

# Yellowstone in the Fall | Trip Report

## September 18-25, 2021 | Written by Pat Lueders

With guides Pat Lueders, Hugh Simmons, & Bryan Calk and participants Andrew, Ann, Darlene, Don, Donna, Gordon, Herbert, Jane, Joan, John, and Susan.



### **Saturday, Sept 18: Bozeman | West Yellowstone | Island Park**

The group met in Bozeman to begin this tour of the northwest visiting Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho over the next 8 days. Today we drove to Idaho, traveling along the Gallatin River, marveling at the dramatic scenery of this area. What a great beginning! Our first herd of American Bison was spotted not far from Bozeman near the continental divide. We stopped in West Yellowstone, the last large city we would see till the end of the tour. Hello wilderness and nature! We arrived at Angler's Lodge, settled into our lovely rooms located only a few feet from the Snake River, met for cocktail hour near the fireplace in the lodge, and enjoyed a delicious dinner as we watched Common Mergansers, Osprey, Bald Eagles, and American White Pelican on the river.

### **Sunday, Sept 19: Henry's Lake | Harriman State Park**

We awoke to a forecast of rain and snow in September! After a delicious breakfast, we drove to nearby Henry's Lake finding a large variety of waterfowl including 12 species of ducks, many in breeding plumage, and 5 species of grebe including Horned, Eared and Western again in striking plumage. Snow began covering the nearby hills as we watched California Gulls, Osprey, and Bald Eagles soaring, and a Peregrine Falcon flew quickly across the lake. On land, we spotted Northern Harriers, Vesper Sparrows, and Western Meadowlarks. As we drove through the beautiful pinewoods to return to our lodge for lunch, we heard over the two-way radios "Great Gray Owl!!!"



from the last van. Darlene had spotted the owl low on a post close to the road. A key bird for most of the group, we watched and photographed this majestic owl from a distance as he hunted from post to post. Wow, what a magical moment and wonderful beginning to our trip! Still excited from the owl sighting, we spent the afternoon birding at Harriman State Park and Silver Lake. We found our first Mountain Chickadees along the road and had quick glimpses of Marsh Wrens. We walked along the stream spotting Belted Kingfishers, our first pair of Trumpeter Swans, and a small migrating flocks of warblers included a Wilson's and Yellow-rumped. On our return, the magical day continued with a young moose feeding in the Snake River in front of our lodge, which we could photograph and watch from our rooms. This would be a day we would never forget!

## **Monday, Sept 20: Madison River | Old Faithful | Geyser Basins**

Today we left our lovely Idaho lodge and drove the beautiful Madison Valley in Wyoming, visiting the breathtaking Firehole Canyon and falls. We arrived at Old Faithful Geyser shortly before an eruption, enjoyed a picnic lunch, and visited the dramatic Old Faithful Inn. This national historic landmark, built in 1903 with local logs and stones, is considered the largest log structure in the world. After we walked the geyser boardwalk, we watched a much better eruption and a Clark's Nutcracker in a tree behind us. As we drove the Firehole Lake Drive, Bryan spotted a pair of Ruffed Grouse in the road, a life bird for many! The temperature, a little above freezing, caused the geysers to be covered in steam and more dramatic than usual as we drove the geyser basin.

Our first drive through Lamar Valley introduced the group to this best location for mammals in Yellowstone. American Bison, sensing the approaching winter season, were seen migrating in large herds down the hillsides from higher altitudes to the plush ponds in the valley. We arrived in Cooke City, checked into our hotel, and enjoyed dinner discussing the wonders we had seen today!



## **Tuesday, Sept 21: Lamar Valley**

Slowly we drove the Lamar Valley looking for mammals that call this fertile valley their winter home. We found our first wolf, a black Gray Wolf, hunting close to the road, quickly getting photographs of this beautiful predator. Shortly afterwards, we saw a lone coyote also hunting along the road, and herds of bison were crossing the road, feeding in the plush grass, and rolling in the dirt circles. We returned to Silver Gate for lunch and stopped near Cooke City at beaver ponds where a male, female, and juvenile moose were feeding on the willow leaves, their favorite food. What a productive day! After dinner, having heard about a wolf pack seen hunting in the area, we returned to the valley before sunset and were rewarded with a pack of up to 19 wolves running along the ridge before dark. This would be the group's most memorable wildlife sighting of the trip!

## **Wednesday, Sept 22: Beartooth Pass**

With beautiful weather this morning, we took the scenic drive to the "Top of the World" on Beartooth Highway. Elevations rise to 12,000' in the 920,000-acre Absaroka Wilderness, and snow remained on the north facing slopes. At the pinnacle, we found a target mammal species, the American Pika, a montane species most had never seen before. The very cute and busy Pika ran from rock to rock making photography difficult. We marveled at the magnificent views at each turn in the highway, truly feeling we were at the top of the world. A stop at the Rock Creek Vista Point restrooms provided us with close views of Red Crossbills feeding on pinecones. Quite a surprise! We ate our picnic lunch in the Limber Pine campgrounds near a stream where we found our first American Dipper. During the drive, we spotted a Prairie Falcon hunting over the cliffs, and Horned Larks fought the wind to feed at the summit. We returned with time for many to visit the museum and other shops in the interesting town of Cooke City. A delicious dinner at the Beartooth Café was a fitting end to this wonderful day.

## **Thursday, Sept 23: Slough Creek | Mammoth Hot Springs | Gardiner**

This morning, after a delightful breakfast at Pilot's Peak Café, we traveled the Lamar Valley, stopping at Pebble Creek for additional sightings of an American Dipper. Slough Creek Campground's trail proved to be very

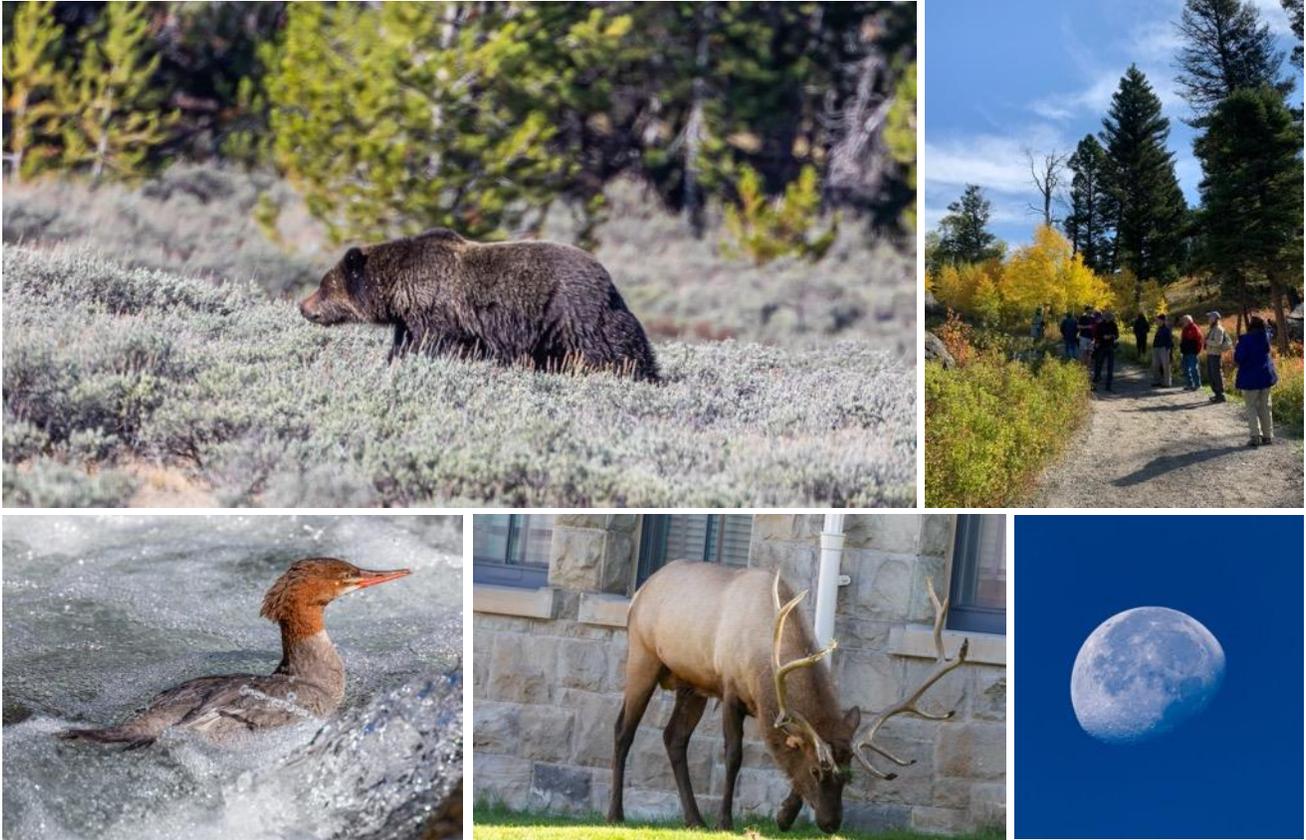


productive with great views of two Three-toed Woodpeckers, a life bird for many, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and scope views of a Golden Eagle which breed on the nearby cliffs. We were stopped often by herds of Bison crossing the road, moving into the fertile valley for the winter, some with tan new calves. On the highway to Mammoth, we stopped at Swan Lake and found a family of Trumpeter Swans, two adults and four cygnets. But the excitement of the day came shortly afterwards when we stopped for a traffic jam near Bunsen Peak trailhead. A male Grizzly Bear was near the road walking in the field and creating quite a commotion. We enjoyed watching this huge bear for a length of time foraging in the field and eventually moving into the nearby woods. Wow, what lucky timing!

We stopped and walked the boardwalk at the travertine terraces of Mammoth Hot Springs, one of the world's best-protected examples of travertine-depositing hot springs. We were surprised to find our first Killdeer and an American Pipit on the thermals feeding on insects. A Townsend's Solitaire perched at the top of a leafless tree. A herd of Elk was feeding in the grass around the visitor's center. We continued into the scenic town of Gardiner, crossing the Yellowstone River, and checked into our lodge located along the river's bank. Wesley Larson, a specialist in bears and naturalist for Yellowstone Park, met with our group to discuss bears and the proper use of bear spray. Dinner in a nearby restaurant featured elk and bison entrees and was a perfect ending to a great day!

### **Friday, Sept 24: Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone | Hayden Valley**

Our last full day in the park was memorable! We first visited the Lower Falls of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, created by a huge volcanic eruption and eroded by the Yellowstone River. The 308' Lower Falls can be viewed from various lookout points, and we stopped for views and photos. We went to the east side to visit the famous Artist Point with great views of the Lower Falls canyon. As we left, to our surprise, a Dusky Grouse was found in the parking lot feeding on seeds in the median for great looks and many photos.



We traveled the Hayden Valley, with the Yellowstone River snaking through it, and stopped at Le Hardy's Rapids. There we found a family of American Dipper interacting in the rapids, two Harlequin Ducks, and Common Mergansers feeding from the rocks. The campground nearby was a lovely picnic site. We stopped on our return at Mud Volcano, where the Dragon's Mouth Spring's geyser's vocalization was very impressive! When we returned to Gardiner, we stopped at the Roosevelt Arch for photos. In 1903, the arch was completed and dedicated by Theodore Roosevelt, who laid the cornerstone to this first national park. Our farewell dinner was enjoyed at the Wonderland Café where we celebrated this memorable week touring Yellowstone National Park and the surrounding wilderness areas!

### **Saturday, Sept 25: Tom Miner Basin | Return to Bozeman**

We had time before our return to Bozeman to stop at Tom Miner Basin, prime grizzly bear habitat just northeast of Yellowstone. The basin is home to an abundant supply of a non-native plant, caraway, with a calorie-rich root that grizzlies like to dig up and eat. We arrived in time to get good scope looks at a male, female, and cub digging in the field. A Northern Harrier sat on a fence post in the field. What a great way to end our visit! Departures from Bozeman was bittersweet as our compatible group said their farewells and departed to various locations in the U.S.

**Photo Credits:** Group Birding (Pat Lueders - PL), Great Gray Owl (Andrew Kenny - AK), Lodge (PL), Geyser Hill (AK), Ruffed Grouse (AK), Moose (PL), Buffalo herd (AK), Limber Pine Campground (AK), Gray Wolves (AK), American Dipper (AK), American Three-toed Woodpecker (AK), Chipmunk (AK), Mammoth Hot Springs (AK), Lower Falls GC (PL), Brown Bear (AK), Group Trail (PL), Common Merganser (AK), Elk (AK), Moon (AK)