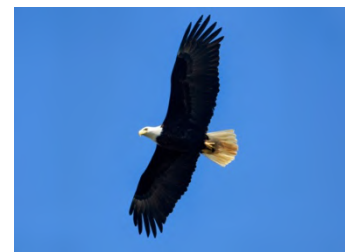
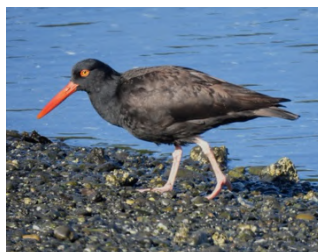
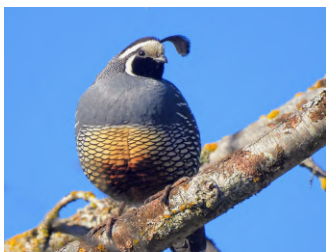


Olympic Peninsula Spring Explorer | May 6-13, 2024 | Trip Report | by Stephen Grace



Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Greg Butcher and Stephen Grace with Jonathan, Joan, Jean, David, Annie, Shirley and Lucas.



Mon., May 6

Arrival in Seattle | Nisqually | Sequim

After gathering at a hotel near Sea-Tac Airport, we loaded into two minivans and put Seattle and Tacoma in our review mirrors as we headed south to our first birding venue: Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge. Bald Eagles greeted us at the parking lot, and swallows swooped and veered among the lowering clouds. As we stepped onto a boardwalk, we were bombarded by hail, rain, and sunshine in close succession—we were baptized by the rapidly shifting weathers of the Pacific Northwest. I was relieved that our group had experienced a good soaking,



as the forecast for the next seven days called for nothing but sunshine, with no precipitation in sight. I wouldn't want naturalists to come to the "Pacific "NorthWet" and not get at least a little soggy, creating a visceral sense of how all the wet makes green in the legendary rainforests of this lush region.

Taking shelter beneath a towering canopy of big-leaf maple and Douglas-fir, I couldn't resist pointing out these iconic Northwest giants to our group. As we listened to raindrops pound the ground, we got to meet some smaller native plants—salmonberry and blue camas, a prairie flower that Lewis and Clark admired for its blooms, forming fields like "fine clear water." A member of the lily family, camas was a vital food source for the Indigenous people here. This wetland wasn't just a haven for birds; it was important to the Nisqually people who hunted and foraged here for countless generations. President Obama in 2015 redesignated this area the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge, honoring the Nisqually tribal leader and treaty rights activist. Now a sanctuary for waterfowl and shorebirds on the Nisqually River delta, the land not only supports wildlife; it also preserves the cultural heritage of the Nisqually people.

At a Thai restaurant in nearby Lacey, we dried off and swapped stories, building the bonds that make these birding tours so rewarding. Our group was a fascinating mix. We had seasoned birders like Jonathan, who'd journeyed all the way from Tasmania, and Lucas, a college student just starting his lifelong birding adventure. Any initial worries about our age diversity vanished. Lucas, thoughtful and mature beyond his years, fit right in with gray-haired people like me—a testament to the unifying power of birds. By the time we finished our first meal of spring rolls, stir-fry, curry, and hot tea, our shared passion for birds had replaced the chill of the downpour, warming our spirits for the journey ahead.

When we returned to Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge, the river delta was alive with another swallow extravaganza. Barn, Violet-green, Northern Rough-winged, and Tree Swallows filled the sky, their aerial ballet joined by majestic Purple Martins. Among the cattails, Common Yellowthroats flashed their black bandit masks, while Marsh Wrens announced their presence with bursts of frantic song.

Then came a scene straight out of a nature documentary. A Peregrine Falcon wreaked havoc, putting up hundreds of birds. This raptor lingered a while, patrolling the sky, providing panic for waterbirds and excitement for bipedal mammals on the boardwalk.

We had good looks at an array of waterfowl. Hooded Merganser, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, and Common Goldeneye—all revealed their beauty when viewed through scopes.



The mudflats were also teeming with life. Western and Least Sandpipers scurried along the water's edge, taking flight in mesmerizing unison. When many birds moved through the air as one, the murmuring flocks looked like sheets twisting in the wind. This stirring sight evoked the bounty of this land, which has supported Indigenous people for millennia, and now brings birders from around the world to revel in the beauty.

As we walked from the boardwalk back toward the parking lot, another stunning scenario unfolded. Raindrops fell from a sun-bright sky, sparkling jewellike in the light, and swallows in uncountable numbers hawked insects. This aerial feeding frenzy stopped us in our tracks. We stood in the fecund air of the wetland taking in the sights and smells.

We ended our day with a delightful welcome dinner in Sequim. Named for a word in the S'Klallam language once thought to mean "quiet waters," Sequim has recently been explained by keepers of the language to mean "place for going to shoot." This town with an unclear name is famous for its clear weather. Tucked in the rainshadow of the Olympic Mountains, Sequim is home to a native prickly pear cactus that grows beneath sunny skies while the rest of the Olympic Peninsula is smothered in clouds. Sequim's microclimate proved irrelevant, as sunshine blessed us throughout our journey. The winds, however, were not so kind.

Tues., May 7 Birding Hotspots of Sequim

Our plan to venture up Hurricane Ridge, an alpine wonderland nearly 7,000 feet above the sea, was thwarted by a forecast for snow and ferocious winds. We stuck to the lowlands, exploring some of the superb birding venues clustered around Sequim.

At Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge, we decided to move quickly through a mile of woodland trail, maximizing our time at the shore. The sound of a Hairy Woodpecker hammering and a Pacific Wren singing compromised this plan. We lingered to look at the busy woodpecker and listen to the Pacific Wren, "this little Pavarotti of the forest," as Naturalist Journeys founder and owner Peg Abbott calls this mighty songster.

Another worthwhile detour came in the form of a Banana Slug, a personal favorite of mine. Not only did this creature need to be relocated to avoid being stepped on, but it also provided the perfect opportunity to showcase its remarkable slime. I explained how, depending on the pressure applied, the slime acts as either a slippery lubricant for gliding or a powerful adhesive for climbing. It's a marvel of nature that ignites the childlike wonder in all of us—a superhero slug colored like a bruised banana. Banana Slugs even rappel from tree limbs



using ropes of slime, and these ecologically valuable creatures enrich the soil with nitrogen from the lichen they consume. While I could have delivered endless stories about Banana Slugs, including my (perhaps ill-advised) experiment of tasting their slime to test its defensive properties, seabirds beckoned us toward the shore.

After marveling at a majestic Bald Eagle silhouetted against the blue backdrop of Dungeness Bay, we ventured down onto Dungeness Spit. One of the longest sand spits in the world, this is also a fabulous birding venue. Pigeon Guillemots with fire-engine-red legs entertained us with their “guillemot games,” chasing each other in pairs above the waves. Horned Grebes were gorgeous in breeding plumage, showing golden “horns” of feathers on their heads. We watched Surf Scoters on the water and saw White-winged Scoters flying in the distance. A Common Loon, the dreadnought of waterbirds, rode low on the sea. One of these big loons winged past us. Whimbrels worked the shoreline, probing sand against a backdrop of crashing waves.

Some of the Marbled Murrelets we saw wore the mottled brown breeding plumage that hides this seabird when it nests in forests far from the ocean. Others were still in their black and white winter plumage, a countershading scheme like the coloration of penguins that conceals them from predators above and below.

A stop at Cline Spit produced a postcard-perfect view of the Dungeness Lighthouse but no birds. At Port Williams, the Pigeon Guillemot show resumed, and we saw more Marbled Murrelets, along with one Rhinoceros Auklet candidate. Difficult to discern in the glare on the water, this bird didn't satisfy our Rhino quest. We tried John Wayne Marina, but no Rhinos were there, either.

A Glaucous-winged Gull, however, performed a fascinating demonstration of innovative behavior. The most common gull species in this region and the only year-round resident of the family Laridae, this clever bird dropped clams on a sidewalk, shattering their shells on concrete so it could eat the soft flesh inside.

A quick phone call with local birding guru Steve Hampton steered us to Shorts Family Farm in the rural community of Chimacum. Steve, brimming with excitement, told us about Black Swifts that had photobombed his scope while he was watching Purple Martins. This secretive swift that nests behind waterfalls and in hidden sea caves was a rare treat—Steve had only seen them a few times before, despite his decades of birding experience. A couple of us glimpsed these black boomerangs flinging themselves among bright clouds in the dizzying heights above.

Back on earth, we got good looks at Semipalmated Plovers and saw a pair of stunning male Wood Ducks on a pond. Cackling Geese mingled with their larger cousins, Canada Geese. Seeing these two similar-looking birds side by side illustrated the subtle differences in neck length and bill size.



Our birding experience at Shorts Family Farm included stereo sound. As we drove over a wooden bridge, two Soras, those elusive rails, vocalized on either side of the van, their voices creating a unique sonic effect.

We stopped at a taco truck for some of the best Mexican food on the Olympic Peninsula. Joan used her fluent Spanish to chat with the people who cooked this tasty, authentic food.

At Anderson Lake State Park, an Osprey dropped from the sky, disappearing behind a wall of trees as it dove toward the water. A Rufous Hummingbird, tiny and bright, gleamed like a copper penny as it perched on a tree branch. This little marvel had traveled here to breed from Mexico—the longest migration of any bird when measured by body length. This hummer granted us long looks as it lingered amid the shimmering leaves of a quaking aspen, an uncommon native tree on the Olympic Peninsula.

Scope work on the lake produced good looks at Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead, and once again we enjoyed superb swallow viewing.

We headed back to Sequim and stopped at Three Crabs, a reclaimed wetland along the Strait of Juan de Fuca. A Northern Harrier skimmed the marsh, flying low as the hunter listened for voles in the grass with its owl-like face that funnels sound toward its sensitive ears. We found a Long-billed Dowitcher in cinnamon and brown breeding plumage. Despite scrutinizing hundreds of American Widgeons on the water, we couldn't find a Eurasian Widgeon among them.

A pair of White-fronted Geese flew by. Jean had taken shelter from the wind in a van—she thought she'd missed this lifer when I mentioned the White-fronted Goose sighting as I climbed inside. But after driving a short distance to chase a wild goose, we found one at the edge of a pond, and Jean was thrilled.

Dinner at Calrsborg's Old Mill Café, located in a nearby farming community, provided rural character and a taste of Sequim's seafood as we plotted the next day's adventure. The weather forecast looked favorable for an ascent of Hurricane Ridge.

Wed., May 8 Dungeness River Nature Center | Port Angeles | Hurricane Ridge | Ediz Hook

After breakfast at our hotel, we headed to Dungeness River Nature Center to do some birding before a scheduled walk. In a tree next to our parking spot, a California Quail perched against a blue sky—a promising beginning.



While checking out feeders, we were treated to a flurry of activity: American Goldfinches, Pine Siskins, a Purple Finch, and a Red-breasted Nuthatch. Then we joined Bob Boekelheide, my friend and birding mentor, on his Wednesday walk. Bob has been leading a crew of community scientists on Wednesday mornings for twenty-three years, compiling a robust dataset of species in the bird-rich riparian habitat along the Dungeness River and nearby forests and fields.

We moved at birding pace along a path that crosses the river on an old railroad bridge, listening closely to the soundscape. Western Flycatchers and Western Tanagers called and sang but remained frustratingly out of sight at the tops of tall trees. A Belted Kingfisher perched on a log in the river, providing superb views. A Spotted Towhee threw back his head to sing as he perched on a No Trespassing sign, as if making a statement about his territory by using the sign. A pendulous Bushtit nest that dangled like a sock from a branch was another highlight. Rufous Hummingbirds, however, stole the show.

Perched on powerlines in bright sunshine, these little gladiators slanted their lance-like bills toward the sky, flashing their orange-red gorgets. These gleaming throat feathers are named for the metallic neck protection worn by knights in medieval wars. The Rufous males flew off to do battle with each other, and to bully bigger Anna's Hummingbirds away from flowers and feeders.

At the end of the walk, I introduced our group to Gary Bullock, a local radio celebrity. A retired firefighter from Alaska turned poet, Gary is a skilled communicator of the science and beauty of birds. He is a regular contributor to Nature Now, a community radio show in Port Townsend that caters to the legions of nature lovers on the Olympic Peninsula.

We left Dungeness and headed west to Port Angeles. This gritty industrial city is reinventing itself as a tourism gateway to Olympic National Park. After lunch at a gastropub in the bustling downtown, we headed into the mountain wilderness, stopping at Olympic National Park's visitor center for information and souvenirs.

As we drove up the winding road toward Hurricane Ridge, each turn offered a new perspective. Gaining elevation was like taking a masterclass in Olympic National Park's biome diversity. From lush lowland forest we rose through montane forest and then emerged in the subalpine zone, where meadows separate stands of trees dwarfed by wind and snow.



Before reaching Hurricane Ridge, we stopped to take in views of snowcapped summits in the Olympic Mountains. In the distant Cascade Range, the snow-buried slopes of Mount Baker rose from green forests at the edge of the blue sea. The San Juan Islands of Washington State, the cityscape of Victoria on Vancouver Island, Canada, and the mountains of British Columbia added to the memorable views.

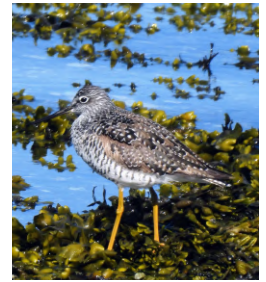
At one roadside pullout, the low bass thumping of a Sooty Grouse was so resonant that we could not only hear this vocalization; we could feel the vibrations in our bodies. Scaling the steep mountain slopes in search of this bird was out of the question, however, so we enjoyed the sound and then headed toward Hurricane Ridge.

Canada Jays patrolled the parking lot. The fierce winds of the previous day had slacked, but chilly gusts buffeted us as we walked to a viewpoint at the top of Hurricane Ridge. Along the edges of melting snowfields, American Robins probed the tawny grasses of the tundra, which would soon be strewn with wildflowers when the snowpack receded. American Pipits, songbirds that breed in tundra and alpine meadows, were colored like the grass. They hopped onto snowfields, probably searching for cold-stunned spiders and insects. Common Ravens were common indeed. Their wings, as wide as those of hawks, made sounds like tearing silk as these corvids turned in the wind. Confiding ravens stood so close to us that we could appreciate their dagger beaks, as ferocious as the bill of any raptor.

On this expedition to the subalpine and alpine realms far above the sea, we checked the second box of our trifecta of targets when we saw a Horned Lark. The third box was checked when we drove down from Hurricane Ridge.

As we cornered a bend in the mountain road, Shirley shouted, "Sooty Grouse!" We hit the brakes, turned on the hazard lights, and found a safe place to pull over. Our group gave a collective gasp when out of the forest shadows strutted a chicken-like male grouse. An orange-yellow comb arched over each eye. The sides of his neck showed throat patches with a white circle surrounding a yellow center. A chicken wearing two fried eggs? Somewhere between strikingly beautiful and improbably weird, this male grouse of the mountains captured our full attention as a female, dressed in drab camouflage, fled across the road.

Elated by the serendipity of this sighting, we continued down the serpentine road. When we reached the lowlands near Port Angeles, the road leveled and headed toward the sea. We decided to stop by Ediz Hook before dinner.



Despite white-capping waves, glaring sunlight, and scant time before our dinner reservation, we managed to get eyes on another gorgeous Horned Grebe in breeding plumage, as well as a trio of loons (Red-throated, Common, and Pacific). We saw many Pigeon Guillemots and several Marbled Murrelets. But their alcid cousin, the Rhinoceros Auklet, continued to elude us.

Our dinner in Port Angeles at an Italian restaurant was a delightful finale, fueled by delicious food and the company of a local Olympic National Park guide who joined us.

On the drive back to Sequim, Mount Baker glowed in the setting sun. Named by Captain Vancouver on his exploratory voyage in 1792, and known as Kulshan to the Lummi people who lived here long before Europeans arrived, the mountain glowed with the last rays of the sun, casting a spell of timeless beauty on our group as we returned to our hotel for our final night in Sequim.

Thurs., May 9 Makah Nation Lands & Cape Flattery | Kalaloch

After leaving Sequim and heading toward the Olympic Coast, we decided to stop in Port Angeles for a final shot at Ediz Hook—a good decision, it turned out.

Glassy water and good light created ideal viewing conditions, and we finally found the “Fourth Puffin.” Not really an auklet, the Rhinoceros Auklet is closely related to the Tufted Puffin, Horned Puffin, and Atlantic Puffin. It shares the compact, muscular build of these birds. Just as we focused our scope on the chunky body of a solitary Rhinoceros Auklet on the water, two more streaked by, their broad wings beating furiously as these “flying footballs” skimmed the sea.

After this satisfying stop, we thought we were heading back to the highway to resume our journey westward, but a Snow Goose changed our plans. When it flew overhead, we stopped at a pond to look for this bird and noticed a Black Oystercatcher. Sporting plumage more chocolate brown than black, this stocky shorebird is a mussel specialist, not an oyster aficionado as its name suggests. The bird’s pink legs make it look like it forgot to put on pants, and its long red-orange bill has earned it the description of a “crow smoking a carrot.” Like a cartoon coming to life in the morning light, this quirky character pried open mussels a dozen yards from us. In many years of watching this species, I couldn’t recall a better view. And how fun to share this experience with new friends, instead of having it to myself on one of my solo wanderings!



Male Buffleheads boasted glossy breeding finery with a purple-green sheen, and a Canada Goose with a gaggle of fuzzy goslings in tow stretched our smiles even further. Our day was off to a spectacular start.

At Salt Creek Recreation Area, an enormous raft of Surf Scoters greeted us. Male Harlequin Ducks showed off their striking combination of slate blue-gray, bold white patches, dramatic black markings, and rich chestnut accents. These handsome ducks flew close to shore and rested on rocks at the edge of the Salish Sea. A vast inland sea of interconnected waterways, the Salish Sea laps against the shores of Washington State and British Columbia, Canada. The Salish Sea encompasses the Puget Sound, near the urban centers of Seattle and Tacoma; the Strait of Georgia, which separates Vancouver Island from mainland British Columbia; and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the outlet of the Salish Sea to the Pacific Ocean. On this fine spring day of cloudless skies, we could see Canada clearly across the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

We continued west toward the Pacific, following the Strait of Juan de Fuca on a rollercoaster road that twisted and turned through timbered hills. At Clallam Bay, we stopped for seabirds. When we stepped from our vans, we saw a Sea Otter. The furry mammal floated on its back like a lazy person lolling in a pool; then it turned and dove, disappearing amid the kelp.

We ate lunch at Breakwater Restaurant, enjoying the dynamism of a waitress named Lisa, the heart and soul of this friendly diner. The homemade soup was tasty, the salad bar stupendous, and the pie . . . well, Greg insisted it was “the best pie in the universe.” Our group, thinking Greg might have gotten a little carried away, gave him time to retract this statement. But he stood by it. Greg is a guy who smiles easily and often, but this pie put an exceptionally large grin on his face.

All of us wore big grins as we watched Bald Eagles circling overhead while we scoped the shore of Neah Bay, homeland of the Makah Tribe. Dozens of eagles perched in a nearby Douglas-fir like enormous ornaments festooning a patriotic tree. As Greg peered through his scope, he used his birding acumen to distinguish Greater Scaup, with their rounder heads and green sheen, from Lesser Scaup, with their heads more steeply sloped and purplish. We all had terrific looks at White-winged Scoters with white patches on their folded wings and white teardrop markings near their eyes.

Dunlin, with their subtly drooping bills, were in breeding plumage, showing large black patches on their bellies. They were easily distinguished from slightly smaller, straight-billed Western Sandpipers, who showed clean white bellies and chests.



At Cape Flattery, the northwesternmost point in the contiguous United States, after a short hike through the woods, we emerged at a commanding viewpoint. Common Murres by the hundreds, perhaps thousands, drifted in rafts among the waves. When these black and white “penguins of the north” took to the air, the commotion of tuxedoed seabirds flying back and forth in countless numbers created an unforgettable spectacle. Despite the damage that our species has done to the natural world, bounteous birdlife still exists in some parts of the sea. On our journey, we had the privilege of witnessing some of this abundance.

Heat shimmer, generally not a problem in the temperate Pacific Northwest, made long-distance viewing on this sunbaked day challenging. But without rain or fog to contend with, we could savor the blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean. We could also study Tatoosh Island, an important breeding sanctuary for Tufted Puffins and other seabirds. Through the heat-rippled air, we scoped what looked like burrows in the soil above sea cliffs—presumably the nesting burrows of Tufted Puffins and Rhinoceros Auklets. While we searched for puffins and picked some Rhinos and Harlequins out of the sun-bright waves, a Cooper’s Hawk passed overhead, pulling its shadow across the ocean’s edge.

Back in Neah Bay, we made a quick stop to try again for Black Turnstones. They continued to stymie us. We did, however, spot a gangly Greater Yellowlegs in breeding plumage. And several Brant Geese foraged along the shore, nibbling green sheets of sea lettuce as thin as cellophane from the cobbles.

As we approached Kalaloch Lodge, our destination for the next three nights, dense forest gave way to a breathtaking vista: the Pacific Ocean shimmered in the evening sunlight. The restaurant at the lodge served up superb ocean views, along with fine food.

Fri., May 10 Hoh Rainforest | Kalaloch Beach | Big Cedar Tree

The smell of the sea was strong when we walked the beach at dawn. Brown Pelicans rested on surf-washed rocks and flew in squadrons above the waves. In forests along the shore, golden light slanted through mist, and Orange-crowned Warblers delivered their song, a series of simple trills with a falling flourish. A Golden-crowned Sparrow in a bramble caught the attention of several members of our group.

Breakfast at the lodge featured a standout dish of French toast made from thick slabs of bread imported from France and topped with flavorful marionberries. After breakfast, we headed to the Hoh Rainforest, stopping



along the Hoh River to look for American Dippers and to check out an innovative bank stabilization project that the National Park Service had recently completed, protecting both the road and the riparian habitat.

As we drove through recent clearcuts and second- and third-growth forests, we passed remnants of old growth that had survived the saw. Sitka spruce the size of skyscrapers stirred anticipation for our hike through the Hall of Mosses, one of the world's great walks.

We meandered along this short loop trail at botany pace, taking time to soak in the atmosphere of this fairytale forest draped in moss. Towering Douglas-fir, western hemlock, and Sitka spruce competed for our attention with big-leaf maples covered in epiphytes colored every shade of green. Snags that had stood for a century or more provided habitat for woodpeckers and other wildlife. Fallen giants on the forest floor were in various stages of decomposition. From these nurse logs soft with rot and plush with moss grew seedlings and saplings. Mature spruce and hemlock stood on stilt-like roots, showing hollow places beneath their bases where logs had lain for centuries—these nurse logs had been completely disassembled by decay and recycled into nutrients that nurtured the next generation of trees.

Enchanted by nature's cycles of death and rebirth in this ancient forest, we stared at trees that can outlive human civilizations, spreading their roots and limbs through spans of time that the human mind cannot conceive. Our hushed conversation paused when we noticed birds, including two Hairy Woodpeckers. One peeked his head out of the hollow top of a standing dead tree. Another hammered a hemlock, probing the living wood beneath the bark.

In the dark forest, Jonathan glimpsed a Black-throated Gray Warbler when it descended from the canopy to eye level. Chestnut-backed Chickadees flitted among branches covered in mosses and lichens that hung like wizards' beards and witches' hair. A Wilson's Warbler, his black toupee complementing his canary-yellow coat, moved from the shadows into the sun.

As we exited the Hall of Mosses and followed a path from the primordial forest back to the visitor's center, the scolding call of a Steller's Jay shattered the silence. The song of a Pacific Wren, a symphony produced by one small bird, filled the air with timeless music.

After driving back to the lodge for lunch, we took a walk on Kalaloch Beach. Crossing a creek on the shore provided more excitement than we anticipated. As the incoming tide pushed waves upstream, we rolled up our pants legs and waded into the flow, stepping carefully on sand and cobbles in the cold current. This ford became



a fun adventure. We ferried a spotting scope and other equipment across the creek and threw water shoes back and forth so people could put them on to protect their feet. Sunshine and warm sand on the other side revived our numb toes.

Gulls gathered around the mouth of the creek, where freshwater spilled into the sea. Among the usual Glaucous-winged suspects were Bonaparte's Gulls, some of them obvious in their black-headed breeding plumage, others more anonymous in nonbreeding plumage. Greg found a Glaucous Gull mixed in with a group of gulls feeding on a whale carcass that had washed ashore. The big chest and broad bill base of this pale, pink-legged bird seemed subtle to most of us. But Greg tuned into these features and locked down the ID of this species that breeds in the High Arctic and is not commonly seen on Washington's shores.

Jonathan, as adept as any professional birding guide, added his expertise to the gull identification project, finding a Black-legged Kittiwake floating on the creek. He also pointed out that terns flying along the shore had smaller bodies and longer tails than Caspian Terns—these were Arctic Terns. The champion migrators of the bird world, these delicate-looking terns every year make the treacherous 24,000-mile round-trip journey between their Arctic breeding grounds and their wintering grounds in Antarctic waters.

After a short walk among humans sunning themselves on the shore and clenching their teeth as they dove into the cold waves, we located the Tree of Life. An archetype in many of the world's mythologies and religions, the tree of life motif connects the hidden underworld to the unknowable heavens above. In a bluff above Kalaloch Beach, erosion has exposed a tangle of roots that mirrors this tree's wind-twisted crown, creating a striking symmetry. Despite this tree's precarious position in a crumbling bluff at the edge of the sea, this Sitka spruce flourishes, testament to life's defiance of a brutal universe—at least for now. In time, wind and waves topple even the mightiest tree.

On the Big Cedar Tree trail, we strolled into one of the most impressive groves of Olympic National Park. The focal point of this trail is a western redcedar. Gnarled and gargantuan, this living monument is thought to be 1,000 years old. The grove contains many more behemoth trees that may have stood for a millennium or more. Leaning back and stretching our necks in yoga poses, we strained to see the upper branches of these rainforest titans. On the ground below, salmonberry and salal bushes bloomed. We heard Brown Creeper and Townsend's Warbler but couldn't spot these birds amid the shadow-wrapped silence of the forest.



After another fine dinner at Kalaloch Lodge, we did our daily checklist and then went to bed—but a few of us got up a short time later. A spectacular Northern Lights show was predicted due to intense solar activity. The sleep debt incurred was repaid by a priceless sight—the starry night sky streaked with red and green curtains of light.

Sat., May 11 Kalaloch | Grays Harbor | Lake Quinault

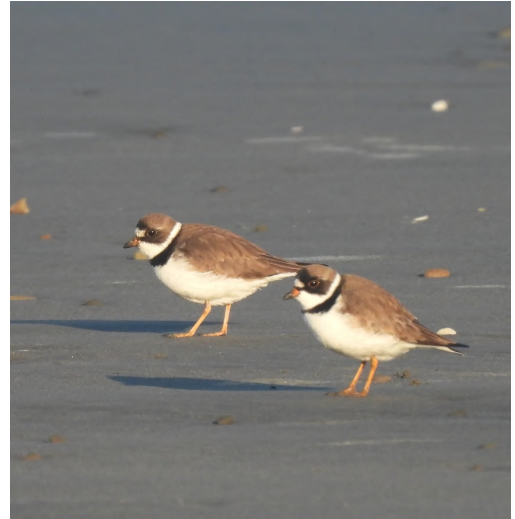
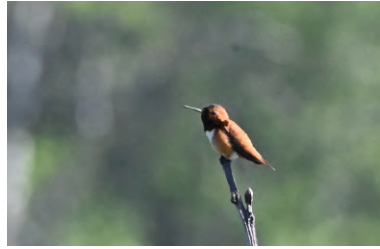
An optional morning birding session at Kalaloch provided more looks at Brown Pelicans flying in squadrons and resting on rocks. Black Oystercatchers probed boulders with their long bills, and Black Turnstones finally appeared. When these shorebirds forage among rocks—which they tend to turn over with their strong bills in search of food (hence their name)—they aren't particularly eye-catching. When they take to the air, however, they are transformed. The geometric tapestry of their wings calls to mind the artistry of Navajo blankets emblazoned with chevrons.

Along with Black Turnstone, we added to our list several more new birds: Brandt's Cormorant, Common Tern, Ruddy Turnstone, Surfbird, and Black Scoter. As waves smashed against rocks to create a background sound of murmuring thunder, we licked brine from our lips and peered through a scope, scrutinizing species on shore. Careful gull identification can distinguish a good birder from a great birder. Greg Butcher is the latter. Along with the usual Glaucous-winged Gulls and Glaucous-winged and Western Gull hybrids, he spotted a suspicious bird. Based on its dark gray mantle and black wingtips, Greg determined this was a pure Western Gull.

Today was World Migratory Bird Day. To celebrate, we drove south to Grays Harbor National Wildlife Refuge, one of the major stopover points on the Pacific Flyway. This vital estuary ecosystem supports one of the largest concentrations of shorebirds on the Pacific Coast south of Alaska.

Sometimes the best bird viewing happens when we least expect it. Before reaching our destination at Grays Harbor, we stopped at a gas station. While pumping petrol into our vans, we saw an Osprey doing a flight display. Males of this cosmopolitan species, found on every continent save Antarctica, move through the air in undulating swoops, performing a "sky dance" to ward off rivals and attract females. The Osprey we watched hovered at the top of each undulating rise with tail fanned and legs outstretched. Then, with wings drawn in, he dove—a sky ballet above the gas station.

Love was in the air at Grays Harbor, too. As we stepped out of our vans, we saw a Northern Harrier rocket into the sky. It swooped and twirled in a spiraling descent as it hurled earthward. Over and over the bird engaged in this feat, trying to impress a potential mate.



A boardwalk led us through a forest, where we saw Yellow Warblers and Wilson's Warblers. We emerged from the woods at a prime viewing area for shorebirds, but the tide was out. The birds were tiny dots in the shimmering distance. While we waited for the tide to turn and push our quarry toward us, we ate a picnic lunch. Several Great Blue Herons flew past; we surmised there was a heronry nearby.

When the rising tide sent water sheeting across the mudflats, the shorebird action picked up. Soon we were getting good looks at Black-bellied Plovers. Some of these birds wore gray winter garb, while others sported striking breeding plumage with an eye-catching contrast of bright white and jet black. Several Red Knots and Short-billed Dowitchers appeared. A single Pectoral Sandpiper looked lost, the only one of its kind we saw on the vast mudflats.

Semipalmated Plovers, Western Sandpipers, and Dunlins were in numbers difficult to count, but their multitudes didn't come close to matching peak migration, when half a million Western Sandpipers congregate here. To fuel their 6,000-mile journey, these little birds build up their bodyweight by slurping biofilm, a nutrient-rich sludge of algae on the mudflats.

The shorebirds we were watching suddenly scattered. What had disturbed them? We scanned the sky and saw the culprit: a Merlin. While Annie celebrated seeing this lifer, her husband David, a pilot, talked about the aeronautic adaptations that allow raptors to perform high-speed maneuvers. Despite an impressive aerial display, the Merlin left the scene with empty talons.

Is any birding tour complete without a visit to sewage ponds? Hoquiam Sewage Treatment Plant provided the usual suspects: Mallard, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, and Lesser Scaup, along with a few Greater Scaup. One Snow Goose stood out among the Canada Geese. In a far corner of a pond, we saw our only Blue-winged Teal of the trip.

On the way back to Kalaloch, we stopped at the historic Quinault Lake Lodge. President Franklin D. Roosevelt stayed here in 1937 when he toured the area and was inspired to establish Olympic National Park. Dinner at the lodge was superb, with the butternut squash ravioli earning high marks, and the chicken salad and duck dishes leaving members of our group licking their lips as we did our daily checklist in the lodge's lobby. Then we walked the gorgeous grounds. The lake sparkled in the evening light.



Anna's Hummingbirds stirred excitement when they visited the lodge feeders—I told our group this was a harbinger of things to come on our final full day together.

Sun., May 12 Ruby Beach | Forks | Lake Crescent | Elwha River | Port Townsend | Fort Worden | Bainbridge Island

We packed up and left Kalaloch Lodge, stopping at Ruby Beach for some tidepooling before breakfast. After climbing over drift logs and ducking under a sea arch, we left our footprints in a black sand beach. We headed toward the ocean's edge to explore sea stacks, towers of erosion-resistant rock that rise above the waves.

We marveled at barnacles making snapping and crackling sounds as the crustaceans inside, related to lobsters, crabs, and shrimp, moved behind the closed trapdoors of their shells. We touched the sticky tentacles of anemones. These animals related to corals and jellyfish look like pretty flowers but are carnivorous predators. Tucked into a mussel bed was a purple starfish, or sea star, as scientists prefer to call these creatures that are a keystone species in the tidepools. Sea stars have a profound effect on intertidal ecology by voraciously preying on mussels. What looks like a lovely, docile creature is the "tiger of the tidepools," acting as top predator in this strange world between the tides.

For breakfast, we stopped in the town of Forks. Once the center of the Olympic Peninsula's logging industry, Forks is now a tourist draw for fans of the Twilight series of vampire books and films set in this gritty, fog-bound town among towering trees.

After a stop at Crescent Lake to gaze into blue-green waters as clear as a tropical sea, we went to the Elwha River. One of the largest environmental restoration efforts in human history began here a decade ago. While discussing the dam removal project to reinstate the free-flowing river and restore native salmon runs, a pair of Harlequin Ducks, a drab female and a gorgeous male, rode the whitewater currents of the freed river.

After a short walk to Madison Falls, we headed to Port Townsend. At Tommyknockers Cornish Pasty, we were joined for lunch by three of my friends: Fred Sharpe, a Humpback Whale researcher and co-founder of Alaska Whale Foundation; Debaran Kelso, a Northern Spotted Owl researcher; and Jackie Canterbury, an ornithologist who led an effort to preserve the old-growth Tongass National Forest in Alaska. This cast of characters went with us to bird at Point Wilson in Fort Worden State Park.



Close to shore, we saw a Rhinoceros Auklet in breeding plumage, the wispy white feathers on the bird's face like the mustachios of a Victorian gentleman or an urban hipster. We also saw the "horn" protruding from the beak that earns this alcid the nickname "Rhinoceros Puffin."

Everyone came to my house to enjoy the backyard bird sanctuary that my wife, Amy, has worked hard to establish over the past several years. Rufous and Anna's Hummingbirds crowded the feeders on the porch and visited red hot poker plants. Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Black-capped Chickadees mobbed the seed and suet feeders. Several American Goldfinches and a Red-breasted Nuthatch joined the party, and two new species were added to our list: Black-headed Grosbeak and House Wren.

While we were driving sixty miles an hour on a highway to our hotel on Bainbridge Island, Jonathan spotted a Red-breasted Sapsucker. If anyone else reported this, I might be skeptical. But Jonathan, who'd come all the way from Tasmania to see our avifauna, had demonstrated throughout the tour an almost superhuman ability to find birds, so I trusted his surprising claim.

We had a fabulous farewell dinner along the waterfront in Bainbridge. As we ate fish and chips, asparagus risotto, and squid ink pasta, we reminisced about the good weather and superb scenery we'd enjoyed, the fantastic birds we'd experienced, and the fun friendships we'd made.

"I've never laughed so much on a birding trip," said David. Laughter and learning are by no means mutually exclusive, and throughout our tour, our group had done plenty of both.

Mon., May 13 Puget Sound | Kent Ponds | Departure from Seattle

After an early breakfast at the hotel, we took the Washington State Ferry from Bainbridge Island to Seattle, spotting Pelagic Cormorants and Pigeon Guillemots as we crossed Puget Sound. The triangular dorsal fins of Harbor Porpoises broke the smooth surface of the water as the Seattle skyline neared.

We drove from the ferry dock to the destination for our final birding session, Kent Ponds. In this wild oasis amid urban office buildings and warehouses, we watched a Marsh Wren cock his tail at a jaunty angle as he climbed to the top of a cattail. Common Yellowthroats seemed to be everywhere, delivering their signature *witchity-witchity-witchity* song, and giving us good looks at the black bandit mask that contrasts with their yellow throat.

From the steps of a viewing tower, we gazed at a madrona. This native tree of the Pacific Northwest looks like it would be at home in Polynesia with its peeling bark, glossy green leaves, clusters of big white flowers, and bright-red berries—indeed, this plant is a relic from when the climate of this region was more tropical. A Black-

headed Grossbeak sang his sweet song from one of the branches, and two Cedar Waxwings passed berries back and forth. This was a new species for us, as was the Lazuli Bunting we saw perched atop an evergreen. A Northern Flicker feeding on the ground next to a sidewalk added another checkmark to our list; this woodpecker also prompted us to investigate what kind of ants it was eating. A busy Bewick's Wren showed off his white eyebrows while he sang in the open. When our time was up and we turned around to head back to the vans, two Green Herons glided overhead, as if heralding the end of our tour.

At lunch near the airport, we shared stories of our favorite birds from the trip. And then off we flew, returning to our home nests, or continuing our migration toward distant lands and further adventures.

As with all tours, this one seemed to have passed by in a flash. But paradoxically, this journey also seemed to have lasted for ages, as if we'd been exploring the Olympic Peninsula together for months. On this tour, each of us had gathered a valuable cache of memories. Memories that would sustain us until our next journey.

Photos: Group (Stephen Grace - SG), Bald Eagle (SG), Semipalmated Plovers (SG), Black Oystercatcher (SG), California Quail (SG), Bald Eagle Silhouette (Lucas Pace - LP), Whimbrels (LP), Glaucous-winged x Western Gulls ("Olympic Gulls") (LP), Scenic (LP), Tree Swallow (LP), Northern Pintail (LP), Scenic (SG), Whimbrel (SG), American Robin (LP), Columbian Black-tailed Deer (LP), Scenic (SG), Rufous Hummingbird (SG), Semipalmated Plover (SG), Scenic (SG), Spotted Towhee (SG), Canada Jay (David Sampson - DS), Olympic Mountains (SG), American Pipit (SG), Black Oystercatcher (SG), Greater Yellowlegs (SG), Kalaloch Beach (SG), Scenic (LP), Kalaloch Beach (SG), Big Cedar Tree Trail (David Sampson - DS), Kalaloch Beach (SG), Big Cedar Tree Trail (SG), Hairy Woodpecker (LP), Tree of Life Group (SG), Banana Slug (LP), Savannah Sparrow (LP), Snow Goose (LP), Great Blue Heron (SG), Rufous Hummingbird (LP), Semipalmated Plovers (SG), Savannah Sparrow (SG), Rhinoceros Auklet (NJ Stock), View from the plane (David Sampson)