

Trip Log
Voyage # 1020
Birding the Kuril Islands
22nd June - 5th July 2010



Heritage Expeditions

53b Montreal Street, PO Box 7218, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Tel: +64 3 365 3500 / Fax: +64 3 365 1300

Freephone (within NZ): 0800 262 8873

info@heritage-expeditions.com / www.heritage-expeditions.com

June 23 - Korsakov and the La Perouse Strait

35 eager passengers arrived at the Port of Korsakov and boarded the Spirit of Enderby, our home for the next 2 weeks. Once aboard, we acquainted ourselves with the ship while we awaited for the last paperwork to be signed off by the Russian bureaucracy. Not long after we were off and heading into the La Perouse Strait. The weather was gloomy with fog and rather hard rain. Huge rafts of Short-tailed Shearwater struggled to take off as the ship sailed past them.

After an introduction and safety briefing, lunch, and a zodiac briefing the rain finally stopped and it became pleasant to spend time outside. The sun even tried (unsuccessfully) to peak through the clouds. Still, it was a very pleasant afternoon sailing through the calm seas off southern Sakhalin Island. Short-tailed Shearwater and Northern Fulmar made up the bulk of the birds that were seen, but numerous Fork-tailed Storm-petrels were also seen well, much to everyone's delight. Very small numbers of Rhinoceros Auklet, Ancient Murrelet, and Common Guillemot were logged along with our first Tufted Puffin. The highlight of the afternoon was a single Aleutian Tern perched on some floating kelp, however only a handful of people were able to set eyes on it as we sailed past. Marine mammals were regularly noted, primarily Northern Fur Seals and small groups of the speedy Dall's Porpoise, none of which seemed very interested in checking out the ship. A single Northern Minke Whale and a pair of Orca were seen by some, and a moderately large, dark shark passed right under the bow.

By late afternoon, it was time for a pre-dinner drink in the bar. Chefs Brad and Nicki served up their first of many excellent dinners and then we gathered again in the bar for a group bird list. Everyone was ready for an early night's sleep in eager anticipation of our first excursion in the Kuril Islands the following morning.

June 24 - Kurilsky Zapovednik – Kunashir Island

As day broke we were rounding the northern tip of Kunashir Island. The keen birders that were out early in the morning were rewarded with a good look at a young Short-tailed Albatross. The sea was covered in flocks of thousands upon thousands of Short-tailed Shearwater, a spectacular sight. Northern Fulmar were also extremely numerous, along with small numbers of Fork-tailed Storm-petrel and Black-legged Kittiwake. The weather was quite nasty as we made our approaches towards our landing at Kunashir Island; the numbers of Short-tailed Shearwater only increased as we came in closer to land. Here we also saw many Rhinoceros Auklet, a few subadult Pacific Divers, and at least 3 Minke Whale and a few Dall's Porpoise. A White-tailed Eagle flew out to the ship to greet us. A break in the weather even allowed us good views of the impressive Tyatya Volcano, at 1,819m/5,966'.

Finally it was time to board the zodiacs and head ashore, although conditions had improved it was still a tricky loading at the gangway with a swell running, followed by a nearly 2 mile run into the landing (with close Rhinoceros Auklets en route). Once ashore we were introduced to the ranger staff who would be our guides. A raft of Harlequin Duck, a single Harbour Seal and several White-tailed Eagles were scoped as we gathered into one large group for a walk into the forest. Due to concerns about Brown Bears, we had to stay in a single group for the walk. Along the coast we encountered Oriental Greenfinch, Siberian Stonechat, Long-tailed Rosefinch, Black-faced Bunting, Grey-bellied Bullfinch and for some the skulking Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler. Heading into the beautiful fir and birch forest we found things to be rather quiet, birds seen included Eurasian Cuckoo, Coal Tit, Goldcrest, Eurasian Nuthatch, Asian Brown Flycatcher and for a few Gray's Grasshopper Warbler and Japanese Bush Warbler. It was a very pleasant up to the river, where we stopped and scanned for some time watching White-tailed Eagle, Gray Wag-tail, Asian House Martin and Pacific Swifts. Our guides next took us along the river hacking a path through nearly head high vegetation. It was an adventurous walk and difficult to look for birds in the thick vegetation, although a few interesting birds were seen by some of the group: Crested Kingfisher, Great Spotted Woodpecker, and Narcissus Flycatcher.

Finally emerging from the forest back onto the beach we were greeted with nice looks at a large raft of Harlequin Duck and then returned to the landing site where a beach lunch was waiting for us. After refuelling we set off on our afternoon walk in the faint hopes of locating the legendary Blakiston's Fish Owl. It started to rain as we left the beach and we soon became thoroughly soaked. A Latham's Snipe seen and heard displaying in the rain was a highlight, and the vegetation-rich bear scat that was seen in numerous piles along the trail was a reminder that they were around. Eventually we arrived at an artificial nest box for the Fish Owl; the owl was unsurprisingly nowhere to be seen and in the rather heavy rain we decided to return to the beach. It was still raining as we returned to the ship, although the weather did clear as we pulled anchor and set sail for Iturup Island. Those who headed out on deck were treated to thousands more Short-tailed Shearwater, and great looks at Rhinoceros Auklet, along with another Minke Whale and a few Dall's Porpoise. As the weather soaked in again everyone retreated indoors to the warmth of the bar where we held a recap and a birdlist before having a well-earned dinner and heading to our beds.

June 25 - Redova Village and Baranskaya Volcano – Iturup Island

Over night the winds and swell picked up and the ship started to roll a surprising amount, causing many of us to lose a few hours sleep. At daybreak Rodney made the decision to abandon our Plan A and run for some shelter in Olga Bay. As we made our way, we observed the usual large numbers of Fulmar and Short-tailed Shearwater, plus good numbers of Crested Auklet and a few Rhinoceros. A few Dall's Porpoise would be the only marine mammals of the day.

After breakfast, we made a landing at the village of Redova and split into smaller groups to explore the area. Along the beach were many gulls – Slaty-backed, Black-tailed, Black-headed, and Black-legged Kittiwake plus a few Pelagic Cormorants. Black-backed Wagtails were numerous and a couple Sky Larks were also seen. Heading inland some scrub and low lying forest was quite productive – species seen included the beautiful and skulking Japanese Robin, Brown-headed Thrush, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Rubythroat, Common Cuckoo, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Oriental Greenfinch, Siberian Stonechat, Willow Tit, Coal Tit, and Latham's Snipe plus a Red Fox. Well pleased with a pleasant morning's birding we returned to the ship in lumpy conditions for dinner.

Refuelled, we headed back in to the landing site where we now boarded our Ural buses for an excursions into the highlands below Baranskaya volcano. The fog had set in and it was also windy by the time we arrived at the hot springs. Many people chose to have a soak in sulphurous hot springs, while the die-hards kept on birding in the difficult conditions, seeing Spotted Nutcracker, Eurasian Siskin and hearing Arctic Warbler.

Returning back down the mountains in our bumpy Urals, we made a stop in a foggy Kurilsk village. The fog cleared just long enough for most people to get good views of 4 Spectacled Guillemot and for some there was a nest of Chestnut-cheeked Starling.

The weather was improving as we returned to the ship in the early evening and everyone was ready for a big dinner. Following a glorious sunset and a birdlist, we headed in for bed in a calm sea.

June 26 - Novokurilskya Bay – Urup Island, Chirpoy Island, Broutona Island

The views were magnificent as we sailed off the western coast of Urup Island in bright sunshine; the snow-capped tops of the mountains gave way to lush forests. Birding was quite good as we made our way towards the northern end of the island. Black-footed Albatross was a surprise and we also recorded 2 Laysan Albatross. Other seabirds included Northern Fulmar, Short-tailed Shearwater, Brunnich's Guillemot, Ancient Murrelet, Crested Auklet and Tufted Puffin, plus our first Red-faced Cormorants. A few Dall's Porpoises and a pair of mighty Fin Whales were also logged.

Conditions looked promising as we made our way in to Novokurilskya Bay over breakfast and we were soon all heading to shore in the zodiacs. Along the coast were White-tailed Eagle and for a few our first enormous Steller's Sea Eagle. Slaty-backed Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Pelagic Cormorant and a few Harlequin Duck were offshore; while Skylarks filled the air with their song and Black-backed Wagtails flushed off the beach. Heading a little inland into the scrub produced Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Siberian Rubythroat, and Grey-bellied Bullfinch. A forested valley had several singing Japanese Robin although actually seeing them proved challenging; some eventually succeeded. The localised Grey Bunting was also seen by some. Other birds included Arctic Warbler, Japanese Bush Warbler, Brown-headed Thrush and Oriental Cuckoo. Some scanning along the coast produced 2 Sea Otter and both Harbour and Larga Seal. Eventually it was time to return to the ship for lunch as we set sail north.

It was a pleasant journey north towards Chirpoy with numerous sightings of Laysan Albatross, good numbers of Fork-tailed Storm-petrel and numerous alcids – a Long-billed Murrelet was seen briefly, along with Brunnich's Guillemot, Ancient Murrelet, many Crested Auklet, Rhinoceros Auklet and Tufted Puffin. The highlight of the crossing was Sperm Whale and a total of 18 of these gigantic mammals were noted, several of them fairly close.

Conditions looked quite pleasant as we approached Chirpoy Islands and Rodney found a haulout of several hundred Steller's Sea Lion. We opted not to do a zodiac cruise around the haulout for fear of spooking the animals, instead we carried on passing an enormous breeding colony of Northern Fulmars. With the bright sun shine hopes were high for a pleasant zodiac cruise at Chirpoy Island, but suddenly a rather fierce wind kicked up and we had to cancel our plans. So instead we headed for Broutona Island. Our first Whiskered Auklets were encountered en route and the fog cleared just in time to reveal an enormous breeding colony of Northern Fulmar wheeling in the sky, covering the water, and surrounding the boat – a great experience.

By now it was time for dinner, birdlist and bed as we sailed north into the central Kurils.

June 27 - Broutona Bay – Simushir Island and Yankicho Island

We encountered heavy fog as we approached Simushir Island. After breakfast, zodiacs were launched. As we were doing this a Black-footed Albatross showed extremely well as it circled the ship for several minutes, along with several Laysan. A *Phylloscopus* warbler also flew around the ship, lost in the fog. Once we finally got aboard the zodiacs we headed in for the opening of the caldera and inside Broutona Bay where we were greeted with a Peregrine.

It was an easy landing ashore at an abandoned cold war submarine base and we were able to spread out and explore the decaying station which was full of rusting artifacts. There was also the chance for a pleasant walk across to the cliffs and of course some birding on offer in the surrounding scrub. Arctic Warbler and Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler were particularly common at this location and other passerines seen included Skylark, Buff-bellied Pipit, Black-backed Wagtail, Rubythroat, Brown-headed Thrush, Black-faced Bunting, Oriental Greenfinch and Grey-bellied Bullfinch. Spotted Nutcrackers were particularly prominent as they perched out in the open on the abandoned buildings. Offshore were Pelagic Cormorant, Greater Scaup, Steller's Sea Lion and Harbour Seal. Some people saw

Arctic Fox and almost everyone saw their main prey item – the Tundra Vole, whose burrows covered many parts of the ground. The winds had increased quite a bit as we returned to the ship and due to the tide we had to run a few miles to reload onto the ship, but it was a rather pleasant ride.

Following lunch we set sail for Yankicho Island, with seabirding outside and Julia lecturing on early Far East Russian history inside. Numbers of alcids built as we approached this amazing island. As we neared the island we were delighted to see that there was no fog about and that conditions looked in fact ideal for our planned activities. We also had a great sighting of a pod of 7 Orcas logging right beside the ship.

It was now time to board the zodiacs and set off for Yankicho caldera. We approached our first bird cliffs that held plenty of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Brunnich's Guillemots along with much smaller numbers of Common Guillemots. As it was high tide we had no difficulty in getting the zodiacs inside the caldera, although at this hour of the afternoon the vast auklet colonies were empty. Numerous Arctic Foxes did patrol the colonies and were very tame giving us excellent views. We made a landing at some venting sulphur and had an hour ashore. Most people opted to walk over to the shoreline and look out to sea where the auklet spectacle was getting underway. Vast swarms of Crested Auklets were gathering on the water and swirling around an amazing sight to behold and as we knew, just the beginning of the spectacle. Returning to the zodiacs we were delayed by two exceptionally curious Arctic Foxes. Once back in the water we cruised over to the colonies where the auklets were not starting to land. The next hour and a half provided a spectacle that none of us will soon forget. Literally hundreds of thousands of Crested Auklets circled overhead and covered the boulders surrounding their breeding. The sight and sound of this can not be described adequately! Much smaller numbers of the stunning Whiskered Auklet also arrived and were seen swimming on the water and perched on the rocks. As the sun set the majority of the auklets suddenly vacated the sky and landed in their colonies and it was time for us to leave the caldera. Just outside the caldera were thousands of Whiskered Auklets, a few Parakeet Auklets and some playful Steller's Sea Lions. It was dark by the time we arrived at the ship for a well deserved dinner. What a day!

June 28 - Toporkoviy Island and Ekarma Island

We awoke to a stunningly beautiful morning as we approached Matua Island – now dormant after its major eruption the previous year and we were treated to clear views of the summit, a truly rare event! After breakfast it was back into the zodiacs for another mindblowing zodiac cruise along the shores of Toporkoviy Island. Crested Auklets were again the dominant species as tens of thousands of birds rafted on the water and circled the cliffs. This island is named after the Tufted Puffin and they did not disappoint with huge numbers sitting on the sea and on the cliffs. This cruise was also our first opportunity to get really close looks and photographs of Pigeon Guillemot which were quite common along the rocky coast. Other nesting seabirds here included Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake and Brunnich's Guillemot; a handful of Parakeet and Whiskered Auklets were also seen. Small groups of Harlequin Ducks cruised the coastline which was also patrolled by numerous Harbour Seals; while Red-faced Cormorant sat on some of the cliffs. The stunning views of Matua Island vied for our attention with the incredible number of birds.

We made a landing on this small island and we were able to stretch our legs. Walking was difficult as the Japanese had built so many trenches on this island, but the weather was stunning and it was good exercise. Few birds were seen, but those included Rubythroat, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Wren, and Reed Bunting. Several Arctic Skuas were seen and even a nest with two eggs was found, a surprising discovery for this island!

Returning to the ship we now set sail for Ekarma Island. Weather conditions were quite good although we did pass through some dense patches of fog at times. Laysan Albatross and Fork-tailed Storm-petrel were plentiful and we also recorded the first 2 Leach's Storm-petrels of the trip. 3 Sperm Whale gave good views and we also recorded 2 Northern Fur Seals and 5 Dall's Porpoise. Indoors Julia gave a lecture on the history of the Bering explorations of the Russian Far East.

Through gaps in the fog we could see dark smoke coming out of the cone of Ekarma; clearly the island was active at the moment. After dinner we launched the zodiacs for a cruise of the coast; conditions were extremely set in fog as we headed in for the island. With the help of the ship's radar we found our way to the coast and set off along the coast in thick fog. Tufted Puffins were covering the water and many more were sitting outside their breeding burrows, with a few Horned Puffins scattered in. Thousands of Fulmars circled over the cliffs above. A pair of Peregrines were screaming from the cliffs as they landed repeatedly at their nest site. We rounded the corner and suddenly the fog was gone, but there was a lot of wind so we decided to return to the ship. Eventually it loomed out of the fog and we made our way back, lingering to enjoy the stunningly beautiful evening light before heading back onboard.

June 29 - Onkotan Island and Atlasova Island

It was a short sleep with a 430 wakeup call as we headed ashore in overcast and chilly weather to land in Nemo Bay. After a straightforward landing and climbing up a steep river bank we were up on the tops admiring the stunted vegetation that covers this island – Siberian stone pine, dwarf birch, polar willow, yellow rhododendrons and stunning wildflowers. Most people opted to bash their way towards Black Lake; it was a bit of a tough slog but well worth it for the stunning views at lake. The lake itself had Greater Scaup and Goosander on it, while the meadows surrounding the lake had Wood Sandpiper, Buff-bellied Pipit, Brown-headed Thrush, Rubythroat, Middendorff's Grasshopper

Warbler, and Skylark. On the walk back we found an easy track to follow and this made the going much easier allowing us plenty of time to enjoy the wildflowers. A few people opted to explore a small valley close to the landing site and were rewarded with several Pine Grosbeaks, 2 Grey Bunting and a Red Fox. Near the landing site were also 2 immense Steller's Sea Eagles soaring around.

Everyone was content to return to the ship and have a big breakfast as we set sail northwards. Conditions were again quite pleasant if a bit chilly, and there was lots of wildlife about. In a short stretch we recorded approximately 30 Killer Whales and 3 Sperm Whales, one of which showed exceptionally well down the port side of the ship. Laysan Albatross were particularly numerous and other birds of interest included Fork-tailed Storm-petrel and Horned Puffin.

The weather remained excellent as we made preparations for our final landing in the Kurils – Atlasova. Once ashore here we spread out and explored this, the highest of all the Kuril Islands. Near the landing site was a colony of Red-faced Cormorants which allowed excellent viewing and photographic opportunities in the great light. In the kelp just offshore 7 Sea Otters were playing and quiet observation produced fantastic views! Small ponds just inshore held Greater Scaup and 3 much-appreciated Falcated Teal. 6 Long-toed Stint were flushed from tall grass and a migrant Red-necked Stint was also seen. The scrubby forest held Arctic Warbler, Rubythroat, Brown-headed Thrush, and Common Redpoll. There was plenty of time for exploring around some decaying building and a lighthouse and just to soak up the views and pleasant weather. Eventually, it was time to head back to the ship for dinner and the birdlist as we set sail north for the Kamchatka peninsula.

June 30 - Utashud Islands and the east Kamchatka Coast

Weather remained excellent and we awoke to clear blue skies and stunning views of the coastline and volcanoes of the Kamchatka peninsula. We came to anchor just off the Utashud Islands and were soon in the water and heading in for a zodiac cruise. Again many thousands of Tufted Puffin were to be seen on the water along with rafts of Common and Brunnich's Guillemots. Close to shore were Pigeon Guillemots and a big surprise was to find 2 Spectacled Guillemots amongst them, allowing great views for everyone! Both Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorants were breeding along the cliff and a few Harlequin Duck were tucked in close to shore. Overhead there was almost always one or two Steller's Sea Eagle flying over; we counted 8 for the morning. The mammals put on a great show, in particular the large numbers of Sea Otter, some of which were carefully guarding pups. Larga Seals were quite common with a lesser number of Harbour Seals as well. After our excellent morning's cruise it was time to return to the ship and head north.

The weather was absolutely beautiful as we sailed along the east coast of Kamchatka. Clear blue skies allowed great viewing of the numerous snow-capped volcanoes and the dramatic coastline. Calm waters allowed great viewing conditions and we could pick out small birds sat on the water, including several Ancient Murrelet and Red-necked and Grey Phalarope. Other seabirds recorded in good numbers included Laysan Albatross, Fork-tailed Storm-petrel, Common and Brunnich's Guillemot, Crested and Parakeet Auklet and Horned and Tufted Puffin. Late in the day 2 Aleutian Terns were seen by some sat on kelp. Marine mammals were prominent by their absence with only a few Dall's Porpoise and Northern Fur Seals observed.

Indoors, Melanie gave a much-enjoyed lecture on seabird ecology and Brad and Nicki served up their usual fantastic lunch and dinner. It was a very pleasant day to be sailing along the Kamchatka coastline!

July 1 - Zhupanova River and en route to Commander Islands

Yet another glorious day greeted us as we awoke on our final approaches to the anchorage off the Zhupanova River, high cloud, mild temperatures and no wind. Following an early breakfast and short briefing, we were all in the zodiacs for a lengthy morning excursion. We headed in through a small estuary and which then narrowed into the Zhupanova River. We followed upriver for more than two hours with beautiful riparian forest surrounding us on both sides, the impressive Zhupanovsky volcano showing well and the even more impressive Karamskaya volcano belching out clouds of black smoke in the distance. Waterfowl was quite abundant on the river and we saw large numbers of Red-throated Diver along with small numbers of Pacific Diver. Ducks were well represented and we saw Mallard, Pintail, Teal, Wigeon, Falcated Teal, Greater Scaup, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, Black Scoter, Stejneger's Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser and Smew. A few waders were also seen – Far Eastern Curlew, Dunlin, Long-toed Stint, Greenshank and Wood Sandpiper. A handful of Arctic Skua were seen along with good numbers of Kamchatka, Black-headed and Slaty-backed Gull and Common Tern. Passerines were more difficult to obtain good views of but we did observe *tshutschensis* Yellow Wagtail, Arctic Warbler, Willow Tit, many Carrion Crow, Rustic, Yellow-breasted and Reed Bunting, Greenfinch, Brambling and Rosefinch.

It was a great diversity of bird, but the main bird to see here is the impressive Steller's Sea Eagle, which nests in big birch trees along the river. We succeeded very well on this objective, observing a total of 9 birds perched in riverside trees, at least 2 pairs of which were near their enormous nests. Great views and photographs for all! As we drifted slowly back down river and entered the estuary, we were pleasantly surprised to find a group of 29 Aleutian Terns loafing on a sandbar, allowing extremely close views.

Now it was time to make a short landing at the fishing camp. The fresh salmon was delicious, although eating was interrupted by the trip's only Brown Bear being spotted. Some people were able to watch it for a few minutes, sadly it ran into the alders just seconds before the majority of the group was able to lock eyes on it.

It was time to move on, so we headed out to the river mouth where several Glaucous-winged Gull were loafing amongst the Slaty-backed. We tried a short zodiac cruise along the coast where we hoped to finally come to grips with the elusive Long-billed Murrelet, but no luck and with time running out we had to return to the ship and set sail for the Commanders.

After lunch Katya gave an excellent presentation on Sea Otters and after the lecture we were all out on decks to enjoy our first Red-legged Kittiwakes, some of which chose to roost on the ship while a young bird entertained us as it tried to bite the rapidly spinning anemometer! Conditions were pleasant and seabirding produced Leach's Storm-petrel amongst hundreds of Fork-taileds, along with both Grey and Red-necked Phalarope and the usual selection of alcids. Excitement was high as tomorrow would bring us the Commander Islands!

July 2 - Nikolskoye, Northwest Cape, Ariy Kaman – Bering Island

Before breakfast we crossed over the shelf off the west coast of Bering Island. It is usually quite productive for cetaceans and did not disappoint today, with our first Humpback of the trip, 2 Sperm Whales, an impressive pod of 30 Killer Whales and some Dall's Porpoise and Minke Whales. Conditions looked ideal as we headed in to the anchorage off Nikolskoye, the only village of the Commander Islands.

Following a briefing we were all ashore and had the morning to explore the village and its surroundings. Opinion varied whether this was a grim or interesting place, some of us would have happily stayed and lived here, others were quite happy to spend only a morning! Most people made it to the excellent museum, where the most interesting object is the skeleton of the now-extinct Steller's Sea Cow. The rest of the morning was spent wandering around the village or birding the surrounding wetlands and tundra. Good numbers of Glaucous-winged Gull and Dunlin could be found in the wetland, but the normally easy Rock Sandpiper was in quite low numbers, a handful along the coast and others at their nesting sites in the tundra. A few Mongolian Plover were also noted. Snow Bunting were remarkably inconspicuous, but Lapland Bunting were very common and showed well. Pechora Pipits displayed overhead and were seen well with a bit of perseverance. Some people saw the endemic Bering Island subspecies of Arctic Fox here.

With the brilliant weather holding we returned to the ship and all aboard as we sailed the short distance over lunch to Northwest Cape. It was an easier-than-hoped landing and then a short and pleasant walk to the blinds over the fur seal colony. Below us were huge numbers of Northern Fur Seal – according to the researchers 1,500 females and 500 males, along with their many pups. Out to sea were as many as 200 Sea Otter, and good numbers of massive Steller's Sea Lions were also on the beach, while some Harbour Seals were hauled out on the rocks. An unexpected Emperor Goose was a huge bonus to find on the rocks as well. We spent nearly an hour here soaking in the experience before returning the zodiacs and the promised wet with a capital W landing was now delivered!

Conditions were so fine that we decided to run the zodiacs straight across to Ariy Kaman, the impressive seabird colony. En route were some photogenic Parakeet Auklets and Horned Puffins and then the spectacle of Ariy Kaman was upon us! The cliffs were thronged with Common and Brunnich's Guillemots and Black-legged Kittiwakes, along with quite small numbers of Red-legged Kittiwakes. The light was excellent and photographic opportunities superb as we circled this small island. It was an amazing evening here and everyone was on a high as we returned to the ship for dinner and birdlist as we set sail for Medny Island. What a day!

July 3 - Preobrazhenskoye - Medny Island and at sea in the Commanders

Another early morning wakeup call for a landing on the stunning and rarely-visited Medny Island in the difficult to spell abandoned Aleut village/Russian border post. The weather was again absolutely perfect! The group spread out here and enjoyed some explorations around the old building and up the tundra slopes. Gray-crowned Rosy Finch was high on the birder's agenda and everyone did manage to get some views of these attractive finches around the buildings. Common Eiders were in the bay and up the river valley. Snow Buntings were to be found in much higher numbers than yesterday along with the usual Lapland Buntings and Pechora Pipit. On the slopes were numerous Rock Ptarmigan. Some of us could happily have spent a week or two here, but sadly it was time to leave and we boarded the zodiacs for the last time to head back to the ship and enjoy a well-earned breakfast.

As we set sail and rounded the north tip of Medny Island we encountered our first cetaceans of the day – Sperm Whale, Dall's Porpoise and Minke Whales. Even better was a Least Auklet perched on the water, one of a very respectable count of 12 made for the day. Thousands of Whiskered Auklet were also in this area. The crossing over to Bering Island was a pleasant one if relatively quiet from a wildlife perspective.

Over lunch we rounded the southern tip of Bering Island and the hoped-for concentrations of cetaceans were encountered. Just as everyone finished their lunches we sailed straight into a feeding concentration of approximately 50 Humpback Whales and spent the next half hour circling through them as they busily fed all around the ship, an amazing spectacle! As we continued north we sailed past more and more Humpbacks so that by day's end we

estimated 150 Humpback Whales, a remarkable number for this part of the world! We also found a pack of about 30 Killer Whales and then shortly after a small pod of 6 Baird's Beaked Whale, a specialty of this area. Shortly after we entered dense fog and after dropping off our ranger back home in Nikolskoye, set a course through the fog for Kamchatka. Yet another amazing day!

July 4 - At sea en route Kamchatka

The morning was a quiet one; pea soup fog outside and a ship full of tired travellers inside! Julia gave an extremely informative talk on the development of Siberian during the 19th and 20th centuries. After lunch there was more fog, accounts settlement and a trip recap with Rodney and the staff. The fog finally cleared outside allowing us to see a few birds and Dall's Porpoise (which meant that we had seen at least one cetacean every day of the trip!) There was an extended bar time and Brad and Nicki had a fantastic buffet lined up for our farewell dinner. After an extremely short birdlist, there was still time for a bit of seabirding and nice views of the Kamchatka coastline.

July 5 - Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky

We came alongside the wharf in PK, luggage was loaded onto the buses and we said our farewells. It was a journey of 1913 nautical miles, filled with wildlife, scenery, amazing weather, and seldom-visited islands. We hope you enjoyed your trip and look forward to the next one. Safe travels and happy birding!