looking for any mechanical issues that could become problems on the gravel roads ahead of us. Meanwhile, Shari and Marlene have been visiting with the people as couples or individuals, filling them in on details. Now, at 2:30 PM, we gather outside of our RV, trying to find a bit of shade on a warm sunny day. We meet first with the newcomers and repeat what the others heard in our Calgary orientation meeting and then the continuing travelers join us for details on plans for Top-of-the-world Alaska. Tomorrow we cross the Yukon River and drive to the remote Alaska border at Poker Creek, population 3.



Orientation meeting



Getting acquainted in Dawson City

Day 1. July 6 – Eagle, Alaska

(Bert) Like a snake slithering across a green desert, Top-of-the-World Highway serpentine along the crests of gentle mountains. Smoke-filled clouds dust the horizon, tinting each sloping mountain ridge a different shade of blue-gray. We stop at a viewpoint of the Yukon River which we just crossed by ferry. Through the smoke fog it is barely visible. At Dawson City our elevation was 1050 ft. Now we continue climbing until near the border we top off at over 4000 ft., high enough for tundra and rock coverage, barren of trees. Here I see my first ptarmigan of the year, a species others saw frequently in the Yukon, but I missed.

Border crossing at Poker Creek is uneventful. Questions are few, easily addressed, and within minutes we are in Alaska. The newly paved Top-of-the-world Highway is amazingly smooth and wide, a substantial improvement over previous years. When we reach Jack Wade Junction, we are back to gravel, heading on the Taylor Highway to Eagle. I would list the road to Eagle in the Top 10 of most impressive mountain drives in Alaska. It is different in its tight curves winding through canyons and over rivers famous for gold mining. In its lowest points it feels closed in by steep cliffs; at its highest points the view stretches forever. By the time we reach Eagle we will have descended again to 820 ft. at the Yukon River, just a bit lower elevation than where we were early this morning.

(Shari) My eyes are sore. I am busy scanning the road ahead as far as I am able to see, for oncoming traffic. Bert and I are acting as a pilot car for the two biggest rigs. Cindy, with the other big rig, is coming with Larry later as she does not feel well this morning. Since the Taylor Highway is narrow and twisty with blind curves, on the personal radio we announce any oncoming traffic to those following. This gives the bigger rigs time to find a pullout and wait for

the oncoming to pass on by. We also put on our flashing lights and talk to the oncoming driver to alert him to the motorhomes coming down the road. Fortunately we only meet ten vehicles on the 60-mi. drive to Eagle. The drive takes us three hours as we average 25 mph when we drive and make several stops.

It is not a fast road but a beautiful one. In the five times I have taken it, today's drive is the prettiest and smoothest. Sometimes we have experienced teeth shattering washboard and sometimes wet slippery gravel. Today we see scenery, top-of-the-world kind. Much of the drive is above tree level and we can see for miles. The road climbs steadily to American Summit and then drops down to the Yukon River. We stay in the middle of the road and hug the side only when we have to for oncoming traffic. A few short distances have only one lane so we make sure there is no oncoming traffic there. We surely do not want to fall off the edge.

We get into camp at 3 PM and expect the others before 4:30. Just at 4:30 others start to arrive but Larry and Marlene do not make it in until well after 6 PM. We hear that the later departing people in our group were held up at the ferry for over two hours, waiting in a long line. There is just enough hot ham and cheese sandwiches, carrot salad, chips and cookies for Larry and Marlene to finish. I think they appreciated the meal as Larry has more work to do. His car has a flat tire. We talk a long time after dinner telling each other what we saw on today's drive. Many women were scared and had their eyes closed. Anne says she kept her eyes open as she wanted to see herself going over the cliff so she could hop out. Judy says on the trip back, she is going into the bedroom and close her eyes. I offer others the chance to depart with us as we act as a pilot car, but have no takers so far, except the two bigger ones.



Top-of-the-world Highway, Yukon Territory



Welcome to Alaska with Shari pointing to our location



View from Top-of-the-world Highway, Alaska



Newly paved Top-of-the-world Highway, Alaska



Fortymile River, Taylor Highway, famous for gold mining



Curves, drop-offs, and narrow Taylor Highway. Steve & Suzette's RV.



Taylor Highway at American Summit. Note RV with dust trail.



Taylor Highway near American River

Day 2. July 7 – Eagle

(Bert) The beaver pond looks to me like any other, but then Bruce explains to us that it has been vacated. He points out that all of the deciduous trees have been removed from the surrounding area and the only remaining trees are spruce, a tree that beavers do not like. No recently felled trees are nearby, nor does the beaver lodge look fresh. Bruce tells us that the beavers move along a stream to a new location when the old one has been depleted of food.

We continue our morning nature walk and reach a clearing edged by forest. Gene draws our attention to a bird lurking in the dense underbrush and our binoculars turn to the location. It's a grouse or ptarmigan, but which one? We circle the area for a better look and I announce my suspicion that it is a Spruce Grouse. Closing in for better photos, the grouse retreats to another location, jumps on a log for best photos, and then onto a low branch of a spruce tree. Definitely a Spruce Grouse sporting a brown terminal tail band! Next, two half-grown chicks scurry through the tall grass in the direction of the adult. Fantastic views and life birds for Dennis and Becca and probably others!

At 10 AM we begin our walking tour of historical Eagle. I wrote about some of the sites before, but two caught my attention this time. In one of the old buildings, remnants from Fort Egbert, are some old vehicles abandoned and mostly without a sure history. The oddest is a 1914 Jeffrey Truck, named after the inventor. It had a number of advanced automotive features, most of which I didn't understand, not being mechanically minded, but its main purpose was to transport larger numbers of people, probably to the gold mining sites so prevalent at the time. How it ended up in Eagle is anyone's guess. A few days ago our guide John had the truck running and it has been used in Eagle's 4th of July parade. John suspects the Jeffrey truck is one of only two operational models in North America.

The second attention getter was Lieutenant William “Billy” Mitchell, who posthumously became General Mitchell. On one of his earliest assignments, Billy Mitchell was stationed at Fort Egbert and assigned the task of finishing the telegraph wires connecting Eagle to the World. At a time when there was no source of current news in Alaska and the Yukon, the telegraph was revolutionary. Ironically, only a few years later wireless transmission was invented and the telegraph become obsolete. Soon thereafter the fort was abandoned. Of course, Billy Mitchell continued on to fame as a World War I hero and an aviation visionary. He predicted that we would be at war with Japan and that we would need an air force for protection. The naval-minded powers that ruled did not appreciate his comments, did not follow his advice, and court-marshaled the persistent Mitchell. Pearl Harbor confirmed his prediction.

A few in our group knock on our RV door. Would the 5 PM dinner proceed if the late afternoon rain continues? Yes is the answer. On our caravans, we do not cancel events. Our motto is there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad preparation and poor attitude. At 4:30 I go to find Larry. His RV awning is much larger than ours, but he is parked next to trees. So, we decide Larry will move his RV to another site. Meanwhile, Jeff helps me haul firewood to the site and I start splitting wood in the rain. Larry shows up with his RV and spreads the awning. Then Larry gets the fire started. People start gathering around us and with perfect timing, the rain stops. Larry sets his tripod over the fire and Marlene takes charge of the order in which meat will be added to the grill, everyone having brought grill meat for themselves and a side to share. After a delicious meal, Gene and Anne offer to bring ingredients for s’mores and the sticks for roasting the marshmallows.

Barbara suggests we should do some evening birding, especially to try to find the Great Horned Owl that has been sighted near Fort Egbert twice in the past week. I’ve chased owls before and know the whimsical nature of the beast and its’ perchance for not showing, but I’m game anyway. We hike to the fort and scan every tree and building for a perched owl. We move farther into the meadow until Becca says she has spotted the distant owl on an aspen bordering the meadow. Amazing! We walk closer for better photos until it takes flight over the hill. Continuing on the trail, we reenter the forest and this time it is Barbara who spots it resting on another aspen branch. What a great night for birding!



Abandoned beaver pond and lodge



Adult Spruce Grouse



Juvenile Spruce Grouse



1914 Jeffrey Truck at Fort Egbert



General Billy Mitchell, a lieutenant when stationed at Fort Egbert



Yukon River at Eagle waterfront



Grill meat potluck just after the rains stopped



Larry's tripod grill loaded with steaks, hamburgers, hotdogs, and more



Great Horned Owl at 8:45 PM

Day 3. July 8 – Chicken

(Bert) The Taylor Highway out of Eagle seems better than the way in. Last night's rain keeps the dust down, although adds a few potholes near the end. The section from the junction to Chicken still has the very narrow portion where RVs have plummeted over the edge in previous years. We warned our caravaners to stop for oncoming traffic and let the mountainside lane pass them before they proceed. We had no mishaps.

Gold mining activity has picked up in these areas and we see several operations. A new sign or one I haven't seen before announces free public non-mechanical gold mining along a fixed section of Jack Wade Creek. Ron#2 tries gold-panning at the creek, but he is still with us so I guess he didn't strike it rich.

We descend the mountainside into Chicken, still hazy with forest fire smoke. Everyone arrives before our 2:15 PM tour of Old Chicken, made famous by the book *Tisha*, the story of Anne Purdy as a young lady teaching school in this backwash of Alaska. For those of us that have read the book, the stories come alive as we see the building where Anne taught school and the backroom where she lived. Surrounding her school are many mining buildings, some from the 1896 gold rush and others from a gold-mining revival in the 1950s. Since the start of Chicken gold mining an amazing 60,000 ounces of gold have been recovered from the immediate area.

Our guide Mary Anne certainly lacks tour guide skills, often referring to her notes, but she has appeal nonetheless. As a young child she lived near Boundary with her goldminer father. She tells of how as a child she was forced to retrieve gold dust from a gold pan by blowing into the pan. At the age of 16 she ran away from home and walked to the nearest town, Chicken. She worked for a couple who were also gold miners and although they recognized her and contacted her father, she did not return home. At that time she met Anne Purdy, then teaching in Chicken.

It wasn't until many years later that she saw Anne's book and read the stories. This summer she had the chance to return to Chicken and is delighted to learn more about the history of Chicken and be a walking tour guide.



Jack Wade Creek gold mining



Chicken, Alaska, dominated by two competing RV parks



Anne Purdy (“Tisha”) schoolhouse and living quarters



Gold mining camp mess hall, circa 1950s



Gold mining camp mess hall, circa 1950s



Historical mining dredge

Day 4. July 9 – Tok

(Bert) I am up by 5:20 and an hour later the rains are heavy enough that I wonder if anyone will want to go on this morning's nature hike. At 7 AM I see Jeff and Barbara outside and so quickly pull on my hiking shoes and raincoat and join them. Phyllis and Ron come too. Fortunately, the rain is light now, but I still wonder what wildlife will make an appearance in inclement weather. Within minutes we are rewarded with a moose and calf ambling through the brush in front of us.

The scrubby woods near the campground is a goldmining graveyard for heavy machinery: caterpillars missing lugs, loaders without engines, trucks without wheels, and a dozen metal frames scavenged for parts to the point that I do not know what their original purpose was. We break out of the woods and see Bea, Becca and Dennis coming down the road to join us. We continue to the single-runway airport and its surrounding ponds. Two families of Buffleheads, one on each pond, are of different ages. The first has half-grown ducklings; the second has fuzzy little ducklings that “duck” below the surface and bounce back up like rubber ducks in a bathtub. A few Rusty Blackbirds perch on tall spruce, always a good find for this threatened species. A Lincoln’s Sparrow sings cheerily from another tree. And, we study dozens of swallows, picking out a few Bank Swallows from many look-alike juvenile Tree Swallows, both the same shade of brown, both with white undersides, but differing in the breadth, width, and darkness of the brown breast band. Sorry, I have no photos of this morning’s outing, not being willing to carry my camera in the rain.

When I return to the RV Shari is ready to go. We decide, though, to have breakfast first at Chicken Creek Café. I don’t know why we never did this on our previous Chicken visits. Owner Susan has been here since our first visit in 1996 and cooks up a great breakfast. Her restaurant is part of the same building that incorporates the gas station, Mercantile Emporium, Liquor Store, and Saloon. In fact, I recall from our 1996 visit that you could visit each store and have the same attendant at each, as that person had a runway in the back so that he could quickly move from one counter to the next.

We leave Chicken and a few miles along on the narrow gravel Taylor Highway I ask Shari if she paid for breakfast. She thought I did; I thought she did. We search for a place to turn around on the narrow gravel road and finally come to a BLM wayside and circle back. As I pay for breakfast, Susan tells me about meals she can cater for large groups and what she serves. I take her business card and we will try to arrange something when we return to Chicken in 2016.



This part of Chicken hasn’t changed since our 1996 visit

Day 5. July 10 – Fairbanks

(Bert) Again we leave early, 7AM, to get to Fairbanks for errands before the others arrive in camp. It has been a long time since we have driven a paved highway at 62 mph. While I drive, Shari calls our credit card company to tell them we are in Alaska. Her cell phone connects by Bluetooth to the RV's audio system, so I can hear the conversation. Just as Shari starts talking, a moose appears in the center of the road. Excitedly, I shout "There's a moose in the road!" The young MasterCard representative becomes confused and asks me to repeat what I said. She doesn't understand "Moose" the second time either, so we tell her to forget it, just put into the file that we are in Alaska and want to use our credit card here. She does so and then advises us that there is a 3% service charge for foreign transactions. One gets the feeling that kids these days don't study geography or biology.

Periodically, we have to slow for frost heaves, well-illustrated by the photo I take through the windshield while Shari is driving. We reach North Pole and the highway switches to 4-lane, something we haven't seen in months. In camp, Shari spends hours on the phone, contacting vendors. Our plans were to leave Fairbanks, heading north and west on the Elliott Highway, another gravel road, but when Shari talked to one of the vendors she found out it has are twelve miles of road construction, six forest fires are near the road, and 300 firefighters are camped where we intended to camp, completely occupying the space. It's time for Plan B.

Chena Hot Springs comes to mind as an alternative. Shari studies The Milepost and makes phone calls to campgrounds and several activity vendors. She figures out how we can substitute days and rearrange the order of the next week's itinerary. I work out revised travel logs and update my spreadsheet document for printing the log. We announce our revised plans at the 5 PM travel meeting, which is followed by a birthday celebration where we eat cake Shari has baked. Having eaten dessert first, most of us walk to a nearby restaurant on the Chena River for dinner. After dinner, I visit with Cindy and Bob (who I often called Bearded Bob in our Mexico-Belize travel blogs). They are traveling in Alaska and are camped just a few sites away from ours. We catch up on events since the years they traveled with us on four south-of-the-border caravans.



Moose leaves the highway



Frost heaves and fireweed, Alaska Highway to Fairbanks



A 4-lane highway approaching North Pole!

Day 6. July 11 – Fairbanks

(Bert) It's a free day, though for us and several others it's an errand day. We spend the morning at Fred Meyer, our favorite Alaska grocery store, stocking up on personal food supplies plus lots for the caravan as Shari will be preparing many of the meals for them. After three hours of shopping, it takes us a half hour figuring out where we will put everything in our small RV. The freezer is the biggest issue and I use a sturdy knife to cut the tails off four frozen whole salmon so that they fit in lengthwise. Then we go to the copy center for copies of our revised travel log. Shari spends the afternoon preparing food for the caravan and is exhausted by day's end. Others take care of errands too, especially laundry and shopping. Fortunately, Steve and Suzette are able to get repairs done to their 5th-wheel. Ruth gets an oil change at the Chrysler dealer—quick in, quick out. But Cindy spends most of the day at the Ford dealer for an oil change and tire repair. More pleasantly, a few have time to bird at Creamer's Dairy and/or to visit the museum and floral gardens at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Chapter 2. Chena Hot Springs Road

Day 7. July 12 – Chena Hot Springs

(Bert) The drive to Chena Hot Springs is on a roller coaster road manufactured by frost heaves. After arriving at the resort, most of our travelers report seeing moose en route, though we missed seeing any. We quickly gather for the 1 PM tour of the Ice Museum. The giant igloo shaped building is kept at 25° inside and was once billed as the Ice Hotel—who would want to stay in ice rooms 7° below freezing, especially at \$600 per night?—but the fire marshal said regulations require a sprinkler system (and rules are rules, even if they don't make sense). So, instead, it is an ice palace of sculptured ice created by a pair of award winning artists. In fact, they won the Fairbanks competition this past winter. The ice carvings are illuminated by tiny multi-colored lights, the only lighting in the ice hall. When photographed, the effect is surreal. For those willing to pay the price, they offer apple martinis served from glasses made of ice, at a bar made of ice, while sitting on stools made of ice.

After our ice tour, we go to the opposite extreme when we swim in the hot springs surrounded by an attractive rock garden. On one end of the large pool a pipe coming out of a rock sprays hot water at high force, providing a unique and forceful back massage. Later, some of us meet for dinner in a private dining room, served by an entertaining waitress from Mississippi.



Aurora Ice Museum



Ice sculpture





Ice bar and ice glasses





Hot springs rock garden pool

Day 8. July 13 – Rosehip

(Bert) Our morning nature walk offers us hordes of mosquitos and three mallards, the poorest birding walk of the two tours. The only salvation is that the mallards were almost unrecognizable males in eclipse plumage, providing me an opportunity to explain the molting patterns of ducks. Male ducks lose their flight feathers in late summer, thus cannot fly, and go into seclusion to avoid predators. At that time they are hard to find and when one does find them they are often mistaken for females because their plumage is so drab. At the end of the walk we reach the sled dog kennels where a hundred huskies bark for attention, each chained to its own doghouse, plus one guard dog unchained.

We move on to a state recreation park for another night of camping and have a relaxing afternoon without agenda. At 4:30 I present a Birding 101 class and provide tips on finding and identifying birds. We have a mixed group on this tour, with about half of them not having had much interest in birds or bird identification earlier, but now are curious and gaining interest. Tonight, Shari's Sloppy Joe's are a hit and the variety of sides prepared by others is delicious.



Can you see the three ducks on the pond?



Cropped photo of three male Mallards



Sled dog kennel



Sled dog resting on its dog house



Sloppy Joe's

Chapter 3. Sterling Highway

Day 9. July 14 – Sterling Highway to Circle

(Bert) More of Sterling Highway is paved than the last time Shari and I had driven it. We stop once, waiting for a few others to catch up, and then study a Western Wood-Pewee on the electrical wire, a bird I don't often see in Alaska. Our next stop is at the Twelvemile Summit Wayside. When Bruce, Olive, Phyllis and Ron arrive we put on layers of outerwear and begin the ascent to Twelvemile Summit. During the hike uphill the weather changes from cold to warm to sunny to rain with ice crystals to dry to cloudy and back to sunny. We reach the top of the trail but have not found our target bird: Northern Wheatear. We do see a family of Willow Ptarmigans in flight and see an American Tree Sparrow, but little else. There is more to explore on the ground than the air and most interesting is the Dead Man's Fingers, strange deformed putrid appendages reaching up from moist ground, an odd mushroom. Later we hear that the earlier group did find Northern Wheatear, but hiked farther than we did along the ridge. They also found them at our next hiking spot at Eagle Summit, but when we reach that trail it is starting to rain and I decide to visit it on our return trip. The rain mist forms a rainbow, strangely below us in the valley, rather than on the horizon one typically views rainbows.

We continue on Sterling Highway, now all gravel except for a short section through the remote community of Central, a remnant of goldmining days. The last miles are through pink mountainsides clothed in fireweed. The fluffy seed packets of fireweed are so light they float in the wind and can be carried for hundreds of miles in strong winds. Those seeds that find a hillside swept barren by a recent forest fire are first plants to take root, as we witness today.

We reach the end of the road at Circle, called Circle City when gold miners created the town. The miners mistakenly thought they had reached the Arctic Circle, but actually were 50 mi. short of the artificial line. We had tentatively thought of camping at the river, but the traffic of boats in and out as well as the small size and unevenness of the gravel prompts us to look elsewhere. Instead, we direct everyone to go to a pleasant gravel lot beside Birch Creek for camping tonight. Once all the wagons are circled, we enjoy Shari's Klondike Pancakes with sausages and fruit while huddled under three RV canopies to keep us dry in the light rain. After dinner and most have retreated inside, Shari gets out her ukulele and a half dozen of us sing along to her tunes.



Paved section of Steese Highway



Phyllis's RV rounds a curve as she approaches Twelvemile Summit



Dead Man's Fingers



View from Twelvemile Summit of RVs parked on Steese Highway



Rainbow in valley below Eagle Summit



Mountain Harebells



Common Fireweed covers burnt mountainsides



Yukon River at Circle



Klondike Pancakes while camping at Birch Creek

Day 10. July 15 – Eagle Summit

(Bert) Sometimes birding gets a little crazy. Witness five birders dressed head to toe, four layers deep, trudging up a steep hill to the summit in 42° weather—that was in the parking lot, not where the wind blows on the summit—in the rain, and dense fog. Oh, did I tell you today is July 15? The fog is so dense that if we walk off the stone trail by as much as 25 ft. we may not find our way back, wandering around over the rocks, maybe falling over the cliff, hoping to find the meager trail again. So, you ask, what was our reward for this 2-hr. adventure? Well, we heard something tweeting a single “tiskk!” a few times, but never could see what was lurking in the fog. (We suspect it was a Savannah Sparrow). We are on the downhill when I hear another sound, not a Savannah. I turn to the sound in the fog and see a dark shadow descend to a rock at the end of a drop off. I call to the others “American Golden-Plover” and binoculars swing to the rock. There it is in all its glory a gray ghost on a gray rock against a gray sky!

We had better luck earlier this morning when Jeff and Barbara relocated the Northern Hawk Owl they saw along the Steese Highway yesterday. This time, though, they find a family of owls just south of Central. One by one as the rest of our RV’s reach the site we stop to watch the owls. By the time Bruce, Olive and Shari and I reach the site just one juvenile remains. Both Bruce and I get photos of the juvenile lacking a long tail.

We finish our return on the Steese Highway and turn north again on the Elliott Highway, camping tonight on pretty Olnes Pond. The entree for tonight is Ptarmigan Grill, Shari’s cute name for chicken roasted on an open fire built by Larry.



Birding on Eagle Summit



American Golden-Plover in the fog on Eagle Summit



Northern Hawk Owl



Steese Highway near Central



Nodding flowers of Lessing's Arnica at Eagle Summit



Paintbrush, probably Coastal Paintbrush (*Castilleja unalaschcensis*)



Camping at Olnes Pond on Elliott Highway



“Ptarmigan Grill” is Shari’s name for it

Chapter 4. Dalton Highway

Day 11. July 16 – Coldfoot

(Bert) Carol suggests that we could have called this tour “End of the Road” because that is what we repeatedly do at Eagle, Fairbanks, Chena Hot Springs, Circle, and now Deadhorse.

We start with the Elliott Highway at 6 AM. Recently extinguished forest fires terminate at the highway. Traces of the choking smell of smoke linger in our noses. At the base of one hillside, the black char meets abruptly with a wall of green spruce. Several in our group comment that it was good we altered our plans and did not travel the Elliott to its terminus.

By 7:30 we are at the start of the Dalton Highway and stop for photos at the welcome sign. At this southern end of the highway we travel through boreal forest. Alongside us is the Alaska oil pipeline, the reason the road was built in the 1970s. Originally and still now known as the Haul Road, it is one thoroughfare for transporting goods to oil fields at Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Ocean and the coastal plain, the other transport modes being by barge and by air. One semi driver said he makes the haul three times per week, about 14 hours north, sleeping for 10 hours and then another 10 hours south. Traveling south is faster than north because his truck is empty on the return. By comparison, we will travel at a snail’s pace, with frequent stops, as we intend to spend nine days in the round trip.

We cross the Yukon River—how many times have we crossed or met the Yukon River this year?—and stop for fuel at \$5.49/gal. At a vacant visitor’s center I read about the Haul Road on one of the informative signs. The 358-mile Haul Road was constructed in just 154 days, starting April 29, 1974, by the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company, the same entity that built and operates the pipeline across Alaska. The road was turned over to the State of Alaska in 1978. Since 1994 the Dalton Highway has been open to the public all the way to Deadhorse.

Finger Mountain is one of the most interesting stops along the highway today. Tors at the mountaintop are lasting mementos of ancient volcanoes that spewed magma, hardened into granite, weathered by ice wedges that carried away the softer materials, leaving just roughhewn granite fingers. The most prominent of the tors points like a directional finger to Fairbanks and was used by low-flying pilots for navigation.



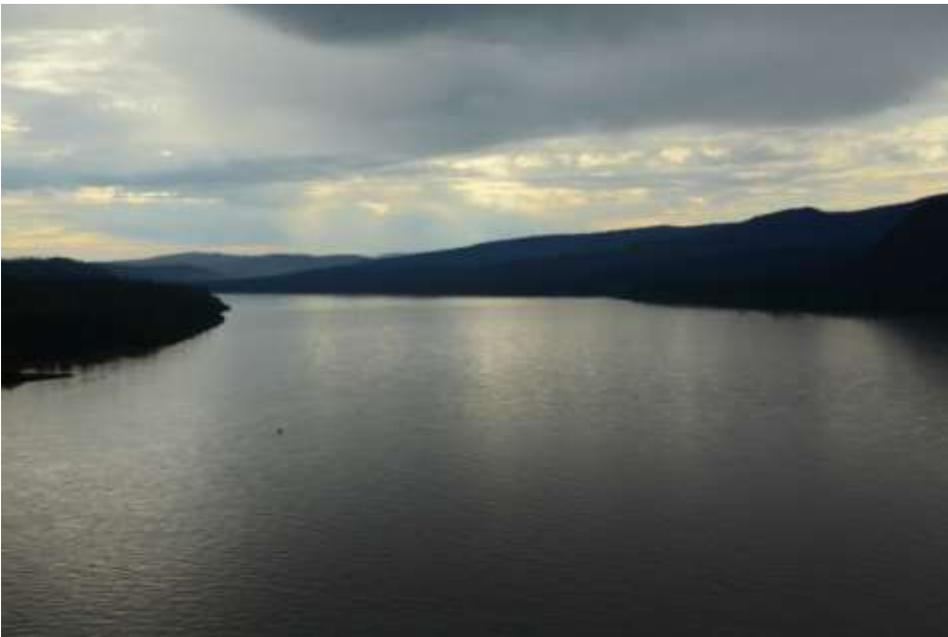
Bert at the start of the Dalton Highway



Gravel section of Dalton Highway with view of oil pipeline



Dalton Highway meets Yukon River



Yukon River in overcast skies at 9:30 AM



The pipeline just after crossing the Yukon River



At No Name Creek, Ron is birding while Carol looks for a geocache under the bridge



Fireweed at Finger Mountain



Pointing tor at Finger Mountain



Tors at Finger Mountain

Day 12. July 17 – Crossing the Brooks Range

(Bert) Scrawled in the muddy rear window of Ruth's tiny trailer is the challenge "DEADHORSE OR BUST." That challenge is tested today as we cross the Brooks Range. Clouds, sometimes strangely shaped into gray sausages linked across the valley with clear gaps above and below, obscure our view of mountains and wildlife. We stop below Sukakpak Mountain (elev. 4000 ft.) for a break and photos of the giant in front of us. Glancing at the ever present Alaska pipeline paralleling the highway I see a bird winging from one spruce top to the next. I head back into the RV to retrieve my binoculars and then zeroing in on the pipeline spruce I see it is an owl. Short-eared or Hawk-owl? Bea gets her scope and aligns on the owl. It's a Short-eared Owl, our first of the trip.

We reach the pullout called Farthest North Spruce where a spruce once stood but was subsequently vandalized and cut done. Nonetheless, remarkable is the sharp line of demarcation between spruce-dominated taiga forest and treeless tundra. Scientists are uncertain exactly what causes tree line, but it seems to be closely related to the mean temperature in July. If the mean is above 10°C (50°F) then trees have enough time to photosynthesize and to grow. If not, then only shrubs such as dwarf willow and dwarf birch grow and the landscape is less than a few feet high to the horizon.

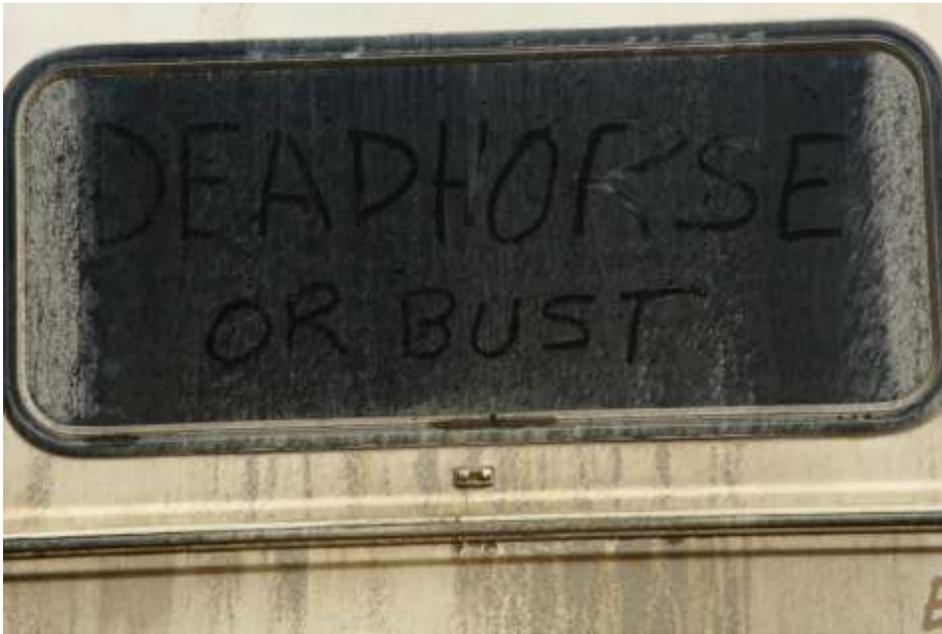
We begin our first steep climb up to Chandalar Shelf. It seems sheer, but it is only a foretaste of what lies beyond. The shelf is a relatively flat plateau surrounded by mountains. The light rain does not deter us from exploring Chandalar on foot. We walk on the graveled airstrip in hopes of finding Arctic Warblers in the willow thickets. Although we find none of those, we do watch a pair of Long-tailed Jaegers pirouette in graceful spins and arches low over the tundra. I remember, in 2012, finding a Say's Phoebe near the sturdy two-track bridge over Chandalar River and I study one side of the bridge, then the other, and then see movement along the river

bank fifty yards upstream. It's the phoebe, a butterfly of a bird flitting from one perch to another in indecision, occasionally flashing its peachy colors that stand out even in these gray overcast skies.

Chandalar Shelf is the gateway to Atigun Pass, the formidable barrier that separates us from the North Slope. The climb is at an acute angle, persistently upward without a break. Even in dim light we can see two of our RV'ers far ahead of us, penciling a dark line across the mountainside at a pace barely perceptible. It is our turn. Shari drives; I take photos or at least try to obtain photo images in the low contrast shades of gray that wash out almost all colors. The rain has turned the gravel into mud, though fortunately it is not slippery and the wheels maintain traction. We slowly rise in elevation like an Otis elevator in a hundred-year-old hotel. We reach the crest of the pass at 4800 ft. and then descend a few hundred feet to a parking area where we had hoped to camp, but postponed, opting instead for one that may be more comfortable in the cold and the rain. To reach it we must brake to keep the engine in first gear, descending a gravel highway as it winds and jackknives down the mountainside to a flat plateau at 3450 ft.

Like a box of fallen matches, our RVs scatter randomly across the enormous parking lot, a remnant of pipeline building days. Larry parks his motorhome to block the wind, Shari positions ours antiparallel with a gap just wide enough to stretch our two awnings across for rain cover, and Gene parks his RV perpendicularly for another windbreak. Soggy gravel fills the gap between vehicles and on this we set up our tables and chairs for Shari's High Elevation Fondue. Beforehand I give a presentation that I originally entitled "50 things I learned about the North Slope," but revised when the list came to 62. The list of remarkable facts covers climate, geology and plant life. I cherry-pick the highlights, but don't reach the end of the list before Shari cuts me off and says it is time for our travel meeting and the fondue. One of the facts, though, is that on average the North Slope gets 10 in. of rain annually, on par with a desert. So how come we are sitting here in the shelter of rain? Well, rain mostly falls in July and August and it rains more in the foothills than in the coastal plain. It can quit now though, for our part.





Deadhorse or bust



Strange cloud across Dalton Highway



Sukakpak Mountain



Studying a Short-eared Owl in light rain and fog



Chandalar Shelf: tundra, river, and mountains in fog and rain



Climbing Atigun Pass



Travel meeting



High Elevation Fondue

Day 13. July 18 – Galbraith Lake

(Bert) Last night Dennis and Becca and others found a Wandering Tattler surveying the fast flowing creek beside our camping spot, so that is the target species for this morning's hike. We are to start at 7:30 AM, but Bea is out ahead of us and she finds the tattler. By the time all of us lumber over the rocks and tundra to reach her, the bird is gone. We find a few other birds on the morning walk, but none as exciting as the one we missed.

Now in our RVs, we travel along the Dalton Highway and stop at every available pullout to look for birds. Under Atigun River bridge no. 1 I see a large nest that looks just like one occupied by a Gyrfalcon I saw in Nome. Later I learn this nest is from a Common Raven and that Gyrfalcons do not build nests but instead steal one from a raven. We have better luck when I scan the distant cliffs and see the profile of a large raptor on one of the peaks. I'm not sure what is the distance and height, but I would guess at least a quarter mile away and a thousand feet up. Jeff thinks it is a bird too and we get out the spotting scopes. The profile matches Golden Eagle and there is even a hint of gold on its head. I find it amazing that we could identify a bird that far away.

One of our target birds is Smith's Longspur and I know from previous experience that we are in the right tundra habitat. Nonetheless, it seems that every sparrow-like bird we look at is a juvenile White-crowned Sparrow. Except just one ... another juvenile but with a washed out ochre belly and a dark back. Barbara sees it too and Bea says she noticed a black crown. The bird disappears, not to be relocated, but it must have been a juvenile Smith's. Later, after Shari and I are in our next camping spot, many of the other birders are still on the road and think they have found Smith's Longspurs. Bruce takes many photos only to find out later that they are all juvenile Lapland Longspurs which are exceedingly common here on the tundra. They have better luck in finding and photographing a Parasitic Jaeger, a nice contrast to the many Long-tailed Jaegers here. Later when I examine my sparrow photos I find one bird that we too easily dismissed as another juvenile White-crowned. Instead, it is a Golden-crowned Sparrow in juvenal plumage, a short phase of feathering that is soon replaced by flight feathers and a plumage I do not recall seeing before.

I've a keen interest in geology and often wished I had taken an introductory course in college. Now I'm always looking at rocks, mountains and landscapes and wondering how they got that way. Under Atigun River bridge boulders are piled at its base for additional support and I find that many of them are conglomerate, a composite formed when glaciers covered the North Slope. Scanning the mountainsides, I can see a few hanging glaciers as remotely high as to be inaccessible to us. Although at our level most everything we see is tundra, whenever a stream cuts a path through the tundra it exposes the glacial rocks and gravel just a few feet below the surface.

Our camping spot tonight is a flat valley besides Galbraith Lake, surrounded by the foothills, distant mountains and glaciers of the Brooks Range to the south and the extensive coastal plain to the north. It is hard to grasp the immensity of the North Slope; our view zooms to infinity.

In late afternoon, Ron parks his RV so that we can use its pale yellow side as a projection screen for Shari's PowerPoint presentation on geocaching. It's a part time hobby for Shari, though a full time activity for Carol, who has found many geocaches along the Dalton Highway.



Gyrfalcon nest under Atigun River bridge



Golden Eagle at top of mountain, just below the red asterisk



Cropped photo showing Golden Eagle on top of mountain



Golden-crowned Sparrow in juvenal plumage



Conglomerate boulders



Glacier on distant Brooks Range



Pastel shades of distant Brooks Range



Pipeline at Tea Lake with Brooks Range in background



RVs parked at Galbraith Lake; tundra and boulders in foreground; Brooks Range foothills in background

Day 14. July 19 – Galbraith Lake to Deadhorse

(Bert) Lapland Longspurs are everywhere here! I've seen them in winter in Texas when they are as drab and distant as to be almost unrecognizable. And I've seen them in Alaska and the Yukon when in unmistakably bright breeding plumage. But these today on our morning hike at Galbraith Lake are juveniles and buffy fall adults in a hodgepodge of black streaks, chestnut patches, and beige undersides. They are so preoccupied while feeding in the tundra grasses that I can get quite close to them for photography.

Another bird that is amazingly close is an Arctic Tern fishing in the icy glacier runoff tracing its way from the mountain top to the lake. We are hiking at the edge of the braided stream as the tern darts helter-skelter, inspecting the water. I doubt there are any fish in this shallow stream, so it must be insects or invertebrates that the tern seeks. Suddenly our attention turns to a family of American Golden-Plovers that spring up from the tundra and fly away. The breeding golden-plover is so much more colorfully plumaged in a gaudy gold, black, and white tuxedo compared to the faded winter plumage when I see them in migration through Texas.

On the road again, we continue our trek north, stopping at Toolik Lake in light rain, heavily overcast skies, and distance-limiting fog. I set up my spotting scope to search for the pair of Yellow-billed Loons that frequent this small lake. They are not in the center of the lake, or this side, but I can't see the far shore so maybe that is where they are hiding. Nonetheless, they are a no show. We try for Bluethroats which are known to nest in the willows. We hike across the difficult tundra in the direction I've looked another year. I suspect we may be too late in the season and, if present, they will be hard to find since they are no longer singing. We miss on that species too. Yet we get one reward, an excellent view of a Hoary Redpoll. Too bad the rain has

prevented me from carrying my camera. This redpoll is facing away from us and very clearly exposing its white rump, a telltale field mark. Then it turns and faces us, showing the pink blush on its chest. This bird is distinctly different from the Common Redpolls we have seen so often thus far. Yet I've heard talk that Hoary and Common Redpolls are likely to be lumped by ornithologists as the current thought is that they are only different forms of the same species.

I am anxious to see Ice Cut as that location had so many interesting birds in my last visit. Now the rain has dampened my enthusiasm and although I trudge through the mud in anticipation, I do not find a single bird. The others in our caravan catch up to the rest stop below the steep hill. Dennis steps out to inspect a tire that has been giving him a low pressure warning on his dashboard. He decides to change the tire for his spare just as we pull out and Tailgunner Larry arrives to assist.

As we continue north, surrounded by endless tundra, devoid of anything with elevation, Percy Pingo sticks out like a mountain, though it is not. The circular, rounded hill is similar to the ones we saw in Tuktoyaktok, though smaller. It is about three miles from the highway, yet clearly visible. The many Long-tailed Jaegers also catch my attention. Everyone was so excited when they saw their first jaeger near Chandalar Shelf. Now they are common or, in birder jargon, have become "trash birds," though I don't see why one would ever put these fanciful acrobats in that category.

I see rainbow colors of Franklin Bluffs on the horizon, rising above the opposite shore of Sagavanirktok River. In the shadows is a long series of disjointed snow banks that have escaped the 24-hour sun of July. The Dalton Highway continues to parallel the Sag River. At Mile 387, just as predicted, we see a small herd of Muskox gathered along the river. I count nine of the lumbering beasts as they cross from one side of the river to the other and disappear in the willow bushes.

Shari and I arrive at Deadhorse an hour before most of the others. We need that time to choose a suitable camping spot (they change from time to time, depending on road construction and parking availability in town), locate the two gas stations and the only sewer dump in town, and to confirm the plans for meals and showers at one of the oil company worker hotels. We finish all our tasks, though not finding a fresh water source as yet, and radio to the caravaners directions to reach the camping spot on the gravel shores of Sag River. Although I had no time for birding Deadhorse, I did take note of the Tundra Swans, Greater White-fronted Geese, and Snow Buntings while cruising up and down the gravel streets in town. After everyone has reached the camping spot on the edge of town, we carpool to the hotel for an enormous all-you-can-eat buffet that includes a huge slab of prime rib cooked to perfection.



Lapland Longspur



Lapland Longspur



Toolik Lake



Hiking the tundra at Toolik Lake



Ice Cut



Percy Pingo



Franklin Bluffs on Sagavanirktok River



Snow banks on Franklin Bluffs



Greater White-fronted Goose at Deadhorse

Day 15. July 20 AM – Deadhorse

(Bert) Too much happens today to contain text and photos in one blog, so I'm splitting it up into AM and PM. After a hearty breakfast at the oil workers hotel, a birding group follows me around town. We start at a gray water runoff pond near the hotel that is adjacent to a very busy road and constant truck and machinery traffic. The first bird I see is totally unexpected: a Ruff! Ruffs and their female counterpart, which are called Reeves, are Eurasian birds that rarely wander to the northwestern coast of Alaska. The bright orange legs are the most striking feature of this plump shorebird with the downsized head. It has lost much of its eye-catching black and orange coloring, including the "ruff" of protruding feathers around its neck—is it called Ruff because of its feather-ruff or is the wearing apparel ruff named after the bird?—yet this is a bird easily recognized. My two bird books do not show this wanderer to reach all the way to Prudhoe Bay, but I have seen it in not-to-distant Barrow to the west as well as on St. Lawrence Island off the coast of Siberia and, incredibly, on the coast of Texas in winter.

It will be hard to top the Ruff sighting, but of course we continue nonetheless. The pond is filled with birds, including 100+ Red-necked Phalaropes, dozens of Semipalmated Sandpipers, and several Pectoral Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitchers, and White-rumped Sandpipers. Also some ducks are at the far northern extreme of their ranges, including Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail.

We move on to another pond, this one at the geodesic dome that is a radar station. Resting on a grassy peninsula is a flock of 14 Spectacled Eiders all in drab brown female-immature plumage. This is a Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean duck that is hard to find elsewhere. Although expected here, because of its limited accessible range it is a good sighting nonetheless.

Checking out Lake Colleen we again find Pacific Loons that seem to be everywhere there is water. We drive out to the 411 wayside and there are more Pacific Loons, this time an adult pair parading two small chicks around a large pond. Also, here is a male Lapland Longspur that is still in breeding plumage. I notice it is feeding on the dried flower head of Mountain Avens, a wispy bundle of disarrayed feathery threads that are easily wind born for seed dispersal.

I hear Shari on the radio; she must be close by. After breakfast she took the RV to a tire repair shop and she has just finished. The tire mechanic found a thin nail about the length of a stickpin. It had wormed its way into the tire, leaving a wormhole that excluded air at every bump. We must have picked up the nail on the Dempster Highway a month ago because I first noticed the tire was low on air when we were at Eagle Plains. Since then, Larry has been adding 10-20 lbs. of air every other day. We are not the only ones with tire problems. Dennis had his leaking tire repaired, the result of a small stone wedged in the treads. Larry had one of the inside tires of his motorhome fixed. His nail was even smaller than ours. Bruce takes the prize for nails as his was much larger than ours and now his is fixed too. Thank goodness for Deadhorse's tire repair shops!

While I wait for Shari to return to the camping area, I walk along the gravel shores of the Sagavanirktok River. A lone Long-tailed Duck floats quietly on a shallow pond. Usually overcast skies plague good photography, but this time it produces an interesting study in shades of gray. The color photo is reduced to near black-and-white with artistic effect.

Walking across the gravel beds I catch the attention of a Long-tailed Jaeger that judges me as an intruder on its territory, even though we are well beyond nesting season. With a screeching warning call, it arches its draconian black wings and beelines toward my head. I aim my camera in its direction and take of series of photos that become increasingly out of focus, but you get the idea nonetheless. I duck just before it makes contact. I don't know if it actually would have hit my head, but I am not taking chances. It attacks three more times before I am out of range.



Semipalmated Sandpiper



Spectacled Eiders



Pacific Loon family



Lapland Longspur eating seed capsules of Mountain Avens



Mechanic repairs our tire



Long-tailed Duck under gray skies



Long-tailed Jaeger



Attacking Long-tailed Jaeger

Day 15. July 20 PM – Deadhorse

(Bert) Deadhorse may be the end of the Dalton Highway, but it is not the end of the road, at least not if you are an oil field worker. Public traffic halts northwest of Lake Colleen at the West Security Gate and a bit past the oilfield hotel at the East Security Gate. The Arctic Ocean is not visible from any place in Deadhorse. However, there is a way around the roadblock and it is the Arctic Ocean tour we join this afternoon. Brandon, our bus driver and tour guide, is very knowledgeable of the oil field operation. He points out the row of small buildings, each surrounding a “Christmas Tree”, a pipe works that controls the flow of hot oil spurting from 8000 ft. below. I’m surprised at how closely spaced are the oil wells. Although we see dozens of oil wells, it is only a small fraction of the over 1000 wells here at the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field on the edge of the Arctic Ocean. Miles of insulated pipes carry the oil west to Pump Station #1 and from there it starts its journey south in the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. Curiously, the half-inch thick pipeline is made in Japan because of a special requirement for the type of steel.

Originally discovered in 1968 after decades of exploratory well drilling by the U.S. Navy and others, production began in 1977 following a massive effort to build a pipeline that could survive earthquakes, not damage the permafrost, nor hinder caribou migration. By October 2012 production surpassed the 12 billion barrel mark. Some 10,000 people, almost all men, work in the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field, although typically only 3000 at one time, the others rotating in and out and commuting by air to cities in south Alaska. The permanent population of Deadhorse is only 25-50 people.

Brandon drives for miles along smooth gravel roads connecting oil fields, interspersed with green marshes and sand dunes. The oil platforms are man-made gravel pads and pre-fabricated modules shipped to Deadhorse via barge. In the undeveloped areas we find ponds populated by

Pacific Loons, Tundra Swans, Long-tailed Ducks, and Glaucous Gulls. A pair of Red Foxes sleeps atop a grassy pingo.

We reach the Arctic Ocean and after Brandon carefully scans the landscape for Polar Bears and Grizzly Bears, we pile out of the bus and head to the shore. Off come shoes and socks for the adventurous. The rest of us photograph them standing ankle deep in the icy ocean. The water looks calm, but the sea breeze is biting. Some of us hustle to the end of the spit to get a closer view of hundreds of Long-tailed Ducks stretched out in two long strings drifting with the current.

Coincidentally, Brandon is a birder and we learn more about birdlife. We haven't seen a Snowy Owl as yet and Brandon says the lemming population crashed, hence the owls are scarce and we are unlikely to see one. Back in Deadhorse, he stops the bus for us to view a large mixed flock of Brant and Cackling Geese feeding in marsh grasses beside a pond. He stops again at the gray water runoff pond, right in front of a shorebird that he, nor anyone else on the bus, can identify. I'll save that story for my next blog.



Row of oil wells capped with boxlike buildings surrounding a Christmas Tree



Example of a Christmas Tree capping each oil well



Discarded oil pipe made in Japan



Exposed insulation that surrounds oil carrying pipes



Red Foxes napping on pingo



Tundra Goose and goslings



Arctic Ocean



Strings of Long-tailed Ducks in Arctic Ocean



Mixed flocks of Brant (foreground) and Cackling Geese (background)

Day 15. July 20 addendum – Mystery shorebird in Deadhorse

(Bert) The bus stops in perfect position for me to aim my long camera lens through an open window and take several shots of the mystery shorebird. I call it a mystery because no one on the bus could identify the bird and even after an hour studying my photos, I am still unsure of its identity. It is either a species or a plumage I have not seen before.

Although no other bird or other size comparison was nearby, I judge its size to be bigger than a “peep”, i.e., greater than 6 in., and probably in the size range 8-10 in. A key field mark is its leg color which is either yellow or yellow-orange depending on what effect the water color has on the submerged legs. For the rest of the story, examine my photos for yourself. I have narrowed my suspicions to three possibilities. One is an Alaskan bird with plumage I haven’t seen before, the second is a vagrant that I’ve seen in Australia, but not in Alaska, and the third is an Asian vagrant I’ve seen two days in Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. If you know what this is, e-mail me your identification and justification.









Day 16. July 21 – Deadhorse to Last Chance

(Bert) The sign outside Aurora Hotel reads 39° at 8:43 AM, a few degrees cooler than yesterday. The range during our Deadhorse stay has been 41-46°. After breakfast I refuel the RV with diesel at \$5.40/gal. and dump our gray and black water tanks, the last errand before leaving civilization and heading south on the Dalton Highway.

At the edge of town I stop to photograph a caribou at the Sag River. The rack on this caribou is simply enormous and I wonder how the animal can support so much extra weight on its head. We see only one caribou, but later I hear that our co-travelers watched a herd of five or six cross the river right in front of where we were camping. Barbara even recorded an excellent video of the event on her iPad.

A few minutes later I stop again, this time to photograph a family of Cackling Geese. These are the Taverner's subspecies, the largest of the Cackling Geese and about the same size as *parvipes*, the smallest of the Canada Geese. I focus my camera lens on the head, as the species differentiation is its roundness and the smaller size of the bill.

Today we enjoy the clearest skies since we arrived on the North Slope. Blue skies and warm sun make for excellent photos, so I reshoot the colorful Franklin Bluffs along Sag River. While at the pullout a pair of Parasitic Jaegers scares up a duck and then hover close to the tundra for several minutes. Are they searching for a breakfast of ducklings?

We arrive at Last Chance Wayside, our camping spot for tonight. We are well ahead of the rest of the group because Shari wants me to fillet the whole salmon she is preparing for everyone. With skill I forgot I had, I remove the bones from the four salmon, leaving eight long fillets

which Shari cuts into quarters. There will be plenty to eat tonight after Larry grills these over an open campfire.

Last Chance Wayside is built on a bluff with a view for many miles, especially on a day as clear as this one. A particularly dense stand of cottongrass is blowing in the wind, blurring the white fluffs for my camera lens. We scan the tundra for Snowy Owls, but find none.

Our 5 PM social has become a daily tradition and again we circle our lawn chairs, share snacks, and join in conversation. Gene and Anne relate their experience of driving a side road to the Sag River and finding the muskox herd. Jeff and Barbara talk about the caribou herd that came so close to them. Ron describes a Northern Harrier that he saw. Everyone has a wildlife story. We finish our short travel meeting, describing our plans for tomorrow and our hopes of camping at the top of Atigun Pass, weather permitting. Then the salmon bake begins and is followed by a sing-a-long. This time Bea joins Shari on ukulele. Barbara comments that the songs are sad, so instead we sing “There is a tavern in town” followed by a hilarious edition of “My Bonnie lies over the ocean.”



Caribou at Sag River



Taverner's Cackling Geese



Taverner's Cackling Goose



Franklin Bluffs in better lighting



Dennis and Becca hiking at Last Chance Wayside



Cottongrass blowing in the wind



Grilled salmon



Bea and Shari lead in sing-a-long

Day 17. July 22 – Brooks Range and Atigun Pass

(Bert) A rainy day might have made me anxious to leave the North Slope, though a bright sunny day like today makes me want to linger in this Arctic paradise. Every scene, every photo, every turn offers a grandeur, a texture, a wonder. In a city, one can see several blocks; in the country, one can see a half mile or so before the horizon cuts short, but here in the North Slope under flawless weather conditions, the beauty goes on and on and on.

We revisit Toolik Lake and again I set up my scope to search of Yellow-billed Loon, this time with the ability to see the far shore. No show on the first two passes. A researcher from the institute stops when he sees me scanning for birds and I ask him about the loons. He tells me the pair is raising two chicks, but we might need a canoe to find them. More spotting scopes come out of the RVs and the search continues. Then Becca exclaims she's got it. We line up behind her scope and then I align mine on the same distant shore. Right against the far shoreline we can see two adult Yellow-billed Loons and two chicks. Even though the distance is great, whenever the loon's large bill tilts toward the sun, we see a flash of yellow. The loons are dully plumaged, made even duller by distance. Their profiles and large size are good features though. We sometimes lose track of the adults as they frequently dive, but keeping the focus on the young means we will soon see the adults again as they bring in their fish catch to eager mouths.

I am distracted by a begging call coming from a willow hedge. It's a Hoary Redpoll feeding its chick and it is so preoccupied it does not mind me getting close for photos. We heard from the Toolik Lake researcher that Bluethroats did not nest at Toolik Lake this year, though he saw a Bluethroat several weeks ago near the highway about 2 mi. back. Although it's a long shot, Dennis, Becca, and Bea head back to try their luck. While we hike the tundra at Toolik Lake we keep in radio contact with Becca. After an hour they give up in their search but as they walk back to their RV they meet Gene and Anne who tell them they just saw Snowy Owl. That gets

all of us to head to the site. The owl is nowhere to be seen. Gene and Anne are excited to have been lucky enough to see it and, as it turns out, the only ones to see Snowy Owl on this trip.

The farther we penetrate into the Brooks Range, the more spectacular the scenery. Galbraith Lake is much more attractive than a week ago. We stop at Trevor Creek, ostensibly to look for Smith's Longspur. Instead, I chance about a female ptarmigan with a covey of precocious chicks. I take lots of photos. However, even after studying the photos I am uncertain as to whether it is a Rock Ptarmigan or a Willow Ptarmigan. By habitat and range, it could be either. For this late summer season, the guidebooks offer little help except one of them says the Rock's bill is a bit smaller than the Willow's.

Shari and I check out the Atigun Pass camping spot and radio to others, parked 5 mi. back along the highway, to proceed. I keep watch as they make the steep climb. Their RVs are so far away that they move like a morning thermometer as the sun rises. An hour later we are all in camp, parked haphazardly in an attempt to find a level parking spot with a view. And what a view we have! We have had some incredible campsites along the Dalton Highway and I'd judge this one as the most amazing because of its scenic beauty, its incredible height, and the arctic wildlife that surrounds us. At over 4000 ft. elevation so far north, we are the equivalent of over 10,000 ft. in the Colorado Rockies. It's only tundra and rock here. Notable among our bird finds are juvenile American Pipits, at least a half dozen Semipalmated Plovers, a Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, and a juvenile Northern Wheatear. Wheatear has a curious history. Firstly, it is its strange name, which derives from the Anglo-Saxon *hwit-oers*. It translates as "white ass" and refers to the bird's white rump, which is clearly visible when the bird takes flight. Secondly, is its migration path. Wheatears on this side of North America migrate west, cross the Bering Sea, join Siberian wheatears, fly south to Turkey and Syria, cross the Sinai desert and the Red Sea into the East Africa grasslands of Tanzania, an amazing 7000 mi. Their counterparts in eastern Canada fly an easterly route, crossing Baffin Bay to south Greenland, then Iceland and Great Britain, down the Iberian Peninsula to Gibraltar, then crossing the Sahara desert to the savannas of West Africa.



Adult Hoary Redpoll feeding a chick



Adult Hoary Redpoll



Galbraith Lake



Female ptarmigan: Willow or Rock?



Ptarmigan chick



View from Atigun Pass looking north. Barely visible are two RVs on the highway before making the climb.



Atigun Pass camping spot, looking south



Atigun Pass camping spot, looking north



American Pipit



Juvenile Northern Wheatear



Shadows on Brooks Range at 8 PM

Day 18. July 23 – South to Yukon River

(Bert) I notice many in our group are out early, taking advantage of the last chance to explore the Brooks Range at Atigun Pass. I hike along the Alaska Pipeline trail, hoping to spot the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch. Instead, I settle for one last photo of our extraordinary campsite set against the steep mountains. I find the now familiar pink River Beauty blossoms and am surprised to find a nearby garden of white flowers with pink ridges. It's the same species, but a rare color variety.

Shari is in the driver's seat again as she cautiously descends Atigun Pass in first gear. We are nearly to the bottom of the steepest part when I shout for her to stop. On the road in front of us two Gyrfalcons gyrate in a whirlpool dance. I radio to Bea and then discover I'm on the wrong channel. Fortunately, she pulls up beside us and I tell her about the Gyrfalcons. She sees them in the road and pulls ahead of me to watch. The Gyrfalcons fly again: one flies right, the other left, resting on a small hill. I take a burst of photos, catching the two in flight, then of the one flying right, even though it is far in front. This has been a good season for Gyrfalcons: an adult with two chicks on a nest, the same adult days later on a cliff perch, a heard-only Gyrfalcon last night, and now two together.

We stop at the airstrip at Chandalar Shelf. Dennis and Becca, who arrived earlier, tell me they just saw a Northern Shrike. I do not relocate the shrike, instead finding Say's Phoebe, Long-tailed Jaeger, and many juvenile sparrows that are a challenge to identify, but include at least White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrows. From Chandalar Shelf we descend once again and then follow several rivers draining from a series of mountain peaks, many without names. We are back in taiga country with valleys of spruce and mountainsides of barren rock.

We reach Coldfoot and a welcome fuel stop. We spend over an hour at the visitor's center there where the best feature is an NPR historical film on the Alaska pipeline, tracing the controversy over its proposed construction, the compromise eventually reached between the oil companies, environmentalists, and the federal government, followed by its phenomenal construction. Amazing is the hard work coupled with drugs, alcohol and sex, the punishing weather conditions, and the extremes of money thrown at the project—and that it finally succeeded in record time, but at a cost of \$8 billion.

It seems like a long haul today, made even longer by delays for wide loads. Three times we are pulled off the road and asked to wait up to a half hour for a wide load. I ask the escort driver where the loads are going and he says they are prefabricated buildings headed 100 mi. beyond Deadhorse. We reached the end of the road at Deadhorse, but these modules are turning west and following the oil field road bordering the Arctic Ocean another hundred miles. My mind spins—I wonder what that road is like and could I drive it someday?

We reach our evening destination and everyone unwinds at our social gathering. Again we relate our sightings: a moose and a calf, two moose, a Short-eared Owl, a Sandhill Crane with a juvenile, a Red-tailed Hawk chasing a Northern Harrier, a Horned Grebe with babies. Then discussion turns to the mishaps of the road: five pockmarked windows (probably all easily repaired), four flat tires (two on the Dalton, two on the Dempster, all repaired), two batteries (replaced in Deadhorse). We are hungry now, so we walk to Hot Spot Café for their delicious hamburgers and continue our discussions around the picnic table. It's been a good day.



River Beauty (rare color), Atigun Pass



One last view of our Atigun Pass campsite



Descending Atigun Pass



Gyrfalcon below Atigun Pass



Common Redpoll at Chandalar Shelf



White-crowned Sparrow (juvenile) at Chandalar Shelf



Ruth beside Dietrich River in the southern mountains of Brooks Range



South slope of Brooks Range



Prefabricated building headed for 100 mi. beyond Deadhorse

Day 19. July 24 – The last haul

(Bert) Someone fingered “Yes” in the mud on the rear window of Ruth’s RV. Yes, we made “Deadhorse or Bust.” What a trip! The Dalton Highway remains my number one favorite road in Alaska for scenic beauty, wild country, and sheer adventure.

Our farewell breakfast ... I feel awkward at farewells. I’d rather just say good-bye, see you later. Some of it is the happy reminiscing of good stories of the trip; some of it is the sadness of departing, the temporary end to good times together. Fortunately, many of the people on our caravans come back for a future trip, so we let the good times roll.

Finally the last of the group departs, leaving just Larry and Marlene, Shari and I. We will stay in contact along the return road to Fairbanks and camp at the same spot so that we can handle our paperwork. Most of the drive to Fairbanks is anticlimactic, though with a few surprises. The first surprise is the Black Bear in the middle of the road, inspecting a roadkill Red Squirrel. At first the bear doesn’t want to give up its position and turns in our direction to check our intentions. It hesitates, turns, walks, turns, and finally decides to leave the road as we pass by.

The second surprise comes while Shari is at the wheel. We hear a sudden noise—metal on gravel—coming from the rear of the RV. I yell, “Stop!” I jump out, walk to the rear, and see the exhaust pipe extension dangling from a hook near the bumper with the loose end aimed forward, pushing against the gravel. Shari backs up a few inches to release the pressure. Gene, who was following close behind, comes and together we inspect the damage. Really, nothing is damaged and I just have to put the extension back on the exhaust pipe. Gene already has his tools out, so I retighten the clamp that holds the two pieces together. Gene suggests we wire the exhaust pipe to the frame in case it comes apart again, but between us we can’t find any wire. Larry, to the

rescue, finds a coat hanger and finagles it around the pipe. This time we can't really call the problem road damage. Already back in Calgary when I took the Mercedes Sprinter in for its first checkup, the mechanic said he tightened the loose pipe connection, and in Dawson City Larry tightened it again. The fitting as delivered from the factory does not hold the two pieces together tightly enough. Of course, our shake-rattle-and-roll road added to the problem.

Finally, we finish the Dalton Highway and continue on the Elliott Highway. The smell of smoke has dissipated, but we can see the scorched forest along Elliott Highway. We find a campground in Fox where we will spend the night. In the evening Larry and Marlene join us for dinner at Gallo's, a favorite Mexican restaurant. But beforehand, Larry and I go to Auto Zone for a replacement exhaust pipe clamp. In the morning, off-duty Tailgunner Larry will put on the new clamp as well as a better safety clamp to replace the coat hanger.

Dinner is delicious while conversation drifts to the completed tours. On the one hand we are relieved of the responsibility; on the other hand we are already talking about future trips, perhaps traveling together again on a return trip to the Trans-Labrador Highway.



Deadhorse or bust! Yes!



Farwell breakfast



Young black bear checks us out



Stopped on the road



Larry's most familiar pose



Scorched forest along Elliott Highway



Before the car wash

Addendum – Mystery shorebird in Deadhorse

The votes are in ... envelope please ...

I received lots of opinions as to the identity of the “mystery bird” I photographed in Deadhorse. The serious contenders were Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Stilt Sandpiper. The three species have much in common, e.g., size (about 8.5”), leg color (yellow or yellow-

orange or yellow-green), bill length (about the same as head width), white supercilium, and feather coloring on the back and wings, all of which are noticeable in my photos.

When I saw the bird and when I examined the photos, I dismissed Stilt Sandpiper because the photo bird did not seem to have long enough legs or a long neck; it looked more like the shape and structure of Sharp-tailed and Pectoral. More on that later. I also did not give much credence to Pectoral Sandpiper because I've seen juveniles of that species in the far north and the black breast streaking is strong and obvious, unlike the weak streaking on the photo bird. So, I was leaning toward Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and particularly liked the way the breast coloring on photo bird seemed to match that of the NGS illustration of a juvenile. But I was not convinced for three reasons, firstly it would have been out of range, secondly, the photo bird had a dark crown whereas Sharp-tailed should have a rufous crown, and thirdly, the photo bird had a dark postocular spot that is inconsistent with Sharp-tailed. Without a field guide that included descriptions and drawings of juveniles, I was stuck.

Among the respondents were a few notable authorities: Dave Porter (an Alaskan birding guide), Dennis Paulson (author of *Shorebirds of North America*), Barbara Ribble (a well-traveled and much experienced birder from Texas), Dan Gibson (former curator of the bird collection at the University of Alaska Fairbanks), and Michael O'Brien (author of *The Shorebird Guide*).

All of these experienced birders suggested the photo bird was a juvenile Stilt Sandpiper. While I have often seen Stilt Sandpiper, to my knowledge I have never seen a juvenile, especially a freshly-plumaged juvenile. So, how did I miss the identification? Firstly, the shape and structure of photo bird is deceiving in that the long legs are obscured by deep water and the neck length is foreshortened by my camera lens being nearly above the bird's head. The pinkish wash on the breast is not shown or described in standard bird guides, but today when I visited my birder friends Kathy and Rick I was able to use the Internet for photos and also look at their copy of *The Shorebird Guide*, page 185, where it states "fresh juveniles show a pinkish buff wash on breast." In his e-mail, author Michael further commented, "Much fresher plumage than when we see them down here, so it looks a little darker and brighter."

This has been an interesting quiz and I am surprised how many readers passed the photos on to experts for opinions. You are welcome to do the same as there are not a lot of examples of this plumage in the books or on the web. One exception I found is the photo by Brian Avens on http://birdseye.photo/photos/review/2073/stilt_sandpiper/ where it shows a juvenile Stilt Sandpiper standing in water in much the same pose as mine.

... and the winner is juvenile Stilt Sandpiper.

