

Mammalwatching Trip Report

Yellowstone NP 20-24 August 2020

Rogers family trip

Guided by: Tyrene Riedl of Yellowstone Wild (www.yellowstonewildtours.com)



American Bison, Lamar Valley

Overview

A great 4 full days in Yellowstone.

Particular highlights were **Gray Wolf and American Badger, with Brown Bear, Pronghorn, and rutting Bison** rounding out the classic Yellowstone experience and providing a high ratio of MTCs (Mammals That Count).

Itinerary

19 August – Arrive Yellowstone Canyon Lodge

20 August – Wildlife watching in Lamar Valley, some rain kept wildlife down (followed by Yellowstone hot springs late afternoon)

21 August – Wildlife watching in Lamar Valley with a hike up the Slough Creek Trail (followed by white water rafting down the Yellowstone river)

22 August – a day of thermal features: Old Faithful, Fountain Paint Pots, Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, Prismatic Pools

23 August – Wildlife watching in Lamar Valley with fly fishing in Lamar valley and Slough Creek campground

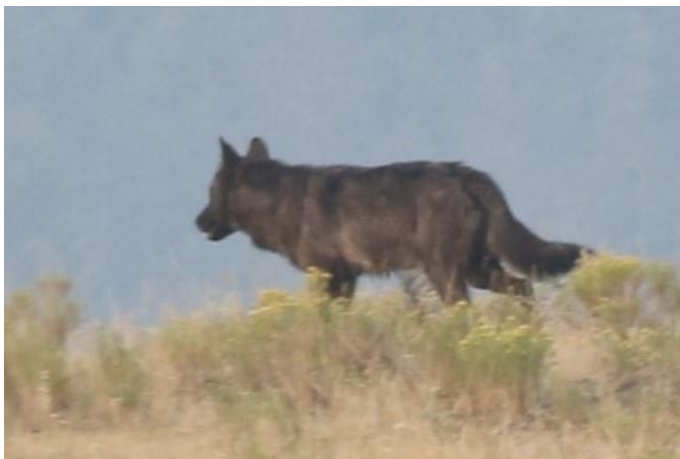
24 August – an early morning drive around Hayden Valley before departure

Yellowstone Sites

Lamar Valley and Slough Creek

This is the destination to see all of the larger mammals and some of the better birds too. It is necessary to get to the sites pre-dawn when wolves and bears are most likely to be active. From Canyon Lodge this was a 1 hour 45 minute drive (we would have saved 45 minutes each morning had we stayed at Mammoth or Gardiner...) so required a 4:15 am departure.

The stops for mammals can be easily identified by the cars of wolf watchers – there must have been 90 cars at a bison carcass at the start of the valley by 6am in the morning. We saw two Gray Wolves and one Brown Bear in the pre-dawn (5:40am) on 23 August close to this carcass. Later in the morning had two wolves close to the road in clear light allowing the quick photos shown below. Having Tyrene's information and communication with other guides really takes the guess work out – we would not have gone back for these closest wolves had Tyrene not picked up the information from other guides/wolf watching chatter over the radios.



Gray Wolf, Lamar Valley

The next site was at Slough Creek turn-off where we could stand on the hills and scope (scopes are absolutely essential) the ~34 wolves in the wolf packs just over a mile away. As long as

these wolf packs remain at this site, wolf sightings are pretty much guaranteed. On the third morning we also were able to track a Brown Bear moving relatively quickly across the hills.

The road between the Slough Creek campground (empty due to COVID) and the river provided this most welcome American Badger sighting in the early afternoon of our last full day. The badger was first seen moving through the grass and then proceeded to excavate a burrow while I watched.



American Badger, Slough Creek Campground

The trail starting at the campground carpark heading up into the hills and culminating at one of the rivers was both beautiful and had some sought-after birds (female Dusky Grouse with 3 juveniles, one MacGillivray's Warbler, a quick Broad-tailed Hummingbird) but only Least Chipmunks and Uinta Ground Squirrels on the mammal front (Yellow Bellied Marmots are already in hibernation by late August). The river running past the campground was great for fly-fishing (thank you Tyrene) but otters were not obliging.

The Lamar Valley proper, the Serengeti of North America, begins a few miles after the Slough Creek turn-off. The Bison herds were always present as were small numbers of Pronghorn (plus a very large herd on the distant hill). A highlight and one of the advantages (only advantage?) of traveling in August is the chance to see male Bison rutting. It is quite a sight to watch their fur fly into the air as two male bison charge into each other. Uinta Ground Squirrels are fairly common in the sagebrush.

One our first day we had a Prairie Falcon swooping down to take a presumed Montane Vole (dark brown, at 6,400 feet of elevation near the river) out of the sagebrush. Additional birds included a distant Golden Eagle (above the Pronghorn flock) and a nice juvenile pale phase Ferruginous Hawk sitting on the ground. We had a pair of Gray Wolf coming over the hills and cross the river on the third day (and as the large group of wolf watchers approached a couple of Sage Thrashers were flushed out of the sagebrush).

Gibbon Falls

We visited these falls on our thermal feature day and it seems a reliable spot for Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel (as well as Least Chipmunk and Red Squirrel).

Fountain Paintpots

This thermal feature had a Snowshoe Hare managing to avoid being cooked by the hot springs (not sure it can thank the people for shouting at it to get away from both the thermal pools and my camera....)

Canyon Village and road to Mammoth Hot Springs

Around the village Least Chipmunk and Red Squirrel were both present. We had three early morning drives to Mammoth with only one (two in one) mammal sighting of note – a Coyote with a freshly killed Red Fox in its mouth. The fox appeared young (but not a baby) and did not seem to be a road kill (although it cannot be ruled out that it had been hit and died and then the Coyote had picked it up and was now travelling down the road with the dead fox in its mouth.)

Wapiti (Elk) were always present in Mammoth and usually seen near the northern park entrance and a few times on roads near Mammoth.

Hayden Valley

This is the other wildlife valley in Yellowstone but based on my one early morning visit there it is nowhere near as productive as the Lamar Valley – some large herds of Wapiti and a few Bison

Spring Hill Road

This road runs out of the park parallel to the Yellowstone River (on the south side) and thanks to a tip from Tyrene was a great place to get a close look at Pronghorn in an irrigated pasture.



Young male Pronghorn

Other sites/species

The rock-strewn hillsides around Boiling River are the site to see Bighorn Sheep but they did not seem to be present for the days we were there (despite much scanning with scopes). The Tower-Canyon road would be the site for American Black Bear at this time of year (they move higher into the mountains in late summer) but unfortunately the road was closed during our stay. We were not looking for Moose but these are apparently in (or just outside?) the far north-east of the park. We did not look for Mountain Goat which are also further into the Lamar Valley. American Marten is not commonly seen in the park but there is apparently a private feeder outside the north-east entrance of the park where these can be seen regularly. Weasels (most commonly Long Tailed) occasionally run across the roads. Uinta Chipmunk is apparently resident near rock scree on hillsides.

MAMMAL LIST

1. Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel *Callospermophilus lateralis* Gibbons Falls



2. [Yellow Pine Chipmunk] *Neotamias amoenus* Slough Creek Trail

[there were significant color differences between the chipmunks - possibly the most yellowish, see image to right, were this species, but the overlap with Least Chipmunk is almost complete and they can only be identified safely by analysis of their skulls/genitalia and one relatively yellowish individual went to a nest in a tree - Least Chipmunks have summer tree nests]



3. Least Chipmunk *Neotamias minimus*



Reddish individual



Dull colored individual

4. [Montane Vole] *Microtus montanus*
[probably died in the instant before I saw it in the talons of a Prairie Falcon and Meadow Vole cannot be totally ruled out in the sagebrush near a river]

5. Uinta Ground Squirrel

Urocitellus armatus



6. Snowshoe Hare

Lepus americanus



7. Coyote

Canis latrans

[relatively common across the park]

8. Gray Wolf

Canis lupus

9. [Red Fox]

Vulpes vulpes

[another "had been recently alive" sighting]

10. Brown Bear

Ursus arctos

11. American Badger

Taxidea taxus

12. Wapiti (Elk)

Cervus canadensis

13. Pronghorn

Antilocapra americana

14. American Bison

Bison bison

BIRD LIST

Not a birding trip but 43 species including the MacGillivray's Warbler and Dusky Grouse that I was seeking, and Ferruginous Hawk and briefly flying Sage Thrashers were unexpected bonuses. There were many more passerines than recorded below.



MacGillivray's Warbler

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Canada Goose | Lamar Valley |
| 2. Trumpeter Swan | Swan Lake |
| 3. Common Merganser | Yellowstone River |
| 4. Mallard | Hayden Valley |
| 5. Redhead | Lamar Valley |
| 6. Ruddy Duck | Lamar Valley |
| 7. Dusky Grouse | Lamar - Slough Creek Trail |
| 8. Common Nighthawk | Roaring Mt. & Twin Lakes area |
| 9. Broad-tailed Hummingbird | Lamar - Slough Creek Trail |
| 10. Sandhill Crane | Lamar Valley |
| 11. Great Blue Heron | Hayden Valley |
| 12. Osprey | Lamar Valley |
| 13. Golden Eagle | Lamar Valley |
| 14. Northern Harrier | Lamar Valley |
| 15. Bald Eagle | Lamar Valley |
| 16. Red-tailed Hawk | Lamar Valley |
| 17. Ferruginous Hawk | Lamar Valley |
| 18. Northern Flicker | Lamar - Slough Creek Trail |
| 19. American Kestrel | Boiling River Trail |
| 20. Peregrine Falcon | Boiling River Trail |
| 21. Prairie Falcon | Lamar Valley |
| 22. Canada Jay | Upper Falls parking & viewpoint |
| 23. Black-billed Magpie | Stephens Creek Rd. |
| 24. Clark's Nutcracker | Lamar - Slough Creek Trail |
| 25. Common Raven | Lamar Valley |
| 26. Mountain Chickadee | Lamar - Slough Creek Trail |
| 27. Violet-green Swallow | Lamar Valley |
| 28. Barn Swallow | Lamar Valley |
| 29. American Dipper | Firehole River Picnic Area |
| 30. Sage Thrasher | Lamar Valley |
| 31. Mountain Bluebird | Lamar Valley and Stephens Creek Road |
| 32. Western Meadowlark | Stephens Creek Rd. |
| 33. Cedar Waxwing | Boiling River Trail |
| 34. Chipping Sparrow | Mammoth Hot Springs area |
| 35. Dark-eyed Junco | Lamar - Slough Creek Trail |
| 36. Song Sparrow | Lamar Valley |
| 37. Green-tailed Towhee | Lamar - Slough Creek Trail |
| 38. Yellow-headed Blackbird | Undine Falls |
| 39. Brown-headed Cowbird | Lamar Valley |

- 40. Brewer's Blackbird
- 41. Orange-crowned Warbler
- 42. MacGillivray's Warbler
- 43. Western Tanager

Lamar Valley
Lamar - Slough Creek Trail
Lamar - Slough Creek Trail
Stephens Creek Rd.



Dusky Grouse adult female



Dusky Grouse juvenile



Canada Jay



American Dipper