Eagle-Eye Tours



Canadian Rockies: Kananaskis & Banff Birding Tour Trip Report 2022

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Our group enjoyed excellent weather and absolutely first-rate birds on the 2022 Eagle-eye Tours trip to Kananaskis and Banff. In addition to the stunning mountain scenery we managed to track down all of our target bird species including American Dipper, several Harlequin Ducks, Clark's Nutcracker, Rufous Hummingbird, along with close views of Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Pacific Wren and American Three-toed Woodpecker. Distant Sabine's Gulls at Frank Lake were a nice surprise and the courtship displays of Western Grebes was an experience that we all won't soon forget.



Western Grebe display © Donna Sheppard

We started our adventure into one of the most stunning regions of the continent, by visiting the Frank Lake Important Bird and Biodiversity Area south of Calgary. This site is one of the best birding locations in the province and our group was spoiled with amazing views of White-faced Ibis, Western Grebes doing their courtship dances along the water, Eared Grebes so close you could almost reach out and touch them, American Avocets displaying, and even a few bonus Sabine's Gulls roosting out on the lake before resuming their long journey from the Salish Sea to the high arctic. Reluctantly, we had to tear ourselves away from this epic location so that we could round up our other targets for the day.



Birder at Frank Lake



Frank Lake Boardwalk



Eared Grebes © Donna Sheppard



American Avocet © Donna Sheppard



Black-necked Stilt © Donna Sheppard

Our next birding locations were in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies. This surprisingly species rich region is home to several boreal species, and the open rural landscape can be an excellent area to find Mountain Bluebirds and Bobolinks - a very localized rarity here in Alberta. We found both of these fairly easily on our drive up to Brown Lowry Provincial Park.

After a wonderful picnic lunch we spent a couple hours exploring the trails through this southern extension of the boreal forest. We managed to find a pair of American Three-toed Woodpeckers, Western Tanager, Tennessee Warbler and even a surprise Varied Thrush! From here we travelled to Elbow Falls where we secured mind numbing views of American Dippers (always a highlight for everyone - including the guide) and our first of many Harlequin Ducks.



Watching American Three-toed Woodpeckers at Brown Lowry Park © Jody Allair



Three-toed Woodpecker © Donna Sheppard

As we were heading into Bragg Creek for dinner, I heard a distinctive call out the window of the van. After pulling over to the side of the road we discovered a small flock of Evening Grosbeaks - a major target species for several of our group members. A solid first day.

The next morning we travelled into the Kananaskis region. We made several stops at key birding locations and managed to efficiently round up all of our target species for the day including Pacific-slope Flycatcher (killer eye-level views!), Dusky Flycatcher, Barrow’s Goldeneye, Cassin’s Vireo, Fox Sparrow and a very cooperative flock of Harlequin Ducks. But the absolute highlight of the day was finding a Grizzly Bear enjoying some tasty vegetation along the edge of a road. Although it's always a possibility at this time of year, but we were all quite thrilled to have close up views (from the safety of our van) of a Grizzly Bear in Kananaskis Valley. A lifer mammal for all the participants! Afterwards we headed off to Banff which would be our base for the next two days.



Grizzly bear and mountains © Jody Allair



Grizzly Bear © Donna Sheppard

Today we were up early and ready to explore the excellent mountain birds of Banff National Park. One of my favourite birding locations adjacent to town is the Cave and Basin Hot Springs wetlands. Here we had tremendous views of Rufous Hummingbirds, MacGillvray's Warbler and Lincoln's Sparrow.

Afterwards we travelled up to Johnston Canyon and Castle Mountain where we enjoyed hearing and watching a Pacific Wren, more Pacific-slope Flycatchers, extremely close American Dippers, Wilson's Warblers along with Oregon Juncos and Townsend's Warblers.

Our lunch spot was in the village of Lake Louise. And despite the human activity, we had several great birds right from our picnic table, including a family of Canada Jays, Swainson's Thrush and a pair of Boreal Chickadees excavating a nest cavity. We celebrated our haul of mountain specialties (which also included a very large Black Bear) with a wonderful dinner at one of my favourite restaurants in Banff.



Canada Jay © Donna Sheppard



Mountain Chickadee © Donna Sheppard



Black Bear © Donna Sheppard

Our final day in this beautiful place started off with an early morning visit to the Vermillion Lakes. Here we found Northern Waterthrush, Willow Flycatcher and nesting Common Loons. From here we made our way to the Sulphur Mountain Gondola where we enjoyed incredible views with sunny clear conditions and very few people. Greeting us up at the summit were Hoary Marmots, Townsend's Solitaires, Clark's Nutcracker and even a couple distant Pine Grosbeaks.



Hoary Marmot © Donna Sheppard



Vermillion Lakes, Banff



Birders Mount Lorette Ponds, Kananaskis

Our final hours of the tour were spent visiting Lake Minnewanka and having some very close encounters with some beautiful Elk. And as is tradition on this tour, we stoped at the famous MacKay's Ice Cream shop in Cochrane on the way back to Calgary.

We ended up with a whopping 129 birds species on this tour. And our mammal list was just as

impressive with 15 species including both Grizzly and Black Bear! An unforgettable tour with an incredible group of people.