



THE BIRDING CAPITAL OF CANADA



THE BIRDING CAPITAL OF CANADA

**Proclaimed in April 2025
by Rocky Point Bird Observatory**

Endorsed by the Greater Victoria NatureHood

Jacques Sirois
Friends of Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary
Partner, Greater Victoria NatureHood

SUMMARY

On 28 April 2025, Rocky Point Bird Observatory (est. 1994) proclaimed the Capital Region of British Columbia the “Birding Capital of Canada”. This unofficial recognition was based on a surprising record number of bird species confirmed on eBird (423), the highest of any region in Canada. On 14 January 2026, this number had climbed to 431 and remains a record.

This proclamation is fully endorsed by the Greater Victoria NatureHood which is interested in the revitalization of three historic Migratory Bird Sanctuaries: Victoria Harbour MBS (est.1923), Shoal Harbour MBS (1931) and Esquimalt Lagoon MBS (also 1931).

Greater Victoria is known for its diverse avifauna, a large and active community of birdwatchers, and a remarkable natural environment. However, birding infrastructure is often lacking at popular birdwatching sites. Birding tourism remains largely undocumented and often involves savvy birders travelling on their own with eBird’s help.

THE BIRDING CAPITAL OF CANADA

Let's make this official! Already known for its diverse, year-round avifauna, large and skilled birdwatching community, one of the best natural environments in urban Canada, three historic Migratory Bird Sanctuaries and a well-established bird observatory, Greater Victoria has just earned a new distinction: *Birding Capital of Canada*.

A recent and surprising analysis by Rocky Point Bird Observatory revealed that the Capital Region of British Columbia has the highest number of bird species confirmed on eBird - a popular platform - in Canada: 431, as of 14 January 2026. This was supported by over 386,700 checklists submitted by 10,200 eBirders. All remarkable numbers.



Great Horned Owl, Saanich's official bird selected in 2025
(Mary Rumble via eBird)

This is more species than two Canadian birding Meccas: Essex County, Ontario, home to the famous Pointe Pelée (413 species) and Norfolk County, Ontario, home to the renowned Long Point Bird Observatory (409). It is also more than Halifax (421) and Metro Vancouver (411), which, incidentally, have record numbers of checklists submitted (510,400+) and eBirders (16,764). Few regions in Canada have 400+ species on eBird.

Additional records not confirmed on eBird suggest that at least two or three more species have occurred in Greater Victoria. Moreover, if ~16 species considered hypothetical or questionable were added, this number could climb to ~450 (G. Newell, pers. comm.).

Greater Victoria has one more Canadian bird record; 154 species observed during a Christmas Bird Count in 2004. No surprise as the south coast of British Columbia, including the

Salish Sea and southern Vancouver Island, is one of Canada's best wintering areas for migratory birds.



Pacific Black Brant, common during spring migration (Pierre Richard)

At least three factors contribute to bird diversity in Greater Victoria. 1) Diverse terrestrial, coastal and marine habitats. 2) A temperate climate with little or no frost, snow and ice. Victoria has a low Climate Severity Index (13), compared to, for example, Winnipeg (51) and Isachsen Weather Station, Nunavut (99). 3) An advantageous location on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, in a busy corridor for birds moving north-south between Vancouver Island and the Olympic Peninsula, and east-west between the Salish Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

Over the years, several birds were chosen to represent various initiatives, groups, sanctuaries and cities in B.C.'s Capital Region. For example, this initiative - proclaiming the Birding Capital of Canada - chose the Black Oystercatcher, Rocky Point Bird Observatory retained the Black-throated Grey Warbler and Swan Lake and Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary selected the Trumpeter Swan. Friends of Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary chose the Marbled Murrelet, Friends of Shoal Harbour MBS the Bufflehead and Esquimalt Lagoon MBS has long been associated with the Pacific Great Blue Heron. The town of Sidney, contiguous to Shoal Harbour MBS, also chose the Bufflehead for its coat of arms and to adorn its police cars and fire trucks; the only duck in Canada so honoured. Saanich, the only certified "Bird-friendly City" by Nature Canada in the capital region chose the Great Horned Owl as its official bird with 33.2% of a public vote in May 2025, followed by the Bewick's Wren (27.3%), Northern Flicker (27.1%) and the Cooper's Hawk (12.4%).

Other birds have generated interest and enthusiasm for various reasons over the years, including Anna's Hummingbird, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Western Purple Martin, Fox Sparrow, Turkey Vulture, Heermann's Gull, Black Brant, Harlequin Duck, Rhinoceros Auklet and Short-tailed Shearwater. Not to mention several rarely seen species like Green-tailed Towhee, Yellow-browed Warbler, Acorn Woodpecker and Rock Wren.

Numerous, popular, birding sites occur in BC's Capital region. They are clearly mapped and documented on eBird and include, for example, Clover Point, Cattle Point, Willows Beach next to Bowker Creek estuary, the Trial Islands area, Ogden Point Breakwater, Esquimalt Lagoon, Race Rocks, Beechy Head, Otter Point, Jordan River, Swan Lake, Panama Flats, Maber Flats, Martindale Flats, Island View Beach, Roberts Bay and Sidney Spit.

For comparison and perspective, eBird Canada, a collaborative project managed by Birds Canada, indicates that Canada has 710 confirmed species documented by 131,700 eBirders in more than 13 million checklists. Wikipedia's List of Birds of Canada contains 704 species and Environment Canada's State of Canada's Birds (2024), 684 species.

OBSERVATIONS:

- **Bird Capitals of Canada**

At least two other regions promote themselves as the "Bird Capital of Canada". Boundary Bay & the Lower Fraser Estuary, in Metro Vancouver, with 400+ species and five million birds. And McLennan, Alberta, including Kimiwan Lake, with 230+ species and tens of thousands of migratory shorebirds, waterfowl and gulls. Rocky Point Bird Observatory felt that "Birding Capital of Canada", not "Bird Capital of Canada", was a more appropriate recognition for the Capital Region of British Columbia.

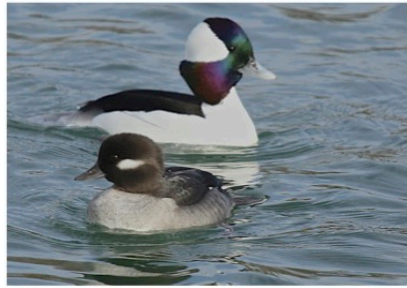
- **Birdwatching tourism and infrastructure in Greater Victoria**

Despite its busy, domestic birdwatching scene, little information and no particular statistics are available on bird-related tourism. Expert guides are available but not widely advertised.

Regular bird and nature tours led by Swan Lake and Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, Nature Victoria (formerly Victoria Natural History Society), Friends of Uplands Park and the Capital Regional District, for example, cater mostly to local residents and schools. Nonetheless, independent, savvy birders equipped with binoculars, spotting scopes and smart phones visit many sites regularly on their own with eBird's help, as they do across Canada and the world.

2025 All Buffleheads Celebration

Of migratory bird sanctuaries, naturehood & community



Friends of Shoal Harbour invite you to our 2025

Bufflehead Welcoming Ceremony

10:00am, Saturday, Oct. 18th

Location: Ardwell Beach Access at Resthaven Drive, Sidney BC

*Under the Distinguished Patronage of Her Honour The Honourable Wendy
Cocchia Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia*

www.friendsofshoalharbour.ca www.facebook.com/foshsoc



In recent years, Eagle Wing Whale Watching and Wildlife Tours, in collaboration with Rocky Point Bird Observatory, has taken hundreds of birders on a dozen boat trips with plans for more in the future. This new initiative appears popular but remains relatively modest compared to whale watching.

Examples of available infrastructure include a nature house and floating boardwalk in Swan Lake & Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, viewing blinds and platforms at Blenkinsop Lake, Quicks Bottom, Goldstream Estuary and Viaduct Flats. Those were built with the support of Nature Victoria. Signage on birds installed by various groups occurs at Cattle Point, Queens' Park, Gorge Creek Estuary, Esquimalt Lagoon and Roberts Bay.



Anna's Hummingbird, adult male, a popular bird common year-round
(Kyle Blaney via eBird)

Various nature houses and visitor centres showcasing nature in general occur at Esquimalt Gorge Park, Beaver Lake Regional Park, Francis King Regional Park, Goldstream Provincial Park and Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. The Malahat Skywalk, a private enterprise, showcases what is arguably the most elaborate nature-oriented infrastructure in Greater Victoria.

Unfortunately, absent, inadequate, ignored or unenforced regulations result in dogs running at large and disturbing birds in many natural areas and birding sites.

- **J. Fenwick Lansdowne (1937-2008)**

One of Canada's most renowned bird artists and ornithologists once lived in Greater Victoria. As a result, our regional avifauna has been professionally and abundantly illustrated in the past as seen in J.F. Lansdowne's *Birds of the West Coast*, Volume One (1976) and Two (1980). Few or no other region in Canada is associated with such an accomplished artistic legacy. A Tribute to Lansdowne was installed in Queens' Park, Oak Bay, in 2021.

- **Greater Victoria's three historic Migratory Bird Sanctuaries**

It is unusual to find three federal Migratory Bird Sanctuaries in one small region of Canada. Victoria Harbour MBS (1923), Shoal Harbour MBS (1931) and Esquimalt Lagoon MBS (also 1931) were established soon after the Migratory Bird Convention (1916) was signed by the United Kingdom (representing Canada) and the United States. In Canada, the convention was followed by the Migratory Bird Convention Act (1917). These events were motivated by the extinction of some species (e.g. Passenger Pigeon in 1914) and the worrisome decline of several others, including waterfowl like Brant, once heavily targeted by market hunters as the "Christmas

Goose”. Today, many species continue to decline but others have bounced back, some geese in particular.



Marbled Murrelets in winter plumage (Eric Ellington via eBird)
This murrelet was chosen to represent the Friends of VHMBS



Friends of
Victoria Harbour
Migratory Bird Sanctuary

In 2026, these historic MBS's are valued for harbouring not only birds but nature in the city, including wild animals and plants and several species at risk (e.g. Marbled Murrelet, Steller Sea Lion, Victoria's Owl-clover and Olympia Oyster). "Nearby Nature" is now considered a magic ingredient that makes cities better and Canadians healthier. The revitalization of these bird sanctuaries is promoted by Nature Canada's NatureHood initiative, itself funded by Environment Canada.

Final words

“Anyone seeing a black oystercatcher for the first time might be inclined to laugh at its grotesque and rather comic appearance. Its outsized red bill is impossibly bright ... When the bird nods and utters a piercingly loud whiny, the observer is convinced that it is simple as well as strange-looking.”

J. Fenwick Landsdowne, *Birds of the West Coast*, Volume One, 1976.

)



Gull feeding frenzy on Pacific Herring (Joachim Bertrands

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Rosa Munzer, Ann Nightingale, Liam Ragan, Gaylia Lassner and Ashlea Veldhoen at Rocky Point Bird Observatory for their help and expertise. Ashlea designed the logo featuring a Black Oystercatcher, a common, resident bird in Greater Victoria. Geoffrey Newell kindly reviewed bird records not available on eBird.