

Yellowstone in the Fall | Trip Report

September 16 – 23, 2023 | by Hugh Simmons



With guides Bryan Calk and Hugh Simmons and participants: Barbara, Kathy, Larry, Mike and Vicki



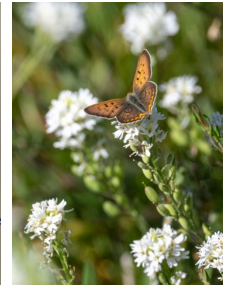
Sat., Sept. 16

Bozeman, MT | Island Park, ID | Angler's Lodge

Our trip started at the Bozeman Airport on a beautiful, sunny 80-degree day. We loaded up the vans and headed south for a two-hour drive to the Angler's Lodge in Island Park, Idaho. Our scenic route followed the Gallatin River, the setting for *A River Runs Through It*, for much of the way. We arrived at the Angler's Lodge, a rustic, log structure located just feet from the Henry's Fork River. After checking in and unpacking, we met for a brief bird walk around the lodge. A dozen or so Cedar Waxwings were feeding in the trees, and there were American Robins, Brewer's Blackbirds and Yellow-rumped Warblers. On the river, 20 Common Mergansers were hunting in their characteristic spin, splash, dive technique, churning up the water. A lone Red-breasted Merganser was spotted downriver, and an Osprey and a Belted Kingfisher made appearances. At 5:30 p.m., we met for happy

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hour on the sunny deck of the lodge and had formal introductions and an orientation discussion, followed by dinner. As the sun set behind the trees across the river, it was amazing how quickly the warm afternoon turned chilly next to the river.

Sun., Sept. 17 Henry's Lake | Quake Lake | Hegben Lake

After breakfast at Angler's Lodge, we stopped at the Happy Angler Cafe to pick up box lunches so we could stay in the field all day. Another lovely, sunny day, although at departure time, the sun had not yet brought the temperatures out of the 30s. Our first stop was Henry's Lake State Park where there are campsites and a boat launch and good views of waterfowl on the lake. And there were waterfowl! On the lake were Red-necked Grebes, Common Mergansers, Bufflehead, Gadwall and Northern Shovelers. Two American White Pelicans drifted by, and Double-crested Cormorants and a Ring-billed Gull flew through. A paved path led to a pond where there were Blue-winged Teal, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Ducks and American Coot. While scanning the pond, two Northern Harriers hunted low over the fields on the other side of the pond. The trees surrounding the campsites held a Common Yellowthroat, Black-capped Chickadees and a flock of Pine Siskins working on the pinecones. A Purplish Copper butterfly was a little gem among the low, white flowers next to the path. A Hairy Woodpecker could be heard but was not seen. As we drove out of the park, six Mountain Bluebirds were spotted in the grass and perching on small structures.

We next drove around the north side of Henry's Lake, then turned north for a scenic drive to Quake Lake and Hegben Lake. Pulling off at Hegben Lake, Bryan spotted a Red-necked Grebe on the water. On the other side of the road, there were a few White-crowned Sparrows, a Song Sparrow and a Black-capped Chickadee. We got back on the road, retracing our route, and stopped at Beaver Creek Wetlands where a Ring-necked Duck stood on a small log in the pond and a couple of California Tortoiseshell butterflies flitted about. Further along, at a pull-off overlooking Quake Lake, a Bald Eagle took off from one of the snags in the river far below and flew downriver and out of sight. There were four Double-crested Cormorants on the river, and Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches in the nearby trees. It was time for lunch, so we stopped at the Quake Lake Visitors Center to enjoy our picnic lunch overlooking the Madison River and the impressive landslide that occurred during an earthquake in 1959. The landslide completely blocked the river, creating the lake.



We returned to Henry's Lake and turned west onto Henry's Lake Drive, making three stops. At the first, a small access to the lake shore at the north end of the lake, the highlights were a couple of Ring-billed Gulls, a Common Loon and Western Grebes! Our next stops were at the Bill Frome Memorial County RV Park and Boat Launch on the northwest corner of the lake and a boat launch on the southwest corner of the lake, which was accessed by a long, rough dirt road. These stops proved very productive for waterfowl, and we found five species of grebes: Western Pied-billed, Horned, Red-necked and Eared. There were Ring-billed, Herring and California Gulls and lots of ducks including Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shovelers, Common Goldeneye, Mallards, Ring-necked Ducks, Lesser Scaup and Buffleheads.

As we drove around Henry's Lake, we passed lovely vistas of cattle grazing on rolling land with the lake in the background. A dozen or so Mountain Bluebirds perched on a roadside fence, taking flight and resettling as our vehicles passed. Two Black-billed Magpies also shared the fence, and a Red-tailed hawk and an American Kestrel flew by. We returned to Angler's Lodge in time to freshen up and gather on the deck for drinks, our checklist and dinner.

Mon., Sept. 18

**Harriman State Park | Yellowstone National Park |
Norris Geyser Basin | Gibbon Falls | Firehole Falls |
Three Bear Lodge | West Yellowstone**

This morning we bundled up against the chill and left at 6:30 a.m. for Harriman State Park, which was only about ten minutes from our lodge. We stopped to scan Silver Lake where there were several distant Trumpeter Swans and American White Pelicans and, a bit closer, some American Wigeon. A Belted Kingfisher flew along the far shore, uttering its distinctive rattle. We drove further into the park and walked to an overlook of the Henry's Fork River. The cold air created a mist that shrouded the river and the birds on it. As the warm light of the rising sun cut through the mist, we were presented with a beautiful, picturesque scene. There were more Trumpeter Swans and a huge number of American Wigeon, estimated by Bryan at 150, as well as substantial numbers of Canada Geese, Ring-necked Ducks and Mallards. There were a few more American White Pelicans, which got up in the air when a Bald Eagle passed through, and a lone Eared Grebe. We could hear a bull elk bugling in the distance, and a female elk was grazing next to the river a few hundred yards away. The brush between us and the river contained several White-crowned Sparrows and a Marsh Wren's distinctive rattle was heard. As we walked a path along the river, a Great Blue Heron could be seen through the mist, an Osprey passed overhead

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and Mountain Chickadees, American Goldfinches, Song Sparrows and Yellow-rumped Warblers could be seen in the trees. We returned to the cars with the promise of a warm breakfast back at the lodge. After breakfast, we packed our luggage into the vehicles, picked up our box lunches and headed for Yellowstone National Park. After passing through the West Entrance Gate, we followed the Madison River into the Park. Mike got a quick look at an elk on the river, but there was no place to stop to get a better view. Turning north on the Grand Loop Road, we made our way to the Norris Geyser Basin, spotting a group of five Sandhill Cranes along the way. We gave ourselves an hour to explore this amazing thermal area. Here temperatures of 459 degrees Fahrenheit were measured only 1,000 feet below the surface, making it the warmest of the geyser basins. The silica-rich, acidic runoff from scores of hot springs coats the ground in crusty white, preventing any plant growth. The scene was otherworldly, a misty, barren, white landscape interrupted by azure pools with orange and green mats of thermophilic bacteria and algae. Were it not for the lodgepole pines that rim the basin, you would not believe you were on this planet.

We left Norris and retraced our path south on the Grand Loop Road, arriving at the Gibbon Falls Picnic area for lunch. A watchful Common Raven kept us company, hoping we would be sloppy eaters. As we finished lunch, ominous clouds moved in, and we could hear distant thunder. We wanted to see Gibbon Falls, so we quickly walked the short distance to the overlook. Always alert for birds, Bryan spotted a Townsend's Solitaire perched at the top of a tree over the falls. With threatening skies, we snapped a few photos and retreated to the vehicles just as the skies opened, dumping a torrential rain. Perfect timing!

We decided to make a loop through the Firehole Canyon once the rain let up. This is a dramatic river gorge with volcanic, rhyolite walls rising hundreds of feet above us. We stopped to look at the beautiful Firehole Falls where the snow-white cascade cuts through the dark, volcanic rock. Continuing along the canyon road, there was an active Osprey nest at eye level, barely 20 feet off the road. We returned to West Yellowstone and checked into our hotel for the next three nights, the Three Bear Lodge. We gathered at 5:30 p.m. in the lobby to do our checklist and then had dinner in the lodge's restaurant.



Tues., Sept. 19

West Thumb Geyser Basin | Fishing Bridge | LeHardys Rapids | Mud Volcano | Hayden Valley | Grand Canyon of Yellowstone

After breakfast at Three Bear Lodge, we went back into Yellowstone National Park through the West Entrance. It was a lovely morning, sunny with temperatures in the 40s. As we drove south on the Grand Loop Road, we encountered a few bison relatively close to the road and stopped for a few pictures. We continued past Old Faithful, then east over Craig Pass, one of the highest roads in Yellowstone at 8,284 feet. We crossed the Continental Divide twice along this winding stretch of road. As we descended from the pass, we could just make out Yellowstone Lake in the distance. Our first destination was the West Thumb Geyser Basin on the shores of the West Thumb of Yellowstone Lake. Walking the loop trail there we saw Black Pool and Abyss Pool, two hot springs whose deep blue color results from their great depth. A couple of Red Crossbills were foraging in the silica-coated soil and a Clark's Nutcracker posed nicely for some photos. On the lake shore section of the boardwalk, Fishing Cone, a dormant cone geyser, emerged from the waters of the lake as a Barrow's Goldeneye floated nearby.

We returned to the Grand Loop Road, turning north and hugging the shore of Yellowstone Lake. We stopped at Fishing Bridge where Yellowstone Lake empties into the Yellowstone River. Walking out on the bridge we scanned the lakeside where there were 40 Barrow's Goldeneye and, on the river side, Barn Swallows hawked for insects. We stopped at LeHardys Rapids picnic area for lunch. This area is reliable for Harlequin Duck and American Dipper, so we decided to take a walk down the trail before eating. We were rewarded with 16 Harlequin Ducks swimming in the rapids, and two American Dippers gleaning the rocks in the rapids close to our vantage point. Our target species spotted, we returned to the picnic area for a riverside meal. Continuing north on the Grand Loop Road, we stopped at the 30-foot wide, sulfurous, Mud Volcano where hot, acidic waters break down the rock into bubbling, clay mud. Another feature here was Dragon's Mouth, where steam spits and snorts from a small cave at the back of the mud pot.

Just north of Mud Volcano we entered the Hayden Valley, one of the great landscape spectacles of Yellowstone. Here the rolling valley spreads out in stunning vistas dotted with bison. We pulled off at Grizzly Overlook on a high bluff overlooking the valley and the Yellowstone River. On the river below us were Trumpeter Swans, American Wigeon, Common Mergansers, Sandhill Cranes and Great Blue Herons. A Northern Harrier drifted by, and an American Kestrel flew past us.

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We continued through Hayden Valley and on to the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone where we parked and walked the short distance to Artist Point Overlook. Here one looks down the 1,000-foot-deep valley to the Lower Falls where the Yellowstone River falls 300 feet into the canyon. The rhyolite walls of the canyon are stained yellow and red from eons of heat and oxidation. We marveled at the views and snapped photos including a must-have group photo with the canyon in the background. After a long day, we returned to West Yellowstone and gathered before dinner to go over the checklist, then walked through the bustling town of West Yellowstone to dinner at Wild West Pizza.

Wed., Sept. 20

West Yellowstone | Midway Geyser Basin & Grand Prismatic Spring | Upper Geyser Basin & Old Faithful | Fountain Paint Pot

After breakfast at Three Bear Lodge, our first stop was the Midway Geyser Basin and the Grand Prismatic Spring. Here the dormant Excelsior Geyser, once one of the largest in the world, discharges 4,000 gallons of steaming water per minute into the Firehole River. This has a lot to do with how the Firehole River got its name, since runoff from this hot spring, and others, can warm the river water temperature to 80 degrees, resulting in a river that steams. Just up the boardwalk from the Excelsior Geyser is Grand Prismatic, arguably the most spectacular thermal feature in Yellowstone. The 300-foot-wide, deep blue hot spring is surrounded by colorful, streaming mats of thermophilic organisms, extending out like tentacles from the pool. While exploring these springs, we noted an American Dipper on a rock in the river, a Yellow-headed Blackbird, a Yellow-rumped Warbler, two Ospreys and 30+ Brewer's Blackbirds. But the highlight may have been when a pack of wolves began howling from somewhere behind Grand Prismatic.

We continued south on the Grand Loop Road to the Upper Geyser Basin, home to Old Faithful and 150 other hydrothermal features. We had a little time to explore the site before Old Faithful's next predicted eruption, and there is plenty to explore here. Some went to the beautiful Old Faithful Inn, built in 1904 and considered the largest log structure in the world. Others visited the Visitors Center or roamed through the many thermal features. Shortly before Old Faithful was due to erupt, Beehive Geyser erupted and then, behind it, Marmot Cave Geyser. We gathered at the viewing area for Old Faithful, which erupted about ten minutes after the



scheduled time. It was a special treat to have three geysers erupt in quick succession. While Old Faithful was taking everyone's attention, Bryan commandeered some benches next to the Inn and set up for our lunch. After lunch, we headed back toward West Yellowstone and stopped at the Fountain Paint Pot springs. There are several mud pots here that are dull red, yellow and brown, resembling paint. The colors come from the oxidation of iron in the mud. As we walked in, there was a grove of dead trees with white bases, a result of uptake of silica in the runoff from the hot springs and the reason for the demise of the trees. At the back of the boardwalk loop was the frothing Clepsydra Geyser that loudly and continuously spewed small columns of water into the air.

Paralleling the Madison River on our trip back on the West Entrance Road, we came across a telltale sign of wildlife in Yellowstone: cars haphazardly pulled to the side of the road. We joined them and hopped out to see a Black Bear coming out of the woods and down to the river's edge on the far shore. We watched for five minutes, cameras clicking madly, as the bear entered the river, went for a short swim, and then climbed back up the way it came in and walked along the river shore. This was a huge treat as one rarely gets to spend this much time safely observing a bear at photographable distances.

Thurs., Sept. 21 West Yellowstone | South Entrance Road | Lewis River Pull-off | Oxbow Bend | Jackson Lake Lodge | Jackson Lake Dam | Mormon Row | The Lexington Hotel, Jackson

We woke to a drizzly, 40-degree morning. After breakfast, we packed the vehicles for our trip to Jackson, Wyoming, and the Grand Tetons. Crossing Craig Pass once again, this time we turned south onto the South Entrance Road. Thanks to Bryan's prior intel, we stopped at the Lewis River pull-off, an unassuming rockslide next to the road. With a few squeaky sounds, Bryan was able to summon the appearance of several Pikas. These tiny, adorable members of the rabbit family perched on the rocks, curious as to the source of the sound. We spent about 10 minutes watching them and, of course, taking plenty of photos.

Our next stop was Oxbow Bend and its iconic view of the Teton Range. The rain continued to hold off as we got our first glimpses of the jagged Tetons rising abruptly from the river plain, although the peaks were shrouded in



menacing clouds. It was now on to lunch in the Mural Room at the Jackson Lake Lodge. With a little time before our reservation, we explored the interesting shops in the lodge and scanned the fields beyond the massive picture windows. The skies had opened with a torrential downpour, but there were still some Barn Swallows zipping around, and Dark-eyed Juncos in the shrubs. At our appointed time we were seated in the attractive dining room with huge murals depicting 19th century life in the area on one side, and picture windows looking out at Jackson Lake and Mt. Moran on the other.

The rain gods continued to smile on us, and the rain let up as we left Jackson Lake Lodge. Just south of the lodge, at Willow Flats, we encountered another group of cars massed on the side of the road. This time the commotion was over a bull elk and his harem a few hundred yards out in a field. After scoping the herd, we went the short distance to Jackson Lake Dam to scan for waterfowl, finding a Common Loon, Ruddy Ducks, a raft of American Coots, lots of Double-crested Cormorants and several American White Pelicans. Two Sandhill Cranes were on the lake shore, and 14 Common Mergansers were in the river below the dam.

We decided to follow the Snake River to Jackson, which gave us great views of the Tetons, its peaks still veiled in clouds. We made a quick stop at Mormon Row for another view of the Tetons, but we were foiled by the rain. Instead, we explored the Moose-Wilson Road, a stretch of road renowned for wildlife viewing. Alas we didn't come across any of the likely charismatic mega-fauna, but it was a beautiful drive nonetheless, sans the construction zone that added a few minutes to our return to Jackson. We checked into the Lexington Hotel with time to unpack and rest a bit before meeting in the lobby to do the day's checklist. Dinner was at Calico, a wonderful Italian restaurant back at the south end of the Moose-Wilson Road.

Fri., Sept. 22

Jackson | Moose-Wilson Road | Teton NP Visitors Center | Signal Mountain Lodge | Signal Mountain | Jenny Lake | National Museum of Wildlife Art

Breakfast was at the Lexington Hotel this morning. We ate quickly as we wanted to get out to the Moose-Wilson Road as early as possible. We arrived at the wetland overlook that is often a good place to spot moose by 8:00 a.m. The rain was holding off, so we got out and started to walk the adjacent trail, but it was closed due to wildlife in the area, a good sign! The area was quite birdy, with Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Pine Siskins, Cedar Waxwings and tons of American Robins. In the shrubs below us near the wetland were Oregon and Pink-sided Dark-eyed Juncos,

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White-crowned Sparrows, Song Sparrows, House Finches, Yellow-rumped Warblers and an Orange-crowned Warbler. A Sharp-shinned Hawk and an Osprey seemed to be having a tiff in the trees overlooking the wetlands that held Mallards, Common Mergansers and a Spotted Sandpiper. In all 25 species at a stop that was supposed to be for moose!

Our next stop was the Craig Thomas Discovery and Visitor Center for the Grand Teton National Park. We arrived in a heavy downpour, so we took our time at the Visitors Center before making another run at Moose-Wilson Road. First, we peeked at the wetland overlook and, seeing no large animals, we slowly cruised down the road. Soon we encountered a line of stopped cars. When our turn came to stop at the break in the roadside vegetation that had everyone's attention, we saw a Black Bear feeding in shrubs about 50 feet off the road! Then a short distance further there was a Black Bear cub about 10 feet up in some trees right next to the road. The ranger there let each car stop, get a look and photos, and move on. This was turning out to be a good run! Returning to the wetland overlook, we found a moose cow feeding slowly along the near shore of the wetland! We watched her for a good 10 minutes and then decided to head into the Grand Teton National Park and in the general direction of lunch.

Driving along the base of the Tetons, we arrived at the Signal Mountain Lodge ahead of the crowds and were soon enjoying a delicious lunch with glorious views of Jackson Lake. Next, we drove to an overlook of the namesake, Signal Mountain that, at 7,700 feet, provided breathtaking views of the Snake River Valley. But the wind-chill was also breathtaking, and we quickly headed back down, stopping at Jenny Lake at the base of Mount Moran. The view here was stunningly picturesque as the mountain rises abruptly from the far shore of the lake.

As we drove back south toward Jackson, bits of blue sky appeared around the mountains, and we were able to stop and get nice views of some of the peaks. Our afternoon activity was visiting the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson. This beautiful museum has pieces by artists from the 19th century to present. We spent two hours there and then headed back to the hotel with time to explore Jackson before dinner. Our farewell dinner this evening was just a few blocks away at The Blue Lion.



Sat., Sept. 23 Jackson | Mormon's Row | Airport

Since there were no early departures this morning, we had a leisurely breakfast and then decided to take a run back up to Mormon's Row before going to the airport. We arrived just as the sun was peeking through the clouds, illuminating the Mormon Row Barn. What a nice scene for a few final photos before it was time to drive to the airport for our farewells.

Photos by Hugh Simmons: Group, Ring-necked Duck, Black Pool West, Black Bear, Grand Prismatic (by Bryan Calk), Red-tailed Hawk, Bison, Angler's Lodge, Mountain Bluebird, Purplish Copper, Common Merganser, Group Quake Lake, Black-billed Magpie, Henry's Lake, Harriman State Park, Clark's Nutcracker, Red Crossbill, Group at Firehole Falls, Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, Grand Prismatic, Abyss Pool West, Grand Prismatic, Beehive Geyser, Larry & Vicki at Grand Prismatic, Clepsydra Geyser, Brewer's Blackbird, Pika, Black Bear, Jackson Lake, Elk, Group at Oxbow Bend, Moose, Common Raven, Black Bear cub, Dark-eyed Junco, Group, Mountain Chickadee