

Vancouver Island, Canada

7-22 May 2019



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A number of trip reports have been written about Vancouver Island, but here is our update from May 2019. We were interested in both mammals and birds.

We booked a fly/drive and hotel package which made the trip very straightforward to organise. We took a ferry from Vancouver (Tsawwassen) to Swartz Bay, Vancouver Island. The crossing was very scenic with lots of islands and sea birds, but the only mammals seen were **harbour seals**. We returned from Nanaimo to Vancouver (Horseshoe Bay); the crossing was pretty uneventful.



Harbour Seal

Victoria area

We visited Elk/Beaver Lake Regional Park, Swan Lake and Esquimalt Lagoon Migratory Bird Sanctuary. **Harbour seals** were seen from the lagoon, in fact we saw harbour seals every day on our trip! Bald eagles were seen here, in fact we had multiples every day on the trip. The only other mammal here was **mule deer (black-tailed deer)** which was seen quite frequently during our travels.



Mule Deer



Bald Eagle

Port Alberni

We visited Hamilton Swamp and a couple of woods. We tried to find a way up Mount Arrowsmith to look for white-tailed ptarmigan, but most of the mountain is privately owned and all the tracks we found were private. So we had to give up on that quest.

Ucluelet and Tofino

We took two boat trips on Zodiacs out of Ucluelet with Jamie's Whaling Station (jamies.com). The whale watching trip gave us good views of **humpback whales**, including a mother and calf, and 4-5 **gray whales** which seem to be resident in the area. There were also plenty of **Steller's sea lions** hanging around on rock islands.

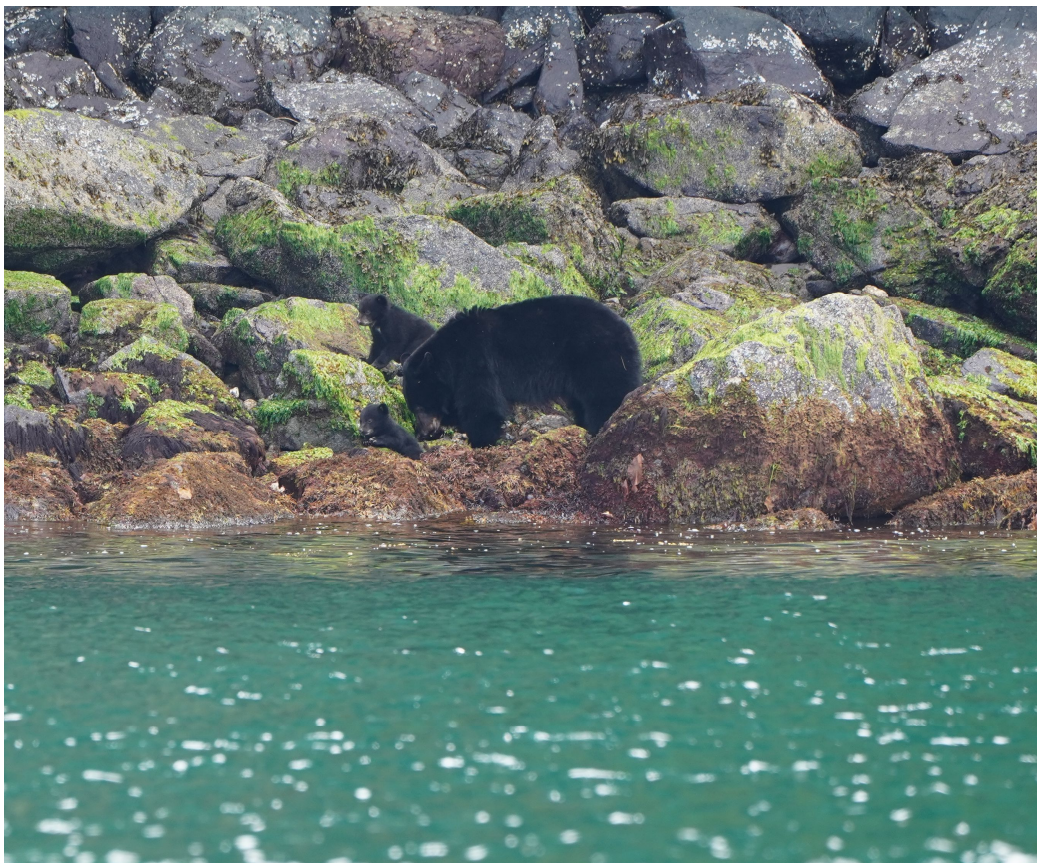


Steller's Sea Lion

The second trip was to watch **black bears** and it certainly turned up trumps! Trips are timed for low tide when bears forage on the shore line, turning over rocks to find crabs etc. We saw four adults, all at fairly close range, behaving naturally foraging for food. The first one had a cub in tow, but kept her distance. The last had three cubs, very small and cute. The trip also turned up two **sea otters**, wrapped up in kelp, and lots of **harbour seals**.



Sea Otter



Black Bear with Cubs

We did various walks around the Ucluelet and Tofino areas. Further down the harbour some **California sea lions** were hauled out on platforms.



California Sea Lion

Walks around the woods were very difficult for finding mammals and birds as the trees are very tall. The only mammal we found was **red squirrel**.



Red Squirrel

Tofino mud flats proved to be a good birding spot as the tide was rising. Quite a few waders were around and we were treated to an osprey catching fish only to be chased by a peregrine! However, a **river otter** then appeared and started fishing in the rising waters; a real treat.

Telegraph Cove

We stayed right in the harbour here which was very good for watching all the comings and goings. There was a resident **American mink** which had a den quite close to our cottage. One evening it was running along the pontoons with a freshly caught crab. It had to jump in the water to get to land, so when it got to shore, it dropped the crab and writhed in the sand to dry off. It then picked up the crab again and took it off to its den.



American Mink

We also saw **Dall's porpoise**, **harbour porpoise** and **harbour seals** just outside the harbour. On a walk up the Blinkhorn Trail (quite tricky in places), **red squirrel** and **mule deer** were the only mammals found. However, we did find a stonking barred owl (an honorary mammal) and our only owl of the trip.



Barred Owl

Visiting in May limited our choices for a trip back to the mainland to see grizzly bears. Tide Rip Tours (grizzlycanada.com) was the only company we could find operating at this time of year. This was a full day trip which started well with close views of **Dall's porpoise**. Next, a good sized pod of **Pacific white-sided dolphins** found our boats and started wake riding. Interestingly, two of the boats were quite close together and the dolphins were jostling for position to get the best place in the double wake! Next up was a close **black bear** foraging on the shoreline. On then to Glendale Cove in Knight Inlet where we disembarked the boat and boarded a double decker skiff to a grassy area where three **grizzly bears** were encountered. One lone female was feeding on grasses; the others were a female and a huge male. He was very impressive when standing on his hind legs. It was raining while we were there and it was good to see him shaking all the water out of his fur. On the way back we saw yet more **harbour seals** and some **Steller's sea lions**.



Grizzly Bear



Pacific White-sided Dolphin

We had one day out to Port McNeill while staying here and found the ubiquitous **harbour seals** there. A very nice summer plumaged great northern diver (common loon) came very close in the harbour. We left it late to drive back to Telegraph Cove in the hope of seeing some bigger mammals at dusk. It was nice to see another **black bear** a few km out from Telegraph Cove, but unfortunately nothing else. We did see two more **black bears** and **mule deer** on our early morning drive out.

Campbell River

We walked the Ripple Rock Trail which leads to the Seymour Narrows lookout where one of the most notorious marine hazards in North America used to wreck ships. The stone masses were successfully removed in 1958 with the largest man made, non nuclear explosion in history! (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYzaTZ232ts>). An interesting walk, but only **red squirrels** again on the mammal front.

We also visited Elk Falls Provincial Park and Strathcona Provincial Park. Nice falls and scenery at Elk Falls, but only a few birds of interest. We made the mistake of hiking the Flower Ridge Trail in Strathcona in search of ptarmigan again. A very strenuous walk up to the snow line got us nothing! With hindsight, we should have chosen somewhere else and looked for elk.

We took another Zodiac trip from here which I can best describe as a white knuckle ride with cetaceans! A mad, but knowledgeable Aussie driver went very fast between excellent wildlife spots. It took about an hour to get to a pod of transient **orcas**, two males, two females and a calf. Another dash on to see two **humpback whales** feeding very close to an island shore, then some **Steller's sea lions**. On our way back we ran into a pod of **Pacific white-sided dolphins**.



Humpback Whales

Courtenay

We contacted the Marmot Recovery Foundation in advance for the latest news on the marmots' whereabouts, but unlike previous writers, we did not get a reply. So we used previous report information and headed up to Mount Washington Alpine Resort. We were planning to park in the lower car park and walk up the Invitation (ski) Run. However, the car park was closed, so we drove up a bit further and put the telescopes up. We scanned across and behold, we saw **Vancouver Island marmots!** From this vantage point we could see a track crossing from the main resort car park across the runs, so we parked up and walked across to where we saw them. We sat ourselves down under the trees and were treated with good views of at least two individuals feeding, warming up on rocks and standing on guard. Brilliant to watch such a rare mammal on our own with no disturbance. We were so pleased, we came back on a second day and saw at least three individuals, one was quite close on the track as we were walking in.



Vancouver Island Marmot



Vancouver Island Marmot

A bonus bird up on the mountain was the sooty grouse. We had excellent views of one displaying.



Sooty Grouse

We visited some other spots in the area, Miracle Beach, Woodhus Slough, Oyster Bay, Seal Bay and Deep Bay. Apart from harbour seals and bald eagles not too much of interest, even birds, in most of these places. We did see evidence of beaver activity at Seal Bay (Swamp Loop), but we didn't get a chance to get back there at dusk.

Parksville

Last stop here before getting the ferry back from Nanaimo. We visited Englishman River Falls Provincial Park, again nice falls and scenery. Only **red squirrels** again, but good views of American dipper visiting a nest site. We also visited Buttertubs and Morrel reserves, but only a few birds of interest.

A checklist of the mammals and birds seen is attached.

