Utah: Birding & National Parks | Sept. 16–24, 2023 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



Guide: Dave Mehlman, with participants: Ann, Karen, Lynette, Marcia, Marie, Maura, Mike, and Steve



Sat., Sept. 16 St. George | drive to Springdale, UT

Since almost everyone was in St. George at the start of the day and was interested in getting out and about, Dave fired up the tour van and did a round of pickups, starting with Ann and Steve at one hotel, Marcia and Marie at another, and Karen and Mike at a third. We then headed the short distance to Tonaquint Park and Nature Center, right in town, to look for species we were unlikely to encounter later in the tour. Almost immediately after arriving we saw a couple of one of these species: Abert's Towhee, restricted to very low elevation areas in the southwest. They were easily seen foraging on the ground under the shrubs, along with very cute White-tailed Antelope Squirrels and Rock Squirrels. An immature Cooper's Hawk also paid a visit, possibly with an eye on those squirrels! A short walk around the area and the pond yielded great views of a Green Heron in the pond, along with a lone Wood Duck, many Mallards, and lots of Red-eared Sliders (possibly introduced there). The woods yielded, with views varying from good to barely seen, Black Phoebe; Yellow,



Orange-crowned, Nashville, Wilson's, and Virginia's Warbler; Warbling Vireo; Greater Roadrunner; Song Sparrow; and a very hard to see Marsh Wren in the bulrushes. After this fun start to the day, we went over to the St. George Shuttle depot to pick up Lynnette and then to the Inn on the Cliff where we met Maura and all had lunch in the Cliffside Restaurant with its fabulous view over old St. George. After lunch, we began the full tour by driving scenic highway Utah 9 toward Zion National Park and stopped at the historic Mormon Pioneer town of Grafton. Enjoying the beautiful, sunny afternoon, we admired the well-maintained log buildings, thinking about the tough life the earliest settlers endured. However, despite the lovely weather and abundance of fruiting trees, we found few birds except for a Northern Flicker, American Robin, and Say's Phoebe. After this, we continued to our home for the first 2 nights: the La Quinta in Springdale, and checked into our rooms. Since we had arrived early, Dave organized everyone and we boarded the Springdale town shuttle at the nearby bus stop and traveled to Zion's Visitor Center to get oriented, arriving in the Park across the pedestrian access bridge over the Virgin River. We then got an overview of the park and the plan for the following day and some in the group checked out the offerings at the park store. We then returned to La Quinta via the town shuttle (having to wait a few buses due to the crowds), took a brief break, and then drove the very short distance to a patio dinner at the Bit & Spur. That concluded our first day and off we went to our rooms in anticipation of our visit to Zion the next day.

Sun., Sept. 17 Zion National Park

We started the day with breakfast in the La Quinta's dining area, then Dave went to nearby Sol Foods to pick up our pre-ordered lunches. We then met at the van, distributed the lunches, and loaded up for our day in Zion! We headed into the park on the van; oddly enough, there was no entrance fee today, so we proceeded through the gates and directly to the Visitor Center parking area (private vehicles are not allowed to drive through most of Zion). After arriving, we walked directly to the park shuttle bus loading area and got on the bus to ride all the way up-canyon to the final stop, Temple of Sinawava. After getting off there, we joined the massive crowds and hiked the paved Riverside Walk to the end, where the trail to the Narrows begins (and everyone else had to plunge into the Virgin River!). It was still shady and cool in the canyon, but we enjoyed the walk and the marvelous hanging gardens on the sides of the rock walls with a very few late-blooming Crimson Monkeyflowers, Cardinal Flowers, and columbines to liven up the scenery. Wildlife was few and far between this



early, with only Mule Deer and Wild Turkey spotted from the bus. Fortunately, an American Dipper flew downriver while we watched the scene at the Narrows, which at least some in the group saw.

We got back on the bus to go down-canyon, getting off at the Big Bend stop to conduct a brief condor vigil. Spending about half an hour there, we saw no condors, but greatly enjoyed talking to a volunteer, Pete, who was tracking condors with a receiver and antenna. He was very chatty and filled us in on a lot of current info and status of the Arizona-Utah condor population—thanks Pete! We did pick up Turkey Vulture and Steller's Jay there, while also seeing the Angel's Landing hikers far above us on a steep cliff. After this, we got back on the bus and headed down-canyon a few stops to The Grotto, where we had lunch at the picnic tables under the shade of the giant cottonwoods. After lunch, the group split up, with some exploring more of Zion on their own and a few brave souls hiking with Dave on the Middle Emerald Pool trail across the Virgin River from The Grotto. Although a nice hike, at this point in the afternoon the trail was on the sunny side of the canyon so it was pretty hot; the water from the springs there provided a welcome cooling relief from the sun as we arrived at the pool. Unfortunately, very few birds were found here, too; only Steller's and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays and a calling Canyon Wren.

After this, we made plans to meet at the end of the afternoon at the Visitor Center for a van ride back, though some made their way back to the La Quinta on their own using the park and town shuttles. A few in the group stopped off at the Natural History Museum on the way down to learn more about the park and its inhabitants, both human and wild. Returning to the visitor center, we all met up and got back in the van and drove back to the La Quinta for a brief rest. We then drove the short distance to the Bit & Spur for our second dinner on the patio there. While waiting for our table to be ready, a Black-chinned Hummingbird perched very cooperatively on some plants over the entrance while an impressive Mule Deer buck munched on the lawn— "dinner with wildlife anyone?" We then returned to the La Quinta for our final night in Springdale and to prepare for a busy day to come.

Mon., Sept. 18Zion National Park, East Entrance | Jackson Flat
Reservoir | Lafevre Overlook | Condor Viewing Site
Navajo Bridge | Grand Canyon National Park

Following breakfast at the La Quinta, we loaded all our gear into the van and then went over to Sol Foods for a coffee stop. Fully caffeinated, we then drove into Zion, paid our fees at the entrance, and then wound our way up to the Zion-Mt. Carmel Tunnel, which we passed through to get to the east side of the Park. Admiring the scenery along the way, we made a few stops, not finding much besides Red-breasted Nuthatch, Mountain



Chickadee, and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay. Alas, no Bighorn Sheep were present on this journey, so we made our way to Kanab, with a top for gas at Mt. Carmel Junction. Since we had time, we continued through town to the Jackson Flat Reservoir just south of Kanab, which consistently yields some good birds for this tour. Stopping at the main parking area for the reservoir, Dave got out the scope and between that and the many bins working, we began to spot birds on the water. Among the hordes of American Coots were a few Mallards, Ruddy Ducks, and Pied-billed and Western Grebes. Sharp eyes picked out a small group of White-faced Ibis resting in some grasses (along with a bizarre domestic goose!) and overhead we saw many swallows (Barn, Bank, and Cliff) flying along with a Northern Harrier, Cooper's and Red-tailed Hawk, and (as we departed) an Osprey. With that nice collection of species, we returned to town for a tasty lunch at the Wild Thyme Café.

After lunch we continued south into Arizona (and a different time zone!) on our way to the Grand Canyon's North Rim. Our first stop, as we climbed up onto the Kaibab Plateau, was the Lafevre Overlook off highway US 89A. This overlook has a superb view back to the north of the Grand Staircase, including back to Zion (where we had come from) and Bryce Canyon (to which we were eventually headed). A Hairy Woodpecker feeding in one of the many old, burned pinyon pines added to the great views. We then drove on to the east, descending the other side of the Kaibab into the incredible House Rock Valley with the amazing Vermilion Cliffs stretched out in front of us. A roadside photo stop to admire the views proved very fortunate as we stumbled across a Wilson's Warbler and the only Juniper Titmouse of the tour at the site.

Continuing into the valley, we turned north on a gravel road to visit the Condor Viewing Site, which is opposite the area of the Vermilion Cliffs which are used to release condors. Despite using the scope and all our bins at the site, all we could find on the Cliffs was whitewash with no actual condors. Sharp eyes, however, could pick out the release pens at the top. Although the landscape was fabulous, the only birds we could find there were a few Western Kingbirds, Say's Phoebes, Common Ravens, and a lone Chipping Sparrow. After having had our fill at the Viewing Site, we continued back to the main highway and continued east to Navajo Bridge (actually, there are two bridges, the old one and the new one) and pulled into the parking lot of the Interpretive Center on the west side of the bridge at the edge of Marble Canyon. What ensued was the definite highlight of the tour, if not a truly memorable birding experience for all of us. Dave got out of the van to open the doors and immediately spotted not one, but two California Condors soaring right over the parking lot! As the cry of "condor!" went out, our group set a Guiness Book record for fastest unloading of a van ever recorded as everyone piled out to see these magnificent birds at close range. We then walked out on the old bridge and noticed two more condors



roosting on the beams of the new bridge next door. But we were still not done as while we were on the bridge, two more condors appeared in the sky and glided in to land on the bridges—a grand total of six California Condors all at once! A few of them even sat on the outer bridge supports so that you could lean over the edge of the bridge and look straight down at them (as they periodically cocked an eye up as if to determine who was the weird one in this place). Since the condors are all tagged, we were able to determine the identities of five of them (R8, 54, 8Y, -Y, and L4). All in all, a truly memorable and epic sighting, made even more so by the realization that not so many decades ago, there were exactly zero condors free-flying in North America anywhere.

After that experience, we drove back up onto the Kaibab Plateau to Jacob Lake, where we had an enjoyable dinner at the Jacob Lake Inn. Finishing dinner at about dusk, we loaded into the van and proceeded to drive the approximately one hour to the North Rim, passing through the Kaibab National Forest into Grand Canyon National Park. Unfortunately, it seemed like every single Mule Deer on the Kaibab Plateau (and there are A LOT of Mule Deer on the Kaibab!) was out and about at night right next to the roadway, but we made it through without incident to the Grand Canyon Lodge on the North Rim. We checked in and everyone received a set of room cards and a small map to their cabin. However, when we got to our cabins, we discovered to our dismay that the cabins required keys and not cards! This totally inexplicable mistake on the Lodge's part meant that we went back to the check-in desk, traded the useless cards for useful keys, and then we all finally got to get into our cabins for a well-earned night's rest.

Tues., Sept. 19 Grand Canyon National Park: North Rim

We had no "official" tour activities until a bit later this morning in order to allow all those who wanted a bit more time to either sleep in (after our late night the previous day) or to take in the sunrise over the Grand Canyon. For those opting for the latter, it was indeed truly amazing and a few folks out on the Lodge's back patio even saw a Peregrine Falcon flyby to top it off! We all met a bit after 8:00am by the Lodge dining room for breakfast, but once informed that there was a 45-minute wait, we went to the nearby Saloon for coffee and breakfast burritos. After breakfast, we took an extended walk around the North Rim visitor center and parking area to see what might be out and about. Although there was limited activity in the chilly morning, we were able to spot Red-breasted Nuthatch, Dark-eyed Junco (here of the Gray-headed form), a flyby Sharp-shinned Hawk, Hammond's Flycatcher, and an unexpected Swainson's Thrush. Finishing the walk, we went into the Deli in the Pines to get some lunch supplies, then loaded up in the van for a day exploring the North Rim.



Our first stop was Point Imperial, one of the many dramatic overlooks on the North Rim. A short walk while admiring the views led us to find the first of many Uinta Chipmunks, along with Red-tailed and Sharp-shinned Hawk, American Kestrel, Clark's Nutcracker, and Pine Siskin. We then proceeded to the end of the "scenic drive" at Cape Royal where we walked out to Angel's Window, again admiring the staggering views. We had a great picnic lunch under the pinyons at the picnic area here, which was topped off by a small mixed-species flock including Bushtits, Rub-crowned Kinglets, and a Townsend's Warbler. Starting our return trip, we first visited Walhalla Overlook and hiked the short nearby trail to the Walhalla Glades Pueblo. These pueblo ruins are one of many small summer occupation sites, used from 1050-1150; most fascinatingly, it is thought that these people wintered in the canyon far below. During this short hike, we had great views of a small group of Pygmy Nuthatches foraging in the Ponderosa Pines, their favorite tree.

Our final stop of the day was at Roosevelt Point, though this area had obviously burned off during a previous wildfire and was pretty treeless. Again, the views were fabulous although a strong breeze had sprung up which made the birding difficult. Nevertheless, we did see a flock of birds hanging about, of which we were only able to identify some Western Bluebirds. Returning to the North Rim Lodge, we had a short break, then Dave treated all those interested to a drink of their choice in the Saloon and we then retired to the patio for the sunset. After the sunset, many in the group watched most of the special evening program, a collection of short films from a Navajo filmmaker, then we headed to the dining room for our final Grand Canyon meal. Our waiter, Guy, was great and served us all well, especially since most of us ordered "The Trout!" Then, off to bed in our snug little cabins, this time with everyone prepared for the low temperatures with extra blankets and/or the heat turned on.

Wed., Sept. 20

Grand Canyon National Park: North Rim | Jacob Lake Inn | Red Canyon | Bryce Canyon City Ponds | Bryce Canyon National Park

We started the day with breakfast in the Lodge dining room, arriving early enough this time to get in with no wait. We then retrieved all our gear from our cabins and loaded up the van yet again and headed north. Our first stop was at Jacob Lake Inn, where Dave wanted to spend a bit of time birding around the water feature. No sooner did we get out of the van than several Red Crossbills flew over and perched in some nearby pine trees. These unusual birds are always highlight, so we were not disappointed. We walked over to the water feature,



finding that the fountain was not running, though there was still some water in the base. As might be expected, water always attracts birds so a bit of waiting by the fountain turned up more Red Crossbills, Pine Siskin, Cassin's Finch, Chipping Sparrow, House Wren, and a MacGillivray's Warbler. Continuing our journey north and east, we stopped for gas in Fredonia, re-entered Utah (and promptly lost an hour!), picked up our pre-ordered lunches in Kanab, and then stopped at the Dixie National Forest's Red Canyon Visitor Center for a picnic lunch. During lunch, we were seated at the same picnic table as a local artist who was painting a picture for the upcoming Escalante Canyons Art Festival, which provided a nice opportunity for discussion.

Continuing our drive eastward through the spectacular Red Canyon, we climbed up to the top of the Paunsagunt Plateau and soon arrived at Bryce Canyon City, where we pulled into the Ruby's Inn complex to see if any birds were present at the ponds in the back. Although activity was limited, we did find the usual complement of American Coots, along with a Ruddy Duck or two, Mallards, and a single R ed-breasted Merganser. Leaving there, we entered Bryce Canyon National Park, finding the entrance line to be surprisingly short, and stopped at the very crowded Visitor Center for a brief orientation. We then went to the Bryce Canyon Lodge, checked in, then drove to our nearby rooms in the Sunrise Motel building. Everyone then had a bit of free time to explore this lovely place (and, in some cases, enjoy the parade of nuthatch species right outside our balconies!) before we met back at the Lodge for our bird list and a nice dinner. Then, off to our rooms to enjoy our first night at Bryce Canyon.

Thurs., Sept. 21 Bryce Canyon National Park | Pine Lake

Today was our full day to explore Bryce Canyon, so we started with buffet breakfast at the Lodge, then returned to the Sunrise Motel area and soon set off for a morning hike while temperatures were low. Heading over to Sunrise Point, we all walked down into the Bryce Amphitheater on the Queen's Garden trail. Since this hike is all downhill on the way in and all uphill on the way back (and, oddly, it is much steeper coming back up than it is going down!), everyone took this hike at their own pace, turning around at various times—the most adventurous made it all the way to the second tunnel. Birds were few and far between, though a Townsend's Solitaire flew by, and Red-breasted and Pygmy Nuthatches, Red Crossbill, and Turkey Vulture were spotted.

Returning to the van, we loaded up and went to the General Store to shop for lunch material (where we had a close encounter with a Mountain Chickadee!) and then departed to explore the rest of Bryce Canyon. We drove all the way out on the Southern Scenic Drive to Rainbow Point, where we admired the dramatic views and



walked the Bristlecone Trail loop. In addition to learning about its namesake pine species, we found a few birds including Clark's Nutcracker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Townsend's Solitaire, and Northern Flicker, as well as the very common Golden-mantled Ground-Squirrel. Starting our way back North on the Scenic Drive, we stopped at Natural Bridge to admire this picturesque formation then again at Farview Point for a picnic lunch. After lunch, we walked the short section of Rim Trail to Piracy Point, having amazing views of an adult Golden Eagle being harassed by a Red-tailed Hawk along the way! Also present were Steller's Jays, a Cooper's Hawk, and our friends the Red-breasted Nuthatches.

Continuing south, the plan was to visit Bryce, Inspiration, and Paria points, but the entrance road was closed due to overcrowding, so we skipped there and went to Fairyland Canyon. Among the great views there, we had the super good luck of having a Prairie Falcon zip overhead to provide a new species for the bird list. Since it was still early in the afternoon, we then headed north to Pine Lake in the Dixie National Forest to see what we could find. At that point, a good breeze had come up, so there was not a lot of bird activity. However, with the scope, we were able to pick out a pair of American Wigeon, Ruddy Duck, and a few Mallards among the Coots. Driving back slowly along the dam, we found a few Spotted Sandpipers hanging out along the shore, the only ones of the tour. On our way back to Bryce Canyon, we spotted a Mountain Bluebird and an American Kestrel on the roadside fences, which added to a decent bird list for the day. We then returned to our rooms for a brief rest, then gathered in the Lodge to do our bird list and enjoy a second excellent dinner there. After that, back to our rooms to enjoy another comfortable evening.

Fri., Sept. 22 Bryce Canyon National Park | Escalante-Grand Staircase Calf Creek Falls | Boulder Mountain | Torrey

We started the day today a bit differently. We had scheduled a later breakfast to allow all interested to get out to the Rim in time for sunrise. Everyone in the group did so and we admired the breathtaking site of the sun slowly rising in the east behind far off plateaus and gradually lighting up the lovely amphitheater—definitely something not to be missed at Bryce. We then returned to the Lodge for breakfast, then to our rooms for final packing. Once fully loaded, we headed off on the final leg of our tour to Capitol Reef. Descending the plateau, our first stop was the Mossy Cave trailhead where we had an enjoyable, but remarkably birdless, hike along the Tropic Ditch to the Cave and back. We then made our way under the towering Powell Point to the town of Escalante, where we stopped briefly at the Escalante Interagency Visitor Center to learn more about the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Again, nothing but a House Finch to be seen here. Next stop was Escalante Outfitters in town where we picked up pre-ordered lunches and many bought some of their very nice t-shirts. We then continued to our lunch stop for the day: the Calf Creek Falls Campground and picnic area,



operated by the Bureau of Land Management. After lunch, we watched the feeders maintained by the campground host and walked around the campground. Again, birding continued very slow, though we had great looks at Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay, Lesser Goldfinch, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet and watched the Hopi Chipmunks scamper around on the ground. Continuing, we drove into the small town of Boulder and stopped at the Boulder Mountain Lodge, which has a pond in the back. A brief walk around the edge produced a Pied-billed Grebe, the usual mallards and coots, and a Black-billed Magpie. Leaving Boulder and starting our ascent of Boulder Mountain in the Dixie National Forest, we stopped by the side of the road by a large, dead Ponderosa Pine. Dave had received info from another NJ guide that this was THE tree to check out, so we did so! Sure enough, after a bit of waiting, our main desired bird appeared: a Lewis's Woodpecker! As we had great looks at this one bird, we soon noticed a whole lot of birds in and around this one pine tree, including another Lewis's, Western Bluebird, Cassin's Finch, Pine Siskin, and Pygmy Nuthatch. Meanwhile, nearby and overhead were Red-tailed Hawk, Turkey Vulture, Northern (Red-shafted) Flicker, and a Clark's Nuthatch—one of the best roadside stops of the whole tour!

Making our way up and over Boulder Mountain, we stopped briefly at the Homestead Overlook to admire the grand views to the south and east, looking at the Waterpocket Fold and the Henry Mountains in the distance. Despite the elevation, a few Red-tailed Hawks were also around taking in the views (and possibly looking for marmots?). We then descended the mountain and soon arrived in Torrey, where we went straight to the Capitol Reef Resort, checked in, and took a brief break. We then reconvened in the hotel lobby to go over plans for the following day and do our daily checklist, then piled in the van for an excellent dinner at Hunt & Gather Restaurant in town—the peach ice cream and sherbet was particularly relished by many. Then we returned to the hotel for another night's rest.

Sat., Sept. 23 Torrey | Capitol Reef National Park

We gathered at the Pioneer Kitchen at the Resort for breakfast as it opened, enjoying the rising sun as it came up over the cliffs. After getting all our gear, we loaded the van and headed into town to get our pre-ordered lunches, spotting a small flock of Pinyon Jays flying near the road on the way. Our lunches at the Chuckwagon were ready to go, so after a bit of final snack-shopping, off we went for a day in Capitol Reef National Park.

Our first stop was the Park visitor center to check in and to orient ourselves to what was available. As luck would have it, it was National Public Lands Day so there was no admission fee! Our first stop in the park was at the Campground, where we took a short hike on the Fremont River Trail. This trail, which runs along the River and is next to some of the old, historic fruit orchards, is lovely, but for whatever reason, there were absolutely no birds present. On our return, we did note a small herd of Mule Deer in the apple orchards munching away on downed



fruit—looked very tasty! Our next stop was at Capitol Gorge, where we drove down a dirt road to the trailhead at the upper end of a canyon. This canyon was the old road through the Waterpocket Fold and the trail (and old road!) literally are in the bed of the wash. We spent about an hour and a half here, hiking down into the gorge and back. At one point on the trail, we encountered some faint petroglyphs and at another point there are an extensive set of names of the original pioneers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries carved into the rocks. One set of names, in fact, had a date that was almost 112 years ago to the day from when we were there! Again, despite the fascinating scenery and the canyon, there were no birds except for a Common Raven or two.

We then returned to the Fruita area of the park and grabbed a nice picnic table under the shade of tall cottonwoods and enjoyed our sandwiches, chips, and cold drinks. We then walked over to the nearby Gifford House and admired the pies for sale, then drove to the Petroglyph Panel to look at the very impressive series of petroglyphs pecked into the vertical rock walls by members of the Fremont Culture who had inhabited the valley long before settlement by outsiders. At the end of the afternoon, we drove down to the lower end of Grand Wash and made a short hike up and back into this impressive wash, fascinated by the holes in the sandstone walls created by water moving stones around—many of the stones were s till present in their holes, some far above our heads. We concluded the day by heading back to the Resort, having a brief rest, then meeting to go over our small bird list for the day and discuss departure plans, followed by a walk across the highway to our final dinner at the Rim Rock Restaurant.

Sun., Sept. 24 Torrey | Drive to St. George

We started the day with a final breakfast at the Pioneer Kitchen, then carefully loaded all bags in the van (first out, last in!) and then departed for the drive back to St. George. This drive is quite scenic as it goes up and over mountains and then down various valleys, until we arrived back on I-15 a bit north of Cedar City. Oddly, we picked up several new bird species for the tour during the drive, including European Starlings in various towns, Red-winged Blackbird, and a small flock of Sandhill Cranes in a field by the highway. Due to our expected arrival time in St. George and the various departure times of everyone, we made a quick stop on the way for some to pick up sandwiches at a Subway outside Parowan. Arriving in St. George, we did the "reverse St. George drop-off maneuver" by letting Lynette and Maura off at the St. George Shuttle, Marcia and Marie at the airport, Steve at his car where he had left it at a downtown hotel, and then Karen and Mike at their hotel for the night, also in downtown. The few of us remaining had lunch there, then Dave took Ann to her hotel for the night, re-



organized his gear, and dropped off the van at the airport, thus sending everyone on their merry way and concluding a wonderful tour.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Marie Young - MY), Bryce Canyon (Maura Hamill - MH), Red Crossbill & Lesser Goldfinch (MH), Uinta Chipmunk (MH), California Condor (MH), Zion Canyon (David Mehlman - DM), Zion West Temple (DM), Zion Group (DM), Rock Squirrel (MH), Grand Staircase (DM), Navajo Bridge (DM), Wilson's Warbler (MH), California Condor (MH), Condor Veiwing Site Sign (MH), North Rim Scenic (DM), North Rim Sunrise (DM), Painting the view (MY), Bryce Canyon (MH), Natural Bridge in Bryce Canyon (DM), Boulder Mountain Scenic (DM), Capitol Reef National Park (MH), Steller's Jay (MH), Capitol Gorge (DM), White-lined Sphinx (DM), Gorge Detail (MH), sunset over Torrey, Utah (MH)