



Canadian Rockies Waterton Birding Tour 2023

[Link: Canadian Rockies Waterton Birding Tour 2023](#)

The eastern slopes of the Canadian Rockies in Alberta are legendary for both landscape scenery and wildlife viewing opportunities. Neither disappointed as our group traveled west of Calgary to explore parts of Kananaskis Country, and eventually worked our way to Waterton Lakes National Park. We found close to 150 species of birds as well as iconic mammals, butterflies, and flora that make this part of the world so renowned. **Day 1: Arrival in Calgary** Many in our group carried over from the very popular [Alberta Birds & Dinosaurs tour](#), and a few more joined to round out 11 participants. Everyone met their fearless leaders Jody Allair and Yousif Attia for supper where we discussed the plan for the upcoming adventure. **Day 2: Kananaskis and the foothills west of Calgary** We hit the ground running on our first full day as we checked out bright and early and started our drive west towards Kananaskis, or what the locals call, “K-Country”. Alberta in the last week of May is a birdy place, and on the drive we spotted many birds including both Red-tailed and Swainson’s Hawks. Sibbald Creek trail is known as the “scenic route” to access K-country, and it was also filled with birds. We made several short stops to enjoy Canada Jay, Mountain Bluebird, Wilson’s Snipe, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and more. The Jumpingpound Forest had our only singing Alder Flycatcher as well as several warblers including Tennessee, Orange-crowned, Yellow-rumped, Wilson’s, and even a brief glimpse at a Cape May! Pushing on down the trail and our species list grew when we found several Willow Flycatchers and a soaring Sharp-shinned Hawk. A lovely Lincoln’s Sparrow sat uncharacteristically high and still for us at Sibbald Meadows Pond.



Lincoln's Sparrow © Yousif Attia

We eventually made it to Hwy 40, the Kananaskis Trail, and decided to make a quick stop at Barrier Lake. The scenery did not disappoint and we were able to watch the behavior of a large group of Cliff Swallows collecting mud at the shoreline. Just before we moved on, a very high flying Golden Eagle was spotted. Little did we know that this would be the first of 5 Golden Eagles we would encounter on the tour! It was time for lunch, so we settled into Mount Lorette Ponds for a picnic feast. Townsend's Warblers were singing from the spruce trees and a single White-winged Crossbill flew over. We don't always look up on our tours, and some keen eyed participants looking down found a patch of lovely Small Round-leaved Orchid (*Galearis rotundifolia*) among other flowers.



Mount Lorette Ponds © Kristen DelMonte



Small Round-leaved Orchid © Jody Allair

After lunch we made a few strategic stops along the Kananaskis River and had our first prolonged looks at the spritely Rufous Hummingbird. A brief exploration down a path turned up a wonderful surprise: a female American Three-toed Woodpecker! We had incredibly close views as we watched her forage by flaking away bark on the conifers. A short drive later to a southern access point of K-Country, and we were enjoying the antics of a pair of American Dippers at their nest at Elbow Falls. The weather was warming up and butterflies kept us occupied too! We spent a bit more time trying ever so hard to turn up a Harlequin Duck, but the uncharacteristically low water levels meant the Harleys were elsewhere.



American Three-toed Woodpecker © Yousif Attia



Birding at Elbow Falls © Jody Allair



Swallow-tailed Butterfly © Diane Brouillette

We rolled into Bragg Creek for an excellent supper. But our birding wasn't done yet. We drove the scenic foothills to Brown Lowery Provincial Park. This patch of transitional boreal to foothills forest is known to harbor a nice diversity of birds. A short stroll through the forest produced singing Varied

Thrush, Evening Grosbeak, Mountain Chickadee and Pacific Wren. On our walk out however, a mysterious large bird flew silently through the woods and perched directly in line with a tree trunk. It was a Great Gray Owl! Unfortunately, the bird did not sit very long and soon after slipped through the woods as silently as it appeared. It's not everyday that you come across a Great Gray Owl on foot! We pressed on to High river for the night. **Day 3: Frank Lake and Waterton Lakes National Park** Part of what makes southern Alberta unique, is the abrupt transitions of landscapes. Frank Lake, on the doorstep of the Rockies, is one of the most important places for birds in Alberta. Dedicated as a BirdLife International Important Bird Area, and Key Biodiversity Area. We departed High River and within minutes were immersed in a prairie wetland birding bonanza. Yellow-headed Blackbirds were seemingly oblivious to our presence as they disputed over territories surrounding the blind. The blind itself gave us an immersive experience where we watched Eared Grebes, Ruddy Ducks, Redheads, and so much more at close range.



Yellow-headed Blackbird © Yousif Attia



Redhead and Canada Geese © Yousif Attia

A bit of scoping in the distance produced several Western Grebes, a large group of American White Pelicans, and two Trumpeter Swans. No less than five Black-crowned Night-Herons flew over us, and we eventually had good looks at White-faced Ibis, Wilson's Phalarope, Willet, Marbled Godwit, American Avocet, and Black-necked Stilt. We also checked out a California Gull breeding colony that already had some recently hatched youngsters. With just shy of 50 species, Frank Lake never disappoints!



White-faced Ibis © Yousif Attia



Black-crowned Night-Heron © Yousif Attia

It was time to switch gears back towards the mountains, but first, we made a very important stop at a nearby coulee. Here, we had two very important targets. It wasn't long after we arrived that we spotted one, then two, and eventually at least four Prairie Falcons! A couple of Rock Wrens sang from the rocky outcrops, and Say's Phoebes perched above a large Cliff Swallow nest. At the same location, we also had the great fortune of observing a nesting pair of Golden Eagles! Some careful scoping of the nest confirmed that there was at least one downy chick! Could it get any better than this?! We took a short drive to Chain Lakes Provincial Park for another epic picnic lunch. Ospreys and Bald Eagles circled above and a single Red-necked Grebe was on the lake nearby.



Birding Williams Coulee © Diane Brouillette



Picnic lunch © Diane Brouillette



Prairie Falcon © Yousif Attia

The afternoon was spent mostly B-lining it to Waterton Lakes National Park. We did have time for one quick birding stop, and it would turn out to be a memorable one. We pulled up to the Bear's Hump trailhead, and started up the first few hundred meters. Recent reports of a pair of Lewis's Woodpecker was just too good to pass up. We weren't sure if we would be successful due to the late time in the afternoon but tried just the same. Sure enough, we eventually spotted one, then two Lewis's Woodpeckers! It was indeed a pair, and we were treated to some incredible interactions as the pair proceeded to copulate on a branch beside their nest tree! Not long after, a male Pileated Woodpecker, minding his own business came too close to the nest tree and was escorted away by the Lewis's! We were in awe of our good fortune to observe this very rare breeding species at such close range and backdropped by the incredible scenery of Waterton. All of a sudden, a MacGillivray's Warbler popped up, followed by a Lazuli Bunting! We proceeded to check into our hotel in town, and met for supper to reflect on a truly incredible day of birding!



Lewis's Woodpecker © Yousif Attia



Birding in Waterton National Park © Yousif Attia

Day 4: Waterton Lakes National Park To maximize our time in Waterton, most of the group went out for some pre-breakfast birding at Haybarn/Dardanelles. We were rewarded with several new species and the woods were teeming with bird song. Several Black-headed Grosbeaks were singing and offered views, as did a few cooperative territorial Calliope Hummingbirds. Ruffed Grouse drummed in the woods and a very clean Red-naped Sapsucker popped into view. Our first

American Redstart was elusive but heard well and perhaps most notable was a cooperative Veery that perched out in the open for several minutes, allowing scope views! After a very scenic breakfast, we proceeded to Cameron Falls where another American Dipper was below the falls and we played hide-and-seek with a couple of cryptic MacGillivray's Warblers. We proceeded down the Akamina highway all the way to Cameron Lake at the end seeing our first Bighorn Sheep beside the road.



Bighorn Sheep © Kristen DelMonte

The extent of the fires from 2017 was evident with most trees completely burned, but standing. Without the foliage on the trees however, the mountains were visible in all their glory and we could really appreciate all the topography. As soon as we parked at Cameron Lake, we were greeted by a beautiful male Western Tanager sitting and singing on a dead snag. Shortly after, "quick-three-beers" came from a wet stand across the parking lot, and we picked up an Olive-sided Flycatcher. We wandered over to the lake and found that a young Black Bear was feeding happily along the shore. It was our first bear of the trip, and watched from a safe distance. Once the bear moved on, we explored the shoreline adding Fox Sparrow, and yet another American Three-toed Woodpecker. Pacific Wren, Swainson's Thrush, Wilson's Warblers and two very cooperative Mountain Chickadees made for some entertaining birding that we had to tear ourselves away from.



Western Tanager © Delores Steinlicht



Red-naped Sapsucker © Yousif Attia

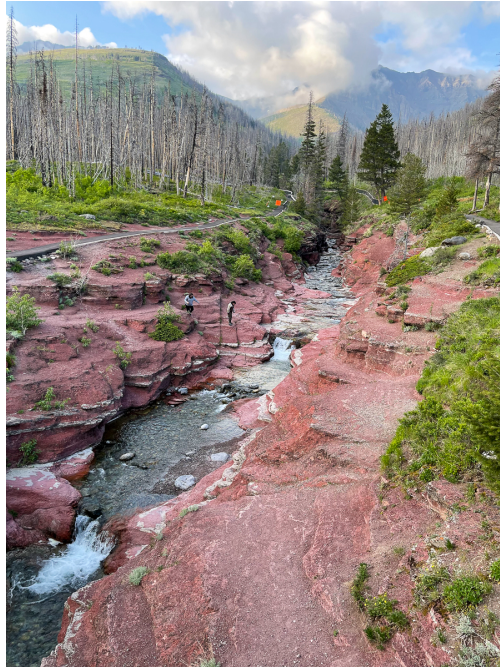


Barrow's Goldeneye © Yousif Attia

We found a great spot for our picnic lunch halfway down the parkway. After Lunch, we drove back to town and had some free time to explore before supper. Waterton is known for its mammal life, but driving around in the early mornings and evenings can increase your chances of encountering them. We did just that and drove the Red Rock Parkway to Red Rock Canyon and back. The scenery in the evening light was breathtaking. Lazuli Buntings were singing along much of the stretch and a Western Kingbird was another nice addition. A short boo around Red Rock Canyon produced Hairy Woodpecker, and a few Red-naped Sapsuckers visiting a well right beside the trail! On the drive back we were rewarded with a lovely cinnamon coloured Black Bear, and the second vehicle had a Dusky Grouse fly right across the road! What a day!



Waterton National Park © Jody Allair



Red Rock Canyon © Kristen DelMonte



Waterton scenery © Yousif Attia

Day 5: Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, return to Calgary We opted for another early morning excursion before breakfast, this time to Maskinonge Marsh. It was another calm morning and the birding was exceptional! We heard a distant American Bittern, Pied-billed Grebe, and Common Loon while Black Terns circled over the wetland. Probably most memorable however was an interaction between a cow Wapiti (Elk), and a large Black Bear. Across the lake, we first spotted the two having a bit of a standoff, and that was followed by grunts and huffs from the Wapiti.



Black Bear and Wapiti (and Common Grackle) © Yousif Attia

We had time for another poke around the townsite where we had improved looks at Barrow's Goldeneye, American Dipper, MacGillivray's Warbler, Cassin's Finch, and both Columbian and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel. Our only Cassin's Vireo was heard on the way to breakfast. After breakfast, we had one more important stop in the park, the Bison paddock. We had no trouble finding the bison, and we also added one more Golden Eagle soaring above for good measure!



American Dipper © Yousif Attia

We left Waterton with pretty much everything we could have hoped to see. We had lunch in Pincher Creek, before heading up to Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump World Heritage Site. The focus here was to learn more about the Plains Bison, and their importance both ecologically and to the Indigenous Peoples that relied on them. The site itself did have some interesting birds including Brown Thrasher, Rock Wren, Spotted Towhee, and a family of Yellow-bellied Marmots. After ample time to learn about the cultural significance in the interpretive center, we hunkered down for our drive to Calgary. Drive-by birding kept our eyes peeled, and we even had a flyby Long-billed Curlew south of Claresholm. We pulled into Calgary with time to clean up before our final supper. It was a great chance to reflect on our action-packed adventure!



Day 6: Departure Everyone had breakfast at their leisure and traveled home. Jody and Yousif on the other hand, headed back east to tackle their Birds Canada Birdathon raising funds for bird conservation in Canada. [Read more](#) about how they did and [show your support!](#)



Eagle-Eye Tours Birding Group 2023

eBird Trip Report: <https://ebird.org/canada/tripreport/135582> iNaturalist Project: <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/eagle-eye-tours-canadian-rockies>