

## March Program Review

*Tim Johnson*

On March 19, DFO meeting attendees had the privilege of hearing from Nathan Pieplow, associate director of the Global Studies Residential Academic Program at the University of Colorado Boulder and author of *Field Guide to Bird Sounds of Eastern North America*.

Pieplow, a frequent presenter at DFO programs, put his undergraduate degree in Russian to good use last June on a trip to Siberia. He revisited old haunts at Irkutsk State University, where he studied 20 years ago, continued on to Lake Baikal, traveled north to the decrepit Arctic port of Tiksi via the city of Yakutz, and, finally, visited a remote weather outpost on the Lena River delta, a bird nesting area of world significance. His richly illustrated DFO presentation, “*End of the World: capturing Siberia’s wildlife on video*,” summarized a trip full of Russian drama, some hardship, and entrancing video of mostly charismatic birds. There’s no way text can do justice to Pieplow’s journey, but you can see the video of his presentation at <https://dfobirds.org/Programs/Past.aspx>.



Nathan Pieplow  
Photo credit: Molly Steele

Pieplow briefly introduced Lake Baikal, the world’s deepest lake – more than 1 mile and getting deeper, thanks to its location above a subduction zone where two of Earth’s tectonic plates collide. It contains 20 percent of the world’s fresh water. Eighty percent of the aquatic species found there are endemic to Lake Baikal, including the world’s only freshwater seal. At Lake Baikal, Pieplow obtained the second video ever taken of the Baikal Bush Warbler. The lake’s principal water source is the Selenge River, whose delta is a huge area of marshes and a World Natural Heritage site. After complicated and expensive negotiations, Pieplow and his companions were able to spend 24 hours at a field station in the delta. He showed videos of White and Citrine Wagtails, a charming Long-Eared Owl, and nesting Azure Tits, a principal target bird. In nearby steppe habitat, similar to Colorado’s high prairie, he captured footage of Demoiselle Cranes, and – yes! – wild gerbils in their native habitat.

The next stop, Yakutz, was supposed to be a brief pause on the way to the coast of the Arctic Ocean. But inclement flying weather grounded Pieplow in Yakutz for the entire weekend of the summer solstice. The timing was good because Yakutz, built entirely on permafrost, has the coldest winter temperatures of any major city in the world. While birding in the taiga, or boreal forest environment outside the city, Pieplow and his companions heard peculiar, grouse-like growling, which turned out to be “hush” calls that Russian Great Grey Owls use to alert their chicks. These calls, and Pieplow’s spectacular video of the owl family, provided evidence later that Eurasian and North American Great Grey Owls might be different species.

Finally, Pieplow reached Tiksi, which he described as “post-apocalyptic,” a largely abandoned military port town whose population had dropped precipitously after the collapse of the Soviet Union. After more delays, including 12 hours on a windy Arctic beach huddled around a bonfire and wearing every scrap of clothing they had brought, Pieplow and his group arrived at their destination: a weather outpost in the Lena River delta from which they hoped to travel to bird-rich delta islands. After further indignities, including failed boat engines and weather too windy to venture out on the water, they were able to catch unique glimpses of Arctic birds and other wildlife. Pieplow showed long lekking sequences of the Ruff, a strange and beautiful shorebird species that has three classes of male. He also shared video of an Arctic Fox being harassed by a Pomarine Jaeger while stealing eggs from nests of White-Fronted Geese and burying the eggs for later consumption. His video included shots of Baikal Teal, flying Ross’ Gulls, Steller’s and King Eiders, reindeer, and, to conclude the presentation, a nesting Snowy Owl.