

# Saskatchewan Whooping Cranes Trip Reports 2021 (Tour 1: Oct 2-6, 2021)

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**Tour # 1 (October 2-6, 2021)** Almost as soon as we drove off the highway near Marcelin we spotted our first large flock of a few thousand field-feeding Snow Geese, but our attention was rapidly diverted to a flock of at least 21 Whooping Cranes to the west. Although quite far and partly obscured from time to time by a ridge, we could see them well in the scopes and had good looks at the first of several slightly brownish juveniles we would observe indicating they had had a productive nesting season this year. As the morning progressed, we would encounter many more small to medium-sized Whooper flocks (60 in total). We'd add one more pair with a juvenile later in the afternoon, but probably the most memorable Whooper encounters for most was when we hurried back from the boreal forest on our last day. Despite a smoky haze hanging in the air, we were able to sneak up a bit on a flock of 35 field-feeding Whoopers and then as we raced around to a lake west of Marcelin in the rapidly fading evening light, a flock of 10 flew quite close to the vans. But to top it all off, as we sat in the vans glassing at least 14 that were in the lake, two flocks of 24 & 9 materialized from the haze flying low over the vans trumpeting as they flew over & alit in the lake. What a way to cap off a most memorable Whooping Crane tour!! **Day 1 - Saturday/Oct 2** Picking up the tall 15-passenger van and a smaller van, plus groceries for lunches and snacks, Ken & Rudolf had some time to check out the river walk along the South Saskatchewan River from the Park Town Hotel north to the Weir/Railway Bridge before meeting the group in the hotel lobby at 6:30. We drove a few blocks from the hotel to dine at the Tomas Cook restaurant. Some of the participants had also done some birding along the river trails near the hotel and elsewhere in and near town that day, so we got a head-start on the trip list adding a few geese (including some White-fronts and a hybrid Snow/Canada), Hooded Merganser, Tundra Swans, Pied-billed & Horned Grebes, Belted Kingfisher, Red- & White-breasted Nuthatches, Palm & Yellow-rumped Warblers, and a variety of sparrows including American Tree, White-throated, White-crowned, Lincoln's, and Harris's. Some Cedar Waxwings had been spotted at the Forestry Farm in Saskatoon which would not be found later in the trip, and Blythe/Dan photographed both a Great Blue Heron and Black-crowned Night Heron along the river. **Day 2 - Sunday/Oct 3** Hearing of a couple of recent Whooping Crane reports well north of Saskatoon, we wanted to get an early start but hadn't calculated that breakfast only opened at 7:30 on Sundays. Nevertheless, we got off at about 8:30 and made our way straight out to Marcelin stopping briefly for a coyote and for restrooms at Blaine Lake. Near Marcelin we turned off the highway and immediately got onto the above-mentioned Snow Geese and at least 21 Whooping Cranes. While scoping the cranes and trying to determine exactly how many were in this feeding flock (as some were behind a ridge and could only be seen when they put their heads up), we also had a pair of Sharp-tailed Grouse fly towards us, landing in the field not too far away (brief looks before they scurried into some taller grass). Our attention was also temporarily diverted by a Merlin fly-by, and a couple of Bald Eagles (first of 5 for the day). Back-tracking to the highway, and proceeding west and north we spotted the first of 6 Western Meadowlarks for the day and the first of 10 Northern Harriers. Some smaller birds perched on the hydro wires proved to be American Pipits; when they flew off with a bunch that had been in the field, a total of 40 were realized. Most of the

Whoopers were still out feeding in the fields, but while we were glassing 4 that were on a larger lake west of Marcelin, another 26 magically appeared not too far out on the lake. After scoping these, we headed north a couple of miles to check out an area where the Whoopers often had been seen in previous years. At a small roadside pond, we added an American Avocet, while a Lapland Longspur scurried in and out of the roadside grass. Proceeding west we spotted another 9 Whoopers feeding in a field some distance south of the road. Carrying on west and south back to the Marcelin road, a large flock of at least 100 Brewers Blackbirds and a few starlings were with some cattle, and a small pond on the way back to Marcelin yielded a few Greater Yellowlegs, 3 Blue-winged Teal, a couple of muskrats, and just as we got ready to depart a Rusty Blackbird put in an appearance. It was now getting on to lunch time so we located a nice little picnic area in Marcelin. While we were preparing and having lunch, several good birds were spotted near feeders and in yards across the street including a pair of Purple Finches, Downy Woodpeckers, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Dark-eyed Juncos, a Harris's Sparrow, and lastly a soaring Turkey Vulture. After lunch we stopped in town to glass a flock of 12 Pine Siskins before proceeding north on gravel roads to Leask picking up a few more small flocks and some field-feeding Lapland Longspurs (total of 150 for the day), and a flock of 10 Horned Larks in a stubble field. A large lake a mile or so SW of Leask was glassed at length producing most of our better ducks and waterbirds for the day including 100 Cackling Geese, a few White-fronted Geese (100 for the day), an estimated 300 Franklin's Gulls, a couple of Horned Grebe, Tundra Swans, Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon, Pintail, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye & Ruddy Ducks, and fairly large concentrations of Gadwall, Redhead & Lesser Scaup. Another large lake immediately west of Leask had thousands of Snow Geese with a scattering of Ross's mixed in (among the estimated 50,000 Snows for the day we were only able to pick out 10 that were definitely Ross's). A small flock of 10 Long-billed Dowitchers fed along the nearby shoreline, along with many more Greater Yellowlegs, and a single Eared Grebe was identified. There were also quite a few more Tundra Swans (40 for the day), and 90 Bonaparte's Gulls. We took the highway back to Marcelin, and headed west of town to the lake where some 30 whoopers had been seen before lunch. Light conditions were now much better and we were able to get some pictures (mostly digi-scoped) of some adult and juvenile Whooping Cranes with a few Sandhill Cranes standing nearby for comparison. South and west of town we located a Whooper pair and juvenile that we had missed earlier, but they were not close to the road so we had brief looks and started on our way back to Saskatoon. Dinner that evening was at Mano's where we celebrated a very successful first day. **Day 3 - Monday/Oct 4** Today we got off by 8:15. First we walked a riverbank stretch from the Weir to Shakespeare Park picking up a few sparrows (American Tree, Lincoln's), Turkey Vulture, Belted Kingfisher, Hooded Merganser, Franklin's Gull, American Coot, Horned Grebe, several cormorants, and some Yellow-rumps, and the ever-present Least Chipmunks. Circling back to the vans on a well-treed back lane, we added a Hermit Thrush, and good numbers of American Robins, Common Grackles & White-throated Sparrows. One last destination in Saskatoon was the Forestry Farm where we had good looks at a Great Blue Heron, Brown Creeper, several Cackling Geese, a Harris's Sparrow, both nuthatches, another Hermit Thrush, and a surprise Mule Deer. As we left Saskatoon heading south to Blackstrap we began to notice more and more smoke in the air (it would get worse & linger for much of the rest of the tour). Along Hwy 11 a group of Sandhill Cranes were spotted, and after we turned off heading into Blackstrap a couple of Red-tails put in an appearance. At Blackstrap a Red-necked Grebe and Pied-billed Grebe were observed along the causeway, and 15 Gray Partridge darted across the road as we drove into our lunch spot at the abandoned Cedar Lodge. At the lunch spot we added Blue Jay, Downy Woodpecker and a few folks got onto a Fox Sparrow. After lunch we drove through Blackstrap Provincial Park chalking up several good sightings in short order (American Wigeon, Hooded Merganser pair, Sharp-shinned Hawk, a richly colored Merlin plucking a bird on a nearby hydro pole, Belted Kingfisher, two Common Loons, 3 Western Grebes). Next was the Blackstrap dam at the north end where we had more good looks at Lapland Longspurs, White-crowned Sparrows, Hooded Merganser, Belted Kingfisher, large numbers of Pied-billed Grebe and

Bufflehead, and a Great Blue Heron. From there, we headed south to Clavet adding a photogenic American Kestrel, good looks at a Ross's Goose with a flock of Canada's, and a dark Harlan's Red-tail that had us thinking Roughleg until we had better looks. From there we headed east to Road 323 and north to 362 where a nice shorebird pond produced Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, a couple of Black-bellied Plovers, 35 American Avocets, and most of the day's 39 Long-billed Dowitchers. It had been a productive bird-filled day; that evening we had dinner in the Park Town Hotel **Day 4 - Tuesday/Oct5** Today would be our day to visit Prince Albert National Park so we loaded up with coffee from the rooms, grabbed some 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 couple of Bald Eagles and Merlins, a Turkey Vulture, Wilson's Snipe, several Greater Yellowlegs, and about 30 Tundra Swans. Before accessing the park, a hike through the Sunset Resort at Emma Lake yielded decent looks at a male Evening Grosbeak plus some fly-overs, a couple of heard-only Boreal Chickadees, a fly-by Sharp-shinned Hawk, 3 Red-necked Grebe, a Hairy Woodpecker, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red- and White-breasted Nuthatches, American Tree, White-throated, White-crowned & a couple of Harris's Sparrows and finally a Ruffed Grouse that would not cooperate for a better look. From there, we followed Hwy 263 adding a few Canada Jays before reaching a peaceful creek-side lunch spot just a couple of miles into the park. After lunch, 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 Waskesiu, a walk along the shoreline/beach yielded a photo op at a couple of sleeping muskrats, brief looks at a Palm Warbler and Swamp Sparrow, 4 Lapland Longspurs & 2 Horned Larks along the beach, a Common Loon, and in the nearby open park 2 loafing spike elk presented more photo ops. A walk along a trail through the forest at the north end of Waskesiu proved to be so quiet, that we changed plans for the rest of afternoon and decided we would make the long drive back to Marcelin for one last look at the Whooping Cranes. On the way out of Waskesiu we ran into the rest of the local elk herd (16) which included a nice 6-point bull. It was well past 4 o'clock when we left the park, with a 2 hour drive to Marcelin. En route, a striped skunk was observed. Getting to Marcelin at 6:15, we quickly spotted the afore-mentioned 35 field-feeding Whoopers, followed by a flock of 10 flying by quite close, and the trumpeting flocks of 24 & 9 that flew low over the vans as we sat glassing 14 that were already in the lake west of Marcelin. Since, we were unsure whether the 24 & 9 could possibly have been most of the 35 we had seen field-feeding earlier, we did not add them to our daily total of 59 Whooping Cranes (all in the last half hour of light)! We had enjoyed Mano's so much a couple of days earlier that 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 - Wednesday/Oct 6** Although some participants had early flights, and others probably enjoyed extra rest, Rudolf and Ken were up early for breakfast as we'd heard that a Kentucky Warbler had been seen in a rather hard to reach section of riparian forest south of Saskatoon. After breakfast we noticed a Peregrine Falcon just outside the hotel perched on a nearby building - since it was so close to the hotel and others may have noticed it, we entered it to the trip list. The directions to the Kentucky Warbler were rather sketchy, so we failed to find it and headed back to the hotel to join a few of the participants who had wanted to meet up for a late breakfast/early lunch. After doing a variety of chores in the afternoon, we met up with two of the participants who were still around and headed out to look for the Kentucky Warbler one more time. This time, equipped with better instructions, we eventually found the seepage spots where it had been seen and 15-20 mins later got to see it. This bird provided Saskatchewan with its first properly documented record of the species. What a way to cap off a very successful tour with a great group of participants!!