



Washington's Olympic Peninsula
Participants: Al, Ann, Don, Connie, Pat, and Milt
June 10-18, 2017



GUIDE
Woody Wheeler

Day One: Arrive in Seattle; Jack Block Park; Dinner at Salty's on Alki



Al & Pat at Jack Block Park with Seattle skyline behind

Our first arrivals were Al and Pat from Memphis and Austin respectively. We had lunch together prior to setting out on a birding/urban exploration of West Seattle. After crossing the West Seattle bridge over Seattle's industrial port area along the Duwamish River, we entered Jack Block Park. It's inauspicious entry across railroad tracks, along chain link fences with scrap metal yards behind, belies the impressive park that lies beyond its gritty exterior.

Restored from being a former hazardous waste site, Jack Block Park boasts spectacular views of Elliot Bay and downtown Seattle, along with densely vegetated walkways, a restored beach and dock areas. It is a fun and fascinating place to stroll. Birds and marine mammals can be found here too, such as the Bald Eagle, Osprey, Pigeon Guillemot, Anna's Hummingbird, Steller's Jay, and Caspian Terns we encountered this afternoon. Harbor Seals cruised just offshore in a calm, contemplative fashion.

From here we continued along Alki Beach, home of Seattle's original Native American settlement, the Duwamish village where Chief Seattle resided. A group of Native American's paddled by in Elliot Bay, creating a historic throw-back moment with the modern skyline of Seattle behind them. We circled the Peninsula, taking in views of Puget Sound along the way before heading back to the hotel.





There we picked up our remaining guests and returning for dinner at Salty's on Alki. This kicked off our week-long adventure in style, with fresh seafood and a backdrop of Elliot Bay, Downtown Seattle and the Olympic Mountains to the west.

Day 2: Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge; Hoquiam Ponds; Lake Quinault Lodge

We left the airport hotel bright and early for Nisqually Refuge under partly cloudy skies and mild temperatures. By the time we reached the refuge, the clouds began parting, until we were walking in full sun and 70-degree weather.

Early in our walk a Black-tailed Deer crossed the board walk 25 yards ahead of us and two young Great Horned Owls alternately perched, preened and pounced on some unseen prey. Two Bullocks Orioles came into view in the sunshine atop Black Cottonwood trees. Yellow and Common Yellowthroat Warblers sang and perched nearby. Cedar Waxwing were everywhere in their impressive plumage.



We hiked to the end of the lengthy raised board walk over the restored tidal wetlands. At the end, where it reaches Puget Sound, a cloud of 40+ Great Blue Herons arose and flew southward, accompanied by a single American White Pelican and followed by a mature Bald Eagle. This was a spectacle to behold.

After a long satisfying walk at Nisqually refuge, we had a picnic lunch at Tolmie Point State Park under tall evergreen trees.

We then drove south to Olympia and west to the timber/shipping twin cities of Aberdeen and Hoquiam. Just west of Hoquiam we stopped at the city sewage ponds to look for waterfowl and other species. We found Gadwall, both species of Scaup and three species of gulls here.

It was then on to Lake Quinault Lodge, nestled in temperate old-growth forest along a beautiful glacially-carved lake. We rested, caught up on our checklists outside on the deck overlooking the lake, and watched a series of feeders frequented by as many as six Rufous Hummingbirds at a time.



Another outstanding seafood dinner followed. Woody read about the role of Teddy and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in creating Olympic National Park as we dined at the very table where FDR sat in 1938 during a park dedication event.

As the sunset added orange tones to the sky above and water below of Lake Quinault, we returned to our rooms in the historic lodge.

Day 3: World's Largest Sitka Spruce; Quinault Temperate Rainforest; Beach #4; Kalaloch

Our day began in the parking lot as we were loading the van. There we had beautiful looks at perched Violet-green Swallows as well as multiple Vaux's Swifts flitting about high above in search of insects. We took the very short drive to the trail to the giant Sitka Spruce. The walk in was eventful. First, we heard and then saw a Pacific Slope Flycatcher. Then we paused to identify plants, including Red Elderberry, Cascara Tree and Foamflower or Tiarella. At the bridge over a small creek with a stunning view of the giant Sitka Spruce, there was a lot of bird activity. A Varied Thrush perched for all to see, as did a Band-tailed Pigeon. A Swanson's Thrush and Common Yellowthroat followed suit.



We took photos and marveled at the grandeur of this 1,000-year old giant. Woody read a passage from a tree book describing uses of Sitka Spruce and the history of the tree's exploitation. Thankfully, demand for Sitka Spruce wood for aircraft has significantly declined, giving this tree a chance to recover.



Just a few miles down the road, we took an incredibly scenic – often inspiring – walk through the Quinault Temperate Rainforest. Here more botanizing took place with a fine representation of Sword, Deer and Maidenhair Ferns, as well as other giant tree species, including Douglas Fir, Western Red Cedar and Western Hemlock. We talked about the elements of old-growth forest and how all are present in this magnificent grove.

Birds sang and made appearances along the way, including a Pileated Woodpecker, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Western Tanager, and a Golden-crowned Kinglet. We spotted our first Douglas Squirrel of the trip, busily gathering cones from the many large trees. Don commented that he wished that this trail was longer. Ann was mightily impressed by the Golden-crowned Kinglet that came close to us and displayed its golden crown.



We then headed to Beach #4 in mild cloudy and cool conditions. After our picnic, two Wilson's Warblers made appearances in the wild berry patches nearby. At the impressive overlook onto the Pacific Ocean beach and sea stacks below, we spotted large numbers of Surf and White-winged Scoter. An Orange-crowned Warbler came very close to us.



From here we hiked down to the beach itself and took a walk toward the rock formations. Milt was captivated by the shellfish burrows in limestone rock on the beach. Al found the Indian Paintbrush in bloom framed by Sitka Spruce photogenic. Pat and several others caught glimpses of Harbor Porpoises surfacing periodically with their dorsal fins visible. Everyone appreciated the wild and scenic beaches that extend for 73 miles in Olympic National Park.

Our final stop was at Kalaloch, where we found even larger flocks of scoters, a large flock of Glaucous-winged, Glaucous-winged/Western Hybrid and Western Gulls at the mouth of Kalaloch Creek where it enters the Pacific. Woody noticed one loon, then scoped a group of half-a-dozen Red-throated Loons bobbing up and down in the waves, their bills aloft in what appears to be a snooty posture.

After a nice mixture of forest, beach, plants trees, birds and wildlife – all in highly scenic locations. We returned to the lodge to relax before dinner and sunset along the picturesque shore of Lake Quinault.

Day 4: Ruby Beach; Hoh River Temperate Rainforest; Lake Crescent Lodge

Today we departed from Lake Quinault Lodge to head north. Our first stop was Ruby Beach, where we first surveyed the spectacular view from above of Sea Stack formations just offshore. Our timing was good as the tide was outgoing, exposing a massive area of flat, glistening sands where we could walk.

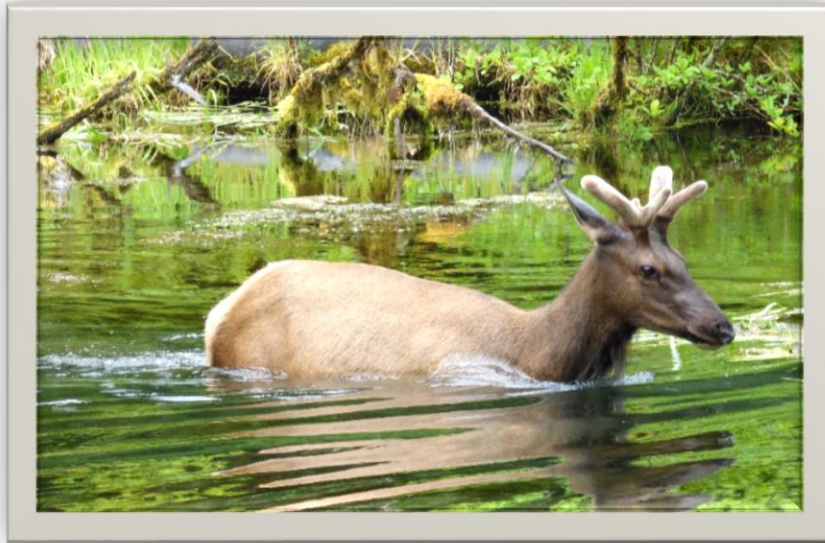


On the way down the trail to the beach, we had superb looks at a singing Orange-crowned Warbler and a Fox Sparrow. Both perched on a small snag only 15 yards away from a prominent overlook. As we descended to the beach, a Bald Eagle flew overhead, White-winged Surf Scoters plied the relatively calm waters and several groups of Pelagic Cormorants perched on offshore rocks. Our first Black Oystercatchers also perched conspicuously on small rock islands.

We explored small sea stacks that were on dry land in the low tide conditions we had. A Peregrine Falcon flew above the beach and perched atop a tall Sitka Spruce where we all had excellent scope views of this adult male's barred chest and malar stripes on the sides of its head.

Yellow, Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warblers flitted among the 10-foot tall natural hedges of Salmon Berry, Red Elder Berry and Salal – a remarkably lush and edible landscape. This was an exceptionally calm day with ideal tidal conditions in which to explore this scenic beach.





We headed north and east up the Hoh River to hike in its famous ancient forest. On the way, we saw a female Kingfisher and a fantastic view of two young Roosevelt Elk crossing the road by first wading through a pond and then trotting across. This all occurred only 30 yards in front of us. What a beautiful site!

Once in the Hoh River visitor center grounds, we had a picnic lunch as

Douglas Squirrels and American Crows staked out our table for future scraps. After lunch we walked the 1.2-mile Spruce Nature Trail through the lush, mossy and majestic temperate rainforest that the Hoh represents. Our first three Common Ravens called to us in eerie raspy tones. Pacific Wrens and Black-throated Gray Warblers sang repeatedly.

We lingered for several hours in this surreal landscape before driving back out to Highway 101, through the logging/vampire mystery book and film town of Forks. As we were entering Forks, our punster Milt quipped “it’s about time!” From here we drove to the shores of Lake Crescent. Its brilliant glacial-blue color was most welcoming as we reached our second historic lake-front lodge of the trip.



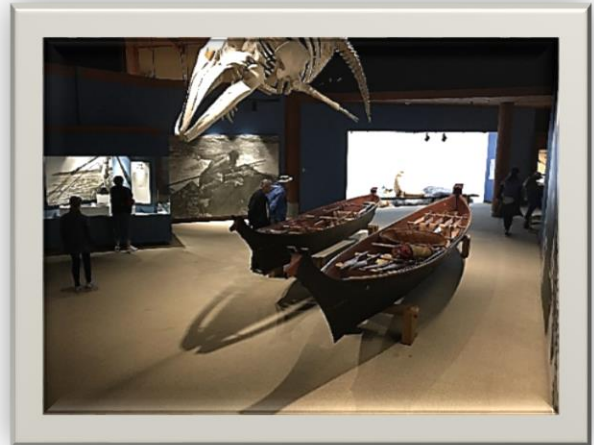
A marvelous meal in the Lake Crescent Lodge followed; this one featuring Connie’s birthday celebration. It was a festive end to another fine day of exploring two of Olympic National Park’s iconic biomes.

Day 5: Makah Tribal Museum; Neah Bay; Cape Flattery

Typical of this area, we had overcast skies and rain to start the day. Undaunted, we decided to reverse the order of our plans and go the excellent Makah Museum first. Soon afterward, we had a picnic lunch under a large shelter in the busy small fishing/logging/tourism town of Neah Bay. At least six Bald Eagles were visible in the town's harbor.

After lunch, we drove to the trailhead for Cape Flattery, the farthest northwest point in the continental United States. We sat out a heavy rain shower in the van, and set out on our hike when it let up. This was a good decision, not only to keep dry, but also to time our visit with a break in the weather for both humans and wildlife.

The trail meanders downhill through an impressive array of cedar planking, small bridges, stepping log rounds and viewing decks. Clearly, the Makah Tribe excels at trail building! At the first viewpoint looking south from Cape Flattery toward several large sea stacks and various rocks with crashing surf and kelp beds below, we started to find birds and wildlife. Among them were nesting Double-crested and Pelagic Cormorants and Pigeon Guillemots. California Sea Lions swam and occasionally surfaced in the Kelp beds.



Cape Flattery

As the weather improved to calm conditions and very light drizzle, we continued to the main overlook - - a large wooden deck with a 180-degree view of Tatoosh Island, the Pacific Ocean, the entrance to the Straits of Juan de Fuca and an assortment of smaller sea stacks and rocks below where the tides and waves mingle. This is a place of breathtaking beauty that is also swarming with wildlife.



Soon after stepping on the deck, Don and Woody found two Tufted Puffins and a Rhinoceros Auklet bobbing on the gentle waves and periodically diving. Meanwhile on the south side of the deck many people were watching two Sea Otters floating in the surf as they held their shellfish meals on their stomachs. We all got terrific scope views of the otters, puffins and auklets.

Then the show continued: a large flock of 100+ Common Murres, a half-a-dozen Harlequin Ducks and several Bald Eagles. We lingered for an hour to watch this awesome scene.



Harlequin Ducks

Finally, we tore ourselves away and returned to Lake Crescent Lodge for another sumptuous meal. As the sun went down, a Black-tailed Deer walked through an open field behind the lodge and a blue/gray watercolor land and waterscape unfolded over the lake.



Day 6: Dungeness River Audubon Center; Roadside Ponds; Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge

We awoke to a rainy day and thus opted to go the rain shadow near Sequim for the day's activities. This proved to be a good decision, as we hardly experienced any rainfall the rest of the day.

Our first stop was the Dungeness River Audubon Center. As we entered the center grounds, we had very good looks at California Quail, Spotted Towhee and a Black-headed Grosbeak. Once inside by the feeders, we saw a Red-breasted Nuthatch at close range.



The Center Director, Powell Jones greeted us and gave us a quick overview of this 16-year-old Audubon Nature Center. Inside the center building lies an impressive collection of taxidermy which allowed us to review many of the species of birds and wildlife we had seen in the past week. These specimens are well preserved and have retained the shape and colors of live birds.



Peregrine Falcon in taxidermic form at Dungeness River Center

Ken Wiersema, a center volunteer, showed us key features in designing a bird house. He teaches a class at the center on how to build them. After a look through this small facility that is packed with high-quality natural history exhibits, we set out for a walk over Railroad Bridge above Dungeness River and through a lush riparian forest with huge Black Cottonwood Trees. Here we found perching Northern Rough-winged Swallows and a Purple Finch along with lots of Cedar Waxwing, Spotted Towhees and California Quail.

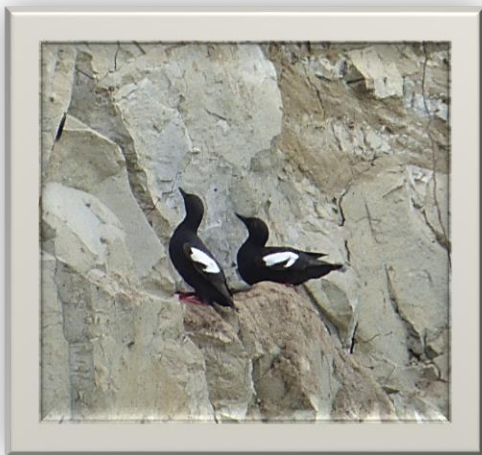
Following a productive walk at the center grounds, we stopped for lunch in a nice café in Sequim. The food was good and the atmosphere cheerful, including humorous signs all around.

On the way to our next stop, we paused at the roadside ponds in the countryside west of Sequim. Here we finally found our first two American Coot of the trip. On our return trip past these ponds we also found our first Ruddy Duck.

The calm, overcast, mild and rain-free weather held for our hike to Dungeness Spit National Wildlife Refuge. The trail passes through mature forest with abundant Salal, Ocean Spray, Red

Elderberry and northwest icon trees including; Douglas Fir, Western Red Cedar, Grand Fir and a few Sitka Spruce.

A breathtaking view of the spit opens up on the bluff just before the trail descends to the beach. Once on the spit itself, a group of 20-some Pigeon Guillemot gathered in the shallow waters near the shore. Periodically they flew up to a bluff where they perched near their nest burrows. When these Alcids are out of water you can fully appreciate their brilliant orange legs in contrast to their jet-black plumage with a bright white wing bar --truly a stunning bird.



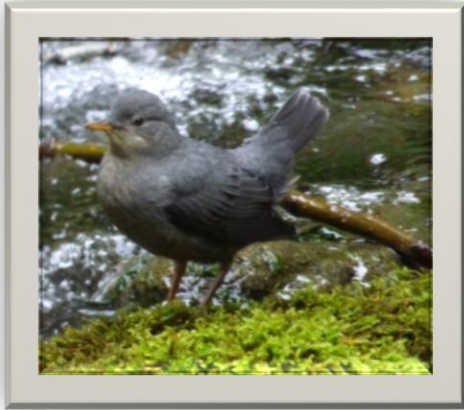
As we walked along the spit, other species appeared including several Bald Eagles, Common Loons, and large mixed feeding flocks of Glaucous-winged Gulls combined with Rhinoceros Auklets. It was a beautiful setting in which to observe this behavior, likely caused by a Herring Ball underneath.

We hiked back out and drove back to Lake Crescent for our final night at this comfortable, aesthetically pleasing lodge.

Day 7: Marymere Falls; Hurricane Ridge; Bishop Hotel, Port Townsend

Sunshine was a welcome sight on Lake Crescent this morning as we had our last breakfast at the lodge and set off for a hike to Marymere Falls. Two Black-tailed deer browsed near the trail, unconcerned by our presence. We headed into the light-dappled forest and soon came across an enormous, most-encrusted Big-leaf Maple Tree.





At the base of the falls, we came to a gravel bed alongside the stream. There we waited in hope that an American Dipper might make an appearance. We were wrong: three American Dippers made an appearance, including one young dipper, persistently and vocally food-begging of the adults. We watched a marvelous dipper show unfold that included perching, feeding, swimming, and of course dipping up and down on rocks. As Don said, “we triple-dipped on Dippers!”

Following this spectacle, we climbed cedar plank stairs to a lovely view of Marymere Falls. We then returned to the lodge briefly, then headed into Port Angeles for a Mexican lunch.

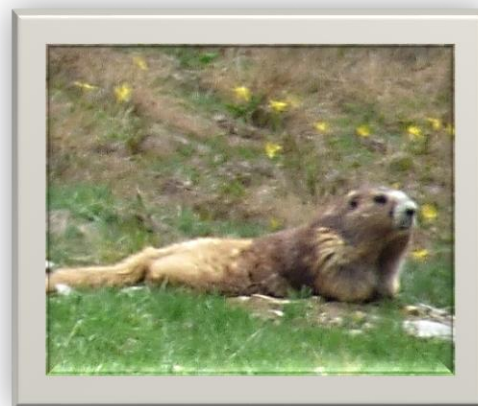


At Marymere Falls

After lunch, we drove up the 5,000-foot climb from Port Angeles to Hurricane Ridge in the high Olympic mountains on a cloud-shrouded road. We were unsure what the weather would be on top. Much to our delight, the clouds broke for a splendid view of the snow and ice-capped Olympic Mountains on top of the ridge at 5,200 feet elevation.



Just before reaching the summit, we saw a male Sooty Grouse on the roadside, displaying and



calling. This was a “life bird” for everyone in the group. As soon as we reached the top, we saw an Olympic Marmot basking in the sun in the grassy field below with freshly sprouted Glacier Lilies all around him. This marmot is endemic to Olympic National Park. Like the grouse, it was a “life animal” for everyone on the trip.

We stopped in the interpretive center and walked on the trails as far as we could get before they were blocked by last winter's heavy snows. An American Pipit perched in the moist field below.

As we headed back downhill, a female Sooty Grouse was perched on the roadside. We paused to take pictures before she took off. It was a two-grouse day!

Our day concluded with a gourmet salmon dinner at the Alderwood Bistro in Sequim, and a scenic drive to Port Townsend in the evening glow. Two of Port Townsends' many deer crossed the main street of town as we entered. They were a "welcoming committee" to this quirky and picturesque historic town.



Bishop Hotel in Port Townsend

Day 8: Kah-Tai Lagoon; Fort Worden State Park; Port Townsend Exploration



Today we enjoyed a leisurely start since both areas are in the city limits of Port Townsend. Kah-Tail Lagoon provided at least two new species, and some very good looks at others. In one of its large ponds, we found Ruddy Ducks in brilliant breeding plumage, including a sky-blue bill on the male, going through courtship. The male held his tale erect and bobbed his head to woo the females.



Soon afterward we first heard and then Ann saw a Virginia Rail moving through the rushes close to shore in the lagoon. Continuing along the shore, we first heard then saw Purple Martins flycatching above the Poplar Trees along the lake shore, which also teemed with Cedar Waxwing.



Heerman's Gull

Our next stop was Fort Worden State Park, location for the film “An Officer and a Gentleman”. Here we walked to the Light House at Point Wilson and found multiple Rhinoceros Auklets there mixed with a variety of gulls, including our first Heerman’s Gulls of the trip. We strolled the sand beach as the tide went out and saw several Great Blue Heron perched on floating kelp beds. A Bald Eagle kept watch over the shore from its perch in a Shore Pine.

We stopped for lunch in a quaint café where the food was fresh and often homemade, then spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the various shops,

museums, galleries and etc. in downtown Port Townsend. In the evening, we gathered again for a final seafood dinner at Alchemy Bistro. The quality of food matched the quality of experiences that we had on this trip in glorious natural areas.

Day 9: Ferry to Edmonds, drop off participants in Seattle and airport

On our last day together, we drove from Port Townsend to Kingston on a misty morning where we boarded a ferry to Edmonds, Washington. On the ferry crossing we had our best look yet at a young Brandt’s Cormorant. From Edmonds, we headed south to drop off Milt and Connie with their son and his family in north Seattle, then continued to Sea Tac Airport where we arrived well in time for everyone to make their respective flights.



We just circumnavigated the Olympic Peninsula!