

**SPRING IN THE
WASHINGTON CASCADES**

A RELAXED & EASY TOUR

JUNE 4–10, 2017

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By Bob Sundstrom

The morning of the fourth day of our 2017 Spring in the Washington Cascades tour found us at the foot of a canyon in the Entiat Mountains, just where the canyon opens to the massive Columbia River. At the canyon's mouth, basalt cliffs tower several hundred feet above steep slopes of grass and sagebrush. Boldly marked White-throated Swifts zipped across the high rim of the cliffs, alongside Violet-green Swallows. A Canyon Wren sang its whistled, descending phrases. Soon a Yellow-breasted Chat sang its way to the top of a bare twig, where spotting scope views enhanced the bold yellow of its breast. The jumbled notes of a Lazuli Bunting now reached our ears, a species we had enjoyed at length the previous morning in the Wenatchee Mountains, its iridescent turquoise sparkling in the morning light. Farther up the canyon, a flash of orange and a guttural call drew our attention to a brilliantly colored Bullock's Oriole, and several Black-headed Grosbeaks flitted from shrub to shrub nearby. Black-billed Magpies flew lazily back and forth, vividly patterned in black and white. California Quail posed on fence posts.

The canyon road ascends more than eight miles, with a narrow creek at its low point near the road, a creek that leads uphill through landscapes gradually changing from sage to pines to fir forest and aspen groves surrounding beaver ponds—an ideal formula for habitat variety and, with it, diversity of bird life. We drove slowly up the canyon, stopping along the way in different zones. Just where the Ponderosa Pines began to fill in along the canyon, we watched a couple of Lewis's Woodpeckers flying out from a tree along the canyon rim—at the same moment a Clark's Nutcracker passed by. It's not too often that birds named for the two famed explorers show up in the same view! Nearby, a Golden Eagle posed for one spotting scope while a Chukar posed for views in a second scope. A female Ruffed Grouse stepped very slowly across the road; then her small chicks tumbled across the rocky road. Western Tanagers showed nicely, as did Cassin's Finches, Mountain Chickadees, Nashville Warblers, and Western Wood-Pewees.

Our Spring in the Washington Cascades tour starts in Seattle and comes at a perfect season to bird across the Cascade Mountains and among the varied habitats near Leavenworth, Washington. Just two hours east across the Cascade Mountains from Seattle and near the confluence of Icicle Creek and the Wenatchee River, Leavenworth looks up at splendid, snow-capped Mt. Stuart. Our lodging for four nights sits among the pines alongside the Wenatchee River as it tumbles down from the mountains, and every guest room features a balcony overlooking the rushing river. Early morning and during afternoon breaks, the balcony is a lovely spot to sit and watch birds perching in the trees near the river's edge, marmots clambering over the rocks, or Violet-green Swallows fluttering at the balcony railing. On short walks from our lodging we had fine views of White-headed Woodpeckers, Pygmy Nuthatches, and California Quail. As one of VENT's Relaxed & Easy tours, we had a nice breakfast at the inn each morning, picnicked or dined at a café at lunchtime, and relaxed each evening over a fine dinner a few minutes away in Leavenworth. There was time for breaks at the inn during each day's series of events, and additional options for those who might want a bit more birding time.

Highlights were many: an American Dipper adult feeding a chick under a bridge along a rushing creek, male Calliope Hummingbirds on sentry perches flashing their purple throats, and a male Williamson's Sapsucker hitching up a trunk—just one of nine species of woodpeckers seen on the trip, including all three Western sapsuckers; a Townsend's Solitaire perched atop boulders amid the steep, rushing torrent of Icicle Creek; the richly textured songs of Veeries, Hermit Thrushes, Swainson's Thrushes, and Varied Thrushes; Evening Grosbeaks feeding near the roadside; Varied Thrushes perched atop spire-shaped firs in the misty Cascade Mountains, and a Pacific Wren singing its long, rapid song from a perch near the roadside; lovely Townsend's Warblers and petite Chestnut-backed Chickadees foraging low in the cedars and firs; three different Wilson's Snipes standing atop fence posts at the roadside; scope close-ups of a handsome Sagebrush Sparrow; and flashy blue Mountain and Western bluebirds, flitting across open landscapes.

Although one cannot hope to see all the birds of Washington in a week-long tour, this tour incorporates some of the richest spring birding possibilities in the Northwest, with the luxury of spending most nights at the same comfortable inn, with diverse natural landscapes close at hand.

ITINERARY

June 4: Arrivals at Seatac and get-acquainted dinner. Night at Seatac Marriott.

June 5: After breakfast at Seatac hotel, birded in the lowlands west of the Cascade Mts. at Lake Sammamish State Park. Next east on I-90 up west slope of the Cascades, birding along Denny Creek Rd. near Denny Ck. Campground, before arriving at Snoqualmie Pass. After a stop at bird feeders near Roslyn, lunch in Cle Elum at El Caporal. Then east along back roads through Swauk Prairie, a dipper stop at First Ck. near Liberty, then north on Hwy 97 across Blewett Pass. Reached Leavenworth late afternoon, checked in Alpine Rivers Inn. Optional pre-dinner walk near lodging. Dinner at Visconti's in Leavenworth. First of four nights at Alpine Rivers Inn.

June 6: Optional bird walk before breakfast in vicinity of Alpine Rivers Inn. First of four 6:30 a.m. breakfasts on consecutive mornings at Alpine Rivers Inn. Morning birding along Camas Ck. Rd. in the Wenatchee Mts. bird at several elevations to above 3300'. Lunch at Big-Y Café in Peshastin. Afternoon break at Inn. Pre-dinner birding option to Icicle Ck. Canyon as far up as 8 Mile Bridge. Dinner at Visconti's in Leavenworth.

June 7: Optional bird walk before breakfast in vicinity of Alpine Rivers Inn. Birded Swakane Canyon from the Columbia River at 250' through various habitats to the top of the canyon at 2500'+, picnicking near 2000'. Returned to Cashmere via Nahahum Canyon Rd.; afternoon break at hotel. Dinner Blewett Brewing Company.

June 8: Optional bird walk before breakfast in vicinity of Alpine Rivers Inn. Re-crossed Blewett Pass to bird along Bettas Valley, then farm roads north of Ellensburg. After a Starbucks stop in Ellensburg, birded sagebrush habitat along Old Vantage Hwy., then continued east across Columbia River to lunch at small café in Quincy, before birding at Quincy Wildlife Area. Drove

Hwy. 28 along towering basalt cliffs on east side of Columbia R., and then Hwy. 2 back to Leavenworth. Dinner Visconti's.

June 9: Optional bird walk before breakfast in vicinity of Alpine Rivers Inn. After breakfast at Alpine Rivers Inn, loaded up luggage and drove up to Forest Road 6700 near Stevens Pass to bird mountain forest. Re-crossed Blewett Pass, lunch at El Caporal in Cle Elum, before heading west on I-90 toward Seatac. Arrived Marriott 4:00 pm. Farewell dinner at Aqua Terra and final night at Seatac Marriott.

June 10: Departures.

BIRDS

[names in *italics* are unusual or seen infrequently; ***bold italics*** are rare or very unusual sightings]

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS:

Canada Goose – a few of the resident Great Basin form, most along the Wenatchee River

Gadwall – a pair or two near Quincy

Mallard

Blue-winged Teal – this species and five other duck species on treatment pond near Quincy

Northern Shoveler

Redhead

Lesser Scaup

Common Merganser – females on several streams; two chicks swimming up First Creek

Ruddy Duck

GALLINACEOUS BIRDS:

California Quail – nice views of some atop posts

Chukar – this sneaky bird was seen twice in Swakane Canyon, a life bird for a number of people

Ruffed Grouse – one of the tour highlights was the female grouse calling her five tiny chicks across the roadway as we watched from the vans

CORMORANTS:

Double-crested Cormorant – a few at Quincy Wildlife Area

BITTERNS & HERONS:

Great Blue Heron

AMERICAN VULTURES

Turkey Vulture

EAGLES, HAWKS & ALLIES:

Osprey – some in the air, including near Alpine Rivers Inn; some sitting atop nests

Bald Eagle – along Lake Sammamish the first morning, at least five birds

Northern Harrier – in the sage east of Ellensburg, close views of a male or two

Swainson's Hawk – in the hayfields east of Ellensburg

Red-tailed Hawk – light and dark morphs

Golden Eagle – nice scope view, simultaneous with a *Chukar* scope view, in Swakane Canyon

RAILS & COOTS:

American Coot

PLOVERS, SANDPIPERS & ALLIES:

Killdeer – on a nest at Lake Sammamish park; lots along farm roads near Ellensburg

Spotted Sandpiper

Long-billed Curlew – two with chicks in a field north of Ellensburg

Wilson's Snipe – several atop fence posts, posing for photos

GULLS, & TERNS:

Bonaparte's Gull – an immature at Quincy treatment pond; unusual for location and time of year

Glaucous-winged Gull – a non-adult on the Columbia River

Caspian Tern – a couple at Quincy Wildlife Area

PIGEONS & DOVES:

Rock Pigeon

Band-tailed Pigeon – a couple in flight the first morning, at Lake Sammamish State Park

Eurasian Collared-Dove

Mourning Dove

SWIFTS:

Vaux's Swift – chattering overhead, daily at Alpine Rivers Inn

White-throated Swift – at the mouth of Swakane Canyon

HUMMINGBIRDS:

Rufous Hummingbird – males at Snoqualmie Pass and in the canyon

Calliope Hummingbird – posing for photos and scope views along Camas Ck. Rd. and in Swakane Cyn.

WOODPECKERS & ALLIES:

Lewis's Woodpecker – two in the lower part of Swakane Canyon

Williamson's Sapsucker – two males in the Wenatchee Mts., along Camas Ck. Rd.

Red-naped Sapsucker – in the aspens at big camas meadow

Red-breasted Sapsucker – after a vigil, at sap wells near Lake Sammamish

Downy Woodpecker – near Alpine Rivers Inn

Hairy Woodpecker

White-headed Woodpecker – One of the most anticipated birds of the trip, we didn't have to wait long to see one: a male perched right next to the group on the first afternoon walk and on several morning walks near the Inn. Heard in Swakane Canyon.

Northern Flicker – of the “red-shafted” variety

Pileated Woodpecker – flying among the tall larches well out Camas Ck. Rd.

FALCONS:

American Kestrel

Peregrine Falcon – seen in flight on three different occasions

FLYCATCHERS & ALLIES:

Olive-sided Flycatcher – heard at two locations

Western Wood-Pewee – a regular sighting most days of the trip, including near the Inn

Willow Flycatcher – seen well the first morning at Lake Sammamish; heard at other locations

Hammond's Flycatcher – seen the final day of the tour near Stevens Pass

Dusky Flycatcher – posing very nicely at the camas meadow

Pacific-slope Flycatcher – a very close view along Denny Ck. Rd. the first morning

Say's Phoebe

Western Kingbird – widespread east of the Cascades, in open habitats

Eastern Kingbird – seen in Nahahum Canyon and Quincy Wildlife Area

VIREOS:

Cassin's Vireo – after much chasing about, two seen near the big camas meadow

Warbling Vireo – very good views of this widespread species

JAYS, MAGPIES & CROWS:

Steller's Jay – the dark, crested jay in the Inn neighborhood and elsewhere

Black-billed Magpie – first seen well in lower Swakane Cyn.

Clark's Nutcracker – flying by a couple of Lewis's Woodpeckers in Swakane Cyn.

American Crow

Common Raven

LARKS:

Horned Lark – wonderful looks at males in the sage

SWALLOWS & MARTINS:

Tree Swallow

Violet-green Swallow – the most widespread swallow of the tour

Northern Rough-winged Swallow – along several streams

Bank Swallow – nesting in a sand pile north of Blewett Pass

Cliff Swallow – attending nests under barn eaves

Barn Swallow

TITMICE through CREEPERS:

Black-capped Chickadee

Mountain Chickadee – the chickadee with the white line above the eye

Chestnut-backed Chickadee – seen very well at Lake Sammamish

Bushtit – at Lake Sammamish

Red-breasted Nuthatch – first responders to owl whistles

Pygmy Nuthatch – wonderful, amazingly close views near Alpine Rivers Inn

Brown Creeper – at Lake Sammamish

WRENS & DIPPERS:

Rock Wren – heard

Canyon Wren – one sang at the mouth of Swakane Canyon, and stood atop boulders

House Wren – nesting near the Inn

Pacific Wren – a tiny cedar colored wren singing its intricate song near Denny Ck. Campground

Marsh Wren – heard at the Quincy ponds

American Dipper – a tour highlight was adults feeding a chick under a bridge over First Ck.; also seen along Peshastin Ck.

KINGLETS:

Golden-crowned Kinglet – a male flashing its fiery orange crest near Stevens Pass

THRUSHES & ALLIES:

Western Bluebird – several pairs on Swauk Prairie the first day; later in Bettas Valley

Mountain Bluebird – gorgeous sky blue males in Bettas Valley

Townsend's Solitaire – perching atop boulders in the middle of tumbling Icicle Creek

Veery – in the riparian thickets of upper Swakane Canyon

Swainson's Thrush – seen well the first morning, its beautiful song was heard at several places

Hermit Thrush – a superb singer, seen by a few near Stevens Pass

American Robin

Varied Thrush – two different males singing atop the tall, spire-shaped firs near Stevens Pass

MIMIDS:

Sage Thrasher – in the sage, shy and skulking

STARLINGS & ALLIES:

European Starling

WAXWINGS:

Cedar Waxwing – pairs almost daily

WOOD WARBLERS

Nashville Warbler – tiny warblers with yellow throat and breast and gray face

MacGillivray's Warbler – often heard, seen best along Camas Ck. Rd.

Common Yellowthroat – near Lk. Sammamish

Yellow Warbler – seen the first morning, heard widely

Yellow-rumped Warbler – good views of Audubon's type males and females

Black-throated Gray Warbler – nice view of a female along Denny Ck. Rd.

Townsend's Warbler – fine views in the mountain conifers of this striking yellow and black warbler

Wilson's Warbler – near Denny Ck. Campground

Yellow-breasted Chat – scoped in Swakane Canyon, where many perched males were singing

SPARROWS & ALLIES:

Spotted Towhee – widespread

Chipping Sparrow

Brewer's Sparrow – right next to the road in the sage; tiny, with an amazing trilled song

Vesper Sparrow

Sagebrush Sparrow – great scope views of an accommodating bird; formerly part of Sage Sparrow species, which has been divided into Sagebrush and Bell's Sparrow species

Savannah Sparrow

Song Sparrow – the heavily marked *morphna* subspecies of the Pacific NW

Lincoln's Sparrow – singing atop little shrubs in the big camas meadow

White-crowned Sparrow

Dark-eyed Junco

GROSBEAKS, BUNTINGS & ALLIES:

Western Tanager – colorful males with red faces and yellow bodies

Black-headed Grosbeak – especially good views in lower Swakane Canyon, but heard/seen widely

Lazuli Bunting – terrific views of a singing male, posing again and again at the camas meadow

BLACKBIRDS & ALLIES:

Red-winged Blackbird

Western Meadowlark – flashy views along Swauk Prairie and in the sage

Yellow-headed Blackbird – first seen north of Ellensburg

Brewer's Blackbird – a common sighting in the open country on the tour

Brown-headed Cowbird

Bullock's Oriole –flashy orange males and dull yellow females

FINCHES:

House Finch

Purple Finch – seen both west and east of the Cascade Mts. crest

Cassin's Finch – the common finch in the Ponderosa pines

Red Crossbill – flying over, calling

Pine Siskin

American Goldfinch

Evening Grosbeak – first seen at feeders near Roslyn, then again in nesting habitat

OLD WORLD SPARROWS:

House Sparrow

MAMMALS

Douglas' Squirrel – near Alpine Rivers Inn and in the mountains

Yellow Pine Chipmunk

Yellow-bellied Marmot – regulars, including some young ones, at burrows near Alpine Rivers Inn

Mountain Cottontail – seen by some

Mule Deer – the only deer species in the area of the tour

Elk – one cow Elk in the sage

Bighorn Sheep – a herd of 11 rams on the high slopes of lower Swakane Canyon

HERPS & OTHER VERTEBRATES

Bull/Gopher Snake – three along the road up Swakane Cyn.

Western Fence Lizard

Bullfrog

BUTTERFLIES (identified by Erik Bruhnke)

Lorquin's Admiral

Indra Swallowtail
Western Tiger Swallowtail
Pale Swallowtail
Anicia Checkerspot
Boisduval's Blue
Square-spotted Blue