

Canada/Fins & Fiddles | Trip Report

July 10 – 20, 2019 | Written by Greg Smith



Guide: Greg Smith, with participants: Linda, Sheila, Judy, Craig, Jean, Bernie, Callie, Steve, Marcie, Gary, Carol, Tom



Wednesday, July 10 | Sydney River/Fortress Louisbourg/Embarkation

The day began with fine weather, so fine that some of us did a wildlife and bird walk along the Sydney River and over to Wentworth Park. Our first sighting was several American mink's that use the rock revetment along the river as both foraging grounds and home base. We saw at least five different individuals as we worked our way along the river.

Common Loon, Great Black-backed Gull, and American Black Duck put in appearances along the waterfront, but the lack of cormorants was unusual. At Wentworth Park we managed to get good views of Red-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler, and Tree Swallow. There was also another mink swimming comfortably across the water surface, along with lots of hybrid-looking ducks.

While at Fortress Louisbourg, the weather continued in a fine way. There was reconstruction of the seawall going on which prevented us from getting a look at the birds around the wetlands in that area. So, we walked out to the coast where we were fortunate to find that Common Eider, Savannah Sparrow and Cliff Swallow were everywhere. Eastern Willet put in great views, suggesting evidence of nesting given their vocalizations and hazing flights. A brief view of a Nelson's Sparrow on the trail to the coast was the only sighting of this east coast species.

We boarded the buses back to the Sydney River, where it was time board the RCGS Resolute. This was our home for the next ten days where we would zodiac out to seabird nesting colonies, listen and dance to the Barra MacNeils, and visit locations that very few folks get to experience.





Thursday, July 11 | Sable Island

As we were out of in the open Atlantic as opposed to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the early morning risers got to see many more pelagic bird species than would've been present later in the day. It could have been the mix of waters from the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Atlantic Ocean, or it might just have been the time of day, but the numbers were much higher that further south. Great, Sooty, and Manx Shearwaters were around early, and then later as we neared Sable Island, but the nesting alcids were mostly on vacation as we left the islands of the gulf to the north.

Sable Island is famous for two things, the final resting place for close to 400 ships that lie on the bottom of the sea along this 45-kilometer-long sandbar, and the 500 horses that call this island

home! The succulent coastal grasses have made this an inviting treat for the horses long ago abandoned on the isolated arc of an island. The island has one tree that towers over the surrounding grasses at two-meters in height, with the highest point being a dune towering in at 25 meters. Most of the island is ephemeral at best, shrinking and swelling at its own pace while trying to keep up with the tides and the winds.

We were told that we were the first group to ever land at South Beach, all because of unfavorable sea conditions on North Beach. Several of us took advantage of this delay and spent time in the forward lounge, as well as outdoors on Deck Seven, birding and looking for whales. It was incredible to see the horses along with gray seals lining the beach.

The seas were smooth with a small three-foot swell, which was a similar sized wave in our landing area. Both the landing and leaving of the island were handled in the most professional of ways by the ship's staff, but some of those waves grew to five-foot as we departed. With people joining island naturalists for different outings, folks got intimate looks at the life of the island's horses, habitats and bird life. The highlight for the birders were views of the temporarily defunct Ipswich Sparrow. This is the only place on the planet that this species nests. And with wild iris as a backdrop, those that wanted to hike a little more were treated to views of the island and its ponies for kilometers in either direction.



Friday, July 12 | Bird Islands

Today's weather was just as nice as yesterday's, and One Ocean put our Naturalist Journeys' group on the first zodiac out! An earlier discussion with the ship's naturalists and expedition leader, created the opportunity for us to spend more time out on the water while exploring both islands as opposed to the main island only. This extra-large zodiac allowed those in our



group who wanted to bird, to head out to explore these area-famous islands.

We found large rafts of Razorbills on the water, and additional individuals lining the cliff ledges of the island. Looking very formal in their black and white tuxes, they seemed pale in comparison to the Caribbean-colored Atlantic Puffins that buzzed by. Two great alcids to start the day, and then further up the island we were found small flocks of Black Guillemot, with most returning to their nests with the red-colored rock gunnel in their bills. There were only a few Common Murre around, but that isn't surprising given that as soon as the young hatch, they take to the water and are raised by the male.

Numerous Herring Gulls were nesting, and some of their exposed young were the perfect prey for Great Blue Heron and Bald Eagle. While Bald Eagle readily fed on the larger young, the heron would take smaller gulls and any young alcids that made the mistake of poking their head out of their burrows at the wrong time!

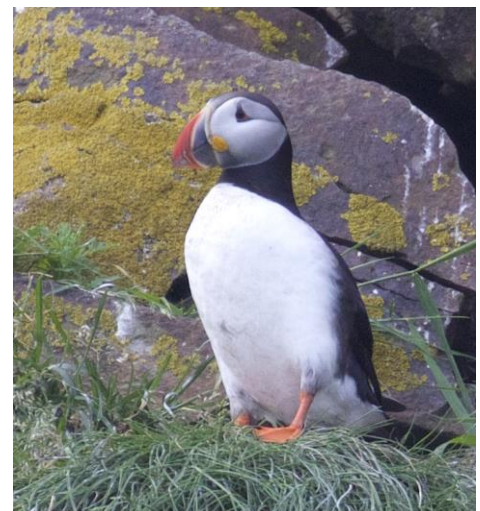
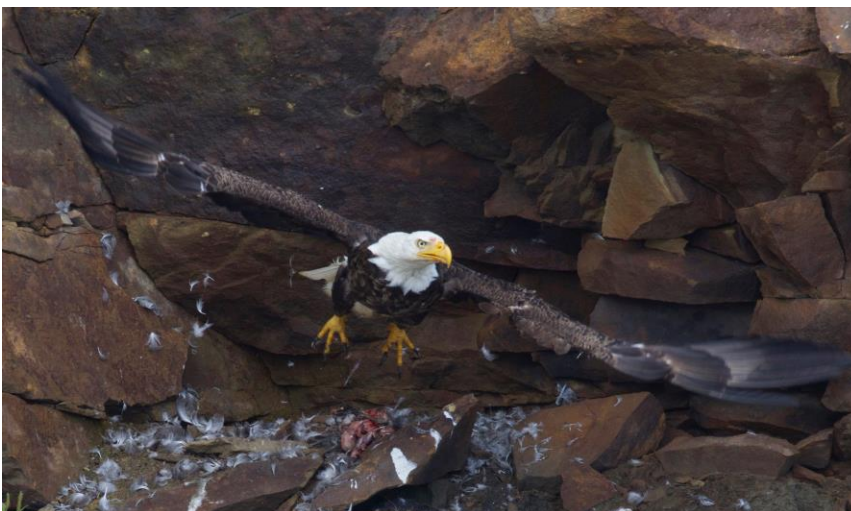
We found two colonies of nesting Bank Swallows, and more herons haunting the earthen burrows of the puffins. It didn't take us long to figure out that screaming gulls usually meant a Bald Eagle was in the 'hood and looking for a meal. As with anything in the natural history world, our time was over far too quickly, but we had spent more time on the water than expected and explored more of the area. But we still had the afternoon up in Ingonish to explore and choices on different activities!

Those activities were as varied as the landscape, so some chose to go on a guided hike where they saw Magnolia and Yellow-rumped warblers, while those heading to the town of Baddeck, had Common Mergansers with large broods, and a pair of red fox. Four of the Naturalist Journeys group decided to kayak which was a new experience for two of them. We were fortunate to see we more guillemots, eagles, and puffins, especially with the fog coating the coast.

A fine finish to a fine day, where we had square dancing lessons that some took part in from the Lisa and the Barrah MacNeils, prior to recap. After recap, the small group that started birding at 6 A.M every day were first to their state rooms, as first light was always the best for birding.

Saturday, July 13 | Georgetown, PEI

Those early risers were in the forward lounge as usual and were able to see lots of Northern Gannet, some Sooty Shearwater, another Manx Shearwater, and a solo humpback whale along with numerous alcids on a very calm sea! As the day wore on, the sea flattened out which always seems to coincide with far less wildlife viewing. We had different lectures available in the bar lounge later in the morning as we motored towards one of PEI's oldest



communities, Georgetown. These were very informative, and members of our group asked some very relevant questions.

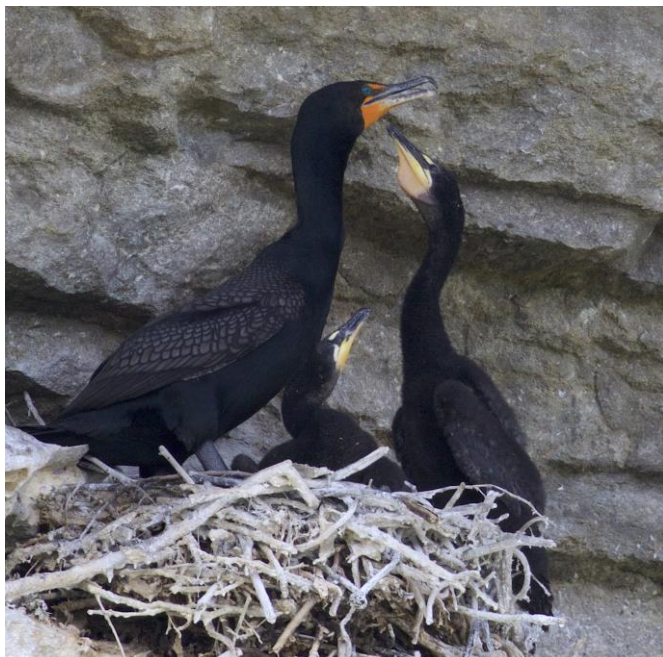
It took a little longer than expected to get to PEI, so after lunch we had two opportunities when we got ashore: A coach transport followed by a hike, or we could zodiac birding cruise into one of the bays. Our group mostly went for the birding along the bay shore in the large zodiac, where we spent the afternoon working our deep into the bay. Our species list for this afternoon on the water was better than expected, with red fox, Pine Grosbeak, Northern (yellow-shafted) Flicker, Common Tern, Spotted Sandpiper, and Yellow Warbler.

During this zodiac ride, we passed numerous lines of oysters and world-famous Prince Edward Island mussels. They are so succulent and sweet, a small bite of maritime heaven. By the end of our three hours on the water, we really felt that we just had to try some of those mussels. So, we landed onshore, about a five-minute walk from the Wheelhouse Restaurant, where those that were interested in tasting these world-famous bi-valves dined on a four-pound bucket. We sat on the deck overlooking the bay that was lined with farmed mussels, life couldn't have been much finer!

Sunday, July 14 | Magdalen Islands

The Magdalens are a primarily French-speaking set of islands off Quebec, New Brunswick, and the Prince Edward Island coasts. Our early-riser group in the forward lounge got excellent, but unexpected, looks at Northern Fulmar this morning. We also got to see an amazing number of alcids, out foraging off of the disjunct islets as we neared our anchorage.

Long spits of sand join some of the islands, and this is where our group again had a birding zodiac that took us along the bluff of the largest of the islands. Common Tern buzzed the zodiac in frenetic flight as they foraged for unseen young along the shoreline. Bank Swallows used the sandy cliffs with rocky outcroppings on this stretch of coastline for nesting, while the deserted beaches had early Least Sandpiper and Great Black-backed Gulls. One large rock shaped like a boot from the early 1900's, was decorated with a group of Double-crested Cormorants.



The afternoon offered us two different activities: One to explore Municipalité De Cap-Aux-Meules, or to take a bus tour around the islands to visit a local craft brewery, a slice of the past industry of herring smoke houses and a fromagerie from the ongoing dairy industry that utilized the Canadian cattle breed for their copious and tasty milk supply. While it was interesting and tasty at all three locations, it was their settings that provided us with some limited, but unique birding opportunities. The brewery was set on the edge of a well-vegetated dune complex, the smokehouse along a rocky inlet and the dairy in lush grasslands. Waterfowl, shorebirds and passerines did their best to distract us from the treat of the cultural lifestyles of this isolated archipelago.

Monday, July 15 | l'Île-Bonaventure/Gaspé

What a setting to wake up to for the early risers! Gaspé Peninsula and Percé Rock to the north of us, and Parks Canada's Bonaventure Island to the south, all this with flocks of alcids buzzing around the ship. On the ship we talked with the Expedition Leader and set up a birding hike for our time ashore. The landing would take us through rocky cliff habitat where we would see nesting Atlantic Puffin, Common Murre, and Black Guillemot. We had views of an early drake Harlequin Duck, roosting on a rock below with all those alcids flying to and from the cliffs.

Then it was a two-mile hike through the boreal forest where Swainson's Thrush, American Redstart, Black-throated Green Warbler, Winter Wren, and a few other species put in appearances for those in our group. Common Raven were frequently heard, but less often seen, as we approached the island's highlight: The 130,000-strong nesting colony of Northern Gannets. Less than five feet away, this year's generation of young being assiduously raised by both parents. Mostly less than ten days of age, adults were in the air, or on the ground protecting their thirty-square inch patch of nesting turf. If an adult over shot its landing, there would be a gauntlet of rapier-like bills to ford off before reaching its mate and nest. No matter where you looked, there was always some gannet action taking place.

It seemed to be over so quickly, but that was more about the unstoppable action we were witnessing than the amount of time. This is a very popular stop for visitors to the Gaspé Peninsula, and the birds paid no attention to anyone standing within five-feet of their nest!

The afternoon was time for exploring the town of Percé. This was one of the few times that our group split up. With a brand-new coastal boardwalk, and an abundance of tourist-serving facilities, everyone had a different experience





on their mind as they landed. Whether it was local music, a chocolatier or some Québécois cooking, the opportunity was onshore.

But it was the return zodiac ride that made the afternoon! No matter what time you returned to the zodiac, you just had to ask to be motored back to the ship via Percé Rock. A variety of nesting alcids and Great Cormorants were a treat, as was the horizontal-layered rock that had been forced into a vertical position. And for those that asked, you could be motored over to an up close and personal view of plunge-diving gannets. It was an outstanding day from weather, wildlife, and scenery perspectives for everyone.

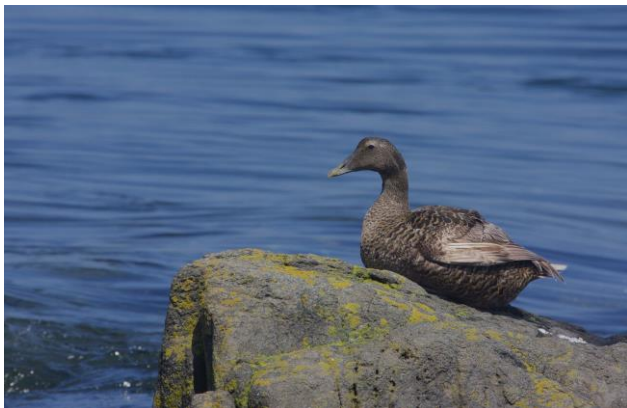
And with the weather just being so nice, the crew set up a barbeque on the stern of Deck Six. More than enough food and varieties to whet everyone's appetite.

Tuesday, July 16 | Anticosti Island

A sail to get to the north shore of this island at the head of the St. Lawrence Seaway this morning, so we had our usual early morning sea watch before breakfast, which was unusually quiet with only gulls, gannets, and Razorbills putting in appearances. Given the dearth of wildlife, the remainder of the morning provided us with the opportunity to listen to lectures on area history and marine mammals.

After lunch it was time to visit Cap Sandtop for a beach party, but first our Naturalist Journeys group had another zodiac to ourselves to cruise the oceanside bluffs. Sandstone sandwiched into massive layers of limestone held fossilized shells and created caves for nesting Black Guillemots and Razorbills, while ledges created the perfect location for nesting Northern Gannets and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Overhead, different ages of Bald Eagle were soaring, and for a while, a pair of Red-tailed Hawks appeared. Spotted and Least Sandpiper filled out our zodiac-based birding.

We landed at the beach party where we were greeted with a rum punch and the opportunity to attempt stand-up paddling, or just rest on the beach. The winds were minimal, the sun was out, and it felt fantastic to relax and be ashore without a schedule. A few of the group explored the nearby marsh after lunch but had no new species. There were plenty of fresh moose tracks, but it was assumed they were bedded down. Offshore, we spotted alternate-plumaged Common Loon, and some flyby Common Eiders.



As with most other afternoons on the ship, we had happy hour with music provided by the Barrah MacNeils, then an afternoon recap that included tomorrow's activities and site visits. Dinner was served in the Bistro and in the dining room for everyone's choice, and the evening ended with some of us attending a lecture, this one by Angel on being a vet in Africa. Pretty sweet...

Wednesday, July 17 | Gros Morne National Park/Tablelands/Woody Point

It was early morning when we sailed into Bonne Bay, the home of Woody Point, and that stunning geologic formation known as the Tablelands. Only about half of the ship was awake, as a number of early-risers gathered on Deck seven to take in the setting and geology of this part of Newfoundland that we were about to explore.

Several options were available for the day, with most of the group choosing to explore the world-class Tablelands of Gros Morne National Park. This is one of the very few places on earth where "Half a billion years in the making – the result of a brilliant coming together of two ancient continents – the Earth's inner soul: the mantle – exposed to you the way few have seen it" is exposed. For a few, it was the primary spot to visit on this cruise, while others just wanted the experience of viewing the earth's core. Certainly not many birds in this vacant habitat, but lots of unique plants and stunning views!

The other option for the morning was a ship-led birding hike through the boreal forest. Guide Greg Smith and ship staff replicated this hike in the afternoon for those that wanted to take in the Tablelands in the morning. Lady slipper orchids, rose pagonia, and three species of carnivorous plants dotted the trail as we hiked towards the Gros Morne Discovery Center from Woody Point. For this afternoon, we had Pine Grosbeak, Lincoln's Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, and Merlin as highlights. Oh, and a minke whale repeatedly surfaced around the ship upon our return.

Thursday, July 18 | La Poile Bay

Today was sunny, very bright, with a stiff breeze. Given that we were pretty close to the coast of Newfoundland, the early-risers didn't have much in the way of birds, quiet you might say.

We were supposed to visit Francoise today, but the winds didn't allow that to happen. So, we ventured further east to La Poile Bay, where we were on zodiacs looking at some very stunning scenery on this isolated section of

coast. Greater Yellowlegs, Willet, Common Loon, and Spotted Sandpiper were the few bird species beyond gulls that we viewed. Those were really the only wildlife sightings we had for the entire day.

Tonight was the charity auction, where folks bid on various items to help support some of One Ocean's favorite charities. And after dinner we had more music from the Barra MacNeils. Definitely a fun and entertaining evening.

Friday, July 19 | St. Pierre

There were only a half dozen people in the forward lounge at sunrise, and that is when St. Pierre and its islands came into view. We all saw the whale blows at the same time, and there must've be at least fifteen whales at different distances – and in all directions from the ship! We would all be saying "Blow" at the same time, there was that much going on. And then there were all the alcids moving around in flocks, and kittiwakes working a surface boil of fish, lots of action as we first approached the area.



When we rounded the island, St. Pierre came into view and we were still surrounded by thousands of birds, swirling around their nesting islands and working all the baitfish – It was one of those dream scenes! All of this before breakfast on our final full day of the trip!

And this morning would be our final zodiac cruise as a Naturalist Journeys group. After discussions with the ship's Expedition Leader, it was made possible for all our group who wanted to go out to the bird nesting islands, to go in one zodiac. So, we started our two-hour journey with our first stop at a spot where thousands of Common Murres were littering the rocky hillside. Mixed with them were Razorbills, and to the east, a grassy patch with numerous Atlantic Puffins. We had nesting Black-legged Kittiwakes, more Black Guillemots, and Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls – all nesting!



This was a spectacular morning, with so many birds buzzing overhead like swarms of bees. The cacophony of sounds made it all but impossible to discern which species we were hearing, but it was a treat to be inundated in such a way.

It was then time to run over to the restored part of the islands, where early cod-fishing families lived and died by the cod. Fields of rubble that were used for laying out the cod so

it could dry and be salted were near every home. Each home also had its own garden patch, where families could raise veggies and some flowers. It surely wasn't an easy life with the winds and the enduring cold, but the number of restored homes and the church showed that several families found it fruitful.

The afternoon was for exploring the town of St. Pierre, or for going on a hike. Those that wanted to do the hike had just enough time for a light lunch before heading up and over the hill. Those that wanted a more leisurely lunch, took the opportunity to go for a bike-ride through town looking for the perfect baguette, or a walk through the French fishing village. Everyone had the opportunity to be ashore, and most of the group took advantage of being on land before we left the pier at 5 P.M.

We had our final recap, our final show by the Barra MacNeils, and our final dinner aboard the Resolute. It was time to say goodbye to all the new friends and acquaintances we had met, as tomorrow's disembarkation would be early.

Saturday, July 20 | Disembarkation

We left the ship early as supplies were being loaded and being made ready for this afternoon's arrivals. Everyone was off in different directions, with some driving home, some staying in Sydney, and the rest taking various flights home!

Photo Credits:

Atlantic Puffin with fish, Greg Smith (GS); St. Pierre houses, GS; Northern Gannet, GS; Sable Island Horses, GS; Razorbills, GS; American Mink, GS; Willet, GS; Tree Swallow, Naturalist Journeys stock; Sable Island Horses, GS; Black Guillemot, GS; Common Murre, GS; Bald Eagle takeoff, GS; Atlantic Puffin, GS; Double-crested Cormorants, GS; Bank Swallows, GS; Great Cormorants sparring, GS; Northern Gannet with grass, GS; Northern Gannet cliff nests, GS; Common Eider, GS; Merlin, GS; Sarrencia Plant with flower, GS; Atlantic puffin in the grass, GS; Black-legged Kittiwake, Peg Abbott (PA);