

# Ultimate British Columbia: Coast & Grasslands Itinerary

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## Tour Overview

From the temperate rainforest of the Pacific ocean to the grassland and desert areas of the Okanagan, we visit a diverse set of habitats on this birding tour of British Columbia.

We begin in Vancouver on the mighty Fraser River delta. This city's position makes it a huge draw for birders from around the world who seek migrants, breeding birds and vagrants. Highlights here include exciting shorebird viewing in Boundary Bay, montane birds of the North Shore Mountains and seabirds and rainforest specialties of Stanley Park.

Vancouver Island awaits us after a two hour ferry ride. We'll spend three days exploring birding hotspots near Victoria such as Swan Lake and Martindale Flats, and take a whale-watching tour to view orcas up close. We'll visit the wild west coast near Tofino for a pelagic tour that opens up a world of possibilities for seabirds, and comb the beaches in hopes of whimbrels, eagles and perhaps even a wolf.

From here we'll traverse inland to the famed Okanagan region, known not only for its vineyards but also for avian diversity. Areas such as Kilpoola Lake host Common Poorwills and perhaps even Sage Thrashers, while Vaseux Lake is a site where we could have our highest daily species totals for the trip.

Overall this unique British Columbia birding tour offers the chance to see an incredible array of birds in addition to some fantastic wildlife viewing. British Columbia is a magnificent province that has much to offer the naturalist explorer, from wild Pacific coastline to alpine tundra, and from arid desert to lush rainforest and more.

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## Itinerary

### Day 1: Arrival in Vancouver

Our Ultimate British Columbia birding tour begins in Vancouver where we meet at our hotel for dinner on the first night. We'll discuss our plans to explore Canada's most diverse province over the coming days. Night near the Vancouver airport.

## Day 2: Vancouver area



We will hit the ground running by exploring a number of birding sites near the airport and in the Vancouver area. Iona Island is one of the best sites in a city that is renowned for good birding. We'll listen for the chattering of Bewick's Wren, Warbling Vireo and Bushtit as we explore this part of the Fraser River Delta. Iona is yet another primo site for shorebird and waterfowl viewing, and rarities are possible. A Spoon-billed Sandpiper was sighted here once! In one flock, we may see all seven species of swallows possible in Western Canada! From here we'll head right into picturesque downtown Vancouver and through the rainforest environs of Stanley Park. We'll cross over to the north shore for dinner. Night in North Vancouver.

## Days 3 - 5: West Coast and Tofino Pelagic



This morning we'll head upslope for some montane forest birding. Weather permitting, from Cypress Mountain we'll have unreal vistas over the city while Vaux's and/or Black Swifts parade by. This is our best spot on the tour for Black-throated Gray Warbler, Black-headed Grosbeak and Anna's Hummingbird. At Cypress, where the 2010 Olympics were hosted, we'll hear and perhaps see a displaying male Sooty Grouse booming one of the world's lowest frequency songs. More obvious songsters include Olive-sided and Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Cassin's Vireo, Pacific Wren, MacGillivray's Warbler, Western Tanager along with Varied, Hermit and Swainson's Thrush. After this we'll board a ferry from Horseshoe Bay to Nanaimo, and from the deck we can scan the waters of the Strait of Georgia for seabirds such as Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorant, Rhinoceros Auklet, Marbled Murrelet and Pigeon Guillemot. Upon arrival we'll get the sense of the relaxed feel of Vancouver Island as we traverse to the real west coast, stopping at a grove of majestic Douglas Firs, some more than 800 years old! Pacific Wren provides the complex audio backdrop to this wondrous ecosystem. Nearing the coast we smell the ocean air and investigate the wild Long Beach, where we look for Black Oystercatcher, Sanderling, Hammond's Flycatcher, Wilson's Warbler and Chestnut-backed Chickadee, among others. The next morning, weather permitting, we depart on a pelagic adventure, and we don't have to go far to find excitement. Gray or Humpback Whales might be sighted in near-shore waters and we'll visit a small colony of Tufted Puffins. Once arriving offshore at the deep Clayoquot Canyon we may encounter ocean-faring species such as Black-footed Albatross, Pink-footed and Sooty Shearwaters, Common Murre, Fork-tailed Storm-petrel, Red-necked Phalarope and Ancient Murrelet, among many others. Blue Sharks, Rizzo's Dolphins and Northern Fur Seals are a possibility and we have twice seen the enigmatic Short-tailed Albatross, a species that nests in Japan. Surprises await us on this six-hour tour. Our second full day in the Pacific Rim area allows a backup day for the pelagic tour and otherwise more exploration of the ethereal rainforests in this area. We'll hike another old-growth trail, scan for Pacific Loons and scoters over expansive beaches and visit the town of Tofino, where Bald Eagles are more common than House Sparrows. Nights in Ucluelet.

## Days 6 - 7: Victoria



This morning we'll commute south to the provincial capital of Victoria, stopping en route to check an estuary for wildlife. Raccoon, Mink, and River Otter are common here. We'll see why the southeastern part of Vancouver Island is so attractive to retirees. Once in in Victoria we'll settle in and have some down-time to see the famed Inner Harbour. When it's time for more birding we'll head for Royal Roads University campus to clean up on western specialties like Hutton's Vireo, Western Wood-Pewee and Red-breasted Sapsucker. Suburban Victoria has the highest density of Cooper's Hawks in North America and Barred Owls are common in the city parks. We're not done with our ocean watch however, and we'll scan for Glaucous-winged, Western, and lingering Mew Gulls. Great Blue Heron, Wandering Tattler and Harlequin Duck could be highlights at Clover Point. One day we'll take a three-hour boat tour into Juan de Fuca Strait specifically to search for Orcas up-close and personal, as they munch on Chinook salmon. Humpback whales are making a comeback and are a probable sighting, along with two species of Sea Lions. In the evenings we'll have a chance to relax amid Victoria's charming ambience and perhaps enjoy a craft brew and some local seafood treats. Nights in Victoria.

## Day 8: Manning Park



Keeping the flow, we depart Victoria and return on a different ferry back to the Lower Mainland, this time stopping at nearby Reifel Refuge. This renowned bird sanctuary will give us a great chance to get a closer look at some species. Resident Sandhill Cranes are of the friendly variety, and they can wander by with newly-hatched colts while we enjoy a picnic lunch. We may see a lingering Snow Goose, a chattering Marsh Wren and predators such as Peregrine Falcon and Great-horned Owl while at Reifel. Nearby, we may try for a roosting Barn Owl before driving to the Cascade Mountains. Night at Manning Park Lodge.

## Day 9 - 11: The Okanagan



Manning Park is a stunning, mountainous birding venue. Depending on the snowpack in the mountains, we may be able to drive fairly high up into the montane zone to pick up some higher elevation species such as Boreal Chickadee, Pine Grosbeak, Clark's Nutcracker and Spruce Grouse. At Lightning Lake we'll have a look in the Engelmann Spruce forest for both species of Crossbill, Canada Jay and Northern Goshawk. We visit a roadside site where American Dipper nests. After lunch we'll continue east and soon enter the Great Basin ecosystem. Nighthawk Road is a great introduction to sagebrush birding where hopefully we'll catch Brewer's and Lark Sparrows singing in the evening and with much luck we could encounter something rare such as Black-throated Sparrow or Sage Thrasher. These birds seem to arrive annually from south of the border, which is just over the hill. We arrive in the splendid Okanagan Valley in early evening and prepare for two final days of birding— possibly the best yet. While in the Okanagan we'll explore the best options for sagebrush and dry forest birding. Small lakes will hold plenty of ducks including Cinnamon Teal and Redhead. Near Oliver we'll watch breeding Wilson's Phalaropes try to out-compete Bobolinks for our attention while we search grasslands and patches of water birch for more amazing birds. At White Lake we'll look and listen for Grasshopper Sparrow and Gray Flycatcher. At Vaseux Lake we'll investigate the riparian areas for migrant surprises while listening to Canyon and Rock Wren both singing from the cliffs above (Marsh, House, Bewick's and Pacific Wrens are also present!). We'll scan for large and small birds alike, including Golden Eagles across the lake and Rufous, Black-chinned and Calliope Hummingbirds in the forests. Lewis' Woodpecker, Williamson's Sapsucker, Lazuli Bunting and Pygmy Nuthatch each have their favourite tree species to cling to. An evening foray might produce a Common Poorwill or Flammulated Owl. If we need a breather there's always a nearby winery to lunch at, or we can dip our feet into the warm waters of Osoyoos Lake nearby our hotel. Nights in Osoyoos.

## Day 12: Return to Vancouver



On our final full day we have some time for more birding prior to returning on a four-hour drive to Vancouver. This leaves time for exploring since we take a different route—one takes us through other scenic mountains. We'll be driving through areas of contiguous forest and may have time to detour and look for bonus birds. Night in Vancouver.

## Day 13: Departure from Vancouver

Our British Columbia birding tour ends today. Breakfast is available, but you can depart for flights home anytime today. If you are carrying on to our Boreal Extension, you will join the guides for a morning flight to Fort St. John to truly round out your Ultimate British Columbia tour!

# What to Expect

## Overview

The Ultimate British Columbia: Coast and Grasslands tour is a moderately paced birding tour, where we focus on finding a diversity of birds. The daily schedule will vary to account for weather, tides and reported bird sightings. You can expect some early mornings and the occasional evening owling expeditions.

## Food

We generally have breakfast at the hotel before we head out for the day. Sometimes we will have optional pre-breakfast walks. We often take a picnic lunch in the field, but will occasionally stop at a restaurant for lunch. Dinner is usually at the lodge or a nearby restaurant. Each evening after dinner we compile the day's checklist, review the day's activities, birds, mammals and other observations, and plan the next day's activities.

## Accommodation

Generally we stay in standard hotel rooms in locations close to where we want to go birding.

## Walking

The walking on this tour is rated easy to moderate. Most birding is done from roads and well-marked trails, but we occasionally traverse low brush, swampy and uneven terrain, and there is some hill hiking. We walk at a slow pace, stopping frequently to observe fauna and flora. Our longest walk will be 2 kms (1.25 miles), taking approximately 2 hours, at Strawberry Flats in Manning Park.

## Driving

Driving times will vary from 1 - 4 hours of driving when transferring to a new location. We will have many rest stops along the way when moving to a new town.

## Climate

The weather in spring in British Columbia can be highly variable, from cool rain and wind on the Ocean, to warm and dry in the Okanagan. It is best to check the weather the week before the tour starts and pack layers!

## Boat Trips

There are 2 boat trips on this tour.

The first boat tour is a 6 hour Pelagic (Open Ocean) boat tour on a 30 ft. Boston Whaler boat with a maximum capacity of 12 people. It has a very small washroom on board for emergencies that can only be used when the boat is stationary at the canyon. Mandatory Mustang Floater Suits are provided in sizes XS to XXXL. Please note that this boat tour may not be suitable for those with serious neck/back issues or those extremely prone to seasickness. The pelagic requires optimal weather and sea conditions and is at the discretion of the boat captain. Our safety is paramount and will be the primary deciding factor in how far and long we can stay out at sea. If sea conditions are not cooperative during the two possible days, we will continue with a nearshore boat excursion.

If you do not want to take the pelagic, we can offer a near shore boat trip that will be primarily whale and bear watching and will not have an EET guide onboard. This near shore option may come at an additional expense, depending on the size of our group. Please let us know your preference at the time of booking.

The second boat tour is a 3-4 hour trip on a large zodiac, with outside seating only. The extra length makes for a smooth ride in all weather conditions. Survival suits are provided. There is a small washroom on board.

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## What's Included

### **Tour Price Includes**

- All accommodation (Good quality)
- All meals and soft drinks
- Two boat trips (weather permitting)
- Ground transportation
- 1 guide with 4 - 8 participants, 2 guides in 2 vehicles with 9 - 12 participants
- All park, conservation and entrance fees

### **Tour Price Does Not Include**

- Flights to and from Vancouver
  - Travel Insurance
  - Items of a personal nature
  - Possible additional excursion costs if you opt out of the pelagic boat trip
  - Taxes (5% GST)
  - Alcoholic Beverages
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