Eagle-Eye Tours



High Arctic & NWT Trip Report (Jul 3 - 13, 2024)

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July 3

After taking flights from our respective domiciles, some with considerable delays we all amassed at our hotel in Leduc, Alberta for some respite from air travel and in preparation for what was to be a truly phenomenal day of birding in central Alberta. We all met up for dinner at the hotel to for introductions and a chance to get to know one another before heading into the field.

July 4

We got up for a relatively early breakfast for us 'Westerners' and not-so-early for those coming from more easterly locations. Our plan for the day was to explore the aspen parkland and adjacent prairie ecosystems replete with numerous wetlands supporting a wealth of waterbirds. So we clambered into the bus and headed straight towards Elk Island National Park. We started birding on the Bison Loop road which proved to be very productive. Several Wilson's Snipe were heard as well as couple of Sora's, while many Franklin's Gulls flew overhead. A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker put in a nice appearance on an aspen snag. We briefly heard a Western Wood-Pewee calling and a Least Flycatcher which were nice finds. A couple of Red-eyed Vireos were singing like there was no tomorrow, as they always do! Unfortunately, we failed to locate a LeConte's Sparrow which is known to breed at this location. We headed down the road and saw a few Plains Bison in very close proximity! Here we lucked into hearing an Ovenbird sing his emphatic song. Our next stop was the Amisk Wuche Trail for a nice hike through the aspen forest and alongside a lake. This proved to be very productive indeed! Some highlights: Red-eyed Vireos singing their hearts; another Ovenbird afforded decent looks responding well to a brief playback; Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers; a Pied-billed Grebe appeared out of nowhere; a Great Crested Flycatcher sang right overhead and we all had good looks. One of the best sightings were a group of 4 Broad-winged Hawks that were soaring high above the canopy and offered fine views of this abundant but rarely seen Buteo. When we

reached the turnaround point on the trail, Blair headed off the trail a bit as he suspected a LeConte's Sparrow. And that is exactly what materialized! We had fabulous views of this beautifully-marked sparrow as it sang from the nearby cattails. And if that wasn't enough, a very territorial Swamp Sparrow came in and displaced the LeConte's Sparrow from his singing perch! We headed nearby to enjoy a tasty picnic lunch on the shore of Astotin Lake where a couple of American White Pelicans soared overhead and we saw our first Forster's Tern! Following lunch we headed east to check out a nice wetland which was teaming with birds. Black Terns were probably the highlight species for most as they buoyantly flew metres away. American Coots with their tiny colourful chicks were in attendance as were Red-necked Grebes and a couple of Lesser Scaup. Several songbirds were also present including an Eastern Kingbird and several Cedar Waxwings which are always a treat to see. Just down the road we picked up Bufflehead, American Wigeon and a few other waterfowl. By mid-afternoon we reached one Beaverhill Lake, an extensive wetland area that supports a myriad of breeding birds. A short walk from the parking area had us on a dyke look at hundreds of birds! Franklin's Gulls were the most numerically abundant species and they were flying right over our heads. Black Terns, White-faced Ibis, Eared Grebe, Blue-winged Teal and Northern Shovelers were nice finds. We were also treated to a wonderful look at Forster's Terns feeding. Tree Swallows, Marsh Wren, Clay-coloured Sparrow, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Baltimore Oriole, Red-winged Blackbird and Common Yellowthroats complimented the waterbirds. Our last stop of this action-packed day was at a big wetland area on Township Road south of Tofield. This site has some prairie grassland habitat juxtaposed to some lakes and pulls in some key target species. Here we saw a nice group of Ruddy Ducks including some colourful drakes with those bizarre blue beaks. A better look at Eared Grebes and some shorebirds including Wilson's Phalarope, Long-billed Dowitcher, Least Sandpiper, Black-necked Stilt and both flavours of Yellowlegs. But the most exciting species were Western Meadowlark, a Sprague's Pipit and a very obliging Nelson's Sparrow which perched on the fence beside us. The latter two species were lifers for many and probably best looks for all! What a great way to wrap up this epic day of central Alberta birding.

July 5

Today was mostly a travel day, with our party departing from Edmonton and flying to Yellowknife, which took up most of the day. Despite this, we still managed to do some birding at Niven Lake, a lovely park located directly adjacent to our hotel. Highlights from our walk included many families of Horned Grebes, a dozen Soras, breeding Bonaparte's Gulls, Eastern Phoebe, Northern Waterthrush, and a single male Redhead. After a three-hour walk, we decided to take the rest of the day off and rest up for the next day's early boat ride

July 6

This morning we ventured on small aluminum boats onto Great Slave Lake. At over 2000 feet (614 m) in depth, Great Slave Lake is North Americas deepest and Canada's second largest freshwater body. At the boat launch in Yellowknife Bay, we heard the distinctive song of the Eastern Phoebe. A large gathering of nesting Cliff and Barn swallows were swarming around the adjacent buildings while a Northern Waterthrush and Yellow Warbler were heard singing. We had fabulous sunshine and gusty winds which made for an exciting boat ride! Fortunately the winds were blowing offshore and Yellowknife Bay offers protection from these winds. We cruised past some forested islands and heard Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco and a White-throated Sparrow singing. A cooperative group of Red-breasted Mergansers were hauled out on the granitic shoreline. Across the bay we encountered a truly spectacular event - a feeding frenzy of gulls and terns giving us phenomenal views of Bonaparte's, Short-billed and Ring-billed gulls and some Arctic Terns as they hovered and plunged into the lake seeking various fish. We then saw a Bald Eagle nest on a tree-less rocky island with three nearly fully-grown chicks. Further out in the bay we cruised past a colony of nesting Herring Gulls and their cryptic-looking

chicks. Heading back in the bay we found some Surf and White-winged scoters and a Long-tailed Duck! The rest of the day was spent birding on the Ingraham Trail - a chip-seal highway heading east of Yellowknife in the boreal forest biome. Our first stop was at the Yellowknife River bridge where we saw several Bald Eagles, a flock of Lesser Scaup, an Osprey and more Bonaparte's Gulls. A small colony of Cliff Swallows were nesting beneath the bridge. We also had fine views of a "Myrtles" Yellow-rumped Warbler. Our second stop produced a variety of waterfowl including Mallard, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead and Lesser Scaup. We heard a rather melodious Fox Sparrow singing here as well. A brief stop at Prosperous Lake proved to be ornithologically prosperous with Belted Kingfisher, a pair of Common Loons and an American Kestrel seen. We then headed to Madeline Lake for a picnic lunch among the mosquitoes and black files. On the way back to Yellowknife we encountered a flock of seven White-winged Scoters - the largest and most striking of North America's scoters. Before dinner, we headed out to a small lake near town on Dhe Cho Boulevard to look for nesting Red-throated Loons. In contrast to Great Slave Lake, this boreal wetland was at high water and forced us to get up close and personal with some willows to avoid a deep puddle. Our efforts were more than rewarded when we saw a family of Horned Grebes at close range. We also found our target Red-throated Loon - one adult with two healthy looking chicks on the lake waiting patiently for the other adult to return with a fish meal. Red-throated Loons differ from other congeners in that they typically forage away from their nesting lakes, requiring both adults taking turns flying out to fish-rich lakes and rivers. They have lower wing-loading than other species and can take off easily from smaller lakes and ponds. This allows them to avoid the territorial interactions and battles facing other species of loons. We also heard an Alder Flycatcher calling. After some patience on our part, the flycatcher eventually showed itself among the vegetation from which it derives it's name. We also saw a lovely drake Green-winged Teal and a couple of not-so-solitary Solitary Sandpipers. Time for dinner at Bullocks Cafe, famous for its local fish and chips. Here we had a group of fledgling and ravenous Common Ravens. A California Gull and several Ring-billed Gulls also showed their affection to the fish and chips. Another awesome day!

July 7

We started the day with another walk around Niven Lake. This walk was even more productive than the first, with better views of many species such as Northern Waterthrush and Eastern Phoebe. The highlight was probably a Cape May Warbler that flew over. After the walk around Niven Lake, we drove to Cameron Falls and hiked to the falls. The trail covers some lovely Canadian Shield habitat and provided some nice highlights, even if the forest was mostly quiet. The top birds seen were a brief encounter with a Palm Warbler and a lovely meeting with a mother Spruce Grouse and her four chicks, who stood in the middle of the trail for what felt like forever. We also had a nice sighting of a non-bird with a very confiding Snowshoe Hare. Other species we saw included Tennessee and Orange-crowned Warblers and Common Mergansers. On our way back to the hotel, we made a brief stop to check out a pair of Pacific Loons, getting good looks at them. In addition to the loons, we also watched (and unfortunately listened to) a pair of very agitated Lesser Yellowlegs, which apparently were breeding nearby.

July 8

Today we departed our hotel in Yellowknife and took our flight to Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. The weather was decent and we had good enough visibility to watch the landscape change from the boreal forest to the treeless domain we call Arctic Tundra. Cambridge Bay is the largest community on Victoria Island. At 217,000 km2 Cambridge Bay is slightly larger than the island of Great Britain. This will be our base of operations for the next 4 days and is without question the most desired location of this tour. After getting settled into our comfy accommodation at the Green Row, we headed out in our vans to the local sewage treatment plant and landfill. Here we saw 22 species of

Arctic birds including: Greater White-fronted and Cackling geese with their attendant broods, Long-tailed Ducks, Sandhill Cranes, Semipalmated Plover, Red-necked Phalarope, Stilt Sandpiper and spectacular Sabine's Gulls! We had some down time and regrouped for dinner. After dinner we headed out to Town Water Road which is always a productive place. Here we saw Tundra Swan, King & Common eiders, American Golden-Plover, Baird's Sandpipers and a couple of Long-tailed Jaegers. We also got the loon trifecta with Red-throated, Pacific and pair of stunning Yellow-billed loons! We encountered a few songbirds as well: Horned Lark, American Pipit, Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting. A wonderful first day on the Arctic tundra!

July 9

After a hearty breakfast, we spent the rest of the day driving the Dewline Road north of Cambridge Bay. This road has a great diversity of shorebirds breeding along its length, with most of the species we saw having fresh chicks in tow. The first stop of the day provided us with a family of American Golden-Plovers, including two very new chicks with their amazing golden-flecked baby down. Other species we saw breeding along the road included Stilt Sandpipers, Semipalmated Sandpipers, and, most interestingly, a small family of White-rumped Sandpipers, a species which can be very difficult to see on this tour. Another highly sought-after species was ticked when we found a lovely and cooperative male Red Phalarope paddling around a small puddle in the tundra. We also had many good looks at Long-tailed Jaegers, including three adults that flew directly over us. We finished the day much like we started it, with a female American Golden-Plover brooding her just-hatched chicks on the side of the road. Other species seen included Pacific Loons, Glaucous Gulls, Lapland Longspurs, and Cackling Geese.



American Golden-Plover © Blair Dudeck



American Golden-Plover chick © Blair Dudeck



Lapland Longspur © Blair Dudeck



Red Phalarope © Blair Dudeck



Stilt Sandpiper © Blair Dudeck

July 10

The weather was a little inclement this morning with rain and low cloud and fortunately the road to Mount Pelly, our destination for the day was in great shape. We enjoyed breakfast at the Inns North and headed of in search of amazing tundra birds. We stopped at numerous location along the road as

wildlife and habitat necessitated. In spite of the cooler weather we managed to tally 24 species. It was great seeing flocks of Snow Geese on the tundra. Lots of other waterfowl were present including Greater White-fronted Geese, skittish Tundra Swans, King Eiders and a Red-breasted Merganser. Shorebirds were less prevalent today but we still managed to see some lovely Stilt Sandpipers and lots of Semipalmated Sandpipers. A distant Rough-legged Hawk was seen soaring over the tundra. We had some great views of Arctic Terns foraging on the lakes adjacent to the road. The highlight for many were the strikingly patterned Sabine's Gulls which put on a real show for us. Mount Pelly, a 200 metre esker and highest landform in the region, rises at the end of the road where we settled for our lunch in Ovayok Territorial Park. After lunch we hiked to the top of Mount Pelly and quickly found Horned Larks and American Pipits. Shortly thereafter a Rough-legged Hawk came into view at close range as it soared on the stiff wind from the north. On the way down we came across a Baird's Sandpiper that was acting "nesty" and after some effort we managed to pick out a diminutive chick that resembled the lichen-covered tundra more than a sandpiper! Heading back we finally caught up with our first Parasitic Jaeger. Then we found a pair of beautiful Black-bellied Plovers in their regal breeding plumage. Satisfied by a phenomenal day on the tundra, we headed back down the sinuous gravel road to get back in time for dinner at the Kuugaq Cafe. The weather had cleared up nicely to we headed out for a quick check for loons at Town Water Road. Not a minute had passed and a spectacular male Yellow-billed Loon surfaced right beside us in the gorgeous evening light!



Sabine's Gull © Ken Wright



Yellow-billed Loon © Ken Wright

July 11

We spent most of our last full day in Cambridge Bay exploring the Dease Road to the west of town. This road follows the coastline and provides great views of the Northwest Passage and still-lingering sea ice. The first animal we stopped for wasn't a bird this morning but a very cooperative Arctic Hare, which allowed us to watch it for several minutes while it foraged on tundra vegetation. Other highlights from the drive included a pair of Parasitic Jaegers actively defending their territory. All in all, it was a very interesting encounter. At one point, we were able to walk down to the sea and dip our toes in the Arctic Ocean while watching Common Eiders relax on nearby ice floes with Glaucous Gulls and Long-tailed Jaegers flying overhead. Further along the road, we saw several pairs of American Golden-Plovers along with many Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings. After our picnic lunch, we hiked around the tundra, enjoying the wildflowers and views, with the most interesting find being fresh caribou tracks in the road. Unfortunately, that was as close as we got to seeing those elusive creatures.



Parasitic Jaeger © Blair Dudeck



Parasitic Jaeger in flight © Blair Dudeck



Arctic Hare © Blair Dudeck



Common Eider © Blair Dudeck



Long-tailed Jaeger © Blair Dudeck

After dinner, we took another drive out to the Town Water Road and the landfill, where we added our first Pectoral Sandpiper and Brant Goose of the trip. We also got more looks at Yellow-billed Loon, Sabine's Gull, King Eider, Long-tailed Jaeger, and a large flock of Sandhill Cranes. We finished the day with a Hoary Redpoll singing on the wires outside our rooms. All in all, it was a great way to finish a great day in the Arctic.



Pectoral Sandpiper © Blair Dudeck



Hoary Redpoll © Blair Dudeck

July 12

We got up extra early this morning to head out for some birding on the Mount Pelly Road before getting ready for our flights back to Edmonton. Here we stopped on a small ridge that afforded a decent view of the surrounding tundra and lakes. There were many shorebirds present including some White-rumped Sandpipers, American Golden-Plover, Stilt Sandpipers, Baird's Sandpipers and even a few Pectoral Sandpipers—a sure sign that migration has begun. We wandered across the tundra to a lake where Sabine's Gulls and Arctic Terns were nesting and we had fantastic looks at this marvellous long-distance migrants. If that wasn't enough, we had a very obliging Red Phalarope fly in and land on the lake margin. A fabulous way to wrap up our time in the Arctic and conclude this very successful and wonderful tour. Thanks everyone for the positive energy and great times!



Group photo 2024

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