

Yellowstone: Birds, Bears & Wildlife

June 5-11, 2025 | Trip Report by Mason Flint



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Participants: Gay, Sharon, Ramona, Nassim, Cynthia, Deborah, Cathy, Kathleen



Thu., Jun. 5: Arrivals, Bozeman, Paradise Valley and Gardiner

After collecting everyone at the airport and hotels in Bozeman, we drove just a few minutes to Cherry River Fishing Access, a marshy area along the East Gallatini River. After climbing out of our vehicles we were met by the raucous calls of Yellow-headed Blackbirds that were perched on reeds above the pond next to the parking lot. We spent about half an hour walking a short loop where we got acquainted and saw several other birds including pairs of Cinnamon Teal and Gadwall, a small flock of American White Pelican, Eastern Kingbird, and Savannah Sparrow. From there we drove a few minutes to Glen Lake Rotary Park where we spent another half hour where we saw or heard recently arriving migrants including Western Warbling Vireo, Gray Catbird, Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart, Northern Yellow Warbler, Western Tanager, and Black-headed Grosbeak.

We loaded up and headed east across Bozeman Pass toward Livingston where we turned south and drove through Paradise Valley. This aptly named valley follows the Yellowstone River with spectacular views of the Absaroka Range on the east and the Gallatin Range to the west. We made a brief stop in Emigrant for a bathroom and snack break and to check out the roadside ponds. The Bobolink we hoped to find were absent, but we saw more Yellow-headed Blackbirds and a Trumpeter Swan.



We arrived at the Absoroka Lodge in Gardiner with time to unpack and relax before making the short walk to the Wonderland Café where we enjoyed a tasty dinner before heading to bed to rest for an early start the next morning.

Fri., Jun. 6: Lamar River, Slough Creek, and Mammoth

We started very early, entering Yellowstone National Park and meeting our Wolf Tracker guide Nathan Varley at Mammoth before sunrise. From there we headed east toward the Lamar Valley, first stopping at the Slough Creek entrance road to scan for wolves just after sunrise.

Finding none, we continued east to the Lamar Valley where we spotted our first American Bison of the trip as well as a few Pronghorn, and Elk. On the way, we stopped and got distant looks at a Brown Bear grazing high up on a hillside. We reached the Lamar River Trailhead at just before 7:00 AM where we scanned in vain for wolves but saw several birds including Spotted Sandpiper, American Dipper, Green-tailed Towhee, and Northern Yellow Warbler. While there, we enjoyed a yummy picnic breakfast and hot coffee.

After filling up, we headed back toward the west and stopped near the Lamar Ranger Station to watch two adults and a few Coyote pups playing near their den below a large rock outcrop. While there, a Prairie Falcon made a flyover. What a treat! Continuing west, we reached Slough Creek Road where we turned north and drove a mile or two before stopping below a cliff close to the road to watch a Golden Eagle tending a nest. These eagles have been nesting in the same spot for at least three years. Eventually the eagle took flight and flew north for a hunting trip. While enjoying the eagle, a Black Bear saw and a couple of cubs descended from the trees below the nest and lazily walked toward us before re-entering the woods.

With lunchtime approaching, we descended back to the Grand Loop Road and headed toward Mammoth, stopping to watch an American Badger year a den beside the road. We had a somewhat hectic lunch at the Mammoth Hot Springs cafeteria before taking a short walk to check out the travertine hot springs, created over thousands of years as hot water cooled and deposited calcium carbonate. After a visit to the Mammoth Visitor Center, we made the short drive back to Gardiner to relax before dinner at the Iron Horse Bar & Grill.



Sat., Jun. 7: Grand Loop Road, Geothermal Features

We woke up early and stopped at Bears Brews in Gardiner for breakfast before heading south on the Grand Loop Road, climbing more than 1000 feet from Mammoth to Golden Gate at Klingman Pass before exiting the canyon at Swan Lake Flat. Swan Lake Flat is a wide valley where the Gardiner River meanders through meadows, providing panoramic views of surrounding mountains. We stopped at Swan Lake where we saw a pair of Trumpeter Swan, several species of duck including Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, and a Ruddy Duck, Sandhill Crane, Eared Grebe, and Northern Harrier. Continuing south, we stopped at Gibbon Meadows Picnic Area for a bathroom break and spotted a Mountain Chickadee and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Just after passing Madison Junction, the turnoff to West Yellowstone, we took a detour along the Firehole Canyon Drive where we stopped for photos of the waterfall. Just before leaving Firehole Canyon Road, we passed one of the few places in the park where swimming is allowed – usually not until July.

We arrived at Upper Geyser Basin, which has the highest concentration of geothermal features in the park including Old Faithful. Most of the group decided to take a walk part of the Upper Geyser Basin Trail before returning to Old Faithful to watch the eruption and enjoy lunch. On the walk we arrived just in time to see a nice eruption at Castle Geyser. Birds were of secondary interest during the walk, but we still saw several species including Common Merganser, Mountain Chickadee, Violet-green Swallow, and Chipping Sparrow. Returning to Old Faithful, everyone grabbed packed lunches and relaxed before enjoying the famously regular eruption at Old Faithful.

After lunch we retraced our route north, stopping at Midway Geyser Basin and perhaps the second most famous geothermal feature at Yellowstone, Grand Prismatic Spring. We were initially concerned that traffic might delay



our entrance to the parking lot but soon found spots and walked out to see this magical place. The largest hot spring in the park, Grand Prismatic Spring, measuring about 250 by 350 feet, the central water in the spring is a brilliant blue, with blue green near the edges. Radiating out from this are rays of yellow, orange, and brown.

After getting our fill, we headed back home to Gardiner where we enjoyed our second delicious meal at the Wonderland Café before heading to bed.

Sun., Jun. 8: Yellowstone Lake, Bears, and Eastern Side of Park

After two nights in Gardiner, we packed up and left *extra* early to increase our chances of seeing wildlife on our way to Cooke City. We grabbed coffee and snacks at Bears Brew and headed south to Norris, east to Canyon, and south to Yellowstone Lake. We made a quick stop at Fishing Bridge before continuing east, passing the north end of Yellowstone Lake, the largest body of water in Wyoming. The lake is 7,732 feet above sea level and covers 136 square miles. The lake fills part of the caldera that was formed after the magma chamber under the Yellowstone area collapsed around 650,000 years ago. The lake is home to native cutthroat trout which are threatened by non-native lake trout discovered in 1994. The decline in the native trout negatively impacts fish predators including river otters and birds.

Thanks to our early start, we arrived before 9:00 AM at a section of the East Entrance Road that's good for Brown Bear and started looking. We drove slowly east past Lake Butte, scanning the forest still showing the effects of the largest wildfire in the recorded history of Yellowstone in 1988. A few miles past Lake Butte we stopped to enjoy the spectacular views of Yellowstone Lake and the Grand Tetons to the south. Unfortunately, no bears and few birds other than a Canada Jay and a few songbirds. Turning around, we drove slowly down toward the lake where we planned to eat a picnic breakfast at Steamboat Point. Just before reaching our destination – BEAR! A young male was quietly grazing close to the road. We carefully stepped out of the vehicles, remaining close to them, and enjoyed the show. The bear continued to lazily feed until he spied an adult female which caused him to scamper up the hillside and disappear over the ridgeline. Wonderful! Happy, we continued another mile or so to Steamboat Point and enjoyed a picnic breakfast under blue skies, watching Barrow's Goldeneye and Common Merganser feeding in the lake.

After filling up, we drove up to LeHardys Rapids where we enjoyed very close looks at Harlequin Ducks before continuing up through the Hayden Valley to Canyon where we visited Artist Point and the beautiful view of Yellowstone falls. Again, birds were secondary, but we did see our first Clark's Nutcracker at Artist Point before continuing to Canyon for lunch. After lunch, we drove up and over Dunraven Pass to Tower Junction and then



east toward Cooke City. We stopped briefly at the Barronette Peak Overlook where we found a few Rocky Mountain Goats high up on the rocky peaks above. After a beautiful drive, we exited the park at the Northeast Entrance and made the short drive to Cooke City where we enjoyed dinner at the Bistro.

Mon., Jun. 9: Leisurely Day in Lamar Valley, Slough Creek

Although we earned a slower-paced day after our long day on Sunday, most of the group was eager to start early again with a drive into the Lamar Valley before breakfast. We departed Cooke City just after 5:00 AM and drove to the Lamar Valley Trail parking area where we spent almost an hour enjoying the scenery and looking for birds and wildlife. Herds of bison grazed as far as our eyes could see to the west along the Lamar River along with a few pronghorn here and there. Those who missed Green-tailed Towhee earlier in the trip saw one close to the parking area and at least 100 Cliff Swallows swooped around delivering mud to nests under the nearby outhouses.

On our way back to Cooke City for breakfast we spotted a bull Moose feeding along the road in Silvergate. Reunited with the rest of the group, we enjoyed hot coffee and breakfast at *The Bistro* before returning to the Lamar Valley. At one stop we got great close-up looks at Wilson's Snipe feeding in the grass along with Vesper and Savannah Sparrows. At another stop we spotted another Clark's Nutcracker, a few Pine Siskin, Lincoln's Sparrow, Wilson's Warbler, and a Western Tanager. We continued west to Slough Creek where we drove up to the end of the road to the Slough Creek trailhead. The trail extends nearly 20 miles across the border into Montana, but we stuck to the first mile which is a good area for birding. Just yards from where we parked, we found a very accommodating Calliope Hummingbird that perched on an exposed branch. Nice! A bit further up the trail a male MacGillivray's Warbler and a pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers gave us good looks. Then, a few minutes later, a Ruffed Grouse perched up, allowing us a few minutes to take photos before disappearing into the underbrush. On our way back down to the parking area, the male Calliope Hummingbird was still perched on the branch before he zoomed over and hovered just above our heads. We retreated, letting him know that we had no intention of nesting in his territory.

After leaving Slough Creek, we drove to the Yellowstone River Picnic Area for lunch and made a short stop at Floating Island Lake before taking a leisurely drive back through the Lamar Valley to Cooke City and dinner.



Tue., Jun. 10: Beartooth Highway

Today we headed east to explore the high country along the Beartooth Highway. Called “the most beautiful drive in America” by the late CBS News correspondent Charles Kuralt, the road is a section of US Route 212 between Cooke City and Red Lodge, Montana. Our first stop was the Yellowstone Overlook in Shoshone National Forest. We spent nearly an hour taking in the scenery and birds including *great* views of Mountain Bluebirds, Green-tailed Towhee, and a surprising Dusky Grouse. As we climbed, the landscape became increasingly forbidding – tundra and frozen ponds with small groves of conifers where we saw more bluebirds and several American Pipit. The highway, which typically closes between October 5 and October 15, had just re-opened the week before we arrived. Near The road at Beartooth Pass, which crests at 10,947 feet, passes through what seemed like a tunnel of snow. We turned around at Beartooth Basin Ski Area which is only open from late May to early July each year after the road opens. Near the pass we added Horned Lark, a new bird for the trip. On our way back down to Cooke City, we stopped at Top of the World Store to buy snacks and souvenirs and another quick stop at the Yellowstone Overlook where we again saw Dusky Grouse. After returning to Cooke City, most of the group returned to the park. We drove slowly down from Cooke City through the Northeast Entrance to the Pebble Creek Campground. The weather didn’t cooperate with some spitting rain, but we saw an American Black Bear and several Spotted Sandpipers as well as some Harlequin Ducks on the river. After a fun day, we returned to Cooke City and our last dinner together at The Bistro.

Wed., Jun. 11: Departures

With most in the group flying out of Bozeman early afternoon, we woke up early for breakfast at The Bistro and began our last drive through the Lamar Valley and Mammoth to Gardiner and on to Bozeman. Our hopes of getting lucky and seeing wolves during the drive weren’t fulfilled but everyone enjoyed one more beautiful drive through the incomparable Yellowstone National Park.

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