



# WildWings

## Tour report: Kamchatka: The Ring of Fire

### Day 1: Tuesday 30th May Avacha Bay, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy

With the 30th May 2017 dawning bright and sunny, a fresh set of expeditioners had assembled in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy for the start of the Russian Far East season. Our epic voyage began amongst the stunning scenery of Avacha Bay, which some declare one of the best natural harbours in the world. It was here that Bering and Steller set sail on their somewhat ill-fated expedition to discover America in 1741, so it was a poignant moment leaving the dock and heading out into the blue waters once sailed by legends. It was with great anticipation that we set sail beneath volcano peaks, towering above the horizon and steaming lightly into the sky. Along the way the numerous keen birders on board noted highlights including **Spectacled Guillemot**, **Ancient Murrelet**, **Tufted Puffin**, **Harlequin Duck** and both **Pelagic** and **Red-faced Cormorants**.

### Day 2: Wednesday 31st May At sea toward the Commander Islands

A day at sea is always met with excitement, whether it be the excitement of catching up on sleep deprived by jet lag, or the excitement of sailing into the great blue unknown. We were exceptionally fortunate this year with some fantastic sightings to kick us off. Large whales were in positive abundance with 10+ **Fin Whale** and 9+ **Humpback Whales** seen, along with a single **Sperm Whale** and, surprisingly, the phenomenal total of 12+ **Blue Whales**, seen by everybody who wanted to see one - truly unexpected and very well received by all on board! Birds were well represented today too, with **Red-legged Kittiwake** becoming a firm favourite, and flocks of **Long-tailed**, **Pomarine** and **Arctic Skuas** capturing attention. Huge flocks of **Red Phalarope** were a fan favourite, as were an abundance of **Tufted Puffins** and a couple of **Horned Puffin**, as well as various stowaways including a couple of **Olive-backed Pipits** and a stunning male **Siberian Rubythroat** that spent a little time on the deck resting.



*Photo credit: L. Gwynn*

### **Day 3: Thursday 1st June Bering Island, North-west Cape and Arij Karmen Island**

Our arrival to the fabled Commander Islands, the last rocks in the Aleutian chain, were marked by blazing sunshine and glorious warmth (relatively speaking), a surprise for most on board. It didn't take us long to cut through the anticipation and excitement and get from the ship to shore where we split into a couple of groups and some went for a wander on their own. The highlight for many was a visit to the local museum and a local artist's gallery where two complete **Steller's Sea Cow** skeletons can be found, along with a good overview of the islands' history, both natural and human. The birders and naturalists enjoyed a long foray into the surrounding area where they found, among others, a shore littered with **Rock Sandpipers**, **Dunlin**, **Harlequin** and **Mongolian Plovers**, and an open area filled with responsive **Lapland Bunting** and **Pechora Pipit**.

Next up on the agenda for today was a visit to North-west Cape where we enjoyed a spectacular show by the **Northern Fur Seal** and **Steller's Sea Lion** colony, which was well tended by **Arctic Foxes** and featured clouds of **Horned Puffin** and constant fly-bys of **Glaucous-winged Gull** and **Pelagic** and **Red-faced Cormorants**. The viewing platforms here really allowed prolonged study of the amazing interactions of the giant mammals, which included a simultaneous charge to the ocean by a large group of fur seals, seemingly spooked by something in the distance.

The highlight for the birders, and many others, this afternoon was a late visit to Arij Karmen, a small rocky island off of Bering Island that hosts thousands upon thousands of breeding seabirds of many species. We spent a couple of hours cruising the edge of the island, seeing, watching and photographing birds including **Red-**

**legged Kittiwake, Ancient Murrelet, Crested and Parakeet Auklets**, three species of guillemot and a surprise in the form of two **Wandering Tattlers**. The sight and smell of giant **Steller's Sea Lions** saw us off into the sunset.



*Photo credit: O. Belonovich*

#### **Day 4: Friday 2nd June**

#### **Medny Island (Peschannaya Bay) and Lisinskaya Bay**

We awoke this morning to a much lumpier and bumpier day than the previous, which made our ride into Peschannaya Bay a little more exciting, though at least we arrived into the beautiful bay dry. We had several hours to explore this breathtaking natural bowl of a valley, with many splitting up and the birders remaining mostly together. Highlights were many and for some included hikes up the valley sides among thick green grass to visit the breeding colonies of **Tufted** and **Horned Puffins**, affording spectacular panoramic views along the way. A beautiful couple of **Arctic Foxes** (of the Medny Island subspecies) patrolled the valley giving excellent encounters to many, whilst a stunning **Common Rosefinch**, a very responsive **Pacific Wren** and a surprise **Yellow-breasted Bunting** that formed a small migrant posse with **Grey-streaked Flycatcher** and **Siberian Rubythroat** were highlights for the birders. Off the shore we found many **Harlequin**, **Pacific Eider**, **Eurasian Teal**, **Pigeon Guillemots** and thousands of **Pacific Fulmar** before returning to the ship ahead of our afternoon excursions.

The transit to our afternoon point of exploration, Lisinskaya Bay, produced hundreds of **Crested Auklets** and the much-desired **Whiskered Auklet**. Our excursion in the afternoon was a well-placed Zodiac cruise along the coast specifically in search of otters, and find otters we most certainly did. Along the coast we drifted, floated and motored, exploring every nook and cranny we could squeeze ourselves into, and in amongst the vast kelp beds we found several hundred **Pacific Sea Otter** which frolicked, hunted, relaxed on the surface and generally entertained us for a couple of hours. During our pleasant and relaxed cruise, other highlights included dozens and dozens of **Harlequin** and several **Arctic Fox** exploring the beaches. The harlequins in particular gave fantastic photographic opportunities, often approaching closely and giving rapid fly-bys showing off their unique and stunning plumage.

### **Day 5: Saturday 3rd June Zhupanova River**

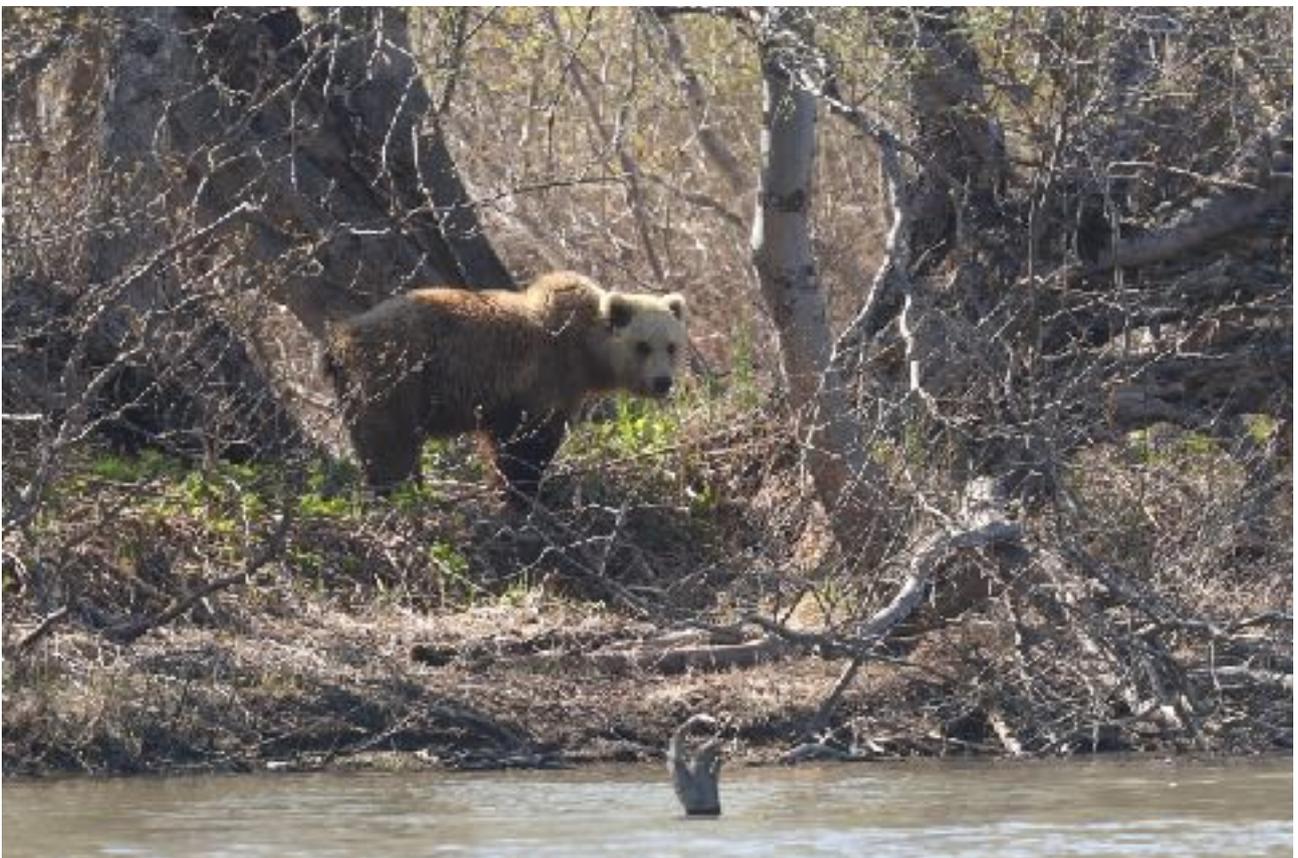
Our morning at sea approaching the coast of mainland Kamchatka was taken as a period of rest for many onboard, either editing photos from previous days, relaxing in the library and reading, or on the bridge or on deck looking for pelagic wildlife. On the wildlife front it was somewhat uneventful until shortly before lunch time when, under the looming horizon dominated by towering volcanoes, a trio of **Blue Whales** were spotted and gave fantastic views. It is not often one encounters these ocean leviathans, and even less often that they appear beneath such a spectacular horizon. In the distance we could see some of the most perfectly-conical volcanoes, complete with black and white snow veining and marbling and steaming calderas.

This afternoon we launched all of our Zodiacs and cruised the Zhupanova River for several hours, entering the mouth of the river which was flanked by **Black-headed** and **Kamchatka Gulls**, and making our way up seeing **Aleutian Tern** and a few of the mighty **Steller's Sea Eagles** along the way. The river itself is vast, long, winding and very wide which allows us free roam of the waterways, giving us room to explore each bank and the land that lays beyond. The pinnacle of our journey was seeing several **Steller's Sea Eagle** nests, one of which featured a visit by a bird carrying nesting material and the appearance of its chick as it approached. It is not often we get to see the chicks of the eagles and to time our visit so perfectly with the arrival of an adult and the changeover of nest attendance is remarkable. This is always a special experience, and this one in particular is one never to be forgotten. Elsewhere along the river we also found dozens of **Red-throated Divers** which formed a constant stream of gangly-necked fly-overs, **Goosander**, **Goldeneye**, **Common Tern** of the distinctive *longipennis* subspecies, and a couple of **Muskrat** which proved elusive, as well as a surprise couple of **Brown Bear** which performed well for several Zodiacs before disappearing into the forest - a highlight for everyone!

Our visit to Zhupanova is often accompanied by an afternoon landing beside the Salmon fishing camp. This is not only to stretch our legs but to take in the abundant and varied flora that lays in the fields beside as well as look for several species of bird. Despite much searching, we couldn't find **Long-toed Stint** but many **Common Snipe** gave good encounters including their raucous display flights. Soon it was time to return to the ship though, but the experience wasn't over yet, with some enjoying views of **Long-billed Murrelet** on the way - a bird that is particularly tough to catch up with, and even rivalled the eagles as top highlight for some.



*Photo credit: M. Kelly*



*Photo credit: C. Collins*

## Day 6: Sunday 4th June Bukhta Russkaya

A glorious dawn broke early this morning, bathing the incredibly scenic fjord of Bukhta Russkaya in a spectacular, warm orange glow. The ride in was positively dream-like, with mirror-calm water making the passage more than comfortable and a couple of **Long-billed Murrelets** creating some excitement. Beyond us we looked upon thick snow-covered undulations in the valley as well as a curiously scenic ship wreck on the southern shore. On land we found a thick covering of snow that provided lots of laughs and more than a few snowball fights, whilst the birders went for an extended explore and found **Brown-headed** and **Eyebrowed Thrushes**, **Japanese Grey Bunting**, **Rustic Bunting**, plenty of stunning **Siberian Rubythroats** and some long overdue **Oriental Greenfinch**. It was truly great fun to spend time in the snow here as it marks probably the only time in this particular journey that we encounter 'real' snow.

The second part of today's outing involved an extended Zodiac cruise out beyond the mouth of the fjord. Along the way we found towering and breathtaking cliffs, a wide open bay, a gurgling and roaring **Steller's Sea Lion** haul out, lots of **Pigeon Guillemots**, a lot of beautiful **Harlequin Ducks** and plenty of both **Tufted** and **Horned Puffins** to see and photograph. As is often the case here in the Russian Far East, it is the scenery that scores highest in the 'impressive' scale, and it is hard to put into words the experience of cruising along silky smooth sea, exploring these rugged shores, marked only by occasional waterfalls and a haunting lighthouse at the end of land.



*Photo credit: L. Gwynn*

## **Day 7: Monday 5th June**

### **At sea off of Atlasova & Onekotan Islands**

Unfortunately today was marred by some unfavourable weather so our planned landings at Atlasova and Onekotan had to be cancelled in favour of waiting in the area and seeing the weather out, in the hope of better fortune on the horizon. The sea around Atlasova saw us dragging anchor and no safe disembarkation of the ship into Zodiacs could be made so we instead spent the time moving between the islands which was productive with **Crested** and **Whiskered Auklets** seen in numbers; however the standout highlight wildlife-wise was a stonking young **Short-tailed Albatross**, a lifer for many on board and one of the holy grails of far east birding. Others took the opportunity to watch the scenery and omnipresent volcanoes, whilst some read or took the chance to edit photos and socialise around the ship.

## **Day 8: Tuesday 6th June**

### **Onekotan & Ekarma Islands**

Delaying our landing on Onekotan from yesterday afternoon and waiting out the weather proved to be a great decision as this morning we were met with a spectacular sunrise over the dual volcanoes of Onekotan. After an exciting landing we arrived on the soft sand beach at the north of the island and departed on walks across the island. All left together, scaling an intimidating yet easy meander up the steep valley side and onwards into the distance to the Black Lake, crossing areas of thick and low vegetation and stumpy dwarves Stone Pine. The scenery was magnificent and the wildlife was equally as impressive with good **Pine Grosbeak** and **Asian Rosyfinch** being the highlights, with a supporting cast of **Buff-bellied Pipits**, **Peregrine** and some out of place looking **Tufted Ducks**. All in all this was a fantastic chance to stretch the legs for those that wished, with longer quicker walks available as well as shorter more relaxed, but equally as scenically-impressive walks available for those that chose. No matter where we chose to go, we were always looking up and across at the dominating volcanoes of these upper kurils.

A short transit this afternoon took us to the small outlying island of Ekarma where we took the opportunity under favourable conditions to drop the Zodiacs in anticipation of an evening cruise in search of... well... whatever we could find. This was a good decision as we cruised the grassy-valley flanked shores, towering rugged cliffs and gravel beaches, finding the reintroduced '**Cackling Goose**' at our outset. Moving along the island we found a bounty of **Kuril Guillemots** and **Horned Puffins** to photograph, but it was a large number of **Rhinoceros Auklets** that really stole the show. In the distance we admired steaming and smouldering craters, fumerols and sulphurous vents of the surrounding volcanoes as darkness descended and we had to make our way back to the ship. The final find of the evening was a lone **Pacific Sea Otter**.



*Photo credit: M. Kelly*

### **Day 9: Wednesday 7th June Simushir & Yankicha Islands**

Simushir is without a doubt one of the highlights of this already spectacular expedition. An old, abandoned submarine base lays within the heart of the caldera of an extinct volcano; with a collapsed wall we are able to Zodiac directly into the flooded centre of the island, landing on the shore and exploring the ruins of civilisation that appear to have been abandoned in a rush. Among them lay trucks, buildings, depots and even anti-aircraft guns. On the land we found **Siberian Rubythroat** by the bucketload, **Black-faced** and **Japanese Grey Buntings**, **Spotted Nutcrackers**, **Oriental Greenfinch** and a curiously dark **Red Fox**. Long before all of this though, our departure from the ship was met with an incredible encounter with all three North Pacific albatrosses with a young **Short-tailed Albatross** coming up first, followed by an adult **Black-footed Albatross** for those that were unexpected yet wished for, whilst **Laysan Albatross** floated by the dozens all around the ship and Zodiacs.

The evening of this day of the expedition is always a favourite. Relocating the short distance to Yankicha Island we boarded the Zodiacs once more, later in the evening, and entered another flooded caldera. Here we bobbed and floated as the sky went black with both evening, and birds. Several million auklets were soon flooding the caldera of this giant volcano, with hundreds of thousands of **Whiskered Auklets** the favourites, the millions of **Crested Auklets** falling not far behind. We made a landing in the mid evening enjoying very close encounters with **Arctic Foxes** and steaming fumarols and hot springs before returning to the water to enjoy the height of the birds' return to the island, revelling in the clouds of auklets. This has to be one of the world's great spectacles and can be matched by very few places on the planet - perhaps only Yamskie, on our Sea of Okhotsk

expedition, can match this experience. This event is not *just* about *birds*, as many of the non-birders discovered - the spectacle in itself is worth the time for everybody as it is purely that staggering.



*Photo credit: L. Gwynn*

### **Day 10: Thursday 8th June Urup Island**

With an extended amount of time available to us at Urup we made a long afternoon landing, affording us an entire afternoon to wander, explore, bird and even swim in the sunshine. The bay in which we land is vast with a deep bamboo-filled valley taking the farther ground, towering cliffs and valley sides marking the outer boundaries, and a lighthouse and lookout point on the furthest points respectively. Most found viewpoints at either end of the large bay to enjoy the scenery, whilst others went birding and found **Japanese Bush-Warbler**, **Long-tailed Rosefinch**, **White-tailed Eagle** and **Japanese Cormorant** as well as **Grey-bellied Bullfinch** and **Eastern Crowned Warbler** to add to their lists. Everybody who went for a stroll, wander or hike came back with tales of amazing views, brilliant wildlife and a gloriously pleasant afternoon, whilst a couple of people even took a dip in the frigid ocean, washing away any cobwebs and coming out refreshed and with a new found appreciation for the Kuril's subarctic climate.

## **Day 11: Friday 9th June**

### **Iturup Island**

Arriving off of Iturup many were surprised at its relative size. After cruising through many smaller islands, which can be taken in over the space of a short while, Iturup is a bit of an anomaly being absolutely huge and somewhat unique in the Kurils as it is actually home to a small population of people, the first we have encountered in some time. For us, that means we can penetrate deep into the heart to this large island thanks to the infrastructure and availability of many 4x4 vehicles. Today was special as we formed a convoy to cross the island, exploring as we went. At our first stop we enjoyed a magical view from upon high, looking out over the huge volcano at the island's north end, and the *Prof. Khromov* sitting in the serene bay with a full vista and panorama of the northern end of the island. The birders also walked away astounded as their main targets - **Japanese Accentor** and **Japanese Robin** - both performed incredibly well, both sitting out in the open and singing their hearts out. At the height of our journey we walked in formation, marching toward our shared goal - a soothing and long soak in the hot pools that lay at the end of our journey, sitting neck deep in bubbling warm springs amongst spectacular scenery, relaxing, socialising, sharing tales and stories of travels. Others birded their way along the track finding lots to occupy their attention including the locally endemic subspecies of **Eurasian Nuthatch** though the relative heat of the day meant activity was slow; it must also be said that with all of their target birds achieved in such an early start there was very little pressure to find anything major here and they enjoyed more of a relaxed, enjoyable birding walk than anything concentrated and targeted.

Our return to the ship was winding, with a stop at a river providing a refreshing break and a **Chestnut-cheeked Starling**, **Latham's Snipe** and **Pacific Swifts** for the birders, before everybody enjoyed a stop in the town where we could observe and immerse in the locals' every day life here in the Kurils before returning to the ship for a well-earned lavish meal.

## **Day 12: Saturday 10th June**

### **Kunashir Island**

After a noticeable switch in climate and ecosystem over the past few days we reached the pinnacle of change at Kunashir with a somewhat subtropical climate featuring smooth sea, barmy sunshine and a summer that is truly out in force. Landing on the beach it was immediately obvious to everyone how different Kunashir in particular is to the other islands, though the predominance of tall pine and bamboo is shared with Iturup and Urup too. Several longer walks were taken whilst some chose to stay and wander along the beach. The walks produced a wonderful leg stretch, time in fresh air and sunshine, and some great wildlife along the way. River creeks, bamboo meadows and pine forest were strolled, whilst a particularly rocky and interest-laden beach was scoured for oddities and treasures. The volcano that loomed over us today is often touted as one of, if not the most beautiful in the world with its double peak, formed after a previous eruption resulted in the formation of a smaller secondary peak within the main caldera, giving it a two-tiered or 'moated' appearance. We also scoured the forest and meadows for wildlife, finding **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker**, **Eastern Crowned Warbler**, **Crested Kingfisher**,

**Common Kingfisher, Kamchatka Leaf Warbler, Long-tailed Rosefinch** and lots of both **Oriental** and **Common Cuckoos**. Offshore we saw **Pacific** and **White-billed Divers**, **Japanese** and **Pelagic Cormorants** and dozens of **White-winged Scoter** and **Harlequin**. This proved to be the perfect ending to the expedition with time for excellent new wildlife, new culture in the form of a Japanese graveyard, and time to relax and stroll at leisure in the sunshine, most even down to t-shirts by the time we re-grouped on the beach. Highlight for some on the beach was a particularly curious **Red Fox** that showed zero fear or trepidation of humans, approaching within inches and looking them right in the eye.

Back at sea and heading to Sakhalin and the end of this expedition, we were elated to enjoy a phenomenal pink, purple and orange sunset simultaneously with a midnight-blue, purple and lilac moonrise as a cacophony of hundreds of **Rhinocerous Auklets** and several hundred **Ancient Murrelets** gave the expedition a suitably impressive close.

**WildWings, Davis House, Lodge Causeway, Bristol,  
BS16 3JB. UK**

**Tel: 0117 9658 333**

**[web:www.wildwings.co.uk](http://www.wildwings.co.uk)**