ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Montana & Wyoming

Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem II

20th June to 27th June 2022 (8 days)



American Bison by Forrest Rowland

There is nowhere in North America as iconic as Yellowstone National Park. Towering mountains, spewing geysers, vast forests and valleys harbouring the highest megafauna density on the continent make this a must-visit destination for anyone wanting to experience the classic American West. But the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, as it is known by locals and researchers, is much more than what is found within the National Park's borders, despite its enormous size. The ecosystem includes huge, pristine prairies, alpine crags and meadows, near-arid desert, and the most diverse and lovely scenery one could hope for.

For birders, a visit to the Yellowstone region means Longspurs parachuting over Mountain Plover chicks, Western Tanagers at the same feeders as Red Crossbills, Black Rosy Finches foraging at the feet

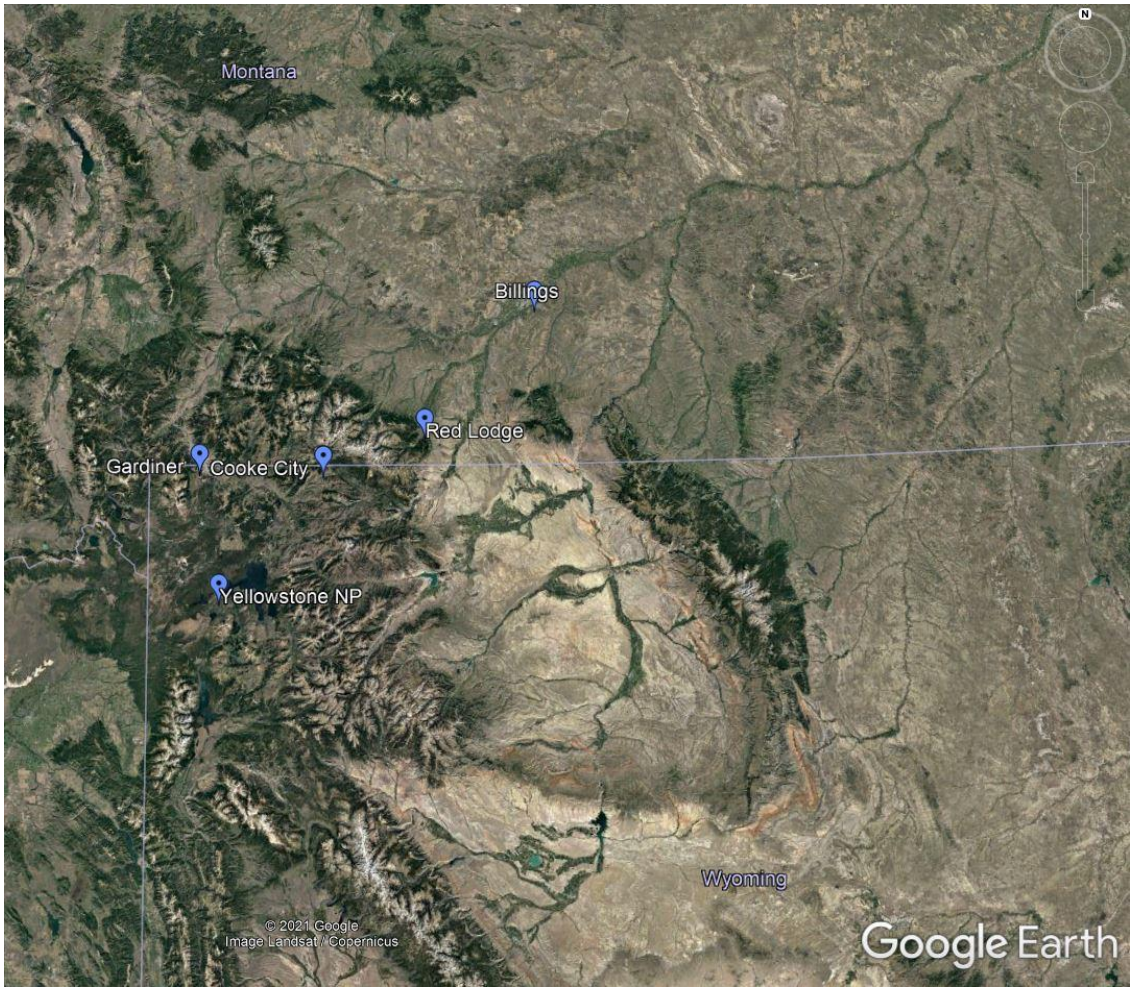
of Mountain Goats, Brown-headed Cowbirds on the back of the original bovine of the continent – the Bison. Yellowstone means time spent observing wolves and bears foraging, hunting, in their natural habitats, otters and Barrow's Goldeneye frolicking in the Lamar River, and some of the most spectacular geothermal sites on Earth. Any visit to Yellowstone is memorable and unique, but there is so much more to be seen and enjoyed than most visitors could conceive.

THE TOUR AT A GLANCE…

THE ITINERARY

Day 1	**Arrive in Billings**
Day 2	**Roundup Prairies, Billings and Pryor Mountains**
Day 3	**Beartooth Range, Shields Valley and Paradise Valley**
Days 4 to 6	**Yellowstone National Park**
Day 7	**The Beartooth Pass, Hellroaring Canyon, and Red Lodge**
Day 8	**Final departures**

TOUR ROUTE MAP…



THE TOUR IN DETAIL…

Day 1: Arrive in Billings. Guests will arrive into Billings Airport where you will be met by your Rockjumper Tour Leader and transferred to our accommodation in Billings. The group will convene for introductions and a nice meal, as well as discuss the upcoming adventure.



Cassin's Finch by Forrest Rowland

Day 2: Roundup Prairies, Billings and Pryor Mountains. Our tour begins in the high plains North of Billings, known for their endless vistas and intact, pristine, mixed grass prairies. Our first sightings of the day will be made during a quick loop drive in the ponderosa pine forest along the breaks of the Yellowstone River itself. The outlying ridges covered in this important conifer are home to specialty birds for the area like Cassin's Kingbird, Plumbeous Vireo, and the special type of Red Crossbill that feeds solely on Ponderosa cones. The first prairie birds of the day often include widespread species like Vesper and Lark Sparrow, and Horned Lark. As we make our way down the road, soon we will find ourselves squarely in the heart of Thick-billed and Chestnut-collared Longspur alley, with no shortage of Grasshopper and Baird's Sparrows singing all around us. The skies will be filled with parachuting Longspurs while we squint to see displaying Sprague's Pipits larking overhead for hours at a time. With some effort, we'll get views of this interesting species on the ground. Swainson's and Ferruginous Hawks, Prairie Falcon, Upland Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, and with luck Dickcissel will also be among the birds we see at our first stop. Later in the morning, we will drive into different highland Sage habitat in search of Lark Sparrow and if we are extremely lucky Greater Sage-Grouse, though serendipity will need be on our side for the latter. Before returning to Billings, we will scan a few wetlands, en route, for species like Wilson's Phalarope, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Black and Forster's Terns, and any late migrants lingering.



Calliope Hummingbird by Forrest Rowland

This afternoon we will journey South, to within a few miles of the Wyoming border, to bird the arid sage deserts at the base of the Pryor mountains. These dry scrublands are home to few species, but of those that thrive in this habitat there are a very special few only found in a few square miles of habitat within the state of Montana. Sagebrush Sparrow will be one of our targets, and with effort we hope to get good views of this mostly terrestrial species! Mountain Plover is another lover of barren patches of ground in the Pryors, and we will look for one of the few remaining pairs of this species that persists. In the dry

juniper scrub we will look for Blue-grey Gnatcatcher and Grey Flycatcher and, with luck, we might come across Chukar and Pinyon Jay!



Western Tanager by Forrest Rowland

Day 3: Beartooth Range, Shields Valley, and Paradise Valley. The day will begin with a quick stop at Ith-Kep-pee campground on the Yellowstone for our first exposure to lower Yellowstone riparian species such as White-breasted Nuthatch (Interior West, ssp.), Yellow-breasted Chat, Bullock's Oriole, Least Flycatcher, American Redstart, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Belted Kingfisher. Nearby irrigated fields are good for Bobolink, while the nearby scrubby hillsides are home to gorgeous Lazuli Buntings, furtive Dusky Flycatcher, songster Green-tailed Towhee, and elegant Violet-green Swallows. We will then make our way over to Bridger Canyon via the West Rosebud drainage. The patches of Ponderosa here are home to Plumbeous Vireo and Pygmy Nuthatch, today being our best chance for those two species. We will then head over to Bridger Creek Canyon. About 10 years an incredibly hot fire tore through Bridger Creek, scouring most of the vegetation from the area. Today, some hearty shrubs and a few trees have taken hold, but most of what remains are the towering, burnt, trunks of Ponderosa Pine that used to cover the hills. Though a bleak description, this habitat is incredibly rich for birds! Especially woodpeckers. Though too old a burn for Black-backed, this habitat is perfect for Lewis's Woodpecker, and the westernmost colony of Red-headed Woodpecker, too! The Creek has two nest pairs of American Dipper, and the cliffs are home to two pairs of Golden Eagles, dozens of Cliff and Violet-green Swallows, and White-throated Swifts. The scrub on the hillsides is perfect for MacGillivray's Warblers, Green-tailed and Spotted Towhees, and more Lazuli Buntings than can be counted! The heavier riparian areas here have great diversity. Cedar Waxwings and both Veery and Swainson's Thrushes are numerous here, as are American Redstart, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and much more!



Evening Grosbeak by Forrest Rowland

Depending on recent sightings, we might head directly towards Cottonwood Reservoir in the Shields Valley. The ecological diversity in the Shields River Valley is impressive, and worth a full morning! We will no doubt encounter Sandhill Cranes, Trumpeter Swans, Mountain Bluebirds, and Pronghorn. We will also make brief stops for Marsh Wren, Virginia Rail (sometime responsive, not always), and always have our eyes open for Grey Partridge. Cottonwood Reservoir is an amazing place! We will spend time here enjoying the displays of Eared and Western Grebes, huge American White Pelicans, as well as an exceptional array

of breeding waterfowl including Barrow's Goldeneye, before heading South to Livingston for lunch.

The early afternoon will be spent at a nice local riparian area on the Yellowstone, and visiting a spectacular feeder setup for breeding birds like Calliope and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Sapsucker, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, Evening Grosbeak, Black-headed Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting, Red Crossbill, Cassin's Finch, Northern Waterthrush, Western Tanager and Bullock's Oriole. We will finish the day with a stop up Tom Miner Basin, where we might get our first views of Moose or Grizzly Bears!



'Grizzly' Brown Bear by Forrest Rowland

Days 4 to 6: Yellowstone National Park.

These days will be devoted to exploring and enjoying Yellowstone National Park to the fullest. We will visit a few of the famed geothermal sites during the slower parts of the day, but focus primetime viewing hours on what the park is best known for: charismatic megafauna. While there will plenty of great birds to search for, including Harlequin Duck, Common and Barrow's Goldeneye, Dusky Grouse, Williamson's Sapsucker, Three-toed Woodpecker, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Northern Saw-Whet Owl, Great Grey Owl (rare), Pine Grosbeak, Audubon's and MacGillivray's Warblers, Ovenbird, and American Dipper, we will spend much of our time soaking up the scenery and observing the behaviors of the amazing wildlife here.

We will dedicate a fair amount of time to locating and observing the famous Gray Wolves of Yellowstone, hoping to come across a carcass, or perhaps even a pack hunting. Every year there are wolf dens staked out, so with luck we should see some pups, too! Bears are, of course, the other big predators of Yellowstone. On our route we should have several good opportunities to watch both Black and Grizzly Bears foraging, often with cubs in tow. Other exciting predatory species we often encounter include Coyote, Red Fox, River Otter, and Badger, while Mink and Ermine are less commonly seen though possible. Those are just the predators...the multitude of Yellowstone visitors are content simply watching the massive herds of American Bison that thrive in the park. We will be at the right time of year to see the youngsters at their cutest and the herds will often be strolling right down the road creating the all too common "Bison Jam". It's an incredible experience to have a huge bull Bison stroll past within inches of the vehicles!



Pronghorn by Forrest Rowland

Majestic Elk are also a common sight in the park. Depending on the time of year (Aug-Oct) the

Bison rut and Elk rut offer some unique experiences ranging from the classic Elk bugling in the crisp morning air, to bull Bison in flat-out combat for dominance. Always exciting to watch these huge creatures! Photographic opportunities will be countless, so bring plenty of memory cards. And while this description of our time in Yellowstone is relatively brief, the steam and colors of Mammoth Falls, incredible sight of Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, and stretching views down the Lamar Valley are but a few of the peaceful yet inspiring things we will experience, aside from the wildlife and birds.



Red Crossbill by Forrest Rowland

Day 7: The Beartooth Pass, Hellroaring Canyon and Red Lodge. Today will be one of the most dramatic and exciting days of the tour. By most testimonials, in fact, the drive from Cooke City to Red Lodge is one of the most dramatic and breath-taking days of the visitor's entire life. Starting near Cooke City in search of Wilson's Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Lincoln's, White-crowned, and Fox Sparrows, we begin in the beautiful high montane forest dominated by Englemann's Spruce and Subalpine Fir trees, with a high likelihood of encountering Moose. Shortly after breakfast, we will begin the ascent towards Beartooth Lake, Beartooth Plateau, and ultimately over the second-highest paved road in North America: Beartooth Pass. Climbing through beautiful meadows, dense stands of Subalpine Fir and White Pine, we will make our way across the most spectacular scenery in the lower 48.

Fields covered in dozens of species of flowers, Mountain Bluebirds, Clark's Nutcrakers, Canada Jays, and finally we will pass above tree line, leaving the wind-swept, stunted firs (limbs growing from just one side of the trunk known as the "krummholz" effect) behind, with endless views of peaks, steep glaciated valleys, rock walls, and rolling alpine grasslands before us. It truly is something to behold! At these elevations (nearly 11,000 feet) there is understandably little diversity. The conditions here in any month can be erratic and harsh, and we will undoubtedly be standing in snow at times, even in Mid-Summer. But the lifeforms that have adapted to the difficult climate here are all the more impressive for it. Enter the Mountain Goat. While, by now, we have surely seen our fair share of Bighorn Sheep which are duly impressive, Mountain Goats are their own level of hardiness. Balancing on tiny ledges and effortlessly jumping and pelting themselves through rockfalls and



American Black Bear by Forrest Rowland

across cliff faces, the Mountain Goats of Beartooth Pass are some of the most beloved by locals. Approachable, relatively docile, and seemingly unperturbed by almost everything around them (save a Grizzly or Wolverine) the two herds of Mountain Goat that frequent the Pass are a highlight of any visit to the region. That's just the goats!



Thick-billed Longspur by Forrest Rowland

Don't get us started on how cute American Pika and Yellow-bellied Marmot are. The birds here are certainly special, too. At this elevation and habitat, there are two principal species to be sought. One is the American Pipit. While relatively drab in color, and not uncommon in Winter, to see the males hovering high above flower-covered meadows skylarking, singing endlessly in flight, is a spectacle that paints them in a different light. Black Rosy-Finch is the other. With a breeding population restricted to the highest elevations of just six mountain ranges, this is one of the most desired birds for enthusiasts and "hardcore" birders alike. The fact that they breed behind rocks on vertical cliffs that must be mostly snow-covered as a requisite is, alone, an incredible behavior the species has evolved! We will end the day in the adorable mountain town of Red Lodge, which has to be one of the nicest and most exemplary "mountain towns" of the region. The Hotel Pollard is centrally located on Main Street, and we will arrive in time for folks to take a stroll through town before convening for a fine dining experience.



Sprague's Pipit by Forrest Rowland

Day 8: Final departures. We will set out fairly early, though not necessarily as early as previous days, for our final day's sights and sounds. We will make our way directly out of the mountains North into the prairie country that dominates Central and Eastern Montana. Focusing out time near Harlowton, the first thing most visitors notice on the prairie is the sounds: Sparrows, Longspurs, and Pipits dominate the scene! Special sights of the day will include parachuting Thick-billed and Chestnut-collared Longspurs by the dozens. Sprague's Pipits will grace the sky, singing loudly as they hang suspended mid-air to broadcast for a mate. Ferruginous Hawks and Golden Eagles will be cruising the fields in search of Ground-Squirrels and Cottontail, while Long-billed Curlew and, with luck, Mountain Plovers will make themselves known as they defend nesting territories. Both Grasshopper and Baird's Sparrows are thankfully common here, and often sit up to sing, sometimes very close by.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:

Tour dates, prices, single supplement rates, approximate flight costs and spaces available for this tour are displayed on our website. Please see under IMPORTANT NOTES below.

This includes:

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to lunch on 8;
- All lodgings;
- Ground transportation;
- Extra activities mentioned in the itinerary;
- Reserve entrance fees; and
- All guiding services (including tips for local guides and services.)

The tour fee does not include:

- Visa fees;
- **ANY** flights (see above);
- Any additional beverages;
- Special gratuities; and
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

a) Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is however fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing (usually 4 months before the tour.) The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates, which are also quoted in the respective fixed currency.

b) Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient participants, a small party supplement will have to be charged.

c) Furthermore, these costs are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.

d) Lastly, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary and / or the designated Rockjumper leader/s at short or no notice due to unforeseen circumstances; please be aware that we will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If, therefore, you feel that he/they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them.

Special notes:

- We'll begin the day around 4:45am, as the sun rises early in Montana. We'll have a light field breakfast at our first destination, after coffee and snacks in the accommodations before departure. Birding and Wildlife observation is great throughout the day, though we will plan to have a two-

hour break, after lunch, during the heat of the day when activity is lowest. We will head back out again around 15:00 or 15:30, continuing to seek out the specialty birds and wildlife experiences we desire, until dusk. Owling is optional, and will be available on two of the seven nights of the tour.

ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE DETAILS:

This tour **does not** include **ANY** airfares. The tour will depart from Billings Logan International Airport (IATA: BIL). As day 1 has been set aside as an arrival day, you are free to arrive at any time. The tour will conclude at Billings Logan International Airport (IATA: BIL) on day 8 in the mid-afternoon.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your **Tour Confirmation** package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

FLIGHTS:

Billings Logan International Airport (IATA: BIL) is the main port of entry for this tour. **Please DO NOT book any flights until you have consulted the Rockjumper office for confirmation on the status of the tour.**