

Grand Teton and Yellowstone Holiday Highlights

Bears, Badgers and Bluebirds

31 May – 14 June 2025

Leader: Darren Rees

Guests: Pam and Graham Stuart, Judy and Steve Down, Sian Piper and Jim Hair

Day 1: We're Going to Jackson

Our comfortable flight from London Heathrow to Denver is nice and smooth and with our own personal entertainment system at hand, the hours pass by. No-one has a window seat but if you crane your neck, you can see the frozen wastes below as the cloud clears somewhere over Labrador. Hours on, the vast tracts of boreal forest and potholes slowly give way to the patchwork of huge fields that dominates the central swathe of the North American continent. Finally, we descend into Denver, landing a little behind of schedule, where we pass through US Customs and Immigration really quickly, which comes as a pleasant surprise.

We have some time for an early evening meal before we resume the journey. The last flight of the day taking us further west and as we descend into Jackson the views are amazing, especially for Pam and Graham who do have window seats this time. Eventually we land at Jackson Hole, just as the sun is setting behind the stunning Teton Range – in no time at all we are reunited with bags, load up the spacious van and soon check-in at the 49er Inn.

Day 2: Mooses, Pronghorns, Coyotes and Our First Bear

It's something of a tradition to kick start the bird list with a pre-breakfast wander around the leafy streets behind the hotel, catching up with some common yard birds of Jackson. Violet-green Swallows are perched on wires nearby and red-faced House Finches are coming to drink in a water drainage. American Robins and Pine Siskins are calling from several trees and Raven, American Crow and Brewer's Blackbirds are commonplace. We also see our first Mountain Chickadee on a tree top and get great looks at a singing Ruby-crowned Kinglet. We walk to where we can scan over a small marsh catching our first bright Yellow Warbler. Other birds include Black-billed Magpie, Canada Geese and a bright orange Bullock's Oriole. A Mule Deer starts the mammal list.

After eating breakfast, we drive through town to drop off our order for sandwiches from the deli, then stop at Flat Creek on the edge of the Elk Refuge. The pools around the Visitor Centre are always productive and the waterfowl list starts: Blue-winged Teal, Cinnamon Teal, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, Gadwall and Mallard. Judy spots two Turkey Vultures on the adjacent slope and a Red-tailed Hawk is perched in the meadow. Both Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds are proclaiming their territories from the reeds and there's a fantastic Marsh Wren collecting nest material right in-front of us.

Judy then spots our first Pronghorn Antelope walking across the flats. Two Coyotes are trotting along too – I'm sure we'll get to see both species closer, later. From the boardwalk we can look down on a beautifully marked Sora Rail. Barn, Tree and Rough-winged Swallow bump up the list. By now our sandwiches are ready so we head north into the Park.

The road climbs north a short distance, then crests the hill to reveal the splendour of the mighty Teton Range and there is no finer series of peaks in all of the Rocky Mountains. It is obligatory to stop at the sign that welcomes visitors to the National Park and there is much taking of photos.

We continue our route along the course of the Gros Ventre River, which is a swollen torrent as the warm temperatures trigger the snow melt at higher levels. We stop first at a group of three Pronghorn bucks, this time close to the road – what a photo with the Tetons behind. A Coyote also makes an appearance and we watch it foraging for gophers (unsuccessfully). We move to a car park next to the river where we can walk along the riverbank. Judy finds our first Spotted Sandpiper and it has spots! We see our first Swainson's Hawk soaring with a Red-tailed Hawk and get great looks at a bathing Vesper Sparrow. Further along, a huge Moose wanders out of the bushes - a fabulous male (bull) with large antlers in velvet. We are tipped off about another Moose a little further along, nestling quietly in the shade.

We take our lunch at Gros Ventre campground in the shade – birds around us include American Goldfinch, House Wren and Judy spots a Dusky Flycatcher. Onto the road that takes us past Kelly Warm Springs, following the river. Sian spots a huge adult Bald Eagle in a large cottonwood tree – a great image, oozing America. Further along we come across a wedding party and the ceremony is being conducted at 'The Wedding Tree', an ancient pine with a view over to the Tetons – a wonderful venue!

The furthest point we reach is the Gros Ventre Slide where the hillside is scarred by a massive landslide, a consequence of the 1955 earthquake that shook the area. We see our first Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, but the landscape is the big winner. On the return route we stop to watch two Long-billed Curlews and get better views of the colourful Western Meadowlarks. Travelling past the Elk Refuge we stop at a close Sandhill Crane and a threesome of cute Uinta Ground Squirrels.

After a well-earned rest we gather for the evening and drive back north into the Park. Before our activities we sample pizzas at Dorman's, with a balcony and a fabulous view of the impressive Tetons. Afterwards we move to Moose Ponds along the Moose Wilson Road and walk along the track above the water, getting great looks at two Sandhill Cranes and their young. There are lots of beaver workings but sadly no beavers. Birds are very active and we get good looks at some new species: Judy finds a Wilson's Snipe and shy Elk are coming out of the trees.

Just around the corner there is a young male Moose browsing in full view – what long legs! Further along we check more beaver workings but it's all quiet. Then, a funny thing happens as we drive through a forested section of the road. A few cars are parked and when we ask what the fuss is about, the answer is a bear cub! There, crossing the road, is a small cinnamon Black Bear cub. It pauses on the road and starts licking at something obviously tasty. What great looks, but we do wonder where mum is. What an end to our first full day in Wyoming.

Day 3: Jackson Lake

Breakfast is at 7am and then we drive north to explore the northern section of Grand Teton National Park. The drive is truly spectacular with the jagged mountains towering above the plain dissected by the Snake River, its corridor marked by a thousand cottonwoods and aspens. We have an unscheduled stop when some Ravens are on the ground in the sage. We park and look – there's a large Elk carcass with three Coyotes present, as well as Ravens and a Bald Eagle waiting in the wings – wow!

At the Snake River Overlook we take photos trying to emulate Ansel Adams who put this place on the map in the 50's with his large format plate camera studies. We also get nice looks at male Audubon's Warbler in spanking plumage.

Further north we can scan a large open area of grassland at Elk Ranch Flats and we see our first of what will be many American Bison. They look particularly wonderful when they stampede and cross the track in front of us, kicking up dust in the sun as they pass - an iconic image and a magic moment for everyone.

Pronghorn Antelope are scattered in the distance and there are Sandhills Cranes in front. We also see our first electric Mountain Bluebird perched in a dead tree with the backdrop of Grand Teton. There are also: Calliope Hummingbird, a perched Yellow Warbler, Dusky Flycatcher and Long-billed Curlew. Further along Pam spots a Red Fox skulking alongside the road too. Swainson's Hawks are overhead and there are distant Turkey Vultures. An American Kestrel enters a nest-hole in an aspen tree but fails to come back out. Instead, we watch House Wren, White-crowned and Brewer's Sparrows.

We pay our fee and enter the Park boundary, stopping soon after to look at the Snake River at Pacific Creek Landing. Next stop is the stunning Ox-bow Bend viewpoint where the Snake River meanders slowly beneath Mount Moran. As we arrive, we can see a large White Pelican with its raised breeding horn on the bill showing it as a breeding male bird. An Osprey flies overhead and gives us a great display – plunging right in front and catching a fish. A Great Blue Heron flies across and lands atop a large conifer.

We take lunch at Cattleman's Bridge next to the flowing Snake River, then it's to Jackson Lake Dam to look over the huge body of water that is backed up – the water level is very high and it's a bit windy so viewing distant birds is not ideal but there is the amazing backdrop of the Teton Range. Close to is a glorious Great

Northern Diver, known locally as a Common Loon. In the far distance are groups of White Pelicans and smaller California Gulls and our first Double-crested Cormorants.

At Jackson Lake Lodge there is a large multi-purpose building with shops, restaurant, bar, café and a beautiful atrium with a feature panoramic window that looks across Willow Flats towards the Teton Range. We grab some coffees then go outside to the panoramic balcony. There are a few distant Elk in breaks in the extensive willow scrub. Northern Harriers float by and we enjoy great looks at a Broad-tailed Hummingbird that lands again and again on the same twig. It's been another full day and we head south back towards Jackson for some down time.

We meet up at 6pm for an early meal at Bubba's, though we're not sure what a Sloppy Bubba is. After a tasty meal we are on our way at 7.30pm and back into the Park to check another Beaver lodge. At Cottonwood Creek there is another series of dams, flows and a well-constructed lodge. The info we have is that it is active, so we get set for an evening's vigil. There are birds to entertain us while we wait: Mountain Bluebird, Yellow Warblers and superb Black-headed Grosbeaks. Perhaps more amusing are the comments from the many people who stop to ask what we are looking at. When we reply 'Waiting for Beavers' one lady hears White Flamingo! Now that would be a turn up. Sadly, it's a no-show from the Beavers for a second night but it's been another super day regardless.

Day 4: North to Yellowstone

As we found a carcass the day before, there is an early morning excursion to check if there's been any overnight developments. We leave at 5.30am and arrive on site twenty minutes later. There is a Coyote present and we get great looks at it tugging at the carcass, with the Ravens perched patiently nearby. After taking its fill, the Coyote wanders off and comes towards us, crossing the road in full view – a nice start to the day.

As we are close to the famous Mormon Row barns, we take a look, though the light is flat due to the overcast conditions. There are a few photographers there to capture these beautiful timbered buildings with the fabulous backdrop of the Teton Range. We wander around, taking in the surroundings and catching up with some birds of the open country. These include our first neat Eastern Kingbirds, Mountain Bluebird, Black-billed Magpie, Western Meadowlark, Savannah Sparrow, American Kestrel and as we leave a nice male Northern Harrier.

After breakfast we pack our bags for our transfer day north. We meet at 9.15am and load the van, but before we leave the Jackson area, we want to check an area where we've seen Bighorn Sheep before. Our morning excursion is a short drive through Jackson's streets to reach the gravel road that skirts the east side of the Elk Refuge. Our first stop is an elevated spot where we can scan the first section of meadows and some close pools. There are a few ducks in the water including Common Merganser and Cinnamon Teal; Savannah and Vesper Sparrows are

singing nearby. Along the adjacent stony slopes, we scan for sheep, but they seem to be absent – there are some delightful Rock Wrens that land close by though.

Further along the track the vista opens out to include the mighty Tetons and a handful of ranch-like dwellings are sited to make the most of the views. It's a shame their taste for panoramas is not equalled by their taste in garden sculpture!

We stop here and there admiring Western Meadowlarks in full song in the morning light and two fantastic Swainson's Hawk on posts. There are Uinta Ground Squirrels scurrying along the short grass and we see two Coyotes cross the road. One doubles back and we notice it joins three other Coyotes. No doubt enjoying all the ground squirrels that are everywhere.

We tease out looks at some handsome Horned Larks (we know them as Shorelarks) – special birds looking particularly horny through the scope! As we drive further north we also note some perched raptors: we see Red-tailed Hawk and two American Kestrels. At the furthest point we park and admire the most iridescent Mountain Bluebird – could be bird of the day!

It's now time to be returning to Jackson, so we trundle along the gravel stopping only for a nice perched Swainson's Hawk. We stop by the deli to pick up the sandwiches then drive into the Teton National Park. We head for our lunch spot next to Cottonwood Creek with wonderful views to the Tetons.

After eats we take the scenic drive along the shore of Jenny Lake, stopping for photos looking over this most beautiful of spots in the Park. We want to explore the area further so park and walk along the gravel road that takes off into the forest. It's a gorgeous walk in the sun and though there is little bird song we slowly see new species. First are some inquisitive Gray Jays that perch on tree-tops to check us out; a little wood-tapping gets some immediate results – a Northern Flicker flies to the top of a tree; next a fantastic Hairy Woodpecker lands even closer and takes a look at us. Red-breasted Nuthatches are calling and a few toots bring them in along with Yellow-rumped Warblers. We are pleased with the new birds and start strolling back admiring the flowers that are colouring the clearings.

Then Pam exclaims 'BEAR!' In front is a glossy Black Bear wandering through the trees – Wow! We move a short distance to where we can view the bear safely watching it forage through the undergrowth – it's just fabulous finding our own bear! And the new experiences keep coming: a nice female Williamson's Sapsucker gives us a show and then a flock of Dark-eyed Junos (Pink-sided form) dance through the trees. A successful stroll.

Onwards to the small lake below Jackson Lake Dam and we spot American Wigeon, Barrow's Goldeneye, Cinnamon Teal and blue, shimmering Tree Swallows.

We stop again as we drive north along the shore of Jackson Lake, where Judy finds a Bald Eagle perched next to its nest – we get a closer bird soaring overhead. New waterfowl include Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead and Western Grebes.

The road continues north from Grand Teton National Park, climbing steadily upwards to the Yellowstone plateau and we note the change in habitat from mixed aspens and pines, to blanket Lodgepole Pine forest. Finally, we arrive at our overnight stop at the South Gate of Yellowstone National Park at Flagg Ranch.

Day 5: Old Faithful and the Geo-thermals Wonders of Yellowstone

A few of us have a stroll before breakfast, around the stands of lodgepole pines, many of which are scarred from forest fires. There are a few birds: Chipping Sparrows are trilling; Yellow-rumped Warblers singing and Robins calling. We try a bit of wood-tapping but it's not as successful as yesterday. We do see a nice Hammond's Flycatcher – a species of the high-altitude forests

After breakfast we set off and it's only a mile to the entrance of the National Park. Of course, there is the obligatory cheesy photograph next to Yellowstone's southern gate, before resuming the journey along the beautiful Lewis River. We can't help noting that there's still strands of snow lying on the ground – a reminder of the altitude we are at.

We stop alongside the Lewis River where there is a scree slope on the left. We've seen some interesting critters here before and as soon as we get out of the van, we see one of them – a smart Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel looking not unlike a big chipmunk with its stripey sides. Jim then spots a bigger animal higher up the slope – a richly-coloured Yellow-bellied Marmot. It works across the boulders swishing its tail with lavish gestures - we get nice looks through the scope. A third, often tricky-to-see animal is next – an American Pika, looking a lot like a short-eared rabbit. Brief, but nice views of an interesting critter.

Our primary destination for the day is the Old Faithful Geyser Basin and we arrive in expectant mood, parking at the Visitor Centre and learning that there's only thirty minutes to wait for an eruption by the most predictable geyser in the world. That's just enough time to pop our heads into the historic Old Faithful Inn – an impressive sight and the largest wood construction in the world no less.

We wander outside to the semi-circular array of seats gathered around Old Faithful and these are now pretty much full of excited tourists. We join in the fun and take a sweepstakes of when she's gonna blow. We start clock-watching and then it happens - Sian wins with an early 12.15pm show, 5 mins before the predicted time - and what a display Old Faithful produces, with a forceful jet of water and steam reaching over hundred feet into the blue sky – bravo!

Equipped with the relevant info for eruptions from the Visitor Centre we opt for a modest route around the boardwalk. The path takes us over the river and through the forest edge where we see an American Red Squirrel. Coming out into the open

we can see Lion Geyser is erupting ahead of us – fabulous! We continue the route strolling past Beehive Geyser, shaped like an old-fashioned beehive, along to admire the nearby Lion formation and the beautiful multi-coloured Heart Pool.

Onwards past Belgian Pool, we arrive at the seating around Grand Geyser shortly after 1pm and decide to stick around and use the chance to sit down to have our picnics. Grand Geyser is due to erupt at 2.30pm but has a window of plus or minus 75 mins, so after eats we play the waiting game. More Yellow-bellied Marmots are scurrying around and we can't help notice that one keeps perching on the very highest rock – it's obviously used as a latrine as there are lots of scats littering the place.

It's a bit of a wait (luckily, we are entertained by the marmots) but finally it happens. At 4.20pm Grand Geyser erupts and starts its 10-12 mins routine of pulsating jets of hot water bursting into the blue sky. An incredible show worthy of the Bellagio in Las Vegas but a completely natural phenomena - well worth the wait!

Onwards to Midway Geyser Basin, home to the impressive Grand Prismatic Pool. We opt to ignore the boardwalk that takes you around the feature, instead choosing the Fairy Falls path that takes us to a raised platform halfway up one of the wooded slopes. The view from the elevated perspective best shows off this truly bewildering and other-worldly sight. A multi-coloured stain sprawls across the barren plain with a deep blue to turquoise heart and a rainbow fringe. Another geo-thermal treasure in the Yellowstone world of natural wonders.

A little later than planned (that's geyser-gazing for you) we finally descend through the beautiful Madison Valley arriving at West Yellowstone and checking in to the Kelly Inn, our base for the next two nights. There's a nice meal at the period Canyon Street Grill awaiting.

Day 6: Hayden Valley and Lake Yellowstone

We have an early start, meeting at 5.30am, as we'd like to explore some key parts of the National Park. The Hayden Valley is a broad open area where several creeks pour into the Yellowstone River and is a premier spot for wildlife watching and we've enjoyed some treasured moments here in the past.

We stop at the first viewpoint where we can scan Alum Creek and beyond. There are wildfowl in the water and Bison dotting the sagebrush with a lone Elk strolling about. Then, a Coyote walks along the creek, beautifully lit by the early morning light, though the geese and cranes ignore its passing.

We scan the far ridge and bingo! A lone Gray Wolf is standing in the open! We train the scopes on it before it sits down to rest. Then another appears in the sagebrush to the right. We then note that there's a small black puppy in tow - we've found the den site of the famous Wapiti Pack!

We watch enthralled as three adults walk around with five pups following their every move. At one point the wolves venture onto the snow strand to cool off – how lucky are we to witness wild wolves doing their thing.

On to brunch at the Lake Lodge, then refreshed we plan to work the north shore of Yellowstone Lake. However, no sooner have we left the Lake Village area we encounter some parked vehicles. There to the left looking somewhat incongruous in the middle of a grassy, fenced pasture is the most handsome Grizzly Bear. We park and walk over to where we can view with several other watchers. The bear hardly lifts his head as it grazes like a cow, the sun catching its two-tone grizzled fur. The beautiful 'bruin' gathers a crowd and we admire how the ranger manages the on-lookers and it's when we hear one of the quotes of the tour when the ranger bellows 'Sir, get out of the tree and away from the bear!'

Crossing Fishing Bridge and Pelican Creek, we stop at Indian Pond to check out the wildfowl as we've seen different ducks here – we list Lesser Scaup, Common Merganser (our Goosander), Barrow's Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Mallard and Western Grebe. Further along we pause at Sedge Bay looking for more bears that we know are in the area - there's no sign at the moment, but we admire the few marmots that are on show. We climb to Lake Butte Overlook that affords the most tremendous view of the still waters of the lake to the jagged Tetons beyond. We scan the slopes too, hoping to find bears but content ourselves with great looks of Red-tailed Hawks with birds bringing prey to the nest.

We continue the climb to Sylvan Pass where an endearing marmot walks right up to us – we suspect that it's getting hand-outs! Nearby, we have a late lunch at Sylvan Lake with the Gray Jays. Then we start our return route and as we pass near Lake Butte we see some cars gathered... someone has spotted a bear below the road so it's all out to join the fun. Walking below is a beautiful Grizzly Bear looking really blonde in the sunlight. It works its way through the trees, then rests on a fallen tree – it looks fab in the telescope.

The route back takes us to Pelican Creek and we stop to scan the area. There are a lot of birds on show and we list White Pelican, Northern Pintail, Blue-winged Teal, Cinnamon Teal, Lesser Scaup and lots of Canada Geese. More unusual are the group of nine White-faced Ibises and a Forster's Tern.

There's a second look at the Hayden Valley and we see a group of four Coyotes working along the riverbank – we break it gently to the others gathered that they are not wolves. Continuing the drive back we come across another group of cars, close to Canyon. We walk up to where people are watching a beautifully coloured 'Cinnamon' Black Bear. What an animal to end the day on!

Day 7: Dunraven Pass to Cooke City

We leave West Yellowstone just after 9am and enter the National Park through the busy west gate. We drive along the scenic Madison Valley and onto Gibbon Falls, a beautiful cascade and our first of many waterfalls for the day. Judy spots

an American Dipper at the base of the falls but it proves a little elusive – we'll see them later, I'm sure.

Next, we drive to view another of the many impressive waterfalls in Yellowstone. At the 'Brink of the Upper Falls' a path takes us along to where the Yellowstone River drops through a narrow gorge and the amount and force of water passing close by is bewildering, rushing over in billowing clouds of spray.

If the Upper Falls were impressive then the next stop has to be described as awesome. At the head of the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone the water drops over the breath-taking Lower Falls, carving its way through the yellow rhyolite cliffs past a series of eroded pillars, or hoodoos - one of the most iconic vistas in the National Park. We continue to the Visitor Centre at Canyon where we learn of the super volcano that lies beneath us. It's a little un-nerving to learn that the next explosion will probably be an 'extinction event' and even more un-settling to know that it's long overdue. Hopefully not this week.

The road from Canyon takes us north over Dunraven Pass and near its summit we take our picnic lunch with a fine view over the forest to the snowy Absaroka mountains. After eats we descend the northern slope of Mt Washburn scanning the wide-open expanse. At the first viewpoint we are in luck as a big Cinnamon Bear is in a clearing with an Elk. Lower down we can look across, over Antelope Creek and there are several Bison, Elk and one Coyote. It's a wonderful scene - gone are the blanket forests of Lodgepole Pines that we've become accustomed to, in favour of a mosaic of bare slopes, rocky outcrops and willow and aspen hollows.

As we descend, we enter a known hot spot for bears, Black Bears in particular and we only drive a short distance from Antelope Creek when we find some parked cars. There to the right is a delightful adult Black Bear. We park and get into position where we can see we have a mother and two cubs. One youngster is black, the other a cinnamon.

We watch as they work their way along the forest edge, at times walking along the trunks of fallen trees. They soon disappear, so we anticipate where they might show up and get into position. When we scan, we can see another solo Black Bear ahead. When the family of bears appear, the mother can see the lone male and signals to the cubs to climb the nearest tree which they do with great ability and speed. There's a stand-off for a while, with the cubs in the tree and the wary mother peering across to the lone bear - at times she stamps the ground with front limbs – it's enthralling to watch.

Eventually the cubs climb down and the threesome wander deeper into the woods. It's the signal for us to leave too, so we drive to take a break at Tower, where we can make the most of the facilities and enjoy the fine views over Tower Falls.

At Roosevelt Junction the road splits and we take the eastward route entering the famed Lamar Valley. At Little America we get looks at Pronghorn and Bison, then

stop at a small pond on the left. There are: Yellow-headed Blackbird, American Coot and our first Ruddy Ducks showing well, the males displaying to the females.

We drive further east to the Lamar Canyon, where we can see a large nest atop a tall tree – an adult Osprey is incubating eggs and we get great looks through the telescopes. A Golden Eagle is soaring overhead and we get looks of a bird hanging in the wind, hovering. Beyond the canyon, the vista opens to one of the most iconic views of Yellowstone. The Lamar River meanders across a valley floor dotted with masses of Bison and Pronghorn, with the snowy Absaroka Mountains looking down on America's Serengeti. At the first pull out there are several cars, so we stop and look out to fully enjoy the moment. Below we see a group of Pronghorns relentlessly chasing a Coyote – lots of fun watching, though less fun for the Coyote.

Finally, we arrive at our hotel at Cooke City and our evening meal is at The Bistro – nice local trout!

Day 8: Badgers and the Bear's Tooth

We are up early at 5.30am and driving into Yellowstone National Park in the first light. We have a sweepstakes on what will be the first critter and the bets are on Red Fox or Mule Deer. It's not long before we find a car parked and as we slow down, we can see a large Moose in the willows – so we are all wrong with our predictions!

As we approach Round Prairie we see two more large bull Moose out in the open – nice. We carry onwards along Soda Butte Creek and we start clocking the Bison herds with their young calves, or 'red dogs'. Towards the confluence of the creek and the Lamar we stop when we see some people with telescopes, obviously trained on something. They are watching a family of Grizzly Bears high on the upper slopes of the ridge – a mother with three cubs – all tiny dots!

At our next stop in the heart of the Lamar and Graham immediately spots a bear walking the edge of the forest – a big dark Grizzly walking determinedly along the perimeter of aspens. We watch as it strides in the background, past groups of Bison and Pronghorn. Onwards to Slough Creek, as we wish to see if there is much action at a known Gray Wolf den. We walk up to a group looking at the close sage and there is indeed a den but this belongs to an American Badger! Ah well – we'd better wait. We don't have to wait too long either, when a beautifully marked American Badger walks into view – what a handsome animal.

Sadly, there is no action at the wolf den and we get news that the adults have moved the pups elsewhere... we retrace our steps driving to Soda Butte to admire the curious rock formation in the middle of the valley and we get looks at another badger digging nearby. Onto to Barronette Peak, where we can scan the steep slopes of this impressive mountain. High on some of the most precipitous ledges we spot a nice white Mountain Goat sitting on a ledge. Further scans reveal a few more too - another new mammal and all before breakfast.

We leave the National Park through the east gate passing back into Montana, where at Silver Gate we can get a well-earned breakfast at the Log Cabin Café. Afterwards we retreat to our rooms to recharge the batteries!

We meet up again at noon to continue our day, ordering some sandwiches at the local deli before heading east to pastures new. For a change of scenery, we start the long climb up the impressive Beartooth Highway, reputed to be the most scenic drive in the lower 48 states and who are we to argue. We stop at two overlooks on the way up, that affords views to the dramatic peaks of Pilot and Index mountains and then the wider panorama to the Absaroka and Wind River Ranges. We take a short walk to explore the open country of aspens, conifer stands and alpine meadows. A stroll yields Hairy Woodpecker, Robin, Bluebirds, Pink-sided Juncos and we hear a Warbling Vireo.

The road winds higher and higher and we stop at a couple of points to admire Beartooth Falls, Beartooth Lake and Beartooth Butte. We stop at the services at the 'Top of the World' for lunch and facilities, then, moving still higher, we enter a winter wonderland of snow-covered slopes and frozen lakes. Finally, the road passes beyond the treeline, doubling back on itself through tight hairpin bends, to the exposed rocky summits and nearing the top we stop for a scan. A few birds are working around the edges of snow strands and flying around – Black Rosy Finch – one of our target species! We also get nice looks at a buff-breasted American Pipit that is confiding, on rocks close to us. There are a few marmots on show too, as well as out-of-place Robins and a White-crowned Sparrow.

At the West Summit we reach 10,947ft and we can't help but pose for photos in the snow. Then it's along a short distance to where we can get out and stroll in the lee of the summit. Beneath our feet is a mix of small rocks and spongy carpet dotted with alpine plants. We identify Mountain Douglasia, Alpine Forget-me-not, American Smelowskia and Spiny Phlox before walking to the edge of the drop-off. The view opens out to include sweeps to the north and the famed Bear's Tooth pinnacle that gives the mountain range its name. What a panorama!

We drive to our furthest point and do some alternative mammal watching, admiring the nerve of the snowboarders and skiers that are going off-piste. Retracing our route, we drive lower and we are in luck as a few cars are parked in a forested section. There to the right, next to the road are two wonderful Grizzlies. What a way to end the wildlife watching!

Day 9: Chief Joseph Highway

We opt for another early morning in the Lamar Valley, hoping for some wolf action. Pushing through this most scenic of places we admire the close little red dogs amongst the Bison herds. Reaching Slough Creek we overlook the old den site hoping that some wolves from the Junction Butte pack may be hanging around. From our elevated position we can look down on a series on river bends and oxbows, as well as across to the slope where the wolves have denned earlier in the season. Try as we might it's a no show for the wolves, but we are entertained

by another American Badger that Steve points to, below us. We get sustained looks at this fantastic animal going about its business in the early morning light.

Working back along the Lamar Valley we stop at the confluence area, where we can walk to look down on Soda Butte Creek. The view is beautiful with looks over the gravelly river and willows, across to the sagebrush plain to the steep slopes beyond. In the far distance we can make out Bighorn Sheep on the precipitous upper escarpment. Below we enjoy looks at Goosander and Spotted Sandpiper along the water course.

We return to Cooke City for breakfast and order our lunches before setting out again. We drive east and this time we choose to explore the scenic Chief Joseph highway that heads to Cody. The drive is wonderfully scenic following the Clarks Fork River course and we stop at our first big pool on the right of the road with a towering escarpment beyond. The water is fringed with extensive reedbeds and we can hear a chorus of Marsh Wrens and Common Yellowthroat, but they are difficult to see. Easier to watch are Red-winged Blackbirds and assorted duck. One of the blackbirds is giving a Sandhill Crane a hard time, mobbing it incessantly.

A short distance further the next pools have a nice selection of ducks and some Spotted Sandpipers. Also seen are smart Chipping Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers and we finally get looks at the Common Yellowthroat.

We continue higher following the Clarks Fork canyon, stopping at the bridge that spans Sunlight Creek Canyon. It's a nice place for lunch and an opportunity to watch Violet-green Swallows, Cliff Swallows and smart White-throated Swifts zoom around the canyon. We get a soar over by a nice Cooper's Hawk.

After eats we drive further, following every twist and turn until we reach the summit of the pass. We get out to admire the amazing view and can't help noticing that there are confiding critters running around – both Yellow-bellied Marmots and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels.

We decide to drive even further east to explore the leeward side of the slope and we drop into a whole new landscape. The slopes are rugged and sparsely marked with juniper bushes and far beyond we can look over the more arid rolling lands of central Wyoming. We stop at one spectacular red cliff face and as we park up, we hear the distinctive wheezy song of a Lazuli Bunting. It perches on the top of bushes giving us great looks. On the skyline is a huge raptor perched – a stunning adult Golden Eagle keeps an eye on us. We suspect that it is nesting on the cliff-face – we've seen them here before.

We decide to venture further into territories new and to the lower levels of the Chief Joseph Highway, where the landscape becomes rolling hills and grasslands. A Bald Eagle is being mobbed by a Turkey Vulture and then a pair of Northern Harriers, that must be nesting nearby, join in so we watch the four raptors overhead at once – a fabulous image.

We start the long drive back but pull over soon to identify a deer in a field alongside the road – it's a White-tailed Deer that has a confusing and atypical red colouring – thankfully lifting its distinctive tail when it runs off!

We also stop at a higher viewpoint overlooking the red cliff that we located the eagle nest earlier – we are hoping to be able to see inside the nest. Not for the first time, we set up our telescopes and this attracts some passers-by. This time its seven. Young Irish lads that are sharing a large RV – we can't show them an eagle, but they enjoy wonderful looks at a perched Broad-tailed Hummingbird and we enjoy the craic.

Back at the lakes we improve our views of Song Sparrow and Marsh Wren, but sadly there are no critters. However, as we drop into Cooke City we spot a large animal in the open - there is a Grizzly Bear in a meadow right on the edge of town! What an end to another fab day.

Day 10: Oops, Where's The Lunches

We have an earlyish breakfast at the coffee shop in Cooke City with fresh pastries and good coffee to fuel us. The sandwiches for lunch are ordered too – we'll pick them up after we've loaded the van or that's the plan anyway.

It's our transfer day and we are passing through the whole of the Northern Tier of the National Park, bound for Gardiner at the northwest gate. Our first stop is close by at Silver Gate when we see two bull Moose in the willows by the road. We stop for photos and enjoy some birds too, with looks at Wilson's Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow and Willow Flycatcher.

At Barronette Peak we have a second look at the Mountain Goats and we watch a group of adults with one small kid. Further along at Pebble Creek we take a stroll around the old campground, now closed so it's quite deserted. We get nice looks at a Swainson's Thrush atop a pine tree, singing away with fluty notes. We also see Northern Flicker, Hammond's Flycatcher, Yellow-rumped Warblers and listen to a Warbling Vireo.

Driving along Round Prairie something catches the eye and we stop immediately – blimey it's a wolf!! It strolls along the riverbank with a lolloping gait and we can see it's a collared individual (many of the re-introduced animals in the Park have radio tags). It's a mature gray phase wolf with a thick set neck – our closest views to date and we marvel at its presence. Other cars stop and before we know it, we've started a wolf jam. The beast works along the edge of trees, then double backs and eventually disappears into the forest – a special encounter.

We drive further into the Lamar where we choose our picnic site, but there's an unscheduled about-turn as the leader has forgotten to pick up the sandwiches! It all works in our favour (or perhaps it's planned!) and we get just past Pebble Creek and into a bear jam with a mum and cubs Black Bear family – that worked out ok! Everyone enjoys fine views of a delightful trio while Darren gets the sandwiches.

Picnic is not without event, as we get our best looks at a Dipper alongside Soda Bute Creek and as we leave, we see another Cinnamon Bear across the other side of the river. We are getting quite a total of bears!

Onto Slough Creek and as we approach the cliff face on the eastern side of the valley, we notice two large eagles moving across the scene. The Golden Eagle eyrie is again active this year and we get great displays from birds in flight, though any chick is sitting tight and not really visible.

There's a well-earned coffee break at Tower, followed by a short walk around the Calcite Springs Overlook boardwalk. There are fine views into the Yellowstone canyon with great looks at the basalt columns that form the upper escarpment. What is a surprise is the engaging male Williamson's Sapsucker that is in a tree next to the path – wonderful looks at a handsome woodpecker. Towards Roosevelt Junction the cars are moving really slowly through the series of bends and we soon find out why, a beautiful Cinnamon Black Bear, almost blonde, is foraging close to the road. We park and get fabulous looks.

Finally, we check in at our new base for two nights, the Big Rock Hotel at Gardiner. Our evening meal is at the Iron Horse Grille overlooking the river that runs through town.

Day 11: Mammoth Terraces and a Pika Fest

Before breakfast we leave Gardiner and drive the winding road to Mammoth, stopping briefly at a roadside pool where Judy has spotted something in the water – we get good looks at swimming Muskrats! Onto Mammoth to explore the famous travertine formations. At the base of the barren slopes stands the Liberty Cap, a now dry pinnacle punching upwards. A boardwalk takes us to Palette Spring, a wet, active deposit, slowly working its way along the hillside leaving a wake of skeletal trees as it goes. The early morning light is perfect for photography and with the added bonus of a Killdeer family walking in the sunlit ripples and two Yellow-bellied Marmots peering down from the top terrace.

We drive to the Upper Terraces, where we can walk the boardwalks and paths exploring this unique landscape. The travertine formations are a wonder, with vapours drifting across a scene marked by more skeletal trees and trickling water that backs up along white terraces, looking like a series of infinity pools from a garden expo. Birds are around and we see Yellow-rumped Warblers, Mountain Bluebirds, American Robins, White-crowned and Chipping Sparrows.

We drop back down into Mammoth to get some breakfast at the Mammoth Dining Room and the breakfast buffet is both delicious and welcome. After this, we explore the town, a former military fort with some of the original buildings now serving as National Park buildings including the Allbright Visitor Centre. There are lots of great displays and information and also some attractive residents - Great Horned Owls have nested here for several years and we are in luck today. In one of the tall trees adjacent to one of the old park buildings a lone adult owl is perched, brilliantly

picked out by Pam. No doubt the parent bird is keeping a watchful eye on proceedings should anyone get too close to the nest site in the next tree along. From a different angle we can work out the tangle of dense vegetation on the centre of the tree, and there is a large orangey-looking downy chick. A fabulous addition to the bird list!

Next, we take the road that climbs through a series of bends through an area of rocky outcrops and pillars. We stop and look down at a jumble of boulders and rocks hoping to catch a glimpse of Pikas – it's a known site for this endearing little critter. A Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel is atop one rock (another endearing little critter) and just a few feet away is a small Rock Wren. Still no Pikas though.

The road continues to its highest point, then levels out at a wide plain marked by the picturesque Swan Lake and rimmed by the snowy Galatin mountains and Bunsen Peak. There are quite a few people gathered as the National Park Rangers are holding an information session, with a table full of bear related items – Grizzly and Black Bear skins and skulls. On the water are large white things - appropriately, two Trumpeter Swans – one swimming, the other on a large nest. We start sifting through the waterfowl seeing Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Green-winged Teal, Bufflehead and our first Shoveler. There are also lots of American Avocets in the water, not wading but afloat and amongst these is a diminutive Wilson's Phalarope. Eared Grebe, Swainson's Hawk, and Northern Harrier complete the bird list.

We push on to nearby Sheep-eater Cliff, where there are striking outcrops of volcanic columnar basalt and some special residents that we have always enjoyed watching – another Pika site! We walk a short distance to where the rock formation forms a natural amphitheatre, and we wait quietly... there are a couple of Yellow-bellied Marmots lounging on rocks and we can soon see two smaller young marmots weaving over the boulders too. Then Jim spots a small grey thing scurrying over the rocks and quickly disappearing. Sure enough, we hear the high pitched squeak from a Pika and soon relocate it, in a cavity in the rocks – fabulous looks through the scope!

We wander back to the picnic tables at Sheep-eater Cliff to find a very approachable Pika in the rocks - so much for being quiet and waiting patiently! A good place for lunch we reckon.

Afterwards we have some time looking at more volcanic features of Yellowstone. First, there's the feature called Obsidian Cliff (no surprise what's there), then its onto Roaring Mountain where we admire the scarred slope marked by several fumaroles – it's as if there's a dragon sleeping beneath the hill. Finally, at Norris Geyser Basin there is the second biggest collection of geo-thermal features in the world (after Old Faithful) and there's a self-guiding trail and boardwalk - plenty to occupy the attention, with imaginative names like Puff'n'Stuff, Porcelain and Porkchop.

Day 12: Yellowstone, From North to South

We leave Gardiner at 7am and drive to Mammoth for another breakfast at the Mammoth Dining Room. Afterwards, we drive east along to Blacktail Ponds and set the scopes up to go through the birds on show. Waterfowl and both Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds are most obvious. Then the peace and quiet is broken with the howling and yipping from a family of Coyotes, but however hard we scan we can't locate them. Then, one Coyote works its way across from the far left and as it makes its way through the sage, we discover the rest of the family. We can make out the size difference with two smaller animals and there's much frolicking and playful action – a delight to watch. Jim also spots a large Prairie Falcon charging through.

The next stop is at the Hellroaring Overlook – a magnificent viewpoint looking over a dynamic vista. Distant individual Bison are dotted about, one looking like a bear as its half hidden by the sage. Not too far away is a big Cinnamon Bear and not for the first time we have fun pointing it out to people as they stop and ask what we are looking at.

We then continue west to Floating Island Pond, where we scan the small weed fringed pond adding Ruddy Duck and American Coot with fluffy young to the day list and enjoying close looks at Yellow-headed Blackbirds displaying from the rushes. Next, we check the small narrow valley that is marked by a Petrified Tree – testament to the volcanic flows that have consumed the area long ago and that have preserved a large upright tree trunk. But what's this? It's starting to drizzle, so it's off to Tower for coffee.

After drinks we work our way south along Antelope Creek, stopping a couple of times to scan the arresting landscape. The drizzle has stopped and as we reach the highest part of the paved road we notice that they've opened Chittenden Road, a gravel track that allows access to the highest point in the Park, just below Mt Washburn. We drive up to the car park and decide that there can't be a better place to have our picnic lunch, with panoramic views in all directions. We do some botanising, as there are flowers everywhere and even see a Horned Lark that has obviously taken up summer territory on the bare tops.

Dropping down to Canyon, we decide to visit the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone for a second time, this time driving along the South Rim to Artists Point. Again, the views are tremendous and we all agree it's worth a second look. Further south lies Hayden Valley and as we enter, we can see cars parked up ahead. We get off the road and enquire – there's a wolf ahead and it seems close by. Indeed, as we walk up it crosses the road in plain view. It's an individual in heavy moult, strolling along in plain view – we get really close views.

At Mud Volcanos there's only time for a short walk around the boardwalk in between showers – enough time to see the Dragon's Mouth and the eponymous Mud Volcano. And so, onto Le Hardy Rapids for one of the birdy highlights of Yellowstone. We walk along the boardwalk towards the cascade, noting that the

water level is really high and the rocks that are usually exposed are covered in rushing water. With no place to perch we see nine Harlequin drakes on the side of the river flow, clutching to fallen trees – fantastic views at what must be the most beautifully marked duck.

There's still time for one last visit to Pelican Creek, where we enjoy a flight of White Pelicans no less. Other birds include Forster's Tern, Bufflehead, Goosander, Lesser Scaup, Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal. We arrive at Flagg Ranch just after 6pm, in time for a quick freshen up and an evening meal.

Day 13: Last Chance Beavers

A pre-breakfast stroll down Grassy Road is really productive, especially as the road is closed to traffic, so we have the place to ourselves. It goes through the lodgepole pine forest and across to open spaces towards a stand of burned-out timber. Birds are really vocal early in the morning and we see Yellow Warblers, Lincoln's Sparrows, Willow Flycatcher, Robins and Cowbirds in full song. The Wilson's Warblers, Sandhill Cranes and Western Tanagers are joining in the chorus but are tricky to see, especially as our attention is drawn to some tapping from a woodpecker species.

We wander to the stand of dead timber and manage to find the culprit – a nice male Red-naped Sapsucker. Then ensues some fun and games with duet wood tapping and we get wonderful views of this inquisitive bird!

After breakfast we pack the van but only drive a short way to the crossing over the Snake River. We park and explore, loving the Cliff Swallows that are gathering mud and building their nests under the bird – there's also a Raven's nest there too. Goosanders (Common Mergansers) are on the river and on a shingle bar a male Spotted Sandpiper displays to its partner. We complete the circuit around the pines, with looks at Vesper Sparrow, Pink-sided Juncos and Mule Deer

We continue south re-entering Grand Teton National Park and choose to drive the road that climbs Signal Mountain. We wind our way to reach the summit, where we can admire the fine views all around. We can spot distant Bison and Elk below whilst soaking up the incredible vistas from two points.

And so to Jackson, where we check in for our final night in the 49er Inn and our last meal at Bubba's Restaurant. There's still the matter of a missing Beaver and as we've finished our meal early, we gather for one last attempt to see these intriguing creatures.

We are only leaving Jackson passing Flat Creek, when something in the water catches the eye... it's a Beaver!! Everyone is out quickly and we approach quietly, though the noise from the road masks our whispers. There in the water we watch the animal dive and surface with handfuls of weed that it nibbles away at. It works its way close and climbs on to the bank in front just twenty feet away – wonderful!

We'd still like to visit the lodge at Gros Ventre, so drive north into the Park. Others are gathered roadside and we join in the fun. Sure enough, a Beaver is nibbling away just outside the large lodge. We can admire not only the animals but their building skills, with the pool backed up by a series of dams. What a way to finish our holiday, especially when we get a fly over from a group of Common Nighthawks – that's a wrap!

Day 14: Jackson Hole and Home

Everyone has some personal time to explore the streets of Jackson Hole, before we meet up at 11.30am to start the long journey home.

Species of the Trip: The Top Five

- 1 Black Bear
- 2 Coyote
- 3= Mountain Bluebird
- 3= Harlequin
- 3= Killdeer

Favourite Place

Lamar Valley, with honorary mentions to the Beartooth Highway and Cooke City.

Magic Moment

There were many nominations: these include Black Bear family and cubs climbing trees; Bison stampede in the Tetons and the wood tapping duet with the Sapsucker!

Geo-thermal Feature of the Trip

Grand Geyser

BIRDS

Common Loon
Eared Grebe
Western Grebe
Clark's Grebe
American White Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Trumpeter Swan
Canada Goose
Green-winged Teal
Blue-winged Teal
Cinnamon Teal
Mallard
Gadwall
Northern Pintail
Northern Shoveler
American Wigeon
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Harlequin
Barrow's Goldeneye
Bufflehead
Common Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Bald Eagle
Golden Eagle
Northern Harrier
Red-tailed Hawk
Swainson's Hawk
American Kestrel
Prairie Falcon
American Coot
Sora Rail
Sandhill Crane
Great Blue Heron
White-faced Ibis
Killdeer
Spotted Sandpiper
Wilson's Snipe
Wilson's Phalarope
Ring-billed Gull
Forster's Tern
Collared Dove
Mourning Dove
Great Horned Owl
Common Nighthawk
White-throated Swift
Calliope Hummingbird
Broad-tailed Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Williamson's Sapsucker
Red-naped Sapsucker
Hairy Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker (h)
Northern Flicker
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Willow Flycatcher

Dusky Flycatcher
Hammond's Flycatcher
Western Kingbird
Eastern Kingbird
Clark's Nutcracker
Gray Jay (Canada Jay)
Black-billed Magpie
Raven
American Crow
Horned Lark
Tree Swallow
Violet-green Swallow
Bank Swallow
Rough-winged Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Barn Swallow
Mountain Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
House Wren
Marsh Wren
Rock Wren
American Dipper
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Mountain Bluebird
Hermit Thrush
Swainson's Thrush
American Robin
Gray Catbird
American Pipit
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
MacGillivray's Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Yellow Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Wilson's Warbler
Green-tailed Towhee (h)
Spotted Towhee (h)
Brewer's Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
(Pink-sided Junco)
Western Tanager
Black-headed Grosbeak
Lazuli Bunting
Brewer's Blackbird
Common Grackle
Red-winged Blackbird
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Brown-headed Cowbird
Western Meadowlark
Black Rosyfinch
Bullock's Oriole
Cassin's Finch

House Finch
Red Crossbill (h)
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

MAMMALS

Black Bear (15)
Grizzly Bear (12)
Long-tailed Weasel (DLT)
American Badger
Coyote
Gray Wolf (11)
Red Fox
Least Chipmunk
Uinta Chipmunk
Uinta Ground Squirrel
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Yellow-bellied Marmot
Canadian Beaver
Muskrat
Pika
American Elk (Wapiti)
Mule Deer
White-tailed Deer
Moose
Pronghorn
Mountain Goat
American Bison
Bighorn Sheep