



Newfoundland Birding with Canadian Geographic Trip Report 2023

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With Liron Gertsman & Tim Lucas

Although the newest province to be added to Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador is filled with an incredible history of the earliest of North American explorers. Its geography and history make it not only an incredible place to see birds, but also a unique location to experience birds. Our group, along with Canadian Geographic Society ambassador Russell Potter, spent 8 incredible days exploring the breeding birds, culture and history of the 15th largest Island in the world.

June 6 - 7: St. John's - Bay Bulls

Our group all arrived safely on June 6 and were greeted with thick North Atlantic fog that added to the magic of an already charming St. Johns. Despite being the capital of Newfoundland and Labrador, St. John's relaxed state and remnants of old architecture has the unique ability to transport visitors back to a time that is written about in history books. Spending any time in St. Johns, it is impossible not to come face to face with the history of early "New World" settlements. The first night, our group ate dinner at the Yellowbelly Brewery and Pub, a unique building built in 1846, and one of the few to survive the great St. John's fire of 1892. After a good nights rest, the group departed early for Cape Race, the easternmost point in North America, where we were greeted with more fog and a light drizzle. However, the same fog that reduced visibility also brought in a few surprises to shore from further out to sea. Soon after arriving, the group locked on to 4 Leach's Storm Petrels bounding in and out of the fog low to the water: a species not often seen during the daytime! A few moments later two Manx Shearwater, a species that has historically bred in very small numbers on islands off of Newfoundland, but whose breeding status is uncertain today! Other tubenoses like Northern Fulmar and Sooty Shearwater also made an appearance briefly, likely brought closer to land by the fog. The group also spotted a young Bonaparte's Gull, rare here during the summer months! Leaving Cape Spear, our next stop was Bidgood Park, near the historic town of

Goulds, where we picked up our first breeding songbirds of the trip like Northern Waterthrush and Black-and-white Warbler. This spruce bog also housed displaying Wilson's Snipe that athletically *wizzed* over our head in formation.



A beautiful male Black-and-White Warbler gave us great views at Bidgood Park! © Liron Gertsman

After Bidgood, we drove south to Bay Bulls where we had lunch and embarked on our first boat tour of the trip with O'Brien's Whales and Birds. A short boat ride out of the bay treated us to point blank views of tens of thousands of Atlantic Puffin, Common and Thick-billed Murres, Razorbills, and Black-legged Kittiwake that covered the cliffs on Gull and Green Island. We even spotted a Great Cormorant on the rocks, a seldom seen species on this boat trip! More surprises awaited as on our journey back to the harbour, where we were followed by three Northern Fulmar and two Leach's Storm Petrels! After saying goodbye to our captains and interpreters on the boat, we made the short journey back to St. John's where we picked up a beautiful male Tufted Duck at Mundy's Pond.



Upon arriving at Witless Bay Ecological Reserve, we were greeted by tens of thousands of Common Murres and Atlantic Puffins © Liron Gertsman



Common Murres resting on a cliff in Witless Bay © Liron Gertsman



Among the abundant Common Murres (left), we spotted small numbers of Thick-billed Murres (middle). Black-legged Kittiwake nests (right) also dotted the cliffs. © Liron Gertsman



The highlight for many in Witless Bay was fantastic views of Atlantic Puffins. © Liron Gertsman



Good numbers of Razorbills were present among the thousands of Common Murres. © Liron Gertsman

June 8: St. John's - Trepassey - St. Shott's

We were up again for a 7am breakfast at the JAG and were out the door by 8:15. The weather today could not have been more different from yesterday: clear and sunny! We headed straight over to the MUN campus where a Pink-footed Goose has set up residency, a very rare species anywhere in North America! We also scored Hooded Merganser, and our first Pine Siskin and American Wigeon in the same pond!



A vagrant Pink-footed Goose that provided close-up views for the group in St. John's! © Liron Gertsman



Group photo with the obliging Pink-footed Goose! © Liron Gertsman

After jumping in the bus, we headed to La Manche, where we walked the trail to the suspension bridge where we picked up our first Black-throated Green Warbler, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, and Magnolia Warbler. We were also treated to incredible scope views of a singing male Pine Grosbeak! After La Manche, we made a quick stop at Cape Broyle where the fishing docks there attracted

hundreds of gulls, terns, loons, and even a Razorbill. Continuing south, we stopped at the Tetley Tea Room for lunch in Ferryland, perhaps one of the most scenic and historic villages on the East coast of the Avalon. After lunch we dove deeper into the rich history of the area with a stroll through the archeological dig. This dig uncovers the first Spanish settlement in the area that dates back to 1623! However, it wasn't long before some of the group was distracted by our first large colony of Arctic Tern on the inner bay there that showed off at point blank range.



Arctic Terns provided fantastic views in Ferryland. © Liron Gertsman

After high fives all around, we continued towards Trepassey where we dropped some of the group off at the Edge of the Avalon Inn. Those that were keen made an excursion to St. Shott's, where we explored the barrens unique to the Southern Avalon peninsula. On the road we enjoyed great views of Greater Yellowlegs, Arctic Tern, and even a surprise Common Merganser! We also stopped to take in a singing Wilson's Warbler, and were buzzed by a Merlin on the hunt! With St. Shott's in view, a stop to scan across the barrens revealed our first and only Woodland Caribou, a species once covering these barrens in the thousands, but now difficult to find. After a brief scan of the Ocean at St. Shott's made it back just in time for dinner at the edge of the Avalon Inn.



The group observes a caribou on the beautiful tundra near St. Shott's. © Liron Gertsman

June 9: Mistaken Point Ecological Reserve - St. Brides

This morning we were treated to breakfast at the Inn, and were out exploring by 9:00 am. We made a beautiful, scenic drive down Lower Trepassey, a large jetty of land that stick out in the harbour, where we had a Harbour Seal, great views of Blackpoll Warbler, and more enchanting Arctic Tern in the beautiful, early-morning fog.



*We admired as this Blackpoll Warbler sang its heart out close to our accommodation in Trepassey!
© Liron Gertsman*

We then made our way to the Edge of the Avalon Interpretive Centre in Portugal Cove South where we learned about the area and fossils we planned to visit. The guides from the edge of the Avalon Interpretive Centre led us out to Mistaken Point Ecological Reserve, an exclusive, rare opportunity to visit this UNESCO world heritage site of fossils buried under ash for millions of years. Along the way, the group shared great views of a couple of males, and one female Willow Ptarmigan silhouetted on the barrens. Although the hike was long, the scenery was spectacular in the morning fog.



This male Willow Ptarmigan, brilliantly camouflaged with the tundra, provided great views near Mistaken Point. © Liron Gertsman



The group explores ancient fossils on the coast of Newfoundland. © Liron Gertsman



A 580 million year old fossil! © Liron Gertsman

After munching down our packed lunches, we headed out to our Hotel in St. Brides, driving through some of the most beautiful scenery that the Avalon has to offer. Arriving in St. Brides just before 6pm, we had dinner at Da Birds Eye and checked into Capeway Inn and Efficiency Units.

June 10: Cape St. Mary's - Castle Hill - Charlottetown

A 7:00 am home cooked breakfast at Da Birds Eye allowed us to get to Cape St. Mary's early to catch the seabird spectacle. Arriving at Cape St. Mary's, the fog continued to be thick, and a light drizzle allowed us a little bit of extra time in the visitor's centre gathering the context and significance of this location. We then made the trek out to the seabird colony ("Bird Rock") and were not disappointed. A few hour gap in weather coincided perfectly with our visit and we were treated to point blank views of Northern Gannets (including some with black eyes that have survived the avian flu) a Razorbill, more Atlantic Puffin, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Common and Thick-billed Murre. The staggering cliffs created an incredible backdrop to a truly wonderful morning. After cleaning up at Cape St. Mary's, we headed back to Da Birds Eye for lunch and continued on our way to Charlottetown to spend the evening.



Thousands of gorgeous Northern Gannets provided fantastic views as they performed courtship rituals during a period of sunshine at bird rock. © Liron Gertsman



Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve provides the most accessible Northern Gannet viewing opportunity on the entire North American continent! © Liron Gertsman



Common Murres were abundant at Cape St. Mary's, and provided fantastic viewing and photo opportunities. © Liron Gertsman

While the group planned for a 2 hour drive to Charlottetown, a mechanical issue with the bus gave us a unique opportunity to experience the kindness and hospitality that Newfoundlanders are known for first hand. While waiting for new vans to be delivered, the group was entertained by an

impromptu version of “I’s the b’y” and a presentation by Liron about some of his favorite bird species in the visitor’s Centre. Parks Canada staff volunteered to drive into the town of Placentia to pick up coffee and tea for the group, a much appreciated way to warm up after looking for birds in the rain! After saying goodbye to our new friends at Castle Hill, we drove a short distance into Placentia for dinner at the Three Sisters Pub, situated in a building that has stood since the mid 18th century! After dinner, we switched vehicles without a hitch, then made our way to Charlottetown to spend the night at the Clode Sound Motel on the very edge of Terra Nova National Park, a park named after the latin name for Newfoundland!

June 11: Terra Nova National Park - Bonavista

Those that got up early this morning were treated to our first Blue-headed Vireo, but the whole group was able to see crippling scope views of Red Crossbill in the hotel parking lot! After a later start, we drove into Terra Nova National Park and started by hiking around Sandy Pond, where we worked to find birds in the rain and were rewarded with a Ruffed Grouse putting on a show right on the trail. We were then treated to great views of a courting pair of Boreal Chickadees at Ochre Hill Lookout Trail before continuing on for lunch at the Terra Nova National Park visitor’s Centre, where we had lunch and explored the exhibits. It was here in this protected sound where we scored our first Red-breasted Merganser and front row seats to a Pine Siskin feeding on the lawn.



We encountered this Ruffed Grouse strutting down the middle of the trail in Terra Nova National Park. © Liron Gertsman



A celebratory post-Ruffed Grouse group selfie! © Liron Gertsman



We were treated to fantastic views of Boreal Chickadee in Terra Nova National Park. © Liron Gertsman

After lunch, we continued on to Bonavista, a postcard-worthy town that has embraced its historically significant role in Newfoundland's fishing industry. Arriving in Bonavista, we scored a Lesser black-backed Gull right on the lawn of the Harbour Quarters Inn! Most of the group checked out the Ryan Premises National Historic Site, and explored this rich history and the role that the Ryan family

played.

June 12: Elliston Puffin Colony - Dungeon Provincial Park - Cape Bonavista Lighthouse

We woke up this morning to wind, rain and fog but positive attitudes and excitement for what we had planned for this day. We drove to Elliston and made the windy walk out to the famous colony of Atlantic Puffins that did not disappoint! It was here that we were treated to our best views of Atlantic Puffins yet and we were alerted to the old root cellar history by Russell. The group then opted to head to *Home from the Sea*, a museum dedicated to the dangerous job of the Sealers, a hardy group of men that used to make their living along this part of the coast.



A pair of Atlantic Puffins flies head-first into the wind past the viewing area in Elliston. © Liron Gertsman

After the Sealer's Museum, we checked out the monument and *Where the Ice Flows*, a unique local carver before heading to Lunch at the Puffin Cafe. Our lunch was happily interrupted by a huge iceberg that we spotted floating offshore from the restaurant window! We even watched the iceberg begin to break up and roll over! Some locals commented that they only see an iceberg of this size once every two years. Our first Iceberg of the trip!



This massive iceberg drifting past was a welcome interruption to our lunch in Elliston! © Liron Gertsman

After lunch, some decided to check out Bonavista on their own, while others opted for an afternoon birding excursion to Dungeon National Park and the Cape Bonavista Lighthouse. On the way back to the hotel, we found a friendly pair of Cross Fox that were hunting a backroad downtown! They passed within a few meters as they hunted in the grass.



A Red Fox searching for prey in downtown Bonavista. © Liron Gertsman

We then headed back to Harbour Quarters Inn to celebrate with an authentic seafood dinner

overlooking the harbour. We even sang along to acoustic live music by a local from Bonavista!

June 13: Trinity - St. John's

Our final day we left Bonavista and headed south to Trinity for a Zodiac tour of Trinity Bay. Arriving at our breakfast stop, we were greeted by a friendly Canada Jay!



The group admiring a friendly Canada Jay, perched on the "Trinity Cabins" entrance sign. © Liron Gertsman

The group admiring a friendly Canada Jay, perched on the "Trinity Cabins" entrance sign. Photo: Liron Gertsman After an awesome home cooked breakfast at the Trinity Cabins, those that opted out of the boat tour enjoyed themselves by exploring the historic and picturesque town of Trinity itself. The rest of the group suited up in survival suits and listened to our skippers give an overview of the life history of whales that we expected to see in Trinity Bay. Black Guillemots, Arctic and Common Terns, Razorbill and Northern Gannets escorted us around Trinity Bay, where we pulled up alongside an iceberg that was grounded in 250 ft of water! To search for whales, we ventured further out, and even stopped by another island puffin colony where we were treated to a show that we had almost become accustomed to! A windy ride back to Trinity Ecotours and Lodge, the group warmed up with hot chocolate, coffee and tea while recalling stories of the boat trip!



We were treated to close up views of this impressive iceberg in Trinity Bay! If you look closely, you'll see Black Guillemots flying past. © Liron Gertsman



Atlantic Puffins and a Black-legged Kittiwake fly by, with an iceberg floating in the distance. © Liron Gertsman

Meeting up with the group that had stayed on land, we said goodbye to our skippers and headed for lunch at one of the best seafood places in town just down the road! This fueled us up for our drive back to St. John's, arriving just in time for dinner at *The Rock*, a fitting place named after this

incredible island that we had been exploring! After hugs and sharing highlights of the trip we parted ways to reflect on a spectacular tour of Southern Newfoundland!