

# Spirit Bears, Grizzlies & Humpbacks - Cruising Canada's Great Bear Rainforest

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th – 21st September 2022

---



Fin Whale



Spirit Bear



Mother and cub Grizzly Bear



Sea Otter

Report and images by Matthew Capper



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour participants: Matthew Capper (Leader) with eleven Naturetrek clients.

Crew: Jeremy Randall (Captain) Mark Drozda (Mate) Anne Stewart (Naturalist) Laura McNeely (Cook).

## Summary

What an amazing place! There can be few experiences quite like cruising through the Great Bear Rainforest on a small boat such as the Island Roamer. Every day brought incredible scenery and incredible encounters with whales, bears and all the other wildlife that calls this area home. We even had wall to wall sunshine for several days. Not bad for a rainforest! Seeing every aspect of the salmon run play out in front of us was a real privilege. Humpback whale bubble netting for over an hour, watching another breach close to the boat and seeing nine individual Fin Whales was great. 13 different Grizzly Bears, including three mother and cub combos, was equally special. But the rare chance to stand just feet away from a female Spirit Bear as she ambled past, happy to share her river bank with us, was both a humbling and very emotional moment that we all shared. It is fair to say that everyone left with memories that will last a lifetime.

## Day 1

Monday 12th September

### → Arrival in Vancouver

It is a strange feeling to fly for nine hours and arrive only an hour after you set off. But that is how you do it Vancouver style. Matthew arrived first on an Air Canada flight, a late replacement for Sara, who had sadly come down with Covid just a couple of days before the trip was due to start. The BA flight was delayed a little but eventually everyone had collected their bags, cleared customs and we boarded the courtesy shuttle bus for the short ride to the hotel. Here, we checked in and met up with a further two couples who had already been exploring the Vancouver area before we arrived.

Canada was in a half-way house with Covid, randomly selecting a small sample of people for testing upon entry to the country. Unfortunately, one of the group was chosen for a test, the email arriving only after we had settled in to the hotel. After a quick dash back to the airport it turned out that the testing centres had all long since closed so arrangements were made for the morning instead.

## Day 2

Tuesday 13th September

Vancouver → Bella Bella ≈ Seaforth Channel ≈ Perrin Anchorage ≈ Salmon Bay 

We were up nice and early and on the courtesy shuttle by 8am, picking up our first birds in the form of Feral Pigeon, Raven, American Herring Gull and American Crow. The latter were formerly Northwestern Crow, a species that was lumped back with American Crow after analysis found extensive hybridisation between the two.

On arrival at the South Terminal we met back up with our group member who had successfully undertaken her Covid test - although given that the result was still not available nearly a fortnight later, you have to question quite what the exercise had sought to achieve. The bags were duly checked in and we successfully negotiated with the airline who were looking to fly either one of us, or several bags, out the following day. A bit of rejigging and the weight was distributed to their liking, some of us carrying on items in drawstring bags that they provided for us.

Our next announcement was to tell us that the flight would be delayed a little as they were waiting for low cloud to clear from Bella Bella. So instead, we watched the wall to wall coverage on Canadian TV of the Queen's

funeral arrangements and spent a little time chatting and getting to know each other better. The flight eventually left and our pilot did us proud. A wide circuit of the area saw us drop down through the cloud, landing gear down, only to pull up again when there was no sign of a break. However, another quick circuit and a different angle and we were in, smoothly down onto the runway and we'd arrived. Kildeer had been calling from the runway as we boarded the plane and another was calling from the side of the runway when we arrived.

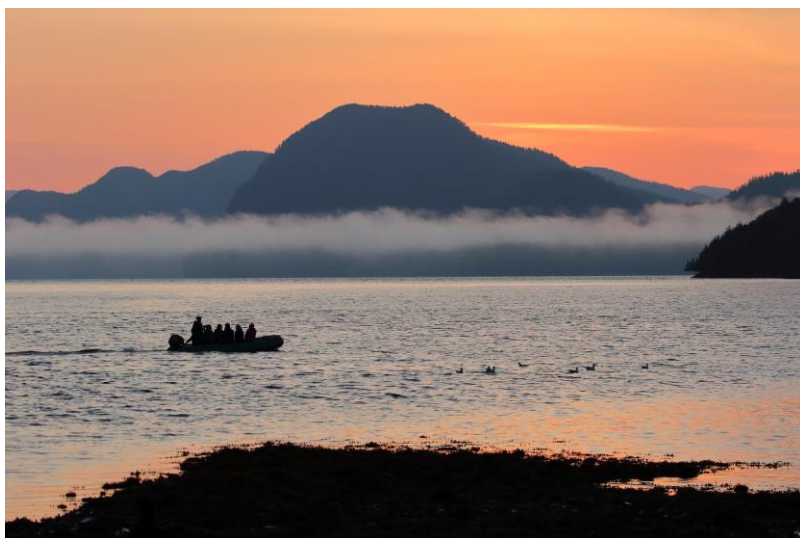
Bald Eagles and Ravens were also there to greet us and a large dragonfly that landed in front of us was later identified as a Lance-tipped Darter. We headed down to the harbour in two shifts and the crew of the Island Roamer were there to welcome us aboard. A hundred or more Black Turnstone and a few Surfbirds were near the jetty and we started to get stuck into the ubiquitous gulls – mostly a mix Glaucous-winged and California Gulls.

Once aboard we set off north, looking to make up a little of the time that we had lost. Laura served up the first of many superb meals and the crew gave us an introductory briefing, showed us to our cabins and talked us through the various systems such as the pumps for the toilets. Overhead, we watched a couple of Sandhill Cranes circling in the distance and later on, 13 more headed south. The weather which had become sunny and warm eventually clouded over and cooled a little but generally, we were to be very lucky with the weather for the whole trip.

There were plenty more gulls and both Pelagic and Double-crested Cormorant and we got to grips with our first alcids – Common Murre (Guillemot to you and me), Marbled Murrelet and Rhinoceros Auklet. Both Red-necked and Western Grebe were seen at regular intervals and both Merlin and Arctic Skua swept past the boat as we headed onwards. The scenery was already fantastic. There can be no better way to experience the rocky islands and wooded hillsides of the area than from a boat, steadily cruising from site to site and stopping whenever anything interesting appears.

This soon happened as we approached Perrin Anchorage, an area known to be good for Sea Otter. This was a much-desired new species for several and in total, we saw about ten. They have spread north steadily after their reintroduction to Vancouver Island and now seem to be firmly established in this area of kelp forest. We didn't have time to stop for them all but one very confiding individual swam alongside the boat for a while and allowed everyone to have great views and the chance to take pictures.

Eventually we arrived at our anchor point for the night in Salmon Bay. We donned wellies and life preservers



and took our first excursion ashore. Here was a perfect introduction to the sight and smells of the salmon run. In places it was wall to wall with fish – the vast majority were Pinks but also a number of Coho with their distinctive red sides and the larger striped Chum salmon too. Anne pointed out a range of plants including several of the berry bushes that the bears would be feeding on such as Red Huckleberry, Thimbleberry, Salmonberry and Oval-leaved Blue Huckleberry.

The sky turned a nice soft orange as we headed back to the boat. We opened the wine, ate a fabulous dinner and reflected on a wonderful start to the trip.



## Day 3

## Wednesday 14th September

Salmon Bay ≈ Mathieson Channel ≈ Mussel Inlet ≈ Mussel Bay ⚓

It was such a nice experience to watch the world waking up from out on the water. Although those of us who were up on deck in the half light of dawn were treated to a call we just couldn't place. Jeremy was on hand on to put us right though. "Toilet flush pump" was his confident identification.

After breakfast we headed on north, spotting a couple of Harbour Porpoise and there were three different Elephant Seals with their heads up, their distinctive profile looking like large buoys out in the water. Birds included three Pacific Diver, more Rhinoceros Auklet and Marbled Murrelet and a Spotted Sandpiper on the rocks at the base of a waterfall we passed.



We headed down Mathieson Channel and through the narrows at the end. As we made to turn right we had our first Humpback Whale of the trip and slowed to allow it to come up alongside us. It was on its own but using the steep sides of the fjord to help it to bubble net small shoals of fish. We enjoyed waiting for the ring of bubbles to appear, then the scattering of small fish and lastly the sideways lunge as the whale enveloped the shoal in its huge mouth. Eventually, 'our' whale was joined by another and

they briefly teamed up although this proved to be rather half hearted and they eventually continued their separate ways down the channel. After an hour or so of constant action, Jeremy quite rightly decided that we needed to make progress and so we exited Mathieson Channel for the second time and continued on our way.

As we headed north we saw another distant Humpback and our sister ship, the Island Solitude heading our way for a pre-arranged rendezvous. Mark took a zodiac across to deliver a package that we had collected and brought with us on the flight from Vancouver to Bella Bella - a new motor for their oven. We weren't going to let them have it for free though – the price was a new pair of wellies for Matthew to replace the leaky ones he had been using.

We headed east into Mussel Inlet, heading all the way to the end and Mussel Bay and Poison Cove. The latter was named after men on George Vancouver's expedition in the late 1700's picked mussels here that poisoned and killed several of them. A couple of Steller Sea Lions welcomed us and it was into the latter creek that we headed first. The second zodiac stopped to watch one of the Sea Lion catch and eat couple of salmon; ripping them apart by holding them in its mouth and thrashing its head from side to side.

We had timed it exactly for high tide and so were able to travel up the river quite a way. There were some salmon on the move but nothing like the experience of the previous night. There were lots of gulls –



mostly Bonaparte's but also Common, California, Glaucous-Winged, Ring-billed and American Herring. Visible berries in the bankside bushes included the thorny Devil's Club and Red Elderberry and we got a nice view of a Belted Kingfisher.

Once we'd had a decent look around, we headed back, dropping Laura off to resume her dinner preparations and took the zodiacs up the Mussel river. We soon spotted our first Grizzly Bear of the trip – a female with one of this year's youngsters; what they call a COY or 'cub of the year'. Mum was in the water up to her neck and we watched as she came ashore and they both ate a salmon in front of us. We all sat in hushed awe, marvelling at how close we were able to drift by and how unconcerned they were by our presence. After they wandered back into the bushes, we moved on up the river. There were more salmon on the move here, mostly shoals of Pink, but also Coho and Chum. Large numbers of gulls were present and many Bald Eagles. The mother and cub reappeared so we watched them again for a while, getting more superb views. You could plainly see the bond between the two and the cub was in a playful mood, jumping on logs, pulling at branches and occasionally jumping up at mum. They again disappeared but we weren't done. This time it was a female with two older cubs – both around 18 months old but one significantly larger than the other. They were feeding on salmon further up the channel on a gravel spit. Once they were finished and made their way further upstream, the Bald Eagles swooped in to feed on the scraps that they had left, closely followed by the larger gulls.

We drifted back downstream, noting some Pacific Crab Apple with its tiny fruit – a favourite of the bears and widely spread through their dung – along with the purple flowered Douglas Aster, Lupin and Lyngbye's Sedge, another bear food plant. Out in the river mouth there was a party of Goosander and a couple of American Wigeon but it was now time to motor back to the boat and settle in for the evening.

While we had been away, Laura had magicked up another delicious dinner. We relaxed with a glass of wine and were going through the 'chart chat' and wildlife log when we noticed the female and cub were back out in the bay

and the mother and two older cubs were again out on the gravel spit further up. All thoughts of species lists were abandoned as we set up the telescope on the back of the boat and everyone got to see them again from the comfort of the deck. The only issue was having to re-find the bears between each user as the boat was gradually moving in the slight breeze.



## Day 4

Thursday 15th September

Mussel Bay ≈ Sheep Passage ≈ Hiekish Narrows ≈ Gram River ≈ Canoona River outlet ≈ Khutze Inlet ⚓

We were up early at 6.30 for a pre-breakfast visit back out into the Mussel river on the zodiacs. In the early morning gloom, Mark spotted the mother and two cubs from last night, closer to the river mouth in the grasses and sedges. From our seated positions, we could see the top of their heads but were quickly distracted by the

mother and young cub again, on the opposite side of the channel. We turned our attention to them, sitting with the engine turned off, watching them feed on salmon just a few metres from us.

An American Dipper bombed past but everyone was busy focusing on the bears. The female turned and led the cub back into cover and we soon found out why. Another lone female walked around the corner and cautiously made her way along the bit of shore they had just vacated. Consciously avoiding a confrontation, she continued round, walking into the water and swimming along the base of a wall of rock, stopping periodically to sample a salmon. On the other side, she hauled herself out and paused for a Pacific Crab Apple snack.

Once she had disappeared, it was time for bear number seven, an adolescent that was slowly wandering down



the right hand side of the river bank, stopping to sample salmon on the way and with an entourage of larger gulls. And then further upstream, an adult female, stood midstream, made it eight different bears in the space of an hour. Wow!

It was clearly a morning of breath-taking moments. Next it was the Bonaparte's Gulls. Hundreds of them took off and swirled and wheeled their way downstream, enveloping us in a Hitchcockian cloud of birds.

The adolescent bear had walked within a few metres of us before heading into cover and as we drifted back down the river, the original mum and cub were back out and provided more excellent views. They walked onto the small headland at the river mouth allowing us to get some nice photos with a lovely scenic background.

Eventually we had to drag ourselves away and return for breakfast – a delicious porridge with blueberries, plus a selection of fresh fruit, sausages, yoghurt and granola. The telescope was again deployed to watch the female and cub swim out across the bay, catching a salmon on route and hauling out on the opposite side.

It had been an incredible start to the day. Eight different bears of all shapes and sizes and all in the space of an hour or so. Far beyond what any of us could have expected. But more than the amazing encounters, our time in Mussel Bay had been such a good illustration of the salmon run and all the species that rely on it. From the Harbour Seals and Sea Lions in the bay, to the river mouth with its fishing bears, Bonaparte's Gull picking eggs from the surface, Bald Eagles feasting on the dead and dying salmon and the larger gulls picking at the scraps. And one of the things that particularly struck us was the 'zombie' salmon. Fish that had achieved their aim of spawning and were shutting down and slowly rotting away. They would bumble about close to the surface, largely unaware of their surroundings and changing direction, much like an automatic Hoover bouncing off the walls of a living room. Once dead, these salmon form an important source of nutrients that can support over a hundred different species, which in turn support the next generation of salmon. All part of the amazing cycle that forms the foundation of life in the Great Bear Rainforest.

Our destination for the day was Khutze Inlet (pronounced 'Coots') so we made progress, passing an isolated salmon farm with a sizeable raft of Surf Scoter and a single Pintail. At the Canoona Falls we got distracted by a Humpback Whale and followed it south for a while. When we got back, a quick scan failed to reveal a bear so we didn't linger.



The weather had taken a turn for the worse and we had rain on and off for much of the rest of the journey. We arrived in Khutze Inlet at the same time as the Island Solitude who would also be anchoring for the night. The river here is quite braided with connecting channels so we agreed that we would take our zodiacs up the south channel and they would take the north.

Our channel proved to be pretty quiet. A few of the ever-present Bald Eagles and a Varied Thrush that was sadly not seen by anyone else. However, Jeremy got a radio message telling us it would be worth us switching to the north channel and so we took a cut through and as we rounded a corner, there was a female Grizzly Bear with two small cubs of the year – both smaller than the one from this morning. They gave us superb views, walking around on some logs before heading into the undergrowth.



We moved up river, stopping just short of an area of shallow rapids. One of the zodiacs got a small mixed flock of birds including Yellow-rumped and Townsend Warbler. We scanned for American Dipper without success but there was the full range of gulls from Bonaparte's through to Glaucous-winged and a Great Blue Heron too. The mother and cubs then reappeared, making their way upstream. Mum decided that she wanted to be on the other side and decided to swim the river, just a few metres from us. The two cubs paddled along a few metres behind. We watched in awed silence, the only sound from the cubs, puffing and panting as they tried to keep up.

We were cold and wet from a couple of heavier rain showers and so headed back to the boat to warm up. En route, we had a large flock of redhead Goosander and a Belted Kingfisher and there were a number of Harbour Seal hauled out on tree trunks and large branches in the bay. On arrival, we took off our wet gear and let it drip dry before stowing it in the engine room to dry overnight.

## Day 5

Friday 16th September

Khutze Inlet ≈ Graham Reach ≈ Bute Dale ≈ Fraser Reach ≈ Mackay Reach ≈ Whale Channel ≈ Cameron Cove (Barnard Harbour) ⚓

Another early start saw us take our turn first in the north channel. The overnight rain had stopped and the low cloud was forming atmospheric ribbons across the sides of the surrounding hills. The Harbour Seals were in the bay and we saw several Yellow-rumped Warbler in a couple of bushes. As we rounded the corner, the mother and two cubs were again there to welcome us. And further up at the rapids, we finally all got a decent view of an American Dipper and a young adult Grizzly appeared on a tree trunk further up river. Better still, a huge adult male wandered down to the rapids, his huge bulk and powerful shoulders made him a completely different proposition to the females and younger bears we had seen up to this point.

Jeremy decided we'd get out for a short walk, heading over to a lone tree trunk that is regularly used by the bears for scratching and rubbing. It took a little while to get us out of the zodiacs and Anne was just telling us how, if we saw a grizzly, we'd need to get back in the boats when one came around the corner about 30 metres away.

“Hey bear” she said softly, followed by “everyone back in”. We were not in any danger but it was interesting how quickly we got back in compared to how quickly we’d got out!

The bear turned out to be the mum and two cubs again, now on the other side of the river. We were joined by the zodiacs from the Island Solitude and anchored ourselves together mid channel. She moved back upstream with the cubs in tow. We left her to it, watching a Sharp-shinned Hawk fly over and land in a tree opposite. By now, breakfast was calling so we headed past the loafing Harbour Seals and back to the Island Roamer.



We headed back down the Khutze Inlet to the Canoon Falls, seeing a Steller Sea Lion on the way. There was another Humpback Whale in the distance and this one was breaching regularly. Everyone was rounded up on deck and we all got to see it breaching. At one point, it had quick go at bubble net fishing and for a while it lay at the surface slapping its pectoral fin on the water, the noise booming like canon fire.

There was still no sign of a bear at the falls but there were a few Marbled Murrelet and

we had to shelter from a couple of brief rain showers. We needed to fill our fresh water tank and so Jeremy took us to Bute Dale, the site of a long-abandoned salmon cannery where, in its heyday, around 200 people had lived. We had a lovely couple of hours, wandering around and exploring the site with Anne, whilst Mark and Jeremy sorted the water.

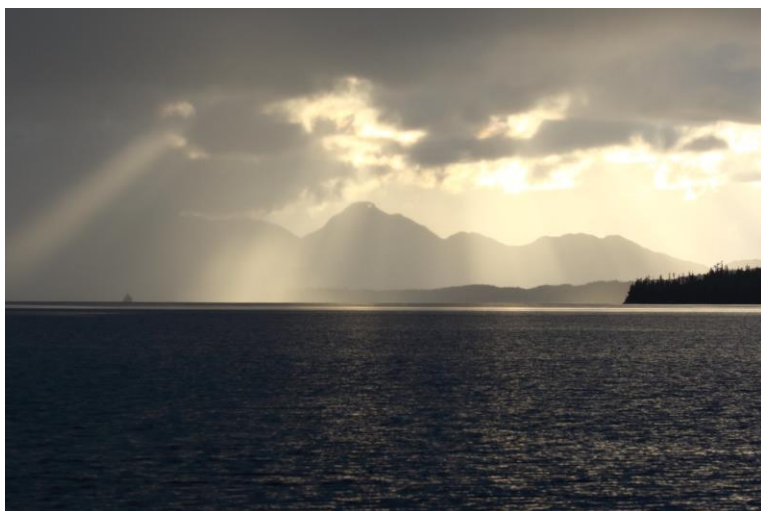
As we disembarked there was a Sand Lance swimming in the water beneath and we could see a colony of Plumose Anemones. Further uphill, there were several black and gold caterpillars, later to be identified as the caterpillar of the Isabella Tiger Moth. Several Red Crossbill were calling and we found plenty of plants such as Salal Berry, Huckleberry, Dagger-leaved Rush, Sitka Sedge and Western Buttercup. Foxglove and Japanese Knotweed were two less welcome non-natives though. As we walked back to the boat a couple of Fox Sparrows showed well and we watched a Marbled Murrelet close by in the bay. Our timing had been perfect, the sun, which had shone as we walked round Bute Dale, gave way to another brief rain shower as we set off again on the boat.



We had a decent journey ahead of us to Barnard Harbour and so made good time, making our way around the top of Princess Royal Island and back down the north western side. A flock of Surf Scoter gave us superb views along with a couple of Red-necked Grebes and two different Elephant Seals. We saw a few more Humpbacks but mostly distant blows so we didn't stop. Eventually we made it into the appropriately named Whale Channel



and the late afternoon light gave everything a silver shimmer. We ended the day with a bit of a whalefest. The



equipment on the boat told us that there was a thick layer of plankton at about 200 feet depth and it was clear that the whales were diving down to this level. At first it was Humpbacks and we probably had ten different whales in the area. But then we saw the taller, more defined blows that told us we had Fin Whales - three in total. The Humpbacks would generally re-surface in the area where they had dived but the larger and more streamlined Fin Whales would travel and come up anything up to a kilometre away. Jeremy's skills from a

previous job operating a whale tour boat were put to good use though and we had the Fins surface close by on a couple of occasions, allowing everyone to get great views in the evening light

We headed into Barnard Harbour, a small and perfectly sheltered anchorage. A couple of Steller Sea Lion welcomed us along with a few Green-winged Teal, although the Mallard we spotted bobbing on the water turned out to be a plastic decoy!

We ended the day with the usual chart chat and evening log, but not before we had helped to celebrate a significant birthday. It had been due to take place the year before but the trip had been cancelled due to Covid. So, we were technically a year late but a vegan chocolate cheesecake complete with candles made sure that we marked the occasion in suitable style. The night sky was fantastic so we headed up on deck to enjoy the stars and Anne and Laura got into one of the zodiacs to demonstrate the bioluminescence. We were impressed, but their splashing around with the oars was not as effective a demonstration as that of a Sea Lion that surfaced close by.

## Day 6

**Saturday 17th September**

Cameron Cove ≈ Whale Channel ≈ Casanave Passage ≈ Campania Sound ≈ Jewsbury Peninsula ≈ McMicking Inlet 📍

Today was a day of warmth and sunshine. In fact, from now until the end of the holiday it became difficult to spot a cloud. It was chilly first thing though as we took a little trip out in the zodiacs. Humpbacks could be seen blowing as it got light and in the still and the calm, we watched a few Bald Eagles, several Raven and heard a few Red Crossbill. The Green-winged Teal of the previous evening were still present but the Mallard this time was the real deal.

After breakfast we returned to Whale Channel and spent the morning back with the whales. There was a mother and calf Humpback with another adult that we spent some time with. The calf could not dive for as long and so would come back up early and play around at the surface whilst waiting for mum. It even breached for us, although most of us were on the wrong side of the boat when it did.

We made our way further up the channel and a little way away was another group of four, so we headed over and turned off the engine and just let them dive and surface again and again close to the boat. Today, the plankton layer was down at about 300ft so the dives were a little longer than the day before. The light was beautiful, with

sunshine sparkling on the water. We turned and headed back the way we had come but the group of three from earlier soon stopped our progress as the calf was breaching again. This time they surfaced right by the side of the boat to gasps from everyone on board. The calf was still in playful mood, breaching again and also tail slapping – rising backwards out of the water and slamming its tail back down.

Next, it was the turn of the three Fin Whales from the day before to re-appear. They were again travelling during each dive but we had them surface close by and could really appreciate their length compared to the Humpbacks. We were still not quite done, with another close Humpback encounter with an adult that at one point surfaced on one side of the boat and came up for its second breath on the other, cruising just beneath us.

On the way down Casanave Passage we had a couple of nice flocks of Surf Scoter and stopped at Ashdown Island for the large Steller Sea Lion colony. There were a few hundred hauled out on the rocky outcrops, lying in the sun or quarrelling with their nearest neighbours. There were also few Guillemots on the water and a couple of Black Oystercatcher. Jeremy had promised the full sensory experience of a sea lion colony and so positioned us just downwind.



Luckily we were soon on the move again and the smell didn't put us off our lunch, another Laura creation of butternut squash soup that we sprinkled with toasted pumpkin seeds and had served with a fresh side salad.

The key decision for the day was going to be whether we could make the crossing across Campania Sound, given its more exposed nature. Luckily the water was pretty calm and so we headed up the western side of Campania Island. The area was rich in birdlife with Guillemots, Great Northern Diver, Red-necked Grebe, White-winged and Surf Scoter, Pelagic Cormorant and a few Pigeon Guillemot.

Eventually, we arrived at the Jewsbury Peninsula and dropped anchor off shore. There were plenty of birds here too with both Double-crested and Pelagic Cormorant, Black Oystercatcher, great views of White-winged Scoter, Great Northern and Pacific Divers. Best of all was a flock of Harlequin Duck, the males looking stunning in the bright sunshine.

The zodiacs dropped us off onto a beautiful sandy beach. Here, we were able to potter along the shore or sit and soak up the views for a couple of hours. Anne showed the group some of the marine life that inhabited the inter-tidal zone and Laura did an excellent job of 'playing' the Bull Kelp, much in the same way you would a digeridoo.

Our finds included Lincoln's Sparrow, Northern Flicker, Lion's Mane Jellyfish, Blood Starfish, Six-rayed Sea Star, Northern Abalone and a beautifully camouflaged Starry Flounder. Along the sand there were the unmistakable tracks of wolf; clearly they had been along the shore since the last high tide.

We scrambled through to the other side of a headland, finding a similarly gorgeous beach, with driftwood washed up above the tideline. Offshore we were able to view Harlequin ducks in the telescope along with all three species of Diver – Pacific, Great Northern and Red-throated. Savannah Sparrows were feeding along the tideline and a Spotted Sandpiper showed well.

Matthew was urgently beckoned over at one point as the undergrowth was violently shaking. Luckily it wasn't a bear but Jeremy, cutting some vegetation to clear a better path between the two beaches!

There were more good birds to be had with Rhinoceros Auklet in the 'scope and a flyby Sabine's Gull. We had a look at some of the Western Redcedar and Hemlocks with Jeremy and Laura even inspired to go for a climb. A Douglas's Squirrel made its way round the trunk of one of the trees a couple of times and our return to the boat was noteworthy for Karen's headfirst dive back into the zodiac and Anne's colourful reaction to a boot full of water.

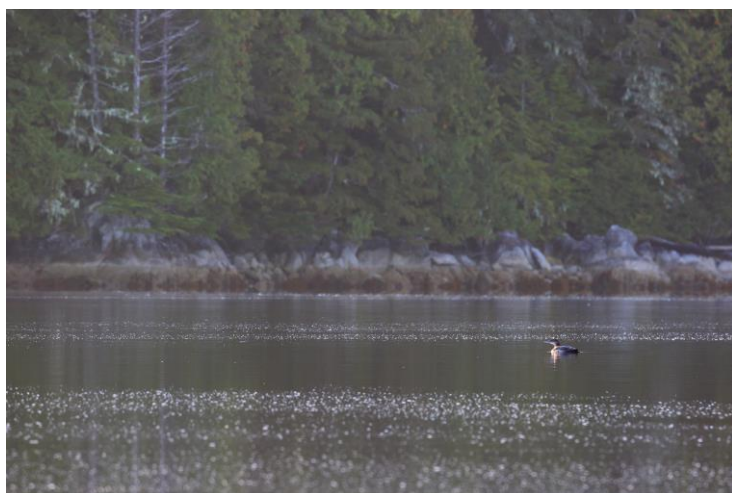
Once back aboard, we headed a short distance up the McMicking Inlet to anchor for the evening, seeing Surf Scoter, Great Northern Diver, Red-necked and Western Grebe on the way. Dinner was a tasty mushroom risotto served with fish and seared sprouts. The clear sky had us back up on deck after the chart chat and wildlife log. Elon Musk's Starlink satellites went over but more impressive was the wonderful view of the Milky Way, spread across the sky above us.

## Day 7

## Sunday 18th September

McMicking Inlet ≈ Campania Island ≈ Squally Channel ≈ Lewis Passage ≈ Hartley Bay 🚢

In the pre-dawn up on deck, Jupiter was twinkling brightly and through binoculars, four of the moons could be clearly seen. We quietly climbed into the zodiacs and began scanning the shoreline intently, hoping for a wolf.



We had no joy, despite checking out a number of likely spots. Instead, there were several Bald Eagles, the croak of Ravens, a Northern Flicker calling and a Douglas's Squirrel clambering around a waterside tree. The best birds were three early wintering Bufflehead that took off and circled around us. The morning was chilly but eventually, the sun climbed over the side of the hills and the light caught a Great Northern Diver, a picture-perfect sight on the flat calm water.

We motored a short distance to the bay and beach of the previous afternoon in order to make it our breakfast spot. It was idyllic. There were Harlequin Ducks in small flocks, Great Northern Divers, two Slavonian Grebe diving by the boat, Marbled Murrelet and a raft of Surf Scoter on the other side. The most impressive moment though was when a huge Peregrine powered across the bay, terrorising the large gulls. It was a Peale's Peregrine, the largest race of Peregrine in the world and found down the north-west Pacific coastline.

Our route for the morning took us up the side of Campania Island through an area of slightly choppy water. We picked up our first Red-necked Phalarope of the trip and had a brief sighting of Dall's Porpoise down the port side heading at speed in the opposite direction. We hoped they might turn and interact with the boat but they weren't interested.



Jeremy was conscious that his right turn into Squally Channel would take us at right angles to the waves and so chose his moment carefully. He got it spot on though and we were soon out of the swell and back into sheltered water. Squally Channel opened out before us and was flat calm. It is another whale hotspot and we soon could see whale blows and a distant breach. Some Harbour Porpoise fins broke the water briefly and then we added more Dall's Porpoise on a couple of occasions. The main activity though came from the larger whales and we spent two or three hours in the sunshine, pottering about, spending time with individuals as they surfaced at different points around us. Most impressive was a total of six new Fin Whales, a pleasing reflection of a recovery in numbers over the last couple of decades.



We decided to anchor for the evening in Hartley Bay, close to the small first nation community settlement. There were a few intrepid souls who were keen to try kayaking and so we donned life jackets, slid our way into the kayaks and paddled off across the bay and up the nearby river channel. It was great to be at water level, drifting in the evening sunshine and we had a Merlin fly over us and perch up in a nearby tree. The consensus was that a certain Naturetrek leader looked incredibly laid back and relaxed in his kayak. The truth was that Matthew's boots were wedged in the narrow end of the kayak and he couldn't sit back up!

While the adventurous had been off paddling, the rest of the group had been enjoying cheese and charcuterie up on the deck. And once we were all back on board, our evening meal was another stunner - prawns, crab cakes, mash and roasted celeriac. One thing is clear, no-one will ever go hungry on a Spirit Bear cruise! We enjoyed some wine, watched a Marbled Murrelet close to the boat and went through the chart chat and evening log, along with a briefing for the following day.

## Day 8

Monday 19th September

Hartley Bay ≈ Gribbell Island ≈ Vernie Passage ≈ Devastation Channel ≈ Sue's Bay 📍

Despite being on the sheltered side of the channel, we awoke this morning to a slight swell, the boat rising gently up and down. We were full of anticipation because today, we were due ashore in the hope of watching the rare and enigmatic Spirit Bear.

Breakfast was taken on the move in order to allow us to get to our meeting point in time. A Humpback was surfacing close by as we landed. It was a little choppy but we were soon safely ashore and in the company of Joleen, our local guide and an amazing woman who had her own children, adoptive children and foster kids too. Guiding 11 Naturetrek clients would be a piece of cake in comparison!

We soon learned that there had been a Spirit Bear seen and excitement levels were high as we set off through the forest to our designated spot at the side of the river.

The woodland had a truly primordial feel to it, dripping with mosses and lichens and with a tangled understory so different to the manicured and managed woodlands of the UK. We were not far short of the viewing area

when Matthew glanced to the left and was rather startled to see a creamy white Spirit Bear stood staring back. Luckily we had been briefed to keep quiet, otherwise there may have been a few expletives uttered!! Instead it was case of tapping the person in front on the shoulder and everyone gradually stopped like a chain of dominoes, quickly tiptoeing back to look back at the bear. She was completely unperturbed and watched us with indifference. Photos were taken, words of delight whispered and eventually our chilled-out bear simply sloped off behind a tree to have a snooze!

Once settled in at the river we were able to reflect on our incredible luck, a superb way to start to the session. Anything else would be bonus territory we felt. A couple of hours passed but we didn't really notice. A Steller's Jay kept coming down to pick at the salmon scraps and a lovely Song Sparrow was doing the same. Some of the group found a Banana Slug whilst using the al fresco facilities and we added a very confiding American Dipper to the one we had seen when we had landed.

What happened next will stay with everyone for a long, long time. The Spirit Bear was back, first peering at us over the top of the slope we had climbed down to get to the river bank and then, once she realised we were



there, mooching off to the left and climbing down to the riverside just downstream of us. She then proceeded to give us the most incredible views, wandering up past us, just feet away and pausing to sample some of the salmon remains on the opposite side of the stream. A walk upstream past the small waterfall and then another stroll back past us and down and away around the corner. We were understandably elated and there were a few tears in eyes at being able to share such an intimate encounter with a bear that

had just completely accepted our presence in her natural environment.

Laura and Mark arrived with our picnic lunch and we sat on a fallen tree trunk, enjoying the food. Suitably refreshed we waited to see what the rest of the afternoon would bring and were not disappointed when a large male Black Bear appeared on the far side of the stream and sat for a while rubbing his back against a tree. Just like our earlier Spirit Bear, we were treated to an extended meander as he walked up past the waterfall and back down, stopping for another back rub on the way and half-heartedly chasing a salmon before he too disappeared downstream.

The time had flown and with the afternoon drawing on, we decided it was time to head back through the woods, retracing our steps and overtaking the male Black Bear again as we did so, allowing everyone a last view and photo or two. We could hear a few birds in the woods as we went, adding more Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Red-breasted Sapsucker and Pacific Wren to ones we had picked up earlier.

Laura welcomed us back on board with apple and cinnamon muffins. We had a little way to go to our evening anchor point in Sue's Bay and so made our way steadily northwards, seeing several Humpbacks along the way, including a particularly nice tail fluke as one dived. A fabulous day still had one final twist though as Brenda's keen eyes spotted our second Spirit Bear, stood on the steep rocky shore. Jeremy was quickly on it shouting below "There's a Bear. It's a Spirit Bear. And I'm not kidding!"

The effect was certainly galvanising and everyone made it up on deck in time to watch the bear stare at us for a bit, climb back up the rocks and then head into cover. She wasn't done though, climbing a tree in order to peep out at us from within the canopy.

We saw plenty of Goosander as we carried on, several parties of Western Grebes and the usual Marbled Murrelet and Scoter. Progress was interrupted by a distress call from a nearby boat with a broken outboard engine that was taking on some water. The occupants were pretty relaxed about their predicament though and refused a tow as the coastguard had been alerted and were on their way. Instead, they accepted the loan of a pump with a promise to return it when we had both docked in Kitimat the next day.



We were treated to a stunning sunset with the sky above the hills turning pink and then orange. It felt like a fitting way to end our last full day.

## Day 9

Tuesday 20th September

Douglas Channel ≈ Kitimat ≈ Terrace Regional Airport → Vancouver

Our last morning on the boat and it was another stunning day of weather. Once again, the early risers were able to see Jupiter in the morning sky and we soon had the anchor up and were steaming northwards towards Kitimat.

Having packed all our belongings for the journey home, most of us were in a reflective mood, taking in the scenery and generally soaking up the atmosphere of small boat travel for a final time. We were able to enjoy a few last encounters with Humpback Whales, our final tally for the trip easily being around 70 of what had been dubbed the local 'charismatic megafauna'.

Soon we were seeing signs of civilisation and the small marina at Kitimat came into view. Jeremy did the boat equivalent of a three-point turn (more of a pirouette to be fair) and we gently moored and tied off the lines. We had arrived in good time so were able to relax on the boat for a bit or take a short walk around the harbour. A couple of small flocks of Red Crossbill were present and we were able to watch a couple sit in the top of nearby tree. They were later replaced by a small flock of American Robin, some of which showed well on the outer branches.

Jeremy arranged for the captain of one of the nearby boats to come over and chat to us about local conservation work he was involved in, buying up bear hunting licences and land for conservation. They now control the licences for an area the size of Belgium. By law, they still have to exercise their right to hunt and proudly boast a zero percent success rate with hunting, but plenty of happy clients!

And then it was time to catch the taxi. Farewells and plenty of hugs with the crew who had done such a fabulous job of looking after us - entertaining, informing and putting us in the right places at the right times. None of us could thank them enough. The ride to Terrace was pretty uneventful and check in was smooth and quick. The



flight was a little delayed but nothing to cause any problems and the flight south was notable for the amazing views of the snow and glacier clad Coastal Mountain Range on the left and the Pacific fjords of the Great Bear Rainforest to the right.

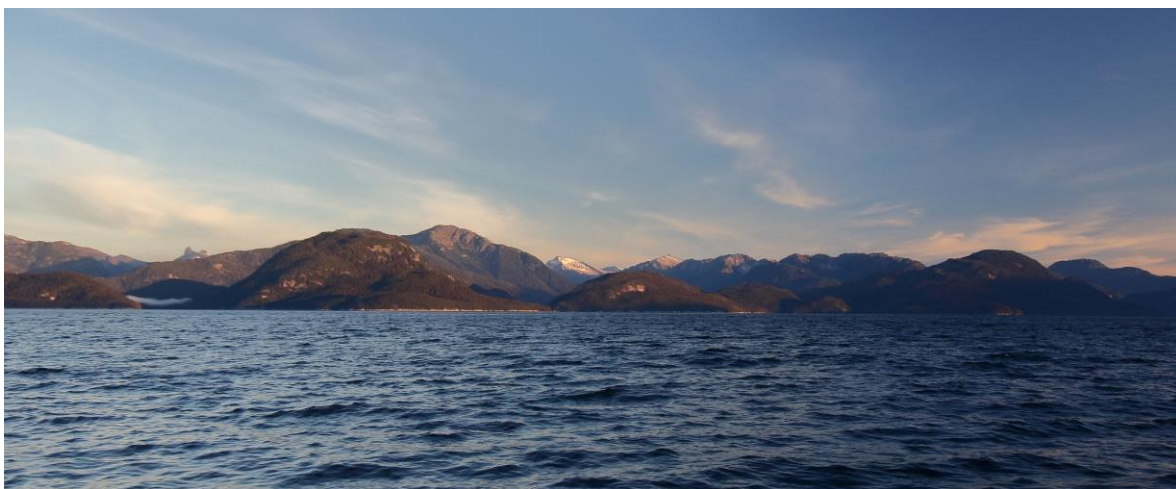
Vancouver was where we said goodbye for the final time. Some to further travel in Canada and others for the evening flight back to the UK, all of us reflecting on an incredible trip to an amazing place.

## Day 10

**Wednesday 21th September**

→ Heathrow Airport - arrival in UK

Humpbacks can be identified by their tail flukes and clear photos can be sent to [wildwhales.org](http://wildwhales.org) for their research. The charity mentioned on the last day was the Raincoast Conservation Foundation – [www.raincoast.org](http://www.raincoast.org)



## Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) to sign up.

## Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



[www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays](https://www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays)



[www.twitter.com/naturetrektours](https://www.twitter.com/naturetrektours)



[www.instagram.com/naturetrek\\_wildlife\\_holidays](https://www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays)

## Species Lists

(✓=recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

			September 2022									
	Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Birds												
1	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>			h	✓	✓	2				
2	American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>			2							
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>						1				
4	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		3		1						
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					✓	✓				
6	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>						20+	10+			
7	Surf Scoter	<i>Melanitta perspicillata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi</i>		✓			1	✓	✓			
9	Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>		✓	✓	1						
10	Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>							3			
11	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>				3						
12	Goosander (Common Merganser)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		5	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
13	Red-throated Diver (Loon)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>						✓				
14	Pacific Diver (Loon)	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>		1	✓			✓	✓			
15	Gt Northern Diver (Common Loon)	<i>Gavia immer</i>		1	✓	✓	1	✓	✓		1	
16	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>		✓	✓		2	✓	✓		✓	
17	Slavonian (Horned) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		1					2			
18	Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>		8+		1		2	✓	20+	3	
19	Sandhill Crane	<i>Grus canadensis</i>		15				2				
20	Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>			1	1	1		1			
21	Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>		✓		3		✓	✓			
22	Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>		✓				✓	✓		✓	
23	Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>					1					
24	Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>				1						
25	Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	20+	✓	✓	2	
26	Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>								1		
27	Black Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus bachmani</i>						4	2			
28	Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>		h								
29	Black Turnstone	<i>Arenaria melanocephala</i>		✓								
30	Surfbird	<i>Calidris virgata</i>		✓			1					
31	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>							6			
32	Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>			1		1	1				
33	Bonaparte's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
34	Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>						1				
35	Common Gull (Short-billed)	<i>Larus canus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
36	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawarensis</i>		✓		✓	✓				✓	
37	California Gull	<i>Larus californicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
39	Iceland Gull (Thayers race)	<i>Larus glaucooides thayeri</i>			1	✓		1				
40	American Herring Gull	<i>Larus smithsonianus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		1								
42	Guillemot (Common Murre)	<i>Uria aalge</i>		4				✓	✓	✓		
43	Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cepphus columba</i>						5				
44	Marbled Murrelet	<i>Brachyramphus marmoratus</i>		10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	Rhinoceros Auklet	<i>Cerorhinca monocerata</i>		C12	1			1				

	Common name	Scientific name	September 2022								
			12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
46	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓							
47	Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megasceryle alcyon</i>		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
48	Red-breasted Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus ruber</i>								1	
49	Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>						1	1		
50	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1					1		
51	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>							1		
52	Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>			✓			✓		1	
53	American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
54	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	<i>Poecile rufescens</i>								h	
56	Golden-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus satrapa</i>								h	
57	Pacific Wren	<i>Troglodytes pacificus</i>			h		h	✓	✓	h	
58	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓								
59	Varied Thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>				1+			h		
60	American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>									c10
61	American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>			1	1			2+		
62	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			h		h	h		3+	6+
63	Pine Siskin	<i>Spinus pinus</i>			h						2+
64	Red Fox Sparrow	<i>Passerella iliaca</i>					2		2	1	
65	Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>								1	
66	Lincoln's Sparrow	<i>Melospiza lincolni</i>				1		1			
67	Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>						4+			
68	Myrtle Warbler	<i>Setophaga coronata</i>				2	✓				
69	Townsend's Warbler	<i>Setophaga townsendi</i>				1					

## Mammals

1	Douglas's Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus douglasii</i>						1	1		
2	American Black Bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>								1	
	Spirit Bear	<i>Ursus americanus kermodei</i>								2	
3	Grizzly Bear	<i>Ursus arctos horribilis</i>			5	11	5				
4	Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>		c10							
5	Steller Sea Lion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>		1	4	✓	✓	✓		1	
6	Northern Elephant Seal	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i>			3	1	2	2	1		
7	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			10				6		
9	Dall's Porpoise	<i>Phocoenoides dalli</i>							9		
10	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>					3	3	6		
11	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			5	1	15+	20+	15+	5+	8

## Selected Other Species



**Plants**

Thimbleberry  
Salmonberry  
Red-Huckleberry  
Oval-leaved Blue Huckleberry  
Devil's Club  
Stink Currant  
Indian Hellebore  
Yarrow  
Silverweed  
Cow Parsnip  
Douglas Aster  
Shore Lupin  
False Azalea  
False Lilly of the Valley  
Foxglove (invasive)  
Western Buttercup  
Western Dock  
Skunk Cabbage  
Lyngbe's Sedge  
Basket Sedge  
Sitka Sedge  
Common Rush  
Dagger-leaved Rush  
Small Flowered Bullrush  
Beach Rye Grass

Elgrass  
Deer Fern  
Red Alder  
Sitka Alder  
Western Red Cedar  
Western Hemlock  
Sitka Spruce  
Red Elderberry  
Pacific Crab Apple  
Salal (Gaultheria)  
Japanese Knotweed (invasive)  
Seaside Plantain  
Sea Sandwort

**Seaweed**

Rockweed  
Bull Kelp  
Ruffled Kelp

**Fish**

Chum Salmon  
Pink Salmon  
Coho Salmon  
Pacific Herring  
Sand Lance  
Starry Flounder

**Jellyfish**

Moon Jellyfish

**Inter-tidal Species**

Common Shore Crab  
Ghost Shrimp  
Graceful Rock Crab  
Hermit Crab  
Lion's mane Jellyfish  
Acorn Barnacle  
Periwinkle  
Bay Mussels  
Nuttal's Cockle  
Butter Clam  
Dogwinkle  
Sitka Periwinkle  
Thatched Barnacle  
Northern Abalone  
Varnish Clam (non native)  
Plumose Anemones  
Green Sea Urchin  
Common Sea Star  
Tidepool Sculpin

**Slugs**

Banana Slug

**Dragonflies**

Lance-tipped Darter

