

Canadian Rockies

Wildlife at Leisure

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 ruderales* 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. We'll depart Calgary Airport during the evening of Day 9.

Day 10

Arrive UK/Europe

Vancouver Island Pre-Tour

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British Columbia is truly a land of sweeping forests, endless mountainous and unspoilt rivers and lakes and nowhere is this truer than on Vancouver Island. Fabulous Coastal scenery, incredible Coastal Temperate Rainforests, and habitats hardly touched by man combine to provide a home for a rich array of fauna and flora that reaches its zenith in the large mammal populations. Both marine and land mammals can here be seen more easily and in good numbers than perhaps anywhere on the continent.

Day 1 To Vancouver

Our flight lands in Vancouver in the afternoon and we'll head straight to our hotel handily situated for the morning ferry journey.

Day 2 Ferry to Vancouver Island and to Qualicum Beach

We'll catch the morning ferry for Vancouver Island which takes two hours to cross the straits. En route we'll see California and Glaucous-winged Gulls, Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants, and there's a chance of a cetacean or two. We'll head for Tofino but there's a great break in the journey! Following an early lunch on the ferry it is a little over two hours to Qualicum Beach where we will settle into the eponymous Inn before heading out to explore the coastal habitats roundabout. The beautiful Anna's Hummingbird speeds between blooms whilst Song Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos seem to be everywhere. Among the trees we'll find the lovely Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Northern Flicker and Spotted Towhee, and along the coast itself we can look for Belted Kingfisher, Northwestern Crow, Black Turnstones and the immaculate Black Oystercatcher.

Day 3 Little Qualicum Provincial Park and transfer to Ucluelet

After breakfast we'll explore Little Qualicum Provincial Park. Here is an ancient forest, the huge Red Cedars interspersed with Western Hemlock, Large Leaf Maple and Arbutus trees with their strange peeling bark. The unusual saprophytic orchid the Western Coralroot blooms here and we'll find Prince's Pine and the lovely Chocolate Lily, not actually a lily but a fritillary. The extraordinary Vancouver Groundcone, a strange purple apparition that parasitises the roots of the Salal is not uncommon in Little Qualicum. Later in the morning we'll head for Ucluelet and the wonderful habitats of the Pacific Rim National Park. A trail from close to our hotel takes us through rock pools with a stunning array of large almost lime green anemones, whilst various gulls and Common Loons will be offshore. An incredibly

scenic trail takes us round a spectacular headland, through contorted and twisted Red Cedars, to the Amphitrite Lighthouse. Myriad fungi decorate the mossy woodland floor including orange-yellow stacks of Chicken-of-the-Woods. There are many viewpoints from which we'll be able to watch for sea-going wildlife. Gray Whales, Humpback Whales and Orcas are all possible, as well as Steller's Sea Lions, Sea Otters, and Harbour Porpoises. The birding is excellent too with elegant Black Oystercatchers, Rhinoceros Auklets and Pigeon Guillemots. The stunted twisted Shorepines emerging from the thick moss along the Sphagnum Bog Trail make for surreal scenery, the trees growing sideways instead of upwards because of the very poor growing conditions. The bog flora here is good with species such as Labrador Tea, Bog Laurel, Crowberry, Bog Cranberry, Sundew and Sweet Gale all present and there's a decent chance of spotting a Columbian Black-tailed Deer or two in the Muskeg forest.

Day 4

Pacific Rim National Park: Tofino Boat Trip – Black Bears & Sea Otters

We'll take our first boat trip out from Tofino where our local boatman will soon have us meeting our first unimaginably cute Sea Otters. These lovely animals have returned in numbers to the Pacific Coast after being driven to the verge of extinction. They have increased dramatically in numbers in recent years which has been great news for the underwater kelp forests as the Otters prey on their main herbivore the sea urchin. The study of the change in habitats brought about by the return of the Sea Otter has been fundamental in elucidating the idea of Trophic Cascades, an important concept now in ecological understanding. Sometimes we'll see them nuzzling their chests – blowing air into the fur to warm up. Sometimes we'll see them holding purple spiny sea urchins, clutching the urchin with their front paws as they swim on their backs, watching us all the while.

Black Oystercatchers feed on the rocky shore, groups of Surf Scoter loaf off the little bays and Belted Kingfishers hunt along the shore. The black backs of Harbour Porpoises surface from time to time around us. There can be a lot of Sea Otters in the waters here and we may see rafts of them wrapping themselves in strands of kelp, so that they can rest up or even sleep without drifting away. We've also a good chance of see babies at this time of year. Vancouver Island is famed for its bears and this trip is also aimed at watching and photographing 'Beach Bears' (Black Bears) foraging along the shore line. We'll see a number of them on our boat trips, all busy 'beach-combing' – it is great fun watching them turning over rocks in search of a tasty snack.

We'll have time to explore the trails in the Pacific Rim National Park either before or after our boat trips each day. Here we can look for Ruffed Grouse, or if we are lucky the rare Sooty Grouse, and we'll note the vertical lines of drilled holes in tree bark that are the indications of Sapsuckers (woodpeckers) feeding. Tasty Red Huckleberry, Himalayan Blackberry (introduced from India via England),

Thimbleberry and Oval-leaved Blueberry line the trails that lead to some ponds where we'll look for Beavers.

Day 5

Pacific Rim National Park: Whale-watching Boat Trip

Almost as we leave the harbour playful Dahl's Porpoises will be with us and they'll be around throughout the trip. These fastest of cetaceans are marked with similar black and white markings to Orcas. Common Seals haul out on the perfectly-formed rocky islets just out of the harbour. As we pass wooded islands, Bald Eagles gaze at the scene from beautiful Shore Pines draped with mosses. A population of around two hundred Pacific Gray Whales spend April to November in Clayoquot and Barkley Sounds. We'll have the chance to get close to this oddest looking of the great whales. Humpback Whales will also be on the agenda and we've another chance of Orcas though sightings are only every couple of weeks here! We'll also see Harbour Seals and, as everywhere, Bald Eagles and Great Blue Herons. Wolf sightings are also possible here.

Day 6

Cathedral Grove and to Moonwater Lodge

Wandering Vancouver's old-growth temperate rainforests is an experience that will leave you awed. The moss and fern-laden understory is peppered with giants – Western hemlock, Yellow Cedar, Western Red Cedar, Douglas-fir, Amabilis Fir and Sitka Spruce - these are some of the largest trees in North America. Red Squirrels scold us as we watch Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Sapsuckers, Pacific Wrens and Chestnut-backed Chickadees. Cathedral Grove has an 800 year old Douglas Fir that stands 76 metres tall and has a circumference of 9m.

The giant moss-covered trunks shine in the golden light streaming down from the high canopy – hence 'Cathedral' Grove. Varied Thrush is amongst the more beautiful of the birds we might see and others include Northern Goshawk, Hammond's Flycatcher, Brown Creeper and Hermit Thrush.

In the afternoon we'll continue along to Malahat where we'll find the lovely Moonwater Bay Lodge, our home for the last two nights of the tour.

Day 7

Whale-watching trip for Orcas and Sea Otters

The boat trips out from the Victoria Island are well-known for their almost guaranteed (95% success rate) wildlife shows with pods of Orcas frequently observed at close range. These are exceptionally dynamic animals and every encounter seems to reveal a new facet of their daily lives – it is astonishing just how well one can see these incredibly powerful inhabitants of the island's seas. The Orcas we'll likely see in the Gulf Islands near Victoria comprise three pods totalling about eighty animals – collectively they are the Southern Resident Orcas. These

Orcas specialise in feeding on salmon preparing for the spawning runs in the autumn. We'll have plenty of time amongst the Orcas and will gain an insight into the behaviour we'll be witnessing as well as learning about their lives so well-known now to the boat guides. As we watch them small groups of Rhinoceros Auklets swim nearby in rafts, some with beaks stuffed with small silver fish. Harbour Porpoises appear briefly from time to time and we've a good chance of seeing a Minke Whale or two, and we've another chance of watching Humpback Whales. We'll encounter huge sleek Steller's Sea Lions swimming under the surface of the crystal-clear water eyeing us disdainfully as they pass. Steller's Sea Lions are not much smaller than a Grizzly Bear. We've another chance of seeing those incredibly cute Sea Otters on this trip and there's a possibility of seeing River Otters in the harbour too.

Day 8

To the Canadian Rockies Tour

Indigo-hued Steller's Jays are common along the trails at Moonwater Bay. Bald Eagles nest in the bay and we'll likely see Downy Woodpecker, Violet-Green Swallow, Red-tailed Hawk and White-crowned Sparrow, before returning to the lodge for breakfast. From Moonwater we've a one-hour drive to the ferry to Vancouver and thence to the airport in Vancouver where we'll catch a flight over the Rockies to Calgary joining the Wildlife at Leisure tour to the Canadian Rockies on Day 1.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our tours to the Canadian Rockies and the pre-tour to Vancouver Island. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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