

Nevada's Great Basin | Aug. 27 – Sept. 3, 2025

Trip Report by Bryan Shirley



Guide Bryan Shirley & 7 Participants: Wyatt, Randy, Doni, Ken, Macia, Marie, and Kalliat (KT)



Aug. 27, 2025

Meet at Airport | Introductory Birding

I met Wyatt at the hotel and we headed to the airport to meet the rest of the group. Utah has been extremely dry this summer, but as luck would have it, huge thunderstorms were coming through the area. Our timing was perfect though as the rain had moved on to the east, allowing us to do a bit of birding on the way to the hotel. We spent about an hour at the Bountiful Pond – a freshwater pond on the shore of the Great Salt Lake. We got our first looks of Forster's Tern, American White Pelican, Killdeer, and a few Song Sparrows before we carried on to our hotel in Layton. Dinner tonight was at an excellent local German restaurant.

Aug. 28, 2025

Antelope Island | Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge

Today was an exciting day, as we visited two of Utah's top birding locations. We started at Antelope Island. The causeway to the island was dry for a lot of the drive, but closer to the island we started hitting water patches and eventually the Great Salt Lake. Wherever there was water, there were birds. Thousands of Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets fed on the Brine Flies in the shallow water. The ducks were all in basic plumage this time of year, but there were lots of Northern Shovelers and a few other species here and there. Large flocks of Franklin's Gulls ran around causing a cloud of Brine Flies to erupt around them. Once we reached the island, we were treated to several Chukars calling from the rocks and walking around us. We counted no less than 14



Burrowing Owls at several locations on the island! Most of the Bison that live on the island were on the far end, but we did have one huge bull near the road. We got two other owls here – a Great Horned Owl in the rafters of the hay barn and in the silo, we could see the tail of a Barn Owl sticking out of its roost. A porcupine on the grass at Garr Ranch was a fun surprise!

After lunch at a local diner, we headed north to Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. Along the loop road, a lot of the areas had filled in with the invasive phragmites, but eventually we got to some large open water areas that were full of hundreds of Western and Clark's Grebes, many of which had small chicks on their backs! Huge flocks of White-faced Ibises and American White Pelicans were visible in the distance.

Back at the hotel, we had good food and locally brewed beer at the restaurant next to the hotel. It was a long but very fun day!

Aug. 29, 2025

Pinyon-Juniper Specialties | Bonneville Salt Flats

We had lots of rain overnight, but it was clear and nice this morning. We started our drive west around the Great Salt Lake. We took a detour to get off the interstate and do some birding at Clover Springs to look for some of the specialties of the Pinyon-Juniper habitat that makes up a large portion of the Great Basin. There is a nice spring here and the birds were coming to drink and bathe. We had multiple Black-throated Gray Warblers, Juniper Titmice, and a surprise Northern Waterthrush and Nashville Warbler. After we finished birding, we continued west toward the Utah-Nevada border. Our next stop was the world-famous Bonneville Salt Flats. With the recent rain, we didn't drive onto the flats but took a break at the rest area to take photos and walk a bit on the flats. From there it was just a short drive into the casino town of Wendover where we had lunch at a local Mexican café full of pictures of famous cars and drivers that tried for speed records on the salt flats. To break up our drive to Elko, we made one other birding stop at the water treatment plant in Wells, NV (what birding trip is complete without a trip to the sewage plant??). There were quite a few ducks and a few shorebirds there including Wilson's Phalarope and several Spotted Sandpipers. From there we continued to Elko where we had excellent Italian food for dinner.

Aug. 30, 2025

Sunrise at Island Lake | Sora and other waterbirds

Today was an exciting, but long day! We left the hotel at 3:15 AM so we could time our hike to arrive at Island Lake at sunrise. We started our hike at about 4:15 with head lamps and stars shining, as we slowly worked our way up the trail. Our target was the Himalayan Snowcock. Snowcocks live above the tree line in the rocky cliffs.



They were brought into the USA as a game bird for hunting and have made the Ruby Mountains their home since the 1960s. It is one of, if not the most, difficult birds to find in the USA. This morning, we were trying the area around Island Lake – a gorgeous lake surrounded by large cliffs. We arrived in perfect time and started scanning the cliffs and surrounding areas. The sunrise and the scenery were truly remarkable. While we searched for the snowcock, we had a few Mountain Bluebirds and Juncos, but it was pretty quiet. At one point, a Golden Eagle flew down the ridge top and we hoped it would flush a snowcock, but it was not to be. Eventually, we gave up and started our walk back down into the canyon. It was nice to be able to see the stunning scenery that we had walked up in the dark! During our walk we were happy to see three Rock Wrens in the rocks near the creek. It was a bit disappointing to miss our target Snowcocks, but we all felt lucky to have been able to spend a morning here in this spectacular place.

We made one stop on our way back to Elko for a Lewis' Woodpecker in the top of a dead cottonwood tree. Once we made it into town, we stopped and ordered lunch for takeout and took it back to the hotel to eat and rest a bit. After our break, some of us went to South Fork Reservoir to bird for a bit before dinner. One of the highlights was a very cooperative Sora feeding along the edge of the marsh. Tonight's dinner was at a local steakhouse.

Aug. 31, 2025 Travel Day to Great Basin NP birding along the way

Today was mostly a travel day, but we were driving through beautiful sage habitat typical to the Great Basin. For a good portion of the drive, we had power poles to watch for raptors. We stopped for quite a few Red-tailed Hawks and a few Swainson's. We made a stop to try for Sagebrush Sparrows at an old Pony Express outpost and had a few running around on the ground beneath the sage. After bathroom stop in the old mining town of Eureka, we continued along "the loneliest highway in America" to Ely where we stopped for lunch. When we arrived in Baker, we made a short stop to check out the Great Basin National Park visitor center with nice displays about the Great Basin and a few souvenirs as well.

We arrived at our beautiful lodge about 4PM. It was amazing to be driving across the desert and then drop into this steep canyon oasis with our lodge! We checked in, used our tokens shopping for breakfast, and had time to relax a bit before we drove back into Ely to the one restaurant open in the area. Pizza was the popular choice tonight and most of us had some left over to put in our fridges for later!



Sept. 1, 2025

Great Basin Day 1 | Bristlecone Pines

Today was another great day! We started with an optional birding outing around the lodge. We heard more Pinyon Jays, but they still sounded far away and refused to show themselves. A few Bushtits were in the small trees near the creek and dozens of Pine Siskins and Lesser Goldfinches were feasting on the sunflowers near the office.

After breakfast, we drove into the National Park. Great Basin was designated a National Park in 1986 and is one of the least visited national parks in the lower 48. We stopped by the visitor center café and picked up our picnic lunch and then drove up the road to the Wheeler Peak campground. The campground is nestled below Wheeler Peak at an elevation of just below 10,000 feet. After our hike to Island Lake, part of the group was still feeling a bit sore or tired and opted to stay and bird around the campground. The rest of the group did the hike to see some of the oldest trees in the world – Bristlecone Pines. The hike was about a 3-mile round trip and pretty rocky, but well worth it to see these amazing trees. Along the hike we saw some high elevation bird species like Mountain Chickadees and Clark's Nutcrackers. On the way back down, a gorgeous Williamson's Sapsucker landed on a pine just in front of us! Back at the trail head, we met up with the rest of the group and enjoyed our picnic lunch before making our way back down the mountain to Baker where an ice cream from the Bristlecone General Store hit the spot! We got back to our hotel in time to have some free time to try the pool, relax, or bird around the area before heading to dinner in Baker. On the way back to our hotel we were pleased to see a Common Poorwill catching insects in the parking area.

Sept. 2, 2025

Great Basin Day 2 | Lehman Caves

We started the day with a walk around the lodge property. Surprisingly until today, we had not seen a single Spotted Towhee – this morning we saw eight! We also finally saw the Pinyon Jays that we have been hearing for the last two days. There was an almost continuous stream of a few birds at a time flying west along the ridge top, making their raucous calls as they went past. We were happy to see them, but they were all quite far and we hoped for closer views later. The Canyon Wren came a lot closer today and posed for photos. We also enjoyed watching a Lark Sparrow feasting on a red ant buffet.

On the way to the national park, we made a stop at a small lake in the desert. Not a lot was there, but we were happy to see a flock of about 40 Horned Larks on the shore. When we arrived at the Lehman Cave Visitor Center, a park employee came running over to see us – he was the “birder” in the park and happy to have other



birders to talk to. He told us of a spot to try to get close looks at Pinyon Jays, so we made a quick detour there and were happy to see about 50-60 Pinyon Jays all around us!

Our ranger-led tour into Lehman Cave was wonderful. We enjoyed learning about the human history of the cave and the fascinating geology. The 52-degree temps in the cave were nice too! After the cave tour, we had lunch at the café and then went for a walk in Lehman Campground. After several days of sage brush and only the small Pinyon and Juniper so common in the Great Basin, the Ponderosa Pines in the campground looked spectacular. We were happy to see a pair of American Dippers working the small creek. A nice flock of Bushtits put on a show as we worked our way back to the van before heading back to the hotel for a bit of down time to either watch Mule Deer and Turkeys in front of the rooms or have a dip in the pool. Tonight was our last dinner together and we enjoyed talking about the trip. Tomorrow would be Doni's birthday, so we sang and celebrated with ice cream before heading back to our hotel.

Sept. 3, 2025 “America’s Loneliest Highway”/End of Tour in SLC

We had a 4-hour drive to the airport today which gave us one more chance to feel the vastness of this beautiful area. On our drive from our hotel to Baker and the next hour+ on the highway, we saw a total of 19 vehicles in 100 miles (Wyatt actually counted!). We arrived at the airport just before noon and said our goodbyes.

Photos: Group Photo (Bryan Shirley – BS), Rufous Hummingbird (Randy Kessler - RK), American Bison (RK), Chukar (RK), Burrowing Owl (Kalliat Valsaraj - KV) Pronghorn (KV), Common Nighthawk (KV), Cassin's Vireo (KV), Chukar (RK), Porcupine (RK), Western Tanager (KV), Dark-eyed Junco (KV), Rufous Hummingbird (KV), Canyon Wren (BS), Western Grebe (RK)