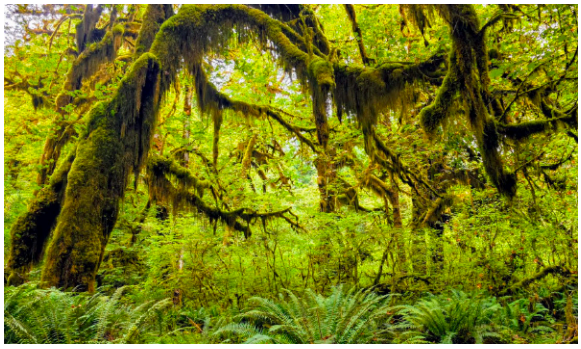
Olympic Peninsula Fall Explorer | Sept. 4 – 11, 2025
Trip Report | by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Stephen Grace and Rick Weiman with Ann, Gary, Peggy, Todd, Jean, Estelle, John, Carol and Dennis



Thur., Sept. 4 Arrivals in Seattle | Nisqually | Port Townsend | Sequim

Our group of thirteen gathered near Sea-Tac Airport, full of anticipation for the days ahead. Once our two vans were loaded, we left behind the bustle of Seattle and Tacoma and set our course for the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge. This rich estuarine delta, where river and tide meet, honors the memory of Billy Frank Jr.—the Nisqually tribal leader whose tireless activism secured Native American treaty rights and reshaped conservation in the Pacific Northwest.

At the refuge entrance, a pair of Wood Ducks floated quietly near the visitor center—a female beside a male in eclipse plumage, his brilliant breeding colors muted by the drabber tones of late summer molt. A River Otter slipped through the shallows. Overhead, a Belted Kingfisher rattled, its sharp call punctuating the morning.

Entering the woods, we puzzled over silent flycatchers at the tops of tall trees. With patience and careful observation, we identified Western Wood-Pewee and Western Flycatcher—the Pacific-slope subspecies, which until recently was treated as a separate species from Cordilleran but is now lumped again.

From the boardwalk we looked out across the vast salt marsh, the site of an ambitious restoration project that removed miles of dikes to reconnect the estuary with tidal flow, breathing life back into the marsh. Greater Yellowlegs foraged in the shallows, while our first gull identification puzzle of the trip—a mottled immature California Gull—sparked lively discussion. Bald Eagles kept watch from tall snags, one giving its surprisingly thin, almost comical call—so different from the fierce scream Hollywood borrows from the Red-tailed Hawk. Nearby, a raucous gathering of crows prompted a trade in collective nouns: a "murder," of course, with someone adding the pun of "two crows—an attempted murder."

The refuge also offered memorable encounters with smaller wonders. A Pacific Tree Frog clung to a wooden railing, dazzling us in bright green. Known as Pacific Chorus Frogs, they are the musicians whose voices can fill a wetland night—one male beginning, others joining in waves. Even more remarkable, their tadpoles can shift body form depending on the predators that share their pool, growing faster and stronger if dragonfly larvae are present. Dragonflies themselves were abundant: meadowhawks zipped past like miniature jets.

We left Nisqually for lunch in nearby Lacey, savoring fragrant Thai dishes prepared by a family from Bangkok—an annual favorite stop. Then it was north along Hood Canal, a fjord carved by Ice Age glaciers. Orca fins did not slice the calm waters today, but Double-crested Cormorants and Bald Eagles kept us scanning. At Dosewallips State Park, we watched Harbor Seals splash and roll offshore, with one curious seal surfacing in a narrow channel to regard us with wide, liquid eyes.

By afternoon we reached Port Townsend, where my wife Amy and our beagle Jack greeted us at my home. Amy's backyard bird sanctuary—created through years of careful planting and daily tending of feeders and bird baths—was alive with activity. Raucous Steller's Jays, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Cedar Waxwings flocked from distant treetops to the yard's edge, while a lively flock of Pine Siskins chattered as they fed in the tray feeders and splashed in the bird baths. Anna's Hummingbirds perched at the tops of small conifers, darted through the twinberry honeysuckle, and hovered at the nectar feeders. Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers worked the trunks and branches, tapping steadily in search of insects. In a nearby tree, a Pileated Woodpecker flared its wings in a dramatic standoff with a Douglas Squirrel—the Pacific Northwest's pint-sized native—that refused to give ground. Two Brown Creepers spiraled upward along the bark, a species Amy and I rarely observe in our backyard.

For many in our group, the visit also brought a lifer: the Chestnut-backed Chickadee, a Pacific Coast specialty with only small disjunct populations in Idaho and British Columbia's interior. All of this was possible because Amy has nurtured a safe haven for birds, while Jack patrols the yard with enthusiasm, chasing off neighbors' free-roaming cats that otherwise prey heavily on songbirds. In his own way, Jack restores balance to our backyard ecosystem, saving countless birds.

We drove slowly past the rainshadow forest I have been working for many years to preserve, a patch of land I named the Quimper Lost Wilderness. Here the Olympic Mountains cast their dry shadow, blocking Pacific storms and leaving the northeast corner of the peninsula strikingly arid. It is a rare ecosystem in a region famous for wetness: trees such as Douglas-fir and Western Redcedar, which grow to giant size in the Olympic rainforests, survive here but are much smaller and slower-growing, adapted to an annual rainfall of barely 18 inches—comparable to Los Angeles—while less than fifty miles away the west side of the Olympics receives over 140 inches, among the wettest places in North America.

We then joined Port Townsend's Steve Hampton, one of Washington's most skilled birders and an advocate for birding access for all, at Fort Worden State Park. Along the shore we admired Heermann's Gulls, their slate-gray bodies, mottled gray-and-white heads, and coral-red bills. Though we didn't see them shadowing pelicans that day, this species is famous for following Brown Pelicans north from Baja California—where virtually the entire world population of Heermann's Gulls nests on a single island.

At nearby Point Hudson, a male Purple Martin shimmered blue-purple in the evening sun as it glided over the marina. Fortune smiled when a murmuration of Black Turnstones wheeled over sea and sand, their black-and-white geometric patterns flashing in flight, with a few Surfbirds mixed in. For Rick, the Black Turnstone was a lifer, and he was thrilled.

Dinner at the Salish Grill capped the day: superb seafood and warm camaraderie as the first evening of the Port Townsend Wooden Boat Festival unfolded outside the windows. Handcrafted vessels, from kayaks to tall ships, filled the harbor—a celebration of maritime heritage against a sunset sky.

After dinner we drove along Port Townsend's Victorian waterfront, where 19th-century brick buildings glowed in the evening light. At the Northwest Maritime Center, we paused to talk about the historic wooden shells made famous in *The Boys in the Boat*. Nearby, a gray whale skeleton—beautifully articulated and lit for display—stretched along a pier.



At day's end, we continued to Sequim, our home for the night. This town sits in the dry heart of the Olympic rainshadow, where sunlit prairie and native prickly pear cactus defy the region's reputation for downpours. With bodies tired, hearts full, and friendships already forming, we checked into our hotel, brimming with excitement for the days to come.

Fri., Sept. 5 Ediz Hook | Port Angeles | Hurricane Ridge

We began the morning on the fog-bound shores of Ediz Hook, a narrow spit that stretches into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The still air and shifting veils of mist created an ethereal atmosphere, sometimes obscuring the view entirely, other times parting to reveal glimpses of seabirds against calm waters. Through breaks in the fog, we scoped Surf Scoters—females alongside one striking male with his orange bill and bold white nape stripe, nicknamed the "skunk-headed coot." Nearby, Western Sandpipers scurried across the tide flats, while our first Rhinoceros Auklet surfaced after diving for fish. This member of the puffin family takes its name from the horn-like sheath on its bill, which glows under ultraviolet light during the breeding season. Rhinoceros Auklets are the most abundant seabird nesting in Washington, with huge colonies on Protection Island near the mouth of Discovery Bay.

A loon on the water kept us puzzling until we settled on Red-throated Loon, smaller and more slender than Common or Pacific and distinctive in its habit of tilting its bill upward. In and out of the fog, it provided a stimulating identification challenge for our group—and for my friend Gary Bullock, who joined us for the day. Gary is a retired Alaska fireman turned artist, poet and bird educator, well known to many in the region through his *Nature Now* radio programs.

The highlight of the morning came with Black Oystercatchers: first their ringing calls through the mist, then dark silhouettes flashing past, and finally a close view of one prying limpets from wave-washed rocks. We had fun describing the bird's look—a crow clenching a carrot, standing on flesh-colored legs that make it appear to have forgotten its pants. Despite their name, these shorebirds rarely touch oysters. Instead, they are masters at opening mussels, limpets, and barnacles, making them keystone predators of the intertidal zone and sensitive indicators of coastal health. Everyone loved this bird, and Peggy chose it as her favorite of the tour. For me, the Black Oystercatcher is especially meaningful: it was one of the first species that sparked my own passion for birds, and sharing it with fellow enthusiasts and new admirers alike is deeply rewarding.

From the shoreline we drove into downtown Port Angeles, where colorful murals trace the town's past as a logging hub and its transformation into a gateway for Olympic National Park. The paintings sparked conversation about the peninsula's layered history—from the art-deco ferry *Kalakala* to the dramatic episode of "sluicing the hogback," when the old town was deliberately buried beneath a slurry of muddy debris to create a new town on

higher ground. We also reflected on the two Roosevelts, Theodore and Franklin, whose conservation leadership helped secure the creation and later expansion of the park. After a cheerful lunch at a local favorite eatery, we aimed our vans uphill toward Hurricane Ridge.

The climb itself was a lesson in life zones. We began the day at sea level with seabirds and intertidal specialists, then ascended through coastal prairie into lush lowland forest of western redcedar, Douglas-fir, and western hemlock. Higher still, montane forests of yellow cedar and silver fir gave way to subalpine meadows dotted with mountain hemlock and subalpine fir, gnarled into krummholz by wind and snow. At the ridgeline, trees dwindled and tundra plants hugged the rocky ground—ecologically connected to the vast Arctic tundra thousands of miles north. In little more than an hour, we had traversed a compressed ecological transect that elsewhere would span an entire continent.

Geology set the stage for our ascent. Along the road we discussed the Cascadia Subduction Zone, where an oceanic plate dives beneath North America, driving the uplift of ocean floor sediments that became the Olympic Mountains. This same fault is capable of unleashing massive earthquakes and tsunamis that can remake coastlines in moments. We also considered the broader context of the Ring of Fire—the great horseshoe of subduction zones encircling the Pacific Ocean, where earthquakes and volcanoes cluster. Our closest neighbors on this fiery ring include Mount Baker and the rest of the Cascade volcanoes. From Hurricane Ridge, distant views of Mount Olympus revealed the icy mantles of modern glaciers, still sculpting the mountains' newest chapter. Despite its stormy name, Hurricane Ridge greeted us with weather that was clear, calm, and unexpectedly warm.

The story of life here is shaped by isolation as well as uplift. During the Pleistocene, ice sheets more than a mile thick sealed off the peninsula, while great rivers carved barriers around its edges. The mountains stood isolated, like a green archipelago in a sea of ice, and species evolved in place. That "island effect" gave rise to endemics found nowhere else on Earth—not only the Olympic Marmot, but also the elusive Olympic Snow Mole and the Olympic Torrent Salamander. We saw Olympic Marmots as soon as we arrived at Hurricane Ridge, standing watch outside their burrows before scurrying back into their dark labyrinths.

Raptors soared above—Red-tailed and Sharp-shinned Hawks—while Vaux's Swifts streaked across the sky, their sickle-shaped wings slicing the blue. Columbian Black-tailed Deer grazed near the trails. While not an Olympic endemic, this coastal subspecies of Mule Deer is the characteristic deer of the Pacific Northwest, a reminder that even widespread animals take on distinctive regional forms.

One hoped-for bird, the Canada Jay, remained elusive at the ridge, so on our descent we stopped at a forested campground. Among towering old-growth trees, the jays appeared at last, gliding silently through the canopy before perching close. These clever corvids are famed for caching seeds in bark crevices, surviving harsh winters on their hidden stores. Everyone delighted in the encounter.

We closed the day with dinner in Port Angeles at a convivial pizza restaurant, then returned to our Sequim hotel. Tired yet satisfied, we tallied the day's impressive list of birds and experiences—a second day that combined fog-shrouded mystery, rich natural history, and the grandeur of mountain heights.

Sat., Sept. 6 Sequim | Dungeness

We began the day at the Dungeness River Nature Center, where the historic Railroad Bridge spans the rushing river. The feeders were alive with activity: Red-breasted Nuthatches, Chestnut-backed and Black-capped Chickadees, American Goldfinches, Anna's Hummingbirds, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, and Dark-eyed Juncos of the Oregon form—so different from the Slate-colored Dark-eyed Junco familiar to our East Coast travelers.

Yet it was the Douglas Squirrel that stole the morning show. This small, charismatic native squirrel relentlessly worked to crack the code of a tube feeder. Tail flicking with every squeak—as though using the motion to push out its calls—it finally perched precariously on top, pried the feeder open, and celebrated with a feast. The group watched in delight at this determined display of persistence and problem-solving.

On the bridge we scanned the river. Though American Dippers eluded us, Belted Kingfishers rattled from the banks, and a splash of silver signaled salmon beginning their upstream run. One male Pink Salmon swam slow circles below, his humped back on full display—a feature of this species, which ascends the rivers in great numbers only on odd-numbered years. The sight was a vivid reminder of the salmon cycle that sustains so much life on the Olympic Peninsula.

Birding highlights followed when we discovered the hanging pouch of a Bushtit nest—a marvel of moss, lichen, and spider silk swaying delicately among the branches. Before long, we spotted the tiny architects themselves. Hardly larger than a ping-pong ball, these busy birds with long tails moved through ocean spray bushes, gleaning insects from blossoms now browned after their foamy white summer bloom. Their restless motion and high, tinkling calls held our group's attention as surely as any larger, more dramatic species.

After a leisurely break to enjoy the center's exhibits and coffee in the viewing room, we ate lunch in Sequim at a cheerful spot serving breakfast all day. Plates of smoked salmon Benedict, peach crepes, and potato pancakes earned rave reviews.

In the afternoon we encountered one of the great wildlife spectacles of the tour: a herd of Roosevelt Elk in an open field. Several dozen cow elk grazed alongside more than a dozen massive bulls, some weighing over 1,000 pounds. Named for Theodore Roosevelt, these elk are the largest in North America. As the autumn rut approached, bulls postured and prepared to clash antlers for the right to gather harems. To see so many of these powerful animals in the open, their sheer size and presence filling the field, was unforgettable.

Later we explored the restored estuary at Three Crabs, where Western Sandpipers fed so close that binoculars were unnecessary. These tiny travelers, weighing about an ounce, breed in the tundra of western Alaska and eastern Siberia. Now migrating, they will continue thousands of miles to wintering grounds that reach as far south as Peru. Sanderlings chased the surf in and out, while a Semipalmated Plover stood beside its larger cousin, a Killdeer—offering a neat comparison of neckbands: two bold bands on the Killdeer, one on the Semipalmated. Dowitchers stitched the mud with their long bills.

Offshore, rafts of Surf Scoters floated, while Common Mergansers pursued fish in the shallows. The skies filled with gulls—California, Glaucous-winged, Ring-billed, and Short-billed (a species recently split from the familiar Mew Gull). In the calm waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, we enjoyed scope views of a Common Loon and a Marbled Murrelet. An American Kestrel perched nearby, and Great Blue Herons stood in striking numbers across the marsh.

At John Wayne Marina, named for the actor whose family donated the land to the Port of Port Angeles, calm waters brought more highlights. Hooded Mergansers floated in a nearby wetland, and Pigeon Guillemots—including some still in striking black-and-white breeding plumage—were seen well as they bobbed and dove offshore. Just yards away from where we stood, a Harbor Seal wrestled with an enormous salmon, while gulls shadowed the sea mammal, ready to snatch scraps. Suddenly a Bald Eagle dropped in, smacking into the water in an audacious attempt to steal the seal's catch. The chaos of predator and prey, thief and opportunist, was exhilarating to witness.

Along the concrete sidewalks of the marina, crushed shells littered the pavement—evidence of gulls dropping them from above to crack them open. A final look at an elegant Heermann's Gull, with its charcoal body and red bill, rounded out the scene.

By evening we gathered for dinner at an Indonesian restaurant in Sequim, where sushi, hibachi, and fragrant noodle dishes offered a fittingly diverse feast after such a full day. Back at the hotel we tallied our growing bird list and traced our route on a map, preparing to leave Sequim in the morning for the next leg of our Olympic Peninsula adventure.

Sun., Sept. 7 Clallam Bay | Makah Nation Lands – Neah Bay & Cape Flattery | Kalaloch

We left Sequim this morning and headed west—far west, all the way to Cape Flattery, the northwesternmost point in the contiguous United States. But before reaching that wild headland, we paused at Clallam Bay to scan the kelp forests for Sea Otters. The sight did not disappoint. Several otters rolled and dove among the waving fronds of bull kelp, pausing to float on their backs in classic sea otter style. We spoke about their biology: how mothers use kelp as a "seat belt" to anchor their pups while they dive, how otters use tools tucked into a natural "pocket" of skin to crack open shellfish, and how their appetite for urchins helps keep kelp forests healthy. Watching their playful antics against the backdrop of a kelp ecosystem flourishing with diverse life—the "rainforest of the sea"—was both entertaining and inspiring.

At a local restaurant we stopped to pick up fresh-baked brownies before continuing into Neah Bay, heart of the Makah Nation. Along the shoreline, Bald Eagles stood sentinel on rocks, Western Sandpipers probed the sand, and Pigeon Guillemots bobbed on the water. A Common Loon, heavy-bodied and low on the surface, still wore remnants of breeding plumage. To hear its eerie call—the sound writer John McPhee once likened to the "laugh of the deeply insane"—was a rare treat.

Lunch at a Makah-owned restaurant was a highlight. Big windows opened onto the water, where we scoped birds between bites. Fresh-caught lingcod, with its firm, lightly sweet flesh, was the favorite dish. While waiting for plates to arrive, Rick spotted a suspicious scoter offshore. Scope views revealed a male White-winged Scoter—a trip first—with bold white comma-shaped patches beneath the eyes and a thick orange-and-black bill that seemed oversized for its head.

Just outside the restaurant, Semipalmated Plovers scurried along the shore. Some in the group caught close views, and Todd especially delighted in their stop-and-start running, paired with their compact proportions. Later, we found vast rafts of scoters on the open water, both Surf and White-winged, joined by Greater Scaup and dozens of Horned Grebes. A small flock of Black Turnstones worked the rocks, while in the distance



shorebirds wheeled in mesmerizing murmurations. Caspian Terns added aerial drama, plunging headfirst for fish, while Belted Kingfishers rattled back and forth across the bay.

Next, we made the atmospheric hike to Cape Flattery. The trail wound through a shadowy, moss-draped forest, where the sound and scent of the ocean grew stronger with each step. At the end, the forest gave way to a series of platforms overlooking sheer cliffs, sea stacks, and caves carved by relentless surf. Offshore, Tatoosh Island rose from the waves, once home to a Makah village and still a vital seabird breeding site. Whale spouts marked the presence of distant Humpbacks, and closer to shore Steller's Sea Lions sprawled across the rocks or rolled powerfully through the surf.

By late afternoon, we drove south along Highway 101, glimpsing the Pacific glittering beyond the coastal forest. Our destination was Kalaloch Lodge, perched above the ocean. Here we settled into comfortable cabins at the forest's edge, with the sound of crashing surf a constant presence. Dinner at the lodge's Creekside Restaurant exceeded expectations: the king salmon and elk burger drew rave reviews, a salad with local berries delighted, and crispy polenta proved a standout vegetarian dish. After completing our bird list, we drifted off to sleep with the Pacific as our lullaby, dreaming of adventures yet to come in this land where some of the world's largest trees rise from forests beyond the surf.

Mon., Sept. 8 Ruby Beach | Hoh Rainforest | Kalaloch Beach

We began our morning early at Ruby Beach, arriving at low tide to explore the intertidal world. After winding through the lush coastal forest, we scrambled over a maze of drift logs—massive trees tossed and tumbled like toothpicks by winter storms—before stepping through a sea cave that felt like a portal into another realm. Before us rose sea stacks—towering pillars of basalt left behind as softer surrounding rock eroded away. Stark and jagged, streaked with white veins of quartz, they loomed against the surf like monuments from another world. Their alien shapes, shrouded in mist and seabird cries, gave the scene a science-fiction quality, as if we'd landed on a rocky shore of some distant planet.

At their feet, tidepools spread alive with color and movement. Giant Green Anemones—seeming like underwater flowers but in truth carnivorous animals—opened their stinging tentacles to catch unsuspecting prey. Aggregating Anemones revealed their unusual talent for cloning; they reproduce by splitting into genetically identical copies, and when one colony meets another, they wage "clone wars," battling along their borders with specialized stinging cells. Sea stars clung to the rocks, looking inert and pretty, but their role as top predators has earned them the title "tigers of the tidepools."

We examined limpets, snails, mussels, and barnacles—both the goosenecks clustered on wave-battered rocks and the smaller acorn barnacles, whose crackling sounds could be heard faintly above the surf in the still morning air. We also spotted sculpins, mottled fish pressed so closely against the rocks they seemed to melt into the tidepool floor, then darting with quick flicks of their fins. These shape-shifting residents can change color to match their surroundings and even breathe air through their skin when water levels drop.

Sitting on drift logs as the tide came back in, we enjoyed a picnic breakfast while waves crashed against the sea stacks and offshore islands. Among the pebbles, we discovered an agate—a translucent form of quartz that fills cavities in volcanic rock as silica-rich water slowly deposits layers over time. Carol especially delighted in this beach agate, tumbled smooth by waves along the shore. She held it up to the morning sky, where it glowed in the sunlight, capturing and concentrating the mystery of the intertidal world she so loved exploring.

Birdlife filled the scene around us: rafts of Surf Scoters floated offshore among Harbor Porpoises, while squadrons of Brown Pelicans skimmed low over the waves with wingtips nearly touching the water. A raucous Steller's Jay scolded from the bushes behind the beach. And as we started back, a Green-winged Teal roosting on a log in a creek just a few feet away blinked open its eyes and stretched. Sunlight flashed across the brilliant green speculum—the iridescent patch of color on its wing, used in flight and courtship displays. None of us had ever seen this species so close, or so well.

From the coast we traveled inland, exchanging surf and spray for the emerald embrace of the Hoh Rain Forest. Passing between two colossal Sitka spruces felt like entering yet another portal—this time into an enchanted realm of moss-draped trees and crystal streams. In a clear rivulet, we spotted salmon fry—young Coho that had hatched in these waters and will one day return as adults to spawn.

The Hoh epitomizes temperate rainforest: towering Sitka Spruce, Douglas-fir, and Western Hemlock; Bigleaf Maples adorned with curtains of epiphytes; and a profusion of mosses nourished by fog and rain. We discussed the OWLS acronym that defines old-growth—**O**ld trees, **W**oody debris on the ground, **L**ayers of canopy, and **S**tanding snags that provide critical wildlife habitat. We marveled at nurse logs that cradle new life and at stilt-rooted trees that once wrapped themselves around decomposing logs now vanished, their nutrients recycled back into the forest long ago.

Birdlife added bright moments. Golden-crowned Kinglets flashed their fiery crests as they foraged in mixed flocks, joined by Chestnut-backed Chickadees—familiar from feeders, but special to encounter in their wild



Olympic home. A Steller's Jay, the "parrot of the Pacific Northwest," added a splash of cobalt blue against the endless green.

We picnicked beneath towering spruce, savoring both food and the sense of being small within such a vast realm.

Back at Kalaloch in the late afternoon, we stood on the bluffs near our cabins and looked out over the Pacific. Hundreds of scoters bobbed offshore alongside cormorants and pelicans. A Pacific Loon—new for the trip—slipped in and out of the waves, while a Spotted Sandpiper bobbed on the rocks above the surf.

After time to rest, reflect, and breathe in the briny air while the surf drummed its ancient rhythm, we gathered again for our checklist as the sun sank into the ocean, burnishing its surface. Another gourmet dinner in the Kalaloch Lodge dining room capped the day with perfect flourish.

We fell asleep to the sound of waves outside our cabins, soothed by the ocean's metronome and grateful for the vivid contrasts of coast and rainforest we had experienced. Few lullabies rival the shush of the Pacific surf.

Tues., September 9 Kalaloch Beach | Big Cedar Tree | Tree of Life | Lake Quinault

Breakfast at Kalaloch Lodge proved every bit as memorable as dinner. Traditional plates of sausage and eggs and bowls of oatmeal shared the table with avocado toast and breakfast burritos, while a few indulgent souls opted for brioche French toast stuffed with marionberries and cream—because if not on vacation, when?

Afterward, we gathered on the bluff to begin the morning's birding. A flock of Red Crossbills descended into a wind-sculpted Sitka Spruce right before us, providing some of the finest views of the trip. Their musical *jeep-jeep-jeep* flight calls had teased us from the forest earlier, but now the birds were close, vivid, and unmistakable. Males glowed red, while females and young birds showed green and yellow hues. We admired their namesake bills—crossed mandibles perfectly adapted to prying open conifer cones.

We talked about how different populations, identified by their distinctive calls, specialize on particular tree species. The birds before us were likely Sitka Spruce–type (Type 10), a Red Crossbill call type unique to the

Pacific Coast that has evolved to exploit the cones of Sitka Spruce. Watching them feed so intently offered a glimpse into this fascinating case of adaptation and diversification. The sighting was especially meaningful for Gary and Ann, who shared that they had been trying to see this species well for years without success. Eventually the flock took wing, their calls fading into the roar of the surf.

Down on the beach, we explored a shoreline rich in natural stories. A rock pierced by a perfectly round hole sparked guesses until I revealed the true culprit: a Piddock clam, a shell-boring mollusk. A Savannah Sparrow perched on a rock just offshore, while Western Sandpipers swirled in tight formations before settling to probe the sand. Using scopes, we worked through the gulls—California, Glaucous-winged, Western, and hybrids—sorting mantle shades, leg colors, and darkness of wing tips.

A perfect sand dollar found in the wrack line prompted discussion of these unusual echinoderms, relatives of starfish and urchins. Like sea urchins, they possess Aristotle's lantern—a set of tiny, five-part jaws on the underside that grind up food particles. Even more curious, sand dollars swallow sand and selectively retain the heaviest grains, especially magnetite, in their gut. This collection of dense minerals acts as a built-in "weight belt," helping them stay anchored on the sandy seafloor instead of being tossed about by waves. The familiar bleached white skeletons we find on beaches are called "tests," the hardened remains of their calcium carbonate body.

From coast to forest, our next stop was the Big Cedar Grove, where ancient Western Redcedars towered like living cathedrals. We discussed how this species is not a true cedar but a cypress relative, and how it has long been revered as the "tree of life" by Indigenous peoples of the Northwest. Its rot-resistant wood was carved into canoes and longhouses, while its bark could be peeled for fiber to make mats, ropes, and clothing—nearly every part of the tree meeting some vital need. Beyond the practical, cedar held deep spiritual significance: its boughs and wood were used in ceremonies and rituals of cleansing, protection, and prayer.

We admired the white-flecked cap of an amanita mushroom and spoke of the "wood wide web," made famous by forest ecologist Suzanne Simard, where fungi link trees in vast networks of exchange. A fallen log stained a brilliant green by fungus offered another story: "green stain" has appeared in both ancient art and modern semiconductor research. A snail-eating ground beetle, the shiny black of polished boot leather, scurried across the forest floor, reminding us of biologist J.B.S. Haldane's quip that the creator of the universe must have had "an inordinate fondness for beetles." Beetles account for nearly a quarter of all known animal species on Earth, their diversity unmatched in the animal kingdom. Here, among giants, science and wonder mingled seamlessly.

At midday we picnicked near Kalaloch's famed Tree of Life. This Sitka Spruce, clinging to a bluff with its roots exposed in midair, continues to thrive despite its precarious perch—a living paradox of persistence.

Across cultures, the tree of life motif symbolizes resilience, connection, and renewal. In Mesopotamian myth, Gilgamesh quests for a plant of life; in Celtic tradition, the "Crann Bethadh" links underworld, earth, and heavens; and in the cosmology of the ancient Maya, the great Ceiba or silk-cotton tree rose at the center of the world, its roots descending into the underworld, its trunk anchoring the human realm, and its crown reaching into the heavens. Earlier in the day we had spoken of Western Redcedar, the "tree of life" for Indigenous peoples of the Northwest, providing spiritual meaning as well as material sustenance.

Now, standing before Kalaloch's wind-battered spruce—its crown mirrored by its exposed roots—we felt that parallel truth: whether in biology, myth, or metaphor, trees have long stood as emblems of survival and connection, rooting us to the land even as we aspire to the sky.

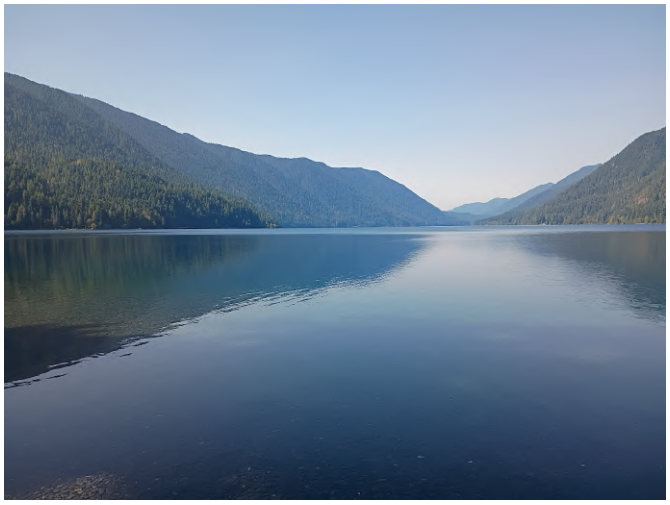
A "pelican party" at a bait ball suddenly turned to pandemonium when Steller's Sea Lions surged through the fish, scattering birds in their wake. From the bluff we scoped rafts of seabirds: Common Murres flashing their tuxedoed bodies as they spread their wings, Marbled Murrelets foraging offshore—a species Jean especially cherished seeing for the first time, despite many past visits to Washington. Western Grebes lifted their long, swan-like necks above the waves, and Dennis was particularly taken with them, calling this species his favorite bird of the trip.

Later, from the lodge bluffs, we enjoyed more free time scoping wildlife. A Sea Otter floated close to shore, grooming and diving, while sea lions surfed the waves. The ocean's edge pulsed with movement and sound, a fitting reminder of the abundance of life at the land-sea boundary.

Later, from the lodge bluffs, some of us enjoyed free time scoping more wildlife. A Sea Otter floated close to shore, grooming and diving, while sea lions surfed the waves. The ocean's edge was alive with movement and sound.

By late afternoon we drove south to the Quinault Rain Forest, where we strolled the historic grounds of Lake Quinault Lodge. The glacier-carved lake shimmered under soft light, its surface carrying Common Loons riding low in water. We discussed their dense bones—so different from the hollow bones of most birds—that allow them to dive deep.

The lodge, visited by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937, played a role in inspiring the creation of Olympic National Park, linking our day's journey back to the conservation stories we had touched upon earlier in Port Angeles.

Dinner in the Roosevelt Dining Room was a fitting finale. From salmon to gnocchi, the fresh and flavorful fare—shared in a space steeped in history—seemed especially delicious.

Driving back to Kalaloch at sunset, we watched forest and sea dissolve into glowing hues, a seamless blend of mountains, shoreline, and sky. It was a fitting reminder of the wild beauty that defines the Olympic Peninsula—and of the privilege of experiencing it together.

Wed., Sept. 10 Forks | Sol Duc Rainforest | Elwha River | Blyn – Jamestown S'Klallam Tribal Lands | Bainbridge Island

Our final full day of the tour dawned bright, the morning sun spilling into the Sol Duc Valley as we left the coastal fog behind. The forest shimmered in countless shades of green, trunks and branches softened by mosses that glowed in the angled light. At Salmon Cascades we were treated to one of the great spectacles of the Northwest: Coho Salmon hurling themselves upstream in their tireless drive to spawn. Each silver flash was a moment of persistence and power, a reminder of how rivers and forests are bound together by the life cycles of fish. Over the rush of water came the rattling call of a Belted Kingfisher, and we paused in hopes of an American Dipper, though none appeared.

At nearby Crescent Lake, a deep aquamarine jewel tucked among glacier-carved mountains, we turned to another story shaped by water. Crescent's crystalline clarity—more reminiscent of the Caribbean than the Pacific Northwest—owes to its glacial origins and unusual geology. Thousands of years ago, a massive landslide dammed the valley, forming this steep-sided basin with little soil erosion or nutrient-rich runoff to cloud its depths. With scant inflowing streams and little organic matter, algae cannot thrive, leaving the lake nutrient-poor but dazzlingly clear. At more than 600 feet deep, its cold, oligotrophic waters dilute what little nutrient input arrives, keeping it strikingly transparent. We marveled at how light penetrated the depths and spoke of the endemic fish that dwell in these isolated, pristine waters.

From this still lake we moved to a river in motion—the Elwha, where human intervention and nature's resilience have written a dramatic new chapter. The largest dam removal project in history has reopened ancestral spawning waters, and as if to mark the moment, we watched fifteen Common Mergansers coursing through the whitewater. Occasionally they vanished beneath the surface in pursuit of fish, their clear nictitating membranes flashing into service as underwater goggles. The flotilla delighted Estelle when the birds swam into an eddy and began bobbing about; with her warm smile she remarked that they looked leaderless, as if waiting for someone to organize them.




Moments later, we witnessed both Pink and Chinook Salmon in the river—the latter the mightiest of the Pacific salmon. Nearby, a Pileated Woodpecker hammered against a riverside tree, its scarlet crest flaring against the green. The pairing of woodpecker and salmon struck John in particular, who noted how perfectly the scene captured the interconnectedness of forest and river life.

Our reflections deepened as we traced the circularity of these relationships. Chinook not only sustain Orcas, bears, and eagles, but also fertilize the very forests through the transfer of ocean nutrients into soil and trees. Those trees, in turn, feed insects that woodpeckers pursue. Pileateds often target decaying trunks already weakened by age or fungus; their chiseling accelerates renewal of many species, creating cavities used by owls, ducks, and flying squirrels. And when great trees eventually topple into rivers, they form the logjams and gravel beds that shape new salmon spawning habitat. For Indigenous peoples, salmon have always been central to culture and survival, completing a circle of connection between river and forest.

Fittingly, we broke for lunch in Blyn on the lands of the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe. Supporting the tribe that created the wonderful Dungeness River Nature Center we had visited earlier in the tour felt like closing a circle of our own—acknowledging the stewardship that continues to sustain the landscapes and wildlife we had enjoyed all week.

From Blyn we continued east, crossing Agate Passage to reach Bainbridge Island. At our comfortable hotel, some travelers chose to relax while others stretched their legs on a nature walk in the park just behind the property. There, I had a final, unforgettable encounter: a Barred Owl responded to my call, swept silently in from behind, brushed past my head, and landed on a branch in front of me, posing for photos. Todd and Peggy, a short distance away, didn't see the bird but heard its call spreading through the forest—a fittingly mysterious farewell from the wild.

In the evening, we gathered as a group to visit Pia the Troll, Bainbridge's whimsical guardian, before heading to Agate—an extraordinary restaurant that proved a fitting venue for our farewell dinner. Appetizers ranged from Purple Haze goat cheese flavored with lavender pollen to fresh rockfish ceviche. Entrées such as pasta with lamb, grilled halloumi, and brined chicken were savored with enthusiasm, and desserts like peach tart ended the meal on a sweet note.

Over toasts and shared stories, we celebrated a week of discoveries and new friendships. Back at the hotel, in the quiet of a common room, we recounted our favorite birds and moments from the journey—a satisfying close to a tour filled with both wonder and camaraderie.

Thurs., Sept. 11 Puget Sound | Departure from Seattle

Fog lay heavy over Puget Sound as we boarded the morning ferry from Bainbridge Island; the muted light heightened the atmosphere of our final crossing. Out on deck, we put our sharpened gull identification skills to work, distinguishing Glaucous-winged from California Gulls by mantle shade, leg color, and wing tip darkness. Pigeon Guillemots reminded us one last time of their puffin kinship in the alcid family of seabirds.

Cormorants were scattered across the Sound—Pelagic Cormorants arrowed low over the water, necks straight and broomstick-thin, while bulkier Double-crested Cormorants flew with kinked necks. On a piling, we tried to pick out the buffy facial patches of Brandt's Cormorants through the mist. Then, as if scripted for our finale, a Fried Egg Jellyfish drifted past the ferry, its golden yolk-like bell rimmed by translucent white—an otherworldly drifter that delighted the group.

Just as the ferry docked in Seattle, Gary spotted the triangular fin of a Harbor Porpoise slicing briefly through the gray water. For Jean, despite many visits to the Northwest, this was her first sighting of the elusive little cetacean—a perfect parting gift from the Sound.

As we rolled our vans off the ferry, the fog began to lift, revealing the towers of the city. Dropping travelers at Amtrak, Sea-Tac, and hotels, we could scarcely believe that only yesterday we had been watching salmon hurl themselves up waterfalls in the mossy grandeur of the Sol Duc Forest. The contrast between skyscrapers and towering trees felt surreal.

From tidepools alive with anemones to alpine meadows echoing with the calls of marmots, from elk herds grazing in open fields to salmon surging upstream through old-growth forests, our week carried us across the full sweep of Olympic Peninsula habitats. Together we traveled from tidelands to timberline and beyond, sharing birds, wildlife, laughter, and learning along the way.

As the tour came to a close, I thought of the cycles we had witnessed: salmon carrying the ocean's bounty into the forest, trees feeding birds, rivers carving paths to the sea. And like the cycles of nature, our story doesn't end here; it turns forward, ready to begin again when our paths cross in a rainforest by the sea or in some other wild corner of the world.

Photos: Group at Ruby Beach (Rick Weiman - RW), Hoh Rainforest (Stephen Grace - SG), Heermann's Gulls (SG), Steller's Jay (SG), Chestnut-backed Chickadee (SG), Belted Kingfisher (SG), Pacific Tree Frog (SG), Song Sparrow (Dennis Utterback - DU), Point Wilson Lighthouse (RW), Canada Jay (SG), Hook (RW), Black Oystercatcher (SG), Roosevelt Elk (RW), Harbor Seals (RW), Cape Flattery lookout (RW), Cape Flattery (SG), Green-winged Teal (SG), Ruby Beach (SG), Green Anemone (RW), Sea Stars (RW), Hoh Rainforest (SG), Creekside Restaurant at Kalaloch Lodge - Crispy Polenta (SG), Creekside Restaurant at Kalaloch Lodge - King Salmon (SG), Brown Pelican (DU), Sol Duc River (SG), Red Crossbill male and female (DU), Tree trunk (Carol Myers - CM), Kalaloch Log (RW), Lake Crescent (Todd Kinney - TK), Madison Creek Falls (TK), Group at Madison Falls (RW), Barred Owl (SG), Fish Market (RW), Group at Ediz Hook (RW)