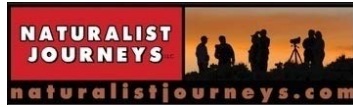


Vancouver Island: Coastal Birds, Bears & Whales | Sept. 3-11, 2025 | Trip Report | by Gavin McKinnon



Guide Gavin McKinnon and participants Marvin and Janine



Sep 3: Arrivals

Welcome to beautiful Victoria!

Sep 4: Birding Victoria

We started our morning at Cattle Point and Uplands Park, one of Victoria's premier urban birding hotspots. The first light of day spilled over the water as Black Oystercatchers probed the rocks, their sharp calls carrying across the bay. Nearby, Glaucous-winged and California Gulls loafed along the shoreline, and an American Pipit passed overhead as flyovers, how we typically saw this species on the tour. Wandering the trails of Uplands Park, we found a nice mix of familiar west coast songbirds. Dark-eyed Juncos of the Oregon subspecies flitted through the undergrowth, while Bewick's Wrens, Song Sparrows, and an Orange-crowned Warbler kept us busy. An Anna's Hummingbird, also showed very nicely for us as we were wrapping up near the parking lot. From there, we

continued west to Otter Point, where the rocky park offered stunning views of the strait. Rhinoceros Auklets and Pigeon Guillemots dotted the water, and we took time to study the subtle differences between local gulls and the hybrids that frequent the island. The highlight, however, was Heermann's Gull. After lunch, we made a stop at Witty's Lagoon Park. The midday lull made for quieter birding, but patience paid off with sightings of California Quail, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and a small group of Harlequin Ducks resting near shore. We wrapped up the day at Esquimalt Lagoon, where the shorebirds we'd hoped for eluded us. Still, a large blackbird flock kept things interesting, and we picked out several Brewer's Blackbirds among them before calling it a day

Sep 5: Travel from Victoria to Tofino

We began our journey toward Tofino with a stop at Island View Beach, just north of Victoria, an excellent coastal spot to kick off the day. The morning was calm and clear, with sweeping views across the bay toward James Island. In just over an hour, we tallied more than 40 species, a testament to the richness of this shoreline habitat. Out on the water, White-winged Scoters, Rhinoceros Auklets and Pacific Loons drifted offshore. Flocks of Short-billed Gulls moved along the beach, and a graceful group of Barn Swallows skimmed low over the water, feeding on clouds of insects. In the brushier edges of the park, we turned up several passerines, including a Lincoln's Sparrow, Song Sparrow a bright Common Yellowthroat, Northern Yellow Warbler and a Western Warbling Vireo, a nice mix of migrants and resident songbirds to round out an excellent stop before continuing our drive up the coast. The remainder of the day was spent on the road as we arrived at Tofino in the late afternoon and settled into our beachfront accommodation. Along the drive we saw some Bald Eagles and had a quick flyby of a Band-tailed Pigeon. In the evening, we went for a casual walk along the beach to reach the restaurant, however the fog rolled in and made birding difficult as we only saw one Glaucous-winged Gull along the shore.

Sep 6: Bear Watching and birding Tofino + Ukee

Day 4 was one of the most exciting days of the tour, as we set out on our first boat trip—an exploration of the sheltered inlets around Tofino and Meares Island. The main goal was to watch Black Bears feeding along the intertidal shoreline, and the experience did not disappoint. We saw three bears in total, including a mother with her cub turning over rocks in search of crabs and other delicacies. The inlets were alive with wildlife. Harbor Seals lounged on rocky outcrops, watching us curiously as we passed by, while these islets also held flocks of Surf-birds and Black Turnstones busily feeding among the kelp-covered stones. Out on the water, we were treated to views of Marbled Murrelets and a Gray Whale, known as “Elsa Sparkles Unicorn” (a name given by an 11-year-old on one of the earlier summer outings), surfaced several times in the calm inlet behind Meares Island, offering wonderful views. And then, as if the day needed any more excitement, things took an unforgettable turn. Not long after watching a raft of over 100 Sea Otters, two Vancouver Island Coastal Wolves appeared along the rocky shoreline, a very rare sighting, and the first our captain had ever seen in this location. They lingered just long enough for everyone to get a good look before slipping silently back into the forest. After returning to Tofino, we drove south to Ucluelet and stopped at the Hyphocus Island causeway. At low tide, this area forms an excellent stretch of mudflat, and it was alive with activity. We found Short-billed Dowitchers, Killdeer, and Greater Yellowlegs probing in the shallows. While enjoying a picnic lunch, a Merlin swooped in, attempting to snatch one of the Yellowlegs, but in an resourceful display of defense, the shorebirds gathered together and pointed their long bills skyward, deterring the attack. Our final stop of the afternoon was the Wild Pacific Trail, where the

forest offered a quieter but pleasant end to the day. We picked up Pacific Wren, Steller's Jay, Western Flycatcher, and a quick glimpse of a Hutton's Vireo before heading back to Tofino for the night.

Sep 7: Clayoquot Canyon Pelagic

Today we got lucky, the weather cooperated, and conditions were calm enough for us to head all the way out to the continental shelf. This was our full-day pelagic trip, and spirits were high as we suited up in Mustang survival suits and gathered at the dock by 7:00 a.m. Our captain for the day was John Forde, who has over forty years of experience navigating the waters off Tofino. It took about two hours to reach the edge of the shelf, and even before we reached offshore waters, the birding was already productive. We spotted Red-necked Grebes, Marbled Murrelets, Common Murres, and several Rhinoceros Auklets cruising the inshore waters. As we entered the nutrient-rich waters of Clayoquot Canyon, the action picked up dramatically. Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwaters streamed past the boat in elegant, fast-moving flocks, and before long we were thrilled to spot our first Buller's Shearwater, a sharp looking and uncommon visitor to British Columbia's waters in late summer and fall. Out here, the strategy is simple - find the fishing boats, and you'll find the birds. While we paused to watch a group of Humpback Whales, we noticed a faint glow of light in the distance, a fishing vessel on the horizon. We headed straight for it. The boat turned out to be a fishing boat named, Southern Dawn, and the scene around it was spectacular. The ocean teemed with life: over 300 Black-footed Albatrosses soared and settled around us, joined by Pink-footed, Sooty, Short-tailed and Buller's Shearwaters, Sabine's Gulls, feeding. Then came the moment of the day. Just as we were preparing to head back, a distinctive pale bird appeared among the darker Black-footed Albatrosses, a Laysan Albatross! This rare visitor in these waters was a true highlight and an unforgettable sighting for everyone aboard. The surprises didn't end there. On the return trip, we spotted a Parasitic Jaeger, and incredibly, both a Red Crossbill and a Surfbird landed on the boat, more than 50 kilometers from shore! But the most memorable encounter came just as we neared land. News came over the radio of a family of Orcas nearby, and as luck would have it, they were directly along our route. We shut off the engines and watched in awe as four Orcas approached, surfacing close enough for us to see their fins gliding beneath the surface. It was the closest encounter any of us had ever had, a heart-pounding finale to an extraordinary day at sea.

Sep 8: Travel to Campbell River

On our final morning on the Pacific Rim, we made a brief stop at the mudflats behind Hotel Zed. From the viewpoint we picked out distant flocks of Western Sandpipers, while a few Short-billed Gulls loafed nearby. An inquisitive Steller's Jay kept us company, calling loudly from the trees above. We didn't linger long, however, as our main destination for the morning was Amphitrite Point, a lighthouse perched on a rocky headland offering sweeping views of the ocean and its wildlife. From the lookout, we set up the scope and scanned the rocks below. The sea was alive with activity: numerous Rhinoceros Auklets, Common Murres, and Pelagic Cormorants dotted the water, while Surf Scoters passed by in small, steady groups. Closer to shore, we enjoyed fleeting views of an Orange-crowned Warbler moving through the brush, while several young White-crowned Sparrows proved far more cooperative. As we returned to the parking area, a bold Pacific Wren appeared along the path, singing from a tangle of roots. It was a peaceful and fitting end to our time on the island's wild west coast before beginning the journey back east to our destination of Campbell River. We stopped again at an outlook on the strait where we saw Common Loons and Double-crested Cormorants, as today was motley a driving day we didn't linger long and arrived in Campbell River shortly before dinner.

Sep 9: Grizzly bear Viewing in Bute Inlet

Today was another exciting and eventful day. We had a slightly later start, as our boat wasn't scheduled to depart until 8:30 a.m. Once at the dock, we boarded the vessel that would be our means of transportation for the day. The goal today was clear, to observe Grizzly Bears feeding on spawning salmon in one of the most remote and beautiful parts of the coast. It was a two-hour journey to reach the productive bear-viewing areas of Bute Inlet, though the ride itself was full of distractions. Along the way, we were treated to encounters with Orcas, as well as sightings of Bonaparte's Gulls and a Caspian Tern flying past the boat. Upon arriving, we stepped ashore, setting foot on the mainland for the first time this tour, and enjoyed a picnic lunch before meeting our Homalco First Nation bear guides. They welcomed us to their traditional territory, shared stories about the cultural significance of the area, and guided us safely to the sites where bears had most recently been seen. It didn't take long. Within fifteen minutes, we were watching a large male Grizzly tearing into a freshly caught salmon at close range. Everyone enjoyed incredible views as he fed contentedly before retreating into the forest to rest. Later, we spotted a female Grizzly with her cub in the distance, a heartwarming sight against the backdrop of the coastal rainforest. Birdlife added an extra dimension to the experience. Vaux's Swifts circled overhead among the Barn Swallows, while Common Mergansers fished in the clear waters of the Orford River. The journey back was equally exciting as we navigated through strong tidal currents, passing groups of Steller's and California Sea Lions, Harbor Seals, and remarkably more Orcas along the way. We arrived back at the dock around 6 p.m., tired but exhilarated, and headed straight for dinner at a waterfront restaurant.

Sep 10: Tyee Spit and travel back to Victoria

On our final full day of birding, we began at Tyee Spit, located at the point where the Strait of Georgia narrows into the Inside Passages. For birds, this natural bottleneck creates a dynamic migration corridor, and we were hopeful for some movement. Our streak of uncooperative shorebirds continued this morning, but we still enjoyed extended views of Bonaparte's Gulls, Northern Pintails, and an intriguing Canada Goose x Domestic Goose hybrid. We also added a couple of new species to the trip list today, including a Greater White-fronted Goose and several Iceland Gulls of the Thayer's subspecies, a fun challenge to pick out amongst the other gulls. After a few more brief stops along the coast, we paused for lunch before beginning the three-hour drive back to Victoria. That evening, we gathered for our final dinner and checklist session, reminiscing about the incredible range of habitats, birds, and wildlife we had experienced over the past week. It was a fitting close to a wonderful tour on the wild and diverse coasts of British Columbia.

Sep 11: Departure

Today we said goodbye to Vancouver Island from Victoria, thank you to Marvin and Janine for a terrific tour