

Yellowstone Birds, Bears & Wildlife

May 30 – June 6, 2024 | Trip Report | by Wes Larson



With guides Wes Larson and Jessie Hallstrom along with participants Rob, Alli, Shannon, Matthew, Lillian, Joanne, Allan, and Janell.

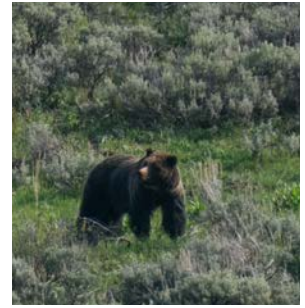


Thurs., May 30 Travel from Bozeman to Gardiner Via Paradise Valley

After picking up most of our group in Bozeman, we took a quick trip to a local park to do some birding while we waited for a delayed flight. We saw some great local birds including Sandhill Cranes, Yellow Warblers and an Osprey collecting nesting material. After picking up Shannon, Kirk and Lilly, we headed down Paradise Valley where a stop at a pond in Emigrant was very productive. Not only did we have an amazing view of a Trumpeter Swan, but also some very photogenic Yellow-headed Blackbirds and some other great songbirds and waterfowl. After arriving in the Gardiner area, we marveled at the plentiful roadside ungulates like Elk and Pronghorn and ate a delicious dinner at the Wonderland Café while we got to know each other and talk excitedly about the week ahead.

Fri., May 31 Wildlife Safari with Wolf Tracker and Mammoth Terraces

We woke up very early to meet Michelle from Yellowstone Wolf Tracker and headed out to our first stop at Slough Creek and an active Gray Wolf den! Not only were two of the adults visible, but we also got to see some brand-new wolf pups that had recently left the den! It was an amazing sighting and one that was made better by a Grizzly Bear high on the mountainside. We also had some great waterfowl right in front of us and a nice look at



a nearby Muskrat. We moved on down the road to an active Badger den in the Lamar Valley and arrived just in time to see the female Badger delivering a freshly caught Ground Squirrel to her hungry kits below. This is a great time of the year for young animals and the whole park feels alive with new life and possibility, a fact that was drilled home with our next sighting, a very visible Grizzly Bear sow and her two cubs digging for roots in the sagebrush. It was a wonderful cap to our first trip to the Lamar Valley, and the valley certainly lived up to its reputation as the Serengeti of North America.

On the drive home we continued to listen to Michelle as she went over the history and geology of the park and we lucked out with a nice Black Bear sighting at Floating Island Lake on the way back to Mammoth. After a short walk around the Mammoth thermal terraces, we headed back to Gardiner for a relatively open afternoon and a delicious dinner at the always-fun Iron Horse bar and restaurant.

Sat., Jun. 1 Geothermal Day at Grand Prismatic Spring and Old Faithful

After a more leisurely start and a nice breakfast at Tumbleweed, we set off into the park and a full day of looking at the geothermal formations in some of the geyser basins, but not without some birding and wildlife first! We stopped at Swan Lake to see the namesake swans, which wowed us with a nice flyover and some great vocalizations. Then, further down the road in the Roaring Mountain area, we saw a large Grizzly Bear digging for vegetation in the valley. Not a bad way to start the day.

Our next stop was the Midway Geyser Basin and Grand Prismatic Spring, and due to the warm sunny conditions, we had excellent viewing opportunities and got to see the beautiful colors of the spring and the amazing bacterial mats.

Next, we drove to the Upper Geyser Basin and arrived in perfect time to see Old Faithful erupt. As the most famous feature in the park, it doesn't disappoint, and afterward we happily ate some lunch on the deck of the gorgeous Old Faithful Inn. A walk around the boardwalk and all the way to Morning Glory pool followed, and then after marveling at all of the beautiful and interesting geothermal features for a few hours, we got back into the vehicles and enjoyed a peaceful drive back through the park and into Gardiner. A second amazing dinner at Wonderland Café followed on a nice warm evening in Gardiner.



Sun., Jun. 2 Exploring the Wildlife Hotspots on the Park's Eastern and Northern Roads

Once again, we got off to an early start and bid farewell to Gardiner and the north entrance to the park as we drove off toward new horizons. Our first stop was at LeHardys Rapids where we saw the resident Harlequin Ducks swimming in the fast-moving water and perched on nearby rocks. Next, we continued to drive down to the east entrance road where Wes assured us that Grizzly Bear activity is typically high this time of year, and it was indeed! We got there just in time to see a female Grizzly that was a bit aggravated with the parked cars and charged out in front of our vehicle to try to cross the road. It was a bit pulse pounding and after she disappeared into the brush, we drove to Sedge Bay where we enjoyed a picnic breakfast on the dramatic shores of Yellowstone Lake.

We returned to LeHardys Rapids to spend a bit more time with the Harlequin Ducks, and then continued on to do a bit of birding in the Hayden valley where we saw Barrow's Goldeneye, Buffleheads, and a number of other birds. Then we made a stop at the Lower Falls Overlook for a majestic view of the iconic lower falls of the Yellowstone. We enjoyed a long lunch at Canyon Village before driving up and over Dunraven Pass and encountering a female Black Bear with some playful cubs in a tree right by the Tower gift shop! The rest of our drive to Cooke City proved to be eventful as well and we saw several more Grizzlies, as well as another Black Bear, a fox and plenty of Bison and other ungulates. We certainly saw some of the more charismatic and beautiful wildlife that calls Yellowstone home today, as well as a lot of the park, and everyone was tired and happy as we pulled into Cooke City and settled into our comfortable and quaint mountain town accommodations.

Mon., Jun. 3 Full Day in the Lamar Valley and Slough Creek

We dedicated today to exploring the northern range of the park, so after a breakfast at the Bistro and coffee at Cooke City Coffee, we headed into the park and drove to Slough Creek (after checking out a distant wolf pack on the way). At Slough Creek we stopped at a wetland and did some birding, and we managed to find some Western Meadowlarks, which for a few in our group was a new bird. Next, we drove down the road where we watched a Great Horned Owl nest and an owlet, and were happy to see a cinnamon Black Bear come strolling into a nearby meadow to eat some clover. Slough Creek is great for both mammals and birds, so we decided to hike up the trailhead a bit and do some birding. A few hundred feet up the trail we found a tiny Calliope



Hummingbird, and then got some other great birds including an Olive-sided Flycatcher and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet.

Our next stop was Calcite Curve in the Tower area, where we checked on a Bighorn Sheep that we were curious about from a few days before, as a few in our group thought it was injured. They were relieved to see it alive and well in the nearby area, and after scouting for more Bighorn, we headed back toward Lamar Valley, stopping for a Black Bear on the way that was rubbing on a pine tree. In the Lamar Valley we saw a brand-new baby Pronghorn that had likely been born within the immediately preceding hours. A Coyote and a distant, yet endearing, mother Mountain Goat and kid rounded out our day in the park. After a wonderful dinner at the Beartooth Café we were lucky to spot a pair of courting Grizzlies just north of town for the second night in a row, and then were lulled to sleep by a particularly impressive late spring thunderstorm.

Tues., Jun. 4 Slough Creek, the Hayden Valley, and Mud Volcano

While originally the plan today was to drive the Beartooth pass, the storm from the previous night dumped a lot of snow on the road and it was closed today! Instead, we opted to explore the park and hope for an open pass tomorrow. The weekend traffic had completely faded and Yellowstone was much quieter today than our previous days. We quickly saw a few Black Bears near the east entrance of the park and then we retraced some of our steps to check out some fixtures on the landscape like the wolf den, owl nest and eagle nest at Slough Creek. Having explored the northern part of Yellowstone the day before, we then opted to drive up over Dunraven pass and head for the Hayden valley and LeHardys rapids once again. They didn't disappoint and we were able to watch a subadult Grizzly at a relatively close distance as it browsed in the Mud Volcano area, and then the Harlequin Ducks once again at LeHardys rapids. We then drove back to the northern range of Yellowstone and had an especially beautiful and green drive through the Lamar valley and into Cooke City. Some of our group ran into the local Moose in Cooke City once again, and then following dinner we went and saw it laying under a tree near some homes. It was another great day with a really fun group in one of the most beautiful places in the country.

Wed., Jun. 5 The Beartooth Highway, Footbridge Trail and more Slough Creek

Due to the snow on the Beartooth pass, the pass stayed closed today but we decided to drive as far as we could anyway, and that ended up being pretty far! We almost made it to the top and had nice views from Top of the World. Along the way we saw a lot of American Pipits, Clark's Nutcrackers, American Dippers and even a solitary



Mountain Bluebird. It was a gorgeous day and the vast valleys along the drive were particularly stunning. Even though we didn't have the chance to make it to the top of the pass, everyone was thrilled with the sections that we saw, and it gave us the ability to spend even more time in our favorite part of Yellowstone later in the day.

After returning back to Cooke City, we took a quick break at the hotel and then headed into the park. Along the way we saw a Fox, Badgers, and a ton of Bison and Pronghorn, as always. We took a quick walk at the footbridge trail where we saw another fox and had a very up-close encounter with a large Bison bull that walked the same trail that we were on. Luckily, it was the bison approaching us, and not the other way around, but we made sure to give him a large enough berth and then quickly walk past when he left the trail. After seeing some Badger kits at Hitching Post, we headed to Slough Creek and did one more short walk down to the campground. The day was getting hot and the wildlife activity lessened, so we made the decision to head back to Cooke City, but not before watching a nearby Bison herd and finding one with perched Cowbirds on its back (a special request from Janell). We had some great photographers in this trip and all of us are excited to go through the photos and see what everyone has captured.

The drive back home through Lamar Valley was particularly radiant and green and I think all of us were realizing that we were lucky to spend such a nice late spring afternoon in a truly indescribably beautiful place. A great dinner at the Beartooth Café rounded out the night, coupled with some ice cream and a quick expedition to (unsuccessfully) look for the local pair of mating Grizzlies.

Thurs., Jun. 6 Saying Goodbye to Yellowstone and Return to Bozeman

We woke up to absolutely stunning weather in Cooke City and we had a really pleasant breakfast at the Log Cabin Café in Silver Gate on our way out. Cooke City had really started to grow on most of this group and it was a bit bittersweet driving out of the area one last time. After entering the park, it didn't take long to find our first wildlife and we enjoyed a nice long look at a Red Fox in a parking lot while it searched for food near a huge bull Bison. The bison started approaching the group, so it cut our fox-watching abruptly short, but we were lucky to spend so long with the curious little canid. Next, we were surprised by a particularly beautiful bull Moose in one of the fields near Pebble Creek, and the early morning light was catching its velvet antlers as we drove by.

Lamar Valley is getting greener by the day and it almost felt like every Bison in the park was in the expansive valley this morning. We had some nice bison crossings right next to the vehicle that gave us up close looks at calves and their mothers. We then drove to Slough Creek, where we got our best look yet at one of the Junction Butte wolves, as well as a nice look at a Badger scurrying around below. Plus, we saw Sandhill Cranes once again,



meaning that we saw these charismatic birds every day of the trip! Wes caught a quick glimpse of a Grizzly Bear high on the mountain, which meant we also had bear sightings every day of the trip! As we drove back through the park, we saw Ruddy Ducks, Coyotes, Bald Eagles, Red-tailed Hawks, and a lot of the other wildlife that we had come to love in our short week here.

Our drive through the always-beautiful Paradise Valley met some long construction slow-downs, which was stressful for Wes, but there are much worse places to be stuck in traffic. A speedy return to Bozeman got everyone to their flights on time, however, and we all said an emotional goodbye at the terminal entrance.

This was an outstanding group with wonderful personalities, stories and hearts. Jessie and I both had so much fun traveling with all of you and it was our honor to show you Yellowstone and to get to experience it again through your eyes. Groups like this truly set the bar so high and we will remember this adventure for years to come.

We really hope to see you again on future Naturalist Journeys trips and thanks again for making this one so fun and memorable.

On this trip we saw 15 Grizzly Bears and 10 Black Bears. The Grizzly Bear and Golden Eagle were deemed the mammal and bird of the trip.

Group (Wes Larson - WL), Mountain Bluebird (WL), Ruddy Duck (WL), Bison and calf (Matthew Gooding - MG), Scenic (Alli Schuch - AS), Trumpeter Swan (WL), Grizzly Bear (WL), Badger (WL), Black Bear cubs (WL), Lower Falls (Alli Schuch), Harlequin Duck (WL), Great Horned Owllet (WL), Cinnamon Black Bear (WL), Calliope Hummingbird (WL), Coyote (AS), Group (Joanne Brown - JB), Scenic (AS), New friends (JB), Pronghorn (WL), Bison with Red Fox (WL), Moose (AS), Scenic (MG)