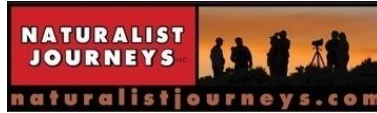


# Nevada's Great Basin

## August 23-30, 2024 | Trip Report

### by Byran Shirley



**Guided by Bryan Shirley with trip participants Jeff & Carol.**



### **Fri., Aug. 23 Farmington Bay NWR**

Our tour started today a bit after one PM. We met up at the Salt Lake City airport and after a few minutes to collect bags we were on our way. We only had about a 30-minute drive to our hotel, so we had time for a bit of exploring first. We started at Farmington Bay Wildlife Management Area. A cold front was working its way across Nevada causing some pretty serious winds. That made for tough viewing of sparrows and other small birds, but there were lots of waterbirds to enjoy. A flock of American Avocets and a few Black-necked Stilts picked bugs off the water surface and there were a couple of dozen Forster's Terns flying around searching for prey. We enjoyed watching a flock of White Pelicans showing off their classic group feeding techniques.

From Farmington Bay we headed to Ogden and planned on doing a walk at a small pond. We had just started our walk and found a bunch of Wood Ducks, not a common species in Utah, when it started to rain quite hard, so we made a hasty retreat back to the car. We enjoyed dinner at a local brewery and went to bed excited to start birding in earnest tomorrow.

### **Sat., Aug. 24 Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge & Antelope Island**

We started the day at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge near Brigham City. Bear River is a huge refuge that encompasses the delta of the Bear River where it flows into the Great Salt Lake and the surrounding marshes and wetlands. Birding here is always exciting – both for the number of species and the sheer number of birds. As we drove the 12-mile loop road through the marshes, we were treated to good looks at a variety of waterbirds. Red-winged Blackbirds & Yellow-headed Blackbirds filled the bushes along the road and large mixed



flocks of migrating swallows were feasting on the midges around the marshes. Both Western & Clark's Grebes showed well, some with nearly fully-grown chicks still riding on their backs! Both Avocets and Stilts were feeding in the water along the roadsides.

We grabbed some sandwiches for lunch and then headed to Willard Bay State Park. It was quite windy here and the bay had some pretty serious waves so we spent most of our time here birding around the campground where the trees offered some shelter from the wind. Birding was a bit slow due to the wind, but we did see a nice covey of California Quail and got into a small mixed flock with Lark Sparrows, Black-capped Chickadee, and a few Cedar Waxwings.



Our next stop was Antelope Island State Park. Antelope Island is a large island in the Great Salt Lake accessible by a causeway. The causeway is one of the best birding places in Utah during migration as thousands of shorebirds, grebes, and gulls feed on the brine flies that breed around the Great Salt Lake. Highlights today included a flock of about 500 Western Sandpipers, several thousand Red-necked and Wilson's Phalaropes, American Avocets, and Eared Grebes. Antelope Island's most famous wildlife is the resident American Bison, but we also saw quite a few Pronghorn & Mule Deer. A Burrowing Owl stood watch over its nest and we found a Great Horned Owl roosting in the hay barn. At Garr Ranch, an old pioneer house and ranch on the south end of the island, we had another Great Horned Owl watching us from its perch as we birded around the old cottonwood trees. The trees were packed with birds trying to find shelter from the wind. Western Wood-Pewees and Western Flycatchers lined the edges of the trees and Lark Sparrows, Meadowlarks, and Sage Thrashers hopped around on the ground in the open areas.

## **Sun., Aug. 25      Bonneville Salt Flats & Travel to Elko**

Today was a travel day, but we had enough time to make a few stops along the way. The winds of the last two days finally calmed down and we headed out of town admiring the cloudless sky – beautiful weather stayed with us the rest of the trip. We started our morning by taking a detour from the interstate near Tooele to look for some Pinyon/Juniper specialties. We stopped at a campground and as soon as we got out of the car we were in the middle of a mixed flock. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Bewick's Wrens, Warbling & Plumbeous Vireos, Townsend's Warblers, and a couple of Nashville Warblers made for a great start. One of our targets here was a Juniper Titmouse and eventually one showed itself.



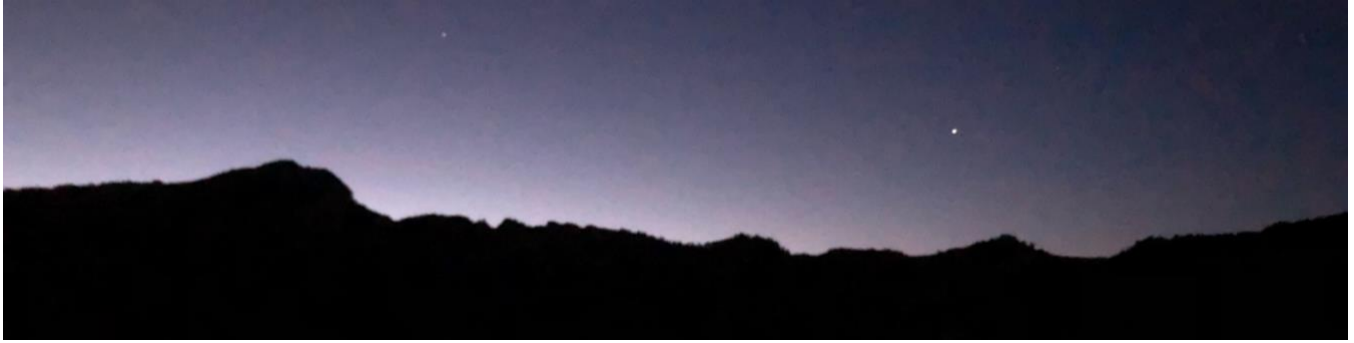


Our next stop was in the border town of Wendover. We had some good Mexican food at a local favorite restaurant. We stopped at the historic Wendover airfields and looked at some of the buildings that were used by the Air Force as a training base in WWII. From there we visited the world-famous Bonneville Salt Flats. There was a motorcycle speed event going on today so we weren't able to drive out on the flats, but it was pretty impressive to see the miles and miles of sheer white salt flats.

We arrived in Elko with enough time to do a bit of birding, so we headed out to arguably the best birding site in the area – South Fork Reservoir. We worked our way around the north end of the reservoir. We found a Sora sneaking along the shoreline, and a few minutes later another in a different spot! Always a great day when you get a Sora, let alone two! A Bald Eagle and A Golden Eagle soared around the lake and the sage around the lake held good numbers of Brewer's Sparrows. We birded for a couple of hours and headed back to town for an early dinner and to get ready for our early morning tomorrow.

## **Mon., Aug. 26      Himalayan Snowcock & Ruby Lakes NWR**

It was cold and clear this morning for our 3:30 start. We had about a 45-minute drive and after a few minutes' preparation we hit the trail at 4:30 in unseasonably-cold 30 degree weather. We were in the Ruby Mountains and our target was the Himalayan Snowcock. The snowcocks were introduced into Nevada's Ruby Mountains in the 1960s. They live at about 10,000+ feet and are one of the hardest birds to see in the US (in every birder's favorite movie *The Big Year* they use a helicopter to search for it). The snowcocks roost in the cliffs and usually before sunrise they move out of the cliffs into the surrounding boulder-strewn grassy areas at the base of the cliffs. This is the best time to see them – thus our early start. The hike in wasn't bad although we were feeling the altitude towards the end! We slowly worked our way up into the basin as we watched the gorgeous outline of mountains growing light to the east. We got to our spot just as it was getting light enough to see and started scanning the surrounding cliffs. Before long we had heard several calling. Surprisingly, there were four other birders there as well. One was someone I know from Salt Lake City so we moved up the ridge to where they were to join forces in the search and before long we were watching a couple of snowcocks feeding up the ridge. High fives and cheers all around! As we watched them through the scopes they kept multiplying and eventually we had 8! The other group started back and we stayed and enjoyed watching the snowcocks and soaking up the warm sun. The Ruby Mountains are often called the Yosemite of Nevada, and hiking out in the daylight the



scenery was amazing. The birds were enjoying the warmth of the sun too. On our hike out we had a few Yellow-rumped Warblers and one Townsend's Warbler, and a few MacGillivray's Warblers. Clark's Nutcrackers were flying around the canyon and we had several flocks of Pine Siskins, Chipping Sparrows, and Dark-eyed Juncos.

Once back at the car, we drove a bit down the canyon and stopped to bird around the campground. There weren't very many species, but we had a pretty crazy number of Warbling Vireos. We put a conservative 18 on our eBird list! At another picnic area, we had two Lewis's Woodpeckers. Back in town, we picked up some gourmet sandwiches at a Basque deli and took them back to our room for some well-deserved down time.

After lunch and a nap, we drove to Ruby Lakes NWR. It is a large wildlife refuge on the east side of the Ruby Mountains. A good portion of the refuge was marsh with tall reeds and phragmites – not the best for birding. Driving the dikes we did pick up one of the surprises of the day though – a flock of Sage Grouse running down our

dike! We followed them for a while; eventually they flew but only went further down the dike and landed again so we had to follow them some more. When we finally got through all the marshes to the actual Ruby Lake it had a ton of birds on it: Pelicans, Ibis, lots of ducks and coots, and a few shorebird species. Besides the birds, it was beautiful with the sun hitting the Ruby Mountains behind the lake.

## **Tues., Aug. 27 Southfork Reservoir | To Great Basin National Park**

Today was another travel day, but we had a few hours to bird in the morning so we decided to try South Fork Reservoir again. Last time we covered the north end, so today we hit the south end. American White Pelicans, White-faced Ibis, and a few Canada Geese stood out among the coots and grebes. We had another Sora sneaking along the lakeshore and one Least Sandpiper as well. A pair of California Quail herded their recently-fledged young away from us and into the tall grass at the edge of the parking area. We birded here for about an hour before we started the drive toward Great Basin NP. As we drove south through the sage brush and scattered hills, we had decent numbers of Swainson's & Red-tailed Hawks and a couple of Golden Eagles as well. A flock of Chukar running across the road was fun, but unfortunately, they didn't stick around long. As we drove, we watched for a good place to look for Sagebrush Sparrows and eventually stopped at a historical site with info about the Pony Express which crossed through the area. Sagebrush Sparrows aren't easy once they finish breeding, but luck was on our side and we had one pop up and land on a sage for us.





After lunch in Ely, we continued on to Great Basin National Park. We stopped and checked out the displays in the visitor's center, then continued onto our lodging. We were staying at Hidden Canyon Retreat and it was wonderful. We did a walk around the property before dinner, birding and enjoying the area. Mule Deer and Wild Turkeys wandered around the orchard and grassy areas near the rooms. Large flocks of Pine Siskins were feeding in the sunflowers and flying around the cottonwood trees. A pair of Golden Eagles soared overhead and we found an energetic flock of Bushtits along the road.



**Wed., Aug. 28**

### **Great Basin National Park: Bristlecone Pines & Astronomy Program**

Today we had a full day to explore the upper part of Great Basin National Park. We took the road into the park, slowly winding our way up toward the majestic Wheeler Peak. At 13,065 feet, Wheeler Peak is the second highest peak in Nevada and is a common backdrop to pictures taken at Great Basin. The glacier-carved cirque beneath the peak has a couple of beautiful lakes and also is home to some of the oldest trees in the world – Bristlecone Pine. The hike is usually a bit under 4 miles round trip, but since the campground and parking area are under construction, the road was closed before the normal starting point. We decided to do a loop hike around the alpine lakes and then see if we were up to doing the spur out to see the Bristlecones. On the hike we had quite a few Red Crossbills. They were frequently heard and a few times we had cooperative crossbills perch for photos. Other birds here included Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, a few Yellow-rumped Warblers, and lots of Juncos. The day was gorgeous and we were all feeling great so decided to hike the remainder of the way up to see the Bristlecone Pines. There are 3 species of bristlecones. The longest lived is the Great Basin Bristlecone Pine. The oldest known specimen is nearly 5000 years old. It was pretty amazing to think about as we walked among the gnarled trees. On our way back we heard a woodpecker tapping and it ended up being an American Three-toed Woodpecker. Great Basin NP is the only place they are found in Nevada so we were excited to see it here.

After our hike, we had a good break and then an early dinner so that we could go the presentation at the National Park amphitheater. As we were heading there, we were talking about how cool it would be to see a



Common Poorwill tonight. After we parked and were walking through the parking area a poorwill flew by us and landed a few feet away on the ground in the lights of the restrooms! Needless to say, we were all pretty excited. Tonight, they had 2 presentations while we were waiting for it to get dark enough to look at stars. The first presentation was about the endangered Bonneville Cutthroat Trout and its reintroduction into much of its original range. The second was about the quest to find life in the universe. Great Basin is home to some of the clearest and darkest skies in the US and by the time it ended it was good and dark. The rangers put a few things for us to look at in the telescopes and we pointed out some constellations and enjoyed seeing the Milky Way.

### **Thurs., Aug. 29      Great Basin National Park: Lehman Caves Tour**

We started out the day with a walk around our lodge. The sunflower patch was busy with siskins and lots of hummingbirds, both Broad-tailed and Rufus. A Yellow-breasted Chat and Warbling Vireo were in the Willows near the creek. A Hairy Woodpecker pounded away on a dead branch of a cottonwood.

This morning was our tour through Lehman Caves. Lehman Caves were designated a National Monument in the 1920's, setting the stage for the transition into Great Basin National Park in 1986. We had a 1.5-hour ranger-guided tour into the caves. It was nice to hear the history and learn details about the cave. The formations inside were spectacular; especially interesting were the cave shields for which Lehman Cave is famous. After our tour we had lunch at the visitor center café, then had a bit of down time at the lodge. In the late afternoon we explored the Snake Creek portion of the national park. It was nice to be in a remote area – we only saw a few vehicles the entire time! Birding was slow, but the scenery made up for it. We enjoyed the relaxing evening birding along the road and taking in the sights.

### **Fri., Aug. 30      Back to Salt Lake City**

We had about a four-hour drive today and needed to be to the airport at about noon so that didn't leave us a lot of time – especially with the one-hour time change between Nevada and Utah. We left early and the drive was happily uneventful. We arrived in Salt Lake with a bit of extra time so we drove through the downtown area and stopped at the State Capital before heading to the airport.

*Photo Credits: Group, Bryan Shirley; Clark's Grebe, Jeff Sole; Birding Scenic, Bryan Shirley; Avocets, Bryan Shirley; Bison, Jeff Sole; Nashville Warbler, Jeff Sole; Sage Thrasher, Jeff Sole; Sora, Jeff Sole; Sunrise, Bryan Shirley; Early Hike, Jeff Sole; Marmot, Jeff Sole; Bristlecone Pine, Bryan Shirley; Pinyon Jay, Jeff Sole; Caverns, Bryan Shirley.*