

## Meadow Lake Ranch Trip June 23<sup>rd</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### Sunday

We met at Bob's and left at 8:20 for our annual naturalists' week in the Chilcotin. Our group consisted of Wim Vesseur and Tineke Goebertus, Bob Puls, Viveka Ohman, Nora Truman, Anne Gosse, John and Sandee Gordon and myself (Gareth).

Our first stop was at Spences Bridge where we ate our lunch and topped up our coffee cups at the local café. We stopped again in Clinton to top up our gas, then continued up Highway 97 and turned off onto the Meadow Lake Road, a well-travelled gravel road that was in reasonable condition. As we drove the 28 kms



The Roadhouse

Photo: Anne Gosse

to the Meadow Lake Ranch, we stopped at several places to check a variety of ducks and also some American Avocets, including the breeding colony we had previously seen in 2022. Our accommodations consisted of two separate cabins half a kilometer apart, the Jefferson and the Roadhouse, four of us staying at the former and five at the latter. Both buildings were very well appointed and contained everything we needed, so in a short time we had moved in. From the front deck we could see a pair of Sandhill Cranes in the meadow but no colts. We later learned that two local pairs had lost their colts to the Bald Eagles nesting in the locality.

There was a large Cliff Swallow colony on the property nesting on the various buildings but mostly on the shed opposite the Jefferson. Periodically if a raptor came by, a large flock would fly around uttering their distress call. This



The Jefferson

Photo: Gareth Pugh

happened regularly as there were a Kestrel and a Sharp-shinned Hawk in the area. Despite all the panic, however, we never saw either of them take a Swallow.

Meadow Lake is a long series of shallow alkaline lakes which are very popular with waterfowl. Due to the low levels of snow and rain this year, the levels in these were lower than in previous years. As we travelled about, we saw that a number of the smaller waterholes had dried up completely and were just white salt pans.

### Monday



View from the Jefferson

Photo: Gareth Pugh

We drove back along Meadow Lake Road stopping at all the ponds and small lakes. At one we were able to get good photos of the fluffy Avocet chicks, feeding under the watchful eye of an adult that expressed its displeasure at our presence. At the same lake we found a number of Wilson's Phalarope plus a variety of ducks: Blue-winged Teal, Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Ring-necked Duck etc. Tom and Greta arrived with their trailer when we were at this lake, so we gave them directions to the ranch. We continued on to the Ogilvie Nature Sanctuary, a Nature Conservancy of



Common Nighthawk

Photo: John Gordon

Canada property, where we met Mike and Carmel, the managers, who were very informative and showed us the best trail to walk along which was an elevated area that gave great views over much of the lake which forms the bulk of the property. We stayed there to eat our sandwiches in the warm sun which brought out a number of butterflies. Wim flushed a Common Nighthawk which sat on a branch in the open so that we could all get a good look at it. Our total species count for the site was 47, including a Virginia Rail, Hooded Merganser, Pied-bill Grebe and Western Bluebird.

## **Tuesday**

We woke to find a thick mist around us but this burned off by 8:30, promising a fine sunny day. We set off up Dog Creek Road, stopping as we went to listen for birds and to check out several small lakes and ponds, where we found Ring-necked Duck, Sora, Solitary Sandpiper and Greater Yellowlegs. The 37 species counted along the road included a Northern Goshawk and a Black-backed Woodpecker, the only ones seen on the trip. By lunchtime we had reached Pigeon Lake where we found a small recreation site, an ideal spot to have lunch. Here again we found a number of butterflies brought out by the sun and recorded 14 bird species, including Black Tern, Pygmy Nuthatch and four Common Nighthawks flying above us. From this point we decided to return down Dog Creek Road, stopping at likely places as we went and recording 14 species. Nothing unusual except for an ungulate that most of us thought was a Mule Deer, but Viveka was quite sure that it was an Elk based on her observation of its characteristics. When we got back to the ranch, some of us decided to spend

the rest of the afternoon relaxing. Others went for a walk from the Lakeview House along a berm which ran across the valley, crossing the lake at a narrow point. They recorded 23 species including Herring Gull, Red-necked Grebe and Hooded Merganser to add to our growing list.

That evening we did the Nightjar Survey, finding seven Common Nighthawks at the first stop but none thereafter. We did, however, see two Common Poorwills as they flew up from the road, a lifer for some of us.

## **Wednesday**

Our first destination was Chasm Provincial Park. The chasm was created by meltwaters after the last Ice Age retreated and has high lava rock cliffs on both sides. There we saw White-throated Swifts (as expected) but failed to find any Rock Wrens which we had seen there



Solitary Sandpiper

Photo: Bob Puls

before. However, a Golden Eagle flying over with two Turkey Vultures more than made up for that as they gave us great views.

We hiked the trail along the perimeter fence on the east side which was steep in places but afforded great views of the Chasm. A pair of Common Ravens were making a commotion and we heard a Great Grey Owl calling but were unable to locate it. The Ravens seemed to be trying to persuade their two fledglings to fly off a ledge on the side of the chasm which they eventually did. Returning to the parking lot, we had lunch sitting in the sunshine on the concrete barriers.





Outside the lodge

Photo: Anne Gosse



Rocky Mountain Parnassian Photo: Viveka Ohman

From there we drove to Clinton to top up our gas tanks and also to have ice cream! On the way back we passed the Meadow Lake Road and turned off onto River Lake Road and Raphael Meason FSR where we tallied 21 species, including a Horned Grebe and a Townsend's Solitaire.

### Thursday

We set off westwards in light rain along Meadow Lake Road turning off onto a road that ended at the lake. This was a very productive spot with 27 species recorded, including Northern Waterthrushes, Pileated Woodpecker, Least and Dusky Flycatchers and Marsh Wren. Despite the damp weather there was plenty of bird song to be heard. From there we had intended to take the FSR 1200 Road but as soon as we turned onto it, we realized that it was too wet and slippery so we continued on

Meadow Lake Road. The first lake we came to contained a variety of ducks, including a number of Redheads, a species we had been hoping to see. The next lake was a small alkali one where we spotted five American Avocets feeding. At Long Lake we recorded 13 species, including a Red-tailed Hawk and a pair of Common Ravens. Eventually we turned onto Big Bar Road and then onto 1180 Road. The only thing we saw of note was three Mule Deer bucks with their partly grown antlers covered in velvet. On the way back some of us decided to try the 1200 Road as the rain had stopped. The first 12 kms were slippery with mud holes in places making the going slow and resulting in two very muddy vehicles. We did see a Spruce Grouse which John was able to get good photos of. We recorded 17 species on this road including six singing Hermit Thrushes, always a lovely sound to hear.

### Friday

Having decided to explore the east side of the highway, we drove to Clinton to top up on gas. We then continued southward in warm sunny weather, turning off on Loon Lake Road where we found a pull-off where we could park overlooking Loon Creek. This was a very productive spot where we quickly recorded 18 species, including Gray Catbird, Spotted Towhee, Belted Kingfisher and a family of Spotted Sandpipers. At our next stop along the road, we found 15 species, including Mourning Dove and Eurasian Collared Dove, before moving on to our next stop at a river bridge. This spot was even better as we found 23



Northern Waterthrush

Photo: Bob Puls

species, including Red-eyed Vireo, Veery and Clay-coloured Sparrow. Part way along the lake we found a place where we could park to have lunch before driving on. At the end of the lake the paved road ended and the rough gravel road started to climb, giving great views of the ranchland in the valley. Along this section we found 17 species, including MacGillivray's Warbler, House Wren and Lazuli Bunting. We stopped a couple of times to search the Ponderosa Pines for Lewis's Woodpecker to no avail. When we reached the Hihium Road junction, the road was in much better condition and took us through a very extensive burn where the vegetation was growing back. Along this stretch we tallied 35 species, including Calliope Hummingbird, Mountain Chickadee and Mountain Bluebird feeding young, House Wren and Lazuli Bunting, along with the commoner species. It was evident from the amount of bark stripped from the burned trees that Three-toed or Black-backed Woodpeckers were in the area but we were unable to find any. The rest of the trip was uneventful but after supper four of us walked across the meadow to the lake and recorded 27 species, including Wilson's Phalarope, Lesser Yellowlegs, Northern Harrier and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Later a Sharp-shinned Hawk flew past the barn causing a large number of Cliff Swallows to fly around making their distress calls.

### **Saturday**

For our last day we decided to head west on Meadow Lake Road as the weather was warming up, a good day for butterflies. We stopped at several potholes to check for waterbirds while at the same time checking the extensive grasslands above the road where Vesper and Savannah Sparrows, Western Meadowlarks and Mountain Bluebirds were found and lots of butterflies were enjoying the sunshine. We stopped at a burned area to look for Woodpeckers without success. Along this stretch we observed 36 species, including Cinnamon Teal, Horned and Eared Grebes, Virginia Rail, Sora, and five Turkey Vultures feeding on a deer carcass in addition to the usual Songbirds.

We turned off onto a grassy track that led up the hill where we found a good spot to have lunch overlooking the valley. We enjoyed the bird song and the butterflies and other insects that were plentiful. Thankfully there were very



Turkey Vulture

Photo: Viveka Ohman

few mosquitoes. It was nice to see so much insect life, as most of the week had been too cool for them. Viveka patiently stalked a Rocky Mountain Parnassian and got an excellent photo of it in addition to a Greenish Blue. Three of us walked further up the hill but did not find anything special except a Red-breasted Nuthatch. Leaving there, we visited White Lake, where the major sighting was approximately 450 Lesser Scaup. On the way back we had a brief sighting of a small Black Bear, the only one we had seen in the area.

After dinner we sat on the deck enjoying the evening and Shea, the ranch manager, joined us and told us about the various mammals found in the area: Badgers, Wolves, Coyotes, Moose and Mule Deer and a small herd of Elk that pass through on Spring and Fall migration. She told us about a Great Grey Owl that teases her dog most nights and also about a Peregrine Falcon that she had seen earlier in the day.

### **Sunday**

We were up early and left at 8:30. We made our usual stop at Spences Bridge where Wim found the only Western Kingbird on this trip. House Sparrows were plentiful there and we also found Bullock's Oriole, Black-billed Magpie and Vaux's Swift. So ended another great trip for which our final total was 137 species reported to e-Bird and a number of butterflies.

**Gareth Pugh**