

Washington's Olympic Peninsula | Trip Report

June 1-9, 2019 | Written by Woody Wheeler



With guide Woody Wheeler, and participants Beth, Cynthia, Jim, Karen, Margie, Mark, and Val



Saturday, June 1 | Arrive in Seattle: Jack Block Park; Alki Point; Dinner at Salty's

Sunny skies, 70-degree temperatures, and a panoramic view of Mt. Rainier welcomed our group to Seattle. Five of us ventured to Jack Block Park in the late afternoon. This former industrial site now has restored beaches, and a ½-mile strip of riparian vegetation along Elliot Bay, Seattle's main harbor. A little-known gem, this park features stunning views of Seattle's harbor along with a surprising diversity of birds and wildlife.

Upon arrival to this park, we were treated to several west coast specialties in the first ten minutes: A male Anna's Hummingbird flashed his iridescent hood in spectacular fashion. As we walked further into Jack Block Park, a family of Bushtits flocked close by.

An adult Bald Eagle perched on a light pole where it remained as we walked all around its base, unperturbed by our presence. An Osprey flew by and called noisily while clutching a fish in its talons. Caspian Terns flew by, uttering their prehistoric sounding craaak!

From the top of a two-story platform in the park, we took in the sweeping view of Elliot Bay and downtown Seattle. Here we found our first marine mammal of the tour – a California Sea Lion resting on a buoy in the bay. Following this delightful urban park walk, we drove briefly along Alki Beach where the Duwamish Tribe originally settled Seattle, which is named after one of their chiefs. We then enjoyed a delectable seafood dinner at Salty's on Alki overlooking Elliot Bay and downtown Seattle at sundown.

Sunday, June 2 | Seattle to Nisqually NWR; Hoquiam Ponds; Lake Quinault Lodge

Today our circumnavigation of the Olympic Peninsula began. We headed south from Seattle to our first stop: Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge. This refuge comprises 3,000 acres of river estuary, woodlands, riparian, and salt-marsh habitat. All of this habitat is accessible thanks to an extensive network of boardwalks and trails.

We started our walk through the woodlands where bird song was abundant. Early on we saw several Band-tailed Pigeons perched on top of a snag. Then we were treated to two male Rufous Hummingbirds on the tips of small branches, with their plumage illuminated by the morning light.

By the time we had hiked a mile, we had seen five species of swallows, two species of hummingbirds and three species of warblers. Nisqually was hopping!

Swainson's Thrush sang its spiraling song often; several flew up and perched on the board walk railing, giving us terrific looks of this bird that often sings from deep within the brush. At one point we estimated that a dozen





Swainson's Thrushes were in our midst. Bald Eagles perched and soared above, and a flock of Cedar Waxwing fed on berries at close range, showing off their profound beauty.

We walked through a riparian forest area, taking note of native plants including salal, salmonberry and Thimble berry. The woods were full of song from Swainson's Thrush, Song Sparrows, American Robins, Yellow Warblers, and Black-headed Grosbeak. It was hard to get good looks through the dense tree canopy, but ultimately, we did see Swainson's Thrush, Willow Flycatcher, Western Wood Pewee, Common Yellowthroat and Yellow Warbler.

At the Nisqually River overlook, we saw a female Common Merganser with her speckled brood of 5-7 young. Just when Woody said the young like to ride on the mother's back, two of them jumped aboard for a short ride. Continuing down the trail, we encountered two more Willow Flycatchers and had an excellent look at a Rufous Hummingbird. We also had good views of Black-headed Grosbeak and Yellow Warblers.

We continued part of the way to Puget Sound on the final one-mile length of board walk, over the salt marsh and then started our hike back, noting a Pacific Tree Frog perched on a matching leaf beside the trail. Two Black-tailed Deer huddled down in the grasses, gazing up at us with moist noses and innocent eyes. Everyone was impressed by Nisqually Refuge, the wide variety of birds and wildlife that it harbors, as well as its first-rate facilities and trails.

Continuing south from Nisqually Refuge, we stopped in Olympia for deliciously fresh deli-sandwiches for lunch. Then we headed west to the twin logging towns of Aberdeen and Hoquiam.

Outside the latter town, we stopped at ponds adjacent to the Bowerman Basin National Wildlife Refuge. They were full of waterfowl, geese, gulls and shorebirds. Among the species





we found here were: Gadwall, Greater and Lesser Scaup, Green-winged Teal, Glaucous-winged, Ring-billed and Western Gulls, and Spotted Sandpiper.

Between the two ponds we noticed a commotion in the grasses: several River Otters travelling between them and eventually swimming in the closest pond. What a pleasant surprise!

In the late afternoon, we entered the magical realm of the temperate rainforest by Lake Quinault. We checked into our historic lodge with the clear waters of Lake Quinault and the forested slopes of Olympic National Park behind. This would be our home for the next two nights. Upon seeing this place, Beth commented that everyone should be able to go to a place like this several times a week to offload layers of stress. She and several others noticed how nice it was NOT to have TV or screens, constantly assaulting us with bad news and instead to have walks in gorgeous country: conversations, good food and the cozy atmosphere of an historic national park Inn. Indeed!

Monday, June 3 | World's Biggest Sitka Spruce, Quinault Rainforest, 4th Beach, Kalaloch

Here in the heart of the temperate rainforest, where it rains more than 100 inches a year, we arose to sunny weather and blue skies. It was a spectacular day in which to explore the rainforests and beaches of Olympic National Park. We first hiked to the world's largest Sitka Spruce, finding a MacGillivray's Warbler and Warbling vireo on the way. When we turned onto a foot bridge where the first full view of the big tree appeared, several in our group gasped at the sight of this 1,000-plus year-old giant.



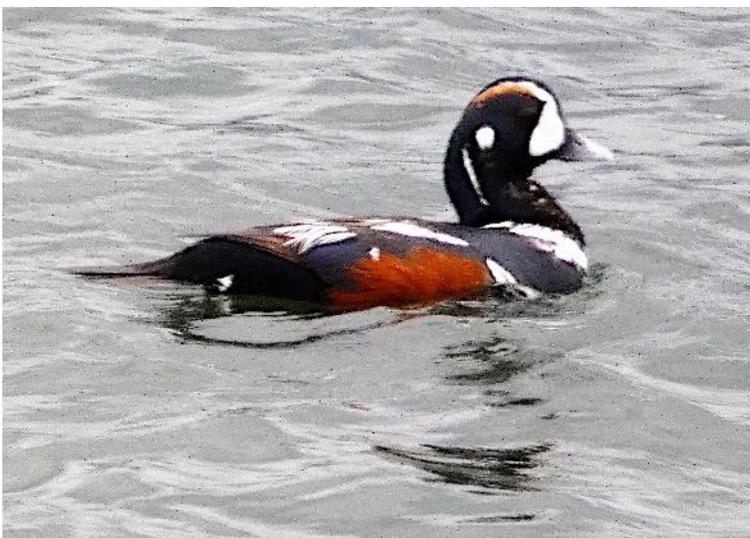
While marveling at this goliath, we also saw Purple Finch, Band-tailed Pigeon and Hammond's Flycatcher. On the return hike, we paused to identify various plants of the temperate rainforest biome. This is a marvelous stroll with an iconic tree, but also an iconic landscape with lots of bird activity.

On the short drive to our next rainforest hike, we had a big surprise: A Sooty Grouse feeding in the vegetation along the side of the road. Most of us were able to see this elusive forest dweller before it vanished into the dense understory vegetation.



We then hiked the Quinault Rainforest Loop trail, stopping often to identify various ferns, trees and plants, and to discuss the ethnobotany of notable species like the Cascara Tree, whose bark has been used as a laxative. Massive Douglas Firs, Sitka Spruce, and Western Red Cedar with a backdrop of a steep fern gully with a creek flowing below, made for an enchanting setting.

As we hiked through this lovely landscape, we heard an impressive concert from the bird with the most notes in its song of any bird species in North America – the Pacific Wren. It perched on the tip of a broken off tree stump and sang its elaborate song repeatedly. We also encountered a pair of Golden-crowned Kinglets flashing their golden crowns conspicuously and simultaneously just a dozen feet high in a nearby Douglas Fir. Then we heard the unmistakable call of an American Dipper in Willaby Creek.



After two outstanding forest hikes, we drove through the Quinault Indian Reservation to a coastal stretch of Olympic National Park. There we had a picnic lunch in the sunshine as a Wilson's Warbler sang. After lunch we walked a short distance to a coastal viewpoint at Fourth Beach. There we saw a Sea Otter, several Harbor Seals, California Sea Lions, and two Pacific

Loons, the latter an impressive sight with their mocha-colored heads and striped necks.

This experience encouraged us to hike down to the beach to search for more. On the way down, we found our first Orange-crowned Warblers. Once on the beach, we saw two Bald Eagles perched atop a large Douglas Fir, and our first Black Oystercatcher resting position on a small rock on the beach.

While hiking on the beach, we were watched intently by two Harbor Seals bobbing in the surf just 30 yards offshore. Indian Paintbrush colored the hillside on the forest side of the beach, which is part of a 73-mile stretch of wild Pacific Ocean beach protected by the National Park. Nowhere else in the continental U.S. does such a large stretch of undeveloped beach exist.

On the way home from this beautiful stretch of beach, we stopped at Kalaloch to check its coastline for birds and marine mammals. We found two more Bald Eagles and three species of swallows. At this point, we headed back to the lodge to enjoy its ambience as we compiled our list, had drinks, and then ate a sumptuous meal. Some strolled in the evening in the lingering daylight along the shore of Lake Quinault to the songs of Western Tanagers and Black-headed Grosbeak.

Tuesday, June 4 | Lake Quinault to Ruby Beach, Hoh Rainforest and Lake Crescent

In calm, clear, 60-degree weather, we walked the intensely scenic trail to Ruby Beach. The trail starts at an overlook of a huge sea stack formation with massive Sitka Spruce and Douglas Fir trees in the foreground. The sound of the surf crashes below and a stream flows into the rocks and tidepools just below. As we descended the trail to the beach, we heard Varied Thrush and had good looks at Orange-crowned Warbler and Swainson's Thrush.

Once on the beach, the tide was out, giving us the opportunity to wander relatively close to the sea stacks. As we drew closer, we noticed Pelagic Cormorants flying to and perching on a rock ledge in excellent light, their white breeding patches clearly visible. A pair of Peregrine Falcons flew directly overhead, chattering noisily as they interacted in an erratic yet highly-skilled manner, at times making contact in the air. Later, we saw the pair perch on a horizontal tree branch on the sea stack – an adult and a juvenile – and watched the juvenile food-begging. As the tide gradually came back in, we hiked back up the headland to the Ruby Beach trail head. Everyone raved about this exceptional beach.

From here, we drove to the Hoh River, which shone blue and bright not unlike the sunny skies. Increasingly, the forest increased in size and diversity as we drove up river. At a series of ponds near the national park entrance, we spotted three species of ducks, all with young trailing behind them: Mallards, Hooded Mergansers, and Wood Ducks. The ponds served as nurseries for these duck species. They also hosted River Otters, including the five we saw swimming and playing only 25 yards away.

In comfortable 70-degree weather, we had a picnic lunch at Hoh River Visitor Center prior to hiking the Hall of Mosses trail. A series of new signs had poems by famous poets that added to the magic and inspiration of being in this, the very heart of the temperate rainforest in Washington.

On the route to Lake Crescent, we stopped briefly for fuel and a visit to the Twilight gift shop in Forks. This logging town experienced a strange and unexpected phenomenon that resulted in an economic boom when the Twilight vampire books and movies set in Forks were released some 15 years ago.

Continuing north, a large chicken-like bird flew across the road and settled into a ditch: our second Sooty Grouse of the trip! This time, everyone saw a female walk parallel to our vehicle on the roadside.



Our final drive of the day took us along the shore of glacially-carved, 634-foot deep Lake Crescent. We checked into another historic National Park Inn with the lake and its steeply forested mountains behind. Everyone was pleased to have this as our home base for the next three days.

Wednesday, June 5 | Cape Flattery, Neah Bay, Makah Tribal Museum

Today the trademark gray and misty weather blew in from the southwest. Thankfully it let up just in time for our morning expedition to the far northwestern corner of Washington, Cape Flattery.

On the way to Neah Bay and the Makah Indian Reservation, we stopped at Sail and Seal Rocks, both visible offshore, to scan for birds and marine mammals. There we found sizeable groups of Harbor Seals and California Sea Lions hauled out on the narrow beaches around tall vertical rock formations. Several Bald Eagles soared overhead, and a Band-tailed Pigeon perched on a nearby power line. Cindy noticed a group of birds moving below in the Kelp Beds. They turned out to be a group of 20 Harlequin Ducks - one of the most colorful bird species in North America. They inhabit fast-flowing waters in spectacular areas like this one.

We continued west through the small fishing, logging and tourist town of Neah Bay prior to arriving at the Cape Flattery trailhead. Fortunately, the weather was calm and overcast with no precipitation as we hiked the 3/4-mile trail to the Cape on multiple wooden steps and decking built by the Tribe. We admired the craftsmanship that went in to the construction of this trail.

As we hiked to the Cape, we passed through at least six Varied Thrush territories, each marked by this bird's haunting, ringing song. We then walked to the first major overlook to the south on a wooden deck crafted by the Tribe. Here we had a breath-taking view of craggy cliffs and forested bluffs plunging into deep blue ocean pools flowing between rocks below. Pelagic Cormorant, Pigeon Guillemot, and Black Oystercatcher were visible below.

A short distance further, we came to a raised deck with a 180-degree view of the rugged coastline with Tatoosh Island and its iconic light house only a mile to the west. Between the Cape and the Island lies a treacherous stretch of waterway strewn with large rocks where powerful currents and rough seas prevail at this junction between the Pacific Ocean and the Straits of Juan de Fuca.



This area was alive with Pigeon Guillemots, Pelagic Cormorants and a massive raft of Common Murres that Valerie spotted near Tatoosh Island. Two chunky alcids flew awkwardly from north to south in front of Tatoosh island and landed in the rough waters: Tufted Puffins! A few of us had distant looks of these charismatic but hard-to-find alcids. Meanwhile, closer-in, we had excellent views of two Sea Otters at play.

A Bald Eagle perched on the Tatoosh Island lighthouse and multiple California Sea Lions backed on the rocks just northeast of the island. Western Gulls flew repeatedly overhead with mouthfuls of nesting material. We had our best view yet of the charismatic Black Oystercatcher.

We took in the amazing scene at Cape Flattery for several hours, then had a picnic lunch in tables tucked into the woods below the view point. We hiked out after lunch and stopped just down the road at the outstanding Makah Tribal History and Cultural Museum. We then returned to the cozy Lake Crescent Lodge for another fine dinner with time for rest and relaxation.

Thursday, June 6 | Hurricane Ridge, Ediz Hook

Taking advantage of a break in the weather, we headed straight for Hurricane Ridge. It was mostly sunny as we drove up into the park. Black-tailed Deer wandered along the road and vistas of the jagged ice and snow-covered Olympic Mountains were out in all of their glory. Red Columbine, Avalanche Lilies, Lupine, Phlox, and Stonecrop further decorated the roadside as we climbed to the 5,000-elevation visitor center.

We stepped out into the fresh, cool mountain air and began scanning the meadows for wildlife. It did not take long before we were rewarded with a good look at an Olympic Marmot sitting by its burrow. We all had good views of this golden-brown Olympic Peninsula endemic mammal.

Meanwhile, a Horned Lark hopped up to a perch on the walkway we were on, just 30 yards away. Nearby, we found our first Canada Jays of the trip, or should I say, they found us? These jays are notorious for scavenging in picnic areas and campgrounds.



We hiked a portion of the Hurricane Hill trail, which was carpeted with wildflowers. The hauntingly beautiful song of the Hermit Thrush filled the air. One Olive-sided Flycatcher perched conspicuously on a dead tree branch, its sooty-colored vest facing toward us.

After lunch, we drove through Port Angeles to Ediz Hook – a spit of land that defines the western part of Port Angeles’ harbor. Here we found Harlequin Ducks perched on logs in large, colorful groupings. Among them were our first few Brandt’s Cormorants.

Near the end of the Hook, we saw our first Marbled Murrelet – a Federally Threatened species. This was an exciting way to wrap up an outstanding day on the Olympic Peninsula.



Friday, June 7 | Marymere Falls Hike, Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge, Sequim

After another sumptuous breakfast at Lake Crescent Inn, we drove just a mile to the Marymere Falls trail head. Under partly sunny skies and mild temperatures, we set out on our ¾-mile hike to the falls. Not far along the trail are massive, moss-encrusted, Big-leafed Maple trees. Farther down the trail, we first heard its sharp, electronic “BZEEP!” call, then saw an American Dipper flying up Barnes Creek. Soon afterward we saw another Dipper flying downstream. From here, we ascended the several flights of wooden stairs to two viewpoints of Marymere Falls – a 200-foot cascade with bright green mosses and multiple Maidenhair ferns on both sides -- a serenely beautiful sight.

We paused on the way down to look at a Pacific Yew Tree and discuss its ethnobotany. This tree contains Taxol in its bark which has been synthesized and is now widely used in the treatment of Breast and Ovarian cancers. It is a reminder of the importance preserving the natural diversity that exists in native forests.

After this pretty hike, we drove to Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge where we had a picnic lunch in a campground. We then hiked to Dungeness Spit, first pausing to take in the gorgeous view of the lower-48’s largest sand spit (seven miles long) before descending to walk a portion of it. Two species of loons were visible about a mile out on the Spit: Pacific and Common. Toward the end of our hike, we saw more than 50 Rhinoceros Auklets – our first of the trip – their breeding horns and plumes visible. The auklets were part of several feeding frenzies along with four species of gulls as herring came close to the surface.

Bald Eagles were also abundant at the refuge perched along the tall firs above the spit. As we departed from the refuge, we saw a Northern Harrier make two aggressive passes just inches above a mature Bald Eagle’s head, causing the eagle to utter loud shrieks of annoyance.

Our group found the countryside around Sequim appealing with its lavender and organic produce farms surrounded by forest, the Olympic Mountains and the Straits of Juan de Fuca (sea). We passed through the tiny community of Dungeness then birded the well-known hot spot at Three Crabs Beach. Multiple Bald Eagles were on the tide flats along with three juvenile Black-bellied Plovers.

From Three Crabs Beach, we drove the few miles through the tidy yet bustling hamlet of Sequim and pulled into our hotel located on the rural edge of town. In the evening, we ate at Alderwood Bistro, a farm-to-fresh restaurant



that serves delicious, uniquely prepared foods from the area. We all had good appetites after our hikes to Marymere Falls and to Dungeness Spit which added up to six miles of walking.

Saturday, June 8 | Dungeness River Audubon Center, John Wayne Marina, Kah-Tai Wetlands, Fort Worden State Park, Port Townsend



Today we started our day in brilliant sunshine. Our first stop was Dungeness River Audubon Center just on the west side of Sequim. Soon after entering the Center grounds, we saw multiple birds at its feeders, including: Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Downy Woodpecker, Black-headed Grosbeak and Pine Siskin. We then commenced walking the trail over historic Railroad Bridge above the fast-flowing, clear waters of the Dungeness River. Just as we arrived on the main span of the bridge, a Red-tailed Hawk soared upstream, directly over our heads and perched in a Western Red Cedar along the river.



Violet-green Swallows flitted all around the river and bridge, occasionally landing, allowing us to take in their exquisite blend of violet green and white colors.

We walked along the bridge west of the river where it becomes more of a canopy walk on a raised, former railroad grade trail. Along the trail, we encountered a group of Bushtits, Orange-crowned Warblers and many Spotted Towhees.



Near the trail's end we first heard the unmistakable "Chi-ca-go!" call of a California Quail, then saw one fly directly over us and perch on a tree limb about 25-feet high. As we continued hiking back toward the Center, we had fantastic looks at Black-headed Grosbeak, which up until now had been frequently heard but seldom seen well.

At the end of our hike, we walked east of the Center where we found a covey of California Quail, including two adults and at least six young.

At the Dungeness River Audubon Center Store, we viewed their impressive taxidermy display of Pacific Northwest birds, including many we had seen recently. All were impressed with the Center and its grounds which includes a native plant landscape.



After a very productive and stimulating morning, we headed east to John Wayne Marina. While overlooking Sequim Bay, we had a picnic lunch. Marbled Murrelets and Pigeon Guillemots swam beneath us offering our closest looks yet of these two alcids.

The next stop on our day's journey was Kah Tai Wetlands Nature Park in Port Townsend. At these ponds and the surrounding marsh and grasslands, we found Ruddy Duck, Hooded Merganser, Purple Martin, and two Virginia Rail. One Black-tailed Deer bedded down on a small island in one of the ponds, as if it were the deer's private island estate.

On the way to our next stop, we took an ice cream break in the historic, artsy community of Port Townsend. The town was playing host to a steampunk festival. Attendees were decked out in historic garb, many including watches, gauges, and assorted tools attached to their clothing. It felt like being in a movie set complete with historic Port Townsend as its back drop.

We departed from this entertaining scene and headed to Fort Worden State Park, a picturesque peninsula with beaches on both sides and a forest behind. Here we strolled the beach and walked to Point Wilson light house to scan for sea birds and mammals. Off the point we saw several small flocks of Rhinoceros Auklets. We also saw California Sea Lions and Harbor Seals just beyond the Kelp “forest” that lines the shore.

In the late afternoon, we explored Port Townsend, with its myriad book stores, galleries and quirky shops. After strolling the town, we had a fabulous meal at the Fountain Café featuring fresh seafood served in savory sauces with fresh vegetables – a fitting last trip supper.

Back at our hotel, Mark shared with us his impressive photographs of the trip set to music. This was a moving presentation that reminded us of the spectacular places we had just visited on the Olympic Peninsula, and the distinctive birds and wildlife we found here. We then compiled our final species list and took a whimsical trivia quiz that Woody created, complete with gift pens from our hotel as “prizes.”

Sunday, June 9 | Return to Seattle

On another banner day, we had a pleasant drive to Kingston, followed by a ferry ride featuring views of three volcanoes: Rainier, Baker and Glacier Peak, as well as vistas of the North Cascade and Olympic Mountain ranges. The trip back to Seattle was smooth; everyone made their flights, hotel and car connections. We said a fond farewell and agreed to exchange photos. The Olympic Peninsula will haunt this group’s memories for a long time and will likely entice some to return.

Photo Credits:

Seattle and Mt. Rainier, Mark Cavallo (MC); Anna’s Hummingbird, Woody Wheeler (WW); Swainson’s Thrush, MC; Cedar Waxwing, WW; Pacific Tree Frog, WW; MacGillivray’s Warbler, MC; Lake Quinault Lodge, Booking.com; Sooty Grouse, WW; Forest with rainbow, MC; Group at world’s largest Sitka Spruce, WW; Peregrine Falcons, MC; Group on Pacific Beach, WW; Ruby Beach, MC; Hoh River Rainforest Group Shot, WW; Lake Crescent, WW; Harlequin Duck, WW; Cape Flattery, MC; Common Murres, MC; Sea Otters at play, MC; Black Oystercatcher, MC; Lake Crescent Lodge, Karen Eckman (KE); Hurricane Ridge, MC; Olympic Marmot, WW; Marbled Murrelet, MC; Group at Marymere Falls, WW; Rough-skinned Newt, WW; Dungeness Spit, WW; Group at Marymere Falls, bystander with WW’s camera; Bald Eagle, WW; Violet-green Swallow, MC; Dungeness River, WW; Mark in action, WW; Port Townsend, WW; California Qual, WW; Ferry with Mt. Baker, MC.