



## **British Columbia Coast & Pelagic (Sep 5 - 10, 2024)**

[Link: British Columbia Coast & Pelagic \(Sep 5 - 10, 2024\)](#)

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A group of eight intrepid explorers joined leader Yousif Attia, between September 5th through 10th on the inaugural British Columbia Coast and Pelagic tour! Starting in the metropolis of Vancouver, we took a ferry across the Salish Sea to Vancouver Island, then across the island to Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. Ultimately, we spent a good portion of a day practicing our sea-legs on a boat adventure out of the famous town of Tofino. We relished in the mountainous scenery, were in awe of the giant trees, and observed nearly 100 species of birds along with mammals and other critters that have become emblematic of the Pacific Northwest.

### **Sep 5 to 6: Vancouver area and travel to Ucluelet**

Our tour kicked off in the suburb of Richmond, BC, near the Vancouver International Airport. The entire group met for supper to get acquainted and it became apparent we would have a great group dynamic for an adventure. The next day, while largely a travel day, would still be a birdy one. After breakfast we were soon on a trail towards the mudflats flat of Boundary Bay, a globally significant Important Bird Area. During migration, these flats are the stopover locations for hundreds of thousands of waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, terns, and other waterbirds. Our first looks at the bay revealed the building numbers of waterfowl including American Wigeon, Mallard, Northern Pintail, and Green-winged Teal that were loafing on the flats with mostly Glaucous-winged and California gulls. It wasn't long before our first shorebirds came into view and we had close views of Killdeer, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Western Sandpipers and one locally rare, American Avocet.



*Boundary Bay waterfowl and gulls © Yousif Attia*

The shrubbery neighboring the foreshore was full of songbirds like American Robin, Black-capped Chickadee, Cedar Waxwing, American Goldfinch, White-crowned, Savannah, and Song sparrows. A flyover American Pipit would be the first of several moving through the region this time of year, and we also had our first Belted Kingfisher and Barn Swallows. We were strategically close to the Tsawwassen Ferry Jetty where we tallied a few extra birds on the water like Common Loon, Horned Grebes, Surf Scoter, Greater Scaup, and a gravel bar that had some roosting Black-bellied Plover, Short-billed Dowitcher, and our first Black Oystercatcher. Our ferry crossed the Strait of Georgia towards our destination, Nanaimo, famous for a delightfully sweet chocolate, coconut dessert, but also the second largest city on Vancouver Island. The ferry ride itself provided our first distant looks at Humpback Whales and we also had all three expected cormorant species: Brandt's, Double-crested and Pelagic. We made our way to Rathrevor Beach Provincial Park for a picnic lunch. The only expected chickadee species on Vancouver Island is Chestnut-backed, and we found our first of many along with Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Bewick's Wren and Pine Siskin.



*Birding from the ferry © Yousif Attia*

Following lunch we made a quick stop at the Englishman River Estuary near Parksville. Here we were greeted by surprisingly cooperative small shorebirds including Western, Baird's, and Least sandpipers offering comparison. A Northern Harrier flew right by our group, and a scan of the open water revealed a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls. We pressed on westward towards Ucluelet, stopping for a bathroom break that provided our only Pileated Woodpecker, a flyover! We settled into our accommodations in the town of Ukee (short for Ucluelet) for the next three nights followed by a delicious supper.

## **Sep 7: Pacific Rim National Park Reserve**

The area between Ukee and Tofino encompasses the northern block of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, known for expansive beaches, rocky outcrops, estuaries, and immense stands of coastal rainforest. These habitats are home to a suite of fauna and flora unique to North America and no shortage of west coast scenery. Our first stop was the area around Kwisis Visitor Centre and the south end of Wickaninnish Beach. Black Oystercatchers patrolled the rocks and a somewhat unexpected Northern Shoveler flew by the beach. The woods here were active with songbirds, some of which were likely fall migrants. We had great views of the "Sooty" Fox Sparrow, a unique coastal variety that looks very different from the remaining population. Also here was a flock of Golden-crowned Kinglets and with a little patience we had excellent looks at the Orange-crowned Warblers.



*Birding the beaches of Pacific Rim © Yousif Attia*



*Sooty form of Fox Sparrow © Yousif Attia*

Next we explored the Shorepine Bog trail to see what other songbirds were around before the day warmed up. We were greeted by “Coastal” Steller’s Jays”, and the wet sections of the boardwalk had blooming King’s Scepter Gentian, a specialty of the Pacific Northwest. Halfway through the loop we encountered a loose group of post-breeding dispersing locals, including an uncooperative Hutton’s Vireo, an “Audubon’s” Yellow-rumped Warbler, and two Townsend’s Warblers. We had already heard

a few flybys of Red Crossbill, but were finally able to hear the unique quality of the Sitka Spruce or Type 10 population at a stop near Comber's Beach.



*Birding Shorepine Bog Trail © Yousif Attia*



*King Scepter Gentian © Yousif Attia*

We also stopped in at the Tofino Airport, a well known birding location because of the open habitat, which is scarce elsewhere in the area. Soon after arriving we sifted through some sparrows in the

brush piles including White-crowned, Song, and Lincoln's. Overhead we got onto a flock of seven Black Swifts, fall migrants that won't be around for much longer in the year. A small creek crossing had a close up Yellow Warbler and Warbling Vireo for our study. We made one quick stop at Radar Hill to take in some magnificent views of the open Pacific and the many inlets, beaches and coves that make up the coastline.



*Black Swift © Yousif Attia*

Switching gears to fine cuisine, we visited the infamous Tacofino taco stand. The weather was beautiful and it was a busy Saturday, but the wait was well worth it! After lunch we drove back to homebase in Ukee and enjoyed a siesta and some free time. Our hotel was situated next to a mudflat and when the tide was low it was a roosting ground for many California Gulls of various ages. This allowed for a nice study opportunity. Other birds around were Bald Eagle, Great Blue Heron, Steller's Jays. Following supper, we went for a walk at Amphitrite Point with hopes for a seawatch and sunset. We arrived at a pea-soup-like fog that encompassed the entire point. We didn't see much through the fog but we took in the sounds of the lighthouse fog horn and waves crashing onto the rocks! Back to the hotel for a good night's sleep and rest for the following day's boat-based adventure.



*A foggy scene at Amphitrite Point © Yousif Attia*



*Typical supper scene during our tour © Yousif Attia*

## **Sep 8: Boat trip!**

After an early breakfast, we were on the road towards Tofino. Given the forecast for unseasonably persistent windy weather offshore, it was decided by our captain that our boat adventure would have to stick to more sheltered waters for safety. While that meant we wouldn't get out onto the sea shelf,

we would still see many of our targets getting out as far as we could.



*Heading out to the boat © Yousif Attia*



*Pacific Harbour Seals were abundant throughout the trip © Yousif Attia*



*Short-billed Gull © Yousif Attia*

While the open waters to the west raged, we found sheltered inlets to start our trip. It wasn't long after setting out that we had close encounters with Common Loon, Red-necked Grebes, and a large group of Common Mergansers. Our captain soon alerted us to a possible Black Bear visible on the beach. Sure enough, we were soon watching a sow Black Bear feeding on the shoreline, turning over rocks for aquatic treats. Not long after, we noticed she had two cubs halfway up a nearby cedar! As we were watching the bears, a large flock of Band-tailed Pigeons was noted high up in the treetops. Not too far away, we came across our fourth Black Bear, a large male!



*A large male American Black Bear works the shoreline during low tide © Yousif Attia*



*Band-tailed Pigeons © Yousif Attia*

We pressed on and eventually came across a very large group of Black Turnstones, and Surfbirds. Seemingly undeterred by our presence, we had great looks at these West Coast specialty shorebirds. Gulls were also in abundance and we tallied more Short-billed, one Bonaparte's. We pressed on towards more exposed waters and zipped by first one, then two Sea Otters. Our captain did not slow down because he had a plan. A little further ahead we encountered an enormous raft of close to 100 Sea Otters, all of which were males! We learned that at this time of the year, males form separate rafts in different locations than the females with pups.





*Sea Otter raft © Yousif Attia*

We pressed on into deeper water and soon found ourselves in the company of a lone adult Grey Whale. We enjoyed this generally shy migratory species as it employed a unique style of fishing called “sharking”. This is when the whale feeds near the surface on its side causing the tail to stick out vertically, like a shark fin. It was also here that we started seeing some deep water loving birds including Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, and Marbled Murrelet. Also present were great numbers of Surf and White-winged Scoters. We approached a large rock islet and a large group of well-marked gulls lifted off. It was an impressively large flock of all Heerman’s Gulls! This species has been spreading northward but is still restricted to the outer coast of Vancouver Island. The islet was bounding with activity and we had more looks at Surfbirds, Black Turnstones, and one very uncooperative Wandering Tattler. We had excellent comparisons of Brandt’s and Pelagic cormorants before pressing on into deeper water. We also had our first of several flybys of Pacific Loons and a couple of Red-necked Phalaropes.



*Grey Whale "sharking" © Yousif Attia*



*Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorant © Yousif Attia*



*Heerman's Gull © Yousif Attia*

We came across a long Humpback Whale feeding, with a large flock of gulls and alcids surrounding it. At least one Herring Gull was added to our list and we soon realized why we couldn't get further out. Even one kilometer offshore was much rougher than the protected waters we were in. We continued to Cleland Island, a well known and protected seabird nesting island. The swells made the birding tricky, but we eventually locked on to a stream of Sooty Shearwaters. Their distinctive flight style and shape was very different from any of the other birds we had seen up to this point - true seabirds indeed!



*Common Murre and Rhinoceros Auklet © Yousif Attia*



*Sooty Shearwater © Yousif Attia*



*Harlequin Duck © Yousif Attia*

We were ready to head back into the sheltered harbour and picked up a Belted Kingfisher on the way. Upon arriving, we said goodbye to our boat crew and settled in for a picnic in Tofino. After lunch, we turned our sights to the mudflats around town. The Sharp Road Lookout had most of the

expected species and a very close flyover of a Peregrine Falcon. The access point behind Hotel Zed (formerly Jamie's Rainforest Inn) produced a new, and somewhat unusual bird for our trip, an adult Western Gull! We moved southward and actually spent a bit more time getting down to Comber's Beach. We had hoped for more action on the beach, but it was fairly quiet on the birding front. Later, during supper we heard a late Purple Martin circling over the restaurant. We enjoyed a delicious meal while reminiscing on the day's adventure.



*Comber's Beach © Yousif Attia*

## **Sep 9 to 10: Travel from Ucluelet to Vancouver and departure**

Our travel back to the Lower Mainland started with a hearty breakfast and some birds near the hotel. We worked our way east over the island encountering some construction. While waiting for our turn to pass through a one way section with windows down, we had our only Rufous Hummingbird of the trip, another late migrant. The Taylor River rest area had yet more Black Swifts, this time a flock of 20! We made it to Cathedral Grove in MacMillan Provincial Park between Port Alberni and Parksville. Although we didn't see much in the way of new birds, we were humbled by the magnificent old growth stand of Douglas Fir and Western Red Cedar trees. Typical of this type of forest, we had Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pacific Wren, and Red Crossbill. We also noticed some large Black Slugs on the paths.



*Group at Cathedral Grove © Yousif Attia*



*Black Slug © Yousif Attia*

After lunch, we made a quick stop at the Englishman River Estuary, a location we stopped at three days prior on our way to Ukee. Since we were in the height of the migration, we hoped for some new shorebird species. One Gadwall was new for the trip and we had very nice scope views of Western and Least sandpipers and American Pipits. We had encountered pipits previously as flyovers but finally had close up views.



*Western Sandpipers © Yousif Attia*

Some members of our group that lived on Vancouver Island headed home on their own, while the remaining group took the ferry from Nanaimo to Horseshoe Bay in West Vancouver. The ferry ride was scenic but uneventful on the birding front. Upon arriving at Horseshoe Bay, we drove back to the hotel through the North Shore, via Stanley Park, taking in the views of downtown Vancouver, and eventually back to our hotel in Richmond.



*Bald Eagle © Yousif Attia*

All in all we had a wonderful trip, with great company sharing the experience of visiting a special

part of the world. We saw close to 100 species of birds, along with two species of whales, bears, and other critters that have become emblematic of the Pacific Northwest. [British Columbia Coast & Pelagic species list](#)