

# Western Canada: From the Prairies to the Pacific Species List | June 16 – 26, 2025 with Naturalist Journeys



**Compiled by guide Stephen Grace with Gavin McKinnon. Our clients included Rich, Christine, Guy, Christy, Don, Ann, and Suratha.**

Our 11-day tour followed an ecological transect across Alberta and British Columbia, documenting 187 bird species as we traveled through shortgrass prairie, boreal forest, montane and subalpine zones, interior dry forest, temperate rainforest, riparian corridors, a coastal estuary, and Pacific shores. Highlights included regional specialties, breeding behaviors, and range-restricted species encountered in their characteristic habitats.

## **Calgary, Prairie, and Wetlands (June 16–18)**

Our initial birding around Calgary and the surrounding plains delivered classic prairie wetland species. Wilson's Phalaropes were abundant, with excellent views of females in striking breeding plumage. American Avocets were seen tending recently hatched chicks. Other shorebirds included Marbled Godwits, Willets, Killdeer, Black-necked Stilts, and a notably early Lesser Yellowlegs. Eared and Red-necked Grebes, along with Ruddy Duck, Redhead, Bufflehead, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, and all three teal species—Cinnamon, Blue-winged, and Green-winged—were recorded. A hybrid Western × Clark's Grebe was spotted at Frank Lake, where Western Grebes were also present.

Raptors were well-represented. Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawks were common, and we observed a Northern Harrier hunting low over a field. Ferruginous Hawks were seen well, including perched adults at a stick nest with two visible chicks. Prairie Falcons were observed flying and perched near a cliffside aerie. A Short-eared Owl carried prey in flight, and Long-eared Owls included an adult and three fledglings near a trail. A pair of Burrowing Owls was scoped at a known breeding site.

Grassland specialists included Thick-billed and Chestnut-collared Longspurs displaying on territory, along with Horned Lark, Vesper Sparrow, and numerous Western Meadowlarks. Despite targeted searches, both Sprague's Pipit and Baird's Sparrow were heard-only. Black Terns, Franklin's Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, and a Caspian Tern were seen over open water. A nesting colony of California Gulls—with chicks—was also observed. American White Pelicans were numerous at Frank Lake.

Among other species, we noted Yellow-headed Blackbird, Red-winged Blackbird, Brewer's Blackbird, Common Grackle, American Crow, Common Raven, Black-billed Magpie, Canada Goose, and American Robin. Several American Coots with chicks were seen, and a Sora made a brief appearance. A singing Marsh Wren offered excellent views. Tree, Barn, and Cliff Swallows were also present.

## **Boreal Forest (June 19)**

We explored a southern extension of the boreal forest northeast of Calgary, where we were rewarded with views of a

Great Gray Owl perched near the forest edge. Tennessee Warbler sang from the canopy, while Wilson's Snipe called repeatedly, with one showing well from a high perch. Notable sightings included Alder Flycatcher and a calling Black-billed Cuckoo, the latter a local rarity. A pair of Common Loons was seen with a chick riding on a parent's back. Additional species included Cedar Waxwing, Gray Catbird, and Yellow Warbler.

#### **Banff National Park & Montane Habitats (June 19–21)**

In the montane coniferous forests of Banff National Park, we located an American Three-toed Woodpecker at eye level, diligently flaking bark in search of insects. A singing Pacific Wren provided excellent views, while Mountain Chickadee and Pine Siskin were also recorded. Rufous Hummingbirds were active in subalpine areas.

Water-associated species included Ring-necked Ducks and a Belted Kingfisher. A Warbling Vireo was also found nesting high in the trees.

#### **Okanagan Valley & Interior Dry Forest (June 21–23)**

Open pine savanna and lakeshore habitats yielded a fresh suite of species. A Lewis's Woodpecker was found in a burned Ponderosa Pine stand, perching on snags. Both Western and Mountain Bluebirds were seen well, and Northern Rough-winged Swallows were observed foraging over water. Other sightings included Western Wood-Pewee, Dusky Flycatcher (at a nest), Say's Phoebe, and American Kestrel. California Quail with chicks were seen near roadside scrub.

Pygmy Nuthatch was found in pine woodland, along with Spotted Towhee and Black-headed Grosbeak. Bullock's Oriole, Lazuli Bunting, and American Goldfinch added vibrant colors to the scene. Bald Eagles and Turkey Vultures were common throughout the area, and a Calliope Hummingbird was seen by some participants.

At dusk, Veery was heard singing from dense riparian undergrowth. we encountered Common Nighthawks and Common Poorwills flying overhead, and one perched Flammulated Owl was observed briefly.

#### **Manning Provincial Park & Subalpine Forest (June 24)**

In the high-elevation subalpine forests of Manning Provincial Park, we found Olive-sided Flycatcher, Swainson's Thrush, Hermit Thrush, Townsend's Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler (Audubon's), and multiple Canada Jays. Two male Sooty Grouse were seen well, and Clark's Nutcrackers were common, including a banded individual.

American Three-toed Woodpecker appeared again, and Red-breasted Nuthatch was noted. A Red-naped Sapsucker was seen by some participants. Varied Thrush remained elusive—heard singing but unseen. Evening Grosbeaks were observed feeding at close range, providing excellent views.

#### **Fraser River Drainage & Coastal Rainforest (June 24)**

A streamside stop produced a memorable encounter with a Barred Owl family—two adults and three fledged juveniles—with adults seen hunting and delivering prey. Also present were Western Flycatcher and Chestnut-backed Chickadee. A Common Merganser with young floated downstream.

#### **Fraser River Delta & Boundary Bay (June 25)**

Our final day of birding focused on coastal estuaries and mudflats. At Boundary Bay, we found large numbers of Bald Eagles, Glaucous-winged Gulls, and probable Western x Glaucous-winged Gull hybrids. Shorebirds included Black-bellied Plover and Black Oystercatcher. A singing Bewick's Wren posed for extended views.

At Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, a near-tame Sandhill Crane offered close views. Northern Pintail, Hooded Merganser, and Wood Duck were among the waterfowl highlights. Anna's Hummingbirds were active at feeders, and Purple Martins were seen using nest boxes. A Bullock's Oriole nest held nestlings being fed by an attending female. Song Sparrows and White-crowned Sparrows were vocal throughout.

Other species included Mute Swan, Eurasian Collared-Dove, and Downy Woodpecker. Common Yellowthroats were heard in marshes, with one male observed well.

### Summary

Across a diverse array of habitats, we documented numerous western North American specialties, including Ferruginous Hawk, Lewis's Woodpecker, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Great Gray Owl, Flammulated Owl, Sooty Grouse, Clark's Nutcracker, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, and Black Oystercatcher. Observations of nesting, fledglings, and territorial displays enriched our experience throughout the tour. This trip provided excellent coverage of western Canada's avifauna during the breeding season, traversing multiple biogeographic zones.

**BIRDS: 187** species were recorded, of which 13 were heard only (HO), none were endemic, and 6 were introduced (I). Details are included below.

The eBird link below details the 187 species of birds our group observed during the tour. If you're new to eBird, be sure to click "Show All Details" on the right side of the list to expand the report and reveal where and when each of the birds were seen and how many.

## [Western Canada: From the Prairies to the Pacific - Naturalist Journeys](#) [16–26 Jun 2025 \(11 days\)](#)

Following is a list of the birds, mammals, and other species we were fortunate to observe during our tour.

### **BIRDS — (187 species and 2 hybrids)**

#### **DUCKS, GEESE, AND WATERFOWL: Anatidae — (18)**

**Canada Goose** *Branta canadensis* — These large, familiar geese are known for their V-shaped migratory flocks and loud honking. Parents are fiercely protective, and goslings can walk, swim, and feed themselves within 24 hours of hatching. Common throughout the tour.

**Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor* — (I) An elegant but non-native species introduced from Europe. Easily recognized by its orange bill with a black knob and graceful S-curved neck. Despite their name, they're not silent—hissing and grunting are common, especially when defending territory. Can be aggressive and may displace native waterfowl. Seen from dike along Fraser River.

**Wood Duck** *Aix sponsa* — Among North America's most beautiful ducks, males display iridescent greens and purples. They nest in tree cavities and their ducklings leap from great heights to reach the ground or water below. One nearly tame male in eclipse plumage approached our group at Reifel Bird Sanctuary.

**Blue-winged Teal** *Spatula discors* — One of the earliest ducks to migrate south in fall. Their powder-blue shoulder patches flash in flight. Males give a distinctive high-pitched "peep" call during courtship. Seen well early in the tour at prairie wetlands.

**Cinnamon Teal** *Spatula cyanoptera* — Males are reddish-brown with striking red eyes. This teal prefers shallow wetlands in the western U.S. and is more secretive than its blue-winged cousin. Seen well at Frank Lake.

**Northern Shoveler** *Spatula clypeata* — With their oversized spoon-shaped bills, they filter tiny invertebrates from the water. Often seen spinning in circles to stir up food, they're social and frequently found in mixed flocks. Observed on prairie wetlands early in the tour.

**Gadwall** *Mareca strepera* — Subtly patterned in gray and brown. Among the most abundant dabbling ducks, Gadwalls are often overlooked, but close study reveals an understated elegance. They often steal food from diving birds like coots. Seen in wetlands on the prairie, Okanagan Valley, and around the Vancouver area.

**American Wigeon** *Mareca americana* — Also known as "baldpate" for the male's white crown. They often graze on land and are known to pirate vegetation from other ducks and coots. Seen in wetlands on the prairie, Okanagan Valley, and around the Vancouver area.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* — Possibly the most familiar wild duck in the world. Males have glossy green heads; females are mottled brown. Mallards are the ancestor of nearly all domestic duck breeds. Seen throughout the tour.

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* — Elegant and slender with a long neck and pointed tail. Males give a distinctive wheezy whistle, and both sexes are fast, agile flyers often seen in open wetlands. Observed at Reifel Bird Sanctuary.

**Green-winged Teal** *Anas crecca* — The smallest dabbling duck in North America, they erupt in tight flocks when flushed. Males sport a chestnut head with a green eye-stripe, and both sexes flash green wing patches in flight. Observed at Frank Lake and Reifel Bird Sanctuary.

**Redhead** *Aythya americana* — A diving duck with a rounded head and vibrant red plumage in males. Redheads sometimes parasitize nests of other ducks, including other species, laying eggs for them to raise. This striking duck was seen well at Frank Lake and spotted at Robert Lake.

**Ring-necked Duck** *Aythya collaris* — A compact diving duck with a peaked head and bold white ring on its bill. The chestnut neck ring is subtle and rarely seen, giving the species a misleading name. Seen in a wetland at Banff.

**Lesser Scaup** *Aythya affinis* — One of North America's most abundant diving ducks. Common on urban wetlands around Calgary, even next to busy highways.

**Bufflehead** *Bucephala albeola* — Tiny, energetic diving ducks with a striking iridescent head in males. They nest in tree cavities, often those abandoned by Northern Flickers, and are monogamous for life—uncommon among ducks. Seen through a scope at Frank Lake.

**Hooded Merganser** *Lophodytes cucullatus* — A small, striking duck with a dramatic fan-shaped crest—white in males, cinnamon in females. Prefers wooded ponds and slow streams, where it dives for fish, crustaceans, and aquatic insects. This duck's narrow, serrated bill helps grip slippery prey, and it nests in tree cavities, sometimes far from water. One female was observed at Reifel Bird Sanctuary.

**Common Merganser** *Mergus merganser* — A large, elegant duck found on clear rivers and mountain lakes. Males are crisply patterned with white bodies and dark green heads, while females sport rusty crests. They are superb underwater hunters of fish and often nest in tree cavities or cliffs. Ducklings leap from their nest shortly after hatching and follow their mother to water. We observed a mother leading her young down the fast-flowing current of a stream at Maple Ridge Park in metro Vancouver.

**Ruddy Duck** *Oxyura jamaicensis* — Males sport sky-blue bills and cocked tails in breeding season. Known for their courtship displays, including bubbling sounds and head pumping. Seen well on prairie wetlands.

#### **NEW WORLD QUAIL: Odontophoridae — (1)**

**California Quail** *Callipepla californica* — **(I)** Iconic for their forward-facing topknots and social behavior. These ground-dwellers form coveys and communicate with a distinctive “Chi-ca-go!” call. A male sentry posted on a fence in the Okanagan Valley caught our attention; then we saw many chicks with a mother in the grass below.

#### **PHEASANTS, GROUSE, AND ALLIES: Phasianidae — (1)**

**Sooty Grouse** *Dendragapus fuliginosus* — Found in forests west of the Cascade Crest, males perform low-pitched hoots during breeding displays. They eat conifer needles and migrate up and down elevation seasonally, sometimes on foot. While we were driving down from a scenic viewpoint in Manning Provincial Park, two males were seen well alongside the road.

#### **PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae — (3)**

**Rock Pigeon** *Columba livia* — **(I)** Domesticated for thousands of years, feral populations now inhabit cities worldwide. Renowned for their homing ability, they have served as messengers throughout history. Common around human habitation throughout the tour.

**Eurasian Collared-Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto* — **(I)** A recent arrival in North America, it spread rapidly after being introduced in the 1980s. Its cooing call is a hallmark of suburban neighborhoods. Encountered often in the Vancouver area.

**Mourning Dove** *Zenaida macroura* — Named for their mournful cooing, they're among the most widespread birds in North America. Their fast, whistling flight is powered by pointed wings and strong chest muscles. Heard and seen often on the tour.

#### **CUCKOOS: Cuculidae — (1)**

**Black-billed Cuckoo** *Coccyzus erythrophthalmus* — A secretive forest bird known for eating large numbers of caterpillars. Its soft “cu-cu-cu” call is often heard, rarely seen. Identified by ear by Gavin in boreal forest habitat near Winchell Lake and then seen briefly by all on our tour. Only the fifth record of this species for the Calgary area.

#### **NIGHTJARS AND ALLIES: Caprimulgidae — (2)**

**Common Nighthawk** *Chordeiles minor* — A crepuscular aerialist known for its erratic, looping flight and nasal “peent” calls at dusk. Despite the name, it's not a hawk but a nightjar. Males perform dramatic courtship dives, producing a booming sound with their wings. Nests are simple scrapes on bare ground, rooftops, or gravel bars. Seen flying in the distance at dusk in the Okanagan Valley.

**Common Poorwill** *Phalaenoptilus nuttallii* — The only bird in North America known to enter true torpor for extended periods, even weeks. This secretive nightjar roosts on the ground by day, perfectly camouflaged among rocks and leaves. Its haunting, two-syllable “poor-will” call echoes through arid western landscapes on summer nights. We heard them clearly and saw them flutter overhead while owling in the Okanagan Valley.

#### **SWIFTS: Apodidae — (2)**

**Vaux's Swift** *Chaetura vauxi* — A tiny, fast-flying aerial insectivore that never perches in the open. Roosts in chimneys and hollow trees, often in large swirling flocks at dusk. Sometimes called “flying cigars” for their shape, they feed continuously on the wing and can sleep while gliding in air.

**White-throated Swift** *Aeronautes saxatalis* — Aerial masters with stiff, sickle-shaped wings that slice the air over cliffs and canyons. They nest in cracks and crevices and spend nearly all their time in flight. Seen well in the Okanagan Valley, especially near Vaseux Cliffs, where they zoomed back and forth like little fighter jets.

#### **HUMMINGBIRDS: Trochilidae — (3)**

**Anna's Hummingbird** *Calypte anna* — Unusual among hummingbirds for being year-round residents in parts of the West. Males perform dazzling dive displays and sing scratchy songs from exposed perches. At Reifel Bird Sanctuary, we observed males flashing their rose-colored heads and gorgets around the feeders, along with drab females.

**Calliope Hummingbird** *Selasphorus calliope* — The smallest bird in North America, yet fiercely territorial despite its tiny size. Males display brilliant magenta throat streaks that flare outward like a fan. Their aerial courtship dives include a unique mechanical sound produced by their tail feathers. Calliopes breed in high mountain meadows and migrate all the way to central Mexico—an impressive journey for a bird barely three inches long. Seen fleetingly in the Okanagan Valley by a few members of our group.

**Rufous Hummingbird** *Selasphorus rufus* — Among the feistiest of hummingbirds, this small species defends feeders and flowers. They make one of the longest migrations of any hummingbird, traveling between Mexico to Alaska. A male was seen well by all in a yard in Exshaw near Banff.

#### **RAILS, GALLINULES, AND COOTS: Rallidae — (2)**

**Sora** *Porzana carolina* — A secretive marsh bird more often heard than seen. Its descending whinny-like call echoes from wetlands, where it picks through cattails and reeds for seeds and insects. Heard many times in prairie wetlands, and one bird was glimpsed before disappearing into the reeds.

**American Coot** *Fulica americana* — Despite looking like a duck, coots belong to the rail family and have lobed—not webbed—feet. They are excellent swimmers and aggressive defenders of territory. Watching comical coot babies at prairie wetlands and in the Okanagan Valley provided our group with great entertainment.

### **CRANES: Gruidae — (1)**

**Sandhill Crane** *Antigone canadensis* — Known for their resonant bugling calls and elegant courtship dances. They migrate in flocks and form long-term pair bonds, often nesting in open wetlands. One nearly tame crane approached us at Reifel Bird Sanctuary for great looks and photos.

### **STILTS AND AVOCETS: Recurvirostridae — (2)**

**Black-necked Stilt** *Himantopus mexicanus* — Striking shorebirds with bubblegum-pink legs and needle-like bills. They wade in shallow waters to pick at aquatic invertebrates and emit sharp alarm calls when disturbed. Seen well at Frank Lake.

**American Avocet** *Recurvirostra americana* — Recognized by their upturned bills and elegant black-and-white patterning. They sweep their bills side to side through shallow water to catch prey. Seen often and well in prairie wetlands on the tour.

### **OYSTERCATCHERS: Haematopodidae — (1)**

**Black Oystercatcher** *Haematopus bachmani* — Found along rocky Pacific shores, these bold shorebirds pry open mussels and limpets with their strong red bills. Their loud piping calls carry over crashing surf. Observed on the ferry jetty at Delta.

### **PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: Charadriidae — (1)**

**Killdeer** *Charadrius vociferus* — Famous for their “broken-wing” distraction display to lure predators away from their nests. Their loud, insistent cries are heard across open fields and parking lots. Observed throughout the tour.

### **SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: Scolopacidae — (7)**

**Marbled Godwit** *Limosa fedoa* — Large shorebird with long, slightly upturned bill. They breed in prairie potholes and winter along coasts, probing for worms and crustaceans. A pair was observed at Frank Lake.

**Wilson’s Snipe** *Gallinago delicata* — Well-camouflaged marsh dwellers known for their explosive, zigzagging flushes. Males perform aerial “winnowing” displays, producing eerie sounds with vibrating tail feathers. Their distinctive call—reminiscent of a rusty hinge—was heard clearly, and two were seen perched in treetops, showing off their round bodies and long, straight bills near Winchell Lake and in Banff National Park.

**Wilson’s Phalarope** *Phalaropus tricolor* — Unusual among shorebirds: females are more colorful, and males do the incubating. They swim in tight circles to stir up aquatic prey from the surface of the water. Seen well on prairie wetlands.

**Spotted Sandpiper** *Actitis macularius* — Easily recognized by its teetering walk and its spotted belly when in breeding plumage. Found along rivers, lakeshores, and mudflats, it’s one of the most widespread breeding shorebirds in North America. Observed near Winchell Lake and at a river’s edge in the Okanagan Valley.

**Solitary Sandpiper** *Tringa solitaria* — A forest-loving shorebird that nests in abandoned songbird nests in trees. True to its name, it’s usually seen alone rather than in flocks. Observed in a wetland near Winchell Lake.

**Lesser Yellowlegs** *Tringa flavipes* — Sleek waders with bright yellow legs and a distinctive sharp call. Agile foragers in shallow water, they migrate long distances to Central and South America. Gavin thought the one he spotted at Frank Lake could be a record for earliest arrival on the prairie.

**Willet** *Tringa semipalmata* — Their piercing “pill-will-willet!” call rings across beaches and marshes. They appear drab while wading, but in flight, their bold black-and-white wing pattern is striking. Observed at prairie wetlands.

### **GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS: Laridae — (9)**

**Franklin’s Gull** *Leucophaeus pipixcan* — A prairie breeder that molts into breeding plumage with a full black hood. Unlike most gulls, it migrates to South America for the winter. Abundant at Frank Lake and other prairie wetlands.

**Ring-billed Gull** *Larus delawarensis* — Common around lakes, beaches, and parking lots. Their yellow bill is ringed in black, and they are highly opportunistic feeders. Seen in the Calgary area and surrounding prairie.



**California Gull** *Larus californicus* — Famous for helping early Mormon settlers in Utah by eating swarms of crop-destroying crickets. They nest inland on islands, and winter along the Pacific coast. We observed a breeding colony, including chicks, at Frank Lake.

**Glaucous-winged Gull** *Larus glaucescens* — A large Pacific Northwest gull with pale gray wingtips. Frequently hybridizes with Western and Herring Gulls, producing a range of intermediate forms.

**Western x Glaucous-winged Gull (hybrid)** — Common along the Pacific coast where these two gull species interbreed. Hybrids exhibit intermediate traits, making identification a challenge for even expert birders. Seen along the coast near Vancouver.

**Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia* — The largest tern in the world, with a heavy red bill and raucous calls. It dives for fish and nests in noisy colonies on islands and sandy spits. Seen at Kinbrook Island Provincial Park.

**Black Tern** *Chlidonias niger* — Graceful and buoyant fliers, these terns breed in freshwater marshes and feed on insects and small fish. Their dark plumage makes them striking among white terns. Seen at Kinbrook Island Provincial Park.

**Forster's Tern** *Sterna forsteri* — Common in marshy habitats, recognized in flight by their long tails and pale underparts. They hover and plunge-dive for fish. Seen at Frank Lake.

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo* — A streamlined, elegant tern with a black cap and deeply forked tail. Found along coastlines and inland lakes, they produce a harsh “kee-arr” call. Seen at Brooks-Johnson Lake.

#### **GREBES: Podicipedidae — (5)**

**Pied-billed Grebe** *Podilymbus podiceps* (HO)— Small, brown, and secretive, this grebe is known for its chicken-like clucks. It sinks like a stone when threatened and can trap air in its feathers for buoyancy control. Heard at Frank Lake.

**Red-necked Grebe** *Podiceps grisegena* — Breeds in northern lakes and displays dramatic courtship dances. Their young often ride on their parents' backs. Seen at prairie wetlands.

**Eared Grebe** *Podiceps nigricollis* — During migration, these birds double their weight and shrink internal organs to prepare for flight. Seen in striking breeding plumage on prairie lakes.

**Western Grebe** *Aechmophorus occidentalis* — Known for their “rushing” courtship display, where pairs run across the water side by side. They have long, elegant necks and piercing red eyes. Observed at Frank Lake.

**Western x Clark's Grebe (hybrid)** — These closely related grebes often hybridize where their ranges overlap. The resulting birds may show mixed facial patterns and calls. One observed at Frank Lake.

#### **LOONS: Gaviidae — (1)**

**Common Loon** *Gavia immer* — A symbol of the northern wilderness, their haunting calls echo across forested lakes. Powerful divers, they chase fish underwater with their dagger-like bills. To the delight of our group, a chick was seen riding on a parent's back at Winchell Lake.

#### **CORMORANTS: Phalacrocoracidae — (2)**

**Brandt's Cormorant** *Urile penicillatus* — Coastal specialists of the Pacific, recognized by their blue throat patch during breeding season. They often nest on offshore rocks in large colonies. One bird was observed in flight at the ferry terminal jetty at Delta.

**Double-crested Cormorant** *Nannopterum auritum* — Frequently seen perched with wings spread to dry. They dive using their webbed feet and have hooked bills for catching slippery fish. Seen in prairie wetlands—the only cormorant species present so far inland.

#### **IBISES AND SPOONBILLS: Threskiornithidae — (1)**

**White-faced Ibis** *Plegadis chihi* — Glossy dark waders with pink legs and a distinctive white border around the face in breeding season. Found in marshes and flooded fields. Observed in flight at Frank Lake.

#### **HERONS, EGRETS, AND BITTERNS: Ardeidae — (2)**

**Black-crowned Night Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax* — A stocky, nocturnal heron that hunts at dusk and dawn. One bird was seen in flight at Frank Lake.

**Great Blue Heron** *Ardea herodias* — North America's largest heron, often seen standing motionless as it hunts fish and frogs. Their deep croak is surprisingly prehistoric for such a graceful bird. Observed many times throughout the tour.

**PELICANS: Pelecanidae — (1)**

**American White Pelican** *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos* — Unlike the Brown Pelican, this species does not dive for fish but scoops them while swimming. In flight, they soar with surprising elegance on broad black-and-white wings. Seen flying and roosting at Frank Lake.

**NEW WORLD VULTURES: Cathartidae — (1)**

**Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura* — Masters of soaring flight, these scavengers locate carrion using their extraordinary sense of smell. Their bald red heads help keep them clean while feeding. Common after we crossed the Continental Divide and headed west.

**OSPREY: Pandionidae — (1)**

**Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* — This raptor plunges feet-first to snatch fish with reversible outer toes and barbed soles. Often seen on nesting platforms near water. Observed several times on the tour.

**HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES: Accipitridae — (6)**

**Cooper's Hawk** *Accipiter cooperii* — A woodland raptor with short, rounded wings and a long tail built for agile flight through dense cover. Known for its explosive ambushes of songbirds at feeders and along forest edges. Seen in the Okanagan Valley.

**Northern Harrier** *Circus hudsonius* — This slender raptor glides low over fields with wings held in a V. Males are pale gray ("gray ghosts"), while females are brown. Notably, they rely heavily on sound to locate prey. A female was seen flying low over the prairie grasses near two Burrowing Owls.

**Bald Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* — The national bird of the United States, once endangered due to DDT. They often steal food from other birds and build the largest nests of any North American bird. Seen often and well around the Vancouver area. Several active nests were observed.

**Swainson's Hawk** *Buteo swainsoni* — A long-distance migrant that winters in Argentina. In summer, it hunts grasshoppers and small mammals over western prairies and fields. Seen often soaring over the prairie around Calgary.

**Red-tailed Hawk** *Buteo jamaicensis* — Perhaps the most widespread raptor in North America, this broad-winged hunter is frequently seen soaring or perched along roadsides. Its raspy scream is a cinematic staple, often dubbed over eagle scenes in films. During the tour, we observed Red-tailed Hawks regularly across a variety of open habitats.

**Ferruginous Hawk** *Buteo regalis* — The largest of the North American hawks, with pale underparts and rust-colored back and legs. This regal raptor nests in open grasslands and may use bones or cow dung in its massive stick nests. We observed an active nest in the foothills south of Calgary.

**OWLS: Strigidae — (6)**

**Flammulated Owl** *Psiloscops flammeolus* — A tiny, elusive owl with dark eyes and a soft, ventriloquial "boo-boo-boo" call that blends into the soundscape of dry western forests. Named for its flame-like markings, it is strictly nocturnal and remarkably well camouflaged against tree bark. Unlike most owls, it feeds almost exclusively on insects, especially moths and beetles. Migratory and hard to detect, it nests in old woodpecker cavities and is most reliably found by its voice on warm summer nights. On an owl prowling in the Okanagan Valley, one was heard and then seen briefly in silhouette.

**Burrowing Owl** *Athene cunicularia* — Unusual among owls for nesting underground, often in prairie dog or ground squirrel burrows. Active by day and often seen bobbing and calling atop mounds. Two were observed at a known nesting site on the prairie east of Calgary.

**Barred Owl** *Strix varia* — Known for its distinctive "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?" call. Prefers mature forests near water and may aggressively defend nest sites. A family of five was observed at close range for an extended period around a river in Maple Ridge Park near Vancouver.



**Great Gray Owl** *Strix nebulosa* — One of the largest owls by length, yet light for its size due to fluffy plumage. Hunts mostly by sound, diving through snow to catch voles beneath. Seen well in morning light at the edge of a boreal forest near Calgary. A tour highlight.

**Long-eared Owl** *Asio otus* — A slender, nocturnal owl that roosts communally in dense trees in winter. Named for its tall ear tufts, which are not actually ears. Three young and one adult observed next to a path at Kinbrook Island Provincial Park.

**Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* — A day-flying owl often seen gliding low over grasslands, with slow, floppy wingbeats reminiscent of a giant moth. Nests on the ground, with populations fluctuating based on rodent abundance. One was observed catching prey in prairie grasses near Frank Lake.

#### **KINGFISHERS: Alcedinidae — (1)**

**Belted Kingfisher** *Megaceryle alcyon* — Recognizable by its rattling call and dramatic, headlong dives into water to catch fish. This crested, blue-gray bird often perches on branches overhanging streams, ponds, or lakes. Unusual among North American birds, females are more colorful than males, with an additional rusty belly band. They excavate nest tunnels in earthen banks—sometimes over six feet deep—and are typically solitary and highly territorial. One was heard and then seen at Cave and Basin Marsh at Banff.

#### **WOODPECKERS: Picidae — (7)**

**Red-naped Sapsucker** *Sphyrapicus nuchalis* — A western woodpecker that drills neat rows of sap wells in trees. Other species, including hummingbirds, may feed from the wells it creates. Seen by some group members at Banff and Manning Park.

**Lewis's Woodpecker** *Melanerpes lewis* — Named for explorer Meriwether Lewis, this unusual woodpecker flies more like a crow and boasts iridescent colors reminiscent of a hummingbird. It often catches insects in flight and stores acorns in tree bark. Seen well in a burned Ponderosa Pine forest in the Okanagan Valley.

**American Three-toed Woodpecker** *Picoides dorsalis* — Adapted for life in boreal and burned forests, it flakes bark off trees in search of beetle larvae. Unlike most woodpeckers, it has only three toes instead of four. Observed at close range in Banff, and also seen at Manning Provincial Park.

**Downy Woodpecker** *Dryobates pubescens* — The smallest North American woodpecker, with a soft, whinnying call. It often forages by gleaning insects from twigs and plant galls, sometimes extracting insect larvae hidden within. Seen at Reifel Bird Sanctuary.

**Hairy Woodpecker** *Dryobates villosus* — Almost identical in appearance to the Downy but larger, with a longer bill. It gives sharp, loud calls and forages by peeling bark or hammering into wood. Observed at Maple Ridge Park in Vancouver area.

**Pileated Woodpecker** *Dryocopus pileatus* **(HO)** — North America's largest woodpecker, recognized by its flaming red crest and loud, echoing calls. Excavates deep rectangular holes in dead trees while searching for carpenter ants—its primary food source. Its powerful drumming and striking appearance make it a thrilling sight in mature forests. At Banff, one was heard by all but seen in flight only by the guides.

**Northern Flicker** *Colaptes auratus* — Unusual among woodpeckers for foraging primarily on the ground, where it eats ants and beetles. Western birds have red underwings, eastern ones yellow. Seen many times throughout the tour across a range of forested habitats.

#### **FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae — (3)**

**American Kestrel** *Falco sparverius* — North America's smallest falcon, often seen perched on wires or hovering above fields. Males are brightly marked with blue-gray wings and a rusty back. Hunts insects and small prey with precision and agility. Bold and adaptable, kestrels thrive in open country, farmland, and urban edges. Observed hovering and hunting in the Okanagan Valley.

**Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus* — The fastest bird on Earth, capable of reaching over 200 mph in a hunting dive. Sleek and powerful, it preys on birds in midair with astonishing precision. Once endangered due to DDT, it has made a

dramatic recovery and now nests on cliffs, city skyscrapers, and bridges. One was seen perched on Golden Ears Bridge in metro Vancouver.

**Prairie Falcon** *Falco mexicanus* — A powerful raptor of open country, often seen coursing low over grasslands in search of birds or small mammals. Its pale plumage and dark axillaries (“dirty armpits”) help distinguish it from the Peregrine Falcon. We observed several birds at a nesting aerie atop bluffs in the foothills south of Calgary.

#### **TYRANT FLYCATCHERS: Tyrannidae — (11)**

**Olive-sided Flycatcher** *Contopus cooperi* — Often heard giving its “Quick-three-beers!” song from a tall perch. A long-distance migrant that winters in South America and depends on intact coniferous forests. Heard and seen well atop a fir tree at Manning Provincial Park.

**Western Wood-Pewee** *Contopus sordidulus* — Identified more easily by sound than sight, it gives a distinctive descending whistle. It sally-hunts insects from open perches in forests and woodland edges.

**Alder Flycatcher** *Empidonax alnorum* — Part of the confusing “Empid” group, best identified by its harsh “fee-bee-o” song. Breeds in wet thickets and bogs and winters in the Andes. Seen in the boreal forest near Calgary.

**Willow Flycatcher** *Empidonax traillii* — Favors wet thickets and riparian areas, where it sings a distinctive, burry “fitz-bew” from exposed perches. Plain plumage is typical of the genus, but vocalizations are key to confident ID. Seen and heard at Banff.

**Least Flycatcher** *Empidonax minimus* — One of the smallest flycatchers, often heard repeating its dry “che-BEK!” call. It prefers open woodlands and is an early migrant in spring.

**Hammond’s Flycatcher** *Empidonax hammondii* — **(HO)** A small, high-elevation flycatcher with a short bill and faint eye ring. Quiet and unobtrusive, its identity is best confirmed by voice.

**Dusky Flycatcher** *Empidonax oberholseri* — A small, grayish flycatcher of shrubby montane slopes and open conifer forests. Best identified by its soft “dew-HIC!” call. Subtle field marks make it nearly indistinguishable from other *Empidonax* species without voice. We observed an active nest in the southern Okanagan Valley.

**Western Flycatcher** *Empidonax difficilis* — Includes Pacific-slope and Cordilleran Flycatcher subspecies, nearly indistinguishable without vocalizations. They inhabit shaded ravines and coniferous forests. Heard many times and seen at Maple Ridge Park near Vancouver.

**Say’s Phoebe** *Sayornis saya* — A dry-country flycatcher often seen bobbing its tail while perched on fences or rocks. Builds mud nests under overhangs and ledges. Observed in the Okanagan Valley.

**Western Kingbird** *Tyrannus verticalis* — Bold and aggressive, it often chases crows, hawks, and even humans from its nest site. Its lemon-yellow belly and gray head make it easily recognizable. Seen on the prairie and in the Okanagan Valley.

**Eastern Kingbird** *Tyrannus tyrannus* — Named for its crown of concealed red feathers, visible only during aggressive displays. Despite its name, its range extends well beyond the East, breeding widely across much of North America, including the West. It favors open habitats and builds tidy nests in shrubs and trees. Seen with its conspicuous white-tipped tail on the prairie and in the Okanagan Valley.

#### **VIREOS: Vireonidae — (2)**

**Warbling Vireo** *Vireo gilvus* — Sings a long, cheerful, and jumbled song from treetops. Drab gray-green with a faint eyebrow, it’s more often heard than seen. One was observed as it sang from a nest in Banff.

**Red-eyed Vireo** *Vireo olivaceus* — **(HO)** A relentless singer, producing hundreds of phrases per day. Recognizable by its red eye and crisp white eyebrow, it favors deciduous forests. Heard on the tour but not seen.

#### **CROWS, JAYS, AND MAGPIES: Corvidae — (6)**

**Canada Jay** *Perisoreus canadensis* — Also known as the Whiskey Jack, this intelligent corvid stores food for winter and may breed in subfreezing temperatures. Friendly and curious toward humans. Observed in subalpine zone of Manning Provincial Park.

**Steller's Jay** *Cyanocitta stelleri* — A bold and vocal jay of western forests, easily recognized by its black crest and deep blue body. Mimics other birds and random sounds, and often raids campsites or feeders. Travels in noisy groups and caches food for winter. Observed in forests of Banff National Park and Manning Provincial Park.

**Black-billed Magpie** *Pica hudsonia* — Conspicuous and flashy with long tail and striking black-and-white plumage. Highly social and vocal, they scavenge, hunt, and cache food in diverse habitats. Common on first half of the tour east of the Continental Divide.

**Clark's Nutcracker** *Nucifraga columbiana* — Closely tied to Whitebark Pine, this corvid caches thousands of seeds annually—helping reforest alpine areas. It has a dagger-like bill and raspy calls. Seen well at scenic viewpoint in subalpine zone of Manning Provincial Park. One individual with a leg band was observed at close range.

**American Crow** *Corvus brachyrhynchos* — Highly intelligent and social, crows can recognize human faces and pass information through generations. Their complex vocalizations go far beyond simple caws. Common throughout tour.

**Common Raven** *Corvus corax* — Larger than crows with a wedge-shaped tail and deep, throaty croaks. Known for aerial acrobatics and problem-solving abilities, they thrive from deserts to tundra. Common throughout the tour.

### **TITS, CHICKADEES, AND TITMICE: Paridae — (3)**

**Black-capped Chickadee** *Poecile atricapillus* — A familiar forest and backyard bird, known for its cheerful “chick-a-dee-dee” call. These tiny birds cache food and can lower their body temperature at night to conserve energy. Seen in Vancouver area.

**Mountain Chickadee** *Poecile gambeli* — Distinguished by a bold white eyebrow. Inhabits coniferous forests at higher elevations and survives harsh winters by hoarding seeds. Seen in Exshaw near Banff.

**Chestnut-backed Chickadee** *Poecile rufescens* — A West Coast species with rich chestnut sides. It prefers moist coastal forests and frequently joins mixed-species flocks. Seen at Maple Ridge Park in temperate rainforest near Vancouver.

### **LARKS: Alaudidae — (1)**

**Horned Lark** *Eremophila alpestris* — A ground-dwelling songbird of open country, named for the tiny black feather “horns” on its head. Their tinkling songs often drift from above during aerial display flights. Many were seen in prairie habitat east of Calgary.

### **SWALLOWS: Hirundinidae — (6)**

**Tree Swallow** *Tachycineta bicolor* — Glossy blue above and white below, these agile insectivores nest in cavities and nest boxes. Seen often during the tour. One memorable encounter came at a park on the prairie where a bird was observed at close range poking its head out of a nesting cavity in a tree.

**Violet-green Swallow** *Tachycineta thalassina* — With iridescent green and violet hues, this western species nests in cliffs and cavities. It often flies higher than other swallows, chasing aerial insects. Beginning near Banff, it became a common bird throughout the rest of the tour.

**Purple Martin** *Progne subis* — North America's largest swallow, with males showing a rich, glossy purple sheen. East of the Rockies, they rely almost entirely on human-provided nest boxes, while many western populations still use natural cavities. The birds we observed at Reifel Bird Sanctuary in Delta were using nest boxes.

**Northern Rough-winged Swallow** *Stelgidopteryx serripennis* — A plain brown-backed swallow named for the tiny serrations on the leading edge of its outer wing feathers. Nests in burrows, pipes, or crevices near water and forages low over ponds and rivers with silent flight. Seen well in the Okanagan Valley flying over a lake.

**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica* — Recognizable by its long, forked tail and agile flight. Its mud nests cling to rafters, bridges, and eaves. A cosmopolitan species found on six continents. Seen often throughout the tour.

**Cliff Swallow** *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota* — Builds gourd-shaped mud nests in colonies under bridges and cliffs. Famous for its spectacular migratory flocks, described as “rivers in the sky.” Seen throughout the tour from Calgary to Vancouver.

### **KINGLETS: Regulidae — (2)**

**Ruby-crowned Kinglet** *Corthylio calendula* — Tiny, hyperactive birds that flick their wings constantly. Males flash a hidden ruby crown when agitated and sing a fast-paced song that seems loud for their size. Seen in a forest in Banff.

**Golden-crowned Kinglet** *Regulus satrapa* — One of the smallest songbirds in North America. Survives sub-zero winters thanks to dense flocks, tree roosts, and constant foraging in conifers.

### **NUTHATCHES: Sittidae — (2)**

**Pygmy Nuthatch** *Sitta pygmaea* — A tiny, sociable bird of western pine forests, often seen in noisy flocks. It forages acrobatically on trunks and branches, sometimes hanging upside down. Roosts communally in tree cavities, especially on cold nights. Many were seen bouncing around in Ponderosa Pine trees at Mission Creek Park in Kelowna.

**Red-breasted Nuthatch** *Sitta canadensis* — Known for creeping headfirst down tree trunks, giving it a unique foraging perspective to spot hidden insects. It sometimes wedges seeds into bark crevices to hold them in place while hammering them open. The nasal “yank-yank” calls echo through spruce and fir forests. Heard at Banff and seen well at Manning Provincial Park.

### **TREECREEPERS: Certhiidae — (1)**

**Brown Creeper** *Certhia americana* — Blends seamlessly with tree bark as it spirals upward in search of insects. Uses its stiff tail as a brace and nests behind peeling bark. Seen at Manning Provincial Park.

### **WRENS: Troglodytidae — (6)**

**Rock Wren** *Salpinctes obsoletus* — Found in dry, rocky areas, it builds nests surrounded by neat rings of pebbles. Its bouncy, descending song rings through desert canyons. Seen on distant ridgeline in foothills south of Calgary while looking at Prairie Falcons.

**Canyon Wren** *Catherpes mexicanus* — Renowned for its cascading, flute-like song echoing from rocky cliffs. It has a rust-red belly and white throat and forages in crevices. Heard but not seen on this tour.

**Northern House Wren** *Troglodytes aedon* — Bold and bubbly, it sings loudly from thickets and backyards. House Wrens are pugnacious nesters and may destroy the eggs of rivals.

**Pacific Wren** *Troglodytes pacificus* — A tiny, secretive forest dweller with an astonishingly long, complex song. Formerly lumped with the Winter Wren before being split into a separate species. One bird seen well in forest at Banff when it perched atop a log and sang.

**Marsh Wren** *Cistothorus palustris* — A cattail specialist with a buzzy, mechanical song. Males build multiple dome-shaped nests, though only one is used for breeding. One bird seen well singing in the open at Kinbrook Island.

**Bewick’s Wren** *Thryomanes bewickii* — A slender wren with a long white eyebrow and a tail often held upright. Found in shrubby habitats of the West, it mimics other bird songs in its repertoire. One bird seen well while singing in the open near Reifel Bird Sanctuary.

### **STARLINGS: Sturnidae — (1)**

**European Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris* — (1) Introduced to North America in the 1890s, they now number in the hundreds of millions. Starlings mimic other birds and form massive murmurations in winter skies. Seen throughout the tour.

### **MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS: Mimidae — (1)**

**Gray Catbird** *Dumetella carolinensis* — Named for its cat-like mewing call, this skulking mimic sings long, jumbled phrases. Prefers dense thickets and often flicks its long tail while foraging. Seen near Calgary and in the Okanagan Valley.

### **THRUSHES AND ALLIES: Turdidae — (8)**

**Western Bluebird** *Sialia mexicana* — A cavity-nesting thrush with vivid blue plumage and a rusty chest. Often seen perching on fence posts or swooping low over fields for insects. Observed at nest boxes near Burrowing Owl Winery in the southern Okanagan Valley.

**Mountain Bluebird** *Sialia currucoides* — Pale sky-blue and ethereal, this species nests in open habitats from sagebrush steppe to alpine meadows. Hover-gleans insects and relies on nest boxes in some areas. Seen well in the Okanagan Valley.

**Townsend's Solitaire** *Myadestes townsendi* — (HO) A sleek, gray thrush of western mountains, known for its clear, flute-like song that carries through coniferous forests. Often seen perched upright on exposed branches, it defends large breeding territories. Heard but not seen on this tour.

**Varied Thrush** *Ixoreus naevius* — (HO) A striking forest thrush with a haunting, metallic whistle and bold orange and black pattern. It's often seen shuffling through leaf litter in dense coastal woods. Heard at Manning Provincial Park but not seen.

**Veery** *Catharus fuscescens* — A shy thrush of damp deciduous forests, known for its ethereal, downward-spiraling song. Warm brown above with a faintly spotted breast, it forages quietly in the leaf litter and migrates to South America for the winter. Heard clearly while owling in Okanagan Valley but remained out of sight.

**Swainson's Thrush** (*Catharus ustulatus*) — Known for its ascending, spiraling song that echoes through forests. Migrates from North America to the Andes each winter, guided in part by stars and Earth's magnetic field. We heard its song and soft "whit" calls several times and finally saw one perched in the open at Manning Provincial Park, showing its distinctive buffy eye ring.

**Hermit Thrush** (*Catharus guttatus*) — Renowned for its flute-like, ethereal song, often considered one of North America's most beautiful. It stays later into fall and returns earlier than other thrushes. It lacks the bold eye ring of Swainson's Thrush and shows rich reddish tones in its tail, which it flicks frequently. Seen at Manning Provincial Park.

**American Robin** *Turdus migratorius* — One of the most familiar and widespread birds in North America. A thrush, not a true robin, it forages on lawns and is among the first singers of spring. A constant companion on our tour.

#### **WAXWINGS: Bombycillidae — (1)**

**Cedar Waxwing** *Bombycilla cedrorum* — Elegant birds with silky plumage, a black mask, and red waxy tips on their wings. Often found in flocks feeding on berries or hawking insects in flight. They gave our group enjoyable views several times throughout the tour.

#### **OLD WORLD SPARROWS: Passeridae — (1)**

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* — (I) An introduced species now common in cities and towns. Males have a black bib and gray crown, while females are brown and streaked. They nest readily in buildings.

#### **WAGTAILS AND PIPITS: Motacillidae — (1)**

**Sprague's Pipit** *Anthus spragueii* — A declining grassland specialist that sings from high in the air, often unseen. Its cryptic plumage blends perfectly with prairie grasses. He heard this bird singing from the air but couldn't get eyes on it in the sky.

#### **FINCHES, EUPHONIAS, AND ALLIES: Fringillidae — (6)**

**Evening Grosbeak** *Coccothraustes vespertinus* — A bulky finch with a massive bill and bold yellow, black, and white plumage. Often irrupts southward in winter in search of tree seeds, especially spruce and maple. Many birds seen at close range at Manning Provincial Park.

**Pine Grosbeak** *Pinicola enucleator* — A giant among finches, found in boreal and subalpine forests. Males are rosy-red, and both sexes feed on berries and buds, often at close range. A male and female were spotted while descending the road from the scenic viewpoint at Manning Provincial Park.

**House Finch** *Haemorhous mexicanus* — Originally native to the Southwest, this species was introduced to the East and spread rapidly. Males have red to orange or yellow tones; females are brown and streaky. Seen in Okanagan Valley and near Vancouver.

**Cassin's Finch** *Haemorhous cassinii* — Distinguished from House Finches by their peaked crown and stronger, raspberry hue. They favor coniferous forests of the western mountains. Seen in the Okanagan Valley.



**Pine Siskin** *Spinus pinus* — Small, streaky finches with yellow in the wings and a buzzy, rising call. Highly nomadic, they follow conifer seed crops and swarm feeders in irruption years. Observed several times.

**American Goldfinch** *Spinus tristis* — Bright lemon-yellow in summer, muted brown in winter. Known for their bounding flight and musical “po-ta-to-chip” call. They breed late in the season, timed with thistle seed. A striking male and duller female were next to a rural road in the Okanagan Valley.

#### **LONGSPURS AND SNOW BUNTINGS: Calcariidae — (2)**

**Chestnut-collared Longspur** *Calcarius ornatus* — A prairie songbird with bold breeding plumage—black belly, white tail, and chestnut nape. Males perform fluttering flight songs above the grasslands. Seen on the prairie east of Calgary.

**Thick-billed Longspur** *Rhynchophanes mccownii* — Found on shortgrass plains, males sing with a tinkling flight song during breeding season. We watched males perform a mesmerizing drone-like descent on the prairie east of Calgary.

#### **NEW WORLD SPARROWS: Passerellidae — (12)**

**Chipping Sparrow** *Spizella passerina* — A small, cleanly marked sparrow with a rufous cap and trilling song. Common in open woodlands, suburbs, and parks across much of North America.

**Clay-colored Sparrow** *Spizella pallida* — Widespread on the northern prairies, it sings a soft, buzzy “zzzz-zzzz” song. Dainty and pale, it prefers shrubby fields and edges.

**Lark Bunting** *Calamospiza melanocorys* — Males are striking black with white wing patches. They breed in grasslands and migrate in large flocks. Seen on the prairie east of Calgary.

**Dark-eyed Junco** *Junco hyemalis* — This sparrow comes in several regional forms, all with pale bellies and pink bills. Common at winter feeders and on snowy forest floors.

**White-crowned Sparrow** *Zonotrichia leucophrys* — A crisp black-and-white striped crown distinguishes this widespread sparrow. Their clear, whistled song varies by region and is learned early in life. Beginning in Banff, it was seen several times throughout the second half of the tour.

**White-throated Sparrow** *Zonotrichia albicollis* — Famous for its whistled song, heard as “Old Sam Peabody” or “Oh sweet Canada.” This striking sparrow occurs in two color morphs—white-striped and tan-striped—that differ in behavior and song. Uniquely, they exhibit “negative assortative mating,” meaning individuals preferentially pair with the opposite morph—a rare phenomenon among vertebrates.

**Vesper Sparrow** *Pooecetes gramineus* — A grassland bird with a white eye ring and outer tail feathers. Named for its beautiful evening song that echoes over the prairie. Seen in open country around Calgary and in Okanagan Valley.

**Savannah Sparrow** *Passerculus sandwichensis* — Small and streaky with a yellow tinge above the eye. Common in meadows, fields, and saltmarshes, they often sing from fenceposts, which is what we saw several of these sparrows doing.

**Baird’s Sparrow** *Centronyx bairdii* — A shy grassland specialist of conservation concern. Its high, tinkling song drifts over prairie habitats, where it nests on the ground. Heard but not seen on the prairie around Calgary.

**Song Sparrow** *Melospiza melodia* — Highly variable across its range, but always with a streaked chest and central breast spot. Known for its rich, complex song and adaptability to human landscapes. It was interesting to hear the different songs of this species as we traversed a wide swath of its range from east to west.

**Lincoln’s Sparrow** *Melospiza lincolni* — A shy, finely streaked sparrow with a delicate song described as “gurgling.” Prefers wet meadows and willow thickets during migration and breeding.

**Spotted Towhee** *Pipilo maculatus* — A bold, ground-scratching sparrow with a black hood and rufous sides. Males deliver a metallic trill from dense shrubbery. Seen several times in Okanagan Valley and west to Vancouver, including males perched in the open while singing.

#### **YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT: Icteriidae — (1)**

**Yellow-breasted Chat** (*Icteria virens*) — With its bright yellow breast and loud, varied vocalizations, the Yellow-breasted Chat is a standout in dense shrublands. Once considered a type of wood-warbler, it is now placed in its own family, *Icteriidae*, reflecting its unique characteristics. Known for its whistles, harsh notes, and mimicry, this skulking bird often

remains hidden in thickets, though it occasionally perches up to sing. We heard it well at Osoyoos Oxbow in the southern Okanagan Valley but couldn't get eyes on it.

#### **NEW WORLD BLACKBIRDS: Icteridae — (9)**

**Yellow-headed Blackbird** *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* — Striking males have bright yellow heads and a harsh, grating song. They breed in marshes and often gather in massive post-breeding flocks. Common on prairie wetlands during the first part of the tour.

**Bobolink** *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* — A striking grassland bird, known for its bold black-and-white breeding plumage and bubbling, mechanical song that seems to tumble through the air. Males perform fluttering display flights over open meadows and prairies. Bobolinks are long-distance migrants, traveling from North America to the grasslands of South America each year—a remarkable journey for such a small bird. Seen well through scopes in the southern Okanagan Valley at Osoyoos Oxbow.

**Western Meadowlark** *Sturnella neglecta* — With its flute-like song and V-shaped yellow chest, this prairie icon is the state bird of six U.S. states. Males sing from fenceposts to defend their territory. Several were observed on fenceposts on the prairie around Calgary.

**Bullock's Oriole** *Icterus bullockii* — Bright orange with a black cap and white wing bars. These weavers create hanging nests and often feed on nectar, fruit, and insects. Seen several times in Okanagan Valley, adding burst of color to tree canopies. An active nest was observed at Reifel Bird Sanctuary.

**Baltimore Oriole** *Icterus galbula* — **(HO)** Famous for their woven, pouch-like nests. Males have brilliant flame-orange underparts and sing flutelike songs from high in trees. Heard but not seen on this tour.

**Red-winged Blackbird** *Agelaius phoeniceus* — Males flash red-and-yellow shoulder patches while singing “conk-a-ree!” from marsh reeds. Females look like large, streaky sparrows. Common at wetlands throughout the tour.

**Brown-headed Cowbird** *Molothrus ater* — A brood parasite that lays its eggs in other birds' nests. Males have a glossy black body and brown head; females are plain gray-brown. Common throughout the tour.

**Brewer's Blackbird** (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) — Glossy males show purplish iridescence and bright yellow eyes, while females are plain gray-brown with dark eyes. Common in open fields and parking lots, they forage in noisy flocks.

**Common Grackle** *Quiscalus quiscula* — Iridescent and long-tailed, these bold blackbirds have a harsh call and yellow eyes. They often dominate feeders and roost in large numbers. Seen often on the first part of the tour; their range ends at the Rockies.

#### **NEW WORLD WARBLERS: Parulidae — (12)**

**Northern Waterthrush** *Parkesia noveboracensis* — **(HO)** A warbler that walks like a thrush, bobbing its tail as it forages along forested streams. Heard only on the tour.

**Tennessee Warbler** *Leiothlypis peregrina* — Despite its name, it doesn't breed in Tennessee but in Canada's boreal forest. Feeds heavily on caterpillars and gives a rapid, high-pitched song. One male observed while singing high in a tree in the boreal forest near Calgary.

**Orange-crowned Warbler** *Leiothlypis celata* — **(HO)** Plain olive with a rarely visible orange crown. Forages low in brush and sings a soft, descending trill. Among the earliest migrants in spring. Heard in Banff and Manning Provincial Park.

**Nashville Warbler** *Leiothlypis ruficapilla* — **(HO)** A small, yellow warbler with a gray hood and faint eye ring. Named from a specimen collected in Nashville, though it only passes through. Heard but not seen on the tour.

**MacGillivray's Warbler** *Geothlypis tolmiei* — **(HO)** A skulking warbler of dense thickets and shrubby forest understories. Males have a bold gray hood and broken white eye-arcs. Often detected by their rich, ringing song before they're seen. Heard in the Okanagan Valley but remained hidden from sight.

**Common Yellowthroat** *Geothlypis trichas* — Often heard before seen, its “witchety-witchety-witchety” song echoes from marshy thickets. Males sport a bold black mask and bright yellow throat. Heard many times, finally seen on the last day of the tour after much diligent effort.

**American Redstart** *Setophaga ruticilla* — **(HO)** A flashy, active warbler that fans its tail and wings to flush insects. Males are black with vivid orange patches; females and immatures are gray and yellow. Common in second-growth woods and forest edges. Heard in Banff but not seen.

**Yellow Warbler** *Setophaga petechia* — One of the most widespread warblers, known for its “sweet-sweet-I’m-so-sweet” song. Males have chestnut streaks on their bright yellow breast. Seen several times on the tour, adding bursts of surprising color to the greenery.

**Blackpoll Warbler** *Setophaga striata* — A long-distance migrant that breeds in northern spruce forests and undertakes one of the most remarkable journeys of any songbird—flying nonstop over the Atlantic to reach South America. Males have striking black caps and white cheeks in breeding plumage. Their high-pitched song can be hard to hear, but Gavin helped our group tune into it at Banff.

**Yellow-rumped Warbler** *Setophaga coronata* — A hardy warbler that can digest waxy berries. Often the first to arrive and last to leave in migration, identified by its distinctive yellow rump and sides. The Audubon’s subspecies with yellow throat was observed several times in Banff, Okanagan Valley and Manning.

**Townsend’s Warbler** *Setophaga townsendi* — A striking Pacific Northwest warbler with a black mask. Forages in coniferous forests and winters as far south as Central America. A singing male was seen perched atop a fir tree in Manning Provincial Park.

**Wilson’s Warbler** *Cardellina pusilla* — A vibrant yellow warbler with a distinctive black cap (in males). It flits low in shrubs and streamsides during migration and breeding. Its cheerful, chattering song is a familiar sound in wet thickets and montane meadows. Heard but not seen at Banff.

### **CARDINALS AND ALLIES: Cardinalidae — (3)**

**Western Tanager** *Piranga ludoviciana* — Males glow with a fiery red head and yellow body. Despite their tropical looks, they’re closely related to cardinals, not true tanagers. This bird dazzled us in Okanagan Valley and Manning Provincial Park.

**Black-headed Grosbeak** *Pheucticus melanocephalus* — Males sing a rich, robin-like song and crack seeds with their heavy bills. A memorable encounter with a striking male bird occurred in Mission Creek Park in Kelowna.

**Lazuli Bunting** *Passerina amoena* — A gem of the West, males are brilliant blue with rusty breasts. They favor brushy edges and sing sweet, jumbled songs from perches. They thrilled us in the Okanagan Valley.

### **MAMMALS — (18)**

**American Bison** *Bison bison* — Once roamed in herds numbering in the millions across the Great Plains. Despite their massive size—up to 2,000 pounds—they are remarkably agile and can leap six feet vertically. A muscular hump on their shoulders supports their large heads, which they use to plow through snow in winter. We saw these formidable beasts in a corral near Calgary, but they are never truly tamed—some still break through fences to reestablish wild herds.

**American Mink** *Neogale vison* — An agile swimmer and fierce carnivore, the mink preys on fish, amphibians, birds, and rodents. Its dark, water-repellent fur was once so prized that it led to intensive trapping and farming. Mink often cache extra food in underwater dens for later consumption. Two mink were seen slinking together like a single serpent across a path at Reifel Bird Sanctuary, and then a couple hours later, a mink was spotted crossing at path at the dog park when we searched for a roosting Barn Owl.

**Black Bear** *Ursus americanus* — The most widely distributed bear in North America, it ranges from Mexico to the Arctic. Omnivorous and highly adaptable, it eats everything from berries and nuts to carrion and human garbage. Black Bears can climb trees and may enter torpor rather than true hibernation in winter. One lone bear, and then a mother and cubs, were spotted while driving across the Continental Divide west of Lake Louise.

**Bighorn Sheep** *Ovis canadensis* — Males (rams) can weigh over 300 pounds and their horns alone can weigh 30 pounds. Skilled climbers, they navigate steep, rocky terrain with ease to escape predators. Horn clashes during mating season can reach 20 mph and echo across mountain valleys. One small, young sheep was spotted near the road while driving in Banff, and then an enormous male with an impressive curl of horns was spotted before disappearing into the woods.

**Columbian Ground Squirrel** *Urocitellus columbianus* — Found in alpine meadows and grasslands of the Pacific Northwest and Rockies. These squirrels spend much of their short active season eating to prepare for long hibernation. Their alarm calls differ based on predator type—ground or aerial. Many of these charismatic and confiding creatures were present in Manning Provincial Park.

**Coyote** *Canis latrans* — Coyotes have expanded their range dramatically, now found in every U.S. state except Hawaii. Intelligent and adaptable, they may hunt alone, in pairs, or in packs depending on prey. Coyotes can interbreed with wolves and dogs, producing “coywolves” or “coydogs.” Seen a few times on the tour in terrain ranging from a heavily trafficked highway in Calgary to an open forest in the Okanagan Valley.

**Eastern Cottontail** *Sylvilagus floridanus* — This rabbit not native to the West prefers brushy habitats and edges near fields and woodlands. Its reproductive rate is high—females may have several litters per year, each with up to 8 young. When threatened, it freezes or bolts in a zigzag pattern to evade capture.

**Elk** *Cervus canadensis* — During the rut, bulls engage in dramatic bugling and antler battles to gain harems. Elk migrate between high alpine meadows in summer and forested valleys in winter. Observed in Banff.

**Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel** *Callospermophilus lateralis* — Unlike chipmunks, it lacks facial stripes. Common in montane forests and rocky slopes, it stuffs cheek pouches with seeds to store in underground caches. It hibernates in winter and is often spotted sunning on rocks near hiking trails. Seen in Manning Provincial Park at the scenic overlook.

**Harbor Seal** *Phoca vitulina* — One of the most widespread pinnipeds, found on both Atlantic and Pacific coasts. Seals have short flippers and move awkwardly on land, but are agile underwater. Pups can swim within hours of birth and often rest on their mother’s back. Observed in the Fraser River estuary.

**Least Chipmunk** *Neotamias minimus* — Smallest of all chipmunks, it inhabits coniferous forests, brushlands, and meadows. Least Chipmunks are active above ground later into fall than most others and can even remain awake through winter in milder climates. They emit sharp alarm calls and store food in multiple caches. Seen in Banff.

**Mule Deer** *Odocoileus hemionus* — Noted for their oversized ears and distinctive bounding gait. Mule Deer prefer open forests and arid shrublands and may migrate long distances seasonally. Bucks grow new antlers annually and use them in sparring contests during the rut. Seen many times in the mountains.

**Pronghorn** *Antilocapra americana* — Not a true antelope but the only surviving member of its family. Pronghorns are North America’s fastest land animals and have large lungs and windpipes for endurance running. Both sexes may bear horns, but those of males are larger and pronged. A herd, including three fawns, was observed through the heat shimmer of the prairie east of Calgary.

**Richardson’s Ground Squirrel** *Urocitellus richardsonii* — Abundant in prairies, where they play a vital role in the ecosystem, but often considered an agricultural pest. These squirrels are highly social, living in colonies with complex burrow systems. Their sharp, whistle-like calls command attention. Common around Calgary, even in highly urbanized areas.

**White-tailed Deer** *Odocoileus virginianus* — Highly adaptable and now common in suburban areas. Their tails flash as a warning to other deer, and their keen senses of smell and hearing help them detect danger. Bucks shed and regrow their antlers yearly in response to changing daylight. They have one main branch to each antler, while Mule Deer have two. Seen east of Calgary.

**White-tailed Jackrabbit** *Lepus townsendii* — Found in grasslands and sagebrush regions of western North America. Their fur turns white in winter for camouflage against snow. Remarkably fast and agile, they can leap over 10 feet in a single bound and reach speeds up to 40 miles per hour. Their wide-set eyes provide nearly 360-degree vision to detect predators such as Ferruginous Hawks and Coyotes. Common around Calgary.

**Yellow-bellied Marmot** *Marmota flaviventris* — Often seen basking on rocks in alpine and subalpine meadows. These social rodents live in colonies and produce sharp whistles to alert others of danger. They gain weight rapidly in summer and hibernate for up to 8 months underground. Many were seen in the Okanagan Valley, and one was observed at close range on the ferry jetty at Delta.

**Yellow-pine Chipmunk** *Neotamias amoenus* — Inhabits dry conifer forests and shrubby slopes in the western U.S. and Canada. This species is solitary and territorial, using high-pitched calls to communicate. Like other chipmunks, it uses cheek pouches to carry seeds to its burrow for storage. These absurdly cute animals scurried around our feet at Manning Provincial Park.

## **BUTTERFLIES**

**Swallowtail Butterfly** (*Papilio* sp.) — Striking large butterflies, easily recognized by their bold black-and-yellow patterns and distinctive tail-like extensions on the hindwings. Observed many times on the tour fluttering along forest edges and

roadsides. Likely **Western Tiger Swallowtail** (*Papilio rutulus*), **Pale Swallowtail** (*Papilio eurymedon*), or **Anise Swallowtail** (*Papilio zelicaon*).

Other butterflies observed on the tour included various whites, blues, coppers, and sulphurs, adding splashes of color to meadows and trails.

## **PLANTS**

**Bigleaf Maple** *Acer macrophyllum* — A broad-leaved deciduous tree common in Pacific Northwest forests, notable for its enormous leaves—often over a foot wide—that create dense canopy cover. In spring, clusters of yellow-green flowers attract pollinators and support native insect life. Frequently draped in mosses, lichens, and licorice fern, it serves as a host for diverse epiphytes. One of the characteristic temperate rainforest trees we saw at Maple Ridge Park near Vancouver, where Barred Owls perched on its moss-covered limbs.

**Fireweed** *Chamaenerion angustifolium* — Known as Rosebay Willowherb in Britain and the “Calendar Plant” in Alaska. Thrives in disturbed areas like wildfire burns and roadside clearings. Blooms from the bottom up—by the time the cottony seeds appear at the top, summer is nearly over.

**Horsetail** *Equisetum arvense* — An ancient plant with hollow, jointed stems and a high silica content. Found in moist soils and often among forest edges, it reproduces by spores rather than seeds. One of the oldest surviving plant genera on Earth, dating back to the Paleozoic era. Grew to a hundred feet tall in the time of dinosaurs, when it was the dominant land plant. Feels rough to the touch because it concentrates silica from the soil.

**Lupine** *Lupinus spp.* — These nitrogen-fixing members of the pea family brighten meadows with spikes of purple or blue flowers. Their deep roots stabilize soil and improve fertility, supporting ecosystem recovery in disturbed sites. Admired by our group at Manning Provincial Park.

**Oceanspray** *Holodiscus discolor* — A cascading shrub with frothy white flower clusters that attract pollinators. Common in dry forests and open slopes, its seed heads persist into winter. Native peoples used its tough wood for tools and arrow shafts. Admired by our group at Reifel Bird Sanctuary.

**Paintbrush** *Castilleja spp.* — Striking red or orange bracts surround the greenish flowers of this hemiparasitic wildflower. It taps into the roots of nearby plants for nutrients while also photosynthesizing. A vivid presence in meadows, especially near lupines, which they often parasitize. Admired at Manning Provincial Park.

**Ponderosa Pine** *Pinus ponderosa* — A towering pine with cinnamon-colored bark that smells of vanilla or butterscotch. Its thick bark and deep roots help it survive wildfires. Found in dry montane forests and noted for its ecological and timber value. When we sniffed the fissured bark of mature trees, we detected vanilla and butterscotch scents.

**Quaking Aspen** *Populus tremuloides* — The most widely distributed tree in North America, known for its fluttering, heart-shaped leaves that tremble in the slightest breeze. Forms large clonal groves through underground root systems, with some stands among the oldest and largest living organisms on Earth. Bright golden foliage makes it a signature of autumn in mountain landscapes.

**Salmonberry** *Rubus spectabilis* — A tall bramble with bright pink flowers and early-ripening orange-red berries. Though watery and mild in flavor, the berries are edible and refreshing. These shrubs grow in moist coastal forests and serve as a useful hydration source in the field.

**Shooting Star** *Dodecatheon pulchellum* — Admired for its backward-swept petals and dark central cone. Uses “buzz pollination”—only the right wingbeat frequency from native bees releases its pollen. Found in moist meadows and open forest edges. Our group admired this wildflower in a field just before we climbed toward the mountains of Banff.

**Sitka Spruce** *Picea sitchensis* — A giant of the temperate rainforest, reaching up to 300 feet tall. Its high strength-to-weight ratio made it ideal for early aircraft frames. Alongside Western Hemlock, it dominates the lush forests of Vancouver’s coastal edge rainforest.

**Western Hemlock** *Tsuga heterophylla* — A shade-tolerant conifer that dominates old-growth temperate rainforests. Its drooping leader and feathery foliage are distinctive. Can live more than 1,000 years and help stabilize cool, moist microclimates.

**Western Redcedar** *Thuja plicata* — An aromatic evergreen with reddish bark and scale-like leaves. Culturally vital to Indigenous peoples, it was used for canoes, totem poles, and clothing. It thrives in moist forests and can live for over a millennium. Not a true cedar, it is more closely related to Swamp Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*).



**Wild Prickly Rose** (*Rosa acicularis*) — Its bright red hips provide food for birds and mammals and are rich in vitamin C. A hardy shrub native to northern forests and open areas, known for its thorny stems and pink blooms, which we admired around Calgary—it is the provincial flower of Alberta.

**Woolly Sunflower** *Eriophyllum lanatum* — A cheerful, drought-tolerant wildflower of open slopes and rocky soils. Silvery, hairy leaves help it retain moisture. Clusters of bright yellow daisy-like flowers attract pollinators and bloom through summer. Admired at Manning Provincial Park.

### **LICHENS**

**Frog's Pelt** *Peltigera spp.* — A lichen with broad, leathery lobes found on moist soil or mossy logs. It plays a role in nitrogen fixation and is sensitive to air pollution, making it a useful bioindicator. We observed this lichen on the forest floor at Manning Provincial Park.

**Witch's Hair** *Alectoria spp.* — A hanging lichen that drapes from conifer branches in humid forests. Its presence signals clean air, and it provides nesting material for birds and winter forage for caribou in the north. We observed this lichen dangling from trees at Manning Provincial Park.