

**THE RING OF FIRE:
The Commander & Kuril Islands
12th-25th June 2011
by
Colin Bradshaw**

If the nine-hour flight from Moscow didn't make me realise just how far east I had come, the sound of Lanceolated Warbler singing just outside the arrivals hall certainly did. We had arrived at a wet and misty Sakhalin Island for the start of the 1,500-mile WildWings 'Ring of Fire' trip through the island chains of the Russian Far East. Directly across from our hotel for the night was Yuri Gagarin Park — a delight for space buffs — and the miserable conditions had forced down large numbers of migrants, especially Siberian (Dark-sided) Flycatchers, to supplement the residents such as Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Rufous-tailed Robin and Sakhalin Warbler (the latter formerly considered a race of Gray's Grasshopper Warbler).



Siberian Flycatcher

Embarking on the Spirit of Enderby, our home for the next two weeks, we set sail across the Sea of Okhotsk via the trip's least inspiring tick, Japanese Cormorant. The Spirit is a well-appointed Russian polar exploration vessel complete with two gourmet chefs, an excellent bar and five Zodiac inflatable boats, which we used each day to land on or cruise around various Kuril or Commander Islands. The Sea of Okhotsk is the moulting ground of the all the world's Short-tailed Shearwaters and huge rafts of this species proved an ideal camouflage for small numbers of the much-sought-after Spectacled Guillemot, which we occasionally saw over the next three days.



The Spirit of Enderby off Kunashir

The first of the islands, Kunashir (the southernmost Kuril), is still a source of dispute between Japan and Russia. The island was almost invisible in the low rainclouds that hung on the branches of the gnarled woodland home of Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker and Narcissus Flycatcher. Because of the large numbers of Brown Bear in the reserve we visited, we were accompanied everywhere by an armed forest ranger—although this didn't seem to put off the one bear that appeared right next to the Zodiac landing site.

Latham's Snipe displayed over more open areas while Japanese Bush Warbler and Longtailed Rosefinch skulked in the wet bushes. Blakiston's Fish Owl breeds on the island but we couldn't find them as they have left their nestbox by mid-June, but did chance upon both White-backed Woodpecker and Crested Kingfisher along the same creek.



Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker



Kunashir creek

We were blessed with good weather for the next two islands: Iturup, with its active volcanoes and hot springs, and the uninhabited Urup. Iturup has a small town and a KGB border post where we were delayed before venturing into the field. The town is the most northerly regular breeding site for Chestnut-cheeked Starling, while low-lying fields host numerous Latham's Snipe. However, it is higher up, on the Juniper-strewn slopes of the steaming volcanoes, that you search for Iturup's specialities. A secretive Japanese Robin briefly showed well; we heard Japanese Accentor on a couple of occasions but only one was glimpsed. There was some compensation for this miss with a steady stream of Pacific Swifts, several very showy Siberian Rubythroats and even a Red-flanked Bluetail.



Chestnut-cheeked Starling



Iturup volcanoes

The main valley in Urup is the site of a deserted summer fishing camp and within minutes of landing I was watching one of my key species of the trip. Because of its limited geographical distribution, only breeding around the Sea Of Okhotsk, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler is a difficult bird to catch up with but here dozens were reeling and displaying in territorial disputes. Siberian Rubythroats sang from every tall bush and Brown-headed Thrush fluted from the single mast. Long-tailed Rosefinch and Eastern (Grey-bellied) Bullfinch flushed from small willow patches in the wet valley bottom, while both Pallas's and Kamchatka (Arctic) Warbler fed in the canopy on the valley sides. Later that day, on a small island that we visited to photograph Steller's Sea-lion, we found a pair of Grey Buntings on the slope above the landing beach.



Siberian Rubythroat



Steller's Sea-lion

The Zodiacs were used to cruise close to the island cliffs and with this, and the long journeys between the islands, we accumulated an impressive list of seabirds and mammals, including large numbers of Sperm and Humpback Whales, Steller's Sea-lion, Fur, Common and Larga Seals, Dahl's Porpoise, Orca and numerous Sea-Otters. Tufted Puffins were with us all the time and we saw up to 50 Laysan Albatrosses in a day. Highlights included three Short-tailed Albatrosses (about 0.2% of the world population) just off Chirpoy — all three of which, at some stage, sat on the water close to the boat — and a fly-by summer-plumage White-billed Diver.



Laysan Albatross



Short-tailed Albatross

The summer weather continued for a third day as we zodiaced into one of the more bizarre birding localities I have visited. The flooded caldera had been a Soviet submarine base until the end of the Cold War, when they suddenly upped and left, abandoning bedding, children's toys, cutlery and crockery as well as vehicles and machinery. Trees on the island grew to no more than six feet but, despite that, there were at least two pairs of Nutcrackers as well as the by-now-routine rubythroats and Kamchatka (Arctic) and Middendorff's Warblers.



Kamchatka Warbler

Leaving this esoteric location the weather began to deteriorate with a strange combination of high winds and thick fog that I have only ever encountered close to the Bering Sea. Because of this, most of us didn't make it onto Yanchiko Island where Crested and Whiskered Auklets are present in six-figure numbers. Fortunately the next morning, though conditions were still pretty awful, we found shelter around Toporkovy Island and bumped into

an obliging Whiskered Auklet that posed for photographs. The weather got progressively worse bringing an unexpected bonus of several hundred Leach's and Fork-tailed Petrels and three Black-footed Albatrosses. As we travelled further northeast, auks became commoner with numerous Crested and Whiskered Auklets, Brünnich's and Kuril Pigeon Guillemots and Tufted Puffins. However, without doubt, the most amazing site was the number of Blue Fulmars, which we estimated at nearly 100,000 on some days.



Whiskered Auklet

Our final landing on the Kurils was on Onekotan Island with its sweep of heathland dotted with thickets of Stone Pine and Dwarf Birch, none more than 5 feet high. Drenching squalls coming out of thick fog was an unusual combination that kept us wiping our binoculars all day. Having previously only seen Pine Grosbeak in taiga forests of northern Europe and Canada, it seemed bizarre to find them on this virtually treeless island. Otherwise, our standard Kuril fare of passerines was augmented by Asian House Martin and Buff-bellied Pipit.

Following our departure from the Kurils, the rest of the day and overnight was spent heading for the Kamchatka Peninsula and Russkaya Fjord. The weather here was miserable, as it had been when we left our last location, although this didn't stop us finding several pairs each of Long-billed and Ancient Murrelets in the mist, while a lump on the shore morphed into an immature Steller's Sea-Eagle as the fog swirled away. We landed on the moraine beach at the base of the fjord but weather conditions precluded passerines showing themselves. This was particularly frustrating as the habitat looked fantastic and, amongst the usual Middendorff's Warblers, a single Eye-browed Thrush singing for long enough to be scoped and a few Eastern Yellow Wagtails alarm calling showed us a glimpse of the potential of the area. A Zodiac trip along the fjord mouth took an unexpected twist when we accidentally got between a hunting pack of Orcas and their lunch — a sea-lion colony — but our boatmen successfully extricated us; and we were off to Zhupanova River Reserve, a huge area of flooded forest and oxbow lakes.



Middendorf's Grasshopper Warbler



Orca

In a tiny marsh next to a small fishing community at the mouth of the Zhupanova reserve we discovered breeding Long-toed Stint and Pechora Pipit, while the low bushes were home to Scarlet Rosefinch as well as rubythroats and the commoner warblers. Upriver, we passed several pairs of Pacific Divers, a few Kamchatka (Common) Gulls and a colony of longipennis Common Terns, with their grey underparts and black bills; occasionally waders, most noticeably Far Eastern Curlew, flew overhead. However, the master of this watery landscape is undoubtedly Steller's Sea-eagle and there were at least three occupied eyries with the inhabitants seemingly completely oblivious to us. Returning along the forest edge allowed us to spot Taiga Flycatcher amongst the rubythroats and warblers. Once again, had it been warm, sunny and still, instead of cold, misty and windy, we may have seen rather more passerines.

A severe storm hit us as we travelled across the Bering Sea to the Commander Islands. I managed to stay on the lookout until I'd got my next lifer, a Mottled Petrel, of which at least 15 passed the boat. However, once that was under the belt, lying down in a dark room dosed up with seasickness tablets seemed the best option.



Steller's Sea-eagle



Zhupanova river Zodiac

Because of the severity of the storm, we were behind schedule and still three hours short of Bering Island next morning. This had the unexpected consequence of our being able to watch the specialist seabirds of the area without distraction. Both Red-legged Kittiwake and Red-faced Cormorant have a very limited distribution, yet here we had both species passing the boat in numbers while flocks of Crested Auklets were augmented by almost as many Parakeet Auklets and, rather surprisingly, Common Guillemot outnumbered Brünnich's.



Tufted Puffins

Arriving at Nikolskoye on Bering Island, we zodiacked to the quay and set off along the rocky shoreline. Here, ten Rock Sandpipers hid from the persistent icy rain and there was a collection of gulls, mainly Glaucous-winged, though two odd-looking birds could have been sub-adult Vega Gulls.



Rock Sandpiper

Walking inland along the river we came to mudflats where two pairs of Mongolian Plovers tripped amongst groups of Dunlin. Lapland Buntings sang beside tussocks, sheltering from the high wind, while Pechora Pipits kept to the ditches and rank grass. Later that afternoon, as the swells abated, we took a Zodiac trip around Ariy Kamen Island, a tiny island with huge seabird colonies. Parakeet Auklets dotted the water below cliffs laden with Red-faced Cormorants and Red-legged Kittiwakes.



Parakeet Auklet



Red-faced Cormorant



Horned Puffin

Finally we arrived at Medney Island, the most easterly of the Commanders, which was still enveloped in low cloud and mist although the wind had decreased. Common Eider of the v-nigra race commuted between the surf and a lagoon giving us excellent views of their bright orange bills. Upon landing, we found Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch on the old survey huts and several pairs of Pechora Pipits, giving better views than in previous encounters. Lapland and Snow Buntings sang and a Rock Ptarmigan showed well on the slope above the huts. A slight movement in some dune grass eventually turned out to be a Lanceolated Warbler that paused long enough for a single photograph. How much excitement would that have caused if it had been 250 miles further east on the Aleutian chain?



Pechora Pipit



Lanceolated Warbler

The long haul back to Kamchatka started that Thursday afternoon and took 36 hours. The first afternoon, as we moved between Medney and Bering Islands before swinging out into the Bering Sea, was full of birds with numerous Laysan Albatrosses, a few Mottled Petrels, lots of puffins, Crested and Whiskered Auklets and, best of all, four Least Auklets in flight. Humpback Whales dominated the cetaceans, with one breaching repeatedly. The Friday was much slower but a group of adult and immature Red-legged Kittiwakes hitched a lift with us for several hours jostling for position on the superstructure. In the late afternoon, fog and rain thickened, staying with us till we docked on Saturday morning in Petropavlosk prior to our long flight home.



Red-legged Kittiwakes