



## New Brunswick and Grand Manan Trip Report (Aug 16 - 25, 2022)

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With Paul Prior and Adam Timpf Such a pleasure to return again to New Brunswick, but especially to the wonder-filled island of Grand Manan. The tour takes in a lovely array of different habitats which even the occasional rain-day can't diminish. This time we amassed a respectable 130 bird species, with the highlights surely being the tens of thousands of "SemiPs" at Johnson Mills, and the boat trip out into the middle of a very, very tranquil Fundy. **Day 1: Arrival Day 2: Fundy Shores** Having met all 9 participants for supper the night before, we were ready for a 7 am departure, and headed up Highway 1 to the Fundy National Park where a lengthy break in the rain allowed us a very pleasant 2 hour hike along the Caribou Plains Trail. Here we soaked up the gorgeous greens and greys that make up the Boreal palette: Ghost Pipe and Hobblebush, Interrupted and Northern Beech Ferns, Spanish Moss and Yellow Birch. Very easy on the eyes. Birdwise we were pleased to find good numbers of Golden-crowned Kinglet families, with a few local warblers - **Myrtle, Magnolia, Black-throated Green** - tagging along. Rain set in as noon approached and so we made the most of the new covered picnic facility for the first of many buffet lunches. After a quick stop at the Visitor Centre in Alma we continued east in heavier rain to Shepody where the excellent Shorebird Interpretation Centre afforded shelter until the rain had passed. We strolled out to the nearby viewing platform but as expected shorebird numbers were low despite the rising tide. Several passes by the local **Peregrines** surely didn't help matters, but we were kept entertained by small numbers of **Semipalmated** and **Least Sandpipers** stopping en route to the main roost location further up the bay. The species list was augmented by a passing trio of **Whimbrel**, several **Short-billed Dowitchers** and numbers of **Semipalmated Plovers** - all recently arrived from the tundra. **Day 3: Shorebirds Galore** A short drive from our Moncton hotel got us to the Sackville Waterfowl Park where we spent the rest of a very lovely morning exploring the series of ponds. **American Wigeon** and **Gadwall** outnumbered all other duck species but shorebirds were a little

sparse and so, before our second picnic, we dropped by the nearby Water Retention Ponds where there was an assortment of **Lesser** and **Greater Yellowlegs** with a few **Short-billed Dowitchers** thrown in for good measure.



*Yellowlegs and Short-billed Dowitcher at Sackville Water Retention Ponds © Paul Prior*

After lunch we headed south towards the Johnson Mills area; the tide was still way out but we could see thousands of sandpipers spread out across the vast expanse of the Fundy mud flats. Knowing that high tide - when the shorebirds would be concentrated at the roost site- was still a couple of hours away, we made a detour to nearby Rockport and Peck's Cove where we were able to get closer to **Least** and **Semipalmated Sandpipers** feeding at the edge of the saltmarsh. An hour or so before high tide we drove back to Johnson Mills in perfect time to take our places on the viewing platform to witness the spectacle of perhaps 30,000 **Semipalmated Sandpipers** flocking back-and-forth along the shoreline, flushed repeatedly by local **Peregrines** and then settling just feet from the platform. An absolutely thrilling display.



*A couple thousand Semipalmated Sandpipers at Johnson Mills, NB © Paul Prior*



*Semipalmated Sandpipers massing on the beach at Johnsons Mill © Paul Prior*

**Day 4: Kouchibouguac National Park** We opted for an early breakfast to allow us to make the most of the deserted boardwalk out to Kelly's beach on the shore of Kouchibouguac National Park. It was a gorgeous morning and we were able to enjoy the foraging **Great Blue Herons**, **White-rumped Sandpipers**, **Red-breasted Mergansers**, and **Northern Harriers** at our leisure. A single

**Red Knot** added some excitement and while at the forest edge our first proper mixed-warbler flock kept us busy identifying **Northern Parula**, **Ovenbird**, **Blue-headed Vireo** and **Blackburnian** and **Nashville Warblers**, among others. The beach itself was pretty quiet but the calm, sunny weather inspired a couple of individuals to dip toes in the Atlantic.



*Northern Harrier at the Saltmarsh at Kouchibouguac National Park © Paul Prior*

Our second trail was the rather obviously named Bog Trail where we stopped to ogle various bog plants including the three local carnivores: Pitcher Plant, Round-leaved Sundew and Horned Bladderwort. Avian interest was provided almost entirely by an obliging family party of **Palm Warblers**, here being the brightly coloured eastern subspecies. Picnic lunch took us into early afternoon, usually a relatively birdless part of the day and sure enough the short Salt Marsh Trail confirmed that notion. **Day 5: Return to St. John** We stayed local to Bouctouche for the morning, catching up with small mixed-warbler flocks in the local riparian habitats, first at Pays de la Sagouine and then in the Irving Arboretum. These flocks provided great looks at various fall warbler plumages- fine looking **American Redstarts**, and **Cape May**, **Black-throated Green**, and **Chestnut-sided Warblers**. **Grey Catbirds** and a young **Lincoln Sparrow** foraged in the shrubs along the "Sagouine" trail, and a pair of **Broad-winged Hawks** soared low overhead at the Arboretum. After a short detour to the search unsuccessfully for a vagrant American White Pelican we hit the road for the 2 1/2 hour drive back to Saint John. **Day 6: Ferry to Grand Manan** A relatively leisurely breakfast was followed by an hour of driving to Black's Harbour where we were to board the ferry for Grand Manan. We scanned the nearshore waters where **Common Eider**, **Black Guillemots** and **Common Loons** were going about their business while various gulls, including half a dozen **Black-legged Kittiwakes**, loafed on the off-shore rocks and islets. Once on the ferry we made straight for the upper deck in readiness for some serious scanning in search of seabirds. We were not disappointed. The one and a half hour crossing introduced us to **Great Shearwaters**, **Red-necked Phalaropes**, **Northern Gannet** and the occasional **Razorbill**. But best of all was the seeming abundance of **Harbour Porpoises**: no doubt the flat calm waters made viewing these animals easier than on all my previous crossings.



*Harbour Porpoises much in evidence on the ferry crossing © Paul Prior*

Our rooms at the Marathon Hotel were not quite ready for us and so we headed straight for the picnic shelters at Castalia Marsh. The rest of the afternoon was spent settling into what would be our home for the next three days. **Day 7: Becalmed at Sea** Back to Castalia Marsh after breakfast to make the most of the high tide in our search for **Nelson's Sparrows**. The current high tide was too low to push the sparrows into the rosebushes by the beach and so we carefully picked our way across the saltmarsh and found a couple of cooperative family parties.



*Searching for Nelson's Sparrow at Castalia (note the Least Sandpiper hiding in the bottom left corner) © Paul Prior*

We were due to embark on our whale watching expedition at noon and were watching the gathering fog with some trepidation. En route to our embarkation point we stopped in at Long Pond and Great Pond - and could barely see the water! But then at noon we set sail from Seal Cove and steamed off into the thick fog, expectations considerably dampened. After about a half hour the boat stopped and drifted in the silence and we were informed by Durlan, the first mate and onboard naturalist, that we would now simply listen for whales surfacing and spouting. Sure enough, after a few minutes the distinctive “fffwwhhh” sounded a few hundred metres off starboard. Orienting on the sound we soon found ourselves in the company of a pod of five **Hump-back Whales**. Magical! At about the same time, the sun broke through burning off the fog and Durlan started “chumming” at the stern.



*Humpbacks ahoy © Paul Prior*

Almost immediately we were joined by a few **Great Shearwaters**, and the lifting fog revealed parties of **Wilson’s Storm-petrels** and flotillas of **Red-necked Phalaropes**. Then seemingly from nowhere we were joined by an adult **South Polar Skua**! It stayed with us for the next half hour affording amazing looks. The pod of Humpys continued to keep our fellow non-birding passengers enthralled while we dozen or so birders checked out a passing adult dark phase **Pomarine Jaeger**, an adult pale phase **Parasitic Jaeger**, a lone **Sooty Shearwater**, and the continuing hundreds of petrels and phalaropes.



*South Polar Skua east of Grand Manan © Paul Prior*



*Great Shearwater © Paul Prior*

As we sailed back to Grand Manan we encountered a large raft of approximately 300 flightless moulting **Common Eider** and then Durlan suggested a close pass by the Green Island rocks where all 16 roosting cormorants turned out to be **Great Cormorants**. All in all, a really rewarding few hours out on the Bay of Fundy.



*Raft of flightless moulting Common Eiders © Paul Prior*



*Great Cormorants, Green Islands, Grand Manan © Paul Prior*

We decided to make the most of the excellent weather before the rain predicted for the following day and drove to Southwest Head to marvel at the high volcanic basalt cliffs, and to watch a pair of adult **Black Guillemots** still taking food to their nest cranny (seemed rather late!). **Day 8: Not Just Birds** As predicted a complete change in the weather. There was some hope that perhaps overnight rain would've dropped some migrant flocks onto the north end of the island but the system had come from the south and so it appeared that all the passerines we encountered at Long Eddy Point were local nesters. Lots of **Red-breasted Nuthatches** and **Black-capped Chickadees**, with a few **Black-and-white** and **Magnolia Warblers**, **Alder Flycatchers** and **Northern Parulas** thrown in. Scanning the straits from Long Eddy with scopes gave us looks at another couple of **Razorbills** but

the persistent “mizzle” and constant foghorn finally persuaded us to change tack and head for the Grand Manan Museum for a change of scenery. This museum really is a treasure trove, with all manner of wonderful tales of island history and characters. We resisted the temptation to include some of the more interesting specimens in the bird collection on our trip list (Passenger Pigeon, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Fulvous Whistling-duck!!). Sated with this cultural diversion and with the weather improving slightly we headed west across the centre of the island to Dark Harbour where we had our picnic lunch and then strolled along the beach to explore the cove. Then since it seemed the fog really was starting to lift we decided to have one last look for stranded migrants. We returned to Great Pond where at least we were now able to see the marsh. Sure enough, there appeared to have been an arrival of songbirds with a good 40 or 50 **Myrtle Warblers** feeding quite frantically on the post-rain emergence of bugs. They were joined by small numbers of other warbler species - **Cape May**, **Bay-breasted**, **Black-and-whites** and a single **Palm Warbler**. As the lifting fog revealed the pond and marsh we were able to ‘scope a few of the shorebirds and found our first **Solitary Sandpipers** and a couple of **Pectoral Sandpipers**. The ducks seemed a lot more nervous and small flights of flushed **Green-winged Teal** and gave rather unsatisfactory views. **Day 9: Back to the Mainland**



*Swallowtail Lighthouse, Grand Manan © Paul Prior*

This morning was to be our last opportunity to visit the splendid Swallowtail Lighthouse where the early morning calm and briefly clearing fog presented us with wonderful photographic opportunities of the lighthouse, the cliffs, and North Harbour. As the fog returned we started to walk back down to North Harbour in readiness for our ferry sailing, stopping to attempt to pull in any nearby warbler flocks. In general the only passerines that were really active were the ever present **Red-breasted Nuthatches** and inquisitive **Black-capped Chickadees**, although a handsome male **Black-throated green Warbler** did add splash of extra color.



*Black-throated Green Warbler © Paul Prior*

We boarded our ferry on time and again spent the crossing scanning the mirror calm sea for any passing seabirds. The crossing was very similar to our first with **Harbour Porpoises** everywhere we looked and flocks of **Great Shearwaters** loafing on the surface of the straits, but there were more family parties of **Common Murres** and even one flyby **Atlantic Puffin**. Rather distant Jaegers, both **Pomarine** and **Parasitic**, added some further excitement. From Black's Harbour we drove back to Saint John, making one last birding detour to explore the Irving Nature Park. The tide was very low so we found a vantage point from where to view the couple of thousand foraging shorebirds. A **Merlin** passed over the flats several times flushing all of the feeding birds and we were able to pick out a single **American Golden Plover** mixed in with the **Black-bellied Plovers**, and a single **Red Knot**. We continued along the Park's main road until we could view the Bay of Fundy from a rocky promontory which afforded us the opportunity to scan and find a dozen **Surf Scoters** feeding a few hundred metres from shore. Group photos were arranged and snapped and then finally we headed back to town via a spontaneous detour to view the Reversing Falls, apparently a must-see for every visitor to New Brunswick, but then I honestly feel that over the course of the past 9 or 10 days our birding group had seen so much more of what makes the Maritimes worth returning to, time and time again.



*EET group 2022 © Paul Prior*