

CANADA, TORONTO TO VANCOUVER, AUGUST 2010

by Chris Harper



Although travelling to Canada with three kids and the missus restricts birding opportunities somewhat (swimming and cooking can be enjoyable too), I did manage to sneak a few excursions on my summer hols this year, during August 2010. We travelled from Toronto to Vancouver in a large-ish RV over 28 days, and again the sheer vastness of the country again meant that prolonged stops in certain areas was difficult. However, armed with my 2 Sibley's, but no idea of 'important bird areas' I tried my best to note down all that tweeted and squawked during the trip, concentrating on new 'ticks' as we travelled across, which is what is written about here, rather than a systematic list of all that was seen at each place.

So what follows is a sort of daily account of where we were and what was seen, concentrating mainly on North American birds only, with the occasional snap thrown in from the family camera (must take up photography when kids get older). If anyone feels the need to ask any questions or has any inkling of planning a Canadian trip themselves please don't hesitate to contact me, and I can tell you how we survived our 7000km with plenty of top wildlife watching thrown in.

August 1st Toronto- Tottenham. Picked up from airport by relatives and a short (1 hour) drive north to the sleepy town of Tottenham. En route Red-tailed Hawk on the lampposts, as was American Kestrel (both pretty common on the trip). American Crows galore, flocks of Common Grackles ('a ruddy nuisance' quoted my uncle), many Mourning Doves (the melancholic call the sound of this 1st jet lagged night), Black Ducks by the freeway ponds, and as we got further out of the city a very handsome Eastern Kingbird calmly catching flies above the road (they proved to be common throughout the trip).

A good meal and drink later we settled down to view the feeders in the garden. Black Squirrels were the first to take advantage, but then a Black-capped Chickadee lit up the scene, only to be usurped by a Blue Jay (beautiful in close up with the bins). I thought I heard another, so peered into the bush only to see a pair of gorgeous Northern Cardinals timidly foraging in the trees. A great end to a tiring day, and a fit full sleep followed, thinking I was still on the 'plane.

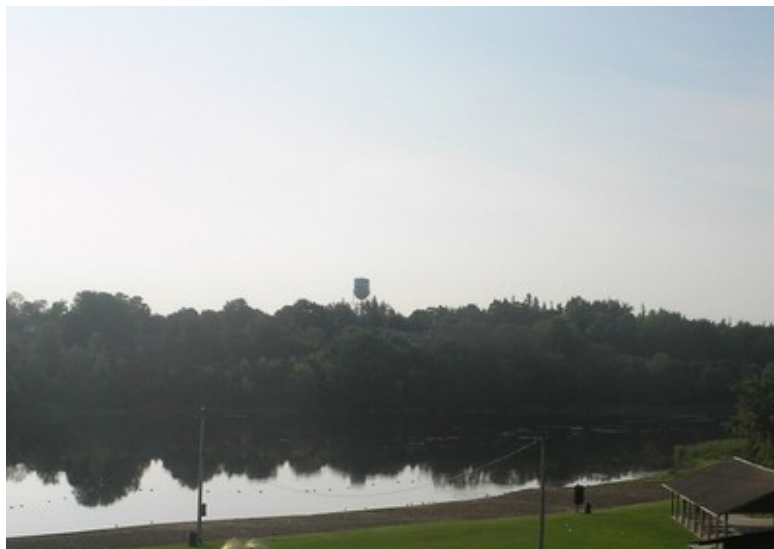
August 2nd Tottenham- Niagara Falls. Next morning (was it 5am or 10am?), having awoken early, I decided to sneak out and have a wander around the town, so I followed Mr. Lindo's advice and headed for the cemetery. Lovely mature trees contained mostly Grackles and Starlings/House Sparrows, but flitting amongst the branches was a White-breasted Nuthatch, and near a railway track, semi-scrub held a small gathering of American Goldfinches (again, common on the Eastern side, I found) and my

first American Robins (the 'blackbird' of Canada I reckon). Overhead a Cooper's Hawk was busy aiming for a distant bank of trees, and that sighting unfortunately remained my best view of the trip of this oversized Sparrowhawk.



American Goldfinch

After breakfast, and the rest of the clan now awake, we headed for a quick half hour at the local 'conservation area' (neat grass, manicured a little too much to do what it says on the tin). The lake was a big hit with about 10 Ring-billed Gulls, and a Belted Kingfisher flew to the opposite side as we approached (a common occurrence throughout the excursion). A couple of Solitary Sandpipers (does that make sense?) seemed unfazed by our proximity and a few Purple Martins fed overhead. Around the trees a Wood Thrush skulked, and this was my last new tick as we whizzed back to Toronto, up the CN Tower, picked up the RV, thanked Aunt and Uncle and headed as a five-piece to Niagara Falls.



Tottenham Conservation Area

Passing large flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds on the way, we arrived 10km upstream of the actual falls on a rural campsite to be greeted by a passing Chimney Swift overhead, a Trumpeter Swan on the opposite bank of the Niagara River and a few Spotted Sandpipers making their way along the exposed banks. This looked like a good spot, but it was getting dark, time for a sleep!

August 3rd-Niagara Falls. Up early for an amble around the campsite perimeter proved extremely rewarding. On the field adjacent were 6 Killdeer, whilst on the river a couple of Great Blue Herons were feeding, with a Green Heron flying over (my only one of the trip). In the damper areas I spotted Louisiana Waterthrush, Veery and a Hermit Thrush. A Tree Swallow briefly joined the numerous Purple Martins around the site, and a Dark-eyed Junco was wary around the fences. Into Niagara itself, and a very productive day. Around the outlying park was an Orchard Oriole, with a well camouflaged Canada Warbler too. On the water were a few Bonaparte's Gulls with hundreds of Ring-billed, and a pair of Broad-winged Hawks circled over in the USA, with

a Peregrine flying over the falls themselves. Apart from almost stroking the gregarious Ring-billed Gulls the final new birds of the day were a few Cliff Swallows around the escarpment. It was roasting, so the falls lit up and our lights went out.



Scrounging Ring-billed Gull

August 4th Niagara to Tobermorey. Up early the next day for a quick campsite boundary foray produced a huge flock of House Finches in the tree next to our pitch, Grey Catbird and Baltimore Oriole on adjacent farm (latter the most gorgeous of the trip I reckon) plus Swainson's Thrush. En route to Tobermorey we passed numerous circling Turkey Vultures, a few Eastern Meadowlarks and a Northern Mockingbird. Picnic stop near Alora produced Chipping and Savannah Sparrows, and on arrival at our Amish run campsite was the first of hundreds of Cedar Waxwings of the trip. A quick trip up the lookout over the Bruce

Peninsula NP bought very close views of Golden-crowned Kinglets but again time was our enemy, so it was a quick wash, get eaten by mosquito's and ready for a very early start to catch the 7am ferry.



Above: Monarch at Alora



Above: Bruce Peninsula lookout

August 5th Tobermorey to Lake Superior PP. An early walk around the local bog (as in 5.30 early) produced an unexpected delight as an American Woodcock flew past my head. Then across Lake Huron on the ferry to Manitoulin Island with close views by the road of Red-shouldered and Sharp-shinned Hawks. As we started the road around Lake Superior the scenery really became stunning, as did some of the new birds, with roadside Sandhill Cranes and our first Bald Eagle of the trip. Late arrival at the campsite bought a lovely flock of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks above our heads, matching a beautiful sunset over the biggest lake in the world.

August 6th Lake Superior PP-Sleeping Giant PP. Up very early for a long journey bought us a Bobcat on the side of the road, as well as Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Pine Siskins in the campsite. Stop offs just after the huge Goose statue at Wawa bought American Coot and Pied-billed Grebes, and a short excursion to Ouimet Canyon added Olive-sided Flycatcher and Song Sparrow. On arrival at Sleeping Giant pp were Red-eyed Vireo, Eastern Wood Peewee and Blue-headed Vireo. A quick rendition of 'on top of spaghetti' and a well earned sleep.



The Wawa Goose

August 7th Sleeping Giant to Grand Beach, Manitoba. Another long journey before a four-nighter at Grand Beach on Lake Winnipeg. Some excellent birds on a stop near the time zone change, including Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Black-billed Cuckoo, and best of all the first Pileated Woodpecker of the trip. A Moose fed quietly at the back of one of the numerous lakes on this leg, and as we got back in the RV after a look, a Timber Wolf ran out of the forest and alongside us. Who needs birds? Crossing into Manitoba bought the first Northern Harrier and a few Western Meadowlarks, as well as Downy Woodpecker as we stopped to view a Beaver Lodge. On arrival at Grand Beach I was immediately impressed that the pitch seemed to be in the middle of Boreal forest, and a quick wander produced Alder Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Least Flycatcher, along with thousands of Dragonflies and Mosquitoes. A last ditch saunter to the beach for sunset rewarded with a flock of 10

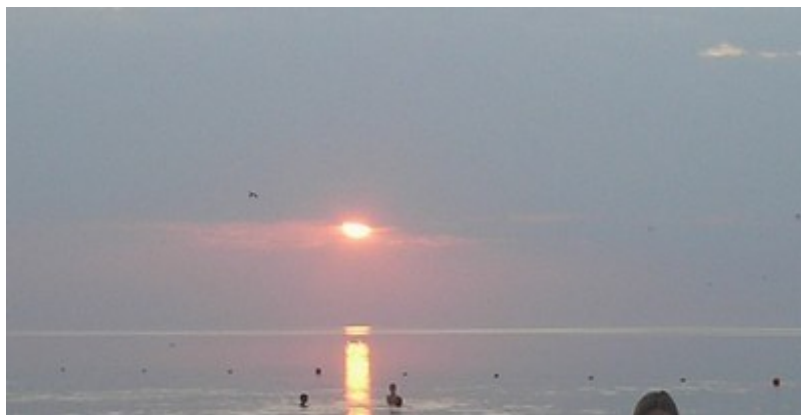
American Pelicans gliding in, 4 Greater Yellowlegs on the shore and 5 Common Nighthawks calling high overhead. Couldn't wait or the next few days to at last do some proper 'patchwork'.



Above: Beaver Lodge at Whiteshill



Above: Piping Plover logo at Grand Beach



Above: Pelicans flying into Lake Winnipeg

August 8th Grand Beach. Early morning look out the window produced a stunning list of birds around the pitch. Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, White-throated Sparrow, Bobolink and Brewer's Blackbird all within 10 minutes of each other and a short walk to the re-cycling point turned up Hairy Woodpecker, Yellow Warbler and many Yellow-rumped Warblers. The rest of the day spent at the beach included diving Ospreys, Bufflehead, Forster's Terns, Palm Warblers in the scrub, and 3 very close Piping Plovers on their way to their South Beach nesting area (although nesting long over I assumed). An evening wander around the 'wildwings' trail produced Beaver as well as American Widgeon and a Sedge Wren. Back to a camp fire to avoid the mozzies.



Above: Start of the Wildwings tour



Above: Non-plussed Beaver

August 9th Grand Beach. Overnight thunder cleared to bring some great birds to the forest early on. An immaculate American Redstart was seen almost touching the window, with Philadelphia Vireo and Wilson's Warbler. Another quick wood walk

produced an almost tame Black and White Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler and Tennessee Warbler (having read all my Bear safety info first of course). A morning at the local water slide park produced the best view of a Golden Eagle I have ever had, it flying low over my head as I was on top in the queue for the 'Bullet', followed later by an immature Bald Eagle. Around the site were a couple of Scarlet Tanagers and loads more Purple Martins.



Above: Enjoying the Boreal Forest

A late afternoon at South Beach to try to get prolonged views of the Piping Plovers proved fruitless but a walk about did produce Least Sandpiper, Wood Duck, both Marsh and House Wren and Swamp Sparrow. Return to camp stalked by Common Nighthawks.



Ring-billed Gulls on the rocks and Piping Plover beach in the distance

August 10th Winnipeg. Up early and greeted by a Black-throated Green and Orange-crowned Warblers on a woodland ramble, before heading to Oak Hammock Marsh, North of Winnipeg (one birding spot I was aware of!). Our arrival was greeted by a few Western Grebes, a single Willet, Redheads, hundreds of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and lots of waders. Couldn't identify them all given limited time, but new ones included a few Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral and White-rumped Sandpipers with many Greater Yellowlegs. A lucky spot, helped by a ranger, was an American Bittern flying low over the reeds. After exploring Winnipeg town, we ventured South to Fort Whyte to see the Bison herd, and whilst there also saw Prairie Dogs as well as flocks of Franklin's

Gulls in surrounding fields and an Eastern Peewee near the bird feeding area. Back on the Trans Canada tomorrow, so fast back for another sound sleep.



Above: Montage for Oak Hammock Marsh



Above: Unwary Prairie Dog

August 11th Grand Beach to Regina. Up early and a prairie ride with some great new birds. Best was a Loggerhead Shrike, lucky spot on wire behind a dilapidated farmstead and across into Saskatchewan a Yellow-breasted Chat by the side of the Trans Canada. Arrival just east of Regina in the middle of great prairie farmland looked promising and the campsite gave my only view of Western Kingbird of the trip along with 5 Brown Thrashers in the trees. Lazing by the pool gave an excellent view of a Swainson's Hawk gliding over (first of many between here and the Rockies). A pre-dusk amble around the locality produced many of the more common birds but also one of the key ones I was after; Sprague's Pipit, diving into the field from afar then giving good views for a minute or so. It sensed something up and within five minutes the heaven's opened. A hasty retreat was beaten.

August 12th Regina to Cypress Hills pp, Alberta. Up early (an hour earlier as it turned out as we forgot to put our clocks back) again and a day to make up for the slight disappointment of Oak Hammock. Some excellent stop off points and in some cases 'view as you drive' points right along the Trans Canada gave great views of some species I had earlier 'missed'. Top ones were Marbled Godwit, Upland Sandpiper, American Avocet, and many Black-necked Stilts. The area around Chaplin and Reed Lakes was best, although smaller lakes near the Alberta border were very good too. California Gulls and Brown-headed Cowbirds were also added to the list. On arrival at Cypress Hills and thankful to avoid tornado's on the plains, we had our first totally wet day of

the trip, so birding took a back seat. This did have its benefits, as when it finally let up at 10pm, an obliging Great Horned Owl moved passed our pitch calling and no doubt glad to get a bit of a respite from the downpour. Sweet dreams.



Avoiding Prairie tornadoes

August 13th Cypress Hills to Drumheller via Dinosaur pp. Again up early (a lie in for a birder—nah!), and very misty views of White-tailed Deer and our first Elk, after spotting a few Lincoln's Sparrows around the RV. A few Black-billed Magpies enjoyed the fields en route to Dino pp, where suddenly it was chilly for the first time in the trip (in a desert!). A tour of this world heritage site gave both Brewer's and Grasshopper Sparrows, a fantastic Prairie Falcon as well as Mule Deer. A route to Drumheller through some amazing 'badland' scenery produced mainly Meadowlarks and Hawks, but this was to be another four-nighter, and time for a well earned rest.



Badlands scenery

August 14th Drumheller. The only new bird species today was a cracker, a beautiful Lazuli Bunting family just outside our campsite. I wondered if they use the nest boxes on the fence posts. A local day, but bear in mind I really didn't have time to list all species at each site, so one new species sounds dull. However around the campsite were Belted Kingfishers, lots of Cedar Waxwings, pelicans, chickadees, nighthawks, sandpipers, warblers and Beavers. Next time, may do a list for each site, maybe when the kids can cook and drive!

August 15th Calgary. Excursion into Calgary in a full day produced a Hooded Merganser from the paddle steamer at the Heritage Park as the only new tick of the trip. Great to go to the Siksika nation Pow Wow, though.



Can you spot the Franklin's Gull?

August 16th Drumheller. Up early with my son for a campsite wander produced a stunning Barred Owl being harassed by a Northern Flicker and a very confiding Willow Flycatcher after the still numerous mosquitoes. A short excursion to a nearby suspension bridge bought a Rock Wren and Western Tanager, as well as an Eastern Kingbird almost tame enough to stroke and a lovely Camberwell Beauty.



Morning Cloak (Camberwell Beauty)

August 17th Drumheller to Banff. Via a stunning Bald Eagle up into the Rockies, passing a few Vaux's Swifts en route to Tunnel Mountain campsite nice and early. An afternoon ride up the gondola produced Mew Gull at its base and at last a few Grey Jays at the summit (expected those earlier, but no luck). Back to camp and a large flock of Red Crossbills stuck around for a while

whilst we prepared our evening drives. The highlight of the trip too, we reckon, with superb views of Big Horn Sheep, Elk and best of all a Grizzly Bear, all on the lake Minnewanka Road (watch that pronunciation).



Above: Obliging Bald Eagle



Above: Smaller Big Horns

August 18th Banff to Jasper. Up very early to drive this spectacular route, with various stop offs along the way, the best for birding by a long way was the sub alpine area around Peyto Lake. A large amount of birdlife was seen especially around the car park and main trail, with Boreal Chickadee, Magnolia, Blackpoll and Townsend's Warblers with a noisy flock of Clark's

Nutcrackers. Arrival at Jasper was met by a haze from numerous forest fires in the North, so visibility wasn't as good as expected, but a three night stop so hopefully cleared by tomorrow.



Alpine Flowers

August 19th Jasper. A wander to the shower block (still hazy), produced Oregon Junco (common here) and Slate-coloured Fox Sparrow but one of the best trips of the holiday was to come in the late afternoon with a jaunt up and down the Maligne Lake road. It got off to a great start early on with Black-headed Woodpecker and then a suicidal Spruce Grouse running up the middle of the road. On the river were a fair few Harlequin Ducks (still no American Dipper; the dip of the trip for me) and about one third of the way up a superb Black Bear chomping Buffalo Berries. Along with Pica's at Medicine Lake car park was an unidentified bird of which I took video. YouTube post may follow, so any help in identification would be gratefully accepted and appreciated. Gorgeous sunset and bed!



Oblivious Bear

August 20th Jasper. No new birds today. Up early for rafting on the Athabasca and very hazy. Past Osprey and kingfisher nests, lots of Spotted Sandpipers and freezing by the end of it. Took all afternoon watching American Crows and Waxwings to warm up, in time for a night out in Jasper and an early set of the watch for a huge journey.

August 21st Jasper to Whistler. Huge journey through British Columbia today, via mountains, high level farmland, desert, scrub and back to mountains. A lot of new birds seen, although none for any length of time. By the side of the road at dawn were many Steller's Jays (common from here on in) and a close lovely Mountain Bluebird. A stop near Blue River produced a close Pacific Slope Flycatcher, Townsend's Solitaire, and Band-tailed Pigeon. Around the parched land of Kamloops the haze lifted and a brunch stop and wander produced American Pipit (at last) and a great deal of woodpeckers, including Williamson's Sapsucker and Red-naped Sapsucker. Lunch at a beautiful spot near Lillooet gave Three-toed Woodpecker, Violet Green Swallow, as well as more Harlequin (perfect Dipper habitat, but nowt). Arrival in Whistler was a relief after a real windy mountain road and before the kids came running from the campsite park late on after a close shave with a bear, the campsite provided some great birds.

Red-breasted Sapsucker in the forest with a large group of Mountain Chickadees and best of all a Rufous Hummingbird on the approach into town amongst someone's front garden. Quick game of mini golf in the drizzle and time for a kip.



Above: Steller's Jay



Above: Habitat near Blue River



Above: Scenery near Lillooet

August 22nd Whistler to Tofino (Vancouver Island). Hopping around the RV on awakening were 4 White-crowned Sparrows. A few stop offs on the way to the Horseshoe Bay ferry gave spectacular waterfalls and a party of Black Swifts. The queue for the ferry gave a taste of things to come with lots of gulls, including Western and Glaucous-winged. A very windy road over Vancouver Island mountains bought us to Tofino and a rainforest environment. Nice and sunny it was though, with the mood lifted further by a Varied Thrush skulking under a hedge backing onto forest. Pacific sunset and rest.



Above: First-calendar year Glaucous-winged Gull



Above: What a welcome!

August 23rd Tofino. An exploration of the coastline today bought some great birds. Around the campsite at Crystal Cove was a key bird I was after, Black Oystercatcher together with an unexpected but welcome group of Black Turnstones. Hundreds of gulls roosted on the local rocks at all times including a Heermann's, but the sheer diversity of the different species here was too much for me to get a grip of in four nights. If you fancy a challenge, then the gulls here and their identification, would provide one. Western? Californian? American Herring? Glaucous-winged? Do they cross breed? Can I tell which ones are cross bred? A

challenge for another day I feel. Further down the coast on Long Beach were both Pelagic and Brandt's Cormorants with rafts of Barrow's Goldeneye and a few Pigeon Guillemot's with lots of common ones (Murre's). Back at the campsite I finally glimpsed a Common Yellowthroat in the scrubby trees (thought I'd see loads of these, but not to be). An even better sunset and bed.



Pelagic Cormorants

August 24th Tofino. Whale watching today, but obviously a bit of bird watching too. On our way to see about 7 Grey and 2 Humpback Whales (including a youngster) we were treated to some great sites. Near the Steller's Sea Lions were a large number of seabirds, helpfully pointed out by the on-board guide. Lucky, as I may have missed our only Tufted Puffin of the trip (about 10

meters from the boat). Also seen were Marbled Murrelet, and both Cassin's and almost comical Rhinoceros Auklet's. Return for an afternoon on the beach but still time in the evening to see a roving party of Chestnut-backed Chickadees next to our pitch.



Above: Humpback



Above: Steller's Sea lions and gulls

August 25th Tofino. No new birds today but a lovely exploration of the coast, rainforest (Wren's calling away; bizarre) and town.

August 26th Tofino to Vancouver. Back the way we had come for the final leg of the journey in Vancouver, out of the RV and staying with relatives for two days-luxury! Having a beer and a feed in their back garden in 'North Van' bought a Brown Creeper, as well as more Steller's Jays and Black Swifts. No hummingbirds on their feeders though-drat! A comfy bed at last!

August 27th Vancouver. A full day in this gorgeous city bought lots of gulls, more cormorants and in Stanley Park a skulking Spotted Towhee, as well as Terrapins, Racoons, and a perfectly sited Canada Goose (no snow on the trip, can't win 'em all).

Waiting for the bus back bought the final new bird of the trip, a lovely bold flock of Bushtits. Reminded me a lot of Long-tailed Tits at home, if only I could get there without a tiring flight back tomorrow.



Above: Canada Goose and Mallard



Above: Unfazed Racoons

End of a magnificent, exhausting, thrilling and thoroughly worthwhile trip, credit cards still being paid off but worth every penny. 187 'Canadian' species, with 1 still to be identified, together with other familiar UK species (sorry, didn't have the time or inclination to count them). A few key birds missed but I'm sure one day the Dipper, Snow Goose, Indigo Bunting and Greater Sage Grouse will give themselves up. Better get that credit card paid off fast.

Chris Harper, December 2010

www.manchesterbirding.com