



Sunrise Birding, LLC
<http://www.sunrisebirding.com>

Montana, Yellowstone & Grand Tetons

TRIP REPORT May 23 - June 4, 2009

Leader: Luke Tiller

TOP TRIP SIGHTINGS:

- ~ A stunning Great Gray Owl successfully hunting from its perch
- ~ A Grizzly Bear digging up ground squirrels at the side of the road
- ~ Finding a nesting pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers
- ~ Two downy Golden Eagle chicks in their eyrie
- ~ A pair of Three-toed Woodpeckers
- ~ A sow Black Bear with cubs
- ~ The blood-curdling howl of Gray Wolf at dusk
- ~ The shaggy Mountain Goats tip-toeing across precarious cliff tops

Day 1 - Saturday, May 23, 2009

The trip started for me as I made the dash down from Bozeman MT after picking up the tour van towards Jackson Hole Airport to pick up the tour party for our adventure. It was worth mentioning only because my GPS unit made an error at the final turn for the hotel and deposited me on a dead end road that turned out to have the greatest feeder setup in Jackson. After a quick scan of the feeders I promised myself that we'd bring the group back the next morning and give the place a thorough bash. That's the thing I love most about birding is you never know when a wrong turn might produce an amazing birding experience.

After arriving at the hotel in Jackson I met up with Carolyn and Carmine. We had time to have a little food before we decided to swing by the airport to pick up the British contingent and then from there head out for our first attempt to go for one of the tour's most highly prized species: Great Gray Owl.

After a brief stop to enjoy our first American Bison (*Bison bison*) or Buffalo as they are commonly called, we were on our way to Wilson to look for Great Gray Owl. We arrived at dusk and waited patiently for the sun to set and listened for the alarm calls of American Robins to let us know if the Great Gray Owl might be around. As we were about to give up on seeing the owl Joyce (who seemed to have a wonderful knack for picking out sightings, especially at dusk) called out that a large owl had flown out onto the power lines. I quickly put it in the scope and have to say for the first time probably in my life was a little disappointed to see a **Great Horned Owl**. Still not that disappointed, as it gave great views of a life bird for all British contingent.

Day 2 - Sunday, May 24, 2009

After a good nights rest we were up early and set off for the Moose-Wilson Road, a well known hotspot for migrant and breeding birds in the vicinity of Jackson. We set off up the road and started to work some of the better areas. Action was soon coming thick and fast and a great little stop had a flurry of vocalizing birds. The group worked hard to eventually get killer views of a much sought after **MacGillivray's Warbler** and then some corking views of **Green-tailed Towhee**. All around us the dense forest rung with the sound of **Black-headed Grosbeak**, **Western Tanager** and the ubiquitous song of **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** (a bird which was to amusingly become Colin's nemesis for half the trip as they could be heard everywhere but rarely were they obliging enough to put in more than a milliseconds appearance as they danced through a distant fir tree.) As we set sights on breakfast, I spotted a small *buteo* perched in a cedar tree and much to my and everyone else's surprise it turned out to be **Broad-winged Hawk**, that I later discovered to be only the second record for the Jackson area.

On the way back we pulled over to have a scan of a very profitable looking temporary pond that had formed on

Highway 22. Here we managed to get great looks at many of the stunning species of waterfowl that we would see during the course of the trip including some stunning **Cinnamon Teal**, **Barrow's Goldeneye** and **Ruddy Duck**. Carolyn commented on the joy of seeing Barrow's Goldeneye without being stuck on a bitter, windswept Connecticut coastline in sub zero temperatures with icy tears streaming down ones face! We also marveled at the sighting of our first **Osprey** a fantastic bird for the British contingent but a sighting that they would realize was somewhat more common over here in the States. Still they are magnificent birds and it was great to see them breeding in such healthy numbers.

After giving the length of the road a good check, we returned to grab a hearty breakfast from our delightful Inn and then we were on the road again for a morning investigation of the Fish Creek area. Before that though we decided to pay a visit to Dick's feeders in Jackson (the ones I had discovered yesterday). We were treated to another set of great birds and to Dick's wonderful genial hospitality as we all literally camped by his feeders and picked off some fantastic birds. The grape jelly was proving a huge hit with our feathered friends and we were treated to amazing views of a dozen or so outrageously plumaged **Western Tanagers**, multiple **Bullock's Orioles** and **Cedar Waxwings** as they vied greedily for Dick's treats. The hummingbird feeders were alive with **Calliope** and **Broad-tailed Hummingbirds** and the seed feeders attracted in a host of cool birds including multitudes of **Pine Siskins**, both **Mountain** and **Black-capped Chickadees** and one **Lincoln's Sparrow** that performed admirably. Whilst we surveyed the feeders, Joyce picked up a little dark bird that was zipping up and down the stream at the back of Dick's yard and we soon had cracking views of our first **American Dipper**; quite a find that wrong turning had turned out to be!

On we went to Fish Creek, birding our way as we looked for, but dipped on, **Lewis's Woodpecker** - for me a major disappointment (to be remedied later in the trip) as it was the only one that I had some information on. We did however have some cool birds in the Fish Creek area including a gorgeous rufous-morph **Red-tailed Hawk**, a couple of **Swainson's Hawks**, some more killer views of hummingbirds at a feeder setup (including drop dead gorgeous views of a male Calliope – wow!), an elusive flock of **Red Crossbills** that we chased around a suburban neighborhood as well cracking views of a sweetly singing **Orange-crowned Warbler**.

With the predicted inclement weather finally rolling in for the mid-afternoon we decided to make our way to the covered towers of the Jackson visitors center to look for some of the hoped for marsh and grassland birds. The site certainly didn't disappoint with wealth of great birds on view including **Trumpeter Swans** nesting out on the refuge, some evil-voiced but stunningly beautiful **Yellow-headed Blackbirds**, vocalizing **Sora** (which Joyce magically picked out of the dense reeds) as well as a host of hawking hirundines and a wealth of waterfowl. Another wonderful spot was a light morph **Ferruginous Hawk** that was perched (as is there wont) in the ground over in the nearby Elk Refuge.

The long days allowed us to really cram in the action and after the rain cleared up we were on to the National Elk refuge to see what could be dug up there. Here we had our first views of stunning **Western Meadowlarks** and a few flocks of sparrows allowed us to do a little workshopping on my favorite family of North American birds. By the end of it Colin professed to be an expert on **Vesper**, **Savannah** and **Chipping Sparrows** as we studied these birds intently. The flocks were quite impressive and we also picked up a few stragglers amongst them including a couple of oddly located **Warbling Vireos** and a number of **Yellow-rumped Warblers** as well as a troop of **Bighorn Sheep** traversing the surrounding rocky outcroppings. The probable highlight of the refuge though was when we sneaked through a few suburban areas nearby and approached the fence from the other end in order to get some simply outstanding views of a few pairs of **Sandhill Cranes**. These big bold and beautiful cranes were a real treat to see.

On the walk to a genial dinner we picked up on a late afternoon kettle of raptors and quickly added, **Bald Eagle**, **Turkey Vulture** and **Coopers Hawk** to our rapidly growing tally of bird species. After dinner it was back to Wilson to try again for the Great Gray Owl but we left the spot by batting 0-2 on Great Gray and 2-2 on Great Horned. I imagine that the Great Horned being present wasn't a great sign for the chances of finding the Great Gray this year.

Day 3 - Monday, June 25, 2009

This morning had us packed up early and ready to head into the Grand Tetons. First though we some birding to do on the Antelope Flats. Here we were looking for some sage brush specialties but luck didn't seem to be favoring us today and apart from some of the regular expected species we weren't having much joy with any of them. The trip out towards Kelly wasn't an absolute bust though as we finally found somewhere that served a decent cup of coffee (a rarity it seems in WY and MT) at the Kelly Café and also managed to pick up some great views of **Mountain**

Bluebirds that were nesting around town (are there any jollier or more stunning birds than a powder blue male Mountain Bluebird?) As we trundled around Carolyn also managed to get us rear end views of a hastily departing **Long-billed Curlew** (better views were certainly desired and obtained later in the trip) and I tracked down a small flock of eye-catching and somewhat unexpected **Bobolinks**.

After the sagebrush dash we were on towards the Grand Tetons and some more forest birding. We headed for Lupine Meadows and gave the area a good bash and were pleased to discover a wealth of woodpeckers, including an annoyingly uncooperative male **Williamson's' Sapsucker** which only gave good views briefly. The stop didn't produce the hoped for but not expected Black-backed Woodpecker but did produce welcome views of **Clarks Nutcracker**, **Hairy Woodpecker** and a humorous number of **House Wrens** (there seemed to be one for every dead tree in the burn). The other main highlight was a beautiful breeding plumage **Common Loon** that was actively feeding out on the lake.

We still had time for a few good stops on our way over to the hotel though, and picked up some more nice species including a picnic stop sighting of **Gray Jays** (that were surprisingly disinterested in harassing people for handouts) as well as nice stop at Coulter Bay where we managed to find a nice duo of Grebes: **Clark's** and **Western** as well as some beautiful **American White Pelicans** all highlighted by the backdrop of snow capped mountains and dense coniferous forests, all sat upon a stunningly crystal blue lake. Joyce's magic eyes also managed to spot our first bear! A **Black Bear** skulking through dense coniferous woodland as we drove the parks wooded roads bound for our hotel.

The Yellowstone Lake Hotel is simply majestic however it seemed like no-one at the front desk seemed to know what was going on and it took an age to sign everyone in. I went off to make a few calls and then we all met for a fantastic dinner. After a well deserved beer or glass of wine we all decided to have an early night and get up first thing for a stroll around the grounds and some early morning birding.

Day 4 - Tuesday, May 26, 2009

Early morning found us out at Fishing Bridge which was rather incongruously covered in "no fishing" signs and then at the rather more aptly titled Pelican Creek which produced a stunning pair of **White Pelicans**. The morning's birding was great, with a bizarrely situated **Western Meadowlark** perched atop a conifer, a stunning adult **Coopers Hawk**, a neat flock of **Red Crossbills** feeding in the muddy edges of the creek and a host of singing **Lincoln's Sparrows**.

Post breakfast we were on our way and back into the swing of birding. As we circled the lake on our way up to Tower Junction I spotted a promising looking recent burn that screamed woodpeckers at me and we stopped to give it a good look. We were not to be disappointed as a cracking **Three-toed Woodpecker** called repeatedly and he flew in to provide stunning views for the group perched in a nearby snag. Even better the bird came in close enough to the road to allow Gladys to gain good views from the van. The site also provided us nice views of a lurking **Swainson's Thrush** as well as more views of simply stunning **Clark's Nutcrackers**. The nutcracker although seen regularly on tour was really turning into a trip favorite for many with its stunning plumage and cheeky calls.

Next stop was the famous LeHardy Rapids, home to one of the trips most sought after species. There perched on some rocky outcroppings amidst a swirling rush of whitewater were two beautiful **Harlequin Ducks**. The stunning markings on these birds are a real sight to behold and it is this that probably makes them the most sought after duck species in North America. The thrashing water of the swollen Yellowstone River and beautiful backdrop of snow-encrusted mounts just made the experience all the more special.

Then we were on to the Hayden Valley and approaching bear and wolf country. There weren't any to be seen on our outbound trip, however we were now in some beautiful open country and we were happy to stumble upon our first **Coyote** of the trip. Unlike the mange ridden ones back east this was a beautiful pristine coated dusty tan specimen which blended almost impossibly with the surrounding grasses. The Coyote also lead us to another great sighting as it skulked around a pool when we suddenly realized there were both **Wilson's Phalaropes** and the much less common **Red-necked Phalaropes** spinning like tops as they picked an aquatic meal from the surface of the pool (probably two of the world's most stunning shorebirds paddling just feet from each other).

By now we were already looking upon those that were pulling over for such common sightings as **Bison** and **Elk** as newbies and we passed them by on for more scenic, animal and birding delights. We passed over the stunning and

still snow-laden Dunraven Pass pausing for photos amid the vistas of Mt Washburn. Then we were on to Tower Junction where we were met with both stunning scenery and a nice selection of birds including a **Prairie Falcon** scooted by one of the cliffs surrounding us but was not kind enough to hang around long enough for the group. Here however we had our first **White-throated Swifts** nesting in the crevices of overhanging cliffs and zipping past us chattering as they went. They were joined by our favorite hirundine, **Violet-green Swallow**, and a nice little side trip up into the campsite found us surrounded by BBQ's, tents, RV's and a nice selection of birds including jaunty little **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, a cracking pair of **Brown Creepers** as well as the ubiquitous **Yellow-rumped Warblers** and **Dark-eyed Juncos**.

The return journey was one devoted more to scenery than anything else as we explored the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and reveled in the stunning scenery, majestic natural landscape and the waterfalls that were flowing with such immense power thanks to the recent snow melt. Colin and Carmine were really in their element as they snapped picture after picture of these incredible scenes. We even managed to find time to spot a few birds as we soaked up the atmosphere of the wilderness surrounding us.

The highlight, however, of the return trip was not avian but rather mammalian in nature. I had seen an injured **Grizzly Bear** before meeting the group but on Mt Washburn we stumbled upon a huge one in full pomp. Our only quality sighting of **Grizzly Bear** of the trip provided astonishing views and caused much excitement amongst a group of onlookers, even more so when it decided to make a dash up towards the road that everyone was viewing the massive beast from. It was cool to watch him in action digging up ground squirrels from their subterranean layer, although I must admit to feeling a little sorry for them as I watched him toss them down his afternoon snack; an unforgettable moment in a trip that was loaded with them.

Day 5 - Wednesday, May 27, 2009

Again we decided to start early and explore the habitat around the Yellowstone Hotel. The Lake itself is stunning and although the weather was beautiful and warm during the day the lake was still heavily encrusted in ice. We wandered the Lake shore around the hotel, picking up a few nice looks at a gaggle of gulls that had collected on the ice. Here we managed to pick out **Ring-billed, California,** and **Franklin's**, with their wonderful clown-like facial makings. We also found a nice patch of open grassland behind the hotel and happily wandered it for a while listening to winnowing **Wilson's Snipe** and flushing a few sparrows from the grass including a bunch of **White-crowned Sparrows**. White-crowns were incredibly common all trip although to me as a self-proclaimed sparrow aficionado it was interesting to note that they all showed the plumage characteristics of the Rocky Mountain subspecies and none of them the yellow billed, white-lored bills that one might expect from any of the western birds.

After another hearty breakfast (this time a little painfully less slow!) we were on our way toward West Yellowstone and we spent much of the rest of the day taking in some of the more spectacular scenery that the park had to offer. Although a little touristy we stopped for one of the admittedly impressive eruptions of Old Faithful. We explored some of the other many stunning and eerily beautiful geologic features including the Grand Prismatic Springs. Although our focus was a little off from the birds for much of the day there were still plenty of avian accompaniments to the journey and wonderful natural beauty to enjoy.

En route to West Yellowstone we pulled in at the Mammoth Springs area and the park headquarters where we were treated to more interesting geological features, the amazing site of **American Elk** loafing around on the lawns and a **Great Horned Owl** incredibly nesting right behind the Parks Headquarters building. As we approached the exit to the park we found a nesting pair of **Bald Eagles** close to the side of the road and stopped for a few snaps before heading on to the our base for the night. That night we went for a great meal in town before stopping at a rather interesting looking bar for a nightcap.

Day 6 - Thursday, May 28, 2009

We started off our day with a run out toward the Targhee Pass a quick peek into Idaho and a wonderful tour of Red Rocks NWR. After a short but productive stop on the Idaho border where we picked up a couple of **Caspian Terns** flying over, we were on towards Red Rocks only stopping momentarily to enjoy some beautiful wildflowers and later on down the road by a simply voracious feeding flock of 30 or 40 **Red Crossbills** that were ensconced in eating fallen cones right by the side of the road – magnificent.

From there it was on to our first birding stop proper the Henry's Fork section of the Snake River. A flock of white birds shifting in and out of a wet field soon had our attention grabbed and we soon found ourselves in an exiting feeding frenzy that was attracting in a variety of birds including a host of **Franklin's Gulls, California Gulls** and

some great looks at a much sought after **Long-billed Curlew**. Also loitering in the field were a number of raptors I assume drawn in by the throngs including a young **Bald Eagle** that was perched rather incongruously on a fence post and a couple of to-and-froing **Northern Harriers** of which one was a stunning 'Gray Ghost' male.

The next two stops were equally productive as we made our way over to the Lake itself. Here we pulled over at the fishing dock and scanned the lake. The site provided a few new goodies for the trip including stunning views of breeding plumaged **Red-necked Grebes**, **Forster's** and **Caspian Terns** skirting the lake and more excitingly good scoped views of a **Black Tern** delicately picking morsels from the surface of watery expanse.

Moving onwards and upwards through more open country habitat we picked up our first **Brewers' Sparrows** and a large number of **Eastern Kingbirds** perching out on the barbed wire fencing. A stop at the Upper Lake Campground provided some cool birding including a dee-hic-ing **Dusky Flycatcher** (for a slam dunk ID on this tough bird) as well as a wonderfully co-operative **Lark Sparrow**. Throw in **Black-headed Grosbeak**, **Red-naped Sapsucker** and a host of the regulars and all in all it was a nice little stop. The lake itself abounded with Pelicans, grebes and a few **Double-crested Cormorants** which were a nice addition to the burgeoning trip list.

Day 7 - Friday, May 29, 2009

Early morning we shot out again to the Targhee Pass to investigate a little wooded sagebrush field and reeled in a few nice species pre-breakfast including our first **Steller's Jay**, **Hammond's Flycatcher** (which sung clearly and then came right in to a quick burst of my iPod, just to confirm the ID) and a couple of **Mountain Bluebirds**.

As we entered the park we hit the mother of all Bison Jams and although we were waylaid for quite some time it was absolutely worth it as we were able to witness an incredible **Bison** herd movement as they rumbled across a wooded hillside down across the road and back into the Madison River Valley. This was an absolutely magical moment seeing these hundreds of colossal animals kicking up a huge dust storm as they crashed across the incredibly scenic terrain. With this large herd in action one could imagine the excitement of seeing the huge herds of these impressive beasts when perhaps as many as 100 million Bison roamed the continent.

Back into the park now and heading east we found perhaps my highlight of the day bird wise. Here we discovered another intriguing burn and we quickly heard our first singing Townsend's Solitaires and then were treated to great looks at a pair as they explored the burn around us. At a pullover a little further along the burn we were then treated to more incredible views of **Three-toed Woodpecker** as both a male and female came in to inspect our presence. The yellow forehead on the male Three-toed was absolutely glowing, set against the black and white plumage of the bird and the blackened landscape surrounding him.

From here we were onto the interesting rock formations that make up The Hoodoos. Where there are rocks there of course have to be **Rock Wrens**, well that was my hope, and joyously there they were right on cue. I have to say one wren performed admirably and put on quite the show as it 'bounced' on its rock whilst singing heartily. We also picked up another uncommon bird at the spot as a **Peregrine Falcon** soared overhead providing nice views and displaying the clean axillars that help to easily distinguish it from its prairie cousin.

After stopping off at our hotel back out of the park in Gardiner we were on for a little more birding and a quick exploration of the Blacktail Plateau Pass which we had passed yesterday and although nice and birdy hadn't added anything new to the list. Today it was much more productive with stellar views of a **Williamson's Sapsucker** and nice ones of **White-breasted Nuthatch** which we had heard regularly but hadn't managed to get on yet. It was cool for the eastern birders to see the Rocky Mountain subspecies of birds that were common at home.

Once again I had some gen on a **Great Gray Owl** that was showing up fairly consistently at Phantom Lake, but another evening vigil left us with an exciting but slightly disappointing aural encounter with a bellowing bird that is probably the most sought after on the trip. However our spirits were kept up on the vigil by the constant flow of activity from the 'magic warbler bush' which produced killer sightings of **Wilson's Warbler** and **MacGillivray's** all within short order. From the hillsides behind us **Rock Wrens** chattered and **Brewster's Sparrows** warbled keeping us thoroughly entertained.

Day 8 - Saturday, May 30, 2009

Following our close but no cigar moment with the **Great Gray Owl** the previous night the majority of the group were surprisingly enthusiastic about the idea of getting up at 4:45am to try for the bird at dawn. This time we were not to

be disappointed. There was the owl perched upon a spruce tree just across the small gorge posing perfectly for photographs (had any of us in our sleep deprived heads managed to remember our cameras). However I don't think cameras were needed to recall this magical moment as this huge owl sat serenely scanning it's hunting ground with it's imposing deep yellow eyes before incredibly launching itself right out in front of us and snatching a gopher or ground squirrel from the turf before retreating to its forest lair. Simply stupendous! We returned to breakfast abuzz with excitement after such an incredibly satisfying encounter with this stately bird

After breakfast we were on with our travels and heading east again toward Cooke City in Montana along the only road which is kept open through the park in winter. With a stop along the 45th Parallel Bridge that produced a nice **American Dipper** and best of all a heartily singing **Lazuli Bunting** which had us hard pressed to decide which of the 'blue' birds we had seen we thought was the prettiest. We stopped again at Blacktail Plateau and were treated to more great birds, nothing new but lots of goodies including **MacGillivray's Warbler**, **Green-tailed Towhee** and **Williamson's Sapsucker**.

The road to Cooke City was a beautiful one (I'd be hard pressed to think of a time that we weren't traveling through gorgeous scenery for the full 12 days) and we had some great sightings en route including nesting **Trumpeter Swans**, **Sandhill Cranes** and perhaps a shorebird to give the phalaropes a run for their money in the beauty stakes: **American Avocet**.

With the long daylight and the relative inactivity of mid-afternoon hours we decided that we were going to concentrate our birding/wildlife viewing time on making the most of early mornings and late evening birding and so arriving in Cooke City at lunch we decided to eat and then take a couple of hours off to relax. Being tour leader I felt that I couldn't completely turn off and decided to have a little wander around town and scope the dense pine forests that surrounded the cabins. No sooner had the group settled in for an afternoon siesta than I was banging on everyone's doors in order to get them on a pair of **White-winged/Two-barred Crossbills** that I had discovered on my stroll and had run back to the cabins to find were teed up perfectly to be seen atop some spruces from the cabins courtyard. The Crossbills were a good rarity and all seen just a couple of yards from everyone's door – quite a treat and one of those happenstance findings that I just adore about birding!

The evening saw us venturing back west into the Lamar Valley in an attempt to find some more of the big mammals we were hoping for on the trip and we were not disappointed. First up we stumbled upon our first **Mountain Goats**; incredible and glorious as they tiptoed their way across the outcroppings of some dangerous looking cliffs. These shaggy beauties were a real highlight of the trip and were an unexpected mammalian highlight for most of the tour participants. We also stumbled upon our first **Mule Deer** of the tour and a huge female **Moose** carefully guarding her calf.

Into the Lamar Valley itself and we were soon scanning the large herds of **Elk** and **Bison** looking for the predators that we hoped would be skirting them. We soon had a Coyote or two padding across the Valley and then our prime target for the day a howling lone **Gray Wolf** calling out across the valley. Views were pretty distant but it was incredible to hear this bloodcurdling sound live in the flesh. The whole valley was alive with mammal activity and Joyce soon had us on a **Black Bear** that was impossibly far away and we just simply stood and enjoyed the North American equivalent of the Serengeti.

Day 9 - Sunday, May 31, 2009

This day saw us heading back for an early morning visit to the Lamar Valley looking for early morning mammal activity. Whilst we sought out the big mammals there were plenty of birds to keep us company including great sightings of a **Wilson's Snipe** perched on a tree stump, a **Western Kingbird** that was hawking insects behind us and best of all a much sought after **Sage Thrasher** working the scrub. Mammals included another **Red Fox**, the same lone wolf as before as well as more of the usual suspects.

After a fantastic breakfast at the Bear Claw Bakery back in Cooke City (by far the food-related highlight of the trip!) In town the feeders at the lodge were active with **Steller's Jay**, **White-crowned Sparrows** and **Cassin's Finches** We decided due to possible inclement weather over the next few days to head up Bear Mountain Pass, before the weather closed in, for a couple of highly sought specialty birds.

Although birds were few and far between on this drive the quality and the outstanding scenery more than compensated for the trip. We rose higher and higher passing The Top of The World (population 8) and up further

into the mountains. Here we were approaching the tree line and the snow still lay deep in the fields and across the frozen ponds as we passed by. The road was certainly living up to its reputation as one of the most beautiful roads in all of North America. Just past Top of the World, I picked up on a few birds that were flitting around in the snowfields and we were soon seeing **American Pipits** in their austere breeding habitat, we were also surprised to find a couple of **Savannah Sparrows** and **Yellow-rumps** out at these extreme elevations.

Up beyond lay our target bird for the day. It was one I had seen in the mountains of Colorado and one that I was keen to find again. As the road climbed higher and higher and the switchbacks sharper and sharper we finally entered an area almost devoid of vegetation let alone animal or bird life. However as I pulled the car over there was the jit calls of a little flock of **Black Rosy-finch** and we soon had excellent views of both brightly colored males and their slightly dowdier partners. The bird itself is incredible, spending its life year round in some of the harshest habitat possible. In Colorado we had seen them banded and their feathers are so heavy and dense that they need to be released very swiftly so as not to allow them to overheat. These really must be one of the toughest passerines on the planet and a real joy to see.

After our mountain adventures we were back to Cooke City for an afternoon breather before we set off for the Lamar Valley Again for an afternoon of mammals. Again the going there was good with **Moose, Elk, Bison, Coyote** as well as a couple of distant **Grizzly Bears**.

Day 10 - Monday, June 1, 2009

We took off early morning after another stop at the Bear Claw Bakery for the Chief Joseph Scenic Highway. A couple of productive early stops had us picking up a little group of three **Townsend's Solitaire** and in one of the campground areas a **Three-toed Woodpecker** was busy working away chipping bark from a diseased tree.

The highlight stop along the highway was a set of small shallow ponds that we discovered that were attracting in a nice variety and large numbers of birds. Here we had everything from **Bald Eagles** to the expected waterfowl. **Sora** were calling from the cattail marsh and a **Killdeer** gave us its old broken wing display trick in order to lure us from its nest. We also picked up a couple of trip birds, with **Marsh Wrens** singing avidly from multiple spots. We soon tracked a couple of them down and had fantastic looks at these some what tough to view species. The British contingent had a new lifer and the US contingent hoping for an armchair tick somewhere down the line if they finally separate the Eastern and Western birds into two separate species. Our other highlight here was empidonax species number four as I picked up a **Least Flycatcher** 'singing', if that's what you can call its every so basic vocalization, in a nearby aspen grove.

The sun was starting to rise in the sky and the day was heating up so we decided to turn around and head for home however I spotted a coral a little down the road and decided that this might provide a good vantage point to scan the huge blue sky for raptors, which we had thus far missed. Although raptors were none too evident we stumbled upon another trip highlight, a most unexpected brilliant green and scarlet **Lewis's Woodpecker**. Lewis's Woodpecker must vie for being one of the most sought after woodpeckers by birders in the US and here we had just accidentally stumbled upon not one but a pair and could see the nesting tree just a few hundred yards away. We kept a respectful distance from the birds but were thrilled to see them returning over and again to the hole. It's always a great moment when you stumble upon a bird like this but even more so when it claws back a sighting of a bird missed earlier in the trip!

After a trip over to the Hartman Wildlife Gallery in the afternoon we were on our way back across the Lamar Valley for the evening. This time we decided to strike out a little farther along the route and were rewarded with probably the mammal highlight of the tour, a sow **Black Bear** along with two adorably cute little **cubs**. The bears were very close to the road and providing quite the thrill for onlookers as the youngsters rolled around in the grass play-fighting, scrambled up trees like little monkeys (amazing how agile they were) and generally acted way too cute for words. This made for a really magical end to the day and a real show-stealing thrill.

Day 11 - Tuesday, June 2, 2009

This day had seen us set to venture across the Beartooth Highway but the projected inclement weather had arrived in the form of rain at our lower elevations. Having already snapped up the Rosy-finches we decided against a weather battling ride over the pass and decided to take the Chief Joseph on our way over to Billings. It turned out to be a fortuitous move as not only did we manage to pick up a couple of nice sightings we also managed to avoid a snowstorm that temporarily closed the pass – on June 2 nd!!!!!! The trip over the Chief Joseph was not without some

snow as well but at the lower elevation it was more of a dusting than a large accumulation.

Having already birded the highway somewhat we decided to make a beeline for Billings and some potential new birds rather than hang around birding the highway. We did however have plenty of time to pull over and observe an incredible **Golden Eagle's Nest** replete with two downy little chicks just off of the road.

The scenery was changing again as we dropped in towards Billings and the yellow stone of the park was replaced in a few spots by these incredible sunset red outcroppings. As we descended lower we found ourselves in small rural communities and farmland. A quick turn off of the road down a farm track had us literally surrounded by **Lark Sparrows** as they flushed down the track ahead of us. **Horned Larks** skipped across the fields and Gladys eagle eye's spotted an introduced but very much naturalized by now **Eurasian Collared Dove**.

On arrival at our hotel in Billings we settled into our luxurious hotel (jacuzzis and all) and whilst Carmine took advantage of the pool the rest of the group set out for some of the local suburban hotspots. With the very different scenery came very different species of birds.

First up was Pictograph State Park. A fascinating historical site which also promised the allure of a few interesting birds. We made an auspicious start as we arrived to hear a jolly **Canyon Wren** singing from one of the rocky outcroppings and slowly tracked it down at nest it had stuffed into an old mud swallow nest. As we headed up to the caves themselves we were amazed to find the surrounding brush loaded with **Yellow-breasted Chats** which were calling heartily and performing their intriguing display flights which provided incredible views of this notoriously skulky warbler. In amongst the brush we also managed our first views of **Spotted Towhee**. Other interesting sightings here included a **Prairie Falcon** that scooted past us all too briefly a pair of seemingly wild **Wild Turkeys** scurrying through the brush and a group of **Rock Pigeons** that were actually nesting on some rock ledges instead of a skyscraper which was kind of cool in its own way.

Next up we were on our way to a little sheltered development in town that had come highly recommended. Here we ran into a nice assortment of birds. We oohed and ahhed at a **Killdeer** with two newborn chicks, stumbled upon our first **House Finches** (a relief to have gone so long without them) and snaffled a **Western Wood-Pewee** that was hawking insects in a small vacant lot. Highlight of the area though was a highly vocal **Plumbeous Vireo** that we finally managed to track down for great looks.

Our last stop was at Two Moon Park a well known migrant hotspot smack in the middle of town. The beauty of the park was only slightly marred by the waste water treatment park next door. The strange smells were overlooked as we got stuck into a nice mix of passerines and had great looks at a **Cooper's Hawk** that was obviously also drawn to the buzz of activity. More great looks at Lazuli Bunting were appreciated. New for the trip was a flyover **Wood Duck** and perhaps the most interesting bird a **Northern Flicker** showing features of both the Yellow and Red-shafted forms (Red-shafted being the norm thus far on the trip).

A quick swing past the accompanying lake gave us nice views of a **Western Grebe**, which was the solitary bird on the lake and then a nice surprise in the shape of a **Caspian Tern** gliding over the lake before heading north.

Day 12 - Wednesday, June 3, 2009

We awoke at a reasonable hour before heading off to meet our erstwhile guide for the day. Helen Carlson is a legendary Billings birder and we were in her hands as we set off to explore the local plains in search of some of the prairie specialties we had hope to find.

The day started perfectly as Helen swung us through a nearby development and up to a friend's feeders in search of **Pinyon Jay**. I could soon hear the vocalizations of these notoriously tough to find birds and then the small flock appeared and performed admirably for the group; a new trip species and a great start to the day.

The scenery around Billings was so different to that of the parklands and the vast open skies and prairies and agricultural fields stretched as far as the eye could see. With different habitat of course came excitingly different birds. We spotted a nice temporary pool aside of the highway and soon were getting a few nice species out of it including our first **Blue-winged Teal**, a few striking **American Avocets** and a couple of gorgeous **Ruddy Ducks** in

full alternate plumage.

Helen was guiding us down side tracks and dirt roads to sites that mere mortals might never find and the great birding experiences and birds kept on coming. At a local fishing pool the waters were littered with birds including a multitude of loafing waterfowl that included a number of spectacular **Eared Grebes**, a dozen or so resplendent **Wilson's Phalaropes**, and a few less spectacular but equally appreciated **Ring-billed Gulls**.

For the next half a day every stop seemed to provide us with something new for the trip or just another memorable moment to enjoy. An opportune pull off on some un-named road had us enjoying point blank views of a lovely **Ferruginous Hawk** and as we enjoyed observing and snapping the bird a jaunty **Rock Wren** sang an accompaniment.

Further along an abandoned barn attracted our attention and we were soon seeing our first **Loggerhead Shrike** of the trip and in that small little area they were suddenly common. The thing I find fascinating as a birder is how little changes in habitat that are almost imperceptible to us can make a huge change to the species that reside there. One turning yielded us **Lark Sparrows**, another encounter with the stunning jet black vision of a multitude of **Lark Buntings** frolicking in the road just ahead of us.

After a fantastic lunch out on the prairie at a restaurant/diner that looked like it probably hadn't changed much since the 1930's we were on to more of our much sought after quarry: **McCown's Longspurs** skylarked (what a great word!) endlessly as they attempted to find mates for the season in a roadside field and their **Chestnut-collared Longspur** cousins provided great views as they performed in another field and were kind enough to actually venture into the road in front of us and perch momentarily on the barbed wire lining the road.

Another neat new species cropped up on a roadside wind break as we spotted two fantastically close **Gray Partridge** just lounging in a furrowed field not more than a few yards away. We watched them for a while before they decided to scoot off and find somewhere a little more private to rest up. Another turning onto a new track brought us another new trip species in the shape of a smartly colored **Say's Phoebe**. As we enjoyed this bird we stared down the track and were surprised to find a number of **Long-billed Curlews** all riled up by the presence of both **Golden** and **Bald Eagles**. We couldn't work out what had drawn in the raptors but they were joined by a huge flock of the trips most ubiquitous birds, **Common Ravens**.

Our prairie tour ended on a perfect note, as Helen lead us down a small dirt track towards a **Black-tailed Prairie Dog** town. Of course where there are Prairie Dogs one also hopes there are **Burrowing Owls** and again we were not to be disappointed as we soon found ourselves observing three different owls as they popped out of their burrows to keep an eye on our presence. A fantastic bird and a wonderful way to finish the trip.

All in all it was an incredible trip with lots of fantastic birds and equally memorable mammals. So many memories to remember as my first trip as leader here, great company and a place that, at least to my mind, seems to be awfully underrated as a birding site in the US. The scenery is almost constantly magical and there is something miraculous about the whole place. I look forward to doing it all again soon.

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