

**WINTER WASHINGTON
AND
BRITISH COLUMBIA**

FEBRUARY 2-9, 2008

LEADER: BOB SUNDSTROM

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Our Winter Washington & British Columbia tour covers the richest winter birding areas in the Pacific Northwest. The tour loops west from Seattle to the Olympic Peninsula, then north to Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia, and then south again for two nights in Anacortes at the foot of the San Juan Islands, before returning to Seattle. We bird along the edges of marine bays, along forest edges, among vast, diked fields of delta flats, from the bows of ferries, and within some very productive sanctuaries.

Our 2008 tour fostered some truly memorable birding experiences. Together with wonderful food, very nice lodging, and great company, it was a week to remember. We greeted the sunrise at Nisqually Refuge the first morning. A Cooper's Hawk perched for scope views, the first Bald Eagle of the tour winged in to perch overhead, a coyote eyed us from a low mound, and several hundred Cackling Geese circled and called before landing nearby. A later stop along Scatter Creek gave us great views of Purple Finches, Golden-crowned Sparrows, Steller's Jays, California Quail, and others. And then we were off on a rare bird jaunt, west toward Willapa Bay near the coast. The extra driving was well worth it, rewarded by great views of a rare and beautiful pair of Emperor Geese foraging with other migratory geese.

By the second morning we were birding on the Olympic Peninsula near Port Angeles. A cold snap in the nearby mountains had pushed flocks of normally secretive Varied Thrushes—striking in their orange and steel-blue ornamented feathering—into the lowlands. Along the Strait of Juan de Fuca, breeding plumaged Harlequin Ducks shared the shallows with Barrow's Goldeneyes, gaudy Surf Scoters, loons, grebes, and Pigeon Guillemots. The afternoon brought us immaculate Long-tailed Ducks, Hooded Mergansers, and a pair of Black Oystercatchers.

On the third morning we headed into British Columbia. At a private sanctuary, tiny Northern Saw-whet Owls perched for close inspection, and a group of Sandhill Cranes not only tolerated our presence, but even dared to take seed from our hands. A Northern Shrike perched close by as it came to inspect a flock of sparrows.

Our fourth morning saw us on a massive ferry to Vancouver Island, docking north of Victoria. It was a marvelous day of scenic travel through the evergreen-clad islands and deep bays, with birding near Victoria. We found Sky Larks in farm fields, a few singing their intricate songs overhead. We watched Surfbirds and Thayer's Gulls along the island's rocky shoreline, and had lunch at the Empress Hotel, downtown Victoria's most elegant landmark.

The fifth day will be remembered especially for two remarkable birds. Just north of the U.S. border we came upon the lone Gyrfalcon of the tour, a massive gray winter visitor from the Arctic. And just after lunch on the U.S. side, as we cruised the waterfront for more views of Harlequin Ducks, an Arctic Loon sat on the water's surface no more than 75 feet away. An extremely rare bird with fewer than 10 records for the state, we had exceptional views of the distinguishing features of this rare Siberian visitor.

On our sixth day we enjoyed the Skagit and Samish River flats at leisure. We parked alongside a gathering concentration of Snow Geese in the morning, as skein after skein flew in to land on a broad, green meadow. The flock foraged closer and closer to the van, as it continued to grow in size to well over 10,000 geese. Among the white geese were several of the “Blue” form of Snow Goose, rare in the Northwest. After lunch at a wonderful local café, we hiked a short distance into a nearby field. A tawny Short-eared Owl flew around us with deep, moth-like wing beats, and then landed for exceptional scope views, its blazing yellow eyes and tiny “ear” tufts visible in every detail.

Nearly daily throughout the tour we passed flocks of Trumpeter and Tundra swans, often hundreds in each flock. One flock of American Wigeons contained more than 30 Eurasian Wigeons, at their greatest concentration here of any place in North America. Our counts of waterfowl (31 species) and grebes (6 species) were extraordinary. Peregrine Falcons flew the delta flats, as did Rough-legged Hawks and numerous harriers. Bald Eagles perched, flew, and stood as sentinels in most fields—several hundred for the week. This was a memorable tour, with more than its fair share of rarities and spectacles.

ITINERARY

Day 1, February 2: Arrival in Seattle and get-acquainted dinner; night in Seattle.

Day 2, February 3: After breakfast, we drove south toward South Bend, with a first stop at Nisqually Refuge, then a second stop near Tenino at leader Bob and Sally’s house. After a nice bit of feeder watching, we continued coastward via Oakville, Montesano, and Raymond. The long drive paid off, as just beyond South Bend we found the pair of rare Emperor Geese. After lunch in South Bend we drove to Tokeland and Westport, before starting north along Hood Canal while listening to the Super Bowl on the van radio. Night in Port Angeles.

Day 3, February 4: Morning birding in Pt. Angeles at Lincoln Park and then at the Olympic National Park Visitor Center, with lots of Varied Thrushes at both spots. We then birded the marine frontage of Ediz Hook, followed by a stop at the hotel, then drove on to Sequim for lunch. Afternoon birding along the Sequim and Dungeness waterfronts and uplands. Second night in Pt. Angeles.

Day 4, February 5: After breakfast at the hotel (and with the Pt. Angeles-Victoria ferry and Pt. Townsend-Whidbey Island ferries out of service) we drove to Kingston and ferried to Edmonds. After a brief visit to the Samish Flats, we crossed the border into Canada and continued on to a Tsawwassen deli, then lunched in the warming hut at Reifel Sanctuary. By mid-afternoon we were walking through Reifel Sanctuary with manager John Ireland, who showed us several Northern Saw-whet Owls and a nesting pair of Great Horned Owls. Night in Tsawwassen.

Day 5, February 6: Catching an early ferry from Tsawwassen, we had breakfast aboard and birded from the deck enroute to Vancouver Island. Shortly after arriving at Swartz Bay on the Saanich Peninsula, we located Sky Larks in an area of farm fields. Then drove through the Martindale Flats, and on to Cattle Pt., birding our way along the waterfront to downtown Victoria. Lunch at the lovely Empress Hotel, then returned north to ferry back to Tsawwassen. Second night in Tsawwassen.

Day 6, February 7: After breakfast we departed Tsawwassen, birding along Boundary Bay, then at Blackie Spit and the adjacent Mud Bay Flats where we found the only Gyrfalcon of the tour. After crossing the U.S. border at Blaine, we had lunch, then birded the Drayton Harbor/Semiahmoo Bay waterfront – where we found a very rare Arctic Loon. Then it was on south via the Samish to Anacortes. Night in Anacortes.

Day 7, February 8: After breakfast in Anacortes, we drove south to the Skagit Flats, stopping alongside a flock of thousands of Snow Geese near the North Fork of the Skagit River. After more touring on the Skagit Flats, our route took us north to Bow, where we had lunch at the Rhododendron Café. Afternoon birding on the Samish Flats. Second night in Anacortes.

Day 8, February 9: After breakfast in Anacortes, we drove birded across the Skagit Flats, stopping for some last views of swan flocks, and made a second stop at the Rexville Grocery. South near Stanwood, had a close look at a Marsh Wren and checked the Stanwood treatment ponds. By late morning, 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]

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Snow Goose – we parked alongside a flock of 10,000+, among them several “Blue” Geese

Emperor Goose – it took a lot of extra driving, but we saw these beautifully marked, rare geese very well, scoping them at leisure near South Bend, Washington

Cackling Goose – miniature Canada-like geese, first seen by the hundreds at Nisqually Refuge

Canada Goose – of several subspecies

Brant – on Sequim Bay, where a flock literally waded ashore in front of the group

Tundra Swan – good comparisons with the larger Trumpeter Swans

Trumpeter Swan – altogether, we saw a couple thousand of these massive waterfowl

Wood Duck – close views on a roadside pond near Sequim

Gadwall

Eurasian Wigeon – seen at several locations; one wigeon flock contained 30+ Eurasians

American Wigeon

Mallard – in prolific numbers

Northern Shoveler

Northern Pintail – many thousands altogether, all in finest feather

Green-winged Teal

Common Teal or “Eurasian” Green-winged Teal – one drake near Sequim with the horizontal white bar at the top of the flanks; European taxonomy considers this a separate species

Ring-necked Duck

Greater Scaup

Lesser Scaup

Harlequin Duck – close views of gorgeous drakes

Surf Scoter – fine views of colorful and bizarre looking drakes

White-winged Scoter

Black Scoter

Long-tailed Duck (formerly Oldsquaw) – scoped on very calm Sequim Bay

Bufflehead

Common Goldeneye

Barrow's Goldeneye – seen especially well at Ediz Hook

Hooded Merganser – close views of all the handsome merganser species

Common Merganser

Red-breasted Merganser

Ruddy Duck – at Reifel and the Stanwood Ponds

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

California Quail – a dozen or so at Bob's feeders

LOONS:

Red-throated Loon

Arctic Loon – an unexpected rarity, a winter plumage loon on the Blaine waterfront

Pacific Loon – hundreds from the B.C. ferry; close views along Ediz Hook

Common Loon

GREBES:

Pied-billed Grebe

Horned Grebe

Red-necked Grebe

Eared Grebe – scarce and local here in the winter

Western Grebe

Clark's Grebe – one on Deas Slough which we crossed enroute to Reifel Sanctuary

CORMORANTS:

Double-crested Cormorant

Brandt's Cormorant – the abundant cormorant on the B.C. ferry crossing

Pelagic Cormorant

BITTERN & HERONS:

Great Blue Heron – daily sentinels on fields and marshes throughout the tour

Black-crowned Night-Heron – a few at Reifel, the species northernmost roost in the West

EAGLES, HAWKS & ALLIES:

Bald Eagle – regular on the tour from the first morning on, we saw several hundred

Northern Harrier – especially prevalent over the Flats

Sharp-shinned Hawk

Cooper's Hawk – two perched scoped studies the first morning

Red-shouldered Hawk – an adult of the California race the last morning near the Skagit River; still rare but gradually increasing in western Washington

Red-tailed Hawk – seen daily in some numbers, we saw several dark morphs too, including a very close view of a Harlan's type on the Samish Flats

Rough-legged Hawk – also on the Flats

FALCONS:

American Kestrel – uncommon in the area, we saw at least four during the tour

Merlin – scoped nicely on the Skagit Flats

Peregrine Falcon – views included one plucking its prey on the ground

Gyr Falcon – on the Mud Bay Flats in B.C., a gray morph perched on a fence post

RAILS & COOTS:

Virginia Rail – heard at Reifel

American Coot

CRANES:

Sandhill Crane – some of the cranes at Reifel were willing to eat grain from one's hand

PLOVERS:

Black-bellied Plover – in their winter gray colors

Killdeer

SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Black Oystercatcher – a pair at John Wayne Marina on Sequim Bay

Greater Yellowlegs – at Tokeland

Willet – at Tokeland marina

Long-billed Curlew – at Tokeland marina and Blackie Spit

Marbled Godwit – a couple at Blackie Spit in B.C.

Black Turnstone – seen remarkably well at Ediz Hook, a few feet from the van

Surfbird – four flocking with turnstones at Cattle Pt. near Victoria

Sanderling

Western Sandpiper – one at Tokeland with Dunlin

Dunlin – flocks of hundreds and thousands

Long-billed Dowitcher

JAEGERS, GULLS, & TERNS:

Bonaparte's Gull – from the B.C. ferry

Mew Gull – the small gull prevalent throughout the tour, often in grassy fields

Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Thayer's Gull – we scoped several in B.C.
Western Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull

AUKS:

Common Murre
Pigeon Guillemot – close enough to see the bright red feet
Marbled Murrelet – a pair from the B.C. ferry
Rhinceros Auklet – swimming close by John Wayne Marina

PIGEONS & DOVES:

Rock Pigeon
Mourning Dove

OWLS:

Great Horned Owl – a nesting pair at Reifel, the female visible in a tree cavity
Short-eared Owl – worth the walk on the Samish Flats; very close scope views of its intense yellow eyes and very short ear-like tufts
Northern Saw-whet Owl – wonderful, close views of the tiny owls at Reifel

HUMMINGBIRDS:

Anna's Hummingbird – one flew over Lincoln Pk.

KINGFISHERS:

Belted Kingfisher

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES:

Downy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker - a mix of red-shafted, yellow-shafted, and intergrades

SHRIKES:

Northern Shrike – perching near the group and bird feeders at Reifel

VIREOS

Hutton's Vireo – posing and singing at Lincoln Pk.

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Steller's Jay – seen best from Bob and Sally's front windows, at the feeders
Western Scrub-Jay – ditto
American Crow
Northwestern Crow – along coastal areas and on Vancouver Is.
Common Raven

LARKS:

Sky Lark – scoped in detail near Victoria; a couple song flights too

TITMICE through CREEPERS:

Black-capped Chickadee
Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Bushtit – in the plantings next to a Victoria Starbucks cafe
Red-breasted Nuthatch – heard

WRENS & DIPPERS:

Bewick's Wren – also next to the Victoria Starbucks
Winter Wren – close views of this tiny wren at Lincoln Pk.
Marsh Wren – the last morning, in the cattails north of Stanwood

KINGLETS:

Golden-crowned Kinglet
Ruby-crowned Kinglet

THRUSHES & ALLIES:

American Robin
Varied Thrush – often a shy bird, the cold conditions had pushed flocks of Varied Thrushes to open areas at low elevation near Pt. Angeles, where we had extravagantly good studies of twenty or more

STARLINGS & ALLIES:

European Starling

WOOD WARBLERS

Townsend's Warbler – a scarce winter species locally

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

Spotted Towhee
Savannah Sparrow
Fox Sparrow – seen best near Tenino, the birds seen were of the “Sooty” group
Song Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Golden-crowned Sparrow – the most prevalent sparrow of the tour
Dark-eyed Junco

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:

Red-winged Blackbird
Western Meadowlark – flocks in a few places on the Flats
Brewer's Blackbird

FINCHES:

Purple Finch – in bright plumage at Bob and Sally's house
House Finch
Red Crossbill – heard only at Lincoln Pk., Pt. Angeles
Pine Siskin

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow

MAMMALS & OTHER VERTEBRATES

Coyote – the best view was the first morning at Nisqually

Harbor Seal - ubiquitous on the marine bays

Steller's Sea Lion – in Active Passage from the B.C. ferry

Elk - two herds, one at South Bend and another on the Sequim uplands

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

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

Eastern Gray Squirrel – gray and black forms in B.C.

“Gloucester Old Spot” pig – identified by Margaret, north of Victoria