

Birding Canyon Country | Trip Report

Sept. 18 – 26, 2022 | by Bryan Shirley



With Naturalist Journeys' guide, Bryan Shirley and participants Ellen, Joel, Linda, Patrice, Robert, Roxanne, and Troy.

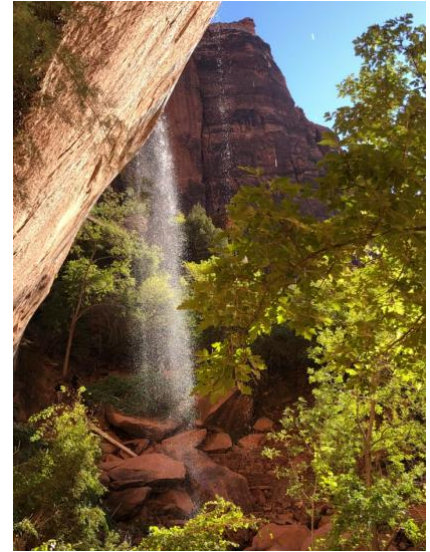


Sun., Sept. 18 **Arrivals | Virgin River Gorge**

After meeting up at the Las Vegas airport in the afternoon, we were all anxious to get out of town, so we started our drive north towards Utah. We made a short pit stop at Cedar Pocket in the Virgin River Gorge. It was pretty hot and we didn't see one bird here, but worth stopping to see the Joshua Trees and some of the other plants here on the Northern edge of the Mohave desert. We continued to our hotel located in Springdale. What a gorgeous place! We had a couple of hummingbirds at the feeder at the restaurant during dinner to cap off a nice first day.

Mon., Sept. 19 **Zion | Lower Emerald Pool**

After a short drive into the park and transferring to the shuttle bus, soon we were all marveling at the towering sandstone cliffs as we made our way into Zion Canyon. We had a couple of Mule Deer and 2 turkeys out the window of the bus before arriving at our stop. We got off at the lodge and started our hike to Lower Emerald Pool. It was still a bit cool and windy, but before long the wind stopped, and the sun started to warm things up. Not far up the trail we had a fun encounter with a Tarantula and a bit further along started to see some good



birds like Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Townsend's Solitaire, Hairy Woodpecker, and others. Thanks to the recent rains there was quite a bit of water at Lower Emerald Pool. Most flowers aren't blooming this time of year, but there was still a few Cardinal Flower and Monkey Flowers high up on the cliff. While at the viewpoint we had an American Dipper fly up the canyon and land on the cliff in the waterfall. After a short break at the lodge, we continued up to the grotto for a picnic lunch. We had just started eating when a Northern Pygmy-Owl started calling in the cottonwoods nearby and before long we had not one but 2 pygmy-owls in the tree above our picnic table! I thought that was going to be hard to beat, but a few minutes later watching an adult California Condor soar against the Navajo Sandstone probably was the highlight of the day. Watching one of the rarest birds in North America soar above us in what is arguably one of the most beautiful places in world is surely an experience we will not soon forget.

Tues., Sept. 20 Jackson Flat Reservoir

We started this morning with a bit of birding near the Grafton Ghost Town. Before we got there, we had a fun experience. Yesterday Reg asked me about the possibility of a Snow Goose – he said he had seen a flock of Canada Geese fly by yesterday and there was one white bird with black wing tips in the flock. I told him it sounded like a Snow Goose, but we don't regularly get them in Utah, and it would normally be later in the year (or early spring. Well, this morning I missed the turn to Grafton and as luck would have it there was a flock of Canada Geese in a field where we turned around. Sure enough, there was 1 Snow Goose in the flock! Back on the road to Grafton, one of our targets was Vermillion Flycatcher and we ended up seeing a pair on the drive in and another beautiful male right in the ghost town. We also had good looks at Both Bewick's and House Wrens, Say's Phoebe, and a few other species. It was fun to see the old pioneer buildings as well. After a quick bathroom break, we checked out of the hotel and headed back up the Zion's. Of course, the upper portion of the park was spectacular as always. We had a few Bighorn Sheep just a bit off the road, but unfortunately there was nowhere to stop so we had to keep going. We arrived in Kanab for lunch (another great meal!), after which we birded a bit at Jackson Flat Reservoir just outside of town. The reservoir had lots of Coots with a few Pied-billed Grebes and Mallards as well. We had good looks at Black Phoebe and our first Yellow-rumped Warblers of the trip. Leaving there we drove along the Vermillion Cliffs to Marble Canyon/Navajo Bridge where we were treated to more views of California Condor. We also had Scope views of a Rock Wren here perched on the fence. We left Navajo Bridge and drove the rest of the way to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, arriving just in time to enjoy a spectacular sunset out the window of the restaurant.



Wed., Sept. 21 **Grand Canyon**

The rain stopped long enough for us to see the Grand Canyon and do a couple of walks without getting soaked! After breakfast we did the short walk out to Bright Angel Point. The cliffs and scenery proved a bit vertiginous for some who opted to look for birds rather than hike to the point. Along the trail we had a few Mountain Chickadees, Stellar's Jays, and Western Bluebirds.

Upon returning to our cabins, we had a quick bathroom stop then loaded up in the van and headed to Cape Royal. It was foggy and raining the whole drive, but when we arrived at the point the rain stopped enough that we decided to try the walk to the point. Most of the way we couldn't see much due to the fog, but just as we arrived at the point it cleared, and we had fabulous views of the canyon below us. The break in the weather held out long enough for us to enjoy our picnic lunch overlooking the canyon, then it socked in again and rained the entire way back to the cabins. Later in the afternoon when the rain stopped, we did a short bird walk, but all the birds we saw were right over our cabins! We had a nice flock of Pygmy Nuthatches, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Western Tanager, and a Warbling Vireo.

Thurs., Sept. 22 **Imperial Point | Bryce Canyon**

Despite the cold and foggy morning, the weather began to burn off by the time we were ready to leave. We decided to drive out to Imperial Point since we couldn't see it yesterday. Much nicer today! Besides the stunning views, we also got a Cedar Waxwing and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. After lunch in Kanab we birded a bit at the water treatment ponds, adding a few birds to the list. At Bryce Canyon we enjoyed watching the cute Utah Prairie Dogs before heading out to Inspiration Point for our first views of the canyon. A Clark's Nutcracker at the viewpoint was a bonus!

Fri., Sept. 23 **Bryce Canyon**

It was a beautiful morning at Bryce! We started the day birding in front of our rooms at the pond at Ruby's. There were lots of Coots and Mallards, but the highlight was a Belted Kingfisher on the telephone wire above the pond. We also had several Brewer's Blackbirds and one winter plumage Yellow-headed Blackbird as well.



In Bryce we started the day at Sunset Point. Wallstreet was closed due to the recent rains, but we hiked the Navajo Loop side of the trail down to Two Bridges. The trail was a bit too vertiginous for some who opted to enjoy the views from the rim. Back on top we added a very cooperative Williamson's Sapsucker to the list and had White-breasted Nuthatches just a few feet away. We enjoyed the rest of the day hitting all the viewpoints and had Green-tailed Towhee join us for lunch at Rainbow Point. In the afternoon we had an optional outing to Pine Reservoir. As usual the scenery was wonderful. We added several trip species, but the highlight was a gorgeous Mountain Bluebird posing on the fence next to the road.

Sat., Sept. 24 **Capital Reef**

After checking out of Ruby's we started the drive toward Capital Reef along scenic highway 12. After picking up sandwiches in Escalante and several stops at viewpoints, we arrived at Calf Creek. The scenery was better than the birding and we saw few birds here but did get good looks at Spotted Towhee and enjoyed a few Rufous and Black-chinned Hummingbirds. After a few more scenic viewpoints we arrived at the long-awaited Lewis' Woodpecker tree and were treated to several (5+?) Lewis Woodpeckers collecting acorns and flying back and forth in front of us! Definitely a highlight of the trip. After dinner in Torrey, we made a mad dash to try to catch the sunset but were a few minutes late so decided to give it another try tomorrow.

Sun., Sept. 25 **Panorama Point**

Another wonderful day. We spent most of the day birding along the Fremont River and around the picnic area. It was not super birdy, but enough birds to keep us entertained and it ended up being a great morning. A few of the highlights were a Green-tailed Towhee on the grass, Wilson's Warbler, and Red-naped Sapsucker, and a Golden Eagle soaring down the ridge, but the most exciting bird for most of us was watching American Dipper working its way up the river. We had a couple of brief views in Zion's, but this one was much more cooperative and allowed for good scope views. After our picnic lunch it was getting hot and most of the birds had quieted down for the day, so we mostly drove around enjoying the scenery and petroglyphs.

Tonight, we made a better effort to see the sunset and arrived at Panorama Point in time to enjoy the growing shadows across Capital Reef and the spectacular scenery before sunset. It was the perfect ending to our last day, but several of us were not quite ready to be done so we met again a couple hours later for some stargazing. We ended up just parking along the highway, so we still had occasional car lights to deal with, but the milky way and innumerable stars were an awesome sight. Through my spotting scope we were able to see several moons on Jupiter and pick out the rings of Saturn.

Mon., Sept. 26 **Departures**

We left the hotel early for our drive to Salt Lake. We didn't have time to do any real birding today but did enjoy 3 Golden Eagles and lots of Magpies along the road before we reached the city and said our goodbyes at the airport.

Photo Credits: Group at the Grand Canyon (Bryan Shirley – BS), Sunset at Panorama Point – Capital Reef (BS), Zion Emerald Pools (BS), Lunch! (BS), Vermillion Flycatcher (BS), Mountain Bluebird (BS), Birding Capital Reef (BS), View of Grand Canyon (Ellen Rockmuller)