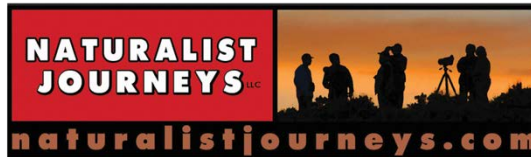


Washington's Olympic Peninsula

May 8 – 16, 2021 | Trip Report by Steve Shunk



With Guide Steve Shunk, Local Guide Carolyn Wilcox & Participants Nancy, Patricia, Daniel; Peter, Hank, Lee, Jean, Jill, Kathryn, Fred, Dean, and Theresa



Trip Summary

Pacific Coast, temperate rainforest, inland waters, and the alpine zone; we covered it all in our circumnavigation of the Olympic Peninsula this spring. Throughout the trip, we enjoyed a plethora of western specialty birds along with the tail end of northern migrants on their way to Arctic breeding grounds. We also experienced nine days of stellar weather—quite a surprise in this region known for its drenching rainfall. From gigantic conifers to glacier-covered peaks, we tallied 149 bird species and 15 different mammals. Here are the highlights of our adventures.

Wildlife Summary

- 149 bird species, including 16 species not encountered on past trips;
- 25 different waterfowl species;
- Daily or nearly daily species included Rufous Hummingbird, Glaucous-winged Gull, Violet-green Swallow, Pacific Wren, and Pine Siskin;
- 15 mammal species, including many Columbian black-tailed (mule) deer.



Sat., May 8 Burien's Seahurst Park

After greetings at our Sea-Tac hotel, we headed to the shoreline of Puget Sound with some easy walking along the beach and trails of Seahurst Park in the city of Burien. Over the open waters we found our first flock of Surf Scoters, about 40 in all, as well as a half-dozen Caspian Tern and our first of countless Glaucous-winged Gulls. Somewhat of a surprise this late in the spring was a solo Red-necked Grebe. On the land side of the park, we walked among western red cedar and Douglas-fir trees, enjoying several birds we would see repeatedly during the trip, including Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Brown Creeper, Pine Siskin, and Spotted Towhee.



As we headed back to the car, we got our big bonus of the afternoon when a Pileated Woodpecker flew into a large tree along the road. We were destined to hear many later in the tour, but this would be the only visual we would get of this amazing woodpecker.

We spend the night in Seattle to allow time for late arrivals, and we enjoyed dinner and introductions at a Thai restaurant just walking distance away.

Sun., May 9 Nisqually, Hoquiam & Quinault

Leaving the hotel early, we headed south toward Olympia and the start of our clockwise tour route around the Olympic Peninsula. First stop, Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge, which provided productive wetland habitats at the delta of the Nisqually River. We found several bird species here that we would not find elsewhere on the tour. Ducks included Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teals, many Northern Shovelers, and Hooded Merganser with a brood of ducklings. We also enjoyed a pair of handsome Wood Duck. Western Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Greater Yellowlegs occupied the shallow edges of wet fields. Along the scenic boardwalk, we found our only Marsh Wren and Muskrat of the tour, and we watched a large flock of Mew Gulls hawking insects high above the wetlands. Other songbird highlights here included an active Bewick's Wren nest, singing Purple Finch, and an excellent comparison of the Audubon's and Myrtle subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warbler in a giant big-leaf maple tree.

After a lovely lunch in downtown Olympia, we headed coastward for another productive water stop at the Hoquiam sewage ponds. As we entered the perimeter of the ponds, a Peregrine Falcon flew through the area, only to be matched later by a Merlin bolting across the water. These would be the only two falcons of the tour. We also watched our one-and-only Osprey on an active nest at the edge of the ponds. Waterbirds showed in



abundance, and we were graced with several other species that would be our first and last of the trip. In particular, we enjoyed a late flock of Cackling Geese and a few Greater White-fronted Geese among a handful of Canadas. We also had superb comparisons of Greater and Lesser Scaup. The saltwater shoreline opposite the ponds gave us our first Whimbrel, Least Sandpiper, and Dunlin of the trip.

We ended the day with 14 waterfowl species; not bad for this late in the spring. Finally, we were greeted by Steller's Jay at the lovely Lake Quinault Lodge, our base for the next two nights. We settled into our gorgeous rooms at this historic park lodge with a view of the lake, lush forests all around, and a sense of excitement for the days ahead. Dinner was at the lodge, enjoyed by all.

Mon., May 10 Quinault Rainforest

Today we dedicated to exploring the magnificent Quinault rainforest, which included several hikes and a leisurely drive along the Quinault River. We visited Cascade Falls, Merriman Falls, and Bunch Falls, and we hiked along Gatton and Morrison Creeks. This was our first introduction to the temperate rainforest of the Pacific Northwest, and we enjoyed non-stop naturalist highlights. Ferns and fungi carpeted the forest floor among flowering shrubs like salmonberry and twinberry honeysuckle. We had to watch our step to not squish the fat little banana slugs, and this allowed us to discover a lovely Garter Snake and Red-legged Frog among the mossy rocks and downed woody understory. Overhead, we found our first Band-tailed Pigeon and Vaux's Swift of the trip, and we saw several "almond-scented" Flat-backed Millipedes along the trails. We took plenty of time to enjoy the wildflowers, including Hooker's fairy bells, Pacific trillium, wood sorrel, and waxflower wintergreen, while the air was filled with the echoing drums of Hairy and Pileated Woodpeckers. Singing Hammond's and Pacific-slope Flycatchers eluded visual observation, though Pacific Wren and Wilson's Warbler were abundant throughout.

We also spent some quality time at the "world's largest spruce", a 1,000-year-old Sitka spruce tree that stands at over 190 feet tall with a 59-foot circumference! This sentinel tree was the most majestic among the many giant conifers in the Quinault Valley. Back at the lodge, we enjoyed excellent looks at Violet-green Swallow, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and the first of many White-crowned Sparrow we would encounter later in the trip. Dinner was back at the Lodge in their cozy dining room.



Tues., May 11 Quinault to Lake Crescent & The Hoh Rainforest

Today was split between the uplands and Pacific shores, with a visit to the legendary Hoh rainforest in Olympic National Park. We started with a quick stop at an ocean bluff to search for

members of a small Sea Otter population. Among the hundreds of Surf Scoter, we finally spotted a few otters rolling in the swells. This spot also yielded a flock of more than 30 Whimbrel along the shore, as well as our first Pigeon Guillemot and our only Red-throated Loon of the tour.

Farther up the coast, we stopped into Ruby Beach in search of “rock-pipers” and the southernmost breeding population of Sooty Fox Sparrow. The sparrows did not show, but several other birds kept us busy, with Sanderling and Spotted Sandpiper feeding along the shore and Band-tailed Pigeon and Bald Eagle perched in the conifers above. Among the rocks just offshore, we found our first two Black Oystercatchers and barely saw two Surfbirds before they escaped into the rock crevices. Throughout our visit, we watched Pelagic Cormorant carrying nesting material to their rookery site on the vertical slopes of the giant rocks.

Lunch was at the Kalaloch Lodge, perched on a bluff above the ocean. While we waited for our sandwiches and salads, Rufous Hummingbird and Orange-crowned Warbler cavorted among the slope-side vegetation. Everyone was very patient trying to sort through the many gulls roosting out on the point, and they were not disappointed. Among five gull species, we found a young Glaucous Gull and our only California Gull of the trip.

It was time to head for the Hoh. Ignoring the crowds typical of our nation’s national parks, we immersed ourselves in one of the most magnificent rainforests in North America. Among the giant spruce and cedar trees, we found Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers and heard the drum of a distant Pileated. We discovered a secretive pair of Wood Duck in a small swamp and enjoyed good looks at Black-throated Gray Warbler in the vine maples. Habitat on the forest floor was similar to the Quinault, and we enjoyed the scurrying Douglas’ Squirrels and several small patches of green bog orchids.

We arrived at Lake Crescent Lodge, another historic park lodge of wonderful character, in time for dinner and we settled into our base for the next three nights.

Wed., May 12 Marymere Falls & The Elwah River

Today would take us to a nice diversity of habitats. We started with a beautiful hike to Marymere Falls from the trailhead just across from the lodge. The forested trail was lined with wildflowers and big trees. Just a few of the



flowers we enjoyed included: Pacific bleeding heart, prickly currant, evergreen violet, vanilla leaf, wild ginger, Oregon-grape, and a handful of stunning calypso orchids. Birds included the continued abundance of Pacific Wren and great encounters with five American Dippers; we found an active dipper nest as well as fledglings being fed in the middle of Barnes Creek. Old-growth Pacific yew trees set the stage for our only visual of Varied Thrush.

After lunch, we headed upstream on the Elwah River. The easy one-mile hike took us to a spot where the road was washed out and where Carolyn gave us a primer on the conservation and ecology of the river. Along the hike we found a Downy Woodpecker at a nest and Common Merganser in the river. A few songbirds gave us nice views, including MacGillivray's and Black-throated Gray Warblers, and Hammond's Flycatcher.

We later enjoyed another very nice dinner and a good night of sleep on the shores of Lake Crescent.

Thurs., May 13 The High Olympics & Ediz Hook

Our big day in the mountains started with an early breakfast in Sequim before heading up to Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park. Our first birding stop took us to Heart o' the Hills Campground. Though birdsong surrounded us, the birds proved to be visually elusive here. We did see a small flock of Vaux's Swift, but that dang Pacific-slope Flycatcher continued to stay out of view. Onward.

On our way up the mountain, we came across two photographers in a clearing. Inquisitive Carolyn asked them what they had found, and it turned out to be one of the big highlights of the trip: Sooty Grouse. We parked the vans and had a great experience watching two displaying males and a female. We continued to the top of the road at Hurricane Ridge.

We explored around the lodge and down Obstruction Point Road in search of high-elevation birds. One of our first encounters wasn't a bird at all, but the fluffy and adorable Olympic Marmot, which is endemic to the Olympic Mountains. We found an Olive-sided Flycatcher and had excellent looks at its white flank feathers—not typically seen from the typical under-belly view. A flock of Canada Jay flew up the ridge and through a stand of pines and seven Band-tailed Pigeons gave us our best view of the trip. Typical birds of the alpine zone included Horned Lark and American Pipit, with a Townsend's Solitaire thrown in for good measure.



We picked up lunch at the Little Devil's Lunchbox and enjoyed a sunny picnic at the Olympic National Park visitor center. Our only Cooper's Hawk of the trip flew over while we ate. Finally, our afternoon took us to the tip of Ediz Hook, a long spit of land that separates Port Angeles Harbor from the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Both sides of the spit proved very productive for new birds. Inside the harbor we watched at least six stunning Harlequin Ducks, as well as a flock of Sanderling on the log booms. But it was the other side of the spit that gave us the big highlights. Among many Surf Scoters, we were able to pick out at least three Long-tailed Ducks. We found Pacific and Common Loons, Pigeon Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, and our only Marbled Murrelet of the tour. Some of the group got quick glimpses at a Harbor Porpoise and we saw several Harbor Seals.

We headed back to Lake Crescent for some leisure time before dinner. Everyone enjoyed great looks at a male Barrow's Goldeneye just off the lakeshore, and one member of the group got a photo of a late Golden-crowned Sparrow.

Fri., May 14 The Sequim Peninsula & Strait of Juan de Fuca

After another early breakfast in Sequim, we headed out to the end of the Sequim Peninsula to look for sandpipers and other waterbirds. The fog hung just off the shore, making viewing a challenge, but we managed to find some fun birds. Our first stop took us to the Three Crabs trail. As we got out of the vehicles, we were treated to a flock of 18 Purple Martins, as well as some of our only Cliff Swallows of the trip. Among seven waterfowl species, we scanned through over 200 American Wigeon and picked out two male Eurasian Wigeons. Shorebird highlights included Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Western Sandpiper.

Just a bit eastward, we dropped down onto Dungeness Landing, hoping for the fog to pull back a bit, but it was quite the opposite. Nonetheless, we were able to find a flock of Brant and a Greater Yellowlegs. Pacific, House, and Bewick's Wrens all sang from the wall of shrubs, but none came out for us to see. Heading toward Sequim Bay, we stopped first at Port Williams and Marilyn Nelson County Park, where we had a fun experience with at least 30 Pigeon Guillemots. Several birds floated just offshore and a pair copulated just a short distance from us at the entrance to a small cave in the sandy bluff. Everyone got stunning looks at perched Violet-green Swallow; seven Red-breasted Mergansers flew north out of the bay; and three Rhino Auklets showed much better than



those at Ediz Hook. Before a quick stop at Washington Harbor—where we got great looks at Golden-crowned Kinglet and Western Tanager—we found a herd of Elk on Schmuck Road.

We enjoyed an early dinner at the delicious Silverwater Café in Port Townsend and then headed for the harbor, where we boarded our boat for an evening trip to Protection Island, near the mouth of Discovery Bay. On the way out of Admiralty Inlet, we got superb looks at over 400 Rhinoceros Auklets, as well as Common Murre and Brandt's Cormorant. We motored slowly around the island to enjoy every corner. A pair of Black Oystercatcher stood on the gravelly eastern spit; Pigeon Guillemots showed well all the way around; and four Bald Eagles cruised the updrafts from the bluffs on the western side. In case that wasn't enough, we found a busy bunch of Harbor Seals hauled out on the southwest beach, and among them was a single Northern Elephant-Seal. More than 1,000 Glaucous-winged Gulls later, we watched the sunset in the west and the alpenglow on Mts. Baker and Rainier before heading back to the harbor. What a celebrated experience!

Sat., May 15 Railroad Bridge & The Quimper Peninsula

Our final full day of the tour started with a hearty breakfast the Oak Table café in Sequim. Stuffed with those giant German pancakes, we headed to Railroad Bridge Park at the Dungeness Audubon Center. Nesting season was in full swing. We caught Downy Woodpecker and Black-headed Grosbeak carrying food and watched an Anna's Hummingbird put the finishing touches on her well-camouflaged nest. We watched nesting Tree Swallow and territorial Warbling Vireo, and we had a great comparison of Black-capped and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. With American Dipper in the Dungeness River and our only Bushtit of the tour, we headed east toward Port Townsend.

After lunch at the Finnriver Farm and Cider, we made the short drive to Anderson Lake State Park. The lake itself was quiet, though we did see our only Pied-billed Grebe there. While standing near the lake we also



watched Cedar Waxwings actively flycatching over the parking lot. In practically the same spot, we enjoyed our first visual of a Red-breasted Nuthatch and had excellent looks at Red-breasted Sapsucker and Western Tanager. With the afternoon waning, we briefly hiked the upper trail and found our only Hutton's Vireo of the tour. For our final outing, we headed to Point Wilson in Fort Warden State Park—one last look over Admiralty Inlet, the main entrance to Puget Sound. As expected, we saw over 100 Rhino Auklets, as well as many Pigeon Guillemots, and a few each of Pacific Loon, Brandt's Cormorant, and Common Murre.

Sun., May 16 Our Journey Comes to An End

This morning we bade our farewells before heading directly back to Sea-Tac airport. In all, the trip was very successful, experiencing a variety of habitats and all their component flora and fauna. Special thanks goes to Carolyn Wilcox of Experience Olympic for sharing all her local knowledge of the region—it was great to have her join us for this Naturalist Journeys adventure.

Photo Credits: Group on Bridge, Carolyn Wilcox; Group on Trail by Tree, Theresa Holtzclaw; Garter Snake and Red-legged Frog, Daniel Peter Siminski; Ferns, Theresa Holtzclaw; Largest Spruce, Carolyn Wilcox; Banana Slug, Theresa Holtzclaw; Group on Trail, Carolyn Wilcox; Pacific Wren, Hank Feilen; Group at Beach, Carolyn Wilcox; Group in Forest, Carolyn Wilcox; Group at Falls, Carolyn Wilcox; American Dipper, Hank Feilen; Sooty Grouse, Lee Carn; Olympic Panoramic, Theresa Holtzclaw; Olympic Marmot, Daniel Peter Siminski; Group in the Mountains, Carolyn Wilcox; Boat Trip, Carolyn Wilcox; Downy Woodpecker, Lee Carn; Anna's Hummingbird on Nest, Lee Carn; Group on Railroad Bridge, Carolyn Wilcox; Group in Front of Church, Carolyn Wilcox.