

Black Hills Birding, Wildlife & Landscapes with Naturalist Journeys



June 17 – 24, 2023
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The Black Hills and Badlands of South Dakota are unspoiled regions of the north-central United States where the combination of wildlife, geology, and Native American and early American history blend to create the perfect route for a birding and nature tour. Explore the region in detail as we offer a series of moderate to leisurely hikes and scenic drives through state and national parks.

As always, our focus is the rich natural history of the area; we look for mountain and grassland mammals such as Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Bison, Pronghorn, Elk, Mule Deer, and Bighorn Sheep. Our travels also provide an excellent opportunity to see a good variety of birds, including Golden Eagle, Prairie Falcon, Black-billed Magpie, Lazuli Bunting, Western Tanager, Mountain Bluebird, and a mix of grassland species.

Wonders in rock, both natural and man-made, highlight our days. We visit Devil's Tower, a massive butte created by an ancient volcano; the colorful and bizarre sedimentary rock formations of the Badlands; and the intricate underground features of Wind Cave. While in the area we also visit Mt. Rushmore, where we take a short hike for a close view of the amazing presidential profiles sculptured in the mountain face.

The local towns and lodgings we visit on this tour are rich in history from the days of mining ventures, the settlements of the great Westward Migration, and the distinguished culture of the Lakota Sioux. Join us to experience a host of natural wonders in this unique area where the prairie surrounds a mountain oasis as a great prelude to the Rockies!

Tour Highlights

- ✓ Discover South Dakota's fascinating Black Hills and Badlands regions, the start of our American West, with fascinating wildlife, history, and culture of the Lakota Sioux
- ✓ Visit impressive Devil's Tower National Monument in neighboring Wyoming
- ✓ Enjoy great accommodations including two nights in the historic Alex Johnson hotel in Rapid City, two at Spearfish Canyon where "Dances with Wolves" was filmed, and three at State Game Lodge in the heart of Custer State Park
- ✓ Stamp your National Park Passport multiple times, including Wind Cave National Park where we join rangers for a guided cave tour, Badlands National Park, and Mt. Rushmore
- ✓ Learn geology and prairie ecology and walk in lush pine and aspen forests—multiple habitats promise us a great mix of birds and mammals including Bighorn Sheep and Bison

Tour Summary

8-Day / 7-Night Black Hills Nature Tour
\$3690 DBL / \$4590 SGL, from Rapid City
Airport is Rapid City Regional (RAP)

Day-to-Day Itinerary

Sat., Jun. 17 Rapid City

Welcome to South Dakota! Arrive at your leisure today but those arriving early can enjoy time to explore this western city; browse the historic Prairie Edge Trading Company and have lunch at your leisure close to our hotel. Our accommodations are in a historic hotel built in the 1920s that showcases South Dakota's rich history. The hotel—especially the grand lobby—combines classic European architecture with authentic Lakota art and treasured Native American artifacts.

At 1:30 PM we plan to meet in the lobby to take those that have arrived early over to the fascinating Journeys Museum and Learning Center. Bring your binoculars— the gardens here are lovely and may attract some interesting birds. Additionally, we make a few airport shuttles according to arrival times, as time allows going to the museum before checking in. Get settled, then at 6:30 PM meet in the lobby for our welcome dinner. Get to know your guides and travel companions and enjoy your guide's overview of the journey.

Accommodations at Hotel Alex Johnson (D)

Sun., Jun. 18 Devil's Tower National Monument | Spearfish Canyon

This morning we pack up and drive two hours west into neighboring Wyoming to visit Devil's Tower National Monument, the first U.S. National Monument created by the passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906. This impressive geologic wonder is perhaps best known as a site in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. In a remote prairie setting, this dramatic remnant of an ancient volcano promises a memorable experience. We circle the base of the tower on a three-mile trail.

Enjoy a picnic lunch and a chance to study the unique plants and animals of this high plains grassland. Listen for the bark of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs as we observe the antics of these engaging mammals in a huge "dog town." Golden Eagle may be patrolling above, while badger and coyote may be in the vicinity hunting prairie dogs. The calls of Black-billed Magpie, Common Raven, and Western Meadowlark ring out in the vast open space. Standing over 1,000 feet above the Belle Fourche River, Devil's Tower is an ideal perch for Prairie Falcon, and a prized destination for technical climbers we may see from our trail.

We also watch for colorful Mountain Bluebirds gathering in the sagebrush. The rich foliage of the cottonwoods and various shrubs decorate the river habitat that we inspect for songbirds.

From Devil's Tower we then head to Spearfish to check in, freshen up and enjoy dinner at this lovely hotel.

Accommodations at Spearfish Canyon Lodge (B,L,D)

Mon., Jun. 19 Local Birding Spearfish Canyon Scenic Byway | Owl Prowl

This morning we hike to Roughlock Falls in search of American Dipper, one of the few places in the state to view this species, and perhaps observe recently fledged young learning how to navigate fast moving waters. Next we continue visiting scenic and birding highlights of Spearfish Canyon Scenic Byway on a series of short walks and van stops including the local city park and a fish hatchery. Spearfish is a popular birding destination, hosting 220 species including some Black Hills favorites: Canyon Wren, Ruffed Grouse, and Clark's Nutcracker. Spearfish Canyon has been designated an Important Bird Area with Western Tanager and Lazuli Bunting always fun to encounter. We spend time looking for woodpeckers including Lewis's, Three-toed, and possibly Black-backed as well as Red-naped Sapsucker. Osprey nest in the area, and Bald Eagle are possible too.

As driving distances are short today, we take a break for lunch at the lodge, and a siesta, then head out to some grassland habitats where we hope to find Eastern Kingbird, Mountain Bluebird, Western Meadowlark, and other species. Or if you prefer, you can opt to enjoy some downtime to relax at this lovely lodge.

Dinner is at the lodge, and we have time to tally up the day's sightings and go out into the ponderosa pine and aspen habitats nearby for those that want to join an owl prowl this evening.

Accommodations at Spearfish Canyon Lodge (B,L,D)

Tues., Jun. 20 Mt. Rushmore | Custer State Park

This morning we have breakfast and pack up to make our way to Custer State Park, visiting Mt. Rushmore en

route. We get an early start to experience Mt. Rushmore in the morning light, then head out on the incredible Iron Mountain Road along the Peter Norbeck National Scenic Byway to reach Custer State Park.

Mt. Rushmore is often crowded at this time of year, but for many it can be a trip highlight. Upon arrival, you can choose to explore Mt. Rushmore in detail or walk a three-mile trail that winds through Quaking Aspen forests and pines. Here we look for Ruffed Grouse, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red Crossbill, Blue Jay, and local Red Squirrels that are the color of toffee. Butterflies such as Painted Lady, Orange Sulfur, and Variegated Fritillary should still be active on late blooming asters and Indian Paintbrush. We have lunch near the Monument, then head out for 17 miles of winding road (314 curves) including three tunnels that frame the sculptures of Mt. Rushmore. We take the drive slow (speed limit is 35 mph) and make stops for photography and birding along the way.

Our lodge in the heart of Custer State Park is listed on the National Historic Register, one we know you will enjoy. Relax on the porch overlooking a peaceful meadow often visited by Mule Deer at dusk. We also keep an eye out for Wild Turkey and Bighorn Sheep that frequent the meadow as we check into our rooms with time to relax before we gather for dinner at the lovely lodge dining room.

Luxuriate in the lodge's rustic elegance and enjoy a group dinner in its beautiful dining room. In 1927, President Calvin Coolidge used the lodge as his summer "White House," and Teddy Roosevelt was another notable visitor. *Accommodations at State Game Lodge (B,L,D)*

Wed., Jun. 21 & Thurs., Jun. 22 **Custer State Park | Wind Cave National Monument**

We have two full days to hike and explore the 73,000-acre game refuge of Custer State Park in the isolated Black Hills, a mountain range often described as a prelude to the Rockies. In 1913, there was great concern over dwindling populations of Bison, Pronghorn, Bighorn Sheep, and Elk. Today they thrive, along with the non-native, but very popular Rocky Mountain Goats that frequent the rocky spires of the Needles and tall granite reaches of Harney Peak. In the park we have a good chance to see Northern Three-toed Woodpecker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Black-capped Chickadee. One year we spotted a Pine Marten!

The Black Hills have large mammals in good number, and it's interesting to see eastern tree species such as American Elm and Birch mingle with the Ponderosa Pines. Trails are numerous, and several can be combined for great days afield. We offer hikes to match the interests and abilities of the group, typically three to six miles per day. Birding should be excellent along the river courses—including the riparian zone of French Creek, where we may find Cooper's Hawk, Pinyon Jay, or Lincoln's Sparrow feeding amidst a background of brilliant fall color. With luck we may spot Ferruginous Hawk or Northern Harrier flying above scenic open meadows.

On one afternoon we drive the scenic wildlife route where we may find Bison, Pronghorn, Elk, White-tailed and Mule Deer, Coyote, Burros, Prairie Dogs, and more. Then we have the opportunity to join a national park ranger for a guided hike through spectacular Wind Cave, one of the oldest and longest caves in the U.S. The cave is well lit, with an excellent path that meanders through delicate box-work filigree, robust stalactites, flowstone, frostwork, popcorn features, and more! Protected since 1903, Wind Cave National Park is a gem in our National Park System. The underground geologic wonders are just one reason to visit; outside the cave, we also enjoy birding, wildlife, and, for those that chose, hiking to a lookout tower providing great vistas of the Black Hills.

We return to State Game Lodge for dinner and time to tally up our sightings. *Accommodations at State Game Lodge (B,L,D)*

Fri., Jun. 23 Badlands National Park | Rapid City

We make a big loop today. It's about an hour and a half drive over to the Badlands, so we can have much of the day to explore one of the prettiest scenic byways in the region. We stop at the Visitor Center (stamp your national park passport once again!), take a variety of short walks, and scan the vast grasslands for resident birds and mammals. After a rewarding day here, it's an hour back on the Interstate highway to Rapid City and we return to the delightful Alex Johnson Hotel for our final evening.

Accommodations at Hotel Alex Johnson, Rapid City (B,L,D)

Sat., Jun. 24 Departures

You may depart at your leisure today. (B)

Tour Details

Plan Ahead!

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

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the journey is \$3690 DBL / \$4590 SGL, per person, based on double occupancy. Cost includes: accommodations for seven nights, meals as specified in the itinerary (B=breakfast, L=lunch, D=dinner), arrival airport-hotel shuttle, 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 Rapid City or items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone, drinks from the bar, gratuities for luggage handling or personal services.

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive at your convenience on June 17. If you've arrived in the morning, we will meet in the hotel lobby for some local birding at 1:30 PM. Otherwise plan to meet up for a group dinner at 6:30 PM. Once we know your arrival times, we will organize with the hotel's shuttle to pick you up to transfer to the hotel.

Please plan departures at your convenience on June 24. Your guide will make a morning group transfer to the airport based on the group's flight times. If you depart in the afternoon, please plan to take a taxi or the hotel shuttle (\$12 per person).

Photo Credits

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