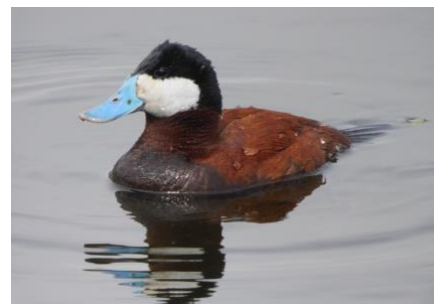


# Utah: Birding and National Parks | Trip Report

## May 16–24, 2022 | by Dave Mehlman



**Guides: Dave Mehlman and Kelly Vandenheuvel, with participants: Connie, Edith, Gary, Glenn-Marie, Jackie, Jean, Patricia, Raj, and Wayne**



### Mon., May 16

### Arrivals in Las Vegas | Springdale, UT

The group all met up at the Las Vegas (McCarran) International Airport about mid-day, with some having come in a day or two earlier to “experience” Las Vegas and others arriving on the same day. After finding everyone, we trooped over to the nearby parking structure where Dave and Kelly had stashed their vehicles, loaded all our bags in, and then headed out of town for the several hour drive to the lovely town of Springdale, the gateway to Zion National Park. The drive north on I-15 had its high and low points. The low point was getting stuck in a slow crawl traffic jam for over an hour due to highway construction. The high point was the magnificent climb up the Virgin River canyon in the short Arizona stretch of the interstate; it’s hard to imagine how the engineers fit a highway through this narrow canyon! In any case, we got off the interstate at St. George (after losing an hour due to a time zone change) and arrived at the La Quinta in Springdale in time to check in and get settled. Just before dinner, we gathered on the lawn of the La Quinta for introductions, a briefing, and the distribution of the bird checklists and other items. After this break, the group either walked or drove the short distance in town to our dinner for that evening: the Bit and Spur Restaurant. At Bit and Spur, we enjoyed our welcome dinner and were helped by the most awesome Alicia, superstar waitress of Springdale! After desserts were polished off, we returned to the La Quinta for a quiet evening in great anticipation of the days to come.



**Tues., May 17**

### **Zion National Park | South Entrance**

The day began with everyone picking up a box breakfast and coffee at the La Quinta lobby; of interest to the foodies along were the pre-packaged hard-boiled eggs, an interesting way to start the day. Kelly dashed off to Sol Foods in town to pick up our pre-ordered lunches, which were then given out to everyone to put in their day packs. With lunch, water bottles, and snacks, we were off for our day in Zion! Dave's initial plan to get into the park went quickly awry, much to his chagrin. All the literature talked about the "convenient" Springdale town shuttles that would take you from town to the park entrance without having to drive. So, we all obediently walked over to the nearby upcanyon shuttle stop and waited. And waited. And waited some more. After 30+ minutes of waiting for a shuttle that comes every 10 minutes, we bailed out and walked about 15 minutes to the Zion National Park pedestrian entrance. Quickly assembling into groups of four based around those who had passes, we entered the park under the eyes of a Ranger over the Virgin River footbridge and explored the Visitor Center.

The large crowds there suggested that we board the Park shuttle bus (basically the only way to get around within the park) and we did so, quickly finding a seat on one of the many, regular buses. Our plan was to go to the last stop, Temple of Sinawa, explore there, then work our way back down to the Visitor Center throughout the day. However, mother nature had other plans, as she so frequently does. The upcanyon bus came to a stop at the Court of the Patriarchs stop (stop 4) due to a rockfall blocking the road ahead. This temporarily shut down the bus system so most of the group decided to get off and walk upstream along the Virgin River to the next stop. This proved to be a wonderful hike between the birds and the spectacular scenery, with the group spotting Yellow Warbler, House Wren, Song Sparrow, Warbling Vireo, and a molting male Summer Tanager with a red head and yellow body. During our walk, of course, the roadblock was cleared so those who stayed on the bus got to ride on up the canyon. The walkers finished their hike at the Zion Lodge stop (stop 5), got on another bus, and then met the riders at our destination, stop 9 at the end of the road.

At this stop, we joined the enormous horde of humans on their upcanyon migration and explored the riverside walk trail in the direction of the Narrows. Most of the humans were dressed in "Narrows attire" (rubber water boots, long balancing poles, drybags) but we took a leisurely place, looking for birds and admiring the lovely wildflowers growing in the many seeps that come out of the canyon walls. The flowers were wonderful, with Golden Columbine, Zion Shootingstar, and Crimson Monkeyflower in full bloom. The birds were fun, too,



especially a pair of American Dipper cavorting and courting in the Virgin; we even got to hear a male sing its unique song, something usually impossible given the background noise of rushing water in its preferred habitat. We were also continually amused by the quite tame and cheeky Rock Squirrels, always on the lookout for a snack. During the walk, hunger pangs struck, so we ate our lunches at a shady spot on the riverbank. We then took the shuttle bus downcanyon to The Grotto (stop 6), where a sizeable contingent decided to hike to the Emerald Pools. Flowers were in full bloom here, too, including yellow and purple prickly pear cactus, Utah Fleabane, and Palmer's Penstemon. These (and the scenery) more than made up for the lack of birds in the afternoon, though we did see a Western Bluebird in the cottonwoods on our return. The group also added an amphibian to the list as we saw several Canyon Tree Frogs clinging to a rock in the Middle Emerald Pool.

On our return from this hike, we took a moment to talk to a Ranger who was counting hikers and got a hot tip on where to look for California Condor: at Big Bend. This prompted several of us to get back on the bus upcanyon to the end, where we had to get off and then back on again to take the bus down to the Big Bend stop (stop 8), which is only accessible from buses going downcanyon. The huge advantage of this stop was that hardly anyone else got off there, so we had the area practically to ourselves to conduct a proper condor vigil. Alas, no condors appeared, but we did see Turkey Vulture and Red-tailed Hawk in the sky there (the latter the only one of the trips) and we were able to find Spotted Towhee and Ash-throated Flycatcher, plus a Wild Turkey called—all in all, a nice reward for our spontaneous extra stop. By this time, we had to head back, so we boarded the park shuttle one final time for the ride to the Visitor Center. There, some used the bathrooms and took a quick tour through the visitor center (still jam packed) and then we left the park via the footbridge and boarded the town shuttle (this time running as scheduled) back to the La Quinta. After a brief break and showers, we walked or drove back to the Bit and Spur (we liked it and Alicia so much we scheduled a second dinner there on the spot!) for a lovely dinner outside on their patio to conclude our stay in Springdale.

## **Wed., May 18                      Zion National Park | East Entrance | Kanab, UT**

We started off our day today with a trip down the road to the ghost town of Grafton, a Mormon settlement which was abandoned in order to consolidate communities. The old houses are still there, and the fields are maintained, but there is no permanent population. The combination of fields and adjacent riparian area makes for a great birding site, and we were not disappointed! The Phainopeplas put on a show here, with several males and females flying around, perching, and eating mulberries (and causing much discussion about their peculiar common name!). Great Blue Herons kept flying by, evidently from a nearby heronry, and we got great looks at



species like Vermilion Flycatcher, Lark Sparrow, Gambel's Quail, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Lucy's Warbler. A fun birding morning! Returning to the hotel, those who had not eaten their box breakfast did so and then we loaded up the vans and headed out to our next destination of Kanab. This trip involves a drive back through Zion National Park and out the east entrance, including a trip through the famous Zion-Mt Carmel Tunnel, which is 1.1 miles long and operated as a one-way drive on the day we drove through. This amazing feat of engineering (as well as the switch-backed road that leads up to it from the valley floor) comes out much higher in the valley through some fabulous canyon country scenery. A stop along the road yielded a few very good birds, including a female Black-throated Gray Warbler, Grace's Warbler, and Chipping Sparrow. Continuing, we stopped at Checkerboard Mesa, a well-known landmark, picking up a male Black-throated Gray Warbler there. As we neared the east exit of the park, a small group of Bighorn Sheep were grazing by the road on the opposite side, though heavy traffic prevented us from stopping there. Pulling off near the east entrance station, Raj (our official tour photographer extraordinaire!) ran back to get some photos.

Continuing our short drive to Kanab, we stopped for gas and a pit stop in Mt Carmel Junction, then continued to Jackson Flat Reservoir south of Kanab for a picnic lunch and birding in the afternoon. Although it was a windy afternoon, we found quite a few birds at this excellent birding site. The most surprising was a breeding plumage Common Loon, which Dave spotted with his scope and helped everyone get good looks at. Other birds present, both on a short walk and on a short drive around the shore, included American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Spotted Sandpiper, California Gull, and a large group of White-faced Ibis. On the water, we found Pied-billed and Eared Grebe and several ducks, including Gadwall, American Wigeon, and Redhead. After this fun afternoon birding and being blown about, we returned to town and checked in at the Canyons Lodge, our abode for the next two days. We met very late in the afternoon in front of the hotel to do the bird list and discuss plans for the next day, then walked across the street for a late dinner at Sego, a small plates restaurant. Extremely satisfied after this long day of adventures, we returned to our rooms for the night.

## **Thur., May 19                      Grand Canyon National Park | North Rim**

Up relatively early, we all walked across the street to Sego for our breakfast buffet. Stomachs temporarily sated, we then loaded up in the vans and headed out for the day to explore the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park. After a long, but very scenic, drive south and east from Kanab, we began the climb up to the heavily forested Kaibab Plateau and through the Kaibab National Forest to the park entrance. After paying our entrance

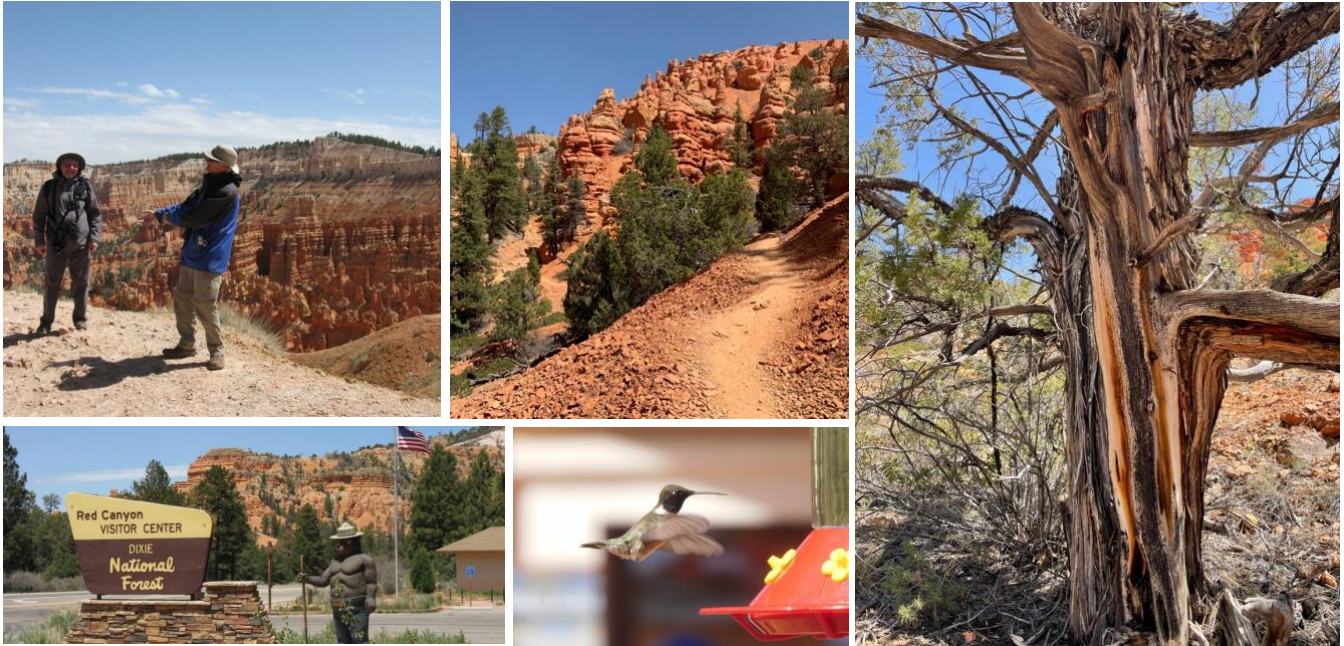


fee, we headed first to the North Rim Visitor Center and Grand Canyon Lodge area. This provided our first views over the magnificent Grand Canyon, the first visit for many to this part of this iconic National Park. While many were admiring the views and checking out the Lodge (which had just opened for the season a few days earlier), Raj made a great discovery: a Pygmy Nuthatch nest in a Gambel's Oak! After this find, we all had to go over and watch—one of the highlights of the tour, we all got great looks and photos of the nuthatch coming and going. A few other birds were around, including Steller's Jay, Violet-green Swallow, the Audubon's race of Yellow-rumped Warbler, and some Gray-headed, Dark-eyed Juncos (the race of junco that breeds in this part of the country).

We then continued our day of exploring the North Rim, visiting many sites along the way, including Point Imperial, Vista Encantada (where we had our picnic lunches that we got at Glazier's Market in Kanab before leaving), and Cape Royal. The scenery was great, though the birds were few and far between on this windy day, with only some White-throated Swifts, Clark's Nutcrackers, and Common Ravens to be found. Ending our day, we started our return trip with a stop at the Jacob Lake Inn, where rumor had it Kaibab Squirrels could be found. A short walk around the inn turned up no squirrels (except for one on a sign!), but we did discover a water fountain which was attracting birds to drink at very close range. This unexpected find produced great views of Pine Siskin, Western Tanager, Pygmy Nuthatch, and both sexes of Cassin's Finch, so it proved a very good stop, squirrel or not. Continuing, we arrived back in Kanab in time to rest at our hotel. Then, we reconvened for a lovely group dinner at the Wild Thyme Café in town, followed by a well-deserved rest for the evening.

## **Fri., May 20                      Sevier River Corridor | Bryce Canyon National Park**

Breakfast was again the buffet across the street from the hotel at Sego. Most of the group participated in a morning birding trip back to Jackson Flat Reservoir. Upon arrival, we discovered a carnival set up at the pavilion/picnic area, so that area was skipped, and we proceeded directly to the gravel road around the edge of the reservoir. Many of the species we found were the same as seen on the previous visit, but with some diligent searching and the use of the spotting scope, we found some new things including a female Common Goldeneye, several Ring-necked Ducks, Cinnamon Teal, and an unexpected Bonaparte's Gull. After this delightful morning outing, we returned to Canyons Lodge for final packing and loading and then continued our merry way toward



Bryce Canyon. The drive to Bryce was another pleasant and not too long drive through the beautiful intermontane valleys of Utah and through old Mormon towns like Orderville and Hatch. After traveling through the Sevier River Valley, we turned east to begin our climb up the Pausaugunt Plateau through the spectacular Dixie National Forest. Our first stop was the Red Canyon Visitor Center of the Dixie, where we enjoyed the incredible scenery of the Red Rocks, saw our first hoodoos, and had a nice picnic lunch picked up earlier in the day from Glacier's Market in Kanab. This was mostly a scenery stop (and quite the scenery it was!), but we did see Black-chinned Hummingbirds at the Visitor Center's feeders and found a Hammond's Flycatcher among the trees while walking the interpretive trail.

Since it was still early in the day, we continued into Bryce Canyon National Park, passing through the entrance station and stopping at the Visitor Center for a quick orientation to the park. After this, we moved on to the Sunset Point parking area, where we spent about two hours in the vicinity of that area, walking to Sunrise Point and back, admiring the incredible geological display below us in the Amphitheater and looking for birds. Although few birds were to be seen, we had excellent views of a pair of Townsend's Solitaires drinking water from a leaky water pipe, as well as White-throated Swifts zipping by, Steller's Jay, Clark's Nutcracker, Grace's Warbler, and a Western Bluebird. We also had many sightings of the two ubiquitous rodents of Bryce: Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel and Uinta Chipmunk. We finished the afternoon by heading to Bryce Canyon Lodge for an early buffet dinner in their large dining room, then we headed to Ruby's Inn in Bryce Canyon City to check in to our lodging for the next two days. Although very windy at this point in the day, our rooms were right next to a lake which had large numbers of swallows foraging over it (apparently in anticipation of the cold night to come), Spotted Sandpiper, a Ruddy Duck, and Yellow-headed, Brewer's, and Red-winged Blackbirds. With that, we called it a day and prepared for tomorrow.

## Sat., May 21

## Bryce Canyon National Park

This day was the coldest of the trip, by far, with morning temperatures around 25° F (which meant some had to quickly buy hats and jackets in the store to keep warm!). The hardest among us met Dave in the early morning light to check out the birds around the lake and we pretty much re-found everything that was there the night before, allowing everyone to add these species to their trip list. We had breakfast in Ruby's voluminous breakfast



buffet room along with many, many other tourists, and then prepared for the day. Our first stop was Ruby's General Store (yes, Ruby's has literally EVERYTHING in its immense complex) to get lunch materials for the day. Once that was accomplished, we set off for a day in Bryce Canyon National Park.

Our first stop was to the east and at a lower elevation than the Bryce Canyon entrance station: the Mossy Cave trailhead. This short hike led us through some of the hoodoos next to a water-filled stream (which was the Tropic irrigation ditch) and eventually to Mossy Cave, a large, shaded alcove in the cliffs. Perhaps due to the cold, not much bird activity was present, though we did find Black-headed Grosbeak, Pygmy Nuthatch, Violet-green Swallow, and a lone Canada Goose flying overhead. Driving back up to the edge of the plateau, we entered the park and stopped to watch some of the action in the Utah Prairie Dog colony right off the park road. Though not much was happening, we had good views of this threatened species checking out the world from their burrows. Continuing, we drove to the very end of the park road, the scenic Rainbow Point, where we spent time at some of the highest elevations of the trip (well over 9,000 feet). The group walked the Bristlecone Pine loop trail here, getting good views of a Green-tailed Towhee on the ground, as well as Mountain Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Western Bluebird, and the seemingly omnipresent Uinta Chipmunk.

We then drove back on the park road to Farview Point, which conveniently had both picnic tables and restrooms, for our lunch. Not much was present there (except for the usual ground squirrels and chipmunks), but we did find a Western Tanager and an Audubon's Yellow-rumped Warbler. We continued our travels by stopping at Bryce Point, continually admiring the stupendous views to be had at Bryce Canyon. Three brave and hearty souls decided they need to walk more, so they walked on the Rim Trail to the next area, Inspiration Point, while the rest drove there to meet them (and admire yet more incredible views). Since we were not yet completely "viewed out", we made a final stop on the way back to town at Fairyland Canyon to ensure the images would remain in our memories permanently. We then returned to Ruby's Inn to rest and refresh, then most of us gathered to head to dinner at the Stone Hearth Grille in Tropic, a town near Bryce Canyon, but at a much lower elevation (hence the name, presumably). Dining here proved to be an interesting experience, since this was one of the restaurants that would not take a group reservation! Instead, we had two reservations, one each for about half the group, at slightly different times. But the food was excellent, and we enjoyed our dinner, with the latter group having to wait a while to get seated while the early group had to wait a while after dinner for the

other group to finish, since we all went in our big van. After that it was back to Ruby's for our final night in the megaplex.

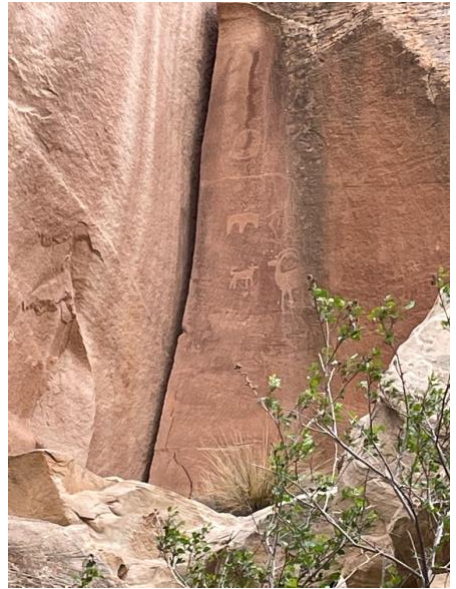


## **Sun., May 22                      Escalante Grand Staircase | Boulder Mountain | Torrey**

We had another breakfast from Ruby's buffet and then gathered for a brief bird walk around the lake at Ruby's Inn. A beautiful morning, this walk yielded more sightings of Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds, Spotted Sandpiper, Canada Goose with goslings, and Pine Siskin. After that, we loaded up and hit the road to the town of Torrey, our final destination on the tour. However, by popular demand, we stopped again in Tropic for some decent coffee at Bryce Canyon Coffee Company (oddly, Ruby's coffee just was not doing it for folks!), which also yielded a sighting of Bullock's Oriole.

Continuing, we stopped at the Cannonville Visitor Center of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. This almost 1.9-million-acre preserve is administered by the Bureau of Land Management and contains some of the most remote and vast areas in the Southwest; parts of this area were the last in the entire country to be fully mapped. The visitor center offered a few avian goodies, such as the familiar Yellow Warbler, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds at the feeders. Continuing our journey along scenic highway 12, we next came to the town of Escalante where we stopped in at the Escalante Interagency Visitor Center for more Black-chinned Hummingbirds and a Say's Phoebe. We then stopped at Escalante Outfitters nearby to order lunches for the day. Moving on, we had an extended stop at the Calf Creek Recreation Area, along the creek of the same name, with picnic, camping, and trailheads to explore. We lucked onto a few remaining parking spots and ate our lunches at a picnic table, admiring the landscape and the numerous Hopi Chipmunks scampering about. After lunch, Dave led a walk along the stream, which yielded a very cooperative, Yellow-breasted Chat, White-crowned Sparrow, Spotted Towhee, Western Wood-Pewee, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, and Lesser Goldfinches at the feeders set up by the campground host.

We then continued our way, this time to make the epic drive up and over Boulder Mountain, reaching 9600 feet at the highest point on the highway. Up here, it was back to very early spring, with most of the aspens not even leafed out yet—what a contrast to the desert below! Descending the mountain to the town of Boulder, we stopped at Boulder Mountain Lodge to do some quick birding at the pond behind the lodge (everyone was too full of lunch for the tasty smoothies at the adjacent Burr Trail Outpost). The pond yielded very close views of 2 male and 1 female Ruddy Duck, and we all wondered at the bright powder-blue color of the males' bills—what



function does that have and why? Also present were Yellow-headed Blackbirds, American Coots, and Black-billed Magpies. We then concluded our drive for the day in late afternoon at our final lodging on the tour: the Capitol Reef Resort just outside the town of Torrey. Everyone had a room with an outside balcony facing the fabulous cliffs of the Waterpocket Fold so it was hard to do anything that would take your eyes off the amazing view, especially late in the day! However, we were able to extract ourselves and walk to the Resort's restaurant, Pioneer Kitchen, for the bird list and dinner together. Then off to rest in our rooms for the day ahead.

## **Mon., May 23                      Capitol Reef National Park**

We started the day with a short walk around the grounds of the Capitol Reef Resort, though it was a bit cool and windy, not the best conditions. The highlight of the walk was a singing Western Meadowlark perched in a tree, which provided scope views. A few other things were around, such as Western Tanager and Common Raven, but all in all, it was a quiet morning. This was followed by a proper breakfast at Pioneer Kitchen at the Resort, and then we loaded up for our day at Capitol Reef. The first stop was in the town of Torrey, where we picked up lunches at the Chuckwagon Bakery & Deli. Our first stop in Capitol Reef National Park was the visitor center, where we paid our entrance fee and familiarized ourselves with options for things to do. While there, we were very intrigued by a large flock of Pinyon Jays that were feeding on the copious amounts of webworms infesting the cottonwoods—a great chance to view this iconic bird of the southwest! Then, we headed off into the park to our first stop: the Petroglyph Panel pullout. There, we walked the short trail and admired the impressive display of rock art, pondering the people who made them long ago. This trail turned out to have some nice birds, too, such as Yellow-breasted Chat, Black-headed Grosbeak, Plumbeous Vireo, and Wild Turkey.

Next, we headed to the parking area for the lower end of Grand Wash and set out for a short hike in this scenic drainage. The rocks and flowers were spectacular; of special interest were the numerous holes in the rock walls, apparently caused during flooding which causes stones in the holes to grind away at the rocks. Some wildlife was present, including White-tailed Antelope Squirrel, Common Side-blotched Lizard, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. The scenery inspired some of the group to make the through hike to the upper trailhead, while the rest of us turned back to the vehicles and agreed to go around and pick them up at the trailhead on the Scenic Drive. On our way into the upper trailhead, we all got great views of a Loggerhead Shrike perched in a juniper—a first for the tour. Our collective timing was perfect, as the vehicles arrived at the upper trailhead right when the hikers emerged from the wash, so we all loaded up and drove back to the picnic area in the Fruita section of the park.



After consuming our sandwiches and lunch fixings, we took a walk around the picnic area to see what was out and about. Although generally quiet, probably due to the human activity around, we found Yellow Warbler; Bullock's Oriole; several Northern Flickers of the western, red-shafted, form; Brown-headed Cowbirds; Spotted Sandpiper (mimicking a dipper in a rocky stream!); and a nicely perched Cordilleran Flycatcher, the only one of the tour. After this, we explored the rest of the Scenic Drive, making stops at Slickrock Divide and the end of the paved road for photos and admiration for the beautiful landscape of the Waterpocket Fold. We then returned to the Capitol Reef Resort to rest and freshen up a bit before our final dinner of the tour at the Rim Rock Restaurant across the highway from the Resort. What a delightful way to cap off a most excellent tour! After dessert, most in the group huddled on the porch of the restaurant for the final bird list. Then, all went back to their rooms to pack and get ready for leaving the following day.

## **Tues., May 24                      Departures from Salt Lake City**

We were first in the doors for breakfast at the Pioneer Kitchen, then did a final loading of the vans. At this point, we separated into the two vehicles, with Kelly taking Connie and Gary in the minivan and Dave taking everyone else in the big van. And then we set off for the several hour drive to Salt Lake City, getting one final view of the vast and beautiful landscapes of southwestern Utah. We arrived right on time at Salt Lake City airport at noon, having made one gas and pit stop along the way, and we said our final goodbyes as the tour came to an end.

Photo Credits: Group (Jackie Adler - JA), Scenic (JA), Ruddy Duck (Sudhakar Naraparaju - SN), Scenic (JA), House Wren (SM), Virgin River (DM), Zion Shooting Star (Connie Armitage - CA), Yellow Warbler (SN), Waiting on the bus (David Mehlman - DM), B&W Tree (JA), Pricklypear Cactus (JA), Utah Fleabane (DM), Emerald Pool (DM), Grafton Scenic (DM), Group Photo (JA), Bighorn Sheep (SN), Vermillion Flycatcher (SN), Checkerboard Mesa panoramic (JA), Group at North Rim (DM), Enjoying the View (Edith Showalter - ES), Red Canyon (DM), Red Canyon Sign (ES), Black-throated Hummingbird (SN), Gorgeous Tree (JA), Yellow-headed Blackbird (SN), Scenic (ES), Panoramic (JA), Green-tailed Towhee (SN), Lesser Goldfinch (SN), Barn Swallows (SN), Chipmunks (CA), Broad-tailed Hummingbird (CA), Scenic (JA), Grand Wash Scenic (Jean Avery), Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker (SN), Pinyon Jay (SN), Wall Art (JA), Capitol Reef Panoramic (JA)