

# Birding in the Russian Far East

An introduction by Chris Collins

## Introduction

Despite the attractions of many Siberian specialities and spectacular concentrations of seabirds, very few western birders visit Far Eastern Russia, as with only a few isolated towns and a limited infrastructure, travelling overland around this region is extremely challenging. Indeed, the vastness of the country creates its own difficulties with the eastern coastline, for example, being longer than the distance from London to Los Angeles !!

As a result, the best option for exploring the Russian Far East is to travel on a ship and in recent years a small number of specialist 'expedition companies' have brought their own vessels to the region offering dedicated trips. With knowledge of the birds and wildlife increasing year-on-year, it is now possible to see many of the specialities on their breeding grounds including Steller's Sea-Eagle, Spoon-billed Sandpiper and Whiskered Auklet.

Whilst there are a few trips which cover the entire coastline from Anadyr, which sits just south of the Arctic Circle, to the Kuril Islands which end just north of Japan, generally these are not at the peak of the breeding season and in late May-mid July, most voyages only cover a part of this route. In 2012, for example, I am aware of three dedicated bird and wildlife itineraries which will allow birders to explore (1) the Kuril Islands, Kamchatka and the Commander Islands, (2) the Sea of Okhotsk and (3) Kamchatka, the Commander Islands and Chukotka coastline. Nevertheless, it is still possible to see an excellent range of species and this article describes some of the birds and wildlife I have been fortunate enough to see on several expeditions to this region.

## Kuril Islands

The most southerly point of Kunashir Island is only 10 miles off the coast of Japan and the Kuril chain then stretches 700 miles to the north eventually ending at the southern end of the Kamchatka Peninsula. The 32 islands have 'changed hands' between Russia and Japan on a number of occasions over the centuries, but at the end of the Second World War, the entire archipelago was annexed by the Soviet regime and despite ongoing protests by the Japanese, this still remains the case.

Formed by the meeting of the Pacific and North American tectonic plates, many of the islands are volcanic, although they also act as a natural barrier between the cold waters of the Sea of Okhotsk and the relatively warm Pacific Ocean. The conditions which arise from the mixing of the two water bodies produce perfect conditions for plankton and fish and this in turn means there are some incredible concentrations of auks and other seabirds with thirteen species of alcids breeding on the islands.

Whilst Tufted Puffin is common throughout the archipelago and hundreds are typically seen on a daily basis, others such as Whiskered Auklet are a lot more localised with this species, for example, generally only seen in the Central Kuril Islands.

The concentration of these birds can, however, be truly phenomenal and it is thought that on the small island of Yankicho, which is only a couple of miles across, there are hundreds of thousands, if

not millions of breeding Auklets. Cruising towards this island can be an incredible experience with individual flocks sometimes numbering tens of thousands of birds. As dusk approaches, however, the spectacle is surely one of the world's most impressive birding experiences as thousands of Crested and Whiskered Auklets per minute fly ashore, heading for their burrows.

During a typical voyage through the region, it is usually possible to see three subspecies of the reasonably widespread Pigeon Guillemot, however, there have been recent suggestions (eg Brazil: Birds of East Asia) that the endemic form in the Kuril Islands, *snowi*, should be treated as a full species, the Kuril Guillemot. These lack the prominent white wing patches on all the other subspecies of Pigeon Guillemot and typically have black wings, with a variable amount of white on the coverts and an indistinct pale eye-ring. To my eye, the birds also seem to have a subtly different background colour compared with a typical Pigeon Guillemot.

The richness of the waters also attracts all three species of North Pacific albatross with Laysan regularly seen and the much desired Short-tailed Albatross a not infrequent visitor. Whilst this latter species can never be guaranteed, we have recorded up to five individuals on a single trip, making it one of the best places in the world to look for the species away from the breeding island of Torishima. Indeed, Black-footed Albatross is invariably the toughest albatross to find with only the occasional individual being seen on a typical voyage.

In May and June, another seabird which can always be found in large numbers in the Sea of Okhotsk is the Short-tailed Shearwater as vast numbers migrate here from their breeding grounds in Australia to moult. Flocks numbering thousands of birds can often be seen sitting on the water as many birds drop so many flight feathers simultaneously that they really struggle to get airborne when a ship approaches. Indeed if there have been several days of calm conditions, it is sometimes possible to see millions of discarded feathers floating on the sea.

Whilst the seabirds are the undoubted speciality of the region, there are also plenty of landbirds to look for ashore. On Kunashir, Iturup and Urup, which are the closest islands to Japan, there are extensive areas of mixed woodland, as well as more open habitats, and a number of birds which are generally considered Japanese specialities can be found including Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Japanese Bush-warbler and Japanese Grey Bunting. An excellent range of more widespread but nevertheless highly desirable birds are also possible with Latham's Snipe, Oriental Cuckoo, Black-browed Reed-warbler, Asian Brown and Narcissus Flycatchers, Black-faced Bunting, Oriental Greenfinch and Long-tailed Rosefinch amongst the more likely species.

These islands are also the only ones in the chain which are inhabited and on Iturup, a road leads up into the hills allowing access to a more alpine environment where species such as Japanese Robin, Japanese Accentor and Brown Dipper breed.

The inshore waters around these islands are also good for Rhinoceros Auklet and Spectacled Guillemot. Unlike both Brunnich's and Common Guillemots which breed in colonies that can number tens of thousands of pairs, Spectacled Guillemots typically only occur in colonies that contain a few dozen individuals and, as a result, it is a far more localised and less frequently encountered species.

Continuing further north up the Kuril Islands chain, the vegetation changes rapidly and becomes increasingly stunted with trees such as Polar Willow, Dwarf Birch and Stone Pine dominating and in mid-summer it is sometimes possible to find extensive stands of Goldish Rhododendrons although unlike other species in this family, this only grows a few feet above the ground. The change in the vegetation undoubtedly reduces the bird biodiversity but there are still plenty of species to look for with Brown-headed Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, Pine Grosbeak, Spotted Nutcracker and Buff-bellied Pipit amongst the possibilities.

## **Kamchatka**

Despite having a population of less than 200,000 people, the modest city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is the main gateway to the Russian Pacific coast and many boat-based birding trips to the region will either start or finish here. The city is 170 miles north of the southern tip of the Kamchatka Peninsula and sits on Avacha Bay which is considered one of the most impressive natural harbours in the world dwarfing, for example, Sydney Harbour.

With the anchorage in Avacha Bay being a perfect natural defence against tsunamis, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy is the headquarters for the Russian Navy's Pacific fleet so access to much of the shoreline is restricted. It is, however, well worth exploring the woods on the edge of town as species such as Olive-backed Pipit, Three-toed Woodpecker, Rustic Bunting and the recently split Kamchatka Leaf-warbler (previously considered part of the Arctic Warbler complex) can all be seen.

An hour or so from the town centre, it is usually possible to find Aleutian Tern, although the birds only breed here in relatively small numbers. For those with more time, a gravel road crosses to the western side of the peninsula where this species is reputed to be significantly commoner. This route also offers a way of getting into the mountains of central Kamchatka where both Black-billed Capercaillie and Asian Rosy Finch can be looked for.

Cruising through Avacha Bay at either the beginning or end of a ship-based trip, several species of alcid can usually be found including Spectacled Guillemot and Ancient Murrelet. For anyone heading north, it is important to see these species here, as this is pretty much the northern range limit for both of them.

With a spectacular volcano dominated coastline, there are many potential landing sites along the Kamchatka shore, however, one of the undoubted highlights on any visit to the region is a zodiac cruise on the Zhupanova River. Steller's Sea-Eagle breed here in good numbers and in July 2011 there were three occupied nests in trees immediately adjacent to the river allowing everyone to enjoy some phenomenal views of this majestic raptor. Non-breeding eagles also congregate in good numbers and, on occasions, we have seen up to fifty birds !!!

Other species which breed here include Long-toed Stint, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Pechora Pipit and Yellow-breasted Bunting with the possibility of migrant waders on the adjacent mudflats including Far Eastern Curlew.

At the mouth of the Zhupanova, there is a modest transient community and the inhabitants spend the summer months catching thousands of salmon which come to the river to spawn. This activity attracts large numbers of gulls and whilst Slaty-backed is the commonest species, it is usually possible to find 'Kamchatka Gull'. Although this relatively poorly known taxa is considered part of

the Common-Mew Gull complex, it does look very different and surely warrants further taxonomic study.

Not too far north of the southern tip of the Kamchatka Peninsula is Russkaya Fjord. As well as being another reliable spot for breeding Steller's Sea-Eagles, this is also an excellent location to look for the localised Long-billed Murrelet and several pairs can usually be found. In 2009, we also saw three pairs of the critically endangered Kittlitz's Murrelet in the fjord at the height of the breeding season. The most southerly breeding sites for this species are generally considered to be several hundred miles to the north, although given how little ornithological exploration has been done in this region, it is certainly possible that there are small populations of this species breeding elsewhere.

### **Commander Islands**

The Commander Islands are over 100 miles off the eastern coast of Central Kamchatka and whilst there is an infrequent and incredibly expensive air service to Nikol'skoye, the only community on the islands, a boat plus multiple official permits would then be needed by anyone contemplating exploring the region independently.

The two main islands in the archipelago, Bering and Medney, were discovered by the renowned Danish explorer Vitus Bering in 1741 and one of the crew on this trip was Georg Steller whose name is now commemorated in the names of many of the birds, plants and animals of the region.

The most extraordinary discovery made by Bering's expedition was the Steller's Sea Cow, a huge herbivorous marine mammal which is related to Dugongs and Manatees. When news of the richness of the wildlife filtered back to Europe, large numbers of hunters descended on the islands and within 30 years of its discovery, the Sea Cow was extinct and the populations of Pacific Sea Otters and Arctic Foxes severely depleted.

Thankfully the Otters and Foxes have now recovered and the area remains very rich in birdlife and over a couple of days, it is usually possible to make at least a couple of landings or zodiac cruises each day and see some of the extraordinary wildlife the islands have to offer.

Trips usually start at Nikol'skoye which is at the western end of Bering Island as the local Russian authorities invariably want to check that all visitors have the requisite permits. On an organised trip this is a painless process and a couple of hours ashore is usually all that is required to find the key specialities.

The shoreline in front of the dilapidated town is an excellent place to start and if the tide is right, it is a reliable site for Rock Sandpiper. This species is inexplicably localised in Eastern Russia but there are usually up to a dozen individuals here.

Good numbers of gulls are also often present with the commonest species being Glaucous-winged Gull. Although the Commander Islands are in reality the most westerly part of the Aleutian chain, they are generally considered part of the Palearctic and the islands are, therefore, the only location within the Palearctic where this species regularly breeds.

On the outskirts of Nikol'skoye, there is an extensive area of tundra where hundreds of waders breed. Whilst Dunlin is by far the commonest species, several pairs of Mongolian Plovers (or Lesser Sand Plovers) can usually be found, as well as Pechora Pipit and both Snow and Lapland Buntings.

If conditions are suitable, a visit to Nikol'skoye is often combined with a zodiac cruise around the small islet of Arij Karmen which is approximately seven miles away. During the summer months, this island, which is little more than a large rock, is packed with breeding seabirds. Although Tufted Puffins and Brunnich's Guillemots are amongst the commonest species, Arij Karmen is also a reliable location for the highly localised Parakeet Auklet. This bird has a specially adapted bill for catching zooplankton and small flocks can usually be found floating on the sea just offshore and it is sometimes possible to get within a matter of metres of them in the zodiacs. Another speciality which breeds on Arij Karmen is the Red-legged Kittiwake and as with the Glaucous-winged Gull, this is one of the few places where this species can be seen within the Palearctic.

To see the best of the Commander Islands, however, one has to travel eastward to Medney Island which offers what is surely some of the most spectacular opportunities for zodiac cruising on the planet. Whilst Tufted Puffin is ubiquitous across much of the Russian Far East, Horned Puffin is less frequently encountered, although there are some good sized colonies along the northern coast of Medney. Small colonies of Red-faced Cormorants are also present here, as well as the more widespread Pelagic Cormorant and ashore, it is usually possible to find Grey-crowned Rosy Finch; yet another species which just creeps into this part of Asia courtesy of the Commander Islands.

Any visit to the Commander Islands is, however, incomplete without some time being spent on ship-cruising offshore from the southern coast of Bering Island as the shelf drops off very steeply only a matter of miles offshore and the area is extremely rich in cetaceans. Both Humpback and Sperm Whales can usually be found in good numbers, Orcas ('Killer Whales') are also common, but the real speciality is Baird's Beaked Whale. Although beaked whales are amongst the least known family of mammals on the planet and there are very few places where any of the species can be regularly encountered, this area is surprisingly reliable and several pods are usually found.

The upwellings which attract the whales also make the area good for seabirds and one species which is often present is Mottled Petrel, a *pterodroma* which breeds on islands south of New Zealand and then migrates north for the Northern Hemisphere summer. Albatrosses also regular occur here and on one occasion we saw Laysan, Black-footed and Short-tailed within fifteen minutes.

### **Chukotka coastline**

Heading north from the Commander Islands and back to the Russian mainland, one is soon within the historical range of the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper. With a world population which is now thought to possibly only number 120 breeding pairs, finding this species away from the only monitored breeding grounds at Meinypil'gyno might seem like a hopeless task. However, this was precisely what Birdlife International, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Taskforce ("SBSTF") and the New Zealand company Heritage Expeditions set out to achieve on a bird and wildlife expedition in July 2011.

Three days were set aside for the passengers to assist in surveying the extremely remote south Chukotka coastline and with two of the world experts onboard, Christoph Zockler and Evgeny

Syroechkovskiy, the searches focussed on areas which Christoph and Evgeny had identified from satellite images as potential breeding sites.

Despite scepticism from some that scientists and birders could work together successfully to help this enigmatic species, the expedition was a considerable success as three Spoon-billed Sandpiper territories were discovered at a previously unsurveyed location. With this partnership due to continue for the next two seasons, there are high hopes that more birds will be discovered.

Whilst Spoon-billed Sandpiper is undoubtedly the most charismatic shorebird along the north-east coastline of Russia, there are a wide range of other waders which also breed here and Pacific Golden Plover, Grey-tailed Tattler, Great Knot and both Long-toed and Red-necked Stints can all be found here. Indeed it is worth checking any small waders which are seen, as it has become increasingly apparent in recent years that a number of species which are generally considered North American breeders do also occur in North-East Russia and birds such as Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers have been recorded by others visiting this region. Another 'spill over' is Sandhill Crane and this species is not uncommon along the Chukotka coastline.

Cruising northward there are also opportunities to see a wide range of waterfowl and whilst some, such as Greater Scaup, Northern Pintail and Tufted Duck, will be well known to those from the UK, there are also good numbers of less familiar species such as Harlequin Duck and Steller's and King Eiders. For anyone wanting to study both Stejneger's and Black Scoters on their summering grounds, this coastline is excellent and on occasions, flocks of thousands of the latter species can be found.

Various species of geese also breed along the coastline, with the most desirable being the range-restricted Emperor Goose. This species is not uncommon at Meinypil'gyno and after visiting two Spoon-billed Sandpiper territories with volunteers from the Recovery Taskforce in July, we saw several geese in the general vicinity of the village.

For anyone with an interest in marine mammals, the zodiac trip between the ship and shore at Meinypil'gyno is often a special experience as both Grey Whale and Beluga can be seen here in good numbers. Indeed, the seas between Kamchatka and Anadyr must rate as some of the best in the Northern Hemisphere with ten species of cetaceans, including the highly endangered North Pacific Right Whale, seven seals plus Walrus all seen in June-July 2011.

On any trip heading north up the Chukotka coastline, it is likely that the expedition will end at the small town of Anadyr. Despite its isolation, this has a regular air service to Moscow and onwards to Western Europe. However, it is well worth exploring before leaving, as birds such as Dusky Thrush, Siberian Accentor and Little Bunting are all possible within a short walk of the downtown hotels.

**Acknowledgments** Special thanks are also due to all the guides I have worked with in this region, especially Adam Walley, and all the passengers who have joined me. Thanks are also due to John Brodie-good and Adam Walley for commenting on a draft of this article.

## References

Brazil, M. 2009 Birds of East Asia

Gaston, A.J., Jones, I.L. 1998 The Auks

Zockler, C., Saving the Spoon-billed Sandpiper – an update *Birding World* 24(6) 262-264