Eagle-Eye Tours



Alberta Birds & Dinosaurs Trip Report (May 25 - 29, 2024)

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What a wonderful tour this was! We had great weather, days jam-packed full of amazing wildlife sightings, and a fantastic backstage look at the fossil collections at the Royal Tyrrell Museum!

Day 1: Irricana Sloughs, Horsethief Canyon, Bleriot Ferry

Our first day started a little drizzly and cool, but that didn't slow down bird activity! After a hearty breakfast, we headed east towards the Irricana Sloughs, where we were able to knock off nearly all our waterfowl species – including a pair of White-winged Scoters, a species not regularly seen breeding in the prairie region. Down in the cattails, Sora gave explosive calls, while a pair of Baltimore Orioles serenaded us from up in the trees. Shorebirds were also present, and we had some great views of Wilson's Snipe, Wilson's Phalarope and especially American Avocet. We followed this up with a fantastic scene – dozens of Black Terns dancing over the water.



American Avocet © Josh Dewitt

After having our fill of marsh life, we headed towards Bleriot Ferry, where we enjoyed lunch. Here was an abundance of forest bird life taking shelter in the cottonwoods, including Gray Catbird, Spotted Towhee and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. After having a look around the picnic area, we made our way down to the ferry, and did some birding as we crossed the river.



Vesper Sparrow © Josh Dewitt

We then made our way over to Horsethief Canyon. From here we got our first real look at the Badlands. After carefully maneuvering around ground squirrel holes as we approached the view

point, we were immediately greeted by a group of Mountain Bluebirds moving along the canyon edge. As we were taking in the view of these little prairie sapphires flitting between the sagebrush, a Prairie Falcon suddenly came rocketing over the canyon and across the valley, prey tightly clutched in its talons. A very lucky sight and a bird everyone was hoping to see.



Mountain Bluebird © Josh Dewitt

From here we made our way over to our last stop for the day, Midland Provincial Park. Along the way, a few of us were lucky enough to get a brief look at a Golden Eagle as it glided over the road. As we pulled into the parking lot and got out for our little hike, the skies had mostly cleared, and the temperature had risen a fair amount. The smell of sagebrush filled the air – and by our last day many couldn't resist picking the leaves of this plant to indulge in its addictive aroma. The rumble of thunder close by meant this stop would need to be a brief one. We made our way up the trails, taking care to watch our step as we ascended. Upon reaching the top of the hill, we were greeted by the old coal mining equipment which is now a feature of the landscape – and what a landscape it is! Jody gave everyone a little talk about the region and its fossil beds, and everyone was able to see his personal collection of fossils. We made our way back down to the vans, as thunder roared overhead and the whistles a Say's Phoebes carried over the hills. We made it to our hotel just in time, as the skies let loose and soaked the valley, only stopping shortly after dinner.



Jody gives a talk on bone beds and share fossils © Josh Dewitt

Day 2: Grasslands and Dinosaur Provincial Park

We headed out bright and early to do some birding on the prairies. After heading up to the top of the ridge wall, it didn't take us long to find wildlife. We passed by a few rough-looking Coyotes, their winter coats coming off in big patches, as well as a Ferruginous Hawks. Some were hunting, and they perched at the tops of the rolling hills to watch for rodent prey.



Ferruginous Hawk hunting Richardson's Ground Squirrels © Josh Dewitt

Pronghorn also gave us some excellent views, some individuals being quite close to the road. These speedy relatives of Giraffes seemed undisturbed and continued to browse despite our group pulling over to get a good look.



Pronghorn in the open prairie © Josh Dewitt



Pronghorn © Josh Dewitt

At our first official stop, we were welcomed by the delightful songs of Western Meadowlarks,

Sprague's Pipits, and Horned Larks. We scanned the horizon – as some curious horses scanned us – and were able to catch some views of a Long-billed Curlew doing a display flight, one of a handful we would see that day. The prairie granted us a gift as well, we were treated to an amazing sighting of an American Badger, busily rearranging the grassland's soil. No doubt it was digging after one of the many ground squirrels that were around it.



American Badger © Josh Dewitt

We continued on and soon made another stop to get our first good looks at a Long-billed Curlew. This large shorebird posed and probed the ground and frantically chased after grasshoppers. All around we were treated to singing and displaying Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and a few times we could hear the mournful whistle of the Upland Sandpiper. Following this, we made a brief bathroom stop where we saw a pair of Loggerhead Shrikes, their nest visible in a low bush.



Long-billed Curlew © Josh Dewitt

We then made our way to Dinosaur Provincial Park, stopping for a while at a viewing point to take in the Badlands. Here we got to see battling Anise Swallowtails, hill and clifftop specialists unique to western North America. As they chased each other, Violet-green Swallows wheeled overhead, snatching up insects on the wing.



Badlands Dinosaur Provincial Park © Josh Dewitt

We made our way down to the riverside, where we had lunch among the huge cottonwood trees. A few interesting birds were to be seen here, including a White-crowned Sparrow, and a pair of Swainson’s Thrushes. We did a short walk to see if the local Yellow-breasted Chats had returned yet, which they had not, but we were successful in seeing a large Prairie Rattlesnake curled up, soaking up the intense sun. Shy animals that want little to do with us, the snake quickly retreated to its rock shelter. Thankfully everyone got a great look at the snake on our return.



Prairie Rattlesnake © Josh Dewitt

From here we made our way to a viewpoint to see if we could spot Rock Wren, a species we had only heard up until this point. We were rewarded with some excellent views, as the wren hopped about and foraged close by. We were also able to see some Say's Phoebes perched conspicuously on the rocks, as well as a great look at an in situ Hadrosaur skeleton.



Say's Phoebe © Josh Dewitt

As we made our way out of Dinosaur Provincial Park, we again made a stop at the first viewing point, where we were able to get our best looks at Lark Sparrow.



Lark Sparrow © Josh Dewitt

To top off the animal sightings of the day, guests in the second vehicle were lucky to get close looks at a 5-6 foot long Bull Snake. We guided this magnificent serpent off the pavement, it was certain to get flattened by oncoming traffic, and none of us wanted that to happen. We made our way over to Last Chance Saloon, where we enjoyed a barbecue dinner, and headed over to the Hoodoos, our last stop for the day before heading to the hotel.



Hoodoos © Josh Dewitt

Day 3: McMullen Island and Royal Tyrrell Museum

We gathered together on our last birding day to have breakfast and load our belongings in the vans and headed off to McMullen Island. After a short walk down the path, we were soon surrounded by Black-capped Chickadees – surprisingly the first of the trip! There were also every species of woodpecker in the region; Downy, Hairy, Northern Flicker, Pileated and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Least Flycatchers were in abundance here, and a pair of both sapsuckers and Tree Swallows put on a show for us at their respective tree hollows, the latter being briefly visited by an inquisitive House Wren.



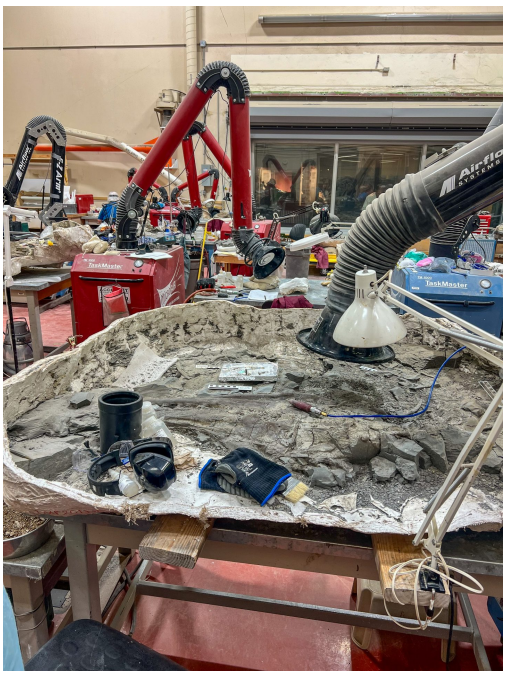
Least Flycatcher © Josh Dewitt

We made our way through the dense willows minding our step between the piles of moose droppings, to check the pond here for Wood Ducks. We were rewarded for our efforts with a pair of these uncommon waterfowl. After returning to our vans, we made our way to the Royal Tyrrell Museum. Favourites here included those of the crocodile-like Sarchosuchus, the bird Confuciusornis, the pterosaur Rhamphorhynchus, as well as many ceratopsians, tyrannosaurs, turtles, ammonites and fish.



Daspletosaurus Skull © Josh Dewitt

We saw several mosasaurs – massive marine relatives of monitor lizards and Gila Monsters which prowled the waters of the interior seaway, the apex predators of their time – as well as a few bird-like Ornitomimid dinosaurs.



Mosasaur fossils © Josh Dewitt



Ornithomimid fossil © Josh Dewitt

After getting our fill of prehistoric life, it was time to pull our minds back into the Holocene and start to head towards Calgary for our last dinner of the tour. Before we headed out of the area, we made two quick stops to attempt to cross off some species we didn't get good looks at. Our first look out point didn't reveal much, a brief flyby from a Turkey Vulture, but the best moment was peeping on a Northern Harrier busy bathing along the edge of the river, certainly a bird highlight of the day! Our second stop revealed a female Mountain Bluebird, which rewarded our patience with some great views. After this we made our way back to Calgary, where we shared the excitement and stories of the past few days. Our last bird of the tour – a Northern Flicker that had decided that it too liked the accommodations at the hotel.



Northern Flicker © Josh Dewitt

Nothing is quite like Alberta. Where else can you smell the wolf willow and sagebrush, while pronghorn swiftly cruise the sea of grass. The hawks soar over this endless green, while the Upland Sandpiper mourns those ancient relatives who lie below, entombed in the stone in eons past.



Our group, 2024

Birds & Dinosaurs Bird List (May 25 - 28, 2024)