

Birding Vancouver Island with Tony and Jack, April 2008

Excitement and anticipation were at peak levels when Jack and Tony arrived at Comox airport at noon on Tuesday, April 15, to be picked up by Don. Tony had visited the west coast once before, birding with Don, and enjoying finding many Life Birds on that occasion, but Jack had never birded the area and was looking forward to a week of birding a new locale, and joining the fraternity of 'the Big Listers'.

It was decided by everyone that driving the slow route, along the coast highway, and stopping frequently along the way, rather than taking the Inland Island Highway to the Port Alberni exit, would be more productive in terms of good birds, which was the goal of the trip. So, once out of Courtenay, we pulled the car over at several promising spots, including **Royston Bay, Union Bay, Baynes Sound, Qualicum Bay, and Qualicum Beach**. Of course, as all tourists to Vancouver Island must, we stopped also at **Cathedral Grove**, along the Port Alberni/Tofino highway 4. At these stops, all were thrilled at good sightings of many good birds, and a group list was begun that included the following: Eurasian Wigeon, N Shoveler, Greater Scaup, Harlequin Duck, all three Scoters (Surf, White-winged, and Black), Pacific Loon, Horned Grebe, Red-necked Grebe, Western Grebe, Brandt's Cormorant, Pelagic Cormorant, Bald Eagle, Black-bellied Plover, Black Oystercatcher, Bonaparte's Gull, Mew Gull, Glaucous-winged Gull, Pigeon Guillemot, Band-tailed Pigeon, Steller's Jay, N Western Crow, N Rough-winged Swallow, Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Varied Thrush, Orange-crowned Warbler, Spotted Towhee, and White-crowned Sparrow, as well as many of the more common species that were familiar to Tony and Jack. By the end of the day, Jack was excited by the number of Life birds he had been able to compile in just 6 hours, even though his standards for adding to his list are quite high: he insists on seeing a bird properly and clearly – and, of course, just hearing a bird is not enough.

It was thus a happy group that finally arrived at Don and Karen's home in Port Alberni, where Karen (and Mitzi the cat) greeted them. And plans were made for the following day, which first included a group outing with the Nanaimo group, led by Colin of the Nanaimo Nature Store, who were conducting their usual Wednesday morning bird walk out of Parksville.

So, shortly after nine AM the next day, we were at **Englishman River** (north side) with members of the group from Nanaimo. Tony was pleased to renew

acquaintances with Colin and Robin, as well as with some western passerine species he had not seen since the last time he had visited the west coast, two years previous.



Tony and Don
at Rathtrevor
Park (Jack's
photo)



The forest at
Rathtrevor
Park (Jack's
photo)

By mid-day, the Nanaimo group broke up, and Tony, Jack, and Don headed for **Rathtrevor Park**. There were not many new species there for the group, but the sheer numbers of Brant were an amazing sight to behold.

And, when the group stopped later at **Hamilton Marsh**, Jack was pleased to see – properly - large numbers of Violet-Green Swallows flying past him as he sat and relaxed on the dock. By the time they made it home to Don and Karen's in the late afternoon, still another species was cooperating for Jack, giving him ample opportunity to get good looks: Rufous Hummingbirds, coming to their 6th Ave feeder on the back deck.

Good birds added to the group list today were: Wood Duck, Gadwall, Ring-necked Duck, Common Goldeneye, Barrow's Goldeneye, Golden Eagle, Am Kestrel, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, both Kinglets, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Purple Finch, Red Crossbill, and Bushtit. This last species – found at the Englishman River - provided everyone with a wonderful surprise, as this bird was, with its partner, building a nest. The Bushtit nest is similar to that of an Oriole, though smaller, and we all watched for several minutes as both birds flew in and out, only a few feet above our heads.

On Thursday, April 17, Don had a few errands to run in Nanaimo, so the group headed to that city, not only so the group could find some more good birds, but also so Jack and Tony could get more of a look at the second largest city on Vancouver Island. At **Buttertubs Marsh**, many species were observed, and the group total was increased by many birds including: California Quail, Pied-billed Grebe, Turkey Vulture, Am Coot, Sandhill Crane, Killdeer, Tree Swallow, Bewick's Wren, Marsh Wren, Common Yellowthroat, Red-winged Blackbird, House Finch, and House Sparrow. The group had lunch on the waterfront in Nanaimo and Jack and Tony explored that area of the city, getting good looks at local gull species, while Don had an errand to run. On the way back to Port Alberni, Don pulled the car over at **Nanoose Bay**, where he was sure there would be a Black Oystercatcher, still a target species for Jack. Alas, there was no Oystercatcher there, but there were still several days left in the trip and eventually we did have clear sightings of that bird.

On Friday, April 18, the group stayed in Port Alberni, checking out the **Harbour Quay, Victoria Quay, and McLean Mill** areas. On this day were added to the group list: Lesser Scaup, D C Cormorant, and others, though the challenge for the group had changed. We were no longer as interested in more species than in

getting better looks at the species we had encountered so far. And, we needed to rest a bit from the hectic pace the group had set themselves up to now. And we also needed to rest up for the outing we had planned for the next day: Whale Watching off **Ucluelet**!

On Saturday, we were up and ready to go early. We were very fortunate to have enlisted Sandy McRuer's company on this trip, as his expertise on local birds, not to mention local history, flora and fauna, and knowledge of the geography of the area made the day very enjoyable for all of us. We wasted little time, for instance, in finding the home of Brian Slater, a Ucluelet birder who had a very active feeder, where Jack finally managed to obtain a very clear look at Steller's Jays and where both Tony and Jack found a Townsend's Warbler. Don got some very good photos of Fox Sparrow and Steller's Jays, and was pleased to discover how to take good photos with the camera and the tripod. And Sandy got a clear, though brief look at the highlight of the day for him, a Brambling. This bird, an accidental from Eurasia, had been seen around Brian's feeders for about a week, so we were all hopeful that a very exciting bird could be added to the group list. However, only Sandy managed to obtain a glimpse of this very shy bird, who obviously did not like being watched by many humans at the same time.

Fox
Sparrow at
Brian
Slater's in
Ucluelet





Steller's
Jay at
Brian
Slater's
feeder in
Ucluelet

By midday we were on the Whale Watching trip, watching for interesting birds as well as for interesting mammals. The boat took us down the **Ucluelet inlet**, across the mouth of the **Barkley Sound**, and close to the **Broken Group Islands**. On and around many of the rocky islets we were pleased to see California Sea Lions, Steller's Sea Lions, Harbour Seals, and Sea Otters. Out in the channel we were finally able to spot some 3 or 4 Grey Whales, feeding and resting before continuing on their way north. Sea birds were added to the group list, including: Black Oystercatcher (Jack got good looks this time), Surfbird (a Life Lister for Don), Pigeon Guillemot, and Rhinoceros Auklet. By the time we were back at the dock, we were all very pleased with the outing. But more was to come that day.



Steller's
Sea Lions
in Barkley
Sound

We had already been for a short trip to **Amphitrite Point**, where Sandy demonstrated that he was far more agile than anyone else in the group, so a quick look at **Long Beach** and **Wikanninish Point** was in order. And very quick it was, too, for the day was fast disappearing, and a long drive was still ahead. However, during that brief outing, and only while we were in the parking lot, the group was treated to at least a dozen very large skeins of Geese. Many of them were Greater White-fronted Geese, but some were Canada Geese. This gave the group the opportunity to look for Cackling Goose, and several of the birds in the skeins were clearly of this newly established species.



On the way
back to
town, we
stopped for
some
photos at
**Kennedy
River.**

Sandy,
Tony and
Jack at
Kennedy
River



On Sunday, April 20, we headed for Nanaimo again, this time to join the local group, headed by Colin, at **Neck Point Park**. A good list of excellent birds was spotted there, including some new ones for Jack. As well there were very satisfying opportunities for Don to take more photos. There were two major highlights for the morning: Anna's Hummingbird, and Black-throated Gray Warbler. Both these birds granted the entire group long and satisfying looks, in good light and in good poses.



Anna's
Hummingbird
At Neck
Point Park

Also cooperative, posing nicely for photos, was a mature Bald Eagle.



Robin, on the outing at Neck Point Park, took this photo and emailed it to Don.

In the afternoon, once back in Port Alberni, there was time for the group to head to Stamp Falls to find a possible American Dipper that Sandy had told us about. But we never made it that day, as a target bird that Jack had been seeking all week suddenly appeared on the shoulder of **Beaver Ck Road** as we were driving out. Tony and Don both noticed it at the same moment, and in the same moment both cried out: 'That was a Varied Thrush!' Of course, Don pulled over, all got out, and Jack had a good long look at the bird, who eventually hopped off into the tall grass.

The last day of the trip was still eventful, even though many western species had eluded us, for there were one or two last surprises in store. At the **Somass Estuary** the group found at least 4 Greater White-fronted Geese among the several hundred Canada Geese. And all of the group had excellent sightings of Golden-crowned Sparrows near the horse barns. But later in the day, at **Stamp Falls Provincial Park**, Jack proved to the others that he was a birder without peer. Tony and Don were determined to find the American Dipper for their friend, but Jack proved he did not need their assistance. While Tony and Don were searching in the gorge for this small elusive bird, Jack whistled loudly to the others and waved his arm. Sure enough, he had found the bird on a rock across the river, tail bobbing characteristically. And, shortly afterwards, he found the nest! On the drive home, he was pleased not only with the new birds he had found, but also with the fact that he had twice bested the others!

Tuesday, April 22, was 'airport day' and Don, resolved to restore a firm grip on his two friends, announced that no more birding was to be done that day. That is, the goal for the day for the group was to get to the airport, then for Jack and Tony to get on the plane safely, and for those two to get back to the Soo in one piece. Also, it was discovered later that the group list had reached the 'century' point, and any more species would have spoiled that nice round number! So, unless someone saw a Wood Stork in the trees along the side of the Inland Island Expressway, or a California Condor in the sky, we were not stopping. As it happened, although Tony and Jack did get back home safely, Tony's luggage did not. And Jack was investigated by the Anti-Terrorism Security Personnel at Comox Airport.

But that is another story.

Group Checklist – Vancouver Island – April 15-22

Red-throated Loon	Hooded Merganser	N Flicker
Pacific Loon	Common Merganser	Hairy Woodpecker
Common Loon	Red-br Merganser	
	Harlequin Duck	
Pied-billed Grebe		Steller's Jay
Horned Grebe	Turkey Vulture	N western Crow
Red-necked Grebe	Bald Eagle	C Raven
Western Grebe	Golden Eagle	
	Am Kestrel	Tree Swallow
DC Cormorant	Merlin	Violet-gr Swallow
Brandt's Cormorant		Nor R-wing Swallow
Pelagic Cormorant	California Quail	
	American Coot	Chestnut-b Chickadee
Great Blue Heron	Sandhill Crane	Bushtit
Greater White-f Goose		Red-br Nuthatch
Brant	Surfbird	Brown Creeper
Canada Goose	Black-bellied Plover	
Cackling Goose	Killdeer	Bewick's Wren
	Greater Yellowlegs	Winter Wren
Wood Duck	Black Oystercatcher	Marsh Wren
Gr-winged Teal		
Mallard	Mew Gull	Am Dipper
N Pintail	Gl-winged Gull	Golden-cr Kinglet
N Shoveler	Bonaparte's Gull	Ruby-cr Kinglet
Eurasian Wigeon		
Am Wigeon	Common Murre	Hermit Thrush
Ring-necked Duck	Pigeon Guillemot	Am Robin
Greater Scaup	Rhinoceros Auklet	Varied Thrush
Lesser Scaup		
Gadwall	Rock Pigeon	Eur Starling
Black Scoter	Band-tailed Pigeon	
White-w Scoter		Orange-cr Warbler
Surf Scoter	Rufous Hummingbird	Yellow-r Warbler
Barrow's Goldeneye	Anna's Hummingbird	Blk-thr Gray Warbler
Common Goldeneye		Townsend's Warbler
Bufflehead	Belted Kingfisher	C Yellowthroat

Spotted Towhee
Fox Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Golden-cr Sparrow
White-cr Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco

Red-winged Blackbird
Brewer's Blackbird

Purple Finch
House Finch
Red Crossbill
Pine Siskin

House Sparrow

Trip total: 100

Mammal species

River Otter (N P Pk)
Sea Otter (off
Ucluelet)
Harbour Seal “
Grey Whale “
California Sea Lion “
Steller's Sea Lion “
Black Bear (Sproat Lk)

D. Wilshire, Apr 08