



Pelagic birding in Tofino, British Columbia

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Photos by Steve Ogle Steve Ogle and I stood on the shores of Tofino with our “Ultimate British Columbia” birding tour group. We were in the first half of the tour, which would take us all over the province - from the boreal forests of Fort St. John to the rainforests of Vancouver Island, through the Cascades and into the dry Okanagan Valley. It was truly “the ultimate!”

However, our destination today was very different from any others on our itinerary. We were going on a pelagic tour to look for birds and wildlife in the open ocean - a unique opportunity, and my favorite kind of birding. While the ocean might seem like a vast, desolate saltwater desert - and for the most part it is - but it hides some amazing creatures that humans can only see if they get on a boat. That is what we were doing today. We boarded our vessel, captained by Cpt. John Forde. He mentioned how he does offshore trips infrequently - mainly focusing on inshore wildlife for short trips - so it was exciting for him to see what was out there. We heartily agreed!



Harlequin Ducks © Steve Ogle

We were surrounded by wildlife right away - flocks of flew by and loafed on the rocks. Brandt's Cormorants showcased their bright blue throats as they perched like sentinels on the cliffs. We stopped to admire some Sea Otters, many of which had with them their tiny, recently born young. We watched a huge Steller's Sea Lion bull as he watched over his harem of females. The quantity of life in these cold, rich waters was immense. Two seabirds, entirely black except for their white faces, two long yellow tufts of feathers on each side of the head, and an implausible massive orange bill flew by the boat and landed on the water - **Tufted Puffins!** Perhaps one of the most iconic birds of the West Coast - and certainly one of the most remarkable!!



Rhinoceros Auklet © Steve Ogle



Stellar's Sea Lion © Steve Ogle

We then set our sights to the edge of the continental shelf, beyond which was affectionately called “The Abyss”, where the water becomes very deep, very quickly. It would take us a couple of hours to reach it, but we would not find the animals we were seeking in the inshore waters. The open ocean can be a desert - but oceanic travelers know how to find oases in this desert - and so did we! Where there are contours, such as a trench or a seamount, there are often upwellings where the currents bring food from the depths, which in turn attract a wide variety of wildlife. As we powered towards the shelf break, it really did become apparent at how lifeless vast areas of the ocean appear. A pair of tiny **Marbled Murrelets** or a distant **Sooty Shearwater** would occasionally break the emptiness, but otherwise it was just sky and sea. Thankfully, it was not particularly windy, so it was pleasant commute and, we assured everyone, it would be worth it once we get to the birds! A huge, black silhouette slowly broke the horizon - not dissimilar from the Sooty Shearwaters that we’d been seeing, but much, much larger - a **Black-footed Albatross**! It would be our first of many. These massive oceanic wanderers may not be the first birds one thinks of as being regular visitors to Canadian waters - but they are, and they are coming from a very long way away. Almost all of the population breeds on the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. One might wonder why they come all this way from a seemingly tropical and idyllic destination - the answer is food! Here on the edge of the shelf, plankton and other food items are pushed up to the surface, and baitfish as well as their predators congregate - it was an oasis. As we got closer and closer to the dropoff, other birds began appearing. Tiny gray wisps flew around the boat - Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels, perhaps coming from their breeding colonies in the Queen Charlottes, or maybe even as far away as Kamchatka. Large flocks of pale-bellied shearwaters - **Pink-footed Shearwaters**, joined the Sooties. They had just finished breeding on small islands off Chile, and came here to dine and molt - many had very rough-looking wings! Three immaculate Sabine’s Gulls flew over, their sooty heads outlined by a thin black border, white wedges on their wings and a yellow tip to their bill. They had not yet started breeding, and were on their way to the Canadian Arctic to do so. All of the Northern Fulmars that were starting to accumulate around our boat suddenly took off on the approach of a massive, hulking **South Polar Skua** - the winner for the trip’s long distance award, coming to see us from the southernmost part of the planet. Indeed, this species has been observed right at the South Pole, and is the world’s most southerly bird species - flying right past our boat here in British Columbia!



Northern Fulmar © Steve Ogle

This is why I enjoy seabirding immensely. The ocean acts as an aquatic highway for migrating birds, and birds from the Arctic to the Antarctic and everywhere in between all pass through and interact with one another here, despite being from extremely different parts of the world and at different points in their yearly cycle - some wintering, some breeding nearby, and some just passing through! We stopped amidst a raft of Black-footed Albatrosses to have our lunch. Suddenly, another albatross appeared in the distance. It looked similar to the Black-footed, but bigger...much bigger. The bill, unlike the Black-footed fine, grayish bill was extremely thick and bright pink. This was no ordinary albatross - it was a **Short-tailed Albatross**! A bird that only breeds on a couple of tiny islands off Japan, which was once thought to be extinct! It was a new bird for even Captain John, who maneuvered the boat so that we could get amazing views of this incredible rarity. Another reason I love seabirding - you never know what you might see!



Short-tailed Albatross © Steve Ogle

We headed back to port, but not before spending some time watching a pod of Risso's Dolphins - enigmatic, squid-eating dolphins that are rarely seen in Canadian waters, right beside the boat. They were joined by a pod of Pacific White-sided Dolphins, a Northern Fur Seal, and briefly by a pair of Dall's Porpoises. Seabirding is not just for the birds! What an incredible day, and one that we will all remember for the rest of our lives!



Risso's Dolphins © Steve Ogle



BC Pelagic tour