Eagle-Eye Tours



Saskatchewan Whooping Cranes with Canadian Geographic (Oct 4 - 9, 2024)

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The weather was daunting on our first day out, with overnight showers persisting into the morning, cool temperatures and a fierce wind out of the northwest. But we hadn't gone far out of Blaine Lake that morning when we spotted out first group of Whooping Cranes feeding in the stubble fields. But that was just the start of an amazing day. We'd see many more - some in solitary pairs accompanied by a single rusty-colored juvenile, others in small groups of adults, and still others in larger flocks mixed with Sandhill Cranes. The earlier Eagle-Eye group had seen Whooping Cranes in some of the same areas where we would see them, but one never knows how long they might remain. At any time they will take wing and carry on their long migration from Wood Buffalo Park in northern Alberta to the Aransas Reserve in southern Texas. But today and on this tour, we wouldn't find just a few Whoopers. Altogether, we'd see 174 Whoopers that morning, another family group of three in the afternoon, and an additional pair closer to Prince Albert later in the week. That's 179 Whooping Cranes, or more than one-third of the entire Wood Buffalo/Aransas population!! Considering that this species had been nearly wiped out in the early 1940s (when the entire world's population had dwindled to 15 birds), a day and a week like this would be one few of us will ever forget.

Day 1 – Friday, 4 October

That first evening, we gathered at the Park Town Hotel in downtown Saskatoon for a meet-and-greet and had dinner in the hotel's Four Seasons dining room. A few guests had arrived earlier in the day and had done some birding along the nearby trails along the South Saskatchewan River, while others had flown in or made long drives with great anticipation for the coming days. After dinner, we all went to bed hoping we'd get to see some Whooping Cranes, and many had a few other species on their wish lists that they wanted to find.

Day 2 – Saturday, 5 October

After a nice breakfast in the hotel, we dressed for the inclement weather, loaded up the two spacious vans and set off north to Blaine Lake. We spotted a few small field-feeding flocks of Canada Geese and some larger flocks of Snow Geese on the way, plus a few other species to start our day's list, but we didn't want to delay in getting to the better areas for Whooping Cranes today. After a quick pitstop at Blaine Lake, we proceeded north just a few miles when we encountered our first Whoopers – actually 25 including 3 juveniles (colts) feeding in a large stubble field. Conditions weren't great but all got really nice scope and binocular looks and decent photos of at least one pair with a colt not too far from the road.



Whooping Crane with colt © Celia Gerry

We still were a few miles from where we'd seen many more Whoopers with the earlier group, so we proceeded north and west to Marcelin adding some large feeding flocks of Snow Geese, at least 100 Long-billed Dowitchers in a small roadside marsh, a soaring Turkey Vulture, and a Cooper's Hawk flew in front of the second van. West of Marcelin we stopped to look at 11 quite far-off Whooping Cranes in a dried up marsh and had a small flock of Tundra Swans fly in giving us nice looks. Heading north and west of Marcelin, the roads started to get quite muddy. But we could see Whooping Cranes in the distance so we ventured on for a closer look. The muddy roads meant we had to be careful where we stopped but as we proceeded 11 more Whoopers were observed on our left, and we eventually found a safe spot where we could stop to scan a large flock on the right. These were spaced out in pairs and small groups along with 75 Sandhill Cranes. We watched and snapped photos for some time, eventually coming up with a count of 73 Whoopers in this grouping. Some were already starting to take off headed for their large day and night roosting lakes a few miles to the west, and we suspected there would be a few more birds a little further up the road so we carried on to the next ridge, spotting 32 additional Whooping Cranes from that vantage point.



Whooping and Sandhill Cranes © Michael Kennedy

At this point, the road had become quite mushy, so we found a place to turn around and headed back east. Turning to head towards Marcelin, we could see a few more Whooping Cranes to the northeast that we hadn't noticed before. They were a ways off and often hidden from view but we counted at least 18 more here, and a little further down the road added another pair with a colt. Our total for the morning was an incredible 174 Whooping Cranes, which included at least 8 colts. Normally we would have had a picnic lunch in Marcelin on our first day out, but the inclement weather meant we would eat in today. We had picked up menus from Betty's Diner in Blaine Lake and ordered ahead but we still had a bit of time left to bird before lunch. The town of Marcelin which had been good with the earlier group produced just a few robins and juncos today. But as we backtracked on roads to Blaine Lake, a Sharp-tailed Grouse flew by giving us nice looks, and stopping in a sheltered spot to scan a large flock of several thousand Snow Geese with a few White-fronted Geese mixed in amongst them, we noted two White-tailed Deer bucks approaching the flock. The geese began taking wing as the running deer approached and it almost seemed like the deer took delight in kicking up as many of the geese as they could as they weaved throw the flock. It was a memorable moment captured in pictures by some of the photographers but a video of the entire sequence would have been priceless.



Deer and Snow Geese © Michael Kennedy

Lunch and some warm beverages at Betty's Diner was superb. After lunch we headed east and north of Blaine Lake towards Leask, picking up a large flock of at least 150 Brewer's Blackbirds, a dark-phased Red-tailed Hawk in flight, 14 Horned Larks also in flight, a few Savannah Sparrows flitted in and out of the roadside canola field, and 3 more Whooping Cranes were added to our total for the day. Stopping at a few smaller lakes, we got our first looks at a variety of ducks including many of the days 185 Green-winged Teal, 11 Blue-winged Teal, 28 Northern Shoveler, 200 Gadwall, 31 American Wigeon, and 10 Mallards. More Northern Harriers were observed (11 total for the day) and more Bald Eagles (9 today). We stopped at a large lake just outside of Leask where a variety of shorebirds were spotted including many of the day's 65 Greater Yellowlegs, 2 Lesser Yellowlegs, 2 Least Sandpipers, 25 Long-billed Dowitchers, 1 Pectoral Sandpiper, and 5 Black-bellied Plovers. The lake was covered with ducks including at least 2500 Lesser Scaup, 10 Northern Pintail, 14 Canvasback, 6 Redheads, 9 Bufflehead, 12 Common Goldeneye, and 11 Ruddy Ducks. After a gas station washroom break north of Leask, we back-tracked gravel roads to Blaine Lake. At Leask, we were able to pick out at least 10 Ross's Geese in a closer flock of feeding Snows. In a lake west of Least with large numbers of dabbling ducks and at least 50 American Coots, we got better looks at some male Canvasback and Redheads (as the sun had finally broken through the clouds), as well as our first Eared Grebe, and 1 American Golden-Plover which we could compare nicely to at least 20 more Black-bellied Plovers (all in winter plumage). Closer to Marcelin we spotted a few of the Whooping Cranes we'd seen in the morning but this time a little closer and in really nice light. At Blaine Lake we hit the highway but as we drove back to Saskatoon we would see many more flocks of Snow Geese field-feeding or heading out to the fields, as well as a few more field feeding Canada's. Coming into Saskatoon a small covey of 6 Gray Partridge were spotted along the edge of the road so we pulled onto the shoulder and eventually had to kick them up as they were a lifer for some but they had hid themselves in the roadside grass. Dinner in the hotel at 7 that evening was a tad later than usual but it had been a very eventful day, and all had many highlights of the day to share.



Whooping Cranes © Michael Kennedy

Day 3 – Sunday, 6 October

Between tours, we'd scouted out a few lake east of Saskatoon that had been good for many of the shorebirds that we'd missed the first tour, so rather than doing the river walk first thing today, we headed to the Forestry Farm in northeast Saskatoon and then east of town. The Forestry Farm grounds were a bit quieter than usual today but we still added a number of good birds to our list including a close up Merlin, White-breasted & Red-breasted Nuthatches, Purple & House Finches, Yellow-rumped & Orange-crowned Warblers, Rusty Blackbird, Cedar Waxwing, White-throated Sparrow, Hairy Woodpecker, and a Swainson's Thrush. There were also many Dark-eyed Juncos (40 today), Robins (157 today), Black-billed Magpies (39 today), a couple Blue Jays (a highlight for one participant who had been trying for years to get a good photo), a few Red Squirrels and a surprise Eastern Gray Squirrel.



Merlin © Michael Kennedy

Our next destination was Porter Lake where we spotted our first of several Gray Partridge covey we would see today, several Eared Grebes, another Pectoral Sandpiper, and our first Western Meadowlarks (19 today). At Patience Lake we stopped to look at a small roadside pond covered mainly with Cackling Geese, a couple Franklin's Gulls were spotted, 10 Horned Larks were added, plus a couple Savannah Sparrows. East and south to Crawford Lake, where a group of 7 American Avocets were spotted but they were flushed by a passing Northern Harrier before we could get scopes on them. A couple small groups of Lapland Longspurs also flitted by but they carried on without giving us good looks. Further down the road we added a few Sandhill Cranes, a couple Red-tailed Hawks, 3 chubby Richardson's Ground Squirrels, a flock of 7 Eurasian Collared Doves in a farmyard, some Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds, and a couple more Gray Partridge coveys. We were overdue for lunch and restrooms so we stopped at a gas station near Clavet and grabbed some snacks before carrying on to our lunch spot in Blackstrap Provincial Park picking up a Coyote and Mourning Dove on the way. We found a real nice picnic lunch spot alongside Blackstrap Lake before carrying on through the park spotting a couple Red-necked Grebes and a Western Grebe, and then a surprise flock of 5 Surf Scoters on the lake. We also identified more Mallards (40 today), Canvasback (50), large rafts of Redhead (212) and American Coots (80) plus 30 Bufflehead. Proceeding to the north end of the lake via backroads a few folks spotted a Mule Deer, a well camouflaged Great Horned Owl that flew before all could get onto it, and a couple American Kestrels. On the dam at the north end of Blackstrap we added at least 400 more Franklin's Gulls, 3 Herring Gulls, a Bonaparte's Gull, an American Pipit, many more Eared Grebes, and a nice close up Horned Grebe. Huge flocks of Snow Geese were going over one after another, and on the way back to Saskatoon we spotted many more huge flocks heading to or feeding in stubble fields (89,500 Snows, 5500 Canada's, 2125 Cackling, and 206 Greater White-fronted Geese were our conservative counts for the day). Another amazing day, we celebrated this evening at the downtown Cactus Club restaurant.



Picnic lunch © Celia Gerry



Horned Grebe © Michael Kennedy



Greater White-fronted Geese © Michael Kennedy

Day 4 – 7 October

Today was our day to head north to Prince Albert National Park, but we wanted to give the river trail and a couple back lanes north of the hotel a look so we headed there after breakfast. These were a little quieter than normal, but we did add a Sharp-shinned Hawk, Great Blue Heron, Common Grackle, Song Sparrow, Belted Kingfisher, and a Least Chipmunk – all new species for our list. After a pit stop at Meewasin Park, we carried on to the city of Prince Albert adding a couple more reasonably close Whooping Cranes feeding in a stubble field, a nice fly-over Rough-legged Hawk, 40,450 more Snow Geese, a few Tundra Swans, and better looks at some Mule Deer on route. Proceeding to our lunch spot in the park, we stopped at a roadside lake where we added our first Hooded Mergansers, Ring-necked Ducks, and a Pied-billed Grebe.



© Celia Gerry

At the scenic picnic lunch spot along the winding Snake River we were greeted by several Canada Jays, a couple Blue Jays, and a Hermit Thrush was heard by one of the participants. Further down #263, we stopped for group pictures at a scenic creek crossing with lots of golden tamarack trees standing out against the dark green spruce trees. Turning off onto the gravel Narrows Road, we stopped at a small pond where a couple very large Beavers were repairing the outside of their lodge and hauling more sticks to stock their feed pile for the winter. Further down, we stopped to look at more beavers swimming near their lodge, when a Red Fox trotted up to us looking as cute and innocent as possible hoping that might entice us to throw out some scraps. Down the road, 3 more roadside Red Foxes were observed and a couple Ruffed Grouse walked from the roadside giving us brief looks but they would not cooperate for better looks. At a camping area at the end of the road, however, we were treated to excellent looks at a Ruffed Grouse feeding on the edge of the road. Back-tracking to #263 and almost at Waskasiu, we spotted a coyote that tried to hide in the ditch, and then a couple elk that mostly gave us butt-shots as they stopped in a small clearing in the woods.



Red Fox © Michael Kennedy



Ruffed Grouse © Michael Kennedy



Beaver © Michael Kennedy

In Waskasiu, we drove to the north end of town hoping some more elk might be in the open park where they occasionally loaf. Before checking into the Hawood Inn we took a short walk across the road to check out the breakwater/beach – wonderfully calm, scenic, with a female Common Goldeneye whose eyes shone in the late evening sun. Walking back to the hotel, we got onto a migrant flock of small birds flitting through the spruce trees, in which there were several Boreal Chickadees – great looks at several but the photographers were mostly challenged by their constant movements.



Common Goldeneye © Michael Kennedy

After dinner in the hotel that evening we had a most entertaining presentation by Wilson Bearhead, the Canadian Geographic Society ambassador, who delighted us with stories about his native heritage, their beliefs, and some healing agents that can be found in the wild. Alvin had volunteered to try one of these to help cure some allergies/sniffles he had. After sniffing some medicinal powder, he sat down and Wilson predicted a sneeze might be forthcoming. Well, all of a sudden there was a mighty sneeze, followed by several more. Alvin eventually had to leave the room to blow his nose, but as Wilson predicted all would be fine 20 minutes later (and it was). It made all of us laugh, however, and emphasized the power of traditional knowledge. It had been a long day, and most of us retired early that evening, but a few folks went up on the roof and down to the beach to observe the northern lights that flickered in spells in the northern skies that night.

Day 5 – 8 October

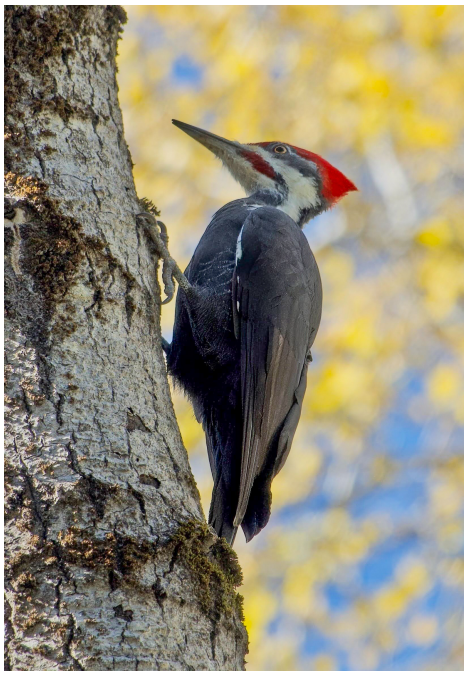
We'd have another half day or so to explore the park and breakfast in the hotel was at 7:30 that morning, so a few folks got up early and had a walk by the beach, some hearing a few elk bugles and others heard a Common Loon calling over the lake. After breakfast, we were treated to some great looks and photos of a large bull elk in the park, and a few White-winged Crossbills landed in the tops of the spruces but were hard to spot clearly. Next we did a short loop of the Red Deer trail at the north end of town which produced a major highlight (2 American Tree-toed Woodpeckers), more White-winged Crossbills, a couple Golden-crowned Kinglets, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, another Purple Finch, at least two more Boreal Chickadees, and a Downy Woodpecker.



Elk © Michael Kennedy

Heading north of town on #264 we stopped to walk the Waskasiu River trail and were greeted by 20 Rusty Blackbirds feeding amongst the rocks in the river. The trail took us through us on a nice boardwalk along and across the river, and then through some good representative boreal and mixed forests where we hoped to find a Spruce Grouse, but were more than happy when a Pileated Woodpecker flew by and lit near us in response to some playback. All got superb looks and photos as it perched on a low tree trunk. At the end of the trail, we stopped for a picnic lunch at a very nice riverside setting and were greeted by more Canada Jays and a Northern Flicker was heard. After

lunch we drove a bit further west along the north shore of Waskasiu Lake adding a swimming Muskrat in a roadside pond and admiring the scenic roadside views of bright golden aspen against the dark green spruce backdrop.



Pileated Woodpecker © Celia Gerry

Eventually we turned around, headed out of the park on #264, and back to Prince Albert where we stopped for gas, rest rooms, and to say goodbye to Wilson who wanted to visit with a son who lived nearby. From there, we headed west and south back to the Marcelin area for one last look at the Whooping Cranes. But they were not nearly as numerous or close as they had been three days earlier. Checking all the spots where we'd seen them the first day, 40 Whoopers were seen which included 9 colts, but all were at least a quarter mile off. It was nice to see them again, and to see so many youngsters with them, but it certainly made us appreciate more the looks and numbers we'd gotten that first day. We also added 2 Harris's & 3 White-crowned Sparrows to our list, and got much better looks at a couple Sharp-tailed Grouse. But it was time to hightail it back to Saskatoon, where we had some time to unwind before meeting downstairs for our final meal together. It had been a superb trip. The group meshed well, the weather had been great (after that cool & windy first day), and there were many surprises among the 104 bird species and 11 mammals we'd seen. Certainly the quantity and quality of Whooping Crane sightings we had experienced were second to none. At dinner everyone got to reminisce about their favorite species and/or moments from the trip, and there were more than enough to go around.



Wilson Bearhead drumming © Alvin Dyck

Thank you for your good company, great stories and we hope to see again in the future. A special thanks to Wilson Bearhead and the Royal Canadian Geographic Society who collaborated with Eagle-Eye Tours to make this extended Saskatchewan Whooping Crane/Prince Albert National Park tour a resounding success. Your ever-appreciative guides, Ken & Alvin



Saskatchewan Whooping Crane tour 2024

Saskatchewan Whooping Crane tour with Canadian Geographic 2024 Bird List