

## Yellowstone NP June 2023 Trip Report

In June 2023 I visited my friend Louis Kreemer in Gardiner, MT, in the hopes of finding some cool birds, mammals, and learning more about the Yellowstone bird program (since he was working for them). My stay was about a week long, with 27 mammal species observed and 110 bird species seen/heard.

|                          |     |  |
|--------------------------|-----|--|
| Red Squirrel             | 51  |  |
| Yellow-bellied Marmot    | 18  |  |
| Uinta Ground Squirrel    | 128 |  |
| Yellow-pine Chipmunk     | 1   |  |
| Least Chipmunk           | 16  |  |
| American Beaver          | 4   |  |
| Muskrat                  | 6   |  |
| Western Jumping Mouse    | 4   |  |
| North American Porcupine | 1   |  |
| Pika                     | 1   |  |
| White-tailed Jackrabbit  | 1   |  |
| Mountain Cottontail      | 1   |  |
| Coyote                   | 6   |  |
| Red Fox                  | 2   |  |
| Gray Wolf                | 3   |  |
| Black Bear               | 10  |  |
| Grizzly Bear             | 10  |  |
| Pacific Marten           | 1   |  |
| American Badger          | 4   |  |
| Striped Skunk            | 6   |  |
| Elk                      | 120 |  |
| Moose                    | 3   |  |
| Pronghorn                | 55  |  |
| American Bison           | 450 |  |
| Mule Deer                | 11  |  |
| White-tailed Deer        | 3   |  |
| Mountain Goat            | 6   |  |

### Day 1 (6/22):

After a long bus ride and some rather expensive Thai food, Louis came and picked me up in Bozeman and we began our journey towards the park. As it was around 3:30 pm, we settled on a 5-mile hike around the Beaver Ponds loop in hopes of potentially finding a Great Gray Owl before dinner. My expectations weren't particularly high considering we hadn't heard of reports from there in a few years, but it was nice to get out as it was my first time in the park in 6 years. As we pulled into the parking lot for the trailhead, I noted my first few UINTA GROUND SQUIRRELS as well as some ELK and a singing Lazuli Bunting. As the hike progressed, we spotted a few more mammal species for the trip including a couple LEAST CHIPMUNKS and a few RED SQUIRRELS. Though the trail was named the Beaver Ponds Trail, we failed to find any beavers, though a MUSKRAT got our attention at the first pond. Continuing around the loop, we noted a family of Dusky Grouse as well as a nesting cavity occupied by Williamson's Sapsuckers. Right as we crossed back into Wyoming (at one point the trail crosses briefly into Montana), we heard the distinct alarm calls of some nearby Red Squirrels and quickly spotted a RED FOX drinking quietly from a stream ~70 ft off trail.



The fox never seemed to notice us as it trotted parallel to the trail for a bit before leaping at some unseen prey and briefly getting on the trail down from us. We followed it briefly hoping to get some documentation, but the fox had other plans and continued deeper into the trees. As

we neared the final mile of the hike, Louis mentioned that right about now was the perfect spot to get a Black Bear. No later than 5 seconds after he mentioned it, I spotted a single BLACK BEAR wandering around the hillside across a stream from us. It started running in our direction but as soon as it noticed us, it stopped dead in its tracks and made a beeline in the other direction. Few mammals were seen as we descended back into the Mammoth Hot Springs area, but we were content enough with our hike despite the lack of Great Gray Owls.

## **Day 2 (6/23):**

We started the day at around 4:45 AM with an early morning point count along the entrance road to the park. Louis had been conducting these surveys for the Yellowstone bird program since the beginning of the summer, though it was my first time joining him on one. The bird diversity was very low, as only a few select species prefer such high elevation shrub-steppe, but we were greeted by many singing Vesper Sparrows and Horned Larks. The mammal diversity was low too, with only two species seen during the full duration of the count. As we pulled into our parking spot at the beginning of the count, we noticed a single male PRONGHORN approaching the car before crossing the road in front of us. This wasn't our only Pronghorn observation though, as later that morning we spotted a few more females, males, and one or two juveniles. At the end of the count, we had counted eleven Pronghorn total. As we were nearing our final points of the count, we heard the howl of a distant COYOTE and Louis spotted a distant Elk on the hillside.

The later portion of the day was spent mostly looking for birds but not without many other mammals to note. While birding along Slough Creek Campground Road we spotted our first BISON of the trip as well as a small family of Uinta Ground Squirrels living dangerously close to the road. The highlight, however, was a pair of male Bobolinks perched up distantly in a willow. Bobolinks are considerably rare in the park, so it was quite a surprise to spot these two while scanning the area. After a bit more birding along the road, we headed off to Trumpeter Ponds where Louis thought we could have a shot at finding a badger. Despite a thorough search around the largest pond, we came up empty handed in our search for badger, though we did encounter a rather loud Coyote on the way out.

Other mammals:

- At dusk, Louis and I staked out a known spot in Gardiner, MT. After waiting a bit, we were rewarded with good views of a family of six STRIPED SKUNKS.

## **Day 3 (6/24):**

Given that it was a Saturday, Louis and I woke up early with a full day of mammaling and birding to do. With our pre-made tuna and PB&J sandwiches and optics loaded up in the backseat, we set out for our first stop: Wolves. Over the past couple days, the pulloff for the Forces of the Northern Range Nature Trail always seemed to be occupied by a small group of people scoping for the nearby Rescue Creek wolf pack. So, considering that the odds looked good, we figured

that we'd swing by and give it a check early in the morning with the aim to see some of the pups. After waiting a bit with a few other people hoping the wolves would make a distant appearance, we were rewarded with views of a single black GRAY WOLF trotting along in a distant meadow. We drove down the road a bit towards the wolf in the hope of getting better views, but unfortunately, we lost enough altitude that the meadow the wolf had been in was now out of view. Despite this, I walked a little down the pull-out we were in and scanned what habitat was in view before spotting a single Black Bear and a few more Bison. Upon returning to the car, however, Louis- who had been scanning with binoculars from the car- mentioned that he had just seen a MOOSE seemingly running away from an unseen predator. Though the moose was now out of view, we hung around a bit longer in the hopes of catching another glimpse of it (as I had not yet seen a moose on the trip). After a minute or two more of scanning, I spotted another black wolf walking towards the general area that the moose had apparently disappeared to. Satisfied with our views, we moved on with our day.

At around 8:30 AM, we arrived at the trailhead to Specimen Ridge where Louis had seen badgers in the past. Though the trailhead itself wasn't particularly great for badger, the open sagebrush the trail went through about ¼ mile in was. Getting up into this area, it became instantly apparent that the extensive sagebrush was littered with various badger dens and badger prey - the Uinta Ground Squirrel. We spent about an hour wandering around the sagebrush with no luck, before hiking a bit off-trail up a ridge that overlooks the area we had just covered. As we walked along the ridge with the river roaring just beneath us, Louis spotted three Black Bears hanging out in a meadow just on the other side of the river. We continued along, noting a rather energetic baby Pronghorn sprinting back and forth between two pairs of adults a ½ mile out, before noting the first YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOTS of the trip. According to Louis, this was the best spot in Yellowstone to see them, and after hiking a bit further I could certainly see why. Every few feet we walked, a new marmot would either come in to view or pop up right below us. Baby marmots sat right on the cliff's edge, while the adults stood standing guard on the highest rocks available. Though the marmots were certainly entertaining, after about an hour of watching them, we decided to head back down into the sagebrush to give the badgers another shot. It took about another hour of searching before Louis pointed and whispered that he had finally spotted one. It was a bit distant, but as we crept closer, we eventually got great looks at two AMERICAN BADGERS excavating a fresh burrow. We watched as a presumed female waddled around with a freshly dead Ground Squirrel in her mouth, before bringing it to a hole where an apparent younger male was poking out of.



The youngster popped in and out of the hole periodically while the female left every now and then to presumably look for food. After another hour or so, we decided we were content with our looks, and headed back to the trailhead. As we reached the car, Louis mentioned that he wanted to photograph some Eared Grebe babies that were swimming around in a pond just by the pull-out to the trailhead. I patiently waited on the side of the road before I struck up a conversation with a pair of birders who had also pulled in to give the pond a scan. We chatted a bit about the mammals and birds seen around the park before, low and behold, I spotted the tail end of yet another badger disappear behind a rock just ~20 feet away. I wandered over, curious as to where it could've gone, before noticing a culvert going under the road right by where the badger had disappeared. I crossed the road so that I was at the other end of the culvert, and no later than a few seconds later, the badger shot out and made a beeline towards a hill just out of view. Fortunately, Louis had just arrived back from the pond and all four of us had had good looks at the rear end of the retreating badger.

Other mammals:

- Early in the morning, we briefly saw a MOUNTAIN COTTONTAIL in Gardiner.
- WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT seen along Old Yellowstone Trail S around dusk. While tracking down this jackrabbit, we saw a Grizzly Bear near Gardiner.

#### **Day 4 (6/25):**

After an unsuccessful morning wandering around a campground near the Tower General Store looking for marten, we decided to loop back toward Gardiner and check for wolves again. Yet

again, we were unsuccessful at finding our target, so we headed back and took a nap for a few hours before heading out again in the afternoon. At 4 pm we hit the road headed towards the Cascade Lake Trail in hopes of exploring some new owl habitat Louis theorized could have potential. We arrived at the trailhead around 5:20 pm and despite a thoroughly covered hike out to the lake and back, we came up empty-handed for everything apart from some Red Squirrels and a couple Least Chipmunks. Considering we still had a fair amount of daylight left, we moved a little further down the road and parked in a double-pullout adjacent to some more habitat that also looked good for owls. The habitat was a relatively sparse Lodgepole Pine forest bordering an extensive wet meadow on one side, and a horse camp on the other. This made covering the area a bit harder than the previous spot, as the trail going through the meadow wasn't in a particularly great spot for covering the habitat. Nonetheless, we worked the edge while periodically sinking our feet into the wet ground surrounded by tall grass. Once we reached the point where the trail bisected our path and went into the forest, we hopped back on the trail and headed towards the horse camp. As we continued down the trail, Louis noticed a small rodent briefly move off the path and sit still in the shadow of a log. We waited a minute or two before the rodent finally moved and quickly we were able to tell it was a WESTERN JUMPING MOUSE. I walked around where it was and walked through a small patch of meadow behind the log where we had initially seen it. Though I was only hoping to get better looks at the mouse, I ended up flushing two more jumping mice which bounded only a few yards ahead of me, and also began jumping around the logs and grass. For the next 20 minutes or so, we watched for movement in the grass as we intermittently had minute or so long views of up to four jumping mice bouncing around our feet and scurrying along the logs. After we were satisfied with our looks and photos, we continued down the trail though not much more was seen until we doubled back and headed back to the car. As we made our way back to the car, I heard some twigs breaking off to our right and quickly spotted a PORCUPINE hobbling its way up a nearby pine tree. The porcupine was rather awkward in its ascent, which allowed for nice views as it slowly made its way up the tree.



Other mammals:

- AMERICAN PIKA heard at a rock pile at the Hellroaring Creek Trail
- 6 MOUNTAIN GOAT seen while briefly driving through Lamar Valley in the afternoon

### **Day 5 (6/26):**

The morning of Day 5 started with one of the more laborious point counts in the park. The spot was called 'Willow Park' and consisted of ~9 points spread throughout a vast expanse of dense willows divided only by sections of river. While the count was very productive bird-wise, it was rather tiresome and by the time we finished the count, we were both ready to take long naps.

After a nap lasting a few hours, we briefly checked out some potential Bushy-tailed Woodrat habitat above Gardiner before deciding on heading out to look for martens. According to iNaturalist and a birder we'd met on the side of the road two days prior, Yellowstone Lake seemed to be the most reliable location to find them. It was a bit of a drive away, but we had dedicated the whole afternoon and evening to the search, so we were prepared. The drive through Hayden Valley on the way to the lake helped find me a couple of new park birds while also spotting a couple of mammals of interest. As we drove by the wet channels that branched off of the river, I spotted a single swimming Muskrat making its way downstream. Further down the road, we noticed a large gathering of cars pulled over on the side of the road and soon got views of a sow GRIZZLY BEAR with two cubs just a hundred feet or so up the slope. These

were certainly the best looks of the trip so far and so after about fifteen minutes, we decided we were satisfied with our views and pressed on towards Yellowstone Lake. Bernie- one of the birders we had met previously at the badger spot - had given us a tip that Martens preferred hanging around the lodge and the forest adjacent to its related buildings. With this in mind, Louis and I pulled into the parking lot of the lodge and began to make our way along the edge of the forest bordering the lodge and a network of cabins. Though the habitat seemed perfect for marten, it took us about three hours to finish our route before deciding to loop back and retrace our footsteps. It seemed as if the Red Squirrels were teasing us as we could never tell if their incessant calling was a sign of a predator nearby or just territorial disputes. However, an hour later, Louis and I were heading back towards the lodge when we heard not only alarming Red Squirrels but also what sounded like alarming Mountain Chickadees and robins. Starting to get a bit excited, we closed in on the small area the birds were alarming from and surveyed the fallen logs and trees surrounding us. Louis pointed and mouthed something and almost instantly we both had good views of a single PACIFIC MARTEN running along a log toward us. We watched the marten work the tree trunks and forest floor for an hour or so before heading back to get some sleep.



#### **Day 6 (6/27)**

After a fun bird banding session with the mammal “highlight” of a couple WHITE-TAILED DEER, we grabbed lunch and set out for our final outing of the trip. For the following point-count, we and a few other YNP bird program employees planned on backpacking up into a valley via the

Slough Creek Trailhead. This consisted of a mild 7.5 hike up to a ranger cabin positioned along Slough Creek right on the Wyoming-Montana border. Despite quite a few bird highlights on the hike up, very few mammals were seen until the following morning when we started our point counts.

### **Day 7 (6/28)**

The day started bright and early at 4:40 with a mile or so hike into Montana from the ranger cabin. By the time we reached the location of the first point count, the sun had risen and bird activity was in full swing. The morning's bird survey consisted of eight ten-minute point counts spread throughout the wet meadow of the river valley. About halfway through the point count surveys, we noticed an odd wren song that didn't sound right for Marsh Wren. We found it and quickly realized it was a Sedge Wren! I got some audio and photos to confirm the ID, and we later learned that it was a new species for the park. There was a second individual present, suggesting they might have been nesting. Around this time, we had a Gray Wolf howling from a slope of the river valley and were able to hear American Beavers vocalizing from their lodge. On the hike out, we had a Black Bear foraging in a meadow.



Good birding and mammal watching,  
Alex Sowers