

Ultimate British Columbia Tour May-June 2022 Trip Report

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Guide: Steve Ogle

Peace Region



The group met in Fort St. John on the first evening although it turned out that most of the guests had already been around, having arrived earlier to do some exploring. The next morning we excitedly began our birdwatching and nature adventure at Beatton Provincial Park, greeted by a moist ground indicating the snow hadn't melted long ago. A hiccup with the passenger van meant we were in two vehicles, which worked well. Most of Canada had been reporting a "late spring" and here was no different: The leaves on the aspen trees were just beginning to unfurl, while the groves of White Spruce were not quite full of birdsong as they would be in a week. Regardless, we encountered numerous boreal forest species including Ovenbird, Black-and-white Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, Least Flycatcher, Blue-headed Vireo, Canada Jay and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

Out on Charlie Lake there were White-winged and Surf Scoters, both species that would soon continue north to their subarctic breeding grounds. More migrants such as grebes, goldeneyes, scaup and loons accompanied the rafts on the lake, while a couple of Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal drakes close to shore indicated some local nesting.



Blue-winged Teal

After lunch we visited the south end of Charlie Lake where we saw our only real migrant shorebirds of the entire trip: a pair of Least Sandpipers. Because the sewage lagoons were flooded we did not

visit but instead continued toward Hudson's Hope. This area is where the Peace River would be further dammed by the new Site C project. The river still ran as normal (ie. dammed upstream) and we spotted migrant geese and ducks from the Peace River viewpoint. We also visited Watson Slough where we attempted to draw in some birds that evidently had not arrived yet from wintering grounds yet. However, we had one of the best showings by a Sora that our guide has ever seen! A Marsh Wren competed for the same attention but everyone was in the van by the time it really started showing.



Sora Rail



Marsh Wren



Least Sandpiper

Another full day in the Peace region included a morning start at Peace River Island Regional Park and a foray to a farm along Johnson Road, leading upriver along the floodplain. Here we saw our star attraction, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird hosted by the feeders of Mary and Dave. More boreal species greeted us in the vicinity including Eastern Phoebe, Baltimore Oriole, Black-throated Green Warbler and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. That afternoon we visited the Kiskatinaw River Bridge, Pouce Coupe Regional Park and sewage lagoons, and perhaps the most interesting hotspot: McQueen's Slough north of Dawson Creek.



Kiskatinaw River

At this decidedly non-touristic marsh complex we found a large breeding colony of Eared Grebe and smaller ones of Yellow-headed Blackbird and Black Tern, and hordes of waterfowl. A Blackpoll Warbler was a nice surprise but perhaps even better was a wayward Brown Thrasher, found on the trail beyond the extent of its range far off in Alberta. A final stop on this segment of the tour was Fish Creek Community Forest on the last morning before we departed on our flight south. Some more breeding birds were found here including “Myrtle” Yellow-rumped Warbler, Swainson’s Thrush and Golden-crowned Kinglet.

Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island

We arrived in Vancouver mid-day and headed directly to Iona Beach Regional Park where we tried for the “swallow slam,” meaning all seven species available in this part of the world! We came up one short, alas, but it was still early. Other species included Spotted Towhee, Cedar Waxwing, Rufous Hummingbird and Bald Eagle. From here we continued through the city and to our hotel in North Vancouver. After dinner we had a short visit to Maplewood Flats, where we completed our “slam” with Purple Martin nesting over the water. A clinic on flycatchers was also on offer, with views of foraging Pacific-slope and Willow Flycatchers not to mention Western Wood-Pewee and Olive-sided Flycatcher. We spotted our first of many Pelagic Cormorants. The next morning started off with a bang at a viewpoint overlooking an overcast Vancouver. A very accommodating Black-throated Gray Warbler put on a show, as did a Pine Siskin and Anna’s Hummingbird. Meanwhile, up higher at Cypress Bowl ski area we found a lot of snow but were able to pinpoint Red-breasted Sapsucker, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Varied Thrush and Sooty Grouse (the latter two being heard only).



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Black-throated Gray Warbler



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Anna's Hummingbird



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Red-breasted Sapsucker

Onward to Vancouver Island! We caught the ferry from Horseshoe Bay and those keeners on the upper deck were treated to distant views of Orcas! Birds included large rafts of Pacific Loon and some Pigeon Guillemot. Once on the Island itself we drove slightly north to Qualicum Beach for a food-truck lunch, which did not disappoint. We had a local meal, sunshine and more Orcas! Who could ask for more? Well, we could, and we did get a Merlin bathing in a creek on the beach!



Our next stop was Cathedral Grove, a magnificent patch of old-growth forest on the drier side of the Island. On a one-hour walk we encountered some 800-year old trees and a few birds including Townsend's Warbler and Pacific Wren.



Cathedral Grove



Pacific Wren

Coombs Country Candy provided just enough energy and morale in the form of ice-cream cones for us to continue the windy highway to Ucluelet, our home for the next three nights. Little did we know it but this would be the last time all of us would be in the same van together, as Covid reared its ugly head and people unfortunately began getting sick. This is a long story and to continue the good memories of the tour I will recount our nature experiences instead of the circumstances relating to

the (still) ongoing pandemic. Our next morning began with some ocean viewing from Amphitrite lighthouse. Here we spotted our first Rhinoceros Auklets and Brandt's Cormorants. High winds pounded the coastline and this was the reason why we were not out on our pelagic birding trip as planned. That would have to wait for a couple of days so in the interim we made the most of our terrestrial birding opportunities. Some of the locations—mostly within Pacific Rim National Park—included: Comber's and Wikinninnish Beaches, Tofino Airport, Florencia Bay, Jensen's Bay, Black Rock Resort, Long Beach and the Rainforest Nature Trail.



© Steve Ogle Photography

Pacific West Coast landscape



Amphritrite Lighthouse



boardwalk, Ucluelet



bird watching on Long Beach

Once it was time for the boat tour the seas had calmed and we had optimal conditions for a 6-hour pelagic trip. Captained by the able John, this tour included an “inshore” component that provided good views of Bald Eagle, Harlequin Duck, Pigeon Guillemot, Marbled Murrelet, Glaucous-winged

Gull, and the star of the show: Tufted Puffin. Mammals included Sea Otter and Steller's Sea Lion. Soon enough we pointed the boat west and headed out over 60-kilometres offshore to the continental shelf edge. On the way we stopped to see a few birds including Common Murre, California Gull, Red-necked Phalarope and Ancient Murrelet. A few Cassin's Auklets offered a fleeting glimpse of their tails as they flew away.



Tufted Puffin



Pigeon Guillemots



Sea Otter

Once out among the fishing trawlers we finally found a boat that had all the birds around it. There were hundreds of Sabine's Gull, Fork-tailed Storm-petrel, Black-footed Albatross and smaller numbers of Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwater, and Northern Fulmar. All in all, we saw large numbers and a lot of variety!



Black-footed Albatross

Back on land we continued on a particularly long day to Victoria. Normally we don't run the pelagic and the commute in one day, but it worked and we rolled with the punches. I think Sue had a decent birthday today! Once in Victoria the pace slowed a bit and on our full day here we started with a pleasant two-hour walk around the campus of Royal Roads University. Some of the interesting species we encountered here and the adjacent Esquimalt Lagoon included: Hutton's Vireo, Barred Owl, Bushtit, Black-headed Grosbeak, Trumpeter Swan and Cackling Goose. From here we had a sandwich lunch taken back to the hotel before we emerged for yet another boat trip. This one probably wasn't in the top ten boat trips of all time, without seeing any whales, but the captain tried hard for us and we did have some positive encounters with wildlife here and there- especially at Race Rocks. People got a sense of the rugged coastline on the southern part of Vancouver Island, and the glaciated peaks of Washington's Olympic Peninsula. Dinner on Victoria's Inner Harbour with drizzly conditions outside provided a decidedly "West Coast" feel.



Whale watching tour, Victoria, BC



Canada and the smaller Cackling Goose

The next morning we drove to Schwartz Bay ferry terminal for our crossing back to the mainland, but not before a quick stop to listen for Skylark at the Victoria airport. The ferry crossing was just gorgeous with Mount Baker as a backdrop under mostly clear skies. Back on the Lower Mainland we had a pizza lunch taken for a picnic at Brunswick Point, north of the Tsawwassen ferry terminal. Beyond this we visited Westham Island Alaksen National Wildlife Refuge in search of a roosting Barn Owl, which unfortunately did not materialize. As a consolation, we saw more Barred Owls and Rufous Hummingbirds up close.



Barred Owl

Manning Park and Okanagan

We arrived to Manning Park in the evening with enough time to relax and enjoy the mountainous surroundings. A storm was approaching but this was not the only shadow overhanging the tour. However, we made the most of things, birding in the morning with a small contingent, then later in the drizzle with an even smaller contingent. The morning was memorable however, with a pleasant walk along the Lightning Lakes chain where Barrow's Goldeneye, Townsend's Warbler and Mountain Chickadee were spotted. Out in front of the hotel some guests got close-up views of Red-naped Sapsucker and Clark's Nutcracker. The road to the alpine was closed due to lingering snows so instead we paid a visit to Strawberry Flats. Once the rain set in we continued to Princeton and beyond for a picnic lunch at Bromley Rock Provincial Park. Here we had decent views of Northern Flicker, Spotted Towhee, Steller's Jay and MacGillivray's Warbler. Past this point we followed the swollen Similkameen River through Cawston for a quick stop to find Long-billed Curlew. From there we continued almost all the way to the border crossing at Nighthawk, USA, where we had a pleasant evening walk into the sagebrush and cactus. Here we found Dusky Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Lewis's Woodpecker and Bullock's Oriole. We did our best to relax in Osoyoos with dinner at an Italian place near the hotel.



lunch break

The next morning after ironing out a few wrinkles we eventually set forth to one of the nicer birding stops on the whole tour: Vaseux Bluffs. Thankfully the weather was perfect and we were greeted with fresh air and excellent views of Lazuli Bunting, White-throated Swift, Osprey, Western Meadowlark and Canyon Wren. Yellow-bellied Marmots lazily mounted their rock piles, noticeably absent of Rock Wrens but that was the only species we missed. Further north toward Okanagan Falls we had additional time to look for the Gray Flycatcher near Mahoney Lake. Alas, we did not find the bird here but this gave us a chance to find other species such as Cassin's Finch, Ruddy Duck and Pygmy Nuthatch. Actually, we also found White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches for another "slam!" A winery lunch at See-Ya-Later Ranch was a great way to unwind before we set off

up McKinney Road to search again for the Gray Flycatcher. Eventually... after much effort and with the help of local birder Jason, some of us did see this rather drab bird. In the meantime we did see a bunch of other nice species including Cassin's Vireo and more of a group favourite: Western Tanager.



Lazuli Bunting

After such a pleasant day it was sad to later realize it would be the last birding day of the tour. Covid eventually caught up with our guide and, unfortunately, we had to cancel the tour with a day and a half of birding left on the itinerary. The remaining guests were, as much as possible and to various extents, able to adjust to their respective departures and trajectories. Steve Ogle