



Alberta Birds & Dinosaurs - Trip Report 2022

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After a long two year hiatus, it seemed fitting that my first tour since 2019 was the Birds and Dinos tour set in my own backyard of the moody and wonderful Alberta Badlands. I came up with the idea of this tour a few years ago not only to show off the amazing birds and scenery of the Canadian Badlands, but to also highlight world class palaeontological history of the region.

My friend and colleague Yousif Attia was my co-leader for this adventure and we had a full contingent of participants from across the continent. There are almost too many highlights from our tour to cram into a single blog post. The prairies and badlands did not disappoint - we found all our target species including several Ferruginous Hawks (including a pair at a nest), Long-billed Curlews (the most I've ever had on a single tour), displaying Chestnut-collared Longspurs, close views of Loggerhead Shrikes, displaying and copulating Wilson's Phalaropes, oodles of waterfowl and shorebirds in the sloughs including great views of Cinnamon Teal and American White Pelican, and even a bonus Eurasian Wigeon. And of course we saw dinosaurs, from fossils eroding out of the badlands to full skeletons on display at the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology in Drumheller.

On our first day we left our hotel in Calgary early in the morning and headed east to catch the active breeding displays of the abundant waterfowl that inhabit the prairie wetlands. These "sloughs" are chocked full of birds, from Eared Grebes to American Wigeon and from Willets to American White Pelicans.

We had a surprise waiting for everyone on our first stop - a nesting pair of Ferruginous Hawks which I had found a couple weeks before the tour started. This was a major target for our group and a heck of way to kick off the tour.

Through the course of the morning we saw thousands of waterfowl, hundreds of shorebirds - including a bonus flock of Black-bellied Plovers, and some great looks at Cinnamon Teal, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Red-necked Grebes and Wilson'd Phalaropes. The big highlights were a Eurasian Wigeon (a lifer for many) and an incredible flock for American White Pelicans that were displaying synchronized hunting.



Yousif prepping lunch

We stopped for a picnic lunch at Bleriot Ferry along the Red Deer River. Gorgeous scenery, and some excellent birding in the Western Cottonwood forest. Afterwards we headed to one of my favourite hangouts - Horsethief Canyon. Here we went for a hike down into the canyon to look for birds, fossils and talk about the geological history of the area. We found some of our badlands specialty birds including Say's Phoebe, Mountain Bluebird and Rock Wren. And everyone got to see and hold their first 70 million year old Dinosaur fossil from the Cretaceous Period. A solid first day.



Horsethief Canyon © Jody Allair



Mountain Bluebird © Yousif Attia



Rock Wren © Yousif Attia

Day 2 of the tour had us heading southeast from Drumheller through the short-grass prairies and into Dinosaur Provincial Park - a UNESCO world heritage site as one of the most significant dinosaur fossil sites on the planet. On the way we managed to see more Ferruginous Hawks and our first of many Pronghorns.



Ferruginous Hawk © Yousif Attia



Pronghorn © Yousif Attia

Yousif and I took the crew to some of our favourite prairie birding backroads as we zig-zagged down to Dinosaur Park. And throughout the morning we found Upland Sandpipers, copulating Wilson's Phalaropes, Long-billed Curlews, a Golden Eagle and close views of Loggerhead Shrikes.



Golden Eagle © Yousif Attia

I'm not sure how to even choose a single highlight from this morning, but the displaying Chestnut-collared Longspurs has to be up near the top of the list. This declining species is getting harder and harder to find across the short-grass prairie region so any day you can find 7 of them is one worth

celebrating. But before we called it a morning, Yousif had one more trick up his sleeve and spotted an American Badger moving across the prairie. Everyone had great scope views of this amazing animal, which are notoriously difficult to see.

We made it to Dinosaur Park at lunch time and stopped for a quick look at the viewpoint before heading down for a picnic lunch by the river. In addition to the jaw dropping scenery, the group found our first Violet-green Swallows, Yousif found a nesting pair of Rock Wrens, everyone had killer views of a Lark Sparrow showing off by the parking lot and a few of us tracked down a beautiful Anise Swallowtail Butterfly hill-topping around the edges of the prairie.



Lark Sparrow © Yousif Attia



Dinosaur Provincial Park viewpoint © Jody Allair

Our picnic lunch was again very birdy, with Common Nighthawks seemingly everywhere and a surprise Townsend's Warbler singing and showing well in the spruce trees by the river. Although common in the mountains, we don't often see this species east of the foothills. Not to mention that it was a stonking adult male to boot!



Common Nighthawk © Yousif Attia



Townsend's Warbler © Yousif Attia

For the afternoon we went exploring around the park trails looking at flowering Pincushion Cactus, finding Spotted Towhees and Brown Thrashers along with some more fossils. The weather was sunny, not too hot and in perfect conditions for finding snakes. And with luck on our side we did manage to find a rather lethargic pregnant female Prairie Rattlesnake whom we enjoyed viewing from a safe distance. We did also manage to hear a Yellow-breasted Chat, but unfortunately weren't able to get eyes on it.



Flowering Pincushion cactus © Jody Allair



Looking at a rattlesnake © Jody Allair



Prairie Rattlesnake © Yousif Attia



Brown Thrasher © Yousif Attia

We capped off our day at the Last Chance Saloon cooking steaks on a barbecue and enjoying the evening light and the colours of the rocks in the Rosedale Ravine. A truly epic day of birding, scenery and natural history.

Our third and final day of the tour had us up early again for some morning birding at McMullen Island Park along the Red Deer River. The forests here provide habitat for several species of birds you don't find anywhere else in the area including: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Veery and Western Wood-Pewee.



McMullen Island trail

After a fun morning of forest birding we headed to the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology for an extended visit to one of the best natural history museums in the world. In addition to the amazing exhibits - many of which contain specimens found locally, we also had a wonderful behind the scenes tour (something we can't always do unfortunately).



Mososaur © Jody Allair



Daspletosaurus mouth © Jody Allair

And just like that our whirlwind Birds and Dinos tour was over. All told our wonderful group found an impressive 121 species during these three days. Most people headed off the next day from Calgary, but a few of the participants stayed on with me for the 4-day Kananaskis and Banff connecting tour.

Until next time.



EET group Orkney viewpoint