

**Holiday Highlights
Yellowstone Autumn
10–24 September 2011**

Leaders: Darren Rees and Steve Willis

Guests: Christine & Max Maughan, Gordon Stuttard, Wendy & Tony Hayward, Pam Litton, Jacky & Richard Kinsey, Joan Hunter, Sue & Mike Jenkins, Adele & Lee Dare.

Day 1: We all meet up at Heathrow for our early flight to Chicago with United Airlines and after a short time wrestling with self-check in (big time saver that one) we are on our way. Those with windows get some views over Labrador and Ontario before crossing Lake Huron and descending to Michigan and finally O'Hare airport. Immigration niceties are over (for once there's no hurry) and we have oodles of time for a meal before our evening flight to Jackson. The final approach past the Teton range is truly spectacular and it's great to finally arrive – it's been an exhausting day.

Day 2: Our early morning walk around the hotel introduces us to some common birds of Wyoming: Pine Siskins are perched on tree tops, as are Brewer's Blackbirds and Ravens. The residents are keen to provide bird feeders and we see lots of birds gathering including Black-billed Magpie, House Finch, Collared Dove and House Sparrows. Star bird is an adult White-crowned Sparrow.

At breakfast everyone meets Adele and Lee who have been in Jackson for three days already, experiencing the thrills and spills of white-water rafting and hot air ballooning but then they've just got married!

After breakfast we pick up the boxed lunches and drive the short distance to view the Elk Refuge at Flat Creek. Lots of wildfowl are in the water including Gadwall, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Barrows Goldeneye and Trumpeter Swans. Over the reeds are Northern Harriers and two Sandhill Cranes flying. The short stop proves to be a longer stop with a look around the visitor centre while we sort out a flat battery. More things are visible from the elevated platform at the centre: Cedar Waxwing, Barn Swallows, Sora Rail and our first Coyote. Vehicles are sorted so we are soon driving north towards the Grand Teton National Park. The skies are perfectly clear and the views to the jagged peaks of the Teton Range are amazing.

We drive to Sawmill Ponds near Moose Junction for our morning walk. We park the vans and walk along the scenic path that winds through

stands of aspens and firs with a backdrop of lofty mountains. Several new bird species show up: American Robins, Hairy Woodpecker, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Dark-eyed Juncos, Pine Siskin, Bald Eagle and Red-shafted Flicker. Star bird is a hunting Osprey that flies overhead with a fish, then circles in front of the snow dotted Tetons – spectacular. Max starts the insect list with Mourning Cloak, Mormon Fritillary and Pallid-winged Grasshopper amongst others.

Afterwards we take lunch at the visitor centre at Moose, where we take our time looking at the exhibits and checking the well stocked bookstore. Then it's a change of habitat as we drive over the Snake River to the large expanse of sage brush beyond. At Mormon Row there are a collection of much photographed barns and we can't help but get our fill of snaps. There are several Mountain Bluebirds around on the old fence posts, along with noisy Magpies. Pronghorn Antelopes are walking through the sage looking fantastic, and Pam finds a delightful Downy Woodpecker. There is one lone Bison at some distance but we will see lots another day.

At Gros Ventre campground there is a flurry of birds in the cottonwoods including Robins, Flickers, and a challenging empidonax Flycatcher..... err, probable Cordilleran Flycatcher. Further along we can walk along the riverbank: at the water's edge is a Spotted Sandpiper (with no spots) and Steve finds our first moose. It's in the vegetation in the far bank but occasionally raises his head to reveal a small wrack of antlers. A great end to today's sightings.

Our first dinner in Jackson is at the Teton Steakhouse.

Day 3:

Breakfast is at 7.00am, then it's off to explore areas in the northern section of Grand Teton National Park. The drive is spectacular with autumn colours tinting the willows, aspens and cottonwood trees, all the while the Teton range dominating the sweeping panorama. Our first stop is at Elk Flats turn out; a large herd of Bison are close to the road and with the backdrop of Mt Moran its a delight for the photographers. Pronghorn are also present and we see a distant Coyote trotting through the grasses. In front of us are two Sandhill Cranes and a couple of Western Meadowlarks. We drive the quiet loop road around the back of the flats and stop first to scan a Coyote. Mountain Bluebirds are on the wires and hawking for insects showing flashes of brilliant blues. A second stop is when Bison are blocking the track ahead. A few birds are around with Brewer's Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, and Red-tailed Hawk.

We stop for stroll along a second track that runs along the base of a spectacular escarpment. Peregrines are vocal and one is patrolling the

skyline. Clark's Nutcrackers are sitting on top of the pine trees and we get our first looks at cute Least Chipmunks. Max adds some insects to the list with several butterflies dancing around the yellow rabbitbrush. Back at the vans we crack open the cookies and two Peregrines soar overhead, a young bird and an adult. Further on we have a similar flying display from a Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawk.

We pause at the entrance gate where Richard spots Common Merganser swimming along the river. Then it's on towards the wilderness area around Two Ocean Lake. The setting is beautiful with a sizeable body of water set amongst rolling mountain and forest. We scan the lake and start sifting through the ducks; Ring-necked Ducks, American Wigeon, Mallard, Green-winged Teal, Bufflehead and Blue-winged Teal. There are also Double-crested Cormorants and Eared Grebes in the water. On the far bank close to a beaver lodge are several American Wigeon and an American Avocet.

After lunch we walk around the edge of the lake taking us through alternating stands of aspens and conifers and we see a few flurries of bird activity with Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Western Wood Pewee.

Ice-creams are calling us towards Jackson Lake Lodge but that's not the only reason we visit this remarkable building. Set on a ridge above the rusting willow flats the view from the terrace is truly astounding. Jackson Lake, Mount Moran and the Teton Range lie before us and there are animals amongst the bushes. First two Northern Flickers sit in the treetops, then a mother and calf Moose appears. Next, a big group of Elk walks out into the open, with a large bull keeping a watch over his harem. Then Richard finds a bull Moose in the thickets below – all the while it's fun pointing animals out to the assembled groups of tourists!

Sadly, at some point the storm that has been entertaining us with lightning bolts over the Tetons, finally brings rain overhead so we start the journey back. We scan Elk Flats for a second time and see a Swainson's Hawk on a post and two really close Sandhill Cranes alongside. It's still raining as we pass Schwabacher Landing so we carry on to a second site where we know Beavers are active.

We park next to a pool marked with a large lodge and by now the rain has stopped. We are in luck and the show unfolds. eventually three animals appear through the network of channels and they are really confiding. We can even hear them nibbling at the bark and stripping branches, deftly manipulating them with their hands. At one point

a Beaver crosses the road to tackle a larger tree! It's particularly funny watching it return across the road between stunned onlookers. And that's not the end of proceedings for the day – as we drive to Dorman's, Richard spots a Great Horned Owl on top of a tree!

Pizzas for anyone?

Day 4:

After the efforts of yesterday, a lazier day is planned, and we have breakfast at 8.00am. Then it's off to explore the birds and animals to be found at the Elk Refuge. We drive to our first viewpoint that is uncharacteristically shrouded in mist (this will not be the only morning that our plans are obscured by fog). We can still see a few duck on the water and some birds sat on perches that seem too cold to fly. Western Meadowlark, Vesper Sparrow and Savannah Sparrow are all showing well in the scope. We soon add Brewer's Sparrow and Marsh Wren to the list. By now the mist is lifting and the full view is revealed. Other birds include Great Blue Heron, Red-tailed Hawk, Raven, Northern Harrier and Mountain Bluebird. Driving along to Miller Butte, our next stop is beneath the steep cliffs and rocky slopes. A Rock Wren calls and gives brief views – more obliging is a pair of Green-tailed Towhees. Other birds include an unusual Ferruginous Hawk.

Further along the track the view opens out and we can see the Teton Range – no wonder there is a collection of desirable houses here. Shame about the garden furniture though. Further still, along Flat Creek there are stands of Cottonwood trees so we stop to look around. We see Swainson's Hawk, Kestrel and a Red-naped Sapsucker that is in one tree with two Cedar Waxwings.

At the furthest point we bird an area around where the first of the conifers are lining a steep valley – the views around are wonderful. Birds include Waxwings, Flickers, Kestrels, Yellow-rumped Warblers and a new bird, a Clay-coloured Sparrow. At our lunch spot beneath the shade of some old cottonwood trees we see Robins, Flickers and a Dusky Flycatcher (that has no tail!) After lunch we drive back to Jackson where everybody has some free time to explore the shops, galleries and boutiques.

We meet at 5.20pm for a late afternoon and evening walk to the river. At Schwabacher Landing we can get very close to the Snake River beneath the towering Tetons. Here there is a long established Beaver lodge and the whole area is marked with a series of dams, channels and stands of dead flooded trees. The sun is setting behind the peaks and the scene is as stunning as it gets. There are a few birds around including

a Double-crested Cormorant, American Wigeon, a family of Cinnamon Teal, Lincoln's and Song Sparrows, Pine Siskin and Yellow-rumped Warbler. A Bald Eagle calls from beyond the trees but fails to show. Unfortunately the Beavers seem to have deserted the area and there are a few tell-tale signs: the lodge is now over grown in parts and the water level is lower than previous visits. However nobody really minds as we have enjoyed such fantastic views the night before. And so back to Jackson and a fun meal at the Virginian Restaurant, with champagne and a toast to the newly-weds.

Day 5:

After breakfast we pack the vans and prepare ourselves for the journey north and our destination for the day, Yellowstone National Park. We are on our way at 8.30am and are still in awe of the Teton Range as we drive through the park. We stop at Elk Flats to admire a handsome Pronghorn close to the road, then at Pacific Creek we slowly drive along side the water hoping for the bear that has been seen in the area but only manage Ruffed Grouse, White-tailed Deer and a beautiful dark morph Red-tailed Hawk. At Oxbow Bend there are Double-crested Cormorants, and a flurry of activity in the near bushes with Black-capped Chickadee, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Green-tailed Towhee. Wendy spots a big immature Bald Eagle flapping over the scene.

At nearby Jackson Lake Dam we can walk the raised dyke to get nearer to the exposed mud and shingle bars that are busy with birds. The view to the right is over the rusting willow flats – the view to the left is over the still water to the mighty Tetons. There can be no more scenic place than this, and Steve's personal favourite. Before we set off we see our first Belted Kingfisher on a wire over the river, and an Osprey gives a display of catching fish, then flies overhead. In the water are Horned, Pied-billed and Western Grebes. Walking to the bend in the dyke we stop and sift through the wildfowl: there are big groups of Canada Geese and even greater numbers of American Coot. Ducks include Pintail, Mallard, Teal, Wigeon and new for the list, Redheads. White Pelicans are on the far side making the Trumpeter Swans look really small. Richard is rewarded for all that scanning and finds an adult Bald Eagle on the island shore. Looking back towards the lodge we glimpse two Moose – one female and a large bull.

We have lunch at scenic Cattleman's Bridge on the Snake River where an Osprey is perched in a tree. At Colter Bay we stop at the visitor centre that features a collection of artefacts from the indigenous Shoshone and Cherokee Indians, which is of great interest – wonderful moccasins! We have to leave and head north to Yellowstone, but we don't get far before we are distracted by a ranger speeding off down a gravel track.

We follow and find a cluster of photographers talking about a Grizzly mother and cubs that we've missed by ten minutes.... I'm discussing the sighting with another ranger when Steve calls "There's the bear!" We go and scan but sadly it fails to disappear.

We still have quite a journey ahead so push on north. It's almost compulsory to stop at the south entrance of the Yellowstone National Park and there is much posing in front of signs and taking of photographs.

Passing through the southern section of the park the landscape is dominated by swathes of lodgepole pines. Amongst the standing dead timber, testament to the forest fires that swept through the park in 1988, are a new generation of young trees. We stop close to the Lewis River where a boulder and scree slope tumbles to the road. We've had success here with cute critters called Pikas. We stop and within seconds it starts to rain so we decide that Pikas can wait for another day.

We eventually arrive at our base for three nights at Lake Village. After an hour and a bit to unpack we are off again in search of mammals. We see lots of Bison by the side of the road as we leave, then at Fishing Bridge, we stop where a large wooden bridge spans the Yellowstone River. As we arrive we immediately notice a Beaver on the shore, fantastic! We walk across the bridge and enjoy great looks of two animals in the water. One carries a fresh willow twig back to the lodge and soon returns passing straight underneath us – it's like playing pool sticks with Beavers! Other delights include a Muskrat, a family of Common Mergansers, an adult Bald Eagle that chases the local duck-life, and Pam spots a Spotted Sandpiper. What an end to the day – now all that is left is to enjoy the first of our lovely meals at the Lake Hotel.

Day 6:

We are on our way towards the Hayden Valley at 6.00am hoping to catch some dawn activity. Unfortunately the early morning fog has other ideas!

Mist is shrouding the valley making scanning impossible but we stop and listen at various points, hoping for some howling. With no luck we drop to some of the creeks where there is some visibility and enjoy some new birds: a group of shorebirds are working the mud so we set the scopes up. There are several Baird's Sandpiper and a larger Pectoral Sandpiper giving good comparison views. Ducks include Bufflehead, Shoveler, Mallard, and Wigeon. We decide to leave Hayden Valley to the mist and head for Pelican Creek for a quick scan before breakfast. This proves more productive with crisp clear views across the water and marsh. Elk are along the edge of the forest and Richard picks up two Bald Eagles in a tree. Ducks include Wigeon, Common Merganser, Bufflehead and

Hooded Merganser. There is a Common Loon on the lake and another eagle flaps across. And so to a well earned breakfast

After eating we retrace a route along the north shore of the lake. Pat Pelican Creek, we stop at Mary Bay where there are Common Loons in both summer and juvenile plumage, and rafts of Barrow's Goldeneye. Nearby there is a Bald Eagle perched high in a tree giving great scope views. At Sedge Bay there are more ducks and more loons.

We drive higher and take the road up to the Lake Butte viewpoint. It is bewildering to see the enormous area of dead trees here from the forest fires. The view from the top is spectacular, looking out over the lake and way south. There are few birds but there is a flurry of Yellow-rumped Warblers and Bluebirds.

As the road reaches its highest point at Sylvan Pass we can scan the boulder and scree slopes of the bare peaks. We can hear high pitched squeaks from critters and we are soon watching endearing Pikas scuttling around the rocks below. Other noises are coming from above and Steve finds the culprits – Yellow-bellied Marmots are high on the skyline and then Tony finds another two animals lower down and we can watch them tugging at grasses and then returning to their burrows to cache them. A third new mammal then appears – a Uinta Chipmunk. Then its back to Sylvan Lake for lunch before returning for some well earned relaxation time at Lake.

Refreshed, we meet at 5.00pm for an evening's viewing at Hayden Valley. The first overlook is hardly recognisable from this morning's misty vista, lots of duck below and Coyote show. Second stop is at an elevated parking lot where lots of cars are parked... they have wolves! Three black and two greys are travelling along the far tree line! Though they are distant it is a real highlight.

Day 7:

After breakfast at 7.30am we are soon back out again heading into the Hayden Valley and arriving at the first viewpoint with a wide view across the river. We start to scan but are quickly distracted by news that there is a wolf showing further up the valley. We'd better take a look.

We arrive at the second elevated viewpoint and are told by an enthusiastic wolf watcher where the animal is. It's another black wolf and this time it's a bit nearer. We watch it lope around the sage and at one point it walks right by a lone Bison, giving us a feel for the relative sizes.

We head north to Canyon where we have time for looking around the shops and informative visitor centre – its going to be earth shattering when the caldera blows! Afterwards we visit the 'Grand Canyon of Yellowstone' driving round to Artist's Point. The views from here are truly spectacular with amazing colours in the rocky sloping sides of the canyon – the rhyolite pillars or hoodoos are an array of yellows, reds and pinks. The Lower Falls waterfall is looking superb powering down into the river below and the cameras are clicking. At the second viewpoint on the north rim we see an Osprey on its nest that perches atop one of the dramatic rock pinnacles.

After lunch we drive back through the Hayden Valley and make a stop at the geo-thermal feature at Mud Volcanoes. Here a board-walk takes visitors around a series of bubbling mud pools, boiling lakes and venting fumaroles, and although by now it is raining we enjoy the imaginatively named features – like sulphur cauldron and dragons mouth.

It's just a short distance drive to our next stop at Le Hardy rapids. Another board-walk along the river gives us views across the stretch of river marked with boulders and white water. On a rock midstream are two ducks – much prized Harlequins. We watch for a while as they swim in the torrent and look for titbits in the water. Other birds include a Bald Eagle and Common Mergansers.

We arrive back at the cabins at 4.30pm and have some time to warm up before an optional evening excursion to Pelican Creek and Fishing Bridge. At the first location we scan the marsh and river – there are Sandhill Cranes, Osprey, Swainson's Hawk, Bufflehead with young, and Spotted Sandpiper. At Fishing Bridge we end with another fine display from a Beaver. Gathering young willow shoots it can only be feet away, amazing views!

Day 8:

We take breakfast at 8.00am and are away from Lake around 9.30am heading north towards our next base a Mammoth. Hayden Valley's first viewpoint is busy and we stop to see what's going on. We have missed a group of wolves by a few minutes so we decide to wait – and we don't have to wait long. Adele is following the Ravens and then Pam shouts 'There's an Elk running and its being chased by a two wolves!' One black wolf, and another heavier black animal with a grey face and neck collar, is giving chase. The elk takes to river, and then the two Grey Wolves come to the riverbank and start pacing back and forth. After a while they start back up the hill where two grey wolves have appeared – there is nose to nose greeting and tail wagging (wolves not guests). The whole experience is a rare and privileged treat.

Driving further north, we wind our way up the slopes of Mount Washburn, one of the highest peaks in the park. At Dunraven Pass we park at the established trailhead for the well worn path that climbs the southern slope. Our walk takes us through the top of the tree line where the forest breaks up into clearings and rocky outcrops. The views south are over the endless forest of lodgepole pines, broken only by the open spaces of the Hayden Valley – to the east is the rim of the Yellowstone Canyon and onwards to the lofty Absaroka Range that are dusted with fresh snow. Several Red-tailed Hawks are around enjoying the updraughts and jousting with Ravens. Clark's Nutcrackers are flying around and within minutes Christine finds a target species. Beautifully marked Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels are busying themselves amongst the rocks below. We also see Yellow-pine Chipmunks scurrying around. The walk takes us higher and gives us spectacular views all round. At the furthest point there are more ground squirrels collecting food from pine tree – should that be tree squirrel?

After returning to the vehicles we resume the drive over Dunraven Pass and choose a picnic site where we can scan the high country – still no bears. We drive even higher along Chittenden Road towards the summit of Washburn. The views from the car park are fantastic but yet more scanning reveals little other than distant Bison herds. Hawks are on the move with several Kestrel, Red-tails and a Cooper's Hawk flying by.

After a comfort and ice cream break at Tower we drive to the Lamar Valley where there is a Bison carcass as a result of wolf predation. A large crowd of onlookers are gathered hoping to get a glimpse of a top predator and we join the group. It proves to be a long wait but all the while the wildlife on show, and the arresting views, keep us entertained. Groups of Ravens and Black-billed Magpies are milling around and a Prairie Falcon zips through. Lots of Red-tailed Hawks are riding the currents and an Osprey soars overhead. Steve briefly glimpses a Golden Eagle soaring but this quickly disappears beyond the ridge. On the opposite side of the valley there is a group of Bighorn Sheep resting in the short grass between rocky escarpments.

Eventually a Coyote trots along the river bed and then Steve calls 'Bear!' A fantastic Grizzly Bear is running down the slope towards the valley floor and straight to the hidden carcass – a magic moment to savour. We watch enthralled as the bear tucks into its Bison meal. His manipulation of the carcass sends the stench of rotting flesh over towards where we stand! Elated, and after a long transfer day we arrive at our base for the next four days at Mammoth Hot Springs.

Day 9:

Before breakfast we have an early visit to the travertine terraces at Mammoth. They are beautiful in the morning light, with layers of flat calcium carbonate that make white ledges with pools of water trapped by narrow raised fringes. Steam is rising from the water that trickles over the surface of the travertine and dead trees are standing, stranded in the middle.

There are a few birds around and we see Chipping Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Mountain Bluebird and our first Townsend Solitaire. Further around the route we can view more formations and at one, the Elephant-back Ridge, there is a flurry of activity with two Hairy Woodpeckers, Cedar Waxwing, Robins, Clark's Nutcrackers, Juncos and Yellow-pine Chipmunk.

After breakfast we have some free time in Mammoth so we can explore the visitor centre, the lower terraces and Liberty Cap, all the while keeping clear of the many Elk that are hanging around the lawns.

We meet up at 1.00pm and drive to picturesque Undine Falls and onto Lava Creek for our picnic with the squirrels and chipmunks. Next we stop at Blacktail Ponds where we start a duck jam. Wildfowl includes: American Wigeon, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck and American Coot. Along the Blacktail Plateau Drive there are stands of colourful aspens amongst a landscape of grass and pines. We have a couple of leg stretches and we do a bit of wood tapping..... at one point in a dense stand of firs with lots of dead trees we get a response of sorts when a Williamson's Sapsucker flies by, albeit briefly. More obliging is a fantastic Steller's Jay.

After admiring the nearby Petrified Tree, we drive towards Tower and the dramatic lower Yellowstone Canyon. At Calcite Springs Overlook we can look down on the eroded pinnacles and across to the upper terrace of basalt columns. For our late afternoon viewing we arrive at Slough Creek, a well known destination for wolf-watchers. We scan the rocky slopes and valley floor but fail to turn up a wolf or bear, but are entertained by a wonderful group of Bison. The dominant bull is running back and forth chaperoning the group.

We have a very early morning planned so reluctantly we leave Slough Creek and drive back towards Mammoth. We arrive to where the Elk are gathered on the lawns including one huge bull and his harem. We even get a jousting display between rival bulls before dinner.

Day 10: An extremely early alarm call wakes us and we are soon off at 6.00am to try to watch the dawn wildlife in the Lamar Valley. We drive through the darkness towards the east, and as we reach the Lamar Valley there is enough light to make out the herds of Bison on the valley floor. We drive to beyond the Yellowstone Institute to where we saw the carcass before. All is peaceful and we scan around with the first light. As well as Bison there are Pronghorns, and in between the cottonwoods is the unmistakable dark shape of a bear. Fantastic! A Grizzly looking very similar to the one we saw previously is tucking into bison leftovers. A Coyote is circling looking for titbits. We watch for fifteen minutes or so then the bear leaves the carcass. It walks of across the shingle banks then walks through the shallow river without breaking its stride. Then it climbs the bank and works its way through the sage and towards the tree line. What a start to the day.

We drive further along the valley to where the road bends left and follows the course of Soda Butte Creek. Several cars are parked and people are looking around. This is close to where the Lamar Canyon pack of wolves have denned earlier in the year and everyone is looking for them. We scan first from the car park, then walk out to a mound where we can look down on the confluence of Soda Butte Creek and Lamar River. Meadowlarks are singing and perching up well, and a Northern Harrier is quartering the ground below. Richard spots a Coyote crossing the river and it's looking particularly beautiful in the morning light. It disappears then Lee picks it up further along and we can watch it foraging in the grass for rodents.

News from folk elsewhere is that no wolves have been seen this morning but they have been getting signals from the forests further up the valley, perhaps we'll have better luck tomorrow.

After a well-earned breakfast at Mammoth we drive east for another look around the Blacktail area looking for elusive woodpeckers and sapsuckers. It's a nice walk through the changing colours but the wind is proving tricky for birds and despite more rigorous wood tapping we only manage Hairy Woodpecker and Northern Flicker. We move through the area around Tower and Petrified Tree and at scan the landscape thoroughly, looking for big furry things... at the last spot a friendly American tells us of black furry things he'd seen earlier that morning.... the hunt is on.

After a late lunch at the scenic Yellowstone River picnic site we drive south towards Mt Washburn. We reach the highest point at Dunraven Pass and pull over for a scan. Confident that there are bears in the area we prepare for a wait, and start to sift through the series of clearings

amongst the pines and firs, checking the hillside thoroughly. Everyone has their eyes trained on the task in hand and it pays off. 'BEAR!' yells Mike, and a black shape works across the closest clearing. All the telescopes are trained on the animal and we start our very own bear jam!

Wendy soon shouts 'There's another bear' and we are watching two Black Bears simultaneously. Where do we look? Wendy's bear soon disappears and then Mike's bear starts to climb a tall tree so all scopes are trained on it. The bear climbs higher and higher and starts to feed on cones in the upper crown of the pine. Fantastic! For over an hour we, and the assembled bear jammers, watch the animals on and off as they climb trees and wander in and out of sight. We don't know what is more amusing – entertaining bears or entertaining bear watchers. Elated, we start the journey back to Mammoth.

Day 11: Breakfast is at 7.00am, and we are away at 7.45am. Our first stop is at Little America in the Lamar valley where a number of wolf-watchers are already assembled. We quiz them and it seems there is a pack on the far slope. From our viewpoint the animals are difficult to pick up at first but then Jackie finds a black wolf crossing the rocks. Telescopes are trained on the area and more come into view. It takes a while but finally we see six individuals on the slope – what a great start to the day.

Sadly there is no action at the carcass save magpies and ravens, so we move on. Next, we check the carcass at Soda Butte Creek, and there is a fantastic Golden Eagle perched on a tree giving us remarkable views through the scope – a contender for bird of the trip. Further up the valley at spectacular Baronette Peak there are several Mountain Goats working the steep slopes.

We take lunch at nearby Soda Butte Creek hoping to intercept a group of wolves that have been seen, but sadly they never materialise. It's still a wonderful place to linger and Steve finds a big wolf print in the mud alongside the river. Birds include Dipper, Spotted Sandpiper, Yellow-rumped and Max finds a Wilson's Warbler.

Next it's onwards through to Montana's Silver Gate and Cooke City, and beyond to where the land opens out to broad valleys with towering peaks. Two are particularly distinct, like giant cathedral spires. These are Pilot and Index Peaks and they dominate the vista to the west. To the south are the lofty Absaroka and Wind River Ranges. Bright yellow aspen groves add colour to the ranks of pines and spruces marching along the valley sides.

We keep driving north and east climbing the scenic Beartooth Highway, reported to be one of the most beautiful drives in America and on this evidence, who would argue?

As we twist ever upwards we drive through the upper tree line noting the stunted profiles of the spruces. Finally we reach beyond the trees to the rocky open summits and we stop at the highest point, West Summit, to explore. From an altitude of 10,947ft the views to the south are spectacular and we walk out across the stony surface. Some Pikas are scurrying about the rocks giving us wonderful looks. Birds are few and far between, with Raven, Clark's Nutcracker and a fantastic Merlin on show. Further along the road the ground drops to the north and opens up the view across to Montana and the mountain wilderness. We can see the pinnacle that names the mountain range – the Bear's Tooth - a candidate for place-of-the-trip no doubt.

Starting the journey down we encounter a flock of Black Rosy-finch and a fantastic Yellow-bellied Marmot sunning itself on the barren rocks. Returning into the Lamar Valley we check the carcass for one last time, there are quite a few cars parked and the news is good. The Grizzly Bear is down for his evening meal and is tugging away, surrounded by Ravens and Magpies. It's a great way to end the day.

Day 12: After a sensibly timed breakfast we pack and leave Mammoth bound for the volcanic features that lie further south. We start the journey, stopping first at Swan lake. Waterbirds include Pied-billed Grebe, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, and American Wigeon. Lee finds us a Coyote in the meadow to the left and we enjoy watching it forage for prey. Nearby, at Sheepeater Cliff are more basalt columns fractured and spilling down to make a boulder and scree slope. Max, Christine and Joan see a Pika in the rocks, and we all enjoy great views of two Dippers on the stream.

The first of our tours of the volcanic features is at Norris Geyser Basin, followed by lunch nearby. The drive south along the picturesque Gibbon River takes us past Gibbon Falls, then it's on to the geo-thermal wonders at Fountain Paintpots. We view the multi-coloured Silex Spring, the bubbling mud-pots, and Clepsydra Geyser. We drive through the upper and lower geyser basin and finally arrive at Old Faithful, just in time for an eruption of the most reliable of all geysers – but how come it's only the Brits that applaud?

We check in and note there's time for a walk around the geyser basin, we catch the tail end of Riverside Geyser and get a spectacular show from Castle Geyser – one of the most unpredictable features in the park.

At one time Old Faithful erupts so we have the rare event of two major geysers performing simultaneously – it's a double whammy!

Day 13: An early morning walk proves atmospheric though not quite as we planned... the board-walk around Midway Basin is treacherously slippery with frost and ice, and the mist and fog is hindering views of the colourful pools. We return for breakfast and what timing! We park and walk the short distance to the remarkable Old faithful Inn when the geyser erupts. Towering into the cold sky the plume of steam is more pronounced than with the eruptions yesterday - the morning light adds to a very special moment.

Entering the Inn is like entering a bygone era. The several storey building is cavernous inside with layer upon layer of wooden platforms looking down on the main concourse. After breakfast we drive back towards Midway but stop short at the Fairy Falls trailhead for a brisk walk along the base of the wooded hills. When we get opposite Grand Prismatic pool we scramble up the hillside to view the huge pool, and our efforts are rewarded. From our elevated viewpoint, the whole wonder of this huge multi-coloured feature is revealed. Volcanic feature of the trip!

Regretfully, we have to leave Yellowstone and we head south for Jackson. Arriving in the Grand Teton National Park we note the advance in colour from the aspen and cottonwood groves - a spectacular counterpoint to the amazing mountain range. We have our picnic at Colter Bay with a wonderful view across the lake to the Teton peaks, then start our afternoon whirlwind tour of the park. At Oxbow bend the colours are at their autumnal best and we even get views of a close muskrat in the still water. Next is a drive up Signal Mountain where there are fantastic views all around from the two summit car parks. Then its photo stops along the Teton Park Road that hugs the base of the mountains. Our final scenic stop is alongside Jenny Lake at the base of Grand Teton – there can be no finer view.

The road south goes through Moose, and we are hoping for a grand finale in the last hours left of our final day. As we drive slowly around Sawmill Ponds we can't help notice that there are a lot of cars parked. Rounding the corner people are out of their vehicles and scanning the hillside. Bushes are moving! Bear!

We park (sensibly, which is more than we can say for others...) then walk back to where others are standing. On the slope amongst the chokeberry bushes is a large Black Bear. It's actually chocolate brown – referred to as a cinnamon form Black Bear. It proves a little elusive at times going in and

out of sight, but where ever it feeds it's no-nonsense approach to pruning bushes betrays it's noisy presence. Eventually it walks across an opening and to lower ground. Just when we think of leaving it walks across the road and we get even closer views – what an end to the day and trip! Now, if only we can start the car.

There is much discussion over the holidays highlights at the Virginian Restaurant at our last evening meal together. Everyone has their own particular favourite moment and the votes for mammal and bird of the week is hotly contested.

Mammal-of-the-trip: Black Bear.

Bird-of-the-trip: Golden Eagle.

Place-of-the-trip: The Beartooth Highway.

Geo-thermal-of-the-trip: Grand Prismatic Pool

Magic-moment-of-the-trip: Wolf chasing Elk in the Hayden Valley.

(There were many nominations from Grizzly at carcass, creating our very own bear jam at Dunraven.

Day 14: It's an early morning departure from the hotel for the short transfer to Jackson Hole Airport. We say goodbye to Steve who is staying on in the states – lucky man. For us its check in time as the first light hits the Teton Range – surely the most scenic airport there is? Before we leave two of us get views from the airplane of Sage Grouse alongside the runway!

It's been a magical tour of Yellowstone and Teton National Parks with so many highlights – thanks to all.

BIRDS

Common Loon
Pied-billed Grebe
Eared Grebe
Horned Grebe
Western Grebe
American White Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Trumpeter Swan
Canada Goose
Green-winged Teal
Mallard
Blue-winged Teal
Cinnamon Teal
Gadwall
American Wigeon
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Harlequin
Barrow's Goldeneye
Bufflehead
Common Merganser
Hooded Merganser
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Swainson's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Ferruginous Hawk
Golden Eagle
American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine
American Coot
Sandhill Crane
Spotted Sandpiper
Baird's Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper
Ring-billed Gull
California Gull
Herring Gull
Mourning Dove
Collared Dove
Belted Kingfisher
Red-naped Sapsucker
Williamson's Sapsucker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Barn Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Gray Jay
Steller's Jay
Clark's Nutcracker
Black-billed Magpie
American Crow
Common Raven
Black-capped Chickadee
Mountain Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
House Wren
Rock Wren
Marsh Wren
American Dipper
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Mountain Bluebird
Townsend's Solitaire
American Robin
American Pipit
Cedar Waxwing
European Starling
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Wilson's Warbler
Orange-crowned Warbler
Green-tailed Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Clay-coloured Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Red-winged Blackbird
Western Meadowlark
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Brewer's Blackbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Black Rosy-Finch
House Finch
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

MAMMALS

Mountain Cottontail
Beaver
Muskrat
Pika
Least Chipmunk
Yellow Pine Chipmunk
Uinta Chipmunk
Red Squirrel
Yellow-bellied Marmot
Mountain Phenacomys
Gray Wolf
Coyote
Grizzly Bear
Black Bear
Long-tailed Weasel
Elk
Mule Deer
White-tailed Deer
Moose
Pronghorn
Bison
Bighorn Sheep
Mountain Goat
Big Brown bat

BUTTERFLIES

Callippe Fritillary
Mormon Fritillary
Aphrodite Fritillary
Mourning Cloak
Weidemeyer's Admiral
Field Crescent
Blue Copper
Lilac-bordered Copper
Edith's Copper
Common Wood Nymph
Green Comma
Hoary Comma
Satyr Comma
Pine White
Cabbage White
Western White
Juba Skipper
Long-dashed Skipper
Northern Blue
Painted Lady
West Coast Lady
Red Admiral
Milbert's Tortoiseshell
Queen Alexandra's Sulphur
Orange Sulphur
Clouded Sulphur
Purplish Copper
Pink-edged Sulphur

DRAGONFLIES

Cherry-faced Meadowhawk
White-faced Meadowhawk
Black Meadowhawk
Variegated Meadowhawk
Saffron-winged Meadowhawk
Paddle-tailed Darner
Variable Darner
Boreal Blewit
Western Pondhawk
Flame Skimmer

MISC INSECTS

Pallid-winged Grasshopper
Band-winged Grasshopper
Mormon Cricket
Long-horned Pine Sawyer