

Canadian Rockies

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 - 9

The Canadian Rockies: Engadine featuring Peter Lougheed and Spray Valley Lakes Provincial Parks then Storm Mountain lodge for Banff, Kootenay & Jasper National Parks

We'll arrive into Calgary at lunchtime and will waste little time leaving this gleaming edifice to modernity for the glistening peaks of the Canadian Rockies already visible to the west. It's just a ninety minute drive to these majestic mountains and a further half an hour will see us in the fascinatingly named Elbow-Sheep Wildland Provincial Park, really just an extension of Banff National Park. The landscapes are everything Canadians claim - these are some of the most scenic mountains on the planet, as much for the immense tracts of forest, bogs and lakes, as for the huge cliffs that reach up to the high peaks.

At the foot of this park the Bow Valley Provincial Park has a memorable display of stunning orange Western Wood Lilies. Under Lodgepole Pines we'll find the striking Striped Coralroot Orchid and in damp dells under alder and willow are gorgeous *Viola canadensis*, pink *Pyrola asarifolia*, and two Lady's Slipper Orchids, *Cypripedium parviflorum*, and *Cypripedium passerinum*. Our attention is drawn to the tall conifers where Red-breasted Nuthatches give their persistent tin-horn call. Below the canopy, we might catch the nasal phrases of Boreal Chickadees.

The road winds easily up from our hotel to the Highwood Pass which at 7200 feet above sea level is above the tree line and in a thoroughly alpine zone. Bighorn Sheep will be seen regularly, they enjoy the salt on the roadsides, and seem unperturbed by vehicles just a metre or three away. We'll be visiting a day or two on after the road is officially opened and this is the perfect time to see Grizzly Bears. They have had the place to themselves for the whole winter and like the Bighorn Sheep find the roadsides attractive though in their case it is the lush vegetation that they enjoy. It takes them some days to gradually move off back into the land away from the road so this is a great chance to see them. In the tundra-like vegetation we'll find Moss Campion, *Smelowskia calycina* and several Anemones. We'll look and listen for Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches as they fly between clumps of stunted spruce. If we're really lucky, we'll catch sight of a covey of White-tailed Ptarmigan. There likely will still be patches of snow here and we'll find Western Pasqueflower *Pulsatilla occidentalis*, and the bright buttercup *Ranunculus niveus*. Screes by the road host the wonderful *Polemonium pulcherinum* and in places there are mats of *Dryas octopetala* and the yellow heather *Phyllodice glandulifera*. We'll stop by a 'rock glacier' where Pikas will scurry for cover. There's a fabulous flora with mats of fantastic *Silene acaulis* and the golden fleabane.

Down the valley Sticky Red Geranium and white Richardson's Geranium flower amongst *Rosa* bushes - the rose is ubiquitous and is the state flower of Alberta. Remnant prairie and riparian floodplain along the Bow River is at its best at this season. Prairie Cone Flower *Ratibida columnifera* is a beautiful sight with its drooping ligules and the 'Purple Prairie Clover' *Petalostemon purpureum*, is of course not a legume at all! We'll see the unusual Scarlet Butterfly-Weed *Gaura coccinea*, *Lithospermum ruderale* or Woolly Puccoon, and *Onosmodium occidentale* or False Gromwell, amongst the dominant Blue Grama Grass. Most of the dawn chorus will have subsided by mid July. However, a few warblers might burst into the occasional song. Bright males like Townsend's Warbler or Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler will delight us with their bold colour and pattern.

The comfort and fine food of Storm Mountain Lodge is positioned on the boundary between Alberta's Banff National Park and British Columbia's Kootenay National Park. Around the lodge are orchids such as Fragrant White Rein Orchid, Slender Rein Orchid, Northern Green Rein Orchid, One-leaved Rein Orchid and *Listera borealis*. Aquilegias vary from yellow *flavescens* to something quite close to orange-red and yellow *formosa*. Red Squirrels and Gold-mantled Ground Squirrels chatter by the lodge's front door and around the cabins Snowshoe Hares hardly bother to move from outside one's balcony. These are the main food of Canadian Lynx which are found in the woods around the lodge but any sightings seem confined to winter. Feeders attract Rufous Hummingbirds and we'll also find Pine Siskins, Gray Jays, Boreal Chickadees and Pine Grosbeaks. Clark's Nutcrackers are common and exceptionally tame, Ospreys and Common Loons nest by nearby lakes, and Harlequin Ducks live along the rivers. Northern Flying Squirrels are found around the lodge grounds though they are strictly nocturnal. Nevertheless sitting quietly on your verandah just after dark might bring results if you listen for the quiet thud of one landing on the tree above you! A path from the lodge takes us to the graceful 'shooting stars' of *Dodecatheon pulchellum*.

The Johnston Canyon is one of many places where the Calypso Orchid may be found in flower in a mossy understory that harbours the lovely pink-flowered *Amerorchis rotundifolia*. Black Swifts nest by waterfalls and there's Varied Thrushes and Townsend's Solitaires too. We'll see Elephant's-head, beautiful *Erythronium grandiflorum*, yellow *Dryas drummondii*, Fringed Grass-of-Parnassus, and a variety of Paintbrushes. A road winds up to the ski resort at Sunshine Meadows so we can reach the snows without having to stretch our legs too much. Four species of *Anemone* produce a sublime show with *Erigerons* and Saxifrages.

Just minutes from the lodge is the Bow Valley Parkway, renowned as the best and easiest way to see the native large (and small) mammals. We'll use the parkway on several days as part of route so during the tour we'll build up a good catalogue of mammal sightings. Bighorn Sheep and huge-antlered male Elk are common and easy to photograph right by the roadside. Muskrats are fun to watch in ponds and in extensive valley bogs we'll look for Moose too. Black Bear are seen regularly and in a week we will see them on a number of occasions. The

full protection of the wildlife in the area means that the mammals in particular are becoming more noticeable, whether because numbers are rising or they are becoming less concerned by the visiting tourists. Sightings of Wolves have been on the increase with several packs known to live close to the Bow Valley Parkway. A sighting is always a bonus but regular drives along this road will give us a good chance – we saw them twice in 2016, once two females with five cubs, these right by the roadside, and later two Wolves at a kill.

Linking Banff to Jasper National Park is the Icefields Parkway which many claim is the most scenic road on Earth. Bow Lake is the quintessential Rockies scenery, featured on a million adverts, brochures and screen savers. The turquoise-blue lake is backed by stunning snow-streaked mountains with pencil thin spruce in the foreground – and the Bow Glacier hanging over the far ridge in menacing fashion. Perhaps even better are the staggering views out over Peyto Lake and the snow and ice clad mountains beyond. Peyto is an almost ice-blue, the colour caused by the glacial dust so fine that it is carried in suspension by the water. Up here are white-haired Mountain Goats, their appearance belying their agility on the rockfaces. Looking closer at hand we'll see the fine yellow blooms of *Erythronium grandiflorum*, amid a great show of *Trollius albiflorus*, occasional *Claytonia lanceolata* too. Near Saskatchewan Crossing the mossy forest floor has thousands of Calypso Orchids as well as *Platanthera obtusata*, and beautiful blue and white *Clematis occidentalis*. Reaching the high ground around the divide we'll see the vast Athabasca Glacier stretching away to our south and as Golden Eagles soar overhead we'll be able to take a walk amongst a rich community of alpine plants.

Kootenay National Park starts just south of the lodge as every bit as beautiful, wild and full of fauna and flora as Banff. Near the hotel we'll visit the Paint Pots, little pools and muddy areas where the mud is a strong ochre colour and has in the past been used by the local Indian population to make pigments by firing little cakes of the mud then crumbling it and using it with animal grease to make a red paint. The mud is a great place to study animal tracks. Here we'll find Cranberries, Lesser Twayblade, and the lovely little *Primula mistissinica*. Driving down the road we'll check salt licks which can be productive places for mammals. The Horsethief River Valley is a great place to look for Moose, the river winding through damp meadows and open woodlands where Bald Eagles nest in the cottonwoods. Red-naped Sapsuckers and Downy Woodpeckers are active in the trees while Alliums and Penstemons bloom in the sandy grasslands. We'll visit a fine population of the uncommon slipper orchid, *Cypripedium montanum*, sure to be a trip highlight.

Days 10 - 14

The Okanagan – Mount Kobai and Mount Baldy

Though styled as British Columbia's summer playground, largely due to a climate even sunnier than Honolulu's, the Okanagan has some great flora and fauna. Positioned between the great Rocky Mountains and the Coastal Ranges, the lower altitude means it is warmer and drier. In fact in places it is decidedly arid. Dry

prairies have some of British Columbia's most beautiful flowers with *Calochortus macrocarpus* at the head of the list. The delightful Showy Jacob's Ladder is joined by *Pedicularis bracteosa*, *Mimulus guttatus* and *Gentiana amarella*. Slender Bog Orchid and pretty Upland Larkspur mix with gorgeous pink *Lewisia rediviva*. *Corydalis sempervirens* with its garish pink and yellow flowers surmounting the elegant glaucous foliage enjoys dry rocky situations whilst colourful Castillejas are everywhere. The stunning *Aquilegia formosa* is an inhabitant of open woodlands and so too the wonderful Mountain Lady's Slipper. The *Lithophragmas* or 'woodland stars' are a pretty and unusual group of saxifrage relatives that have several species in this region. Wetter meadows host Tall White Bog Orchid, Death Camus and the very local (in Canada) 'shooting star' of *Dodecatheon conjugum*.

During the afternoon of Day 14 we'll fly from Kelowna to Calgary and then depart from there for Europe. Or continue to Vancouver for the Extension....

Day 15

Arrive UK/Europe.

The Vancouver Island Extension

The itinerary for this will appear on this page during September this year!

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