Eagle-Eye Tours



High Arctic & Northwest Territories (Jun 29 - Jul 9, 2024)

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This tour provides an amazing opportunity to visit two of Canada's territories: Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, and combines parkland, boreal and ultimately high arctic birding. After a start in Edmonton, the tour headed to Yellowknife where we explored the vast boreal forests, lake life and more. We ended up in the tundra around Cambridge Bay, where we enjoyed shorebirds, ducks and more. During the first 2024 tour, our group observed **165 species of birds**. Highlights were undoubtedly the very many sightings (14!) of Yellow-billed Loon, including a spectacular takeoff at close range, a bird fishing right next to the road and discovering a female on the nest. Many shorebirds found during previous years proved to be still present, and witnessing the mating of a pair of Red Phalaropes was truly spectacular, as well as a sudden find of a Rock Ptarmigan on the side of the road. Truly, the tundra holds so many special birds, often familiar to us but never encountered in this behavior before, that it is difficult to really to make a choice. On the mammal front, the hunting Eurasian Stoat, Arctic Fox and the often-docile Arctic Hares were amazing extra's, as well as hundreds of Ringed Seals on the ice, which were barely present the year before.



Yellow-billed Loon © Joachim Bertrands



Rock Ptarmigan © Joachim Bertrands

Edmonton

We all met each other the night before, except Joachim, who thanks to the WestJet strike was stuck in Victoria until the evening and arrived late at night. The next morning, some extended time on the parking lot proved we were in Alberta, as Common Grackles, Swainson’s Hawks and Black-billed

Magpies flew by. Franklin’s Gulls were very common, as we started the tour by driving the one hour to Elk Island NP. We traversed the parkland habitat, consisting of cottonwoods and grassy meadows, with the occasional nutrient-rich pond, over which many (American) Black Terns were fluttering and hunting for insects.



Black Tern © Joachim Bertrands

We entered Elk Island and explored the famous ‘bison loop’ at first, where we picked up our first species such as Northern Flicker, Chipping Sparrow, White-faced Ibis and more. A Broad-winged Hawk that soared by proved to be our only one of the day. Eventually we made it to a nearby hike loop which we walked over the course of the rest of the morning. Numerous birds were added here, including breeding Red-necked Grebes, Ovenbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Least Flycatcher, Alder Flycatcher and ducks such as Hooded Merganser, Redhead, Canvasback and Lesser Scaup. Star of the show was the Western Tanager, which showed beautifully in some of the trees next to the trail. After a picnic in the park, we decided to drive south to Tofield, and explore the prairie and lakes along the way. We had multiple stops as we encountered close views of Black Terns, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, more White-faced Ibises and Eared Grebes. Eventually, we arrived at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory, where we were lucky to find a nest of Loggerhead Shrike, probably the star-bird of the day! Brewer’s Blackbirds were studied by our group as Common Grackles and Bobolinks flew by and sang loudly. We drove to the end of the gravel road here, and had to turn around, but heard a LeConte’s Sparrow, which, with some perseverance, suddenly popped up on a fence post and sang away. Everyone enjoyed gorgeous view of this beige beauty of the grasslands. Meanwhile, Forster’s Terns and Franklin’s Gulls kept flying over and provided good looks.



LeConte's Sparrow © Joachim Bertrands

Eventually, we decided to head back to the hotel, but with a short stop at a recently discovered shallow pool along one of the township roads. It was here we picked up many shorebird species, of which Marbled Godwit, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Wilson's Phalarope, Spotted Sandpiper and even Black-winged Stilt and American Avocet, which all were new additions to our increasing trip list. Nelson's Sparrows eventually showed well but the real surprise were a few Sprague's Pipits, which initially showed high up in the sky and then were located on the gravel road, with great looks that followed.



Sprague's Pipit © Joachim Bertrands

After this successful day, we headed back to Leduc and prepared for an early rising and departure to Yellowknife.

Yellowknife

Birding around Yellowknife comes down to spending a lot of time in the boreal forest. The Canadian Shield provides very challenging conditions for forests to grow, and trees are tiny and thin, despite often being hundreds of years old. Last year, right after our second tour, the town had been endangered by a massive forest fire that had come close, and this year it was obvious a lot of the forests we birded the year before, had been destroyed. Next to our hotel, the beautiful Niven Lake provides a great opportunity to observe many of the boreal breeding ducks, the diversity is mindboggling every time: Canvasback, Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead made out the majority while Horned and Red-necked Grebes were plentiful. The gulls were different too, and where we earlier enjoyed Franklin's Gulls in Edmonton, these had now been replaced by Bonaparte's Gulls, one of the few gull species nesting in trees! The first terns flew over too, and it would be here we had our only Common Terns of the tour, among the ironically far more common Arctic Terns. A few additional songbird species were seen: Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Marsh Wren and many Swamp Sparrows – with a Blue-eyed Vireo maybe being the most unexpected. Our annual boat trip with boat driver Carlos was challenging due to heavy winds that morning, and we missed out on close looks of the Common Loons, which stayed far away compared to previous years. Northern Waterthrush, Cliff Swallow, Surf Scoter, Arctic Tern, Red-breasted Merganser and of course the local Bald Eagles showed well, while baby American Herring Gulls were fiercely defended by the parents. Especially the latter really performed well as they went in to steal a freshly caught Northern Pike out of the talons of a local Osprey. The Osprey dropped the prey, yet the eagle was unable to retrieve it. Possibly, the pike got away. True NatGeo stuff happening in front of our eyes to say the least!



Red-breasted Merganser © Joachim Bertrands

Another highlight this tour was our walk to Cameron Falls, along the famous Ingraham Trail, which runs east of town. It was here we heard Palm Warbler but also had a strange flyover of a Pileated Woodpecker, had Canada Jays stalk us for food and enjoyed numerous Tennessee Warblers besides

the gorgeous vistas over the forested Shield. A drive west of town, on the other hand, produced Pacific Loon and some songbirds at a sandy side-arm of the Great Slave Lake, which had been somewhat spared from the fire.



Herring Gull chicks © Joachim Bertrands

After a decent visit to the town and packing our bags, we all were anxiously awaiting the adventure to really take off!

Cambridge Bay

Our time in Cambridge Bay was marked by loads of adventure, great birding and numerous experiences with the arctic life. Our arrival was fairly nerve-wracking, as due to intense fog the pilot notified us a landing was maybe impossible. It all came down to a short 10-minute gap within which we managed to make landfall, a true stunt by the pilot! For the next 3 full days, our routine would be to drive one of the 3 main roads out of town: the road towards Mount Pelly, the DEW line road, and subsequently the Dease Lake Road. The first runs towards the famous Mount Pelly, and old deposition of gravel and rocky debris from all over the arctic, brought to this location by huge glaciers that covered this region thousands of years ago, during the last Ice Age. The road there leads along a big river filled to the rim with Arctic Char (we witnessed many kids pulling out huge fish from the cold water!), subsequently along numerous little tundra pools and eventually ends at the bottom of Mount Pelly. Birding is good along this whole road, which often hosts colonies of Sabine's Gull, multiple pairs of Pacific Loon and numerous shorebirds. Mount Pelly itself is worth it to climb, allowing for beautiful views over the tundra. The DEW line road is part of the Distant Early Warning line that was brought to life to make sure Russian troops or explorers would be caught in time, especially during the Cold War. Over the years, advanced technology has slowly reduced the once extensive human presence, and the DEW line road is now a great road that leads deep into the tundra and allows for good looks at many of the breeding shorebirds. Along the coast, the Dease Lake Road has been providing maybe the most interesting birding. Exploring remote beaches is always a good idea when looking for something out of the ordinary, and this road allows for just that. Numerous little cabins and huts mark the hunter and fishermen settlements that are located a bit

out of town and were frequented by gulls and jaegers on a daily basis. The highlights during our time in Cambridge Bay were numerous. Yellow-billed Loons showed very well this year, with multiple birds seen fishing at close range, numerous flyovers and so on. The large lake north of town has been a reliable site for the species in recent years, and after seeing a male on it on our first day, we discovered a female on the nest in the surrounding area. Despite its large size, the bird was perfectly camouflaged as it noticed us from a huge distance (1.8 km to be exact!) and tried making herself tiny by lifting her head and bill. To see the giant of the tundra breed in this pristine environment is a privilege to behold, and we managed to get excellent looks as the lady tucked in her eggs. Pacific and Red-throated Loons were also present in higher numbers than last year, maybe due to earlier ice-melt this spring? We got numerous good sightings of both, but especially Pacific Loon performed best, being the most common loon in this area.



Yellow-billed Loon © Joachim Bertrands



Pacific Loon © Joachim Bertrands



Yellow-billed Loon © Joachim Bertrands

On the gull front, it was needless to say the king of the arctic - Glaucous Gull – dominated the field. We encountered many of these giants at numerous places, especially on the sea ice but also breeding in the tundra pools. Sabine's Gulls on the other hand, the second most common *larid* on site, had moved their very approachable breeding colony from last year slightly more inland and was now visible daily yet not necessarily that close, although we got good looks in the end. Here and

there, a strange gull often proved to be an immature or adult Iceland Gull (*thayeri*), a species supposed to be breeding in the high arctic archipelago right now, but clearly a few nonbreeders had decided to call Cambridge Bay home for summer.



Iceland Gull and Glaucous Gull © Joachim Bertrands



Sabine's Gull © Joachim Bertrands

The most obvious spectacle from Cambridge Bay comes in the shape of eiders, and both King and

Common Eiders were very common throughout the tour. We got good looks of these in the beginning of our stay, including a pair at point-blank range on one of the pools, yet as the ice visibly melted during our stay, by the end of it, getting very close looks started to get more difficult. Males would often congregate on the ice which often meant they were already done mating and were now about to molt into their somewhat drabber winter plumage, while the females were left with all the work. Other ducks are rare in Cambridge Bay, but Northern Pintail occasionally showed, while Northern Shoveler and Green-winged Teal remained accidentals. Snow Geese were seen on a handful of occasions, local breeders but strongly outnumbered by Cackling and Greater White-fronted Geese, where a flock of flyover Canada Geese was welcomed with enthusiasm (by the guides mainly…) and a few Brant of two subspecies (nigricans and 'gray-bellied') were welcome additions to our list.



King Eider © Joachim Bertrands



Long-tailed Duck © Joachim Bertrands



Group looking at King Eiders © Joachim Bertrands

Many people travel to Nunavut to see breeding shorebirds, and as usual we found many breeding Baird's and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Black-bellied and American Golden-plover, Semipalmated Plover and the occasional Stilt and Pectoral Sandpiper. White-rumped Sandpiper remains rare, but a breeding site of the previous years proved to be successful and delivered one bird that was briefly seen by some of the group. Lucky for one of the participants, who really wanted to see the species,

an approachable bird she photographed while a little issue with both vans had to be resolved (read as: got stuck in the tundra), ended up being this very species, a welcome surprise! Red-necked Phalaropes were very common as usual, while Red Phalaropes were only occasionally seen, but in an amazing way as we witnessed mating between the two! To see the male for a brief second adopt its ‘classic gender role’ was quite unique, given that this species mainly has reversed roles, the females simply lay the eggs and then let the male handle it.



American Golden-Plover © Joachim Bertrands



Baird's Sandpiper © Joachim Bertrands



Red-necked Phalarope © Joachim Bertrands



Looking at American Golden-Plover



Red Phalarope © Joachim Bertrands

Last but not least – the mammals. Nunavut is mostly known for its Polar Bears, Narwhals and Belugas, but none of those are very expected around Cambridge Bay. The area offers great opportunities to see Arctic Fox and Arctic Hare, both which we observed numerous times very well, as well as Brown Lemming and even a Eurasian Stoat, the latter being restricted to the Canadian High Arctic in this continent, south of which American Stoat takes over.



Arctic Fox © Joachim Bertrands



Arctic Hare © Joachim Bertrands



Eurasian Stoat © Joachim Bertrands

In short: Cambridge Bay was an overwhelming success once again, and a place every Canadian birder should at least once experience.



Long-tailed Jaeger © Joachim Bertrands

[High Arctic & Northwest Territories (Jun 29 - Jul 9, 2024) Bird List]