



Ultimate British Columbia: Coast & Grasslands Trip Report (May 26 -Jun 5, 2025)

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Monday, 26th May

Our first morning of the tour began at Brunswick Point, timed perfectly with the falling tide. Large numbers of Great Blue Herons were present, and a Bald Eagle waited nearby for the mudflats to be exposed. As more mud appeared, more birds followed. We had good views of Whimbrels, Black-bellied Plovers, and a few Greater Yellowlegs. Further scanning revealed Least Sandpipers and a distant Western Sandpiper. A group of Caspian Terns settled in among the Ring-billed Gulls, and we were treated to excellent views of a close Marbled Godwit. After a nice lunch, we arrived at Colony Farm. Unfortunately, no sooner had we stepped out of the vans than it began to rain quite heavily. We took shelter and waited for the weather to pass—and were fortunate to enjoy lovely sunny skies just half an hour later. Making up for lost time, we soon started spotting many common but beautiful western birds, including Spotted Towhees, Bullock's Orioles, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Vaux's Swifts, and Violet-green Swallows. Our first hummingbird of the trip was a snazzy male Rufous Hummingbird. Eastern Kingbirds and Willow Flycatchers were active in the open areas, while the sky above held six species of swallows. Later that afternoon, we arrived at the beautiful Minnekhada Regional Park. This ancient forest was alive with birdsong, and even before we left the parking lot, we were already watching multiple bright red and yellow Western Tanagers. Band-tailed Pigeons flew overhead, and a stunning Red-breasted Sapsucker gave us exceptionally close views. Wilson's Warblers were also rather showy as we continued down the trails, until we heard a Black-throated Gray Warbler. This gorgeous bird performed very well for the group and even allowed for some great photo opportunities. Western Tanagers continued to appear, along with multiple Black-headed Grosbeaks. Flycatchers were numerous too, with sightings of Hammond's, Olive-sided, Western, and Western Wood-Pewees. Deeper into the park, we reached some small ponds where we observed Wood Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, Ring-necked Ducks, and even a few Bank Swallows. It was a fantastic afternoon of birding, with excellent views of all our target species and many great photos.

On the way back, we added a Douglas Squirrel and had some nice views of Orange-crowned Warblers. We then returned to the hotel for a well-deserved meal and rest.



Black-throated Gray Warbler © J Lees

Tuesday, 27th May

We started the day by driving up Mount Seymour. At the top, it was rather cold for the time of year, but still fairly active for high-elevation birding. A Red-breasted Sapsucker made plenty of noise as it drummed on a metal road sign—its chosen spot for maximum resonance. Next, we heard the wonderful song of a Varied Thrush ringing out from the spruce trees. We quickly located a few of these and enjoyed some great views. Dark-eyed Juncos, Pine Siskins, Red Crossbills, and Violet-green Swallows were present in good numbers. A couple of Canada Jays showed up, and we had our first looks at Townsend's and Audubon's Warblers. Chestnut-backed Chickadees gave us excellent views, and a Steller's Jay appeared just as we were leaving. Later in the morning, we caught our ferry to Vancouver Island. The crossing provided our first good looks at Glaucous-winged Gulls, Pelagic Cormorants, and a couple of Pacific Loons. We enjoyed a pleasant meal on board before beginning our long journey across Vancouver Island toward Ucluelet.



Chestnut-backed Chickadee © J Lees

Wednesday, 28th May

We started our day with a picnic breakfast at Radar Hill, where we got good looks at a male Townsend's Warbler and a Steller's Jay. But the real star of the show was a male Sooty Grouse that strutted around the parking lot in full display mode. It was quite something to see the display at such close range. After such a great start to the day, we headed to Tofino for our scheduled pelagic trip. Unfortunately, the seas were too rough to reach the deep-water shelf, so we began by exploring the inlets around Tofino. Along the way, we found a mother Black Bear with her two yearling cubs and enjoyed some excellent views as they flipped over large rocks in search of crabs. We also saw many Bald Eagles and Common Mergansers. Next, we headed just offshore to Cleland Island, where we saw large numbers of Pigeon Guillemots, Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, Black Oystercatchers, and many fine Harlequin Ducks. Marine mammals included Steller Sea Lions, Harbour Seals, and Sea Otters. We were able to venture 20 kilometers offshore, where we saw a beautiful Tufted Puffin, numerous Marbled Murrelets, Rhinoceros Auklets, and a few Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters. A surprise highlight was a South Polar Skua, spotted just before we had to turn back due to high winds that prevented us from reaching the shelf. Back on dry land, we enjoyed a delicious lunch in the quaint town of Tofino. On the way back to Ucluelet, we stopped at Combers Beach and took a walk through the coastal rainforest trails, which were active with Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Townsend's Warblers, Wilson's Warblers, and Red Crossbills. We also added Golden-crowned Kinglets, Swainson's Thrushes, and a Fox Sparrow. Down on the beach, we found a large flock of gulls that included many Glaucous-winged Gulls, a few California Gulls, and one lovely adult Western Gull. Nearby rocky islets hosted several Steller Sea Lions and a few Black Oystercatchers.



Tufted Puffin © J Lees

Thursday, 29th May

We were greeted by warmer temperatures today, though it remained a little breezy. Our day began at Wickaninnish Beach, where rough ocean conditions and strong winds limited our chances of finding shorebirds. However, the surrounding coastal forest proved to be highly productive. Highlights included exceptional views of a male Varied Thrush gathering food for nestlings, as well as multiple Townsend's Warblers and Wilson's Warblers. A Fox Sparrow provided our first quality views of the trip, and several flocks of Red Crossbills allowed for good views.. Our next stop was the Shorepine Bog Trail, a short but rewarding walk through a unique Pacific pine bog ecosystem. Both Orange-crowned Warblers and Dark-eyed Juncos were seen well, singing from exposed perches on dead branches.. Red Crossbills were again present, with singing males adding to the experience. We then made a brief visit to the Tofino Airport, as it can be a good spot for songbirds and rarities. Here we were treated to a female Lazuli Bunting, and enjoyed excellent views of several displaying Rufous Hummingbirds. Other species of note included Savannah Sparrows, Cedar Waxwings, and overhead flybys from Turkey Vultures and Red-tailed Hawks. After another pleasant lunch in Tofino, we visited the Tofino Mudflats Wildlife Management Area, where it didn't take long to locate our main target: Hutton's Vireo. We were not disappointed and had fantastic views of this often-elusive species, providing great photo opportunities and happy birders all around. We wrapped up the day with a search for Anna's Hummingbirds in downtown Ucluelet, successfully finding several individuals to close out another excellent day of birding.



Hutton's Vireo © J Lees

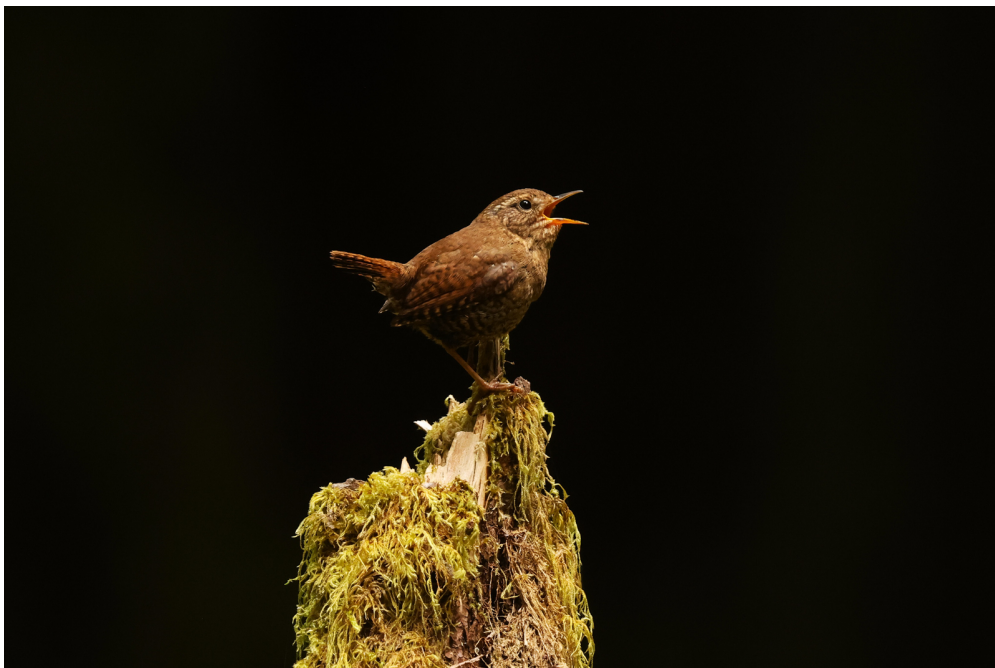
Friday, 30th May

Today involved a long drive across Vancouver Island toward Victoria, but we planned several stops along the way to break up the journey and to look for more birds. Our first stop was the rather picturesque Amphitrite Point. With calm seas and very little wind, ocean viewing conditions were ideal and we were able to see plenty of birds. A large movement of Pacific Loons was observed migrating north just offshore. A trio of noisy Black Oystercatchers flew past, while a Gray Whale surfaced several times further out. Small numbers of White-winged and Surf Scoters were seen flying past, and Brandt's Cormorants, Marbled Murrelets, and Rhinoceros Auklets were spotted bobbing on the water. We then continued for a couple of hours to our next stop, the world-famous Cathedral Grove. Here, we were all awed by the sight of some of Canada's oldest and tallest trees. Among these towering 800-year-old Douglas Firs, we watched several tiny but vocal Pacific Wrens singing enthusiastically. The contrast between the small songbirds and the ancient trees was striking. We also observed Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Brown Creepers, and Swainson's Thrushes. The avian highlight, however, was a pair of American Dippers feeding in the fast-flowing river. We enjoyed close views of one individual collecting food for its nestlings. This was a really great stop in so many ways before we continued our journey.



Our group at Cathedral Grove © Susan Goods

Our final birding location of the day was Cowichan Estuary, where we were greeted by the first real heat of the trip. Under sunny skies, we spotted our first California Quails and Bewick's Wrens of the tour. There were plenty of Great Blue Herons, as well as a couple of very showy Marsh Wrens. A Rufous Hummingbird perched nicely on a dead branch, offering good views, and we also saw a few Yellow Warblers. After a full day on the road—with rewarding stops along the way—we made our way to the hotel in Victoria for a well-deserved rest.



Pacific Wren © J Lees

Saturday, 31st May

We started the day early, heading out before breakfast in search of two target species. We birded around some open country near Pike Lake, and within minutes of our arrival, we had excellent views of our first target: the MacGillivray's Warbler. With all of our group traveling from Eastern Canada, this species gave us a great opportunity to compare it to its eastern counterpart, the Mourning Warbler. The MacGillivray's gave us close views, allowing us to confirm its black lores and broken white eye-ring. Soon after, we came across our second target, the Bushtit. These proved a bit harder to get good looks at—though we would change that later in the trip. The area offered fantastic birding overall, with numerous Rufous Hummingbirds, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Spotted Towhees, and Willow Flycatchers keeping us busy. We then returned to the hotel for a well-deserved breakfast. Next, we loaded up and headed down to the harbor in downtown Victoria for our scheduled boat trip. After suiting up and receiving a safety briefing, we set off into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The suits were certainly very helpful in keeping us warm on what turned out to be a cool and murky day. Before long, we encountered many Rhinoceros Auklets and Pigeon Guillemots bursting out of the water in front of the boat, providing some excellent flight views. We passed several small islands and managed to spot Black Oystercatchers and a large breeding colony of Glaucous-winged Gulls. About halfway through the trip, we encountered a female Humpback Whale with her half-grown calf. With the engines turned off, we enjoyed multiple close-range surfacings from the pair. Another group of islands produced sightings of Black-bellied Plovers and a large number of Harlequin Ducks. A single White-winged Scoter gave us excellent views, and plenty of Bald Eagles kept us entertained. On our return through the harbor, we were treated to a fairly rare sighting of a Black-legged Kittiwake. After lunch, we visited Panama Flats just as the clouds cleared and some pleasant sunshine broke through. We found a nice variety of waterfowl here, including American Wigeon, Cinnamon Teal, Northern Shoveler, and even a late Bufflehead. A Spotted Sandpiper and a Virginia Rail both offered close views, while the sky above was busy with feeding swallows. Among the more common Tree, Violet-green, Barn, and Northern Rough-winged Swallows, we even managed to pick out a scarce Bank Swallow. We then returned to the hotel for a delicious dinner and a well-earned rest.



Glaucous-winged Gull © J Lees

Sunday, 1st June

After breakfast, we loaded up the vans and headed down to Sidney to catch our early morning ferry back to Tsawwassen on the mainland. While we waited to depart, we enjoyed some excellent views of Pelagic Cormorants coming and going with nesting material below the ferry. Despite the entire group standing on the upper deck in rather glorious weather, sightings during the crossing were fairly limited. A couple of Humpback Whales and some Pigeon Guillemots were the highlights. Once back on the mainland, we returned to Brunswick Point since we were nearby. The tide was a bit too far out, but we still managed to find a few shorebirds. There were good numbers of Whimbrel, Black-bellied Plovers, Semipalmated Plovers, and a few Western Sandpipers. The highlight was our first—and only—Pectoral Sandpiper of the trip. After lunch, we had a fairly long drive to our next destination: Manning Park. We arrived in the late afternoon and checked into the splendid accommodations located right inside this beautiful national park. After an early dinner, we headed out for an evening of birding around Lone Duck Lake. The calm blue waters were surrounded by boreal forest, set against a backdrop of high, snow-capped mountains. The grassy fields were dotted with Columbian Ground Squirrels, behaving much like meerkats as they kept watch. We soon added some exciting new species to our ever-growing trip list. The magnificent Steller's Jays—with their jet-black plumage and peaked crests—were a very welcome sight, as were numerous Barrow's Goldeneyes loafing in the river. Western Tanagers were common in the area, and we had great views of both Townsend's and Audubon's Warblers.



Columbian Ground-Squirrel © J Lees

Monday, 2nd June

We rose early and headed out, hoping to find some displaying grouse. It was a lovely sunny day, though rather chilly at first. That didn't stop us, and before long we had fantastic views of a male Spruce Grouse perched at eye level in a spruce tree. We could also hear several Sooty Grouse displaying in the distance. Evening Grosbeaks were abundant, almost constantly flying overhead. Even better, we tracked down two very cooperative Pine Grosbeaks that gave us incredible close-range views. A few Band-tailed Pigeons and a Pileated Woodpecker flew past, and we had our best

looks yet at several Mountain Chickadees, as well as a few Snowshoe Hares. After enjoying some nice scope views of a singing Varied Thrush, we headed back for breakfast. Fueled by waffles and coffee, we then made our way to higher elevations in search of several key target species. Once again, we had immediate success, spotting a pair of Clark's Nutcrackers waiting for us on arrival. These mountain specialists gave everyone fantastic views—some even remarked how tame they seemed. Soon after, a Townsend's Solitaire appeared and lingered long enough for everyone to get good looks. We also saw our first Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Cassin's Finch of the trip. This was an excellent spot for small mammals, with three new species added to the trip list. Cascade Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels and Yellow-pine Chipmunks allowed for prolonged close views, as they are accustomed to being fed at the Cascade Lookout. Best of all, we spotted a couple of American Pikas feeding among the rocks just over the edge. Although we only had the morning to bird around Manning Park, we made the most of it and were treated to some outstanding sightings. After a satisfying morning, we headed for lunch, packed our bags, and continued our journey farther east. A few hours later, we arrived in the world-famous Okanagan Valley.



Spruce Grouse © Blair Dudeck

Tuesday, 3rd June

After breakfast at our Osoyoos hotel, we headed up the valley to bird along the river. We were greeted by our first Say's Phoebe and Bobolinks of the trip. Black-billed Magpies and California Quails perched along the fence line, while a majestic pair of Bald Eagles watched from a large dead tree. Then we enjoyed our first views of a stunning male Lazuli Bunting and a few Bullock's Orioles. An American Redstart was a nice sighting, but the star of the show was a Yellow-breasted Chat that showed exceptionally well. Further up the valley, we climbed into the foothills and stopped in some lovely pine forests. These proved particularly productive, delivering excellent looks at our main target, the Gray Flycatcher. Several Dusky Flycatchers sang nearby, and a Cassin's Vireo gave us some nice views. Both White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches were present, and we enjoyed lovely looks at Cassin's Finches. A little further down the road, we stopped to see the tiny and utterly beautiful Calliope Hummingbird. At least two gave us mesmerizing looks, accompanied by a couple more Lazuli Buntings in full song. Our next stop produced a bagful of new birds in quick succession.

First, we had great views of two Rock Wrens singing from large boulders. Then several diminutive Pygmy Nuthatches came in to check us out. Next was a singing male Lark Sparrow, though he was soon eclipsed by the appearance of a pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers. These red, green, and pink woodpeckers were busy flycatching from the pines and were even observed mating at one point. Our following stop aimed to find the very special Williamson's Sapsucker. This proved to be a difficult challenge despite our best efforts. However, we did see several Swainson's Hawks and some lovely Mountain Bluebirds. Then, three very distant soaring birds were picked up and identified as a rare sighting of White-faced Ibis. Just as we were leaving, a gorgeous male Williamson's Sapsucker was spotted right next to the van. We all piled out and enjoyed good looks as this male bird collected ants to feed his young. We continued on and took a pleasant walk into the almost desert-like habitat dotted with many flowering Prickly Pear cactuses. White-throated Swifts and a pair of Peregrine Falcons soared overhead. The canyon below was filled with singing Lazuli Buntings and a pair of more elusive Canyon Wrens. The wrens played hard to get at first, but with some patience, we were rewarded. After an early dinner, we headed out for an action-packed evening. En route, we saw several American Kestrels and Western Kingbirds along the roadside. We climbed higher and higher until we could look down upon Osoyoos in the far distance. We searched for Dusky Grouse but had no luck, instead spotting more Cassin's Finches and a Western Tanager. We watched the sun set over the valley and waited for the nocturnal birds to awaken. First, a Common Poorwill began singing, then gave us some nice flybys, and one even landed briefly on the road. Once it was completely dark, a Flammulated Owl began tooting from the trees uphill. We gave it a good try but had to leave satisfied with just hearing the smallest owl in Canada. All in all, it had been a spectacular day.



Gray Flycatcher © J Lees

Wednesday, 4th June

After a slightly later breakfast following yesterday's full day, we headed out to Nighthawk Road. It was hot, and singing birds were few and far between. However, we did find both Brewer's and Lark Sparrows in the sagebrush. This area also gave us good looks at many Western Kingbirds and several more Lewis's Woodpeckers. Not far down the road, we stopped at some small ponds and

added Yellow-headed Blackbird and Wilson's Phalarope to our list. We enjoyed a lovely picnic at Okanagan Falls, accompanied by a very refreshing onshore breeze. An Osprey kept us entertained during the lunch break, continuing to bird nearby. Further up the road, we took a dusty track up the hillside and stopped a few times to look for Red-naped Sapsuckers. Along the way, we spotted a pair of Red-tailed Hawks, one of which was carrying a decent-sized snake. After some patience, we were rewarded with fabulous views of a male Red-naped Sapsucker. Meanwhile, a forest fire broke out on the other side of the valley, and we watched as water bombers were quickly deployed to control the blaze. Careful scanning revealed at least three Black Swifts feeding high above the fire, presumably catching many fleeing insects. Our next stop was just outside Oliver, in a quiet neighborhood. Here, we saw large numbers of White-throated Swifts feeding high over the cliffs. But we were here to see hummingbirds, and we found three species in quick succession. First came a smart male Anna's Hummingbird, followed by a splendid little Black-chinned Hummingbird. We finished off with a Rufous Hummingbird and also heard a couple more Yellow-breasted Chats. In the late afternoon, we headed to White Lake but unfortunately failed to find any Burrowing Owls. However, we did see four Gray Partridges and a Coyote.



Red-naped Sapsucker © J Lees

Thursday, 5th June

Our time in the Okanagan had come to an end, and it was time to head north toward Kelowna. A quick stop at Osoyoos Lake produced a fine pair of Red-necked Grebes and, even better, a migrating flock of nine Franklin's Gulls. An hour later, we found ourselves passing through the town of Peachland. It would have been rude not to stop and see the rare Blue Grosbeak that had been present there for a week. We connected with the stunning bird fairly quickly and also enjoyed additional views of Lazuli Buntings and a Calliope Hummingbird. We arrived in Kelowna early in the afternoon and stretched our legs at Robert Lake. This proved to be an excellent spot, and soon we were watching Wilson's Phalaropes and Yellow-headed Blackbirds at point-blank range. Eared Grebes in their pristine summer plumage were abundant, but the stars of the show were three Black-winged Stilts. We then said goodbye to two members of our group at Kelowna airport before beginning our four-hour drive back to Vancouver. Once settled at our hotel, we enjoyed one last

meal together, reminiscing about what a great trip it had been.



Wilson's Phalarope © J Lees



Birding group looking at Lewis's Woodpecker © J Lees