



Yellowstone National Park: Birding and Wildlife September 22-29, 2016

GUIDES:

Woody Wheeler and Greg Smith

With: Jonathon, Calvin, Jean, Cindy, Beth, Susan, Woody, Lori, Ilene, Penny, Madeline, Corky, Pat & Sunday



Day One: Arrive to Jackson, head to Lake Village Yellowstone Park

Our trip got off to a smooth start with everyone arriving on time. There was an immediate positive energy evident among the group. Eight opted to stay in Jackson the night before. We took this group to the wetlands behind the Jackson Visitor Center on the way to the airport. Highlights included Redhead, Ring-necked, American Wigeon, Ruddy Duck and a Sora that swam close to the shore.

Once the group fully assembled, we drove to the town of Moose for a picnic lunch by the Snake River. A Peregrine Falcon flew by to start our bird and wildlife sightings on a positive note.



After lunch, we headed north into Grand Teton National Park, taking in stupendous views of golden, green and rosy hues of Aspen, Willow and Cottonwood trees in fall colors. The ever-changing lighting, from cloudy to partly cloudy to sunny, illuminated these colors in spectacular fashion. The photographers in our group – especially Calvin and Greg -- started taking the first of many pictures. Our first Pronghorn, a relatively large buck, moved slowly through the Sagebrush.

At Oxbow Bend, the astounding fall colors reflected into the Snake River for a view that even Ansel Adams would have envied. Rain showers alternated with periods of sun and clear skies to cast magical light upon the fall foliage as we drove along the shore of Jackson Lake to a viewpoint on the north shore. Here we had excellent scope views of American White Pelicans, Trumpeter Swans, Sandhill Cranes and an assortment of waterfowl. The sheer beauty of the site led Susan to remark that it resembled a Thomas Moran painting.

We continued north into Yellowstone National Park, stopping for a walk at Lewis Falls which was framed by golden-hued aspen and willows. As we drove the final stretch to Lake Village, two Elk strolled along a shallow gravel island in Yellowstone Lake, creating striking profiles against the massive lake with the Absaroka Mountains lining the far shore.

Later, we checked into our cozy and nicely furnished cabins at the historic and recently renovated Lake Hotel. Then, we had a delicious meal at the Lake Hotel Restaurant to cap off a fine first day.

Day 2: Hayden Valley, Bridge Creek, Pelican Creek, Indian Pond, Lake Butte, Gull Point Drive

We awoke to partly cloudy skies and the haunting sounds of elk bugling. Soon after departing from the lodge, we encountered the buglers in action: a bull elk herding his small harem of four cow elk. On the way to Hayden Valley, we met a lone Bison calmly walking toward us on the highway in the opposite lane. We stopped to observe and photograph him as he strode by nonchalantly.



At our first Hayden Valley viewpoint, we once again heard elk bugling and then saw a herd of 20+ elk on a high bench across the Yellowstone River. Jonathan noticed a Coyote hunting on the hillside just below us. We watched his entertaining and life-sustaining movements, walking a few steps forward, side-stepping, pouncing, digging then repeating the process in its never-ending search for food.

We then moved to another viewpoint located in sight of a known wolf den. A group from



Scotland was already there with scopes in place and wolves in sight. Soon, we saw them too – a black and a gray morph wolf. All of us had good scope views of these iconic, imperiled animals. What a treat to see them so well on only our second day out!

Acting on a lead from the Scots, we proceeded directly to the Bridge Creek area near Yellowstone Lake where we were soon feasting our eyes on a Great Gray Owl a mere 20 yards away. It perched, flew, hunted, pounced onto the ground, and at one point flew to a branch within ten feet of us. This was an astounding performance of the largest North American owl

and a life bird for most of our group.

All of these great sightings occurred before breakfast, which we finally had at the lodge at their well-stocked buffet. In the late morning, we headed to the eastern and southern shores of Yellowstone Lake for Lake Butte via Pelican Creek and Indian Pond. At Indian Pond, we had good looks at Barrow's Goldeneye, Greater Scaup and American Wigeon. Atop Lake Butte, the gorgeous, expansive views of the lake opened up, revealing the surrounding mountains and previous burn areas. A large Mule Deer buck sat in a highly visible location, while elk continued bugling in the distance.

Our last stop for the day was at Gull Point where we enjoyed close range views of Barrow's Goldeneye, Greater Scaup and American Wigeon. A Muskrat, alertly spotted by Jean, was swimming toward us on the near shore of a pond with a mouthful of vegetation. At a nice picnic area, we had lunch amid the scavenging Gray Jays and walked out onto large rocky spits extending into the clean waters of massive Yellowstone Lake. As storm clouds closed in, we returned to the lodge and our cozy cabins for a relaxing end to a fantastic bird and wildlife watching day.

Day 3: LeHardy Rapids, Hayden Valley, Upper and Lower Falls, Yellowstone Grand Canyon

On a cool, misty morning, we departed for Canyon via LeHardy Rapids and Hayden Valley. Just as we arrived at our first destination, the drizzle stopped as we walked on the board walk above LeHardy rapids. Here, Cindy and Beth spotted two American Dippers flying upstream. Then, Lori found a lone female Harlequin Duck perched on a rock with several Common Mergansers nearby. Clark's Nutcrackers foraged noisily through the conifer trees on the opposite bank of the river. Ravens picked at an old bison carcass on the river's



edge. Lori also spotted two Orange-crowned Warblers that we all watched moving through willows across the river.



We continued onward, climbing up Hayden Valley to an overlook. Our group saw wolves again closing in on a pair of elk. The elk remained on high alert, their gaze pointing directly toward the wolves with their ears perked up. As the drama subsided, we headed further down river to the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone which Thomas Moran said was “beyond the realm of human art.” The upper and lower falls, with their 100 to 300 foot drops into the multi-colored canyon, is indeed one of Earth’s most captivating sights.

Just as a rain squall moved in, we ducked into the dining room at Canyon for a welcome hot lunch. Afterward, we had a relaxing time shopping in the Canyon Village stores and browsing the displays in its fine Visitor Information Center.

On the way back to Lake Hotel, Woody spotted three Ruffed Grouse on the roadside. He turned the vehicle around, and Cindy found them again moving through the woods. We all got out just as the trio made their way across the road to the other side.

By late afternoon, we returned to the lodge for an early dinner that was so delicious and substantial that Beth quipped that we would need a wheelbarrow to get back to our rooms. As we strolled to our cabins, the clouds had parted, revealing a sparkling array of stars – a good weather omen for the days ahead.

Day 4 – Canyon, Dunraven Pass, Tower, Mammoth, Calcite Canyon, Lamar Valley, Silver Gate, Montana

We awoke to calm, crisp and clear weather, which was ideal for our plans for a high elevation hike. Once again, we passed through the lovely Hayden Valley with its unique combination of river, thermal vents and abundant wildlife. As we neared Canyon, Susan reported seeing an owl from the back seat of the van. We drove back, parked and, led by Susan, walked slowly toward the place she had seen it. Incredibly, she had found a second Great Gray Owl, once again in close proximity! Numerous photographs and expressions of happy disbelief followed.

We then motored on through Canyon Village to Dunraven Pass. Once there, we took a short hike on the Mt. Washburn trail. As we crested the first rise, Sunday spotted a blue-colored bird – a



Steller's Jay. While watching this individual and some Gray Jays, Lori called our attention to a low-flying raptor heading in our direction. It flew directly toward us, passing maybe ten feet over our heads before perching briefly on a nearby snag. In the bright light, we were in a pleasant state of shock as we realized that we had just seen an immature Northern Goshawk at very close range. Wow!

As if these sightings were not enough, Greg then found two Bighorn Sheep high on the ridge across from us. We all enjoyed scope views of these denizens of the high Rockies. The hike back down to the trail head yielded Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches and Clark's Nutcrackers harvesting Whitebark pine nuts.



We continued on to Mammoth, a 25-mile drive through gorgeous forested canyon country. Within a mile from Tower, we had another wildlife encounter: four Big-horned Sheep browsing calmly beside the road. In another few miles, we encountered a full-bodied, adult, cinnamon morph Black Bear foraging along the hillside 50 yards away. We watched as it munched on plants, inspected tree stumps, walked over logs like a trained gymnast on a balancing beam, and occasionally licked its chops.

At Mammoth, we had lunch in the café and then walked through the distinctive marble-white travertine formations made even more remarkable by the presence of three elk resting on them. Perhaps they were enjoying the soothing spa effect of the formation's warm waters.

Returning to Tower from Mammoth, we took the enchanting walk along the rim of Calcite Canyon. Pine Siskins and a White-breasted Nuthatch moved through the nearby pines. Greg pointed out the dark liquid sulfur water that poured into the Yellowstone River. Everyone was impressed by the colorful geology and well-formed basalt columns in this canyon – one of Yellowstone's less heralded yet phenomenal natural wonders.



As we headed east into Lamar Valley, a Bighorn Sheep ram fed on vegetation only ten yards from the road. This made for excellent looks and photos of a truly majestic animal.

We then cruised through scenic Lamar Valley, with thousands of Bison, multiple Pronghorn, Coyotes and an assortment of birds and other wildlife on display. This valley, along with Hayden Valley, offers a glimpse of how the west might have appeared to Native Americans and early settlers.

Soon we departed the Park and entered the state

of Montana via Silver Gate, a tiny, rustic tourist town surrounded by towering mountains and majestic spruce and fir forests. We checked into our cabins where we would stay for the next two nights to further explore Yellowstone Park and venture into the Beartooth Mountains.

Day 5 – Beartooth Mountains



Indian Summer weather prevailed as we set out for the Beartooth Mountains after a sumptuous breakfast at Silver Gate’s venerable and highly atmospheric Log Cabin Café. As we drove east into Shoshone National Forest, Aspen trees in their distinctive golden fall foliage illuminated the way. We stopped at Pilot Peak Viewpoint, which showcases this 11,000+ foot peak as well as the entire Absaroka Mountain range. Then, we continued to Clay Butte, where we took a pleasant walk to the seasonally-closed lookout tower. Flocks of American Pipit, a Horned Lark, a few Cassin’s Finches and Mountain Bluebirds were visible on this stroll, as were spectacular vistas of the Absaroka and Beartooth Mountains.

We continued to Beartooth Lake for a picnic lunch with Clay Butte looming above. Gray Jays made the rounds, hoping for lunch scraps. A small flock of Eared Grebes plied the waters in the center of the lake.

In the early afternoon, we traveled up the road that Charles Kurault once said was “America’s most beautiful.” Our group would probably not argue with his assessment.



At Beartooth Pass, we left the vans and started a search for Pikas on foot. It did not take long to find them. We first heard their nasal “beep,” then saw one perched on a rock. Then, there were other “beeps!” followed by other Pika sightings. In the same general area, Woody found a resting Mountain Goat that everyone was able to see well in the spotting scope. We took several other short walks in the high Beartooths, finding a soaring Prairie Falcon, a mixed flock of American Pipits and Black Rosy

Finches in flight.

The group's impression of the Beartooths was unanimously positive as indicated by the adjectives they chose to describe it:

"Indescribable, majestic, sublime, overwhelming, intoxicating, fantastic, beautifully brutal, awesome, humbling, breathtaking, expansive, spiritual, ineffable, stark/beautiful, dazzling, joyous, unbelievable"

On the return trip, we stopped to read the interpretive signs at the mining reclamation project just outside of town. It was uplifting to read about the massive cleanup and restoration that has occurred since this mine started operating in the late 1800s, leading to the development of Cooke City, Montana.

Back in Silver Gate, we stopped at the Hartman's outstanding wildlife photography gallery. Dan and Cindy Hartman were there to greet us. They are currently working on a PBS documentary called *The Great Thaw* that, among other wildlife, features the Great Gray Owl. This was a fitting end to another phenomenal day in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Day 6 – Lamar Valley, Slough Creek Canyon, Lake Village, West Thumb Geyser Basin, Old Faithful



At daybreak, we departed for Lamar Valley on a cold, clear and calm morning. As we headed to our first stop, we encountered a large Bison with a frosted mane due to last night's freezing temperatures. At Pebble Creek, we snacked on the Log Cabin Café's delicious pumpkin bread as we scanned the area for wildlife. Woody spotted a cow and calf moose browsing on willows across the valley. Everyone enjoyed good looks of these two large representatives of the deer family through the scope and binoculars.

We carried on through Lamar Valley, with the Lamar River sparkling in the morning light and the valley's trees ablaze in brilliant fall color. Three Coyotes joined a dozen Common Ravens in cleaning out a Bison carcass. A chorus of Coyote yipping was heard in the distance – perhaps celebrating the recent feast of Bison leftovers.

As we turned into Slough Creek canyon, the charred hillsides provided fresh evidence of a recent fire. We climbed onto a small knoll to search for wolves, but instead Woody spotted a Black Bear and two cubs high on a rocky hillside loafing on a large rock. Everyone got good scope views of these three. We then returned to Silver Gate to pick up luggage, have coffee and snacks, and proceed on to Canyon via Dunraven Pass. As we ascended the pass from the north side, Cindy and Lori noticed two large birds soaring side-by-side: Golden Eagles!

Due to a temporary road closure, we retraced our steps from Canyon through Hayden Valley to Lake Village, where we had lunch. Our afternoon drive to West Thumb along Yellowstone Lake was

absolutely gorgeous with the sky blue waters of the lake gleaming in the sunlight. We stopped for a stroll at the West Thumb Geyser Basin under brilliant blue skies which illuminated the hot pools and their brilliant colors.

At the day's end, we settled into cabins at Old Faithful and enjoyed another delicious meal at the historic wooden lodge. As we turned in for the night, we were serenaded by Coyotes.

Day 7 – Fountain Paint Pots, Grand Prismatic Spring, Firehole Lake Drive, Old Faithful

“The Earth is more alive where geysers and hot boiling water are present. Because of its geyser basins and thermal areas, Yellowstone is considered to have a lot of medicine and to be a powerful spiritual place.” – Eastern Shoshone Cultural Center

Our final day in the park consisted of geyser gazing at three of the park's most renowned geyser basins: Fountain, Midway and Old Faithful. On another “bluebird” day, the colors of the pools and organisms within them stood out vividly.

As we hiked up to Grand Prismatic Pool, a Merlin flapped by, disappearing into the mist but not before half of our group saw it. We then marveled at the size, the colors, the steam and the overall impression of this giant hot pool.

In the afternoon, we wandered about the vast Old Faithful geyser basin. As our group commenced hiking to the Morning Glory pool, a Prairie Garter Snake slithered by – our first trip reptile. Following a mile-plus walk, we all marveled at Morning Glory, a truly glorious hot pool. It resembles a gorgeous piece of jewelry illuminated from underneath in deep tones of blue, green and yellow. You have to see it to believe it.



After witnessing the colorful spectacle of Morning Glory, we walked back through the Old Faithful geyser basin which features many equally if not more impressive geysers that do not erupt as often or as regularly as Old Faithful. Lori spotted a Cutthroat Trout swimming upstream in the Firehole River. The rest of our walk featured multiple geysers and pools with names like Chromatic, Giant, Riverside, Castle, and Daisy. In addition, during our collective leisure time, everyone saw the world's most famous geyser, Old Faithful, erupt at least once. It never disappoints.

In the evening we gathered for a final trip feast at the Inn. Later we shared memories, tallied our bird and wildlife list, and called it a night under another clear, starry sky.

Day 8: Return to Jackson and flights home

Reluctantly, we hit the road for Jackson on a cool, pine-freshened morning with Bison overseeing our departure. We stopped to photograph a continental divide sign where the road serves as the split between the Pacific and Atlantic watersheds. As we left Yellowstone, the fall colors increased in intensity in Grand Teton NP, reaching a crescendo at Oxbow Bend. We took a short photo and scenery break at Willow Flats to absorb the colors and the grandeur of the Tetons before driving the final segment of our trip to the Jackson airport. Everyone made their return flights with time to spare and fond memories of birds, wildlife, scenery and thermal features galore.



Instructions for the Traveler

The following is recommended.
Sit for a while above the tree line in the mountains.
Hear the air moving past your ears.
It's the wind.
Examine the tiny plants that hold tightly
to the earth and
look closely at the mosses and lichens.
They are green, yellow, orange,
pink, black, grey and brown.
Now descend the mountain.
Wander about.
Hear the waters of the lake lapping.
Look up at the sky and the clouds,
the trees and the birds.
Smell the damp sagebrush.
Breathe in the sulfurous steam of the volcano.
Study the bubbling pots and the blooming ponds.
Pay attention.
Remember all of this
and ponder.

Susan – Yellowstone 2016

People photos: Woody Wheeler All other photos Gregory (Slobirdr) Smith – www.Flickr.com/photos/slobirdr