



Field Guides Tour Report

Yellowstone in Winter 2013

Jan 12, 2013 to Jan 20, 2013

Terry McEneaney

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The Roosevelt Arch at Yellowstone's northern entrance may be the main gateway into the park, but for these migrating bison, it also serves as a convenient place to exit the park. (Photo by guide Terry McEneaney)

The YIW tour materialized into a good one, right up there with one of the best. The weather finally cooperated providing us with adequate snow and cold temperatures. In fact some places in Yellowstone exceeded -29F, but it didn't matter; we were prepared for the occasion. We ended up tallying 55 species of birds and 12 species of mammals. These are expected numbers or slightly above expected numbers for a YIW tour.

Bird highlights included: 2 individual Northern Pygmy-Owls on three separate occasions. On one occasion outside the park, there was a Northern Pygmy-Owl being harassed by a richardsonii Merlin. MAGNIFICO! We were watching all this take place in a van only 10 meters away. On another occasion we watched three Townsend's Solitaires trying to get a pygmy-owl to move on. Very cool. Another relatively rare sighting was of 5 Trumpeter Swans flying over the Old Faithful geyser just before it erupted in a column of steam. This is a very rare sighting for birds in this thermal area, especially in the winter. We also saw a record number of 181 Common Redpolls for the trip, 175 of them in Yellowstone NP. I have never seen this many in the park before. They kept moving slowly in front of the van, feeding on weeds exposed above the snow. Other highlight YIW birds included a Canvasback.

Gray Wolves were always on everyone's mind, especially for a FG Yellowstone In Winter tour. We delivered true to form, though first we missed a pack of 4 wolves by 10 minutes, then a white wolf by 2 hours. But we ultimately found one gray morph wolf one day, bedded down but alert, then another morning 8 wolves (4 gray/4 black) were hunting and traveled right through a bison herd with bison tails erect.

Our biggest bird numbers were: 217 Trumpeter Swan, 136 Barrow's Goldeneye, 10 Gray Partridge, 77 Bald Eagles, 82 Rough-legged Hawks, 51 Red-tailed Hawks (which included 5 dark morph Harlan's), 96 Eurasian Collared-Doves, 1 intergrade Northern Flicker, 31 Pinyon Jays, 31 American Dippers, 43 Townsend's Solitaires, and only 9 Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch (2 Hepburn). But the true numbers are in the mammals: 9 Gray Wolves, 13 Coyotes, 1,373 Elk, 362 Mule Deer, 728 White-tailed Deer, 83 Pronghorn, 1,952 American Bison, and 43 Bighorn Sheep. Our rarest mammal on the tour was a Northern Raccoon; we found this very rare raccoon in a thermal stream on the Yell Plateau in Hayden Valley, and everyone (rangers, the other guides and tour companies) was jealous.

People were shocked with the few numbers of winter visitors, and the magnificent photographic opportunities. In fact I figured we saw less than 1,000 visitors. But the snow and cold and the steam of the geothermal features were in full form, coupled with the incredible wildlife opportunities. Let's face it-the FG Yellowstone In Winter tour is one of North America's best kept secrets.

Thank you for the opportunity of letting me guide you through Yellowstone, and to show you my version of Yellowstone In Winter. It has been a memorable trip. I hope to see you again on future Field Guides tours. In the meantime, take good care!

--Terry

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

CANADA GOOSE (*Branta canadensis*) – Seen 6 out of 8 days. 290 individuals.

TRUMPETER SWAN (*Cygnus buccinator*) – Seen 6 out of 8 days. 217 individuals. Rarest Trumpeter Swan sighting of the tour were 5 Trumpeter Swans flying Old Faithful right before it erupted. Beautiful sight. A very rare view in winter.

TUNDRA SWAN (*Cygnus columbianus*) – Found two individuals.

WOOD DUCK (*Aix sponsa*) – About a dozen total.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – A couple dozen total.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Anas americana*) – Counted 41 individuals.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Over 500 individuals, estimated 570 Mallards.

CANVASBACK (*Aythya valisineria*) – One lone individual near Bozeman.

RING-NECKED DUCK (*Aythya collaris*) – 10 Ring-necks counted.

BUFFLEHEAD (*Bucephala albeola*) – 35 or so.

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*) – Counted a total of 136 individuals.

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*) – Counted a total of 209 individuals.

HOODED MERGANSER (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) – Saw 2 total--one drake in Yellowstone and one outside of Yellowstone.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*) – Total of 19 individuals counted.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

GRAY PARTRIDGE (*Perdix perdix*) – Found about 10 individuals flying from a herd of 220 elk. Very cool!

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (*Phasianus colchicus*) – Found about 13 RNPH.

WILD TURKEY (*Meleagris gallopavo*) – Six total.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

PIED-BILLED GREBE (*Podilymbus podiceps*) – Found a lone individual in the Paradise Valley.

Ardeidae (Hérons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*) – Surprisingly only one individual.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Got to see a fair number of Bald Eagles--77 total. Also got to see all 5 recognizable age classes.

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (*Accipiter striatus*) – Found three different individuals near Bozeman and Gardiner.

RED-TAILED HAWK (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – 51 total. Found rufous, light, and dark morphs, including 5 of the dark morph Harlan's race.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK (*Buteo lagopus*) – A good year for Rough-legged Hawks---82 total. A clinic in Rough-legged hawk ID.

GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Found at least 13 individuals. Observed all three recognizable age classes.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

AMERICAN KESTREL (*Falco sparverius*) – One individual.

MERLIN (PRAIRIE) (*Falco columbarius richardsonii*) – This was the one of best experiences of the tour. As we watched a perched Northern Pygmy-Owl only 10 meters away from our van, a richardsonii Merlin also known as Prairie morph or form of the Merlin made several passes and attacks of this beautiful diminutive owl. Quite the sight. One that will not be forgotten anytime soon.

PRAIRIE FALCON (*Falco mexicanus*) – Got great looks at this bird. One individual, first perched then flying. This bird was an adult "falcon" also known as female.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*) – Found three individuals.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

KILLDEER (*Charadrius vociferus*) – Found two individuals on the last day.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Many--400 plus.

EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Quite a few individuals--a minimum of 96 individuals over the course of the tour.

Strigidae (Owls)

NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL (*Glaucidium gnoma*) – The bonus for the tour--and never a given. Only this year we found two individuals one in Yellowstone NP and one outside of YNP. We found probably the same individual on another occasion. Our most memorable sighting was Northern

Pygmy-Owl being attacked by a female Merlin (Prairie or richardsonii race). The view was amazing, since we were only 10 meters away from all this action. Also observed three Townsend's Solitaire's harassing another Northern Pygmy-Owl as well. WOW!

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (Megascops alcyon) – Found 5 individuals.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

DOWNY WOODPECKER (Picoides pubescens) – Found 2 individuals.

HAIRY WOODPECKER (Picoides villosus) – Only one Hairy Woodpecker.

NORTHERN FLICKER (Colaptes auratus) – Found three individuals--two were of the red-shafted race the other was an intergrade (yellow and red combine forming a gold color).

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

PINYON JAY (Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus) – After a great deal of searching, finally found 31 individuals.

STELLER'S JAY (Cyanocitta stelleri) – Two individuals.

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (Pica hudsonia) – A minimum of 127 individuals.

CLARK'S NUTCRACKER (Nucifraga columbiana) – 17 individuals.

AMERICAN CROW (Corvus brachyrhynchos) – Counted a minimum of 176 individuals.

COMMON RAVEN (Corvus corax) – Counted a minimum of 165 individuals.

Alaudidae (Larks)

HORNED LARK (Eremophila alpestris) – Only four individuals.

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE (Poecile atricapillus) – About a dozen total.

MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE (Poecile gambeli) – A minimum of 28 individuals.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (Sitta canadensis) – Surprisingly only one individual for the whole tour.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

AMERICAN DIPPER (Cinclus mexicanus) – Counted a minimum of 31 individuals--including some very close looks at this fascinating songbird of rushing water.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE (Myadestes townsendi) – A minimum of 43 individuals-including three solitaires harassing a Northern Pygmy-Owl.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (Sturnus vulgaris) – Minimum of 90 individuals or so.

Bombycillidae (Waxwings)

BOHEMIAN WAXWING (Bombycilla garrulus) – Not a good waxwing year--only 50 individuals this year.

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies)

SONG SPARROW (Melospiza melodia)

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

GRAY-CROWNED ROSY-FINCH (Leucosticte tephrocotis) – Only 9 individuals (two of the Hepburn race), all seven others L.t. tephrocotis race.

PINE GROSBEAK (Pinicola enucleator) – About 15 individuals.

COMMON REDPOLL (Acanthis flammea) – A record year for Common Redpolls--never have I seen more in Yellowstone. Found on two separate occasions in Yellowstone-35 individuals on Yellowstone Plateau and 140 redpolls on the Northern Range. Six seen at feeders. 181 total.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

HOUSE SPARROW (Passer domesticus) – Over 200 individuals found. Estimate 212.

MAMMALS

NUTTALL'S (MOUNTAIN) COTTONTAIL (Sylvilagus nuttalli) – One lone individual.

RED SQUIRREL (Tamiasciurus hudsonicus) – One lone individual.

MUSKRAT (Ondatra zibethica) – One lone individual.

COYOTE (Canis latrans) – 13 total-numbers seem to be down.

GRAY WOLF (Canis lupus) – 9 total. We worked hard and had our chances early but luck had to wait. First we missed a pack of 4 (by 10 minutes) on a snowcoach heading to Old Faithful, then a lone individual by two hours heading to Mammoth. But our persistence paid off with one individual bedded down on a rock knob. Finally we found eight wolves (4 grays/4 blacks) on the hunt for elk as they ventured close to a herd of bison. Very nice. Wolves on the move are nothing less than sensational. Currently there are less than 80 wolves in Yellowstone NP, during peak of wolves and elk in 1990's there were over 170 wolves.

NORTHERN RACCOON (Procyon lotor) – This was our rarest mammal sighting of tour. Raccoons in YNP are very rare. And in the winter there are very few sightings. So rare in fact that rangers, other tour companies and guides were envious of our find on our FG tour. One individual of medium size--you could see its black mask and rings on the tail. It was found on thermal stream in Hayden Valley. What a find!

ELK (Cervus canadensis) – Counted a minimum of 1,373 elk. Elk are incrementally declining in YNP. More were found outside the park than inside the park.

MULE DEER (*Odocoileus hemionus*) – A minimum of 362 found.

WHITE-TAILED DEER (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – A minimum of 728 individuals counted.

PRONGHORN (*Antilocapra americana*) – Approximately 83 individuals seen from the road.

AMERICAN BISON (*Bison bison*) – One of the most numerous large mammals in Yellowstone these days--numbers are increasing. Counted a minimum of 1,952 individuals. We also watched a rare event of a herd of bison passing out of the park and migrating through the Roosevelt Arch in Gardiner, Mt as the sun was setting. Amazing sight! How ironic!

BIGHORN SHEEP (*Ovis canadensis*) – Found 42 individuals-including ewes, lambs, and large rams.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 55 bird taxa and 12 mammal taxa