

Vancouver Island (and some British Columbia mainland)

Saturday 24 September 2022 to Saturday 01 October 2022

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Introduction

Every year my wife and I try to take a trip somewhere in late September, to celebrate our anniversary. For 2022, we decided on Vancouver Island. This wasn't a dedicated mammal-watching trip, but we did have some activities scheduled (a Grizzly Bear day trip, in particular), and also ended up doing some initially unplanned trips. My first draft of this report included notes on some of the birds observed, particularly lifers, but I removed them in the interest of length. If anyone wants information on birds seen, places stayed, or restaurant we would recommend (or avoid), please reach out.

A note on bat detections

I have a Wildlife Acoustics Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro for Android, and I used it every evening. All bat detector attempts occurred in urban areas near our various accommodations, and many of these areas were quite loud, with lots of people, traffic, and interference from various electrical sources (the area around the hospital in Campbell River was particularly "noisy"). The auto-IDs for Hoary and Silver-haired Bats were often just background noise (electrical sources, traffic). I carefully reviewed all auto-ID detections, including comparison to my call library for species that also occur in Manitoba, and deleted many recordings that clearly were not bats. There were a total of 8 different species identified by the software, but only 3 (outlined below) were considered reliable upon review (false detections for Red Bats, Silver-Haired Bats, Big Brown Bats, Townsend's Big-eared Bats, and Yuma Myotis). I have kept the Townsend's Big-eared Bat ($n = 2$) and Yuma Myotis ($n = 1$) recordings and they are available for review by any interested party.

Trip details

Saturday 24 September

We started our trip by flying Winnipeg to Vancouver on a new budget airline called Lynx Airlines. The plane was on time, and was clean and well maintained. The crew, while not having to do much (they offer water on board, and nothing else), was pleasant. Our return flight a week later was similarly good, and we would fly on Lynx again. After collecting our luggage we checked in for our pre-booked BC Connector Service travel to Victoria. The BC Connector (run by Wilson Transportation) offers an easy and convenient option for transport to Tsawwassen, onto the ferry to Vancouver Island (Swartz Bay), and into Victoria.

We boarded the Spirit of British Columbia ferry for the 3 PM crossing, and after getting a quick bite to eat I went out birding and mammal watching on deck until around 4:20 PM, before heading back to the bus. On the crossing I saw 4 **Harbour Seals** and at least 4 **Harbour Porpoises** (3+ in one sighting, a single in another) (no photos).

We got into Victoria a little after 5 PM and walked to our hotel. I went for a brief walk with the bat detector that evening. I walked around downtown (BC Museum, Legislative Assembly) and along the edges of Beacon Hill Park between 8 and 9 PM. There was a lot of background noise but I recorded **Hoary Bats** near the museum and in Beacon Hill Park. Other bat auto-IDs were all deemed to be false detections.

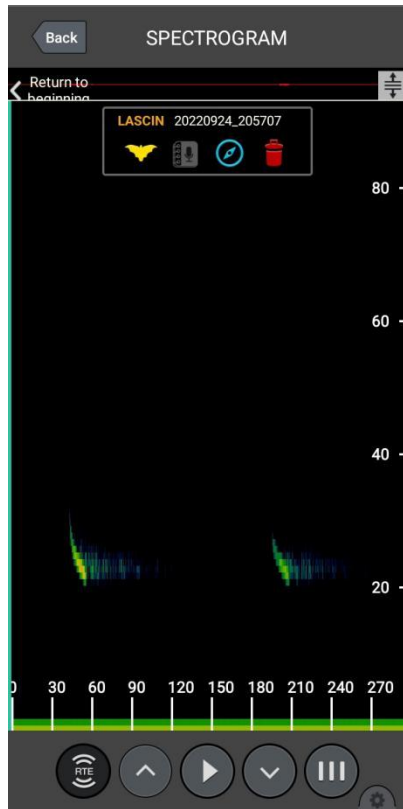


Photo 1. A screenshot of a Hoary Bat spectrogram, recorded in Beacon Hill Park, Victoria, BC on 24 September using an Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro for Android.

Sunday 25 September

After breakfast we checked out and picked up a rental car. We had an AirBnB booked in Campbell River and planned to make a couple stops en route. Our first stop was at Butchart Gardens. Interesting spot with a beautiful collection of plants and flowers, but too busy for me. We stayed for about an hour. I heard an **Eastern Gray Squirrel** here. We started to make our way north with a stop in Cowichan Bay for lunch. Roadkill **Raccoon** were observed in several areas on the highway. We then took a slight detour to Coombs to see “the goats on the roof” at the Old Country Market. It’s a big tourist draw, for some reason, and was quite busy. It is an interesting market though, and we picked up some food there.



Photo 2. The Old Country Market in Coombs, BC, with “the goats on the roof” (it’s a big tourist draw, for some reason...).

We arrived at our Campbell River AirBnB in the early evening. After getting some groceries I went out for a short walk with the bat detector, but we went to bed early as we had an early rise for the Grizzly Bear trip the following day. Review of the bat detector files indicated that all auto-IDs were false detections.

Monday 26 September

We were up early for our grizzly bear tour with Homalco Wildlife and Cultural Tours. This was an excellent tour, one that I would highly recommend. We checked in at the marina just after 7:15 AM and were off soon after. There were 11 guests, plus a naturalist guide and captain. We were on a beautiful steel-frame boat with twin outboard 300s and ample seating both inside and outside. We boated across to the mainland coast and Bute Inlet, where we disembarked in Orford Bay and met up with our two guides from the Homalco First Nation.

On the boat ride over to Bute Inlet we saw two **Humpback Whales** (a mother and calf), some **Steller’s Sea Lions** (lifer), and **Harbour Seals**. On the mainland side, I heard a **Douglas Squirrel** calling as we were starting our orientation. My wife saw a **Black-tailed Deer**, which I missed, from the bus soon after departing for the bear

viewing platforms.



Photo 3. A female and calf Humpback Whale observed en route to the Grizzly Bear viewing in Bute Inlet, 26 September (cropped).

The **Grizzly Bear** (lifer) viewing on this tour was spectacular. We saw a female with two cubs at our first viewing platform stop, which was the start of 12 individual bear sightings, of 9 or 12 individual bears (the initial female with two cubs may have been seen again later). There were quite a few Chum Salmon in the Orford River, and we watched bears catch some in addition to seeing salmon spawning behaviour.

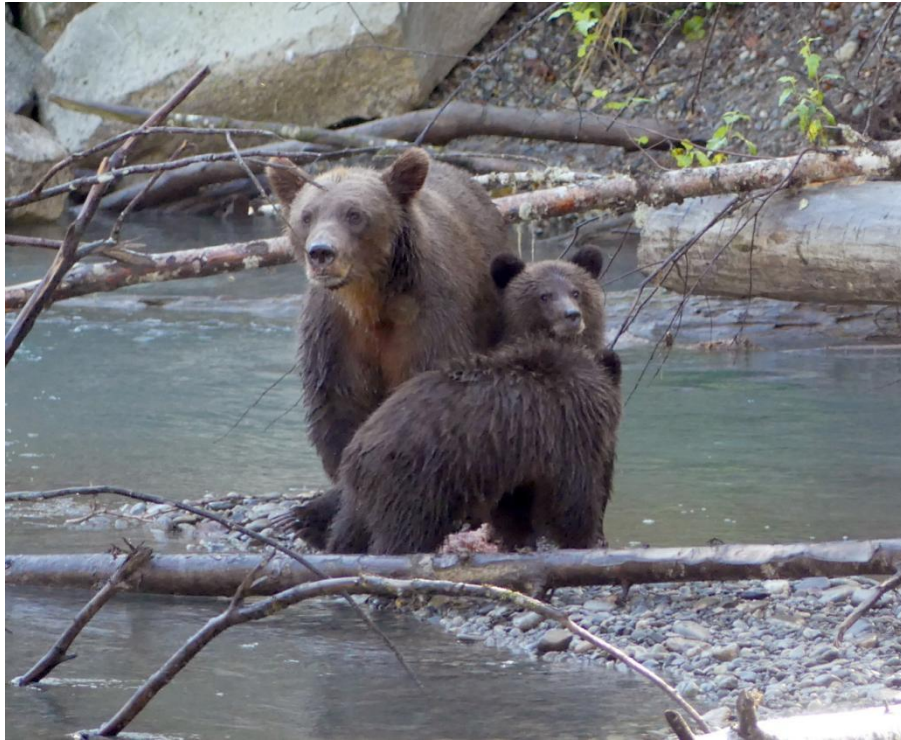


Photo 4. My first-ever sighting of a Grizzly Bear, a female with two cubs at our first stop on the Orford River, 26 September (cropped).



Photo 5. Another Grizzly Bear on our tour in Orford Bay, Bute Inlet, 26 September (cropped).



Photo 6. One of the bear viewing platforms in Bute Inlet. We saw most bears from the ground but did go up into several of the platforms.

During the tour we also saw **American Beaver** dams in one of the salmon spawning channels (more on this below). After the Grizzly Bear viewing tour ended we went back to the dock for lunch, where there was **River Otter** spraint and food remains (shells) (no photos of the beaver or otter sign). We then took the boat ride back to Vancouver Island, arriving at the Campbell River marina before 4 PM.

We decided to go to Elk Falls Provincial Park before supper, to take a short hike to check out the suspension bridge. We saw 2 **Red Squirrels** (different sightings) and a **Townsend's Vole** (lifer) that came running up the trail next to us. On the drive out we stopped to watch and photograph a **Black-tailed Deer** doe and fawn.



Photo 7. The first of two Red Squirrels seen on a short section of trail in Elk Falls Provincial Park, 26 September (cropped).



Photo 8. A Townsend's Vole that ran up the trail in Elk Falls Provincial Park, 26 September. I had inadvertently hit a button and changed my camera focus settings prior to seeing this animal, so this is the best photo I could manage (cropped).

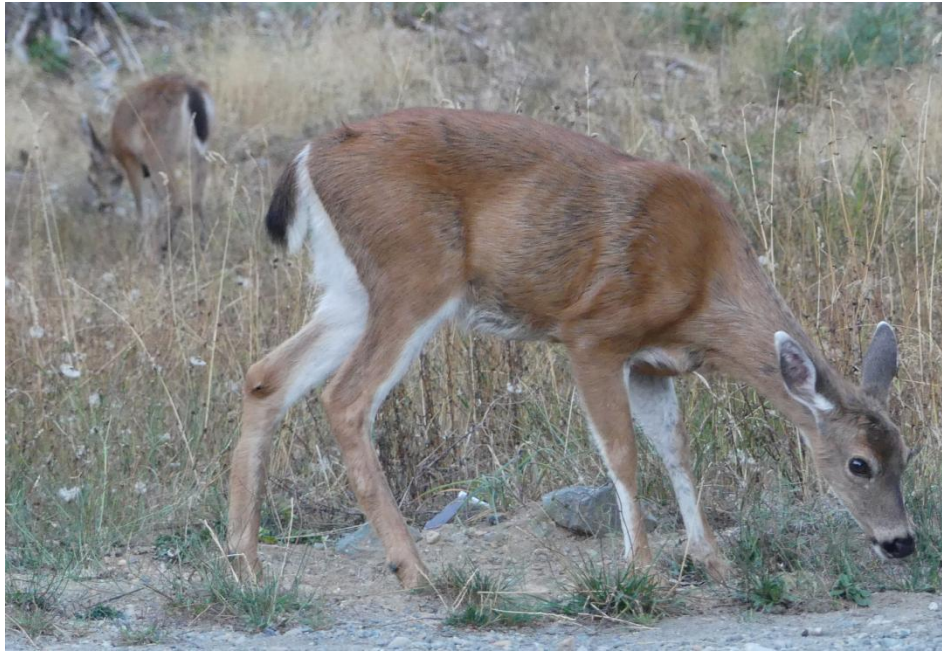


Photo 9. A Blacktailed Deer foraging alongside the road in Elk Falls Provincial Park, 26 September, with fawn in the background (cropped).

Later that evening I again took a short walk in the neighbourhood with the bat detector. Subsequent review of recordings indicated that all were false detections.

Tuesday 27 September

Monday had been a long day, so we had a lazy morning on Tuesday, not leaving our AirBnB until after 11 AM. We got to Mount Washington around noon, seeing a roadkill **Black-tailed Deer** en route.

My goal for Mount Washington was, of course, Vancouver Island Marmot. I was unsuccessful, but they apparently often start hibernation in late September so it's quite possible that we were too late in the year. We also stopped there on a weekday and nothing was open this late in the summer season, so we couldn't ride the chairlift. I also did not contact the Marmot Recovery Foundation for information, and probably should have. I hiked up one of the ski runs a little ways, but the slope and especially the elevation wasn't kind to this slightly out of shape Prairie boy. I heard several **Red Squirrels** and that was it for mammals.



Photo 10. Vancouver Island Marmot habitat at Mount Washington.

We stayed at Mount Washington for almost an hour and a half before heading to Courtenay for a wine tasting we had booked. On our way back to Campbell River we stopped for an impromptu hike at Seal Bay Regional Nature Park. This was a great decision as it is a beautiful park. We hiked on the ocean side of the road, but the park, and various hiking trails, extends in a greater distance on the other side as well. The trails led down to the beach, where we had excellent views of 3 **River Otters**. While walking along the beach towards the otters I briefly saw, and then heard, a **Red Squirrel**. We saw one **Black-tailed Deer** alongside the road soon after leaving the park on the drive back to Campbell River.



Photo 11. Two of three River Otters seen in Seal Bay Regional Nature Park, 27 September (cropped).

Later that evening we went out to get some supplies, and saw two **Black-tailed Deer** in a sports field in town. I went out with the bat detector again for a while in the evening, and recorded one short sequence of a probable **Hoary Bat**. None of the other auto-ID detections were deemed to be actual bat recordings.

Wednesday 28 September

On today's schedule was a 6 hour Zodiac whalewatching tour with Campbell River Whale Watching and Adventure Tours. This was an unplanned tour, as detailed below. The Zodiac was almost full, with 9 clients including us (plus guide/driver). We had great mammal watching on this tour, with 6 **Humpback Whales** including one mother and calf, lots of **Harbour Seals** including seeing several haulout sites, some **Dall's Porpoises**, and great views of **Steller's Sea Lions** at a haulout site. Harbour Porpoises and Pacific White-sided Dolphins are often seen on these tours, but we didn't have any luck with these species, or Bigg's Killer Whales.



Photo 12. Two Humpback Whales observed on our Zodiac tour, 28 September (heavily cropped).



Photo 13. Harbour Seals at a haulout, observed on our Zodiac whalewatching tour, 28 September (slightly cropped).



Photo 14. Steller's Sea Lions at a haulout near Sonora resort, 28 September (slightly cropped).



Photo 15. Dall's Porpoise seen on Zodiac whalewatching tour, 28 September (cropped).

We got back to the marina around 3:15 PM and immediately departed south for our hotel in Ladysmith (where we stayed for two nights), arriving there at 5:30 PM. En

route, we saw a roadkill **Pacific Marten** (lifer) on highway 19A. We didn't stop for a close examination but it was clearly a marten. We also saw more roadkill **Raccoons**. I saw an **Eastern Cottontail Rabbit** alongside the road on front of our hotel. Two short evening walks with the bat detector failed to turn up anything.

Thursday 29 September

We were up early again for a seaplane flight from Nanaimo (about 20 minutes north of Ladysmith) to Sechelt, on the (mainland) Sunshine Coast. The seaplane trip is billed as a "flightseeing tour" but it's basically just Harbour Air's regularly scheduled seaplane flights to Sechelt and back, with a couple hours on the ground. We flew over in a DeHaviland Turbo Otter, and I saw a small pod of **Harbour Porpoises** from the air.

Upon arrival we walked into town from the marina, had breakfast, walked around town a bit, and then stopped at the salt marsh park (Sechelt Marsh) on our way back to the marina to check-in for return flight. No mammal sightings there, but an interpretive sign highlighted the various species that do occur there.



Photo 16. Interpretative sign at Sechelt Marsh identifying the mammals that have been recorded in this small park.

We flew back to Nanaimo in a smaller DeHaviland Beaver, and I got to sit in the co-pilot seat as we were full. While sitting on the plane, but prior to taxiing out for takeoff, there was a **Harbour Seal** swimming around the marina. After landing back in Nanaimo we went back to Ladysmith for a quick snack in our hotel room, before my wife went for a massage in town. We saw an **Eastern Gray Squirrel** on the side of the road in front of the hotel as we were leaving.

While she was at her massage I hiked part of the Trans Canada Trail and walked around the wharf and marina area. I saw 7 feral rabbits (**European Rabbits**) and one **Eastern Cottontail Rabbit** near the Ladysmith Train Station building. There was **River Otter** spraint on the breakwater, and one **Harbour Seal** around the community marina. After meeting up with Christa again we saw another **European Rabbit**. On our way to supper that evening we saw two **Black-tailed Deer** in a yard.



Photo 17. Two feral rabbits (European Rabbit) and an Eastern Cottontail (both species introduced) in Ladysmith, 29 September (cropped).

I was thinking about not going out with the detector that night, but decided I would. A good call, as it turned out to be the best attempt. I had multiple detections of what the auto-ID feature said were **Little Brown Bats**, one detection of a **Californian Myotis** (lifer, and with a sonogram that was distinct from the Little Brown sonograms), and one **Hoary Bat** detection.

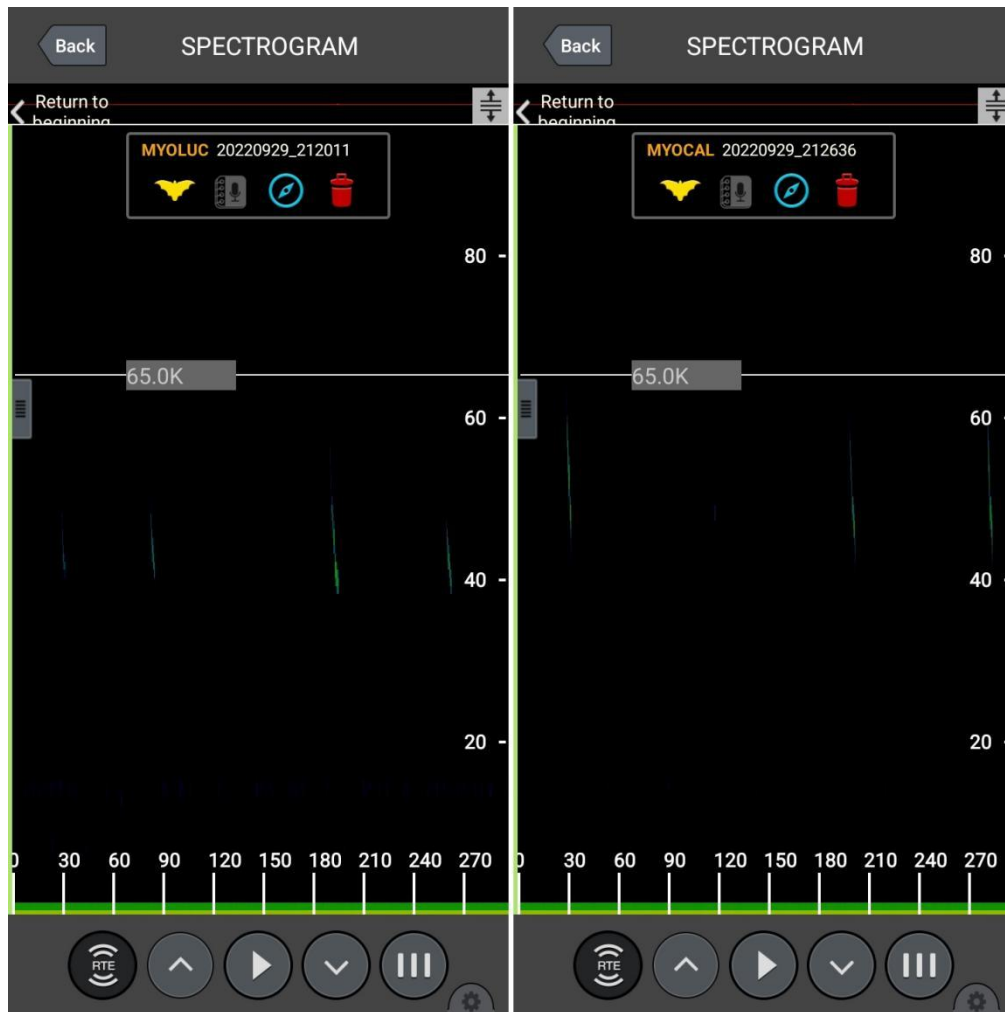


Photo 18. Screenshots of Little Brown Bat (left) and Californian Myotis (right) spectrograms, recorded in Ladysmith, BC on 29 September using an Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro for Android.

Friday 30 September

This was our last morning on Vancouver Island, with our planned return to Vancouver that afternoon. While packing up the car I could hear an **Eastern Gray Squirrel**. We saw one **Eastern Grey Squirrel** in the Greater Victoria area (during a washroom detour off the highway, in the Saanich area). After arriving back in Victoria we returned the rental car, stored our luggage at the downtown bus station, and went for a walk to kill time before getting the BC Connector service back to the ferry and into Vancouver (Richmond).

We took the 5 PM crossing to Tsawwassen, again on the Spirit of British Columbia ferry. While watching vehicles come off the ferry from the mainland, I saw a truck towing a boat with a very large bull Moose in it. Hunting season is open, and Moose aren't found on Vancouver Island, so these folks were hunting on the mainland (I didn't include this species on my list).

I spent the crossing on the bow deck birding and mammal watching. I saw 4 **Harbour Seals** (individual sightings) and saw (and managed to get a couple quick photographs of) a small group of **Harbour Porpoises** just as I was getting ready to go inside, find

Christa, and return to the bus. I thought there were probably 5 or 6 animals there, and the photos show that there were at least 4.



Photo 19. Three Harbour Porpoises, from a group of at least 4 animals, observed from the ferry en route to Tsawwassen, 30 September (heavily cropped).

The last **Harbour Seal** of the trip was spotted in Tsawwassen Bay while we were on the shuttle and en route to our hotel in Richmond.

I took the bat detector out into a field across the highway from our hotel that evening. No auto-ID detections, although one recording did include what looked like bat calls (but “NoID”). While walking across the field I saw what I initially thought was an **Eastern Cottontail Rabbit** until I realized there was a second one that was all black. Richmond has a large population of feral **European Rabbits**. I only had my smartphone, and it (a Samsung A32) has a terrible camera, so the photos and videos are quite useless. On my way back to the hotel I saw 4 more feral **European Rabbits**, and I went and got my Lumix camera and went back out to get some photos. While I was coming back into the hotel I saw a **House Mouse** run across the floor and underneath a heater. This was the last mammal species seen on the trip.



Photo 20. Feral rabbit (European Rabbit) in Richmond, 30 September (slightly cropped).

Saturday 01 October

I took a quick walk outside in the morning to see if the feral rabbits were around, with no luck (except for one partially-mummified carcass). After relaxing in our room for a bit, we took the free shuttle to the airport for our flight home. Everything went smoothly and we were home in Winnipeg by early evening.

Species Summary

Final mammal tally - 21 species (14 seen, 1 heard only, 1 evidence only, 2 as roadkill only, 3 bats detected)

Order	Family	Species	
Chiroptera	Vespertilionidae	Little Brown Bat (<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>)	Recorded with Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro, 29 September in Ladysmith.
	Vespertilionidae	Californian Myotis (<i>Myotis californicus</i>)	Recorded with Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro, 29 September in Ladysmith. Lifer.
	Vespertilionidae	Hoary Bat (<i>Lasiurus cinereus</i>)	Recorded with Echo Meter Touch 2 Pro on 24 September in Victoria, 27 September in Campbell River (probable), and 29 September in Ladysmith.
Lagomorpha	Leporidae	Eastern Cottontail Rabbit (<i>Sylvilagus floridanus</i>)	Introduced. Observed September 28 and 29 in Ladysmith.
		European Rabbit (<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>)	Introduced (feral populations established). Observed 29 September in Ladysmith and September 30 in Richmond (mainland).
Rodentia	Sciuridae	Eastern Grey Squirrel (<i>Sciurus carolinensis</i>)	Introduced. One heard at Butchart Gardens (mainland) on 25 September, one seen on 29 September in Ladysmith, one heard on 30 September in Ladysmith, one seen on 30 September in Saanich area.
	Sciuridae	Red Squirrel (<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>)	Two observed on 26 September (separate sightings) in Elk Falls Provincial Park, two heard on 27 September at Mount Washington, one briefly seen (and heard) on 27 September in Seal Bay Regional Nature Park.
	Sciuridae	Douglas' Squirrel (<i>Tamiasciurus douglasii</i>)	Heard only, on 26 September in Orford Bay, Bute Inlet (mainland).
	Castoridae	American Beaver (<i>Castor canadensis</i>)	Sign only (dams), on 26 September in Orford Bay, Bute Inlet (mainland).
	Cricetidae	Townsend's Vole (<i>Microtus townsendii</i>)	One seen on 26 September in Elk Falls Provincial Park. Lifer.
	Muridae	House Mouse (<i>Mus musculus</i>)	Introduced/invasive. One seen at Richmond hotel on 30 September

			(mainland).
Carnivora	Ursidae	Grizzly Bear (<i>Ursus arctos</i>)	12 sightings of 9 or 12 bears (possible repeats) on 26 September in Orford Bay, Bute Inlet (mainland, on a boat trip from Vancouver Island). Lifer.
	Procyonidae	Northern Raccoon (<i>Procyon lotor</i>)	Roadkill only, various areas on Vancouver Island.
	Mustelidae	Pacific Marten (<i>Martes caurina</i>)	Roadkill only, one observed on 19A highway south of Campbell River on 28 September. Lifer.
	Mustelidae	North American River Otter (<i>Lontra canadensis</i>)	Spraint and food remains (shells) in Orchard Bay (mainland) on 26 September, good views of three animals at Seal Bay Regional Nature Park on 27 September, and spraint observed on the Ladysmith breakwater on 29 September.
	Otariidae	Steller's Sea Lion (<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>)	Distant sightings of foraging animals on boat portion of Grizzly Bear day trip, 26 September. Close views of hauled out and swimming animals on 28 September whalewatching tour. Lifer.
	Phocidae	Harbour Seal (<i>Phoca vitulina</i>)	Abundant, widespread sightings. Easily observed from the ferry and at marinas. Close views of animals at several haulout sites on 28 September whalewatching tour.
Artiodactyla	Cervidae	Columbian Black-tailed deer (<i>Odocoileus hemionus columbianus</i>)	Abundant, numerous sightings alongside roads and in a yard and sports field. Best views (female and fawn) in Elk Falls Provincial Park on 26 September.
	Balaenopteridae	Humpback Whale (<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>)	Eight individuals, including two female/calf pairs, observed over two boat trips on 26 and 28 September (out of Campbell River).
	Phocoenidae	Harbour Porpoise (<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>)	Observed on both ferry crossings (September 24 and 30), and briefly from the air on a seaplane flight from Nanaimo to Sechart on 29 September.
	Phocoenidae	Dall's Porpoise (<i>Phocoenoides dalli</i>)	Observed on several occasions during 28 September whalewatching tour.

Suggestions, final thoughts, etc.

We did two mammal-focused (and boat-based) tours, the Grizzly Bear trip with Homalco Culture & Wildlife Tours and the Zodiac whalewatching trip with Campbell River Whale Watching and Adventure Tours (see links below). Both were excellent and I would strongly recommend both operators. Several different companies offer Grizzly Bear trips to Bute Inlet, but all the actual bear viewing is conducted by guides from the Homalco First Nation that you meet in Orford Bay. Knowing this, we decided to just book directly with Homalco. Other companies will ferry you across to the mainland and back, but we wanted to directly support the Homalco First Nation to the greatest extent possible. A portion of the tour costs goes to restoring wild salmon populations in Bute Inlet through the construction of spawning channels and monitoring of the salmon runs. Your tour fee also contributes to the growth and preservation of Homalco First Nation culture and Indigenous employment. Some companies in Campbell River also conduct Grizzly Bear tours into Toba Inlet in cooperation with Klahoose First Nation guides.

Our 6-hour Zodiac trip was unplanned, and we originally weren't going to a whalewatching trip at all. We had a winery and distillery tour booked for Tuesday, with the same company, but that got canceled because 2 of the 3 stops are only open a couple days a week this time of year. We weren't flexible enough in our schedule to change to Thursday or Friday, so the company offered us the option to switch to a 4 hour Marine Wildlife tour for Tuesday. The next day they called again saying they were short boat drivers but could upgrade us to a 6 hour on Wednesday instead (at no extra charge). That required us to shift around a few things but we made it work. We managed to get to one winery for a tasting, so while it wasn't a full replacement for the canceled tour it was a really nice time, and something Christa was really looking forward to. The company did their best to accommodate us and our limited time, and we were impressed. The whalewatching tours often see Harbour Porpoises and Pacific White-sided Dolphins (and Bigg's Killer Whales more rarely), but we didn't have any luck with those species. We also checked out a couple islands for Black Bears at low tide, and they occasionally see a Grizzly Bear on the mainland. We didn't get either, and if Grizzly Bears are a priority I would definitely recommend a bear-focused day trip. Coastal Wolves are rarely observed on these whalewatching trips, but it is possible. Had we not done this tour my list would be missing Dall's Porpoise, as this was the only time they were observed on our trip (they are also a species I have previously seen). We did get better views of Harbour Seals and Steller's Sea Lions than we otherwise would have, but both species had previously been recorded on the trip (and many times in the past for Harbour Seals).

If I was planning to go to Vancouver Island specifically for mammal watching, I would definitely go earlier in the year. We were likely too late for Vancouver Island Marmots, and while we had great success with Humpback Whales, some animals had already departed for the southward migration. Our Zodiac guide (who was excellent) said the Steller's Sea Lions return from the northern rookeries in late August, so if that species is a target this is an important consideration. But going too early could also be problematic, as our naturalist on the Homalco tour (who was also excellent) said the salmon run was a bit late this year and the Grizzly Bear tours weren't having any luck during the first 10 or so days of the season (which starts in mid-August). We saw more Grizzly Bears than typical, but on most tours you can expect to see 4 or 5

animals. Early September would offer a good balance as far as mammal watching opportunities go.

We spent 6 nights on Vancouver Island, which was not really enough time. While we were organizing this trip I quickly realized that there was no way we could include a trip to Tofino and Ucluelet and also spend sufficient time on the Salish Sea side. My priority was the Grizzly Bear trip out of Campbell River, and there are more options for things like wineries on that side of the island, so it was an easy decision. But a longer trip would allow you to do both without being rushed. For a mammal trip that included both sides of the island I would suggest a minimum of 10 days, and I would go in late August into early September. I would probably start on the Tofino side for Black Bears, Sea Otters, and Grey Whales before shifting to the Campbell River area for Grizzly Bears on the mainland.

We also flew in and out of Vancouver instead of Victoria. That cost us time but saved us money. However, the only reason we had any substantial cost savings was because we flew on a budget airline (and Lynx only flies Winnipeg to Vancouver and back on Saturday). If we had to go on a major carrier like Air Canada or WestJet there wouldn't have been any savings once the ground transportation and ferry costs were factored in. Flying into Vancouver allowed us to experience the ferry crossing, which my wife had never done before, but did cut into our time on Vancouver Island. My best views of Harbour Porpoises on this trip were on the ferry crossings, but this is a species that can usually be seen on whalewatching tours.

Webpage for Homalco Culture & Wildlife Tours' Grizzly Bear trip - <https://homalcotours.com/tours/great-bears-of-bute/>

Webpage for Campbell River Whale Watching and Adventure Tours' 6-hour Zodiac trip - <https://campbellriverwhalewatching.com/tours/whale-watching-tours/6-hr-whale-watching/>