

ITINERARY
OWLBERTA: ALBERTA'S OWLS & MORE
Feb 15-21, 2020



The imposing Great Gray Owl tends to perch quietly in forested areas, and although their plumage blends in well to the wintry surroundings, we've had good luck in finding at least one and getting great views on our tours.

Photograph by participant Jonathan Slifkin.

We include here information for those interested in the 2020 Field Guides Canadian Rockies: Alberta tour:

- a general introduction to the tour
- a description of the birding areas to be visited on the tour
- an abbreviated daily itinerary with some indication of the nature of each day's birding outings

Those who register for the tour will be sent this additional material:

- an annotated list of the birds recorded on a previous year's Field Guides trip to the area, with comments by guide(s) on notable sightings
- a detailed information bulletin with important logistical information and answers to questions regarding accommodations, air arrangements, clothing, currency, customs and immigration, documents, health precautions, and personal items
- a reading list
- a Field Guides checklist for preparing and noting the birds we see
- after the conclusion of the tour, a list of birds seen on the tour

The Canadian province of Alberta may not be the obvious choice as a winter birding destination. Located above the 49th parallel, at the eastern foot of the Rocky Mountains, Alberta may instead seem like a place that birds, and thus birders, would likely want to avoid until spring. In reality, though, the province actually boasts some excellent winter birding thanks to its geographical location and climate. The combination of boreal forest, aspen parkland, mountains, and prairies provides a wonderful winter home for a rich assortment of northern birds, and owls, diurnal raptors, woodpeckers, and winter finches are all well-represented here, though numbers vary from year to year.

Our tour begins in the provincial capital of Edmonton, on the edge of the vast boreal forest regions to the north. While basing ourselves in a modern, comfortable hotel in the city, we'll have easy access to one of the province's premier areas for Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls, both of which are resident in the area. Though numbers can vary considerably from winter to winter, there are generally at least one or two of each species present each winter, with some winters seeing good numbers of either or both. While finding these species will be our main goal in the region, we're sure to come across a number of other northern specialties that could include Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, and others. Most winters also see a Gyrfalcon or two taking up residence in the city, and we'll make an effort to track that down as well.



The Rough-legged Hawk is a winter resident that we'll watch for in the open prairies. Photograph by participant Pieter Poll.

From Edmonton we'll move southward to Calgary, situated along the Bow River, at the eastern foot of the Rockies, and the western edge of the prairies. Calgary's location between these two major ecozones makes it an ideal base from which to explore both regions. To the east, the broad, open prairies host Snowy and Short-eared owls, Golden Eagles, Rough-legged Hawks, Gray Partridge, Horned Larks, and Snow Buntings, while the foothill forests to the west hold American Three-toed Woodpecker, Mountain and Boreal chickadees, Canada Jay, Clark's Nutcracker, and a variety of winter finches including Evening Grosbeak, Common Redpoll, Red and White-winged crossbills, and, in some years, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch. Open water along the Bow River can attract good numbers of wintering waterfowl (with the possibility of Barrow's Goldeneye among the more common species), Bald Eagles, and the occasional American Dipper. And, if the Edmonton region has failed to produce Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls, we'll have an excellent back up location in another nearby area. Plus there's always the possibility of something like Northern Saw-whet or Northern Pygmy-Owl, Black-backed Woodpecker, or Hoary Redpoll to liven up most winters in the area.

About the Physical Requirements & Pace: This is not an overly strenuous tour from a physical standpoint. Much of our birding will take place along roadways, so getting in and out of the vans will be one of the most strenuous activities we engage in. In Calgary, we may do a short walk or two in one or more parks; the trails we'll likely use will be mainly flat, though possibly covered with ice and/or significant snow, so adequate snow boots with sufficient grip, are a necessity. Weather conditions on this tour can be highly variable, with temperatures ranging anywhere from a low of -25 °F to a high of 60° F. More likely the temperatures we encounter will fall somewhere in between, with average daily temperatures in the Edmonton area reaching into the low 20's, in Calgary into the low 30's. Participants need to come prepared for cold conditions, with adequate clothing for the climate, including warm, waterproof winter boots and warm gloves. The pace will not be especially taxing, as the days are relatively short, but we do want to spend much of the daylight hours in the field. Morning departures will not be especially early, and we'll often be back at our hotels at a reasonable hour in the late afternoon. Our birding will be mainly restricted to daylight hours, though if an opportunity arises, we may choose to stay out after dark on at least one occasion. Though no mid-afternoon siesta breaks will be possible, we will retreat to the warmth of a café or restaurant for our lunches, and the vehicles will generally always be nearby for anyone who feels the need to remain inside to keep warm. As Alberta is situated along the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains, the elevation may be higher than what you are accustomed to, but we do not get to any areas that are especially high up. The elevation of the city of Calgary is about 3400', and in the foothills to the west, we may go as high as about 4500', but we are unlikely to go up any higher than that.

This tour is designed to find winter specialties, particularly several owl species, not to compile a large list of birds, and so we will often spend a fair bit of time with the target species once they are found. This should allow for some good photographic opportunities, but please note this is not a photographic tour per se. The welfare of the birds is of primary importance, and any actions that place unnecessary stress on the birds, including approaching too closely for a better photograph, will not be tolerated.

About the Birding Areas

Edmonton region— Birding around Edmonton will be primarily from the roadside as we travel the back roads northeast of the city through a mosaic of farmland and forest in search of Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls, Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, and other northern specialties. The remainder of our time here will be spent where conditions dictate, but may well include a visit to the city’s grain terminals where Gyrfalcon and Prairie Falcon can often be found preying upon the large flocks of Rock Pigeons that winter in the area.

Calgary region—The city of Calgary provides easy access to a good variety of habitats, and we’ll divide our time between birding in the prairies to the east, the foothill forest to the west and the riverside parks within the city itself, as conditions dictate, and based upon our needs and what target species are present. Prairie birding will be primarily roadside, as we scan the open country for Snowy Owl, Golden Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk, and other species of the windswept plains. In the forested regions and within Calgary’s parks we may spend more time on foot as we search for a variety of waterfowl, raptors, woodpeckers, and winter finches.



Bohemian Waxwings are nomadic, and some years they are more abundant than others. We'll keep an eye out for these lovely birds when we are in the Edmonton region. Photograph by participant Sarah Lane.

Itinerary for Owlberta: Alberta’s Owls & More.

Day 1, Sat, 15 Feb. Arrival in Edmonton. Please plan to arrive in time to meet your guides in the hotel lobby at 6:30 p.m. for introduction and dinner. Night in Edmonton.

Day 2, Sun, 16 Feb. Edmonton region. We’ll start as early as conditions allow, heading for a region roughly 50m northeast of Edmonton, where Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls are resident, and are sometimes present in good numbers. Driving the back roads, we’ll scan the forests and fields for these magnificent birds, all the while keeping our eyes peeled for other species such as Ruffed Grouse, Merlin, Canada Jay, Northern Shrike, Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill, and Common Redpoll. If time allows, we’ll make an afternoon visit to the grain terminals in the city to look for Gyrfalcon and/or Prairie Falcon if any are known to be present. Night in Edmonton.

Day 3, Mon, 17 Feb. Edmonton region; to Calgary. Our plan today will depend largely on our success the previous day. If need dictates, we’ll continue our owl search in the Edmonton region before making the roughly 3-hour drive south to Calgary; if not, we’ll leave Edmonton early and begin birding the Calgary region today. Night in Calgary.

Day 4, Tue, 18 Feb. Calgary region. We’ll begin our exploration of the Calgary region with a trip west of the city into the forested regions, though our exact destination will be determined by conditions and need. In any case, we’ll be searching for a variety of forest birds that could include Northern Goshawk, Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls (if we still need them), Northern Pygmy-Owl, Pileated, Black-backed and American Three-toed woodpeckers, Gray Jay, Clark’s

Nutcracker, Mountain and Boreal chickadees, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Brown Creeper, Pine and Evening grosbeaks, Pine Siskin, and both Red and White-winged crossbills. Night in Calgary.

Day 5, Wed, 19 Feb. Calgary region. Today will find us heading out east into the prairies. This wide open country allows for limitless vistas, and an abundance of rodent life in the grasslands and agricultural areas can attract a good number of raptors. Snowy Owl numbers vary from year to year, but there are almost always a few around somewhere. Other aerial predators that we can encounter include Short-eared Owl, Golden Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk, and Northern Harrier, and Gray Partridge, Black-billed Magpie, Horned Lark, Snow Bunting, and Common Redpoll are among the other open-country species we may see today. Night in Calgary.

Day 6, Thu, 20 Feb. Calgary region. We'll have a final day to bird in the Calgary region, which we'll use to target whatever local species we are still missing. Night in Calgary.

Day 7, Fri, 21 Feb. Departure from Calgary. Please take the hotel shuttle to the airport for your flight homeward. Safe travels!

About Your Guide

Jay VanderGaast was introduced to birding by his father, and his obsession with birds was evident by age seven when he memorized the plates in Peterson's eastern field guide. He went on to earn a B.S. in biology at university and briefly contemplated a career in research, but two years on the mosquito-infested arctic tundra watching ptarmigan do little other than occasionally getting eaten by Gyrfalcons soon put an end to that plan! Instead, he strapped on a backpack and a pair of bins and began roaming the world in search of birds.

His travels eventually led him to Costa Rica, where he stumbled into a job as a birding guide at Rancho Naturalista Lodge. Amazed that he was actually getting paid to watch birds, he jealously guarded his position there for six years. His career with Field Guides coincided with the dawn of the new millennium (if you believe that began in 2000!), and since then he has guided more than 100 tours on several continents.

When he's not on tour, Jay's native habitat is his home near Montreal.

A second guide will be added as tour size warrants.

Visit <https://fieldguides.com/guides> for Jay's complete tour schedule; just click on his photo.

"Jay VanderGaast was a delight to travel with...incredible at finding the birds and extremely helpful in getting us on the birds—which was much appreciated! ...he made the trip an exceptional experience which I will remember for the rest of my life." L.K., Costa Rica

Financial Information

FEE: \$2475 from Edmonton

DEPOSIT: \$250 per person

FINAL PAYMENT DUE: October 18, 2019

SINGLE SUPPLEMENT (Optional): \$400

LIMIT: 10

Other Things You Need to Know

TOUR MANAGER: The manager for this tour is Christine Boilard. Christine will be happy to assist you in preparing for the tour. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call her!

ACCOMMODATIONS: All accommodations on this tour are comfortable and of high quality, and all rooms have private baths.

TRANSPORTATION: This year, in order to improve our mobility in varying weather conditions, we have opted for 4WD SUV's instead of 15-passenger vans. As a result, the tour limit has been reduced to 10 and each participant will have a window seat and space for luggage storage in the rear.

DOCUMENTS: US citizens will need a valid passport for travel to Canada. We recommend that your passport be valid for at least 6 months beyond the dates of your visit, as regulations vary from country to country, and are subject to change. If you are not a US citizen, please check with the Canadian consulate nearest you for entry requirements. Information about consulates and entry requirements is generally available online or you can contact us and we will be happy to look this up for you. Passports should have an adequate number of blank pages for the entire journey. Some countries require a blank page for their stamp and as a precaution it is best to have one blank page per country you will visit or transit.

AIR ARRANGEMENTS: **Please note that the tour begins in Edmonton and ends in Calgary.** Field Guides is a full-service travel agency and your tour manager will be happy to assist you with flights to join this tour. Field Guides does not charge a service fee for these services to clients booking a tour. However, we understand that tech-savvy clients often prefer to shop online or that you may wish to use mileage to purchase tickets. Regardless of which method you choose, your tour manager will be happy to provide assistance regarding ticket prices and schedules, along with rental cars and extra hotel nights as needed.

Please be sure to check with your tour manager prior to purchasing your ticket to make sure the flights you have chosen will work well with the tour itinerary and that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. Once purchased, most airline tickets are non-refundable and carry a penalty to change. Field Guides cannot be responsible for these fees. **Also, it is imperative that we receive a copy of your comprehensive flight itinerary—including any and all flights not covered in the tour fee—so that we may track you in the event of missed connections, delays, or other mishaps.**

TOUR INCLUSIONS/EXCLUSIONS: The **tour fee** is \$2475 for one person in double occupancy from Edmonton. It includes all lodging from Day 1 through Day 7, all meals from dinner on Day 1 through dinner on Day 6, all ground transportation, entrance fees, and the guide services of the tour leader(s). Tipping at group meals and for drivers, porters, and local guides is included in your tour fee and will be handled for the group by your Field Guides leader(s). However, if you would like to recognize your Field Guides leader(s) or any local guide(s) for exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are optional and not expected.

The above fee does not include your airfare to Edmonton and from Calgary, airport taxes, any alcoholic beverages, optional tips to local drivers, phone calls, laundry, or other items of a personal nature.

The **single supplement** for the tour is \$400. If you do not have a roommate but wish to share, we will try to pair you with a roommate from the tour; but if none is available, you will be billed for the single supplement. Our tour fees are based on double occupancy; one-half the cost of a double room is priced into the tour fee. The single supplement is calculated by taking the actual cost of a single room and subtracting one-half the cost of a double room (plus any applicable taxes).

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, complete the Registration/Release and Indemnity form and return it with a **deposit of \$250** per person. If registering by phone, a deposit must be received within fourteen days, or the space will be released. **Full payment** of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to departure, or **by October 18, 2019. We will bill you for the final payment at either 120 days or when the tour has reached sufficient subscription to operate, whichever date comes later.** Since the cost of your trip insurance and airline tickets is generally non-refundable, please do not finalize these purchases until you have received final billing for the tour or have been advised that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate by your tour manager.

SMOKING: Almost all of our clients prefer a smoke-free environment. If you smoke, please be sensitive to the group and refrain from smoking at meals, in vehicles, and in proximity to the group on trails and elsewhere.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refund of deposit and payment, less \$100 handling fee, will be made if cancellation is received up to 120 days before departure. If cancellation occurs between 119 and 70 days before the departure date, 50% of the tour fee is refundable. Thereafter, all deposits and payments are not refundable.

This policy only applies to payments made to Field Guides for tour fees (and any services included in those fees). Airline tickets not included in the tour fee and purchased separately often carry penalties for cancellation or change, or are

sometimes totally non-refundable. Additionally, if you take out trip insurance the cost of the insurance is not refundable so it is best to purchase the policy just prior to making full payment for the tour or at the time you purchase airline tickets, depending upon the airlines restrictions.

The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute another guide for the original one. Where this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members, and they will have the right to cancel their participation and receive a full refund.

TRIP CANCELLATION & MEDICAL EMERGENCY INSURANCE: We strongly recommend you consider purchasing trip cancellation (including medical emergency) insurance to cover your investment in case of injury or illness to you or your family prior to or during a trip. Because we must remit early (and substantial) tour deposits to our suppliers, we cannot offer any refund when cancellation occurs within 70 days of departure, and only a partial refund from 70 to 119 days prior to departure (see CANCELLATION POLICY). In addition, the Department of State strongly urges Americans to consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether their policy applies overseas and if it will cover emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation. US medical insurance plans seldom cover health costs incurred outside the United States unless supplemental coverage is purchased. Furthermore, US Medicare and Medicaid programs do not provide payment for medical services outside the United States.

When making a decision regarding health insurance, Americans should consider that many foreign doctors and hospitals require payment in cash prior to providing service and that a medical evacuation to the United States may cost well in excess of \$50,000. Uninsured travelers who require medical care overseas often face extreme difficulties. When consulting with your insurer prior to your trip, please ascertain whether payment will be made to the overseas healthcare provider or whether you will be reimbursed later for expenses that you incur.

US citizens will receive from us a brochure regarding optional tour cancellation/emergency medical insurance. Our agent, CSA, will insure for trip cancellation and interruption, medical coverage, travel delay, baggage loss and delay, 24-hour accident protection, and emergency medical transportation. If you purchase the insurance when making final payment for the tour, and cover all non-refundable parts of the trip (including any non-refundable flights), pre-existing conditions are covered. The CSA brochure includes a contact number; you may also purchase your CSA policy on-line by visiting our website at <https://fieldguides.com/travelinsurance.html> and clicking the link to CSA. **Currently we are unable to offer CSA insurance policies to residents of New York and Hawaii.** We have had clients provide positive feedback after acquiring insurance with InsureMyTrip (www.insuremytrip.com) in the past, and would suggest that company as an alternative. Please let us know if you have any questions about this. Please note, once the insurance is purchased it is non-refundable, so please check with your tour manager prior to making the purchase to assure the tour will operate as scheduled. Citizens of other countries are urged to consult their insurance broker.

RESPONSIBILITY: For and in consideration of the opportunity to participate in the tour, each tour participant and each parent or legal guardian of a tour participant who is under 18 agrees to release, indemnify, and hold harmless Field Guides Incorporated, its agents, servants, employees, shareholders, officers, directors, attorneys, and contractors as more fully set forth in the Release and Indemnity Agreement on the reverse side of the registration form. Field Guides Incorporated acts only as an agent for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, or other means, and assumes no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity caused by defect in such vehicles or for any reason whatsoever, including the acts, defaults, or bankruptcies of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. Field Guides Incorporated accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. The tour participant shall bear all such losses and expenses. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. Field Guides Incorporated reserves the right to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely.

Participants should be in good health and should consult a physician before undertaking a tour. If you have questions about the physical requirements of a tour, please contact our office for further information. Participants should prepare for the tour by reading the detailed itinerary, the information bulletin, and other pertinent matter provided by Field Guides. Each participant is responsible for bringing appropriate clothing and equipment as recommended in our bulletins.

THE RECEIPT OF YOUR TOUR DEPOSIT SHALL BE DEEMED TO BE CONSENT TO THE ABOVE CONDITIONS. EACH TOUR PARTICIPANT AND EACH PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN OF A TOUR PARTICIPANT WHO IS UNDER 18 SHALL SIGN AND DELIVER THE RELEASE AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT AT THE TIME OF REGISTRATION.
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