

Washington's Olympic Peninsula May 1–8, 2023 | Trip Report by Carolyn Wilcox



With Guides Carolyn Wilcox and Mason Flint and Participants Kathleen, Beth, Kim, Marie, Kathy, Tom, Thayer, Barb and Liz



Trip Summary

We spent three nights on the east side of Olympic National Park (ONP) in “sunny” Sequim, and then three more nights on the wetter, west side of ONP at the Kalaloch Lodge. We visited lakes carved by glaciers, a dozen wild rivers, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Salish Sea taking in the Pacific Coast and its temperate rainforest. Throughout the trip, we enjoyed western specialty birds including northern migrants on their way to their arctic breeding grounds. The enchanting light drizzle and transitional rain showers really set the mosses glowing in the Hoh Rainforest and enhanced our wildlife watching opportunities. We tallied 135 bird species and 12 different mammals. Following are highlights of our adventures.



Wildlife Summary

- 135 bird species, including Marbled Murrelet
- 25 different waterfowl species, including Harlequin Duck
- Nearly daily species observed including Surf Scoter, Rufous Hummingbird, Black Oystercatcher, Pigeon Guillemot, Common Loon, Pelagic Cormorant, Bald Eagle, Steller's Jay and Pacific Wren
- 12 mammal species, including a beaver

Mon., May 1

Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge

We met as a group after breakfast at the Radisson in SeaTac. Leaving the hotel around 11 AM, we headed south toward Olympia to the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge. We explored the productive wetland habitat at the delta of the Nisqually River, which has its headwaters in Mount Rainier National Park. We saw American Coot and Pied-billed Grebe, species we did not view anywhere else on our trip. We also enjoyed a handsome male Wood Duck at close range. Along a boardwalk, we found a Marsh Wren nest and our only beaver sighting, which was the first time one was found on a Naturalist Journey trip in this location. We watched an interaction between a mixed flock of female Brown-headed Cowbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds that likely involved nest parasitism. Other songbird highlights here included Tree Swallow, views of a singing Warbling Vireo and an excellent comparison of the Audubon's and Myrtle subspecies of Yellow-rumped Warbler in deciduous trees that had not yet totally leafed out. An amphibian highlight in Nisqually was a camouflaged Pacific Chorus Frog on a leaf at eye level. Later in the trip, we heard chorus frogs chirping when we were visiting the largest spruce tree in the world in the Quinault Rainforest.

After Nisqually, we drove up Highway 101 along the Hood Canal, a long inlet of the Salish Sea that provides a scenic introduction to the Olympic Peninsula. Along our route, we stopped at Shelton Memorial Park for California Scrub-Jay, a species that is just starting to move into Sequim and Port Angeles. We also had a flyover Black-headed Grosbeak while looking for the jay. After leaving Shelton, we passed many quaint small towns and enjoyed views of the Salish Sea, which contains both salt and fresh water. After arriving at the Holiday Inn Express in Sequim, we had a nice first dinner across the street at the Black Bear Diner.



Tues., May 2 Dungeness Estuary | Lake Crescent | Waterfalls

We started the day early for good mudflat exposure at a restoration site and birding hotspot called 3 Crabs at the mouth of the Dungeness River, one of the 12 major rivers that drain Olympic National Park. This tidally influenced mudflat habitat is similar to what we observed later in the trip at Grays Harbor National Wildlife Refuge; however, the species makeup was quite different. At 3 Crabs, we observed birds that we would not see elsewhere on the trip such as Eurasian Wigeon, Black-bellied Plover and Sanderling. 3 Crabs also boasts a Purple Martin nesting colony over the engineered brackish pond at the entrance, maintained by the Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society. Here we observed a pair of courting martins on one of the white PVC nestboxes, which are designed to dissuade European Starlings and other nest competitors. This is the day we would have gone to Hurricane Ridge, but since it was closed for construction, we actually had the subalpine come to us in the form of an American Pipit, a bird that breeds in subalpine habitat, but we were fortunate to have one land right in front of us at 3 Crabs as we were observing shorebirds and waterfowl.

We then traveled to Dungeness Landing on the other side of the estuary where we were able to observe a Pileated Woodpecker using a utility pole for a drumming exercise. From here we continued west toward Lake Crescent, with a stop at Ediz Hook in Port Angeles where we observed a continuing rarity: Lapland Longspur, another first for a Naturalist Journey trip. This sighting would later be trumped when we found a breeding male Lapland Longspur in Grays Harbor.

After picking up our lunches in Port Angeles, we traveled to a beautiful outdoor dining spot near the Lake Crescent Lodge where we had our only good look at a breeding Golden-crowned Sparrow. From the lodge, we hiked to Marymere Falls along Barnes Creek and enjoyed an abundance of singing Pacific Wrens. The forested trail was lined with spring wildflowers and giant western red cedar trees as well as giant Douglas fir, grand fir, and western hemlock. Just a few of the flowers we enjoyed included bleeding heart (*Dicentra formosa*), violets (*Viola* sp.), trillium (*Trillium ovatum*) and a handful of stunning calypso orchids (*Calypso bulbosa*).

We were treated to a fabulous view of an American Dipper on our return hike along Barnes Creek, upstream of the Highway 101 bridge, a long-standing site of a dipper nest. An adult bird burst into song after treating us to a prolonged demonstration of its diving, swimming and hunting skills in the chilly, clear waters of Barnes Creek. We also heard and saw Hammond's Flycatcher and heard Townsend's Warbler and Varied Thrush.



After Lake Crescent, we stopped to learn about the restoration of the Elwha River at the easy-to-access and beautiful Madison Falls, and watched a dipper here as well, this time climbing up the waterfall. We dined in Port Angeles and then returned to our lodging in Sequim.

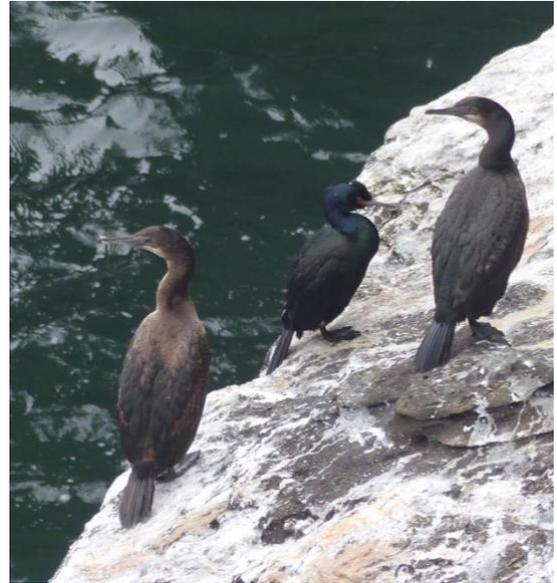
Wed., May 3 Railroad Bridge | Salish Sea from Sequim

Today we found the Dungeness Roosevelt elk herd and enjoyed the Dungeness River Nature Center and Railroad Bridge Park. We started the day by joining Bob Boekelheide on a well-attended, weekly bird walk that he has been operating for many years. This was a great opportunity to observe bird nests and nesting behavior. Many of the regulars on the bird walk had just volunteered as guides for Olympic BirdFest and were thus well informed of local bird habits and migration. Highlights of the walk included watching Bushtits build and use nests, a Red-breasted Nuthatch carrying food, a calling and rather conspicuous California Quail, a singing Bewick's Wren, excellent hummingbird observations of both species (Rufous and Anna's), views of a Townsend's Warbler high in the riparian canopy and sightings of Purple Finch, Downy Woodpecker, Red-breasted Sapsucker and a California Scrub-Jay chasing a Steller's Jay. Everyone seemed to really enjoy the varied habitats on the walk itself, the interactions with local birders, the birdfeeders at the Nature Center and the amazing access and views of the dynamic wild Dungeness River and associated riparian forest from the elevated bridge.

We transitioned to the John Wayne Marina for a great look at a pair of Marbled Murrelets, one of the most threatened bird species we encountered during our trip.

After lunch, we went on a short search for Roosevelt elk and had a distant but good view from Schmuck Road. We stopped at a few different overlooks of Sequim Bay and Protection Island. Just outside Dungeness National Recreation Area, we looked down from the top of naturally eroding marine bluff at birds in the Salish Sea far below. All these scenic locations added to our appreciation of the Olympic Peninsula and Olympic National Park, kept dry due to the rain shadow effect. After driving by many ponds, pastures and commercial lavender fields, we had a special dinner at Alderwood Bistro where we had the entire outdoor patio area to ourselves.

Thurs., May 4 Cape Flattery, the Makah Museum | Neah Bay



Today we left our lodging in Sequim to head west to the very northwest tip of the Olympic Peninsula on the Makah Nation Reservation. We started our transitional day back at Ediz Hook where we found Long-tailed Duck, Pacific Loon and Harlequin Duck. The unpredictable May weather brought in some thunder making the birding fast paced and exciting. We also observed good numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers, Western Grebes and a good assortment of alcids including Marbled Murrelet, Pigeon Guillemot and Rhinoceros Auklet. We also had great looks at Harbor Seals.

From here we drove on highway 112, with good views of the Salish Sea en route. This was also our first views of Sitka spruce- and western hemlock-dominant forests on the wet, western side of the Olympic Peninsula, which we would later explore in protected Olympic National Park. We stopped at Clallam Bay and heard a Killdeer making a commotion, possibly because American Crows were threatening its eggs or chicks.

After continuing along a scenic, winding road full of beaches, sea stacks and rocky outcroppings, we arrived in Neah Bay, the last Makah village. The marina was overflowing with trucks and trailers for halibut (and possibly black cod). We drove from the bay to Cape Flattery, the northwestern-most point in the continental U.S. The trail is magical, full of old twisted western red cedar, Sitka spruce and western hemlock. Thanks to our plant experts, we observed a shrub that was just beginning to leaf out that looked like western azalea (*Rhododendron occidentale*) but may have been false azalea (*Menziesia ferruginea*). The trail was full of evergreen huckleberry and blooming yellow skunk cabbage as well as deer and licorice fern. The boardwalks and overlooks had been repaired during the pandemic, but the trail was quite slippery, and we found that using a hiking pole was helpful for many of us.

From the final overlook to Tatoosh Island, we had fleeting views of Tufted Puffin in flight, a giant raft of Common Murre and great looks at stationary, basic-plumaged (nonbreeding) Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants. This was the only spot on our trip where we found Brant, a loosely shaped V flying at a distance out at sea.

Over lunch at the Warmhouse Restaurant back in Neah Bay, we saw two Whimbrel and a few Marbled Godwits. After lunch, a person set out fish heads for the Bald Eagles, and we were treated to a convocation of 25+ variably aged Bald Eagles that swept in to pick up the food. Some people in our group were quite close to the action and nearly had a fish head dropped on them! We spent the afternoon at the Makah Museum and enjoyed

learning more about native culture and traditional lifestyles. We then headed south to the Kalaloch Lodge to settle into our base for the next three nights.



Fri., May 5 The Hoh Rainforest – Temperate Old Growth Rainforest

We started out with an optional early walk along the Kalaloch Creek Nature Trail in the coastal forest under a heavy fog and mist. We heard Varied Thrushes and there may have been one foraging on the narrow trail in front of us, but its secretive nature won out and no one was able to see it. After the fog lifted from the campground overlook above the Pacific Ocean, we observed Brown Pelicans, a species whose nonbreeding range extends north to Vancouver Island. After breakfast, we had some incidental sightings: 100 Cackling Geese flying right over the Kalaloch Lodge, following the coastline on their northward migration, and a pair of Red Crossbills seen at close range on the marine bluff.

For many, the highlight of the trip was a long, leisurely stroll on the Hall of Mosses Trail in the Hoh Rainforest among ancient Sitka spruce and western hemlocks. We observed the four features of old growth forests: large, old trees, some of which are over 500 years old; forest layers (multilayered canopies with gaps that result from the deaths of individual trees); dead standing trees and nurse logs. Just above the Hoh River floodplain, the ancient Douglas firs are quite spectacular. As is often the case in forests where the canopy is 230 feet (70 meters) in height, we relied on birding by ear. Although we heard many birds, our only sighting was a Hairy Woodpecker. We heard the drumming of a distant Pileated Woodpecker as well as the songs of Brown Creeper, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Pacific Wren, Pacific-slope Flycatcher and Dark-eyed Junco.

We enjoyed the abundant terrestrial and epiphytic plants and lichens. Some of the many lichens we examined were frog pelt (*Peltigera neopolydactyla*), fairy barf (*Icmadophila ericetorum*), lichen agaric (*Omphalina umbellifera*), British soldiers (*Cladonia bellidiflora*), lungwort (*Lobaria* sp.), and devil's matchstick (*Pilophorus acicularis*). We also enjoyed a moss closely related to a type of club moss called Oregon selaginella (*Selaginella oregana*). This moss hangs down like curtains, occurs only in temperate rainforests, and is especially beautiful on the big-leaf maples. In the open area around the Hoh Visitor Center, we saw a secretive pair of Wood Ducks, a pair of female or immature Hooded Mergansers and enjoyed great looks at Black-throated Gray and Wilson's Warblers in red alder stands in the campground.



We enjoyed a nice lunch at the Hard Rain Cafe and were treated to information about the Kalaloch tree of life that helped inspire us to visit. We drove back to Kalaloch to observe a Sitka spruce clinging to the marine bluff that will soon topple over as the bluff erodes. While on the beach, we saw a flock of 100+ migrating Greater White-fronted Geese flying right over our heads, so close we could see the barring on their chests. We also watched a small group of shorebirds, predominately Semipalmated Plovers, and another Brown Pelican as it coasted above the surf. Dinner at the Kalaloch Lodge was a delightful end to the day.

Sat., May 6 The Grays Harbor Shorebird Festival | Quinault Rainforest

We awoke to a beautiful morning, quite a change from the prior morning. The weather was so nice that dog owners were running their dogs off leash, scaring up all the birds on the beach (Olympic National Park allows dogs on all the Kalaloch beaches, but only on-leash). Once we ventured down on the beach, obviously interested in the wildlife, the dog owners mostly put their dogs back on-leash. We observed Black Oystercatchers and our only Red-throated Loon of the trip. We also had our first Vaux's Swifts of the trip fly overhead. After breakfast, we drove south to Grays Harbor for the annual Shorebird Festival. We started at the Hoquiam Sewage Treatment Ponds (STP) and were rewarded with many birds that were only seen here such as Ring-billed Gulls and both Lesser and Greater Scaup on the ponds. There were also two Blue-winged Teal and a pair of Osprey near a nest site. This is also where we found the gorgeous male Lapland Longspur in breeding plumage.

After the Hoquiam STP, we walked or rode the festival school bus a short distance to the beginning of the Sandpiper Trail in the Grays Harbor National Wildlife Refuge. There were throngs of people, but we were happy to support the continued success of the festival by joining its organized tour. Despite the crowd, we were awed by the sheer numbers and close up views of Western Sandpipers and Dunlin. There were also about 25 Caspian Terns perched on the sand for a nice, close observation, and it was fun to be among so many enthusiastic bird watchers of all ages and experience levels.

After the festival tour, we decided to check out some sites in Ocean Shores, between Grays Harbor and the Pacific Coast. Our best sighting was of Cliff Swallows gathering mud from a puddle for a nest. We drove north along the scenic coastline and took the Moclips Highway back to 101, stopping at the Quinault Lodge to view the largest known Sitka spruce tree. Here we heard Pacific chorus frogs singing, and there were many flowers along the short walk to the ancient tree. While looking at Lake Quinault from the lodge grounds, we heard a short call from a presumably breeding Common Loon and then enjoyed a nice dinner at the historic lodge.



Sun., May 7

Port Townsend | Fort Worden

We started the day early with an optional walk on Ruby Beach to explore the tide pools. We found an abundance of colorful sea stars that we observed through the spotting scope, and most of us crossed a log over a stream to get a closer look at the northern part of the beach, while a few people birded the trail leading back to the parking lot, finding and photographing a Fox Sparrow. Meanwhile, on the north side of Abbey Island, we observed Pigeon Guillemots perched on rocks and nesting Pelagic Cormorants.

After breakfast, there was time for a bit more birding at Kalaloch, and we identified Mourning Dove, Band-tailed Pigeon and more Vaux's Swifts before it was time to check out of the lodge and say goodbye to the ocean. On the way back along the north Olympic Peninsula, we stopped at the Visitor Center in Port Angeles where someone caught a fleeting glimpse of a small flock of about eight Red Crossbills. Two Red-breasted Sapsuckers were also observed. We continued to Port Townsend for lunch and walked through historic downtown to Point Hudson just down the street overlooking Whidbey Island and the entrance to Puget Sound. Rhinoceros Auklets and Glaucous-winged Gull hybrids (Glaucous-winged x Western) were participating in what is known as a "bait ball" a feeding frenzy with diving alcids (often accompanied by cormorants) had trapped a large school of bait fish (usually herring, surf smelt or sand lance) allowing the gulls on the surface of the water to dine. While observing this feeding event, we also found at least two Bonaparte's Gulls flying around.

From Point Hudson, we took the short drive to Fort Worden State Park and were serenaded by many White-crowned Sparrows. There was an assortment of birds in the water, and as we returned to our vehicles, we had an unexpected sighting of a Western Meadowlark. We continued driving, leaving the Olympic Peninsula over Hood Canal Bridge, spotting many Surf Scoters, the white spot on the back of the male's heads easily identified. We arrived on Bainbridge Island and enjoyed a lovely farewell dinner. Everyone was so full that it was hard to finish the scrumptious Crème Brûlée!

Mon., May 8

Our Journey Comes to An End

A few early risers participated in an optional early morning bird walk from the hotel to Sakai Park. We were treated to our first and only, albeit distant view of a Western Tanager that must have just arrived. We were also serenaded by a male Black-headed Grosbeak. We parted ways after a splendid ferry ride across Puget Sound



into downtown Seattle, with stunning views of Mount Rainier. Half the participants were staying in a hotel in downtown Seattle and the other half were returning to SeaTac Airport. The trip was wonderful, and we experienced a variety of habitats and all their component flora and fauna in an internationally recognized world heritage site and biosphere reserve. We enjoyed our time together with a great group of inquisitive naturalists and good travel companions.

Photo Credits: Ring-necked Duck (Kathleen Neugebauer - KN), American Dipper (KN), Group Photo (Carolyn Wilcox - CW), Harlequin Ducks (KN), Frog (CW), Callanan Park (CW), Green-winged Teal (KN), Group Birding (CW), Lapland Longspur (KN), Pacific Wren (KN), Anna's Hummingbird (CW), California Quail (KN), Birding the Coast (CW), Brandt's Cormorants (CW), Coastline Scenic (CW), Rainforest Scenic (CW), Beach Scenic (CW), Squirrel (CW), Sunset (KN), Group Photo (CW), Mountain Scenic (KN)