



NORTHERN ALBERTA:

Boreal Forest & Rocky Mountains

June 24–July 5, 2015

We first explored Alberta's boreal forest in 2000, when we found 20 warbler species—with males aggressively defending territories in their full breeding colors—and we knew we had stumbled on something spectacular. Watching these gorgeous songbirds exhibiting breeding behavior in their breeding habitats gave us a special connection to these northern forests of North America. Since then, Alberta has become one of our favorite destinations anywhere, partly because of the warblers, and partly because of all the other natural treasures we've discovered. Now, we combine the boreal forest with Jasper's magnificent northern Rockies, timed for the peak of nesting season, for a world-class birding vacation that will take your breath away.

Your host, Stephen Shunk

NOTE: Our 2007 Alberta tour was led by renowned California naturalist David Wimpfheimer, and we are honored to have David on the roster again for 2015. David brings many years of birding experience and his broad natural history knowledge to this adventure, enhancing the tour for all participants.

TOUR SUMMARY

Northern Alberta hosts one of the most diverse arrays of nesting birds in North America. Our tour begins in a transitional patch of land known as the parklands. At Elk Lake National Park, we will bird our first aquatic habitats, with numerous lakes, ponds, and marshes that invite an abundance of waterbirds and passerines. Common sights will include the floating nests of Red-necked Grebes, families of Common Loons, and many active beaver lodges. The surrounding chorus will include the songs of Tennessee Warbler and Rose-breasted Grosbeak, as well as a chance for our first Nelson's Sparrow.

Leaving the parklands, we head into Alberta's largest natural region, the boreal forest. We will visit three major birding areas here, from Cold Lake on the Saskatchewan border east to Lesser Slave Lake. A number of warblers reach their western extremes here, including Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, and Chestnut-sided warblers. Black-throated Green, Canada, and Magnolia warblers will be widespread in the region, as will Ovenbird and American Redstart. We will also visit specialized habitats in search of Palm, Cape May, and Connecticut warblers. Other key birds may include White-winged Scoter, Broad-winged Hawk, Boreal Chickadee, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

We will complete our tour among the glacial valleys and towering peaks of Alberta's northern Rockies. From our base in Jasper, we will explore a wide range of mountain habitats in search of some especially charismatic birds. Cascading rivers host Harlequin Duck and American Dipper, while Black Swifts forage overhead. Mountain marshes showcase Alder and Willow Flycatchers singing side-by-side, as well as Le Conte's Sparrow and Northern Waterthrush. Above the forests we will search for "Timberline" Brewer's Sparrow, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, and White-tailed Ptarmigan, and folks on our 2007 tour enjoyed a stunning Northern Hawk-Owl in the flats along the Athabasca River.

While we explore all of the above habitats, we will keep watch for dozens of additional nesting species. Around the wetlands we could see Common Loon, Bonaparte's Gull, Common Tern, Solitary Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, Marbled Godwit, and both species of yellowlegs.

Additional raptors may include Swainson's Hawk, Bald Eagle, Osprey and Merlin. From the chorus of songbirds, we will sort out Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird and Western Wood-Pewee; Swainson's Thrush, Veery and Townsend's Solitaire; Red-eyed, Blue-headed, and Philadelphia vireos; Swamp, Lincoln's, Vesper, Clay-colored, and White-throated sparrows; plus Yellow-headed Blackbird, Baltimore Oriole, Purple Finch and White-winged Crossbill. A host of big mammals will keep us pleasantly distracted from the bird life, including bison, bighorn, bear, elk, moose and mountain goat, many with babies, and all at home in their favored habitats.

DAILY ACTIVITIES

Extensive birding experience is not required for this grand adventure, although birders with more advanced skills may be more successful at finding and identifying the anticipated species. This tour may even be fine for some beginners, but they should be prepared for the pace, the abundance of new information, and the length of the high-latitude summer days. Your guides are patient, professional educators, with many years of combined birding experience. We will work diligently to help each participant learn bird songs and visual identification, as well as local conservation issues and general natural history and cultural nuances of the region.

This tour is for moderately active people in good health. Both guides are certified first aid providers, but we will often be several hours from any medical facilities. Every day will involve considerable walking, and we may hike up to three or four miles per day. Most individual walks will be short and at a "birdwatcher's pace," but a few routes may take us up steep hills or over rough terrain. Prior to heading out on a more strenuous hike, we will give you the option of staying back with one of the guides for a less demanding stroll.

Throughout the tour, we will bird mostly on foot, with very little of our birding to be conducted from the vehicle. To take advantage of the northern summer's long days, we will start birding early each morning, with an early dinner followed by optional birding until sunset. We may break up the day with an extended lunch or travel between sites. The group will travel in two minivans, giving us ample room for guests and luggage, with everyone enjoying a window seat.

CLOTHING & EQUIPMENT

Relatively mild temperatures and moderate humidity predominate in Northern Alberta, but the daily weather can be quite changeable. We may experience thunderstorms, light rain, and extended periods of sun, and Jasper's higher elevations may even receive snow in mid-summer. You should be prepared to be outside, away from the vehicle or other shelter, for a few hours at a time. Please pack conservatively to allow room for all our gear, but do not compromise your ability to be comfortable in a wide variety of conditions.

You should bring your own binoculars and favorite field guide on the tour, and you also may bring a spotting scope, although we will have two spotting scopes available for the group. We will bring extra binoculars for your personal use, should you wish to test the latest optics, and we carry a birding and natural history library for reference and learning.

Biting insects occur in some areas along our route, and we recommend that you take the proper precautions. Very few of our stops host enough mosquitoes to hinder the birding experience, but when we reach those sites, you will need repellent or bug resistant clothing in order to enjoy the birds. You also should be prepared to protect yourself from the sun, as we will spend many hours outdoors on most days, with at least a couple days around 8,000 feet (2,440 m) elevation.

ACCOMMODATIONS, MEALS & REFRESHMENTS

We will spend each night in comfortable motels, and except for our arrival night, we will stay in each location a minimum of three consecutive nights. If you are traveling independently and do not designate a roommate, we will match you with another participant of the same gender. If we are not able to pair you with a roommate due to the gender balance of the group, you will be required to pay the *single* tour fee. If you wish to have a private room, we should be able to arrange this for you at most locations, also at the *single* rate.

Your tour fee includes all meals from dinner on Wednesday, June 24, through lunch on Sunday, July 5. Alberta is not exactly known for its cuisine, but we will do our best to seek out quality restaurants that appeal to participants with a wide variety of food preferences. It may be difficult to accommodate the most restrictive diets. If you maintain such a diet, remember that appropriate foods may not be available at restaurants or even in local grocery stores. To prepare for these contingencies you may wish to bring a limited amount of the foods that will meet your needs.

Most breakfasts will be held early to allow us an early start to our birding day. Some will be continental-style while others will be complete meals. Regardless of the breakfast meal served, we will ensure that coffee and tea are available for the earliest risers. We will eat some lunches in restaurants and some in the field. Restaurant lunches may be followed by a break at our motel or by a period of driving between birding sites. Dinners will usually be eaten together at casual local eateries; they will typically be scheduled early enough to allow some optional birding time before sunset. Our mid-day meal will occasionally be the largest meal of the day.

In addition to restaurant meals, we will provide snack foods and beverages in the field. We will also provide personal water bottles for you to use during the trip. One of our goals is to keep you pleasantly fueled and hydrated so that you make the most of the long birding days without getting exhausted. The survey included in your registration materials asks your dietary restrictions and preferences. While we cannot honor every food and drink request, the more detailed your response, the better we can serve you on the road.

TRAVEL ITINERARY

Your trip fee includes transportation from Edmonton International Airport. We request that you arrive in Edmonton by 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday, June 24. If you have any challenges meeting this schedule, please contact us as soon as possible. If you live in the U.S., remember that you are traveling into a foreign country and will be passing through both Canadian and U.S. customs on either end of the journey. For this, *you are required to carry a current U.S. Passport.*

Our daily travel will follow the itinerary below. However, we may adjust some of our specific birding destinations depending on a number of factors, including local bird movements, current weather, and our success at finding certain species. If you have additional questions about the route or birding spots, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Wednesday, June 24.....Early arriving participants take the Best Western shuttle to the motel; others will be met at Edmonton airport by 6 p.m.; early dinner followed by afternoon/evening birding at parkland around Leduc.
Night in Leduc

Thursday, June 25.....Brief early morning drive to Elk Island National Park. Here we will enjoy good numbers of warblers and waterbirds, including our first Red-necked Grebes, Bonaparte's Gulls, and possibly Great-crested Flycatcher.

After lunch, we will drive to Cold Lake, where we will just scratch the surface of the next couple days' excitement at Cold Lake Provincial Park.

Night in Cold Lake

Fri.-Sat., June 26-27 Two full days birding Cold Lake Provincial Park, where we will enjoy our first big dose of boreal songbirds, with our best chance for Blackburnian and Chestnut-sided warblers, plus Connecticut & Bay-breasted warblers, Boreal Chickadee, Least Flycatcher, "Red" Fox Sparrow, and Ruffed Grouse.

Nights in Cold Lake

Sunday, June 28 We will depart early for our drive west, with various stops to search for Swamp, Le Conte's, and Nelson's Sparrows, as well as Philadelphia Vireo, Palm Warbler, and Baltimore Oriole. We will arrive at Lac la Biche (pron. "bish" or "beesh") by mid-morning, where we should find Mourning and Bay-breasted warblers, Winter Wren, and large rafts of diving ducks. The evening drive will take us to Slave Lake for a late dinner.

Night in Slave Lake

Mon-Tue, June 29-30 Two full days birding the Slave Lake region, with songbirds in abundance, including up to 15 warbler species and a dozen sparrows, plus up to 5 different gulls, 4 terns, Bald Eagle, and Pileated and American Three-toed woodpeckers. We will enjoy a foothills hike and plenty of boreal wetlands birding. Other possible birds include Great Gray Owl, Canada and Cape May warblers, Trumpeter Swan, and Hooded Merganser.

Nights in Slave Lake

Wednesday, July 1 Morning drive toward Jasper, birding en route among the rich habitats of the Swan Hills, where we may find Connecticut Warbler; evening birding in Jasper, where we should get our first looks at Mountain Goats and Bighorns.

Night in Jasper

Thu-Sat, July 2-4 Three full days birding the magnificent Jasper region. On one day, we will take a tram ride up The Whistlers peak for carpets of alpine wildflowers, plus White-tailed Ptarmigan, White-winged Crossbill, Clark's Nutcracker, and American Pipit. Another day will include a hike to Wilcox Pass in search of "Timberline" Brewer's Sparrow, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, Golden Eagle, Townsend's Solitaire, and Mountain Chickadee; mammals en route may include bighorn sheep, hoary marmot, and pika. Other Jasper highlights will include the rugged Maligne Canyon, with its Black Swift, American Dipper, Gray Jay, and Harlequin Duck, as well as wetland habitats around Jasper townsite for Willow and Alder flycatchers, "Slate-colored" Fox Sparrow, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Evening Grosbeak.

Nights in Jasper

Sunday, July 5 Early morning birding around Jasper townsite; early lunch en route to Edmonton Airport, arriving by noon for 2 p.m. or later departures.

TOUR REGISTRATION

Your tour fee includes all meals, snacks and beverages; 11 nights lodging; transportation from Edmonton; park entry and activity fees; service-related gratuities; and the instruction and leadership of your guides. The fee does not include guides' gratuities, which are never expected but always appreciated based on your satisfaction with our service.

TOUR FEE FOR 2015: \$4250 double / \$5160 single

We are pleased to accept checks, money orders, or credit cards. A non-refundable \$95 U.S. deposit is required to hold your space.

CANCELLATION NOTICE & REFUND POLICY: This tour will run with a minimum of six participants. If we have not reached the minimum 90 days prior to departure date, we must cancel the trip. We recommend that you purchase travel insurance. Your \$95 deposit is nonrefundable. Your tour balance is due March 30. If you cancel after March 30, we will refund your tour fee (less your \$95 deposit) *only if we can fill your space*. If we cancel the trip due to under-registration, we will refund all deposits.

PARADISE BIRDING CONTACT INFORMATION

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We look forward to seeing you in Alberta this summer!

