

BOW SUMMIT, ALBERTA, CANADA

SHORT NOTES FOR TRAVELING BIRDERS



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Fig. 1. Morning at Peyto Lake – an archetypal view of Canadian Rockies.

On the first week of July 2010, I was visiting Alberta, Canada, in order to see some of the few North American bird species still missing my world list. The situation was far from ideal, because I had fallen on a trail in Hawaii, injured myself and got a bacterial infection in the right leg. On arrival in Calgary, there was good reason to suspect deep vein thrombosis in the inflamed leg. I had tried to get help at the emergency room of Calgary's Peter Lougheed hospital. They agreed it was an emergency situation but that was it. In 6.5 hours, only one patient in the waiting room received treatment. I had to leave for help. A nurse supported this decision!

Only in Canmore hospital, 100 km away, the medical help emerged. Before that, I had to sleep at Deadman's Flats, waiting for a clot in lungs. After an 11 hour process in Canmore the next day, the situation was, however, in control again. I could do some limited birdwatching during the remaining days, before a first class flight back home on the expense of my reliable insurance company, Eurooppalainen.

In the beginning of the year, I had tried to find out the whereabouts of the missing species. The birdwatching scene in Alberta was, however, surprisingly incompetent. There were Atlas maps and general advice in the Internet, but nobody seemed to be able to pinpoint certain locations for species. Where I live, any reasonably active birder is capable of giving a list of locations for species such as Hazel Grouse. In Alberta, nobody I contacted was able to do the same with Ruffed Grouse, by far the most common species on my list. Perhaps I did not meet the right people? The best guidelines were given by Tim Allison, a local 'birding pal', who also pointed me to Bow Summit in Banff National Park, in the Canadian Rockies. Thank you, Tim!

As many other Europeans such as me visit the region on an annual basis, I thought it might help them to read some details on one productive site, from the viewpoint of another visitor. See also the 'Prairie Appendix'.

Accommodation

There is a moratorium on constructing more hotels in the Banff National Park. This is a very good decision, but as not much has been built between Calgary and the park and millions visit the place, the prices of accommodation have become inflated, to say the least. Expect to pay 100 to 200 € inside the park, especially in the high tourist season (July-August). I did my reservations in April and had it really hard to make a good deal.

After extensive search, I found out that the best thing to do was to look for motels in Dead Man's Flats (5 minutes east of Canmore) or Golden, in British Columbia. Both villages have budget motels for 65-80 € per day, such as the Bighorn Motel (www.bighornmotel.com/) or Pinewood Inn and Rondo Motel (Golden). The rooms are very comfortable, even though probably not up to the standards of some Calgarites, who have miserably short vacations and like spend a lot during these

moments out of the 'mouse running wheel'. The other option is to camp. It is very economical and the forest campsites are nice (crowded during the peak months?).

I stayed at the Bighorn Motel, which is better located for the Bow Summit, because the highway is straight on the Alberta side, and therefore saves a lot of time on the way there and back (national park fees apply). The place is run by a pleasant Kenyan Indian family, now American Indian (India!), who will look after you. There is a Husky gas station and restaurant next door, and supermarkets in Canmore, a short drive away. Canmore also has a Safeway supermarket, one of the few chances to find quality food items in North America. Deadman's Flat is, even though right next to the four lane Trans-Canada Highway 1, a peaceful location. What is more, it is a genuine human settlement like its neighbor Canmore, not a plastic Disneyland 'Alptraum' like Banff or a massive day-tripper parking lot like Lake Louise.

A group of female **Bighorn Sheep** was seen close to Deadman's Flats, right by the Highway 1, grazing on green roadside grass. Great scenery!



Fig. 2. One of the glaciers along the Icefields Parkway, Banff National Park.

Transportation

There really is no alternative to car rental, even though national park tour buses visit Bow Summit during the mid day hours. One needs to arrive there early in the morning, before the stampeding hordes of tourists and the end of morning bird activity. Fortunately, rental cars are readily available in Canada. I picked my Budget Chevy Impala at the Calgary International Airport. No problems with the rental.

Access

Leave early, also because there is a chance to see animals (or grouse) by the highway during the early hours. Later on, there is too much traffic. Drive to the Icefields Parkway junction and turn right, continuing past the turquoise Bow Lake, and turning left at the Peyto Lake Viewpoint junction, before Waterfowl Lakes. Unfortunately, it is not allowed to park in the upper parking area, which is reserved for buses. One has to park down right and walk first (steep) to the lookout. After taking a few early morning photos (it is a special scenery), continue on the right hand trail, taking the middle trail up in a three trail junction. Soon afterwards, a gravel 4x4 track goes up and off the trail on left. This is the track to Bow Summit.

The easy to walk track meanders through some stunted fir forest to tree-line, and eventually well into alpine meadows. On the first week of July, snow still reached the tree-line in places, the meadows being only partially open. Melting snow had filled the small bogs on the slopes and created pools of water and small streams. There is no need to take a steep short cut up to the alpine habitat, unless you prefer to do so. The track may seem to go into forest but it soon arrives in open habitat and provides an easier way to walk up to higher altitudes.

Only about ten other visitors were seen trekking on the track during the day, a strong contrast with the thousands of others who jammed the viewpoint and trail to the lower parking area. Peyto Lake view is a 'must' for a Banff National Park visitor. I almost got a panic attack because of the close exposure to such a mass of tourists, superficially human but behaving not unlike crazed lemmings on the move...



Fig. 4. The Bow Summit track, close to tree-line.



Fig.5. A Clark's Nutcracker, one of the common species at Bow Summit.

There is a nice little spot on the opposite site of the Peyto Lake Viewpoint junction. A short (cut) gravel track goes down to the back of a marshy lake, where a number of boreal species may be observed. This was also my picnic spot.

Birds and mammals

Countless spring flowers were in full bloom and birds were busy defending their breeding territories. The forest around the parking lots had **Cooper's Hawk**, **Hairy Woodpeckers**, **Veeries**, **American Thrushes**, a **Hammond's Flycatcher**, **Gray Jays**, **Clark's Nutcrackers**, **Mountain Chickadees**, **Audubon's Warblers**, *schistacea* **Fox Sparrows**, **Song Sparrows**, **White-crowned Sparrows**, **Lincoln's Sparrows**, **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **Pine Grosbeaks**, **White-winged Crossbills**, **Pine Siskins** and **Ravens**.

My two target species, **Blackpoll Warbler** (2 territories) were also in the same area, together with **Hudsonian Chickadees** (much less common than M.C.). A number of unidentified bird songs and woodpecker drummings were heard. I more or less walked through the lower altitude, being in hurry to reach the tree-line early in the morning and to get away from the tourist hordes in the afternoon.

A **Townsend's Solitaire** was recorded almost at the tree-line, where **Grey-crowned Rose-Finches** (one of my targets) were common at snowline, feeding on the meadows by the snow. None were seen lower down. The higher up slopes had **American Pipits** (common) and a single **Sprague's Pipit**, but not a single **White-tailed Ptarmigan** (or **Spruce Grouse**) were seen (target species).

I had a recording for the first species and played it regularly, but there was no response. Neither did I hear any ptarmigans early in the morning, or was able to find them at the tree-line bogs or on higher slopes. The season may have been over, the population low in 2010, or I was simply not in the right side of the summit. Difficult to know, as there was no detailed information available.

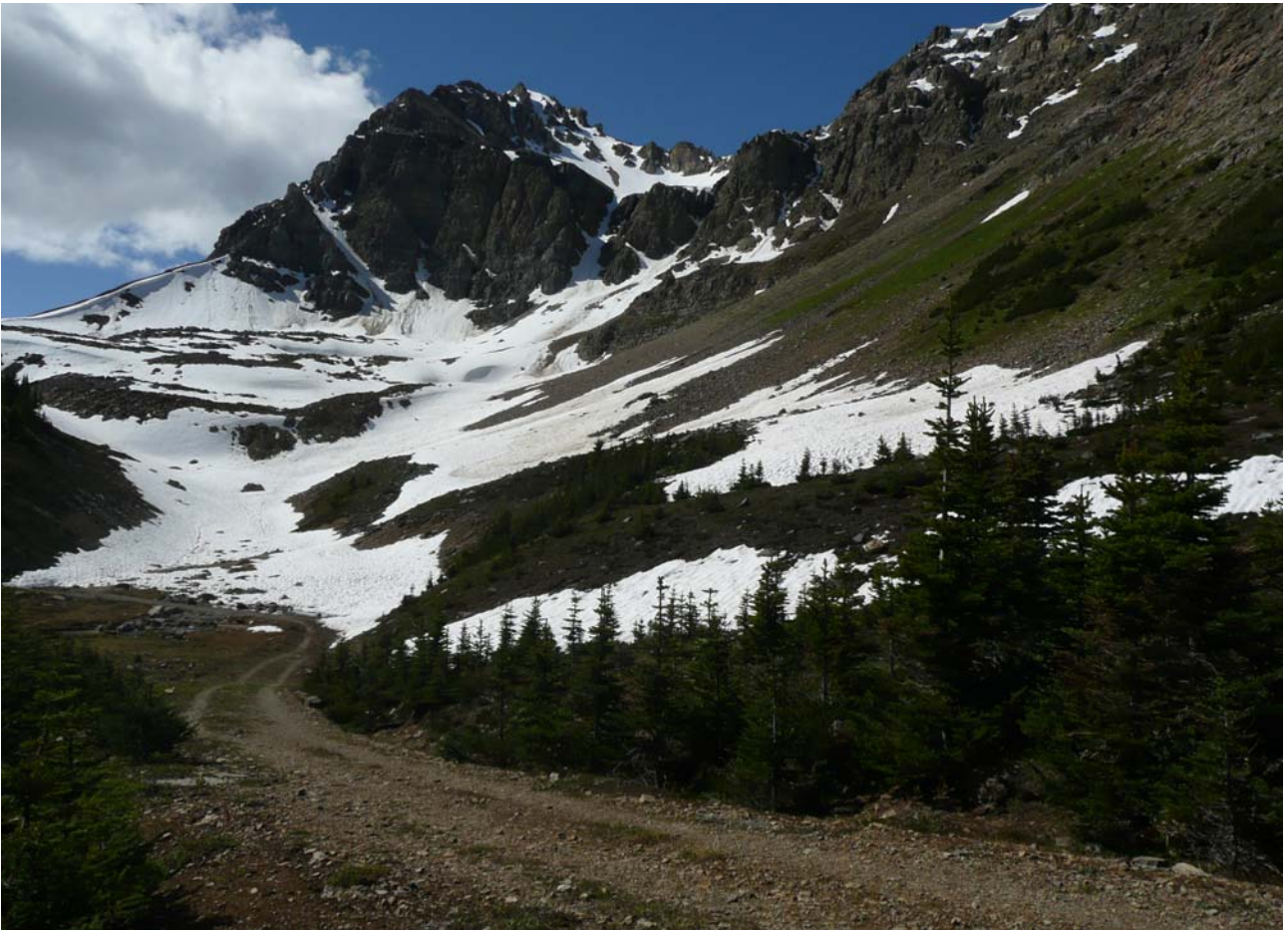


Fig. 6. The alpine meadows, home of rosy-finches, pipits and marmots.

The small lake at the junction had displaying **Wilson's Snipes**, a breeding pair of **Solitary Sandpipers** and **Spotted Sandpipers**, together with **Mallards** and a female **Blue-winged Teal**. Two **Least Chipmunks** were noted below the viewpoint, with **Red Squirrels** higher up. **Hoary Marmots** were well visible on the alpine meadows, together with a few **Columbian Ground-Squirrels**, the former species being rather bold as long as one sat down, did not move and let the animals do their things. By the highway, a lone **Mule Deer** and two **Moose** were seen, plus the numerous **Columbian Ground-Squirrels** and **Feral Rabbits** in Canmore. After Bow Lake, next to a glacier, a group of three snowy-white **Mountain Goats** was a nice find.

The other visitors at this rest area were far too busy photographing one another to notice the wildlife around them. I believe one family from India took over one hundred such photos at one rest stop.



Fig. 7. A Hoary Marmot on a rock, after a dip in icy snowline waters.

At the end of the day

Bow Summit was a beautiful place to visit and with a good variety of birds and animals. I wish I had been there in a better shape and outside high tourist season, with more time to explore the high slopes and to look for more mammals, such a Grizzly Bear.

It would probably be better to go in June, but not too early because of the snow. Another great option would be the autumn, but there is less bird song in the forests at that time.



Fig. 8. Columbian Ground-Squirrels inhabit the tree-line at Bow Summit.



Fig. 9. A family of Northern Divers, along the Icefields Parkway.

Prairie Appendix

Other species on my list included two prairie specialists: **Sharp-tailed Grouse** and **Upland Sandpiper**. The latter species is occasionally seen in Europe, but it has never been recorded in Finland. Both species can be seen in Southern Alberta, but again, no sites could be pinpointed by the information available.

I spent two days prospecting in the general areas they are known to breed: in the agricultural prairie between Nanton, Fort McCleod and Brooks. Heavy rains in June had created thousands of water pools in the farmlands (and destroyed much of the crop) and numerous shorebirds could be seen there, including nice ones such as **Hudsonian Godwit**. The **Upland Sandpiper** proved to be very difficult to see. After tens of thousands of fence poles, one bird was discovered on the way from MacCleod to Pincher Creek, by the main highway in a place where the latter town can first be seen. Also the grouse, a rather difficult one to spot, was seen close to Fort McCleod, when a single flying bird landed in a reintroduced prairie lot to the east of Granum, along Township Road 104, close to 811. Otherwise, no records of either species despite extensive search in potentially good habitats!

