

Holiday Highlights

British Columbia

7 – 21 September 2024

Leaders: Julian Sykes and Darren Rees

Guests: Gill and David Parmee, Elaine and Colin George, Diana and Eric Condliffe, Andrew Seal and Marilyn Davidson

Day 1: **On Our Way**

We meet at London's Gatwick airport for our trans-Atlantic flight to Vancouver, excited for the upcoming exploration of this dynamic part of the world. The flight is comfortable enough and we while away the hours. Those with a window view can look down on the dramatic Canadian Rockies and the final descent into the Vancouver area reveals the wonder of the region, with islands dotted across the bay and mountains beyond.

After passing through immigration, we pick-up our bags and proceed through Arrivals to meet Marilyn who arrived a few days earlier. At the rental desks we get our vehicles for the tour, two premium SUVs – lots of buttons and knobs and very comfortable seats.

We leave the airport bound for Delta and note a few birds flying, mostly gulls moving across, a few American Crows and our first Great Blue Heron. We finally arrive at the Coast Hotel at Tsawwassen, our base for the next two nights, where we are allocated our rooms and quickly freshen up. Its only 4.15pm so we agree to take a stroll around at 5pm. We take in our new surroundings and cause a stir from the locals as people ask what are we looking at? New birds – that's what. There are both Black-capped and Chestnut-backed Chickadees in conifer trees alongside delightful Bushtits - a Red-breasted Nuthatch makes a brief appearance and we see our first wonderful Anna's Hummingbirds.

We walk along a path at the back of more houses, which borders a weedy field. There are some sparrows chirping and we start the interesting North American sparrow game. There's a young White-crowned Sparrow with a ginger 'humbug' head, along with familiar House Sparrow, less familiar House Finch and a few American Goldfinch. The species trip-list is up and running! Time for a shower before we drop into the restaurant next door for a nibble before retiring for a well-earned sleep.

Day 2: **Birds of Reifel Sanctuary and Boundary Bay**

After breakfast at 7.30am we set off at 8.30am to explore the bird-rich Reifel Sanctuary at nearby Westham Island. We drive across the fertile flat delta region towards the Reserve, crossing over the Fraser River and noting some Mute Swans on the water as we pass - they are not the only imports to view as a few Collared Doves are along the roadside.

Next, we stop at one field when we see a group of large birds in a field – it's always worth a look. We park and note that they Canada Geese – genuine wild birds in this case and not the imports we are familiar with in the UK. Julian then spots some other large birds on the ground further to the right. These are orangey young Northern Harriers – we count four individuals. As usual, when you stop for one bird, others appear and as the harriers start flying around, they put up flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds. We also spot our first Red-tailed Hawk (looking like a buzzard) and a feisty Bewick's Wren.

On to the well-appointed George C. Reifel Sanctuary that lies on the north corner of Westham Island. We park and walk to the first pool next to the Visitor Centre and there are lots of birds to go through - we sift through them, one group at a time. There are a large number of shorebirds roosting on one of the islands and more are in the shallows. Medium-sized with very long bills and a snipe-like gait, they are dowitchers, but just which one? We set up telescopes and work through the group and they seem to be all Long-billed Dowitchers with nice clean tertials (blimey, it's only day one but we are getting technical). Greater Yellowlegs are uttering their Greenshank-like chu-chu-chu call, looking noticeably larger and brighter than the dowitchers. Ducks are a-plenty, though sadly, all are in dull 'eclipse' plumage - we see our first Green-winged Teal amongst the many Mallards. Then some very large birds wade into view – a family of Sandhill Cranes with two adults and two rusty marked young 'colts' – we learn later that these have bred on the reserve.

We start the trail that weaves through the series of ponds and pools – in the first large one there are Wood Duck, Gadwall, a Red-eared Slider (a big terrapin), and we get great looks at Great Blue Herons and a soaring male Northern Harrier. A little further, the pool to left is full of Greater Yellowlegs but a few have finer bills and are noticeably smaller - our first Lesser Yellowlegs – it's nice to see a few at the back walking side-by-side for comparison. As we are watching, Marilyn spots a furry animal working the near edge and soon we get looks at two American Mink.

The path continues, taking us on a circuit around another large pool busy with ducks and we get looks at our first Hooded Mergansers, Pintail, Cinnamon Teal and Green-winged Teal. One of the logs in the water is laden with roosting waders and amongst the dowitchers are two Pectoral Sandpipers. Two Glaucous-winged Gulls also make an appearance, then we sift through some small birds moving through the bushes, getting our first looks at Orange-crowned Warbler alongside Black-capped Chickadees and Bushtits.

A little further along, the path becomes a defensive dyke between the pools and the coastal marsh, affording us views across the water to Vancouver Island. We continue walking, getting better views of birds and gaining some new species like Downy Woodpecker (similar to our Lesser Spotted Woodpecker), Pied-billed Grebes (a bit like our Dabchicks) and American Coot (similar to European Coot). We also hear the rattling calls of Marsh Wrens, but they fail to show themselves. More obliging are the Cedar Waxwings that are in treetops – we can see them

clearly, showing their clean vents that separate them from the waxwings we see at home (Bohemian). Back at the Visitor Centre we have our packed lunches enjoying our sandwiches and reflecting on the haul of species for the morning.

Afterwards we start an exploration of the north and east of the Reserve that takes us first through more wooded habitat. There are lots of chickadees and confiding Spotted Towhees along the path. A flurry of activity from smaller birds includes Yellow-rumped Warblers that are flycatching from the open branches of a dead tree, showing off their “butter butts’. We also add more Cedar Waxwings, more dingy Orange-crowned Warbler and glimpse a brighter Yellow Warbler. At one of the hides, or ‘observation blinds’, we get better looks at Pied-billed Grebes – we can see the black marking in the bill that gives rise to their name.

The path continues towards a large observation tower and we climb the steps to take in the expansive view. At the top deck there are friendly Red-winged Blackbirds coming to food, giving us great looks of their intense red ‘epaulettes’. Jules is scanning the broad vista and spots our first Bald Eagle, a bird that will feature on most days on the trip – it’s an adult with a bright white head and tail. We also see our first swallows zipping around: most are similar to ours, Barn Swallows, but there is one with a reddish rump and a collar – a Cliff Swallow. More obvious are the much larger and darker birds – Purple Martins. A little further along we can see the several nest boxes erected in the reedbeds that are devoted to the martins.

The furthest pools on the Reserve have two Killdeer, looking like large Ringed Plovers and not at all like a fearsome predator (their name is derived from their ‘kill deer’ call). There is also a nice selection of waders and shorebirds, with more yellowlegs, dowitchers and our first Stilt Sandpiper. Behind these, working its way along the base of the reeds is a nice Virginia Rail. A Peregrine makes a dashing fly-by too!

We eventually return to the entrance building then say our goodbyes to Reifel Sanctuary – a wonderful place that has introduced us to so many new birds.

There’s still lots of the day left so after driving back to the hotel for a brief pit-stop we decide to drive to nearby Boundary Bay. Here there is a regional park allowing access to the shore and we have a delightful session enjoying the vast sweep of the bay, the view including the distant Vancouver skyline that is dwarfed by mountains in the north. And the new birds keep coming with our first scan of the huge number of ducks before us. There are big groups of American Wigeon along with Pintail in the water, as well as lots of Mallard and Green-winged Teal.

The light is perfect for examining the big group of gulls that are in front of us: there are lots of Ring-billed Gulls, the adults showing neat black rings in their bills and a pale eye. There are slightly larger gulls with a darker wing and a dark eye – these are California Gulls. Even larger gulls are showing dull grey (not black) primaries – Glaucous-winged Gulls. Jules also points to some young, heavier-billed Western

Gulls. Elaine's sharp eyes find us a smart black-capped Caspian Tern amongst the gulls on a sand bar.

There are plenty of waders on show too: we are now familiar with the many yellowlegs and we see both Greater and Lesser in good numbers. Lots of Killdeer are on the weedy wet shingle and a few Least Sandpipers scurry across the mud - Elaine also finds a trio of Western Sandpipers and two Pigeon Guillemots far out to sea. The star bird, and a little unusual for the location (it's the first time Julian has seen one on his many trips to British Columbia) is a nice American Avocet that is bathing in a little creek. We retrace our steps and drive back to the hotel after a fabulous first day in the field.

Day 3: To Vancouver Island

After breakfast, we load the vehicles and head to scan the beach at Tsawwassen hoping to find some birds before our ferry ride. We are not disappointed as large numbers of birds are both in the water and on a shingle bar to the right. We see our first Common Loons (Great Northern Divers) with three birds holding their amazing pied plumage. Loads of Horned Grebes are further out and we get nice flybys from two Caspian Terns. We follow them with our binoculars and they land on the spit - blimey! There's a large group of two dozen Caspian Terns there. We start examining the many cormorants on show: there are orange-throated Double-crested, scrawny-necked Pelagic and large, black Brandt's.

We need to make our way to the ferry terminal at Tsawwassen but there's still time to pause on the causeway to scan the bay to the right. We see our first Raven and get looks at a few Black Oystercatcher on rocks below. In the water are White-winged Scoter, more Horned Grebes and a smart winter plumage Common Loon. We get a flyby from two Hudsonian Whimbrel and looks through the scope of female Greater Scaup on the rocks. So, a nice selection of new birds before our ferry ride.

We carry on to the terminal and wait a short while to be loaded onto the ferry for our sailing. Soon enough we drive onto the vehicle deck and prepare for the voyage. We don some layers and move to the sun deck where we can look down on the jetties. On one of the groynes are a couple of Common (or Harbour) Seals and we get our first look at Black Turnstones. In the water beneath another pier are Surf Scoters including two striking males.

We set sail and move out into the open water that is marked by lots of white caps from the stiffening wind. There's a wrap-around panorama and the weather is looking clear to the west and over Vancouver Island. Crossing the Georgia Strait is very quiet for birds but after a half-hour or so we see the distant bushy blow of a whale - a Humpback. As we get nearer, we see some splashing as it raises its huge white pectoral fin and brings it crashing down to the surface - so-called 'pec-slapping' - wow! A second whale appears and the two seem to be travelling together. There's another blow to the left and later two more whales appear on the opposite side of the ship - that's five in total. As we get nearer Nanaimo,

we see Turkey Vultures circling over the forests, then it's back to the vehicles as we prepare for disembarkation.

The road north is busy with ferry traffic and we exit the highway after forty minutes or so at Qualicum Beach, where we plan to have lunch over-looking the shingle and sea. From our picnic spot we can see a group of fifty delicate Bonaparte's Gulls on a shingle bar. Closer to are several Killdeer with two Western Sandpipers and even nearer are three Black Oystercatchers. In the shallows are more Horned Grebes with brief looks at two Red-necked Grebes also.

Heading north we pass through ranks of forest on the fast route to Campbell River where the main road changes to two lanes – all very scenic. There are lots of Turkey Vultures soaring on teetering v-shaped wings and one Red-tailed Hawk sails over too. We break the journey for coffee and ice creams at Sayward then continue north and west. Finally, we turn off the main road towards Telegraph Cove, then after a few kilometres we take a dirt track signed to Hidden Cove Lodge. We've only gone a short distance through the forest when we see a large black shape on the right-hand verge ahead – it's a beautiful, glossy Black Bear – blimey, what a welcome.

We continue along the track to Hidden Cove Lodge, set on the shore of the most perfect quiet cove. There we meet the owner, manager and cook Sandra and her assistants Diane and Judy. They show us to our rooms, we unpack and prepare for our evening meal. From the dining area we can look out over the water and we watch the comings and goings of this special place. A Belted Kingfisher working its way around the cove and a Great Blue Heron waiting patiently on the floating kelp weed. What a wonderful first evening at Hidden Cove – we are going to love it here.

Day 4: A Day to Remember

Everyone is keen to explore our surroundings at Hidden Cove so we meet outside at 7.30am intent for a short walk, but we should check the old jetty and cove area first. Out on the water there are huge number of birds including lots of dark grey auklets – they show the stout bills of Rhinoceros Auklets and there are big rafts of them. Just as we are comparing them to the few Common Guillemots, Elaine calls out 'bear!' To the left, ambling along the shore is a large glossy Black Bear – what a start to the day! We watch enthralled as it picks along the shore examining and turning over boulders looking for titbits. We watch for half-an-hour before it disappears into the trees – just wonderful.

There are a few passerines to see with Steller's Jay, American Robin, Raven, Crossbills, Song and Fox Sparrows. We also get good looks at a male Belted Kingfisher as it works around the cove. Next a huge Bald Eagle flies over and as we are watching it pass overhead, Elaine calls out 'whale!' Everything is happening at once! In the distant water there is a blow and the distinctive stumpy dorsal of a Humpback. We watch it go across and pick up a second whale travelling alongside. Just seeing the large amount of seabirds present we can guess the amount of bait

fish out there – a veritable marine soup. We follow them back and forth for twenty minutes or so as they feed, then David picks out some fins coming into view from the left and these are much, much closer. When they next surface, with an audible ‘whoosh’ as they expel air, we can see the fins are tall and they have black-and-white markings. Orcas! What an incredible thing to witness from front of the lodge. Surf Scoter, Short-billed Gull, Marbled Murrelet, Red-necked Phalarope and Red-necked Grebe complete the list. And all this before breakfast – blimey.

The focus of the day is our boat trip from Port McNeil with the whalewatch team who have pioneered whale-watching off northern Vancouver Island. The huge Queen Charlotte Sound and associated passages and channels is one of the most productive marine environments in the world and Port McNeil is one of the gateway harbours, so it’s with great excitement and anticipation that we arrive quayside. We confirm our booking at the whalewatch office then wander down to the jetty to check the birds on the exposed mud in the harbour – there’s plenty of time before the boat leaves so we can spend some time looking at the shorebirds. There’s a nice group of Black Turnstones – our best looks yet. A small flock of Western Sandpipers are flying around and briefly alights but only a few linger to get looks. Gulls include California and Glaucous-winged. Two Bald Eagles are perched on top of one of the crane structures, making a right noise - two more eagles are flying around and four Turkey Vultures are teetering over the woods too. Suddenly a Peregrine flies through and disturbs the peace - a nice list before we board the boat.

Boarding our boat, we are introduced to Captain Bill and his assistant Marieka who take us through the safety procedures and tell us a little of what to expect. We are soon off and start seeing new birds immediately with Pigeon Guillemots (looking a lot like our Black Guillemots), Red-necked Grebe and the first of many Common Guillemots or Murres. In with these are lots of darker Rhinoceros Auklets and some still have a little colour to the chunky bill. We see our first Pacific Loons (similar to our Black-throated Diver) and see a flight of Common Merganser (our Goosanders).

Moving further east along Cormorant Channel it’s not long before we see our first Sea Otters and the Captain slows the vessel so we can enjoy these endearing creatures. They seem happy to loaf in small groups, lying on their backs with their feet in the air and hands on their chests. They look inquisitively as we sail by – just adorable.

There are reports of some ‘transient’ Orcas ahead, so we keep moving and scanning. We can’t relocate these, though we do see the first blow from a Humpback Whale ahead and to the left. We watch as it surfaces a couple of times then dives to show its flukes. The crew fail to recognise the whale so stay with it, giving Marieka the chance to photograph the underside of the tail. This proves a tall order so after a few surfaces and dives we move on.

Captain Bill gets another report of some 'resident' Orcas further east, so we keep moving, all the while the wrap around landscape is one to be cherished. We move into an open area, Blackfish Sound and ahead we can see the distinctive tall black fins of Orcas or Killer Whales. Amongst fins and the dots of birds are blows from several whales – we've reached the feeding grounds in the most grand of natural amphitheatres.

We spend some time slowly working the area, watching small groups of Orcas and we find one group happy to associate with far smaller Pacific White-sided Dolphins. It seems only the transient Killer Whales are a threat to the dolphins so this mix of residents with dolphins are a common sight – fish-eaters travelling together. While we watch, a big Humpback breaks the surface of the water and joins the feeding frenzy.

We watch enthralled as the show moves on – a group of Orcas are moving along close to an island and there are a group of kayakers in the water. The humans bunch together as a large raft and see the giant fins pass between them and the shore – what a thrill that must be.

More Orcas cruise along, including a large bull with a distinct blunt tipped dorsal fin – he's labelled as A25 and we are told a little of the family clans in the Northern Resident groups. At one stage the crew lower a hydrophone and we can listen to the calls – we are told each clan has a distinct voice and vocabulary.

Captain Bill then steers us to an island where a big group of tan-coloured Steller's Sea Lions are hauled out on rocks. They are impressive animals, far bigger than our Grey Seals, looking really chunky propped up on their forelimbs. The alpha male stands out as the biggest of the group, taking up the highest spot on the rock. Close by another island are groups of Red-necked Phalaropes on floating weed. Another kelp raft has more phalaropes and two Harlequin Ducks.

We are now on our route back but there are still more Humpbacks along the way. Finally, we return to the harbour after an epic time on the water. We say goodbye and thanks to Captain Bill and Marieka – we've been shown so much. There will be lots to discuss and much reviewing of photos when we get back to Hidden Cove. There's also a birthday meal to enjoy as Julian's special day has coincided with our day of days.

Day 5: Cluxewe Beach and Telegraph Cove

Some early birds are up and out at 6.45am and are well rewarded with an early morning bear! Others gather at 7.30am to hear the news and we settle in for a scan around the cove. On offer this morning are White-sided Dolphins and a Humpback Whale!

We have another delicious breakfast and set off for the day, driving west along the coast to where the Cluxewe River forms an estuary before it empties into the Queen Charlotte Strait. We park and take a stroll in near perfect conditions – the

overnight rain has moved through and all is calm. We start looking at the mill pond like sea and what's immediately noticeable is the profusion of fish. Lots are jumping and splashing and a Common Seal is rounding them up causing a stir (we learn that these are Pink and Coho Salmon). Birds are dotted around and note several Common and Red-throated Loons, Red-necked Grebes and a group of Surf Scoter. Close to, on the shoreline in front of us are five Black Turnstones. Some Harlequin Ducks fly by and join a bigger group in the water to the right – we'll get better looks later.

The walk runs along the course of a spit of land and alternates between looks out to the calm sea and views across the inner marsh. There are several young Bald Eagles flapping low over the river and saltings and we find a huge nest, so we presume they are local birds, raised here. Adults are flying around too and we lose count of how many we see along the walk. Along bends in the river are Green-winged Teal, Pintail and lots of Canada Geese. A Belted Kingfisher is perched on a stump and a Greater Yellowlegs is working along the water's edge. Song Sparrows and a Yellow Warbler make appearances.

Walking along the shingle beach we see lots of Savannah Sparrows that are working the tideline and perching on the stranded logs and dried-out wood stumps. Several fishermen are dotted along the shore but it's interesting to note that we see none actually catch anything despite the abundance of fish. We continue to the mouth of the river to scan through the big groups of birds that are milling around. Lots of gulls are gathered – mostly Glaucous-winged, California and Short-billed Gulls. Occasionally they are all put up by one of the eagles that flap around. There are groups of American Wigeon on the edge of the water, but these are outclassed by the superb group of Harlequins including several males – surely one of the most striking of ducks. There are also big groups of Surf Scoter with one pair of White-winged Scoter and we get good looks at the male. On the spit we can approach a group of confiding 'peeps' and try our identification skills - there are two Western Sandpipers amongst a bunch group Least Sandpipers. It's been a lovely walk but it's time to wind our way back, enjoying further looks at the many eagles that are still squabbling with each other.

After lunch we drive east towards Telegraph Cove, stopping a few kilometres before the town to check on some dirt tracks close to the river. At one point we get a flurry of activity from small birds, so get out to investigate. We see our first Lincoln's Sparrow and Oregon Juncos as well as White-crowned Sparrows. We also get our best looks at a Steller's Jay that is looking really colourful – there are lots of Ravens honking and there are several Turkey Vultures soaring.

Onto Telegraph Cove where we can get some coffees and a little retail therapy. We walk around the delightful little cove and harbour with pretty, wooden buildings and walkways. There's a fabulous Whale Centre and Museum with great exhibits explaining the whaling history and more recent research programmes on the most studied group of cetaceans, the Orcas of BC. When we are in the museum we get the call that there are real Orcas outside! We scramble out and watch four passing

across right to left. The staff inform us that these are Biggs Killer Whales or transients – it's all in the pointed dorsal fin evidently. Fabulous and a fitting way to end our visit to where whale-watching in BC began.

Returning to Hidden Cove we arrive and find a close Sea Otter in the cove, being followed by two gulls that are after titbits. The otter is enjoying a Dungeness Crab and is on its back tucking into its bright red shell. It finishes then dives under the kelp in search of more. A nice thing to see before our own evening dinner.

After an earlier than usual meal, we set off again looking for creatures of the evening... we know that there are Canadian Beavers along a nearby river, so we head for a bridge that overlooks a neat dammed section of the water. Well, that's the plan anyway – just before we get there, Julian shouts 'Bear! Two of them!' We stop and park and what a sight to behold... a large area on the left of the road looks like a spoil heap (we learn that is a mix of timber waste and fish farm debris) and is attracting Ravens, Eagles, Turkey Vultures and Black Bears. A third bear walks across, making the birds take to the air. A couple of minutes later a mum and two cubs run across followed by two more. Eight bears! Bonkers!

We drive to the bridge for our end of day vigil. Looking upstream we can see a perfectly constructed beaver dam running across the water and backing up a significantly higher body of water. There are freshly gnawed twigs suggesting that it's well maintained and the beavers are still present so we start the waiting game.

There are a few birds around: an American Robin lands in a bare tree; a group of Red Crossbills alight in a tall conifer and we hear a Pileated Woodpecker. It takes a while but eventually we get some action. Jules spots a beaver tucked into the bank on the far stretch of water and we set the scopes up. We can see it holding white twigs and gnawing them. A second one is under a bush but difficult to see and the light is fading. They soon move out into the open, criss-crossing the pool. A third appears but is not happy and smacks its tail on the surface of the water with a loud whack, then dives. It marks the end of the show in the diminishing light. What a successful outing!

Day 6: To Zeballos

The early birds catch a couple of Humpback Whales before breakfast – now that's not a line we use very often in a Speyside trip report, but it's standard fare for Hidden Cove. Then it's breakfast, followed by goodbyes to Sandra and Judy, but not before one last walk around the property. We wander along the path that leads to two chalets – a few Crossbills are perched and there are Steller's Jays squawking around. The view across the channel is irresistible so we are drawn to wander to where we can scan. It's so calm and windless we can hear the Humpbacks as they surface. There are four or five dotted around the panorama and we can't help but spend time watching them. At one point one rolls and pec-slaps then two breach – it's all a bit distant but wonderful to witness. Elaine finds two bright white Western Grebes and we see more Marbled Murrelets, Rhino Auklets and two close Dall's Porpoises passing by. Continuing our walk around we see some more Red

Crossbills, a Yellow Warbler and we get brief looks at a Golden-crowned Kinglets. Reluctantly we have to move on from Hidden Cove – we hope to return.

We start the journey south to Zeballos and we note that it's getting brighter and sunnier. Down the long gravel road we pass through endless forest with rugged tree-covered peaks either side. Eventually we arrive at sunny Zeballos, the former mining town at the head of huge Zeballos Inlet. The tide is high as we have our picnic lunch overlooking the head of the bay and enjoying the sun. There are a nice group of Common Mergansers (Goosander) in the shallows and there's something of an oddity on the jetty – a pure white Great Blue Heron (which sounds a bit of an oxymoron).

After checking in at Cedars Inn we have some down-time before meeting at 4pm to wander the streets of Zeballos, an old gold-mining town that's seen its hey-day and now, for the most part, is a sleepy backwater – just as we like it. We walk past the library and motel and admire the quirky wooden buildings. The birds are few and far between, but we do see Collared Dove and we get nice looks at Steller's Jays. Across the water are a few American Wigeon and some Harbour Seals in the shallows. Another view along the river yields sixteen young Goosander and a few California Gulls. Although the small birds are difficult to find we do catch up with a nice small group of Chestnut-backed Chickadees, our best views to date, and Gill finds a nice Brown Creeper that looks just like our Treecreeper and behaves the same too.

There's still some time before dinner so we drive the short distance to look over the Zeballos River upstream and from a bridge we can look onto a stretch where we've seen American Dippers before. Bingo! Diana says 'there's one!' We watch one working along the pebbly bank in the same fashion as our Dippers at home do. Julian looks the other side of the road and finds one a lot closer and we enjoy fantastic looks at a real character – we watch it swimming underwater and catching prey, it even starts singing for us. A nice new bird to end the day on.

Day 7: An Impromptu Cruise

With the news that the local boat trips have resumed after an enforced break, we can't resist an impromptu cruise to explore Zeballos and Esperanza Inlets. We meet our local captain Dan at the quayside and board our open vessel. He quickly goes through the safety procedures, and we are soon off.

There is no wind and the water is flat calm as we move down Zeballos Inlet with fabulous moody views wherever we look. It's not long before we see our first adult Bald Eagles sitting in the lichen festooned conifers, their heads standing out like beacons. A Belted Kingfisher files along the shore and in another tree a large flock of Red Crossbills gather. Most of the shoreline we are passing is rocky, so we pass an area that has a beach and marsh and we pause, scanning for something different. There are Common Mergansers and California Gulls gathered and American Crows flitting around, but sadly there's nothing bigger.

As we move into the main channel Marilyn spots a whale blow ahead. We approach and see three Humpbacks at the surface. We spend time hanging around with the trio, one is smaller than the others and 'flukes up' when diving whereas the other two slide below for shallow dives. It's wonderful when Dan cuts the engine and we drift in the silence with only the whale blows breaking the quiet.

Onwards to where the water joins the main east/west channel of Esperanza Inlet, where we head west. We hug the shore of Nookta Island and scan the foreshore as we pass. We arrive at a low rock that has some Common Seals resting with two Double-crested Cormorants. Just a little further are our first Sea Otters. These move away but we soon enter a quiet bay with more Sea Otters, Common Loons and a small pod of Harbour Porpoises. Again, Dan cuts the engine and we drift, getting nice looks at difficult-to-see cetaceans.

Mid-channel, Julian spots another whale blow and we move nearer to investigate. A single Humpback is logging on the surface then dives showing its flukes. We approach the area and cut engines, waiting for it to reappear. After a few minutes it does just that and it slowly travels towards the boat in the milky calm water. It gets close and starts its sequence of a couple of breaths, then a nice dive showing off the tail. A beautiful moment in the silence of the misty inlet.

Dan then sets a course for the outer series of rocks and reefs that mark the edge of the open ocean. Here, there are more little heads popping up as Sea Otters gather in the kelp beds. Black Oystercatchers fly from rock to rock, and we catch up with a few Marbled Murrelets.

The weather deteriorates and we are now getting a bit wet so it's time to set course for home. Jules still has some new birds in store on the way back - on a large rock is a collection Surfbirds with two Black Turnstone - they round-off the trip perfectly.

After eating lunch and warming up a little, we load the cars and get on the road to Campbell River. It's a beautiful drive through steep, wooded slopes, with glimpses here and there of rushing rivers and we stop at two lakes – at the first we add Barrow's Goldeneye to the species list; at the second we get wonderful looks at a dark Pacific Merlin who's calling from a treetop. We continue on the road east and into the rainy weather, to our base for the next three nights at the Anchor Inn in Campbell River. The hotel has wonderful views across the narrow passage to Quadra Island and the British Columbia mainland – we'll be exploring some of this tomorrow.

Day 8: A Bear and Whale Bonanza

Our big day out today is a Grizzly Bear quest and this means an early breakfast, but what's this? There's no staff at the restaurant... a change of plan and we gather our kit for the day and drive into town and have coffees and pastries at Tim Hortons. At eight o'clock we arrive at the harbour where we sign some forms and get a brief intro by our guide and captain for the day, Tyler and his able sea mates Lexi and Wayne. They outline the plan for our day that will take us deep into the system

of channels and inlets, to the Orford River Homalco Reserve on the mainland, where every year Grizzly Bears gather to feast on the annual salmon run. We are soon boarding the boat Tenacious III and on our way heading south around Quadra Island into the Salish Strait. The weather is overcast with some light showers as we leave, so everyone gets some shelter and we pay little attention to the groups of Common Guillemots and Rhino Auklets.

Thankfully, soon the weather improves and we slow down when Jules spots a blow ahead. We cut engines and watch three Humpback Whales surfacing close by each other – one is distinctly smaller, probably a calf of the year. We spend some time watching them rest at the surface and shallow dive – only once do we see the tail flukes when one does a deeper dive. In the background, tighter to the shore, is another whale – so that's four Humpbacks and a good start to the day.

We start to head north into the Sutil Channel and we can see the mountains of the interior beckoning, clad with lower bands of cloud and mist and looking very atmospheric. The waters are smooth, making for a moody landscape of successive peaks, steep forested slopes, and small islets – the spectacular coastline of British Columbia. We see groups of birds on the water as we pass – Marbled Murrelets, Western Grebes, and Surf Scoter.

Finally, we arrive at Orford Bay where the Homalco First Nations have a small settlement and a thriving eco-tourism business with some star exhibits. Every year, through August and September, when the salmon are running up the Orford River to spawn, the place is a magnet for Grizzly Bears and the Homalco have placed a series of small, covered viewing platforms at various places along the lower stretch of the river for optimum viewing. We arrive at the dock where we have a welcome picnic lunch and we can scan our new surroundings. The mouth of the river is busy with birds with a dozen or so Bald Eagles flapping around and perching on many of the scattered stumps and logs. In the water are Goosanders, Surf Scoters, Red-necked and Western Grebes. On floating logs are lots of gulls – Californian, Ring-billed, Short-billed and Glaucous-winged.

After lunch we meet our local guide, Wilson, who shows us to the mini-buses for the short drive to the village centre – we are reminded that there is no walking allowed as there are too many bears around! One of the houses has been converted into a small museum and interpretive centre, illustrating the history of the site and explaining more about the Homalco culture. After a brief introduction, we are then loaded back into our small bus, and we start our tour of the platforms.

We drive through the forest then take a short track that passes over a bridge where we can look down. One of the Homalco guides is on the bridge as he has located our first bear, so we park and get out. There to the left, is a Grizzly Bear walking along the shingle bar but it soon disappears around the bend and out of sight. As we look to the right there is a far closer bear on the other side of the bridge. We can look down as it works the edge of the water, this time over the green rocks. It decides that it is too steep so then climbs the bank and into the woods.

It circles around and then drops over the other side and gives us a good show as it wades into the water and crosses the river. Nice looks, and we are only ten minutes or so into our tour!

Next, we park close to a raised platform that is sited at the confluence of two river courses, the Orford and a smaller tributary. We can look into the water of the minor river and clearly see lots of salmon below the surface. We spot some movement downstream... working along the water's edge and coming in our direction is another bear. It strides onto a shingle bank and proceeds to wade into the water chasing fish, though not at first very successfully, making splashing dashes into the water below us. We get fabulous views as we follow it along the water and it eventually catches a fish and eats it.

We return to a spot on the riverbank where we can look over the water that is marked with stranded logs and shingle bars. We get out to look and we can see a mother and large cub walking towards us. We take our time as they pick their way along the water giving us superb views as they pick at the salmon. Further along, we can view over a log jam of fallen trees from the riverbank, where another bear is weaving its way through the scattered timber.

As we approach the platform for a second look around, we catch the tail ends of a mother and two small cubs but they soon disappear into the undergrowth - that's ten bears in total. Our final encounter is back at the log jam area where there is a really close bear tucking into a freshly caught salmon. We watch at close quarters as it pulls the fish out to eat on a fallen tree stump, tugging at the fish and peeling the fat-rich skin off - it acknowledges us but is not bothered and happy to load up on calories. It's the perfect model, a photographer's dream and the ideal bear to end on.

On the journey back from Orford Valley Tyler takes us on a different route back through the maze of islands and round the north of Quadra Island. We turn south towards Campbell River passing through Ripple Rocks Passage, the narrowest section of the straits between Vancouver Island and the mainland. There has been reports of Orca in the area and Tyler knows exactly where to look. There in a sheltered bay we see four or five black dorsal fins... Killer Whales in stealth mode, working the shorelines looking for seals.

What unfolds is another thrilling show as we track the pod of six or seven animals along the shore. We can see one small calf in the group and one large bull and when the youngest animal comes up to breathe it jumps higher than the rest. At one stage one of the larger Orcas brings their head out of the water to 'spy hop' checking us out - what a vision.

The pod crosses the channel and works along a rocky section of the shore where there is a group of tan-coloured Steller's Sea Lions looking and sounding nervous... these are transient Biggs Killer Whales and Sea Lion is on the menu. There are twists and splashes from the Orcas but we can't see whether they catch anything or not,

but for half-an-hour or so we are trans-fixed by what we are witness to. Just a wonderful end to a memorable day.

Day 9: **Everyone Needs a Lift**

We meet for a full-on breakfast at 8am that sets us up for the day ahead. The sun is shining and we head south to explore the higher elevations around Mt Washington, taking the Strathcona Highway to the ski resort at the summit. When we arrive at the trailhead we are surprised to see so many walkers but we guess everyone wants to make the most of the good weather.

We start our walk along the well-maintained trail that takes us through some beautiful habitat - around us is spruce and fir forest broken with colourful meadows, with a suggestion of the autumn hues from a mix of asters, bunchberry, crowberry, and huckleberry. There are only a few birds about and they make us work for views. Many American Robins are passing over and landing at the tops of trees. Julian spots a woodpecker on a dead tree – it's a Red-breasted Sapsucker but it only lingers for a few to get telescope views. More obliging is a sweet Golden-crowned Kinglet that shows really well and we all comment how it reminds us of a Firecrest.

Towards the end of the loop we see some jays landing in trees. There are a few Steller's Jays but also some friendly Gray Jays, more birds arrive and we get wonderful looks at the birds in the morning sun. A few other species are noted like Raven, Oregon Junco and a nice group of Vaux's Swifts that are grouping up for migration. We end our walk elated by our close encounters with the jays. Now to find a spot for lunch.

We drive to the ski resort to use the facilities and use the picnic tables watching the comings and goings of the 'eagle' chair lift that is taking the last of the season's summer visitors to the summit (we learn it closes the next day for maintenance). We eat our lunch and scan the slope and spot two large Black Bears on the upper slope - they are foraging right beneath the course of the chairlift.

We quiz some Brits who have just come down and they report they've seen marmots!! This is really exciting news considering that the endemic Vancouver Island Marmot is found in only a few locations on the island and one of the rarest mammals in the world. We hatch a plan and within ten minutes we are ascending the chair lift, three at a time in three consecutive chairs. David, Gill and Darren are in the first chair.

We are only a third of the way up when we spot a chocolate critter on the ground in a flowery slope. Wow! A Vancouver Island Marmot. We continue and further up we can look down on two Black Bears! What fun it is wildlife watching while in motion on chairlift. We arrive at the summit then greet the following chairs as they reach the top. 'Did you see it?' we ask. Unfortunately not.

We walk around the summit of Mt Washington and admire the extensive views all around: mountain scenery of Strathcona to the west and to the east the views

across Discovery Passage and beyond towards the distant Canadian Rockies – just breathtaking. There are a few Band-tailed Pigeons flying around the summit and more friendly Gray Jays. Yet we don't stay too long as we have another plan for our descent.

We swop places and this time two chairs see marmots on the way down. Colin spots one in the middle of the mountain bike trail on a series of bends. Julian catches up with our original marmot on the lower slope so now only Andrew is missing out. So, we about-turn and ride up and back again and this time we all get great views of a chocolate-coloured critter eating yellow flowers amongst grasses and white flowers. We get more looks of the bears too. Mission accomplished and a new mammal for everyone including the leaders!

We start our journey back to Campbell River taking the main highway back, so we can spend some time at Tyee Spit. The peninsula marks where the Campbell River meets the sea at Discovery Passage and can be interesting for birds. Although the conditions are not perfect with a high tide and strong light to contend with, we still manage some good birds. No sooner have we parked, a Merlin races through putting up the local pigeons. In the water are Common Goldeneye, Goosander and Canada Geese, as well as two Bald Eagles on an island of grasses. We get nice looks at a Savannah Sparrow and Brewer's Blackbirds, before watching a group of Harlequins assemble in the water. There are also some American Pipits next to the totem pole cemetery.

Day 10: The West Coast Beckons

After breakfast we say goodbye to the staff at the Anchor Inn and start the transfer day ahead. Although we have a long distance to drive to our next base, our first port of call is along a river just outside Campbell River. We arrive at a fish hatchery and note lots of large birds soaring overhead. There is one big Bald Eagle, lots of Ravens and a few Turkey Vultures. Some are still perched in trees waiting for the thermals and we get great looks at them standing, some adopting a heraldic posture, with wings spread to catch the morning sun - one by one they start to lift. A good start.

We walk around the buildings and fish tanks and along a path that leads back to the river. Reaching the water, we can see masses of Pink Salmon working their way upstream, but there is a grill placed over the river so the hatchery management can harvest eggs to eventually restock the rivers. This is where the fun begins. A little upstream and walking in our direction is a beautiful Black Bear. It's on its way to the salmon café and works its way to the grill and quickly scoops out a large fish. Easy! We watch delighted as it paces along upstream, fish in mouth, to find somewhere quiet to feast. Fabulous!

We decide to explore a track that also leads upstream and we get some nice birds: Pileated Woodpecker, Song Sparrow and a nice Downy Woodpecker (or is that Diddy Woodpecker Diana?) foraging alongside a Chestnut-backed Chickadee. For our first visit to this spot, we are pleased with our sightings.

And so we start our long journey to the west coast and to our next base at Tofino. We have some stops planned enroute and the first is at Qualicum Beach. We go back to the elevated platform area we were at a week ago and although there is a good view of the channel and rocky foreshore the tide is well out and any birds are at a distance. At sea are the now familiar birds with Common Loons and Horned Grebes and for those with telescopes we see four Pacific Loons fly by with pale heads.

We have lunch nearby, then head west to Macmillan Provincial Park where at Cathedral Grove there is a magnificent stand of coastal Douglas Firs, some of the best examples on the planet. A popular trail weaves through the rich green forest with trees draped with moss, passing by firs thought to be over nine-hundred years old and 75 m high – taller than the Leaning Tower of Pisa – thankfully more upright too! We continue driving through the central Vancouver Island Ranges passing the beautiful Sproat and Kennedy Lakes before reaching the Pacific at Ucluelet, where we decide to pause and take in the fab ice-creams. Refreshed we drive to the boat launch where we can scan across the inner sound and we can't help notice the honking calls from California Sea Lions – there are a group hauled out underneath the pier to the right - really loud characters!

Across the water we can scan the far shore and the tide state is perfect for beachcombing – especially for bears – there are three Black Bears on show. A mum and two decent sized cubs are going through the routine of lifting boulders and looking for titbits. Time is moving on, so we carry on the drive to beautiful Tofino, checking in at our hotels at 5.40pm. It's been another full day with four bears in total – we can't complain.

Day 11: **Gray Whales**

Before breakfast we have a short exploration of our new surroundings at beautiful Mackenzie Beach. Tofino lies at the tip of a long peninsula and there are a series of beaches and coves on the western, outer side facing the wild Pacific Ocean. At Mackenzie Beach there are a series of rocky islets that protect the cove from the full brunt of the ocean rollers but today it's calm, if grey and overcast. The tide is out and there are a few locals walking their dogs and one brave soul coming out of the water after an early morning swim. We walk along the wet sand and mud to the left to the adjoining Crystal Cove to check out the rocks. We've seen Surfbird and Wandering Tattler here before, but the dog walkers have beaten us to it and there are few birds to view. There are a few birds calling from the bushes and trees that come right up to the sand and water. We hear Savannah Sparrow, Pacific Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet and Hairy Woodpecker - it's a pleasant stretch of the legs before breakfast.

After breakfast we drive the short distance to downtown Tofino and to our boat tour operator, who have been the base for pioneering whalewatching here for decades. We sign some paperwork and get kitted with survival suits and a large waterproof as rain is forecast for the day. Nevertheless, we walk to the quay and

board our boat 'Big White' and meet Captain Mark Sawyer, a British former teacher who has made a home in Tofino (well why wouldn't you?)

We set off into Maurus Channel the body of water between Vargas Island and Meare's Island. Red-necked Grebes and Common Loons escort us through, before we round into Calmus Channel and our first Gray Whale off Morfee Island. It has a marked white saddle spot and is likened to the reverse markings of a Friesian, hence the name 'Dairy Cow'. Gray Whales have a blotchy skin and carry lots of growths, callosities and scars, giving each individual a personal fingerprint and Mark has many committed to memory from the whales that make up the Clayoquot Sound population. We spend a little time watching it come to the surface, where it rolls its back showing no discernible fin. Beyond the vestige of a dorsal fin there are bumps along the tail stock where the vertebrae are. It shallow dives a few times but always at a distance, so we move to where another whale has been seen, a little further along the coast.

When this second whale surfaces Mark takes a photo and identifies it as 'Lasso'. This whale is riding a band of turbulence marking where the current is passing over a shallow sand bar. Again, we watch it surface six or seven times, but it fails to show flukes as the water is very shallow.

We pass across towards Vargas Island to an area of water marked by lots of Common Murres and Rhino Auklets and a handful of Marbled Murrelets. Close to the shore is another blow and we float nearer to get photos. Again, Mark says the individual is catalogued as a whale called 'Snowflake'. Again, there's lots of shallow dives but no flukes to see. This is followed by another blow ahead, but Mark fails to i.d. the mystery whale (number four).

We circumnavigate Vargas Island and on one of its western bays we see a number of blows. Mark takes us slowly nearer and we start to get better views. He identifies the first singleton as 'Thirty-two'. We get some looks but decide to move to a group of three together that are more co-operative. Mark i.d's these as Sunny, Topspot and Liana. That's eight Gray Whales for the morning!

The route back is along the outer reefs and we see a few Sea Otters but lots of birds. Most are gulls including California, Glaucous-winged and one dark-winged Western Gull. There are also some grey-brown birds with white-trailing edges to the wings – Heerman's Gulls. Mark points to some Harlequin Drakes in the surf and to big number of Black Oystercatchers. Nice additions to the bird list for the morning and so back to Tofino.

Everyone has got a little damp from the boat trip, so we take our lunches back to the hotel and have some time to dry out before heading out at 3pm for the afternoon. We drive in the drizzle to the Visitor Centre for the Pacific Rim National Park at Wickaninnish Bay. We can scan the bay and rocks from a raised platform at the Centre and we see Black Oystercatchers and Black Turnstones on the rocks. In the water are Surf Scoters, Loons, Red-necked Grebes and some surfers! The

Visitor Centre is a mine of information on both the natural and cultural history of this spectacular seashore outlining the rich diversity of flora and fauna and how it was utilised by the First Nations people.

We emerge into the drizzle but as we drive back it has eased enough to stroll onto the beach. There are some waders flying up and down and they eventually settle long enough to set our telescopes on them. It's a big group of Sanderling with a handful of Western Sandpipers. A new bird species for the last site of another wildlife-filled day.

Day 12: Otters Galore

We've another boat trip scheduled for today, so we have breakfast at 8am. A little before, we gather to have a look around the quayside and scan from the wooden pier. We get a nice show from two noisy Belted Kingfishers who are chasing each other between bouts of fishing and perching on yacht rigging – nice!

Breakfast is very efficient and so we are in good time for our briefing before our trip out with Captain John. He's been plying his trade here for decades and knows each inlet, island and bay intimately. We head across the water to a sand bar where an adult Bald Eagle is perched – a good start. Crossing the channel, we hug close to the shore of Vargas Island, following its indented coastline and checking out the coves, beaches and rocky outcrops. Rounding one headland we surprise a couple of River Otters in the water. One comes out onto the rocks then climbs up with a fish. The other comes out followed by one, two, three, four, five, six animals! Great looks at a difficult-to-see species.

The birds are now the familiar species including Black Turnstones, Rhino Auklets, and Red-necked Grebes. We move back across to tranquil Cypress Bay where the water is like glass. We see some close White-winged Scoter pairs as well as more abundant Surf Scoters. Ahead, close to shore is a huge raft of loafing male Sea Otters, so we slowly approach and cut the engines. We enjoy watching them playfully writhing around and witness their petty squabbling. Every now and then they all roll on their backs and start sculling to keep a comfortable distance from the boat – our best views to date.

After we've watched for a while John takes the boat out to one of the main channels and where we saw the Gray Whales the day before. A blow reveals at least one present for a second day – it shows itself and it has a distinct white saddleback – it's Dairy Cow. We watch it surface and dive a few times, but the water is shallow and the tail flukes are not shown.

We move out towards the small islets and reefs for views of Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants and Heerman's Gulls. John skilfully works the outer reefs getting close to Harbour Seals, Black Oystercatchers and Harlequin Ducks. When we move to open water we find big groups of fantastic Sooty Shearwaters and small numbers of spinning Red-necked Phalaropes. Finally, we move back to the calmer inshore waters and return to Tofino – it's been another great boat trip.

After lunch a few folks check out the shops in Tofino for an hour. We meet up again at 2.30pm for our afternoon activities and drive south into the Pacific Rim National Park. A short path takes us through a pristine rain forest with lofty cedars draped with lichens, then down to a long sandy beach. In both directions the high tide mark is littered with huge logs from trees that have succumbed to storms over the many decades, now pale, dried and wind blasted. To the left a freshwater channel empties into the ocean and there are lots of gulls washing and preening. With an absence of shorebirds, we play the gull i.d. game. Most are Californian and larger Glaucous-winged Gulls but there are a few Herring Gulls too. All these come in a variety of confusing ages to test us - an easier option is the single Heerman's Gull to the right. We walk a short distance along the beach checking out the rocks in the bay – one has a number of Steller's Sea Lions loafing and is topped with cormorants. The now familiar Surf Scoters and Common Loons are in the shallows and some Savannah Sparrows keep us company on the high tide line.

Our last port of call is Chesterman's Beach, nearer Tofino, where despite the number of walkers and dogs, there are lots of small waders – there be peeps! The first group in the channel of water running along the middle of the beach consists of five Least Sandpipers. Then we see a much bigger group of peeps flying along and landing in the channel further along. We walk nearer and eventually get great looks at these busy little shorebirds. Most by far are Western Sandpipers (two to three hundred) but we count smaller yellow-legged Least, as well as larger Sanderling. Higher, on the drier part of the beach, are birds looking like our Ringed Plovers – these are American Semi-palmated Plovers. What a delightful way to end the day amongst so many Arctic nesting shorebirds on the move.

Day 13: Bye-bye Bear and Bye-bye Whales

For our last full day in British Columbia we decide to have a pre-breakfast look over Tofino Flats, the tidal mud and marsh on the inner side of the peninsula. It is low tide at first light, so we meet at 6.45am for the short drive to view the mud and shore. Unfortunately, the mist and fog hinder our scanning opportunities but we persist anyway. We can make out Great Blue Herons and one immature Bald Eagle lurking in the channels of water, with lots of California and Glaucous-winged Gulls wandering about the mud - it's interesting to note the total absence of shorebirds. Soon the mist lifts and we can see further to the opposite side and Meare's Island. It's a beautiful peaceful time to scan the area and we see more Bald Eagles and a small mid-channel rock crammed with Harbour Seals.

Back at Tofino Resort we have our last breakfast and get ready to leave – we will all be sad to leave this wonderful place. We load up the vans, collect our lunches and set off driving through the mist along the peninsula. As we turn inland and head east the mist starts to clear giving us nice views as we pass through the mountains and past Lakes Kennedy and Sproat.

We arrive at Stamp River Provincial Park at 11.45am giving us over an hour to walk down to the scenic river where, at the waterfalls, there is a salmon 'ladder' to assist the fish on their journey upstream. It's fun to look down on the series of canals and

watch some really big fish swimming through. Others tackle the falls head-on with spectacular leaps out of the foaming water. Elaine points to a Dipper on the rocks – we see another two birds during our visit. The track goes along the narrowest part of the gorge where we can look down on the plunge pool below the falls and this is stuffed with salmon, grouping up before tackling the falls.

We wander back so we can have lunch before leaving, but things don't quite go to plan... as we retrace our steps along the river we see that all the fish activity has attracted more than just human visitors.. a beautiful big Black Bear is slowly walking downstream in our direction, thankfully on the other side of the water. We watch enthralled at a perfect specimen – a big male with a glossy coat and we note that he's sporting a neat white necktie marking on the lower throat – a beautiful 'bye-bye' bear.

We take time to enjoy the bear and resort to lunches in the vans as we need to get on our way. It's just over hour-and-a-half's drive to the ferry terminal at Dukes Point, Nanaimo for the passage to Vancouver.

The weather is perfect for a crossing so we can get up on the top deck to watch the flat sea. Its not long after we've left the port when we see a Humpback Whale on the left. A few breaths at the surface then some tail flukes for a deeper dive – nice. This is quickly followed by another two travelling together and a singleton. Jules gets another blow far out – five Humpbacks for the journey back! As we get nearer Nanaimo we see a few Harbour Porpoises. Within no time it seems, we are coming in Tsawwassen and the light catching the Black Oystercatchers and Black Turnstones on the groynes. We play the cormorant i.d. game for the last time – all three present with lots of Brandts, Double-crested and a few Pelagics.

Soon we are disembarking and heading for The Coast Inn where there's an hour turnaround before we meet up for our fabulous final evening meal at the local Greek restaurant.

Day 14: One Last New Bird

It's our last day in BC so we opt for an early morning stroll before breakfast, planning to leave late morning for the airport. We drive the short distance to a nearby Park, with a stand of tall trees adjacent to Boundary Bay. All seems quiet in the big trees save a few Starlings cackling from the top perches, so we walk the path that opens out to view the water – and a lovely panorama too, in the early morning light with views to the mountains and the Vancouver skyline. On the water are a large amount of waterfowl – mostly Canada Geese, Pintail and American Wigeon. There are lots of hirundines to the left so we walk north along the trail dyke to check them out and hopefully we can find something in the bushes along the way.

There is a small group of American Pipits in the field and a few Savannah Sparrows along the path. We stop at some brambles where some White-crowned Sparrows and a single Lincoln's Sparrow make a brief appearance - on a brush pile is a nice Spotted Towhee too. A little further the scrubby bushes on the beach side of the

dyke is a little taller and really busy with small birds. There is an obvious fall of migrant Yellow-rumped Warblers flicking around and we sift through the sparrows. There is a mix of Song, Savannah and White-crowned but there is one that has a neat yellow crown marking – a young Golden-crowned Sparrow and a new bird for the list!

All the small bird activity has attracted the attention of a superb Pacific Merlin that sits in waiting on a tree. It launches and charges across but fails in its hunting sortie so perches again in the most beautiful light. Then it gets spooked by a lovely young Northern Harrier and we watch both birds flying around together – a wonderful spectacle to end our wildlife watching adventures. We wander back and have breakfast before the final round up of checklists and those all-important votes:

Species-of-the-trip: Joint Winners are the Grizzly Bears of Orford River and the Sea Otters of Tofino, with joint runners-up of Black Bears and Orcas.

Top bird: Pacific Merlin

Place-of-the-trip: Joint Winners are Hidden Cove and Esperanza Inlet

Magic Moments: Plenty to choose from but most votes go to the hunting transient Orcas and the magical moment when they started spy-hopping – just who was watching who?

Sincere thanks to all.

BIRDS

Canada Goose
Mute Swan
Wood Duck
Mallard
Gadwall
Northern Pintail
American Wigeon
Northern Shoveler
Green-winged Teal
Blue-winged Teal
Cinnamon Teal
Greater Scaup
Harlequin Duck
Surf Scoter
White-winged Scoter
Barrow's Goldeneye
Common Goldeneye
Hooded Merganser
Common Merganser
Common Loon
Pacific Loon
Red-throated Loon
Horned Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Western Grebe
Pied-billed Grebe
Sooty Shearwater
Fork-tailed Petrel
Brandt's Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Turkey Vulture
Northern Harrier
Red-tailed Hawk
Bald Eagle
Sandhill Crane
American Coot
Virginia Rail
American Avocet
Semi-palmated Plover
Killdeer
Black Oystercatcher
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Hudsonian Whimbrel
Black Turnstone
Surfbird
Western Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Sanderling
Pectoral Sandpiper
Stilt Sandpiper
Short-billed Dowitcher
Long-billed Dowitcher
Wilson's Snipe
Red-necked Phalarope
Black-legged Kittiwake

Bonaparte's Gull
Short-billed Gull
Ring-billed Gull
California Gull
Western Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull
Heerman's Gull
Caspian Tern
Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua)
Pigeon Guillemot
Common Murre (Guillemot)
Marbled Murrelet
Rhinoceros Auklet
Cassin's Auklet
Feral Rock Dove
Band-tailed Pigeon
Collared Dove
Vaux's Swift
Anna's Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Pileated Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Red-breasted Sapsucker
Northern Flicker
Peregrine
Pacific Merlin
Steller's Jay
Canada Jay
American Crow
Common Raven
Purple Martin
Barn Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Black-capped Chickadee
Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Bushtit
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
Bewick's Wren
Pacific Wren
Marsh Wren (h)
American Dipper
Golden-crowned Kinglet
American Robin
American Pipit
Cedar Waxwing
European Starling
Orange-crowned Warbler
Yellow Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Spotted Towhee
Savannah Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Golden-crowned Sparrow

Dark-eyed Junco
Brewer's Blackbird
Red-winged Blackbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
House Finch
Red Crossbill
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow
(125 species)

MAMMALS

Black Bear
Grizzly Bear
American Mink
River Otter
Sea Otter
Steller's Sea Lion
California Sea Lion
Harbour (Common) Seal
Red Squirrel
Grey Squirrel
Canadian Beaver
Vancouver Island Marmot
Eastern Cottontail
Black-tailed Deer
Pacific White-sided Dolphin
Killer Whale (Orca)
Harbour Porpoise
Dall's Porpoise
Grey Whale
Humpback Whale
Minke Whale
(21 species)

MISC VERTEBRATES

Red-eared Slider
Chinook Salmon
Pink Salmon
Coho Salmon

INSECTS

Band-winged Grasshopper
Two-striped Grasshopper
Blue-eyed Darter
Green Darter
Four-spot Skimmer
Northern Bluet
Cabbage White
Hydaspe Fritillary
Celery Leaf-tier Moth

MISC INVERTEBRATES

Banana Slug
Sunflower Star
Ochre Seastar
Dungeness Crab
Shield-backed Kelp Crab
Fringed Anemone
Giant Green Anemone
Rose Anemone
Moon Jellyfish