

Birding Canyon Country

May 17 – 25, 2026 | Trip Report

by David Jaffe



Naturalist Journeys Tour Leaders David Jaffe and Barb Jording with participants David, Suzie, Joel, Ellen, Barrie, Jerry, Tom, Holly, Frank and Anne



Southern Utah has a way of making you feel genuinely small — not in a diminishing sense, but in the most humbling and awe-inspiring way imaginable. Our journey took us through some of the most dramatic landscapes on the continent, from the soaring red sandstone walls of Zion Canyon to the otherworldly hoodoos of Bryce Canyon, standing like silent armies of ancient stone beneath an enormous sky. We explored Capitol Reef, a place that somehow gets overlooked in the shadow of its more famous neighbors, yet stopped us cold with its wrinkled cliffs and hidden canyons carved by the Fremont River over millions of years. Threading through it all were the Vermillion Cliffs — great burning bands of orange and crimson that seemed to glow from within, especially in the low light of early morning and late afternoon — and tucked between Zion and Bryce, the Coral Pink Sand Dunes offered something none of us quite expected: vast, rose-colored dunes rolling through a forest of ponderosa pines, a landscape that felt like it had drifted in from another continent entirely.

No moment, though, captured the spirit of the trip quite like standing on Navajo Bridge and scanning the sky for California Condors. These enormous birds — once nearly gone from the earth entirely — have made a quiet comeback in this remote corner of the Colorado Plateau, and watching a few perched on the bridge in the



morning and then returning to the bridge after our boat excursion through Marble Canyon and watching one catch a thermal, drifting effortlessly overhead felt like witnessing something that wasn't supposed to still exist. It set the tone for everything that followed: a trip full of landscapes and creatures that remind you the natural world, given even half a chance, has a remarkable capacity to endure.

Sun., May 17 Tonaquint Park | Grafton Ghost Town | Zion National Park

Our day began with an early “bonus birdwatching session” at a local park called ‘Tonaquint Park’. The reason this park is significant so far as birds are concerned is that it marks the furthest northern and eastern point for several species, including the Roadrunner, Abert’s Towhee, and Verdin. These would be our target species for the morning. But this morning was also a time for us just to get to know each other and some of the local birds that we might see as we made our journey through southern Utah.

Some of the first birds we observed included the Mourning Dove, White-faced Ibis and the song of a Song Sparrow. However, pretty quickly we spotted our Abert’s Towhee and a little later on, we got some clear looks of the Verdin.

In addition, we got some really good looks of an Anna’s Hummingbird in flight with the sun perfectly aligned to show off its beautiful pink gorget and crown.

At the small pond in the park, we saw several Mallards, a Northern Yellow Warbler, a female Wilson’s Warbler, several Red-eared Sliders (turtles), and an Ornate Tree Lizard, shining nicely in the sun as it hung head facing down on a large Freemont Cottonwood tree.

Before our hour and a half was up, we also spotted a Black Phoebe, an American Robin, and a couple Great-tailed Grackles. One final bird before we loaded up into the van was the Say’s Phoebe. All in all, a productive first session for us with 19 species in total.

From here, we returned to our hotels to check out while Barb went to pick up the remaining three participants arriving on a 10:00 AM flight. We then all met at Springs Park for a little more birdwatching and an introduction since we were all together for the first time.

During our introductions, people shared what they were excited about and why they chose to visit this part of the country. Then we birded for a little while in Springs Park. Our new folks got a look at the Abert’s Towhee and the Northern Yellow Warbler among some great looks of the other species we had seen earlier in the morning.



After lunch at the Stagecoach Grille in La Verkin, we continued on to Grafton Ghost Town, where we saw three new species immediately upon exiting the van: a Phainopepla, a Western Bluebird, and the Western Tanager. A great start to a post lunch birding session. After a little more fast and furious birdwatching, we had a lull. Barb shared a little bit of the history of Grafton. We learned about when the orchards were planted and how the people of the community acquired the water necessary for the crops they grew.

We then birded for another half hour before we got back in our vans and made our way to one of the premier national parks of the country: Zion National Park!

Upon arrival to the park, it took us a few minutes to actually get from the van to the lodge for check-in because we were gazing in wonder at the grand scene before us!

Following check-in and a little break, we all met for our first bird check-list of the trip and to rejoice about the wonderful experiences we shared and about the amazing opportunities that lay before us!!

Mon., May 18 Zion National Park

To take a full advantage of our day in Zion National Park, we all met at the vans at 6:30 AM to collect snacks for our morning, grab an early breakfast and start our excursion up towards The Narrows as soon as the park buses started to run. This is one of the most well-known hikes in the park however, we did not go there directly.

We took the shuttle bus to our first stop: Weeping Rock. This is a seep in the sandstone that hosts an incredible diversity of flora due to the abundance of water in this location. We were able to see several species of flowers including the Golden Columbine, Crimson Columbine, Shooting Star, Palmer's Penstemon and Monkey Flower. We also saw some of the beautiful and delicate Maidenhair fern. These are plants that we would not see anywhere else in the desert, but due to the water seeping out of the rock, we were fortunate to see them here.

From Weeping Rock, we re-boarded the shuttle to take us further up canyon to begin the Riverside Walk trail towards The Narrows. As the name suggests, this is a very tight part of the canyon and is truly remarkable!

After a leisurely visit at the end of the trail, we slowly made our way back down canyon marveling at the grandeur that continued to amaze us. At one point, we were able to observe two American Dippers working the river, collecting food, and presumably bringing them to a nest that was upstream and out of sight, to feed their young.

We took the bus to Big Bend to search for the California Condor. Literally, immediately after disembarking, Barb spotted our first California Condor of the trip. How wonderful!!!



Following a break after lunch, we all met in front of registration to go for a hike towards the Lower Emerald Pools. This would get us a little bit closer to a large, beautiful alcove and away from the valley floor, giving us an entirely different perspective of the massive walls we were staring up at earlier in the day.

From the Lower Emerald Pools we made a nice big loop past the Grotto, had some incredible views, and enjoyed our time getting off of the valley floor. Following the walk, David gave a lesson on the geology of the Colorado Plateau, explaining rock types, formations and the terminology used in describing the geologic features we were seeing before we completed our bird list and went to dinner.

A full day, and a good one!

Fri., May 19 Zion National Park | Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park | Jackson Flat Reservoir | Kanab

We enjoyed a tasty breakfast at the buffet in the Zion Lodge dining room before we headed up the hill towards the Carmel Tunnel. Our first stop was at a switchback before the tunnel. This gave us a commanding view of the east facing wall of Zion Valley. We took out the park map and pointed out the tremendous rock features such as The Sentinel, The Beehive and the Court of the Patriarchs

Here we got some really good, open views of the Spotted Towhee and Turkey Vulture. We talked a little bit more about geology before heading back into the vans, driving through the tunnel, and making a stop at the Checkerboard Mesa viewpoint: a great opportunity to talk about Cross-bedding. This is a prominent geologic feature we can easily see from this viewpoint that illustrates the historic sand dunes that have solidified into the rock we are seeing today.

Before we left, we got some really good looks of Cassin's Finch and maybe the closest looks any of us have ever seen of the Western Tanager. Exquisite!!

Our next stop would be the Coral Pink Sand Dunes State park. As the name suggests, the dunes host a beautiful, rich orange color and support a diversity of plants, including Narrow-leaf Yucca in flower, Gambel's Oak and other plants that miraculously get a foothold in the shifting sands.

As we walked up to the viewpoint, we observed a Western Whiptail lizard. We spent a little time at the viewpoint and then got on the sand to investigate the different flowers and plants and look for the endemic Tiger Beetle.



Although we did not find the special beetle, we did take some time to notice the beautiful details of the Rice Grass and the patterns in the bright sand made by the wind blowing grasses and other vegetation across its surface as well as the tiny paired footprints surrounding a thin, wavering tail line of a scurrying Western Whiptail lizard. Overall, a visually engaging experience!

Our final birdwatching stop of the day was Jackson Flat Reservoir just north of Kanab. Some of the highlights at this stop included the Yellow-headed Blackbird, several Western Grebes, a couple of Wilson's Phalaropes, Black-Necked Stilt, Eared and Western Grebes, and a Common Goldeneye. We were very pleased with the 21 species we saw at the reservoir. From here we went and checked into our very comfortable accommodations in Kanab for a rest before our bird list and evening meal.

Wed., May 20 Kanab | Marble Canyon River Float | Navajo Bridge

Our day started early with a drive through more beautiful landscapes on our way to Navajo Bridge. Our target species for the morning was the California Condor. We were hoping to find them roosting beneath the bridge before the day warmed up, allowing them to ride the thermals above the Colorado Plateau. We were in luck! Shortly after we arrived at the bridge, we found not one, but TWO condors in full view resting on the bridge in windless morning. We got some good looks at these birds. In fact, so good that we were able to identify the tags on their wings: #59 and #88. Now we could go on to Condorspotter.com to learn more about the history of each individual. This was a wonderful way to start our day. From here we made our way to Lee's Ferry where we would get into a large raft and explore the flat waters of the Colorado River that flowed through Marble Canyon.

At Lee's ferry, we met our boat driver, Tom, who gave us our safety introduction as well as our plan for our time on the river. We motored up canyon and Tom provided information about the natural and cultural history of what we were seeing. In addition to the extreme grandeur through which we were boating, we had the bonus of lots of really good information from a local guide! He knew the river really well...

About one hour into the ride, we got off on the beach to visit a petroglyph site where we learned about some of the symbols that were written on the rock walls of the canyon ranging in age from thousands of years ago to centuries ago.

From here, we walked back to the beach, where some folks decided to dip their toes into the 50° water of the Colorado River, but nobody was brave enough to dip their entire body! From here we traveled back down canyon slowly. Tom continued to share more information about the canyon while David also tributed to the story.

Upon return to land, we made our way back to the Navajo Bridge, hoping to see the condors in flight. It was pretty calm without much wind or thermals. But as luck would have it, we saw a couple soaring as well as one



that was perched. The perched individual was different than the two we had seen before our river trip. We knew this from close up photographs that revealed the wing tag K6 and the red head of a mature Condor, versus the black heads we had previously observed.

Folks then went into the visitor center to browse and look at the dinosaur track! Incredible to see a 200-million-year-old dinosaur footprint solidified in the rock right in front of us. We ate a nice lunch in Cliff Dweller, the ONLY game in town, and then returned to Kanab for a short break before reconvening for our bird list and dinner.

Thurs., May. 21 Kanab | Dixie National Forest | Bryce Canyon National Park

We started the day with a buffet at Parry Lodge which has images of many actors and actresses that have made films in this part of the world. Everybody enjoyed looking at the signed images and reading a bit more about the lodge and its history.

From here we started our journey towards Bryce Canyon National Park with our first stop being McDonald Lake. We were in search of more ducks and other waterfowl. On the lake, there were at least four individual families of Canada Geese with 4 to 6 goslings for each pair. We also found ourselves our first Brewer's Blackbirds, Barn Swallows, a Belted Kingfisher and Black-billed Magpie for the trip. We put the scope on some male Brewer's Blackbirds to get a really good look at the beautiful yellow iris.

Our next stop was Red Canyon Visitor Center in Dixie National Forest to learn a little more about the area and go for a hike amongst the hoodoos. Once on the trail, our first stop was to look at a very close Western Tanager. Shortly after this, Barb shared with us some details about the Ponderosa Pine tree and it wasn't long before we had everybody sniffing the furrows of this tree to enjoy the butterscotch fragrance exuded by this conifer. It's also fun to just see people sniffing trees!

This half mile loop brought us up close and personal with the beautiful pink hoodoos and the brilliant green conifers that were all backlit by a rich blue sky with white cotton clouds. All very aesthetically pleasing...and a favorite hike for several folks on this trip.

In addition to the incredible landscape, we watched a Common Raven fly to and from its nest several times, presumably feeding young chicks. While a few of us were waiting for others to catch up, we got eyes on a Bushtit, a first for the trip. After rejoicing about how beautiful this trail was, we made our way to Bryce Canyon City for lunch.

Right behind our lunch spot was a small pond that we investigated. We saw another family of Canada Geese and their goslings, several Mallards, a nice look at a Killdeer and two Barn Swallows.



From here it was on to Bryce! Immediately after checking in, we all walked to the rim and were bedazzled by the view of the amphitheater that lay before us. We saw an incredible display colors and shapes and patterns that shifted in quality as the sun dipped behind and reappeared from the puffs of clouds scattered through the sky. We met for our bird list followed by dinner. Some ventured back out to watch the sun set and light up the

amphitheater for the last moments of our day, a wonderful day indeed!

Fri., May. 22 Bryce Canyon National Park

Nine out of 10 woke early for the sunrise on the rim. Cloud cover blocked the sun from lighting up the Amphitheater. However, the beauty of the scene was not diminished. A large patch of clouds lit up in brilliant pink and rose as dawn turned to day. It was a little brisk, but a lovely way to start the day.

Following breakfast and a quick stop at the market to pick up our picnic lunch supplies, we made our way out to Rainbow Point for our hike. Rainbow Point is at the end of the scenic drive in Bryce Canyon National Park and the trailhead to our morning hike. The Bristlecone Pine walk is a one-mile loop that brings us through a forest of conifers which includes a species of pine tree that holds the record for the oldest organism on the planet. While some of the oldest Bristlecone Pine trees on this loop may be well over 1500 years old, the oldest in the world reach 4 to 5 thousand years old!

Shortly after we started our hike, we saw a few new species for the trip including Mountain Chickadee, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Chipping Sparrow. A little further down the trail, we heard and searched for the Green-tailed Towhee, but were not successful in locating it, at that point. Patience and perseverance paid off for in just a few minutes we got some very nice views of the Towhee with great light. We also got our first looks at the Red-breasted Nuthatch.

There is a sign at the furthest point on the trail that explains a little bit about the Bristlecone Pine tree. We had a nice break here, looking out over the valley, chatting and enjoy enjoying our time together in this beautiful landscape.

From here, we slowly began our journey back towards the parking lot. Of course, it was not direct. We stopped to look at flowers, talk about the biological mechanics of trees, and of course, look for more birds.

After enjoying our picnic lunch at some picnic tables near the trailhead, we slowly made our way back down the road towards the lodge stopping at numerous pullouts on the way. At the first pull out called Agua Canyon, we



spotted our first Pine Siskin and two Clark's Nutcracker of the trip. One of the Clark's Nutcracker was doing exactly what the "textbooks" say it should be doing: pulling seeds out of pine cones. This was a very educational natural history moment to observe!

Our next stop was Natural Bridge. Who doesn't love a natural bridge! This was indeed a hit. Our last scenic stop for the afternoon would be Fairview Point...it was well beyond 'just a fair view'. Some might say it was dazzling! But, perhaps 'Dazzling View Point' doesn't roll off the tongue as nicely. Oh well!

On the way to the visitor center we stopped at the meadow across from the lodge to look for prairie dogs. We observed at least two Utah Prairie dogs and were able to get them in the scope for really close looks. Very cute.

Following a visit to the visitor center and a nice long afternoon break, we met for our bird list and then dinner. Dinner this night was early because we wanted to head back out to Bryce Point in time for a sunset. While the clouds still obscured the sun partly, pieces of the amphitheater lit up in beautiful reds and tans before we decided to call a day. Another wonderful day in the Southwest!!

Sat., May 23 Bryce Canyon National Park | Mossy Cave Trail | Grand-Staircase Escalante

Our first post-breakfast activity was a walk at Mossy Cave. There was a bit of bird activity on the way up to the cave, but then once we got to the cave where there was running water and a robust riparian zone, there was quite the flurry of activity including a first year Bullock's Oriole, Lucy's Warbler and a pair of Western Tanagers. We saw movement of a few other species, but could not get a good enough look to identify them.

We spent about another half hour or so marveling at the hoodoo's and enjoying the waterfall before we made our way back down the trail. From here, we continued east on scenic Highway 12 towards Escalante for lunch.

East of Escalante, Highway 12 might be one of the most beautiful stretches of desert highway in western North America. The landscape was spectacular and every turn presented more grandeur.



Shortly east of Boulder we stopped at a known Lewis's woodpecker nesting site to test our luck. Luck was on our side, for just moments after we got out of our vehicles, we saw one woodpecker on a very distant tree. Once we all got looks at it in the scope, we moved forward to see if we could get better views of it. While we were approaching the snag tree in which this woodpecker first appeared, two others showed themselves. We were successful in getting close enough views so that we could see the green and pink feathers of this elegant woodpecker. After some nice time with the woodpeckers, we continued on to one final incredible overlook called Homestead Overlook before heading to our lodging for the evening.

Sun., May 24 Capitol Reef National Park

For some, our last full day started with a pre-breakfast birding session behind the hotel in Torrey. We got some really nice looks at a Gamble's Quail, a singing Spotted Towhee and a couple of Bullock's Orioles. As the sun rose, the morning warmed and at about 7:00 am we made our way in to the restaurant for breakfast.

From Torrey we traveled to the end of the scenic drive to the Capitol Gorge trail in Capitol Reef National Park. The drive is incredible and the gorge gets us into a deep canyon of the geologic phenomena for which this area is known: The Waterpocket Fold. Hiking into the canyon really gives one a sense of scale and the grandeur of this place.

In addition to some of the usual suspects, we got our first look at the Canyon Wren. It appeared to be two parents feeding their chicks. As we walked further downstream, the incredible beauty of the canyon continued to reveal itself until we decide on a turnaround point and began our journey back upstream.

We enjoyed a picnic lunch under the shade of a gazebo and then drove the scenic drive back towards the Fremont River, where we would do a little more birdwatching. Like most rivers in the American Southwest, it was lined with Cottonwood trees creating a fantastic habitat for a diversity of all types of animal species.

As we walked down downstream along the river, we heard a Yellow-breasted Chat, but just could not get a good look at it. So, we continued upstream to see what else we could see. In addition to a White-winged Dove and Western-wood Pewee, which were both new for the trip, we saw a couple hikers on a nearby ridge with a backdrop of a couple thousand feet of vertical sandstone. This gave us a wonderful sense of scale and just how large this landscape really is.

Just as we thought we were done with the Chat and were leaving the river, we spotted a Chat right out in the open. Literally on the end of a dead branch and maybe the best open viewing any of us have ever seen of a Yellow-breasted Chat. This bird is known for being a 'skulker' and hard to observe. So, this viewing was extra special and allowed us to return to the vans without feeling like we were missing out on something!



Pleased with this sighting, we made our way to the visitor center for a short look around and then off to the petroglyphs just east of the scenic drive. After marveling at and discussing the prehistory of the region, we made our way back to a shaded area of the park with a nice seating arrangement where David was able to facilitate a closing appreciation circle.

He started by talking about the beauty of receiving a hand-written letter from another. Then he asked folks to imagine how a recipient would feel if they received a hand-written letter from them. He read a short piece by Terry Tempest Williams about the act of tenderness that is letter writing. During the appreciation circle, one individual would start by choosing one of the blank notecards from the table. They would then present this card to another member of the group and express something that they appreciated about that person or a reason that person enhanced their trip. After all the cards were chosen and appreciations expressed, David shared a reading about the value of sharing nature with others and how important this is these days. A few more folks expressed gratitude to the group for various reasons. Following this sentimental experience, we returned to Torrey for a brief rest and our final dinner together.

Mon., May 25 Torrey | St. George

We started the morning again with a pre-breakfast bird session. It was quiet, but we did get a decent look at a Western Meadowlark, our last new bird for the trip. After this bird session, we packed up and made our way to the Butch Cassidy Hideout in Circleville, Utah, where we enjoyed breakfast before continuing on our way to St. George. This was also the location where we parted ways with some folks going to the airport and others going back to La Quinta in St. George to enjoy one more evening before returning home the next day.

As expected, the goodbyes were heartfelt and the sentiments were sincere as we wished each other safe travels with wishes to see each other again, perhaps on another Naturalist Journeys adventure!

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