Eagle-Eye Tours



Ultimate British Columbia: Boreal Extension Trip Report (June 2024)

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Our annual Ultimate BC tour has been a classic for years now. An intense two-week tour providing the most comprehensive itinerary to BC birding. After a thorough visit to the coastal forests and mudflats of Vancouver, an in-depth visit to Vancouver Island including a far offshore pelagic boat tour and a final visit to British Columbia's hot interior, the main tour ends, and we regroup for the final part: the boreal extension. An in-province flight has us land in Fort-Saint-John, the perfect base for a few days of dipping into many of the far eastern specialties that barely make it into BC. During our 2024 British Columbia: boreal birding tour, our group observed a dazzling **126 species of birds**. Highlights included seeing not only Rock but also Willow Ptarmigan from mere meters away, roaming flocks of Bohemian Waxwings and Franklin's Gulls, many of the beautiful eastern warblers such as Canada Warbler, Black-throated Green and even a surprise find of a Northern Parula, and seeing the scarce Philadelphia Vireo from up close. A trip full of highlights and amazing success, and one to remember!

8 June

We met part of our group on the flight towards Fort-Saint-John in the early morning, and as we crossed our province, it soon became clear that the north had some cloudier and cooler weather in store, a stark contrast with the heat wave that was hitting Vancouver the night before. That being said, cool and cloudy means more bird activity throughout the day, and so hopes were high for a good start. We checked into our comfortable hotel and decided to head out for lunch and subsequently birding. The first stop was the famous Big Bam Road in Taylor, a little patch of aspen and spruce forest that continuously produces good, eastern birds. Upon arrival, we got some of the easier birds 'out of the way', including many Ovenbirds, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, American Redstarts, Yellow Warblers, Red-eyed Vireos and eventually the not so easy Black-throated Green Warbler. The latter gave exceptional looks, something that's hard to come by in this province that

doesn’t have too many of them breeding in it! A strange ‘zzzzzziiiiip’ song proved to be a singing Northern Parula, a rare record for the province, as breeding birds rarely make it past Manitoba, yet the typical song echoed a few times through the forest in what seemed perfect habitat. Closer to the Peace River, we found breeding Red Fox Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco, and we were surprised about the first Lincoln’s Sparrows we heard, a very common species from the south in winter, but absent during the breeding season.



Black-throated Green Warbler © Joachim Bertrands



Rose-breasted Grosbeak © Joachim Bertrands

We visited the famous feeders in Taylor that had been frequented in the past by Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, yet it was still early, and the feeders weren't out. We did however have an unexpected, good time at the local yard pond that had many interesting birds bathing, including Clay-coloured Sparrow, Yellow Warbler and even a Tennessee Warbler. A flyover Pileated Woodpecker was a great bonus, as we decided to head towards Dawson Creek and search for some meadow birds along the way.



Pileated Woodpecker © Joachim Bertrands

We eventually stopped at McQueen's Slough, a usually traditional spot for breeding Black Terns, but couldn't find any. That being said, the variety of breeding ducks is always exceptional here, and we quickly encountered species such as Canvasback, Redhead, Blue-winged Teal, Barrow's Goldeneye, Trumpeter Swan and our first Eastern Kingbirds of this extension. A second stop before dinner, at Swan Lake just outside Pouce Coupe, did in fact produce our first Franklin's Gulls for the tour, some gorgeous Red-necked Grebes and even a Pacific Loon, not too shabby! Dinner came quickly and after that we headed back to Fort-Saint-John for a well-deserved rest.

9 June

A big day, because thanks to early snow melt and just low snow levels in general, it was possible for us to access Pink Mountain. This isolated mountain range 2 hours north of Fort St. John is BC's most accessible location to see Rock Ptarmigan but is also an ecological highlight in terms of butterfly and plant species. We started off the day at Beatton Provincial Park, where we hoped to get some of the variety in warblers we were hoping for. It was pretty cold, and maybe we were out a bit too early in the day, because the results were not as good as expected. That being said, we still raked in goodies such as Mourning Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler and many of both Alder and Least Flycatcher. A distant tern had to be left unidentified. We headed back to the hotel for breakfast and then regrouped to head north. A two-hour drive later had us gas up at the foot of the mountain before starting the one-hour ascend of the slope along a windy gravel road. Occasional stops produced the first interesting birds including two Spruce Grouse, Tennessee Warblers and so on. Before we arrived at the summit, we decided to have lunch and were greeted by a flock of very accommodating

Bohemian Waxwings.



Bohemian Waxwing © Joachim Bertrands

The road up otherwise didn't have too much in store, so we continued driving and as soon as we made it to the spot that in the past had had many Rock Ptarmigan, a ptarmigan looked at us from a few meters away. Unexpectedly, this proved to be a Willow Ptarmigan, a species not often encountered in this area, albeit known from here. We enjoyed gorgeous looks of this absolute cracker of a bird, basically a highlight for many right away. It would show itself numerous times throughout the rest of the morning, as we attempted to find Rock Ptarmigan, which took a while to find. Eventually, we found a bird in the willow meadows, pretty much in the area we would rather expect the Willow Ptarmigan to show up! Great additions came in the shape of Stone's Sheep (BC's rare subspecies of Dall's Sheep), Hoary Marmot and even a Woodland Caribou. What a day!



Willow Ptarmigan © Joachim Bertrands



Rock Ptarmigan © Joachim Bertrands



Woodland Caribou © Joachim Bertrands

We birded our way down again and left for Fort St. John again in the late afternoon. From here, it was straight to the hotel as everyone was tired, and then to bed.

10 June

Our morning kicked off with a bit of a drive. We first headed to Swan Lake again, right on the border with Alberta, to look for some remaining warblers in the tall aspen woodlands found here. Right upon arrival, the birds were numerous, but we couldn't find our main target: Connecticut Warbler. We lucked out however with BC's most elusive vireo: Philadelphia Vireo. This bird sounds quite like Red-eyed and breeds sparsely throughout the Peace area. A slow-sounding vireo caught our attention and quickly became this very bird, as we all enjoyed terrific looks. The high density of Mourning Warblers was welcome too, and we enjoyed numerous looks of this often skulky bird.



Philadelphia Vireo © Joachim Bertrands

We attempted to access another slough just outside Dawson Creek, keeping in mind we hadn't been able to see Black Tern yet. We luckily found 4 birds here, foraging somewhat distantly over the water, and added some extras including Horned Grebes in breeding plumage, a variety of waterfowl and some Common Grackles. It was at this point that the heat started to set in for the day, as it was fairly sunny and post-lunch visits to Peace Island Park and again Big Bam Road didn't produce anything new but allowed us to see some classics well, including of course Ovenbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Red-eyed Vireo. An evening excursion to a location with Yellow Rail was disturbed by the ever-encroaching construction now having made the access road impassable for us, and we decided to visit a nearby pothole area instead. Some birds such as Northern Harrier and a beautiful male Baltimore Oriole were welcome additions to our list, and we were happy having seen them on our final night in The Peace.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker © Joachim Bertrands

11 June

We decided to do a final morning at Beatton Provincial Park before the flights to Vancouver were taking off. This proved to be a success! Slightly warmer weather had produced many new arrivals it seems, and we lucked out with our most wanted bird: Canada Warbler. This true forest gem performed well while the cameras rattled, a species that always tends to show off after leaving the initial cover. Our luck didn't stop there, as we suddenly became aware of a dark woodpecker up in a larch tree: American Three-toed Woodpecker! This bird is a classic here, and always a most wanted for many birders.



Canada Warbler © Joachim Bertrands

Looking over the lake, we were surprised to find large numbers of Franklin's Gull roosting on the water, likely all wanderers from Alberta, and a tern came in that proved to be a Common Tern, another new bird for the trip. Some late Red-necked Phalaropes were foraging distantly over the lake as the yodeling Common Loons in breeding plumage put on quite the show. Last but not least: upon return to the vehicles, a gorgeous Magnolia Warbler showed himself off, which was a huge welcome given that we had missed this often-secretive species until now.



Magnolia Warbler © Joachim Bertrands

After that, we headed for coffee and the hotel, only to pack our stuff and leave for the airport. This short tour had come to an end and had been highly successful in seeing a large number of The Peace's most typical birds. An amazing region that always has some surprises up its sleeve! Ulitmate BC: Boreal Extension bird list 2024