

Yellowstone Trip Report: May 2024

Yellowstone has been a place I've always wanted to visit and after rediscovering my love of mammal watching I only grew more eager to take a trip there. Luckily, the opportunity presented itself to spend a few days here when my dad heard some of his friends wanted to visit and invited us along. We moved to the US from South Africa and my dad hadn't seen these friends in person since the move, so it was very exciting. My main targets were Grizzly Bear and Grey Wolf, both of which were amongst my most wanted species in the world. I have to thank Greg Easton for his phenomenal Yellowstone guide which was of a lot of help to me while we were planning this trip. This trip report is broken up by species, with information on our sightings below.

Moose (Lifer):

This was an unexpected sighting for me. I really wanted to see a Moose, but they seemed to be rare in the park, so I wasn't holding out much hope. However, we lucked into two encounters with what was likely to have been the same animal. We saw the Moose at Elk Creek on both Sunday and Monday late in the morning. It was standing in some willows, and we were only able to see it because of the large number of people who'd pulled over and were watching it. We were able to move further along the road and got a look at the Moose standing behind the willows. I understood Moose were big, but I hadn't truly grasped their humongous size until I was looking at it. I was thrilled to have seen this species and this was a highlight of the trip.



Moose, courtesy of Paul Linton

Black Bear:

We had two Black Bear sightings on this trip, both of a mother and cub. Our first was on Monday, on the road between Hayden Valley and Canyon Village. It was early evening, and it had started snowing. There were many cars who'd pulled over, so we had to park at the end and rush up to make sure we didn't miss the bears. We watched them for a few minutes and the baby even stood up on his hind legs! Our next Black Bear encounter was right before Hellroaring in the early afternoon on Wednesday. This mother and cub were even closer, and the mother was a gorgeous cinnamon color. If what we overheard some of the people saying was correct, then she was aptly named Cinnamon. We watched them for a few minutes and this time we weren't freezing as the weather was a little warmer. Even though Black Bear wasn't a lifer for me, these were wonderful sightings, and I was very pleased.



Black Bears, courtesy of Paul Linton



Baby Black Bear, courtesy of Paul Linton

Grizzly Bear (Lifer):

This had to be the mammal of the trip for me. We had two sightings of the same bear at Tower Junction on Sunday and Wednesday. On Sunday, the bear was lying down near some relaxing Bison and we only stopped because of the many people pulled over. The bear was facing the away from the road and so it was blending in with the Bison. Once we stopped and got onto it, we were able to watch it make the important decision to lift its head or continue sleeping. I was very happy with this first Grizzly sighting. However, I was even more excited about the sighting on Wednesday. We were doing one last drive in the park before we left to head home and this time the Grizzly was up and walking away. I was able to get a true understanding of how big this bear was, especially in comparison to the Black Bears. Overall, wonderful encounters with one of my most wanted mammals and I could not have been more happy.



Grizzly Bear, courtesy of Paul Linton

Bighorn Sheep (Lifer):

Just past the Yellowstone Valley Bridge we saw Bighorn Sheep on both Saturday and Monday. They were right by the road, and we were able to get great views of them. Unfortunately, none of them had the huge round horns so I will keep looking to see this species in their full glory. Regardless, I was very happy to have seen this species!



Bighorn Sheep, courtesy of Paul Linton

Mountain Goat (Lifer):

We saw Mountain Goats on both Sunday and Monday at Barronette Peak. You had to have a scope to see these guys as they were too distant to view even with binoculars. I missed them the first day as the pair my dad had seen vanished behind some rocks before I saw them. We had to move on for the day but returned and this time got a good, prolonged view of them on the peak.



Mountain Goats, courtesy of Paul Linton

Grey Wolf (Lifer):

This was my other target, and I was very happy to have two sightings of these fabulous animals. My dad had read about the Slough Creek wolf pack which could be seen quite consistently in the early morning at their den site. We visited Slough Creek on Saturday and Sunday. We arrived mid-morning on Saturday and only saw the alpha female wolf lying down near the den. She was a simply gorgeous jet-black color, but we didn't see any other wolves. We arrived early in the morning on Sunday and this time saw three yearling wolves who were all grey. They were more active and walked around rubbing each other. This area should be easy to find as there seems to always be some wolf watchers posted up and recording all the wolves activities. If you want to see these wolves you definitely need a scope. They wouldn't have been viewable with binoculars since their den site was too distant. The arrows in the photo show where the wolves were sitting. We swear they are there, but this really was an exceptionally distant view.



Grey Wolves, courtesy of Paul Linton

Coyote:

We had a few sightings of Coyotes. We saw them twice on Sunday, one at Slough Creek running along the road and a pair at Lamar Valley which obligingly posed for pictures as they rubbed each other. There was also a Coyote at Tower Junction running around across the road from the Grizzly Bear. While this wasn't a lifer for me, these sightings were definitely the best view I've had of Coyotes, especially the affectionate couple.



Coyotes, courtesy of Paul Linton

Red Fox (Lifer):

We had phenomenal encounters with one or two Red Foxes by Soda Butte Creek on Monday. We saw the first one running along the road as we drove down to the Barronette Peak for the Mountain Goats. It stayed right by the car and ran alongside it for a while. After seeing the goats, we drove back down and found either the same fox or another one running around in an open section of the trees. We got out the car and watched it run around before it ran up to the road and passed within a few feet of us! We also saw another Red Fox briefly in West Yellowstone on Wednesday running by the gas station, which was very surprising for us!



Red Fox, courtesy of Paul Linton

Elk (Lifer):

Very common throughout the park, but we saw them most often at the North Entrance to the park. The North Entrance also provided the best views of the Elk. We also had a fun encounter when we left our accommodation in Gardiner one morning to discover two Elk grazing on someone's lawn.



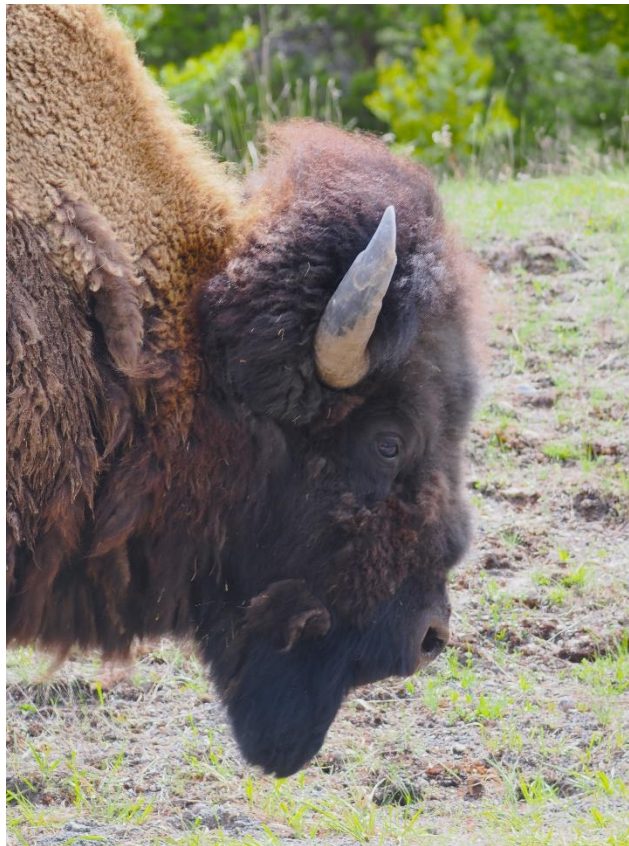
Elk, courtesy of Paul Linton

American Bison (Lifer):

Bison are everywhere at the park and unmissable. You can see exceptional numbers of these guys at Lamar Valley but there were also plenty along the roads and we got into two Bison jams, aka hour long traffic jams caused by a bison herd claiming the road as their own. Awesome animals and my dad got some amazing photos of them!



American Bison, courtesy of Paul Linton



American Bison, courtesy of Paul Linton

White-tailed Deer:

We only saw this species once along the road out of Mammoth Hot Springs. It was brief but I got enough of a view to identify it. We didn't see any others which was a bit surprising but that's probably because we made no effort to see this species. It was nice to add another species to the trip list though.

Mule Deer:

We also only saw this species once and it was also along the road out of Mammoth Hot Springs. There were a few Mule Deer along this road and even though I've seen this species before it was nice to add to the species list for the trip.

Pronghorn:

Pronghorn were very common at the North Entrance although we saw them throughout the park. These were my best sightings of Pronghorn as I'd only seen these distantly before. We also had this great view of two Pronghorns having a mock battle right by the road. The battle seems a lot more ferocious in the picture but in reality, it was very gentle head butting.



Pronghorns, courtesy of Paul Linton

Yellow-bellied Marmot:

This was a surprising encounter for us as I hadn't expected to see this species in the park. We had one pop up alongside the road as we were driving on Monday from Mammoth to Tower. It stood up on its hind legs and stared at us seemingly in shock. We had a good look for a few seconds, but it sprinted off right as our cameras were being lifted. Darn it!

Uinta Ground Squirrel (Lifer):

We saw this species a few times. First was at Slough Creek on Sunday, where this squirrel was scrambling around in the grass near our feet as we scoped out the wolves. It was very obliging, which allowed my dad to get some wonderful photos. This was definitely our best encounter with this species and one of my favorite squirrel sightings in general. We also saw three separate squirrels running around by Lamar River on Monday.



Uinta Ground Squirrel, courtesy of Paul Linton



Uinta Ground Squirrel, courtesy of Paul Linton

Red Squirrel:

We saw this species twice in the park. First was in Hayden Valley early in the morning on Wednesday as we were driving around looking for the Molly wolf pack, which we didn't see. We saw Red Squirrel again later at Paint Pots, although my dad was the only one who saw it. I've seen this species very well before, but I was still happy to add another new species to our trip list.

Yellow-pine Chipmunk (Lifer):

We saw this species once at Old Faithful. It was running around under the boardwalk although it dashed off before we could get a photo. We also saw another Chipmunk species in Mammoth Hot Springs although we couldn't identify it.

Common Muskrat (Lifer):

We saw this species early on Wednesday in Hayden Valley. It was swimming along in a small pond and we got a good but brief view. Unfortunately, it dived before we were able to photograph it, but I was extremely excited because of how cute this animal is!

White-tailed Jackrabbit (Lifer):

We saw this on the road from Norris to Canyon. It was early on Wednesday morning and we saw it dash across the road in front of us. We were able to see it was a rabbit and were just able to make out the white tail as it ran along. So, while I was happy to get another lifer, this is a species I definitely want better views of.

This was an amazing trip! We saw a total of 19 mammal species, 12 of which were lifers for me. We did miss Least Chipmunk and American Pika, but I didn't really put effort into seeing these species as I was prioritizing other mammals. Outside of Yellowstone there was a chance of seeing White-tailed Prairie Dog, but we didn't have the time to leave the park. A great trip and I hope this report helps you out on your visit!