

**TRAVIS AUDUBON SOCIETY**

**WINTER WASHINGTON  
& BRITISH COLUMBIA**

**FEBRUARY 13-20, 2010**

**LEADER: BOB SUNDSTROM**

**COMPILED BY: BOB SUNDSTROM**

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## **WINTER WASHINGTON & BRITISH COLUMBIA**

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**Leader: Bob Sundstrom**

*Our 2010 Winter Washington and British Columbia tour was favored by a week of almost spring-like weather, amid sunny days, blue skies, and temperatures reaching into the 50s. The tour route began in Seattle, then ran south along Puget Sound to Nisqually, and then back north to the Olympic Peninsula where we spent two nights near Port Angeles. From there, we crossed to Vancouver Island and then on to mainland British Columbia before returning to the north Puget Sound region. Birding extensively along the edges of marine bays and straits, along forest edges, among vast, diked fields of delta flats, and from the bows of ferries, we had many terrific birding experiences. Together with wonderful food, very nice lodging, and great company, it was a week filled with memorable scenes of nature.*

*Near Port Angeles, we encountered a small flock of Varied Thrushes, wintering in the lowlands. The thrushes hopped along a shady forest edge, turning leaves with their bills as they foraged, gradually coming closer and closer to the van. We had wonderful views of boldly patterned males and subtly patterned females, all dappled above in black and orange—an ideal camouflage as they hopped over leaf litter at the shadowy forest edge.*

*On a ferry crossing from Port Townsend to Whidbey Island, pair after pair of Marbled Murrelets—endangered in the Northwest—flew past the ferry's bow. It was such a calm day that we could even hear the murrelets whistling to one another as they took flight. On the same crossing of Admiralty Inlet, we had our best and closest views of dashing Long-tailed Ducks as small flocks winged by the bow. The same day, along a rocky shoreline, we were treated to point-blank views of ornate Harlequin Ducks, swimming a few feet from shore. Along other rocky shorelines from Port Townsend, Washington to Victoria, B.C., we would enjoy terrific views of shorebirds of this milieu: Black Oystercatchers, Black Turnstones, and Surfbirds all turned up for close scope scrutiny.*

*During the ferry crossing from Port Angeles to Victoria we had a very nice surprise of a hundred or more Black-legged Kittiwakes. There were adults with crisp, black triangular wing tips and immatures with bold black-white-gray back patterning. More of an offshore bird, we were fortunate to see them. Not long after we had completed this crossing, we stood below singing Sky Larks, as they hovered high in the air and poured forth their long, rich songs. Difficult to see once they touch down, we had good scope views of one hunkered on the ground.*

*Another highlight, this time in the broad, open agricultural areas south of Vancouver, B.C., was a regal gray Gyrfalcon. The huge falcon stayed perched atop an electrical tower, allowing tremendous scope views for as long as we wished to watch it. At another stop north of the border, a Golden Eagle with glistening golden nape shared a tall, bare tree with a Bald Eagle. Golden Eagles are rare in the western lowlands. Bald Eagles, on the other hand, are numerous in winter here. From the first day*

*of the tour to the last, we saw Bald Eagles soaring and perched, and in pairs sitting alongside immense nests. We saw hundreds altogether.*

*The tour featured many, many birds of prey. Just south of the U.S. border we came upon a Short-eared Owl standing in a field, watching us with intense yellow eyes—a thrill for all of us. A Peregrine Falcon suddenly flew in—a very pale, bluish gray Peregrine. The Peregrine landed on the ground and, as we watched it preen, we found that another Peregrine Falcon was perched just a few utility poles down the road. At another spot along Skagit Bay, three Peregrines were lined up near the shore, as an immense flock of Dunlin sought a place to land at high tide. The flock numbered between five and ten thousand Dunlin, all flying in unison, performing what seemed almost magical aerobatic maneuvers.*

*The prevalence of raptors was more than matched by the abundance of waterfowl. Altogether, we saw 30 species of swans, geese, and ducks—likely more than almost any other area in North America can claim. Flocks of hundreds of Trumpeter and Tundra swans whitened many broad farm fields, and thousands and thousands of American Wigeons, Northern Pintails, and Mallards crowded the landscape. Eurasian Wigeons were sprinkled among the flocks of American Wigeons. We saw both goldeneye species, all three scoters, and all three mergansers—and all in their finest nuptial plumage. And it was possible to take in 20,000 Snow Geese in one view, as they flocked around sunset over the tidelands of Port Susan Bay.*

*A memorable tour all the way around— terrific birds and natural spectacles, wonderful scenery, superb food, and great camaraderie!*

### **ITINERARY:**

**February 13:** Arrival in Seattle and get-acquainted dinner; night in Seattle.

**February 14:** The tour's birding began with a check of several waterfowl spots just east of Seatac where we encountered our first Eurasian Wigeons, swans, geese, and Common Mergansers of the trip. Soon we were driving south to Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge, where we walked a loop trail of open country and wooded edge. Midday took us north across the Kitsap Peninsula for birding stops along Hood Canal and Sequim Bay; Dinner (Joy's Bistro) and night in Port Angeles.

**February 15:** First morning birding stop was in Pt. Angeles at the Olympic National Park Visitor Center, where we had great views of Varied Thrushes. Then it was off to Port Townsend, with birding stops at Point Hudson and Pt. Wilson, before birding from the ferry back and forth across Admiralty Inlet to Whidbey Island. Later in the afternoon had birding stops near Pt. Angeles at Elwha River mouth and Ediz Hook; Night in Pt. Angeles.

**February 16:** Rode the first morning ferry from Port Angeles to Victoria ferry, birding from the bow during the 90 minute crossing of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. North of Victoria in Central Saanich, we checked fields for Sky Larks where a number were singing aloft. After lunch, there was more birding along the Saanich Peninsula waterfront and Beach Drive from Cattle Point to downtown Victoria. Late afternoon included birding across Martindale Flats before arriving at night's lodging in Saanichton.

**February 17:** After a bit of birding in Central Saanich, took the ferry from Swartz Bay to Tsawwassen, birding from the deck enroute. From Tsawwassen, drove the Delta Flats in search of birds of prey, finding a Gyrfalcon, Peregrine, and Rough-legged Hawk in short order. After lunch at Sharkey's in Ladner, birded for a couple of hours at Reifel Sanctuary on Westham Is., then looked for a rarity at Campbell River Park in Langley. We crossed the border south into the U.S.; Dinner (Pacioni's) and lodging in Mt. Vernon, Washington.

**February 18:** A bit of birding at a wooded park in Mt. Vernon before breakfast at the excellent Calico Cupboard. Spent the bulk of the day birding the river delta flats on the Washington side of the border: Samish Flats including the town of Edison; Skagit Flats and Skagit Wildlife Area; mid-afternoon break at the motel; then to the Stilliguamish Flats and West Pass area west of Stanwood. Dinner was at Rhododendron Café in Bow, then owling near Bayview; Second night in Mt. Vernon.

**February 19:** Pre-breakfast birding along Skagit Bay, then a second visit to Calico Cupboard. We then birded north along the Samish Flats, then north to the Blaine waterfront. Re-crossed into Canada from Blaine, and then birded southeast Delta for Golden Eagle before a coffee stop in Tsawwassen. Went south again across the border to the Lummi Flats where we found Short-eared Owl. Dinner at Pacioni's in Mt. Vernon with final night at Tulip Inn.

**February 20:** After a final breakfast at Calico Cupboard, we drove I-5 south to Seattle and crossed West Seattle to bird along Puget Sound and at Lincoln Park. We arrived at Seatac Airport before noon for departure flights.

**BIRD LIST** [*italics* for uncommon or unusual sightings; ***bold italics*** for rarities]

**GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:**

Snow Goose – flocks of tens of thousands flying over the Port Susan Bay area

Cackling Goose – we made a trip south to Nisqually to see flocks of these small geese

Canada Goose – both migratory and sedentary forms

Brant – super views of these attractive geese, first seen at Pt. Hudson in Port Townsend

Tundra Swan – one flock of 400 + was scoped north of Hwy. 20

Trumpeter Swan – thousands seen, sometimes mixed with Tundras; the tour covered the primary North

American wintering areas for this species

*Mute Swan* – 6-8 along Deas Slough in British Columbia, where “countable”

Wood Duck – a few in dazzling plumage at Reifel Sanctuary

Gadwall – seen early in the tour in Kent and Nisqually

*Eurasian Wigeon* – distinctive ruddy headed males scattered in larger flocks of Am. Wigeons

American Wigeon – some flocks along Padilla Bay numbering in the thousands

Mallard – abundant, in all muddy fields and wet places; many thousands

Northern Shoveler – small numbers seen on several days of the tour

Northern Pintail – small to large flocks, we stopped to admire the elegant drakes

Green-winged Teal – often alongside pintails, sieving mud in the shallows

Ring-necked Duck – seen only the first morning near Seatac

Greater Scaup – surprisingly scarce, we saw just one for certain at Blaine harbor

Lesser Scaup – a few small flocks

Harlequin Duck – excellent views of these ornate ducks at Port Townsend and Port Angeles

Surf Scoter – the males were unmistakable, black and white with enormous orange bills

White-winged Scoter – seen best at Blaine, where small flocks flew close by

*Black Scoter* – decidedly uncommon, we saw one pair on the West Seattle waterfront

Long-tailed Duck (formerly Oldsquaw) – best views were of a flock flying just in front of the ferry bow as we crossed Admiralty Inlet toward Pt. Townsend

Bufflehead – these tiny and boldly patterned diving ducks were seen every day of the trip

Common Goldeneye – good views of glistening males

Barrow's Goldeneye – at a few sites, like Ediz Hook, Sequim Bay, and Cattle Pt.

Hooded Merganser – superb views, including a pair on the first day of the tour

Common Merganser – the largest merganser, we saw males with a pink bloom on their white breasts at Reifel Sanctuary

Red-breasted Merganser – the shaggy headed mergansers, we saw them regularly on salt water

Ruddy Duck – just a few

**LOONS:**

Red-throated Loon – pale faced winter plumaged birds, they were seen flying by at Point Wilson and on the water at Blaine

Pacific Loon – the dark-faced loon, seen best from the ferries, but also on the bay at Blaine

Common Loon – often close to shore, we saw mostly winter plumage birds breeding plumage

**GREBES:**

Pied-billed Grebe – a few early in the tour

Horned Grebe – the most prevalent small grebe, at most salt water birding stops

Red-necked Grebe – larger and darker, this grebe was regular on salt water

Eared Grebe – a couple scoped at Blaine

**CORMORANTS:**

Double-crested Cormorant – the largest and palest of the three local species

Brandt's Cormorant – the larger dark cormorant, seen commonly on the ferry crossings

Pelagic Cormorant – the slender, iridescent cormorant seen near shore, often at ferry landings

**BITTERN & HERONS:**

Great Blue Heron – the only common, widespread heron of the area, often in fields

Black-crowned Night-Heron – two at Reifel, the species' northernmost Pacific site

**EAGLES, HAWKS & ALLIES:**

Bald Eagle – From the first day of the tour to the last, we saw Bald Eagles soaring and perched, and many pairs alongside immense nests. Hundreds seen altogether, far outnumber the House Finches seen during the tour.

Northern Harrier – very regular on all the river delta flats, we had many good views of both brown adult females and gray adult males, as well as warm brown immature.

Sharp-shinned Hawk – at least one seen soaring

Cooper's Hawk – some fine views of perched adults and near-adults, plus a few more bolting by on the track of bird prey

Red-tailed Hawk – lots, of the Pacific Northwest slightly darker variety

Rough-legged Hawk – great looks at light and dark morphs, all on the flats

*Golden Eagle* – truly an unusual bird for the western lowlands, we had nice scope studies of an adult in Delta, B.C., and watched it fly and then perch alongside an adult Bald Eagle

**FALCONS:**

American Kestrel – only three seen during the trip, early and late in the tour

Merlin – a perched male in Edison was much admired, before it took off in pursuit of prey

Peregrine Falcon – at least seven seen during the tour, including a pale Tundra type

*Gyr Falcon* – One of the more tricky birds to find in North America, we had a superb scope view of a large gray Gyr' as it perched atop an electrical tower in Delta, B.C. The lighting was perfect for a highly magnified view, which showed this to be a second or third-year bird with still a gray cere. By its apparent large size, it was very likely a female.

**RAILS & COOTS:**

American Coot – a few here and there on fresh water

**CRANES:**

*Sandhill Crane* – One of the most memorable experiences of the tour was the opportunity to meet – up close – the cranes wintering at Reifel Sanctuary. Because of their regular association with birders along the sanctuary trails, the cranes have become tame enough to feed from one's hand – which just about everyone did, as the cameras clicked.

**PLOVERS:**

Black-bellied Plover – in their plain gray winter plumage

Killdeer – a few in ploughed fields

**SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:**

*Black Oystercatcher* – fine views at Sequim Bay and Point Hudson; overall quite uncommon

Black Turnstone – superb, close scope views at Cattle Pt. of turnstones on offshore rocks

*Surfbird* – a flock of seven at Cattle Pt. made great subjects for scope study

Sanderling – on the beach at Point Wilson

Dunlin – a flock of 5-10,000 along Skagit Bay performer magical aerobatic maneuvers

**JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:**

Mew Gull – the ubiquitous small gull of tide rips and ploughed fields

Ring-billed Gull – seen only at Blaine

California Gull – seen best at Cattle Pt., where several adults were in breeding color

Herring Gull – a few seen from ferries and in large gull flocks

Thayer's Gull – surprisingly scarce, we scope one at Blaine and others in Delta

Western Gull – seen best as we waited to board the ferry at Port Angeles

Glaucous-winged Gull – the abundant large gull of the area

*Black-legged Kittiwake* – A very nice surprise were the many kittiwakes seen during the ferry crossing of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. There were both adults with crisp, black triangular wing tips and immatures with bold black-white-gray back patterning. More of the offshore bird, this species is an unlikely sighting where we saw them.

**AUKS:**

Common Murre – many seen during ferry crossings and from Pt. Wilson

Pigeon Guillemot – the most near to shore of the alcids, we had fine views of black breeding plumage birds and gray winter plumage birds, and of their bright red feet as the dove

Marbled Murrelet – Quite a few pairs seen from Pt. Wilson and the Pt. Townsend ferry, one could even hear them whistling to one another over the calm waters. Endangered in the Pacific Northwest.

*Ancient Murrelet* – very scarce during this tour, only one crossed the bow of the Victoria ferry

Rhinoceros Auklet – small flocks seen on the ferry crossings, some close enough to see orange bills and white facial plumes

**PIGEONS & DOVES:**

Rock Pigeon

*Eurasian Collared-Dove* – 8-10 in Edison, Washington; now locally prevalent in the northwest

Mourning Dove – seen primarily near Sequim, at one large roost along the highway

**OWLS:**

*Short-eared Owl* – We searched several of this species regular winter daytime haunts, and finally were rewarded with a spectacular view of one standing on the ground (Lummi Flats area). The owl's blazing yellow eyes were set off by the dark feathering around the eyes.

Northern Saw-whet Owl – missed by a day at a day-roost at Reifel, we heard one or two calling at night near Bayview but were unable to find it with the spotlight

**HUMMINGBIRDS:**

Anna's Hummingbird – a male posed atop a bush at a waterfront park in Victoria, its gorget flashing a red wine color

**KINGFISHERS:**

Belted Kingfisher – nice views on several days, seen best as we waited for the Swartz Bay ferry

**WOODPECKERS & ALLIES:**

Downy Woodpecker – side by side with Hairy at the Discovery Bay *Birds Unlimited* yard

Hairy Woodpecker – the grayer coastal Northwest form, at Nisqually and Discovery Bay

Northern Flicker – of the “red-shafted” form

Pileated Woodpecker – heard in Central Saanich

**SHRIKES:**

*Northern Shrike* – one scoped as it foraged from a series of low bushes on the Samish Flats

**VIREOS**

Hutton's Vireo – the little resident vireo species finally turned up the last day in West Seattle

**JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:**

Steller's Jay – much admired for its deep blue plumage

American Crow

Northwestern Crow – smaller, gruffer sounding crows of the shoreline

Common Raven

**LARKS:**

*Sky Lark* – Found at their only regular North American site, on the Saanich Peninsula north of Victoria, B.C.

Several males sang lengthy in-flight songs, and one hunkered on the ground for good scope view.

**TITMICE through CREEPERS:**

Black-capped Chickadee – seen each day somewhere on the tour

Chestnut-backed Chickadee – a western specialty, the Northwest version has chestnut-colored sides and back

Bushtit – seen several places in the drier habitats near Victoria, and on the Skagit Flats

Red-breasted Nuthatch – close views of an alarmed nuthatch in Mt. Vernon

Brown Creeper – seen nicely in several wooded spots, males singing regularly

**WRENS & DIPPERS:**

Bewick's Wren – mostly heard, but seen well early in the tour

Winter Wren – amazing views of this tiny wren, both at Nisqually and in Mt. Vernon

Marsh Wren – great looks at this skulker at Nisqually

**KINGLETS:**

Golden-crowned Kinglet – males flashing the fiery orange central crown feathers

Ruby-crowned Kinglet – a flock of 10 or so at the Elwha River Mouth

**THRUSHES & ALLIES:**

American Robin – ubiquitous, often around berry bearing shrubs

Varied Thrush – wonderful views of boldly patterned males and subtly patterned females as they worked the leaf litter at the shadowy forest edge

**STARLINGS & ALLIES:**

European Starling

**WOOD WARBLERS**

Yellow-rumped Warbler – a few of the “Audubon's” form

**SPARROWS & ALLIES:**

Spotted Towhee – nice views of black males and chocolate brown females

Fox Sparrow – of the “Sooty” category, we first saw one at Nisqually, others at Reifel

Song Sparrow – the Pacific Northwest *morphna* subspecies, one of the darkest varieties

Lincoln's Sparrow – several perched up in view at Nisqually  
White-crowned Sparrow – a few flocks in Central Saanich  
Golden-crowned Sparrow – with amber fore-crowns, the large brown sparrows seen widely  
Dark-eyed Junco – of the “Oregon” form

**BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:**

Red-winged Blackbird – males already singing on nesting marshes  
Western Meadowlark – scoped along the Skagit Bay foreshore  
Brewer's Blackbird – small flocks on several of the flats

**FINCHES:**

Purple Finch – brightly colored males at Nisqually  
House Finch – surprisingly scarce, a species in decline in many places  
Pine Siskin – a few at Lincoln Park on the tour's final day

**OLD WORLD SPARROWS:**

House Sparrow

**MAMMALS & OTHER VERTEBRATES:**

River Otter – a family group of three crawled out on a raft of timber logs at Ediz Hook  
Raccoon – along the roadside after dark in Bayview  
Coyote – one standing in the tall grass not far from a perched N. Harrier  
Harbor Seal – on most of the marine bays  
Elk – a single elk on the outskirts of Sequim  
Eastern Gray Squirrel – gray and black forms