

# Eastern Alberta

## 5-30 to 6-6-2017

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Pix: <https://goo.gl/photos/Hj63XT69h4LCvaHRA>

### General info

- To enter Canada, a non-American citizen is required to have an eTA. I didn't even know about this, but was able to do it at the airport. Had to go online, filling out the forms took about 20min. Approval was immediate. Glad I had enough of a buffer at the airport.
- It looks like Township Roads (Tws Rd or TR for short) run east-west and Range Roads (RR) run north-south.
- St. Paul, Bonnyville and Cold Lake ended up being much larger towns than I thought. Lodging, food and gas were all easy to find. Lac La Biche is a little bit smaller, but still has everything you need.
- Some foods like cheese and chocolate are very expensive. Alcohol is too. Gas was about 0.98 to 1.06/liter.
- My itinerary did not include the mountains as I can see western birds where I live. One can make the point that the extreme southeast corner of the state can be skipped. All the prairie species can be seen easily near Brooks. Dinosaur PP is definitely worth visiting. Cypress Hills is interesting since some of the eastern and western species intermix and interbreed.

### Itinerary:

#### **5-30: Flight to Calgary, drive to just SE of Brooks**

After landing and getting my rental car with Europcar (slightly inconvenient as it involved taking a 10min shuttle from the airport to their site), I headed east on the Trans-Canada Hwy, picked up supplies in Bassano and moved in position for my first morning in the Canadian badlands. I drove south on 875 south east of Brooks, then east on TR152 and found a cozy spot to car camp off RR132.

#### **5-31: RR132, RR105 (both east of Brooks); Onefour loop, RR20 near Wildhorse**

Early morning I quickly found Baird's Sparrows and displaying Sprague's Pipits along RR132. Also in the area were Lark Bunting, Marbled Godwit, Grasshopper Sparrow and Chestnut-collared Longspur. It was a beautiful morning.

Next I moved over to RR105 which takes off due north from the Trans-Canada Hwy maybe 8km northwest of Suffield. A good road indeed ... Chestnut-collared Longspurs were common in the first few kilometers, yet McCown's took over closer to TR182 which is where I turned around. Displaying Sprague's Pipits, a Baird's Sparrow, my first Ferruginous Hawk, more Lark Buntings and Brewer's Sparrows augmented the tally.

As the day was heating up mid afternoon I took a drive through the Onefour area in the extreme southeast corner of the province. I came down from Manyberries along 889 and then did the loop 501, RR62, TR22 which eventually pops out on 41 just north of the border station Wild Horse. This proved to be a very rich area, with lots of potholes peppered with grebes, shorebirds (like Long-billed Curlew, Willet, Wilson's Phalarope and Snipe, Marbled Godwit) and waterfowl. Many other prairie specialties including Baird's and Grasshopper Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur and Lark Bunting were also present.

As the day was winding down I drove RR23A, TR12, RR20 straight out to 501, before finding a quite spot on the south side of Cypress Hill PP to bed down. RR20 was another great area to find all the prairie species including McCown's Longspur, the latter a little further towards 501.

### **6-1: Cypress Hills PP, Dinosaur PP; drive to St. Paul, Upper Therien Lake**

First thing in the morning, I drove through the park to Spruce Coulee. I was surprised by the unusual habitat of lodgepole pines which seemed to come out of nowhere. Veery, my only White-crowned Sparrow, Warbling Vireo, Dusky Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee and Catbird were all neat birds to get. There were also many Least Flycatchers. At one stage I heard an oriole, but couldn't get on it. Bullock's and Baltimore both exist there and even hybridize. Wish I could have stayed longer and explored more, but I opted to push on to Dinosaur PP.

En route there I found a Sharp-tailed Grouse and a Short-eared Owl along 41 just north of Cypress Hills PP.

Once I entered the badlands of Dinosaur PP it was midday and quite hot, so bird activity was low. I visited the museum and walked several trails. Then I drove the park loop and looked at the impressive on-site dinosaur fossils. Brown Thrasher, Common Grackle, Lark and Vesper Sparrow, Yellow-breasted Chat, Spotted Towhee and several Baltimore Orioles were the bird highlights.

After a few hours of driving, I got to St. Paul by about 6pm. Upper Therien Lake, viewed from Parc Lagasse Park (yeah, ok ...), was hopping: There were several Sabine's Gull (the usual spring window for them is May 25 to June 5), a few Bonies and many Franklin's Gulls, a large flock of about 30 Red-necked Phalaropes, Purple Martin, Black Tern and loads of waterfowl.

I tucked myself in along a side road at Kehewin Lake, not knowing at the time that the southeast corner is good for Great Crested Flycatcher.

## **6-2: Cold Lake PP, English Bay Rd**

I ran up to Cold Lake PP early morning. The first bird was a Chestnut-sided Warbler near the parking lot of the boat launch. Nice! It proved to be the only one of my trip. I relatively easily found Blackburnian, Black-throated Green, Magnolia and Bay-breasted Warblers along the trail from the boat launch to the campground. Ovenbird, Black-and-white and a nice, tame Canada Warbler all posed well. Blue-headed Vireo, Winter Wren, Blue Jay and Boreal Chickadee were good as well. Hall's Lagoon added some water birds to the tally.

After lunch, I drove up English Bay Rd. A small marsh produced Sedge Wren and Swamp Sparrow, but then the rain settled in. Tennessee Warblers were still active, a Rose-breasted Grosbeak was also still singing. Between the rain squalls, a Cape May Warbler was singing away in the white spruces near the beach at English Bay Rec Site.

I bagged it, went to town and got my only motel of the trip, longing for a shower.

## **6-3: Around Cold Lake: English Bay Rd, Primrose Lake Rd, Ethel Lake Rd, Jessie Lake and Muriel Lake (Bonnyville), drive to Lac La Biche**

The weather had cleared overnight. I had read in Finley about a nice marsh near Cold Lake PP (take the road just outside the park entrance south to a T. This is the intersection of TR630 & RR20. I immediately heard Sedge Wren, Virginia Rail (rare that far north), Sora and a LeConte's Sparrow, but couldn't get on the LeConte's. Maybe I should have been more patient.

I again drove out English Bay Rd to the Rec Site where the same Cape May was again singing. I also added a White-winged Crossbill and Pine Siskin to the list on a short walk. A rather large black spruce and tamarack bog along English Bay Rd yielded Palm Warbler, Swamp Sparrow and 2 eastern race Nashville Warblers were countersinging there (rare for the area).

Along 897 (or Primrose Lake Rd which I found out later) I found good habitat for Connecticut Warbler and quickly found 2 birds. Tracking them down is an altogether different matter, but I did get great looks. It helps that they like minimal understory.

At Ethel Lake Rd, both Turkey Vulture (a rare bird in eastern Alberta) and Broad-winged Hawk were overhead. My first Eastern Phoebe was calling loudly at the Ethel Lake MD CG. I heard a Mourning Warbler, but couldn't track it down. My only Northern Waterthrush and Evening Grosbeak also came from this area. Almost where Ethel Lake Rd t's into 55, a Cape May Warbler was singing from an overgrown black spruce bog.

At Jessie Lake in Bonnyville, several Forster's Tern were working the lake on the west end. It was an active place with tons of waterfowl, terns and grebes. I noticed a drake Ruddy Duck display from only 20ft away. At first I thought it was for me (hahaha), but then a female did come out of the marsh and I left annoyed.

At Muriel Lake, I had no info other than there may be Piping Plover. It is a huge area ... I drove through the large, empty park and campground encountering a disheveled black bear on the access road. I did find a spit near the campground, but it was a little far for the scope. Scads of gulls, cormorants and terns were on it. Common Terns were obvious, so was a singing Gray Catbird at the viewpoint.

Onto Lac La Biche ... I briefly stopped at Alexander Hamilton Park (which is between town and Sir Winston Churchill PP) in the evening and noted good habitat for LeConte's Sparrow. A Philadelphia was working the willows in the parking lot and I got great pictures. Churchill Park was booked up, so I had to camp at Beaver Lake.

#### **6-4: Lac La Biche area: Alexander Hamilton Park, Sir Winston Churchill PP, Long Lake PP, Beaverhill Lake**

I started the day again at Alexander Hamilton park. Quickly, a LeConte's Sparrow was found and he perched up nicely. Then a Nelson's Sparrow started singing and I again got fine looks. Osprey and Bald Eagle were patrolling the grounds. Nice place!

By 7:30am I was at Sir Winston Churchill park (the loop road opens at 8am) and started walking in from the campground. Canada and Mourning Warbler were easy near the Lac La Biche viewpoint. I then birded the loop road; there was pretty much no traffic in the morning (looks like all the campers stayed in the full campground, more power to them). The white-spruce patches held Blackburnian, Cape May and Bay-breasted Warbler. Boreal Chickadee, Blue-headed Vireo, and Gray Catbird and Bank Swallow along the causeway added to the cast. The roundabout area had lots of old-growth conifers, so I worked the area and found a Three-toed Woodpecker nearby. There are lots of dead trees on the peninsula; I guess that's why the fire danger status was labeled extreme (nowhere else on my trip was more than medium). A Mourning Warbler was inside the roundabout proper as well. Boy, was that fun!

Lunch at Taco Bell was worse than I had imagined. The visitor center and museum has a strong WiFi signal and pleasant folks with lots of good info. I briefly cruised town for hummingbird feeders, but only found a Purple Martin house with several birds.

In the afternoon I stopped at Long Lake PP, my only stop in Athabasca County. I skipped driving up to Calling Lake. Canada Warblers were thick along the trail off the southern end of the campground. In the campground proper were Bay-breasted, Blackburnian and Tennessee Warbler.

My last stop for the day was Beaverhill Lake east of Edmonton where I stayed overnight. I only made it to Frances viewpoint, the mosquitos were very bad. There were about 7 or 8 LeConte's Sparrows singing. A Sprague's Pipit was displaying overhead. A male Bobolink and a Black-crowned Night-heron were between Frances and the Bird Observatory.

#### **6-5: Rochon Sands, roads around Hanna and the Sheerness power plant, Little Fish Lake PP**

Wanting to have nothing to do with the skeeters of Beaverhill, I opted to go to the south end of Buffalo Lake to Rochon Sands to try for Great-crested Flycatcher. I had gotten a tip from 2 ladies I had run into in Lac La Biche. I worked the area they had recommended (a dirt road off to the right as you come down to the T on 835; and then about 500m in). I did find one loudly calling bird at 122 Buffalo Dr after lots of searching. Also in town and at the provincial park were Baltimore Oriole, Gray Catbird, Ruffed Grouse, Bank and Northern Rough-winged Swallow and Purple Martin. I did watch a filled feeder for Ruby-throated Hummingbird for a few minutes, but nothing came in.

The final quest was to get better looks at Upland Sandpiper. I had gotten a glimpse of a bird on a fence post along 36 south of Hanna. So, I cruised the dirt roads around Hanna and the Sheerness power plant. It was cold and the wind was howling, so the smaller bird didn't show up. Amongst some of the regular prairie birds like Loggerhead Shrike, Long-billed Curlew, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Swainson's and Ferruginous Hawk, I finally dug up a pair of Upland Sandpipers about 3.6km into TR28-4. This is just south of the power plant and west of 36. A Sharp-tailed Grouse was nearby as well. Prairie Oasis Park also had a lot of birds, so is well worth pulling in for: Common Tern, a snoozing Marbled Godwit on a fencepost and Black-crowned Night-heron were along the access road. A (suspected) summering Snow Goose was mixed in with Canadas just NW of Hanna.

The final attempt to get a new bird was to try for Piping Plover again, this time at Little Fish Lake PP. I didn't see one, but the place was serene and no one was there but me. I opted to stay the night, it cooled down to 5F overnight. Birds were plentiful, but nothing rare.

#### **6-6: Drive back to Calgary and fly out**

On the drive out (20km of dirt roads each, both in from the north and out to the west), I found a Sharp-tailed Grouse in the road and 2 singing Baird's Sparrows just 0.5km east of 573 & 848.

I gave the car a wash seemingly making it even dirtier, but at least that took care of the caked mud on the undercarriage. Still, there was a lot of dust in the inside, but Europcar didn't complain when I returned it.

#### **Highlights and lowlights:**

- Species that I never found: Yellow Rail (didn't really try), Ruby-throated Hummingbird (I watched a feeder in Rochon Sands for a while, but zip), Blackpoll Warbler (only tried once randomly), and - at great embarrassment - Dark-eyed Junco.
- Great scope looks of Baird's, LeConte's and Nelson's Sparrow. The high-pitched warblers are always really neat: Blackburnian, Cape May, Bay-breasted. The skulkers like Canada and Mourning Warbler were plentiful. Finding a Connecticut is always a top-3 highlight. Also, finding a Philadelphia Vireo always seems like finding the needle in a haystack, so that success on that front is always good.
- I made a several hours detour to get good looks at Upland Sandpiper, one of my absolute favorite shorebirds.

### **Resources:**

- I used eBird for the general areas where to bird. I didn't really have or need stakeouts
- Andy Stepniewski's EXCELLENT trip report:  
[http://www.surfbirds.com/trip\\_report.php?id=1426](http://www.surfbirds.com/trip_report.php?id=1426)
- The Alberta portion of J. Cam Finley's "Bird-finding Guide to Canada"
- For free WiFi, the local visitor center are the best bet. McDonald's and Tim Horton's will have free WiFi as well, but you will have to buy something to use it.

### **Species list (172 seen or heard):**

Snow Goose (1 late or summering bird with Canadas SW of Hanna)  
 Canada Goose  
 Gadwall  
 American Wigeon  
 Mallard  
 Blue-winged Teal  
 Cinnamon Teal  
 Northern Shoveler  
 Northern Pintail  
 Green-winged Teal  
 Canvasback  
 Redhead  
 Ring-necked Duck  
 Lesser Scaup  
 White-winged Scoter (2 males over Ethel Lake Rd)  
 Bufflehead  
 Common Goldeneye  
 Common Merganser  
 Ruddy Duck  
 Ring-necked Pheasant  
 Ruffed Grouse

Sharp-tailed Grouse (near Little Fish Lake, off 41 north of Cypress Hills PP, south of Sheerness Power Plant off TR 28-4)  
Common Loon  
Pied-billed Grebe  
Red-necked Grebe  
Eared Grebe  
Western Grebe  
Double-crested Cormorant  
American White Pelican  
Great Blue Heron  
Black-crowned Night-Heron  
Turkey Vulture (1 over Ethel Lake Rd)  
Osprey  
Northern Harrier  
Bald Eagle  
Sharp-shinned Hawk  
Broad-winged Hawk (1 over Ethel Lake Rd)  
Swainson's Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk  
Ferruginous Hawk (many in the prairies)  
Virginia Rail (1 at marsh at TR630 & RR20 just east off Cold Lake PP entrance)  
Sora  
American Coot  
Sandhill Crane  
American Avocet  
Killdeer  
Upland Sandpiper (2 south of Sheerness Power Plant off TR 28-4 about 3.6km in)  
Long-billed Curlew  
Marbled Godwit  
Wilson's Snipe  
Wilson's Phalarope  
Red-necked Phalarope (group of 30 on Upper Therien Lake in St. Paul)  
Spotted Sandpiper  
Willet  
Sabine's Gull (12 on Upper Therien Lake in St. Paul)  
Bonaparte's Gull  
Franklin's Gull  
Ring-billed Gull  
California Gull  
Black Tern  
Common Tern (Lake Muriel)  
Forster's Tern (Jessie Lake south of Bonnyville)  
Eurasian Collared-Dove  
Mourning Dove

Rock Pigeon  
Short-eared Owl (one off 41 just north of Cypress Hills PP)  
Belted Kingfisher  
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker  
Red-naped Sapsucker (Spruce Coulee at Cypress Hills PP)  
Downy Woodpecker  
Hairy Woodpecker  
American Three-toed Woodpecker (Sir Winston Churchill PP)  
Northern Flicker  
Pileated Woodpecker  
American Kestrel  
Prairie Falcon (Onefour)  
Western Wood-Pewee (Cypress Hills PP)  
Alder Flycatcher  
Least Flycatcher  
Dusky Flycatcher (Cypress Hills PP)  
Eastern Phoebe  
Great Crested Flycatcher (1 at house 122 Buffalo Dr at Rochon Sands)  
Western Kingbird  
Eastern Kingbird  
Loggerhead Shrike  
Blue-headed Vireo (various spots)  
Philadelphia Vireo (1 at Alexander Hamilton Park in Lac La Biche)  
Warbling Vireo  
Red-eyed Vireo  
Blue Jay (Cold Lake PP only)  
Black-billed Magpie  
American Crow  
Common Raven  
Horned Lark  
Northern Rough-winged Swallow  
Purple Martin  
Tree Swallow  
Bank Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
Cliff Swallow  
Black-capped Chickadee  
Boreal Chickadee (various spots)  
Red-breasted Nuthatch  
Rock Wren (Dinosaur PP)  
House Wren  
Winter Wren  
Sedge Wren (English Bay Rd marsh, 1 at marsh at TR630 & RR20 just east off Cold Lake PP entrance)



Marsh Wren  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
Mountain Bluebird  
Veery (Cypress Hills PP, near Kehewin Lake)  
Swainson's Thrush  
Hermit Thrush  
American Robin  
Gray Catbird  
Brown Thrasher (Dinosaur PP, Little Fish Lake PP)  
European Starling  
Sprague's Pipit (all southeastern locations including 1 at Beaverhill Lake)  
Cedar Waxwing  
Chestnut-collared Longspur (RR20 north of Wild Horse, RR105 northwest of Suffield, Onefour)  
McCown's Longspur (RR20 north of Wild Horse, RR105 northwest of Suffield)  
Ovenbird  
Northern Waterthrush (only 1 along Ethel Lake Rd)  
Black-and-white Warbler  
Tennessee Warbler  
Nashville Warbler (2 in black spruce/tamarack bog along English Bay Rd, Cold Lake)  
Connecticut Warbler (2 along Primrose Lake Rd or 897, 1 at 0.6km before official Marie Lake turnoff, 1 7.8km past)  
Mourning Warbler (several at Sir Winston Churchill PP)  
Common Yellowthroat  
American Redstart  
Cape May Warbler (Sir Winston Churchill PP, English Bay Recreation Site)  
Magnolia Warbler  
Bay-breasted Warbler (common at Sir Winston Churchill PP and Cold Lake PP, 1 at Long Lake PP)  
Blackburnian Warbler (common at Sir Winston Churchill PP and Cold Lake PP, 1 at Long Lake PP)  
Yellow Warbler  
Chestnut-sided Warbler (1 at boat launch at Cold Lake PP)  
Palm Warbler (1 in black spruce/tamarack bog along English Bay Rd, Cold Lake)  
Yellow-rumped Warbler  
Black-throated Green Warbler (Cold Lake PP only)  
Canada Warbler (several at Long Lake PP, Sir Winston Churchill PP, 1 at Cold Lake PP)  
Yellow-breasted Chat (2 at Dinosaur PP)  
Grasshopper Sparrow  
Baird's Sparrow (several sites)  
Le Conte's Sparrow (many at Beaverhill PP - Frances Viewpoint, 1 at marsh at TR630 & RR20 just east off Cold Lake PP entrance, 2 at Alexander Hamilton Park in Lac La Biche)  
Nelson's Sparrow (1 at Alexander Hamilton Park in Lac La Biche)  
Chipping Sparrow  
Clay-colored Sparrow

Brewer's Sparrow  
Lark Sparrow (1 at Dinosaur PP)  
Lark Bunting (many near Onefour and RR20 north of Wild Horse)  
White-crowned Sparrow (Spruce Coulee at Cypress Hills PP)  
White-throated Sparrow  
Vesper Sparrow  
Savannah Sparrow  
Song Sparrow  
Lincoln's Sparrow  
Swamp Sparrow  
Spotted Towhee  
Western Tanager  
Rose-breasted Grosbeak (English Bay Rd, Kehewin Lake CG)  
Bobolink (1 at Beaverhill Lake)  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Western Meadowlark  
Yellow-headed Blackbird  
Brewer's Blackbird  
Common Grackle (Dinosaur PP)  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Baltimore Oriole  
White-winged Crossbill (English Bay Rec Site)  
Pine Siskin (just one at English Bay Rec Site)  
American Goldfinch  
Evening Grosbeak (Ethel Lake Rd)  
House Sparrow

**Other wildlife:**

Black bear (Muriel Lake)  
Pronghorn  
Mule deer  
Coyote  
Red Squirrel  
Richardson's Ground-squirrel  
Snowshoe Hare  
White-tailed Jackrabbit  
Muskrat