

Birds and Beasts of the Great Parks

June 14-22, 2008

Brian Rapoza, TAS Field Trip Coordinator
Photographs by Jeff Weber



Ten birders joined Paul Bithorn and me for Tropical Audubon's nine-day trip to the stunningly beautiful states of Montana and Wyoming. From start to finish, we enjoyed perfect weather, with clear skies and comfortable daytime temperatures. During our visit to three national parks and a number of other birding locations, we tallied 152 species of birds, including one unexpected species, seen only by Paul, and spotted 22 different mammals, plus untold numbers of wildflowers, butterflies and other critters!



Our adventure began and ended in Billings, Montana; our first and last bird of the trip was Black-billed Magpie, which we found around the Billings airport, and just about everywhere else we visited. After a late-afternoon arrival, we headed to short-grass prairie habitat near the town of Molt, west of Billings, where we found **Pronghorns** and Black-tailed Prairie Dogs. Birds seen here or en route included Cinnamon Teal, Gray Partridge, Ring-necked Pheasant, Prairie Falcon, Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, Wilson's Phalarope, White-throated Swift, Say's Phoebe, Western and Eastern Kingbird, Common Raven,

Horned Lark, Brewer's, Vesper and Lark Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Western Meadowlark and Yellow-headed and Brewer's Blackbird. Before heading south to our motel in Laurel, we birded a short stretch of Canyon Creek Road, located between Molt and Laurel, hoping to find Pinyon Jays. We had no luck with the jays, but we did see the first of many Mule Deer.

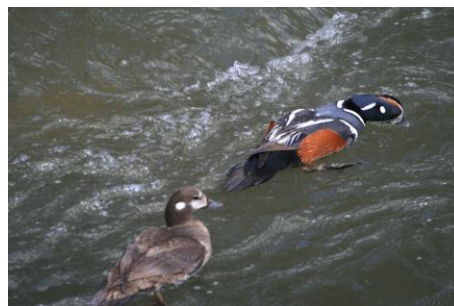
The next morning we returned to Canyon Creek Road; this time we heard, but failed to see the Pinyon Jays. Also found here were Wild Turkey, White-throated Swift, Hairy Woodpecker, Cliff Swallow, Black-capped Chickadee and Lark Sparrow. We then headed south to Red Lodge; a stop at a rest area along the way produced our first Red-naped Sapsucker, Western Wood-Pewee, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow Warbler and House Finch. In Red Lodge, we visited the home of local Audubon member Barbara Jaquith, hoping to see **Black Rosy Finch**.



This species is usually seen during

summer only at the highest elevations, but fortunately for us, recent snows extended their stay in the lowlands. Her backyard feeders were still attracting a flock of about 200 rosy-finches! Also seen at her feeders were Calliope Hummingbird, Cassin's Finch and Pine Siskin.

Our intention was to enter Wyoming and Yellowstone National Park via the spectacular Beartooth Highway. Unfortunately, the road was closed due to a recent avalanche and snowstorm, so we had to detour via the equally scenic Chief Joseph Highway. Birds seen en route included Northern Goshawk, Golden Eagle, Warbling Vireo, Mountain Bluebird and Townsend's Solitaire. Our first Moose was sighted in a marshy area along this road. Soon after entering Yellowstone, we found our first **Gray Jays** and spotted a stunning pair of **Harlequin Ducks** on Soda Butte Creek. We searched for American Dipper along Pebble Creek, but instead found Spotted Sandpiper and Western Tanager. In the Lamar Valley we witnessed an aerial battle between a Bald Eagle and Prairie Falcon, and found our first Elk and Bison. On the road between Tower Junction and Mammoth Springs, we ran into our



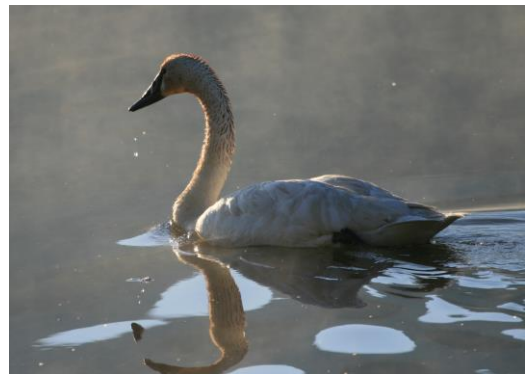
first bear-jam, as tourists (and attendant park rangers) lined the road to view a pair of Black Bears. Also seen along this road were Gadwall, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck and Sandhill Crane, the latter with chick. At Lava Creek, just before Mammoth Springs, we found an **American Dipper** on nest! Everyone in the group was able to study its unique feeding behavior as it dove into the rushing torrent and carried captured insects to its hungry nestling.

The following morning at Mammoth Springs, we began with a hike on the Beaver Ponds Trail, where we spotted a pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers, plus Violet-green and Cliff Swallow, Mountain Chickadee, Mountain Bluebird, Western Tanager, Lazuli Bunting, White-crowned and Chipping Sparrow and Pine Siskin. We also paid a quick visit to the unique thermal features that make Mammoth Springs famous. In trees near the springs, Paul found both Plumbeous and Red-eyed Vireo. After breakfast, we headed south to the Old Faithful area. Along the way, we found our first Barrow's Goldeneye and drove through an area being used by a large herd of Bison, including many calves. At Old Faithful, the famous geyser erupted right on schedule. Leaving Yellowstone, Paul's van spotted a brown-morph **Black Bear** along the



road. We continued south into Grand Teton National Park, where at the northern end of Lake Jackson, we sighted Common Merganser, Common Loon, Western Grebe, our first California Gulls and an unidentified Empidonax flycatcher. At Oxbow Bend, near Lake Jackson's southern end, we added Clark's Grebe, American White Pelican and Beaver. Black-headed Grosbeak and Lincoln's Sparrow were found in surrounding willows. That evening, after we checked into our lodge in Jackson, Paul met with Jimmy Farmer, a childhood friend now living in the Jackson area, who had inside information on the whereabouts of a resident Great Gray Owl. After considerable searching, they located the owl and immediately planned a return engagement with the entire group for the following night.

The next day began with an early morning visit to Jackson airport, a well-known location for Greater Sage Grouse. During the drive to the airport, we spotted a pair of **Trumpeter Swans** on a pond just north of Jackson. At the airport, the group scoured adjacent sagebrush habitat, but failed to produce a Sage Grouse. Several Brewer's Sparrows were flushed and a Sage Thrasher was heard. After breakfast at Bubba's Barbeque in Jackson, where the group was introduced to Paul's friend Jimmy, the rest of the morning was spent in Grand Teton National



Park, on trails near Jenny Lake. We began on the Valley Trail at Lupine Meadows, south of Lake Jenny, and then moved on to the Hidden Falls Trail at the lake's northern end. At **Lupine Meadows**, the group saw Northern Goshawk, Williamson's Sapsucker, Least Flycatcher, Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglet, Western Tanager, Chipping Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco, not to mention a dazzling array of



wildflowers. In a burn area along the Hidden Falls Trail, we found a nesting Black-backed Woodpecker, as well as Calliope and Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Williamson's Sapsucker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Western Wood-Pewee, Clark's Nutcracker, Mountain Bluebird, Swainson's Thrush and MacGillivray's Warbler. An American Dipper was spotted in a stream that flowed into Jenny Lake. Jimmy led us to a pair of Yellow-bellied Marmots playing on rocks alongside the trail.

After enjoying lunch and spectacular views of the Tetons at Dornan's in Moose Junction, we headed to Gros Ventre Campground, located east of the national park. Empidonax flycatchers were abundant here. Cordilleran Flycatcher was identified by call; Dusky Flycatchers were almost certainly present, but none could be reliably identified. Also present were Swainson's Hawk, Common Nighthawk, Western Wood-Pewee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Yellow Warbler and Cassin's Finch. After covering the campground, the group split up, with half returning to the lodge for a late-afternoon break. The other half joined me for a short hike on the trail to Death

Canyon, located off Moose-Wilson Road in the southern end of the national park. Our highlight here was a Hammond's Flycatcher, which was seen and heard by everyone. Farther down Moose-Wilson Road, a female **moose** feeding right along the road provided excellent photo opportunities. Also feeding on a roadside tree was a Three-toed Woodpecker, but the bird disappeared before everyone in the van could view it.



After dinner south of Teton Village, the group was graciously invited to Jimmy's house to view the Calliope Hummingbirds coming to his feeders, and to wait for darkness to fall. At the appointed time, we all headed to the spot where the **Great Gray Owl** was seen the previous night. No owl was present when we first arrived, so we drove farther down the road to give the owl more time. Sure enough, the owl was there when we returned, perched on a phone wire ahead of us. Just when we thought that our views would be limited to silhouettes, the owl took off and flew towards us, landing on a fence right alongside the vans! With a nearly full moon in the background, we enjoyed crippling views of this magnificent bird before it finally moved on. What a memorable ending to an incredible day!

Our first stop during our last day in the Tetons was at Signal Mountain, a reliable spot for **Dusky Grouse**. On previous visits here, I've found grouse feeding along the road close to the summit. On this visit, we had to wait until we reached the overlook beyond the summit parking area, where a male grouse was obligingly perched on a fence. The bird then flew into an adjacent spruce,



allowing us to observe it at close



range. Other birds seen at the summit included Gray Jay, Mountain Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, **Green-tailed Towhee** and Dark-eyed Junco. After breakfast at the Signal Mountain Lodge, we continued north, pausing briefly at Lake Jackson Dam and Christian Pond, our last stops in Grand Teton National Park. A Red-naped Sapsucker was seen near the dam, while Willow Flycatchers were easily found around the pond.

After re-entering Yellowstone National Park, we headed to the park's east side. Our route took us past Yellowstone Lake and through the Hayden Valley to the Grand Canyon of the

Yellowstone, where we stopped briefly to view the upper falls. We continued north towards Dunraven Pass, Mt. Washburn and Tower Falls, but heavy snow prevented us from exploring much along this stretch. As a result, we saw only a few birds, including Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Townsend's Solitaire, Gray Catbird, Western Tanager and Dark-eyed Junco. We also experienced our second bear-jam, where another **Black Bear** was entertaining the tourists. At Tower Junction, we headed west towards our night's lodging at Mammoth Springs. A short hike at Petrified Tree, just west of Tower Junction, produced our last sightings of Williamson's Sapsucker, but the first for Paul. We also experienced our only rain shower of the trip on the drive to Mammoth Springs.



A herd of Elk greeted us as we left Yellowstone National Park the next morning and headed north to Montana and Interstate 90. A Black-headed Grosbeak was spotted across the road from our breakfast stop in Livingston. Red-naped Sapsucker, Western Wood-Pewee, House Wren, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow Warbler and Northern Waterthrush were found at a rest area on I-90, west of Deer Lodge. We also stopped briefly at the University of Montana in Missoula, but were unable to locate any of the Evening Grosbeak that allegedly summer on campus. From Missoula we headed north to National Bison Range, part of the National Wildlife Refuge system. After a brief stop at the visitor center, we explored the refuge via the Red Sleep Mountain Drive, which includes a 2000-foot change in elevation along the 19-mile route. We saw a handful of **Bison**, along with Pronghorn, Mule and **White-tailed Deer**, as well as a pair of Columbian Ground Squirrels whose burrow was in

the middle of the road. The birding here was exceptional; gorgeous **Lazuli Buntings** were singing everywhere we looked! Another highlight was the Lewis' Woodpecker we found along a high elevation section of the drive; still another was the Willow Flycatcher that landed on the open door of Paul's van! Other birds seen include Ring-necked Pheasant, Bald and Golden Eagle, Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, Western and Eastern Kingbird, Warbling Vireo, Clark's Nutcracker, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Mountain Bluebird, Spotted Towhee, Vesper and Savannah Sparrow, Western Meadowlark, Yellow-headed Blackbird and Bullock's Oriole.



From our motel in Kalispell, we headed north the next morning to the West Glacier entrance of Glacier National Park. Our first stop was at Fish Creek Picnic Area, on the north side of Lake McDonald, where we saw Spotted Sandpiper, Winter Wren and Townsend's Warbler. Stops along Camas Road produced sightings of Swainson's Thrush, MacGillivray's Warbler, Western Tanager and White-tailed Deer. Along Going-to-the-Sun Road, we first visited Sprague Creek Picnic Area, on the south side of the lake, where we found Willow Flycatcher, Cedar Waxwing and American Redstart. At Trail of the Cedars in the Avalanche Creek Campground, we had up-close looks as a Varied Thrush gathered food for its fledgling offspring. Black and Vaux's Swift fluttered over Avalanche Creek; a distant Mountain Goat was spotted high above us on the cliff face opposite the creek. Due to heavy snow at the highest elevations of Going-to-the-Sun Road, the road was closed beyond Avalanche Creek, so we had to backtrack to West Glacier, then drive around the southern end of the park to our lodging in Rising Sun, near St Mary at the east end of Going-to-the-Sun Road.

On US-2, just north of the Goat Lick Overlook at the southern tip of the park, Paul spotted, on a power pole along the road, the only unexpected bird for the trip, a White-headed Woodpecker. They backtracked to try to relocate and possibly photograph the bird, but unfortunately, it had disappeared. White-headed Woodpeckers are normally found in the mountains of Washington, Idaho, Oregon and California. According to Jeff Marks, secretary for the Montana Bird Records Committee, there are only seven accepted records for this species in Montana! Only Paul could find such a rarity on his first visit to the state! At the Goat Lick Overlook, we found several Mountain Goats, including young. We then headed to Two Medicine campground, in the southeast corner of the park, where Paul's woodpecker luck continued. As we walked through the campground, Paul spotted a Three-toed Woodpecker; we eventually found its favorite snag, allowing everyone in the group to add that bird to their life lists. Also seen here were Bald Eagle and Fox Sparrow. We tried desperately to find a Steller's Jay, which we were told were common in the picnic area, and should have been seen long before this point in the trip, but were once again unsuccessful.

On our last full day, we began with a visit to the Many Glacier area; it would be our closest approach to the Canadian border. Hooded Mergansers were seen on a beaver pond at the beginning of Many Glacier Road, near the town of Babb. A cooperative Common Loon on Swiftcurrent Lake provided excellent looks. Before breakfast at the Swiftcurrent Motor Lodge, we hiked a portion of the Iceberg Lake Trail, where we saw Warbling Vireo, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Dark-eyed Junco and Pine Siskin. We also found fresh bear scat along the trail, possibly Grizzly, and spotted Bighorn Sheep on the cliffs overlooking the lodge. We stopped at the beaver pond again on our way out; Cedar Waxwing and Yellow Warbler were seen and Wilson's Warblers were heard. We then began the long drive back to Billings. On US-89 south of St. Mary, we encountered a Ruffed Grouse hen with young, standing in the road. Fortunately, the grouse did not stray far from the road, allowing satisfying looks for all participants. After lunch in Choteau, we drove through Freezeout Lake Wildlife Management Area (US-89 bisects the refuge), pausing to admire the nesting American Avocets, as well as Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Eared Grebe (in breeding plumage), Black-necked Stilt and Forster's Tern. Ring-necked Pheasant and

Swainson's (on nest), Red-tailed and Ferruginous Hawks were also spotted along US-89 before we reached Interstate-15, just north of Great Falls.

From Great Falls, we continued to Billings via back roads, first US-87, then US 191 to US-12. Late in the afternoon, we stopped in Two Dot, a barely-on-the-map location I had visited in 2003 with Robin Diaz, Stefan Schlick and Leo Miller. During that previous visit, we found two target birds, Mountain Plover and McCown's Longspur. Driving into short-grass prairie habitat on Haymaker Road, north of US-12, we soon spotted McCown's Longspurs, many performing their aerial mating displays. Also seen were Northern Harrier, Horned Lark, Vesper Sparrow, Chestnut-collared Longspur and Western Meadowlark. In spite of a thorough search of the first few miles of Haymaker Road, we failed to find a Mountain Plover. Running out of daylight, we proceeded to our motel in Billings, to prepare for our early-morning flights back to south Florida.

Following are participant, bird and mammal trip lists:

Participants: Brian Rapoza, Paul Bithorn, Susana Barciela and Dan Zuckerman, Kathy Burkhart, Nancy Freedman, Linda McCandless, Maria Rodriguez, Lorena Siqueira, Arthur and Susan Sissman and Jeff Weber. Special guest: Jimmy Farmer (Thanks for that owl!)

Birds:

Trumpeter Swan
Canada Goose
Green-winged Teal
Mallard
Northern Pintail
Blue-winged Teal
Cinnamon Teal
Northern Shoveler
Gadwall
American Wigeon
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Harlequin Duck
Common Goldeneye
Barrow's Goldeneye
Bufflehead
Hooded Merganser
Common Merganser
Ruddy Duck
Gray Partridge
Ring-necked Pheasant
Dusky Grouse
Ruffed Grouse
Wild Turkey

Common Loon
Pied-billed Grebe
Eared Grebe
Western Grebe
Clark's Grebe
American White Pelican
Great Blue Heron
Turkey Vulture
Osprey
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Northern Goshawk
Swainson's Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Ferruginous Hawk
Golden Eagle
American Kestrel
Prairie Falcon
American Coot
Sandhill Crane
Killdeer
Black-necked Stilt
American Avocet
Spotted Sandpiper
Long-billed Curlew
Marbled Godwit
Wilson's Snipe
Wilson's Phalarope
California Gull
Forster's Tern
Black Tern
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared Dove
Mourning Dove
Great Gray Owl
Common Nighthawk
Black Swift
Vaux's Swift
White-throated Swift
Calliope Hummingbird
Broad-tailed Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Lewis' Woodpecker
Red-naped Sapsucker

Williamson's Sapsucker
Hairy Woodpecker
Three-toed Woodpecker
White-headed Woodpecker
Black-backed Woodpecker
Northern Flicker (yellow-shafted and red-shafted)
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Western Wood-Pewee
Willow Flycatcher
Least Flycatcher
Hammond's Flycatcher
Cordilleran Flycatcher
Say's Phoebe
Western Kingbird
Eastern Kingbird
Plumbeous Vireo
Warbling Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Gray Jay
Pinyon Jay (heard only)
Clark's Nutcracker
Black-billed Magpie
American Crow
Common Raven
Horned Lark
Tree Swallow
Violet-green Swallow
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Barn Swallow
Black-capped Chickadee
Mountain Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch
House Wren
Winter Wren
American Dipper
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Mountain Bluebird
Townsend's Solitaire
Swainson's Thrush
American Robin
Varied Thrush

Gray Catbird
Sage Thrasher (heard only)
Cedar Waxwing
European Starling
Yellow Warbler
Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler
Townsend's Warbler
American Redstart
Northern Waterthrush
MacGillivray's Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Wilson's Warbler (heard only)
Western Tanager
Black-headed Grosbeak
Lazuli Bunting
Green-tailed Towhee
Spotted Towhee
Chipping Sparrow
Brewer's Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Lark Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
McCown's Longspur
Chestnut-collared Longspur
Red-winged Blackbird
Western Meadowlark
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Brewer's Blackbird
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Bullock's Oriole
Black Rosy-Finch
Cassin's Finch
House Finch
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Mammals:

Western Small-footed Myotis
Black Bear
Elk
Moose
Mule Deer
White-tailed Deer
Bison
Bighorn Sheep
Mountain Goat
Pronghorn
White-tailed Jackrabbit
Mountain Cottontail
Beaver
Least Chipmunk
Uinta Chipmunk
Red-tailed Chipmunk
Yellow-bellied Marmot
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel
Columbian Ground Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Uinta Ground Squirrel
Black-tailed Prairie Dog