Oregon: Mountain Peaks to Pacific Beaches with Naturalist Journeys July 25- August 1, 2026 | Trip Report

by David Jaffe

Guided by David Jaffe and Chris Newton

Our group included Jimmy, Eileen, Karen, Susan, Jim, Melissa, John, Estelle, Patti, Terry and Lynn

An adventure through western Oregon is a journey through one of the most ecologically diverse corners of the Pacific Northwest. Here snow-capped peaks, old-growth forests, high-elevation prairies, and windswept Pacific shorelines sit within a few hours' drive of one another. Over the course of this trip, we traveled a transect from the volcanic heights of Mt. Hood, through the oak savannas and numerous National Wildlife Refuges of the Willamette Valley, up into the fog-drenched noble fir forests of Mary's Peak, and finally out to the dynamic, rocky intertidal world of the Oregon coast at Yaquina Bay, Cannon Beach, and Haystack Rock. Each of these habitats supports its own distinct community of birds and wildlife, from Mountain Chickadees and Canada Jays in the subalpine forests to dusky Canada Geese and streaked Horned Larks in the valley refuges, to Tufted Puffins and Pigeon Guillemots offshore. Few regions in North America offer so much habitat diversity in such close proximity making for an extraordinary opportunity to understand how geology, climate, and elevation shape the distribution of species across a landscape.

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Beyond the birds and wildlife, this route carries us through layers of Oregon's human history as well. Our stop at the Oregon Trail Museum grounded us in the story of the thousands of emigrants who crossed half a continent to reach the fertile Willamette Valley, a migration that reshaped the land we explored in the refuges and farmland below Mt. Hood. The valley itself was long stewarded by the Kalapuya people, whose traditional use of fire helped maintain the oak savanna and prairie habitats that refuges like Baskett Slough and Finley now work to preserve. And along the coast, the dramatic sea stacks of Haystack Rock and the estuary at Yaquina Bay reflect both a deep Indigenous fishing and gathering heritage and the more recent history of maritime trade, lighthouses, and coastal settlement. Together, this trip offers not just an outstanding birding and natural history experience, but a chance to see how Oregon's wild places and its cultural past are deeply, and often beautifully, intertwined.

Saturday, July 25 – Arrivals in Portland | Mt. Hood's Timberline Lodge

Since nearly everyone had arrived in Portland early, Chris and I decided to offer a bonus birdwatching session on the morning of day one. We made our way to Chinook Landing Marine Park, and right out of the gate, two Ospreys soared overhead toward the mighty Columbia River. Continuing on to a nearby overlook, we watched a pair of Black-capped Chickadees working busily through the thick deciduous canopy lining the riverbank. Moments later, all eyes turned skyward as a Great Egret glided past, far higher than the Ospreys had flown.

Walking from the overlook toward the lake, we were treated to exquisite views of a Rufous-sided Towhee, perched right out in the open atop a fence rail—no obscuring branches, no skulking in the underbrush. Turning around, we caught a Double-crested Cormorant skimming low across the water. On our way back to the van, we capped off the morning with one final sighting through the scope: a Red-tailed Hawk surveying the landscape from atop an electrical tower.

After a wonderful lunch at Dadash Turkish Grill, we drove about an hour east toward Mount Hood. Along the way, we stopped at Wildwood Recreation Area—a perfect introduction to the Pacific Northwest in every sense. The trail hugs the Salmon River as it winds through a mature second-growth forest, home to the trees so characteristic of this temperate rainforest ecosystem. There, we talked watersheds,

studied maps, and enjoyed a wonderful look at a Pacific Wren. After a beautiful walk through the woods, we continued up to Timberline Lodge, majestic and grand at the base of Mount Hood. A National Historic Landmark, and rightfully so—the woodwork and wrought iron are stunning, and the stonework is nothing short of incredible. Jim remarked that it was already a trip highlight for him, and this was still only day one!

Before dinner, we gathered outside in the crisp mountain air for our introductory meeting and reviewed our first bird list of the trip. The evening closed with a wonderful meal in the Cascade Dining Room, where we marveled at the lodge's massive seven-ton support beams and caught glimpses of the 11,239-foot volcano looming beyond—its summit occasionally breaking through the fast-moving clouds. A truly perfect way to end a remarkable first day.

Sunday, July 26 – Birding in the Shadow of Mt. Hood

Today began beneath clear skies and those who rose early and ventured outdoors were rewarded with spectacular views: Mount Hood standing in its full glory to the north, and to the south, Mount Jefferson's snow-clad peaks glowing in the soft morning light. Between the lodge and Mount Jefferson, scattered "seas of clouds" drifted below, with coniferous forest emerging here and there through the mist. It was a stunning start to the first full day of our Oregon Mountains to Beach adventure.

After breakfast, we gathered and made our way to the base of the Magic Mile Chairlift. Once everyone was loaded onto the chairs, a brief ten-minute ride carried us above the treeline, closer to Mount Hood than any of us had ever been. To the south, ridgeline after ridgeline of forested slopes rolled toward the horizon, an endless wave of green.

Wandering near the top of the lift, we discovered several species of wildflowers not yet blooming at lower elevations, among them Pussytoes, Davidson's Penstemon, and Partridge Foot. After soaking in the view from the summit, we began our slow descent, pausing often to marvel at the sweeping vistas surrounding us.

We returned to the lodge after a truly exquisite morning in the high country. Following a short break, we headed down the hill to a restaurant for lunch before setting off on our afternoon excursion along the Salmon River.

Chris and I dropped everyone at the Salmon River trailhead, then shuttled one vehicle about a mile and a half upriver. We all reunited at the river and wandered through a breathtaking old-growth forest. In a

word: majestic. This forest offered such tranquility and beauty — what a gift it was to be immersed in it! Upon return to the lodge, and after another short break, we met for our bird list and another incredible dinner.

Monday, July 27 – Sunrise at Trillium Lake| End of Trail Museum | Willamette Falls | Baskett Slough | Corvallis

As the early morning sun lit up Mount Jefferson, ten intrepid folks joined Chris and me for a pre-breakfast excursion out to Trillium Lake. Our two main targets: good birdwatching and a mirror-like reflection of Mount Hood on the water.

We were rewarded with both! Not only did we catch an exquisite reflection, but we were also treated to a stunning display of mist glowing on the lake as the sun slowly crested the horizon.

As for birds, we had the Corvid trio on our drive down to the lake, with sightings of the Common Raven, Steller's Jay, and Canada Jay. Then, the moment we stepped out of the vehicle, we heard the unmistakable call of the Pileated Woodpecker.

We also enjoyed good looks of the Chestnut-backed Chickadee, a female Common Yellowthroat, Spotted Sandpiper, Hermit Warbler, and a Northern Yellow Warbler. After some careful listening and searching, we all got nice views of a Vaux's Swift darting quickly across the clear blue sky. As tough as it was to tear ourselves away, we managed to leave by 7:30 AM, just in time for breakfast at the lodge at eight.

After breakfast, our first stop was the End of the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center in Oregon City, to learn more about the Oregon Trail and its remarkable historical significance. Before heading inside, we wandered through the outdoor exhibits, where the first bird we spotted was an immature Cooper's Hawk making off with a rodent in its talons. As we searched for the hawk and made our way into the large open grassy area, we all looked up to see a flock of roughly fifty White Pelicans soaring high overhead in a great, sweeping group. What a surprise!

After spending some time observing these birds, we headed into the museum, which turned out to be engaging, with an especially inspiring film. The Oregon Trail is one of those pieces of American history you learn about in grade school, but unless you're a history buff, it's easy to underestimate just how vital it was to the development of the Northwest — or how perilous the journey truly was.

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From the museum, we grabbed lunch in Oregon City, followed by a quick stop at Willamette Falls. Known as the "Birth of Oregon Industry," it's the second-largest waterfall in the United States by volume, surpassed only by Niagara.

After our time at the falls, we set off in search of the Fender's Blue butterfly at Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge — and what a success story this is! Fender's blue butterfly is endemic to Oregon's Willamette Valley. In 2000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed it as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, when only thirty-two sites were known and its habitat continued to shrink. Over the past twenty years, the USFWS has worked tirelessly with landowners, conservation agencies, businesses, and other partners across the region to protect the species. Today, Fender's Blue butterfly occupies twice the acreage it did when first listed as endangered.

At Baskett Slough, we found ourselves immersed in an entirely different habitat — an oak forest bordering open grassland which was noticeably warmer than the high mountain air we'd experienced over the past couple of days around Mount Hood.

Though we came up empty-handed on our target butterfly, the shift in habitat and climate rewarded us with our first Northern Harrier and Western Wood-Pewees of the trip. It was a lovely way to close out another wonderful day in the field.

After a little downtime at the hotel, we all reconvened for a short walk to a nearby restaurant to share another meal together.

Tuesday, July 28 – Birding the Willamette Valley

After breakfast at the hotel, we made the short drive to Finley National Wildlife Refuge. Our first stop was the Mill Hill overlook, where—before we'd even stepped out of the car—an acorn woodpecker greeted us from the information sign. A lovely welcome!

Looking out over the pond, we spotted our first Black Phoebes and our first Bank Swallow of the trip. After spending some time taking in the landscape and the diversity of birds, we piled back into the

vehicles and headed to the Woodpecker Loop. This trail wound through beautiful oak forest interspersed with open grassland, offering wonderful habitat diversity. Along the way, we enjoyed great looks at Cedar Waxwings, California Scrub-jays, and Western Tanagers.

Our next stop was the Homer Campbell Marsh Boardwalk. We followed it out to the bird blind, where we turned up more waterfowl, including Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, several Pied-billed Grebes, and a female Hooded Merganser.

We found a wonderful restaurant for lunch between our two refuges of the day. Then on to Ankeny NWR where our first stop was the Pintail Marsh pullout. We set up the scopes and got excellent looks at a nice variety of ducks—Wood Ducks, Cinnamon Teals, and Gadwalls—along with Short-billed Dowitchers and Greater Yellowlegs. A very productive stop indeed.

Our final destination at the refuge was the Rail Trail, known for its waterfowl. However, the first bird we laid eyes on was a Bewick's Wren, which we spotted as we walked through a riparian forest of Cottonwoods and other deciduous vegetation. We continued along the boardwalk through the forested area, where some in the group were lucky enough to spot a Brown Creeper.

As we closed our day at Ankeny, we also came to the close of our time in the Willamette Valley. Tomorrow we would make our way to the coast…but first the bird list and another wonderful meal in Corvallis!

Wednesday, July 29 – Mary's Peak | Yaquina Head Lighthouse | Oregon Coast | Garibaldi

Following our final breakfast in the Willamette Valley, we loaded up the vans and set out early for the coast, our first stop being Mary's Peak. As we climbed toward the summit, we rose above the clouds — the Cascades still visible to the east, and the higher ridges of the Coast Range emerging to the west. Along this gorgeous drive, we also flushed a few Sooty Grouse, along with a covey of about ten of the smallest and cutest Mountain Quail one could hope to see!

Shortly after arriving, and following a brief photo session to take in the landscape, we set off up the gentle grade toward the top of Mary's Peak. Along the trail we enjoyed good looks of several Red-breasted Nuthatches and Chestnut-backed Chickadees, plus our first sighting of the trip of a Hammond's Flycatcher. From the summit, the views stretched in every direction — the cloud-draped coast to the

east and several volcanoes of the Cascades to the west, emerging through the clouds. After soaking in the scenery and snapping our obligatory summit group-selfie, we began our unhurried descent, some of us retracing our steps and others opting for a steeper route through the forest.

As we descended the road in the vehicles, we made a quick stop near the campground, where David pointed out a small patch of thimbleberry — a treat for anyone willing to sample a wild, sweet berry!

Heading toward Newport for lunch, we paused briefly at the Harris Covered Bridge, where Chris shared a few facts and stories before we pressed on toward the mighty Pacific.

After lunch, we made our way to Yaquina Head Lighthouse, where we got our first sight — and scent — of the ocean. The headland was home to a spectacular seabird colony, with thousands of Common Murres and Brandt's Cormorants blanketing the rocky outcrops. We had excellent looks at Pigeon Guillemots and a few Pelagic Cormorants-rounding out a truly quintessential Oregon coastline scene. Along the shoreline, roughly sixty harbor seals lounged in the sun. It was hard to tear ourselves away from such a lovely stretch of coast, but the time had come to head north to our hotel for the evening.

After a beautiful drive along the Oregon coastline, we arrived in Garibaldi, checked in, and had a bit of downtime before gathering for dinner and our first sunset over the Pacific. Sublime!

Thursday, July 30 – Lewis and Clark NHP | Nehalem State Park | Tillamook Creamery

After breakfast at a locals' favorite in Garibaldi, we headed up the coast to Lewis and Clark National Historic Park, where we spent the morning tracing the footsteps of the expedition and birding our way toward the Lewis and Clark River. The trail wound through a mature forest, home to massive old spruce alongside venerable Western Red Cedars and Western Hemlocks. That mix of species and ages spoke to a forest with real ecological integrity — a welcome contrast to the tree farms we'd passed on our way from the Willamette Valley out to the coast.

After exploring the trails and the river, we made our way back up to the replica of Fort Clatsop, where Lewis and Clark and their party of 29 weathered four wet, cold winter months at the end of their cross-country "Voyage of Discovery".

From there, we refueled at a nearby restaurant ahead of an afternoon of adventure at Nehalem State Park, where our target bird was the Snowy Plover.

Within minutes of arriving, we were winding through the dunes and out onto the sands of the Pacific coast, on the hunt for our quarry. We turned south along the beach, dunes on our left and surf on our right, with crashing waves, dune grass rustling in the breeze, and a clear blue sky setting the scene beautifully. After scanning a group of gulls with our scopes, Jimmy spotted our prize: a Snowy Plover resting in full sunlight, clearly visible through the glass. We took in some satisfying close looks before heading back to the vehicles and pointing them toward the Tillamook Creamery.

We spent about half an hour there, wandering the exhibits, sampling cheeses, and picking out pints of ice cream — which our dinner restaurant would keep frozen and bring back out for dessert while we compiled the day's bird list. All in all, a perfect way to cap off a wonderful day.

Friday, July 31 - Exploring the Oregon Coast

We left Garibaldi with time to spare, aiming to catch Cannon Beach at low tide. Our goals were twofold: a morning of tide pooling around the iconic Haystack Rock, and a chance to spot Tufted Puffins – and we succeeded on both fronts! Tufted Puffins were abundant—some wheeling through the air, others perched on land. We also got wonderful looks at Harlequin Ducks and Surf Scoters and some spectacular tidepools. It was a sublime morning altogether: strolling the beach, listening to the surf, feeling the sun and a light breeze on our faces—about as good a start to the day as one could ask for. We capped it off with brunch at a restaurant whose 'larger-than-life' windows framed the Pacific in full view.

From there, we headed north to Ecola State Park. The trail down to the first viewpoint rewarded us with a commanding vista of Cannon Beach to the south—Haystack Rock unmistakable in the distance, waves rolling onto the sand below. We then made our way to the other side of the headland for a look at the Tillamook Lighthouse, perched dramatically on its offshore rock.

Beyond more sightings of birds we'd already come to know, we were treated to excellent views of a large raft of Surf Scoters and a group of Steller Sea Lions hauled out beneath the lighthouse. From the viewpoint, we piled back into our vehicles and wound through gorgeous older forest en route to the Indian Beach trailhead, where we did some more exploring.

There was something deeply relaxing about simply being at the beach, surrounded by so many others clearly savoring the same joy. From there, we continued on to Klootchy Creek County Park, home to a Sitka Spruce Tree Heritage area. Even before we'd left the parking lot, massive trees and one enormous stump signaled what awaited us. It was deeply impressive. A short, flat loop trail carried us through breathtaking first-growth forest.

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Once our walk through this remarkable forest ended, David led an appreciation circle. He opened by reflecting on the beauty of receiving a handwritten letter, then asked everyone to imagine how it might feel for someone to receive one from *them*. He read a brief passage by Terry Tempest Williams on letter-writing as an act of tenderness. For the circle itself, each person began by selecting a notecard from the table, then presented it to another group member along with something they appreciated about that person, or a way they'd made the trip richer. Once everyone had shared, David offered a final reading on the value—and growing importance—of sharing nature with others. A few more voices rose to express gratitude to the group before we closed. Then after the circle, we returned to Garibaldi for a bit of downtime before our final celebratory dinner at a locally owned restaurant just down the road.

Saturday, August 1 – Tour Conclusion and Departures

Our final morning arrived with a gentle drizzle accompanying the packing of our bags, a striking departure from the abundant blue skies and warmth that had graced our journey thus far. This soft rain, however, served as a beautiful, fitting reminder of why the temperate rainforest thrives in this part of the world, underscoring our immense fortune in having enjoyed so many ideal days for birdwatching, hiking through verdant forests, and lingering by the sea. In its own quiet way, it felt like the perfect, poetic conclusion to an extraordinary expedition. After a final breakfast, Chris and I prepared for our divergent paths: his van of companions heading back to the Hyatt, while my group departed directly for the airport. Before heading out, while still at the restaurant, we exchanged heartfelt farewells and wishes for safe travels, already anticipating our next shared adventure.

Trip Report Photos *– **Page 1**: White Bark Pine, Mount Hood (Chris)* ***Page 2:*** *Mount Hood viewed from Trillium Lake (David), Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel (Eileen)* ***Page 3:*** *Welcome dinner at the Timberline Lodge (David), Group on Mount Hood (David)* ***Page 4:*** *Forest view along the Salmon River trail (Eileen), Group on Salmon River Trail (David)* ***Page 5:*** *Willamette Falls (Chris)* ***Page 6:*** *Birding at Yaquina Head State Park (David), Common Murre colony (Eileen)* ***Page 7:*** *Nehalem Bay State Park beach walk (David), Tufted Puffins (Eileen)* ***Page 8:*** *Tidepool view at Haystack Rock (David), Haystack Rock (Chris)* ***Page 9:*** *Our great group! (More trip photos can be viewed here.)*