

**Holiday Highlights**  
**Yellowstone Spring - The Cute Critter Tour**  
**26 May – 9 June 2018**

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**Guides:** Darren Rees & Duncan MacDonald

**Day 1: Getting There**

Our United Airways flight from London Heathrow to Denver is comfortable and not without highlights, for those with a view through the windows: the Atlantic crossing is largely obscured by cloud but there are breaks as we exit over the west coast of Ireland and as we reach the North American continent somewhere over the Arctic wastes of Labrador. Flying over thousands of square miles of snow-covered boreal forest and pools, we cross over the southern arm of the Hudson Bay, still jammed with pack-ice.

Onto the prairie belt and ordered fields below, before descending into Denver airport where we can see the distant line of the Rocky Mountains. We pass through US Customs and Immigration in record time and 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, the most scenic airport, sited beneath the snowy, jagged Teton Range. We pick up our bags and load the rental vans then 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 for our first foray 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 an American Robin sings from the top of a spruce. Rhona spots another bird on top of an adjacent tree – our first Red Crossbills. We add Mountain Chickadee and get nice looks at both Tree and Violet-crowned Swallows and we haven't yet moved from the car park! Next is a Northern Flicker feeding on the ground, followed by a family group of Clark's Nutcrackers in a spruce, then we are distracted by a colourful Western Tanager in the top of a nearby tree. Along the perimeter of the rodeo ground are Black-billed Magpies and our first Brewer's Blackbirds. Duncan hears a Ruby-crowned Kinglet singing and we coax it nearer to see its brilliant red head. Far on a rocky slope is an unusual black Yellow-bellied Marmot – he should have a yellow belly! At the end of one street we can look over a small marsh and we see more siskins with Chipping Sparrow, Cassin's Finch and a delightful primrose-yellow American Goldfinch. Retracing our steps, we add Black-capped Chickadee, Yellow Warbler, Red-tailed Hawk and Turkey Vultures to the list – a good start!

After breakfast we drive through town, pick up our sandwich order at the deli, then stop at Flat Creek on the edge of the Elk Refuge. The water level is high with seasonal snow melt and many of the reed beds are flooded, yet we see some handsome Yellow-headed Blackbirds calling from their perches - Red-winged Blackbirds are mobbing the Ravens that fly over. Ducks are dotted around including Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Mallard and Redheads. Right in front of us are the most obliging Tree Swallows perched on the fence, looking iridescent blue in the light - Song Sparrows are singing in the bushes nearby too. Across the grasses are our first Sandhill Cranes, and raptors are on the wing with a large white-tailed Bald Eagle and a Northern Harrier in the distance, then Duncan spots a Peregrine that passes right over our heads before charging across the rocky slope – wow!

Continuing, 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 that is perched next to one of the many nest boxes along the fence.

We drive a little further north to Moose Junction, then over the swollen Snake River and take the less busy road towards Wilson. A little way along, a car park gives us a view over Sawmill Pond where there is a nice male Barrow's Goldeneye in the water. Unfortunately, our planned walk along the riverbank is curtailed due to 'bear activity'! We drive a little further along where we can venture down a track that skirts the forest edge and sage brush. Yellow Warblers are singing and showing brilliant yellow, a Killdeer pair are looking nervous in front of us and a Great Blue Heron stalks through a watery patch. Our first White-crowned Sparrows are singing and an obliging House Wren also utters his bubbly song from a bare perch. Duncan picks out a Sharp-shinned Hawk soaring overhead, then Rhona spots a flock of white birds circling against the dark brooding sky – a spectacular group of sixteen White Pelicans! All the while we have a backdrop of mountain splendour so all is wonderful!

We stop at a couple of other places along the road, adding Dusky Flycatcher to the species list, before driving to the impressive visitor centre building at Moose. We arrive with perfect timing as the rain is just about to start, so it's a good place for a sheltered picnic. After eats and a look around the exhibits we decide a warming coffee at Doman's is in order – the most amazing views from any café in the world.

The pause in proceedings is enough to see an improvement with the weather and we set off, driving north into clearer skies. The views to the west are arresting with the mighty Teton Range dominating the panorama – from Mount Moran in the north to Mount Teewinot in the south. We take off down a dirt track to explore the south side of Elk Flats, an area where we have seen big groups of Bison before. We stop where we can scan across the expansive scene but there are only singles dotted around with isolated Pronghorns. Right at our feet are some adorable Uinta Ground Squirrels – we love 'em.

Further along the track we get nice close looks at a Bison scratching his moulting skin against a tree and a nice group of close Pronghorns. At the furthest point we scan the crags and surrounding hills but only find some distant Elk. Starting the drive back there is a nice Swainson's Hawk in a tree, then it's not long after before Linda shouts 'There on the left!' Wow! – a fantastic American Badger scurries up the slope between fallen logs and then out in the open again. What an animal to finish the day with!

The journey back affords great views to the Tetons, that are now clear of the earlier cloud. What a great first day. And so to dinner at nearby Bubba's BBQ restaurant.

### Day 3: **Evening Beaver-time**

After breakfast, we gather at 7.15am to drive to the north section of Grand Teton National Park. We check out Sawmill Ponds, where there have been reports of a Great Grey Owl – a much sought-after species. We arrive and scan for large grey lumps in trees – we have no luck with owls but we enjoy a smart male Belted Kingfisher, a beautiful Barrow's Goldeneye pair, some Gadwall and Gray Catbird that does indeed sound like a cat!

Further north we have another perspective across Elk Flats and from the large turnout we get great looks at Western Meadowlark, Savannah Sparrow, Long-billed Curlew, Swainson's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawks, Bison, and Pronghorn. We also meet up with our friend Dan Muscatell, a local guide and wildlife photographer who knows Teton and Yellowstone like the back of his hand – he keeps us abreast of recent sightings, as he has for many years now.

Back to the main road, we enter the National Park gates and then arrive at the spectacular Oxbow Bend that looks wonderful, bathed in the morning light with the awesome Mount Moran as centrepiece. There are some wildfowl on the still water – American Wigeon, Canada Geese, Common Merganser (Goosander), Mallard and a Double-crested Cormorant. An Osprey circles around completing the scene in one direction and looking the other way we see there are lots of female Elk - it's interesting to note that there are no calves present.

We carry on north, driving through an area where two Grizzly Bear families have been seen throughout the spring, including as recently as last night. We decide to take a walk in the centre of the bear zone (armed with bear spray) and what a delightful walk it turns out to be. Pink-sided Juncos are new birds and we see lots of Chipping Sparrows, Cassin's Finches, Northern Flicker and Mountain Bluebirds. The sun is shining, bringing out lots of butterflies including Western Pine Elfin, Spring Azure, Western White and Pale Swallowtail. New mammals come in the shape of a darling Red Squirrel and even more cute Yellow Pine Chipmunks. We get better looks at Yellow-rumped Warbler and Mountain Chickadees before winding our way back to the vans.

Colter Bay is our destination for lunch, right on the beach over-looking the lake and mountains. As if the view and eats are not enough, Duncan spots a distant Golden Eagle soaring – I'm not saying it was on the limit of visibility but it was probably in Idaho!

After lunch, we drive to Jackson Lake Dam where we can scan the considerable body of water beneath the mountains. Lots of White Pelicans are on the far shore with Ring-billed Gulls, two Caspian Terns and a single Franklin's Gull. In the water are Western Grebes, Eared Grebe, American Coot, American Wigeon and a single Common Loon (Great Northern Diver) in summer plumage. Behind us in the top of a cottonwood tree is a lovely male Red-naped Sapsucker.

It's now warm and we decide to 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. It's a great place to enjoy ice-creams with a view and from the elevated terrace we can see there's a female Elk in the bushes below. A male Northern Harrier is quartering the ground beyond some Sandhill Cranes and Canada Geese. A Broad-billed Hummingbird responds well to Duncan's coaxing, heading for us like a guided missile. Then a Moose appears from nowhere in the bushes - a male with its short velvet-covered antlers.

The drive back is as scenic as one can want for and we hatch a plan to stay out longer as no-one wants to call it a day. First, we stop at Dorman's Pizza place where there is Monday night eats and music. We take our pizzas, salads and beers on the upper outside deck with the most amazing views possible of the Tetons. Yet we can't help but notice that the clouds are building up around the summits and soon after we finish as a few spots of rain start to fall.

Thankfully, no sooner do we drive ten minutes up the road the weather improves and we end the day at beautiful Schwabacher Landing, on the banks of the Snake River. This has been a traditional site for American Beaver for many years and has hosted many a film crew, including the BBC Natural History unit. As we park the vans we can see the tell-tale signs of beaver activity - a series of dams and pools span the river beneath the towering backdrop of the Tetons. At the largest pool, marked by ranks of dead skeletal trees, there is a large beaver lodge that has housed a succession of families over the years and is now looking old with tufts of greenery from within the pile of felled wood. We are hopeful that it is still active as we walk to the edge of the water and prepare to wait quietly... across from us are two beautiful Barrow's Goldeneye and one of the many dead trees is laden with swallows – Tree, Cliff, Northern Rough-winged and Bank. Cassin's Finches are singing along with a very close Fox Sparrow. Within a few minutes Rhona spots something swimming in the water - we get into a better position and find two fun Muskrats. But we are looking for something much bigger so we keep up the vigil. The evening progresses and a Common Nighthawk starts calling and flies around overhead, but still no sign of Beavers..

We wander back towards the vehicles and then it happens.. In the main channel something catches the eye – a large animal is swimming in the middle of the channel, then starts coming towards us – an American Beaver. We get great looks as gets closer and closer, then the animal climbs out right in front of us showing off its flat tail. It pauses for all to see then slips back in the water and is away, disturbing a Spotted Sandpiper as it leaves. What an evening's viewing!

#### Day 4: Coyotes, Badgers and more

Our planned early morning excursion to photograph the scenic Mormon Row barns at dawn means leaving at 6am, but as we drive north we have a couple of distractions. First, Peter spots a Coyote close to the road as we pass Flat Creek - we double back and watch the animal scurry along the fence-line, push through the wire, then cross the road to the slope. Shortly afterwards, as we are approaching Gros Ventre river, there's a young bull Moose walking along the fence-line, again very close to the road. A fantastic start and we haven't got to our planned first site yet!

At Mormon Row there are a collection of old barns that mark a settlement of pioneering farmers and ranchers dating back to the late nineteenth century. They must be some of the most photographed barns in the world as they have the scenic backdrop of the snowy Teton Mountains, today shrouded in low cloud but wonderful nevertheless.

Lots of birds are calling from the sagebrush – Western Meadowlarks are the most obvious and obliging. We need to work at our sparrow identification as three species are usually present in the surrounding low brush. But what's this? The first sparrow we see is picking around the gravel path in front and it's a surprise Lark Sparrow – a handsomely marked bird with rich black, white and chestnut head markings and a clean breast.

We get looks at Brewer's, Savannah and Vesper in quick succession so we are all brushing up on our sparrow i.d. skills. Walking along the length of the row of rustic buildings we can scan beyond to the sage-covered flats. Pronghorn and distant Bison dot the landscape and along the path in front, where there is a break in the brush, are two large Sage Grouse – a target bird! Scanning further we can pick up one inflated male with his black and white breast to the fore. Other birds include Raven and smart perched American Kestrels. Walking back, we get great looks at 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 and great looks at an obliging Mountain Bluebird that is prospecting for nest sites in a short tree stump. We take the drive back around Antelope Flats via Kelly, stopping at one scenic overlook where we can scan down and across the sagebrush to the mountains beyond. As soon as we get out we can hear the distinctive song of a Sage Thrasher and we get great looks through the scope. A close Green-tailed Towhee joins in the morning chorus – superb looks

at a richly-coloured bird. Others seen on the route back include perched Swainson's and Red-tailed Hawks, close Pronghorn and a superb male Northern Harrier that flies alongside the vans to our left (Peter manages a drive by photo). What a haul of species before breakfast.

After breakfast, we drive the short distance to the Elk Refuge, this time exploring the huge area by the quiet gravel road that skirts the eastern perimeter. From our first stop we can look down on pools busy with duck including our first brick-red Cinnamon Teal and Green-winged Teal. Sandhill Cranes are walking in the distance and a Bald Eagle is perched on a pole in the marsh. All the while we are, once again, entertained by Uinta Ground Squirrels – we love 'em!

The road passes beneath the crags of Miller Butte and Turkey Vultures are gathered at a carcass on the floor beneath the rocks. It looks like the remains of a Bighorn Sheep – perfect Cougar prey! Could we be looking at the remains of a kill so close to downtown Jackson? Further along the escarpment we stop to where Mountain Lions have dened in recent history – we can but hope. Rock Wrens are calling and flitting around the rocks, then a sandy-coloured falcon flashes by – a Prairie Falcon. The road then passes by a series of large private residences with open views across the expansive grasslands to the Tetons beyond – wonderful views but their tastes in garden sculpture borders on the tacky with bucking broncos, bugling elk and the like. We stop at a road junction to scan around. Bald Eagle and Red-tailed Hawks are using utility poles as perches, a Vesper Sparrow sings away on a small post and two Horned Larks fly overhead. A little further on two more larks are perched on small rocks in the grass – excellent looks.

Then something quite extraordinary happens. To the right, in broad daylight and in the warm midday sun, a family of American Badgers are scurrying along in the grass. It's a female with three kits and she is leading the way, seemingly on a mission to get from one place to another. We follow, looking from the vans and enjoying an unexpected bonus. We anticipate where they are heading for and drive ahead, parking and getting out of the vans readying ourselves for their arrival. Down they trot in full view and the cameras start to roll then the female starts digging as the young disappear from view. We get amazing views of the big female shifting earth and periodically pausing to look around – we presume she is moving the kits to a new den. Best-ever Badgers!

Time for lunch at the Flat Creek picnic area and all the talk is of our exceptional morning. After eats we walk over to the nearby pool and reed beds as the birds are beckoning us: Cedar Waxwings and Yellow-rumped Warblers are fly-catching from the upper rung of the wooden fence; Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Marsh Wrens are calling from the reed stands and a smart Common Yellowthroat keep us entertained.

Next there is some much-needed downtime in Jackson – opportunity to check the many galleries and shops. Most folk check the Images of Nature Gallery that

showcases the photography of Thomas Manglesen, though at several thousand dollars per piece there are no takers for a print!

After another evening meal at Bubba's we travel to the north section of the Moose-Wilson road for an owl quest. There have been reports of Great Grey Owls around Sawmill Ponds so we intend to do another evening vigil hoping for a glimpse of these enigmatic birds. As we cross over the Snake River at Moose Junction there is a small group of people gathered on the bridge, looking down at a young moose – that seems appropriate!

At Sawmill Ponds we see a Barrow's Goldeneye pair in the water and lots of Tree Swallows that are flying around. Joyce is scanning the scene and finds us a rare treat – a Raccoon is working the edge of the water picking along through the fallen dead wood. It carefully selects tit-bits on the edge of the water and delicately manipulates food with its fore-feet – wonderful to watch. Wilson's Snipe are drumming over our heads against the dramatic skyscape – a nice way to end the day. Sadly, there is a no show from the owls – something to look forward to seeing another time.

#### **Day 5: To Yellowstone National Park**

As we have a long travel day in store we opt for a relaxing breakfast before loading the vans for the transfer to Yellowstone National Park - but we've still a little more exploring of Grand Teton National Park to do first.

We drive along Pacific Creek in the north of the park, and walk along the gravel track that goes towards Two Ocean Lake. The path climbs a small incline and from our elevated view we can admire and scan the vast panorama and we see distant Bald Eagle, close Hammond's Flycatcher and two Elk lying on the far slope. There is lots of botanising to add to Toni's growing list and some good butterflies including Milbert's Tortoiseshell, Satyr Comma, Mourning Cloak, and Anise Swallowtail. As we get to the treeline we glimpse a Red-naped Sapsucker flying across too.

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 with two Ospreys and we get looks at two Spotted Sandpipers that are making lots of noise on the opposite bank. Two Common Mergansers are in the water and two American Wigeon fly by. Seems everything is going by two by two! Western Tiger Swallowtail is also added to the list!

After lunch, we drive slowly north through the area that the bear families have been seen but again we are not in luck today. Instead we start the slow climb in altitude taking us through endless pine forest to Yellowstone National Park. The route takes along the Rockefeller Highway and climbs up through to 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. As we arrive at the entrance the heavens open and the rain pours down. Climbing higher towards the

Continental Divide the rain turns to hail and there is a covering of slushy ice on the road, making for a slow and interesting drive. It eases as we drop to the shoreline of Lake Yellowstone at West Thumb and we can see the first fumaroles venting steam into the air, a reminder of the geological volatility of the region. Driving along the shore through the rain we finally reach our base for the next three days at Lake Hotel and cabins.

After a delicious meal at the elegantly appointed Lake Hotel dining room we note that the rain has finally stopped and the sky is clearing. So, we set out to explore the north shore for an evening wildlife viewing stopping first at the beautiful Pelican Creek. We can't help but notice there are two huge White Pelicans sat on a log and towards the mouth of the creek a large group is swimming and communally fishing – a rather aptly named place! Ducks abound and we get our first looks at neat Buffleheads and Blue-winged Teal, as well as better looks at Green-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Common Mergansers and Western Grebes. There are lots of Canada Geese and groups of gulls, both Ring-billed and slightly larger California, then Rhona yells out 'Muskrat!' Two animals are busying around and at one point one comes out of the water and starts grooming itself on a log.

We continue around the north shore of the Lake Yellowstone towards Lake Butte overlook. As we climb the road to the summit we can see the extent of the damage from the great forest fire of 1988, as we can see standing and fallen dead trees as far as the eye can see – it's an alarming landscape. Once at the top we get out and notice a fantastic Dusky Grouse that is pecking around just below the car park. It then starts display, puffing himself up, fanning his tail and booming. What a bird to end the day on – and what a place to watch the sun go down.

#### **Day 6: Hayden Valley: Bears in the sage, Wolves in the snow**

Before breakfast, at 5.30am, 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. Bison dot the valley floor, Elk browse in the sagebrush and the meandering river is marked with groups of wildfowl – Canada Geese, Lesser Scaup, Common Merganser American Wigeon, Cinnamon Teal, Bufflehead and our first Shoveler. Two adult Bald Eagles are like white beacons in two trees to the left and Duncan finds two diminutive Wilson's Phalaropes spinning in the still water below. Joyce finds some Spotted Sandpipers too.

We drive further to where we can scan Trout Creek and something catches the eye. Two dark shapes are hurrying through the brush – a Grizzly Bear mum and cub! We get the telescopes out and enjoy watching them move briskly along the far ridge – the distinctive shoulder hump is clearly visible on the adult bear as she leads her offspring away. Our first bears and there is much rejoicing!

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. Sadly, despite the name, there are no bears here this time but we get a good show from two Bald Eagles that are picking at carrion on the far bank and more cranes, geese and ducks.

Further along at Alum Creek we can scan a huge area to the left and as we pull up we see a couple of people with scopes, looking intently towards a clump of trees. We stop and set up our telescopes, enquiring to what's about. The reply is immediate – Wolf!

In a stand of dead trees is a pale head and through the scope all is revealed. A striking whitish wolf is sitting and there's more movement next to it – another wolf, this time with a more classic grey brindled pelage, stands up and walks to the left. Then we can see a third animal resting to the left. The whitish wolf is clearly chewing on something and it's great to watch through the scope.

It's only when they all get up and start walking, that we realise that there are five wolves in the group (later we learn these are the Wapiti pack). They start working down the slope in single file with that distinctive lolloping gait, though we note one is carrying an injury to its rear leg and limping. The group continue working their way across the wide-open countryside then take off up a slope marked with huge banks of snow. They pace across the snow and then start cavorting and rolling around, seemingly enjoying themselves in the white stuff. Then they lay up in the sagebrush before walking across the ridge and across another snow strand – truly memorable views of special animals. What a morning's viewing and all before breakfast.

After the classic Lake Hotel breakfast buffet, we feel ready for another session out in the wilds around Yellowstone Lake. We drive along the north shore, stopping at Mary Bay where a Coyote is laid up watching over the geese and ducks on the pond. It's catching the sun and looking beautiful with its sandy and beige colouring. It briefly stands up then walks a few yards before settling just beyond view – time for us to move along.

At Sedge Bay we park and scan the low rocks and sunning itself on the top of one crag is a large male Yellow-bellied Marmot. It's soon joined by two others and there is some chasing around and tail wagging. The female then breaks away and starts grooming herself, while the male resumes his 'king-of-the-rock' pose on the crag. All great fun to watch their antics.

We drive further and the road leaves the lake shore, climbing to nearly 8000ft at Sylvan Pass. Huge scree slopes climb either side of the road and we park at a spot we've seen American Pikas before. Sadly, they don't show today but we see a Peregrine soaring around one of the high snowy buttresses and get a fly-by from a Sharp-shinned Hawk. We drive a short distance to the frozen Eleanor Lake to photograph the icy landscape and there are a few snowballs thrown! Sylvan Lake is our lunch spot – more Common Mergansers, Barrow's Goldeneye and a Bald Eagle, while we tackle our first Xanterra sandwiches! We drive slowly back

and decide to have some down-time at the cabins after the rigours of our early morning start.

After our early evening meal, there is time for another session in the field, so we choose nearby Fishing Bridge as the place to end the day. It's always been a good place for aquatic mammals and tonight it again proves so. We park and walk to the picturesque wooden bridge over the Yellowstone River and immediately spot a Muskrat swimming along the near bank. It climbs out and starts nibbling on the grass then swims up a small channel right beneath us.

Duncan spots a Beaver on the far shore of the river and we anticipate the route it might take, so walk to the other side of the bridge hoping for a close encounter. The animal doesn't at first swim our way but after a short wait it starts slowly working its way along. We all get down from the skyline on the water's edge and it swims right by us, just feet away – wow! It then goes under the bridge so we run over to look down as it comes out the other side – like playing pooh sticks! What a wonderful end to another magical day in Yellowstone.

## **Day 7: June Snow**

The next day we meet again for breakfast at 7am and we are away at 8.15am, driving 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! There is the same spread of species of ducks and geese as before but with no wind we do get better looks and everyone gets used to identifying Blue-winged, Cinnamon and Green-winged Teal. The two Bald Eagles are now sat in the same tree, Elk are dotted around the sage slope and Bison are scattered around the valley floor. We enjoy the spread of species for a while but then things turn cold and the rain starts.

We drive the rest of Hayden Valley, scanning from the vans through the cold rain. We decide that now might be an opportune time to go to the Canyon Visitor Centre that is dedicated to the volatile nature of Yellowstone and we can learn about the super volcano beneath us – there are periodical eruptions every 400,000 thousand years or so... and the next one is long overdue. It's all disturbing to learn that the next explosion will be an 'extinction event', so we hope it waits until we leave.

When we exit the centre the rain has finally stopped, so we take in the wonderful waterfalls nearby. At the Upper Falls there is the first major cataract that the Yellowstone River plummets down as it charges through the eroded walls of the canyon. We can walk to the very brink of the falls and experience the raw power of millions of gallons of turbulent water pouring over in white plumes - truly awesome.

Next, the road takes us along the north rim of the canyon and at Lookout Point we can admire the full splendour of the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone. Steep walls of yellow and rusty volcanic rhyolite have been eroded further into dramatic

pillars, or hoodoos and on two separate rocks are two Ospreys that look like they are nesting - through the scopes we can see that they are still to lay eggs.

If the view one way is stunning then the view the other way is sublime and it is Yellowstone at its most iconic. At the head of the canyon is the breath-taking Lower Falls with the river dropping a dynamic 308 ft – the highest waterfall in the Park.

From Canyon we drive west through another shower to Norris and when we arrive we thankfully have a window of an hour to take in the impressive Porcelain Basin that showcases a series of geysers, fumaroles and hot pools, testament to the volcanic nature of West Yellowstone.

We drive back to Canyon for lunch but the rain is still coming down so end up eating our picnic in the vans. Outside, the rain has turned to snow so hot chocolates and coffees are the order of the day at the Canyon Fountain Grill. Thankfully, when we are finished the weather has taken a turn for the better and we drive south to the Hayden Valley to resume some wildlife watching. At Alum Creek we park and scan around us and notice two bull Bison on the far bank of the main river. They launch into the water and swim across towards us, making progress against a strong current, then choosing the steepest part of the bank to climb before crossing the road right next to Duncan's van. Fantastic!

Driving only a short distance further we can see a few people with scopes trained on the hill. We stop and can make out a brown blob rummaging in the sage and through our scopes all is revealed – a big male Grizzly Bear. We watch for nearly half an hour as it works its way across the hillside, rooting around here and there, lifting its head and sniffing the air and basically doing beary things. A birthday bear for Linda!

There's still time for one more site visit and we stop at Le Hardy rapids hoping to see some of its colourful residents. We walk to the edge and Hilary says, 'there they are!' Across the river, loafing on rocks at the rushing water's edge is a group of bright Goosanders and amongst them are exquisitely marked Harlequin Ducks - three drakes and a female. Walking further along the path we come to the most turbulent section of the water and on the opposite side, on rocks close to the torrent, is a pair of American Dippers courting. One then flies over the river and drops in the fast-flowing water right in front of us and does some energetic swimming. Brilliant!

As if finishing on the high of two new and very special birds isn't enough, we stop again between Le Hardy and Lake when there is another Grizzly Bear by the road – sadly it's quick to disappear into the forest but it's a two bear day nevertheless.

#### **Day 8: Follow the Bears**

We have an early start at 6.30am hoping to find the two Grizzly Bears that have been seen along the north shore of the lake. The rain from yesterday has long

gone and it's a glorious crisp morning and we have to de-ice the van before setting off. Crossing Fishing Bridge and Pelican Creek the water is glassy calm and the distant mountains have a fresh coating of snow, creating the perfect scene. Carrying on to Mary Bay we notice a group of cars ahead – this looks good.

We get out and sure enough the two target bears have been seen on the near slope and we catch them as they walk along through the fallen trees. These have been frequenting the area for a couple of months and the rangers and local photographers have named them Raspberry and Snow. Further, we have enjoyed seeing the same bears last year. As we watch, they start working down the slope and though they disappear from view behind trees, they emerge on the road ahead. Incredibly they start walking along the road and everyone gets in their vehicles and follows them - we join the bear cavalcade!

We must drive nearly half a mile when we can park and find out where the bears have gone – they've disappeared over the hill and out of sight, still what an experience. We drive further around the headland hoping that they may reappear the other side. Further along at Sedge Bay we pause and scan, enjoying a close fly-by from a huge young Bald Eagle. Also, the morning sun is warming up a Yellow-bellied Marmot who has emerged from his burrow.

We get back in the vans and retrace our steps, noting a Killdeer close to the road. Then we see a number of cars parked ahead... the bears are back. We park and what happens next can only be described as magical. The two Grizzly Bears, Raspberry and Snow, are walking along the shore and we walk along with them peering through trees. They work along to an open area and we get unrivalled looks at the two foraging on the beach. At one point, they swim across a channel to a shingle spit to resume their foraging, shaking their wet coats in the morning sun to the sound of scores of camera shutters buzzing into action – the Yellowstone paparazzi is at work and who can blame them. We watch the bears for nearly an hour, foraging on the beach, crossing the road between the cars and digging on the hillside opposite – a humbling experience and we travel back to Lake Hotel elated.

After another lovely breakfast buffet, we are checked out and on our way by 10.15am in the glorious sunshine, weaving our way north to our first stop at Mud Volcanoes – some more geo-thermal activity for the trip. Everyone has their own hour to explore the Dragon's Mouth and other imaginatively named features. There are birds here too, with a Killdeer raising its brood of four fluffy chicks.

Onto the Hayden Valley, where 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 daytime Beaver that swims by, spotted by Toni. It pulls itself out onto the bank for a short while to groom its fur. We stop for further scans along the valley but decide to push on further as we have some miles to cover today.

We ascend Dunraven Pass, stopping just after the highest point where we can walk around and enjoy some alpine botanising – Alpine Phlox, Shooting Star, and Alpine Forget-me-not to name a few. A Red-tailed Hawk gets buzzed by a Goshawk and we have a fine look at a Mountain Bluebird on top one of the many dead, bleached trees.

The north slope of Mount Washburn drops steeply into a mosaic of broken stands of aspen and pines and we stop a couple of times to scan. At the second pull-in it seems the perfect spot for lunch and we settle in with the Uinta Ground Squirrels. Below, across the valley floor are lot of Elk including one very young calf. We scan further and find a Black Bear foraging in a clearing. It's good to compare the low shoulder profile with the humpy Grizzlies of earlier in the morning.

At Tower we use the facilities and check out the scenic Tower Falls that plummet between tall volcanic hoodoos. Re-joining the scenic Yellowstone canyon, we stop under one cliff where we can look across to the terraces of rhyolitic basalt pillars – overhead we get close views of Violet-green Swallows and spectacular White-throated Swifts that are charging around the sky and swooping into nest cavities in the over-hanging rocks.

The route west takes us across the expansive Blacktail Plateau and we pause at roadside ponds where there are assorted duck, Sandhill Cranes, Yellow-headed Blackbird and a nice Coyote that is intently stalking small prey in the grasses. Finally, we check in at our new base for four nights, the Mammoth Terraces Hotel and cabins and we get assigned our own units that are all neatly arranged around a grass lawn that is dotted with rodents – Uinta Ground Squirrels? We love 'em!

After dinner, we take a stroll in the remaining light, around the streets of Mammoth and we investigate the alarm calls of an American Robin. It's coming from the tall trees around the Visitor Centre and we immediately find the reason for the bird scolding – a beautiful large Great Horned Owl is sitting on the limb of a tall cottonwood. We watch a while before it flies off to a nearby rooftop, then disappears underneath an overhang. It reappears and flies across with prey in its talons. It lands on a rooftop, calling all the while and we can see what prey its carrying – half a Snowshoe Hare. It has provoked calling from the two young owls in a tall pine tree – Dad is bringing home the supper. What a way to end a great day.

## **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 lots of Pronghorn and Bison among the way. We stop when we see a group of photographers who are stalking an American Badger in the sagebrush – that's a good start!

We are keen to go further along the Lamar Valley so push on hoping to get some wolfy action, as they have dened in the area again this year. As we approach

Slough Creek we can't help but notice that there are a lot of cars parked. We join a group of people, some with telescopes trained down the valley and learn that there has been a kill earlier in the morning but the wolves have moved off. We can still see Ravens and a Coyote where the carcass lies, just out of sight. In a nearby tree a young Bald Eagle sits being mobbed by Black-billed Magpies. We are also directed to a small scar in the sage beneath a line of pines – it's where the wolf den was, but again we are out of luck as we learn that the adults have moved the pups some five days prior.

There is still a lot to see though, with Beaver in the water, Sandhill Cranes in the marshy areas and Elk chasing a Coyote that dares get too close. Golden Eagles are soaring over the hillside, a Turkey Vulture arrives at the carcass and two Mule Deer are on the slopes. As we are watching another closer Coyote, Duncan notices another American Badger at its hole – we've never seen so many Badgers in one trip!

Further along the Lamar Valley we stop opposite Jasper Bench, where we get the perfect view looking down onto the valley floor dotted with large herds of Bison and small groups of Pronghorn. Opposite, in a tall dead tree is a huge nest with an adult Bald Eagle attending its young and at a higher altitude on the far slopes is a Grizzly Bear foraging close to a bank of snow. No wonder they call this America's Serengeti!

We push on further and take a walk near the confluence of the Lamar River and Soda Butte Creek. It's a delight walking through flowers and sage to where we can look down the bank to the braided river system and flower-covered valley bottom. Amongst the yellow and green carpet are Pronghorns and Bison – what a picture. Further along the riverbank we see a House Wren singing from the highest point in a dead tree and two Harlequin Ducks mid-stream with a nearby Trumpeter Swan and American Wigeon. Then we get a Golden Eagle display with two soaring low over the cliff and climbing higher and higher. After our walk, we decide to stay at the Hitching Post for lunch and we get looks at a well-horned Bighorn ram sat high on the escarpment.

We start the slow drive back, keen to take in a few different sites. At Calcite Springs we can walk along the boardwalk that takes us along the ravine edge with spectacular views across to the basalt columns and rhyolitic pillars. We get great looks at adorable young marmots, as well as scope views of a Bighorn ewe and lamb and looks along to an Osprey on its nest.

After ice-creams and drinks at Tower we feel up for more adventuring so drive towards Petrified Tree looking for Black Bears that have been reported from the area. There's nothing at first, so we take a look at the pillar of rock that once was a tree, consumed by volcanic pyroclastic flow – bewildering to look at. Leaving the site we notice a car parked looking up a slope. There's a single Black Bear walking along the fallen trees and we get great looks at an individual with a shiny velvety

black coat. We watch for a while and we are joined by others who tell us of a mother and cubs party around the corner so we leave to investigate.

As we approach Rainy Lake just past Tower Junction, we notice a Black Bear on the other side of the water. We drive past slowly and park at the nearest lay-by to set up scopes. We scan the edge of the woods and find her cubs coming down from a nearby tree to join mum in the grass. The family are fun to watch and at one point the cubs are walking along a dead tree. The cute critter tour continues.

Our final stop is at Floating Island Pond, where we enjoy wonderful looks at Ruddy Ducks, with males displaying to their females. Yellow-headed Blackbirds are displaying too and on the scree slope Yellow-bellied Marmots are loafing on rocks.

### **Day 10: The Early Bird Catches The Wolf**

We meet at 5.30am for an early morning quest for Grey Wolf, hoping to improve on the no-show from yesterday. We drive east into the rising sun passing through beautiful Blacktail Plateau and onwards towards Tower, noting Bison and Elk close to the road and one bull Elk has a large set of antlers. Entering Little America and the start of the Lamar Valley the herds of both Bison and Pronghorn are larger with one frisky buck antelope running around close to the road.

We arrive at Slough Creek and walk to the uppermost viewpoint thinking that any action around the carcass will be easier to view. The panorama is magnificent and we set our scopes next to a small group of wolf-watchers noting that they have scopes and radios for up-to-the-minute information. They tell us that there has been no sign of wolves this morning, so we scan around enjoying what is on offer: Two Bald Eagles are centre stage walking and picking at something on the ground, before one flies off and perches on a fallen tree. Ducks and geese are dotted around the water courses and a Trumpeter Swan flies through. Then a wolf watcher announces she has found a wolf - a black individual lying on the ground. We set our scopes on the dark object but it doesn't seem to be moving - we are to be convinced. After a while, a strange thing happens. A Mountain Bluebird lands on 'the wolf's' head - it's all a pile of poop.

We resume the vigil, keen to see some action, then at 7.15am someone yells, 'behind you!' We turn to the left and there is a lone blackish wolf walking by, really close! We watch it as it comes to water's edge, then swims across channel to where the carcass is. It spends some time foraging out of sight, then walks across the flooded grass for all to see. We watch it walk through the scene for twenty minutes, eventually climbing through the sage and up the valley side - what an encounter. We wind our way back for a well-earned late breakfast.

We are out again soon after breakfast but before we leave Mammoth we spend some time around the cabins tracking down a Lazuli Bunting that has been calling from the slope. We soon find it singing in a nearby bush - what a smart bird. We stop a few miles out of town to view the impressive Gardner Bridge and walk

through the sagebrush to peer down into the steep-sided ravine – there's no sign of the Grizzlies that have been in the area recently but it is nevertheless a beautiful spot.

Driving further to Blacktail Ponds we see a Common Yellowthroat that sings from one of the only bushes on view. Further, at the Blacktail Plateau Drive we notice that the one-way road is closed, so we plan to 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 great looks at a beautiful bird. Unfortunately, the road is closed to foot traffic as well as vehicles, as there is a lot of bear activity – not for the first time we've been thwarted. So, we decide to drive to another place where we can walk before lunch – well that was the plan, but Rhona has other ideas. We round a corner and she says, 'there's a bear – on the right!'

We park in a lay-by, conveniently only yards away. In the trees is the most beautiful Cinnamon Black Bear and it wants to cross the road, which it does with no worries about the traffic, but then who would argue! It walks between cars and down the slope right in front of us – we get superb looks and we have started our own bear jam! We can watch through the scopes and note its two green ear tags and radio collar, so we presume that it is a known bear.

Time is getting on, so we head to the Yellowstone picnic site next to the river before starting to work our way back – we have some down-time promised in Mammoth. Again, Yellowstone has other ideas as when we pass Elk Creek, where the Cinnamon Bear was earlier, there are more cars parked. This time we get out and find that two, very black Black Bears are wandering slowly between the fallen trees. At one point one bear acts like Baloo, standing up and scratching himself against a dead tree – everyone is humming 'The Bare Necessities' in their head - priceless!

## 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 through but we choose to keep driving to Slough Creek to where the wolf-watchers are gathered. We walk to the upper view point and peer across the now familiar scene and start systematically scanning the animals dotted about the beautiful panorama. The ducks we've seen on earlier visits include a Canvasback drake that is gleaming white in the morning sun. Common Mergansers are lined up on a log and Bison are wading through the flooded areas of the valley floor. A further group of Bison are grazing and close by is a smaller black animal. Another dark Grey Wolf that walks along and sizes the Bison up, then sits down and starts howling – what a start to the day.

We continue to scan around but no other wolves are responding to the lone black's calls. The two adult eagles we've seen before are sat in different trees and we catch a glimpse of both Beaver and Muskrat. We watch a while but the wolf



seems to be hunkered down for the morning so we decide to move on for our breakfast spot and to the Lamar Valley, now bathed in morning sun. What a place to enjoy our eats, serenaded by close Meadowlarks and a Sage Thrasher. Further away, across the valley floor and amongst some trees on the far slope, are two Black Bears foraging and travelling together. One is a black form and the other, smaller beast is a cinnamon form. A nice couple!

Moving through the Lamar Valley, we drive to Soda Butte, the strange rock formation that names the valley and river. Walking around the back of the rock we see lots of Cliff Swallows tending their cup shaped nests. A single Mountain Goat is teetering on a steep cliff-face opposite. Past Pebble Creek we stop where a few cars are stopped and people are looking towards the treeline. There in the shade of trees, is the most beautiful Cinnamon Black Bear – this time we can see no tags or collars – just a luxuriant brownish-red coat. A real beauty!

At Baronette Peak we park where we can scan the steep slopes of this impressive mountain. High on some of the most precipitous ledges Joyce and Hilary spot some white Mountain Goats with kids. What a place to live!

We leave Yellowstone National Park through the east gate, stopping at Silver Gate and the Log Cabin Café for some well-earned coffees. 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 the scenic Beartooth Lake that sits beneath the impressive Beartooth Butte. A cute Least Chipmunk keeps us entertained while we eat our sandwiches and a few crumbs fall in its direction... well there are no rangers about!

Onwards, the road winds higher and higher, finally going beyond the treeline to the exposed rocky summits and at West Summit we reach 10,947ft! 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 looking for three target bird species and specialists of the high country. Within minutes we see two Horned Larks alight on the bare ground in front, followed quickly by American Pipits flying around. Then, as if to order, Black Rosyfinches land on the edge of a strand of snow and start picking around – great looks through the scope. We walk across the spongy ground which is coloured with lots of small alpine flowers - there's Alpine-forget-me-not, Moss Campion, Marsh Marigold, Moss Phlox, and Mountain Douglasia. We move to where the terrain falls away revealing a miraculous view north over a broad deeply-gouged valley. We see Yellow-bellied Marmots and glimpse a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, but there's still no sign of those Pikas.

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 get photos of the walls of snow each side of the road – a great opportunity for a group shot dwarfed by a twenty foot of snow. The

route back takes us through Cooke City (nice loos) and back into the National Park, where we slowly take in a tour along Soda Butte Creek and the very special Lamar Valley, populated by huge herds of Bison and dotted with Pronghorn. We continue moving, content to view from the vehicles, but we can't help but stop at Elk Creek where a number of vehicles are parked. It's another Black Bear and when we see it through binoculars we can see it is one of the black individuals we saw at the same spot yesterday.

Around the corner is another jam but we are told it is the Cinnamon Bear from yesterday and as it's a walk and we are late, we carry on driving. However, when a confiding Coyote walks close to the road we can't help but stop and get the cameras out. The magic of Yellowstone keeps giving! Finally, we arrive at Mammoth at 6.30pm, a whole twelve hours in the field. What a long but rewarding day.

## **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 one of the favourite geo-thermal features of the trip.

Birds are around in the early hours and we see several Mountain Bluebirds, American Robins, Chipping Sparrows and Violet-crowned Swallows perched on one of the bleached trees. Both Killdeer and a Yellow-rumped Warbler have clearly not read the signs about touching the water and are wading or picking along the pools edges. At the formation Orange Spring Mound we stop and have a short walk adding some birds that are singing in the morning sun: Green-tailed Towhee, Dusky Flycatcher (or is it Hammond's?), Western Wood Pewee and Cassin's Finch. Marmots and Yellow-pine Chipmunks are also busying around. 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 Old Faithful. The road climbs through a series of bends marked with pinnacles and boulder fields and we stop at a place we've christened Pika Grove – let's hope it lives up to its name. As soon as we get out we can hear the high pitch call of a Pika but we just can't locate it. Louder barks come from the Yellow-bellied Marmots and they are more obliging, showing well as they clamber amongst the rocks. But why the warning calls? Then a special animal enters the rocky bowl as an American Marten hunts through the nooks, crannies and crevices. It disappears for a short while then re-emerges with carrying a prey item – could it be a Pika? We watch and again it reappears, this time closer and we get wonderful looks at its chocolate coat and orange bib. Perhaps we should rename this place Marten Grove!

We carry on higher, then the road 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 and the first we see is a delightful group of four Wilson's Phalaropes and two American Avocet. More appropriately are two Trumpeter Swans and also Lesser Scaup, American Wigeon, Mallard, Ruddy Duck and Canada Geese. Yellow-headed Blackbirds are in the reeds and we can see the heads of Sandhill Cranes as they wade through the damp grasses.

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 Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Dark-eyed Juncos and a Hermit Thrush singing. The latter makes an appearance when coaxed into nearby trees. We don't have to wait long before a Yellow-bellied Marmot scurries along, deftly negotiating the boulders. However, we see no sign of Pika or Golden-mantled Squirrel so the quest goes on.

Working south we stop at Gibbon Meadows for lunch, before continuing along the whirlwind tour of Yellowstone Natural Wonders. Next stop is Gibbon Falls that is in full spate and gets an eight out of ten! The waterfalls continue at Firehole Canyon, another picturesque spot with the added bonus this time of a Yellow-rumped Warbler that has nested in a pine at eye level – Joyce finds an American Dipper too.

At Fountain Paintpots it's our first opportunity to walk around some more of the famed geo-thermal features, first avoiding the Bison bull close to the boardwalk (the following day it goes a tourist from California!). 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, whereas 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 in the morning. But we've still the rest of the day to consider. We check in to the Snow Lodge and 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 and the vapours from the many features are backlit and looking fullsome in the cool temperatures of the end of the day. We walk the boardwalk past steaming Excelsior Crater, a relic of an enormous explosive geyser and then around Grand Prismatic, the largest of the multi-coloured pools – like others we can't resist stopping for photos. What a way to end the day.

### **Day 13: Geyser Gazing**

We decide an early walk at Midway Geyser Basin is in order, as we'd like to investigate the newly constructed Grand Prismatic overlook, created last year.

We leave at 6am for the short drive to the trailhead for Fairy Falls. We park and walk across the bridge over the Firehole River noting two very close Spotted Sandpipers on a log. White-crowned Sparrows and Dark-eyed juncos are singing from treetops and as we approach the viewing platform we hear Townsend's Solitaires singing. We can see one bird flying overhead in song flight before it lands on a tall dead tree. The view over Midway Basin is fantastic with Grand Prismatic taking centre-stage – turquoise water is colouring the steam from the centre and orange mats radiate from the fringe.

We get back for breakfast at 8am 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 short walk to the fabulous Old Faithful Inn, the huge original wooden building that has been welcoming visitors to Yellowstone since 1904. From inside the main lobby we can look up through the wooden tiers linked by half-log stairs and gnarled railings, with pride of place the massive fireplace and tall stone chimney – an architectural gem.

Then we set our path for 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!).

Onwards to an appointment with Daisy Geyser – some are lucky enough to see an American Marten enroute! We wait and take a sweepstakes on when Daisy will blow, all taking timings around the prediction given of 12.25pm. Then, bang on time, she blows and Tony is nearest, being two minutes adrift.

There's time to take in famous Morning Glory pool, one of the most colourful of the hot pools in the Park, then we walk to nearby 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 and it's due to erupt at 1.30pm, give or take 30 minutes. When we arrive, there are crowds gathering so we play the waiting game. We settle in for our scenic picnic lunch and take in the moment, admiring a Red-tailed Hawk that sails through the skeletal trees that mark the perimeter of the splash zone of the geyser. Then, completely unannounced she blows, ten minutes before time. Wow! Sustaining for a full fifteen minutes there's plenty of time to photograph the wonder from all angles. What a finish and a candidate for 'geo-thermal of the trip'.

It's soon time to leave and with some reluctance we start driving south. We are still on a Pika quest, so factor in some time for a stop at the cliffs along the Lewis River. There, we have some success, with nice looks at Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels, Yellow-bellied Marmot and tantalising glimpses of Pika – one for another time.

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 inner park 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 shortly after 6pm for our final night in the 49er Inn. The last meal is a fun affair at the Gather Restaurant – a fitting end to an amazing trip.

#### **Day 14: An Early Start**

It's a relaxing final morning in Jackson, with everyone having their own free time to have breakfast and some leisure time for some last-minute exploring of this fun town - some choose to walk to Flat Creek, others wander the shops. We are all loading up the vans at 11am, then pick up some extra drivers from the rental company. They drive us to the airport for our first flight, checking in without too much fuss, bound for Denver and Heathrow.

At Denver, we have a bite to eat before boarding our late-afternoon flight to London. We collect those all-important votes for Species of the Trip and Magic Moments. And the results of the jury are:

#### **Species of the Trip - the top three**

1<sup>st</sup> – American Badger

2<sup>nd</sup> – Black Bear

3<sup>rd</sup> - Grizzly Bear

#### **Favourite Place**

Joint winners Beartooth Highway and Lamar Valley

#### **Magic Moment**

So many nominations reflect on the wonderful encounters we've enjoyed: Beaver at Schwabacher Landing; Bison swimming across the Yellowstone River; watching a Coyote pounce on a gopher; mum and cubs Black Bears; Grizzlies on the shore; walking in the forest with butterflies and birds; the list goes on... but the most popular was watching the mum American Badger with her cubs.

#### **Geo-thermal Feature**

A clear winner is Riverside Geyser, with Old Faithful as runner-up

#### **Day 15: Home**

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

## Birds

Canada Goose  
Trumpeter Swan  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Northern Pintail  
American Wigeon  
Blue-winged Teal  
Cinnamon Teal  
Green-winged Teal  
Northern Shoveler  
Canvasback  
Redhead  
Ring-necked Duck  
Lesser Scaup  
Harlequin  
Barrow's Goldeneye  
Bufflehead  
Common Merganser  
Ruddy Duck  
Dusky Grouse  
Sage Grouse  
Common Loon  
Eared Grebe  
Western Grebe  
American White Pelican  
Double-crested Cormorant  
Great Blue Heron  
Turkey Vulture  
Northern Harrier  
Osprey  
Sharp-shinned Hawk  
Northern Goshawk  
Red-tailed Hawk  
Swainson's Hawk  
Ferruginous Hawk  
Bald Eagle  
Golden Eagle  
American Kestrel  
Prairie Falcon  
Peregrine  
Sandhill Crane  
American Coot  
Sora Rail (H)  
Killdeer  
American Avocet  
Spotted Sandpiper  
Long-billed Curlew  
Wilson's Snipe  
Wilson's Phalarope  
California Gull  
Ring-billed Gull  
Franklin's Gull  
Caspian Tern  
Collared Dove  
Mourning Dove  
Feral Pigeon  
Great Horned Owl  
Long-eared Owl  
Common Nighthawk  
White-throated Swift  
Calliope Hummingbird  
Broad-tailed Hummingbird  
Belted Kingfisher  
Red-naped Sapsucker  
Hairy Woodpecker  
Downy Woodpecker (H)  
Northern Flicker  
Western Wood-pewee  
Hammond's Flycatcher  
Dusky Flycatcher  
Clark's Nutcracker  
Black-billed Magpie  
American Crow  
Raven  
Bank Swallow  
Rough-winged Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
Tree Swallow  
Cliff Swallow  
Violet-green Swallow  
Black-capped Chickadee  
Mountain Chickadee  
Red-breasted Nuthatch  
Broad-tailed Hummingbird  
Calliope Hummingbird  
Marsh Wren  
Rock Wren  
House Wren  
American Dipper  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
Townsend's Solitaire  
Mountain Bluebird

Hermit Thrush  
American Robin  
Horned Lark  
American Pipit  
Cedar Waxwing  
European Starling  
Gray Catbird  
Warbling Vireo  
Yellow-rumped Warbler  
Yellow Warbler  
MacGillivray's Warbler  
Common Yellowthroat  
Green-tailed Towhee  
Brewer's Sparrow  
Chipping Sparrow  
Savannah Sparrow  
Vesper Sparrow  
Fox Sparrow  
Song Sparrow  
White-crowned Sparrow  
Lark Sparrow  
Dark-eyed Junco  
Western Tanager  
Lazuli Bunting  
Brewer's Blackbird  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Yellow-headed Blackbird  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Western Meadowlark  
Black Rosyfinch  
Cassin's Finch  
House Finch  
Red Crossbill  
Pine Siskin  
American Goldfinch  
Black Rosyfinch  
House Sparrow

### **Mammals**

Black Bear (10)  
Grizzly Bear (7)  
Raccoon  
American Marten  
American Badger  
Coyote  
Gray Wolf  
Red Fox (Cross Fox)

Least Chipmunk  
Yellow Pine Chipmunk  
Yellow-bellied Marmot  
Uinta Ground Squirrel  
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel  
Red Squirrel  
Northern Pocket Gopher (in the mouth of a Coyote!)  
American Beaver  
Muskrat  
American Pika  
American Elk  
Mule Deer  
Moose  
Pronghorn  
American Bison  
Mountain Goat  
Bighorn Sheep  
Big Brown Bat  
Little Brown Bat

### **Butterflies**

Stella Orange-tip  
Clouded Sulphur  
Western White  
Mourning Cloak  
American Painted Lady  
Satyr Comma  
Pale Swallowtail  
Anise Swallowtail  
Western Tiger Swallowtail  
Two-tailed Swallowtail  
Milbert's Tortoiseshell  
Meadow Brown  
Boisduval's Blue  
Silvery Blue  
Spring Azure  
Common Alpine  
Western Pine Elfin  
Western Green Hairstreak  
Juniper Hairstreak  
Thicket Hairstreak  
Sheridan's Hairstreak,  
Ruddy Copper  
Jubba Skipper

## List of plants identified in Grand Teton, Yellowstone and Beartooth by Toni Goodley

Small-leaf Pussyfoot	<i>Atennaria parvifolia</i>
Arrowleaf Balsamroot	<i>Balsamorhiza sagittate</i>
Cutleaf Daisy	<i>Erigeron compositus</i>
Canada Goldenrod	<i>Solidago canadensis</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum officinale</i>
Field Chickweed	<i>Cerastium arvense</i>
White Champion	<i>Silene latifolia</i>
Silvery Lupin	<i>Lupinus argenteus</i>
Red Clover	<i>Trifolium pretense</i>
White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>
Green Gentian	<i>Frasera speciose</i>
Ballhead Waterleaf	<i>Hydrophyllum capitatum</i>
Leopard Lily	<i>Fritillaria atropurpurea</i>
Yellowbells	<i>Fritillaria pudica</i>
Meadow Deathcamas	<i>Toxicosordion venenosam</i>
Longleaf Phlox	<i>Phlox longifolia</i>
Few-leaved Dock	<i>Rumex paucifolius</i>
Shooting Star	<i>Dodecatheon pulchellum</i>
Wild Strawberry	<i>Fragaria sp.</i>
Small-flowered Woodland Star	<i>Lithophragma parviflorum</i>
Stinging Nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>
Nuttall's Violet	<i>Viola nuttallii</i>
Silver Sagebrush	<i>Artemisia cana</i>
Rubber Rabbitbush	<i>Ericameria nauseosa</i>
Oregon Grape	<i>Mahonia repens</i>
Chokeberry	<i>Prunus Virginian</i>
Solomon's Seal	<i>Maianthemum racemosum</i>
Yellow Salsify (Goatsbeard)	<i>Tragopogon dubious</i>
Narrowleaf Collomia (Tiny Trumpet)	<i>Collomia linearis</i>
Henbane	<i>Hyoscyamus niger</i>
Shepherd's Purse	<i>Capsella barsa-patoris</i>
Montana Goldenrod	<i>Solidago multiradiata</i>
Sitka Valerian	<i>Valeriana sitchensis</i>
Western Meadow-Rue	<i>Thalictrum occidentale</i>
Bristly Black Gooseberry	<i>Ribes lacustre</i>
Pennycress	<i>Thlaspi arvense</i>
Western Wallflower	<i>Erysimum capitatum</i>
Glacier Lily	<i>Erythronium grandiflora</i>
Rosy Pussytoes	<i>Antennaria rosea</i>
Spring Beauty	<i>Claytonia lanceolate</i>
Little Flower Penstemon	<i>Penstemon procerus</i>
Sagebrush Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus glaberrimas</i>
Prairie Smoke	<i>Geum trifolium</i>
Hooked Spur Violet	<i>Viola adunca</i>
	<i>Aquilegia sp. (Pink)</i>
Evening Primrose	<i>Oenothera sp. (Yellow)</i>



Black Medick	<i>Medicago lupulina</i>
Cons Biscuitroot	<i>Lomatium cous</i>
Graceful Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla gracilis</i>
Sugarbowl Clematis	<i>Nisutissima</i>
Parry's Townsendia	<i>Townsendia parryi</i>
Western Stoneseed	<i>Lithospermum ruderale</i>
Forget-me-not (Mountain)	<i>Eritrichium</i> sp.
Lanceleaf Stonecrop	<i>Sedum lanceolatum</i>
Rocky Mountain Iris	<i>Iris missouricasis</i>
Sulfer Buckwheat	<i>Eriognum umbellatum</i>
Alpine Speedwell	<i>Veronica wormskyoldis</i>
Wyoming Kittenails	<i>Besseya wyomingensis</i>
Fernleaf Biscuitroot	<i>Lomatium dissectum</i>
	<i>Saxifrage</i> sp.
Nineleaf Biscuitroot	<i>Lomatium triternatum</i>
Woolly Groundsel	<i>Senecio canus</i>
Houndstongue	<i>Cynoglossum officinale</i>
Mountain bluebell	<i>Mertensia ciliate</i>
Yellowstone Draba	<i>Draba oligosperma</i>
Dyer's Woad	<i>Isatis tinctoris</i>
Field Milkvetch	<i>Asraga insagrestis</i>
Blue Penstemon	<i>Penstemon cyaneus</i>
Waxleaf Penstemon	<i>Penstemon nitidus</i>
Moss Phlox	<i>Phlox hoodia</i>
Cutleaf Anemone	<i>Anemone multifide</i>
Alpine Avens	<i>Geum rossii</i>
Graceful Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla gracilis</i>
Roundleaf Alumroot	<i>Heuchera cylindrica</i>
Common Mullein	<i>Verbascum thapus</i>
Common Cattail	<i>Typha latifolia</i>
Crackwillow	<i>Salix fragilis</i>
Quaking Aspen	<i>Populus tremuloides</i>
Plains Cottonwood	<i>Populus deltoids</i>
Mountain Ash	<i>Sorbus scapuline</i>
Woods Rose	<i>Rosa woodsia</i>
Lodgepole Pine	<i>Pinus contorta</i>
Subalpine Fir	<i>Abies lasiocarpa</i>
Sticky Currant	<i>Ribes visosissimum</i>
Red Osier (Dogwood)	<i>Cornus sericea</i>
Big Sagebrush	<i>Artemesia tridentate</i>
Edible Valerian	<i>Valerianaceae</i>
Tall Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla arguta</i>
Dwarf Fireweed	<i>Chamerion latifolium</i>
Franklin's Phacelia	<i>Phacelia franklinii</i>
Sticky Geranium	<i>Geranium viscosissimum</i>
Richardson's Geranium	<i>Geranium richardsonii</i>
Alpine Milkvetch	<i>Astragalus alpinus</i>

Elk Thistle	<i>Cirsium scariosum</i>
Cow Parsnip	<i>Heracleum maximum</i>
Pale Paintbrush	<i>Castilleja pallescens</i>
Wild Onion	<i>Allium sp.</i>
Longleaf Aster	<i>Symphotrichum ascendes</i>
Prickly Pear Cactus	<i>Opuntia polyacantha</i>
Yellow Sweet Clover	<i>Melilotus officinalis</i>
Green Gentian	<i>Frasera speciose</i>
Bitterroot	<i>Lewisia rediviva</i>
Showy Jacob's Ladder	<i>Polemonium pulcherrimum</i>
Pasque Flower	<i>Pulsatilla patens</i>
Serviceberry (Juneberry)	<i>Amelanchier alnifolia</i>
Common Juniper	<i>Juniperus communis</i>
Blue Flax	<i>Linum lewisii</i>
Butter-and-eggs	<i>Linaria vulgaris</i>
Moss Campion	<i>Silene acaulis</i>
American Bistort	<i>Polygonum bistortoides</i>
Small Tumblemustard	<i>Sisymbrium loeselii</i>
Many-flowered Stickseed	<i>Hackelia floribunda</i>
Utah Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera utahensis</i>
Cleavers	<i>Galium aparine</i>
Whiteleaf Phacelia (Scorpion Weed)	<i>Phacelia hastata</i>
Leafy Spurge	<i>Euphorbia esula</i>
White Mountain Avens	<i>Dryas octopetala</i>
Rocky Mountain Douglasia	<i>Douglasia montana</i>
Red Elderberry	<i>Sambucus racemose</i>
Blackberry sp.	<i>Rubus sp.</i>
Parry's Clover	<i>Trifolium parryi</i>
	<i>Imomopsis sp.</i>
Beargrass	<i>Xerophyllum tenax</i>
Dusty Maiden	<i>Chaenactis douglassi</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Huckleberry	<i>Vaccinium globulare</i>
Pale Mountain Dandelion	<i>Agoseris glauca</i>
Wild Red Raspberry	<i>Rubus idaens</i>
Sagebrush Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus glaberrimis</i>
Yellow Pond Lily	<i>Nuphar polysepala</i>
Selfheal	<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>
Yellow Monkeyflower	<i>Mimulus gutthus</i>
Alpine Rock Jasmine	<i>Androsace chamaejasme</i>
One-Flower Sunflower	<i>Hilianthella uniflora</i>
Prairie Sunflower	<i>Helianthus petiolaris</i>
Fuzzy-Tongued Penstemon	<i>Penstemon erianthus</i>
Wyoming Paintbrush	<i>Castilleja linarifolia</i>
Pennycress	<i>Thlaspi arvense</i>
Dame's Rocket	<i>Hesperis matronalis</i>
Drummonds Rockcress	<i>Arabis drummondii</i>

Sowthistle  
Woolly Groundsel  
Fringed Gentian  
Idaho Blue-Eyed Grass  
Black Alpine Sedge  
Plantain sp.  
Dogwood  
Fireweed  
Cow Parsley  
Nuttall's Larkspur  
Crack Willow  
Osier  
Low Larkspur  
Common Snowberry  
Rocky Mountain Maple  
Parry's Lousewort

*Sonchus arvensis*  
*Senecia canus*  
*Gentianopsis thermalis*  
*Sisyrinchium idahoense*  
*Carex nigricans*  
*Plantago sp.*  
*Cornus canadensis*  
*Chamerion(Epilodenum) angustifolium*  
*Heracleum lanatum*  
*Delphinium nuttallianum*  
*Salix fragilis*  
*Salix viminalis*  
*Delphinium bicolour*  
*Symphoricarpus albus*  
*Acer glabrum*  
*Pedicularis parri*