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Yellowstone National Park Tour Report
June 10-15, 2012
Guide Peg Abbott, with six participants:
Lynn, Maggie, Hazel, Peter, Suzanne and Chris

Sun., June 10 Billings / A Bit of the Prairie near Molt / Red Lodge



We met in Billings on a very blustery day, but as the entire group arrived either a day early or were continuing from the week before, we got an early start. The wind was howling, and rain started as we left town, foiling our plans to pick up a few signature prairie species en route to Red Lodge.

We gave it a try, seeing Horned Larks and Lark Buntings from paved and gravel roads near Molt, as well as several Pronghorn. We turned south from there, lining up with Laurel and our route to Red Lodge, where we enjoyed some time to explore this pretty little mountain town ahead of

our welcome dinner.

The historic Pollard Hotel is always fun to stay at, giving a sense of Montana's rich past. The hostess greeted us warmly but not with the best of news. Peg became worried about the next day as today Beartooth Pass was closed, due to the weather conditions (snow!), blocking our planned route into Yellowstone. An alternate route was also scenic but longer, we'd have to wait and check conditions in the morning...



Mon., June 11 Beartooth Pass (almost) and Sunlight Basin to Cooke City

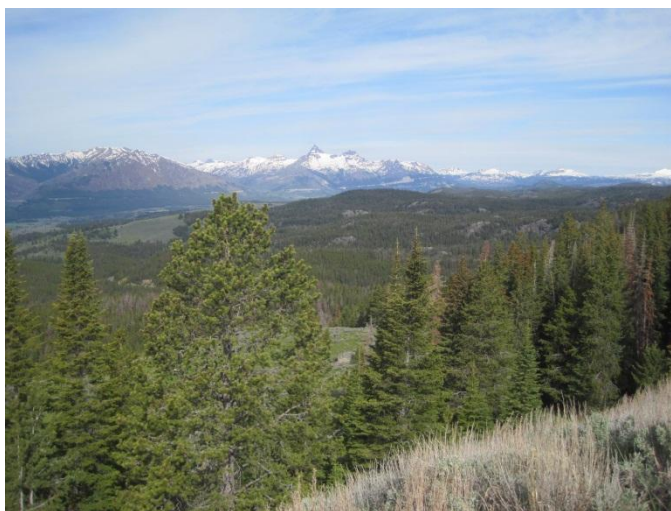
We walked in the city park of Red Lodge to give the pass some time to open, knowing plows on both sides were at the task, but over three feet of snow had fallen the day before. The park is lined with cottonwoods, and our prize birding find was a cooperative American Dipper. We decided to give going over the pass a try, and headed up past Rock Creek, and on up the switchbacks to Vista Point, where stunning views of Rock Creek's classic U-shaped headwaters were in store. The Beartooths are gorgeous anytime, but dressed out in new snow they are spectacular. We enjoyed seeing Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels and chipmunks,



over Sunlight Basin.

For a break we stopped at a small Montana Café known for its “world-famous” banana cream pie. They had homemade soup, sandwiches, and yes, delicious pie, and it was warm enough to dine outside. The small town here sits amid mining relics from coal-mining days; an historic marker told of one of the biggest mine disasters in history here, one in which seventy-some men died entrapped in the coal seam.

Views from Dead Indian Pass, and another sad story, that of the Nez Perce flight to Canada, awaited us on the road's passage. By five-thirty we were in Cooke City, with time to get settled, and then look for Red Fox (successful) and Moose (unsuccessful) ahead of dinner at the delightful Log Cabin restaurant in Silver Gate.



Clark's Nutcrackers, a Yellow-bellied Marmot, quick glimpses of a Pika, and a very cooperative Pine Grosbeak that perched for our inspection. We continued up to the state line, but after an hour or so of watching American Pipits, Horned Larks and a few fly-by Black Rosy Finches, and searching out the first Alpine Forget-me-nots and other cushion type flowers, we gave it up.

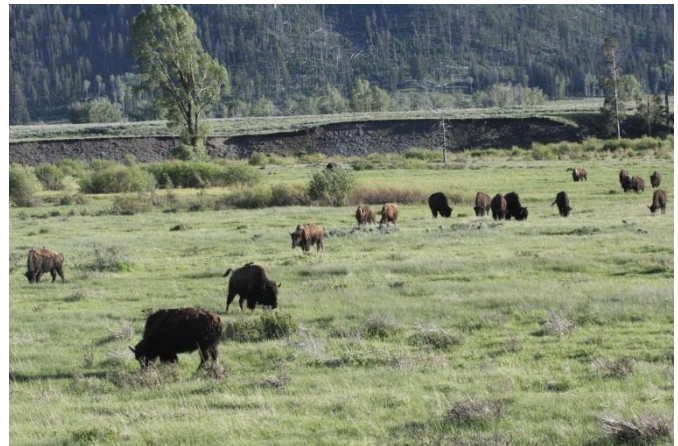
It was noon, the crew was concerned about lunch, and we did need to ensure we'd get to Cooke City, gateway to Yellowstone, by nightfall. So down we went, back to Red Lodge and around the mountains on a route still scenic but not as high – the route



We had a spectacular day, even by Yellowstone standards! First of all the weather was fine, fresh in the morning up to sixties mid-day, with no wind yet loads of white puffy clouds to augment our photos. We got a good early start, keeping breakfast simple by making it in the leaders' apartment. We left not long after dawn, and were well rewarded to find the Mollies wolf pack in Lamar, feeding on a fresh bison kill. There were three wolves bedded, and another four surrounding the carcass, ripping and tearing to eat. Several more came down from the trees and at one time we had ten in scope view. It

was too far a reach for cameras (though we tried, including some digiscoping and videos) but an excellent sight in our scopes, close enough to see faces and interactions.

Most amazing was that part-way through our time of watching, four bison males came in, walking right up to the carcass still laden with wolves. They had their tails up (aggressive) and in almost slow motion sized up the situation, then faced off various wolves, running them off in short spurts. The wolves gave way, but with persistence would circle back, return, eat, and then get chased off again. We could see grimacing and snarling, quick reactions; at one point a wolf nipped at one of the bison's back leg. The bison were there for maybe ten minutes, moved off and remained in a group, then returned for a second round of the same type of behavior. It was rather poignant, and we speculated what it was all about – grief, protection,



harassment to prevent future killing, or ... It was clear that that the bison sniffed the carcass quite carefully, and clear that they reacted to the death and feeding scene.



This was not the only drama we witnessed, for just down the road, we watched a pronghorn mother fend off two coyotes; they were so persistent in harassing her one could not help but want to intercede. They followed her about a body's length away; she'd turn and chase them in powerful spurts, only to have them circle and return to the sage to hunt for her fawn. She led

them off, was aggressive to them, and finally we saw a second female across the river – with two her chances of the coyote keeping on her trail was reduced. Safety in numbers, if just for this day.

We heard other coyotes howling in the distance, so went in that direction, getting distracted by a just-fledged American Kestrel begging loudly in sight of its parent. A dark morph Red-tailed Hawk passed overhead, a very handsome raptor. Wilson's Snipes winnowed away while Brewer's and Vesper's Sparrows provided a sagebrush symphony. Bison were everywhere; one herd had MANY new orange-colored young. The various herds seem to flow over the landscape, moving almost continuously; from upland to river was the main direction of travel.



We left Lamar mid-morning, drawn to see other parts of the park. Peg pointed out the stunning rock of Lamar Canyon, some of the oldest in the park, as she parked to check on a few things. Yes, the traditional nest was active, with BIG Great Horned Owl chicks. We invited several others stopping to view in the scope and smiled as one small boy commented on the owl's big eyes. At Slough Creek we made a pit-stop, watching a mother Grizzly Bear sow and cub high on the opposing ridge. She and her cubs were little dots, but we could watch their movement and feeding. The flowers amid the sage were lovely and we took time to photograph bright blooms of Bitterroot and phlox.

Looking for Black Bear, we turned into the Petrified Tree area, admiring the tree while listening to loud, tree-top-perched, calling Olive-sided Flycatchers, Western Tanagers, and Common Ravens. Continuing on to Floating Island Lake, we found a Red-tailed Hawk nest with white downy chicks, Eared Grebes on a floating nest, and Ruddy Ducks, dapper in breeding plumage, among other species.

We had heard about an active American Badger den near the Children's Fire Trail, west towards Mammoth, and as the group was keen to see it, we went out of our way, winding west through forests, and past the views of Hellroaring Overlook. Snow made the views of the Gallatin Range just stunning

and as we rounded the “S” curve below the trailhead a line of photographers tipped us off to the location of this badger den. We had no idea that the kits were almost fully grown, and they proved to be most entertaining. We were anchored there for close to an hour as they wrestled like puppies, groomed each other, investigated the mound, and came and went from their burrow. At times they’d take note of us, other times they lumbered around – how marvelous to see their shape and movement so well. At one point an adult came in carrying a Uintah Ground Squirrel which it carried immediately into the den. Either the kits were well fed or well trained, as they did not rush to greet it or grab the prey. It would soon be time for them to go off hunting, so we were very fortunate to see them this day.



We assessed our day after time with the badgers, and decided to stick with our plans to go to Canyon and Lake, enjoying it in full with disregard to how much we filled the day. Everywhere we stopped jaunty Uintah Ground Squirrels kept us company. We stopped often, for flowers, Gray Jays, raptors, views of the Canyon, views of both the Upper and Lower Falls, and Hayden. Being higher in elevation, Hayden Valley was greener than we thought it would be with all the recent snows, but the river was also much higher, so there was no mud habitat along Alum Creek for shorebirds other than tenacious Spotted Sandpipers. Barrow’s Goldeneyes formed a flotilla near Trout Creek, where we stopped to see a very large male Bison and a Coyote. The Coyote was hunting in sedges along the creek, and it still had its thick winter coat, whitish in color, so many of the viewers thought it was a wolf. Indeed Peg paused for more than one check, but with a pointed snout, pointed ears and shorter legs, our photos confirmed it as a Coyote. At one point it bounded up a steep slope – marvelous to watch it on the prowl. Rough-winged Swallows came and went from nests in the cliffs, and we saw several Red-tailed and one Swainson’s Hawk. Canada Geese with their broods were everywhere, and White Pelicans became more numerous as we headed down to Lake.

LeHardy Rapids was roaring! We stopped here to look for Harlequin Ducks known to frequent the area for a few weeks of spring, and were pleased that Lynn spotted them on the far shore right away. We were even more pleased to watch them fly upstream, and tumult down the wild waters, diving to feed on the way! They slipped out of the mid-part of this rushing cascade on our side, using their strong bodies like fish to navigate and their short, strong wings for an extra push to jump up on rocks to rest.



There we photographed them preening and resting, distracted by a White Pelican which made repeated flights up the rapids, floating down the side channels. An American Dipper flew in close to the resting Harlequins, driving into retrieve small aquatic insects, feed and dive again. What a show!

We checked Fishing Bridge for Bald Eagles, but alas, none at home today, just stunning views of Mt.

Sheridan covered with snow and the outlet of the lake, the start of Yellowstone River. There were over

a hundred Barrow's Goldeneye in large groups by two small islands – quite a sight! We were running out of time to explore, but Peg wanted all to see the historic Lake Hotel. We decided a break would be nice, and a chance to relax in the hotel's lobby, with its large windows facing the lake and gracious ambiance, was just the thing. We ordered appetizers as our meal, with wine or tea, and tucked in to absorb a bit of the Inn's elegance.

By the time we visited both the Upper and Lower Falls the crowds had thinned to almost no-one, save one lone male Bison that stood firm as if to cue up for the bathroom. We took an alternate route to the viewpoint – these boys are preparing for the July rut and are nothing to mess with! There was still a cone of snow to the left of the Lower Falls and both were thundering. Glacier Lilies, Spring Beauty and Yellow Bells were thick, providing bright color among the trees.



We stopped at the far end of Lamar to check on reports of a wolf (no activity) and made good time going up Dunraven Pass as there was almost no traffic. Coming down into Antelope Creek the cars were stopped in the road and we soon saw why – right next to the road, feeding in a frenzy, was a lone, collared Grizzly! He was about two van lengths out, and though we grabbed a place to park, we waited until it had moved off sufficiently to feel comfortable doing so. One of the observers identified the bear as one well-known to Yellowstone bear watchers – Scarface, a 25-year old male. They seemed very happy to see him, and in general the bear ignored the gathering crowd,

feeding on shrubs and other vegetation before turning downslope. We watched it graze and dig, and within about ten minutes it was out of sight. Today was Hazel's birthday and she was having quite a day of presents!

At this point one would think we'd seen all we could hope for, but passing through Lamar, near the historic Buffalo Ranch, now serving as headquarters for the Yellowstone Institute, we saw a female bison close to the road, with tiny legs hidden next to her – a calf still carrying its umbilical cord! Peg put on the flashers, stopping the small bit of traffic going through, so she could cross. With bears and wolves about she would need to find the herd and catch up to them to ensure safety for her calf. It strode off behind her on wobbly legs, already a tough little bison. One last highlight remained – two young bull Moose appeared close to the road near Pelican Creek Campground. They seemed gangly like teenagers and thin from winter; we enjoyed the sighting but left them to feed, returning after a very long but very rewarding day of wildlife in wild Yellowstone. At the end of the tour, we all voted this to be our favorite day, though they all held highlights.



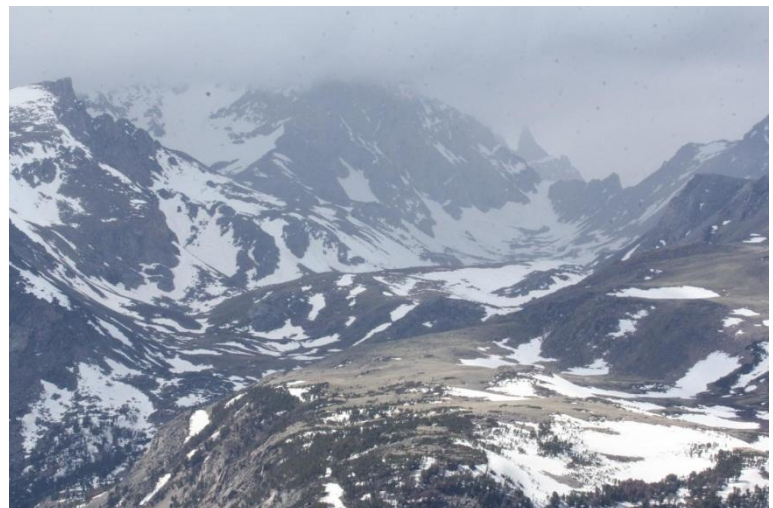


Wed. June 13 Lamar Valley / Slough Creek / Soda Butte Creek Picnic / Return to the Beartooth

We were moving a bit slowly after yesterday's amazing events, but enjoyed a drive back through the dense forests that line the road under Mt. Republic and the Thunderer, two great peaks that define the entry to Cooke City. We were starting to expect certain species in certain places: big bull Bison in Pebble Creek Meadows, Bison cows and calves from Soda Butte onwards. Elk were few this spring in contrast with others, but we found one today – a carcass, just being opened up by an American Bald Eagle, myriad ravens and a bold coyote and its mate, actively denning in the area.

No wolves in sight on this one; we watched for a while, enjoying sounds of Brewer's Sparrows and Meadowlarks, and the warmth of sun and smell of sage. We found Sandhill Cranes from another pull-off, and an active

Osprey nest. The Lamar River was running full, and watching Bison cross was a draw. We worked our way down to Slough Creek where we found some ducks, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and along the trail some fledgling Lincoln's Sparrows, Warbling Vireos, Red Crossbills and an elusive but calling Cordilleran Flycatcher. Time passed quickly, and we wanted to save the afternoon for a return to Beartooth, so we returned back through the valley for time to picnic in one of Peg's favorite spots, set in forest with a swiftly moving stream and adjacent meadows. A man was photographing a Long-tailed Weasel with great patience. We devoured fresh-made tuna and various sandwich meats and cheeses, hummus, veggies and sweets. We took a break in town for a quick look around, and decided despite the now-gathering clouds we'd brave a run up Beartooth. By the time we loaded the vans a squall moved through, drenching the streets, but we were tucked inside the van and moving, on towards a patch of blue sky and the allure of wide mountain vistas. The views came and went with the weather, and we found Beartooth Lake open, but all the lakes above it still frozen – soft ice varying in color, ready to melt with a sun-bright day. Brave alpine flowers tucked their heads out from cushion mats – owl clover, azaleas, forget-me-nots. We braved the blowing winds to appreciate them, bending low for photographs, rising to take it all in.



There was a LOT of snow – steep banks of snow over the car in some places, and few birds. Brave American Pipits fed in water channels and along the pavement, but we could not find the Rosy Finches we were seeking. We went as far as the ski lift and turned around, getting back for a very nice dinner at Beartooth Café, where the cozy log architecture, nice menu and camaraderie were most welcome. Gail Richardson, another guide for Naturalist Journeys, joined us today, and we appreciated her sharing her knowledge of the area.

Thurs., June 14

Old Faithful or Bust!

As our crew were either new to Yellowstone (from UK), or had not been in Yellowstone for some time,



they all voted to take the option to go see Old Faithful and other geysers of the various thermal basins, traveling over there via Mammoth Hot Springs, scenic Swan Lake Flats, and past Fountain Paint Pots and Grand Prismatic Spring. We had a hot breakfast at the Bistro, then took off through Lamar, stopping to see that the Mollie's Pack wolves had indeed found that elk kill, and were trying to feed on it, blocked again by a herd of bison, this time mainly a large group of cows. Four grays were in sight, and we watched them try to feed, then move off to bide their time. We got excellent scope views, and then continued on our way towards Mammoth, where we took a break with time to see some of the terraces up close and personal.

From here to Old Faithful we followed several river corridors, all lush and green; along the way we saw some grazing Elk and a few Bison. The steam from several geysers became commonplace as we approached the



Upper Geyser Basin, a spectacular place that holds 25% of the world's large geysers. Peg and our van got deterred by a federal Department of Transportation inspection – something that takes place twice a summer it seems, and we just hit the day. The group went to lunch, walked the

basins, saw not one but two blasts of iconic Old Faithful, and feasted on ice-cream while she sorted out permits, regulations, and new transport to take the gang home. Colleague Wayne from West Yellowstone arrived without too much delay – Peg said, “thank goodness for years of connections!”

We all returned to our roost after some stops for scenery and thermal features en route home. Another fulfilling day; this one a feast of scenery.



Fri., June 15 Beartooth Pass once more try, and departures from Billings

Our jinx on good weather on Beartooth broke today, and after packing up our gear, we had a couple of hours of blissfully clear skies, amazing views, and this time Black Rosy Finches – at our feet. This was a life bird for several of the group and a great grand finale. We stopped for coffee, bakery goods, and some shopping in Red Lodge, and then headed to the airport. This was quite the Yellowstone blitz – we did a LOT in a short time, and loved it. Next year we'll add back in a few more days – just too much to see in Yellowstone at the time of year when nature seems to be exploding! Our highlights were many, from badger kits to wolves and bears, but one of the highlights was our group – we had a lot of fun!



