

Trip Report: Yellowstone and around, September 2012
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We spent two weeks in the USA focussed on Yellowstone but also visiting some of the western states surrounding. It wasn't a dedicated mammal-watching holiday, we didn't do any night spotlighting for example, but we still got 27 species including 16 new to our life list.



River otter in Grand Teton – always our favourite sighting

A short stop in Utah at Dinosaur National Monument showed up desert cottontails and rock squirrel right around the visitor centre in the daytime, and as an aside if you're interested in palaeontology then this is one of the most amazing sights in the world – an entire rock bed stuffed with enormous dinosaur bones, left in situ with a building built over it.

The Grand Teton NP just south of Yellowstone was our first stop, and proved good for some animals less common in the famous park. We got various elk sightings, also pronghorns on the grassland east of the park as well as our first bison herd. Plenty of least chipmunk, red squirrels and probably yellow-pine chipmunk seen on walks in the pine woods. A dirt road just before the popular Oxbow Bend turnout goes to the Snake River at Cattleman's Crossing where we saw common muskrat and a great sighting of North American river otter. It's not often you can actually watch the otter chasing fish under the water! Near this area we also saw three moose. On the Cascade Canyon hike beyond Jenny Lake we saw an American marten trot away from us with a yellow-bellied marmot in its mouth. Further on the trail we saw a living marmot and several American pika. Everyone returning along the trail told us they had been watching otters just up the creek, but when we reached the spot they had vanished.



Marten with a dead marmot in Grand Teton

Once in Yellowstone we focussed first on the Hayden Valley and then on the Lamar Valley area; everything we read and were told suggested these were the best opportunities for wildlife. We saw

enormous bison herds, sometimes with tag-along coyotes, more elk as well as mule deer and once a group of white-tailed deer. I have never been in any National Park with so many people on the roads looking for wildlife. We found the grey wolves when we found 40+ vehicles pulled up on both sides of the road and everyone out of their cars with binoculars and scopes trained the same way. There was an elk kill perhaps only a hundred metres from the road, which all the pundits around us agreed was a rare and excellent sighting for wolves; they are usually watched by scope up to a kilometre away. We saw four different wolves visit the carcass, and a brave coyote that scouted around and tried to get close enough to grab a snack.



Three wolves on a dead elk, 400m from Yellowstone Canyon Village

We caused our own traffic jam the next day. Having spotted a crowd of ravens in the woods the previous evening we went out at first light and checked the spot again. Sure enough, there was a grizzly (brown) bear on a deer carcass. Within five minutes we had three more cars pulled up. An hour later and the circus was really in town, with probably 30 cars pulled up (on what was a winding road with a drop-off on one side), various idiots trying to creep closer for a better shot, and a ranger yelling at the more stupidly parked cars to move. One 4WD filled the scene with tyre smoke when he found that he'd been a bit too courageous in parking off-road and couldn't get enough rubber on the tarmac to move. A mother was good enough to try tempting the bear out of the woods with her two little kids. Or perhaps just trying to get them a better view? We watched the bear cover thirty metres from a standing start in four seconds when he chased some ravens off. Even that didn't seem to faze her. I should add, we were scarcely forty metres away ourselves and she was a lot closer.



Grizzly bear, also near Canyon Village

Back on the road, we spotted red fox a couple of times in the north of the park and saw a total of six more moose in the Lamar Valley; a family of three in the willows of Soda Butte Creek at dawn and a trio of bulls across the valley later. According to the stats this is almost 10% of Yellowstone's moose population, so I'm a little suspicious of their count. For this part of Yellowstone we stayed in Silvergate Cabins, just outside the NE entrance, and this is a good place to talk to guys like Doug who spends most of his mornings out looking for the wolves. They also have sagebrush voles digging holes all around the cabins and my parents had an American deer mouse eating the hot chocolate in their cabin.

We continued east as far as the Black Hills and the Badlands of South Dakota. In the Black Hills we saw mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorns, least chipmunk and eastern fox squirrel. At the Devil's Tower NM there's a black-tailed prairie dog colony where we also spotted a thirteen-striped ground squirrel. We spotted one again among the prairie dog colony in the Badlands, so they're obviously associated. And as a complete surprise, we found entirely wild mountain goats chewing on the grass right in front of Mount Rushmore. Potentially an easy place for otherwise elusive goats.



Mountain goats at Mount Rushmore

With the wolves we got our key target for the trip, but in terms of things we'd like to have seen and didn't: we are still drawing a blank with American beavers, in spite of many dawn and dusk stops in the right environment. We didn't get a black bear this trip, but have seen them in BC. If we had gone night-spotting in Badlands or the Black Hills we might have got black-footed ferrets, American badgers, striped skunk and porcupine which would all have been life listers.



Bull moose to the east of the Lamar Valley

Detailed List

Day 1 – 2 bighorn sheep, road to Steamboat Springs; 3+ desert cottontails, 1 rock squirrel, Dinosaur NM; mule deer, road from Vernal

Day 2 – pronghorns, road from Rock Springs; 1 muskrat, Oxbow bend area; 1 elk, Jackson Lake shore; 3+ least chipmunk, 1 yellow-pine chipmunk, 3+ red squirrel, Colter walk

Day 3 – 3 elk, least chipmunk, Signal Mountain hike; 2 otters, Cattleman's Crossing; bison, pronghorns, Antelope Flats

Day 4 – 6+ elk, road nr Signal Mountain; 3 moose, nr Jackson Dam; bison, pronghorns, Antelope Flats; 1 mule deer, Gros Ventre river; 1 American marten, 1 yellow-bellied marmot, 3+ American pica, Cascade Canyon hike

Day 5 – not much

Day 7 – 1 coyote, bison, 1 mule deer, Hayden Valley

Day 8 – 4 wolves, 1 coyote, nr Canyon Village; elk, bison, 2 coyote, Hayden Valley; 1 red fox, Mt Washburn road

Day 9 – 1 grizzly bear, nr Canyon Village; bison, pronghorns, mule deer, Lamar Valley; 3 mule deer, Mt Washburn; sagebrush vole, Silvergate Cabins

Day 10 – 6 moose, pronghorns, bison, Lamar Valley; 1 red fox, nr Tower; elk, nr Mammoth; 4 white-tailed deer, Blacktail Drive; bighorn sheep, Gardiner exit

Day 11 – 1 coyote, nr Silvergate

Day 12 – pronghorns, Wyoming; black-tailed prairie dogs, thirteen-stripe ground squirrel, Devil's Tower NM; white-tailed deer, nr Hill City

Day 13 – white-tailed deer, nr Hill City; pronghorns, white-tailed deer, Custer SP; 3 mountain goats, Mount Rushmore

Day 14 – pronghorns, mule deer, 2 bighorn sheep, black-tailed prairie dogs, least chipmunk, Badlands NP

Day 15 – 1 eastern fox squirrel, nr Hot Springs; pronghorn, black-tailed prairie dogs, South Dakota + Nebraska + Wyoming.