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Naturalist Journeys Trip Report Washington Winter Birding February 16-22, 2013

Guide: Woody Wheeler, with four participants: Bill, Denise, Richard and R.T.

Trip Report by Woody Wheeler; photos by Woody Wheeler, and trip participants RT Cox and Denise Drucker.

Sat. Feb. 16, 2013 – Seattle to Port Townsend, WA

Brilliant sunset at Kah Tai Wetlands, Port Townsend, WA – photo by Denise Drucker



(stay tuned on this count) making its signature broken flute call from its perch from a snag overlooking the park. A silvery glow illuminated the Hood Canal Bridge that we would soon cross to the Olympic Peninsula.

We then crossed over Hood Canal and drove to historic Port Townsend. On the edge of town we walked into Kah Tai Wetlands to search for waterfowl in the waning light. We were rewarded there not only with waterfowl, but with a spectacular sunset. Ruddy Ducks, Common Goldeneyes, Gadwalls, Mallards, and Hooded Mergansers comprised our waterfowl list for this stop. In addition, we found a Pie-billed Grebe and heard the unmistakable “oinking” of a Virginia Rail.

Right: Group at historic Bishop Hotel in Port Townsend, WA

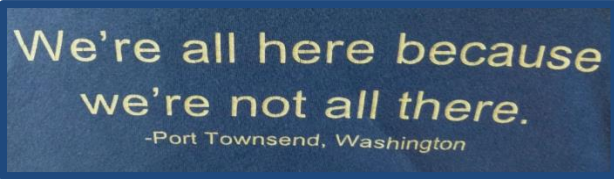
Promptly, even slightly before our designated meeting time, this group was ready. We left the airport under sunny skies (yes that’s right) and temperatures in the low 50s and drove north along Seattle’s scenic waterfront en route to the Edmonds ferry. Once aboard, we climbed to the top deck of the ferry and commenced birding on Puget Sound in fine weather. Soon we spotted Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants, Surf Scoters, Western Grebes, Glaucous-winged, Mew and Bonaparte’s gulls.

We exited the ferry in Kitsap County, where after a short drive we were birding again at Salisbury County Park on Hood Canal. Here we found our first Red-breasted Mergansers, Pigeon Guillemots; Horned and Red-necked grebes, and Buffleheads along with our first Bald Eagle



We checked into the historic and charming Bishop Hotel in Port Townsend's ornate Victorian-themed downtown district— just a four-block walk from a fabulous seafood meal at the Fountain Café to put an exclamation point on the first day of our journey.

Sun., Feb. 17, 2013 – Port Townsend and Marrowstone Island Area



Partly sunny skies greeted us this morning as we departed from our Victorian B & B. Just a half-hour east of Port Townsend, we arrived at our first birding spot: Oak Bay County Park. A variety of ducks and gulls were on display there, including: Glaucous-winged and Glaucous/Western hybrid and Mew gulls; Northern Pintails, American Wigeons, Buffleheads, Green-winged Teal, Gadwalls and

Red-breasted Mergansers.

Next we made an impromptu stop at Isthmus Bay where Indian and Marrowstone Island merge. There we first heard then saw a Greater Yellowlegs and a Pileated Woodpecker. Richard found the journey's first Common Raven and we heard a Steller's Jay calling repeatedly. We carried on to Nordland and its charming general store prior to entering Fort Flagler. Once inside this former military facility, we parked near a long sand spit pointing toward a nearby island with views of Port Townsend and the Olympic Mountains behind. As soon as we parked we realized that our car was surrounded by hundreds of shorebirds standing in grassy areas beside us. Scores of Dunlins, Black-bellied Plovers and Sanderlings were in this mixed crowd.



Stopping at historically-preserved general store, Nordland, WA

As we hiked along the spit, a pair of Harlequin Ducks made a showy appearance. A group of Brant soon followed, hauling out at the end of the spit where we enjoyed excellent views through the spotting scope. Thirty Harbor Seals stretched out in a long line and stared at us from 40 yards offshore. We reluctantly departed from this haven for shorebirds and marine mammals to have lunch in Port Townsend.

Following another delicious meal with fresh vegetables, homemade bread and good coffee, we set out for Fort Worden State Park. On the way there, I asked if it reminded anyone of a movie. Without hesitating, Bill said it looked like the place where an Officer and a Gentleman was filmed. Indeed it was. The same military base is now a prime spot for birding: especially for seabirds. In unusually sunny, mild weather, we watched a parade of seabirds floating by in the strong tidal currents in the Straits of Juan de Fuca. Among them were: Surf Scoters, Red-breasted Mergansers, and all three Washington species of cormorants: Brandt's, Double-crested, and Pelagic.



Left: Denise & Lori beach-birding, Port Townsend

We then walked onto a pier near the Marine Science Center and found Long-tailed Ducks, a Life Bird for several in our group, and a Pacific Loon. To top off our afternoon, Lori “pished in” a mixed flock of woodland birds including: Black-capped & Chestnut-backed chickadees; Ruby-crowned & Golden-crowned kinglets with their crests a-flaring, and a Pacific Wren. All were impressed by Lori’s pishing prowess!

The remainder of the afternoon was spent exploring Port Townsend, its many book stores, art galleries and docks for those who wished to continue birding. The latter group turned up the journey’s first Belted Kingfisher, an attractive female in good late afternoon light. To top off the day, we feasted on

fresh seafood on the waterfront and retired to our cozy B & B.

Presidents Day Mon., Feb. 18, 2013 – Port Angeles, Sequim Areas

Today the rain shadow was in full effect. The Olympic Mountains wick out moisture from marine air masses that blow off the Pacific and dump up to 200 inches on the south side of the range, resulting in a rain shadow on the northern Olympic Peninsula where annual rainfall averages between 14-18 inches. Despite rain in the forecast, we never felt a drop of rain the entire day! Our first stop was John Wayne Marina, named after the actor who once docked a boat here, appropriately named “The Wild Goose.” As soon as we parked a Varied Thrush perched in a small tree, fully illuminated. Then we enjoyed good views of Long-tailed Ducks and Surf Scoters, including one female that we watched swallow three shellfish before paddling off nonchalantly.

Our next destination was Ediz Hook, a long sand and rock spit that forms the harbor of Port Angeles. The harbor side is a good spot for wintering seabirds. Harbor Seals like it here too. We saw at least 30 of them basking on log rafts floating in the harbor. Several Harlequin Ducks made an appearance here, as did the first Black Oystercatcher and Ruddy Turnstone of our journey.



Harlequin Duck Pair and Black Turnstone - Ediz Hook, Port Angeles, WA (Turnstone photo by RT Cox)

Close to the end of the spit, Richard found a large flock of Black Turnstones mixed with a few Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderling. Just offshore we found several Marbled Murrelets along with several Brant, a Black-bellied Plover and a majestic male Common Merganser.

Although it was hard to summon the motivation to leave Ediz Hook, we took a lunch break at an excellent soup and sandwich place in Port Angeles. In the early afternoon, we drove a short distance to the Dungeness Spit trailhead. This 4.5-mile long spit is one of the world's largest, and hosts such a large variety of birds that it was designated by Audubon as an Important Bird Area. We hiked the mile to the Spit through a mature naturally-regenerated coniferous forest, stopping to identify a few of the Pacific Northwest's iconic species. Just before descending to the spit from a magnificent viewpoint, we paused by several bird feeders to observe Fox Sparrows, Spotted Towhees, a Red-breasted

Nuthatch and another Varied Thrush.

Left: Basking in sunshine on Dungeness Spit, Sequim, WA



Once on the spit, a large expanse of the Straits of Juan de Fuca was on one side and a more protected shallow bay on the other. Red-throated Loons, Red-breasted Mergansers, Pelagic Cormorants and White-winged Scoters appeared on the Strait side while Green-winged Teal, American Wigeons and Buffleheads were on the protected side. A Bald Eagle and several Northern Flickers looked on from the forested headlands.

Buoyed by this experience and the continuing good weather, we pressed on to one more stop while we still had daylight: Dungeness River Audubon Center. Earlier in my career, I helped establish this nature center. Now I enjoy taking people there. On the way to the

Center, we found a Peregrine Falcon perched majestically atop a tall snag. Upon arriving at the Center, we visited the bird feeders and a unique bird bath with water flowing across the top of a rock. This water feature attracted Anna's Hummingbirds who came to drink. It made for a spectacular show!



Left: Anna's Hummingbird on rock fountain – Dungeness River Audubon Center, Sequim, WA photo by RT Cox

We strolled over Railroad Bridge on a former logging railroad route that has been transformed to a pedestrian, bicycle and horse trail. The trail enters the forest at the mid-canopy level, providing a great perspective for birding. As the sun set, we walked back over the bridge and heard the electronic tones of an American Dipper. Soon afterward we all watched the Dipper in the fast-flowing waters of the Dungeness River. A sumptuous seafood dinner and relaxing night followed at Port Townsend.

Tues., Feb. 19, 2013 – Port Townsend to Whidbey Island and LaConner

Better Living Through Coffee could be a slogan for Seattle. Instead it is the name of a coffee shop overhanging the Straits of Juan de Fuca in downtown Port Townsend. You can literally bird out the window of this coffee shop and see such species as the federally threatened Marbled Murrelet in the deep waters I refer to as "Alcid Alley."

Well caffeinated with strong, rich coffee, we boarded the ferry to Whidbey Island. Perched on the upper deck of the bow, we had brief looks at Red-necked Grebe, Marbled Murrelet, Pigeon Guillemot as well as an exciting look at a brown-toned Northern Sea Lion that almost rubbed up against the ferry.



Right: Mt. Baker looms over Straits of Juan de Fuca – photo by RT Cox

Left: RT and Bill sort through 3 species of cormorants on Whidbey Island; lower right, Northern Shrike at Crockett Lake refuge



Once on the Whidbey Island shore, we scoped an old dock platform where all three species of cormorants perched, providing us with a clear, well-lit view. Denise spotted the first Northern Harrier of the trip, a female perched on a piling. We continued inland where Bill spotted a Northern Shrike.

On the way to Coupeville a Ring-necked Pheasant flew directly across the road in front of our van. We paused to look at an especially large glacial erratic boulder near town before heading through the quaint tourist town of Coupeville. After another delicious lunch at a waterfront

café, we paused at Penn Cove, where we found more Black Turnstones.

Right: Denise surveys Deception Pass

After a short drive to the north end of Whidbey Island, we entered Deception Pass State Park. At West Beach we found more Black Oystercatchers on small rocky islands. RT spotted a distant Peregrine Falcon in good lighting. Denise's running Bald Eagle count was up to 35 by the end of the day as we reached



our hotel in LaConner. A fine salmon dinner at Seeds Restaurant capped off another fine day of birding in majestic scenery and again, in excellent weather.

Wed., Feb. 20, 2013 – Skagit River Delta (aka Skagit Flats)

Shortly after a breakfast of fresh fruit, granola and yoghurt, we set out to visit nearby refuges in Skagit Flats – all located within 20 miles of our lodge. This tour is low on driving, but high on birds and other natural wonders.

Immediately, the trip Bald Eagle numbers started to climb rapidly. Two Black Cottonwood trees near the town of Edison contained 37 Bald Eagles. We did well with other raptors too, such as Rough-legged Hawks, American Kestrel and our first Merlins, spotted in Edison. While sharing a homemade cinnamon roll at the Edison Bakery we saw our first Eurasian Collared Dove – a species that was not found in western Washington a decade ago.



Bald Eagles fill Black Cottonwood Trees outside of Edison, WA



After lunch in LaConner, we went south to Fir Island and the delta of the North Fork of the Skagit River. Here we found our first owl of the trip, a Short-eared Owl. On the way back, Denise made a remarkable discovery: an American Bittern eating fish underneath a clutter of driftwood logs above a tidal channel of water. How she spotted this Bittern, we still don't know!



Left: Short-eared Owl, Skagit Delta, WA

In the late afternoon, we found more Short-eared Owls, including one perched at close range. At dusk, we took a scenic route home hoping to encounter Snow Geese. It worked! Just outside of Conway, we came upon 6,000 Snow Geese feeding on a farm field. As we continued on rural back roads to LaConner, we found another Short-eared Owl, and sorted through flocks of Trumpeter Swans until we finally found three Tundra Swans mixed in with them-- a fitting way to conclude a fine day in Skagit Flats.



Snow Geese carpet farm fields - Conway, WA

Thurs. Feb. 21, 2013 – Boundary Bay and Reifel Refuge, British Columbia

Today we headed north for a full day of birding in BC's Fraser Valley. Due to the vast areas of snowy, frozen terrain north and east of Vancouver, the Fraser concentrates big numbers of owls, raptors, swans, geese, waterfowl and shorebirds. Boundary Bay was our first stop. When we started walking on the dike at Boundary Bay and saw our first Snowy Owl, the rain and wind picked up considerably. Within 20 minutes, the weather calmed and became dry and sunny for the rest of the day. Outstanding owling and other birding ensued.

Boundary Bay yielded a total of 12 Snowy Owls and one Short-eared Owl along with other species, like Merlin, Red-tailed, Rough-legged and Northern Harrier hawks. Following a coffee stop in the bustling suburb of Ladner, we were delayed for our lunch stop by Sandhill Cranes that blocked the entrance to the refuge. Several Black-crowned Night Herons detained us further until we finally made it to the cozy wood-heated shelter the refuge provides for picnicking. After lunch, Reifel Refuge continued to work its magic, presenting Wood Ducks, 3 Saw-whet Owls (the first spotted by Denise), Evening Grosbeak that Bill found, and Ring-necked Ducks that swam toward us in a beautiful formation. We lingered and savored this magnificently beautiful and birdy refuge on an island in the Fraser Delta.

Right: One of 12 Snowy Owls at Boundary Bay, BC

Toward dusk, acting on a tip from another birder, we headed back to the Boundary Bay area to search for a Long-eared Owl. Although we did not find this owl, we did find another – a Barn Owl; and also found our first warbler of the journey: a Yellow-rumped "Audubon's" Warbler. As the sun set, we departed British Columbia, satisfied with an awesome day.

Four species of owls, well over 100 Bald Eagles, and more than a dozen new species for our journey were added to the list. We celebrated at the Boundary Bay Brewery in Bellingham.





Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Sandhill Crane and Fox Sparrow – all at Reifel Refuge, BC

Fri., Feb. 22, 2013 – Return to Seattle and flights home

On our final morning, we did a bit of car birding on the way to Seattle, pausing at two Nature Conservancy preserves and a Wildlife refuge. A huge flock of Snow Geese lifted suddenly at one of the Conservancy preserves, creating a magnificent spectacle and a loud chorus of geese calls, leaving a lasting impression of our journey. The rest of the drive through rural coastal and farming areas eventually led us to Seattle, where everyone made their connections in plenty of time.

In summary, we saw:

- 111 species of birds
- 338 Bald Eagles
- 4 species of owls, including 12 Snowy Owls
- 4 species of mammals, including two species of marine mammals
- Thousands of Snow Geese and Trumpeter Swans

The weather was dry and sunny except for two mornings! As a flyer we picked up at our hotel in LaConner said: “One of Washington’s most spectacular events is the return of the migrating birds to the Skagit Valley.” The same could be said for most of the areas we visited on this journey, and we were there to experience this winter spectacle to the fullest extent.



Left: Wood Duck, Reifel Refuge, BC

For this tour, a contribution was made to The Trumpeter Swan Society

www.trumpeterswansociety.org

in support and with recognition for the work they do in the Pacific Northwest, and nationwide, on behalf of swans, wetlands and waterfowl.

We plan to repeat this great journey in the winter of 2014, contact Naturalist Journeys for details!