

Yellowstone in the Fall | Trip Report | September 11 – 19, 2022 | by Hugh Simmons



With guides Hugh Simmons, Mason Flint, and Jessie Hallstrom and participants: Abby, Holly, Jeffery, Joseph, Kristin, Lorraine, Maryse, Pamela, Randy, Stephen, Thomas, and Yvonne



Sun., Sept. 11 Arrivals | Angler's Lodge

We left Bozeman under clear skies with warm temperatures for the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Angler's Lodge in Island Park, Idaho. Our route followed the Gallatin River for much of the way. We made a stop at Big Sky Community Park to stretch our legs and checked out the ponds where we saw Mallards, Green-winged Teal, and several Cedar Waxwings flitting about. A little further down the road we had our first mammal sighting with a pair of Pronghorn close to the road. After arriving at Angler's Lodge, a few members of our group sat along the Snake River before dinner, enjoying the warm weather and watching a dozen or so Common Mergansers diving on the river as Double-crested Cormorant, Osprey, California Gulls and a Belted Kingfisher flew by. Back at the lodge we enjoyed happy hour on the deck just a few yards from the river and listened to an informative presentation from Yellowstone Ranger and bear expert Wes Larson, who answered our questions about bears and bear safety. Dinner was at the Lodge.

Mon., Sept. 12 Henry's Lake | Red Rocks Lake

After a filling breakfast of eggs, bacon, and pancakes at the lodge, we packed our picnic lunch and headed just 20 miles up the road to Henry's Lake. Eight square miles yet only a few feet deep, the lake is often loaded with waterfowl. Starting at a small wetland at the east end of the State Park Campground, we found a moose cow about 200 yards out and were able to watch her for some time. On the lake we saw many Green-winged Teal as well as Barrow's Goldeneye, Bufflehead, and Pied, Eared and Western Grebes. Eleven American White Pelicans could be seen on the other side of the lake, and a single Common Loon made appearances between dives. Further around the lake we made another stop that didn't add any new waterfowl species, but a juvenile



Swainson's Hawk perched on a roadside fence post and was very accommodating for photos from all three vehicles. A stop at a small RV Park and boat launch on the west side of the lake afforded a bathroom break and added Red-necked Grebe, Clark's Nutcracker and American Crow, unusual around Yellowstone where Common Raven is, well, the more "common" corvid.

From there we headed west on notoriously rough roads to Red Rocks Lake where we were rewarded with a spectacular view of thousands of American Wigeon scattered across the lake as far as one could see. Other notable sightings included Ruddy Duck, White-faced Ibis, and both Yellow and Wilson's Warblers flitting about in the trees near the picnic area where we had lunch. On the drive back to the lodge, we saw a Loggerhead Shrike, Mountain Bluebirds and Lark Sparrows along the roadside. Since we had a little time, we decided to explore Harriman State Park to see what was on Silver Lake in the late afternoon. We were excited to see nine Trumpeter Swans, both snow-white adults and grey cygnets, which were just as large as the adults at this time of year. We also saw a dozen or so American White Pelicans on the Snake River as well as Ring-necked Ducks and a Sora spotted along the shore just below our overlook.

Another beautiful evening back at Angler's Lodge, and just in time for happy hour on the deck followed by a delicious dinner.

Tues., Sept. 13 Harriman State Park | To Yellowstone!

We rose before dawn and grabbed coffee at the Angler's Lodge before heading back out to Harriman State Park in search of elk and any other wildlife that might be active in the early morning hours. We took in a beautiful sunrise over the bend in the Snake River and could hear elk bugling in the distance., unfortunately out of range for us to locate. But we did enjoy a lovely, if chilly, two-mile hike around the park and saw Mountain Chickadee,



Chipping Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, White-crowned Sparrows and several Sandhill Crane. Twenty Trumpeter Swans were on the lake, and a few juvenile Ring-necked Ducks swam close to the foot bridge we were crossing.

Then it was back to the lodge to warm up and enjoy a proper breakfast! Afterward a hardy meal, we packed the cars to head to Yellowstone National Park and the Norris Geyser Basin. Accessing the park through the West Entrance Road, we followed the Madison River and stopped at the Two Ribbons Trail for a short walk down to the river. Then it was on to the scenic overlook at Gibbon Falls. Mason scouted the nearby picnic area and scored two picnic tables overlooking the Gibbon River where we enjoyed our lunch. The next stop was our primary destination for the day, the Norris Geyser Basin. We spent an hour walking the trails and boardwalks through this other-worldly landscape, a target rich environment for photographers.

It was an hour-long drive back to West Yellowstone to check into our next lodgings, the Three Bear Lodge. Along the way we encountered five female elk close to the road along the Madison River. We got out and everyone was able to get photos at a relatively close, comfortable distance. We arrived at Three Bear Lodge in time to relax in our rooms before meeting in the restaurant for a delicious dinner.

Wed., Sept. 14 Firehole Falls | Old Faithful

Today was geyser day. After a large breakfast at Three Bear Lodge, we headed into the park to take in the iconic thermal features. Our first stop was Firehole Canyon Road and Firehole Falls. We had an added treat and much fun running into our bear expert, Ranger Wes Larson, who is the partner of Jesse, one of our guides. Arriving at Grand Prismatic Spring, we split into two groups with some of us opting for closer observation along the boardwalk and the rest electing to hike the 1.6 mile round trip to the overlook where one can get a sense of the enormity of this 375 foot diameter spring from above. It was raining off and on this morning but kindly let up for our time at Grand Prismatic. The cloudy skies and steam from the hot spring made for dramatic photographs.

Our next stop was the famed Upper Geyser Basin and Old Faithful. We arrived about 20 minutes before the next scheduled eruption, so we grabbed our picnic lunches and got set up on benches at Old Faithful. The predicted



times are plus-or-minus ten minutes, and the geyser erupted within that window, about eight minutes after the predicted time. Fortified with lunch, we split up once more, spending an hour exploring the Old Faithful Lodge, Visitor's Center and some of the other thermal features on the many pathways in the Upper Geyser Basin, returning to the Lodge at 2:30 p.m. Brewer's Blackbirds were common around the Geyser Basin.

On the return to West Yellowstone we stopped at the Fountain Paint Pots and walked the many trails and boardwalks there. It's easy to see how this bowl of bubbling thick-white liquid surrounded by cracked, pinkish "dried paint" got its name! A little further down the boardwalk the Fountain Geyser put on quite a show with continuous hissing, spitting and bubbling. We had two options for dinner this evening and a few of us took in a local BBQ restaurant with the rest going to The Branch.

Thurs., Sept. 15 Yellowstone Grand Loop Road | Artist Point

Today we left after breakfast for a counterclockwise trip around the southern loop of the Yellowstone Grand Loop Road. Retracing our steps from the previous day, we passed the Upper Geyser Basin and Old Faithful and drove east over Craig Pass, elevation 8,262 feet, crossing the Continental Divide twice. Turning north at West Thumb, we headed toward Yellowstone Lake Hotel. The West Thumb Geyser Basin was temporarily closed, so we could not make a stop there, however, we took Gull Point Drive to scan the lake in hopes of finding more waterfowl. A lone loon was all we could muster on the water, and Stephen spotted a White-breasted Nuthatch. On our return to the cars, Tom spotted a bull elk in the woods that proceeded to cross the road directly in front of us! First bull elk sighting and it was spectacular!

At the Lake Hotel we took in the historic architecture and fortified ourselves with coffee from the hotel's cafe. From there we crossed Fishing Bridge and headed east along the East Entrance Road to Indian Pond where we scoped a Redhead and a Sora. Acting on a tip about a couple of bears around Lake Butte, we drove out there but failed to locate them. On the way back we stopped at Pelican Cove to search for a Great Grey Owl that had been reported., again with no luck. But we did manage to spot two Sora, and an American Red Squirrel did a remarkable imitation of an American Three-toed Woodpecker call.

Lunch along the Yellowstone River at the LeHardy Rapids picnic area was a welcome respite. Following our meal, we backtracked a short distance to the LeHardy Rapids boardwalk parking lot and walked the trail to see Harlequin Ducks and American Dippers. Both put on a show and definitely were a highlight for the day. A light



rain held off long enough for us to enjoy the ducks and dippers. As we drove north through the Hayden Valley, we encountered the largest herds of American bison that we had seen so far. Our next stop was the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone where we hiked to Artist Point to enjoy the iconic view of the canyon and many photo ops. Once again rain threatened our parade, but let up just when we needed! Even on a drizzly day the view was stunning. With a very full day behind us we headed back to West Yellowstone for dinner at The Branch restaurant.

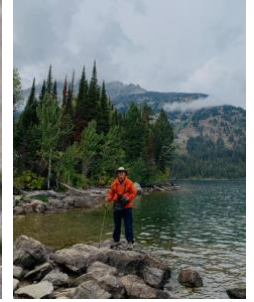
Fri., Sept. 16 Jackson Lake | National Museum of Wildlife Art

This morning we packed up the cars and said goodbye to West Yellowstone, heading out on a 2.5-hour drive to Jackson Lake Lodge where we would have lunch. Here huge picture windows look out over Jackson Lake. Cloudy skies and misty rain made for a somewhat subdued but no less beautiful scene, and a Merlin along with a few American Pipits could be seen from the lodge. After lunch we visited Jackson Lake Dam and discovered hundreds of Common Mergansers and American Wigeon, and a huge raft of 500 or more American Coot that swam so tightly packed together that they looked like a black log floating in the water. A handful of Killdeer worked the water's edge and a flock of Forster's Terns swooped above the dam. Mason spotted five Western Wood-Pewees sallying for insects from their perches south of the dam.

Rainy skies now had us looking for indoor activities, so we stopped at the National Museum of Wildlife Art just a few minutes outside of Jackson. Everyone enjoyed spending time with this remarkable collection of modern and historic wildlife art. Then we checked in to the Lexington Hotel and got a short rest before heading out for a wonderful dinner at Gather in Jackson.

Sat., Sept. 17 Moose-Wilson Road | Jenny Lake | Tetons

This morning we set out before dawn to look for wildlife along the Moose-Wilson Road and, in particular, at the Sawmill Ponds pull-off. Shortly after we arrived a bull moose was spotted in the bush, a little too close for comfort, causing us to retreat to the parking area. We then drove slowly down Moose-Wilson Rd. to the Laurance S. Rockefeller Preserve where some of us went for a short walk while Jesse and her van returned to Sawmill Ponds. At the Rockefeller Preserve we had Pine Siskin, large numbers of Cedar Waxwings and American Robins, and a heard-only Great-horned Owl. About twenty minutes later we got a call from Jesse saying that



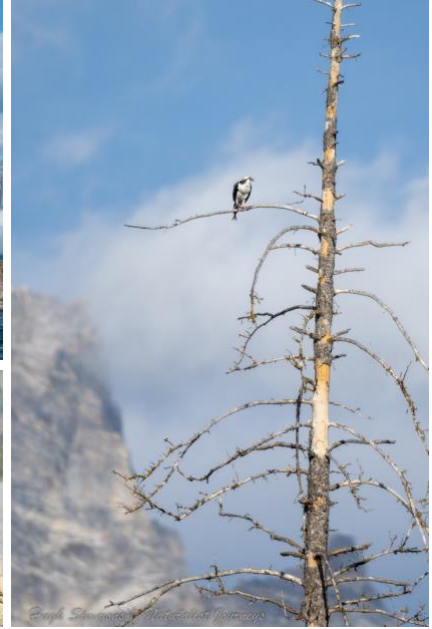
they had moose, elk and bear back at the Sawmill Ponds pull-off, so we rushed back in time for a remarkable wildlife viewing experience. There was a young black bear munching on foliage up the hill, a bull elk, also on the hill, was bugling next to a female, a cow moose and her calf were in the riverbed on the other side of the road along with two young male moose who were practicing their sparing skills. We saw all this action from one parking area in under 30 minutes! None of us wanted to leave but we had to return to the hotel before they stopped serving breakfast!

After breakfast we headed back north on the Teton Park Road to Jenny Lake hoping the cloud cover would clear and give us views of the Tetons, which had been shrouded until now. We made our way along a path to the boat launch. Barn Swallows danced above as a tour boat was loading, and Chipping Sparrows flitted in the brush. At the boat landing the clouds began to lift giving us good views of Idol and Worshipper, and Teewinot Mountains. The guides went to retrieve the vehicles and came across a group of Pronghorn in the fields behind the boat launch. We decided to stay in the area for lunch at the Signal Mountain Lodge, which has nice views of Jackson Lake. The wait was painfully long, but we were rewarded with excellent food and stunning views.

After lunch we took the long way home, passing back over Jackson Lake Dam and stopping at Oxbow Lake for one of the most iconic views of the Tetons. A Bald Eagle and four Great Blue Herons were perched in trees across the Snake River and as we made our way south, toward Jackson, the clouds continued to dissipate giving us better and better views of the Tetons. Jesse's car headed back to Jackson but Mason got a tip that there was a Grizzly Bear on a carcass and of course we decided to have a go at finding it. We never did find the bear, but we did come upon a pair of Swainson's Hawks, an adult and a juvenile, soaring overhead and great views of the three Tetons. Our search for the grizzly also put us in proximity to one of the old cabins of Mormon Row, which provided some photo opportunities. Dinner this evening was at Calico, an excellent Italian restaurant on the southern end of Moose-Wilson Rd.

Sun., Sept. 18 Snake River | Tetonia, Idaho

Today we packed the vehicles for our move to the Sacajawea Hotel in Three Forks, MT. But before heading north, we drove 20 minutes up the road for a rafting adventure on the Snake River. We met our rafting guides who took us to the launch point. Not surprisingly, our guides were incredibly knowledgeable about the river, its



hydrodynamics, the vegetation, and the wildlife. Several Bald Eagles were spotted along the way and an Osprey perched in a snag with the Tetons as a backdrop. On the riverbank were several Spotted Sandpipers and a family of six racoons padded in the shallows for some snacks.

With a four-hour drive ahead of us, we stopped at the Badger Creek Cafe in Teton, Idaho, which turned out to be a little gem. We were able to sit outside on a patio all to ourselves and added Eurasian Collared-Dove to the list while there. Three hours later we checked into the historic Sacajawea Hotel, built in 1910. Beautifully appointed, the only nod to modernity in the rooms was a television. That evening we celebrated with a wonderful farewell dinner at Pompey's Grill restaurant.

Mon., Sept. 19 Departures

Today was departure day. We packed the cars for the short trip to the airport and said our fond farewells.

Group at the Lower Falls (Hugh Simmons - HS), Opal Pool (HS), Elk (Yvonne Hunter), Swainson's Hawk (HS), Group Birding (HS), American White Pelican (Yvonne Hunter - YH), Ring-necked Duck (HS), Barn Scenic (YH), River Snapshot (HS), Elk (HS), Norris Geyser Basin (HS), Group (HS), Group at Grand Prismatic Basin (HS), Grand Prismatic Basin (HS), YNP Falls (HS), Lunch Break (HS), Harlequin Ducks (HS), Elk (HS), Group Birding (HS), Pronghorn (HS), Soaking in the views (Maryse Lortscher), Moose (HS), Tetons (HS), River Journey (HS), Eagle (Joseph Koscielnny), Jessie (HS), Osprey (HS)