Eagle-Eye Tours



High Arctic & NWT Trip Report (Jun 29 - Jul 9, 2023)

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Guides: Yousif Attia and Jody Allair This incredible tour of the High Arctic took us on a journey through the seasons, but backwards! We started our trip by spending a day in search of birds and other fauna and flora in the mid-summer heat of the southern edge of the Boreal forest around Edmonton, AB. We then travel 1000 km due north to spend a few days on the shores of Great Slave Lake and Yellowknife, NT, at the northern edge of the Boreal. Here spring has just turned to summer. Finally, a third flight takes us 850 km northeast to Cambridge Bay, NU, above the Arctic Circle, and home of the open tundra. With sea-ice still melting, and snow drifts still clinging, many birds, such as the near-mythical Yellow-billed Loon are just arriving onto their breeding grounds. Standing there, on the open tundra, with toques on our heads and gloves on our hands, it really does feel like we traveled 6 weeks back in time and get to relive the magic of early spring all over again. Except this time it's with a high quality suite of birds including the already mentioned crown-jewel of Cambridge Bay, the Yellow-billed Loon, but also King Eiders, Sabine's Gulls, Long-tailed Jaegers, and so much more!

Day 1: Arrival in Leduc, AB

The first of our well established annual tours to the High Arctic and NWT kicked off in Leduc, Alberta on the outskirts of Edmonton on June 29. This tour visits three distinct eco-regions, the parkland, the boreal, and the tundra, and provides an opportunity to see a fascinating array of creatures. We leave no proverbial stone unturned in our search for critters in some of the wildest places in Canada. The participants and leaders met for supper at our hotel in Leduc to go over the plan and get to know our travel companions for the upcoming 10 days.

Day 2: Elk Island National Park and Beaverhill Lake Area

Our adventure started with a pleasant day around Edmonton, the launching point. We headed to Elk

Island National Park, a place known for a diversity of parkland-boreal transition birds, and a host of large mammals. Shortly after arriving, we found a large group of American Bison, the largest land mammals in the western hemisphere. The bison were active and we saw many young bulls practicing their rutting skills. Many birds typical of the region were in evidence including Least Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, Chipping Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, and White-throated Sparrow, Tennessee Warbler, and Yellow Warbler. We also noted many Brown-headed Cowbirds in their "natural habitat". Franklin's Gulls we're calling overhead, and we'd hear and see them for the entire day.



American Bison © Yousif Attia

A short drive north and a Broad-winged Hawk flew over the bus causing a moment of excitement! We moved on to Astotin Lake where we had a chance to scope the lake. Many of the expected waterfowl were present including Gadwall, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Blue-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Redhead, and Ruddy Duck. The most abundant species however, was Red-necked Grebe, of which we counted more than 80 on the water. Also of note was an impressive flock of American White Pelicans. In the woods we discovered Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Western Tanager, and a briefly drumming Ruffed Grouse. An Eastern Phoebe on a nest near an administration building was a treat to see! The wetlands near Astotin had singing Song Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, and Common Yellowthroat. The warm day was perfect for butterflies, and we spotted several species including Milbert's Tortoiseshell, White Admiral, Red Admiral, Northern Crescent, Mustard White, and Great Spangled Fritillary.



Great Spangled Fritillary © Yousif Attia

We enjoyed a lovely packed lunch at Tawayik Lake, and also had a chance to add a few birds to our list. A small flock of Pine Siskins flew over, while the loud song of Ovenbirds rang from the forest. A little ways down the trail and we had a nice view of singing Lincoln's Sparrow and American Redstart. We left Elk Island, skirting the western side of Beaverhills Lake towards some productive wetlands to the southeast. As soon as we arrived, it was apparent that the breeding season was in full swing. We quickly noted many Northern Shovelers, some Northern Pintail, and many expected waterfowl. Local breeding shorebirds included Killdeer, Black-necked Stilt, Marbled Godwit, Wilson's Phalarope, and Willet. But most surprising was that there were already flocks of southbound migrant shorebirds, including Red-necked Phalarope, Long-billed Dowitcher, Short-billed Dowitcher, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, and many Lesser Yellowlegs. Other highlights included a few Black Terns, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and scope views of singing Nelson's Sparrow! We even added a reptile in the form of Western Wandering Garter Snake! We had our fill of the wetlands and headed back to Leduc making a quick bathroom stop at Miquelon Lake Provincial Park. Our only Black-capped Chickadee for the day obliged us and we had nice looks at a 'Myrtle' Yellow-rumped Warbler.



Red-necked Grebe © Jody Allair

Day 3: Travel to Yellowknife, NT

Today was mostly a travel day, between Edmonton and Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. We dropped our luggage off at the hotel, which conveniently is located close to some excellent birding sites. The hotel itself turned out to be a gull hotspot and hotel staff were feeding Herring, California, and Ring-billed Gulls giving us a chance to study and compare at close range. We walked over to Frame Lake, where one of the first species we saw was a pair of Horned Grebes with young chicks on their backs. Many of the species we found near Edmonton were here as well, but we also added Common Merganser, White-crowned Sparrow, and Orange-crowned Warbler. Our first Short-billed Gull, Bonaparte's Gull and Arctic Terns flew around us, calling all the while. Frame lake also held our first Common Loon. The first of four species we would look for on this tour. It was Canada Day and we passed by many friendly locals on their way back from the downtown parade.



California, Herring, and Ring-billed gulls © Yousif Attia

After supper, we decided to take an evening stroll around Niven Lake, at the doorstep of our hotel. The lake and surrounding woods were absolutely "hopping' with life. Our attention was drawn to a section of the lake where a Bonaparte's Gull was feeding two chicks. Soras were calling from what seemed like every corner of the emergent vegetation. We eventually spotted one feeding at the edge of reeds, and even glimpsed a small black downy young! Many birds were already with newly hatched young, including Canvasback, White-crowned Sparrow, Yellow Warbler and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Other local highlights included Eastern Kingbird, Common Grackle, and Cedar Waxwing. As it turns out we would see Cedar Waxwings at many locations, which is somewhat unusual this far north.



Niven Lake © Jody Allair

Day 4: Yellowknife - Great Slave Lake & Frontier Trail

This morning was our boat trip around the Yellowknife Bay portion of the north arm of Great Slave Lake. Great Slave Lake is one of the deepest lakes in the world, and is an important migration stopover and breeding location for many birds. Conditions were perfect for being on the water, which was glass calm and paired with warm temperatures. A large flock of Cliff Swallows circled over the harbour, with a few Tree and Barn Swallows mixed in. Our first Red Fox of the trip was spotted while we waited for boats to launch. Once on the water we started adding birds to our list. Red-breasted Mergansers were straddling the islands and we noticed a distant Osprey above the city. As we boated further out we watched mostly Arctic Terns and Bonaparte's Gulls feeding on insects and small fish near the surface of the water. Many would buzz right past our boat allowing for great looks. We also eventually had close looks at Common Terns, and were able to compare them with the more abundant Arctic Terns. A small island had nesting pairs of Arctic Terns and their super cute downy chicks. We linked boats and enjoyed some of Carlos' famous wild berry tea and pound cake. The water was calm enough that we could hear songbirds as well, including Boreal Chickadee and Northern Waterthrush. Our fearless boat captains, Carlos and Dan-O took us to several islands with noisy nesting gull colonies. It was an incredible experience watching the behaviour of the adults communicate the threat of the boats to the young, that would either scamper into the bushes on the island, or even follow the adults in the water. Of course we posed no real threat and behaviour returned to normal as soon as we moved on.



Boat trip on Great Slave Lake © Jody Allair

Later, we noticed a couple of Bald Eagles perched on a small islet near the gull colony and decided to investigate. We were not prepared for what we would discover. Upon approaching the islet, we noticed there was not one but two young chicks! It was a Bald Eagle ground nest! No one on the boat including the Eagle-Eye guides nor the boat operators had ever witnessed this rare behaviour before! You never know what you will see when out in nature! We had a picnic lunch near town, then

proceeded west along the Frontier Trail (Hwy) 3 to explore the boreal forest. We lingered at one of our favourite spots where we came across a pair of raucous Lesser Yellowlegs. We also took this opportunity to add a few butterflies to our list including Greenish Blue and Northern Blue. Our first Swainson's Thrush was a nicely posing singing bird, and our first American Kestrel was on a wire on the drive back.

Day 5: Ingraham Trail

Today was designated for exploring the Ingraham Trail that extends northeast of Yellowknife. Our first stop was beside a productive wetland that had many of the regulars, plus American Coot and Ring-necked Duck. A flock of 17 White-winged Crossbills flew over and another Lesser Yellowlegs perched on a nearby tree, communicating its displeasure with our short visit. Our next stop was at Pontoon Lake Territorial Park where a coy Red-throated Loon was on the lake. We reached our lunch spot, the Cameron River Rampart falls. Following a picnic, we were greeted at the trailhead by a family group of Canada Jays. The short hike to the falls was pleasant and a Spotted Sandpiper was below the falls.



Cameron River Rampart Falls © Jody Allair

We worked our way back to Yellowknife, stopping for Belted Kingfisher, and a brief but exciting fly over adult Northern Goshawk. Once in town, we enjoyed a delicious fresh fish supper at Bullock's Bistro. Following supper, some of our group walked up to Pilot's Monument, where we had an opportunity to appreciate the town and bay from a vantage.

Day 6: Travel to Cambridge Bay, NU

Our flight to Cambridge Bay was in the early afternoon, so we squeezed in some morning birding at a local hotspot, Willow Flats. Another Red Fox was spotted near the parking lot. The boardwalks took us through some willows and eventually to a view of the bay. A Northern Waterthrush was nearby offering brief views. A Wilson's Snipe displayed over a marsh, and a distant flock of Cliff Swallows was harassed by a local Merlin. After breakfast, we traveled to the airport for our final leg of the journey, our flight to Cambridge Bay, on Victoria Island, Nunavut. Our flight had a very brief

layover at Kugluktuk, where we disembarked and had a few minutes to explore the nearby Rocky habitat. Our hope was for Harris's Sparrow, which we didn't find, although we saw a few other birds including a distant Bald Eagle. The best sighting though, was a chunky Arctic Ground Squirrel, a new mammal and one that doesn't occur on Victoria Island.



Arctic Ground Squirrel © Yousif Attia

We landed in Cambridge Bay in the late afternoon and we hit the ground running! Snow Buntings were singing right at the airport and it wasn't long before we started viewing some true Arctic birds. As usual, we checked the local dump ponds first. Spectacular King Eider, Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck and Red-necked Phalarope were waiting for us. A lovely Sabine's Gull showed off its diagnostic wing pattern while ghostly pale Glaucous Gulls cruised overhead. Among the dump enthusiasts were rusty Sandhill Cranes, displaying Horned Larks, and a singing White-crowned Sparrow.



Horned Lark © Yousif Attia

After supper, we went for a short drive around the airport and found our first Arctic Hare. The beautiful song of Lapland Longspur rang from the tundra and we noted the exquisite display of wildflowers carpeting the tundra.



Arctic Hare © Yousif Attia



Arctic wildflowers © Jody Allair

Day 7: Road to Mount Pelly and Dease Road

Our first full day above the Arctic Circle did not disappoint. A short pre-breakfast check of the waterfront provided our awaited views of Red-throated Loon. After breakfast we drove the road to Mount Pelly, northeast of town and started collecting all the expected birds. Not far from town we saw and heard American Pipits in flight display. Semipalmated Sandpiper were the dominant shorebird, but we soon also observed Baird's Sandpiper and found a Semipalmated Plover nest. Long-tailed Jaegers were common and Pacific Loons seemed to be on every pond. The most common goose was Cackling, followed by Greater White-fronted. Our first Arctic Fox was a fast moving but splendid individual with a puffy white tail running across the tundra.



Semipalmated Plover © Jody Allair

Despite the cooler Arctic temperatures, butterflies were in evidence and we found Polaris Fritillary, Ross's Alpine and Melissa Arctic. A clogged culvert during the spring melt created a washout about halfway down the road to Pelly. Undeterred, we explored the areas we could and hoped that the washout might be fixed during our stay. At some point, we saw a front loader with a pile of gravel pass by and held our fingers firmly crossed.



Long-tailed Duck © Yousif Attia

We headed back to town for a picnic lunch at the waterfront. As soon as we exited the vehicles, we

stirred a baby Arctic Hare from hiding, a few feet in front of us. Lunch was entertaining as we ate and watched large rafts of Common and King Eiders in the bay. At some point during lunch, we spotted the crown jewel of Cambridge Bay fly right over, an immaculate breeding plumage Yellow-billed Loon! This was our fourth and final loon species of the trip. After lunch, we drove the road west of town called Dease Road. This road skirts along the coast line with epic views of Dease Strait in the Arctic Ocean. One particularly productive viewpoint provided more views of two Yellow-billed, one Red-throated, and a few more Pacific Loons. A nice surprise in the form of an adult Peregrine Falcon was well received. The ice shelf was still largely intact and distant Ringed Seals provided contrast to the white ice. We also encountered our first Tundra Swans and American Golden-Plovers and even spotted a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers.



American Golden Plover © Yousif Attia

Day 8: Dew Line Road & Pelly Road

An early start this morning and we were bouncing down the Dew Line road. It was nice to get better looks at some of the regulars, and noting some northern Northern Pintails. It wasn't long before we came across our first Stilt Sandpipers and Pectoral Sandpipers. Eventually we had multiple sightings of both species with newly hatched chicks. We even witnessed a tender moment where a female Pectoral called her brood to take shelter under her belly feathers to keep them warm. Our first of several Rough-legged Hawks was also noted on the drive back towards town.



Pectoral Sandpiper with chicks © Yousif Attia

After some time off to check out the townsite in the afternoon, we met for supper. After supper we took advantage of the endless sunshine for more birding along the road to Mt. Pelly for perhaps improved chances at another Arctic Fox sighting. It was apparent that bird activity was still high and we added a family of Snow Geese with newly fledged young. Another Arctic Hare gave us a demonstration of how well they can blend into their surroundings. We were pleased to find our first Black-bellied Plover, a female near her nest. The greatest triumph however was learning that the washout was indeed fixed and in excellent condition. The drive home did produce an Arctic Fox, and although the views were distant, we watched it chase around the tundra spooking up ground nesting birds and at some point even dive into a pond and go for a swim to cross! Sometimes it pays off to stay up late on the tundra.

Day 9: Mount Pelly & Dease Road

We were all pretty excited that we could now reach Mt. Pelly Territorial Park, and the plan was to have lunch there. The birding along the way was keeping us busy but we were also focussing on searching for the species we had not seen yet, and that list was already short. We stopped near a pond that held a Red Phalarope the previous year, and decided to stop and check, without putting too much hope into it. Incredibly, not only was a male Red Phalarope there again, its nest was probably no further than 5 meters from where it was last year! The phalarope trifecta was complete! Although Red Phalaropes are present, they seem to be less in number and are usually harder to find than other shorebirds around Cambridge Bay. Also sitting on nests nearby were Arctic Tern, Long-tailed Ducks and the abundant Lapland Longspurs.



Lapland Longspur © Yousif Attia



View from top of Mt. Pelly

We had a lovely picnic lunch at the base of Mt. Pelly, and about half of the group even walked up a good portion of the northwest slope. The views from the top offered an opportunity to take in the vast rolling tundra landscape and the amount of freshwater bodies there are. The drive back produced more Snow Geese, including some blue phase individuals. We also noted mixed flocks of Pectoral, Semipalmated, and Stilt sandpipers, already preparing to head back south after likely

failed breeding attempts. On the drive back we found an adult Baird's Sandpiper with newly hatched chicks just on the outskirts of town. The point where the tundra begins and the town ends, and vice versa, really is a grey area.



Stilt Sandpiper © Yousif Attia

After supper, we drove down the Dease Road again. We noticed that the recent south winds had pushed the ice up against the shoreline, in contrast to the open water we saw just two days previous. This did limit the number of loons we expected to see but we still saw many of the now familiar Arctic species including another pair of Parasitic Jaegers. After only a few days of warmer weather, the wildflowers were even more noticeable and indeed the tundra was covered in flowers.

Day 10: Travel to Leduc, AB

It was our final morning in the Arctic. We stopped to check out a popular road and lake just north of town called Water Lake. This lake has always been known to produce Yellow-billed Loons and we were not disappointed. Before long, we heard the yodeling call of a loon. It sounded like a Common Loon, but deeper and louder. We enjoyed scope views while a second loon flew over, quite low over the lake. Perhaps for territorial reasons, the loon on the water began calling and kept that going for a good 5 minutes! What a treat and the perfect send off to see this prize on our last day! Watch a video of the Yellow-billed Loon here. With a bit more time, we thought of checking out the Dump and Sewage Pond, which was the first place we visited when we arrived 4 days ago. We counted nearly 40 Red-necked Phalaropes, a sign that some birds were already thinking of heading back south. A few Sabine's Gulls and King Eiders indulged us one last time. After brunch, we drove a short portion of the road that leads to Mount Pelly to spend every last minute on the tundra.



Baird's Sandpiper © Yousif Attia

Finally it was time to fly back south. Our flight to Yellowknife was silky smooth, and we transferred as a group on our connecting flight to Edmonton. Since it was our last evening together, we all gathered for some appetizers and drinks at the hotel restaurant. After much reminiscing and sharing, we all said our goodbyes.



Our group

eBird Trip Report:https://ebird.org/canada/tripreport/142212 iNaturalist Project: https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/eagleeye-tours-high-arctic-northwest-territories