

## **Bering Sea Islands Expedition, June 27-July 4, 2017.**

The islands of the Bering Sea are cold, remote, inhospitable and difficult to get to, but they are inhabited by some of the most spectacular wildlife in North America. The remotest of them is the uninhabited island of St. Matthew, famous for its endemic bird, McKay's Bunting (arguably the most beautiful Arctic songbird), and its endemic mammal, the strikingly golden **Insular Vole**. The island also has a **Walrus** haulout in most years. A bit to the south, Pribilof Islands have the world's largest **Northern Fur Seal** rookeries, tame blue-morph **Arctic Foxes**, and a distinctive race of **Barren Ground Shrew**, often considered an endemic species (**Pribilof Shrew**), as well as huge seabird colonies. Yet farther south, the eastern Aleutian Islands have a beautiful endemic lemming (**Unalaska Collared Lemming**), as well as **Tundra Vole** (an endemic subspecies), **Red Fox**, and introduced **Norway Rat** (living away from human settlements) and **Arctic Ground Squirrel**. The mysterious **Unalaska Shrew** was described from two specimens in 1889 and never collected again despite considerable effort; it might be conspecific with **Masked Shrew**. The islands are one of the world's best birding destinations, and the surrounding waters have lots of marine mammals, including such rarities as **Ribbon Seal**, **North Pacific Right Whale** and **Steineger's Beaked Whale**.

In 2015 Zugunruhe Birding Tours ran the first birding tour to St. Matthew. They were not looking specifically for mammals and got hit by the worst storm of the season, so they didn't get many marine mammals, and spent only very short time on the island. They still got Insular Vole. Birds were more than spectacular, and included multiple Short-tailed Albatrosses, as well as tons of McKay's Buntings in rarely seen, superb breeding plumage, as well as lots of alcids (including Crested Auklets), Red-legged Kittiwakes, and other goodies.

In 2017 the company will run a similar tour, visiting Unalaska, St. Paul and St. Matthew. This time it will be a bird- and mammal-watching tour, and I'll co-guide it as the mammals expert. I will ensure a constant watch for marine mammals during the crossings, and will do my best to find Tundra and Insular Voles, Unalaska Lemming and Pribilof Shrew (Northern Fur Seal, Arctic Squirrel and Arctic Fox are pretty much certain). All four species of small mammals are known for extreme population fluctuations; in some years shrews are abundant on St. Paul. The winter of 2015-2016 is forecasted to be relatively mild in Bering Sea area, so there's a good chance of small mammal numbers being high. We'll spend two extra days on Unalaska before the boat trip to look for the lemming (the island has an excellent network of hiking trails, sublime scenery and some of North America's best wildflower displays), and two extra days on St. Paul after the trip for exhaustive birding, fur seal watching and shrew hunting.

The estimated cost is \$5700 pp.