

Canada: The West

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 September - 1 October 2016



Black Bear, Tofino



Grizzly Bear, Great Bear Lodge



Humpback Whale flukes



Sea Otters in Kelp

Report and images compiled by Alan Miller



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Summary

The 2016 Naturetrek 'Canada – The West' tour group spent two weeks in stunning scenery visiting the Vancouver area and Vancouver Island, where we enjoyed fantastic vistas and wonderful wildlife. There were many highlights, including close encounters with Black and Grizzly (Brown) Bears and a large raft of cute Sea Otters. Not only was the wildlife first class but we stayed in some lovely places, enjoyed delicious food and encountered excellent hospitality. A bonus was the weather which was generally kind to us. There were two exceptions when rain affected expeditions: one was for most of a trip on an open boat at Zeballos; the other was for a walk in the rainforest at Great Bear Lodge but, on the positive side, we did experience the real rain forest! During almost daily outings on the water, the sea was mainly calm and still. This tour is designed to offer a whole range of wildlife encounters and we maximised the opportunities and shared wonderful experiences whilst having a lot of fun, with everyone taking home a wealth of happy memories.

Day 1

Sunday 18th September

Fly London Heathrow to Vancouver then drive to Tsawwassen

Six group members flying out from the UK met Alan at the British Airways check-in desks in Terminal 3, London Heathrow Airport. Our 5.15pm flight to Vancouver on Canada's west coast was slightly delayed, but shortly after 6pm the new Airbus A380 took off for our journey of 4,838 miles across eight time zones; British Columbian time being GMT minus 8 hours. Our route took us north to Scotland then west over Iceland and Greenland to Canada. We landed at Vancouver just before 7pm local time, but our body clocks thought it was around three in the morning!

Once we had cleared immigration and collected our baggage, we were greeted by Duane and Norm, our local guides for the tour. After sorting out vehicles we headed for Tsawwassen. Night had fallen so we watched the twinkling lights of Vancouver as we drove away from the airport.

We were soon at Tsawwassen and checked in at The Coast Tsawwassen Inn, where we met the last two members of the group, Jane and Steve, who were already at the inn having arrived earlier and spent a few days in Vancouver. Due to the hour and the journey, most chose to retire and inspect their beds. Before retiring, arrangements were made for pre-breakfast birding and for the group to meet properly over breakfast the following morning.

Day 2

Monday 19th September

Ferry crossing to Vancouver Island then drive to Ucluelet on the west coast.

After a dry night there were a few drops of rain as we met at 7am and drove to Boundary Bay, en route spotting our first bird of the tour – Northwestern Crow. After parking in the car park, we walked to the seashore. There were rafts of ducks on the sea close to shore and, as the light improved, we spent some time sorting through the many Pintail, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Mallard and Black Scoter. We got to grips with Glaucous-winged Gull, the commonest gull in the area, and also saw American Herring Gull and some smart Ring-billed

Gulls. On the sea we also noted a Western Grebe and Canada Geese. We had seen a couple of Great Blue Herons in the distance, and as we started to walk back to the vehicle, one was spotted in a water channel next to the path and it posed wonderfully for photographs. On the way back we also found a small flock of House Finches and an obliging Song Sparrow. Pleased with our introduction to Vancouver's birdlife, we returned to the inn for breakfast.

Over breakfast in a private room, everyone introduced themselves and gave their hopes and wishes for the tour ahead. Having received their challenges, Duane, Norm and Alan talked over plans for the days ahead. We then checked out, loaded the vehicles and headed for the Ferry terminal. Once we had booked in and the vehicles were in line at the ferry waiting area, we went to look out over the bay. As we arrived we saw movement on the land just outside the fence and then realised we were watching a pair of River Otters playing! The otters were soon lost from view so we checked the bay and noted Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorants and more Western Grebes. Soon the call came to return to our vehicles and we boarded the Queen of Alberni Ferry.

After parking we went up to the open deck and noticed Black Oystercatchers and many Pelagic Cormorants on the quayside rocks, a Harbour Seal in the sea and a Common Loon (Great Northern Diver) on the sea. We left our berth at 10.15am for the two-hour sailing across the Strait of Georgia to Nanaimo. The sea was calm and visibility was reasonable. We all stayed on the Observation Deck for the crossing and notable sightings were a flock of White-winged Scoter, a pair of Surf Scoter and a couple more Common Loons. Approaching Vancouver Island there were a number of Harbour Seals around Entrance Island.

Soon we were disembarking and heading away from Nanaimo; north and then west towards the Pacific Rim National Park. As we turned onto the access road to Qualicum Falls, two Turkey Vultures and four Vaux's Swifts were spotted from the rear vehicle. We stopped for lunch at Little Qualicum Falls Park and whilst Duane and Norm prepared our picnic, we did a lovely circular walk, crossing both the Upper and Lower Falls. An American Dipper was spotted on the river and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet in the trees, but both only by a couple of people. We had better success when a small flock of American Robins was found and they posed for the cameras, and a Brown Creeper was nearby. Back at the picnic area we enjoyed our first tour picnic lunch.

Once back on the road we made good progress. As we drove over the Island's central ridge we passed through areas of rain. We stopped at Wally Creek to stretch our legs and were rewarded with views of an American Dipper which, this time, we all saw. We arrived at Ucluelet at 5.15pm and checked in to our home for the next three nights at the Bayshore Waterfront Inn. Some were distracted by the wonderful setting and first a Greater Yellowlegs was spotted, then three River Otters frolicking nearby.

We met at 6.45pm and walked into the village for dinner. We were sidetracked when we came upon a Mule Deer which didn't mind us watching it eating. We then continued to Norwoods restaurant for an enjoyable evening meal. As we walked back to the inn, plans for the next day were outlined before we adjourned after a wonderful first full day in Canada's magnificent scenery.

Day 3

Tuesday 20th September

Tofino (Bear boat trip) and the Pacific Rim National Park (Wickaninnish Beach)

Today we went for an early breakfast at The Blue Room before driving to Tofino. We checked in at Jamie's Whaling Station and then, to much amusement, we were kitted out with red full body floatation and waterproof suits before going to the jetty to meet Sean who was taking us on a Black Bear Zodiac tour. Just after 9am we boarded the zodiac and cast off. Once out of the harbour area we held on and had fun racing along Browning Passage to get to the inlets around Fortune Channel and Tofino Inlet to search for Black Bear.

It wasn't long before our first Black Bears were spotted. We watched two young females on the shore line turning over rocks to look for crabs and other food. The bears were very wary of each other and, as they got closer, one moved out of the other's way and climbed a fallen tree trunk. Both bears were in excellent condition with rich, thick glossy coats. During the course of the next hour and a half, we saw seven Black Bears; one male and six females. The last female was a mature bear and much bigger than the others. She showed her strength by turning over quite large boulders with ease.

As our time on the water was nearing an end, Sean received a radio message that another boat had spotted wolves. We raced to the spot but just missed the animals as they moved from the shore into the trees. Whilst this was a little disappointing, we were more than happy with the wonderful bear sightings. We then returned to our berth and, after thanking Sean, returned our red 'onesies' and got ready to continue our day.

Next we drove to Wickaninnish Beach in the Pacific Rim National Park. Whilst Duane and Norm prepared the picnic, we walked out onto the beach with Alan. Overhead an Osprey was spotted and along the wood flotsam some Savannah Sparrows were watched.

After an enjoyable picnic we walked along the beach to the Visitor Centre. Whilst some looked at the displays, others scanned from the observation deck where Surf Scoter, White-winged Scoter and Harlequin Duck were seen.

We then set off to walk the Nuu-chah-nulth trail which took us to a couple of nice bays. In one we had good close views of both Surf Scoter and Harlequin Duck. Alongside the path were many berry bushes and we were amazed at the number of bear scats on the path. We assumed it was a 'bear highway' after the visitors had left. On the return walk a Bald Eagle was spotted at the top of a conifer tree and people gathered to enjoy looking at this iconic bird.

After a pleasant time in the Park we returned to Tofino and had an hour to explore before dinner. Whilst people mostly went their own way, at a viewpoint White-crowned Sparrow and Spotted Towhee were seen in a patch of brambles, at the park a good number of European Starlings were present, and in a roadside bush were two House Sparrows.

We had an enjoyable dinner at Wolf in the Fog restaurant before returning to Ucluelet. On the way back, people in one vehicle checked the access roads to Wickaninnish Beach in the dark and spotted some small shrews/mice, but they moved too quickly to get any identification.

Day 4

Wednesday 21st September

Ucluelet (Whale boat trip) and the Wild Pacific Trail (Amphitrite Point walk)

Most of the group met at 7am for a pre-breakfast walk. The day dawned bright and sunny with a cloudless sky and so it continued throughout. Sightings included Belted Kingfisher, American Robin and Great Blue Heron. We were also pleased to spot two Bald Eagles in the tops of trees, one reasonably close and showing well in the sunlight. Two birds were spotted in a berry bush, one being a Song Sparrow and the other eventually identified as a first-year Wilson's Warbler.

The 'early birds' met the rest of the group at 7.45am and we drove to Fetch restaurant at Black Rock Resort for an enjoyable breakfast in lovely surroundings, with a super view out to sea. After breakfast we did our first checklist session, which was hastily concluded due to a last minute change to our time schedule. We then drove the short distance to Jamie's Whale Watching Tours office for the 10am trip on the boat Chinook Princess, skippered by Lynette.

Our route for the trip took us into Barkley Sound and towards the Broken Group of islands. As we left our berth we spotted about 30 Black Turnstones on the water's edge. Then, as we passed a fish processing plant, a California Sea Lion hauled itself out onto the deck to look for scraps. Nearing the harbour entrance a juvenile Bald Eagle flew past and landed on a tree, and on some rocks in the channel Black Oystercatchers showing their bold bright orange bills.

As we entered the channel a whale 'blow' was spotted, and for 45 minutes we were captivated watching our first Humpback Whale which would 'blow' and show itself three or four times before making a deep dive and displaying its characteristic tail 'fluke', and then be submerged for some minutes before reappearing.

Eventually we moved on and passed close to a number of islands. We were captivated by some cute Sea Otters in the kelp at one island. Other mammal sightings included Harbour Seal, Steller Sea Lion and more California Sea Lions. Birds were not to be outdone and we spotted our first Common Murre (Guillemot) and two Marbled Murrelets.

After a wonderful session in perfect conditions, we returned to our berth and thanked Lynette and her crew. We then went to the Co-op where we bought our picnic makings before moving to Big Beach, where we sat on driftwood logs on the beach and enjoyed our picnic in bright sunshine. As we walked back to the vehicles, a Steller's Jay was spotted.

Next we drove to Amphitrite Point and walked the Amphitrite Lighthouse Trail, part of the Wild Pacific Trail. The path was through the woods but it also gave us views out to sea. Typically for a hot afternoon walk, the birding was quiet but we did find a Whimbrel, discussed the flora and, in a sunny corner, found a good number of Canada Darner dragonflies, one inquisitive specimen hovering a few feet away to inspect us!

We arrived back at the inn in the late afternoon with enough time for everyone to enjoy the location in perfect conditions before reconvening at 6.45pm to walk to a restaurant for dinner. We ate at Matterson House and enjoyed a tasty evening meal, after which we retired happy following a superb day in the fresh air.

Day 5

Thursday 22nd September

Ucluelet to Zeballos

Today we had a reasonable distance to cover to get to our next adventure stop, so the vehicles were loaded with our baggage at 6.45am before we went to The Gray Whale for breakfast. We left Ucluelet at 7.45am, initially retracing our route across the island. We had a comfort stop at Tseshahat and behind the service station, eagle-eyed group members spotted Northern Flicker, Band-tailed Pigeon and a superb female Northern Harrier quartering a paddock in front of us.

We continued to Cathedral Grove and walked the trail through some ancient trees, including an 800-year-old Douglas Fir, standing 76 metres tall and with a girth of nine metres. During the walk we added Pacific Wren and Red Squirrel to our trip sightings.

Moving on, we drove to Miracle Beach on the east coast for our picnic lunch. Many Harlequin Ducks were sitting on rocks nearby and three Red-breasted Mergansers flew by offshore. Whilst Duane and Norm prepared lunch, Alan went with the group for a walk through the woodland where Spotted Towhee, Chestnut-backed Chickadee and an obliging Red-breasted Sapsucker were seen. We then returned to the outdoor tables to enjoy a delicious picnic in a lovely setting on a bright, sunny afternoon.

After lunch we still had a distance to travel so we pressed on, making a stop at Sayward Junction before turning onto an unpaved road, lasting 42 kilometres, into Zeballos. During today's journey there was some rivalry between the two vehicles as to how many vultures were spotted en route. The final analysis showed that we had seen 39 Turkey Vultures; also 10 Ravens, three Bald Eagles and a Red-tailed Hawk. We arrived at the Cedars Inn, Zeballos shortly after 6pm and were greeted by Christina. We settled in to our rooms and met later for dinner.

Day 6

Friday 23rd September

Zeballos (Sea Otter boat trip and wildlife walk)

It rained during the night and we awoke to a grey, misty morning with dampness in the air. We had breakfast at 7.30am and then drove to the harbour. At 8.30am and wearing full waterproofs, we met Dan and joined him on his 28-foot open Skiff, the Nootka Express, for a trip on the waters around the Zeballos and Esperanza Inlets.

As we left Zeballos harbour we saw two squabbling and noisy Belted Kingfishers, and shortly after, we saw the first of many Bald Eagles, mainly sitting near the tops of trees. In the end we counted 14 individuals. Soon we came upon a Steller Sea Lion and stopped to watch it as it dived for fish, unconcerned by our presence. After a few dives it surfaced with a salmon in its mouth. It then consumed the fish with a few gulls in attendance to scavenge scraps. It was at this point that we noticed the rain clouds fast approaching and we caught the first of a couple of heavy downpours.

Undeterred, we continued, spotting Hooded and Red-breasted Mergansers in a cove, before we came across our first Sea Otters for the day. Photography was hampered by the rain but we enjoyed watching the cute otters. Our next sighting was a Humpback Whale which we saw blow and shallow dive a few times before fluking into a deep dive.

In the late morning we landed on Nootka Island for a break to stretch our legs. There were lots of gulls and five Black Oystercatchers on the exposed beach. On the water again, we continued our otter search and on a large Kelp bed we found a raft of over 40 Sea Otters; some mothers with kits. We were very wet by this time but the smiles on our faces showed we were enjoying the experience! Next we found a splendid male Mule Deer on a small island to which he must have swum, and a Black Bear foraging on the shoreline turning over stones.

As we headed back to Zeballos we found more Humpback Whales and spent some time watching a pair as they blew and shallow dived, and were logging for a while (lying on the surface looking like logs!) We also found a California Sea Lion relaxing in the water. By this time the grey skies had moved away and we finished the trip in bright sunshine, which was helping to dry our clothing.

We docked at 1.45pm after a wonderful trip for which we thanked Dan very much. Most of us then walked back to the inn where we had lunch. Sustained and in dry clothing on a lovely sunny and still afternoon, we set off again. Some went with Norm for a cultural visit to Zeballos Museum and a walk around the village, whilst others went with Duane and Alan for a walk around Zeballos Nature Trail and Zeballos River Estuary Trail. Interesting sightings included Steller's Jay, Red-tailed Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, House Finch, Song Sparrow and White-crowned Sparrow. A European Black Slug on a forest path caused much debate as this introduced species is causing a nuisance in Canada.

In the evening we met at 7pm to do our checklist, and plans for the next day were outlined. We then enjoyed dinner, reliving the Sea Otter experience before retiring to bed.

Day 7

Saturday 24th September

Zeballos to Port McNeill. Whale watching trip.

We had breakfast at 6.30am and then said goodbye to Christina and the Cedars Inn before setting off for Port McNeill. We arrived about 9am and had coffee at Mug2 on the sea front before reporting to Mackay's tour office. Once checked in, we boarded the Naiad Explorer for a whale-watching trip on the north-west side of Vancouver Island. Captain Bill from Mackay's Whale Watching Tours welcomed us aboard and at 10am we departed Port McNeill Harbour and headed into Broughton Strait. This was the last tour of the season and Bill's family and some friends were aboard, so the feeling was more like an 'end of session' party.

Although the sky was overcast, it was fairly calm. As we powered along the Strait we passed a few birds: mainly gulls and Common Murre, but a couple of Marbled Murrelets, Cassin's Auklets and White-winged Scoter were good spots. As with this type of public cruise and people finding their 'spot' around the boat, not everyone saw everything, but we all saw the spectacle provided by a pod of about 100 Pacific White-sided Dolphins. We could see the sea 'boiling' and when we got to the spot, the dolphins came all around us. It was a wonderful experience. We watched a larger vessel and the dolphins rode the bow wave as it passed. Then we saw the blows of Humpback Whales and a couple appeared in the middle of the dolphins. We were captivated.

After some time we moved on and came across a flock of at least a thousand Sooty Shearwaters. Soon they were around us, both sitting on the water and flying by. Then the same thing occurred when Humpback Whales surfaced in the middle of them, causing conflict and excitement. At one time we had four whales blowing and surfacing amongst the shearwaters.

Just when we thought things couldn't get any better, we drifted towards an area where there were some more whale blows and surfacing. In the next half hour we saw three breaches by Humpback Whales. In one the whale leapt clear out of the water, and in another it barrel-rolled in the air before splashing back into the sea. It was incredible to watch and everyone was on a high with the excitement.

Eventually we drifted away and had an enjoyable lunch of chicken broth before moving on. Next we visited a haul-out of Steller's Sea Lions on a small bare island, a matter of yards from the coastline. We could smell them as we approached and a head count revealed there were 120 present. As we watched they suddenly became agitated and raised themselves up as though to dive into the sea. We then saw a couple of Humpback Whales searching for smaller fish in the shallows by the rocky shore and near the island. Some sea lions joined the whales, whilst the majority relaxed as the whales worked their way along the coast. We stayed with the whales for some time and even had two of them surfacing almost alongside the boat. It was spectacular!

Captain Bill had hoped to show everyone Orcas but they had moved away. He did receive a report that some were towards the open ocean so we headed that way. Out of the protection of the Strait the wind and swell increased so, for safety, we had to abort. As we headed back the conditions became unpleasant, with a few drops of rain before we reached our berth. The time had flown by and the four-and-a-half-hour trip had been a wonderful experience with excellent mammal sightings.

One of Captain Bill's party was a well respected First Nation Chief. Back at the vehicles a number of people including most of the group gathered around and joined him in a ritual dance to the salmon. A memorable end to a superb voyage! We headed off and one vehicle made a quick stop to view what is described as The World's Largest Burl (a massive growth on a tree stump) before we headed to our accommodation at Black Bear Resort where we checked in.

We met again at 6pm and drove to Cluxewe Resort where we had a short walk before dinner. There was a chill in the strong wind blowing off the sea and we had to be content with spotting Canada Geese, Northwestern Crows, a Bald Eagle and Harlequin Ducks. The atmosphere was pleasant inside the restaurant and we all enjoyed our dinner.

Day 8

Sunday 25th September

Port McNeill, Telegraph Cove, Quatse River and flight to Great Bear Lodge from Port Hardy

Today we had a leisurely start to allow everyone time to repack luggage to take on the Float Plane later in the day, as we were only allowed 13kg per person. After breakfast we loaded the vehicles and departed at 9am.

First we drove a short way south and turned off towards Telegraph Cove. We stopped at a viewpoint to see the massive logging operation in Beaver Cove before arriving at Telegraph Cove. As we started our visit it began to rain, but it only lasted 15 minutes and then the rest of the day was fine and dry. We spent a pleasant hour enjoying a cultural visit, looking at the original houses with history notices outside. In the past week, major works had started on the museum and it was closed, but we managed to get access to view the collection of mainly sea-mammal skeletons, which was interesting. Back at the car park we spotted a Steller's Jay sitting on a vehicle wing mirror, a number of American Robins, and a new bird for the trip: Yellow-rumped Warbler.

Next we drove north and called at Port McNeill to buy sandwiches before arriving at Quatse Salmon Hatchery on the Quatse River near Port Hardy. As we arrived at the picnic shelter a Black Bear was spotted by the river and was seen by a few before it moved off out of view. As we ate our lunch another new trip bird, the Oregon race of Dark-eyed Junco, was spotted. After lunch we went into the Salmon Stewardship Centre and received a guided tour by Lorraine who introduced us to the different salmon species and the work of the hatchery.

Moving on, we arrived at Port Hardy Seaplane Base around 2pm. We completed personal paperwork, stowed excess baggage, and then were taken to Port Hardy airport for a flight in a 'flying goose' (small planes capable of take-off and landing on both land and water). With the extended capacity at Great Bear Lodge, we were joined for our stay by six Australian ladies. With clear skies, the two planes took us on the direct route and shortly after 3.30pm we were all at the floating lodge at Nalos Landing, Smith Inlet, being given a warm welcome by owner Tom and the staff. With rooms allocated, we were soon having refreshments whilst Blakeley briefed us on lodge etiquette and safety. The last job was to issue everyone with an all-in-one quilted suit and full waterproofs for use during the stay.

Around 5pm we boarded the lodge buses (old school buses) and set off along the old logging track running alongside the Neikite River. As we approached the covered blind (hide) a bear was briefly seen by a couple of people. We were soon all safely seated in the blind overlooking the river and eagerly awaiting action. It had rained heavily overnight and during the morning on the mainland so the river was quite high and some of the shingle areas were underwater. Nevertheless, we soon spotted a Grizzly (Brown) Bear chasing salmon in the shallows near the opposite bank. A little while later, a Grizzly Bear passed in front of the blind, in the water, only feet away from us. We also had another couple of bear sightings to conclude an interesting first session, where the support cast included an active and noisy Belted Kingfisher, a couple of American Dippers, many Common Mergansers (Goosanders) active in the fast-flowing water, and a Bald Eagle which spent most of the session sat in a tree opposite us.

With darkness falling we returned to the lodge and enjoyed a dinner of Sockeye Salmon before retiring, tired but happy.

Day 9

Monday 26th September

Great Bear Lodge

The day dawned with a little mist and drizzle. The air was still and the surface of the surrounding water like glass. A ripple alerted us to the presence of a River Otter which we watched till breakfast was ready.

At 8am we set off in the buses and returned to the same blind we had visited the night before. The water level had dropped and we could see more of the exposed gravel and rock beds. The drop in water level had deposited dead salmon on the gravel and there were many gulls and crows feeding on the carcasses. We watched the scene in front of us for over an hour before there was movement opposite, and a large Grizzly Bear came into view. It was thought to be a female and for the next hour we were mesmerized as we watched her, mainly in full view, sometimes snacking on salmon carcasses but also catching Chum Salmon and devouring them. She was fishing both in the shallows and in the deeper water so we could observe different techniques. The gulls and crows were also pleased as they quickly pounced upon the discarded carcasses once she had had her fill. It was well after 11am when we set off to return for lunch. There was one more surprise in store when we came across another Grizzly Bear walking along the road.

Back at the lodge we enjoyed a delicious lunch before our afternoon ‘mystery activity’; a walk through the rain forest. During lunch it began to rain heavily so it really was a walk in the rain forest. The lodge had provided everyone with a complete waterproof outfit including wellingtons so in theory we were wet on the outside and dry on the inside, but inevitably there was a build-up of heat inside the suits causing condensation. Nevertheless, in true Naturetrek spirit, we set off. Initially we walked along the roadway with regular stops where the lodge guides explained the forest, its trees and the ecology of the area. We then turned off along a bear trail where we found Banana Slugs and learned about their interesting lifestyle and the effects of the slime. We were shown a bear rubbing post, and the usefulness of decomposing salmon and other vegetation was explained. We then retraced our steps back to the road where a lodge bus was waiting to take us back. All along the track, impressive waterfalls had been created by the falling rain and the dykes were full to overflowing.

Once back at the lodge we hung our waterproofs in the drying room and then had the chance to relax for an hour and enjoy the facilities before our next adventure. During this time we took the opportunity to update our checklists.

At 5pm we returned to the blind. With the rain, the river level had risen considerably and we estimated it was about three feet higher than this morning. We stayed a while with our only sighting being a passing Bald Eagle, so we returned to the buses to drive to the end of the old logging road and back to see what we could find using the vehicles as hides. It was fairly quiet on the outward leg, but we were told about the various tree species found in the forest. On the return journey our luck changed. First we stopped to look at a tree and some of the group spotted a Douglas Squirrel. Then we disturbed a Grizzly Bear which ran away across the road in front of us. A plain thrush flying away from us was later identified as a Swainson’s Thrush and, lastly, we came across a female Varied Thrush on the road. She was intent on searching for food and ignored the vehicle, allowing us to watch her in the headlights for some time. Each time we tried to move on, she would fly a short distance in front and then resume her food search. Eventually we persuaded her to move off the track so that we could pass.

Back at the lodge, we enjoyed a delicious dinner of lamb shank before Blakeley showed us a number of video clips taken from remote cameras set up around the lodge. We then retired to our rooms with high hopes for the next day.

Day 10

Tuesday 27th September

Great Bear Lodge

After a clear, starry night the day dawned calm and bright. As the sun rose, the scenery looked magnificent. A Harbour Seal was in the bay before breakfast.

Our first activity today was a boat outing around the inlet. At 8am we assembled for a briefing and then boarded the lodge boats, five of us in one and four in another. The conditions were perfect and our sightings superb. Both crews saw slightly different things but the Grizzly Bear experience was good for everyone. People in one boat had 11 bear sightings and in the other, seven. Grizzly Bears were seen on the shore, swimming, foraging for crab apples and taking fish. It was a wonderful experience to watch these magnificent animals in such perfect conditions. The supporting cast was good too, with many Bald Eagles as well as Canada Geese, Cackling Geese, Common Merganser, Belted Kingfisher, Mallard, American Wigeon, Pintail and Sharp-shinned Hawk, to name a few. After nearly four hours we returned to the lodge very happy and ready for lunch.

We enjoyed lunch chatting about our morning sightings and comparing notes. The sun had brought out a butterfly as a Red Admiral flew past the window. We were back on the boats again for our early afternoon 'mystery activity'. This time we were spread across three boats but our sightings were broadly similar. We travelled to the head of Walkum Bay and it was interesting to see that it was devoid of fish, but there were numerous Canada Darner dragonflies flying in the warm air over the sedge beds. We saw lots of Harbour Seals and a new bird was a Red-necked Phalarope which was feeding on a 'scum' line on the water, ignoring our presence, which allowed us to get quite close. Moon Jellyfish were also spotted. After a pleasant couple of hours we returned to the lodge for a little down-time in the sunshine.

Replenished with afternoon snacks, we set off at 5pm for the outdoor platform located just upriver from the blind. With the better weather the water level had dropped, exposing the large gravel bar. We settled ourselves onto the platform and opposite, a large female Grizzly Bear was at one end of the gravel eating a fish. Within minutes two younger sibling females appeared on the gravel island, soon followed by another adult. We had four Grizzly Bears in front of us! All four were being very cautious of each other but without conflict. As a couple moved on, a fifth bear appeared from the forest onto the island. This one had a blond head and was quite striking. With all the activity opposite, we were brought back to earth when a Grizzly Bear came along our side of the river and stopped within a few yards of the platform and looked as though it was trying to decide what to do as we were in its way. The decision was made by our guides who gently persuaded the bear to go another way!

We had been watching the bear activity for almost an hour and the whole time the large female we had first seen kept catching Chum Salmon and dispatching them with relish. Eventually she waddled away due to the size of her stomach, full of fish. Whilst the bears were the main attraction, we also watched gulls and Ravens trying to get fish leftovers, two noisy Belted Kingfishers were active, Bald Eagles kept coming and going to the trees opposite, and American Dippers were zipping by.

Just as we were about to leave, another bear approached the platform but took to the river and swam away. Then we became aware of a bear behind us. It decided to investigate our vehicle and at one point stood at the rear on its hind legs and peered in. Eventually it was persuaded to move on and, when it was safe to do so, we rejoined the bus for the return drive to the lodge.

Over dinner we recounted our favourite moments of a day which was full of memorable sightings and experiences. Up to 20 Grizzly Bears had been seen, with many sightings being fabulous and prolonged and, with the sun shining and the water calm, we had seen the area at its best.

Day 11

Wednesday 28th September

Great Bear Lodge, return flight to Port Hardy and drive to Port McNeill

Today was our last day at Great Bear Lodge. Before dawn one early member of the group saw a Little Brown Bat around the lodge. After breakfast we again boarded the lodge bus and made our way to the same open platform we had visited the night before. As we approached, two Grizzly Bears were at the far side, walking downstream. We settled ourselves and then waited. The day was clear and still but the sun hadn't reached us so the air was a little chilly. People were glad of their warm 'onesies'.

As we waited for bears, an American Dipper landed on a log directly in front of the platform, and then a Song Sparrow appeared on a tree stump, also in front of us. On the shingle opposite the platform were lots of gulls so it was a good use of time to check them out. They were mainly Glaucous-winged and American Herring Gulls, but one flew in with more white than black in the upper wing tips and almost white lower wing tips. It showed a heavy yellow bill with an orange gonydeal spot, and strong pink legs. This was our first Thayer's Gull.

Suddenly there was movement just downstream and a Grizzly Bear appeared in the water about two yards from the corner of the platform. It stopped to look at us then decided against passing the platform and retreated. Another two bears were active behind us, passing the vehicles, and we had good prolonged views of another as it swam across the river and spent some time on the exposed shingle.

Eventually it was time to return for lunch, but not before spotting another bear by the side of the river. Over the lunch break we packed our bags before our last mystery activity; a boat trip to revisit the large area of sedge islands upstream from the lodge. Two of us opted to stay and enjoy the lodge and the rest departed in two boats. A bear was soon spotted from one boat before we reached the sedges. We saw a number of Bald Eagles together with Canada Geese, Pintail and Green-winged Teal. A little further upstream two Grizzly Bears were found at the edge of the river slowly making their way downstream whilst looking for fish. We watched them for some time before they went along a small creek. We quietly went around the backwater and saw them again as they emerged. It was a wonderful experience to finish our time at Great Bear Lodge.

Back at the lodge we barely had time for a coffee and cookie before our float planes arrived. We said our thanks and goodbyes to Tom, Marg and the staff before we were loaded onto the planes for the return flight to Port Hardy airport. The sky was blue and there was no turbulence so we sat back and enjoyed the views with a little sadness at leaving such a unique and wonderful place.

We landed about 5pm and were transported back to the float plane office to collect our stowed excess bags, and to be reunited with Duane and Norm after their break. We then drove back to Port McNeill and the Black Bear Resort and were soon checked in for the night. We met again at 6.55pm and walked across the road to the Northern Lights restaurant for our evening meal.

Day 12

Thursday 29th September

Port McNeill to Tsawwassen via Vancouver ferry

The day dawned clear and still, but a little chilly. Although mainly a travelling day, our list of sightings increased dramatically. We had breakfast at the Resort, packed the vehicles and were on our way by 8am. The roads were quiet and we made good progress. We had a comfort stop at Keta Lake Rest Area before stopping for coffee at Tammy's Café, where we saw a young Mule Deer which had been raised by the owner after its mother had been knocked down on the main road.

We reached our lunch stop at Rath Trevor Provincial Park around noon. During the journey there had been a challenge between the vehicles to count the number of vultures seen en route. The consensus was that we had seen 25 Turkey Vultures and also 22 Ravens. Whilst Duane and Norm laid out the picnic, we went with Alan for a walk to the shore where we saw Great Blue Heron, Western Grebe and Canada Geese, and in the bushes

Savannah Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco. We also spotted a new mammal when three European Rabbits were seen, one being almost black.

After an enjoyable picnic we continued to Buttertubs Marsh on Jingle Pot Road, just north of Naniamo. We spent a pleasant hour and a half, walking along the track around the marsh and adding a host of new trip sightings. New birds included Pied-billed Grebe, Wood Duck, Ring-billed Duck, American Coot, Purple Finch and Red-winged Blackbird. We passed a house with bird feeders and in the area we added Bushtit and Collared Dove. The black form of Eastern Grey Squirrel was spotted in an oak tree eating an acorn. A form swimming across the main body of water was spotted. We looked at it and debated if we had seen an otter or a beaver. We were still talking about it when, a little further along the path, a beaver lodge was found at the edge of the water in line with the direction the animal had been swimming. Duane said he had seen the lodge two weeks earlier when it had been much smaller. That, together with the large size (length and width) and mid-brown colour brought us to the conclusion that it must have been an American Beaver.

We reached Naniamo Ferry Terminal at Duke Point in plenty of time for our 5.45pm ferry. The Queen of Alberni ferry left on time and the crossing was smooth. As we set off, most were assembled at the front of the ferry. There was a discussion about the identification of Brandt's Cormorant which we had yet to see and, amazingly, one then flew across our bows! Further on we could see gulls busily collecting on the surface of the sea and as we watched, the head of a Steller Sea Lion came into view a few times. There was a lovely sunset and as darkness fell it became cold and the wind increased, so we retreated below deck.

After landing at Tsawwassen at 7.45pm we drove to The Coast Tsawwassen Inn, our home for the night. Rooms were allocated and we quickly freshened before going next door to Browns Socialhouse for our last group dinner.

Day 13

Friday 30th September

Tsawwassen to Vancouver Airport via Reifel Bird Reserve and Iona Beach Regional Park.

With an overnight flight in prospect for half the Group, we had a later breakfast taken in a private room. As this was our last opportunity for a group meeting, after we had eaten we had our last log call and then debriefed the tour. Everyone talked of their highlights and the main thread was the wonderful views and experience of watching Grizzly and Black Bears, Sea Otters and Pacific White-sided Dolphins. The group had got on well and shared expertise, and special mention was made of Steve sharing his interest in trees. After thanks said to Duane, Norm and Alan for managing the tour, we collected our bags and loaded the vehicles. At this point a bird was noticed sitting in the sun at the top of a tree and we enjoyed watching a Northern Flicker in excellent light through the telescope. We then boarded the vehicles and departed.

We drove to Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, arriving about 11am. We spent a magical four hours around the reserve and were delighted with a host of new sightings. As we arrived we saw Anna's Hummingbird on the nectar feeder. We did a complete circuit of the reserve, starting at the pond behind the visitor centre where we added Gadwall. We then moved to the Fuller Slough Lookout and watched two Black-crowned Night Herons. Along the path at the eastern edge we were delighted when Jane and Elizabeth put seed on their hands and Black-capped Chickadees came to collect the seed and eat it in the nearby bushes. Along the path were Spotted

Towhee and Golden-crowned Sparrows. Wood Duck also came onto the path with the numerous Mallards. In the distance we watched two circling Red-tailed Hawks, one showing a splendid red tail.

At the Observation Tower were many noisy Red-winged Blackbirds, and on the pool we examined a flock of dowitchers. Most were Short-billed Dowitchers but we found a couple of Long-billed Dowitchers amongst them.

We took the marsh-view path back to the visitor centre and watched a Northern Harrier hunting over the extensive reed bed. We made our way to the picnic area where Duane and Norm had laid out lunch, which we enjoyed sitting in the sun. After lunch we had an hour before we had to leave, so some visited the shop and most did a shortened circuit. This time the new addition to our list was a Red-eared Slider (Terrapin).

At 3pm we departed Reifel and drove to Iona Beach Regional Park near the airport. Traffic was very heavy and the short journey took an hour. At Iona Beach we had a pleasant time looking at the ponds, the river and out to sea. Crickets were calling and one was found. We watched a female Northern Harrier hunting low over vegetation near the shore in perfect light. Our last new bird was a large flock of Snow Geese on the sea in the bay, glinting in the sunshine. We left after seeing the iconic Bald Eagle for the last time.

At Vancouver airport we said goodbye to Monica and Elizabeth who were staying on in Vancouver for a few days, to Jane and Steve who were going to catch the Rocky Mountaineer train, and to Duane and Norm who were thanked again for their sterling work in sorting out the logistics which allowed the tour to run smoothly. For the rest, it was time to go through the airport procedures and await our flight.

Our overnight BA flight took off a little late but once in the air, we settled down for our flight back to London Heathrow Airport.

Day 14

Saturday 1st October

Arrival at London Heathrow Airport after overnight flight from Vancouver

Flight BA84 touched down at 1.30pm after a good flight. We passed through immigration and collected our baggage, and then Christine, Chris, Liz, Trevor and Alan said their goodbyes and another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

A Group is only as good as the people who form it and thanks must go to all members who got on well together, joined in the fun, shared knowledge and expertise, and enhanced the overall enjoyment of the trip. We shared an enjoyable time in Canada seeing many new species and sharing many new experiences in a spectacular environment.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September												
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1	Pacific Loon	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>						2							
2	Common Loon (Gt. Northern Diver)	<i>Gavia immer</i>		3				4	5					1	
3	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>												6	
4	Horned (Slavonian) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>						6							
5	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>					1	2	4						
6	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>		4	1				2			1		1	
7	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>							1000+						
8	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>		6	4	✓		✓	✓					6	1
9	Brandt's Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax penicillatus</i>												1	
10	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>		200		✓		✓	✓						
11	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>													2
12	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>		2	20	6	4	4	1	1	1		1	4	8
13	Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>		6			39							25	
14	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>		20			8		20	20		30	50	30	40
15	Cackling Goose	<i>Branta hutchinsii</i>								2		3			
16	Snow Goose	<i>Chen caerulescens</i>													100
17	Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>												22	12
18	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>													10
19	American Wigeon	<i>Anas americana</i>		50								2		14	30
20	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		500							1	2	30	8	100
21	Blue-winged Teal	<i>Anas discors</i>		6											
22	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>													12
23	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		20								6	7		10
24	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		50					3				3		10
25	Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>												2	8
26	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			4		46	1	12						
27	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>		2	12	1	10	25	20			3			
28	White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>		40	2				2						

	Common name	Scientific name	September												
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
29	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		50		15			6	10		20	10		
30	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>								6					
31	Hooded Merganser	<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>							5	1					1 4
32	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>					3	15			60				
33	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>									10	12	25	20	
34	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			2										
35	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>			1	3	3	14	3	4	2	36	7	2	1
36	Northern Harrier (split from Hen)	<i>Circus hudsonius</i>				1									2
37	Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>										1			
38	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>							1						2
39	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>					1	1							7
40	American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>												1	2
41	Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>		8		5		5							
42	Greater Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>		1											3
43	Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>		10											
44	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				1									
45	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>			30	30		2		39					
46	Western Sandpiper	<i>Calidris mauri</i>							1						
47	Short-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus griseus</i>													45
48	Long-billed Dowitcher	<i>Limnodromus scolopaceus</i>													2
49	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>										1			
50	Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		3											
51	Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>		1						✓					
52	Mew (Common) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			10	6	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	
53	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>		4				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
54	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>		1				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	
55	Thayer's Gull	<i>Larus thayeri</i>												1	
56	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>		6	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>		100	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			2										
59	Common Murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>				40				250+					

	Common name	Scientific name	September												
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
60	Marbled Murrelet	<i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>				2				18					
61	Cassin's Auklet	<i>Ptychoramphus aleuticus</i>								2					
62	Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>								8					
63	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		50+	12	✓	✓							✓	✓
64	Band-tailed Pigeon	<i>Columba fasciata</i>					1								
65	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>												5	1
66	Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>			1										
67	Vaux's Swift	<i>Chaetura vauxi</i>		4											
68	Anna's Hummingbird	<i>Calypte anna</i>													3
69	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle alcyon</i>		1	4	6	2	6	2	2		5	4		2
70	Red-breasted Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus ruber</i>					1								
71	Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>					2					1			
72	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>			1		2								1
73	Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>		1		1	3	10	1	4	3	2	2	3	
74	Northwestern Crow	<i>Corvus caurinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		8	4		8	8	2	2	H	2	1	24	H
76	Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>													20
77	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	<i>Poecile rufescens</i>					1								
78	American Bushtit	<i>Psaltriparus minimus</i>												8	
79	Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>		1											
80	Pacific Wren	<i>Troglodytes pacificus</i>			1		1	1	1			1			1
81	American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>		2			3		1	3	4	3	2		
82	Golden-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus satrapa</i>				1									
83	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>		1											
84	Swainson's Thrush	<i>Catharus ustulatus</i>									3				
85	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>		6	1	20	✓	✓	1	4		2		3	8
86	Varied Thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>									1	1			
87	European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			40	8	✓	✓	✓	1					2
88	Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>								4					
89	Wilson's Warbler	<i>Cardellina pusilla</i>				1									
90	Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>			1		2							4	6

	Common name	Scientific name	September													
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
91	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>			20	20							1		3	
92	Fox Sparrow	<i>Passerella iliaca</i>			1		1				1		1			4
93	Song Sparrow (Pacific Northwest)	<i>Melospiza melodia rufina</i>		1		1			1					1	3	6
94	White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>			4				2						5	3
95	Golden-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia atricapilla</i>														6
96	Dark-eyed Junco (Oregon)	<i>Junco hyemalis oregonus</i>									1				4	8
97	Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>													10	25
98	Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>			3	2									1	
99	Purple Finch	<i>Carpodacus purpureus</i>													3	
100	House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>		4					2	1						
101	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			2										4	10

Mammals

1	Black Bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>			7				1		1					
2	Grizzly (Brown) Bear	<i>Ursus arctos horribilis</i>									4	4	20	9		
3	Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>				4		60								
4	River Otter	<i>Lutra canadensis</i>		5							1					
5	Steller Sea Lion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>				2		1	120	2					1	
6	California Sea Lion	<i>Zalophus californianus</i>				6		1								
7	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		30	2	18	2	12	6		1	8	3			
8	Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>					3									
9	Douglas Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus douglasi</i>									1					
10	Eastern Grey Squirrel	<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>													1	3
11	Canadian Beaver	<i>Castor canadensis</i>													1	
12	Mule (Black-tailed) Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>		3		4	1	1	2	2					10	
13	Pacific White-sided Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus obliquidens</i>							100+							
14	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>				1		5	10							
15	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	1													
16	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>													3	
17	Little Brown Bat	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>											1			
18	Shrew/mouse sp.				3											

Other Taxa

Pacific Banana Slug, *Ariolimax columbianus*

Red Admiral butterfly, *Vanessa atalanta*

Field Cricket, *Gryllus sp.*

Various moths, crickets and flashwings,

European Black Slug, *Arion ater*

Canada Darner dragonfly, *Aeshna canadensis*

Red-eared Slider, *Chrysemys scripta elegans*

Small (Cabbage) White butterfly, *Pieris rapae*

Striped Meadowlark dragonfly, *Sympetrum pallipes*

Moon Jellyfish, *Aurelia aurita*

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A close 'Grizzly' encounter



Group Photo