

# Yellowstone in Fall | September 20–26, 2025

## Trip Report by Greg Smith



**Guides Kip Miller & Greg Smith along with Kathy, Sandy, Susan K & Alan, Susan M & Ed and Phyllis & Michael**



### **Saturday, 20 September - Arrivals | Island Park, ID**

Everyone had arrived a day or two early, so shortly after noon we jumped into our two vehicles and met at Bozeman Pond for introductions and a bit of birding. Our drive was a little over two hours as we edged around Hebgen and Earthquake Lakes, birding our way along the shore. We arrived at the Angler's Lodge a little after four, with enough time to relax at the edge of the Madison River as the sun set. Then it was time for our welcome dinner.

### **Sunday, 21 September - Red Rock Lakes NWR | Henry's Lake**

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge was created in 1934 to bring the 200 remaining Trumpeter Swans back from the edge of extinction. We started our drive to the west after breakfast and were then surrounded by sagebrush flats with lines of mountains to the north and south of us. The steep mountains were cloaked in places with forests of conifers interspersed with a quilted mosaic of yellow and orange quaking aspens. This was what we spent our day traversing thru on a well-maintained gravel road, absolutely stunning scenery!

Our three primary stops included a willow and aspen forest where we had loads of Mountain Chickadees, a Townsend's Solitaire, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Yellow-rumped Warblers. Our second stop was at Upper Red



Rock Lake where there was a group of 28 Trumpeter Swans, interspersed with Ring-necked Duck, Canvasback, Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon and Mallard. Our third stop was along the lake shore where we had Clark's, Eared & Pied-billed Grebes, Common Loon, California & Ring-billed Gull, Double-crested Cormorant and Bufflehead.

We had plenty of shorter stops where we got stunning views of Azure-breasted Prairie Hoverers (aka Mountain Bluebirds), Ruffed Grouse and roosting Bald Eagles. This made for fifty species of birds over the first two days of our trip thru the Yellowstone Ecosystem!

## **Monday, 22 September - Island Park Dam | Norris Geyser Basin**

Light ground fog in places, otherwise clear skies. All good for birding, so we headed over to the dam in Island Park. Clear as a pair of opticians eyeglasses, with spectacular morning lighting! We had Common Loon, Western Grebe, Pink-sided Junco, Northern "Red-shafted" Flicker, American White Pelican, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and loads of Mountain Chickadees.

But it was the three moose in the river below the dam that made us all swoon. We first spotted them from the top of the dam and took a road down so that we were eye level with all of them. It was a cow/calf duo with a two-year old male with his first set of spike antlers. And again, the morning light just made the three of them pop from the background!

We grabbed our bags and some breakfast at the Angler's Lodge as we said goodbye to our hosts. Then it was off to Yellowstone National Park where we got to explore one of the park's thermal wonders, the Norris Geyser Basin. From churning mud pots to radically colored hot springs, we explored them all. But the most intriguing were the steamy, sulphur-scented fumeroles, with all of them trying to outdo one another when it came to eschewing volumes of steam.

At the end of the day we headed to our West Yellowstone lodging at Three Bears. Pizza for dinner was an Italian extravaganza of red, white and pesto sauces. Perfect timing for finishing our day after all that we had explored.

## **Tuesday, 23 September - Hayden Valley | Lake Butte Overlook | Old Faithful**

Another gorgeous morning over the entrance to West Yellowstone as we made our way to the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. The parking lot was not even half full, given our early start over to the Hayden Valley side of





things, always a good thing! With a ranger there creating a painting of Yellowstone Falls and its surrounding yellow rocks, we asked how Yellowstone got its name. His answer that it was from the yellow bluffs along the Yellowstone River near Billings surprised us all. The river was named before the park was created, and the river's headwaters are from Yellowstone Lake. We all learned something new...

Next along our driving route today was the Hayden Valley, one of the meccas for wildlife in this park! We were fortunate enough to get great views of Trumpeter Swan and herds of bison as the winding road took us from north to south. It was lunchtime by the time we made it to the south end, so we drove a bit further south and had our picnic lunch at the Gull Point Drive picnic area on the spectacular shores of Yellowstone Lake.

The Lake Butte Overlook gives you a dreamy view of Yellowstone Lake from horizon to horizon with coup d'oeil of the Grand Tetons to the south. But we were going to have to delay our drive to the top as there were a few cars pulled over on the side of the road with everyone outside looking downhill. We had to stop and see what was down there, and glad we did! There was a sow grizzly with one cub in the grassy ravine foraging on some herbs and roots at the bottom. Both were a dark 72% cocoa color and weren't the least bit disturbed by those of us about 125m away from them. It was our first grizzly sighting of the trip, what a treat!

Finally made it up to the overlook and viewed the pièce de résistance. It really is a magnificent view, but what is more amazing is how few people know about it and take the short time to make the drive. There were only three other cars in the parking area...

Our final stop of the day was Old Faithful and the Old Faithful Inn. The Inn was designed by Robert Reamer and financing for the one-year construction (June 1903 – June 1904) was by Harry Child. It was constructed of local hand-selected trees with naturally occurring bends and local rhyolite for the fireplace. The design is based on sixteenth century technology with the twentieth century conveniences of electricity, indoor plumbing and steam heat.

We had thirty minutes to explore the Inn before the next projected ejection of steam and water from the geyser, and we all lined up off to the side of the crowds to view the show with a more natural and aesthetic view. It really was spectacular!



## **Wednesday, 24 September - Grand Prismatic | Grand Teton National Park**

You just have to do Grand Prismatic Spring early in the day or you are going to have to have to park out on the main highway and walk in. We were able to gather in a couple of parking spaces when we arrived, but there was a line out onto the highway when we left. Perfect timing!

It was a little foggy when we arrived, but that burned off as we walked towards Grand Prismatic. We discussed the blue color in the spring which indicated a temperature of at least 193°, along with the oranges, olive greens and whites that meant the super-heated water had cooled down as it flowed away from the spring proper. Those colors indicated that thermophiles of consisting of mats of algae and bacteria were present and adapted to the heated waters. This is a primordial (Latin for “first” (primus) and “to begin” (ordiri)) world we were walking thru on the boardwalk.

We had a 12:30 lunch reservation in the Mural Room of the Jackson Lake Lodge, so we made our way south after stopping to look at a very obliging pika that was sun-bathing at eye level. She just relaxed in front of us for about five minutes while we shared our find to all those that stopped to see what we were looking at. Our own little pika jam.

Of course, lunch was outstanding, and then there was the opulent view of the Tetons thru those thunderously large windows. Just an amazing view that coincided with our smoked trout Caesar salads.

We spent the afternoon taking in all the various pastels of leaf colors that the quaking aspens threw our way. Everywhere you looked there was a palette of aspens glowing through the conifer forests. But the best colors were reflected in the waters of the Snake River along with Mount Moran, at Oxbow Bend.

## **Thursday, 25 September – Grand Teton National Park**

This was the last full day of our tour, so we started with a drive north from the south end of Teton-Moose Road. After paying our entry fee we came upon a cow moose that was trying to figure out what was going on with the group of 23 cow elk and one bull who just couldn't figure out which of the 23 cows needed attention first. With his lips flared and too many distractions, the bull was a crazed animal with blood-shot eyes. Sure looked like a grin on the mouth of that moose!

A little bit further up the road we had a single black bear amble across the road before continuing her saunter up the hillside. But that wasn't the last of the bruins this morning. We came around a bend in the road and





found a cub sharing its back side as it ambled up the road. We knew mama was somewhere around, so we watched the cub make a sharp left into the brush, and there was mom slurping down berries from some low-growing shrubs.

The rest of the drive was pretty quiet, so we drove out into the sunshine and stopped to look at those gleaming Tetons in the early morning light. With no foothills, they just jump out of the sagebrush flats and seem to be close enough to touch!

Morning is a wonderful time to go up Signal Mountain. The sun is still low enough in the SE sky to make the Tetons stand up to the Poseidon blue of the high-altitude sky. The outline of the mountains is reminiscent of early polychrome postcards, and then there is the rest of the view highlighting the valley of Jackson Hole.

Emma Matilda Lake was a wonderful drive thru aspen-laden sagebrush flats, but the birding was a little on the tame side with Clark's Nutcracker, Red-tailed Hawk and Yellow-rumped Warbler being the only the only species present during our walk thru the trees.

We enjoyed a hearty lunch at the Trapper's Grill along the edge of Jackson Lake before heading off to Oxbow Bend for a second view of the fall colors and the mesmerizing-mirrored pastels of the trees in the Snake River.

We took the highway return to our hotel in Jackson so that we could pass through the herds of bison and Pronghorn antelope that line the northern sections of the roadway. There were lots of parked cars as we passed through this section of the roadway, but it was a little further down the road at Deadman's Bar where we got to see two Dusky Grouse on the shoulder picking up some bits of gravel to help with their digestion. We had been looking for this species along the entire trip, so a well-earned sighting!

Our farewell dinner was at the Blue Lion, a short walk from our hotel. Appetizers and well-plated meals made for a fine farewell meal after which, we headed back to our rooms.

## **Sunday, 26 September - Departures**

Everyone had flights out of Jackson over the next couple of days, while one person joined me for a ride back to their vehicle in Bozeman. We had a respectable 69 bird species for the trip along with twelve species of mammal including grizzly & black bear along with pika, elk and moose. Great looks at all these species along with some of the best fall colors in years!

*Photos: Group (Greg Smith), Coyote (Kip Miller - KM), Female Elk (Hugh Simmons - HS), Mountain Bluebird (KM), Moose (KM), Trumpeter Swans (HS), Old Faithful (Alan Hull - AH), Pika (KM), Grand Prismatic Spring (KM), Part of the group (KM), Mount Moran (KM), Bull Elk (AH), Emerald Spring in the Norris Geyser Basin (KM)*