Olympic Peninsula Spring Explorer
May 5-12, 2025 | Trip Report
by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Stephen Grace and Jessie Hallstrom with Rick, Betsy, John, Howard, Lynne, Peter, Mary, Bob and Sandy.

Mon., May 5 Arrival in Seattle | Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge | Port Townsend | Sequim

Our Olympic Peninsula adventure began at the Radisson near Sea-Tac Airport, where signs of spring were

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already all around us—even in the hotel parking lot. Betsy spotted a Bushtit nest tucked in a tree out back, and our plans to hit the road were immediately put on hold.

The nest, woven of spider silk and moss, dangled from a tree limb. We watched both male (dark eye) and female (light eye) Bushtits ferry strands of material to the structure, working together to build a stretchy, secure cradle. With only one narrow entrance near the top, these nests are hard for predators to breach—a remarkable bit of avian engineering, and a fitting way to begin a trip filled with marvels.

After that auspicious start, we loaded into our vans and headed south, leaving Seattle and Tacoma behind. As we drove, we were treated to a jaw-dropping, unusually clear view of Mount Rainier—often hidden behind clouds. At 14,410 feet, this iconic stratovolcano rises from the Cascades with a summit cloaked in snow and ice. It's a young mountain in geologic time, formed by subduction and uplift, and still very much alive beneath its glaciers.

Our first birding destination was the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge, where spring migration was in full swing. Swallows swirled overhead—Tree, Barn, Violet-green, Cliff, and Northern Rough-winged. We were joined by Woody Wheeler, a longtime Naturalist Journeys guide and expert birder, who generously helped us explore this rich estuarine habitat.

This refuge protects a delta where the Nisqually River meets the Salish Sea—a place rich with ecological and cultural history. Renamed in 2015 to honor Nisqually leader and treaty rights activist Billy Frank Jr., the land is a sanctuary for wildlife and a tribute to Indigenous stewardship.

Our sightings at Nisqually were impressive and full of surprises, with rich rewards around every bend in the trail. We marveled at two active Rufous Hummingbird nests, expertly camouflaged with lichen and moss, each cradling a pair of nestlings, their tiny beaks pointed skyward in anticipation.

In the cattails, Common Yellowthroats flashed their black masks while Marsh Wrens burst into energetic song. Waterfowl filled the wetlands—Northern Shovelers, Hooded Mergansers, and Common Mergansers—each offering excellent looks in the bright morning light.

A Yellow-headed Blackbird appeared—a striking rarity west of the Cascades and a first-ever sighting at Nisqually for Woody. A single Blue-winged Teal paddled past, its subtle beauty easy to overlook among the more familiar ducks. Nearby, a lone Snow Goose lingered, seemingly unbothered by the warming season.

We paused to note the clear differences between Cackling and Canada Geese, the former's stubbier bill and shorter neck standing out in close comparison. And Greater White-fronted Goose—a life bird for some in the group—was a perfect finale to a memorable morning in the wetlands.

From Nisqually, we chose the slower, scenic route north along Hood Canal—a fjord carved by glaciers and now flooded with marine water, forming part of the greater Salish Sea. This stretch of Highway 101 winds between forest and water, and with the clear weather, the views of the Olympic Mountains were breathtaking.

By late afternoon we arrived in Port Townsend. We made a stop at my home, where my wife Amy has spent years restoring our backyard with native plants. The rewards were immediate: Rufous and Anna's Hummingbirds nectaring on blooming Red-flowering Currant and Twinberry Honeysuckle, and a Golden-crowned Sparrow—one of the last stragglers before the species departs for breeding grounds to the north.

We passed through a stand of old-growth forest on the edge of town—part of a rare rainshadow ecosystem I've worked to help preserve. These trees, some over 300 years old, don't have the girth of rainforest giants on the peninsula's west side, but they've weathered centuries of dry summers and shallow soils in the Olympic rainshadow.

At Fort Worden's Point Wilson, where the Salish Sea meets the Strait of Juan de Fuca, seabirds were abundant. Rhinoceros Auklets cut low over the waves, and we had great views of Pacific Loons in crisp breeding plumage, along with Common Murres, Pelagic Cormorants, and Pigeon Guillemots—members of the auk family, built for diving and wing-propelled swimming.

Steve Hampton and Ali Kasperzak joined us there—Steve a scientist and birder with a great blog, and Ali a glass artist and excellent bird photographer. They greeted us with excitement and immediately pointed out a family of Killdeer, including downy chicks racing after parents with that classic run-and-stop plover behavior.

Dinner followed at Point Hudson, with more birding as we waited for our meals. A Bald Eagle perched nearby. Purple Martins swooped and chattered. White-crowned Sparrows posed in the low shrubs, and out on the water, more Pigeon Guillemots bobbed in the current.

We ended our full and satisfying day in Sequim. Once thought to mean "quiet waters" in the S'Klallam language, the name is now understood to translate more accurately as "place for going to shoot." This town, known for its blue skies thanks to the Olympic rainshadow, is home to Washington's only native cactus—and tonight, it was a peaceful place for weary birders to rest. With a full day behind us and many highlights already, we settled in for the night, ready for the adventures ahead.

Tues., May 6 Ediz Hook | Port Angeles | Hurricane Ridge

From surf to summit, from tidelands to timberline and beyond—today we traveled across the full spectrum of the Olympic Peninsula's coastal and mountain ecosystems.

Our morning began at Ediz Hook, a narrow spit of land arcing into the Strait of Juan de Fuca from Port Angeles. This slender barrier—formed by currents moving glacial sediments—offered stunning views and excellent birding.

We were joined today—and again tomorrow—by Gary Bullock, a familiar voice to many on the Olympic Peninsula. A retired firefighter from Alaska, Gary is also a published poet and longtime bird educator. He is a gifted interpreter of the natural world, blending science and storytelling in a way that makes birding exciting and accessible for people of all levels. A regular contributor to Nature Now, a community radio show based in Port Townsend, Gary brings a deep appreciation for birds to every conversation.

One of the day's highlights came early: a Black Oystercatcher working the rocky shoreline with focused intensity. This striking bird—dark brown plumage, orange bill and eye ring—rarely eats oysters despite its name. Instead, it targets mussels, limpets, chitons, and barnacles, using one of several learned techniques: prying, stabbing, or hammering open the shells. These feeding styles are passed down through observation and practice. Oystercatchers are monogamous and often defend the same coastal territory for years. Their presence here is heartening—they're a species of conservation concern, vulnerable to oil spills, human disturbance, and rising seas.

We also watched a pair of Harlequin Ducks, first at a distance, then close to shore. The males—dressed in bold slate blue with chestnut and white accents—seem built to dazzle. It's hard to think of a more handsome duck. Their life history is just as dramatic: they winter in pounding coastal surf, then move inland to breed in fast-moving mountain rivers.

Nearby, Black Turnstones perched on a floating log, resting between feeding forays. A sleeping duck on a rock gave us an ID challenge—its head was tucked tight. But when a group of Buffleheads clambered onto the same rock, it lifted its head: a Common Goldeneye.

We scanned the water and shoreline for more treasures: Surf Scoters and Red-breasted Mergansers. In a nearby lagoon, we had excellent views of Harbor Seals with their big, dark eyes—reminding some of us of selkies from European myths.

After a satisfying morning, we headed into downtown Port Angeles. This gritty industrial city is reinventing itself as a tourism gateway to Olympic National Park. Before lunch at an excellent local restaurant, we took time to appreciate the town's vivid murals, which celebrate the intertwined human and natural histories of this coastal region.

In the afternoon, we climbed high into the heart of Olympic National Park, heading for Hurricane Ridge. Along the way, we pulled over for a roadside geology talk, diving into the dramatic forces that shaped this rugged landscape. The Olympic Mountains owe their existence to the slow-motion collision of tectonic plates—where the oceanic plate subducts beneath the continental plate, creating uplifted terrain known as an accretionary wedge. This is a story written in stone, shaped by pressure, time, and upheaval. Atop the mountain summits you can find seashell fossils and pillow basalt that cooled beneath the ocean ages ago.

As we gained elevation, we caught sight of Mount Baker glowing in the midday light. This majestic peak, part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, is a still-active stratovolcano born of the same subduction process that built the Olympic Mountains. Named by Captain George Vancouver in 1792 during his exploration of the Pacific Northwest, Mount Baker has long been known to the Lummi people as Kulshan, a name that predates European arrival by centuries. Here, fire and ice coexist—molten rock from deep within the Earth feeding towering, glacier-draped summits like Baker and Rainier. The grandeur of these peaks reminds us that the Pacific Northwest is still very much alive, geologically speaking—shaped not only by time but by the constant interplay of elemental forces.

From lowland rainforest and montane forest, we rose into subalpine slopes and alpine tundra, where trees shrink and wildflowers brave the snow.

At the top, the ridge unfolded before us: a dramatic high-country landscape nearly a mile above sea level, with sweeping views across valleys and peaks. We admired the glaciers of Mount Olympus, their crevasses visible even from afar.

Birdlife kept our focus sharp: American Pipits chased insects across lingering snowfields, their high aerial displays giving away their wagtail lineage. A brief look at a Steller's Jay was quickly overshadowed by a satisfying view of a Canada Jay—a lifer for many in the group.

The tundra yielded more surprises: Chipping Sparrows, a localized breeder here, and a final bonus—just before we departed—a Horned Lark appearing among the tawny grass.

We also encountered Olympic Marmots, a species found nowhere else on Earth. These charismatic high-country residents are a living legacy of the last Ice Age, isolated on the Olympic Peninsula by glaciers and time. Their sharp whistles echoed across the rocky slopes, a reminder of the wild and ancient rhythms that still pulse through this landscape nearly a mile above the sea.

Luck was still with us—no hurricane-force winds today, despite the ridge's formidable name. The air was calm, the sky clear, and the views were nothing short of breathtaking. To one side, the jagged peaks of the Olympics stretched into the distance; to the other, the Strait of Juan de Fuca shimmered in the afternoon light. It was one of those rare moments when the mountains feel both vast and intimate, inviting us to pause and take it all in.

On the way down, one van caught a glimpse of a Sooty Grouse hustling up a hillside—another fitting emblem of the wild terrain we traversed today.

Later, back in Port Angeles, we enjoyed some free time to explore the town. Some visited a bookstore and local shops, others walked the waterfront. At the city pier, birding brought close, satisfying views of species we'd seen earlier—Surf Scoters, Pelagic Cormorants, and Pigeon Guillemots flashing their vivid red feet and gape linings. We also added two new species: a Red-necked Grebe in full breeding plumage, and a female White-winged Scoter—with its telltale white wing patches tucked away, a tricky identification due to its subtle field marks.

We capped the day with a delicious meal and lively conversation, recounting highlights and reflecting on how much ground we'd covered—geographically, ecologically, and experientially.

In one day, we traveled from coastal edge to mountaintops, crossing an extraordinary range of life zones. We scoped the Salish Sea for seabirds, watch shorebirds feed in the intertidal zone, and explored coastal prairie, lowland temperate rainforest, montane forest, subalpine slopes, and alpine tundra.

Each zone brought new discoveries—lush ferns and towering evergreens giving way to wind-shaped trees and snowfields, until we reached vistas of ice-capped peaks. We witnessed how natural forces have shaped this land and how life has adapted from tideline to tundra. At every turn, another world revealed itself. The salty tang of the sea mingled with the earthy scent of moss-draped trees. The sound of crashing waves gave way to alpine stillness. From coastal fringe to glaciated summits, the Olympic Peninsula unfolded as a living mosaic—shaped by water, wind, and time. Every moment invited us to marvel, to question, and to cherish.

Wed, May 7 Dungeness River Nature Center | Dungeness Landing | Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge | Three Crabs

After breakfast at our hotel, we set out for the Dungeness River Nature Center. The morning light filtered through the trees as we began birding the nearby trails, greeted almost immediately by Band-tailed Pigeons—the closest living relatives of the extinct Passenger Pigeon. Moments later, a Cooper's Hawk swooped in and landed in a nearby tree, giving us striking, up-close views.

Gary Bullock was with us again today. With his keen eyes, quiet humor, and gift for sharing wonder, Gary added depth to our birding experience. His presence brought a thoughtful rhythm to the group—one that invites closer observation and quiet appreciation.

Soon after, we met up with Bob Boekelheide—my friend, birding mentor, and former director of the Dungeness River Nature Center—who has been leading this Wednesday morning bird walk for nearly 24 years. His dedication has produced a robust dataset of bird populations in this rich riparian corridor, while fostering a vibrant community of observers and learners. It was a true privilege to participate in the tradition with our group.

We followed the Olympic Discovery Trail across the old railroad bridge spanning the Dungeness River, moving at birding pace and tuning into the layered soundscape around us. Black-headed and Evening Grosbeaks called

from high in the canopy but remained hidden, their rich songs drifting down from the treetops. Red-breasted Nuthatches called from the trees as well, their nasal notes easy to recognize, though we didn't see them.

A fully built Bushtit nest hanging from a high branch drew our attention—its finely woven, hanging pouch a contrast to the just-begun nest we had marveled at earlier in the week at SeaTac. Another highlight came when we enjoyed close, extended views of Chestnut-backed Chickadees in a bush near a tree cavity where they were nesting. This range-restricted species is found mostly along the Pacific Coast, from central California to southeastern Alaska. Its warm brown back and chattery call are signatures of the Pacific Northwest's coniferous forests. For many in our group, it was a life bird.

Red Crossbills were another life bird for many, and a standout of the walk. Through the scope, we could see their uniquely crossed bills—adapted to pry open the tough cones of conifers. Watching them work the treetops was a memorable moment.

Rufous Hummingbirds put on a dazzling show. Perched along wires in the sunshine, the males lifted their heads and flashed their brilliant orange-red gorgets—those jewel-like throat feathers named for the neck armor of medieval knights. These fierce little birds zipped out to chase intruders and duel with Anna's Hummingbirds, defending feeding zones with a combination of agility and spark.

Bob Boekelheide spotted a Red-breasted Sapsucker flying across the river and vanishing into the trees. Some of us staked out the area, and persistence paid off with excellent views of its striking red head and patterned back.

As we returned to the Dungeness River Nature Center, another Red-breasted Sapsucker flew into a nearby tree, giving us close looks to cap off a morning rich with forest birds and shared discoveries.

After the walk, we enjoyed a relaxed lunch at a café in Sequim, where several of us indulged in "breakfast for lunch" and swapped morning highlights before heading out again.

Our next stop brought us to an active Bald Eagle nest. One adult sat low in the nest, while other Bald Eagles glided and soared nearby. We watched as two Red-tailed Hawks patrolled the sky, a Cooper's Hawk darted over the fields, and a Northern Harrier cruised low across the grass. That harrier wasn't just looking—it was listening. Its dish-shaped face funnels sound toward its ears, just like an owl's, allowing it to detect the faint rustling of voles in the grass below. A fine example of convergent evolution—and a thrilling encounter to witness.

At Dungeness Landing, the wind was up and the tide imperfect, but the shorebirds made up for it. We watched Dunlin in crisp breeding plumage sweep across the flats in tight, flickering flocks. Brant were visible on a distant spit through the scopes, and a collection of Harbor Seals had hauled out, piled together like driftwood logs, sleek and silent against the windblown shore.

As we continued toward our next stop, we noticed Gary had pulled over to the side of the road. We followed—and were rewarded with one of the most memorable moments of the day. A male Northern Harrier, pale and ghostlike, hovered and swept across the field. The sight carried a layer of profound resonance: Gary's first published poem was inspired by this species. We stood together in quiet appreciation as the bird worked the wind.

Nearby, another drama unfolded. A raven attempted to raid a nest and was quickly mobbed by a swarm of Red-winged Blackbirds and crows. The sky erupted in aerial conflict—three species clashing, calling, diving. Sandy and Bob, two talented photographers in our group, captured the action beautifully. It was a stroke of luck to witness such a raw, dynamic moment in the web of avian life.

We arrived next at Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge. Strong winds and rough seas made seabird viewing difficult from the bluff, so we dropped into the forest for protection and new discoveries. Along the trail, we delighted in finding banana slugs—natives of the forest floor. Their slime, with a unique liquid crystal structure, is being studied by scientists and robotics engineers as a model for soft, flexible materials. These slugs also enrich the forest with their nutrient-rich droppings—an underappreciated but essential part of the ecosystem. They drew a mix of fascination and delight from the group.

Another long-anticipated moment arrived when we finally got excellent views of Brown Creepers. We had been hearing their high-pitched calls for two days. This time we watched them fly to the base of a tree and spiral upward, searching for insects beneath the bark. Though Red-breasted Nuthatches weren't seen today, their calls echoed nearby—each species exploiting a different direction on the tree trunk, a textbook case of niche partitioning.

From there, we walked to the overlook above Dungeness Spit, one of the longest natural sand spits in the world. It stretches over five miles into the Strait of Juan de Fuca and continues to grow, formed by longshore drift as ocean currents carry and deposit sediment along the coast. It's a remarkable landform—and a haven for wildlife. On the shoreline below, we had good views of Whimbrels, foraging methodically with their curved bills. And just inland, Howard pointed out a striking caterpillar—the larva of the Silver-spotted Tiger Moth. This colorful native species looks like something from the tropics, though it feeds on Douglas-fir and is entirely at home in this landscape.

We made a final stop at the restored estuary at Three Crabs. The wind was sharp, but the rewards were strong. Among dozens of American Wigeon, we picked out a Eurasian Wigeon—its rust-red head with a buffy forehead and warm-toned flanks setting it apart. Native to Eurasia, this handsome duck is a rare but regular visitor to North America. We also had close looks at handsome Green-winged Teal and admired Black-bellied Plovers in full breeding plumage, their bold black-and-white contrast glowing in the late light.

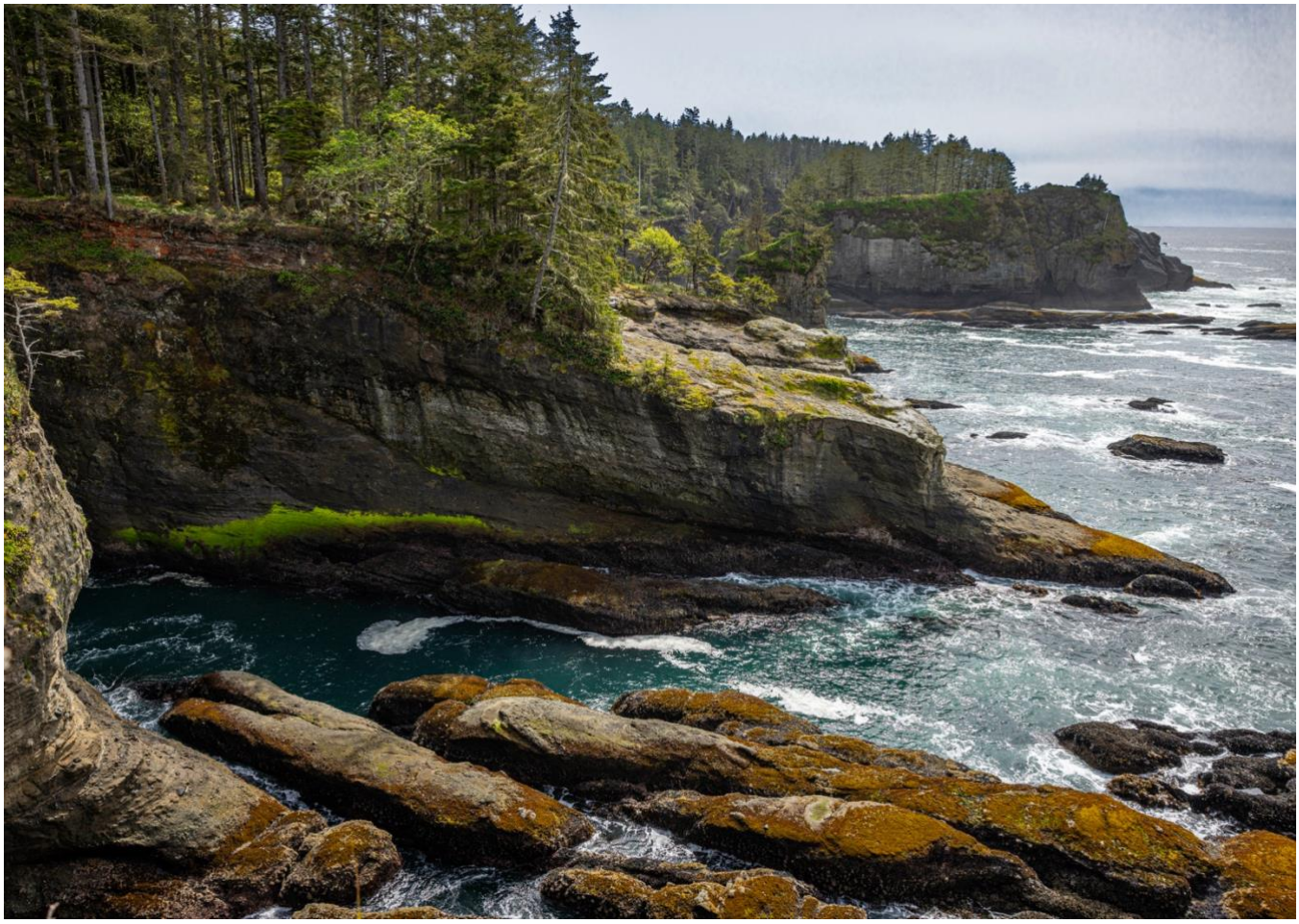
The Three Crabs estuary is an ecological restoration success story—one of many we encountered on this tour. It was once a degraded shoreline, but careful planning and community effort have returned it to functioning wetland habitat. These victories are worth celebrating, even as we acknowledge the profound challenges that remain in protecting and restoring bird and wildlife habitat for future generations.

Dinner back in Sequim brought warmth and good cheer—wood-fired pizzas, savory entrées, and lively storytelling around the table. As we wrapped up the bird list for the day, we reflected on how much we'd seen, heard, and learned. It had been a day rich in birds, behavior, beauty, and renewal—another step in a journey that deepened with every mile.

Thurs., May 8 Makah Nation Lands & Cape Flattery | Kalaloch

Heading west along the Strait of Juan de Fuca toward the Olympic Coast, we made our first stop of the day at Clallam Bay to scan the kelp beds. We hadn't been there long when Betsy called it out—Sea Otter! Floating on its back with flippered feet in the air, it quickly became a favorite among our group and even drew in a few curious passersby. One enthusiastic father brought his daughters over to look through the scopes, joining the celebration.

The otter groomed its long, sensitive whiskers—tools as much as adornments, capable of detecting the faintest movement of prey in murky water. We talked about the remarkable lives of these animals. Sea Otters



sometimes anchor their pups to kelp to keep them from drifting while the mother dives. They even carry a favorite rock in a loose patch of skin under the forearm—like a tool belt—for cracking open shells. Every part of their lives is woven into the kelp forest.

We continued west toward Neah Bay and stopped for lunch at the Warmhouse Restaurant on the ancestral lands of the Makah people, who have lived along this coast for thousands of years. The Makah are deeply tied to the sea, traditionally harvesting halibut, seals, whales, and seabirds in this rich marine environment.

Birding didn't stop for lunch. Many of us stepped outside after ordering to check the nearby shoreline, while others scanned from the restaurant windows. Western Sandpipers and Greater Yellowlegs worked the tideline. In the trees near the marina, Bald Eagles gathered—so many that the branches bowed under their weight. Some were in flight, some perched, and others hunched near the docks, waiting to scavenge fish scraps from the returning boats.

Their abundance here belies the fact that Bald Eagles were once on the brink of disappearing. In 1963, only 417 nesting pairs remained in the lower 48 states, their numbers decimated by DDT and habitat loss. But thanks to the persistence of conservationists, the banning of harmful chemicals, and the protection of key nesting habitats, the eagle's story became one of extraordinary recovery. Today, Washington State alone hosts more than 600 nesting pairs—a powerful reminder of what's possible when we choose to protect the wild.

In a sheltered cove nearby, calm water allowed for excellent scope views. Surf Scoters drifted past, their oversized orange bills unmistakable. A male White-winged Scoter showed its distinctive face pattern—an

upturned white teardrop behind the eye, plus the namesake wing patches. Greater Scaup, a new species for our tour, were present too, their rounded, greenish heads helping to set them apart from their Lesser Scaup cousins with purplish, peaked heads.

From Neah Bay, we continued to Cape Flattery. The trail to the cape winds through coastal rainforest, where towering trees rise from a floor of moss, salal, and sword ferns. The air was filled with the scent of sea and spruce. We hiked through this cathedral of green until the forest suddenly gave way to open cliffside viewpoints overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Waves thundered below us. Sea caves and sea stacks jutted from the surf, carved in sedimentary rock over millennia by wind and tide. We looked across to Tatoosh Island, long used by seabirds as a nesting site. Conditions were excellent. We spotted Harlequin Ducks on the water, Black Oystercatchers foraging on the rocky shelves, and Pelagic Cormorants displaying crisp white flank patches—signs of breeding plumage.

Through the scopes, we picked out something even more remarkable: hundreds—possibly thousands—of Common Murres rafted together far offshore. From a distance they resembled an oil slick or drifting debris, but closer inspection revealed a black-and-white flotilla of deep divers. Common Murres can dive to depths over 600 feet, chasing schools of fish with wing-powered propulsion.

Persistence paid off when we finally located a half-dozen Marbled Murrelets—small, dark alcids with fast wingbeats. Seeing them here was a true privilege. Unlike most seabirds, which nest on cliffs, Marbled Murrelets nest in old-growth forests, sometimes as far as 50 miles inland. They lay their eggs on the broad, mossy limbs of ancient trees and fly daily between forest and sea. Now listed as a threatened species, they've become a symbol of the deep connections between marine and terrestrial ecosystems.

A final surprise: Tufted Puffins, flying in the distance. Their rounded bodies, bright orange bills, and swept-back golden plumes made them easy to pick out, even against the distant sea. Close relatives of the Rhinoceros Auklet, they looked like winged footballs—sturdy and unmistakable.

By late afternoon, we made our way to our final stop for the day: Kalaloch Lodge, perched on the edge of the continent in Olympic National Park. After a beautiful dinner in the lodge's restaurant, we fell asleep to the rhythmic hush of the Pacific surf—a lullaby from the living sea.

Fri., May 9 Ruby Beach | Hoh Rainforest | Kalaloch Beach | Big Cedar Tree

The smell of the sea was strong as we followed the trail down to Ruby Beach at dawn. Golden light slanted through the mist drifting in the forest along the shore, where driftwood logs—flung like toothpicks by the angry Pacific in winter storms—were piled in tangled heaps. We needed to cross a creek to reach the best tidepooling

area, so we got to work, throwing logs across the water to build a makeshift bridge. Once across, we walked among sea stacks rising from the surf. Some of us squeezed through a narrow sea cave—a moment that felt like stepping through a portal into another world: the intertidal zone.

Here, at the meeting place of land and sea, strange and wondrous life thrives. Mussels clung to rocks, held fast by strong, stretchy byssal threads—natural fibers so tough and flexible that they've inspired medical sutures. Gooseneck barnacles extended leathery stalks, filtering the surf with feathery feeding appendages. Anemones, some open like delicate flowers, were in fact predatory animals, their tentacles armed with stinging cells. Sea stars, or starfish as they're commonly known, came in a dazzling range of colors—royal purple, brick red, blazing orange. Though beautiful, these creatures are apex predators of the tidepools. A single sea star can pull apart the shell of a mussel using nothing but its tube feet and patience.

Above the swells, Brown Pelicans flew in squadrons. Surf Scoters bobbed in the waves, rising and falling with the swell. A Spotted Sandpiper foraged along barnacle-crusted rocks, tail bobbing with each step.

Brynn, a Naturalist Journeys employee, insect educator, and tidepool enthusiast, joined us in our exploration of the ocean's edge. When the incoming tide chased us up the shore, we enjoyed a picnic breakfast with one of the most breathtaking views imaginable—sea stacks and islands rising like something from a dreamscape. Then we continued inland to the Hoh Rainforest, entering a landscape very different but equally enchanting.

After climbing back up from the beach, Sandy captured a phenomenal photo of a Wilson's Warbler. Bob heard another song that sounded like a junco's trill, but his photo confirmed it as an Orange-crowned Warbler.

Luck stayed with us. The road into the Hoh, closed for months due to a winter washout, had reopened just the day before.

We passed recent clearcuts and second- and third-growth forests, interspersed with remnants of old growth—massive Sitka Spruce that stirred anticipation for what lay ahead. At the Hall of Mosses, we walked one of the world's great trails at botany pace, pausing often to take in this fairytale forest. Western Hemlocks, Douglas-firs, Sitka Spruce, and Bigleaf Maples towered above us, draped in epiphytes of every green imaginable.

We admired the miniature landscapes too—mosses shaped like tiny palm trees and stair steps, bird's nest fungus that launches its spore-filled "eggs" with raindrops, false morels, and polypore conks: the fruiting bodies of fungi that, unlike gilled mushrooms, produce spores through pores on their undersides.

Dead trees told stories too. Snags that had stood for a century or more provided nesting sites for woodpeckers and shelter for other wildlife. Fallen giants became nurse logs, soft with rot, where seedlings took root. In some places, mature trees now stood on stilt-like roots—the decayed nurse logs beneath them long gone, completely returned to the soil.

Surrounded by life in every stage—from decay to rebirth—we were drawn into nature's ancient cycles. Some of these trees, centuries old, began their lives before modern history was written. We fell silent when we heard the song of a Pacific Wren, what Peg Abbott calls the "Pavarotti of the forest." Its powerful, endlessly complex song echoed through the moss-laden understory. We spotted two wrens darting through the forest—perhaps a territorial skirmish, or maybe courtship, or simply play.

We ate our picnic lunch in the woodland nearby. Bob and Sandy worked hard to photograph a Black-throated Gray Warbler we'd been hearing. At last, two birds descended from the canopy, offering rare eye-level views.

After lunch, one group returned directly to the lodge, while the other made a short detour to the Big Cedar Tree. We marveled at the ancient Western Redcedar near the trailhead—a tree so massive and awe-inspiring, we resolved to return with the whole group for a longer visit.

Later, some of us went for solo walks along the beach. Gulls rested on rocks and gathered at the mouth of the creek, where freshwater met the sea. We added Ring-billed Gull to our species list, and had excellent views of Western Gulls. The complexities of gull identification became a joyful challenge. Many species undergo multiple plumage changes as they age, and several hybridize—especially here in the Pacific Northwest, where Glaucous-winged and Western Gulls commonly interbreed. These hybrids, informally called "Olympic Gulls," blur the boundaries between species. We found a few pure Western Gulls, distinguished by their darker mantles (the upper back and wings) and sharply contrasting black wingtips with bold white spots.

Hundreds of Surf Scoters and White-winged Scoters rode the waves offshore, appearing in the crests and vanishing into the troughs. Black Oystercatchers piped their loud, staccato calls—*wheep wheep wheep biddy biddy biddy*—an anthem of the tidelands.

We crossed paths with Betsy, who reported a strange fish on the beach. Following her directions, we walked a lovely stretch of shore, scanning for agates and listening to the surf. Up ahead, we saw a juvenile gull and a crow picking at something. When we arrived, we found it: a Spotted Ratfish, a kind of Chimera. This relative of sharks dwells in deep water and rarely washes ashore. With its long, tapering tail, silvery body, and winglike fins, the Spotted Ratfish seemed a fitting finale to our day—a mysterious creature from the depths, reminding us how much of the ocean's life remains unseen.

That evening, we gathered for another delicious dinner at the lodge. Fantastic salads and appetizers were followed by entrées ranging from local salmon to crispy polenta cakes—every dish a hit. Afterward, we gathered for our daily bird checklist, celebrating the day's discoveries and finalizing our plans for the next day—a perfect way to honor what was coming next: World Migratory Bird Day. Who better to celebrate it than us?

Sat., May 10 Kalaloch | Grays Harbor | Lake Quinault

To make the most of World Migratory Bird Day, we headed south to Grays Harbor National Wildlife Refuge, one of the most important stopover points along the Pacific Flyway. This vast estuary is a critical resting and refueling site for hundreds of thousands of migrating shorebirds each spring. The timing of our visit—tide, season, and weather—couldn't have been better.

Rain tapped the van roof on the way down, but as we approached the refuge, the clouds lifted. Once again, we were met with clearing skies and calm conditions. We were also joined by my friends Monica and Steve, whose knowledge and joy for birding added so much to the day.

We arrived as the tide was coming in—a detail I had planned, thanks to past visits when low tide left the birds frustratingly far away. On this day, as the rising water pushed flocks closer to the viewing platform, everything clicked.

Before we even reached the tidelands, we had great looks at Black-bellied Plovers near the grassy runway of the regional airport that borders the refuge. Some were in winter's muted gray; others gleamed in full breeding

plumage, jet-black bellies and crisp white foreheads catching the light. Dowitchers fed nearby, their bills moving in rapid, rhythmic jabs. We squinted into scopes and puzzled over them. Short-billed or Long-billed? Their bill lengths overlap, and their plumage offers little help. Without a call, even the best field guides can leave you guessing. Their voices, however, are different enough to be diagnostic—a good illustration of how essential birding by ear is.

From the boardwalk, we took in the main event. Dunlins and Semipalmated Plovers foraged in loose flocks, but it was the Western Sandpipers that stole the show. We had arrived in the heart of their migration window, when as many as half a million of these tiny travelers pass through Grays Harbor. They gorged on biofilm, a thin layer of algae and microorganisms that coats the mudflats—slurped up with brush-tipped tongues, fueling their 6,000-mile journey to Arctic breeding grounds.

The sky seemed alive. At intervals, vast flocks lifted off and wheeled through the air, moving like a single creature. Wings flashed white in the sun as they banked, turned, and settled again. To witness such movement is to feel the scale of migration not just in numbers, but in rhythm, instinct, and distance.

Among the Greater White-fronted Geese, we picked out a lone Snow Goose—a ghostly figure among the grasses. When it took to the air, we noted its black wingtips—rich in melanin, which makes them stronger and more resistant to wear. Caspian Terns cruised above the flats, plunging for fish, their big red bills and raspy cries unmistakable. Great Blue Herons flapped high overhead.

And then, cutting across the marsh with serene authority, came an American White Pelican. Not common here, and impossible to miss—massive, glowing white, and soaring like a jumbo jet gliding above a fleet of puddle jumpers. After hours of squinting at sandpipers, this one required no field marks, just admiration.

We ate lunch on the refuge boardwalk, grateful for a place to rest and refuel—just like the birds. On the return trail through a stand of riparian forest, we saw and heard Yellow Warblers, their bright-yellow forms bouncing through the branches. A Swainson's Thrush and a Warbling Vireo were heard but not seen, their voices mingling in the canopy. A Marsh Wren, however, perched boldly atop a stick and sang with gusto—seen and heard clearly by everyone in the group.

Later, at the Hoquiam Sewage Treatment Ponds—a classic if unglamorous birding stop—we added new birds to the list. A Ring-necked Duck was a new species for the tour, swimming alongside Mallards, Gadwalls, Northern Shovelers, Lesser Scaup, and a few Greater Scaup.

Among a scattered flock of dowitchers, one finally called—its sharp *keek* cry cutting across the pond and confirming it as a Long-billed Dowitcher.

In a nearby field, two Whimbrels moved slowly through the grass, their long, curved bills probing the soil. We admired their shape and poise—another long-distance traveler pausing in our corner of the world.

Then the surface of the water caught our attention. Red-necked Phalaropes, spinning in tight circles, were drawing up prey with their vortex-generating foraging technique. These tiny, delicate shorebirds—barely larger than a sparrow—behave more like ducks. And in this species, it's the female who is more brightly colored, while the male tends the nest and raises the young.

When I explained this reversal of roles, Mary, with a twinkle in her eye, said, "My new favorite bird." One of many great quips throughout the tour. There had been much laughter as humor wove through our learning like a bright thread.

On our way north, we paused at historic Quinault Lake Lodge, nestled beside its namesake lake and surrounded by towering rainforest. Franklin D. Roosevelt stayed here in 1937, during a tour that helped inspire the creation of Olympic National Park. We walked the beautiful grounds, sunlight spilling across the lawn and dancing on the lake's surface—late-day brilliance, not sunset yet, but trees and water glowing with golden calm.

Dinner that evening at the lodge was a perfect finale to the day. A halloumi appetizer and butternut squash ravioli entree drew rave reviews, and everything else—from salmon to salad to steak—was savored with gusto. Once more we completed our bird list and celebrated our sightings.

We had stood in one of the Pacific Flyway's great staging areas, watching flocks pour in with the tide. We had marveled at the scale of migration, and smiled at the small moments in between. On this day of wings and wonder, World Migratory Bird Day had been honored with open eyes, open ears, and open hearts. As we left Lake Quinault, we looked ahead to our final full day together.

Sun., May 11 Big Cedar Tree | Forks | Lake Crescent | Sol Duc | Elwha River | Bainbridge Island

Just before we left Kalaloch Lodge to begin the final day of our journey, Bob and Sandy pointed out a male Rufous Hummingbird performing a dazzling display. His orange-red gorget flashed in the morning light as he perched against the backdrop of the Pacific Ocean. We lingered a little longer to appreciate the Cliff Swallows nesting under the lodge's eaves—their white foreheads shining like headlamps in the shadows. Squared-off tails and buffy rump patches helped distinguish them from the more familiar Barn Swallows as they darted overhead.

Our first stop was the Big Cedar Tree, a cathedral-like grove of Western Redcedar, some of them over 1,000 years old. These survivors of centuries of Pacific storms still stand tall, though many bear the marks of time—massive slabs fallen from their trunks, tops sheared off by wind. And yet they live on, ancient and resilient. Their roots stretch deep into the soil, connecting with neighboring trees through a vast mycorrhizal network—the hidden fungal web that knits the forest together, allowing trees to share nutrients and signals across space and species.

For many Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest, the western redcedar is known as the Tree of Life. It has provided shelter, medicine, clothing, transportation, and spiritual connection for millennia. Standing among these giants, one feels not just awe, but a rootedness—like being held by the forest itself.

We made a quick stop in Forks for gas and snacks—Twilight country for a few grinning fans among the group—and then continued eastward past the Bigfoot Institute, keeping our eyes on the woods for any strange silhouettes.

Next came Lake Crescent, its waters glassy and deep, cradled by steep ridges and veiled in morning light. Carved by glaciers and over 600 feet deep, the lake holds its own mysteries, including two endemic fish found nowhere else: Beardslee rainbow trout and Crescenti cutthroat trout. Every glance across its shifting blues seemed to reveal another layer of depth.

Then a surprise encounter: we crossed paths with my friend Ben, who shared a tip that American Dippers were nesting near Sol Duc Falls—and that Varied Thrushes had been calling nearby. The group quickly agreed to change our lunch plans and make the chase.

We made a brief stop at Salmon Cascades—no dippers this time—then continued to the Sol Duc Falls trailhead. The trail itself was a treasure: less than a mile, but every step passed under towering cedar and hemlock, filtered green light cascading down. We paused often, listening. Soon we heard it—a Varied Thrush. That shrill, unearthly, flute-like whistle carried clearly through the forest. Though we didn't get eyes on one, the sound alone was unforgettable.

At the falls, full and roaring from recent rain, we scanned the stream's edges. And then we found one: American Dipper. Bobbing on slippery rocks, blinking its white eyelids to communicate with other dippers without calling over the waterfall's roar. It dove under the current, emerging moments later downstream—perfectly at home in this tumult. They are North America's only aquatic songbird, and their presence was a thrill. For many in the group, this was one of their most-wanted birds of the tour—and one we had worked hard to find. The payoff was powerful.

We made one final natural history stop at the Elwha River—now flowing free after more than a century of being held back by dams. This is one of the great restoration stories of our time. With the dams gone, salmon are returning. And with the salmon come nutrients that feed bears, eagles, and forest renewal. "Salmon grow the trees," as the saying goes. It's more than a metaphor—marine-derived nitrogen from salmon carcasses literally fertilizes the soil.

We took a short walk to another waterfall. Though the birds were quiet here, the plant life was anything but. Hooker's Fairybell flowers, also known as drops-of-gold, were admired, and Howard identified Waterleaf blooming along the trail—a diminutive flower easily overlooked. He and Lynne had shared their love of botany throughout the tour, as well as their deep conservation ethic and legacy: helping save rivers from damming, and long-time advocates for recycling and environmental stewardship.

In fact, every member of the tour had contributed something meaningful. John brought his expertise in soil science, pointing out the excellent structure of the dark, rich soil in the Hoh Rainforest—an invisible foundation supporting a world of life. He and Betsy were also sharp-eyed observers, always noticing subtle details, and always ready with a recommendation for great natural history reading.

Sandy and Bob offered not just tremendous skill in finding birds, but phenomenal photography. Again and again, they captured moments of movement and light, feathers and form, that allowed the group to identify species and see each bird in a new way.

Peter and Mary brought a rare blend of scientific acumen and aesthetic appreciation, reminding us that knowledge deepens wonder, and wonder fuels knowledge.

Rick's many years of birding had not dimmed his enthusiasm one bit. Every lifer, and every good view of species he had seen before, was greeted with celebration—and his curiosity spilled over from birds to the broader forest world.

Jessie brought her love of charismatic megafauna and a deep background in animal husbandry and behavior. Her presence reminded us that behind every encounter—from bird to mammal—there is a story of adaptation, intelligence, and care.

Finally, we arrived at Bainbridge Island, checked into our hotel, and gathered at the marina for our farewell dinner. The sunset did not disappoint. As the water turned golden and the sky flared pink, we raised glasses, shared stories, and relived the week in laughter and appreciation.

We had traveled together through ancient forests, alpine ridges, tidal flats, and surf-swept beaches. We had followed birds across great migrations, and felt—if only for a moment—part of something larger, older, and beautifully alive.

Mon., May 12 Puget Sound | Departure from Seattle

After breakfast at the hotel, we boarded the Washington State Ferry from Bainbridge Island, heading eastward across Puget Sound. As we leaned on the railings for one last look, Pelagic Cormorants and Pigeon Guillemots fished near the pilings, Rhinoceros Auklets zipped low across the waves, and Glaucous-winged Gulls wheeled overhead, their calls familiar now. A Harbor Seal surfaced, its shiny head breaking the glassy calm of the water just as the Seattle skyline came into view, the Olympic Mountains receding behind us in morning light. Once again, the weather had smiled on us—clouds lifting, views sharpening, the city gleaming ahead.

Then came the moment that every journey eventually brings: the parting of ways. Some had flights to catch, and a few would linger in the Pacific Northwest a little longer. There were hugs and promises to stay in touch—as there always are—but this time, it felt like we all meant it.

We had shared a week of discovery and delight, of rainforests and ridgelines, Sea Otters and sandpipers, Rhinoceros Auklets and wrens. We had walked in silence beneath ancient trees and laughed together at dinner. We had learned from each other, and from the birds and wild places that drew us here, to this enchanted corner of the Earth.

As we scattered to our many homes, I couldn't help but feel that the luck we'd carried through this tour—our gift of good weather, good timing, and even better company—might just follow each of us forward. And I have no doubt that, somewhere down the trail or at the edge of some estuary blessed with an abundance of birds, our paths would cross again.

Photo Credits: Group (Steve Grace), Rufous Hummingbird Nest (Sandy Sipe), Dark-eyed Junco (Bob Sipe), Group Birding (Jessie Hallstrom), Rhinoceros Auklet (Bob Sipe), Group (Jessie Hallstrom), Black Oystercatcher (Sandy Sipe), Canada Jay (Steve Grace), Olympic Marmot (Sandy Sipe), Fungi Display (Peter Boice), Pigeon Guillemot (Bob Sipe), Mural (Peter Boice), Spotten Towhee (Sandy Sipe), Pacific Banana Slug (Bob Sipe), Cape Flattery (Sandy Sipe), Stellar's Jay, Tide Pooling (Bob Sipe), Group at Ruby Beach, Douglas Squirrel (Sandy Sipe), Spotted Ratfish (Steve Grace), Kalaloch Lodge (Sandy Sipe), Group on Dock (Jessie Hallstrom), Kayaks, Group on Bridge (Sandy Sipe), Group Smiles (Peter Boice), Pacific Waterleaf (Sandy Sipe), Group on Ferry (Jessie Hallstrom).