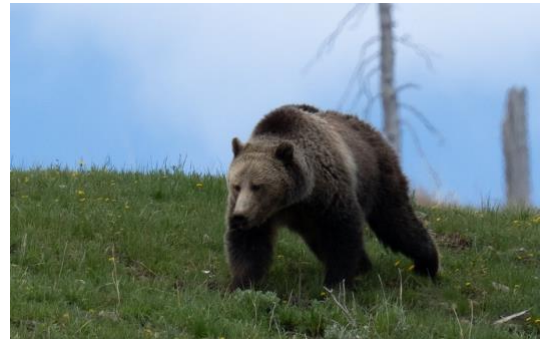


Yellowstone: Birds, Bears & Wildlife

June 1 – 8, 2023 | Trip Report | by Wes Larson



With guide Wes Larson and participants Duke, Gabrielle, Gordon and Rachel



Thurs., Jun. 1

Arrivals | Paradise Valley | Gardiner

Our first day was one of those perfect Montana late-spring mornings. A storm the previous night made the air especially crisp, and the green landscape was so vibrant it almost hurt one's eyes. After collecting our crew from their Bozeman hotels, we headed out of town toward Livingston, driving over Bozeman pass and marveling at the Absaroka Mountains. Once we entered paradise valley, we made some stops to admire the vibrant bird life along the way. Our first stop was to get a look at a particularly handsome, male American Kestrel that unfortunately did not stay put for all in our group to see it. Then we stopped to investigate a nest that Wes spied from the highway, thinking it might be an eagle's nest. Sure enough, a large Bald Eagle nestling was there, and this time there was plenty of time for everyone to enjoy great looks as it awaited the next food delivery from its parents. We also saw several Tree Swallows and had a very nice look at a Western Meadowlark when we stopped to view a regal-looking pronghorn buck. The drive was about as beautiful as they come, and we got to chat a bit about the history of the valley and the catastrophic floods of 2022.



We arrived in Gardiner and then drove to the Stephens Creek area of the park where we saw a lot of elk and pronghorn, and some interesting birds including a pair of Eastern Kingbirds, another American Kestrel and a great view of a Common Grackle and some Red-winged Blackbirds. Following that, we checked into our lodging and then decided to do a quick drive into Mammoth to bird at Swan Lake. The short trip did not disappoint, and we saw a number of waterfowl at Swan Lake including Gadwall, Ring-necked Ducks, Green-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup and, appropriately, Trumpeter Swans. The two birds that stole the show were a vibrant Yellow-headed Blackbird and a closeup Sandhill Crane, both spotted by Rachel and enjoyed by the entire group.

After a very successful and care-free first day, we returned to Gardiner where we ate at the always tasty Wonderland Café, and celebrated Rachel's birthday with a cake that Wes brought along. Gordon told us some tales of his time working as a teacher in a one-horse town in Labrador, and we got to learn about both complex virus proteins and Pomeranians from Duke and Gabrielle. A great start to a week-long trip in a truly special place.

Fri., Jun. 2 Mammoth | Lamar Valley | Slough Creek

We had a VERY early morning on day two, as we needed to get to Mammoth to meet Jack from Wolf Tracker and the Yellowstone Wolf Project at 5 a.m. After picking up Jack, we drove across the northern range of the park and learned a bit about the different wolf packs and some of the work Jack is doing with the Wolf Project. We stopped on Blacktail Plateau to search for the Rescue Creek Pack but did not hear or see anything. Moving on, we checked on the Junction Butte Pack den site, but it too was inactive early in the morning. We continued into the Lamar Valley and had our first glimpse of what has been called the Serengeti of North America. Vast plains stretched out in front of us and were dotted with bison, pronghorn and the occasional elk. At the end of the valley, we spotted our first bear of the trip, a nice-sized black bear weaving in and out of the aspens, and we could see it well through Jack and Wes's scopes. We then moved back toward Slough Creek, on the way spotting two grizzlies digging for food in a mountain meadow! Once again, the scopes gave us a good view of the bruins, and we were all thrilled to see our first grizzlies. We narrowly missed seeing some wolves on the western end of the Lamar Valley but decided to return to Slough Creek in hopes of finding the elusive canines. And we did! At Slough Creek we watched an adult female wolf nurse two pups and saw a yearling wolf as well. The bird life was also abundant at Slough Creek, and we had great sightings of American Widgeon, American Coot, Sandhill Cranes building a nest, Barrow's Goldeneye, Lesser Scaup, Yellow-headed Blackbirds and many more!

Jack made breakfast for us as we watched the wolves, but unfortunately at some point Gordon lost his camera bag full of equipment. We searched everywhere without luck, and Wes suggested we check with the rangers at



the Tower Ranger Station. Fortunately, Wes has great connections having worked at the park for years. Calls went out to all the rangers, and in no time the bag was located and delivered to the ranger station! A true Yellowstone miracle! In the meantime, we had another black bear sighting at Calcite Curve followed by a delicious lunch at the Roosevelt Lodge. On the way back to Mammoth, we saw five more black bears including three cute cubs in the top of a tree as well as a beautiful, cinnamon black bear!

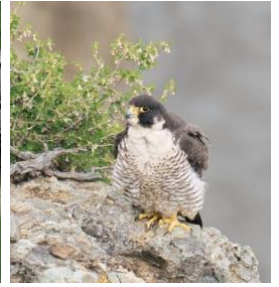
When we got back to Mammoth, we said our goodbyes to Jack and Wes and went to look for a Great Horned Owl nest that he had heard about in Mammoth. After a fair bit of searching, he managed to find an adult owl and one owlet, and we got some nice views of both before packing up and heading back to Gardiner and a celebratory dinner at the Iron Horse Bar.

Sat., Jun. 3 Old Faithful | Upper Geyser Basin | Fountain Paint Pots

After a very long day Friday, we decided to sleep in an extra hour and get started at 8 a.m. We stopped at a Gardiner Diner to pick up breakfast and lunch, then entered the park driving toward Old Faithful and the Upper Geyser Basin. Along the way, we stopped to view the gorgeous Gibbon Falls, took the Firehole Canyon drive and walked the boardwalks at Midway Geyser Basin bordering the Grand Prismatic Spring. When we finally arrived at Old Faithful, we learned that it had just erupted, so we took a stroll on the boardwalks, viewing the famous springs and geysers of the Upper Geyser Basin including the stunning Morning Glory spring.

After a brisk walk back to Old Faithful Geyser, we arrived just in time to see it erupt, a perfect finale! We ate our sandwiches in the historic Old Faithful Inn, then continued our tour of Yellowstone's thermal features. We all agreed that Fountain Paint Pots was one of our favorite stops. After admiring the geological marvels in the area, we headed back toward Swan Lake for some birding. Along the way we saw many interesting and new birds including a beautiful Cinnamon Teal, Barn Swallows, Wilson's Warbler, Dusky Grouse, Chipping Sparrows, Trumpeter Swans, a Swainson's Hawk, and many more!

In Mammoth we walked around the terraces a bit and had a very nice view of our first Mountain Bluebird, and we spotted a black bear that had killed and partially consumed an elk calf! Back in Gardiner, we decided to return to the Iron Horse Bar for another wonderful meal. After some great conversation and reviewing the species list, we returned to our hotel rooms.



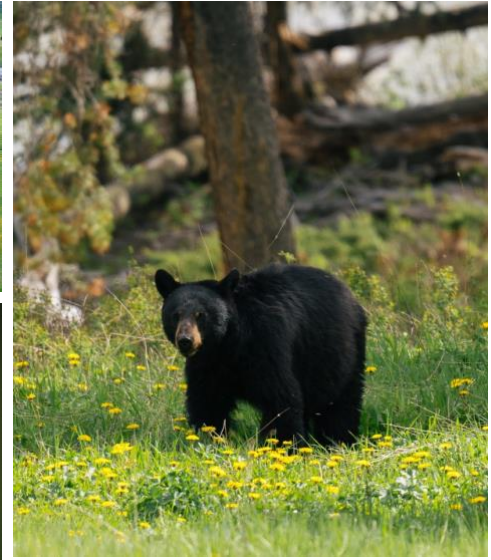
Sun., Jun. 4 Swan Lake | Bears Galore! | LeHardy Rapids | Yellowstone Falls

What a day in Yellowstone! We departed Gardiner early, stopping at Swan Lake where we had a quick look at a Redhead, a new bird for the trip. We continued into the Hayden Valley where the landscape opened to reveal the vast beauty of the fertile prairie and its winding rivers. We noticed a man with a large telephoto lens on the hillside, we decided to see what he was photographing. It turned out that he was watching a mating pair of grizzlies near the Mary Mountain Trail. The male bear was absolutely massive, and we set up Wes's scope to watch as the bears ran around in circles, with the much smaller female doing all she could to elude the huge male. We received a tip that a mother and daughter grizzly were quite close to the East Entrance Road, so we decided to drive straight there, ignoring the many distractions (which was difficult because there are a LOT of distractions for wildlife enthusiasts in Yellowstone!) When we arrived, both grizzlies were digging and grazing on a nearby hillside, and we were able to get great looks and photos. Intrepid Rachel remained focused on birds even during bear watching, and she pointed out a Mountain Bluebird and our first Downy Woodpecker.

After about an hour watching the bears, we ate a late breakfast on the shores of Yellowstone Lake as a Bald Eagle perched in a nearby tree, and a yellow-bellied marmot sunned itself on the rocks near the van. We had perfect weather today, and the stop at the lake felt especially scenic to everyone. At our next stop, Rachel and Wes identified several birds including Dark-eyed Juncos, warblers and chickadees.

Our next stop was LeHardy Rapids where almost immediately we spotted our target bird for the morning, Harlequin Duck. These elaborately patterned waterfowl gave us quite a show, at one-point scattering at the approach of a low-flying Bald Eagle. It's an unusual treat to have such close views of Harlequin Ducks, and our good fortune was far from over. After leaving LeHardy Rapids, we spotted a Great Blue Herons rookery containing at least eight birds. Duke marveled at seeing so many herons in such a tight space.

Yellowstone Falls was our next destination, timed to take advantage of the evening light. We took our time admiring the power and beauty of the iconic cascade, then crossed over Dunraven Pass and descended to the tower area, where Wes knew of a Peregrine Falcon nest. We could hear the young falcons calling from the nest



even before we could see it! This was the bird of the day for many, even considering the Harlequin Ducks. Amazingly, just 200 yards ahead we stumbled across a black bear with cubs grazing in a small clearing. Our return drive took us through the Little America section of the park and the Lamar Valley, where we marveled at the vast herds of bison and pronghorn spread out across the plains. Many of the female bison had calves, or “red dogs” as they are affectionately called. Continuing through Soda Butte Creek, we spotted a couple mountain goats on the cliffs, and we watched them through the scope for a few minutes before leaving the park. As if that weren’t enough, we found a family of foxes at their den under a dilapidated cabin in Cooke City. We delighted in watching the playful kits and their mother, then we checked into the Alpine Motel and reviewed the extensive species list after a lovely dinner.

Mon., Jun. 5 Slough Creek

Wes and Rachel woke early for some birding before breakfast. They saw the fox family again as well as a grizzly bear with two cubs! Their bird list included a Spotted Sandpiper and a Dusky Flycatcher, which they shared the group over breakfast at Cooke City Coffee. As we entered the park, Gabrielle spotted a nice Yellow Warbler, and a few minutes later we found a colony of Cliff Swallows on the side of Soda Butte, watching as they flew back and forth from the large rock structure. Along the creek we spotted Common Yellowthroat, Yellow Warbler, Black-billed Magpie and a number of other birds. Sharp-eyed Wes also spotted three more grizzlies on a patch of snow a long distance away.

Arriving at Slough Creek, we hiked through aspen and spruce groves, which were birdy, but our attention shifted to an unexpected sight a badger digging for rodents! Eventually the badger disappeared in the brush, and we continued birding, finding Downy Woodpecker, House Wren, Warbling Vireo, Mountain Chickadees, Say’s Phoebe, Hammond’s Flycatcher and Western Wood-Pewee. But the star of the show was a gorgeous male Calliope Hummingbird. As we admired him, suddenly the badger reappeared, crossing the trail, and posing for photos before scampering off! We ate lunch overlooking Slough Creek and observing some of the wetland birds and raptors found in the area. Afterwards, we went on a short hike to look for American Dipper, but the species remained elusive. Driving through the Lamar Valley, we stopped to watch some bison near a small pond and marveled at the unbelievable scenery. Meanwhile, Gordon, Gabrielle and Wes focused on photography as Duke and Rachel relaxed, soaking in the beauty. We figured that would likely be the last stop of the day, but of course we were wrong. In the Soda Butte Creek section of the park, we found a female black bear with a yearling, cinnamon cub that scampered into a tree as we stopped the van. Gordon snapped some beautiful photos of the



small cub snoozing on some branches, then we each shared our favorite part of the day as we returned to Cooke City. We once again ate at the Beartooth Café, and an evening thunderstorm led to an amazing sunset and a perfect cap to a great day in Yellowstone.

Tues., Jun. 6 Beartooth Highway

The group watched the foxes as we waited for our breakfast sandwiches, then we piled into the van and headed toward the Beartooth highway! The scenery was stunning, and we made stops along lakes, vistas and birding spots on the way up. We were fortunate to have good looks at American Pipit, Mountain Bluebird and the target bird of the day, Black Rosy-Finch! These alpine finches feed on seeds along the edges of melting snowfields, and we saw several throughout the day. Duke and Wes found pikas, with one nearly running over their feet! Other highlights included a quick glimpse of a Golden Eagle, a very nice look at a male Ruby-crowned Kinglet, some distant mountain goats, and some VERY up-close time with golden-mantled ground squirrels. But the high mountain scenery took the prize today, the combination of perfect weather and great company making for an incredible day.

Wed., Jun. 7 Slough Creek | Roosevelt Lodge | Tower Falls

Rachel again went birding at dawn, and we were jealous to hear that she had found a Western Tanager! Driving to the park, Wes assured everyone that we wouldn't be stopping much on our way to Slough Creek, but he broke that promise when we found grizzly bears on the mountainside in Lamar Valley. Stopping, we also noticed a distant coyote, and Duke got amazing video of a male pronghorn. Arriving at Slough Creek, we were greeted with a quick glimpse of a badger family. On our walk, we found another Calliope Hummingbird and had our first look at a Green-tailed Towhee! Wes and Duke and Gordon glimpsed a Hairy Woodpecker, and we saw other interesting passerines in a grove of trees and on a walk to Slough Creek itself.

After leaving Slough Creek, we stopped at a pond to look for beavers and were surprised to find a showy male Ruddy Duck. On our walk to Roosevelt Lodge, Wes heard the call of a Western Tanager, and soon we were all



appreciating this gorgeous yellow, orange and black bird that we decided was the bird of the day! Roosevelt Lodge had a long wait for lunch, so we decided to order instead. We saw a black bear on the way down from Tower Falls, and then kept driving to Floating Island Lake where we saw more Ruddy Ducks along with Northern Shovelers.

Weather started blowing in, so we decided to head back toward Cooke City, but the conditions in the Lamar Valley were so beautiful that we had to stop for some photos. The stormy skies made the mountain scenes that much more dramatic. Over dinner at the Beartooth Café, we reminisced at how amazing the trip had been. Not only did we have incredible wildlife and scenery, but we had an amazing group that was kind to each other and easy to chat with, and we could bond over a shared love for the natural world and the wonders of Yellowstone.

Thurs., Jun. 8 Cooke City | Lamar Valley | Departures

It's always hard to get moving on the last day of a trip, but the crisp, beautiful Cooke City morning provided some additional motivation. We gathered for a final breakfast together at Cooke City Coffee, then loaded into the van to drive through the northern section of the park. We spotted the resident fox mother on our way out of town, busy hunting to feed her eight hungry kits. In the Lamar Valley we were treated to a wolf sighting, and we watched as the grey-colored wolf walked along the river, then laid down in the sagebrush to rest near a bison herd. A quick stop at Slough Creek earned us another glance at the elusive Green-tailed Towhee, and we found several more coyotes.

Further down the road in the Phantom Lake area, we were fortunate to find two black bears at close range. It's amazing how much wildlife one can see in just a 45-minute drive through the park this time of year! A final treat was a pair of two elk bulls laying in a meadow along the North Entrance Road. After some photos, we packed up and drove through Paradise Valley on our way to the airport. It was an amazing trip full of once-in-a-lifetime wildlife sightings, unforgettable scenery and great company!

Photo Credits: Stunning Scenery (Gabrielle Metz-Virca - GM), Mountain Bluebird (Wes Larson - WL), Fox Kits (WL), Harlequin Duck (WL), Grizzly Bear (WL), Rodent NEEDS ID (GM), Sandhill Crane (GM), Killdeer (GM), Geyser Basin (GM), Bison (WL), Grizzlies near Lake Butte (WL), Fox Kits (WL), Peregrine Falcon (WL), River Views (GM), Harlequin Ducks (GM), Bison Field (GM), Badger (WL), Calliope Hummingbird (WL), Black Bear in dandelions (WL), Landscape (GM), Fox Kits (WL), Pika (WL), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (WL), Coyote (WL), Coyote & Raven (WL), Western Tanager (WL), Elk (WL)