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Grand Yellowstone

19 June – 1 July, 2011 Trip Report

Greg Smith, Guide with five participants

www.flickr.com/photos/slobirdr (photos)



Sunday, 19 June 1, 2010 - Arrival in Billings, MT

Most of our group had late night arrivals from the UK, so our first evening was a low-key dinner affair for the earlier arrivals. After gathering everyone at the airport, we made it to the hotel where folks could rearrange their sleep habits given the plus seven-hour time difference with the UK.

Monday, 20 June - Billings Area / Pompey's Pillar National Monument

After breakfast at the inn, we headed off to explore Billings, with its lush landscaping and riverfront setting. Our first was going to be Pompey's Pillar National Monument, a site where William Clark (yes, that Clark from the Lewis and Clark duo) carved his name into one of the sandstone pillars that form the "rim" along the Yellowstone River.

The Yellowstone was flooding which made one of our original planned stops unattainable. Pompey's had a great assortment of birds including Willow Flycatchers, American Redstarts and Red-eyed Vireos. It was also a great opportunity to learn more about the Lewis and Clark expedition and how these men and their accomplices explored the west. Pompey's Pillar has the only known onsite remnant of the expedition.



After lunch we drove to Pictograph State Park for a cultural overview of the earliest inhabitants of area. The cave paintings had faded with time, but some still had enough detail to show what was being depicted. Highlights in the bird world were a very cooperative Yellow-breasted Chat, Yellow Warblers and Lazuli Buntings – all stunning males.

Riverfront Park was our next stop, where at least 100 Canada Goose goslings were roosting in the middle of the pond. Still lots of chats sounding off, and the ever-present Yellow Warblers were singing to their heart's content. Various turtle species found the humidity to their liking and spent a great deal of time hugging logs in the different sloughs that an through the park.

Tuesday, 21 June – Prairie North of Billings

After an easy breakfast, we headed of to the prairies north of Billings. The area had an exceptionally wet spring and we had to pick our way around the wet roads to our intended locations. Amazing how two days of rain can get everything so sloppy. Our first successful top was just north of Broadview where we got some great looks at various waterfowl and shorebirds. A short drive brought us to an area usually reliable for McCown's Longspur. And sure enough we saw three different males doing display flights in alternating series.

After watching Chestnut-collared Longspur males do their displays, and Long-billed Curlews try to drive off a Golden Eagle, we looked across the road at the Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony. And then we saw an immature Bald Eagle, an adult Bald Eagle and



an immature Golden Eagle. Amazing how much bigger the bill is on the Bald Eagle

We did see Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawks along with numerous other grassland bird species, including a

quick look at a Burrowing Owl. But the most common resident of the prairie were all those dogs...

Wednesday, 22 June - Beartooth Pass

Today we headed southwest towards Yellowstone National Park in search of blue sky in the Big Sky State. The morning was a little cloudy as we headed down Highway 212 where we stopped at a lay by and did a little birding. American Goldfinches, Song Sparrow and a blazing orange, adult male Baltimore Oriole were a few of the new birds for our trip list.



After we ate lunch at the campground, we headed up to high elevations of the Beartooth Plateau where we were greeted with a patchwork of cumulus clouds and bright blue sky. It is an ethereal feeling being in the clouds with no trees, seeing last year's grasses

peaking out of bright patches of snow (with one drift the van passed at nineteen feet!). A

Clark's Nutcracker put in a brief appearance at the top of a tree.

And then down the other side we went where the sun was trying very hard to melt the snow. The Yellow-bellied Marmots didn't care, as their short summer wanderings were all about fattening up for next winter. The snow-laden peaks chose to play hide seek with the clouds and our views as we drifted from 11,000 feet down to 7,000 in Cooke City.

We had a little extra time so we dropped into Yellowstone where we saw a nanny Mountain Goat with two kids clinging to the near vertical cliffs of Baronette Peak. Then a Moose with her newborn calf were alongside the road causing a Moose jam. We headed back as it was time we checked into the Alpine Hotel before heading of to another tasty meal, this time at the Bistro Café!



*Thursday,
June 23 -
Lamar
Valley &
Mammoth*
Off to the valley of wildlife we rode, anticipation riding along with us as we searched out the wild, the massive, and

the unforgiving. Our first wildlife was Mule Deer as we entered the park. Next came an unruly American Bison bachelor herd, with their dripping beards matching their loose coats of fuzz. Bloodshot eyes watched as we took turns photographing these burly boys. They are just so BIG...

Then there were the herds of bison cows with their cinnamon-colored young. They were scattered all over the valley. We parked and scanned the herds for telltale signs of approaching predators, no luck. No wolves, no bears, no predators – that is until we got back in the van and headed to Slough Creek.

We did find a predator, but not one of the big three. A Coyote was intent on sounds in the grass and paid us no mind. It sauntered off and swam across the flooded creek, shook itself off and didn't even look back.

There were more bison around the west end of the valley as we headed to Mammoth for lunch and our first look at some of Yellowstone's geo-thermal features.

We passed by lots of bison on our way back through Lamar Valley. A lone Coyote made its way through a herd of bison that caused cow/calf pairs to get a little *fidgety*, but the bulls barely even blinked. Now the Uinta Ground Squirrels made a run for it and survived another day.



We still hadn't seen a Gray Wolf or Grizzly Bear yet, so we spent time glassing hillsides and the river bottom. Even the ardent wolf

watchers, "Wolfies" seemed ambivalent about what was out there. Many of the folks were kicking dirt and not looking in any general direction, so we headed back to town for dinner.

Friday, June 24 - Lamar, Tower & Hayden

We searched Lamar Valley with a keen alertness for wolves and any other species

beyond the local



herbivores, but an American Badger out on the prowl was the only predator we could

come up with.

That was until we saw a number of cars pulled over by the road. A bear jam? Yes, but the cinnamon-colored Black Bear was gone as we pulled to the side of the road. A Ranger who was directing traffic said we might want to get up to Yellowstone picnic area. So we made a U-turn and as soon as we got to the picnic ground a young Grizzly Bear wearing a radio collar crossed the road in front of us.

We saw what direction it was headed and passed most of the cars and pulled over. And there we watched the bear jump into a pond and start swimming parallel to the road. We pulled forward a little more as it got out of the water, shook itself off and then crossed the road in front of us – again. Sweet!

Next we went to Calcite Springs where Bighorn Sheep ewes and their young-of-the-year were playing on the opposite cliff. The lambs were just running as fast as they could on this steep hillside trying to outdo one another. They were very sure footed!

After visiting some geysers we headed to the Hayden Valley, where unfortunately it was very quiet. But we all knew morning was the right time, so we checked into the lodge and had a great dinner in the dining room!

Saturday, 25 June – Hayden Valley, Old Faithful & Geysers

Before
breakfast
we drove
the
“Valley”
again
looking for
the wolves
and
whatever.
The bison
were there,
Elk with
calves
were there
but we
couldn’t
find any
wolves.
But our
first survey



with the scope turned up a sow Grizzly Bear with two yearlings on our side of the river. We looked across the river and there was another Grizzly Bear working on a carcass and two others waiting their turn. We spent thirty minutes watching the sow and cubs forage below us in the early morning sun!

We drove the valley twice more, but still no luck on the wolves. So we headed off to Pelican Bay where the morning sun created a spectacular landscape of wetlands, forests and mountains.

Next we drove towards the marvelous views possible from the Lake Butte overlook. We came out of the trees just beyond Indian Pond (where there are geothermal pools and vents) and saw two bull bison and then we noticed the black wolf lying in the grass. Alert and watchful, we got to spend about three to four minutes observing our first wolf of the trip. Very cool!!!

After breakfast, we headed over towards Old Faithful to get a glimpse of people watching this amazingly timed spectacle. The semi-circle had folks from all over the world watching as the false starts previewed the spectacular gushing that thousands of gallons of smoking water skyward. It is one of the better places to observe people standing in awe of something that is so fundamentally Yellowstone!



Then we headed up to the Firehole River where we stopped and watched the rainbow sorbet steam floating from the top of Grand Prismatic spring. What an amazing random set of colors enhanced by the bright blue of the high altitude skies.

We drove Hayden Valley one more time, but there was very little going on. But just before we turned into Lake, we ran into another jam. There next to the road was another Grizzly Bear slowly grazing its way to Fishing Bridge. A great end to an eleven-hour day!

Sunday, 26 June - West Thumb & Grand Teton

We left the Lake Hotel and headed along the shoreline of Yellowstone Lake to West

Thumb Geyser Basin. At West Thumb, the thermal system here is shallow in comparison to other basins in the park. The park service states that if the lake were to drop just a few feet “an immense hydrothermal explosion could occur here.”

As you followed the boardwalk that separates the lake from the basin you can see the thermophiles that colored some of the steaming cauldrons. These microbes are able to

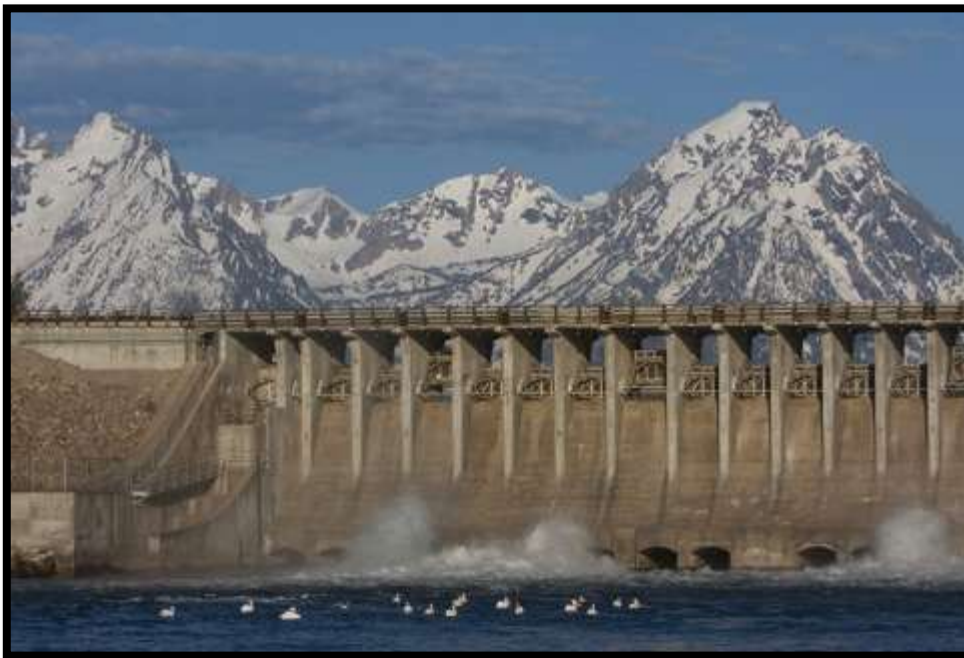
thrive in high temperatures, and as such, give color to some of the waters associated with the basin (along with algae).

Driving south to the Tetons, we left the huge Yellowstone caldera and started dropping towards Jackson Lake. There was still a lot of snow on the ground at the higher elevations, but once we



made the climb over the pass, the fields started to come alive with color. Two thousand feet lower in elevation made quite a difference in the state of the wildflower bloom!

We had lunch at a picnic area on the shores of the lake where Osprey soared overhead and Red-eyed Vireos and Swainson's Thrushes serenaded us. The aspen forest was alive with birds as we attempted to eat lunch without looking up at the local residents. Tasty lunch, great location.



*Monday,
27 June -
Pilgrim
Creek,
Pacific
Creek, &
Jackson*

An early start took us out to Jackson Lake Dam and then Pilgrim Creek where we looked for

Moose or any other large mammals. We did see more wildflowers, but not the same

species we had in Yellowstone like Glacier Lily and Elephant's Head, but species of lupine and lomatium were abundant.

Pacific Creek winds its way back towards Two Ocean Lake through low growing willow scrub and patchy aspen forest. Yellow Warbler was the most evident bird with males singing from the tops of all the willows. Grosbeaks, sapsuckers and wrens were some of the other vocal residents that made sure we all knew it was a gorgeous, sunny day.

With all the snow – a record year – NPS had not yet opened the road to Two Ocean Lake. It was a disappointment, as it is one of the best wildlife roads in the park. There are always lots of birds, wildlife and wonderful vistas on this road. So we headed further along Pacific Creek where we came on upon a herd of cow Elk that was easily spooked. Not much more for whatever reason, but the Ruffed Grouse on the side of the road let us take lots of pictures.

After lunch, we drove into the town of Jackson where some folks visited the National Wildlife Art Museum and others went into town. At the end of the visit everyone was a little surprised by the nightly tourist spectacle of a western shootout at the town square.

Our slow drive back to Colter Bay provided us with the opportunity to see a big cinnamon boar Black Bear slowly following a black-colored sow. It is bear breeding season and he was patient, very patient!

Tuesday, 28 June – Oxbow, Signal Mountain, Mormon Row & Rafting

We were heading out early this morning when we stopped at Oxbow Bend, one of the most scenic views of the Tetons within the park. The waters of the Snake River didn't have that glassy calm, which allows for a stunning reflection of Mt. Moran and clouds. But still definitely post card material for all that took a photograph!



Signal Mountain pokes up from the valley floor just south of Moran Junction. The view is spectacular as you can see in every direction except to the north. The forest sends fingers of trees into the sagebrush flats where elk are grazing. Pools of water have other animals along their edges, but the big treat was a couple of male Dusky Grouse on the side of the road. Very

cooperative and very photogenic!

After lunch we headed back south where we stopped at the Cunningham Cabin (lots of Mountain Bluebird), then to Mormon Row and finally to Dornan's where we stopped at the new visitor center, what an outstanding venue! Visually provocative and the displays were well thought out and accessible, nice.

We headed over to an early dinner at Dornan's as we had to be back at the launch site for our evening float trip down the Snake. As we left the parking lot a male Broad-tailed Hummingbird visited the hummingbird feeder at the house.



We met up with Travis, our raft guide for the next 1.5 hours. After a short drive to our launch site at Deadman's Bar we headed down to the Snake that was flowing at

10000 cubic feet per second that day. We immediately saw the first of three Bald Eagles. The looks were not long given the speed of the river, but the animals didn't leave either, giving us great photo ops.

Our biggest surprise was the family of seven River Otter on the bank and then we saw Elk, Canada Geese and deer along with lots water birds. But the highlight was the mountains that were picking a fight with the clouds. One minute you couldn't see the sun and the next the mountains cleared and the sun would send shafts of light streaming towards us.

Spectacular clouds danced around the peaks as we finished our trip and landed ashore.

*Wednesday,
29 June -
Grassy Lake
Road &
Harriman
State Park*

It was time to visit our third



state of the journey, so today we packed lunches and headed off to Idaho. Between the Tetons and Yellowstone there is a wonderful dirt road that heads west to the Land of Famous Potatoes. Known as Grassy Lake Road, the first section is also known as the John D. Rockefeller Memorial Parkway. Absolutely gorgeous! Green meadows with a mosaic of ponds, mossies' flying hither and thither and secluded campsites make this an ideal drive.

We got about six miles into the thirty-mile drive when that barrier showed up, the one that said "Road Closed". Apparently the amount of snow and the warm weather were flooding this road out along with so many others in the area.

We turned back and made the decision to go north through Yellowstone and then south into Idaho (the other alternative was to go south through the Tetons and then north into Idaho). It is always a treat to go through Yellowstone with all the geysers and wildlife. And we got to have lunch on the river!

Harriman Park is located a few miles from our lodging for the next two evenings – Angler's Lodge. With portions of the Henrys Fork of the Snake River, covered with white caps (white horses) and the wind gusting to over sixty miles an hour, we decided that trying to bird in those conditions was fruitless.

So we headed to our lodge, unpacked and had an excellent meal. Time to rest up for our day tomorrow at Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge!



*Thursday, 30
June – Red
Rock Lakes
National
Wildlife
Refuge &
Mesa Falls*

It is always amazing that you can be in a developed community and drive ten minutes and see a pair of

Sandhill Cranes in a meadow foraging with their colts. The west is so open and wild, and we were just getting started.

After birding our way to the top of Red Rock Pass, we continued over the dirt track road and through sagebrush flats edged with aspens. The snowmelt was flooding the road in various places, but we kept going. A pair of Swainson's Hawks soared silently over a small hillock as Brewer's Sparrows froze silently watching fate and fortune glide past them. More *Azure-breasted Prairie Hoverers* (Mountain Bluebirds) found perches on small-stalked shrubs. Time was ticking as we headed towards the refuge.

The big lake at the refuge had a few pair of Trumpeter Swans visible, Redheads, Canvasbacks, and a wonderful flock of alternate plumaged Franklin Gulls conducting Class A aerobatics as they caught insects on the wing. These are stunning birds!

Lunch was at a café in Island Park before we headed to Mesa Falls.

Both upper and lower falls are along the Henrys Fork of the Snake River (as we missed them yesterday because of the washed out road). The lower falls are a tumultuous jumble of rocks and pools, while the upper falls are a classic 300-foot wide precipice that drops 114 feet. Lots of pictures and faces full of mist...

We celebrated our two weeks with a farewell dinner and stories of our journey through the wilds of the west.

Friday, 1 July - Bozeman

It was our final day and the weather treated us to spectacular clouds and a safe drive back to Bozeman, where we caught home flights home. Safe landing to all...

153 Bird species and 32
Mammal species

And a peek at the wildlife
waiting to greet Greg back
home...

