



**WildWings**

## **In Search of Spoon-billed Sandpipers 2013 Voyage Report**

By Chris Collins, Tour Leader

### **Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> June – Petropavlovsk–Kamchatskiy**

Having crossed eleven time zones on our journey from London, many of the WildWings group arrived in Petropavlovsk–Kamchatskiy to overcast skies and a temperature of 10 degrees centigrade. After the short ride to our hotel, the appropriately named ‘Petropavlovsk’, and some lunch, there was an optional afternoon excursion with Chris to an area of rough ground not far from our hotel.

Although the habitat may not have looked particularly promising, this was an excellent introduction to some of the birds of the region. One of the first species to be seen was a displaying Olive-backed Pipit, and a few minutes later, this was followed by what was for many of the group was one of the more wanted birds in the whole of the Russian Far East, a stunning male Siberian Rubythroat. Common Rosefinch and Slaty-backed Gull were also soon added to our list and we then found two of the more localised specialities – Kamchatka Leaf-warbler and Middendorff’s Grasshopper Warbler. Initially both birds proved hard to see but eventually everyone got very satisfactory views and after a leisurely few hours we returned to the hotel, well satisfied with the start to our time in the Russian Far East.

### **20 June – Paratunka and Forest Lake**

With a full day to explore the environs around Petropavlovsk–Kamchatskiy, we began by visiting the forests near the village of Paratunka which was about 40 minutes or so from our hotel. There were a number of species to look for here and over the course of the next couple of hours, we saw a nice selection including the somewhat localised Grey Bunting. This was not a species we could expect to see during the voyage, so was a very welcome addition to the list and a new bird for many of the group.

The more colourful Rustic Bunting also showed well, however, our attempts to tape in a singing Rufous-tailed Robin were frustrated, as the bird showed repeatedly in flight but was only seen perched by some.

A little later, we returned to the bus for the short drive to Forest Lake, where we spent several hours exploring this very birdy location with an excellent range of species being recorded. Amongst the highlights were Eye-browed Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, Three-toed Woodpecker, Kamchatka Leaf-warbler, Common Rosefinch

and Asian Brown Flycatcher. Several more Rufous-tailed Robins were also heard but once again these proved impossible to see.

With a few minutes to spare on the ride back to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, we made a short stop at a roadside lake. Initially it looked like the birds would be similar to Western Europe with Black-headed Gull, Common Tern and Greater Scaup all spotted, however, we were then delighted to find a pair of Falcated Ducks. Although these spent most of their time in the vegetation on the far side of the lake, it was still possible to get some decent views of them and appreciate the gorgeous colouring of the male bird. With this species only being seen very occasionally on WildWings trips to the Russian Far East, it was a real bonus sighting and we headed back to the hotel, well satisfied with our day.

### **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> June – Paratunka and Avacha Bay**

With the Rufous-tailed Robin being the main outstanding bird, the decision was taken to head back to Paratunka to have another crack at this speciality, however, for the majority of the group the day started earlier with a short, pre-breakfast, trip to the birding site near our hotel. Our main target was Lanceolated Warbler and as we headed towards the marsh, we were informed that a bird had been already located by some of our fellow travellers. This proved to be a highly obliging individual and we were able to watch it for over a quarter of an hour, as it sat almost motionless in an open bush singing its reeling song.

With some of the WildWings group wanting better looks at Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, we made this our next target and one of these large Locustella warblers was soon taped into view. It had been a highly productive final visit to this site which was then nicely wrapped up by a cracking male Siberian Rubythroat which sat on a dead snag just above us giving some fantastic views.

Once breakfast was over, we set off for Paratunka to look for Grey Bunting and Rufous-tailed Robin and whilst the former was quickly nailed by those who had missed it the previous day, the Robin proceeded to lead us on a merry dance and whilst many of the group joined Chris in wading through an area of flooded swamp forest, most people only got fleeting views at best. We were left agreeing that this species can be one of the trickiest birds in Kamchatka to see well.....

After a packed lunch in glorious sunshine, we headed to Avacha Bay and enjoyed an hour and a half exploring the wooded hills adjacent to the wharf. Looking across the bay, which is one of the largest protected harbours in the world, we saw good numbers of Pelagic Cormorants and Common Guillemots.

After a short cultural stop at Lenin Square, it was time for the short ride to the quay where the Spirit of Enderby, our home for the next couple of weeks, awaited us. Once all passengers were aboard, there were a series of briefings including an introduction to the ship and Expedition Team, a zodiac briefing and the theoretical part of the safety drill.

A little later, Expedition Leader Rodney explained that there would be a delay in our departure as a couple of the ship's zodiacs had been sent for servicing. This, therefore, gave everyone time to unpack and orientate themselves around the ship, although the keen birders were soon outside, with various birds found including Slaty-backed Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake.

As dinner concluded, we sailed away from the wharf and out across Avacha Bay finding our first Tufted Puffins of the expedition. Several small groups of Ancient Murrelets were also spotted, as well as our first Crested Auklets of the voyage.

As we exited the bay, the sun began to set, and as the light faded many headed off to bed in expectation of the days ahead.

### **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> June – Zhupanova River**

For some of the group (and especially the insomniacs who had not yet adjusted to the time change), the day began well before breakfast and as we cruised northwards towards the Zhupanova River, the views of the coastline were truly spectacular with mile after mile of snow-capped mountains. It was an excellent opportunity to get familiar with some of the species we could expect to see over the coming days, with good numbers of Tufted Puffins, as well as our first Laysan Albatrosses and Northern Fulmars.

By the time breakfast had concluded, the Spirit of Enderby was positioned off the mouth of the Zhupanova River and after a briefing from Expedition Leader Rodney, we boarded five zodiacs and set off for the river entrance.

Entering the river mouth, there were five Steller's Sea-eagles on the shore. This was a 'must see' bird for many and although the birds soon flew off, nevertheless, we got some great views.

Setting off up the river, we soon found a flock of a hundred or so Common Terns. These were of the Pacific subspecies longipennis and were quite different from the birds many were familiar with from Europe with their jet black bills.

Moving further upstream, we passed a group of Larga Seals hauled out on a sandbar and it was possible to see the distinctive patterning on this North Pacific endemic species which is sometimes known as the Spotted Seal.

Our main goal on this particular zodiac cruise, however, was to get good looks at Steller's Sea-Eagle, so we continued upstream to where the Expedition Team knew there were usually some occupied nests. At one of these, the birds were indeed 'at home' and we enjoyed some phenomenal views of this majestic raptor, with the birds looking down at us from their nests – a major trip highlight for many.

After cruising along the river for several miles, the zodiacs turned round and headed back towards the fishing village at the river mouth. Whilst a few of the group went to investigate the village, most of the birders joined Adam and Chris on a short walk to a wet grassland behind the village where we soon found a Pechora Pipit. Our main target, however, was Long-toed Stint and after flushing a couple of individuals, we changed strategy and the group stood on the edge of one of the pools whilst Chris went round the back and gently pushed one of these beautifully patterned waders forward so it could be admired by the assembled throng.

All too soon, it was time to return to the ship and as we cruised towards the Commander Islands, the water depth began to rapidly deepen and the range of seabird species changed, with more Laysan Albatrosses and our first Fork-tailed Storm-petrels. Several pods of Dall's Porpoise were also spotted with a number of animals coming in to bow ride, giving us a fantastic opportunity to appreciate their beautiful black-and-white patterning.

## **Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> June – Bering Island, Commander Islands**

Once again, the day began well before breakfast for the ‘early birds’ and as we approached Bering Island, the number of birds increased significantly with Tufted Puffin, Common Guillemot, Black-legged and Red-legged Kittiwakes, Fork-tailed Storm-petrel and Pelagic Cormorant amongst the species seen. Several Humpback Whales were also spotted.

Once breakfast had concluded, Rodney gave us a briefing about what we could expect on Bering Island and advised everyone to bring their passports as the local Border Guards sometimes wanted to inspect these. As soon as everyone was ashore, we learnt that this procedure would not be necessary – this ‘security check’ was evidently not required on Sundays.....

Whilst Nikol’skoye can be somewhat bleak on occasions, we were extremely lucky today and as we set off, the clouds parted and the sun came out – we were fortunate indeed !!!

There were several options, with some visiting the small museum in the middle of the town where there were a range of exhibits including one of the few complete skeletons of a Steller’s Sea-cow. This extraordinary looking beast had apparently been common around the Commander Islands when Vitus Bering’s expedition had discovered the islands in 1741 but tragically had become extinct within thirty years.

Walking along the shoreline, the birders were on the lookout for one particular bird, the somewhat localised Rock Sandpiper and after a fair bit of diligent checking of the seaweed covered rocks, two individuals were found. Although these would periodically disappear, soon enough they would climb back onto their favoured rocks allowing everyone to get some nice scope views of this special bird.

Further along, there were several dozen summer plumaged Dunlins and many of the group also saw one of our other target birds for the morning, the Mongolian (or Lesser Sand) Plover. Turning inland, Chris played a recording of Pechora Pipit and this was an immediate success, as a bird which had been singing high in the sky parachuted downwards and landed on a wooden pole, giving us some great views of this much-wanted bird.

All too soon, it was time to turn around and head back towards the landing site, although some took the opportunity to visit the modest art gallery run by resident artist Sergei, whilst others made a stop at the memorial statue to Vitus Bering. Although this great explorer had been the first to reach the Commander Islands when his ship had been wrecked here in 1741, he had only survived another month before succumbing to scurvy. A truly tragic end for one of the most amazing (but little known) explorers of the Russian Far East.

By 12:45pm everyone was back at the landing site and the zodiacs soon began shuttling us back to the ship. It had been a truly fantastic morning ashore.

Over lunch the Spirit of Enderby repositioned to North-West Cape and after a short briefing from Rodney, five zodiacs were lowered and we set off for the shore. The weather had deteriorated compared with the morning but we persevered and despite warnings that this landing might involved us getting wet feet, everyone was soon safely ashore and we set off with local Ranger, Victor, for the seal colony.

There were two viewpoints on the cliffs overlooking the colony and there were literally hundreds of animals on the beach. Whilst the majority were Northern Fur Seals, there were also good numbers of Steller's Sea-Lions. These endangered animals were much larger than their smaller cousins and whilst the main breeding season was yet to start, we saw several of the large bulls chasing females.

With the wind continuing to strengthen, Rodney took the decision to end the landing earlier than had been originally intended and this proved to be a wise decision as the ride back to the ship was rather wet and bumpy.

The adverse weather meant that the plan to zodiac cruise the nearby island of Arij Karmen after dinner would be unrealistic, so Rodney announced that we would head along the southern coast of Bering Island to a steep shelf edge where he hoped we would find some whales.

By the time dinner had concluded, we were in the 'whale zone' and as we cruised onwards, there were regular sightings of Humpback Whales, with several dozen animals sighted over the course of the evening. More unexpected was a lone Mako Shark which showed very well off the port side of the ship.

### **Monday 24<sup>th</sup> June – Medney Island, Commander Islands**

During the night, the Spirit of Enderby continued south-eastwards and at 5:00am we were off the southern tip of Medney Island. This was where the Ranger we had collected the previous day at Nikol'skoye had wanted to be dropped, although with thick fog and a heavy swell, conditions were wholly unsuitable for getting him ashore, so the ship turned to the north-west and we head along the northern coastline of Medney.

Despite the early hour and far from ideal viewing conditions, a small band of birders were already on the bridge and were well rewarded when a juvenile Short-tailed Albatross suddenly appeared out of the murk. The uniform chocolate brown plumage and pink bill were well seen but, unfortunately, the bird disappeared as quickly as it had been found.

A few minutes later, two Whiskered Auklets were spotted not far off the bows and there was little doubt that the early risers had been well rewarded for their efforts.

Once the Ranger had been dropped off at a marginally more sheltered bay, we continued along the coast and after a post-breakfast briefing from Rodney, everyone readied themselves for a landing at Peschanaya Bay.

With a heavy swell in the bay, it took a little while to position the ship to minimise the roll at the gangway but once the Captain turned the ship to the North, conditions were much improved and we were all soon shuttled ashore and were then able to begin exploring this dramatic location.

One of our main targets was the Grey-crowned Rosy Finch, a species which is usually reasonably reliable in this bay and after a few minutes searching, we found several individuals around the abandoned buildings on the west side of the bay. There were at least three adult birds, as well as some recent fledglings, and everyone was able to get some fantastic views of this special species.

With the Rosy Finch secured, many of the birders set off along the rocky shore in search of Pacific Wren and at least a couple of pairs were soon located. Although these birds had been regarded as a subspecies of Eurasian Wren until only recently, they certainly looked and sounded somewhat different. Continuing along the shoreline, we enjoyed some nice views of Horned and Tufted Puffins, Pigeon Guillemots and Harlequin Ducks, as well as a truly spectacular view of the surrounding vista. There was no doubt that the scenery on Medney Island was very special indeed.

By late morning, we were all back at the landing site and as the first zodiacs began shuttling back to the Spirit of Enderby, two Parakeet Auklets were spotted. This allowed those aboard to get some exceptionally close views, whilst everyone else got some reasonable looks through Chris' telescope from the beach.

With the weather conditions being unsuitable for a zodiac cruise, we headed towards Commander Bay on Bering Island and over the course of the next few hours at least a couple of hundred Whiskered Auklets were spotted. Although few were close, their dingy white bellies could be seen.

By the late afternoon the zodiacs were in the water once again and we landed at Commander Bay which was where Vitus Bering and his men had been shipwrecked in November 1741. Whilst some of the crew, such as Steller (whose name is now associated with the Steller's Sea-eagle, Steller's Sea-cow etc) had survived and eventually made it back to Kamchatka, Bering and several of his men had died here and we made the short walk to the modest cemetery where the graves were located.

Although the birding was very quiet here, there were plenty of colourful flowers to enjoy including some stunning orchids. Indeed, it was a fascinating and somewhat poignant place to visit with the simple graves and memorials to these explorers from a bygone age. It was difficult to have anything other than complete admiration for those who had made exploratory journeys through the Russian Far East over 260 years before us.

After an hour or so ashore, it was time to head back to the ship and after dinner had concluded, we were crossing the edge of the shelf and a couple of Sperm Whales were seen. Although the first of these dived whilst the ship was a mile away, the second animal proved to be more obliging and the Captain turned the ship and we enjoyed some fantastic close views and were able to watch it dive only 30 metres off the starboard side of the ship. It was a fantastic finale to our time in the magical Commander Islands.

## **Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> June – Karaginsky Island**

After a couple of very full days in the Commander Islands, many took the opportunity to have a lie-in and enjoy a more conventional start to the day with breakfast being served at 08:30am.

During the morning, we cruised north-west towards Karaginsky Island and whilst a selection of seabirds were spotted, the real highlight was the cetaceans with six species being seen – Fin Whale, Sperm Whale, Humpback Whale, Northern Minke Whale, Orca and Dall's Porpoise. For some of the group, Fin Whale was a new species and when several animals were spotted travelling together, the Captain

diverted the ship and we were able to get some nice close views of what is the second largest animal on the planet.

For those looking for other entertainment, there were two lectures during the morning with Katya Ovsyanikova giving a presentation on Sea Otters, followed by Evgeny Syroechkovskiy and his wife Elena talking about Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Their lecture told us the story about how this species had declined over the recent decades to the point where it is believed that there are possibly now only 100 breeding pairs.

Shortly after lunch had concluded, Rodney gave us a briefing about the landing and we were soon boarding the zodiacs and ashore on Karaginsky Island. The birders set off across the tundra walking across a beautiful patchwork of plants and lichens. Our destination was an area of small pools and bushes and over the next three hours we saw a good range of species.

Whilst much of the wildfowl was familiar from home, ie Scaup, Long-tailed Duck and Pintail, nevertheless, it was great to see them here on their breeding grounds. There were also some less familiar birds with Dusky Warbler and Red-throated Pipit being the main highlights. Although not seen by all, the 'best bird' for a lucky few, however, was Pallas' Reed Bunting, with two individuals seen.

It was a very pleasant afternoon and it was with real reluctance that we headed back to the landing site and ship.

### **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> June – Verkhoturova Island and Goven Peninsula**

It was the earliest start to date of our expedition and Hotel Manager Meghan made the morning wake-up call at 05:15am, with breakfast following a quarter of an hour later. After a briefing from Rodney, we boarded five zodiacs for a short cruise along the shore of Verkhoturova Island. The number of alcids was incredible, with thousands of Crested Auklets and hundreds of Parakeet Auklets and we were able to get some great views of both species.

After half an hour or so cruising, we headed for the landing beach and once everyone was ashore, Chris led the steep climb up onto the plateau on Verkhoturova Island and we were then free to explore.

It had been suggested at the briefing that this island had some spectacular concentrations of seabirds and this was indeed the case with Tufted Puffins, Brunnich's and Common Guillemots and Black-legged Kittiwakes all only a matter of metres away. Although we had already seen good numbers of Tufted Puffins from the ship, it was an entirely different experience being ashore amongst them and many of the group spent a significant part of their time ashore watching these amazing birds.

Further along the cliff top, a couple of Least Auklets were spotted and many of the group were able to get a view of them down Chris' scope. Although they were somewhat distant, it was possible to appreciate their tiny size and occasionally one could make out their paler throats and dingy off-white bellies. It was the first time this species had been recorded here and it was certainly a very welcomed bonus to our growing bird list.

Although most people elected to concentrate on seabirds, a few went inland to look for passerines and Middendorf's Grasshopper Warbler and Dusky Warbler were both found.

By 11:00am everyone was back on the landing beach and it was a somewhat damp experience getting back aboard but we were all soon on the Spirit of Enderby and on our way towards the Goven Peninsula. Whilst a few remained outside or watched from the bridge, many took the opportunity to download their photos or have a short nap after the recent early starts.

By mid-afternoon we had arrived off the western side of the peninsula and before the zodiacs had even been lowered into the water, four Brown Bears were spotted ambling slowly along the beach. Once everyone was aboard we set off, initially heading for an old fishing boat which was stuck fast on some rocks a couple of hundred metres off the shore. This was now just a rusting hulk, although it had been completely taken over by nesting Slaty-backed Gulls.

After watching these for a few minutes, we cruised slowly south and saw several bears including a family party of four individuals which gave us some fantastic views as they clambered over the rocky mountainside. Sadly they soon ran away – it is sad fact that even in isolated areas such as Kamchatka and Chukotka, bears have learnt that humans can be a serious threat to their welfare.....

Despite this, the views were exceptional and in less than 30 minutes, we notched up an impressive total of thirteen individuals. Rodney had said this area could be good for bears and this was certainly the case !!!

We then headed towards the landing site and with no bears in sight, disembarked and headed for a small knoll. The weather was now glorious with blue skies and hardly any cloud and despite crossing some substantial snow patches, some of the group stripped down to t-shirts. Even though we were only a matter of miles from 60 degrees north, the weather was positively mild.

Reaching the viewpoint, we sat and waited and whilst not further bears were found, there were several interesting birds with Red-throated Pipit, Bluethroat and Siberian Rubythroat all seen, although the highlight was a somewhat distant Dusky Thrush that was found singing.

By early evening, it was time to head back to the landing site and after what had been a spectacular day, few socialised after dinner in expectation of another early morning the following day.

#### **Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> June – Tintikun Lagoon**

It was another reasonably early start and after the customary pre-landing briefing from Rodney, we boarded the zodiacs for the ride to Tintikun Lagoon.

Depending on the tide, this location can be somewhat challenging to navigate, although today we were fortunate as the tide was reasonably high and were soon over the bar at the river mouth and heading upstream. As we headed towards the landing site, there was a radio message from Rodney to alert everyone that a male Steller's Eider had been spotted. Although the bird soon flew off with a flock of Harlequins, nevertheless, we were able to get some great views of it as it made a



close fly-past. This was a very welcome addition to our trip list after missing this species at Verkhoturova Island.

A few minutes later, we were dropped ashore whilst the zodiacs were driven up the river to the lake and had a brief view of a pair of Steller's Sea-eagles sitting on a rocky cliff.

After a 20 minute walk, we reach the lake to news that Adam had found a Siberian Accentor, so everyone headed over to where this had last been seen but it proved elusive and only responded once to the recordings on Chris' iPod. As a result, we boarded the zodiacs once again and set off to explore. The weather was steadily improving and it soon became possible to understand Rodney's comments about this being one of the most scenic places along this stretch of the Russian coastline, as we could see the forested slopes and craggy mountains and eventually there were only a few fluffy clouds covering the top of the highest peaks.

After cruising approximately half way along the lake, we got out of the zodiacs at some hot springs and were almost immediately rewarded with a response when a recording of Siberian Accentor was played. As we were unlikely to see this species anywhere else on the expedition, it was very much our main focus for the morning but the birds proved to be rather flighty and would pop up on a bush for only a few seconds before disappearing into cover once again. Eventually most of the WildWings group saw at least one individual but by the time we boarded the zodiacs, a few were still needing better views, so we knew we would have to try and find another bird.....

Cruising up to the far end of the lake, we found two Brown Bears wandering through the scrubby bushes. These seemed not unduly perturbed by our presence, so Rodney allowed the zodiacs to slowly approach and we all then quietly disembarked and watched as the animals slowly ambled off into the vegetation. After our encounters the previous afternoon on the Goven Peninsula, it was fantastic to see some bears which were not so stressed by human visitors.

Another short ride took us to the spot where Chris had seen Siberian Accentor on previous occasions and whilst it took a little while to find any, eventually one obliged and most who had missed the earlier birds got to see this eastern speciality, along with further views of Dusky Thrush.

By late morning we were back on the ship and began the journey across the huge Oluytorskiy Bay to where we planned to search for Spoon-billed Sandpipers the following day. Although the afternoon's seabirding was relatively quiet, a decent range of birds were still seen including Laysan Albatross, Fork-tailed Storm-petrel, Tufted Puffin, Slaty-backed Gull, as well as two pods of Orcas and three Humpback Whales.

## **28<sup>th</sup> June – Koriak coastline sandpiper searches day 1**

It was the first day dedicated to our search for new breeding populations of Spoon-billed Sandpipers and early in the morning, Rodney, Evgeny, Elena and Adam headed ashore to assess the area and agree a strategy for the searches.

As soon as breakfast had concluded, everyone gathered in the Lecture Room and Evgeny and Chris outlined how the searches would be operated and Rodney described the terrain and who would be in each of the five groups.

With the expectation that we would be ashore for most of the day, the Chefs had laid out some food for packed lunches and at 09:30am the first teams headed ashore, with the rest following over the next hour.

Unfortunately, the weather was far from ideal for much of the morning but most people persevered and between them found an excellent range of waders including Wood Sandpiper, Red-necked Stint, Long-toed Stint, Mongolian Plover and Ringed Plover.

As well as the birds, this search site proved to be excellent for Brown Bears and we amassed the incredible total of a minimum of thirty individuals. It was difficult to imagine what these massive animals were finding to eat and it seemed amazing that the area could sustain such a high population.

By late afternoon, all the teams had returned to the ship. Although we had explored a considerable amount of ground, some of which was undoubtedly ideal for breeding waders, it was with a degree of disappointed that we ended the day without any Spoon-billed Sandpipers being found.

### **29<sup>th</sup> June – Koriak coastline sandpiper searches day 2**

It was another early start for Rodney, Evgeny, Elena and Adam as shortly after 06:00am they headed towards the shore to establish if a landing would be possible. With the tide ebbing, it was just possible to get the zodiacs up the river, so Rodney made the decision to land a small team of searchers, as the habitat looked ideal for Spoon-billed Sandpipers. As a result, a few of the WildWings group got an early morning wakeup from Hotel Manager Meghan, with instructions that they had 10 minutes to get ready.

As the river was extremely shallow, it was only possible to take 3 people in each zodiacs and even then it was a real challenge to get upstream but a dozen or so people were landed and soon fanned out across a vast area of ideal looking tundra. Although the area was huge, the teams were able to search it fairly thoroughly and whilst a few waders were found, unfortunately, it was another blank for Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

By 11:00am the teams were back in the zodiacs and Katya and Rodney had to carefully navigate the zodiacs out of the river mouth. With the tide having dropped, this was certainly a tricky task but everyone was soon safely back aboard the Spirit of Enderby and Rodney then asked the Captain to set a course for another bay which Evgeny and Elena wished to check.

With somewhat restricted visibility, only a limited number of birds were seen on the journey but these included at least three Kittlitz's Murrelets. As we had missed this species a couple of days before at Tintikun Lagoon, it was great to now add it to the list. A group of four Parakeet Auklets were also spotted, so the ride was very productive despite the inclement conditions.

By early afternoon we had arrived at the search site and those who had not been ashore in the morning were invited to join the team leaders in searching this

location. Like some of the other places, there were several square miles of habitat, however, we were able to cover this systematically over the next few hours but sadly, it was another blank for the sandpiper.

Despite this disappointment, several interesting species were seen including reasonable numbers of Mongolian Plovers and three Asian Rosy Finches.

### **30<sup>th</sup> June – ‘Gyr’ Bay and Koriak coastline sandpiper searches day 3**

The day began reasonably early for most of the WildWings group with a 05:00am wake up call from Hotel Manager Meghan and half an hour later, we were in the zodiacs heading into ‘Gyr Bay’. This location had been explored during previous sandpiper searches and the nest of a White Gyrfalcon had been discovered, so there were high hopes that the nest would be occupied once again.

Once everyone was ashore, we set off passing the remains of several abandoned buildings and were soon at the cliff face where the birds had been seen before. Whilst there had been three ‘ready to go’ youngsters on the previous visit, on this occasion, we found four young birds plus the adult female. It was an incredible sight and undoubtedly one of the expedition highlights for many of the group.

As well as the Gyrfalcons, there were a number of other interesting birds in the immediate vicinity including Sandhill Crane, Little Bunting, Arctic Warbler and Dusky Thrush, so it proved to be a highly productive landing.

By 08:00am, everyone was back aboard the Spirit of Enderby and the Captain set a course for our afternoon search site. The journey took several hours and with a number of the group still needing to see Kittlitz’s Murrelet, many were either out on the bows or watching from the Bridge. With good visibility (albeit a biting wind), conditions were nigh on perfect for looking for wildlife and during the morning an excellent range of species were seen including ten species of auks – it is hard to think of anywhere else in the world where one could see such a diversity in so short a time.

The main bird for many, however, was the Kittlitz’s Murrelet and over fifty of these critically endangered birds were found. Although some of these were somewhat distant, those who spent long enough looking were rewarded with some decent views and it was possible to see the speckled brown plumage of this distinctive species.

As well as the Kittlitz’s Murrelets, the other alcids included a couple of Least Auklets, several Ancient Murrelets, both Tufted and Horned Puffins, Crested and Parakeet Auklets and Pigeon Guillemot.

Another impressive sight were the number of Fork-tailed Storm-petrels, with literally thousands of these being seen over a two hour period. Although we had seen this species earlier in the expedition, the sheer number of individuals was really impressive and many of the photographers were out on the bows attempting to get photos of this North Pacific endemic.

As the ship approached our afternoon search site, several cetaceans were seen including at least two breaching Northern Minke Whales, two Harbour Porpoises and as we turned into the bay we were planning to check, there were multiple sightings of Grey Whale with at least a dozen animals being found.

By the time lunch had concluded, the ship was in position and after a briefing from Rodney, the five teams headed ashore with these being led by Evgeny, Elena, Anders, Adam and Chris. With another huge area to check, the teams inevitably saw a different selection of species, however, the main difference from some of the other places we had been to previously was the sheer number of waterfowl. The highlights were probably the Falcated Duck and American Wigeon which were found by two of the teams but the other species seen included Tundra Bean Goose, White-fronted Goose, Eurasian Wigeon, Long-tailed Duck, Harlequin, White-winged Scoter and Black Scoter. Reasonable numbers of Pacific Divers were also found, with some of the birds on the ponds and pools almost certainly being local breeders.

The habitat was also clearly good for Sandhill Crane and about forty individuals were seen, although it was seemingly not ideal for breeding waders, with only a handful of individuals being seen including single figure counts of Mongolian Plover, Ringed Plover, Red-necked Stint, Temminck's Stint and Long-toed Stint. Sadly our four search sites had not resulted in any new breeding locations for Spoon-billed Sandpiper being found but, nevertheless, the contribution everyone aboard had made in increasing the knowledge of the bird was invaluable.

### **Monday 1<sup>st</sup> July – Meinypil'gyno**

During the night the Spirit of Enderby continued heading northwards and after several long days ashore, most people took the opportunity to sleep in and few were out on deck when we arrived at Meinypil'gyno shortly after 07:00am.

Once breakfast had concluded, Rodney, Katya, Evgeny and Elena headed ashore to finalise arrangements with the Border Guards and local representatives of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper Recovery Team. This took a little time to organise but after an early lunch, everything was in place and we boarded five zodiacs. A couple of Grey Whales and plenty of Larcha Seals were seen as the zodiac drivers skilfully navigated the somewhat lumpy conditions at the river mouth and we soon arrived at the village of Meinypil'gyno. Evgeny and Elena were waiting for us along with two members of the SBS Taskforce, Nikoli and Igor, and the five zodiacs then set off up the river.

To minimise the impact we would have on any individual pair of sandpipers, we were divided into two groups and after travelling for half an hour, the zodiacs arrived at the first site, with the second location being a further ten minutes up the river.

Fortunately, it was a relatively short walk to both nests and we were then privileged to be able to watch this iconic species both sitting on its nest and walking around on the tundra. With less than one hundred and fifty birders having ever visited Meinypil'gyno, it was a truly unique experience for everyone and something that we would remember for the rest of our lives.

After enjoying the sandpipers, the two groups explored the surrounding area and an excellent range of species were found, with the undoubted highlight being several sightings of Emperor Goose. After the 'Spooners', this was probably the most wanted bird at Meinypil'gyno for many of the group and when it was eventually time to return to the zodiacs, the mood was one of total contentment – it had been a spectacular afternoon.

## **Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> July – At sea and Pika River**

During the night, the ship remained at anchor offshore from Meinypil'gyno and with a reasonably heavy swell running in from the east, many found that it was their first night on board the Spirit of Enderby when it was difficult to sleep due to the motion.

After breakfast, Rodney and Adam headed to the river mouth in a zodiac to see if it would be possible to get ashore, however, they were soon back on the ship explaining that the conditions were far worse than the previous evening and that it would be impossible to land. As a result, the anchor was lifted and we headed towards Pika River, with an excellent range of species seen as we travelled. There were plenty more Kittlitz's Murrelets, several White-billed Divers, as well as more familiar species such as Horned Puffin and Parakeet Auklet.

As we approached Pika Bay, we began to see Walruses in the water and after lunch, five zodiacs were launched and we set off to explore this scenic location. Although the walruses were, unfortunately, not present on their beach haul-out (possibly due to a large storm a few days before), there were several hundred in the water and small groups of up to a dozen individuals would approach the zodiacs coming within a matter of metres of us. Up close, we could see their incredibly wrinkled skin and smell their foul breath – it was a truly special being with a group of creatures who seemed as interested in us as we were in them !!

The Walruses were, however, not the only animals to look at and there were also good numbers of Grey Whales in the bay. It was with genuine reluctance that we returned to the ship in the late afternoon – it had been a truly special cruise.

## **Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> July – Keyngypilgyn Bay**

After cruising northwards overnight, we arrived at Keyngypilgyn Bay as breakfast was being served and by the time most had finished eating Rodney, Adam and Katya had been on a short scouting trip to assess whether it would be possible to land. The news was positive, so everyone readied themselves for the final landing of the expedition and we were soon ashore on a large island just inside the mouth of the river.

Evgeny and Rodney had told us that this area was excellent for waterfowl and during the course of the morning, an excellent range of species were found. We had some good views of several small groups of Emperor Geese, as well as White-fronted Geese, Long-tailed Duck, Wigeon, Pintail and Scaup, however, the big surprise was a stunning White Gyrfalcon which was found sitting on the tundra. We slowly approached this enjoying some nice looks through telescopes but were somewhat surprised when it was chased off by a very determined Mountain Hare !!!!!

Moving forward, we refound the falcon sitting on a log out on a sand bar and were able to watch it for the next 20–30 minutes. Although we had enjoyed some great views of this species a few days before, nevertheless, everyone was delighted to see another individual.

As well as the Gyrfalcon, another pleasant surprise was an Aleutian Tern which obligingly flew directly over us. After the disappointment with this species at

Zhupanova River, it was great to now get some good looks and the distinctive white forehead and call were appreciated by all.

By late morning it was time to head back to the landing site and after lunch, it was time to settle accounts and attend an expedition recap and disembarkation briefing. Sadly, our expedition was almost over but we had certainly experienced many things which would stay with us forever.