

YELLOWSTONE – JULY/AUGUST 2006

We are a family group who take holidays based around wildlife watching. We are not professional wildlife watchers. Our annual holiday is taken somewhere that we can see wildlife whilst taking in the scenery and culture of the places that we visit. We decided in 2006 to visit Yellowstone National Park in the USA. The combination of scenery, geysers and wildlife was irresistible.

The trip did not start well. We boarded the plane at Gatwick ready for the 12.30 flight. At 1.30 we were told to get off as there was a problem. At 4.30 we were told that the flight was cancelled! The first night of the trip was spent at a hotel in Gatwick! The booking in the next morning was chaotic. Our delayed flight and the flight for that day were both booking in at the same time! Unfortunately, the problems didn't finish there. We had an internal flight booked in USA, from Minneapolis to Billings. This had been missed and they had not re-booked us on another one! After a lot of walking around Minneapolis Airport, we were sorted out but we had to spend 9 hours in Minneapolis. Not exactly the start that we wanted but we decided to visit the "Mall of America", which is worth a visit if you've got a few hours to waste in Minneapolis!

We spent our first night in America in Billings and picked up the hire car the next morning. We had a long drive ahead of us, some 280 miles. Two leisurely days had become one hectic one. We were booked into a hotel in Jackson Hole this evening. The route from Billings took us over the Beartooth highway and through Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. The scenery was wonderful. The highest point on the pass is over 10,000 feet. On one of our many photographic stops we saw our first mammal of the trip – a golden mantel ground squirrel, feeding alongside a footpath.

We entered Yellowstone via the north east entrance. The numbers of bison grew as we drove along the Lamar valley, although they were fairly distant. Later on we encountered our first Bison Jam. A large male Bison provided excellent photo opportunities as it passed within touching distance of the car. A large herd of Red Deer was seen in Grand Teton before we arrived at Jackson Hole Lodge at about 8.00. This was to be our home for the next four days.

28th July – Not out till 10.00, to tour part of Grand Teton NP which is famous for it's Moose. (It is confusing in USA. The animals that we know as Red Deer are called Elk. The animals that the Europeans call Elk are Moose. I'll avoid the use of Elk – they will either be Red Deer or Moose) Saw a couple of Trumpeter Swans with cygnets. We decided to take the cable car up the mountains. The guide said that a Moose had been seen from the car earlier. We didn't see one. We walked around the top of the mountains. There were superb views and lots of interesting flowers. The two boys went further than we did and saw a Marmot. Mangy Moose for evening meal. (This is a restaurant, not an animal!). Out after meal to Moose Overlook – no moose -pattern starting to emerge!

July 29th – Early-ish start to drive through "Moose country" – saw several deer but no Moose. We took the shuttle across Jenny Lake for the walk to Hidden Falls and Inspiration Point. Excellent views again but no animals. (Someone told us that they saw a bear – We couldn't find it) Visited to local rodeo in the evening.

July 30th – Up at 7.00 to go Moose searching. Nothing along Moose-Wilson road. The Ranger knows us now and just waves us through! Drove to Signal Mountain which has good views from the top over the areas where the Moose are, but they weren't, only Red deer. Then, at last, a MOOSE! Great photo opportunities of a female feeding on a lily pond. Continued to Jackson Lake Lodge and saw more Moose, although rather distant, including a mother and baby. We stopped at Oxbow, which is a prime Moose spotting area. None there, but we did see a lone Pelican. Huge evening meal at Bubba's – doggy bags required!

July 31st – Up early for a bit of shopping to stock up before the journey to our cabin in Gardiner which was north of Yellowstone. Several stops along the way but two large Red deer were the only animals that we saw today.

August 1st – Drove into Yellowstone. Saw a Coyote on side of the road. Just taking some photos when a huge 4 x 4 hurtled past frightening it away. This was the best view of a coyote that we had during the trip. Decided to drive along Blacktail Plateau Drive. A car stopped in front of us had just seen a bear. Once again we did not see it, but we did see a female Moose with a youngster. (They're getting quite common now!) We stopped to have a look at Tower Falls, where there was an American Red Squirrel in a tree. We took several short walks throughout the day; that to Lost Lake produced good views of a Mule Deer, whilst at Wraith Falls we saw a family of Yellow Bellied Marmots, with one in particular being very photogenic, sitting on a rock. We walked the main terrace at Mammoth before returning to the cabin for a barbecue.

August 2nd – Up at 5.00 for a 5.30 start, to drive the long way round to Old Faithful Geyser. (There is a shorter route but animals are more likely on the longer one) The first few hours were fairly quiet although we did see a Pronghorn Antelope and a couple of passing Coyotes. We headed towards Canyon and saw several cars parked on the side of the road. This usually means that animals are nearby. We could see three Wolves (An adult and two young), and a Grizzly bear in the distance. We stopped for breakfast at Dunraven pass and were told of a bison carcass near Canyon, which had attracted wolves. We stopped for about 20 minutes on the way to Old Faithful without success. Old faithful erupted as predicted but we managed to miss eruptions from all of the other major geysers. We stopped off at another geyser basin where we saw a Bald Eagle and two Osprey. We returned via the wolves but they had gone by the time that we got there. We arrived back at the cabin at 8.30 – a long but rewarding day.

August 3rd – Left the cabin at 8.15 and headed for Canyon. Stopped to scope six Osprey but no mammals to be seen. Stopped at Antelope Creek, where we saw the wolves yesterday, and saw two more; different ones from yesterday. The remainder of the day was spent at Canyon, walking the various trails and look out points along the north and south rims, with many wonderful views of both the Upper and Lower falls. Saw a couple of distant Coyotes on the way home but nothing else.

August 4th – We had a different timetable today. We decided to visit a nearby town in the Morning and go into Yellowstone later in the day. We drove to Livingstone where a film was being shot. The first shop that we went in was a film set! We had lunch in Livingstone before returning to the cabin for a

couple of hours rest before venturing out again at 5.00 to the Lamar valley. Quite a disappointing evening, although we did see a Pronghorn Antelope and several Bison.

August 5th – A good start to the day with an Osprey on the river near the cabin. Lots of female red deer at Mammoth this morning. Moved onto Antelope Creek again and saw an incredible nine wolves, a mix of adults and cubs. Stopped on Chittenden Road to look for Mountain sheep but could not find any. Lot of Bison in Hayden valley before seeing the three large red deer, known as “The Boys of Summer” just south of Canyon. Visited Norris Geyser basin in the afternoon. We returned slowly to the cabin, stopping on many occasions but with no success. Heavy rain and Thunderstorms during the evening.

August 6th – Our last full day. Out at about 7.30. We stopped several times to scan for wildlife. There was a lone Pronghorn antelope just inside the park entrance and a lot of Bison, both in Hayden Valley and around Lake Yellowstone. We were involved in several Bison Jams during the day. Good views of a roosting Bald Eagle in a tree. We passed Antelope Creek again on our way back to the cabin and were surprised to find a Grizzly bear in the area where we had seen wolves on previous days. There were a lot of people around and finding a parking space was not easy. There was also a Bull Moose hidden amongst some trees. After spending an hour and a half bear watching, we moved onto Tower to buy some last minute souvenirs, where there was Mule Deer right beside the road. We also saw another female Moose and baby but did not have time to stop as we still had to pack to go home.

August 7th – Early start this morning to be back at Billings Airport by 9.00. Flight home uneventful.

Mammals seen:

Ground squirrel, Bison, Red Deer, Moose, Coyote, Mule Deer, Yellow Bellied Marmot, Pronghorn Antelope, Wolf, Grizzly Bear.

Best Moment: seeing the wolves for the first time, which was not expected.

Biggest disappointment: Not seeing a black Bear.

Lesson learnt: Use accommodation in or as near to the park as possible. We wasted too much time driving.