



BC Coast and Pelagic Trip Report: Sep 8 -12, 2024

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The BC Coast and Pelagic tour was a success - not only did we manage to get offshore and find coveted pelagic species like South Polar Skua, Black-footed Albatross, and Buller's Shearwater, but we also found a good diversity of birds from shore owing to good migration conditions during our stay. Along with the expected species, our group saw some local rarities starting with the American Avocet in Boundary Bay, a Palm Warbler in Ucluelet and a Long-billed Curlew on Wickaninish Beach.

Day 1: September 8th: Richmond

The group met up at 6:30 for our first dinner, laying out the plan for the following day and getting to know each other.

Day 2: September 9th Richmond-Ucluelet

After an early breakfast our first birding stop was Boundary Bay part of the massive Fraser Delta, one of the most important stopovers and wintering sites for Pacific waterfowl and shorebirds. September is an ideal time to visit Boundary Bay as many shorebirds are still passing through while the first large numbers of waterfowl are beginning to arrive in numbers. We were treated to many hundreds of Northern Pintail and American Wigeon feeding on the flats. Shorebird diversity was good with excellent comparative views of Greater and the less numerous Lesser Yellowlegs feeding side by side. A few Western and Least Sandpipers were also present, and it is thought that as much as 50% of the global population of the former species relies on this area for a stopover site during migration. A few days prior to our tour an American Avocet was reported at this location and luckily it was still there when we visited. A rare but annual visitor to the Fraser Delta, American Avocets are one of very few shorebirds with up curved bills.



American Avocet © Blair Dudeck

After 45 minutes or so it was time to head to our ferry from Tsawwassen to Duke Point on Vancouver Island. Birds seen along the ferry jetty and the ferry itself include: Black Turnstone, Short-billed Gull, Pelagic Cormorant, and Surf Scoter. Multiple Humpback Whales were also spotted from aboard the ferry. Once we got onto Vancouver Island we drove North to Rath Trevor Provincial Park in Qualicum Beach, where we got to bird one of the rarest ecosystems in British Columbia, the Coastal Douglas Fir biogeoclimactic zone, accounting for only 0.3% of the Province's land base. Here we managed excellent looks at our only Spotted Towhees and Bewick's Wrens of the trip, two species absent from the much wetter forests of Western Vancouver Island. We also had our first glimpses at one of the West Coast forest specialties: the Chestnut-backed Chickadee. After lunch we settled in for the 2 hour drive to the other side of the island leaving behind the drier Douglas Fir/Big Leaf Maple forests of the eastern Island and entering the true temperate Rainforest dominated by Western Hemlock, Western Red Cedar and Sitka Spruce. Smack in the middle of this transition we had a break at the Sutton Pass rest stop, where we viewed the azure waters of the Taylor River and had our first sightings of B.C.'s provincial bird the Steller's Jay. Arriving in Ukelee around 5:30 we grabbed dinner and discussed our hopes and dreams for the following days Pelagic Trip out of Tofino.

Day 3: September 9th Pelagic Trip

At 8:30am we pulled away from the dock in Tofino after donning bright red survival suits and utilizing the washroom at the Tofino Whale Center. The previous few days had seen poor weather for going offshore and we lucked out with a narrow 8 hour window of suitable conditions. The wind and waves were still dying down offshore so our driver Mark took us around some of the reefs and small islands off the South West coast of Vargas Island. Many good birds were to be found here, small flocks of Rhinoceros Auklets and Red-necked Phalaropes allowed for some close up views. Two juvenile Arctic Terns on their way south emerged from the fog and surprised all of us affording the only sighting of this species for the entire trip. Black Oystercatchers, Common Murre, and Harlequin Duck were other near shore highlights. Many Harbour Seals and a handful of Sea Otters were present in the kelp beds around the rocks and reefs.



Red-necked Phalarope © Blair Dudeck



Common Murre © Blair Dudeck

We visited Cleland Island, an important seabird breeding site home to Clayoquot Sounds only breeding Tufted Puffins. In a good year there are only a handful of Puffins breeding here but even then, May-June is the best time to look for this species. We didn't find any puffins but we did manage to find 2 Wandering Tattlers and a handful of Heerman's Gulls both of these species having a short window (August and early September) in which they can be found in BC. We wished the Tattlers a

safe voyage to their preferred wintering grounds of South Pacific Islands and set out to the Continental shelf in search of truly pelagic species.



Heerman's Gull © Blair Dudeck

From the coastline of Tofino the Continental shelf is about 26 nautical miles (46km) which translates to around a 2 hour run in the boat. We were aiming for one of the deepwater canyons that snakes in towards shore from the outer shelf. As currents flow in towards the coast of Vancouver Island they are pushed upwards by the sudden change of depth causing a massive upwelling of nutrients. Though a lot of the open ocean is a fairly quiet and unproductive place these shelves and canyons are often bustling with life. As we transited out there, birds were few and far between. Within the first hour we managed to get Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwater, two species that utilize the North Pacific boreal summer for their non-breeding haunts. We even came across a huge Mola Mola, a bizarre looking pelagic fish that can often be found offshore in the summer time. Quick looks at the once Critically Endangered Northern Fur Seal supplemented the days growing mammal list. Eventually we reached the shelf and found some feeding humpback whales, and within their vicinity there was a handful of Fork-tailed Storm Petrels and even a single Red Phalarope. We had seen a few shearwaters and one Pomarine Jaeger at this stage but no huge aggregations of birds. As with any pelagic trip, it is never a guarantee to leave the dock and be assured bird viewing, as the ocean is a big, vast place making finding birds difficult. You want enough wind that the shearwaters and albatross are flying but not too much wind that sea state conditions become hazardous. The first task is reaching the continental shelf which is by no means easy, the second task is finding the birds. The best case scenario on one of these trips is to come across a commercial fishing vessel pulling their nets or lines, usually there will be a large flock of birds trailing the boat feeding on the bycatch.



Fork-tailed Storm-petrel © Blair Dudeck



Fork-tailed Storm-petrel © Blair Dudeck

With a 4 hour round trip boat ride out the the shelf we were all aware of our time constraints out here and we began to worry at our lack of albatross and bird numbers in general. As we neared our turn around time we sighted a very distant fishing vessel which we decided to aim for. As we approached we got some views of Sabines Gull, South Polar Skua, and Cassin's Auklet all rather distant and in flight. 15 minutes later we discovered the fishing vessel was targeting Albacore Tuna,

a fairly sustainable fishery that has very little bycatch and thus usually not popular with seabirds. We were almost out of time and although we had some good pelagic species, we were still missing a good number of them. As we began to turn back we spotted another fishing vessel along our tack back to shore. We all crossed our fingers but at this point we were beginning to give up on Albatross and accept what was still a good list of birds for the trip. To our excitement the next fishing vessel was a longliner actively hauling their lines and had a storm of birds trailing them. ALBATROSS! We shouted at once as the massive wingspan of a Black-footed Albatross arced over the horizon. Although we were at our turn around time our captain was amicable to spending 25 extra minutes or so with our one and only feeding frenzy of the day. Not only was there around 30 Black-footed Albatross fighting over barotrauma'd rockfish but we also had great looks at Sooty, Short-tailed, Pink-footed, and a single Buller's Shearwater! Northern Fulmar was present in small numbers along with Herring and California Gulls. We also had one of the worlds most cooperative adult Pomarine Jaeger's make multiple passes around us showcasing its distinctive club shaped tail feathers.



Black-footed Albatross © Blair Dudeck



Black-footed Albatross © Blair Dudeck



Buller's Shearwater © Blair Dudeck



Pink-footed Shearwater © Blair Dudeck



Short-tailed Shearwater © Blair Dudeck



Short-tailed Shearwater © Blair Dudeck



Northern Fulmar © Blair Dudeck

After our up close and personal experience with all these infrequently seen species it was unfortunately time to head back and leave the pelagic realm behind. The excitement wasn't over however! On our way journey back, we came across the trips one and only adult Tufted Puffin! Two hours of choppy seas stood between us and the dock so we got underway stopping only one more time for a lone Buller's Shearwater, sitting amidst the swell. Once back at the dock and out of

our survival suits we had “Drunch”(Lunch/Dinner) and drove back to Ucluelet for another nights sleep.



Tufted Puffin © Blair Dudeck

Day 4: September 10th Birding in Pacific Rim National Park

Our day started like most days in September do on the west coast, foggy and cold. We grabbed breakfast and then hit up some of the local hot spots in Ucluelet. We were eager to check out some of the main hotspots as well as some of the more obscure sites. We first went to Ucluelet’s premiere sea watching site, Amphitrite Lighthouse. Although the fog made sea watching difficult, we saw a handful of Brandts and Pelagic Cormorants along with many California and Glaucous-winged Gulls. The highlight here though wasn’t to be found in the ocean but in the trees, while watching Orange-crowned Warblers and Yellow Warblers we managed to find a Palm Warbler mixed in with them! Rare anywhere west of the Rocky Mountains, a handful of Palm Warblers show up on Vancouver Island every fall. The dark coastal subspecies of Fox Sparrow and Song Sparrow popped into view briefly before a coast guard helicopter fired up and we decided it was time to bird somewhere quieter.



Palm Warbler © Blair Dudeck

We headed to a pocket park on the harbour of Ucluelet where there wasn't much activity on the water, however we did have decent looks at Black Turnstone and a Belted Kingfisher. The alder grove behind us was absolutely bustling with passerines however and we observed a mixed flock of Golden-crowned Kinglets, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, one Warbling Vireo, Townsend's, Yellow, Orange-crowned and a singular Black-throated Grey Warbler! The latter being a great example of a common bird on eastern Vancouver Island but a rare bird for the west coast. After the excitement, we drove through town stopping to observe some Cedar Waxwings in the tree tops. This was a lucky stop as we also had a few Greater White-fronted Geese and 4 Purple Martins, another scarce bird on the west coast. Our next destination was the soccer fields of Tugwell Park which is often an excellent migrant trap. On this particular day it was very quiet with the only bird of note was a 'fly by' Wilson's Snipe. Our next destination was the Shore Pine bog board walk in the national park, a unique ecosystem of the west coast akin to the muskeg of the boreal forest. Home to many old bonsai'd trees including the namesake Shore Pine (a subspecies of lodgepole pine) we also saw a wide variety of plants in the open spaces of the bog including King Sceptre Gentian, Sitka Burnett, Labrador Tea, Bog Laurel, and Bog Cranberry. Birds put on a good show as well, with many Oregon Dark-eyed Juncos, Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warblers, and Townsends coming in to investigate our pygmy owl whistles. The star of the bog was a pair of Type 3 Red Crossbills who conveniently landed on snag in front of us and sat still long enough to view. After the bog, it was off to nearby Wickaninish Beach where upon arrival we managed to see a large tawny shorebird before a pair of unaware beach goers flushed it and it flew off into oblivion never to be seen again. There was initially excitement that we had just seen a Bristle-thighed Curlew, a very rare arctic breeding shorebird that occasionally shows up on the west coast on its way to its south pacific wintering grounds. After scrutinizing photographs of the bird we determined it to be a Long-billed Curlew with an uncharacteristically short bill. Some quick scoping turned up all 3 regularly occurring species of loon being Red-throated, Common, and Pacific as well as a few Horned Grebes, a Marbled Murrelet, Black Oystercatcher, Surf and White-winged Scoter.



Long-billed Curlew © Blair Dudeck

As we headed back to the car for lunch we got quick views of a pair of the often cryptic Pacific Wren. With Lunch covered, we headed for the Tofino Airport another excellent migrant trap with limited access. It was afternoon and pretty quiet on the bird front but we did manage to see a Turkey Vulture and hear the trips first Wilson's Warbler. Our final destination of the day Combers Beach, saw us walking down to the beach through some towering Spruce and Cedar forests where we got good looks at Brown Creeper. Upon exiting the forest on the beach we picked up a few species of shorebird and gull, most notably one early Iceland Gull and a few Sanderling along with a Bald Eagle and quick fly by of a mystery hummingbird.



Semipalmated Plover © Blair Dudeck

Day 5: September 11th Ucluelet to Vancouver

After breakfast we said goodbye to the west coast and headed back across the island, stopping in the famous Cathedral Grove, one of the few remaining valley bottom old growth forests on the heavily logged eastern side of Vancouver forest. Here we spent an hour marvelling at the giant Douglas Fir trees some of which exceeded 800 years old. Plants such as Devils Club and the bizarre Ghost Pipe, a parasite on tree roots provided some non bird related entertainment as well as two Banana Slugs. Old Growth forests can be tough to bird especially outside of spring when no one is singing. Luckily, Blair heard the call notes of an American Dipper coming from the direction of the stream we had just walked by, after a quick backtrack we all got great views of North Americas only aquatic songbird foraging in the stream. One vocal Pacific Wren sat still long enough for some photo opportunities on the way back to the car. On our way to the Qualicum fish hatchery, we briefly observed a Pacific Marten cross the road, adding to our mammal list. At the hatchery itself raptors were in abundance with looks at Coopers and Red-tailed Hawk along with a very distant Peregrine Falcon. In the creek itself a few large Chinook salmon could be viewed along with some Coastal Cutthroat Trout. In the crustacean department, Signal Crayfish could be sighted amidst the stream bed and I caught one to allow for a closer look. Once another day's lunch was consumed, we headed to the Departure Bay ferry for our 2:45 sailing. Birds were few and far between but a juvenile Sabines Gull provided excellent views and much excitement as it crossed the bow of the vessel. Several Humpback Whales could be seen breaching and pec slapping as we neared Horseshoe Bay. Deciding to wait out rush hour we had an early dinner and then headed up to Cypress Bowl to try and find some subalpine specialties. Unfortunately as it turned out, the road up to the bowl was infested with noisy motorcycles and sports cars all conspiring to make hearing birds rather difficult. We did however get to see a massive 1200+ year old Yellow Cedar on the side of the road along with a few Yellow-rumped Warblers. We capped the trip off with a sunset view of Vancouver City and read some interesting sigils upon a motorcycle before driving through downtown back to our hotel.