

Canada: The West

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 28 September 2019



Bald Eagle



Grizzly Bear



Orca



Sea Otter

Report & Images by Matt Collis



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Summary

This tour enjoyed two weeks in stunning scenery and seeing incredible wildlife as we explored Vancouver Island and the wider Vancouver area. The weather was highly unpredictable but overall it was sunny on the important days and workable on the wetter ones. We recorded many sightings, including a fabulous array of birds, with some rare species, notably two Sharp-tailed Sandpipers. However, it was the mammals which were the stars on the show. From the boats we were lucky enough to have encounters with many Black Bear, Sea Otter, a Grey Whale, lots of Humpbacks and a pod of Orca which put on quite the show. From the land we were able to get close to both Black and Brown (Grizzly) Bears with some encounters as close as just a few metres!

Not only was the wildlife first class, but we stayed in some lovely places, enjoyed delicious food and encountered excellent hospitality from all our supporting guides. This tour is designed to offer a whole range of wildlife experiences which not only get you close to nature but also connect you to the landscape. It was through this sharing of wonderful experiences that the group formed a close bond which not only made the trip a lot of fun but meant everyone took home a wealth of happy memories.

Day 1

Sunday 15th September

Arrival in Vancouver

Arriving in London Heathrow, the group attempted to assemble and meet leader Matt in the departure lounge, before boarding our afternoon BA flight to Vancouver. Travelling almost 5,000 kilometres across the Atlantic and passing eight time zones, we arrived at immigration before reassembling at the luggage collection carousel and heading out to arrivals to meet Ken, our local leader.

From here we moved to collect the vehicles and make our way to the Tsawwassen Inn where we met three other members of our party who had arrived early in Canada. Given our late arrival, everybody agreed that we'd save a formal introduction for the morning and headed off to bed for a good night's sleep.

Day 2

Monday 16th September

Drive to Ucluelet

After such a long flight and the large time-zone shift, we started our day with a leisurely breakfast which also included a more formal introduction from the two guides and instructions for the day ahead. Most our day was spent travelling, starting with our ferry crossing from Tsawwassen to Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. Arriving with very little time before boarding, our first birding was done from our vehicles, with a couple of Ring-billed Gulls and a Northern Flicker starting us off. A fly-over Red-winged Blackbird was also a nice addition, as was a Peregrine Falcon which was spotted sitting on top of a roadside pylon.

Once on the boat, we headed straight to the top deck where we spent the rest of the crossing. From here we could see the many Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants sitting on the dock, alongside the odd Black Turnstone and an impressive Great Blue Heron. During the crossing itself, we were lucky enough to avoid the worst of the weather, with relatively dry conditions and only minor winds which made the bird watching incredibly pleasant.

Most of the birds we encountered were fly-bys, which included Surf Scoter, a couple of Wing-winged Scoter, Common Loon and two Red-throated Loon. The occasional small group of Marbled Murrelet and Common Murre were also seen keeping low to the water but the stand-out bird was a single Parasitic Jaeger which took off from the water and glided majestically down the side of the boat for all to see.

Mammals were reasonably abundant too, with a few Steller Sea Lions and Harbour Seals spotted in the waters and hauled out on the odd small island as we entered the bay of Nanaimo. One small pod of Dall's Porpoise were our first cetaceans, but the stand-out sighting of the crossing was our first whales: two Humpback Whales, mother and calf, gently coasting along the shoreline of Vancouver Island, giving us the occasional view as they surfaced to breathe – fantastic!

After docking, we returned to the vehicles and began our drive towards Ucluelet, making two stops along the way. The first was at Little Qualicum Falls where we had lunch and took a short stroll around the trails to enjoy the two raging waterfalls demonstrating the power of the local river systems. Birds here were limited to just one group of Golden-crowned Kinglet which were high up in the canopy, calling as they worked their way through the forest. Our second stop was at Taylor River where we were greeted by two stunning Steller's Jays eating crumbs in the car park. Although a little bit flighty, they eventually gave fabulous views perched on some of the boulders. For those who were lucky enough to see them, we also came across two American Dippers which were chasing each other downstream before settling on a shallow rocky area where they switched to feeding.

The rest of our journey was a constant supply of dramatic views as we meandered our way through stunning valleys of temperate rainforest with large mirror-like lakes at their base. It was picture-perfect Canada at its best, and the clinging low cloud only added to its drama. After a fairly long day, we pulled up into the beautiful harbourside town of Ucluelet and settled into our lovely rooms at the Baywater House Inn before heading off for our dinner at a local diner. With such close proximity to the water, many opted for fresh seafood dishes, accompanied by drinks from the local brewery of Tofino. A pleasant end to a wonderful first day.

Day 3

Tuesday 17th September

Ucluelet - Long Beach

Following a night of strong winds and persistent rain, we awoke to find the conditions not much different and rain forecast for much of the day, and so it was no surprise our scheduled bear-watching tour was cancelled and we were forced to adjust our plans. Plan B saw us head off to a local aquarium where all the occupants are creatures collected from the local area on 'short-term loan', meaning everything had been collected and is returned to the wild within nine months, and tanks only contain creatures found within a few miles' radius of the centre. We spent a wonderful hour perusing the various tanks and displays, ogling over the amazing myriad of local crustaceans, fish and nudibranchs which had been assembled. The friendly and knowledgeable staff, all marine scientists, were more than happy to answer our questions and were particularly keen to show off their main attraction, a Pacific Giant Octopus, which gave a wonderful show exploring its tank.

With the weather improving, we made a quick visit to the local lighthouse for a short walk along the coastal path for a spot of sea watching. In a relatively short space of time, we managed a fair few birds despite the choppy waters, including Common Murre, Pigeon Guillemot, Pacific Loon and Surf Scoter. We also had the great joy of

watching a couple of Myrtle (also known as Yellow-rumped) Warblers feeding in rock pools and two mischievous Steller's Jays chasing one another through the pines.

After our walk we returned to the hotel for an early lunch overlooking the harbour: a prime spot to enjoy our plentiful picnic while spotting local wildlife. A Belted Kingfisher, an adult Bald Eagle perched at the top of a tree and a few Steller Sea Lions were all seen, but the stars of lunch were our first Black Bears, a mother and cub, spotted walking along the far shore searching for food. Fortunately, we managed to gather the majority of the group to watch as they headed along the shore before turning into the forest and disappearing out of sight. A short but wonderful moment made particularly sweet given our bad luck with our tour earlier in the morning.

With the weather now dry, we spent the afternoon in the Pacific Rim National Park walking through the woods and along the beaches adjacent to the visitors centre. The scenery was spectacular: rugged rocky coastline fringed by virgin temperate rainforest full of giants. Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Golden-crowned Kinglets filled the trees around us with several coming within just a few metres, allowing for some excellent photo opportunities. Later we also had a nice encounter with a Brown Creeper and saw a Wilson's Warbler flitting around in a bush.

Whimbrel, Western Sandpiper and Black Oystercatcher were all seen resting on coastal rocks, and several groups of Common Loon, White-winged Scoter and a pair of Horned Grebe were found during sea watches. The only other bird of note was a lone Common Tern which was persistently fishing just off the beach, but seemingly having little luck in the choppy surf. Our final stop of the day before dinner was at the local Bog Trail, which was particularly good for Sundews: a fairly rare and interesting plant due to its insectivorous nature. It also turned out to be a great location for Northern Flicker, with two seen flying between dead trees, as well as providing a few Song Sparrows and skein of Canada Geese, too.

Day 4

Wednesday 18th September

Tofino

After yesterday's cancellation, we were up early for our bear-watching tour from Ucluelet harbour. The weather was glorious sunshine and we spent the next few hours exploring the harbour back and forth, searching for bears. We didn't have to wait long, with a mature male Black Bear spotted foraging along the far shore, demonstrating its amazing strength turning over rocks and boulders as though they were filled with air. This was the first of four bears we encountered, which included one, a younger male, frolicking around on an abandoned mattress like a playful child, and a young mother with her second-year cub who walked a long stretch of exposed shoreline, allowing us to follow her for over 15 minutes.

Other mammals seen included a group of California Sea Lions which fought for space aboard an abandoned square of floating dock, some Harbour Seals hauled out on some logging poles and a brief glimpse of a North American River Otter. Birdwise, we managed to get right up close with a few Rhinoceros Auklets resting in the harbour, we had a small group of Spotted Sandpiper hanging around a rocky cove, and a Merlin flew fast overhead, heading upriver. However, the two stand-out sightings were of a lone Cackling Goose, in amongst the gulls back in the dockyard, and a hunting Osprey joined by several Turkey Vultures, circling high above the entrance to where a small river joined the channel, a popular spot for salmon.

With our itinerary action-packed, we headed straight to Tofino to join our second tour of the day looking for whales. This started particularly well when two River Otters turned up, foraging around the dock whilst we waited to board – a good omen. Once on board we had an hour's drive to our final destination and enjoyed the entertaining and educational commentary on the local area. Given our speed, the birds were coming thick and fast, but we did pick out a few good birds including Red-necked Grebes, Western Grebe, two Caspian Terns and a small flock of Dunlin. Other common birds included Rhinoceros Auklet, Surf Scoter and large rafts of Common Murre. The surprise bird of the trip was a lone Marbled Godwit which was seen on a sandy island as we left the main harbour.

Once out at sea it didn't take long before we had our first glimpses of a Grey Whale in amongst the waves. A total of three were seen in the area but we opted to stay with this one adult, known locally as Big White due to her extensive white patch around her back. She's a well-known whale of the area, first seen back in 1979, and thought to be at least 50 years old, if not older. Initially she played a little hard to get, as she drifted close to a very rocky and turbulent passage which we could not pass through, so instead, we drifted around the other side to wait for her. After about 20 minutes, she appeared to have finished whatever she was doing and then ended up heading straight for the boat, giving everyone fabulous views as she arced her way through the water.

We followed her for a further 30 minutes, getting views every six minutes or so as she came up for a breath, before softly dropping below the surface. Our time was almost up when she finally decided she was going to feed and gave us a wonderful parting gift of a tail fluke. As we headed back to harbour, we had a few last surprises, including a wonderful sighting of a Bald Eagle perched eating a fish and a close encounter with our first Sea Otter which laid on its back, cool as a cucumber, as we pulled up alongside. On returning to harbour we had a bit of free time to explore Tofino, before having a delicious meal and then heading back to the hotel in Ucluelet. It just worked out that we passed Long Beach at the perfect moment to watch the sunset over the end of the beach and so stopped to enjoy the riot of reds, oranges and yellows. A fitting end to a spectacular day.

Day 5

Thursday 19th September

Ucluelet to Port McNeil

Today was a transfer day taken up with heading north up Vancouver Island towards our next base at Port McNeil. It was a fantastically scenic drive and we made several stops along the way, including Cathedral Grove: an area of untouched virgin forest dominated by the epic Douglas Fir. We took a short stroll around the main looped path before stopping to visit the oldest tree in the wood, a mighty 79-foot-tall Douglas Fir believed to be around 800 years old, and the perfect location for a group photo.

Our next stop was back at Taylor River before heading on to Oyster Bay and Miracle Beach for our picnic lunch. The weather had dampened slightly by now, but we braved some birding nonetheless, and were rewarded with fantastic views of Harlequin Duck, Red-necked Grebe, Common Loon and a Mew Gull on what can only be described as a mirror-flat lake. We also saw a few waders including Black Turnstones and a group of three Black-bellied Plover foraging on the shoreline and had a particularly good flock of small passerines coming through which included Yellow Warbler, Wilson's Warbler and Townsend Warbler along with Chestnut-backed Chickadee and Golden-crowned Kinglet.

The only additional birds of note came from birds seen whilst driving or during unscheduled stops and included a Pileated Woodpecker which flew over both buses, a Cooper's Hawk sitting out on a roadside perch, Red-tailed Hawk, and a ringtail Northern Harrier mobbing a group of Turkey Vultures. Once at Port McNeil we settled into our rooms before heading back out to dinner at a fantastic First Nation-run restaurant overlooking the water towards Malcolm Island; a rather jaw-dropping setting to a fabulous meal.

Day 6

Friday 20th September

Port McNeil

After a slower morning involving a leisurely breakfast, we headed down to the dockside of Port McNeil to join our whale-watching tour. We had a bit of time before docking the boat, which gave us the opportunity to look for birds in the harbour, resulting in excellent views of Ring-billed Gull, a small group of Killdeer and a pair of magnificent Hooded Merganser. Bald Eagles and Turkey Vultures were also present, as were several sparrows including Fox, White-crowned and Savannah.

Aboard the boat, we headed off into an epic misty landscape with clouds softly draping themselves over the various small islands and rocky coastline. It meant we had slightly restricted views for bird watching but the numerous Red-necked Grebes, White-winged Scoter and odd Common Loon were all still picked out among the many Common Murre. As we began to reach Hanson Island, we stopped for our first whale, an elusive Humpback which appeared only briefly before disappearing into the mist.

We moved on and past into a large expansive of open water near Stubbs Island where the open sea seemingly met with the sheltered waters of the coast. This was where we spent the majority of our tour as it became clear these nutrient-rich waters are a magnet for the surrounding marine life, including both the Humpback Whales and Orca. We hadn't been in the area too long when, off the front of the boat, we spotted our first Orca, soon followed by another and then another; a total of five spread across a fair expanse of water making us have to turn our heads this way then that. These playful members of the dolphin family, also known as Killer Whales, proceeded to spend the next few hours feeding and slowly moving in and around the bay in search of food, dropping in and out of sight.

It took a while for our guides to identify the pod, but eventually it became clear this was I35, a resident pod of salmon-eating Orca, with a matriarch, her two daughters, maturing son and one grandchild forming the group. We were treated to fairly constant views and, despite our best efforts to leave them space, the Orca seemed intent on giving us a good show, coming within 30 metres of the boat at times. We got to see several interesting behaviours including some 'spy hopping', tail slaps, breaches and social play. They really were a fantastic group to have observed, and highly entertaining.

Our experience with Humpback Whales was just as enthralling with a total of four whales closely interacting with us whilst many more could be seen around the bay. As well as observing them surfacing for air and the occasional tail fluke, we also got to see some more unusual behaviours including 'trumpeting' and a super-rare behaviour known as 'trap feeding' where the whale floats vertically with its mouth open just below the water. It was extraordinary to observe and a real privilege, seeing as only 24 whales are known to do this and this is the only place in the world they have been observed feeding in this way.

Additional mammal highlights included several pods of Dall's Porpoise (one of which rode the bow of the boat for a few minutes), a large colony of Steller Sea Lion and smaller colony of Harbour Seal. As for birds we were spoilt with sensationally close views of Sooty Shearwaters and thousands of Red-necked Phalaropes feeding in large groups just off the surface. A couple of Black-legged Kittiwake and a few Ancient Murrelet were particularly special sightings, as was the much-loved Rhinoceros Auklet – always a welcome sighting.

Finishing our tour, we headed back into the harbour delighted with our experience and one I'm sure nobody is likely to forget. Our afternoon was spent very differently, making our way to Zeballos along the dirt-track road, which was a relatively quiet journey except for an exciting surprise Black Bear on arrival, standing on the roof of a house eating apples from a tree. We maintained a safe distance and watched for a few minutes before it snapped a large branch, spooked itself, and wandered off into the forest. With a small amount of time before dinner, our final excursion involved a short walk along a local nature trail where we encountered two Common Merganser, an American Dipper, and a Bald Eagle perched in a tree. Otherwise it was very quiet for birds and so we made our way back for a delicious Italian-inspired dinner before heading to bed.

Day 7

Saturday 21st September

Zeballos

With a series of heavy showers forecast for the afternoon, our focus was to make the most of the morning and our Sea Otter tour. After breakfast, we headed down to the docks at Zeballos, the start of our tour, and enjoyed the wonderful sight of seven River Otter feeding, playing and resting at the river outlet – a fantastic start. Once aboard our boat, we made our way out through the inner channel and out towards the Nuchatlitz Provincial Park on the coast.

En route we saw plenty of birds, including Common Loon, Red-necked Grebe, Surf Scoter, Common Merganser and Black Oystercatcher. Gulls were also present in good numbers, with Mew, California, Glaucous-winged and a lone American Herring Gull all spotted. We even made a few stops to enjoy close encounters with a few scarcer birds, including a large group of Surfbird, Marbled Murrelet and a lone Green-winged Teal.

We didn't struggle for Sea Otters. In total we encountered at least 100, some as lone individuals, whilst others formed rafts of up to 30, including mothers with kits. Unsurprisingly they were fairly cautious of the boat but particularly so today, as Orca had been seen in the area: a prolific predator of Sea Otter. A few individuals did allow us to drift close, at times just 10 metres or so away, floating sweetly on their backs as though butter wouldn't melt in their mouths.

After spending a couple of hours with the Sea Otters, we spent the remainder of our time exploring a second inlet in search of bears. En route we couldn't resist stopping briefly to enjoy three Humpback Whales feeding in the open water, before reaching the second inlet where we were treated to seven Black Bears foraging on the low tide across four small beaches. A couple were lone bears, whilst two were mothers with cubs which were especially nice to see. Surprisingly, these were the most tolerant of the bears although all seemed very cautious. Just as our tour had ended, the first of the rain arrived and we took this as a cue to head back to the dock and to lunch.

Safely back at the hotel, we dried off before enjoying some food whilst watching a surprise visitor: a Black Bear in a neighbouring garden's apple tree, having its lunch too. After more or less having its fill, it headed for the shelter of the wood to shelter from the continual downpours. Our afternoon then saw the offer of either relaxation time or some short walks in the local area, including a tour of the local town. With the rain on and off, the birdlife during these walks was fairly suppressed, but some great views of some Hooded Merganser made our efforts worthwhile. Following the walks we took an early dinner and an early night, ensuring we were well rested for our journey to the much-anticipated Great Bear Lodge.

Day 8

Sunday 22nd September

Zeballos – Great Bear Lodge

Whilst the morning was a little grey, the majority of our day was enjoyed with clear skies and warming sunshine as we made our way from Zeballos to Port Hardy. We made a few stops en route, the first at the Twin Lakes to search for Beaver, but with no luck. A lone American Dipper was a small consolation but when a sky-full of Greater White-fronted Geese flew high overhead, we were overjoyed: a rare chance encounter to watch over 1,000 of these geese on migration down the coast. It was a really special moment.

Our second stop was at Boyden Creek, a tidal estuarine habitat with saltmarsh and saline lagoons. We unfortunately arrived at low tide, meaning most of the birds were fairly far away, but we did get some great views of Common Merganser, Marbled Godwit, a small group of Pintail and some juvenile Bald Eagles fighting over fish scraps. For lunch we headed to a nearby Salmon Hatchery where the centre catch, raise and release young salmon in order to boost local populations. They also monitor numbers on the neighbouring creek where we were able to stand and watch as Pink Salmon made their way over a fish pass, which was exciting to watch. We also managed to find some Red Crossbill here too and, despite them favouring the tops of the trees, we got very lucky when one stunning male sat out on a branch, giving perfect views.

The final leg of our journey was to take the Sea Plane from Port Hardy to Great Bear Lodge. We didn't have to wait long to board our planes but had just enough time to spot a group of three American Mink playing in the harbour before being whisked off to the minute airport. From here we took to the skies and enjoyed a 30-minute flight over the rolling mountains of the Great Bear Rainforest as we soaked in the epic scenery. Although wildlife watching wasn't very easy, we were lucky enough to see a Humpback Whale from the air as it surfaced and then tail fluked to feed. Our landing was dramatic too, the plane landing like a boat on the water, before slowly making its way to the dock of the lodge where we got a very warm welcome from all the staff.

We had a short length of time to settle in, before heading out for our first evening bear watch upriver at the Nekite Estuary viewing point. Incredibly, as we arrived, a Grizzly Bear mother with her two cubs were already on the river with the mother actively fishing in the shallows. We took our seats on an open platform and watched as she caught and ate two Coho Salmon in quick succession while her cubs stood on the side awaiting their share. After a short while, they wandered downriver and out of view, but it wasn't too long before another bear, this time a lone female, arrived on the river. Less competent at fishing, she made some half-hearted attempts before opting to eat the scraps left by the previous mother before wandering off in a similar direction. One final bear was a large male who made an appearance downstream but was hard to view and never moved any closer: presumably wary of our presence.

With the light beginning to fade, we went to make our way back to the lodge for dinner but got stopped in our tracks when an Osprey flew low down through the estuary spooking the congregation of Common Merganser and gulls present throughout our watch. We also then had a wonderful moment with a Bald Eagle which subsequently came down to feed on a salmon carcass right at the end, before flying off itself to devour its meal. A fabulous first watch on our first day at the lodge.

Day 9

Monday 23rd September

Great Bear Lodge

Following our now well-established trend of one day of sunshine followed by one day of rain, today was decisively wet throughout. Fortunately for us, it had little impact on our two bear-watching sessions undertaken from a very comfortable blind adjacent to where we'd watched the bears yesterday. Our morning session was the more fruitful of the two, with a total of six Grizzly Bears making an appearance but never more than one at any time. Five of these were females with quite a mixture of fishing ability; some opted to scavenge the partially or completely dead carcasses of salmon that were being washed down from upstream, whilst two were a lot more proactive in hunting salmon on the move to the delight of us watching. One significantly large and shyer male bear was spotted walking upstream towards us; however, once he'd caught his fish he moved off into the forest and out of sight to eat in private – a typical behaviour of males who are less comfortable around people.

Our late-afternoon session required a lot more patience and it was not until the last hour that our first bear showed up, another female, who gave a good show fishing at both ends of the hide. Having been waiting for so long, everyone was so transfixed on this bear that it wasn't until our guides told us to look down, that we became aware of another bear walking directly beneath the hide, a mere one metre away! The appearance of numerous faces looking over our raised hide proved to be too intimidating for the bear as she skipped forward to create a bit of space before continuing her walk along the shore. Wow, what an encounter!

Shortly after this we heard some rather timid growls coming from upstream and about 15 minutes before the end of our watch, we were treated to seeing a mother and her two cubs coming to our section of the river to feed. With so much rain, the river had risen and had quite a strong flow, forcing the young family to swim across the river. It was potentially the highlight of the day, watching the two cubs follow mum as they floated downstream on the current before attempting to swim into the shallows. It was a nervous few minutes, but everyone made it, to our great relief. The original female, however, didn't stay long and rushed up into the forest to escape this more dominant mother who was left to feed her cubs. It was about this same time when our light went and we too had to make our exit to return to the lodge.

Away from the bears, we also had plenty of time to enjoy some birdwatching and managed to spot a few new birds for our trip, including Varied Thrush, a Thayer's Gull and a Sharp-shinned Hawk which perched in the trees directly in front of the hide, giving excellent viewing opportunities. A Barred Owl was spooked from the path into a tree during the drive home, but unfortunately, only a small number of people saw this. The only other bird to note today was a rather impressive Great Blue Heron which managed to swallow an enormous salmon tail; it was a hysterical and absorbing saga which looked increasingly uncomfortable for the bird, but it eventually prevailed and hopefully enjoyed its meal.

Another wonderful day ended with some delicious food, wine and a presentation from a local wildlife photographer who amazed us with his pictures of Vancouver Island, Great Grey Owls and a recent expedition to Churchill for Polar Bears.

Day 10

Tuesday 24th September

Great Bear Lodge

Today's morning session started off where yesterday's left off, with a lone Grizzly deciding to walk on right under our noses beneath the hide. Fortunately, this time it was completely tolerant of us and so everyone could enjoy this magical moment as she walked a mere metre below us – an incredible start. Our next sighting came a short while later, when a mother with two cubs appeared from the forest. We soon realised this was the same family as from last night, thanks to a very identifiable cub who has a white spot on its right shoulder. They hung around for a full hour's fishing, with mum catching two large Chum Salmon and foraging the odd dead carcass. In the afternoon we took boat rides in small groups into the main estuary, to explore the river from a different angle and see what we could find. It was a great opportunity for the guides to show us some salmon up close and show us the plants the bears feed on during the spring when the fish are all gone. We were fortunate to encounter a couple of Grizzly Bears too, including a mother and her yearling cub who ended up within 10 metres of our boats, after being carried downstream as they attempted to cross the river. They too were tolerant and so we enjoyed fantastic views before they walked back upstream. We also encountered one small cub, coming down to the water's edge to drink, apparently alone although we suspect mum was hidden in the forest somewhere nearby.

This trip also happened to be our best chance for some birdwatching, with one corner particularly productive for waterfowl, including Canada Geese, Mallard, Pintail, American Wigeon and a surprise lone Eurasian Wigeon which the guides got very excited about. Further upriver we were able to get much closer to Bald Eagles feeding on fish, Belted Kingfisher and lots of Common Merganser. We also encountered two new birds: a Mourning Dove eating a dead salmon, and two Red-breasted Sapsuckers perched in a tree with a Varied Thrush and American Robin.

Our evening session saw us return to the hide where the same mother and two cubs spent the entire session fishing in front of us. We had great fun watching how territorial one of the cubs had become, growling and grunting anytime its smaller sibling came close to any pieces of fish it found. One other particularly notable moment was when the mother caught the most enormous Chum Salmon, which wriggled and flailed around in a desperate attempt to escape, but to no avail. She then rather grotesquely, yet fascinatingly, proceeded to skin and eat the fish, sharing very little with her hungry onlooking cubs. Away from the bears, birds of note were a surprise Spotted Sandpiper which hung around on the bank, and a small group of Myrtle (Yellow-rumped) Warblers flitting through in the bushes. Overall, despite a very wet day, we'd encountered a huge amount of wildlife and everyone returned incredibly happy with their day. We finished the day off celebrating one client's birthday with a delicious meal of smoked salmon, a few drinks and a hilarious game – a perfect way to spend our last night at the lodge.

Day 11

Wednesday 25th September

Great Bear Lodge – Port McNeil

Our final morning saw us back at the sheltered hide with the family of Grizzlies which had entertained us almost every session we've spent there. As on our other visits, mum spent most of her time either proactively hunting healthier salmon from the river or sitting in the deep water kicking up dead salmon from the river floor. Her cubs on other hand, continued to fight over the scraps, with one of the cubs particularly vocal and unwilling to share with its smaller sibling. The scene remained this way for almost the entire session, until the very last 30 minutes, when a second female arrived and walked down past the family to fish lower on the part of the river. The mother appeared incredibly nervous and, when she attempted to leave the area, she became equally spooked by something hidden in the forest. We can only speculate, but assume it must have been another bear, leaving her pinned on the river with her cubs in tow. Unfortunately, it was at this point our time was up and we returned to the lodge.

On the drive back, one bus got very lucky, spotting the very shy and elusive Ruffed Grouse sat on the road. Other than this encounter, the birdlife at the hide was very similar to our previous visits, with the highlight the return of a Sharp-shinned Hawk which continued to be harassed by the crows. Back at the lodge, we enjoyed lunch before kitting up in full waterproofs to head back out on the boats. It was a good job we all wore waterproofs, as the rain was torrential by the end of our trip, but before then, we enjoyed a pleasant tour of a second river inlet where Pink Salmon were very abundant swimming under the boat and a American Dipper showed incredibly well right next to the boat. We also explored a hidden waterfall concealed by the forest and checked out the Harbour Seals resting on some logs.

This completed all our tours at the lodge and so we returned to wait for the planes to arrive to take us back to Vancouver Island. Due to the amount of fog in the area, we had to wait an additional two hours before it was deemed safe enough to fly and resulted in a more coastal route, flying at just 250 feet above the sea, back to Port Hardy. Once back on solid ground, the only thing left to do was to make our way to a local restaurant for some food and then on to the hotel at Port McNeil to get some sleep.

Day 12

Thursday 26th September

Port McNeil - Tsawwassen

Today our aim was to make our way south to Nanaimo and collect the ferry back to Tsawwassen, in preparation for our flight home tomorrow. We had a thoroughly enjoyable, slow and sunny day with lots of interesting stops along the route. We started off with a visit to Telegraph Cove, an old town based on salmon-processing and saw-mills, steeped in history connected to World War Two. In addition to learning all about this small town's eventful past, we also enjoyed a nice walk to a point overlooking the inner channel. Although no whales were seen, a group of Pine Siskin and an Eastern Grey Squirrel in the woods behind were great additions to the view.

Leaving Telegraph Cove, we then headed south, stopping for some lunch at the Vancouver Island visitor centre before finally reaching Nanaimo just after 3pm. With a few hours to spare before our boat crossing, we headed to Buttertubs Lake Nature Reserve for a walk and some casual birdwatching, which proved to be very productive. On the water we found Pied-billed Grebes, Great Blue Heron and several groups of stunning Wood Duck resting on logs. We also encountered lots of birds in the neighbouring trees and scrub, including Marsh

Wren, Northern Flicker, Spotted Towhee and Band-tailed Pigeon. There was great excitement at the sight of both a Northern Harrier and Red-tailed Hawk, both of which flew close overhead, but the star bird of the visit was an Anna's Hummingbird which was spotted at some nectar-feeders in the gardens of the adjacent retirement village.

With just an hour before of scheduled ferry departure, we made our way to the port and, after a short delay and a group of Dark-eyed Junco around the cafe, we boarded the ship to make our crossing. With the sun setting all around us, opportunities to look for birds and bird activity were limited. Instead, we sat at the bow of the ship and enjoyed a magical sunset over Vancouver Island and reminisced over some of the experiences from the last two weeks. Before we knew it, we were at the dock, from where we continued on to Mario's, a wonderful restaurant, before heading to the hotel to get some much-needed sleep before our last day.

Day 13

Friday 27th September

Tsawwassen – Airport

With our flight not until the early evening, we had a whole day to explore some of the local wildlife spots in and around Tsawwassen, but before we could set out, it was time to say goodbye to two members of our group who were heading into Vancouver for a few days. It was with great sadness that we said our goodbyes, as the group had grown incredibly close during our two weeks, but it was also a great opportunity to relive trip highlights and say thank you over breakfast.

Bags loaded, we headed off to Boundary Bay, situated right at the southern tip of Vancouver and on the border with the USA. Here we took a gentle stroll along the coastal/wetland path, viewing the inner marshland and the surrounding estuarine saltmarsh in search of birds. It was excellent from the start, with a whole array of small birds flitting around the hedges, including White-crowned Sparrow, Black-capped Chickadee, Dark-eyed Junco and Spotted Towhee all making an appearance. Unfortunately, our visit coincided with low tide, but we still manage to spot both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Cackling Geese, Pintail, a Eurasian Wigeon and Mallard on the mudflats. Other birds of interest included an American Pipit, Barn Swallows, Purple Finch, Band-tailed Pigeon and a very showy Northern Flicker. We also did very well for birds of prey, with a close encounter with Northern Harrier and two Red-tailed Hawk circling in thermals, one of which was an interesting-looking white-morph bird.

Our second stop of the day saw us visit Reifel Migration Bird Sanctuary where we were blown away with the quality of the birds we got to see. Walking around the main ponds, we encountered huge numbers of duck including Pintail, Gadwall, Shoveler, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Greater Scaup, Ring-necked Duck and Hooded Merganser. We also managed to see hundreds of Long-billed Dowitcher and Greater Yellowlegs, including some particularly confiding birds which allowed us within just a few metres to take photos. Other good sightings included a Peregrine Falcon perched on top of a tree next to the path, Anna's Hummingbird at the feeders in the car park, a fly-over group of Snow Goose, and many Red-winged Blackbird which took seed from our hands. By the time we had lunch we felt like we'd seen it all, but when news reached us of a rare wader on site, a small group headed out in search of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in amongst the Dowitcher. It took a short amount of time before we enjoyed cripplingly good views of this stunning wader, resting on some exposed mud surrounded by 200 or so Long-billed Dowitchers who were less-than-friendly towards it. If that excitement

wasn't enough, a few moments later we noticed a second Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and a Short-billed Dowitcher! What a way to top off our visit!

Our third and final stop of the day was at Iona Beach which is a bird oasis located immediately adjacent to the airport. We only had an hour or so to explore, but we still managed to pick up two new birds for our trip: a Barrow's Goldeneye sat on one of the lakes and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet flitting in the scrub. We took a moment to take one last look across to Vancouver before heading to the airport for our flight back to London. It was with even greater sadness that we said goodbye to our local guide Ken, who had done an incredible job leading us around and sorting logistics, before heading to check-in followed by departures. Safely back in London, we said our final goodbyes before everyone split off in their various directions to make the final journeys home.

An incredible trip, incredible memories and an incredible group none of us will likely forget.

Day 14

Saturday 28th September

Return to the UK after an overnight flight

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September												
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
1	Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>											1		
2	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	H	✓	✓	✓	
3	Cackling Goose	<i>Branta hutchinsii</i>			1					1				✓	
4	Snow Goose	<i>Anser caerulescens</i>												3	
5	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>								1000+					
6	Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>											12		
7	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>												✓	
8	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>												✓	
9	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>												✓	
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>										1		1	
11	American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>		4	✓							✓	✓	✓	
12	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>										✓		✓	
13	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>								6		✓		✓	
14	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>						1						✓	
15	Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>												1	
16	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>												1	
17	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				✓									
18	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓				✓		
19	White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi</i>	2	✓				✓							
20	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>												1	
21	Hooded Merganser	<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>						2	3					✓	
22	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>						2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
23	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			2										
24	Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>												✓	
25	Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓											✓	
26	Band-tailed Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas fasciata</i>		✓										✓	
27	Eurasian Collared Dove - I	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓			✓						✓	
28	Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaidura macroura</i>									1				
29	Virginia Rail	<i>Rallus limicola</i>												H	

	Common name	Scientific name	September											
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
30	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>												✓
31	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>											2	
32	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			1			
33	Horned Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		2										
34	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>			✓		✓							
35	Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓						
36	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				✓								
37	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>					4							
38	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		12										
39	Marbled Godwit	<i>Limosa fedoa</i>			1				2					
40	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
41	Surfbird	<i>Calidris virgata</i>						✓						
42	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	<i>Calidris acuminata</i>												1
43	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓									
44	Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>		5										
45	Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>												✓
46	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>												1
47	Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>												1
48	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>					✓							
49	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>			4						1			
50	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>												✓
51	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>												✓
52	Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>		✓			✓							
53	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
54	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
55	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
56	Thayer's Gull (ssp of Iceland Gull)	<i>Larus glaucooides thayeri</i>								1	1			
57	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
58	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
59	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>			2									
60	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		1										
61	Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1											

	Common name	Scientific name	September												
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
62	Common Murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓	✓			✓								
63	Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cepphus columba</i>		2	✓		✓								
64	Marbled Murrelet	<i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>	✓					✓							
65	Ancient Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>						2							
66	Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓							
67	Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	2												
68	Pacific Loon	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>		✓				✓							
69	Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
70	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>						✓							
71	Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓							
72	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓						
73	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	✓	✓	✓										
74	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
75	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓					✓	✓		
76	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			1					1					
77	Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>									1	1		1	
78	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>				1								✓	
79	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>													
80	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>				1							1	3	
81	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
82	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	✓			✓							1	2	
83	Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>									1				
84	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
85	Red-breasted Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus ruber</i>										2			
86	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Leuconotopicus villosus</i>									1	1			
87	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	1	2									1	✓	
88	Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>				1									
89	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1										
90	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓											1	
91	Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
92	Northwestern Crow	<i>Corvus caurinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
93	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	September											
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
94	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>												✓
95	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	<i>Poecile rufescens</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓		✓
96	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>												✓
97	Golden-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus satrapa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓			
98	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>												1
99	Marsh Wren	<i>Cistothorus palustris</i>											1	
100	Bewick's Wren	<i>Thryomanes bewickii</i>							1					
101	Pacific Wren	<i>Troglodytes pacificus</i>		✓		✓	✓				✓	✓		
102	Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>		✓										
103	Common Starling - I	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓				✓				✓
104	Varied Thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓
105	Hermit Thrush	<i>Catharus guttatus</i>			1									
106	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>			✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
107	American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>	2				1		✓	✓	✓	✓		
108	House Sparrow - I	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓									✓
109	Buff-bellied Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>												1
110	Purple Finch	<i>Haemorhous purpureus</i>												✓
111	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>							✓					
112	Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>										15		
113	Red Fox Sparrow	<i>Passerella iliaca</i>		✓			✓	✓					✓	✓
114	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>		✓										✓
115	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>		✓			✓		✓					✓
116	Golden-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia atricapilla</i>												1
117	Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>											3	✓
118	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓			
119	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>											6	✓
120	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	✓											✓
121	American Yellow Warbler	<i>Setophaga aestiva</i>				✓								
122	Myrtle (Yellow-rumped) Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>		2							3	✓	✓	✓
123	Townsend's Warbler	<i>Setophaga townsendi</i>				✓								
124	Wilson's Warbler	<i>Cardellina pusilla</i>		1		✓								

	Common name	Scientific name	September										
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26

Mammals

1	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>												1	
2	Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>	1			1								2	
3	American Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>				1	1								
4	American Black Bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>		3	5		1	9							
5	Brown Bear (Grizzly)	<i>Ursus arctos horribilis</i>							5	10	8	3			
6	Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>			4			100+							
7	North American River Otter	<i>Lontra canadensis</i>		4	2			7		1					
8	American Mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>							3		1				
9	Steller Sea Lion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓							
10	California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>			✓	✓									
11	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
12	Orca (Killer Whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>					5								
13	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		✓											
14	Dall's Porpoise	<i>Phocoenoides dalli</i>	✓				✓								
15	Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>													
16	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	2				12+	4	1						
17	Grey Whale	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i>			1										
18	Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>		2	✓	✓								✓	

Other Taxa of note

Banana Slug, *Ariolimax columbianus*Bacon and Egg Jellyfish, *Phacellophora camtschatica*Garter Snake, *Thamnophis sirtalis*Western Toad, *Anaxyrus boreas*