Western Canada: From the Prairies to the Pacific
June 16 – 26, 2025 | Trip Report | by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Stephen Grace and Gavin McKinnon with Rich, Christine, Guy, Christy, Don, Ann, and Suratha.

Mon., June 16 Arrivals in Calgary

We began in Calgary, where prairie skies swallow the horizon. Seven travelers from across the United States, each bringing distinct stories and shared curiosity, gathered with their guides: Gavin, a prairie son of Canada, and me, from the Pacific Northwest.

This was the inaugural Naturalist Journeys tour, *Prairies to Pacific*, and expectations ran high. We were about to traverse a vast swath of the continent—grasslands, mountains, boreal forest, temperate rainforest, and coast—all woven together into a single unfolding narrative of place and species.

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Our first taste of Canadian birding came at a nearby prairie wetland, where American Avocets paraded along the pond's edge. Their upturned bills sliced the shallows in elegant, rhythmic sweeps. Nearby, tiny avocet chicks wobbled through the sedges, still downy and new to the world. Overhead, a Swainson's Hawk soared, regal in silhouette—until it was besieged by Brewer's Blackbirds, black darts of aggression defending unseen nests. Even raptors, we were reminded, have their limits in nature's arena of constant vigilance.

At the far side of the pond, distant Wilson's Phalaropes shimmered through the heat haze—those wonderfully paradoxical shorebirds in which females wear the brighter plumage and pursue multiple male mates. We made a group goal to see them closer before journey's end.

That evening, at a fun restaurant called Moxie's, we gathered around a table filled with laughter and first impressions. We savored truffle fries, chipotle mango chicken, and power bowls with roasted veggies. With glasses raised, we toasted the prairie and the promise of the path ahead.

Tues., June 17 Prairie Birding | Kinbrook Island Provincial Park

The morning was rich with birdsong and the promise of immersion. We began at a wetland, where American White Pelicans soared overhead like B-52 bombers—massive and purposeful. Below them, Red-necked Grebes bobbed on the water, and Common Terns, aerial acrobats, hovered and dove with precision.

Then we journeyed deep into one of Alberta's last strongholds of native shortgrass prairie. Grasses often go unnoticed, but they are ancient survivors—adapted to drought, fire, wind, and the trampling hooves of migrating herds. This sea of bunchgrass, needle-and-thread, and blue grama may lack the drama of mountain crags or rainforests, but it rewards an open eye and open mind. Here, under the vast Alberta sky, the subtle becomes profound.

When we left the highway and turned onto a rural road, a Western Kingbird perched on a signpost like a prairie gatekeeper, while a Vesper Sparrow serenaded from nearby. A short drive brought a spectacle: Thick-billed Longspurs parachuting from the sky, wings outstretched, descending like drones, their controlled falls

punctuated by sweet, bubbling songs. These birds are specialists, Gavin told us, found only in intact shortgrass prairie. Their presence was a measure of the land's integrity.

Horned Larks chased each other through the grasses, landing close enough for us to admire their namesake tufts—raised in excitement like little horns. Then came the Chestnut-collared Longspurs, males in breeding plumage with bold black bellies and that warm chestnut collar glowing in the sun.

At a nearby pond, we found what we'd hoped for: Wilson's Phalaropes up close. Females, bright in their rusty masks and clean white throats, spun in tight circles to stir up prey. Nearby, an Eared Grebe shimmered on the water, golden plumes flared from its head, its ruby-red eyes catching the strong prairie light.

On the horizon: Pronghorn. Adults stood alert, while three gangly fawns trotted behind. We talked about the astonishing speed of this species—an evolutionary ghost of the American Cheetah, now extinct, that once pursued them. Their white rumps flashed like beacons, a visual alarm across the plains.

At a known Burrowing Owl site, the burrow looked vacant. Then a low sweep of motion: a Northern Harrier glided past, its owl-like facial disc downturned catch the rustle of prey below. Moments later, a Burrowing Owl appeared, perched atop a rock, feeding on a grasshopper. Then a second owl rose into view. Though distant, we brought them near through a spotting scope. We paused in silence—just wind, sunlight, and two small owls on a sea of grass. Gavin smiled. "This is my happy place," he said. We understood.

Onward we traveled. A Ferruginous Hawk soared into view—pale-bodied, rufous-legged, its size unmistakable. The common name comes from *ferrugo*, Latin for "rust," derived from *ferris*, meaning iron—a nod to the reddish tones that show most vividly under the wings in flight. Its scientific name, *Buteo regalis*, translates to "royal buzzard"—though not in the vulture sense. In European usage, "buzzard" refers to broad-winged hawks of the genus *Buteo*, known for their graceful soaring and command of open skies. *Regalis* evokes nobility, and this bird wears its crown well. North America's largest hawk, and surely one of its most majestic. Gavin teased us with tales of a nest we might visit.

Lunch was an oasis—literally. A leafy grove shimmered with birdlife. A Tree Swallow poked its head from a cavity in a trunk, Cedar Waxwings brightened the branches, and a Yellow Warbler sang sweetly from a thicket. Tillebrook Lake held more gifts. Yellow-headed Blackbirds glowed like sunbursts among the reeds. A Marsh Wren sang boldly in the open. Black Terns flicked their silver wings as they passed. A Caspian Tern—the world's largest—glided overhead. And then, a true highlight: three fuzzy Long-eared Owl chicks near the trail, wide-eyed and watchful, with an attentive adult nearby.

Before returning to Calgary, we stopped at a final marsh. A baby American Coot swam among reeds, its bare red head and bright orange feathers a sharp contrast to the soot-black adults. Ruddy Ducks dazzled with baby-blue bills. Teal of every kind—Cinnamon, Green-winged, Blue-winged—fed along the edges. A Black-necked Stilt moved with elegant steps along a distant shore.

We returned to Calgary just ahead of a storm. Lightning split the blackened sky, and rain fell in torrents. But the prairie had granted us a full day, dry and golden. That night, we gathered again for a celebratory dinner—grateful for the birds, the land, and the company that had brought the prairie alive.

Wed., June 18 Calgary's Birding Hotspots

Morning came cool and clear. We headed south of the city to Frank Lake, where two elusive prairie specialists revealed themselves only by voice. High above, a Sprague's Pipit gave its cascading, ethereal song in flight, barely visible against the blue. Closer to the ground, a Baird's Sparrow sang its sweet, descending notes from deep within the grasses, just out of view. Though we didn't lay eyes on either bird, their voices carried the spirit of the prairie. More obliging were the Western Meadowlarks, perched on fenceposts like yellow-breasted sentinels, filling the air with their iconic, flute-like song.

In the shimmering distance, we watched a Short-eared Owl lift a vole in its talons and flutter to a post in bright sunlight. Its broad wings and moth-like flight gave the scene an otherworldly feel—like watching a mirage made real.

Above us, Franklin's Gulls—black-headed, with bold white arcs around their eyes—filled the sky. "Penguins of the prairie," someone joked, and the nickname stuck.

Down by the water's edge, Cinnamon Teal glowed, and scores of Yellow-headed Blackbirds dazzled with their bold plumage. A Sora called from the reeds; though we caught a fleeting glimpse, it remained hidden for the rest of our visit, as rails so often do. Marbled Godwits added long-legged, long-billed elegance. From the shelter of a blind, we studied Western Grebes with their long, swanlike necks, along with an intriguing Western × Clark's Grebe hybrid—its features blending the two species in subtle ways. Buffleheads dotted the distance, while Ruddy Ducks and Eared Grebes, in full breeding splendor, continued to impress.

A Black-crowned Night Heron took flight, and a pair of Black-necked Stilts worked the shallows nearby. The light was perfect, and several in our group gathered for a fantastic photo session—Blue-winged Teal, Willets, American Avocets, and Wilson's Phalaropes reflected in the glassy water.

We walked out to a viewpoint overlooking a nesting colony of California Gulls, where gray chicks huddled among the white-winged adults. Gavin spotted a Lesser Yellowlegs—exceptionally early for the region, and likely a record.

The day's finale brought a raptor crescendo. Prairie Falcons exploded from a rocky bluff, their signature "dirty armpits" flashing beneath pale wings—the mark that sets them apart from their Peregrine cousins. On the perch, their black malar stripes stood out, like the glare-reducing eye marks worn by athletes.

Just down the road, we found a Ferruginous Hawk nest. Two fluffy chicks shifted in the bulky stick structure, one adult perched nearby while the other sat for several minutes in the nest before launching into the air—soaring over the grasslands in search of prey. Red-tailed and Swainson's Hawks circled in the same thermal, giving us a vivid, side-by-side comparison. Three *Buteo* species, each with its own form and flight style, offering a masterclass in contrast.

We picnicked beneath cottonwoods, shaded from the sun and content. That evening, we gathered to fill out our bird checklist, recounting the day's highlights. Then over fish tacos and burgers, we shared stories and laughter. Tomorrow, we would leave the prairie behind and ascend into the mountains.

Thurs., June 19 Boreal Forest | Banff National Park

We left Calgary and the grasslands behind, driving north beneath the rising sun toward a finger of boreal forest that extends unusually far south—an ecological anomaly, a sliver of the subarctic world stitched into the Alberta plains. The boreal forest is the largest forest biome on Earth, circling the northern hemisphere like a green halo. Here, just beyond Calgary's city limits, it shelters a suite of species rarely seen without venturing far to the north.

Gavin knew just where to go. And there, as if summoned by Gavin, stood a Great Gray Owl—ghostlike at the forest edge. The predator's head swiveled with uncanny precision, yellow eyes bright and still. Our breath caught. The world hushed. At over two feet tall, this is one of the largest owls on Earth by length, yet it flies on whispering wings among spruce and fir. We could see the concentric rings of its facial disc—an acoustic parabola tuned to the tremble of voles beneath the snow. But here, in summer's green bloom, he reigned over flowers and moss.

Nearby, a Wilson's Snipe perched atop a spruce, long bill silhouetted against the sky. A surprise came in song: the low, hoarse call of a Black-billed Cuckoo—rare this far west. Gavin heard it first, then we all spotted the sleek, brown form amid the leaves. Only the fifth record for the Calgary area.

Then came a moment of quiet awe: a pair of Common Loons floating on a still lake, backs checkered in black and white. One chick, no more than a handful of fluff, rode on its parent's back. "That's the first time I've ever seen a loon in breeding plumage," Ann said, eyes wide. She had only seen them on the coast in winter, when they wore drab attire.

A Tennessee Warbler added brightness from the canopy, its sharp, bouncing notes a signature of the boreal summer. A tiny neotropical migrant, it travels thousands of miles to breed here.

We lunched at Chopped Leaf, a Canadian chain that quickly became a group favorite. Vegetarian quesadillas, savory sandwiches, seasonal berry bowls, and smiles all around.

Then westward. The front range of the Rockies rose before us, a fortress of tilted stone. Sedimentary layers—ancient seafloor raised skyward—formed ramparts and ridges. The Canadian Rockies differ from their American cousins: older rock, more deformed, more sharply thrust.

We paused in the little town of Exshaw, where a dazzling male Rufous Hummingbird sat glittering on a wire. Violet-green Swallows circled above, their backs flashing iridescence like peacock feathers. Mountain Chickadees flitted through the pines—bold white eyebrows distinguishing them from the Black-capped and Carolina species many in our group knew well. Pine Siskins foraged in the gravel at our feet.

Seizing the good weather, we made an afternoon push into Banff National Park. At Vermilion Lakes, Mount Rundle reared above the placid water. At Bow Falls, glacial meltwater flowed turquoise with "rock flour"—sediment ground to silt by ancient ice and suspended in motion. Erosion, turned to beauty.

Dinner brought joy at Banff's best pizza spot. We discussed our bird of the day (the Great Gray Owl, a unanimous favorite) and debated the best pizza: The Canadian, with maple syrup, and the Godfather, with roasted garlic and arugula, were top contenders. Our waitress shared a tip—honey mixed with chili oil makes the perfect crust dip. She was right.

After dinner, we took a scenic evening drive through the park. The mountains turned lavender in the fading light. We spotted a full-curl Bighorn Sheep ram beside the road, his heavy horns worn by years of survival. A cow Elk browsed nearby, mouth full of greenery, as a Brown-headed Cowbird hopped around her hooves, snatching up the insects she stirred.

Light lingered past 10 p.m. as we returned to the quiet comfort of Buffalo Mountain Lodge, grateful for the beauty and the sense that something vast and wild had opened to welcome us.

Fri., June 20 Banff National Park | Cave and Basin Marsh | Fenland Trail

A forecasted storm held off. We awoke to stillness and birdsong.

At a quiet wetland, we watched a Warbling Vireo sing from its nest woven into a fork of branches overhead. A Wilson's Snipe called from the treetops, and a Belted Kingfisher rattled by, low and fast, a flash of blue and white.

Our forest walk brought one of the trip's most coveted species: the elusive American Three-toed Woodpecker. First glimpsed in shadow, then suddenly near—a male flaking bark from a spruce. Unlike most woodpeckers, this species has only three toes, an adaptation that may allow for a stronger grip as it probes bark in search of beetle larvae. The soft shimmer of his yellow crown glowed above the black-and-white barring on his back.
Nearby, a Pacific Wren perched atop a root wad and sang—the tiny bird's voice a bold cascade of liquid notes. This is one of the most powerful songs, ounce for ounce, of any bird.

Lunch featured elk flatbreads and tacos. In the afternoon, as rainclouds gathered, we explored Banff: museums of Indigenous and natural history, art galleries, shops.

That evening, a grand meal at the lodge. "Best chicken I've ever had," someone said. Another called his Old Fashioned "perfect." We toasted not only the feast, but our fortune at dodging rain—though the storm finally arrived that night. Rain drummed on the roof, and we fell asleep to nature's lullaby.

Sat., June 21 Lake Louise | Okanagan Valley | Owl Prowl

Morning revealed a cloud ceiling just high enough to glimpse the peaks—fresh snow glinting on the upper slopes. We packed up and said farewell to Banff, but not before one more stop: Lake Louise.

Rain fell as we arrived, but nothing could dim the lake's glacial blues. Named for Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria, this storied place is shaped by ancient forces—ice, gravity, and time. We stood in our rain jackets beneath the towering amphitheater of stone and snow, awed by the silence, the scale, the color born of pulverized rock suspended in meltwater.

From there, we crossed the Continental Divide, slipping from Alberta into British Columbia. On the west slope of the Rockies, from our rain-streaked vehicle windows we glimpsed wildness: first, a solitary bear on a

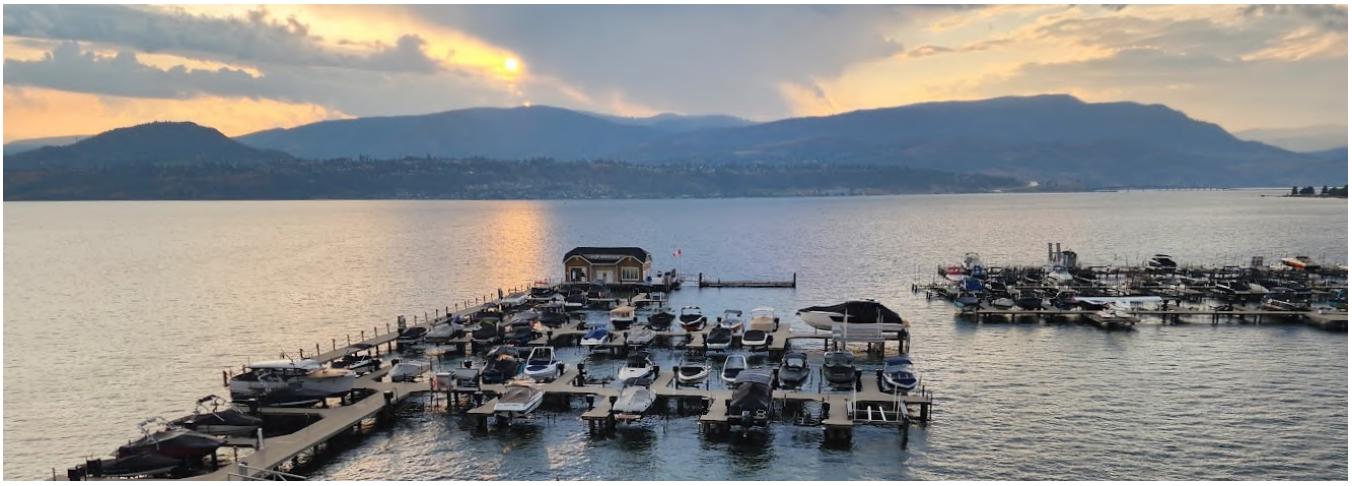
mountainside. Later, a mother and cub near the road. A powerful reminder that these forests still belong, in part, to creatures that move on paws, not wheels.

Subalpine forest gave way to dripping stands of Douglas-fir and Western Hemlock, thick with moss and rain. This is the world's only inland temperate rainforest—where coastal moisture is funneled deep into the continent and held among fog-draped ranges. We crossed the Selkirk Mountains—older and more eroded than the Rockies, yet equally dramatic in their relief. In Canada's Glacier National Park, avalanche chutes scored the cliffs, raw reminders of the forces still shaping this land. As the rain eased, we descended into the much drier Okanagan Valley. Douglas-fir spread across the hills in open, savannah-like groves, giving way to Ponderosa Pine forests. We stepped from the van to sniff the bark—sweet aromas of vanilla and butterscotch rising from deep fissures of ancient pines.

At a lake's edge, we paused to watch wetland birds. American Coots with half-grown young practiced feeding on strands of green algae, mimicking the motions of their attentive parents. Then, a California Quail covey appeared—first, a vigilant male perched like a sentry on a fencepost, scanning the open. Suddenly, a burst of motion: the rest of the covey flushed in alarm as a Red-tailed Hawk passed overhead. Moments later, the family reassembled—one of the day's most endearing sights. A fluffed-up mother stood watch as a fuzzy parade of chicks bustled through the grasses, their tiny forms barely visible above the stems.

That evening, we dined well—Fijian curry, vegetarian bowls, sirloin steaks—and then turned our attention back to the wild. We searched for Calliope Hummingbirds, Canada's smallest bird. A few fleeting glimpses rewarded our effort, but the star of the evening was an American Kestrel, hovering motionless above the grasses, then dropping like a stone to catch its prey.

As night settled, we went owling. Common Poorwills flew ghostlike across the path, their fluttering wings barely visible in the dusk. From deeper in the woods came the flutelike, descending song of a Veery—melancholy and wild. And then, the moment we'd hoped for: a Flammulated Owl, one of the hardest birds to see in North America. We caught a brief silhouette as this tiny raptor perched on a bare limb—compact, silent, and gone in an instant. A little whisper with wings.



Exhausted but exhilarated, we returned to our hotel. We drifted to sleep with memories of mountains, birds, and bears folded into our dreams.

Sun., June 22 Okanagan Valley

We slept in a bit—well-earned rest after a long, full day and a late-night owling adventure. Over a relaxed breakfast of strawberry pancakes and eggs Benedict, served by perhaps the friendliest waitress in Canada, we recharged for another day of birding in British Columbia's sunlit interior.

Driving a rural road above Okanagan Lake, raptors kept us company. An immature Bald Eagle passed low overhead, and then we spotted adults, their white heads and tails bright against the blue sky. A Cooper's Hawk shot across a clearing. Red-tailed Hawks circled on thermals, and Turkey Vultures wobbled along with outstretched wings, riding the warm air.

In the trees, Bullock's Orioles flamed from the canopy—females a subtle lemon hue, males vivid orange, weaving through the green. American Goldfinches glowed, their neon yellow plumage catching the light. Lazuli Buntings flashed brilliant blues, like scraps of sky in motion. We stopped to check a Western Bluebird nest box—empty—but soon a flash of color caught our eyes. Mountain Bluebirds glided across the open field and landed in view, their sky-blue tones stunning in the sun.

Then a moment of wild drama: three Coyotes coursed through the grasses, appearing to chase a Mule Deer. They vanished as suddenly as they came, melting into the golden hills like shadows on the move.

Spotted Towhees brought smiles next. One hopped and scratched beneath the shrubs, rustling leaves. Another, in rare form, perched high in a tree, ruby eyes glowing as it posed in the open. Northern Flickers called sharp "keer!" notes as they flashed by.

After a park picnic, we watched Pygmy Nuthatches bounce through the Ponderosa Pines—tiny, tireless bundles of energy. A male Black-headed Grosbeak stunned us with his flame-orange chest and bold black-and-white wings. Along the riverbank, a Spotted Sandpiper bobbed its way through the stones while Violet-green Swallows traced glittering loops above the water.

That evening, we dined at a lively sports bar—burgers, pasta, and a generous helping of laughter. As stories passed around the table, it was clear the group had gelled. Though we hailed from different regions and generations, we had become a community—woven together by shared wonder, exhilarating bird sightings, and inside jokes. We teased Gavin for his frequent Canadian "ehs," which he accepted with his usual good-natured grin. A spirited debate erupted over which nation—Canada or the United States—had invented the donut hole, or *Timbits*, as Gavin insisted on calling these Canadian delicacies.

We returned to our elegant hotel—a quiet place to pause, take in the views of Okanagan Lake, and reflect on how far we'd come.

Mon., June 23 South Okanagan | Wine Tasting | Manning Provincial Park

We left our lakeside lodging and headed west again, pausing in a fire-scarred Ponderosa Pine forest to search for a tough target: Lewis's Woodpecker. Gavin had warned us—success wasn't guaranteed. But within minutes, someone called out, "There!" A dark shape flapped into view—flying more like a crow than a woodpecker, with slow, floppy wingbeats instead of the usual bounding undulations typical of its family.

The bird perched in plain view and shimmered in the morning light: iridescent green back, rosy chest, red face, gray nape. Named for Meriwether Lewis, this striking bird behaves like few others in its family—sallying after insects in flight, calling in soft chatters, often nesting communally in snags. A woodpecker unlike any other.

We caught more views—through scopes, binoculars, and cameras. A triumph.

Farther down the road, we stopped at a cliff face, scanning hopefully for Mountain Goats, but found none. Instead, White-throated Swifts sliced the sky above us, darting like fighter jets. At another stop, we strained to hear a Canyon Wren—its descending song just audible among distant stones.

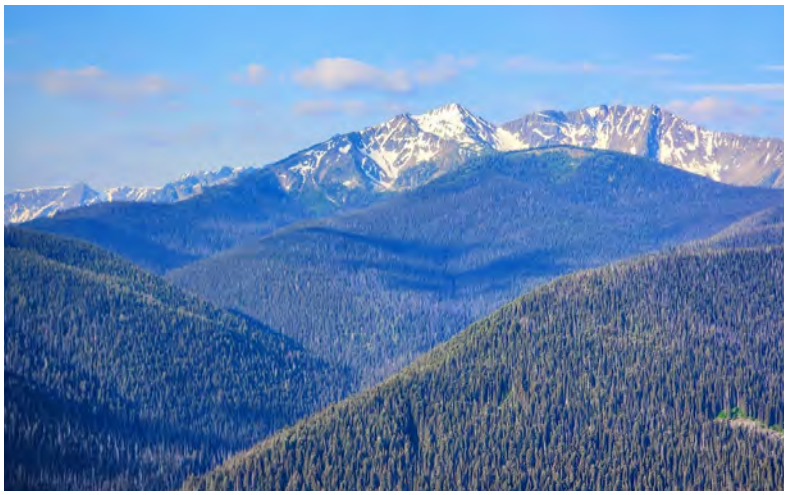
Next came a surprising view: a Dusky Flycatcher feeding nestlings in a tidy cup nest tucked within a low bush. We watched the rhythm of life unfold—chicks craning, beaks wide, adults returning with food.
Then, something unexpected: a Spotted Towhee tumbling from a perch, fluttering down like a falling leaf. Startled? Injured? Or simply indulging in its own unpredictable flight style. Whatever the reason, it was unforgettable.

Lunch came at a rural diner known as much for its fresh-baked muffins as its cheeky shirts reading “Mother Cluckers.” Sandwiches were scrumptious, and laughter plentiful.

Nearby, Burrowing Owl Winery welcomed us. Gavin and I abstained, but our guests enjoyed a memorable tasting. Interpretive displays explained how proceeds support conservation of the namesake species, including efforts to install artificial burrows for this declining prairie owl. A fitting cause—and, by all accounts, several fine wines were sampled.

We resumed birding and soon found Western Bluebirds at nest boxes—brilliant males glowing like sapphires against the summer sky. A bit later, we stopped at a roadside produce stand to sample fresh Bing cherries—dark, sweet, and at their peak in the Okanagan Valley. As we enjoyed the fruit, we chatted with the friendly farming family who owned the stand, learning about their roots, which traced back to India, and hearing stories of the region’s agricultural history—how orchards, vineyards, and farms have long shaped the landscape of this fertile valley.

Before leaving the region, we visited one last marvel: Spotted Lake, sacred to First Nations peoples. Its surreal, polka-dotted surface—formed by mineral deposits in evaporating water—tells a geological story as old as the hills, painted in salt and silence. We stood in quiet awe, humbled by beauty shaped by time.
That evening, we arrived at Manning Provincial Park, our most remote stop yet. The lodge was rustic but comfortable, nestled within a forest that felt rich and wild.



The dinner menu featured a beloved Canadian specialty: poutine—offered in both traditional and vegetarian versions—for those willing to indulge. We ended the evening with stories, smiles, and our rapidly growing bird list, spirits high. Tomorrow, we would ascend to new alpine heights in search of new species.

Tues., June 24 Manning Provincial Park | Vancouver

We rose early and climbed a winding mountain road toward a scenic overlook near the U.S.–Canada border. Wildflowers lit the slopes like a painter's palette: red paintbrush and skyrocket, purple lupine and penstemon, golden composites, clusters of white yarrow. The meadows shimmered in the crisp morning light.

Birdsong rose from the surrounding forest. An Olive-sided Flycatcher called from a high snag—"Quick, three beers!"—and stayed long enough for a good view. Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes fluted their ethereal songs from open perches. A Townsend's Warbler glowed yellow atop a fir, shining like a star on nature's own Christmas tree. A male Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler threw back his head and sang from a prominent perch, bathed in golden light.

At the summit, we were greeted by Canada Jays and Clark's Nutcrackers. The Canada Jay—unofficially recognized as the national bird of Canada—seems to embody the spirit of Canadians: rugged and resourceful, intelligent and friendly. It survives harsh alpine winters by caching food and then navigates the snow-buried forest with remarkable memory to locate these hidden stashes. Often, it approaches people with curious, fearless ease.

One Clark's Nutcracker landed just feet away on an interpretive sign, offering an unexpected look at its banded leg. These striking birds are more than just mountain residents—they are the primary seed dispersers of Whitebark Pine, a keystone species of the subalpine. Each year, they cache thousands of seeds, many of which germinate into future forests. It's a story of coevolution—bird and tree bound together by survival.

Below, ground squirrels and chipmunks added a touch of mischief to the morning, darting among our feet. Descending from the ridge, we finally found a bird that had eluded us on the way up: Sooty Grouse. First, one male emerged, his orange eye combs flaring against his dark plumage. Then another appeared farther downslope. These high-elevation forest dwellers are beautifully adapted to their rugged terrain, feeding

primarily on conifer needles. In winter, when deep snow blankets the mountains, they migrate downhill mostly on foot—then climb back up again in spring, step by step, as the snow recedes. A life lived on the vertical, powered by walking.

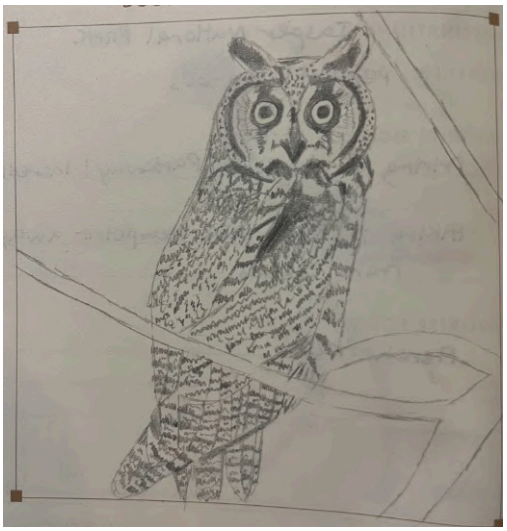
Breakfast at the lodge was hearty—breakfast burritos, oatmeal, fruit, pancakes—and the birding continued outside the dining room. Evening Grosbeaks brightened the trees with flashes of yellow and that signature lime-green bill. A Red-naped Sapsucker showed well among the aspens.

Then to Strawberry Flats, where the forest floor lived up to its name. Wild strawberry plants spread among mosses, ferns, and Witch's Hair Lichen that draped from tree limbs like forest tinsel. A Pacific Wren poured its entire soul into song from atop a low snag. Another American Three-toed Woodpecker made an appearance, flaking bark with quiet focus.

We also spotted Red-breasted Nuthatches working their way down trunks, and another Evening Grosbeak, this time at eye level. Varied Thrushes called with eerie, metallic whistles—haunting voices of the montane forest—but remained out of sight.

We left Manning Provincial Park and descended westward, winding through the Canadian Cascades toward the coast. Trees grew taller. The air grew wetter, heavy with the breath of the Pacific. The Fraser River Delta lay ahead.

We lunched in the Vancouver metro area at Tim Hortons—home of Timbits, now a crowd favorite—along with flatbreads, wraps, and other quick bites. Then we continued to a small stream cloaked in epiphyte-laden Bigleaf Maples and towering conifers. We scanned for American Dippers, but instead we found something extraordinary: Barred Owls—five in total. Two adults and three fuzzy fledglings flanked the streambank, their screeches echoing through the understory. We watched as one adult dove to the river's edge, caught prey, and returned to feed a young owl. Then again. Wild parenthood, unfolding before our eyes.



Nearby, a female Common Merganser floated downstream with a train of ducklings in tow. A Western Flycatcher flitted through low branches, while a Chestnut-backed Chickadee—a Pacific Northwest specialty—foraged in the open long enough for everyone to have a look.

That night, we arrived in Delta, south of Vancouver, our final home base by the sea. After the high ridges and rain-soaked forest, the salt-tinged air felt like the closing exhale of a continent-crossing journey.

Wed., June 25 Vancouver

Our final day began early, chasing the best tides for birding. At the edge of the sea, Bald Eagles soared and perched—dozens of them. Black-bellied Plovers fed along the mudflats, mostly in drab non-breeding garb, but a few still shimmered in bold black-and-white.

The sky cleared slightly as we visited a jetty near the ferry terminal. Black Oystercatchers called with sharp whistles. Their red bills and flesh-pink legs stood out against rock and sea. Glaucous-winged Gulls wheeled above. A few darker-mantled birds with blackish wingtips suggested the Olympic hybrid: Glaucous-winged Gull crossed with Western Gull.

At Reifel Bird Sanctuary—an island oasis in the Fraser River delta—birding reached its joyful crescendo. Bewick's Wrens sang. We found one perched, tail flicking, white eyebrows glowing. At hummingbird feeders, Anna's Hummingbirds sparkled—some perched, some darting—while their gorgets and heads flashed fuchsia.
The sanctuary's feeding-friendly policy meant some birds were nearly tame: a Wood Duck waddled right up to us, and a Sandhill Crane approached so closely we had to back up just to focus our cameras. From a viewing tower, we scanned the delta, then wandered the trails. Purple Martins came and went from nest boxes, and a Bullock's Oriole nest dangled from a tree limb—chicks inside, the adult returning with food.

As we rounded a bend in the path, two American Minks—sleek and black—slinked across, moving like a single serpent through the grass.

We lunched again at Chopped Leaf, now a group favorite, then stopped at the Fraser River mouth. Harbor Seals bobbed in the current. Common Yellowthroats called again—and at last, we saw one! A male posed long enough for all to enjoy—victory in the tour's final hour.

That night, at our celebratory dinner, we raised our glasses. Not just to birds—but to the friendly bonds we'd formed, to the vast landscapes we'd crossed, to the silent gaze of owls and the riotous calls of waterfowl. We had traced an ecological arc across western Canada—from the wide-open prairies east of Calgary to the tide-swept Pacific shores.

Together, we'd witnessed the resilience of wild things and the profound joy of discovery. And in each other, we found not just fellow travelers, but companions in wonder.

Thurs., June 26 Departures

Our final morning dawned quietly in Delta. There were some last shared coffees, final hugs, and fond farewells. Some in the group continued their journey, exploring more of Canada or nearby Washington State, while others made their way to the airport, bound for home.

Over eleven days, we had crossed a continent in miniature—from prairie grasslands to coastal estuaries—and along the way, forged connections with birds, landscapes, and one another.

Though the group dispersed, the spirit of the journey lingered—carried in memories, photos, and quiet moments of gratitude for the wild beauty we had witnessed together.

Photos: Group Photo at Vermilion Lakes (Stephen Grace - SG), Great Gray Owl (SG), American Avocet (SG), Sandhill Crane (SG), Long-eared Owl (SG), Tree Swallow (SG), Ground Squirrel (Suratha Elango - SE), Blue-winged Teal (SG), Wilson's Phalarope (SG), Ferruginous Hawk (SG), Birding at Frank Lake (SG), American Avocet (SG), Bow River, Banff National Park (SG), Banff National Park (SG), American Three-toed Woodpecker (SG), The Group! (SE), American Coot adult and chick (SG), California Quail (SG), Lake Louise (SG), Okanagan Lake (SG), Burrowing Owl Winery (SG), Canadian Flag (SE), Spotted Lake (SG), Columbian Ground Squirrel (SG), Manning Provincial Park (SG), Barred Owl (SE), Bald Eagle (SG), Yellow-bellied Marmot (SG), Sandhill Crane (SG) Long-eared Owl Sketch (SE)