

## **Birds and Musk Oxen of Nome, Alaska**



Alaska's Seward Peninsula and the surrounding nutrient-rich waters of the Bering Sea have been home to the Iñupiat people for thousands of years. Once, these small groups of subsistence hunters made seasonal encampments along much of Alaska's northern coast, fishing and hunting the coastal waters for birds and marine mammals, and venturing further inland for caribou and musk oxen.

With the discovery of gold in 1898 on Anvil Creek—where the small city of Nome now stands—life on the peninsula was forever changed as the windswept area experienced its first gold rush population boom. Since then many prospectors, adventurers and scoundrels have come and gone in search of their fortune. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the population of Nome swelled to almost 20,000, making it Alaska's largest city at the time—five times larger than it is today.

With the ongoing search for gold in the isolated Nome area, the Seward Peninsula saw three major gravel roads constructed into the adjoining Alaskan wilderness. These 200-plus miles of roadways penetrate deep into the surrounding arctic ecosystem allowing modern-day nature photographers excellent access to a wonderful assortment of arctic birds and mammals in habitats



not easy to reach in other northern locations.

In Nome the summer arrives quickly and seems to depart even faster. By early June the snows of winter are receding, sea ice has pulled away from the shore, the rivers have thawed, and throngs of migrant birds return from their wintering grounds far to the south. The coast comes alive with shorebirds and waterfowl.

Rafts of common eiders float just offshore of the coast's dark gravel beaches as arctic terns dip and glide overhead. Ice on lakes and tundra ponds retreats, providing valuable feeding and nesting habitat for ducks, geese and swans. Setting up our cameras along the shore of one of these wetlands provides opportunities to photograph long-tailed ducks, red-necked grebes, and Pacific and red-throated loons in breeding plumage.

While the returning birds are busy and distracted by the onset of the breeding season it is possible for a patient photographer to approach and photograph bar-tailed godwits, whimbrels, red-necked phalaropes, American golden plovers, common snipes and semipalmated sandpipers as they perform their fascinating courtship displays.

Streamside willows and alders now come alive with songbirds just returning for a chance to mate and nest during the short summer season. The area around Nome is one of the best places to find and photograph Eurasian songbirds, such as arctic warblers, bluethroats, yellow wagtails and northern wheatears—found almost nowhere else in the US.



A vast carpet of low-growing tundra stretches from the Bering Sea to the Kigluaik Mountains. As the days warm the tundra bursts forth with colorful summer wildflowers. A macro lens provides a glimpse into the miniature world of arctic poppies, Kamchatka rhododendron and alpine azalea—all while under the watchful eye of a long-tailed jaeger sentinel.

The open tundra ecosystem provides sweeping landscapes of time-worn mountains and misty coastlines sensuously combined with the low-angle light of early summer mornings and quiet evenings to enhance our photographic landscape potential. Some days start with dense and mysterious coastal fog generated by the cold Bering Sea waters, on other days we head to the high country where we pursue one of the north's most iconic creatures—the musk ox.

Following a series of reintroductions of musk oxen to the Seward Peninsula in the 1970s, the animals now thrive in

this rugged environment. Traveling around town or heading out on any of the roads from Nome can provide some iconic photographic opportunities with these woolly denizens of the tundra. If it has been a good winter for the musk ox the photographic rewards include a new batch of the year's calves. We also search the roadsides and hills for other local inhabitants—red foxes, moose, reindeer, grizzly bears and wolves.

There are always new photographic opportunities waiting to be found on Alaska's arctic tundra, all under the summer's long hours of daylight.

## Tour Itinerary

### Day 1 (Jun 6)

Participants should arrange to fly from home to Anchorage, Alaska, and on to Nome where we meet for dinner. Following dinner we make a short first foray into the rugged landscape of the Seward Peninsula. (D)

### Days 2–6

The roads leading in and out of Nome offer us the chance to photograph along Bering Sea beaches and lagoons. We also take time to explore inland tundra and mountain landscapes. Our flexible schedule gives us time to photograph the light, the land, and the varied arctic wildlife.



With a very small group and five full days based in Nome we have the ability to adjust our plans to take advantage of the changing weather and light as we see fit. The 24 hours of daylight requires some personal adjustment in sleeping schedules! Our typical shooting schedule—influenced by weather conditions and distance needed to drive to a shooting location—has us in the field between 5 AM and 11 AM. We return to town for an early lunch, break for a midday nap, and then eat an early dinner. We are again out in the field between 5 PM and 11 PM.

Because of the early shooting schedule, we may not be in Nome during typical breakfast hours. Breakfast items and snacks are not included in the trip fee, but can be purchased in town during the tour and consumed in your room or carried into the field.

Photography of the dawn chorus of songbirds, such as arctic warblers, blue throats, the ever-present common redpoll, and numerous other northern species, is on our agenda. We encounter photogenic willow ptarmigans with plenty of opportunities to photograph these dapper birds, as well as many

of the shorebirds that spread out over this expansive tundra breeding habitat. Small tundra ponds become important nesting habitat for intriguing waterfowl, including red-throated and Pacific loons, while almost every little wet area becomes home for other water birds from red-necked phalaropes to long-tailed ducks.



As the light changes throughout the day we can spend our time looking for larger species to photograph. Musk oxen are often spotted and can be safely and easily photographed from the road system. Always keeping a keen eye out may turn up a moose and calf along one of the river valleys. Evenings are always a great chance to get out and photograph wildlife in the long hours of the quiet Alaskan twilight. (LD)

### Day 7 (Jun 12)

After one more early morning in the field we return to the hotel to gather our belongings and check out in time for the morning flight back to Anchorage.

## Trip Details

**Jun 06 - Jun 12, 2020**

**Fee:** \$4,995 from Nome Alaska\*

**Deposit:** \$500

**Limit:** 7 participants

**Activity Level:** Easy

\* The fee does not include breakfasts due to trip logistics. Participants will be responsible for their own breakfast food and snacks to be purchased at the local grocery store.

## Tour Leader



**ERIC ROCK**

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