

SPRING IN THE WASHINGTON CASCADES

MAY 24 – 30, 2010

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Our Spring in the Washington Cascades tour proved Leavenworth, Washington to be an ideal venue for a spring nature tour. Leavenworth, east of Seattle across the Cascade Mountains, sits at the foot of Icicle Canyon, on the north side of scenic Mt. Stuart. At our lodgings, tucked right alongside the Wenatchee River, every guest room had a balcony overlooking the rushing river, where we could sit and watch birds in the morning or evening and during tour breaks. Balcony watchers saw Evening Grosbeaks and Western Tanagers visiting the river's edge, as Violet-green Swallows and Ospreys flew along the stream. On the grounds of the inn we saw, almost daily, White-headed Woodpeckers and Pygmy Nuthatches, as well as several families of yellow-bellied marmots. Wildflowers carpeted the forest floor in yellow and blue, among the trunks of massive Ponderosa pines. And, our lodging was just a few minutes from fast-flowing Icicle Creek, where American Dippers bobbed on the rocks and pairs of Harlequin Ducks swam in the rushing water, as Townsend's Solitaires sang from the adjacent rock faces.

The tour began in Seattle, and its dates were set at an ideal season to bird across the Cascade Mountains. As we neared Snoqualmie Pass, we heard the haunting notes of Varied Thrushes near the misty mountain pass. One of these exquisite thrushes was perched atop a spire-shaped fir as it sang, and nearby we scoped Red Crossbills so closely you could see the fine detail of the crossed bill tips.

Reaching Leavenworth, east of the Cascade crest, we spent four nights, all at the same lovely inn. From this wonderfully situated base, we explored a variety of sites within reasonable driving distance, including beautiful Icicle Canyon. On one day, we birded slowly up the full length of a canyon in the nearby Entiat Mountains. Beginning at the rocky cut of the Columbia River, the canyon opened with towering rimrock cliffs, then passed through sagebrush and hayfields, then higher into Ponderosa pine stands, and then firs, right up among aspen-rimmed beaver bogs. In the lower canyon we watched pair after pair of Bullock's Orioles—the males neon-orange—as they worked on weaving their sack-like nests. And all along the canyon we saw, one after another, scintillating male Lazuli Buntings, singing from low perches. Yellow-breasted Chats also sang all along the canyon, with the first of the day singing in the open from a bare tree, flashing its bright yellow breast. Here and throughout the tour, whenever we came near a creek or stream, Black-headed Grosbeaks belted out their rollicking songs, often from a bare twig atop a tree. Again and again, male Calliope Hummingbirds perched on lookouts atop a shrub, showing off the purple streamers of their gorgets.

At one spot in this same canyon, we stopped alongside an aspen grove, set in the stream bed and backed by firs and pines. Soon, to a bit of pygmy-owl imitation, a Downy Woodpecker appeared, followed quickly by a stunning male Red-naped Sapsucker. Then Nashville and MacGillivray's warblers, Cassin's Finches, and other small birds darted in and, after a few minutes, a Northern Pygmy-Owl began hooting. At first its hoots seemed distant, then much closer and, before long, we were watching the perched owl in the spotting scope. And as we admired the owl, a Golden Eagle soared by overhead. A definite tour highlight spot, in a canyon full of wonderful birds.

We also found time to explore back roads in the Wenatchee Mountains, where Ruffed Grouse drummed and Williamson's Sapsuckers tapped out their Morse Code-like rhythms on the huge pines. Hermit Thrushes seemed to sing all day, too. An optional evening drive in the mountains gave us great views of Common Poorwills. Another day took us into the nearby sage and potholes country, home to nesting Sage Thrashers and Brewer's and Sage sparrows, and where we saw Cinnamon Teal and Blue-winged Teal drakes side by side. Displaying male Ruddy Ducks flashed their blue bills as Yellow-headed Blackbirds clamored.

Although one cannot hope to see all the birds of Washington in a weeklong tour, this tour incorporates some of the richest spring birding possibilities in the Northwest, and the opportunity to spend most nights at one lodging while exploring diverse areas within a reasonable driving distance.

ITINERARY SKETCH

May 24: Arrivals at Seatac and get-acquainted dinner. Night at Holiday Inn.

May 25: After breakfast at the hotel, drove east on I-90 up the west slope of the Cascades, birding along the upper Snoqualmie River and along Denny Ck. all the way to Snoqualmie Pass. Stopped briefly just east of the pass at Hyak to check out hummingbird feeders at a local residence. Lunch in Cle Elum at Bakery Café. Checked birds at seed feeders in Cle Elum and briefly birded near South Cle Elum ponds. Drove back roads east of Cle Elum to Hwy. 97, then on to Leavenworth by 4:00 p.m. Brief pre-dinner outing to nearby Fish Hatchery grounds and interpretive trail. Dinner and first of four nights in Leavenworth at Alpine Rivers Inn.

May 26: Optional outing before breakfast to wooded grounds of Sleeping Lady resort, with light rain falling. Given prevailing rainy weather around Leavenworth, departed east after breakfast through East Wenatchee to the sage and potholes country east of the Columbia River. Birded in the Quincy Wildlife Area and, after lunch at a small café in Quincy, birded part way down Frenchman Coulee and through the tall sagebrush habitat along Silica Rd. Returned to Quincy via farm roads, then back to Leavenworth. Dinner and second night in Leavenworth.

May 27: Early departure for breakfast at Big Y Café, then north to Swakane Canyon. Birded to the top of the canyon through various habitats and picnicked at a broad meadow around 2000' elevation. Returned to hotel for a late afternoon break, before an optional quick trip before dinner up Icicle Ck., in search of dippers and other birds. Dinner, third night in Leavenworth.

May 28: Pre-breakfast optional trip up Icicle Ck. about 9 miles, returning to Inn for breakfast. After breakfast drove into Wenatchee Mts. along Camas Ck. Rd. to above 3000'. After lunch at Big Y, took a break at the Inn before driving up to the end of the road in Icicle Canyon, then up to Stevens Pass along the rapidly rushing Wenatchee River. Dinner at Pavz. Optional after-dinner drive into the Wenatchee Mts. for night birds, returning to Inn by 11:15 p.m. Last of four nights in Leavenworth.

May 29: After breakfast at Alpine Rivers Inn, loaded up luggage and departed south across Blewett Pass, checking along a few side roads enroute. Drove southeast to Ellensburg then out

Umtanum Rd., to look for a few last birds in the sage and pines there. Late lunch in Cle Elum, then across Snoqualmie Pass with rain all the way to Mercer Island in the lowlands. Birded for almost an hour at Luther Burbank Park on Mercer Island, before driving south to the Holiday Inn at Seatac. Optional pre-dinner drive down to Puget Sound at Des Moines marina. Farewell dinner at Aqua Terra and final night at Seatac.

May 30: Departures.

BIRD LIST

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

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Canada Goose – pairs of non-migratory *moffiti* subspecies, some with goslings

Wood Duck – a drake on Bullfrog Pond near Cle Elum

Gadwall – pairs in the potholes area

Mallard

Blue-winged Teal – drake alongside Cinnamon Teal drake in the potholes

Cinnamon Teal – several pairs, drakes in lustrous cinnamon brown feathering

Redhead – a number of males on the ponds in the sage/potholes area

Ring-necked Duck – ditto

Lesser Scaup – ditto

Harlequin Duck – John spotted two pairs together along Icicle Ck.

Common Merganser – on several fast flowing streams

Ruddy Duck – displaying drakes with bright blue bills

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

Ring-necked Pheasant

Ruffed Grouse – heard males drumming at close range in aspen groves, both in Swakane Cyn. and along Camas Ck. Rd. in the Wenatchee Mts.

California Quail – many good views of these tassel-topped quail along back roads

GREBES:

Pied-billed Grebe – on ponds in Quincy Wildlife Area

Eared Grebe – a pair in breeding plumage in Quincy Wildlife Area was a surprise

PELICANS:

American White Pelican – a flock soaring high above the sage, not far from the Columbia R.

CORMORANTS:

Double-crested Cormorant

BITTERNS & HERONS:

Great Blue Heron – on a potholes pond and on a jetty in Puget Sound

Black-crowned Night-Heron – also in the potholes area

AMERICAN VULTURES:

Turkey Vulture

EAGLES, HAWKS, FALCONS & ALLIES:

Osprey – best views were of Osprey flying above the river behind our hotel

Bald Eagle – the last afternoon, at Mercer Is. and along Puget Sound

Northern Harrier – adult pairs in or near the sage habitat

Swainson's Hawk – a few on power poles east of Quincy

Red-tailed Hawk

Golden Eagle – seen aloft at two different spots along Swakane Cyn.

American Kestrel

RAILS & COOTS:

American Coot

CRANES:

Sandhill Crane – A very odd sighting of one in flight over the Wenatchee Mts. Not known to breed close by this area.

PLOVERS SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Killdeer

Spotted Sandpiper – nesting along Icicle Ck.

JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:

Ring-billed Gull

California Gull

Glaucous-winged Gull

Caspian Tern – flying over a lake in the sage/potholes country; nesting nearby

AUKS:

Pigeon Guillemot – a last minute run to Puget Sound turned up one locally nesting alcid

PIGEONS & DOVES:

Rock Dove

Band-tailed Pigeon – a few flying over near Snoqualmie Pass

Eurasian Collared-Dove – in Cle Elum and Quincy, now widespread in the Northwest

Mourning Dove

OWLS:

Flammulated Owl – two heard hooting close to the road in Wenatchee Mts. at night wouldn't come closer for a chance to see them

Great Horned Owl – we flushed one during the day in Swakane Cyn.

Northern Pygmy-Owl – One of these tiny owls flew in to an imitation of its call and posed nicely for prolonged viewing in the spotting scope. It was a special treat to see the pygmy-owl, a diurnal owl that may be common in the mountains but mostly goes unseen and unheard.

NIGHTJARS:

Common Poorwill – wonderful view of one sitting on a forest road just at dark

SWIFTS:

Vaux's Swift – a flock over lower Icicle Ck. Zoomed low over the road and our heads

White-throated Swift – close views along the sheer walls of Frenchman Coulee

HUMMINGBIRDS:

Calliope Hummingbird – One of the most memorable parts of the trip were the repeated sightings of male Calliope Hummingbirds sitting on lookouts atop shrubs in the dry canyons.

Rufous Hummingbird – first seen near feeders at Hyak, we saw a number of other males perched on their shrub or tree top lookouts

KINGFISHERS:

Belted Kingfisher – one along the jetty at Des Moines

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES:

Lewis' Woodpecker – it took some patience, but we were rewarded with nice scope views of one at a nest tree along in Umtanum Canyon

Red-naped Sapsucker – wonderful views of a male in an aspen grove in Swakane Cyn.
Williamson's Sapsucker – lucky to find, we scoped a male and heard several other calling and drumming in the Wenatchee Mts.

Downy Woodpecker

Hairy Woodpecker – a pair in the Wenatchee Mts. hovered near their nest hole

White-headed Woodpecker – One of the most wanted birds of the tour, we were greeted by one in the parking lot of our lodging in Leavenworth. Another turned up about 5 miles up in Swakane Canyon, in the pines.

Northern Flicker – of the “red-shafted” geographic form

FLYCATCHERS & ALLIES:

Western Wood-Pewee

Willow Flycatcher – on a beaver pond high in Swakane Cyn.

Hammond's Flycatcher – heard in much of the conifer forest of the tour, we saw one the first morning along the Snoqualmie R.

Dusky Flycatcher – commonly heard in the drier mountain zones, we saw them at several spots

Pacific-slope Flycatcher – heard

Say's Phoebe – especially nice views of a pair near a pothole pond

Western Kingbird

Eastern Kingbird

VIREOS:

Cassin's Vireo – flying from tree to tree in the Swakane pines

Warbling Vireo – common in most riparian areas we visited

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Gray Jay – an impromptu drive up to Stevens Pass turned up the only Gray Jays of the trip

Steller's Jay – turned up somewhere every day of the tour

Black-billed Magpie – flashing black and white wings in the open country

American Crow

Common Raven

SWALLOWS & MARTINS:

Tree Swallow

Violet-green Swallow – lots, including a pair nesting along the stairwell at the Alpine Rivers Inn

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Bank Swallow

Cliff Swallow – nesting under many bridges east of the Cascades

Barn Swallow

TITMICE through CREEPERS:

Black-capped Chickadee

Mountain Chickadee – came in reliably and close to pygmy-owl imitation

Chestnut-backed Chickadee – seen nicely the first and last full days of the tour

Bushtit – stalked to a spot in the lower edge of Luther Burbank Park

Red-breasted Nuthatch

White-breasted Nuthatch – seen along Swakane Canyon

Pygmy Nuthatch – best views were those in the parking lot trees at Alpine Rivers Inn

WRENS & DIPPERS:

Rock Wren – calling from atop a rocky crag in Frenchman Coulee

Bewick's Wren – seen well in the park on Mercer Is.

House Wren

Winter Wren – singing with its tiny tail cocked, near the Snoqualmie River

American Dipper – great studies of at least two pairs along Icicle Ck.

OLD WORLD WARBLERS:

Golden-crowned Kinglet – a male flashing the red-orange center of its yellow crown

THRUSHES & ALLIES:

Western Bluebird – great looks at both bluebird species, sometimes side by side

Mountain Bluebird

Townsend's Solitaire – a couple of pairs on the rock faces along Icicle Ck.

Veery – an amazing view of the secretive Veery, perched in the open on a bare branch

Swainson's Thrush – heard, and seen near Snoqualmie Pass

Hermit Thrush – mostly heard singing its beautiful song

American Robin

Varied Thrush – good views near Snoqualmie Pass, where we also heard their unique reedy notes

MIMIDS:

Sage Thrasher – perched atop sagebrush and fence posts

STARLINGS & ALLIES:

European Starling

WAXWINGS:

Cedar Waxwing

WOOD WARBLERS

Nashville Warbler – lots of nice views of this miniscule warbler, as it came in to tooting

Yellow Warbler

Yellow-rumped Warbler – lovely “Audubon’s” warblers with five spots of yellow

Black-throated Gray Warbler – mostly heard, seen by Scott

Townsend's Warbler – at home in the tall conifers, we had some good views

MacGillivray's Warbler – skulking and singing

Wilson's Warbler – seen very well along Denny Ck. just west of Snoqualmie Pass

Yellow-breasted Chat – Scott spotted one singing from a bare tree at the foot of Swakane Cyn.

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

Spotted Towhee – more heavily spotted east of the Cascades

Chipping Sparrow

Brewer's Sparrow – singing heartily in the sage

Vesper Sparrow

Sage Sparrow – amazing scope views of the interior form of Sage Sparrow

Savannah Sparrow

Song Sparrow

Lincoln's Sparrow – singing in a mountain meadow in the Wenatchee Mts.

White-crowned Sparrow

Dark-eyed Junco – of the “Oregon” form

TANAGERS, GROSBEAKS & BUNTINGS:

Western Tanager – many fine views of flashy males, yellow and black with red faces

Black-headed Grosbeak – singing and singing, often from an exposed perch

Lazuli Bunting – most memorable were the exquisite views, again and again, of singing male

Lazuli Buntings

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:

Red-winged Blackbird

Western Meadowlark

Yellow-headed Blackbird – noisy nesting colonies on the pothole lakes

Brewer's Blackbird

Brown-headed Cowbird

Bullock's Oriole – lots of flashy males and pair nest-building in lower Swakane Cyn.

FINCHES:

Cassin's Finch – mostly perched atop Ponderosa pines

House Finch

Red Crossbill – scoped near Snoqualmie Pass, right down to the crossed bill tips

Pine Siskin

American Goldfinch

Evening Grosbeak – we luxuriated in these colorful, trilling grosbeaks, which seemed to be everywhere east of the Cascades in the pines

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow

MAMMALS, HERPS & OTHER CRITTERS:

Yellow-bellied Marmot – right on the grounds of the hotel in Leavenworth

Cascade Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel

Washington Ground Squirrel

California Ground Squirrel

Douglas' Squirrel

Townsend Chipmunk

Yellow Pine Chipmunk

Muskrat – swimming by on a potholes region pond

Mule Deer

Gopher/Bull Snake