

The Russian Far East - Birding the Kurils
From Yuzhno-Sakhalin to Petropavlovsk Kamchatskiy
17 to 30 June '09



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

Thursday, 18th June 2009

Departing Sakhalin and in the Sea of Okhotsk

Forty-two travellers converged on the wharf of Korsakov, Sakhalin in the early afternoon to board the vessel that would be our home for the next two weeks, the *Spirit of Enderby*. As we settled into our cabins, the ship slipped her moorings and we set a course southeast away from Sakhalin. A few Slaty-backed and Black-tailed Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes accompanied us as we departed, and numerous dark Northern Fulmars and huge flocks of Short-tailed Shearwaters were spotted once we had put a little bit of distance between us and land. Soon it was time for a quick lunch before heading back out on deck. Excitement was running very high as we began to encounter a variety of North Pacific seabirds.

We now began to spot our first alcids – occasional Common and Brunnich's Guillemot, Tufted and Horned Puffin, Ancient Murrelet and Rhinoceros and Crested Auklet and, for some, Spectacled Guillemot and Long-billed Murrelet. Our first cetaceans of the trip were Dall's Porpoise and over the course of the day we spotted a couple of small groups swiftly passing by, occasionally displaying their white flanks. We also saw a couple of Northern Fur Seals as they stuck their heads out of the water. Over the course of the afternoon we completed our introduction to the ship and staff as well as the safety briefing and lifeboat practice. The fog rolled in and out throughout the afternoon and before we knew it, it was time for dinner. In the evening we compiled the bird list and turned in, in eager anticipation of the next day.

Friday, 19th June 2009

Sea of Okhotsk and Kunashir Island

Much of the morning was foggy as we steamed towards Kunashir. Persistent sea-watching produced tens of thousands of Short-tailed Shearwaters as well as good numbers of Northern Fulmar and Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel. A couple of Sooty Shearwaters were also picked out amongst the masses of Short-tailed. The undisputed tubenose of the day was a young Short-tailed Albatross, which was seen by only two people during breakfast. Sadly it disappeared into the fog long before the breakfast-eaters had a chance to see it. Amongst the alcids we recorded good numbers of Rhinoceros Auklet and smaller numbers of Brunnich's, Common, and Spectacled Guillemot, and Tufted and Horned Puffin. During the morning we had a landing briefing and a briefing on zodiac operations.

As we enjoyed our lunch the ship moved into its anchoring position and the zodiacs were launched into the water. It was a long run to the landing beach but the distance was covered rather quickly and we were all enjoying setting foot on the beautiful Kunashir Nature Reserve. We were met by our local Russian guides, split into three groups and began exploring the island. Along the beach were stunning Long-tailed Rosefinch, Siberian Stonechat, Black-faced Bunting, Oriental Greenfinch, Brown Shrike and Siberian Rubythroat. White-tailed Eagles were in view for much of the time we were on the island, patrolling the waters and perching in the trees, perhaps 30 birds in all. The forests, composed primarily of birch and fir were strangely quiet, but patience produced a variety of forest species – Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Common and Oriental Cuckoo, Japanese Pygmy and Great Spotted Woodpecker, Coal and Long-tailed Tit, Eurasian Treecreeper, Eastern Crowned Warbler, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Common Crossbill, Narcissus Flycatcher and Eurasian Bullfinch. One group was fortunate enough to have a close encounter with a Brown Bear that growled rather menacingly and poked its head up just a few meters away from them! From the banks of the nearby river there was a very good view of Tyatya Volcano, 1,819m/5,966'.

Following our very enjoyable landing we returned to the ship and carried on towards Iturup Island. The coastal waters of Kunashir are extremely rich in marine life and we had some great sightings before dinner – a pair of Long-billed Murrelets was the bird highlight, but there were also numerous other species of alcids, and great looks at three Long-tailed and one Pomarine Skua. Red-throated and Pacific Diver, Common Tern were all seen as well, along with some more Dall's Porpoises and some co-operative Northern Minke Whales, 4 in all. We also saw couple of large sharks logging at the surface. Following dinner there was a briefing for tomorrow and the bird list.

Saturday, 20th June 2009

Kuril'sk "bus" trip & Tornaya Bay and Four Brothers, Iturup Island

The day started clear and calm, at anchor off Kuril'sk, the largest settlement on Iturup. At least three Long-billed Murrelets were scoped around the ship before breakfast and after breakfast we headed in to town, landed on the beach and boarded our "Ural" buses. Setting off on a rather rough truck which the Ural drivers easily navigated we passed through stunted birch and pine forests and arrived at some geothermal hot springs near Barinskya volcano. While some opted to soak in the pleasantly warm hot springs, most birded along the roadside, observing a handful of species – Eastern Buzzard, Great Spotted and Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Japanese Bush Warbler, Arctic Warbler and Siberian Rubythroat. A Japanese Robin sang frustratingly close, but skulked in the dense vegetation. Returning towards town, we made a stop in the stunted birch forest and spent another hour birding the forest. A few new species were recorded in this habitat – a few Eurasian Bullfinch, Wren, Grey Wagtail, a pair of Brown Dipper for some, and more heard only Japanese Robin.



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

One final stop produced a brilliant male Pine Grosbeak that disappeared quickly into dense foliage and Chris finally taped out a Japanese Robin, giving terrific looks for some. Before boarding the zodiacs back in the village, we made a brief search for Russet Sparrows in town, but failed to find them. On the coast were Grey-tailed Tattler, Common Tern and a variety of gulls – Black-tailed, Slaty-backed, Glaucous-winged, Glaucous, Black-headed and Black-legged Kittiwake.

Once back aboard we headed for the northern part of Iturup Island. Over lunch a group of Orcas were spotted, including a huge male that repeatedly slapped its tail on the water. Shortly after lunch a second group of Orca was spotted close in to shore which included a very small calf lying on its back and being nudged along by its mother. We saw a handful of tubenoses and alcids including Short-tailed Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, Leach's Storm-Petrel, Common and Brunnich's Guillemots, Rhinoceros Auklet and Tufted Puffin. As we neared our afternoon's anchorage we saw a sizeable flock of Crested Auklets zip past and had another rush of marine mammal sightings. We saw our third group of Orcas and these provided the best views of all; one individual breached and others slapped their flippers and tails on the water. They allowed a remarkably close approach. Our Orca sighting was followed by a rather distant Sperm Whale and a close Minke Whale.

Once we had settled into our anchoring position we were quickly shuttled ashore and soon spotted two different but distant Brown Bears on the hillside. We split up into smaller groups and explored the surrounding area. Some got much closer views of one bear and birds seen included Brown-headed Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Buff-bellied Pipit, Oriental Greenfinch and a Hawfinch. Flowers were much in evidence including a pink lady's slipper, a beautiful purple orchid and some anemones. Returning to the ship it was now almost getting dark and it was time for a late dinner, bird list and bed!

Sunday, 21st June 2009

Roadstead Open & Novokurilskaya Bay, Urup Island

We awoke to another wonderfully clear, calm day off Urup Island. After breakfast we were ferried ashore for an expedition landing at a small bay on the western coast of the island. It had the bizarre name of Roadstead Open! We split into groups and birded the shoreline and inland into a moderate sized freshwater lake. Common birds in the grassland habitat included Oriental Turtle Dove, Common Cuckoo, Black-faced Bunting, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Sky Lark, Buff-bellied Pipit, Brown-headed Thrush and the by now ubiquitous rubythroat. A few White-tailed Eagles and Large-billed Crows cruised over the lake which also held Tufted Duck and Black-tailed Gull. Patches of scrub held Eurasian Bullfinch, Long-tailed Rosefinch, Oriental Greenfinch and, for some, Nutcracker. The weather was extremely pleasant and we all enjoyed our stroll and the wildflowers which were blooming in profusion – anemones, buttercups, roses, and orchids.

Returning to the ship for lunch we then cruised towards our afternoon's landing at the northern end of Urup Island. Foggy conditions prevailed, but in between the fog banks there was a chance for some birding – Northern Fulmar, a handful of Short-tailed Shearwater, Common and Pigeon Guillemots, Crested Auklet and Horned and Tufted Puffin. Several Sperm Whales were seen logging on the surface and a couple Dall's Porpoise zipped by.

The fantastic conditions held for us as we made our way to shore for a landing at Novokurilskaya Bay. Along the shoreline were White-tailed Eagle, a couple of Harlequin Duck, Goosander and some Japanese Cormorants. Two Sea Otters were scoped as they fed in offshore kelp beds. Inland there was some scrubby birch/alder forest and a small abandoned Russian settlement. More Nutcrackers were here along with good numbers of Eurasian Bullfinch, Oriental Greenfinch, Black-faced Bunting, Arctic Warbler, Rubythroat, Japanese Bush Warbler, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler and a pair of Oriental Cuckoos. Both Latham's Snipe and Woodcock were seen flying through the clearing. Japanese Robins sang from dense foliage but never did show themselves despite several hours of patient waiting from some folks. A Grey Bunting was equally skulking. Despite these frustrating songsters, it was another fantastic landing in sunny conditions and a last chance to enjoy the forested southern Kuril Islands. Returning to the ship for dinner we set sail for Simushir Island. Just after dinner the first Laysan Albatross of the trip showed itself briefly in the fog and we finished off the day with the usual bird list in the bar.

Monday, 22nd June 2009

Simushir Island and Yankicha Island

The day dawned for us adrift off Simushir Island with yet again clear and calm conditions. After breakfast we boarded the zodiacs as the ship drifted with the current and headed in for shore. Passing through the 80 meter deep entrance to the caldera on the north-eastern tip of Simushir Island we made the short run into the shore and the abandoned submarine base. A couple of curious Steller's Sea Lions came in to investigate the zodiacs as we made our way up into the abandoned village and surrounding birch/alder forest to explore its birdlife.

The leaves were still not out on the birches and birdlife was noticeably less than it had been on previous islands. Nonetheless there were several species of passerines recorded – Arctic Warbler, Brown-headed Thrush, rubythroat, Middendorff's



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

Grasshopper Warbler and Sky Lark. Some people saw the sought-after Pine Grosbeaks and Gray Bunting. A Nutcracker appeared to have a nest in one of the abandoned buildings and was watched entering and exiting the building. The most unusual bird on the island was a Cattle Egret; this vagrant is apparently the first record for the central Kurils. A curious Red Fox was seen by some and patient waiting outside the many holes that betrayed the presence of Tundra Voles produced fine views of these little creatures scurrying about. The weather remained fantastic and we enjoyed the variety of flowers – buttercups, anemones, orchids, poppies and others. The hastily abandoned buildings and scattered electronic equipment made for a weird experience.

Returning to the ship before lunch we set sail and headed north. Once again it was heavily foggy but most of us were out sea-watching anyway. We saw quite a few Laysan Albatross, the usual large numbers of Short-tailed Shearwater and Fulmars, a single Leach's and several Fork-tailed Storm-petrels and a few alcids. They built in numbers as we neared Yankicha Island, with thousands of auklets passing under the bow in the dense fog. Dall's Porpoise were once again cooperative and singles of both Sperm and Northern Minke Whale were spotted.

The dense fog had not lifted as we set anchor and prepared for our excursion at Yankicha Island. The seas were confused as the tide and wind stirred up the water. After an initial bouncy ride we were in the lee of the island and could cruise along the coast in relative comfort. Several Northern Fur Seals bobbed in the water with a few hauled-out on the rocks. The *snowii* Pigeon Guillemots were fairly numerous close inshore showing their mostly black wings. A few Common and much larger numbers of Brunnich's Guillemots were also swimming in the water along with numerous Tufted and the odd Horned Puffin. The vast majority of the alcids were auklets and large flocks of Crested were seen. Closer in shore were small groups of the beautifully patterned Whiskered Auklet, which performed well for the zodiacs. Very small numbers of Parakeet Auklet were also picked out amongst the Crested.

Cruising along the cliffs we passed huge breeding colonies of Kittiwakes and Brunnich's Guillemots and Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorants on the rocks. In dense fog we passed into the caldera and cruised along its edge, finding three different Arctic Foxes, an introduced species here. During a brief landing we could explore some geothermal springs and watch a Peregrine Falcon fly over. Whooshes of wings betrayed the presence of auklets flying in and out of their scree nesting slopes. As we headed back to the ship in dense fog we passed through strong currents and strong winds, a bumpy ride back. The ride was also enlivened by the spectacle of tens of thousands of Crested Auklets (and small numbers of other alcids) rafting on the water as they prepared to visit their nesting burrows or flying round in huge numbers.

On account of the rough conditions, we decided to forego an evening zodiac cruise and set sail north, enjoying dinner and the bird list as it became dark.

Tuesday, 23rd June 2009

Matua Island and Ekarma Island

We approached Matua Island in the darkness. The previous week, the Heritage trip to this island had witnessed an impressive volcanic eruption, so we were all quite eager to see what would be in store for us this morning. Frustratingly, the persistent Kuril Island fog shrouded the entire island and kept it totally out of our view. We stayed in the vicinity of Matua for a few hours but the fog just did not lift and we had to sail on without ever sighting the island. Conditions remained 'pea soup' as we sailed north towards Ekarma Island. The hardy sea-watchers remained outside and recorded Laysan Albatross, Short-tailed Shearwater, Northern Fulmar, good numbers of Leach's and a few Fork-tailed Storm-petrel. Indoors Adam gave a talk on seals of the region and Robin opened the shop. Just before lunch, the dedicated sea-watcher's persistence paid off as a sub-adult Short-tailed Albatross was spotted on the water. Our captain manoeuvred the ship in an attempt to relocate the bird but this proved an impossible task in the dense fog.

Following lunch, as we neared Ekarma, the dense fog suddenly lifted and we were treated to an incredible spectacle of tens of thousands of seabirds surrounding the ship. The bulk of the birds were Northern Fulmars, Crested Auklets (tens of thousands!) and Tufted Puffins, but there were numerous other species as well and some Killer Whales put on a fabulous show, swimming right past the ship and slapping their tails on the water. A pair of these whales was even observed mating! Northern Minke Whale and Dall's Porpoise also swam by, albeit more briefly. The weather had cleared and conditions were calm, so we grabbed the opportunity for a zodiac cruise around Ekarma. As the ship slowed down, a huge mob of thousands of Fulmars gathered in the wake. Suddenly a sub-adult Short-tailed Albatross was spotted just a few meters off the stern and finally virtually everyone could come to grips with this much sought-after species. A Laysan Albatross also joined the growing horde of birds and offered fantastic looks.

It would be hard to top this spectacle, but the leisurely zodiac cruise in beautiful sunny weather amongst breeding and feeding Fulmars and Tufted Puffins was most enjoyable. We also had opportunities for great looks at three species of guillemots – Common, Brunnich's and Pigeon, the latter species here of the distinctive *snowii* race. Along the cliffs were a few nests of Red-faced Cormorants and single Northern Fur Seals and Harbour Seals patrolled the waters below. A



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

single Vega Gull was picked out amongst the numerous Slaty-backed Gulls. Just before heading back to the ship a pair of Peregrines were observed perched on the top of the sea cliff. We returned to the ship to be greeted by the Fulmar mob and remained drifting slowly as we ate dinner. Following dinner we spent the last hour of daylight watching the thousands of seabirds all around and went to bed ready for an early start.

Wednesday, 24th June 2009

Onekotan Island and Krasheninnikova Bay, Paramushir Island

We awoke for an early breakfast with a howling wind and frothy seas. It was obvious that our planned landing on Onekotan Island would have to be cancelled and we sailed north for some shelter on the west coast of Paramushir Island. Indoors we had a presentation by Yuriy on the Kamchatka peninsula and he showed us many of the fabulous photographs he has taken there over the years. Outside, in the Fourth Kuril Strait, it was again mainly foggy with choppy seas, but through the mists we did record Fulmars, Laysan Albatross, Short-tailed Shearwater and Leach's and many Fork-tailed Storm-petrels. The weather had cleared but the wind was still strong as we passed the southern tip of Paramushir Island. Alaid volcano, the largest volcano on the Kurils showed well and even the Kamchatka peninsula could be seen in the distance. Two groups of Killer Whales and numerous seabirds were present around the ship as we tucked into a sheltered bay on the west coast under the smoking cone of an active volcano.

Following lunch it was a relatively quick and smooth ride to our landing beach in Krasheninnikov Bay, although it took a little while to find a landing spot. Then we had several hours to explore the coastline and surrounding alder scrub. Rhododendrons, harebells, wild strawberries, and orchids were amongst the prolific wildflowers recorded, while birding was slow but steady – the usual rubythroats, Brown-headed Thrush, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Arctic Warbler, Buff-bellied Pipit and Black-backed Wagtail. Single Rough-legged Buzzard and Long-toed Stint were seen by some. Offshore, a large raft of Black Scoter was joined by smaller numbers of White-winged Scoter and numerous Pelagic and Red-faced Cormorants were feeding out there as well. Four Slavonian Grebes and a large flock of Harlequin Duck were also observed offshore. A distant Brown Bear was spotted feeding quietly on a hillside and provided decent views through the scope. The wind had picked up as we left the landing site and became very strong as we left the lee of Paramushir and sailed north. After dinner and bird list we turned in, sailing through a rather lumpy sea.

Thursday, 25th June 2009

Kamchatka, *Russkaya Bay*

During this morning's talk on North Pacific Whales and Dolphins there was a startling revelation from Adam. After talking in detail about the great variety of species here he explained that there were so many whales in the area that we were sailing through that what we could see outside was not thick fog at all but the spray from a multitude of spouting whales.

After checking out conditions very early this morning Nathan realised that our hoped-for excursion would have to be cancelled. Instead, we sailed on to *Russkaya Bay*, no doubt named after that famous maritime Kiwi family. Upon arrival there was great excitement when, first land and then Steller's Sea Eagles were spotted. A bird on a cliff was perched very close to a bird on a huge nest, which from its size looked to be made not of sticks but of tree trunks! The border guards were very keen to check us out so the formalities took a little longer than expected. "Niet pictures!" cried one of them, "Niet telescopes!" cried another, not wanting to be outdone. Ja-ja-ja. Anyway, on our way down the fjord we went very close to a flock of rafting otters – over 30 of them. All were on their backs and their pale heads showed up very well. Another species of interest was Kittlitz's Murrelet, two of which were seen very close to the ship.

Once in the zodiacs we were off towards the head of the fjord, which turned out to be very shallow. Undaunted, our heroic zodiac drivers plunged into the icy-ish waters to drag us all the last few yards to the sandy beach. The landscape was very impressive: a long, sandy beach, fjord waters, a river estuary, a gushing stream, grassland interspersed with beds of yellow, lupin-like flowers, much scrub, hills going up into the low cloud and many patches of snow. Our walk allowed us views of two more eagles, perched in a distant tree, as well as a variety of other species.

Pressing further up the valley we passed through scrub, alder swamp and had to cross streams. Being the afternoon there were not too many birds in evidence but there was still a nice selection: a very obliging Lanceolated Warbler, plenty of Yellow Wagtails, a singing Rustic Bunting, Brambling, snipe and Oriental Greenfinch. There were thousands of other winged creatures too; they were pleased to see us but we were not enthralled by them – mosquitoes. No surprise then that we didn't need to be encouraged to return to the beach! Once underway on the ship the cliff eagles were seen again and shortly before dinner a number of Dall's Porpoises showed up. One even rode the pressure wave at the bow for several minutes, giving most of us our best view so far of this frequently fast-swimming species. Finishing off the day, after dinner, was yet another immature Short-tailed Albatross. Time for bed, said Zebedee.



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

Friday, 26th June 2009

Zodiac cruising on the Zhupanova River & en route to the Commander Islands

Stars in the sky, moons of Jupiter, two satellites, an orange flush on the eastern horizon and a massive, conical volcano greeted the eyes of the very, very, very early birds today. The first four things soon disappeared from sight but the volcano stayed in view until dinnertime. It was Kronotskaya Mountain, 3,528m or a staggering 11,571 feet high and it was just one of several volcanoes in view; one of them was smoking quietly away.

On the way from the ship to the small fishing community at the mouth of the river one of the boats struck an underwater object and was retired injured to the ship. Those aboard were re-distributed and we continued just beyond the fierce, estuarial current to pick up our local guide. Acting as our pilot he steered us carefully up the, at times, very shallow waterway. Once we were away from the settlement the riverside scrub grew in height until we were cruising past trees. The leaves were still fresh so the colours were rich and vibrant in the strong morning sunshine. Gulls and terns were soon forgotten when an immature Steller's Sea Eagle hove into view on the near bank. It allowed a very close approach so we were able to get some idea of just how big these birds really are – massive! Later on a number of very impressive-looking adults were encountered but they didn't allow us to get very close to them. At one point the boats passed very close to a nest beside the water but the adult occupant was sitting so tight that it was very difficult to see. However, this species was certainly a trip highlight.

Other birds were more difficult to see and were mainly of the small variety: Oriental Greenfinch, Common Rosefinch, Yellow Wagtail, Rustic Bunting, Willow Tit and Wood Sandpiper. Waterfowl were represented by two or more species of diver plus Mallard, Teal, Pintail, Red-breasted Merganser, Great Scaup and Common Goldeneye. No land mammals were seen but in one place a group of 40 Larcha Seals was basking in the sun on a sand bar. Ahead of us hills and volcanoes beckoned but, all too soon, it was time to turn around and head for our welcome from the locals. There are approximately 50 people in the area in the summer but the person who draws the short straw gets to spend winter there on their own! Whilst one half of us went off to look at 40 Far Eastern Curlews and a single Long-toed Stint, the rest enjoyed fresh salmon and cod, tea and biscuits. After switching around it was back into the boats for the return trip to the ship. The local dogs were so excited by our visit that one of them even jumped into a zodiac as it was being pushed into the water and another followed us along the shoreline.

Our next destination, the Commander Islands, was described late in the afternoon during a presentation by Yuri. Then Nathan outlined "Plan A" for our time there. Shortly afterwards a close Sperm Whale was seen off the port side, wrinkled skin and all and a Long-tailed Skua was a very nice bird to see. At around the same time the two chums, Adam & Chris, went out onto the stern to do some chumming together (n.b. nothing like the gamming that courting albatrosses indulge in). Chris took care of the fish chum whilst Adam took care of the vegetarian chum, sneakily eating only a little of it in preparation for his forthcoming four-month trip to Africa. It wasn't long before we gathered curiously around to watch this spectacle whilst customers gathered in the wake. There were 2-300 fulmars there but the best bird was a single, close Laysan Albatross. It was a very worthwhile session so Adam & Chris remained the best of chums for the rest of the day. Hooray!

27th June 2009 (Derek's Birthday!)

Bering Island, Commander Islands

The lists were out early today and ticks were added; even though it was foggy and before breakfast, Mottled Petrel and Red-legged Kittiwake were seen. The approach to Nikol'skoye was also notable for Pomarine Skua, Fork-tailed Storm-petrel and Laysan Albatross. Once we were at anchor the swell caused a short delay but conditions were deemed safe so off we went! The fog-shrouded derelict machinery and buildings did not seem to bode well but just along the beach from our landing site were otters, Glaucous-winged Gulls, Rock Sandpipers and, best of all, breeding-plumaged Lesser Sand Plovers. Further along and also in breeding plumage, was a flock of Dunlin and a single Bar-tailed Godwit. Pressing on into the marshy grassland, we found ourselves in the haunt of Pechora Pipit and Lapland Bunting and back in the village Snow Bunting, Tree Sparrow and Grey-crowned Rosy Finch were noted.

The museum's collection was surprisingly varied and was notable for the skeleton of Steller's Sea Cow. This rare species was wiped out very soon after being discovered and all that remains are the bones. There were also artifacts and information about Vitus Bering, who was shipwrecked here and died on the island. Steller, his expedition naturalist, survived to tell the tale.

Not many of us made it up onto the plateau above the landing beach but here was a stark, modern-day reminder about how wildlife used to be exploited. Row upon row of derelict wooden buildings lay testament to the trade in fox furs. Each small wire mesh cage would have housed one of these animals and a conservative estimate of 20,000 or more cages was made. And this was just *one* fox farm. A lot more uplifting was the sight of a few Red-legged Kittiwakes on rocks near the zodiacs; spotted as we returned to the ship. Just as Chris aimed his bazooka at them they flew off.



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

The swell made it impossible to attempt another landing on the west side of the island so we headed southeast down the coast en route to Medny Island. By now the fog was clearing and there were even occasional patches of blue sky and sunshine. The edge of the continental shelf was only a couple of miles offshore and our course took us along it – would we see any whales? Well, after 1 hour there was no sign at all. Then, all of a sudden there were Killer Whales! Out of a pod of eight animals there were at least two males and a female with a calf. Just minutes later a group of eight more whales with a low, bushy spout turned out to be not Baird's Beaked Whales, nor Baird's Beached Whales but the even rarer Baird's Baked Whales, according to one pundit. I supposed if we had seen them just a little further to the east, at the end of the Aleutian Island chain, they would have been Baked Alaska Whales, boom-boom!

Four minutes later there were yet more whales – four more Baird's, nine killers and two Sperm, at least one of which was seen to fluke. Five more Baird's at 17.24 were quickly followed by a sporty Humpback Whale. At first it was breaching, then it slapped its tail on the water then it generally played around, seemingly for our benefit. Although we turned the ship the whale disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. The final whales of the day came at 18.36 when the closest Baird's yet (two of them) surfaced just ahead of the ship. The birds weren't overlooked while all this was going on and the most notable were Laysan Albatross, Red-legged Kittiwake, Mottled Petrel and two Horned Puffins that flew round the ship several times.

The afternoon was unplanned but turned out to be wildly exciting, just as expedition cruising often seems to be. At 19.15 we entered a fog bank so those still out on deck soon found their way to the bar. Since it was still his birthday and he had seen not only a new bird but also a new whale, Derek offered everyone attending the wildlife list a free drink. Has anyone seen Derek? Derek?! Those out looking for him saw instead the peaks at the northern end of Medny rising above a bank of fog.

28th June 2009

Medny Island, Commander Islands: Gladkovskaya Bay & Cape Matveya Zodiac cruise

Fog again! The ship was at anchor when we awoke and we had a few birds around us, including a single Pechora Pipit. After a very early meal we were off! The run to shore was a long one through the mangrove but once on the sandy beach we were able to go off exploring. However, it took a long time to get going, due to the close and singing Pechora Pipit, the close male & female rosy finches and the close Arctic Fox, which had a den under one of the small, wooden buildings. Once we had all gone through the area fox came out again onto the pile of concrete blocks, where it ate something – hopefully nutritious.

The tidal lagoon here has some very interesting invertebrate life, apparently but birds were of greater interest this morning. On the way to the beach a few Common Eider were noted and there were more on the lagoon. Anyone who ventured “off-piste” and went up the slopes was in for a treat. The whole area was carpeted with very soft, spongy vegetation; home for many flowers such as orchids and Yellow Rhododendron. There wasn't a lot of time to go far but in a relatively small area more rosy finches, more confiding Pechoras and numerous Lapland Buntings were discovered. Luckily the fog lifted a little to give us a clue about the landscape here but it had drenched the vegetation.

After a very quick lunch, which was more like a brunch, we set off again on our last excursion of the voyage. The ship had moved up towards Cape Matveya, at the northern end of the island and on the way three Least Auklets were spotted. Making the most of a flat calm sea we dropped the boats to explore the coastline. Heading for some rock stacks, we were confronted by lots of things of interest. Even though the cloud was very low, the visible landscape was very dramatic, with heavily-vegetated slopes, cliffs, caves, beaches, kelp-covered rocks and bare, sulphurous-looking slopes.

Wildlife was in abundance and a good way to observe it was to stop the boats so that we could sit *quietly* and watch and listen. The first things to excite us were small groups of chattering Parakeet Auklets, which allowed a fairly close approach. For many of us, the views were our first of this species. Relatives included both Tufted and Horned Puffin, some of which also allowed a very close approach. Numerous cormorants dotted the cliffs and they too were remarkably tolerant of us. Pigeon Guillemots were fewer in number but were even tamer! A small group of Harbour Seals was very confiding and after some time they started to come closer and closer to one of the boats. At the same time several otters were in sight and a Steller's sea lion popped up briefly. The most unexpected sighting was not one but two male rosy finches on the seaward side of the rocks. Much further on there were some small rocks sticking out of the water (Nathan apparently found some that weren't quite so easy to see) and here we photographed several Red-legged Kittiwakes and watched some Harlequin Ducks fly by. A big male sea lion also appeared and stayed around for long enough for a couple of boats to get a good look at him.

All too soon it was time to drag ourselves away from the riches of the shore and head back towards the ship. Lunch seemed hours ago but we still had five hours to go until dinner – time for some more sea-watching. The middle part of the



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

