

Holiday Highlights

British Columbia

9 – 22 September 2017

Guide: Julian Sykes

Guests: Pat Gurling, Jane Nickerson, Margaret and Mike Betts, Lily and Paul Birkbeck, Hilary Rolton

Day 1: We safely land at Vancouver International Airport slightly after the scheduled arrival time and to some pretty inclement weather – things can only improve. A fairly hassle-free passage through passport control and bag collection see us in the arrivals hall meeting with the vehicle rental company, which is great. Another quick transition and around 1.30pm we are on the road south towards Delta. We soon leave the urbanisation and across the Hudson River it opens up into a more rural scene, where we get a half-decent view of a female Northern Harrier quartering the area. We reach Delta and drive straight past the hotel to our lunch stop a few blocks further on, where we have a very nice and welcome meal. Julian is now keen to check-in, which happens again fairly seamlessly with all of us given our room keys before our guide has parked the bus. We have an hour to unpack and adjust to our new surroundings before meeting again for a walk round the streets adjacent to the hotel.

It is all very relaxed and jovial despite the lack of sleep generally and Julian walks us round the quiet side streets, where we see a couple of California Gulls fly over and a few Northwestern Crows. However, we reach a track that borders some fields and gardens that house some feeders and the 'real' birding starts. In the bushes we quickly find American Goldfinches, Black-capped Chickadee, Savannah and Lincoln's Sparrows but Julian then shouts "hummingbird?" It gives us all a bit of a runaround before we clinch it sat on an exposed branch – it's a female Anna's Hummingbird. We then realise there is a second and this one is a gorgeous male, which we get in the telescope showing the beautiful purple gorget – what a beauty. A small flock of Pintail fly over along with a few Canada Geese, then Jane finds our first lovely male House Finch sat in the top of a nearby small tree. Lily then spots a stunning Chestnut-backed Chickadee, which is a good find but best of all is Mike spotting a fabulous male Common Yellowthroat that shows right out in the open – so unlike this species. In the same tree and nearby is a female Yellow Warbler seen by Pat, Paul and Julian but sadly it quickly disappears. It has been a brilliant half hour in one position and it is nearly time to head back to the hotel but we check one more garden, which produces our first (black morph) Eastern Grey Squirrel.

The walk back to the hotel produces nothing new and we are ready for another short break to freshen up ahead of our evening meal. At 7pm we again meet, firstly to do the checklist and to give Julian a chance to go through the plan for the next few days. We drive the short distance to the Alpha restaurant, where we

are tended to by the very amiable Randell, who keeps our spirits high despite being on the go for almost 24 hours. However, sleep now beckons and we head back to the hotel.

Day 2: It has been an interesting night as Julian finds out at breakfast, there was a fire alarm set off during the night by mistake and he slept right through it! The rest of us endeavoured to rally outside the hotel in a shambles of a semblance – obviously we let our thoughts be known to the hotel staff. However, we are all ready to leave at the allotted time of 8.30am heading off towards the George C. Reifel Bird Sanctuary. Being Sunday morning it's a fairly quiet drive, so stopping is easy, which is great as we soon stop for a couple of Red-tailed Hawks sat on pylons. Then a little further Julian stops quickly and reverses saying "Coyote in the left" – sure enough there is our first mammal of the day, close to the road but trotting away, great start. We continue along the minor roads seeing commoner species before stopping again for a fabulous male Cooper's Hawk sat illuminated on a fir tree, which is quickly followed by a second flying over. The drive continues again for a short way before a female Sharp-shinned Hawk is seen sitting in a small dead tree, just fabulous. This is the last of the great excitement before we reach this excellent reserve, that's the entrée, now for the main course!

We ready ourselves for a walk of a few hours and before we leave the car park we are getting great looks at a few gorgeous drake Wood Ducks. Anna's Hummingbirds are visiting the nectar feeders, two Ravens fly over, a couple of showy Red-breasted Nuthatches and the skies are alive with Barn Swallows along with several young Purple Martins. Even as we pass the visitor centre we enjoy our first waders with super comparison views of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, plus half a dozen Pectoral Sandpipers. Eventually we start along the track seeing Red-winged Blackbirds, chickadees and sparrows, but a single Black-crowned Night Heron takes our attention. We start to lose the crowds and continue to find new species with Spotted Towhees, Song Sparrow and American Robin along the track before reaching another pool. We quickly see Shoveler, Pintail, Green-winged Teal and American Wigeon amongst the ubiquitous Mallards. Mike spots an American Coot, which is new and a Belted Kingfisher starts to give us the runaround, refusing to land in site. We then hear the distinctive bugle of Sandhill Cranes and a pair fly past, what an elegant bird. The waders now kick in with lots more 'yellowlegs' to go through and we spot several Long-billed Dowitchers (or as Jane says 'dowidgers!') but then Julian starts to get excited. There is a slightly smaller wader asleep which he thinks could be Stilt Sandpiper (a good bird here), this is thankfully confirmed when it lifts its head and it's smiles all round – Reifel Island Reserve always delivers.

We carry on along the track towards the coastal track, stopping again for the Belted Kingfisher, along with a Gadwall, adult Glaucous-winged Gull and a Peregrine that's flushed a group of Western Sandpipers taking one in mid-flight and then eating it on the wing – wow. Out on the salt marsh we get good views of a couple of young Northern Harriers, Great Blue Herons and a few American Goldfinch. Then at another scrape we find the Western Sandpiper flock, showing

really well but there's something else amongst them. Julian looks puzzled and checks with his telescope saying it's a partial summer plumage Curlew Sandpiper – something he has never seen here before and didn't know the status but presumed rare? An Osprey flies over that causes some consternation as a local declares it to be Red-tailed Hawk and blatantly refuses to admit the mistake, despite her colleagues saying Osprey too. This is distracting and another Peregrine fly-by causes the sandpiper flock to take flight, this time heading out towards the coast, this is a shame as no photos were taken of the Curlew Sand.

Very pleased with the morning so far but starting to get tired and hungry we move along but stop again as Julian hears a Virginia Rail. Our guide is scanning the reedbed edges and announces he has found one and after a time of 'hide and seek' the rail reveals itself to a lucky few through the telescope. It is time now to head back to the entrance for lunch, so we start to push on back through the Cottonwood and Cypress woodland, which is full of Black-capped Chickadees. We see a photographer and Julian asks what he's seen and the reply is "woodpecker" but he did not know which one. So with the aide of 'magic stick' found by Jane, Julian starts to tap a nearby trunk. The 'pecker' hops up and reveals itself on a trunk as a lovely Northern Flicker, which is great and fitting end to a brilliant morning. The call for lunch and a break is now strong, so without adieu we walk up along the track to the visitor centre and collect our 'boxed lunches' before going to the picnic tables, which are now bathed in warm sunshine.

Our boxed lunches are superb and while we are sat enjoying them we see a couple of Anna's Hummingbirds coming to the nearby trees, allowing the photographers to get some more excellent images. Once we have finished Julian suggests a small amount of time to ourselves around the visitor centre before we have to be back at the vehicle. Once ready we leave this wonderfully productive Reserve and drive slowly back along the narrow lanes towards Delta, stopping to look at the river on the way back but there's nothing new as the tides right out.

It is now mid afternoon as we pass our hotel and continue on to a small car park where we ready ourselves for a short walk out into Boundary Bay. We only have a couple of hours so Julian suggests a short walk out to a viewing platform which looks out over the mudflats with a potential for some more waders. We are all totally happy with this having already had a terrific day and it's still quite hot to be walking long distances.

Immediately after into the bay area we are scanning the low tide channels, finding a couple of Killdeer along with lots of gulls in the distance – apparently we are going to get an identification summary later on! Along the edges we see more Savannah Sparrows then Julian spots a Western Sandpiper where the Killdeers have been seen but sadly it flies before we all get to see. Out at the very nice, seated platform we set up the telescope and start to scan through the mass of gulls, geese and wildfowl. Julian endeavours to point out the Glaucous-Winged,

California and Ring-billed Gulls, highlighting their differences, which can be both difficult and subtle, especially between age groups. We spot lots of Canada Geese before we also find among them several Greater White-fronted Geese, which is brilliant. The ducks loitering on the flats hold nothing new but it's good to search through the flocks of Mallard, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and Pintail looking for something unusual.

Late afternoon Julian suggests we head back to the hotel and have a good break before reconvening for the first daily checklist in reception, followed by another visit to the local restaurant, which again is superb and (of course) plentiful! Tomorrow we are heading off to Vancouver Island and our first boat trip.

Day 3: A pre-breakfast walk is organised by Julian and all of us (bar Margaret) dutifully turn up at the minibus at 7.15am. It is a lovely morning in Delta and we only drive a short distance to Boundary Grove Park, a small but fantastic stand of Cottonwood trees. As we arrive a (black) Eastern Grey Squirrel crosses the road and as we get out we can hear Northern Flickers calling, always a good sign. Soon enough Julian has located a Flicker, with Jane and Pat spotting a couple of others high up in the trees. We all eventually get a good look at these woodpeckers before moving on through the copse, hearing Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatch. On the far side we stop in a bit of open ground surrounded by hawthorns loaded with berries and initially just see a Song Sparrow. The sun is starting to warm things up and in the back hedge Julian spots a small flock of Cedar Waxwings, giving much better views than the previous day. Hilary is looking at a tiny Anna's Hummingbird sat on a bare twig before it alights and is joined by a very gaudy male. They now give a fantastic aerial display flying up into the sky and then diving down and chasing each other, behavior not even Julian has seen previously. We continue to search the area and Paul spots another hummingbird that flies straight towards our heads with its pinky/purple gorget illuminated in clear morning sunlight – what a fantastic experience! It is sadly time to leave for breakfast and as we return to the van Julian points out an old Bald Eagle nest, which is huge. It has been a very enjoyable and productive start to the day.

After breakfast we load the vans and set off for the Tsawwassen ferry terminal, stopping just before the entrance to watch Horned Grebes in the bay, along with a couple of Double Crested Cormorants. At the terminal we soon head on to the ferry and quickly make our way to the sun deck where we scan the harbour wall. Mike has already found a lovely Belted Kingfisher and Jane is enjoying a couple of Harbour Seals frolicking in the sea beyond as Julian arrives. We then use the best of our time when Hilary and Pat spot one of our target species Black Oystercatcher followed by another one Black Turnstone, which is superb. Mike has been checking the quay where lots of Pelagic Cormorants are sitting and we get some good views as we leave harbour for the Georgia Strait.

We stand at the bow of the ship as it moves out into open water seeing a small flock of Surf Scoters on the sea and a Black-legged Kittiwake flies by. We have

split up a bit when Julian spots a few Harbour Porpoise moving through the water, followed by a Caspian Tern flying by. Things are now beginning to quieten off and we start to move away when Hilary and Julian see a small group of Common Terns fishing around one of the many fishing trawlers in the bay. Thoughts of a hot drink take over and once one has been purchased we go our separate ways with some staying below decks and some heading to the tables at the stern of the boat, which is bathed in warm sunshine.

The two hour journey goes quickly and before we know it we are off the ferry and heading north along the Vancouver Island coastal highway. After an hour we arrive at our lunch stop a little after 1pm at Qualicum Beach. We sit on the new benches and enjoy our boxed lunches looking out into the bay. We soon find a few Common Loons offshore along with a few Red-necked Grebes but they're not easy as they're diving and the sea is choppy! On the shoreline we find a couple more Black Oystercatchers, along with Killdeer, Canada Geese, California and Glaucous-winged Gulls. The scanning continues with Julian seeing a distant shape he believes is a skua? He gets the scope and checks, confirming it as a Parasitic Jaeger (or Arctic Skua). Sadly not all of us get to see it, so fingers crossed for another later in the trip. We need to leave as we still have a long drive to Telegraph Cove, but not before a visit to the local public facilities.

We now speed north along the highway seeing several Turkey Vultures but not much else, especially as the weather is getting progressively worse. A stop at Sayward Junction is most welcome but we need to press on hoping to be there for 6pm. It is this time as we drive on to the dirt bumpy track down to our wonderful accommodation.

We are not quite prepared for this wonderful place set within a cove and surrounded by forest and as we get to the parking area a River Otter is spotted in the water heading towards the shore. Sadly our vehicle passes the gap in the hedge so Julian quickly backs up but the otter has disappeared into the far corner. Julian says to get out and continue to search while he parks the bus and soon enough we are looking out where it had last been seen. We need to check in but we cannot stop ourselves scanning the rocky shoreline for the otter as an American Red Squirrel scolds us from a nearby Douglas Fir. Julian spots a few 'peeps' (stint-like waders) that are identified later (with better views) as Least Sandpipers, which is brilliant. However we really do need to check-in as dinner is not too far off, so in we go to this incredible accommodation, meeting the enigmatic owners Dan and Sandy for the first time. Julian kindly brings in our luggage as we go through the paperwork before being shown to our rooms, Jane is absolutely thrilled that she might get a bear from her bedroom window!

Shortly after, we are back into the dining area with its huge picture windows overlooking the small cove with the tide rising slowly covering the kelp-covered rocks. We start our excellent meal but during the main course Dan say "Oh yeah – there she is" pointing out across the bay to the shoreline. There is a Black Bear turning rocks looking for crabs and other tasty morsels, which is superb and looks

great, with her beautiful glossy coat in the gathering low light. After a few minutes the she-bear disappears into the forest and we continue with our meal – what an incredible experience and a fantastic way to end the day.

Day 4: Breakfast is scheduled for 8am and we are all out before this watching the cove and the antics of the comical Stellar's Jays around the verandah. There are a few Song Sparrows and Pat finds our only Fox Sparrow of the morning, which is great. Julian watches an adult Bald Eagle land in one of the tall mature Western Hemlocks and puts his telescope on it and this majestic bird looks resplendent in the morning sunlight. Out in the bay are a couple of couple of Common Loons calling along with lots of gulls that are difficult to speciate but there are certainly California and Glaucous-winged Gulls amongst them. We are all ready for something as we sit down for breakfast, which is both varied and delicious, catering for all our needs. After this we have about an hour and a half before our scheduled boat trip, so Julian suggests a short walk around the accommodation.

Margaret opts to stay behind and do some artwork, which looks fabulous and the rest of us set off up the track on our short circular journey. The first thing we stop for is 'bear poo' on the track just metres from the hotel and reinforcing the fact that these predators are within close proximity. It is pretty quiet according to our leader but we see another Belted Kingfisher and more Song Sparrows as we wander slowly round. Then Julian says "there's Vaux Swifts" and above the tall conifers fly these tiny bat-like birds but they're not easy to locate. A little further then Jane says "what's these" and we are told Golden-crowned Sparrows, despite the yellow being both in distinct and very restricted! Still this is an excellent bird to find and a welcome addition to the list. We head back to the hotel stopping at a fascinating Cherry Tree, which has been completely drilled by Red-breasted Sapsuckers – as Lily says "it's probably sapped its strength!" We now soon stop again as Julian can hear an American Red Squirrel and find it amongst the dense foliage of the pine tree. However this 'critter' is our friend and duly sits out in the open in direct sunlight nibbling on a cone – fantastic.

With plenty of time still we ready ourselves for the day's main event and reconvene just before the scheduled departure time. This gives us enough time to look at the crabs loitering in the clear water below the small jetty. A little late the small boat arrives already laden with people, which makes it pretty difficult to find a seat on the main viewing deck. It is a clear, sunny day but the speed of the boat and the cool wind makes it quite chilly on board as we speed north up the Johnston Strait. We see Kittiwakes, Mew Gull and a couple of distant flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes flying by but the scenery alone is worth the journey, it is fabulous. Then the call goes out "Orca" and in the distance near the shore is a lone individual but we quickly realise there are at least two others in this family pod. A locally agreed initiative by the boatmen to stay a minimum half mile offshore precludes us from going any closer. Although it makes viewing slightly difficult, we all agree it's in these resident Killer Whales best interest. However our captain leans out of the cabin and says "big male Orca coming towards us starboard side". So we look right and sure enough in the distance a huge

dorsal fin emerges heading our way and looking quite ominous – we are sure glad they only eat fish! It's gets closer and closer allowing for photos before changing course and heading towards the others working their way south along the shoreline.

Once he has joined the line we continue to watch them, seeing that there are a few Pacific White-sided Dolphins (notorious for stealing their fish) nearby. Then we see some obvious splashing, with a brief hint of a marine mammal, which can only indicate one thing – Dall's Porpoise. Their short, stocky bodies and lack of dorsal means they are built for speed but also means they are difficult to ascertain in the water apart from their splash as they move across the surface. This is fabulous as we are managing to watch (sadly at distance) three fantastic 'dolphin' species with the Orcas continuing to make their slow progress south. It is now getting to noon and our captain wants to move position and have our lunch in a much more sheltered position. So off we go crossing the strait and harbouring in the lee of the wind in calmer water, where Marika breaks out the delicious soup and rolls.

After lunch we set off for the Blackfish Sound and hopeful a date with some Humpback Whales, which have been seen there recently. As we are moving along we start to see lots more Red-necked Phalaropes both flying past and sat on the water. Julian then shouts "Fork-tailed Petrel" and points at a small seabird cruising alongside of the boat and showing incredibly well as it moves effortlessly over the water. There is then a 'blow' in the distance and over the tannoy Marika informs us that there are a couple of Humpbacks up ahead and as we get closer they tail-fluke, saying that they are diving to feed and might be under the water for quite some time! Another Humpback surfaces and off we go in its direction, seeing Rhinoceros Auklet and Common Murres on the water but incredibly there are no Sooty Shearwaters around, which really surprises our guide. Better views are now being had of the Humpback Whales, with adults and young ones alike being seen – they are fantastic to watch and occasionally getting an image before they disappear.

Having seen now plenty of whales our captain takes us slowly past a group of Steller's Sealions loafing around on the rocks and with some in the water, where they look completely at home. Julian spots a female Harlequin Duck amongst the throng, which isn't easy to pick out – he does say we should have better chances later in the holiday! Mid- afternoon it is time to return to the hotel and we sail quite quickly back across the Blackfish Sound into the Johnstone Strait seeing a couple of diminutive winter plumage Marbled Murrelets plus more gulls, loons, auks and phalaropes, the latter now getting to their hundreds, which is fantastic. Eventually we reach our jetty on this glorious afternoon and say 'thank you and goodbye' to the captain, Marika and the others who had joined us during the trip and we're now going back to Port McNeil.

Back on terra firma Julian says we shall have a relaxed couple of hours to ourselves around the grounds, joining him if we like watching for bears, etc.

This is most welcome after being on board the boat and armed with hot drinks and some snacks we sit or wander round looking at the local wildlife. The tide is out so we are hopeful of a bear but we are really entertained by the noisy Red Squirrel who is collecting and storing cones nearby, obviously saving them for winter. A fabulous adult Bald Eagle flies over calling, the Least Sandpipers are showing better on the exposed mud and our resident Belted Kingfisher raucously announces its arrival. We also get good looks at both Fox and Song Sparrows that are flitting about the Salal bushes and on a small walk up the track Julian finds a couple of Golden-crowned Sparrows, which is brilliant. Sadly though no Black Bears show up before we head inside and ready ourselves for dinner, which is again superb. After this we complete the checklist and we go through the next day's plans, that involves sadly leaving and driving a 40Km dirt track!

Day 5: Another pre-breakfast vigil is most notable for birdlife with our highlight being a Merlin sat on top of a Sitka Spruce for a lucky few. We also see a few American Robins around the hotel alongside the ubiquitous Steller's Jay. The American Red Squirrel is still around its Western Hemlock trees and is causing some amusement as it scolds any passer-by's wandering past. Breakfast is scheduled at 8am and it soon arrives, so we move inside and again enjoy a welcome, healthy start to the day. Following this our thoughts turn to moving on to our next accommodation and pack the minibus with our luggage before embarking on another jaunt around the hotel grounds. This time we go in the opposite direction and we see the same species including Fox and Song Sparrows, Raven and Pacific Wren to Paul and Lily. We reach the cabins where we engage in conversation with a family leaving also and Julian scans the water, with the current moving quite fast. There are lots of Mew, California and Glaucous-winged Gulls, Flocks of Surf Scoters fly past plus a couple of White-winged Scoters. Then our guide spots a tiny auk floating past and calls "Marbled Murrelet" and eventually we all get to see this diminutive seabird. Once out of sight we continue back to the hotel with Margaret gives us a lesson in conifer identification, which is brilliant. After checking the bay and finding a winter plumage Common Loon, we say our "goodbyes" to Dan and head on our way out along the dirt track.

All the way along is evidence of bear, which makes it even more frustrating that we have only seen one briefly during dinner on the first night. Jane spots a Northern Flicker fly up from the track and once we reach the main road, we don't stop until Telegraph Cove. It is now a gloriously warm sunny day and after sorting out the parking ticket, Julian takes down to the marina, with a promise of starfish! We actually would like to see a 'Nudibranch' but Julian reckons that's unlikely. We reach the jetty boardwalk and start to peer into the clear waters and Mike says "here's a crab" and sure enough we start with a strangely named Dungeness Crab, quickly followed by the much more impressive Shield-backed Kelp Crab. A little further we see our first starfish – Leather Star, followed by Daisy Brittle Star and then Ochre Sea-star. A strange looking creature is a Bay Ghost Shrimp and a little further there is a closed Red Sea Anemone, which must look fabulous opened up. A couple of small jellyfish

are floating around but we cannot find their full identity -even with the help of the internet. It has been an interesting hour and Julian now gives us some time off (for good behaviour) to look round this pretty unique village and whale museum. It is lovely in the warm sunshine slowly strolling around taking in all the signage and local information. We reconvene just before 1pm with Julian having secured a picnic table for us to sit at and fetch our lunches from the van. It is another large lunch of filled roll, fruit, juice and a huge slab of cinnamon swirl. During lunch Hilary, does really well finding a 1st winter Yellow Warbler in the tree above our heads as Pat is sure it possesses an invisible cloak, completely disappearing amongst the foliage.

After lunch we return to the vehicle and set off back south away from Port McNeil, waving goodbye to the excellent Hidden Cove. It is an easy drive initially until we reach Zeballos Junction and we turn on to the metalled road, which is mainly dry and dusty with short patches of hard mud from the recent rains. It is very slow progress as we are stopping for the massive 'timber-laden' articulated lorries coming the other – some not even bothering to slow down on this single lane track. It is pretty quiet until Julian spots something coming out of the forest on the left and shouts "Black Bear -left!" A small bear runs out and along the road stopping briefly to look back before disappearing into the spruce forest. Julian is concerned that such a small bear is without its mother but is also sure it will be okay as it looked really healthy. The drive continues to Zaballos, without too much else as the level of logging wagon activity didn't really make it safe to stop.

We eventually reach our hotel and get assigned our rooms in this very quaint and quirky accommodation, with an equally quaint and quirky hostess – Cristina. We really like this place that is like something out of the Wild West and only accessible by vehicle until quite recently. We have a couple of hours before dinner, so Julian organises a short walk through this small fishing village as in the past it has been quite productive for migraine land birds.

Once ready we set off along the streets, which are normally quiet but there is a new bridge being built and construction work is ongoing at the moment. Still we manage to get away from the site and start to find the usual Great Blue Heron, Belted Kingfisher and Song Sparrows along the road. A few Cedar Waxwings are now found in a small spruce tree amongst the much commoner European Starlings but there are other things here. A young Yellow Warbler is spotted, along with another and then Julian says "Black-throated Gray Warbler" as we see a small grey, black and white bird disappear through the bushes, but then a Western Tanager appears. Julian now gets quite agitated as he has seen something that he was not expecting and says "a grosbeak?" This and the other birds are moving through the bushes so we walk quickly along the road to try and catch up with them and do so well. The tanager and the grosbeak are together and we get further good views of the former as it feeds out in view but the other is still frustrating us. Now it suddenly appears and Julian very excitedly says "flipping heck it's a Black-headed Grosbeak!" – a new bird for our guide and

we could tell with his beaming grin. The birds fly on and we need to get back to the hotel for dinner, so we wander slowly back, discussing this wonderful sequence of events.

This is such a good way to finish this surprisingly good 'travelling day, enjoying a terrific evening with a very good wholesome meal and as always great company.

Day 6: We are all at breakfast for 7.30am, having plenty of time before our scheduled Sea Otter boat tour with the owners husband Dan. An hour later we are readying ourselves to leave, with Jane taking the healthy option of walking down to the quay, through this quaint coastal village. Julian drives the rest of us down there and we are all together a little before our departure time, with our captain waiting at the boat. It is an absolutely glorious morning with wall to wall blue skies but still there is a chill in the air. We board and get ourselves seated as Dan edges us slowly away from the harbour and doing so we see a Great Blue Heron and no less than three Belted Kingfishers chasing each other. We have only gone a short distance when Dan stops to show us our first of many Bald Eagles, which looks resplendent in the morning sunlight. We continue to cruise the Zeballos Inlet marvelling at the incredible scenery opening up in front of us – this alone is a fantastic treat.

It is still quite chilly on the boat as we reach the Esperanza Inlet, where we stop for our first Harbour Seals plus a single Harlequin and Surf Scoter, before checking one of the beaches for any bear or wolf activity. Julian sees our first Sea Otter- a single animal in the distance, Dan attempts to get close but this guy is quite skittish so we leave it in peace. A little further Julian asks if we can get closer to some rocks as he has seen some waders that look interesting. Closer in he confirms their identity being mainly Black Turnstone with a few Surfbirds – something we were keen to see. Dan does incredibly well and drifts in really close allowing the photographers amongst us to get a few shots. Keen to press on we continue seeing the usual, Ring-billed, California and Glaucous-winged Gulls plus our first Common Loons.

Julian is constantly scanning as we head out towards the mouth of the inlet and shouts "Bear, Bear, Black Bear" to Dan, who immediately heads towards the dark shape being pointed out. As we get nearer it is clearly a big mature animal, with a fantastically glossy coat and large claws! Margaret who hadn't realised there was a bear is getting brilliant views of a Red-necked Grebe until she looks up and sees our mammal on the shoreline, now only metres away. The bear is conscious of our presence but it is not spooked and continues to go about his business of turning huge rocks looking for crabs and other tasty morsels. It is simply an amazing experience being so close to such a magnificent predator. Eventually our Black Bear moves slowly away as do we heading towards the Pacific Ocean and now finding Common Loons, drake Surf Scoter and a small flock of Common Mergansers. A comfort break is asked for and Dan duly obliges by dropping us off at one of the wee islets dotted about (excuse the pun), so we choose Saltery Bay.

We are now nearly at Gillam Channel- serious Sea Otter territory and start to see singles and pairs with great regularity, along with kayakers. These people are not good news (even though they mean well) as the otters regard them as predatory Killer Whales and keep a very safe distance. We do get some great looks until Dan spots a crèche of 30+ animals together in the open water. We try to get closer but the combination of boat and kayak send them underwater, so Dan decides to move away and maybe try again later. We keep going out towards the ocean to the heart of Gillam Channel, where we get excellent views of a Marbled Murrelet, several Red-necked Grebes but sadly only brief looks at a winter plumage Red-throated and Pacific Loon. We leave the channel and head back in the direction of the raft, spotting it a little further away and slightly less individuals but still a good number. This time there is no attention from kayakers and Dan skilfully gets us alongside this group drifting in the water. They are aware of our presence but don't scatter underwater, it is obvious our captain knows these animals intimately.

Time is moving on and we need to start back towards Zaballos on this glorious morning but we certainly don't take the direct route as Dan skirts the beaches and coves looking for wildlife. We see plenty more individual Sea Otters plus a Harbour Seal hauled out on one of the tiny islands. There are more seabirds, with further looks at Bald Eagles (seen now in double figures), Mike spots a couple of Black Oystercatchers and on another large exposed rock there are a combination of Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants. Eventually we make it back into Zaballos Inlet with the town in the distance and the towering mountains, which make the back-drop look magnificent – it is now almost five hours since leaving the harbour. It has been a fantastic morning but everyone now is ready for some lunch and a rest back at the hotel. At the jetty we thank Dan very much for his excellent work, climb back into the van and head back to the accommodation stopping briefly for a Black-tailed Deer on a lawn.

The lunch is delicious but we are now conscious that we will be eating again in just over two hours as we have to go out later looking for American Beaver. This time is given to ourselves and most of us just rest in the heat of the afternoon, although Margaret enjoys herself sketching the surrounding mountains, that look resplendent. At 5pm we are back at the dining area, enjoying another lovely meal but most of us are not that hungry and cannot do it justice. We decide to forgo our sweet as Cristina has offered to have it ready for us on our return from the Beaver expedition. A little after 6pm we convene at the van and Julian drives us all out to the Mason Falls pond, seeing an American Red Squirrel cross the road enroute. Thankfully the traffic is much quieter than the previous day and we can stand at the edge of Mason's Falls Pond without being covered in dust from the logging trucks!

We spread out along the edge of this large pond and it is initially quiet apart from Julian seeing a Ruffed Grouse fly across the road, which sadly Mike missed looking the other direction – chalk up another DLT (Dodgy Leader Tick!) It is still pretty light when Julian spots a movement in the ponds channel in the corner and says

“Beaver – coming through”. Sure enough the aquatic mammal swims into the main pond and keeps close to the reeds but it’s coming directly towards us. Paul is already armed with his camera and gets some excellent shots in the low-light as it swims slowly past and also dives allowing us to see it under the water, which is brilliant. We are all managing to get good views of this animal before it disappears at the other end but after a few minutes it reappears. However as we have moved position to the bottom end, Hilary spots an American Dipper on the shingle spit, in fact there are two together. This is superb as its yet another of our target species and we are getting some excellent looks through the telescope. The light is fading and we continue to watch the American Beaver and Dippers (there is now a third) before Julian suggests we return to the hotel for dessert – there is no argument.

Back in Zeballos we head back to the dining area, where our hosts offer us something to eat and drink and whilst enjoying this we complete the checklist. It has been another fantastic day and tomorrow we leave for Campbell River.

Day 7: We have a pre-breakfast walk planned and all meet up at the agreed 7.30am meeting time outside. Julian takes us again off down the main road, where we see an American Red Squirrel along with a Merlin flying over and the usual American Robins and Steller’s Jay. Instead of continuing down the road we divert along the river into the campsite, where we see our first Common Merganser along with a few Coho Salmon rising from the water. Mike also spots a Great Blue Heron and a very noisy Belted Kingfisher flies past. We now again divert along a narrow track with huge sword ferns either side until we reach the bridge over the stream, which is slow due to low tide. It is very quiet apart from many of the usual suspects although Julian picks out a Western Tanager, which continually disappears in the dense Alder foliage. We are now back on the road and continue down towards the end, where we look out over the bay seeing more Common Merganser, Belted Kingfisher and Great Blue Heron. Mike spots a passerine disappear into a flowerbed, which turns out to be our only Savannah Sparrow of the walk. It is now time to head back for breakfast and slowly we wander off to the hotel, with Jane spotting a Song Sparrow along the way and getting back around 8.45am.

After another excellent meal here we collect our luggage, load the minibus and set off along the dirt track to the main road. It’s a bumpy journey but it isn’t long before we are screeching to a halt with Julian shouting “bear on the left!” and sure enough there is a sub-adult Black Bear loping up the metalled road. This bear is sensible and quickly after being seen gets off the road and heads into the forest, where it’s safe. We carry on the road, taking it easy as the traffic is heavy with forestry vehicles and we didn’t want any accidents. After about an hour we reach the tarmac and drive south east towards Campbell River, stopping at Hoomak Lake rest area for a much needed comfort stop and leg stretch. It is now getting towards lunch time as we near Campbell River and Julian has a plan to have our picnic lunches before reaching the hotel. We turn off the busy main road into a quiet lumber yard on the edge of Discovery Passage in Duncan Bay. We are

probably not meant to be there but no one seems to mind, so we sit with our boxed lunches and look out towards Quadra Island with the main land mountains in the distance. We have brief views of a female Hooded Merganser before she flies off, plus out in the bay there are Surf Scoters, Pelagic Cormorants and our first Bonaparte's Gulls. There are also a few Harbour Seals, bobbing around in the water and we also find one 'hauled out' on some logs. Soon enough we are back in the road and only 15 minutes later we are at our lovely accommodation. It doesn't take too long to check-in and Julian asks us to reconvene an hour later, with a view to driving south to John Ford Country Park.

The weather is not brilliant as we leave our accommodation north of Campbell River and drive through the town south along the Discovery Passage coast. A little before our planned destination there is a delay in the traffic, so Julian decides to drive into another parking area where he has seen some gulls loafing on the rocks. This is a temporary stop while the congestion dies down but quite productive as we get another masterclass in gull id and we also find our first Thayer's Gull amongst the commoner ones. Paul and Lily are also enjoying themselves as they have gone to photograph some First Nation Totem Poles and carvings that are on display at the south end of the parking area. After a while we decide to drive on to the John Ford Country Park, which now does not take too long.

Thankfully the drizzle has now stopped and Julian sets up his telescope to look out into the bay, which initially looks pretty quiet but we are hopeful. There are the usual flock of Surf Scoters, Common Loons, Pelagic Cormorants, Mallard and several Killdeer on beach. A single Harbour Porpoise surfaces that unfortunately only a few of us see followed by Julian finding a pair of gorgeous Pacific Divers in full summer plumage – just wonderful. Mike has also been scanning and finds a Rhinoceros Auklet, which is not unexpected but better are a couple of Marbled Murrelets – one in summer and one in winter plumage! Julian is now pointing out both Western and Horned Grebes, with a small flock of Harlequin Duck flying past including one handsome male. It has been a very productive hour but the weather is again deteriorating, so we decide to head back to the hotel and give us plenty of time before our evening meal. Just as we are getting back into the bus a Merlin flies over and whilst we are driving Pat spots a Black-tailed Deer on one of the roadside garden lawns – you wouldn't think they hunted them here!

Day 8: Game day for our Grizzly tour and the excitement is evident even at breakfast, which is taken from 7am. We agree to meet an hour later at the tour office, which is right next to our room block. Julian sorts things out with the company and we first need to take a water taxi to Quadra Island then hook up with 'Go Wild'. As we wait for the taxi we get to see a couple of Bald Eagles, Anna's Hummingbird, two Spotted Towhee's and lots of gulls, which include the usual Glaucous-winged, California and Ring-billed. Eventually we climb aboard our boat and cross the Discovery Passage to Quadra Island, where we meet up with Jack – our skipper for the 70Km journey into Bute Inlet. Our captain is excellent,

explaining things as we motor along taking the route south of Quadra because of the tidal situation.

A voice comes on the radio informing us of a Humpback Whale between us and Bute Inlet – it would be rude not to try and see it. So off we go into Evan's Bay, passing lots of birds on the water such as Common Merganser, Common Murre, Common Loon and even a couple of Rhinoceros Auklets. As we get into the bay we see a 'blow' in the distance, then another and speed in that direction getting fairly close when they surface again. This time there are flukes, which usually indicates a deeper dive, so we could have quite a few minutes before it shows again. This passes quite slowly but again a little further away right along the rocky shoreline the Humpbacks break the surface and make their distinctive blow. We move in the whales direction, watching as they surface a couple more times before going deep again – they are fabulous to see so close to the shore. Jack however has in the meantime received another message over the radio of Orcas but this pod is moving away from us – if we want to see them we need to go now as we have a time-slot to keep at the First Nation camp. However it is game on and off we go further towards the mainland, with a Jack pointing out Michelle Pfeiffer's summer house and Bill Gates' island! As we get to Jimmy Judd Island through the Gillard Pass we encounter a couple more small boats and they are watching Orca – a fabulous family pod. Sadly these animals move swiftly away as they are travelling with the fast-moving current. There are also a few Steller's Sealions in the turbulent water, making it look effortless, swimming through the torrents and eddies. However we need to go.

Our skipper makes good time as we reach the mouth of Bute Inlet but we still have 40kms to the Orford River, which takes our very speedy boat about an hour – in plenty of time for our 11.30am Grizzly tour. We soon dock at the small jetty and as we stand waiting Julian spots our first Grizzlies of the day in the estuary – a sow and two cubs. We cannot believe this but they are a bit distant and not easy to see, fingers crossed for more later. We are now introduced to representatives of the Homalko First Nation trip, who are going to be our tour guides in this area, only right as it is their land we are visiting. A bus takes us to the visitor centre, where we make full use of the facilities along with looking at their fabulous pictures and artefacts on display. After a while we are back in the large bus and heading to our first viewing platform alongside the Orford River.

As we drive the narrow vegetated tracks, our First Nation driver and guide point out signs written in their native tongue of the local wildlife, making the short journey quite interesting. We get to the platform and as a safety precaution the locals check the surrounding area and also if there is anything on view – and there is! We are advised to go quickly on to the platform and as we do we can see Grizzlies in the river – another mother with two young cubs, unbelievable in less than one hour our bear tally is already six! We are now here a while watching the antics of the young bears in the water, trying to catch their own salmon under the watchful instruction of their mother. It is brilliant to see this and how

differently the cubs get on in their quest, with one being pretty successful. The sow does not seem fazed at all with our presence, although she keeps her charges a safe distance away. The platform is very busy with people making any kind of movement difficult and when Julian finds a Western Wood Pewee and a couple of Common Yellowthroats in an adjacent bush they are only seen by a lucky few standing nearby. There are two bus loads around and the second set of visitors are being unsuccessful with Grizzly Bears, so we are asked to move on and allow them a look at these three individuals, which is only fair.

We climb back into the old bus and set off again, following the river, stopping suddenly as there are two more young bears moving through the forest next to the track. We can see them clearly through the branches but photography seems impossible with both people and vegetation in the way. Once these have moved away we go to a second larger platform, where we can now see lots of Chum Salmon trying desperately to make their way to their spawning grounds. It's actually quite sad to realise this is their final act in life and they are also running the gauntlet of bears and other predators. Here, we also see another individual, this time a big male making short work of any salmon he comes close to. Our luck is certainly in today with these fabulous Grizzly Bears.

After a while we move on again and when we reach the next viewing point we are informed of a 'bull' Roosevelt Elk but it's difficult to see. Sadly it disappears back into the Willow scrub so we turn our attention to the gulls feeding on the waste fish littering the shingle banks of this glacial river. There are lots of Glaucous-winged and California Gulls, plus several Ring-billed with Julian pointing out an American Herring Gull, which is new to the list. A Bald Eagle flies over then the elk reappears and decides to cross the river, which is brilliant as it's a big male with some very impressive antlers and we are getting some fabulous views. Time is now moving on towards our lunchtime but we have no thoughts of food as we are reflecting on our nine bears and how lucky we have been. Back in the bus we start back down the river towards the estuary, only to encounter our third set of three Grizzly Bears – another sow and two cubs, quite incredible. We have seen so many Grizzlies in three hours, far the best tally for Julian who has done similar trips at least seven times and nickname our guide - 'Twelve Bears'.

Back at the visitor centre we welcome the comfort break and our boxed lunch, as we sit in the lovely warm sunshine at the picnic tables, reflecting on our day so far. Jane is ever vigilant and finds a wee Red-legged Frog in the grass but it doesn't like our attention and quickly hops out of sight under the verandah. Following lunch and now being mid-afternoon we are invited back into the bus one more time and taken back down to the jetty, where we meet up with Jack and our boat back to Campbell River. We don't expect a repeat performance on the way back but our skipper is determined to make it memorable by this time taking us through the north side passage of Quadra Island. As we move back down through Bute Inlet we see rafts of Surf Scoter, with literally 1000's sat

on the water and the spectacle of them alighting as we pass by is fantastic against the backdrop of glacial green water within this picturesque 'fjord'.

Further on we travel seeing Pacific and Common Loons, Marbled Murrelets and a couple of Harlequin Ducks flying by. Eventually we reach Stewart Island and there are lots of Steller's Sealions playing in the water amongst the eddies, which is fascinating and on the rocks there are lots of Pelagic Cormorants. We are nearing the north side of Quadra and Julian has warned us not to stand up as the turbulence within the current can make our boat shift at anytime. Jack knows these waters well and our passage is pretty smooth but to see the 100's of Bonaparte's Gulls around the whirlpools of Hole in the Wall is superb. Then we see another cetacean – Dall's Porpoise and we had hoped to see these better but when they come alongside and bow-ride our boat it is yet another 'magic moment' on this day of several. It is an awesome thing to see these 'mini-orcas' speeding along under the water just below where we are stood.

Eventually we are back into the Discovery Passage and heading south to the jetty associated with our hotel. We thank Jack very much for such a fabulous day and wander back silently to the hotel, not quite believing what an incredible time we have just had – but it's all true. Julian arranges a time to meet for dinner, followed by the checklist but a pre-dinner drink and chat is almost as welcome!

Day 9: This morning starts overcast with a prospect of rain, with Julian and Hilary (who's a little under the weather) doing a bit of a pre-breakfast walk around the grounds seeing a couple of Northern Flickers, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, American Robin and lots of European Starlings. We all meet up in the breakfast dining room with the news from Andy our concierge that all fishing and wildlife tours have been cancelled due the potential severity of the weather front heading our way – we are so glad we had already done our grizzly tour. After breakfast Julian agrees a meeting time with a sketchy plan that initially involves visiting the retail park at Campbell River.

At 9am we are setting off and soon enough we turning off the main road into town towards Tyee Spit, where Julian and Mike are leaving us to try and sort out a charger for his camera battery. We all go off to the small open hide that overlooks the inlet, which is sheltered from the rain that is starting to fall. As we get there Jane spots three mammals running up the shore and alerts Paul who sees them also before they disappear into the deep grass. Then with a little discussion agree that they were American Mink, certainly being mustelids and much smaller than an otter. In the water there are a few ducks, which turn out to be Hooded Mergansers along with Common Mergansers, Mallard and Pintail, all of which are confirmed by Julian upon his return with Mike. They also have a plan to return to the retail park for 10am as that's when the appropriate shops are open, in the mean time we continue to look out over the inlet. We don't see too much more, apart from a couple of Bald Eagles, Great Blue Heron and lots of gulls. Just before 10am we set off back to the minibus with Julian pointing out a Golden-crowned Sparrow sat on the track we are using.

We drive the short distance to the retail park and first visit a very nice First Nations shop, where we spend some money on gifts for home. Mike has gone to sort out the camera and returns with the news that we could have a solution but needs to come back that afternoon. With the weather deteriorating by the hour, there is no argument from the rest of us. Julian suggests a hot drink, which is most welcome and after this we endeavour to find Lily some postcards – not an easy task these days. Failing miserably at this and wanting to at least try some wildlife watching Julian sets off south along the coastal highway. This is pretty quiet in the poor conditions, seeing only Ravens and Turkey Vultures. We turn off the highway at Courtney and drive down to the coast road, where we hope to find a petrol station before reaching Fanny Bay. This does happen and its smiles all round as Lily has also found some proper postcards, which is just brilliant.

On we drive the short distance to the jetty at Fanny Bay, with the rain and high winds battering our minibus. We are here to see California Sealion but an initial look reveals none – what is going on? Julian has seen these sealions all the previous years – what is going on? Our guide unpacks our boxed lunches and hands them to us before walking off in the miserable weather to look for them. He returns about 20 minutes later pretty wet and dejected having failed to find anything else except – Harbour Seals, Black Oystercatcher and more gulls. Once he has finished his humongous sandwich we decide to set off back north heading for Miracle Beach Provincial Park.

We arrive into the parking area with the weather still being pretty miserable, cold and wet but we are all up a walk to aide the digestion of the humongous lunchtime sandwiches. Once we are ready we set off through this old growth forest of Douglas Fir, Western Red Cedar, Large-leafed Maple and Western Hemlock – it is a magical place despite the rain. We reach the coast and start to find some birds along the shoreline, which include a mixed flock of Black-bellied Plover and Black Turnstone but careful scrutiny reveals a few Western Sandpipers and a single Sanderling. There are also the usual gulls around but we do pick out a couple of Thayer's amongst them and around the river-mouth there are a few Mallard. Out to sea Mike spots a few White-winged Scoter flying south and a raft of Harlequins, with a couple of handsome male birds. Sadly these are not easy to see through the telescope as they keep disappearing into the trough of the waves. Julian is conscious that we have spent enough time in the rain so decides to walk slowly back in a circular route through the park back to the van. We are glad to get inside but all agree that it was nice to have a walk having spent so long in the bus previously.

We get a request to “home James and don't spare the horses” so off we go driving north towards Campbell River past Oyster Bay. It is around here that Julian stops suddenly and pulls over saying “just seen an otter running through a garden on the right!” Obviously our guide has had too many magic mushrooms in his sandwich! It sadly takes a long time to turn round and Jane is right by saying it needs to be running in circles for it still to be there but we try anyway.

As predicted there is no sign of this aquatic mustelid but we do love a tryer. On we go again, this time not stopping until we reach the retail park where Mike's camera battery has been left (hopefully) charging. On the way we have seen a few things with Paul spotting a few Pelagic Cormorants, Hilary and Pat again see a Black-tailed Deer along with 100's of Bonaparte's Gulls along the shoreline. Sadly Mike's battery hasn't charged, so on we go a short distance back to the hotel, where we have a good break before recovering for the daily checklist and then another excellent buffet meal in the restaurant.

Day 10: The weather is still overcast but not raining as we meet Julian again for a pre-breakfast walk around the grounds, with Hilary and Jane enjoying a lovely Anna's Hummingbird display and a couple of bright Yellow Warblers near their room block. We are now joined by Paul and Lily, so we wander up along the hedge line seeing a 'dark' Merlin fly over. There are the usual American Robins flying around but we also see and hear a family party of Chestnut-backed Chickadees before the breakfast room beckons at 8am.

As always Julian opts for a table with a view of Discovery Passage and after greeting Pat, Mike and Margaret he starts to scan the water whilst drinking his coffee and eating. There are lots of Bonaparte's Gulls around with much lesser numbers of California and Glaucous-winged. The usual Common Mergansers are looking like a mini flotilla along with a few Mallard around the jetty. Across the other side of the island towards Quadra Island he sees a huge feeding frenzy of gulls followed by a dorsal fin and Julian says excitedly "Orca across the channel" – Jane is straight on to it as are Paul and Lily whose is also sat there. We attract attention and the rest of us get to see this family group of Orca in the bay just offshore from Quadra – just incredible. Then Mike who's stood nearby says "there's a blow?", just offshore from the restaurant are a couple of big Steller's Sealions, plus a couple of Harbour Seals – what a trio of marine mammals as we are having our breakfast! Time is however moving on and Julian is keen to leave at 9am as we have a long day ahead.

Incredibly (and testament to our group) we leave slightly ahead of time, with the knowledge that Jane has seen the Orcas from her room balcony. We drive south along the highway until we reach the exit for Strathcona Provincial Park, where we head up the mountain to the main parking area of this part of Mount Washington. It is much colder here and still overcast but the rain is holding off as the forecast predicted. We set off on the Paradise Meadows, which is a fantastic boardwalk trail bordered by species of montane trees and plants unique to this area.

Initially the wildlife is quiet apart from a few Chickadees and an American Red Squirrel. Then Julian hears a familiar call, stops and gets out a biscuit – there are 'whisky jacks' (Gray Jays) around. In fact it is just one that joins us, sitting on our palms (and even Hilary's hat) taking morsels of food – what a highlight. We continue around the path, stopping again for a mixed flock of thrushes flying around, there are obviously American Robins but there are also another target

of ours – the gorgeous Varied Thrush. We get fabulous looks at several birds through the telescope, which is a real bonus. Also here we find our first Dark-eyed (or Oregon) Juncos along the wooden pathway that are also showing incredibly well. This has made our morning and as it nears midday we carry on round the loop getting back to the facilities and small visitor centre as the drizzle starts to fall – what timing! The kind lady in the visitor centre offers us a hot drink, which we gladly engage in, as we have got quite cold walking this mountain trail.

About 30 minutes later, we are back in the minibus and driving back down the mountain with the rain becoming increasingly more steady. Julian is thinking about lunch and where to eat our sandwiches, opting to return to Fanny Bay and try again for the elusive California Sealions. Sadly they still have not returned but we enjoy our lunch looking out into the bay seeing much the same things as the previous day. In fact an articulated lorry reversing skilfully down a narrow jetty was the most interesting thing of the stay. With a long drive still and wanting to make another stop, Julian is again keen to move on, which we soon do. As we drive the rain starts again but incredibly stops just before our next planned stop to see the 'Big Tree!'

Cathedral Grove is a stand of huge Douglas Fir, including the tallest in the world at around 76m, which is big and when you stand under it, the sheer scale is immense. It is still cold and grey here but we enjoy walking around the tracks and boardwalks of this impressive forest, where we also get to look at several American Red Squirrels, American Robin, with both Red Crossbill and Pine Siskin flying over calling but are not seen sadly. We continue around the trail loop back to the main road and after a visit to the facilities we drive on towards Port Alberni then the long and winding journey to Tofino. Late afternoon we arrive at our lovely accommodation south of the city and easily get checked in. Julian points out that there is a short walk to a platform that overlooks a tidal inlet and we will be going there to round off the day.

A few of us decide to make the short walk with Mike and Margaret getting their best view of Pacific Wren along the way. The tide is out so there is a lot of exposed mud and wet channels that produces a couple of Great Blue Heron, lots of gulls and a Song Sparrow in the adjacent bushes. We walk back to the hotel with plenty of time to freshen up before our first evening meal.

Day 11: Another pre-breakfast visit is arranged and we drive the short journey to Chesterman Beach at 7.30am. We walk out and the ocean is breaking big waves on to the shoreline but there are lots of surfers, dog-walkers and strange people taking selfies! This does not help our cause as all this disturbance are causing the waders to be unsettled but we do eventually manage to see Western Sandpipers and a Sanderling on the beach. A small group of Killdeer fly over and there are a few Savannah Sparrows around the washed up logs but we agree to go back to our hotel. With some time to spare before breakfast we walk out to the inlet viewing platform to find the tide is totally out and consequently pretty quiet.

There are a few gulls around plus we see a Belted Kingfisher, Great Blue Heron and Song Sparrow. Julian then hears a 'crest-like' call and finds the source – Golden-crowned Kinglet. In fact there are several in the small conifer along with a few Chestnut-backed Chickadees and we even manage good views through the telescope. It is now breakfast time.

After breakfast we make the short drive to Tofino, from where we are taking our whale watching boat trip. We get suited up in our floatation gear - wonderfully comfortable and warm and designed to keep you that way plus keep you afloat if anything did ever go wrong. Then we walk down the jetty where we meet Howie and board our little boat, a Boston Whaler, perfect for this outing.

We head out into the sound, towards some islands and pausing when we see anything of interest. We soon see our only Heermann's Gull flying past - a smart dark bird with a bright red bill. We pass Common Murres, three remarkably tame Rhinoceros Auklets and on the rocky islands both Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants. The sea is quite choppy but there is also quite a swell and this is beginning to get to a few people sat at the front. Julian spots a Sea Otter and normally we don't get close views of this species but on this occasion this animal is remarkably tame and allows us to fully enjoy it and take some pretty good photos too bobbing around in the water.

Howie now takes us into Ahous Bay, where 'snowflake' – a young Gray Whale has been feeding for the past few weeks. Initially it is quiet apart from a few sea-duck, until our skipper spots a blow in the distance which looks to be coming towards us. We speed over in that general direction and Howie cuts the engines, searching all around for it to surface. It blows again and close by and it is much closer and still coming nearer moving slowly past us and further into the bay. Howie then spots another blow and another – two more Gray Whales, which is fantastic and the radio conversations are electric. Snowflake keeps going so we leave him and head for the area of the other animals quickly picking up the blow as we near the shore. Howie also knows this whale being the friend of Snowflake as they have associated with each other for a while now, especially as Snowflake's mother is away doing her own thing. This Gray Whale surfaces again but then it breaches right in front of us, which is incredible as they rarely do this. We are all on alert for more and this young Gray Whale duly obliges a second time lifting itself out of the water – what a thrill. Our time is moving on and Howie wants to show us more, so we leave this animal to the newly arriving boats and speed off to White Beach Cove.

Howie knows these waters incredibly well and where the animals are but even he is staggered to see 'Snowflake's mam' in this bay, making for an incredible five individual Gray Whales. Apparently a fantastic total for this time of year! There are also lots of seabirds here and we get further good looks at Red-necked and Horned Grebes, a couple of Marbled Murrelets, Rhinoceros Auklet and our only Pigeon Guillemots of the tour. Our time is coming to an end, so Howie guides

us skillfully round the channels and islets towards Tofino Harbour seeing a cracking Osprey enroute. Soon enough we are moving into our mooring station and saying “thank you and goodbye” to Howie, who has been superb, making this morning such an adventure. We walk slowly back into town to the Whale Centre with Julian and Jane going ahead as our guide is keen to commandeer a couple of picnic tables overlooking the Tofino Bay. This is thankfully achieved (thanks Jane) and we enjoy our picnic lunches in a lovely location in equally lovely warm sunshine.

After lunch Julian plans a quick return to the hotel, which is brilliant as he spots a gorgeous male Red Crossbill sat in a spruce from the car park, which Hilary and Mike are thrilled about. Once ready we drive on towards Ucluelet turning off the main road to the Wickaninnish Beach and Visitor Centre. Here we park and walk out to the viewing platform adjacent to the centre. This overlooks the beach and bay, with waves crashing in over the offshore rocks, making for quite an impressive scene. On the beach there is a flock of waders, which Julian quickly identifies as Sanderling and out around the rocks there are both Black Turnstone and Black Oystercatchers. Double Crested Cormorants are flying past and another Osprey flies over but generally it's quiet and more time is spent looking at the museum with the centre.

Mid-afternoon Julian says we will move on to Ucluelet where he knows of a fish farm that can be good for Black Bear. We near Ucluelet and turn towards the bay, with Julian trying to remember desperately the route along these minor roads. He eventually does find the track to the river farm but is met with a locked metal gate that will not be opened until the following morning – he cannot believe this and certainly a change from the last time he visited? Maybe there has been an incident with a Black Bear as they do come close visiting the fish farm? However there is always a ‘plan B’ and our guide takes us into the town, where he knows an excellent local ice cream parlour, where he kindly treats us! By the time we have finished and savoured these lovely desserts it is late afternoon so Julian decides we shall head back to the hotel and visit the viewing platform overlooking the inlet.

We all head out along the track to the platform where the tide is again out but we soon find a cracking Belted Kingfisher sat in the trees and a couple of close Great Blue Herons. There are the usual Glaucous-winged, California and Ring-billed Gulls, along with a few American Wigeon, which is nice. A Northern Flicker flies over calling landing briefly, before moving on and Julian points out a ‘feeding flock’ of Golden-crowned Kinglets and Dark-eyed Junco in the nearby bushes, bringing to an end another wonderful day on Vancouver Island.

Day 12: Our final day on the island and it's mostly travelling but with stops enroute to Duke Point ferry terminal. It is another lovely day but definitely cooler than our first days of the holiday and this is reflected in the autumnal colours starting to show through. Jane decides on a walk to the bay viewing platform and things are again quiet but does see a Pacific Wren, which is new for her.

Breakfast takes its usual time but we are prepared and still manage to leave the hotel around the proposed departure time. The initial journey is back along the heavily forested winding road with lots of traffic to keep us company but once we exit the Pacific Rim NP things start to ease off until we reach Port Alberni. We make a comfort stop at the first available fuel station as its required but as we wait in the parking area Mike spots a woodpecker in the adjacent conifer. Julian gets a pretty good look at the bill and seeing its short confirms it to be a Downy Woodpecker, which are superficially like Hairy but slightly smaller and with an obviously smaller bill more akin to our Lesser Spotted. Most of us manage to get some kind of view before it disappears but sadly not all. Woodpeckers have been difficult on this tour and this bird is a nice addition.

As we enter Port Alberni we turn off on to a minor road that takes us up into the hills behind and as we pass the rural accommodation Lily spots a Black-tailed Deer on one of the lawns. Eventually we reach the track that takes us down to Stamp Fall Provincial Park, where we park and get ready for a short walk. The river is a torrent of water and looks fabulous as follow its edge to the man-made salmon run. Margaret and Paul have found a 'live' Banana Slug that really underwhelms them but Julian is ecstatic! At the salmon run we enjoy the great spectacle of hundreds of Coho Salmon making their way to their spawning grounds either moving up the run or the traditional method of leaping up the rapids. We also see them waiting patiently to go, making a 'fish frenzy' in the calm waters – it is brilliant. However, we are on a schedule and Julian wants us back at the picnic tables with our boxed lunches, which again are incredibly filling and delicious.

Once we are ready we dispose of the rubbish appropriately and set off again, returning to Port Alberni then on past Cathedral Grove to Coombes, where we have another comfort/coffee stop. Although this place is all about 'goats on the roof' and we get to see these now interesting tourist attractions – whatever next 'otters in the attic?' Julian is now pretty relaxed about our final third of the journey as we have both plenty of time and it is most highway and we arrive at the terminal entrance 45 minutes before the boat's departure – perfect.

Soon enough we are called aboard, park and make our way to the sun deck for the duration of the voyage. It is generally quiet but we do see a couple of Double Crested Cormorants and the usual gulls leaving harbour. Then as we reach Delta there are further Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, White-winged Scoter, Common Loon and a small flock of Bonaparte's Gulls, which is unusual here. We get back to the van and drive off the ferry towards Tsawwassen with Paul seeing a Horned Grebe in the bay along with Harbour Seals and more gulls and comorants.

We quickly reach our hotel and get checked in, with about an hour to sort ourselves out before meeting for the penultimate checklist and also our selection of highlights of the tour with species and place of the trip plus our 'magic

moment', which brings back some great memories of a terrific time in British Columbia. After this we drive to the restaurant, where we enjoy our final evening meal in Canada – I think most of us are sad to be leaving.

Day 13: Our meeting time is 9am and after breakfast we bring our luggage to reception, where Julian has organised a storage room to leave it while out this morning. Right on time (as usual) we set off again for the George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary. The journey is actually pretty quiet seeing just the usual common species apart from a male Ring-necked Pheasant at the side of the minor road. It is a glorious morning as we cross the river to Reifel Island and on to the bird Reserve. As we drive along the entrance road we check the adjacent river finding several Hooded Mergansers and a few Mallard. Then at the parking area we stop and get ourselves ready, while Julian sorts out the entrance fee.

The advice from the lady in reception (who also confirms the Curlew Sandpiper to be BC's fourth record!) is head straight down to an area where a Great Horned Owl is sometimes seen, before anyone else gets there – so we head off. There is an Anna's Hummingbird at the nectar feeder, with Pat spotting a huge Carolina Locust on the ground below. We now walk out on to the Reserve stopping to add the Black-crowned Night-heron to the daily list along with lots of Red-winged Blackbirds, Black-capped Chickadees and House Sparrows. We take the track along the conifer trail, having Mallard and Black-capped Chickadees as our constant companions. Mike spots a lovely male Wood Duck in the river and on the track we get good views of Spotted Towhee and Dark-eyed Junco, with Hilary seeing a 'catharus' thrush but sadly not well enough to name it. The main river channel has Green-winged Teal, Gadwall and Shoveler with Jane spotting our first Savannah Sparrow of the morning. We wander slowly on and thankfully it is quiet with people today as again we stop for more sparrows with several White-crowned, a single Golden-crowned and a few Song Sparrows to look through.

We eventually reach the corner where the owl had been seen a couple of days previously and we start to search but Margaret grabs our complete attention when she calmly says "oh, there's a snake!" Sure enough right next to her shoe is a gorgeous adult Garter Snake just basking but our movement disturbs it and just slowly slithers off out of sight under a hawthorn. We continue the owl search and Julian the says "Varied Thrush!" and sure enough on a low branch is a female, which is brilliant and the first time our guide has seen one here. There are lots of other things around but not what we had hoped for so we (being conscious of the time) continue on towards the salt marsh. We really haven't gone far when an American Mink crosses the track right in front of us but disappears again immediately.

Out on the salt marsh track we start to find lots of Long-billed Dowitchers in the shallow pools along with lots more wildfowl and some 'cracking' Northern Harriers over the reeds. A Virginia Rail squeals from deep cover and we don't see it but overhead there are both Barn and an odd Bank Swallow (Sand Martin).

On we move now keeping a track of the time to a viewing platform, where Julian quickly spots a close Pied-billed Grebe (with Paul getting a great photo) and Hilary finds a Yellow Warbler along with Common Yellowthroat in a nearby tree. There are more dowitchers here along with a Lesser Yellowlegs, but it is now time to head back to the Reserve centre. We stop briefly to look at the Greater Yellowlegs before having another look at the hummingbird feeder while we use the facilities. Eventually we climb back into the minibus and head for the entrance but within metres Julian stops and says "Lesser Canada Goose". Amongst the much commoner Greater Canada's are two diminutive 'Cackling Geese' – a fabulous way to finish both this visit and our holiday to British Columbia.

We now do leave the island and return to the hotel, seeing a couple of Red-tailed Hawks along the route. At the hotel we change, have our lunch, talk a little and leave for the airport. Mike and Margaret are leaving earlier than the rest of us for Toronto and we wish them a fond farewell and safe journey. The rest of us have a leisurely check-in and wait for our flight, which leaves on time back to the UK.

Day 14: Around midday we arrive back into London Heathrow, so completing our wonderful British Columbia adventure.

Species of the Trip

Paul – Sea Otter/Black Bear

Lily – Gray Whale/Gray Jay

Mike – Grizzly Bear/Varied Thrush

Margaret – Sea Otter/Surf Scoter

Hilary – Gray Jay/Steller's Sealion

Pat – Grizzly Bear/Golden-crowned Kinglet

Jane – Sea Otter/Wood Duck

Julian – Black-headed Grosbeak/Sea Otters

Place of the Trip

Paul – Bute Inlet/Hidden Cove

Lily – Bute Inlet

Mike – Zeballos Inlet/George C. Reifel Bird Sanctuary

Margaret – Hidden Cove

Hilary – Zeballos Inlet

Pat – Hidden Cove/Telegraph Cove

Jane – Bute Inlet/Ahous Bay

Julian – Bute Inlet

Magic Moment

Paul – Dall's Porpoise bow riding/Black Bear give us 'the look'

Lily – Raft of Sea Otters

Mike – Close Black Bear on the Zeballos cruise

Margaret – Zeballos boat tour – seeing a Red-necked Grebe close then realising there was a Black Bear near too

Hilary – Large raft of Surf Scoters

Pat – Breaching Gray Whale/Raft of Sea Otters

Jane – Seeing the Beavers in Mason Falls lagoon

Julian – Breaching Gray Whale

Bird List

Red-throated Loon
Pacific Loon
Common Loon
Pied-billed Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Horned Grebe
Western Grebe
Fork-tailed Petrel
Double-crested Cormorant
Brant's Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Mute Swan
Canada Goose
Lesser Canada (Cackling) Goose
White-fronted Goose
Wood Duck
American Wigeon
Gadwall
Green-winged Teal
Mallard
Northern Pintail
Northern Shoveler
Harlequin Duck
White-winged Scoter
Surf Scoter
Common Merganser
Hooded Merganser
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Red-tailed Hawk
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon
American Kestrel
American Coot
Ring-necked Pheasant
Sandhill Crane
Virginia Rail
Black Oystercatcher
Black-bellied Plover
Killdeer

Long-billed Dowitcher
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Black Turnstone
Surfbird
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Stilt Sandpiper
Curlew Sandpiper
Red-necked Phalarope
Arctic Skua
Heermann's Gull
Mew Gull
Ring-billed Gull
California Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull
American Herring Gull
Thayer's Gull
Kittiwake
Bonaparte's Gull
Caspian Tern
Common Tern
Common Murre
Pigeon Guillemot
Marbled Murrelet
Rhinoceros Auklet
Feral Pigeon
Band-tailed Pigeon
Collared Dove
Vaux's Swift
Anna's Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Northern Flicker
Downy Woodpecker
Western Wood Pewee
Steller's Jay
Gray Jay
Northwestern Crow
Raven
Barn Swallow
Bank Swallow
Black-capped Chickadee
Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
Pacific Wren

American Dipper
Golden-crowned Kinglet
American Robin
Varied Thrush
Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Black-throated Gray Warbler
Yellow Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Western Tanager
Spotted Towhee
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Golden-crowned Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Black-headed Grosbeak
Red-winged Blackbird
Brewer's Blackbird
Red Crossbill
House Finch
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Mammal List

Black Bear
Grizzly Bear
Coyote
Northern Raccoon
Sea Otter
River Otter
Steller's Sealion
Harbour Seal
Gray Whale
Humpback Whale
Killer Whale
Pacific White-sided Dolphin
Dall's Porpoise
Harbour Porpoise
North American Beaver
Eastern Cottontail
American Red Squirrel
Eastern Grey Squirrel

Black-tailed Deer
Vagrant Shrew

Reptile & Amphibian List

Garter Snake
Western Pond Turtle
Red-legged Frog

Fish & Marine Creature List

Coho Salmon
Chum Salmon
Stickleback
Red Crab
Dungerness Crab
Shield-backed Kelp Crab
Bay Ghost Shrimp
Leather Star
Ochre Sea Star
Daisy Brittle Star
Red Sea Anenome
Black Katy Chiton
Jellyfish (sp)

Butterfly and Insect List

Cabbage White
American Painted Lady
Pacific Fritillary
Woolly Bear Moth caterpillar
Blue-eyed Darter
Red-eyed Mollyhawk
Banana Slug
Great Slug
Banded Garden Spider
Band-winged Grasshopper
Carolina Locust
Spruce Sawyer