

THE WILDLIFE OF ARCTIC ALASKA

Text and landscape photos by **MORTEN STRANGE** and **BEE CHOO STRANGE**

Animal photos by **BEE CHOO STRANGE**

In May-June 2025, the two of us visited the state of Alaska, USA, for a wildlife watching road trip and to visit old friends. Our last trip to the state together was in 2008, so it was time for a refresher course. This time, we did trips out of Fairbanks in the interior (a town with some 70,000 people). Before this year, Bee Choo had never been north of the Brooks Range, or to the Arctic region period, so our priority this time around was the high country north of the Arctic Circle and the tundra along the North Slope towards the Arctic Ocean.

In the north, the timing for a visit is crucial, as seasonal conditions change by the week, sometimes within a few days. As it turned out, spring was very late in 2025, so in early June, the Arctic had more snow and ice than we had anticipated. This made camping and walking off trail difficult to impossible. The ground was frozen and although the sun was out all day, the temperatures ranged between 0°C in the day and -7°C at night.

From Fairbanks, we flew up to Anaktuvuk Pass, and spent two nights there in the Gates of the Arctic National Park. We were lucky to find a room at the workers guesthouse in the village. After that, we drove from Fairbanks on the Dalton Highway to the end of the road at Deadhorse, at the Prudhoe Bay oilfields, 495 miles, or nearly 800 km, straight north.

The Dalton (or the North Slope Haul Road) was built in 1974 to service the oilfields around Prudhoe Bay and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline built subsequently in 1975-77; since its opening to the public in 1994, it had gradually become a tourist destination for adventurous eco tourists in cars, RVs and on motorcycles. Today

much of the road is paved, but there are still long sections of gravel and dirt.

Nevertheless, this is the type of Alaska trip that anyone can do. All you need to be is a fairly safe driver. The Dalton Highway is straight and wide and easy to drive in the summer — just watch out a bit for deep potholes and the occasional big rig coming at you at high speed. We switched to all-wheel-drive only twice, going across the 1,444m Atigun Pass in muddy, snowy and foggy conditions.

Two things draw us to Alaska: The enormous wide-open wilderness and sense of space, and also, the people, who are friendly, chatty and always helpful. In Alaska, you are free: Almost the whole state is public land and you can drive and stop and sleep wherever you want. You can hike anywhere, you can camp and build a fire if you want to; you don't need to follow a trail or ask for permission, and you don't have to tell anyone about your plans or take a guide. Where in Asia is this possible?

Wildlife-wise, the interior boreal forest belt is a bit quiet. Although hunting is strictly regulated, it is allowed in many areas and that makes what little wildlife there is somewhat skittish. Up north, however, the tundra habitat is amazing: The window is narrow, but during the breeding season from early June to early August, the

Above: As you drive north from the Yukon River along the Dalton Highway, following the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, you approach the Brooks Range foothills and exit the interior around Coldfoot; the Coldfoot landing strip is visible in the top of the picture. Only 12 people are permanent residents in the village, but there is a large camp servicing the truckers and tourists; this is the last place to buy petrol before Deadhorse, some 380 km farther north.

In Alaska, you are free: Almost the whole state is public land and you can drive and stop and sleep wherever you want... you don't need to follow a trail or ask for permission, and you don't have to tell anyone about your plans or take a guide.

open grasslands come alive with birds, mammals, and insects, and yes, in some places, with mosquitoes as well! For someone coming from Southeast Asia, where shorebirds and waterfowl are few and far between, seeing the thousands and thousands of ducks and geese and waders in the tundra is an astonishing and encouraging experience!

Northern Alaska

The three habitats covered by the authors:

- 1 The interior forested lowlands
- 2 The Brooks Range mountains
- 3 Tundra on the North Slope

— Authors' route



1 THE INTERIOR



● The boreal forest belt runs all across the interior of Alaska, here just south of Fairbanks; characterised by spruce and birch trees.



● The American Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) is common throughout the interior boreal forest; this one was crossing a trail in Fairbanks.

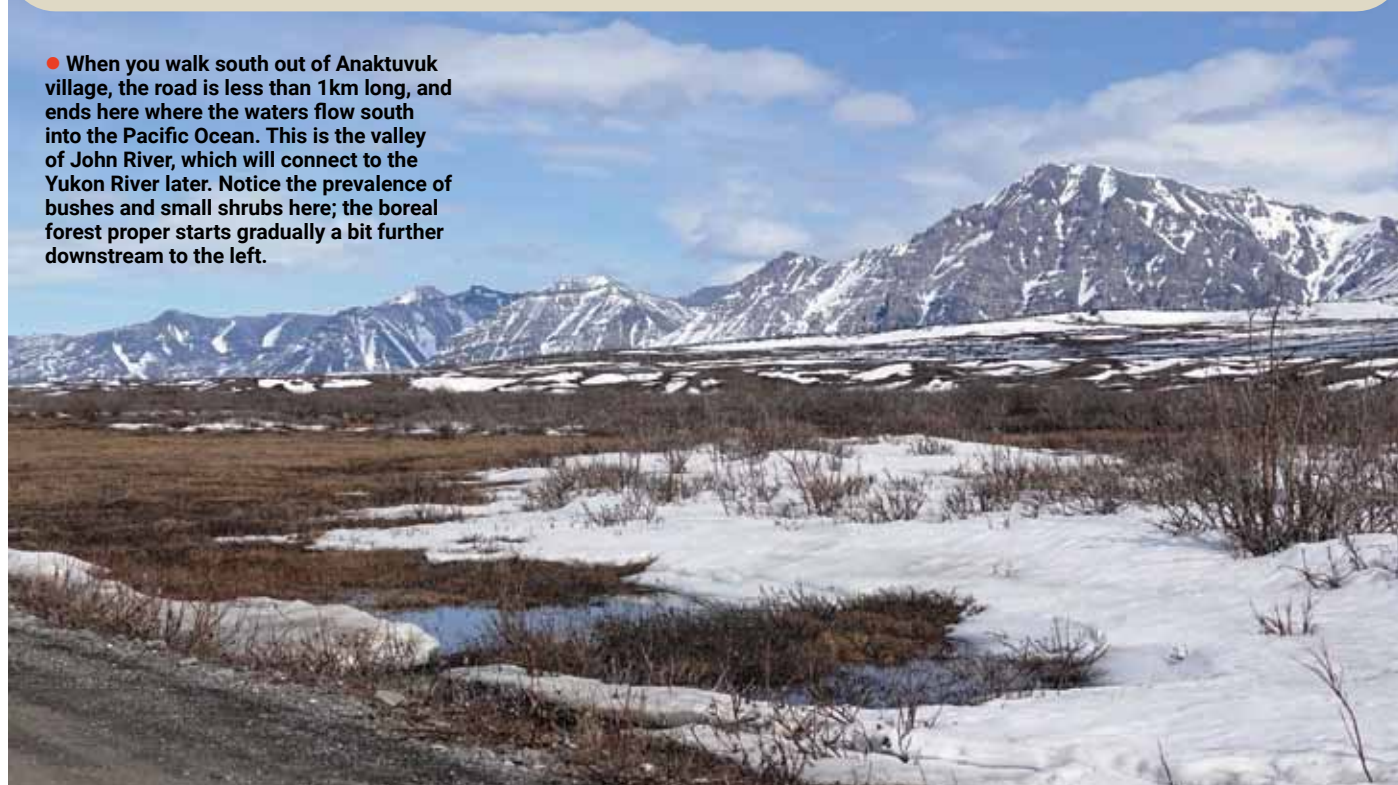
● The iconic American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) can be found all over North America, except in the Arctic. In Alaska, it heralds the spring with its arrival in May.

● The interior is rich in vegetation that may hide surprises like this North American Porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*).

● Creamer's Field is a bird sanctuary in the northern outskirts of Fairbanks and we always go there during our visits. In 2025, we found this beautiful Horned Grebe (*P. auritus*) in a wooded pond inside the reserve.

2 THE BROOKS RANGE

● When you walk south out of Anaktuvuk village, the road is less than 1km long, and ends here where the waters flow south into the Pacific Ocean. This is the valley of John River, which will connect to the Yukon River later. Notice the prevalence of bushes and small shrubs here; the boreal forest proper starts gradually a bit further downstream to the left.



● Anaktuvuk Pass is the only human settlement in the Brooks Range west of the Dalton Highway. It is considered the most isolated community in the US. There are no permanent roads into the village, and supplies are flown in by air. When we flew in on 1 June 2025, there was only one other passenger, a lady, with the two of us on board this Cessna 208 Caravan, coming in to land. Some 300 people live here, mainly Nunamiut inland Eskimos. While trophy hunting is not allowed in this part of the Brooks Range, the native Inupiat people are allowed to hunt Caribou for subsistence. In autumn, thousands of Caribou migrate south across the pass.

● In Anaktuvuk Pass, almost every structure has a pair of Arctic Ground Squirrels (*Urocitellus parryi*) living under it or nearby. This individual was about a metre away from us, trying to make himself invisible on the trail!



● Snowshoe Hares (*Lepus americanus*) are everywhere in Anaktuvuk Pass, feeding on the open patches of vegetation between the houses. At this time of year, their fur changes from snow white to greyish brown.

● A number of shorebirds had arrived at Anaktuvuk Pass while we were there, to either breed or continue their migration to the North Slope through the pass; this is a Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*).



3 THE NORTH SLOPE



● In the interior of Alaska, big mammals are few and far between. But this changes as soon as you get to the North Slope. We were not even out of the northern Brooks Range foothills, when Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) started emerging. They soon numbered in the hundreds!



● The story of the Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) versus the Arctic Fox (*V. lagopus*) is a classic ecological tale of a widespread and adaptable generalist squeezing out a low-density specialist. Wherever their ranges overlap, the Arctic Fox is losing ground, a situation that is possibly exacerbated by climate change. In Scandinavia, Siberia, and on the North Slope of Alaska, the Red Fox (above, left) is expanding into Arctic Fox (above, right) territory, replacing and sometimes killing off the smaller species. Reports of Arctic Foxes south of the Brooks Range are not correct, and originate instead from sightings of pale Red Fox (above, centre) individuals. Arctic Foxes have a white coat in winter, which changes to dark grey in summer. So, it was nice to see several 'real' Arctic Foxes on the snow-covered tundra just before and around Deadhorse.



● The Muskox (*Ovibos moschatus*) is one of the success stories of Arctic wildlife conservation. The Alaskan population was decimated once firearms reached the Arctic coastline in the early 1800s. In 1865, two years before the Americans bought the territory from Russia, the last 13 animals were shot. Then in 1930, the US purchased 34 Muskox from Greenland, and a reintroduction programme has since successfully established new populations on the North Slope and west coast of Alaska.

REFERENCES

Many illustrated field guides cover the birds of North America, but we used: Armstrong, Robert H. (1995). *Guide to the Birds of Alaska*. Fourth Edition. Portland, Oregon: Alaska Northwest Books.

For mammals, we used: Smith, Dave. (1995). *Alaska's Mammals*. Portland, Oregon: Alaska Northwest Books.

<https://www.uaf.edu/toolik/edc/guides/> by the Toolik Field Station Environmental Data Centre has amazing illustrated guides to all birds, mammals and plants of the Alaska North Slope region.



Morten Strange is a retired petroleum engineer, retired nature photographer, retired publisher and former Editor-in-chief of *Nature Watch*; member of NSS since 1984, now life member. Check mortenstrange.com for details. **Bee Choo Strange** is a long-time NSS (now life-) member, sole proprietor of Wild Vigil Network and also active in international hornbill conservation.