

Vancouver Island and Jasper National Park, August 2023



This summer I have had the chance to visit Canada on a family vacation for two weeks. Despite not being a wildwatching holiday, I have managed to see 21 mammal species and 119 bird species, many of those lifers for me. My dad shares my passion for the outdoors and has recently picked an interest in birdwatching, so when we go on holiday, we always try to balance enjoying nature and not boring my sister and my mom too much. We spent 3 days in Vancouver Island, 7 in the Rocky Mountains and the rest travelling in between. The highlight of the trip was the whale watching excursion we did in North Vancouver Island, and the biggest miss the Mountain Goat in Jasper. Surprisingly, we didn't see any Bears. I wasn't too disappointed with this as I have seen both Bear species before, but I thought they were pretty much guaranteed if we spent two weeks in BC and the Rockies.

My trip started on the 19th of August in London, and after two flights and a long stopover in Toronto I landed in Vancouver early in the morning of the 20th. My parents and my sister picked me up in the RV we had rented for the next two weeks, and we went to a parking lot near the Tsawwassen Ferry Terminal to get some sleep. At 8am we had our ferry to Nanaimo in Vancouver Island. As soon as we got in the ferry, I saw the first mammal of the trip, a **Harbour Seal** in the terminal itself, and some common seabirds too. My dad and I had planned to stay in the upper deck looking for wildlife during the journey, but it was too windy, and the sea was too rough to see anything. After landing, we got on the road towards Alder Bay, in the northern part of the island, where the next morning we had booked a whale watching trip. We stopped for lunch in the Oyster Bay rest area near Campbell River, a lovely place to do some light birdwatching. Here we saw another Harbour Seal and our first **Bald Eagle**. We continued our way north and stopped in the town of Seaward to get some water for the RV and empty the dumps. As the place looked very nice, we decided to spend the night in the RV Park there. We took a short walk to the seafront and the views of the Johnstone Strait were very impressive, but once again the sea was too rough to look for anything.

The next morning, we left early, as we still had some kilometres to drive to Alder Bay for our whale watching trip. We had booked the afternoon trip with Seasmoke Whale Watching, and the experience was superb. As we were being picked up, another boat that was coming into the pier told us they had seen some Orcas nearby, so after the initial briefing we went after them. Orcas were my main objective of the holiday. Around 300 Northern Resident Orcas live in North Vancouver Island during the summer months, but this year they seemed to be less common than other years, so I was not too sure if we would see them. It took us around 30 minutes to get to the area, and soon after stopping the boat the guide spotted the pod in the distance. As we got closer, we saw it was a group of 5 **Bigg's Killer Whales** including a big male, fantastic!!! During the time we spent watching them, a group of 30 **Pacific White-sided Dolphins** swam by, and we also saw the first **Humpback Whale** of the day. All this in the same spot and within minutes!! We hoped the Orcas would try to attack the Dolphins, but they didn't seem too interested. The Dolphins, however, did notice the Orcas and went quiet quickly, so we couldn't enjoy them properly.



After this, we continued our excursion watching some **Steller's Sea Lions** (another lifer) in a haul-out site, and another Humpback Whale. We reached more open seas, and we had 1000s of seabirds flying around, including more than a hundred **Fork-tailed Storm Petrels**!! I really wanted to see this little seabird, but I was not very confident as they are never very common. However just a few days before our excursion a big storm pushed a lot of them into the area. Soon after, we found two more Humpback Whales. As our guide explained, they were a female called *Guardian* and her newborn calf. *Guardian* had been summering in the area for years, but this year was the first time she returned with a calf, so the sighting felt very special. We enjoyed them for some time, during which the calf would often breach for small breaths, until they dipped showing their tails (only the mom, the calf tried but couldn't lift the tail enough). We then started our way back to the dock, stopping in the way to see a small group of **Sea Otters**. I had seen these lovely creatures some years ago in California, but it was the first time I could see them so close and take some pictures. The final sea mammal of the trip was another Harbour Seal when we were landing in the dock.



We had lunch after the whale excursion and started heading south. We decided to spend the night in the town of Zeballos, in the western coast of the island. To get there, we had to drive through a gravel road for around 40kms. The road was beautiful, and looked promising for Bears, but we didn't encounter any. If there were any around, we probably scared them away as the RV in the gravel road was very noisy. Besides, the forest was too thick to try and look further away from the roadside. The next morning, we had a quick walk around Zeballos. The inlet was spectacular, but aside from the usual Harbour Seal and an **American Red Squirrel** there wasn't much else to see mammal-wise. We then headed south to Nanaimo for the night before catching the ferry the next morning. We stopped for lunch in the Kin Beach Provincial Park, where we saw yet another Harbour Seal, and driving around Nanaimo looking for a place to stay we saw our first **Mule Deers** and several feral Rabbits. We couldn't find any proper place so we parked in a park near the ferry terminal for the night.



We woke up early to take the 8am ferry. This time the weather was calm, and the journey looked more promising, so my dad and I spent the two hours in the top deck scanning around

looking for wildlife. We saw the first mammal of the day even before departing, a **North American River Otter** in the shipyards. Once in the sea, it didn't take us too long to find the first Humpback Whale of the day, out of 6 in total. None of them were very close but we could see them tail-slapping, which was pretty cool. The rest of the mammals of the journey were my first ever **Harbour Porpoise** and several Harbour Seals. After landing we started our long way to the Rockies, stopping in Salmon Arm for the night. The drive was uneventful. We did some birdwatching in the bay the next day, and also saw some **Beaver** traces. I imagine it isn't too hard to see them early in the morning. We carried on, arriving in Lake Louise in the afternoon. We stayed there for the night and drove to Jasper the next day for the next 6 nights (25th -31st). Before leaving for Jasper, we hiked to the actual lake, which was pretty crowded, but we managed to see some American Red Squirrels and a Vole I believe was a **Southern Red-backed Vole**. We then started the drive to Jasper through the spectacular Icefields Parkway. In a stop at the Athabasca Glacier, I saw some **Grey-crowned Rosefinches**, and elsewhere during the drive we saw a couple of Mule Deers. We stopped in the Goats and Glaciers lookout near Jasper too, but there were no Mountain Goats around. From reviews I have read online they don't seem to go there as often as before. The stop was well worth for the views though, and we also saw the first Chipmunk of the trip, that I believe was a **Least Chipmunk**.

On the 26th, our first full day in Jasper, we decided to go hiking around the Mount Edith Cavell area. This is a good place to see **American Pikas**, but early in the morning they were not around. We kept climbing up, coming across two **Hoary Marmots**, our first **Columbia Ground Squirrels** and several **Golden-mantled Squirrels**, but we couldn't find the Pikas. It wasn't until the very end of the hike that one of these little animals crossed the trail right in front of us, not too far away from the parking lot. Once we learned its call it wasn't too hard to find some more, and we enjoyed some close views of these fantastic creatures. We couldn't do much in the evening, as we had to go to Jasper town to run some errands.



The next day, we tried climbing Cinquefoil Mountain. This would have been a very good chance to see the Mountain Goats, but the scramble was too much for my mom and my sister, so we had to turn back before reaching the Goat habitat. The most interesting sightings were

some Squirrels and a **Golden Eagle**. We spent the afternoon driving along the 16th Highway east of Jasper town, watching our first **Elks** and **Bighorn Sheep**. For the next day, we had planned to go to Maligne Lake. It was Monday so we thought it wouldn't be as crowded as in the weekend. The road there is good for animals, but we arrived a little too late and there was some traffic already, and we only saw Mule Deers and Elks. The lake itself was amazing, and hiking the surrounding hills very pleasant, but not too productive wildlife-wise. In the evening, as we had time, we decided to drive the road up and down to see what could come up, and we added one more species of Deer, the **White-tailed Deer**. They are apparently rare in the park. Even though we stayed until late, the weather was very nice so there were a lot of cyclists in the road, which I imagine was not ideal to see any wildlife.



In our 4th day we climbed the Whistlers Peak from the bottom. Here we had one of the highlights of the vacation, and maybe even my birding career. We were walking in a narrow trail when suddenly a **Spruce Grouse** flew right across and landed in a tree nearby. It started eating and progressively got closer until it ended up jumping to the trail right next to us! Yet this was nothing compared with what followed. The bird started to make some weird cackling noise, and as we started to move decided to attack and knock down my dad! Unfortunately, there is no footage of the incident as I was too busy laughing to take my phone out and record. After surviving the vicious attack, we carried on and soon got out of the forest. In the more alpine areas, we saw some more Pikas and Golden-mantled Squirrels, and in the way back some kind of Mouse/Vole that was too quick to try to ID. We tried with the Bears again in the evening, driving up and down the Pyramid Lake Road above Jasper town, but once again it felt too crowded for anything to get close to the road.

For our 5th and last day, we decided to go back to the Maligne Lake Road in the morning, as it looked it would be the best place to see anything. We were just seeing the usual Deer species until we saw two cars stopping next to two darker animals. Two **Mooses**! They were a

cow and a calf eating next to the road. Their numbers in Jasper are low, but the Maligne Lake area is the best place to see them. For the rest of the day, we did some light hiking around the Pyramid Lake area, with some nice birding but no mammals.



After this our holiday was coming to an end. We had a long drive back to Vancouver, and we spent one night in the Juniper Beach Provincial Park on the way. This place is quite in contrast with the rest of British Columbia as it is very desert-like. It is a good place to see Coyotes, but it was raining when we arrived (the only rain we had in the whole trip) so we didn't even try looking for them. I still managed to add some final birds to my list. On our final night in Vancouver, we stayed in a RV park in West Vancouver. A quick stroll in the waterfront yielded the last mammals of the trip, at least 3 different Harbour Seals.

Although I missed the Mountain Goats and didn't see any Bears, the trip was very successful overall. I got to see 7 sea mammal species between the two ferry trips and the whale watching excursion, plus 4 species of Deer in Jasper. I also saw the Pikas, and even if they are not rare, they were one of the animals I wanted to see the most in the trip. See the mammal list below, in no particular order, with lifers highlighted.

1. Harbour Seal. Seen in almost every stop in the coast in Vancouver Island.
2. **Killer Whale**. 5 seen in the whale watching trip in Alder Bay (21st of August). Absolute highlight of the trip.
3. Humpback Whale. 4 seen in Alder Bay (21st of August), and 6 in the Nanaimo-Vancouver ferry (23rd of August).
4. **Pacific White-sided Dolphin**. A pod of approximately 30 seen in Alder Bay (21st of August).
5. **Steller's Sea Lion**. Several seen in Alder Bay (21st of August).
6. **Harbour Porpoise**. 1 seen in the Nanaimo-Vancouver ferry (23rd of August).
7. Sea Otter. 6 seen in Alder Bay.

8. **North American River Otter.** One seen in the Nanaimo ferry terminal (23rd of August).
9. **Elk.** Seen almost every day in Jasper, around town and in the Maligne Lake road.
10. **Mule Deer.** Seen in Nanaimo (22nd of August) and common in the Rockies, but not too conspicuous.
11. **White-tailed Deer.** One seen in Jasper, Maligne Canyon area (28th of August).
12. **Moose.** Two seen in Jasper, Maligne Lake road (30th of August).
13. **Golden-mantled Squirrel.** Seen in several stops along the Icefields Parkway (25th of August) and in several hikes in Jasper.
14. **Least Chipmunk** (*probable*). Seen in Jasper mostly around lookouts. ID based on previous reports.
15. **American Red Squirrel.** Common during the trip.
16. **Columbia Ground Squirrel.** Several seen in Jasper, Edith Cavell Meadows trail (26th of August).
17. **Shrew sp.** A very small mammal crossed the road next to the camping in Jasper, it didn't look a rodent (25th of August).
18. **Southern Red Backed Vole** (*probable*). One seen in Lake Louise area. ID based on reddish back (24th of August).
19. **Hoary Marmot.** Two seen in Jasper, Edith Cavell Meadows Trail (26th of August).
20. **Bighorn Sheep.** One group along Hwy. 1 near Yoho NP (24th of August) and another group in Jasper, Hwy. 16 20km East of Jasper town (27th of August).
21. **American Pika.** Several seen in Jasper, Edith Cavell Meadows Trail (27th of August) and Whistlers Peak (29th of August).

I won't include a list of birds in this report, but if anyone is interested, they can find the eBird trip report [here](#). I didn't make any effort to see the Vancouver Island Marmot as I thought that hijacking part of the family vacations for a marmot was too much. In hindsight, I should have at least done a bit more of research. Turns out that Mount Washington Ski Resort, the place where the marmots are seen, is very close to Campbell River. In our way up or down to Alder Bay, it very well may have been possible to do a quick lunch stop in the area, and at least give it a try.

We think the reason why we missed the Bears in Jasper was, simply, lack of food in the roadsides and everywhere in general. We barely saw any wild berries, and the effect of the draught was evident across the park. Spring is a much better time for them. As for the Mountain Goats, unless you hit jackpot in the roadside lookout it seems some serious scrambling is required to see them, and we didn't come prepared for this. My parents managed to see them in the area 30ish years ago, so I'll need to come back some day to get them!

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