



Field Guides Tour Report

Owlberta: Alberta's Owls & More 2018

Feb 17, 2018 to Feb 23, 2018
Jay VanderGaast & John Coons

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The Great Gray Owl was voted "Bird of the Trip", and rightly so! This imposing bird posed nicely for us, showing how well its plumage blends into the wintery landscape. Photo by participant Jonathan Stifkin.

If you read the trip list from last year's inaugural tour, you'll have seen that I was a bit stressed out prior to the trip, wondering if things would all work out, if we would find the owls we were targeting. You would think that this year would be different, that I would be feeling more relaxed and confident about things. But as the tour date approached, and word from my local contacts kept suggesting that it was a tough year for owls, I was probably feeling just as stressed out as a year ago. So I was more than a little pleased that things got off to a much better start than they did last year, and we began things off with one of our big targets on the very first morning.

From then on, everything just kind of fell into place, and we ended the tour with very similar totals to last year. Once again we had at least one owl every day, with 15 owls of 6 different species being seen on the trip, while our overall bird list was up by 3 species. I like consistency and that's pretty darned close to last year's results! Ultimately, I think everyone had a good time, and came away from the tour with the birds they had hoped to see, and that is the most important thing in my view.

Starting off in Edmonton, we headed straight out to a spot where we'd seen a Northern Hawk Owl the day before, and found it right in the same area, though it was a bit distant. Before we'd moved on, though, the bird had moved much closer thanks in part to the efforts of an angry raven that chased it from one of its more distant perches. With that key species securely on the list, we turned our efforts towards the next big target, Great Gray Owl. Things didn't look so rosy after the first afternoon's attempts to find one, when despite considerable ground covered through excellent habitat at the perfect time of day, we came up empty. The next morning continued with more of the same, but just when it looked like we'd be heading to Calgary without one, we stumbled across an incredibly cooperative bird on a roadside fence post and spent some quality time with it before leaving it to carry on hunting in peace. The rest of our time around Edmonton gave us a healthy dose of other sought-after northern targets in the form of multiple Northern Shrikes, a small flock of Bohemian Waxwings, a lone Hoary Redpoll among a bunch of Common Redpolls and Pine Grosbeaks at some feeders, a hard-working Black-backed Woodpecker busily hammering at a dead tree, and a very tame Boreal Chickadee. And a trip to the grain terminals just before heading south rewarded us with an unforgettable sighting of a couple of Prairie Falcons in an epic aerial battle with a crystal clear blue sky as a backdrop! Our 6 moose day in the Opal region was pretty memorable here, too.

Down in Calgary, with our two main owl targets already secured, we turned our attention to the windswept prairies to the east of the city, with Snowy Owl on our minds. The deeper than usual snow cover was making it tough for Snowies, not only for their hunting, but also ours, as they just don't stand out against the snow like they do when the ground is bare. Still, we fared well with them, and by the morning's end we'd had super views of 3 different birds. The following day found us tracking Northern Pygmy-Owls in the beautiful foothill forests to the southwest of the city, and Short-eared Owls along the scenic Grand Valley Road. And on the final morning, a stoic pair of Great Horned Owls roosting above a well-used trail in the south of the city rounded out our owls. Interspersed with these sightings were a number of other great birds, from handsome waterfowl like Barrow's Goldeneye, male Hooded Merganser, and a young male Harlequin Duck, to superb views of perched Merlin and Northern Goshawk, to Gray Jays, Mountain Chickadees, and American Three-toed Woodpeckers in the hushed stillness of the snow-covered conifers at Brown Lowery Provincial Park.

With daily temperatures in the single digits (Fahrenheit, that is) this may go on record as the coldest tour ever run by Field Guides, but I've got to say, you all handled the cold temperatures superbly and without complaint. The clear, sunny days really brought out the stark beauty of Alberta's varied landscapes, and I'll take that any day, but it certainly kept the temperatures on the brisk side of things! Still, I was pleased and surprised to hear all the positive comments about that walk in the forest at Brown-Lowery on what was arguably the coldest morning of the tour. It was a wonderful experience, wasn't it? John and I had a great time sharing this, and all the rest of the province's gorgeous winter landscapes with you, and we'd love to see you all on another tour sometime soon. Somewhere warmer next time, 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*) – Fair numbers winter on the open water of the Bow River which runs through Calgary, and each site long the Bow had a bunch, and plenty were also seen flying to feed in agricultural fields to the north of the city.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Quite numerous along the Bow River, with good numbers at both Carburn Park and Fish Creek Park.

REDHEAD (*Aythya americana*) – The extensive open water at Carburn Park held about 20 of these handsome ducks, with great looks at them in beautiful late afternoon light.

RING-NECKED DUCK (*Aythya collaris*) – Not a regular wintering species here, but some had been spending this winter along the Bow River, and we saw a pair at Carburn Park.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – A rare winterer in the province, so when one was reported from Carburn Park just before the tour, we crossed our fingers it would stick around long enough for us to find it. And it did. It took some time to locate, but eventually we had some wonderful views of the bird, a fine young male just getting his adult colors.

BUFFLEHEAD (*Bucephala albeola*) – Seen in small numbers at both Carburn and Fish Creek parks.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – One of the more numerous wintering ducks here, and there were plenty on the Bow. It was especially fun watching that one male diving in shallow water just offshore at Fish Creek. We could see his legs paddling hard to hold his position in the fast-flowing water.

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*) – Often a few of these are mixed in with the many Common Goldeneyes along the river, and though we missed a reported pair at Carburn, our visit to Fish Creek paid off with excellent views of two different males and a female.

HOODED MERGANSER (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) – A gorgeous male on the river at Carburn Park showed wonderfully for us as it swam across the river, then sat out on the edge of the ice, preening. What a beauty!

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – A fairly common wintering bird here, and we saw 20+ at Carburn and a few at Fish Creek.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

GRAY PARTRIDGE (*Perdix perdix*) – Our only sightings came on our swing through the prairies east of Calgary where we had very good looks at a half a dozen birds. [I]

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Dan, my friend from Calgary, led us along some country roads southwest of the city in search of Sharp-tailed Grouse, and, while no grouse were to be found, our only Golden Eagle was a nice consolation prize.

NORTHERN GOSHAWK (*Accipiter gentilis*) – Driving the back roads around Turner Valley, southwest of Calgary, I spotted something teed up atop a tall spruce, and it turned out to be a gorgeous adult goshawk in great light. It's not often you get to see a goshawk like this, and it was my favorite bird of the trip.

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Our first was seen at the grain terminals in Edmonton, a beautiful adult looking stunning against the brilliant blue sky. Later in Calgary we saw several more, mainly along the Bow River, where the open water that leads the ducks to spend the winter also allows the eagles to stay, feeding on ducks.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Not overly common in winter here, but a couple of dark morph birds were first spotted from inside the Blackfoot Diner while we ate lunch, then scoped from the parking lot afterwards, as they were too far away to identify without the scope. Our only other one was seen the next day southwest of Calgary.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK (*Buteo lagopus*) – A flyby near Turner Valley was not completely satisfying, especially since a few folks missed it, so it was great to find a perched bird that we could scope on our final afternoon's drive out towards Grand Valley Road.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Almost daily, including a large flock around the government grain terminals in Edmonton, which were being hounded by the Prairie Falcons. [I]

Strigidae (Owls)

GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*) – Thanks to Dan's info, we walked right up to a roosting pair in Fish Creek PP on our final morning. The birds barely gave us a glance as we ogled them, obviously accustomed to the presence of humans, as they were sitting right next to a well-used trail. I believe these large, pale owls belong to the race subarcticus. Deb chose these imposing birds as her favorite of the tour.

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*) – By all accounts it wasn't an especially good year for this arctic owl in Alberta, but there were still a few around and we set out to the east of Calgary to see what we could find. It wasn't too late into the morning that we had our first success, getting outstanding looks at one perched on a fencepost reasonably close to the road. Before the morning ended, we'd added two more, one sitting in the snow far out in a field, the other, spotted by Jonathan, sitting on a gas well apparatus much closer to the highway. Our fourth and final Snowy was our last owl of the trip, spotted on a roadside power pole as we returned to Calgary on our final afternoon. This was the favorite bird for both Randy and Bev, as well as Kingfisher (aka John).

NORTHERN HAWK OWL (*Surnia ulula*) – John and I had found this bird prior to the tour, thanks to a tip from a local birder, so we headed straight out there our first morning and there it was again, distant, but unequivocally this owl. After getting our fill of it, we decided to get on our way, but just as I was driving off, John radioed that the owl had flown to a tree much closer to the road, so I parked again, and we got out for even better views. Suddenly, a passing raven happened to notice the owl and began hovering over it, calling loudly, until the owl moved once again, this time flying into a grove of trees right next to where we stood! We couldn't have scripted our first owl's appearance any better than this. This owl was Don's top pick for bird of the trip.

NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL (*Glaucidium gnoma*) – John was a bit skeptical about our technique for finding these small owls by driving around scanning the treetops, and even when Dan spotted the first one on our drive out from Elbow Falls, I think he wasn't quite convinced. But when we spotted a second, much closer bird a short while later, I think he was starting to come around. If we'd stopped for the next owl Dan spotted a short while later, we might have turned him into a true believer!

GREAT GRAY OWL (*Strix nebulosa*) – The word I was getting from most of my local contacts was that this wasn't an especially good year for this species, and though there were some around, there wasn't any one bird that was really reliable. So, we had to fall back on persistence and luck, and we sure needed both to get one this year! Our first afternoon of driving roads through good habitat northeast of Edmonton came up short, and the next morning wasn't looking good either. It was past 10:00 AM and getting close to time to start heading south, when we decided to do one more swing along some promising roads. Finally, we hit an intersection with a dead end road leading to some excellent looking habitat, and I decided to check it out, and a couple of hundred meters along, there was a Great Gray on a roadside fencepost! We braved the icy wind and stood out by the vans, watching as its head swiveled back and forth as it listened for rustling under the snow. At one point it flew a few posts nearer to us, then back again, and finally crossed the road and sat in a grove of young alder trees, where the color and pattern on its feathers made it incredibly hard to pick out, though it was fully in the open. This was easily one of the biggest highlights of the trip, and, as it was last year, this was the top bird of the trip by a wide margin, thanks to first place votes by Karen K, Marilyn, Doris, Judy, Holly, Karen C, Tom, Joe, Alice, and Jonathan.

SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*) – Yet another owl which was less numerous than usual in the province this winter, and the only recent records were all from one single site west of Calgary. Luckily, there were several there, and they were being seen pretty reliably in the late afternoon. Our first visit netted us pretty decent views of 4 different birds, though the lighting was not the best. But the next afternoon when we returned, the lighting was beautiful, and we found at least 5 birds, with a couple posing on roadside fenceposts to the delight of the photographers in the group.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Picoides pubescens*) – Arguably the most common woodpecker in the province, and we saw these pretty much whenever we were in a suitable site.

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Picoides villosus*) – Larger than the very similar Downy, with a longer bill giving it a different head shape, and lacking the black spots on the white outer tail feathers that Downies generally show. Usually less numerous than Downy as well, and we certainly saw fewer, though we had good looks at a couple at Grey Nuns White Spruce Park near Edmonton.

AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (*Picoides dorsalis*) – Brown-Lowery Provincial Park is a well-known site for these hard-to-find woodpeckers, and we made our visit on a crisp, cold, but beautifully sunny day hoping to track some down. It didn't take long as Dan, who had joined us for the day, spotted one taking in the morning sun atop a tall spruce. After getting some good scope views, we decided to continue along the loop trail, despite the cold. And while we failed to find any more woodpeckers, the beauty of that forest with the sunlight glinting off the immaculate snow and the stunning blue sky as a backdrop to the towering spruce made for an absolutely gorgeous and memorable walk, never mind that it was probably the coldest day ever on one of our tours!

BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Picoides arcticus*) – This species has always eluded me in the province, so when a local contact told me of a reliable spot with easy access near Edmonton, John and I went to check it out. And I'm sure glad we did, as we ended up with super looks at a female busily hammering away on a tall dead tree that also attracted in a Hairy Woodpecker.

NORTHERN FLICKER (*Colaptes auratus*) – An uncommon wintering species here, and we saw just two birds, one each at Carburn Park and near Turner Valley. Both types of flicker occur in the province, but the birds in the Calgary region belong to the western, 'red-shafted' type.

PILEATED WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus pileatus*) – I thought we were going to miss this strapping woodpecker, but on our last morning at Fish Creek PP, we happened upon a local birding group that was watching a pair of these feeding low in an alder grove, and they kindly pointed them out to us. The birds were pretty unconcerned about our presence, offering the photographers some excellent photo opportunities.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – Though it was a real long shot, we took some time to follow up on our best lead for a Gyrfalcon to the east of Calgary. We drove some side roads to try to get to a place where we could scan the cell tower where it had been seen perched a week earlier, then pulled into a driveway to turn around and make our way back to the main road. As we did so, Deb pointed out this bird perched on top of one of the smallest conifers along the drive. This bird was a handsome male of the prairie race richardsonii.

PRAIRIE FALCON (*Falco mexicanus*) – No Gyrfalcons had been seen this year at the Edmonton grain terminals, where most winters see at least one bird in residence, feeding on the huge numbers of Rock Pigeons present there. But, reports of Prairie Falcon were still enticing enough for us to make a stop, and it was well worth our time. We hadn't been there long when the first one came in, scattering pigeons in all directions, though it never did make any effort to go after one. A while later a second bird flew in and we watch a chase and altercation where the birds actually came into contact with each other, after which one flew off while the other stuck around terrorizing pigeons. Against that brilliant blue sky, the views of these beautiful falcons were magnificent!

Laniidae (Shrikes)

NORTHERN SHRIKE (*Lanius borealis*) – We had no trouble finding this northern specialty this year, as we had four different birds on our very first day, including great looks at one that flew in and scattered all the birds at the feeders in the Opal region. A couple more on our day to the southwest of Calgary rounded out our sightings.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

GRAY JAY (*Perisoreus canadensis*) – A group of 4 greeted us at the parking lot at Brown Lowery PP, sitting atop the tall conifers for some great views. There is a proposal afoot to change the common name back to Canada Jay, and some people are pushing for us to adopt this as the national bird of Canada. We should know if either or both of these things come to pass, but I'd be okay with both changes, if they come.

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – I think this species has gotten more common in the province than it was when I lived there. We recorded them every day but the final one, with a high count of 9 birds in one group near Opal.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (*Pica hudsonia*) – A very common species, and the local farmers don't have much love for them, but I'm quite fond of them myself, and they really are quite spectacular. One of only 4 species we saw every day of the tour.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – One of the other species seen daily on the trip. While crows mostly leave the province in winter, ravens spread out into the prairies, and are far more widespread in the province during winter.

Alaudidae (Larks)

HORNED LARK (*Eremophila alpestris*) – A few small flocks were found in the windswept prairies east of Calgary, though getting close enough to the skittish birds for good views was not an easy task. Still, we managed to see them well enough to get colors and see the "horns".

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (*Poecile atricapillus*) – The most numerous and widespread of the chickadees, and another of the birds we saw every day. Queen's Park Cemetery held especially impressive numbers of these familiar birds, but the birds in the riverside parks (Fish Creek and Carburn) were the friendliest of all, and have obviously grown accustomed to eating out of peoples' hands.

MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE (*Poecile gambeli*) – Not many this year, with just a pair seen in Brown-Lowery PP, and a single bird mixed in with the hordes of Black-capped Chickadees at Queen's Park Cemetery.

BOREAL CHICKADEE (*Poecile hudsonicus*) – We had several good encounters with this northern specialty, including excellent studies of several at Brown-Lowery, where all three chickadees were seen. But the best was our first one, a friendly bird that sat in John's hand at Grey Nuns White Spruce Park, which, though not a lifer for him, was a lifer "in the hand" species.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) – Generally the common nuthatch of conifer dominated forests, so it was a bit surprising that we didn't see any of these until the final day at Queen's Park Cemetery.

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta carolinensis*) – A lone bird was seen at Grey Nuns White Spruce Park, then a few folks saw another at Carburn Park, but that was it for the trip.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers)

BROWN CREEPER (*Certhia americana*) – A calling bird at Queen's Park Cemetery played hard to get, and only a few folks had any sort of look at it.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

AMERICAN DIPPER (*Cinclus mexicanus*) – It was a bit of a long drive in to Elbow Falls, but our super views of a pair of these hardy birds plunging into the icy waters of a small stretch of unfrozen river near the falls were more than worth the time it took.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET (*Regulus satrapa*) – It's hard to imagine that these tiny birds can survive the harsh Alberta winters, but they can! We saw our only one at the Queen's Park Cemetery.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – Most of the group had gone on ahead when a pair of robins were spotted perched across the river at Carburn Park, so only a handful of us saw them.

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – Edmonton was having a good showing of this northern species this winter, though we didn't really notice it so much on the tour. We ran into only one group of waxwings at Gray Nuns White Spruce Park, but at least they perched right above us for a few moments of good viewing before they moved on.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – With the deeper than normal snow cover in the prairies this winter, Snow Buntings were reportedly local and hard to find, but we had good luck with them, finding a few small flocks feeding in cleared areas around several gas well fixtures to the east of the city.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

PINE GROSBEAK (*Pinicola enucleator*) – Not only pretty to look at, but the cheerful warbling of this species, even in the cold heart of winter, can help take the bite out of the icy wind. We had excellent views of these birds at the Opal area feeders, and also ran into a few southwest of Calgary.

HOUSE FINCH (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) – Though they're a fixture in parts of southern Alberta now, House Finch is a fairly recent addition to the regular avifauna of the region. Expanding into the province from both natural populations to the southwest, and the introduced eastern population, these birds have only become established here in the last couple of decades. Our lone sighting was of 7 or more individuals together at Carburn Park.

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – A good winter for them in the province, and we had these beautiful little birds every day of the trip, with exceptionally good views of them at the Opal area feeders.

HOARY REDPOLL (*Acanthis hornemanni*) – With so many Common Redpolls around, it seemed a good bet that a few of these scarce birds would be present too, and there were plenty of recent records scattered around. One bird at the Opal area feeders stood out from the others, and after some careful scrutiny, we determined that it was indeed a Hoary. I suspect there were more in other redpoll flocks, but we didn't pay such close attention to them after that point.

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL (*Loxia leucoptera*) – John and I had paid a visit to Queen's Park Cemetery before the tour, and found good numbers of this bird around, so it was a bit surprising and disappointing when we got there and couldn't find a single bird after driving pretty much the entire grounds. But, we stuck with it, and finally spotted one pair teed up on a spruce across a small ravine. Scope views were great, and it was a treat to get such nice views of both sexes.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – Generally only encountered in the cities. [I]

MAMMALS

NUTTALL'S (MOUNTAIN) COTTONTAIL (*Sylvilagus nuttalli*) – Randy was the only one to see one of these near the Opal feeders. It's pretty easily identified at this time of year, as it's the only one of the province's three rabbits that doesn't turn white in winter.

WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT (*Lepus townsendi*) – One was seen by someone outside of our Edmonton hotel before the tour officially got underway, but the only one seen during the tour crossed the parking lot of our Calgary hotel in front of my van while people were still clambering aboard the second van.

EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – Introduced into Calgary, where our only sighting was of a black one at Queen's Park Cemetery. [I]

RED SQUIRREL (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – Kind of surprising that we only had one of these common animals on our first morning at Grey Nuns White Spruce Park.

NORTH AMERICAN PORCUPINE (*Erethizon dorsatum*) – John and I had found one at Grey Nuns when we scouted it prior to the tour, and by the amount of bark stripped from the small tree it was in, it looked like it had been there for at least a couple of days, so we were hopeful it would be again when we returned with the group the next day. And it was, and it posed well for photographs, pleasing Jonathan especially, as it was a lifer mammal for him, and perhaps a few others (?).

COYOTE (*Canis latrans*) – Seen on all but the last day of the trip, with a total of 7 different ones being seen. though a little short of last year's count, in which we had at least 11, with 7 on one day alone.

MULE DEER (*Odocoileus hemionus*) – I seem to recall this being the more commonly seen deer in Alberta when I was growing up, but maybe that is just the case in the areas I frequented as opposed to other parts of the province. We saw at least three definite Mulies near Cochrane one afternoon, though I'll bet a good number of the many other deer we noted as we drove through the area were also this species.

WHITE-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – Plenty of these were around on all but the first day of the tour.

MOOSE (*Alces alces*) – We worked pretty hard to get everyone a view of our first one, an antler-less bull in the Opal region on our first afternoon. Had we only known we'd see a surprising six moose the next day, including great close looks at a cow with two yearling calves foraging in some scrub willows near the road.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 54 bird taxa and 9 mammal taxa