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## **Trip Report - Utah Hiking: Bryce, Zion and Grand Canyon** **Oct. 1-9, 2011**

*Peg Abbott, Pat Owens and 8 participants, including one from Spain who we were pleased to welcome.*

### **Sat., Oct. 1** **Arrival in Salt Lake City / Bryce Canyon**

Several of the group arrived in Salt Lake City a day early and Carol, Pat and Arturo made a memorable trip to Antelope Island to see Bison, Pronghorn, American Avocets and

other species along the causeway and out onto the island. Peg arrived early today and went off to shop for our lunches; others gathered late morning at a nearby hotel where Ed and Beth had breakfast. With a few cell phone calls to connect, we were soon on our way south.

Utah's canyon country is not readily accessible from any major airport, but every route into the



region is scenic. For the first two hours or so, we stared off to 11,000-12,000 ft. peaks of the Wasatch Range until passing the southern terminus at Mt. Nebo, where we stopped for a break. We tried to sample local lunch foods what looked like a fruit stand, but the place was packed with pumpkin-hunting children and their families who were enjoying hay wagon rides and festivities, so with making time in mind, we moved on to dine at a non-descript truck stop, the type found off nearly every truck ramp in America. There were Common Grackles and Black-billed Magpies in the parking



lot, and Red-tailed Hawks and Northern Harriers flying over the sage-steppe and fields. Some Dairy Queen ice cream made up for the less than local fare.

South of Interstate 70 we passed from the Southern Rockies into country defined by the Marysville Volcanic Field, a colorful route through sculptured hills of pumice, ash and hardened sedimentary layers. A particularly hard cliff area had been used for centuries by the Fremont Indians for their drawings. We walked a state park created to preserve this. It was a dramatic light day, and though blustery, it felt great to walk and we took an hour to wind about the trails. Rabbitbrush was ablaze with brilliant yellow color and





against it the Utah Asters shone a deep purple-blue. We saw some rock art panels up close and others at a distance with our binoculars. There were animals, human figures, symbols, centipede-like creatures and more. Views from the final ridge were spectacular, with deep reds and mustard yellow colors peeking through pines and sage.



A driving rain came on suddenly and with luck we were in fair range of the vans and the event served to scurry us on our way. We followed the Sevier River south, passing by the rich yellow and chocolate chevrons of rock at Big Rock Candy Mountain. Another trail along the river looked inviting, as colors of the willows and cottonwood were displaying a lovely hue, but it was time to reach our destination. Peg had a back road in mind with a bit of trepidation; as it was dirt and rain in this country can cause havoc on that substrate. However, there was enough gravel we did just fine, and we enjoyed the expansive landscapes. We passed several Utah Prairie Dog

areas but they were underground in the inclement weather, and no Coyotes were on patrol as they are on many days. We passed through the entry gate to Bryce just at dusk. After settling in to our wonderful cabins, we conversed over dinner like old friends at a big table in Bryce Canyon Lodge's lovely log and rock dining room.

## Sun., Oct. 2

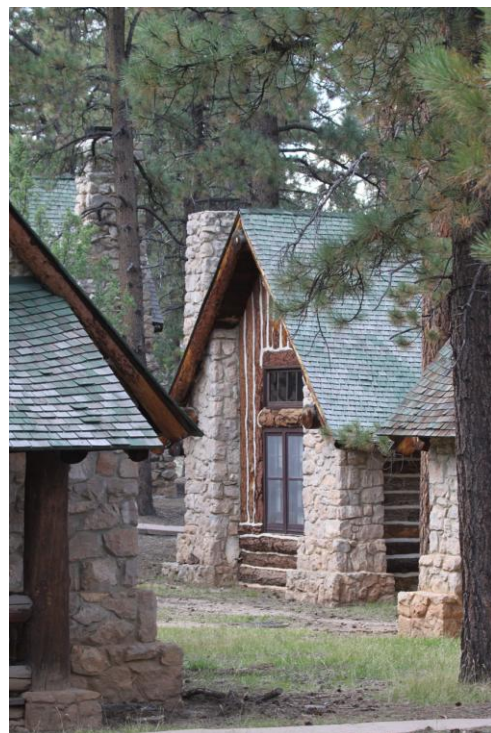
## Sunrise at Bryce / Great "Intro" Hikes at Bryce

Several of the group walked out to the rim, quite near our cabins, to take in the beauty of sunrise. It was a first visit for many, and Linda came back to say, "You didn't tell us it was this beautiful!" After breakfast, we bathed ourselves in this beauty for the full day. Donning boots and daypacks, carrying plenty of water and an abundant lunch, we headed down into the maze of spires that comprise Bryce. Peg explained the geology of this giant amphitheater, perched on the edge of one of the sub-plateaus of the larger Colorado Plateau(s) region. Bryce sits on the Paunsaugunt **and** is drained by a tributary of the Paria River, at this time of year running dry. Our walk was impressive from the start, winding down to three massive Douglas Fir trees that grow in a crack not much wider than one car would fit through. Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels and Least Chipmunks darted about. We got great looks at



Townsend's Solitaires that sang from perches on both rock and trees. The conifers are fascinating here and quite varied: Utah and Common junipers, Ponderosa, Limber, and Bristlecone pines, Douglas Fir and a real beauty, Grand Fir.

Down among the spires, one's perspective changes back and forth from positive to negative spaces, inverting one's view so that rocks frame shapes in the sky. The sky was deep, deep blue and we commented on this being the perfect place for the once standard, Kodachrome film, **so** deep were the reds and blues. Peg had billed the shorter loop (Wall Street to Queen's Garden) as a good "Intro" hike, but then urged





all on to the longer and more strenuous Peek-a-boo trail. Up and down we went, winding amid spectacular spires to take in longer views of the full landscape, one that presents an indescribable array of texture and color, all on a massive scale. Fred went out ahead and hiked another two miles to Bryce Point and back rejoining the group near the horse corrals. We had lunch on a high point, where we crept into the shade for a break from the intensity of the sun. Had we known what our future weather would be this week we'd likely have basked liked lizards. All in all, we returned from this 7.5 mile adventure with sore feet and smiles, and after a break, headed off to dinner at the Lodge.



### **Mon., Oct. 3 A day in Fairyland / The Storm Moves In...**

We woke to the promise of another good day, but knew from watching the news that a major, unseasonable storm was on the way, and would likely hit by afternoon. We did a car shuttle to start the day, descending into the canyon at the Fairyland Trail, where Peg did a brief review of the park's geology. This is one of the great hikes of the west, challenging (Carol tallied 2300 feet of overall gain and loss throughout the day) but sublime. The scenery changes with every turn, and hues of the landscape change with

the light. We wound our way in and out of vistas, up and down several ridges that fanned out from Boat Mesa, the centerpiece of our walk.

We chose a lunch spot with a view of the full valley near Tropic, Utah. Steller's Jays came inquisitively



to our lunch spot, and Ed and Arturo spotted a Clark's Nutcracker harvesting seeds in a bowl of conifers at the brink of the rim. After lunch we set off a bit renewed, happy with a fairly level expanse of trail, one we could walk with ease, frame our photos and stretch our legs.



But then came another DOWN, which meant another UP, oh please, oh please, just one! At the bottom of the DOWN we took a side spur to see a natural bridge, one perched quite high above us with several smaller ones on the rim nearby. Our stronger hikers took off and had some time to lounge, the rest of us feigned interest in any living thing that would allow us to stop and breathe on the ascent. In time we all reached the top.



We wanted to leave time to drive out to Rainbow Point, stopping at vista points along the way. Everyone was beautiful, different, in tone and inspiration. At one, a tolerant Common Raven posed for views, lovely as red rock was the background. We particularly liked looking down through a massive natural bridge. Two beautiful Mule Deer bucks grazed on the road margin and their nonchalant attitude afforded us some fine photos. The promised storm was moving in by the time we got out here, so we made our stops brief, zipping our coats and donning our hats and gloves. Rainbow Point sits at over 9000 ft. and by the time we pulled into the parking lot the rain was coming down in earnest, promising to change to snow at any moment. A few brave ones hopped out for

the view, but our hopes of birding here (usually a good spot on this mixed-conifer trail) were dashed. It was time to call it a day! Some opted for pizza and beer right on our arrival back, and others selected to take showers and then return to the lodge later for a relaxing dine. Carol, Arturo, Linda, Fred and Pat had great laughs when they saw the size of the pizzas. We had ordered enough for twice our party so we offered free pizza to the next couple through the door. Smiles all around.







**Tues., Oct. 4**

**On To Zion / Fall Turns to Winter at Cedar Breaks NM**

We felt a little sad to leave Bryce with its golden red world of spires. Clouds were heavy bellied and gathering at the rim as

we left, but some breaks with blue sky kept us hopeful we'd have time to explore the maze of even redder spires at Cedar Breaks National Monument if we headed that way. Peg had doubts about driving her favorite back road from there, through California Condor county near Kolob Reservoir, into Bryce, explaining that the soils of the road bed had a lot of clay, not a good situation with the recent moisture. We left straight away after breakfast, wanting to do some walking when we got there. We made a brief stop at Red Canyon to admire its intense hues, and zigzagged around to reach the road labeled "this is not 89". A large flock of Pinyon Jays flew over and we stopped to hear their nasal chatter and get



good looks at them and at a male Cassin's Finch. Our next stop was at the far end of Panguitch Lakes to look for ducks. There were thousands, though far away as water levels were low. Our list included Gadwalls, Mallards and Redheads; all drab in eclipse plumage, but the rather stunning thing here were veritable clouds of coots. We must have caught a big wave of migrating American Coots, set down ahead of the storm, and feeding like mad. It was really fun to watch their antics and squabbles on the mud.

The next serendipitous event made the day

for many. Driving up the winding mountain road to Cedar Breaks (over 10,000 ft.), we saw the SUV towing a boat ahead of us put on the brake lights, seeing something ahead in the road. We'd had our eyes keen to see Elk, but here was another mob of hoofed mammals coming our way, domestic sheep, 1700 of them according to the lone cowboy moving them through. He was hunkered down in his thin coat while the two working dogs, in fine fur, kept the herd in line. They nearly bowled Beth over for a few pats and "good dogs" before moving on.







The front sheep hesitated as we got out of the car for pictures, but the sheer number coming behind them pushed them on, and they merely split like fish in the sea around coral, passing us by. They totally surrounded the small car behind us. A few had black faces; all had thick wool and were heading off this mountain before this early snowstorm.

We continued on, chatting loudly about the sheep, when we came around the corner to cars stopped again, this time for aspen. We'd been seeing groves of nice yellows, pale to bright, interspersed with pines, but here there were lush dark spruce reaching up like ladders into to orange and golden crowns. One photographer looked parked for the day. We joined him, trying to capture in still frames light that played like spotlights on a band stage. Clouds were whipping overhead. Sun would break



through and close rapidly, lighting up one stand after another, sometimes a ridge, sometimes a lone tree in a meadow. We could see a couple of the large volcanic peaks that dot this high plateau, creating a backdrop to the amphitheater of colorful sediments that comprise Cedar Breaks.



We got to the first viewpoint of the monument and Carol's voice squeaked from under her hood, "It's COLD". We got out for brief views, but the winds held the power of a winter gale, and a moist sleet was beginning to fall. Peg wisely cancelled the picnic lunch (with abundant thanks from helper Pat), and headed the group to the main overlook, where a warm visitor center could be used like a blind as we waited for the sun to break through. As we made a dash for this shelter, valiant Arturo rescuing Peg's wallet that fell in the rush, but it seemed we'd arrived in vain with gray clouds all around. But within minutes the squall went through, and while still wild in spirit, the storm allowed us to experience a

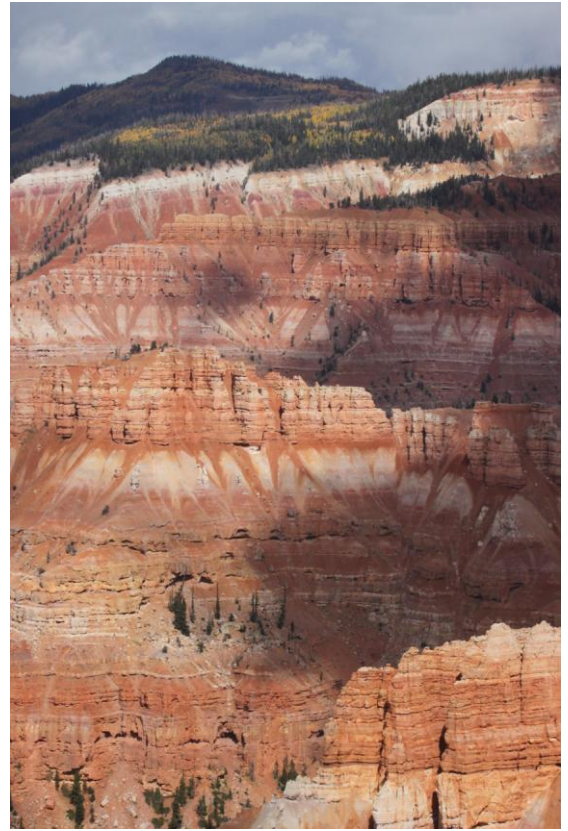
dramatic show of light on this splendid place. Additionally a talented woman park ranger had chosen Amazing Birds as her topic of the Noon ranger show, and she enjoyed interacting with our group. She started by using a rope to show the wingspan of her featured species, 11 feet for the Condor down to a small one, which Beth



immediately chimed in as “Clark’s Nutcracker”. She said no one had ever guessed this, but we are aficionados of this avian jester, known for its marvelous memory, as Peg started a Master’s degree on this species and had brought its story to the group’s attentions.



We set our hopes on getting hot soup in a town, so being after Noon, we headed down, passing 15,000 year-old dark lava that held clusters of bright colored aspens. We passed a couple ponds, finding an Eared Grebe and many more coots. Late in the season and on the late end of lunch, the first town’s restaurants were closed, and we cautiously went back to

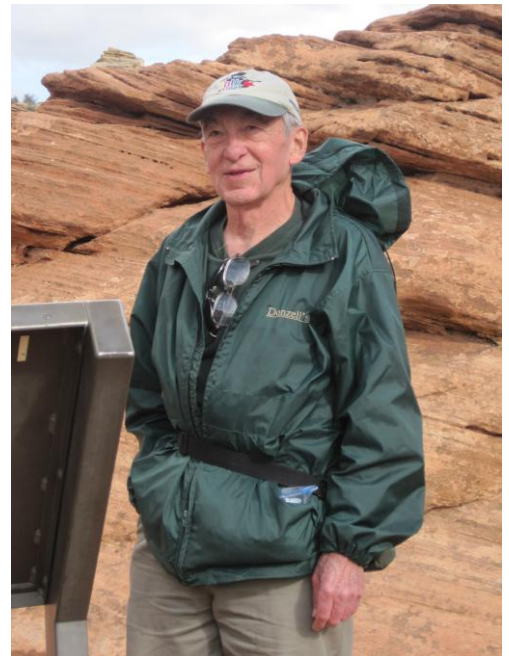


the picnic plan and stopped at an interpretive kiosk and park area created by the Escalante - Grand Staircase National Monument. We all chose to sit in the sun, seeking its warmth as we looked off to green apples in the adjacent orchards, wondering just how they would get ripe this fall season with the cold coming on so soon. Further down the road we found some excellent coffees, a mountain bluebird, and at least a fenced in herd of Elk, with a magnificent bull that bugled for Arturo to admire. Bob bought the group some local organic apples at the unusual coffee house, built to look like a huge boulder.



Our next stop was inside Zion National Park, at the magical scored sandstone massif of Checkerboard Mesa. The Bighorn Sheep that sometimes reside here were likely off seeking shelter, but for us conditions were improving and it was time to put on our boots and walk. We did the 2-mile

trail roundtrip trail called Canyon Overlook that takes off just at the Zion Tunnel, and were rewarded with a nice array of flowers blooming against the warmth of a rust-colored rock wall, and fabulous views of the monoliths of Zion at our end point. All remarked on how different this bold, massive place of rock was than

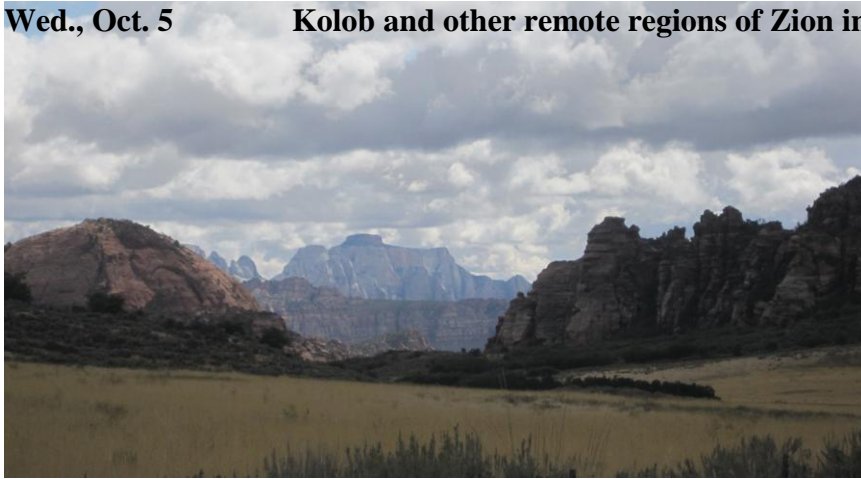




Bryce. We drove down through it en route to Springdale, where we settled into our most comfortable lodgings at the Desert Pearl. Carol got in a quick swim in their fabulous pool, others enjoyed some down time. For a bit more exercise we walked to the other end of town for a merry dinner, with a super waitress serving us, at the Bit and Spur. Here sweet potato tamales, fresh fish dishes and roasted pork abundantly delighted our palettes.

**Wed., Oct. 5**

**Kolob and other remote regions of Zion in the SNOW!**



Did our instructions say to expect 70 F ° at Zion? We set out today to explore the Kolob section of Zion, a spectacular outcrop of salmon-colored rock with intricate canyons, sheer scarlet walls, and hanging canyons.

The sky was open as we drove past the small towns of Rockville and Virgin, traveling back in time through older rock layers that underlie the splendor of sandstone from which Zion's monoliths

are carved. But as we approached Interstate 15, with its coat of Great Basin vegetation, the clouds whirled in. Sadly, rain precluded the 5-mile hike we hoped to take, but we enjoyed the scenic drive, and bundled up for a shorter walk at the end of it that offered us panoramic views. At one of our stops, Linda spotted a Canyon Wren, which pleased us by uttering its descending signature call.

The heater in the van felt pretty darn good as we drove to our next location. We retraced our steps as far as Virgin, and then parked for a walk at the lowest elevation possible, that of Coal Pits Wash, where we walked on sandy soils up a lovely cottonwood-lined stream. We saw Lesser Goldfinches, Black-capped Chickadees, White-crowned and Chipping Sparrows, House Finches and a Rock Wren. The scenery was very inviting, but as weather seemed to be closing in even at this elevation we headed on, driving into the ghost town of Grafton to have our lunch. The skies let loose at this juncture, not altogether comfortable as this was a slippery gumbo road to return on, but it gave us a sense of what the Mormon pioneers faced in trying to settle the area, and of how lovingly they crafted their homes, schools and barns. This is a wide area of the Virgin River where alfalfa is now grown, and on the margins of these fields Linda spotted a Lark Bunting. Views are marvelous in all direction. We made one more stop at the park's Visitor Center, before a break back at the hotel. Tonight was a free night, so everyone fanned out to sample their choice among the town's restaurants.



**Thurs., Oct. 6**

**Zion's Narrows / a Hike to Twin Gates and Snow on the Hunt for Condors**

This morning we realized we'd have one more day of dancing with the storm, so we set out while it was good to ride the tram up Zion's inner canyon. We rode to the end, and walked the paved trail to the brink of





the Narrows, a water trail we might have taken in better weather. Today the trail was closed - too much risk and too much water. It was still fun to wander up to the start, and we had fabulous looks at the antics of an American Dipper family. Peg heard them and we stopped. To our delight a persistent begging baby (now adult size) led them right to us, even landing on the wall of the trail! They seemed to accompany us along the way until the water got too fast, but were there again when we returned.



Arturo found us several of Zion's endemic

snail, as well as another freshwater species in a small creek that ran out from a pool. We found a lovely orange-colored monkey flower, Scarlet Gilia, and Cardinal flower. Canyon Wrens sang - it was a lovely morning despite the weather. We then got off at Big Bend, watching for a half hour or so for condors, with a park ranger stationed there that had seen them the week previous. Cold winds were strong in this section, so we decided to return the following day and headed on. Fred and Pat opted to hike from Big Bend to then hike up to the



Weeping Wall, adding another mile along the creek on an unofficial trail shown to us by the ranger and elevation gain to the Weeping Wall.



Returning to our vans, we drove north from Virgin toward Lava Point and Kolob Reservoir, hoping to find condors at one of these two locations and to take in some fine scenery in a less-crowded sector of the park. We kept our eyes out for birds of the lower desert zone as we started to climb, and then turned our attentions to scenery as views rivaling that of Checkerboard Mesa opened up behind us. Arturo was a keen spotter of wildlife throughout our journey, and today was no exception as he called out "Coyote". We watched this canid trot through thick grass with colors of the rainbow behind, nice! However, the skies held colors we could describe as ominous and they grew denser as we drove on. By the time we reached our trailhead it was looking iffy, but we pushed on to try the first condor site seven miles up ahead.





These seven miles was up, and rains soon turned to snow, covering the road with an inch of wet slush by the time we reached to top. We parked and searched the cliffs to no avail; even condors knew enough to find shelter in this! Our other known sighting spot was accessed by dirt road, so we could not go, but with luck, lower in elevation our hiking trail was still clear, and the squall had abated a bit.

We somehow got a great four mile hike in with Fred, Bob and Carol led the way with their strong pace. Several caught the full, rewarding view at the end between cloud masses. Peg and Linda brought up the rear after finding a nice flock of birds with Yellow-rumped Warblers, three species of nuthatches, Northern Flickers, a female Western Tanager and a Red-naped Sapsucker. The trail was nearly level, allowing us to stretch out and really walk, which felt good to all.



The smell of pines, large towering Ponderosa Pines was lovely. By the time we returned to our vans, snow was falling again in earnest, decorating the Gambel's Oaks and leaving circles on the ground under the pine's protective canopy. We laughed as we took photos of each other coated in snowflakes, and drove down in elevation to our warm and welcoming lodgings at Springdale. Tonight we enjoyed a fine meal together at Flanigan's Spotted Dog restaurant.







They admired Box Elder and a mix of shrubs, hanging gardens of Maidenhair and other ferns, mats of columbine, and patches of lush sedges in seeps along the Emerald Pools trail. After seeing exhibits and an art show at the historic museum, they drove on towards Grand Canyon, taking a detour at Jacob's Lake junction to descend the great monocline to reach Vermilion Cliffs National Monument.

### **Fri., Oct. 7    Zion's Observation Point / Weeping Rock, Emerald Pools and Vermilion Cliffs**

For some it was time for another challenging hike, and about half of our group packed up for the hike towards the East Rim and Observation Point. Others were content to explore a few of Zion's more leisurely trails and then continue the search for the wild condor. We all rode the tram up to Weeping Rock trailhead together and we made plans to rendezvous at the Grand Canyon at day's end. Carol and Pat led the hikers and Peg led the bird and nature walk crew.

Bob described the more rigorous hike as rewarding, particularly the views from Echo Canyon. All paced themselves and enjoyed lunch at the top with a fine view all around. Peg's gang saw Spotted Towhees, a Lincoln's Sparrow, and several Mule Deer.







The extra drive was worth it for scenery alone, but we were pleased to run into two biologists from the Peregrine Fund, set up at the wildlife viewing station with scopes trained on a group of California Condors, being released this week. Two were out of their cage, hanging about on the cliffs, immature birds with black heads but still massive. Three were reticent to come out yet, but would in time as the group integrated themselves into the wild flock. Several adults had been there early morning, but the researchers felt firmly that we'd have a better chance to see these at Navajo Bridge, another twenty miles down the road. This would put us into Grand Canyon

after dark, but we jointly decided, "What the heck" and drove on. Ed and Beth had floated the Colorado several year's back and were pleased to see familiar surroundings at spectacular Lee's Ferry, the put in station for grand adventure. Arturo spotted a Prairie Falcon and we all got looks at White-throated Swifts, but our adult California Condors remained elusive.

We let the quest go, and headed back, driving alongside the scarlet escarpment that is once-again their home. We drove up the monocline into forests and meadows, watching closely for Mule Deer that come all too close to the road. Our hiking buddies dined at the restaurant at Jacob's Lake, Carol extolling the taste of her delicious pulled pork sandwich as we met up in the check-in line for our accommodations. Our little motel rooms seemed a bit cramped after our more lavish digs at the other park, but being what was available at North Rim, we coped.



Peg, Bob and Arturo beat the lineup for limited dinner seating by getting food to go, enjoying it in the lodge's great room. We enjoyed the company of several young people preparing for their rim to rim walk the next day.



### **Sat., Oct. 8 Widforss Trail - Kaibab Squirrels, Color and VIEWS**

We just had one full day here, and with the aspen color so lovely, all selected to walk a trail on the rim, one that afforded fine views of Bright Angel

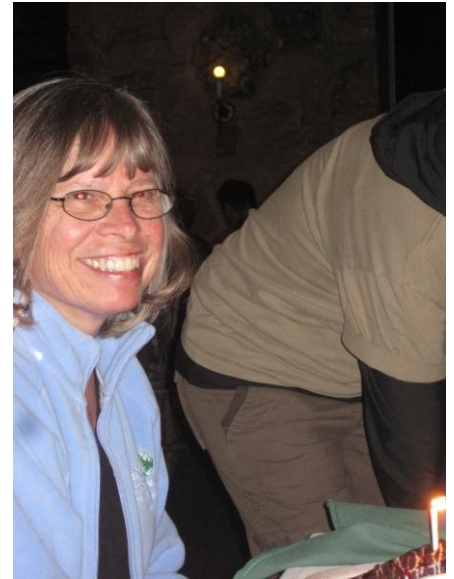


Canyon. It was a 10-mile round trip in and out hike, and many made it all the way to the end.

Everyone got fine views and numerous photos of Kaibab Squirrels. We were first alerted to them by sound. Their calls are not unlike those of quetzals in Central American cloud forests, bubbly, alert and elusive. High in the trees, they are difficult to appreciate in full, as one gets a glimpse of the astounding white tail, then a face, then a paw. But on the ground they sometimes pose, and with patience we got some good pictures.

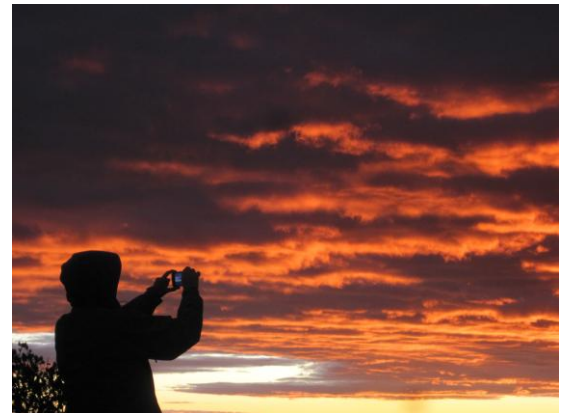
There were large groups of Pygmy Nuthatches, keeping company with Red-breasted and White-breasted nuthatches, Hairy Woodpeckers, and Mountain Chickadees. We had ample lunches which we ate as at various view points, a scenery-inspired progressive lunch.

It was a lovely last day, and we celebrated our adventures, and Linda's birthday with a fine dinner at Grand Canyon's North Rim Lodge.



### Sun., Oct. 9 Departures from Salt Lake City

We left in two shifts according to our return flight times, and pushed on north, leaving red rocks behind for the now snowy peaks of the Wasatch Range and the airport. We left Carol behind at Kanab, who sent us notes the following week about their fine weather and sightings at Big Bend of..., condors. We thoroughly enjoyed our Fall (and Winter!) trip to Utah's canyon country!



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Photos: Beth Morsman – Kitty Cat Rock Bryce, Vermillion Cliffs Condor sign, Bob, Arturo and Ed and Beth in snow; Carol Simon- Grand Canyon sunset, Zion trail to Observation Point, Line of hikers in Bryce, girls in Snow; Pat Owens – Doug Fir on trail, Bryce; Arturo Valledor DeLozoya – Peg hiking Bryce; others by Peg Abbott, Naturalist Journeys, LLC.

