

Seven degrees of latitude: mammal watching from central Alaska to the Arctic Ocean.

A trip to Alaska has been simmering on the back burner for many years, but it finally started to take shape with an email, simply seeking trip planning advice, to one of my college house-mates, Pat Valkenburg. He and his wife, Audrey Magoun, have been biologists in Alaska (primarily caribou and wolverines, respectively) since they left the University of Maine in 1972. They have traveled extensively throughout the state, chiefly flying in a Super-Cub that can land on riverine gravel bars and snowfields. They made Aram and me an irresistible offer: taking us on a driving / backpacking trip from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay along the Pipeline Road (aka the Dalton Highway).

Our trip began with three days in Fairbanks for logistics and a local hike (Wickersham Dome) and paddle (Upper Chena River), during which we encountered various mammals we know well: **hoary marmot, muskrat, red squirrel, snowshoe hare, red fox, and moose**, to use the local names. On June 12th we headed north for what should have been a 9-hour (~360 miles) drive to and through the Brooks Range, but we stretched it into three days because of the weather forecast, 10 cm of snow on the Atigun Pass. Car camping with hordes of mosquitoes was not fun but Marion Creek and Galbraith Lake campgrounds were pleasant and we had a couple of nice, though damp, hikes that gave us a good feel for the country.

June 15-18th was the core of our trip, backpacking down the Atigun Gorge well beyond sight or sound of the highway, then setting up a base camp from which we could explore and look for wildlife. Here are our mammal sightings in order of viewing distance:

Arctic ground squirrel: Widespread, abundant, and quite tame. A young one ran directly to me from 15m away and sat between my feet briefly: perhaps driven by an atavistic attraction to tree-like structures?

Root vole (Tundra vole). A mother and six young shared our campsite and let us watch them sun-bathe and feed from 2m away.

Alaskan marmot: We worked hard to find a marmot because piles of rocks with marmot-sized cracks adjacent to foraging ground were quite uncommon. We finally got a single individual on our last day with nice views of its luxurious fur, viewed through a spotting scope from 20m.

Red fox: A red fox seemed very relaxed to have us 50m away: sunbathing, stretching, and napping in the open while we sat and watched.

Caribou: We saw only two bulls, lingering in the mountains after the cows had gone down to the coastal plain to drop their calves.

Wolves: We had only one encounter but it will be etched in our memories forever: three adults 150m away, close enough so that with our scope we could see the "yellow of their eyes" and their lips pursing as they barked and howled to communicate their annoyance at us.

Dall sheep: Small groups of ewes and lambs were seen every day as they foraged on or just below the talus slopes, but the rams were elsewhere.

Grizzly bear (Brown bear): Audrey spotted a sow with three 2-year old cubs on our first afternoon and they were "with us" off and on throughout the four days, exploring the opposite slope, thankfully never less than half a mile away. Though we carried bear spray and a shotgun

we wondered about their efficacy as Pat and Audrey recounted tale after tale of deadly bear encounters. Fortunately the scope allowed us to watch them quite closely, e.g., nursing and learning how to dig up ground squirrels. The only drama came on the last morning; we spotted a boar and sow coming up the valley, and soon “our” bear family was charging up the slope to avoid them.

Predictably wolverines were a dip for us ... only some scat ...despite Audrey’s constant scanning of all the best microsites like snow banks. Audrey may have seen more wolverines than almost any other biologist (online you can see her and Pat in a PBS Nature documentary: *Wolverine: Chasing the Phantom*) but even she cherishes every sighting.

On June 19 we headed up the highway (~140 miles, <4 hours if driving directly) to Deadhorse/Prudhoe Bay and encountered a scattering of **caribou** groups, ultimately finding a gathering of cows and young calves that stretched to the horizon. We had something like 2,000 - 4,000 animals in view and who knows how far the aggregation extended. That same drive produced what was probably our favorite species of the trip, **muskoxen**. We found them (12, 8, then 1 individual) foraging close to the highway, perhaps attracted to vegetation favored by road dust. At Deadhorse we searched the dystopian industrial landscape for Arctic foxes with no luck, but were very happy to overnight in the Aurora Hotel, essentially a “man camp” for oil workers. What a treat to have hot showers and excellent food after 8 days of dining on various forms of dehydrated nutrition and bathing with a tepid wash cloth.





We flew Alaska Air to Barrow (aka Utqiagvik), a key destination for North American birders, staying at the King Eider Inn and renting one of their cars, June 20-23. After scoring our key bird targets we spent a few hours sea-watching and were rewarded with distant views of three **gray whales** and two **bowheads**. Just along the shore there was pack ice both northeast (toward Point Barrow) and west of town where we counted about 100 and 300 **ringed seals** respectively. Based on conversations with various people, belugas, killer whales, polar bears, walruses, bearded seals, and ribbon seals all occur repeatedly, but we got the sense that seeing them would require a good dose of luck. Our last mammal of the trip was a **nearctic brown lemming**, which we found by flipping the first piece of old plywood that we encountered.

Some final notes that may be interesting or useful:

The suite of birds we found was not as striking as the mammals but Smith's longspur, Steller's and spectacled eiders, and yellow-billed loons are some of North America's most sought-after species. Once we passed onto the North Slope the mosquitoes were surprisingly scarce, totally absent most of the time despite unusually warm weather. Pat had predicted that our dates would fall just before the deluge of insects and he was right. This period was also excellent for wildflowers; both the diversity and abundance were fabulous, a thick icing on a delicious cake. Indeed, while the trip only generated 7 life mammals and 4 birds for me (7+6 for Aram) it was easily our best trip in North America, filled with many hours of watching wildlife in open terrain against a spectacular backdrop.