

**WINTER WASHINGTON
&
BRITISH COLUMBIA**

**JANUARY 31 -
FEBRUARY 7, 2009**

LEADER: BOB SUNDSTROM

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Some of North America's most exceptional winter birding—great variety, spectacular numbers, and rarities—can be found each year in northwestern Washington and nearby British Columbia. The climate is mild for the latitude, and food resources for birds of prey, diving birds, and waterfowl are rich. Our tour ranged from Seattle to the Olympic Peninsula, then north to British Columbia, and then south again before returning to Seattle. The best birding is along the edges of marine bays, along forest edges, among vast, diked fields of delta flats, from the bows of ferries, and in some bird-filled refuges. With sparkling Mt. Baker (nearly 11,000 feet) to the east and the saw-toothed, snow-capped peaks of the Olympic Mountains to the west, each day's birding has a majestic backdrop.

Our 2009 tour began with crisp morning views of Varied Thrushes, Evening Grosbeaks, Purple Finches, Fox and Golden-crowned sparrows, and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. We soon headed west to Willapa Bay in search of a pair of rare Emperor Geese. Despite finding thousands of geese—Cackling, Greater White-fronted, and migratory Canadas—the Emperor Geese didn't show. But another rare sighting balanced the day: just after dark we had a good view of an American marten, a secretive and elusive forest mammal.

With two nights at Port Angeles, wedged between the foot of the Olympic Mountains and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, both waterbirds and forest edge birds were plentiful. Beautiful Harlequin Ducks swam near finely-patterned Barrow's Goldeneyes, and Long-tailed Ducks and all three scoters dove in deeper water. The forest edge yielded wonderful looks at Winter Wren, Northern Pygmy-Owl, and more lovely Varied Thrushes. At Port Townsend we watched a large flock of Brant, close enough to see the fine details of their "lace collars," and tracked many Pacific and Red-throated loons as they flew close by a sea watch point. Birding from the bow of a foot-passenger ferry across Admiralty Inlet where we stood perhaps six feet above the smooth water, we pushed directly through several flocks of Ancient Murrelets and more than a hundred calling pairs of Marbled Murrelets.

With two days to explore north of the Canadian border, the tour ranged from Boundary Bay to downtown Vancouver. In Canada we had great views of five more owl species—Northern Saw-whet, Long-eared, Short-eared, Barn, and Barred—all seen during the day! The tiny Saw-whet Owl perched on the branch of a conifer, at eye level and at arm's-length. Equally memorable was the detailed spotting scope study of an adult Northern Goshawk, which perched in a bare tree as we admired the hawk's intense red eyes, finely marked underparts, and silver-gray back. Finally, we had to just walk away from the perched goshawk. This was really the view of a lifetime of a scarce and enigmatic bird that rarely perches in the open for long.

We covered repeatedly the area used by a roving Gyrfalcon, but were unable to catch up to it. In the process we saw numerous Peregrine Falcons and had great looks at Merlins. The open country on both sides of the border produced nice views of Northern Shrikes, dozens of handsome Rough-legged Hawks and, as a rough estimate, at least 500 Bald Eagles. In some places, more than a dozen Bald Eagles perched in the same bare trees. On the Boundary Bay tide flats, one could count 50 or more eagles from one spot.

The Boundary Bay waterfront produced dozens of Eurasian Wigeons and, as we re-crossed the border to the U.S., we saw both Tufted Duck and Common Teal, good rarities for North America. By the end of the tour we had seen 34 species of swans, geese, and ducks. And it was Snow Geese that left us with the most stirring experience of the entire trip: as we sat in the van alongside a massive goose flock grazing in a field, the entire flock—perhaps 25,000 Snow Geese—took flight. The deafening flock flew for minutes, back and forth across the road, in a low, tight, swirling curtain, nearly blotting out the reddening sunset, in a spectacle that left us speechless.

It was a great tour, with scarcely a drop of rain, more than its fair share of rarities and spectacle, and terrific Pacific Northwest seafood.

ITINERARY

Day 1, January 31: Arrival in Seattle and get-acquainted dinner; night in Seattle.

Day 2, February 1: After breakfast, drove southwest toward South Bend with a stop near Tenino at leader Bob and Sally's house. After some very productive study of birds at the feeders and on nearby back roads, continued coastward via Oakville, Montesano, and Raymond. Much searching did not reveal a pair of recently reported Emperor Geese among thousands of Cackling, Greater White-fronted, and migratory Canada geese. Late afternoon returned east and then north along Hood Canal while listening to the Super Bowl on the van radio with the very unexpected highlight of an American Marten walking out into the road. Night in Port Angeles.

Day 3, February 2: Morning birding in Pt. Angeles along the lower part of the road into Olympic National Park. We then birded the marine frontage of Ediz Hook and, after lunch in Pt. Angeles, drove to Port Townsend where we rode the foot passenger-only ferry back and forth across Admiralty Inlet to Whidbey Is. Second night in Pt. Angeles.

Day 4, February 3: After breakfast at the hotel (and with the Pt. Angeles-Victoria ferry and Pt. Townsend-Whidbey Island car ferries out of service) we birded in the Sequim area than continued on to Kingston to ferry across Puget Sound to Edmonds. Had lunch in Conway and then birded on Fir Island and along Padilla Bay and on the Skagit Flats before driving north into Canada. Night in Tsawwassen.

Day 5, February 4: Birded extensively in the rural fields north of Tsawwassen, then at Reifel Sanctuary where we saw four species of owls. After lunch in Ladner, birded at Jericho Beach Park in Vancouver adding amazing views of an adult Northern Goshawk. Late afternoon to near Brunswick Pt. where a Short-eared Owl posed for scope views. Second night in Tsawwassen.

Day 6, February 5: After breakfast we departed Tsawwassen, birding along Boundary Bay and then near White Rock on the Mud Bay Flats. After crossing the U.S. border at Blaine, birded the Drayton Harbor/Semiahmoo Bay waterfront then drove south for lunch in Edison nearby. Later, birded the Samish Flats and then the Skagit Flats where we had an unforgettable encounter with about 25,000 Snow Geese. First night in Anacortes.

Day 7, February 6: After breakfast in Anacortes, we drove south to Fidalgo Island birding at Lake Erie and Mt. Erie, then south to Penn Cove, Coupeville, and Crockett Lake. After a second stop at Mt. Erie, birded more of the Skagit Flats area. Second night in Anacortes.

Day 8, February 7: After breakfast in Anacortes, we birded across the Skagit Flats stopping for some last views of swan flocks, and then south across the Stilliguamish Flats, before heading south toward Seattle. We arrived at Seatac Airport around noon for departure flights.

BIRD LIST [names in *italics* are rare or unusual; **bold italics** are exceptionally rare or unusual]

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Greater White-fronted Goose – a good-sized flock of 60+ near South Bend

Snow Goose – One of the highlights of the tour was sitting in the van beneath a low flying, swirling, calling flock of perhaps 25,000 Snow Geese at sunset!

Cackling Goose – hundreds to thousands along Willapa Bay

Canada Goose – of several migratory forms plus sedentary “Great Basin” geese

Brant – exceptional views of 100 or more at Port Townsend

Mute Swan – four along Deas Slough in British Columbia, where “countable”

Tundra Swan – side by side with Trumpeters for careful comparison

Trumpeter Swan – upwards of 1000 Trumpeters and Tundras were seen

Wood Duck – best views were at Reifel Sanctuary, where drakes climbed atop a bird feeder

Gadwall

Eurasian Wigeon – seen regularly in flocks of American Wigeons, at least 25 for the trip

American Wigeon

Mallard

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail – by the thousands, with fine views of these elegant ducks

Common Teal - (*Eurasian Teal*; “*Eurasian*” *Green-winged Teal*) – There is some difference of taxonomic opinion about the bird we saw on Edison Slough. Most authorities consider *Common Teal* a distinct species, *Anas crecca*, and *Green-winged Teal* as *Anas carolinensis*. The American Ornithological Union is still debating the issue, while IUCN and Birdlife International split the two species. There seems to be lots of “behavioral, morphological, and molecular data” in support of separating the two species.

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback – just one, near Sequim

Ring-necked Duck

Tufted Duck – a female with scaup and other diving ducks at Lake Erie, Washington

Greater Scaup

Lesser Scaup

Harlequin Duck – excellent views of birds in fanciest plumage

Surf Scoter – great close ups, especially at Port Angeles

White-winged Scoter

Black Scoter – a pair at Port Angeles

Long-tailed Duck – beautiful ducks at Port Angeles and Blaine

Bufflehead

Common Goldeneye

Barrow's Goldeneye

Hooded Merganser – seen on most days of the tour, very close at Reifel

Common Merganser

Red-breasted Merganser

Ruddy Duck

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

California Quail

LOONS:

Red-throated Loon – most numerous at Penn Cove, in winter plumage

Pacific Loon – close fly-bys at Port Townsend of Pacific and Red-throated loons

Common Loon - widespread

GREBES:

Horned Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Eared Grebe – one on Penn Cove
Western Grebe

CORMORANTS:

Double-crested Cormorant
Brandt's Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant

BITTERN & HERONS:

Great Blue Heron
Black-crowned Night-Heron – at the species northernmost Pacific roost in B.C.

EAGLES, HAWKS, FALCONS & ALLIES:

Bald Eagle – hundreds seen: perched, flying, chasing prey, and in communal roosts
Northern Harrier – a daily occurrence
Sharp-shinned Hawk – at least one immature studied in the spotting scope
Cooper's Hawk – some excellent views of adults and immatures
Northern Goshawk – a tour highlight was the adult that sat perched for excellent scope views for at least 15 minutes of careful study and admiration
Red-tailed Hawk – hundreds, including a few dark morphs
Rough-legged Hawk – seen most days of the tour, some at very close range
American Kestrel – uncommon in the area of the tour
Merlin – fine scope views
Peregrine Falcon – seen regularly, with a high of 7 on one day

RAILS & COOTS:

Virginia Rail – heard
American Coot

CRANES:

Sandhill Crane – six at Reifel, where very approachable

PLOVERS, SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Black-bellied Plover
Killdeer
Black Oystercatcher – a pair at Pt. Angeles whistled their crazy calls
Greater Yellowlegs
Black Turnstone
Surfbird – a couple with turnstones on Penn Cove
Sanderling
Dunlin – by the tens of thousands, forming magnificent swirling flocks

JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:

Mew Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Thayer's Gull – several scoped in roosts of large gulls
Western Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull

AUKS:

Common Murre

Pigeon Guillemot – in plumages from full winter to full breeding

Marbled Murrelet – an amazing 100+ pairs seen from the Pt. Townsend ferry

Ancient Murrelet – great views of birds off the bow of the Pt. Townsend ferry

Rhinoceros Auklet – a few; uncommon in winter on the north Puget Sound

PIGEONS & DOVES:

Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Collared-Dove – three in Edison, Washington; increasingly common in the PNW

Mourning Dove

OWLS:

Barn Owl – scoped on a day roost in B.C.

Northern Pygmy-Owl – one came in to tooting for fine scope views near Port Angeles

Barred Owl – close views on a low day roost

Long-eared Owl – two in deep camouflaging foliage posed for scope study

Short-eared Owl – nice views of one perched and later jousting with a harrier

Northern Saw-whet Owl – one of these tiny owls on a day roost, viewed with arm's length

HUMMINGBIRDS:

Anna's Hummingbird – singing at our motel near Anacortes

KINGFISHERS:

Belted Kingfisher

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES:

Downy Woodpecker

Northern Flicker – most of the birds seen well were intergrades of red X yellow-shafted forms

Pileated Woodpecker – heard

SHRIKES:

Northern Shrike – scoped near Raymond and Anacortes, both adult and immature birds

VIREOS

Hutton's Vireo – scolding near Tenino

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Steller's Jay

Western Scrub-Jay – near Tenino

American Crow

Northwestern Crow

Common Raven

LARKS:

[*Sky Lark* – We skipped trip to Victoria area for Sky Larks this year because participants had seen them recently. Other years, they have been seen reliably.]

TITMICE through CREEPERS:

Black-capped Chickadee

Mountain Chickadee – rare west of the Cascades, we saw one in Edison, Washington

Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper – a trio chasing up and down a cedar trunk in Anacortes

WRENS & DIPPERS:

Bewick's Wren
Winter Wren – close views near Port Angeles
Marsh Wren – heard

KINGLETS:

Golden-crowned Kinglet
Ruby-crowned Kinglet

THRUSHES & ALLIES:

American Robin
Varied Thrush – great looks at this very special thrush; at least 30 seen for the tour

STARLINGS & ALLIES:

European Starling

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

Spotted Towhee
Fox Sparrow – of the “Sooty” group, seen best in Bob’s front yard
Song Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow – one in Sally and Bob’s yard, moderately rare in the region
White-crowned Sparrow
Golden-crowned Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:

Red-winged Blackbird
Western Meadowlark
Brewer's Blackbird
Brown-headed Cowbird – a couple in a large group of Brewer’s Blackbirds; scarce in winter

FINCHES:

Purple Finch
House Finch
Pine Siskin
Evening Grosbeak – not often seen on the tour, we had wonderful views of them coming to Bob and Sally’s feeding stations

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow

MAMMALS & OTHER VERTEBRATES:

Coyote

Harbor Seal

California Sea Lion

River Otter – swimming in leisurely fashion along the edge of the Strait of Juan de Fuca

American Marten – The rarest animal sighting of the tour, one on the road along Hood Canal after dark stopped and stared back at the van long enough for a good view. This mammal of the weasel family is fairly uncommon, but rarely seen due to its secretive ways.

“Black-tailed” Deer (regional form of Mule Deer)

Elk – a herd of about 50, including some bulls with large antlers, near Sequim

Eastern Gray Squirrel – both black form and gray form in B.C.