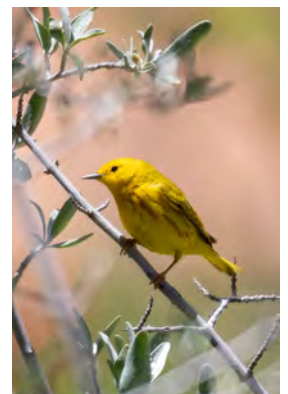


# Birding Canyon Country | Trip Report

## May 12 - 22, 2021 | Written by Pat Lueders



**With Guide Pat Lueders, assisted by Kelly Vandenheuvel & Hugh Simmons, and participants Gina, Phil, Lorry, Carol, Elizabeth, Charlie, Dottie, & Nancy**







### **Wed., May 12 Pre-tour Extension: Farmington Bay Wildlife Management Area**

After arrivals at the Salt Lake City Airport, we had lunch, visited a local park, and stopped at the Farmington Bay WLM area to begin birding this area teeming with waterfowl along the Great Salt Lake. We found Cinnamon Teal, Redhead, Ring-necked Ducks, and beautiful Ruddy Ducks in breeding plumage. Mixed with the ducks were Pied-billed Grebes, Eared Grebes in breeding plumage, and Western Grebes. In the marsh areas, we spotted Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, a Black-crowned Night-Heron, and heard Marsh Wrens and Virginia Rails. Carol spotted a Ring-necked Pheasant lurking along the road. From the hill, we had scope views of White-faced Ibises, Franklin's & California Gulls, and Forester's Terns. What a great beginning to our extension!

We checked into our hotel in Layton, Utah, had dinner, and looked forward to our adventures tomorrow.

### **Thurs., May 13 Antelope Island State Park | Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge**

Only a short drive from Layton, we left early to visit Antelope Island, with an area of 42 square miles, it is the largest of ten islands located within the Great Salt Lake. Stopping along the causeway, we found Long Billed Curlews, Willets, Black-bellied Plovers, hundreds of Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, and Wilson's Phalaropes. The areas around the Great Salt Lake contain the largest population of breeding White-faced Ibis in North America, and hundreds were seen along the causeway.

One of our target birds on Antelope Island was Chukar, a beautiful game bird that blends in with their rocky surroundings. We drove slowly along the eastern shore watching the rocks for a perched male. Success! We found a male out in the open for a great photo opportunity. In the fields, we spotted additional Long-billed Curlews, Willets, Sage Thrashers, and a Rock Wren in the open on a rock. Lark Sparrows, Horned Larks, and Western Meadowlarks were plentiful.

We stopped at the Fielding Garr Ranch, an oasis of trees and water on the East side of the island. In 1848, Fielding Garr started his ranch on Antelope Island and the Mormon Church assigned him to watch over their large cattle herd. In 1869, the Federal Government opened the rest of the island to homesteading. We found a mixed migrant flock in the Cottonwood trees including Orange Crowned, Yellow, Yellow-rumped, and Wilson's



Warblers. Bullock's Orioles, Lazuli Buntings, and Western Tanagers were higher in the trees. An adult and two juvenile Great Horned Owls were camouflaged in the trees. Two Coyotes stood on the dry salt bed near the ranch. When we pulled off the road at a rest area, we saw a female Chukar under the bushes.

On the west side of the island was the visitor's center with nature displays and a gift store. There was also marina access to the lake and camping facilities. We looked for, and found, a nesting Burrowing Owl just past the center. A Loggerhead Shrike poised for us on top of the roof of a shelter. Unbelievably, we found another male Chukar perched on a rock close to the road. What a lucky day!

Our next destination was Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, north of Antelope Island. The refuge lies on the eastern fringe of the Pacific Flyway and the western fringe of the Central Flyway and is considered one of the top 10 birding spots in the nation. Its 78,000 acres have been protected over the last 75 years. We slowly drove the auto tour route, stopping to enjoy the many grebes including Clark's, a Neotropic Cormorant, American White Pelicans, hundreds of White-faced Ibis, Cinnamon Teal, and additional Ring-necked Pheasants. An American Pipit was spotted feeding along the bank of a channel. Yellow-headed Blackbirds were plentiful. What a delightful afternoon!

## **Fri., May 14 Farmington Bay WMA | Canyon Country Tour begins | Drive to Zion National Park**

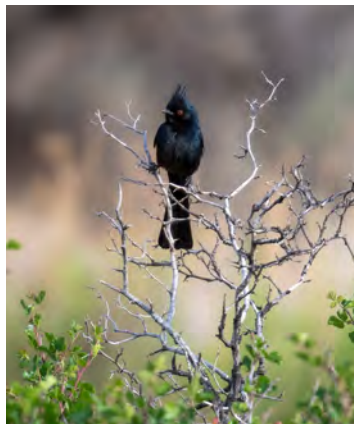
We packed and left Layton with enough time to visit Farmington Bay WMA one last time. Hoping to find Sandhill Cranes, two were spotted in the field. A Virginia Rail was heard and then found on the road only feet from the vehicle. A large number of Long-billed Dowitchers and Stilt Sandpipers were new additions to the shorebirds the day before. Cattle Egret in breeding plumage were also a new addition as was a Caspian Tern. Forester's Terns hovered over the marshes looking for food. We were so happy that we had returned one last time to this magical place!

The rest of the group arriving for the main tour were met at the airport and became acquainted with each other on the afternoon drive to Zion national Park. Pronghorns were spotted often in the agricultural fields during the journey. We arrived in Zion in time to check in and enjoy a delicious introductory dinner at Bit & Spur Restaurant in Springdale.

## **Sat., May 15 Grafton Ghost Town | Zion National Park**

We started early this morning, driving a short distance to Grafton, a southwest ghost town composed of a small group of aged wood buildings in a tree-lined field near the Virgin River. Established in 1859 by a small group of settlers, the last inhabitants didn't leave until 1944. A large number of species of birds enjoy the fruit trees, grass, and water found in this area. We walked the town road and saw Western Bluebirds, Lesser Goldfinches,









and Lazuli Buntings bathing in a puddle. An Ash-throated Flycatcher called from the treetop as did Cassin's and Western Kingbirds. Phainopepla were perched on bare branches, a Say's Phoebe called from the roof. A male Vermilion Flycatcher was found in the field for good scope views. We stopped at the Grafton Cemetery that contains a few dozen graves from 1860-1910. The inscriptions tell of the harsh life at that time, and several Native Americans are also buried there. Two Gambel's Quail ran across the road as we left.

Our shuttle took the group into Zion Canyon, stopping at the Grotto. Some hiked the trail and others walked along the Virgin River. All marveled at the beauty and majesty of the cliffs of this dramatic National Park. To the group's delight, a California Condor was spotted soaring between two of the cliffs. A pair of Pinyon Jays was vocalizing and seen during the walk. House Wrens, Plumbeous and Warbling Vireos, and Yellow Warblers were numerous. We walked to the Zion Lodge, finding a Warbling Vireo on a nest over the trail. A Wild Turkey kept us company in the Grotto.

The King's Landing Bistro was our dinner spot and had not only great food but a wonderful atmosphere, the perfect ending to a magical day in Zion!

## **Sun., May 16 Kanab | Jackson Flat Reservoir | Vermilion Cliffs | Navajo Bridge**

After breakfast, we left Springdale, crossing through Zion's Checkerboard Mesa finding Western Bluebirds at the park entrance. We drove south on scenic Highway 89 towards Kanab, our next destination. We stopped first at Jackson Flat Reservoir south of town. Scope views of Horned Grebes in breeding plumage, American Avocets, California Gulls, Ring-necked Ducks, and White-faced Ibises were exciting for all. We continued along Highway 89A to the California Condor release location hoping to spot more Condors. Without having any luck on this extremely windy day, we continued east to Navajo Bridge, passing the famous Cliff Dwellers site where Blanche Russell lived among the boulders joined by others during the depression. We looked down on Violet-green Swallows from the bridge and visited the informative visitors center.

Returning to Kanab, we checked into our lodgings and enjoyed a delicious dinner at one of the new upscale restaurants in town.

## **Mon., May 17 North Rim Grand Canyon National Park**

All were excited to travel this morning to the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park. Having opened for the season only two days before, the weather had cooperated, and snow was still visible on north facing areas. We stopped first at the visitor's center and the famous Grand Canyon Lodge. We drove along the rim, first stopping at Vista Encantada to watch for Condors and enjoy our first views of the magnificent canyon. We were alerted by a short scream and rushed to find that a Gopher Snake had surprised members of the group. A



MacGuillivray's Warbler was spotted for quick looks along the trail. While driving the road, there was a brief sighting of the unique Kaibab Squirrel.

We next stopped at Cape Royal to walk the trail to the Angels Window. At the end of the trail, a Black-throated Gray Warbler was heard vocalizing and quickly found for great looks. At the same location, a pair of Pinyon Jays were vocalizing and quickly moving around. We looked down on White-throated Swifts and saw Dark-eyed Juncos near the path. Rock Squirrels were seen in the trees near the rim. We enjoyed our delicious picnic lunch and then drove to Point Imperial. As we arrived at the parking area, three Clark's Nutcrackers landed by the vehicles and then quickly flew down the canyon. The views from this point were dramatic and a great photo opportunity for all!

We returned to Kanab, still amazed at the wonderful day we had experienced on the North Rim, and enjoyed a delicious meal at our hotel, hearing and spotting a Lesser Nighthawk during dinner!

## **Tues., May 18 Jackson Flat Reservoir | Highway 12 | Red Canyon | Bryce National Park**

We returned this morning to the nearby Jackson Flat Reservoir and were pleased to discover many new species. A surprise Hudsonian Godwit was spotted and photographed by Hugh for positive identification. An unexpected Snowy Plover was feeding along the shore. Wilson's Phalaropes, White-faced Ibis, Black-necked Stilts, and a Spotted Sandpiper were seen well in the scope. A Yellow-headed Blackbird was spotted in the willows as was a Hammond's Flycatcher and Yellow Warblers. An Osprey flew low over the water, and four species of swallows were identified. Another great visit to Jackson Flat!

We moved today to Bryce National Park, traveling scenic Highway 12 through the Sevier River Corridor. What beautiful scenery! We enjoyed our picnic lunch at Red Canyon after a short walk and a visit to the delightful visitor's center. Their hummingbird feeders gave us great looks at Black-chinned Hummingbirds and quick ones at the noisy Broad-tailed. A Townsend's Solitaire was spotted on a treetop at the beginning of our walk. The Red Rock formations were dramatic!





We arrived at the entrance to Bryce National Park and enjoyed watching the cute Utah Prairie Dogs in the prairie dog village. We checked into our lodgings and enjoyed dinner in the historic Bryce Lodge.

### **Wed., May 19 Bryce National Park**

Many of the group met on the rim to enjoy sunrise over Bryce Canyon. The colors and shadows changed continuously as the sun rose over the hoodoos and pinnacles on this clear but chilly morning. We also watched for birds, seeing Clark's Nutcrackers, Western Bluebirds, and Spotted Towhees flying to the rim from the valley below. Some of the group spent the morning hiking into the canyon, others birded along the rim. White-throated Swifts disappeared into cliffs to nest. Pygmy Nuthatches were moving through the pines, Mountain Bluebirds perched along the rim. Steller's Jays were vocal as were Chipping Sparrows and Cassin's Finches.

We spent the afternoon at Rainbow Point, stopping during the drive at scenic pullouts along the road. The Natural Bridge was a popular and dramatic stop and a great photo opportunity. We ate our picnic lunch at Rainbow Point and then walked the Bristlecone Loop Trail keeping watch for the Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel. Unfortunately, the Bryce Canyon fire a few years ago had devastated much of this area but thankfully had not damaged the centuries-old Bristlecone Pines. Near the end of the loop, we finally sighted a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel near its den. What good luck!

Many of the group wandered out to Sunset Point after our delicious dinner in the historic Bryce Lodge to enjoy the sunset and star display.

### **Thurs., May 20 Bryce National Park | Escalante Grand Staircase | Calf Creek Falls State Park | Boulder Mountain Lodge & Pond | Capitol Reef Resort**

Before we left Bryce, many arose early to enjoy another sunrise over the canyon. Continuing on Scenic Highway 12, we drove through Escalante, seeing some of the vistas that comprise the Grand Staircase National



Monument in route to Capitol Reef National Park. Displays at a stop at the Escalante Interagency Visitor Center educated the group about this dramatic area. We arrived at Calf Creek Falls State Park and enjoyed a bird walk before lunch. The Park host had bird feeders contributing to our sightings of Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays, Cassin's and House Finches for close comparisons, Pine Siskins, White-crowned Sparrows, Green-tailed Towhee and Spotted Towhees, and Lazuli Buntings. On our walk, we found a mixed warbler flock containing Black-throated Gray, Yellow, and Wilson's Warblers. The star of the walk was a cooperative, Yellow-breasted Chat, seen in the open along the river. A wonderful morning!

We continued on Hwy 12 after lunch, stopping at Boulder Mountain Lodge and pond. A beautiful male Ruddy Duck in breeding plumage in the pond was a hit as were Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Black-billed Magpies, and Ringed-necked Ducks. The smoothies at the Boulder Store were delicious!

Near Torrey, we traveled through a magnificent Aspen grove that continued for miles, arriving at the Capitol Reef Resort in time to unpack and enjoy sunset over the mountains before a delicious dinner at their restaurant.

## **Fri., May 21 Capitol Reef National Park**

At dawn many gathered for a short walk around the resort. Two Gambel's Quail were feeding along the road, Western Meadowlarks were vocal, Bullock's Orioles were nesting as were Black-billed Magpies. After an early breakfast, we drove a short distance to the entrance to Capitol Reef National Park. A vibrant palette of color spilled across the landscape as we began to see the towering cliffs, massive domes, arches, and bridges of this dynamic park. After a stop at the visitor's center, we drove to Larb Hollow, a slot canyon, to hike the trail. Canyon Wrens are heard but hard to find. A Say's Phoebe was vocal along the Fremont River, and Cassin's Kingbirds were nesting in the cliff.

After the hike, we stopped at the site of the protected petroglyphs, carved by people who lived here from about 300 to 1300 Common Era, ancestors of the modern-day Hopi, Zuni, and Paiute tribes. We drove the western side of the park and returned to the Fruita Historic District to enjoy our picnic lunch. In the 1880s, Mormons established the small settlement of Fruita at the confluence of the Fremont River and Sulphur Creek. They built irrigation systems to water orchards and pastures containing apple, peach, pear and apricot trees. We birded this lush area, finding Cordilleran Flycatcher, Black Phoebes along the river, Plumbeous and Warbling Vireos, Bullock's Orioles, and Black-headed Grosbeaks.





The reality that this delightful week in Utah was coming to an end came as we enjoyed our delicious farewell dinner at the Rim Rock Restaurant. We shared memories from the week and agreed we will never forget the new friendships made and the dramatic scenery we enjoyed together.

### **Sat., May 22 Drive to Salt Lake City | Koosharem Reservoir**

This morning we packed and began our return drive to Salt Lake City. A stop at Koosharem Reservoir proved successful when a Sandhill Crane was spotted and seen by all in the scope. A Northern Harrier soared low over the field. Later, near another lake, a number of American White Pelicans were on the shore and soaring above the hills. What a fitting ending to a successful tour of the Utah Canyon Country!

### **Photo Credits:**

Bryce Canyon, Hugh Simmons Photography (HSP); Gambel's Quail, HSP; Chipping Sparrow, HSP; Black-throated Gray Warbler, HSP; Grafton walk, HSP; Group Image, Pat Lueders (PL); Western Bluebird, HSP; Yellow Warbler, HSP; Ruddy Duck, HSP; Male Chukar, PL; Sandhill Crane, PL; Virginia Rail, PL; Coyotes, PL; Yellow-headed Blackbird, PL; Zion NP, HSP; Group @ Jackson Flat Reservoir, HSP; Grafton, HSP; Phainopepla, HSP; Say's Phoebe, HSP; Western Bluebird, HSP; Tree at Bryce Canyon, HSP; Navajo Reservation, HSP; Gopher Snake, HSP; Dark-eyed Junco, HSP; Western Kingbird, HSP; Steller's Jay, HSP; Group at Red Canyon, HSP; Rock Squirrel, HSP; Red Canyon, HSP; Mountain Bluebird, HSP; Bryce NP, HSP; Natural Bridge, HSP; Black Phoebe, HSP; Black-headed Grosbeak, HSP; Group at Capitol Reef, HSP.