



Saskatchewan Whooping Crane Trip Report 2021 (Tour 2: October 6-10, 2021)

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Almost as soon as we drove off the highway near Marcelin we spotted our quarry - a pair with a juvenile Whooping Crane in nice light to the west. Some quick scope looks before they disappeared behind some trees. Next we headed about 3 miles west of Marcelin where 3 more juveniles were among at least 23 adults half a mile north of the road. Backtracking and heading NNW of Marcelin, we spotted another pair, and then from a hilltop a couple of miles west we spotted the largest group - at least 46 birds including at least 7 more juveniles! Altogether, an amazing 79 Whooping Cranes... including 11 juveniles - evidence that they'd had a very productive year in Wood Buffalo. To top off the tour, on Day 4 we hurried back from the boreal forest to get one last look at the Whoopers and were rewarded with good digi-scope photo ops at a Whooper pair field-feeding with some Canada's in nice light north of Marcelin and at last light we got even closer looks at 10 adults and at least 1 youngster standing in the lake west of Marcelin. We were so enthralled with these birds, few noticed a large flock of 24 more Whoopers until they landed close to the ones we had been watching, trumpeting loudly! What a way to cap off a most memorable & productive Whooping Crane tour!!



Whooping Crane

Day 1 - Wednesday/Oct 6 Ken & Rudolf had spent much of the day getting ready for the group, but we had some time to pre-scout some spots around town including the river walk along the South Saskatchewan River from the hotel north to the weir/Railway Bridge before meeting the group in the Park Town Hotel lobby at 6:30. We decided to eat in-house rather than driving; food was great just took some time to arrive due to Covid-related staffing shortages. Several people had apparently walked stretches of the river or birded nearby today, so we added those birds to the list. Four birds and one mammal were seen by participants on Day 1 that were not found elsewhere on the tour. These included a Peregrine Falcon seen outside the hotel in the morning by Ken & Rudolf (added as other participants may have seen it Day 1 or 5). Along the river, Irving and perhaps others had a Great Blue Heron and some participants reported several Franklin's Gulls. The three Alta ladies, however, had the most unusual sighting of a Barrow's Goldeneye east of the city near Prud'Homme (we would try for it there a couple of days later but we could not find it). Lastly, Royden & Tom reported a White-tailed Jack Rabbit on the grassy strip between the hotel and the river. **Day 2 - Thursday/Oct 7** The Marcelin area more than an hour north of Saskatoon was once again a hotspot for Whooping Crane activity this year so we headed straight out there after breakfast, spotting a coyote en route and making a quick rest stop at Blaine Lake. Immediately after turning off the highway a couple of miles SSW of Marcelin we were on to our first 3 Whooping Cranes as mentioned in the introduction. Carrying on to the Marcelin Road, and west to a big lake which had been good for Whoopers with the earlier group, but this time a quick scan revealed none. A kilometer or so further west however, we could see a few Whoopers in a field half a mile north of the road which we scoped at length; at times most would be obscured by a ridge and then they would move a bit and most or all would be visible. In this group we counted at least 23 adults & 3 juveniles. Backtracking to Marcelin and driving 2 miles north brought us to another road where the Whoopers often were seen from. Before long we had located a pair half a mile north and a few miles further west from a hilltop we were able to count at least 39 adults and 7 more juveniles. Over 20 of this latter group eventually flew to a very large lake less than a mile west of where they had been feeding (Paddling Lake), flying very close to one of the vans as we stopped to scan the lake. One other pair of Whoopers would be encountered in the afternoon; these were in a small lake about 3 miles north of the hilltop where we had seen the 46 earlier in the day. Although we saw a few Whoopers in a

couple other spots later that morning and afternoon, these were close enough to spots where birds had been seen in the morning that we decided they may have been counted earlier. In total, we settled for a total of 79 Whooping Cranes for the day which included an amazing 11 juveniles. Although Whoopers were clearly the order of the day for at least the first few hours we did observe and make note of many other birds before lunch. A Merlin put in an appearance at the first crane stop, and later in the morning an American Kestrel was observed at a distance. At least 10 Northern Harriers were observed for the day, most of these in the Marcelin area. A total of 8 Bald Eagles were seen including 5 that were seen at one location along the north Marcelin road; large numbers of Ravens and Magpies nearby indicated there was a carcass in the area. Many of the day's 5 Red-tailed Hawks were also seen in the morning. Near Paddling Lake, a Hairy Woodpecker was observed by one van, and at least two Brewer's Blackbirds were spotted with some cows. A beaver was spotted swimming near its lodge and food cache in a small roadside pond. This same pond produced a couple of Blue-winged Teal, some Greater Yellowlegs and a Wilson's Snipe.



Muskrat

For lunch, we headed to a small picnic area in Marcelin. After lunch, while many of the participants walked to restrooms down the street or to see some other sights in town, a few birds put in a brief appearance at the feeders and trees across the street including a Purple Finch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and American Goldfinch. In some shrubbery on the east end of town, some of the participants got fleeting looks at a few sparrows including a Harris's, Song, and some American Tree Sparrows. Next, heading north to Leask on backroads a small flock of Horned Larks was observed. We made an extended stop at a lake about a mile SW of town to glass a huge congregation of geese (large numbers of Snows, Canada, and Cackling, with quite a few White-fronted and a scattering of Ross's mixed in), some Tundra Swans, a few Horned Grebes, and a healthy variety of ducks (large numbers of Gadwall, Mallard & Lesser Scaup, with some Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Shoveler, American Wigeon, Pintail, Canvasback, Redhead, Ring-necked, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead and Ruddy Duck). Another large lake immediately west of Leask was also loaded with ducks and geese, but on this lake we also identified a few Eared Grebe, large concentrations of American Coots, 5 Sanderlings, 3 Black-bellied Plovers, probably half of the day's 91 Long-billed Dowitchers, a few Greater Yellowlegs, and a couple of Lesser Yellowlegs. From Leask we took some

backroads west and south back to Marcelin. At a small pond we came upon a pair of Whooping Crane that were fairly close but they quickly flew off. A few more non-cooperative sparrows were briefly observed in roadside shrubs including another quick look at a Song Sparrow. From Marcelin we took backroads west & south to Blaine Lake stopping at one lake that had a big flock of Rusty Blackbirds, more Long-billed Dowitchers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, one stationary Lapland Longspur across the lake that was scoped repeatedly to make sure it was actually moving, and another coyote was spotted. At Blaine Lake we took more backroads south all the way to the North Saskatchewan River valley. A larger lake near Blaine Lake yielded another Wilson's Snipe, more Long-billed Dowitchers, and 2 Pectoral Sandpipers. Along the drive south we encountered some Mule Deer and then along the edge of the road a Badger! Unfortunately the second van was hanging back because of the extremely dusty roads and by the time they arrived the badger had found a hole to duck into. We had made reservations for Mano's that evening and looked to be in good time but 3 Great Horned Owls along the highway on the drive back to Saskatoon were irresistible photographic ops. Nevertheless, we made our dinner destination on time & had lots to celebrate for an eventful first full day of the tour. **Day 3 - Friday/Oct 8** Off by shortly after 8, today would be our day to check out some birdy sites around town before heading south to Blackstrap and finishing east of town. First order of business was the Forestry Farm which yielding a number of good birds (Northern Flicker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, 3 Cedar Waxwings, Purple Finch, 5 House Finches, 7 Pine Siskins, 2 Harris's Sparrows, White-throated Sparrows, 2 Brown Creepers, and a surprise Swainson's Thrush). A Bald Eagle was heard, a Merlin seen, and a couple of Mule Deer made for an amazing start to our day. Next we walked the riverbank from Shakespeare Park to the weir adding Yellow-rumped, Palm, and Nashville Warblers, Double-crested Cormorant, a California Gull on the sand bank that stood out among several Ring-bills, American Tree, White-throated and another Harris's Sparrow, 1 or 2 more Merlins would add to our eventual 9 Merlin day!, and a Turkey Vulture soared overhead. The back lane walk back to the vans showed lots of promise but yielded only a few grackles, robins, juncos, Hairy Woodpecker, more White-throated Sparrows, and a Red-breasted Nuthatch.



Mule Deer

After a restroom stop at the hotel, we were off to our lunch spot at Blackstrap Reservoir picking up

very little on the way. We had lunch at the abandoned Cedar Lodge serenaded by a couple of Blue Jays and a Downy Woodpecker. After lunch we cruised through Blackstrap Provincial Park where we added a Hooded Merganser, a fly-by Sharp-shinned Hawk, 3 Western Grebes, 2 Belted Kingfishers, and a Common Loon. On the way to the dam at the north end of Blackstrap we lucked into a couple of Mourning Doves on the hydro wires, the only ones on both tours, and at the dam we had more good looks at Lapland Longspur, plus 3 White-crowned Sparrows, 5 Ruddy Ducks, a couple of Horned among 15-20 Pied-billed Grebes, most of the 700 American Coot we would get today, one more Western Grebe, and a surprise 4 American White Pelicans.



Belted Kingfisher

From Blackstrap, we headed south to Clavet where a stop for gas and restrooms yielded our first of 3 Western Meadowlarks, and in a huge flock of 400 Common Grackles were at least 5 Red-winged Blackbirds. Naturally a Merlin would show up as well. Heading east a few miles to Rd 323 we stopped at a hobby farm (with caribou & a bison) to look over a large flock of Brewer's Blackbirds (90) and starlings. While stopped, we would finally hear and get to see at a distance our first and it would turn out to be our only Sandhill Cranes (32) for the trip! Next was a good shorebird pond at Roads 362 and 323 which was loaded with good stuff including 10 American Avocets, 12 Pectoral Sandpipers, 23 Long-billed Dowitchers, several Greater Yellowlegs, 1 Lesser Yellowlegs, and a nice mixture of about 50 Black-bellied Plovers and 7 Golden Plovers.



American Avocets

We were having such good luck with the birds today we decided to give the Barrow's Goldeneye and Franklin's/Bonaparte's Gulls that had been seen at Prud'Homme a couple of days earlier a shot. One quick look at a bunch more Black-bellied Plovers and Greater Yellowlegs at a pond around the corner on 323 and we were off. The lake at Prud'Homme was packed and the light wasn't great. We were unable to locate the Barrow's nor any Franklin's Gulls, but there were at least 200 Bonaparte's Gulls, and huge numbers of Ross's Geese (estimated 2000) were among the Snows (conservative estimate of 25,000 for the day). There were too many birds to count and the light was poor but Rudolf made a valiant attempt! But it was time to head back to Saskatoon. Taking backroads part of the way we added a few birds including a couple of Savannah Sparrows that flew from a road that became a trail and ended at a gate, and a Ruffed Grouse that barely missed the lead van as it darted across the road. We made our 7 pm reservation at the downtown Taverna Italiana on time and once again were very pleased with a most productive day. **Day 4 - Saturday/Oct 9** Today would be our day to visit Prince Albert National Park so we loaded up with coffee from the rooms, grabbed some yogurt, fruit, juice and muffins for the road, and headed off to Prince Albert shortly after 7. At Prince Albert, we grabbed some more coffee and food for lunch at Tim Horton's/Subway and continued north to the park. On the drive to the park, one or both vans had spotted a huge flock of Ring-billed Gulls near Saskatoon (1000+), a couple Bald Eagles and Merlins, several Greater Yellowlegs and Rusty Blackbirds, about 20 Tundra Swans, 2 Richardson's Ground Squirrels and a coyote. Before accessing the park, a hike through the Sunset Resort at Emma Lake yielded very nice looks at several Evening Grosbeak flocks (60 in total), 25 Pine Siskins, 30 Common Mergansers, 3 Red-necked Grebe, 10 Pied-billed, Common Loon, Double-crested Cormorant, , Red-breasted Nuthatch, Swamp, Lincoln's & White-crowned Sparrows, 100 American Coot, and a variety of ducks including 300 Gadwall, 50 American Wigeon, 2 Canvasback, 2 Redhead and 2 Common Goldeneye. From there, we continued on Hwy 263 to our peaceful creek-side lunch spot just a couple of miles into the park but not before Margaret got us onto a surprise male Wood Duck just before the park gate . At the lunch spot we were visited by 3 very inquisitive Canada Jays. After lunch, a fully "ruffed out" male Ruffed Grouse in the ditch caught our attention; then we noticed at least 4 females that he was closely following. Next, we stopped at an open creek-side spot where the yellow of the tamarack and deciduous trees against the rich green of the spruce made for a scenic backdrop for

group pictures. At Waskasiu, a walk along the shoreline/beach yielded a photo op at a couple of sleeping muskrats, a Lapland Longspur on the beach & a Common Loon on the water but the elk that were usually in the park or somewhere in town could not be found. A walk along a trail along the forest/cabin/lake edge at the north end of Waskasiu proved to quite exciting when not 1 but 2 Townsend's Solitaires were located! A Boreal Chickadee was also heard here but it could not be found. Everyone was excited to head back to Marcelin for one last look at the Whooping Cranes and it was getting on to mid-afternoon, so off we went with only one stop en route in Prince Albert for gas and restrooms. Arriving at Marcelin at 5:30 we tried for the initial Whoopers we'd seen SSW of town without success but a Northern Shrike along that road was a nice addition. Heading NNW of town we spotted the same pair here as a couple of days earlier but this time in nice light and got some decent digi-scoped pics. We even could tell that the one was banded (white/yellow on right).

On to the hilltop further west were at least 34 Whoopers visible at a distance, and finally back to the lake west of Marcelin where we got the final looks at 11 in the water plus the 24 trumpeting fly-ins mentioned in the intro. 71 Whooping Cranes in the a little more than an hour isn't too shabby! We had enjoyed Mano's so much a couple of days earlier we went back there for our final get-together as a group, celebrating an amazing tour topped off by the final evening's Whooper sightings! **Day 5 - Sunday/Oct 10** Some participants had early flights today; we saw several others at breakfast that morning and said our goodbyes. I'm not aware of any birds that were added today, but our trip list of 106 bird species, 11 mammals, and at least 79 Whooping Cranes was among the highest we have ever had on this tour. It had not only been very successful, but very enjoyable as the group was most easy going and fun to be with. On top of that, the weather had been great and the smoke that had somewhat hampered conditions for earlier group had vanished. Thank you all and we hope to see you again in the future. Ken & Rudolf