



## Saskatchewan Whooping Cranes with Canadian Geographic Trip Report 2023

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Guides: Dominic Cormier and Alvin Dyck Appropriate for a Whooping Crane Tour, we started and ended with the stars of the show! We enjoyed plenty of quality time with Whooping Cranes, spotting at least 68 of these magnificent birds. We watched them dance and call, feed in the stubble fields, and poke around at fairly close range in a slough. We even had a few close flyovers! In addition to the cranes, we had incredible spectacles of Snow Geese, an abundance of other waterfowl, and an idyllic stay in Prince Albert National Park immersed in the fall colours of the Boreal forest. Here is a day-by-day account of our trip. **Day 1** Our first evening we gathered at the hotel for a meet-and-greet and dinner. A few guests had some nice sightings along the South Saskatchewan River prior to meeting, while others had made long drives with great anticipation for the coming days. We all went to bed with thoughts of Whooping Cranes, and for some, the idea of all the new bird species they would encounter on this, their first bird tour! **Day 2** The first morning dawned with a cold north wind and eager birders. Whooping Cranes stopover in Saskatchewan during their fall migration from Wood Buffalo National Park to the gulf coast of Texas. Marcelin, an hour NW of Saskatoon has been the preferred area for a number of years. Arriving there, we enjoyed our first Whooping Crane sighting of two adults and a rusty-coloured colt. The goose migration was in full swing, and guests learned the differences between Snow and Ross' Geese, and Canada and Cackling Geese. The numerous Greater White-fronted Geese were also a highlight.



*Adult and a Juvenile Whooping Cranes in flight*



*Snow and Ross' Geese in flight © Chantal Imbeault*

Finding a small wetland, we arrived just in time for 21 Whooping Cranes to fly-in and make the slough their resting area for the next hour or so. Sheltered from the north wind by our vans, we soaked up these superb birds at close range! For their part, sheltered by the tall cattails on the edge of the slough, the cranes preened, probed the water, danced, called, and simply rested between forays for leftover grain in the stubble fields. We were close enough to see that a couple of the adult

cranes were sporting both coloured leg bands, and satellite transmitters. A group of Sandhill Cranes obliged us by joining their endangered cousins. Tundra Swans, their pure white plumage glinting in the sunlight, cruised over our stakeout, and the ever present geese flocks came and went.



*Whooping Cranes fighting the wind! © Chantal Imbeault*

By lunchtime, we were on the road to Prince Albert National Park to spend the evening and the following day in the Mixed and Boreal Forest. Stopping at Emma Lake to stretch our legs and we all got our first taste of snow for the year. Not deterred by the white stuff, we found a mixed flock of sparrows, some Pine Siskins, and a few Bonaparte's Gulls loafing on the beach. The ensuing drive through the park to Waskesiu was punctuated by roadside Horned Larks in the middle of the forest, curious Canada Jays, and upon arriving in town, Elk! A great way to end an action packed first day!



*Elk in Waskesiu © Chantal Imbeault*

**Day 3** Today we had the whole day to explore and enjoy Prince Albert National Park. The fall colours and a calm morning painted an idyllic scene, and a bull Elk first thing after breakfast highlighted the picture. We took a drive along the south side of Waskesiu Lake to the Narrows Campground. Along the way we enjoyed views of Pied-billed Grebe and Rusty Blackbird. We stopped to take in the fall colours and get a group photo just in time for a Pileated Woodpecker to make its presence known with its far carrying call.



*Birding in Prince Albert National Park © Carol Patterson*

At the campground, we were greeted by a friendly Red Fox, Canada Jays, and a Black-billed Magpie. The Jays were determined to extract a food tax from us, delighting with their inquisitive nature. Hooded Mergansers on the calm waters pried our attention away from our begging friends, who returned once we broke out the snacks. The drive back to Waskesiu had a flyby American Three-toed Woodpecker, reminding us that not all birds are as cooperative as the Canada Jays, or the male Ruffed Grouse we had just seen in full display along the roadside!



*No food here! © Chantal Imbeault*



*Red Fox © Dominic Cormier*

No trip to the Boreal forest is complete without seeing its great engineer, the iconic Beaver. Great close-ups were had as Alvin discussed Beaver ecology to a rapt audience. A walk on the Red Deer trail allowed us close-up views of Boreal Chickadees. We made our way south along the scenic drive, spotting an obliging Porcupine, and climbing the Height-of-land Tower to take in the stunning landscape from a bird's perspective. It was also a great reminder that not all of Saskatchewan is flat!



*Porcupine © Marie Jordan*



*Fall colours of Prince Albert National Park © Chantal Imbeault*

**Day 4** We started off the day with a nice walk along the South Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon. Saskatoon has done a wonderful job of preserving the waterfront, with most of it being a mix of parkland, native riparian forest, and open greenspace. Our group was very thankful for the wild space to explore, as were the Dark-eyed Juncos, Orange-crowned Warblers, Yellow-rumped Warblers, White-breasted Nuthatch, Downy Woodpecker, and other songbirds we found. The walk to the Weir was slowed to photograph the many Least Chipmunks and their food-gathering antics, as well as a nice side-by-side comparison of a California Gull with the more numerous Ring-billed Gulls. A walkway on the rail bridge crossing the river gave us sweeping views of the city, and another California Gull harassing a Ring-billed Gull for its breakfast added to the excitement.



*Orange-crowned Warbler © Chantal Imbeault*

At the Forestry Farm Park, many Pine Siskins feeding in the birches, a number of Brown Creepers creeping their way around, Ruby-crowned Kinglets refusing to perch quietly, and a Hermit Thrush in the open were highlights. At Blackstrap Reservoir south of town, some lingering American White Pelicans did not disappoint as they lounged on a small sandbar. With a marked turn in the weather making it feel positively tropical, we enjoyed a picnic lunch on the shores of the lake with the sun on our faces and the company of not one, but two Townsend's Solitaire. As it turned out, we weren't the only creatures enjoying the sunny weather. Hordes of Boxelder bugs resolutely guarded the port-a-potties until Alvin's brave actions cleared the way for the more wary guests.



*American White Pelicans © Carol Patterson*



*Townsend's Solitaire © Dominic Cormier*



*Sunny skies on the prairies © Chantal Imbeault*

East of the lake, Western Meadowlarks, Coyotes, and Mule Deer in the pastureland kept everyone's eyes sharp, as did a calling Red-tailed Hawk and a majestic pair of Bald Eagles soaring under a blue sky. Richardson's Ground Squirrels also thought highly enough of the improved weather to leave their subterranean lairs. Arriving at a large slough, the sight and sounds of 50 000 Snow Geese blew our eyes and mouths wide open. The abundance of Snow Geese was both thrilling and overwhelming. A nice group of Sandhill Cranes reminded us that this is a Crane tour. Content with a day filled with sun, nice walks, and plenty of birds and mammals, we returned to the hotel for a presentation by Carol on the workings of Canadian Geographic, and some funny anecdotes of travelling around Atlantic Canada with Alex Trebek. **Day 5** An early start had us watching skeins of Snow Geese under blue skies in a Tim Horton's parking lot as we grabbed breakfast on the go, portending a bird-filled day as we returned to the Marcelin area to look for more Whooping Cranes, waterfowl, and shorebirds. Our early start paid off when we saw numerous Sharp-tailed Grouse perched atop buffalo berry bushes backed by the rising sun. The Whooping Cranes were in their usual haunts in the fields, and we counted 66 in one scope pass. Pretty humbling to see almost 10% of the world's population in one view! With the weather on our side, we soaked up the Whooping Crane magic, catching a few flying off to roost on Paddling Lake to the west along with some Sandhill Cranes and thousands of geese. Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs called overhead as we watched a large Cooper's Hawk cruise low over the fields hoping to make a meal of one of them. Wandering the area, we saw the ever dapper Thirteen-lined ground squirrel, Rusty Blackbirds, American Pipits, Northern Harriers, and a flyover of 2 Snow Buntings to remind us that despite the 20 degree weather, the shifting seasons were upon us.



*Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel © Chantal Imbeault*



*Scanning the fields © Carol Patterson*

Nearby Leask Lake was teeming with life. 20 000 Snow Geese kept a wary eye on us as we got great views of American Avocets and Pectoral Sandpipers along the near shoreline. At the SW end of the lake, hordes of dabbling ducks covered the water, and I had a Black-capped Chickadee come land on my head in the middle of the open country while we scoped and identified 10 species of shorebirds, including great views of American Golden-Plover, and Baird's Sandpiper.



*American Golden-Plover © Carol Patterson*

By the end of the day, we returned to the small wetland from day 1, where 20+ Whooping Cranes were once again in full view. Passing the next hour in their company, we could not have picked a better way to end the trip. With our cups full, we said our farewells to the cranes, with a last Northern Shrike on the drive home to close out the day.



*Whooping Cranes in slough © Chantal Imbeault*

Alvin and I want to thank everyone for a wonderful trip! It was a great pleasure to share the spectacle that is Whooping Crane migration and so much more with all of you!



*EET group 2023*