

Holiday Highlights

Nova Scotia

26 August – 3 September 2017

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Guests: Sarah Sharland, Pauline Pothecary, Marilyn Davidson, Sian Piper and Jim Hair

Day 1: **Getting There**

Our flight from Heathrow to Halifax is comfortable and on time and we arrive in Nova Scotia to be greeted by clear blue skies. We pick up our hire vehicle and drive 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 birds include American Crow, Common Raven, Red-tailed Hawk and a Bald Eagle.

After two-and-a-bit hours we arrive at delightful Digby (home of world famous scallops we are told!) 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 (check out the thighs), Ring-billed and American Herring Gulls.

Our last leg takes us along Digby Neck peninsula, where we pause at a roadside lake – there's a beaver lodge on the far side of the water but the only mammal we see in the water is a human being bathing! No chance of a beaver then, there are however our first Ring-necked Ducks in the water. 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 9.15pm – it's been an exhausting day.

Day 2: **Our First Whales**

Most folk are up and about before breakfast keen to explore our new base and we can't help notice that there are birds in the low alder bushes and higher conifer trees behind the lodge; American Goldfinch utter their 'potato chips' call, Yellow Warbler and Common Yellowthroat are our first in the list of migrants and a Gray Catbird calls, sounding just like a cat! We stroll along the track through the spruce forest and we meet Black-capped Chickadees and a family of White-throated Sparrows on the side of the gravel road. Another track to the left enters 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 glimpse a bright male American Redstart with a couple of less bright immature birds. A stunning male Yellowthroat wows us in a close bush and a Blackburnian Warbler is active in one treetop. We get good looks of Black-throated Green Warblers with less good views of a Cape May Warbler.

Birds are moving quickly and are teasing us but we manage looks at Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Black-and-white Warbler (acting like a Nuthatch) and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. A group of Cedar Waxwings are flying around and trilling but these fail to land to give us looks but we are nevertheless pleased with our pre-breakfast session. At breakfast we are introduced to Melody who will be looking after us for the coming week - the eggs are great and pancakes and maple syrup even better.

After breakfast we drive the short distance towards Northlight, the lighthouse on the northernmost tip of Brier Island, so 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 (to our right) and beyond to the north is the Bay of Fundy, looking particularly calm and tranquil this morning. As we park the van a smart Northern Harrier drifts right by us on buoyant wings – a young bird with rich orangey underparts and a neat white rump. We walk to the lighthouse and scan out to sea noting Gannets, Eiders, Double-crested Cormorants and Black Guillemots (both in summer and winter plumage). A Willet flies by showing off its pied wing markings, and Common Loons surface on the water.

We soon see larger things further out... a whale blow! Blimey - it's our first Humpback Whales and we haven't been in a boat yet! They are surfacing close to whalewatch boats and we can't help think we'd like to be out in one – well we will be in a few hours! Through the scopes we can make out small birds moving far out too – Greater Shearwaters and Red Phalaropes.

Walking further along, the shore path skirts the edge of the spruce trees and there is a flurry of activity with both Savannah and Song Sparrows – it's nice getting a handle on the difference between these two similar species. At sea we see Atlantic Gray Seals both on rocks and in the water and then we notice more large things in the water at the mouth of the passage – more whales. They are blowing and show a long back that takes time to roll before a strong dorsal fin appears. The sun is catching them too and we can clearly see a paler patch behind the mouth – Fin Whales! We can even hear them exhale as they come to the surface, working along the shore in our direction – fabulous! We sit and watch them pass by and all the while another richly coloured Northern Harrier drifts by, hugging the fringe of spruce trees. Pretty Monarch butterflies are on the wing too, and we can't help feel we are going to like Brier Island.

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 – we add Lesser Yellowlegs to the list as well as enjoying the sun and our sandwiches.

Soon we are getting ready to board our first scheduled whalewatch 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 Harold Graham is at the helm and we are in safe and knowledgeable hands as he has pioneered whalewatching from Brier Island. Onboard naturalists Tania and Alison take us through the all-important safety drill and without delay we are soon on our way. We head south through the narrow passage between Brier and Peter's Island, then hug the shoreline that in places is marked by striking columnar basalt cliffs. A Bald Eagle is on the shore, sitting in a spruce above one of the cliffs – when it flies we see the bright white tail and head of an adult bird. Further along the south tip of Brier runs ever lower into the water before breaking up into a series of low-lying rocks. Over the last section of forest we note hawks circling as they discover that they are passing over the last piece of land and they are trying to gain height – these are Broad-winged Hawks, nearly twenty of them – migration in action!

Further out, on the rocky shoals are Gray Seals loafing and Gannets plunge diving nearby - another Bald Eagle, this time a brown immature bird, moves between islands. Beyond we enter the Bay of Fundy proper and it's not long before we see our first cetaceans – Atlantic White-sided Dolphins are breaking the water and as we approach they become more exuberant – we get nice looks at smartly marked animals.

Further ahead are two Humpback Whales and we move closer – they allow us one good look at their flukes before the dive. The area is obviously rich with food and it is busy with seabirds - we see Wilson's Petrels, Greater Shearwaters, Red and Red-necked Phalaropes. 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 logging at the surface and after working the group the crew can get looks at the flukes and identify them. We enjoy a further session with four close to boat, then a little bit further out we see another two including one chin-breaching - spectacular! What a great start to the whalewatching week. What's left but ice-creams in Westport and back to the lodge.

Day 3: A Day of Days

We meet at 7a.m. for an early breakfast as we have a special boat journey lined up. We take a cursory look around the bushes as we load the van noting warblers on the move: Black-throated Green and Yellow Warblers and American Redstarts. There is little time to linger though, so we drive to Westport and the dock where we meet with the crew of the Mega Nova again. We are accompanying them on their research cruise, a tour of the Bay of Fundy that they take 3 or 4 times a year to survey the whale populations. We feel privileged to join head naturalist Shelley, Alison and Captain Roy and we have been very fortunate with the sea conditions as it is flat calm as we board the boat. We pass along the passage to Northlight and the Bay of Fundy is looking like a mill-pond. Birds stick out easily and we see flocks of Eiders and a Common Loon on the surface. Moving further out we see big groups of phalaropes and smaller black birds. These are Wilsons' Storm-petrels and they are doing exactly what they

should be doing – fluttering and pattering their feet on the surface and seemingly walking on water ('petrel' from St Peter).

With such perfect conditions we can see every break in the glass-like water and start picking up Common or Harbour Porpoises that show their small triangular dorsal fins. Further out is a big group of larger finned Atlantic White-sided Dolphins and we approach these slowly to see if we can get a better look. It works a treat and with the sea state we can easily see the dolphins in the water as they pass near the boat – we enjoy wonderful looks at a group of over thirty animals including young calves. They leap sporadically and unpredictably so are teasing to photograph but it is fun trying - best ever views!

After spending quality time with dolphins we continue beyond 'The Rip', an area of upwelling that lies above a series of underwater ridges and walls that drive nutrients, plankton and fish to the surface. The horizon is dotted with whale blows too - let the whalewatching begin.

Our first encounter is with two Humpbacks that are close to the surface and shallow diving. It takes a while to establish the identity of the whales as the researchers need to see the tail flukes well – each whale has a unique set of black-and-white markings on the underside and this is only viewable when the whale executes a deeper dive. Sometimes some whales will have a particularly shaped dorsal fin or carry scarring on the back, but for most cases it's the tail flukes that hold the key to identification. After a series of dives Shelley establishes that we are watching Vader plus a travelling companion.

Similarly, the next encounter is with Cowlick plus two others and these whales are travelling with a small pod of dolphins. We are thrilled with what we've seen but it's about to get a whole lot better, we move closer to a group of four Humpbacks. We see them surfacing, logging then diving together and Shelley informs us that they are Gremlin, Patchwork, Tether and Magpie. Patchwork ventures very close to boat and from the elevated deck we can look down as it almost touches the side – Shelley tries to get some film footage of the encounter and she lowers a GoPro camera fastened to a pole into the water. From our position she is dwarfed by the immense size of the whale and we are casting shadows across its back – what a sight!

We watch the antics of Patchwork for a while then it drifts away to join the others loafing on the surface. At one point the whales attract a young Herring Gull that actually tries to land on one their backs. As the bird touches its skin the whale immediately reacts, arching its back and splashing its tail, which in turn spooks the other three whales. The surface again and are later joined by an interloper named Tsunami.

In the distance we notice lots of splashing and white water from breaching and pec-slapping whales so we set a course for these. However, when we travel towards the whales we come across two more Humpbacks that are surfacing

close to our right. We investigate and identify two well-known whales Tornado and Milky Way. What happens next is remarkable... they both move slowly towards the boat and Captain Roy cuts the engine. We are floating in the middle of the bay and the whales are approaching us but just who is watching who? Shelley lowers her Gopro camera as Tornado nudges ever nearer. At one point the whale is inches away from the camera - we later see the footage and the whale's eye is moving around and seems to be engaging with it. At one point it seems to lose awareness of its own size and actually bumps its snout on the bottom of the boat.

On the way back we see two more (unidentified) Humpbacks, then a single whale called Thistle. Our final encounter is with a whale called Sargasso (with a distinct hooked dorsal fin) and her calf that are travelling with a large adult whale called Pluma. We get alongside the three whales on several occasions and it's a fitting end to an amazing day on the water.

Day 4: A Bird in the Hand

After breakfast at 7a.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 thirty 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 – Lance hands the bags over to his wife Andre to reveal the first gems from the paper bags. First is one of the American thrushes – a testing i.d. for starters! It has a uniform rich brown plumage with muted speckling on the breast and no obvious eye ring – a Veery. Marilyn offers to release it and handles the bird. Then a smart Ovenbird is produced by magic with its fine streaks, stripey head and big eye - Pauline releases that one. Next is an exquisite Black-and-white Warbler (look at those tree-creeper like claws), then a Common Yellowthroat released by Jim and Sian. Two Cape May Warblers are presented and they are of differing plumage – an adult and an immature. Then we get a wonderful Northern Waterthrush that looks like a thrush but is in fact a warbler! Next, we are confronted with some birds from the tricky Empidonax flycatcher complex – a beautiful Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, followed by either a Willow or Alder Flycatcher (in autumn these are inseparable and the banders refer to these as 'Trails') and an Eastern Wood-pewee – all very educational. Finally, a Dark-eyed Junco completes round one.

With very little lull in the action Ron, Peter and Eddie enter with more bags and round two commences: as per Pauline's request, Lance produces, not one but two, Canada Warblers. Next, to complete the flycatcher masterclass we get a delicate Least Flycatcher. Then an exquisite bright Wilson's Warbler is followed by a Swainson's Thrush that Joanna displays. Then we see two beautifully marked American Redstarts and Andre points out the fine rectal bristles that make this

particular warbler a fine fly-catching machine. Another Northern Waterthrush finishes round two. We then get a tour of the nets escorted by Andre who fills us in on the history of the site. The third round completes a fantastic and informative morning: three American Redstarts - what a wonderful session with the banders – we shall return!

Afterwards we drive back to the lodge, pick up the packed lunches and go on to Westport where we stop on the edge of town to walk around this pretty village. Sian points out our first Blue Jay and we get looks at our first Mourning Doves. Raptors are on the move and we get great looks at both male and immature Northern Harriers. There's also a Broad-winged Hawk circling in the blue sky.

Lunch is at our usual spot on the dock at Westport, then it's a drive to the south section of the island. At the Joshua Slocum Monument 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 Great Cormorants mixed in with the numerous Double-crested Cormorants.

Next we proceed to the southernmost point of the island, where we park and walk towards Pond Cove. A lovely Northern Harrier is drifting around as we walk to the edge of Big Pond and here we can see lots of gulls on the spit but sadly no waders. There are Great Blue Herons and lots of Double-crested Cormorants on show and waterfowl include our first Black Duck and Canada Geese. Towards the back of the pond, across the spruce trees are two huge young Bald Eagles soaring. Crossing over the shingle we can scan along the beach and the incoming tide has pushed some peeps to scurry along the sand. We get good looks at sparkling Sanderling, with Semi-palmated and Least Sandpipers and a Semi-palmated Plover. At sea there are lots of Eiders and Jim finds a Common Loon. Further along we can scan Little Pond and there are Lesser Yellowlegs and Spotted Sandpipers.

Retracing our steps, we come across more Least Sandpipers that are bathing in the freshwater of Big Pond. There is also a larger, greyer, longer winged peep, a White-rumped Sandpiper. Towards the back of the water we see two Bald Eagles perched on treetops – a white-headed adult and a brown, white-bellied second year bird. A Merlin then enters from the right, charging around and lands on the top of a spruce, giving us great looks in the scope.

We drive back to the lodge but no-one wants to quit so we have a late vigil at the Northlight to see our daily whale. Far out are Humpbacks and it is so calm and quiet that we can hear the distant smashing sound of whales breaching, amazing! One Humpback is close by and we can hear the expulsion of air as it surfaces. A great end to the day.

Day 5: Lighthouses and Balancing Rocks

Today we decide to venture off Brier Island, to explore some of the sights on neighbouring Long Island. After breakfast we take the ferry across Grand

Passage to Freeport, then drive the length of the island to Tiverton where we can park the van and walk the track that leads to Boar's Head Light. It is overcast and cool and the bird activity is low nevertheless we stumble across an unusual species – a Mourning Warbler is close to the track. There are a few birds calling in bushes as we walk along but these prove elusive to view. It's not until we get to the picturesque lighthouse that we see a flurry of activity as warblers drop into bushes and trees in front of us. We see American Redstart, Yellow-rumped and Wilson's Warbler (a cracking black-capped male). At sea we scan the flat surface and note Common Loon, Gannets, Harbour Porpoises and White-sided Dolphins in good numbers. We see one distant Humpback fluke, then note that a zodiac is resting on the surface to the left. We train our binoculars and scopes on it and see two Humpbacks surface close by – these fluke up several times while we watch.

On the return walk we finally come across a 'warbler wave' with several birds hopping around the short trees and bushes. Along with Black-capped Chickadees are Black-throated Green, Yellow and Parula Warblers - an Eastern Wood Pewee is also on show.

Lunch is at Central Grove and then we drive to where we can walk to the geological feature called Balancing Rock (no prizes for guessing what is there). When we arrive at the car park we see a nice Hairy Woodpecker before setting off on our walk. The trail takes us across a rich tamarack and black spruce bog and then climbs through mixed forest before descending via a series of steps to the shoreline. We see Least Flycatcher, Black-and white Warbler and Golden-crowned Kinglets that are feeding a family. The rock feature itself is a twenty feet high pillar of basalt that teeters on the shore looking for all-the-world that it will fall over with the next storm. Walking back along the trail birds are few, but when we get back to the car park there is a tree full of Cedar Waxwings and we finally get good looks at a Ruby-throated Hummingbird working its way around the flowers.

At Freeport we can work our way around the cove that forms a large natural harbour. Lots of gulls are loafing around on weedy rocks and Black Ducks are in the freshwater channel that empties into the bay - we also see a cute Muskrat swimming nearby! Sarah finds a Black-bellied Plover – the only shorebird on show. We drive round scanning from a couple of points but fail to locate any wading birds and it's not until we retrace our steps that we find an obliging Greater Yellowlegs.

With so few birds around we decide to take the ferry to Westport at 4pm and spend the last session at Northlight on Brier Island. Again, the sea conditions are great for scanning for whales and it's not long before Sian spots a Humpback in the narrow channel between us and Long Island. It hugs the far shore and works its way along, for the duration of our time there. Elsewhere, far out close to the horizon, Jim spots some splashing from some whales. Through scopes we get the full array of lob-tailing, pec-slapping and full breaches from two

Humpbacks. Pauline finds another two further to the right and these breach too! What a finale to another great day!

Day 6: **Two Bites at the Cherry**

After an early breakfast we walk towards Northlight with the intention of visiting the banding station again – and we are not the only ones as a film crew from Quebec are also looking to record the migration. There are a few birds working through the trees and bushes at The Dell and we can scope an American Kestrel that is sat on a distant spruce – new for the list.

When we arrive at the banding station we are surprised to learn that the film cameras didn't stick around – peculiar as the temporary tented operations camp and bonhomie of the banders are irresistible, to us anyway. Lance is ready for our visit and has our wish-list in mind. The first round pleases Marilyn with two delightful Golden-crowned Kinglets to order – Sian's request for a hummingbird is also simultaneously satisfied as a Ruby-throated Hummingbird visits the sugar feeder suspended above Lance's head. Next, a quiz bird for us, ably worked out by Sian - a Bay-breasted Warbler. The second round of birds yields a Cape May Warbler, a very young Yellowthroat (with no yellow throat that is really confusing for the leader!), a Least Flycatcher, a Cape May Warbler, followed by a delicate Nashville Warbler and a bright Yellow Warbler.

The pause in ringing action doesn't mean there's a respite for birding as in the amphitheatre of trees around the station there is a flurry of action au-naturelle – Blackburnian, Cape May, Black-throated Green Warblers and a Red-eyed Vireo! The third round keeps giving with Golden-crowned Kinglet, Black-throated Green and a new bird for the list – a nice Magnolia Warbler. Finally, our fourth round consists of only two birds back from the nets – a Black-and-white Warbler and an American Redstart. Another great session.

Before lunch there is a brief walk close to the town cemetery that lies on the high land above Westport. There have been records of Eastern Bluebirds here, but we fail to locate them and decide to wander back to our favourite picnic spot – the dock on the bay.

After snacks we board Mega Nova for our third whalewatch and conditions are different from previous cruises with noticeably more chop and a few white caps. What's more, we need to sail much further out, west of the rip before we see some action. Seabirds start appearing in good numbers with the now accustomed Red and Red-necked Phalaropes and Greater Shearwaters. The whales we saw from the lighthouse the previous evening have disappeared and we are far from land when we join a single boat loitering on the surface. They have our first whale of the day – a single Humpback Whale. This does a series of shallow dives and never reveals its flukes clearly, so remains a mystery animal.

We move towards some splashing to the south and find another two Humpbacks - a mother and calf and the youngster is feeling frisky. It proceeds to do a series

of tail breaches and we get a great show of consecutive splashy action very close to the boat – fantastic! Then Alison yells ‘Jaeger’ – a lithe skua enters and it has spoon-shaped tail feathers - a Pomarine Jaeger. This is followed by brief looks at a South Polar Skua (looking a lot like a Bonxie) and then we set sail for Westport. As we approach Brier we get news that a rare Right Whale has been spotted nearby and we don't really know how to react... Captain Roy needs to get back to Westport for an evening cruise but can arrange for a zodiac if we would like to go straight back out again. We all agree that sounds like a plan and, although we might have to amend our dining arrangements, soon after we dock we get kitted out with survival suits and meet Guy who is willing to take us out again. We speed out past Northlight and into the Bay of Fundy to the approximate area where the Right Whale was seen over an hour ago. Guy uses his considerable knowledge of the water and undersea ledges and of how Right Whales travelling usually behave and slowly picks a route parallel to the shore. All eyes are looking in every direction... after a while Guy gets a radio message from Harold who is looking from the mainland at Westlight - he's seen a blow to the southwest in the waters ahead of us. We continue our search as the sun starts to set and at one point we do see a blow but unfortunately we cannot locate the whale, instead we round Gull Rock enjoying the sunset and then take the speedy route along the south shore back towards Grand Passage. Guy drops us off at Freeport on Long Island where we get out of our survival suits on the ferry ramp, not without a comical struggle! Then it's a short walk to Lavena's Catch Café where they are expecting us – time for a drink and a good meal. What a fun end to a crazy day on the Bay of Fundy.

Day 7: Our Daily Whale

After yesterday's exertions we start at a more leisurely hour with a stroll at 8a.m. There is a path nearby that takes us from the lodge towards the sea at Seal Cove. It takes us through some beautiful sections of the forest and there are a few birds on the way. Then there's a flurry of activity from Yellowthroats, Chickadees, Golden-crowned Kinglets followed by a Hairy Woodpecker. At the seashore we are greeted by a fantastic Bald Eagle adult that flies across the scene. The Bay of Fundy is whipped up in the stiff wind with lots of white-caps – it doesn't bode well for our planned zodiac trip.

After breakfast we go to Westport to get an update on how the weather conditions are affecting plans... it seems that there will probably be no boat trips today. We plan a further exploration of different parts of Brier and we walk along Camp Road in the southern section of boreal forest. Shortly after starting our stroll we bump into a mixed group of birds with Red-breasted Nuthatch (a new bird species), Magnolia Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, Yellowthroat and Black-capped Chickadees. The path takes us past several wooden summer homes or 'camps' (hence the name of the road) and reaches the shore at Little Pond Cove. Along the coastline are three Bald Eagles, an adult with two young of the year. Northern Harriers drift by and Gray Seals and Eiders bob in the water of the bay. On the return walk we come across a group of four Trails Flycatchers and some are uttering a soft 'wit' note – these are Willow Flycatchers. We carry

on back to the van then drive the short distance to Westlight for lunch. There, as well as enjoying our sandwiches in the shelter of the lighthouse, we get a good show from Northern Harriers and Bald Eagles. At sea strong winds keeping the Gannets and Shearwaters close to shore.

Afterwards we drive to Westport where we get confirmation that there will be no boats out today – it seems our sunset zodiac cruise was to be our last boat trip of the week. And so we take a second look at Pond Cove. On the beach are Sanderlings, Semi-palmated Sandpipers, Semi-palmated Plovers, Least Sandpipers. Walking along the inner pool we see more eagles and harriers, then we return along the beach seeing two White-rumped Sandpipers amongst the 'peeps'. A Belted Kingfisher is hovering, looking for fish, and at the far end of the cove we get great looks at shorebirds at water's edge and really close Least Sandpipers in the rusting weed - veritable peep show!

Everyone is up for an end of day session at Northlight, after all we need our daily whale. Gulls on the nearby rocks include Lesser Black-backed and Ring-billed with Turnstones showing well too. At sea we see two Manx Shearwaters as well as the usual Gannets, Greater Shearwater and Black Guillemots. New for the list are Black-legged Kittiwakes in the mouth of passage. Just as we decide to call it a day there's a huge splash in distance – a breaching Humpback! We set the scopes up and then we watch it tail-lob for a few minutes – a whale a day!

Day 8: Yet More New Birds

Our transfer day will not be without new birds and we have a full day planned. We start after an early breakfast with our final visit to the banding station and when we arrive there is the wonderful sight of paper bags twitching on the washing line. Lance starts to process our first round of birds: a superb Northern Waterthrush, a cracking male Cape May Warbler, a delightful Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and finally a tricky Bay-breasted Warbler. The bags keep coming and the second round sees a Magnolia Warbler, another Northern Waterthrush and a Black-throated Green Warbler.

We are then invited to escort Gerry on a round of the nets and watch Ron extract another Magnolia Warbler. This is ferried back to the ringing table and joined by a Cape May and another Bay-breasted Warbler. It seems a slower than normal day and there's a break before we finish with two Golden-crowned Kinglets. What a great morning and another special treat thanks to the generosity of our banding hosts. It's time to 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 noting that things are clearly on the move, not least the hundreds of bikers on Harley-Davidsons. We can't resist checking out the Beaver lodge at Sandy Cove – sadly the mammals are quiet (well it is midday) but we do get great looks at Ring-necked Ducks and our first Wood Ducks. Our picnic site is the beautiful

Lake Midway on Digby Neck and we even add a new bird – well sort of, a Pileated Woodpecker calls out from the trees but remains out of sight.

After lunch we start the long journey east stopping after half-an-hour at Annapolis Royal to birdwatch around the small wetland reserve. A well maintained path takes us around a large reed fringed pool that is busy with wildfowl. We set up the telescope and play the eclipse plumage duck identity game. Amongst the nearest group of brown ducks are several Ring-necked Ducks, Black Duck, Mallard, Gadwall, as well as our first Pied-billed Grebe. On the edge of the reeds is a family of Wood Ducks and further along we see Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon and smaller Green-winged Teal. 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 Common Yellowthroat and Yellow Warblers too. Cedar Waxwings are using the dead trees in the water as fly-catching perches and a Belted Kingfisher looks for its prey. In a sheltered corner a Wood Pewee and Trails Flycatcher watch for insects and a Red-winged Blackbird perches in with more Cedar Waxwings. Completing the circuit we add Blue-winged Teal and a smart Downy Woodpecker – a fitting bird to end on.

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. Afterwards we review the trip highlights and the votes are counted:

Whale-of-the-trip is Tornado, one of the two humpbacks that spent so much time so close to the boat on our day of days.

Top bird-in-the-hand is shared with Golden-crowned Kinglet, Canada and Black-and-white Warbler.

Place-of-the-trip is Northlight, with honourable mentions to the Banding Station.

Magic Moments are plenty but all refer to either our day-of-days with the research cruise on the glassy Bay of Fundy, or looking out from Northlight: Dolphins leaping while the Storm-petrels patter; watching Humpbacks breaching through the telescopes and our unforgettable close encounters with Tornado and Patchwork. What a great trip!

Our sincere thanks to Harold, Roy, Shelley, Alison, Tania, Guy, Dawn and Joanna at Brier Island Whale and Seabird Cruises; to Lance, Andre, Ron, Peter, Eddie, Gerry and Joanna at the Banding Station; to Virginia, Melody, chefs and crew at Brier Island Lodge.

SPECIES LISTS

Birds

Common Loon
Pied-billed Grebe
Greater Shearwater
Sooty Shearwater
Manx Shearwater
Wilson's Storm-Petrel
Leach's Storm-Petrel
Northern Gannet
Great Cormorant
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Canada Goose
Wood Duck
Mallard
Black Duck
Gadwall
Pintail
American Wigeon
Northern Shoveler
Green-winged Teal
Blue-winged Teal
Ring-necked Duck
Common Eider
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Broad-winged Hawk
American Kestrel
Merlin
Semi-palmated Plover
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Ruddy Turnstone
Sanderling
Semi-palmated Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
White-rumped Sandpiper
Red-necked Phalarope
Red Phalarope
Pomarine Jaeger
South Polar Skua
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Black-legged Kittiwake
Common Tern
Black Guillemot
Atlantic Puffin
Feral Rock Dove
Mourning Dove
Chimney Swift
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Pileated Woodpecker (h)
Northern Flicker
Eastern Wood Pewee
Willow/Alder Flycatcher
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Least Flycatcher
Barn Swallow
Blue Jay
American Crow
Common Raven
Black-capped Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Veery
Swainson's Thrush
Cedar Waxwing
European Starling
Red-eyed Vireo
Northern Parula
Yellow Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler
Bay-breasted Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Northern Waterthrush
Mourning Warbler

Common Yellowthroat
Wilson's Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Canada Warbler
Chipping Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Song Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Red-winged Blackbird
Common Grackle
American Goldfinch

Mammals

Humpback Whale
Fin Whale
Minke Whale
Atlantic White-sided Dolphin
Harbour Porpoise
Atlantic Grey Seal
Harbour Seal
Red Squirrel
Muskrat

Butterflies

Monarch
Red Admiral
Painted Lady
Wood Nymph
Great Spangled Fritillary
Cabbage White
Pearl Crescent

Dragonflies

Twelve-spotted Skimmer
Scarlet Darter
Yellow-legged Meadowhawk