



# PEACE AREA BIRDING/WILDLIFE TRIP

JULY 1-4, 2020



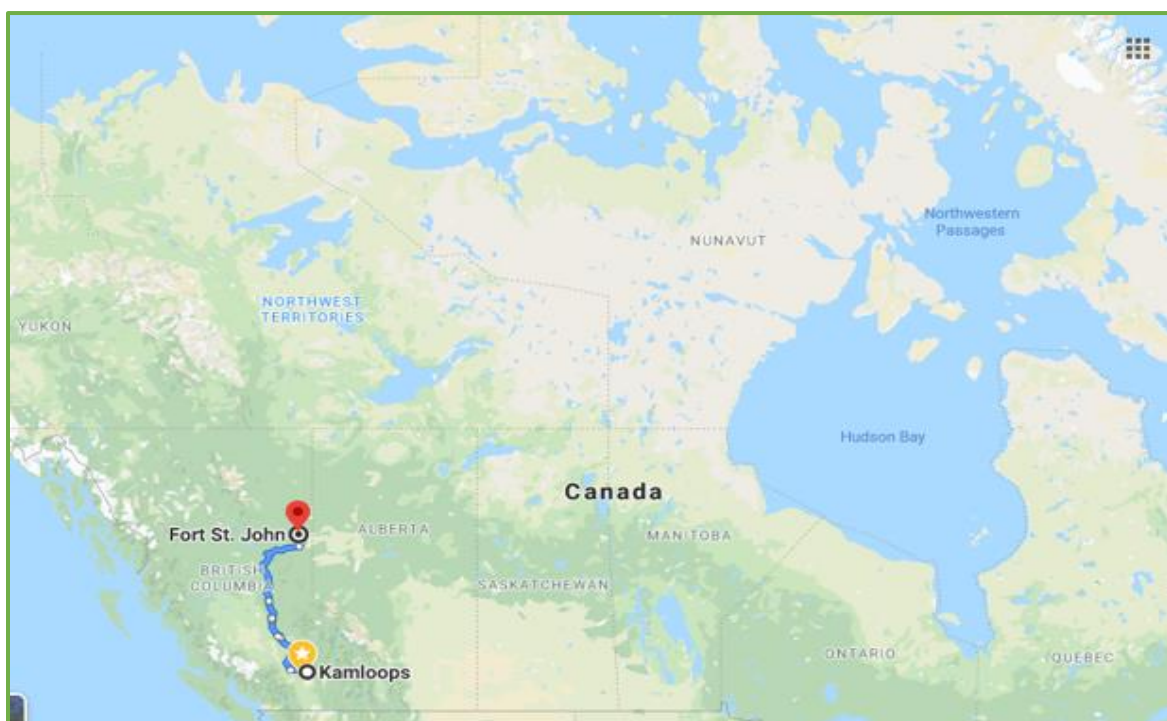
Isaac Nelson and I had spoken plenty of times about a trip to the Peace River region (the Peace) of British Columbia in the last few months. As dates and times became clearer, we realized there was a window of time where a quick 4 day trip could be arranged. The best time to visit the peace area is probably several weeks earlier than we did but, like most birders who are not retired, one cannot always choose the exact time a trip is possible. We were hoping that most things would still be singing in early July and this was true for the most part.

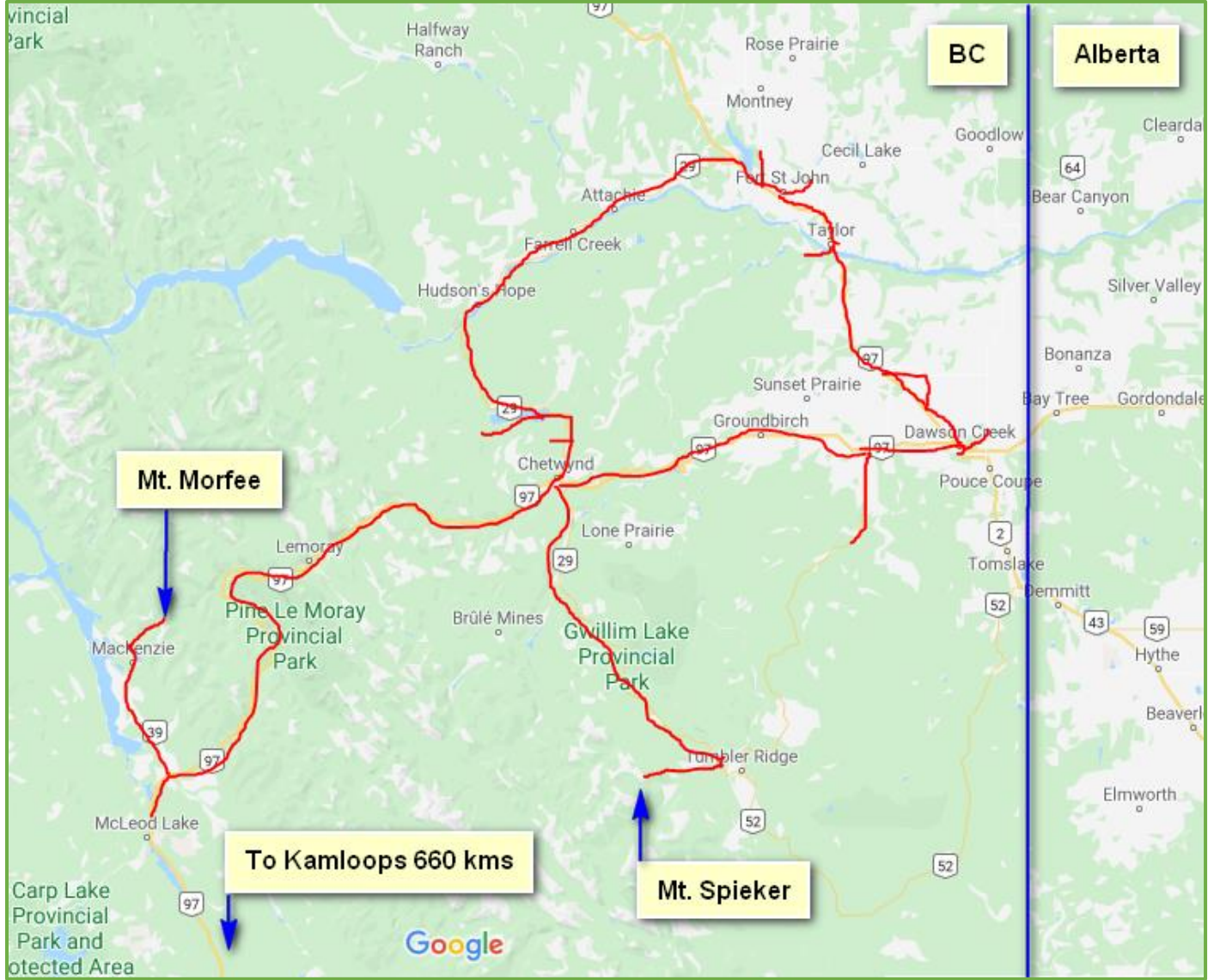
The Peace region is a huge draw for BC birders because it is one of the only regions in the province east of the Rockies. In other words, birders can get plenty of eastern species on their BC lists by visiting this region. Fort St. John, the furthest destination on our trip, is approximately 11 hours driving from where we both live in Kamloops. We decided to try to drive right through to our furthest point and then work our way back to the Mackenzie area in the 4 days we had.

The weather was an issue to say the least. On the drive up, special weather announcements were being made regarding major rainfall. Unable to change our trip dates, we were hoping for the best and were determined to bird the peace area – even if we had to use a canoe! In the end, the weather forecast was almost exactly as predicted, and it rained for the majority of our visit. We experienced horizontal rainfall at the Ft. St. John sewage lagoons. All of our shoes and socks ended up wet and unable to dry for the duration of our trip. I went through 3 pairs of shoes in 4 days. Isaac even birded on bare feet for several hours in Beaton Provincial Park... By the time we arrived home, we had layers of stinky wet clothes in our vehicle and we resorted to putting most of it in the trunk to avoid the smell. Even “waterproof” footwear didn’t stand up to the soggy ground and soaking ground cover.

In addition to the birds, the fantastic wildlife and scenery we experienced on this trip added to an amazing 4 days, even if it rained for most of the trip. We live in such a rich area for everything wild!

In all, we travelled around 2500 kms from start to finish. Our route can be seen on the map below.





A closer map showing exact roads travelled.

We had the vehicle loaded up and left Kamloops by 4:20 am July 1. We started birding from the road right after leaving. A quick washroom stop at the Hush Lake Rest Area produced a nice list that included an Alder Flycatcher and a Northern Waterthrush as highlights. Just south of Prince George we circled back to get some photos of an adult and juvenile Long-billed Curlew in a large grassy yard right beside the highway.

Juvenile



Adult



Just north of Prince George we were discussing how the area was looking good for bears beside the highway when a Black Bear stood up on its hind legs and had a look at us going past. This was followed by 2 more Black Bears a while later. Bears will come to the roadside to feed on the vegetation that is not available inside the forest. Dandelions and other wildflowers make up a huge portion of their diet in spring and early summer. When we make roads, we often clear more space than needed and this allows vegetation to grow in areas where it would be mostly dominated by Spruce or other coniferous trees. A wide shoulder along a road, train track, or under powerlines usually results in a buffet of greens for bears. This is great for people wanting to see bears because it brings them right to the side of the road. This is great for bears because it provides them with an excellent food source but also bad for bears because it brings them into contact with fast moving vehicles. Not sure where the balance is there. During the rest of our trip we also observed Elk, Moose, White-tailed, and Mule Deer using these roadside grassy areas.



Roadside wildflowers



Vegetation areas beside the road



Black Bear



Wildflowers

Our first real stop was Moberly Lake Provincial Park. It was raining heavily and there was also some wind, so conditions were not the best. We tried to hear and/or see anything, but the songs and sightings were slow given the conditions. We were able to add Tennessee, Magnolia, and Black-throated green Warblers to our growing list among other things. It was also here that we said goodbye to the feeling of dry feet for the next few days... After this we decided to travel the rest of the way to Fort St. John via Highway 29 through Hudson's Hope. More than halfway along this route is Watson Slough where we had heard Nelson's Sparrow was possible. We first birded Watson Road behind the wetland and went part ways up that road for a bit. As well as the birds, we found 2 Woodchucks. This is a common mammal in many parts of Canada but not in BC and it was great to add this specie to our BC mammal list. Pics below from Watson Road.



We then put boots and waders on and birded the Watson Slough hotspot with Nelson's Sparrow as the primary target bird. After a while one flew in behind us and gave brief views.



Nelson's Sparrow

Beaver skull in the marsh

We then birded from the road the rest of the way to Fort St. John, grabbed some food, and checked into our hotel. By then the wind was picking up and the rain was steady. We had planned on birding the Fort St. John Sewage Lagoons before dark, but the weather was deteriorating even more. Once we had our gear in our room and looked out the window, we made the decision to give it a go anyway. How could we not?! The result was one of those memories that are not soon forgotten. For anyone who has birded this location, you know the access road can be interesting and this certainly proved to be true in the monsoon conditions. Once in sight of our destination, our vehicle decided that steering in the wet clay was optional and our brakes started making noises from the clay piling up. We ended up parking along the road quite a distance from where the gate to get in is. We suited up with the best we had for horizontal hurricane-like rainfall and 30-40km/h wind and walked the rest of the way. I left my camera in the car, something that rarely happens. The walk to the lagoons was into the wind, we birded with the wind behind us, and sometimes had to walk perpendicular to the wind between ponds. This resulted in getting pelted with rain from all sides like a spray tan and the result was we were thoroughly drenched by the end of our 1.5 hours there. It was worth it, however, adding Red-necked Phalarope in breeding plumage, a single Semipalmated Plover, 20 Semipalmated Sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher and various other shorebirds to our list. We were not able to bird the grassland around the ponds at all given the conditions. Back at our hotel, we tried in vain to have things dry out over night and Isaac began to reflect on bringing only 3-4 pairs of socks for the trip. For the rest of our trip, the smell of wet musty clothes seemed to be coming from somewhere in our vehicle.



Isaac (left) and I (right) scoping the lagoons in wet and blustery conditions. Notice Isaac's bi-coloured pants.

The next morning, we were out of our hotel in Fort St. John by 5:00 am and headed straight to Beaton Provincial Park. It has been a good year for Bay-breasted Warbler in the Peace, so we had this as our target as well as Cape May Warbler and the other eastern species this site is known for. Birding started slowly with more rain falling. Blue-headed Vireo, more Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, and lots of White-throated Sparrows held our attention. After strolling

around for a while, we ventured further south in the forest along the lake and 2 White-winged Crossbills appeared on the ground. We had good looks at those and then birds started appearing quickly. Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Black and White Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, Least Flycatcher, and others appeared. We then explored the trails leading out of the ball field area and ran into Bay-breasted Warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and others. The trails were soaked with the ground refusing to absorb any more of the rain and it was here that Isaac abandoned all footwear and went barefoot for the next hour or so. Cape May Warbler proved to be difficult, but we finally got one on a different trail dominated by Spruce. In the end we finished with 48 species in 5 hours of tough conditions.



Bay-breasted Warbler



Black-and-White Warbler



Blue-headed Vireo



A wet Merlin on the way in



Ovenbird



Rose-breasted Grosbeak



Tennessee Warbler



White-tailed Deer



White-winged Crossbills



White-throated Sparrow

We then made a brief stop at the Big Bam Road hot spot where the sun popped out for a bit. It was midday and most things were quiet here. A highlight was finding a Red-eyed Vireo nest.



Trying to dry things on Big Bam Road



Female Rose-breasted Grosbeak

We decided to check at a known Upland Sandpiper place on the way south. We found one sitting on some power lines and another just down the road on a telephone pole. A Mule Deer was also in the area. While taking side roads to get back on the main road a Red Fox ran across the road in front of us and a Savannah Sparrow popped up while we were waiting for the fox to return.



Upland Sandpiper



Mule Deer



Red Fox



Savannah Sparrow

McQueen Slough east of Dawson Creek was the next destination. We enjoyed 1.5 hours here in great weather. New birds for the trip included Swamp Sparrows, Franklin's Gulls, Black Terns, Common Grackles, and others.



Canola field near McQueen Slough



Franklin's Gulls



Swamp Sparrow



Wilson's Snipe

We birded a bit along the road after that on our way to Chetwynd and secured a room there at the Country Squire Inn. We then headed towards the Del Rio area on Jackfish Lake Road. We stayed on this road and a few others from 7:00-midnight and enjoyed fantastic mammals and birds. LeConte's Sparrows and 3 owl species were the highlights in terms of birding. We also added our first Moose, Coyote, Beaver, Snowshoe Hare, and Elk of the trip here.



Elk/Wapiti



Beaver



Great Gray Owl



Isaac photographing Great Gray Owl



LeConte's Sparrow



Moose



Short-eared Owl in the headlights



Snowshoe Hare



Solitary Sandpiper



White-tailed Buck

Because we got to bed so late the night before, we slept until 7:00 the next morning and headed east to where you can turn south on highway 52 and do a full circle through Tumbler Ridge and back up to highway 97 on highway 29. That was the plan until we found out that 52 was closed because of a washout as a result of the heavy rain... The highway was closed just past the Brassey Creek hotspot. No problem, we would bird Brassey Creek Road and then retrace our tracks north back to Chetwynd. We turned with anticipation onto Brassey Creek road only to find it not doable because of rain as well. Right off the highway there was deep mud with ruts showing the extent of it. Not going to happen. I'm adventurous with a Honda Civic (see Mt. Morfee Road section below) but there is a limit. Disappointed, we turned back north and drove back to Chetwynd to head south on 29. This resulted in 3 hours without birding and we had already had a late start. Trips like these are full of high and low moments and this was threatening to turn into a low moment. Before finding out the 52 was closed we had passed through a river flowing over highway 97 between Chetwynd and Dawson Creek and were surprised that was still open. Now we had to pass back through that way and if that was closed, we were in big trouble. Fortunately, it was open but was at the maximum level a Civic could pass through. See photos below.



Flooded river over Highway 97 between Dawson Creek and Chetwynd

We drove south on 29 with Mt. Spieker as the destination. On the way a Moose ran out on the road in front of us. We also passed a few places we planned to stop at if time allowed after our planned hike to the alpine on Mt. Spieker. We then drove up to the trailhead for Mt. Spieker on very well-maintained roads and the Honda Civic had no problems. We passed the huge Wolverine coal mine on one back road after missing a right turn.



Moose on the road



Part of the Wolverine Coal Mine

Because of 52 being closed due to a washout, we didn't get to the Mt. Spieker trailhead until 2:30 pm. We deliberated about hiking it because of the weather. It was raining and the wind was up so we discussed our preparedness for horrible weather in the alpine. We also did not know if the wind would be worse up on the ridge where we planned to look for ptarmigan. In the end we set out to see how far we could get and ended up spending 4 hours hiking. The scenery from the top was fantastic despite the rain and wind. All in all, it was a very easy hike up and we enjoyed our time up there. No ptarmigan were found but we had another trip to the alpine at another location planned for the next day... Photos below of the alpine area on top of Mt. Spieker. A quick 30-minute hike uphill and then reasonably flat areas to explore.



The hiking trail up



View from the top looking down on the parking area



Alpine area near the top



Alpine area at the top

New species added to our list at or near the top of Mt. Spieker included Golden-crowned Sparrow, American Pipit, Hermit Thrush, Fox Sparrow, Ruffed Grouse, and White-crowned Sparrow. It was overcast the entire time and sometimes we were in the clouds so checking for Golden Eagle, etc... was not possible. We also found Hoary marmots here as well as fairly fresh Grizzly Bear scat.



Golden-crowned Sparrow



Hermit Thrush



Hoary Marmot



Ruffed Grouse

After the hike we had a very productive stop at Bull Moose Marshes located a short way from where the Mt. Speiker access road meets highway 29. New birds added here include Barrow's Goldeneye, Bohemian Waxwing, and Blackpoll Warbler. It was incredibly special to see Cedar and Bohemian Waxwings side by side at this location where their breeding habitats overlap.



Barrow's Goldeneye



Beaver



Blackpoll Warbler



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

We were back at our hotel in Chetwynd by 10:00 pm and out the door the next morning at 5:00 a.m. to meet up with Evan Pye, the birder with the most species on eBird for the Peace region. Isaac had been texting with him and he offered to go out birding with us. Unfortunately, we only had a morning with him and his wife Glenda due to our tight schedule but hopefully we will meet up with them again sometime down the road. We met at Moberly Provincial Park and while we were meeting each other Isaac spotted a Fisher walking out onto a fallen tree. A life mammal for both of us and certainly a great start to what would be a productive day! Through discussing our trip, Evan learned that we had not seen a Mourning Warbler yet so offered to take us a short distance where he knew of some. Isaac and I rode on their tailgate into the Chetwynd Community Forest (not doable in a civic at that time because of the rain). Within minutes of arriving at the location he knew, a Mourning Warbler flew in carrying food to its nest in the immediate area. I snapped a few pictures. We really enjoyed our very short time with Evan and his wife Glenda but had to leave in order to be able to do Mt. Morfee before being home that night.



Fisher



Mourning Warbler

On the 2 hour drive from Chetwynd to Mackenzie we had one place in the road where there was a Black Bear, a Moose, and 2 Elk/Wapiti all within 0.5 kms of each other. Took us a while to get through that stretch 😊.



At Mackenzie we headed to the access road to Mt. Morfee. This is a special road because it leads to the alpine without much hiking. For two birders in a hurry that desperately wanted to add a ptarmigan to their trip list, it was irresistible. We could tell that the road up is normally quite well maintained but these were not normal times. The road had turned into a river in recent days without washboards to steer water off the road. I had to draw on skills learned in my younger years when I used to go 4X4ing for fun in a lifted Jeep to make it up. We received a few glances and comments from people at the top when we rolled up in a Honda Civic! Anyway, the Alpine area here was enshrouded with cloud and we could not spread out too much in searching for ptarmigan for fear of losing each other. Gotta love smart phones that have google maps accessible even when not in cell range. We again explored without success and decided to go down one last area back to our vehicle. It was here that we finally found a Willow Ptarmigan! Finally a ptarmigan after hours of checking two mountains. After this experience we went for our second target bird up there → Gray-cheeked Thrush. In a good area, we listened intently for a singing Gray-cheeked among all of the singing Hermit Thrush. Sure enough, we could hear a Gray-cheeked singing! It later popped up for a quick photo.



Willow Ptarmigan



Searching for Ptarmigan on Mt. Morfee

Gray-cheeked Thrush



After Mt. Morfee, we basically drove straight back to Kamloops (8 hour drive) and arrived around 9:30 pm. We stopped when a dark Red Fox crossed the road between Mackenzie and Prince George. There is a lot of colour variation in Red Foxes in northern BC. We had one productive washroom break just north of Prince George where we saw American Redstarts and another Magnolia Warbler among other things.



Red Fox



Take your pick



Male



Female

The rest of the drive was about putting kms behind us. We did keep an eye out for new species and added 2 Trumpeter Swans and some American White Pelicans south of William's Lake.

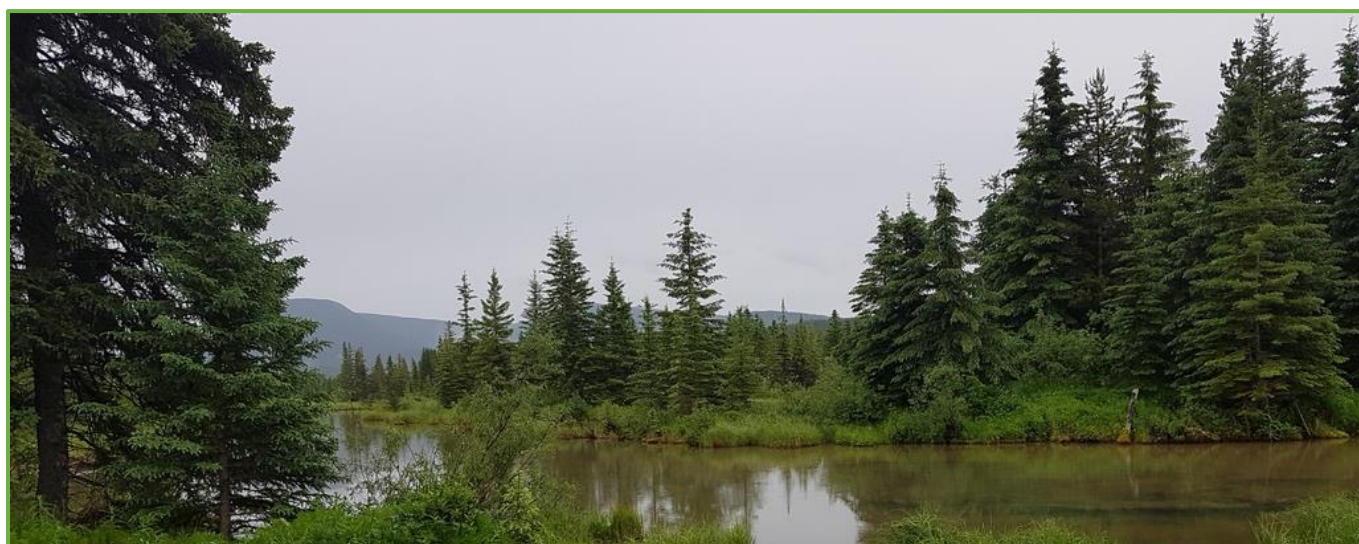


Near Kamloops, on the way back, we encountered this Gopher Snake on the road. I stopped to move it to the side and saw that it looked like it had been grazed by a tire. It was not dead but clearly wasn't doing well either. I am not sure if it took a direct hit or not. Hope it makes it.

#### Mammal list from the entire trip:

1. Elk/Wapiti – 3 (1 cow in Del Rio area, 2 bulls NE of Lemoray)
2. Mule Deer – 22 (bucks, does, and 2 fawns at many places)
3. White-tailed Deer – 5 (bucks and does at Del Rio area, highway 52, and Beaton)
4. Moose – 5 (1 bull at Del Rio, 2 cows on highway 29, 1 cow NE of Lemoray)
5. Fisher – 1 (along access road to Moberly Provincial Park)
6. Black Bear – 4 (all between Prince George and Chetwynd on highway 97)
7. Coyote – 2 (1 in Del Rio area, 1 along highway 97 just west of Chetwynd)
8. Red Fox – 2 (1 just north of Dawson Creek, 1 near Lemoray)
9. American Beaver – 4 (3 in Del Rio area, 1 at Bull Moose Marsh)
10. Least Chipmunk – 1 (in alpine on Mt. Morfee)
11. Hoary Marmot – 5 (4 adults and one young on Mt. Spieker)
12. Woodchuck – 2 (along Watson Road behind Watson Slough)
13. Columbian Ground Squirrel – 3 (a minimum of 3 encountered along the road at a brief stop at the south end of William's Lake)
14. Red Squirrel – 3 (Moberly, Beaton, Bull Moose Marsh)
15. Snowshoe Hare – 4 (3 in Del Rio area, 1 by Moberly PP)

Additional: Grizzly Bear scat on the access road and hiking trail of Mt. Spieker  
Gray Wolf scat on the bittern trail at Bull Moose Marsh



Complete bird list from leaving Kamloops to returning. All individual places, numbers, and additional photos on eBird.

125 species seen in the Peace Regional District

40 species seen in Fraser-Fort George District

35 species seen in the Cariboo District

- 1 Canada Goose
- 2 Trumpeter Swan
- 3 Blue-winged Teal
- 4 Northern Shoveler
- 5 Gadwall
- 6 American Wigeon
- 7 Mallard
- 8 Green-winged Teal
- 9 Redhead
- 10 Greater Scaup
- 11 Lesser Scaup
- 12 Bufflehead
- 13 Common Goldeneye
- 14 Barrow's Goldeneye
- 15 Common Merganser
- 16 Ruddy Duck
- 17 Ruffed Grouse
- 18 Willow Ptarmigan
- 19 Red-necked Grebe
- 20 Eared Grebe
- 21 Rock Pigeon
- 22 Eurasian Collared-Dove
- 23 Common Nighthawk
- 24 Calliope Hummingbird
- 25 Sora
- 26 American Coot
- 27 Sandhill Crane
- 28 Semipalmated Plover
- 29 Killdeer
- 30 Upland Sandpiper
- 31 Long-billed Curlew
- 32 Least Sandpiper
- 33 Semipalmated Sandpiper
- 34 Long-billed Dowitcher
- 35 Wilson's Snipe
- 36 Red-necked Phalarope

- 37 Spotted Sandpiper
- 38 Solitary Sandpiper
- 39 Greater Yellowlegs
- 40 Lesser Yellowlegs
- 41 Franklin's Gull
- 42 Ring-billed Gull
- 43 Black Tern
- 44 Common Loon
- 45 American White Pelican
- 46 Great Blue Heron
- 47 Northern Harrier
- 48 Sharp-shinned Hawk
- 49 Cooper's Hawk
- 50 Bald Eagle
- 51 Red-tailed Hawk
- 52 Barred Owl
- 53 Great Gray Owl
- 54 Long-eared Owl
- 55 Short-eared Owl
- 56 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
- 57 Hairy Woodpecker
- 58 Pileated Woodpecker
- 59 Northern Flicker
- 60 American Kestrel
- 61 Merlin
- 62 Western Wood-Pewee
- 63 Alder Flycatcher
- 64 Least Flycatcher
- 65 Pacific-slope Flycatcher
- 66 Eastern Phoebe
- 67 Western Kingbird
- 68 Eastern Kingbird
- 69 Blue-headed Vireo
- 70 Warbling Vireo
- 71 Red-eyed Vireo
- 72 Canada Jay
- 73 Blue Jay
- 74 Black-billed Magpie
- 75 American Crow
- 76 Common Raven
- 77 Black-capped Chickadee
- 78 Northern Rough-winged Swallow
- 79 Tree Swallow

- 80 Violet-green Swallow
- 81 Bank Swallow
- 82 Barn Swallow
- 83 Cliff Swallow
- 84 Golden-crowned Kinglet
- 85 Ruby-crowned Kinglet
- 86 Red-breasted Nuthatch
- 87 White-breasted Nuthatch
- 88 House Wren
- 89 Pacific Wren
- 90 Winter Wren
- 91 Marsh Wren
- 92 European Starling
- 93 Varied Thrush
- 94 Veery
- 95 Gray-cheeked Thrush
- 96 Swainson's Thrush
- 97 Hermit Thrush
- 98 American Robin
- 99 Bohemian Waxwing
- 100 Cedar Waxwing
- 101 House Sparrow
- 102 American Pipit
- 103 Evening Grosbeak
- 104 Purple Finch
- 105 White-winged Crossbill
- 106 Pine Siskin
- 107 Chipping Sparrow
- 108 Clay-colored Sparrow
- 109 Fox Sparrow
- 110 Dark-eyed Junco
- 111 White-crowned Sparrow
- 112 Golden-crowned Sparrow
- 113 White-throated Sparrow
- 114 Vesper Sparrow
- 115 LeConte's Sparrow
- 116 Nelson's Sparrow
- 117 Savannah Sparrow
- 118 Song Sparrow
- 119 Lincoln's Sparrow
- 120 Swamp Sparrow
- 121 Yellow-headed Blackbird
- 122 Western Meadowlark

- 123 Red-winged Blackbird
- 124 Brown-headed Cowbird
- 125 Brewer's Blackbird
- 126 Common Grackle
- 127 Ovenbird
- 128 Northern Waterthrush
- 129 Black-and-white Warbler
- 130 Tennessee Warbler
- 131 Orange-crowned Warbler
- 132 MacGillivray's Warbler
- 133 Mourning Warbler
- 134 Common Yellowthroat
- 135 American Redstart
- 136 Cape May Warbler
- 137 Magnolia Warbler
- 138 Bay-breasted Warbler
- 139 Yellow Warbler
- 140 Blackpoll Warbler
- 141 Yellow-rumped Warbler
- 142 Black-throated Green Warbler
- 143 Wilson's Warbler
- 144 Western Tanager
- 145 Rose-breasted Grosbeak
- 146 Lazuli Bunting