

Northern BC Road (+ Jasper NP) trip July 2021

By Jamie Lamb

There is a lot of information on mammalwatching about trips to Vancouver Island, but there is so much more to British Columbia than just the Island, hence this report.

This was a trip my girlfriend Amanda and I took leaving Vancouver on July 9th and returning on the 27th. The main target species on my trips around Western Canada are always Wolf and Lynx, however, both of them, as many will know, require a lot of luck. So we set ourselves the more realistic targets of Wood Bison, Stone Sheep and Caribou. All relatively easy to find and fairly common in certain areas. I have tried to find Caribou in the Canadian Rockies before, but they are becoming more rare and harder to find by the year in the Southern Canadian Rockies, so we ventured to their range in the Northern BC Rockies.

Originally we had planned to try the Yukon as there we would have had a better chance for Canadian Lynx (which would be a lifer for me). But with Covid restrictions still in place for those not fully vaccinated when entering the Yukon, and at that point we were only partially vaccinated, we decided on spending more time in Northern BC, in the areas between Stone Mountain Provincial Park and Laird River, including Muncho Lake.

Accommodation was a mixture of sleeping in our Subaru Forester (I have a built in bed), tent camping and the odd cabin. A lot of the campgrounds we had planned to stay were not running as normal or the owners had given up and closed all together as there just simply wasn't enough customers due to the pandemic. This led moving through the trip quicker than planned.

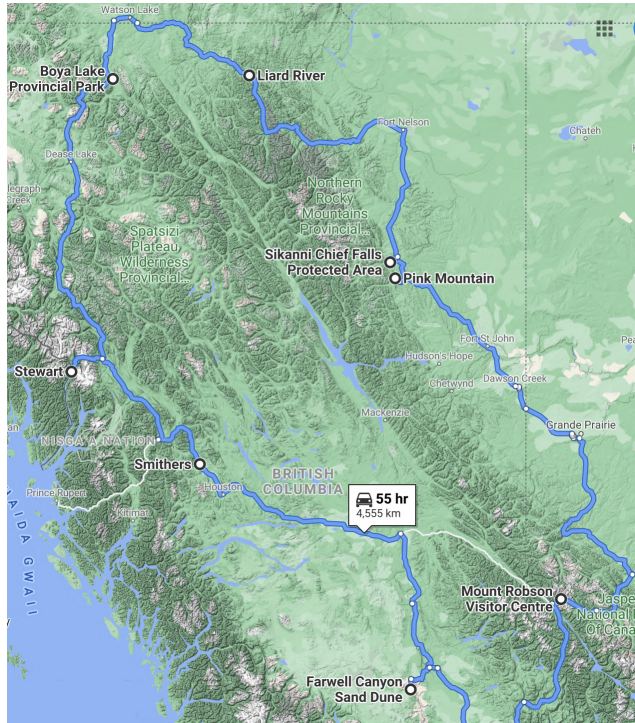
Itinerary

- July 9 Vancouver to Merritt
- July 10 Merritt to Mt Robson Provincial Park
- July 11 Mt Robson Provincial Park & Jasper National Park
- July 12 Mt Robson Provincial Park & Jasper National Park
- July 13 Mt Robson Provincial Park to Dawson Creek
- July 14 Dawson Creek to Pink Mountain area
- July 15 Pink Mountain area to Stone Mountain Provincial Park via Sikanni Falls
- July 16 Stone Mountain Provincial Park to Laird River Hot Springs Provincial Park
- July 17 Laird River & Muncho Lake Provincial Park
- July 18 Laird River & Muncho Lake Provincial Park & Stone Mountain Provincial Park
- July 19 Stone Mountain Provincial Park to Laird River
- July 20 Laird River to Boya Lake (Tā Ch'ilā Provincial Park)
- July 21 Boya Lake (Tā Ch'ilā Provincial Park)
- July 22 Boya Lake to Stewart
- July 23 Stewart to Smithers
- July 24 Smithers

July 25 Smithers to Quesnel

July 26 Williams Lake

July 27 Williams Lake & Farewell Canyon to Vancouver

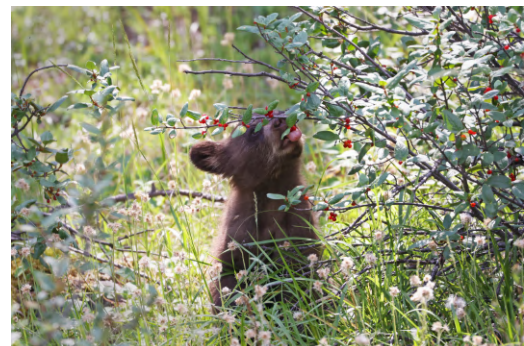


We camped on the night of the 9th near Merritt and finished the rest of the drive to Mt Robson PP on the 10th. Along the way we saw our first Moose of the trip, on a road side lake between Lac Le Jeune and Kamloops. We also encountered a handful of Mule Deer close to the Highway between Kamloops and Clearwater. We didn't stop in the Kamloops area on this occasion, but the same time the year before we hiked the Mara Canyon on the northern side of Kamloops. There we saw a whole herd of California Bighorn Sheep, so the northern side of Kamloops is a great place to find them. Rattlesnake can also be found here.

Mt. Robson Provincial Park & Jasper National Park

The main reason for visiting this area was not primarily for mammal watching, as we met up with some friends to do some hiking around Jasper. However, the wildlife is so plentiful there that it is difficult not to come across mammals.

On the 11th we hiked the East Ridge of Edith Cavell Mountain. On the drive there we saw a mother Black Bear with 2 very young cubs between Jasper town and the Edith Cavell carpark along the 93A. The carpark for the Edith Cavell hike is fairly high and is surrounded by rocky escarpments. As soon as we opened the car door I could hear Pika and Marmot. Along the hike we saw at least 10+ Hoary Marmot, some very close to the car park, but more higher up on the ridge, which made for great photo opportunities with the glaciers of Edith Ca-





vell as a backdrop.

We also saw a few American Pika in the rocky areas around the beginning of the hike and 3 Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel (a lifer for me).



On the 12th we hiked the Sulphur Skyline from the Miette Hot Springs carpark. The carpark had a herd of Rocky Mountain Bighorn licking minerals from the bottom of the cars and rubbing the last of their winter coats off on the cars. We also saw a large herd of Rocky Mountain Elk crossing the Athabasca River close to Jasper town.



We left this area on the 13th and drove all the way to Dawsons Creek (the start of the Alaska Highway (AH)). Along the Yellowhead Highway between Jasper town and Hinton there are a few areas where the rocky mountainous sections come down to the road, this is where we saw more Bighorns from. This is also a good area for Mountain Goat, at the right time of year. We also saw more Elk and what I thought was a Groundhog, although I haven't been able to find much information about their presence in Jasper. The rest of the journey was relatively uneventful with only a few Mule Deer be-

tween Hinton and Grand Cache and another Bighorn herd on the road after Grande Cache.

We didn't drive the road to Maligne Lake on this occasion, but it is common knowledge that this road is good for wolf, with a bit of luck. Also, Maligne Lake is good for seeing moose. Maybe not so much in the summer due to the droves of tourists. Wolf can also be seen occasionally from the Highway leaving Jasper in the direction of Mt. Robson and Valemont. I had a great experience with a pack near Moose Lake, along this stretch of road in October 2018.

Pink Mountain & Sikanni Falls

I had read that the Pink Mountain alpine area was used by Caribou and Grizzly Bear in the summer months, so we decided to check it out. There were some pretty severe forest fires further south, which made the visibility poor and scanning in the smoky air a waste of time.

All we saw up there were more Hoary Marmot and the



odd White tailed deer back down the mountain near the AH. We camped at Duhu Lake where we saw a few Snowshoe Hare. In the morning we headed to the Sikanni Falls where we saw more Hare along the bumpy road and a lone Mountain Goat on the cliffs around the falls.



Stone Mountain PP, Muncho Lake PP and Laird River Hot Springs PP

This area is fantastic for wildlife viewing, known as the Serengeti of North America. We had planned a few hikes in the area and had to rearrange the hiking days around the bad weather, so there was a bit of back and forth, which I didn't mind as there is so much to see from the AH. On the 15th after Fort Nelson and between Toad River we saw 3 Black Bear from the road. Once you get to Stone Mountain PP and pass the Summit Lake, there is a steep rocky pass where you are pretty much guaranteed to find Stone Sheep, if you spend a little time there. We saw our first Caribou in North America near the Rocky Mountain

lodge 10 minutes after the sheep.

The next day, due to bad weather, we rescheduled our planned hikes in Stone Mt PP and continued through to Muncho Lake and Laird River. We stopped at the Mineral Lick north of Muncho Lake and saw 2 Black Bear cubs sprinting down the steep mineral lick cliffs, looking like they were playing Tag (or

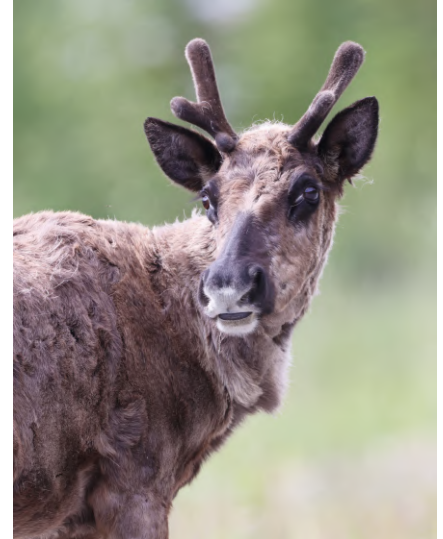
Tig). Although we al-

ways carry Bear

Spray, we left the

area soon after just in case we came across an angry mother. As we left the carpark we found another young Black Bear on the AH.

As you leave the Muncho lake and near Laird River, you arrive in Wood Bison country. They are very easy



to see, as they hang out in the cleared grassy sections along the sides of the AH. We stayed in a cabin out the back of the Laird River Hot Springs Lodge and I reckon there were maybe 70+ Bison hanging around the area. Some even came and grazed in the RV parking and tenting area, scratching their chins on the picknick tables.

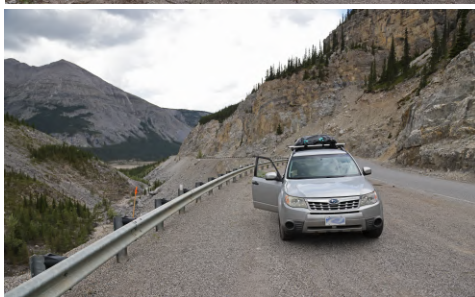
The Hot Springs are definitely worth a dip if you are passing through. There is a boardwalk over a marsh to get to the hot springs which attract Moose to the warmer waters. There is also the Hotwater Physa or *Physella wrighti*, a freshwater snail endemic to the

Laird River Hot Springs area. I spoke with a young French guy who said he was relaxing by himself at

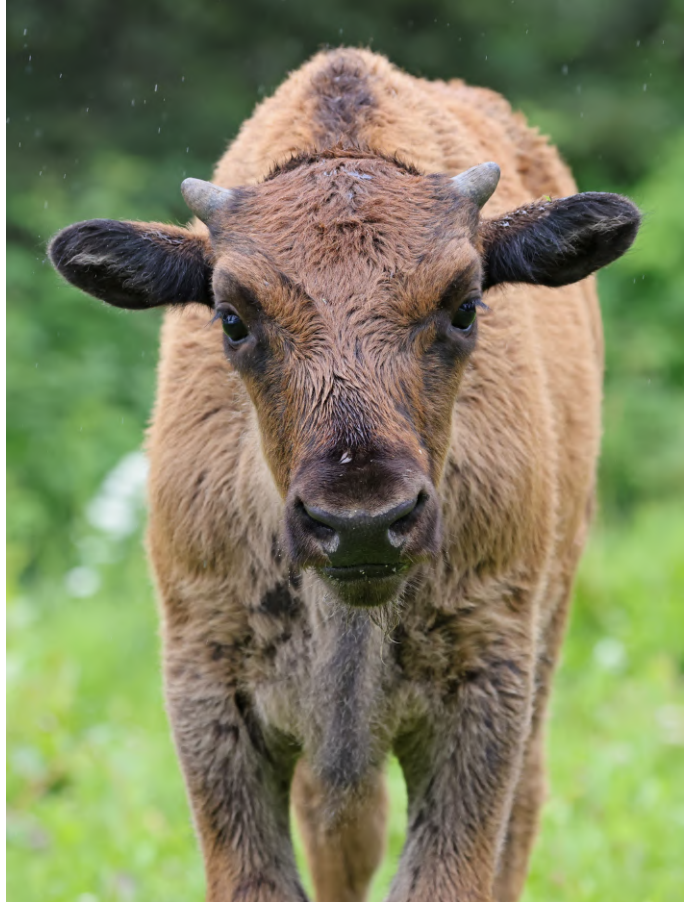
around 10pm in the hot springs and had a Moose come and pee in the water right next to him.

On the 17th we took a drive down back down to Muncho Lake to hike the Stone's Sheep Trail, again stopping at the mineral lick, this time finding a Porcupine. Then we drove back up to Laird River to stay in the cabin.

On the 18th we drove all the way back down to Stone Mt PP, passing Bison, another herd of Stone Sheep north of Muncho lake (almost getting ploughed down by a speeding trucker, a real problem along the AH), 1 Black Bear quite high up a mountain where the Toad River runs through Muncho Lake PP, a



Moose with a very young calf south of Muncho Lake, 3 young Caribou along the same stretch of road where Toad River runs in Muncho Lake, 1 Moose eating water vegetation in the lake behind Toad River RV park, another Black Bear along the AH as you enter the west end of Stone Mt PP, more Stone Sheep at the same steep pass and a mother and calf Caribou close to where we parked for the night at McDonald Creek. In the afternoon we hiked the Flower Springs Lake trail, no mammals, but nice if you like alpine flowers.





On the 19th we hiked the Summit Peak Trail from Summit Lake. We saw our first Stone Sheep rams, on the same pass as I mentioned earlier, on the drive to the hike. Also another Caribou on the AH next to the Summit Lake campground. I am a keen wildlife photographer and really wanted a picture of a Bull Caribou with large antlers, unfortunately for me the only one I saw was on this hike where I didn't bring my big lens. However, even with the lens it would have been difficult as it was sprinting down the mountain and into the tree line. On return to the AH and venturing north again we found 3 more individual Caribou within the Stone Mt PP, 1 Mule Deer, another 3 herds of Sheep and a new herd of Bison north of Muncho Lake.

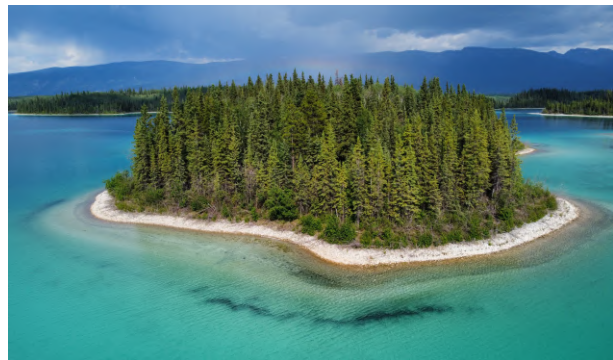
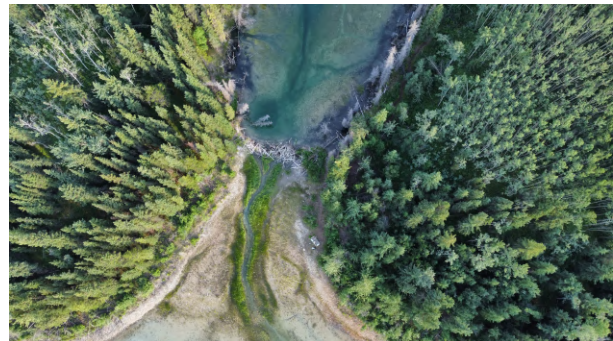
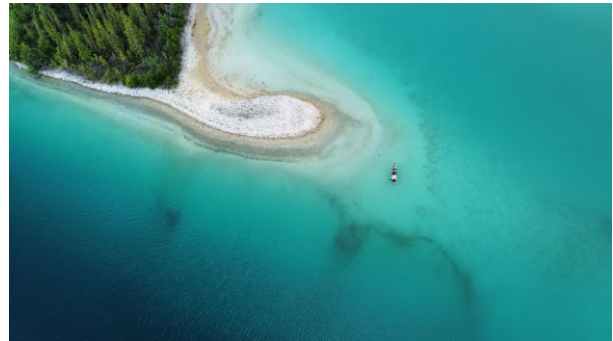
Boya Lake (Tā Ch'ilā Provincial Park)

On the 20th we drove from Laird River to Boya Lake. We were allowed 24 hours in the Yukon to transit back into BC. We left by leaving the AH and driving back south down highway 37. Along the drive we saw another Black Bear 10 minutes after Laird River on the AH and 5 lone male Bison between Laird River and Watson Lake.

Boya Lake is absolutely stunning! However, the mosquitos this year were horrific! Biting you through 2 layers of clothing, easily the most aggressive mosquitos I have ever experienced and no amount of Deet would deter them. The area doesn't offer much in the way of mammal watching, however there is a nice trail to a large beaver dam (middle picture) where we saw around 4 beavers in the evening and Red Squirrel are everywhere (as they were most of the trip).



Beavers are common throughout BC, so I didn't spend much time photographing them, as the mozzys were so bad, although a beaver picture would have been nice in the turquoise water. I am currently based in Vancouver and they are common throughout the city, even in downtown parks. If you are looking for beavers around Vancouver I would recommend Minnekhada Regional Park, Jericho Beach,



Stanley Park or Colony Farm.

On the walk back from the Beaver dam I had a close encounter with a porcupine.

On the 21st we had a chilled lake day. They say the water is good for swimming, but I found it bloody freezing and couldn't stay in more than 15 minutes, but it was a nice break from the mozzys. We rented a canoe in the afternoon and headed out into the lake where we saw another Black Bear along the side of the lake.

Boya Lake to Stewart

On the 22nd we took the long drive to Stewart, planning on staying Tatogga Lake, but the campsite was unexpectedly closed when we arrived, so we drove on to Stewart. Along the 37 we saw a large bear on the road after Jade City, which may have been a potential Grizzly. By the time we caught up with it, it had disappeared into the dense forest, so I'm only counting it as another Black Bear. I read good things about Gnat Pass south of Dease Lake, but we had no luck with seeing anything. We had 2 separate Red Foxes sightings, 1 all black, just north of the Stikine River. We also saw 2 small voles which I think were Southern Redback Voles near Iskut.

The area of the 37 north of Meziadin is said to be one of the best places in North America to see bears. We saw 1 young Black Bear about 10km north of Meziadin Junction and another on the road between Meziadin and Stewart.



Stewart and its Alaskan neighbour town of Hyder are famous for its bears. The Hyder side has a special viewing area along the river called the Fish Creek Wildlife Observation Site. We were still a month or so premature for the best bear viewing as the salmon run had not yet started and it wouldn't have mattered anyway as the US border was still closed. Which was a shame as we would have like to have visited the Salmon Glacier, which is in Canada, but the viewpoint is on the US side.



When we spoke to the owner of the campground we stayed at and told her we had only seen 2 Black Bears in the area. She was surprised and said it was probably due to there being a lot of food available

in the forests at that time of year. She told us if you come in spring, they come and eat the roadside flowers and in the autumn they come down to the rivers to eat salmon. She said that is you drive on the roads between Stewart and any of the towns in the surrounding areas, like Terrace, Kitimat or Prince Rupert, its not unusual to see between 15 and 20 bears within an hour.



We had planned to head to Prince Rupert and visit the Khutzeymateen Grizzly Bear Sanctuary to give ourselves a good chance of seeing Grizzly, but the main tour company that visits the area had cancelled all tours in 2021 due to the pandemic. The only other tour company allowed to visit the sanctuary were from an extortionately expensive lodge, so we gave it a miss. We do plan on visiting the Bella Coola area later in the year to find Grizzly Bears during the Salmon Run.

Stewart to Smithers, Williams lake, Farewell Canyon and back to Vancouver

The drive from Stewart to Meziadin is very scenic and has many glaciers to see along the way. We found another Black Bear along the road on the wildlife corridor north of Gitanyow and also another Groundhog. In Smithers we hiked the Hudson Bay Mountain on the off chance of finding Mountain Goat, but had no luck, great hike though, and we did see another Black Bear on the road down from the Ski Resort.

The drive from Smithers to Quesnel was very uneventful as it's a busy highway, mostly farmland, just the odd Mule Deer around Prince George. The Prince George area is said to have the most dense population of Moose in North America and its easy to see why as there many forests and marshy lakes in the area.

We then stayed near Williams Lake and took an aimless drive around some farmland and along the Beaver Valley road. During this drive we saw a coyote, a colony of Columbian Ground Squirrel, an insane amount of Least Chipmunk and a lot of Mule Deer.

That evening we went to Scout Island in Williams Lake, which is a birders paradise. We saw a couple of Beavers and a cou-



ple of Muskrats. I went back early the next morning to try for River Otter but was unsuccessful. However, I did see a lot more Mule Deer, more Beaver, Muskrat and a colony of Yellow Bellied Marmot were visible on the mainland. For birders this is a good place for Pelican, nesting Osprey, Northern Flicker, Red-necked Grebe, hummingbirds, Common Loon, Wood Duck, Yellow-headed Blackbird, flycatchers, woodpeckers, Yellow Warbler and Great Blue Heron. There are also Western Painted Turtle present around the island.



We drove to Farewell Canyon to see the sand dunes and Hoodoos close to the Fraser River which were very cool. This is another good area for California Bighorn, but we didn't put much effort in searching, although we did find bobcat tracks. On the drive back to Vancouver we took the scenic route through Whistler to avoid forest fires on the main route through Hope and Lytton. On that final route, we saw another Coyote near Whistler, before re-

turning home.

24 mammal species viewed (no order)

11 Woodland Caribou – Seen throughout Stone Mt & Toad River area

18 Black Bear – Seen throughout Province

15 + Hoary Marmot – East Ridge of Edith Cavell trail, Jasper NP & Pink Mountain

4 Moose – H5 near Kamloops, 2 south Muncho Lake, 1 Toad River

3 Golden mantled Ground Squirrel – Edith Cavell Meadows area, Jasper NP

2 American Pika - Edith Cavell Meadows area, Jasper NP

Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep – Miette Hotsprings, Yellowhead Highway and Grande Cache

Wood Bison – multiple herds seen, Laird River area

Rocky Mountain Elk – herd near Jasper Town

Stone Sheep - Seen throughout Stone Mt & Muncho Lake

Mule Deer - Seen throughout

White Tailed deer – AH near Pink Mountain

Mountain Goat – Sikanni Falls PP

2 Red Fox – Stikine River on the 37

6 Beaver – Boya Lake, Scout Island

Groundhog – Jasper NP and highway 37 near Gitanyow

2 Southern Redback Vole - near Iskut, H37

3 Snow Shoe Hare – Duhu Lake road & Sikanni falls road

Muskrat – Scout Island

2 Coyote – Near Williams Lake & Whistler

Yellow Bellied Marmot – Scout Island

Columbian Ground Squirrel – farmland near Williams Lake

Red Squirrel – seen throughout

Least Chipmunk – seen throughout

Apps used

WikiCamps Canada

Mapy.cz – great for using offline... a lifesaver

Google maps

References

Peterson Field Guide to Mammals of North America: Fourth Edition by Fiona Reid

British Columbia Wildlife Viewing Guide by Bill Wareham

Peterson Field Guide to Finding Mammals in North America - Peterson Field Guides by Vladimir Dinets

<https://www.env.gov.bc.ca/fw/wildlife/viewing/wheretoview.html> - Canadian Gov site has some fantastic information broken down into region

If you would like to see some more of my wildlife photography please visit my website at www.elusive-images.co.uk or follow me on Instagram @elusiveimages

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