RUSSIA
AN EXPEDITION FOR ROSS’S GULL & MORE!
Best Time: June - July
With Aleksandr Povarintsev & Machiel Valkenburg as leader

Russia is by far the largest country in the world, this immense vast country offers so many ecological treasures that it is no more than logical that we are able to pick the best places for a splendid bird photography tour and the Indigirka Delta is one of those places where we can meet an extraordinary avifauna.

We start our tour in one of the largest cities of Siberia, we all come together in Yakutsk. Here we will explore the wonderful nature along the Lena River. The famous Russian taiga hold good numbers of Siberian buntings like Rustic and Yellow-browed Bunting. We all fly together to the absolute north of Russia, here in the middle of nowhere at the Arctic Ocean coast we find a small settlement called Chokurdah, here only 2300 inhabitants live. In this small village our adventure into the real wild starts.

The river Indigirka is one of the great Siberian rivers that flow into the Arctic Ocean. Its delta is the largest arctic delta covered entirely by tundra, it is one of the richest areas in the arctic north of 71° N for both species’ diversity and breeding density. Summer transforms the region into a gorgeous lush wetland for only a few months. Large concentrations of birds are especially coming here to breed and we will have great opportunity to photograph many of these gems in breeding plumage! Several species really jump out very every birders or photographer; the Ross’s Gull is regarded by many as the holy grail and is definitely one of those species! This gorgeous little pinkish gull breeds in some very isolated places in northern Russia and Greenland.

During this expedition we venture into an area where the gulls have been breeding for many years. We found no less than 18 pairs breeding during our 2018 scouting trip. The list of birds that occur here on large scale is no more than impressive and during this tour we have a good chance to come very close to our targets and photograph many at close range. Individuals here are not used to humans which works in our advantage. In this isolated area where very little number of birders and photographers have ever been, we will explore the best places in search of that mouth-watering image!

Arctic Redpoll, Yellow-breasted Bunting, Yellow-browed Bunting, Rustic Bunting, Black-faced Bunting, Little Bunting and Pallas’s Bunting. All species mentioned above all were seen on our 2018 scouting expedition.

**June 00-00, Day 1-2: To Yakutsk**
Clients depart from home heading towards the largest city at the Lena River, Yakutsk. The city is located only 450km south of the Arctic Circle. Clients need to be in Yakutsk before June 20 – 04h00! If you like to come in earlier please contact the RBT office and we’ll gladly help with extra hotel bookings.

NIGHT: on aircraft

![The lovely Yellow-browed Bunting is a typical Siberian forest species (Photo R. Groenink)](image)

**June 00, Day 3: Forest birding around Yakutsk & visit to Lena River**
We start our exploration of the northeast of Russia with an excursion visiting the taiga forests along the Lena River. In this gorgeous transition habitat, we find our first birds such as Siberian Rubythroat, Brown Shrike and Oriental Cuckoo. In the dark forests we do our best to show you the lovely Rustic Bunting, Red-flanked Bluetail and the wonderful Yellow-browed Bunting. Above the forest, Pacific Swifts are found together with Eastern Buzzard and in the marshes near the Lena river, Lanceolated and Pallas’s Grasshopper Warblers are commonly found singing their song. Perched in the grasses we find the attractive Japanese Stonechats, the ‘stejnegeri’ race of Common Stonechat, while Naumann’s Thrushes are foraging in the grass fields. At the end of the day we are returning to Yakutsk and will enjoy a lovely dinner in a local restaurant.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel, Yakutsk

**June 00, Day 03: Flight to Chokurdah**
Depending on the flight schedule we will depart during the day for the Yakutsk domestic airport to board our airplane that will bring us to the far north. Chokurdah is located around 1300km to the northeast of Yakutsk, at the Indigirka river delta. It is not connected with the outside world by a year-round road. The flight time will be around three hours and after arrival we make our way to the regional office to register our visit. This may be very fast but also can take a long time... as bureaucracy is a way of life in Russia. This will add to the level of adventure of this tour. Please keep in mind that everything in this part of Russia is basic and isolated. After the paper-work we will head for our accommodations where we will spend our first night. In walking distance from the hotel, we will be able to find already the first good birds like Dusky Thrush (very common), Siberian Accentor, Pallas’s Bunting and Vega Herring Gull.

NIGHT: Basic hotel, Chokurdah

Ross’s Gull on its nest in the Indigirka Delta. (Photo R. Groenink)

**June 00-00, Day 04-10: Birding Indigirka River for Ross’s Gull & Siberian Crane**

For the next seven days we are exploring the Indigirka river delta. On the first day we are heading further into the delta by boat to an ornithological station. Here we will set up camp and make further excursions in the surrounding area. In these tundra grounds, many exquisite birds have their home and we are in search of some the greatest. The remoteness of this location and lack of hunting in this area has an effect on the birds, because they are not used to people, therefore they are easily approachable. The main reason for visiting these grounds are the breeding colonies of the Ross’s Gull which are all reachable in walking distance from our tented camp. This gorgeous little gull breeds in very isolated places in northern Greenland and, here, in arctic Russia. We will spend a lot of time studying and photographing these gorgeous creatures. Another top bird is the critically endangered Siberian Crane, with a world population of maximum 3800 birds it’s one of the rarest crane species in the world; only the American Whooping Crane is rarer. These elegant
snow-white birds are common around our tented camp and were seen daily during our scouting trip in 2018.

On and around the many little lakes we find many birds like the beautiful Spectacled, King and Steller’s Eiders. All three species are very attractive and all live in remote places in the arctic. Here we also come across Baikal Teal, Long-tailed Duck, White-winged Scoter and Sandhill Cranes; all are commonly found in the vicinity. This space is also interesting for no less than four species of divers; Red-throated, Arctic, Pacific and the large Yellow-billed Diver. All were seen frequently during our scouting trip. Large quantities of waders are breeding in the northern regions where they use the never-ending summer days to raise their young. In full summer plumage we find the amazing Pacific Golden Plover, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Ruff and many Long-billed Dowitcher.

The skies are filled with predators where the Arctic Jaeger, Pomarine Skua and Long-tailed Jaeger are kleptoparasitizing to some extent. Like most birds occurring in this range, these species are commonly found here. Other common birds include Red-throated Pipit, Little Bunting, Eastern Yellow Wagtail and Lapland Longspur. On the last day we motor back to the tiny city of Chokurdah.

NIGHT: Basic tented camp

**June 00, Day 11: Birding Chokurdah**

Today we plan to check out some of the regions around the village to find more of the birds we found earlier during our visit to Chokurdah but hopefully we’ll also find some new birds like Wood Sandpiper, East-Siberian Wagtail race *ocularis*, Glaucus Gull, Redpoll and Bean Goose. We also will check in with the airline company for our scheduled flights back to Yakutsk. In the evening we sleep in the only hotel in Chokurdah!

NIGHT: Basic hotel, Chokurdah
**July 00, Day 12: Flight to Yakutsk**

In the morning we board our flight back to civilization and head south again after a wonderful experience in the Russian tundra. In the evening we will enjoy a feast in one of the many good restaurants of Yakutsk.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel, Yakutsk

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**July 00-00, Day 13-14: Birding in vicinity of Yakutsk**

We enjoy our final days of birding around Yakutsk near one of the ornithological stations in the forest west of the city. Along the way we stop at some of the lakes where White-winged Terns will prove plentiful. Eurasian Hobbies are hunting for dragonflies while Black-eared Kites are patrolling the roads for any roadkill. In the forests we search for ‘brevirostris’ Great Spotted Woodpecker while the Pine- and Black-faced Buntings are singing in the background. The rarest catch of the day will be the critically endangered Yellow-breasted Bunting. In the evening we return back to our hotel where we get ready for the flight back to home. Naturally, we will enjoy a wonderful dinner in the evening with a few toasts to this once-in-a-lifetime adventure!

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel, Yakutsk

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**July 00, Day 14: Yakutsk to home**

We have a day room until 11am in our tourist hotel in Yakutsk before flying back home.

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**The tour schedule depends closely on internal flights, which may change from the itinerary listed. If so, the itinerary will be altered, but with all of the special regions still being visited.**