



● Known simply as “The Spit,” it is one of the iconic destinations on the ABA Area birding circuit. An extremely thin strip of land extending almost five miles into Kachemak Bay, in Alaska’s Lower Cook Inlet, The Spit offers lodging and seafood, beachcombing and fishing, charm and quirkiness—and fantastic birding. Mudflats immediately off The Spit provide refuge for thousands of migratory shorebirds, as well as bird lovers who come from all over to marvel at the spectacle. *Photo by © Randy Weisser.*

A Week on the Kenai

Birding around Homer, Alaska

An immersion experience in The Last Frontier: Seabirds and shorebirds, glaciers and aurorae (and an earthquake), and a wonderfully quirky and supportive birding community

A rush of warm night air pushed past me when I opened the front door. A Barred Owl called from down the street while myriad insects chirped softly in the background. I could already feel my clothes sticking to me as I walked toward the Uber at the end of the driveway. Even at 4am, the humidity of this May morning in Florida was

curling my hair and fogging windows. It felt strange carrying layers of warm clothing in my backpack on such a muggy morning, but I knew I would be needing them soon.

Hours later, I arrived at the Orlando airport and settled into my seat on the plane. I gladly ac-

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cepted the rounds of free snacks and drinks to pass the time and keep me awake. After a day of flying, the pilot announced that we were beginning our descent. I peeked out the window to see a landscape rippled with dramatic creases. Peaks and valleys rose from the sea, many of them still capped with snow. In the airport, figures of moose, bears, and muskoxen decorated the hallways—a stark change from the familiar images of Florida’s manatees, panthers, and egrets. I stepped outside and was promptly greeted by a frosty breeze. I reached into my backpack, now grateful to have extra layers at hand. I took in a breath of chilly air, excited to finally be at my destination: Alaska.

● One of the allures of birding “The Spit” is the ridiculously close-up views of resident and migratory shorebirds. Sit patiently, and the birds will walk right in front of your lens. CLOCKWISE

FROM BOTTOM LEFT: **Black-bellied Plover, Whimbrel, Semipalmated Plover.**

Photos by © Joey Hausler.

I was generously hosted by local birders during my first night. They picked me up from the Anchorage airport and then drove toward their home in the Chugach Mountains. Anchorage faded away as we ascended into the mountains. When I awoke the following morning, the eerie song of a Varied Thrush and the hoarse chatter of a Boreal Chickadee drifted through the open window of my room. Already a promising start.

Alaska is a prime destination for birders, especially in spring during the arrival of shorebird and songbird migrants. Well known among birders are the fabled Bering Sea islands, with their promise of vagrants from Asia, and the expansive Arctic tundra, where shorebirds display in the nearly constant daylight and defend against predatory jaegers, Gyrfalcons, and foxes. But I was closer to home, relatively speaking, in Homer, with small-town charm but fully equipped with all modern conveniences.

Homer is located on the Kenai Peninsula, which is sandwiched between Cook Inlet and Prince Edward Sound. With so much coastline, the peninsula provides excellent opportunities to view waterfowl, shorebirds, and seabirds. Most of Homer comprises tidal mudflats and spruce woods, but the fabled birding hotspot there is “The Spit,” an extremely narrow tongue of land extending well into Kachemak Bay. On my first morn-

ing, I pushed open the blinds and started scanning Kachemak Bay from the comfort of my hotel room. I saw Black and Surf scoters, Harlequin Ducks, mergansers, Red-necked Grebes, and more. Movement near the scoters caught my eye. I focused on what I thought was debris only to find that it was a sea otter. I scanned the rest of the bay and realized there were over 100 sea otters floating lazily amongst the waterbirds. To be precise, these are the Southcentral Alaskan population of the northern sea otter, *Enhydra lutris kenyoni*. Once hunted extensively for their fur, most sea otter populations in Alaska are now back to stable numbers following federal protection starting in the early 1900s. Right off the bat, the waterfowl and sea otters made me excited for the wildlife that Homer had to offer.

That same morning, I went on a boat ride into Kachemak Bay. White-winged Scoters made an appearance, quickly completing the scoter trifecta. More Harlequins flashed their gaudy colors and Brants paddled away from our approaching boat. Just as we left the harbor, a Pigeon Guillemot in salt-and-





• Any birding visit to Homer and vicinity requires a stop at the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge headquarters. The refuge is staggeringly immense, reaching from the Aleutian Islands to the Inside Passage and north all the way to the Chukchi Sea. But the grounds of the refuge headquarters are comparatively modest, offering vistas of mudflats and hiking trails through spooky conifer woods.

Photo by © Randy Weisser.

pepper attire, so nicknamed for the splattering of black and white plumage acquired by immatures and adults during their nonbreeding season, dipped below the water. Shortly after, a Marbled Murrelet skirted around the boat, looking very much like a miniature version of the guillemot. Farther out in the bay, two Tufted Puffins captured the attention of everyone onboard. De-

spite their outrageous yellow eyebrows, they were soon overshadowed by large rafts of Common Murres, numbering several thousand in all.

The boat operator—who happened to be a fine birder—took us to Gull Island, a looming rock with sheer drops on all sides. Here, Black-legged Kittiwakes perched on narrow ledges of the rock face. These same narrow rock ledges are where they will raise their young, each nest easily identified by an intense whitewash of fecal matter. Amid the sounds and smells of 1,500 kittiwakes, I was just as interested in the other life forms that occupied Gull Island. Limpets and chitons of several varieties were wedged almost invisibly into the island's creases and crevices. Sea stars, nudibranchs, and sea squirts (like the Pacific sea peach) added remarkable splashes of red and orange to the dark rock.

Several Surfbirds moved about the kelp and other brown algae. Their squat bodies and stout bills reminded me of the Ruddy Turnstones I frequently see in Florida. On several occasions, I have observed turnstones ramming into piles of rack on the beach. They flip through the newly exposed rack at the bottom of the pile with their trowel-like bill. I could only imagine the Surfbirds behaving similarly here on the seaweed-covered shores of Alaska. Black Oystercatchers added more color to the mix with bright red-orange bills and golden irises. It was pointed out to me that every individual has a unique eye pattern. Some have perfectly round irises, while others have irregular blotches or shapes.

Back on land, the boat harbor of the Homer Spit proved to be a wonderfully birdy place. Wandering Tattlers and other shorebirds could be seen for-



● Shorebirds are, unsurprisingly, the focus of the Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival. But the region is home to 300+ species of birds. COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Alcids like the enchanting **Ancient Murrelet** can be seen from close to shore; the sought-after **Emperor Goose** is regular in small numbers in the colder months; the exceedingly rare **Long-billed Murrelet** has perhaps been more reliable in recent years in the Lower Cook Inlet than anywhere else in the ABA Area; and **Anna's Hummingbirds** are rapidly expanding in the region, with some even overwintering. *Photos by © Aaron Lang.*





● Shorebirds and seabirds are what Homer is famous for, but be sure to do some upland birding when you visit. On a Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival field trip in May 2024, birders going to the Calvin and Coyle Trail, right in town, enjoyed great studies of White-winged Crossbills, American Three-toed Woodpeckers, Boreal Chickadees, Varied Thrushes, "Sooty" Fox Sparrows, and more. *Photo by © Lora Haller—U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service*

aging on the rocky walls of the harbor. As it turned out, a boat wasn't necessary at all to find kittiwakes. They perched comfortably on the narrow metal ledges of tall structures in the harbor. Other larids, like Short-billed Gulls, were also quite common. They were formerly called Mew Gulls, and one would be

excused for assuming that "mew" is an onomatopoeia of the bird's call. Rather, "mew" is derived from the Dutch name for the bird, *zeemeeuw*, which literally translates to "seagull." Large American Herring and Glaucous-winged gulls frequented the area. Interestingly, these two species hybridize here with enough regularity that they have acquired the name "Cook Inlet Gulls."

On the western edge of the peninsula, Anchor Point Beach produced an exciting mix of birds. Greater White-fronted Geese and dabbling ducks dotted the freshwater ponds near the parking lot. I was pleased to find the cinnamon-colored head of a Eurasian Wigeon mixed with the dabblers. Ducks aside, my goal here was to find shorebirds. I was not disappointed: Scattered

along the rocky beach and freshwater pools were shorebirds aplenty. I was excited to find Western Sandpipers showing their beautiful rusty caps and shoulders. Dunlins sported black bellies, a refreshing change from their plain gray and white plumage I am used to seeing in winter. Short-billed Dowitchers, Wilson's Snipes, and plovers joined the array.

Of course, Anchor Point was only one of several places to view shorebirds. Along the shoreline of the Homer Spit, I found Ruddy and Black turn-



● The 33rd annual Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival will be held May 7–11, 2025. Watch shorebirds, go on a boat trip, dust off your best bird call imitation, and have the time of your life!



• Even widespread species, familiar across much of the ABA Area, take on a different character in Homer. Birders acquainted with **Song Sparrows** in the Lower 48 states will be startled by the large, cold gray, long-billed *kenaiensis* subspecies of the Song Sparrow. This one was on a bird festival field trip to Anchor Point. Photo by © Ted Floyd.

stones, a Rock Sandpiper, and Surfbirds foraging among the pebbles. Beluga Slough and Lake, Mud Bay, and Mariner Lagoon had their fair share of birds, including Red Knots, Pectoral Sandpipers, and Whimbrels. At Beluga Slough,

the simple *too-too-too* call of a Greater Yellowlegs transformed into a prolonged warble. I was surprised at hearing this, unaware that this species could even “sing.” The sounds and striking colors of shorebirds on the cusp of their breeding season were a special treat.

I thoroughly enjoyed watching sparrows during my time in Homer. Some mornings, Fox Sparrows sang in the shrubs

outside my hotel room. I also heard the sweet whistles of Golden-crowned Sparrows. Some gold miners of the late 19th century noted their songs to be disheartening. They called the bird “Weary Willie” because it sounded like they sang “No gold here” or “I’m so tired.”

Of all the sparrows I saw, my favorite was the Song Sparrow. I grew up with this species nesting in my front yard. In fact, the species has been omnipresent in most of the places I have lived. What set apart the Song Sparrows in Homer was their color, size, and bill structure. Depending on taxonomy, seven or more subspecies of Song

Sparrow occur in Alaska. They vary in size and color, from large and pale to dark and small. The ones I saw belong to the very dark *rufina* group. They are overwhelmingly sooty in color and have very minimal rufous tones. More precisely, the ones breeding on the Kenai Peninsula are the long-billed subspecies *kenaiensis* within the *rufina* group. They look quite different from the milk chocolate-colored sparrows I am used to seeing in the eastern U.S.!

I spent some time on the trails be-

• The Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival offers an impressive diversity of indoor programming—with a special focus on activities for young people. Which is a good thing, given the often rainy and cold weather around Homer in May. LEFT: Young birders learn about avian physiology at an exhibit at the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center (photo by © Lora Haller—U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service).

RIGHT: An entrant in the popular bird-call contest gives her best rendition of a Black-capped Chickadee (photo by © Heather Kallevig).





low the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center. There I encountered dabbling ducks, Sandhill Cranes, Red-necked Phalaropes, Lapland Longspurs, and a moose grazing near the trail. My favorite moment was watching eight White-winged Crossbills feed on black spruce cones. Males and females, both adults and immatures, perched low in the dense spruce branches. One by one, they dropped to a small puddle on the ground and pulled out a cone. Flying laboriously back to a perch with their hefty haul, they stripped the cone of its seeds.

There were Red Crossbills here, too, and I learned about research on bill structure in the two species. Approximately half of Red Crossbills cross their

• A boat trip into Kachemak Bay is highly recommended. The operators know birders and the birding culture—and will get you quite close to the sea rocks for good viewing of shorebirds like this **Black Oystercatcher** and these **Surfbirds** (photos by © Aaron Lang). The author, at far left, and her companions, including local expert Mike Schantz and *Birding* Editor Ted Floyd (center), on a half-day boat trip enjoyed superb viewing of kittiwakes, alcids, “rockpipers,” sea ducks, sea otters, and other marine life (photo courtesy of Ted Floyd).





bills right over left. The other half cross them left over right. The direction of their crossed bills determines the direction of the circular motion in which they feed on cones. Any seeds not eaten by a bird with one type of bill can still be eaten by a bird with the opposite bill type as it feeds on the cone from the opposite direction. However, White-winged Crossbills are three times more likely to cross their bills right over left. This is supposedly because they manipulate their food, positioning cones in such a way that an individual can extract more seeds. Whatever the reason, it was fascinating to watch these birds devour seeds only feet away from me.

I would be remiss if I did not explain how I was able to visit Homer. I was honored to be a recipient of the Schantz Brothers Foundation Scholarship, which supported my trip to the 32nd annual Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival. This same scholarship program has supported many prominent birders well known to ABA members: Josh Engel, Ben Winger, Tyler Hicks, Jessie Barry, Andy Johnson, Neil Gilbert, Marcel Such, Joel Such, and Hannah Clipp. The festival offers

● Immediately northeast of “The Spit” is a shallow tidal lagoon called, appropriately enough, Mud Bay. Thousands of **Western Sandpipers** gather here in May. Instead of being plain gray as they are in most encounters in the Lower 48 states, they are boldly patterned in black and rufous by the time they reach the Kenai Peninsula. *Photo by © Lora Haller—U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Inset by © Joey Hausler.*



• The scenery alone is worth a visit to the Kenai Peninsula. In early May, there is still a wintry feel to the region, but with the promise of spring in the air. Sightings of moose are essentially guaranteed, while thimblehorn sheep and belugas require a bit more searching. Brilliant aurorae are frequent, and you might even experience an earthquake in this seismically active region. *Photo by © Michael Armstrong.*

bird walks, field trips, educational programs, children's events, crafting, trivia, and more. As a condition of the scholarship, I was required to deliver a plenary address. It was an exciting honor! At the end of my presentation, I was overwhelmed by the positive remarks from guests, fellow speakers, and festival planners. They weren't necessarily complimenting me or the program. Rather, their remarks came from somewhere deeper. They were excited to know that there is a young generation of people passionate about protecting birds.

This kind of positive, supportive attitude permeated the festival. I was accompanied by keynote speaker Ted Floyd, scholarship organizer Mike Schantz, and several young birders during the aforementioned boat trip to Gull Island. We pointed out birds to each other, stared at sea otter pups floating with their mothers, felt excitement for life birds, and bonded over the experience we were sharing together. The sense of community was strong within our small group, but that same sense of community was obvious throughout the whole festival. It was evident to me in many ways. I received free rides, was invited out to dinner, and was welcomed into homes for warm drinks and snacks. But nowhere else did I feel the spirit of the festival more strongly than at the annual bird-calling contest.

I arrived at the Homer Brewing Company to see a gravel lot packed with lawn chairs and excited guests. When the contest commenced, the emcee joked and jabbed, preparing the audience for the fun that would follow. One by one, participants stepped up to the stage to give their best bird calls. Some calls were serious. The amazingly accurate sounds of Common Ravens, Snow Geese, and shorebirds were met with approving applause from the audience. Other calls were silly. We laughed over side-splitting parodies of warbling loons, cartoon ducks, and anthropomorphized peacocks with Southern accents.

The youth category wrapped up the contest. Children whistled, chirped, and clucked adorable impersonations of Alaskan birds. My favorite call of the evening was from a duo of young children who imitated the *chickadee-dee-dee* of Black-capped Chickadees in precious, childlike fashion. Even in the cold, drizzly weather, the event was full to the brim with laughter, friendship, and beer. Above all, it was full of people celebrating birds in the spirit of togetherness.

It was hard to pull myself away from Homer when the time came to fly back home. And I should note in passing that my visit to Homer coincided with a historic display of the aurora borealis (obscured by steady drizzle during the peak, alas) and even a small earthquake (not uncommon on the seismically active Kenai Peninsula). But it was the birds and people that made for a memorable experience. On the drive back to Anchorage, I saw the large shape of a Harlan's Hawk perched on a spindly spruce by the highway. The Harlan's is a subspecies of Red-tailed Hawk that breeds in taiga regions of Alaska and northwestern Canada. Seeing the hawk was the perfect farewell. It made me think of all the special birds I had seen and wonderful people I had met over the past week. By the next afternoon, I was back in Florida. I traded my coat for short sleeves, but happily clung to the memories of my week on the Kenai Peninsula. 🌊