

Yellowstone National Park Guide

I'm overdue to share something about Yellowstone, but rather than write individual trip reports I think it may be more beneficial to provide an overview of the park from my personal experience with, of course, some of my favorite pictures. I first visited Yellowstone while a college student in Utah in 2001. After living back east for 4 years after graduation I moved to Idaho in 2006. Since then I've been to Yellowstone once or twice each year for the past 18 years for a total of 27 visits. Each season of Yellowstone holds a different appeal and reason to visit. I've been in January, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, and October. A couple of my kids would call it their favorite place in the world. My favorite months are April, May, September, and October, when most species can still be found but there aren't quite as many of the most common species—homo sapiens. While you will still see abundant wildlife, perhaps even more of it, the summer can be overwhelming with the crowds and logistically challenging. There's little more frustrating than waiting in a 30 minute bear jam only to learn the animal has moved out of sight by the time you pass. I've hiked many of the short to moderate hikes in the park and have yet to find crowds beyond paved trails. The animals, however, seem easier to find and less skittish from the road than while on foot. Very few of my memorable sightings have been while hiking. The weather can be unpredictable and snow is not uncommon in the spring and fall months so be prepared. Hiking is better generally in the fall than spring as trails are usually dryer—many are inaccessible in spring due to snow or water.

I have a spreadsheet that tracks the highlights from each visit. Due to its relative proximity and my family size (6 kids), most visits have just been for a couple of nights. We've camped at several campgrounds in the park, stayed at lodges and hotels inside and outside the park, and last year camped in the back country for the first time. Not counting winter visits by snowmobile, we've seen wolves on 52% of the visits, moose on 52%, grizzly bears on 64%, and black bears on 68%. All told I've had just a single non-winter visit without a large carnivore. There's no question that the early morning and late afternoon/early evening hours are the best and it is worth hitting the road in the dark to be in prime spots like the Lamar Valley at first light.

Each entrance to the park has its own neighboring community with different amenities and culture. My favorite place to stay is in Gardiner, MT for easy access to the northern stretch of the park. Yellowstone Gateway Inn has accommodations for groups from 1-8 and has full kitchens which are convenient for meals based around optimal wildlife watching rather than body clocks or seasonal restaurant hours. Check the park website for road closures, both seasonal and construction related or you may be in for long detours or disappointment that some parts of the park are not yet accessible. The park's geothermal features are a good distraction in inclement weather or when you are having bad luck with the mammals and fortunately draw in thousands of the tourists that would otherwise be keeping you from seeing wildlife. This guide will comment briefly on different sections of the Grand Loop that is really more of a grand figure 8 as seen below:



I never really get tired of any of the drives in the park other than the 21 miles from West Thumb to Lake. I only do that drive if I'm going through Grand Teton which makes it worth it. Old Faithful is worth taking the kids to at least once, though we only go every few years now when we have guests. I typically enter through West Yellowstone so that's where this guide will begin.

West Entrance to Madison:

The first couple of miles are through forest with the Madison River running below you on the left side. Look for deer and elk down along or across the river. There's an old Eagles Nest just off the road on your right side a couple of miles in and we still frequently see Eagles flying along the river or perched in the top of trees. Several miles in you will cross the river and a gorgeous valley with meadows will open on your right while the mountain side will rise fairly abruptly on your left. The open grasslands along the river on your right usually have elk and sometimes bison in addition to numerous waterfowl. There are a lot of pull offs on the right that provide good viewing opportunities. Because this is near the entrance to the park you'll often have more cars stopped for elk and bison than will be the case further into the park. I've never seen a bear or wolf in this stretch but have heard that others have. Just enjoy the scenery and the first of many mammals to come. The Madison campground will be on your right. We've camped there several times and it provides good access to wander down along the river. Be ready to have deer or elk walk right through your campsite.

Madison to Old Faithful:

Turning Right or South at Madison takes you towards Old Faithful through a series of open flats, river bends, and forests. Elk and Bison are common and I've also seen Coyotes and Foxes in the meadows and Eagles along the river. There are some interesting geothermal features and the Firehole Canyon drive is a scenic one-way detour, especially if you plan to come back out towards Madison it will mean a few miles of new scenery without the repeat.

Old Faithful to West Thumb:

The highlight is probably passing the Continental Divide—there is a turnoff and sign for a picture opportunity. I don't spend much time in this part of the park so don't have a lot of insight...

West Thumb to South Entrance & South Entrance to Jackson, WY (through Grand Teton NP):

I haven't seen many mammals from West Thumb to the South Entrance, but Grand Teton has magnificent scenery you won't find in Yellowstone and a high moose population. Black Bears and Moose are common along Moose Wilson Rd SW of the park. I've seen Grizzly from the main highway 191 passing through the park.



The Grand Tetons October 2017



It's that time of year for the moose in Grand Teton NP September 2013

Madison to Norris:

Turning Left or North at Madison leads along river with steady but gradual climb in elevation. I've seen a few grizzlies to the right along the river. Norris Geyser Basin is a good place to get out and stretch your legs. There are a series of boardwalks, and you could go anywhere from .5-2 miles depending on the path you take. Lots of interesting geothermal features and plenty of people too.



Grizzly Bear eating winter kill carcass April 2018

Norris to Canyon:

This is a short cut to get to the other side of the park but it is through thick forests with few opportunities to see much wildlife until the large meadows as you pull into Canyon. I try not to use this route much except to save time on my way in or out...But there's still wildlife, I lucked into a pack of 4 wolves running through the forest in one of my favorite Yellowstone moments. There's a large meadow as you pull into Canyon that has been good for elk, deer, and coyote.



Norris to Mammoth:

This is great bear country; I've seen numerous black bears in the forests and grizzlies in the more open areas. There are lots of willows in some areas that would appear to be good moose country but I've yet to see them in this area. The Artist's Paint Pots has another good boardwalk trail for geothermal features, I'd probably save that for a different day than walking Norris Geyser Basin because they are close together and have some similarities. Swan Lake Flats is a good area for wolves and grizzlies and there are often sandhill cranes passing through.



Wolf pack May 2012 at Swan Flats



May 2012



Coyote at Glen Creek Trailhead June 2020

As you leave Swan Lake Flats you drop steeply down a curved route into Mammoth. There's a very short one-way drive through some rocky areas that can be good for marmots when the sun is out. The road continues through mixed forest, and I've seen black and grizzly bears along this stretch. By the time you get to the Mammoth Terraces you'll be seeing lots of Elk. It's a convenient place in the fall to see the elk rut and hear the haunting bugles. The terraces are very interesting, and the numerous boardwalks provide good access for the crowds.



Bugling Bull Elk 9/26/2021



October 2011

Mammoth to Tower Jct/Roosevelt:

Leaving Mammoth you'll see Elk and Bison before you cross a high bridge and then a steep ascent through forested hill sides. Look for Mule Deer in the forests. When you come out on top there's a pull off for Undine Falls on the left and then a picnic area with outhouses on the right at Lava Creek. If you want a short walk away from people to a different view of the Falls you can cross the creek heading East and there's a trail on the left side that will take you to the brink of the falls a few hundred yards away. Next potential stop on your right is Wraith Falls a short (less than 1 mile) easy walk to another small falls. The next few miles is pretty open country, keep an eye out for grizzly bears.

You'll pass Blacktail Deer Creek which has a long hike off to the left and then a series of switch backs climbing to another pass. At the top there's a board walk for a self-guided hike that I wouldn't bother with. The next stretch is very good black bear country—we've seen black bears on both sides of the road and couple of grizzlies too. There's a one way 6-mile dirt road on the right called Blacktail Plateau or something like that--it is worth taking to get a little further off the main road, especially if you'll come back the same direction later and cover the ground on the primary road. We've seen a couple of moose in the willows off the main road in that stretch. The Blacktail Plateau drive connects back to the road just before a turn off for Petrified Tree. A short walk from that parking lot takes you to the standing trunk of an old, petrified tree that's kind of cool to see. There's also a trailhead there for a hike that we've enjoyed that runs along a stream and ends at a lake and then a viewpoint (take your bear spray!). In the last few years moose appear to be getting more common along this stretch so keep your eyes on the willows and ponds.



Black Bears near Tower Jct April 2018 and June 2020



Black Bear near Tower Jct June 2020



Cow Moose March 2017



Calf Moose near Elk Creek May 2019



Red Fox hunting opposite the Petrified Tree turnoff March 2017

Tower/Roosevelt to Northeast Entrance:

I wouldn't go all the way to the Northeast Entrance (ok, I usually do but it probably isn't worth it), but the stretch from Tower to Pebble Creek is my favorite part of the entire park. Turn Left at Tower junction through the large clearing and then you'll drop down to a bridge over the Yellowstone River. Keep an eye out for black bears and as you ascend on the other side odds are very good that you'll see some bighorn sheep, there's a herd that can almost always be found somewhere in the next ½ mile. They may be on the road, by the small ponds to your left or even back in the trees on the right side after the Yellowstone River picnic area. There's a nice hike from the picnic area that takes you along the ridge with spectacular views of the river canyon below. To do the full loop on this hike is probably 4-5 miles but you can go in for a mile or more and then just turn around if that's more practical. The valley opens up and you'll see large numbers of bison and usually antelope on either side of the road. This open area known as "Little America" is a decent

place for badgers. Keep an eye out for coyotes and look for bears further afield near the forest edges. I've also seen wolves on the hillsides in the area before you cross the river again. At the Slough Creek turnout there are restrooms and usually wolf watchers with telescopes watching a wolf den far to the north. If you haven't seen wolves, it is worth stopping, people are very friendly and generous to let kids look through the mounted scopes, just don't knock them over!

The road continues through a narrow gorge with the river below on the right. There's an osprey nest off to the right above the river. After the next bend you enter the Lamar Valley which is a broad valley where you should see Bison, Elk, Antelope, and hopefully some predators. If you are lucky, you'll find something close to the road or look for cars stopped with spotting scopes for more distant predators (I've seen coyotes, wolves, black and grizzly bears in the valley).



Lamar Valley September 2013



Lamar Valley May 2014



Pronghorn Bucks Lamar Valley May 2015 and April 2016



Badger in the Lamar Valley in May 2019



Grey Wolf in the Lamar Valley June 2020



Grey Wolves in Lamar Valley April 2018

At the far end of the valley the road turns to the left and you'll reach the junction of Soda Butte Creek and the Lamar River. I've seen a group of 8-10 large Bighorn Rams multiple times in this stretch, often quite close to the road. This section is also good for coyotes and Eagles, both Bald and Golden. Continuing on, look high up on the mountain walls for white specks—the Mountain Goats are easier to see as the snow recedes. They are almost always present, but you'll want binoculars to have much of a look. I like the trail to Trout Lake. I haven't seen them, but it is reportedly a good place for river otters. I've seen swans in the lake, but they are seasonal. Around the next bend past Trout Lake is the best place for Moose in the park. If you can be there early in the morning or the late evening (not easy given how far away this part of the park is), you should have good luck. We've seen as many as 4 moose at once in the willow flats along the river, many times within 75 yards of the road, but I've seen them on both sides of the road. I've watched both species of bears in the clearing too. Pebble Creek campground has toilets and a good place to turn around and head back through the Lamar Valley (it is currently under repair after the 2022 floods). If you haven't had enough, drive out to the hamlet of Cooke City which has limited options for lodging, meals, and gas. During the winter Cooke City is only accessible through the park as the outlet over the pass on the other side of town is closed due to snow. This forested stretch is one of the few areas I've seen red fox multiple times, again always early or late in the day.



Bighorn Rams near Lamar River Trailhead March 2017



Black Bear near Pebble Creek



American Bison near Pebble Creek September 2021



Moose Cow with Twins at Pebble Creek September 2021



Bull Moose near Pebble Creek October 2017

Tower/Roosevelt to Canyon:



Bighorn lamb near Tower Jct

Tower Falls is worth the short walk to the viewpoint and look across the canyon for nesting birds of prey. The forest leading up to Tower Falls is prime Black Bear territory and Bighorns are frequently seen in the rocks at Tower. This spectacular part of the park that doesn't open until Memorial Day weekend because of the snow on top at Dunraven Pass and closes in early October. I've seen both species of Bears and Wolves on this stretch and even a large bull moose near the pass, just don't run off the winding road while you are looking for animals. There's a drive to Mount Washburn that offers views from the top of Yellowstone. Keep an eye out for bighorn sheep between Tower and the pass.



Black Bear Sow with Twins killing an Elk Calf May 2019

Canyon to Lake:

The Grand Canyon of Yellowstone is gorgeous with waterfalls and vibrant colored rocks but it will be crowded. It's worth stopping anyways. There are lots of different viewpoints and some trails in the area. Continuing south is great Grizzly country. Keep an eye in the river for muskrats and otters. I've also seen some nice bucks in this area. Hayden Valley is one of the best places for Grizzlies and Wolves. There are a number of turnouts to look from and there will be plenty of cars if there are carnivores in sight. These two pictures capture the best and worst of Yellowstone in one event as we watched a mother grizzly and twin cubs walk across a snowy hillside the last week of May—we weren't alone!



Another grizzly sow with twins from October 2011 in the Hayden Valley

Lake to East Entrance:

There are a few nice trails and some good Grizzly country in the first few miles East of Lake. I really like the Pelican Valley trail, it goes through some burned areas, meadows, and mature forests (definitely take bear spray). It's one of the few trails I've seen bears on while hiking. I also saw a long-tailed weasel on this trail.



An orphaned baby river otter we tried to rescue along the East entrance road

Lake to West Thumb: I avoid this section whenever possible as it is 20+ miles driving along a lake...

Yellowstone Mammal Species List (26+, best individual trip was 20):

Grizzly Bear

American Black Bear

Coyote

Red Fox

Grey Wolf

Long-Tailed Weasel

American Badger

River Otter

Raccoon

Beaver Rocky Mountain Elk

Pronghorn

Mountain Goat

Moose

White-Tailed Deer

Mule Deer

Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep

American Bison

Yellow-Bellied Marmot

Snowshoe Hare

Mountain Cottontail

Pika

Red Squirrel

Uinta Ground Squirrel

Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel

Least Chipmunk

Muskrat

Other unidentified rodents...