Eagle-Eye Tours



Nova Scotia Trip Report: Sep 3 - 12, 2024

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Day 1 - We kicked off the inaugural Eagle-Eye fall Nova Scotia tour with a wonderful bird filled and sunny day in the Annapolis Valley. Having arrived in Halifax the night before, our group drove the hour and a bit to Miners Marsh in Kentville. This DU marsh along the banks of the Cornwallis River offers a nice mix of ducks, shorebirds and songbirds. We started right away with a flurry of activity, enjoying the antics of numerous Northern Flickers, and Eastern Wood Pewees. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds whizzed by as we scoped the numerous shorebirds at fairly close range, including both yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Solitary Sandpiper, Wilson's Snipe, Least Sandpiper, and Semipalmated Sandpiper. Green-winged Teal were in abundance, and we spotted a few Wood Ducks coming back into their striking plumage. Before we knew it, the morning had flown by, and we left Miners having tallied 44 species, and the ice officially broken! A picnic lunch at the Grand Pre Historic site in Wolfville had us spotting many Bald Eagles as we ate, and after a quick refueling at Just Us café, we made our way to the Guzzle at Grand Pre to get up close with thousands of roosting Semipalmated Sandpipers. Perched on the edge of the Minas Basin with the world's highest tide, the shorebirds have endless mudflats to fatten up on for their big journey to South America for their winter. However, at high tide with the mud covered, the sandpipers roost right on the rocky shore edge and allow us humans to get up close and personal. Thousands of these birds delighted us with their swirling flocks, sometimes in an effort to dodge two Peregrine Falcons, other times simply to resettle on the shoreline. We scanned through all the semis and picked out numerous White-rumped Sandpipers, Semipalmated Plovers, Sanderling, Least Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstones, and a lone American Golden Plover. It was quite the spectacle, and after a few hours, we reluctantly pried ourselves away from the birds to go have a lovely dinner at the Old Orchard Inn.



Semipalmated Sandpipers at the Guzzle © James S Lees



White-rumped Sandpipers © James S Lees

Day 2- Today was another sunny beautiful day as we went to nearby Blomidon Provincial Park. Perched high on red sandstone cliffs, this park can be great for migrant songbirds in the fall. After taking in the spectacular scenery, we wandered the park in search of songbirds. What started off slow, soon turned into a flood as we crisscrossed the large campground area, encountering small flocks everywhere. Cedar Waxwings and Purple Finches were constants as they enjoyed the

bountiful mountain ash berry crop. We saw 15 species of warblers, most providing good views, along with Blue-headed Vireo and Red-eyed Vireos. As the morning wore on, we had a nice little bit of raptor movement, with Broad-winged Hawks and Sharp-shinned Hawks circling overhead. After another picnic lunch overlooking the bucolic Minas Basin and surrounding land, we headed over to Scots Bay and Cape Split. Here we explored the beach at the head of the Bay of Fundy, and enjoyed a nice forest walk on part of the Cape Split Trail. A last stop to look for a reported Yellow-crowned Night-Heron did not deliver on the heron, but Belted Kingfishers, and Eastern Kingbird kept our attention. We later enjoyed another nice meal at the Church restaurant in Wolfville, a 110 year old stone church that has been converted into a restaurant and brewery.



Palm Warbler checking out the group © James S Lees

Day 3 - A third beautiful day in a row did not give any hints of the impending storm for the following day. However, we were well warned of the incoming weather and changed our Brier Island Whale and Seabird boat trip up to this afternoon. Leaving Wolfville, we made only a brief stop at the French Basin Trail in Annapolis Royal, before breezing down Digby Neck to catch the two small ferries to Brier Island. Our first Common Eider, Great Cormorant and Black Guillemots were spotted while we waited for the ferries, and we all enjoyed the scenic nature of the area. Quaint fishing villages, lighthouses, and black spruce clad islands characterize the region. Brier Island, our home for the next two days, offers both a hotspot for songbird and raptor migration in Nova Scotia, and a gateway to the krill rich waters of the Bay of Fundy full of whales and seabirds. After a nice sit down lunch at the lodge restaurant, most rested up, while a few of us walked the road to the north lighthouse. Raptors were on the move, and we were shocked to look up and spot a young Mississippi Kite circling low with some Turkey Vultures. Unfortunately, it was only the two guides that saw it, so we would have to dig hard to try and find one for the whole group! Before we knew it, it was time to head to the wharf and hop on the boat. Geared up and excited, we were soon steaming out of the Grand Passage between Brier and Long Island on to the open waters of the Bay of Fundy. Calm seas, warm air, and soft late afternoon light made the physical conditions rather perfect, and it wasn't long before we spotted the telltale signs of Humpback Whales on the horizon. As we approached the whales with Northern Gannets overhead, and a few Great Shearwaters cutting across the ocean's surface, we knew we were also going to be treated to a veritable spectacle of Red Phalaropes. A

large percentage of the world's population of this species stage in the Bay of Fundy in late summer, and we could see the waters teeming with them! As we got up close and personal with 3 humpbacks, we were awed by the constant stream of phalaropes. Murmurations of thousands dotted the sky. In total, we estimated 40 thousand of these amazing birds! Not to be forgotten, there were hundreds of Red-necked Phalaropes mixed in with the reds, a few South Polar Skuas, including one at point blank range sitting on the water, Manx Shearwaters, Razorbills, a few Atlantic Puffins, and some dolphins and porpoises. A fine day out on the waters of the Bay of Fundy.



Great Shearwater over the Bay of Fundy © James S Lees



Red Phalaropes and one Red-necked Phalarope feeding on the Bay © James S Lees



Phalarope flock in the evening light © Dominic Cormier

Day 4 – The storm arrived as predicted, so we got a late start to the day. By 11, the rain had ceased so we braved the winds and walked the marsh boardwalk on Brier. We had a few nice birds, including flyover Bobolinks, numerous Great Blue Herons in the treetops, and a few raptors on the move. We drove to Pond Cove on the south end of the island. As we prepped lunch and were eating, James was soon spotting kestrel after kestrel cruising by, and then an adult Mississippi Kite hunting dragonflies above a far ridge. Most managed to get on the kite, but it disappeared into the fog leaving us wanting more! As we walked out on the beach at Pond Cove, we enjoyed Common Eiders and Black Scoters, Sanderling, a watchful group of Grey Seals, and plenty more American Kestrels. We tallied 96 kestrels, along with Sharp-shinned Hawks, Northern Harriers and Turkey Vultures. Next up was the West Light, a picturesque lighthouse perched on the edge of the striking shoreline. We did our best to brave the renewed showers and wind, but after a bit, we called it a day and went back to the lodge to warm up and enjoy another delicious meal.



A little colour after a wet day! © Laurie Koepke



Colourful building © James S Lees

Photo 7 Caption – Some color after a bit of a wet day. Day 5 – This morning we left Brier Island and returned to the French Basin Trail in Annapolis Royal for a proper visit. With the rain stopping just in time, we enjoyed a beautiful sunny walk on the well maintained trail around the marsh. It was chalk full of birds, with hundreds of dabbling ducks, swallows, and a nice assortment of shorebirds, including a scarce Stilt Sandpiper. Everyone was able to get their fill of great views, and we left fully

content! Next stop was at Mavillette Beach PP. The weather was once again perfect, and we enjoyed a lovely late afternoon scoping two Little Blue Herons as they voraciously hunted eels in the salt marsh. We hopped on over to the sprawling sand beach, and a few dipped their toes into the ocean. Before we knew it, it was time for supper in Yarmouth, and then a short drive to Barrington Passage for the evening.



Little Blue Herons catching eels © James S Lees

Day 6- Today we had two main targets. The first was a very rare Burrowing Owl that had set up shop on a beach on the Blanche Peninsula since at least early July. Anticipation was running high, and we were not to be disappointed. We found the owl calmly roosting on an exposed rock along the beach edge, and we all got our fill of this special bird. Our next target was American Oystercatcher. Only breeding in two small places in Canada, Cape Sable Island is the best place to find them, not to mention that it is also one of the premiere birding destinations in all of Canada! We stopped for a delicious lunch at Dan's and then it was over the causeway and on to Daniel's Head Beach. Here we enjoyed more sandy shores, and plenty of shorebirds, including a couple Red Knots. We made a stop at the Guzzle (yes there are at least two Guzzles in NS, both birding spots!) where we enjoyed more shorebirds, with some great views of Black-bellied Plovers running around on some seaside sheep pastures. Our final spot was the Hawk. This area has an extensive tidal mudflat, and has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA). With a stunning view of the Cape Sable Lighthouse in the distance, we waiting patiently for the tide to fall and bring out the shorebirds. Even before the mud was exposed, James keenly scoped an American Oystercatcher on a far sandbar. As the tide receded, the bird slowly came close enough for everyone to get decent looks in the scope! Two top notch birds, sandy beaches covered in shorebirds, epic lighthouses… just another fall birding day in Nova Scotia!



The local celebrity! Burrowing Owl © James S Lees

Day 7 – August and September are the two sunniest months in NS, and once again today was no exception! We started off at Baccaro Lighthouse, and while the views did not disappoint, there was little bird activity on the water. We weaved our way up the coast of Shelburne County, enjoying the scenery, but little in terms of birdlife. Sometimes you just get a slow morning. We ate our picnic lunch under a tall canopy of White Pines along the Clyde River, and then stopped in at Summerville Beach PP. We walked the sandy beach and the back of the dune edge. The highlight was a very vocal Blue Grosbeak, that despite its constant calling, played a bit of hide and seek with the group. We made an early afternoon arrival at White Point Beach Resort, where people took time to relax, and enjoy the nice weather and scenery. A few of us went on a late afternoon bird walk where we ran into a few small flocks of migrating warblers, including Blackburnian.



Fall Blackpoll Warbler © James S Lees

Day 8 – After a hardy breakfast, we were gearing up to head to Lunenburg, but got side tracked as a nice flock of birds was moving through the resort. Numerous Ovenbirds, an Eastern Kingbird, Black-throated Green Warblers, Northern Parulas, and others kept our heads on a swivel. Finally on the road, we swung through the town of Lunenburg to enjoy the sights of this UNESCO heritage designated town. We continued on to the forests near Halifax to try for a more boreal suite of birds. Despite some decent warbler movement, we had no luck with our targets, and we were then on our way to the iconic Peggy's Cove. We timed out arrival at Peggy's Cove perfectly, with the Bluenose schooner sailing by the much loved lighthouse perched on the granite shoreline. A picture perfect moment! With this as our final stop of the tour, we said farewell to the lighthouse and ocean, and made our way into Halifax for the last meal. Two Whimbrel flew over the van as we left, making them the last additions to our trip list.



Peggy's Cove Lighthouse with Bluenose in full sail © Laurie Koepke

Bellies full from a hearty meal at the Henry House in downtown Halifax, James and I shepherded the group to the hotel one last time. Farewells given, and highlights taken, it was time to officially close the 2024 Eagle Eye Nova Scotia Fall tour. Thanks to all the wonderful guests, and especially to the birds, people and places of Nova Scotia that shared their magic with us all! Until next time, Dominic



Nova Scotia species list Sep 3 - 12, 2024