

Holiday Highlights
Yellowstone Spring
11-25 June 2016

Guests: Franky and David Perry, Elaine and Malcolm Sparey, Vanessa and Ian Johnston, Fiona and Ian Tulloch, Jane Nickerson, Pauline Pothecary, Heather James, Gaye Henson, Sue Ripley.

Leaders: Darren Rees and Duncan MacDonald

Day 1: Getting There

A comfortable flight from London's Heathrow to Chicago is not without highlights: most of the Atlantic crossing is obscured by cloud but it finally breaks somewhere over the wastes of Labrador. Flying over thousands of square miles of boreal forest and pools, we finally reach the Great Lakes of Huron and Michigan. What a view! Finally we descend into Chicago, landing at O'Hare airport where we pass through US Customs and Immigration. After a bite to eat we resume the journey with the last leg and the second flight of the day taking us further west. Eventually we land at Jackson Hole, pick up our bags and drive to our hotel, arriving after 10 pm. Phew what a day!

Day 2: The Mighty Tetons

We decide to take a wander around the leafy streets behind the hotel and catch up with some common yard birds of Jackson. Pine Siskins are calling from several trees, Ravens are croaking as they fly about and Brewer's Blackbirds are commonplace. American Robins, Mountain Chickadee, Yellow Warbler and Ruby-crowned Kinglets are singing and showing well. Beautiful Cedar Waxwings are sitting on the spruce trees and trilling and we also get to see a smart White-crowned Sparrow. At the end of one street we can look over a small marsh and we see Northern Flicker, Violet-green Swallows, Black-billed Magpie and David spots an Osprey perched in a tree. Retracing our steps we see colourful Western Tanagers and get more feeder action with better looks as Pine Siskin. So, a good start for the bird list!

After breakfast we drive through town, place our sandwich order at the deli and then stop at Flat Creek Visitor Centre on the edge of the Elk Refuge. In the reeds around a pool are both Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds; perched on wooden railings are Tree, Violet-green, Bank and Barn Swallow, soon joined by our first Song Sparrow. Marsh Wrens, normally difficult to see, are very obliging this morning – less so a Sora Rail that sounds off from the cat-tails. Across the grasses are our first Pronghorn with calves and a Sandhill Crane.

Further along we can see more waterfowl in the water, so we go through the species: Ring-necked Duck, Mallard, Gadwall, Redhead and Trumpeter Swan. Duncan spots a distant Northern Harrier drifting across the reeds and there are

some Red-tailed Hawks above the rocky ridge behind. A large Bald Eagle does a fly-by then Jane spots a different raptor – it's white-tailed... it's a Ferruginous Hawk! This is followed by a Swainson's Hawk – a good raptor list already!

The road climbs north a short distance, then crests the hill to reveal the splendour of the mighty Teton Range – a must for a photo stop. We also see our first Mountain Bluebird and delightful Uinta Ground Squirrels playing sentinel on sage bushes. Duncan finds a smart new bird too – a Western Kingbird.

We drive the road that parallels the riverbank at Gros Ventre and there are two dark lumps in the bushes close to the water... two Moose! They look great through the telescopes and we can study the male's emergent antlers and his curious dingly dangly beard thingy! (We later learn that it's called a dewlap.) Further along we stop and watch a Pronghorn group with one chasing off a Coyote.

We stop at Gros Ventre campground for lunch, where we relax with our ample sandwiches and some quality birds: House Wrens, Yellow Warbler and Green-tailed Towhees are singing. Swallows are sat on wires, there's a Common Nighthawk flying over the river, a Yellow-rumped Warbler flits through the cottonwood trees and David finds a Townsend's Warbler too.

Following the river along the Gros Ventre valley we see more Swainsons Hawks and our first Kestrel on the way. We stop in narrow gully to watch Olive-sided Flycatcher, Broad-tailed Hummer and good looks at delightful Yellow-bellied Marmot. Further along, in rocky sheltered wooded area we see Cassins Finch, a male Western Tanager singing and Duncan finds a Hammond's Flycatcher.

Opposite the great landslide site (half a hillside crumbled in 1925) we park at the trailhead and straight away Franky spots a target critter – a cute American Pika. We walk the Geology Trail to the rubble spill area and witness an amazing landscape, testament to the tectonic power of the region. As well as wondering at a both devastated and naturally reclaimed habitat we see Clark's Nutcracker and Townsend's Solitaire.

The journey back affords great views to the Tetons and we have to stop. Broad-tailed Hummingbirds are showing well with one male going through his dynamic territorial display. Turkey Vultures spiral in the distance and further along we see American Wigeon and Spotted Sandpiper. What a great first day. And so to the nearby Thai restaurant. Bon Appe Thai!

Day 3: Bison, Beavers and Big Eagles

After breakfast we gather at 7.30am to drive to the north section of Grand Teton National Park. The drive is truly spectacular and we can't resist stopping at Glacier Viewpoint to admire the landscape. The mountains tower above the sage covered plain and the Snake River corridor is marked by a thousand

cottonwoods and aspens. On some of the flat shoulders are groups of American Elk, our first of the trip.

Further north we come off the paved road and drive a gravel track that skirts along the southern perimeter of Elk Ranch Flats. The first elevated viewpoint reveals another breath-taking panorama with hundreds of American Bison dotted across the grassland. Pronghorn Antelope are scattered in fewer numbers but looking more striking with their handsome beige and white markings.

At a couple of points we stop and scan the scene adding birds here and there: Mountain Bluebirds, Red-tailed Hawk, Swainson's Hawk, Northern Harrier, Yellow-rumped Warblers, White-crowned Sparrows. Further along we can get our closest looks at Bison with red calves and Pronghorn groups, and watch their comings and goings, all the while soaking up the sunshine and wondrous panorama.

Duncan spots a distant Golden Eagle and it plummets from the sky behind a ridge, that's worth investigating. We drive to the base of an escarpment and Pauline spots two large birds coming in low from the right. Two adult Golden Eagles are riding the updraft and at times hovering allowing us to view in the scope, handsomely marked pale-naped birds and they continue to display before one perches on a rock on the skyline. Wow.

Back to the main road we enter the park gates and then take a slow ride up Pacific Creek towards Two Ocean Lake. In the woods is a lone moose and soon afterwards we stop at an elevated section of road to scan. There are several colourful Lazuli Buntings singing with White-crowned Sparrows. At the lake we have our picnic lunch, then take a quick look at the water. A White Pelican is soaring overhead, there are smart Western Grebes, lots of Goosanders, Trumpeter Swans, Lesser Scaup and a Mallard with chicks. We then get a great show from an Osprey fishing then getting chased by a young Bald Eagle.

Next we drive to the well-appointed Jackson Lake Lodge that sits on a ridge with wonderful views across Willow Flats to Jackson Lake and the Teton Range. Lots of Elk dot the grassy areas and Duncan spots a Coyote. There are also Sandhill Cranes and we witness a food passing display from a pair of Northern Harriers.

A short drive further is Ox Bow Bend and another inspiring vista in the park. The Snake River slows to negotiate a series of bends with the backdrop of the imposing Mount Moran. There are birds in the water: American Wigeon, Common Merganser, Canada Geese, Muskrat and a Bald Eagle. Then comes the rain, so back to Jackson for an early evening meal at Bubba's.

Thankfully, the weather improves and we decide to end the day at Schwabacher's Landing on the banks of the Snake River. This has been a traditional site for American Beaver and as we park the vans we can see the tell-tale signs of their presence. A series of dams and pools span the river beneath the towering

backdrop of the Tetons. We walk to the edge of the water and prepare to wait quietly, across from us are two beautiful Green-winged Teal, a young Killdeer and a noisy Spotted Sandpiper, with Western Wood Pewees that are landing on the dam. The wait is not long.

Within minutes we spot an animal swimming beneath the surface and we can track as it leaves traces of bubbles. Up it pops, like a discarded piece of carpet floating in the water. Another beaver appears and swims the same course followed by a smaller animal with a different shaped tail – a Muskrat. As the light starts to fade, Common Nighthawks start calling and flying overhead and we get really close views of Beaver coming back to the lodge in front of us, a photographer's dream. What an evenings viewing!

Day 4: From First Light to Last Light

Our planned early morning excursion to photograph the scenic Mormon Row barns at dawn means leaving at 5am (blimey) but as we drive north we can see it is worth the effort. A line of mist and low cloud hugs the base of the snow-capped Tetons – awesome as they say in these parts! At Mormon Row there are a few photographers and we join in taking pics of the most scenic barns in the world.

Lots of birds are calling from the sagebrush – Western Meadowlarks are most obvious and obliging. We need to work at the sparrows but eventually we get great looks at Brewer's, Savannah and Vesper. Walking along the length of the row of rustic buildings we can scan beyond to the sage-covered flats. Elk, Pronghorn and distant Bison dot the landscape but there are no signs of the elusive Sage Grouse. Walking back we get great looks at obliging Mountain Bluebirds and delightful Uinta Ground Squirrels that are the epitome of cuteness, we want to take them home.

Driving along the dirt track to the south we pause at the iconic Moulton Barn for more photos, before catching up with Black-capped Chickadee, a perched Swainson's Hawk (looking very harrier like). Further along the track we get scope views of unusual Long-billed Curlews, a rare breeder in the park and another addition to the list.

After breakfast we head back out to Sawmill Ponds at Moose Junction. Gray Catbird, Song Sparrows, Barrow's Goldeneye and Yellow Warblers are all visible from the overlook. Walking along the top of riverbank is a delight: Dusky Flycatcher, Red Crossbill and Green-tailed Towhee put on a show. Tree Swallows are nesting in aspens and one is peeking out of a hole. In pools below we see Gadwall, Green-winged and Cinnamon Teals. Overhead are Turkey Vulture, Osprey and Red-tailed Hawks. After checking the impressive visitor centre nearby, we move on to Dorman's for lunch. There is a squally shower that has us all running for cover but when this abates the nearby hummingbird feeders get busy with visits from Broad-tailed and Calliope Hummingbirds.

Next there is some much-needed downtime in Jackson – opportunity to check the galleries and shops, and for Sue to visit the clinic as she's under par. After another evening meal at Bubba's we travel to the south section of the Moose-Wilson road for an owl quest. There is an amazing landscape of aspens, spruces and pines with meadows, a known territory of Great Gray Owls. Walking through the forest we enter a sage and grass filled meadow or clearing, several Elk are grazing and lift their heads to acknowledge us. There is also Mule Deer and Red-tailed Hawks on show. We scan likely perching places and thoroughly work the area before returning to the vans and moving to another clearing nearby.

We keep looking, the evening songs from birds diminish. then we notice the persistent mobbing or scolding calls from American Robins. We investigate and are eventually rewarded with great looks at a superb Great Horned Owl. A result! A wonderful end of a great day, from dawn til dusk.

Day 5: To Yellowstone National Park

Our pre-breakfast outing starts at 7.00am and it's just a short distance to the National Elk Refuge to see what we can find. The weather is perfect and there are fine vistas across the valley as we approach some pools beneath Miller Butte. Ducks in the water include Cinnamon Teal, Lesser Scaup, Shoveler and Gadwall. Across the grasslands, two Sandhill Cranes are flying and calling adding to the morning chorus from Vesper Sparrows, Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds. We see our first Bighorn Sheep on the rocks, so drive along for better looks. When we get out of the vans Ian notes a bird perched on the rocky skyline, a superb Prairie Falcon, looking great in the telescopes. We get better looks at two Bighorn ewes that seem to be nibbling at a bald patch in the sparsely vegetated slopes.

Further along we find a Pronghorn with the smallest of calves, it can only be hours old. Still further, where the landscape opens to reveal the full panorama of the Teton Range, we stop and watch Horned Larks on the gravel road, some males singing their simple ditty from stone perches. Our final new species for the morning is a delightful Rock Wren, that also perches on a small rock at the base of the steep cliffs along Miller Butte.

Checking out of our hotel we leave for the transfer to Yellowstone but we've still a little more exploring of Grand Teton National Park to do first. Driving north we arrive at the dam that backs up Jackson Lake. We can walk a short distance along the dam wall to scan around, one side we can look across Willow Flats and the other side across the water to Mount Moran. Most obvious, along the edge, are the large bright forms of White Pelicans, standing with a few Double-crested Cormorants. On the water are assorted waterfowl with small groups of Western and Eared Grebes (Black-necked Grebes), Canada Geese and a single Common Loon (Great Northern Diver).

We take lunch at Cattleman's Crossing on the Snake River, relaxing in the sun by the edge of the water, watching the world go by. An adult Bald Eagle soars

across the panorama and we get looks at a Killdeer and Spotted Sandpiper on the near bank. We are watching these when they start to look alarmed... suddenly a big Northern Goshawk flies through, crosses the river and disappears behind the trees on the opposite bank. Wow!

After lunch we drive north to the visitor centre at Colter Bay where, amongst the usual facilities is a fine collection of crafts and artefacts from the indigenous peoples of the area. From there it's non-stop to Yellowstone - the route takes along the Rockefeller Highway and climbs up through the south gate, an area marked by swathes of dead trees and newly generated forests after the 1988 fires that burned almost a third of the National Park. After crossing the Continental Divide we drop to the shoreline of Lake Yellowstone at West Thumb and can see the first fumaroles venting steam into the air, a reminder of the volatility of the region. Driving along the shore we finally reach our base for the next three days Lake Hotel and cabins.

After a delicious meal at the elegantly appointed Lake Hotel, Duncan takes the group for an evening at nearby Fishing Bridge to see what's around. There are a selection of waterfowl, Osprey and delightful Muskrats!

Day 6: Hayden Valley

After breakfast at 7.30am we leave Lake, keen to explore our new surroundings and one of Yellowstone's prime destinations, the Hayden Valley. We stop at the first raised viewpoint where we can look over a wonderful scene straight out of the text book. A large herd of Bison dot the valley floor and the meandering river is marked with groups of wildfowl: Canada Geese, Trumpeter Swan, Lesser Scaup, Common Merganser American Wigeon, Cinnamon Teal and our first smart Bufflehead.

Onwards to Grizzly Point, a raised overlook that views northeast over the Yellowstone River flood plain and sagebrush covered slopes to the extensive lodgepole forest beyond – the name gives a clue to the potential of the area. Sadly there are no bears this time but we get a good show from a young Bald Eagle scaring cranes, geese and ducks, and can view into a Raven nest.

The rest of the morning is devoted to catching up with some of the natural wonders of the park and a visit to the impressive visitor centre at Canyon. This is focussed on the vast super volcano that lies beneath Yellowstone and has periodically erupted every 400,000 thousand years or so... and it's long overdue. Blimey, we'd better hope and pray but we think it's a hopeless case as it will be an extinction event... a sobering thought indeed.

Nearby, the Yellowstone River has carved out the mighty Grand Canyon of Yellowstone and from Artist's Point we can look down into the gorge with its colourful red and yellow rhyolite pillars or hoodoos (some with Osprey nests on them). At the canyon head the river tumbles over the huge Lower Falls, the tallest and most thunderous in the park. Awesome!

After a picnic lunch at Otter Creek we drive south to Mud Volcanoes, our first geo-thermal activity of the trip. Everyone has their own hour to explore the Dragon's Mouth and other imaginatively named features. At nearby Le Hardy Rapids we walk from the car park to the river and to the series of cascades, white water and rocks. Duncan finds a target bird, a superb Harlequin drake is swimming in the river on the far side of the river. Franky points out another duck that is much closer and obligingly sat on a rock for all to see. Further along three drakes are on a tree stump that is stranded mid-stream. What wonderful looks at the most beautiful of ducks.

After an early evening meal we return again to the Hayden Valley near Grizzly Point. The evening light is raking across the valley floor and far hillsides. A big herd of Elk are on one sage slope with several small spotted young. Bison are on show in smaller numbers and there is the same spread of waterfowl species as before. An adult Bald Eagle flies along startling the geese but it fails to catch any and alights on a slope, attracting the attention of a Swainson's Hawk. We watch the goings on of ducks, sandpipers and a single Muskrat as the day draws to a close. Sadly there's still no sign of bears or wolves but there's always tomorrow.

Back at our cabins we can get our telescopes on some heavenly bodies as Jupiter, Saturn, Mars and Venus are all on show with a bright moon as centre stage.

Day 7: Bath time Bear

The next day we meet again at 6.00am and drive north to Hayden Valley, stopping at the first viewpoint or Happening Viewpoint as we've christened it due to the fact that there's always something happening! The Bison herd is very close and there is frost on both animals and sagebrush. There is the same spread of species of ducks and geese as before and a Coyote walks along the far riverbank.

At Alum Creek there are some more waterfowl looking wonderful in the morning light, enriching the colours on the Cinnamon Teal and making the small group of Trumpeter Swans shine. Close-by a wolf-watcher at Wapiti tells us of the activity of the nearest pack and where to watch but sadly no animals are to be seen.

We drive back and find a number of cars parked ahead at Trout Creek – people are standing looking beyond the bison – we look with binoculars and can see what they are studying – a Grizzly Bear. We park and walk across the sage to a good vantage point and can look across the river to where the bear seems to be feeding on a carcass. It soon is replete and like a well-mannered bear strolls to the river to wash after eating. We get ten minutes or so of the most amazing views of a Grizzly at his bath time. Fantastic!

After breakfast we visit nearby Pelican Creek and as we arrive we notice a close Coyote swimming across the creek. We park and get great scope views, adding ducks-a-plenty, White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorant, Ring-billed Gull and Osprey overhead. A change of plan takes us back to Fishing Bridge visitor centre and some much-needed downtime at Lake. Duncan takes everyone for short walk where the stars of the show are Fox Sparrow and very tame White-crowned Sparrow!

After dinner we take an evening drive along Yellowstone Lake north shore. At Mary Bay there are Barrow's Goldeneye and Western Grebes close to the road. Climbing through the forest marked by the 1988 wildfires we arrive at Lake Butte Overlook to see the sunset to the west over Yellowstone Lake and the Galatin Mountains. Far to the south we can see the Teton Range and to the east the Absaroka Mountains.

There's still light available to end the day at Pelican Creek: we see two Coyotes, Elk foraging in the meadow, a flight of White Pelicans, Snipe drumming and bats over water. The planets are showing well too, so we train our scopes on Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and a brilliant full moon.

Day 8: Dunraven and a Bear Jam

We have a more relaxing breakfast on this our transfer day. We are checked out and on our way by 9.00am in the glorious sunshine, weaving our way north through the Hayden Valley. Bison and Elk are dotted across the landscape and we can't resist another scan at Happening Viewpoint. We see the same cross section of species, with the addition of a small group of neat Wilson's Phalaropes working the pool edge. At Alum Creek, Bison are strewn across the sand bars.

We make a photo stop at the scenic Brink of Upper Falls, where a short path takes us to the very edge of first big waterfall along the Yellowstone River. Standing next to the torrent as it tumbles over is quite an experience with foaming white water and spray.

At Canyon we can't resist a second look at the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, this time from the North Rim, with spectacular views of the Lower Falls and hoodoos, one of which has an Osprey pair on a nest. Through the scope we can see two small chicks, perhaps a couple of days old, fantastic looks. Leaving Canyon we stop at Cascade picnic site for lunch and Fiona glimpses a reddish American Marten!

We ascend Dunraven Pass, stopping just short of the highest point where we can walk the start of the Mt Washburn trail. The slight gradient takes us through pines to a fine panorama of meadow and forest that leads into the distant and the snow-capped Absaroka Mountains. Ravens are flying around on the stiff wind and when we reach a sheltered spot we see Clark's Nutcrackers and fantastically cute Yellow-pine Chipmunk and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel. A small Least Chipmunk completes the cuddly critter line up.

The north slope of Mount Washburn drops steeply into a mosaic of broken stands of aspen and pines and we stop several times hoping to see a bear (we've seen them here before). We have no luck finding any but as we drive through the wooded area we encounter a queue of parked cars. It's a Yellowstone Bear jam – below on the right in a green meadow full of colourful flowers is the most beautifully coloured bear. It's the 'cinnamon' form of American Black Bear. We watch entranced as we see it browse grass and flower heads, beautiful! At Tower we rejoin the scenic Yellowstone canyon that is marked by terraces of rhyolitic basalt pillars, overhead we get close views of Violet-green Swallows and spectacular White-throated Swifts.

Finally we check in at our new base for four nights, the Mammoth Terraces Hotel and we can't help notice that Sue is there to greet us! There are lots of Elk gathered on the watered greens around the buildings but most folk are charmed by smaller critters, on the greens between our cabins are lots of Uinta Ground Squirrels!

Day 9: Lamar Valley

We meet at 6.30am for an early breakfast, then soon after 7.15am we are off to explore the legendary Lamar Valley. We drive through the scenic Blacktail Plateau area before entering the Lamar Valley at Little America, noting Pronghorn, Mule Deer and Bison among the way. As we approach Slough Creek we can't help notice that there's a lot of cars parked. We join the group of people, some with telescopes trained on the far hillside. We are directed to a small scar in the sage beneath a line of pines – it's an active wolf den and home of the Junction Butte pack. Through the scope we can detect movement of pups around the den. Soon after, we pick up a beautifully marked adult animal that walks towards the line of pines where it sits at the base of one of the trees, in the shade. It periodically raises its head but for the most part is difficult to view.

Further along the Lamar Valley we stop opposite Jasper bench, where we can look down onto the valley floor dotted with large herds of Bison and small groups of Pronghorn. At a higher altitude on the far slopes a Grizzly Bear and cubs are sat on a strand of snow, that's one way to keep cool with a fur coat!

Onto Soda Butte, a small conical formation in the middle of the valley, another travertine deposit and as we wander around we can see it hosts a small colony of Cliff Swallows. Birds are coming in and out with mouthfuls of mud and building their cup-shaped nests.

Lunch is at the Hitching Post, where we get a Golden Eagle display and it lands in a dead tree. Gaye also finds a nearby Coyote and we watch it lead us to a den with a single pup!

To Antelope Creek where we've been tipped off that a bear and cubs has been seen recently. From a good viewpoint we scan around seeing Williamson's

Sapsucker, Northern Flicker and a Hairy Woodpecker pair that is nesting in a dead tree below us.

Back down the hill we find another bear jam. Unfortunately it is a tight section of the road and we only glimpse a Black Bear and cub before being moved along by the ranger! At Blacktail Ponds we see Lesser Scaup, Coot and a group of Pronghorn. We decide to go back to the hotel for an early meal to give us time for some evening activities!

Dinner is at 5.45pm, leaving us time for an evening viewing at Slough Creek. The light is not too good for viewing the den area, though we can make out movement from some of the pups on occasion. Instead, we drive further along the Lamar where at Jasper Bench viewpoint we can look down on a valley flooded with evening sun on Bison and Pronghorn, glorious!

Day 10: The Early Bird Catches The Wolf and The Bear

We meet at 5.30am for an early morning quest for Gray Wolf, hoping to improve on our distant sightings from the previous day. We drive east into the rising sun and only get as far as Blacktail Ponds when we notice two cars parked in the middle of the road, we instinctively look to the green meadow to the right and can't believe our eyes - a large black dog is standing there. Wolf!

We watch for a couple of minutes, paralysed by what we are seeing, a beautifully coloured animal taking an early morning wander. We drive a short distance further, where we can safely pull off the road. We quickly set up scopes and the views take our breath away – a chocolate coloured wolf gazes back at us with the most piercing yellow eyes – the devil's own dog.

We watch as it lopes across the meadow to a stand of pines. We move to a better viewpoint a hundred yards further, where we gain a better perspective on the landscape and we follow the animal as it finally disappears behind trees. What happens next is amazing: we hear cries from the trees and the wolf emerges with another animal, a sandy coloured coyote that continues yelping at the much larger beast. It then follows the wolf as both wander up the slope. The coyote is soon joined by another of its kin and the wolf is outnumbered. Both smaller animals continue to harass and lunge at the darker, stronger, bigger beast and we witness little stand-offs as the trio ascends to the treeline. The aggression from the coyotes keeps up as they all finally disappear from view – a truly remarkable encounter. Follow that then!

We continue our drive east but only get to Tower Junction when we have to stop when a couple of more vehicles are parked on the side of the road, everyone is looking at the trees where a big dark shape is foraging around. Another Black Bear jam! We park and join in the fun and games as we watch a mother and two delightful cubs. One cub shows off its climbing skills taking to a nearby tree and teetering on the spindly branches and pulling itself up by its fore limbs.

At Slough Creek there's more wolf fun with distant views of pups at the den site and looks at a lone black wolf that comes down to the river's edge. It ventures into the water and pulls out the remains of a kill, what looks like elk antlers. We drive closer to view but catch the tail end as it walks along the riverbank and into the dense sage. Time to travel back for breakfast.

We are out again soon after breakfast, driving back to Blacktail Plateau where we can park and walk the gravel track. We've seen MacGillivray's Warbler in the area before and after only minutes we can hear one bird singing. It takes a while to track it down but with persistence everyone gets a great look at a beautiful bird. Similarly, a Warbling Vireo is singing from high in a tree but is a little less obliging. Walking to another stand of trees we see Dark-eyed Junco, Black-capped and Mountain Chickadee, Western Tanager and Ian finds a Townsend's Solitaire.

We continue driving along the one-way track that takes us over sage covered rolling hills fringed with pine and aspens, before descending through conifer forest. We park and walk one section, where we've had luck with woodpeckers before. Today we have better luck with smaller birds luring in a male Western Tanager, Mountain Chickadee and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Time is getting on so we head to Yellowstone picnic site next to the river, we have to slow down near Tower Junction where the mother and cub Black Bear family are still foraging but the rangers are keeping the traffic flowing.

At our lunch spot a Williamson's Sapsucker makes an appearance alongside a Northern Flicker. We check out the ices, drinks and waterfall at Tower before moving to Calcite Springs overlook to show Sue the amazing basalt columns. We see Osprey, White-throated Swift and Bighorn Sheep too. On the way back there's still time to check Floating Island Lake, where we see Eared Grebe, Coot (with chicks), and charming Ruddy Duck – new for the list. At Mammoth another fine meal awaits and some of us see Great Horned Owls before its dark.

Day 11: A Very Big Day

We pick up both boxed breakfasts and boxed lunches at 6.30am, ready for our big day east. The early morning light is starting to colour the Blacktail Plateau as we pass but we choose to keep driving to Slough Creek to where the wolf-watchers are gathered.

We choose to view the den site from the river, hoping to get closer views of the pups and we are not disappointed. Four young pups are sitting on the entrance mound. At times we see one of the suspected two mothers of the pack with pups nudging at her. There's also a dark sub-adult wolf that spends some time lounging below the den on the grass in full sight. After a while it paces through the sage to the den and disappears.

Further right we find another adult wolf, this time a collared grey animal. It is followed by a black individual and in the same field of view a large female cinnamon Black Bear wanders into view with her single cub in tow. These disappear from view behind a sage bank then a White-tailed Deer leaps across the slope below, with its tail erect, presumably alarmed by both bear and wolf. The wolves are soon nowhere to be seen but we manage to relocate the bears that are now working through a stand of old pines. The cub is scampering up a tree and the female starts chasing another bear, this time a smaller jet black bear. That's a lot of action in a small period of time! Meanwhile back at the den site the pups are still cavorting and entertaining us while we take our boxed breakfasts.

Moving through the Lamar Valley, we drive to Baronette Peak, where we can scan the steep slopes of this impressive mountain. High on some of the most precipitous ledges Franky and Heather spot some white Mountain Goats with kids. What a place to live!

We leave the National Park through the east gate, stopping at Silver Gate and the Log Cabin Café for some well-earned coffees, teas and chocolate. Rested, we start the long climb up the impressive Beartooth Highway, reputed to be the most scenic drive in the lower 48 states. We stop at two overlooks on the way up that affords views to the dramatic twin peaks of Pilot and Index mountains and then the wider panorama to the Absaroka and Wind River Ranges. Amazing views!

Lunch is at scenic Beartooth Lake that sits beneath the impressive Beartooth Butte. It's a large landscape to scan but it yields another bear, a lone Black Bear that walks along the edge of an escarpment in full view, wonderful!

The road winds higher and higher, finally going beyond the treeline to the exposed rocky summits and at West Summit we reach 10,947 ft! The short walk to the viewpoint is through boulders and alpine vegetation in bloom - a veritable rock garden and a delight for the botanists. There's Alpine-forget-me-not, Moss Campion, Marsh Marigold, Moss Phlox, and Mountain Douglasia, and although it's windy we get great looks at a confiding Yellow-bellied Marmot. We park a little further east, where we can see the famed Bear's Tooth pinnacle that gives the mountain range its name. We walk across more tundra-like vegetation to where the terrain falls away revealing a miraculous view north over a broad deeply-gouged valley. We see American Pipits on rocks before catching up with another target species, Black Rosyfinch. They land close by and we get great views through the scopes.

From the top of the world there's only one way to go and that's down. We stop after a couple of bends to an area marked by lots of boulders and scree, enjoying fine views of a confiding American Pipit next to the road. At Cooke City there are some well-deserved coffees and ice-creams that give us a boost before the

final drive back. Of course, there is a lot of wildlife to drive by and we can't help check the den at Slough Creek.

Those that stay late enjoy more views of pups at the den and some very close Wilson's Phalaropes along the river. Those that leave early drive slowly past the mother and cubs Black Bear family before taking a look at the Petrified Tree that is testament to the turbulent volcanic history of the region. An ancient lava and ash flow has preserved a giant redwood that now stands as a crumbling rock monument.

What a long but rewarding day... yet still the wonders keep coming: after dinner there's a catch-up with the local Great Horned Owl family. It's a hoot.

Day 12: Mammoth Terraces and Grand Prismatic

Before breakfast we drive the short distance to the top of Mammoth Terraces, where the perfect morning light is illuminating the other-worldly travertine formations. Steam vapours drift across a scene marked by skeletal trees and trickling water that backs up along white terraces, looking like a series of infinity pools from a garden expo. It's an evocative image and proves to be the favourite geo-thermal feature of the trip.

Birds are around in the early hours and we see several Mountain Bluebirds, American Robins (one bathing in a warm pool), White-crowned and Chipping Sparrows, Violet-crowned Swallows nesting in holes and some lucky people glimpse a White-tailed Jackrabbit. Continuing the auto route around we can add some more features with evocative names like White Elephant Back and Angel Terrace. A wonderful morning in a very special place.

After our last Mammoth breakfast we head south in the sunshine, bound for geo-thermal wonders around Norris and Old Faithful. The road climbs through a series of bends then levels out at a wide plain rimmed by the Galatin Mountains and Buntsen Peak, and marked by the picturesque Swan Lake. There are lots of birds on the surface, most appropriately Trumpeter Swans and also Lesser Scaup, Green-winged Teal, Mallard and Canada Geese. Yellow-headed Blackbirds are in the reeds and we can hear Sora and Yellowthroat.

It's a short drive to Sheepeater Cliff, where there are striking outcrops of volcanic columnar basalt. We park and walk left along the escarpment to where the formation has formed a quiet and natural amphitheatre. We wait to see what comes along, noting Western Tanager and Dark-eyed Juncos singing. We don't have to wait long before a Yellow-pine Chipmunk scurries along, followed by a larger marmot that moves perhaps a bit slower over the rocks before flaking out in the shade of a tree. Franky spots another critter, a charming Golden-mantled Squirrel. Two butterflies attract the attention of the photographers who are keen to capture the moment the pair bond is consummated!

Back at the river we scan the stones and rocks mid-stream and Gaye spots an American Dipper on one! Some get scope views but others miss out so we wait a short while for a second viewing – nice!

Working south we stop at Norris Geyser Basin around lunch for a snack and a do-it-yourself tour around the wonders of the Porcelain Basin. Next on the whistle-stop tour of Yellowstone Natural Wonders is Gibbon Falls, where Vanessa finds another American Dipper upgrading the waterfall to eight out of ten! The waterfalls continue at Firehole Canyon, another picturesque spot with the added bonus this time of a darling Golden-mantled Squirrel in front of us.

At Fountain Paintpots it's our first opportunity to walk around some of the famed geo-thermal features. Silex Spring is a deep turquoise steam pool that brings boiling water to the surface, spilling over creating a multi-coloured bacterial mat of orange and yellow. Paintpots pool is a basin of hot pink mud, bubbling away and popping continually. Other features sound like churning washing machines, where as Spasm Geyser does exactly that; throwing hot vents of steam out at jerky intervals.

It's a short drive further to our base for one night at Old Faithful, the most active geyser area in the world and home to the most predictable, Old Faithful itself. Lots to explore over the next day.

After our evening meal there is still light for a wander and so we head for Midway Geyser Basin. As we approach the sunset view is colouring the sky pink and the vapours from the many features are backlit and looking fullsome in the cool temperatures of the end of the day – like others we cant resist stopping for photos.

We park a little further on, where we can walk the boardwalk that takes us across the Firehole River to the raised fragile crust that has been wrecked by Excelsior Crater. Steam billows into the sky and Common Nighthawks croak as they fly overhead – a scene straight from Tolkein's world. Continuing, around the crust is flooded and coloured by the spill from the mighty Grand Prismatic Spring. Sublime.

Day 13: Geyser Gazing

We have breakfast at 7.00am so we can make the most of the day ahead. After another great round of pancakes, eggs benedict and the like we go to the visitor centre for those all-important timings!

Equipped with the relevant info of just when the geysers are going to blow, we head outside to get our first show from Old Faithful itself. Bang on time it ejects a jet of water and steam high into the cloudless, blue sky. From there it's a walk to the furthest point of the geyser basin along the boardwalk that weaves past the imaginatively named features of the basin. Grotto Geyser (looks like a Hobbits grotto); Chromatic Pool (colourful); Beauty Pool (nice); Belgian Pool (a Belgian fell

in!). We even get another eruption from the unpredictable Lion Geyser. Onwards to an appointment with Daisy Geyser, some are lucky enough to see the eruption and a Coyote trotting past!

To Riverside Geyser and one of the most attractive settings for any of the features, Riverside's circular cone is perched on the banks of the Firehole River. It's due to erupt at 10.50am give or take 30 minutes. When we arrive there are crowds gathering, so we play the waiting game. A Bison bull slowly grazes on the opposite bank amongst the skeletal trees that mark the perimeter of the splash zone of the geyser. Then, completely unannounced she blows. Wow! Sustaining for a full fifteen minutes, there's plenty of time to photograph the wonder from all angles.

The route back takes us first to Morning Glory pool then a walk back towards Old Faithful noting the explosive Beehive Geyser that is in full expulsion. We meet up at lunchtime at the Old Faithful Inn for sandwiches on the terrace and a well timed final eruption, not only of Old Faithful but of Grand Geyser – a double!

We have one last sweep of the car park searching for the last remaining state plates but it looks like Delaware and Hawaii will elude us and we'll settle for 48 states. Our appointed 'Keeper of the List', Jane, is pleased with the tally.

Driving south we stop at the Lewis Falls, where there is another attractive cascade, complete with two American Dippers – our best looks yet. And so to the whirlwind tour of the Grand Teton National Park or those parts we didn't manage to see earlier in the tour. As we reach the north shore of Jackson Lake we note the shining water and dynamic Tetons beyond. We continue south and choose to drive the road that climbs Signal Mountain where, at the summit, we can admire the fine views all around. We can spot distant Bison, Pronghorn, and Malcolm finds an Elk below. Nearer is a fine Green-tailed Towhee.

We leave, continuing the inner loop road that skirts the base of the Tetons. Stopping at Cathedral Point we join the photographers gathered to admire the amazing mountain landscape. Further, at Jenny Lake there are more photos taken before we have to call it a day. And so to Jackson, where we check in for our final night in the 49er Inn. The last meal is a fun affair at the Virginian Restaurant, a fitting end to an amazing trip.

Day 14: An Early Start

Blimey! It's an early morning alarm call and we are all loading up the vans at 5.00am for our first flight. Luckily, Jackson airport is just a short fifteen minutes drive, where we check in for our return flight to Chicago and onwards to the UK. Boarding our flight allows us one last look at the Tetons before we are airborne and on our way to O'Hare airport. There, we do find space and time to relive the tour's Magic Moments and gather those all important vote for Species of the Trip. The results of the jury are:

Species of the Trip The Top Five

1st = Gray Wolf and Black Bear

3rd Broad-tailed Hummingbird

4th = Grizzly Bear and Golden Eagle

Favourite Place

Joint winners Beartooth Highway and Mormon Row

Magic Moment

So many nominations: Bathtime Grizzly; mum and tree-climbing cubs Black Bears; evening visit to Grand Prismatic Pool; Black wolf looking straight at us with piercing yellow eyes; the list goes on... what a trip!

Geo-thermal Feature

A split vote with Riverside Geyser and Grand Prismatic Pool ahead of the rest

Day 15: Home

We finally arrive in London's Heathrow airport and say our farewells after another wonderful Yellowstone and Grand Teton trip. Thanks to all. Additional thanks for the excellent botanical list from Ian and Vanessa.

Birds

Common Loon
Eared Grebe
Western Grebe
American White Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Trumpeter Swan
Canada Goose
Green-winged Teal
Cinnamon Teal
Mallard
Gadwall
Northern Shoveler
American Wigeon
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Harlequin
Barrow's Goldeneye
Bufflehead
Common Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Bald Eagle
Golden Eagle
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Northern Goshawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Swainson's Hawk
Ferruginous Hawk
American Kestrel
Prairie Falcon
American Coot
Sora Rail
Sandhill Crane
Killdeer
Long-billed Curlew
Spotted Sandpiper
Wilson's Snipe
Wilson's Phalarope
California Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Collared Dove

Mourning Dove
Feral Pigeon
Common Nighthawk
Great Horned Owl
Boreal Owl (heard)
Hairy Woodpecker
Downy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Red-naped Sapsucker
Williamson's Sapsucker
White-throated Swift
Bank Swallow
Rough-winged Swallow
Barn Swallow
Tree Swallow
Violet-green Swallow
Gray Jay
Clark's Nutcracker
Black-billed Magpie
American Crow
Raven
Western Kingbird
Western Wood-pewee
Hammond's Flycatcher
Dusky Flycatcher
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Black-capped Chickadee
Mountain Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Broad-tailed Hummingbird
Calliope Hummingbird
Marsh Wren
Rock Wren
House Wren
American Dipper
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Swainson's Thrush
Mountain Bluebird
Townsend's Solitaire
American Robin
Horned Lark
American Pipit
Cedar Waxwing
European Starling
Gray Catbird
Western Tanager
Warbling Vireo

Yellow-rumped Warbler
Townsend's Warbler
Orange-crowned Warbler
Yellow Warbler
MacGillivray's Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Green-tailed Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Brewer's Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Song Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Common Grackle
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Red-winged Blackbird
Brewer's Blackbird
Western Meadowlark
Brown-headed Cowbird
House Finch
Cassin's Finch
Red Crossbill
American Goldfinch
Pine Siskin
Black Rosyfinch
Lazuli Bunting
House Sparrow

Mammals

White-tailed Jackrabbit
American Beaver
Muskrat
American Pika
Yellow-bellied Marmot
Uinta Ground Squirrel
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Yellow Pine Chipmunk
Least Chipmunk
Gray Wolf
Coyote
Grizzly Bear

Black Bear
American Elk
Mule Deer
White-tailed Deer
Moose
Pronghorn
American Bison
Bighorn Sheep
Mountain Goat
Silver-haired Bat
Big Brown Bat
Little Brown Bat

Butterflies

Sara's Orange-tip
Clouded Sulphur
Pine White
Phoebus Parnassian
Monarch
Red Admiral
Mourning Cloak
Pale Swallowtail
Anise Swallowtail
Western Tiger Swallowtail
Two-tailed Swallowtail
Milbert's Tortoiseshell
White-lined Sphinx
Clouded Sulphur
Edward's Fritillary
Callippe Fritillary
Hayden's Ringlet
Ocher Ringlet
Prairie Ringlet
Boisvidal's Blue
Greenish Blue
Dotted Blue
Satyr Anglewing
Common Alpine
Western Pine Elfin
Immaculate Green Hairstreak
Chryxus Arctic
Ruddy Copper
Double-banded Skipper

Grand Teton and Yellowstone June 2016: Botanical List

Compiled by Ian and Vanessa Johnston

General

Tufted evening Primrose	<i>Oenothera caespitosa</i>
Green Gentian	<i>Frasera speciosa</i>
Common Cowparsnip	<i>Heracleum lanatum</i>
Blue penstemon	<i>Penstemon cyaneus</i>
Small flowered penstemon	<i>Penstemon procerus</i>
Western meadowrue	<i>Thalictrum occidentale</i>
Wild buckwheat	<i>Eriogonum umbellatum</i>
Western valerian	<i>Valerian occidentale</i>
Balsam root	<i>Balsamorhiza sagittata</i>
Common rabbitbush	<i>Chrysothamnus nauseosus</i>
Silver sagebush	<i>Artemisia cana</i>
Big sagebrush	<i>Artemisia tridentata</i>
Heartleaf arnica	<i>Arnica cordifolia</i>
Lanceleaved stonecrop	<i>Sedum lanceolatum</i>
Creeping barberry	<i>Mahonia repens</i>
Sticky geranium	<i>Geranium viscosissimum</i>
Prairesmoke	<i>Geum triflorum</i>
Giant red paintbrush	<i>Castilleja miniata</i>
Scarlet gilia	<i>Ipomopsis aggregata</i>
Low larkspur	<i>Delphinium nuttallianum</i>
Longleaf phlox	<i>Phlox longifolia</i>
Silvery lupin	<i>Lupinus argenteus</i>
Wild blue flax	<i>Linum lewisii</i>
Spotted coralroot	<i>Corallorhiza maculata</i>
Golden currant	<i>Ribes aureum</i>
Swamp gooseberry	<i>Ribes lacustre</i>
Western serviceberry	<i>Amelanchier alnifolia</i>
Shrubby cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla fruticosa</i>
Bitterbrush	<i>Purshia tridentata</i>
Wood's rose	<i>Rosa woodsii</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Roman ragweed	<i>Ambrosia artemisifolia</i>
Rosy pussytoes	<i>Antennaria rosea</i>
Subalpine daisy	<i>Erigeron peregrinans</i>
Elk thistle	<i>Cirsium scariosum</i>
Yellow salsify	<i>Tragopogon dubius</i>
Duncecap Larkspur	<i>Delphinium occidentale</i>
Common camas	<i>Camassia quamash</i>
Starry false Solomon's seal	<i>Smilacina stellata</i>
Douglas's triteleia	<i>Tritelleia grandiflora</i>
Field mint	<i>Mentha arvensis</i>
Rocky Mountain phlox	<i>Phlox multiflora</i>
Woodland strawberry	<i>Fragaria vesca</i>

Slender cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla gracilis</i>
Scorpion weed	<i>Phacelia hastata</i>
Field chickweed	<i>Cerastium arvense</i>
Low hawksbeard	<i>Crepis modocensis</i>
Western groundsel	<i>Senecio integerrimus</i>
Cliff anemone	<i>Anemone multifida</i>
Mountain snowberry	<i>Symphoricarpus oreophilus</i>
Narrowleaf collomia	<i>Collomia linearis</i>
Hound's tongue	<i>Cynoglossus officinale</i>
Milk vetch	<i>Astragalus arvense</i>
Northern mule ears	<i>Wythia amplexicaulis</i>
Bracted lousewort	<i>Pedicularis bracteata</i>
Richardson's geranium	<i>Geranium richardsonii</i>
Fireweed	<i>Epilobium angustifolium</i>
Broadleaf bluebell	<i>Mertensia paniculata</i>
Mountain dandelion	<i>Agoseris aurantiaca</i>
Yellow monkey flower	<i>Mimulus guttatus</i>
Alpine aster	<i>Aster alpines var haydenii</i>
Redstem filaree	<i>Erodium cicutarium</i>
Self-heal	<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>
Showy locoweed	<i>Oxytropis splendens</i>
American bistort	<i>Polygonum bistortoides</i>
Showy Jacob's ladder	<i>Polemonium pulcherimum</i>
Utah Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera utahensis</i>
Woolly eriophyllum	<i>Eriophyllum lanatum</i>
Shortstyle onion	<i>Allium brevistylum</i>
Western Monkshood	<i>Aconitum columbianum</i>
Pacific red elderberry	<i>Sambucus racemosa</i>
Rocky Mountain parnassia	<i>Parnassia fimbriata</i>
Narrow leaved desert parsley	<i>Lomatium triternatum</i>
Double bladder pod	<i>Physaria acutifolia</i>
Drummond's rockcress	<i>Arabis drummondii</i>
Chokecherry	<i>Prunus virginiana</i>
Hooked spur violet	<i>Violet adunca</i>
Prairie sagewort	<i>Artemisia frigida</i>

Mt Washburn

Sky pilot	<i>Polemonium viscosum</i>
Mountain forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis alpestris</i>
Yellow violet	<i>Viola nuttallii</i>
Yellow fritillary	<i>Fritillaria pudica</i>
Silky Phacelia	<i>Phacelia sericea</i>
Sugarbowl	<i>Clematis hirsutissima</i>
Arctic alpine forget-me-not	<i>Eritrichum nanum</i>
Mountain bluebell	<i>Mertensia ciliata</i>

Upper Falls North Rim

Roundleaf alumroot

Heuchera cylindrica

Lamar Valley

Common toadflax

Linaria vulgare

White campion

Silene latifolia

Arrowleaf groundsel

Senecio triangularis

Western blue flag

Iris missouriensis

Idaho blue grass

Sisyrinchium idahoense

Elephant head

Pedicularis groenlandica

Yellow paintbrush

Castilleja pallescens

Mammoth to Tower

Purple virgin's bower

Clematis occidentalis

Littleleaf alumroot

Heuchera parviflora

Dalmation toadflax

Linaria dalmatica

Common juniper

Juniperus communis

Mountain penstemon

Penstemon montanus

Red clover

Trifolium pratense

Spatterdock

Nuphar polysepala

Beartooth Lake/Plateau

Yellow columbine

Aquilegia flavescens

Canada violet

Viola canadensis

Snow cinquefoil

Potentilla nivea

American globe flower

Trollius albiflorus

Marsh marigold

Caltha leptosepala

Moss campion

Silene acaulis

Spotted saxifrage

Saxifraga bronchialis

Purple mountain saxifrage

Saxifraga oppositifolia

Rocky Mountain douglasia

Douglasia montana

Petrified Tree

Roundleaf harebell

Campanula rotundifolia

Northern bedstraw

Gallium boreale

Common Yampah

Perideridia montana

White sweet vetch

Hedysarum sulphurescens

Mammoth Terraces

Twinpod

Physaria didymocarpa

Old Faithful and around

Fringed gentian

Gentian detonsa

White bog orchid

Platanthera dilatata