Eagle-Eye Tours



Grand Newfoundland Trip Report (Jun 14 - 25, 2023)

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With Jared Clarke & Adam Timpf Our group of twelve adventurers and two guides explored a variety of coastal, forest and even tundra habitats across beautiful Newfoundland from June 14-25. From showy songbirds to spectacular seabird colonies and whales to wildflowers, Canada's most easterly province offers a wonderful array of nature to enjoy. *(Find more on this birding tour in Newfoundland here.)*



EET group photo in Terra Nova

June 14-19: The Avalon Peninsula

Our adventure began in St. John's – a historic, seaside city with amazing scenery and excellent birding right at its doorstep. Using the city as a hub, we spent our first few days exploring nearby parks, forests and seabird colonies of the northeast Avalon Peninsula. Morning strolls in the boreal forests that characterize this part of this island were filled with birds like Boreal Chickadee, Fox Sparrow, Pine Grosbeak, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and Blackpoll Warblers. City green spaces like Bidgood Park and Mundy Pond offered up Northern Waterthrush, Wilson's Warblers, Purple Finch and Cedar Waxwings among many others. Local ponds hosted a variety of waterfowl including American Black Ducks, Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, American Wigeon and two unexpected (for the season) Eurasian Wigeon. A long-staying Pink-footed Goose was a hands-down highlight – the rare visitor from Europe being a lifer for most participants. Even more exciting was the beautiful Black-tailed Godwit found foraging at a golf course – a very rare and sought-after shorebird from Europe. Cape Spear National Historic Site – the easternmost point of land in North America – was also fun with a very cooperative American Pipit, singing Savannah Sparrows and lots of passing seabirds. The lighthouse here dates back to 1836 and has been a key waypoint for travelers ever since. The fog sitting just offshore was a surprise blessing, as several pelagic species wandered closer to shore than they otherwise might – numerous Leach' Storm-petrel, four Manx Shearwater and two Sooty Shearwaters made for plenty of excitement amongst our crew. Sooty Shearwaters actually breed in the southern hemisphere and spend their "winter" in the food-rich waters off Newfoundland! Even a Minke Whale appeared briefly just off the rocks.



Boreal Chickadee © Jared Clarke



Yellow-bellied Flycatcher © Jared Clarke



Black-tailed Godwit © Jared Clarke

A boat tour of the incredible Witless Bay Ecological Reserve is always amazing, and this year was no exception. A beautiful day on the water, we experienced the spectacle of North America's largest Atlantic Puffin colony numbering more than 250,000 pairs!



Atlantic Puffins © Jared Clarke

Not to be outdone, hundreds of thousands of Common Murre were spotted on and around the islands. We also managed to pick out several much scarcer Thick-billed Murres nestled among the throngs. Black-legged Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Black Guillemots and some wandering Northern Gannets also joined in for the show. We even heard the ethereal songs of at least two Gray-cheeked Thrush ringing out from Gull Island – a locally endangered species that we often miss on the tour.



Common Murres © Adam Timpf



Common Murres, Thick-billed Murre and Black-legged Kittiwake © Jared Clarke

Heading south along the “Irish Loop”, we were awed as the landscape changed from rolling coastlines and lush forests to towering cliffs and eventually treeless barrens. A quick stop to view the southern islands of the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve, we spotted a dozen Northern Fulmar nesting on the craggy cliffs of Ship Island – a relatively rare breeder in Atlantic Canada – along with the abundant Puffins, Murres and Kittiwakes. A lone Great Cormorant stood out amongst the more abundant Double-crested Cormorants at the end of the island. A Barn Swallow at Witless Bay was a welcome surprise, as were two male Surf Scoters in nearby Mobile bay. Near La Manche Provincial Park we enjoyed a very cooperative Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, and heard our first Black-throated Green Warblers of the trip. A stop at Renews produced a locally rare Great Blue Heron foraging in the bay, along with a family of Northern Pintail and our first Belted Kingfisher of the week. In the estuary, we managed to pick out at least five Arctic Terns among the more widespread Common Terns at a mixed colony – all while enjoying a picnic lunch with a wonderful view.



Cape Race Road © Adam Timpf

The Avalon Peninsula's "eastern hyperoceanic barrens" are a unique and globally rare habitat, where the world's southernmost subarctic tundra meets the ocean – so we made sure to take time and explore it. At Cape Race, situated at Newfoundland's southeastern corner, we stood below one of the most important and iconic lighthouses in the North Atlantic to scan for seabirds. An American Pipit displayed overhead while two Common Loons joined several Common Murre, Razorbill and Black Guillemots in the waters below us. At the edge of the fog, we spotted at least three Leach's Storm-petrels – our second sighting in as many days of this often-missed seabird. The vast barrens at the southern tip of the peninsula proved cool but delightful with Horned Larks, American Pipit and plenty of Savannah Sparrows. We even managed to spot a Woodland Caribou foraging on the tundra – part of the world's southernmost herd. Overlooking the rugged cliffs and wild ocean at nearby St. Shott's, we found a lingering flock of ten Common Eiders along with dozens of Northern Gannets, Black-legged Kittiwakes and some surprise Manx and Sooty Shearwaters that coasted by offshore. Perhaps most exciting was a Parasitic Jaeger which we watched harassing kittiwakes in search of a stolen meal. We also found our first Short-tailed Swallowtail here – a beautiful but range-restricted butterfly that is near-endemic to Newfoundland. An unexpected Lesser Black-backed Gull was an added bonus as we enjoyed a picnic at St. Vincent's beach, as was a single Long-tailed Duck at nearby Point LaHaye. The drive to our evening destination at St. Bride's was interrupted by fun encounter with a family of curious Canada Jays, as well as a very unexpected American Kestrel at Branch – rare here in summer.



Short-tailed Swallowtail © Jared Clarke



Caribou © Jared Clarke



Canada Jays © Jared Clarke

One of the most anticipated days of any summer tour in Newfoundland is a visit to Cape St. Mary's. Known as one of the foggiest places on earth, we were fortunate that the fog cleared out just as we arrived and beautiful vistas awaited. A short hike over the tundra brought us great views of "bird rock" (a towering sea stack) and surrounding cliffs that are home to North America's third largest colony of Northern Gannets. Thousands of these majestic birds greeted our arrival and the close views amazed everyone, as they always do. Among the hundreds of Black-legged Kittiwake and Common Murre that lined the cliffs, we also spied several nesting Razorbill and Thick-billed Murre. On the rocks below, we found a lone Great Cormorant drying its wings – another summer specialty for this location. Savannah Sparrows flitted around the path, while Horned Lark were singing and advertising their territory alongside the interpretation centre. Also notable were several patches of Moss Campion, an alpine plant that makes its home on the oceanic edges of this windswept tundra.



Cape St. Mary's © Jared Clarke



Northern Gannets at Cape St. Mary's © Jared Clarke



Sunset at Placentia Bay © Jared Clarke

June 20-22: Terra Nova National Park & Trinity Bight

Exciting news broke as we were leaving the Avalon Peninsula and heading towards Terra Nova National Park – the very rare and equally famous STELLER'S SEA EAGLE had been sighted in Trinity Bay, just an hour or so from our destination!! With a combination of luck and local connections, Jared was able to pull some strings and arrange a last-minute boat tour to the area. Despite some winds and choppy seas, we headed out the bay with very high hopes … and were *not* disappointed. After a few short distractions with both Humpback and Minke Whales, we turned into a sheltered cove to find a large, beautiful iceberg waiting for us, glistening in the sun. Just moments later we spotted the unmistakable silhouette of the Steller's Sea Eagle, perched atop some trees at the bottom of the cove. We spent some time enjoying this incredibly rare and unexpected bird; awed by its size, elegance and massive bill. It eventually took flight, circling first around our boat, then the iceberg and eventually high up in the sky where it cavorted with two Bald Eagles - both of which looked surprisingly small next to this gargantuan visitor. What a bird!! What an experience!!



Steller's Sea Eagle in Newfoundland © Jared Clarke



Iceberg © Jared Clarke

The remainder of these two days were spent exploring Terra Nova – Canada's most easterly national park and a great example of Newfoundland's lush boreal forests and sheltered ocean inlets. Our mornings began with pre-breakfast birding adjacent to our lodge in Charlottetown, followed by hikes and explorations around the park itself. We checked out old growth forests, spruce and larch bogs, coastal estuaries and tranquil ponds. We encountered numerous new birds along the way including

Red-breasted Mergansers, Black-throated Green Warblers, Magnolia Warblers, eastern Palm Warblers, Olive-sided Flycatchers and Lincoln Sparrows among others. A Black-backed Woodpecker was heard calling as we soaked in the views from Blue Hill – the highest point in the park – though it never did show itself. We had an especially fun encounter with a Spruce Grouse on one trail, as it hung out in the middle of trail and posed for 10+ minutes, then eventually sauntered off into the forest. Leaving the park, we stopped to see our only Caspian Terns of the trip – at least ten hanging out at the nearby community of Traytown.



Blackpoll Warbler © Jared Clarke



Taking a picture of a Spruce Grouse © Jared Clarke



Spruce Grouse © Jared Clarke

Our last day in this region was spent in Grand Falls-Windsor, where we spent a morning exploring wetlands and the mixed forests of central Newfoundland on the beautiful Corduroy Brook Nature Trail. A family of Ring-necked Ducks were diving at the edges of a pond, while a wonderful variety of songbirds entertained us from the trails. We encountered our first Alder Flycatchers, watched as Swamp Sparrows peeped through the reeds, and even spotted a locally rare Polyphemous Moth fluttering over the boardwalk. A brilliant male Evening Grosbeak was an unexpected find, and eleven species of warblers included new-for-the-trip Ovenbirds and Tennessee Warblers.



A male Evening Grosbeak © Jared Clarke



Tennessee Warbler © Jared Clarke



Ovenbird © Jared Clarke

After lunch, we took in several views of the mighty Exploits River, which roars its way nearly 250km from central Newfoundland to Notre Dame Bay on the northeast coast. An afternoon visit to the Exploits Valley Salmonid Interpretations Centre was very enlightening as we learned about Atlantic Salmon, the wonderful work that has been done to protect and enhance their population in this large river system, and their incredible life cycle and migration. Sadly, that migration was late starting this spring and there no salmon present for us to see in person. Later that afternoon we pointed our bus west and headed off to our next destination at Gros Morne National Park.



Pitcher plant © Jared Clarke

June 23-25: Gros Morne National Park

Gros Morne National Park is considered one of the gems of Newfoundland, and rightly so. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the park is known around the globe for its amazing geology, stunning scenery and world-class hiking. We spent two full days soaking it all in – birds, wildlife, flowers and landscapes. Strolling trails in the northern half of the park, we spotted highlights such as Swainson's Thrush, Blue-headed Vireo, Mourning Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Pine Grosbeak and White-winged Crossbill. Beautiful wildflowers including dainty Dragonsmouth Orchids, Tall Northern Green Orchids and unassuming Water Avens captured our attention along the way. It was fun to watch Bank Swallows zipping in and out of their cliffside colony and over the roaring ocean at Parson's Pond. A boat tour of the renowned Western Brook Pond fjords was a relaxing and beautiful treat – the glacier-carved cliffs and towering mountains absolutely breathtaking. In addition to the scenery, we also spotted a large bull moose munching away on a beach below the cliffs, and our only Common Merganser of the week.



Lincoln's Sparrow © Jared Clarke



Western Brook Pond © Jared Clarke



Dragonsmouth Orchid © Jared Clarke

Southern portions of the park were equally amazing. Deer Arm, at the base of Gros Morne Mountain, offered up Swainson's Thrush, Mourning Warbler, Common Loons and a Bald Eagle being harried by several Common Terns - along with a world-class view. We also enjoyed great views of a locally uncommon Philadelphia Vireo here – a species often missed on the tour.



Gros Morne Mountain © Jared Clarke



Mourning Warbler © Jared Clarke

At nearby Mill Brook we watched both a Harbour Porpoise and a Harbour Seal just off shore in the otherwise tranquil waters. Our stop at the Lomond & Stuckless Pond trailhead proved interesting as we enjoyed yet another pair of curious Canada Jays and a much shier Olive-sided Flycatcher, along with many other birds. We even managed to find a patch of beautiful Yellow Ladyslippers to enjoy, along with numerous clumps of the much rarer Striped Coralroot orchid.



Yellow Ladyslipper © Jared Clarke



Striped Coralroot © Jared Clarke

We continued along beautiful Bonne Bay and visited the magnificent Tablelands – a massive chunk of the earth's mantle that juts out of the ground. These rocks are so full of heavy metals that little can grow here, and the red barren landscape stands in stark contrast to the forested ridges of the Long Range Mountains that surround it. Geological formations like this can only be glimpsed at a few places on earth. While our hike through the Tablelands was nearly devoid of animal life, plenty of

interesting plant species such as Purple Pitcher Plant (Newfoundland & Labrador's provincial flower), Common Butterwort and Round-leaf Sundew (all carnivorous!) and hardy alpine shrubs dotted the landscape. What an amazing place to experience! Our tour concluded in Deer Lake, where we reminisced and shared our favourite memories over dinner before heading our separate ways. What a fantastic trip, with a wonderful group of people!



Cape St. Mary's

[Grand Newfoundland 2023 eBird Checklist]