

Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks

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Trip Report

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In early July, my wife and I took her cousin, who just graduated from high school, on a six-day trip to Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, including driving to and from Boise, Idaho. My wife's cousin already is developing a travel bug and had never been to the Rockies before.

As has always been the case for us, Yellowstone did not disappoint as a wildlife destination. We did not spend our entire time looking for animals. We took a rafting trip, fly fished, hiked and photographed. We often didn't start our day until well after sunrise. Despite this, we had some fantastic sightings of various interesting species, many close enough for good photographs.

The northern part of Yellowstone is one of the best places in the United States for wildlife viewing. It is also much less visited than the southern parts of the park (where Old Faithful and many of the other geothermal features are located). The Lamar Valley is just fantastic and well worth exploring if you want to see wolves, grizzly bears, black bears and other wildlife.

We stayed at the Mammoth Village cabins this time. While there really isn't quiet accommodations (unless you camp in the backcountry) or eco-lodges, the lodges in the northern part of the park have served us well. There is a lot of wildlife right around Mammoth Village, especially elk and their calves in the early evening. Roosevelt Cabins is another nice place to stay. Both are pretty reasonably priced too, due to the fact that bathrooms are shared.

In the Grand Tetons, we stayed at the Colter Bay Tent Cabins, very simple bunks in a canvas tent. They're rustic but were fine for us.

Yellowstone can be very crowded, but I have always found that crowds are very easy to escape, especially if you hike. Very few people get very far off the roads. You can have solitude and amazing wildlife sightings—you just have to walk a short distance.

I love watching wildlife, but I'd be remiss if I didn't encourage you to visit the geothermal features while you're in the park. Yellowstone has the most extensive series of geysers and geothermal features in the world. The Old Faithful Geyser Basin gets the most attention, although I find myself more aggravated by the circus-atmosphere of Old Faithful itself each time I visit. But there are other interesting features. I love the Fountain Paint Pots, Norris Geyser Basin, the truly weird Sulfur Cauldrons (near Hayden Valley), and the Mammoth Terraces.

A great resource for wildlife is the Yellowstone Net forums, forums.yellowstone.net. There are a number of wildlife photographers and naturalists on that forum who know and report on the latest wildlife sightings.

Mammal Sightings

1. Grizzly bear – One seen extremely well off a small side road located between Colter Bay and Jackson Lake Lodge in Grand Teton National Park. There are several gravel roads that run through meadows in this area, and they are worth exploring. There were no other cars anywhere in sight and the bear was very close. Without a doubt, my best-ever grizzly sighting. I also saw two at a distance in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone.
2. Black bear – One ran by our car, right on the road. Another was spotted at the meadow near Tower Falls, at a distance.
3. Gray wolf – Driving at night, two wolves—one gray and one black—stood in the road just a few feet from our car. They loitered around for a bit and then moved into the forest. A stunning sight in the moonlight. We also saw an adult wolf with two younger ones in Lamar Valley. My wife also saw an additional one through a spotting scope in Lamar Valley. The avid wolf watchers are out and can point you to good spots. Many will also share spotting scopes.
4. Coyote – One on forested slope near Gibbon Falls; one in meadow near Slough Creek on the road to Slough Creek Campground.
5. Northern river otter – A family of four otters was seen at Trout Lake, a .4 mile hike from a parking area in Lamar Valley. The otters were observed catching and eating fish, playing and swimming. They can be observed at very close range. The Yellowstone cutthroat trout are currently moving out of the lake to a small tributary stream to spawn. Hundreds of trout are in the stream and many are going up the small waterfalls. It is a dramatic sight, one any naturalist would enjoy. The otters are feasting on these fish—a great spectacle to observe and photograph.
6. Moose – Bull moose observed very well and very close along a creek in Cascade Canyon in the Grand Tetons.
7. Elk – Very common in both parks. 300+ were in the meadow visible from Jackson Lake Lodge. Cow elk and calves congregated right in Mammoth Village in the evening hours, offering excellent photographic opportunities.
8. Mule deer – Common in many forested areas of both parks.
9. White-tailed deer – One seen at the National Elk Refuge near Jackson.

10. Pronghorn – Singles and small herds seen near Jackson and in the Lamar Valley, meadows near Mammoth and Flat Ranch Preserve. Also common on the drive through Idaho.
11. Mountain goat – Eight seen on the rocky cliff face of Baronette Peak (look for pull-off near northeast corner of park). The goats were distant but easily viewed with binoculars.
12. Bison – Very common throughout Yellowstone, with small herds in Grand Teton. Largest herds were in Lamar Valley, with smaller herds and solitary bulls in many other places of the park. We did not make it to Hayden Valley on this trip but there are supposed to be many congregating there as well.
13. Mountain cottontail – Three seen at dusk near the historic staff quarters in Mammoth Village.
14. Yellow-bellied marmot – Common on the trail to Hidden Falls and Cascade Canyon in Grand Tetons. One also seen near Old Faithful.
15. Uinta ground squirrels – Extremely abundant in many areas of both parks, including around picnic and lodging areas. They were thriving around the Mammoth Village cabins.
16. Golden-mantled ground squirrel – Very common at Inspiration Point in Grand Teton National Park. Also present around boardwalks at Old Faithful Geyser Basin.
17. Pine squirrel – Common in forested areas of both parks.
18. Least chipmunk – Seen at Tower Falls area and Canyon Village.
19. Yellow-pine chipmunk – Seen at Cascade Canyon and Jenny Lake parking area.