



Belugas, Bears & Birds Trip Report (July 11-21, 2022)

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Highlights on this trip abounded. On our final evening together we shared some memorable birds, mammals & moments from the trip and it brought back some great memories. Hopefully this report will help you relive some of those memories. Given the time of year and major road washouts in Riding Mountain, we set an optimistic target of 200 species of birds and 25 mammals for the trip. Although we fell a couple species short of our target for mammals, we got fabulous looks and photos for the main highlight species (Moose, Black & Polar Bear, Belugas). And while we didn't get dynamite looks at all of the birds as in mid-July most are preoccupied with nesting, our mid-summer list of 221 bird species (many with young) for the trip was much higher than expected. **Day 1 - July 11** We met in the lobby of the Hampton hotel that first evening and walked over to the nearby Chop Steakhouse restaurant where we dined, got acquainted and discussed trip logistics. We'd have an early start tomorrow and the first days would involve a fair bit of driving and stopping with minimal time for afternoon rests, so we packed it in early that evening. **Day 2 - July 12** Stocked with coffee from the lobby, and bag breakfasts from the hotel, we left the hotel at 6am bound for St Ambrose on Lake Manitoba. On the way, we checked out a Gray Partridge spot near Wpg's north perimeter (one pair spotted in the field) and stopped at a known spot along PR227 for Red-headed Woodpeckers getting a head-start on a number of birds including Clay-colored & Lark Sparrow, Least Flycatcher, House Wren, Baltimore Oriole, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and others before a couple Red-headed Woodpeckers finally put in an appearance.



Red-headed Woodpecker © Betty Fisher

Further down the road we added post-sitting Wilson's Snipes & Upland Sandpipers, and a variety of swallows on the lines in St Ambroise. At St Ambroise beach we had breakfast and spotted a few birds on the lake including Common & Forster's Terns, Bald Eagle, and a large offshore colony of American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant and Herring Gulls. In the marsh, we had our first looks at Turkey Vulture, Northern Harrier, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Black Terns, Marbled Godwit, Willet, Marsh Wren, Common Yellowthroat, a Sora with young, a roadside Virginia Rail!, and we heard a few others that would not cooperate for a look (American Bittern, Nelson's & Swamp Sparrow, Sedge Wren). At our next stop, the PR 227 landfill, we found a Lesser Black-backed Gull among hundreds of Franklin's, Ring-billed & Herring Gulls.



Upland Sandpiper

Pushing on to Neepawa, we lunched at Subway before heading north to have a look around the east gate of the park - great looks and pics of a female Black Bear with two cubs and then a yearling cinnamon-colored Black Bear. With the main E-W road in RMNP (PR19) being out of commission due to spring flooding, we looped south to Mountain Road and arrived at our destination for the next couple days (The Elkhorn Resort) in time to have a couple hours rest before dinner.



Black bear and cubs © Betty Fisher

After dinner at the resort we headed south of the park and east on PR262. We waited until sunset for the Great Gray Owls to show up at a spot where they always nest, but this time we would have to settle for a couple Coyotes on the way, a Beaver and Great Blue Heron in the creek there, and a hunting Short-eared Owl on the way back. **Day 3 - July 13** Out by 6am, we drove down Hwy 10 to the north end and back to Grayling Lake picking up Common Loon, Solitary Sandpiper, a Red Fox, Black Bear, White-tailed Deer and a Least Chipmunk scurried off the road. Breakfast at Grayling produced a couple Evening Grosbeaks, Chestnut-sided & Yellow-rumped Warblers. Boreal Trail has usually been good for birds so we headed there next and were rewarded with a variety of new birds for the trip (Blue-headed Vireo, Cape May & Bay-breasted Warblers, Boreal Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Pine Siskin, Winter Wren, Lincoln's Sparrow). Marg had a good look at a Western Tanager but unfortunately it flew before the rest of us got onto it.



Red Fox

Heading south on Hwy 10, a young male Moose entertained us feeding in a nearby roadside marsh, we picked up a few more new birds (Broad-winged Hawk, Pileated Woodpecker, Swainson's & Hermit Thrush, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Black-and-white, Tennessee, Nashville & Blackburnian Warbler), and joined a lineup of cars looking at & photographing a roadside sow bear with 3 tiny cubs. After driving North Shore Road, we stopped for a picnic lunch on the north shore of Clear Lake.



Moose

After lunch we drove down a small section of Lake Audy Road that was open (the rest of that road including access to the Bison compound closed due to late spring flooding) and proceeded south of the park for a few miles picking up a variety of ducks, Red-necked Grebe, coots, numerous Black Terns, Bald Eagles, American Kestrel, Merlin, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Belted Kingfisher, and a variety of open country and marsh birds. It was getting warm, so we headed back for a mid-afternoon rest, while Ken went to check alternate sites for an evening Great Grey Owl search. That search didn't wait until evening, however, as a mid-day roosting Great Grey necessitated getting everyone up from their rests. Thankfully the bird cooperated giving us great looks and photos; the setting was so enthralling that Al stayed behind while the rest of us headed back for dinner. After dinner we picked Al up & did a couple hours birding in Onanole and west - new for the trip were a couple California Gulls with a large Ring-billed and Franklin's flock roosting in a field.



Great Gray Owl © Betty Fisher

Day 4 - July 14 Out at 6am, a Wild Turkey greeted us as we drove from the resort and a walk along sections of the North Shore Road yielded good looks at Boreal Chickadee, and a few warblers (Mourning, Nashville, Chestnut-sided, American Redstart, Tennessee & Ovenbird). A surprise at the Moon Lake picnic breakfast that morning was a Moose that ambled slowly along the nearby shoreline, some Trumpeter Swans way out across the lake, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Pine Siskin, and more warblers (Northern Waterthrush, Blackburnian). Continuing north on Hwy 10 a quick stop at the Beaches Trailhead parking lot was good for a couple Veerys. We wanted to get around the north end of the park to the east escarpment this morning, so in the intermittent rain we took backcountry gravel roads adding Swainson's Hawk, Eastern Phoebe, Alder Flycatcher, and more Lark Sparrows and Bobolink.



Swainson's Hawk



Swainson's Hawk © *Betty Fisher*

Before long we hit the Aggasiz Ski Road heading up the park's east escarpment. High on our list there were Indigo Bunting & Eastern Towhee which we eventually found, plus a couple Sharp-shinned Hawks and a Philadelphia Vireo. After a picnic lunch at the old ski hill, we found a very cooperative Ruffed Grouse along the road heading out, more Indigo Buntings, Broad-winged Hawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Wood Pewee, Eastern Phoebe and a Wild Turkey near the

entrance, and in some mature forest a variety of birds responded to scolding calls including our first White-breasted Nuthatches and Downy Woodpecker.



Indigo Bunting © Betty Fisher

The mid-day temperatures were getting up, so we hit the highway south to Neepawa & checked into the Bay Hill Inn for a couple hours rest. Dinner that night was at a delightful little bistro (Brew Brothers). After, we walked around the childhood home of Margaret Lawrence and went to some birdy spots south of town finding a large flock of bank-nesting Bank Swallows, a Chimney Swift and a couple Northern Rough-winged Swallows, plus a very large Purple Martin “apartment complex” in the east end of town. **Day 5 - July 15** Today we had a fair bit of driving to do, so an early continental breakfast in the hotel was nice and were off by 6:30. Driving through the Minnedosa pothole country, we made a few selective stops to scan the hundreds of ducks, ducklings, grebes, grebelings & other marsh inhabitants (including firsts for Hooded Merganser, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Pied-billed & Eared Grebes). Proceeding west, we stopped in Rapid City for a washroom break, admiring a Beaver in the river there. Rivers Provincial Park produced very little. As we approached Hwy #1, what looked like mountains in the distance turned out to be a heavy fog bank. Near Oak Lake town we took a stretch of gravel road with many nest boxes but not a single bluebird could be found! At Oak Lake resort, a Warbling Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo & Orchard Oriole were heard, a “colony” of Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels photographed, and both Western & Eastern Wood Pewee turned up when we stopped for a washroom break. We traversed a long dyke separating Oak & Plum marshes, adding a couple Franklin’s Ground Squirrels, Alder Flycatcher, Western Grebes and a Meadow Vole scurried across the trail.



Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels

By the time we stopped for lunch at a roadside picnic area near Deleau, temps were already quite hot. Near Grand Clairiere, 3 more Red-headed Woodpeckers were spotted! We drove through a large marsh (Marshy Lake) where our first and only White-faced Ibises and Black-crowned Night Herons were spotted...and of course Hil's "beast" turned out to be our only Raccoon for the trip. Near Pipestone, a Loggerhead Shrike was found on hydro lines, and several stops for Sprague's Pipits finally yielded a couple singing pipits at the Broomhill Wildlife Management Area. One more species was on the agenda for the afternoon, Burrowing Owl. At a release area near Broomhill where some wild birds had shown up, 3 were spotted perched on short posts well over a quarter of a mile away! Way off in the distance, Ken pointed out a Ferruginous Hawk nest that he had started out as a nest basket over 25 years earlier; it had been occupied successfully every year since, and young were evident standing in the nest again this year. As we neared Melita, we happened upon a large flock of shorebirds in a flooded field, stopping to identify several American Avocets, Marbled Godwits, Wilson's Phalarope, Short-billed Dowitcher, Dunlin, Stilt, Baird's, White-rumped & Pectoral Sandpipers, and our first Lesser & Greater Yellowlegs. We got to our destination in Melita (Western Star Motel) before 4 and had a couple hours rest before dinner at the Chicken Chef. The evening's agenda was to recheck the shorebird pond and then drive to the extreme SW corner to a prairie trail where the grassland specialties might be found. We spent a few minutes sorting out and getting better looks at the shorebirds before beating it to the extreme southwest -- picking up at least 30 Upland Sandpipers, and more Gray Partridge and on the way. Driving the prairie trail, a Sharp-tailed Grouse flushed up and before long a Baird's Sparrow was heard and eventually seen well. Further down the trail, a couple Chestnut-collared Longspurs and 3-4 Grasshopper Sparrows obliged us sitting on nearby fencelines. A glorious prairie sunset greeted us on the way back to the hotel and Ken prayed that no deer would jump out of the long grass that flanked the narrow roadsides. Near Melita, a Great Horned Owl flew over the highway which would prove to be our only one for the trip.



Baird's Sparrow © Betty Fisher



Chestnut-collared Longspur © Betty Fisher

Day 6 - July 16 Breakfast in the hotel at 6 and off by 6:30, we drove through town hearing a couple House Finch and then proceeded to a riparian area along the Souris River south of Melita picking up a White-tailed Jack Rabbit on the way. In short order we called in a couple Yellow-throated Vireos, a Great Crested Flycatcher and an Eastern Wood Pewee. On the way to a known Ferruginous Hawk nest site near Elva where we had good looks at a couple Ferruginous adults and a fledged young

sitting on some hay bales, we got great looks/pics at Gray Partridges plus a very cooperative Sharp-tailed Grouse on the road. Near Pierson we added a Red-necked Phalarope on a small pond, a Brown Thrasher flushed up from a roadside shrub, and a washroom stop in Pierson produced a male Orchard Oriole and a pair of Say's Phoebe. Heading south, we added Willow Flycatcher and a calling Ring-necked Pheasant at the Antler Creek, and an alfalfa field in the extreme SW corner yielded excellent looks at a rare write-in - 5 Dickcissels. More Horned Lark & Chestnut-collared Longspurs were found in a short-grass pasture near Lyleton, and an Ibis was flushed from a roadside marsh. We wanted to get to and around Whitewater Lake before lunch, so we hightailed it east.



Dickcissel © Betty Fisher

At the west end of Whitewater several flocks of shorebirds were spotted; mostly all the same species that we had seen yesterday (Avocet, Stilts, Pectorals, Dowitchers, both yellowlegs, etc), but then at least two Buff-breasted Sandpipers were identified (another unexpected write-in)! We made a few additional stops around the north end of the lake and made it to Boissevain for a late lunch at Subway. After lunch we took a few pics with Tommy the Turtle, had a look around town, and headed south to Brandon. In Brandon, we spotted a young Peregrine near the downtown MacKenzie Seeds nest site. Carrying on to Shilo for one last stab at bluebirds, we hit the jackpot finding a pair of Mountain plus a pair of Eastern Bluebirds! From there we beat it to Winnipeg and had time to unpack and freshen up before dinner at Chicago Joe's. It had been two very full days, but the southwest had been very good to us, and tomorrow we could sleep in a little before our flight to Churchill. **Day 7 - July 17** We had a casual breakfast at the hotel and took an 8am shuttle to the airport. A bit of a panic when we were told our flight to Churchill had been cancelled, but eventually they figured things out and we got on the scheduled flight! Landing in Churchill at 1pm, we checked in at the Polar Inn and headed up the street to the Tundra for lunch. It was a rainy day but there was lots of good birds we could see from the van on Goose Creek Road. In short order we added White-crowned Sparrow, Common Redpolls, Pine Grosbeak, Arctic & Common Terns, and a few shorebirds (yellowlegs, Stilts, Short-billed Dowitchers) as well as our first looks at Hudsonian Godwit, Semipalmated Plover and Solitary Sandpiper.



Pine Grosbeak © Betty Fisher

Carrying on Hydro Road, we were excited to find a couple Little Gulls in a small group of Bonaparte's Gulls, a Rusty Blackbird, and several new northern waterfowl species (American Black Duck, Greater Scaup, Black & White-winged Scoters, Red-breasted Mergansers). Before headed to dinner at the Seaport we checked out the Lower Docks by the elevators getting our first looks at Parasitic Jaeger, Common Eider, Sanderling and Whimbrel. But we were most spellbound by the sight of pods of Belugas surfacing wherever one looked across the Churchill River. It had been a very productive first half day in Churchill despite the rainy weather. **Day 8 - July 18** Dawn broke bright & sunny. Off at 6, we hit the Lower Docks, Coast Road (where the downed airplane Miss Piggy sits), and a bit of Launch Road. All along the Hudson's Bay coast we could see Belugas surfacing & a few small ice-flows way out in the bay attested to this being a rather late breakup (slightly concerning as Polar Bears usually stay out on whatever ice they can find as long as possible). Our first Pacific Loons, Sandhill Cranes, Ruddy Turnstone, and flocks of Black Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser and Whimbrels were highlights of the morning.



Whimbrel © Betty Fisher

We had a later 9 am breakfast at the hotel and drove down to the docks to catch the 10 am zodiac tour out to Prince of Wales fort across the river. As we drove up to the docks a couple voles or lemmings darted across the road, but we never seen them well enough to positively identify them. The fort was interesting, and we had a Golden Eagle fly by, but we kept looking out to nearby Eskimo Point as a couple boats seemed to be looking at something there & when a sightseeing helicopter hovered over the site, we briefly spotted a Polar Bear among the rocks. We couldn't get back to the zodiac fast enough and sure enough when we did get out to the Point there was a half-grown Polar Bear feeding on a rotting whale carcass. Excited as we were to get to see and photograph it close, the best was yet to come. At the tip of the Point, a female and cub frolicked in the water, while another half-grown bear watched on. The interactions were amazing - cub and mom rolling around and wrestling, mom going over to the other bear and growling a "stay-back" warning, and eventually all strode ashore. It was all & more than we could have hoped for. We hardly could take our attention from them to a couple nearby seals (both Bearded & the much smaller Ringed) and Beluga pods surfacing just a few meters from the zodiac!



Polar Bears



Polar bear getting chased by Arctic Tern © Betty Fisher



Bearded Seal © Betty Fisher

Eventually pulling away and making our way back to the docks, we checked out the first cargo ship of the year almost fully loaded with vehicles, boats and other equipment for inaccessible destinations further north on Hudson's Bay. Back on land, we had a picnic lunch at Cape Merry and did a short walk around there adding a couple American Pipits and a nearby Whimbrel. The afternoon agenda involved heading out Launch Road to the Twin Lakes Road beyond the Northern Study Centre. Along Launch we witnessed a Parasitic Jaeger pair dive bombing some Canada Goose family groups, got our first looks at a couple Rough-legged Hawks, plus we got better looks at a hunting Short-eared Owl, Pacific Loons and more Bald Eagles (11 for the day!). At the Twin Lakes shorebird fen we added more Sandhill Cranes and a displaying Least Sandpiper. Temperatures were climbing, the horseflies were buzzing the van mercilessly, and it was time to make our way back. We had a rather tardy dinner that evening at the Lazy Bear Café. A few folks that went out for a quick look down Goose Creek Road to the Weir that evening were rewarded with a family group of Northern Shrike, a Merlin, 2 Cackling Geese with a flock of Canada's, 4 Tundra Swans and 9 Rusty Blackbirds. We also drove to the west end of the flats (an area flooded only at high tide) and saw enormous numbers of Canada Geese with young (conservative estimate of 2000)!



Alpine Arnica

Day 9 - July 19 Our zodiac trip this morning was a hour later so we spent a couple hours checking out Goose Creek Road offshoots and the Weir, came back for breakfast at 8, and went a bit further down Hydro Road before making our way to the docks for our 11 am departure. Morning highlights included brief looks at a Nelson's Sparrow near the Weir, 3 Red-necked Phalaropes, 6 Canada Jays, nice male Pine Grosbeaks, Dark-eyed Junco and a Pine Siskin at the feeders, our first good looks at Blackpoll Warbler & Fox Sparrow, an Osprey, a couple of Orange-crowned Warblers (heard only), and our first Snowshoe Hares for the trip. The zodiac tour to Eskimo Point and vicinity was another highlight. Rounding Eskimo Point, the 4 Polar Bears we had seen yesterday were all leisurely swimming offshore. We watched as they eventually made it to the rocks and clambered onto land. Then the Beluga show took over. The waters in the Bay were so calm and clear today. We spent over an hour with the feeding whales taking pictures as they surfaced in groups near the zodiac, diving under the zodiac, and one put its head out for a peek around doing its best imitation of a porpoise. All too soon it was time to head back, but what a show!



Beluga whales © Betty Fisher

After lunch back at the Polar Inn, we spent the rest of the afternoon checking out the sites around town (Itsanitaq Museum, Parks Canada, tourist shops). After dinner at the Tundra Inn, a few folks that were still wanting to see Spruce Grouse or Willow Ptarmigan made the long haul to the end of Twin Lakes Road. Although the walk at the end of Twin Lakes Road failed to produce the hoped for Spruce Grouse, we did run into a family group of Willow Ptarmigan on the way back. Other highlights for the evening along Twin Lakes Road were our first Long-tailed Ducks, a pair of Semipalmated Sandpipers with young, and 2 more Short-eared Owls. **Day 10 - July 20** This would be our last half day at Churchill, so we went out for a quick look at Goose Creek Road before breakfast, had one more look at the Lower Docks, Cape Merry and the Flats while we waited for the gas station to open, and then went out Launch Road to Halfway Road & Camp Nanuk before lunch. Highlights of the rainy morning include our first and only Surf Scoter, 9 Little Gulls, 10 Baird's Sandpipers, our first looks at American Tree Sparrow, and a few more Canada Jays. Packed up and ready to drive to the airport after lunch we found out that the plane would be at least two hours late! We killed some time looking at exhibits in the Parks Canada building and did up our list at the airport. Finally the plane landed and got off some 3 hours behind schedule. It would be nip and tuck for Sheila to catch her connecting flight home in Winnipeg. The flight back was slower than normal so by the time the plane had landed, her flight had already departed! Instead, she got to join us for our final meal together at Chicago Joe's where we got to relive favorite memories from the past 10 days before everyone went their separate ways. Our final trip totals were truly impressive -- 221 bird species and 23 mammals. Each part of the trip had so many memorable moments - from the scenic boreal and mixed woodlands of Riding Mountain National Park that we traversed early in the trip, to the farmlands, aspen parklands, lakes and prairies of southwestern Manitoba that we criss-crossed the rest of the first week, and finally to Churchill which never fails to yield a plethora of memorable vistas and northern wildlife encounters. There were many unexpected finds, close-up views and photographic opportunities. Thanks to all for a wonderful trip, and for helping capture some of those memorable moments in the attached photos. Thank you all; may our paths cross again sometime in the future. Ken De Smet