

ALASKA 2009

23 May – 2 June (Richard Webb & Bill Underwood)
29 August – 5 September (Richard Webb)

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Introduction

- A birding trip to Alaska back in 1998 fired my enthusiasm for mammals, & the news that a Snowshoe Hare population explosion in Denali had resulted in a similar increase in Canada Lynx numbers was sufficient to encourage me to return in late May 2009. Although Lynx were being seen regularly from the park shuttle buses we dipped. On returning to the UK we discovered that two friends in Denali at the same time as us not only saw a Lynx but to add insult to injury could see us while they were watching it. If only our mobiles had worked in Denali.
- Being gripped off, coupled with the knowledge that Lynx numbers are likely to crash in the near future as hare numbers crash was sufficient to encourage me to return again at the end of August & fortunately it proved to be a good move with 4 sightings of at least two Canada Lynx (my last Lynx) over a 3-day period. In addition I also saw several Wolves & had a fabulous pod of Belugas near Anchorage (another lifer).
- Based on my experiences it does seem that the autumn may be a better time for mammal-watching in south-central Alaska although June may be better if you are planning to visit any sites in northern Alaska.

Richard Webb

Logistics

- Although we hired a 4WD on the first trip in reality there was no need to do so although it did give us better clearance & greater visibility from the higher seating position. On the second trip I hired a 2WD which was more than adequate even on gravel roads. **Note:** none of the car hire companies 'allow' you to take their cars (even 4WD) onto gravel roads, this includes the Denali Highway, Nabesna Road etc. This is absolutely ridiculous given that many of the main highways are still unpaved. Consequently take extra care not to have a prang on these roads as you will not be insured.
- We booked some accommodation in advance on the first trip but need not have done so. There were vacancies almost everywhere & you have more chance of negotiating a lower rate on the spot.
- It is worth pre-booking shuttle buses in Denali particularly if you wish to use early buses but see comments in the site guide.
- Generally speaking the weather was fine throughout both trips although low cloud resulted in poor visibility on my first shuttle bus run on the second trip.

References

- Although essentially a birding guide the ***ABA Birdfinding Guide A Birders's Guide to Alaska*** is an essential reference to the key sites in Alaska.
- ***Alaska Wildlife Viewing Guide*** (Watchable Wildlife Series) by Michelle Sydeman and Annabel M. Lund. A useful overview providing a pointer to key sites but lacks sufficient detail to be of great use.

Key species

- **Canada Lynx** – Likely to be difficult in most years. Currently going through a population explosion in Denali & if you are keen to see one it is probably best to act quickly as the population of Snowshoe Hares (their main prey) is just starting to crash. Best seen either by riding the park shuttle buses or staking out areas with recent sightings (see Site Guide).
- **Wolf** – Several packs are resident in Denali. They are more difficult elsewhere. Although adults were being seen in the spring they are far more visible in autumn when the young have left the den & I was able to watch a pair with 8 young on two consecutive evenings on the second trip. They can be very confiding, I saw two within metres of the bus.
- **Brown (Grizzly) Bear** – Easy in Denali, it is not unusual to see 10 or more in a day on some of the longer shuttle runs. They occur throughout the state & I also found a sow with two cubs along the Denali Highway. However it seems very likely that they are heavily hunted here as they were very jumpy bolting at over a mile's range.
- **Black Bear** – probably easiest on the Kenai Fjord boat trips. We saw three (having seen four on the same trip in 1998). It is also worth scanning the hills above Turnagain Arm. I saw one here one evening & also saw another along a trail at Eagle River Wildlife Center north of Anchorage.
- **Sea Otter** – easy on the Kenai Fjord Boat Trip.
- **Dall's Sheep** – easy in Denali NP, at Beluga Point & at Sheep Mountain along the Glenn Highway.
- **Mountain Goat** – only likely to be seen from the Kenai Fjord boat trip. I've seen it on both boat trips that I've done.
- **Moose** – easy in Denali (bulls are easier to see during the autumn rut, they move away from the roads in spring/summer) & very common along Denali Highway & along the Seward Highway south of Anchorage. Even seen in central Anchorage.
- **Beluga** – best seen in August/September although from talking to locals numbers have crashed in recent years. The best time is as the tide comes in as the Belugas herd herring into the shallows although they can also be seen on the falling tide. I had a tremendous pod of 40+ Belugas including females carrying calves on their backs. A fabulous experience.
- **Humpback Whale, Orca & Dall's Porpoises** – all likely to be seen on the Kenai Fjord Boat Trip. The Orcas were excellent and I've seen them dive under the bow of the boat giving superb views.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Bill Underwood for his company (& driving) during the first trip (I only wish we had had more success on that trip), Carol McIntyre & Pat Owen in Denali NP for information on recent Lynx sightings etc, Craig Lewis for his amazing run of Lynx sightings & good company on the shuttle buses on the second trip, & Phil Telfer for gripping me off with his sighting in May & providing me with the incentive to return for a successful trip in late August.

Itinerary

May-June

23 rd	Late evening arrival transfer to hotel. Night Puffin Inn
24 th	Depart hotel 0330, drive to Seward with several stops on route, 9 hour boat trip into Kenai Fjords, evening driving back to Anchorage. Night Puffin Inn
25 th	Lie in followed by drive north to McKinley Cabins. Late afternoon/evening shuttle in Denali NP followed by late evening drive to Savage River. Night McKinley Cabins
26 th	Early morning shuttle in Denali NP, evening along Savage River road. Night McKinley Cabins
27 th	All day along Denali Highway. Night Tangle River
28 th	Morning Richardson Highway. Afternoon drive back to Cantwell. Evening along Denali Highway & road to Savage River. Night Cantwell
29 th	Morning road to Savage River. Afternoon Healy. Evening Denali Highway. Night Cantwell.
30 th	Morning road to Savage River & Denali Highway. Afternoon/evening Denali NP to Toklat. Late evening drive to Savage River, night McKinley Cabins
31 st	Most of day in Denali NP, particularly Igloo Canyon & Teklinika. Late evening drive to Savage River. Night McKinley Cabins
1 st	Most of day in Denali NP, particularly Igloo Canyon & Sanctuary River. Evening drive back to Anchorage. Night Puffin Inn
2 nd	Morning Beluga Point, Potters Marsh & Westchester Lagoon. Afternoon return flight to UK

August/September

29 th	Late evening arrival transfer to hotel. Night Puffin Inn
30 th	Morning drive north to Denali. 1400 Eielson Shuttle Bus arriving back 2215. Short drive to mile seven. Night McKinley Cabins
31 st	0630 Eielson shuttle getting off at Teklanika Reststop. Spent morning covering 2 miles back along road towards entrance & then took shuttle bus back to Sanctuary River for 2 hours. Early afternoon shuttle back to entrance. 1700 shuttle to Toklat arriving back at 2315. Night McKinley Cabins.
1 st	0615 Wonder Lake shuttle getting off at Teklanika Reststop. Spent morning covering 2 miles back along road towards entrance & then took shuttle bus back to entrance. 1700 shuttle to Toklat arriving back at 2315. Night McKinley Cabins.
2 nd	Morning along entrance road to Savage River. 1400 Eielson shuttle getting off at Polychrome Pass & walking back along the road for a mile. Shuttle back to Sanctuary River where spent period 1830-2110. Caught 2110 shuttle back to entrance arriving 2215. Night McKinley Cabins.
3 rd	Morning along Denali Highway. Afternoon along Denali & Richardson Highways south to Gulkona Junction. Evening along Tok Cutoff & Nabesna Road. Night Gulkona Junction.
4 th	Morning along Glenn Highway returning to Anchorage early afternoon. Late afternoon & evening south of Anchorage along Turnagain Arm south to Bird Point. Night Econo Lodge, Anchorage.
5 th	Early morning Westchester Lagoon. Mid-late morning Turnagain Arm. Late morning/early afternoon Eagle River Nature Centre. Late afternoon flight home.

Checklist

Species	May-June	August-September
North American Porcupine	One Anchorage, a total of 9 in Denali NP & along Denali Highway including one in the middle of the day near Gracious House feeding in a roadside tree.	Denali NP - only one seen at Sanctuary River on the 2nd. Glenn Highway - at least three dead along the road.
Arctic Ground Squirrel	Common Denali NP & Denali Highway	Denali NP - scarce, none seen on the first 3 days but three Igloo Canyon & two Polychrome Pass after the weather improved on the 2nd. One Denali Highway.
Red Squirrel	Up to 5+ per day in Denali NP, also seen along Denali Highway	Denali NP - seen WAC, Sanctuary River & Teklanika. Particularly common at the latter where up to seven seen each day. Singles Denali Highway, Turnagain Arm & Eagle River Nature Center.
American Beaver	A total of five at 3 locations along Denali Highway	Not seen
Muskrat	Singles Potters Marsh, Richardson Highway, Denali NP & Denali Highway	Not seen
Collared Pika	Two Denali NP Polychrome Pass	Not seen
Snowshoe Hare	Abundant Denali NP, smaller numbers Denali & Richardson Highways	Denali NP - in smaller numbers than in the spring but still common particularly around Plains of Murie & Primrose Ridge. Smaller numbers Denali Highway & Nabesna Road.
Canada Lynx	Not seen	Denali NP - 31st - great views of an adult at close range at Sanctuary River & another adult stalking a Snowshoe until disturbed by another shuttle bus just west of Teklanika River. 1st - poor views in the headlights just east of the Sanctuary River bridge. 2nd - one flushed by a porcupine just east of the Sanctuary River bridge.
Coyote	Two Denali NP	Singles Cantwell & Denali NP (Sable Pass & Savage River)
Wolf	Not seen	Denali NP - 31st - Female plus 8 cubs Plains of Murie (playing with dead Snowshoe Hare). Adult at close range feeding on a recent kill. between Plains of Murie & Toklat. Adult at close range trotting along road through Toklat Restcamp. 1st - Pair plus 8 cubs Plains of Murie.
Red Fox	One (black morph) Wasilia	Singles (red morphs) Polychrome Pass (Denali NP) & Gulkona Junction
Sea Otter	15+ Kenai Fjords	Not seen

Black Bear	3 Kenai Fjords	Singles Turnagain Arm (distant) & Eagle River Nature Center
Brown Bear	Denali NP - single male on first afternoon, seven (female plus full grown cub, female plus two young cubs & two sub-adults) on second drive & an adult at close range between the entrance & Savage River on the penultimate drive). An excellent adult feeding along the Parks Highway about 60 miles south of Denali.	Denali NP - 30th - adult Polychrome Pass, female plus large young Sable Pass, 31st - young male Teklanika River, adult between WAC & Savage River, 2nd - female plus two young Sable Pass. Denali Highway - female plus two young near Susitna River. Extremely jumpy moving uphill at a mile's range suggesting considerable hunting pressure in area.
American Bison	Three Black Rapids Canyon	Not seen
Moose	Three Anchorage, 5 Seward Highway, four Parks Highway, Up to 8 per day in Denali NP (a minimum of 12 individuals including 4 small calves & one very blond individual), female plus two young McKinkey's Cabins, up to 8 per day along Denali Highway (minimum of 12 individuals).	Denali NP - common WAC - Savage River seen daily, at least 9 individuals including two cracking bulls. 1st - four Plains of Murie, 2nd - one west of Teklanika River. Denali Highway - 14 Nenana River Valley, 3 Tangle Lakes area.
Caribou	Up to 20 per day in Denali NP & four along Denali Highway on two occasions	Denali NP - 30th - 22 Toklat, 31st - 4 Plains of Murie, 1st - 5 Plains of Murie. 2nd 3 Sable Pass. Denali Highway - a total of 20 individuals in 7 groups.
Dall's Sheep	Two Beluga Point & up to 16 per day in Denali NP	Denali NP - 30th - 3 Igloo Canyon, 31st - 6 Igloo Canyon, 2nd - 5 above WAC, groups of 3 & 5 Igloo Canyon & 5 Sable Pass. Turnagain Arm three above Indian Creek.
Mountain Goat	Two Kenai Fjords	Not seen
Harbour Seal	Not seen	One Turnagain Arm
Steller's Sealion	100+ Kenai Fjords	Not seen
Dall's Porpoise	20+ Kenai Fjords	Not seen
Orca	Three pods totalling 16 individuals in Kenai Fjords including two passing right under the bow of the boat	Not seen
Humpback Whale	Great views of one in Kenai Fjords	Not seen
Beluga	Not seen	Turnagain Arm - 4th - one of my best wildlife experiences ever, 40+ including females with small & large calves riding on their backs close in shore between Beluga Point & Indian Creek. Fabulous views of adults herding fish into the shallows on the rising tide. 5th - 15+ heading slowly back out to sea on the falling tide between Indian Creek & Beluga Point.

Site guide

The following should be used in conjunction with the excellent **ABA Birdfinding Guide A Birders's Guide to Alaska**. All page references refer to this book. Directions to all the sites can be found in the book.

Denali NP (pages 59-63)

- Probably the premier accessible mammal site in Alaska, in part due to the lack of hunting, & in part due to the fact that mammals are relatively habituated.
- On the downside the park is overrun with visitors & you can only take private vehicles beyond the Savage River ranger station if
 1. you win the lottery for permits & even then only after mid-September
 2. you are staying at the Teklanika Camp Ground in which case you can drive to the campground.
- Most visitors stay in accommodation just outside the park & travel into the park each day on the shuttle buses. Buses run from mid-May to mid-September & the times of buses change from month to month. See <http://www.reservedenali.com/shuttles/index.cfm> for timetables & prices. There are several shuttles going to various locations in the park, Toklat 53 miles, Eielson 66 miles, Wonder Lake 85, & Kantishna 89 miles from the entrance.
- You can also book on guided natural history or tundra buses but these are much more expensive & often not as good for seeing mammals. The natural history tour for example barely enters the park.
- You can obtain a pass for several days travel, alternatively every third ticket booked is free. Once you enter the park on a particular day you can ride backwards & forwards on shuttles all day so long as you don't go back beyond the Savage River ranger post. Once you return east of here you have to buy another ticket to go back in. Once in the park you can get on & off the buses pretty much anywhere along the road although the buses will not let you off within half a mile of a bear sighting. There are several areas worth exploring on foot (see below).
- Early & late shuttles seem to be best for mammals although the early shuttles are often very full making it difficult to move around & it can be difficult to see mammals on the other side of the bus. By contrast the late shuttles are often empty except for people travelling to campsites & on two late shuttles I was the only person on the shuttle which meant we could stop & watch things for longer than would normally be the case.
- The shuttle bus drivers are primarily drivers not guides but most are fairly knowledgeable about the park & its wildlife. Some are exceptional & I would particularly recommend Craig Lewis. Not only does he have the Midas touch where Lynx are concerned, over 30 sightings in 2009, including four in the three days I was with him, but he is very knowledgeable about the park's mammals & I saw Wolf with him on two consecutive days. He also tends to drive the late shuttles which is an advantage,
- **Park HQ & Visitor Centre area** – the area around the entrance is good for American Red Squirrels, Moose are often seen along the entrance road particularly in the early morning & late evening & a family of Lynx were regularly seen near the railway crossing in 2009. Dall Sheep can sometimes be seen by scanning the mountains to the south of the visitor centre.
- **Park HQ to Savage River (mile 15)** – The first 15 miles of the road are open to private vehicles & you can drive as far as the car parking area at Savage River. This stretch of road is excellent for Moose (particularly during the autumn rut) & Porcupine are common at night (at least in spring). We also saw Brown Bear on two occasions & Coyote twice. Lynx are often seen along this stretch & in 2008 a female raised four young near the Savage River campground. Caribou are often seen between miles 9 & 12.
- **Savage River** – from the car park a trail leads north along the eastern bank of the river. After a mile you can cross the river & return down the other side. Alternatively continue up the valley to look for Hoary Marmots which occur on the talus slopes. Although you cannot drive beyond the ranger post without the permissions described above you can walk the road & a Lynx was regularly seen along the road between here & Primrose Ridge (an area with a high

Snowshoe Hare population) in the spring of 2009. Phil Telfer saw one c.1 mile beyond the ranger station in early June.

- **Sanctuary River (mile 22)** – Sanctuary River was very productive for me producing sightings of Canada Lynx on three consecutive evenings & according to the drivers was one of the most productive areas for Lynx in 2009. I walked this section of the road on several occasions & found lots of Lynx tracks & I also found lots of evidence of Wolf in this area. This is likely to remain a good area to look for Lynx in 2010 at least.
- **Teklanika Campground – Teklanika Reststop (miles 29-30)** – this was another Lynx hotspot in 2009 particularly around the pool on the south side of the road half a mile east of the campground, & around the small pool on the south side of the road just before the rest stop although I failed to see them here. Muskrat were denning on the second pool). Brown Bears are regularly seen in this area & I saw one feeding along the river one morning.
- **Teklanika River** – I saw another Lynx (stalking a hare) in the forest just beyond the bridge although this does not seem to be a particularly good area for the species.
- **Igloo Creek (mile 34)** – the road just west of Igloo Creek campground was another good area for Lynx in 2009 probably due to the large amount of prey (Arctic Ground Squirrels & Snowshoe Hares) in the area. The area is also good for Wolves, a pack having denned in the area for several years. The slopes in this area are good for Dall Sheep & Brown Bears are often seen.
- **Sable Pass (mile 40)** – An excellent area for Brown Bears & also good for Dall Sheep & Caribou.
- **Polychrome Pass (mile 46)** – it is well worth getting off the bus at the Polychrome Rest Area & walking east back along the road. Red Foxes are often seen around the rest area. Arctic Ground Squirrels are common in this area & Collared Pikas occur on the scree slope along the road. Scanning the valley below the rest area can be good for Moose & Caribou & I saw a Brown Bear on the scree above the road a mile east of the rest area & a sow with cubs in the valley two miles east of the rest area. Hoary Marmot occur on the talus slopes above the road.
- **Plains of Murire (approx mile 50)** – in autumn 2009 a pair of Wolves with 8 cubs were resident in this area & easy to see most evenings. Moose & Caribou are often common here.
- **Toklat Rest Area - Eielson Visitor Centre (miles 53-66)** – I only went beyond Toklat on one occasion & unfortunately the road was totally fogged in so we saw very little. However Brown Bears are common in the area & Wolves are frequently seen. I had excellent close views of a Wolf trotting through the Toklat Rest Area one evening.

Denali Highway (pages 115-127)

- An excellent road for mammals although judging by their behaviour probably subject to heavy hunting pressure.
- All distances are given from Cantwell at the western end of the highway.
- Note – all but about 20 of the 135 miles are gravel so please note the warnings about insurance. If you are using a hire car you will not be insured to drive on this road. However it is an excellent road in the main so you should not have any problems.
- The road is only open from mid-May to 1 October. Outside this period it is not maintained & quickly becomes inaccessible due to snow.
- Joe Lake on the south side of the road 10 miles from Cantwell held Beaver & Muskrat.
- Between miles 15 & 20 the road goes through an area of flooded spruce forest. Where the creek crosses the road we had excellent views of Beavers down to a few feet.
- The road then follows the Nenana River valley. It is worth stopping & scanning the valley at every opportunity particularly early & late in the day. The valley holds large numbers of Moose & looks ideal for bears & Wolves.
- From mile 30 to mile 53 (Gracious House) scan the mountains to the south of the road for Caribou.
- Three miles after Gracious House the road crosses the Susitna River. Three miles east of the river I've seen Brown Bear (a sow with 2 cubs) on the slopes on the north side of the road,

albeit distantly. The next 10 miles is good for Caribou & I've also seen North American Porcupine here. Arctic Ground Squirrels can also be common on this stretch.

- Approximately 100 miles from Cantwell you enter the Tangle Lakes zone & a pull out on the south side of the road gives great views over a vast area of marshland. Moose are very common here.
- A further 15 miles on the road becomes paved & shortly after this you pass Tangle River Inn on the right. Stopping at the restaurant here clearly demonstrates the hunting pressure in the area with the walls adorned with skins of Wolverine & American Marten among other species.

Seward Highway (pages 267-275)

- **Potter Marsh** (pages 34-35) can be good for Muskrat, often viewable from the main highway & Moose particularly in the early morning.
- **Turnagain Arm** (pages 267-268). In late summer Belugas can be seen anywhere from Beluga Point to Bird Point, particularly on the incoming tide. I have also seen Harbour Seal here. Dall's Sheep are easy to see on the slopes above Beluga Point & I have seen Black Bear on the slopes c.5 kms south of Beluga Point.
- **Portage-Tern Lake** (page 268) – Moose are common along this stretch of the highway particularly in the early morning.
- **Seward** (page 273) – Sea Otter & Steller's Sealion can both be seen in & around the marina at Seward, the starting point for trips into the Kenai Fjords.

Kenai Fjords (pages 276-279)

- Essential if you want to see cetaceans & also good for Black Bears & Mountain Goats.
- Several companies offer cruises into the fjord & based on my 2 visits I would recommend Mariah Tours' Cruises. Their 9-hour cruise (Captain's Choice) leaves the harbour at 0830 each day (from late May) & weather permitting visits most of the key areas. It cost \$189 plus tax in 2009. <http://www.kenaifjords.com/kenai-custom-tours.html> . It is important to let the captain know what your target species are at the start of the trip to ensure that he/she visits the appropriate areas in the fjord.
- Sea Otters are easy on the first part of the cruise as you leave the harbour.
- Further out you are likely to encounter Humpback Whales, Orcas & Dall's Porpoise & you will normally visit a Steller's Sealion colony. We also saw Grey Whale in 1998.
- The cruise normally turns back at a glacier. Black Bears are often seen on the slopes near the glacier, we saw 4 in 1998 & 2 in 2009.
- On the way back to Seward the cruise normally visits areas where Mountain Goats occur. We saw Black Bear in the same area in 2009.

Richardson Highway – Delta Junction to Paxson (pages 107-114)

- The main area for reintroduced American Bison. There is a viewing point at milepost 262.5, 3.5 miles south of Delta Junction although we found viewing difficult here.
- We did however see bison in the Delta River valley by making regular stops to scan the valley floor & found three bison in Black Rapids Canyon to the north of the Black Rapids Glacier Overlook at mile 225.4 .
- Just south of McCallum Creek bridge at milepost 202.5 (page 111) a track runs up a valley on the east side of the road to some pools near a radio relay tower. This track held lots of Snowshoe hare even mid-morning so could be worth checking out for Lynx.
- We also saw Muskrat on the river just north of the Gulkana River hatchery at milepost 188.

Nabesna Road (pages 188-191)

- I only travelled 25 miles down this gravel road and saw very little but the road continues for another 20 miles into Wrangell-Saint Elias National park which holds most of Alaska's large

mammals, e.g. bears, Wolves, moose etc. It could well be worth exploring if you have sufficient time.

Glenn Highway (pages 185-187)

- Sheep Mountain, on the north side of the highway, 113-116 miles from Anchorage is excellent for Dall's Sheep.
- The lakes to the south of the highway between mileposts 199 & 213 (115-129 miles from Anchorage) hold Beavers & Muskrats.

Eagle River Nature Center (page 36)

- I stopped here briefly on my way to the airport & saw Black Bear & Red Squirrel on the trails near the center.
- Two Brown Bears had been seen here over the course of the previous couple of weeks & some trails were closed due to this.

Additional opportunities for mammal watching (sites visited on 1998 trip)

Nome (page 207) – Musk Ox are easily found along Kougarok Road (page 217) & others have seen Tundra Hare & Brown Bear along this road. Larga Seals can often be found hauled out near Safety Sound (page 215) in summer.

Barrow (page 197) – Point Barrow is traditionally an excellent site for Polar Bears particularly in early spring before the pack ice pulls away from the shore. A number of operators offer hummer trips out to the point to look for them although they seem to have become increasingly difficult in recent years. Depending on the time of your visit & the state of the ice a number of species are possible. Ringed & Bearded Seal are often seen & Bowhead Whale & Walrus are less frequent. Arctic Foxes occur on the tundra inland of the town.

St Paul's Island (page 246) – expensive to get to but the only place where you are likely to see Northern Fur Seal & also good for Arctic Foxes.