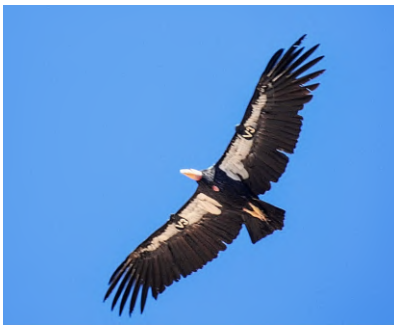
Birding Canyon Country | Sept. 16 – 24, 2025
Trip Report | by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders Stephen Grace and Barb Jording with Louise, Jon, Richard, John and Joan



Tues., Sept. 16 St. George | Grafton Ghost Town | Zion National Park

Our first morning together began with bonus birding at the Tonaquint Nature Center in St. George, a biogeographic crossroads where three great North American regions meet: the Mojave Desert, the Great Basin, and the Colorado Plateau. This desert-edge oasis offered us a fleeting chance at species we would not encounter again once we climbed onto the Colorado Plateau.

Naturalist Journeys, LLC PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632 PH: 866.900.1146
naturalistjourneys.com | travel@naturalistjourneys.com

The first light touched a pond at the center of the preserve. Water mirrored the sky as a Green Heron stood statue-still at the edge, bill honed to a spear, its feathers etched by the morning light as it waited for the strike. A Black Phoebe added motion and sound, sallying from shoreline perches to pick insects off the skin of the water, its sharp calls stitching the quiet.

In the surrounding mesquite and willow, we began to pick out desert-edge regulars. An Anna's Hummingbird landed on a low branch—once mostly coastal California, now pressing north and inland with help from gardens, feeders, and milder winters. Nearby, Abert's Towhees moved confidently in the open—heavy-bodied members of the sparrow family, plain brown with a dusky face mask and warm rufous under the tail. Their feeding came with the familiar scratch-step rhythm, a quick two-beat shuffle in the dirt. I demonstrated the move, and soon the group was laughing as we adopted it as our dance for the trip.

Then came a Verdin, one of the desert's smallest and toughest songbirds, its bright yellow face flashing from the scrub. Elsewhere in the thicket we noticed a twiggy ball of sticks—a Verdin nest. We talked about how this species survives extremes by building multiple nests, including roosts for scorching days and cold desert nights, shelters as essential as their breeding homes.

From there the day widened. Lunch at Cliffside Restaurant perched us high above town, with sweeping views across the red-rock basin. Over a good meal we reflected on the history of St. George—nicknamed "Utah's Dixie" for the cotton-growing experiments of early Mormon settlers. Once a remote agricultural outpost, the city has grown into a bustling desert metropolis at the edge of the Colorado Plateau. From that vantage we could trace the pathway our journey would take, upward into stone and sky.

The afternoon brought us to Grafton Ghost Town, a green bend on the Virgin River where Mormon settlers once dug irrigation ditches and planted orchards. Floods and hardship eventually drove them away, but several cabins and a small church still stand, weathered yet sturdy. The place has long felt cinematic, and Hollywood seized on that quality—scenes from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* were filmed here. Paul Newman's character famously rode a bicycle down these very lanes with Katharine Ross on the handlebars, Robert Redford watching from the wings. By coincidence, Redford passed away the day we visited, adding a poignant undertone to our walk through the quiet streets.

Birds lent color to the silence: Western Bluebirds, bright as scraps of sky, flickered among the orchards. Western Wood-Pewees worked the fence lines, hunting insects in the shade. A female Summer Tanager, yellow and heavy-billed, flashed briefly among the cottonwoods.

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By late afternoon we arrived at Zion National Park. Staying inside the park gave us the rare privilege of driving deep into the canyon. Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays showed themselves at the entrance gate, as if ushering us in. Then came the reveal: Navajo Sandstone rising sheer in red and cream, cliffs glowing in the afternoon light. Mule deer grazed the lodge lawns, Wild Turkeys drifted across the shadows, and as the sun dropped the walls themselves seemed to hold the day's last light. Dinner in the historic lodge capped the day—chicken, trout and salads savored with a sense of arrival.

And around the table, our fellow travelers added their own stories to the journey. Jon and Louise, joined by their friend Richard, were marking a half-century of friendship by setting out on this adventure together.

Accomplished scientists—physical chemists and crystallographers—they brought not just sharp minds but wide curiosity, eager to puzzle out the patterns of the natural world. John and Joan, both from Alabama, carried a different kind of wisdom: he a semi-retired physician, she an artist, both passionate nature enthusiasts deeply committed to animal welfare and peaceful human relations.

This was also the first Naturalist Journeys tour that Barb guided after joining the company as a participant on earlier trips. She fell in love with guiding and was clearly having the time of her life sharing discoveries. As for me, though I'd led this itinerary twice before, the day felt just as exhilarating—each journey becomes new when it's seen through different eyes and shaped by the stories people carry.

Wed., Sept. 17 Zion National Park

We began early to beat the heat and to catch the morning light show on the cliffs. A shuttle ride to Big Bend gave us the overlook nearly to ourselves. We watched as the towering walls of Navajo Sandstone lit up in stages—an unfolding sequence of golds and reds. Cameras clicked, lenses turned upward toward soaring rock, but our eyes searched for something living: California Condors. These immense, endangered birds—reintroduced at Vermilion Cliffs in northern Arizona and now regular over Zion, where they've even nested—are a prize for any birder here. We scanned the rims, hearts quickening with each passing shadow of a raven or vulture. None proved to be a condor. The absence only deepened the anticipation. The quest would continue. Even without condors, the canyon brimmed with life. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers stitched the air with quick flicks, while flocks of Bushtits ricocheted through the brush—so bouncy they seemed caffeinated. A Northern Flicker gave its sharp call, and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays bounded across the scene, noisy and bold. The canyon felt alive, hinting that the day still had secrets to reveal.

Next we visited Weeping Rock, climbing the short trail to one of Zion's famed hanging gardens. Here, water seeps through porous Navajo Sandstone until it meets a tighter layer, then spills from the alcove in a dripping

curtain that feeds mats of maidenhair fern and other plants that thrive in cool, shaded seeps. A Bewick's Wren sang in the thickets. Above us, Turkey Vultures and Common Ravens soared. One raven perched close, its black showing oil-slick sheens in the sunlight; when it called, its throat hackles flared into a shaggy beard—a look no crow wears. As we made our way back, the notes of a Plumbeous Vireo led us to a cottonwood, where we spotted the bird.

After lunch and a rest at the lodge, we set out for the Riverside Walk, where the Virgin River narrows into a shady corridor. I'd scouted a different stretch earlier, guided by a tip from a restaurant employee who's an avid birder, but the spot he suggested was too difficult for the group—the footing too precarious. The dipper there would have to wait.

The search wasn't over. Off the Riverside Walk, on a quiet side path away from the crowds yet safe for us all, the river gave up its secret. There, as if conjured, stood an American Dipper. Alone and undisturbed, we had the bird and the river to ourselves. It bobbed ceaselessly, flashed its white eyelids, and let its song carry over the water's roar. We watched it dive, swim, and reemerge onto wet stones, droplets flying as it shook itself dry—a moment of wildness distilled, just for us.

As if to add an encore, Canyon Wrens revealed themselves along the river's edge—silent today but in plain sight, their bold patterns and white throats usually betrayed only by that haunting, spiraling song. More dippers worked the current as we walked upstream. A Western Tanager dropped onto a branch in front of us and lingered—a southbound migrant pausing before continuing on its journey. In a quiet pool beside the trail, an Arizona Sister butterfly lay motionless, a small wreck of color; I lifted it gently and it shivered—alive after all, one wing neatly notched, likely by a bird beak. We set it on a sun-warmed rock and wished it well. In hanging gardens along the shaded banks, wildflowers still bloomed: golden columbine with its long-spurred yellow flowers, Davidson's penstemon, and scarlet monkeyflower. Most special of all was endemic Zion lobelia, a brilliant red flower found only here in the canyon bottoms, its blooms blazing to draw in hummingbirds.

By the time we returned to the lodge, the canyon walls were glowing once more with evening light. Another fine meal in the lodge dining room capped the day as conversation turned again to the condor. We had yet to see it, but the quest was not over. We would have another chance later in the tour.

Thur., Sept. 18 Zion National Park | Kanab |Jackson Flat Reservoir | Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park

We checked out of the lodge but continued exploring Zion, climbing from canyon floor to plateau via the east entrance road. The switchbacks rose sharply, each bend revealing a broader sweep of stone. We admired the

scenery and the geology, paused to watch a flock of Bushtits busily moving through roadside brush, and then passed through the historic Carmel Tunnel, a Depression-era engineering marvel carved through solid Navajo Sandstone. At Checkerboard Mesa we studied the crosshatched weathering patterns, watched chipmunks at close range, and marveled at a Red-tailed Hawk kiting in the sky.

Lunch in Kanab was at Wild Thyme Café, a local favorite. We enjoyed homemade guacamole and "Taco Thursday" specials, while outside the window Lesser Goldfinches fed among blooming sunflowers, a cheerful backdrop to our meal.

In the afternoon we birded Jackson Flat Reservoir. The water held elegant Western Grebes—long, swanlike necks and graceful dives. Among the near-uncountable American Coots we picked out Pied-billed Grebes, Mallards, and Ruddy Ducks, and through the scopes puzzled over American Wigeons in eclipse plumage. White-faced Ibises worked the shallows, unmistakable with their long, gently downcurved bills; in shadow they were only silhouettes, but when they stepped into the sun their wings flashed bottle-green and wine-purple iridescence. Along the shore a Spotted Sandpiper teetered, and Say's Phoebes and Vermilion Flycatchers chased insects from low perches. Then Barb called out something remarkable on a distant shore: far across the water, a Greater Roadrunner darted into view. Unexpected in this setting, it electrified the group—one of those sightings that lifts spirits and leaves everyone a little giddy.

That evening we checked in at the Best Friends Roadhouse, a lodging linked to the nearby Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, one of the largest no-kill rescue centers in the world. The connection to animal welfare felt especially fitting for our group—and for John and Joan in particular, given their deep commitment to treating all living creatures humanely. Dinner was at Peekaboo Canyon Wood Fired Kitchen, also tied to Best Friends, where we shared wood-fired pies—pear and gorgonzola, wild mushroom, and vegan—alongside excellent salads, baked eggplant, and paninis.

As dusk fell, we drove to the Coral Pink Sand Dunes, a wind-sculpted desert sea where grains of Navajo Sandstone drift and reshape the landscape with every gust. Clouds muted the sunset, but for a few minutes the western horizon flared like fire, fading to coals as darkness came. On the drive back, Common Nighthawks swept across the road and even perched briefly on the pavement, their angular wings catching our headlights.

The day had begun with sunrise ablaze above Zion's cliffs and ended with fiery afterglow at the dunes—a fitting symmetry, a passage from stone walls to open sky.




Fri., Sept. 19 Kanab | Vermilion Cliffs | Navajo Bridge | Upper Antelope Canyon | Horseshoe Bend

We set out early for a full day in northern Arizona along the Colorado River. A tragic wildfire had closed the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, so we ascended the Kaibab Plateau in search of other adventures. At LeFevre Overlook we looked north across the Grand Staircase, the sequence of "colored cliffs" that geologist Clarence Dutton described in the 1870s and published in the early 1880s. Closest rose the Vermilion Cliffs, carved mainly from the Moenave and Kayenta formations, with softer, slope-forming Triassic Chinle beds beneath (and, farther south in the staircase, the Moenkopi—known as the Chocolate Cliffs). Beyond them stood the White Cliffs of Zion, made of Navajo Sandstone—the rock we had explored days earlier inside the canyon. Higher still lifted the Cretaceous Gray Cliffs, and crowning the sequence were the Pink Cliffs of the Eocene Claron Formation at Bryce, where we were headed the next day. To the south, the Grand Canyon bites into the southern edge of the Kaibab Plateau—the low step in this grand set of stairs. Seeing so much of the stack at once felt like reading the region's history with its pages laid open—and Dutton's framework still holds up, the same-colored steps modern geologists use to make sense of this country.

We were looking at more than cliffs—we were reading chapters from vanished worlds. The Moenave records slow, shifting rivers and lakes at the dawn of the Jurassic; the Kayenta carries the story into broad, braided rivers. On some bedding planes, three-toed footprints stride across the ancient mud—dinosaurs passing along sandbars and shorelines. Beneath them, the Chinle's purples and reds preserve big Triassic rivers, floodplains, and buried forests. It is the deep past, but not a dead one: those three-toed trackmakers belonged to the theropod line, the lineage that would, over tens of millions of years, give rise to modern birds. Hollow bones, wishbones, feathers—traits that evolved within theropods—are the bridge from fossils beneath our feet to the living creatures we were seeking. In that sense, the day's quests for Pinyon Jays and a California Condor were not separate from the rocks: the birds we sought were the next chapter.

The birding carried its own layers of suspense. Flocks of Bushtits flitted through junipers while sparrows tested our identification skills—plain-faced Brewer's and Vesper with white outer tail feathers flickering over the grass. A Hairy Woodpecker called from a fire-scarred snag, having pecked the char away to reveal wood as white as bone. An American Kestrel streaked past. Then another, and another—three in all, a family group. Our hopes lifted. Perhaps the next flash of wings would be the uniform slate-blue Pinyon Jay we were after. A promising bird appeared and we gave chase—only to find another Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay. Close, but not yet. The quest continued.

From there we wandered the ponderosa forests around Jacob Lake, the trunks fragrant with vanilla and butterscotch in the sun. Pygmy Nuthatches, Mountain Chickadees, Cassin's Finches, Western Tanagers, and hummingbirds animated the canopy, stitching the morning with movement and color. A Rufous Hummingbird lingered late, tanking up on nectar for the push south.

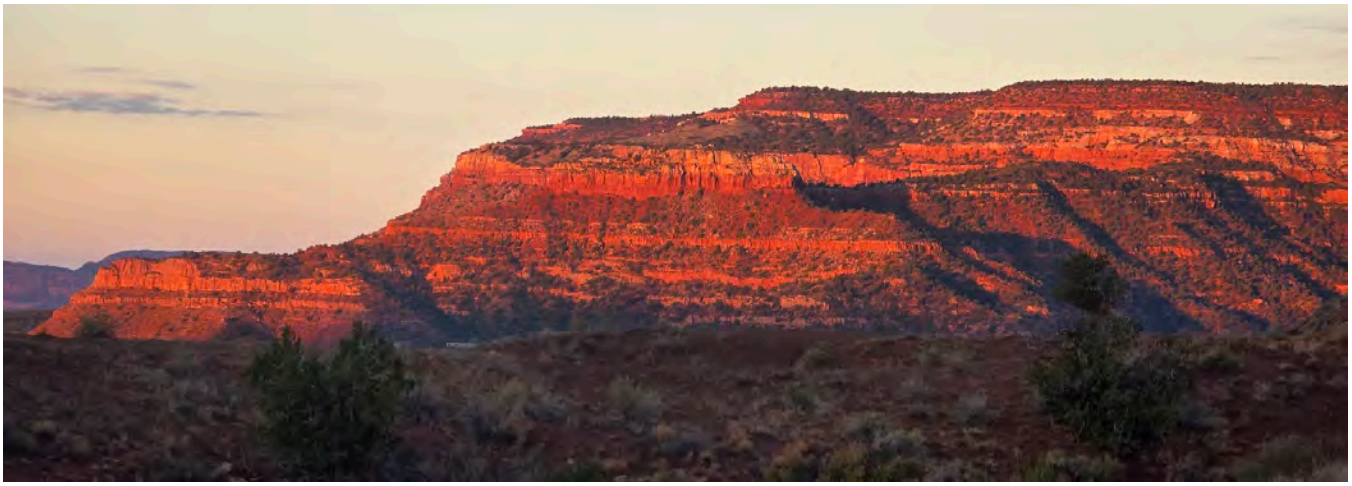
At last, along a dramatic stretch of road that wound through Kaibab Limestone with distant views of the Vermilion Cliffs, we found them: a flock of Pinyon Jays coursing together across the pinyon–juniper, their field marks unmistakable. Even at a glance they read differently from Woodhouse's—uniform blue rather than two-toned; stockier, barrel-chested bodies; short tails; and longer, dagger-like bills. The tight flocking sealed it—classic Pinyon Jay behavior. We savored the moment.

We descended toward the desert and stopped at Navajo Bridge, which spans Marble Canyon nearly 500 feet above the Colorado River—a key site in California Condor recovery. Heat shimmered off the stone. At first the sky stayed empty. Ravens traced lazy arcs, vultures drifted high, and the air above the canyon seemed to hold its breath. We talked about the condor's brush with extinction—by 1982 only 22 remained in the wild, and by 1987 the entire world population of 27 birds was in captivity. Careful breeding and reintroductions followed, including releases at Vermilion Cliffs beginning in 1996; from there the Arizona–Utah flock spread across this country of stone. Now Navajo Bridge is a prime place to watch an ancient bird ride the wind—but no condors yet.

Leaning on the railing, Richard spoke softly of his dear wife, recently lost, who had planned to travel here with him. The group fell quiet. We waited. Would the condor come, or would this be one of those days when the bird never appears and a man stands on a bridge with only his memories for company?

Minutes stretched. Suddenly a dark shape appeared from the distance, growing as it approached. Broad wings outstretched, primaries splayed like fingers—the unmistakable form of a condor. It swept past almost at eye level, circled, and held in the wind. In the recovery program, each bird also has a studbook number—an official record that tracks hatch date, ancestry, and releases—so V3 is known on paper as studbook 883. He hatched May 10, 2017 at the Oregon Zoo; was released in 2018 into the Arizona–Utah flock; was eight years and four months old on the day we saw him; and has known parents and fourteen siblings. But in that moment he was simply a vast living presence.

We watched in silence as he wheeled above us, and Richard's face lifted; for a heartbeat it seemed his grief lifted, too, carried on those wings. Exhilarated, our group celebrated with a picnic lunch.



The day was not done. With a Navajo guide in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, we rattled along a sandy track into Upper Antelope Canyon, which lies within the Navajo Nation and is visited only on guided tours. The Navajo call themselves Diné—"the people"—and our guide wove geology with culture as we walked; flash floods have carved the Navajo Sandstone here into flowing curves. The walls glowed orange and rose in the filtered light. Then the weather turned—rain began, thunder rumbled, and sudden waterfalls sheeted down the slot. We hurried out, drenched and laughing, mud-splattered and exhilarated. Louise was grinning like a child, giddy with excitement. She admitted she'd worried she'd lost her sense of adventure and the thrill of wild places; in that rush of water and light, she found it again.

Still grinning, we pressed on to Horseshoe Bend, where the Colorado rounds a giant incised meander—a curve the river learned on a flat plain long ago, then carved straight down as the plateau rose, turning a gentle wiggle into a sheer horseshoe of Navajo Sandstone. From there we crossed Glen Canyon Dam and looked out over Lake Powell, talking about the reservoir's contested legacy—beauty and access on one hand, drowned canyons, sediment, and evaporation on the other. Then we turned back toward Kanab. The sky offered a final act: lightning on the horizon, a rainbow arcing over the desert, and a sunset glowing like embers—closing a day that carried us from rock record to living wings, from quests fulfilled to wonders unexpected.

Sat., Sept. 20 Kanab | Best Friends Animal Sanctuary | Bryce Canyon National Park

After breakfast at the Best Friends Roadhouse—fresh zucchini and banana bread, muffins, oats, fruit, and excellent espresso and coffee—we explored the Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. Our group split among tours: a grand property loop with time to pet pot-bellied pigs and cuddle cats, a goat walk, or a hike into red rock country. At the visitor center feeders, Black-chinned and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds zipped past like green sparks and perched on feeders for close inspection. Out on the trail we spotted American Kestrel, Northern Flicker, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Violet-green Swallows—and even found a slot canyon in the making, a geology lesson unfolding as rain and runoff carved a seam in the sandstone. The swallows were a highlight: iridescent green backs flashing into violet rumps, white faces that seemed to glow, and those distinctive white patches on the sides of the rump—little "saddlebags" you can see when they bank overhead. They stitched the air with easy, buoyant arcs, as elegant as their name.

John and Joan chose the goat walk. Inspired by the sanctuary's work and the animals they'd just met, they decided to become members in support of its animal-welfare mission.

We caravanned to the sanctuary's vegan buffet for lunch—jaw-dropping views included—and on the way spotted a Gambel's Quail sentinel posted on a fence. We pulled over and watched the rest of the covey down low in the grass. In quail families, one bird climbs to a perch to stand guard, trading off with others; sharp calls buy the foragers a few extra seconds to dash for cover.

After lunch we turned the van toward Bryce, following the modest Virgin River—a small thread with a giant résumé—on its way from headwaters to the canyons it has carved. At Red Canyon we stepped into warm air scented with ponderosa and sage and took our first close look at hoodoos of the Claron Formation. These spires rise from ancient lake beds laid down in the Eocene, about 50 to 40 million years ago, when quiet waters pooled across this plateau. Eocene means "dawn of the recent," and it truly was a dawn for mammals: early bats taking to the night, whales beginning their return to the sea, and primates branching out—one small twig on that tree leading, much later, to us.

Iron and other minerals painted the Claron layers pink and orange; long after the lakes vanished, uplift raised the land, and freeze–thaw cycles pried the rock apart, while summer monsoons swept loosened pieces away. That slow work carves hoodoos—slender towers often topped by a tougher "hat" of caprock that shields the softer pillar below. And while geologists trace the word here to a Southern Paiute term for something uncanny, you can see why English speakers heard "hoodoo" and thought "voodoo": the hat-wearing towers look bewitched, some desert sorcery wrought by geology's slow magic.

At a prairie dog town we watched Utah Prairie Dogs pop up and down like pistons. This smallest and rarest of North America's five prairie dog species lives only in Utah. As with the quail, sentinels posted up atop mounds and gave alarms; here the chatter carries fine-grained information—research shows prairie dogs can encode details about predators and urgency, essentially talking about us while we stand there watching them. Their colonies aerate soil, feed predators, and create burrowing space for other species; that makes them a keystone in the grassland web. Least and Uinta chipmunks shared the colony edges: the Least—small and slim, often dashing with tail held straight up; the Uinta—larger, richer brown, and more likely to carry the tail level as it runs. Mule deer lounged in the shade, unbothered by our quiet presence.

After checking in at Bryce Canyon Lodge we gathered for our daily species list and dinner—salmon, pork chops, vegan bowls, and beef and black bean burgers—then walked out to watch the amphitheater ignite at sunset. In Bryce, the amphitheater is a vast bowl carved by headward erosion along the rim of the Paunsaugunt Plateau. No single river cuts the main stage here; thousands of gullies, freeze–thaw cycles, and summer storms nibble backward into the plateau, revealing ranks of hoodoos like an audience of stone. Clouds from an earlier storm blazed orange and rose as the light dropped, and the day closed in a hush of color.

Sun., Sept. 21 Bryce Canyon National Park

We started before dawn, walking from the lodge beneath a black, star-pinned dome. Bryce is famous for its night skies; with so little light pollution, the constellations crowd in. Orion climbed, Taurus close by, the Pleiades a cold sprinkle, Andromeda faint but there—and in the east, the planet Venus burned bright. We kept silence, letting our walk be a moving meditation along the rim toward Sunrise Point. On benches above the amphitheater we settled in as a thin orange stripe lit the western horizon and the stars dimmed one by one, all but Venus. Clark's Nutcrackers ghosted past in the half-light, and a raven coasted so near we could hear the beat of its wings—like tearing silk. Then the hoodoos began to glow in stages until the whole bowl brightened. Glorious.

After breakfast we drove deep into the park, climbing through forests of pine and fir until the altimeter crept past 9,000 feet. Quaking Aspen along the road were torching—gold, copper, and faint flashes of red. At Rainbow Point we stepped into cool, thin air and then hiked the Bristlecone Loop, botany turning into a roll call: Manzanita on the slopes; White Fir and Subalpine Fir tucked into cooler pockets; Douglas-fir in the draws; Ponderosa Pine with thick, fire-resistant bark, orange plates warm to the touch. Along the harsher, wind-scoured edges we found Limber Pine—the rim specialist whose name comes from its pliant, "limber" branches that can flex in strong wind and heavy snow, bending rather than breaking. The true highlight was the Great Basin Bristlecone Pines—silver survivors, many centuries old—twisted by wind and time, living tissue hugging narrow strips of bark while dead wood weathered to driftwood gray. The trail rode an exposed vantage on the rim, and the views seemed to run both directions in time, out across the Grand Staircase and back through the ages that shaped it.

We kept an eye on the sky for a Golden Eagle and didn't find one—then a Peregrine Falcon flashed past in a full stoop, wings tucked, gone almost before we could breathe. Later, from our high vantage on the rim, we looked down on an American Kestrel darting ahead. New birds for our list included Red-breasted Nuthatch, Lazuli Bunting, and a Brown Creeper—tiny and bark-colored—spiraling up a trunk in quick hops before dropping to the base of the next tree to begin again.

We picnicked near a viewpoint where a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel paid a short visit, its russet mantle bright around the shoulders and neck.

On the way back we stopped at Natural Bridge. Despite the name, it isn't a true bridge made by flowing water, but an arch: frost, rain, and gravity have carved a window through a fin of Claron rock. A bridge is a river's


handiwork; an arch is the weather's slow labor. This one frames a spill of green trees far below, as if someone set a forest in a picture frame.

Later in the afternoon we returned to the lodge for free time. Some napped; not Richard and John. The two set off along the amphitheater rim and, with an easy, steady pace, wandered farther than we had gone together at dawn. Their energy and curiosity after more than eight decades were inspiring—an example for all of us who hope to keep exploring the outdoors as long as we can. John, whose sharp mind is matched by playful wit, waved off our concern: "Don't worry about us old guys getting into trouble." They hike together each week at home, and it showed.

As evening drew in, we regrouped for an early dinner and drove to Bryce Point for sunset. Everyone said it was their favorite vantage yet. The show was 360 degrees: the amphitheater glowing from within, distant mesas catching fire, even the clouds above us lit up. For a few surreal minutes we were inside the color—transported like a condor taking flight—until the glow drained out of the clouds and the rocks rose firm beneath our feet.

Mon., Sept. 22 Bryce Canyon National Park | Escalante Petrified Forest State Park | Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument | Boulder Mountain | Torrey

We packed up and left Bryce Canyon Lodge, but we weren't finished with Bryce. We drove out of the park and then hiked back in at the Mossy Cave Trail, where the path threads through red fins, allowing us to look up at hoodoos instead of down on them—a fresh perspective everyone loved. The sound and smell of water felt luxurious in the desert.

In the 1890s, Mormon settlers dug the Tropic Ditch to divert part of the East Fork of the Sevier River to farms; that water still runs here, spilling into a small waterfall. We ducked into the cool of Mossy Cave itself—more grotto than cave—where constant seep keeps the damp walls plush with moss. Birds were sparse, but a Spotted Towhee scratched in the leaf litter outside the cave, Steller's Jays flashed blue in the pines, and ravens crossed against the blue sky and red rock, their voices rolling and echoing off the canyon walls.

Onward to Escalante Petrified Forest State Park, where wood has turned to stone. Long ago, fallen logs were buried in sediment; silica-rich groundwater seeped through and gradually replaced the original wood tissue with quartz, preserving bark and growth rings in mineral form. We walked among petrified wood pieces bright as gemstones, then turned scopes on Wide Hollow Reservoir. Among American Coots, Mallards, and Pied-billed Grebes we picked out Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Cinnamon Teal, and American Wigeon.

Lunch was a short hop away at Escalante Outfitters—fun and funky—with racks of outdoor gear, a gift shop, and a bookstore stocked with desert-literature icons like Edward Abbey's "The Monkey Wrench Gang," Marc Reisner's "Cadillac Desert," and Craig Childs's "The Secret Knowledge of Water." Childs even stops by the shop on occasion. Sandwiches, salads, pizzas, and fresh-baked desserts refueled us, and water bottles were refilled for the road.

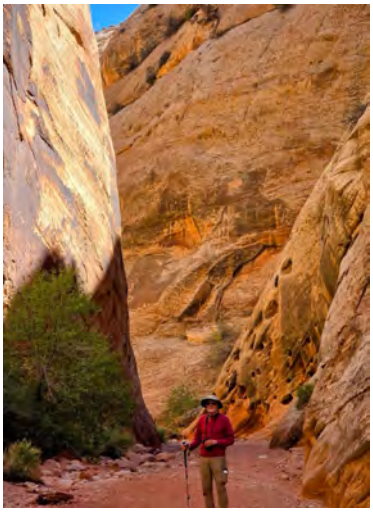
We rolled east on Scenic Byway 12 through Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument, stopping at overlooks to take in the sweep of slickrock and badlands—beautiful from the comfort of a car today, daunting in earlier times for Indigenous peoples, for the 1776 Domínguez–Escalante expedition, and later for pioneers. The highway rode the narrow Hogback, sky on both sides, then dropped into the green of Boulder before climbing toward Boulder Mountain.

A roadside field held our target species: Lewis's Woodpeckers working a towering Ponderosa Pine snag—a guide-passed rumor that paid off. Two birds hawked insects in midair and looped back to their perches. Unusual among woodpeckers, Lewis's flies with smooth, crow-like wingbeats instead of the typical bounding flight, wears an iridescent palette that could belong to a hummingbird, and often hunts like a flycatcher—sallying out to catch insects on the wing. While we watched, a Clark's Nutcracker swept through—namesakes for Lewis and Clark in one field of view. A Red-tailed Hawk sailed overhead, a White-breasted Nuthatch worked a fencepost a few feet away, and Chipping Sparrows flicked past with crisp rufous caps and clean eyelines. Back on the road, a Red-tail plunged near us and flared over the grass—an attack on something unseen, over in a heartbeat but thrilling to witness.

We climbed higher, nearing the trip's ceiling just shy of 10,000 feet. A passing shower at Homestead Overlook left a rainbow draped across distant forests. We stopped more than once for aspen—great clonal families that share a single root system, whole hillsides turning together because each grove keeps the same calendar. Mule Deer grazed the meadows, and somewhere in the timber an Elk bugled—the clear herald of the autumn rut.

With Quaking Aspen forests gilding the slopes—and some trees blazing orange and red—the air carried the clean, rain-washed scent of dust and pine, and the slanting light made the mountain feel like the year's hinge between summer and winter: autumn crisp and cool, full of color and scent.

Red rock pulled us back as we descended toward Torrey. Scattered among the sage were black basalt boulders—chunks of relatively young lava that once poured across the high plateaus. On the west edge of the Colorado Plateau the crust is being stretched by the Basin and Range; fissures opened, fluid basalt rose, and broad flows




capped places like Boulder Mountain. Now frost and gravity pry that caprock apart and roll the blocks downslope onto the red sandstone below.

Dinner was at La Cueva, a lively Mexican spot with big flavors, then on to our lodge to rest up for the final day.

Tues., Sept. 23 Capitol Reef National Park

Before we left the lodge we spotted a Canyon Wren working the stone—silent, its white throat bright against a rusty back and finely barred tail. We pushed back our departure to bird the grounds behind the property, where a llama-trekking outfit grazed in quiet paddocks and a path followed a small stream. Birds were everywhere—White-crowned Sparrows by the dozens, American Robins in the fruiting trees, and our daily constant, Common Ravens. A Wilson's Warbler slipped through the willows. The morning's prize was a Sage Thrasher—a sagebrush specialist through and through: pale and neatly streaked below, with a short, slightly down-curved bill and striking yellow eyes, bright flashes in the gray-green.

We spent the day in Capitol Reef National Park—its name joining the white Navajo Sandstone "capitol" domes, so-called because they resemble the dome of the U.S. Capitol, with the long rocky "reef" of the Waterpocket Fold, a cliffy barrier that once blocked travel like a coral reef at sea. The Scenic Drive, finally open after closures on previous tours, did not disappoint. First we birded the green corridor of the Fremont River: a Cooper's Hawk sliced by—our first of the trip—and Brewer's Sparrows kept us busy with ID, some juveniles showing streaked chests that contrasted with the adults' cleaner underparts. At the historic Gifford House we stepped into Fruita's story of orchards, irrigation, and heirloom fruit, then stood in the vast shade of a cottonwood so large it felt like its own building.

We rolled south on the Scenic Drive into the park's deep geology: sheer curtains of Wingate Sandstone, the stepping ledges of Kayenta, painted Chinle slopes, and bright Navajo domes gleaming above. At the end of pavement we eased across gravel into Capitol Gorge and walked where the road ends. Human history shared the stone—petroglyphs etched on varnished walls and the Pioneer Register, names and dates chiseled by settlers who threaded wagons through that narrow hallway of rock. We picnicked beneath walls that made our voices sound distant even to ourselves.

Back at the visitor center, the hands-on model of the Waterpocket Fold—Capitol Reef's great monocline—made the landscape click. It's a single long wrinkle in Earth's crust, where one side of the rock layers is lifted higher than the other. That tilt unveils a staircase of formations and, in softer sandstones, cups rain into "waterpockets" that give the fold its name. We'd spent the morning driving along the backbone of that wrinkle


and the afternoon walking inside it at Capitol Gorge—research fodder for geologists, yes, but also a built-in invitation to awe and reflection.

In the gift shop Jon picked up a book about local petroglyphs, saying he'd use the figures as inspiration for his pottery—news to me that he throws clay. Even after a week of conversation, it was a joy to learn another facet of a friend's passions.

We stopped at the roadside Petroglyph Panel next, where the Fremont people (circa 300–1300 CE) left figures and symbols beside the river they irrigated and the country they farmed and hunted. Their stories are carved into stone but challenging to read from this far away in time—messages from ancestors whose descendants still live across the region. As we traced the panels with our eyes, White-throated Swifts spun overhead like feathered boomerangs, flinging themselves across the blue sky and making the cliffs feel even taller.
Barb pointed out the cottony patches on prickly pear—cochineal scale insects. The white looks like webbing but is a waxy shelter the females and nymphs produce; press a white tuft and the insects inside stain your fingers vivid crimson, a dye that has colored textiles for centuries and still tints some foods. She also found milkweed pods, and as we were talking about monarchs one drifted past Louise, a living stained-glass window.

Evening found us at a restaurant with wide windows on red rock. The view ran to the horizon, but our talk turned inward: the week's wonders, the near-misses and unexpected triumphs, the ways the desert had opened us to one another. We raised our glasses not just to what we'd seen, but to the company we kept—friends now, bound by a landscape that asked us to look up, look long, and carry that feeling home.

After dinner some of us opted for a star show. We waited for full dark, then stepped onto our balconies as the stars kindled one by one. The Big Dipper's two pointer stars led us to Polaris, and the handle's curve arced to Arcturus—an orange giant, larger and older than our Sun, with a steady, ancient glow. Cassiopeia's crooked W stood on the far side of Polaris from the Dipper; from there we star-hopped to the Andromeda Galaxy, a faint, oblong smear in binoculars—our nearest large galactic neighbor, about 2.5 million light-years away. The photons reaching us began their journey that long ago—long before our species existed. On Earth, late australopithecines and the earliest members of our genus, Homo, were walking African savannas and chipping stone. When we gaze at stars, we look far into the past. Deep space, like deep time, unmoors our sense of scale and reminds us we are a small part of something vast and beyond our knowing.

While our thoughts stretched outward, bats stitched the air through the beam of a green laser pointer. With an Echo Meter 2 "bat detector" on a smartphone translating ultrasound into sounds we could hear (and offering likely IDs), we listened to their biosonar—quick, elastic click-trains tightening as they homed in on prey. The app

tagged two species: California Myotis and Western Small-footed Myotis. Stars overhead; bats at work around us; the cold infinity beyond.

Wed., Sept. 24 Torrey | St. George

Dawn broke clear and crisp. After breakfast, before departing Torrey on the long drive back to St. George, we pulled on jackets and did a little bonus birding behind the lodge, along the stream and llama paddocks. White-crowned Sparrows were everywhere—fence lines alive with them—and some juveniles were whispering subsong, those wonky, half-formed phrases young birds use to practice the real thing. American Robins dotted the ground and trees, and Black-billed Magpies patrolled the fences. Then our familiar friend who never grows old—the Common Raven—appeared yet again, the only species we'd seen every day. Its gloss caught the sun with purple-blue sheens, and its deep *kronk* rolled across the fields—a voice like water flowing through stone. Robins, too, deserve an ode—bright breasts in cool light, flocking now to fruiting trees. And those young White-crowneds, wobbly songs and all, were tuning tiny syrinxes—the bird's voice box, an avian invention that arose late in the dinosaur lineage. These little living dinosaurs were practicing songs above stone that holds their ancient kin.

One bird left us perplexed in the best way. Barb spotted it first—as she had so many times on the tour—with her uncanny eye for motion and diligent searching. The bird kept to the bushes, and each of us caught a different piece as it shifted in and out of view. Someone saw wing bars suggesting a female Bullock's Oriole. Someone else glimpsed an incomplete eye-ring like a MacGillivray's Warbler. Another noticed the overall size and posture of a vireo. No photos, no definitive look. It will remain a mystery—and that's fine. Think of the old parable: a group of people who cannot see touch different parts of an elephant—one holds the trunk and says "snake," another the leg and says "tree," another the ear and says "fan," another the tail and says "rope." Each is partly right, none has the whole. Birding asks for that humility. No matter how many species we identify and list, birds remain feathered marvels—appearing and vanishing as quickly as our thoughts, reminding us that not everything bright and alive can be pinned down.

On the long arc home, as the sun lifted over the red rock cliffs and warmed the world, we reflected on what we'd each gathered on our journey. Joan and John found fresh resolve in their commitment to ethical eating and animal welfare—our time with Best Friends gave it shape and a community. Joan also carried new sparks for her story quilts; the canyon colors and petroglyph lines felt like patterns waiting for fabric, and the desert silence she celebrates will echo in her art. John, ever the fascinating fact machine, stocked his mental shelves with geology, birds, and human histories to investigate—fodder for a mind that delights in how the world works and how each thing connects to everything else.

Louise rediscovered her childlike thrill for adventure, grinning in Upper Antelope Canyon as rain turned the slot alive and she felt that joyful jolt again, one she feared she'd lost. Jon felt stamina building day by day; he was off to Colorado next to meet his trainer and take on more trail miles—midway through his eighth decade and still leaning into the wind, putting one boot in front of the other, always an impish grin on his face. And Richard, perhaps most profoundly, told us the journey had helped him begin a new chapter after the loss of his wife—a quiet shift you could see in the way he smiled at the vast sky above vanished worlds, stories told in stone. Barb, on her first Naturalist Journeys tour as a guide, had threaded care and competence through every day—keen birding eyes, steady organization, committed teamwork, and a genuine focus on each person's experience.

As for me, I got to keep doing the work I love—work that sometimes feels made exactly for who I am: sharing spectacular nature with curious travelers, and, in small ways, helping people be the most interesting and generous versions of themselves. If there's a single theme to carry forward, it's that wonder travels well: from the voice of a dipper above the spilling current, to the lift of a condor over a canyon, to the laughter that runs through a group of new friends.

The long drive back to St. George delivered some of the tour's finest scenery. Under a clear blue sky we rolled past crumpled mountains and wide basins, through quiet towns with cut hay and tidy fields. Hillsides of aspen lit the slopes—great groves turning in unison—gold everywhere with runs of orange and red flashing through. Light and color chased us down-canyon as we returned to where we'd begun, on the desert floor at the edge of a vast plateau, a last generous flourish to carry home.

Photos: Group Bryce Canyon (Stephen Grace - SG), Gambel's Quail (SG), Upper Antelope Canyon (SG), California Condor (SG), Western Bluebird (SG), Zion (SG), Zion (SG), American Dipper (SG), Zion sunrise (SG), Coral Pink Sand Dunes (SG), Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay (SG), Horseshoe Bend (SG), California Condor (SG), Upper Antelope Canyon (SG), Barb & Steve at Horseshoe Bend (Barbara Jording - BJ), Kanab (SG), Bryce Canyon (SG), Quaking Aspen (SG), Capitol Reef (SG), Petroglyph Boardwalk (BJ), (SG), Capitol Reef (SG), Junction, Utah (SG)