

Winter in Northwestern Washington | Trip Report

February 5-11, 2022 | by Steve Shunk



With guides, Steve Shunk and Michael Good, and participants Carol, Glynnis, Louisa, Marcy, Marie, Mary, Steve, Sylvia, and Terry.



We prepared for a rainy trip to the Pacific Northwest—and we got sunshine and lots of birds. This was my 10th winter tour to the Skagit Valley, and the region continues to support a great birding experience. We saw hundreds of Trumpeter Swans, Buffleheads, Bald Eagles, and Marbled Murrelets; plus thousands of American Wigeon and thousands of Snow Geese. We watched a Gray Whale at Rosario Head and Harbor Porpoises at Admiralty Inlet. And we tasted some of the best seafood on the planet. Here are the highlights—from Blaine to Sequim—of our winter adventure in northwestern Washington.

Sat., Feb. 5 Afternoon on the Skagit Flats

Somewhere between Sea-Tac airport and the Hilton Garden Inn, our group coalesced and headed north toward the Skagit Valley. One of our guides, Michael Good, was delayed back east by a big storm, so Mason Flint joined us for the initial drive and first day. The Cascades were enshrouded in clouds, so our scenery was limited, but we enjoyed our introduction to the Evergreen State. We made it to the turnoff at Conway and crossed Fir Island and the Skagit River. However, we couldn't get all the way off Fir Island without our first glimpse at the Wrangel Island Snow Geese—just a few of the thousands of Snow Geese that breed on Russia's Wrangel Island and overwinter here on Skagit Bay. We made it to La Conner, but our hotel wasn't quite ready for check-in, so we headed out for some birding.

We crisscrossed the north side of the Skagit Flats, scanning the fields for water birds and raptors, especially enjoying our introduction to Trumpeter Swans and Bald Eagles. Swans litter the region's fertile agricultural lands each winter; they are hard to miss and easy to study. Hundreds of Bald Eagles move to the flats after feasting at the fall salmon run up the Skagit River. Both would prove to be big highlights of the tour. We found a large group of American Wigeon that included a few male Eurasian Wigeon. Most of our dabbling duck flocks also included



Mallards and Northern Pintails. We found our first Common Goldeneyes and Buffleheads, both of which would be common. Perhaps the highlight of the afternoon was an adult Peregrine Falcon that we watched bolting across a muddy field and then stopping in the middle for all of us to enjoy. After checking in at the charming La Conner Channel Lodge, we took a short break and then met for our introductory dinner overlooking the Swinomish Channel.

Sun., Feb. 6 Drayton Harbor to Samish Flats

Michael arrived late the prior night, so we bade farewell to Mason and headed out for our first full day. A thick fog blanketed the Skagit Valley, and we were initially concerned about its implications for seeing *anything* in the fields. As we approached Burlington, however, the fog had cleared and a 'bluebird day' was off and running. After a quick but satisfying breakfast at Starbuck's—and two Ruby-crowned Kinglets in the trees out front—we headed north to Drayton Harbor and Semiahmoo Spit. Our first stop at the obligatory restrooms in the county park always includes some great birding on both sides of the spit. We looked out onto Semiahmoo Bay and the Straits of Georgia to find many White-winged and Surf Scoters and hundreds of Brant. Everyone also delighted in our first two Harlequin Ducks as they fed along the shoreline in front of us. We found our first Anna's Hummingbird—a daily bird for the trip—in the parking lot, and a few of us enjoyed watching a singing Bewick's Wren. On the flip side of the spit, we scanned the harbor and found dozens of Greater Scaup, as well as our first Red-throated Loon of the tour.

We next headed down the spit to the marina and Tongue Point. The floating deck that encloses the marina always has a collection of loafing shorebirds, and it maintained its reputation. Among a flock of 150 Dunlin, we found a single Sanderling, a couple dozen Black Turnstones, and two Black Oystercatchers. Farther down, we picked out a couple of Pelagic Cormorants from the many Double-crested. We also enjoyed Ruddy Duck, Horned Grebe, and Belted Kingfisher inside the marina. A lovely walk out to Tongue Point allowed us to look once again into Semiahmoo Bay. We compared Pacific and Common Loons on the open water, and we found our first Red-necked Grebe of the trip, offering its own comparison with more Horned Grebes. We enjoyed lunch in Bellingham at the Boundary Bay Brewery, giving us our first taste of the famous Northwest beers. Our after-lunch route took us down the scenic Chuckanut Drive and along the bluffs overlooking Bellingham and Samish Bays before dropping onto the Samish Flats. Once we hit the agricultural fields, we stopped to check some



random songbirds in the trees and found a spectacular female Rough-legged Hawk perched low in the adjacent yard. Down Bow Hill Road and into the Samish Flats, we experienced a Bald Eagle extravaganza. Dozens of eagles of all ages covered the fields and perched in the trees, moving around constantly, as if to jockey for the best view. The muddy fields around the perimeter had plenty of Trumpeter Swans and a couple hundred pintails carefully watching the show. Just around the corner, we found a large mixed flock of dabbling ducks that included dozens of American Wigeon, this deserved a thorough scan. Carefully sorting through the flock, we were able to find at least four Eurasian Wigeon drakes, with their rusty heads glowing in the afternoon sun. As we were wrapping up with the wigeons, we saw a huge cloud of birds wheel up in the distance. They could only be one thing: Snow Geese. We headed that way and found the flock right next to the road! The blue sky, green fields, and gleaming white geese made for quite a scene. We parked carefully and joined several other onlookers as thousands of Snow Geese chatted and fed in front of us. The birds were so close that we could easily get phone photos, and those with bigger cameras enjoyed full-frame head shots of these beautiful birds. It was hard to tear ourselves away, but we had one more stop to make before heading home.

Just a mile or two down the road, we stopped at the 'West 90' parking lot, part of the Samish Unit of the Skagit Wildlife Area. These fields typically harbor a nice collection of raptors, and they did it again. Besides more Bald Eagles, we had several Northern Harriers coursing over the fields. One of our many Red-tailed Hawks flushed straight up from the dense grasses at the edge of the parking lot and then perched right next to us in an alder tree. Scanning the expansive habitat, we found a couple more Rough-legged Hawks. Then Steve saw an interesting bird perched near the top of an isolated stand of alders. He knew it was a falcon, and we had not yet seen a Merlin, so that was on his mind. But it wasn't quite right for Merlin, so he scoped the bird and IDed a handsome Prairie Falcon, a rare bird in the region. We all got excellent scope views of the bird, and then it suddenly bolted from its perch on a straight bead across the flats, and—after a speedy quarter mile—went down on prey. We were all amazed at the distance from which the falcon could spot its prey. We scoped the bird with its fodder until it returned to the original stand of trees, offering a nice photo opp. to end the day. After a short break and a review of our day, we had dinner at another brewery, the La Conner Brewing Company. La Conner is this tiny little harbor town on the Swinomish Channel, and its charming downtown supports several good restaurants, hotels, and galleries, all within a few blocks. One should place La Conner and the Skagit region on one's winter birding bucket list.



Mon., Feb. 7 Fir Island and the Skagit Flats

Our second full day was dedicated to the Skagit River flood plain, and especially the three-sided Fir Island, bordered by the terminal north and south forks of the river and by the mudflats of Skagit Bay. This area is famous among birders for winter specialties, and we had a day full of birds. After a lovely ride through Dodge Valley, we headed for the Hayton Reserve unit of the Skagit Wildlife Area. En route, we were distracted by what was likely the largest group of Snow Geese we would see, probably 10,000+ birds. They weren't as close as the flock in the Samish experience, so we were more easily able to pull away. Hayton Reserve has a reputation for being biting cold and windy, and today was no exception. We hiked up the short ramp and exposed ourselves to the brisk winds of Samish Bay. Spotted Towhee. Red-winged Blackbird. Black-capped Chickadee. Ducks. We got down off the levee.

After leaving Hayton Reserve, we ran into a shuffling mess of ducks that included at least one male Eurasian Wigeon. And eighteen Bald Eagles later, we made it to Wylie Slough. This unit probably offers the best habitat diversity on the island. From old cottonwoods among dense riparian woodlands to tidal salt marsh and mudflats, the birding is good here. No exception. The upper reach of the slough wraps around entrance road and parking lot, offering dense, shrubby tangles of vegetation and a nice collection broadleaf trees. A Pacific Wren, several Spotted Towhees, and a dozen Golden-crowned Sparrows kept us busy. Now, the Slough Trail. We packed up what gear and clothing we headed for an exposed saunter above the marshes and mudflats, though it was not as cold as Hayton Reserve, presumably because of the trees. One of the first highlights was discovering a Pileated Woodpecker working its way down the slough. It vocalized and made a great showing for everyone. Magnificent bird. A little farther down, we spotted an Accipiter on the back side of a row of trees. Moving quietly past the bird, we found an opening for a perfect scope view of this gorgeous adult Cooper's Hawk. A little farther still, we ran into a perched Rough-legged Hawk. More great scope views. We also found a cute little Downy Woodpecker of the resident Pacific race, *D. p. gairdnerii*. We headed back to La Conner for lunch, trying our best not to stop for every collection of raptors, ducks, and swans. Lunch at Calico Cupboard never fails to satisfy; a bit lengthy but worth it. Back to Fir Island. We covered the bayshore section of the wildlife area in the morning and would spend the afternoon in the uplands. The rest of the day saw us zigging and zagging across the agricultural lands between the two forks of the Skagit River. It was a typically cloudy winter day in the Skagit Valley, which is excellent for bird viewing. No glare, no shadows, and no backlighting. Several experiences stood out during the afternoon. At one point, we were driving the perimeter road, and someone saw a flock of birds



feeding on catkins in a small alder. As we drove by, we could tell they were Pine Siskins, but someone said, “Maybe we should stop in case there are any redpolls in there.” So, we parked the car and approached the magic tree. On closer examination, there were no Pine Siskins. They were all Common Redpolls! What an exciting find for the group, a life-bird for some, and a major highlight of the trip. But we weren’t finished quite yet. Shortly after the Redpoll experience, we came upon a huge line of ducks in the distance. Upon closer examination it was a flock comprising almost entirely American Wigeon, over 1,000 of them. There had to be Eurasians in there, but they were in a long way away. A quick glimpse confirmed that there was at least one male Eurasian Wigeon in the flock. Moving on. It was late in the afternoon and time to head back to the hotel. We drove around another corner and saw a few cars pulled along the roadway. It took us only seconds to realize that they were looking at Snow Geese. Thousands of Snow Geese. Obligated to stop, we pulled over to gaze upon the spectacle. We wouldn’t encounter a scene quite like this the rest of the trip, so we spent plenty of time immersed in Snow Geese. We found a few ‘blue-morph’ Snows, and there was a small pod of 6 Cackling Geese in the middle. At one point, a Sharp-shinned Hawk dove behind us trying to catch a Brewer’s Blackbird. It was a productive afternoon that deserved a delicious Mexican dinner at Santo Coyote Café, just two blocks from the hotel.

Tues., Feb 8 March Point to Admiralty Inlet

It was time to head west toward our next base in scenic Port Townsend. After breakfast at the Farmhouse, we birded around March Point. With oil refineries behind us we scanned the waters of Padilla and Fidalgo Bays. A few dozen Brant and a few dozen Gadwall represented the waterfowl, along with a few scoters, Common Goldeneyes, and Red-breasted Mergansers, and many Buffleheads. We also enjoyed a handful of sandpipers on the shoreline, which included a few each of Dunlin and Sanderling. We headed south to Rosario Head. This classic seabird spot looks down from steep rocky cliffs into the Salish Sea. We never know what we will find here, but it’s always something amazing. And I would call over 400 Red-throated Loons amazing! We also found our first Short-billed Gulls of the tour and counted over 60 Pigeon Guillemots. Four Black Oystercatchers and five Bald Eagles lined the surrounding shores. Back at the parking lot, we shared great scope views of our second Pileated Woodpecker of the trip. A few Golden-crowned Kinglets and two Pacific Wrens kept us distracted. After a quick lunch in Oak Harbor, we worked our way down Whidbey Island toward the Coupeville ferry. We stopped

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adjacent to the ferry dock to bird the little harbor and the coastal side of Admiralty Bay. A lone male Harlequin Duck sat on the opposite shore, and we studied a collection of all three cormorant species loafing just off Fort Casey Beach; these were our first and best looks at Brandt's Cormorant. Before boarding the ferry, we had plenty of time to bird the length of Crockett Lake. We couldn't make it out of the parking lot, however, without studying the group of gulls present. Among the Glaucous-winged and 'Olympic' gulls (Western x Glaucous-winged hybrids), we picked out an adult Iceland Gull of the 'Thayer's' subspecies; that was a life-bird for several of our group. Heading down the roadway between Crockett Lake and Admiralty Bay, we made a handful of stops to scan the waterbirds, with our radars on for a Short-eared Owl in the uplands. Many dabbling ducks were present, along with nice comparisons of Greater and Lesser Scaup. We found a few harriers and a few Bald Eagles before IDing a distant Rough-legged Hawk. Wraing up our last stop, we turned toward the vans and, lo and behold, a gorgeous Short-eared Owl flew right by us as it hunted over the grassy marshland. We chased it down the shore and everyone had excellent looks as we watched it hunt just opposite the ferry dock. Next was our cruise across Admiralty Inlet, the passage between the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound. This ferry route to Port Townsend takes about an hour and offers a great opportunity to study Alcids and other water birds from the open lower deck of the boat. The trip produced our first looks at Ancient Murrelets, flying by at a distance just above the water's surface. We also saw several Short-billed Gulls, plus plenty of Common Murres and Pigeon Guillemots. To our amazement, as we got closer to Port Townsend, we found a flotilla of hundreds of Marbled Murrelets! Amazing numbers of this cute little seabird, and a great chance to see them on the water before they flushed beyond the ferry route. After reaching Port Townsend, we checked into our motel and enjoyed a short break before an amazing dinner at Silverwater Café.

Wed., Feb. 9

Discovery, Sequim, and Dungeness Bays

Today we headed west, around the northeastern corner of the Olympic Peninsula, birding from Port Townsend to Dungeness Bay. Our first stop would take us out to the northeast corner of the Miller Peninsula and the little settlement of Diamond Point. On the northern edge of this neighborhood, one of the residents has set up a swath of lawn on the shoreline where birders are welcome to scan the open waters. And scan we did. Birds were not abundant, but they were diverse, and we found all five species of Alcids from the trip, including our first Rhinoceros Auklets. Before piling in the vans, we found our first House Finches of the tour, and as we drove around the loop, we enjoyed a perched male Northern Harrier at close range. After a short bathroom break in the parking lot at Miller State Park, where we found our first Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Red-breasted



Nuthatches, we headed for the Sequim Peninsula. Our first stop, the John Wayne Marina on Sequim Bay, produced many of our common water-bird species as well as a single Hooded Merganser and a few more Rhino Auklets. The highlight came as we left the parking lot and found a much sought-after Varied Thrush perched right next to the entrance. We got about as close as we wanted—without flushing the thrush—and several folks enjoyed another life bird. We next headed north, to the locally famous Schmuck Road. Schmuck is a simple straight road that doesn't do much except connect two other roads, but the conditions in its tilled and stubby agricultural fields seem to attract a lot of birds. This year, we immediately found a flock of Canada Geese. Closer inspection resulted in finding a mixed flock, with about half Canada and half Cackling Geese. These fields regularly attract Black-bellied Plovers, and they again reliably came through. We found 83 plovers scattered about, with 37 Dunlin running around beneath them. A couple of harriers seemed to keep the shorebirds on their toes. We enjoyed lunch at a local coffee house before a productive afternoon of birding. First stop, Three Crabs.

The local birding hotspot known as 'Three Crabs' is named for a restaurant that once stood there. Three Crabs Restaurant operated here from 1958 to 2011. The restaurant was demolished in 2013, and the land became part of a long-term habitat restoration project. Sometimes, conservation works. Currently, Three Crabs is a small parking lot and porta-potty, with short trails accessing the shoreline of Dungeness Bay. Birding here is great if you catch the tide right. This day, we met the ebbing tide just before it got too far out. We found over 300 Black-bellied Plovers, over 600 Glaucous-winged Gulls, and over 700 Dunlin. We had a few dozen Brant and Bufflehead, a few Alcids, and a distant pair of Long-tailed Ducks. One big trip highlight included our only Northern Shrike, which we watched for a while hunting from the various perches around the dune grass. We also found four Marbled Godwit, which were a first for me in ten years of trips to the region. The afternoon was waning, and we tried to get out of there, but we were stopped by a Peregrine Falcon perched across the marsh.

We headed down Anderson Road toward the west side of the Sequim Peninsula. On a mission for our next stop, we zoomed right by a big flock of wigeon and decided we should check them more closely. Turns out, we had passed right by a flock of 65 Greater White-fronted Geese, our only ones of the tour. Continuing south, we decided we didn't have time for the drive to Port Angeles, so we went for a change of habitat at the Dungeness



Audubon Center and Railroad Bridge Park, just a few minutes from downtown Sequim. The park was busy with joggers and cyclists, but we managed to find a few fun birds, including an American Dipper a way upstream. Near the trailhead, we all struggled to get good looks at Chestnut-backed Chickadee—only very high in the trees until now—until someone said, “Hey they’re coming to a feeder over here!” We chuckled and proceeded to sit on the benches watching the feeders. Were we had nice comparisons of Chestnut-backed and Black-capped Chickadees. After the hour drive back to Port Townsend, we took a short break and then enjoyed another delicious downtown dinner.

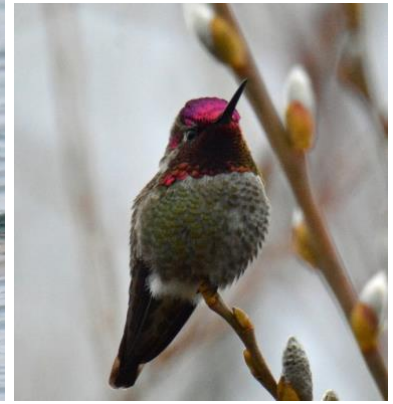
Thurs., Feb. 10 Marrowstone Island and Kah Tai Lagoon

Our final full day of the tour took us down the western shore of Port Townsend Bay and onto Marrowstone Island. We planned a couple stops at Fort Flagler Historical State Park, 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 first headed to Marrowstone Point just inside the mouth of Admiralty Inlet. We found a good-sized collection of Pacific Loons, a few Red-necked Grebes, and several Red-breasted Mergansers, among other common species from the trip. Crossing the north end of the island, we parked near the campground and walked to the northwestern tip of the island, a narrow spit that reached out across the mouth of KILLSUT Harbor. On our way out there, we watched a flock of shorebirds in the grassy upland that included Black-bellied Plover, Sanderling, and Dunlin. Farther out on the spit, we found a pair of Black Oystercatchers, and several Harlequin Ducks fed just off the beach. The end of the spit and the near shore of Rat Island were covered with “Gray-bellied” Brant, the dominant subspecies of the trip. We enjoyed excellent looks at these handsome geese as they fed on eel grass from the shoreline. Across Port Townsend Bay, we found a dozen Pigeon Guillemot and Rhino Auklets, as well as a few Ancient Murrelets. A dozen or more Short-billed Gulls were seen well on the open water.

One our way down the island, we stopped for a quick scan of Mystery Bay. No sooner had we gotten out of the car when we found a gorgeous pair of Long-tailed Ducks. Most of the group had missed them the prior day, and these up-close birds were appreciated by all. Along the road, we passed a little muddy inlet, where we had great

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light on several Green-winged Teal and our only Greater Yellowlegs of the tour. We enjoyed one of our best lunches of the trip at the Finnrivier Cidery in Chimacum, after which we headed for the northern tip of the Quimper Peninsula. We reached Point Wilson and did some of our final scoping of the trip—we were all getting a little tired of ‘scope eye’ and distant seabirds. It was scenic nonetheless, standing at the lighthouse on Admiralty Inlet and watching the birds fly by. Our last stop of the day took us into Port Townsend to a city park that surrounds Kah Tai Lagoon. The trail here produced some excellent views at several key songbirds. Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets showed well, as well as several Golden-crowned Sparrows. After great looks at a male Anna’s Hummingbird, Michael found a dead bird in a bush that turned out to be a Marsh Wren. We looked closely at the bird but couldn’t surmise its cause of death, and then we turned around to find a live Marsh Wren skulking in the shrubs behind us, kind of a surreal experience. One of the final birds of the day was three birds—a few vocal Virginia Rails that responded to brief playback. After a break at the rooms, we headed for the outer marina of Port Townsend for our farewell dinner—and more fresh seafood!

Fri., Feb. 11 Port Gamble to Sea-Tac

Our final breakfast would take us to the posh village of Port Ludlow, where we enjoyed traditional fare with linen tablecloths. After the meal, we worked our way southeast, en route to the airport. After crossing the Hood Canal floating bridge, we decided to forego one last bout of sea scoping at Point No Point and headed for new habitat at Port Gamble Forest Heritage Park. We all enjoyed the walk in this mature, second-growth coniferous forest. One of our first birds was a male Varied Thrush, only our second of the trip. Just around the corner, we found our only Hairy Woodpecker of the tour. Fifty Pine Siskins, 11 Pacific Wrens, and a Brown Creeper later, and it was time to head for Port Gamble and our final meal together. The Port Gamble general store does an outstanding light lunch, with plenty of homemade pies and ice cream as an alternate source of sustenance. Louisa and Michael birded outside the store and lucked out on a Red-breasted Sapsucker, a first of the trip, and our last bird of the tour.



Note: After reviewing the eBird checklist for the park and one of Michael's photos of a sparrow, I deduced that he had found a Fox Sparrow on the trail, a new bird for the trip!

In addition to the birds described above, we had several non-bird experiences of note. Harbor Seals were practically everywhere we had saltwater, and we saw several Harbor Porpoise. One of the vehicles spotted a raccoon on Marrowstone Island, and we all enjoyed excellent looks at a California Sea Lion at Marrowstone Point. We also found a few "Black-tailed" Mule Deer. And one of the highlights for this naturalist was the giant barnacles and sea anemones at Mystery Bay.

BIRD SUMMARY

27 waterfowl species + 27 additional water birds

Near-daily Anna's Hummingbirds

Several rarely seen birds in 10 years of tours to the region (total years found, including 2022): Cackling Goose (3); California Quail (2); Marbled Godwit (2); Turkey Vulture (1st ever); Prairie Falcon (2); American Dipper (2); Common Redpoll (2).

107 total species against a 10-year average of 109.

Photo Credits: Snow Geese (Steven Pace), Black Oystercatchers (Michael J. Good - MG), Anna's Hummingbird (MG), Bewick's Wren (MG), Common Goldeneye (MG), Trumpeter Swan (MG), Snow Geese Closeup (MG), Red-tailed Hawk (MG), Cooper's Hawk (MG), Golden-crowned Sparrow (MG), Common Redpoll (MG), Rough-legged Hawk (MG), Brewer's Blackbird (MG), Sanderling (MG), Cormorant's on rock (MG), Snow Goose profile (MG), Birding Townsend (MG), Gray Whale (MG), Iceland Gull (MG), Kennewick Port Ferry (MG), Northern Harrier (MG), Black-bellied Plovers (MG), Schmuck Road Sign (MG), Varied Thrush (MG), American Crow (MG), Dunlin (MG), Lesser Scaup (MG), Steve at Mystery Bay (MG), California Sea Lion (MG), Anna's Hummingbird (MG), Pacific Wren (MG), Pied-billed Grebe (MG), Marsh Wren (MG), Mystery Bay