



High Arctic & Northwest Territories 2022 Trip Report

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High Arctic & Northwest Territories 2022 Trip Report (July 4-14, 2022)

Leaders: Ken Wright & James Lees

July 4, 2022 Everyone converged at the Best Western in Leduc after their day of air travel. We settled into our rooms and all met up for dinner at the hotel pub and planned our first exciting day of action-packed birding in the Edmonton area. **July 5, 2022 (James)** We all met at 7am for a fine breakfast in the hotel to set us up for the morning's activities. Unfortunately for our first full morning it was raining quiet heavily. But we continued with our plan and headed out with our waterproof clothing. Our first stop was Elk Island National Park where despite the rain we got our first views of exciting but common birds for the area like Franklin's Gulls, Black Terns and displaying Wilson's Snipes. Not just birds, but some seriously big and fantastic mammals too. We were treated to wonderfully close views of several Plains Bisons that continued to feed in the wet pastures. We also got good looks at a LeConte's Sparrow and many Clay-coloured Saprrows. We decided not to do several of the planned hikes into the forest as the rain was now even heavier. Luckily for a short time, the rain subsided a little, so we took a walk around the boardwalk Astotin Lake. Here we saw many beautiful Red-necked Grebes including one sat very close on a nest. This area also held both Yellow and Yellow-rumped Warblers as wells as many Purple Martins. However, the rain got very heavy once again, so we headed back to the vans to dry off and to go for a warm drink.



Plains Bison

We headed south-east and the weather began to clear up a bit. We made a few stops on the way to look at flocks of hundreds of beautiful Franklin's Gulls feeding over the canola fields on the way. Next was our picnic lunch stop at a very active slough. Here we were surrounded by lots of Lesser Yellowlegs, Wilson's Phalaropes, Willets, Black-necked Stilts and even a Marbled Godwit. Wildfowl were here in good numbers too with Northern Pintails, Northern Shovelers and Blue-winged Teal whilst noisy Black-billed Magpies called from the bushes. Next stop was Miquelon Lake Provincial Park and it was now even sunny! Here we had some nice looks at American White Pelicans, Californian Gulls and four species of grebes including a distant flock of Western Grebes. Next on the tour was another roadside wetland where we were really treated with a large nesting colony of Eared Grebes. Not only were they in their finest summer dress but also very noisy and busy nest building - it was great fun to watch. Here we also had Northern Harrier, Yellow-headed Blackbirds and great looks at an American Bittern. But we saved the best for last as we stopped at a quality grassland area and the weather had changed to warm sun and blue skies. No sooner had we stepped out of the vans than we were hearing the song of a very scarce bird - the Sprague's Pipit. It took us a while, but we eventually pinned the pipit down and had nice views of it doing song flights. This area also gave us looks at Western Meadowlark and lots of Savannah and LeConte's Sparrows. Several Eastern Kingbirds darted around and we had our first view of a Swainson's Hawk. Just before we got back on the bus, several flocks of White-faced Ibis's flew past which made for a nice end to the day.

July 6, 2022 (Ken) This morning we rose early to catch a shuttle to the Edmonton Airport for our first flight north to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. This was a relatively short flight and fortunately, we didn't experience any of the lost baggage issues that have plagued recent travel. In contrast to Edmonton, Yellowknife was hot, sunny and smoky from forest fires. After a short shuttle to the Chateau Nova Hotel (our base camp for the next three days) and check-in, we headed across the street to Frame Lake which is known to support a multitude of boreal species. Here we saw several attractive black-headed Bonaparte's Gulls, one of which was perching on top of a spruce tree! Several Orange-crowned Warblers, including some fledglings, and some Lincoln's Sparrows were also encountered. Tennessee Warblers were heard giving their distinct song as well. It was a great to see both Common & Arctic terns and a large Herring Gull and several Short-billed Gulls (formerly Mew Gull) were roosting on a rocky islet.



Bonaparte's Gull © Ken Wright

We headed into town for a tasty lunch at the Black Knight Pub, a favourite of the locals. Following lunch we had a bit of down time and then met at the hotel lobby for a walk around Niven Lake which conveniently abuts the end of the hotel parking lot! This spot proved to be very productive with twenty-five species and many great looks at various waterfowl and their broods including a Canvasback with sixteen tiny ducklings in tow. Lesser Scaup were in abundance as were American Wigeon. It was a great seeing a female Bufflehead with several tiny ducklings. Like the waterfowl, both Red-necked and Horned grebes also had small chicks with their peculiar head-stripe patterning. The latter species was particularly tame, allowing us to approach within a few metres on a bridge and wins the contest for the most photographable grebe on the tour! But the star of the show was a Sora that James somehow managed to lure out of the dense emergent vegetation with a short call-playback on his cell phone. This colourful rail posed nicely for the photographers in the group. And then it started walking out in the open down the same trail we were on! Several Swamp Sparrows were heard singing in the lakeshore willow habitat. Another fantastic outing in Yellowknife. A tasty dinner was enjoyed at the hotel restaurant before retiring for the evening.



Sora Rail

July 7, 2022 (James) This morning we had a boat tour of Yellowknife Bay and up the lower portion of Yellowknife River. After breakfast we headed down to the quayside where we got our life jackets and boarded two small boats whilst Cliff Swallows flew overhead. It was a glorious sunny day and flat calm waters made it a great day for a boat trip. The Great Slave Lake is the deepest in Canada, so it was great to be out on it. The first bird we encountered was a singing Northern Waterthrush, whilst a noisy Bonaparte's Gull sat on guard in pines above their well camouflaged young on the rocks below. We headed far out into the bay where several islands were covered in breeding gulls. Most were Ring-billed but among them smaller numbers of Herring and California were also nesting.



Eagle-Eye Tours group enjoying the boat tour of Yellowknife Bay © James Lees

Both Common and Arctic Terns were observed flying around the bay and we spotted pairs of Common and Pacific Loons too. Lots of Red-breasted Mergansers could be found around the bay but the wildfowl highlight had to go to some flocks of Surf Scoters. These birds really were magnificent up close with the white, yellow and red bills of the males. We stopped to have some fine local tea and cake whilst both Orange-crowned and Tennessee Warblers were singing away behind us and lots of Red-necked Grebes close by. The return journey allowed us to get nice looks at several Bald Eagles, a sharp-shinned Hawk and a Belted Kingfisher. After a fine lunch we went to a small lake not far from town to look for a pair of breeding Red-throated Loons. Our timing could not have been more perfect as the male headed out to fish on bigger lakes nearby, and we got to see the female swimming with one small fluffy grey juvenile. The adults were very beautiful indeed, of course the red throat but especially the pattern on the back of the neck. Then the male returned with a rather large fish, it soon became apparent that it was far too big for the juvenile to take. We watched for some time as he swam around trying to off load his monster catch, but eventually he ended up eating it himself! After dinner some chose to bird around the ponds close to the hotel. Here there was plenty of breeding wildfowl with young to observe as well as Short-billed Gulls and Horned Grebes up close. **July 8, 2022 (Ken)** We started our third and final day in the Yellowknife area driving out the Ingraham Trail, the main road heading north. This frost-heaved ribbon of asphalt passes several lakes and wetlands which are remarkably productive bird-wise. We made a brief stop near the Yellowknife River Bridge where we had an Eastern Phoebe the day before on our boat tour. The phoebe remained inconspicuous but came across a female Canvasback with seven blond ducklings at close range in a roadside pond. This was an unbeatable view of this lovely waterfowl. Further down the Ingraham Trail we stopped at lake with an extensive marsh. Here we heard a Sora and a Wilson's Snipe and managed a fleeting distant view of a Lesser Yellowlegs on the far side of the lake. James with his eagle-acuity spotted a couple of a loons in flight well over a mile away but were too distant to definitely identify. Other waterfowl tallied: American Wigeon, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup.



Lesser Yellowlegs © Ken Wright

Continuing down the road we stopped at Prosperous Lake where a variety of gulls and terns could be seen. Common and Arctic terns co-occur in this region, challenging our ID's of these superficially

similar species. Three adult Bald Eagles were a treat — it should be noted that raptors have been quite scarce thus far in Yellowknife. Just down the road we saw an American Kestrel in flight, so it seems our raptor karma has improved. The next lake had a large beaver lodge and we spotted some loons! A gorgeous pair of silver-naped Pacific Loons with a small chick. We found a place to pull-out and park and walked down a little side road towards the lake for a closer view of the loons. Here we had great scope views of the loons and their adorable down-covered chick. We also had a very nice close-up visit by a Lesser Yellowlegs that was very intent on perching on the top of a nearby tamarack. It is definitely strange seeing waders balancing on top of trees here in their boreal breeding domain! Also of note was a family of Bonaparte's Gulls with a cryptically-plumaged chick on sitting on a log. Further on we stopped at Cameron Falls at Hidden Lake Territorial Park. Some of us hiked 1.2 km on the trail which heads up a rocky and sparsely vegetated hill before descending to the said falls, while others did a more leisurely walk through the forest near the parking area. Those that hiked to the falls were rewarded by a spectacular female Spruce Grouse with a four chicks! We also had a family group of ever-inquisitive Canada Jays make an appearance. The attractive waterfall produced a female Common Merganser and a Belted Kingfisher. We headed back to the parking area for a picnic lunch where Common Ravens and a Merlin made an appearance. After lunch we headed further up the Ingraham Trail to pullout before the road crosses the river. This is where the road switches to gravel and is our turnaround point. We did a short walk through the pine forest abutting the river. Several waterbirds were present: a single female Bufflehead, three more Common Mergansers and another Belted Kingfisher. We also had a couple more Canada Jays, some Cliff Swallows and a 'Slate-coloured' Dark-eyed Junco that was carrying insect larvae. Yellow-rumped (Myrtle's) Warblers were quite numerous at this site. The heat of the afternoon was quite intense at this point and thunder clouds were developing so we headed back to Yellowknife a little down time before dinner at Bullock's Bistro.



Spruce Grouse



Cameron Falls © Ken Wright



Dorcas Copper (Tharsalea dorcias) © Ken Wright

July 9, 2022 (James) Today we began our journey to the high arctic! After breakfast at the hotel, we headed for Yellowknife airport. Unfortunately, there were some issues with our aircraft, and it took a couple of hours to resolve. But better late than never and we boarded the unique combi 737 which was half passenger and half cargo. To get to Cambridge Bay the flight would make a short stop at Kugluktuk after an hour's flight from Yellowknife. Here we were able to get out to stretch our

legs for about twenty minutes. This gave us a small opportunity to see our first Snow Buntings and Common Redpolls of the tour. Soon we were hammering down the gravel runway and heading towards Victoria Island. Those with a window seat would now start to see the vast amount of still frozen water between the mainland and the arctic islands. After another hour flight and a tasty snack, we began to descend and get our first views of the vast and beautiful arctic tundra.



Canadian North



Showy Male Snow Bunting © Ken Wright

No sooner had we collected our bags and got in our new vans than we were already stopping to see some great Arctic nature. Within a few minutes from the airport, we stopped to look at the bay and some pools just before the town. First up were about 200 eiders sitting on the ice edge - about 25% of these were fabulous King Eiders. Not that the Common Eiders weren't also beautiful, but the male King Eiders really are showstoppers and one of those arctic dream birds. These beautiful arctic ducks were nearly all males as the more camouflaged brown female were incubating nests on land. Also here were many Cackling Geese which is the most common goose on the tundra. These very small geese held amongst them a couple of Brant Geese and several Greater White-fronted Geese.



Birding on tundra © James Lees

Some small pools here also held our first breeding shorebirds in the Arctic. Several Semipalmated Sandpipers fed around the edges, often chasing each other around and offering several beautiful display flights. We also had Semipalmated Plover and lovely looks at an American Pipit. After the initial excitement of arctic birding, we headed to our accommodation to check in. Once we had settled and had a delicious dinner, we headed out for our first evening. Perhaps not the most idyllic spot but the road to the town dump offered some wonderful birding opportunities. One small lake had 22 Red-necked Phalaropes in their most splendid breeding plumage, and as always, they were busily spinning around feeding with such energy. Another treat was a trio of elegant Stilt Sandpipers, one even delighted us with its wonderful yet bizarre song and display. Further up the road we got familiar with many Glaucous Gulls that would be the most commonly seen gull on the island. But the Sabine's Gulls that were also there definitely got a different reaction from us. These tiny and dainty gulls really are a treat to see especially sporting their dark gray hood and yellow-tipped bill.



A spectacular Sabine's Gull foraging in a stream near Mount Pelly © Ken Wright

We continued further away from the town and into the tundra that was wonderfully carpeted in wild flowers at this time of year. Lapland Longspurs were everywhere, constantly flying up and landing on rocks close to the roadside. These gorgeous birds would become very familiar to us and were by far the most common songbird on the island. We ended the evening watching a trio of Long-tailed Jaegers hunting across the tundra with a distant Arctic Fox below them. As we returned home for the night, we realized there is no night here; as the sun never sets **July 10, 2022 (Ken)** We lucked into another sunny day in the Arctic hamlet of Cambridge Bay. This morning we headed out relatively early for a drive on the Dew Line Road, one of three drive-able roads leading out of town. A good number of Cackling Geese including one yellow gosling were on the big lake at the start of the road. James later spotted a Greater White-fronted Goose on a nest with the mate sitting in close proximity. Several female King Eiders and a Common Eider were seen flying around small lakes. We stopped for a light picnic breakfast to tide us over until our brunch at the Qillaq Cafe. The road passed several lakes and then headed into some upland tundra habitat where we spotted our first American Golden-Plover. We walked off the road here to get better looks at the plover and encountered a Horned Lark flightless chick that looked more like tundra than a bird! In the distance we could hear the bizarre “xxree-xxree-xxree-xxree-ee-haw” song of a Stilt Sandpiper. Another example of how shorebirds diverge from expectation in their behaviour on the breeding grounds.



What looks like a rock but isn't a rock? Horned Lark chick © Ken Wright

We climbed back in the vans and proceeded slowly down the rutted single-lane road and soon found our first Parasitic Jaegers! Once again we were treated to fabulous views of what turned out to be very obliging jaegers. They landed on the tundra <75 metres away and were seemingly more interested in each other than scope-wielding birders emerging out of vans. After digesting some great looks at these tundra predators, we carried onwards. Those cute and diminutive Semipalmated Sandpipers could be heard at most stops giving their diagnostic chattering song—these were by far the most abundant shorebird. Eventually we got to a spot where we could view a big lake that still had a large pan of ice. With the aid of our spotting scopes we could make out good numbers of Sabine's Gulls, Arctic Terns, Glaucous Gulls and waterfowl. We turned around here so we could make it back for our brunch at the Qillaq Cafe.



Parasitic Jaeger patrolling the tundra © Ken Wright

Following brunch we made a brief stop at the Cambridge Bay Dump & Sewage Pond. Here we had a couple of Northern Pintails which have been surprisingly scarce thus far. Several gorgeous Long-tailed Ducks were loafing on the pond, while many Red-necked Phalaropes were gorging themselves on the abundant arthropods. We had excellent close-up views and photo opportunities of these colourful shorebirds. We also heard a White-crowned Sparrow singing—a rather scarce passerine in the region. We headed back to the Green Row for some rest and relaxation before our afternoon activity. By mid-afternoon we were back in the vans and driving north up the Mount Pelly access road. This is perhaps the most popular road leading out of Cambridge Bay and has a collection of small cabins and fishing camps along the river. We spotted good numbers of Greater White-fronted Geese, Cackling Geese, Tundra Swans and both King and Common eiders using the ponds adjacent to the road. We had fabulous views of a group of three Long-tailed Jaegers, one of which decided to pose on a large rock for photos very close to the road. We stopped at a wetland with a known Red Phalarope nest discovered by the previous Eagle-eye Tour group. Initially all we saw were a few Red-necked Phalaropes, but with patience and a good tolerance of mosquitoes we were rewarded with great looks at the male Red Phalarope returning to its nest! We piled back in the vans and continued along the undulating road towards Mount Pelly. At 200 m (660 ft), Mount Pelly is the tallest landform in the area and for much of southern Victoria Island for that matter. In a wetland at the foot of the mountain, we found our first Black-bellied Plover and had great looks from the vans before heading up to the parking area for a bathroom break and leg stretch. We gawked at the rolling tundra and extensive lakes that we traversed on our drive before heading back. We had one more treat on the way back—a close-up view of a Sabine's Gull feeding on stickleback in a stream right beside the road. What a spectacular gull that is rarely appreciated from such close proximity! And our gull karma continued with a sighting of a Thayer's (Iceland) Gull in flight near town. Another one or possibly the same individual was seen by some of us in town after dinner. **July 11, 2022 (James)** Whilst waiting to leave for the day we were as always surrounded by Snow Buntings either busy feeding young or singing for a second breeding attempt. During the summer, Snow Buntings are nothing but black and white, very striking against the dusty town roads. Today we headed west and along the coast and were soon stopping to look at Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers both of which gave us amazing views. But that was soon eclipsed by a beautiful American Golden-

Plover that was incubating a nest barely ten feet from the roadside. At last, we reached some open sea water, where we were hoping to find some different loon species. The small stretch of water between the land and the vast sea ice did indeed hold several loons. In fact, there were three species: Red-throated, Pacific and our most wanted - the Yellow-billed Loon! The Yellow-billed Loon was a splendid adult sporting a vast array of white spots and the characteristic large yellow bill. Unfortunately it became apparent as we watched this splendid bird through the scopes that it was caught in a fishing net. We went down for a closer look and this confirmed this bird was entangled and would certainly die if left. So both guides with the help of Tim went out and rescued the loon. It was quickly caught and extracted from the net and given a quick health check before being released back into the open water. On release the Loon let out a loud call as if to say thank you. Unfortunately at this time of the year there is very little open water and both man and nature come into conflict trying to catch the same prey. After this encounter and a wonderful morning birding from the road, we stopped for a very picturesque picnic lunch where we had tundra to our right and the Northwest Passage to our left. After lunch we headed out for an afternoon tundra walk. It was great to get out there on foot and see so many beautiful flowers and even a few nice arctic butterflies. We walked on top of a ridge and had an amazing view stretching far across the tundra to the north. From here we could see several pairs of Greater White-fronted Geese with young and a pair of Sandhill Cranes with young too! The walk back down produced another couple of American Golden-Plovers. But the most exciting discovery was a pair of Baird's Sandpipers sitting close to the vans. The male was sitting on top of small rocks calling frequently, followed by the most wonderful display flight where he towered up high in the sky singing away before plummeting back down like a rocket. We returned for another fine dinner in town happy with the day's birding so far. After dinner we headed out again, this time to the western side of the bay. Here we were treated to a flock of splendid male King Eiders feeding close to shore. Also here were a few Common Eiders and Pacific Loons. However, the highlight of the evening was a couple of massive Arctic Hares feeding on wildflowers amongst the rocks. Despite their size, when feeding they blended in well with the rocks, but once they stood up, their large legs, ears and huge tail gave them away. After photographing the midnight sun it was finally time to head back for some rest.



Eagle-Eye Tours birding group

July 12, 2022 (Ken) For our penultimate day on the tundra we headed back out the DEW Line Road fairly early. We saw many of the species we had previously but had some nice additions. We found a pair of Baird's Sandpipers with two chicks and had nice scope views. A large group of Cackling and Greater White-fronted geese on a large lake contained two white birds—our first and

only Snow Geese! This aggregation is probably non and failed breeders that are getting ready for their annual flight feather moult which renders them flightless for a three-week period. They typically form large groups during this period for safety from predators. We came across a small pond with a lovely Red-necked Phalarope and then a Red Phalarope appeared right beside us! But this phalarope was not alone, it had three recently hatched but very precocial chicks that swan into view. The adult climbed onto a rock and the chicks followed and snuggled up and were brooded by the male. This was an amazing behaviour to observe! Shortly after we saw a Rough-legged Hawk flying over a distant ridge, our first and only raptor on the tundra. We found another pair of Sandhill Cranes with two rufous-coloured colts in tow. Another great outing on the tundra. We headed back to town for a hearty lunch and enjoyed some down time for the afternoon.



Red Phalarope brooding chicks © Ken Wright

After dinner some of us headed out on the Town Water Road. On a small lake to the north we spotted a pair of magnificent Yellow-billed Loons! They were too far for decent photos so we decided to do a tundra trudge. This proved to be very rewarding and worthwhile and we even managed to keep our feet dry! The loons were very cooperative and remained on the lake for great views and photos. The mosquitoes were thick but it didn't matter because we were having the time of our lives absorbing all the life on the tundra. Several Sabine's Gulls flew overhead. Another Red Phalarope made a brief appearance. A large flock of female King Eiders with some Commons mixed in and a pair of regal Tundra Swans were gathered on a smaller lake. Several American Golden-Plovers were heard calling and we even found a family group of Stilt Sandpipers. The tundra is pure magic! We even did a short drive towards the airport to photograph the midnight sun and some Arctic Hares before calling it a night.



Midnight sun over the tundra ponds © Ken Wright



Arctic Hare

July 13, 2022 All too soon the last morning on the tundra had arrived. After breakfast we went birding for a couple of hours just outside the town on the water road. It would have been hard to plan a better session and we got to see some really high-quality arctic species. Sabine's Gulls, Arctic Terns, Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers, Tundra Swans, and many shorebirds but best of all three Yellow-billed Loons. Ken being a biologist and loon expert was able to tell us all so many interesting

facts about the loons. These were our best and closest looks at these splendid loons, and at one point one flew past us super close, giving us the most amazing views. That really was the perfect way to end the tour, so we headed back for lunch and to pack our luggage.

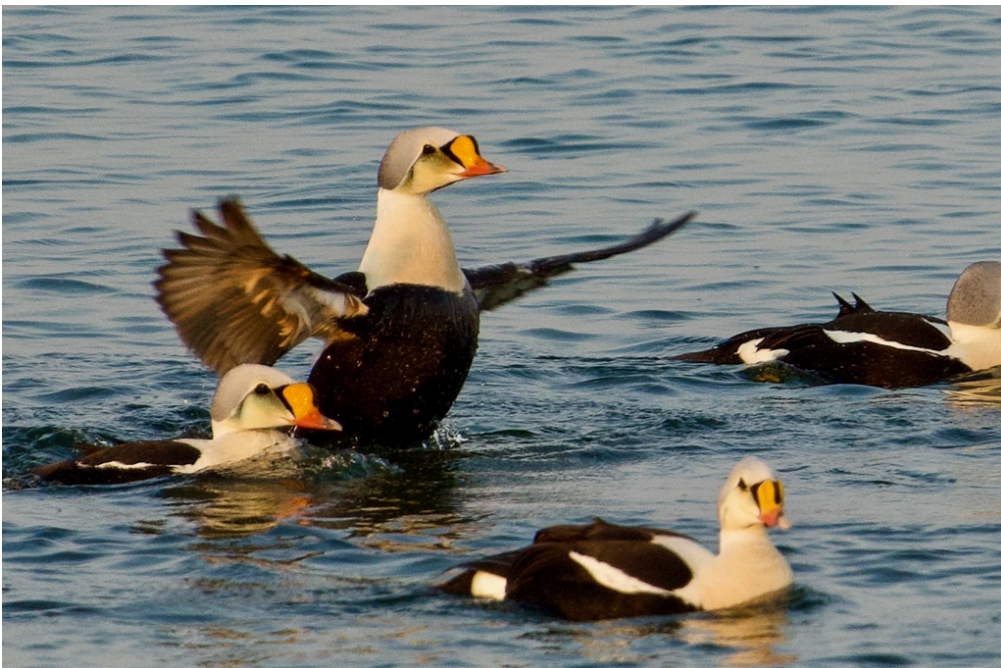


Yellow-billed Loon © Ken Wright

Check in at Cambridge Bay Airport was probably the quickest and least problematic of any airport in the world. Our afternoon flight back to Yellowknife was on time and we made our onward connection to Edmonton with plenty of time to spare. It was a fantastic trip that took in three very different parts of Canada. Everyone in the group had a great time and I think it is fair to say we were all very taken with the tundra. Despite a rainy day in Edmonton, and unseasonably hot weather in the arctic, we still managed to see a respectable 143 species of birds on the trip.



Yellow-billed Loon in flight © Ken Wright



King Eider drakes © Ken Wright



Horned Lark © Ken Wright



Long-tailed Jaeger



American Golden Plover