



## **High Arctic & Northwest Territories Trip Report (Jun 30 - Jul 10, 2022)**

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*This tour REALLY has it all - An impressive list of quality flora, fauna, and scenery! We start with a full day in the parkland region of central Alberta, then head straight north to the boreal shores of Great Slave Lake, Northwest Territories, before making the final hop above the Arctic Circle to Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. We found our target wildlife, which included Yellow-billed Loon, Pacific Loon, King Eider, Sabine's Gull, Red Phalarope, Long-tailed Jaeger, Iceland Gull, Arctic Tern, Arctic Hare, Arctic Fox and more!*



*EET group Mt Pelly*

**June 30 To July 1 - Leduc/Edmonton Area** Our epic journey began in Leduc, just south of Alberta's capital city, Edmonton. The region is rich in bird and mammal life, as we would soon discover. The area to the east of Edmonton is a unique transition zone of parkland ecosystem with some influence from the prairie potholes to the south, and the boreal forest to the north. July 1<sup>st</sup> was Canada Day so we went straight to Elk Island National Park to enjoy the bounty of life there, before the hordes of people would arrive. We were fortunate to actually find a few Wapiti (Elk) as we arrived, which can sometimes be elusive. Shortly after passing the park gates, we were greeted by a very large herd of American Bison and some young calves. Bird song was in full swing with ever-present Red-eyed Vireo, White-throated Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Yellow Warbler. Tree and Cliff swallows circled overhead, and we noticed a steady stream of Franklin's Gull throughout the day higher in the sky. Astotin Lake gave us our first views of nine species of waterfowl as well as Horned, Red-necked, Eared, and Western grebes! Other highlights included a briefly vocal American Bittern, a distant Broad-winged Hawk, and a couple of cryptic Le Conte's Sparrow. A short walk near Tawayik Lake produced looks at Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Tennessee Warbler, and we also picked up singing Ovenbird and Mourning Warbler. Insect life was in evidence with the most obvious butterfly being White (Red-spotted) Admiral. We drove around the area to the east of Edmonton to some sloughs that promised to include some prairie species that reach their northern limit. Along the way, we made a pit stop near Tofield where a colony of Purple Martins entertained us as they collected nest material of the ground. We had so far enjoyed incredibly cooperative weather, but we could see something was brewing in the sky. This caused many of the high-flying Franklin's Gulls to move lower in altitude and we even spotted a Swainson's Hawk catch one! Our most memorable birding stop was a productive wetland east of Leduc where we sampled more of the parkland waterbirds. One of the biggest surprises was a lone Snow Goose, apparently trying to over summer down south! Some early migrant shorebirds in the form of both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Long-billed Dowitchers were also somewhat unexpected. The crowd pleaser awards however, went to the resident shorebirds led by Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Wilson's Phalarope, and Willet. We even had some southbound migrating Long-billed Dowitcher, and Greater and Lesser yellowlegs. Other wetland goodies here included Black, Common, and Forster's terns, American White Pelican, White-faced Ibis, Eastern Kingbird, Nelson's Sparrow, and Yellow-headed Blackbird.

A couple of lucky participants had brief looks at our only Long-tailed Weasel of the trip.



*Black Tern © Yousif Attia*



*Black-necked Stilt © Yousif Attia*



*Yellow-headed Blackbird © Yousif Attia*

**July 2 To 4 - Yellowknife Area** We arrived in Yellowknife with time to squeeze in some birding before lunch. The birds that call this area home are some of the hardiest of the familiar widespread species from the south, mixed in with a few of the really northern species that are found above tree line. Orange-crowned and Tennessee Warblers were in full song, and we noted the funny northern accent of the Lincoln's Sparrows in these parts. We observed our first very cooperative Bonaparte's Gulls, and the newly renamed Short-billed (formerly Mew) Gulls. Many of the waterfowl and wetland birds were observed earlier in the trip, but we added Canvasback to our list.



*Bonaparte's Gull © Yousif Attia*

A sure highlight of the tour was a boat trip on Great Slave Lake. Higher than usual water levels over the past couple of years have displaced some of the traditional islets that were breeding habitat for terns. We did still manage great looks at both Arctic and Common terns, often side by side for study. We visited some larger islands that were breeding colonies for California, Herring, and Ring-billed gulls. Common and Red-breasted merganser, Surf and White-winged scoters were in small rafts out on the lake, and a flyby Parasitic Jaeger was cause for excitement! We also enjoyed cooperative flyovers of both Bald Eagle and Osprey.



*Great Slave Lake boat trip © Yousif Attia*

The wilderness around Yellowknife holds many great birding opportunities. We spent a day exploring the Ingraham Trail that heads northeast of town and ends where the ice road begins. Many of the birds found here are highly sought after, including Bohemian Waxwing, which we heard well at one roadside stop. Other species we encountered included American Kestrel, Sora, Cliff Swallows, Palm Warbler, Hermit and Swainson's thrushes, and a family of Canada Jays that joined us for lunch. We also went for a hike to Cameron Falls where we were rewarded with Belted Kingfisher, Spotted Sandpiper, and Merlin in addition to the scenery. A drive west of Yellowknife along the Frontier Trail produced several Common Loons in the many lakes. One particularly productive lake and adjacent wetland hosted a pair of Pacific Loons with young! Another iconic spectacle we enjoyed was a Lesser Yellowlegs sitting on top of a spruce tree. Only days earlier we watched a few of these on migration 1000 kms to south of us near Edmonton, but during the breeding season in the northern boreal, they are at home perched on top of trees. In addition to the excellent birding, we also took time to appreciate the delicious cuisine available, highlighted by fresh Lake Trout and Arctic Char. Our travel from Yellowknife to Cambridge Bay included a brief layover at Kugluktuk. The rocky outcrops near the airport are known to harbor Harris's Sparrows. We took the opportunity to search and had a brief look at this Canadian breeding endemic.



*Red-necked Grebe © Yousif Attia*



*Bald Eagle in flight © Yousif Attia*



*Supper in historical Yellowknife © Yousif Attia*



*Arctic Tern in flight © Yousif Attia*



*Common Terns © Yousif Attia*



*EET group*

**July 5 To 9 - Cambridge Bay Area** We landed in Iqaluktuutiaq, commonly known as Cambridge Bay on Victoria Island under ideal weather conditions. We were greeted outside the airport doors by Snow Buntings in full song. Our first stop was just outside of town at the local Dump and sewage ponds. This is one of the birdiest locations and it wasn't long before we were swooning over scope views of King Eider, Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, and Red-necked Phalaropes. The dump itself

had foraging Glaucous, and Iceland gulls as well as several rusty Sandhill Cranes. Exploring a little further from town and we added Pacific and Red-throated loons, several shorebird species and the indescribably beautiful Sabine's Gull. Pairs of Tundra Swans, Greater White-fronted Geese, and both Canada and Cackling Geese dotted the landscape.



*Snow Bunting © Yousif Attia*



*Greater White-fronted Goose © Yousif Attia*

The most common songbird by far on the tundra was Lapland Longspurs. Rocky, dry areas also had American Pipits and Horned Larks in flight song display. We also had brief encounters with White-crowned Sparrow and Savannah Sparrow and even had a pair of Barn Swallows, which are considered rare this far north. Every year is different, but our timing was excellent for wildflowers and the floor was carpeted with mountain-avens, locoweeds, louseworts, poppies, saxifrage and many other species. Ross's Alpine, Polaris Fritillary and Melissa Arctic butterflies were flitting about the tundra.



*Arctic wildflowers © Yousif Attia*

Given the paucity of songbird diversity on the tundra, it seems like some shorebirds help fill in the role. The most common and vocal species being Semipalmated Sandpiper. It was not uncommon to see them perched up on the highest rock singing away. We also had a few Stilt Sandpipers in flight song, showing off their long legs and striped plumage. Travelling the road to Mt. Pelly, the Dew Line Road, and the Dease Road, we eventually tracked down the other expected shorebirds including American Golden, Black-bellied, and Semipalmated plovers, Red Phalarope, and Baird's and Pectoral sandpipers. The only raptor we encountered was Rough-legged Hawk, but both Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers seemed to fill the raptor niche on the tundra, preying on small birds and rodents.



*Semipalmated Sandpiper* © Yousif Attia



*Black-bellied Plover* © Yousif Attia

For many who visit this part of the arctic, no trip is complete without sighting the largest and hardest to find loon species in the world. The Yellow-billed Loon is larger than the Common Loon with a slightly bumpier head and a larger clean ivory-coloured bill. We were treated to excellent views of this northern specialty, in full breeding plumage, which was definitely one of the highlights of the entire trip. Mammals on the tundra can be tricky to find, but with some determination we

found both Arctic Fox and Arctic Hare. Ringed Seals were hauled out on the sea ice that was present but melting and breaking up during our visit. As always, the charm of the people of this northern community was evident. We were greeted with friendly smiling faces everywhere we went. We were all reminded of just how unique the arctic of North America truly is. We had a very smooth flight back to Edmonton via Yellowknife. Our final evening was filled with laughter as we reflected on the incredible journey we just completed. We tallied 150 species of birds including some of the most famous northern and arctic species.



*Birding on the Tundra, Victoria Island © Yousif Attia*



*Sabine's Gull © Yousif Attia*



*Long-tailed Duck © Yousif Attia*