

# IDAHO and WYOMING MAMMAL TOUR

- *In Search of Wolves, Badgers and Other Elusive Mammals of the American North-west*



Soda Butte Creek, Yellowstone National Park

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## 1 Introduction

This report describes the results of a two week trip to Idaho and Wyoming (and bits of Montana) in May 2012, from May 9<sup>th</sup> through May 24<sup>th</sup>.

## 2 Objectives

My main objective was to find an American Badger and, if time allowed try for Swift Fox in Wyoming or Montana. I had failed to get Badger on two previous trips and so I was determined to make amends this time.

I also had a long list of other targets which included Coyote, Bighorn Sheep, Bison, Pika and various Chipmunks, Ground Squirrels and other small mammals. I particularly wanted to see Idaho Ground Squirrel as they are so restricted in range. Of course, since Yellowstone was on my itinerary, I was more than happy to look at Wolves or Bears even though I had seen them all quite a few times before. In fact, I was also looking forward to seeing Yellowstone purely from a scenic point of view.

## 3 The Plan

I planned to start in Boise, Idaho where previous reports suggested a strong likelihood of finding Badger. A local wildlife expert, Matt Miller, had very kindly offered to help and provided me with detailed information on good sites for many of my target species. He also spent a lot of time with me on the first two days and I am indebted to Matt for his extremely generous support.

The plan was then to head east towards Yellowstone, stopping at various locations which Matt had suggested for some of the target species. I had four days booked in Yellowstone and then, depending on the Badger situation, would either return to Boise to finally nail the elusive mustelid or, if having been successful, head further east in search of Swift Fox. I also had information on sites for White-tailed Prairie Dog and Pygmy Rabbit from an earlier John Fox report and was thinking about how best to include these in a potentially over-crowded itinerary.

## 4 Summary of Results

I found the Badger! It was a complete fluke in the end but nevertheless I finally got one. But the urge to get a second and more prolonged sighting proved too strong and I sacrificed the (probably slim) chance of a Swift Fox in an attempt to do so.

In all, I recorded 37 species of mammal and 82 species of birds, (the latter not being a priority and not having received a great deal of attention). I found practically all the targets among the supporting cast and had great sightings of Black Bear and Wolf in Yellowstone. I also witnessed a Bison giving birth which is not an experience I had in mind originally.

## 5 Some Lessons

I learned a lot about Yellowstone and after six days there felt I was starting to get to grips with it. Here are a few suggestions:

- Go early. By the third week of May the park starts to get very crowded. Late April and/or early May is best.
- For easy access to the Lamar Valley, stay in Silver Gate or Cooke City. The accommodation is good and you can eat well. Avoid that mess called Mammoth.
- Don't ignore the areas to the east of the park which are rich in wildlife and offer exciting prospects for difficult species such as Marten and Fisher. Grizzly and Moose are apparently often in Cooke City and when I say *in* Cooke City I mean walking the main street!
- Slough Creek apparently has a bit of a reputation for Badger. I found out too late to benefit but I think it is worth spending a bit of time here. A Badger also lives in the sage scrub opposite Soda Butte but again I found out too late.
- Soda Butte Creek produces Northern River Otter but often outside the park around Silver Gate. The locals see them here quite frequently they tell me.
- For Wolf, keep close tabs on the meadows around the junction of Soda Butte Creek and the Lamar River. There don't seem to be many days when Wolves aren't visible in this area!

## 6 Day-by-day Record of Events

A detailed blow-by-blow account follows.

### Wednesday May 9<sup>th</sup>

Arrived in Boise at around midnight, absolutely exhausted after a long flight via Minneapolis and checked into the Best Western Lodge in Boise.

### Thursday May 10<sup>th</sup>

Rose at the crack of noon and found Pronghorn on the scrub fields opposite the hotel. A group of fourteen animals in total, which became very edgy as I approached on foot. A very pale hawk flew directly overhead which I later confirmed as Ferruginous. Also found American Kestrels as well as Killdeer and House Finch back at the hotel.

Met Matt Miller in the hotel lobby at about 13.00 and followed him to his house in Boise where he dropped his car off. The Eastern Fox Squirrels, which he explained were active in his back garden earlier, had disappeared but we made up for it shortly afterwards by finding two Yellow-bellied Marmots on a scree slope about a mile down the road. Drove westwards and Matt showed me sites producing Piute Ground Squirrel and Idaho Ground Squirrel, the latter at Emmett in Gem County, (making it the *endemicus* race).

Spent the evening at Snake River Birds of Prey Nature Reserve looking for American Badger. Found several Ord's Kangaroo Rats and two Black-tailed Jackrabbits but

unfortunately no Badger. Also accounted for Prairie Falcon, Burrowing Owl, Hen Harrier, Barn Owl, Western Kingbird and Vaux's Swift.

### Friday May 11<sup>th</sup>

Lazy morning in view of the long session ahead. Pleased to find Mountain Cottontail on the grass outside the hotel along with Bullock's Oriole, American Robin and Ring-billed Gull in the scrub opposite.

Joined Matt in early afternoon and drove to a public park in Boise where we found Eastern Fox Squirrel very easily. Continued to a site near Marsing, to the west of Boise where Matt had previously found White-tailed Antelope Squirrel and Wild Horses. Both were visible as we arrived, the former showing nicely in the warm sunshine. The Horses, ferals of course, were skittish and quickly disappeared.



White-tailed Antelope Squirrel, near Marsing.

Next stop was Jack's Creek, about twenty miles south of Boise, offering higher altitude sage scrub habitat. Found two different species of ground squirrel – the larger one having buffy-brown fur and a black-tipped tail and thus being easy to identify as Belding's Ground Squirrel – the substantially smaller one having plain greyish-brown fur and a thin plain tail and therefore being Merriam's Ground Squirrel. (Piute and Merriam's are indistinguishable in the field, but Matt knows from prior research that this area contains only Merriam's). As we were watching the Ground Squirrels I noticed something moving in the grass. A Long-tailed Weasel! We watched the Weasel sneaking ever closer to the Ground Squirrels and



then, in the blink of an eye, it was bounding away with a Merriam's in its jaws. Now that's what I call a "*take-away*" snack!

We continued on foot into sage scrub where we soon found Mule Deer. Moving through the sage I spotted something moving – which I quickly realised was a Coyote. We also found Least Chipmunk, the erect tail being the giveaway as it scuttled off. (The other, similar, Yellow-pine Chipmunk runs with its tail held horizontally). Horned Lark and the incongruous Chukar Partridge were also on show.

With time not on my side and a long drive back to Matt's in prospect I decided to skip the evening's spotlighting at Snake River.

### Saturday May 12<sup>th</sup>

An early start at the nearby Indian Creek Reserve in the hope of a daytime Badger. Lots of Piute Ground Squirrels were showing and a fine looking male Hen Harrier tried to "mob" me as I walked along the reservoir road. On the reservoir itself were two Black-necked Stilts and a variety of ducks: Gadwall, Mallard, Redhead and so on. But no Badger, despite a four hour search in the sea of sage brush and grass that characterises Indian Creek.

At midday I took a look-see along the Boise River near to Matt's place and was astonished to see a Coyote rush across the road in front of me and disappear into someone's front garden. Moreover, it was clutching a small rodent in its jaws, quite possibly North American Deermouse.

That evening I was back at Snake River looking for a Badger. I arrived quite early and took a stroll down to the look-out at Dedication Point where there is a panoramic view of the river running through a deep gorge. Scanning the water through binoculars I quickly found two Muskrats scuttling around in the shallow waters opposite. But then something much bigger caught my eye. A very large brown back was chugging along the surface – which quickly changed course and headed across the river towards me. Eventually it became obvious what it was – a Beaver! I was able to watch it for about half an hour as it cruised up and down the river.

Eventually it got dark and I resumed my Badger search. An Ord's Kangaroo Rat soon presented itself and when I shone my torch directly at it, instead of running away, it came loping towards me. It stopped two feet away and I was able to bend down and take a really good look. It didn't seem to mind having the torch shone in its face! Otherwise, things were very quiet and I found nothing else of note. At about 01.00 it was getting quite chilly so I decided to give up for the night.

### Sunday May 13<sup>th</sup>

It was time to start moving East as the next day I was booked at the Mammoth Hotel in Yellowstone. So a relatively early start, (before noon!), saw me heading south-east on the I-84 to Mountain Home and then due east on Route 20 to Fairfield, Arco and Idaho Falls, my intended destination for the night. I planned to look at some places Matt had told me about

en-route: the back roads around Fairfield for Columbian Ground Squirrel, the Silver Creek Reserve for Moose and the Craters of the Moon Reserve for American Pika.

At Fairfield I had little idea which roads to try so I took the first minor road I came across, a gravel track heading south past the air strip. At first there were only potato fields on both sides but eventually I came to some more interesting habitat – some rough pasture and wet fields. There were several recently used Badger holes in evidence so it looked quite promising, but I could find only Pronghorn. In the wetter fields were Snowy Egrets and two nice looking Wilson's Phalaropes. And, at a junction of several minor roads, was a horse paddock, where standing on its hind legs was a Columbian Ground Squirrel. I had expected these to be common but this was the first one I had found.

At Silver Creek there were about half a dozen weekend holidaymakers messing about with canoes so I didn't stay long. There were no Moose in view as far as I could see. At the top of a small hill were a couple of buildings and, as Matt had predicted, a lone Columbian Ground Squirrel was in residence. In the distance, lost in the heat haze, an animal was running across the potato fields – which might have been a Coyote.

The Craters of the Moon is an extraordinary place – an ocean of bare, black lava-rock, thinly vegetated in a few places but mostly barren and bleak. The black rock absorbs the sun's heat and by mid-afternoon, (when I arrived), it becomes suffocatingly hot. There seemed little prospect of finding mammals, at least until much later, but I decided to try nevertheless. The rocks hold American Pika (my main target) as well as Least and Yellow-pine Chipmunk. And the caves, for which I obtained a special permit, sometimes hold roosting Little Brown Myotis.

I found the two Chipmunks fairly easily as it turned out, though the Pika eluded me; (the ranger had warned me that these were very crepuscular, so I wasn't surprised). The caves were unproductive. The ones which the permit entitles the visitor to enter are quite disturbed during the day and, given that there are many other caves available for roosting bats to which access is prohibited, I doubt that bats use them very often.

By early evening I was on my way across the empty sage-scrub desert east of Arco towards Idaho Falls.

### Monday May 14<sup>th</sup>

It took less than two hours to drive up to West Yellowstone in which time the scenery changed completely: from desert to mountains and pine forests. I entered via the west gate and paid my \$25 for a seven day pass, which is outstanding value when you consider what is on offer.

The road follows the Madison River eastwards for about fifteen miles to Madison Junction, during which I had my first look at Bison and Red Deer (Elk). Matt had suggested that if I failed to find Bison I should hang up my binoculars. Well, given that the meadows absolutely teem with them and that the traffic is frequently held up by bovine jaywalkers, I think I can safely say that it is completely and utterly impossible *not* to see them! I stopped to admire a

group of about twenty just before Madison but, turning the corner towards Norris, I came across my first truly vast herd – some three hundred or more beasts – which rather put things in context!



American Bison, Blacktail Plateau, Yellowstone National Park..

I made my way northwards, stopping frequently to scan lakes and hillsides. I found Uinta Ground Squirrel, which turned out to be far more common than I had anticipated, as well as lots more Red Deer and Bison. Then, just south of Mammoth, at Swan Lake, I encountered a cluster of vehicles parked by the side of the road and a line of a dozen or more people with scopes and cameras. Obviously something interesting was on offer! About five hundred yards away three Grizzlies, a mother and two sub-adults, were feeding on a carcass. And, accompanying them, at a safe distance, was a Coyote. I set up the scope and spent the next two hours watching the comings and goings of the three bears and the bothersome Coyote.

Mammoth, a hub for accommodation and food in the northern section of the park, is hideous. The size of a small town, it sprawls incontinently in all directions – an ugly and incongruous blot on an otherwise pristine landscape. Frankly, the visitor might just as well stay in Gardiner which is only five miles away and which offers better dining options and more reasonably priced accommodation. The service in the Mammoth Dining Lounge, incidentally, is comically poor. What a contrast to the breathtaking beauty of the surrounding park.

After an arduous meal in the Dining Lounge I went for a drive eastwards to a site at the Hellroaring Trailhead which Matt had told me about and which promised a sighting of American Pika. The drive was extremely pleasant; the Blacktail Plateau looked a picture in the evening sunshine and Phantom Lake produced a nice group of Mule Deer. I found a huge rockpile at the Hellroaring Trailhead, which I presumed was the site Matt meant, but failed to find Pika. But it was an enjoyable evening and I was starting to get a feel for the park.

### Tuesday May 15<sup>th</sup>

I rose early, too early for breakfast at Mammoth, and headed east again, intending to spend the day in the Lamar Valley. The Hellroaring Trailhead again failed to produce Pika but I had better luck at Garnett Hill, (just east of Roosevelt Lodge), where I found a splendid group of fourteen male Bighorn Sheep, some toting magnificent rounded horns. Across the road I noticed a group of a dozen or so people with spotting scopes and cameras and so, armed with my own scope, I marched over to see what was up. I confidently expected Wolf but, to my surprise, they were watching Bison and as I arrived on the scene one proceeded to give birth! This produced appreciative squeals of delight from the mostly female audience who apparently had been willing the mother on with wise words of encouragement. Within two minutes the new calf was on its feet and staggering after its mother. Not quite what I was expecting, but an interesting spectacle nevertheless.

Continuing into the Lamar Valley proper I found the well-known Osprey nest where two chicks could be seen popping their heads above the parapet. Here, the Lamar River meanders through lush meadows where the grazing attracts huge herds of Bison and Red Deer. The Valley has been called the “Serengeti of North America” and it easy to see why. As I scanned the valley hundreds upon hundreds of animals could be seen dotted across the meadows.

Further along, where the Soda Butte Creek joins the Lamar River the valley widens and beyond the river junction is a broad plain of sage brush and grass. A gaggle of watchers, armed with expensive-looking equipment, had gathered on the hillside and had obviously spotted something out on the prairie opposite. I parked up and walked up the hill to see what was afoot. This time it *was* a Wolf, a single animal that one of the more expert watchers explained was the alpha female of the Lamar Pack. She was busy chewing at the dry remains of an old carcass, attended by an inquisitive Coyote that she periodically reminded to stay clear. She made quite a good sight at two hundred yards in the scope and for twenty minutes or so I had good views. Then, she had had enough and trotted off westwards, prompting the other watchers to rush back to their vehicles in hot pursuit.

I decided to let her go and continued my way up into Soda Butte Creek. At Pebble Creek I found distant Mountain Goats on hillsides on both sides of the road and further east, on the slopes of the Baronettes, I found some more. By now, having had no opportunity for breakfast, I was starving and so I drove a few miles further to the north-east park gate at Silver Gate and bought myself a sandwich in a quiet cafe called “Stop The Car!”



I spent the afternoon slowly working my way back westwards along the Lamar Valley. Matt had told me that Northern River Otters were sometimes seen on Trout Lake so I stopped here for a couple of hours to rest and watch the lake. No Otters were at home but I did add Yellow-rumped Warbler and Red-breasted Nuthatch to the bird list. I also spotted a couple of good sized Cutthroat Trout cruising in the margins.



Uinta Ground Squirrel, Madison River, Yellowstone National Park.

That evening I was too tired to go out again and drove the short way to Gardiner in search of a proper meal. I found a nice restaurant called “Rosie’s” where I gorged on an enormous slab of buffalo meatloaf, by far the finest meal I had enjoyed so far.

### Wednesday May 16<sup>th</sup>

The previous afternoon I had stumbled across a trail – the “Lost Lake Trail” – starting at the Petrified Tree near Tower. At the trailhead was a sightings book and I was intrigued to notice that visitors were seeing Pika quite regularly. So, making an early start, I decided to give it a try. The sun was shining but it was a cold morning as I set off down the trail. The lake was about half a mile away and on the far side was a big scree slope, presumably where the Pikas had been seen. I scanned hopefully but found only a lone Yellow-bellied Marmot. A Muskrat was busy in the lake margins but little else was stirring.

Later, I drove down to see Old Faithful, my one and only visit to a geyser. If I had been depressed at the urban sprawl of Mammoth, I was in for a shock here! The Old Faithful development is virtually a city, comprising various hotels and lodges, a supermarket, massive car parks and a maze of access roads. Hundreds of geyser-watchers had gathered on

boardwalks around the geyser itself, waiting for the imminent next eruption, (which I was assured would come at 13.30). It arrived ten minutes late and for about two minutes thereafter a big plume of water and steam shot high into the air. Cameras clicked and camcorders whirled into action and at the conclusion the crowd gave it a round of applause, (which I'm sure the geyser appreciated). I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

Driving back towards the wildlife zone, I found a Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel at Beryl Spring, (a steaming natural Jacuzzi). And back at Swan Lake, another big crowd had gathered to watch the three Grizzlies who were still hanging around. This time they were much closer, (about one hundred yards), and I half expected the rangers, (who were busy directing traffic), to move people back to the opposite side of the road. The crowd was increasing all the time and when I left some seventy vehicles were in attendance, stretched out over about half a mile of roadside.



American Pika, Hellroaring Trailhead, Yellowstone National Park.

After an early dinner in Gardiner I went for a short drive eastwards towards Tower. Near Phantom Lake a small gathering was watching a very handsome cinnamon coloured Black Bear, which moved off into the trees shortly after I arrived. Unreasonable!

I tried once more for Pika at Hellroaring Trailhead. But just as I started scanning a car drew up and the driver asked what I was looking for. When I told him "Pika" he laughed and told me I'd got the wrong rockpile. "Go down the track for about a quarter of a mile" he said. "You'll find another big rockpile there beside the car park. The Pikas are in the rocks at the base of the pile to your right as you look at it". I thanked him and drove down to the car park, which hitherto I hadn't even known existed. There indeed was *another* impressive rockpile



and this time, right where he had predicted, was a Pika. Success at last! And shortly afterwards a second appeared. They were quite confiding and I was able to get close enough for photos.

I went back in a happy frame of mind, stopping at Blacktail Lake to watch a Bald Eagle, at which several birders were getting unduly excited.

Thursday May 17<sup>th</sup>

Went back for a Pika encore and both animals obliged. Getting easy now! There were also quite a few Chipping Sparrows “chekking” away around the car park, distinctive both by call and by their chestnut coloured crowns.

Two Black Bears, a mother and a juvenile, were on show near Floating Island Lake and provided excellent views at quite close range. The park rules say that you shouldn’t get within 100 yards of Bears and, in truth, the four other spectators and I were probably only fifty yards away – but everyone was keeping quiet and behaving themselves and the Bears were calm and relaxed. After a little while the two Bears went shuffling off into the woods more interested in looking for food than worrying about us.

In the Lamar Valley a fairly small crowd had gathered looking at distant Wolves. There were five animals present at a range of 800 yards plus. This was a gang from the so-called “Mollie’s” pack, a mighty army of Wolves that had recently destroyed the previously resident “Agate” pack and taken over its territory. The Mollies now numbered nearly twenty animals and were clearly a formidable force. The alpha male and female from the extinct Agates had both been brutally killed and the others dispersed, I was told. That had left the Mollies in charge of a huge territory covering large parts of the prime hunting grounds of the Lamar Valley. We watched these gangsters for an hour or more before they eventually moved too far away to see through the heat haze. As they drifted off, two Coyotes appeared only fifty yards in front of us, creating a bit of a stir among the many watchful Uinta Ground Squirrels.

About a mile further up the valley another small crowd had formed in a lay-by. A young Grizzly was feeding on a carcass only seventy or eighty yards away on the hillside, though it spent most of its time obscured behind a ridge. And at the junction of the Soda Butte Creek and the Lamar River two female Bighorns were close to the roadside on the hill but quickly disappeared after I had parked the car at the next pull-in and walked back for a photo.

A little further on another small crowd was intent on something and I pulled in to take a look. About a mile away, scarcely identifiable in the horrendous heat haze, I found a lone Grizzly in the scope and assumed that was what people were watching – until someone pointed out a Wolf feeding on a carcass at one hundred yards! This was a member of the Lamar pack, a powerful pack in their own right but one now vulnerable to the expansionist ambitions of the dreaded Mollies. The Lamars numbered only about ten animals and several people I spoke with feared their eventual demise.

I lunched in Cooke City, four miles outside the north-east entrance of the park, stopping en-route at Pebble Creek to see a Dipper on the Soda Butte Creek. I spent the afternoon

dawdling my way back to Mammoth, stopping at the Wolf carcass to see what was going on. Two Wolves were now present, taking turns to feed. Back at the Yellowstone River, in a spot Matt had previously recommended, a nice group of Bighorn were drawing attention from a small crowd though they quickly moved up the hill and out of sight as more cars stopped to look.

The weather was changing. It had been very warm and sunny that morning but now ominous black clouds were gathering overhead. The temperature plummeted and by early evening rain, sleet and hail were falling. The wind had also got up and by the time I had returned to Mammoth Summer had become Winter.

### Friday May 18<sup>th</sup>

I had set the alarm for 06.00 but when I got up and looked out the hotel window I couldn't see across the road. Thick fog! Eventually it got a little clearer but then it started raining. It was 11.00 before it seemed worth venturing outside, where an icy wind greeted me and blew rain and sleet in my face.

Conditions were pretty hopeless but I pressed on regardless. At Garnett Hill about twenty die-hards in waterproofs were watching three members of the Mollies but I had got there just in time to be too late and the trio disappeared at a trot the moment I got out the car. I had just enough time to recognise two of them: "A-Grey" and "A-Black" from the Wolf ID card I had bought in the Visitor Centre at Mammoth.

With the rain once more absolutely hammering down I pulled in for an hour or so and listened to the radio. Eventually it eased a little and I got moving again but things were quiet until I reached the Soda Butte Creek. There, at Ice Box Canyon, I spotted a Black Bear up on the hillside, perhaps fifty yards from the road. There was nowhere to pull in at all so I drove half a mile further to find a safe parking spot and walked back. Thankfully the rain had temporarily stopped. Two Harlequin Ducks were parked on a mid-stream boulder in the Creek but I had eyes only for my Bear, which fortunately was still around when I finally made it back to Ice Box Canyon. Within a few minutes another vehicle had stopped to see what I was looking at and within ten more minutes a dozen more vehicles had accreted (from nowhere it seemed) and a traffic jam was forming. No-one cared to do what I had done and before long traffic was spread across the road, on a dangerous blind corner, and people on foot were milling about. It was chaos! But the Bear didn't seem to care and carried on foraging for food. I left before rangers turned up and arrested everyone. Bang on cue it started raining again. The car's thermometer claimed it was 45 degrees. Welcome to Summer in Yellowstone!

There were some saturated Mule Deer at the Baronettes but apart from that I couldn't find anything else and with the gloom of evening closing in prematurely I gave up for the day. My four day sojourn at the Mammoth conurbation had ended and that evening I stayed in the more civilised enclave of Cooke City.



Saturday May 19<sup>th</sup>

From John Fox's report I knew about a White-tailed Prairie Dog town near Cody, about 80 miles to the south-east of Cooke City and decided to give it a try. The morning was very cold, (below zero at first), but at least it was clear and sunny and the roads were virtually empty. I stopped to look at Yellow-bellied Marmot on the Clark's Fork River before turning off down the very scenic Chief Joseph Road. It took quite a long time to do the eighty miles, not least because I kept stopping to admire the view. At Dead Indian Pass, there was a glorious view of the surrounding mountain peaks, many still covered in snow. And in the little car park I found both Yellow-pine Chipmunk and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel. They were more than willing to come to my offering of peanut butter biscuits and greedily wolfed the bait down only a couple feet away from me.



Yellow-pine Chipmunk (with reddish undertail) , Dead Indian Pass.

Better, much better, was to follow. About eight miles north of Cody, on an eerily empty highway, I drove over the brow of a slight rise only to encounter an animal walking slowly across the road perhaps sixty or seventy yards ahead. It seemed to waddle along – a bit like an alligator – keeping a low profile. I slammed on the brakes, wondering at the same time what on Earth I was looking at. Then, as the car pulled up about twenty yards short of the animal, which by now had reached the verge, it dawned on me. Badger! The animal now ducked down into the roadside ditch and began moving towards me. For a few moments I could see clearly now that Badger it most certainly was, the facial detail now being obvious.

It didn't stop but carried on into a culvert. I quickly got out and hurried over to the culvert entrance – where, to my amazement, a head with a yellow dorsal stripe popped out and looked up at me. For a few seconds we gazed at each other, barely three yards apart, before suddenly it was gone. Nevertheless I thought I had the situation under control. I could see both ends of the culvert; he couldn't leave either one without me spotting him. Or so I thought! Fifteen minutes later he still hadn't re-appeared so I got my torch out and peered into the entrance at the nearest end. No sign of him. So I tried again at the other end. Predictably perhaps, still no sign. Somehow he had escaped from the culvert without my seeing him. I will never know how. Houdini has nothing on this fellow.

The Prairie Dogs proved very elusive. I followed John Fox's directions but could find no trace of them. However, the field in which he saw them, (assuming I was looking at the right field), appears to have been recently ploughed up for potatoes, so perhaps they have all been dispersed.

On the way back I found a group of White-tailed Deer, rare inside the park but apparently quite common in this area to the east of it. And on some ponds about 15 miles south-east of Cooke City I found Muskrats. The Motel manager in Cooke City had told me the previous evening about these ponds. Apparently he had seen Fisher there a few months earlier and with that in mind I spent a little while carefully scanning the area. However, on this occasion I found only a couple of Goosanders and a few other common birds.

Back in Cooke City I made enquiries about accommodation for the night and booked in at some cabins in Silver Gate. The proprietor told me that "Mountain Foxes" (Red Fox) were active in the area and had been seen that morning in Silver Gate. And, sure enough, a few minutes later I found one wandering down the middle of the road. These Foxes are *Vulpes vulpes*, ie plain old Red Fox, but you would never guess it from first appearances. They are magnificent! They have evolved to have very long cinnamon and white fur and look absolutely stunning. I also heard about an art gallery a couple of hundred yards down the road called "Wildlife Along The Rockies" where they put out food for the Squirrels. The story was that American Marten was a regular visitor. However, when I asked the people there it transpired that the Martens only come daily in Winter and show only very occasionally once the snow has gone. Nevertheless, Silver Gate did have one last surprise: a Moose in willow scrub opposite the cabins.

I re-entered the park later in the afternoon and found a young Wolf, one of the Lamars I think, on Soda Butte Creek. And at Pebble Creek, far away on a high Alpine meadow was a lone Black Bear, not much more than a black blob even in the scope.

### Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup>

The next morning was bitterly cold and the grass outside was covered in frost when I looked out the window. The plan was to spend the morning and early afternoon inside the park and then to drive back to Idaho Falls in the early evening.



Just downstream of the junction of the Soda Butte Creek and Lamar River I found a large crowd of people and, when I pulled in, three Wolves were feeding on a carcass washed up on the mid-river shingle beach. These were Lamar pack luminaries including: the Alpha Female, her younger sister 820F and an unnamed/numbered young male. An expert from the Wolf research team was standing nearby and explained “the Alpha Female is called 832F but we know her so well we like to call her 06”. “How *intimate*” I remarked, but it didn’t get a reply. Two other pack members appeared later, one known as “Little Girl”, (named presumably in a fit of romantic innumeracy) and another unnamed youngster. The Red Deer they were merrily chomping was carrying a radio collar, revealing it to be the subject of study by the Elk Research Team. I surmised that that particular line of research had just come to an abrupt end!



Wolf 06, Alpha Female of the Lamars, Soda Butte Creek, Yellowstone National Park.

Having spent over two hours with the Wolves I had to move on and made my way down to the Petrified Tree just west of Tower. I intended to stop only to see what sightings had been added to the log book but got distracted by a Black Bear which was snoozing about a hundred yards away. Through the scope I could see it had two very young cubs in tow but the view was obscured and I decided to move on.

Just south of Mammoth a huge traffic jam had built up. I guessed it might be the Grizzly trio that had previously been on Swan Flats but, no, it was yet another Black Bear, again with two cubs. The mother, a pale cinnamon coloured animal, was at the base of a tall pine tree about one hundred yards away. The two cubs, however, were two thirds the way up the tree providing a very endearing spectacle for the enormous crowd that had gathered. Before long

a ranger had appeared to restore some semblance of sanity and to clear the road. This was, he explained, the sixth Bear-induced traffic jam of his day already and he looked exhausted. I took this as my cue to keep moving.

Nothing else interrupted my journey to Idaho Falls and by 20.00 that evening I was back in the same motel I had used a week previously.

### Monday May 21<sup>st</sup>

The plan for the last few days was to head back to Boise and make one big last effort for another Badger sighting either at Snake River or Indian Creek.

Along the way, I took the opportunity to mooch around a bit at Craters of the Moon, Silver Creek and Fairfield but nothing of any great interest presented itself. Near Mountain Home I found some decent birds: a fine looking Lazuli Bunting and on the shores of a reservoir an American Avocet and a resplendent male Wood Duck.

After a drive of nearly 300 miles I didn't feel much like spotlighting late into the night so I opted for a gentle stroll along the Boise River. This quickly produced a good-sized rodent with a long tail which dashed across the footpath before I could really get on its case – Matt assures me it must have been North American Deermouse, given the preponderance of that species hereabouts and the lack of any obvious other candidates.

Later, with darkness falling, I tried for Bats and found a number of small, fast and very agile Bats coming from the houses across the road towards the river. They then milled around the trees next to the river whereupon I was able to use both torch and bat detector. I expected them to be Little Brown Myotis which I knew from Matt roosted in the eaves of the houses – but instead of Myotis-like dry clicking at around 45-50 Khz I was getting loud slaps at 28 Khz. These bottomed out as faint squeaks at 24Khz and disappeared into faint clicks at 33Khz. What was going on? Only big Bats echo-located at such low frequencies normally. Was the strong wind having some unusual affect? Or were these social calls rather than hunting calls? I knew that Little Brown Myotis was by far the most common small Bat occurring locally and also that this species roosted in the very spot from which they had evidently emerged. The only other candidates, as far as I could see, would be Californian Myotis or Yuma Myotis. But both of these seemed fairly improbable (on habitat and distribution grounds) and I could scarcely believe that either would be present in such numbers as there were here. And neither of these would ordinarily produce such weird calls either. I was left concluding, on grounds of common sense, that they had to be Little Brown Myotis – though why they were producing such strange calls remained a mystery to me.

### Tuesday May 22<sup>nd</sup>

A cold, windy morning and an early start at Indian Creek in the hope of snagging a daytime Badger. The unfriendly male Hen Harrier again tried to mob me as I approached the reservoir, passing only a few feet overhead, with talons outstretched, and screeching “*kek-kek-kek-kek*” in my ears. Either he hates my guts or he has females with nests nearby. Probably both. I mounted the reservoir wall and scanned the sage scrub, quickly finding a



distant Coyote. But nothing else was stirring and even the Piute Ground Squirrels were scarce. I gave up the chase at midday and returned to the hotel to thaw out, noticing belatedly that the hostile Hen Harrier had defecated on my trousers. Not a great morning.

That evening it was back to serious business at Snake River. Dedication Point again produced a Prairie Falcon as well as a more polite Hen Harrier, that is to say one that didn't attempt to rip my eyeballs out and crap on me. The spotlighting proved very disappointing. Three hours of intensive effort produced precisely nothing and at 01.00 I surrendered. I just about avoided running over a suicidal Mountain Cottontail on the way back to the hotel on the Kuna-Morra Road.

### Wednesday May 23<sup>rd</sup>

I had a lazy morning strolling along the Boise River. The sun was shining but the wind, practically a gale, felt very cold. The trees were full of Cedar Waxwings and a lone Mule Deer was browsing. The only real thing of note, however, was a food pass between two American Kestrels. I watched a male Kestrel fly overhead and settle in the branches of a dead tree. He had a small rodent, probably a Montane Vole, in its bill but rather than eating it he gave a chirruping call and a female then appeared beside him. With great delicacy he offered it to her. She accepted it greedily and began tucking in at which point the male flew off, presumably to catch another Vole. I decided that this Vole was untickable on the grounds that it was almost certainly dead.

I decided to spend the last evening at Indian Creek, where intuition (and a huge number of Badger holes) suggested prospects might be brightest. The wind had not abated and I donned three layers of fleece to keep out the cold.

Needless to say the angry Hen Harrier was immediately airborne to greet my arrival and wasted no time in expressing his extreme displeasure with me. But I was ready this time and hurried past before he could bomb me again.

With an hour to go before dusk and to get out of the eye-watering wind I settled down on some rocks overlooking the reservoir where I could at least get some shelter. A dozen or so Western Grebes were on the water, some passing quite close to the shore where I could confirm their identity. A pair of Rock Wrens were also close by – which suddenly started screaming in alarm. Just as was starting to wonder if all the birds here hated me, I noticed the real reason for their concern. A Long-tailed Weasel had arrived on the scene, working its way sinuously and very rapidly between the rocks. It got closer and closer until at one point it was only inches from my right boot. What a fantastic sighting! Over the course of the next hour it re-appeared twice more, each time provoking panic among the Wrens.

I had stationed myself close to an area where several very recently used Badger holes were located and waited for dark in the hope that a Badger would oblige. But when it became obvious that wasn't going to happen I moved on, spotlighting my way along the reservoir and back into the sage brush. Five Mule Deer had ventured out into the open and looked very

surprised to see me. And I quickly found two Mountain Cottontails. Well, at least I was finding eye-shine, which is more than I had managed the previous evening at Snake River.

It started raining and the wind freshened but I pressed on, determined to give it one last shot. But despite my Trojan efforts the Badgers weren't coming out to play. Total frustration! Freshly used Badger holes all around but not a Badger to be seen anywhere. I couldn't believe how hard it had proved to find one and, boy, was I thankful for my fluke Badger near Cody!

As I drove down the track and back onto the road a Montane Vole made a suicidal bid to get itself run over. I hit the brakes hard and missed by a hairsbreadth. It would hardly have done to have killed this final addition to the mammal list.

Thursday May 24<sup>th</sup>

By 10.30 I was aboard a flight to Minneapolis where, after an interminable seven hour stopover, I connected with a flight to London. I got home at 15.00 the next day, exhausted but happy.

## Annex 1: Summary of Mammal Sightings

Species	Latin Name	Notes
American Pika	<i>Ochotona princeps</i>	Two in YNP (Hellroaring Trail CP)
Mountain Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus nuttalli</i>	Several around Boise.
Black-tailed Jackrabbit	<i>Lepus californicus</i>	Two at Snake River.
Muskrat	<i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>	Snake River, YNP and Cooke City.
American Beaver	<i>Castor Canadensis</i>	One on Snake River.
Yellow-bellied Marmot	<i>Marmota flaviventris</i>	Common in suitable habitat.
Eastern Fox Squirrel	<i>Sciurus niger</i>	One in park in Boise.
American Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>	One at Craters of the Moon (COTM).
Columbian Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus columbianus</i>	Common around Fairfield.
Belding's Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus beldingi</i>	Common at Jack's Creek.
Uinta Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus armatus</i>	Abundant in YNP.
Merriam's Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus canus</i>	Common at Jack's Creek.
Piute Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus mollis</i>	Common around Boise.
Idaho Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus brunneus (endemicus)</i>	Locally abundant at Emmett.
White-tailed Antelope Squirrel	<i>Ammospermophilus leucurus</i>	Several at site near Marsing.
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus lateralis</i>	Common in suitable habitat.
Least Chipmunk	<i>Tamias minimus</i>	Common in YNP. Also COTM.
Yellow-pine Chipmunk	<i>Tamias amoenus</i>	Seen at COTM & Dead Indian Pass.
Ord's Kangaroo Rat	<i>Dipodomys ordii</i>	Several at Snake River.
North American Deermouse	<i>Peromyscus manicularis</i>	One on footpath along Boise River
Montane Vole	<i>Microtus longicaudus</i>	One in CP at Indian Creek.
Little Brown Myotis	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>	Colony beside Boise River.
Grey Wolf	<i>Canis Lupus</i>	Seen daily in Lamar Valley, YNP.
Coyote	<i>Canis latranis</i>	Boise, Jack's Cr, Indian Creek, YNP.
Mountain (Red) Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	One at Cooke City.
Black Bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>	Daily in YNP.
Grizzly Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	Four sightings in YNP.
American Badger	<i>Taxidea taxus</i>	One on road 8 miles north of Cody.
Long-tailed Weasel	<i>Mustela frenata</i>	Jack's Creek and Indian Creek.
Pronghorn Antelope	<i>Antilocapra Americana</i>	Common throughout.
Mountain Goat	<i>Oreamnos americanus</i>	Baronettes and Pebble Creek (YNP).
Bighorn Sheep	<i>Ovis Canadensis</i>	Three groups Lamar Valley (YNP).
American Bison	<i>Bison bison</i>	Abundant throughout YNP.
Elk (Red Deer)	<i>Cervus elephus</i>	Common throughout YNP.
Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>	One at Cooke City.
Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>	Common in and around YNP.
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>	One group of seven north of Cody.
Total Species Recorded	37	

NB: Species in red are "lifers".

## Summary of Bird Sightings

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>	Two sightings – Indian Creek & Fairfield.
Western Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus occidentalis</i>	Group of ten on Indian Creek Reservoir.
Double-crested Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax auritus</i>	Several on Boise River & near Mountain Home.
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>	Two on scrape near Fairfield.
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	Common in suitable habitat.
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	Common throughout.
Wood Duck	<i>Aix sponsa</i>	One on reservoir near Mountain Home.
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Common throughout.
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Fairly common throughout.
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	Fairly common throughout.
American Wigeon	<i>Anas americana</i>	Fairly common throughout.
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	Fairly common near Boise/Mountain Home.
Redhead	<i>Aythya americana</i>	One at Indian Creek.
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>	Fairly common in Idaho.
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>	Fairly common throughout.
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	Pair on Soda Butte Creek, YNP.
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	Common in YNP.
Bufflehead	<i>Bucephala albeola</i>	Fairly common in YNP.
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	Several on Boise River.
Ruddy Duck	<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	Common in YNP.
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>	Common throughout.
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Nesting in Lamar Valley. One near Cody.
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus Ccyaneus</i>	Fairly common throughout.
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Two in Lamar Valley, YNP.
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	Several in YNP; one Snake River; one Boise.
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	Common throughout.
Swainson's Hawk	<i>Buteo swainsoni</i>	One YNP near Baronettes.
Ferruginous Hawk	<i>Buteo regalis</i>	One in Boise.
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	Fairly common throughout.
Prairie Falcon	<i>Falco mexicanus</i>	Twice at Dedication Point, Snake River.
Chukar Partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Fairly common around Snake River/Indian Creek.
Ring-necked Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	Several around Boise.
California Quail	<i>Callipepla californica</i>	Common around Boise.
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>	Abundant on lakes in Idaho.
Sandhill Crane	<i>Grus canadensis</i>	Fairly common in YNP.
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	Common in Idaho.
American Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra americana</i>	Sightings at Indian Creek and Mountain Home.
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>	Two at Indian Creek Reservoir.
Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularia</i>	Several en-route to YNP.
Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>	Locally common at Indian Creek Reservoir.
Wilson's Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus tricolor</i>	Several near Fairfield.
Ring-billed Gull	<i>Larus delawaensis</i>	Fairly common throughout.
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	Presumed true rock doves in YNP.
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>	Common around Boise.
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	Several at Snake River.
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	Several at Snake River.
Great Horned Owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>	Two at YNP; nest site in Lamar Valley.
Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>	Several at Snake River.
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>	Quite common in YNP.
Western Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus verticalis</i>	Several at Snake River.
Vaux's Swift	<i>Chaetura vauxi</i>	Snake River.
Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>	Two at feeding station, Silver Gate.
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Common throughout.



American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	Several around Boise and other towns.
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Common throughout.
Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	Quite common in Idaho.
Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>	Locally abundant at Silver City.
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Common in YNP.
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>	One on Boise River.
Mountain Chickadee	<i>Poecile gambeli</i>	Quite common in YNP.
Red-breasted nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>	One in YNP.
Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>	Common alongside reservoir at Indian Creek.
American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>	One at Pebble Creek, YNP.
Mountain Bluebird	<i>Sialia currucoides</i>	Common at COTM.
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	Common throughout.
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Several around hotel in Boise.
American Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens</i>	One near Fairfield.
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>	Large group in trees on Boise River
Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Dendroica coronata</i>	Several in YNP, eg near Trout Lake.
Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>	Several in scrub along Boise River.
Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>	Common in YNP, esp near Hellroaring Trailhead.
Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>	Several groups near COTM.
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>	Common in YNP.
Lazuli Bunting	<i>Passerina amoena</i>	One near Mountain Home.
Western Meadowlark	<i>Sternella neglecta</i>	Common throughout.
Yellow-headed Blackbird	<i>Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus</i>	Quite common in suitable habitat.
Red-winged Blackbird	<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	Abundant throughout.
Common Grackle	<i>Quiscalus quiscula</i>	Several around hotel in Boise.
Brewer's Blackbird	<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>	Several around Boise.
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>	Several around Boise.
Bullock's Oriole	<i>Icterus bullocki</i>	Several around Boise.
House Finch	<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>	Common around towns.
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Abundant around human habitation.
Total Species Recorded	82	

NB: Species in red are "lifers.