



WildWings

Kamchatka – The Ring of Fire 2012 Voyage Report

By Chris Collins, Tour Leader

Saturday 26th May: Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy

After crossing eleven time zones in eighteen hours, we arrived at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy to a somewhat overcast day and an air temperature of only six degrees centigrade. With snow on the surrounding mountains and volcanoes, it was somewhat cooler than the UK where the previous day it had been over 25 degrees at Heathrow !!

After a short ride to our hotel, the appropriately named Petropavlovsk Hotel, we had a couple of hours to relax before meeting our fellow travellers over dinner. Most of the group then headed off straight to bed – it had been a long time since we had left Heathrow.....

Sunday 27th May: Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, Avacha Bay, Kamchatka Coastline

For many of the WildWings group the day's birding started shortly after breakfast with a gentle stroll around an area of rough ground immediately opposite the hotel. Initially it looked like the weather might be unkind to us with heavy snow falling, but this soon cleared and we enjoyed some pleasant, if slightly chilly, conditions.

It was very apparent that Spring was yet to arrive in Petropavlovsk as most of the trees had not come into leaf and some of the summer migrants were still to arrive, but as we wandered around we saw many of the more likely species. Whilst some, such as Common Snipe and Willow Tit, were familiar birds from home, the local races looked quite different, with both looking 'colder' than those in Western Europe. The main objective, however, was to find some of the regional specialities and with Olive-backed Pipit, Rustic Bunting, Common Rosefinch and Oriental Greenfinch all seen, this was an excellent start to our trip.

By late morning, the wintery conditions had returned, so we headed back to the hotel and it was then soon time for the short ride to downtown 'PK' and then onwards to the wharf where the *Spirit of Enderby*, our home for the next couple of weeks, awaited us.

By 4pm the Pilot was onboard, and a few moments after pulling away from the wharf, the first alcids of the expedition were spotted, with several Tufted Puffin found. As we crossed Avacha Bay (which is undoubtedly one of the most impressive natural harbours in the world), we remained on the look-out for more auks, with good numbers of Ancient Murrelets seen and then our first real speciality, the somewhat localised and never common, Spectacled Guillemot.

Although a chunk of the late afternoon was taken up with three compulsory briefings (the theoretical and practical part of the lifeboat drill plus a short lecture about using the zodiacs), there was still plenty of time for birding and with excellent visibility, it was a very pleasant afternoon and with Red-faced and Pelagic Cormorants, Slaty-backed Gull, Brunnich's and Pigeon Guillemots and Horned Puffin all seen, our voyage aboard the *Spirit of Enderby* had got off to an excellent start.

Monday 28th May: At Sea heading for Commander Islands

For the “early birds” (or those still suffering from jetlag !!), the day started at 05:00am with a fine sunrise allowing us to get on with the serious business of looking for wildlife.

Over the day, an excellent selection of seabirds and cetaceans were seen including our first Laysan Albatrosses and Crested Auklets. Whilst the commonest alcid was undoubtedly the extraordinary-looking Tufted Puffin, there were also plenty of Common and Brunnich’s Guillemots, as well as hundreds of Fork-tailed Storm-petrels. Some of these showed exceptionally well off the bows and the keen photographers were soon getting some nice images of a wide range of species.

As well as the storm-petrels, another bonus was the exceptional number of Grey Phalaropes with the estimate being that there were many hundreds over the course of the day. Unlike those which occasionally show up in the UK (when they are invariably in their drab winter ‘grey’ plumage), almost without exception these were in their summer finery and were brilliant ‘red’ in colour – yes the American name of ‘Red Phalarope’ certainly seemed more appropriate !!!

Whilst it was apparent that most of the phalaropes were moving through on their migration to more northerly breeding grounds, these were not the only migrants that were seen during the day as several small flocks of skuas also passed the ship including several Long-tailed and one nice Pomarine.

With pleasant weather, conditions were also perfect for looking for cetaceans and the day certainly lived up to expectations on that front too, with at least 40 Dall’s Porpoises, eight Fin Whales, 21 Humpback Whales and single Sperm and Minke Whales.

By late afternoon, the ship was approaching the Commander Islands and some new species were added with our first Red-legged Kittiwake, as well as a fine Parakeet Auklet which nicely showed off its diagnostic white belly.

With a selection of lectures also taking place (‘an introduction to the Commander Islands and its history’ and a talk by Chris about the ‘Seabirds’ we could expect to see during the cruise), it was a great day, although by the time dinner had concluded, the weather had begun to deteriorate as a weather system approached the Commander Islands. We would have to hope this did not impact on the plans for the coming days.....

Tuesday 29th May: Bering Island, Commander Islands

Shortly after 8:00am everyone was ashore at the small town of Nikol’skoye and we divided into three groups, with all those in the Wildwings group joining Chris and Adam to look for some of the specialities which can be found on Bering Island.

Walking along the shoreline, we passed several Glaucous-winged Gulls but the main target for the morning was Rock Sandpiper. With a fairly high tide, conditions were not really ideal but despite this, several individuals were soon located with these looking extremely smart in their fine summer plumage.

Further along the track, we found good numbers of Dunlins, as well as another of the morning’s target birds, Mongolian (or Lesser Sand) Plover. With the wind blowing strongly, it was looking like the weather would make it difficult to find the final target for the morning, Pechora Pipit, but we persevered out on the tundra behind Nikol’skoye and eventually managed to tape a bird into view. Clearly the bird was on territory and we got some nice views of this eastern speciality easily seeing the bright ‘tramlines’ running down its back.

As we headed back towards the landing site, a number of the group stopped off at the small museum in the middle of Nikol’skoye where there were a range of interesting exhibits. These included one of the few complete skeletons of a Steller’s Sea-cow; this species had become extinct within thirty years of the archipelago being discovered on the second of Bering’s expeditions in 1741.

By midday everyone was back onboard the *Spirit of Enderby* and the ship set off eastward along the southern coastline of Bering Island. After lunch, most of the group were back out on deck and as we cruised onwards, we enjoyed some spectacular sightings of Humpback Whales. At least a couple of animals were seen breaching with others tail-slapping – it was certainly a great show !!

With the wind still blowing strongly, Nathan decided to make an ‘expedition landing’ at a bay on the southern side of Bering Island which none of the staff had previously visited. Setting off in four zodiacs, we initially made for some cliffs where the white marks on the rocks suggested there were good numbers of breeding seabirds. As we approached, we could see that these were mainly Common Guillemots and Kittiwakes and whilst many of the Kittiwakes were Black-legged, there were also good numbers of ‘Red-legs’.

Sea Otters and Pigeon Guillemots were amongst the other species which were found but with the chilly wind still blowing, many welcomed the opportunity to get ashore, stretch their legs and warm up. With 45 minutes to explore, most of the group set off to see what they could find and with Harlequin Ducks in the bay and several summer plumaged Lapland and Snow Buntings in the grass, it was a pleasant end to the day’s birding.

By 18:30 everyone was back onboard the ship and after dinner had concluded, Nathan explained that the weather was not looking good for landing the following day on Medney Island, as the low pressure system was not expected to move away. With the wind predicted to blow from the north, he anticipated this could make things difficult, as all the landing sites were north facing. We would have to wait and see.....

Wednesday 30th May: Bering Island, Commander Islands

During the night the ship travelled to the north-west corner of Medney Island and many were woken early by the motion of the ship, as the Captain and Nathan assessed the conditions. With the strong northerly wind and heavy seas, unfortunately, they concluded that we would be unable to get ashore anywhere along the northern coastline.

When the morning announcement came at 06:00am, it was to advise everyone that we were drifting off the western shore of Medney Island and after viewing the spectacular scenery from the ship, we headed back towards the south-west tip of Bering Island.

The Channel between Bering and Medney Islands is relatively shallow (170 metres or so), so not ideal for cetaceans but nevertheless there were plenty of birds with dozens of Laysan Albatrosses and our first Whiskered Auklets.

As we had rounded Cape Monati (the southern tip of the Bering Island), the weather rapidly changed and after a morning of gale force winds and leaden skies, the wind dropped, the clouds largely disappeared and the weather became rather pleasant.

With conditions now much improved, Nathan decided to offer another zodiac cruise and over the next couple of hours we cruised slowly along the shoreline finding an excellent range of wildlife. There were bird cliffs containing thousands of kittiwakes and whilst many of these were Black-legged, good numbers of Red-legged were also present, giving everyone a last opportunity to get some great views of this regional speciality.

Reaching Cape Monati, we found a haul-out of Steller’s Sea-Lions. As these creatures are notoriously skittish, our approach was very sedate but we eventually got some good looks at them including several animals which had been branded by Russian researchers as pups.

By early afternoon, everyone was back on the ship and as we cruised westward, two pods of Orcas (Killer Whales) were found. Unfortunately, neither group was particularly ‘friendly’ but, nevertheless, we could easily make out the large males with their substantial dorsal fins.

All too soon it was time for the Captain to set a course for the Zhupanova River and as we sailed away from the amazing Commander Islands, there were hundreds more Grey Phalaropes. Good numbers of cetaceans were also seen with about 50 Dall's Porpoises and approximately 30 Humpback Whales.

The most frustrating sighting of the day, however, was just before the evening log when two beaked whales were spotted less than 400m in front of the ship. Although four species are known from these waters, Baird's and Cuvier's could be confidently eliminated, leaving us knowing that these animals must be either Hubb's or Stejneger's Beaked Whales, two species which are extremely poorly known and have only rarely been seen.....

Thursday 31st May: Zhupanova River, Kamchatka

During the night the calm conditions we had experienced the previous afternoon changed significantly and we awoke to 30 knots of wind and swells of over 2 metres. Whilst it certainly could not be described as rough, the weather had undoubtedly changed for the worse. With no lee at the Zhupanova River mouth, we would have to hope that the conditions would improve.....

As we proceeded on towards Kamchatka and the Zhupanova River, most of the species we had seen when sailing to the Commander Islands a couple of days before were seen again including Laysan Albatross, Fork-tailed Storm-petrel, Slaty-backed Gull and Tufted Puffin, as well as several pods of Dall's Porpoises.

By mid-morning the coastline was in sight and the weather began to moderate. With a high cloud base, the snow-capped mountains and volcanoes could be seen and we could readily understand why this region is often known as the "Ring of Fire" with at least one of the volcanoes actively smoking.

Shortly after noon, the *Spirit of Enderby* arrived at the anchorage off the Zhupanova River mouth and Nathan gathered everyone in the Bar for a briefing to outline the plans for the afternoon. The intention had been to set off immediately afterwards, however, a hydraulics problem with the crane (for lowering the zodiacs) meant the crew had to make some emergency repairs. This was done very efficiently and after a short delay, five zodiacs left for the fishing community.

After Nathan and Katya had confirmed that there were no restrictions on our planned activities, we set off upstream to explore. Initially the river was several hundred metres wide but it rapidly narrowed and we soon found our main goal, the majestic Steller's Sea-eagle.

Whilst we had seen three eagles distantly from the ship, these were much closer and we were able to slowly approach several birds which were perched on the river bank giving those with cameras some great photographic opportunities. A little later, we reached two nests with adult birds in attendance and with others eagles sitting in trees and yet more flying a matter of metres overhead, it was clear to all that the Zhupanova River truly was a fantastic place for this amazing bird with at least twenty individuals over the course of the afternoon.

Other birds seen included Red-throated Diver, Goosander, Goldeneye, Wood Sandpiper and Rustic Bunting, but after cruising upstream for over seven kilometres, the zodiacs turned round and we headed back towards the fishing community.

Reaching the wider part of the river, the flock of Common Terns we had seen whilst heading upstream was still present. The birds here are a different subspecies, *longipennis*, from those in Europe and they were now much more obliging than before and we could easily see their all black bills and generally darker plumage.

The cruise ended on a major high, however, when several Aleutian Terns were spotted. This species is never easy to find and although odd birds are occasionally seen at the Zhupanova, we were extremely fortunate to find at least eight birds, with several of these being very obliging allowing us some great views.

By 17:00, we had arrived at the river mouth where there were two options with some of the group visiting the very hospitable locals, where they were able to have some hot tea and salmon, whilst those who wished to continue birding explored a nearby area of wet grassland and scrub. Our main target was Long-toed Stint but before we had even started looking for this diminutive wader, we had a very pleasant surprise when a pair of Falcated Ducks were found.

This species has only been rarely recorded on previous WildWings trips to Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands, so we were extremely fortunate and whilst the birds were a little distant, the spectacular green head of the male truly glowed in the late afternoon light.

With only a limited amount of time available, attention soon returned to stints, so we formed a long line and then headed out across the bog. When two small waders were flushed, the group reassembled and we quickly located the birds in the boggy tussock. Eventually they walked into full view giving everyone some nice looks, before we headed back to the fishing village highly satisfied with our short stroll.

As we cruised away and southwards along the Kamchatka coastline, the views of the mountains were spectacular and whilst nothing new was added to our growing bird list, Tufted and Horned Puffins, Laysan Albatross and Northern Fulmar were amongst the species seen.

After a rather worrying start, the day had been a stunning success and several people told Chris that they considered it amongst their top five birding days ever !!!!!

Friday 1st June: Bukhta Russkaya, Kamchatka

During the night, the ship sailed to Russkaya Fjord (Bukhta Russkaya) and when the morning announcement came at 06:15am, it looked like our luck with the weather would continue as there was very little wind and only a small amount of cloud – perfect conditions for enjoying the Kamchatka coastline.

Ten minutes later, what was surely one of the most incredible experiences of the expedition occurred, when a full adult Steller's Sea-eagle flew directly towards the ship, passing a matter of metres from those on the top deck and then landed on the mast towards the stern of the ship !!!

Nathan quickly put the news out on the PA system but even this did not disturb the bird and it seemed utterly oblivious to more than thirty people coming out on deck to admire and photograph it. More than half an hour later, it finally flew off but by then hundreds (or was it thousands ??) of photos had been taken and we had surely had 'the ultimate views of the ultimate raptor'.

Proceeding into the fjord, a Brown Bear was spotted wandering across a large snow patch. This was a new mammal for many and although a little distant, views were nevertheless pretty good.

With everyone out on deck, there were high hopes of finding Long-billed Murrelet as this species is usually reasonably reliable in Bukhta Russkaya and whilst a single bird was seen by some, sadly the majority failed to see it – we would have to hope for better luck on another occasion.....

By mid-morning, the Captain had dropped the anchor at the head of the fjord and we were soon shuttled to the sandy beach in the zodiacs. Once ashore, two walks were offered with some joining Samuel and Chris to explore the forested valley, whilst Katya and Adam led a walk along the foreshore.

Those with Chris saw a range of birds including Eye-browed Thrush and Eastern Yellow Wagtail but the biggest surprise was when what appeared to be a pure white raptor was spotted sitting in a tree. Before everyone had got onto this, it took off and leisurely flew away from us. Whilst it was initially presumed this was a white morph Gyrfalcon, the jizz and flight action were all wrong for this species and it seemed we were watching a Goshawk but unlike any Goshawk any of us had ever seen before.

This would prove to be a great example of the value of digital photography, as photos showed that although the bird appeared to be gleaming white in the field, there was actually some pale grey tones in the plumage. Our

bird was, therefore, a Goshawk of the poorly known race *albidus* which is only found in Far Eastern Russia, although it was considerably paler than in the illustration in Mark Brazil's excellent guide 'The Birds of East Asia'.

All too soon, it was time to return to the ship and as we cruised out of the fjord, the bear we had seen on the way in was still present, but much to our surprise it had been joined by a second animal which was much paler with almost blonde fur.

Only half an hour or so later, the ship was a few miles to the south offshore from a spot where the Expedition Team knew there was a Steller's Sea-lion haul-out. This area is also often excellent for Orca and before we had even got into the zodiacs, both species had been spotted.

We then spent a fantastic hour and a half enjoying some great views of the Orcas as they patrolled up and down in front of the Sea-Lion haul-out. It was difficult to be sure how many animals were present but it was undoubtedly at least a dozen individuals including a couple of large males both of which had impressive dorsal fins which were well over one metre high. With some of them coming within 20m or so of the zodiacs, it truly was an incredible experience.

All too soon, it was time to head back to the ship whilst the Orcas continued patrolling in front of the shore. It had been a highly memorable zodiac cruise and during the rest of the afternoon, we continued to head south along the Kamchatka coastline. The weather remained kind and with only scattered clouds, we had some superb views of the spectacular scenery.

Saturday 2nd June: Paramushir and Atlasova Islands, Kuril Islands

The day began reasonably early with a 6:30am wake up call to inform us that the sea and weather conditions were suitable for a zodiac cruise and by 7:00am, all the Wildwings group had boarded the fleet of four zodiacs.

Our intended destination was some small islands, 'Bird Rocks', off the north-east corner of Paramushir Island and as we got closer, it was very obvious how the islets had got their name as there were hundreds, if not thousands, of Black-legged Kittiwake nests. The main objective of visiting this location, however, was to look for Sea Otters and as we got closer, about twenty could be seen loafing on some seaweed covered rocks. A little further along, we encountered several hundred of these threatened animals, with some lying quietly on a sandy beach whilst others watched us from the water – the numbers involved were truly astonishing.

As well as the otters, there was also a selection of birds with good numbers of Pigeon Guillemots including several of the endemic Kuril Island subspecies, *snowi*, which has a lot less white in the wing. For many of the group, however, the highlight was some excellent views of Parakeet Auklet. This was the main species we had 'lost' as a result of the inclement weather around Medney Island, so it was great to see it here instead.

Over breakfast, the ship sailed up 'Second Straight' at the north end of Paramushir Island and after dropping off Leonid, a Russian who had assisted on the previous expedition, we sailed onwards towards Atlasova Island. The weather was glorious with blue skies and very little wind and with the conditions perfect for photography, many shots of Tufted Puffins, Slaty-backed Gulls and a lone Glaucous Gull were taken.

As we continued onward, the views of Aleid volcano on Atlasova were stunning and despite passing through a small fog bank, we arrived at the anchorage to fantastic weather conditions.

Once ashore, there were various options available with most of the Wildwings group joining Chris on a bird walk. The plants and trees were beginning to sprout but many of the migrant birds had already arrived with the most desired being Siberian Rubythroat. Whilst our initial attempts only resulted in fleeting views, we soon found some more cooperative males and enjoyed some great looks at this Asian speciality.

Further on, we found our first Buff-bellied Pipits of the expedition and it soon became clear that Atlasova must be perfect habitat for this species, as it was extremely common with several dozen seen over the course of the afternoon.

Reaching the lake, we found plenty of midges (which fortunately did not bite !!) but the main target was Long-toed Stint which had been reported by some of the other passengers. This individual was not particularly obliging but we still managed to get some scope views of this species for the second time in three days.

All too soon it was time to return to the ship and after the nightly log and dinner some of the group ventured outside or onto the Bridge for some further seawatching. Although the clouds had rolled in, this was well worth the effort, as there were dozens of Fork-tailed Storm-petrels flying by every minute with a few Leach's Storm-petrels also present.

There were also a large number of summer plumage Grey Phalaropes, although the highlight was surely the Orcas, with at least twenty seven animals seen before dusk finally forced us inside ending another incredible day.

Sunday 3rd June: Onekotan and Ekarma Islands, Kuril Islands

After a 06:15am wake-up call and a briefing from Nathan, Katya and Chris, we headed ashore landing at Nemo Bay on Onekotan Island. Conditions were once again almost perfect with blue skies, only high cloud and little wind. Our good fortune with the weather looked as though it would continue to hold for yet another landing.....

As we set off towards the trail, a sub-adult Steller's Sea-eagle flew overhead and then two passerines were spotted near a snow patch which it was quickly realised were Asian Rosy Finches. Although this species is known to occur in the Kuril Islands, it had not been seen on any of the previous expeditions to this region on the *Spirit of Enderby* giving us a fantastic start to the day and a bonus 'tick' for just about all the birders.

Once the finches had moved on, we followed the trail up the side of the raised beach and onto a relatively flat area of tundra-like vegetation where the main trees were Stone Pine, Polar Willow and Dwarf Birch. Most of these were growing no more than a metre or so above the ground (despite some of them clearly being very old), giving us an idea of how extreme the weather must be on this rather exposed island during the winter months.

There were also a good range of flowers and whilst many were already in bloom, most of the Goldish Rhododendrons were in bud with only a few just starting to bloom – we were a few days early to enjoy the spectacle of their yellow flowers.

Whilst one option was a fairly long walk to Black Lake, most of the birders explored the stands of Stone Pine and Dwarf Birch, with the highlight being some nice views of Pine Grosbeak with a female in particular giving us some fantastic views in response to the tape.

Another target was Middendorf's Grasshopper Warbler and whilst this was trickier to see than the grosbeak, nevertheless, everyone got tickable views as well as seeing Buff-bellied Pipit, Siberian Rubythroat and Brown-headed Thrush.

All too soon, our three hours ashore were up and as we headed back to the landing site, our second Asian Brown Flycatcher of the expedition was spotted. It had been an excellent morning with just about everyone getting several new birds, with the Rosy Finches undoubtedly being the 'bird of the day'.

As the ship headed south towards Ekarma Island, we finally experienced the banks of fog which the Kurils are so renowned for but those who persevered on the decks were well rewarded with the highlight being two Dall's Porpoises which spent more than five minutes bow-riding.

By 4:30pm Ekarma Island began to appear out of the fog and as we got closer, the wind dropped and we had another glorious afternoon with the stunning island of Ekarma as a spectacular backdrop. A little later, four zodiacs set off for a cruise and as we got closer to the shore, we could begin to appreciate the vastness of the

Northern Fulmar colony on the island. There were literally tens of thousands of birds wheeling in the sky and ashore thousands upon thousands of nesting birds could be seen in the tussock.

After cruising along the coast, we headed a little offshore where several species of auks were found. Whilst Tufted Puffin was the most numerous, there were also smaller numbers of Horned Puffins and Crested Auklets and after some searching, we eventually found a single Whiskered Auklet. With most of the group having missed the small number which had been seen off Medney Island a few days before, this was a much wanted bird and we were able to get some great views of this lone individual from the zodiacs.

All too soon, it was time to return to the ship and we had only sailed a mile or so before entering the fog once again. Yet again, we had been extraordinarily lucky with the weather.

Monday 4th June: Shimushir and Yankicho Islands, Kuril Islands

Once again the day began at 06:15am with the morning wake-up call and as soon as breakfast was over, Nathan gathered everyone in the lecture room for an outline of the plans for the morning.

Once the briefing was completed, we boarded the zodiacs and set off for Shimushir Island passing the expedition ship, *Orion II*, which by an extraordinary (and somewhat unfortunate) coincidence was visiting the same location. After five minutes or so on the open sea, the zodiacs entered the caldera of Broutona Bay and we were soon landing by the abandoned submarine base. The weather remained glorious for the rest of the morning and with almost four hours ashore, there was ample opportunity to thoroughly explore the area.

Although many of the buildings were rapidly falling into a state of serious disrepair, the main office and barracks had been built of concrete and some went inside to see the Soviet-style murals on the walls and some of the artefacts which the troops had left behind when the site was abandoned shortly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Almost all of the WildWings group joined Chris for a bird walk up past the buildings and on through some of the scrub and over the course of the morning an excellent range of species were seen. Every few metres there seemed to be a singing male Siberian Rubythroat and whilst these were widely admired, there were other target birds to also look for, with the first of these being Eurasian Nutcracker. This species is usually reasonably common on Shimushir and one soon responded well to the iPod giving us some nice views.

A little later, a pair of Japanese Grey Buntings was found and with good numbers of Brown-headed Thrush also present, it was a very pleasant stroll through this strange relict of the Cold War.

By 1pm we were all back onboard the *Spirit of Enderby* and the Captain then set a course for Yankicho Island. With forty nautical miles to run, it took several hours to reach our destination with the undoubted highlight of the journey being an immature Short-tailed Albatross. Although the bird quickly disappeared, fortunately, it reappeared a little later allowing those who had missed its first pass to catch up with this extreme rarity which has an estimated world population of only a couple of thousand individuals.

As we approached Yankicho Island, the weather did not look good for a zodiac operation as the wind was blowing strongly, with a very confused and lumpy sea. It looked like *Orion II* was also struggling but as we approached the spot Nathan had selected as an anchorage, the conditions improved considerably.

Having seen relatively few auks on the journey up from Shimushir, it soon became apparent that most of these were feeding to the north of Yankicho and as we cruised along, the number flying past was truly mind-boggling. It was difficult to even guesstimate how many there were – the streams of birds just seemed to go on forever.

With the weather now once again being kind to us, we boarded five zodiacs and whilst it was a little splashy, we were soon safely at the entrance to the caldera on Yankicho Island. Cruising inside, the alcid spectacle continued with tens of thousands of Crested and Whiskered Auklets streaming in overhead.

Whilst the vast majority seemed to be heading directly for their burrows, there were also hundreds of birds sitting on the water and by slowly approaching these in the zodiacs, we were able to get some amazing close up views. The Expedition Team had suggested earlier in the day that the auks at Yankicho could be one of life's most memorable birding experiences and there were few that would disagree with this assessment !!!!

Cruising onwards around the flooded caldera, we found several Arctic Foxes and then made a short landing near an area of thermal activity where there were a number of boiling water pools and sulphur vents. Looking out towards the entrance, the number of auks which were still coming in seemed to have increased still further with thousands of birds per minute – it was a truly staggering sight !!!

Back on the zodiacs, we exited the caldera and then came across several flocks of hundreds of Whiskered Auklets. Whilst there had been a few of these inside, it was very apparent that unlike the Crested Auklets, these were rafting up outside and after getting some stunning views of these birds, we returned to the ship, passing yet more flocks of auklets swirling around us. It had been another spectacular day which few would ever forget.

Tuesday 5th June: am-Novokuril'skaya Bay, Urup Island, Kuril Islands

After the comparatively late finish the previous evening at Yankicho, many took the opportunity to have a lie in and only a few determined sea-watchers were outside before breakfast. Unfortunately, however, there was scant reward for the early risers, as the fog was the thickest and most persistent of the expedition with visibility consistently less than 50m and only a few Fork-tailed Storm-petrels and Tufted Puffins to be seen.

With the conditions unsuitable for a landing on the exposed beach at Chirpoy Island, Nathan took the decision to continue heading south to give us more time on Urup Island and as a result two lectures were offered during the morning, with Katya discussing the adaptations of marine mammals in the Russian Far East and Adam telling us about the legacy of Georg Steller who had been the naturalist on Bering's second expedition.

At 10:30am the fog suddenly cleared and the northern end of Urup Island came into view – it seemed that our luck with the weather would continue for yet another landing.....

Following an early lunch, the zodiacs were launched and everyone was soon ashore in Novokuril'skaya Bay. Many people elected to explore by themselves and with almost three hours, it was possible to investigate the shoreline, sand dunes and the area around an old abandoned fishing community which was surrounded by forested hills.

With blue skies and little wind, conditions were nigh on perfect and it was very apparent how more advanced the Spring was here compared with further north, as many of the flowers were in bloom and the trees in leaf.

As the best birding was near the old village, most of the birders headed in that direction and an excellent range of birds were found with Middendorf's Grasshopper Warbler, Pacific Swift, Long-tailed Rosefinch, Japanese Bush-warbler and Siberian Rubythroat amongst the species seen. Both Kamchatka Leaf-Warbler and Japanese Robin were heard but we were thwarted in our attempts to find these despite the assistance of Chris's iPod. We would have to try and find these species further south.....

By 4:00pm everyone was back onboard the *Spirit of Enderby* and after the anchor had been lifted, we headed south along the coast of Urup towards Iturup. Although the wind was blowing, the sky remained almost cloudless with great visibility and as we sailed onwards we saw Laysan Albatrosses, Orcas and Dall's Porpoises. A little later in the afternoon, three Sperm Whales were also spotted and as the nightly log and dinner approached, several dozen Short-tailed Shearwaters were seen. Although we had seen a few of these previously, huge numbers moult in the south-west part of the Sea of Okhotsk and it seemed likely that these would be the first of the thousands we could expect to see in the coming days.

Wednesday 6th June: Iturup Island, Kuril Islands

We arrived off the village of Kurilsk in the early hours of the night and by 6:30am the zodiacs were in the water and we were soon ashore landing on a beach a couple of miles to the south of Kurilsk.

Yet again the weather was fantastic and as our transport had not yet arrived, most people fanned out to explore. There were several fishing boats hauled up above the beach and the birders were delighted when a couple of new species for the trip were found. Whilst the first of these was a Eurasian Wryneck, the other was a far more range-restricted species, Chestnut-cheeked Starling, and with two feeding amongst the seaweed on the beach, we got some great looks at this very attractive bird.

A few minutes later, our two specially chartered Ural trucks arrived and we boarded these for the ride up into the mountains. As the vehicles climbed upwards towards the Rubeytsky Volcano, we passed through a mixture of broadleaf woodland and more open areas where the dominant vegetation was Stone Pine.

Stopping at a lookout point overlooking a small crater lake, there were some magnificent views over the forest, across to some distant volcanoes and down to the shore, with the blue skies giving us great visibility.

The birders, however, had one special species to look for here, the Japanese Accentor, and Adam and Chris led the group towards an area which looked promising for this species. The first attempt at playback proved unsuccessful but as we approached a second patch of Stone Pine, Chris spotted an accentor singing in the pines. Most saw the bird before it disappeared from view but our luck was in and it reappeared on a couple of occasions allowing everyone to see this much wanted species.

Further along, another short stop was made and again this was highly successful with an incredibly obliging Japanese Robin found. Usually this species is very elusive and creeps around in the bamboo but this individual had clearly 'not read the right books' and it sat singing for several minutes allowing many to even watch it through the telescope – our morning had barely started and the two main target birds had already been found !!!

Arriving at the thermal pools, some of the group went for a swim in the hot, mineral rich waters whilst others set off on another bird walk led by Chris and Adam. Again this was highly successful, with the highlights including Kamchatka Leaf-warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail, Japanese Robin and Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker. It had been an amazingly successful morning with the weather undoubtedly helping us considerably.

Having disappeared back to Kurilsk without telling any of the Expedition Team, in the late morning the two Ural trucks eventually reappeared and we climbed aboard and were taken back to the landing site.

As soon as the last of the zodiacs was safely stowed, the ship set off southward along the coast of Iturup. Sailing onwards, we passed several pods of Dall's Porpoises, at least forty Orcas and the first Rhinoceros Auklets of the expedition.

By 6:00pm we had reached the southern end of Iturup and the ship turned to port and we entered the flood caldera of Lyvinaya Past Bay. Over the next couple of hours, we cruised slowly around this spectacular location with the mist obscuring the tops of the ancient crater rim. The main objective of visiting this location was to look for Brown Bears and at least eight were seen. It was a great end to another very memorable day.

Thursday 7th June: Kunashir Island, Kuril Islands

The day began with another early breakfast, however, it looked like our luck with the weather had finally ended as there was thick fog and steady rain.

Following Nathan's announcement the previous evening that we would be visiting a new location due to a major weather system off the eastern side of Kunashir, some of the Expedition Staff went ashore at 6:00am to investigate and an hour later they were back onboard. Nathan gave us an update on what would be possible and at 7:30am the zodiacs began shuttling everyone ashore.

Initially we walked as a group to view a spectacular waterfall which flowed almost directly into the sea and then three different options were available, with Adam leading a walk up a steep trail into the forest, Katya a gentle stroll along the beach and Chris a birding walk.

With the rain falling steadily, it was hard work looking for birds although a number of more widespread species were seen including the local races of Marsh and Coal Tit. Everyone was, however, encouraged to stay together, as there was plenty of evidence of Brown Bears with numerous footprints on the beach including some which were extremely fresh – clearly bears had been wandering along the beach that morning prior to our arrival.....

By 9:15am most people had returned to the landing site and as we returned to the ship, several small flocks of Rhinoceros Auklets were spotted, although the inclement weather and 'pea soup' fog made viewing difficult. With these conditions continuing, few birds were seen during the morning and most were content to begin packing their bags or watch the "Big Year" movie which told the story of three American birders who had all tried to see the highest number of birds in a year within the USA.

After lunch, the fog cleared and we began to pass vast numbers of Short-tailed Shearwaters. These long distance migrants breed south of Australia and almost the entire population comes to the Sea of Okhotsk to moult. As we sailed onwards towards Korsakov, there were flocks of thousands of birds sitting on the sea, as well as a steady stream flying passed the ship.

After the settlement of onboard accounts, Nathan invited everyone to join him in the Lecture room for a disembarkation briefing which was followed by a slideshow of pictures taken during the voyage by the Expedition Staff.

Later we had the final reading of the birdlist which was followed by a buffet dinner in the restaurant. After that, many headed to bed in the expectation of an early start the following morning and the beginning of journeys home.

Friday 8th June: Port of Korsakov, Sakhalin Island

During the night, the Spirit of Enderby continued her north-westerly journey towards the Port of Korsakov on Sakhalin Island and by the time everyone got up, the island was in sight and a little later the *Spirit of Enderby* was tied up at the wharf.

Our expedition was sadly almost over and we had travelled over 1,900 miles and experienced many sights, sounds and other experiences which would stay with us for a long time. It had truly been a unique voyage.

(NB The 2013 voyage will not be visiting the Southern Kurils and Sakhalin.)

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