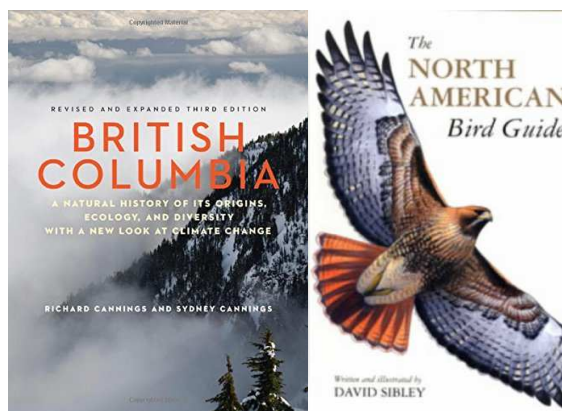


British Columbia, Canada

June 2017

Jean Hugé

This report outlines ornithological and other wildlife observations done during and after a professional trip to British Columbia, Canada in June 2017. While in Vancouver, I stayed at the Walter Gage Building on the UBC Campus, an excellent location for wildlife watching within easy bus / taxi distance from downtown Vancouver. I also spent a few days in Ahousaht on Flores Island off the west coast of Vancouver Island. I used Sibley's North American Bird Guide (2000) and Cannings & Cannings' 'Natural History of British Columbia' as background information. <https://www.amazon.ca/British-Columbia-Natural-History-Diversity/dp/1771640731>



Day 1 – Wreck Beach & UBC, Vancouver

Having spent some time at the University of British Columbia (UBC) a few years earlier (in June 2015), I knew my way around campus yet was amazed again by the proximity of excellent wildlife watching opportunities immediately next to campus. The UBC campus is situated on a peninsula protruding in the Sea of Georgia west of downtown Vancouver, and the campus is surrounded by Pacific Spirit Regional Park <https://visit.ubc.ca/see-and-do/gardens-and-nature/pacific-spirit-park/>. I stayed at Walter Gage Student Housing on campus <https://vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/residences/walter-gage/> and had easy walking access to all trails and beaches of the Regional Park. On the first morning I took trail 3 to Wreck Beach, off NW Marine Road (see map below).

Walking to the beach on the impressive stairs in the coastal forest I spotted my first two **Rufous Hummingbirds** of the trip. Three noisy **Belted Kingfishers** were feeding and flying around on the beach and a **Bald Eagle** sat atop a tree. In the shrubs lining the pebble beach, **Song Sparrows** and **White-crowned Sparrows** were present. **Wilson's Warblers** were singing and **Blue Jays** and **Douglas Squirrels** were present in the forest. **Northern Rough-Winged Swallows** and **Violet-Green Swallows** were present too. The Strait of Georgia is rich in sea life, and sea-watching yielded **Marbled Murrelets**, **Rhinoceros Auklet** and eight **Pigeon Guillemots**. **Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants** were very common.

After this amazing start, I continued birding on the UBC campus. This yielded **Spotted Towhee**, **Northern Flicker**, lots of **Glaucous-winged Gulls**, **Canada Goose** and a few territorial, singing **White-crowned Sparrows**. I went back to Wreck Beach in late afternoon, and while sitting on the beach, a **North American River Otter** walked out of the forest a few meters away from me, jumped in the sea

and swam off! A few **Harbour Seals** were also around, and I could add a **Great Blue Heron** to the species list.



Map of the UBC Campus and the surrounding Pacific Spirit Regional Park



Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*), UBC campus, Vancouver

Day 2: Wreck Beach & UBC campus, Vancouver

After a day at work, I hit the trails to Wreck Beach in late afternoon, which was again rewarding, wildlife-wise. I spotted a hunting **Cooper's Hawk**, a young **Bald Eagle**, singing **Wilson's Warbler**, and on the calm sea I could spot a lone **Common Loon** and a **Surf Scoter**. I spotted **American Goldfinches** and a few –feral- **Grey Squirrels** on campus, next to the ubiquitous **Glaucous-Winged Gulls** and **White-crowned Sparrows**.



Wreck Beach, Pacific Spirit Regional Park, Vancouver

Day 3: Pelagic trip to the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve and the San Juan Islands

I took a bus to Steveson, a lovely seaside town south of Vancouver where I had booked a whale watching trip with Vancouver Whale Watch <https://vancouverwhalewatch.com/>. The day-long trip with a knowledgeable guide took us to the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve and along the many islands and islets close to San Juan, to the Canada-US border. The ‘stars’ of the trip were a pod of **Killer Whales** close to San Juan island – my third sighting of this species. I also spotted tens of **Harbour Seals**, four **Pacific White-Sided Dolphins** and a **Humpback Whale**. The weather was perfect and the sea was flat, which created ideal conditions for observing wildlife. Among the many bird species seen, highlights include **Rhinoceros Auklet**, **Pigeon Guillemot**, **Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants**, multiple **Bald Eagles**, **Rufous Hummingbird**, **Ospreyn Black Oystercatcher** and **Surf Scoter**. On the way back to Steveson Harbour, we rode along the Fraser Estuary where we spotted a large group of **Snow Geese** and a group of noisy and smelly **California Sea Lions**. Overall, the landscape and wildlife sightings of the day were amazing.



California Sea Lions (Zalophus californianus), Fraser River Estuary



Killer Whale (Orcinus orca), near San Juan Island

Day 4: Squamish

After an early-morning wildlife watching routine at Wreck Beach, where I spotted the now-usual species such as Harbour Seal, Bald Eagle, Spotted Towhee and Song Sparrows, among others, I took a bus to Squamish (the cheap Squamish Connector <https://www.squamishconnector.com/>) an hour north of Vancouver along Howe Sound, where I took the Sea-to-Sky Gondola to explore the mountain areas overlooking the Sound. Along the scenic road north, I saw two **Bald Eagles**. The gondola provides amazing views of the spectacular landscape, and from the gondola, I could even spot a **Red-breasted Sapsucker** up-close. Arriving at the top of the mountain, there are a few viewing platforms which were quite busy and touristy although the views are so great that this is not really an issue. From the top, one can choose between a range of trails, which were very quiet the day I visited. It seems like most people don't venture more than a few 100 meters away from the Gondola arrival point. Trail info can be found here: <https://www.seatoskygondola.com/trails/>. Walking and birding the trails I spotted **Audubon's Warbler**,

American Black Swifts, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Northern Raven, Pine Siskin, Steller's Jay, Varied Thrush, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Western Wood Pewee, Townsend's Warbler, Dark-eyed Junco and Sooty Grouse – all species which I had not seen back on the coast. On the mammal front, **Yellow-Pine Chipmunk** and **Coast Mole** were new for the trip.

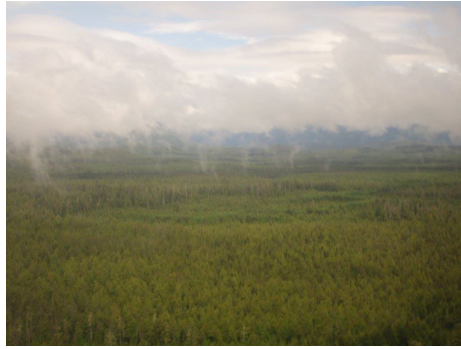


Panoramic view of Howe Sound, Squamish

Day 5: Vancouver Island: Tofino & Ahousaht

After a morning at UBC where an adult **Bald Eagle** flew right over the Walter Gage Building, I went for a run in Pacific Spirit Regional Park (east of campus), during which I saw **American Robins, Spotted Towhees** and a large group of **Violet-Green Swallows**. I later took a cab to Vancouver Airport where I had booked a flight to Tofino on Vancouver Island. On the airport grounds, on the middle of the day, I spotted a **Coyote** with prey. The short flight to Tofino allowed me to get great views over the Fraser River Estuary (and the Reifel Bird Sanctuary which I would visit later), Nanaimo, the forests of Vancouver Island and finally the Tofino area. Landing at the small Tofino Airport, I hitchhiked to Tofino Docks, where I went grocery shopping and then asked around until I found the small boat set for Ahousaht on Flores Island. In the harbour, an inquisitive **California Sea Lion** was swimming around. From the harbour, and later during the boat trip, I could also spot a few **Bald Eagles** and **Harbour Seals**.

Arriving in the First Nations community of Ahousaht on Flores Island, I was picked up by the owner of the Ahousaht Aauuknuk Lodge, a quiet, basic youth hostel-kind of place on the outskirts of town, ideally located next to the trailhead of the Wild Side Trail in a slightly shabby forested area. I arrived there in the evening, **Swainson's Thrushes** and **Cedar Waxwings** were the most conspicuous birds. I went for a short hike to the magnificent beach, where **Harbour Seal, Northern Raven** and **Belted Kingfishers** were present, before going to sleep to get up early the next day.



Temperate rainforest on Vancouver Island, view from the plane between Vancouver and Tofino



Tofino Docks, Vancouver Island



Map of Flores Island & Tofino, west coast of Vancouver Island

Day 6: Wild Side Trail, Ahousaht, Flores Island

I got up early to hike the Wild Side Trail, a 22 km round-trip hike along the coast of Flores Island Marine Provincial Park <https://www.wildsidetrail.com/>. I started off from the Aauuknuk Lodge and walked the particularly scenic and totally empty trail for the whole day, enjoying the rich wildlife and spectacular landscapes in variable weather (mostly sunny, with an occasional light shower). Along the trail I regularly spotted **Harbour Seals** on the rocks. I also spotted **Belted Kingfishers**, **Great Blue Herons**, **American Robins** catching flies on the beach, a **Red Fox Sparrow**, numerous **Song Sparrows**, **Northern Ravens**, **Wilson's Warblers** and **Steller's Jays**, **Red Crossbills** and **Cedar Waxwings** in the beach-fringing

coniferous forests. The trail winds through forest, beaches and rocky sections and each habitat had something to offer. In the forest I saw **Banana Slugs, Rufous and Anna's Hummingbirds, Douglas' Squirrels** and had great views of a confident **Varied Thrush**. Other notable species included **Band-tailed Pigeons, Pacific Wren, Sharp-shinned Hawk** and a lone **Turkey Vulture**. On the beach I spotted **Killdeer** and **Black Oystercatchers**, and nearing Cow Bay I had great views of a group of 119 (!) **Harlequin Ducks** while sitting on a rock. A **Sea Otter** swam by, and **Bald Eagles** and **Glaucous-Winged Gulls** were having a fight. I saw a few **Ospreys** during the day, as well as **Common Mergansers**. I saw my first **Heermann's Gulls** since my first visit to Vancouver Island in 1996. Crossing a small creek in the forest, I saw a **North American River Otter**. Suddenly a **Mule Deer** walked on the beach, and I saw **Wolf** tracks in the sand. Turning to the Pacific Ocean yielded an almost constant flow of seabird sightings: **Pigeon Guillemots, Rhinoceros Auklets, Pelagic Cormorants, Surf Scoters, Common Loons, Glaucous-Winged Gulls** and **Short-billed Gulls**, and large numbers of fast-flying **Cassin's Auklets**. In total, I spotted 15 **Bald Eagles** during the day-hike. After this extremely rewarding wildlife day, I had a great home-cooked salmon dinner at the Auuknuk Lodge while watching **Cedar Waxwings** fly by.



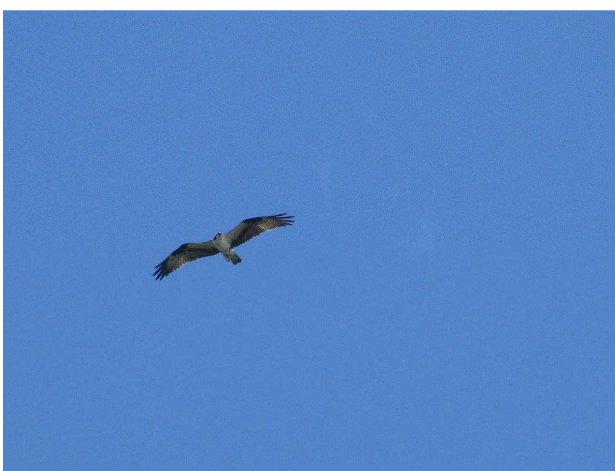
Map of the Wild Side Trail (source: <https://www.bcmag.ca/take-a-hike-on-the-wild-side/>)



Harlequin Ducks (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) Flores Island



Along the Wild Side Trail, Flores Island



Osprey (Pandion haliaetus), Flores Island

Day 7: Flores Island & Tofino

I birded a short section of the Wild Side Trail again in the morning, which again yielded many interesting species. I added **Chestnut-backed Chickadee** to yesterday's list, and again spotted **Bald Eagles, Red Crossbills, Common Loon, Anna's Hummingbirds, Harbour Seals** and recently fledged **Wilson's Warblers**. After breakfast I got in touch with a boat owner who brought me back to Tofino, while winding around the islets as I had asked. The trip was way too expensive yet the wildlife sightings were worth it. I saw two **Marbled Murrelets**, lots of **Pelagic Cormorants, Rhinoceros Auklets, Pigeon Guillemots, Common Murre**, a **Bald Eagle** and a **Sea Otter** during the trip, and I managed to spot my first two **Grey Whales** ever! A mother and a calf swam close by, I could even smell them from the boat. A group of 20+ **Brandt's Cormorants** was also a great sighting.

Back in Tofino, I walked around the peninsula, and next to some sea-watching, I hiked the short Tonquin Trail (<https://tofino.ca/trails>) along which I spotted **Anna's Hummingbird, Red-tailed Hawk, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Brewer's Blackbird, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Cedar Waxwing, Swainson's Thrush, Band-tailed Pigeon** and **Audubon's Warbler**. I then walked to Tofino's Botanical Garden, where I spent some time birding near Darwin's café. This spot yielded more **Band-tailed Pigeons, Osprey, Bald Eagle** and another **North American River Otter**.



Belted Kingfisher (Ceryle alcyon), Flores Island

Day 8: Working at UBC

Day 9: Reifel Bird Sanctuary

After another morning trip to Wreck Beach and the fringes of Pacific Spirit Regional Park, which yielded the usual birds (and a flock of **Violet-Green Swallows**) I headed to Reifel Bird Sanctuary with a friendly birder I had contacted through birdingpal.org. The Reifel Bird Sanctuary is situated in the Fraser River Delta, south of Vancouver. I had seen the Delta from the airplane to Tofino, and had skirted it by boat but now I would have the chance to explore the well-maintained trails of the sanctuary, guided by a knowledgeable local. <https://www.reifelbirdsanctuary.com/>.

The trip did not disappoint, and even yielded two lifers for me: **American Bushtit** and **Sandhill Crane**! I will not list all birds seen at Reifel, but will focus on the new ones for the trip. The wetlands and small ponds of the sanctuary were teeming with ducks and shorebirds: **Blue-Winged Teal**, **Green-Winged Teal**, **Northern Shoveler**, **Northern Pintail**, **Gadwall**, **Wood Duck** and many **Lesser Yellowlegs** and a few **Killdeer**. Songbirds were well-represented too: **Tree Swallow**, **Purple Martin**, **American Cliff Swallow**, **Marsh Wren**, **Pacific Slope Flycatcher**, **Brown Creeper**, **American Yellow Warbler**, **Song Sparrow**, **Rufous Hummingbird**, **House Finch**. **Brown-headed Cowbirds** were also around. I saw an occupied nest of **Bald Eagles** and a recently fledged young of **Great Horned Owl**. An **American Mink** was foraging alongside a trail.

Back at UBC I also spotted a flock of **American Bushtit** over there! A walk in Pacific Spirit Regional Park yielded two more **North American Otters** and **Harbour Seals** along the coast. At Stanley Park, next to downtown Vancouver, I rented a bicycle and went birding there too. This yielded **Chestnut-backed Chickadees**, **Northern Rough-winged Swallow**, **Red-winged Blackbird**, **Song Sparrow**, **Swainson's Thrush**, **Bald Eagle**, **Rufous Hummingbird** and an active **Red-breasted Sapsucker** nest. A **North American Sea Otter** was swimming in the harbour next to the park.

Day 10: Heading back to Europe

Report written by Jean Hugé (jean_huge@hotmail.com).

Species List (Birds, n= 87 species)

American Black Swift
American Bushtit
American Goldfinch
American Robin
American Wigeon
American Yellow Warbler
Anna's Hummingbird
Audubon's Warbler
Bald Eagle
Band-tailed Pigeon
Barn Swallow
Belted Kingfisher
Black Oystercatcher
Blue Jay
Blue-Winged Teal
Brandt's Cormorant
Brewer's Blackbird
Brown Creeper
Brown-headed Cowbird
Canada Goose
Cassin's Auklet
Cedar Waxwing
Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Cliff Swallow
Common Loon
Common Merganser
Common Murre
Common Yellowthroat
Cooper's Hawk
Dark-eyed Junco
Double-crested Cormorant
Downy Woodpecker
Feral Rock Pigeon
Glaucous-winged Gull
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Great Blue Heron
Great Horned Owl
Green-Winged Teal
Hairy Woodpecker
Harlequin Duck
Heermann's Gull
House Finch
Killdeer
Lesser Yellowlegs
Mallard
Marbled Murrelet
Marsh Wren

Mute Swan
Northern Flicker
Northern Pintail
Northern Raven
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Northern Shoveler
Northwestern Crow
Osprey
Pacific Slope Flycatcher
Pacific Wood Pewee
Pacific Wren
Pelagic Cormorant
Pigeon Guillemot
Pine Siskin
Purple Martin
Red Crossbill
Red Fox Sparrow
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Red-breasted Sapsucker
Red-tailed Hawk
Rhinoceros Auklet
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Rufous Hummingbird
Sandhill Crane
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Short-billed Gull
Snow Goose
Song Sparrow
Sooty Grouse
Spotted Towhee
Steller's Jay
Surf Scoter
Swainson's Thrush
Townsend's Warbler
Tree Swallow
Turkey Vulture
Varied Thrush
Violet-Green Swallow
White-crowned Sparrow
Wood Duck

Species List (Mammals, n = 15 species)

American Mink
California Sea Lion
Coast Mole
Coyote
Douglas' Squirrel

Gray Whale
Grey Squirrel
Harbour Seal
Humpback Whale
Killer Whale
Mule Deer
North American River Otter
Pacific Wide-sided Dolphin
Sea Otter
Yellow-Pine Chipmunk