

Yellowstone: Birds, Bears & Wildlife with Naturalist Journeys



June 1 – 8, 2023

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Experience Yellowstone in its most vibrant season. In the mountains, early June is spring, the time when birds are at their peak of song as they court and nest and the hooved mammals bear their young. The peak of Elk calving occurs the second week of June; our trip is timed to ensure seeing the park's iconic predators: Black and Grizzly Bears, Gray Wolf, Red Fox, Coyote, and Badger.

In early June few places in the world match Yellowstone National Park's Lamar Valley for viewing the dynamics of large predators and their prey. Snow in the high country keeps herds of Elk and Deer in the valleys. Predators—particularly bears and wolves—take advantage of this, often in numbers that create real pressure between species. At the same time, prey species are raising young, which are abundant and a joy to see.

We focus on wildlife viewing in the dawn and dusk hours, while mid-day we offer excursions to the interior of Yellowstone to explore the geyser basins, Hayden Valley, and the dramatic Upper and Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River. Our route to and from Bozeman lets us see some of North America's finest mountain scenery following the Yellowstone River through Paradise Valley. Western birds are active with song throughout our days, busy in the long-daylight hours of their short nesting season.

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Enjoy the American West with fun meals, grand scenery, and wildlife
- ✓ Begin on the Yellowstone Ecosystem's west side, where Trumpeter Swan, Sandhill Crane, and Moose are often found at Red Rock Lakes NWR and Harriman State Park
- ✓ Travel up the Madison River where Elk herds congregate with young, a verdant and bird-rich corridor entering the park from West Yellowstone
- ✓ Observe Osprey and Bald Eagle on nests
- ✓ Feel the steam of Yellowstone's iconic geysers and marvel at myriad, colorful thermal features
- ✓ Watch the brilliant colors of male Harlequin Duck as they feed in cascading rapids of Hayden Valley
- ✓ Take in the arresting beauty of Yellowstone Falls and the antics of American Dipper nesting nearby
- ✓ Find Mountain Bluebird and Red-naped and Williamson's Sapsuckers at their nest holes, and possibly Ruffed or Dusky Grouse as they display
- ✓ See hundreds of Elk with their calves in the Lamar Valley, spot Mountain Goat and Bighorn Sheep young
- ✓ Witness hunting by the park's great predators, Black and Grizzly Bears, and coming and going from their den sites, Gray Wolves
- ✓ Watch Lazuli Bunting throw their heads back in song and Green-tailed Towhee bring food for their young

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Yellowstone Wildlife Tour

\$3590 DBL / \$4365 SGL from Bozeman

Airport is Yellowstone International (BZN)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Thurs., June 1

Bozeman/Gardiner, Montana | Northern Gateway to Yellowstone

Please arrive in Bozeman no later than 2:00 PM today; afterwards we drive over a mountain pass to Livingston, and then turn south along the Yellowstone River to the northern gateway of Yellowstone National Park. Our drive is through lush agricultural areas, mainly hay crops grown to feed livestock. This is classic Big Sky scenery. Sometimes we spot raptors, perhaps Sandhill Crane or White-tailed Deer feeding in the meadows. We stop a

few places along the way and arrive in time for you to settle into your room with fine views of mountains and the Yellowstone River. Enjoy dinner tonight at a favorite local restaurant.

Accommodations at the Absaroka Motel, Gardiner (D)

Fri., June 2 Wildlife Watching with a Wolf Expert | Lamar Valley

Jumpstart your adventure in Yellowstone by spending time with a real expert, Nathan Varley, also known as the Wolf Tracker. Nathan did his doctoral work on the Yellowstone Wolf Project and has been close to the project ever since, residing in Gardiner. This highly successful program that began in 1995 reaches its 25-year milestone this year. Nathan accompanies us today in the field, with a keen eye for all wildlife but particularly wolves. We stay out for the full day, taking a picnic lunch, and enjoying time at vast herds of elk, possible Mule Deer, Pronghorn, and birds such as American Dipper, Mountain Bluebird, and Lazuli Bunting.

We return in the afternoon, and if you wish, enjoy time to look around the small mountain town of Gardiner with its tempting shops. Dinner tonight is at another favorite local restaurant.

Accommodations at the Absaroka Motel, Gardiner (B,L,D)

Sat., June 3 Swan Lake Flats | Norris Geyser Basin | Old Faithful Geyser Basin

Today we mix it up a bit and head into the interior of the park. Swan Lake Flats has several ponds that attract Sandhill Crane and various species of waterfowl at this time of year. On a walk to explore thermal features at Norris Geyser Basin, we are among mixed conifer trees, a good place to spot Red or possibly White-winged Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, and Pine Siskin. We then follow a lush river corridor past Madison Junction, heading to Old Faithful with its iconic lodge and thermal features. Elk graze in the meadows, Canada Geese lounge on the shores, and Bald Eagle may be present and fishing. A boardwalk trail winds through geysers, fumaroles, mud pots, and colorful hot springs en route down to Morning Glory Pool, passing many of the major thermal features for which the park is known. Bison seem attracted to the basin at this time of year; watching their calves is a delight. The Firehole River is a good place to watch for dippers, Barrow's Goldeneye, and even River Otter.

We enjoy a picnic lunch, time for an ice-cream at one of the parks stores, and return to Gardiner for dinner.

Accommodations at the Absaroka Motel, Gardiner (B,L,D)

Sun., June 4 & Mon., June 5

Lamar Valley, Yellowstone | Dunraven Pass | Hayden Valley

The second part of our week is based out of Yellowstone's Northeast entrance, with two full days to survey abundant wildlife of the Lamar Valley in search of wolves, Black and Grizzly Bears, and all of the hooved mammal species upon which they prey. At no time is the drama more intense—snow on the mountains keeps the large herds down in the valley during their most vulnerable time: during the birth of calves. The predators search the sagebrush flats, new-leafing aspen groves, and sheltered pine and Douglas Fir forests for their prime targets, Elk, as well as other prey.

We should have close looks at Bison, Mule Deer, Bighorn Sheep, Elk, and Pronghorn, all of which should have young. We hope to see wolf activity as well: hunting, traveling, and possibly feeding young. We review the entire history of wolf reintroduction, and by using a spotting scope at the edge of the road, we also hope to observe both Black and Grizzly Bears in great detail at a safe distance.

Slough Creek and the cottonwood-lined Yellowstone River corridor give us good birding sites for riparian species, Williamson's and Red-naped Sapsuckers, and a variety of western warblers.

One afternoon we venture over Dunraven Pass to the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone with its dramatic Upper and Lower Falls, a scenic highlight for many. En route we may see active Peregrine Falcon or Osprey at their nest sites, fascinating to watch from above as they are found in the canyon below us. Bison herds with calves often create “roadblocks” in Hayden Valley beyond the falls, much to viewers’ delight. In the vast open hills of Hayden Valley, we may see Coyote, Northern Harrier, and possibly bright male Harlequin Ducks at LeHardy Rapids.

Dinners are in Cooke City or nearby Silver Gate where several good restaurants vie for our attention. Lunches are picnic or perhaps we visit the log-cabin dining room at Tower Falls.

Accommodations at the Alpine Hotel (B,L,D)

Tues., June 6 Beartooth Pass | Top of the World!

Today we mix it up again and head to higher elevations, weather permitting. After breakfast and scanning for hummingbirds at a local resident’s feeders, we head off for an extraordinary drive; one Charles Kuralt has called the most scenic in North America. Even in June we may have walls of plowed snow near the upper reaches. If we can tear our eyes away from the stunning views of both the Beartooth and Absaroka Mountain ranges, we’re likely to see montane and alpine species such as Black- and Gray-crowned Rosy Finches, American Pipit, Horned Lark, Northern Goshawk, Yellow-bellied Marmot, Pika, and other species. Clark’s Nutcracker and a herd of Rocky Mountain Goat frequent the rest stop at Rock Creek.

We descend through lush forests broken by meadows and with luck we may spot a Moose and her calf. The pointed peaks of Pilot and Index mark our arrival back to the mountain town of Cooke City where we dine tonight.

Accommodations at the Alpine Hotel (B,L,D)

Wed., June 7

Birding the Northeast Entrance | Lamar Valley | Mammoth Hot Springs

This morning we enjoy birding around the tall trees and underlying willows at Silver Gate. We also visit the studio of famed wildlife photographers Dan and Cindy Hartman where birds use feeders and natural perches to reach them. We have a leisurely breakfast, pack up our gear, and make our way back through Lamar Valley. We should make it to Mammoth Hot Springs for lunch and birding in the chokecherry thickets behind the lodge, and at the nearby 45th Parallel parking area.

Over dinner we celebrate our grand adventure in style!

Accommodations at the Alpine Hotel (B,L,D)

Thurs., June 8 Departures from Bozeman

Enjoy optional early birding on the grounds of our hotel, and then breakfast in the cozy dining room at Chico before packing up to head to Bozeman (about 1.5-hour drive) and flights out. (B)

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is **\$3590 DBL / \$4365 SGL** per person, based on double occupancy, from Bozeman, MT. This cost includes: accommodations for 7 nights, all meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner), airport welcome and transfer, land transportation during the journey, professional guide services, park and other entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

Cost does not include: round-trip airfare to and from Bozeman, items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, and gratuities for luggage handling or personal services.

Travel Information

The airport for this journey is Bozeman, Montana (BZN). Plan on arriving in Bozeman no later than 2:00 PM on June 1, departing after 1:00 PM on June 8, or we can drop you at an airport hotel nearby if you wish to stay on to enjoy this fun western city with its famous Museum of the Rockies.

Photo Credits

Pilgrim Creek Pond by Greg Smith; Bison by Peg Abbott; Steller's Jay by Peg Abbott; Coyote by Peg Abbott; Mountain Bluebird, Naturalist Journeys Stock; Grizzly Bear by Peg Abbott; Gray Wolf by Greg Smith.

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