



Field Guides Tour Report

Owlberta 2017: Alberta's Owls & More

Feb 18, 2017 to Feb 24, 2017
Jay VanderGaast & Chris Benesh

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Participant Pieter Poll captured the full magnificence of this Great Gray Owl in flight, a tour highlight. Check out those fantastically feathered feet!

I must admit I lost more than a little sleep in the days leading up to the start of this tour. Doing the first run of any new tour certainly plays on a guide's nerves, but when that tour is named for a group of iconic, highly sought-after, and often difficult-to-find birds, there's an added dose of nervousness involved. My concerns were that perhaps naming the tour "Owlberta" was a bad idea, too optimistic and foolish, and I might just regret that decision by the time the tour got going. I'll also admit that on that first morning, with both the weather and the birds making things difficult on us, I was really second-guessing my decision to run a winter tour in Alberta. Fortunately, with the weather clearing in the afternoon, our fortunes changed, and by the end of that first day, we'd had enjoyable encounters with our first two owl species, and a weight had lifted from my shoulders! From then on, things progressed a lot more smoothly, and I think this turned out to be a pretty successful first run of this trip.

When it was all said and done, we had tallied 15 owls of 6 different species, a respectable total, especially when you factor in the "Big Three" of Great Gray, Snowy, and Northern Hawk owls. These are generally the three most sought-after northern owls on a trip like this, and we did very well with all of them. The Northern Hawk Owl was the icebreaker that first afternoon, and our views of it perched nearby in plain sight, then flying, hawk-like, across the road, raised our spirits after our trying morning. Spirits were lifted even higher when we tallied a gorgeous flock of Pine Grosbeaks and several Common Redpolls at some local feeders, then higher still when we ended the day with the sight of three Short-eared Owls coursing over a fallow field in search of prey. The next morning, a return visit to the NE netted us a handsome flock of Evening Grosbeaks, scarce in the province this winter, and our lone Northern Shrike, before we headed to the west of Edmonton, where we found our first Great Gray Owl perched on the sign marking the exact intersection where we'd been told to look for it! Cameras got some action as the bird peered intently around for several long minutes before finally plunging into the ditch below, then the bird flew off with the catch dangling from its beak.

The next day found us in the city of Calgary, where a trip into the foothills to the southwest kicked things off nicely. An icy walk at Brown-Lowery Provincial Park let us tally a pair of American Three-toed Woodpeckers working over a stand of old pines in search of grubs. Gray Jays and Boreal and Mountain chickadees were among the other nice finds in the area, but a couple of Northern Pygmy-Owls that we spotted from the vans were one of the day's best finds, as this is not always a common species here in winter. When we headed east into the prairies the next morning, Snowy Owls were on the menu, and we easily found three birds, including a sparkling white adult male. We also found several Great Horned Owls roosting in the shelter belts of isolated farms, while introduced Ring-necked Pheasants and Gray Partridge were spotted scuttling along in stubble fields. Back in the city a stop along

the Bow River produced few waterfowl including many Common Goldeneyes and Buffleheads, along with a Pied-billed Grebe that had successfully wintered on this open stretch of river. A lone Brown Creeper and a distant flock of Bohemian Waxwings were our other additions here.

On our final morning we were down to just a few gettable targets, and we picked one up early, with a busy flock of White-winged Crossbills feeding on a healthy crop of cones at a local cemetery, joined by an equal number of Pine Siskins. A hoped for Black-backed Woodpecker failed to show in Fish Creek Park, so we ventured north and west, first for a visit with the long-staying Northern Hawk Owl in the city's southwest, with the bird posing nicely for the photographers. We then finished up along the scenic Grand Valley Road, where birds weren't particularly abundant, but another close encounter with a gorgeous Great Gray Owl made the drive worthwhile and was a fitting end to our inaugural Owlberta tour.

I want to thank all of you for choosing to join Chris and me on this Alberta adventure. It was fun showing you around what I still consider to be my home province, even if I haven't lived there in a while. Thanks especially for your patience when the tour didn't quite get off on a solid footing that first morning. I appreciate that you all maintained good spirits and that the only pressure I got was what I put on myself. In the end, this was a good first run of what I hope will become a successful annual offering. Keep well, everyone, and I look forward to seeing you on another trip soon. Somewhere warmer, perhaps?

--Jay

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*) – Quite a few in the Calgary region. With plenty of open water along the Bow River, many of these were birds that overwintered, but it's possible we were seeing some early arriving migrants as well.

TRUMPETER SWAN (*Cygnus buccinator*) – Bart saw some swans flying over the North Saskatchewan River as we crossed a bridge in Edmonton. As there were several reports of Trumpeter Swans arriving in Alberta at this time, it seems likely these were also this species rather than Tundra Swans.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – In Edmonton seen only at Hermitage Park, where unfortunately the fishing robins were nowhere to be found. In Calgary, there were hundreds of these around, mainly overwintering birds.

BUFFLEHEAD (*Bucephala albeola*) – About 70 of these lovely small ducks were present on the Bow River at Carburn Park.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – Only at Carburn Park, where 25-30 were on the Bow River, with some males displaying. Unfortunately, the warm weather just before the tour led to widespread ice melt, and there was a lot more open water along the river than in the days preceding the tour. This meant a few of the stake out ducks from this park had already moved on, including the only reliable pair of Barrow's Goldeneyes in the city this winter.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – Again, only seen at Carburn Park, where 9 of these birds swam along the edge of the remaining ice along the river.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*) – Someone in the second van spotted a cock pheasant in a stubble field as we were driving through the prairies east of Calgary, and when we backed up to try and find it, folks in my van spotted another cock. Both birds disappeared fairly quickly, but I think everyone had a look before they got away. Introduced into the province in 1908 and has done quite well since then, though especially harsh winters can reduce the local populations significantly. [I]

GRAY PARTRIDGE (*Perdix perdix*) – We had great views of a couple of small coveys totaling about 20 birds feeding in stubble fields east of Calgary. [I]

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*) – The open water at Carburn Park this winter saw a number of unusual wintering waterfowl hanging out through the snowy months, and birds like Redhead, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, and Lesser Scaup were all seen here in the days leading up to the tour. By the time we arrived, all of these birds had moved on, but this bird, the most unusual of all the birds that spent the winter here, was still hanging out among the Buffleheads and goldeneyes.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

NORTHERN HARRIER (*Circus cyaneus*) – Only small numbers of harriers remain in the province through the winter, and we saw one of them, a lone female hunting at dusk over an uncut field east of Edmonton.

NORTHERN GOSHAWK (*Accipiter gentilis*) – Only the folks in the second van saw this bird, a juvenile, fly across the road between the vans as we traveled slowly along the back roads near Opal in search of owls and shrikes.

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Three records: one nice adult was spotted perched in a roadside spruce in the Calahoo area, a juvenile was seen across the Bow River at Carburn Park, and an adult was spotted flying low over a field along Grand Valley Road.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Very small numbers winter in Alberta and we saw just a single bird southwest of Calgary. The bird was completely dark, and we initially called it a Harlan's type, but given that the bird showed a red tail (Harlan's lacks the red in the tail), I'd say this was actually a dark morph of "Western" Red-tailed Hawk of the subspecies *calurus*.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK (*Buteo lagopus*) – A fairly common wintering bird in the province. We saw about half a dozen in the foothills southwest of Calgary, and a lone bird perched on a roadside sign just to the east of the city.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Numerous in the cities, with huge numbers especially around the grain terminal in Edmonton, where, sadly, no Gyrfalcons came to feed during our visit. [I]

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Since first appearing in Alberta in about 2003, this species has spread rapidly throughout, and is now a fairly widespread in the province. The only ones we saw, however, were a pair on consecutive days around the same farm in the Opal

region east of Edmonton. [I]

Strigidae (Owls)

GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*) – Alberta's provincial bird, and a very common species throughout the province. Most easily found in the south, where most farms that have a shelter belt of large cottonwoods probably harbor a pair of these. By carefully scanning one such stand of trees east of Calgary, we managed to pick out one bird perched cryptically next to a large trunk. A bit further along, Bill spotted another pair perched right next to the road at another farm.

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*) – Varying numbers of these beautiful owls move south to spend the winter on Alberta's prairies each year, but there are always some present in the province each winter. This seemed to be a fairly average year, and we found three Snowies on our morning of driving the back roads east of Calgary. The first two were younger birds, with heavy dark barring. The third was a brilliant adult male in almost immaculate white plumage, looking for all the world like a lump of snow as he sat in the middle of a field south of Langdon.

NORTHERN HAWK OWL (*Surnia ulula*) – A hot tip from a local birder was the best thing we got out of our Gyrfalcon vigil at the Edmonton grain terminal the first morning, and that same afternoon we headed straight to the spot east of Edmonton where we were almost guaranteed this owl. And there it was, right where we were told it would be! We enjoyed some great views as it sat fairly close to the road, then flew across the road, showing the hawk-like flight profile that gives it its name. Calgary held another of these, a bird that was very faithful to a particular area in the city's southwest. We were thwarted by dense fog on our first try, but a second visit on our final day got us some up close and personal views of the bird as it perched right next to the road. The runner up in the bird of the trip voting, but the top pick for both Virginia Bill and Jeff.

NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL (*Glaucidium gnoma*) – Most winters this tiny owl is pretty hard to find in the province, but this has been a pretty good year for them particularly in the Calgary region, so I was pretty confident we'd be able to find one. And that we did, as we spotted one teed up on a tall spruce next to the road near the town of Bragg Creek. That one gave us all decent scope views, but the second one that Chris spotted a few kilometers down the road was even closer and better, though we did cause a bit of a traffic jam as we set the scopes up along the shoulder of the highway! This species placed third in our bird of the trip voting, thanks to first place votes from both Peter and Lois.

GREAT GRAY OWL (*Strix nebulosa*) – On a winter trip like this, this is almost always the most sought-after species for most birders, so a guide feels a certain amount of pressure to produce one. So, that first morning's fruitless search in poor weather conditions was especially stressful for me, as that particular owl west of Edmonton had been the most reliable one in the province this winter. The next day we decided to make another run out to Calahoo in better weather conditions, before heading south to Calgary, and thank goodness we did. As we approached the intersection where the owl was most often being seen, I spotted the bird perched right next to the road, on the sign that identified the intersection! After quickly getting out of the vans, we all watched this gorgeous bird as it focused intently, listening for the rustle of a rodent under the snow. After several minutes, its attention became fixed on the area just below its perch, and suddenly it swooped down into the ditch, then quickly came up with a hapless vole dangling from its beak as it winged off into the forest and vanished. Another Great Gray Owl was seen a few days later, spotted sitting on a fence post along Grand Valley Road on our final afternoon, a fitting ending to our inaugural Owlberta tour. Hands down the top bird of the trip, with Bev, Bart, Gary, Nancy, Jean, Bob, John, Sully, Bill, Dick, and both guides choosing it as their favorite bird of the trip.

SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*) – Overwinters in small numbers in select areas where rodent populations can sustain them, and where they are found, there are often several around. We visited one such area east of Edmonton at dusk, and promptly found three of these owls hunting over a field that had been left uncut. A couple of the birds made some close passes as they flapped moth-like over the field in search of food, and a third bird was scoped as it sat atop a distant fencepost.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*) – A common species in the province, and we recorded them more often than any other species.

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*) – Always seems a little less numerous than the similar, but smaller, Downy, but still a pretty common bird. Some saw one on our first day near Edmonton, and several were recorded on our final day around Calgary.

AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (*Picoides dorsalis*) – Though quite common in the forest of the Rocky Mountains, this can be a tricky species to track down as it is quite quiet and unobtrusive. But by walking through a reliable area at Brown-Lowery Provincial Park, and listening carefully for the soft tapping of a woodpecker prying the bark off of a tree trunk, we ultimately managed to track down a pair of these northern specialties feeding quietly among the conifers.

NORTHERN FLICKER (*Colaptes auratus*) – There always seem to be a few of these wintering in Calgary, and we saw them daily in the city. Alberta lies right along the contact zone between "Yellow-shafted" and "Red-shafted" forms of this species, (as well as a number of species pairs--Pacific and Winter wrens, Red-naped and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Audubon's and Myrtle warblers, etc) and though Calgary birds are primarily of the Red-shafted form, many birds show intermediate traits, as Chris pointed out on one bird we saw.

PILEATED WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus pileatus*) – Folks in the first van saw one west of Edmonton our first morning, though radio troubles kept us from being able to alert the second van. Later, west of Calgary, a good spot by Jean got us excellent scope views of a male drumming from atop a dead tree along the roadside, a sure sign of spring's imminent arrival.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

NORTHERN SHRIKE (*Lanius excubitor*) – Another northern specialty that was high on the target list of many of you, this fierce bird is a regular winter visitor to the province, but it isn't always easy to find. We managed to find just one bird, though that's all we needed. Our bird was right where I'd found it during my scouting of the Opal region, and it gave excellent views as it wolfed down the remains of what appeared to be a vole as it perched on the edge of a dense stand of scrub willows.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

GRAY JAY (*Perisoreus canadensis*) – Our first ones were a dumpster-diving trio in the foothill town of Bragg Creek, but later we also saw some less trashy ones both at Brown-Lowery PP and along Grand Valley Road.

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – Seen in small numbers around Edmonton and at Queen's Park Cemetery in Calgary.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (*Pica hudsonia*) – If any species on this tour can be described as ubiquitous, this is the one. We saw large numbers of these attractive birds daily.

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – Generally pretty scarce in Alberta in the winter, but one or two were picked out among the greater numbers of ravens by a few folks.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – Numerous, and seen daily wherever we went.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (*Poecile atricapillus*) – The most versatile of the chickadees when it comes to habitat choice, though this species generally avoids pure conifer forests. Other than that, they are pretty much everywhere, and are cheerful companions in nearly any wooded area. They are also incredibly tame in a lot of Calgary's parks, and are pretty easily enticed onto an outstretched hand, as we saw several times.

MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE (*Poecile gambeli*) – As the name suggests, this chickadee primarily occurs in the mountains, though, in winter at least, they do wander into the foothills as well as into the city of Calgary. We first encountered these birds at the West Bragg Creek PRA, then had them again at Queen's Park Cemetery in Calgary. Lastly, we saw a single, very bold bird (it landed on my hand!) at Bebo Grove in Fish Creek PP on our final morning.

BOREAL CHICKADEE (*Poecile hudsonicus*) – A stop at Hermitage Park in Edmonton in hopes of seeing the fishing robins that winter there ended up being devoid of robins, but we did meet up with our first Boreal Chickadees of the tour. More were seen at Brown-lowery PP, and finally, our best view came on our final morning at Bebo Grove, when a bird came in low and close to the trail for some excellent views.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) – This nuthatch shows a preference for coniferous forests, and is pretty common in areas where conifers predominate. We saw them fairly regularly at most of the treed sites we visited.

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta carolinensis*) – Though it has a more restricted range in the province than the Red-breasted Nuthatch, this species is common in both Edmonton and Calgary and we saw them daily on the tour. This species has different sounding calls in different parts of its range, and Chris noted that the calls of the ones we saw lump them in with the eastern forms.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

BROWN CREEPER (*Certhia americana*) – Easily overlooked, but we had one bird fly into a lone pine tree right in front of us at Carburn Park.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE (*Myadestes townsendi*) – One of our targets on our final morning's walk at Bebo Grove, but only the folks that turned back a little early (Jeff and Sully at least) got to see one perched atop a tall spruce.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – We only saw a handful of these birds in the Edmonton area; most starlings leave the province for the winter. [I]

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – Though there were plenty of reports of these birds in both Calgary and Edmonton, there didn't seem to be one reliable area to get them. It was more just a matter of luck to run into them, and sadly, we had very little waxwing luck. Our only sighting was of a single flock of about 150 birds at Carburn Park, though they were a bit too far away to get much on them other than shape. Of course, the day you all went home, I saw two flocks fly past the window of my mother's hospital room.

Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

AMERICAN TREE SPARROW (*Spizelloides arborea*) – Only Gary saw a pair of these sparrows alight briefly behind us as we watched the feeders in the Opal area our first afternoon. Most tree sparrows move through Alberta during migration and winter further south.

DARK-EYED JUNCO (*Junco hyemalis*) – Like the above species, most juncos tend to winter to the south of the province, but a handful remain in certain areas, often around feeders. Aside from a lone bird seen east of Calgary, the only ones we saw were at the Queen's Park Cemetery. Though Alberta gets 4 different types of junco, the boreal forest breeding "Slate-colored" form is the most likely here in winter, and that is the type we saw.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

PINE GROSBEEK (*Pinicola enucleator*) – After last winter's finch bonanza in the province, it wasn't surprising to find that this was a relatively poor finch year here. But even a poor finch year can be pretty good, and we fared quite well with several key species. Around a dozen of these at some feeders in the Opal region were one of the main highlights of our first day in the field. The next morning we saw just a couple of females.

HOUSE FINCH (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) – Prior to the late 1990's, there were very few House Finch records in the province. Now they have become quite common, with the birds expanding into Alberta from both the native populations of the southwest, and introduced populations to the east. We had a flock of 8 birds fly over at Carburn Park, then a couple of birds at Queen's Park Cemetery, including a singing male.

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL (*Loxia leucoptera*) – Queen's Park Cemetery in Calgary was the most reliable site for this species, so we headed there on our final morning and started searching the stands of spruce dotted throughout the cemetery. Eventually we tracked the crossbills down, finding a flock of about 40 of them feeding on the abundant cone crops present there.

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – Redpolls were also quite scarce in the province this winter, and the only ones we saw were a handful around the feeders in the Opal region.

PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*) – A few were with the redpolls at the feeders, but we also ran into a bunch of these, at least 50 birds, with the crossbills at the cemetery.

EVENING GROSBEEK (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*) – The Opal area feeder site was the only reliable place on the tour route for this species, which was very scarce this winter. Our second visit to the feeders paid off wonderfully with incredible views of about 20 of these handsome finches.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Just a few birds were seen mainly around Edmonton. [I]

MAMMALS

WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT (*Lepus townsendi*) – It was something of a surprise to see these large hares at Queen's Park Cemetery, and more surprising was that there were at least 5 of them there. I think of these animals as more of an open prairie species. In any case, it was nice to see them in their white, winter pelage.

EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – Introduced into the Calgary region, where we saw a few around the city parks. [I]

RED SQUIRREL (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – Heard often, and eventually we saw a couple of these small squirrels which show a strong preference for coniferous forests.

MEADOW VOLE (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) – The vole seen by Bart as we were fiddling with our malfunctioning radios, as well as the one that was captured by the Great Gray Owl, were most likely this common species.

MUSKRAT (*Ondatra zibethica*) – The warm weather brought out a pair of these aquatic animals along the Bow River at Carburn Park.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Just a couple of folks got on this animal before it got away, right after our great hamburger lunch at Turner Valley.

COYOTE (*Canis latrans*) – A common sight in the province. We saw at least one each day of the tour, with a high count of 7 on our morning swing through the prairies east of Calgary.

ELK (*Cervus canadensis*) – Ones seen near Edmonton were probably farmed animals, others seen by some along Grand Valley Road were very likely wild.

MULE DEER (*Odocoileus hemionus*) – Just a few of these were in the Calahoo area.

WHITE-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – Pretty common and we only missed seeing them on the travel day from Edmonton to Calgary.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 51 bird taxa and 10 mammal taxa