



High Arctic & NWT Trip Report (Jul 3 - 13, 2023)

[Link: High Arctic & NWT Trip Report \(Jul 3 - 13, 2023\)](#)

This [tour of the High Arctic](#) 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 second 2023 tour, our group observed **166 species of birds**. Highlights included enjoying calling Yellow-billed Loons from up close, an Arctic Fox posing nicely, displaying King and Common Eiders, finding White-rumped Sandpipers and many other breeding shorebirds, a Red Phalarope that swam by us from two meters distance, climbing the remote hill Mount Pelly, walking on ice sheets and so much more. This region truly is a gem and it was an absolute privilege to visit the Canadian arctic. **4 July** We all met each other the night before, and after an initial moment of 'getting-to-know-each-other', it was clear our small group of only 3 participants was ready to explore the birdlife of the north. We were up bright and early, enjoyed a hot breakfast before headed out and driving the one hour to Elk Island NP. Along the way, it became clear we were in the parkland habitat: transitioning meadows with lots of aspen and the occasional spruce tree. Certain open country birds were present, including the mighty Swainson's Hawk, but also more common ones as Black-billed Magpie and Common Grackle. The first (American) Black Terns announced themselves as we drove past the first overgrown ponds, indicating high quality waterbodies with lots of birdlife!



Black Tern © Joachim Bertrands

As soon as we entered Elk Island, the forest thickened, and we became aware of the chances for seeing the Woodland subspecies of American Bison that's been successfully reintroduced to the park. It didn't take long before we noticed what seemed to be an adolescent male standing on the road in front of us. It seemed rather curious and walked up to the car to give us a very close look. Not often do the local bison show that much action, and are usually lethargically munching away on grass, so this was a real treat. We started a 4-kilometer-long walk that looped through a bit of intact forest, ponds and meandered via boardwalks through some sedge marsh. Birds were plentiful with Red-eyed Vireo, Least Flycatcher and Ovenbird being the main species, but other specialties such as American Redstart, Baltimore Oriole and Rose-breasted Grosbeak filled in where needed. We briefly heard LeConte's Sparrow but as usual for this species, the bird didn't show. The real treat came in the form of a pair of Broad-winged Hawks that guarded their territory while Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Pileated Woodpecker squealed away from their respective perches.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker © Joachim Bertrands

At the lookouts over the ponds, we enjoyed some duck species, including Bufflehead with young, Blue-winged Teal, Red-necked Grebe, Swamp Sparrow and many Common Yellowthroats. The skies were heavy and gray, and it started drizzling right before we got back to the car. We ended up putting on our rain jackets, having a snack and headed for the large Astotin Lake, to see what we could find. Upon arrival, the weather started slowly improving and the local American White Pelicans seemed to have liked that a lot as suddenly the skies were filled with them. Forster's Terns were calling away and we found a pair of Eared Grebes among the many Red-necked Grebes present on the lake. The shrubs surrounding the beach produced Eastern Phoebe, Gray Catbird, Eastern Kingbird and Blue Jay among many other of the expected species. Interesting was an American Avocet flying high over the lake, it would end up being our only one of today! We had lunch at the Islet Lake area, where some Purple Martins were gone quicker than they had shown, and we decided - given the forest was quiet - it would be best to head for Beaverhill Bird Observatory. One of the main biologists there gave us a great intro to the park after which we explored the forest and surrounding meadows. Absolute highlight here, and maybe of today, were the up-close sightings we had of multiple male Bobolinks, singing their bizarre song while showing off. An amazing opportunity to study this grassland species. Unexpected extras here were Ruby-throated Hummingbird, White-faced Ibis, Great-crested Flycatcher, Yellow-headed Blackbird and some good looks at Nelson's Sparrow.



Bobolink © Joachim Bertrands



Nelson'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, Least Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Wilson's Phalarope, Long-billed Dowitcher and Spotted Sandpiper were new additions to our increasing trip list. Western Meadowlark sang away while we noticed how the 3 teal species (Northern Shoveler, Cinnamon Teal

and Blue-winged Teal) were slowly getting into eclipse plumage. After this fairly intense day, we made good time and got in rather early. It was great putting together the list and thinking of what we could see later on during the tour, but mostly it was time to catch up on sleep before an early morning flight the next day. **5 July** An exciting leg of our tour, as we headed to Yellowknife this morning. We left the hotel at 6 and by 8 we were well on our way to Yellowknife, flying over northern Alberta and seeing massive stretches of boreal forest. We landed around 10 AM and started making our way to the hotel. On our way, we got reminded we were now in a different landscape, having left the fertile plains of Edmonton and now driving around on the Canadian Shield, with nutrient-poor conditions and extreme cold creating rather tiny trees! Black spruce and birch dominated as we found our way to the hotel and saw the first new birds of the trip fly over: American Herring Gull, among other species. We left our bags at the front desk and walked around the conveniently located Niven Lake, a shallow waterbody next to the hotel and with great access to several freshwater duck species, songbirds and grebes. We did well, and were surprised with the diversity here: 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 far more common Arctic Terns. A few additional songbird species were seen: Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Marsh Wren and many Swamp Sparrows. The afternoon was spent relaxing, but we did have an amazing lunch beforehand, enjoying some fine Vietnamese food in the local restaurant. Yellowknife is home to a surprising number of excellent dining options, and also that same evening we went to the famous Bullock's Bistro, where we were treated to some of the best fish any of us had ever eaten. A great start of our stay here! **6 July** An iconic morning as we were set to be welcomed by boat driver Carlos for our boat tour across Great Slave Lake. Standing on the dock, we finally noticed our first Common Loons, as well as Merlin, Northern Waterthrush and Cliff Swallow.



Common Loons with chicks © Joachim Bertrands

The boat drive gave us access to some of the more sheltered parts of the Yellowknife Bay, where numerous interesting species were breeding: White-winged Scoter, Surf Scoter, Ring-billed Gull,

Herring Gull, Red-throated Loon, Arctic Tern and Bonaparte's Gull. We even witnessed a Bald Eagle grab a whitefish sp. in front of our eyes and found another ground nesting Bald Eagle on one of the small islets. A truly interesting experience to see this top predator nest in such a vulnerable spot. Ospreys made our day as we headed back along a grassy shore, adding Nelson's Sparrow to our Northwest Territories list and enjoying the squealing of Red-necked Grebes. We had a relaxed picnic at Frame Lake, but birding here was fairly quiet, so we decided to drive the Ingraham Trail Road east, headed deep into the boreal muskeg, hoping to find more wildlife. The birding here was tough, high temperatures and being right after the peak period in activity had us scrambling for birds, but we did end up with some great sightings at the end. A big female American Goshawk entertained us, the exact day after it was announced this taxon had been lifted to species status and therefore split from the Eurasian Goshawk! The rest of the afternoon proceeded to be rather uneventful, but we did see our first pair of Pacific Loons on a lake, heard many Swamp Sparrows and enjoyed the beautiful scenery along the road.



Pacific Loon © Joachim Bertrands

Our dinner ended up being another whole experience as we tried excellent Ethiopian food at a local restaurant, another highlight for our group as some had not yet experienced this. Yellowknife truly is a small place of many surprises! **7 July** Our last full day in Yellowknife. We didn't have too many targets left, and aimed to simply see more species to add to our Northern Territories list. There were a few requests to find Boreal Chickadee, Belted Kingfisher and try and find some of the high boreal warblers such as Palm and Blackpoll Warbler. An early morning trip before dinner with part of the group produced Alder Flycatcher as well as a pair of Red-throated Loons on a small pond just outside of Yellowknife, but other than that it was fairly quiet. We subsequently drove east towards the shallowest part of Great Slave Lake, named Marian Lake. Along the way we found breeding Lesser Yellowlegs, displaying Wilson's Snipes and other species such as a briefly singing Clay-coloured Sparrow, but most importantly: Boreal Chickadee! Finally, we got brief but good looks, a highlight for our people from Ontario where this boreal specialty is increasingly difficult. It got even better as we bumped into a Bank Swallow colony, and the soft sand indicated the possibility of our next target: Belted Kingfisher. It didn't take long before one showed itself and gave away some quick flyby's before perching in a birch and showing off. Marian Lake itself was fairly quiet, and the milky

water seemed to not be very productive for waterfowl, possibly due to limited visibility under the surface. We saw a few distant flocks of ducks, of which we could identify some Red-breasted Mergansers, but it seemed we better would be spending our time elsewhere. We headed back to town and had a lovely lunch at the Wildcat Café, an iconic place in Yellowknife, the place of seemingly endless dining options! The plan for the remainder of the afternoon – which had suddenly become fairly short as it was already 3 PM – was to head east again and try two spots for warblers. The first one was unproductive and rather windy, so we headed farther east and found a great collection of little lakes that were accessible via a grassy trail. This little spot proved to be highly productive, and within minutes we were treated with point blank views of both a breeding male Palm Warbler as well as a recently fledged juvenile, a strange, scaly plumage which none of us had ever seen before. It didn't just stop there, because as soon as we approached the car, a very cooperative Boreal Chickadee appeared from the woods, showing us his best pose before taking off again. A great end to our time here! We ended the day by enjoying some exquisite fish (the Arctic char was simply outstanding!) in our hotel restaurant, before we got in for an early night. The next day would be an exciting one, as we were about to travel to Cambridge Bay. **8 July** The big day was here! But we didn't simply board the plane without any additional birding. We set out early again and tried our both spots again to potentially get some extra warblers. This didn't work out, but a singing LeConte's Sparrow was a highlight, given that we hadn't seen this species yet on tour. The bird sat high up in a dead spruce tree in a bog, a great setting for such a gorgeous sparrow, which often does not cooperate that well. Our flight was leaving at 10:45 AM, so we headed back to the hotel to enjoy our last 'boreal breakfast' before taking off. The first leg of the flight was entertaining, although the smudgy windows did their best to conceal the beauty of the landscape below us. We did make good progress though, and stopped at Kugluktuk, an arctic settlement on the mainland of Nunavut, to gas up the plane. This was our first little taste of the arctic so far, and we quickly went out to see what we could find. Birding here was not really productive, and besides some Common Redpolls and White-crowned Sparrows, we couldn't find a thing. Needless to say we were eager to get to Cambridge Bay. And that's when we left for the second half, leaving the willowy tundra from Kugluktuk behind and flying over lichen-covered rolling hills, crossing a long stretch of the Arctic Ocean, before we finally touched down again. We were here! We were surrounded by arctic beauty, yet after checking into our cozy suites, the first stop was the local dump and sewage facility. Facility might be an overstatement, given that the debris and waste water can't really go anywhere at these latitudes. The result is a smelly collection of ponds and piles of waste, which despite the uninviting looks ends up being very productive for birding. We basically picked up over 3 quarters of all our targets in the hour we spent here: many Semipalmated Sandpipers, Stilt Sandpipers, Greater White-fronted Goose, Cackling Goose, our first King and (Pacific) Common Eiders, Long-tailed Duck, Sandhill Crane, Baird's Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Sabine's-, Glaucous- and *thayeri* Iceland Gull, as well as Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings. A White-crowned Sparrow was rather surprising, but apparently, they nest in town nowadays, a recent range expansion north of their usual range. The sun still stood high when we went to bed, but so we did as tomorrow would be an intense day.



Common Eider © Joachim Bertrands



Long-tailed Duck © Joachim Bertrands



Snow Bunting © Joachim Bertrands



Baird's Sandpiper on rock © Joachim Bertrands



Sabine's Gull © Joachim Bertrands

9 July We started off our early morning at 5 AM to try and profit from better light, higher activity levels and more birds! A morning session in town would be followed by the long drive along the wonky road west, have lunch in town, drive east towards Mount Pelly, and eventually end with a visit to the dump again. And so we did, and it was productive. Highlight of the morning was having an amazing experience with a calling Yellow-billed Loon, the absolute star from Cambridge Bay, which provided great photo opportunities. King Eiders delivered as well, and we saw a small raft of males offshore, as females were clearly gearing up for nesting season. But there was more, and maybe one of the toughest phenomena to observe was an incubating female King Eider only a mere 20 meters away from a Long-tailed Jaeger nest, the latter which kept continuously mobbing the female by diving down on her and hitting her in the head. It remains unclear who was first, but it is known in the natural world that certain species such as eider or geese specifically look up the presence of more aggressive birds to profit from their defense against predators such as Arctic Fox. That being said, it didn't seem as if it was part of the eider's plan that she was gonna be noticed in the process as well.



Yellow-billed Loon calling © Joachim Bertrands



King Eider © Joachim Bertrands



Long-tailed Jaeger © Joachim Bertrands

Talking about the devil, we had an incredible encounter with an Arctic Fox that crossed the road in front of us and gave the best of looks, posing nicely on the side of the road while the cameras rattled. Another highlight of this special place! Back in town, we enjoyed lunch before setting off to the complete opposite side, east this time, onwards to the base of Mount Pelly, while trying to find numerous specialties along the way. Our highlight here was a male Red Phalarope that came in at a location the tour 4 days ahead of us - led by the legendary Yousif and Jody - bumped into this bird, and we happily took the opportunity to study this bird well while it swam past us at only a few meters distance. We ended up at the very end of the road - or well at the river - and turned back. The dump had no new surprises in store, so we headed for dinner to reflect on a wonderful first full day.



Red Phalarope © Joachim Bertrands

10 July We left early again, and headed to a remote road that headed deep into the tundra, the DEW line road. Just like all major 3 roads running east, west and north of town, it simply ended at a point where our minivan was unable to pass a small washout, and we decided to pull over and be on the lookout for whatever we could find. The tundra was filled with shorebirds: displaying Stilt Sandpipers, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Semipalmated Plovers and more.



Semipalmated Plover © Joachim Bertrands



Horned Lark © Joachim Bertrands

Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs were numerous - of course - as we scoped the surroundings to find any other wildlife. A very distant raptor could be revealed to be a Rough-legged Hawk, a lovely species that inhabits these tundra deserts on an endless quest for lemmings, just like most species here. We pulled over at a few other locations, one which seemed like it had potential for the two ptarmigan species occurring in the area. We searched and searched, but in vain, and only were able to find some Sandhill Cranes. A brief sighting of a distant 'blob' that looked like it had potential, made us make plans to return the next evening however, but until then, we were left without a clue what it was. Back in town we checked a larger lake just north of town and were rewarded with an amazing show of Yellow-billed Loons, including some very close fly-bys. A territorial pair was fiercely fending off a third bird, likely a male, and we enjoyed observing them calling and wailing at each other for quite some time. Panic in the distance in the form of some aggressive Arctic Terns indicated the presence of our second and last Arctic Fox of the tour, and we got distant but prolonged scope views of this tundra predator. A flyover Red-throated Loon was new for our Nunavut list as we headed back to the car. The rest of the afternoon was spent driving parts of the Mount Pelly Road, as well as our obligatory stop to the sewage lagoons, and we were treated with some great extra sightings, albeit nothing new.



Yellow-billed Loon © Joachim Bertrands

11 July Our final full tour day, at least the one birding! Today we had planned to climb Mount Pelly, a large shallow hill northeast of town, at the very end of the aptly named 'Mount Pelly Road'. We were hoping to potentially find some ptarmigan or maybe any breeding shorebirds. Upon arrival it only took us about an hour to reach the summit, from where we had an amazing view across the tundra, the town and the surrounding ocean. No shorebirds were found, but we noticed a clear difference in bird composition as American Pipits and Horned Larks replaced other species and - the highlight here - came in the form of a mammal as 4 Arctic Hares showed ridiculously well. We snuck up on them using the slope as a cover and got some great looks before they noticed us and more or less became airborne trying to get away. A great experience!



While being up on the summit, we heard numerous birds call from the lowlands, which sounds were carried uphill by the wind, including a Yellow-billed Loon, some Sandhill Cranes and Snow Geese. The weather was gorgeous and thanks to the sunshine we got some butterflies in for our trip, including Polaris Fritillary and Melissa Arctic. Back down we slowly headed back to town, and explored a bit more along the road. One of the highlights here was finding a breeding pair of Black-bellied Plovers, with chicks nonetheless, that showed very well. Territorial display was included as well, and while we stood there we witnessed some intense chasing around and fighting. A nearby house had a Musk Ox skull on its front porch, quite an amazing sight of a mammal that's unfortunately no longer reliably seen along the roads near Cambridge Bay.



Black-bellied Plover © Joachim Bertrands

After lunch we decided to drive part of the west road again, and mainly took some photos of the ice fields, ourselves on the ice and some flowers, as well as interacting with some locals that were living along the waterline. We drove past the King Eider nest again, and still the Long-tailed Jaegers were constantly mobbing her. We tried documenting this bizarre behaviour before leaving her in peace.



Arctic wildflowers © Joachim Bertrands

Our last dinner in Cambridge Bay was spent in one of the local lodges and we reflected on the trip which had exceeded all reasonable expectations. Great to have shared this experience with a small group of 3 wonderful people while we enjoyed the wonders of the arctic. After dinner, part of the group went to check on the ptarmigan location along the DEW line road. We didn't find any ptarmigan but were rewarded in the form of finding multiple Pectoral Sandpipers, including one with chicks. Major highlight however was finding at least two White-rumped Sandpipers, both suspected of breeding behaviour, as they were clearly trying to distract us. We got some amazing looks of this unexpected local breeder, and despite sightings by researchers earlier in spring each year, they're not reliable at all during summer.



White-rumped Sandpiper © Joachim Bertrands

12 July Our last day of the tour and unfortunately not the most interesting one as we were headed back to Edmonton, but limited flight options had us make various stops in Nunavut before getting to Edmonton fairly late. We did manage to squeeze in some birding at the sewage lagoons that morning, which remarkably produced a few new trip birds, including Savannah Sparrow and Northern Shoveler, two species that - alongside White-crowned Sparrow - seem like uncommon but expected range extenders in this part of the territory. And so we left Cambridge Bay, first headed to Taloyak Airport, then Kuugaruuk and eventually Gjoa Haven before we finally said goodbye to the arctic and flew to Yellowknife. A layover later and we were back in Edmonton, checked in the same hotel we stayed at the first two nights. This tour was a blast, and we're already looking forward running this trip again next year! Joachim Bertrands