

Alpha Birder Explores Alaska

Avid birder Bob Cooper hasn't given up on his favorite hobby; he has just learned to adjust. He is pictured here on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. Three miles behind him is the town of Gambell, population 650 (96% Eskimo), and forty miles west of Gambell are the volcanic mountains of the Russian Far East.

"This is something I love doing," Bob says, "and I'm just not willing to become a couch potato. 'No guts no glory' I've always said and I mean it."

Bob is outfitted for the trip with four layers of clothes, an oxygen tank on the ATV and the cannula under his nose. Notice the binoculars around his neck and the spotting scope tied to the front of the ATV. The medical clinic in Gambell gave Bob free oxygen, which he paid to have flown in from Nome.

According to Bob, "Life is good... We saw 20 species of birds that were LIFERS (we've never seen before). Plus we saw whales, walruses, Arctic foxes and seals. It's a real adventure."

Bob's career and hobbies have always kept him outdoors. He spent 26 years teaching Forest Resources Technology at the community college level. In the 1980s, he worked summers as a Ranger Naturalist at Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, where he led nature walks and natural history canoe trips and gave evening programs. The valley in the Tetons is 7,000 ft. above sea level and each summer Bob came down with a respiratory infection when moving from his home in Oregon.

In 1987, Bob climbed Mt. Whitney at 14,496 ft., the tallest mountain in the lower 48 states, with his wife



Beverly and their daughters. Five days into the week-long backpacking trip, Bob came down with what he assumed to be altitude sickness. As a life long non-smoker, it never occurred to him that he had emphysema. Bob and his family reached the top, although Beverly and their daughters had to carry his gear the rest of the way. Finally 10 years later, with over 25 years of seeing

doctors for respiratory problems, he was accurately diagnosed with Alpha-1.

Bob retired in 1997 when his Alpha-1 began interfering with his job, but Bob and his wife continue to plan trips designed to bird watch and enjoy the plants, animals, history and geology of natural locations.

"I'm not cavalier," Bob says. "I'm a real planner. I take all my medicine on my trips. I am on oxygen almost 24/7, and I have a portable oxygen concentrator that I take with me wherever I go. I am very fortunate to have a wife who is such a tremendous caregiver. She is always ready for a new adventure in the natural world."

In 1997, when he was diagnosed, Bob and Beverly had already seen about 200 species of birds in the United States. Over the last 13 years, their list of birds seen has grown to 625 species.

"We're going back to Alaska in 2010, this time to Adak Island and the Pribilof's," Bob says. "We're going to keep on doing this until I can't anymore. 'No guts no glory'. That's how we're living and it is quite a ride."