

Nova Scotia
The Charm of Brier Island
Holiday Highlights
24 August – 1 September 2024

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Guests: Emma Pearcey, Roger Shorrocks, Marilyn Davidson, Hazel and Andrew Fardell

Day 1: The Long Journey to Brier

We meet at Heathrow Terminal 2 and are quickly checked in for our flight with Air Canada. Everything works near enough to schedule and we are soon on our way to Halifax and after an uneventful flight we land in the sunshine on time at 3.30pm.

Passing through immigration and customs we progress to the car rental area - we've a big black SUV van which is going to be comfortable for the week. We join the highway and are soon on our way driving south and west through unbroken forest that seems to go on forever. Reaching the north coast of Nova Scotia, we pass through the verdant Annapolis Valley where the forest gives way to fields of maize, groves of apples, and even vineyards.

Roadside species include American Crow, Common Raven, Red-tailed Hawk, Common Nighthawks, Cedar Waxwings and White-tailed Deer. After two-and-a-bit hours we arrive at delightful Digby (home of world-famous scallops the sign tells us), where we stop for a meal overlooking the Bay of Fundy and new birds keep coming with our first Common Loon (Great Northern Diver), Great Blue Heron and American Herring Gulls.

Our last leg takes us along Digby Neck peninsula in the fading light. We pause at a roadside lake where we've seen Canadian Beaver before – there's a lodge on the far side of the water but the visibility is not on our side. However, we do see two smaller Muskrats working across the water, so we have a result of sorts. Then, as we continue on towards the first ferry and after only a few miles, we notice an animal in the middle of the road – a large Beaver! A real bonus!

We then catch the first ferry for Long Island, before the final ferry, twenty minutes later, to Brier Island. Finally, we arrive at the lodge at 10.15 pm – it's been an exhausting day.

Day 2: Our First Whales

Everyone is up and about before breakfast keen to explore our new base and though there is some overnight fog lingering, we walk down the nearest track. Things are quiet at first but then we pick up the distinctive chatter from a Black-capped Chickadee. It shows itself and attracts a neat Least Flycatcher too.

We stroll along the track further through the spruce forest and we meet our first American warbler – a nice Common Yellowthroat. Another track takes off to the left, entering a clearing in the forest that we've explored on previous trips and we've christened 'The Dell' – it's always been productive when migrants are travelling through as there are low bushes and edges of trees to help with viewing birds on the move. We first get wonderful looks at a bright male American Goldfinch with another less bright immature bird. Two really small birds are moving quickly around some flowers and are teasing us, but we persist and manage looks at our first Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. A Greater Yellowlegs flies over and a Gray Catbird calls, sounding just like a cat! Walking back, we see a group of Blue Jays working through the trees - not a bad start.

At breakfast we are introduced to Katherine and Pam who will be looking after us for the coming week - the omelettes are great! Shortly after eats we drive the short distance towards Northlight, the northernmost point on Brier. Here we can see the lie of the land and appreciate the geography of the island. The light marks the mouth of the narrow Grand Passage between Brier and Long Island that is obscured by fog to our right. Beyond to the north and west is the Bay of Fundy, looking particularly calm and tranquil this morning and mostly clear of fog.

We walk to the left of lighthouse and scan out to sea noting Gannets, Eiders, Double-crested Cormorants and a Common Guillemot in winter plumage. Walking further along, the shore path skirts the edge of the spruce trees, all the while looking across the water to our right. Atlantic Gray Seals and Common Seals are both on the low weedy rocks in the water and there is a chorus of low wailing and crooning. Behind them are Common Loons on the surface on the water and we also notice a large fin in the water - a Basking Shark!

Retracing our steps, Hazel points to a Spotted Sandpiper on the rocks – through the telescope we can make out its spots. Other birds on our walk include Raven, Song Sparrow, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. We wander back to the van then pick up our lunches and take them to the wooden deck at the harbour in Westport. Our picnic spot is surrounded by a series of attractive shacks on timber pillars that line the waterfront and overlook the weedy bay – a perfect spot to enjoy our picnic.

Soon we are getting ready to board our first scheduled whalewatch boat that leaves from the nearby jetty. We settle in on the good ship Mega Nova and meet the crew that will lead us on our adventure into the Bay of Fundy. Captain Roy is at the helm and we are in safe and knowledgeable hands with onboard naturalists Pascale and Cindy. They take us through the all-important safety drill and without too much delay we are soon on our way.

We pass the fish farm in the passage and continue close to the shoreline, noting a Turkey Vulture and a Broad-winged Hawk soaring over the island's treeline. As we pass the Northlight we see Porpoises at the mouth of Grand Passage, then it's out to the open water.

The surface is calm but there is light fog yet to be burned off. We pass through the misty grey for twenty minutes before reaching an area that is obviously rich with food as it is busy with seabirds - we see our first Greater Shearwaters and big flotillas of Red Phalaropes (with a few Red-necked Phalaropes thrown in). In the present conditions, with limited visibility, the captain initiates a stop-and-listen search technique. We turn off the engines and float on the surface keeping as quiet as possible, listening for the tell-tale sounds of whales as they exhale when coming to the surface. And it actually works! We hear a distant whoosh from a whale and we take off to the left.

We move to a clearer area and there it is – a Humpback Whale at the surface. The naturalists and whale watchers of the Gulf of Maine population have compiled a photo library of the distinctive black-and-white patterns on the underside of the tail flukes and as they dive they can be identified. Our whale is referred to as Bungee.

Then, to the starboard there is a huge splash accompanied by whooping and hollering as the whale does a full twisting breach – some of us see it, some of us don't, but we are primed to look in the right area. This time we are all looking in the right direction when, for the second time, the whale rises up from the deep. How thirty-five tonnes of animal propels itself clear of the water is a mystery, but we all witness the feat as if it was in slow motion. Oh, the thrill! Two full breaches! Marilyn captures the wonder with her camera – simply amazing!

And the fun doesn't stop there. Two nearby whales surface again, perhaps prompted by Bungee(?) and these roll over and reveal their huge white pectoral fins. They lift them one by one, bringing them crashing down on the water in so called 'pec slapping'. Again and again it happens, and again and again the performance is joined by the joyous shouts by the band of lucky whale-watchers.

In the distance there are more whales and we move to an area with four animals that come slowly close to boat. We enjoy nice views of them at the surface and after working the group the crew can get looks at the flukes and identify them. They are Tusk, Partition, Bungee (again) and an unidentified animal. We enjoy a session with four close to the boat, playing energetically at surface and then one does a chin-breach alongside the boat - spectacular! (Later the crew suggest that this was Tusk, a known energetic whale, perhaps reacting to the mystery whale – it's all a mystery to me!). Andrew and Emma both capture the fun with their cameras. What a great start to the whale watching week. What's left but to return to Westport and enjoy some ice-creams.

Day 3: Birds on the Move

We wake and look out of the windows to see that the lodge is fogbound! Sure enough, when we are having our breakfast, we get the message that the banding station will not be operating this morning so we will have a change of plan for the day.

We catch the ferry from Brier to Long Island, heading northeast in an attempt to find some better weather. It's still foggy when we reach Tiverton, so we continue onto Digby Neck where we find some clear skies at Lake Midway. There's a convenient picnic area so we can use the loos as well as have our first scout around. The first bird we hear is a whinnying Downy Woodpecker and it shows well in a treetop. Similarly, we get great looks at Cedar Waxwings that are landing in the top of some spruces. As we leave, we see our first adult Bald Eagle, but it flies over and away quite quickly.

At Sandy Cove we park and get out to explore a large freshwater pond and environs. Marilyn points to two ducks on the water surface – two young Ring-necked Ducks. A Pileated Woodpecker is calling and we locate it in the tallest dead tree on the skyline – what a fabulous look at what can be a tricky bird to see. Two trees away, a Hairy Woodpecker lands and they eye each other up – a nice comparison. Around the lake we also see Yellow Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Song Sparrow, Cedar Waxwings and a brief Belted Kingfisher. As the skies clear a group of six Turkey Vultures lift up from the trees and start to gather height.

The road continues to the beach at Sandy Cove and we stroll along taking in the surroundings of mixed woodland and isolated large clapperboard houses. At one point Emma points to some small birds ahead. We stop and find a good deal more – we've hit a warbler wave of small birds on the move – visible migration! First up is a young American Redstart, followed quickly by a stunning male with its showy red and black tail. There's a Black-and-white Warbler (does what it says on the tin), Yellow-rumped Warbler (streaky with a yellow rump), Common Yellowthroat (it has a neat yellow throat) and Wilson's Warbler (yellow with a black cap) as well as Black-capped Chickadees (looks like our Coal Tit). After looking over a misty Sandy Cove (where a Common Loon emerges from the fog) we return to the pond by the vehicle and get great looks at a nice Muskrat that is nibbling vegetation close to the bank.

Lunch is at the harbourside at Tiverton and just as we leave we see another adult Bald Eagle fly over, its white tail catching the sun. A short distance away is Boars Head Light where one of the famed square clapperboard lighthouses watches over Petit Passage. We see a Spotted Sandpiper on the rocks below and a smart Black Guillemot in the water.

Walking back from the lighthouse we stumble across our second migrant wave of the day. The birds come thick and fast with Blackburnian, Black-throated Green, Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided, Black-and-white, Magnolia and Wilson's Warblers. Black-capped Chickadees, Yellow Warbler and Slate-coloured Junco complete the show. All the while Cedar Waxwings are trilling and landing on treetops between fly-catching sorties.

We drive back towards Freeport to check the cove, hoping that the rising tide will bring any shorebirds close to the road. Andrew spots a smaller gull in with the

Herring Gulls. It's hooded with a long drooping bill and no showy wings – a Laughing Gull which is quite unexpected. A good bird to end the day.

Day 4: **A Double Dose of the Bay of Fundy**

Today we have two whale watch trips back-to-back so we will be spending a lot of time in the Bay of Fundy. We leave Westport on the Mega Nova with Shelley, Cindy, Rhianna and Captain Roy. As we enter the zone north and west of the island, we start getting lots more phalaropes and our first Wilson's Storm Petrels. There are bigger numbers of Great Shearwaters and Gannets too.

Our first whale is not named but is very approachable. At one point it lies next to the boat with both pectoral fins spread so we can assess the span of the animal – hugely impressive as the white fins glow turquoise in the water. As it gets nearer and nearer we can also gauge the length – maybe thirty plus feet? It goes beneath boat and we hold our breath – sadly it disappears.

We next get alongside a pairing of New Moon and Prongs. As well as the difference in the tail markings this pair show different dorsal fins – one is round and stubby, the other triangular. They go through their dive and surfacing sequence to the customary paparazzi of clicking cameras as they fluke up.

As well as the now familiar shearwaters and phalaropes, we also get a new bird – a large, dark skua with white wing flashes is hanging around with the shearwaters – much darker and less colourful than the Great Skua we know from Scottish waters – it's a South Polar Skua and it's no doubt followed the Great Shearwaters north from their breeding grounds in the Southern Ocean.

Another pair are identified as Chromosome and Sabretooth – we can make out some black triangular marks on Sabretooth that could be construed as teeth but why the other is called Chromosome is a challenge. Before the end of the trip, we add a new bird species when Pomarine Jaeger flies through the bird and whale melee.

Lunch is on board the boat as we are moored at the jetty awaiting new passengers for the 1.30pm trip. There's a change of personnel for the afternoon shift with Tania, Pascale and Claire joining Captain Roy on the Mega Nova. We head into a different area of water, heading due west into the fog. We stop and listen twice but fail to hear any sound, so we head north and east. As we do the fog clears and we see whale watch boats ahead. We can also see lots of fins and blows from masses of White-sided Dolphins and more Humpback pairings. We probably watch some of the same whales as we saw in the morning, but they never fail to impress. Just wonderful!

Emma spots a Bald Eagle passing over the lodge when we return to the van and as we drive towards lodge, we see two Eastern Wood Pewees flycatching from wires.

Day 5: A Bird in the Hand

Before breakfast, at 7.30a.m, we drive the short distance towards Northlight to where a temporary seasonal banding station is sited amongst the short trees and undergrowth. Here Lance Laviolette has been heading a bird-ringing programme for over forty years and for three weeks spanning August and September he and a team of regular volunteers have unfurled their mist nets and caught small passerines in an effort to quantify the fall migration of birds through Brier Island.

When we arrive, they have goodies in store – a row of paper bags are clipped to nylon line suspended between to trees – they are twitching with their contents. Lance brings them over to his work desk and his assistant, Wesley, is ready to take details. The first is a striking warbler – a Cape May; this is followed by a diminutive Golden-crowned Kinglet (looking like our Firecrest); then an Ovenbird, one of the ground-dwelling warblers that resembles a small thrush.

Before the second batch of birds, an assistant brings in a Ruby-throated Hummingbird that's been caught in the mist nets – what a treat to see this iridescent jewel in the hand. Ron brings in more bags and hands them to Lance. There's another Ovenbird followed by a wonderful Northern Waterthrush that looks like a thrush but is in fact a warbler! Then there's a heavily moulting Song Sparrow without a tail, followed by another Ovenbird.

Lance hands the bags over to his wife Andree to reveal the first flycatcher of the day. She takes us through the features that makes it the perfect insect hunter, from its broad-based bill and its rictal bristles. The bird has a lovely yellow suffusion throughout – a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. For comparison Andree then shows an American Redstart that has similar features – convergent evolution in action. Both birds are handed to guests to release.

We then get a tour of the nets, escorted by Lance who fills us in on the history of the site and how the data is collected and used. Its humbling to learn that the whole project has been conducted by volunteers – citizen science at its best.

Soon we commence our next session: Yellow and Cape May Warbler, followed by a young Golden-crowned Kinglet that doesn't want to leave Lance's hand when he releases it. Then, another Waterthrush before we are confronted with a bird from the tricky Empidonax flycatcher complex – either a Willow or Alder Flycatcher (in autumn these are inseparable and the banders refer to these as Traill's Flycatchers). More Yellows, Ovenbirds and a Blackburnian - what a wonderful session with the banders – we shall return!

We drive back to another big breakfast at the lodge and plan the rest of the day. When we pick up the packed lunches, we note the rain that has been forecasted is starting to fall, so we go to Westport to catch the ferry to Long Island. We decide the path to Balancing Rock might offer some shelter from the weather as it passes through some nice spruce and larch forest as well as showing us a nice geological feature. We start our walk and though there is some rain it comes in light bouts and

allows us to see some birds along the trail. We bump into small waves of migrant warblers, the first includes Black-throated Green, Magnolia and Blackburnian Warblers.

The end of the trail descends via a well-constructed series of wooden steps to the shoreline at Mary Bay and the feature known as Balancing Rock. It's perfectly named as we can see how other pillars of basalt have been eroded and collapsed leaving one proud pillar, standing perhaps twenty-five to thirty feet tall. There's not much bird activity on the water but we do see Double-crested Cormorant and two Spotted Sandpipers.

Lunch is taken at Central Grove Park and after another delicious sandwich and cookies we take a stroll around the place. We've seen Boreal Chickadees here before so start 'pishing' to attract small birds. A Magnolia Warbler and Redstart make an immediate appearance. Further along we watch some bright American Goldfinches and both Least and Traill's Flycatchers. Then we hear the distinctive call of a Boreal Chickadee. With a little encouragement it comes to check us out and he brings his mates along too. In quick succession we see Chestnut-sided, Yellow, Magnolia Warblers and a nice Red-eyed Vireo.

The state of the tide is perfect for a visit to Freeport, so we drive to the road that hugs the cove, seeing a Purple Finch and a Ring-necked Pheasant as we pass some houses – both new species. At the first stop there's a creek that flows into the bay and Andrew spots a shorebird wading in the water – a smart Greater Yellowlegs. In the bay we see the familiar gulls, Black Duck and distant peeps. We drive along the south shore to get better looks and soon locate some shorebirds on the shingle. These are Semi-palmated Plovers (looking like our Ringed Plovers) and both Least and Semi-palmated Sandpipers. In the water are our first Black Scoter with some drakes showing their yellow shield on the beak.

At the furthest point we can look over Peter's Island where there are lots of cormorants – through the scope we see they come in two sizes – Great and Double-crested. On the return route we get wonderful looks at a young Northern Harrier as it works along the edge of the water – we follow it in the van and manage some fab photos of a beautiful bird. Completing the drive back we pass the same creek that had the Greater Yellowlegs – this time there is a smaller wader – a nice Solitary Sandpiper. Time to catch the ferry back to Brier Island – there's room for one more car – phew!

We drive back to the lodge but no-one wants to quit so we have a late vigil at the Northlight to see if we can catch a whale or two. We walk to the benches and set up, enjoying some clear conditions and our first blue skies of the day. It's a bit breezy and there are white horses in the distant water but there are also tall bushy blows from Humpbacks. Then to the right we see the unmistakable sight of a tall white fin waving as one whale indulges in a bout of pec-slapping – wonderful! It's good to share with two women from Pennsylvania who have journeyed a long way to see whales and whose boat trip was cancelled. A great end to the day, or we think

so at the time... Emma has other ideas when she spots a pod of White-sided Dolphins in the passage when we are settling down for our evening meal. A restaurant with a view!

Day 6: More Warblers and Whales

We meet for breakfast at the earliest opportunity, at 7.30am, as we want to spend some of the morning back at the banding station. We leave after eating and park at Northlight, noticing that there are lots of birds hopping around the trees including Magnolia, Blackburnian, Yellow and Nashville Warbler - things look promising for a bumper haul with the banders.

As we walk to the encampment, we note a fabulous Ovenbird on the path and it hasn't got a ring on its legs! The station is busier than normal with lots of volunteers drafted in to help process the birds - Lance is going to a busy man this morning.

The species list starts with a sparkling American Redstart, Bay-breasted, Black-and-white, Yellow, Black-throated Green, Parula, Chestnut-sided and a nice Black-throated Green male. Then we catch our breath when a stunning Black-throated Blue Warbler is revealed by Andree - what a bird! Another Parula and an Ovenbird finishes round one.

The next wave has Common Yellowthroat, Waterthrush and a nice Red-eyed Vireo. More Traill's Flycatchers, Black-throated Green, Redstarts and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher follow. Superb! What a wonderful and informative session.

Before lunch there is a brief walk close to the town cemetery that lies on the high land above Westport - we are hoping that we may see some different birds here, including any raptors that are on the move. As we approach there are two young Chipping Sparrows on the verge and when we walk back to locate them, we find an Alder Flycatcher sat on top of a bush calling. We get a nice pass by from a young Northern Harrier and a close Broad-winged Hawk and then when we scan the far treeline, we can see a lot of more distant hawks spiralling upwards on thermals from the last, most southerly part of the island - we decide to drive to see if we can get better looks.

We drive south and west towards West Light and as the road crosses an open area of boreal bog we stop to scan. A Sharp-shinned Hawk is chasing an American Kestrel along the treeline; two large young Bald Eagles are soaring around and three or four Northern Harriers drift buoyantly by. We relocate the spiral or 'kettle' of Broad-wings, but they are still some way off.

As we are near to West Light we decide to take our picnic lunch there - on the approach there are more harriers and hawks. The view from our table next to the sea is fabulous with clear skies and dark blue waters of the Bay of Fundy. We even spot a blow from a Humpback that is close to one of the whale watch boats. A Savannah Sparrow is on the rocks nearby and when we look inland, we see even more harriers drifting over the trees.

And so to the Mega Nova for our fourth whale watch. This time we've Captain Trevor in charge with Tania and Pascale assisting and taking us through the safety instructions - a young Bald Eagle soars over as we leave the dock.

We pass Northlight and soon get glimpses of Harbour Porpoises, but they never seem to show much more than a brief appearance. Then we get our first phalaropes and shearwaters – everything is getting familiar.

A single whale appears but our Captain Trevor is determined to reach two boats that have whales on the horizon. These have been identified as Photon and Raccoon and as we approach, we see them go through their sequence of coming to the surface twice or three times before taking a deeper dive, showing their flukes and feeding. We watch them for fifteen minutes or so then move to another area, clocking a large South Polar Skua on the way.

The second pair are identified as Tusk and Partition and we are told they've been travelling together for a few days. When they both dive, we can see a lamprey attached to the tail stock of Tusk – sometimes we see whales bearing circular scars from their teeth. It is supposed that whales often breach or tail slap if they are carrying these irritating passengers.

All the while we are watching Tusk and Partition we can see, in the far distance, a Humpback is standing tall, upside down in the water with the tail waving tall and crashing down on the water surface – so-called 'tail lobbing'. Another behaviour to add to the list of acts of these engaging animals. Coming back into the Grand Passage we notice an adult Bald Eagle in a tree beneath the lodge – a lovely end to another fabulous trip.

We end the day at the Joshua Slocum Monument where there is a tribute to Brier Island's most famous son - the first person to sail solo around the world. Here we can look over the narrow channel to Peter's Island where there are one or two Great Cormorants mixed in with the numerous Double-crested Cormorants. A Merlin makes a brief appearance, zipping by, briefly landing on a wall before flying across to the island and beyond. And the good birds keep coming – at our evening meal an adult Bald Eagle flies by the window and two Nighthawks dance across the sky.

Day 7: A Zipping Zodiac

We start the day with a leisurely stroll before breakfast, leaving the lodge at 7a.m. It's obvious that there has been a fall of migrant birds when we meet at the car park, as there are warblers moving through the tree-tops and bushes – more Common Yellowthroats, a Yellow and a Cape May Warbler. We start walking the track and find more birds, including an American Redstart, Black-throated Green and Blackburnian Warbler. There's a real flurry of birds as we approach the Dell with Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Black-throated Blue Warbler and Golden-crowned Kinglets. Making a loop around the perimeter of the Dell is a joy as the morning sun warms the bushes and trees. Hummingbirds are zipping around the flowers, Black-and-white Warblers picking along branches and a Northern Parula makes

an appearance. Most unusually, a Green Heron flies over. And the new birds keep coming when we see an Olive-sided Flycatcher on the wires on the way back to breakfast.

After breakfast we go to Westport to get ready for our zodiac trip into the Bay of Fundy. We check in and get fitted with our survival suits then drive to the dock to meet Trevor, our captain for the morning. We board our small rib and are soon on our way, zipping over the flat water towards Northlight – no time to stop for the Bald Eagle in the trees!

When we clear the lighthouse point the water is still remarkably calm and flat – it's easy to see anything break the surface and we soon spot some porpoises. We carry on and head for the Mega Nova that is with a whale. It's Sockeye, named for its over-bite likening it to a sockeye salmon. But it's a lot bigger. As we approach, we can see it logging on the surface – a good description for when a whale lies motionless, resting on the surface and looking somewhat like a floating log. A big broad log.

We get some nice looks but Sockeye is not in a playful mood, so we leave the area and head for another boat that has a whale in the distance. It too is logging on the surface so although we can get quite close, nothing much seems to happen. The whale goes through a cat and mouse routine when we near and it dives.

We can't help notice that we are surrounded by White-sided Dolphins. We decide it would be more fun watching these busy animals, so we set sail to intercept. When we reach the heart of the pod Trevor cuts the engine and all is quiet save the mini-explosive breaths as the dolphins come to the surface. One is travelling closely with a small calf. It's a very special moment.

We move back to shore spending a second time with Sockeye and this time he performs a little – it's wonderful to have him alongside – its bigger than the boat!

Lunch is at Northlight where we can scan over the Bay of Fundy that is still looking remarkably calm and flat. It is so quiet and peaceful we can hear the expulsion of air as a Humpback Whale passes close to the shore working its way west. Wow!

After lunch we drive to Westport to explore a new feature in the landscape – the Big Bog boardwalk. Here an impressive raised wooden path takes us deep into one of the large boreal bogs that crosses the island – interpretive boards tell us how the communities have used and managed the water levels over the years but now efforts are in place to restore the bog to its former glory. A dozen or so Bobolinks are star birds along the way.

After some nice ice-creams we proceed to the southernmost point of the island, where we park and walk towards Pond Cove. Emma spots a Peregrine flying away from us as we walk to the edge of Big Pond – the first of many raptors on the move - there are Turkey Vultures soaring and three Northern Harriers drifting around

too. We can see lots of gulls on the spit and a smaller wader – a Greater Yellowlegs. There are lots of Double-crested Cormorants on show and three Belted Kingfishers are chasing around – one bird lands on a rock and we can check out its double breast bands – a female. Walking further along the edge we see another smaller wader – a Lesser Yellowlegs and it moves towards its bigger cousin offering a nice comparison.

Crossing over the shingle we can scan along the beach and rocks where lots of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls are resting. Hazel spots a bird in the rocks nearer than the gulls - a fantastic Hudsonian Whimbrel with striking striped head markings. We note that there are some gulls with dark backs and bright yellow feet – Lesser Black-backed Gulls – a rarity in Nova Scotia and there are five of them! Close by are two Black-bellied Plovers (in the UK we call them Grey Plovers) and one still has a black belly!

We walk along the beach looking for birds along the water's edge – there are some peeps scurrying along the sand. We get good looks at sparkling Sanderling with Semi-palmated Plovers and closer to us are several Least Sandpipers and a few Semi-palmated Sandpipers. At sea there are lots of Eiders, Black Scoter, a Common Loon and a few Grey Seals.

Day 8: Yet More New Birds

Our transfer day will not be without new birds and we have a full day planned. We start with an early visit to the banding station and when we arrive there is just Lance and Andree at the desk but within minutes there are paper bags twitching on the washing line as the posse of assistants return from the rounds of the nets.

Lance starts to process a round of birds: a familiar Common Yellowthroat is followed by another striking Black-and-white Warbler. Next is a superb Northern Waterthrush which Andrew has predicted when Lance reads out the weight – impressive! Then there's a Magnolia Warbler, a Black-throated Green Warbler and a delightful Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Finally, there are two Yellowthroats and another Northern Waterthrush. It's another joyful session and another special treat, thanks to the generosity of our banding hosts - we say our farewells. Reluctantly, it's time to get back to the lodge for our final breakfast. Afterwards we say goodbye to Brier Island and the helpful folk at the lodge – we'll be back!

We leave in the sunshine and are soon on the ferry, crossing to Long Island and onwards to Digby Neck noting that things are clearly on the move, not least the hundreds of bikers on Harley-Davidsons. We stop near Sandy Cove when we see raptors on the move – we get a nice look at Red-tailed Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Northern Harriers and Turkey Vultures, all circling above, catching the morning thermals. We can't resist checking out the beaver lodge again – sadly the mammals are quiet (well it is the middle of the morning) but we do get great looks at Ring-necked Ducks. We carry on the short drive to the cove for one last look over

the Bay of Fundy. Sadly, there are no whales to report but plenty of loons – we count seven or eight.

We've time to check Marsh Road that hugs the head of Mary Bay. When we park it's a short walk to the sea wall where we can look over the bay, now at high tide. Two Ospreys are hunting over the shallows, hovering and looking for fish. They dive a couple of times in vain but when they do have success and emerge from the water with fish, they attract the attention of two young Bald Eagles that chase them and force them to drop their booty – great looks at some raptor interaction!

We head east to Annapolis Royal Marsh and arrive for a quick lunch before exploring further along the French Basin Trail. A well-maintained path takes us around a large reed-fringed pool that is busy with wildfowl, gulls and two large white birds – a large Great Egret and another smaller bird. This is a testing species, looking for all the world like a Little Egret. However, it has pale legs and a whitish beak with a dark tip. It is a young Little Blue Heron (very white and not at all blue!).

We next set up the telescope and play the eclipse-plumage-duck-identity game. Amongst the nearest group of brown ducks are two Wood Ducks showing some markings around the face that gives a suggestion of what they might look like in full plumage. There are lots of Black Duck, Mallard and large-billed Shoveler, plus many more, smaller ducks. These are a mix of Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal. Far more interesting to look at are the many shorebirds in the shallow water. There are lots of Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs with the larger birds showing the longer legs and the shorter birds wading in the water up to their tummies. Small peeps are on a sand bar – Semi-palmated and Least Sandpipers with some Semi-palmated Plovers. A single Solitary Sandpiper lands close to us along the water's edge.

Cedar Waxwings are flying over in groups and we get looks at Belted Kingfisher, Osprey and Bank Swallows that fly around too. All the way round this beautiful Reserve we are kept company with small flurries of action from groups of warblers. These are mostly 'Myrtle' Yellow-rumped Warblers, but we do note American Redstart, Chestnut-sided, Yellow and Palm Warbler too. On the last section we add Short-billed Dowitcher, Gadwall and American Wigeon to complete the species tally.

From Annapolis Royal we drive along the Harvest Highway in the sun towards Halifax. Reluctantly we have to end somewhere and we have reached the time to move to the airport for check-in and a final meal together where we review the trip highlights and cast our votes. We say goodbyes to Marilyn who is staying on in Canada – Darren will see her next week in Vancouver!

The results of the voting:

Whale-of-the-trip is the full-breaching Humpback Whale – possibly Bungee!

Top bird-in-the-hand is Black-throated Blue, closely followed by Black-and-white Warbler.

Place-of-the-trip is choice between Northlight, Balancing Rock and the flat calm of the Bay of Fundy – special places indeed.

Magic Moments are plenty, but most refer to our first whale watch with full breaching, chin-breaching and pec-slapping whales on the Bay of Fundy.

Sincere thanks to Trevor, Roy, Shelley, Tania, Pascale, Dawn and all at Brier Island Whale and Seabird Cruises; to Lance, Andree, Ron, Peter, Eddie, Wesley and Gerry at the Banding Station; to Virginia, Katherine, Marcus and the crew at Brier Island Lodge.

BIRDS

Canada Goose
Wood Duck
Mallard
Black Duck
Gadwall
Pintail
American Wigeon
Northern Shoveler
Green-winged Teal
Blue-winged Teal
Ring-necked Duck
Common Eider
Black Scoter
Red-breasted Merganser
Ring-necked Pheasant
Ruffed Grouse
Common Loon
Greater Shearwater
Wilson's Storm-Petrel
Northern Gannet
Great Cormorant
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Egret
Great Blue Heron
Little Blue Heron
Green Heron
Turkey Vulture
Northern Harrier
Osprey
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Broad-winged Hawk
Bald Eagle
Peregrine
American Kestrel
Merlin
Black-bellied Plover
Semi-palmated Plover
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Solitary Sandpiper
Hudsonian Whimbrel
Ruddy Turnstone (h)
Semi-palmated Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Sanderling
Red-necked Phalarope
Red Phalarope
Ring-billed Gull
American Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Laughing Gull
Common Tern
South Polar Skua
Pomarine Jaeger
Black Guillemot
Common Guillemot
Atlantic Puffin
Feral Rock Dove
Mourning Dove
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher

Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Pileated Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Eastern Wood Pewee
Alder Flycatcher
Traill's Flycatcher
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Least Flycatcher
Blue Jay
American Crow
Common Raven
Barn Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Bank Swallow
Black-capped Chickadee
Boreal Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Gray Catbird
Cedar Waxwing
Red-eyed Vireo
Ovenbird
Northern Waterthrush
Black-and-white Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
American Redstart
Cape May Warbler
Northern Parula
Magnolia Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler
Yellow Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Bay-breasted Warbler
Palm Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Wilson's Warbler
Chipping Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Song Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Bobolink
Common Grackle
Eurasian Starling
Purple Finch
American Goldfinch
(114)

MAMMALS

Humpback Whale
Atlantic White-sided Dolphin
Harbour Porpoise
Atlantic Grey Seal
Harbour Seal
Red Squirrel
Muskrat
Eastern Cottontail
White-tailed Deer