

YELLOWSTONE PREDATOR AND PREY

MARCH 27 – APRIL 1, 2010

LEADER: DENVER HOLT

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Our first winter tour to Yellowstone National Park lived up to expectations. In between sunny days and a winter storm-watch, we negotiated snow, icy roads, and high elevation sunshine to record a very impressive list of species. The advantage of staying at Chico Hot Springs proved a good move. Outside of YNP and in the Paradise Valley, the weather can be different. So we used this valley as a backup to the YNP winter storm-watch.

It was only moments after entering the park that we observed elk and female big horn sheep. This time of the year most mature bull elk have lost their antlers; however, a few younger bulls retained smaller “racks” and we were able to get good observations of these. Bison were also numerous, as few left the park for winter due to low snow pack. Although we viewed wolves on day one, they were very distant. However, we did see them chase two pronghorn for a short distance. It did not take long for the fastest terrestrial mammal in North America to outrun the wolves. We made it all the way to Cooke City on day one and had outstanding views of Pine Grosbeaks, and Black and Gray-crowned rosy-finches at a feeder.

Over the next two days we made adjustments as our winter weather set in. In many ways this is what the Yellowstone winter tour is all about. A beautiful blanket of snow enriched our viewing opportunities as animals stood out against the white background, and spent much time foraging around for food. I am sure the group will always remember our walk around Mammoth Hot Springs. The blizzard was starting, snow swirled around our bodies, the smell of sulphur distinct, and steam from hot springs—all commanded our attention. It was beautiful.

We had great looks at mature big horn sheep rams and Golden Eagles. The big horn rams were very obliging as they fed along a roadside for 30 minutes. Twice we observed Golden Eagles feeding on dead deer carcasses. We were able to observe these eagles perched and in flight from close distances. Although we still felt a need for better looks at wolves and a chance at grizzly bear, the weather was not that cooperative. So again we made adjustments and explored new country. Wildlife and outstanding scenery were everywhere; however, we still had those target species to see.

On our final day we ventured one more time into the park. We agreed not to give up. If you work hard it will pay off—we hoped. The snow lifted and the roads were reasonable. Within ten minutes of entering the park we saw three wolves bedded on a nearby hill. Indeed, they were within 100 yards, and with our scopes we could look into their eyes. One was whitish, one silver and one black. This time it was us who left the wolves in search of other wildlife. Within 30 more minutes we saw the grizzly bear. It appeared to be an adult and was alone. It also appeared to be enjoying the day—perhaps after a long winter sleep it was happy for spring—but I suppose only the bear knows that. We viewed this bear for an hour as it rolled on its back, played with grass, and stumbled along like a puppy dog. During this time it was continuously monitored by nearby bison, elk, and big horn sheep. A last try for red fox, river otter, and moose was unsuccessful. It was time to drive to our new hotel 100 miles away for our farewell dinner.

Our first Yellowstone National Park tour was great. We saw 12 species of mammals and 50 species of birds. The aura of Yellowstone in winter was captivating to all of us. But to observe and contemplate how wildlife adapt and survive these harsh winter conditions is more astonishing. From additional fur and feather growth to increases in body fat, to reduction of blood flow to appendages, to huddling and using shelters, among other strategies, we learned a lot about winter adaptations in animals.

Fortunately, we could use our high tech clothing and return each evening to our rooms and restaurant, and soak in warm hot pools. These are our adaptations for coping with the winter environment.

BIRDS:

ANATIDAE

Canada Goose
Mallard
Green-winged teal
American Wigeon
Northern Pintail
Northern Shoveler
Common Goldeneye
Barrow's Goldeneye

Ducks, Geese, Swans

Branta canadensis
Anas platyrhynchos
Anas crecca
Anas americana
Anas acuta
Anas clypeata
Bucephala clangula
Bucephala islandica

ARDEIDAE

Great Blue Heron

Herons, Bitterns, & Allies

Ardea herodias

ACCIPITRIDAE

Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Red-tailed Hawk
Rough-legged Hawk

Hawks, Eagles, Kites

Haliaeetus leucocephalus
Circus cyaneus
Buteo jamaicensis
Buteo lagopus

FALCONIDAE

Prairie Falcon

Falcons, Caracaras

Falco mexicanus

RALLIDAE

American Coot

Rails, Gallinules, Coots

Fulica americana

GRUIDAE

Sandhill Crane

Cranes

Grus canadensis

CHARADRIIDAE

Killdeer

Lapwings, Plovers

Chardrius vociferous

COLUMBIDAE

Rock Pigeon

Doves, Pigeons

Columba livia

PICIDAE

Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker

LANIIDAE

Northern Shrike

CORVIDAE

Gray Jay
Steller's Jay
Clark's Nutcracker
Black-billed Magpie
American Crow
Common Raven

ALAUDIDAE

Horned Lark

PARIDAE

Black-capped Chickadee
Mountain Chickadee

SITTIDAE

Red-breasted Nuthatch

CINCLIDAE

American Dipper

TURDIDAE

Mountain Bluebird
Townsend's Solitaire
American Robin

STURNIDAE

European Starling

BOMBYCILLIDAE

Bohemian Waxwing

EMBERIZIDAE

Song Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
 Oregon form
 Pink-sided form

Woodpeckers & Allies

Picoides villosus
Colaptes auratus

Shrikes

Lanius excubitor

Crows, Jays, & Magpies

Perisoreus canadensis
Cyanocitta stelleri
Nucifraga columbiana
Pica pica
Corvus brachyrhynchos
Corvus corax

Larks

Eremophila alpestris

Chickadees, Titmice

Poecile atricapillus
Poecile gambeli

Nuthatches

Sitta canadensis

Dippers

Cinclus mexicanus

Thrushes & Allies

Sialia currucoides
Myadestes townsendi
Turdus migratorius

Starlings

Sturnus vulgaris

Waxwings

Bombycilla garrulus

Buntings, Sparrows, & Allies

Melospiza melodia
Junco hyemalis

ICTERIDAE

Western Meadowlark
Red-winged Blackbird

FRINGILLIDAE

Gray-crowned Rosy-finch
Black Rosy-Finch
Cassin's Finch
House Finch
Pine Grosbeak
Pine Siskin

PASSERIDAE

House Sparrow

MAMMALS:**LEPORIDAE**

Mountain Cottontail

SCIURIDAE

Red Squirrel

CANIDAE

Coyote
Gray Wolf

URSIDAE

Grizzly Bear

MEPHITIDAE

Striped Skunk

CERVIDAE

Elk
White-tailed Deer
Mule Deer

ANTILOCAPRIDAE

Pronghorn

BOVIDAE

American Bison
Big Horn Sheep

Troopials & Allies

Sturnella neglecta
Agelaius phoeniceus

Siskins, Crossbills, & Allies

Leucosticte tephrocotis
Leucosticte atrata
Carpodacus cassinii
carpodacus mexicanus
Pinicola enucleator
Spinus = carduelis pinus

Old World Sparrows

Passer domesticus

Rabbits & Hares

Sylvilagus nuttallii

Squirrels, Chipmunks, & Marmots

Tamiasciurus hudsonicus

Wolves, Coyote, & Foxes

Canis latrans
Canis lupus

Bears

Ursus arctos

Skunks

Mephitis mephitis

Elk, Deer, & Allies

Cervus elaphus
Odocoileus virginianus
Odocoileus hemionus

Pronghorn

Antilocapra americana

Bison, Goat, Muskox, & Sheep

Bos bison
Ovis canadensis