

Winter Washington and British Columbia Tour

February 4 - February 11, 2006

Leaders: Bob Sundstrom

(Tour Summary and Bird List prepared by Bob Sundstrom)

ITINERARY SKETCH

Day 1, February 4: Arrival in Seattle and get-acquainted dinner; night in Seattle.

Day 2, February 5: After breakfast, we made a first morning visit to the Kent Valley, where flooded fields were full of ducks. We then drove north to the Stillaguamish Flats, where we had our first fine scope view of a Snowy Owl, and also watched two Peregrines chase Dunlin. After lunch at the Farmhouse Inn, we headed south across Fidalgo and Whidbey Islands, birding at Penn Cove and Crockett Lake. Next we boarded the Keystone ferry and made the crossing of Admiralty Inlet to Pt. Townsend, watching seabirds enroute. Night in Port Angeles.

Day 3, February 6: Morning birding in Pt. Angeles at Lincoln Park, where we found a good variety of songbirds and waterfowl, then at the Elwha River mouth for gulls and sea ducks and other diving birds. Late morning found us along the lower entrance road to Olympic National Park's Hurricane Ridge access. After lunch in Pt. Angeles, we birded east to the Dungeness waterfront, then drove the Sequim uplands to Sequim Bay before sunset. Second night in Pt. Angeles.

Day 4, February 7: After breakfast at the hotel, we caught the morning ferry from Pt. Angeles to Victoria, birding from the deck enroute, and had our best views of Ancient Murrelets. On Vancouver Island, we were greeted by singing Sky Larks. After an early lunch nearby, we caught the ferry from Swartz Bay to Tsawwassen. We birded enroute as far as Active Passage, where hundreds of Pacific Loons and Brandt's Cormorants and scores of Harbor Seals were concentrated. Arriving on the mainland mid-afternoon, we explored a series of roads leading to Boundary Bay, finding ten Snowy Owls and a couple of Short-eared Owls at one stop. Night in Tsawwassen.

Day 5, February 8: After breakfast at the hotel, we crisscrossed roads leading down to Boundary Bay, and drove adjacent farm roads to the north, looking for birds of prey and revisiting one of the Snowy Owl concentrations. Late morning we toured Reifel Sanctuary with manager John Ireland, who showed us three Northern Saw-whet Owls and a number of other species. After lunch we re-visited Boundary Bay. Second night in Tsawwassen.

Day 6, February 9: Leaving the hotel after breakfast, we headed to Brunswick Pt., where a walk along the dike produced spectacular views of Snowy Owls and a nice look at a Virginia Rail. After a final pass along the roads to Boundary Bay, we crossed the border into the United States, heading south to have lunch at the Rhododendron Café in Bow. The remainder of the afternoon was spent driving the Samish and Skagit Flats. First night in Anacortes.

Day 7, February 10: After breakfast in Anacortes, we drove south to the Skagit Flats, stopping at Hayton Preserve and hiking the loop trail along the South Fork of the Skagit River. After lunch in Mount Vernon, we drove Chuckanut Dr. to the Samish Flats, and birded there and on Samish Is. Second night in Anacortes.

Day 8, February 11: After breakfast in Anacortes, we drove slowly around March Point, taking some last looks at many of the waterfowl species and loons and grebes we had admired throughout the tour. Crossing the Skagit Flats toward the freeway, thousands of Snow Geese flocked right along the roadway. After a stop at the Rexville Grocery, we continued 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]

BIRD LIST

LOONS:

Red-throated Loon – a few of these very pale gray winter plumage loons

Pacific Loon – hundreds seen from the ferry to Tsawwassen in Active Passage

Common Loon – widespread on the marine bays

GREBES:

Pied-billed Grebe

Horned Grebe – the small, crisply black and white grebe

Red-necked Grebe – the dusky, large grebe, seen widely

Western Grebe – the larger, swan-necked crisply black and white grebe

CORMORANTS:

Double-crested Cormorant - ubiquitous

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

Pelagic Cormorant – the slender, iridescent cormorant of the marine bays

BITTERNS & HERONS:

Great Blue Heron – daily, in pastures, fields, and any bit of water

Black-crowned Night-Heron – a few adults and immatures at Reifel Sanctuary

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Greater White-fronted Goose – two among Canada Geese at Reifel Sanctuary

Snow Goose – Perhaps the most impressive wildlife spectacle of the entire tour were the flocks of Snow Geese numbering in the tens of thousands. Bald Eagles sat on the ground like sentries around the flock edges. On the Skagit Flats, we watched thousands rise together, all giving voice at once, as a Bald Eagle winged toward the flock. The final morning of the tour, the Snow Geese were shoulder to shoulder right up the edge of the road – close enough to reveal the diminutive Cackling Goose weaving through the massive flock of white geese.

Cackling Goose – Sandy spotted one at Lincoln Park, the first of these tiny geese we had a good look at. Also seen the final morning, among the much larger Snow Geese.

Canada Goose

Brant – We scoped a flock of at least a hundred “Black” Brant at the tidal edge near the mouth of the Dungeness River, close enough to see nicely the Brant’s white, lace-like collar. A few others were seen on the ferry crossing of Admiralty Inlet.

Tundra Swan – With both Tundras and Trumpeters in the same swan flocks, we made direct comparisons of their facial field marks while also seeing the size difference between the species.

Trumpeter Swan – Trumpeter Swans were seen every day of the trip, with some flocks numbering in the hundreds. Lots of dark immatures seemed to indicate a good nesting summer.

Mute Swan - a small group near Westham Island, countable in British Columbia

Wood Duck – at Reifel Sanctuary

Gadwall – its beauty often underrated, we had excellent views of finely marked Gadwalls

Eurasian Wigeon – a couple the first morning, and others later near Padilla Bay

American Wigeon

Mallard – thousands, seemingly in every wet field

Northern Shoveler – One pair near Sequim performed a continuous, tight circling maneuver for as long as we watched them.

Northern Pintail – There were many, many Northern Pintail to admire, often at close range, and with the winter sun lighting up every detail of their elegant plumage.

Green-winged Teal - ditto

Canvasback – Karl spotted a couple at Reifel that the rest of the group had overlooked.

Ring-necked Duck – quite a few in the Kent Valley the first morning

Greater Scaup

Lesser Scaup

Harlequin Duck – Stunning male Harlequin Ducks were studied closely on a few occasions, first at the Whidbey Is. ferry terminal as a pair foraged along the water’s edge. A new bird for some, and a pleasure for all, as we marveled at their intricately painted plumage pattern.

Surf Scoter – With huge pink bills with black and white markings, as well as boldly patterned black and white heads – and a white iris – the male Surf Scoters garnered careful views and much commentary.

White-winged Scoter – seen in flight and on the salt water

Black Scoter – Very nice views, especially from Ediz Hook, of a number of Black Scoter pairs.

Long-tailed Duck (formerly Oldsquaw) – We scoped several immaculate drakes, with their long tails angling backward, as they floated on the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Bufflehead – hundreds of these dapper black and white ducks

Common Goldeneye – seen nicely in winter light, with gleaming white sides and golden eyes

Barrow's Goldeneye – we saw a number of these beautifully patterned sea ducks

Hooded Merganser – great views of these lovely diving ducks on several occasions

Common Merganser – huge males with intensely red bills and a rosy bloom on their breasts

Red-breasted Merganser – The most prevalent merganser, their shaggy head plumes gave them a very distinct profile, and the males’ complex and colorful plumage was at its seasonal peak.

Ruddy Duck – the first morning, in the flooded Kent Valley

EAGLES, HAWKS & ALLIES:

Bald Eagle – Bald Eagles of all age groups were a daily sight, often surprisingly conspicuous and numerous. At one spot along Boundary Bay, we counted eighty-six from one viewpoint, and we certainly saw a couple hundred or more on the days we checked a series of viewpoints along the bay.

Northern Harrier – Harriers hunted over the flats wherever our route took us, and made the list every day of the tour. Some days we saw a couple dozen or more, some flying right alongside the road.

Cooper's Hawk – Seen almost every day of the tour, we couldn’t turn a single on into a Sharp-shinned Hawk.

Red-tailed Hawk – Red-tails were ubiquitous throughout the tour, but the afternoon on the Samish Flats topped the viewing: we saw all three color morphs of the Western Red-tailed Hawk subspecies, including chestnut-breasted intermediate morphs, an all chocolate brown dark morph, and numerous light morphs; plus both an adult and an immature Harlan’s Red-tail.

Rough-legged Hawk – both light and dark morphs

FALCONS:

American Kestrel – Uncommon in the area, our best view was the final morning along March Pt.

Merlin – We scoped two perched Merlins from one spot one afternoon, as they both occupied high tree perches overlooking the Samish Flats and thousands of potential Dunlin prey.

Peregrine Falcon – Peregrines were seen every day of the tour. The most memorable were the two that simultaneously stooped on a flock of Dunlin on the Stillaguamish Flats.

*Gyr*falcon – This species proved surprisingly elusive, and we were limited to one view of a *Gyr*’ flying out of view along Boundary Bay. A second possible *Gyr*falcon on an electrical tour flew before we could scope it.

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

Ring-necked Pheasant – a few; seen on both sides of the border

RAILS & COOTS:

Virginia Rail – A Virginia Rail walked out several times from the tall, brown cattails along Boundary Bay, offering a nice view as the group watched quietly from near the dike.

American Coot

CRANES:

Sandhill Crane – The six cranes at Reifel Sanctuary walked up very close to us, for a remarkably close view of such a large bird.

PLOVERS, SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Black-bellied Plover – in gray winter plumage

Killdeer

Black Oystercatcher – two on the Tsawwassen Jetty

Black Turnstone – excellent views at Penn Cove and Ediz Hook

Sanderling

Dunlin – Aerobic flocks of thousands of Dunlin were among the highlights of the tour, as they whirled in a variety of flock shapes and alternately showed their dark backs and then their reflective white undersides, which shone brightly in the winter sun.

JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:

Bonaparte's Gull – a flock of several hundred in Active Passage, on the ferry to Tsawwassen

Mew Gull – the dainty gray and white gull seen widely throughout the tour

Ring-billed Gull – a few singles and one flock

Herring Gull – in side by side comparison with Thayer's Gulls.

Thayer's Gull – good, diagnostic scope views along the Strait of Juan de Fuca; others seen in flight from the ferries

Western Gull – the darker backed large gull

Glaucous-winged Gull – the ever-present large gull, some hybridized with Westerns

AUKS:

Common Murre – many great views from the ferries

Pigeon Guillemot – in both gray winter and black summer plumages

Marbled Murrelet – flying in front of the ferries, markedly teetering in flight

Ancient Murrelet – On the ferry crossing from Pt. Angeles to Victoria, we were fortunate that a flock of six Ancient Murrelets flew up right in front of the ferry and then kept pace with the ferry for a moment or two – showing gray backs and black heads – before diving under water directly from flight.

Rhinoceros Auklet – just a single bird, on the ferry crossing from Pt. Angeles

PIGEONS & DOVES:

Rock Pigeon (formerly Rock Dove)

Mourning Dove

OWLS:

Snowy Owl – Quite likely the bird of the tour for just about everybody, we saw at least nineteen different Snowy Owls. The first was an extremely white individual, scoped nicely along Port Susan Bay on the first day of birding. But along Boundary Bay in British Columbia we truly soaked up the Snowies. One late afternoon we counted ten at one spot, as we saw Snowy Owls on driftwood, on grassy mounds, and atop small trees. On two occasions we had superb morning light views of Snowies, in one instance of two heavily marked immatures at Point Brunswick that sat so close by you could see every feather.

Short-eared Owl – We had wonderful views of Short-eared Owls flying moth-like across the Flats, as well as superb views of birds sitting on the ground or in a small, bare tree – showing their tiny, “short ears.”

Northern Saw-whet Owl – It was our good fortune to see not one but three different tiny Saw-whet Owls on day roosts, with each view a bit better than the last. Always a much hoped for bird on the tour.

KINGFISHERS:

Belted Kingfisher

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES:

Downy Woodpecker

Hairy Woodpecker

Northern Flicker – a number of the “red-shafted” form

VIREOS

Hutton's Vireo – a very close view, at eye level, of the tiny, resident vireo

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Steller's Jay

American Crow

Northwestern Crow – smaller, hoarse crows near the marine edge

Common Raven

LARKS:

Sky Lark – Our experience with Sky Larks was superb. Even as we arrived at the site north of Victoria, Sky Larks were singing loudly overhead. Walking just a short distance along a path in the field, we flushed more Sky Larks at close range, then watched as others hovered low and high nearby, singing and fluttering their wings. A very satisfying encounter – both in sight and sound – with this very locally established North American population of larks.

SWALLOWS & MARTINS:

Barn Swallow – A few birds, nearly all pale below and less than full length outer tail feathers, were seen in the U.S. and Canada; part of an odd, early season influx.

TITMICE through CREEPERS:

Black-capped Chickadee

Chestnut-backed Chickadee – excellent looks at a flock emerging in the morning from a roost

Bushtit

Red-breasted Nuthatch – noisily attending at Lincoln Park

Brown Creeper – good looks in wooded edges near the Stillaguamish and Skagit rivers

WRENS & DIPPERS:

Bewick's Wren – several close views

Winter Wren – A very confiding Winter Wren sang near a path in Lincoln Park, as it hopped from one low branch to another.

Marsh Wren – An amazing view of this skulker: one sat in a sunny, grassy hollow early on a cold morning, alongside the road just a few feet from the van.

KINGLETS:

Golden-crowned Kinglet – a feisty male flashing his orange and yellow crown feathers

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

THRUSHES & ALLIES:

American Robin

Varied Thrush – Another tour highlight, as we watched two beautifully marked males feeding at close range on a roadside west of Pt. Angeles. The same morning, we saw several more very well near the entrance to Olympic National Park.

STARLINGS & ALLIES:

European Starling

WAXWINGS:

Cedar Waxwing – heard at Lincoln Park

WOOD WARBLERS

Yellow-rumped Warbler – a few “Myrtles”

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

Spotted Towhee – good views of this large, colorful sparrow

Savannah Sparrow

Fox Sparrow – nice studies of one of the “Sooty” forms of Fox Sparrow

Song Sparrow – common and heavily marked in the Pacific Northwest

Lincoln's Sparrow

White-crowned Sparrow

Golden-crowned Sparrow – the most abundant sparrow of the tour

Dark-eyed Junco – the “Oregon” form

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:

Red-winged Blackbird

Western Meadowlark – just a few, in a part of their range where they are very local

Brewer's Blackbird

Brown-headed Cowbird – surprisingly prevalent in the fields north of Victoria

FINCHES:

House Finch

Pine Siskin

American Goldfinch

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow

MAMMALS, HERPS & OTHER CRITTERS:

Coyote – one each in Washington and B.C.

Harbor Seal - ubiquitous on the marine bays

Elk - a herd of "Roosevelt" Elk on the Sequim uplands at sunset

Black-tailed Deer - the regional form of the Mule Deer species

Douglas's Squirrel – at Lincoln Park in Pt. Angeles

Pacific Chorus Frog – heard a couple places

Sea Stars – large “starfish” at Keystone, both orange and blue ones