Eagle-Eye Tours



Grand Newfoundland Trip Report (Jun 17 - 28, 2023)

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Guides: James Lees & Tim Lucas Tour: Grand Newfoundland Birdwatching

June 17: Arrive in St. John's

We all arrived safely in St. John's and had a round of introductions in the lobby of our hotel. After handshakes and hellos, we made a short walk downtown for dinner at the Yellowbelly Brewery, one of the oldest buildings in downtown St. Johns, and one of only a few that survived the fire of 1892! After dinner, it was time to rest for what was sure to be a big 10 days ahead of us!

June 18: St. Johns - Bay Bulls

On the morning of our first full day we woke to fog, a theme fitting for the foggiest June in recent history! After breakfast at the hotel, we made our way south to get our first taste of birds in Newfoundland. Fox Sparrows, Northern Waterthrush and Purple Finch serenaded us from the fog while we birded back roads around Goulds. A cooperative Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and White-throated Sparrows popped up from the Balsam Fir for everyone to get great looks at. Some of the group even had brief views of a beautiful male Pine Grosbeak! After warming up with hot drinks at Tim Horton's we made our way to Bidgood park in Goulds, where we watched Wilson's Snipe in the scope, heard our only American Bittern, and even caught up with a male Bobolink, a rare bird in Newfoundland! After Bidgood park, we headed for an authentic seafood lunch in Bay Bulls. During lunch, we watched excitedly as the fog began to clear just in time for our boat trip out of the harbour with O'brien's Whale and Bird Tours! The boat made its way out of the bay, where Black Guillemot dotted the water around us, and continued on to float directly alongside Gull and Green Island. Our group was treated to thousands of nesting Atlantic Puffin, Common and Thick-billed Murre, Razorbill, and Black-legged Kittiwakes swirling the boat and stacked on the cliffs! We were stunned when an island full of puffins and murre lifted off and began circling in response to an opportunistic

Bald Eagle that patrolled Green Island. We felt as if we were in the middle of a National Geographic film! On our way back in we spotted a friendly Minke Whale that continued to surface around the boat! This is rare for Minke Whale, a species that tends to prefer its solitude.



The impressive Murre colonies of Witless Bay Photo: James Lees

After saying goodbye to our boat crew, we headed back to St. John's, where we all explored the historical city individually.

June 19: Cape Spear - Petty Harbour - St. John's

This morning we decided to let the fog clear and opted for a relaxed breakfast in the hotel. We were still on the road by 8:15 am. We made a beeline to Cape Spear, a must-see destination around St. John's and the easternmost point of land in North America. While it seemed foggy from St. John's, the conditions at Cape Spear were perfect for watching the sea and exploring this unique piece of coastline. While waiting for seabirds takes patience, we were rewarded with brief views of Leach's Storm Petrel and Manx Shearwater, species that can be difficult to see from land! We also scored great views of the American Pipits that breed there as they displayed over the cliffs in front of us. After Cape Spear, we headed south to tour Petty Harbor, a postcard worthy piece of the Avalon Peninsula, before sitting down for lunch in the town of Goulds. After refueling, we searched for some of the rare birds that have been hanging around St. John's. Our first stop was to look for the Black-tailed Godwit that has been hanging around at the Baly Haly Country Club. While we missed the Godwit, we did score some other species that can be difficult to find: Eurasian Wigeon, American Wigeon, and a young Iceland Gull.



Two Eurasian and one American Wigeon at Baly Haly Country Club Photo: James Lees

We then made a short drive across town to the foggy but scenic Signal Hill, where the group learned about its storied military history, and the place that has played a key role in the development of radio communication in Canada and the World. We made our way back for dinner at the Celtic Hearth, another historic building in downtown St. John's.

June 20: St. John's - Ferryland - Trepassey

After a couple of great days in St. John's, we began to journey on towards the southern edge of the Avalon, Trepassey. On the way we made sure to stop at a few worthwhile places that produced some new species and new scenery. A short hike towards the suspension bridge at La Manche gave us great views of a Black-throated Green Warbler and Boreal Chickadees. The real highlight of the day came at an unexpected time. When we stopped for lunch at The Million Dollar View Restaurant in Ferryland, we noticed a few Humpback Whales surfacing at a distance. When we began to look closer, we were treated to a spectacle of over 300 Humpbacks migrating North as far as the eye could see! We could not have timed it better! Still buzzing about what we had just seen, we checked out the archeological dig in Ferryland, where we scored our first Arctic Tern and a few Spotted Sandpipers.



We had beautiful views of this male Black-throated Green Warbler at La Manche. Photo: James Lees

As we continued south, Spruce and Fir trees became shorter and gave way to the unique tundra-like Barrens that defines the southern Avalon peninsula. In this transition, we spotted a cow and a calf moose out in the open that allowed all in the group great views. Just down the road, we stopped for a Woodland Caribou that was feeding in the open barrens, our first for the trip! After a brief stop at the Edge of the Avalon Interpretive Centre, we checked the pebble beach at Portugal Cove south and Biscay Bay, where we spotted a Lesser black-backed Gull, our first Common Eider, and White-winged Scoters. After dinner in Trepassey, those that were still keen drove down the Lower Trepassey Spit for some beautiful sunset photos. At dinner, we caught wind of some exciting, breaking news: the Steller's Sea Eagle, a now-famous Mega-rarity that has been lost in North America over the last year, was refound near Trinity! So we quickly started making plans for a chase on Friday.

June 21: Cape Pine - St. Vincent's - St. Brides

After breakfast, we left Trepassey and drove a short distance to Cape Pine. Along the way, we were sure to look for Willow Ptarmigan and other barren-habitat specialties. After hard work scanning, Van #2 spotted a male right beside the road and had great photo opportunities! After it flushed, those willing to make the walk searched and eventually found this bird, and even heard it call!! We even found 4 more Woodland Caribou, including a calf! Leaving the Ptarmigan and Caribou, we were treated to views of Horned Larks and some Short-tailed Swallowtails at the Cape Pine Lighthouse. By now, it was time to depart and work our way Northwest towards our accommodations for that night.



The Humpback Whales put on a great display for us at St. Vincent's Photo: James Lees

We stopped at St. Vincent's Beach on a hunch that there may be whales close to the beach. Sure enough, while eating our lunch we were treated to a spectacle of Humpback Whales! This time, we watched a small group put on a show at point blank range, right beside the beach! These whales breached, rolled around in shallow water, and slapped their tails for photos and video. Although it was tough to leave such a sight, we eventually continued on to check in at our accommodation in the picturesque town of St. Brides.

June 22: Cape St. Mary's - Placentia - Charlottetown

We awoke to sunshine! This was the first full day of sun that we have had, and it couldn't have come with better timing! Today was a big day. We left St. Brides early for a special breakfast with the folks at Da Birds Eye restaurant, where we experienced the hospitality that Newfoundland is known for. After breakfast we headed straight for Cape St. Mary's where we made a long walk out to view the Nesting Seabird Colony. 10's of thousands of Gannets, Murres and Kittiwakes covered the cliffs. The west winds had pushed Capelin, the predominant food source for the seabirds here, further out to sea, so most of the colony was present while we were there! This was the best day of the year for seabirds and visibility at Cape St. Mary's! Point blank views of Common Murre and Razorbill occupied the photographers in the group for over an hour, while Gannets swirling just feet away kept shutters snapping. Finally, we had to move on, and headed for lunch at Da Birds Eye where we enjoyed the food and the company.



The Gannets really stole the show at Cape St. Mary's Photo: James Lees

We began towards Charlottetown, on the edge of Terra Nova National Park, but not before a brief visit to Castle Hill in Placentia. Those willing to make the hike to the top were treated to stunning views of the harbour and town of Placentia, while standing in the footsteps of those long gone. We arrived in time for dinner at Clode Sound Motel, where we would spend the next two nights.

June 23: Terra Nova National Park - Trinity Bay

This morning, we woke with excitement and anticipation. Those that opted for an early morning walk spent time on the trails around Sandy Pond in Terra Nova. Where they had views of several Wilson's Warblers and some really close Black and White Warblers. Further along the trail an Olive-sided Flycatcher could be heard singing and with some determination we tracked it down. However a family group of Canada Jay's tracked us down and came in incredibly close with their all dark youngsters. While our plan was to spend the whole day within Terra Nova National park, we decided, instead, to make the hour drive to the coastal town of Trinity for a Zodiac Ride to try for the Steller's Sea Eagle. Luckily, the weather could not have been better! On our way out, a boat coming back excitedly told us that they had found the eagle, so we made a beeline for the spot. After a few moments of holding our breath, we turned the corner, THERE IT WAS! Sitting on a large rock outcropping! Despite our excitement, the water at this spot was rough so photography was tricky. But, as if the bird could read our minds, it lifted its enormous body up and flew further into Spaniards Cove where the water was calm and we were able to enjoy this mega rarity for half-hour or so. While we watched, our only Surf and Black Scoters buzzed past the stern of the boat and gave us an opportunity for photos. On our way back, we stopped by for awesome views of a huge iceberg, iceberg popsicles, and a few friendly Minke Whales!



The rarest bird in Canada sitting up on some of the most dramatic cliffs on the island, The Steller's Sea Eagle was a big highlight of the tour Photo: James Lees

After high fives all around, we said goodbye to Sea of Whales Adventures, ate our packed lunch at the Dock Marina and spent a couple of hours exploring the scenic town of Trinity; a town that was once in the running for the capital of Newfoundland! Satisfied after a full day, we then headed back to the hotel in Charlottetown for dinner and a good night's rest.

June 24: Terra Nova National Park - Gander - Grand Falls



One of the icebergs we saw whilst out looking at the sea eagle Photo: James Lees

Still in disbelief from the previous day, we had an amazing breakfast at the hotel, before driving over to Louil Hill Trail. A hike here provided great views of Mourning Warbler and Fox Sparrow, along with unique hardwood habitat that is difficult to find in Terra Nova. We then made our way to the Terra Nova Visitor's Centre where we had lunch, explored the exhibits there, and picked up a pair of Red-breasted Merganser. After lunch, we stopped at Cull's Harbour to pick up 18 Caspian Terns and a Red-eyed Vireo before continuing towards the Gander airport. In addition to its strategic military significance since the second world war, this site has become renowned for its connection to "come from away" story about passenger planes that landed in Gander during 911. Across from the airport, we hiked another unique hardwood plot, where we managed to see Alder Flycatcher and Evening Grosbeak, two new species for us! Finally we continued on our way to Grand Falls to spend the night. In Grand Falls, some of us attended a traditional "Mug up", where we were treated to some Newfoundland music, coffee, tea, pastries, and a lesson in local history!

June 25: Grand Falls - Rocky Harbour

After mostly avoiding rain for the entire trip, today it finally caught up with us. Instead of hiking, we took the opportunity to check out the Salmon Interpretation Centre in Grand Falls, and stop for a tasty brunch at the Dragonfly Café. After crêpes and coffee, we drove through the rain to Rocky Harbour. As we approached Rocky Harbour, the rain began to let up, so we made a stop to take in the scenery, and ended up spotting a suite of new species for us. A Cape May Warbler, another Pine Grosbeak, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Ovenbird, and Evening Grosbeak all provide great views. We then made our way for dinner at Rocky Harbour where some had in season Lobster and all were able to take in one of the most scenic towns on the West Coast of the Island. As the sun set, we headed back through colourful houses and narrow streets to our hotel to rest up before exploring Gros Morne the next day.



Pine Grosbeaks were always a group favorite whenever we encountered them Photo: James Lees

June 26: Gros Morne National Park

Our first full day in Gros Morne National Park started with a drive along the coastline to look for

ducks and shorebirds. It wasn't long before we spotted a huge target for us here: 3 male Harlequin Ducks! This is a species that can be difficult to find! We also spotted more Iceland Gulls, a Glaucous Gull, Green-winged Teal, and Least Sandpiper! In the afternoon, most of the group decided to go on a beautiful, one of a kind boat ride through Western Brook Pond, some of the oldest rock in the world! On the pond, we picked up Common Goldeneye, but were most enthralled with the scenery and live music on the top deck! Those that decided not to go on the boat were equally successful, stopping at several spots along the coastline to scan for ducks and gulls. A female Common Eider feeding close inshore with her five small youngsters was very welcome. Stopping for a picnic lunch next to male Pine Grosbeak that spent half an hour preening and sunning himself after bathing. Further up the coast a small colony of Bank swallows was observed and the first Lesser Scaups of the trip.



Common Eider with her young was a real treat to see Photo: James Lees

We made our way back to Rocky Harbour for dinner where we took advantage of fresh lobster and homemade pies!

June 27 - Gros Morne National Park

Our final day in Gros Morne turned out to be very productive. We headed South-West to explore the Tablelands and made a few stops on the way. At the tablelands, pitcher plants provided great photo opportunities. A brief stop at the Gros Morne Visitor's Centre provided lots of exhibits to explore and learn about local history and culture. We then had lunch in Woody Point where the scenery and close flyby Lesser black-backed Gull and Iceland Gull provided some extra entertainment. Some of us even took advantage of the dance floor and two stepped to the music! After lunch, a final walk on the Lamond River Trail turned out to be one of our most productive walks yet! Olive-sided Flycatcher, Canada Jay, Tennessee Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler, Philadelphia Vireo and White-winged Crossbill topped the list. We even spent 20 minutes with an extremely obliging pair of Evening Grosbeaks that allowed for full frame photos of this stunning species! After a successful day in Gros Morne, we made our way to Deer Lake, where we shared our final meal together before saying a tough goodbye.



This stunning male Evening Grosbeak was a perfect bird to end our successful trip on! Photo: James Lees

Grand Newfoundland 2023 species list (eBird)