



BC Coast & Pelagic Trip Report (Aug 29 - Sep 3, 2026)

[Link: BC Coast & Pelagic Trip Report \(Aug 29 - Sep 3, 2026\)](#)

August 29: Vancouver area

Our group met this evening at our hotel in Richmond, not far from the Vancouver Airport. We enjoyed dinner, got to know each other a little bit and talked excitedly about the next few days.

August 30: Boundary Bay to Vancouver Island

After an early yet traditional “Canadian” breakfast (Tim Horton’s!), we headed out to nearby Boundary Bay Regional Park and our first birding of the week. This bay forms part of the vast Fraser River delta and its tidal estuaries provide an important stopover for migrating waterfowl and shorebirds at this time of year. The tidal marshes hosted dozens of Canada Geese along with a mix of ducks such as Mallard, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler and Green-winged Teal. A muddy pool along the trail was being foraged by a small flock of “peeps” (Western, Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers), along with several Semipalmated Plovers and Killdeer. Exciting for many in our group was a Baird’s Sandpiper that allowed excellent views as it picked around in the mud just 15 metres away - a beautiful shorebird and difficult to spot in eastern parts of the country.



Birding at Boundary Bay © Jared Clarke

We also explored the scrubby habitat along the coastal trails where we spotted a variety of songbirds such as a displaying Anna's Hummingbird, a Willow Flycatcher sallying from branch to branch and a very cooperative Marsh Wren. Several Common Yellowthroats perched atop the reeds, a Lincoln's Sparrow skulked along the path edge, and both Bewick's Wren and Spotted Towhee (local specialties) called from nearby shrubs. Just before reaching the vans at the end of our walk, a Northern Harrier zipped by just metres in front of us.



Marsh Wren © M Green



Northern Harrier © M Green

Later this morning we boarded the ferry and started our voyage to Vancouver Island. Before leaving the dock we spied several Surf Scoters, a handful of Black Oystercatchers and some Black Turnstones foraging around the stone jetty. All three of Double-crested, Pelagic and Brandt's Cormorants were perched at very close range, allowing for excellent comparisons of these similar species, while a number of Harbour Seals lounged on the lowest boulders looking very unimpressed with our otherwise massive ferry. The crossing to Vancouver Island was relatively quiet, although we did spot several Humpback Whales along the way and a small group of Black Swifts surprisingly far out over the open waters.



Black Turnstone © Jared Clarke



Three species of Cormorants - Pelagic (L), Double-crested (R) and Brandt's Cormorants © Jared Clarke



Harbour Seal © Jared Clarke

After arriving in Nanaimo and enjoying lunch, we hit the extremely scenic (and often twisty) drive across the island via the Pacific Rim Highway, traversing the mountainous Vancouver Island Range as we went. Two rest stops along the way offered up sightings of more Black Swifts, a Vaux's Swift, Chestnut-backed Chickadees and a very showy Steller's Jay.



Steller's Jay © Jared Clarke

August 31: Pelagic Trip

Today was the day for our much anticipated “pelagic boat trip” – heading out from Tofino and into the open Pacific Ocean at the very edge of the continental shelf. We couldn’t have asked for a better day as the early morning fog lifted to reveal overcast skies, light winds and excellent water conditions (a slight swell, but no real waves to speak of). We departed just before sunrise, making our way out of Clayoquot Sound and into the open waters. The early part of our voyage provided looks at numerous Common Murre and several Rhinoceros Auklet floating by, as well as our first Sooty Shearwaters zipping over the ocean. As we neared the shelf edge we began to encounter our first Pink-footed Shearwaters and tiny Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels of the trip, along with several Northern Fulmars. One area with a concentration of feeding birds also produced several Arctic Terns, three Sabine’s Gulls and a lone Pomarine Jaeger sailing by and circling around the activity, while two somewhat distant Buller’s Shearwaters offered up our only views of this much scarcer species. We continued to follow a fog bank which was sitting right at the shelf edge, and were rewarded when the first of several Black-footed Albatross came banking out of the fog and around our boat. Albatross are always a highlight out here, and seeing these massive seabirds with their incredibly long wings flying so elegantly over the water was a special moment for us all.



Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel © Blair Dudeck



Black-footed Albatross © Jared Clarke

Our first Cassin's Auklets also entertained us as these tiny little alcids bobbed up and down in the swell. Often diving as we got close but eventually sitting still for great views. The excitement itself swelled as we spotted our first Tufted Puffin of the morning, albeit a drab immature bird. We were all relieved later when we found a much more colourful adult - not only fun to see, but ridiculously cooperative as we circled the boat around it several times! However, the hands-down highlight of the morning came as we approached a pair of very tiny black-and-white alcids floating on the water. We initially expected them to be Marbled Murrelet, which are relatively common in this area - however, as we got closer looks Blair yelled for us all to get good looks and photos as they "could" be the much rarer Scripp's Murrelet that is barely recorded in Canadian waters. Sure enough, the distinctive lack of a white collar and presence of a small white patch in front of the eye became evident and we all soaked in several minutes as they sat patiently for us to enjoy them. These birds were not only a lifer for almost everyone on board, but an exceptional find for Canada and something to celebrate later that day ;) Non-bird highlights of the morning included some very close encounters with Humpback Whales feeding all around us, a very unexpected Elephant Seal checking us out and an extremely entertaining pod of Dall's Porpoise that rode our bow and showed off briefly before heading their own way. Amazing animals!!



Scripp's Murrelet © Jared Clarke



Scripp's Murrelet © Jared Clarke



Tufted Puffin © Jared Clarke

Heading back towards land, we were surprised by a large, dark bird approaching the boat – and thrilled when we realized that not only was it a South Polar Skua, but it sailed right over heads providing quick but amazing looks! We stopped by Cleland Island where numerous species of seabirds nest and/or hang around on the surrounding waters. We spotted several species of shorebirds including Black Oystercatcher, Black Turnstone and Surfbird along with a family of Harlequin Ducks resting on the rocks. We got our best looks at Rhinoceros Auklet here, as well as Pigeon Guillemot which prefer these coastal waters to the open ocean. Several Heerman's Gulls were spied lounging on the low rocky islets, and a we were entertained by a Sea Otter playing nearby. We arrived back in beautiful Tofino at noon, with our hearts & souls brimming with the memories of so many incredible bird & wildlife encounters.



South Polar Skua © Jared Clarke



Heerman's Gull © Jared Clarke



Sea Otter © Jared Clarke

Having squeezed a full day into just our morning, we grabbed a quick lunch in Tofino and headed back to the hotel for a little downtime. An afternoon stroll along the waterfront in Ucluelet gave us an opportunity to compare several species of gull – (Glaucous-winged, California and Short-billed), while we heard our first Brown Creeper of the week and enjoyed the antics of a family of White-crowned Sparrows in an adjacent neighbourhood.

September 1: Ucluelet & Pacific Rim National Park

Our second full day on the island was spent exploring the coast from Ucluelet to Tofino. After a lovely breakfast at a local café, we headed to the Amphitrite Lighthouse and some beautiful vistas over the rolling ocean and rugged coastlines. Scanning the ocean from here, we spied numerous seabirds flying past just offshore – Rhinoceros Auklet, Marbled Murrelet, Pigeon Guillemot, both Common & Pacific Loons and our first Western Gull of the tour. We scanned for shorebirds along the trail, finding a pair of Spotted Sandpipers before keen eyes were able to pick out our main target – a Wandering Tattler foraging among the cracks and crevices of a rocky outcrop. While they weren't close, they were cooperative and everyone was able to enjoy prolonged scope views of this locally scarce and often hard-to-find species. We also found a large flock (##) of Surfbirds flittering from rock to rock and probing for food as the waves washed around their feet. The beautiful forested trails here also produced a variety of songbirds including Pacific Wren, Orange-crowned Warblers and Golden-crowned Kinglets among others.



Birding at Amphitrite Lighthouse © Jared Clarke



Pacific Wren © Jared Clarke

The afternoon was spent exploring two beaches in and around Pacific Rim National Park. Our first stop was the park's Kwistis Visitors Centre at the southern end of Wickaninnish Beach, where we enjoyed comparing Surf and White-winged Scoters as they loafed just offshore. A large flock of Black Oystercatchers were spied foraging atop one of the nearby islets, and the raised viewing deck gave us opportunity to scope the waters and take in some of our best views of both Marbled Murrelet and

Rhinoceros Auklet. A little mixed flock of birds in the beachside shrubbery included our only Hutton's Vireo and Wilson's Warbler of the week among a relatively cooperative group of Chestnut-backed Chickadees.



Birding at Kwistis Visitors Centre © Jared Clarke

From here, we headed north to Chesterman's Beach for a stroll along the sandy strand. Several flocks of shorebirds along the way consisted of seven species, including a Pectoral Sandpiper and three Baird's Sandpipers among the more expected mix of Sanderling, Semipalmated Plovers and all three "peeps". A Merlin put on an awe-inspiring show as it zipped, dipped and whirled around for several minutes in pursuit of one very lucky sandpiper that eventually got away! Walking back to the vans we were treated to close-up views of a Short-billed Gull, our best study yet of this west coast species. After some fine-dining in Tofino, we made our way to Ucluelet to wrap up another very full day.



Shorebird flock © Blair Dudeck



Merlin chasing flock © Jared Clarke



Short-billed Gull © Jared Clarke

September 2: Cathedral Grove & Return to Vancouver

A rainstorm had rolled through the region overnight, and the remnants continued to hit us with heavy showers as we made our way back along the winding roads of the Pacific Rim Highway. Our good luck (karma?!?!) continued as the rain stopped and the skies partly cleared just in time for our stop at Macmillan Provincial Park. Cathedral Grove represents one of the last remaining, and certainly most accessible, stands of old growth forest on the island – protected now, and absolutely ethereal to hike through. Massive Douglas firs, red cedars, big leaf maples and other ancient trees tower over the trails, some reaching 75m (250ft) in height. It was pure magic just being there! Birds were scarce, but we did hear Golden-crowned Kinglets, Chestnut-sided Chickadees and Northern Flickers calling from way up in the canopy and several Pacific Wrens from the thick undergrowth.



Cathedral Grove © Jared Clarke

The second-growth forests at our next stop near Qualicum were a bit less lofty yet full of birdlife. A short stroll produced looks at Red-tailed Hawk, a pair of Belted Kingfishers, the recently “split” Western Warbling Vireos, Violet-Green Swallows, Cedar Waxwings and several Black Swifts. Our main target here was American Dipper – it took a while, but we finally managed to spot one foraging in the water just upriver. Such an amazing bird to watch in action!



Black Swift © Blair Dudeck

We enjoyed a picnic lunch at Parksville, overlooking the Englishman’s River Estuary. High tide had

pushed a variety of shorebirds into the river mouth itself, including our first Black-bellied Plovers and Great Yellowlegs of the week. We also spied our first Red Crossbill feeding in the treetops of a neighbouring yard, and a small group of Common Mergansers fishing in the shallow waters. Our ferry trip from Nanaimo to Horseshoe Bay (North Vancouver) was very windy, but punctuated by several Humpback Whales, including at least two that were breaching right out of the water as we sailed past. We enjoyed dinner at the locally famous Troll's restaurant in Horseshoe Bay before making our way through beautiful downtown Vancouver and back to our hotel in Richmond.



Our group

September 3: Departures

The time to bid farewell to our new friends came much too quickly - but the incredible birds, amazing places and fun conversations will stick with us for years to come. Everyone headed off in their own direction this morning, taking those wonderful memories with them.