

Holiday Highlights
Yellowstone Spring
4 – 18 June 2011

Leaders: Roy Atkins and Mark Denman

Guests: Elizabeth & Norman Wildon, Andrew Foulkes, Jamie Walker & Marie Cassidy-Walker, Sheila Hunt, Jane Atkins, Elsie & Roger Evans, Tom Parr, Keith Stedman and Penny & Keith Chantler

Day 1: After an early start at Heathrow our flights to Chicago, Denver and final destination Jackson Hole are all bang on time, with the snow covered Teton mountains looking spectacular in the evening sunshine as we make our final approach. On the way to the hotel we see a few distant Bison and an assortment of wildfowl, including a couple of sleeping Trumpeter Swans and although very tired, we're all extremely happy to be in this wonderful place, eagerly looking forward to the delights that tomorrow will bring.

Day 2: It's a beautiful day and with our body clocks registering lunchtime most of us are awake early! Jamie, Roger and Mark go for a stroll before breakfast and are rewarded with great views of Western Tanagers, White-crowned Sparrows, Cassin's Finches and Swallows including Violet-green, Tree and Rough-winged. Only Mark sees the Broad-tailed Hummingbird that buzzes in briefly but both Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Mountain Chickadee are more obliging and some of us spot a Yellow Warbler while tucking into breakfast!

After a quick chat about our plans for the day we pick out our first mammal of the day, a Mule Deer high on the slopes above the hotel before loading the vans for the beginning of our adventure. We make our first stop at Flat creek, an area of pools, reed beds and wide prairie beyond. Red-winged and Yellow headed Blackbirds look fantastic sitting up in the reeds and wildfowl here include Gadwall, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck and Shoveler. Though pride of place must go to the handsome drake Cinnamon Teal and a Trumpeter Swan. Roy picks up our first Northern Harrier, a nice male looking a little darker than our Hen Harrier, and we also see Common Grackle and Song Sparrow here along with a beautiful Yellow Warbler singing his heart out. We pick out our first Swainson's Hawk amongst the numerous Red-tails, get great views of Osprey but stars of the show here have to be a pair of Sandhill Cranes with a tiny chick.

The plan now is to go to a lovely area of woodland for a walk but on rounding the corner we are greeted with an astounding view of the Tetons covered in snow and there is a unanimous chorus of 'Can we stop for a photo!?' This

proves to be fortuitous as we get great views of Mountain Bluebirds and Tree Swallows, a brief Brewer's Sparrow and close views of a pale Swainson's Hawk. Uinta Ground Squirrels scamper around us and we witness a Least Chipmunk entering a Tree Swallow box much to the distress of the Swallows. Moving on we take the turning towards Moose and promptly see one! this proving very popular with the photographers amongst us. We find a big colony of Cliff Swallows nesting under the bridge, a Yellow-rumped Warbler and Jane points out four American White Pelicans that shine in the blue sky above the mountains.

On parking the vans we pick up some new ducks on the flooded river below us, Green-winged Teal, Barrow's Goldeneye and American Wigeon. A co-operative 'Empidonax' allows us to pick out the salient features of Dusky Flycatcher and most of us manage good views of a sweet singing Black-headed Grosbeak. Tom points out three American Kestrels above us, their colours looking fantastic against the bright blue sky and we also see several Cassin's finches, Chipping Sparrows, a Hairy Woodpecker and a very confiding Red-breasted Nuthatch. A little group of Crossbills sadly don't linger but we do get good views of a Turkey Vulture as it drifts slowly past and the warm sunshine is encouraging a few butterflies including Callippe Fritillary, Milbert's Tortoiseshell and Green Comma. We get nice views of several Northern Flickers of the red-shafted western race but the woodpecker highlight of the morning has to be when we come across the nest hole of a pair of Red-naped Sapsuckers that show brilliantly in the telescopes.

After lunch by the river and a look round the visitor centre at Moose we go in search of hummingbirds. Nearby we know of some cabins with hummingbird feeders and on climbing out of the vans a male Calliope Hummer, America's smallest bird perches right in front of us, frequently returning to this spot allowing us fabulous views in the scopes. We're also very lucky to witness Broad-tailed Hummingbirds displaying, their characteristic 'buzzing' filling the air-great stuff!

We then head over to Mormon view where we get even better views of a male Northern Harrier and a couple of very smart Western Meadowlarks. One of the famous Mormon barns (surely the most photographed view in Teton?) is surrounded by cute Uinta Chipmunks that are just begging to be photographed. After doing so we decide to head back to the hotel as we are going to try to see Beaver this evening. As so often happens on this holiday we get hi-jacked when Roy spots a distant Coyote, so driving a little further up the dusty road we get out and set up the scopes. The light is near perfect and with the songs of Meadowlarks and Vesper Sparrow filling the air we get nice views of this colourful animal, though its tail does look a bit mangy!

After freshening up at the hotel we head out again before dinner to a well known Beaver lodge. Driving down the bumpy track a couple of close Bison provide a photo opportunity, though catching them with their heads up is not easy! There are Spotted Sandpipers (with spots!) and Killdeer on the river but much more surprising is the Northern Harrier that is fishing like an Osprey, something none of us have seen before (it did catch a fish!) With the sun setting behind the mountains the scene by the Beaver lodge is idyllic and as we wait there are lots of birds to entertain us. Northern Rough-winged Swallows hawk above the water with Kinglets, Warblers and Sparrows flitting from bush to bush. We have lovely views of Barrows Goldeneye and Cinnamon Teal and Andrew points out the first of several Common Nighthawks that hunt above the tree line. With the light fading (and dinner calling!) we do see a Muskrat, or Least Beaver as we christen it but unfortunately the Beavers don't co-operate so we head back to Jackson after what has been a terrific first day.

Day 3: We awaken to a cloudless blue sky and before breakfast Roger finds some Cedar Waxwings, a Clark's Nutcracker and some fly-over Cranes. After breakfast we see a couple of Clark's Nutcrackers perched high on the skyline and sing Happy Birthday to Norman before heading north towards Two Ocean Lake. The Teton mountains look even more enticing this morning and we simply can't resist stopping to take more photos. There are Common Merganser (AKA Goosander) on the river below and Jamie finds us a nice Red Squirrel but the highlight here is the singing Green-tailed Towhee, an extremely handsome bird. A little further along the road we stop for another scan, adding Savannah Sparrow to our growing list along with Swainson's Hawk, Meadowlark and a very close Harrier found by Keith but the only mammals here are a distant herd of Bison so we decide to move on towards Two Ocean Lake.

We get very good views of both Osprey and Turkey Vulture at a brief comfort stop before discovering that the track up to Two Ocean Lake is closed. This is a bit of a shame as it is such a beautiful place but undeterred we carry on to Oxbow bend. There are lots of Double-crested Cormorants and smart looking Western Grebes here and there is much excitement when Roger discovers the much rarer Clark's Grebe amongst them, a new bird for all including the guides! A distant White Pelican drops in and we're all thrilled when an Osprey catches a fish right in front of us - brilliant! We decide to have lunch at Jackson lake lodge, stopping en-route to admire a mother and incredibly cute baby Moose-an early contender for the 'ahh factor' moment of the holiday.

The view from Jackson lake lodge over Willow flats, Jackson lake and the snow covered mountains is breathtaking, and in the warm sunshine we're relieved to find a nice shady spot under some trees. In the scrubby slope before us we see Common Yellowthroat, Yellow Warbler and Roy finds a couple of handsome Fox Sparrows that we eventually all get good views of. Andrew has a close encounter with a Red-naped Sapsucker and some of us are lucky enough to see a Coyote chasing a rather nervous Elk! After lunch, coffee and Huckleberry Ice-cream we head back to the vans, getting super views of the very colourful Western Tanagers and the pink sided form of Dark eyed Junco. We then receive a tip-off from someone who works at the lodge that he saw six bears yesterday from the road nearby, so as often happens on this holiday our plans change again!

Driving the area a couple of times we see nothing but it's the middle of the day and Roy and Mark think it would be better to try later so we drive the short distance to Jackson Dam. There are lots of Cormorants, Grebes and Pelicans in the distance so we walk along the dam to try for a closer view. There are distant California and Ring-billed Gulls on the shore and Roy picks out three big Caspian Terns. A few sudden gusts of wind encourage some raptors to take to the wing and we see our first Bald Eagles, a splendid adult, white tail and head gleaming in the sun that is then joined by a second adult and a young bird. We then find another young Eagle perched on a telephone post and decide to try and walk a little closer. Well, closer views we certainly get, extremely close in fact and we all manage frame filling shots of this magnificent young bird that seems completely unbothered by our presence.

In order to maximise our chances of seeing a bear we make the decision to eat locally rather than travelling back to Jackson. We make a stop to admire a close pair of Sandhill Cranes before finding a nice restaurant for dinner where one of our servers cheerfully tells us that she saw a mother Grizzly and three cubs yesterday! After a lovely meal we head out again full of anticipation to check all the local roads and tracks but despite much searching in deteriorating weather the bears don't show so we head back to Jackson for a good night's sleep, another great day.

Day 4: We're a little disappointed to wake to grey skies and rain this morning so the best plan seems to be to spend some time exploring the shops and galleries of Jackson and meet later on in the hope that the weather will have improved. Roy and Jane go to check some local bird feeders and get a big surprise when they flush a Common Nighthawk that settles in a nearby tree so when we all meet up later that morning we're all very keen to see if it is still there. It is! We all get fantastic views of this very seldom seen bird and manage to get some frame fillers! Dozens of Cassin's Finches cram the feeders and every

tree seems to be full of Western Tanagers - what an unexpected start to the day.

We then travel to the visitor centre at flat creek where we have our sandwiches and enjoy the excellent exhibition and shop. From the viewing platform we find a drake Redhead and get wonderful close views of Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Only Mark and Roy see a couple of elusive Bullock's Orioles but there is great excitement when Roger and Roy find a thunderingly rare Red-headed Woodpecker that sadly only shows for about thirty seconds. From the boardwalk we see Common Yellowthroat and get our best views of Dusky Flycatcher.

We're going to spend the rest of the day on the national Elk refuge, pausing briefly on the way to admire a stunning male Broad-tailed Hummingbird. We've not been out of the vans long when we find a nice little group of Bighorn Sheep that are crossing the valley. Penny then brilliantly spots two falcons chasing each other that turn out to be Peregrine and Prairie Falcon and although a little distant it's great to be able to compare these two supremely efficient hunters. Moving down the road we get incredibly close views of the Sheep and marvel at the extremely sure-footedness of these animals on what seem like near vertical slopes! A Rock Wren shows briefly and with a little encouragement starts singing back to us. Try as we might we just can't find this little songster as it moves around the big rock face before us and only when we've nearly given up does it appear only twenty yards in front of us! Before moving on we get much better views of the Prairie Falcon as it mobs a Red-tailed Hawk and listen to a green-tailed Towhee that sings behind us.

Driving a little further we get excellent views of Meadowlarks, their yellow throats gleaming in the sunshine and eventually find the first of several Horned Larks that although a little elusive at first show very well in the end. Our next bird is a Long-billed Curlew that is feeding fairly close by and it is only when we get it in the telescopes that we can really appreciate the long bill and lovely warm plumage tones that contrast with the rather brown/grey colour of its European cousin. Our final stop is at a site where Mark saw Lewis's Woodpecker last year. Unfortunately there's no sign of any today but we head off back to Jackson very happy to have dodged the worst of the weather and having seen some more great wildlife.

Day 5: We're heading up to Yellowstone today but before we go a local photographer has given us a tip-off about a Coyote sighting. We all meet up early before breakfast and are pleasantly surprised by the sunny weather that greets us, a far cry from the doom and gloom forecast of yesterday! Driving through the valley the mountains look very atmospheric in the mist and

as we approach the area where the Coyote has been seen we see lots of cars parked. It turns out that most people here are landscape photographers and in no time at all we find an adult Coyote hunting in the long grass. Four Long-billed Curlews are a nice surprise, especially as the light is perfect and they are a little closer than yesterday's bird. Just as Mark decides to go and check an area he saw Sage Grouse last September a local birder tells us she has just seen three Sage Grouse displaying in the very same spot! We see at least three birds with their strange spikey tails looking most un-bird like as they almost turn themselves inside-out. There are Vesper, Savannah and Brewers Sparrows in the sage that surrounds us along with another smart Green-tailed Towhee. A male Northern Harrier gives us a superb close fly-past but this is soon forgotten when five incredibly cute Coyote cubs come out to play. They seem totally oblivious to the admiring throng of people and over the next half an hour or so and we are treated to a wonderful show, all of us taking a ridiculous number of pictures! We make one more quick stop to snap some very close Bison before heading back for breakfast and any final packing.

The first stop on our journey north to Yellowstone is at the very picturesque String Lake where we see our first Yellow-pine Chipmunks and a brief Gray Jay. The views from the top of Signal mountain are quite superb and highlights here include a very confident Red-breasted Nuthatch, a Hairy Woodpecker found by Andrew and several Gray Jays that keep landing on our hands.

As we enter Yellowstone National Park we are astonished by the amount of snow still lying on the ground, so much in fact that we are unable to stop at a very reliable spot for Pika. Vast areas of the ocean like Yellowstone Lake are still frozen and it's exciting to pass our first geo-thermal area with steam rising from the ground - a little taster of things to come. After settling into our cabins and enjoying a delicious meal we decide to go out for an hour or so to Pelican Creek. Once again our plans change when we see lots of cars parked either side of the road and when we draw near we too see the focus of attention, a young Grizzly Bear, our first bear together! We watch, absolutely thrilled as it tries to dig out small rodents and despite the fading light manage a few pictures. After half an hour or so watching this magnificent animal we head back to our cabins, grinning from ear to ear - great stuff!

Day 6: After not managing to get to Pelican Creek the night before we decide to try again pre-breakfast. After scraping the ice off the windows of the vans we set off again up the road, only to be confronted by last night's bear! This time in much better light we watch enthralled as it digs effortlessly, its finger length claws scything through the mud. It catches and eats several small animals and after nearly an hour we have to tear ourselves away and head towards Pelican Creek. There are lots of wildfowl here including Green-winged Teal, Gadwall,

American Wigeon, Merganser and smart little Bufflehead, a new bird for many. We get closer views of some Gulls and once more are able to compare Western and the much rarer Clark's Grebe. St Mary's Bay is still completely frozen but at the geo-thermal pools and surrounding areas we see Bluebirds, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper and lots of Savannah Sparrows.

A kind passing motorist then tells us of another Grizzly half a mile up the road so we clamber back into the vans eager to see our second bear of the morning. This second animal, a four or five year old female is very close to the road and in the warm morning light looks absolutely fantastic. She digs in a similar fashion to the first bear but only seems to be eating roots. Roy points out a couple of Yellow-bellied Marmots further down the slope but with a beautiful Grizzly so close they don't hold our attention for long! With thoughts turning to breakfast we start heading back to the hotel, only to be confronted by another enormous 'Bear-jam', this time for a mother and cub. Parking further up the road we walk back and watch the incredibly cute cub with its substantial mother who is noticeably bigger than our two previous bears. With snow starting to fall we head back for breakfast, some of us glimpsing a Swainson's Thrush found by Jamie right next to the vans-what an incredible morning!

We all meet up after a celebratory breakfast and make our first stop at LeHardy Rapids, where we are hoping to see Harlequin Duck and American Dipper. Roger is first on the scene and finds us a nice female Harlequin sitting in the middle of the river. Searching a little further downstream we find a nice little group of Mergansers but the much hoped for drake Harlequin sadly eludes us. Jamie spots an American Dipper just a few yards away that shows brilliantly ,but alas not for very long.

We then visit our first geo-thermal site, mud volcano and spend an hour here enjoying the bubbling mud, steam and sulphur as well as birds like Red-breasted Nuthatch and Yellow-rumped Warbler. We have our lunch by the river in the company of some very attentive Ravens, a nice pelican and lots of Juncos. Keith picks out an American Dipper on the far shore and Tom finds a Grey Catbird which is fairly scarce in these parts and a very good find. After lunch we visit the grand canyon of Yellowstone where the view from artists point back to a massive waterfall is spectacular to say the least and Jane finds excellent views of Osprey.

The exhibition at Canyon explaining some of the geo-thermal and geological features of the park is both very educational and terrifying, with the stark realisation that the magma chamber is barely three miles beneath our feet in places! With dinner time nearing we head off back towards Lake however

we haven't gone far when we encounter another bear-jam, this time a mother and two cubs. Although a little more distant than this morning's animals they still look great in the telescopes with one of the cubs noticeably larger and blonder than the other. It's been another fantastic day that none of us will ever forget, the day we saw seven Grizzly Bears!

Day 7: We all meet up early for a pre-breakfast trip to the Hayden Valley, managing to resist the temptation to stop and look at our first Grizzly that is still digging away, instead driving straight to an area where wolves have been seen recently. There are lots of Elk scattered around and it's lovely to hear the evocative call of Sandhill Cranes, but despite constant scanning there don't seem to be any wolves present. A pelican lands in the river below us and two Swainson's Hawks sweep past but other than that it's rather quiet so we move to another overlook. Juncos, Savannah Sparrows and Yellow-rumped Warblers provide a pleasant soundtrack and a Least Chipmunk appears right in front of us. Jane spots our eighth Grizzly of the week and it's soon joined by our ninth shortly afterwards. We watch these magnificent animals for some time and enjoy an impromptu talk by one of the rangers who tells us a little of the eco system of Yellowstone and more specifically something of the history of the wolf in the area.

After breakfast, before heading out for the day we explore a little strip of woodland that separates the cabins and Yellowstone Lake, this proving to be a wise choice as it's simply jumping with birds. We're very pleased to re-find a splendid male Ruffed Grouse seen earlier by Mark and also find another Catbird. Amongst the numerous Yellow-rumped Warblers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets we see at least two Tennessee Warblers, a scarce bird in Wyoming and after a bit of detective work identify a tricky 'empid' as Cordilleran Flycatcher. Lots of White-crowned and Chipping Sparrows hop around the tangles of dead branches on the snow covered ground and we're pleased to find two Lincoln's Sparrows that look extremely like our Dunnock.

The water levels are extremely high at Fishing Bridge and the only wildfowl here are Barrow's Goldeneye and Bufflehead. Killdeer and Spotted Sandpiper are found on the edges of the water but with little else of note here we move up the road to Pelican Creek. Amongst the more numerous birds here we find the Western and Clark's Grebes along with a single Double-crested Cormorant and with the gulls being a little closer today it's much easier to pick out the differences between the Ring-billed and California varieties. A little further along the shore of Yellowstone Lake we stop to scan Indian Pond. The ducks of yesterday have gone but Roy points out two splendid Common Loons (aka Great Northern Diver) that look very handsome in their breeding finery.

The young female bear of yesterday has moved a few hundred yards up the road, and it goes without saying that we can't resist stopping to have another look. After about twenty minutes of feeding she flops to the ground for a rest, so we take our leave and find a lovely spot overlooking the frozen lake for our picnic. It's difficult to find anywhere in Yellowstone where Ravens don't join you for lunch and this place is no exception with two very vocal birds keeping us company. The plan now is to travel up to Sylvan Pass to look for Pika amongst other things. Pika inhabit the boulder strewn scree fields but as we start climbing, the snow once again becomes incredibly deep and we seriously wonder whether they will all be buried.

Sylvan Lake is completely covered in snow and ice but miraculously a large area of habitat where we see these strange little animals is clear of snow so we pull over and start scanning. After about ten minutes of searching Keith announces that he has found one down the slope near the edge of the snowfield and most of us get great views of this characterful little animal that looks rather like a rabbit with small round ears. Both Penny and Roy then spot a couple more Pika, though they rather more typically don't stay still for long. We're then told of some Bighorn Sheep that are sitting close to the road about a mile up the road so we set off to investigate, eventually finding them about four miles away - must be the altitude! There are two big males sitting just above the level of the road and we are able to get some great pictures of these amazingly well adapted animals. A Stellar's Jay lands briefly beside them but sadly doesn't linger and most people only get flight views as it melts back into the forest. We do get much better views however of several Yellow-bellied Marmots on the way down that look very colourful in the afternoon sunshine and then actually drive past three Grizzly Bears - what a difference a day makes!

After another delicious meal we head out again in the direction of Pelican Creek to see if we can locate a beaver. Most of the birds we saw earlier in the day are still present and with better light we get even better views. A couple of Muskrats or 'Least Beaver' as we have christened them set the pulses racing briefly and we're really pleased when one of them climbs out of the water and starts munching away! It's incredibly beautiful and tranquil as the last embers of light fade away and Andrew does brilliantly to spot a falcon flying low over the water. It lands in a dead tree and in near darkness we can just make out the features of a Peregrine-the wonders of modern optics! With the evocative sound of Snipe drumming overhead we leave this beautiful place for the last time and head back to the cabins to pack, we're moving to Mammoth in the morning.

Day 8: Before breakfast a few of us venture into the woodland that had been so good the previous morning - well, what a difference a day makes with the only bird of note being a Cordilleran Flycatcher! Heading north towards Mammoth we make a very quick stop at LeHardy Rapids in the hope of finding a drake Harlequin. Mark and Roy check the river but find only the female seen previously and a brief Dipper. We had planned to make a couple of stops in the Hayden Valley but with the rain lashing down we continue to Canyon and stop for a coffee and a browse around the shops.

The road north through Dunraven Pass has only been open for a couple of days due to frequent avalanches and it's an amazing experience to drive through what are canyons of bulldozed snow as we make our way up the side of Mt. Washburn. We do make a stop at a spectacular viewpoint, watching skiers and snowboarders hurtling towards us down the steep slope, the only birds here being the ubiquitous Ravens, White-crowned Sparrows and another very brief Stellar's Jay. A little further down the road we find a stunning male Dusky Grouse that is holding territory beside the road and Roy tries to encourage it to move to a safer spot away from passing traffic but it refuses to move, becoming very aggressive to anyone who ventures too close. We're able to get some fantastic shots of this splendid bird, our third Grouse of the week!

We have lunch at Tower where some of us have an ice-cream and Penny really enjoys two American Dippers on the river here. After a bit of retail therapy in the excellent shop we stop just down the road to admire the superb basalt columns here and get point blank views of Mountain Chickadee and Yellow-rumped Warbler. While watching a Bighorn Sheep with baby we overhear someone say that there is a Black Bear just a few hundred yards up the road and arriving at the site we find a large group of admirers, so Roy and Mark drop everyone off before parking the vans further up the road. The Black Bear shows really well as it makes its way through the meadow below us and looks rather small after all the Grizzlies we've seen in the past two days. Roy points out a female Williamson's Sapsucker to a lucky few and we also see Song Sparrow and Dusky Flycatcher here. Driving on towards Mammoth we encounter another 'jam', this time for a pair of Coyotes that are trotting nonchalantly along the side of the road and we get incredibly good views of these striking animals that are almost too close to photograph.

After settling into our cabins we meet for a pre-dinner stroll to see if we can find a Great-horned Owl that we have been told about. We soon locate the tree in the centre of town and Roger immediately picks out one of these huge Owls high above us. It looks absolutely superb through the scopes and we're

even more thrilled when the two young downy Owls show themselves as well, bringing to a close another fantastic day in Yellowstone.

Day 9: We all meet up at 5.00am for a pre-brekky trip to the Lamar Valley. It's just starting to get light as we set off and Roy's van get brief views of White-tailed Jackrabbit that was flushed by Mark's van. We make a brief stop for our first Pronghorn but don't stay long as we want to get to the far end of the valley where the most recent wolf sightings have been. We see lots of Elk, Bison and Pronghorn in the valley along with our first bears of the day, two Grizzlies with one of them on its back having a jolly good scratch! Roy and Mark find a Black Bear before Mark goes a little further up the road to see if anyone is seeing any wolves there. The rest of the group is then treated to the Grizzly show as four bears run through the sage, scattering Bison as they go-great stuff! Mark then returns with the news that no wolves have been seen at SodaButte but he did see another Black Bear high on the snow covered hillside.

Talking to some of the locals that monitor the wolves in the area we then hear the distressing news that only seven wolves remain in the entire valley which is not good news for us but of course far worse news for the poor wolves. We decide to make a stop at the other end of the valley at a place called Slough Creek, en route encountering a large number of Bison that stream past the vans almost at touching distance, a unique experience being so close to these enormous creatures. on arriving at Slough Creek we see another Grizzly high on the slopes above us and get brief views of a Coyote as it makes its way through the long grass. There is a good selection of Wildfowl here including Blue-winged Teal - in fact at one point you can see all three Teal in one scope view! Roger finds an American Coot(!) and we get nice views of perched Red-tailed Hawk and Bald Eagle. Highlight of the journey back is a Pronghorn and baby (pronglet!) and although it is a little disappointing not to have seen wolf we can't really complain at nine bears! It's been an exceptional morning of wildlife watching.

After breakfast we have a bit of free time to explore Mammoth or rest before meeting up just before lunchtime. We have barely (no pun!) passed the Travertine terraces when we encounter yet another bear-jam, this time Black Bears, a mother and cub asleep high in a tree. We get great views in the scopes as the bears are level with us, occasionally glimpsing the cub that is hidden by its mother. A little further along the road we make another impromptu stop, this time for a splendid pair of Northern Harriers that are being mobbed by Red-winged Blackbirds. It's the most prolonged view we've had of these raptors and the first ring-tail we've seen-most presumably being on eggs. A Mule Deer at the side of the road is very photogenic and eventually

we arrive at our destination, Sheepstealer Cliff, an impressive area of basalt cliffs and boulder scree. Yellow-pine Chipmunks scurry under the tables as we eat our picnics but the only life we see on the scree is human!

Despite the threat of rain we go for a lovely walk along the side of the river, scrambling over scree, felled trees and willow. It's well worth it though when we find some Yellow-bellied Marmots and a pair of Townsend's Solitaire, the male bird being very obliging by posing and singing for us in the now quite heavy rain. The discovery of American Dipper is very popular and we watch as the adult birds come back and forth entering a mossy crevice just a few feet above the raging river. On the way back to the hotel we make a quick stop to scan Swan Lake. There are no Swans but we do find a nice Eared Grebe to add to our list before heading back to dry off and have dinner.

After dinner we head out again with the intention of going back to Slough Creek, stopping to scan Blacktail pond on the way. Yellow-headed Blackbirds screech from the reed beds and amongst the numerous Lesser Scaup we find a nice drake Pintail, also before moving on Jane points out a smart little American Kestrel that sits atop a dead tree and we find a Killdeer that is sheltering her young. We've not long entered the Lamar valley when once more we have to stop, this time to watch some fascinating interaction between a Pronghorn and a Coyote. Neither animal seems entirely sure who should be chasing who and we watch with great interest as a second Pronghorn and Coyote are added to the drama. We never did get to Slough Creek but over a cup of coffee we enjoy a most beautiful sunset and with the sound of a distant Coyote howling another day in Yellowstone draws to a close.

Day 10: Thankfully the rain of the previous night has stopped and we all meet up at 7.00am for a trip to the famous travertine terraces. Hot water seeping up through the limestone deposits the white travertine and bacteria and micro-organisms create a range of beautiful colours that are constantly changing. We're really lucky this morning being the first to arrive and for about twenty minutes we have this wonderful place all to ourselves. Violet-green Swallows perch all around and the shrill call of a Killdeer can be heard from the terraces. Chipping Sparrows, Bluebirds and Cassin's finches are the only birds to be seen and other than singing Kinglets there don't seem to be many other birds here. We do however watch an interesting altercation between a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches and Mountain Bluebirds that seem to be interested in the same nest hole, the larger Bluebirds coming off best! Driving a little further to Orange Soda Butte we find some more smart Cassin's finches and a most delightful family of Marmots that seem just as curious in us as we are in them! The three baby Marmots are just adorable and all you can hear are camera shutters and a chorus of 'Ahs!' Hearing the

distinctive call of White-breasted Nuthatch Roy plays a little of the call back and the Nuthatch flies in like a missile to the dead tree above us giving us all incredible views of this very smart bird.

After breakfast and a bit of a break we meet by the cabins to go for a local walk before lunch. Keith and Penny decided to go and have a look at the Owls again and discovered an Elk that was about to give birth, so we all head back to the Owl site to see if there have been any developments. Things are progressing slowly, so some of us decide to go for a walk on the scrubby hillside behind the hotel, while some decide to stay with the Elk. Our main target here is Lazuli Bunting which Mark saw earlier in the day and a singing Green-tailed Towhee is a nice start, as is the Warbling Vireo that Roy points out. Other good birds here include a Lincoln's Sparrow and a frustratingly elusive Macgillivray's warbler that only Mark and Jane see well, but the Buntings remain hidden for today.

After a rather prolonged (!) luncheon we meet by the vans where Elsie has discovered a pair of White-tailed Jackrabbits. They race around the hillside and even come down to the roads between the cabins giving us all brilliant views of these great animals. We've not travelled far when we see a Golden Eagle fairly low in the sky, so we park the vans at the side of the road and get out for a proper look. We get fabulous views as it is mobbed by a Raven, then being joined by a second Goldy and a Peregrine - raptortastic! We then take a walk on the Blacktail plateau road, an area that looks very promising for woodpeckers. We see a White-breasted Nuthatch briefly and a trio of Mule Deer that seem very relaxed and allow us to photograph them. Both Mark and Roy keep tapping dead trees in the hope of attracting Woodpeckers but the only birds we see are Northern Flickers. Jane then picks out the song of a Hermit Thrush and we find the little songster at the top of a distant tree. This smart little bird looks great in the scopes and although a little distant you can just make out the rufous tale - honest! A Townsend's Solitaire doesn't linger and on the way back to the vehicles Elsie finds a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches.

We want to spend the rest of the day in the Lamar valley looking for Wolves amongst other things but unfortunately the weather has taken a turn for the worse and by the time we reach the other end of the valley the rain is very heavy and the visibility is very poor. We have a cup of coffee in the vans while the worst of the weather passes over, and eventually we feel brave enough to venture outside and start looking through the big numbers of Bison, Elk and Pronghorn. A lone Coyote makes its way through the sage but sadly there are no Wolves so we decide to go and have a look at a Grizzly that we've been told about. On climbing out of the vans, Roy and Mark take one look at the

animal and say 'Black Bear' to each other, it's a beautiful Cinnamon animal. The bear shows well for a few minutes, even swimming in the river at one point before the light finally gives up on the day and we head back to Mammoth - we need to find a Wolf tomorrow!!

Day 11: Once again, after the heavy rain in the night it's a bit of a relief to awaken to a beautiful sunny day. Roger has been out early and had point blank views of both Macgillivray's Warbler and Lazuli Bunting, so encouraged by his success we all go for a quick look before heading back to the Lamar Valley. The light is fantastic this morning and we all get great views of Macgillivray's Warbler and the incredible Lazuli Buntings that look iridescent in the sunshine.

Our first port of call is looking for Great-horned Owl, we see two fluffy young in full view, one even waving a wing at us! We also get great views of one of the adults again and find a pair of Warbling vireos, one of them warbling! Just a couple of miles out of town a suspected Bear-jam turns out to be just a Mule Deer but it does give us the opportunity to look at Undine falls with its colony of pretty Violet-green Swallows. At Blacktail Ponds we get terrific views of a pair of Sandhill Cranes and whilst watching them we find lots of baby Killdeer, much to Penny's delight! Other birds here include Ruddy Duck, Ring-necked Duck and a great overhead Bald Eagle.

After a quick look at the petrified tree we stop on the bridge over the Yellowstone River to look for Harlequin Duck. We've all but given up when Penny brilliantly finds a pair directly below us, including a much prized drake. Some of us scramble down the bank to get pictures, whilst others are content to view from the bridge but wherever we watch from we all enjoy what must surely be one of the world's most beautiful ducks. Barely four hundred yards up the road we encounter a large number of cars and photographers, presumably not a Mule Deer this time! Roy goes to investigate and comes back with the exciting news that there are two Badgers showing really well. We get intermittent views of these great animals which would have been satisfying enough but then another appears much closer and it performs brilliantly, eventually running towards us and crossing the road through a tunnel, much to the delight of everyone present.

One of the great things about Yellowstone is the way everyone is very happy to share information and a chance conversation here as the Badger excitement subsided revealed the news that there had been several wolves at Slough Creek this morning and that two of them were still there! Dashing back to the vehicles we head off in the said direction and are very relieved to see lots of cars and a lot of people looking in the same direction! After a little initial confusion we manage to locate the two wolves on a distant hillside, but even

through the scopes it is far from easy to make them out amongst the boulders and sage. Any frustration turns to elation however when a third animal is spotted down by the water and we get superb views for the next twenty minutes or so as it starts its journey back to the den at the other end of the valley. We see it swimming across channels of water, shaking itself off, then diving in again to cross the next channel, covering a lot of ground surprisingly quickly.

After a relatively serene lunch we head up the Lamar Valley and are absolutely thrilled to re-find the wolf as it trots through the sage, this time really close to the road. We park further up the road and watch as it passes by, trotting purposefully through the sage pausing a couple of times to look back. We drive a little further and find it again, this time our attention divided by the superb wolf and a pair of very close Golden Eagles that are being mobbed by a Raven. Add two Peregrines into the mix and it really is very difficult to know where to look next!

At a comfort stop we add a very nice Swainson's Hawk to our day list before carrying on to our final destination where we hope to find Mountain Goat. Being white, Mountain Goats are relatively easy to find in the summer when they stand out against the dark rock faces but at this time of year when there is still a lot of snow around it is an entirely different proposition, so it makes it even more extraordinary that Roy somehow manages to spot a couple while driving!! They are still a little distant through the scopes, so when someone tells us of a Grizzly just down the road we decide to go for that and hopefully get better views of the Goats. The 'Grizzly' once again turns out to be a beautiful Black Bear, the biggest we have seen-hence the confusion- we get far better views of the Mountain Goats and Penny(who else?) even finds a baby. We seem to create an awful lot of interest in these amazingly sure-footed mountain dwellers and it's rather funny to see all the assembled scopes and cameras pointing upwards when there is a superb Black Bear in front of us with barely anyone paying it any attention.

We stop on the way back to the hotel to take a few pictures and enjoy our final meal in Mammoth. We're all very sad to be leaving this very special place after what has been a very exciting day but we're also very excited to be heading to Old Faithful, exploring the geo-thermal wonders of the world's first National Park.

Day 12: It's another gorgeous morning and several of us are out and about before breakfast. New birds include House Wren for Roy and Jane, Willow Flycatcher for Roger and Mark and once again Lazuli Bunting and Macgillivray's Warbler show really well. After breakfast, while packing, we notice some Elk

on the hillside behind the cabins and watching them closely we can't help but notice that they seem rather nervous. After a few moments the reason for their unease becomes clear when a lovely cinnamon Black Bear strides across the hillside-right on the path that Roy and Jane were walking this morning! Our first geo-thermal stop is at Norris Geyser basin where we spend a couple of hours walking the trails and boardwalks around the various hot pools and geysers. The most famous geyser here is 'Steamboat' which when it erupts spews water up to four hundred feet in the air, making it the world's tallest geyser. The only trouble is that there can be up to fifty years between 'events' although there were two eruptions in May 2005 within four days which really doesn't seem that fair! There is relatively little bird life here with a few Sparrows and Juncos hopping around but a fly-over Osprey and singing Hermit Thrush are welcome additions to our day list.

After lunch by the river we drive the spectacular Firehole Canyon road stopping near the end to take some pictures of a spectacular waterfall. Much to our delight there are a few Golden-mantled ground squirrels here with one of them taking a particular shine to Roy, although on reflection it might have had something to do with raisins! Our next stop is at Fountain Paint Pots where once again we take to the boardwalks to see the various geo-thermal features. There are more of the beautiful deep blue pools, small geysers and bubbling mud along with the paint pots themselves which are caused by bacteria growing at different temperatures forming colours such as orange, green, pink and many others.

After another stop for a Grizzly that turns out to be another Black Bear we arrive at Old Faithful having just missed an eruption so we have about ninety minutes to settle into our cabins before the next show. Unfortunately it erupts a little earlier than we were told (not quite so faithful or bad info?) so we don't all see it before dinner. Afterwards we do all catch it together, watching as this iconic Geyser spews water and steam high into the night sky-well worth braving the cold!

Day 13: Some of us manage to see the seven o'clock eruption and by the eight forty five eruption the area surrounding Old Faithful is not just very popular with people but a herd of Bison have sat down very near the geyser. They don't even blink when it erupts which seems rather extraordinary but I guess they have seen it all before-many times! We get to spend the best part of the morning at this wonderful place, before reluctantly dragging ourselves away to begin our journey south to Jackson. We make a stop at Lewis waterfall and are rewarded with great views of a Dipper below us which is great news for Sheila who hadn't managed to see one earlier in the trip with Tom then spotting

a Beaver swimming down the river which we get good views of as it swims into the bank, although we can't find it when we walk down the road. We make the obligatory stop at the entrance to the park to get various photos of the group and individuals with the sign and spot a Western Wood Pewee.

Lunch by the lake is very pleasant and we see a lot of Pelicans flying to and from an Island. American Pipit on the shore is a new bird for the holiday and we also see a nice butterfly, Variegated Fritillary which is on the wing despite the rather cool temperature. We had then planned to go for a coffee in the lodge at Jackson Lake, but a Bull Moose is too good to pass up so our plans change again! The Moose shows very well at the other side of a picturesque meadow and we also see a couple of Willow Flycatchers here. News of a nearby Grizzly probably relates to one of the animals we searched for a week or so ago and on arriving on site it is indeed on one of the tracks we tried. No doubt about this animal and we all agree that it is the most beautiful bear we've seen as we watch it digging around the roots of a big tree before finally flopping to the ground for a rest-fantastic!

We head south via the very pretty Jenny Lake where there are the usual Gray Jays and Ravens in attendance, and after taking some photos make our way back towards Jackson. There is still time for one more bit of excitement however when we come across a mother and cub Black Bear that bring our bear total to a staggering twenty-eight animals! A fitting way to conclude what has been an outstanding wildlife experience for us all in some of the most beautiful surroundings in the world.

After our final dinner together we all meet up in time honoured Speyside tradition in the entrance to the hotel to talk about our favourite species, places and magic moments. Not surprisingly Bears, Wolves and Badgers are very high on most people's lists, with Mountain Goat, Coyote and Bison also getting a mention. Great Horned Owls, Bluebird and Harlequin Duck were the most popular birds and even though we didn't see Beaver at Schwabacher Landing it just pipped the Lamar Valley as place of the trip. Of course 'magic moment' is highly personal and several people mentioned the Elk birth, along with the Bison march, the Coyotes trotting past the vans and of course that wonderful wolf we watched swimming at Slough Creek. Many thanks to you all for being such a fun group to be with, both guides had a wonderful time and we look forward to seeing you all on another holiday.

BIRDS

Common Loon	Killdeer	Mountain Chickadee
Eared grebe	Spotted Sandpiper	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Western Grebe	Long-billed Curlew	White-breasted
Clark's Grebe	Wilson's Snipe	Nuthatch
Double-crested	Ring-billed Gull	Rock Wren
Cormorant	California Gull	House Wren
American White Pelican	Caspian Tern	American Dipper
Great Blue Heron	Feral Pigeon	Golden-crowned Kinglet
Trumpeter Swan	Mourning Dove	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Canada Goose	Collared Dove	Mountain Bluebird
Green-winged Teal	Great Horned Owl	Townsend's Solitaire
Mallard	Long-eared Owl	Swainson's Thrush
Pintail	Common Nighthawk	Hermit Thrush
Blue-winged Teal	Calliope Hummingbird	American Robin
Cinnamon Teal	Broad-tailed	Gray Catbird
Shoveler	Hummingbird	American pipit
Gadwall	Red-naped Sapsucker	Cedar Waxwing
American Wigeon	Williamson's Sapsucker	Starling
Redhead	Downy Woodpecker	Warbling Vireo
Ring-necked Duck	Hairy Woodpecker	Yellow Warbler
Lesser Scaup	Red-headed	Tennessee Warbler
Harlequin	Woodpecker	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Barrow's Goldeneye	Western Wood Pewee	Macgillivray's Warbler
Bufflehead	Willow Flycatcher	Common Yellowthroat
Common Merganser	Dusky Flycatcher	Western Tanager
Ruddy Duck	Cordilleran Flycatcher	Black-headed Grosbeak
Turkey Vulture	Horned Lark	Lazuli Bunting
Osprey	Tree Swallow	Green-tailed Towhee
Bald Eagle	Violet-green Swallow	Chipping Sparrow
Northern Harrier	Northern Rough-winged	Savannah Sparrow
Swainson's Hawk	Swallow	Brewer's Sparrow
Red-tailed Hawk	Barn Swallow	Vesper Sparrow
Golden Eagle	Bank Swallow	Fox Sparrow
American Kestrel	Cliff Swallow	Song Sparrow
Peregrine	Gray Jay	Lincoln's Sparrow
Prarie Falcon	Stellar's Jay	White crowned Sparrow
Blue Grouse	Clark's Nutcracker	Dark-eyed Junco
Ruffed Grouse	Black-billed Magpie	Red-winged Blackbird
Sage Grouse	American Crow	Western Meadowlark
American Coot	Raven	Yellow-headed Blackbird
Sandhill Crane	Black-capped Chickadee	Brewer's Blackbird

Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Northern Oriole(Roy
and Mark only)
Cassin's Finch
House Finch
Red Crossbill
Pine Siskin
House Sparrow

BUTTERFLIES

Hoary Comma
Green Comma
Milbert's Tortoiseshell
Mourning Cloak
Callippe Fritillary
Checkered White
American Painted Lady
Variegated Fritillary
Silvery Blue

MAMMALS

White-tailed Jackrabbit
Mountain Cottontail
Beaver
Muskrat
Pika
Least Chipmunk
Yellow-pine Chipmunk
Yellow-bellied Marmot
Golden mantled Ground
Squirrel
Uinta Ground Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Gray Wolf
Coyote
Grizzly Bear
Black Bear
American Martin
Badger
Elk
Mule Deer
Moose
Pronghorn
Bison
Bighorn Sheep
Ord's kangaroo Rat