

## Vancouver to Bella Coola Self-drive Birding Tour 2021

[Link: Vancouver to Bella Coola Self-drive Birding Tour 2021](#)

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Our group of seven nature lovers and their guide traversed southern British Columbia from June 21<sup>th</sup> to June 29<sup>th</sup> starting in the Sea-to-Sky corridor. We joined the Gold Rush Trail from Lillooet to Williams Lake and finally, we drove west along Highway 20 across the Fraser Plateau to finish in Bella Coola. The trip was catered to British Columbia residents and adhered to provincial health regulations.



## **21-23 June: Sea to Sky to Williams Lake**

We started mid-morning at the Squamish River Estuary where a heatwave was taking shape, but despite the lower bird activity it was nice to get acquainted during most guests' first extended group trip since Covid took a grip on our collective adventure plans. We walked down to a nice vista over the estuary and the Stawamus Chief and stood for an hour seeing what we could. A Savannah Sparrow made a repeat appearance, distant Caspian Terns were over the Mamquam River and Tree Swallows flew overhead. Purple Finch and Cedar Waxwing were feeding on saskatoon berries. We played the tape for Virginia Rail in a likely spot, and heard a response but (as was the case throughout the entire trip), the bird would not reveal itself!



*Birding at Squamish Estuary*

The bugs were out, but we did make another quick stop for some birds such as Red-eyed Vireo and Chestnut-backed Chickadee before proceeding to Whistler for a patio lunch at Earl's Restaurant.

Being a self-drive tour, we would set our sights on a destination and try to meet there. This worked successfully for our arrival in Lillooet via an uneventful but always-spectacular drive over the Duffy Lake road.



*Duffy Lake Road*



*Birding West Pavillion Road*

Our next morning in Lillooet started off with a foray near the Fraser River. After a wrong turn, some of the group had a chance to see a Chukar and check out the historic bridge over the muddy-brown Fraser, while Steve made it look like this was the plan all along. Back on track, we soon found ourselves high over the river on the West Pavilion Road. Bird life was scarce but the scenery and cool air were nice. On the way back we saw an endangered Gopher Snake on the road.

We backtracked to the hotel and continued up to a site that Steve had visited on a powerline project

in years past (on the Fountain reserve). Although the powerline wasn't built due to some of the listed species present, said species didn't get the memo and departed anyway (no Lewis's Woodpecker, Common Nighthawk, Golden Eagle). We did, however, get to listen to the haunting—if not taunting—calls of the Long-billed Curlew on an adjacent field, and a pleasant surprise was getting a fleeting glimpse, and hearing a Lark Sparrow, at the very north end of its range. The sagebrush benchlands over the Fraser River sure are an interesting place to visit!



*Birding Fountain reserve bench*

Unfortunately, our four-tiered system of communication (convoy, cell phones, radios and an app) broke down and we lost a couple folks for a few hours, but they met us in 100 Mile House after the rest of us stopped for lunch at Marble Canyon. Here we saw Warbling Vireos up close, heard Clark's Nutcrackers and enjoyed a sandwich. Eventually in 100 Mile, Joan and a few of us had scope views of a Yellow-headed Blackbird outside of the visitor's centre that just reopened.



*Bobolink*

Our next stop was the Mission Road grasslands loop before Williams Lake—a new site for the guide but it turned out to be a good one for future tours. We enjoyed scope views of Bobolink in an extensive field, despite the mid-day high temperatures. Mountain Bluebird, Common Yellowthroat, and Clay-colored Sparrow were also sighted.



*Mountain Bluebird*

## 23-25 June: Chilcotin Plateau



*Lincoln's Sparrow*

It was overcast and humid this morning when we set out from our hotel for the 2-minute drive to Scout Island, a nature reserve in Williams Lake the town, and on Williams Lake proper. This was our first blitz of bird activity, owing primarily to the riparian and marshland habitat. The first birds were hard to miss: American White Pelicans on a slough, and our last bird gave great views too: the gorgeous Veery. In between we encountered a family of Red-necked Grebes, all three teal species, the only Wood Ducks of the trip, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Gray Catbird, Willow Flycatcher among others. This would be a pleasant area to have in your neighbourhood. After a combination of a Tim Horton's breakfast with the scant grab-bag available at the hotel, and a gassing up, we headed up the hill toward the Fraser Plateau, also known as the West Chilcotin area.



*Veery*



*American White Pelicans*

We were on a roll for bird sightings and our next pull-over resulted in several nice records. A male Lazuli Bunting offered scope views! That was surreal, but we also had looks at Western Kingbird and Say's Phoebe in the scope. A male Bullock's Oriole offered a brief glimpse before we rallied for the short drive across the Fraser and up the hill to Becher's Prairie, noting extensive Douglas-fir beetle-kill on the way up. We turned onto Meldrum Creek Road and stopped at a scraggly-looking lake

(everywhere was high water) to see what was there, and lo-and-behold we had very close views of Northern Waterthrush and Lincoln's Sparrow. These gave the newer birders in our group a chance to hone their skills at getting on fast-flying birds. It's a lifelong process- trust me!

Soon we arrived at our home for the next two nights: The Historic Chilcotin Lodge. It's a quaint place run by Kurt, Brenda and their son Chris, of ex-cinnamon bun fame, although they had a franchise in my hometown for ten years and I'd never heard of it. They fed us lunch and we were able to see the local birds using the building to nest: Mountain Bluebird, and Cliff, Tree and Barn Swallows. Before long, we regrouped for a visit to the stunning Farwell Canyon, a photographer's dream. Along the way we had some good views in cooler weather (it actually rained a bit!) at some grassland ponds. We got our first looks at Eared Grebe, Northern Shoveler, the stately Ruddy Duck and Canvasback. Descending down into Farwell Canyon was a thrill, and we stopped at a lookout at a bend in the river where we saw a group of about 30 Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis*). Recent taxonomic revisions have re-ordered what we would have called California Bighorns to be grouped with Rocky Mountain Bighorns (those in the Rockies) as two ecotypes of one subspecies, with the other two subspecies being Sierra Nevada Bighorns (California only) and Desert (U.S. Southwest) Bighorns. Confusing- but in a nutshell it's three subspecies we can just call Bighorn Sheep. Especially on a bird tour. Speaking of which, we did see a dozen dive-bombing White-throated Swifts at this lookout— they are spectacular aerial acrobats!



*Eared Grebe*



*Bighorn Sheep*

David was the keener on the trip, and we went out for an evening of owling. Around 9pm he and Steve backtracked to the Fraser River and turned toward Doc English Bluff Ecological Reserve, a gorgeous area of open Ponderosa Pine forest at an elevation suitable for both Flammulated Owl and Common Poorwill. And... yes.. we did hear both, along with dozens of Vesper Sparrows singing into the night. Tick...

The next day had some minor challenges, starting with a lengthy tutorial by a military munitions expert about which of a myriad of bombs could blow you up (spoiler alert: all of them). The area is, paradoxically, protected from disturbance due to the presence military trainees bombing and shooting. Their troops were "mobilizing" to leave the area when we arrived. With a thirst for adventure and thoughts of tripping a landmine, mingled with the euphoric aftertaste of cinnamon buns, we set forth to the prairies on a loop that Steve promised would be a morning outing. Alas, it turned into a five-hour backroads odyssey. Although our munitions friend promised that the loop did connect, he did not mention it was a different road from the one that Steve navigated 20+ years ago as a youthful field biologist. Eventually, we found our way back, but not before the entire group decided we could survive another hour on the prairie without cinnamon buns. Just an hour though... so we stopped at a wonderful waterbody called Roundup Lake. We saw American Avocet, Horned Grebe, and American Kestrel. On the entire loop, we tallied our highest species total of the trip, some highlights being White-throated Sparrow, Least Flycatcher, Canada Jay, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, House Wren, and Mountain Chickadee.

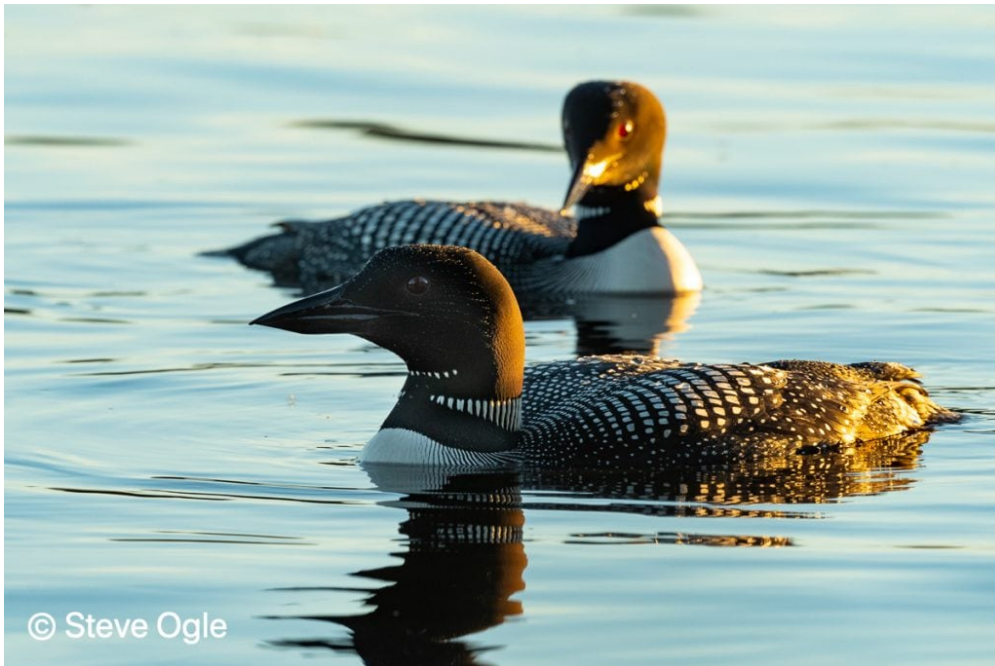


*White-throated Sparrow*

On yet another clear, warm morning we packed up and headed west on Highway 20, noticing the two newly-renovated gas stations at Alexis Creek and Redstone. The area seems to be opening up.

Our first stop, Bull Canyon Provincial Park, produced some nice birds but more importantly was a pleasant spot to get out and walk around while it was still cool. After that we tried again at another area for Long-billed Curlew but they weren't around. However, we did find an Alder Flycatcher and American Redstart as a consolation. Pollywog Lake (or possibly Pinto Lake) produced some great birds such as Marsh Wren, Blue-winged Teal, Pied-billed Grebe and a nesting Spotted Sandpiper. We could not lure out a Sora or Virginia Rail although they came close to our vantage point. One bird we did not see was Black Tern, which also inhabit these ponds.

Next, we headed off the highway to Eagle and Tatlayoko Lakes, the latter draining to the coast via the Homathko River. We were cresting the divide. It was heating up but we managed to cool down in whatever shade we could find. When temperatures reached 37C we foolishly thought this was an unbreakable record; temps would later soar to 49.6C in Lytton! We had some luck with our target Arctic Tern at Eagle Lake and the rest of the day was mainly a scenery and rehydration tour. We finished in good time at Nimpo Lake for some drinks and snacks on their welcoming deck, while Common Loons serenaded us on the lake.



*Common Loon pair*

## **26-29 June: Rainbow Range and the Coast**



*Stewart's Lodge, Nimpo Lake*

The next morning our first stop was for a long-shot bird: Yellow Rail, which had only been detected once near Anahim Lake. Its local distribution is similar to the Arctic Terns in that the closest other known population is hundreds of kilometres away. The “mini-arctic” feel of this area is intriguing for birders seeking out BC birds beyond their normal range. Understandably, it was not ideal to try for a

nocturnal species such as the rail at 10am but we gave it a go anyway. With that out of the way, we continued to the Rainbow Range trailhead.

The Rainbow Range is a renowned hiking and birding venue. We felt ambitious enough to attempt a substantial hike despite the heat.



*Lupins in the Rainbow Range*

A decade-old burn is the main feature of the first half of the trail. We made it up through this feature to a pair of subalpine lakes after about five kilometres. At one point, the top of a burnt tree seemed to fly away before our eyes and we quickly realized it was a Northern Hawk Owl! Other exciting (but more expected) birds on this hike included: Blackpoll and Wilson's Warblers, Clark's Nutcracker, Barrow's Goldeneye, and Fox Sparrow. We were worn out at those lakes but a couple of us cooled down in them. The hike down was hot and dusty—the temperature was 35C in the subalpine, which must be an unbeatable record! Or not...

Back at the vehicles, we set the air conditioners at frigid and descended over Heckman Pass down the infamous "Hill." Everyone had a different sort of thrill on the descent but it was agreed we'd not head back up there anytime soon to do any roadside birding. Our hotel was a pleasant respite from the heat—to a point. It peaked at 40C in Bella Coola on the days we were in the valley and ice-cold beer was the only way to cool down while at the hotel.

Our first morning in the jaw-dropping Bella Coola Valley began at Snootli Regional Park's old-growth trail. This short loop passes through centuries-old cedar trees, some of which are culturally-modified—mainly from cedar-stripping. Birds in this area included MacGillivray's Warbler, Hammond's Flycatcher, and a family of Barred Owls.



*Clayton Falls*

For both of our afternoons we threw in the towel on birding and instead spent some time by the ocean, below the misty spray of Clayton Falls. Some of us did catch a glimpse of an American Dipper, and while scanning the ocean we were excited to see Mew Gulls, and also two species of marine mammals: Harbour Seal and Harbour Porpoise. On our second morning in Bella Coola we visited the Kettle Pond trail and fed some mosquitos, but also saw flocks of Vaux's Swift spiralling above the kettle lake. After this we visited the property of local doctor and nature enthusiast, Harvey Thommason. He showed us some coho salmon fry and his interesting land he was in the process of donating to Nature Conservancy of Canada.



*Snootli Regional Park*

On the last morning, we walked to a nearby trailhead to search for the elusive (to this point) Black-throated Gray Warbler. The Universe finally delivered and we did at least hear one of them. Birds were not very interested in being sighted during the heatwave but they were still singing from within the foliage. We were also fortunate enough to see the only Black-headed Grosbeak of the trip—a final new bird rounding out our total to approximately 150 species sighted during the journey (give or take one or two that only the guide sighted).

This was a new itinerary for Eagle-Eye tours and we are greatly appreciative of the patience and enthusiasm shown by not only our guests, but the tourism providers that were still getting their feet under them. This trip was as successful as any long-standing tour that we offer, and perhaps more so because we were the first to experience it together. In addition, it took place in a special, seldom-visited corner of our own province. Hopefully we can look at COVID-19 in the rear-view mirror and embark on more adventures together down the road. Thank you.

Steve Ogle

July '21