

In Tim's Footsteps



By: Tyler L. Hicks

The wind howled through my polar fleece chilling the sweat that had formed under the layers of clothing that I was wearing. Far below and off in the distance the city of Anchorage was barely visible through the blowing snow and the grey waters of the Turnagain Arm that lie beyond it. It was my first of five days of birding in Alaska and I was out searching for Willow and Rock Ptarmigan with Bob Diettrick, owner of Wilderness Birding Adventures. Several months prior to that moment I had been perusing various state birding listservs, as I often do to see what else is showing up in neighboring states, when I saw a post about a scholarship opportunity for young birders. The Tim Schantz Memorial Scholarship was created in order to honor the memory of Tim Schantz, an energetic and enthusiastic birder who passed away in the summer of 2000 while guiding in Alaska. The scholarship winner is provided with airfare and hotel so that they may attend the Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival. Any college level student with an interest in ornithology or birding may apply.

Several months later I was on top of mountain scanning the rock strewn snowfields for Rock Ptarmigan. Suddenly before me stood a stunning male Rock

Ptarmigan shining purer white than the purest snow with striking black lores and flaming red eyebrows. Not less than an hour before I had enjoyed fine looks of my first Willow Ptarmigan but I must admit that I favored the Rock Ptarmigan's crisp colors more than that of the Willow's. As we strapped our snowshoes on for a fast descent to the car I thought about how lucky I was to have stumbled across that e-mail months ago. There are limited opportunities for young birders and I wondered how many more opportunities existed out there. The rest of the day was spent birding the Anchorage area observing Arctic Terns, countless Hudsonian Godwits, and a variety of waterfowl before boarding a small prop plane for the flight south to Homer.

As the plane droned low over the Alaskan landscape I could see that winter was only beginning to loosen its grip on the land. Meanwhile the first large wave of Neotropical migrants had already landed in my hometown back in Kansas. As the plane and I began to "fallout" on our approach into Homer, the five mile spit of land that juts out into Kachemak Bay was easily visible and I wondered what birds awaited me there. The Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival is annual birding event held at Homer, Alaska during the first week of May. The festival involves various field trips, boat tours, and presentations on birds and birding. As part of the scholarship, the recipient must make an hour-long presentation at the festival. I was excited to do my presentation on Spoon-billed Sandpipers and the threats they face in the East Asian flyway. It primarily focused on the reclamation of the Saemangeum estuary in South Korea, that consists of 400 square kilometers of tidal flats. Saemangeum is the primary fall staging area for Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Now it destined to become rice fields, golf courses, and an industrial park. Only months before I had been birding on the Saemangeum flats and gazed out upon endless flocks of shorebirds and the 33 km long wall behind them that would eventually seal off the ocean and perhaps seal the fate of the critically endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper. As I presented the grizzly details of the reclamation project to my audience I could hear their gasps and moans of disgust. While there is very little that can be done now to save Saemangeum, I felt it was important to enlighten others about the reclamation as few in North America had heard about it. Despite the dark overtones of the presentations many enjoyed the talk and took the time to tell me so afterwards.

Fortunately there were plenty of birds to be seen in the Homer area and I took full advantage of my few days of Alaska birding. Yellow-billed Loons, Kittlitz's Murrelets, and Stellar's Eiders cruised the waters off the spit and far off-shore thousands of Common Murres, Red-faced Cormorants, and Tufted Puffins awaited me on the many boat tours associated with the festival. At low tide, mixed flocks of American and Pacific Golden Plovers scoured Mud Bay while swirling flocks of Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers flashed against a snow-capped mountainous background.



As I was without transportation, I bounced from one carload of visiting birders to the next. Finding and showing birds to other people is one of the great joys of birding to me and it gives me the opportunity to share my passion for birding with others. One group of birders, from Colorado, I had run into not but three weeks before in a remote canyon in southeastern Colorado while leading a bird tour. It always amazes me how small birding makes the world seem. In a matter of days the birds of Homer became as familiar to me as the birds back home. Unfortunately my time in Homer was quickly running out. I began to think about the schoolwork that needed to be made up and the impending finals that were to begin the next week. Due to my time constraints I had to leave before the main guest speaker, Bernard Heinrich, would give his talk on ravens. As I waited at the miniscule airport at Homer a moose passed through the corner of the parking lot and a Merlin shot down the runway, I hope he we was cleared for landing! I boarded the eight-seater prop plane and buckled in. The little plane's two propellers roared to life and the Homer scenery dropped away below me. As the plane banked low

over a spruce bog, two Greater Yellowlegs took flight. They were home for the summer, how good that must feel.

Anchorage was now far behind me. Looking out the window the endless snow-capped Canadian Rockies spilled outward towards the horizon. What an honor it had been to be the recipient of the scholarship. I hoped that I had honored Tim's memory and emulated the traits that made him an excellent bird guide. This article was written with intention of not only informing others about the scholarship but also to thank those who helped organize my trip. I would like to thank Bob Diettrick of Wilderness Birding Adventures, who formerly employed Tim, for a wonderful morning on the mountain searching for ptarmigan. I would especially like to thank the Schantz family, namely Tim's brothers Mike and Tom. Tom spent a fair bit of time trying to chase me down while I bounced all over Homer like an Arctic Tern out for a Sunday cruise. Tom is Tim's twin brother, who is also an avid birder, a point immediately realized when he introduces his son whose name is Eider. I was gracious to have been able to meet and bird with Tom as I had never had the opportunity to meet or bird with Tim and this was as close as I would get. I undoubtedly will return to Homer and Alaska in the future. Most of all I want to wish the best of luck to next year's recipient of the scholarship.



Sidebar

For more information on the Tim Schantz Memorial Scholarship visit

<http://www.iowabirds.org/other/schantz.asp>.

For more information on the Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival visit:

<http://www.homer.alaska.org/shorebird.htm>.

For more information on the Saemangeum Reclamation Project and the Spoon-billed

Sandpiper visit: <http://www.birdskorea.org/>.