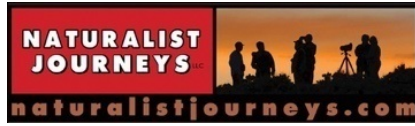
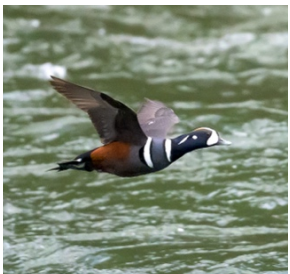
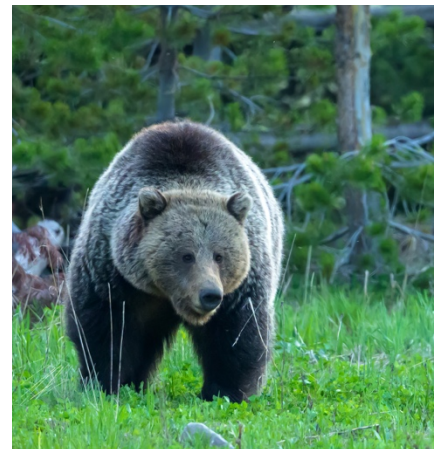


# Yellowstone Birds, Bears & Wildlife | June 7 - 14, 2024 | Trip Report | by Wes Larson

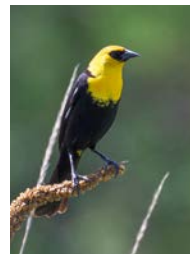


With guides Wes Larson and Hugh Simmons along with participants Gwen, John, Susan, Holly, Gaurav, Sarah, Timothy, and Nancy.



## **Fri., Jun. 7      Travel from Bozeman to Gardiner Via Paradise Valley**

Our group gathered at the Day's Inn in Bozeman and then we set out for Paradise Valley and Gardiner. There is currently some construction in the valley, but the day was so perfect and beautiful that a little slowdown didn't bother anyone. Along the way we spotted a number of birds including Bald Eagles, Ospreys, Eastern Kingbirds, and lots of Red-winged Blackbirds. A stop at a pond near Emigrant led to some other great birds including up-close views of Yellow-headed Blackbirds and a quick glimpse of a Trumpeter Swan. We continued down the



highway towards Gardiner, enjoying views of Pronghorn and Elk in a setting so picturesque it could be a painting. We took a quick jaunt to the meadows near the Roosevelt Arch where we scanned for Elk with calves and didn't manage to find any, but then as we were checking into the hotel some of our group spotted a cow Elk with a calf just a couple dozen yards away. We settled into our wonderful accommodations at the Absaroka Lodge, and then met up for a lively dinner at the always-fun Iron Horse Restaurant, where we went over our first species list.

## **Sat., Jun. 8      Wildlife Safari with Wolf Tracker and Mammoth Terraces**

What a day! We woke up VERY early to head out into the park with Michelle from Yellowstone Wolf Tracker. After finding a few quick Black Bears near the road, including a female with a cub, we headed to the Slough Creek area of the park to try to get a look at the Junction Butte Wolf pack, and we lucked out! A few of the wolves were still near the den site, and we got great looks at both a grey and black individual from the Junction Butte wolf pack. A Grizzly Bear also briefly appeared on the hillside above the wolves and then we had an amazing sighting of a Coyote with pups in the valley! It was one of those days where wherever you looked there was new and impressive wildlife spectacle to take in. We also managed to see active Golden Eagle and Great-horned Owl nests, and some in our group got a brief sighting of a Calliope Hummingbird.

We decided to respond to some news we heard over the radio of a Grizzly on a kill, and while we didn't find the grizzly, the best surprise of the day was waiting for us in the Antelope Creek area. A Black Bear was grazing near her two rambunctious and adorable cubs, and the two cubs continued wrestling and playing near their mom while we watched the scene for about half an hour. It was prime cub viewing as they were out in the open, and we also got to watch them climb to the very top of a roughly 60-foot tree. It was an amazing sighting and one that left us all excited and energized. On the way back to Mammoth, we saw a few more bird species including Red-tailed Hawks, Ruddy Ducks and a brief sighting of some Sandhill Cranes. We parted ways with Michelle in Mammoth and our group enjoyed lunch at the Terrace Grill in Mammoth and then had some time to explore the geothermal features in the area, where some of our group spotted a large Bull Snake near the hot springs terraces.

Afterwards, we headed back to Gardiner for some time to relax in the heat of the day before meeting up for a wonderful dinner at the Wonderland Café and to compile a lively species list. We also got to celebrate Nancy on her 63<sup>rd</sup> Birthday, which was a treat for all of us.





**Sun., Jun. 9**

## **Geothermal Day at Grand Prismatic Spring, Old Faithful and Black Sand Basin**

After enjoying a buffet breakfast in Gardiner, we headed down the Grand Loop Road in the park and went to a few different geyser basins. It didn't take us long to see two courting Black Bears near Mammoth, and one of them practically brushed the front bumper of our stopped car in the road! Our first stop of the day was for some birding, however, and we spent about half an hour at Swan Lake where we saw Wilson's Phalaropes, Northern Harriers, Trumpeter Swans, a Northern Pintail, Sandhill Cranes, and a ton of other birds. We then moved down to the Midway Geyser basin and the Grand Prismatic Spring overlook on the Fairy Falls trail. While we got rained on and learned that the mosquitoes are definitely out for the season, it was well worth the beautiful sight of the most famous hot spring in the park.

Next, we drove to the Upper Geyser Basin where the most well-known geothermal feature of the park is located, Old Faithful. The geyser had just erupted when we got there so the group spent time looking at some of the other springs and geysers and a family of American Dippers that were swimming and feeding in the Firehole River. We gathered back up to watch Old Faithful and to our delight, there was a pair of large bull Bison that watched with us, and we got a once-in-a-lifetime view of Old Faithful erupting with large bull Bison in the foreground. Next, we had a great picnic lunch on the deck of the Old Faithful Inn, and then a really fun stop at the Black Sand geyser basin, a favorite area for a lot of the group.

We then drove all the way back to Swan Lake for a bit more birding and had great looks at a Swainson's Hawk as well as some soaring Red-tails. When we got back to Gardiner, a few in our group went on a mini-mission to try to find some of the reptile life that lives near Gardiner, and while we mostly struck out with reptiles, we did see Lazuli Buntings, Cedar Waxwings and Western Tanagers all in the same tree, as well as a nearby Rock Wren and a Green-tailed Towhee! Another dinner at Wonderland Café rounded out the stormy night.



## **Mon., Jun. 10                      Exploring the Wildlife Hotspots on the Park's Eastern and Northern Roads**

What an incredible day. We had been in the park less than 15 minutes when we saw our first Black Bear, right on the side of the road. We all felt that it might be a good sign for the rest of the day and we certainly were not disappointed. Our next stop was in the Hayden Valley where we spotted the Wapiti pack of wolves, far in the end of the valley, playing with a newborn pup in an open meadow. While the wolves were far away, it was a really beautiful scene, and we all were thrilled to have seen another of the park's packs of wolves. As we drove on, Wes mentioned that the Mud Volcano area might be good for Grizzly Bear activity, and then as we passed, he noticed one of the bear management vehicles in the parking lot, but no real commotion. We decided to turn around and we were really glad that we did, because a subadult Grizzly Bear was laying on the pathway near the parking lot, and as we watched it get up and start to forage, we were surprised to see it chase down, kill and eat a Ground Squirrel! It was by far the closest we had been to a Grizzly on this trip, so we were all buzzing as we got back in the vehicles. Wes had heard that there was likely more Grizzly activity down at Lake Butte, so we made good time in that direction, and sure enough when we arrived there was a female Grizzly Bear grazing with her cub of the year. It was an especially charismatic little cub, and even though it was cold, we watched the little family of bears until our hands were shaking. A bit of coffee and breakfast warmed us back up at Fishing Bridge, and then we headed to Bridge Bay to look for owls. While there were no owls, we did find a particularly regal bull Elk with large velvet antlers, and a few in our group got some nice shots as he laid down in a nearby clearing.

Our next goal was to see the Harlequin Ducks at LeHardys Rapids, and boy did we ever see them. A total of 10 of the ducks lined up on logs and rocks in front of us, and we got to watch as they swam through the water and flew around the area. For a lot of our group, it seemed like the day couldn't get any better at that point, but there were some more surprises ahead. First, though, we stopped at both the Lower Falls Overlook and Artist Point to get nice views of Yellowstone Falls, and we enjoyed lunch and some time to shop at Canyon Village. We then drove up and over Dunraven Pass and down into the Tower area, and after passing a few more Black Bears, we pulled up to a spot near Calcite Curve that Wes and Hugh said might be good for Bighorn Sheep, and we quickly found some thanks to the sharp eyes of this group.

Moving on down toward Cooke City, we finally got our first looks at the almost unbelievably gorgeous Lamar Valley and the massive herds of Bison spread out in the bright green grass. Soaring raptors, Magpies and Ravens





were everywhere you looked, and a quick stop in the valley produced looks at some sleeping wolves from the Mollies pack, as well as a Grizzly with two cubs high on the mountain. And then not much further down the road we got a great roadside sighting of a hunting Coyote!

As we drove alongside Soda Butte, the guides had the group stop and check the mountain peaks for Mountain Goats, and just like all of the other wildlife we had seen that day, the goats seemed to appear on cue. As an extra fun bonus, a very inquisitive fox showed up in our pullout as we were watching the goats. A bit further down the road we saw a second fox in the road, and then we finally left Yellowstone after a long and very productive day and settled into our accommodations in beautiful and cozy Cooke City.

## **Tues., Jun. 11                      Full Day in the Lamar Valley and Slough Creek**

We woke up to the clear skies and beautiful sunlit mountain peaks of Cooke City. After a filling breakfast at the Bistro, we drove toward the park. A lot of our group had a big wish to see a Moose and we had been talking about them for days, so when we rounded a corner and a calf Moose was standing in a meadow, people got VERY happy. It was a perfect way to start our day.

The Lamar Valley brought some great wildlife as always, and we saw a distant Grizzly Bear as well as some close nesting Cliff Swallows. We then headed down to Slough Creek and after passing lots of Bison, Pronghorn and waterfowl, we parked at the Slough Creek trailhead and started on a birding walk. It was a really fun and really successful walk, and some highlights included Calliope Hummingbirds, Williamson’s Sapsuckers, MacGillivray’s Warblers, and Yellow-bellied Marmots.

We had so much fun birding that we lost track of time and by the time we got back to the vans it was time for lunch, so after quick stops to look at the Golden Eagle nestlings we headed for the Roosevelt Lodge. When we arrived, there was a bit of a wait but both Hugh and Wes heard a Western Tanager calling so we started looking for the bird (as it was a big target for John) and we were shocked when it swooped into a tree right above our heads and then flew over to a nearby roof! We all got great looks and were thrilled to talk about how lucky we had been over lunch. Afterwards, Wes thought we should do a quick detour to look for bears toward Tower, and sure enough we found a solitary Black Bear and then a Black Bear with a cub within a few hundred yards. After leaving the area we found the Sandhill Cranes we had looked for earlier and watched in amazement as the cranes dodged an irate pair of Red-winged Blackbirds and then proceeded to eat some of the blackbirds’ newly hatched young. It was yet another incredible day that still held a couple of surprises back in Cooke City.



After a delicious dinner at the Beartooth Café where we celebrated Gurav’s birthday, Wes took a little drive on his own to look at the nearby Soda Butte campground. The campground was the site of a fatal bear attack in 2010 that Wes was fascinated by, and when he drove into the empty campground to see the site where the attack had happened, a Moose was standing in the site. He drove up and the Moose ran out and looked panicked, and then a Grizzly Bear charged out of the woods and chased the Moose right past the car and Wes! The bear wasn’t able to catch the Moose, but started grazing in a nearby field, so Wes went and rounded up Gurav and Sarah and then Hugh got most everyone else, and they all arrived in time to get some nice photos of the bear in the late evening light.

### **Wed., Jun. 12                      Traversing the Beartooth Highway**

Today was our Beartooth Pass day! After an early breakfast at the Cooke City Café, we headed up toward the mountains. While we picked up a number of new birds today, the main focus of the day was enjoying the beautiful scenery of the surrounding Beartooth and Absaroka mountains. Everywhere you look on the pass and during the drive up is breathtaking, and the drive was a nice break from the northern range of Yellowstone, where we spend most of our time on this leg of the trip. We managed to pick up a few new birds on the trip as well, including the always charming Black Rosy-Finch, American Pipits, and our whole group finally got a good look at Clark’s Nutcrackers.

After the drive, we returned to Cooke City and enjoyed a second dinner at the Bistro, as well as a rousing discussion about near-death experiences that some of our group has had in the past. After dinner we decided to go for a short drive and look for Moose, as we have had great luck with the biggest member of the deer family around Cooke City and Silver Gate, and we managed to find a number of Moose browsing in the willows on our evening drive.

### **Thurs., Jun. 13                      Final Day in the Northern Range of Yellowstone**

Because it was getting quite hot, we wanted to take advantage of the cooler morning and evening temperatures today, so Hugh and Wes made the plan for a 5:00 am departure. It wasn’t long before we saw a roadside Black Bear near the northeast entrance to Yellowstone, and then we had some great Bison viewing along the Lamar Valley, with calves and adults both crossing the road and hanging out right on the shoulder. We slowly made our way to Slough Creek with a few stops in between, and as we arrived in Slough, we noticed that there was a lot of





commotion in the parking areas. The wolves were active at their den site, and we watched through scopes as several adults played with the new pups. It was some of the best wolf activity we had had so far, and it made for a really nice morning of wolf watching. As we watched the den, we got great looks at some familiar birds and a few new species as well, including Northern Shovelers and Barrow's Goldeneyes. We then headed back to Cooke City for breakfast, but stopped in Silver Gate as there were two Moose running through the willows and across the road, and this group was full of moose enthusiasts!

After a late breakfast, we went back into the park for a short walk near Hitching Post. The walk took us through some small rolling hills and we had some decent birding and picked up an American Kestrel, a Harlequin Duck, a Gadwall, and a number of different songbirds. It was quite hot, however, so we scrapped the idea for a second hike and instead drove to a shaded campground for a picnic lunch and a bit of birding near Soda Butte creek. Then we made the return to Cooke City and had a few hours to rest before a lovely final dinner at Beartooth Café.

Following dinner, we made another sojourn into Yellowstone and the evening light on Lamar Valley was incredible. Seemingly endless herds of Bison unfolded across the bright green grass dotted with yellow dandelions, and the scene seemed so heavenly that we could barely believe it. As we explored the valley one last time, we got a nice view of a Coyote that started yipping and howling not far away, amazing up-close Bison views, and a really nice view of a Golden Eagle nest where one of the adults was feeding the nestlings. It was a perfect last night and some up-close fox and Black Bear encounters were the cherry on top.

## **Fri., Jun. 14                      Saying Goodbye to Yellowstone and Return to Bozeman**

One of the best things about this trip is that you get one last drive through the park on your way home, and we woke up early to eat a delicious breakfast at the Log Cabin Café in Silver Gate before heading through Yellowstone for a final drive. We of course saw a number of Black Bears along the way, plus absolutely huge herds of Bison and a final distant Grizzly Bear on the hill. A lot of the animals we had seen throughout the week were present, and we had nice views of Pronghorn, Elk, Sandhill Cranes and a number of other charismatic Yellowstone regulars as we drove and stopped. A quick stop at Blacktail ponds produced a number of great birds including Green-winged Teals, Gadwalls, Wilson's Phalaropes, Tree Swallows and others. And then we enjoyed the beautiful and open drive through stunning Paradise Valley and back over Livingston Pass to Bozeman. This was a wonderful group and every single person added something beautiful and complementary to the group, so the goodbyes and promises to meet up in the future were genuine and heartfelt. We had amazing success and a



bit of great luck as we traveled one of the most storied and ecologically intact parks in the world, and being able to do it with such an incredible group of travelers was truly something special. Until next time!

On this trip we saw 15 Grizzly Bears and 22 Black Bears, and the Moose and Harlequin Ducks were voted the mammal and bird of the trip.

*Photos: Group (Hugh Simmons - HS), Great Horned Owl (HS), Grizzly Bear (HS), MacGillivray's Warbler (HS), Pronghorn (HS), Western Tanager (HS), Harlequin Duck (HS), View from Gardiner (HS), Yellow-headed Blackbird (HS), Mammoth Scenic (Sarah Redding - SR), Calliope Hummingbird (Wes Larson - WL), Black Sand Basin (HS), Osprey (Gaurav Kapoor - GK), Northern Harrier (HS), Old Faithful (HS), Grizzly at mud volcano (WL), Harlequin Ducks (WL), Bull Elk (WL), Group LeHardy Rapids (HS), Black Bear Cub (HS), Coyote (HS), Birding (GK), Sandhill Cranes (HS), Grizzly Bear (HS), Warbling Vireo (HS), Yellow-bellied Marmot (Sue Cossins - SC), Clark's Nutcracker (HS), Moose (HS), Bison Calf (HS), Black Rosy-Finch (HS), Bison (HS), Red-tailed Hawk (HS), Sticky Geranium (HS)*