



Field Guides Tour Report

Owlberta: Alberta's Owls & More 2019

Feb 16, 2019 to Feb 22, 2019

Jay VanderGaast & Dan Arndt

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).



Numbers of the nomadic Bohemian Waxwing can vary a lot from year to year, but our 2019 tour had good numbers. Participant Sarah Lane captured this image of a lovely group of them in the top of a spruce tree.

On our first night in Edmonton, I greeted the group with the following words: "Welcome to Alberta. I have some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is that the extreme cold advisory the region has been under for the past couple of weeks has just been lifted. The bad news is that -21C is not considered extreme cold up here!" Yes, it was brutally cold to start the tour, and overall this was the coldest of the Owlberta tours to date, but we adjusted to the temperatures, planned out our excursions based on weather forecasts, and by doing so, we actually had a pretty successful run. In fact, we actually tallied a couple more species than we've done on past outings. If nothing else, this tour certainly gave us an appreciation of how hardy these northern birds really are!

Obviously the main goal of this tour is to see some winter owls, and we definitely did that, though results were a little different than on previous tours. Despite lots of effort and a real promising lead this year, we were unable to find a hawk-owl on the tour for the first time. And Great Gray Owl was also more difficult than usual, though we did ultimately find one bird hunting at dusk on a snowy evening west of Calgary. On the plus side, this was a bumper year for Snowy Owls, and we saw far more than usual, without even a fraction of the effort we usually have to put in. Short-eared Owls were also in good supply, though, as usual, they were all concentrated in a single area. That makes it fun though, as who doesn't enjoy seeing close to a dozen owls all in one spot! A handsome subarctic Great Horned Owl and a Northern Pygmy-Owl glaring at us from the apex of a nearby spruce rounded out our owl sightings on the tour.

In addition to the owls, we also tracked down a good selection of other northern specialties that were high on people's target lists. The biggest highlight among these was undoubtedly that magnificent Gyrfalcon we found east of Calgary on our final morning. Though a regular winter visitor to Alberta, this is always a tricky species to locate, so we were really thrilled with this sighting. And the scope views of it devouring an unfortunate bird it had just caught were simply outstanding. Other stars of the tour included a good variety of species. Striking male Barrow's Goldeneyes and a Harlequin Duck (also a male) stood out among the many waterfowl along the Bow River in Calgary. A Golden Eagle perched atop an electrical pole on a sunny afternoon NW of the city was a good find. A female American Three-toed Woodpecker persistently probing the lower section of a nearby tree at Brown-Lowery PP was a standout on our beautiful walk through the forest there. Northern Shrike, Canada Jay, Bohemian Waxwing, and Boreal Chickadee were also much appreciated northern species to put in appearances, and this year's finch crop wasn't too bad either. Both Pine and Evening grosbeaks showed up at some feeders northeast of Edmonton, White-winged Crossbills were plentiful, and decent numbers of Common Redpolls were also seen at a number of locations.

While the weather and road conditions (not to mention the police!) certainly made this a challenging tour at times, I was very pleased to find that all of you were up to the challenge. Dan and I were impressed that you all dealt with the cold and snow in good spirits and with good humor. Thanks for being such a wonderful group of traveling companions; you sure made our jobs enjoyable! Hope to meet you all on another trip someday soon. Happy spring migration everyone!

--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)

- CAKCLING GOOSE** (*Branta hutchinsii*) – Several of these were present among the many Canada Geese on the open section of the Bow River at Calgary's Carburn Park. The birds stood out as much smaller than the surrounding Canada Geese, with shorter necks, stubbier bills, and rounder heads. I think we tallied close to 10, though at least some of them may have belonged to some of the smaller races of Canada Geese.
- CANADA GOOSE** (*Branta canadensis*) – The year-round open water in the province has allowed this species to winter here in great numbers, especially in Calgary, with a couple of thousand birds present at Carburn Park, and many other flocks seen flying about. In the very cold weather that day at Carburn, several of the geese (along with a couple of Cackling Geese) had icicles several inches in length hanging from the tips of their bills. Don't recall ever seeing that before!
- TRUMPETER SWAN** (*Cygnus buccinator*) – A lone over-wintering bird at Carburn Park was an unusual winter record for the province.
- MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – The most numerous of the ducks at Carburn Park, with several hundred of them present there.
- REDHEAD** (*Aythya americana*) – In recent winters, this species seems to have become a more regular overwinterer. We found at least 7 birds among the many waterfowl at Carburn Park, including a few handsome drakes.
- GREATER SCAUP** (*Aythya marila*) – Generally less common than Lesser Scaup in the province, but a few birds were spending the winter in the province, including a pair at Carburn Park. We had good views of them, both on the water and in flight allowing us to see all the salient features.
- HARLEQUIN DUCK** (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – We knew there was a lone male at Carburn Park, but a photographer we met told us he'd just seen the bird fly upriver and beyond the next bridge, so we were debating whether to continue walking on or to return to the vans. We'd just reached the decision to split up when the bird came floating down the river below the bridge, and everyone wound up with nice looks at this gorgeous bird. Looking at eBird records, this appears to have been the only Harly in the province this winter!
- BUFFLEHEAD** (*Bucephala albeola*) – About 50 of these handsome little ducks were present at Carburn.
- COMMON GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala clangula*) – A common wintering species wherever the water remains open in the colder months. We counted about 150 of these at Carburn, and despite the icy temperatures, courtship displays were being enthusiastically performed by the males!
- BARROW'S GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala islandica*) – Always way outnumbered by Common Goldeneye, but most winters there are a handful of these around. We had good scope views of a couple of striking males thanks to some good spotting by Doug, who picked these put from the swarms of other ducks.
- COMMON MERGANSER** (*Mergus merganser*) – Three or four males were seen at Carburn Park. At one point we spotted a recently dead merganser on the ice, near the downstream end of the open water, and we wondered what had caused its demise, as there was no evidence of predation. We got the answer from a local photographer, who had watched the bird struggle to haul itself out of the water, then keel over dead after it had managed to get itself onto the ice. Presumably it had gotten swept under the ice, and in its struggle to get out, had exhausted all its energy reserves, succumbing to the cold having used its last energy to escape the water. Winter can be pretty harsh to those birds that choose to stay on through rather than migrate south.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

- RING-NECKED PHEASANT** (*Phasianus colchicus*) – Our lone sighting was of a female feeding on the railway tracks to the east of Calgary. [I]
- RUFFED GROUSE** (*Bonasa umbellus*) – Jeff was in fine form on our day along Grand Valley road, spotting a quartet of these birds feeding on the buds of a deciduous tree tucked back in away from the roadside among the predominant conifers of the area. Though these are common birds here, they aren't always very easy to see, so it's always nice when you do.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

- ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) – Seen daily in small numbers in urban areas. [I]
- EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE** (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Several of these were seen as we birded around the town of Turner Valley, no doubt attracted to the numerous feeders around town. These doves first turned up in the province in 2003 and they've been on the increase ever since. [I]

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

- GOLDEN EAGLE** (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Just one sighting, that of a bird perched on one of the H-frame electrical poles along Grand Valley Road.
- NORTHERN GOSHAWK** (*Accipiter gentilis*) – During a stop east of Edmonton for some Snow Buntings, I spotted one of these birds perched in a distant stand of trees, but the bird flew off just after I drew everyone's attention to it, and I don't recall if anyone else saw it. Sadly, it was the only one we had on the trip.
- BALD EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – These eagles can be quite common along the open stretches of water in the Bow River in Calgary, where they prey on the numerous waterfowl that spend the winter. We saw only three or 4 at Carburn Park, though there were counts of up to 28 birds in other city parks during our time in Calgary!
- RED-TAILED HAWK** (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Generally a rare species in the province in winter, though there are often a few about and dark-morph Harlan's forms seem to be the most likely. Our lone sighting was of a dark Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk (*B. j. harlani*) during an unsuccessful Gyrfalcon search south of Calgary.
- ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK** (*Buteo lagopus*) – Several birds in the Calgary area, including one to the south of the city (where we'd been hoping for a Gyr) and another close bird on our second run up Grand Valley Road.

Strigidae (Owls).

GREAT HORNED OWL (*Bubo virginianus*) – Our sojourn east of Edmonton may have failed to turn up the hoped-for Northern Hawk-Owl, but it did net us the only one of these birds for the entire group. The owl, a handsome, pale, bird of the subspecies subarcticus, was nicely picked up by Tom as it sat out on the edge of a copse of trees, taking in the late afternoon sunlight. A couple of other folks also had a brief view of one they inadvertently flushed in the ravine at Queen's Park Cemetery.

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*) – It was a bumper year for Snowies in Alberta, and we picked up at least a dozen of these birds, without even trying. We saw most of our birds around the Edmonton region, so we didn't spend much time in their favored areas around Calgary, which is where we usually look for them. If we had, no doubt we would have upped our total considerably! This is always one of the big targets on this trip, and it took bird of the trip honors this time around, thanks to first place picks by Joy, Doug, Janet, Larry, and Jerry. Best of the lot was probably that immaculate white adult male east of Calgary on our final morning.

NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL (*Glaucidium gnoma*) – Had I been a better driver, we might never have seen this bird! I had failed to maneuver my van up a snowy hill west of Calgary, and had to reverse back down to make a second run at it. At the bottom, just as I was about to make attempt number 2, Jeff called out that there was an owl watching us, and pointed out this little guy glaring at us from the top of a nearby conifer. We all enjoyed scope views before (successfully) driving up the hill to catch up with Dan's van, which we found bogged down in the soft snow on the side of the road. After freeing the van, I told Dan of the pygmy-owl, as I hadn't been able to reach him by radio, and he and his group headed back down to find the bird still there! Jeff picked this as his top bird of the trip.

GREAT GRAY OWL (*Strix nebulosa*) – After the pygmy-owl episode, we continued our driving search for Great Grays in an area they'd been recently recorded, dividing up so as to cover more ground at the crucial time of the day. Dusk was beginning to settle in and the snow had once again began to fall, and we were about to head in to Water Valley for dinner, when I saw a large bird fly in to a roadside power pole--Great Gray Owl! We managed to raise Dan on the radio, and soon both vans were enjoying excellent looks at this majestic bird, even if the low light didn't allow for a decent photography opportunity. Had it done so, I'm sure this bird what have rated higher than 3rd place in the voting, but it had some pretty stiff competition. Still, both Carol and Peg picked it as their favorite bird of the trip.

SHORT-EARED OWL (*Asio flammeus*) – It seems that every year sees a good congregation of these owls in a single spot, with few, if any winter records anywhere else around the province. Two years ago, that spot was east of Edmonton, last year, it was northwest of Calgary, and this year, it was to the east of Calgary. And it was a great spot this year, as we tallied nearly a dozen of these birds hunting over a fairly small area of stubble fields, and had great looks both at them flying and sitting on nearby fenceposts. I learned that 2 days after our trip ended, these birds were joined by a Long-eared Owl which spent at least a few afternoons hunting among the many Short-eareds.

Picidae (Woodpeckers).

AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (*Picoides dorsalis*) – Brown-Lowery Provincial Park is a well-known site for these woodpeckers which are attracted to the large stands of mature conifers, many of which are nearing the end of their lives and are dying off. We only found one this year, but it was a satisfying sighting of an unwary female feeding just a couple of feet off the ground and not far off the trail.

DOWNY WOODPECKER (*Dryobates pubescens*) – A common and widespread species throughout the province, and we had them on all but one day of the tour.

HAIRY WOODPECKER (*Dryobates villosus*) – Usually outnumbered by the smaller Downy, but like that species, this is a common bird pretty much everywhere in the province, and we had several sightings.

NORTHERN FLICKER (*Colaptes auratus*) – A few flickers seem to winter in Alberta each year, particularly around Calgary, and we had a few sightings there, mainly at Carburn Park. Both "yellow-shafted" and "red-shafted" types occur in the province, and there is a considerable amount of hybridization between the two forms here, but I think all of our flickers appeared to be pure "red-shafted" types.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras).

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*) – One sighting of a female at Carburn Park, where the magpies took exception to her presence and did their best to chase her away.

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*) – As Dan and I were discussing a plan of attack for the final morning, he mentioned he had seen a bird that might have been a Gyrfalcon as we drove the ring road east of Calgary the previous day, so we decided that would be our first destination. As we approached the area, we spotted a likely looking, but distant, bird perched on a power pole, and we wound our way over to it through a sprawling industrial area. In the time it took us to reach the right area, the Gyrfalcon (as it turned out to be) had the time to hunt down some unfortunate bird, and we found it on the ground, ripping apart its meal. We enjoyed long studies of it through the scope as it ate its meal, and stayed with it until it returned to its power pole perch. This magnificent falcon took second place in bird of the trip voting, and garnered first place votes from several folks, with Bob, Amy, Tom, and Sarah (as well as both guides) choosing it as their favorite bird of the tour.

Laniidae (Shrikes).

NORTHERN SHRIKE (*Lanius borealis*) – Just a couple of birds on our first day around Edmonton, but we did get especially good looks at a close one along the track at the Grey Nuns woodlot.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies).

CANADA JAY (*Perisoreus canadensis*) – The foothills west of Calgary are good for this species, and we found a couple teed up on conifers at the entrance to Brown-Lowery PP, then had several more at the feeders we visited our last afternoon to the northwest of the city.

BLUE JAY (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – This familiar bird has been expanding its range in the province in recent years, and is now quite common over much of our tour route. Our biggest group was a flock of 8+ birds near the feeders at Halfmoon Lake.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (*Pica hudsonia*) – A very common species in the province, and generally seen in big numbers daily. Biggest concentration was probably the roughly 20 birds in a single tree at Carburn Park. We also found one pair beginning to build a nest just outside the door of our Calgary hotel. [N]

CLARK'S NUTCRACKER (*Nucifraga columbiana*) – A highlight of our visit to the feeders near Waiparous Village on our final afternoon was seeing half a dozen of these dapper and distinctive Corvids, a first for this tour!

AMERICAN CROW (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – Most crows fly south of the province for the winter, but small numbers regularly winter at select sites. One such site this winter was Carburn Park, where we tallied more than a dozen of them.

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*) – In winter, ravens are common along the entire tour route, and we saw them daily in good numbers.

Alaudidae (Larks).

HORNED LARK (*Eremophila alpestris*) – The only sighting for most of us was of a single bird in a stubble field east of Calgary, where it was very difficult to pick out but stayed put long enough for us to get everyone on it.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice).

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (*Poecile atricapillus*) – The most numerous and widespread of the chickadees in the province, occurring pretty much anywhere there are trees. We saw them in bunches every day, and got real up close and personal with those amazingly tame ones at Carburn Park that were literally eating out of our hands.

MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE (*Poecile gambeli*) – True to its name, this species is usually found in, or very near to, the mountains. All of our sightings came from the foothills to the west of Calgary, including at Brown-Lowery PP and in the town of Turner Valley.

BOREAL CHICKADEE (*Poecile hudsonicus*) – Another highly sought-after northern specialty, this chickadee is a fairly common denizen of spruce and fir forests, in particular. We had our first in the spruce woodlot at Grey Nun's, where they gave great views, then saw a few more at Brown-Lowery PP and along Grand Valley Road.

Sittidae (Nuthatches).

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta canadensis*) – Like the boreal chickadee, this species shows a strong preference for coniferous trees, and we had them regularly wherever there were good stands of conifers.

WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (*Sitta carolinensis*) – More of a deciduous or mixed forest species than the Red-breasted Nuthatch, but likewise common in the regions that sported this sort of habitat. We missed them only on the day we visited Brown-Lowery, when we were mainly in coniferous forest.

Certhiidae (Treecreepers).

BROWN CREEPER (*Certhia americana*) – It seems amazing that such small birds as the Brown Creeper are hardy enough to survive winters in this part of the world, but they somehow manage. We saw just one this trip, a somewhat elusive bird at Queen's Park Cemetery.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies).

AMERICAN ROBIN (*Turdus migratorius*) – A lone bird at Queen's Park Cemetery was all we had this trip.

Bombycillidae (Waxwings).

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (*Bombycilla garrulus*) – The numbers of these northern nomads vary from year to year across the province, dependent upon the availability of food. This year seemed a pretty good one for the species in the Calgary region, and we had a couple of good-sized flocks. We first tracked down a group of about 75 in the town of Turner Valley to the SW of Calgary, then the next day had in the vicinity of 150-200 posing for us at Queen's Park Cemetery.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies).

EVENING GROSBEAK (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*) – Most winters find a few of these handsome finches showing up at various feeders around the province, though in recent years there haven't been too many reliable spots on our tour route. But we only need one reliable spot, and once again, that spot was up by Halfmoon Lake, where a flock of 20+ were present at the feeders of a friendly local couple.

PINE GROSBEAK (*Pinicola enucleator*) – Those same feeders also hosted our only Pine Grosbeaks of the tour, about a half dozen birds, including at least a couple of pretty males.

COMMON REDPOLL (*Acanthis flammea*) – I don't think it was a real bumper year for redpolls here, but there were still good numbers of these around, and we saw them most days. A roadside flock of about 100 birds east of Edmonton on our first day was by far our largest concentration.

RED CROSSBILL (*Loxia curvirostra*) – I really haven't seen a whole lot of this species in Alberta, so finding a couple of pairs feeding low next to the road at Halfmoon Lake was a real treat.

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL (*Loxia leucoptera*) – It seemed to be an excellent winter for these crossbills as there were plenty about and we saw them on all but one day of the tour. Our first encounter was with a flock of about 30 birds in the shelter belt of a farmhouse east of Edmonton, but they were most abundant at Queen's Park Cemetery, where we tallied about 100 birds, many of which posed nicely for our photographers.

PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*) – A lone bird was mixed in with a small group of redpolls at the Halfmoon Lake feeders.

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH (*Spinus tristis*) – Not a common overwintering species, though a few sometimes try to survive the winter in areas where feeders are regularly stocked. We found a few birds in the town of Turner Valley.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings).

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – We came across a couple of good-sized flocks in the open country to the east of Edmonton. As is often the case, they were pretty flighty, but I think most folks managed to get good scope views.

Passerellidae (New World Sparrows).

DARK-EYED JUNCO (*Junco hyemalis*) – Just a couple of birds at Queen's Park Cemetery, and a couple more at the feeders near Waiparous Village, all of which were of the "Slate-colored" form.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows).

HOUSE SPARROW (*Passer domesticus*) – A few birds around Calgary, and a couple of big flocks in Turner Valley. [I]

MAMMALS

WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT (*Lepus townsendi*) – A couple of these large rabbits in their white, winter pelage were found on the grounds of our Calgary hotel, where they seem to be attracted to the exposed grass right next to the building.

EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – With more than a dozen species of native squirrels in the province, it's a mystery to me why anyone would want to introduce this species, but someone did introduce them in Calgary, and now a self-sustaining population resides in the city. We saw a few at Carburn Park and Queen's Park Cemetery, all of which were of the black form which predominates here. [I]

RED SQUIRREL (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – Common wherever there are conifers and we heard or saw them most days.

COYOTE (*Canis latrans*) – An amazingly successful species, and quite abundant across the province. We had at least one animal every day of the tour.

AMERICAN MINK (*Mustela vison*) – Just a few of us saw one of these weasels emerge from the Bow River onto the ice before disappearing somewhere on the riverbank at Carburn Park.

MULE DEER (*Odocoileus hemionus*) – The grayer coats, larger ears, and black-tipped tails separate these from the next species. We saw a few groups of these, primarily to the west of Calgary.

WHITE-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – Once confined to the Cypress Hills in the southeast of Alberta, White-tailed Deer are now abundant right across the province. We saw them daily.

MOOSE (*Alces alces*) – Half a dozen northeast of Edmonton (with 5 on one day!) included a mother and yearling calf that suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the middle of an open field. Though we were perplexed at first, the fact that they were covered in snow helped us realize that they had been bedded down in some low shrubs, and stood up while our backs were turned. Another moose northwest of Calgary gave us a great show, as we spotted it trotting across a pasture, headed for the road ahead of us. We got our vans into position, and had front row seats as it hopped effortlessly over the fences on either side of the road!

AMERICAN BISON (*Bison bison*) – Though these animals are free-ranging within Elk Island National Park east of Edmonton, they are confined to the park by fencing that completely encircles it. We saw them as we drove the highway that bisects the park, with "Plains" Bison to the north of the highway, and the larger "Wood" Bison to the south.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 57 bird taxa and 9 mammal taxa