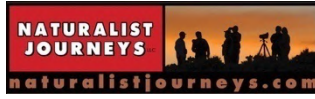


# Yellowstone In the Fall | Sept. 21-27, 2024 Trip Report | by Hugh Simmons



**Guides: Bryan, Hugh, and Emily.**

**Our participants were Brenda, Donna, Erica, Jane, Nan, Cole, Telli, Edward, Mandy, Glen, Mary Anne.**



## **Sat., Sept. 21                      Bozeman, MT | Gallatin River Valley | Angler's Lodge, Island Park, UT**

Our group left Bozeman, Montana on a brisk, sunny morning heading south on Rt. 191, the Gallatin Gateway Highway. We had a three-hour drive to Island Park, Utah and our first hotel, the Angler's Lodge. The road followed the Gallatin River for much of the way, winding through rolling fields and spectacular mountain vistas.

Along the way we saw Turkey Vultures, a Red-tailed Hawk, American Crows and a nice, perched Bald Eagle. A few in the first car saw a Swainson's Hawk. As we approached the lodge we took a pull-off next to the Henry's Fork River. Common Mergansers floated by, an Osprey soared and dove over the river, and a couple of Mountain Bluebirds perched on phone wires. We checked into the hotel at about 5 o'clock and had a meet-and-



greet happy hour at 5:30 followed by dinner at 6:30. Dinner was excellent with many of us getting the delicious rainbow trout entree.

## **Sun., Sept. 22                      Henry's Lake | Hebgen Lake | Earthquake Lake**

We awoke today to a clear, chilly morning and a cloudless sky. During breakfast, through the dining room's picture windows, we could see a Bald Eagle perched across the river and a Ring-billed Gull flew past. After breakfast we picked up our picnic lunches and headed north to our first stop at Henry's Lake State Park in search of waterfowl.

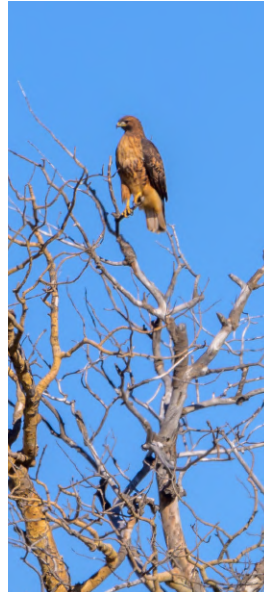
Henry's Lake is four miles long and two miles wide but only 2-9 feet deep, making it a magnet for waterfowl. We arrived at the lakeside campground to find a few hundred American Coots, White Pelicans, Canvasbacks, Ring-necked Ducks, Barrows Goldeneyes, and Red-necked, Eared and Western Grebes. Around the park were White Crowned Sparrows, Steller's Jays, Pine Siskins, a Song Sparrow, Mountain Bluebirds and our first of many Mountain Chickadees. A flock of about eight American Pipits flew over. At the pond, Bryan spotted a Lincoln's Sparrow in the willows along with a calling Marsh Wren that we never quite picked out. Behind us, Sawtell Peak loomed with its radar dome.

We next traveled around the north side of Henry's Lake and stopped at the North Parking Area turnout where Nan spotted a White-crowned Sparrow that stayed around for photos. Also, a Song Sparrow and a pair of Wilson's Warblers gave us brief looks. On the lake were scores of Buffleheads and Barrow's Goldeneyes and a great showing of grebes: Pied-billed, Horned, Eared, Red-necked and Western. A very dark Red-tailed Hawk perched in a bare tree a hundred yards behind us.

Next, we continued north to Quake Lake and Hebgen Lake. At the pull-off at Hebgen Lake we got good looks at a couple of Clark's Nutcrackers, and fifteen Red Crossbills flew through. On the lake were Ring-necked Ducks, Common Mergansers, Red-necked Grebes, Eared Grebes and Common Loons. We then back-tracked to the Quake Lake Visitors Center which, although closed, provided a nice spot for lunch overlooking the huge landslide that completely blocked the Madison River during a 7.1 Richter earthquake in 1959.

After lunch we returned to Henry's Lake where we continued on our circumnavigation, first stopping at the Bill Frome Memorial Park. Here, a Ring-billed Gull and a California Gull sat together on the dock, providing a good comparison. Walking back to the vehicles, in a particularly fun and unexpected find, Edward spotted a Little





Brown Bat roosting under the eaves of an information kiosk. While enjoying the special treat of finding the Little Brown Bat, a vibrant, blue Variable Darner dragonfly landed in a nearby bush.

Our final stop at Henry's Lake was the Henry's Lake Boat Launch. There, we found two Trumpeter Swans and a White-faced Ibis as well as Redheads, American Wigeons, Ruddy Ducks, more Barrow's Goldeneyes, and massive rafts of American Coots. A male and a female Northern Harrier swooped around on the far side of the inlet. We were surprised when they proceeded to, cooperatively, chase and catch a songbird over the lake. American Pipits were also flying around and a couple landed on the edge of the lake providing decent scope views. On the way out of the boat launch road, a Black-billed Magpie perched on a fence for us.

We returned to Angler's Lodge for our checklist and another excellent dinner.

## **Mon., Sept. 23                      Harriman State Park | Firehole Falls | Norris Geyser Basin | Three Bear Lodge, West Yellowstone**

We arose early this morning for a 6:30am departure for the nearby Harriman State Park. Mist rose from Henry's Fork River in the 30°F morning. The silhouettes of hundreds of ducks could just be made out along the river. As the sun rose and the mist cleared, we could see large numbers of American Wigeons, Gadwalls, Mallards, Canada Geese and Double-crested Cormorants. There were also Northern Pintails, Ring-necked Ducks, Common Mergansers, Trumpeter Swans and an American White Pelican. Several Red-winged Blackbirds called from Willow Island in the river.

Walking a trail along the river, Bryan found some Lincoln's Sparrows in the bushes next to the river and Edward spotted a Mink running along the shoreline.

On our way out of the park we stopped at Silver Lake where there was a family of two adult and two juvenile Trumpeter Swans, a raft of Double-crested Cormorants, American Wigeons, American White Pelicans, a female Ring-necked Duck and a Pied-billed Grebe. A River Otter swam close to the shore allowing the photographers in the group to get some shots. A Belted Kingfisher could be heard and we found a pair of them perched in a dead snag on the opposite side of the road from the lake.



Leaving the park, we stopped at Osborne Bridge where a side road leads to a narrow bridge across the river. There were Red-winged Blackbirds on a small island and Common Mergansers in the river. But the real highlight of this stop was when Donna spotted a lone female elk standing in the middle of the river, framed with the Teton Range in the distant background. A beautiful photo opportunity.

We returned to the lodge for a much-needed breakfast before heading to Yellowstone National Park through the West Entrance. Our first stop was Firehole Falls Canyon, where the road winds through black, 800-foot high, volcanic walls. We stopped at the beautiful Firehole Falls and, while there, Bryan spotted an American Dipper on the rocks at the base of the falls. Our first Dipper! We left the canyon and turned north on the Grand Loop Road, following the Gibbon River to Gibbon Falls where Emily spotted a Common Raven's nest above the falls, on the opposite cliff wall. After viewing the falls, we had lunch at the Gibbon Falls picnic area overlooking the river. We then continued north to the Norris Geyser Basin, but along the way made a stop to look at a couple of American Bison, one of which had a Brewer's Blackbird riding on its back. A special bonus while there were two Sandhill Cranes out in the grassy field. At the Norris Geyser Basin, some of us walked the Porcelain Basin loop trail, taking in the other-worldly landscape of this hot and acidic thermal area. Others walked a longer loop that included Steamboat Geyser. It was time to head back to West Yellowstone to check into the Three Bear Lodge. Following the Madison River on the West Entrance Road we stopped to take a look at four female elk lounging in the grasses near the river.

We checked into the hotel and then met for dinner at the Three Bear restaurant. After dinner we went through our species checklist in a conference room at the hotel.

## **Tues., Sept. 24                      Grand Prismatic | Old Faithful | Black Sands Geyser Basin | Wolf and Grizzly Discovery Center**

This morning, we headed back into the park from West Yellowstone and turned south. Our first stop was the magnificent Grand Prismatic hot spring. Unfortunately, the cold air temperature coupled with the steam from the giant hot spring created a thick fog, obscuring our view. We decided to save the overlook for later and instead walked the boardwalk. The fog was so thick it was hard to see much, even from ground level, but the eerie scene was still beautiful to behold. It was then on to Old Faithful. When we arrived, the famous geyser was due to erupt in about a half hour, so we took our places on the benches and waited for the show. The





eruption was beautiful against the clear blue sky. After Old Faithful settled down, we all took an hour to explore the Upper Geyser Basin, the historic Old Faithful Lodge, and the Visitors Center. Leaving Old Faithful, we stopped in for a walk around the Black Sands Geyser Basin, which some have described as a mini-Grand Prismatic. Colorful sheets of thermophilic algae, bacteria and archaea flowed from the blue and turquoise hot springs. We were now getting hungry so we stopped into the Whiskey Flats picnic area to have our lunch. A couple of opportunistic Canada Jays that were working the picnic tables for scraps left behind gave us good views and photo ops.

After lunch we returned to the Grand Prismatic Overlook trail. The half-mile trail rose one hundred feet in elevation, taking us to a viewpoint where we could look down on the Grand Prismatic Hot Spring. The decision to do this later in the day paid off as we were greeted by clear views of the three-hundred-foot-wide hot spring. Tones of deep blue in the middle fused into shades of turquoise and green toward the edges, all surrounded by rivulets of yellow and orange thermophilic organisms. Just spectacular!

Still having some time in the afternoon, we headed back into West Yellowstone to visit the Wolf and Grizzly Discovery Center. Here, rescued wolves, grizzlies, and raptors provided up-close views that would not otherwise be possible. The staff and signage provided information on the behavior, life history and conservation of these magnificent animals.

Tonight, we took a short walk through the town of West Yellowstone to have dinner at Wild West Pizza.

## **Wed., Sept. 25                      Grand Canyon of Yellowstone | Hayden Valley | Mud Volcano | LeHardy Rapids | West Thumb Geyser Basin**

After breakfast at the Three Bear Lodge, we headed back into the park to the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone. Just before the turnoff for the Grand Canyon, about a hundred feet from the road, we were lucky to see a bull elk on the edge of the woods. We stopped for a good look and took a few photos before it moved into the tree line. We made a brief rest stop in the parking lot at the access to the Upper Falls Trail where we saw Red Crossbills and a couple of very eager, and amusing, Common Ravens looking for handouts. At Artist Point, we had an iconic view of the 308-foot-high Lower Falls and the impressive Grand Canyon. From there, we headed south



through the Hayden Valley, making multiple stops for herds of bison and scans for wolves and bears. At the south end of Hayden Valley, we stopped for a walk around the Mud Volcano, a huge mud pot thermal feature.

Our next stop was LeHardy Rapids on the Yellowstone River. We parked and walked up the riverside trail in search of Harlequin Ducks and American Dippers. A photographer leaving the area said he had been there two hours and had not seen a Dipper. Never having missed the Dipper here before, we pushed on and very shortly found one dipping and diving in the rapids. We then quickly found a pair of Harlequin Ducks sitting on a rock in the river. Then, a couple more American Dippers appeared in the rocks, just feet from where we were standing! We stayed for quite some time, enjoying the antics of both the Dippers and the Harlequin Ducks, as they swam and dove and dipped in the roaring water. With tons of photos taken and images in our minds, we pulled ourselves away and returned to where we had parked the vehicles. A picnic table there provided a base for a lovely, riverside lunch as another pair of Canada Jays hovered around looking for handouts. Ruddy Ducks and Common Mergansers could also be seen on the river.

Our next stop was the West Thumb Geysers Basin. This field of hot springs and geysers is located right on the water's edge of the West Thumb of Yellowstone Lake. The West Thumb was formed when there was a comparatively small eruption 140,000 years ago. Geysers situated in the water give a hint that the bottom of the 400-foot-deep lake is also an active thermal area with underwater geysers raising the temperature of the immediately surrounding water to 200°F. As we walked the boardwalk, we could hear a Red-breasted Nuthatch, which Bryan had spotted, along with a Hairy Woodpecker.

We left West Thumb, driving over Craig Pass at 8,262 feet and crossing the Continental Divide twice. In another hour we were back at West Yellowstone for dinner at the Three Bear Restaurant.

## **Thurs., Sept. 26                      Moose Falls | Jackson Lake | Teton Range | Rockwell Hotel, Jackson, WY**

After breakfast at the Three Bear Lodge's restaurant, we packed up and left West Yellowstone, heading south to Jackson and Grand Teton National Park. At Biscuit Basin we spotted a dark form out in a field which turned out to be a black Grey Wolf. Pulling over quickly, we got out to watch it and then saw a second one in a field further to our left. We were able to watch them both for a full five minutes before they loped out of sight behind the





trees. Leaving Yellowstone and heading south along the Lewis River, we made a stop at a rocky slope where Bryan applied his best Pika calling techniques. Several were heard and, finally, one popped up to check us out for a brief minute before disappearing back into the rocks. For some, this cute, little "rock rabbit" was their favorite animal of the trip. Our next stop was Moose Falls where we scrambled down a dirt slope to the water's edge for great views of these photogenic falls. Telli spotted an American Dipper at the base of the falls on the other side of the river. Then, we stopped at Jackson Lake Overlook to take in the spectacular views of the lake and the Teton Range. A bonus was the several Common Loons seen on the lake and two Savannah Sparrows.

Next on the agenda was lunch at the Jackson Lake Lodge. We climbed the stairs to the second level of the lodge and were greeted by massive picture windows framing the Teton Range. We had a delicious meal in the Mural Room dining room and had a little time for shopping in the shops within the lodge.

Leaving the Jackson Lake Lodge, we headed south to the iconic Oxbow Bend overlook of the Tetons where the Snake River curves in front of the majestic range. There we took lots of photos of the mountains and saw White Pelicans, North American River Otters, Double-crested Cormorants, American Wigeons and Gadwalls. Bryan also spotted a Song Sparrow in the riverside bushes. We then headed south toward Jackson with magnificent views of the Teton range the entire way down, stopping at Teton Point Overlook to take a few photos. We checked in at the Rockwell Hotel in Jackson and, after some rest time, drove about 15 minutes to Calico, an excellent Italian restaurant.

**Fri., Sept. 27**                      **Moose-Wilson Rd. | Jenny Lake | Teton Range |  
National Wildlife Art Museum | National Elk Refuge |  
Jackson, WY**

This morning, we departed before breakfast at 6:30am to maximize our chances of seeing wildlife. Our first stop was the wetlands overlook at the north end of Moose-Wilson Road. With no activity there we drove south, spotting several bull elk as well as a few female elk in the fields to the left, along with two very distant moose and a brief Coyote sighting as well! We looped around and headed back toward the ponds and spotted a yearling bull moose on the hillside to our left that came down to the road and crossed in front of our vehicles. Back at the wetlands overlook, there was still no activity so we made a stop at the Craig Thomas Discovery and Visitors Center where there were Black-capped Chickadees spotted in the parking lot.



Next, we went south to Teton Village for a wonderful breakfast at The Spur. Our appetites sated and energized to go on, we headed back north to Moose-Wilson Road. Along the way there was a young-of-the-year Osprey eating a fish on a nest platform. We made a last stop at the wetlands overlook and Emily took her group down the trail that ran along the ridge and found a bull moose lounging in the grass about 100 yards below. It seemed quite content and allowed us to observe it for some time.

We then headed north along the Teton Park Road, stopping at the Teton Glacier Turnout to take in the spectacle of the mountains. It was then on to the Jenny Lake boat launch which allowed us to get right to the water's edge to see Symmetry Spires, Mount Saint Johns and Mount Moran rising abruptly and dramatically from the other side of the lake. We took a group photo there along the rocky shoreline.

We returned to Jackson and our group divided up according to interest. Some went to the National Wildlife Art Museum; others explored the town of Jackson and several of us went birding through Jackson and along the National Elk Refuge. There were Red-winged Blackbirds with a call that sounded odd to easterners and a couple of Orange-crowned Warblers along Flat Creek behind our hotel. Crossing the main road, we made our way to the Flat Creek Wildlife Observation Point and Marshes. Standing on the observation deck, we were excited when several flocks of Yellow-headed Blackbirds flew by. We saw an American Goldfinch and a Marsh Wren could be heard calling but was not seen. A coyote could be seen in the distant, tall grasses of the refuge. On the open water there were scores of ducks including American Coots, Redheads, Common Mergansers, Ring-necked, Green-winged Teals, Gadwalls, American Wigeons, and Trumpeter Swans.

We returned to our hotel to pack and freshen up before dinner. Our farewell dinner was held at the wonderful Blue Lion restaurant just a few blocks from our hotel, which provided live music and a nice street view – a fitting conclusion for a wonderful trip. Afterward, we walked back to the hotel and said some of our goodbyes since a few were leaving for the airport in the predawn hours the next morning.

All in all, it was a wonderful trip with a wonderful group. The weather was stellar with clear blue skies every day. We saw 71 species of birds plus two heard-only. We were also very successful with mammals; tallying 14 species including Pronghorn, hundreds of American Bison, Elk, Moose, Mule Deer, and relatively close views of



Grey Wolves. Oh, and then there was the Western Terrestrial Garter Snake that Bryan spotted from a moving vehicle, stopped and caught it, for everyone to get a good look.

*Photos by Hugh Simmons: Group at Hegben Lake, Group at Henry's Lake, Bald Eagle, Pine Siskin, Common Raven, Sawtill Peak, Red-tailed Hawk, White-crowned Sparrow, American Pipit, Elk Grant Teton, Group in Harriman State Park, Muskrat, Gibbon Falls, Grand Prismatic, Old Faithful, Canada Jay, Captive Gray Wolf, Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, Group at Mud Volcano, American Dipper, Gray Wolf, Cole & Telli, Teton Scenic, Pika, Elk, Moose, Group, Osprey, Bison Tussle*