

The Lehman Effect

by Colin Campbell, with input
and insights from Paul Lehman

For more than fifteen years, Paul Lehman has been leading birding tours in late summer and early fall to western mainland Alaska and to the Inuit village of Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. Lehman always stays on after the departure of his clients to bird the Gambell area with other people crazy enough to share the almost guaranteed bad weather, the hard slog, and the frustration required to add new birds to one's ABA Area lists and—every now and then—to enjoy the immense adrenaline rush of finding a new bird species for the ABA Checklist. With the closure in 2000 of relatively easy access to Attu Island at the far western end of the Aleutian chain, and with apologies to the Pribilof Islands, Gambell has recently taken over as *the* place of choice for searching for Asiatic rarities—plus, it offers some of the best seawatching in the world. St. Lawrence Island is in the northern Bering Sea, some 1,000 miles northeast of Attu and, as just as Sarah Palin has noted, on a clear day you really can see Russia—the

eastern tip of Russia's Chukchi Peninsula.

The diligence and perseverance has paid off for Lehman and his companions. In 2002, no fewer than three new additions to the ABA Checklist were made inside of three weeks—Willow Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, and Spotted Flycatcher. Pallas's Leaf-Warbler followed in 2006 and Yellow-browed Bunting and Sedge Warbler in 2007. All were found toward the end of August or in September. Meanwhile, other species most ABA birders would die for have cropped up in the same time period. To give those who have never had the Beringian experience that Gambell has to offer, I share here some observations, thoughts, and emotions—from Lehman, as well as from some of his associates. For more on St. Lawrence Island, see Lehman's detailed description of the island and its birdlife in a 2005 monograph in *Western Birds* ("Fall Bird Migration at Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska," vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 2–55).

2002—Willow Warbler. This bird was thought to be a single individual covering a fair bit of ground, being seen first on 25 August, then again on 26 August, and then again on 29–30 August—at three separate areas, each close to two miles apart from the others. At the time, it was a first North American record, so it had to be just one bird, right? Since 2002, how-



Birders scour one of the boneyards at Gambell. © Brian L. Sullivan.

ever, we have learned that Willow Warblers are likely breeding all the way east to virtually the Russian Bering Sea coast near Anadyr. On top of that, Gambell has now hosted six additional Willow Warblers, all between 23 August and 11 September. So, was the 2002 bird just one bird? Were they overlooked in autumn before 2002? Are they now of regular occurrence?

2002—Lesser Whitethroat. As Ned Brinkley said at the time, “Paul Lehman’s breathless phone calls are getting routine! He phoned this morning [8 September] with word of North America’s first Lesser Whitethroat, a stunning bird at Gambell that followed a brief lull in the incredible fall birding there this year. The nearest breeders are perhaps at Lake Baikal; there are a few records from Japan. This rather eclipses his first North American Willow Warbler of last week. The weather system that brought in the bird produced gentle westerlies, followed by a strong southwest wind with moderate rain; the wind kicked up to about 20 knots, with two hours of fairly hard rain the previous night.”

Paul’s thoughts that night, during the rain: “This is what I pray for!”

The bird was not identifiable as to race, but chances are it was the widespread nominate race (*curruca*), occurring as far east as the Lena River area of Russia. Regardless, it was seriously out of its normal range at Gambell!

2002—Spotted Flycatcher. When first seen on 14 September, the bird was immediately identified as a *Muscicapa* flycatcher—Dark-sided, Gray-streaked, or Asian Brown. None of those had been recorded before in autumn at Gambell. “But I was having a tough time identifying it as any of those three,” according to Lehman, “In each case, calling it one of those species seemed to be like trying to put a square peg in a round hole. Then it dawned on me that there was an additional *Muscicapa* from Europe and western Asia—the Spotted Flycatcher. Sure enough, it fit to a tee.” Like the Sedge Warbler at Gambell in 2007, the Spotted Flycatcher is a species that breeds nowhere close to Alaska, but its fall migration from the western Asian section of its nesting range in central Russia takes it first far to the west, before turning south or southwest to winter in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, a reverse or mirror-image migratory path could bring such an individual a few thousand miles in the opposite direction, to western Alaska.

2006—Pallas’s Leaf-Warbler. Here’s how Lehman put it in 2005: “In each of the past three years, I’ve been telling people before coming to Gambell in the fall that my ‘most wanted’ bird is anything that begins with the name ‘Pallas’s’. It could be a Pallas’s Bunting, a Pallas’s Grasshopper-Warbler, or a Pallas’s Leaf-Warbler. Well, today, 24 September, we found a Pallas’s Bunting and

got great photos and video for the fifth record for North America. The next day, with the bunting still hanging around in the Near Boneyard, Gary Rosenberg and I found a Pallas’s Leaf-Warbler in the Circular Boneyard, just two hours before Gary’s departing flight was due. Panic ensued, as Gary had the critical digital camera (my simple video likely wouldn’t be good enough) for the definitive pictures needed to separate this beautiful, tiny warbler from its numerous congeners. By good fortune, the bird remained to be enjoyed the next day, after which the Pallas’s duo departed.” Pallas’s Leaf-Warbler breeds from southern Siberia to Sakhalin, northern Mongolia and northeastern China, and it winters in southeastern China and northern Indochina.

2007—Yellow-browed Bunting. Here is Lehman’s account of this new species for the ABA *Checklist*: “The three of us remaining at Gambell on 15 September found a bunting in the Far Boneyard. When I first flushed the bird I saw the typical slim build, small size, and white outer tail feathers of an Asian bunting. The rump area was a fairly bright reddish-brown, so I assumed I had found my long-awaited first fall record of Rustic Bunting for Gambell. After two more quick flushes, I finally saw the bird on the ground for a couple of seconds and jubilantly announced that it was, instead, North America’s first Yellow-browed Bunting. Dave Sonneborn’s interest level suddenly picked up! Panic ensued, as usual, and all three of us (Paul Meyer was there, too) spent the next two hours making sure the bird was properly documented.” The Yellow-browed Bunting breeds from southeastern Siberia to the Lena River region in the Russian Far East, and it winters in southern China.

2007—Sedge Warbler. The tale of the discovery of the Sedge Warbler—a species not on anyone’s radar screen as a likely candidate to occur in the ABA Area—is one that illustrates the old adage, “Never give up.” For a number of days leading up to the bird’s discovery, Gambell had been plagued by northerly and northeasterly winds, the least productive wind direction for producing land bird rarities. According to Lehman, “When the winds finally slackened or reversed direction late on 29 September, we had high hopes for the next day, as such a wind shift had often produced rarities in previous years. After a long, long day of miles upon miles of walking and slogging, we had found a few new, but regular, Alaska mainland wanderers—sparrows, basically. Somewhat dejected, Gary [Rosenberg] called it a day and returned to the lodge for an early dinner. I said I’d just check the Near Boneyard one last time. The rest is history. Sometimes, when it just doesn’t seem to be in the cards, it is worth digging and digging until the sun goes down...” Sedge Warblers breed across northern Europe to northwestern Russia and south to northwestern China. They winter primarily in sub-Saharan Africa.