

c/o Karen Piplani, 1502 Halifax Rd.  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514  
krpiplani@nc.rr.com

**The BULLETIN...**  
**Chapel Hill Bird Club**  
**September 2009**  
<http://chbc.carolinanature.com>

To:

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**>Meeting: Monday, Sep 27, 2009 <**

**When/Where:** 7:15 PM/refreshments; 7:30/Meeting  
The lounge, Olin T. Binkley Baptist Church, corner  
of Hwy. 15-501 bypass and Willow Dr., behind  
University Mall, Chapel Hill.

**Who/What:** Dr. **Stuart Pimm** will be speaking on  
“Bird Extinctions—What we can do  
to prevent them”

Dr. Pimm is the Doris Duke Professor of Conservation  
Ecology at the Nicholas School of the Environment  
at Duke University. He became a conservation  
biologist partly by watching species extinction in  
Hawai’i in the 1970s, and has a variety of interests in  
this area. Join us for a fascinating talk by one of our  
nation’s foremost experts in this important area  
and learn what we can do to help prevent extinctions.

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**Saturday Field Trips Resume!**

Saturday field trips led by Doug Shadwick have  
resumed. Trips depart from Glen Lennox Shopping  
Center Parking lot off HWY 54 promptly at 7:30 most  
Saturday mornings. All skills are welcome. Trips are  
usually over by noon. Dress for the weather and for  
walking. For further details, call Doug at 942-0479.  
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**Report on Alaska Talks**  
**by Norm Budnitz and Lena Gallitano**  
**at Nov 2008 Meeting.**

As promised last year, I will give a brief summary of  
Norm Budnitz’s talk about his trip to Alaska given at  
our November 2008 meeting. This will be followed  
by Lena Galliano’s write-up of her

trips to Alaska. Lena also spoke at our November  
2008 meeting. Lena’s write-up, which was first  
published by the Carolina Bird Club, appears with  
their kind permission. It is much more detailed and  
accurate than my quick notes would allow me to  
write, and that’s the reason my summary is first..  
Although late, these two accounts may be of interest  
to many members. Lena and Norm really brought  
their experiences to life for us. If you missed this  
program, don’t forgo any chance to hear Lena  
Gallitano and Norm Budnitz speak of their travels.

**Norm Budnitz’s Trip to ANWAR**  
**in search of the Gray-headed Chickadee**

**By Karen Piplani**  
**Norm’s trip** to the Canning River on the North Slope  
of the Brooks Range started in Anchorage at the end  
of June with a flight to Fairbanks, another flight in a  
small plane to a small village on the South side of the  
Brooks Range, and then a flight in a 4-seater plane to  
a landing strip beside the river. The plane had tundra  
wheels to allow landing on boggy ground. There  
were three couples, Norm, and 2 guides in the group.  
It was a group of mixed interests: one man was a  
geologist, others were birders, and people interested  
in the outdoors. The area near the river was filled with  
scrubby willows and Balsam Poplar. Mew Gulls  
were nesting in the area. Each person was limited to  
40 pounds of gear which was stored in dry bags. The  
participant had to be able to carry his bag wherever  
required. There were 2 rafts, one with paddles and  
one with oars.

When camping, they set one raft on its side with a fly  
overhead and a table underneath to act as a sheltered  
cooking and resting area. The “Growler” area was a  
pit placed a distance away, and was sheltered from

view of the camp by a strategically placed blue tarp. A red life vest on a stake beside the tarp signaled whether the facility was free or in use.

Each day, the rafts were carried from the campsite to the water. There were areas on the river with sheets of ice pushed up on shore, overhanging the river. These areas of layered ice would be pushed up when the river was high, and stay until they melted or washed away. These are called "Aufeis". The guides had to scout these areas carefully to be sure that the rafts could go around the ice. If there were no way around the ice, the rafts could slide under the ice and get hung up. There were Grayling trout and Arctic Char in the streams, and this is one place in North America where they could safely drink the untreated water without fear of Giardia. The sun was up for 24 hours each day. Hip boots and rain gear were the order of the day. The guides were scrupulous in their care of the travelers. One woman got fell in shallow water and got wet. She brushed off the request from the guide to change her clothes, saying that she was fine, but the guide announced that the group would not travel on until she had gotten out of her wet clothes, dried off, and into dry ones.

The group took one side trip up a small stream when they were in the mountains, and located a Grey-headed Chickadee in a hole in a small tree. This is one of the least common North American breeding birds, and was a real prize. They saw Yellow Wagtails, Smith's Longspur, Semi-palmated plovers, and Willow Ptarmigans.

Animals and tracks seen included moose, caribou, red fox, grey wolf, Dhal sheep, Arctic hare (which eat tree bark in winter) and grizzly bear, which are huge. The scat was interesting too, and varied with the season. For instance, in the winter, moose scat is about the size of pecans; in the summer it resembles "cow pies." The wild flowers were fantastic, and the scenery was breathtaking. They could see the shape of the land as they traveled down river. There were no trees softening the shapes of the up-thrust land masses. One day they could hear the sound of "barking" as they neared a bend. As they came around the corner, they could see at the base of a cliff, a fox barking at a hole in the base of the cliff. As they traveled further, they could see that a wolverine had come out of the hole. The guide said that he had only seen a wolverine 3 times in 10 years of guiding. I thought of all the stories I have heard of the North country and was definitely jealous.

The fox continued to bark at the wolverine all day and was still doing so the next day as the group took off down the river. The barking continued, fading slowly, until they could no longer hear it.

Norm's trip continued down river into the tundra area north of the mountains. Being able to experience vicariously some of the sights and sounds of the trip, hearing about going to sleep with the sounds of birds in the air and the midnight sun above the horizon made a wonderful experience for those of us who may never get to the far north.

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## **Alaska Trips To the Chevak Spectacled Eider Camp and ANWAR in Search of the Gray-headed Chickadee**

**By Lena Gallitano**

For a number of years I'd been thinking about a trip to Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in hopes of seeing a Gray-headed Chickadee but just as much or more, to see the Refuge itself. When my friend Lynn Barber called to see if I wanted to make the trip in 2008, there was not a moment's hesitation on my part. We booked our trip with Wilderness Birding Adventures (WBA) quite early but then a second WBA trip caught my eye. It was the Chevak Spectacled Eider Camp – another bird I had longed to see in its native habitat for quite some time.

The description of the Chevak trip on the WBA website offered intriguing details:

This trip is a truly amazing and out of the ordinary birding experience where we will come as close as we ever will of guaranteeing the sighting of Spectacled Eider. Ulric Ulroan, a Yup'ik Eskimo from the village of Chevak in western Alaska on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (Y-K Delta), has opened his hunting and fishing camp for birders to visit. The Y-K Delta is one of the largest in the world roughly the size of the state of Oregon and the breeding area for millions of waterfowl and shorebirds. It's among the most productive bird breeding areas in Alaska.

We conducted an exploratory trip to this vast area and were delighted with what we found.

Spectacled Eiders surrounded us as they prepared to pick nesting sites. The most common gull was Sabine's, the most abundant goose was Emperor and the most common shorebirds were Black Turnstone and Bar-tailed Godwit. The birding was amazing among an astounding number of birds.

I was even more intrigued with Chevak when WBA co-owner Bob Dittrick told me that after living in Alaska for

30 years, he had never visited an area in Alaska where there are as many birds. My trip began on June 10, 2008 and with 24-hour daylight, we could see and hear birds all the time. Have you ever gone to sleep listening to a Dunlin's display call? Or seen a Semipalmated Sandpiper repeatedly sneak into her nest 20-25 feet away from your tent door? Or found pairs of Spectacled Eider looking for nest sites? Or pairs of Emperor Geese in flight or popping their heads up to see where the human voices are coming from? If not, you should add Chevak to your list of future birding destinations! But let me share more about the experience.

Chevak is west of Anchorage and 135 miles northwest of Bethel and is accessible only by air. As a small native village of about 800, it requires advance preparation in order to visit. WBA's first scheduled birding trip to Chevak was in 2008. It was exciting to be on the first trip and experience the village, the hospitality of the local residents and the birds of the area. It was especially fun to meet Ulrich's mother whose name was also Lena!

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From the village, we headed to Ulrich's fish camp in an outboard motor boat – a cold, breezy ride but interesting as we followed the twists and turns of the Niglikfak River. Along the way, we could see flocks and pairs of waterfowl streaming across the sky and with the noise of the boat and high tide, heads of others popped up like periscopes along the shoreline. We reached camp in about 45 minutes and quickly settled in getting the sleeping tents up since Ulrich had already set up the walled tent where meals were cooked and shared. With the flat topography and short, immature growth of the summer plants, we could see for miles and in every direction there were birds singing, calling, foraging, incubating and flying – a virtual 24-hour show. My best comparison is to Lake Mattamuskeet and Pea Island in the winter although with the vast area of the Y-K Delta, the birds were not as condensed as they are here in the winter but they were ever present.

With 24-hour daylight, time is not a concern and as our very capable WBA guide Aaron Lang explained, we would just go with the flow and enjoy the day as it comes. Just as he predicted, dinners grew later and sleeping to 7:30 or 8:00 AM on a birding trip is unheard of except

with arctic summer days. Our days consisted of boat trips or hikes from camp to the many tundra ponds where we could count on seeing Red-necked Phalarope, Black Turnstone, Dunlin and Western Sandpiper that were quite spectacular in breeding plumage. Overhead both Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaeger were common. Speckled bellies (Greater White-fronted Goose), Emperor Goose and Cackling Goose were constant companions either in the air, foraging or incubating eggs with camouflage so complete that more than once they flew when we accidentally came way to close for comfort.

One of our boat trips was to Old Chevak and we had some time to watch the birds on their territories while we ate lunch. A Red-necked Phalarope scurried from waters edge through the dead grass to settle down and disappear in its nest. We wondered if it was the female still laying eggs or the male returning to his incubation responsibilities. On another trip to a Sabine's Gull colony by a small delta pond, we had a demonstration of their skillful flight maneuvers and this spectacular bird now has my vote as the most beautiful gull on my life list.

Chevak was a very special experience, not only for the birds, but also for the opportunity to visit this friendly village. Ulrich shared many fascinating and alluring stories of native folklore as well as samples of native foods. The hospitality offered will always be a nice memory of this unique birding experience. But let me go on with the rest of my adventure as it continues in ANWR ...

Over the years, my fascination with seeing the Gray-headed Chickadee had become intertwined with my interest in ANWR so I was very excited but also a little nervous at the prospects of an eight day camping and rafting expedition in what might be a cold and daunting climate – even though it was the second week of June! This was going to be the longest camping trip I'd ever taken and would require not only some careful planning for proper clothes but also physical stamina to transport my own gear – and unfortunately I'm not a light packer (but I will be the next time)! WBA again showed their skill and proficiency with wilderness expeditions by providing detailed gear lists and even began the trip with a one on one check to be sure everyone had the essentials for all circumstances. Leaving from Fairbanks, we took a scheduled flight to Arctic Village where we waited on the runway for our pilot and tundra plane to shuttle us, three at a time with our gear, to the put-in on the Marsh Fork of the Canning River. The high-winged Cessna was the perfect airplane to see the mountains of the Brooks Range as we passed between the peaks on a beautiful, sunny and warm day. Getting everyone on site, pitching camp, having dinner (Bob and Scott proved to be excellent chefs) and

learning the routine for the week took most of the day but we were able to fit in several hours for a leisurely walk to explore the site and enjoy the abundant summer wildflowers.

Day two was sunny, warm and beautiful but also the most physically demanding of the trip as we portaged all of our camping equipment, personal gear and two rafts about a quarter of a mile across *aufeis* and the braided river to reach the open water channel suitable for launch. *Aufeis* (German for “ice on top”) accumulates throughout the winter as the water in the river freezes in layers and can reach depths of several meters. The ice was beautiful and crunchy so it helped with the rafts since we were able to slide them most of the way across the river bed.

After numerous trips back and forth, Scott, discovered the nest of a Mew Gull. Made of sticks and lying out in the open on the river rock in a dry part of the river bed, it was very well camouflaged but once we discovered it, Mama Mew became a ferocious protector of her nest so even getting close enough to take a picture had us ducking to avoid her dive-bombing passes.

With the season early, the rafts fully loaded and the river low, we often had to pull the raft over shoals of sand and river stone because of low water so the first few days we were frequently in and out of the rafts and looking for deeper water. Bob and Scott were both excellent in their guidance and instructions – the paddlers did have a bit of trouble with paddle right and paddle left a few times but we eventually even got that figured out. There were some Class 3-4 rapids about mid-way through the trip but by that time we were river pros!

Billed as the Gray-headed Chickadee trip, Bob took no chances so we checked every known site for nest cavities and birds. In one likely spot we all scattered to look and listen when Scott heard a call – in minutes we were all gathered around a nest hole in a tree watching a pair of Gray-headed Chickadee’s going in and out feeding young. We watched these beautiful birds for nearly an hour as they brought insect after insect to their young and removed fecal sacs with each trip. Later in the trip we found a second family group with two fledged young hidden in the rocks. Needless to say, there were a lot of high fives to celebrate our success.

Every day we saw birds along the river and had a trip list of 41 species. The most memorable were life birds for me: Gray-headed Chickadee, Wandering Tattler, Smith’s Longspur and Arctic Warbler. Finding an American Dipper nest on a rock face across the river from a lunch spot will also be a lasting memory.

Another fascinating aspect of this trip was the geology of the Brooks Range. From rounded river stones with coral fossils to the mountain that looked like a cut-away to demonstrate the plate tectonic formation of mountains, ANWR is nature’s classroom. As we made our way downstream, the sharp peaks and rocks of the younger mountains gave way to rounded hills as we headed toward but stopped short of the coastal plain.

About half way through the trip, I made this note: white water rapids, 42° air temperature, raining, splashing – never would have thought I’d be doing this for birding! In retrospect, it was a fantastic trip of a lifetime and I would highly recommend it to anyone looking for a unique birding experience – Alaska remains high on my list of places to visit and I’m hoping to return some day for another ANWR experience along the coastal plain. And then there is Nome, Gamball, Adak ...

If you’d like more information about these trips, go to the Wilderness Birding Adventures website at [www.wildernessbirding.com](http://www.wildernessbirding.com). The April 2008 issue of *Birder’s World* had an excellent article about Chevak and the Y-K Delta titled “Unbirded Alaska” and is on-line at <http://www.birdersworld.com/brd/default.aspx?c=a&i=1076>.

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#### Reminder:

#### **New Hope Audubon Society Bird Seed Sale Orders with Payment are due October 1<sup>st</sup>.**

Seed order proceeds help support educational and outreach programs, including the building of a new eagle viewing platform. You can obtain an order form from our web site: [www.newhopeaudubon.org](http://www.newhopeaudubon.org) There will also be a few order forms at the Monday, September 27 meeting of the Chapel Hill Bird Club. Orders are to be picked up on Oct. 24 at the Wild Bird Center in Eastgate Plaza. Please call Martha Girolami: 362-5759 with any questions.

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#### **Chapel Hill Bird Club Officers**

**President:** Amalie Tuffin, [amaliel@post.harvard.edu](mailto:amaliel@post.harvard.edu)  
**Vice Presidents:** Larry & Sue Wilson, [su1wil2@nc.rr.com](mailto:su1wil2@nc.rr.com)  
**Vice Presidents:** David & Judy Smith, [davidjudysmith@verizon.net](mailto:davidjudysmith@verizon.net)  
**Secretary:** Amalie Tuffin, [amaliel@post.harvard.edu](mailto:amaliel@post.harvard.edu)  
**Treasurer:** Patsy Bailey, (919) 933-5850  
**Field Trip Coordinator:** Doug Shadwick,  
 (919)942-0479 [dougshadwick@nc.rr.com](mailto:dougshadwick@nc.rr.com)  
**WebMaster:** Will Cook [cwcook@duke.edu](mailto:cwcook@duke.edu)  
**Bulletin Editor:** Karen Piplani, (919) 929-6553, [k\\_piplani@alumni.unc.edu](mailto:k_piplani@alumni.unc.edu)