Olympic Peninsula Spring Explorer
May 11 – 18, 2026 | Trip Report
by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Guide Stephen Grace with Emily, Sue, Chris, Des, Jeff, Mary vB and Mary B.

Sun., May 10 SeaTac | Pre-tour Birding at Angle Lake

What began as a gray, chilly Pacific Northwest spring morning transformed into one of those luminous May afternoons western Washington does so well. By the time Sue, Chris, Emily, and I met for bonus birding at Angle Lake Park in SeaTac, the airport city nestled between Seattle and Tacoma, blue sky had opened above the fresh green canopy and sunlight flashed from the lake.

Almost immediately we encountered one of the themes that would define the tour: spring renewal. Juvenile Golden-crowned Kinglets begged noisily while attentive parents darted through the trees delivering insects. Tiny but remarkably hardy, kinglets survive northern winters through dense insulating feathers, rapid metabolism, and near-constant foraging.

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Despite busy Mother's Day crowds in the park, birds remained abundant. A pair of Wood Ducks floated in dappled sunlight near the shoreline, providing wonderful views of both the ornate drake and subtler hen. The encounter also gave Chris, the avid photographer in our group, a chance to capture some stunning images. Few ducks rival this species in beauty, and its recovery from severe early twentieth-century declines, aided by habitat protection and nest-box programs, ranks among North America's notable conservation success stories.

A family group of Bewick's Wrens moved through dense underbrush nearby, their bright white eyebrows flashing through the shadows as they scolded and foraged.

Between bird sightings we discussed some of the signature trees of the Pacific Northwest. Towering Douglas-firs—despite the name, not true firs—form the ecological backbone of many northwestern forests, while Pacific Madrone, with its smooth peeling bark and wonderfully contorted trunks, gives rain-shadow landscapes an almost Mediterranean feel. Together these trees tell the story of a region shaped as much by climate and geology as by birds.

What struck me most that afternoon was the spirit of the group itself. Sue, Chris, Emily, and later Mary B., who joined us for dinner, were interested not simply in identifying birds, but in understanding linkages—between species and habitats, geology and ecology, people and place. Chris captured the group's curiosity perfectly when she said she was interested in "how things connect."

For a naturalist guide, those are magic words. Birds are often the doorway, but the deeper story lies in the relationships that bind ecosystems together. This group was eager to explore that larger story from the very beginning.

By evening, beneath clearing skies and the vivid greens of a Pacific Northwest spring, it felt as though the journey had truly begun.

Mon., May 11 SeaTac | Port Townsend | Fort Worden | Point Hudson | Sequim

By late morning our group was complete. Mary vB., Jeff, and Des joined the tour, rounding out a warm and engaging group of travelers. Good humor came easily, conversations flowed naturally, and anticipation for the week ahead was unmistakable.

Our Olympic Peninsula journey began beneath unusually clear skies near SeaTac. At the very first stoplight we paused before a magnificent view of Mount Rainier rising above the southern horizon. At 14,410 feet, Rainier is

the tallest peak in the Cascades and the most heavily glaciated mountain in the contiguous United States—an active stratovolcano born from the tectonic forces of the Pacific Ring of Fire.

For me, the mountain carried personal significance. Decades earlier it had drawn me west to learn mountaineering and prepare for future expeditions in ranges like the Andes and Himalaya. Now I found myself sharing it with a new group of naturalists, completing a satisfying circle.

Leaving Seattle behind, we crossed the Tacoma Narrows and later the Hood Canal Bridge, spanning a fjord carved by immense glaciers during the Ice Age. The Olympic Peninsula itself is a remarkably compressed world of ecosystems: inland seas, rainshadow prairies, alpine ridges, and temperate rainforests all packed into a relatively small landscape shaped by water, mountains, and climate.

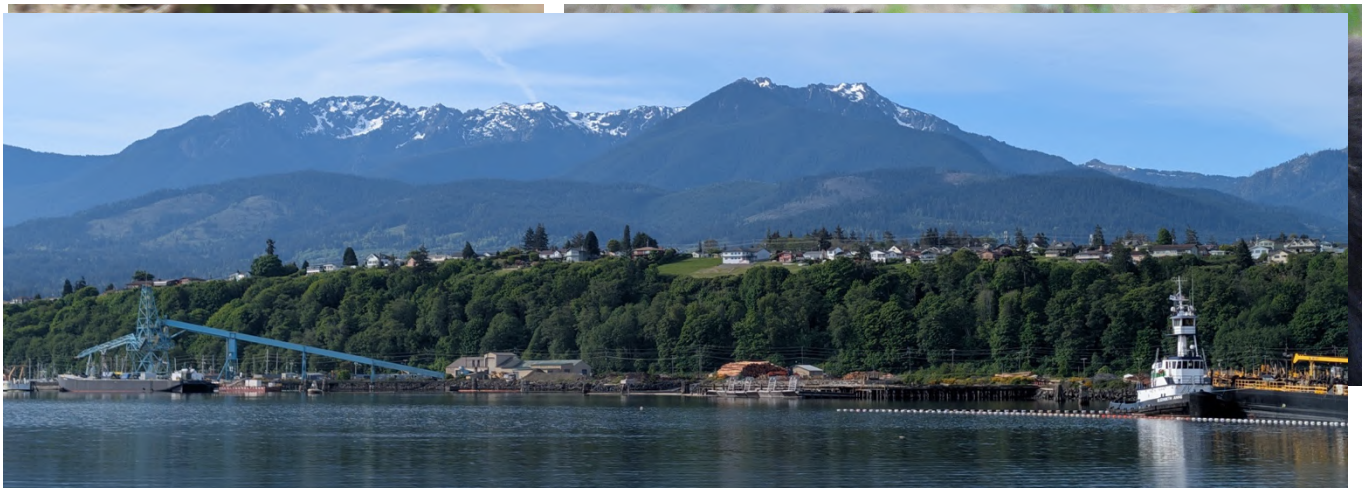
Our first stop came at my home in Port Townsend, where my wife Amy has transformed the backyard into a native plant sanctuary. Rufous and Anna's Hummingbirds visited blooming Twinberry Honeysuckle while American Goldfinches flashed through the garden. White-crowned Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and a hyperactive Wilson's Warbler added to the activity.

One especially welcome arrival was a Black-headed Grosbeak, recently returned from Mexico and Central America. Naturalist Journeys had intentionally shifted the tour slightly later into spring to better align with passerine migration, and already the strategy was paying off.

Nearby, we drove through a remnant stand of old-growth forest within the Olympic rainshadow, where I have spent the past eight years leading a community effort to protect and preserve these remarkable trees. Though smaller than the rainforest giants farther west, many have stood for centuries in soils so dry that native Brittle Pricklypear cactus grows among sunbaked rocky outcrops—a striking contrast to the lush forests that have come to define the Olympic Peninsula in the popular imagination.

By afternoon we reached Fort Worden State Park beneath brilliant blue skies. Once part of the coastal defense network guarding Puget Sound, the old fortifications now overlook waters rich with seabirds and marine life. There we were joined by Steve Hampton, an exceptional birder, science communicator, and citizen of the Cherokee Nation whose knowledge and enthusiasm enriched the afternoon immensely.

A Bald Eagle perched at close range above an old pier while nearby Pigeon Guillemots floated offshore, their bright red feet and white wing patches standing out against the dark water. Though their name suggests pigeons, guillemots are alcids—close relatives of puffins and murres that "fly" underwater in pursuit of fish.



Purple Martins occupied nesting boxes installed by local conservation volunteers while kettles of Turkey Vultures drifted northward on rising thermals. Inspired by a recent regional raptor watch, we carefully studied every distant bird overhead, briefly hoping one immature Bald Eagle might instead prove to be a Swainson's Hawk.

At Point Wilson, where the Strait of Juan de Fuca meets the Puget Sound, seabirds filled the waters. Pacific Loons glowed in breeding plumage while Rhinoceros Auklets skimmed low over the waves alongside Common Murres, Brandt's Cormorants, Red-breasted Mergansers, and more guillemots.

Dinner at Point Hudson extended the birding still further. Bald Eagles perched along the shoreline while White-crowned Sparrows sang in the cooling evening air.

By the time we reached Sequim, golden light still lingered across the rainshadow landscapes of the Sequim-Dungeness Valley.

Already the Olympic Peninsula was revealing itself as an intricate mosaic shaped by glaciers, ocean currents, mountains, and deep time. In a single day we had crossed fjords and inland seas, wandered through rainshadow forests, and explored seabird-rich shorelines. The journey had scarcely begun, yet the Peninsula was already hinting at the remarkable diversity that awaited us in the days ahead.

Tues., May 12 Ediz Hook | Whale Watching on the Strait of Juan de Fuca | Hurricane Ridge

Today carried us across the astonishing ecological range of the Olympic Peninsula—from the inland waters of the Salish Sea to an alpine ridge a mile above sea level.

Our morning began at Ediz Hook near Port Angeles, a long sand-and-gravel spit built by currents transporting glacial sediment eastward from the Elwha River along the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Calm water, snow-capped peaks, and abundant birds greeted us immediately.

Joining us for the day was Gary Bullock, one of the Peninsula's most beloved bird educators. Gary combines deep knowledge with infectious enthusiasm, and his keen eye for birds enriched every stop along the way.

A Black Oystercatcher feeding among shoreline rocks quickly became a highlight. Despite the name, these striking birds use their long red beaks to feed primarily on mussels, limpets and chitons. Individuals learn through years of experience how to pry open mussels, chisel limpets from rocks, and exploit the brief moments

when tides expose vulnerable prey. An immature Common Goldeneye stood a few steps away from the oystercatcher while River Otters swam sinuously through a nearby lagoon.

Farther offshore we found Harlequin Ducks, Surf Scoters, Common Loons, Pelagic Cormorants, and Brant. Particularly meaningful were several Marbled Murrelets floating distantly offshore. These small alcids feed at sea but nest high in old-growth forests, linking marine and forest ecosystems in one remarkable life history.

By late morning we boarded the *Glacier Spirit* with Puget Sound Express for whale watching in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Rhinoceros Auklets surrounded the boat, their bizarre horned bills and facial plumes glowing in the sunlight. Harbor Porpoises surfaced briefly nearby before vanishing again into the calm sea.

Then came our first whale: a Humpback known locally as Scuttle. We watched the whale surface repeatedly before lifting immense flukes into the air and diving.

Soon afterward the excitement intensified. Near San Juan Island we encountered a pod of Bigg's Killer Whales, also known as Transient Orcas. Unlike Southern Resident Orcas, which feed primarily on salmon, Bigg's specialize in hunting marine mammals. These whales belonged to the T49A matriline led by the female Nan. For nearly twenty minutes we watched the family surface and travel through glittering blue water, including a calf and a young male whose dorsal fin had not yet fully straightened, what researchers call a "sprouter."

The return trip produced still more wildlife, including a Bald Eagle nest with an eaglet visible above the rim of the massive stick structure.

Back on land we headed upward toward Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park. Along the way we discussed the geology of the Olympic Mountains, formed not by volcanism like Mount Rainier but by uplifted seafloor sediments and basalt scraped from the descending Juan de Fuca Plate.

At Hurricane Ridge we were joined by Alex, a young local birder whose enthusiasm and fresh perspective added another dimension to the day. Snowfields still lingered among the subalpine meadows, while Mount Olympus gleamed far to the west beneath a crystalline sky. Common Ravens soared overhead in the cool mountain air. A Canada Jay moved quietly through stunted conifers, Pine Siskins harried a Sharp-shinned Hawk in flight, and Glacier Lilies bloomed beside retreating snowbanks.

Then came mammals.

First came two distant American Black Bears feeding on a lush green hillside. Soon afterward we encountered Olympic Marmots, one of the Peninsula's endemic mammals, whistling from alpine meadows and feeding among the wildflowers.

As we descended the mountain, the day delivered one final surprise. An American Black Bear with two cubs grazed beside the roadside when suddenly one of the cubs lunged toward movement in the grass. A bird exploded upward—the elusive Sooty Grouse we had searched for throughout the afternoon. The grouse escaped unharmed, and we enjoyed fleeting views of this target species. A short distance farther down the road, yet another bear cub crossed in front of us and scrambled up a steep hillside, bringing our bear tally for the day to six.

Back in Port Angeles, we paused to admire several murals depicting the rich human and natural history of the Olympic Peninsula before gathering for dinner at an excellent Italian restaurant. Conversation carried the satisfied energy of a group trying to absorb an almost overwhelming day of wildlife encounters and spectacular scenery.

In a single day we had traveled from marine estuaries and whale-filled inland seas to alpine ridges inhabited by marmots and bears. The Olympic Peninsula continued to reveal itself as one of North America's richest and most interconnected landscapes.

Wed., May 13 Dungeness River Nature Center | Dungeness Landing | Three Crabs | John Wayne Marina

After breakfast in Sequim we headed to the Dungeness River Nature Center beneath soft morning light and gathering clouds. Gary and Alex joined us once again, and later we met longtime naturalist and conservation leader Bob Boekelheide, whose Wednesday community-science bird walks here have become a local institution.

Crossing the old railroad bridge above the glacier-fed Dungeness River, we birded slowly through riparian forest alive with spring song. Black-headed Grosbeaks sang from the canopy while Red-breasted Nuthatches bounced among the feeders near the Nature Center.

But one species occupied everyone's thoughts: American Dipper.

Earlier that morning Gary warned us the active nest appeared abandoned; the young had likely fledged days earlier. Still, we searched the river carefully.

Then Alex spotted movement downstream.

Dippers—adults and fledglings both.

Excitement spread through the group as we watched the birds forage in the rushing current. American Dippers are among the world's most remarkable songbirds, capable of walking underwater along stream bottoms in search of aquatic insects. Dense plumage traps a layer of insulating air, an unusually high oxygen-carrying capacity supports repeated dives into icy mountain streams, and a transparent nictitating membrane protects the eyes and functions much like built-in swim goggles beneath the surface. Everyone became fascinated by the flashes of white that appeared whenever the birds blinked—produced by white feathers lining the eyelids—which may serve as a form of visual communication in the noisy environment of a rushing stream. Nearby, adults repeatedly plunged into the current before returning with food for recently fledged young perched along the streambank.

The surrounding forest offered constant activity. Black-throated Gray Warblers sang overhead while Chestnut-backed Chickadees fed young in a cavity nest. A Brown Creeper spiraled up a tree trunk like a scrap of animated bark, and we admired the intricate hanging nest of a Bushtit woven from moss, lichens, and spider silk.

Meanwhile Rufous Hummingbirds turned the forest edge into an aerial battleground, males flaring their brilliant copper-orange gorgets while chasing rivals many times their size.

By late morning we reached Dungeness Landing to scan tidal flats and open water. Dunlin, Black-bellied Plovers, Hudsonian Whimbrels, and Marbled Godwits fed along the estuary while Brant and Harbor Seals rested on sand spits.

Glaucous-winged Gulls drifted above the shoreline, their pale, pearly-gray wingtips lacking the black coloration typical of many gull species. Sue spotted a Western Gull nearby, allowing an excellent comparison between the Western Gull's dark slate-gray back and black wingtips and the much paler upperparts and wingtips of the Glaucous-winged Gull. We also discussed the common hybrids between the two species, informally known as "Olympic Gulls." Suddenly the estuary erupted as Bald Eagles flushed hundreds of American Wigeon into the air. The swirling flock wheeled across the marsh in synchronized motion while sunlight flashed from pale bellies and white foreheads.

Lunch in Sequim brought relaxed conversation and another welcome addition to the tour: Amy joined us for the remainder of the journey.

In the afternoon we explored the restored estuary at Three Crabs, a local conservation success story where degraded shoreline habitat has gradually been returned to functioning marsh.

Strong winds swept across the estuary as we examined some of the specialized life adapted to salt marsh conditions. Bright orange tangles of Pacific Dodder sprawled across the vegetation, a parasitic plant that siphons nutrients directly from hosts. Nearby, pink Sea Thrift bloomed while Pickleweed glowed vivid green across the mudflats. A few adventurous members of the group even sampled Pickleweed straight from the marsh, laughing at its crisp salty flavor.

Green-winged Teal, Short-billed Dowitchers, Northern Pintails, and a Spotted Sandpiper added to the afternoon birding while offshore rafts of Buffleheads and White-winged Scoters floated beyond the dunes.

Our final stop came at John Wayne Marina, where we scoped Pigeon Guillemots, Rhinoceros Auklets, and distant Common Murres offshore.

Dinner that evening at Alderwood Bistro featured excellent wood-fired pizza and lively conversation as rain clouds gathered outside. Forecasts suggested major weather changes ahead, forcing us to rethink plans for the next day. The group embraced the uncertainty enthusiastically, and increasingly the tour felt shaped not by rigid itinerary but by flexibility, curiosity, and shared adventure.

By nightfall we returned to the hotel tired and windblown but deeply satisfied after another day exploring the rivers, estuaries, and forests of the Olympic Peninsula.

Thurs., May 14 Elwha River | Madison Falls | Lake Crescent | Salmon Cascades | Sol Duc Falls | Kalaloch Lodge

Heading west along the Strait of Juan de Fuca toward the outer Olympic Coast, we entered a landscape shaped by water—glaciers, rivers, rain, and eventually the immense Pacific itself.

Our first stop was the Elwha River, site of one of the greatest ecological restoration projects in American history. For nearly a century, two dams blocked salmon from more than seventy miles of spawning habitat inside Olympic National Park. Beginning in 2011, both dams were removed, allowing the river to reclaim its wildness.

The Elwha once supported all five Pacific salmon species along with Steelhead and Cutthroat Trout. Especially important were Chinook Salmon, vital both to the Lower Elwha Klallam people and to the endangered Southern

Resident Killer Whales that depend heavily on large salmon. Few places better illustrate ecological interconnectedness than the Elwha.

A Western Sandpiper fed along the shoreline while a Spotted Sandpiper bobbed nearby. A MacGillivray's Warbler sang from dense brush until Amy finally picked it out, its bold white eye arcs glowing in the shadows as it slipped through the vegetation. The brief but satisfying view rewarded our patience with one of the Peninsula's most elusive breeding warblers.

We walked an old riverside road damaged after the dams were removed and now reclaimed by recovering riparian habitat. Orange-crowned and Black-throated Gray Warblers sang overhead while a handsome red-shafted Northern Flicker perched atop a snag for excellent scope views.

Bigleaf Maples draped in mosses and epiphytes hinted at the rainforest ecosystems ahead. Near Madison Falls, where water cascaded over luminous moss-covered rock, we found recently arrived Swainson's Thrushes. Fresh from migration, they remained quiet, withholding for now the ethereal, upward-spiraling songs that would soon fill northwestern forests with one of spring's most enchanting voices.

By midday we reached Lake Crescent, one of Olympic National Park's most beautiful lakes. Carved by glaciers and isolated by landslides, Crescent is famous for its extraordinary clarity and deep blue color. The lake also harbors two endemic forms of trout found nowhere else on Earth: the Crescenti Cutthroat Trout and Beardslee Rainbow Trout. A Black-throated Gray Warbler flickered briefly through a flowering hawthorn before vanishing, offering only a tantalizing glimpse of one of the West's most elegant wood-warblers.

Lunch at historic Lake Crescent Lodge featured excellent Dungeness Crab rolls while rain swept dramatically across the water in shifting silver curtains. Unsure what the weather intended, we decided to continue onward toward Sol Duc.

The forest there, dominated by Douglas-fir and Western Hemlock, lacked the immense scale of the Hoh Rainforest but possessed its own quiet beauty of mosses, ferns, and rain-soaked air.

At Salmon Cascades we searched for Varied Thrushes but instead found something equally memorable: two Harlequin Ducks swimming in the turbulent whitewater below the viewing platform. The ornate male—slate-blue with chestnut and white markings—looked almost unreal against the emerald river and dark rainforest.

Harlequins winter in pounding Pacific surf before moving inland to breed on fast mountain streams like the Sol Duc. Later, everyone would cite these ducks as one of the most unforgettable moments of the tour.

Then the rain arrived in earnest.

As we hiked toward Sol Duc Falls we became steadily soaked, but the weather only intensified the rainforest's beauty. Mosses glowed electric green while every fern seemed newly alive beneath the rain.

A Varied Thrush appeared quietly on the trail, its orange breast glowing from the dim forest understory. Then at Sol Duc Falls itself came another extraordinary encounter: American Dippers nesting behind the waterfall. Adults repeatedly carried food through curtains of spray to hidden young while the roar of the falls echoed through the canyon.

Drenched but exhilarated, we returned to the van and continued westward toward the Pacific. Near Forks we passed through the heart of *Twilight* country, joking about vampires and werewolves before the skies finally began clearing above the coast.

At last we reached Kalaloch Lodge perched above the outer Pacific Ocean. Sea stacks, surf, and endless coastline stretched southward beneath late evening light.

Dinner at the Creekside Restaurant—King Salmon, polenta cakes, Elk Burgers, and warm conversation—marked the first of several memorable evenings there. Later, with waves breaking below the bluff, we fell asleep to the steady rhythm of the Pacific surf.

Fri., May 15 Hoh Rainforest | Kalaloch Lodge

Rain swept across the coast throughout the morning, so we postponed our tidepooling plans and headed inland toward one of the world's great temperate rainforests: the Hoh.

The drive itself told the ecological story of the Olympic Peninsula. We passed a patchwork of recent clearcuts, dense second-growth stands, and scattered remnants of ancient old growth, while beside us the glacier-fed Hoh River wound through the valley in pale turquoise braids. Its striking color comes from finely ground rock flour—glacial sediments eroded from the slopes of Mount Olympus and carried downstream from the icefields high above.

Along the road Amy spotted a group of Roosevelt Elk grazing in a meadow. Soon afterward another herd appeared ahead of us, including numerous cows, several calves, and a young bull whose antlers were still

wrapped in living velvet. Named for President Theodore Roosevelt, Roosevelt Elk are the largest elk in North America and rank among the most iconic mammals of the Olympic Peninsula.

At the Hall of Mosses Amy quickly found another treasure: a Varied Thrush perched in the dim rainforest. Its orange breast glowed against the dark forest while its haunting single-note song echoed through the trees like a distant flute. Few birds better capture the mood of Pacific Northwest old growth.

Before embarking on the trail, we discussed Sitka Spruce, among the largest trees on Earth and historically prized for aircraft construction because of its remarkable strength-to-weight ratio.

Then we entered the rainforest itself.

The Hall of Mosses revealed not simply large trees but an entire suspended ecosystem. Bigleaf Maples arched overhead, their branches draped with mosses, spikemosses, lichens, liverworts, and Licorice Ferns. Curtains of epiphytic moss hung from the canopy, and centuries of accumulated organic matter formed hanging gardens high above the forest floor. In places the rainforest seemed to exist vertically as much as horizontally, with entire communities of plants thriving upon the trunks and branches of other plants.

We moved at “botany pace,” slowing frequently to examine towering Douglas-firs, fallen giants, nurse logs, fungi, and woodpecker-excavated snags. Conversation turned to old-growth ecology and the “OWLS” framework used by foresters and ecologists: Old trees, Woody debris, Layers, and Snags. Every element was on display around us, illustrating the structural complexity that supports the extraordinary biodiversity of temperate rainforests.

The group became fascinated by the hidden fungal networks connecting forest ecosystems underground, sometimes called the “Wood Wide Web.” We discussed Suzanne Simard’s pioneering research as well as the astonishing discoveries made by canopy scientists exploring the rich ecosystems high above the forest floor.

Everywhere, life emerged from decay. Fallen trees nourished new generations while fungi slowly returned wood to soil. Bird’s Nest Fungi, bracket fungi, false morels, and miniature moss forests transformed even small corners of the trail into intricate worlds of their own. Throughout the forest, Pacific Wrens poured forth cascading streams of trills, warbles, whistles, and musical phrases, their astonishingly powerful songs emerging from a bird that hardly weighs more than a walnut.

Rain fell steadily throughout our walk, deepening the greens and intensifying the rainforest atmosphere. Rather than diminishing the experience, the weather completed it.

Back at Kalaloch Lodge some members of the group relaxed while others scanned the Pacific from the bluff. Harlequin Ducks rode the surf below while Brown Pelicans glided low above the waves, using dynamic soaring to travel efficiently along shifting wind gradients.

Then Chris spotted a Sea Otter offshore.

We watched it rise briefly atop the swells before disappearing again among the waves. Sea Otters survive in cold Pacific waters not through blubber but through the densest fur of any mammal. They are also a keystone species whose feeding helps maintain healthy kelp forests by controlling sea urchin populations.

That evening, swallows circled the lodge beneath clearing skies. Barn Swallows and Cliff Swallows nested beneath the eaves while Violet-green Swallows flashed overhead in the evening light. A male Rufous Hummingbird nicknamed “Halo” by the lodge staff repeatedly returned to his favorite perch glowing copper-orange whenever sunlight broke through the clouds.

Another memorable dinner at Kalaloch closed the day while the Pacific darkened beyond the windows. By now, the rainforests, surf, elk, seabirds, and old-growth forests of the Olympic Peninsula had woven themselves into a shared experience that was becoming far richer than any species list.

Sat., May 16 Kalaloch Beach | Big Cedar | Tree of Life

Low tide and improving weather drew us back onto the coast after breakfast at Kalaloch Lodge. Before descending to the beach, we scanned the shoreline and found an exceptional gathering of Black Oystercatchers. Fifteen birds flew together from offshore rocks onto the sand below, adults glowing with bright red bills while younger birds still showed dusky dark coloration near the bill tips.

Nearby, a Red Crossbill fed quietly in a wind-twisted Sitka Spruce shaped like a bonsai by years of coastal storms. These remarkable finches use crossed mandibles to pry seeds from conifer cones and occur in several specialized “types” associated with different tree species. Along the outer Olympic Coast, this bird was likely one of the Sitka Spruce-associated coastal forms.

Just as we reached the beach a Pacific squall swept ashore, sending us scrambling back uphill for shelter beneath a gazebo. There we met Jean, a Quinault elder from the Queets Reservation. She spoke warmly about the canoe traditions of her people and the annual intertribal canoe journeys that continue across the Pacific Northwest today. The storm unexpectedly opened a doorway into the deeper human history of the Olympic coast.

As rain eased, we returned to the beach to explore the wrack line and tidal debris. Dungeness Crab molts littered the sand while nearby sandstone rocks riddled with holes revealed the work of piddocks—burrowing clams capable of grinding chambers into soft stone.

We examined piles of kelp and discussed the ecology of marine macroalgae before discovering countless stranded Velella velella, the remarkable colonial hydrozoans known as “by-the-wind sailors,” each equipped with a tiny translucent sail.

Later we visited Big Cedar, a grove of ancient Western Redcedars hidden within the coastal forest. One especially massive tree, perhaps approaching a thousand years old, still survived despite losing huge sections of trunk and crown to centuries of storms. For Indigenous peoples throughout the Pacific Northwest, cedar functions as a Tree of Life, providing materials for canoes, baskets, clothing, rope, shelter, and ceremony.

There Mary B delighted everyone by discovering a baby Banana Slug clinging to a leaf. These iconic rainforest decomposers recycle fungi and plant matter back into the ecosystem and seem perfectly suited to the damp green world they inhabit.

After a picnic lunch beneath towering Sitka Spruces, we returned to the shore in search of Kalaloch's famous Tree of Life. Along the beach, Hudsonian Whimbrels foraged in the intertidal zone, probing the sand and mud with their long decurved bills. Moments later nearly twenty birds rose together and streamed overhead, calling loudly as they followed the coastline. Offshore, another Sea Otter surfaced among the waves, allowing everyone excellent views this time.

Then we reached the Tree of Life—a Sitka Spruce improbably suspended above an eroded hollow where the soil beneath it has largely disappeared. Somehow the tree continues living despite appearing unsupported, its roots gripping empty air above the beach.

Standing beneath it prompted conversations about sacred trees and world-tree traditions found throughout human cultures, from the Maya Ceiba linking heaven, earth, and the underworld to mythic trees in Norse and Mesopotamian traditions. The Kalaloch tree itself appeared lower and more fragile than during previous visits, slowly surrendering to the Pacific even as it continues to survive.

Back at the lodge, some members of the group relaxed while others wandered nearby rainforest trails through dim green woods draped in mosses. One particularly memorable scene featured a Banana Slug feeding on Oyster Mushrooms atop a fallen log—a perfectly Pacific Northwest moment.

That evening clearing skies illuminated the Pacific in silver and gold outside Kalaloch Lodge. Tomorrow would bring our final day together and one last extraordinary ecosystem: the intertidal zone.

Sun., May 17 Ruby Beach | Bainbridge Ferry | Seattle | SeaTac

Our final morning on the Olympic Peninsula dawned transformed. The storm had vanished, leaving behind crystalline blue skies and air washed clean by rain. Descending toward Ruby Beach, we breathed in the sharp scent of kelp, driftwood, and the Pacific itself.

Near the trail a Hairy Woodpecker fed a loudly begging youngster, another reminder that spring had reached full momentum on the Peninsula.

Then Ruby Beach opened before us.

Huge driftwood logs lay scattered across the shore like matchsticks tossed by winter storms. Beyond them rose sea stacks—isolated towers of rock left behind as relentless Pacific waves slowly erode the surrounding coastline. One sea stack contained a dark archway framing the ocean beyond, and at that exact moment a brilliant male Rufous Hummingbird hovered briefly within it, glowing in the morning light like a tiny spirit of the coast.

Crossing a creek, we entered the intertidal zone.

Here life survives between worlds—submerged twice daily by seawater, then exposed again to sun, wind, and crashing surf. Tidepools revealed astonishing diversity packed into small pockets of habitat. Mussels anchored themselves with remarkably strong byssal threads while Gooseneck Barnacles filtered seawater with feathery appendages.

Anemones bloomed across the rocks in vivid greens and pinks, though these “flowers” were in fact predatory animals armed with stinging cells. Aggregating Anemones formed dense clone colonies that wage slow-motion territorial battles against neighboring colonies.

Sea stars in shades of orange, red, and purple clung to the rocks, apex predators capable of prying open mussel shells using hundreds of tube feet. Chitons hugged wave-battered stone beneath armor-like shell plates while

tiny tidepool sculpins rested nearly invisible among pebbles, capable of changing color to match their surroundings.

All around us came the faint crackling sound of barnacles circulating water through their shells.

Purple Shore Crabs scuttled among the pools while an oversized isopod captured everyone's attention. Resembling a giant pill bug, it was a Sea Slater—a semiterrestrial crustacean related to shrimp and crabs and a close relative of the pill bugs found on land. Sea Slaters spend their lives at the boundary between land and sea, darting across wave-washed rocks and sheltering in crevices to avoid drying out. The intertidal zone felt less like a beach than another planet—harsh, beautiful, and overflowing with specialized life.

Eventually the rising tide forced us back toward the trail. Pelagic Cormorants flushed from a nearby sea stack while Song Sparrows sang among blooming Salmonberry beside the surf.

It was difficult to leave.

As we drove eastward, the miles passed too quickly. One final stop at the Dungeness River Nature Center proved unexpectedly productive. At the feeders, a male Anna's Hummingbird perched in full sunlight, its rose-magenta gorget and crown flashing brilliantly as it turned its head.

Then came two birds that had eluded us throughout the tour. First, a Red-breasted Sapsucker landed briefly on the old railroad trestle above our heads before disappearing in the undulating flight characteristic of woodpeckers. Finally, just as we were preparing to leave, Sue spotted movement high in a cottonwood. Binoculars swung skyward. There, glowing against a backdrop of fresh green leaves and deep blue sky, was a male Western Tanager. Its brilliant yellow body and flame-orange head seemed impossibly bright in the afternoon sun. It was a fitting final addition to the trip list and a satisfying conclusion to our birding.

The ferry crossing back toward Seattle carried us across Puget Sound beneath calm evening skies, gulls wheeling above the wake. Behind us, the Olympic Mountains gradually receded into the distance; ahead, Mount Rainier and the Seattle skyline rose above the horizon. Between wilderness and city, we reflected on a remarkable week in a landscape shaped by glaciers, ocean currents, mountains, and deep time—one still rich in wildlife, abundant in birds, and filled with the ecological connections that make the Olympic Peninsula one of North America's premier natural history destinations.

By the time we reached SeaTac, the journey felt less like a completed itinerary than a shared immersion into one of the world's great ecological strongholds—wild, intricate, and profoundly alive.

Mon., May 18 Departures from SeaTac

By morning our Olympic Peninsula journey had come to an end. Travelers departed from SeaTac carrying muddy boots, rain jackets still faintly scented with salt air and cedar, photographs of whales and mountains, and memories of a remarkable week together.

We had crossed an extraordinary range of landscapes—from inland seas and rugged Pacific shores to temperate rainforests, glacier-fed rivers, and alpine ridges high above the clouds. Along the way we shared close encounters with Orcas, Humpback Whales, American Black Bears, Roosevelt Elk, Olympic Marmots, Sea Otters, intertidal creatures seemingly borrowed from science fiction, and more than one hundred species of birds. We wandered wave-sculpted beaches, crossed wildflower-filled meadows, stood beneath twisted Pacific Madrones and towering Sitka Spruces, and entered rainforests draped in mosses, ferns, and lichens displaying every shade of green. We listened to the songs of Pacific Wrens, watched American Dippers feed their fledglings, admired Harlequin Ducks in crashing whitewater, marveled at Banana Slugs, and traded stories and questions along forest trails and around dinner tables.

Yet what I will remember most is the spirit of curiosity, kindness, and enthusiasm that each traveler brought to the journey. The Olympic Peninsula provided the setting, but it was the people who made the experience special.

Thank you, Sue, Chris, Emily, Mary B, Mary vB, Jeff, and Des, for your good company, sharp eyes, thoughtful questions, and willingness to embrace whatever weather and wildlife the Peninsula offered. I hope our paths cross again on a future adventure.

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