

## Report on Birdwatching Trip to the Lena River Delta.



This trip was organized for us by the Ecological Travel Center in Moscow. It was at first rather uncertain whether we would be able to do the tour, because we were for some time only two of us, my son Raphael and myself. All the organization was done by Tatiana our contact person in Moscow. Tatiana Kalishevskaya was instrumental in helping us understand what we should get prepared to and was very willing to listen to our wishes and make sure that all would be ready and on time for the departure. She warned us about starting early enough the formalities with the Russian Embassy, and rightfully so,

because some administrative hurdles made the process a bit lengthy.



***1 Kestunis and Volodia at the entrance of the museum in Tiksi***

Until the very last minute we were supposed to be four participants. One of us unfortunately had to give up at the last minute. The two of us and the third participant, Kestunis Cepenas, from Lithuania, were very much in phase with the objective, which was, first to see and be able to take good pictures of the Ross's Gull, but also other arctic species, particularly waders, in their breeding grounds. All the three of us were in agreement to walk, look for and, if necessary, wait

for good pictures opportunities rather than trying to maximize the number of

species encountered. In this respect, this trip was a big success, it was also a success for the number of species encountered, which amounted to over fifty, among which many typical arctic species.

Our guides were Wladimir Yourievitch Akkanov (Volodia), from Moscow, Ivan Ivanovitch Nikiforov (Vania) and Ivan Dimitrevitch Achikasov (Vania too!) our two local evene guides. Volodia is an outstanding birdwatcher, his exceptional knowledge of birds calls helped much draw our attention to



**2 Vania and Vania, our two Evene guides: Ivan Ivanovitch (right) and Ivan Dimitrievitch (left)**

species we might have missed, he managed to see the Ross's gull from pretty far away thus allowing us to approach and enjoy quality photography time. He gave us a lot of freedom to walk on our own, but drawing always our attention to the do's and don'ts, to impact wildlife as little as possible whilst taking pictures. Our two local guides, rangers of the nature preserve, really made this trip possible. Without their impressive boat driving ability, their knowledge of the rough weather

conditions of the place and the very complex geography of the delta, this trip would not

have been possible. Moreover, their great sense of humor, their cooking talent with the limited means we had, and their constant worry about our well-being, no doubt that this trip would have been less enjoyable (we said that they were forming the Vania & Vania Expedition team, which they appreciated very much!)

The arrival in Tiksi gave us an immediate polar impression as the port of Tiksi was still full of pack ice, and the departure had to wait for a day. The wind was chilly but we had a beautiful light which allowed us to walk in the tundra around the city, take some good shots of red and red-necked phalaropes, grey

plover, minute sandpipers among others.



**3 Bringing the boats to the water and loading them with 15 days worth of food and gasoline was not the easiest of the exercises!**

We were lucky enough to see the wind blow away the ice during the second night, and we were able to leave for the delta. The first part of the trip, we sailed up stream in a branch of the Lena river coming "backwards" in a roughly north-south direction into the Laptev sea. With on our left, on the West, the hilly shore, and on our right the seemingly endless delta, the landscape was breathtaking.

The first part of this boat ride lasted a bit more than five hours, with one stop on the

way, Some Glaucous and Vega Gulls as well as Bewick Swans and King Eiders accompanied us at times. Dragging the boats on the shore was not the easiest exercise, but thanks to the experience and strength



**4** *Our first home, with the hill in the background*



**5** *A red phalarope with one of his three chicks*

of Vania and Vania, after this last effort in the chilly wind and mist, we could find some warmth. For the first part of the stay we slept in a wooden house, serving as a ranger's house. Here, with an excellent reindeer leg which fed us for the most part during this first part of the tour, we could appreciate the



**7** *The observation of two pairs of nesting Ros's gull was undoubtedly the highlight of the tour*



the cooking talent of our guides. Immediately next to the house was a red-necked phalarope nest with



**8 A sabine's gull was also nesting on the Ross's gull island.**

from the house, in the tundra and on the hills close by. The first day, the weather being beautiful we went to the place where reportedly Ross's gulls were nesting. Not all that easy a trip because of the shallowness of the river and the sandbanks, which forced Vania and Vania to push the boat with a wooden row, or even get out and drag it by hand. This allowed us to have an extraordinary afternoon where we could not only watch for a very long time two nesting pairs of Ross's Gull, but also a Sabine's Gull nest a King Eider's nest and a number of waders among which Red-necked, Temminck and Least Stints, this was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the tour. On another island in the delta we had great picture opportunities of an arctic loon, and saw all three jaegers the same day.

A couple of days later we went back to the Ross's gull place, the weather and the light were less good, but watching a Ross's gull is such a privilege, that we could not resist the temptation. We could also see ruffs, with one in breeding plumage, and among others, Long-tailed Ducks, Bean Geese, a nice four chick party of Least Stint.

three eggs, a small water body where least and pectoral sandpipers regularly showed up. A hundred meters from the house another small pond was inhabited by a red phalarope with three chicks. A Temminck stint, most likely nesting around, had decided that the small toilet house was the best perch from which to check what we were doing. From the house we did boat

trips into the delta, and walks



**9 A red-necked stint, not that easy to tell from a least sandpiper.**



**10 A cute least sandpiper family**

The weather was good enough to go out around the house and do some outings into the delta, but not good enough to ride the 80 Km necessary to reach the second refuge, more to the North at the junction with the Lena River mainstream.

When the weather was clear we climbed two of the

hills close-by, not very high probably two or three hundred meter above sea level, but

deceptively far away. This resulted in an approximately one hour and a half walk each, but was largely worth the effort, the reward being an incredible view on the wilderness of the continental Siberia, with endless snowy hills, contrasting sharply with the other side of the river, completely flat and composed of



**11 From the hill close to the refuge: the endless hills of the continental side of the river (left) and the gigantic network of channels and islands of the delta.**

an innumerable quantity of islands and channels. On the way to the northern hill was a Red-throated Loon's nest, and many pacific golden plovers. In the tundra around the house were Red-throated Pipits, Lapland Longspurs, Snow Buntings, and chicks of Pectoral sandpiper and Dunlins. On the way to the Southern Hill were arctic skuas and also arctic tern but we could not locate a nest although the attacking behavior made us think that it should not be far. Loons were crossing above, calling, from and too the river, letting us assume there were more ponds with nests in the surroundings.

One morning we woke up in a bright sunshine with a wind close to zero, and we packed everything, loaded the boats and left for our second stay-place. The ride was magnificent, with the huge delta, its endless network of flats, sometime sandy, and sometime covered with tundra, the wild cliffs of the continental shore, with sometime still very large accumulation of snow. A very pleasant temperature, an almost cloudless sky and completely flat water, made the ride very enjoyable.

Not even three hours later we arrived at an island where the scientific arctic station is, close to which we found our second home, the rangers' house. The scientific personnel of the station were kind enough to welcome us with tea and snacks and offered us to use the wi-fi and shower which was highly



**12** *This solitary Ross's gull was showing nesting-like behavior, it might have lost its mate.*

appreciated. The size of this island allowed us to walk around within a couple of hours, and was populated with many nesting bird, Arctic Terns, Arctic Skuas, Glaucous and Vega Gulls, Bewick's Swan, Arctic Loon, and just next to the house were nests of Red-throated Pipit, and Temmink Stint. Many of both Red-necked and Red Phalaropes were all over the place, together with Ruffs, Pectoral and Least Sandpipers. The cherry on the cake was a single Ross's gull, which we could see almost every day. From here we did several excursions by boat on neighboring island.

One island had both a nest of Rough-legged Hawk and Peregrine falcon. There was a large number of Bean Geese with chicks, many waders, among which a beautiful Curlew Sandpiper, and we had great



**13** *We were fortunate enough to see all three jaegers in a single day*

pictures opportunities of an arctic loon in a superb light.

On another island, we did not succeed to see the black headed marmots, but the place was very handsome, with high rock cliffs and hills where we could climb, seeing there Buff-bellied Pipits, and Horned lark.

Regrettably, the delicious reindeer leg came to an end and we had to switch



to corned beef, however Vania and Vania managed to find great variation in the menu in bringing delicious freshly caught fish to the menu.

Our guides brought us to a very interesting place where the permafrost is apparent and lets some prehistoric evidences surface from time to time. One of us found a mammoth bone which found its place in the museum in Tiksi. This island was populated by nesting bluethroats, sandpipers, plovers, gulls, and arctic loon.



***14 As many waders, the pacific golden plover fakes to be wounded to lure away potential aggressors***

During the last two days of the second week, the weather deteriorated and we started to worry about catching our flight back in Tiksi. Eventually, the wind eased up in time to let us go and reach Tiksi on time. We had an opportunity to admire our guides' skill in driving their boats in a rather rough weather.

We went to the headquarters of the Nature Preserve and had a very interesting presentation on the delta scientific work and expeditions which were accomplished in recent years. We

still had a chance to scramble the tundra around Tiksi and take some good last pictures of some waders and chicks.

We had an overnight stop in Yakutsk, where we had a taste of local food and a last outing early in the morning allowed us to admire the beautiful pacific swift, the elegant white-winged tern, the black-billed Siberian common tern and Richard's and Olive-backed Pipits.

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