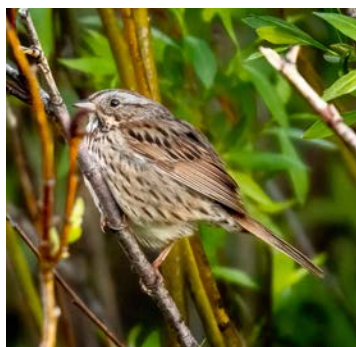


Yellowstone: Birds, Bears, & Wildlife | Trip Report

June 9 – 16, 2021 | Written by Hugh Simmons



With Guides Carlos Sanchez, Rick Weiman, & Hugh Simmons and participants Linda, Elaine, Linda, Sandy, Cathy, Robert, Kathy, Wayne, Edith, Stephen, Linda, & David





Wed., June 9 Arrivals | Cherry River FAS | Glen Lake Rotary Park

Our trip began as we left Bozeman airport with twelve guests and three guides, Carlos Sanchez, Rick Weiman and Hugh Simmons. We had a one and one-half hour drive to the Abrosoka Hotel in Gardiner, Montana that would be our base of operations for the next few days but were able to get in a little birding along the way. The first stop was the Cherry River FAS, well known for the Yellow-headed Blackbirds that inhabit the cattails on the pond margin. Both male and female Yellow-headed Blackbirds gave us very close views, especially for the photographers. There were four guests in our group with a serious interest in photography. A single White Pelican circled and settled on the pond while an Osprey passed through overhead. A pair of Cinnamon Teal also paddled about. A total of 15 species in our first stop only fifteen minutes from the airport.

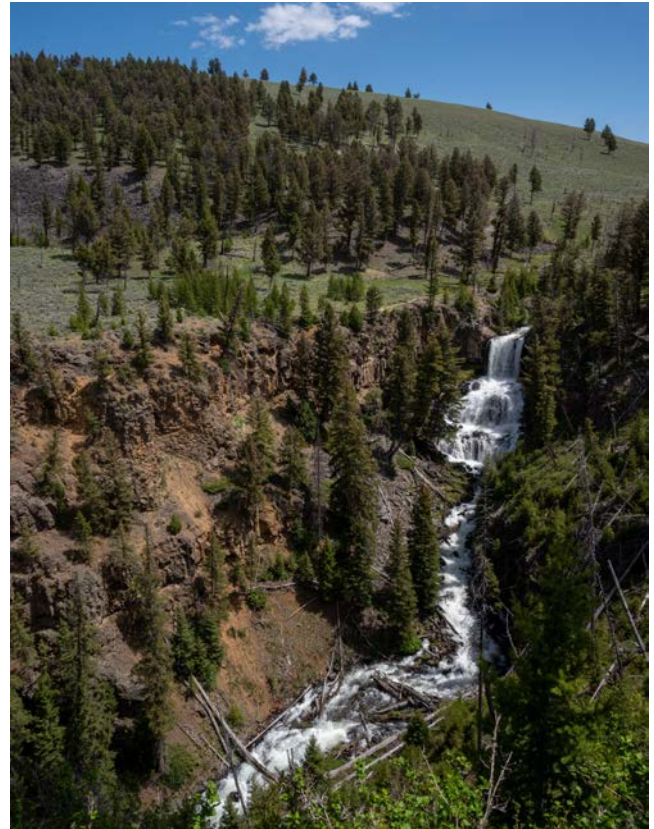
On this trip I was the photography guide, along to help the photographers in the group get better results through recommendations in technique and equipment setup. A significant part of the driving time in my vehicle was spent discussing everything from camera settings to how to process photos back at home.

Our next stop was the nearby Glen Lake Rotary Park. This Park was busy with people enjoying a swim in the lake, but we went for a walk through the adjacent fields. We added a few but notable species here including Mountain Chickadee, Black-billed Magpie and Eastern Kingbird. Then onto our hotel in Gardiner, MT and a refreshing dinner salad at the delightfully eclectic Yellowstone Grill.

Thurs., June 10 Mammoth Hot Springs | Lamar River Valley | Gardiner

Today started early, gathering coffee and boxed lunches from the Yellowstone Grill at 5:15am. But this early rise was for good reason. We were off to look for wolves, bears and other megafauna with local guide and wolf expert, Nathan Varley. Early morning is the best time to find these animals out and about and our bleary eyes were rewarded. At 5:30am, when we met Nathan at Mammoth Hot Springs, elk grazed lazily on the lawn a few feet in front of our vehicles. At 6:00am we found a Black Bear with a cub and by 7:00am we had found our first Grey Wolf which, in this case, was black in color. As Nathan Varley explained, about half of the Grey Wolves in Yellowstone are black. This color variation comes from a gene mutation believed to have been introduced through hybridization with Old World domestic dogs that humans brought across the Bearing Strait within the last 7,000 years. We stopped for a picnic breakfast and added Evening Grosbeak, Dusky Flycatcher and Dark-eyed Junco (pink-sided) to our bird list. After breakfast we encountered a family of Sandhill Cranes next to a roadside pond. At other stops to this point we had also added Ring-necked Duck, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle, Spotted Sandpiper and Vesper Sparrow.

After breakfast we continued to slowly explore vast vistas of the Lamar River Valley working our way back west to Mammoth Hot Springs. With stops at Crystal Creek and Slough Creek we added Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, and Prairie Falcon to our bird sightings. We also stopped to enjoy the view at Undine Falls. The rock face next to this 60-foot cascade on Lava Creek is the remnant of the lava flow from the irruption of the Yellowstone



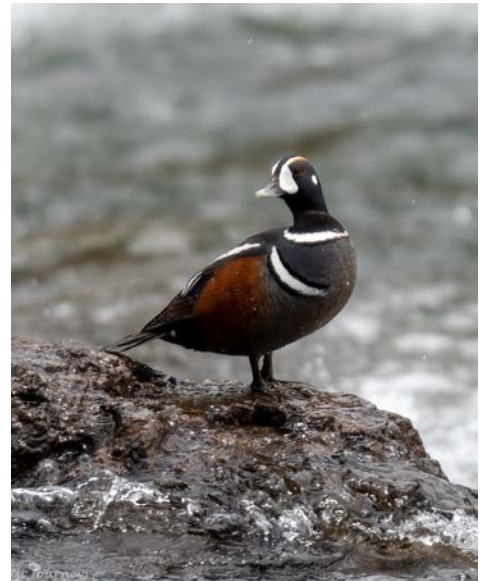
volcano 2.1 million years ago. Back at Mammoth Hot Springs, Mountain Bluebirds and Pine Siskins gave us great views as we made our way to the park food concession for lunch. Due to COVID restrictions we still were not able to eat inside. Outside temperatures were unseasonably warm but more challenging were strong wind gusts that made for quite the juggling act to keep our hats on our heads and our lunch on the table at the same time. After lunch we had time to explore the remarkable, step-like, travertine formations of Mammoth Hot Springs. These formations result from the deposition of calcium carbonate that has been dissolved from the underlying limestone by superheated water. A steady stream of water ran over the surface and a lone Killdeer seem to be looking for insects in the water.

After exploring Mammoth Hot Springs, we made the short drive back to our hotel with a few spare hours to rest after the early start or explore the town of Gardiner, MT.

Fri., June 11 Old Faithful | Bison Jams!

Today was geyser day. As we headed south from the North Park Entrance to the Norris and Old Faithful geyser basins, we stopped at Swan Lake where we had eleven species of waterfowl including, aptly, two Trumpeter Swans. Also present were Barrows's Goldeneye, Cinnamon Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup. Our next stop was the Apollinaris Spring Picnic Area where we added to our list Warbling Vireo, Clark's Nutcracker, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch and White-crowned Sparrow. Our first geyser stop was at the Norris Geyser basin. Here steam rises from hissing and spitting natural cauldrons in an otherworldly vista. We spent an hour exploring the trails and boardwalks through this barren landscape and then headed on to Old Faithful.

Our trip to Old Faithful was interrupted by a long line of traffic that turned out to be due to bison on the road. "Bear jams" and "Bison jams" are common occurrences in Yellowstone. Since the traffic was barely moving, we decided to pull over at a picnic area on the Firehole River and have lunch. We finally arrived at Old Faithful in the mid-afternoon and due entirely, I am sure, to lead guide Carlos Sanchez' exquisite planning we arrived five



minutes before the next scheduled irruption. We watched Old Faithful blast its stream of hot water 100 feet into the air and then ventured off to explore the rest of the Old Faithful Geyser Basin and Visitors Center at our leisure. While there, we got great looks at Violet-green Swallow that were nesting under the eaves of the Old Faithful Lodge. Then it was back to Gardiner for dinner and to pack, for the next night we would be in Cooke City, Montana.

Sat., June 12 Hayden Valley | Virginia Cascades | LeHardy's Rapids

Today was our day to explore the Hayden Valley on our way to Cooke City. We packed the vehicles at 6:15am and picked up a picnic breakfast and our boxed lunches. Not long after getting into the park we spotted a Grizzly Bear on a hillside. (9351) Scope distance, but good views nonetheless. Our first planned stop was Virginia Cascades where we had our breakfast and did a little birding. Here highlights were a Clark's Nutcracker, several Ruby-crowned Kinglets and a Common Loon flyover, calling as it passed. A short distance further and we were at the Yellowstone River and the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone. Here the river drops 417 feet, 109 feet at the Upper Falls and 308 feet at the lower falls. The view of the Lower Falls from Artist Point is one of the iconic images of Yellowstone. Happily going along with the cliché, we took a group photo at Artist Point with the Lower Falls in the background. At the Upper Falls overlook, we added Swainson's Hawk as it flew over the parking lot. Travelling south into the Hayden Valley we spent some time watching a Bald Eagle nest with two adults and at least one eaglet that was almost as large as the adults. Other stops gave us Tree, Bank, and Cliff Swallow, and added Blue-winged Teal to our list. Our destination on this leg was LeHardy's Rapids. Here the Yellowstone River



narrows and rushes over rocks providing great habitat for Harlequin Duck and American Dipper. Both species were found, as promised, and gave us great looks and great performances with several Harlequin Ducks flying, swimming and sitting on rocks and an American Dipper gleaning the rocks just feet away from the path where we were standing.

After the excitement of the Harlequin Duck and Dipper we had lunch in the shade of the trees right next to LeHardy's Rapids. Continuing south after lunch, we came to Fishing Bridge where the Yellowstone River leaves Lake Yellowstone and Pelican Creek where, on cue, there was an American White Pelican as well as Western Grebe and Northern Shoveler. A little further east along the north shore of Lake Yellowstone is Indian Pond where we found Redhead, Spotted Sandpiper and Savannah Sparrow. With a three-hour drive to our next hotel in Cooke City we turned around at this point and backtracked through the Hayden Valley and then headed east through the Lamar Valley. Bison were everywhere and some were ambling down the road right next to the vehicles. Nothing ambles like a bison. There were also many adorable bison calves. Back at Cooke City we had dinner at The Bistro.

Sun., June 13 Lamar Valley | Hiding Ducks | Roosevelt Lodge

Today we ventured back into the Lamar Valley. At Pebble Creek, a campground that seemed to be closed for renovations, we heard an Olive-sided Flycatcher when we first arrived but unfortunately could not see it. Uinta



Ground Squirrels were chirping, their sound easily mistaken for some unknown bird species. We also found Western Tanager, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Northern Flicker. As we made our way back to the vehicles the Olive-sided Flycatcher was finally spotted high on the very top of a tree. At one roadside stop in the Lamar Valley there were thick grasses growing in a wet area. At first glance there seemed to be nothing there, but some patience and careful viewing turned up a number of ducks hiding in the grasses. There were Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, and a Wilson's Snipe. It made one think about how much life lay hidden from view as we drove along. There were scattered Bison and Pronghorn throughout the Lamar valley but at one stop a herd of Bison scattered widely across the valley easily numbered around 500. Our delicious lunch stop today was at the Roosevelt Lodge. This log construction building was established in 1906 in commemoration of a camping trip to the region by President Theodore Roosevelt. After lunch we headed back through the Lamar valley where we spotted another Gray Wolf. This one was also black. It was prowling through a bison herd and seemed to be circling a bison calf that was lying down. But the adult bison were having none of it and moved to surround the calf and the wolf ambled off. Other stops in the valley added Brewer's Blackbird, American Kestrel, Lincoln's Sparrow and Yellow Warbler. On the way back to Cooke City we came across another Black Bear not far from the road. It seems that Black Bears really like dandelions as this one was eating them as was a bear earlier in the week. Back at Cooke City, we had dinner at the Beartooth Cafe.

Mon., June 14 Cooke City | Beartooth Pass | Rocky Mountain Goats

We started the day with a pre-breakfast walk around Cooke City that provided good looks at some nice birds; Wilson's Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, and a surprise American Dipper in the stream behind the town. After breakfast we headed east on Beartooth Highway. Our destination, Beartooth Pass and a search for Black Rosy-Finch. Our first stop was at Clarks Fork Picnic Area where we had a spectacular view of Beartooth Butte and its reflection in Beartooth Lake. While there we also had a close Steller's Jay and White-crowned Sparrow. At 10,947 feet Beartooth Pass is well above the tree line and is one of the highest paved roads in the lower 48 states. The air was crisp and significant patches of snow remained. The ground was rocky and covered with lichen and tiny, ground-hugging wildflowers such as the Alpine Forget-Me-Not. Here we were looking for Pika and Black Rosy-Finch. Unfortunately, only one Pika appeared briefly and only a couple of our group saw it. The Black Rosy-Finch was another story. Several appeared and wandered within feet of some of the photographers in our group. Continuing up the pass we encountered a dozen Rocky Mountain Goats grazing in a field with the mountain that gives Beartooth Pass its name looming in the background.

Tues., June 15 Lamar Valley Trail | Chico Hot Springs

Today was a travel day back through the Lamar Valley and Gardiner to our last night of lodging and farewell dinner at Chico Hot Springs. Along the way we stopped again at Lamar Valley Trail where a large herd of bison



could be seen just across Soda Butte Creek, Blue-winged, Green-winged, and Cinnamon Teal paddled the creek and Brewer's Sparrow and Western Meadowlark were in the brush. Cliff Swallows were nesting under the eaves of the park rest stop buildings, and at least 50 of them flew about. Further on we made another stop a Slough Creek, this time for a short hike up Slough Creek Trail. There wildflowers and butterflies tried to steal the show, but birds made a strong showing as well with MacGillivray's Warbler, Dusky Flycatcher, Western Tanager, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Brewers Sparrow. A Yellow-bellied Marmot also came quite close to the group. On the return walk down the trail a lone Pronghorn walked perhaps 30 feet away. As we drove out of Slough Creek, we spotted a female Mule Deer in a field close to the road and then noticed a tiny fawn at her feet. It struggled for a few minutes to get up but then shakily succeeded and took off at a run behind its mother. Many of us found that experience magical! We had lunch once again at Roosevelt Lodge and then headed west out of the Lamar Valley. We arrived at the beautiful Chico Hot Springs resort in time for some to go for a swim in the pool. Then we had a magnificent farewell dinner in the resort's restaurant.

Wed., June 16 Old Slough Creek Trail | Departures

This was the travel day to the airport, but our intrepid group opted for a 6:15am, pre-breakfast trip to the Old Slough Creek trail. Thirteen species including Red-naped Sapsucker, Western Wood-pewee and Black-headed Grosbeak provided a just end to a memorable trip.

Photo Credits:

Rockey Mountain Goats, Hugh Simmons Photography (HSP); Group Gardiner Lake, HSP; Wilson's Warbler, HSP; Lincoln's Sparrow, HSP; Beartooth Lake, HSP; Norris Geyser, HSP; Black Rosy-Finch, HSP; White-crowned Sparrow, HSP; Elk, HSP; Dusky Flycatcher, HSP; Group Cherry River, HSP; Yellow-headed Blackbird, HSP; White Pelican, HSP; Sandhill Cranes, HSP; Killdeer, HSP; Lamar Valley, HSP; Undine Falls, HSP; Group Lunch, HSP; American Dipper, HSP; Group LeHardy's Rapid, HSP; Harlequin Duck, HSP; Group, HSP; Bison, HSP; Baby Bison, HSP; Lamar Valley Bison, HSP; Pronghorn, HSP; Group Lamar Valley, HSP; Macgillivray's Warbler, HSP; Sticky Geranium, HSP.