



Canadian Rockies: Waterton Lakes Trip Report (May 30 - Jun 4, 2026)

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Most tours have to deal with patches of inclement weather, that's just the reality of spending countless days outside. However, the once-in-a-decade storm that coincided with our tour was admittedly a bit of a shock. 150+ mm of rain over 48 hours, 40-90 km/ hour winds, and the amazing part was—it did not dampen our spirits. The guides, along with a brilliant collection of participants, managed to have a memorable tour filled with innumerable highlights. Here's how it began.

Day 1 - May 30

Our journey started at the hotel in Calgary where we had a brief introduction to the tour and then settled in for a meal.

Day 2 - May 31 (Kananaskis to High River)

Not a chance the driving rain was going to keep us from birding this morning. After a few last minute adjustments to the itinerary (namely scrapping picnic lunches in lieu of a warm restaurant) we headed off to Sibbald Creek Trail in Kananaskis. More of a road than a trail, we stopped at several sloughs looking for waterbirds from the dry van. We were rewarded with nice views of Ring-necked Ducks, Pied-billed Grebe and a stunning male Cinnamon Teal. After a bit of searching along the roadsides we managed to track down one of our target species—a strikingly beautiful adult male Mountain Bluebird. From here we drove down into Kananaskis Park, making a quick stop to warm up at the indoor fireplace in the visitor centre. Barrier Lake was gorgeous as ever and a brief foray along the bridge to Kananaskis Village produced a singing Tennessee Warbler, our first Mountain Chickadee and a Black Bear—our first of 9 sighted on the tour! After an enjoyable lunch stop in Bragg Creek, we headed off to Elbow Falls to search for our two target species for the afternoon. And within minutes of arriving at the viewpoint we had exceptional views of American Dipper foraging and visiting a nest, along with an adult male Harlequin Duck showing off along the river

edge. After a remarkably successful day of birding in the rain, we made it to High River where we settled in for a very nice meal.



Elbow Falls © Jody Allari

Day 3 - June 1 (Frank Lake to Waterton)

After successfully proving that you can have a tremendous day of birding in the pouring rain and wind, we headed off to Frank Lake where we put that new found confidence to the ultimate test. The winds were pushing 90 km/hr and the rain was basically horizontal. Luckily the winds were coming from the north, so we were able to park the vans beside each other and use them as viewing blinds while we looked south into Frank Lake. The strategy paid off. We had exceptional views of White-faced Ibis (foraging in the puddles along the access road), American White Pelicans, California Gulls, Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, Wilson's Phalaropes, Eared Grebes, Ruddy Ducks, Yellow-headed Blackbirds and a surprise group of 14 White-rumped Sandpipers.



Rainy birding at Frank Lake © Jody Allair

After Frank Lake we drove down to a nearby coulee to search for a nesting pair of Prairie Falcons. Thanks to the keen eyes of Yousif, we ended up having great views of a Prairie Falcon perched under a ledge attempting to stay dry. The Pincher Creek Tim Horton's was our lunch stop today. Afterwards we made the incredibly scenic drive down to Waterton. A quick roadside stop provided us with great views of a pair of Sandhill Cranes along with displaying Wilson's Snipe and a Horned Grebe. Once we arrived at Waterton we took a break from the rain and spent time in the Waterton Lakes National Park Visitor Centre. A couple keen participants went outside and found our first Canada Jay of the tour. The rain continued through the afternoon, so we decided to head off for a drive through the park to look for mammals and were rewarded with nice views of Elk, Mule and White-tailed Deer and our first Columbian Ground Squirrels of the tour. We settled in for a hot meal and looked forward to exploring the park tomorrow.



Elk © Yousif Attia

Day 4 - June 2 (Waterton Lakes National Park)

Cool temps, and morning showers would not deter our group this morning. With the promise of clearing skies in the afternoon we declared today the Waterton Big Day. We were going to make up for all the van birding and go find everything we could out on the trails. We started early for some pre-breakfast birding down at the marina where we found a small flock of sleeping Barrow's Goldeneye. From here we travelled down Haybarn road to look for Calliope Hummingbird and Black-headed Grosbeak, unfortunately the rain and cold temperatures only allowed us fleeting glimpses. We decided to make a quick stop at the Bear's Hump trailhead where we had nice views of Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak and singing MacGillivray's Warbler and Dusky Flycatcher. Not a bad start. After a hearty breakfast we made our way up to Cameron Lake. The rain was tapering off and the birds responded in-kind with some of the best birding of the trip. Walking the various trails up at the lake produced some great birds including Pacific Wren, Cassin's Finch, Bald Eagle, Wilson's Warbler and Olive-sided Flycatcher. The trail adjacent to the lake had a pretty remarkable assemblage of birds giving us point blank views including White-crowned Sparrow, Swainson's Thrush and the two big highlights—an American Pipit in bright breeding plumage and a "slate-coloured" Fox Sparrow basically throwing itself at us. I don't think I've ever had better views of this mountain subspecies of Fox Sparrow.



Birding at Cameron Lake © Jody Allair



Slate-colored Fox Sparrow © Yousif Attia

We arranged for packed lunches and managed to squeak in a picnic lunch along the Akimina Parkway. Within minutes we were enjoying sandwiches and Tim Tams alongside a flock of Cassin's Finches. This range restricted species in Alberta is always a target on this tour, but seldom do we get views like we were having at our lunch spot.



Cassin's Finch © Yousif Attia

After lunch we decided to head back to Haybarn road for another chance at Calliope Hummingbird. And this time the males were out and perching in the open giving us all jaw dropping views of this tiny denizen on the mountains. We made one last stop around Cameron Falls before taking a quick break for an early dinner. The falls were roaring with all of the rainfall over the past two days, but we could still manage to see the nesting American Dipper on its precarious nest ledge.



American Dipper © Kathy Springer

After an excellent Italian dinner we headed off to Red Rock Canyon for the evening. Unfortunately

the Lazuli Buntings were just not in the mood to sing today (they much prefer hot and sunny conditions) but that was all forgotten when a Grizzly Bear appeared on the road right in front of our vans. We had wonderful views of this amazing mammal from a safe distance in our vehicles. It was a lifer for most of the group and a species we always hope to see on this tour but is never guaranteed.



Grizzly Bear © Chris Ellingwood



Red Rock Canyon © Jody Allair

Birding around the canyon produced close-up views of Western Tanager, Red-naped Sapsucker and the most outstanding scenery. A quick stop on the drive back produced a flock of Mountain Bluebirds along with a couple of Townsend's Solitaires. A truly unforgettable Waterton Big Day.



Female Western Tanager © Yousif Attia

Day 5 - June 3 (Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump to Calgary)

Our pre-breakfast birding excursion took us out to the Maskinonge wetlands where we enjoyed tremendous mountain views (including some sun!) and a nice mix of marsh birds including Cinnamon Teal, Black Terns and a surprise Common Goldeneye. The biggest highlight of the morning was seeing a Western Tiger Salamander that was expertly spotted by Yousif along the side of the road.



Morning birding at Maskinonge © Yousif Attia



Tiger Salamander © Jody Allair

After breakfast we packed up and headed off to the Bison Paddock where a few Bison obliged us with some nice views. The highlight here was actually another large charismatic mammal. Just across the road we spotted a female moose with two very young calves. An absolute treat which was celebrated by all.



Bison © Chris Ellingwood

Next stop was Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. After some expert back-roads driving through the Porcupine Hills we arrived at this culturally significant UNESCO World Heritage Site. Our tour guide gave us a wonderfully narrated description of the location and why it was such an important site for the Plains People for over 6,000 years.



Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo Jump © Jody Allair

We reluctantly had to say goodbye to this special part of the world and head back to Calgary for a final meal and goodbyes. Until next time.



Our group © Jody Allair