

Yellowstone: Bird, Bears and Wildlife

Trip Report | May 28- June 03, 2026

With Naturalist Journeys

by Wes Larson



Guided by Wes Larson and Hugh Simmons

**Participants: Mary Jo and Guy McDonald, Georgia and Jim Struhstaker,
Katie and Brad Nadolny, Fio Kerins and Hans Meltofte**

Thursday, May 28 – Bozeman to Gardiner Via Paradise Valley

After hotel pickups and introductions, we started our Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem adventure by driving through the always stunning Paradise Valley, tucked between the Absaroka and Gallatin Mountain ranges. Vibrant green snow-capped mountains gave way to the blue big sky, and as we traveled we observed a number of birds from the vehicles, including Osprey, Sandhill Cranes, American Kestrel and others. A stop at Emmigrant pond was productive as well and we had great looks at Trumpeter Swans, Yellow-Headed Blackbirds, Red-Winged Blackbirds, Cinnamon Teal, Great Blue Heron and others.

After arriving in Gardiner, we drove down the Old Yellowstone Road into a hardly visited part of the park where we got up-close views of Western Meadowlark as well as Horned Larks. We then settled into our always wonderful riverside rooms at the Absaroka Lodge and then we drove up Jardine Road to get a





view of the town from above while we looked for birds on the mountainside. It was an especially warm afternoon and the birds were scarce but the views were spectacular. Following the short excursion, we ate a delicious dinner at the Wonderland Café, probably the best tasting restaurant in town, did our first species list and then fell asleep to the special waning late evening light that you only get during summertime in the Northern Rockies.

Friday, May 29 – The Northern Range of YNP with Wolftracker

Sometimes getting up super early is worth it. We met Quinn from Wolftracker at 5:00 AM in Mammoth and then headed into the park. It was less than 20 minutes before we saw our first black bear roadside near Phantom Lake. As we drove into Little America and then the Lamar Valley, Quinn taught us about the history of the wolf reintroduction in Yellowstone as well as the current science on trophic cascades and how wolves likely influence many of the different animal and plant species in their ecosystems. Once we arrived in the Lamar Valley, we marveled at the long, open, green expanse of prairie, filled with Bison and Pronghorn. Surely the Lamar Valley is the closest thing we have in modern days to the kind of wildlife spectacle indigenous people and early explorers enjoyed throughout the Western United States. We quickly were able to find a Grizzly Bear with two yearling cubs on a distant mountain ridge, and we watched as all three dug in the ground in the search for roots and other underground sources of food.

Next, we drove back down the valley and managed to see two Wolves in the distance momentarily. Quinn decided that we should head in the direction they were going and as we got to Little America, one of the cars got to see a group of three Coyotes chase away a black Wolf and then all of our travelers watched the Wolf on the side of the river at a very close distance. As if the day wasn't already good enough, as we got back into the Lamar Valley, we were able to observe a Grizzly Bear on a nearby slope, and it was much closer than the group of three we had seen earlier. We then continued on to the Footbridge pullout where we had a delicious picnic breakfast and were treated to a group of six Coyote pups and one adult on the hill on the other side of Soda Butte Creek. There isn't much that is cuter than Coyote puppies, and it was a real treat to watch while we ate breakfast. We continued up the road and had a coyote cross right in front of our cars, and then we stopped in a pullout to look at Mountain Goats on the cliff-face with some new kids that had just been born.

We then started on our way home but took a small diversion to the Tower Falls area to see both an adult Peregrine Falcon that was incubating eggs and some nearby Bighorn Sheep that also had lambs that had



recently been born. Finally, we took the drive back to Mammoth, passing a Black Bear along the way and we dropped Quinn off in Mammoth. Our group had lunch in the historic building that now houses the Terrace Grill, and then we explored the Mammoth Geothermal Terraces, where some of us observed Mountain Bluebirds, Killdeer, Pine Siskin and a few in our group even saw a large bull snake.

As we drove back to Gardiner, we stopped to look at some waterfowl in a small pond and were lucky to see a number of species including Cinnamon Teal, Bufflehead and Ringneck Duck and we also got to see a Terrestrial Garter Snake up close and personal when Wes handled it so the entire group was able to get a better look.

Back in Gardiner we rested for a bit and then had another great dinner at the Iron Horse, and following dinner some of our group walked around town to do a little birding. It was a perfect way to end a wonderful first full day in Yellowstone.

Saturday, May 30 – Geothermal Day

Today we woke up, picked up some great breakfast and coffee from Bear's Brew, and then headed into the park. After passing some courting Black Bears near Mammoth, we headed to our first stop, Swan Lake, where we observed the resident Trumpeter Swans, as well as Sandhill Cranes, Lesser Scaups, Mallards, Buffleheads, Western Meadowlark and many other birds, as well as some nearby Elk. It was a great place to enjoy breakfast and some nice company. We then drove on to the Norris Geyser Basin, where Hugh gave us a lesson in the geothermal activity of the park and we marveled at the otherworldly look of the basin. Continuing on, we observed a lot of Bison and Elk from the cars, and then another Black Bear near the Madison Junction. Our next stop was the Midway Geyser Basin and the famous Grand Prismatic Spring, and a bit of moody weather meant we didn't have to deal with the typical crowds and it was a memorable experience walking through the mist of the springs and seeing the beautiful bacteria mats and boiling hot water. Then we continued onward to Old Faithful and after some time in the Inn, we watched Old Faithful erupt while a beautiful Mountain Bluebird flew around in front of us on the ground. Some of the group then did a short walk around some of the thermal features, and then we ate lunch in the historic Old Faithful Inn.

Heading back, we stopped at Fountain Paint Pots, which was a favorite destination for many of our group due to the beautiful springs, interesting paint pots, and constant geyser eruptions, and then we got back into the vehicles and drove through Mammoth and to Floating Island Lake, where we did some birding and managed to see some great new birds including some courting Ruddy Ducks and lots of flying Tree Swallows. On the way back to Mammoth and Gardiner, a stop for a bathroom break led to Wes investigating a nearby draw and finding a black bear that was chewing on an old Bison Skull. It was our fourth black bear of the day and a very memorable sighting. We drove back to Gardiner in high spirits and our final surprise was a beautiful Glover's Silk Moth near our rooms at the lodge. A nice dinner at the Wonderland Café topped off the night and brought a close to our time in Gardiner.

Sunday, May 31 – Full Day Wildlife Safari in Yellowstone

Once again, we got up early and picked up breakfast from Bear's Brew and headed into the park. We passed through Mammoth, Norris and Canyon Village, before making our first stops in the beautiful Hayden Valley, and our reason for stopping...? Grizzly Bears! We first saw a lone grizzly running across the sage on the other side of a huge expanse of sagebrush, and right around the corner a courting pair of grizzlies, a huge male and a reluctant female. Then just a short drive down the road, yet another grizzly much closer and digging for roots in the rain. It was four different grizzly bears within a couple miles of each other, and as we ate our breakfast and watched the bears, we marveled at our luck. We also were





able to do some birding and saw Barrow's Goldeneye, Cinnamon Teal, Bufflehead and lots of other waterfowl in a nearby pond.

We then continued our drive and stopped at Lehardy Rapids where we were treated to some beautiful male Harelquin Ducks in the middle of the river in addition to a couple females. On the far bank there were also a family of American Dippers feeding two of their young, and we also had a quick flyby from a Belted Kingfisher. We would return later to the spot to spend more time with both the ducks and the dippers, but it was a great start to our time in the Yellowstone Lake part of the park. We then turned at fishing bridge and headed out toward Lake Butte, which is often considered the best area for grizzly bears in the entire ecosystem. We just caught the end of some drama with another courting pair of grizzlies and saw the male chasing the female over the ridge and out of sight. We stayed in the area to bird a bit and picked up some new species like American White Pelican, Wilson's Snipe and Ring-Billed Gull. It was then back in the cars for a quick look at a Black Bear by Fishing Bridge, and then we slowly started making our way north again. After stopping once more at Lehardy Rapids, we drove back through the Hayden Valley and up to Artist Point where we took in the grandeur of the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River. It's a sight that never gets old and we decided to also take our lunch in the parking lot. Next, we drove up and over the scenic Dunraven Pass and dropped down into the Tower area of Yellowstone. We once again stopped to view the Peregrine Falcon in its nest and then also got lucky to see a newborn Bighorn Sheep lamb with its mother. As we drove into the area often referred to as Little America, we stopped to admire a particularly handsome group of Pronghorn and then continued down into the Slough Creek area. It was now raining pretty hard so rather than spend much time birding in Slough, we opted to head back out in to the Lamar Valley and then through the dense forest near the Northeast Entrance to the park. We then got our first glimpses of both Silver Gate and Cooke City, the latter being our home for the next few nights. We settled into the Alpine Inn and got a nice and lively dinner at the Bistro. A wonderful end to a VERY eventful day.

Monday, June 1 – Day on the Northern Range

Today we decided to spend the entire day on the Northern Range of Yellowstone. We let ourselves sleep in a touch longer than normal and then went for coffee and breakfast sandwiches and Pastries at Cooke City Coffee. You wouldn't expect a coffee shop this tasty in a tiny town like Cooke City, but we're thrilled it's there! We then got into the vehicles and drove toward the park. Our first surprise was in Silver Gate, and we got a nice look at both a female Moose and her calf in some willows near the road. After entering

the park, we enjoyed some particularly beautiful morning light. A recent rainstorm had cleared, and the park felt like it was glowing and fresh and alive.

Our first stop in Yellowstone today was Slough Creek. The Slough Creek drainage is famous for its wildlife and today it definitely did not disappoint. We went on a short hike to do some birding and got multiple views of Calliope Hummingbirds, Hammond's Flycatchers, Warbling Vireo, MacGillivray's Warbler, a Golden Eagle and many other birds. But the best sighting was still to come and happened as we were about to leave the drainage. We saw a North American Badger that was bringing a dead ground squirrel back to its den where two badger kits were waiting for their next meal. We watched for over an hour as the adult continued to leave and then bring back more ground squirrels and this sighting led to us voting badgers as the mammal of the trip on our last night. While we waited, we also spotted a black wolf on the hillside and for a few minutes it was hard to decide where to point our binoculars, which is the best kind of problem.

After eating some lunch in Slough Creek, we left and drove to the Tower area where we saw two Black Bears grazing in a beautiful meadow. Tower is one of the best places in the country to see American Black Bears, and it certainly didn't disappoint today. After leaving Tower we drove back toward Lamar Valley and the Northeast Entrance to the park, but not before stopping at Pebble Creek where we saw one of the closest and most photogenic American Dippers you could possibly imagine. It was a real treat and a nice cap on the end of the day.

Tuesday, June 2 – Early Morning Safari and the Beartooth Pass

We decided to have an early morning sunrise trip to Yellowstone and left Cooke City around 5:30 AM. It turned out to be a great idea because we saw three Moose before even getting to the park entrance, including a big bull in the road and the female with her calf again. But once we got into the park, we had another incredible sighting when we followed a Grizzly Bear that was walking in the road for about 15 minutes. We managed to get the vehicles parallel to the bear as it wove through the trees and deadfall on the side of the road, and it was without a doubt our best look at a grizzly so far. The morning continued to produce great sightings and we saw another large bull Moose near round prairie and then a really beautiful herd of Bison in the Lamar Valley. The herd had a lot of newborn calves in tow, and we got to watch as they frolicked and ran around the adults. It was really a perfect way to start the day and as we got ready to leave, two Coyotes crossed the road not far from us. The cherry on top was that as we drove back to Cooke City, we finally saw our first Red Fox of the trip sitting next to the road in Silver Gate.





After breakfast at Cooke City Coffee, we got our winter gear and started the drive up to the Beartooth Pass. If you've never done this drive before, it's hard to really imagine just how beautiful and breathtaking the views are for essentially the whole drive. Sprawling forests and snowcapped peaks give way to alpine splendor that rivals mountains anywhere on earth. It's without a doubt one of the most beautiful drives in the country, if not the world. And there's some great birds too! On top we saw American Pipit, Mountain Bluebird and the much sought-after Black Rosy Finch. These interesting little finches take advantage of feeding opportunities on the melting edge of snowdrifts, and they are always a treat to find on top of the pass. After spending some time soaking in the views, we drove down and ate lunch on the edge of Soda Butte Creek and did some more birding. We had our first good look at a Western Tanager, some up-close views of Yellow-Rumped Warblers and a number of other great birds.

Following our return to Cooke City, some of our group went to check out a reported fox den in Silver Gate, and while we didn't see any of the fox kits, we did see one of the adults hunting and successfully catching a Montane Vole. Its jump through the air was impressive as it completed its arc and slammed into the ground, pulling the vole from a hole. It was a real treat to see and while we waited at the den site for a bit, we did see two more moose as well as a few of the fox kits up on the hillside.

A farewell dinner at the Beartooth Café capped off the night, and we took the chance to trade travel stories as well as reminisce on our favorite memories of the trip. We each submitted our votes for the favorite mammal and favorite bird of the trip and the American Badger and Harlequin Duck emerged as the victors.

Wednesday, June 3 - A Final Morning in Yellowstone and Return to Bozeman

Rather than spend the morning in waiting in Cooke City, we opted to have an early breakfast and spend a few more hours in Yellowstone before departing for Gardiner and Bozeman. The morning delivered a few more distant looks at Grizzly Bears, a much closer Black Bear and a Coyote right next to the road. As well as our first elk calves on the hillside as we drove through Mammoth. Right before leaving the park, we passed a particularly handsome Pronghorn buck and it was a very nice last sighting as we drove out of the north entrance of Yellowstone and back into Gardiner.

We took in the beautiful surroundings of Paradise Valley as we drove north and while it was hard to enter back into civilization as we drove into Bozeman, we all agreed that it had been the trip of a lifetime and that we had been truly lucky when it came to the mammal and bird sightings that we had. But the

luckiest part of the trip was the overall wonderful energy and kindness of the group. This was a group of travelers that bonded quickly and we shared a lot of stories, laughs and excitement as we experienced the wonder and majesty of the world's first National Park and the premiere wildlife park in North America. Hope to see you all on a future trip!

Mammal of the Trip: North American Badger

Bird of the Trip: Harlequin Duck



Trip Report Photos – Page 1: Yellow-headed Blackbird (Georgia), Wolf on the move (Wes) **Page 2:** Wildlife watching in Yellowstone (Hugh), Roadside Coyote (Fio) **Page 3:** American Bison (Brad), Mammoth geothermal area (Hugh) **Page 4:** American Dipper (Georgia), Lehardy Rapids observation deck (Brad), Grizzly Bear (Brad), Harlequin Duck in the rapids (Hugh) **Page 5:** Black Bear (Hugh), Bucking baby bison! (Georgia) **Page 6:** Red Fox, (Brad), MacGillivray's Warbler (Wes), American Badger (Georgia) **Page 7:** Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler (Brad), Elk crossing (Wes) **Page 8:** Our great Yellowstone group! (Hugh)