



Ultimate British Columbia Trip Report 2023

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Guides: Joachim Bertrands & Alvin Dyck & Kaiden Bosch *The Ultimate BC tour is an intense two-week tour providing the most comprehensive itinerary to BC birding. A start in the far northeast of the province delivers many eastern specialties that barely make it in the province, before flying down to the southwest and see the more typical coastal birds of the region. A final visit to the Okanagan adds another layer of diversity to the species total, with many desert specialties of the warm interior.* During the 2023 tour, our group observed a dazzling **247 species of birds** and no less than **25 species of mammals**. Highlights included getting close views of calling Flammulated Owl, Common Poorwill and an unexpected Great Gray Owl, finding the second White-eyed Vireo for British Columbia, floating among Sabine's Gulls, Tufted Puffins and Black-footed Albatrosses in the Pacific Ocean and... seeing a Cougar from a few meters away. A trip full of highlights and amazing success, and one to remember! **28 May** After meeting each other the night before, we started off with some intense boreal birding in the outskirts of Fort St. John. A beautiful local park near Charlie Lake provided good access to boreal habitat and dropped the first specialties on us: Ovenbird, Tennessee Warbler, Mourning Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Magnolia Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler and so on.



Mourning Warbler © Joachim Bertrands



Ovenbird © Joachim Bertrands

We spent a while getting good looks at American Three-toed Woodpecker, a highlight for our group! Olive-sided Flycatchers and Western Tanagers sang fiercely while flocks of White-winged Crossbills filled the sky. A brief stop at the south end of the lake before lunch gave away great looks at Eastern Phoebe - on the nest - and the first Blue-winged Teal of the tour. We headed east after lunch and explored the Peace River valley, including Dawson Creek and Taylor. A stop at Peace Island Park in

Taylor provided better looks at Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, many Red-eyed Vireos, and an Alder Flycatcher - the latter our only one of the tour! We continued towards a property that has had Ruby-throated Hummingbirds in the past, but the birds had not returned yet, so we continued towards Dawson. A windy visit to one of the local sloughs had us scoping through distant ducks, but we lucked out with a good assortment of both dabbling and diving ducks, of which Canvasback and Redhead are species to remember, while Sora and Black Terns fluttered away over the distant lily pads. A few stops in the agricultural fields around Dawson produced an unexpected Short-eared Owl and of course the star of the parkland prairie in this area: Upland Sandpiper. We got great looks at a silent bird on a wheat field, that graciously walked away while we snapped a few distant record shots. **29 May** 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 the south end of Charlie Lake, but besides a close Common Grackle and the usual suspects, nothing new had shown up. 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 flocks of White-winged Crossbills, Tennessee Warblers and so on. Upon arrival at the summit, we noticed the massive Donnie Creek forest fire in the far distance, a fire that would grow to become the largest forest fire ever recorded in history in Canada, a few weeks later. Windy conditions didn't immediately predict a good start on the mountain, and we must admit the first bit was not great as we tried to find our main target: Rock Ptarmigan. We noticed a few Horned Larks, Red-tailed Hawk and American Pipits but it was until a good hour after arrival at the summit a distant Rock Ptarmigan was found perched on a small rock. We approached and were rewarded with great views, including even a full display! Happy faces, and a good mood before a picnic was had on site. We birded our way down again and left for Fort St. John again in the early afternoon. Right before entering the town, a stop at the Charlie Lake Provincial Park produced a few good new birds again, including multiple Baltimore Orioles, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and even a few distant Bonaparte's Gulls on the lake.



Baltimore Oriole © Joachim Bertrands



Rock Ptarmigan © Joachim Bertrands

30 May Our last morning in Fort St. John. We still missed a few of the eastern warblers and decided it would be a good idea to return to Beatton Provincial Park, despite having visited this on the first day already. Upon arrival, it was clear conditions were far better than the previous days: there was virtually no wind, and the forest was filled with bird song. We immediately picked up a new bird for the trip: Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, a real boreal specialty and despite being not rare in BC, still a bird many birders struggle with to see within the boundaries of the province. We continued deeper into the woods and suddenly heard a bird that we all had hoped for: Canada Warbler! This gorgeous mid-storey warbler had finally arrived and was right in time for us to fall in awe! We enjoyed it for a few good minutes before leaving it, and worked our way back to the cars while the other warblers gave away quite a spectacle. So many good birds, but unfortunately, we had to catch our mid-morning flight to Vancouver, which we managed to do so (although it might have been a bit rushed!).



Canada Warbler © Joachim Bertrands

We arrived in Vancouver and had suddenly skipped ahead a few weeks. It was summer, and birds were silent. It would be a few days before we would head into the interior again, basically going back in time and being in full spring again, but here on the coast, summer had set in. We worked our way to Delta where we birded a local park and got a hint of the first coastal specialties: Bushtit, Black-headed Grosbeak and Bullock's Oriole, all typical birds of the deciduous woodlands of the coast.



Black-headed Grosbeak © Joachim Bertrands

A walk at a local arm of the Fraser River Estuary produced species such as Brewer's Blackbird, Northern Harrier and House Finch, among other common birds. The first Turkey Vultures were seen, and we ended the day with good looks at Killdeer. **31 May** Another busy travel day, with a morning we would spend by looking for the coastal forest specialties up Cypress Mountain. The lookout over Vancouver's Skyline was spectacular, but yes, we were mainly focused on the birds, and quickly picked up Black-throated Gray Warbler (arguably our prettiest warbler), Warbling Vireo and Varied Thrush.



Black-throated Gray-Warbler © Joachim Bertrands

When we reached the upper parking lot area, a weird metallic drum proved to be a Red-breasted Sapsucker drumming on the side of a container, producing a rather atypical sound! Chestnut-backed Chickadees were common, but the azure Steller's Jay provided great looks while coming in for a peanut or two. Hermit Thrushes sang in the forest while we got good looks at Townsend's Warbler and Cedar Waxwings. We made it in time for our ferry crossing, which as usual between Vancouver and Nanaimo was quiet, although we did bump into an unseasonal Red-throated Loon, Brandt's-, Pelagic- and Double-crested Cormorants as well as a Common Murre, our first of the trip. The afternoon was spent driving to Ucluelet, a long crossing through some of Vancouver Island's only remaining old growth forest, where we briefly paused and bumped into the first views of Varied Thrush, a bird we had only heard up until now. Our arrival in Ucluelet was rather uneventful, and we enjoyed an early night before heading out again at the crack of dawn.



Cathedral Grove © Joachim Bertrands



Steller's Jay © Joachim Bertrands

1 June We woke up bright and early and were surrounded by dense coniferous forest before the clock hit 6 AM. A search for the enigmatic Northern Pygmy-owl proved to be unsuccessful, but we did luck out with more Varied Thrushes, Orange-crowned- and Townsend's Warblers. An improvised plan to see a Sooty Grouse had us visit a local hill, where we parked all the way on top. We hadn't fully exited yet, or a male Sooty Grouse appeared from the surrounding vegetation and started

displaying right in front of us. An experience never to forget, especially as the bird showed off in full only a few meters away!



Sooty Grouse © Joachim Bertrands

Still buzzing, we went for breakfast, before making a long beach walk. Tofino's beaches are so wild that even with the surfers, hipsters, families, and dogs spread out over the sandy plains, you still are in full contact with wildlife. With a few surfers in the background, we noticed an adult Bald Eagle disembowelling a washed-up seal pup on the beach. Rather gruesome, but wildlife in its rawest form, and something we did in fact enjoy! Black Oystercatchers yodeled away while we saw our first Marbled Murrelets, White-winged Scoter and Surf Scoters.



Bald Eagle © Joachim Bertrands

The rest of the afternoon was spent exploring the dense coniferous forests to search for species such as Hutton's Vireo and Macgillivray's Warblers, of which we missed the latter but saw the vireo. A quick glance at a local overgrown jetty produced our only Red-breasted Merganser of the tour, among a large congregation of Common Mergansers as well as Northern Rough-winged Swallows, Ospreys, and many Pacific-slope Flycatchers.



Birding in Tofino © Joachim Bertrands

2 June Today promised to be an exciting day as we headed to Tofino to experience a true pelagic birding trip. We left the docks shortly after 7 AM and immediately were submerged in the world of coastal seabirds: Pacific Loons, Pigeon Guillemots, Harlequin Ducks, Brandt's - and Pelagic Cormorants, Marbled Murrelets and many Rhinoceros Auklets made the day. We noticed a big raft of Sea Otters before smelling the Steller's Sea Lions, basically sea-grizzlies! Getting out further we visited Cleland Island, home to a small colony of Tufted Puffins, and sure enough, a gorgeous bird was floating in front of us, quickly followed by a few more distant ones. This was a major target for many in our group, and a highlight of the morning.



Tufted Puffin © Joachim Bertrands

Right after, it was time to head out deep into the blue, and we sped out at full speed for a good hour before we reached the edge of the continental shelf. Right away we noticed a difference in bird species: our first Sooty Shearwaters showed up, quickly followed by Pink-footed Shearwaters and a few Fork-tailed Storm-petrels. A distant brown bird proved to be our only South Polar Skua of the trip, and we noticed a handful of Parasitic Jaegers as we neared a few fishing vessels. It didn't take long to notice the king of the western Pacific: Black-footed Albatross, one of the most beautiful seabirds out there. We saw multiple individuals, all showing well. Northern Fulmars came in all colours, and we even got close views of a small raft of Sabine's Gulls that showed well before continuing their way north.



Whales were present as well, and despite only brief views of Gray Whale, we were rewarded with amazing looks at a Humpback and - finally - a lonely male Bigg's Transient Killer Whale. This individual - known as 'Rainy' - belongs to the true mammal hunters, a group that is doing well unlike the local southern resident population.



Orca © Joachim Bertrands

After arriving back on the docks, we quickly called it a night as a day on the water really wears one out and celebrated with a good meal before hitting the hay. **3 June** Another travel day to Victoria, and one we wouldn't immediately forget! We woke up bright and early and headed to a neighborhood in Ucluelet that allegedly had a few territories of Hutton's Vireo, a bird we had briefly seen the day before, but that had been it so far, and we hoped for some better looks. Upon arrival, it was quiet, except for a Warbling Vireo. Then a bird sang from a tall patch of alders, a very loud song, that sounded unlike anything we had come across so far. Recordings were made, and it took a while before we figured out what it was: a WHITE-EYED VIREO!



White-eye Vireo © Joachim Bertrands

Only the second record for the province of British Columbia, after an initial bird in 2014 in the Kootenays. A mega find, and one that took the BC birding community by surprise. That same day, a few people travelled all the way from Vancouver to see it but were only able to relocate it the next morning. The bird eventually stayed until 13 June, with multiple days of being undetected, and often popping up on the complete opposite side of town. With this mega under the belt, we left Ucluelet with big smiles all around, and travelled through Nanaimo down to Victoria. We had a stop at Buttertubs Marsh, a small and pretty marshland that held a few new birds for the trip including Purple Martin, Pied-billed Grebe and Virginia Rail. A stop in the highlands just north of Victoria produced the typical Garry Oak species that Victoria is known for, which means a lot of Macgillivray's Warblers as well as Sooty Grouse, Willow Flycatcher and more Western Tanagers. We couldn't but have lunch at a Tim Hortons with a lookout on our local pair of Golden Eagles, which fiercely defended their nest against the local Bald Eagles, which were very common in the outskirts of town. The afternoon was spent installing in our comfortable hotel for the upcoming two nights, and we went off on a small chase of some target species, which all cooperated: Mute Swan, Trumpeter Swan, Marsh Wren and a lovely female Wilson's Phalarope. The Indian restaurant was a big hit that night, and we went to bed early after a long day. **4 June** An early morning - once again - as we found ourselves in the highlands of Victoria again, albeit this time a bit lower and with some ponds filled with lily pads. We were on the search for Cassin's Vireo but were only able to hear it distantly. A Pileated Woodpecker started calling from far away, and after a quick drive around, we were able to get some cracking views of this fantastic woodpecker. We had courting Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers present on the ponds while we looked for other small passerines. Very soon, it was time to head back to the hotel for a quick breakfast as we were expected in downtown Victoria by 10 AM for a whale watch trip that would take us all around the southern tip of the island.



Pileated Woodpecker © Joachim Bertrands

We took off and immediately sailed along the Victoria waterfront, getting a great look at the city before we headed out farther into the deep blue. Rhinoceros Auklets and Pigeon Guillemots were common as we sailed farther away from town and navigated along the wild coasts of Discovery Island and even dipped briefly into Washington waters along San Juan Island. We first saw a Humpback Whale, which showed off its fluke well and was identified later as Cassiopeia, an individual wintering annually off the coast of Puerto Vallarta. Spectacular! Once farther away from Victoria, we had amazing views of a lone male Orca which was quietly foraging along the shoreline, hoping to snatch a seal or porpoise as time went by. On our way back to Victoria, we sailed past a few bait balls and rocky islets, getting absolutely pampered with views of Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, Rhinoceros Auklets and dozens of Harlequin Ducks. An amazing few hours on the water and an absolute highlight of our stay in Victoria!



Humpback Whale © Joachim Bertrands

That evening, we attempted to find Cassin's Vireo again at a local park, but managed to only get looks of Hutton's Vireo, which was welcome as well, and we did hear the Cassin's, but never got a visual. We had embarked on an owling mission, a trip which would be tiring and so required some preparation. We tried for Barred Owl at the first location, with success! An adult was feeding young a few meters away from us, and we got some amazing looks. Next, we attempted to find Great Horned Owls, but were only able to find another family of Barred Owls. Our last bird of the night - American Barn Owl - we would dip as well, but it was while driving to that last location that the unthinkable happened... We were driving in the dark on a residential road in a forested neighborhood when a deer crossed the road in front of us. Joachim stared ahead and suddenly noticed a second 'deer', although this one had a long tail!!! A COUGAR!!! The animal crossed the road and jumped right into a forested ditch on the side of the road. Alvin pulled over right away and Joachim jumped out, opened the sliding door, and raised his flashlight. And there it was. An adult Cougar, presumably a female, nervously walking up and down the ditch trying to find a way deeper into the forest. It stared back at us and gave amazing views only a few meters away, as everyone gathered and quietly stared into this animal's dark eyes. It was only here we realized none of us had a camera or phone in their hands, and Joachim quickly sprinted back to the car to grab a camera to at least fire off some documentation shots of this incredible encounter. By that time, the animal had already moved farther off and found a driveway of a small farm to follow away from us. It was only here the few photographs were made, but still enough to properly identify the animal as a Cougar, although not the same as the amazing views we had. What an evening! Needless to say, that missing the Barn Owl didn't bother us that much...



Cougar © Joachim Bertrands

5 June We left Vancouver Island around 8 AM and headed to Vancouver. It was a sunny day, and the weather would likely be a little too hot for birding. Nevertheless, we headed to Pitt Meadows, an old marshland at the foot of the coastal mountains and consisting of an interesting mix of eastern and western birds. Sure enough, we ended up with Eastern Kingbird and Gray Catbird new for our trip list and were enjoying an Osprey that had a catfish for dinner. Cliff Swallows showed off nicely, while Common Yellowthroats were indeed very common.



Osprey © Joachim Bertrands

Finding an American Bittern would be tough, but we did try at Colony Farm, another legendary birding destination in Vancouver and a spot that's always recommended to get a good list going. Great looks at Cinnamon Teal, Band-tailed Pigeons and even more Eastern Kingbirds, but no bittern.



Cinnamon Teal © Joachim Bertrands

It was here we decided for an impulsive plan to try and get us up until that moment pathetic shorebird list off the ground, and headed for a drive down to Boundary Bay. The tides were perfect to see a small group of shorebirds fly in, which held the continuing Bar-tailed Godwit, a very rare visitor to BC, which had been found by a local birder a few days earlier. But it didn't end there, and we added goodies such as Ruddy Turnstone, Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin and Greater Yellowlegs to the list, all species we wouldn't run into for the remainder of the tour. A late birding session, and we quickly headed east as we still had to get to Manning Park that same night. A long two-hour drive later and we hit the bed before a day of mountain birding! **6 June** Today would be an intense day. We had been birding religiously over the last couple of days and the fatigue was building up, so a complete afternoon of rest was welcome. We decided to bird all morning in the subalpine forests of Manning Park, trying to connect with several high-altitude specialties. A walk before breakfast quickly produced species such as a flyover Pine Grosbeak and Evening Grosbeak, Mountain Chickadee, Varied Thrush, and distantly hooting Sooty Grouse. Breakfast didn't come soon enough, and the rest of the morning was spent going up to the famous Cascade Lookout, from where we had an amazing look over the valley, got up close and personal with Clark's Nutcrackers and bagged a few other good trip birds such as Sharp-shinned Hawk, Dusky Flycatcher and weirdly enough a migrant Western Kingbird.



Clark's Nutcracker © Joachim Bertrands

Going higher up, it was a short walk which eventually produced our star of the day: a great Spruce Grouse of the Franklin's subspecies which showed beautifully in the side of the road.



Spruce Grouse © Joachim Bertrands

Eventually we left for Osoyoos and basically drove straight there, although we did stop briefly to see Long-billed Curlews at a small-scale agricultural site along the way. These magnificent shorebirds are endangered in the province and becoming harder and harder to guarantee on tours, but here we lucked out. We had an early dinner in Osoyoos before enjoying a well-deserved rest, but even at

dinner it was impossible to not keep birding as we saw our first Ring-billed Gulls walk around between tourists on the shore of the lake. **7 June** It was very early this morning! A forecast of 30 degrees Celsius had us out at 5 already, and we first explored the river valley of Road 22 for species such as Yellow-breasted Chat, Say's Phoebe, Bobolink and Veery before we headed into the desert for wrens such as Rock and Canyon Wren. Lazuli Buntings were plentiful and an absolute favourite of everyone. We enjoyed typical, dry, interior scenery while enjoying so many new birds for our trip. Western Bluebirds and White-throated Swifts stole the show, the latter partly due to their noisy calls of course. A quick drive into the pine forest produced excellent species in the shape of Gray Flycatcher and Cassin's Finch. Breakfast was had, and we headed out right away again to find some more birds before the heat would become too much. Anarchist mountain is located a bit outside Osoyoos and is a known site for the beautiful Williamson's Sapsucker. We found the bird almost right away and added the last of the 4 sapsuckers on top of that: Red-naped Sapsucker. A gorgeous light morph Swainson's Hawk greeted us as we headed out of the hills into the Okanagan Valley again and grabbed a few more species along the way including Lewis's Woodpecker, Pygmy- and White-breasted Nuthatch and of course the always present Lazuli Buntings.



Williamson's Sapsucker © Joachim Bertrands



Lazuli Bunting © Joachim Bertrands

The rest of the afternoon was spent relaxing, as we planned a true owl excursion that same night. A drive of about an hour had us in the outskirts of Penticton where we walked down a birdy trail and waited for the sun to set. Veery and Gray Catbird ended the day, and it only took a few minutes of darkness for a Common Poorwill to start its hypnotizing song from a dry slope in the distance. It took a bit of bushwhacking, but we soon found the bird calling from a tree stump, giving away amazing looks!



Common Poorwill © Joachim Bertrands

After enjoying this specialty, we headed deeper into the woods along an unpaved road and listened carefully for Western Screech Owls. A locally known pair proved to be present and showed off nicely to the participants, 2 out of 3! Last one - the Flammulated Owl - is a notoriously hard bird that rarely gets seen and is always an adventure to find. For a good hour there was no sign of them, then suddenly some distant hoots and eventually some closer ones. It still took another hour (!) to find it high up in a tree, but the views were amazing, and the group was simply elated after this.



Flammulated Owl © Joachim Bertrands

All owls seen, or didn't we actually? Don't forget we still hadn't seen a Great Horned Owl on this tour, and despite hearing a pair on the way back to the car, we didn't see it. We drove back to Osoyoos at 1 AM, and most were fast asleep when Joachim noticed a large owl land on a traffic light. Great Horned Owl! The van was whipped around in no time and with some help of the flashlight we enjoyed great looks of our last target of the night. Needless to say, we went straight to bed after this adventure, and prepared for another early morning.



Haines Ecological Reserve © Joachim Bertrands

8 June



Kruger Road © Joachim Bertrands

The morning was rather painful, but we still managed to be out bright and early in the grasslands looking for Grasshopper Sparrow and Sage Thrasher. We only found the first one, as Sage Thrasher seemed hard to find this year. Western Meadowlarks filled the sky with their song and numerous Vesper-, Chipping- and Savannah Sparrows were singing. A nearby Burrowing Owl nesting site was occupied, and we had gorgeous looks – albeit distant – of two adults playfully hunting and hopping

around on the fence posts nearby. A drive up to another open forest area to look for Nashville Warbler ended in success, but on the way out the real surprise fell in the form of a singing Sage Thrasher in less than appropriate habitat! A very weird situation given that this species is declining in British Columbia and usually requires extensive sage desert but was singing from a Saskatoon Berry right in front of us! We spent the afternoon mostly relaxing before heading back to Road 22 and exploring the riparian forest once again. We ran into a whole family of Great Horned Owls, spectacular seeing the adult and fluffy juveniles sit there in the evening light, while Bullock's Orioles and Yellow-breasted Chats kept scolding away. A female Northern Harrier was busy as well, and we enjoyed photographing some of the swallows that kept flying by at close range.



Northern Harrier © Joachim Bertrands

We had some amazing Italian food that night and once again headed into the mountains to search for the mythical Great Gray Owl, a species always high on everyone's wish list. Dark clouds rolled in and it suddenly got much darker earlier than anticipated, which made finding these owls quite a challenge. We ended up hearing them sing - both male and female giving consistent deep hoots from the forest - but were unable to get a visual. With a displaying Wilson's Snipe, we ended the night, and prepared for our final full day of the tour. **9 June** Our last day, and what a time it had been already! We had only a few remaining targets left and decided to first try and ascend a nearby, dry sagebrush-covered mountain to search for our last remaining grouse of the tour: Dusky Grouse. Within minutes, we lucked into one sitting on the road, but that was about it as no display seemed to be going on anymore, and the bird quietly shuffled away into the undergrowth. Brewer's Sparrows were singing but didn't give away their location just yet, and we decided to try for this species down in the valley again. While driving down, another surprise happened as an adult Great Gray Owl flapped in front of the car, a totally unexpected location for this species and a major highlight for the group. It paused briefly while sitting in a tree before taking off again. A bird that clearly had a nest somewhere and was industriously feeding young.



Great Gray Owl © Joachim Bertrands

We spent some time down the mountain in the sage desert looking at Brewer's Sparrows, which eventually cooperated. A Common Nighthawk on a post was a great addition to our sightings and an appropriate observation at 'Nighthawk Road'. After that, we decided to have breakfast, pack our bags and head to Kelowna in order to try and find the last few targets of our trip: American Dipper, which we actually 'dipped' but instead enjoyed a female Harlequin Duck foraging in the river - the typical breeding habitat of this rare duck - and Black-necked Stilt as well as American Avocet, two rare breeding birds of BC that have their strongholds in Kelowna. Getting to Kelowna took a long time, and traffic was bad, but we eventually enjoyed views of all our targets with an amazing supporting cast of Eared Grebes, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Wilson's Phalaropes, and numerous Ruddy Ducks in full display mode. And just like that, the tour concluded, and we drove the remaining 4 hours back to Vancouver, before having a last dinner together and laughing and chatting all evening about the amazing time we'd had. What a wonderful time with wonderful people that all were on the same wavelength from the start, something that doesn't happen too often!



Cinnamon Black Bear © Joachim Bertrands