



Tour report: In Search of Spoon-billed Sandpipers

Day 1: Tuesday 27 June Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy and at Sea

The day of departure has arrived. People eager to do a wildlife tour with Chris convened at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiys' brand new cruise ship terminal at 0700 and promptly set off to tour the area, successfully spotting a family of seven Northern Hawk Owls and 2 Spotted Nutcracker. The rest of us arrived at the terminal at 1500 to board the *Spirit of Enderby*, our home for the next 2 weeks. After getting settled in, Expedition Leader Rodney informed us that we would be departing earlier than scheduled and following his suggestion we made our way out on decks to watch a tug boat assist our departure. We sailed away from the pier and out into Avacha Bay, considered the most beautiful and sheltered harbour in the world. The view was indeed beautiful; unfortunately it was soon obscured as we sailed into a low bank of sea fog. We were called down to the lecture room where Rodney once again welcomed us on board and the staff introduced themselves before Meghan, our Cruise Director, gave us a run down on ship life. Next, Rodney gave the theory side of our lifeboat drill and not long after we did the practical, grabbing some warm clothes and the big orange lifejacket from our cabins before heading up to the lifeboats where Lisle and Chris gave a quick talk about life on the ocean in a lifeboat.

The bar opened at 1830 for the first time and over pre dinner drinks we got to know a few more of our fellow passengers. Dinner was called shortly after and we all made our way down to the dining room where a special welcome aboard dinner had been prepared by chefs Matt and Connor.

Sated, most of us chose to retire to our bunks early while others enjoyed the outside air and evening light for a bit longer.

Day 2: Wednesday 28 June Zhupanova River

Aside from a hardy few already up, Meghan's delightful tones roused us from our slumber at 0615. We had arrived off the mouth of today's destination, the Zhupanova River, a breeding ground of the Steller's Sea Eagle.

Following a delicious breakfast buffet we met with Rodney in the lecture room for a briefing on the use of the Zodiacs. Promptly after, we put our knowledge into practice, deftly boarding the Zodiacs and setting out for our cruise in clearing conditions. The views along the coast were stunning with a distant volcano erupting huge clouds of ash into the air. Perhaps it was the Schmidt Volcano?

On the way to the river mouth we cruised past two big flocks of Slaty-backed Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwake as well as several Kamchatka Gulls and after briefly stopping off at the fish processing factory we continued up the river observing many Largha Seals and good numbers of Red-throated Divers as well as several Far Eastern Curlews. Steller's Sea Eagles were spotted in the distance along the shoreline and unfortunately did not stay too long once our boats started to approach them. Rodney spotted two eagles in a tree on the opposite bank and thanks to careful manoeuvring by the staff we managed to get very nice views of both. Heading further up the river we could hear many songbirds in the trees along the river's edge. Rodney led us to two Steller's Sea-Eagles nests; the first one was unfortunately empty however we were lucky at the second as both birds and their chick were in view. A Carrion Crow pestered one bird off and those with binoculars were able to see the remaining bird reasonably well.

The boats split up shortly after and we explored the river as we slowly made our way back down to the fishing village. One Zodiac was lucky to spot a bear in a meadow as it trundled off towards the tree line and several more Sea-Eagles were observed.

Once we arrived at the village we split into two groups. The birders went with Chris to some nearby marshy grasslands to try their luck and they were indeed lucky as a Long-toed Stint was seen in flight, two stunning Siberian Rubythroats were also spotted and they had some nice looks at several Eastern Yellow Wagtails.

The second group took a gentle walk through the small village to the black sand beach behind. It was a beautiful walk with the sun shining and birds singing all around. A Sea Otter was observed way out in the water, as well as an approaching bank of fog. It was time for us to head back to the ship!

The ride back to *Spirit of Enderby* was a bit bumpier than our journey in, however two Zodiacs spotted a Minke Whale so that made up for the discomfort. After a slight delay we were all back aboard and once the anchor was home we commenced sailing towards our next destination, the Commander Islands.

Following lunch it was nap time for a few of us but the majority spent the afternoon under relatively clear conditions, spotting numerous Tufted Puffins, several Laysan Albatrosses and the usual Northern Fulmars being just a selection. Chris gave an informative presentation on the birds we are likely to see on this trip and at 1700 Rodney was scheduled to give a presentation on the Commander Islands. All was going to plan until several whale blows were seen in the distance, starting with a far off Sperm Whale. More blows were seen ahead and to the sides of the ship, we appeared to have sailed into a productive zone. Several Fin Whales were spotted, one in close proximity to the ship and showing its distinctive white right jaw and beautiful chevron patterning. Humpbacks were in the distance and some appeared to be lunge feeding at the surface, while a Northern Right Whale was seen in close proximity to a Fin Whale. A Minke Whale was spotted and a Blue Whale was seen fluking as it dove deep. Another logging Sperm Whale was spied in the distance and to round this fantastic afternoon off a large male Killer Whale and several smaller ones were seen slightly beyond the Sperm Whale. What an incredible afternoon, 8 different cetacean species within the space of a few hours, not to mention the numerous and varied birds flying around the ship!

There was a distinct buzz in the bar when it opened and it continued on through dinner and into the daily 'Bird Club'. Most of us decided to turn in early after such a fantastic day, resting up for an undoubtedly busy day tomorrow.



Photo credit: M. Kelly

Day 3: Thursday 29 June Bering Island - Commander Islands

Sunrise saw several hardy souls out on deck and beginning the day's bird count under delightful conditions. Their enthusiasm was rewarded with more Laysan Albatross and Tufted Puffins seen. As we approached the village of Nikolskoye, our morning's destination, the bird numbers increased with Tufted Puffin, Common Guillemot, Red and Black-legged Kittiwake as well as others circling the ship for some great photo opportunities.

Following breakfast we met with Rodney and he imparted a short history of the Commander Islands, which were discovered by Commander Bering by accident in 1741 when his ill-fated ship was wrecked there. He then gave a talk through of the layout of the town and where buildings of note were located.

After the anchor was dropped, Rodney and Tania were shuttled ashore to liaise with the local Border Guards. Our passports and papers must have been in good order for the call to board the Zodiacs came soon thereafter. We all gathered on the beach before the birders wandered off on their quest for the Rock Sandpiper, Mongolian Plover and Pechora Pipit. Those remaining made their way towards town and the local museum. We were guided around the atmospheric museum by local woman Evgenia before purchasing some souvenirs and wandering the town. The dichotomy of buildings was impressive to say the least, with shops poked away in seemingly abandoned relics and accommodation blocks

more recently upgraded. The locals were all very friendly and the children curious towards these strange people wandering amongst them.

We all started making our way back to the landing site prior to the 1300 deadline to be shuttled back out to the ship. The birders were all quite happy having viewed the Rock Sandpiper, Mongolian Plover (or lesser Sand Plover), Harlequin Ducks, a high flying Pechora Pipit and numerous Glaucous-winged Gulls.

After an earlier than planned lunch we again met with Rodney for a briefing on this afternoons landing at North West Cape, approximately 9nM from Nikolskoye where we planned to see Steller's Sea Lion and Northern Fur Seal amongst other wildlife.

Boarding the Zodiacs we set off for shore and under ideal conditions landed on some slippery seaweed and met with local ranger Viktor, who led us across the Pechora Pipit studded landscape to the seal colony. Reaching the first lookout at the top of the hill we were afforded fantastic views of said colony with fur seals and Steller Sea Lions of all ages littering the beach, making noise and generally going about their business. Wandering along the cliff top to the second lookout gave us a more enfilade view along the beach and some roamers were lucky enough to watch as an Arctic Fox foraged along the beach and amongst the seals for bits of food to take back to its den. After appreciating the view south along the coastline we turned and headed back to our landing site where the tide had risen. This was not a problem as it meant the Zodiacs could pick us up off the beach, avoiding the slippery rocks.

Once we were all in the Zodiacs we set off for Arij Karmen, a small rocky island a scenic boat ride away. Once there we were treated to a spectacular view of Common and Brunnich's Guillemot, Parakeet Auklets, Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorant, Horned and Tufted Puffins, Black and Red-legged Kittiwakes. The Zodiacs allowed us to see them all from water level and to get so close to the birds was a brilliant thing. On the far side of the island we saw several bull Steller Sea Lions hauled out on the rocks and taking a well-earned break from beach life. Keeping the Zodiacs a safe distance away from these impressive animals bought home the actual size of them, which we couldn't really grasp from the lookouts. After spending over an hour circling the island we returned to the ship to warm up and prepare for another delicious dinner.

Bird Club was postponed this evening as we were sailing parallel to a submarine trench, always a good spot to look for whales. Conditions were almost glassy as the sun dipped towards the horizon, ideal for spotting whales. Despite everyone's best efforts none were seen and as the light started to fade, the last of us turned in to get a well deserved rest.



Photo credit: M. Kelly

Day 4: Friday 30 June Medny Island

Conditions were almost perfect as Meghan made the daily wakeup call. After breakfast we met with Rodney for a short briefing and then boarded the Zodiacs to go ashore at Paschanaya Bay, the site of an old Border Guard station.

Once onshore, and after a quick final briefing, we were free to roam the area. The birders set out to successfully find the Pacific Wren, their target species for the morning, and the rest of us let our feet direct us. To have the opportunity to wander such a pristine environment, following roads cut by the Aleut people, walking the beach or up the densely vegetated slopes was a special experience as not many people are allowed to visit this area. Some people were lucky to spot the endemic subspecies of the Arctic Fox roaming the slopes and at least one passenger spent their time marvelling at the diversity of plant life in this stunning valley. A lone Grey-crowned Rosy Finch was spotted by several people however most of us were too far away to be able get to it before our Zodiac cruise commenced at 1000.

Once we were all back in our boats we followed Rodney out of the bay and to the north, following the coastline and keeping an eye out for any wildlife. Several Larga Seals were seen as well as Harlequin Ducks, Common Eider, numerous Sea Otters, Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorants and Brunnich's Guillemot. Several people briefly spotted a Rosy Finch high on a cliff but despite Chris' attempts to call it lower it would not cooperate and we moved on with our cruise.

The wind steadily picked up so we stayed close to land, exploring the rocks and caves to avoid the worst of it. By the time we were dropped off for a quick leg stretch the gusts had increased again but despite some of us being frozen the wind was offshore and presented no problem for the Zodiacs. Once the *Spirit of Enderby* had relocated we got back aboard and set sail for our afternoon's destination at Commander Bay.

After lunch many of us lined the decks to look out for the Whiskered Auklet, which are known to frequent the area. Despite the sightings being patchy, by some counts well over one thousand were seen with a few very large flocks crossing our bows, a just reward for those who braved the elements.

Approaching Commander Bay mid-afternoon, Rodney decided that conditions were suitable for a landing to visit the historically significant site. Those who were willing to go met in the lecture room where Rodney explained that this is the site where Vitus Bering and his men were shipwrecked in November 1741 and he, along with 15 of his crew, did not survive the winter. After overwintering and building a new boat the surviving members of the expedition managed to sail back to Kamchatka.

After a bumpy ride in we followed the information boards through the historic camp before arriving at the memorial on the side of the hill. It was an atmospheric setting and quite easy to imagine the hardships faced by those men as we looked out over the desolate vista.

Close to the memorial several orchids were unexpectedly seen and caused a flurry of photographic activity, while a lone fox kept a watchful eye from a high vantage point as these interlopers moved below.

After about 20 minutes we made our way back to the shore, boarded the Zodiacs and shuttled back out to the ship. Once the anchor was raised the Captain turned *Spirit of Enderby's* bow westwards and we set sail for tomorrow afternoons planned landing on Karaginskiy Island.

Following dinner there was a double Bird Club to cover yesterday and today's sightings and it was not long after that the ship went quiet as we all turned in.



Photo credit: A. Bishop

Day 5: Saturday 1 July Karaginskiy Island

For some of us the day started, as usual, at sunrise or a bit there after. Many others made the decision to let the angelic tones of Meghan's wakeup call rouse us from our slumber to start the new day.

Following breakfast, Andrew gave a presentation on Volcanoes, the different kinds, their formation and the destruction they can wreak before concluding with a brief geological history on the formation of the Kamchatka area.

This was followed by Christoph, who gave an informative presentation on the fantastic efforts groups of people from many different countries are undertaking to assist in ensuring the survival of the enigmatic wader, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper (SBS). The challenges these passionate people are attempting to surmount range from foraging by predators, habitat destruction through pollution and land reclamation, to hunting by desperately impoverished people. The SBS cover an amazing area ranging from their breeding grounds on the Koriak and Chukotka Coasts to their over wintering destinations as far away as Miramar. A small fundraising gift shop was set up in the bar following Christoph's talk and we each did our part to help in the conservation of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

A very enjoyable lunch was next on the agenda, afterwards most of us went out on decks to enjoy the delightful sunshine and numerous birds that were following the ship. The

amount of birds flying around could be attributed to a Russian trawler that was seen off to our starboard.

Constantine gave a very interesting talk about the nomadic reindeer herders of Russia at 1400. He showed us the diversity of dwellings, clothing and herding styles that each community of herders use. He also demonstrated the close ties between the Russian economy and amount of reindeer the herders farmed.

It was time to get a quick breath of fresh air before Rodney called a short briefing, as we were approaching our afternoons landing at Karaginskiy Island. We went ashore under idyllic; most would say warm, conditions. The birders, as usual, set out to see what they could find. As it turns out Lisle was the man of the hour spotting a Bluethroat against the bank of a small pond along with good numbers of Red-necked Phalaropes and a selection of duck species. The rest of us followed Meghan and Johns lead as they blazed a trail to the seemingly near at hand escarpment. The going was OK as we crossed the relict dunes covered with heather, the situation changed slightly when we arrived at a series of ponds and marshy ground. The mirror calm waters made for some stunning photos, as did the Dwarf Arctic Beach and other plants. The mosquitos were not quite so welcome. Unperturbed, Meghan continued on, deftly finding the safest route through the quagmire and up onto the escarpment where a slight breeze cooled us down. We enjoyed the expansive view for some minutes before the group split yet again, most of us deciding to search for a fox den that Chris told us about, with a few heading back to the beach the way we had come.

We all more or less arrived at the same time to the beach, some slightly more out of breath than others, but by 1930 we were all back on the ship and making a b-line for the bar and a well deserved drink.

Dinner was, as usual, a delicious affair and after a quick Bird Club led by Lisle some chose to turn in while others chose to get a bit more fresh air and enjoy the stunning sunset.



Photo credit: A. Bishop

Day 6: Sunday 2 July Verkhoturova Is & Primetniy Cape

It was another early wakeup call for those still in their bunks. We had arrived at Verkhoturova Island and once again the weather was perfect.

Post breakfast a quick briefing was given by Rodney and soon after we were again embarking the Zodiacs to investigate the impressive bird strewn volcanic cliffs. It took some time to approach the shoreline due to the number of birds rafting on the water, guillemots, auklets and gulls abounded and made for some fantastic photos. Slowly cruising the shoreline turned up some sought after Least Auklets and huge flocks of Crested Auklets and allowed us the opportunity to view thousands of kittiwakes nesting or resting on the slopes.

We all disembarked the Zodiacs on a scenic beach and the majority of us chose to climb the perilous slope behind the beach to gain the grassy plateau above. The struggle was well worth it as by carefully following the edge of the cliffs, nesting kittiwake, Tufted Puffin and Brunnich's Guillemot were easily accessible to all.

We spent a good few hours enjoying the sunshine and gentle breeze, watching birds go about their daily lives and selecting our photographs as they posed 'just so'. Many birds were sitting on eggs and a cormorant was spied standing next to a nest with three chicks in it. Obviously the gentle heat was a bit too much for some. A Red Fox was seen running down the steep slope behind the plateau and one lucky passenger got a very nice view as it came closer to investigate before running off.

We all reconvened back at the landing site and instead of going straight back to the ship Rodney led us around the corner to several offshore rocks, where 32 Steller Sea Lions were hauled out and making noise. As we gently drifted at a respectful distance several herds of sea lion passed our Zodiacs reasonably closely, curious as to what these strange coloured floating things were. Quite a few Larga Seals were seen on barely submerged rocks closer in to shore, displaying the typical banana shape they adopt when resting.

After reboarding the *Spirit of Enderby* we had some time to relax and go through our photos, or perhaps take a short nap, before lunch was called at 1230.

Moshe entertained us with a talk on the botany we have been seeing at 1400. The diversity is astounding and goes to show we should all look down every now and then to see what we are walking over.

We had made good time across to Primetny Cape so Rodney bought forward our planned timings which necessitated Moshe finishing his talk a bit pre-emptively. After a quick briefing we prepared to board the Zodiacs and cruise the coastline looking out for bears. While investigating a shipwreck that had been torn in two last winter some bears were spotted further down the coastline. It was soon determined to be a mother and 3 cubs, not unusual but uncommon none the less. They didn't seem the least bit perturbed by our presence and we followed them along the coastline until they decided to climb the side of the hill. After following the coastline for a while longer we returned to the ship to drop off those who didn't want to go ashore and then returned to the beach. After securing the Zodiacs we set off up a valley, crossing a stream and small snowfield to gain some elevation. Our observation point allowed us a commanding view of the surrounding valleys and it wasn't long before we were settled in and looking for movement. The minutes passed with the sounds of the local area adding a nice backdrop to our vista. A few bears were spotted through the scopes but were a very long way out, nothing was seen in closer proximity. Towards the end of our time we reacquired the mother and three cubs that must have made it up the hill behind the beach and down the other side. We quietly left our post and made our way back to the beach refreshed from such a relaxing experience. While we were getting our lifejackets on Meghan spotted a bear further up the beach who was heading towards us. We gathered in a tight group, waiting in anticipation to see what it would do when it stuck its head around the corner. It was a brief encounter for as soon as it spied us it backed off, had another quick look and stood up then retreated at a good clip. Most of us walked down the beach to look around the corner of the rocky outcrop but did not see it, it had climbed the hill to get away.

We all returned and boarded the Zodiacs out to the ship where dinner was promptly called. Bird Club was cancelled for tonight considering it was such a long day and since we had another early morning tomorrow most of us headed straight for our bunks once Peta's birthday cake was finished up.



Photo credit: A. Bishop



Photo credit: A. Bishop

Day 7: Monday 3 July Tintikun Lagoon

Meghan's sunny voice brightened an otherwise overcast morning as she welcomed us to a new day. Breakfast was well attended and after a pre-landing briefing from Rodney we embarked the Zodiacs and set out for Tintikun Lagoon. The Lagoon was formed by the end moraine of a glacier that has since disappeared, and a shallow stream allowed access to us so we could cruise the shoreline looking for bears and birds. Due to the depth of the stream we all disembarked and walked to the lagoons shore line as the drivers slowly made their way upstream. As the first walkers arrived two bears were spotted on the opposite side of the stream and we watched them for a good few minutes before they caught wind of us and hurriedly reversed their direction and disappeared into the bush. Chris took the birding group and successfully called in a Red-flanked Bluetail before it was time to jump back in the Zodiacs and see what else we could find. Several Grey Wagtails were seen before we stopped again, this time to visit some 'hot' pools on a small spit of land. The only way to make these springs truly hot is to plunge into the lagoons frigid waters before running to the pools, which some of the more fool hardy staff decided to do. Moshe voluntarily gave a short talk about Orchids while Chris tried to call in some other small birds from two different locations with the best birds being a pair of Pine Grosbeaks and several Dusky Thrushes.

Once we were back in the Zodiacs we followed Rodney across to the end of the lagoon where a bear was busy relaxing in the grass. We all managed to get great views from the Zodiacs as the bear wandered the area before disappearing into the bushes. Several more bears were spotted on the nearby slopes and a curious bear was seen sitting in the bushes for quite some time, happy to observe the observers observing the observer. There were too many bears in the area to go ashore so we relocated to a rangers hut and after the area was checked for bears we all disembarked to stretch our legs and take some dramatic landscape photos. After about 20 minutes it was time to head back to the ship. Chris and Andrew cruised the coastline looking for more passerines. They saw an Arctic Ground Squirrel instead.

The wind had picked up throughout the morning, making the ride out to the ship quite bumpy and splashy. The gangway was a little bit challenging however we all made it back aboard safely.

After lunch and a short rest period we were called to the lecture room where Rodney conducted the pre-landing briefing for our afternoon's Zodiac Cruise at Lavrova Bay.

Thankfully the fiord system was sheltered from the winds we experienced this morning, the cloud remained but this just added to the dramatic atmosphere. We cruised the southern side of the fiord, looking out for any wildlife and spotting quite a few Harlequin Ducks. At the back of the fiord are the remains of an old herring processing factory and it was to this we were making our way. First up we visited the ruins of the southern plant, impressed with the amount of old wood that was laying around and trying to recreate how it looked in its heyday. A bear was spotted on the opposite shore and so after about half an hour of roaming we returned to the Zodiacs to get closer and see if it was a friendly bear. Unfortunately it wasn't, however it didn't seem too put out as it slowly trundled off into the bush, turning back every now and then to show off the white blaze on its face. We turned around and set out for the northern, and much larger, settlement on the opposite side of

the fiord. On approach another bear was spotted and so we followed Rodney as he went for a closer look. This bear was very relaxed and not at all disturbed by our presence, quite happily strolling along the beach as we followed its progress from our boats. As it came to the buildings it decided to turn inland and left the beach and our view. That seemed to be the perfect way to end this cruise, there was no chance of doing a landing now that a bear was strolling the abandoned ruins. We headed out of the fiord and into some wind-driven swell which caused a good amount of bounce for those sitting in the front of the Zodiacs. Eventually we arrived at the ship, and after embarking relaxed in our cabins or the bar until dinner was called at 1900. A double Bird Club was well attended after dinner and once that had concluded it wasn't long before we were all safely ensconced in our bunks.



Photo credit: M. Kelly

Day 8: Tuesday 4th July Koryak Coast

After a bumpy night it was with mixed emotions we listened to Meghan make her usual chirpy wakeup call at 0645. After breakfast Rodney let us know that the weather was not at all favourable to disembark the ship, let alone land, at our mornings planned destination. Instead we were sailing to another area we hoped to look at to see how conditions were there. While Lisle and John unravelled the mysteries around taking world class photos, Rodney led two Zodiacs to shore to better asses conditions. After a good look at several potential landing sites it was determined the fog and amount of bear sign seen was not a good mix and so this landing was also cancelled.

As we continued further north Meghan opened the ship shop for a bit of retail therapy. A broad range of items meant most of us indulged in purchasing at least something as a memento of our time in the Russian Far East.

Following lunch Andrew gave a presentation on glaciers and the landforms they leave behind and this helped better explain the landscape we have seen over the past few days and hopefully will see again before the end of the trip, fog depending.

We were lucky to witness the inaugural presentation of Christoph's talk on the feeding ecology and adaptations of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper at 1600. It was an informative talk that stimulated discussion about the *Calidris* genera's feeding strategies.

Several Humpback Whales were spotted as the ship entered our harbour for the night, with at least one seen lunge feeding. Kittlitz's Murrelet's were also seen in amongst the fog, some sitting on the water and others flying past the bow. Thankfully the swell dropped as we sailed further into the fjord, and with the fog lifting just enough for us to view the shoreline we were tempted into trying our luck at spotting birds in the shallows.

Meghan announced the bar open at 1800. This was enough to encourage some of us in out of the foggy damp, or from our bunks, to partially slake our thirst before dinner. After Bird Club a few of our contingent stayed at the bar to celebrate America's Independence Day before retiring for the night.

Day 9: Wednesday 5 July

Koryak Coast

It was again a foggy morning and our plans were adapted to suit the conditions. Despite the overcast conditions Rodney was keen to get us off the ship and as such four Zodiacs set out on an atmospheric cruise towards the entrance of the fiord while three of our number went kayaking with John. We managed to see several different species of birds but for the most part the cruise was about the scenery. We stopped off at a graveyard where several people were buried, most notably a Captain, Chief Mate and Bosun, who had died at different times. We continued up into the side branch of the fiord system and landed at a glacial outwash plain for a quick leg stretch and to observe a flock of birds sitting on a bar in the shallows. Rodney declared the return to *Spirit of Enderby* a race with the last Zodiac back shouting the bar. Andrew's Zodiac was first back and Rodney, through some 'competitive' manoeuvring only just secured second position from Lisle. Once the kayakers were aboard the Captain heaved anchor and we set sail to see if the conditions onshore would allow us a landing for the afternoon. During our exit from the bay Chris called out over the PA that a walrus was seen nearby in the water. There was a frantic rush to the outside decks however not everyone got to see this enigmatic Arctic mammal.

Following lunch another call was made, this time a Gray Whale was spotted to Port and reasonably close. Those who made the dash outside were fortunate enough to see the whale blow several times before the ship had sailed past. Once we had arrived at our destination, Rodney, Lisle, Christoph and Chief Engineer Costa boarded two Zodiacs to scout our planned landing site for the afternoon. Conditions were not favourable for crossing the bar safely so we heaved anchor and set sail for another destination, aiming to arrive there just after an early dinner.

While on approach to this destination we searched for more walrus, for if there is one there are usually more in the area. Despite our best efforts the walrus evaded detection and

soon after we dropped anchor offshore from another abandoned herring fishing factory. Dinner was called for 1830, just after Rodney gave a quick brief to those who wanted to brave the elements ashore. We enjoyed yet another sumptuous meal and then dressed in our waterproofs and were shuttled ashore in overcast and rainy conditions.

Once onshore we kept as a loose group and wandered past the derelict buildings, making sure we made plenty of noise to alert any potential furry occupants of our presence. The wet conditions certainly lent an air of desolation to the ruined structures, still, they were interesting to look into, taking note of the items that had been left behind once things had closed down. Despite the weather the birders saw a number of species including Red-throated Pipit and Northern House Martin. Shuttles back to the ship commenced from 2100 and on our return, and after drying out, a delicious desert of crème brûlée awaited. A pleasant way to end the day.

Kayak Log

As the sounds of the Zodiacs faded into the fog, two double-kayaks slipped quietly through the calm waters. In one craft were Pam and Craig, with David and kayak guide John in the other. As the snow-streaked peaks surrounding this fiord appeared through the fog, the magic of the setting became apparent.

Several Harbour Seals watched the paddlers, their curiosity keeping them on the surface, unthreatened by the kayakers' quiet travel. A wagtail flew from a rocky bank past the bow of David's kayak, closer than he had seen one before. Large numbers of Common Eider Ducks were observed close to the south-western shoreline, and two Harlequin Ducks, with their distinctive markings, nestled on a rock and let the kayakers pass by.

It was noted how the slow pace of travel seemed to relax both the fauna and the paddlers, and both parties were content quietly watching the other.

As clouds swirled around the peaks, a light rain started, the splashes the only movement on the placid waters. The *Spirit of Enderby* appeared through the fog, and all too soon the Zodiacs returned from their cruise, signalling the end of the paddle.



Photo credit: J. Kirk-Anderson

Day 10: Thursday 6 July Koryak Coast

Our repositioning overnight was once again a bumpy affair, although now being hardened sailors this did not disturb us too much. Although the swell remained, sunshine once again greeted us as we started a new day. After a 0700 breakfast we very carefully boarded the Zodiacs in order to search for Gray Whales. The swell was still quite in evidence which led to some enjoyable driving and it was interesting to note the other Zodiacs disappearing from view every now and then. Lisle spotted a blow away off down the beach but despite a concerted search we could not locate the whale it belonged to. For the birders, the highlights included several Kittlitz's Murrelets. After approximately an hour the decision was made to cut our losses and return to the ship in order to spend more time at our afternoon destination.

Once the Zodiacs were aboard and secured we set sail, keeping a look out for blows and walrus in the water. After lunch our diligence was rewarded with quite a few walrus seen relatively close as the ship sailed past.

Anchoring off our next planned landing we went into standby mode as Rodney deemed crossing the bar too risky. He would wait for an hour or so before checking again when the tide was higher. In the meantime Constantine gave an enjoyable presentation on the lives of Meinypil'gyno and the Chukchi and their traditional way of living.

Following two more scouting missions Rodney made the tough decision that while conditions had improved only three Zodiacs of seven passengers would be going ashore to search for Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Under the leadership of Chris, Meghan and Christoph the teams boarded the Zodiacs and set out for a wet and bumpy ride ashore.

After several hours searching the teams arrived back aboard in fine spirits. Meghan's team decided to search some unlikely habitat towards the end of the landing and the decision paid off as several Spoon-billed Sandpipers were spotted in amongst other nesting waders. This is an encouraging find as Christoph believes the number of birds is more than when this site was last searched.

As the ship set sail for Meinypil'gyno a second dinner was put on for the searchers and after a short sojourn to the bar for Bird Club it was time for bed.



Photo credit: C. Collins

Day 11: Friday 7 July Meinypil'gyno

The sun was once again out as Meghan made the wakeup call. Most of us were already awake and out on deck, searching the surrounding sea for wildlife. We were anchored off Meinypil'gyno and the swell was still enough to make the ship roll. Rodney had been up early to collect some locals and they, as well as some staff and crew, were busy offloading supplies for the town and the SBS Taskforce. At the same time Tania was liaising with the Border Guards for clearance so we could promptly disembark after an early lunch. Evgeny Syrevochoskiy, the head of the SBS taskforce, was on board so just before lunch was called we met with Rodney and Evgeny to learn more about our plans for the rest of the day.

Everything had run to plan so after lifting the anchor to make disembarkation a bit easier we followed Rodney in across the bar. Looking at the small huts, people fishing along the rivers banks and the fish factory it was as if Constantine's photos had come to life.

We all disembarked and set out for the SBS, most deciding to walk but some of us took up the offer of a lift in one of the three vehicles on offer. It was good to get a leg stretch as we made our way through the town and out onto the tundra, eventually arriving at the muster point and waiting to see the two nesting Spoon-billed Sandpipers just a bit further up the road. The pair was quite skittish and took a short while to return to the area, cautiously keeping an eye on us as they slowly made their way back to the nest. We had split into three groups and as we waited to cycle through a friendly and curious Arctic Ground Squirrel kept us entertained. After getting some nice views of the SBS through the scope we made our way back to the township, some along the roads, and others along the bank of the lagoon hoping to spot more wildlife.

After a short wait back at the landing site we again boarded the Zodiacs to return to the ship. The swell at the bar had dropped but it was still a bit bumpy and we had to weave amongst Larga Seals on the way out. A mother and calf Gray Whale were seen quite close at hand as we cleared the choppy waves and after spending a short while with them continued on out to the ship.

The bar was opened a bit earlier than usual, and with worthy cause. With less than 200 birders having ever visited Meinypil'gyno we are now part of a very exclusive club and are so very lucky to have seen such an iconic bird in its nesting grounds.

Dinner was served at 1900 and another Bird Club followed before we could call an end to a very successful day.

Day 12: Saturday 8 July Meinypil'gyno & Pika River

Although the swell continued to abate overnight, the not so gentle rocking motion of the ship was a bit too much for some people trying to sleep. Meghan made the wakeup call at 0715, announcing the overcast weather and following breakfast we got ready to go back to Meinypil'gyno for a cultural performance. The fog slowly lifted and we had a bit of spare time to get some more nice views of Gray Whales as we slowly made our way towards the bar. Rodney led the way across and soon enough we were once again dropping our lifejackets in the white bins onshore. We made our way up to the local hall where a group of school children met us in traditional dress and encouraged us to don some spare costumes for a photo. Some staff were very excited to do this and were in such a rush to dress up they decided to utilise the spare female attire and put on the women's costume. This caused some confusion amongst the locals until they realised it actually suited said member of staff quite well.

Once we were settled in the hall we were entertained with several traditional dances and songs and also some demonstrations of local games. Participants were called from the crowd to test their prowess against the locals. Some succeeded and took the opportunity to challenge other staff. After a victory against a local lad half his size, Lisle challenged Rodney to a game of stick-pull and graciously took a dive to the elder statesman in the interest of self-preservation. At the end of the show many of us got out of our chairs and quickly learnt a traditional dance about the Chukchi and their cousins from Alaska. It was a great way to end the cultural exchange.

Once we were back at the landing site we split into three groups, one setting off with Chris and Meghan to look for birds on the lagoon, one going with Lisle and Costa to look for mammals and the remaining few people visited the museum. We all spent a few hours

exploring our respective locales before making our way back to the landing site to catch a Zodiac out to the ship. After a few hiccups were ironed out we were all back aboard and enjoying a lunch prepared by Matt as we sailed towards Pika River, a place known to have walrus hauled out if conditions are right.

On the way we were lucky enough to see several pods of Killer Whale pass by the ship and some understandably nervous walrus. As we approached Pika River more and more Gray Whales were spotted blowing and fluking both near and further out from the ship. A buzz went through the bridge as a lot of Walrus were seen at their haul-out. This meant dinner would be delayed and a Zodiac cruise be offered in short order. Those who wanted to go bundled into their waterproofs and lined up at the gangway where Tania and Andrew counted us into the boats and we set out. As we approached the shoreline it was evident we were looking at quite a few walrus, Chris and Rodney estimated the number at least 1000+! A few small herds were in the water and walrus, although nervous on land, can become very curious in the water. These animals did not disappoint, urging each other ever closer to us and allowing for some fantastic photo opportunities. And some very, very smelly odours. An hour passed by in a flash and it was getting time to head back out to the ship so we left the walrus and were lucky enough to spend some quality time with a few Gray Whales.

Once back aboard it was a mad dash to get our gear off and to the bar to grab a well-deserved celebratory drink after such a close encounter to these charismatic and curious animals. Dinner was called at 2100 and bed time followed not long after.



Photo credit: M. Kelly



Photo credit: M. Kelly

Day 13: Sunday 9 July Keyngypilgyn Lagoon

Rodney woke us this morning with the unfortunate news that due to fog and persistent swell we would not be going ashore at Keyngypilgyn Lagoon as planned, and would instead set sail for the pilot station at Anadyr. Throughout the morning we took the opportunity to start packing up our cabins and attempt to stuff all our gear back into our bags. Divesting our no longer required rubber boots helped in this endeavour somewhat, although for some it was still a struggle given the purchases that were made during our journey.

At 1000 Fedor, a researcher with the SBS Taskforce, gave a talk on the Genetics of the SBS. We learnt how taking genetic material can greatly assist with the head start program in maintaining as much genetic diversity as possible and other interesting things genetics research can help with. At 1130 we returned to the lecture room to listen as Rodney talked about the history, trials and tribulations of being a pioneer of the tourist industry in the Russian Far East. To gain a small insight into what goes into organising these trips and the tenacity needed simply boggles the mind. Meghan was also there to explain the logistics of provisioning the ships for such a long season, the forethought required and the problem solving and adaptability needed by the staff and crew when not everything arrives as it should.

After lunch it was time to settle our on board accounts and so deck by deck Meghan called us to the office to lighten our bank balance. We arrived at anchor off the Anadyr pilot

station mid-afternoon under drizzly conditions. With a few spare minutes it was time to finish packing our bags and ensuring we had all the necessary paperwork to disembark tomorrow.

We met once more in the lecture room for a recap of our expedition and a disembarkation briefing before we prepared for our final dinner. Our time aboard *Spirit of Enderby* was drawing to a close, and looking back at all the wonderful experiences and sights we were lucky to be a part of it is easy to see why we were drawn to the Russian Far East in the first place.

Day 14: Monday 10 July
Anadyr

After breakfast disembarkation procedures commenced by barge across the harbour, concluding this Siberia's Forgotten Coast expedition.



**Davis House, Lodge Causeway, Bristol,
BS16 3JB. UK**
Tel: 0117 9658 333
[web:www.wildwings.co.uk](http://www.wildwings.co.uk)