

Yellowstone: Birds, Bears & Wildlife

Trip Report | June 9 – 15, 2023 | by Wes Larson



With guide Wes Larson and participants Bob, Christine, Meg, and Rich



Fri., Jun. 9

Arrivals | Stephen's Creek | Absaroka Lodge

After meeting Bob and Meg at their hotel and picking up Rich and Christine at the airport, we headed out toward Paradise Valley and the park. We made our first stop near the Emigrant General Store where a beautiful Trumpeter Swan was found in a small pond along with a nearby Sandhill Crane and both Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Other birds seen here were Cinnamon Teal and a Great Blue Heron, a great first stop for the group!

Arriving in Gardiner, we made a short detour to the Stephens Creek section of the park where we saw both pronghorn and elk, including some newborn elk calves. This offshoot of the park doesn't get much traffic and we essentially had the area to ourselves. We returned to Gardiner and checked into the Absaroka Lodge, but the



excitement was far from over. After a nice dinner at the Wonderland Café, we found Lazuli Buntings and a Western Tanager in the trees right outside the lodge, and Meg added Cedar Waxwing and a Common Yellowthroat. These were some of our target birds, so it was a good omen to see them on day one!

Sat., Jun. 10 Wolf Watching | Lamar Valley | Mammoth

What an amazing day viewing wildlife! We met Jack from Wolf Tracker and the Yellowstone Wolf Project at the Visitor Center at 5 a.m. Not long into the drive, we stopped near Blacktail Plateau where we could see a few wolves from the Rescue Creek Pack in the distance, a relatively new wolfpack in Yellowstone. Then, heading out toward Hellroaring, we came upon a female black bear with two young and very rambunctious cubs. The bears were only about 100 yards off the side of the road, giving us a front-row seat as the cubs wrestled and played while mom grazed nearby. Then we noticed another black bear, a large male, walking up the side of the road toward us. We retreated into the van to safely watch the much larger bear as it approached. Eventually we decided to head to our next destination, but not far up the road we spotted yet another black bear, this one a cinnamon-brown color. What an amazing scene!

Once we arrived in the Lamar Valley, the action picked up immediately. Jack and Wes spotted grizzly bears high on a distant peak, and everyone had the opportunity to view them through the scope. Then we received a tip that there was wolf activity further down the valley, so we headed out and soon found a grayish black wolf feeding on an island in the Lamar River. We settled in to observe the wolf and enjoyed some breakfast of our own with an active Cliff Swallow colony just behind us. Then Jack spotted a group of nine wolves approaching from the east, so the group walked down the hill to get a closer look. As we were setting up the scope, a coyote chased a ground squirrel within 15 feet of us! We could hardly turn around today without having another incredible wildlife sighting.

From this observation point we watched as two black and two gray wolves slowly made their way in front of us and down the valley. Seeing the group and watching them for so long was an impressive experience and was heightened by the discovery of two more groups of black bears in the trees behind the wolves, and one of them had two cubs with it too! We savored our time watched both wolves and bears, then decided to head further east, stopping about a mile down the road. Here four wolves had surrounded a small group of bison. The adult bison defended a terrified calf as the wolves probed for openings, testing the bison's fortitude. Their efforts were in vain though, and after a tense 10 minutes or so, the wolves gave up walking down the valley in search of easier prey. It was an amazing encounter to watch.



We continued exploring the Lamar Valley and pulled over to scan for mountain goats and bighorn sheep, both of which we found as well as a handsome Yellow Warbler. On the return to Mammoth, we found a beautiful Golden Eagle, handsome Ruddy Ducks and yet another black bear. When we arrived in Mammoth, we said goodbye to Jack and grabbed a quick lunch in town, then walked out on the lower mammoth terraces. We took us to the site of a Great Horned Owl nest, and we were thrilled to see both an adult and several owlets perched on an exposed branch. After an extremely productive day, we returned to Gardiner for dinner at the Antler Lounge where we re-lived some of the best moments from a particularly great day of wildlife spotting.

Sun., Jun. 11 Swan Lake | Upper Geyser Basin | Old Faithful

Geothermal day! Yellowstone is home to a rich variety of geothermal features and today would be dedicated to seeing some of the most famous geysers and hot pools throughout the park. We headed out after a breakfast at the Tumbleweed Café, and our first stop was Swan Lake, where we did a bit of birding and saw our first Lesser Scaup, the most plentiful diving duck in the park. We continued, making brief stops along the way to look for birds. We spotted an American Dipper in the Firehole River, and the rest of the group saw the bird as it flew down the river. Luckily that would not be our only dipper of the day. We also had a nice sighting of a Mountain Bluebird near Nez Perce Creek. When we stopped at Midway Geyser Basin to view the Grand Prismatic Spring, we were fortunate to have a very cooperative bison pose alongside the massive, multi-colored spring for photos.

Our next stop was the Upper Geyser Basin, home of Old Faithful, and as luck would have it, we arrived just in time for an eruption! We enjoyed a quick lunch in the Old Faithful Inn just as light rain showers started, but we didn't let them discourage us. Walking on a boardwalk loop, we found another American Dipper that was nesting under the bridge spanning the Firehole River. Dippers were definitely the birds of the day, even eclipsing the beautiful Mountain Bluebirds.

When the rain intensified, we headed to the van making a quick stop at Biscuit Basin and Sapphire Pool on the way back home. Heavy rains continued as we drove, but we kept our eyes peeled in the hopes that we would see a female grizzly bear with three cubs that had been reported early that morning. While we didn't find the bear, the weather cleared as we neared Swan Lake Flats, and we were treated to beautiful skies and a meadow



that seemed to stretch out forever in front of us. Back in Gardiner, we had another great meal at the Wonderland Café, and some of the group did a bit of birding, once again spotting Western Tanagers and Cedar Waxwings.

Mon., Jun. 12 Gardiner | Hayden Valley | LaHardy Rapids

We woke early for a 6 a.m. departure, packed up the car and headed out of Gardiner! The drive through Mammoth, Norris and into Canyon was lovely with plenty of bison, elk and pronghorn. As we descended into the fields near the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, we were treated to a very close look at a chocolate-colored black bear and her two very playful cubs. Not many people were up this early, giving us a rare opportunity to enjoy the bears without the chaos that often follows bears in the summer. Next, we entered the Hayden Valley, one of the more beautiful parts of the park and also rich with wildlife. Bison can be seen grazing as far as you could see down the valley, the bright green grass and meandering Yellowstone River greatly contributing to the serene, otherworldly beauty. We hiked a hill and to scan for grizzly bears and wolves and finding none, we continued a bit further down the road where we noticed someone pulled over with a spotting scope. Sure enough, he was watching a grizzly bear down the valley! Wes set up his scope and we watched the bear dig for food, using its powerful shoulder muscles to easily turn up the ground beneath it.

We then moved on to LeHardy Rapids to search for Harlequin Ducks. Once again, we were not disappointed! A group of male Harlequin Ducks were dozing on the rocks in the middle of the rapids, giving the group plenty of time to marvel at their beautiful patterns and colors. continuing our adventures, we headed out on the East Entrance Road where we found a female grizzly with a three-year-old cub foraging for insects and roots about 200 yards off the road. We had a great time watching the pair for about half an hour while talking to one of Wes's colleagues.

We stopped at Sedge Bay for breakfast and then returned to LeHardy Rapids where the Harlequin Ducks were actively feeding, deftly navigating the rapids. Birding in the Hayden Valley, we located a Clark's Grebe, separated from Western Grebe by its thinner, brighter orange bill and the facial pattern with white surrounding its red eye. We again saw the black bear family in a meadow on our way to the Lower Yellowstone Falls.

Next, we crossed over Dunraven Pass, dropping into Roosevelt where we ate a well-earned lunch. In the afternoon we found Warbling Vireo and Hammond's Flycatcher, then drove through the Lamar Valley where we spotted a group of moose and another black bear near the NE entrance of the park. This bear was very close to



the road, and we even got to watch it cross between two cars. Our final sighting was a red fox before we settled into our accommodations in Cooke City and dinner at the Beartooth Café.

Tues., Jun. 13 **Slough Creek**

Our targets this morning were Calliope Hummingbird and Green-Tailed Towhee. Of course, just as we entered the park we saw a black bear across Round Prairie. It wasn't easy driving through the Lamar Valley without stopping, but we wanted to get to Slough Creek early enough to find our target birds. And we lucked out! The Calliope Hummingbird was right where Wes thought it might be, and we also had an amazing look at Green-Tailed Towhee, plus another beautiful Western Tanager.

We took a short walk to the closed Slough Creek Campground and enjoyed a nice picnic lunch on the shores of Slough Creek. Next, we searched the Tower area for Peregrine Falcons that had nested in the area, and while the birds were not found, the weather and views were so nice that no one really cared. On the way back to Cooke City, we made a few stops to view both waterfowl and passerines. The warm weather reduced the number of animals that were out and about.

The park did have one last surprise for us though. As we headed out the NE entrance, we noticed fox walking down the side of the road with something in its mouth. At first we thought it might be a rabbit, but as the fox approached, we could see that it was actually deer fawn! An ambitious kill for the diminutive fox, and quite a meal for its kits. Back in Cooke City a rainstorm set in, so we returned to the Beartooth Café for another great meal and daily species list report.

Wed., Jun. 14 **Yellowstone National Park | More Wolves!**

We had planned to drive the Beartooth Highway today but woke up to rainy, cloudy skies and decided to explore the park instead. Within minutes we located a black bear and not long after we stopped to watch a grizzly bear with cubs on a hillside. As we watched, some of Wes's colleagues informed him that wolves from the Shrimp Lake Pack were nearby. After a bit of searching, Wes spotted wolves on a ridge where we had just seen a pronghorn had just been. The wolves disappeared, then reappeared just as quickly, and we were treated to a very close sighting of four wolves, including the alpha female of the pack! We watched them for a while before going further into the park for a walk on the footbridge trail. Although the trail was quite muddy, but we still



managed to see a few birds including Common Yellowthroat, Willow Flycatcher, Northern Flicker and a few more Harlequin Ducks.

After lunch, we made a slow return to Cooke City, stopping along the way. We found a handsome Wilson's Warbler, then stopped to watch a black bear, but learned that a grizzly with cubs had been seen a bit further up the road. We observed the grizzly family for more than 40 minutes, definitely our best bear sighting yet, which is saying a lot given that we had seen 26 bears up to this point! before we left, we stumbled on a fox hunting in a field, a perfect end to a truly remarkable day in Yellowstone National Park.

Thurs., Jun. 15 Beartooth Highway | Cooke City

Today the weather was much better, and we decided to take our delayed trip up the Beartooth Highway. Not five minutes into the drive and we were face to face with a female moose in the road. Her newborn calf was on the other side of the guardrail, and we watched as the pair made its way into the woods. The Beartooth Highway is considered one of the most scenic drives in the country, with stunning vistas across the alpine areas of the Beartooth Mountains. As we gained elevation, we entered the habitat of the Black Rosy-Finch, which are often found feeding along the edges of melting snow fields. We were fortunate to find several groups of these mountain finches, then we entered a rocky area to search for another high-elevation specialist: American Pika. After waiting for a bit, we saw several of these small mammals, relatives to rabbits, moving in and out of the rocks. As we watched, a large pika emerged on a rock and made several loud vocalizations in our direction, ensuring that our presence was known to all. We also found golden-mantled ground-squirrels, least chipmunks, red squirrels, Horned Larks and American Pipits.

We enjoyed lunch along the river where several American Dippers were dipping and also noted Western Wood-Pewee, Yellow-rumped Warbler and a particularly showy Ruby-crowned Kinglet. A great day with a lot of new birds! Back in Cooke City, we finally managed to see one of the red fox kits, part of a den beneath a cabin in town. Later that evening, as Bob was sitting on the hotel porch, an ermine carrying a rodent passed right by his feet and crossed the parking lot to its den. A few minutes later it returned and did it again. When Wes showed up, he was able to watch, and soon the whole group sat transfixed, watching as the weasel annihilated a family of rodents, bringing them all to its den under a nearby cabin!

We reviewed the day and the entire trip at our farewell dinner that evening, then settled into our rooms for one more night in Cooke City and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Photo Credits: Scenic (Robert Scamman - RS), Grizzly Bear (Wes Larson - WL), Scoping the rapids (RS), Western Tanager (WL), Great Horned Owl owl (WL), Coyote (WL), Ruddy Duck (WL), Cliff Swallows (WL), Mammoth Hot Springs (Richard DeFrehn - RD), Cedar Waxwing (WL), Harlequin Ducks (WL), Elk & young (WL), Scenic RD, Bear Crossing Road (WL), Grizzlies at Lake Butte (WL), Hammond's Flycatcher (WL), Calliope Hummingbird (WL), Western Tanager (WL), Green-tailed Towhee (WL), Group Birding (RS), Wolf (WL), Fox with fresh kill (WL), Grizzly Bear (WL), Grizzly Bear & Cubs (WL), Wilson's Warbler (WL), Coyote Pack (WL), Mountain Scenics (RS), Red Crossbill (WL), Ermine with vole (WL)