

Yellowstone in the Fall | Trip Report

September 15 - 22, 2019 | Written by Pat Lueders



With Guides Pat Lueders & Rick Weiman, with participants Connie, Gary, Julia, Sheila, Tim, Charlotte, Barb, Gary, Nancy, Mary, Larry, Diane.





Sunday, Sept. 15 Yellowstone National Park | Grand Teton Mountains

Our journey to Yellowstone National Park, Montana, and Idaho had a great beginning with our visit to the Jackson Hole & Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center in Jackson, Wyoming. Located at the National Elk Refuge, we birded around the surrounding wetland and grassland habitat, quickly finding a Wilson's Warbler, and Blue & Green-winged Teal. American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Redhead, and Common Merganser were swimming in Flat Creek. After a picnic lunch, we studied the blackbirds perched on top of the cattails, finding numerous Yellow-headed Blackbirds mixed in with Red-winged Blackbirds. Our first Black-billed Magpie, Brewer's Blackbirds, and Common Ravens fed on the grass, and numerous Barn Swallows circled the marsh. One Tree Swallow sat for good scope looks—what a great start to our trip!

We stopped on our drive to Yellowstone at scenic outlooks to marvel at the majesty of the Grand Teton mountain range, the youngest mountain range in the World that is 40 miles long and 15 miles wide. Grand Teton at 13,770 feet looms 7,000 feet above Jackson Hole, and the Tetons are still rising!

Our stop at Oxbow Bend, where the Snake River winds past the Teton Mountains, provided us with scope looks at five American White Pelicans. Lewis Falls provided our first of many spectacular photo opportunities, and we spotted a Broad-winged Hawk in a kettle with four Red-tailed Hawks. The next stop, West Thumb Geyser Basin, was our first visit to one of Yellowstone Park's unique thermal features, the various colors created by thermophiles, heat-loving microorganisms. Bordering West Thumb, we had our first view of the "heart of Yellowstone", Yellowstone Lake, 20 miles long, 14 miles wide, and 390 feet deep, the largest high elevation lake in North America.

We arrived at Canyon Lodge traveling through Hayden Valley, one of the premier wildlife-watching areas in Yellowstone, spotting numerous Bison grazing in the grasses. After dinner, our first checklist gathering was outside on the patio and was a perfect ending to our first day in Wyoming.



Monday, Sept. 16 Hayden Valley | LeHardy's Rapids | Yellowstone Lake Hotel

We left our lodge early this morning to spend some time birding at LeHardy's Rapids, and we were amply rewarded with some great sightings. We started down the trail and immediately found a group of five Harlequin Ducks sitting on the rocks. Not in striking breeding plumage, they were still a duck not seen very often and our only sighting of the trip. Quietly we moved down the boardwalk and heard the distinctive vocalization of the American Dipper. An individual was poised on a rock in the rapids for a great photo opportunity, a life and target bird for many of the group! Common Mergansers, a Mallard family, and three Canada Geese were also feeding in the rapids of the Yellowstone River. As we moved along the trail, we spotted two Dark-eyed Juncos, the expected pink-sided subspecies, low under a bush, Brown Creepers moving up the pines, and a Cassin's Finch. What a superb beginning to our day!

After a delicious breakfast at the historical Yellowstone Lake Hotel, we saw the Common Loon feeding in the lake that was present upon our arrival. The drive at Gull Point produced our first and only sighting of Mule Deer,



two standing on the edge of the woods. The pond held a pair of active Belted Kingfishers and provided a quick look at a flying Clark's Nutcracker.

Ongoing construction of the new Fishing Bridge didn't slow our progress, and we walked the trail at Pelican Valley to Indian Pond. On the pond, we had good views of Lesser Scaup, Barrow's Goldeneye, Ruddy Duck and Common Mergansers. At our next stop at Lake Butte for a scenic picnic lunch, we viewed for miles the extensive fire damage from 1988 when 36%, or 800,000 acres of the park was burnt.



Our special treat for the week was a program on Gray Wolves by Brad Bulin, a Senior Naturalist with Yellowstone Forever. We met at the Canyon Village Visitor Educational Center and enjoyed learning about the history and behavior of the wolves, and the Yellowstone ecosystem. Brad was a skilled and interesting speaker who definitely enjoyed sharing his knowledge with us.

Tuesday, Sept. 17 Lamar Valley | Slough Creek | Floating Island Lake

Our plan for today was shaped by information we received from yesterday's speaker, Brad Bulin. He shared with us the best way to view the Gray Wolf pack that was known to be hunting in Lamar Valley. We left after an early breakfast and drove directly to Lamar Valley, slowed down for a few minutes by a herd of Bison in the road. We arrived at the valley and spotted a large group of vehicles and people viewing the wolf pack feeding on a Bison on the hillside. Additionally, other wolves were spotted in the area resulting in a traffic jam of vehicles and tourists. Wow, a rare experience that we would never forget!



Eventually, steady rain forced us to leave, and we drove to Slough Creek. A large flock of Mountain Bluebirds, most of them juveniles, were found in a field, and we stopped for pictures. Golden Eagles also nest in this area, and we found a nest from this season on the cliff. Miraculously, an adult Golden Eagle was sighted soaring directly overhead. What good luck! We moved on to Floating Island Lake adding Pied-billed Grebe, Eared Grebe, and a dark morph Red-tailed Hawk to our sightings.



As we drove to Tower Falls for lunch, our good luck continued as we had another traffic jam watching a Black Bear near the road feeding on grasses and plants. After lunch



and a short walk to Tower Falls, we visited Calcite Canyon for a spectacular view of the Yellowstone River canyon and close looks at two Red-breasted Nuthatches. We returned to the village with snow showers enhancing our view of the Yellowstone caldera below Dunraven Pass.

After a break to rest, we drove a short distance to the Upper and Lower Falls and Artist's Point, the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. The breathtaking and spectacular views spread out before us as we viewed the canyon from both sides of the falls. What an ending to a truly magical day in Yellowstone!

Wednesday, Sept.18 Norris Geyser Basin | Gibbon Falls | Madison Campground

After breakfast, we left Canyon Village to travel west through Yellowstone Park to Idaho. Our first stop was Norris Geyser Basin, named after the second superintendent of the park, and home to Steamboat Geyser, at 300 feet the tallest active geyser in the world. We discovered when we arrived that Steamboat had erupted earlier that morning, and it was still erupting higher than usual. Because of the early morning low temperatures, the journey to view Steamboat on the boardwalk was very slippery but worth the challenge. At Norris Basin, the magma is closer to the surface of the earth than at any other place in the park. Upon our arrival, a Townsend's Solitaire could be heard calling and was eventually seen.



The visit to Gibbon Falls was rewarded not only with spectacular views of the falls but also with good looks across the valley at two Clark's Nutcrackers feeding on the cliffs. We continued on to Madison Campground for a short walk and to bird the woods surrounding the area. Chipping and White-crowned Sparrows mingled with more Dark-eyed Juncos and Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Nashville and Yellow-rumped Warblers were feeding in the pines with Mountain Chickadees.

After a delicious lunch at Ernie's in West Yellowstone, Montana, we entered our third state of the day, Idaho, to visit Henrys Lake. Brewer's and White-crowned Sparrows were on the road and we had scope looks at thousands of waterfowl including Western and Eared Grebes, Bufflehead, American Coot, and Ruddy Duck. A herd of Pronghorn were spotted amongst cows in a nearby field.



On our drive to Angler's Lodge, we crossed the Snake River and spotted a female Moose and juvenile feeding in the river, quickly stopping to get great photos of them. We arrived at Angler's Lodge in time to enjoy sunset from their outside deck and many of the group dined on local rainbow trout for a perfect ending to another wonderful day.

Thursday, Sept. 19 Henrys Lake | Red Rocks National Wildlife Refuge | Henrys Lake

We started the morning on the west side of Henrys Lake getting good scope looks at Red-necked Grebe, more Western Grebes, American Crows, and a Solitary Sandpiper along the shore. We traveled the lake getting close views of an American White Pelican, Black-billed Magpies, and a pair of Sandhill Cranes. We selected a sagebrush field on the scenic drive to Red Rocks National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) to try for sparrows, and it yielded a nice variety including Song, White-crowned, and two Lincoln's— Surprise! Two Green-tailed Towhees, life birds for many, were found with them in the low shrubs.

At the state line sign on the Idaho/Montana border, two Canada Jays flew across the road. Another



Pronghorn herd grazed in the fields as we approached Upper Red Rock Lake, critical to the survival of Trumpeter Swans. We stopped at the Upper Campground to scope the thousands of waterfowl in the lake finding Cinnamon Teal, Trumpeter Swans, Gadwall, American Widgeon, more grebes, and many American Coot and Ruddy Ducks. A Lesser Yellowlegs fed along the shore near us. During our picnic lunch we spotted the first woodpecker of the trip, a Downy, and a late Western Tanager enjoying the berries. Raptors sighted included a Golden and Bald Eagles, Northern Harrier, Broad-winged Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, and American Kestrel. In an open field, a seldom seen American Badger quickly ran after seeing us. We stopped on our return trip at the state line and saw our second woodpecker, a Hairy. An afternoon visit to the east side of Henrys Lake added a Forester's Tern and a Ferruginous Hawk that flew in, landed, then showed its distinctive under wing pattern when it flew. As we neared Angler's Lodge, we crossed the Snake River again, and a female moose was feeding, giving us our third Moose for the trip!

Friday, Sept. 20 Harriman State Park | Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center

We traveled to Harriman State Park this morning, stopping along the lake to view at least four vocalizing Marsh Wrens. We scanned the Snake River area from under a picnic shelter to shield us from the rain, finding our first Killdeer, an Osprey, American White Pelicans, Trumpeter Swans, and a perched Bald Eagle. As we left, a Red-necked Grebe still sporting a red neck was spotted in the lake.

We spent the remainder of the rainy morning at the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone. The well maintained and expansive display areas provide a home for wolves, bears, otters, hawks, and owls that cannot be released in the wild. The delightful gift store was well received!

We had lunch at Ernie's Deli, which was followed by a beautiful drive in the valley where we spotted a herd of Rocky Mountain Elk lying in the grass. A visit to Firehole Canyon along the Firehole River featured two dramatic waterfalls. The Firehole Lake Drive provided an opportunity to visit smaller yet beautiful thermal features; while we were there, the Pink Cone Geyser erupted! Our arrival at Old Faithful was timed perfectly, and we witnessed our first eruption of this reliable geyser. We enjoyed a delicious dinner at the Snow Lodge and rested well in our comfortable cabins.





Saturday, Sept. 21 Lone Star Geyser Trail | Grand Prismatic Spring | Old Faithful

Our last full day at Yellowstone was memorable. After another delicious buffet breakfast, we drove to Lone Star Geyser Trail, spotting a coyote in a field before the entrance to the main drive. While watching the coyote, a large flock of Brewer's Blackbirds flew into the trees, a Yellow-headed Blackbird in with the flock. Also, a Common Redpoll was on top of a small pine tree near them, seen by a few of the group.

Lone Star Geyser Trail is a scenic trail bordered by pine and evergreen trees near Kepler Cascades, another photographic waterfall we had briefly visited the previous day. Snow had fallen giving the trail a winter wonderland appearance. After a group picture, we slowly walked the trail bordering the Firehole River. Birding started slowly, seeing only a few Yellow-rumped Warblers, until we stopped at an opening overlooking the river. Across the river, a Great Gray Owl was perched only a few feet above the ground hunting intently for prey. What wonderful luck! We quietly watched the owl in amazement as it sat, seeming to ignore our presence, moving a few times but still out in the open. The owl was voted the "bird of the trip" and was a target species for most of the group!

With the excitement of the owl still lingering among us, we moved on to the Grand Prismatic Spring, the largest hot spring in the U.S. and third largest in the world, named for its striking coloration. Because of the colder temperatures, steam surrounded the thermal features as we walked the boardwalk, but the enormous size and bright colors were still apparent.

Lunch was enjoyed in the historical Old Faithful Inn, built in 1904 with logs and stones, and is considered the largest log structure in the world. We visited the adjacent Visitor Education Center featuring exhibits on hydrothermal features, volcanic geology, and scientific investigations of these phenomena. From this area we could watch another eruption of Old Faithful, erupting close to every 90 minutes daily.

During our final checklist before our farewell dinner at the Inn, we reminisced about the week and the experiences we had shared, choosing the Gray Wolf pack as the #1 experience and the Great Gray Owl as the #1 bird.

Sunday, Sept. 22 Return drive to Jackson, Wyoming | Departures

We departed Old Faithful to return to Jackson, crossing the Continental Divide numerous times, and spotted a few more Elk lurking in the woods. A routine rest stop at Lakeview Picnic Area on Jackson Lake proved to be fortuitous. As we waited in the parking area along the shore, a Red-naped Sapsucker was heard, and two were spotted, low in a bush and then on a tree for all to see, the last new species for our very successful trip. A Common Loon and a Red-necked Grebe were feeding in the lake.



Some of us departed for home, a few extended their stay, but we all agreed that we had spent a rewarding week with a delightful group of new and old friends in one of the most beautiful and unique areas of our world!

Photo Credits:

Great Gray Owl, Gary Stone (GS); Birding near the Continental Divide, Nancy VanCott (NVC); Lesser Yellowlegs, Barb Stone (BS); Osprey, GS; American Robin, GS; Birding, NVC; American Dipper, GS; Center, Pat Lueders (PL); Clark's Nutcracker, PL; Least Chipmunk, PL; American Dipper, PL; Elk, PL; Sandhill Crane, PL; Group at Lake Butte, PL; Black Bear, PL; Grand Canyon, PL; Grand Canyon sign, PL; Gray Wolf Pack, PL; Bison, PL; Eared Grebe, PL; Norris Geysers, PL; Moose, PL; White-crowned Sparrow, PL; State Line, PL; Western Tanager, PL; Pronghorn, PL; Awaiting Old Faithful, PL; American Red Squirrel, PL; Pink Cone Geyser, PL; Bison, PL; Group picture, PL.