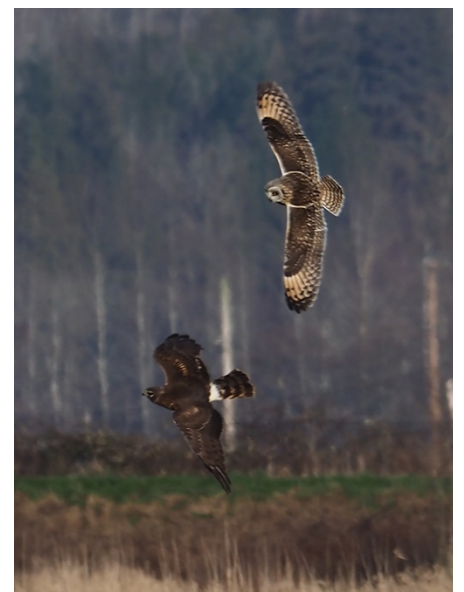


# Washington Winter Birding | Trip Report

## February 16 – 22, 2021 | Written by Steve Shunk



With Guide Steve Shunk, and participants Mason, Terry, Terry, Dick, & Andy





None of us were sure what to expect: a week-long winter car caravan in the rainy Pacific Northwest—during a pandemic. But, we all needed to get outside to scratch our birding itch, so we did it responsibly and enjoyed a superb experience from the Skagit Valley to the Olympic Peninsula.

## **Tues., Feb. 16 Afternoon on the Skagit Flats**

We had just missed a big winter storm in the region—a foot of snow lined the roadsides in the Skagit Valley! The early half of the group met at our lodge in scenic and historic little La Conner, on the Swinomish Channel, our base for the first three nights. We spent the afternoon practicing our Covid-safe car caravan with three vehicles, crisscrossing the north side of the Skagit Flats. Highlights included our introduction to what would be hundreds of Trumpeter Swans and Bald Eagles, as well as a handsome male Rough-legged Hawk and our dominant gull of the trip, the Glaucous-winged. The others met us for dinner and our first chance for formal greetings and orientation.

## **Wed., Feb. 17 Northern Bays to Samish Flats**

Our first full day started with a drive to Blaine, on the upper coast, and birding on the Semiahmoo Spit and Drayton Harbor. Flocks of White-winged Scoter and Common Merganser floated inside the bay, where we saw our only Greater Yellowlegs of the trip on the shoreline. Brant geese made a good first showing, portending hundreds to come. We compared Greater and Lesser Scaups and enjoyed our first pairs of Harlequin Ducks and Red-breasted Mergansers—the firsts of many we would see in the coming days. Down the log boom that separated the small-boat harbor from the bay, we found many Black Turnstones and a few Dunlin and Sanderlings.

A short walk took us out to Tongue Point, at the north end of Semiahmoo Spit. At the mouth of Drayton Harbor we were delighted with stunning looks at a male Long-tailed Duck, as well as a couple of females. A flock of Pacific Loons—among several Common Loons—fed in the glassy waters, and we studied the differences between Surf and White-winged Scoters. Many more Brant fed on eelgrass on Semiahmoo Bay. We also got excellent looks at our most common Alcid of the trip, the Pigeon Guillemot, and several Red-necked Grebes. A brief stop at Birch Bay gave us more Harlequin Ducks, both scoters, many Common Loons, and a couple of Red-throated Loons. We spent a little time in the forest of Birch Bay State Park, enjoying a few of the common songbirds, like Pacific Wren and Spotted Towhee, and our departure from Birch Bay introduced us to our first big flocks of Dunlin.

After lunch of delicious Northwestern cuisine in Bellingham, we drove the scenic Chuckanut Drive along the western shores of Bellingham and Samish Bays before popping out onto the Samish Flats. As soon as we hit our first flooded fields, we came upon a large flock of wigeon that included at least five drake Eurasians; perfect afternoon light allowed us to easily pick out their rusty heads and creamy-orange forehead strips. Just a hop





down the road, we came upon a mess of cars parked along the road just outside of the tiny hamlet of Edison, an area known as the East 90 of the Skagit Wildlife Area. Many cameras and scopes were out, so we asked what was up: folks were watching a passel of Short-eared Owls hunting over the flats! This experience turned out to be one of the big highlights of the trip, and we spent the better part of an hour enjoying the show, which included several scuffles between some of the dozen-plus owls and the hunting Northern Harriers.

Our final stop of the day took us to the West 90 and the Samish Unit of the Wildlife Area, where we enjoyed quite an array of diurnal raptors. Bald Eagles were present by the dozen, among many Red-tailed Hawks and couple of Rough-legged Hawks. Several more harriers floated across the marshland in the setting sun. We ended our first full day with the best waterfowl tally of the trip: 22 species of ducks, geese, and swans.

## **Thurs., Feb. 18 Fir Island and the Skagit Flats**

We spent the entire third day on Fir Island and the Skagit Flats, just outside of La Conner. The island is formed by the two terminal forks of the Skagit River, with the remaining flats to the north. This area is famous among birders for winter specialties and rarities. We were joined by Naturalist Journeys' Mason Flint, who proved to be an excellent second guide, with plenty of local knowledge on recent bird sightings.

We started the morning with a handsome Merlin and our only Western Meadowlark of the trip in Dodge Valley. We spent most of the morning creeping along the rural roads of Fir Island watching raptors, ducks, and Trumpeter Swans. Early on, we were captivated by a large falcon that we were sure was a Gyrfalcon, later proving to be an immature Peregrine after studying our photos. We enjoyed a flyover adult Peregrine and several American Kestrels on the island. Mew and Glaucous-winged Gulls were scattered across the wet fields. The morning also gave us an excellent lesson in swan identification: some Trumpeter Swans have yellow in the bills like Tundra Swans, a species that we never did find on the trip.

After a socially distanced lunch at The Rex—also known as the Rexville Grocery—we headed for Wiley Slough of the Skagit Wildlife Area. Before walking out the dike, we spent at least an hour watching an abundance of passerines in the swampy, wooded habitats at the head of the slough. Upon entering the parking area, we picked up our best rarity of the trip, with a rather unwary Black Phoebe; there turned out to be two phoebes working the flooded channels. We found a large flock of Pine Siskins, a Lincoln's Sparrow, several Black-capped Chickadees and Golden-crowned Sparrows, and one of only two Downy Woodpeckers found during the week.

Our last venture of the day took us on a bone-chilling walk down the dike of Wiley Slough; we sought a Northern Shrike that had been reported in the area, and we were braced for the brisk winds. We found a few Pied-billed Grebes, a couple of Northern Flickers, and our first-of-the-tour Hooded Merganser. A few Marsh Wrens and





Red-winged Blackbirds sang from the tules. Just about when we were ready to turn around, we found the Northern Shrike, the only one of the trip. It stayed active, hunting from the tops of marshland snags north of the dike, giving us brief but satisfying looks. On our way back to La Conner, we tallied a rare Great Egret in a small slough in the Skagit Flats.

## **Fri., Feb. 19 March Point to Admiralty Inlet**

After our third night in La Conner, it was time to head west toward our next base in scenic Port Townsend. Birding first around the very industrial March Point, we scanned the waters of Padilla and Fidalgo Bays. Many of the common ducks were present, and we found more Long-tailed Ducks and Pigeon Guillemots from the north tip of the point. Heading south, we enjoyed a handful of Hooded Mergansers in excellent light off Similk Beach before reaching Rosario Head. This classic seabird spot did not disappoint. In addition to the expected Common and Red-throated Loons, we found our first Marbled Murrelets and Common Murres of the trip, among several more Pigeon Guillemots and Red-necked Grebes. We enjoyed the screaming courtship behaviors of several Black Oystercatchers and our only looks of the trip at Hairy Woodpecker in the twisted spruce trees. Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Golden-crowned Kinglets made eye-level showings in the trees and shrubs around the parking area.

Heading south, we enjoyed another socially distanced lunch in Oak Harbor, with lattes and sandwiches from Starbucks eaten in our individual vehicles. We wound our way down Whidbey Island, serenaded by jet fighters from the Naval Air Station, finally reaching the Coupeville ferry dock in preparation for our cruise across Admiralty Inlet to Port Townsend. The trip produced our first looks at Ancient Murrelets, flying by at a distance





just above the water's surface. We also saw several loons and cormorants, as well as more Pigeon Guillemots. After reaching Port Townsend, we checked into our lodging for the next three nights.

The late afternoon took us to the end of the Quimper Peninsula. We made a brief stop at the Point Hudson before heading out to Fort Worden Historical State Park. Driving all the way to the lighthouse, we walked out to Point Wilson for some more seabird watching. In addition to still-distant looks at Ancient Murrelets, we saw our first Rhinoceros Auklet of the trip and several Red-necked Grebes and Marbled Murrelets. Our final stop of the day took us on a short walk along the lagoon at Port Townsend's Kah Tai Park. In addition to excellent looks at Black-capped Chickadee, we heard a brief chorus of Virginia Rails from the lagoon.

## **Sat., Feb. 20 Strait of Juan de Fuca**

Today we headed west, around the northeastern corner of the Olympic Peninsula, birding from Port Townsend to Dungeness Bay. We started on Sequim Bay, birding Sequim Bay State Park and the John Wayne Marina. The calm waters of the bay hosted many of the same ducks we had seen prior in the trip, including Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, and Surf Scoter. We stopped at the mouth of Sequim Bay, where we enjoyed our first looks at Varied Thrush near Washington Harbor.

Heading north, we drove the locally famous Schmuck Road. The slow drive produced some fun birds, including flocks of 10 Greater White-fronted Goose—among many Canada Geese—and at least 50 Northern Pintails. A dozen or so Black-bellied Plovers were scattered across the field in front of the geese. Stops at Dungeness Landing and Cline Spit County Parks gave us beautiful looks across Dungeness Bay and Graveyard Spit, and out to the Dungeness Spit lighthouse. Birds in the area included Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants, and more of the same sea ducks. An exposed island in Dungeness Bay provided loafing space for dozens more Black-bellied Plovers and Dunlin, as well as many Sanderlings.

After lunch in town, we headed for the Dungeness Audubon Center and Railroad Bridge Park, just a few minutes from downtown Sequim. An afternoon walk along the Dungeness River gave us nice looks at an American Dipper, our only one of the trip. Golden-crowned Kinglets twittered from the alders along the river, and we found several Steller's Jays from the bridge. Leaving the Sequim Peninsula, we made a cultural stop at the S'Klallam Tribe's art gallery, Northwest Native Expressions, in Blyn. A few of us picked up new face masks in Northwest Indian motifs, among other simple gifts and souvenirs.

Our final birding of the day took us out to the Miller Peninsula. After a short rainforest walk in Miller State Park, we drove to the northwestern tip of the peninsula at Diamond Point. This turned out to be one of our best seabird spots of the tour. The water was like glass, and we could easily see all the way to Protection Island. With the afternoon sun at our backs, we enjoyed excellent looks at Rhinoceros Auklet and many pairs of Marbled



Murrelets, more than any this birder had ever seen in the same spot. Perhaps the best sighting though was the clear look we had at floating Ancient Murrelets, which prior to this had been limited to distant high-speed flight views, unsatisfying at best.

## **Sun., Feb. 21 Port Townsend Bay to Port Ludlow**

Our final full day of the tour took us down the western shore of Port Townsend Bay, out to the tip of Marrowstone Island, and south to Port Ludlow. Our first stop at Port Townsend Historical State Park was a fun experience with songbirds. After hearing Red Crossbills twice earlier in the week, we finally got good looks at them perched in the spruce trees around the park picnic area. A few Ruby-crowned Kinglets bopped around in the small trees, while Spotted Towhees and Varied Thrushes kept us busy in the shrubs and larger trees around the park.

We next headed to the north end of Marrowstone Island and Fort Flagler Historical State Park. This was just one of the many parks on our tour route that featured World War II bunkers and batteries that told stories of this Great War. Focusing on the birds, we walked to the northwestern tip of the island, a narrow spit that reached out across the mouth of Killsut Harbor. We again enjoyed excellent light as we scanned the waters of Port Townsend Bay. A handsome male Northern Harrier hunted the spit and Brant covered a small sandbar off the tip.

We continued south toward our decadent lunch spot at the posh village of Port Ludlow. After the meal we went for a walk on the Timberton Loop Trail that skirted the outside of the Trail Nine Golf Course. The big highlight here was the whooping of a Barred Owl from the surrounding woods. We saw Pileated Woodpecker carpentry, but the birds failed to appear. We headed back north toward Port Townsend, with a final stop at Irondale Beach County Park. Afternoon light again shone at our backs, giving us great looks across the southern end of Port Townsend Bay. Here we found our only Western Grebes of the tour, along with many more of the common water birds across the bay.

## **Mon., Feb. 22 South to Point No Point**

Our departure from Port Townsend gave us our first rainy morning of the trip—our ‘good luck’ of dry prior days was an understatement. Never mind the weather, as we were all prepared for the rain. Our first spot took us on a nice misty walk around Anderson Lake State Park. The Anna’s Hummingbirds didn’t seem to mind the rain. A





family of Trumpeter Swans floated together on the lake, and we found a flock of Purple Finches near the park headquarters. Other songbirds included nice comparisons of White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrows.

Our final stop would take us to yet another legendary birding spot at the northern tip of the Kitsap Peninsula: Point No Point. This drive always seems to take forever, but the views from the end of the road and the birding are worth the effort. Our biggest highlight here was a collection of all three cormorant species—Double-crested, Pelagic, and Brandt’s—standing together on a small collection of pilings just off the shoreline. We had fleeting glimpses at Brandt’s before this, so it was great to compare them all in the same spot. Horned and Red-necked Grebes were easily seen offshore, along with our last Pacific and Common Loons. After lunch in Port Gamble, we bade our farewells.

In addition to the birds described above, we had several species that were seen almost daily. These included: an abundance of Buffleheads, the most common diving duck of the trip; Common Goldeneye, though we missed the more difficult Barrow’s; Bald Eagles and Red-tailed Hawks were everywhere; and “Oregon” Dark-eyed Juncos occupied just about every habitat. We also saw several Columbian black-tailed deer, and Douglas squirrels frequently chattered from the forested areas. The introduced eastern gray squirrel was the species most readily seen in the region. In the saltwater, we enjoyed repeated quality looks at harbor seals.

## Bird Summary

26 waterfowl species + 30 additional water birds  
 4 days of Harlequin Duck and 3 days of Long-tailed Duck  
 4 days with Belted Kingfisher  
 Near-daily Anna’s Hummingbirds  
 107 total species against a 9-year average of 109  
 Only 3 species tallied as ‘heard-only’ (owl, rail, and Marsh Wren)  
 Only 3 species tallied as ‘guide-only’ (sapsucker and 2 sparrows)



### **Photo Credits:**

View from Channel Lodge, Mason Flint; Birding at Rosario, Steven Shunk (SS); Bald Eagles, SS; Trumpeter Swan, SS; Brant, SS; Short-eared Owl & Northern Harrier, SS; Juvenile Northern Harrier, SS; Birding Fir Island, SS; Rex Lunch Fir Island, SS; Snow Geese, SS; Swinomish Channel, SS; Great Blue Heron, SS; Birders @ Rosario Head, SS; Schmuck Rd., SS; Bridge Sign Sequim, SS; Driftwood Whale, SS; Brandt's Cormorant, SS; Northern Harrier, SS; Snow Geese Skagit, SS; Birding!, SS.