



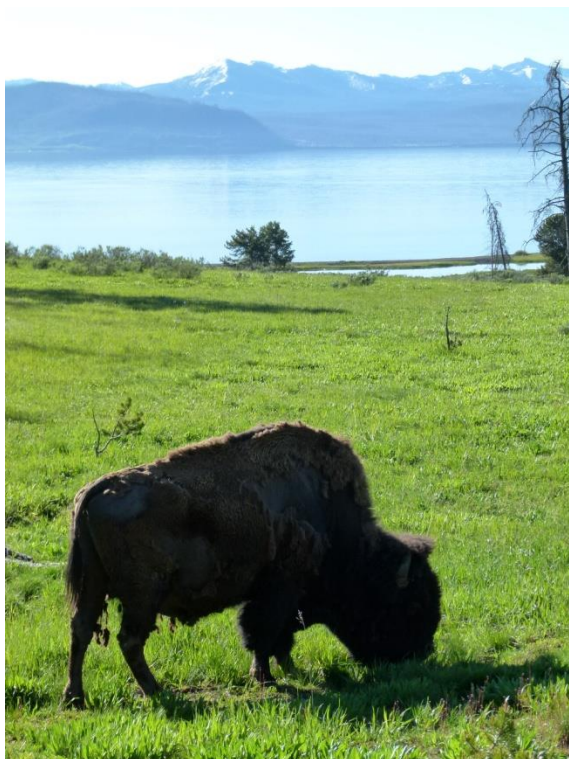
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## **Yellowstone National Park A Naturalist Journeys' Birding and Nature Tour Trip Report June 15-21, 2013**

*Woody Wheeler guide, with eight participants: John and Mary, Christine, Bob, Nancy, Dawn, George, and Bonnie*

### **Sat., June 15 Arrival in Billings / Cody / Lake - Yellowstone Park**

Under sunny skies, we embarked upon our journey to Yellowstone, the Grand Tetons and Beartooth Mountains. In the western-themed town of Cody, we had a picnic lunch outside of the Buffalo Bill Historic Center. We could not help but notice that an Indian Pow Wow was taking place in the adjacent park. Our group dispersed: some taking in the Pow Wow and some the historic center. All were impressed by their respective experiences.



In mid-afternoon, we headed west for Yellowstone up the scenic Shoshone River Gorge to Sylvan Pass. Just beyond the pass were two sparkling emerald lakes, followed by a breathtaking view of Yellowstone Lake, the Grand Tetons beyond, and wildflowers at our feet. As we entered the park, evidence of past wildfires were abundant, and before too long, our first mammals – Bison.

As we descended to Yellowstone Lake, we saw two Yellow-bellied Marmots, a small flock of Barrow's Goldeneyes and several California Gulls. The park, its intoxicating beauty and abundant wildlife were already on display.

Dinner at the Lake Hotel was outstanding as usual. A string quartet played softly in the background as we compiled the day's list of birds, mammals and butterflies. Everyone was eager to get out the next day to explore this extraordinary place.

Refreshing brisk mountain air and a bluebird sky greeted us this morning as we headed out. Just a few miles down the road we encountered Bison and our first group of elk. As we headed into the expansive meadows of Hayden Valley, the numbers of Bison and Elk increased significantly. The Bison had many calves with them. While scanning the valley, we found Sandhill Cranes and a variety of waterfowl: Bufflehead, American Wigeon, Lesser Scaup, Common Merganser and Cinnamon Teal. A Wilson's Phalarope spun around and around stirring up its food.

Continuing westward, we stopped for lunch and a visit to the visitor center at Canyon. Then we returned via Hayden Valley and a stop at LeHardy Rapids. In the area of greatest water turbulence, Dawn Spotted our first Harlequin Duck - a stunning male feeding in tandem with another male in the whitewater. Eventually it came out of the water and perched on a rock, allowing our group to see and photograph it clearly. Our first American Dipper then landed on the near shore, affording good looks for everyone prior to returning to its nest on the opposite shore.

Wildflowers and butterflies were also on display here, including Larkspur, Bluebells and Avalanche Lillies. Following this terrific show of water birds and wildflowers, we headed on to Indian Pond, where more wildflowers were on display, as well as Spotted Sandpipers on a muddy spit in the pond. We hiked to the beach along Yellowstone Lake where a flock of Barrow's Goldeneyes cruised by.



Next we stopped for a Yellow-bellied Marmot perched conspicuously on rocks along the lake shoreline. After pausing, we noticed two young marmots joining the adult for a family show. We then ascended Lake Butte for its magnificent view of Yellowstone Lake and the Grand Tetons in the distance. A



Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, Cassin's Finch and Swainson's Hawk made appearances there.

On the way back we had a special surprise -a young male grizzly was feeding on a carcass a hundred yards from Fishing Bridge. We watched it eat the remnants of the carcass, then some grass followed by a drink of water. Then it ambled toward us and the many others gathered on the bridge. We all enjoyed terrific looks, photographs, and videos of this spectacle.



Mon., June 17

Grand Teton National Park/Jackson Lake



Bright and early, we set off for Grand Teton Park. En route, we saw two bull elk with large racks wading in the shallows of Yellowstone Lake in the glistening waters with the Absaroka Mountains behind -- a picture-perfect moment. Not far down the road, we stopped at Lewis Falls to enjoy the views of this gorgeous cataract and to look for the nesting birds underneath Lewis River Bridge. We had great success there: an American Dipper perching in a confiding manner, and numerous Cliff Swallows going to and from their adobe houses glued to the underside of the bridge. On the way to the van we found a Wilson's Warbler and Lincoln's Sparrow singing from the Willows.

We continued south along the shores of Jackson Lake, taking in some of the best mountain scenery in the United States. At Willow Flats, Graham spotted our first American Moose with a calf. Further on at Oxbow Bend, a place of breathtaking beauty where the Snake River bends in serpentine fashion with the Tetons behind it, we found two nesting Osprey and a third soaring above. A Bald Eagle also flew by, and a Red-tailed Hawk was aggressively chased in flight by a Common Raven. White Pelicans floated majestically downriver along with Common Mergansers and a Double-crested Cormorant, and a McGillivray's Warbler flew out of the willows and perched in plain view. As if this weren't enough of a show, fire-red Scarlet Gillia and Pink-flowering Sticky Geranium were in full bloom at our feet.



We then stopped at Jackson Lake Lodge for an elegant lunch with the Tetons framed by the restaurant windows. The restaurant host referred to us as a "birdwatcher group." When one of the waitresses came to seat us, she announced that the table was ready for "Mister Birdwatcher." From here we returned to Yellowstone Park, stopping at the Continental Divide for a group photo. In the mid-afternoon, we checked into Old Faithful lodge, pulling in just as Old Faithful geyser erupted. Once we were checked in to this historic inn with amazingly intricate wood beam construction, everyone took walks around the spectacular geyser basin. John and Mary watched an adult dipper feeding its young

and had good looks at one of Mary's favorite birds: the Western Bluebird. To their delight, the Castle Geyser, which erupts sporadically, erupted for nearly an hour as they were passing by.

<b>Tues., June 18</b>	<b>Fountain Paint Pots, Dunraven Pass to Cooke City, Montana</b>
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On another clear, sunny day, we set out for the Fountain Paint Pots geyser area. As so often happens in Yellowstone, we were distracted along the way by wildlife. A nice group of Bison with calves was grazing in an open field. While looking at them, Bob noticed a large bird sitting in the meadow, which turned out to be a Golden Eagle.



At the entrance to Fountain Paint Pots, we found a Mountain Bluebird and nesting Tree Swallows, sitting calmly near their nest hole in close proximity to the board walk. The paint pots themselves, with their colorful, muddy, bubbling mix of pools, geysers and fumaroles were captivating too in an artistic way.

Our next stop was Dunraven Pass where we hiked a stretch of the trail to Mt. Washburn, the highest point in the park. Along the way we saw Least Chipmunk, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, and our first Steller's Jay. A Tiger Swallowtail perched fetchingly upon a pine. Indian Paintbrush, Shooting Star and



Monkey flowers were in full bloom along the trail. Following a picnic lunch along the Yellowstone River, we headed east up the Lamar Valley. It did not take long for the wildlife sightings in this famous valley to commence. First we saw two Pronghorn parents tending to their fawn. Further on we found huge herds of Bison, well over 1,000 in number, along with additional Pronghorn.

As we exited the park at the Northeast gate, Christine shouted "bear!" We stopped immediately and enjoyed terrific views of two adult Black Bear grazing on a steep meadow. Nearby a Western Tanager perched on top of a snag where everyone could see it clearly.



Our last wildlife stop of the day was at Barronette Mountain to search for Mountain Goats. It didn't take long, thanks to Bob's sharp spotting, to find one just below the summit of the peak. We then drove the short distance into Cooke City, Montana where we checked into our rooms and then enjoyed a dinner in the cozy and excellent Log Cabin Restaurant.

### Wed., June 19 - Lamar Valley

Bright and early, we ate a sumptuous breakfast at the Log Cabin Inn prior to our wildlife safari in Lamar Valley. While we were eating breakfast a park ranger stopped by to speak with us about wolves and other wildlife. We then set out and first stopped at Soda Butte to enjoy this unusual formation, and its active Cliff Swallow colony. While enjoying this scene, a young man from the Wolf Watch group pulled over in his wolf-watching car and notified us of a wolf sighting just ahead down the road. We dove into the van like the Keystone cops, and quickly but safely drove to the cluster of people gathered to watch the wolf. We joined them and all had superb looks through the spotting scope of the female known as "Middle Gray" to the wolf-watchers. This was a tremendous thrill!

Buoyed by this fortunate sighting, we continued on, and soon found another group of people scanning the horizon with scopes. This time, there were two Grizzly Bears on the distant slopes. Once again, we all had good looks of this other iconic species of Yellowstone.

Feeling confident by these sightings, most of our group hiked up the one-mile trail to Trout Lake in search of River Otters. Although we did not find this species, we did find a Muskrat, a large group of Cutthroat Trout heading upstream to spawn, and a female Western Tanager.

As we headed toward our picnic lunch spot, while searching for Moose, Woody found a Mountain Goat with kids on distant Barronette Peak. Then after further searching, he and Dawn found additional goats with kids across the valley. In total we saw about ten goats, including five kids.

Finally, we paused for lunch on a large log overlooking Soda Creek and the Absaroka



Mountains. After lunch we stopped for a creek side visit to Soda Creek. Dawn, Nancy and Bob waded in the bracing yet refreshing waters of the creek.



We then pulled into Cooke City in the afternoon. Some opted to rest and stay in town; others opted to search for Moose and other wildlife east of town. The latter trip yielded more Mule Deer, wildflowers, and stunning scenery. By mid afternoon, we were all were back in Cooke City

exploring the outside open-air markets, the old general store, the nice visitor center and more. This rustic former mining town set among the craggy peaks of the Absaroka Mountains is charming and picturesque.

#### Thurs., June 20 – Beartooth Highway

The famous journalist Charles Kurault called the Beartooth Highway the most beautiful in America for a reason. Today we set out under partly sunny skies, to find out why. We stopped at the Pilot Peak viewpoint to take in the spectacular panorama of the Absaroka Mountain range, including the 11,000 foot spire of Pilot Peak. Uintah Ground squirrels stood sentry watching us. Common Ravens cruised by hoping for a picnic.

We then drove up the Beartooth Pass highway, stopping near the top of the pass to search for birds, wildlife and wildflowers. We found several Gray-crowned Rosy Finches working around the edges of large snow patches, gathering seeds.

At our next stop, we encountered spectacular wildflowers. The flowers we saw were in miniature – Forget-me-nots, Penstemon, Phlox, Moss Campion among them -- adapted to survive the extreme conditions that exist on 10,900-foot Beartooth Pass. Although small, they are quite vivid. As Bob said, they looked as though they were painted on to the rocks. Dawn said that this for her was a trip highlight.



Not far from this wildflower show, we searched the snowfields for bird species that also adapt to these extreme alpine conditions. It did not take long to find them: American Pipit and Black Rosy Finches, once again working the edge of the snowfields.

We stopped near the small ski area that was still operating, and found a Hoary Marmot in the rocks near a snowfield. Alarmed, the Hoary ran across a snowfield, his tail bobbing skyward.

On the way back down the pass, we stopped for a picnic at Island Lakes with a sensational view of the Beartooth Mountains behind them. Mountain Bluebirds and a Clark's Nutcracker flew by and perched in vivid lighting. Marsh Marigolds in full bloom carpeted the landscape at our feet.





We capped off the day with a shopping and rest break at Top of the World.

<b>Fri., June 21</b>	<b>Over the Beartooth / Departures</b>
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The air on our final day was crisp and cool, almost wintry as we headed for the cozy Log Cabin Café for a sumptuous breakfast with excellent coffee. On the outskirts of tiny Silver Gate, Montana, Dawn spotted an animal on the road – a Red Fox. Soon another one crossed the road providing everyone with a clear view of this new animal species for the trip.

We continued on a few miles east of Cooke City when Nancy called out “Moose!” Indeed it was, with a calf in tow. Mary in particular was deeply moved by this sighting of an animal we had been seeking for the past few days.

As we climbed up Beartooth Pass, storm clouds blanketed the Absaroka Mountains. At the summit, Christine remarked that it seemed we were in a tunnel of good weather surrounded by inclement weather on two sides. The weather was dynamic and beautiful, casting a magical light on an already striking mountain range.

As we began descending the pass to the north, we stopped at Vista Point for a rest break and a final view of the majestic Beartooth Range. Three species of squirrels were there to greet us: Yellow Pine Chipmunk, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, and Red Squirrel. Snow flurries fell as we descended the rest of the pass into Red Lodge, Montana.



As we rolled onto the flats of the Yellowstone River valley, we passed through ranch lands surrounded by picturesque rim rock cliffs. A Wild Turkey calmly strolled across the highway, bringing us to a stop to admire this impressive new bird species for the trip.

A short while later, we arrived at Billings airport and said fond farewells to one-another. Many lamented that they were sad to leave such an inspiring place. Hopefully, everyone will find a way to return to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.