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# CANADA & ALASKA SEP 23

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Just returned from a six-week trip to Canada and Alaska This was not a full blown birding trip. It was mainly a holiday, visiting some old friends in Toronto who did their best to show us as many Canadian birds as possible. We visited Niagara and Point Pelee, the famed migration watching spot on Lake Erie before a little local birding on Toronto Islands. Then more holiday- a trip from Calgary through the Rockies on board the Rocky Mountaineer through to Vancouver. We had a couple of days in Vancouver before flying up to Anchorage and then on to Nome to join our expedition ship the Silver Wind. It felt strange being back in Nome just two years after birding there with Birdquest.



Trumpeter Swan

We arrived in Canada towards the end of August a few weeks too early for the start of the fall migration but I was interested to see what might be around. Birding in Canada in late summer is hard work. Bird density appeared to be very low where ever we went and I did not have any calls with me to see if playback would help. Our friends lived in Aurora a suburb to the north of Toronto and we birded a couple of local parks. Found Trumpeter Swan on a small lake alongside dozens of Mallards, a couple of Double-crested Cormorants and some juvenile Wood Ducks along with parents. They were not nearly as secretive as the wood ducks I had seen in the past in Colorado. Canada has only one Dove- Mourning Dove and there were plenty of those around.



Black-billed Cuckoo

After visiting Niagara a popular attraction at any time of the year, we drove along Lake Ontario and Lake Erie stopping at Port Dover where we found American Herring, and Ring-billed Gulls and not much else. It was a long drive through to Point Pelee and we really did not have time to explore other spots along the lakes which was a shame. We overnighted in Leamington and headed for the park early next morning. A walk along the boardwalk through the reed beds proved to be extremely quiet. A Wild

Turkey gave us a moment of excitement but it was much later in the morning – after 10am when things began to pick up a little. A small flock of Cedar Waxwings gave me a photographic lifer, followed by another new bird- a young Black-billed Cuckoo. We found Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Northern Flicker, Eastern Wood Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher and Red-eyed and Blue-headed Vireos. We rounded off the morning with Black-capped Chickadee, American Cliff Swallow, White-breasted Nuthatch, Pine and Audubon's Warblers, Northern Cardinal and several juvenile American Robins. So, after a quiet start we had a pleasant and interesting morning visiting the most southerly part of mainland Canada.

Back in Toronto we visited downtown Toronto and caught a ferry out to Toronto Islands- three small islands just a few hundred meters offshore. A few hundred locals still live on the islands but there are no cars allowed and there are no shops and in late summer they don't have many birds either. Three hours birding around the quieter parts of the main island did produce a few new species. A Mute Swan – not sure how common they are around here. A young Cooper's Hawk made a brief appearance, Blue Jays made their noisy presence felt, and the shrubs produced Grey Catbird, American Goldfinch, a Warbling Vireo looking very dull and drab, Song Sparrow, Black and White Warbler and American Redstart. Several Common Starlings were



Grey Catbird  
Rock Sandpiper 1

present, a Baltimore Oriole passed through high in the canopy and a Northern Rough-winged Swallow made a brief appearance.

After a week in Toronto we bade our friends farewell and flew on to Calgary to pick up our hire car to drive through to Banff via Lake Louise. Again, very quiet birding wise but we did pick up a female Hooded Merganser on a small stretch of water. We had to endure two days of fairly persistent rain on our way to Banff so birding was fairly non-existent as were the views of the scenery.



*Rock Sandpiper*

In Banff we joined the Rocky Mountaineer, a train ride I would recommend to anyone. The weather improved, the views were great, the food and drink unbelievable and I even got a new bird. I spotted a pair of Ruffed Grouse sitting in a dead fir tree. We saw plenty of Bald Eagles and Osprey en-route as we followed several rivers on our way through to Vancouver.

We walked along the edge of the water out to Stanley Park in Vancouver but apart from the Canada Geese, aptly named – they are everywhere in Canada (the equivalent of our Gypo's back here at home) and a few gulls there was really no birds at all. The Vancouver Island ferry gave us a small flock of Harlequin Duck and a Black Oystercatcher while the beautiful Butchart gardens (among the best in the world) gave us a solitary Lincoln's Sparrow and a pair of Dark-eyed Juncos and that was that.



*Horned Puffin*

So, after many hours of hard birding for precious little reward in Canada we looked forward to Alaska where I still needed a couple of new birds.

We booked on the Silver Wind when the itinerary included the Russian Far East. Putin put paid to that, so the itinerary was changed

to include two stops in the Pribilofs - St Matthew and St Paul Islands and 5 stops in the Aleutians which actually gave me more chance of finding the birds I was looking for. What we were not told in the pre cruise literature was that the zodiacs while in American waters would not be allowed to view wildlife. You need to fly an American flag and the skipper needed to be Coastguard approved to do so. Getting close to wildlife in the zodiacs is the essence of expedition cruising so that was a big disappointment for us. Photography from the boat was difficult. Deck 8 at the back was sheltered but most of the action was happening up front. You had good views from the observation lounge on deck 9 but had to rush outside to try for a photo. Standing outside you could manage for limited periods when the boat slowed down but the winds at times nearly blew you off your feet and you had to wear your warmest gear. Our cabin was on deck 6 and I did manage a few shots from our balcony there.

We left Nome in the late afternoon and arrived at St Matthew the following morning. I was chasing two birds here. Rock Sandpiper and McKay's Bunting. The Bunting actually breeds on St Matthew but leaves in September to overwinter on the Alaskan coast. Our Expedition leader said – you have no chance they will be gone. Well he destroyed his reputation with those words because after our wet landing on a desolate beach the first bird



*Northern Fulmar*

we saw was a McKay's Bunting. A male flew over the headland and I never saw him again. The adults are not difficult to ID but the juveniles are easily confused with young Snow Buntings which are also there. I have two very poor photos and I am still not sure if it is a McKay's or Snow juvenile. There is seems to be enough white in the wing for McKay's but the head looks grey/brown like a Snow. Any comments would be gratefully received. There were plenty of Rock Sandpipers around foraging in the sea weed on the beach, Tufted Puffins were still nesting high on the cliffs near the beach and there were Glaucous Gulls keeping their distance along the shore line. A great start with two new birds.



*Glaucous Gull*

We sailed for St Paul (often referred to as the Galapagos of the north) later after lunch. St Paul is inhabited whereas St Matthew was not. 450 hardy souls live on St Paul so we had organized transport to take us up to the large seal hide to view the thousands of Northern Fur Seals there. We had a nice selection of birds here including a Red-legged Kittiwake which some one saw but I missed. We had 130 people from the boat all milling around in different groups with different leaders. The Murres- Common and Thick-billed along with Horned Puffins were still on the cliffs but the Auklets (I needed Crested and Whiskered) had finished breeding and were out to sea. We spotted a Wandering Tattler out on the rocks and a flock of Grey-crowned Rosy-Finches (the local ssp) flew overhead while a young Snow Bunting perched on a rock nearby. A small stretch of inland water gave us Green-winged Teal and Northern Pintail and we found some confiding Arctic foxes in their burrow on the edge of town. We left St Paul in the afternoon and we picked up Least and Crested



*Laysan Albatross*

Auklets at sea. I did not get a shot of either. These birds have the infuriating habit, just as you are trying for shot, of diving deep and never reappearing again. The seas between the Islands held many Laysan Albatrosses- they were common and we saw a few Black-footed Albatross as well and long with lots of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Northern Fulmars.

Our next 3 stops in the Aleutians at Kiska, Tanaga, and Atka Islands were all much of a muchness. Wet landings on deserted beaches with

just a few old World War II relics to look at. Dutch Harbour was next. We spent two days here. We walked their drab little town but found everything unbelievably expensive. Didn't visit any birding spots but saw lots of Bald Eagles – they were all over town. Our guides told us the best chance for Whiskered Auklet was around the Baby Islands and in particular the Baby Strait a narrow channel between the islands. The Baby Islands are half an hour out of Dutch Harbour and so it turned out to be. The cliffs there were empty but several small flocks of Whiskered Auklet flew away as the boat approached. We had Least Auklet again, more Tufted Puffins and an exciting episode with a Peregrine Falcon

The bird was hunting over the water and chased a Varied Thrush. In its' desperate attempt to escape the Thrush dived straight into the water. The Falcon gave up and to our surprise the Thrush managed to lift itself from the water and flew up onto the boat. I managed to find it in an obscure corner on deck 7 where it sat drying out and recovering from its close shave before flying off to the islands.

While leaving the Baby Islands we also had one of the greatest spectacles in the pelagic world. Short-tailed Shearwaters spent the northern summer in Arctic waters before returning to Tasmania to breed. These birds migrate in their tens of thousands. We had one flock pass the boat- they fly 20-30 birds



*Peregrine Falcon*

deep in a flock over a kilometer long. They passed on masse for 20 minutes. A rough count suggested over 15000 birds- a truly amazing sight.



*Short-tailed Shearwater*

We entered Glacier Bay early in the morning heading for the Hubbard Glacier. We had been here before- over 20 years ago but the Glacier (one of the longest in the world – over 70 Kilometers in length) was just as spectacular as we remembered it – lots of calving ice. No birds though. We found a lone Brown Bear a long way off and a herd of mountain goats even further away. On leaving the Bay the Orcas and Humpbacks caused some excitement.

Over the next week we visited Elfin Bay, Sitka, Rudyerd Bay and the Misty Fjords and Metlakatla before heading down through the inside passage to Vancouver. Total distance from Nome to Vancouver 3973 nautical miles.

This part of the trip was all about spectacular scenery and some culture- visiting some of the local people. We left our boat to travel on local boats with local skippers at 3 stops along the way. At Elfin Cove we boarded a local boat to explore the Inian Islands before cruising the Icy strait aboard the Wind heading for Sitka.



*Marbled Murrelet*

Sitka is a fairly large town and we walked through the nature reserve at the top end of town. There were plenty of Gulls along the shoreline and a couple of Black Turnstone. We heard several Blue Jays and saw a couple of Chipmunks. In the river the Pink Salmon had finished spawning and were dying in their dozens attended by flocks of Glaucous-winged Gulls.

Our most productive birding trip was later in the morning when we joined a local boat to cruise around the islands in Sitka sound. The usual Steller Sea lions and Sea otters were about along with plenty of Bald eagles. But on the quieter waters we found both Surf and White-winged Scoters. The Common Murre were moving into their winter plumages as too were the Marbled Murrelets and Rhinoceros Auklets.

Misty Fjords gave us a couple of new Gulls- Short-billed and California. Rudyerd Bay has beautiful scenery- cloudy-blue glacier lakes with snow-capped mountains behind and deep green pine forests along the lake shores- Plenty of gulls but little else. There were still a number of Short-tailed Shearwaters around making their way south and the Kittiwakes and Fulmars were ever present.

Another day at sea took us through the inside passage where California Gulls seemed to predominate and we found our first Bonaparte's Gulls – all in non-breeding plumage.

And so back to Vancouver with just the misery of 5 hours back to New York on the truly appalling Canada Airways and another 14 hours back to Johannesburg on the not much better United Airlines.

Six weeks- a long trip but one filled with lots of good memories and another six special birds knocked off the list.

