

Trip Report — Canadian Rockies: Alberta 2025

June 12-22, 2025 with Jay VanderGaast & Dan Arndt



This gorgeous photo of Waterton's Cameron Falls by participant Don Taves looks like it should be on a postcard or a jigsaw puzzle! Stunning scenes like this are a daily occurrence on this tour!

I grew up in Southern Alberta. The prairies and pothole sloughs were where much of my formative years of birding took place, along with on occasional forays westward to the Rockies. Though it's been many years since I've lived out west, the extensive grasslands and the lakes and marshes teeming with waterfowl are still some of my favorite birding habitats on the planet. I love the sights, the sounds, the feel of birding these regions, and I am enamored with the enormous skies and sweeping vistas in this part of the world. Coming back here each spring is a highlight of my touring calendar; that homecoming feeling keeps this tour near the top of my list of favorites!

While my favored habitats were not at their best this tour, with rain hampering our efforts on the prairie and parkland days on both ends of the tour, we made the best with what we were dealt. And I think overall we were pretty successful in seeing most of the birds we hoped to encounter, tallying many of the species that this tour is known for, though some required a little extra effort in the wet conditions! On the plus side, our weather in the mountains could hardly have been better, with clear sunny conditions showing off the spectacular scenery to full effect!



Once considered endangered in Alberta, the regal Ferruginous Hawk is once again a common sight in the province thanks to measures such as the installation of artificial nesting sites. Participant Don Taves snapped this portrait of one of the many we saw along the Milk River.

Our first couple of days in the Edmonton region saw us picking up loads of waterfowl in the myriad lakes of Elk Island NP and surrounding areas. Massive American White Pelicans soared overhead, nesting Red-necked

Grebes gave their wailing cries in the reed-lined marshes, and a surprise flock of Barrow's Goldeneyes glided just offshore on the largest of the park's lakes. Franklin's Gulls, including an exceptionally rosy-looking one, were all around, and we also managed to get some looks at a furtive Sora or two. To the east of the park, we found White-faced Ibis, Wilson's Phalarope, and Marbled Godwits in another large marsh, and a nearby grassland gave us a couple of nice surprises. We'd stopped for an unexpected Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel, a beautiful animal that showed well for all, and while enjoying that, we heard a Sprague's Pipit (here at the northern limit of its range) displaying overhead, and soon had it in our sights as it landed nearby after finishing its song flight.



Large mammals are a wonderful feature of this tour, and they started appearing as soon as we entered Jasper NP. This group of Bighorn Sheep, photographed by participant Marsha Hand, were among the first to welcome us to the park!

We continued fighting the rain the next day, but, with persistence and patience, we eventually got acceptable views of a couple of much-wanted sparrows--LeConte's and Nelson's-- before leaving Edmonton behind. Further west, while trolling in vain for Connecticut Warbler, we got great looks at a Broad-winged Hawk, trying to dry out after the rain, plus our first

looks at Boreal Chickadee. And a lucky few also got to see a magnificent Great Gray Owl which sadly melted back into the forest when we stopped to have a look. Soon after, the mountains of Jasper NP, which were looming ever larger as we worked our way westward, began to envelop us, with the skies beginning to clear about the same time. A herd of Bighorn Sheep, a mix of ewes and kids, served as a welcoming party shortly after we entered the park.

Evidence of the wildfires that tore through the park last summer were all around, but a visit to one heavily burned area had been attractive to woodpeckers, so we headed there before checking in at our lodge, finding some Mountain Chickadees and an American Three-toed Woodpecker for our efforts. A couple of Turkey Vultures soaring over the lake were a surprise, looking distinctly out of place here, as they are rarely present in the mountains, and your guides had never seen them here before. Perhaps the extensive burned areas attracted them here as well. We spent some that same evening at the heavily burned Maligne Canyon overlook, failing to find any swifts for the first time ever, but a female Grizzly (the now-famous Grizzly #222) with a pair of 2-year-old cubs did their best to entertain us in the swifts' absence.



Franklin's Gulls are abundant in the Edmonton region, where participant Pieter Poll snapped this lovely shot of a bird winging its way across a wet meadow east of the city.

Next morning we were surprised to find that the area around the lower tram station at the Whistlers Sky Tram had somehow been spared from the fires, and the oasis of greenery was alive with birds. As we awaited our flight up the mountain, we were treated to views of a singing Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, a quartet of Clark's Nutcrackers, the sight, and ethereal sounds of a lovely Varied Thrush, a brilliant Western Tanager and Rose-breasted Grosbeak, among others. Our visit to the top of Whistlers was a mixed bag. While the weather was the best we've ever experienced up there, (good enough for Hoary Marmots--the Whistlers-- to be soaking up the sun) and the views were simply astounding, we also had to hike significantly farther up than ever to track down a White-tailed Ptarmigan, though the looks were great for the few who persevered.

After a picnic lunch accompanied by a brief but intense storm that passed through, we worked our way up to the scenic Maligne Lake. A stop at the traditional Bald Eagle nest area got us some good views of this regal bird as well as an impossibly blue Mountain Bluebird. We also found a trio of striking male Harlequin Ducks at their traditional spot along the Maligne River, where we also enjoyed watching a busy pair of American Dippers plunging into the shallows of the lake edge to feed, returning every couple of minutes to their nest of ravenous chicks below the bridge. On our way back down from here, Grizzly #22 and the kids gave us an even better show as they walked up the road towards us. An American Black Bear was another treat along here.



If you're a sparrow-lover, there are few places better than Alberta, where nearly 20 species are possible. This Grasshopper Sparrow was caught mid-song by participant Don Taves. Love those yellow epaulets, not a feature one sees very often!

The next day was primarily a travel day, dominated by spectacular scenery, including the thundering Athabasca Falls, Athabasca Glacier at the Columbia Icefields, and the unbelievably turquoise waters of stunning Peyto Lake. But we also managed to squeeze a few birds out at our various stops, including a family of Common Loons at Leach Lake, Hammond's Flycatcher in a burned-over area nearby, a surprise Nashville Warbler trying to pass itself off as an Orange-crowned near the Icefields, and the Slate-colored subspecies of Fox Sparrow on the hike to Peyto Lake. And much to Dan's surprise, the Goats and Glaciers stop actually had a small group of Rocky Mountain Goats licking up minerals next to the highway, a first for him here!

The Kananaskis area the following morning was super as always. Birding our way east along the Sibbald Creek Road turned up a number of good finds. A female Hooded Merganser and a pair of Solitary Sandpipers frequented one of the wetland areas along the way, Willow and Western flycatchers kept us on pace for a sweep of the possible Empids, and Canada Jays, Townsend's Solitaire, and a variety of warblers and sparrows kept us entertained. Further east along the road, a curious Virginia Rail gave us great views, a pair of Northern Rough-winged Swallows wheeled around a roadside cut bank, and a pair of handsome Evening Grosbeaks posed obligingly. We finished the day in the Water Valley region, where, though we were unable to connect with any owls, we picked up a number of great birds, including a surprise Prairie Falcon, Trumpeter Swan, Ruddy Duck, an Osprey showing off its fishing skills, and a brilliant male Baltimore Oriole, an uncommon species on the tour route!



While it's not unusual to hear Soras whinnying from the many marshy areas throughout this tour, seeing them requires a bit more effort. Participant Pieter Poll did well to get a photo of this Sora as it scurried across a small opening in the reeds!

Heading south the next day, we had to detour around Kananaskis PP due to the ongoing G7 Summit, but we made the best of our detour, picking up Sandhill Crane, both Eastern and Say's Phoebes at a single site (something neither of your guides had seen before!) and an extroverted male Bobolink at one of the few sites for them on this tour. We then drove the eastern flank of the Rockies southward to Waterton Lakes NP, with gorgeous, sweeping vistas across the grasslands to the towering mountains pretty much all along the way. The next day in Waterton was a busy one as we tracked down stunning Lazuli Buntings, MacGillivray's Warblers, tiny Calliope Hummingbirds, and Olive-sided Flycatchers in the Cameron Lake area, with a surprise trio of Black Swifts, a rarity in the park, circling overhead near the lake! Another surprise was a chunky male Dusky Grouse that Pieter spotted ambling along the roadside at the Bear's Hump, a long-awaited Alberta tick

for me! A provincially-rare pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers highlighted our afternoon trip up to Red Rock Canyon, while an evening drive netted us a couple more Black Bears and a couple of Red Foxes at their den.



The dramatic landscape of Dinosaur Provincial Park holds a staggering amount of Late Cretaceous fossil material, and it is home to a handful of bird species we don't get elsewhere on the tour too! Photo by participant Don Taves.

Our final two days found us back out of the mountains, and back in the rain! But we birded on despite the challenging weather, and still tallied most of the hoped-for species we were still searching for. The open grazing lands along the Montana border, and the valley of the lazy Milk River came through with plenty of great sightings. Massive Ferruginous Hawks nested on a cliffside overlooking the river, Gray Partridge scuttled through a weedy roadside ditch, Horned Larks, Vesper Sparrows, and dapper Chestnut-collared Longspurs sang from fencelines along the native grasslands in the grazing reserve, and prairie potholes and larger lakes offered up Western Grebe, elegant American Avocets and Black-necked Stilts, Cinnamon Teal, Canvasback, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Back roads near Taber produced

Long-billed Curlew, Grasshopper Sparrows, the often tricky Baird's Sparrow, and the incredible spectacle of 50+ Swainson's Hawks congregated in a small area of prairie!

The final morning saw us battling more rainy conditions in the rugged landscape of Dinosaur PP. Despite the drippy weather, most of the birds we were looking for-- Violet-Green Swallow, Rock Wren, Brown Thrasher, Lark Sparrow, and even Yellow-breasted Chat-- came through for us. Another challenge awaited us at Tide Lake, where the slick, muddy roads made the driving interesting, but the birding continued to be great. Burrowing Owl, Thick-billed Longspur, and Lark Bunting were all great finds in this area, while stately Pronghorns, and, during a brief sunny window, an American Badger, were fun to see as well. We ended our birding with a quick visit to Kinbrook Island PP for some great looks at a soggy-looking family of Long-eared Owls, a first for this tour!

Dan and I truly enjoyed your company on this trip. Thanks so much for joining us on this trip, and we look forward to seeing you all on another tour someday soon!



The iconic Pronghorn reaches its northern limit in the shortgrass prairies of southern Alberta and neighbouring Saskatchewan. This handsome buck was photographed by participant Don Taves in the Brooks region.

Snowshoe Hare (*Lepus americanus*): several at Elk Island NP.

Least Chipmunk (*Neotamias minimus*): seen by some west of Edmonton.

Red-tailed Chipmunk (*Neotamias ruficaudus*): a local species in Alberta, pretty much restricted to the Cameron Lake area of Waterton NP, where we saw a couple.

Hoary Marmot (*Marmota caligata*): a pair enjoying the sun on the Whistlers Mountain.

Columbian Ground Squirrel (*Urocitellus columbianus*): common in the mountains.

Richardson's Ground Squirrel (*Urocitellus richardsonii*): very common in the prairies.

Common Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel (*Callospermophilus lateralis*):

high mountains. First seen on Whistlers.

Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel (*Ictidomys tridecemlineatus*): a nice surprise east of Edmonton.

North American Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*): numerous in coniferous forest areas.

North American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) : Elk Island NP and Sibbald Creek Road.

Common Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*): first at Elk Island, then again in the Kananaskis region.

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*): a couple at a den on the Waterton evening drive.

Coyote (*Canis latrans*): a few in the Kananaskis region and the southern prairies.

American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*): one at Jasper, two on the Waterton evening drive.

Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*): mama and her two grown cubs along the Maligne Lake Road.

American Mink (*Neogale vison*): seen by some at Elk Island NP.

American Marten (*Martes americana*): one dashed across the road in front of the Grizzly trio, another scavenged under a picnic table at the Hay Barn picnic area at Waterton.

American Badger (*Taxidea taxus*): one hunting Richardson's Ground-Squirrels at Tide Lake.

Wapiti (*Cervus canadensis*): Pretty much daily, including a couple at Elk Island for some.

Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*): numerous in the south, mainly prairie and open-country areas.

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*): daily. Prefers more treed areas than Mule Deer.

Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*): some handsome ones on the last two days in the south.

American Bison (*Bos bison*): both Plains and Wood subspecies at Elk Island.

Rocky Mountain Goat (*Oreamnos americanus*): 5 at the Goats and Glaciers stop in Jasper NP.

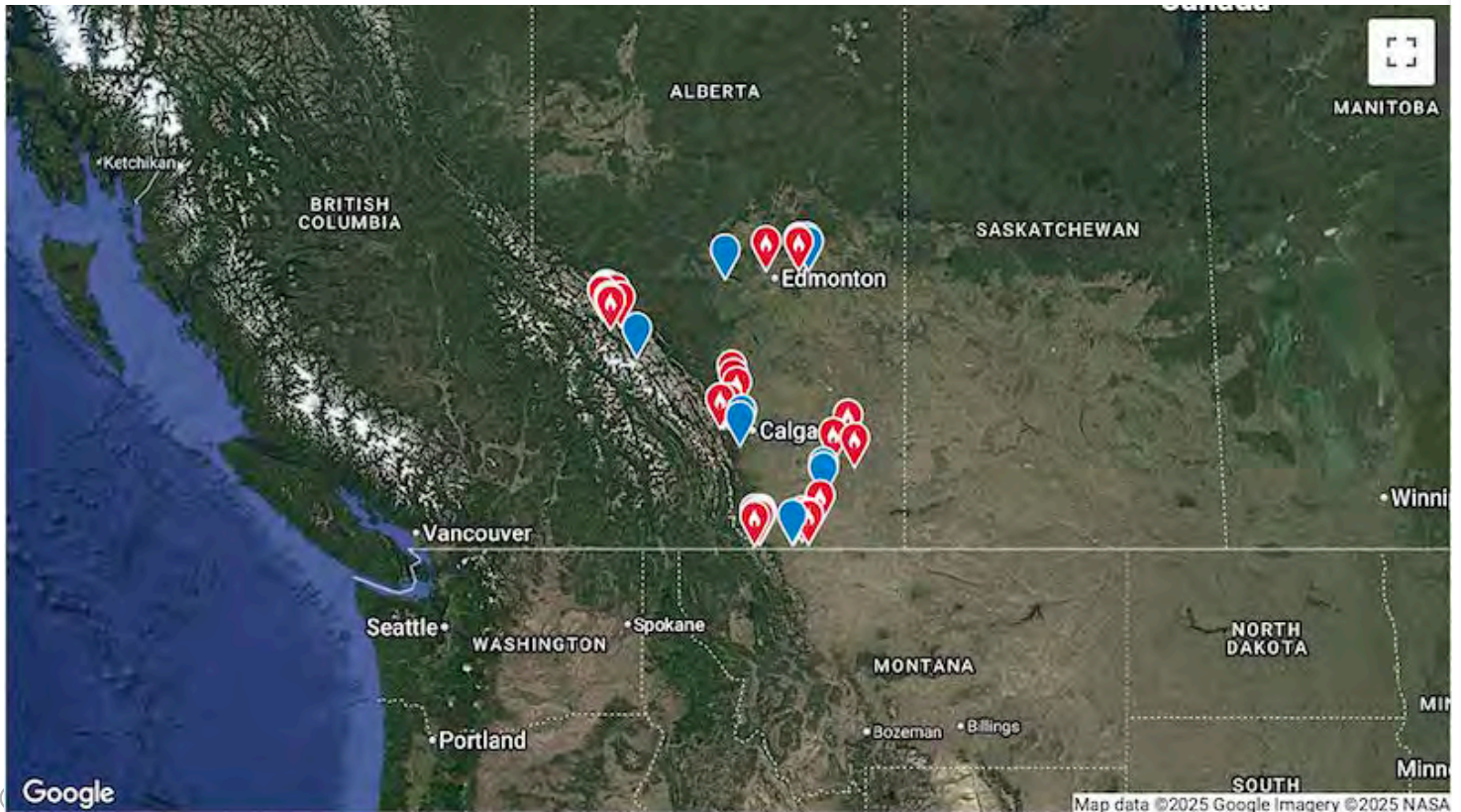
Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis*): several groups in the mountain parks.

You can see my complete trip report on eBird at this link: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/384905>

Jay

Alberta Rockies 2025

13 – 21 Jun 2025 (9 days) Link-only



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👤 [Daniel Arndt](#), [Jay VanderGaast](#), [Donald Taves](#), [Michael Mecham](#), [Pieter Poll](#) [+3 more...](#)



For a narrative summary of this tour, including a Field Guides photo gallery and additional media for this trip...

DATA FOR: [Group \(all people\)](#) ▾

 185

Species Observed

 49


















Checklists

 10

Species with Photos

 1

Species with Audio

Species Observed		Show all details
437	Canada Goose	▶  6
2	Trumpeter Swan	▶  1
227	Blue-winged Teal	▶  7
3	Cinnamon Teal	▶  1
471	Northern Shoveler	▶  6
117	Gadwall	▶  3
11	American Wigeon	▶  4
158	Mallard	▶  7
9	Green-winged Teal	▶  5
36	Canvasback	▶  2
78	Redhead	▶  3
14	Ring-necked Duck	▶  1  3
277	Lesser Scaup	▶  6
3	Harlequin Duck	▶  1  1
40	Bufflehead	▶  5
8	Common Goldeneye	▶  1
20	Barrow's Goldeneye	▶  1
1	Hooded Merganser	▶  1
10	Common Merganser	▶  3
304	Ruddy Duck	▶  4
2	Dusky Grouse	▶  2

1	White-tailed Ptarmigan	▶  1
10	Gray Partridge *	▶  4
18	Rock Pigeon *	▶  3
9	Eurasian Collared-Dove *	▶  2
17	Mourning Dove	▶  4
3	Black Swift	▶  1
3	Calliope Hummingbird	▶  1
2	Rufous Hummingbird	▶  2
4	Virginia Rail	▶  2
14	Sora	▶  6
52	American Coot	▶  4
1	Sandhill Crane	▶  1
5	Black-necked Stilt	▶  2
26	American Avocet	▶  2
44	Killdeer	▶  7
1	Long-billed Curlew	▶  1
8	Marbled Godwit	▶  4
18	Wilson's Snipe	▶  6
168	Wilson's Phalarope	▶  4
11	Spotted Sandpiper	▶  6
4	Solitary Sandpiper	▶  2
5	Lesser Yellowlegs	▶  2
5	Willet	▶  2
2	Greater Yellowlegs	▶  1



























468	Franklin's Gull	▶  9
22	Ring-billed Gull	▶  6
47	California Gull	▶  4
6	Black Tern	▶  2
3	Forster's Tern	▶  1
3	Common Tern	▶  1
1	Pied-billed Grebe	▶  1
41	Red-necked Grebe	▶  3
144	Eared Grebe	▶  5
5	Western Grebe	▶  1
13	Common Loon	▶  6
6	Double-crested Cormorant	▶  3
15	White-faced Ibis	▶  1
5	Great Blue Heron	▶  5
10	American White Pelican	▶  2
5	Turkey Vulture	▶  3
3	Osprey	▶  3
1	Golden Eagle	▶  1
1	American Goshawk	▶  1
2	Northern Harrier	▶  2
6	Bald Eagle	▶  3
2	Broad-winged Hawk	▶  2
71	Swainson's Hawk	▶  5

13	Red-tailed Hawk	▸  9
18	Ferruginous Hawk	▸  4
2	Burrowing Owl <small>Sensitive</small>	▸  1
1	Great Gray Owl <small>Sensitive</small>	▸  1
1	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	▸  1
2	Lewis's Woodpecker	▸  1
2	American Three-toed Woodpecker	▸  2
1	Downy Woodpecker	▸  1
3	Hairy Woodpecker	▸  3
3	Pileated Woodpecker	▸  3
16	Northern Flicker	▸  8
2	American Kestrel	▸  2
1	Merlin	▸  1
2	Prairie Falcon	▸  2
5	Olive-sided Flycatcher	▸  2
15	Western Wood-Pewee	▸  10
1	Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	▸  1
8	Alder Flycatcher	▸  5
30	Willow Flycatcher	▸  1  6
17	Least Flycatcher	▸  7
1	Hammond's Flycatcher	▸  1
2	Dusky Flycatcher	▸  2
4	Western Flycatcher	▸  2

3	Eastern Phoebe	▸  2
3	Say's Phoebe	▸  2
4	Western Kingbird	▸  3
24	Eastern Kingbird	▸  10
31	Warbling Vireo	▸  14
8	Red-eyed Vireo	▸  3
7	Canada Jay	▸  2
4	Blue Jay	▸  1
19	Black-billed Magpie	▸  8
4	Clark's Nutcracker	▸  1
20	American Crow	▸  9
55	Common Raven	▸  17
2	Black-capped Chickadee	▸  1
11	Mountain Chickadee	▸  5
2	Boreal Chickadee	▸  1
28	Horned Lark	▸  3
10	Bank Swallow	▸  1
41	Tree Swallow	▸  7
19	Violet-green Swallow	▸  2
4	Purple Martin	▸  1
2	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	▸  1
12	Barn Swallow	▸  3
750	Cliff Swallow	▸  6

15	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	▶  7
2	Golden-crowned Kinglet	▶  1
9	Red-breasted Nuthatch	▶  7
3	Rock Wren	▶  2
14	Northern House Wren	▶  9
1	Pacific Wren	▶  1
6	Marsh Wren	▶  2
3	American Dipper	▶  2
96	European Starling *	▶  4
5	Gray Catbird	▶  4
6	Brown Thrasher	▶  2
5	Mountain Bluebird	▶  1  2
1	Townsend's Solitaire	▶  1
6	Varied Thrush	▶  3
3	Veery	▶  1
14	Swainson's Thrush	▶  6
111	American Robin	▶  28
127	Cedar Waxwing	▶  15
16	House Sparrow *	▶  3
4	Sprague's Pipit	▶  1
2	Evening Grosbeak	▶  1
1	Purple Finch	▶  1
147	Pine Siskin	▶  14

7	American Goldfinch	▶  6
65	Chestnut-collared Longspur	▶  3
7	Thick-billed Longspur	▶  1
8	Grasshopper Sparrow	▶  1
12	Chipping Sparrow	▶  10
29	Clay-colored Sparrow	▶  14
5	Lark Sparrow	▶  3
2	Lark Bunting	▶  1
6	Fox Sparrow	▶  1  2
25	Dark-eyed Junco	▶  8
10	White-crowned Sparrow	▶  8
18	White-throated Sparrow	▶  8
62	Vesper Sparrow	▶  8
6	LeConte's Sparrow	▶  3
4	Nelson's Sparrow	▶  2
32	Savannah Sparrow	▶  7
1	Baird's Sparrow	▶  1
8	Song Sparrow	▶  6
23	Lincoln's Sparrow	▶  8
9	Swamp Sparrow	▶  4
1	Yellow-breasted Chat	▶  1
12	Yellow-headed Blackbird	▶  3
5	Bobolink	▶  4  1

40	Western Meadowlark	▶  9
2	Baltimore Oriole	▶  2
203	Red-winged Blackbird	▶  14
83	Brown-headed Cowbird	▶  16
43	Brewer's Blackbird	▶  7
24	Common Grackle	▶  6
5	Ovenbird	▶  2
5	Northern Waterthrush	▶  1  4
4	Black-and-white Warbler	▶  2
18	Tennessee Warbler	▶  5
1	Orange-crowned Warbler	▶  1
1	Nashville Warbler	▶  7  1
8	MacGillivray's Warbler	▶  5
1	Mourning Warbler	▶  1
36	Common Yellowthroat	▶  11
11	American Redstart	▶  6
28	Yellow Warbler	▶  13
2	Blackpoll Warbler	▶  1
43	Yellow-rumped Warbler	▶  13
2	Townsend's Warbler	▶  2
7	Wilson's Warbler	▶  2  4
8	Western Tanager	▶  4
2	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	▶  2

1 Black-headed Grosbeak



4 Lazuli Bunting

