



Saskatchewan Whooping Crane Tour (Sep 30 - Oct 4 2022)

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Day 1 - 30 September Participants to the Eagle-Eye Tours Saskatchewan Whooping Crane Tour arrived in Saskatoon, bringing with them lovely weather, which was to stay with us for the duration of the tour. We met in the evening in the lobby of our hotel and after introductions we were off for dinner at Mano's, a restaurant that had become a favourite in the past few years. A couple of participants had arrived early enough to take the river walk from the hotel to the Weir, yielding a few good species to start off our list including a Northern Shrike, American Kestrel, White-breasted Nuthatch, House Finch, and a White-tailed Jack Rabbit by the bridge near the hotel. **Day 2 - 1 October** Just after 8 a.m. we set off in two vans, heading north to Blaine Lake, where we made a pitstop and gassed up. All morning was spent in the Blaine Lake/Marcelin area, where we looked for Whooping Cranes, our target species, but we made quite a few stop for other birds as well. It was not long before we saw a single adult Whooper and juvenile fly off to join another pair with a juvenile quite far off the road. As we watched these, a party of two adults and one juvenile was spotted much closer by. Given that cranes tend to be very wary and often stay far off, we were pleased that these birds were relatively close and gave us great views, even though they were still a bit far for really good photographs. During the remainder of the morning we added another family group of three, plus four more adults that were feeding along a lakeshore but these were mere specks in the distance. Raptors were abundant, especially Northern Harriers (22 for the day), Red-tailed Hawks (20), Bald Eagle (6), Turkey Vultures (8) and a late Swainson's Hawk. Snow Geese, Canada Geese and Cackling Geese were prominent, with smaller numbers of Greater White-fronted Geese and Ross's Geese.



Red-tailed Hawk © James Harron

We stopped to look at five Killdeer in a roadside pond and added a few scattered Long-billed Dowitchers. A lone Lapland Longspur skulking in the stubble near the road was a nice addition as we had seen a few small flocks flying around earlier. A picnic lunch at Marcelin capped off the morning. Here we added a bunch of Yellow-rumped Warblers, Black-capped Chickadee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, House Sparrow and Purple Finch to the day's list. The sun was now out and it was almost balmy. After lunch we headed north. A couple of lakes near Leask were very productive. Here we noted a few thousand Snow Geese, most of the ducks and coots we saw during the day, as well as 15 Tundra Swans, a Pied-billed Grebe, a lone Bonaparte's Gull, and an American Pipit. Shorebirds were scarce, other than a handful of Greater Yellowlegs and at least one Lesser Yellowlegs, but an American Avocet was a good find. We had nice looks at some Horned Larks and a few more Lapland Longspurs. A Coyote trotted in the distance.



Greater Yellowlegs © James Harron

During the remainder of the afternoon we explored the region to the west of Leask and Marcelin, picking up one more fairly close Whooper pair with a juvenile, a Sharp-shinned Hawk, Wilson's Snipe, Pectoral Sandpiper, two Merlins, 9 Mourning Doves, 8 Savannah Sparrows, 3 American Goldfinch, a Palm Warbler, and a Rusty Blackbird. The latter bird was at a small tree-bordered pond where we had also seen a single bird the year before. It was time to head back to Saskatoon, where we had dinner at our hotel. A very productive day, with our target bird "in the bag" and so many more nice sightings. **Day 3 - 2 October** After breakfast, the group walked the river trail along the South Saskatchewan River from the hotel to the Weir, returning to our vehicles via a few wooded backlanes. Today we would be travelling with a local videographer (Jaxon) who would be taking numerous pictures of the day's activities. The river walk was rather quiet, with only some Least Chipmunks for excitement, but the backlanes produced two Eurasian Collared-Doves, two House Finches, seven Red-breasted Nuthatches and a Golden-crowned Kinglet.



Next we were off to the Forestry Farm, in the northeast corner of the city. This park had been quite productive on previous visits, and once again, it did not disappoint. Harris's Sparrow was high on the wish-list of some in the group, and we managed good looks at it along with several other migrant passerines (White-throated, White-crowned & Chipping Sparrows, Orange-crowned & Palm Warblers, Golden-crowned & Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Dark-eyed Junco, and Cedar Waxwing). We could nicely compare Cackling Geese and Canada Geese at a pond, with a lone snow Goose keeping them company. A Sharp-shinned Hawk ripped by, an Osprey sailed overhead, plus a few Blue Jays, a Downy Woodpecker, and a Northern Flicker were added to the list. It was a great spot for lunch, but unfortunately Teddy had a fall and injured her knee; by the next day it had swollen preventing her and Bill from coming along the last day. After the productive morning we headed south to Blackstrap Lake. Being a Sunday, the lake and shores were full of boaters and fisherfolks, which may have explained the scarcity of birds on the water. On the lake we found a Red-necked Grebe, while a dead tree full of cormorants provided a nice photo op.



Heading around to the north end dam a group of 11 Mourning Doves was spotted. The dam was packed with fisherfolks, but we were able to add a few good species along the secluded northeast corner including a Belted Kingfisher, seven Hooded Mergansers, a Song Sparrow, a covey of 18 Gray Partridges and a couple of Mule Deer that obliged us by posing nicely for photos.



Mule Deer © James Harron

Our route now turned northeast, to the Clavet region. Here we finally found large numbers of field-feeding Sandhill Cranes, in the same area where we'd found them in 2021. At a farmyard, we found 10 Eurasian Collared-Doves under some grain bins and the shelterbelt trees there hosted a large flock of 60 Brewer's Blackbirds and 3 Common Grackles. Heading east to some small wetlands we hoped would have shorebirds, we spotted several groups of Western Meadowlarks (21 for the day), 3

American Kestrels, a couple more Merlins, Richardson's Ground-Squirrel and Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel. Like many of the wetlands in the area, water levels in the good shorebird ponds from 2021 were down considerably, but these ponds did support a few Long-billed Dowitchers and Greater Yellowlegs and a big flock of Lapland Longspurs swirled around. On the way back to Saskatoon we detoured via Patience Lake, but other than lots of Franklin's and Ring-billed gulls, it had little to offer. Dinner was again at the hotel.



Day 4 - 3 October

Having found almost all of the prairie and water birds we could expect, one our last day we headed for Prince Albert National Park. Ken spotted a cow Moose and two calves not too far off the highway - a great bonus sighting. We walked around the Sunset Bay cottage development at Emma Lake, again in nice, sunny weather. On the lake were Hooded Merganser, Red-necked Grebe and Common Loon, and shrubbery held several sparrow species, including Harris's (8 for the day!), White-crowned and Lincoln's. Nice views of Evening Grosbeaks. We then drove into the national park

proper and stopped at a scenic creekside picnic spot, where we were briefly visited by three Canada Jays and a Swamp Sparrow obliged us with a few brief looks. At Waskesiu, the tourist town in the park, we walked a stretch of wooded beach and a loop of the Red Deer trail on the north edge of town. Very quiet, but a female or young Spruce Grouse posed nicely in a nearby tree, while high above a male White-winged Crossbill perched in the very top of a spruce, and Pine Siskins were heard. We have often found Elk right in town in the past, but had no luck this time.



Spruce Grouse © Rudolf Koes

By mid-afternoon we departed and headed once again to the Marcelin area. Road construction slowed us down, but eventually we got there and started looking for Whooping Cranes. We found nine including a fairly close pair with a young in a dried up alkaline basin, and after sunset had a close fly-over by six more calling Whoopers. Thousands of Snow Geese were in the air and on the fields.



Whooping cranes © James Harron

Folks in the rear van, who often miss birds flushed by the vehicle in front, lucked into a covey of Gray Partridges. Then we all got out to enjoy a spectacular sunset, after which we rushed back to the city where we enjoyed a last meal together at Mano's.



Saskatchewan sunset © Rudolf Koes

What a great tour: the group meshed well, the weather was unbelievably nice, and our final tally of 97 bird and 10 mammal species was pretty good for a short trip at this time of year. One always wishes for much better opportunities to get close up photos of the Whooping Cranes, but they are a

very wary bird and we certainly got much closer to a couple of family groups than we have in some years, so we believe all were quite pleased with that aspect of the trip as well. Ken and Rudolf thank you for your good company and your generosity and hope to see again in the future. Safe travels!



Eagle-Eye Tours group 2022