

SPRING IN THE WASHINGTON CASCADES

A RELAXED AND EASY TOUR

JUNE 5-11, 2011

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TOUR REPORT
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By Bob Sundstrom

Day 3 of our 2011 Spring in the Washington Cascades tour took us into a canyon in the Entiat Mountains. The mouth of the canyon opens just above the massive Columbia River, where basalt cliffs several hundred feet high tower above steep slopes of grass and sagebrush. Here, a Rock Wren sang rhythmic, ringing phrases, and we soon spotted the bird perched on a large rock face, where it posed for scope views. Soon a Canyon Wren announced itself with a melodic slide of notes. Remarkably, the Canyon Wren appeared on the same rock face that a moment ago had held the Rock Wren. Boldly-marked White-throated Swifts zoomed low across the slope, alongside Violet-green Swallows.

The jumbled notes of a Lazuli Bunting now reached our ears. We located the male bunting singing atop an elderberry bush, its powder-blue sparkling in the morning light. It was the first of dozens of Lazuli Buntings that day. In a shrub adjacent to the bunting, a flash of orange and a guttural call drew our attention to a brilliantly colored Bullock's Oriole. Black-billed Magpies flew lazily back and forth, vividly patterned in black and white. A Say's Phoebe called plaintively, as a pair of California Quail whirred across the dirt road. We had moved only a few yards since first stepping out of the vans.

The canyon rises nine miles to the top, with water all along its run—a narrow creek leading upward to a series of beaver ponds. Habitat changes continually with elevation, and the north facing slope is more heavily wooded than the south facing. This creates an ideal formula for habitat variety and, with it, diversity of bird life. Through at least the lower half of the canyon, Yellow-breasted Chats were prominent, as were MacGillivray's and Nashville warblers. As we reached open pine woods in the fourth mile, Western Tanagers and Cassin's Vireos showed nicely, as did Cassin's Finches and Western Wood-Pewees. A tiny male Calliope Hummingbird perched atop a shrub to survey its territory, its wine-colored throat feathers glinting in the spotting scope. Halfway up the canyon, we picnicked at the edge of a wide meadow rimmed with pines and aspens and dotted with blue lupine flowers. Hundreds of butterflies attended a nearby puddle.

To this point, one key bird had still eluded our efforts: White-headed Woodpecker. Having heard one call during lunch, hopes were raised that one lurked nearby. Sure enough, at our next stop a short distance up the canyon, the much anticipated woodpecker was seen hitching up and down the Ponderosa pines just off the edge of the road—to everyone's delight.

The day in an Entiat Mountains canyon represents just one of five varied days of birding on this tour. Each day takes us to a different set of natural landscapes, to bird different habitats. Our tour, which meets in Seattle, is focused on the birds, other wildlife, and flora found east of the crest of the Cascade Mountains. The tour route crosses the Cascade Mountains to the east on the first morning, en route to Leavenworth, Washington at the foot of Mt. Stuart. We stay the next four nights at the same comfortable inn alongside the Wenatchee River. Every guest room has a balcony overlooking the rushing river, a fine place to sit and watch birds in the morning or evening and during tour breaks. One of VENT's Relaxed and Easy tours, we had an excellent breakfast at the inn each morning, picnicked at a good birding spot each lunchtime, and had a fine dinner close by in Leavenworth each evening. We took time for breaks at the inn during each day's series of events, and added options for those who

might want a bit more birding time.

Highlights were many: Dippers bobbing atop boulders and diving in the middle of fast-flowing Icicle Creek; simultaneous views of Williamson's Sapsuckers and a tiny Northern Pygmy-Owl; gorgeous male Western Tanagers and Evening Grosbeaks all but dripping from the trees; the ethereal songs of Varied, Hermit, and Swainson's thrushes—plus good views of all these superb singers; great views of western warblers such as MacGillivray's, Townsend's, and Black-throated Gray; nine flycatcher species, six of them unique to the West; lovely nesting ducks like Cinnamon Teal, Ruddy Duck, Common Merganser, and Barrow's Goldeneye; raucous Yellow-headed Blackbirds, sweet-singing Black-headed Grosbeaks, trilling Pacific Wrens; and the unanticipated good fortune of seeing a young Long-eared Owl on a day roost.

This tour offers the relaxed and easy opportunity to spend most nights at one comfortable inn, and use this as a base to explore diverse areas within a reasonable driving distance. And 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.

ITINERARY

June 5: Arrivals at Seatac and get-acquainted dinner. Night at Holiday Inn SeaTac.

June 6: After breakfast at the hotel, visited Puget Sound shoreline at Salt Water State Park and birded edges of camping area. Then east on I-90 up the west slope of the Cascades to Snoqualmie Pass, birding briefly along Alpentel Rd which was still largely in the snow. East of the pass, birded at Crystal Springs, headwaters of Yakima River, before picnicking at Lake Easton State Park. In Cle Elum, stopped at start of Coal Mine Trail, then drove along railroad ponds of South Cle Elum. North on Hwy 97, with stop at Williams Ck. campground and Liberty store feeders, before reaching Leavenworth late afternoon. First of four nights at Alpine Rivers Inn and first of four dinners in Leavenworth.

June 7: Birded Swakane Canyon from the Columbia River through various habitats to the top of the canyon until mid-afternoon. Picnicked at a broad meadow around 2000' elevation, before continuing to the top of Swakane Canyon and the descending to Cashmere via Nahahum Canyon. Returned to hotel late afternoon, with an optional outing before dinner to bird the National Fish Hatchery grounds in Leavenworth.

June 8: Morning birding west along the rushing Wenatchee River, making several birding stops in different habitats while ascending to Stevens Pass (4000'+) by late morning. Backtracked to drive up Icicle Canyon, picnicking at Eight Mile Campground in Wenatchee National Forest. Birded along the canyon as high up as the upper bridge crossing, then back down along the creek. Late afternoon break and optional outing before dinner to the wooded grounds of Sleeping Lady Resort.

June 9: After breakfast at Alpine Rivers Inn, drove into Wenatchee Mts. along Camas Ck. Rd. to bird above 3000'. South on Hwy. 97, to canvass farm roads north of Ellensburg, then picnicked along Yakima River west of Ellensburg. After lunch, drove the Old Vantage Hwy. to bird the sage habitat along Schnebly Coulee, then stopped at Wanapum State Park. East across the Columbia River and north to Quincy Wildlife Area and pothole lakes. Scenic drive north along the Columbia, crossing the river at East Wenatchee, then back to Leavenworth. After dinner, an optional drive along into the Wenatchee Mts. for poorwills. Last of four nights in Leavenworth.

June 10: After breakfast at Alpine Rivers Inn, loaded up luggage and departed south across Blewett Pass and then west to bird the prairie landscape of Swauk Prairie. After a late morning stop at Cle Elum Bakery, birded near Roslyn then drove north along the Cle Elum River and Cle Elum Lake to bird and picnic at Cle Elum River Campground in Wenatchee National Forest. Re-crossed Snoqualmie Pass to the west, stopping to bird the first

part of the trail to Christmas Lake, south of North Bend. Farewell dinner at Aqua Terra and final night at Seatac.

June 11: Departures.

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

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Canada Goose
Gadwall – nesting pairs on the pothole lakes of Quincy Wildlife Area
Cinnamon Teal – handsome ducks, sharing a small lake with Gadwalls
Redhead – another pothole species, a pair resting on a boat launch
Lesser Scaup
Barrow's Goldeneye – a female on a nesting pond in South Cle Elum
Hooded Merganser – in the same view as the goldeneye
Common Merganser – best views along the Wenatchee River, including a female and ducklings
Ruddy Duck – male with bright blue bill

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

Wild Turkey – seen by Steve in front of the Alpine Rivers Inn
California Quail

GREBES:

Pied-billed Grebe
Western Grebe – a few on Wanapum Lake

CORMORANTS:

Double-crested Cormorant

BITTERNS & HERONS:

Great Blue Heron

AMERICAN VULTURES

Turkey Vulture

EAGLES, HAWKS & ALLIES:

Osprey
Bald Eagle – one of the first birds the first morning, adults at a nest overlooking Puget Sound
Northern Harrier
Cooper's Hawk
Swainson's Hawk – soaring over the picnic site on the Yakima River near Ellensburg
Red-tailed Hawk – a daily sight, including a few dark morphs

FALCONS:

American Kestrel
Peregrine Falcon

RAILS & COOTS:

American Coot

PLOVERS, SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Killdeer
Spotted Sandpiper – seen several places, with great views along Icicle Ck.

Long-billed Curlew – heard in the hayfields north of Ellensburg
Wilson's Snipe – heard winnowing at dusk over a wet meadow in the Wenatchee Mts.

GULLS, & TERNS:

Glaucous-winged Gull – the gulls along Puget Sound and near the airport
Caspian Tern – flying over the Quincy potholes

AUKS:

Pigeon Guillemot – scoped from the shore of Salt Water State Park
Rhinoceros Auklet – seen from the same spot as the guillemots

PIGEONS & DOVES:

Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared-Dove – well established in much of the Pacific Northwest
Mourning Dove

OWLS:

Flammulated Owl – we heard as many as four owls hooting at once in the Wenatchee Mts., as we were returning from a drive to look for poorwills
Northern Pygmy-Owl – wonderful scope views of the tiny owl in the Wenatchee Mts.
Long-eared Owl – an immature still near its nest in a park along the Columbia River

NIGHTJARS:

Common Nighthawk – just arriving in the area as migrants
Common Poorwill – several heard on an after dinner drive in the Wenatchee Mts.

SWIFTS:

Vaux's Swift – excellent views of these small swifts over the Cle Elum River and at the Leavenworth hatchery
White-throated Swift – zooming low across a cliff face at the foot of Swakane Canyon

HUMMINGBIRDS:

Calliope Hummingbird – We had the opportunity to admire perched males flashing their striped purple gorgets as they surveyed territories in Swakane Canyon and elsewhere
Rufous Hummingbird – all rufous males visiting feeders or perched in their mountain territories

KINGFISHERS:

Belted Kingfisher

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES:

Red-naped Sapsucker – an adult came and went from a nest cavity along Williams Ck.
Williamson's Sapsucker – fine views of two males, just before the pygmy-owl came on the scene
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
White-headed Woodpecker – A much anticipated bird for the tour and one searched for diligently in Swakane Canyon, a male was nice enough to fly in and then hang around for a long time as it worked the Ponderosa pines. Some of the group later saw a female in Icicle Canyon.
Northern Flicker – of the red-shafted form

FLYCATCHERS & ALLIES:

Olive-sided Flycatcher – whistling across a mountain hillside in the Wenatchee Mts.
Western Wood-Pewee – widespread in the area of the tour

Willow Flycatcher – singing “fitz-bew” at various locations, seen best at a pullout along the Wenatchee River west of Leavenworth that also had Hammond’s and Dusky flycatchers
Hammond's Flycatcher – of the shady forest mid-level, seen first at Crystal Springs
Dusky Flycatcher – of more open habitats, common in the Wenatchee Mts.
Pacific-slope Flycatcher – giving its high, thin calls on the trail to Christmas Lake, the final afternoon
Say's Phoebe
Western Kingbird – good studies of both kingbird species
Eastern Kingbird

SHRIKES:

Loggerhead Shrike – very uncommon in the region, we saw two in the Schnebly Coulee sage

VIREOS:

Cassin’s Vireo – one showed well in Swakane Canyon
Hutton’s Vireo – heard the first morning near Seatac
Warbling Vireo – a daily presence in many birding spots, especially riparian areas
Red-eyed Vireo - very local in the state, one came in to owl tooting along the Wenatchee R.

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Gray Jay – sampling peanuts and almonds at Stevens Pass
Steller's Jay – the dark blue jay of the region
Clark's Nutcracker – seen from Michael’s van the first day
Black-billed Magpie
American Crow
Common Raven

LARKS:

Horned Lark – good views of males showing “horns” along the edge of Ellensburg hayfields

SWALLOWS & MARTINS:

Tree Swallow
Violet-green Swallow – the widespread, small, white bellied swallow of the trip
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Bank Swallow – local in the region, first seen over the water at Wanapum State Park
Cliff Swallow
Barn Swallow

TITMICE through CREEPERS:

Black-capped Chickadee
Mountain Chickadee – of the “Bailey’s Chickadee” form, in a species which may soon be split
Chestnut-backed Chickadee – the Northwest form showed chestnut on back and flanks
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Pygmy Nuthatch – amazingly close views on the Sleeping Lady property

WRENS & DIPPERS:

Rock Wren – at the foot of Swakane Canyon, we saw – in sequence – Rock and Canyon wrens on the very same rock face
Canyon Wren – singing in much of lower Swakane Cyn.
House Wren
Pacific (formerly Winter) Wren – enticed from the lush undergrowth along the trail to Christmas Lk.
Marsh Wren – mostly heard
American Dipper – The tour included some wonderful studies of dippers. At Crystal Springs just east of Snoqualmie Pass, a dipper sang and then splashed into the stream close by. Along Icicle Ck., we

watched a dipper forage for quite a while. It plunged into the rushing stream, disappeared under water for a moment, then popped up with startling buoyancy to bob up and down on another rock in the creek.

KINGLETS:

Golden-crowned Kinglet – males flashing the orange feathers usually hidden under their yellow crowns

THRUSHES & ALLIES:

Western Bluebird – at one stop on Swauk Prairie, a bluebird visited a nest box not twenty feet from us

Mountain Bluebird – dazzling sky blue males in upper Schnebly Coulee

Townsend's Solitaire – seen briefly atop Swakane, heard in the lower canyon too

Veery – the shy russet thrushes seen at several riparian spots

Swainson's Thrush – best views the final afternoon along the Christmas Lake trail

Hermit Thrush – east of Stevens Pass, we had good views of this thrush along a small creek

American Robin

Varied Thrush – a much hoped for sighting, some saw this mountain nester near Snoqualmie Pass and, later, we scoped a couple at leisure east of Stevens Pass

MIMIDS:

Gray Catbird – in the dense willows of a wet meadow west of Leavenworth

Sage Thrasher – scoped in the sage-steppe of Schnebly Coulee

STARLINGS & ALLIES:

European Starling

WAXWINGS:

Cedar Waxwing

WOOD WARBLERS

Nashville Warbler – singing seemingly everywhere east of the Cascades

Yellow Warbler

Yellow-rumped Warbler – gorgeous male “Audubon’s”

Black-throated Gray Warbler – near Roslyn, a male sang and flitted through a series of trees

Townsend's Warbler – looking like the yellow version of the previous species

MacGillivray's Warbler – seen very well at a few spots, and heard singing every day many places

Common Yellowthroat – in a wet meadow west of Leavenworth

Wilson's Warbler – great views at Salt Water State Park and Snoqualmie Pass

Yellow-breasted Chat – “chatting” through much of Swakane Canyon, some perched in the open

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

Spotted Towhee – different forms west and east of the Cascades

Chipping Sparrow

Brewer's Sparrow – perched on a wire over the sage, an amazingly close view

Vesper Sparrow – singing its lovely song, showing a pinkish-brown epaulet

Lark Sparrow – in Schnebly Coulee

Savannah Sparrow

Fox Sparrow – of the “Slate-colored” Fox Sparrow group, great views at Stevens Pass

Song Sparrow – heavily marked *morphna* subspecies over much of the tour

White-crowned Sparrow – the *pugetensis* subspecies, that some think should be a separate species

Dark-eyed Junco – of the “Oregon” form

GROSBEAKS, BUNTINGS & ALLIES:

Western Tanager – It's hard to believe how many amazingly good views we had at gorgeous male tanagers. Many were feeding quite low to the ground in such places as the campgrounds where we picnicked along Icicle Ck. and Cle Elum River.

Black-headed Grosbeak

Lazuli Bunting – many superb views of scintillating males, beginning at the first stop in Swakane Cyn.

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:

Red-winged Blackbird

Western Meadowlark

Yellow-headed Blackbird – very striking blackbirds, with a song only another blackbird could love

Brewer's Blackbird

Brown-headed Cowbird

Bullock's Oriole – wonderful views in lower Swakane Canyon

FINCHES:

Purple Finch – Michael spotted a pair near a wet meadow west of Leavenworth

Cassin's Finch – the finch of the Ponderosa pines, seen well in Swakane Canyon

House Finch

Red Crossbill – flying over, calling

Pine Siskin

American Goldfinch

Evening Grosbeak – terrific views of this northern finch, every day of the tour

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow

MAMMALS, HERPS & OTHERS:

Coyote – spotted at three different spots on three different days

Bighorn Sheep – Michael spotted a group of rams on the upper slopes of Swakane Canyon

Mule Deer

Snowshoe Hare – on the poorwill drive

Muskrat

Yellow-bellied Marmot – whistling and frolicking near their dens by the Alpine Rivers Inn

Cascade Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel

Washington Ground Squirrel

California Ground Squirrel

Douglas' Squirrel

Eastern Gray Squirrel

Townsend's Chipmunk

Yellow Pine Chipmunk

Least Chipmunk

Western Rattlesnake – a sizeable specimen in the road up Swakane Cyn.

Bullfrog

Pacific Chorus-Frog

Banana Slug

BUTTERFLIES – courtesy of Michael O'Brien

Mourning Cloak

Western Tiger Swallowtail

Pale Swallowtail

Spring Azure

Silvery Blue

Western White
Clouded Sulphur
Northern Checkerspot
Coronis Fritillary
Common Ringlet
Persius Duskywing
Common Checkered-Skipper
Common Branded Skipper