



Quebec: Birds & Whales Trip Report 2023

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Guides: Gareth Thomson and Andra Florea What a great trip we had, exploring the birds and whales of Quebec! This year we had great success as we tried a few new things in our exploration of this wonderful area. We managed to observe 110 different bird species and visit many different habitats that Quebec has to offer. From the taiga to salt marshes, from the coast to up the mountains, we witnessed bird migration in all their possible habitats and were gifted with great observations, like this **Green Heron** close enough for incredible photographs.



Green heron up close in Leon Provancher Marsh © Ian Doris

For one thing - Eagle-Eye Tours loves to support nonprofits, and this year we partnered up with the Côte-Nord (North Coast) Migratory Bird Festival in famous Tadoussac, Quebec. We attended and supported their nocturnal banding activities and had the wonderful good fortune of seeing a bird bander band a tiny, delightful **Northern Saw-whet Owl**. Banding is so important: it helps us learn about the health of individual birds, and the population as a whole - incredibly valuable information when it comes to understanding the birds and supporting their conservation. Around 3-4% of all these banded owls are recaptured - enough to paint a good picture of their movement patterns.



Northern Saw Whet Owl © Ian Doris

Guide Andra Florea also has a federal banding permit in Canada and, during one particularly active banding session, proved to us that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush...



Andra holding a Canada Warbler © Gareth Thomson

Our only rainy day did not hold us down to explore birds and habitats since we went all the way up to caribou land, the taiga, where we witnessed a **Northern Harrier** chasing 200 and more **American Pipits** feeding on the lichens and moss-covered grounds! After a bit of exploring, we saw a family group of **Canada Jays**. Wet and boggy habitat around the lakes made us find a **Lincoln Sparrow** and a group of **Rusty Blackbirds**, always a bliss to put our eyes on these species.



Rusty Blackbirds © Andra Florea

Arriving closer to Tadoussac, we had one goal that everyone shared, watching **Beluga whales**. After

our stop at Pointe Noire, we were fully satisfied after almost an hour of whale watching from land where we were privileged to witness family groups with young belugas.



Participants enjoying beluga whales in this beautiful landscape © Gareth Thomson

Another change we made to our tour that bore dividends: we switched our whale watching and pelagic birding to a more intimate experience, using smaller, powerful zodiac boats that could travel up to 25 nautical miles per hour. Travelling like this meant we could cover a lot of ground as we combed the area, stopping immediately when we found exciting things to look at! On the pelagic bird tour, we were rewarded by some great sightings, from delicate sea-loving **Red-necked Phalaropes** pattering along the tide lines, to wonderful views of an **Atlantic Puffin**. We even had the great pleasure of admiring many **Sabine's Gulls** feeding closely to the boat and dancing in the air with their graceful flight.



Red-necked Phalaropes feeding along the tidelines © Andra Florea



Juvenile Atlantic Puffin © Andra Florea

And then there were the whales - and boy, do we have a Whale Tale to tell! We saw the region's endangered **Beluga whales**, and several elegant **Minke whales** - but the main event was something very different... We stumbled upon a group of seven **Humpback whales** and kept the usual respectful distance, viewing them from afar through our binoculars. But then - the whales came to us! One moment we were floating calmly on a glassy, silent ocean - and the next moment

pandemonium reigned as whales surfaced all around us, their huge bulks roiling their surface just a few meters away, seemingly close enough to touch, their noisy exhalations deafening. Even our experienced boat captain had never seen anything like it. Best of all, Guide Andra - a former whale watching guide - recognized an old friend, a female Humpback called Tic Tac Toe who is a regular visitor of the St Lawrence where she often brings her young to feed in its rich waters.



At one point our little zodiac was surrounded by seven humpback whales © Gareth Thomson

It is always a thrill to see unusual or rare birds, and on this trip we had these in spades, from such rarities as **Sabine's Gull** to birds like the **Lapland Longspur** that we managed to find in a sea of **Horned Larks**. With the sighting of 14 species of shorebirds and all the expected seabirds in their winter plumage, every participant went home with more advanced bird identification knowledge and sharpened skills.



Sabine's Gull © Andra Florea



Horned Lark feeding © Andra Florea

Buff-breasted Sandpipers are reliably seen in migration - but only in the prairie provinces! We were delighted to find two of these beautiful long-winged flyers, in the sort of ideal optical conditions that we birding guides dream of: our entire group, with the sun at our back, was able to view two such birds calmly feeding just a few feet away, for twenty minutes!



Buff-breasted Sandpiper © Andra Florea

Sure, we saw lots of birds - and we saw a lot of sumptuous landscapes as well and got to know one another over some equally sumptuous meals, sampling some of the best gastronomy that 'La Belle Province' of Quebec has to offer. Participants all felt that this Quebec Birds and Whales tour was a great experience - and a wonderful way to tie a bow around summer!



Enjoying dinner on the balcony of our restaurant © Andra Florea