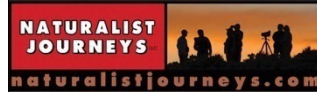


Yellowstone: Birds, Bears and Wildlife

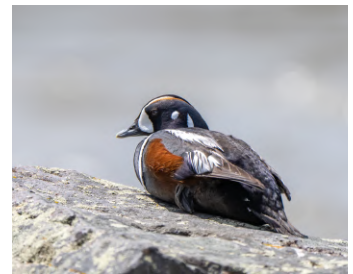
May 29-June 4 2025 | Trip Report

by Wes Larson



Guided by: Wes Larson and Hugh Simmons

Participants: Jan and Ian Gasper, Lisa and Greg Klein, Linda and Steve Norton, Barb Bryson and Mitch Boriskin



May 29: Pick-ups, Paradise Valley and Gardiner

After picking up the entire crew at both the airport and their respective hotels, we headed over Bozeman pass and toward the Livingston turnoff to Paradise Valley, and it's easy to see why it is called that. With the beautiful Absaroka mountains on one side and the Gallatin range on the other side, the drive is one of the best in the country. We stopped at a small pond for some birding as saw yellow-headed, redwing and Brewer's blackbirds, as well as trumpeter swans, cinnamon teal and our first sandhill cranes. It was a great stop in the middle of the valley and then we continued down the road toward Gardiner. Once in Gardiner we headed out on the Old Yellowstone Trail Road and saw elk, pronghorn, horned lark, western meadowlark and American kestrel. It was a great introduction to the grassland wildlife in the area.



After checking into the Absaroka Lodge, we walked to dinner at Wonderland Café where we shared some wonderful food and got to know everyone from the group. This is a particularly easy-going and fun group, and the conversations around dinner were carefree and interesting. Following dinner, we did our first species list and some of our group left to explore the town of Gardiner.

May 30: Wolftracker Morning and Time in Mammoth

We woke up very early to meet our Wolf Tracker guide, Jack and head into the park. He almost immediately took us toward Antelope Basin, and after passing some tantalizingly close black bears along the tower road, we got to where we were headed, and boy were we happy we got there early enough! A group of wolves had killed an elk calf and were eating it while the elk mother was doing her best to run them off. They were quite close as far as wolf sightings go, and we got to watch a very interesting and dramatic scene unfold. Had we gotten there 15 minutes later we would have missed most of it, so we were very lucky to get there as early as we did.

After leaving the wolves, we spent some time with the black bears that we had passed on the way down, and then slowly made our way to the Lamar valley, stopping for different animals like coyotes, black bears and baby bison. Once we got to the Lamar Valley we ate our breakfast and then watched some far away black bears and our first grizzly bears! A female with two cubs playing way up on a snow drift. We then continued on to Slough Creek where we did some birding and the highlights were a calliope hummingbird and a dusky grouse. Then on the way back to Mammoth we saw bighorn sheep and a pair of sandhill cranes with a colt, plus one more black bear.

In Mammoth our group ate at the grill and then visited some of the geyser basin and checked out a great horned owl that was nesting near the administration buildings. We then drove back to Gardiner for some downtime and some afternoon birding in the hills above the hotel and then a delicious and fun dinner at the Iron Horse above the Yellowstone River. A perfect and full first day in the park.

May 31: Full Day Exploring Geothermal Features

We woke up early once again and headed toward the Old Faithful area after a really tasty breakfast at Bear's Brew in Gardiner. We marveled at the different geological formations and features on the way southward, and then made our first stop at Grand Prismatic and the Midway Geyser Basin. Some of our group opted to walk the boardwalk and the others hiked to the overlook, and both groups had a truly wonderful time.



After meeting back up we drove to the Lower Geyser basin and Old Faithful, which was erupting right as we drove in. So we took the time to walk around the geyser basin and we were given a real treat when Beehive Geyser erupted right in front of us! This is one of the taller and more powerful geysers in the park and it really was quite the spectacle! We continued walking and saw Old Faithful erupt and then enjoyed a nice picnic lunch on the deck of the Old Faithful Inn. Following lunch we drove to fountain geyser basin and looked at the springs and mudpots as well as a very photogenic mountain bluebird. Our final stops of the day were some birding at twin lakes and then swan lake, and we then drove back down the hill and into the beautiful town of Gardiner and we enjoyed a lively and delicious dinner at the Iron Horse.

June 1: Big Wildlife Day While Driving/Sightseeing the Eastern Side of the Park

We woke up very early again because the recent warm up had made the mornings much more productive than any other part of the day, and we had a good distance to drive! We drove down to the Lake Butte Area on the East Entrance Road, as Wes had promised the group that it was the most consistent grizzly bear viewing in the park, and we were lucky to see four different grizzly bears right after arriving! Two subadults that had recently been kicked off from their mom, and two courting adults. While the views were fleeting the behavior was very interesting and after watching the bears, we enjoyed some breakfast on the shore of Yellowstone Lake.

Following breakfast we did a bit of birding in Indian Pond, seeing both Western Grebe and Barrow's Goldeneye, and then we continued up to LeHardy Rapids, where we had some very nice looks at the harlequin ducks as they fed in the rapids and then rested on some rocks. It was quite the show, and we all left the rapids very happy. We then continued into the Hayden Valley where we did some birding in some ponds of the Yellowstone river and managed to see both blue and green-winged teal, as well as a lot of other waterfowl! We also heard a female grizzly was out, so we made our way in and out of the Hayden Valley until we managed to see the bear and her nearly fully grown cubs in the fields next to Canyon Junction. A quick visit to Artist Point and a beautiful view of Yellowstone falls was really the cherry on top of the first part of the day

Following lunch and some shopping at Canyon Village, we drove over beautiful Dunraven Pass where we were surrounded by whitebark pine and learned about how important they are to the ecosystem. Driving down into the familiar Tower area, Little America and Lamar Valley, we were able to see some of our old favorites including black bears, bald eagles, bison and pronghorn. It was a beautiful drive out of the park and into the always gorgeous mountain town of Cooke City, where we enjoyed a fun dinner at the Beartooth Café.



June 2: Driving the Scenic Beartooth Highway and Evening in the Park

With some moody weather that seemed to be clearing, we made the decision to head up the Beartooth pass following some great coffee and breakfast at Cooke City Coffee. While the drive started out cloudy, rainy and even snowy! When we neared the top of the pass the clouds started clearing and we were treated to some of the most beautiful skies and clouds imaginable! On the way we spotted American pipit, as well as the much sought-after black rosy finches! It was truly an unbelievable view up top and we were all in incredibly high spirits as we drove over what felt like the top of the world with jaw-dropping views of both the beartooth and Absoroka mountains. We then drove back down the pass and enjoyed our lunch near a creek where we also did some birding and found downy woodpeckers, mountain chickadees, American dipper and a number of other great birds.

We then spent some time back in Cooke City resting, and ate an early dinner at the Beartooth Café. Following dinner, we drove back into the park and had a wonderful evening viewing a roadside fox, a golden eagle in her nest, baby bison, a black bear with two cubs, and some of the wolves from the Mollies pack as they chased some bison. One last surprise was waiting when we got back into Cooke City though, a large male grizzly bear was browsing on some clover in a field just outside of town, and our group watched in awe as the huge bear moved through the field until it was too dark to see anymore. A perfect end to an amazing day.

June 3: Full Day in the Northern Range of Yellowstone National Park

Today would be a day that was dedicated to the northern part of the park and trying to see some of the wildlife and birds that we had missed so far. After breakfast it didn't take us long to find our first target and an animal that some of our group had been very excited to see, a moose! We had been doing some birding in the pebble creek area when we heard a report that a female moose and her calf had been seen in the area the night before. We did some searching with his binoculars and managed to spy the rump of the moose in the trees where she was laying down with her calf. We found a better angle and watched the two for a while and then headed out. Our next spot was the cliffs near Tower Falls where we watched some newly calved bighorns play with their moms in the shadows of the rock features, and we also enjoyed the swallows and the osprey in the area. Black bears are also common in this part of the park and we got to spend some time watching a female black bear and her cub as they grazed on clover. We then tried to do some birding near Roosevelt Lodge, but the area was



closed and we decided to head to Slough Creek for a short walk and some birding. Along the way we were treated to an incredible interaction between a herd of pronghorn and two coyotes, and the pronghorn were aggressively pushing the pair of coyotes out of the area. It was quite thrilling and ended up being a favorite experience of the trip for many of our group.

After parking at the Slough Creek trailhead, we walked up the trail to find and observe a number of birds and we got quite lucky. Some standouts were both female and male dusky grouse, with the male putting on quite a show in his breeding plumage. We also saw a calliope hummingbird and a large number of songbirds and walking in this area is always productive and invigorating. As we got back to the trailhead and ate lunch, some of our group walked a couple hundred yards to join a group that was watching a female black bear with her two cubs of the year, or “coy” and the playful cubs made for quite the show.

We then decided to slowly head back toward Cooke City but along the way we made some stops and had some of our best sightings of the day. We got a brief but amazing glimpse of a Western Tanager, as well as a really nice look at two harlequin ducks resting on a rock with an American dipper family nearby. One last look at the female moose and calf finished our day out, and many of us agreed that this was a perfect last full day in the park. We had a wonderful dinner at the Bistro and relived a lot of the trip during the meal, and even voted on the favorite bird and mammal of the trip, with the winners being the harlequin ducks and the wolves we saw on the first day.

June 4: One Last Drive Through Yellowstone, the Drive to Bozeman and Goodbyes

We started our final day with some breakfast and coffee at Cooke City Coffee, which is a truly great little café in the tiny town of Cooke City Montana. Following breakfast, we drove into the park and it wasn't long before we had our first surprise of the day, a large black bear grazing directly on the side of the road. Some of our group got to get closer to a black bear than they had ever been before (from the safety of a vehicle) and it was a perfect way to start our last drive through the park. We had another brief glimpse of a black bear near Soda Butte, and then we stopped near Slough Creek for our best and cutest sighting of the morning. A group of coyote pups were out playing in the flowers and sunlight, and our crew got to watch for a few minutes as they played with each other before heading back down into their den. We then stopped briefly at Floating Island Lake to look for ruddy ducks, and got to see several males with their bright blue bills as they pursued females around the lake. We wanted to make sure we had plenty of time to get to the airport, so we continued driving and one of the cars made a brief stop to watch a pair of red-tailed hawks mobbing a nearby bald eagle.



Leaving Yellowstone is always hard but at least the drive through Paradise Valley is a wonderful way to say goodbye to the ecosystem, and after some warm goodbyes at the airport, we finished a wonderful and insanely productive trip. This group was particularly wonderful with all four couples being courteous, patient, flexible and so fun to be around. It was always easy to strike up interesting conversation throughout the trip, and it was easy to see that everyone in this group had a deep love and appreciation for the wild things of the world. Hope to see you all on future Naturalist Journeys trips, and thank you for making this one so special!

Mammal of the Trip: Gray Wolf

Bird of the Trip: Harlequin Duck

Total Bears Seen: 17 Black Bears and 12 Grizzly Bears

Total Wolves Seen: 9 Wolves

Photos: Group (Hugh Simmons - HS), Harlequin Duck (HS), Grand Prismatic (HS), Black Bear (HS), Great Horned Owl (HS), Lamar Valley Scenic (HS), Midway Geyser Scenic (HS), Beehive Geyser (HS), Mountain Bluebird (HS), Black Rosy-Finch (HS), Grand Canyon of Yellowstone (HS), Dusky Grouse (HS), Pronghorn (HS), Bison (HS), Red Fox (HS), Grizzly Bear (HS), American Dipper (HS), Coyote Pups (HS), Mammoth Hot Springs (HS), Wolf Tracker (HS)