

## VANCOUVER, MAY 2009

by Andy Bissitt; Photos by Andy Bissitt, David Bissitt and Oona Bissitt



Not all birds! Black Bear, Vancouver May 2009

### 20th May

After a 'warm-up' day in Seattle, which featured Pigeon Guillemot and Caspian Terns, it was time to turn to the main event. Part of this involved a ferry trip across to Vancouver Island. It was quite busy on the sea, but many things went unidentified, as the boat was moving pretty swiftly. However the big one which did not escape was Rhinoceros Auklet which fell to us because they were nearby, well lit and in numbers (a couple of rafts of 20 plus). A couple of dolphins showed in glimpses, but other birds like Bald Eagle, Pacific Diver and Great Blue Heron were put into the "we'll see more and better" category.



Glaucous Gull, Vancouver May 2009

Once in Victoria, we were soon off to Clover Point, the first 'hot-spot' according to the guide. As expected, we were too late for the specialities (waders), and had to make do with a gammy-legged Glaucous Gull amongst the more common species. A Mink provided a fine diversion. After lunch, more tree orientated birding nearby proved to be a better bet, and we were soon enjoying Anna's Hummingbird, Spotted Towhee and Bushtit. Further exploration brought other 'common' fare, but that did not make them any less welcome, especially Red-breasted Nuthatch, which I did not remember seeing so well on previous trips to North America. Chestnut-backed Chickadees also entertained. Just when we thought that we had dried up, Dave spotted a bird of prey perched in a tree above the path. Instead of the expected disappearing trick, it kindly moved into clearer view and proceeded to tear up a kill. After a few minutes of this, it moved off, but no sooner had it done so than another raptor was found sitting nearby. This was easier to view (i.e. not directly overhead against a bright sky) and was identified as a superb male Cooper's Hawk. We deduced that the first bird had been a juvenile Cooper's (a female from the size of it), and that the male had caught the prey it had been dispatching.

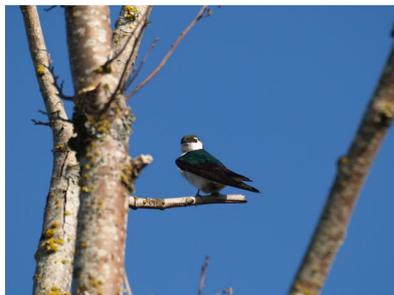


Glaucous-winged Gull, Vancouver May 2009



Anna's Hummingbird, Vancouver May 2009

A quick call in at Witty's Lagoon (which was close to our 'base') whet the appetite with Ringed Kingfisher, Rufous Hummingbird and Greater Yellowlegs for starters, and fabulous Violet-green Swallows in the car park. Tough going but worth it, and a superb memory refresher.



Violet-green Swallow, Vancouver May 2009

### **21st May**

We had a Spotted Sandpiper prior to breakfast at a nearby pond, but then lost half a day really on a whale watch. This will probably be appreciated more at a later date, but the ten minutes or so we spent with the Orcas was not augmented by much more action, the lack of sea ducks being particularly felt. The afternoon therefore had to be better, but a trip up Mount Douglas did not really deliver. Our first Orange-crowned Warblers were welcome, and a fly-over Pileated Woodpecker a relief, but Spotted Towhees and American Robins ruled the scene. It was not until we broke out onto the summit and into the sunshine that more interest was had. Butterflies of an English flavour, e.g. Swallowtail, Comma, Painted Lady and Large Tortoiseshell types of the American varieties, generated much of this but House Wren, Chipping Sparrow and Northern Flicker created a diversion of sorts. So really the 'warm-up' was over, and we had to start seeing the 'big ones' pretty soon. Would this prove to be wishful thinking?



House Wren, Vancouver May 2009

### 22nd May

But at least the weather was helping, and another day dawned calm, cloudless and sunny. Near to our 'digs', this brought Yellow Warbler to brilliant life, and Red-breasted Nuthatch closer even than the first day. A Swainson's Thrush sat up in the open, one we had only heard the previous evening. A juvenile junco with a parent showed how far the season was advanced. Our first drive went astray, but led to a brilliant chance encounter. From the car, something large was spotted trying to lift off from the sea only about 50 meters out. Osprey was suspected, but in fact it was a Bald Eagle, and it was struggling to lift-off with a gull it had apparently killed. At about the fourth attempt, it lifted itself clear, and flying about a meter above the water for about 100 meters, reached the safety of the rocks. It then proceeded to rest for about twenty minutes before disappearing around the corner of the bay with its kill. Whatever, the sight of it as it sat on the sea like a giant gull will stay in the mind. Having found the Sooke River estuary, our target area, we found that we hadn't missed much, with Black Oystercatcher and Greater Yellowlegs the best of what there was. A distant female Hooded Merganser was dragged from the heat haze. Nearby, a converted railway line didn't promise much, but a superb piece of spotting by Oona picked out a fledgling owl in the trees above whose plumage was just advanced enough to give away its identity as being a Barred Owl. As new ticks go, this was as unexpected as you could imagine. Owls were low on our hit list anyway, but at midday!! Anyway, this quite low, unobstructed view was just fantastic. Less spectacular but still worthy was the sight of Bewick's and 'Winter' wren together responding to some pishing.



Juvenile Barred Owl, Vancouver May 2009

After lunch we headed for tomorrow's possible site to check accessibility, but ended up at Camp Barnard instead. After a bear warning from a local, we had a pretty good hour plus, first of all tapping out Hairy Woodpecker, then pishing out Common Yellowthroat, Wilson's and Townsend's Warblers, all looking great in their flashing yellow finery. Ravens overhead amused as usual. Dave and I returned to Witty's lagoon early evening and bagged Olive-sided Flycatcher and Cliff Swallow as newbies. So many picturesque scenes in one day almost caused sensory overload, and disappointments always seemed to be followed by triumph. But could this continue?

### 23rd May

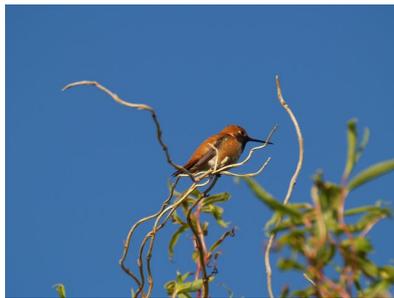
The 'reccie' of yesterday did not really help, and I expected the required road to Tugwell Lake to be closed, and so it was. We could walk in however (more bear warnings), and gained some useful information about the birds from a passing local. Black-headed Grosbeak was soon on the list, and as with so many birds seen on a previous West coast trip to rainy Oregon, looked far brighter in the sunshine. Anyway, we made our way to the hot spot picked out for us, a huge excavation site which looked like a bomb had hit it. A magnificent male Western Tanager proved the point made above again; the red of its head and the blinding yellow standing out so much against the dark background of the conifers. The main target was much more elusive, with every passing American Robin causing excitement. However, we did begin to get views of it, at first distant and in flight, but two birds did seem to be flying to and from a nest site deep in the woods. Eventually I struck lucky as I was well placed to see the Red-breasted Sapsucker land in a tree 30 feet away in all its glory – and it was a good bird. It seemed to glow in the dimness as it flew a few trees back into the woods. Further decent flight views followed, but thankfully I had seen one of the main target species very well and could walk away happy. The after lunch period certainly tailed off as a biting sea breeze took away any pleasure the Jordan river area might have had. This amounted to a few divers just offshore (Great Northern and Pacific), and a male Blue-winged Teal on the river itself. A bit poor really, but we weren't finished yet! Sundown found us following the guidebook to the letter, and it was true to its word as an adult Barred Owl flew in in response to the CD recording of its call. With just enough light to appreciate it, this removed any doubts we may have had about the validity of the youngster we had already seen. So another acceptable day in the sun.



Black-headed Grosbeak, Vancouver May 2009

### 24th May

This was always going to be an awkward day (the day of the wedding), but it turned out much worse than that. Really apart from the usual pre-breakfast things like Rufous Hummingbird, and the sound of the wilderness song of Swainson's Thrush, only the Marsh Wrens at Swan Lake stood out. The water was near deserted and the sky's only offering was a Bald Eagle/Red-tailed Hawk skirmish. Due to the sunshine and it being Sunday, Elk and Beaver Lakes were less attractive than they appeared in the guide. Truth was, we had cleaned up the area. Time to move on.



Rufous Hummingbird, Vancouver May 2009

### 25th May

The statement above was soon borne out on the road to the north when we called in at Buttertubs Marsh and had superb action within minutes. We approached a line of trees with much 'chirping' evident, and were amazed to see a male Sharp-shinned Hawk sitting frozen at eye-level less than five meters away. It somehow seemed mesmerised by the choice on offer, remaining stationary for about a minute before making off into another tree. Its chances of success were high as there was a flock of 75 plus Crossbills, which, strangely, were feeding at the tops of these non-coniferous trees before they departed noisily. A massive Bullfrog then appeared on the path before us, soon putting in an enormous leap for cover at the marshes edge. Pied-billed Grebe and a male wood duck were top quality birds on the water itself, whilst 'super-hirundine', the Purple Martin, sailed through the sky like mini flying fortresses. We also had Cedar Waxwings, Yellow Warbler and two Ospreys, so it was a fair place. We then had to do some miles before putting in any more birding time. This came at Oyster Bay where at least a few of the 'missing' waders were lingering, albeit only Sanderling (2) and Grey Plover (10), although one of the latter was in summer plumage. Out to sea, Great Northern Divers were seen well, and Caspian Terns patrolled the tide line. As we approached our destination at Campbell River, it appeared that birding opportunities were diminishing, and stopping for some dark shapes bobbing just off shore seemed

optimistic - just flotsam or seaweed we expected. But then my binoculars hit them and my eyes filled with colour and patterns. Perhaps THE most wanted bird of the trip, Harlequin Duck, about twenty of them. Absolutely superb is the only way to describe them, especially the male in full adult costume with the deep red/tan flanks. The single American Wigeon was simply outshone. So the non-stop effort had been repaid, and we hadn't finished yet. No sooner had we checked into the B&B a mile or so up river than we were scoping the Sound from the balcony, and adding another lifer. In poor light, and at a distance, the shape was only a presumed tick at first, but finding increasingly nearer birds, and with an increase in light levels, Marbled Murrelet was brought into being. Conclusive views of the pointy-headed alcid were well appreciated and, well, what did you expect from a house that had an eagle's hunting tree in the garden! Brilliant eye level views of 'baldie' were also had at no more than 25 feet distance. What next?



Sharp-shinned Hawk, Vancouver May 2009. Not everything posed so well for the camera!

#### **26th May**

Our big trip into the 'wilderness' of Strathcona Provincial Park was punctuated by a stop at Elk Falls where we had fine views of American Dipper and family by an impressive waterfall: an underrated bird in dusty grey, and yellow feet. The only other thing worth mentioning was the actual sighting of a Pacific Slope Flycatcher, a difficult one to see in the massive conifer trees. These things had to last us some time as a hard climb found next to nothing on view apart from Townsend's Warbler. The next stop sounded promising, and was indeed so, but not for birds! The valley looked like good habitat, but we couldn't hear much bird song. Then again, we could easily (and nearly did) overlook two massive Black Bears foraging on the flat valley floor. This was what it was all about: a stunning view, no one else around, and two completely wild animals going about their activities. They allowed plenty of time for study before one spotted us and ran away! One of life's highlights. It was a good job really as apart from close-up Stellar's Jay at our snack stop, the area was not too productive, probably through lack of time. Another bear by the road on the long drive back south to Victoria closed this chapter of the expedition.



Dark-eyed Junco, Vancouver May 2009

## 27th May

Sadly the last day, but at least with time to do a few spots. The area round the base had been good for stuff, and this last morning provided Cedar Waxwings, Red-breasted Nuthatch and a stunning male Rufous Hummingbird displaying. Dave also made an unfortunate find on the tide line, a not long dead Bald Eagle. To feel its weight made you wonder how it stayed airborne, let alone could pluck a gull from the water and take off from it when saturated. The find was reported to a responsible local who promised to hand it over to the authorities. Whatever, it certainly left an impression on my cousin's youngsters. A local 'dog's playground' was not meant to be the first stop, and was unsurprisingly not great apart from giving up good views of grounded Turkey Vultures and a tree-bashing Pileated Woodpecker. The next site did not deliver either, and seemed very quiet in comparison to what the guide stated might be about. However, it was partly redeemed by the finding of lifer Willow Flycatcher which was seen and heard well. Where the expected warblers were was anyone's guess. A trip back up Mount Douglas was a last throw of the dice for new stuff, and was reasonably successful in turning up a briefly viewed Lazuli Bunting and a Vaux's Swift. Anna's Hummingbird and a snake posed for pictures (not together). Then it was to the ferry and last views of Rhinoceros Auklet, which is where we nearly came in.



Turkey Vulture, Vancouver May 2009

The trip had not been a raging success, which was part expected, but at times it certainly appeared as if the crushing hand of humanity had won again, and it certainly hasn't finished yet. The other thing to come out of the holiday was the realisation that Oregon (my previous snow/rain blighted trip to the western U.S.) wasn't as bad as I thought. It was, of course, all down to the weather. This time it was a bit too good.



Adult Barred Owl, Vancouver May 2009

**Andy Bissit, October 2009**