



Saskatchewan Whooping Cranes Trip Report (Sep 30-Oct 4, 2024)

[Link: Saskatchewan Whooping Cranes Trip Report \(Sep 30-Oct 4, 2024\)](#)

Many things made this tour a success for everyone. Great people, beautiful scenery, a myriad of birds and other wildlife, decent weather, laughter and so many shared stories. Of course, the Whooping Cranes were the main attraction, and they did not disappoint! In all we saw 108 “Whoopers” and added an additional 104 other species as we travelled the highways and backroads North and South of Saskatoon, 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 each day. For a complete listing of all the species we encountered, see the accompanying species list.



Whooping Cranes flying © Richard Stern

Day 1 On the first day of our tour, participants gathered in the lobby of our hotel for introductions, and to discuss plans for the coming days. Some guests had arrived a day earlier and had already done some birding along the scenic river trails near the hotel. Lively discussions continued over dinner at our hotel. **Day 2** After an early breakfast, we made our way northward towards Marcelin to begin our search for Whooping cranes. On the way, one of our keen-eyed spotters pointed out a moose on the distant edge of a field. We hurried out of the vans to get scopes set up for a better look, but the young bull started to run. Alvin made a strange nasal moaning sound in a feeble attempt to imitate a cow moose and to everyone's surprise it worked! The bull stopped and even moved a little closer allowing everyone some excellent views.



The big highlight of the day for everyone were the Whooping Cranes. We found them in groups of various sizes, scattered over the rolling fields in different locations. (insert standing cranes with colt) Just North of Blaine Lake, we encountered our first group of 20 Whoopers. This was a “life bird” for many. The next group was our largest, 81 Whooping Cranes mixed in with 125 Sandhill Cranes. The difference in size was a surprise to many. As we watched them feeding in the field, a coyote approached and moved through the middle of the group which caused them to stop feeding and pay attention, but they held their ground and did not fly off! There were mostly adult birds, with a few rusty coloured juveniles (colts) mixed in.



Whooping Cranes © Richard Stern

With a few smaller groups sighted before and after lunch, our final tally grew to 108 Whooping Cranes for the day! Guests were also in awe of the sheer numbers of geese (Snow, Ross’s, Canada and Greater White-fronted) we saw flying or feeding out in the fields.



Snow and Ross's Geese © Richard Stern

A thirteen-lined ground squirrel was also a big attraction, in his fancy brown and tan coat of stripes and spots.



Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel © Richard Stern

A very special encounter for us all was a juvenile American Goshawk that rocketed past us as we were watching a Wilson's Snipe. It was brief look for some, but exciting to see this unexpected raptor. One of our guests was happy to identify a Harris' Sparrow for the first time ever, in the willows along the road as this was her 600th species for her life-list. Many other guests had lifers as

well. We “dipsy-doodled” (a new favourite expression for one of our American guests) our way back to Saskatoon for dinner, satisfied with a 64 species first day! **Day 3** Having successfully accomplished our mission of finding Whooping Cranes, we set out to see what other species we could encounter. Our day started off with a walk through a local neighbourhood and on the forested Meewasin Trail along the South Saskatchewan River. A pleasant walk but fairly quiet bird-wise with Belted Kingfisher, Merlin and Hooded Mergansers being the highlights.



Merlin © Richard Stern

Next we headed for Forestry Farm Park and then South of Saskatoon to the Blackstrap Lake area. Guests were excited to get close looks and great photos of an Orange-crowned Warbler in the park.



One of the guests noticed a small bird darting into the undergrowth and after some careful searching we were delighted to identify it as a Winter Wren. Another cryptic and often hard to find species, the Brown Creeper, was also seen scurrying up the trunk of a pine tree. Cedar Waxwings, a Swainson's Thrush, Purple and House Finches, a Cackling Goose and more, were added to our list before we left the park to head for Blackstrap Lake and a picnic lunch.



Cackling Goose surrounded by Canada Geese © Cathy Pasterczyk

Along the way, one guest was happy to photograph a large flock of Canvasback ducks on a small prairie lake. At Blackstrap we were able to scope a single American White Pelican and one guest got his first good photograph of an Eared Grebe.



Eared Grebe © Richard Stern

Identifying the differences between non-breeding Eared and Horned Grebes became a “hot topic” for the rest of the tour, and we all improved our identification skills afterwards! On our way back, we checked out the dam on the North end of Blackstrap Lake and had our first American Pipit and Spotted Sandpiper, both moving amongst the jumble of rocks near the water’s edge. As we drove the gravel backroads on our way back, we came across a small herd of 5 Mule deer. We all laughed as they “spronged” away through the tall grasses and out of sight.



Mule Deer © Cathy Pasterczyk

The final highlight of our day was a group of ~800 Sandhill Cranes feeding on a low hillside along the road. Mixed in here and there were the darker, rusty red brown “colts.” A gorgeous scene! Over dinner we tallied another 64 bird species day.



Sandhill Cranes © Richard Stern

Day 4 We made an early start and planned breakfast on the road in the town of Prince Albert so that we could maximize our time in Prince Albert National Park. It was exciting to encounter a few more Whooping Cranes near a wetland along the highway on our drive northward, but they flew off shortly after we stopped our vans. A brief walk in the community of Emma Lake didn't turn up any new species, so we headed to our beautiful lunch spot in the park. Almost immediately after we arrived, we were visited by some inquisitive Canada Jays.



Canada Jay © Cathy Pasterczyk

As we made our way further into the park the contrast between green Spruce, yellow Poplars and golden Tamarack trees against the azure blue sky was stunning.



Roadside landscape © Alvin Dyck



Prince Albert National Park © Alvin Dyck

We stopped beside a quiet pond in the forest to watch a family of beavers working on their lodge and bringing in pond lilies to add to their food pile. Very unusual to see beavers so active in the middle of the day.



Beaver © Cathy Pasterczyk

We had a fly by of what we thought were a large flock of Crossbills but they didn't stop to allow us a definitive identification. A short while later, we did finally find a single White-winged Crossbill perched atop a spruce. It stayed long enough to even allow for very good scope views.



White-winged Crossbill © Richard Stern

As we continued along the Narrows road we encountered a very curious red fox (the first of three) who sat down on the edge of the road and watched us as we treated him like the paparazzi. We were mesmerized by its golden eyes.



Red Fox © Cathy Pasterczyk

On the shores of Paignton Beach we found a small group of Ring-billed Gulls with a single California Gull mixed in. This allowed for an excellent side-by-side comparison where we could highlight the differences between these very similar species.



Ring-billed and California Gull © Richard Stern

Double-crested cormorants lined the dock at the end of the road and high above, Ken's sharp eyes spotted a Golden Eagle. We had a brief fly-by by a Pileated Woodpecker before we loaded up the vans to make our way to a hike on the edge of the town of Waskesiu and then the long ride back to Saskatoon for dinner. Weary but satisfied, we gathered for a final meal together, shared highlights of the tour and swapped more stories, laughs and favourite experiences. There were many firsts for guests on this trip. For some it was their first time seeing some species and others it was their first birding trip ever. Both beginners and experts felt it was a great group to be a part of, with something for everyone and a fine sense of camaraderie. Ken and I would like to thank everyone for their enthusiasm and generosity and wish them well on all their future birding adventures.



Saskatchewan Whooping Crane Tour group 2024

[Saskatchewan Whooping Crane bird list tour 1 \(Oct 2024\)](#)