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## Southwest Parks Nature Tour September 17 – 26, 2015 Trip Report

With Guide, Pat Lueders and Four Participants: Gillian, Gerald, Katherine, and Lesley

### Tour Highlights

#### Thurs., Sept. 17 Arrival in Salt Lake City / Capitol Reef National Park

Our group met this morning in Salt Lake City, Utah, to begin our nature tour of the Southwest and four of the national parks. Folks arrived from Great Britain, Canada, and the mid-western United States. We are welcomed with a dusting of snow on the nearby mountain tops and an assortment of birds in nearby ponds including Ring-billed Gull, Black-billed Magpie, American Kestrel, and a large flock of White American Pelican, one of the largest of the boreal birds, appearing and disappearing as they bank in the sky.



On our scenic drive to Torrey, Utah, and our first national park, Capitol Reef, we enjoy the Utah farming communities and stop at the Koosharem Reservoir for great scope views of water fowl such as Red-necked Phalarope; Eared, Western, and Clark Grebe; Cinnamon Teal, a large flock of Greater White-fronted Geese,



and a surprise Black-crowned Night-Heron sitting on the shore. Northern Harrier and Turkey Vulture are seen hunting in the area.



We arrive at the charming town of Torrey in time to dine at Café Diablo, where our guests from Great Britain sample a Rattlesnake appetizer and agree it is delicious. We speculate whether they are caught in the wild or farm raised! The historic pioneer Torrey Schoolhouse Bed & Breakfast, built in 1914 and newly renovated, is our home for the next two nights.



### **Fri., Sept. 18 Capitol Reef National Park**

Our early morning drive around Torrey yields a vocalizing Long-eared Owl, a Western Meadowlark, White-crowned Sparrow, and Western Bluebird. After a delicious breakfast, we drive to Capitol Reef, stopping first for photo opportunities at Chimney Rock and at Gooseneck's Overlook above the Fremont River. We find a Clark's Nutcracker and Ruby-crowned Kinglet working the pine trees at the trailhead. After an informative stop at the visitor's center, we bird the Fruita and Fremont River area, once home to Mormon pioneers that chose to settle in this fertile valley where many of the fruit trees they planted still bear their bounty.



We enjoy a picnic lunch near the "pick your own" apple orchard and find a large flock of Wild Turkey also enjoying the fallen fruit. A number of Downy Woodpecker and a Hairy Woodpecker are seen low in the fruit trees for close comparison.

After enjoying the scenic drive along the Grand Wash Road, we attend the National Park Ranger program at the petroglyph site where, from 600 to 1300 C.E., the native people of the Fremont Culture made their home at Capitol Reef and left their signature on the cliffs. We would see more later in the week at Navajo Bridge.

Passing the Capitol Dome, we hike the Grand Wash slot canyon and hear a Rock Wren vocalizing, see a Hermit Thrush, and find a Desert Cottontail hiding. The colorful sunset against the red rocks of Capitol Reef is enjoyed during dinner at the scenic Rim Rock Restaurant.

### **Sat., Sept. 19 Drive from Capitol Reef to Bryce Canyon National Park**

As we leave the town of Torrey, we find Western and Mountain Bluebirds along the fence line, providing a nice color comparison between the two species. We travel through 20 miles of Aspens, many of which are bright gold in the morning sunlight. Free-range cattle feed along the road, seemingly oblivious to our presence. We stop at a scenic overlook and find Mountain Chickadee, Pygmy Nuthatch, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Clark's Nutcracker, and a perched Red-tailed Hawk in the surrounding pine trees. We stop in the unique town of Boulder to bird around the pond and find a large number of American Coot, a Willow Flycatcher, and Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped Warblers.



Calf Creek Falls Recreation Area is a beautiful roadside stop and camping area along the rapidly moving Calf Creek. Hummingbird feeders are centered in a quiet area near the creek where we find Black-chinned, Broad-tailed, and Rufous Hummingbirds to study as we enjoy our picnic lunch. We sit and watch the creek for American Dipper and are rewarded in less than 15 minutes with a dipper feeding a short distance from us. The first Dipper is then joined by two others, and we watch and listen to the three vocalize and feed along the rapids. What a treat for all of us! A flock of Bushtit is seen feeding in the trees near the creek.



We leave Calf Creek and continue through the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, marveling at the views and beauty of this drive. At the visitor's center, we learn about the geology and history here, the Bureau of Land management's first national monument.

The unique hoodoos that signify Bryce Canyon National Park come into view as we travel through the town of Tropic and approach the park entrance. We find a Utah Prairie Dog town while scanning the pond across from Ruby's, also finding Brewer's Blackbird and a pair of House Finch. Pictures are taken of the Utah Prairie Dogs just inside the park entrance, a federally threatened species, and we enjoy dinner at the historic Bryce Lodge, marveling at the starlit sky as we return to our rooms, a perfect ending to a wonderful day!

### **Sun., Sept. 20 Bryce Canyon National Park**

We awake to a cool morning and take our position on Sunrise Point to experience sunrise at Bryce. The sun casts shadows on the hoodoos, formed 10-million years ago, giving them lifelike appearances, and the colors of the canyon change as it rises.

Birds fly up from the canyon to the rim, and we see Dark-eyed Junco, a Rock Wren, Clark's Nutcracker, and Pygmy Nuthatch. After breakfast at the lodge, we walk along the rim again, some hiking the Queen's Trail into the canyon.

We take the driving tour, stopping at the Natural Bridge for pictures and enjoying our picnic lunch at Rainbow Point, which offers expansive views of southern Utah, including Navajo Mountain and the Kaibab Plateau, 90 miles away in Arizona.



At the road's end, we walk the Bristlecone Loop Trail hoping to find the Bristlecone pines, some more than 1600 years old. In addition to finding at least 10 of the trees, we see a Plumbeous Vireo, Mountain Chickadee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, a pair of Hermit Thrush, and a Brown Creeper.

After a relaxing evening, we walk out to enjoy the sun going down at Sunset Point. We find a Townsend's Solitaire near our rooms, and he serenades us with his delightful vocalization!



### **Mon., Sept. 21 Drive to Lake Powell / Antelope Canyon Tour**

After another delicious meal in the historic Bryce Canyon Lodge, we depart for Lake Powell, traveling the beautiful Utah Highways 12 and 89. We pass through the Red Canyon Arch and follow the Sevier River toward Vermilion Cliffs. A diligent watch for perched Golden Eagle is rewarded when one is spotted close to the road. We carefully emerge from the van and the Eagle remains on the post for great looks, especially at his intimidating talons. After a short period, he flies, showing off his beautiful golden head and buffy tail patch.



As we enter the Lake Powell area, named for the Civil War veteran Major Wesley Powell who explored the Colorado River in 1869, we detour into the Wahweap Marina searching for a Greater Roadrunner. We are again rewarded when Gerry spots one close to the road, and we watch his behavior for a few

minutes. Our next stop is a visit to the Glen Canyon Dam, completed in 1963. The dam provides power to a five-state grid of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona. The Carl Hayden Visitor's Center displays a pictorial view of the construction of the lake and dam.

After lunch in Page, we enjoy the native hoop dance by a Native American portraying Chief Tsosie, and then board our truck for a ride to the protected Antelope Canyon.

Located on the Navajo Reservation, the slot in Upper Antelope Canyon measures a quarter mile long and 130 feet deep. Visitors must go with a licensed tour guide, and ours is named Irene. The canyon was first



discovered in 1931 by a young Navajo girl herding sheep in the area. Irene is a master with cameras, and she sets ours so that the maximum exposures are realized and the pictures are magnificent!

We return to the marina before dinner to view the Lake at sunset and find another Greater Roadrunner. Our restaurant in Page, Bonkers, has murals painted on their walls depicting many of the local wonders. Today has been a very lucky day for our group!

## **Tues., Sept. 22 Lake Powell Cruise to Rainbow Bridge / Drive to Grand Canyon National Park**

We board our cruise to the Rainbow Bridge on a beautiful, overcast day. We travel 48 miles to reach this deeply religious and spiritual landmark to the Native American tribes. During the trip, Native Americans provide a narrative along the route, and we learn about the lake and the history of the Navajo nation.

Rainbow Bridge stands 290 feet high and is made of Navajo Sandstone at the top and Kayenta Sandstone at the base. In 1910, this sight was named a national monument by President William Taft. We walk for a little over a mile on an



improved trail to view the bridge, passed weeping walls and beautiful, colorful cliffs and a petroglyph of a Brahman Bull, which the ranger says was created in the 1800s.

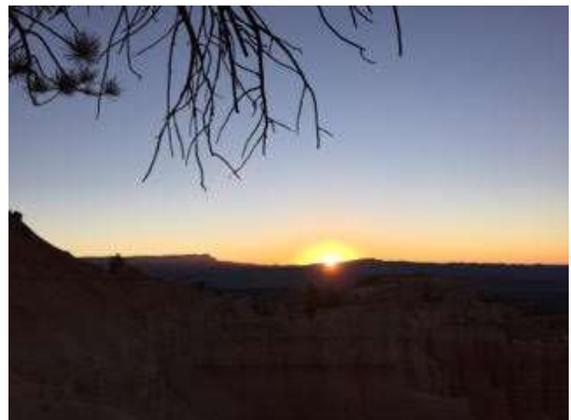
We leave Lake Powell and drive south to the Grand Canyon, traveling through the Navajo nation, experiencing their nomadic lifestyle. We stop at the Cameron Trading Post, where authentic Navajo art and clothing is for sale in museum-type shops.

As we enter the Grand Canyon, a herd of Elk graze along the road, and we watch a mother and juvenile from close range. Dinner at the historic El Tovar Hotel on the rim is the perfect way to end this magical day.

## **Wed., Sept. 23 Grand Canyon National Park**

Sunrise on the south rim at the Grand Canyon is the perfect way to start the day. As sunlight spreads over the magnificent canyon, the birds awake and feed quickly in the trees bordering the path. We see Bushtit, Pygmy Nuthatch, White-breasted Nuthatch, Mountain Chickadee, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Black-throated Gray, Yellow-rumped and Townsend's Warblers, and a Williamson's Sapsucker. A Plumbeous Vireo vocalizes and is seen, and Juniper Titmouse join the mixed feeding flock. Sunlight fills the canyon, providing unparalleled photographic opportunities.

After breakfast we visit the Yavapai Point and Geology Museum where displays explain the geologic layers of the canyon, and



we are surprised by a Canyon Wren feeding around the building. The canyon shuttle takes us to Yaki Point where we enjoy the migration of numerous Cooper's, Red-tailed, and Sharp-shinned Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, and Turkey Vulture.

After lunch, we ride the shuttle to Hopi Point where we find a Merlin and more migrating hawks soaring in the thermals of the canyon. Our goal is to see a California Condor, but we miss them on this beautiful day.

### Thurs., Sept. 24 Drive to Zion National Park / California Condor Search



We regretfully depart the grandeur of the Grand Canyon but anticipate two stops for possible sightings of a California Condor.

Our first stop is the Navajo Bridge over the Colorado River where condors are often seen. We walk the footbridge, which parallels the driving bridge, and spot a condor on the supports. In the scope we see the number is a black 2, and we can also see the transmitter. Angela, a ranger with the Peregrine Fund, informs us that this is actually female #722, because they have run out of numbers in Arizona. She was born in the wild, is 2 ½ years old, and is still occasionally fed by her father. Her mother died this year, and it appears that the father has a new mate. California

Condor is the largest flying bird in North America and each one is fitted with a transmitter. In 1982, only 22 condors were known to remain in the wild. The successful reintroduction program has resulted in over 700 condors now in two populations, one in Arizona and one in California.

After a short visit to the Cliff Dwellers location where homeless people lived during the depression, we continue west along the Vermilion Cliffs and view through the scope the condor release location high on the bluffs. Three condors can be seen awaiting their release on Saturday, and eight other condors can be seen visiting the location.

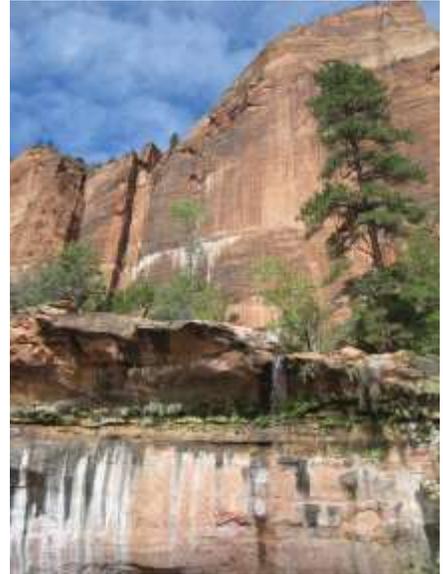
Lunch in Kanab is certainly enjoyable now that we have seen more than one California Condor! We arrive in Springdale in time to enjoy a beautiful sunset on the cliffs of Zion National Park!



## Fri., Sept. 25 Day at Grafton & Zion National Park

We arrive at the Grafton Ghost Town early, a few old buildings in good condition standing in tree-lined fields near the Virgin River. The combination of fields, fruit trees, and the river attracts many species of birds. The fields are filled this morning with two large flocks of Wild Turkey. We find a female Vermilion Flycatcher, a Say's Phoebe, Bewick's Wren; sparrows including White-crowned, Lincoln, Vesper and Brewer's; Cassin's Vireo and a Red-naped Sapsucker. A Summer Tanager vocalizes from a treetop, and a Cooper's Hawk hunting for breakfast perches in the open for our enjoyment. Lesley spots a pair of Osprey flying up the Virgin River. A visit to the nearby cemetery finds a pair of Rock Wren for close looks.

We picnic at the historic Zion Lodge and enjoy the narrated shuttle ride to the end of the canyon, the Temple of Sinawava, where we hike the Riverside Walk along the Virgin River. The friendly squirrels pose for pictures hoping to receive a reward. We enjoy wild orchids, maidenhair ferns, and other plants along the weeping walls. Stopping on the descent at Big Bend, we spot a pair of soaring Peregrine Falcon.



Our farewell dinner at the Bit & Spur Restaurant, signifying the completion of our trip, is bitter sweet as we reminisce about the highlights of our fantastic week touring the Southwest's National Parks!

## Sat., Sept. 26 Return to Salt Lake City

This morning we return to Salt Lake City to catch our flights home, taking mostly memories of a wonderful week in Utah and Arizona, and vowing to return soon!

### *Trip Report by Pat Lueders*

Photo credits: Pg. 1: American Kestrel, Bud Ferguson; Capitol Reef scenic, NJ Stock; Group at Chimney Rock, Pat Lueders (PL). Pg. 2: Capitol Reef scenic, PL; Common Raven, Peg Abbott (PA); Clark's Nutcracker, PA; Brahma petroglyph Navajo Bridge, Lesley Davis (LD). Pg. 3: Mountain Bluebird, Greg Smith (GS); American Dipper, GS; Bryce National Park, PL. Pg. 4: Natural Bridge, PL; Ground

Squirrel, PA; Greater Roadrunner, PL; Antelope Canyon, LD. Pg. 5: Lake Powell Cruise, LD; Pat and Lesley at Rainbow Bridge, PL; Sunrise at the Canyon, PL. Pg. 6: Grand Canyon, LD; Condor at Navajo Bridge, LD; Condor sign, Elizabeth Morsman. Pg. 7: Zion National Park scenic, PA; Pat Lueders, guide, LD; Farewell Dinner, PL.

