

# Yellowstone and Grand Teton

## The Cuddly Critter Tour

### Holiday Highlights

3-17 June 2017

**Guests:** Mick & Trina Stallwood, Ste Rowland & Di Westwood, Fliss Tomlin, Don Mills.

**Leader:** Darren Rees

#### Day 1: **Getting There**

A comfortable flight from London's Heathrow to Dallas is not without highlights as the cloud parts somewhere over Quebec and we see snow dotted boreal forest as far as the eye can see. Onwards to the patchwork of huge fields that dominates the central swathe of the North American continent, broken by ribbons of rivers. Finally we descend into Dallas, landing a little ahead of schedule, where we pass through US Customs and Immigration in record time thanks to computerised ESTA kiosks. We resume the journey with the last leg and the second flight of the day taking us further west and as we descend into Jackson the views are amazing – there's a lot of snow down there! Eventually we land at Jackson Hole, pick up our bags and drive to our hotel, arriving after 9pm. Just time for some late nibbles for some. Phew what a day!

#### Day 2: **The Mighty Tetons**

Before breakfast we all decide to take a wander around the leafy streets behind the hotel and catch up with some common yard birds of Jackson. American Robins and Pine Siskins are calling from several trees and both Raven and Brewer's Blackbirds are commonplace. Fliss points out our first House Finch, joined quickly by Song Sparrow, Clark's Nutcracker and a bright Yellow Warbler. Tree Swallows are flying around and we get looks at Violet-green Swallows on wires and a smart Western Tanager in a tree.

Overlooking a small wetland we see our first mammal – a nice doe Mule Deer. Ducks are in the water and we see Gadwall and a Mallard family. Red-winged Blackbirds are amazing us with their vivid epaulettes and Don picks out a smart Black-headed Grosbeak, then finds a Spotted Sandpiper. Cedar Waxwings are flying around and we add a neat Chipping Sparrow. So a good start to the bird list and we even add a Townsend's Solitaire piping from the top of a conifer before breakfast.

After eating we drive through town and collect our sandwiches from the deli, then stop at Flat Creek on the edge of the Elk Refuge. Red-tailed Hawks are soaring above the rocky ridge behind as we walk over to a pool fringed with cattail reeds.

A Marsh Wren is showing well, singing from the reed heads and picking up fine mace for nest building. Yellow-headed Blackbirds are proclaiming their territories

from the reeds too and there's a nice Belted Kingfisher on the fence. We see Barn Swallows and Violet-green Swallows collecting nest material and then a Muskrat swims across the water surface. In the distance we see our first Sandhill Cranes in the marsh.

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 (and our first Mountain Bluebird and Uinta Ground Squirrels too!) We continue our route along the course of the Gros Ventre river, which is a swollen torrent as the warm temperatures trigger the snow melt at higher levels.

We walk along the riverbank at a couple of places, scanning the lush banks for a Moose mother and calf that has been seen here. We get no luck with them but do see our first Turkey Vultures sail by on teetering wings and our first colourful Red-shafted Flickers.

At Gros Ventre campground we take a short walk in the tall cottonwoods before eating lunch. We see House Wren, Western Wood Pewee, Yellow Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Green-tailed Towhee, as well as lots of Mountain Bluebirds and Robins. Continuing along the Gros Ventre valley the landscape narrows and at one stony slope we stop and scan. Marmot! One large animal is scurrying along the stones and nibbling at green grass tussocks. It then stands up tall and utters its sharp alarm call as Red-tailed Hawk sails by. Fantastic!

The road climbs through conifers to where we can look across to a scar on the opposite slope. Half the hillside has clearly moved downhill with incredible force – the Gros Ventre Slide that accompanied an earthquake in 1925. At one point we can walk a short trail that takes us through the boulder field. We get brief looks at Yellow-rumped Audubon's Warbler and Western Tanager as well as hearing Warbling Vireo calling. The furthest we drive is to where we can scan the muddy waters of the lake that was backed up after the landslide. Lots of Canada Geese are in the water and a beautiful MacGillivray's Warbler is singing nearby. It shows off well for Mick to get some stunning photos!

On the return drive Fliss picks up some star Bighorn Sheep on the rocky hillside. They are four superb rams, looking great in the scope and we even get a bout of head-butting (from the sheep, not guests). We wind our way back, stopping to admire the Tetons at a couple of places and getting looks at nice Northern Harriers, both female then male. We can't resist a second look across the National Elk Refuge and as well as better looks at the Sandhill Cranes, we get some new birds: a Trumpeter Swan pair is showing well and we add Ring-necked Duck and Green-winged Teal to the list. Then, as a fitting finale to the day we get a flyby from a magnificent adult Bald Eagle being chased by tiny Ravens!

After a well-earned rest we gather for our early evening meal in Jackson. Delicious and it gives us a boost for an evening drive along the Moose-Wilson road. We

see two Beavers nibbling in a pool as well as another Muskrat. Finally, we see a Great Horned Owl in the fading light – phew, what a first day!

### **Day 3: Two Ocean Lake and Jackson Lake Lodge**

Our body-clocks are still somewhere mid-Atlantic, so an early breakfast at 6.30am is not as hard as you might think! After breakfast we drive to the north section of Grand Teton National Park. The drive is truly spectacular and we can't resist stopping at Glacier Viewpoint to admire the landscape. The mountains tower above the plain and the Snake River corridor is marked by a thousand cottonwoods and aspens. Birds are singing from bushes and Brewer's Sparrow and Green-tailed Towhee vie for attention with more adorable Uinta Ground Squirrels.

Further north we can scan a large open area of grassland at Elk Ranch Flats. It's a breath-taking panorama with hundreds of American Bison dotted across a flower-studded natural pasture. Pronghorn Antelope are scattered in fewer numbers but looking more striking with their handsome beige and white markings. They are all a bit distant but it's a wonderful scene – we will dedicate some more time to buffalo-watching I'm sure.

Next stop is the delightful Ox-bow Bend viewpoint, where the Snake River meanders slowly beneath Mount Moran. As we arrive an Osprey and Great Blue Heron are in the air and in the water there are more new birds. A huge White Pelican stands out and through the scope we can see the large raised breeding horn on the bill of a breeding male bird. In the water are a brick-red Cinnamon Teal and bright Green-winged Teal, as well as many Canada Geese.

We are keen to drive a little further north to where a Grizzly Bear family have been seen. As we arrive at Pilgrim Creek Road there are a number of cars – it seems we've missed them by about an hour – I'm sure there will be others. Di finds us a pair of American Kestrels as consolation.

At Colter Bay we make a pit-stop and take in the well-stocked shops at the visitor centre. Outside a Pink-sided Junco trills away from a tree-top and the air is busy with lots of Cliff Swallows. We then drive the back road to Two Ocean Lake that takes us into magnificent wild country. At places we scan the hillsides but it is only when we arrive at the lake that we can gear up for a walk and a good explore. We start with a look across the water, adding American Wigeon and Bufflehead to the list. Ring-necked Duck and Canada Geese are joined by a huge flotilla of Common Mergansers.

We walk around a section of the lake on a trail that weaves through conifers, aspens and open meadows marked with yellow balsamroot and purple larkspur. A Yellow Warbler is singing from waterside bushes and a Willow Flycatcher is in the willows (appropriately). In conifers is a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and we even get looks at its ruby crown. In aspen stands are Tree Swallows and a Western

Wood Pewee and then we find a Red-naped Sapsucker in a group of trees. Don follows it as it flies to a nest hole and we get great looks in the telescope.

Further along the path we can view the lake and there is a commotion on the water when all the geese clatter across surface – they are spooked by a River Otter (that sadly shows itself just once). Back at the car park we enjoy lunch before heading back to Jackson Lake.

At Jackson Lake Lodge there is a large multi-purpose building with shops, restaurant, bar, café and a beautiful atrium with a feature panoramic window that looks across Willow Flats towards the Teton Range. Outside is an equally panoramic balcony where we can enjoy ice-creams. Birds include: Bald Eagle, Swainson's Hawk, Northern Harrier, Osprey all in the distance. Closer to us is an obliging Gray Catbird and a hovering Broad-tailed Hummingbird. It's been another full day and we head south back towards Jackson.

#### **Day 4: Mormon Row and Moose Junction**

Our early morning excursion to photograph the scenic Mormon Row barns means a 5.30am meet up! And you thought this was a holiday!

We drive to the north and already the sunlight is touching the uppermost summits to the Teton range in a most sublime vista. We stop briefly to overlook Blacktail ponds next to the Snake River hoping to catch some early morning critters. Birds are in full song and Ste spots a Coyote in a small clearing – result!

At Mormon Row the picture-perfect series of barns are catching the morning sun with the awesome backdrop of the snowy Tetons. Already there are a small number of photographers who are as keen as we are to document the wonderful view.

Lots of Cliff Swallows are flying around one building, where they are constructing their cup shaped nests and periodically bursting out in a cloud of whirring wings. The morning sun is making the blue on a Mountain Bluebird's wing electric and around us is the sound of singing Western Meadowlarks, Vesper and Brewers Sparrows. Even the new recruits to the 'New World sparrows appreciation society' are waxing lyrical about the light on the supercilium on a Savannah Sparrow. As President, Darren feels pride that his diligent work promoting the fine points of sparrow i.d. is paying off, then the Uinta Ground Squirrels start frolicking and no-one wants to look at streaky brown jobs!

We continue working our way along Mormon Row enjoying the early light on Pronghorns, Meadowlarks, Northern Harriers and Long-billed Curlews before returning to Jackson for a well-earned breakfast.

Then it's a quick freshen-up and back out to enjoy the morning around Moose. At Sawmill Ponds we can walk a path along the raised riverbank looking down on forest edge and damp meadows and all the while on the other side is the

backdrop of the Tetons. Birds are in full song, most notably a smart Black-headed Grosbeak that has attracted a female. Yellow Warblers dart around the bushes and we get looks at a delightful family of Red-breasted Nuthatches and scope views of a Red Squirrel. Then we chance upon a bush in blossom full of feeding Cedar Waxwings – what beautiful birds with their quiffs, masks and red-tipped wings!

The walk along the bank is a delight and although we see no large mammals we note the signs of beavers along the water channels. Birds include Green-tailed Towhee, Willow Flycatcher, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Red-tailed Hawks on a nest with downy young!

After lunch at Moose Visitor Centre we take a quick look at Dorman's, where we've enjoyed watching hummingbirds at feeders before – but what's this – no feeders! We see Broad-tailed Hummingbirds whizzing around nevertheless. It's now very warm and we've been up for many hours so some downtime in Jackson is called for.

After some all-important relaxation time, when folk explore Jackson's shops and galleries, we met up at 6pm to exchange stories on where we've been. There's a little rain in the air and when we drive north we can see ominous clouds over the mountains. We opt to eat early at Dorman's hoping the weather will soon pass – it sounds like a plan until the sudden storm puts the power out! Luckily, we have already ordered and they are still cooking so we get our meals as others are being turned away. By now the rain has stopped and it is another glorious evening as we eat alfresco with views to the Tetons. Pizzas have never tasted better!

After eats we drive to Schwabacher Landing on the Snake River – a beautiful site where we've seen Beavers before. Unfortunately, the rise in water levels has meant that the Beavers have moved to less stormy waters but we admire the scenery and get wonderful looks at colourful Calliope Hummingbird that returns again and again to the same bare snag – the perfect photographer's model.

We drive to Sawmill Pond where we walk the riverbank looking down on the area where we know Beavers are present. Ste spots an American Elk below and there are two Sandhill Cranes on show. Further on we see a Beaver working the narrow channels and we play the game of anticipating where it will show next as we can only see sections on water as it twists and turns across the valley floor. Nice looks through the scope! By now the pink light is behind the Tetons and the skyline is beautiful. A Common Nighthawk starts calling and flies across the dynamic panorama. Then to add the ideal soundtrack to a perfect scene, a Sandhill Crane starts bugling and it echos around the forests. Then the bats come out and our evening is complete.

## Day 5: North to Yellowstone

Another pre-breakfast outing is planned and we meet at 6.30am to drive the short distance to the Elk Refuge to see what we can find. From the first elevated spot we can see across the pools to the marsh and grassland. There are lots of ducks including our first Lesser Scaup and Cinnamon Teal. Harriers drift by and Don picks out a Long-billed Curlew.

At Miller Butte we can scan the steep escarpment and Fliss finds an unusual bird – a striking Prairie Falcon is sat on a rock just below the skyline and we enjoy looks at it preening. She is joined by another (a smarter male) and he gets mobbed by a Mountain Bluebird – the size difference is really noticeable. A Rock Wren calls from nearby and we get looks at that before Ste points out two Coyotes on the high slope – fantastic.

Further along the track there are many Uinta Ground Squirrels busying themselves on the gravel. All these little mammals have attracted birds of prey and we see Red-tailed Hawks and Swainson's Hawks on several posts. A larger Bald Eagle takes centre stage, then as we are watching it a Horned Lark lands right in front of us! It has been a great early morning session with target birds seen and more Pronghorns.

After breakfast we load the vans, as we are transferring to our new base at Lake in Yellowstone. We drive north taking in a few new spots in Grand Teton National Park stopping first at Cattleman's Bridge, an old crossing of the Snake River. The high water level has resulted with a flooded car park so we opt for a nice stroll along by the river and highlights include a lovely Two-tailed Swallowtail on the damp sand. At Jackson Lake Dam we can scan the huge body of water of Jackson Lake. Lots of White Pelicans are on the far shore with distant Western Grebes, American Coot and Ring-billed Gulls. Then we get a great show from two young Bald Eagles that fly right by us.

The road from Grand Teton National Park climbs steadily and we note the change in habitat from mixed aspens and pines to blanket Lodgepole Pine forest. Of course, there is the obligatory cheesy photograph next to Yellowstone's southern gate, before resuming the journey along the beautiful Lewis River and we can't help note that there's still lots of snow lying on the ground. We stop at a boulder and scree slope and fling a few snowballs because it's June and we can! Scanning the rocky slope proves productive as we find a large Yellow-bellied Marmot foraging around, joined soon by a spritely Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel. Then we hear the high-pitched squeak from a Pika and we don't know where to look. There then starts a 'what-to-set-the-scope-on-first game – we gradually all get great looks at all three critters and what's more we gather some attention from passers by. What fun showing Americans their own wildlife: 'Is that a baby bear?' is the most memorable comment from one gentleman peering down the scope at a marmot!

Onwards around the shores of Lake Yellowstone we pass through big areas of fire-damaged trees before finally arriving at Lake Hotel and the folksy cabins that will be home for the next three nights.

After a super meal in the dignified surroundings of the Lake Dining Room, we can't resist another evening out for some more wildlife. We drive the short distance to Pelican Creek, where there are lots of wildfowl present: Western Grebe, Canada Geese, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Cinnamon Teal, Green-winged Teal, Common Mergansers, Gadwall and Northern Shoveler. The show from mammals is as good with two Muskrats swimming closely by, then Mule Deer and Elk making appearance. A Coyote is sitting in the grass and periodically raising its head to check things out. Eventually this is chased off by one of the large Elks. A nice evening's show and the full moon to boot!

#### **Day 6: Hayden Valley and a Lone Wolf**

We are keen to explore our new surroundings, so arrange an early morning excursion to one of Yellowstone's prime destinations – Hayden Valley. We meet at 5.30am and drive slowly north through forest along the course of the Yellowstone River. As the landscape opens we can view little as a cloak of mist envelops the scene. Nevertheless we stop at the first raised viewpoint, where we can see wildfowl on the river and a few Bison dotted around. As we drive on more Bison are close to the road and at one point we get stuck behind a group with young red calves.

Working our way back we pause at the only restroom around and it's good timing.. There's a large pale animal walking along in front – a Gray Wolf! We watch it climb a dry mud slope to a sage ridge and we can get great looks through the telescope. It's a collared pale-coloured animal and we watch it for twenty minutes or so as it paces around a lone Bison. Another watcher standing next to us has found a distant Grizzly with cub – a very distant Grizzly with cub! Still, what a pre-breakfast session – our first wolf and bear!

Back at the hotel we enjoy a well-earned breakfast, then afterwards we explore the north shore of the lake. We drive along the lakeside, stopping first at Indian Pond where there are Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Barrow's Goldeneye, Western Grebe, Spotted Sandpiper and our first Killdeer. At Mary Bay there are perfect conditions for scanning Lake Yellowstone and we find a star bird – a handsome Common Loon, or Great Northern Diver. A Bald Eagle flies over and we see another perched on a dead tree. We decide to move closer to get a better look at the loon and are lucky enough to get fantastic views looks at a beautifully marked bird at close quarters.

At Sedge Bay there are four Yellow-bellied Marmots scurrying around, then we continue as the road climbs through the forest marked by the 1988 wildfires that gripped hundreds of thousands of acres of prime habitat. We scan at various places but there is no sign of any bears that are often in the area. The highest point is at Sylvan Pass where there is still a lot of snow cover and ice on some

lakes. We persist with looking for high altitude critters – Pika. We see two scurrying across the boulders but they disappear quickly. Back at Lake Butte Overlook there is a fantastic view over the lake to the far mountains of the Galatin Range in the west and the Tetons to the south. We decide to drive back to the hotel for some rest as we plan on another evening out.

After dinner at 5.30pm, we set off at 7pm for an evening excursion along the Hayden Valley, hoping for some wildlife viewing. From the first viewpoint there is much that we have seen on earlier visits: wildfowl including Blue-winged Teal, and two Bald Eagles with one bird tucking in to a young Elk carcass. Red-tailed and Swainson's Hawks are riding the wind above the forest skyline.

Further north we stop near Grizzly Point, where lots of wolf-watchers are gathered but they are all looking in different directions. There are no wolves on show but the scene is wonderful with a panorama dotted with Bison, Elk and wildfowl. We wind our way back watching another full moon rise and getting close and personal with the Bison.

#### **Day 7: Bison and Dusky Grouse**

A more relaxing day is planned with breakfast at a leisurely 7am! After another lovely buffet we collect our boxed lunches and we are soon on our way north along the Yellowstone River, stopping first for a White Pelican that is sailing along the river at a rate of knots, past Goosanders and a Belted Kingfisher.

At the Hayden Valley the warm temperatures we've enjoyed have been replaced by a cold wind that from our elevated viewpoint hampers the scanning a little. Nevertheless the same collection of birds and mammals are gathered with good numbers of Elk with calves and wildfowl dominated by Canada Geese. The Bald Eagles are present and one returns to the calf carcass that is in the water. We spend some time checking viewpoints along the length of the valley, enjoying the bison close to the road but failing to locate any bears or wolves.

For a change of pace we drive to view one of the many impressive waterfalls in Yellowstone. At the Brink of the Upper Falls a path takes us along to where the Yellowstone River drops through a narrow gorge and the amount and force of water passing close by is bewildering, rushing over in billowing clouds of spray. An American Dipper seems to enjoy the view as much as we do as it sits on a rocky outcrop high above the foaming water.

If the Upper Falls was impressive then the next stop has to be described as awesome. At the head of the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone the water drops over the breath-taking Lower Falls, carving its way through the yellow rhyolite cliffs past a series of eroded pillars, or hoodoos. On one of these is a nest of an Osprey and a parent bird is incubating while another is circling overhead seeing off a Raven that has strayed too close. It then settles on a rock nearby and we can see it's a female and it is the male that is on egg-sitting duties. Two other Ospreys pass by – it's a popular nesting area.



We continue to the visitor centre at Canyon, where we learn of the super volcano that lies beneath us! Then it's onto a lunch spot at Dunraven Pass, where there are big banks of snow still lingering. Refuelled we decide to walk the start of the Mt Washburn trail that takes us gradually higher so we can scan the alpine slopes and upper treeline. We soon find a target animal – a cute Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel is foraging around and collecting mouthfuls of dried grass – perhaps as a lining to a burrow or maybe as a food cache. The path goes through trees and rounds a corner where we can view the summit of Mt Washburn marked by a weather station hut. We are now out of the wind and below we can scan a scree slope, where there are Least Chipmunks busying themselves. A Red-tailed Hawk sails by then drops into a bare tree – looks great from our elevated position. As we start to walk back we are suddenly confronted by an unusual bird. A male Dusky Grouse is sat on a rock on the edge of the path and is holding territory. It fills its air sacs and starts booming – amazing! We point it out to some walkers and then Fliss points out a Yellow-bellied Marmot on a rock in the opposite direction. Where to look?

We drive higher to investigate a report of a bear on Mt Washburn but fail to locate it, instead enjoying the fine views all around. From here it's downhill all the way, passing through the Hayden Valley with a scan here and there. At Le Hardy Rapids the high water has smothered any rocks where we sometimes see Harlequin Ducks – a bird for another day. Finally we stop to admire a fine bull Elk sporting a rack of antlers in velvet. And so to our last evening meal in the genteel surroundings of the Lake Hotel Dining Room. Bison are frolicking outside to keep us entertained while we eat, but we can't help notice it has also started to rain, our late evening plans are put on hold.

#### **Day 8: Otter, Snow and Raspberry**

We have another pre-breakfast outing, driving the short distance to the picturesque Fishing Bridge, in search of aquatic mammals and on arrival, our first scan across the water reveals a Beaver swimming along the edge! We walk across the wooden bridge, to where we can look more closely at the riverbank that is marked with fallen trees. A Muskrat swims along in the same direction as the Beaver. Then we note a movement in the water and it's coming this way. Larger than a Muskrat and with a distinctive flat head, it's a River Otter and we are in luck – it swims right past us giving us wonderful looks! And it just gets better.

We walk back across the bridge, tracking the route of the otter as it passes underneath the bridge, along one willowy bank then starts across the span of the river towards a shingle bank. We prepare ourselves and we are amazed as it climbs onto the sand and starts to defecate and urinate marking its territory. It moves along and starts rolling over! What views!

Onto to Pelican Creek, where the usual collection of wildfowl are gathered and looking good in the morning light. Elk are grazing with a single Mule Deer. We scan around for twenty minutes or so then decide to explore further as it's still early.

At Sedge Bay, two Yellow-bellied Marmots are catching the early sun – one is in a fallen tree. We continue to Lake Butte, where we slow down for one car that is parked on the side of the road. As we slowly pass we can see a bear on one of the fallen trees! About turn! We park and get out and see a second animal – we have a mother and two year-old cub and they don't seem bothered by us. We get great looks through the telescope as the two animals forage for food. Of course we attract other cars and soon two becomes five, becomes ten vehicles and even the Yellowstone Tour Bus joins in. It's a wonderful session watching two Grizzly Bears at close quarters and Di gleans info from a local photographer that we are watching Raspberry and her cub Snow. What a pre-breakfast session!

We load up the vans as we are transferring to our second base in Yellowstone, at Mammoth. The route takes us north along the Yellowstone River, where we move onto our first visit to one of the many geo-thermal sites at Mud Volcanoes. Here a series of fumaroles and hot pools with imaginative monikers like 'Dragons Mouth' testify to the volcanic nature of Yellowstone. From there its one last look at the Hayden Valley, with viewings of Bald Eagles, Bison, Elk and the like, before another stop at Canyon, where we can't resist a second look at the Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, this time from the South Rim, with spectacular views of the Lower Falls and hoodoos from Artists Point.

After lunch we resume our travel north, over Dunraven Pass, descending the north slope of Mount Washburn through a mosaic of broken stands of aspen and pines and we stop overlooking Antelope Creek, where several cars are parked. We follow suit and peer down immediately seeing two bears. A black and cinnamon Black Bear – probably a courting couple travelling together. Sadly, they disappear all too quickly but we can also enjoy great looks at marmots loafing in the sun on rocks.

Beyond Tower, the Yellowstone River passes through another dramatic canyon where the upper tier of columnar rhyolitic basalt has formed an even row of pillars. It's a must for a photo stop and we promise we will return to explore the landscape further, but for now we have more miles to go and we press on.

We check the small narrow valley that is marked by a Petrified Tree – testament to the volcanic flows that have marked the area and have a large upright tree trunk. Di spots a bear head rise up from the grassy meadow at the valley bottom, so we wander closer to investigate. The bear fails to re-appear but we are treated to a super show from a family of marmots that have taken up residence in an uprooted tree - the young marmots are adorable. We also see Dusky Flycatcher and Lincoln's Sparrow close by.

We continue west to Floating Island Pond, where we scan the small weed-fringed pond adding Ruddy Duck and American Coot to the list and enjoying close looks at Yellow-headed Blackbirds displaying from the rushes. Finally we check in at our

new base for four nights, the Mammoth Terraces Hotel cabins and we can't help notice there are lots of Elk gathered on the watered greens around the buildings.

## Day 9: Lunches With Wolves

We meet at 6.30am for breakfast then drive off to the east for a day exploring the north section of the Park, in particular the famous Lamar Valley. We haven't gone far out of town, crossing the Gardner River, when we see a black shape in the sage below – it's a Black Bear! We park then walk back onto the bridge to look down on the bear foraging on the slope. What a start to the day.

At Blacktail Ponds we see Lesser Scaup, Coot and a marvellous Common Yellowthroat. The elegance of a Sandhill Crane is disregarded as it gets bombed by Red-winged Blackbirds – a little too close to their nests methinks.

Past Tower Junction we enter the much-portrayed section of Yellowstone and site of the project to re-introduce Grey Wolves to the lower 48 states of the US, the Lamar Valley. We stop first at Slough Creek, where there is a den of the local Prospect Peak pack of wolves. Through a telescope we can just make out two pups at the den entrance – they are warm brown colours in the green and grey. We take turns in watching closely with the telescope – a sort of wolf-vigil-rotta. While Steve is watching he picks up an adult animal that moves closer to the den and the pups react and greet the larger wolf.

As we are watching this, something remarkable happens much nearer. Mick points out two Coyotes that are very close. What's more, they are getting closer and walk right past us just feet away! Remarkable!

Activity at the den slows down and we get news that there are more wolves further along the Lamar Valley. We drive past the Lamar Canyon to where there are some cars stopped. We get out with scopes and look beyond the stand of cottonwoods along the river. In the short grass and sage edge are dark shapes. Sure enough, when we have telescopes trained on them we can see a small group of wolves at rest. Gradually more stand up in the taller sagebrush and move to the shorter grass to join their comrades. First three, then four, then five and six – finally a seventh - two greys and five dark from the Junction Butte pack. What a sight! We watch them for a while, looking at animals mostly at rest but there are bouts of howling from one grey. We decide that it's a good place to relax and open our picnic – it's our 'Lunches with Wolves' moment.

After a while the wolves seem more restless and start howling and going through some socialising, with tail wagging and bouts of sniffing each other. Then they're off, they start strolling to the right and we can see one animal has a limp. Nevertheless, the pack moves along and we decide to follow them. We drive along stopping twice to intercept their travels and at the second spot we notice they start running. Ahead of them is a group of Bison including several red calves. The wolves accelerate with a concerted effort to chase the calves but teasingly they disappear behind the raised ground, so we can only guess what's going on.

It's a while before we pick up the pack of wolves, another mile further on and clearly they are all present, so we suspect that they didn't catch anything. Finally, these move from view and we decide to move on.

At Calcite Springs we come across another bear jam - a female Black Bear and cubs - we can't see the smaller cubs, just the adult that forms a black shape in grass that occasionally raises its head. Behind us is a Great Horned Owl nest with two healthy looking chicks out in the open - fantastic.

On to Tower, where we take a break (and ice-creams) and look at the dynamic waterfall that plunges between the rhyolite pillars. We slowly work our way back towards Mammoth but we are forced to stop at Elk Creek - Ste spots a Moose in the hollow! We park and walk back to view a female sat between the trees. Fantastic!

## Day 10: A Big Day

We have breakfast at 6.30am and are away shortly after 7am, ready for our big day east. We are only a mile or so down the road, crossing the Gardner Bridge when we see a Cinnamon Bear on the same slope as the Black Bear was yesterday. What a gorgeous looking animal! Further at Blacktail Plateau we see a beautiful Red Fox close to the road and it sits down in the sage catching the morning sun - what a start to the day!

As we approach the Yellowstone River Bridge we can see a Yellow-bellied Marmot, so we slow down to get a look - Don goes one better and spots two Harlequin Drakes on a rock mid-stream. We are out of the van and soon watching the most beautiful ducks in the world through the telescope, sensational.

We pass Slough Creek and can't resist another look at the wolf den. We take it in turn watching closely through the scope and Trina spots the adult coming in with food - we get more great looks at a grey adult that is carrying a bone. As if by magic the three puppies appear! Also seen is a nice Prairie Falcon that does a flyby and shows off its dark armpits. We've a big day planned so drive on through the Lamar Valley towards Soda Butte Creek.

At the rock formation called Soda Butte (surprise, surprise) we take a quick look at the unusual feature and note the delightful Cliff Swallow colony on the far side. A scenic place to call home! From Soda Butte we drive to Baronette Peak, where we can scan the steep slopes of this impressive mountain. High on some of the most precipitous ledges we spot some white Mountain Goats. These are mostly in pairs of mothers with kids but there is one herd of ten or so animals. What a place to live! We leave the National Park through the east gate and pass into Montana where at Silver Gate we can get a coffee or hot chocolate at the Log Cabin Café.

We then 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 peaks of Pilot and Index mountains and then the wider panorama to the Absaroka and Wind River Ranges. Even though the cloud is obscuring the very summits of mountains the view is amazing!

The road winds higher and higher and we enter a winter wonderland of snow covered slopes and frozen lakes. Finally the road passes beyond the treeline, doubling back on itself through tight hairpin bends, to the exposed rocky summits and at West Summit we reach 10,947 ft – it's a shame that is shrouded in low cloud, but that doesn't stop Fliss lying in the snow and making snow angels! We then park a little further east, where the strong wind pushes the cloud away and the view opens out to include sweeps to the north and the famed Bear's Tooth pinnacle that gives the mountain range its name. We walk a short distance across the tundra-like vegetation admiring the arctic-like flora including Moss Campion, Spotted Saxifrage, Alpine Forget-me-not, Moss Phlox, and Mountain Douglasia. There are also some special birds on show too with American Pipits, Horned Larks and difficult-to-see Black Rosy Finch that are feeding at the edge of strands of snow.

From here it's all down hill as we retrace our route back to Yellowstone. Nearing Cooke City we slow down as a car is parked watching a nice Mule Deer close to the road. A short distance further is something larger – a fantastic Moose! It seems content where it is until the other reverses to get a better look – it then crosses the road in front of us revealing those oh so long legs, before working its way into the forest. We work our way back through the Lamar Valley stopping at Little America for a Bison herd with red calves next to the road. As we are passing Blacktail Ponds Fliss spots a Coyote trotting along and we complete a three-dog day! Finally we get back to Mammoth arriving after six o'clock - a full twelve hour day in the field!

## **Day 11: Mammoth Terraces in the Morning Drizzle and Bears Aplenty**

Before breakfast we drive the short distance to the top of Mammoth Terraces, where we have the place to ourselves as there's a little drizzle in the air. Low cloud is obscuring the mountains and the steam from the terraces is making it all very atmospheric, if not other-worldly. The travertine formations are a wonder, with vapours drifting 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. Birds are around in the early hours, despite the cool temperatures and drizzle and we see Mountain Bluebirds, American Robins, Hammond's Flycatcher, White-crowned and Chipping Sparrows.

After breakfast we head east stopping first at Undine Falls to admire the cascade, then onto the Blacktail Ponds. Sandhill Cranes are standing in a group in the rain looking somewhat bedraggled. Blackbirds, Scaup and Canada Geese are present too. Driving further on we come across a few cars parked and look to the slope on the left where a Black Bear is foraging amongst the flowers. It looks like a young animal and it has a distinct white triangle marking on the base of the

throat. It's a beautiful scene as it forages amongst the yellow balsamroot on the hillside.

We continue towards Tower and as we near Calcite Springs another Black Bear crosses the road in front – it's in perfect condition with a healthy glossy black coat. It walks smartly into the woods so the sighting is brief but it's additional bear to the tally.

Further, at Calcite Springs Overlook, we can gaze into the Yellowstone Canyon that is marked here by upper terraces of columnar basalt. Bighorn Sheep are on the far slope and some are in the most inaccessible of places – how they get there we'll never know. A Peregrine zooms through the gorge and over the trees – another addition to the list. Back at the car park we can get the telescope on the Great Horned Owl nest and the two chicks are looking a bit cold and hunched up.

At Tower we use the facilities and Ste gleans some information of the whereabouts of some more bears – off we go to Petrified Tree! We arrive and there are a few cars parked but no obvious people watching bears. Then Di spots some shapes in the wooded slope to our left. It's a mum and cubs Black Bear! We watch enthralled as the two cubs climb trees as mum watches on. We see them rolling on their backs and kicking their paws and feet – just wonderful. Driving back towards Mammoth, we pass near Phantom Lake and see yet another Black Bear in the sage brush to the right - a distinct individual with a green ear tag and collar.

After lunch at Mammoth we take the road that climbs through a series of bends then levels out at a wide plain marked by the picturesque Swan Lake and rimmed by the snowy Galatin mountains and Buntsen Peak, their summits obscured by low cloud. There are a few Lesser Scaup on the water but the wind is making it uncomfortable to scan so we push on to the shelter of nearby Sheepeater Cliff, where there are striking outcrops of volcanic columnar basalt, and equally as striking residents. A family of young marmots are being kept in check by an irate parent. A cheeky Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel approaches and walks up to our feet looking for food. We walk a short distance to where the rock formation forms a natural amphitheatre and we patiently wait quietly. More marmots and chipmunks appear but we fail to catch up on Pika.

At Norris Geyser Basin there is the second biggest collection of geo-thermal features in the world (we'll be going to the greatest). There's a self-guiding trail and boardwalk and plenty to occupy our attention, with imaginative names like Puff'n Stuff, Porcelain and Porkchop.

From Norris our course follows the Gibbon River and we are soon backed up in a long queue of traffic – what could this mean? We have to wait twenty or so minutes to find out – we've been caught in the longest bear jam Darren's encountered. We get out and scan the trees where people are pointing -it's

a mother Grizzly Bear and two cubs! They are moving slowly between fallen logs and forest edge and for times they are tricky to see but with patience we all get great looks. By now there is quite a crowd gathered and the telescope (the only one) getting popular – awesome as they say!

To Gibbon Falls, another beautiful cascade of white water and there's a Dipper going in and out of its nest. Finally, after a busy transfer day, we arrive at our base for the next two nights, Old Faithful.

## **Day 12: Geyser Gazing, Grand Prismatic and Fountain Paintpots**

We have breakfast at 7.30am so we can make the most of the day ahead. After another great buffet we go to the visitor centre for those all-important timings. As we enter the building that is wonderfully designed with a huge feature window that overlooks Old Faithful, the geyser erupts! Fantastic!

Equipped with the relevant info, of just when the other predictable geysers are going to blow, we head outside to explore the world's greatest collection of geysers and other geo-thermal features. From the centre there's a network of trails and boardwalks past smoking vents and colourful pools with wonderfully descriptive names: Chromatic Pool (colourful); Beauty Pool (nice); Belgian Pool (a Belgian fell in!). We walk to the furthest point of the geyser basin and an appointment with Riverside Geyser. One of the most attractive settings for any of the features, Riverside's cone is perched on the banks of the Firehole River. It's due to erupt at 10.15am, give or take 30 minutes. We arrive at 9.45am and there are crowds gathering, so we play the waiting game. To the right of us a huge plume of steam billows into the sky as nearby Grotto geyser erupts – wow! We then settle in for a wait for Riverside and play the geyser sweepstakes – when will she blow? At 10.26am, just as Ste predicts, Riverside springs into action with an angle plume that showers the river before the wind arcs it back towards the trees. What a show.

Onto Daisy. She is predicted to blow at 11.15am, so we take our seats watching a Bison amble around in the background. We are not waiting too long before Daisy erupts. We are now getting picky with our geysers, noting the different characters of the plumes and height of steam jets – we are becoming geyser-gazers!

We wander back past Grand Geyser (that must have erupted while we were watching Riverside), admiring the colourful geo-thermal features. After our exertions we decide to take lunch and drinks on the veranda of the amazing Old Faithful Inn, a huge, remarkable wood construction building – one of the oldest in the Park, hosting visitors to the Park since 1904. The main lobby is a wonder of timber construction and has to seem to be believed with five wooden floors emanating from a huge stone fireplace. Our timing for our lunch spot on the inn's veranda is perfect as we have the best seats in the house for another eruption from Old Faithful.

For a change of scenery after lunch we drive to Midway Basin, where we walk the trail and boardwalk around the region's greatest multi-coloured pool – the famed Grand Prismatic. The amount of steam stops us from getting the perfect view, but in between bursts of wind we can see its fantastic colourful water and fringe.

At Fountain Paintpots, it's our opportunity to walk around some more of the noteworthy geo-thermal features. Silex Spring is a deep turquoise steam pool that brings boiling water to the surface, spilling over creating a multi-coloured bacterial mat of orange and yellow. Paintpots pool is a basin of hot pink mud, bubbling away and popping continually. Other features sound like churning washing machines, whereas Fountain and Spasm Geysers does exactly that what is says on the tin - throwing hot vents of steam out at jerky intervals (and a personal favourite of Mick's).

The last site on our driving tour is the scenic Firehole Canyon, accessible by a one-way road that hugs the route of the sparkling river. We stop beneath the canyon wall to admire a mother elk and spotted calf on a scree slope. Further, the Firehole River drops through a dramatic waterfall and as we stop to photograph the landscape we can't help notice more cuddly critters – two Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels are right beneath us on a rocky slope.

We arrive back at Old Faithful at 4.45pm and we are hoping we have timed it well to catch a late afternoon eruption from Grand Geysir, due at 5pm give or take 90 minutes! We are in luck, as we walk out we get a fantastic show from Castle Geysir that is in full thrusting performance mode. We notice that crowds are still gathering at Grand, so move on to take our place with the geyser-gazers, noting a Yellow-bellied Marmot that has a ringside seat too. And we don't have to wait for long – within minutes of us arriving Grand bursts into life, like a rhythmical watery firework show. Pulses of hot water leap into the air filling the sky with billowing steam and the show lasts a full 12 minutes. It stops to loud applause, then as if acknowledging the appreciation from the crowd we get an encore and the tallest of jets erupts into blue sky. What a finale! Surely geo-thermal feature of the trip!

Yellowstone keeps delivering, as when we are getting ready for our evening meal yet another cute critter appears, an American Marten ambles past the car park and into trees as Darren waits in the restaurant lobby! After a frantic round-up of guests (in two waves) we all get stunning views of a confiding marten on the edge of a watery hollow (a Muskrat makes an appearance too). It comes so close we can see that one eye is infected, perhaps explaining its confiding nature? A beautiful animal anyway!

After dinner there's still enough light for a short walk along the Mallard Lake trail that takes us through the forest. Red Squirrels are alarming and juncos flit across the path. Then we hear the distinct throbbing drumming from a Ruffed Grouse, (and no amount of chest beating by a tour leader can persuade it to appear).



### **Day 13: We're Going to Jackson**

It's our last full day but we've not had our fill of geyser-gazing, so after breakfast we go back for one last eruption of Old Faithful and we all agree that it's the best we've seen from the world's most predictable geyser – top marks! We leave at 10am and head south, criss-crossing the Continental Divide as the route weaves through the southern section of the National Park. We stop at Lewis Falls for more scenic photographs (and a fly by from four pelicans) and then it's on 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 have to stop to take in the scene. The water is calm and in parts there are reflections of the Teton range, with the surface broken here and there by Canada Geese and Eared (black-necked) Grebes.

We continue south and choose to drive the road that climbs Signal Mountain. We wind our way to reach the summit, where we can admire the fine views all around. We can spot distant Bison, Pronghorn, Elk and below, across a slope covered with yellow Arrow-leafed Balsamroot are two White Pelicans.

We continue driving the inner loop road that skirts the base of the Tetons, stopping at Mountain View Point to photograph the amazing Teton landscape that has more snow than the week before. Lunch is at String Lake then it's on to Jenny Lake, where there are more photos taken, but not by Di who realises she's mislaid her camera, a quick about-turn to String Lake and all is revealed – the cleaner has found it and handed it to Lost Property.

And so to Jackson, where we check in for our final night in the 49er Inn and there's time for a last look at this fun place with its array of galleries and shops. Our last meal is at Sweetwater Café, where we link up with Christie and we regail her with highlights of the trip!

### **Day 14: The Early Bird Catches the Moose**

We've a lunchtime flight so there's still time to squeeze in an early morning excursion, so we meet at 6am to drive the Moose-Wilson Road from south to north (should that be the Wilson-Moose Road). Five Turkey Vultures are circling low over a field outside Jackson, struggling to find any lift from thermals. We stop near Granite Canyon trailhead for a walk through the aspen and pine forest to a meadow where we know Great Grey Owls frequent (they bred there last year). The walk is a delight in the morning air and we encounter grazing Elk in the sage clearing. Birds include Dusky Flycatcher, Western Wood Pewee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Pink-sided Junco and Chipping Sparrow. Further along the road we try a bit of wood-tapping to tease a woodpecker in, but it's all a bit windy.

Indeed, the strong overnight wind has brought down an aspen tree and it causes a jam of vehicles further along, but what's this? As we stop to discuss with another van the options, there's a fantastic male Moose close by! What a view of a browsing young bull with sprouting antlers and oh those legs!

We watch for five minutes or so and by now the fallen tree has been pushed aside, so we can continue our route north. We stop for a last-chance Beaver but have to settle for a Muskrat. At Sawmill Ponds we take a short walk, failing to catch up on Hairy Woodpecker but seeing a Red-naped Sapsucker and finding a Northern Flicker visiting its nest hole. It's time to leave this magical place, so we drive via the Park HQ and the Lost Property to hopefully re-unite Di with her camera... we are assured it will be posted to the UK).

And so to breakfast and after a quick turn-around back to the airport for our homeward flights to the UK. We say our goodbyes to Fliss, who is taking her flights to Denver and Calgary for her extended adventure to the Canadian Rockies and Alaska! For us it's boarding the flight to Dallas and connecting with an over-night flight to London.

## **Day 15: Home**

We finally arrive in London's Heathrow airport and say our farewells after another wonderful Yellowstone and Grand Teton trip. The votes have been cast and there are lots of contenders for the species of the week. Results are:

### **Species of the Trip The Top Five**

1. Cinnamon Black Bear
2. Grizzly Bear
- 3= Red Fox
- 3= Calliope Hummingbird
- 3= Harlequin Duck

### **Favourite Place**

Lamar Valley with a close second Beartooth Highway

### **Magic Moment**

Many nominations: Confiding Coyotes at Slough Creek, Grizzly mum and suckling cub, Red Fox in the morning sun, Calliope Hummingbird catching the evening sun, snow angels at Beartooth summit, and lunches with wolves!

### **Geo-thermal Feature**

A clear winner is the performing Grand Geyser, complete with encore!

## Birds

Common Loon  
Eared Grebe  
Western Grebe  
American White Pelican  
Double-crested Cormorant  
Trumpeter Swan  
Canada Goose  
Green-winged Teal  
Blue-winged Teal  
Cinnamon Teal  
Mallard  
Gadwall  
Northern Shoveler  
American Wigeon  
Ring-necked Duck  
Lesser Scaup  
Harlequin  
Barrow's Goldeneye  
Bufflehead  
Common Merganser  
Ruddy Duck  
Turkey Vulture  
Osprey  
Bald Eagle  
Northern Harrier  
Red-tailed Hawk  
Swainson's Hawk  
American Kestrel  
Peregrine  
Prairie Falcon  
Dusky Grouse  
Ruffed Grouse (h)  
American Coot  
Sora Rail (h)  
Sandhill Crane  
Killdeer  
Spotted Sandpiper  
Wilson's Snipe (h)  
California Gull  
Ring-billed Gull  
Collared Dove  
Mourning Dove  
Great Horned Owl  
Belted Kingfisher  
Hairy Woodpecker (h)  
Northern Flicker  
Red-naped Sapsucker  
Bank Swallow  
Tree Swallow  
Violet-green Swallow  
Rough-winged Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
Gray Jay  
Clark's Nutcracker  
Black-billed Magpie  
American Crow  
Raven  
Black-capped Chickadee  
Mountain Chickadee  
Marsh Wren  
Rock Wren  
American Dipper  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
Mountain Bluebird  
Townsend's Solitaire  
American Robin  
Swainson's Thrush  
American Pipit  
Cedar Waxwing  
European Starling  
Yellow-rumped Warbler  
Yellow Warbler  
MacGillivray's Warbler  
Common Yellowthroat  
Green-tailed Towhee  
Chipping Sparrow  
Savannah Sparrow  
Brewer's Sparrow  
Vesper Sparrow  
Song Sparrow  
White-crowned Sparrow  
Lincoln's Sparrow  
Dark-eyed Junco  
Yellow-headed Blackbird  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Brewer's Blackbird  
Western Meadowlark  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Cassin's Finch  
Black Rosyfinch  
House Sparrow

## **Mammals**

White-tailed Jackrabbit  
American Beaver  
Muskrat  
American Pika  
Yellow-bellied Marmot  
Red Squirrel  
Uinta Ground Squirrel  
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel  
Yellow Pine Chipmunk  
Least Chipmunk  
Gray Wolf  
Coyote  
Red Fox  
Grizzly Bear  
Black Bear  
American Marten  
River Otter  
American Elk  
Mule Deer  
Moose  
Pronghorn  
American Bison  
Bighorn Sheep  
Mountain Goat

## **Some Butterflies**

Western Tiger Swallowtail  
Two-tailed Swallowtail  
Anise Swallowtail  
Pine White  
Red Admiral  
Clouded Sulphur  
Stella Orange-tip  
Mourning Cloak  
Mormon Fritillary  
Green Comma  
Persius Duskywing