



Saskatchewan Whooping Cranes Trip Report 2023 (Sep 30 - Oct 4)

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Guides: Alvin Dyck and Dominic Cormier Despite some challenging weather and road conditions, our tour was a great success on many levels (according to our guests). Of course, the Whooping Cranes were the stars of the show, and they did not disappoint! In all we saw 68 “Whoopers” and added an additional 102 other species as we travelled the highways and backroads of Saskatchewan to visit fields, lakes, forests, rivers, and wetlands. Every evening, as we gathered for dinner, guests were asked to share their “highlights of the day.” The following report is a compilation of their and our most memorable experiences.



Day 1 On the first day of our tour, participants gathered in the lobby of our hotel for a meet and greet session, and to discuss plans for the following day. Lively discussions continued over dinner.

Day 2 The day dawned with a cold and steady rain, but that didn't dampen the spirits of our group as we headed out in search of Whooping Cranes. We all layered-up against the elements and drove NE towards the small hamlet of Marcelin. Fields along our route were sometimes covered with flocks of Snow Geese and guests were very interested to learn about the blue and white colour morphs and what their young looked like. The big highlight of the day for all were the Whooping Cranes. We found these stately, white birds in groups of various sizes at distance, but had very good views using our scopes.



Our group looking at birds © Alvin Dyck



Looking through a scope © Alvin Dyck

There were mostly adult birds, with a few rusty coloured juveniles mixed in. Guests were intrigued by the variation in colour of the young birds. As we watched, some pairs began vocalizing and briefly “danced” into the air with wings outstretched. The most captivating highlight was a very close fly-over by a group of 7 adult cranes that were jostling and interacting mid-air before they landed in a field close to us. Breathtaking!



Whooping Cranes flying over hay field © Dominic Cormier



Whooping Cranes landing in field © Dominic Cormier

We were treated to more aerial displays when a Sharp-shinned Hawk was harassing some Robins, and later as a Peregrine Falcon tried repeatedly to pluck a Bonaparte's Gull from a large swirling flock. As the Peregrine went into its final stoop, we had difficulties following it in our binoculars. Sadly, it left "empty-handed." Between the Whooper and raptor shows, guests were treated to the structural differences between Ross' and Snow Goose, and Canada and Cackling Goose. Can't beat a side-by-side comparison! We also learned how easily Lapland Longspurs and Horned Larks can blend into the muddy stubble fields, but some deft scoping revealed their subtle beauty to all. We were further treated to almost every dabbling and diving duck that is expected this time of year all on one lake. It made for a lengthy stay as we scanned our way through the teeming masses. We ended the day with a fly-by of a covey of Gray Partridge, leaving many hoping for a better look, but still satisfied with a 60 species first day! **Day 3** A slight change of itinerary brought us back to the Marcelin area to search for Whooping Cranes again. The steady rain had not abated so roads were getting "greasy," soft, and rutted. We still managed to see another 19 Whoopers and had a great look at a perched, sodden Peregrine Falcon. We made our way back S to Forestry Farm Park where highlights included a White-breasted Nuthatch "lifer" and a park facility with heated toilet seats! Next stop was the S end of Blackstrap Lake where many were thrilled to see over 250 American White Pelicans. As we arrived, many of the birds soared away over the ridge, but a good number remained on the lake, and formed a tight group that fed together as if choreographed. A lone Yellow-headed Blackbird entertained the group as it fed beneath the roosting Pelicans.



American White Pelican © Marie Jordan



Abandoned Farmhouse in Saskatchewan © Jane Gawin

Crossing the bridge to other side of Blackstrap, we slithered up the hill in search of Sharp-tailed grouse at a lek site. Driving through pasture land and harvested hay fields, one keen-eyed guest spotted the baddie of the prairies, the reclusive Badger. As it ran with undulating body over a ridge, most were able to catch a brief glimpse of this elusive creature. Western Meadowlarks, their yellow breasts glinting in the scattered sun rays poking through the clouds, did their best to not be outdone

by a mammal. With the sun low in the sky, we stopped by a large pond just as tens of thousands of Snow Geese took off to fill the skies in a mass of wings and voice. Their cries occasionally pierced by the sound of American Pipits flying over, and Greater White-fronted Geese which seemed loathe to leave the pond for the skies. We were truly in awe!



Snow Geese on lake © Jane Gawin



Flock of snow geese in flight © Marie Jordan

Still buzzing from the great spectacle of migration, we rolled up to the lek site, where our large vans flushed some birds from the nearby fields. We still got excellent views of Sharp-tailed Grouse on the ground and flying so it was time to head back to the hotel for dinner. **Day 4** Finally, a break in the weather and the clouds began to reveal that there actually was a sun up there! This was our day to explore Prince Albert National Park, so we headed N on Hwy 11. On our way to the resort town of Emma Lake, we made a stop by a wooded wetland to watch a very large flock of Rusty Blackbirds feeding, bathing, and preening. A lifer for many, and as one guest put it, it was very nice of us to find half the world's population of this declining species. With the sun shining on our faces, a pleasant walk at Emma Lake turned up a Townsend's Solitaire, Belted Kingfisher (among other species), and our first Harris' Sparrows obliging us with great views along the path.



Harris's Sparrow, adult © Dominic Cormier



Harris's Sparrow, immature © Dominic Cormier

With legs stretched, hunger led us to a stunning outlook on Sandy Lake within the park for lunch. Lapland Longspurs, Horned Larks, and American Pipits patrolled the beach, providing some excellent photo ops.



Dominic taking a photo © Alvin Dyck

The stillness of the lake revealed many a Red-necked Grebe, and a Park's Canada employee was kind enough to take our group photo. As we drove through the park, we were surprised to find small groups of Horned Larks and even a Lapland Longspur along the forested road.



Lapland Longspur © Dominic Cormier

Rolling into town, we had excellent looks at some Elk in and around Waskesieu as we made our way to the Red Deer Trail.



Elk © Jane Gawin

A trio of Harris', Fox and American Tree Sparrows allowed for some comparisons and good sparrow identification practice.



American Tree Sparrow © Dominic Cormier

A soft tapping sound helped us to find an American Three-toed Woodpecker feeding on a spruce. These boreal denizens never disappoint. The final highlight of our peaceful forest walk was a small group of Boreal Chickadees flitting acrobatically in the trees along the trail. Driving back to Saskatoon for our final dinner together, the sun had set, and the prairie sky was ablaze with colour. A fitting backdrop for our final bird of the tour, a silhouetted Great Horned Owl perched atop a bare Poplar. Weary but satisfied, we gathered for a final meal together, shared highlights of the tour and swapped stories, laughs and experiences. Dominic and I would like to thank everyone for their enthusiasm and generosity and wish them well on all their future birding adventures.



Group photo

