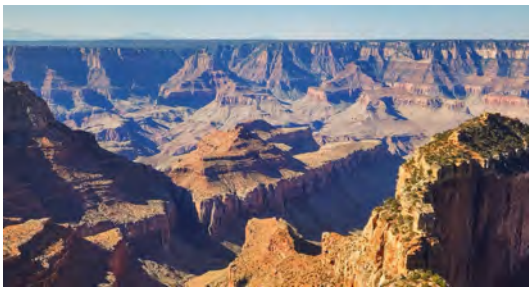
Birding Canyon Country | May 18 – 26, 2025 | Trip Report | by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Stephen Grace and David Jaffe with Mike, Linda, Dave, Janet, Don, Donna, Bill, Arlene, Chris and Gillian



Sun., May 18 St. George | Grafton Ghost Town | Zion National Park

Our journey began with an optional pre-tour outing at Tonaquint Park in St. George, where the Mojave Desert brushes against the uplifted edge of the Colorado Plateau. Some early risers joined DJ (David Jaffe) and me in search of species we'd be unlikely to encounter later, as our route would soon climb into canyon country.

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We quickly found our targets. Abert's Towhee, with its sooty face and rusty undertail, scratched methodically in the leaf litter—a large, range-restricted sparrow of desert thickets and a lifer for several in the group. Nearby, male Anna's Hummingbirds perched like living jewels, flashing radiant rose-pink crowns and gorgets—so named for the neck armor of medieval knights. We paused to discuss how this dazzling color arises not from pigment, but from structure—light refracted off microscopic feather features that shift hue with angle and illumination.

Hundreds of Cliff Swallows swooped over the pond, their buffy rumps and pale foreheads distinguishing them from the more iridescent Violet-green Swallows. The Violet-greens flashed metallic hues—emerald, amethyst, and sapphire—in the right light, while their bold white flank patches wrapped up over the rump like bright saddlebags, making them instantly recognizable in flight. Quick, buoyant, and agile, they were a common presence throughout the tour, yet always striking—birds of understated beauty and sudden brilliance.

Our first mammals of the trip showed themselves here as well: Desert Cottontails hopped along the trailside; Rock Squirrels sprawled on warm boulders; and a White-tailed Antelope Squirrel zipped past with comic urgency, which we at first mistook for a chipmunk. That sparked a quick field discussion: chipmunks have bold stripes that run across their backs and continue onto their heads, including through the eyes, while ground squirrels may have stripes on their backs but none on their heads.

When a Greater Roadrunner dashed across the path, Linda—who proved to be a superb spotter throughout the tour—exclaimed she thought it was a squirrel. Understandable, given its low posture and speed. We were treated to extraordinarily close looks at this iconic desert bird before it sprinted around a bend and vanished into the brush.

Following our successful morning, we gathered the rest of the group from their hotels and headed to a shuttle stop, where we welcomed Chris and Gillian—our intrepid travelers from Australia. Their presence added a warmly appreciated international element to the group. Over the coming days, they would teach us a bit of Aussie slang and bring bright humor and perspective to every stop.

We paused for lunch in La Verkin, where a blooming patch of prickly pear cactus in radiant yellow sparked spontaneous admiration. Botany would become a thread throughout the journey—shared delight in flowering plants, unfamiliar trees, and unexpected blooms.

Our afternoon stop was the ghost town of Grafton, nestled beside the Virgin River in a green oasis shaded by cottonwoods. Founded by Mormon pioneers in the 1860s, Grafton was plagued by floods and isolation. Today,

the remnants of cabins and gravestones rest quietly in the river's bend, where irrigation still brings water to the land and cottonwoods rise like sentinels above the ruins.

A Summer Tanager, brilliant red against the canopy, briefly interrupted our tour overview. Western Tanagers glowed in gold and scarlet, flitting through the greenery. A Common Black Hawk circled above. At the northern edge of its range, this tropical raptor favors cottonwood-lined desert rivers, hunting amphibians and small vertebrates.

A male Vermilion Flycatcher perched briefly on a branch, a burst of red in the landscape like a flame in a tree. Western Bluebirds added flashes of azure from fenceposts, and Black-headed Grosbeaks and a Lazuli Bunting contributed still more color and song.

Then came the only rain of the tour—an intense but brief shower that sent us laughing to the van. The scent of wet dust rose like the land exhaling. As the clouds parted and we rolled down the windows, we caught final looks at a Brewer's Sparrow in a brush pile and several Phainopeplas—silky black birds shaped like cardinals, with blood-red eyes and flashing white wing patches in flight. A fan favorite.

By evening, we arrived at our lodge inside Zion National Park, embraced by the towering Navajo Sandstone walls that would define the days ahead. The Virgin River, green-fringed and winding, has done the slow, patient work of carving this dramatic canyon—a sanctuary of water and life in the desert.

Wild Turkeys strutted across the lawn, and Mule Deer browsed beneath an enormous Fremont Cottonwood, some of its seed fluff drifting on the breeze like snow. We shared our first group dinner—salmon and chicken were popular choices—and completed our first checklist together before raising a toast to a beautiful beginning.

After dinner, we walked back to our rooms beneath a star-strewn sky. The canyon walls loomed around us in quiet majesty. With the promise of days to come and sandstone rising like sentinels in the dark, we stepped fully into the sculpted world of the Colorado Plateau.

Mon., May 19 Zion National Park

We rose early, and as the morning sun spilled over Zion's eastern rim and set fire to the west-facing cliffs, we gathered like silent pilgrims to greet the first light. The Navajo Sandstone ignited in glowing waves of ochre, rose, and gold, each stratum revealing the windblown layering of ancient desert dunes hardened by time and

uplifted toward the sky. With coffee in hand and the murmur of the Virgin River nearby, we watched the canyon awaken.

After a light breakfast, we set out on the Grotto Trail, walking from the lodge beneath towering walls of cross-bedded sandstone. We paused to interpret the park's geology: the vast Navajo Sandstone formation, once an immense Jurassic dune field, now carved into monoliths and alcoves by water and time. We spoke of lithification, iron staining, and the slow sculpting of canyons through deposition, uplift, downcutting, and erosion—a geologic tale told in porous stone and echoing silence.

Birdsong accompanied us along the way. Spotted Towhees skulked and scratched in the underbrush, drawing admiration for their vivid rufous flanks and bold black-and-white contrast. Their red eyes stared back from the shadows when they finally emerged. We split into two groups for morning hikes: one heading up the trail toward the Emerald Pools, the other exploring the lower section of the Angels Landing trail.

The lower group made a thrilling discovery—a tidy, domed Bushtit nest hidden in a shrub, swaying gently like a silken pouch. We marveled at the tiny architects' use of spider silk, grass, and lichen, watching as they darted in and out of the nest's entrance with remarkable precision. Nearby, a Cassin's Kingbird perched on a drift log beside the river. We studied its dark gray head and crisp white throat with a narrow mustache stripe—field marks that, along with its uniformly dark tail, set it apart from the more familiar Western Kingbird, which shows white outer tail feathers and a paler gray head.

The upper group, climbing higher, enjoyed broad views across the canyon. A distant raptor, possibly a Golden Eagle, soared on canyon thermals—too far to confirm, but thrilling to imagine. We reunited beneath the cliffs for a group photo, spirits high, smiles wide.

After a midday rest, DJ delivered an optional geology talk that was enthusiastically attended. Using visual aids, he helped us make sense of the "layer cake" of time preserved in the region's stratigraphy. Each rock layer told a story—deserts turned to stone, shallow seas rising and vanishing, rivers slicing through uplifted plateaus. With diagrams in hand, DJ brought the vast geologic timescale into focus, revealing the canyons not just as scenic marvels, but as pages in Earth's deep history.

Then we set out on one of Zion's most iconic trails: the Riverside Walk to the Narrows. Our target here was the American Dipper, a river sprite cloaked in charcoal-gray feathers. We scanned boulders and riffles, momentarily

misled by bobbing Black Phoebes and hopping American Robins. The phoebes, tail-dipping and fly-catching along the banks, put on a fine show of their own.

Over it all, the liquid notes of Song Sparrows mingled with the sound of the current—a duet of birdsong and river. These semi-aquatic sparrows were right at home, hunting insects at the water's edge, threading through willow thickets, and adding their voices to the riparian chorus. Yellow Warblers, bursting with golden energy, sang their classic refrain—*sweet, sweet, sweet, I'm so sweet*—and seemed to be everywhere, bright sparks in the green canopy arching over the river.

A Monarch Butterfly nectaring on flowers caught our attention—its stained-glass wings glowing in the sun. Moments later, a female Broad-tailed Hummingbird zipped into view, darting with quick, purposeful movements among the blooms. This stretch of canyon shelters Zion's famed hanging gardens—lush alcoves where water seeps through porous sandstone, nourishing pockets of improbable abundance. Scarlet Monkeyflowers blazed beside yellow Alcove Columbines and lavender Utah Shooting Stars, while Maidenhair Ferns arched from the rock in lacy green fans, defying the arid landscape beyond. The scent of water trickling down mossy, sun-warmed stone lingered in the air—a reminder that in the desert, life gathers where stone cradles moisture and shade.

Our American Dipper search paid off. One flew past and landed briefly on a boulder—just long enough for some in the group to catch a glimpse before it vanished downstream. Moments later, around a bend, the magic truly unfolded. Gillian pointed: a family of four dippers. Two fledglings, fluffed and fluttering, begged along the stream's edge while both parents plunged into the current and emerged with insects for waiting beaks. We watched in awe at close range.

Dippers are North America's only truly aquatic songbird. They walk underwater against the current using their wings like flippers. Dense, waterproof plumage, nasal flaps, and a third eyelid—a translucent nictitating membrane—help them thrive in icy mountain streams. Their blood carries extra oxygen, enabling prolonged dives. We observed the adults bobbing and blinking—behaviors that help them communicate amid the roar of the river. The white flash of those third eyelids was even caught on camera.

At trail's end, we reached the mouth of the Narrows, where brave hikers wade directly into the Virgin River and continue upstream between sheer sandstone walls. Here, water is the trail.

On our return, we made one final stop—Big Bend, where we scanned the sky for the elusive giants of Zion: California Condors. The sun had warmed the cliffs, and thermals lifted a dozen Turkey Vultures into the air,

wings held in dihedral, rocking and wobbling as they circled. We watched intently for the steady, level flight of a condor—for the pale wing patches on the *leading* edge (not the trailing edge, like the vultures), for the broad primaries splayed like fingers, and for the numbered wing tags that mark these survivors of near-extinction.

No luck today. But we hatched a plan to try again tomorrow in another promising location. The search had only just begun.

Back at the lodge, another delicious dinner awaited. This time, the sweet finale stole the show: chocolate lava cake crowned with vanilla ice cream earned rave reviews, alongside the savory entrées. We ended the day with full bellies, full hearts, and a renewed sense of wonder—already looking forward to the discoveries still ahead.

Tues., May 20 Zion | Navajo Bridge | Kanab

We packed up and said farewell to Zion National Park Lodge, taking a final deep breath beneath the towering cliffs before climbing eastward out of the canyon and onto the plateau above. Our departure was punctuated by scenic overlooks and geologic puzzles, each turn offering a new angle on stone, sky, and story.

One stop in particular drew curiosity: Checkerboard Mesa. Its distinctive grid—etched into the pale Navajo Sandstone—sparked a playful challenge. Why the checkerboard? We let the group puzzle it out. Eventually, Don and Donna, a husband-and-wife team, landed on the correct answer: the horizontal lines are ancient cross-beds, remnants of windblown Jurassic sand dunes hardened into stone; the vertical lines are more modern joints—fractures that formed as the uplifted sandstone expanded and cracked through freeze-thaw cycles. Time layered upon time, recorded in stone.

In Kanab, we picked up lunch to go and continued to Navajo Bridge, high above the Colorado River. Hopes for California Condors hung in the still air—but the canyon was quiet, and the sky empty. We retreated to the visitor center's shade to eat and sip cold drinks. A Rock Wren foraging insects from car grilles provided unexpected entertainment—small consolation for the missing giants we'd come to see.

We crossed the bridge on foot, stepping from Arizona onto Navajo Nation land, where Diné artisans displayed handmade jewelry and textiles. The Diné, or "the People," are stewards of this land and culture. For Arlene, an avid weaver, this was a highlight. She purchased a rug woven from hand-spun Churro wool, and through a

translator learned that the elder weaver, now nearly blind, could no longer create such intricate patterns. The story added poignancy to an already beautiful textile—a piece of art woven with heritage and heart.

I spoke with the artisans about the condors. “No wind,” they said knowingly. “When the air is still, the birds stay perched.” They pointed to ledges beneath the bridge and shadowed nooks in the cliffs. I scanned every crevice. Nothing.

We were preparing to leave—moved by the grandeur of the canyon and the richness of the cultural exchange, but quietly disappointed. This was our last chance to see a California Condor. Perhaps it just wasn’t meant to be.

Then, just as we were waiting near the restrooms, I glanced up.

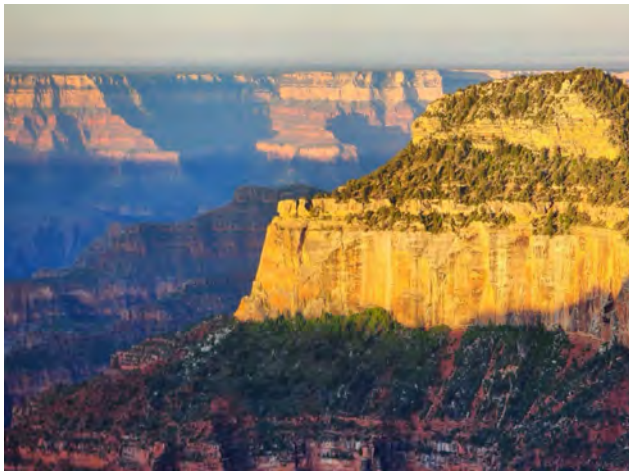
There it was.

Condor #96 soared out from the cliffs—wings broad and steady, white patches on the leading edge catching the light. A second juvenile followed, circling once before vanishing behind the bridge. Cheers rose from the group. Cameras clicked. Spirits soared.

These immense birds, with wingspans nearing ten feet, are among the rarest in the world. By 1987, only 27 individuals remained—all brought into captivity in a last-ditch effort to save the species. Since then, thanks to decades of conservation—captive breeding, reintroduction, and constant monitoring—California Condors have returned to the skies of Arizona, Utah, and California. Each wears a numbered wing tag—not a mark of captivity, but of survival.

As Condor #96 passed just twenty feet above us, soaring effortlessly on canyon thermals, we felt the power of those immense wings and the weight of the story they carried. This was no ordinary sighting. It was a symbol of resilience—one of the unforgettable moments of the tour. To witness a condor in flight isn’t just a thrill—it’s a reminder of what’s possible when science, dedication, and hope come together.

On our return to Kanab, we stopped at the Vermilion Cliffs overlook. The stunning escarpment rose in banded layers of rust and rose—rock waves frozen in time. For geologists, they’re a record of Earth’s deep past—Triassic through Jurassic strata shaped by uplift and erosion. For the rest of us, they’re simply awe-inspiring. A reminder that we move through a world much older and grander than ourselves.

Back in Kanab, we checked into our lodge rooms and gathered for a well-earned dinner. Pizzas, pastas, and fresh salads were met with enthusiasm—comfort food after a day of beauty, emotion, and wonder.

But we didn't linger long.

Tomorrow would bring something rare. Something immense. Something worth waking early for.

Wed., May 21 North Rim, Grand Canyon National Park

We departed Kanab before dawn, the vans rolling out at 4:00 a.m. beneath a star-bright sky. Our destination: the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park—a place of staggering beauty and ecological richness. Unlike the more visited South Rim, the North Rim rises higher in elevation, cloaked in forests of spruce, fir, pine, and aspen. Snow lingers here well into spring, and the air is crisp with altitude—cool, pine-scented, and steeped in silence.

We arrived just in time. As the sky paled behind us, we walked out to the canyon's edge and watched the first light ignite its walls. One by one, the ridges caught flame—pinks, reds, and golds kindling in the morning quiet. A reverent hush fell over the group. No one needed to speak. We were witnessing one of Earth's great spectacles. Bill, especially—drawn to silent moments of reflection—found a solitary perch to absorb the grandeur, savoring the scene in peaceful stillness.

Then came the encore: coffee. As the sun climbed higher and the cliffs glowed deeper, hot coffee warmed our hands and enhanced the sensory experience—because as many naturalists know, sunrise is beautiful, but sunrise with caffeine is sublime. The canyon may have taken everyone's breath away, but the coffee brought it back just in time for birding.

From the North Rim Lodge, we continued to Cape Royal, one of the finest panoramic viewpoints in the entire canyon. Along the trail, we had fantastic looks at Black-throated Gray Warblers, unusually cooperative and singing from exposed perches just a few feet away from us. Their crisp facial patterns with tiny spots of yellow above their eyes, paired with buzzy songs, added beauty to the high-altitude forest.

At the overlook itself, we spread out along the rim, stunned into stillness by the scale. In the distance, the San Francisco Peaks—snowcapped and ancient—rose beyond the far rim. DJ read a moving passage aloud, his voice rising above the chasm. It was a moment of clarity, perspective, and emotional gravity—words carried on canyon wind.

The voices of Pygmy Nuthatches captured our attention, and we saw them flitting through junipers. A perched raptor drew excitement: we hoped for a Golden Eagle, but closer study revealed a Red-tailed Hawk with a golden-hued head and nape. The tell-tale red tail confirmed its identity. Still, it was a fine sight against the canyon's cathedral walls. A Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay posed on a wind-silvered snag, framed by a sweep of red rock vastness that dwarfed us all.

On the trail to Angel's Window—a natural arch carved in stone—we spoke of erosional processes and deep time. Chris captured a partial photo of a striking woodpecker, likely a Red-naped Sapsucker, though the bird slipped away before all could confirm.

We enjoyed a picnic lunch beneath a grove of Ponderosa Pines. Several of us leaned close to the trunks, hoping to catch their famously sweet aroma. The first stand offered only faint hints. But later, near a group of mature trees with deeply fissured bark, the magic was undeniable—everyone took turns leaning in, inhaling deeply, and naming what they smelled: butterscotch, vanilla, root beer, cappuccino. These pine trees, acting as perfumers, stirred something childlike in us—a sense of wonder we too often leave behind in adulthood.

DJ, who so often gifted us with meaningful reflections, shared his admiration for Sigurd Olson, a writer and conservationist who championed the emotional power of wilderness. Olson believed that nature helps reawaken the submerged sense of wonder we all carry. As he once wrote, "While we are born with curiosity and wonder and our early years full of the adventure they bring, I know such inherent joys are often lost. I also know that being deep within us, their latent glow can be fanned to flame again by awareness and open mind."

That moment—sniffing trees, laughing together, inviting curious passersby to join us—was Olson's truth come alive. What might have seemed silly to others became contagious joy. These tours, as DJ reminded us, aim to rekindle the spark of wonder that still lives inside us all.

Then came a mammalian highlight—a Kaibab Squirrel bounded into view. This high-elevation, range-restricted subspecies of Abert's Squirrel is found only on the Kaibab Plateau. With its dark gray, almost black body and expressive, tufted ears, it looked like a character from folklore come to life. Everyone was enchanted.

Before leaving the North Rim, we paused in a patch of mixed aspen and evergreen forest to bird and reflect on the natural history of the Grand Canyon one last time. We spoke of the trees—Quaking Aspen with their fluttering, wind-stirred leaves; Engelmann Spruce with sharp, spiky needles; and White Fir, whose soft needles invite a gentle touch. Chipping Sparrows trilled from the branches, their rufous crowns catching the light. Yellow-rumped Warblers of the Audubon's subspecies flitted among the trees, flashing golden throats and buttery rumps.

We returned to Kanab for an early dinner at a lively local restaurant. Smoked meats—from flat iron steak to chicken thighs—were the house specialty, complemented by honey cornbread, garlic mashed potatoes, crisp salads, and flavorful grilled vegetables for non-carnivores. We shared toasts, laughter, and birding memories from the day, then gathered on the patio to complete our checklist. Afterwards, we headed back to the lodge—grateful, tired, and still absorbing the immensity of what we'd experienced.

Thur., May 22 Jackson Flat Reservoir | Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park | Bryce Canyon National Park

After our predawn pilgrimage to the Grand Canyon the day before, we treated ourselves to a leisurely morning in Kanab. We checked out at a sedate pace and went to breakfast at the historic Parry Lodge—a gathering place for Western film stars in a former era, and now the setting for birds. Outside the dining room, a male American Goldfinch flashed his brilliant yellow plumage from a tree, while Turkey Vultures stretched their wings wide in classic pose, either soaking up the morning sun after a cold desert night, drying their dew-dampened wings, or testing the air for rising thermals.

Our first birding stop of the day was Jackson Flat Reservoir, a tranquil expanse near Kanab that offered some striking additions to our trip list. Forster's Terns perched on a peninsula. Eared Grebes in full breeding plumage—black necks, cinnamon flanks, and golden wisps fanning from their red eyes—drew audible gasps. They looked like brushstroke paintings come to life.

From there, we made our way to Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park, a surreal landscape where rosy-hued dunes rise in a basin between the Moquith and Moccasin Mountains. We posed a geology challenge to the group: why is there so much sand here—and why is it pink?

With some lively discussion and collaborative sleuthing, the group pieced it together. The dunes are composed of finely weathered Navajo Sandstone, eroded from the cliffs above by wind and water. Unusual local wind patterns act like a funnel, sweeping the sand into this low-lying pocket where it accumulates in sculpted, ever-shifting forms. The distinctive coral color comes from iron oxide staining—a mineral blush that tints the grains. The result is otherworldly: a Martian landscape softened by Earth's green palette.

Though the dunes weren't especially birdy, we found beauty and insight in the small things. A Bewick's Wren sang clearly from a grove of Gambel Oak tucked amid the sand, and sharp eyes spotted tracks of lizards and


small mammals winding alongside our own footprints. Curious naturalists, walking across an ever-changing canvas in the footsteps of other living creatures—perhaps as curious about us as we are of them.

After lunch, we continued toward our next wonder—Bryce Canyon National Park. But before entering the park, we made a stop at a windswept pond. The gusts nearly turned us away, but our instinct to explore paid off. We were greeted by a spectacular sight: male Yellow-headed Blackbirds showing off their gold-and-ink contrast, one even perched dramatically overhead, perhaps abandoning its cattail habitat to shelter from the wind. Ruddy Ducks—males with cinnamon bodies, jaunty stiff tails, and powder-blue bills—cut dapper figures in the ripples and waves.

Wilson's Phalaropes stole the show, circling and feeding daintily at the water's edge. We talked about their remarkable reverse sexual dimorphism: the females are more brightly colored, and it's the males who incubate the eggs and raise the young. A Swainson's Hawk soared low and close, offering breathtaking views as it cruised past the pond, followed soon after by an Osprey gliding above.

Upon entering Bryce Canyon, we paused to observe Utah Prairie Dogs—the rarest of all prairie dog species, found only in southwestern Utah. For Mike, a mammal enthusiast as well as an avid birder, this sighting completed his quest to see every prairie dog species in North America. These charismatic rodents are not just adorable—they're ecosystem architects. Their burrows aerate soil and provide homes for dozens of other species, making them a classic keystone species. And their alarm calls? Some of the most sophisticated known in the animal kingdom, with the ability to describe predator species, direction, and speed.

We checked into our lodge rooms nestled in a high forest of Ponderosa Pines. Birds flitted through the branches, and Mule Deer browsed quietly nearby—a peaceful mountain setting.

Dinner at the lodge was delicious, the first of two nights here. We ate early to make time for something unforgettable: sunset at the Bryce Amphitheater.

As golden light spilled into the hoodoo-filled basin, we stood at the rim and tried to take it all in. These towering stone spires—called hoodoos—are sculpted from the limestone of the Claron Formation, shaped by rain and frost-wedging into otherworldly forms. Over time, vertical cracks become fins, then windows, then isolated towers. Harder capstone protects the softer layers beneath. Their surreal silhouettes stirred our imaginations: Linda saw an audience of silent beings assembled below, waiting to be addressed from the rim. Others envisioned onion domes of Russian Orthodox churches, castle keeps, and turrets spiraling into the sky. Each hoodoo was a story in stone, a monument to time that invited us to dream.


We watched as shadows deepened and colors intensified—reds, creams, and oranges lit from within. Some gazed in silence. Others clicked photos. All of us, in our own way, were trying to preserve a moment too grand for memory alone.

Fri., May 23 Bryce Canyon National Park

A spectacular dawn awaited those who opted for an early morning walk along the rim. Sunrise at Bryce is not a repeat performance of sunset—it's its own light show entirely. First, the clouds in the east burned blood red in the rising sun. Then, as the sun cleared the horizon, the hoodoos seemed to glow from within, catching the low light in hues of golden rose. We walked in silence and then sat in shared stillness, listening to the hush that only such a place can hold.

In that silence, came song. A Canyon Wren's haunting, descending trill tumbled down the cliffs like water, while the whistled song of an Olive-sided Flycatcher rang out from the pines: "Quick! Three beers!" as the mnemonic goes. Violet-green Swallows chattered as they flew among the hoodoos. Few moments on the trip matched the peace and power of that morning light paired with the wild voices of canyon and sky.

After breakfast, we packed picnic lunches and set out for a full day of exploration across the park. Our first destination was Rainbow Point and Yovimpa Point, at the far southern end of Bryce Canyon National Park. From this high perch, the world seemed to unfurl beneath us. Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels darted near the overlook, and Uinta Chipmunks with rufous sides and strongly contrasting facial stripes popped in and out of sight as they scurried for cover—apt members of the family Sciuridae.

We hiked the Bristlecone Loop Trail, winding through wind-swept forests perched above 9,000 feet. The trees were astonishing—some of the Great Basin Bristlecone Pines here are over 1,600 years old, their trunks twisted and gnarled by centuries of cold and wind. Dead branches shone silver in the light, while living limbs still bore green needles—resilient witnesses to time's long passage.

Birding was rich and lively. Both Mountain and Western Bluebirds put on a show, giving us the chance to compare: Mountain Bluebirds are luminous sky-blue across the body, while Westerns wear a deeper blue with a rusty chest and flanks. Every tree seemed full of Yellow-rumped Warblers—flashing gold at every turn, in such numbers we lost count. We found Cassin's Finches feeding in the conifers, and were thrilled to spot a Red Crossbill, with its uniquely crossed mandibles perfectly evolved for prying seeds from tightly closed cones.

Out on the exposed point of the trail, a flash of wings sliced the sky—an accipiter, moving like a guided missile, too fast for a positive ID but unmistakable in shape, with a long tail banded in black and white and short rounded wings built for navigating forests. Then came a highlight for many: a flock of raucous Clark's Nutcrackers appeared, bold and handsome with gray bodies, black wings, and white tail flashes. They won't win any singing contests, but these intelligent birds are high-country specialists, deeply tied to the fate of Whitebark Pines. They cache thousands of seeds each year, some of which they retrieve, and many of which grow into the next generation of trees—a keystone bird for a fragile mountain ecosystem increasingly threatened by climate change.

After our picnic lunch, we began working our way back toward the lodge with a series of scenic and geological stops. At Natural Bridge—despite the misnomer, actually a natural arch—we explained how these features form not by river carving, but by frost wedging and erosional forces eating into the cliff face, eventually breaking through to create a window in stone.

The day's grand finale came at Bryce Point, one of the park's most dramatic overlooks. From there, the entire amphitheater spread out before us like a palace of flame. Hoodoos towered in clustered spires, glowing orange and gold as the sun angled westward. We lingered long, reluctant to leave the view, the light, and the profound sense of time exposed in stone.

Sat., May 24 Bryce Canyon National Park | Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument | Boulder | Torrey

We left Bryce Canyon a little reluctantly this morning—it's not easy to say goodbye to a place so sublime, where every sunrise and stone formation feels like a revelation. But the journey ahead promised wonders of its own.

Before officially departing the park, we made one last hopeful stop at the Utah Prairie Dog colonies to scan for Burrowing Owls. No owls this time, but the lively antics of the prairie dogs were enough to start our day with a smile. These charismatic mammals, once near extinction, are slowly recovering in pockets of protected habitat. We watched them chatter, chase, and posture atop their mounds—little sentinels of the sage.

Next, we hiked the short trail to Mossy Cave—a hidden gem tucked into the eastern edge of Bryce Canyon. Here, hoodoos flanked the path, offering a fresh perspective: instead of gazing down on these stone towers from the rim, we looked up at them from below. What made the site especially striking, though, was the presence of running water. What appears to be a natural stream is actually an 1890s irrigation ditch, hand-dug

by Mormon pioneers who diverted water from the East Fork of the Sevier River. The result is a rare desert–riparian interface, where red rock meets cool water and vibrant green life thrives in an unlikely oasis.

At the spring-fed grotto known as Mossy Cave, moisture seeps from the sandstone year-round. Moss carpets the overhang in luminous green, transforming bare stone into a soft and shaded refuge. We found excellent birds here—a Hermit Thrush emerged briefly from the shadows before vanishing into a thicket, and Wilson's Warblers flitted low through the leafy underbrush, their tiny black caps like neatly placed toupees. We also spotted bold yellow Evening Primrose blooms and the delicate, star-shaped blossoms of Solomon's Seal—plants that flourish where water softens the desert's edge.

Continuing east, we reached the town of Escalante in time for lunch at the beloved Escalante Outfitters. With its funky outdoor vibe and delicious sandwiches, pizzas, savory scones, and sweet desserts, it was the perfect midday stop. Books, maps, and gear inside gave the place a mountain-town feel, and a few folks picked up books and souvenirs—even a new backpack.

From Escalante, our route climbed into the heart of Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument, one of the most geologically significant—and visually spectacular—landscapes in the American Southwest. This vast region is named for the series of giant steps in the Earth's crust that descend from Bryce Canyon to the Grand Canyon, each "stair" representing a different layer of sedimentary rock and a different chapter of deep time.

As we drove the winding road toward Boulder, we passed through slickrock expanses sculpted by wind and water, crossed narrow ridgelines with dramatic drop-offs, and paused atop a high pass to marvel at the maze of canyons below. From this lofty perch, we looked out over terrain that once baffled early explorers—remote, rugged, and still largely wild.

A quick stop at a pond just below the summit brought another burst of birdlife: Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Ruddy Ducks with their powder-blue bills, a trip-first Ring-necked Duck, and a sharply dressed Olive-sided Flycatcher, perched upright with its distinctive dark vest—always looking ready for business.

Just outside of Boulder, we made a brief stop at a snag where Lewis's Woodpeckers have nested for decades. And we were in luck—they were there. These are not your average woodpeckers. With glossy green backs, pink bellies, and crimson faces, they look almost tropical. They fly like crows, sally out to catch insects like flycatchers, and shimmer like oversized hummingbirds in the sun. A life bird for many, and a crowd favorite.

We ascended again to the Homestead Overlook, where the landscape opened like a book of geologic time. A friendly motorcycle gang was already there, enjoying the view and swapping stories with us. Together we gazed out over the Waterpocket Fold, a 100-mile-long wrinkle in Earth's crust. This monocline is the backbone of Capitol Reef—a fold in ancient rock layers that exposes millions of years of history in one great sweep.

Descending toward the park, we passed through Quaking Aspen groves before entering forests of Ponderosa Pine. Late afternoon light gilded the cliffs and orchards as we arrived in Torrey, our base for the next two nights.

Dinner at a lively Mexican restaurant was a hit—chips with homemade guacamole and zesty salsa, enchiladas, tacos, and chimichangas made for a festive end to a travel-filled day. We wrapped up with our bird list and a preview of tomorrow's explorations in Capitol Reef, ready for another chapter in this unfolding canyon country story.

Sun., May 25 Torrey | Capitol Reef National Park

Our final full day together, and we made it count.

After picking up sandwiches in town for a picnic, we entered Capitol Reef National Park—one of Utah's lesser-known gems. Though it receives fewer visitors than Zion or Bryce, it's no less magnificent: a land of soaring cliffs and hidden canyons, verdant valleys and ribbons of riverside vegetation. The park's name reflects both its geology and the impressions of early explorers—"Capitol" for the white sandstone domes that resembled capitol buildings, and "Reef" for the formidable ridge that, like a marine reef, once posed a serious barrier to travel.

At the visitor center, several group members spotted Northern Flickers perched in the gnarled limbs of old cottonwoods. Say's Phoebes hovered hawk-like over the grass, scanning for prey—a behavior that sparked curiosity and conversation.

On foot we followed the Fremont River—a modest stream by most standards, but in the desert, even a trickle is lifeblood. Water attracts life, and the riparian habitat rewarded us with Bullock's Orioles glowing among the leaves like lanterns, White-crowned Sparrows foraging below, and a puzzling assortment of silent flycatchers. After close scrutiny and collective debate, we agreed on Ash-throated Flycatcher and Western Wood Pewee. A Yellow-breasted Chat sang invisibly from the thickets—teasing us with voice alone.

Then, a surprise: a Black Phoebe dipped into the stream, followed by an odd flapping shadow. Another phoebe? No—a bat, fluttering by in broad daylight, landing in a nearby cottonwood. A rare midday sighting that brought delighted gasps just as the sky began to darken.

Storms were forecast—but first: pies.

We made a beeline for the Gifford Homestead, a preserved pioneer farmhouse now famed for its handmade pies. The pie fillings—heirloom peaches, pears, apples, and cherries—come from trees planted by Mormon settlers in the 1880s, still bearing fruit. A taste of living history, served in flaky crust.

With pies secured and raingear ready, we continued upriver beneath darkening skies. More orioles flared against the gray. A frisky colt trotted through a nearby pasture, and vivid Woods' Roses bloomed along the path. I spotted a salmonfly—an aquatic insect newly emerged from the river and nearly as long as my finger. It flew toward me, was gently caught, admired, and released—free to mate or become a meal for a hungry bird. Thunder rumbled, vibrating through the soles of our boots. We made a quick retreat to the van and pressed deeper into the park.

The storm passed, all sound and no fury.

At Grand Wash, the geology took center stage. Towering sandstone walls closed in as we walked through the narrows, their layered stories whispering of ancient dunes, inland seas, and the restless shift of Earth's crust. The canyon felt like a cathedral carved by time.

Near the park entrance we found a peaceful cottonwood grove with picnic tables for lunch—and for pie. Among birders, there's a beloved tradition: you eat pie when you see a life bird, a custom started by birding legend Kenn Kaufman. On this tour, it was well earned, especially by our Aussie friends, for whom nearly every bird was a lifer. As we savored slices of peach, apple, and mixed berry, a female Lazuli Bunting flitted onto the flagstones near our tables, while more Say's Phoebes hovered nearby, scanning the grass for insects.

After lunch, we visited the Fremont petroglyphs—ancient figures, both human and animal, etched into the stone over a thousand years ago. While admiring the cliffs, we spotted White-throated Swifts slicing the sky and nesting in crevices high above. Then came another prize: a MacGillivray's Warbler, skulking low in the dense

brush. When it finally revealed its yellow body and gray head with broken eye arcs, a cheer went up. Bystanders turned, puzzled by our excitement—until they, too, caught the thrill of discovery.

Our final scenic stop was Goosenecks Overlook, where Sulphur Creek has carved tight, looping meanders—testament to the patient, persistent work of water through stone. The view stretched for miles: rock, sky, and silence. A fitting finale to our journey through deep geologic time and the avian wonders of this harsh and beautiful land.

Back in Torrey, we returned to the lodge to tally our final bird list—hearts full. DJ facilitated an appreciation circle, laying out an assortment of small trinkets on a table: stickers, patches, keychains. Each person chose one to give to another group member, offering words of appreciation in the process. One by one, we reflected on the moments, quirks, and qualities that made each person memorable. Laughter and gratitude flowed freely. It was a heartfelt and joyful way to end the tour, celebrating the bonds we'd built. This was one of the most cohesive, kind-spirited groups I'd ever traveled with—and DJ, without a doubt, one of the finest co-guides I've had the pleasure to work alongside.

That evening, we celebrated at Rim Rock Restaurant as sunset lit the cliffs in glowing reds. The house mole—a rich sauce made with over 50 ingredients—earned high praise, as did the grilled salmon. Dessert, warm mixed berries with vanilla ice cream, brought a sweet close to the day.

The next morning, we would part ways. But that night, we raised a glass to a journey filled with wings and stone, color and light, discovery and laughter—and the deep bond forged by sharing wild places.

Mon., May 26 Torrey | Departures from St. George

We rose before the sun. Janet and Dave were already at the vans—cheerful as ever, ready to roll with any change and adapt to any challenge, bringing warm humor and an easygoing spirit that never wavered. When the rest of the group gathered, we departed early for the long journey back to St. George. Though the tour was nearly over, the land had one final show to offer.

As we drove, the rising sun ignited the cliffs and buttes—red rock glowing, snow-capped mountains gleaming in the distance, and wide-open vistas rolling toward the horizon. Light shifted across the land like memory, revealing once more the majesty of canyon country.

We paused for breakfast at a roadside café near the boyhood home of Butch Cassidy, close to the rugged canyons where he and the Wild Bunch once hid out at Hole-in-the-Wall. A fitting stop in a landscape shaped by geology and layered with legend.

Our final birds of the trip appeared along the road: Black-billed Magpies flashing their bold black-and-white plumage, a Red-tailed Hawk rising slowly on morning thermals, and Common Ravens carving wide circles overhead, riding the same invisible currents that seemed to lift our spirits, too.

Watching them soar, we saw reflections of ourselves—carried not by feathers, but by the updraft of shared experience. Over the course of this journey, we had become something more than a group of travelers. We had become a community. Through days of wonder, laughter, wind, wildlife, and stone, we had woven a bond—built on early mornings and late sunsets, shared birding challenges and shared meals, scenic walks and spontaneous moments of awe.

And just as surely, we had formed a connection with the land itself. The sculpted hoodoos, ancient bristlecones, folded stone, and flowing rivers had opened their stories to us, and in turn, we had stepped into those stories. We became part of the landscape's long arc—not merely as visitors passing through, but as observers briefly rooted in time.

There was belonging—in each other, and in this place. In the silence between birdsong. In the recognition of deep time held in the bones of the Earth. In the shared gasp at a soaring condor, the reverent hush at sunrise, the glint of bluebird feathers in canyon light.

By midday, we rolled into St. George and went our separate ways—grateful, a little road-worn, and full of the kind of memory that doesn't fade. Though we returned home in different directions, something of us remains on those trails and ridgelines, stitched into the rock, carried on the wind.

We had seen the land, and for a moment, we belonged to it—and to the birds that rise above the red rock, circling the vast sky.

Photos: Group (Stephen Grace - SG), Grand Canyon North Rim (SG), Ruddy Duck (SG), Prickly Pear (SG), Western Tangaer (Bill Monk - BM), Zion (Arlene Monk - AM), Zion National Park (SG), American Dipper (SG), Colorado River at Navajo Bridge (SG), Californian Condor (Michael Boss - MB), Stunning views (Chris Jamieson - CJ), Yellow-rumped Warbler (BM), Jackson Flat Resevoir (AM), Eared Grebe (SG), Yellow-headed Blackbird (SG), Bryce Canyon National Park (SG), Bill and Arlene (SG), Clark's

Nutcracker (SG), Bryce Canyon National Park (SG), Bullock's Oriole (SG), Capitol Reef National Park (SG), Fremont petroglyphs (MB), Group (MB), Petroglyph area (DJ), Sunset at Capitol Reef (AM)