

# Yellowstone in the Fall with Woody Wheeler

## September 25 - October 2, 2018



### ***Yellowstone in the Fall – September 25-October 2, 2018***

***Guide: Woody Wheeler with Jason, Lyn, Martha, Mimi, Sharon, Sue and Trish***

***Trip report and photos by Woody Wheeler***



*Grand Tetons Showing Superb Fall Colors at Oxbow Bend of the Snake River to and from Yellowstone*

#### **Day 1: Arrive to Jackson, travel to Lake Village, Yellowstone National Park**

Fall does not get any better than travelling the stretch of highway between Jackson and Yellowstone Park through the always majestic Grand Teton National Park. Its majesty was further enhanced by vivid fall colors of Quaking Aspen and Great Basin Cottonwood.

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Prior to witnessing the grand view of the Grand Tetons, we stopped at the Jackson Visitor Center. Tens of waterfowl were rafted up in Flat Creek, just feet away, including American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, and one lone Redhead. A family of Trumpeter Swans graced the scene, eventually departing in an elegant single-file formation.



As we headed north toward Yellowstone, the Tetons burst into view in spectacular fashion. We enjoyed a picnic lunch at Glacier Point with the Tetons providing a breath-taking back drop. What a fine way to start our journey!





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On the way to Oxbow Bend, we spotted our first Bison of the trip. It strode purposefully toward our van, veering away when within 20 yards, and then crossing the highway just behind us in a trot. The Bison then gracefully hopped across a low-point in the buck and pole wooden fence, eliciting our applause.

We continued north from Grand Teton Park along the shore of Jackson Lake, then climbed up the long grade into Yellowstone National Park by ascending its giant caldera. Once on top, we savored more blazing fall colors on our short walk to Lewis Falls.

Further into the park we visited West Thumb Geyser Basin. The views of the steaming hot springs, colorful bacterial formations, and turquoise blue – lime green pools with the aqua-blue waters of Yellowstone Lake and the massive, wild Absaroka Mountains behind were stunning.



*Hot spring at West Thumb Geyser Basin*

The last leg of our first day's journey took us along the wild and scenic north shore of Yellowstone Lake. Here we encountered a sight to behold near Bridge Creek campground: A Great Gray Owl! It was perched low in a sparsely-wooded area, and gradually moved closer to us in smaller trees. This was a sight none of us would soon forget, and a "life bird" for several in our group.

Turning into Lake Lodge, the natural wonders continued with a Red-tail Hawk perched conspicuously in a tall Douglas Fir and a



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Clark's Nutcracker flying overhead. Our first half-day in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem was inspiring!

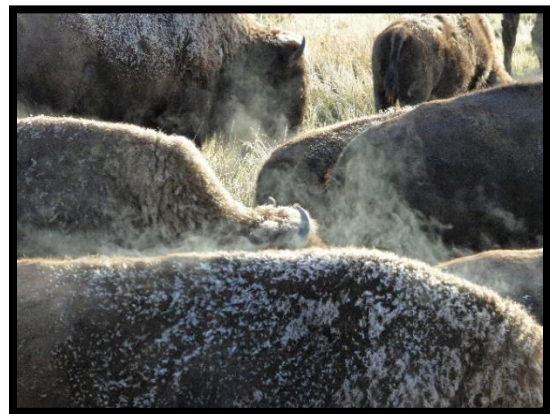
### Day 2: Hayden Valley, Fishing Bridge, Pelican Creek, Indian Pond, Lake Butte, LeHardy Rapids and Canyon

Just after sunrise, we attempted to load the van to head to Hayden Valley to search for wildlife. There was only one problem: the wildlife came to us first, and obstructed our way! A very frisky bull elk 15 yards from our van was anxiously guarding his harem of cow elk visible through the Lodgepole Pine trees about 30 yards distant. He glanced at us, his nose in the air, his neck hairs erect, as if daring us to cross the road (we did not). Instead we watched the spectacle from the safety of our cabins and behind the van. Eventually he trotted off in pursuit of his harem.



Finally, we departed for Hayden Valley. As we drove by the Yellowstone River, steam rose from it in small spiral columns. Several Trumpeter Swans drifted by amid the steam plumes. At our first stop overlooking Hayden Valley, we heard a distant chorus of bugling elk across the valley. We then saw 40-plus cow elk surrounded by at least four bulls vying for control of the herd. The bugling increased in intensity as they competed for the harem and gradually moved to higher ground.

At our next stop there was no parking available in the turnout because 50-plus Bison were occupying the spaces. They passed within five yards of our van, their coats still partially frozen and steaming as they thawed out in the morning sun.



In the afternoon, we visited Pelican Creek where Lyn found a Wilson's Snipe in the wetlands. It fed in the mud flats as we admired its distinctive plumage and oversized bill.

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At Indian Pond we found a large Bison loafing on a lakeside beach. The pond itself was filled with waterfowl, including a flock of 75 Redheads.

Continuing southwest along the shore of Yellowstone Lake, we ascended Lake Butte to a commanding view of the lake and surrounding mountain ranges. We took note of the fact that we were standing on a remnant of the Yellowstone super volcano caldera as we gazed over its 40X35 mile crater.

After a rest break in our cozy cabins at Lake Lodge, we headed to Canyon Lodge for dinner via LeHardy Rapids and Hayden Valley. The rapids were impressive – not only due to their sheer volume and large standing waves, but due to the presence of a half-dozen American Dippers and Common Mergansers plying their turbulent waters in search for food, and at times it seemed, for recreation. The dippers would periodically emerge from the frothy waters, perch and preen on rocks along the shore within 15 yards of us. What a phenomenal dipper performance!



### **Day 3: Hayden Valley, Artists Point, Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, Dunraven Pass, Calcite Canyon, Slough Creek**

On a mild, slightly overcast morning, we set out for Hayden Valley and Yellowstone's Grand Canyon. At Hayden Valley we stopped at several viewpoints to see assorted waterfowl and Trumpeter Swans, along with a Coyote going about its hunting routine. We found it fascinating to see the Coyote alternately freeze and pounce in its never-ending quest for a meal.

At Artist's Point we marveled at the scenic grandeur that inspired artists like Thomas Moran, who in turn used his paintings to help convince the U.S. government to establish Yellowstone as our nation's first national park. Yellowstone's Grand Canyon is a landscape of awesome beauty.



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At Canyon, we stopped for lunch, shopping and a visit to its outstanding interpretive center. We then turned north and headed up Dunraven Pass. On the way up, we paused at the rim of the Super Volcano to take in an awesome view of the Absaroka, Beartooth and Teton mountain ranges.

Closer to the pass, we saw Black Bears harvesting White Bark Pine cones. At least four bear cubs were high in White Bark Pines gathering cones. A mother Black Bear was on the ground below supervising, and perhaps picking up pine cones knocked down by her cubs. White Bark Pine seeds provide nutritious food for Black and Grizzly Bears, Red Squirrels, Clark's Nutcrackers and other species.

We continued over Dunraven Pass, descending into the Tower Area. Here we took a short hike along the top of Calcite Canyon. This geologic wonder provided more magical views of Yellowstone Canyon along with a flock of Pine Siskin. We then carried on to Slough Creek where we searched for wildlife and admired Golden Eagle nests on the top and in crevices of sheer basalt rocks.



On the return trip to Lake Lodge, we encountered a herd of 40-some Bison crossing the Yellowstone River bridge. This caused a considerable vehicle back-up, but also resulted in an impressive display of these magnificent animals. A family of Mule Deer also crossed the road and browsed alongside our van near Dunraven Pass.

As we pulled into Lake Lodge, we were greeted by the resident elk herd in the midst of their rut season. Several cow elk were resting on the lodge grounds, and bull elk were bugling nearby.

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Yellowstone is a unique place where the wildlife moves through and continues its business despite hoards of human visitors that pass through. This is part of what makes it so special to be here. As we headed to our cabins we were serenaded by Coyotes howling.

### **Day 4: Lake Lodge to Island Park, Idaho via Gibbon Falls, Norris and West Yellowstone**

Today was an especially gorgeous “bluebird” day – appropriate for entering into Idaho, whose state bird is a Mountain Bluebird. We started by making our final pass through Hayden Valley. Several hundred Bison lined the roadway and at times walked directly on it.

We continued into new terrain, heading southwest to Norris– the hottest geyser basin in Yellowstone, with the thinnest crust (3-6 miles deep versus an average of 20 miles deep in the rest of the U.S.). It is also home to Steamboat Geyser, the park’s largest geyser. Steamboat used to erupt infrequently but since 2014 it has erupted 20 times! Although it did not erupt while we were there, we admired this large, scenic and active basin that has a large variety of geysers large and small.



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*Norris Geyser Basin*

Next, we headed to Madison pausing at the Gibbon River to look at the falls and canyon by the same



name. Several American Dipper were at the bottom of this glorious gorge and falls. One hopped onto a large boulder and dove into the frothy pools. Another landed at the top of the 40-foot falls, somehow clinging to the rock despite the powerful currents leading to the cataract. The falls flow gracefully down a steeply-angled former lava flow, creating a smooth, lacy effect. We were all impressed by this roadside wonder – one of many in Yellowstone.



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*Gibbon River Canyon*

At Madison, we stopped for lunch while a Bald Eagle circled overhead. After a pleasant picnic, we strolled along the banks of the Madison River, admiring the views of the winding river and steep valley. Shortly after we left a cow Elk swam across the Madison and walked through a scenic turn-out area prior to trotting into the forest. At West Yellowstone, we stopped to refuel our van and re-charge our bodies with coffee and ice cream.



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From West Yellowstone, we entered the state of Idaho and drove the loop route around Henry's Lake. Fall colors here were brilliant. Along the lake we spotted large numbers of Idaho's State Bird, the Mountain Bluebird. We also saw our first Bufflehead in a sheltered cove on Henry's Lake. A kettle of Turkey Vultures rode a thermal upward prior to coasting downward on their vertical migration south.

We arrived at Angler's Lodge on the Henry's Fork of the Snake River in the late afternoon. We enjoyed dinner outside on the deck as Bald Eagles, Cormorants and Common Merganser flew by. Soon the sun set to complete another special day in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

### Day 5: West Yellowstone Wildlife Discovery Center, Red Rock Lakes



We started our day at West Yellowstone's Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center. This proved to be highly entertaining and informative. All birds and animals at the center were either previously injured or in conflict situations with humans or livestock. In addition to having close looks at wolves, grizzlies and raptors, we even watched grizzlies test various camping containers. They could open them effortlessly.

Following this interesting experience, we headed to the Red Rock Lakes Wildlife Refuge. These remote and shallow lakes

located at the foot of the Centennial Mountains, were brimming with waterfowl and Trumpeter Swans. We saw at least 45 of the latter in these lakes which were critical to the survival of Trumpeters when their numbers were down to fewer than 200 individuals. They are now off the endangered species list.

We visited Upper and Lower Red Rock Lakes as well as Sparrow Ponds. Among our sightings were a group of Pronghorn, a Mule Deer that ever-so-gracefully jumped over a barbed wire fence, and two Golden Eagles. We were all taken by the peace, the majesty and the biological richness of these lakes.



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### Day 6: Harriman State Park, Fountain Paint Pots, Old Faithful

Crisp fall air greeted us this morning on our sixth consecutive day without precipitation. We said a fond farewell to the Angler's Lodge staff, who were incredibly hospitable, and good cooks too.

Our first stop was at Harriman State Park just a few miles south of the lodge. Under partly sunny skies and cool but comfortable temperatures, we set out for a hike on the Ranch Loop trail. This trail took us through Lodgepole Pine to the shore of Silver Lake, and returned through the restored ranch that the Harriman family once occupied. Early on our hike, an Osprey perched atop a snag just 50 yards away with a fish it was eating. Its yellow eyes glowed in the early morning light as it glanced at us and flew off with its prized possession. Like Red Rock Lakes before, Silver Lake was dotted with a variety of waterfowl species – mostly American Wigeon and Gadwall. In addition, there was a family of Trumpeter Swans and a flock of roughly 20 American White Pelican.

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The pelicans soared by us in a long line, then congregated in the northwest end of the lake in a tight cluster, herding fish in the shallows, their bills dipping in and out of the lake in a sewing machine motion to harvest them.

On the return loop we passed through the historic Harriman Ranch, a small village of well-preserved buildings. The Harriman and Guggenheim magnates established this getaway, which due to their generosity, is now a park for all to enjoy. We certainly did.



We journeyed back to West Yellowstone for a nice lunch at Ernie's Deli and Bakery. Then we re-entered the park and drove through the Madison River valley once again. We drove the Firehole River loop road, stopping to take in Firehole Falls. Our final stop was at Fountain Paint Pots. Here bubbling cauldrons of mud combined with small geysers and hot springs never cease to amaze.

Just down the road, we checked into our spacious cabins at Old Faithful to unpack, relax and just before our dinner reservation, watch Old Faithful geyser erupt! We then entered the unique and fascinating wooden architecture of the Old Faithful Inn, a 1904 National Historic Landmark, and had a fine dinner there.



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### Day 7: Grand Prismatic Spring, Firehole Lake Drive, Kepler Cascades, Lone Star Geyser Trail and Old Faithful Geyser Basin

We toasted this morning at breakfast to a week of excellent weather. Once again, we had bright blue skies, crisp cool air and great visibility.

We set out early for Grand Prismatic Spring to beat the crowds that flock to this iconic thermal feature. It was still cool, foggy and a bit frosty, so we opted to return later in the day after the fog cleared and the ice melted. We returned in the mid-day to ideal conditions. The rainbow-colored mats of bacteria were aglow, the sky-blue hot springs with mists swirling around them and the yellow-orange hot streams were all well-lit and visible. This hot spring, the largest in Yellowstone, is bizarre yet beautiful.



In the late morning we drove the Firehole Lake loop, a quiet but intensely scenic stretch that includes geysers, hot springs, fumaroles and a hot, steamy wetland. Afterward, we stopped in Whiskey Jack Picnic area to search for birds. Mountain Chickadees, our first Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Red Crossbills were found here.

We continued south of Old Faithful to Kepler Cascade, another stunning set of pools and waterfalls in a steep volcanic gorge of the Firehole River. Here we enjoyed our best looks yet at a Clark's Nutcracker. One appeared to be storing seeds in caches. Our last stop of the morning was at the Lone Star Geyser trail. It passes through a mature pine and spruce forest surrounded by lush, grassy meadows along the Firehole River. Everyone was taken by the peaceful beauty of this place.

We spent the remainder of the day wandering the trails and exploring the shops and interpretive center at Old Faithful. We then had our final group meal at the iconic Old Faithful Inn.



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### **Day 8: Return to Jackson via Lewis Lake, Willow Flats and Oxbow Divide.**

Moderate temperatures and a partial cloud cover prevailed in Old Faithful this morning as we set out on the last leg of our journey. We drove over the highest point of our tour at 8,300 feet near Craig Pass on the Continental Divide. We then descended into the West Thumb Basin, completing our loop of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

At Lewis Lake we took a rest break and checked the trees and lake for birds. Several new species appeared: Common Loons in the lake and Red-breasted Nuthatches in the forest. At Willow Flats in Grand Teton Park, we searched in vain for moose. We were rewarded nonetheless with a stupendous view of the Grand Tetons rising dramatically above colorful layers Willows, Aspen and Cottonwood.

We managed to tear ourselves away from these beauty spots to drive to Jackson Airport in time for everyone's flights. Our trip ended with even more views of the majestic Tetons as we flew above them on our way out. Yellowstone and its neighbor park to the south leave positive, lasting impressions.



*Our group modeling bear hats purchased in Yellowstone*