



Saskatchewan Whooping Crane Tour (Oct 4 - 9, 2022)

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Day 1 - 4 October Participants for this inaugural Eagle-Eye Tours/Royal Canadian Geographic Society Whooping Crane Tour arrived in Saskatoon bringing with them lovely albeit somewhat cool fall weather, which we enjoyed for the duration of the tour. We met in the evening in the lobby of our downtown hotel and after introductions we were off for dinner at Mano's, a restaurant that had become a favourite of ours in the past few years. A couple participants had arrived early enough to take the river walk along the South Saskatchewan River from the hotel to the Weir, mentioning a few good species to start off our list including a Red-necked Grebe, Cackling Geese, Hairy Woodpecker, a White-tailed Jack Rabbit by the bridge near the hotel, and several Least Chipmunks.

Day 2 - 5 October Just after 8 a.m. we set off north to Blaine Lake, where we made a pitstop and gassed up. The morning was spent in the Blaine Lake/Marcelin area, where we focussed on Whooping Cranes, our target species. It was not long before we spotted a single adult with a rusty-colored juvenile not too far off in a field but they departed soon after we pulled up flying a short distance to a roadside pond. I'd warned the participants that we might be hard-pressed to get any close up Whooper photos, so we were amazed to find not only them but another pair with a juvenile on the edge of the pond AND... they hung around long enough for us to get real nice looks and some pretty decent pictures as well. Eventually they departed, and we drove around spotting a couple more Whooper threesomes that were a little further out. But our Whooper good fortune was just starting. Way off in the distance by a large lake we spotted 6 adult whoopers in a stubble field and another pair with a young in the reeds. Driving on, one of the participants spotted some realistic-looking white field scarecrows, but as we stopped to check these another group of 8 adult Whoopers were spotted. Getting out to secure a long range look at them through a spotting scope, a vehicle pulled up and the driver indicated that he lived at the nearby farm, very close to where these cranes were feeding. He indicated we were welcome to stop by, but warned us to stay very close to the

yard so as not to scare them. Pulling into the yard, we spotted a small group of 5 adults and a juvenile probably no more than 100 meters away. As we watched these, some of the other flock of 8 flew in and joined them. What an amazing opportunity! We were close enough to see that two of the adults were banded and could almost make out all of the color combinations on the bands. By the time we had finished our morning's jaunts, we had spotted a total of 28 Whooping Cranes, including 6 juveniles.



Whooping Cranes in field © Carol Patterson

Although other birds were secondary to our quest that morning, we were treated to good van-side looks at a Horned Lark and a Lapland Longspur, a small flock of 5 Rusty Blackbirds, a couple Common Grackles, some straggler Meadowlarks, as well as numerous raptors including many of the day's 20 Northern Harriers and 9 Bald Eagles. Snow Geese, Canada Geese and Cackling Geese were prominent in the fields and in sky, with smaller numbers of Greater White-fronted Geese and Ross's Geese evident in some of the closer field flocks that we stopped to scan. A picnic lunch at Marcelin capped off the morning. After lunch, we headed towards Leask where some large lakes yielded a variety of waterfowl including most of the day's 85 Tundra Swans, and 150 American Coots. Shorebirds were also plentiful here, including most of the day's 60 Long-billed Dowitchers, 25 Greater Yellowlegs, 4 Lesser Yellowlegs, 3 Black-bellied Plovers, and singles for Wilson's Snipe & Pectoral Sandpiper. During the remainder of the afternoon we explored the region to the west of Leask and Marcelin, south to Blaine Lake and then backroads south to the North Saskatchewan River valley at Petrofka. No more new Whoopers were seen, but we did add a flock of 7 Sharp-tailed Grouse, a flock of 200 Red-winged Blackbirds, two Merlins, a Sharp-shinned Hawk, and an American Kestrel. It had been a very productive day, with our target bird "in the bag" and with so many more nice sightings and great photo ops, but it was time to head back to Saskatoon where we celebrated over dinner at our hotel. **Day 3 - 6 October** Today after breakfast, we warmed up a bit walking the river trail along from the hotel to the Weir, returning to our vehicles via a nice wooded backlane.

The river walk was rather quiet with only a few Yellow-rumped Warblers, two White-breasted Nuthatches and a flock of 15 Double-crested Cormorants to add. But the backlane produced several Dark-eyed Juncos, Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted & Red-breasted Nuthatches, three House Finches, a Purple Finch, some Golden-crowned Kinglets, and lastly a surprise Gray-cheeked

Thrush.



Bird art in Saskatoon © Carol Patterson



Birding in Saskatoon © Carol Patterson



Ken birding © Carol Patterson

Next we were off to the Forestry Farm in the northeast corner of the city where an extended walk-about yielded a Chipping Sparrow, three Harris's Sparrows, numerous White-throats, more Golden-crowned & three Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and a couple participants had decent looks at a suspected Short-tailed Shrew in the Rose Gardens. It had been quite cool that morning, so we found a nice sunny spot in the park and had an early picnic lunch. The second afternoon has usually been reserved for Blackstrap Lake south of town, but we'd seen very little there with the earlier group so we headed east of Saskatoon to some areas that Ken had scouted out between tours. Taking gravel roads beyond St-Denis, large flocks of Snow Geese (a conservative estimate of 90,000 for the day), Canada Geese and Cackling Geese were prominent in roadside lakes, with smaller numbers of Greater White-fronted Geese and Ross's Geese, a variety of waterfowl species, a lone Pied-billed Grebe, and 70 Bonaparte's Gulls. We added a Cooper's Hawk, numerous Red-tailed Hawks (30 for the day including a few nice dark Harlan's color morphs), a flock of 250 Brewer's Blackbirds with some cattle, two American Pipits, a couple Savannah Sparrows, a mixed sparrow flock with more Harris's Sparrows (8 for the day), Mule Deer (12 for the day), the first of two Red Fox for the day, and some Richardson's Ground Squirrels in a heavily grazed pasture. A couple ponds along a busy stretch of Highway between Dana and Meacham yielded 49 American Avocets, three Semipalmated Plovers, two Wilson's Snipe, and large numbers of Long-billed Dowitchers and Pectoral Sandpipers. Near Meacham Lake, an estimated 3000 Sandhill Cranes were observed feeding in the stubble fields. It was time to head back to Saskatoon, with a few stops at roadside ponds for Black-bellied Plovers (20), American Golden-Plovers (5), Lesser Yellowlegs (4), a Killdeer, and many more Long-billed Dowitchers, Pectoral Sandpipers and Greater Yellowlegs (450, 80 and 35 of these respectively for the day). Back at the Park View hotel, Carol gave us a short presentation on the workings of the Royal Canadian Geographic Society and we celebrated another very productive day over dinner. **Day 4 - October 7**



Enjoying the beautiful fall colours and weather © Carol Patterson

Having found most of the prairie and wetland birds we could expect, we headed for Prince Albert National Park. At Prince Albert we bought lunches at Subway and Tim Horton's, and carried on to Emma Lake where we walked around the Sunset Bay cottage development. On the lake were Red-necked Grebe, Common Loon and our first Common Goldeneye, the shrubbery held several sparrow species, including Harris's, White-crowned, Lincoln's, Swamp, and American Tree. We had nice views of 8 Evening Grosbeaks, a brief look at a Hermit Thrush, and spotted a soaring Rough-legged Hawk. Carrying on into the park, we stopped at a pretty little creekside picnic spot and were greeted by a fly-by Osprey, a couple Purple Finches, some calling Blue Jays, but the expected Canada Jays never showed up to investigate what we might have left them for crumbs.



© Carol Patterson

Carrying on, we made a quick stop at Sandy Lake where a Horned Grebe and 3 Red-necked Grebes were spotted, and we stopped for some group pictures at a scenic roadside pullout. A couple of the participants who had grown up in Saskatchewan had childhood memories of the Narrows roadway and campsite. It was a nice scenic drive and we were rewarded with multiple Canada Jays (40 for the day!), our first and only Belted Kingfisher and Common Merganser, a beautifully displaying Ruffed Grouse (its ruffs puffed out and tail fully fanned), and on the way back a resting roadside Red Fox, a Snowshoe Hare, and a Beaver. We had a quick look around the town of Waskesiu for the Elk that sometimes hang around before checking in at our hotel (the Hawood Inn) and having dinner there that evening. **Day 5 - October 8** We'd have another half day or so to explore the park. Carol had gone out before breakfast and had seen a Muskrat along the beach, so after breakfast we checked that area looking for it or the Otters that are occasionally seen there, but could only come with a few gulls - mostly Ring-billed but there were three Herring Gulls among them. At the north end of town we walked a short loop of the Red Deer trail, getting good looks at some very vocal Boreal Chickadees and a large flock of 30 White-winged Crossbills feeding on the abundant treetop cones. Next we headed down the road around the north end of Waskasiu Lake picking up seven more Ruffed Grouse, and finally a female Spruce Grouse. We had an early picnic lunch along the Kingsmere River (at the start of a 20 km walking trail that leads Grey Owl's cabin from the 1930s that he shared with the beavers on Ajawaan lake).



© Carol Patterson

After one last look around town for the Elk (no luck this time), we backtracked on Hwy 263 through the park, stopped at yesterday's picnic spot where we were greeted by more vocal Boreal Chickadees (at least 6 for the day), and branched off on 240 to Shellbrook picking up some Hooded Mergansers, Bonaparte's Gulls, and a few Sandhill Cranes en route. We were headed to the Marcellin area for one last look at Whooping Cranes. Taking gravel roads north of Leask yielded our first and only Northern Flicker, Mourning Dove and American Goldfinches for the trip, and a second Horned Grebe. Shorebirds were abundant at the lake near Leask -- mostly Greater Yellowlegs and Long-

billed Dowitchers, but also more Pectoral Sandpipers, a couple Lesser Yellowlegs, and one Black-bellied Plover. Carrying on to Marcelin and Blaine Lake, we spotted a few quite distant Whooping Cranes (8 including two juveniles), more Bald Eagles (a total of 6 today and 27 for the trip!), a Rough-legged Hawk, 4 more Sharp-tailed Grouse, and a Northern Shrike. We gassed up at Blaine Lake, and highwayed it back to the Park View hotel where we enjoyed a last meal together and reminisced. What a great tour: the group meshed well, the weather had been a bit cool some mornings but overall superb, and the birds and beasts had really cooperated. Our final tally of 101 bird and 11 mammal species was among the best we have ever done on this tour, but certainly the quality of Whooping Crane sightings we had experienced were second to none. Thank you for your good company, great stories and I hope to see again in the future. A special thanks to the Royal Canadian Geographic Society who collaborated with Eagle-Eye Tours to make this extended Saskatchewan Whooping Crane/Prince Albert National Park tour a reality. Your ever-appreciative guide, Ken.



EET group 2022