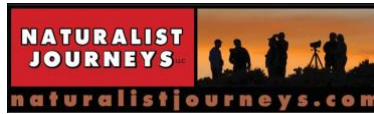


# Utah: Birding & National Parks | Trip Report

## May 7–15, 2023 | by Dave Mehlman



With guide, Dave Mehlman, and participants: Bill, Christine, Jim, Joan, and Sheila



### Sun., May 7 St. George | drive to Springdale, UT

Everyone on the tour had arrived a day or two earlier, so Dave picked Bill and Joan up at their hotel, then went on to retrieve Christine, Jim, and Sheila at the other hotel for some extra birding in the St. George area. Our first stop was at the lovely and easy-to-access Tonaquint Park right in town where we enjoyed about 2 hours of nice birding along the easy trails. Of perhaps most interest were Abert's Towhees, which are quite common here, but were unlikely to be seen anywhere else on the tour. A local birder kindly showed us a fantastic Black-chinned Hummingbird nest with the female incubating. It was so close we could clearly tell that this bird had built a new nest right on top of an old nest and we could photograph it to our hearts' content. Other sightings included Yellow, Lucy's, and many Yellow-rumped Warblers; Plumbeous and Cassin's Vireo; Black Phoebe; and a nesting pair of Mute Swans.

Our next stop for the morning extra birding was Confluence Park, named since it includes the confluence of La Verkin Creek and the Virgin River. Although late in the morning, we found some very vocal Bewick's Wrens, Rock Wren, Ash-throated Flycatcher, the first of many Bullock's Orioles, and a Red-tailed Hawk. We closed out the start of the day with lunch at the comfortable Stage Coach Grille in the nearby town of La Verkin and then proceeded on our drive to Springdale.



We stopped on the way to Springdale at Grafton Historic Town, an old Mormon community that, although no longer inhabited, is maintained to provide an example of pioneer life of the area. The birding here was interesting, despite the mid-afternoon timing, with great (and crowd-pleasing!) views of Vermilion Flycatcher, a pair of Gambel's Quail, Summer Tanager, and a fly-over Common Park Black Hawk. After this stop, we drove to our hotel for the first two nights: the La Quinta in Springdale and everyone got settled into our rooms. We then made the short trip to nearby Springdale Pond where we found a few waterbirds such as American Coots, Pied-billed Grebe, and our only Belted Kingfisher of the tour. Northern Rough-winged Swallows swooped over the water while Yellow Warblers, Bullock's Orioles, and Black-headed Grosbeaks serenaded us from the nearby cottonwoods. A walk through the nearby grove of trees did not yield a hoped-for Lewis's Woodpecker, but we did find a Black Phoebe near the creek. After this, we returned to the hotel to rest and organize, then went to the always fun Bit & Spur Restaurant just down the road for a lovely dinner on the patio and our first checklist review of the tour. After that, to our rooms to rest for the day ahead—a great first day of the tour!

## **Mon., May 8                      Zion National Park**

We began the day by joining the breakfast rush at the La Quinta—everyone wants to be up early in Springdale to get to Zion! After breakfast, Dave dashed off to nearby Sol Foods to pick up our pre-ordered lunch sandwiches then we all loaded up in the van and drove into Zion National Park, having to wait a bit in the expected entrance line. Parking at the visitor center, we took a quick look around the visitor center before getting into one of the Park's buses to start our exploration of this iconic national park. For our first activity in Zion, we took advantage of the lovely morning and took a hike. We got off at the Grotto stop and then walked one-way on the Lower Emerald Pool trail back to the Zion Lodge stop. This lovely hike had numerous wildflowers on it, particularly a profusion of Utah Beardtongue in full bloom! Although a bit slow birding, we had great looks at many Black-headed Grosbeaks, Violet-green Swallow, White-throated Swifts (far, far up along the canyon rim), Black-throated Gray Warbler, and a pair of Common Mergansers surfing in the raging Virgin River (that looked like fun!). A few Canyon Tree Frogs were spotted in the pools and we had the magic experience of walking behind the waterfalls as the water plunged off a pour-off from the Middle to the Lower Pool! A truly zen experience worthy of an extended watch. Arriving at the Lodge, we used the facilities, then boarded the bus all the way to the last stop, Temple of Sinawava, where we got off and ate our tasty lunches.



After lunch, we took a short walk on the Riverside Trail alongside the Virgin River. Despite the Narrows being closed, there were many, many other people out and about, so we soon turned around to continue our exploration of the park elsewhere. On this walk, we heard House Wren and found Warbling Vireo and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, though we could not locate an American Dipper, possibly due to the high and rushing water in the Virgin. Joan and Sheila had the great luck of spotting a California Condor fly over to add to our list! Returning to the bus stop, we took the bus down-canyon one stop to Big Bend, reputedly the most reliable place to spot condors in the park. We got off and mounted a condor vigil—as usual, hardly anyone else was there. Alas, the vigil proved fruitless, at least for condors, though Turkey Vultures periodically cruised by to confuse us and a Great Blue Heron flew upriver to provide an unexpected sighting. Deeming our vigil complete, we returned to the visitor center for a quick look around and some shopping, then went back to the van and drove back to the La Quinta. We met early for dinner, this time driving the short distance to the Spotted Dog Café for another lovely dinner in Springdale. We then came back to the La Quinta, went over our checklist, then retired for the night.

## **Tues., May 9                      Zion National Park, East Entrance | Kanab, UT Page, AZ**

We started today by braving the breakfast rush again at the La Quinta, then came back to our rooms for final packing and loading of the van (by this time, Dave and Jim were becoming quite the bag-loading team!). We headed back into the park, this time negotiating a bit smaller entrance line, and then drove the highway out to the east entrance through the long tunnel. Emerging on the east side, we drove out of Zion, stopping several times at various roadside stops amidst the fabulous checkerboard mesa country that is the east side.

The various stops proved to have some nice birding, with great views at various points of Virginia's, Black-throated Gray, and Grace's Warbler; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher; Plumbeous Vireo; and Brown-headed Cowbird; alas, despite constant searching by all, we could not find any Bighorn Sheep. Continuing on to the east and south, we stopped for gas in Mt. Carmel then went to the Jackson Flat Reservoir just south of Kanab. The Reservoir was quite full and therefore not as birdy as usual, but we did find a lovely breeding plumaged Common Loon (second year in a row at this site), Eared Grebes, lots of American Coots, one Western Grebe, Black-necked Stilts, and a few Gadwall and Ruddy Ducks. At this point, the group was getting hungry, so we went back into Kanab for a great lunch at the Wild Thyme Café, where there was no wait fortunately.



After lunch, we continued south and east, taking old US route 89 up and over the Kaibab Plateau with a stop at the Jacob Lake Inn. At this point, we had entered Arizona on the tour and all our clocks and timing devices had to be reset, though we did gain an hour. This was our first true opportunity to look for Ponderosa Pine birds at a bit of elevation (and our first Arizona birding of the tour), so we took a short walk around the Inn which has a water feature that attracts birds. Although it was pretty quiet, we had super views of Western Tanager, the Audubon's race of Yellow-rumped Warbler, and a Broad-tailed Hummingbird coming to bathe in the water. Also around were some Gray-headed Dark-eyed Juncos (the local breeding subspecies here), White-breasted Nuthatch, Western Bluebird, and Grace's Warbler. All-in-all, a short but very productive Ponderosa stop!

We then continued on old 89, eventually dropping off the Kaibab Plateau for incredible views of the Vermilion Cliffs across the valley in front of us—truly one of the great roadside views in the Southwest. We made a short detour up the gravel road in the valley to visit the Condor Viewing Site adjacent to the Cliffs. We did not spot any condors, but there was very obvious whitewash on some of the rocks near the cliff tops indicating recent use. We then drove on to the famous Navajo Bridge over the Colorado River and parked at the Interpretive Center on the west end of the old bridge. We all walked over the old bridge (now converted to a pedestrian bridge since the new bridge carries the vehicles) and admired the view deep into Marble Canyon. At that point, we got a tip from someone there that a few condors were hanging around at the base of the east side of the bridge. Sure enough, by looking closely we saw a juvenile California Condor walking around on the base of the bridge pylon! This fun sighting allowed everyone in the group to add condor to their list and provided a nice conclusion to the birding day. We then drove north through Page to our lodging for the next two days: Lake Powell Resorts at the Wahweap marina on Lake Powell. After getting settled in our rooms, we walked over to the Resort restaurant and enjoyed dinner in their lake-overlook dining room with its magnificent view. We then did our checklist and discussed plans for the next day and then called it a night.

## **Wed., May 10                      Grand Canyon National Park: South Rim**

Today we implemented an alternative itinerary of accessing the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park (which is lower in elevation than the North Rim, which this tour normally visits, and therefore gets less snow) from the town of Page near Glen Canyon Dam. We started the day with an early buffet breakfast at the Lake Powell Resort cafeteria, then returned to our rooms to retrieve our gear for the day and started off for a relatively long day with lots of road travel.



Heading south, we made our first stop at the Cameron Trading Post on the edge of the Navajo Reservation and where the road to Grand Canyon National Park's East Entrance leaves the highway. The drive from Cameron to the East Entrance passes parallel to the Little Colorado River, which makes its own, smaller, canyon before it enters the Colorado River. While driving, Dave spotted a Prairie Falcon flying along the ridge which provided a brief glimpse of this fast-flying raptor before it disappeared out of view. Arriving at the East Entrance, we found a surprisingly short entrance line, paid our "dues," and then proceeded west along Desert View Drive to the Grand Canyon Visitor Center at Mather Point. Stops along the way included Desert View, Moran, and Grandview Points; at each stop, we parked, got out, gazed in awe at the incredible view, and identified a few birds. The most frequently encountered birds were Turkey Vulture, Common Raven, and White-throated Swift (the latter zipping by at incredible speed), with Chipping Sparrow and Rock Wren at some of the individual stops. While at Grandview, we met a biologist with the Peregrine Fund who was doing her daily radio check of the Canyon's condors. She advised that we MIGHT be able to find condors from Yaki Point, a piece of intel which we filed away for further use.

After arriving at the Visitor Center, we noted our first Brewer's Blackbirds of the trip, then went into the convenience store to get some grab-and-go lunch sandwiches, which we ate at the nearby picnic tables. After lunch, we climbed aboard one of Grand Canyon's shuttle buses and rode it a short way to Yaki Point, in search of the rumored condors. Alas, the condors did not show, but we did admire more spectacular views, complemented by the usual ravens and swifts. Giving up on our condor quest, we got back on the bus and took it the other direction to the Geology Museum at Yavapai Point. The Geology Museum proved to be an excellent visit to give us an overview of not only the fascinating and unique geology behind the Grand Canyon, but also the wider landscape of the Grand Staircase that encompasses all of southwestern Utah from Zion and Cedar Breaks all the way down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. At this point, however, the need to start our 2.5-hour trip back to Page became apparent, so we bused back to the Visitor Center, used the facilities, and found our van. We then drove all the way back to Page, with an intermediate stop at Cameron Trading Post, arriving at the State 48 Tavern in town for a great dinner at a local restaurant. Finishing dinner, we ended our journey back at Lake Powell Resort as it was getting dark, putting an end to a great, though long, day.



## **Thurs., May 11                      Red Canyon | Bryce Canyon National Park**

We started the day with another buffet breakfast at Lake Powell Resort, then the usual packing and loading of the van, followed by departures for points north and west. We quickly passed into Utah, and our first stop was in the town of Kanab, where we got gas and picked up our lunches at Glazier's Market. We then continued on to the Red Canyon Visitor Center of the Dixie National Forest, which is set among a spectacular canyon of red rock with many hoodoos. After arriving, we went for a short walk on the visitor center's nature trail, admiring the plants toughing it out in the eroding rock. Bird-wise, though, it was pretty quiet with only a Black-chinned Hummingbird visiting the feeder and a few Violet-green Swallows and Common Ravens flying around the area. After finishing our walk, we hauled our lunch materials to the picnic tables and enjoyed a peaceful lunch in this lovely area.

After lunch, we continued the short way into Bryce Canyon National Park, stopping at the ponds by Ruby's Inn in Bryce Canyon City on the way in. The ponds yielded a few good birds, including our first Yellow-headed Blackbirds of the tour, Brewer's Blackbird, a small group of Ring-necked Ducks, and a lovely male Red-breasted Merganser. We then entered the park and stopped at the visitor center, where it turned out to be Utah Prairie Dog Day 2023! Who knew?! We went inside the visitor center for a quick look around and orientation. Outside, we looked at the prairie dog displays from all the federal and state agencies involved in this threatened species' recovery. Across the parking lot, some of the biologists had spotting scopes set up so we could spy on a few prairie dogs in the flesh.

Our next and final stop of the day was the Bryce Canyon Lodge. We first went to the main lodge building to check-in, then drove to our rooms nearby at the Sunset Building. After unloading, we then had some free time to explore the wonders of Bryce Canyon next to the lodge. Many walked to nearby Sunset Point to admire the views; while walking, we found several birds common to the park such as American Robin, Townsend's Solitaire, and Western Bluebirds as well as the ubiquitous Uinta Chipmunks wandering about. We reconvened for dinner at the Lodge dining room where we enjoyed a great dinner in the large dining room, then did our daily checklist before retiring to our comfortable rooms for the night.



## **Fri., May 12**                      **Bryce Canyon National Park**

We started the day with the buffet breakfast at the Lodge dining room, then returned to our rooms to get our gear, then headed out to spend the day in Bryce Canyon National Park. Our first stop, however, was the General Store Deli to pick up some lunch sandwiches to take with us; on the way out of there, we ticked our daily Utah Prairie Dog at one of the colonies that are near the lodge. We thoroughly explored the Park, driving all the way out to the far end of the scenic drive and back. Specific stops were, in order: Farview Point, Natural Bridge, Rainbow & Yovimpa Points (at the end of the scenic drive), Agua Canyon, Inspiration Point, Paria View (where we had lunch), Fairyland Point, and, after returning to our building for a bit, the walk from Sunset to Sunrise Points. There was still a lot of snow on the ground, particularly at the far reaches of the scenic drive which are considerably higher in elevation than the area around the Lodge and Visitor Center. So much snow, in fact, that we could not do the planned Bristlecone Trail hike at Rainbow Point since the drifts were still covering the trail and the picnic tables. Although the bird activity was generally pretty quiet, we did find some very interesting things along the way. Probably the best bird was a female Dusky Grouse, which wandered across the parking lot and the road at Farview Point. Also at Farview was a very unexpected and quite tame Wild Turkey, which was quite comfortable perching on the cars parked there! Other sightings included Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Cassin's Finch, Mountain Chickadee, Brown Creeper, Hairy Woodpecker, and a fly-by Peregrine Falcon at Yovimpa Point. Violet-green Swallows and Common Ravens were with us the entire day. Christine and Dave, emboldened by the beautiful day and scenery, hiked a short ways down the Queens Garden Trail from Sunrise Point to experience the "below-the-rim" terrain. That was a great experience for them, but strangely enough, the trail was steeper going back up than it was going down! No satisfactory explanation was made up for this effect!! Finishing the day, we returned to the lodge, then met at the Lodge dining room for our last fine dinner at Bryce Canyon, followed by the bird list in the lobby. Then off for a very well-earned rest to prepare for the next day.

## **Sat., May 13**                      **Escalante-Grand Staircase | Boulder Mountain Torrey, UT**

We began with the buffet breakfast at Bryce Canyon Lodge, then returned to our rooms to retrieve all our belongings and load the van. Starting off on our drive to Torrey, we stopped again on the way out of Bryce at the ponds behind Ruby's Inn. Most of the same species were there, though it seemed that more Yellow-headed Blackbirds had appeared since our first visit 2 days earlier and some Ruddy Ducks and a Great Blue Heron were around. The Red-breasted Merganser and a pair of Eared Grebes were still present to provide more great views



of these species. We then continued our drive on Utah highway 12, dropping off the east edge of the Pausaugunt Plateau and stopped at the Mossy Cave trail. The cloudy skies made for a pleasant hike, however there were few birds to be found aside from the ubiquitous Violet-green Swallows and Common Ravens. We continued our drive, stopping in the town of Escalante for gas and to pick up lunch sandwiches at Escalante Outfitters, which Dave had pre-ordered the day before.

We then drove out of town and made a brief stop at the Escalante River, where there is a trailhead for hiking up or down the river. We picked up a few birds here, including a wonderfully displaying Yellow-breasted Chat, Western Tanager, Bullock's Oriole, and a far-off Red-tailed Hawk among the great scenery. Continuing on, we drove to the Calf Creek Falls recreation site and campground, administered by the Bureau of Land Management, and lucked on to a parking place. We promptly found a picnic table and consumed our delicious sandwiches along with chips from the box and drinks from the cooler. After lunch, we took a walk around the picnic area and campground to see what could be found. Interesting sightings included a Common Yellowthroat, which Sheila found hiding in a shrub, Hairy Woodpecker, Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, and more Bullock's Orioles.

After lunch and birding, we resumed our travels, stopping in the small town of Boulder to visit the pond behind the Boulder Mountain Lodge. This stop proved quite productive, starting right as we got out of the car where a large flock of Pine Siskin, Lesser Goldfinch, and 1 Cassin's Finch were eating dandelion seeds in the grass! The pond itself was a hub of activity, with Pied-billed Grebe, Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal, American Wigeon, and Gadwall in the water; numerous Barn, Cliff, Northern Rough-winged, and Violet-green Swallows cruising in to get a drink; and Western Meadowlark, Bullock's Oriole, and Black-headed Grosbeak in the surrounding trees—what a fun stop! We then continued on the highway, passing up and over Boulder Mountain, topping out at 9,390 feet. Although it was still very much winter up there, with the aspen stands completely bare, we stopped at an overlook and admired the vast views to the south and east to the Henry Mountains. We then soon arrived in the town of Torrey and checked into our lovely rooms at the Capitol Reef Resort. After a brief break, we reconvened for dinner in the restaurant of the Resort after enjoying another great adventurous day in Utah. We did our checklist after dinner at the table, then returned to our rooms for yet another well-earned rest.

## **Sun., May 14**                      **Capitol Reef National Park**

We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at the Pioneer Kitchen at the Resort, then got all our gear and loaded up for a day exploring. Before doing so, we stood on the balcony of the first floor rooms and spotted a few birds right off the porch, including Western Meadowlark, Western Kingbird, Lesser Goldfinch, and a small flock of Cedar Waxwings, the only ones of the tour. Our first stop, however, was in the opposite direction from the Park, as we





ducked into Torrey very quickly to pick up our lunch sandwiches from Chuckwagon Deli which Dave had pre-ordered that morning. This critical mission accomplished, we drove to Capitol Reef and stopped at the visitor center to square away our permits. We noted a few birds there, including a Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker perched in a tree, Western Tanager, and Black-headed Grosbeak. We then went to the nearby amphitheater next to the campground for a little birding, since the campground has a large number of tall cottonwoods and there is trail along the riparian area adjacent to the Fremont River. There are also many fruit orchards in this area (known as Fruita due to all the trees planted by the original Mormon settlers). Perhaps the most interesting sight was well over a dozen Mule Deer bedded down in the comfy grass among the fruit trees—what a life! The birding along the Fremont River Trail was a bit slow, though we did see our usual complement of Yellow Warbler, Bullock’s Oriole, and Black-headed Grosbeak, along with a very cooperative singing Song Sparrow and a silent *Empidonax* presumed to be Willow Flycatcher due to its appearance and habitat (in many willows).

We then retraced our steps a bit to the picnic area, which proved a bit more productive. We had spectacular views of a full adult male Summer Tanager and an incessantly singing Plumbeous Vireo was spotted after a bit of effort. These were joined by Brown-headed Cowbirds, Western Tanagers, a Wilson’s Warbler, and numerous American Robins. We then proceed to the Petroglyphs Trail to admire the ancient rock art; however, the only birds here were Lesser Goldfinches and some Turkey Vultures overhead. At this point, it was mid-day and we went back to the picnic area (which was by now pretty full of cars and buses) for our sandwich lunches. At this point, ominous gray clouds starting building up overhead and distant sounds of thunder occurred. But our timing was impeccable, as no precipitation actually occurred before we finished lunch and got back in the van!

We completed our exploration of Capitol Reef by driving down the rest of the scenic drive. The afternoon weather was quite varied, with intermittent sun, clouds, and even a hail storm at one point. Apparently, the motto at Capitol Reef is: “don’t like the weather, just wait a bit!” We drove down the Grand Wash trailhead road to the Cassidy Arch viewpoint, at which point the road was a bit washed out, so we briefly walked around, then turned the van around and went back to the paved road. We stopped at Slickrock Divide to admire the scenery and some lovely wildflowers (such as Spiny Milkwort and Yellow Cryptantha) then drove into the Capitol Gorge trailhead at the end of the pavement. The latter site yielded our second Peregrine Falcon of the tour, but not much else. Considering our work here at Capitol Reef done, we began the trip home, stopping at the amazing Goosenecks Overlook for a final view and group picture. Arriving back at the Resort, we had some free



time to get organized for our various trips the following day, then we drove across the highway to the adjacent Rim Rock Restaurant for a great final dinner, last checklist, and a celebration of this wonderful tour.

## **Mon., May 15**                      **Departures from St. George**

We began our final day together with a breakfast at Pioneer Kitchen when it opened at 7:00am. We then did all our final organizing and the last packing of the van, this time attempting to follow a “first out, in last” strategy. Many also took a final walk around the Resort, noting that the Western Meadowlark and Cedar Waxwings were still present. With that, we started off on our drive back to St. George, gradually working our way west and south in the mountain valleys until we got to I-15 just north of Parowan, after which it was a straight shot on the interstate to St. George. We made a few stops on the way, first at Koosharem Reservoir, a known birding hotspot not too far out of our way. Although it looked promising, a strong breeze across the lake made for few birds, aside from Brewer’s Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, Eared Grebe, Mallard, and a pair of Gadwall. Remarkably, we added a few new species while driving along the road, in particular a single Sandhill Crane outstanding in its field near Otter Creek State Park accompanied by a few Killdeer flying across the road! Never...Stop...Birding. After all that, the trip ended with everyone heading off with fond memories of our time in southwestern Utah and northern Arizona.

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (David Mehlman - DM), Red-tailed Hawk (NJ Stock), Natural Bridge, Bryce Canyon (DM), Gambel’s Quail (NJ Stock), Group at Confluence Park (DM), Black-chinned Hummingbird (DM), Lesser Goldfinch (DM), Black Phoebe (NJ Stock), Canyon Tree Frog (DM), Emerald Pools (DM), Utah Beardtongue (DM), Virgin River, Bryce Canyon (DM), Group at Condor viewing site (DM), Lake Powell Scenic (DM), Marble Canyon (DM), Barestem Larkspur (DM), Grand Canyon (DM), Common Raven (DM), Red Canyon (DM), Queen’s Garden Trail (DM), Western Tanager (NJ Stock), Wild Turkey on car (DM), Boulder Mountain (DM), Group at Capitol Reef (DM), Yellow Cryptantha (DM), Brown-headed Cowbird (NJ Stock), Spiny Milkwort (DM), Goosenecks Overlook parking area (DM)*