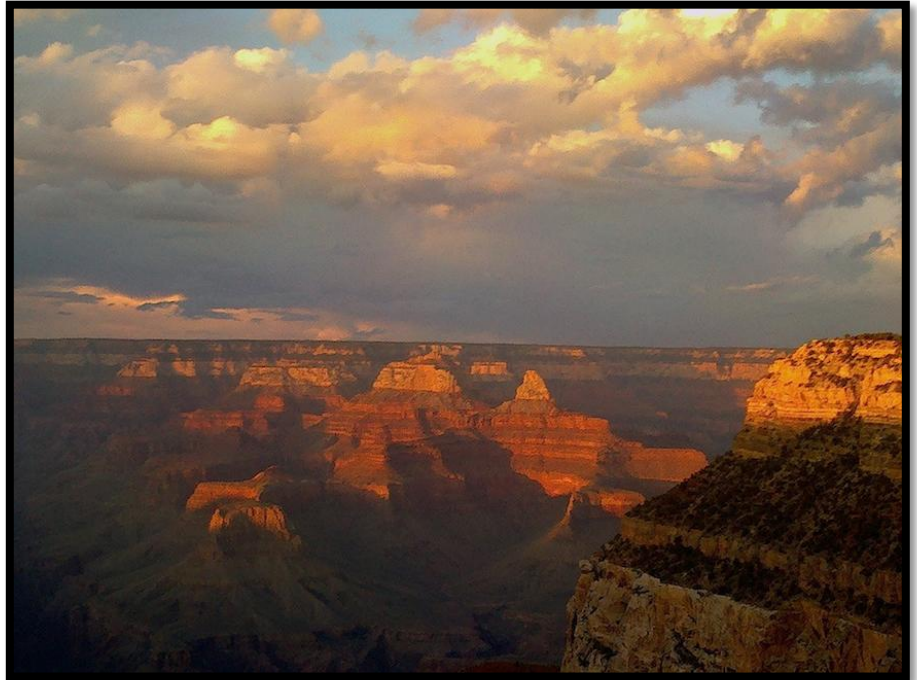


Naturalist Journeys – Arizona & Utah

16 – 24 September, 2011 – Daily Journal
Greg Smith, Guide, Wynne Browne, Assistant Guide
And 10 participants

Fri., Sept. 16 - Arrival in Phoenix, AZ

After meeting at the airport, we headed north on our way to the Grand Canyon. The weather was mild and the skies clear as we caught our first glimpse of this ten-mile wide wonder. The sun was setting as we celebrated our outstanding welcome dinner at the the gracious and historic El Tovar Restaurant. And that sunset was outstanding!



Sat., Sept. 17 - Grand Canyon NP

After a hearty breakfast we drove to the new park Visitor Center and then the Yavapai Geology Museum. From there we hiked the rim trail with its excellent interpretive displays that let us walk “through time”. For two miles we watched as the canyon shared view after view. Our hike dipped and rolled with the erratic rim as we watched the different layers change hues

as the sun rose higher in the sky.



A circle of
cavorting Common
Ravens croaked
loudly drawing our
attention skyward.
And there in their
midst soared the
largest and rarest
bird in North
America, an adult

California Condor. With wings set, it glided directly overhead and slowly disappeared to the northeast. A great start to our trip!

Our next stop was the shuttle up to Hopi Point where we watched the late afternoon sun light up and then change the color of every layer of sandwiched rock in the canyon. The shadows were a deep purple, while the sunlit walls conformed to various shades of pastel. It is almost surreal to experience that magic on a calm night in northern Arizona...

Sun., Sept. 18 – Zion NP

After a delicious breakfast we headed east to drive from one side of the canyon to the other. We stopped at the Desert View watchtower and wandered from level to level marveling at the design and decoration of the structure created by Mary Colter. We spent more time than planned, but the building and its interior did its best to capture our imagination.

We made it to the entrance gate at Zion under a sunny sky that made for excellent looks at the sculpted sandstone. But it wasn't the sandstone that caught our attention as we entered the park.

Zion has a population of about 100 Desert Bighorn Sheep. We pulled around a curve and were fortunate enough to see a ram and a ewe right next to the road. As we looked up the side of the slope here were a few more rams and a number of



ewes! What a treat to see such a rare mammal right along side the road!

As we drove off, we really had to focus on the scenery, but our minds were still with the sheep. After a few stops we started to realize we needed to photograph the spires and multi-colored bands of slick rock. Checkerboard Mesa is one of Zion's many stunning vistas, and the drive in from there unfolds in a most intriguing way. Finally we made it through the big tunnel and headed to our lodging for the next two nights – the Desert Pearl Inn. Nice lodging and splendid view, and at this time of year, we appreciate its location with more hours of daylight and precious sun outside the canyon.

Mon., Sept. 19 – Zion National Park

Half of the group started the day with a shuttle ride up to the top of the canyon that was home to the Virgin River. It was a very breezy morning in the canyon making birding opportunities a challenge; but not too much of a challenge, as an immature California Condor sat atop a snag at Big Bend. A definite treat for everyone, as this was a much longer look than the one in the Grand Canyon that just soared by.

Making several stops along the way, we finally made it to the top where we hiked the paved walkway that paralleled the swollen Virgin River. Today no one was going to hike up the Zion Narrows where the river was concentrated by two immense sandstone walls; there was just too much water.

The other group spent the morning exploring the eastern half of the park. More desert bighorn sheep and lots of geology in the Checkerboard area. We did a short hike and talked about the adaptation of the different desert plants and also spent some time exploring the tracks left in the sand by the park's four-legged residents.

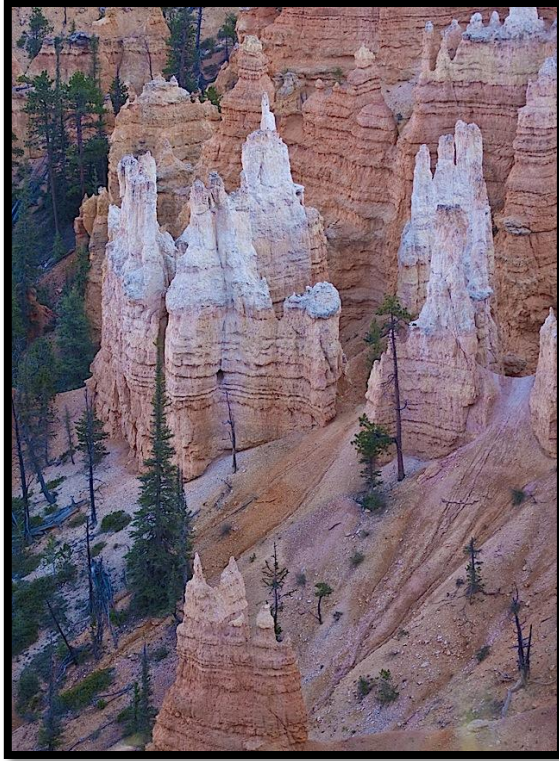
After we all had lunch, each group reversed its exploration of the park. The immature California Condor was still enjoying the view at Big Bend as an adult soared by for a brief view. It was a little on the warm side and I think we all envied the cool air the condors were experiencing!

Tues., Sept. – Bryce Canyon NP

We took a run up Kolob Terrace Road hoping to intersect with Utah 14. It was wonderful scenery as we climbed higher toward Kolob Reservoir. Beyond the reservoir we started to see aspens in fall color. Not a huge number, but enough to light up the hillsides. And then we got distracted as a Northern Goshawk flew across the road – the first of three on this trip!



After having lunch in Cedar City we started up Utah 14 towards Cedar Break National Monument. Cedar Breaks is at an elevation of over 10,000 feet. The air is clean, but warm and the scenery was just a taste of what is ahead in Bryce! We got back in the vans and birded our way to our next national park.



We did make it to Bryce Canyon National Park with a stop in Red Rock Canyon, which was being lit up by the late afternoon sun. Exquisite corals and reds were glowing. The Sevier River was flowing freely as faraway clouds let loose with torrential downpours. The pronghorn near our night's lodging was a fitting finish to our day.

Wed., Sept. 21 – Bryce NP

The morning was bright and clear, so we headed to the rim of the amphitheater to see what birds were foraging in the morning sun. A Grace's Warbler, Say's Phoebe and a very docile White-breasted Nuthatch (and other species) all gave us great looks. Then it was time for breakfast before we split into smaller groups for hiking and birding!

Those that went hiking did the Queen/Navajo loop while those of us that went birding found more birds and then headed over to the local town, the local Utah prairie dog town.

This endangered species' distribution is limited to the SW corner of Utah. From a population of 90,000, trapping and poisoning has dwindled their population to less than 3300. The park is a safe haven for this once common animal.

We took a lunch up to Rainbow View and settled into the 9000 foot elevation prior to our afternoon hike. We were off to see the bristlecone pine about a mile away. They were fascinating,



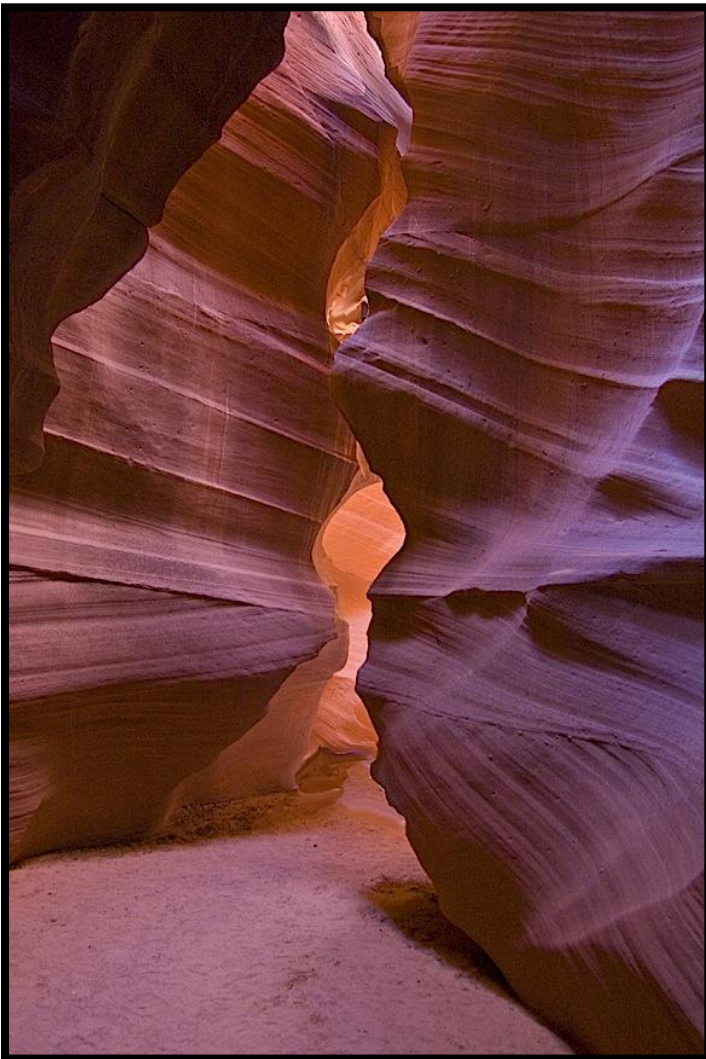
but it was their dead brothers and sisters that stole the show. Their skeletons positioned against the blue sky and clouds made for striking photographs. Another highlight and an exceptional one!

We finished the day with dinner at the Bryce Canyon Lodge before watching the sunset take another colorful swipe at the amphitheater.

Thurs., Sept.22 – Antelope Canyon and Lake Powell

We left Bryce Canyon early today so we could be in Page, AZ before our one PM tour of Antelope Canyon. We climbed into the truck and headed out to the Navajo Nation reservation with our guide Carl at the south end of Antelope Canyon.

This section of the canyon has a big sandstone barrier that impedes the passage of water down canyon. But water always finds a way, and here it has created a slot canyon. A narrow slot no more than six feet wide and 50 – 60 feet in height is the only escape route for the water charging downstream. This was our hike!



The inside of the canyon has been smoothed by high velocity water being forced through the narrow channel. Smooth sandstone revealing layered colors of iron-stained rock. We followed the route further and further back into the slot. Here and there a shaft of sunlight lit the floor, a sharp contrast to walls of the slot. Sand rolled in from the top after a breeze cooled the sweat on our faces. We made it to the end of the canyon before turning around and retracing our steps to the entrance of Antelope Canyon.

Time to head to our rooms at the Lake Powell Resort!

Fri., Sept. 23 – Rainbow Bridge

After an early breakfast we boarded the Ethel B for the fifty-mile ride on Lake Powell to Rainbow Bridge. It took us

two hours as the early morning sun lit up the buttes and plateaus that surrounded the lake. Rocks took the shape of camels, cobras and more. We turned to starboard and entered a narrow channel with walls towering over 400' in height. We slowly motored further back into the channel until the floating dock we tied up to prevented us from going any further.

The hike back to Rainbow Bridge is only half a mile, but the scenery never stopped being impressive. And then the bridge appeared. This is the largest natural bridge in North America and spans a canyon over 200 feet in width. The softer Navajo sandstone was eroded away leaving the harder arch rock standing.



Arches on solid walls are a common sight in this sandstone country. Slabs of rock peel off the vertical walls in rounded pockets. You won't see angled breaks in sandstone, as there isn't any structural support in this weak rock to support that kind of fracture (Besides, small grains of sand and silt get washed out between the lenses of sandstone). So arches with their inherent structural strength are all that we see.

But a bridge is all about erosion. The incessant pounding of water on a relatively weak material creates most sandstone arches!

It took us a little longer to return to the marina but it was a gorgeous day, so we didn't mind! We did get back in plenty of time to get ready for our farewell dinner that we celebrated that evening at the resort! Tomorrow, a four hour drive back through beautiful saguaro desert to reach the Phoenix airport for departures home. Great trip!