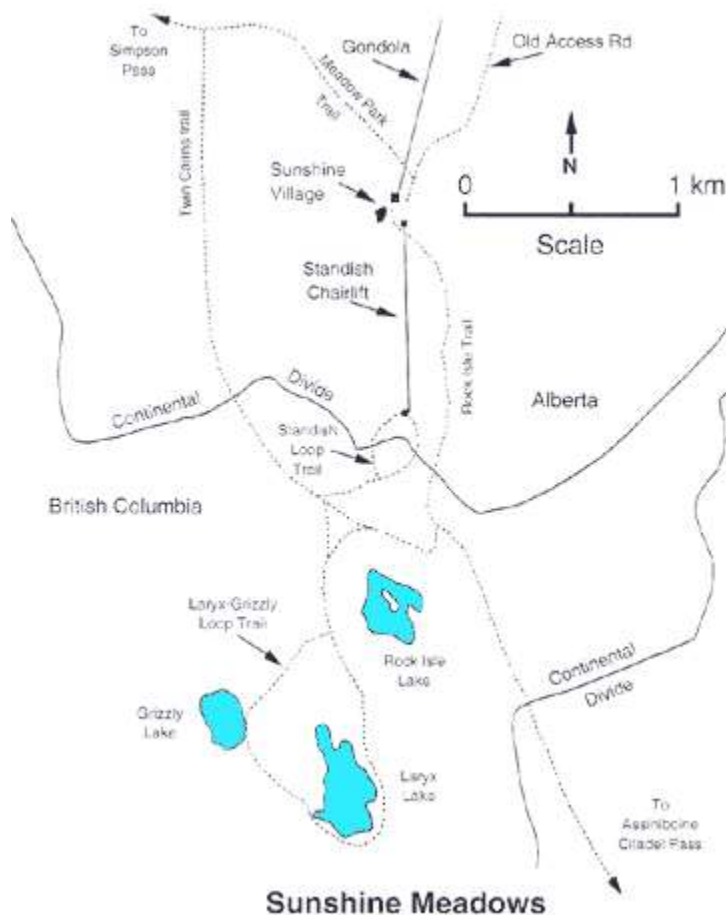


## Sunshine Meadows *by John McFaul (1993)*

Sunshine Meadows, one of the most easily accessible large areas of alpine meadow habitat in the Region, are located astride the Continental Divide between Alberta and British Columbia, about 18 km directly southwest of the Banff Townsite. Access to this alpine habitat is by a daily shuttle bus from mid-June to the end of September (check with White Mountain Adventures for a shuttle schedule and cost). It reopens from November to May for the ski season. The best times for birding at Sunshine are in early July when territorial males are singing and from mid-August to early September during migration. Apart from the magnificent scenery, the main attraction for birders is the chance of finding White-tailed Ptarmigan and Rosy Finch. Allow a full day to do justice to this interesting area.



From the Mt. Norquay /Banff Townsite interchange on the Trans-Canada Highway (Hwy 1) drive west for 7.3 km and exit to the right onto the well-signposted Sunshine access road. Follow this road for a further 9.6 km to the parking lot. As you drive watch for the occasional Spruce Grouse crossing the road, as well as Bighorn Sheep, Elk, and on rare occasions, Black Bear.

Although one can hike the 7 km up the old access road to Sunshine Village at the edge of the meadows, it is recommended that you take the shuttle bus. Once at the village proceed to the Visitor Centre to obtain information and area trail maps. Gray Jay, Clark's Nutcracker and

Common Raven may be seen in the village area at any time. Look for Barn Swallow nests in the Day Lodge porch. From the village a system of well-graded, hardened trails takes the birder out into the subalpine and alpine habitats that surround the village. Visitors to the meadows are requested to stay on these trails to protect the fragile alpine vegetation.

The main trail (Rock Isle Lake / Twin Cairns/Meadow Park Loop) starts just south of the Visitor Centre. It runs in a clockwise direction past Rock Isle Lake, continues west of the ski area, and finally descends back down to the village beside the Day Lodge. This loop is 5.8 km in length, with an elevation gain of 170 m. From this main loop, other trails branch off to other regions of the meadows.

After leaving the village, the main trail passes through the upper zone of the subalpine forest. In this area watch and listen for Townsend's Solitaire; Hermit Thrush; Fox, Golden-crowned, and White-crowned Sparrows; and Dark-eyed Junco. Leaving behind the last tree islands the visitor enters the extensive alpine meadows. These meadows are not as productive as the treed areas for birds; however they offer great views of the surrounding mountains as well as a beautiful display of alpine flowers which reach their peak in mid-July. Horned Lark, Mountain Bluebird, American Pipit and Rosy Finch occur in these open areas. Overhead an occasional Northern Harrier, Swainson's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk or Golden Eagle may be observed.

The water bodies of Rock Isle, Laryx and Grizzly Lakes as well as the ponds along the Twin Cairns segment of the main loop attract a few waterfowl and shorebirds. Reports of Common Loon, Common Merganser, Semipalmated Plover, Solitary Sandpiper and Spotted Sandpiper have come from these areas. The Laryx-Grizzly Lake Loop (4.4 km, 102 m elevation gain) is highly recommended. Watch and listen for Mountain and Boreal Chickadees; Red-breasted Nuthatch; and Yellow-rumped, Townsend's, and Wilson's Warblers during early July. This area is active again during the last two weeks of August and early September, when small mixed flocks migrate through it.

From the intersection with the Laryx-Grizzly loop the main trail climbs to meet the Standish connection and then passes behind the ski area into more alpine terrain. American Pipits can be seen performing their courtship displays in this area from early to mid-July. Large flocks of these birds occur during fall migration; Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk and Merlin, which pass through this area in low numbers, are attracted to these flocks. Peregrine Falcons have been sighted on rare occasions during migration.

White-tailed Ptarmigan may be seen, with luck, in rocky meadows along the Twin Cairns segment of the trail, in the Quartz Ridge area, or around the edge of the Sunshine Meadows along the Simpson Pass trail. An intermediate level cross-country ski trip to the low summit of Quartz Ridge could be rewarded with a view of these elusive birds in winter plumage. From the connection with the Simpson Pass trail the main trail starts its descent to the village. On the way down there is the possibility of hearing Brewer's Sparrow singing as one begins to enter the trees. As the trail

enters the more heavily forested area, watch for both Golden and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Varied Thrush, Pine Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill and Pine Siskin.

More than 60 species of birds have been recorded at Sunshine; on a good day expect to find 20 or more species. Birding is hampered somewhat by the requirement to stay on the trails; this is very necessary, however, to protect the fragile meadows. Because of the elevation (2100-2400 metres), those not used to hiking at altitude may find the walking more taxing than normal. Also, those sensitive to the sun should consider using sunblock cream, hat and sunglasses. Alpine areas can experience severe storms, including snow, during the summer months. Always carry warm clothing while hiking in the meadows. Lunch or snacks can be obtained at Sunshine Village but it is wise to pack a bag lunch.