Eagle-Eye Tours



# Churchill & Southern Manitoba Trip Report (June 2024)

Link: Churchill & Southern Manitoba Trip Report (June 2024)

---

The prairies of SW Manitoba are always special to me because I spent so much of my career doing fieldwork on endangered species in that corner. But when the forecast for the day showed extremely strong winds from the first thing in the morning, it looked like we might have great difficulty finding those grassland specialties that birders regularly come to that corner of the province to find. Getting to a real nice mixed-grass prairie crown-land parcel west of Lyleton, we crossed the fence and walked in a way. Hearing no calls, Ken played a Sprague's Pipits call so that the participants would know what we wanted to hear. Almost immediately, one began flitting in circles near us but it would always land in longer grass too far away to spot. Placing the speaker in some shorter grass and backing off, we played the call a few more times before the pipit finally strode into view for great looks and photos. That very difficult one out of the way, we focused on getting better looks at Chestnut-collared Longspurs and Grasshopper Sparrows that were nearby and they also posed very nicely for photos. When we talked about highlights of the trip, getting to see those birds that well under such trying conditions stood out. But there were many other highlight moments and birds that were discussed. Hopefully, I can capture some of those in this report. And special thanks for all the great photos you all took, only a few of which we will have room for in the final report.



*Prairie walk © Delores Steinlicht*

## Day 1 – May 30

Our group of five adventurers plus myself and Alvin Dyck (who would be accompanying us up north) met in the lobby of the Hampton hotel the first evening and walked over to the nearby Victoria Inn where we dined at Chicago Joe's, got acquainted and discussed trip logistics.  Despite many of the group having afternoon flights and some delays, everyone got here in time!  But, we'd have a fair bit of driving with many stops on route tomorrow, so we packed it in early that evening.

## Day 2 - May 31

Stocked with coffee from the lobby, and a bag breakfast from the hotel, we were packed and on the road particularly early today (5:30) bound for St Ambroise on Lake Manitoba.  On the way, we stopped at a good spot along PR 227 for Red-headed Woodpeckers (far off looks) and got a head start on a few nesting birds of the parklands region.  Further down the road we spotted a flock of Wild Turkeys, some pole-top perched Wilson's Snipes, two Brown Thrashers, good looks at Brewer's Blackbirds, plus many of the more regular parkland/prairie birds which we would get looks at later. At St Ambroise marsh, we added Bobolink, Marbled Godwit, Northern Harrier, many calling Marsh & Sedge Wrens, Swamp Sparrow, Yellow-headed Blackbird and many Black Terns.  We stopped at St Ambroise Beach for breakfast, which we ate in the van as the winds blowing off of Lake Manitoba were extremely brisk.  Along the beach during and after breakfast we would add a couple Bald Eagles, good numbers of Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstones, Forster's Tern, American White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, two Western Grebes, and some calling Soras.



*Western Grebes © Steve Czyzycki*

There was several hundred gulls to sort through at our next destination, the PR 227 garbage dump. Most were Franklins, Ring-billed and Herring, but we eventually found three California Gulls and a subadult Lesser Black-backed Gull.  On to Cal's place along the Portage Creek, where we added a few birds (American Wigeon, Wood Duck, Eastern Wood Pewee, and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher).  At Delta Marsh we found a semi-sheltered spot for a picnic lunch, spotted a couple Orchard Orioles, and along the beach added single Common & Caspian Terns and a large flock of 90 Black-bellied Plovers.



*Black-bellied Plover and Ruddy Turnstone © Delores Steinlicht*

On the way to Riding Mountain National Park we spotted a raccoon, some coyotes, and stopped in Neepawa for gas and restrooms. We took a sideroad near the Park's East Gate looking for Golden-winged Warbler (no luck), and carried on through the park on PR 19 adding Ring-necked Duck, Common Goldeneye, more Wild Turkeys, our first of 18 Black Bears that we would see in the park, and two Beavers. We arrived at our accommodations for the next 3 nights, individual chalets at the Mooswa Resort in Wasagaming, with enough time to unpack and have a short rest before heading out for dinner at TR McCoys – a very quaint Italian restaurant in Wasagaming. After dinner a few of us had planned on going to Lake Audy to search for American Bison in their expansive compound there. Finding the Lake Audy road closed, we went west along the southern edge of the park hoping that the back road into Lake Audy might be open but it also was closed. The evening certainly wasn't a bust, however, as the winds had died down and we got nice looks at several ducks (Northern Pintail, Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup), other waterbirds (Common Loon, Hooded & Red-breasted Mergansers, Red-necked Grebe), as well as our first Eastern Bluebirds, Olive-sided & Alder Flycatchers, and Swainson's Thrush.

## Day 3 – June 1

Our routine in Riding Mountain Park would be to head off in the morning at 6 am, and do a bit of birding/driving for an hour or so on the way to a nice lakeside picnic breakfast spot. Today we headed east on PR 19 spotting 3 Snowshoe Hares and a couple Black Bears on the way. At Whirlpool Lake, we heard a far off Connecticut Warbler which came in beautifully to playback, and we spotted a couple of Brown Creepers. We had breakfast near a lakeside shelter where a Red Squirrel was brave enough to try and steal some of the breakfast grub off the table, a Least Chipmunk was spotted nearby, a pair of Evening Grosbeaks flew into some nearby trees, and a rather distant Trumpeter Swan was observed on Whirlpool Lake. After breakfast, we walked a portion of a trail near the lake where we heard a couple drumming Ruffed Grouse and had good looks at some Nashville Warblers. Near the picnic area a female Common Merganser, Blue-headed Vireo and Blackburnian Warbler cooperated for photos, and a couple Black-backed Woodpeckers, plus an American Three-toed Woodpecker were spotted – an incredible start to our day. The winds picked up through the morning as we progressed east to the East Escarpment, and around to the Agassiz Ski Hill road (west of McCreary) where we heard a couple singing Mourning Warblers and had brief close up looks at one before it flew back and refused to come back for a second look. We stopped for lunch at a picnic spot at the base of the abandoned Agassiz ski hill. Heading back after lunch, we heard and briefly saw a couple Broad-winged Hawks, and we walked a stretch of road along some scrub oak forest where an Eastern Towhee and gorgeous male Indigo Bunting came in to give us some great photos, but no Golden-winged Warblers could be found.



*Indigo Bunting Delores Steinlicht*

This evening we would make a shot at finding Great Gray Owls and some other birds south of the park, so we beat it back to the resort, had a couple hours rest, and an earlier dinner before heading out for the evening.  Shortly after leaving the park, we spotted a Pine Martin, a not uncommon species but rarely found on this tour.  It crossed the road giving us a brief look, but it didn't go far and soon after it came back posed briefly along the roadside giving us superb looks before crossing the road behind the van disappearing into the woods.  A couple more Black Bears (9 for the day) including a rather scruffy-looking cinnamon-colored one were seen, as well as our first Belted Kingfisher, Sandhill Cranes, Muskrat, and a Beaver sitting on the edge of the road munching on dandelions.  We tried a few roads where Great Grays have occasionally been seen in the past, and we waited for nearly an hour at the spot where they have recently been very reliable without seeing them.  While we waited, we had brief looks at a Purple Finch and a couple Ruby-throated Hummingbirds near some feeders, a Great Blue Heron flew nearby, and we played around with some Sedge Wrens in a nearby marsh getting a few looks and some mediocre photos.  We left a little early as we didn't want to get back too late, but maybe we should have waited a bit longer as the owls have occasionally waited until after sunset to emerge from the forest and begin hunting.



*Black Bear © Celia Gerry*

## Day 4 – June 2

Leaving the resort at 6, we headed north on Hwy 10 spotting two more Black Bears eating dandelion flowers in the roadside ditches, a Trumpeter Swan that appeared to be on a nest in some reeds in a roadside lake, a young male Moose trotted by giving us superb looks, and a Pileated Woodpecker flew by but could not be called in for better looks. Our breakfast destination today was Grayling Lake which was alive with birdsong including several warbler species (Mourning, Chestnut-sided, Blackburnian, Yellow-rumped & Northern Waterthrush) and a pair of Common Loons swam nearby. After breakfast we proceeded to the Boreal Trail but the entrance gate was closed. This has always been one of the best birding sites in the park, and right away near the gate we found three very difficult to find warblers (Black-throated Green, Bay-breasted & Cape May). We carried on to use the restrooms and walked a portion of the trail that was under construction picking up an amazing collection of new birds (Magnolia & Canada Warbler, Ovenbird, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Ruffed Grouse & Winter Wren). We carried on further down Hwy 10 and stopped along the North escarpment at the Beach Ridge parking lot where at least two Philadelphia Vireos, Veery, Black-and-white Warbler and White-breasted Nuthatch were nice additions to our list.



*Bay-breasted Warbler © Celia Gerry*



*Cape May Warbler © Delores Steinlicht*

Getting on to lunch time, we backtracked on Hwy 10 getting a couple more Black Bears, another Moose, and our first Canada Jays.  We had lunch at Katherine Lake along PR 19, and continued east a bit to the “S-curves” where Ken walked a short section of the woods and was able to find a Spruce Grouse near the road but it flew off before the rest of the group got to see it.  We’d have an early 5 o’clock dinner at TR McCoy’s again tonight, so we headed back to the resort and rested for a couple

hours while Ken went and checked out a friend's woodlot just south of the Park where Great Gray Owls have often been found (no luck there either). The optional evening agenda today was driving roads south and west of the park. Once again it had calmed down a fair bit in the evening, we had our first Sharp-tailed Grouse, better looks at an Olive-sided Flycatcher, and we had a chance to observe/photograph many species better, but no hoped for Great Gray or Black-billed Cuckoo were found.

## Day 5 – June 3

Today we had a fair bit of driving to do heading to the extreme southwest corner of the province, so we were packed and departed from the Mooswa by 6. Sometimes Proven Lake can be good for Black-crowned Night Herons or even calling Yellow Rails, so we pulled off the highway to give it a quick check. Instead, both Nelson's and LeConte's Sparrows were heard called in extensive sedge meadows along the lake, but neither would come in to give us a look. In downtown Minnedosa, we pulled into a nice picnic spot along the South Saskatchewan (Ishii Gardens/Tanner's Crossing Park) and had breakfast. After breakfast, we drove through the Minnedosa pothole country, a series of small glacial depression lakes, always good for a variety of waterfowl including our first Ruddy Ducks (40 for the day), Pied-billed and Horned Grebe, most of the day's 35 Red-necked Grebes, and many Black Terns (200 today). Driving past an old farmyard in this area, we stopped to look at a raptor being mobbed by several smaller birds; it turned out to be our only Great Horned Owl for the tour. Driving through Brandon, we had our only House Finches for the tour (2), and a Red Fox in the middle of a residential area! South of Brandon, we stopped at a small creek where several Northern Rough-winged Swallows were observed in flight, and we walked a short section of trail in the Brandon Hills hoping to find a Scarlet Tanager. South of the Brandon Hills, a Virginia Rail was heard calling in some cattails, so we positioned ourselves on the opposite side of the road and played the call – it answered immediately and before long was staring at us from the edge of the grass across the road! Before hitting Boissevain, we stopped at a lake near Ninga, where we had our first "peeps" (White-rumped and Semipalmated Sandpipers), as well as 2 Dunlin, some Wilson's & Red-necked Phalaropes, our first American Avocets, Willets, Spotted Sandpiper, and another Horned Grebe. At Boissevain we stopped for a Subway lunch and had a quick look around town before proceeding west to Whitewater Lake. Stopping at most of the accessible spots on the lake around the north and west ends that afternoon we had a couple far-off Snow Geese, a White-faced Ibis, many more American Avocets (35 today) and Black Terns, 3 Upland Sandpipers, several Marbled Godwits, more Willets, and our first of 6 Gray Partridge for the day (normally hard to find, we saw an amazing 16 during the next 4 days!). In Deloraine, we spotted 2 Eurasian Collared Doves and as we approached Melita a small pond along the Highway yielded our first Stilt Sandpipers (15). At Melita, we checked into Western Star, and had some time off before dinner at the Chicken Chef. After dinner, we drove around town checking out various chimneys used by Chimney Swifts and spotted at least 5 twittering overhead, but with high winds and rain imminent, we retired early.



*Upland Sandpiper © Celia Gerry*

## Day 6 – June 4

Today would be our big day for the southwest prairie specialties.  Thankfully, the rain had let off by breakfast (in the hotel at 6:30), but the winds were strong and predicted to just keep getting worse as the day progressed.  We got off by 7, picking up some Ring-necked Pheasants by the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) near Melita and quick looks at a Lark Sparrow.  West of Lyleton, a close up Loggerhead Shrike in a hawthorn shrub gave us brief looks, and we watched several Sharp-tailed Grouse do some stand-offs but very little strutting on a dancing ground (lek).  We wanted to hit the mixed-grass prairie spot before the winds got too strong, but by 8 am they were already whipping to over 50 km.  We ventured across the fence anyway, coming up with the fantastic close ups for Sprague's Pipit (2 others heard later), Chestnut-collared Longspur (10 for the day), and Grasshopper Sparrow (5 heard and seen) mentioned in the intro.  Baird's Sparrow, in that wind was another story.  Leaving the group near the van, Ken ventured far and wide in a couple spots where they normally occur, and finally found one singing at a distance.  After getting the group to that spot, the bird could still be heard but stopped singing soon after and we were unable to locate it.



*Sprague's Pipit © Celia Gerry*



*Chestnut-collared Longspur © Celia Gerry*

We tried a few other spots that morning without success, spotting a Fox Squirrel along the road and taking a drive through Lyleton getting pics of some leaning grain elevators.  At noon, we stopped for a picnic lunch at Sourisford Park – a nice birding spot near the confluence of Antler Creek and the Souris River near Coulter.  The Say's Phoebes that normally nest here were not present this year, but we did get a look at some fly-over Bank Swallows, a pair of Hooded Mergansers on the Souris,

and large numbers of Cliff Swallows building their mud nests on the underside of the bridge. After lunch we carried on to another riparian spot along the Souris where we called in a Yellow-throated Vireo and some Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Proceeding north of Pierson through the Poverty Plains we added more Upland Sandpipers (12 for the day), and checked out some rather far off Ferruginous Hawk nests (one had an adult fly in with food and at least two young were obvious in the photos). Ken explained that during his career as a wildlife biologist with the province, he had erected many artificial nests for Ferruginous Hawks in strategic locales in sw Manitoba (a wire basket with just a few sticks added in a large tree far removed from roads and other disturbance). Some have been used and added onto for over 30 years by Ferruginous Hawks and are now over 10 feet deep! Today we would observe at least four of these at a distance that were occupied by Ferruginous Hawks. A nice surprise near one of the "Grasslands Birding Trail" signs in the Poverty Plains was a cooperative Red-headed Woodpecker that we watched for a few minutes flycatching and stuffing its catch into small cracks in the fence posts. Near Broomhill we checked out a former Burrowing Owl release site but were unable to spot any owls. Nearby, another Loggerhead Shrike was observed on some hydro wires (our 4th for the day). In Broomhill, we looked for Say's Phoebes near an old building that had once served as the hub for this small town. Taking backroads to Melita, we checked out some roadside ponds adding more White-rumped and Semipalmated Sandpipers, some Black-bellied Plovers, and a Short-billed Dowitcher that appeared to have a broken wing. Back in Melita, we had an hour or so rest before heading to Happy Chopsticks for dinner. After dinner a few of us proceeded south of town hoping to find a Say's and maybe some iconic prairie mammals (badger or mule deer), but we had to settle for some superb vistas over large expanses of prairie lowlands, another Ferruginous Hawk using an artificial nest near Coulter, and several more groups of shorebirds including a few more Stilt Sandpipers.

## Day 7 –June 5

Packed, fed and ready to roll by 7, we headed north and west of Melita, but not before having a nice long stroll through the Mallaher WMA near Melita. Once again, the winds were fierce (50-90 km)! At one stop, as we were observing a White-tailed Deer along a shelterbelt another animal scurried into the tree row behind it and part way up a tree. All we could really see was a rather bushy, foxy red tail, and we caught a brief look at what seemed to be a rather large animal as it climbed down, but we could not figure out what it was. Later Ken determined that it was a Pine Martin, the first time he had ever seen one in the southwest; this one was reddish colored as opposed to the dark colored one we had seen earlier at Riding Mountain. A little further down the road, a large Moose was observed at a distance trotting across an open field and into a patch of willows. Getting into the Poverty Plains, we stopped to check out some old buildings in an abandoned yard site and were finally able to spot a Say's Phoebe. By some roadside willows at a creek crossing, 2 Willow Flycatchers responded immediately to playback, perched out in the open, and then began calling back verifying their identity. While we watched these, a raptor observed in flight at a distance turned out to be a Ferruginous Hawk. Retracing some of our route through the Poverty Plains that we had done yesterday, we spotted the same Red-headed Woodpecker we'd seen yesterday and we stopped to look at a few Swainson's Hawks (8 seen today). East of Pipestone we drove through a large marsh called Hunter Lake, and then through a section of the Plum Lakes marsh where we saw 22 White-faced Ibis, various other waterbirds, and many of the day's 400 Black Terns and 1500 Franklin's Gulls.



*Franklin's Gulls © Celia Gerry*

Further down the highway we looked over some roadside ponds east of Deleau and then headed to our lunch spot in a more sheltered picnic area near Oak Lake Beach. After lunch we had nice looks at an Eastern Wood Pewee near the van, and driving through the cottage area had good looks at a Fox Squirrel. We also drove a long stretch of dyke between Oak Lake & the Plum Lakes Marsh where we saw most of the day's estimated 1000 Eared Grebes, some Forster's and lots more Black Terns, two brief looks at Franklin's Ground Squirrels scurrying off the trail, and two Western Grebes at end of the road. The rest of the afternoon, we cruised backroads heading east to Brandon getting to our hotel (Lakeview Inn) with plenty of time to rest up before we walked across the back lane to a nice Greek restaurant (Albert's Bistro). A few of us went for a short evening jaunt after dinner to the Shilo area hoping to find bluebirds or another shrike, but we had limited cooperation from the wildlife that evening.

## Day 8 – June 6

Today we'd do a fair bit of a driving day with some rechecking of some sites near Lake Manitoba. Before breakfast we went to the Ag Canada Forestry Farm where we had good looks at a Great Crested Flycatcher, more White-tailed Deer and another Fox Squirrel. Back to the hotel for a continental breakfast at 7. In Brandon, we walked a short nature trail and met the owner of the property (Dave Barnes). We looked for Peregrines that nested on some hydro buildings on the east side of town, and carried on the Shilo, where we had a Cooper's Hawk zip by, a few Eastern Bluebirds, and then finally a Mountain (albeit a female but good looks). From Shilo we drove through the Douglas Marsh (at one time declared the "Home of the Yellow Rail" but water levels have reduced their numbers there considerably). Hitting the Trans Canada #1 Hwy, we drove straight through to Portage la Prairie where we had a surprise White-winged Dove dart across in front of the van, and we checked out Crescent Park – good for numerous Eastern Gray Squirrels and a couple broods of Common Goldeneye ducks. After lunch at Subway, we had a quick look for shorebirds at Delta Beach (a nice breeding plumaged Short-billed Dowitcher added), stopped in at Cal's place where we made for another attempt to call in a Black-billed Cuckoo, and then made a more thorough examination of hundreds of Franklin's, Ring-billed & Herring Gulls at the PR 227

dump, but couldn't come up with anything more exciting. We veered north to St Ambroise Beach for washrooms hoping an American Bittern or some shorebirds might be present, but other than about 200 Sanderlings along the beach there was little of interest found there. Checking into the Hampton Hotel, we had an hour's rest before walking over to Chicago Joes for dinner. We'd thought we might have time to check out a couple parks in Winnipeg, and the winds had finally died down, but folks wanted to finish packing for the next leg of the journey (Churchill), and Ken had to return the rental van and pack, so we took the evening off.

## Day 9 - June 7

Our flight to Churchill was scheduled for 10 am, so we got up for a continental breakfast at the hotel, and took a shuttle to the airport at 8. Alvin Dyck, another part-time guide with Eagle-Eye, would join us as a volunteer for the Churchill portion of the tour – his first trip to Churchill so he was mighty excited (as we were to have another keen observer for Churchill portion of the trip). At the airport, we were told the flight was delayed until 11 but it was nearly 11:30 before we got off the ground and around 2 before we landed in Churchill. The van that we were scheduled to take was waiting at the airport but it wouldn't start so we waited a bit longer for them to secure another van for our use. The weather in Churchill was supposed to be pretty nasty for today (rain and windy), so we were glad to see that the rain has ceased but it was still cool, windy and rather dreary for the rest of the day. After quickly checking in at The Polar Inn and putting on some extra layers of clothing, we hastened out to see some of the best birding sites near town. The Granary Ponds had a pair of Long-tailed Ducks and some Greater Scaup, about 50 Red-necked Phalaropes, many Herring Gulls nesting on big rocks in the water, and several other ducks and gulls that we had seen earlier in the south. On to the Lower Docks directly below the elevators, large ice flows covered much of the Churchill River, but there was a nice patch of open water closer to shore where there were many close Pacific Loons (at least 100 estimated), a few Red-throated Loons flew by and a couple landed giving us scope looks, Black Scoters were everywhere (very conservative estimate of 250), with a few Surf Scoters (12) and a couple of White-winged Scoters mixed in. An estimated 85 Common Eiders were also nice to see at close range, more Long-tailed Ducks (19 today), Common Goldeneye (15), and we had our first looks at Arctic Terns flying about (40 for the day). For mammals, we spotted two darker colored Red Foxes near town, and a Harbour Seal in the Churchill River. We also ran into a couple of really knowledgeable birders (Bruce DiLabio & Doug McRae) that Ken knew who informed us where they and spotted some highlight species; we exchanged particulars which would come in handy down the road. Driving around closer to the docking bay for Sea North Tours, we scared up and got great looks at our first of 3 Arctic Hares we would encounter in the north (this one half white and half brown).



*Pacific Loons © Delores Steinlicht*

We checked out a section along the Churchill River near town known as “The Flats” where some good birds had been seen recently. There we found a few shorebirds (Semipalmated Sandpipers, and a single Baird’s Sandpiper), a few Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs (nice birds to get as they have often migrated through at this time of year), and as we were leaving a Short-eared Owl flew past. Next we headed out of town past Akudlik, and down Goose Creek Road where water levels in the roadside ditches were unusually high (consequently there were almost no mudflats present which traditionally harbor good numbers of migrant shorebirds). At the Goose Creek Cabins, the main feeder was extremely busy with several White-crowned Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos, along with a couple Pine Grosbeaks, Common Redpolls, single American Tree, Fox & White-throated Sparrows, and a surprise (for the north) Brown-headed Cowbird. On the Churchill River above the Weir, two Tundra Swans were added and a closer Harbor Seal. Hydro Road beyond the Weir also had exceptionally high water levels due to recent rains, but some really close Red-throated Loons were a nice surprise, and we added our first Hudsonian Godwits (4), Lesser Yellowlegs (8), Semipalmated Plovers (5), American Pipits (2) and a Rusty Blackbird, as well as a few more Snow Buntings and Spotted Sandpipers along the ditch/water’s edge. Past the Marina some Arctic Terns were observed, as well as the odd Bonaparte’s Gull, but the hoped for concentrations of foraging/flying Bonaparte’s which might have some Little or Sabine’s Gulls with them were not present. Eventually we headed back to town for a hearty dinner at the Ptarmigan Inn. Some of us headed back up Goose Creek and Hydro Road for a couple hours that evening all the way to CR 30 (the pumping station at the end of Hydro Road). Conditions still weren’t the best with winds and poor lighting, but we managed to find a few more birds including some American Black Ducks, 3 Sandhill Cranes, an Osprey, plus a couple of Northern Harriers and Bald Eagles. Despite the later than expected arrival, and less than ideal weather, we’d had a very successful intro day to Churchill.

## Day 10 – June 8

In Churchill, we would settle into an early morning routine of heading out at 6 for a quick look around town, the Flats, Granary Ponds, and the Lower Docks before coming back at 7 to a well-stocked continental breakfast at the hotel. Today, we lucked into a very nice pale adult Iceland Gull

and a Peregrine Falcon fly-by at the Flats.  Along the water's edge and flying by were many Snow Buntings (68 today), Lapland Longspurs (18), Ruddy Turnstones (42), Sanderling (30), 2 Dunlin, as well as a scattering of Semipalmated and White-rumped Sandpipers.  At the Lower Docks many of the Pacific Loons that we'd seen yesterday had departed (although we still counted 76 for the day) and there were a handful of Red-Throated (14 today) and 2 Common Loons spotted on the river today.  Black Scoters were still prominent (500 between here and Cape Merry for the day), as well as quite a few Surf (68 today) and White-winged Scoters (42).  It was nice that most of the birds on the water were much closer than usual as the ice flows seemed to be mostly concentrated on the far side of river.  A fly-by Parasitic Jaeger presented out first look at this species, but we would see 6 more today (mostly inland). After breakfast we headed to Cape Merry for our initial look at Hudson's Bay, the river nearer to the mouth, and Prince of Wales fort across the river. On the Bay, almost no open water was visible, just heaps of ice piled up in jagged mounds everywhere.  If a Polar Bear was out there, even close to shore, good luck trying to spot it.  The river too had no open water near the mouth, and minimal open water below us and between the ice flows.  On Cape Merry road on the way in we had great looks at our first Willow Ptarmigan, the only female we would see during the tour.  Cape Merry in the morning with the sun at our backs and all the gorgeous ice flows and some open water below us was spectacular.  We stayed for about an hour at the artillery battery at Cape Merry hoping for spot something unusual, but the species composition here was much like at the Lower Docks earlier.  There were however more Common (174 today) and Red-breasted Mergansers (55 today) than we'd seen yesterday, although many of them, as well as the loons, scoters and Long-tailed Ducks seemed to be flying downstream and heading out over Hudson Bay.  A couple of American Pipits in full territorial display overhead and occasionally landing nearby on the rocks added to the overall ambience.



*Cape Merry River View © Delores Steinlicht*



*Willow Ptarmigan female © Steve Czyzycki*

Cape Merry had been phenomenal but we wanted to get inland and all the way out to the Twin Lakes today.  We saw very little worthy of stopping for along Launch Road except for a pair of Parasitic Jaegers defending their territory near Camp Nanuk.  At the Churchill Northern Studies Centre, we stopped to buy some merchandise and use the restrooms.  Proceeding inland on Twin lakes Road, we stopped to get good looks at our first Blackpoll Warbler, and lucked into a nice male Willow Ptarmigan adorned in its rufous above and white below courtship plumage.  It chuckled back at us in response to playback and crossed the road nearby.  Further down the road, we would get another Willow Ptarmigan, a couple more Blackpolls, our first Orange-crowned Warblers for the tour, and added several Yellow-rumped Warblers to our northern list.



*Willoow Ptarmigan © Steve Czyzycki*

The shorebird fen was a bit quieter than usual, but we were still able to observe a couple more Parasitic Jaegers, some Hudsonian Godwits, 2 American Golden Plovers, a Black-bellied Plover, several Lesser Yellowlegs, a Dunlin, and a couple of Short-billed Dowitchers. Getting hungry and well past lunch time, we pulled into Cook Street and drove to a dilapidated cabin at the south end of West Twin Lake. A Boreal Chickadee and some Canada Jays greeted us before and after lunch, and we walking a trail west of the cabin finding 2 Merlins, a Pine Grosbeak, and a Northern Shrike (not great looks but a species that is getting hard to find). After Cook Street we drove a bit further down Twin Lakes Road and then headed back adding a couple more Willow Ptarmigan along Launch Road. We had a short afternoon rest before dinner at the Ptarmigan at 6. One or two participants went out with Alvin and Ken for a couple hours after dinner. Checking out the Flats, Pipeline Road (parallels the highway to Akudlik), Goose Creek Road and Hydro Road to CR30, we added to the day's numbers for many waterfowl species, and added several species for the day as well as some for the north, including 10 Black Ducks, 5 Bufflehead, 11 Sandhill Cranes, more Hudsonian Godwits (20 today), 8 Stilt Sandpipers, 8 Baird's Sandpipers, an Osprey, Northern Flicker, American Tree & White-throated Sparrows, and several Northern Waterthrushes. New for the tour was our first Lincoln's Sparrow; thankfully we would get a couple more in the next two days. Half way down Hydro Road, a vehicle caught up quickly and past us, so we wondered if there might be an unusual bird being seen at CR 30. We sped down to CR30, and upon talking to the occupants of the vehicle found out that a Lark Sparrow had been seen there. We located it after searching for a few minutes, not an unusual bird for the tour, but very unusual for the north.

## Day 11 - June 9

Alvin was quite sure he had heard a Harris's Sparrow in behind the buildings across the street first thing in the morning so we had a good look at the shrubbery there. We were unable to locate the Harris's, but we did get a good look at a pale Hoary Redpoll, our only one for the tour. Afterwards, we checked out the ever-changing avifauna and river/iceflows at the Flats, Granary Ponds and Lower Flats before breakfast. At the water's edge along the Flats and at Lower Docks, Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderlings were particularly prominent today (86 & 110 for the day). Semipalmated Sandpiper numbers had also peaked (350 for the day), with a mixture of White-rumped Sandpipers and a few Dunlin observed. We were taking our time meandering back looking at the shorebirds when Bruce texted that he was onto some Sabine's Gulls at the Lower Docks. It took only a few minutes to get there. Sure enough, nice and close to shore were 3 Sabine's (the yellow tipped black bills and gray hoods with a black lower border clearly visible). Occasionally they made short flights showing their unique upper-wing pattern. A nearby Parasitic Jaeger nearby in the water and later flying presented great looks. The decline in scoter, merganser and loon numbers on the river today was particularly noticeable. Less than half as many scoter were observed -- still predominantly Black (202 today), with just over 30 for each of Surf and White-winged Scoter here and at Cape Merry. Merganser numbers had dropped even more, particularly Common which declined from 175 yesterday to 25 today. Likewise Pacific Loon numbers had dropped from 76 to only 10 today, whereas 14 Red-throated Loons were counted for both days.



*Parasitic Jaeger © Steve Czyzycki*

After breakfast, we again hit Cape Merry taking advantage of the rising tide and nice early morning light conditions there. Like yesterday, the setting and conditions were unbelievably nice but there was little unusual to be found for birdlife. We wanted to give the feeders and Marina areas another chance this morning before doing some of the side-roads off of Launch Road and that turned out to be a very fortuitous decision. At the Goose Creek cabin feeders, a Harris's Sparrow had been reported earlier and today we got there at the right time to see it. It flew off before everyone had a good look, so we carried on to the end of the cabin's road, where we got out to look at a Snowshoe Hare and a couple Northern Flickers. Hearing a slightly different call from some lower shrubbery off the road, we called in a Wilson's Warbler (a nemesis bird for me in the north). Backtracking to the feeder, the Harris's had returned giving us much better looks, and then a Boreal Chickadee showed up and hung around long enough for everyone to get very good looks. Just past the Weir turnoff on Hydro Road our good luck continued when a group of surface feeding black-headed gulls very close to the road was found to contain two Little Gulls! We watched them for an extended time, occasionally seeing their dark underwings when they flicked their wings. While we waited for better looks, our attention was distracted by a Rusty Blackbird, followed by a Red-winged Blackbird (another unusual bird for the north), and better looks at a Northern Waterthrush. As we were about to leave, a Gray-cheeked Thrush began calling from some bare flooded trees and we were able to get decent scope looks at it. The Little Gulls still hadn't flown so we headed to the Marina for washrooms and to have our picnic lunch. While there, Alvin got onto another Sabine's Gull but it landed beyond some willows and was not seen again. Soon after, however, two Little Gulls appeared (perhaps the same two that we had seen earlier). These gave us excellent looks at their black underwings as they flew about amongst the nearby willows and even flew right over us as we were having lunch! After lunch, we headed back to Launch Road via Scrap Metal Road and took the very rough but usually productive Halfway Point Road to the coast. In the tidal flats there, we spotted a few more Black Ducks, and quite a few Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderling. We had been there some time when someone noticed that an Arctic Hare had been calmly sitting very close to us in the rocks – what a great photo op. On the way back, we got better looks at a pair of American Golden Plovers. Beyond the Studies Centre, we took a short road (Ramsey Trail) and immediately were rewarded with our first Whimbrel standing along the road edge – what a relief to finally find this gorgeous bird

and get really nice looks.  The road ended up soon after at a large, mostly ice-bound lake, where all 3 species of loons were present (all reasonably close), as well as some Red-breasted Mergansers, a single pair of White-winged Scoter, and a pair of Black Scoters.  Way off in the distance, a couple of very distant soaring eagles were checked out.  Knowing that Golden Eagle nest along the far northern coast of Hudson Bay and are occasionally seen in this area, we eventually got good enough looks in the scope to identify them as Golden Eagles by their unmistakable upper mid-wing barring.



*Arctic hare © Delores Steinlicht*

Heading back to town, we took the Coast Road for the first time stopping to have a look at Miss Piggy (the cargo plane that went down in the rocks).  But when we got back to town we found out that, contrary to what we'd been told, all the restaurants were closed on a Sunday!  Luckily there was a grocery store open that sold enough main course meals.  Dinner was a little delayed as Ken and Alvin scrambled to get everything warmed up, but in the end we had a fine meal in the breakfast room at the hotel; we even had some apple pie for dessert.  It had been a full and rewarding day, but Ken and Alvin managed to get one client to accompany them for a short evening jaunt providing we could get her some better Black Duck photos.  No problem we thought.  First we wanted to see if an American Coot (rare for the north) that had been reported on the Granary Ponds was still around; indeed there is was right next to the road.  We headed down Goose Creek Road checking out a short offshoot (Nodwell Trail) on the way.  While there, Doug McRae texted that they had just seen a Red Phalarope near Akudlik but it had flown off.  Off we were on a Phalarope chase. We caught up with Doug on the Akudlik Lake trail, found out where he had last seen it flying well off to north, and headed off that way hoping we might find it out there somewhere.  We'd gone just a short distance when Doug texted again that it had just flown back, but had landed further south near the highway with some Red-necked. Not exactly sure where he meant, we drove slowly along the highway looking for any phalaropes in the nearby marsh.  Eventually we found some Red-necked Phalaropes, and then another one by itself a distance off.  This one proved to be our target bird – a brightly colored female Red Phalarope!  We never did get Celia her Black Duck photos that evening, but we got her back by 9:30 as promised…. with photos of something a heck of a lot better.

## Days 12 – June 10

Today we decided to do something a little different before breakfast first checking out where we had found the Red Phalarope by Akudlik to see if it was still around and then going down Goose Creek Road to Kennedy Park hoping we might luck into a Spruce Grouse had been reported there a few days earlier.  Near the entrance, we found a Gray Catbird (another unusual bird for the north). Further down, we heard some loud woodpecker tapping and eventually called out an American Three-toed Woodpecker for a look.  While watching it, a second American Tree-toes could still be hear tapping back in the bush.  At that same spot, Alvin was sure he heard a Palm Warbler which we later called out for good looks.  As we walked a little further down the trail, a Spruce Grouse hopped up into the lower branches of a spruce tree giving us superb looks/photos as it displayed in response to playback.  We were definitely on a roll, so on the way back we walked into a spot where there was a nest box that has occasionally been used by Boreal Owls.  No owl this time, but a nearby vocalizing Brown Creeper that was eventually spotted was another nice bird for the north.



*American Three-toed Woodpecker © Steve Czyzycki*



*Spruce Grouse © Steve Czyzycki*

After breakfast we checked the river by the flats, noticing that all the shorebirds and almost all the ice flows from yesterday had disappeared. Likewise, at the Lower Docks, the water was almost completely free of ice flows but heading around to Cape Merry, there was still quite a few jammed up below the fort and the mouth of the river was completely clogged. Numbers of waterbirds in the river had decreased significantly, but with the scope large numbers of scoters and mergansers could still be seen in some open water channels further out from the mouth of the river. We remained at the fort for nearly an hour just taking in the ever changing beauty of Hudson's Bay and the Churchill River and giving it one last look (or so we thought as we wanted to check out the Museum and other town attractions in the afternoon). We'd planned to get back to town at 1 pm when the Museum was scheduled to be open, so we drove out Coast Road and Launch Road, checked out Camp Nanuk and drove out to the coast on Halfway Point Road one more time. Still no caribou or Arctic Fox to be found there, but as we took in the scenery at the end of the Halfway Point Road, a pair of Bohemian Waxwings were found in some nearby scrub willows (a rather unusual spot to find this often hard to find boreal-nesting species). Making our way back to town, the Museum and National Parks office which were supposed to be open were both closed, as was the Ptarmigan Restaurant! So we headed to the Seaport where we had our final meal together, and reminisced about our favorite birds and moments from the tour. The Museum was still not open after lunch and we had some time to kill before heading to the airport so we went back to Cape Merry. The transformation since we had been just here a few hours earlier was amazing. The mouth of the river was now completely open and the open water stretched way out into the Bay. We thought there might even be enough open water that perhaps there might be a few Belugas showing up, but try as we might none could be spotted. Still it highlighted how quickly things can change on the river and the bay at this time of year. Making our way to the airport by 4, the 5 pm flight was on time, and we landed in Winnipeg at 7:30. We said our goodbyes while waiting for our luggage, Ken & Alvin headed home and the rest of the group caught the shuttle back to the Hampton for their last night in Winnipeg, It had been a very successful and enjoyable tour. In spite of the weather in the south we'd done amazingly well finding most of what the participants had really wanted and pulling together an impressive list of birds and mammals. Although we missed a few species or didn't get the best looks at everything in the south due to the unusually windy weather, we'd still accumulated 192 bird and 18 mammal species for the

south.  The north had been even more generous for birds (103 species) including many hard to find ones, and many that are rare for the north.  Our overall tally for the trip, 239 bird species and 21 mammals, sets a high bar for the future.  I hope that this report helps you relive many of the great experiences and highlights that we experienced while traversing many of Manitoba's top birding and wildlife-viewing destinations.  You were a great group - may our paths cross again in the future.
Ken De Smet