



PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632  
Phone 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667  
Email [info@naturalistjourneys.com](mailto:info@naturalistjourneys.com)

## NATURALIST JOURNEYS & TRAVELLING NATURALISTS SOUTHWEST PARKS

### 2013 TRIP REPORT

Sept. 12-Sept. 21, 2013

*by Wynne Brown*

*Guides: Wynne Brown and Pat Lueders, with 7 participants: Cathy, Dixie, Stuart, Alistair, Janice, Anne and Janet*

#### Thursday, Sept. 12 – Arrival in Salt Lake City

Leaders and participants alike all converged on schedule from England, Scotland, North Carolina, Maryland, Missouri, and Arizona, all eager to spend the next ten days exploring the beauty and magic of the Southwest. The lead guide was Wynne Brown, assisted by Pat Lueders, bird guide extraordinaire!

No sooner had we hit the road to Capitol Reef before a downpour delivered a hint of what we'd be in for ... Little did we know how much of our itinerary would be rearranged by both local and distant storms!

Lunch was fun: Tomatillos is a small Mexican place in Nephi where the UK residents received a tutorial on burritos and enchiladas and watched in fascination as our selections were prepared.



We stopped at a pond off Rt. 50 for species-rich birding and our first spotting scope session: White Pelicans, Canada Geese, Western Grebe, Redheads, American Coot, Golden Eagle, Black-billed Magpie, and more. We also saw a Western Racer, one of the few snakes on the entire trip. Pausing at Fremont Indian State Park gave us a chance to stretch our legs and see some petroglyphs.

Our base for Capitol Reef is Torrey, UT, at the Best Western, well out of town and nestled against a stunning red backdrop of rim rock, still glowing from the afternoon sun.



Our lively welcome dinner at Rim Rock Restaurant included scampering out to the feeders to watch Broad-tailed, Calliope, and Rufous hummers.

### **Friday, Sept. 13 – Capitol Reef National Park**

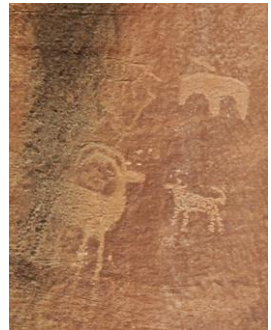
Several hardy souls in lots of layers braved the chill for sunrise birding and photography: an American Robin, Lesser Goldfinch, and a Mystery bird later identified as an unusually solitary Pinyon Jay. What fun to try to capture dawn's lovely light on the rocks and surrounding rim...



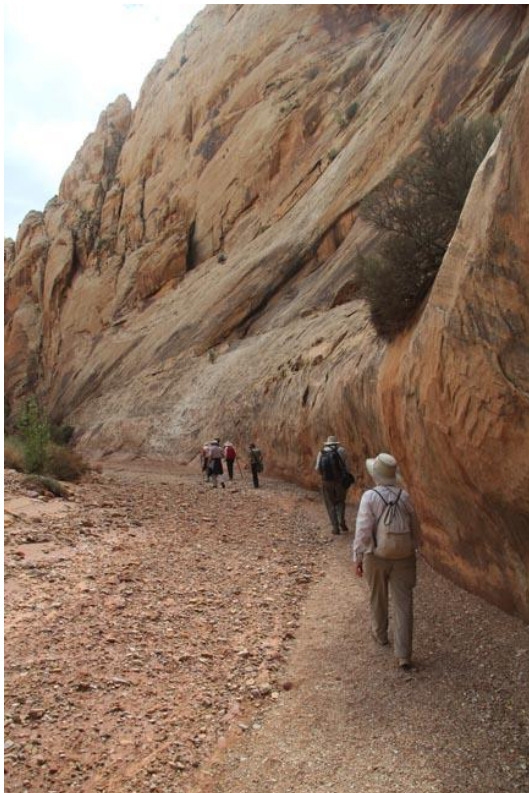
After a generous American breakfast (and seeing two Say's Phoebes on the restaurant's roof), we headed to Capitol Reef National Park for a delightful day. Our first stop was at Chimney Rock where a Rock Wren posed, close enough for a regular lens.

Since storms and floods had forced the closure of the both Scenic Drive and the Cohab Canyon trail, we spent a peaceful morning in Fruita campground, ambling along the still-swollen Fremont River, adding Gray Vireo, Black-headed Grosbeak, both Western and Summer tanagers, and a Sphinx Moth to our list.

After a picnic lunch (observed by a relaxed and dozing Mule Deer) we—along with what seemed like hundreds of other tourists—stopped at petroglyphs panel along the boardwalk that gives easy access to these remnants of an earlier civilization. Next, we hiked up Grand Wash between towering canyon walls—accompanied by the rumblings of thunder. Everyone made it back in the van before the downpour, which gave us a reason to head back to the motel for a little birding (Ash-throated Flycatcher, and



Alistair heard Gambel's quail and saw an Abert's Towhee) and some downtime before a spectacular dinner at Cafe Diablo.



### **Saturday, Sept 14 – Boulder Mountain, Bryce National Park**

After packing up, we cruised slowly through Torrey, stopping at a flooded field where we observed Blue-winged Teal sp., Solitary Sandpiper, more Magpies, and our daily dose of Turkey Vultures.

Scenic Byway 12 wanders through Dixie National Forest, rises up over Boulder Mountain passing through giant groves of aspen with ample views of the surrounding area and the occasional crowd of Pinyon Jays. Larb Hollow Overlook gave us our first looks at Clarks Nutcracker, Mountain Chickadee, Steller's Jay, Sharp-shinned Hawk, among others. We enjoyed a pleasant break in the community of Boulder where we picked up lunch and birded the peaceful pond and got our only look at Pine Siskins.





Our next stop was picnicking at Calf Creek Falls where Stuart spotted an American Dipper, which everyone got to watch at length, and a couple of Belted Kingfishers. Bureau of Land Management is doing a 5-year-study of hummingbirds here and have learned that, yes, individual birds do indeed return to the same place. With the addition of Black-chinned and Costa's, we've now seen all the hummingbirds of the area.

Once again our plan to hike was thwarted: the Calf Creek Falls trail was closed due to flood damage.



The drive through Escalante-Grand Staircase is spectacular with its sweeping vistas of tan and yellow sandstone with the green ribbon of the Escalante River winding below.

We rambled on, stopping at Powell Point for more stunning views and a perfect photo op of a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel and a Tree Lizard—surprisingly, our first lizard.

Just as the afternoon light faded into evening's glow, we arrived in Tropic, UT, and took up residence in our rustic-style cabins at the Bryce Valley Inn, where we could simply walk a block to dinner at Clarke's Restaurant and then home to turn in.

### **Sunday, Sept. 15 – Bryce Canyon**

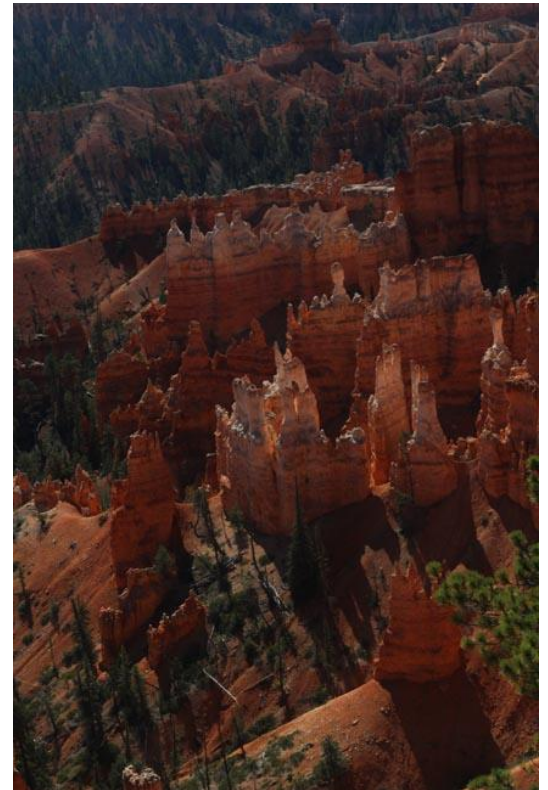
After a Continental breakfast under the watchful eye of the motel's mounted mountain lion, we headed out on the Mossy Cave Trail. It's a short 2-mile hike with some elevation that rewarded us with our first Juniper Titmouse and a Warbling



Vireo, along with soul-stirring views of sunlit spires, still glowing in the early morning light.

We moved on toward the park itself and sauntered along the Rim, where we were lucky enough to hear the melodic song of a Townsend's Solitaire (a life first for Pat!) and see the bird itself.

After the last couple of days, no one was surprised to hear the Navajo Gardens/Wall





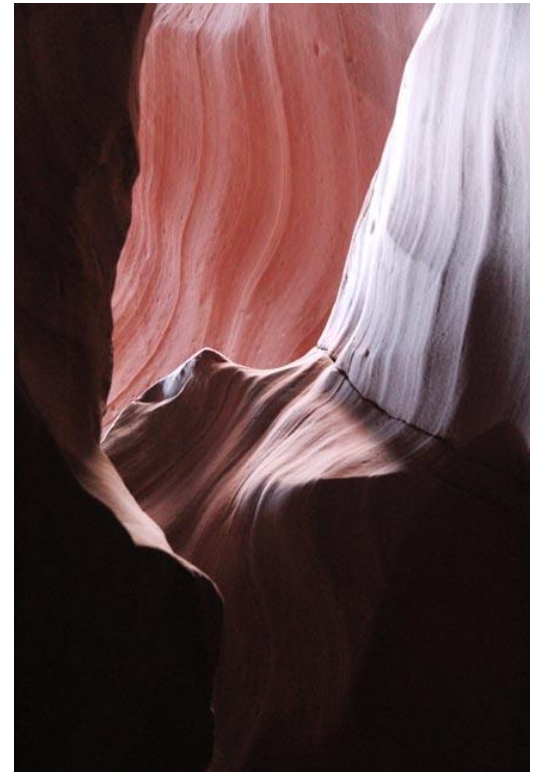
Street Navajo Gardens/Wall Street trail we intended to hike was closed from storm damage. Instead, we all headed down toward Victoria Gardens, admired the hoodoos close up, then returned to the top of the rim.



We'd picked up lunches in Torrey and drove through intermittent sunlight toward our intended picnic spot at Rainbow Point, noting the wet cars that were descending the mountain. Sure enough, we'd barely gotten under the picnic shelter when the rain (and a hopeful Common Raven) arrived.

After munching our sandwiches as the rain subsided, we hiked down the trail to see the bristlecone pines—glancing at these long-lived trees only briefly since it was raining and lightning approached. Despite our haste, several of us got totally soaked in the next downpour and hail. Hooray for quick-dry pants!

Next we headed to the Bryce Lodge and another gift store shopping opportunity. A little birding at the bus stop added Grace's Warblers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets to our list. Dinner was on our own before soaking up the evening light on the Rim, then heading down the mountain, pausing at a cow pen near Ruby's for terrific looks at Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Once back in Tropic, some, not quite ready to call it a day, hung out in the motel parking lot aiming our iPads at Tropic's starry night sky and using the app *Skyviewfree* to identify constellations.



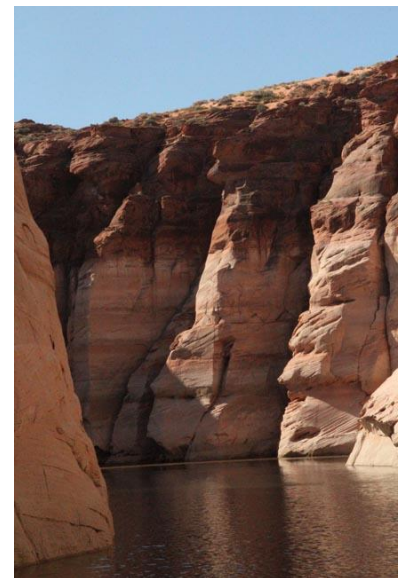
### **Monday, Sept. 16 - Red Canyon, Kanab, Antelope Canyon**



After Wynne and Pat once again conquered the puzzle of loading the suitcases in the most compact way possible while leaving full access to the all-important snack box—we said goodbye to Tropic, stopping soon to admire Red Canyon, reputed home of Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid. From

there we headed toward Kanab and a terrific lunch at the Rocking V Restaurant where two Kanab residents, dear longtime friends of Wynne, joined us. Next, we headed toward Page, with a stop at the Glen Canyon Dam Visitor Center. In Page we had a little time to explore, shop, and find ice cream before clambering into the covered truck that bounced us along a sandy wash still damp from the flooding of two days earlier to Antelope Canyon.

Patrick, our Navajo guide, pointed out the flood debris high above our heads, explained the often-fatal power of flash floods in slot canyons, named the various rock formations, and helped each of us capture at least one memorable shot of the spectacular colors and shapes that



make up this photographic treat.

Emerging with an enhanced respect for flash floods, we headed toward Lake Powell Resort and a lively dinner in the Rainbow Room as the sun's rays faded on the lake's still surface.

### **Tuesday, Sept. 17 - Lake Powell boat trip, Grand Canyon**

Our original itinerary called for a mega-early rising for the boat trip to Rainbow Bridge. The lake is low from drought, so getting to the bridge involves a 1-mile hike—yet another hike we didn't do since a 22-foot section of the trail collapsed in last week's storms. Rainbow Bridge won't be available for visitors for another year.

Instead we took a different boat trip—and didn't have to get up quite so early!—to see the Glen Canyon Dam from the water, then the upper part of Antelope Canyon (about 15 miles from the area we explored yesterday), and Navajo Canyon. The Lake is a huge reservoir that provides water to parts of Arizona, Nevada, and California, stretches for 186 miles, and includes nearly 2,000 miles of coastline! At some point in the future, the Navajos expect to open a 350-room hotel and a golf course here.



After a futile search in the campground for roadrunners, we hit the road on yet another detour since Highway 89

collapsed last February. The new road just opened two weeks ago, and gave us long and lovely vistas of Sagebrush- and Rabbitbrush-covered grasslands and the ever-present Raven.

We paused at the Cameron Trading Post, which includes a museum-like gallery of Native American arts and artifacts. Wynne promised to make room for the 36" original Apache basket—but at \$17,000, no one took her up on the opportunity.

Next we stopped at Desert View Tower, a striking building designed by Mary Jane Colter, for everyone's first glimpse of the Grand Canyon. Late afternoon light and moodily impressive clouds gave us a terrific photo op.

After dodging the numerous Rocky Mountain Elk along and in the road, we were checked in and settled in time for our 7 p.m. dinner reservation at the historic and lovely El Tovar Hotel. Another treat of this particular trip has been following the footsteps of Janice's father, Frank, a 1940s RAF pilot who was stationed in Mesa's Falcon Field. Alistair has transcribed his father-in-law's diaries and scanned the photos, and shared his findings with us over dinner. Frank too had dinner here at the El Tovar, but at \$1.25, his cost a little less!





### **Wednesday, Sept. 17 - Grand Canyon**

After some confusion locating breakfast and the Maswik Lodge—and finding a pair of Williamson’s Sapsucker, our first Hairy Woodpecker, and a handsome Abert’s Squirrel—we hopped on the shuttle and headed toward Hopi Point, having heard that condors were hanging out in the area. A sign points to the Battleship Cave, a former condor nest. The next day we learned the nest IS being used this year, and that the chick was inside when we were there, but not visible. But thanks to Pat’s determination and spotting scope skill, we did get to watch a condor settled comfortably in the shade at the base of a cliff. Later we saw two more, flying.



We hiked along the Rim to Mojave Point, where we picnicked (in gusts so strong they threatened to blow the cheese right off our sandwiches!) before hopping the shuttle out to Hermits Rest, another Colter building.

After returning to the lodge in late afternoon, everyone disbanded for some independent time to relax, do some birding, photograph the canyon in the evening light, and have dinner on their own.

The evening brought an almost full moon—what a magnificent sight to see that oh-so-Grand Canyon lit up by moonlight!



### **Thursday, Sept. 19 — Marble Canyon to Zion**

Before breakfast Pat led a group of eager early morning birders, adding White-breasted Nuthatches, Black-throated Gray and Townsend’s warblers, to our list. We packed up and headed north, pausing for one more look at this very grand Canyon at Lipan Overlook. What a view! As well as brief looks at Bushtits, and Cathy’s spotting of our first Northern Harrier. We moved on, hoping to see condors close up where they’ve been perched recently on the support struts of Navajo Bridge. No luck there—but we did run into Eddie Feltes, Condor Project Field Manager, for the Peregrine Fund, who kindly allowed us to join another group in a side trip to Marble canyon to see the active nest and—maybe—the chick and/or its parents. This particular chick is famous: It has three parents, a female and two males, who share the incubation and feeding duties.

Luck wasn’t with us—the chick must have been napping in the back of the cavity while the parents were out feeding. But we did get to see our first Canyon Wren—and a surprising number of Sphinx moth larvae.



After an excellent lunch at the only restaurant in the tiny community of Cliff Dwellings, we headed on to Zion. Soon after we entered the national park, a handsome male bighorn sheep posed in the perfect backlit spot for all the pictures our group could take.

Next, we hiked the Canyon Overlook trail—a route some found very challenging and not quite the “it’s got railings all the way” route Wynne described... But all agreed the lovely views, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, and not one, but two tarantulas, were worth the effort!

After a long day, filled with Southwest magnificence, everyone was grateful to arrive in Springdale to our comfortable rooms in the La Quinta, and all turned in early.



#### **Friday, Sept. 20 - Zion**

Springdale has a terrific shuttle system that runs to the park entrance from multiple drop-off points every 15 minutes. We hopped aboard and headed to the Riverside Trail, where we ambled along photographing the Virgin River, Monkey Flowers, and the ever-present Rock Squirrels. Lunch was outside the historic Zion Lodge surrounded by the towering cliffs, smudged with desert varnish.

We had one more goal: to find the elusive Grafton Ghost Town. Mission accomplished!

And well worth the search: Established in 1859 by Mormons, abandoned in 1921 because of flooding, it’s a lovely peaceful spot with an apple orchard and buildings lovingly restored. A Vermilion Flycatcher was the star of the day, flashing its orange brilliance and dashing after insects. We made one more stop

at the poignant Grafton Cemetery and saw two Golden Eagles before returning to our lodgings.

Our farewell dinner at the always-excellent Bit and Spur was lively and filled with laughter, stories, and suggestions for how to fit even more into the trip.

#### **Saturday, Sept. 21 - Departure Day**

By 5:30, long before dawn, everyone was at the van, and we were on the road to Salt Lake City, and everyone’s departures.



What a FUN trip—and what a terrific and very flexible group!





*Photo credits: Group photo (outside) and image of Wynne Brown by Pat Lueders; Group photo (dinner) Alistair White, all others by Wynne Brown.*