Yellowstone in the Fall | Sept. 27-Oct. 3, 2025
Trip Report | by Kip Miller

Guided by Hugh Simmons and Kip Miller

Our group included Robert, Marina, Laura, Steve, Mitch, Deanna and Susan Jo.

Saturday, September 27 – The Adventure Begins: Bozeman to Island Park

Everyone arrived on schedule the previous day, so we linked up in early afternoon and started the scenic drive south from Bozeman to our riverside lodge in Island Park, Idaho. Along the way we kicked off our mammal list with sightings of Muskrat, Mule Deer and Pronghorn and started our bird list with widespread species such as Common Raven and Black-billed Magpie. After getting settled in our rooms at the comfortable Angler's Lodge, we met for a short bird walk near the lodge, where the undisputed highlight was a Wilson's Snipe that provided close

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views in a roadside stream. Later, we concluded our relaxed first afternoon with drinks, introductions and dinner together in the lodge restaurant.

Sunday, September 28 – Henrys Lake | Earthquake Lake

We began our first full day with a few hours of easy birding at Henrys Lake State Park, where the marina provided excellent vantage points of the lake's southeastern corner. Waterbirds we found here included Trumpeter Swan, Barrow's Goldeneye, Common Merganser, Eared Grebe and Common Loon. In a wetland bordering the lake we found Green-winged Teal, a few more Wilson's Snipe, Red-winged Blackbird and Song Sparrow, while a walk through the campground yielded Black-capped Chickadee, Mountain Bluebird and White-crowned Sparrow – a good start to our day! Next, we traveled to Henrys Lake's north side, where a small parking area provided another vantage point of the lake. Many waterbirds could be seen, but what really got the group's attention was a young bull Moose that wandered out into the shallow water of the lake and remained conspicuously present (often in the same binocular field with a couple of Trumpeter Swans) for most of our time here.

From here, we continued north a few miles and slipped back across the border into Montana for a visit to Earthquake Lake – a lake that was formed in 1959 when a strong earthquake caused a massive landslide that blocked the flow of the Madison River. We enjoyed our lunch on the patio of the Earthquake Lake Visitor Center, where interpretive signage told the story of the lake's formation and we could see both the lake and the extensive landslide that created it. For the remainder of the afternoon, we slowly worked our way back to Island Park, first stopping in a wooded area along the Madison River where we found Mountain Chickadees and Clark's Nutcrackers and later at locations on Henrys Lake's west and south sides, where we enjoyed fall colors, a herd of resting Pronghorn and a variety of birds including California Gull, Western Grebe and Northern Harrier.

Monday, September 29 – Island Park Reservoir Dam | Yellowstone National Park

Today we started with an optional dawn outing to the nearby Island Park Reservoir Dam. Scanning the reservoir from a couple of vantage points in the early morning light was productive for multiple Western Grebes, Common Loons, Great Blue Herons and Bald Eagles. We also found a nice mixed group of woodland birds along the forest edge, including Mountain Chickadee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Dark-eyed "Pink-sided" Junco and Yellow-rumped Warbler.

After a late breakfast back at the lodge, we packed the vehicles and eagerly set out for our first visit to Yellowstone National Park. We entered from the entrance station just outside of the town of West Yellowstone and enjoyed the scenic drive along the Madison River, before taking the park's Grand Loop Road north to the Norris Geyser Basin. Here we spent the next couple of hours slowly exploring trails that provided views of many of Yellowstone's famed hot springs, geysers and active steam vents. After this impressive and "other worldly" experience, we took a break for a picnic lunch and then backtracked towards the park entrance, but with a detour to enjoy views of the Firehole Falls on the Firehole River. From here, we continued back towards West Yellowstone with a couple of strategic stops along the Madison River that provided our first views of Elk on the tour, including one young bull crossing the river.

Tuesday, September 30 – Yellowstone National Park

We drove back into the park this morning in a light rain, but fortunately it soon let up and was not an issue for the remainder of the day. Our first stop was along the Grand Loop Road when we encountered several American Bison fairly close (but not *too* close) to the road. While watching the bison and enjoying the views of the meadow with an active thermal basin in the background, Hugh noticed a few Sandhill Cranes feeding in the distance – so a great start to the day on all accounts. Our next stop was at Artist's Point, where we enjoyed the scenic views of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River. Continuing south along the Grand Loop, we entered the expansive Hayden Valley with high hopes of locating interesting wildlife and we were not disappointed, as we located two Grizzly Bears in the distance at our first stop! With the spotting scopes we were able to watch the bears for quite a while as they slowly worked their way up a distant ridge, while a much closer Northern Harrier kept us entertained as it hunted back and forth in front of us. Continuing on through the Hayden Valley, we noted other mammals such as Elk and American Bison and birds such as Trumpeter Swan and Bald Eagle. We then concluded the morning along the Yellowstone River at LeHardy Rapids, where an American Dipper provided exceptionally close views – a crowd-pleasing moment for sure!

Continuing around the Grand Loop Road, we began the afternoon in the park's Upper Geyser Basin where we witnessed the famed Old Faithful Geyser erupt (right on time of course!). We then had our lunches on one of the upper decks of the historic Old Faithful Inn, followed by walk around the Upper Geyser Trail that provided views of multiple other geysers and hot springs. Later, we wrapped up our full day in Yellowstone with a visit to the

Midway Geyser Basin, home to the large and colorful Grand Prismatic Hot Spring. Some in the group opted to enjoy the hot spring up-close from the lower boardwalk trail, while others walked a trail to the Grand Prismatic Spring Overlook. Those who walked to the upper overlook enjoyed an additional bonus, when a young male Grizzly was encountered as it fed near the trail and even provided some comic relief when it stood and scratched its back on a utility pole. (Many other hikers were also present and we maintained a safe distance as we enjoyed this unexpected experience.) We then regrouped and made the drive back to our hotel in West Yellowstone together, concluding a day in Yellowstone that exceeded all of our expectations!

Wednesday, October 1 – Yellowstone & Grand Teton National Parks

For our final morning in Yellowstone, we visited two more thermal basins, the Lower Geyser Basin, where we viewed more geysers, hot springs and our first boiling mudpot – and the West Thumb Geyser Basin, where we enjoyed a walk viewing thermal features with Yellowstone Lake in the background. From here we continued on to the nearby Grand Teton National Park, with a stop for views of American Pikas (surely one the cutest mammals there is!) in a talus slope adjacent to the highway.

Our first stop in Grand Teton was at the Jackson Lake Lodge, where we enjoyed lunch with a spectacular view of the Teton Range. After lunch we made a stop at Oxbow Bend on the Snake River, which provided fantastic fall colors and mountain views. We then started working our way south to Jackson, our home for the next two nights. On the way we opted to take the Moose-Wilson Road, which turned out to be a great idea, as we were able to view a lounging bull Moose near the road. Once in Jackson, we made a final stop for the day at an observation deck on Flat Creek that provided views of a hunting Northern Harrier and a variety of waterfowl species, including a pair of Trumpeter Swans with three cygnets.

Thursday, October 2 – Grand Teton National Park

Our plan for the morning was to make an early return to the Moose-Wison Road in hopes of finding Black Bear or other wildlife species. On our way we found a herd of Elk in a field adjacent to the road and stopped to view them. Watching the bull bugling and keeping tabs on his harem in the early morning mist with fall colors in the background was a memorable moment of the tour for all and a more than worthy delay. Eventually, we continued on as planned and found the fall colors in the forest along the Moose-Wilson Road to be spectacular in the early morning light – and as a bonus, we did find a Black Bear! After this great start to the day, we made a stop at a highway turnout to enjoy the view of the Tetons in morning light and then did some exploring along an access road to the Snake River, where the highlight was a well-seen Ruffed Grouse perched on a log next to the road. We then returned to Oxbow Bend for another view of the mountains in morning light and enjoyed watching a group

of three River Otters in the river. After this, we wrapped up our eventful morning with a drive to the top of Signal Mountain (where we found another roadside Ruffed Grouse) and then a stop to enjoy the reflection of the mountains on Jackson Lake.

Following another lunch with a view – this time in the Signal Mountain Lodge – we wrapped up the birding on the tour with a walk below the Jackson Lake dam, where the fall colors of the Narrowleaf Cottonwoods were spectacular and we found a few more River Otters and Common Mergansers. We then made our way back to Jackson, where some enjoyed a visit to the National Museum of Wildlife Art and others used the time to rest or pack for the trip home.

Later we met for a final checklist session, followed by dinner at an excellent local restaurant. During this final time together, all were in agreement that in addition to the birds and mammals we enjoyed, the group camaraderie and combination of Yellowstone's thermal features, Grand Teton's rugged mountain views and fall colors throughout the tour created a truly wonderful and memorable tour experience. Thanks again to all for joining us!
- Kip Miller

Photos: Group (Hugh Simmons – HS), American Dipper (HS), Group at Henry's Lake (HS), Scenic (Marina Kennedy), Trumpeter Swan (HS), Norris Geyser Basin (HS), Mountain Bluebird (HS), Old Faithful (HS), Least Chipmunk (HS), Grand Prismatic (Kip Miller – KM), Tetons (HS), Mule Deer (HS), Tetons & Jackson Lake (Deanna Smart)