

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler



**With Guides Woody Wheeler & Greg Smith and Participants  
Craig, Fiona, Hugh, Jane, Julia, Kay, Philip, Richard H., Richard  
O., Richard S., Ursula, Vicki**



## **Day One:**

### **Arrival in Jackson, Wyoming, Grand Tetons to Yellowstone National Park**

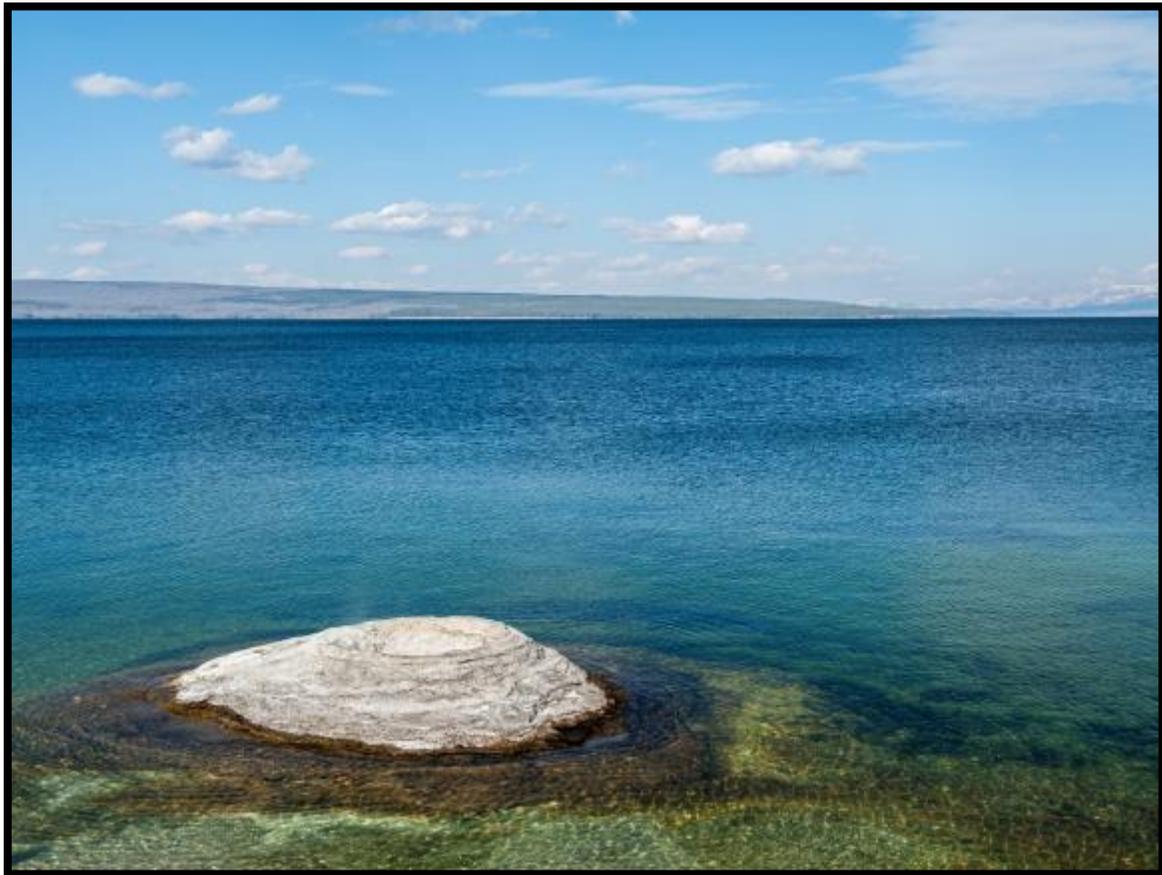
On a crisp, sunny fall day, our guests arrived in Jackson, Wyoming. We promptly loaded the vans and drove to the Flat Creek viewing area on the edge of town. Here a family of Trumpeter Swans paddled into an open stretch of water illuminated by the afternoon sun. They were accompanied by an array of ducks and grebes including Ring-necked Duck, Redheads, Canvasbacks, Eared and Pied-billed Grebes. Richard S. spotted a

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Yellow-headed Blackbird in the Cat Tails and Julia saw a Northern Harrier hovering over the wetlands. This gave a nice jump start to the bird and wildlife sightings of our trip.



Following this successful stop, we had lunch in Jackson at a place with a huge salad bar. From here, we headed north toward Yellowstone via the Grand Tetons. To savor the Teton view as well as fall colors, we stopped at Oxbow Bend of the Snake River where several Mule Deer fed on the banks of the river. The Tetons had a fresh dusting of snow, adding to an already sublime river and mountain scenery.



# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler

We continued north, climbing into Yellowstone Park up one of the world's largest calderas at 45 x 30 miles wide. This is the Yellowstone super volcano that helps define the park and its many thermal features.

At West Thumb, we stopped to walk our first geyser basin under sunny blue skies. The lake had a brilliant aqua blue color complemented by the snow-covered Absaroka Mountains looming on the far eastern shore. We walked the board walk past the various thermal pools, mud pots, and fumaroles. American Pipits, Mountain Bluebirds, and Yellow-rumped Warblers flitted through the thermal area, occasionally perching on snags. What a lovely first stop in a thermal area!

We then drove our last leg of the day's journey to Lake Lodge. This drive also featured stunning views of Yellowstone Lake. We spotted several elk, a Bald Eagle, and a Bison along the way. Upon arriving, Greg had already checked in for us and placed our bags in our respective rooms. What a nice touch! We ended the day with one of Lake Lodge's fabulous meals in the elegant setting of its dining room with huge windows looking out over the lake and surrounding forest.



## **Day 2: “Bio Blitz” including Hayden Valley, Slough Creek, Lamar Valley, Icebox Canyon, Cooke City (MT), Yellowstone Bridge, Calcite Canyon, & Artist’s Point**

Today was the calm before a forecasted storm — rare for this time

of year! — so we opted to cover a lot of ground. It was a “bio-blitz” of sorts and it worked extremely well. The first indication that this would be a special day was when we pulled out of our hotel and immediately saw two Elk on the roadside. As we drove along the Yellowstone River toward Hayden Valley, we saw Trumpeter Swans accompanied by a Bison on shore — an odd pairing.



# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler

At Hayden Valley, we were thrilled to find a pack of five wolves feeding on an elk carcass!

This was an extraordinary look at wolves in a variety of morphs ranging from gray to black to white and mottled. Then the wolves howled!

We continued north through Canyon up and over Dunraven Pass, heading directly to Slough Creek. Near the turn off several Pronghorn browsed along the roadside. At Slough Creek, we watched a large group of Bison as well as a Western Meadowlark and Mountain Bluebird that made flashy appearances when they perched on nearby rocks.



Further up the drainage, several noticed raptors soaring over the ridgeline. While looking at them, Woody found a Golden Eagle perched in the crown of a conifer. This cooperative eagle provided excellent scope views for all of us. While marveling at the eagle, Kay spotted a Black Bear up a grassy draw. What a marvelous convergence of two iconic species in Yellowstone!

Deeper into Yellowstone's famous Lamar Valley we spotted a Coyote stalking Canada Geese. As we entered Ice Box Canyon in the northeastern corner of the park, two moose appeared in the spruce/fir forest along the road. Moose are the largest members of the deer family and these two were indeed impressive representatives.

We drove into Cooke City, Montana, for lunch, then returned to Yellowstone. The great wildlife sightings continued with nearly a dozen Mountain Goats found on the massive volcanic tuff slopes of Barronette Peak (10,404 feet) and later, a half-dozen Bighorn Sheep just off the road near the Yellowstone bridge. Some of them crossed the road nearby. Fiona spotted a Yellow-bellied Marmot in the area — one of the few that had not yet gone into hibernation.

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler

After this convergence of wildlife, we took a gorgeous walk at Calcite Canyon — one of Yellowstone’s lesser-known but truly dramatic landscapes. We found more Bighorn Sheep here.

Last, but definitely not least, we visited Artist’s Point and the iconic Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. The colors of rock were especially vivid under cloudy skies.

On our drive back to Lake Lodge at dusk we saw Elk and Bison along the way, including one bull Bison that casually sauntered right down the middle of the road through Hayden Valley. He ambled slowly just ahead of our van for several hundred feet. Upon arriving at Lake Lodge, we retired to our cozy cabins and lodge, satisfied by an incredible combination of wildlife, thermal features, and scenic grandeur that only Yellowstone can provide.

## **Day 3: LeHardy Rapids, Hayden Valley, Artist’s Point, Canyon, Gull Point**

We awoke to snow flurries and a carpet of fresh snow on the ground. Undeterred, we loaded up the vans after a hearty breakfast and headed for LeHardy Rapids. We were glad that we did.

A small group of Common Mergansers launched into the turbulent waters of the Yellowstone River as we walked by the lower portion of LeHardy Rapids. Then we spotted at least a dozen Harlequin Ducks perching, feeding, and swimming near a cluster of rocks amid the white water. This was a life bird for some in our group, and always a treat for the rest of us. Harlequins have an affinity for aesthetics in both their plumage and in their choice of habitat. Another species with a similar ecological niche, the American Dipper, was also present in this stretch of the river. This too, was a life bird for one of our participants.



We continued up Hayden Valley, then returned to Artist’s Point to see Yellowstone’s iconic Grand Canyon in the snow. It provided yet another glorious perspective on one of America’s most picturesque landscapes. Hugh took a group photo in this beautiful scene that we will likely all remember for a long time to come.

Next, we headed to Canyon Village to take in its excellent visitor center exhibits and to shop. We then returned to Lake Lodge in a sunbreak between snow showers. We perused Hayden Valley for bears and

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler

wolves, but instead were surprised to find an American Kestrel that strafed us and a Wilson's Snipe that seemed terribly out of place in this snowy environment.

After a satisfying warm meal at the hotel deli, we searched in vain for a Great Gray Owl, but found instead more surprises including Wilson's Phalaropes and a Palm Warbler at Gull Point and Bridge Bay Campground.



As a snow squall blew in, we retreated to the historic elegance of Lake Lodge where we compiled our species list and Woody read an essay from his book about Harlequin Ducks. Afterward we enjoyed our final dinner at Lake Lodge, a culinary treat worthy of the elegance embodied by the hotel, prior to returning to our cozy cabins.

## Day 4: Return to Jackson & Grand Teton Park

We arose to several inches of snow on a crisp, sunny day. While the roads were thawing, we took a bird walk loop near Lake Hotel and the shore of Yellowstone Lake. The Absaroka Mountains were shining in the distance but looked closer and larger due to their fresh coat of snow. A Bison grazed calmly in the meadow, seemingly unconcerned about our presence. On the way back to the lodge, we encountered a mixed flock of birds that included: Pine Siskin,



# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler

Cassin's Finch, Dark-eyed Junco, Red-breasted Nuthatch, a Cooper's Hawk, and Phil's first good look at a Clark's Nutcracker — a life bird for him.

At this point in the morning, we loaded up and took a short foray to Fishing Bridge, a quiet, picturesque wintry scene, before retreating to Jackson and Grand Teton Park at lower elevation with less snow. On the way, a Coyote suddenly leaped onto the roadway, perhaps attempting to catch several Robins that were there before. He then calmly strolled along the center double-yellow line before turning into the meadow where he plunged into the snow to dig something out — likely a rodent.

Wildlife are always on the move in Yellowstone and those of us who travel here and pay attention are



privy to a fascinating, ongoing show. As we descended Yellowstone's super-volcano caldera into the Snake River Valley, the snowfall abated. There was little-to-no accumulation in Jackson Hole. Fall colors in the Aspens, Willows, and Cottonwoods were vivid.

We stopped at Flagg Ranch to gas up and to take a short walk before lunch on its forested



grounds. Soon after exiting our vans at the Huckleberry Creek trailhead, a Pine Marten walked across the bridge and disappeared into the vegetation on the other side — an unexpected delight.

We enjoyed a delicious warm lunch at Flagg Ranch before taking a second stroll on the Huckleberry Creek trail. This time we found our first Belted Kingfisher and a late-blooming Heart-leaved Arnica in a burn area. The contrast between the yellow flowers and burnt soil and

wood was striking.

We then drove up the Pilgrim Creek Road searching for Grizzly Bear. Although we did not find one, Richard O. spotted a Peregrine Falcon and Greg discussed the Shrub-Steppe ecosystem and the presence of large isolated Douglas Fir Trees in the valley. The scene had a spectacular backdrop of the snow-covered Teton Mountains. It was an inspiring place for an interpretive lesson.

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler

In Jackson, we checked into our hotel, and Greg brought the group to the Snake River brew pub, one of Jackson's many fine eateries. We settled into our new hotel with plans to start early in the morning on a quest for wildlife in Grand Teton National Park.

## Day 5: Grand Teton Park Wildlife & Museums

Early morning, just before sunrise, we set out on a wildlife-watching expedition to the famous Moose-Wilson Road. At day break we pulled over at the park entrance where a bull Elk came into view, followed by six cow Elk. Soon afterward came the telltale, haunting sound of the bull Elk bugling.

Farther north, we stopped at a well-known overlook for moose but found instead one Osprey with a small accumulation of snow on its back. Time to migrate south? Perhaps.

On the return trip to Jackson we saw another Moose and more Elk. After spending time in the cool moist morning air, we were ready for a hot breakfast at the Virginian Hotel Café. They delivered!



Afterward, we headed to the National Museum of Wildlife Art just north of Jackson. Everyone was impressed by the quantity and quality of the art and photography at this museum, set in a replica of a small Scottish castle. Here you can find works from artists and photographers ranging from Robert Bateman, to Andy Warhol, to Georgia O'Keeffe, to Thomas Moran. An outdoor sculpture garden added to the already impressive collection which will continue to expand in the future.

We drove north once again, this time toward Jackson Lake Lodge, our lunch destination. As often occurs in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, animals distracted us on the way. This time it was another bull Elk and its small harem near Jackson Lake Junctions. At one point the bull sat in the tall

grasses so that only its massive antlers were visible. Occasionally they would pivot from side-to-side, giving the appearance that they were installed on some mechanical device on the ground. Very amusing!

At Jackson Lake Lodge, we had lunch with the scenic backdrop of Willow Flats and Jackson Lake. After lunch, we took in another interesting exhibit at Colter Bay Lodge where a collection of Shoshone Indian artifacts was on display.

On the return trip to Jackson, we stopped for another look at the birds and wildlife at the Flat Creek overlook. Numerous waterfowl and a few Trumpeter Swans had congregated close to shore. Several Western Wood Pewees surprised us in this habitat, as they hopped along the muddy shoreline harvesting insects, probably loading up for their migration south. Lingered Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warblers, along with a few Willow Flycatchers, were found in the willows behind the visitor

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler

center. All of these species would likely be gone in a few days, southbound on their respective migrations.

On our evening drive to Wilson for dinner, we spotted a large cow Moose resting in a grassy area on the banks of the Snake River. This scene was captured by the Jackson newspaper in a front-page photo with caption the next day. Our drive took us to the venerable Calico Restaurant in a lovely setting where Osprey and Moose sometimes can be found on the grounds. Following one of the finest meals of the trip, we returned to Jackson. Among the lasting impressions of this day were two auditory ones: the trumpeting of Trumpeter Swans and the bugling of Elk.



## Day 6: North to Yellowstone & Old Faithful Inn

Today we left early once again for breakfast along the road in Grand Teton National Park. Our route took us along the Moose/Wilson Road again, a reliable wildlife-watching corridor. This time we found an adult Black Bear with cinnamon coloring about 15-feet high in a Hawthorne tree, calmly harvesting berries while its two cubs frolicked nearby on the ground.

Farther up the road a cow and calf Moose we were watching seemed distracted by some unseen creature. This turned out to be a young bull Moose that suddenly bolted through the brush thrashing its antlers in a most dramatic fashion in hot pursuit of the cow, grunting as it went. The cow Moose ran away with her calves, crossing the road behind us. As the chase intensified, we took refuge in our van just as the bull Moose pranced onto the road about 30 yards away, full of vim and vigor, and slightly out of control. He grunted again and took off into the woods on the other side of the road chasing the cow, who continued to elude him and seemed uninterested in his aggressive overtures.



Following this exciting wildlife show, we headed to Signal Mountain Lodge along Jackson Lake for what was for many, one of the best breakfasts we had anywhere. Following this generous breakfast/brunch, we headed up nearby Signal Mountain in rapidly clearing and sunny weather. Once on top, we enjoyed a view eastward over a vast area of forest and sagebrush steppe. Fiona spotted a distant Bison, then Woody saw a bull Elk trotting ahead of several cow Elk, raising its head to bugle as it went.

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler



On the way down the mountain a lone female Dusky Grouse came to the edge of the road, nibbling on the vegetation as she went. This was a life bird for some, and a confiding one at that.

At Jackson Dam, we watched as River Otter descended from nearby rocks into the frothy spillway zone looking for fish. An Osprey also flew into this area and very quickly plucked out a fish that it re-positioned in mid-air and flew away with to find a place to dine.



We then drove north to re-enter Yellowstone Park. As we climbed its caldera, snow flurries appeared once again, and then we were surprised by a road closure to Old Faithful Lodge. This forced us to make a detour that was somewhat lengthy, but took us through an 85-mile swath of the park with excellent wildlife-watching areas. Off we went.

Along the way, we saw numerous Elk and Bison, but added a new and hard-to-find species to our list: an American Badger that was trotting at a good clip through a geyser basin otherwise mostly inhabited by bison.

We eventually made it to our cabins at Old Faithful lodge. Some of the group saw the famous namesake geyser erupt before dinner.



## Day 7:

### Old Faithful & Vicinity Geyser Basins

We appreciated waking up to a sunny “bluebird” day to explore the many and varied geysers, hot springs, fumaroles, and hot rivers in the area. Yellowstone has more than 10,000 hydrothermal features, and more than half of the world’s active geysers. Our first stop was to Grand Prismatic Hot Spring, the largest hot pool in the park, and as the name implies, very

colorful. The combination of its aqua blue waters and the brilliant green and orange shoreline and billowing steam clouds above was mesmerizing.

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler

Part of our group hiked on a new overlook trail and the other part on the old trail that circles this massive, colorful hot spring. Both groups had gorgeous hikes enhanced by sightings of Mountain Bluebirds, a Merlin, American Kestrel and an assortment of sparrows, Pine Siskins, and Yellow-rumped Warblers.

Our next stop was Fountain Paint Pots, featuring a bubbling, mud-saturated hot spring that resembles a witch's brew. Several researchers were on hand here taking water samples from thermal water features. It was encouraging to see science in action and the park



being used as a laboratory for higher learning about these amazing features.

Our final stop of the morning was a board walk stroll at Black Sands Thermal Area. This impressive place features multiple hot water streams pouring into the aptly-named Firehole River. It too was fascinating and beautiful.

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler



Satisfied for now with our varied and most interesting explorations of thermal features, we had lunch in the Old Faithful Inn, a masterpiece of log architecture. In the afternoon, everyone wandered through Old Faithful Geyser Basin, shopped, explored the visitor center or rested. It was a delightful way to wind down from our journey in such a magical place.

We re-united in the evening for a final celebration dinner at the Inn, followed by a special slideshow assembled by Hugh with fresh images from our journey. They were spectacular! We also compiled our final species list and Woody read an essay from his book about bird intelligence. Most reported seeing “life birds” as well as “life animals” on the journey. All were dazzled by Yellowstone’s incredible and unique natural wonders.

## **Day 8: Return to Jackson & Flights Home**

We arose early for the drive back to Jackson under mostly fair skies. Once we descended from Yellowstone’s super volcano, dropping some 1,500-feet into Jackson Hole, the weather moderated and the fall colors from cottonwoods and aspens became more vivid. Views of the Grand Tetons — partially cloud shrouded, covered in fresh snow, and topped by a deep blue sky — were stunning. But this was not our last dramatic nature encounter.

Just south of Jenny Lake, a huge bull Moose with velvet hanging from its massive antlers in tatters, appeared trotting alongside the road — our seventh moose sighting of the journey.

After this tour, most would agree with Ferdinand Hayden, head of the Yellowstone expedition of 1870: *“The intelligent American will one day point on the map to this remarkable district with the conscious pride that it has not its parallel on the face of the globe.”*

# Yellowstone National Park: Birding & Wildlife | Trip Report September 17 – 24, 2017 | Written by Guide Woody Wheeler



Oxbow Bend of Snake River & Grand Tetons by Hugh Simmons; Group Watching Trumpeter Swans at Flat Creek Wildlife Area by Hugh Simmons; Yellowstone Lake at West Thumb Geyser Basin by Hugh Simmons; Bison with Trumpeter Swans on Yellowstone River by Woody Wheeler; Watching a Wolf Pack at Hayden Valley by Hugh Simmons; Mountain Bluebird and Western Meadowlark by Woody Wheeler; Bighorn Sheep by Hugh Simmons; Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone before and after snow by Hugh Simmons; Group at Artist's Point by Hugh Simmons; Lake Lodge by Hugh Simmons; Birding walk near Lake Lodge by Hugh Simmons; Clark's Nutcracker by Hugh Simmons; Pine Marten by Hugh Simmons; Heart-leaved Arnica by Greg Smith; Andy Warhol's radiant Big Horn Sheep painting by Woody Wheeler; Rambunctious bull Moose by Woody Wheeler; Bull chasing cow moose by Hugh Simmons; Dusky Grouse by Woody Wheeler; Osprey with fish by Hugh Simmons; American Badger by Woody Wheeler; Grand Prismatic Hot Spring by Woody Wheeler; View from above of Grand Prismatic Hot Spring by Hugh Simmons; Bison and thermal features – a quintessential Yellowstone scene by Hugh Simmons; Grand Tetons over Snake River by Hugh Simmons; Your trip guides in action: Woody Wheeler on Fishing Bridge and Greg Smith at Grand Prismatic Hot Spring — both by Hugh Simmons.