



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**Yellowstone in Winter 2015**

Jan 3, 2015 to Jan 11, 2015

Terry & Karen McEneaney

*For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).*



*Hot springs (Photo by participant Ann Camp)*

"I can think of no better experience for the explorer." These are the words of Ferdinand Hayden, the leader of the first scientific expedition in Yellowstone in 1871.

We explored Yellowstone and especially Yellowstone In Winter and benefited from the fruits of our labor. The YIW tour materialized into a nice Field Guides experience, and one that will not be forgotten. The Yellowstone winter mantra held true: "the worse the weather the better the birding, the milder the weather the less exciting it is." Most of the birds on this tour are usually found at lower elevations -- the Bozeman area was frozen up when we started the tour, and there was a blizzard in progress when we left Bozeman, leaving bird species numbers lower than normal. So we started and ended the tour with full-fledged snowstorms. The Gardiner/Paradise Valley was slow due to missing snow and mild temps, but in spite of the mild conditions in the valleys we ended up tallying 45 species of birds and 14 species of mammals, just under average for our past tours.

Abundance numbers were good for both birds and mammals. We found the following of note: 60 American Dippers, super looks at a total of 12 Red Crossbills on one occasion, two to three dozen Pine Grosbeaks, and two Prairie Falcons. Other locally rare highlight birds included one Canvasback and one Tundra Swan. Bird counts of special note were: 148 Trumpeter Swans, 120 Barrow's Goldeneyes, 150 Common Goldeneyes, 30 Golden Eagles, 70 Bald Eagles, 45 Rough-legged Hawks, 15 Red-tailed Hawks, 240 Eurasian Collared-Doves, 25 Townsend's Solitaires, and 300 Black-billed Magpies. And surprisingly, 3 Wild Turkeys in isolated Silver Gate, Montana, the second time ever in this heavy snow area (obviously being fed by locals).

Gray Wolves are on everyone's mind for this tour -- and especially for your guides! Happily, we did not disappoint. We found 14 gray wolves on this trip from two packs (6 from Junction Butte and 8 from Lamar Canyon). Wolves are fascinating to watch, especially in the winter when the prey is more concentrated and easier to kill in snow. Participants' eyes light up when we mention wolves, and while other groups relied on radio-telemetry, we were fortunate to discover wolves on our own rather than chasing other reports. It was a little easier finding wolves this year because the wolf population is up (110 wolves, 8 packs) compared to the recent past, so the Elk numbers may have leveled off and be climbing slightly. We enjoyed seeing these magnificent animals, and this experience made the trip.

In addition to the wolves, complete mammal list was quite impressive, with an added 18 Coyotes, 1100 elk, 260 Mule Deer, 1800 White-tails, 240 Pronghorn, 2000+ Bison, 5 White-tailed Jackrabbits, and 90 Bighorn Sheep. Our rarest mammals on the tour were two River Otters, a Pine Marten, and a whopping five Moose (4 bulls, 1 cow; exciting, since they are becoming a rarity). Very few groups came in contact with these last three species. We were all delighted by the River Otters -- they are becoming difficult to find. Bison were just starting to move out thru Gardiner; winter stress was just beginning.

We had some super encounters with wildlife: Golden Eagles feeding on a Coyote carcass; Ravens feeding on a large bull Elk and small bull Bison; Golden Eagles soaring repeatedly over a cliff; a White-tailed Jackrabbit coming out of hiding only to find itself less than 12 feet from our group.

It was an all-encompassing, delightful tour that can be summarized by a few of our experiences: erupting geysers; falling diamond dust (microscopic

sparkling ice particles in the dry air); wolves on the move; otters in hot pursuit of fish; Red Crossbills feeding on Lodgepole Pine cone seeds in early morning light; Rough-legged Hawks following snowstorms in search of voles; American Dippers diving for submerged invertebrate prey; Bison heading out of the park due to unfavorable snow conditions; and Native Americans hunting Bison.

The food was great, the wildlife viewing exceptional, the winter experience unfathomable, and the camaraderie wonderful. Coupled with the very few visitors, it made this a Yellowstone In Winter tour not to be forgotten any time soon.

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to show you our version of Yellowstone in Winter as we know it. We hope to see you again. Till then,

*Safe travels! Slan Ahaile!*

Terry and Karen McEneaney

---

#### 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*) – Observed several hundred individuals on six of eight days in the field.

**TRUMPETER SWAN** (*Cygnus buccinator*) – Found five of eight days in the field. 170 swans.

**WOOD DUCK** (*Aix sponsa*) – Counted 14 woodies.

**GADWALL** (*Anas strepera*) – About a half dozen.

**AMERICAN WIGEON** (*Anas americana*) – About a half dozen on day 7.

**MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Seen every day-several hundred.

**GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN)** (*Anas crecca carolinensis*) – Observed about 20 total.

**RING-NECKED DUCK** (*Aythya collaris*) – One individual on day 1, and one on Firehole River day 2 and 4.

**LESSER SCAUP** (*Aythya affinis*) – Found on day one--only one individual.

**BUFFLEHEAD** (*Bucephala albeola*) – Less than a dozen individuals.

**COMMON GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala clangula*) – Good looks at well over one hundred individuals.

**BARROW'S GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala islandica*) – Good looks at well over one hundred individuals.

**COMMON MERGANSER** (*Mergus merganser*) – Less than one dozen seen.

#### Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

**RING-NECKED PHEASANT** (*Phasianus colchicus*) – A half dozen on day 1.

**WILD TURKEY** (*Meleagris gallopavo*) – Found on days 5 and 7. Three individuals at Silver Gate, several in Paradise Valley.

#### Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

**GOLDEN EAGLE** (*Aquila chrysaetos*) – Saw dozens including all three age classes. Our best observations included a close-up of a male feeding on a coyote, another of a juvenile circle soaring over a cliff. Seen 4 of the 8 days in the field.

**NORTHERN HARRIER** (*Circus cyaneus*) – Observed a half dozen or so--mostly in Paradise Valley, some in Gallatin Valley, and one in Gardiner Valley.

**BALD EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – Dozens - including all five age classes. One roost had 14 another 8. Seen very day.

**RED-TAILED HAWK** (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Seen in the lower elevations.

**ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK** (*Buteo lagopus*) – Dozens.

#### Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

**AMERICAN COOT** (*Fulica americana*) – One individual on day 1.

#### Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

**ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) – The most I have ever seen, particularly the massive flock in the feedlot in Paradise Valley.

**EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE** (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Well over one hundred individuals-especially near Belgrade.

#### Strigidae (Owls)

**GREAT HORNED OWL** (*Bubo virginianus*) – Heard on days 5 and 8. Two individuals calling day 8.

#### Picidae (Woodpeckers)

**HAIRY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides villosus*) – Only two individuals--one on day 5 another on day 6 all in Montana.

**NORTHERN FLICKER** (*Colaptes auratus*) – One individual -day 7.

#### Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

**AMERICAN KESTREL** (*Falco sparverius*) – One individual- a adult male on day 7.

**PRAIRIE FALCON** (*Falco mexicanus*) – Two individuals on day 7.

#### Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

**GRAY JAY** (*Perisoreus canadensis*) – One individual at Mud Volcano and a flock of 4 or so at Cooke City.

**STELLER'S JAY** (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) – A few individuals on day 5.

**BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE** (*Pica hudsonia*) – The most ever seen on this Yellowstone in Winter tour. Total 500+.

**CLARK'S NUTCRACKER** (*Nucifraga columbiana*) – Seen five of the eight days in the field. About a dozen.

**AMERICAN CROW** (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – Seen on day eight-hundreds.

**COMMON RAVEN** (*Corvus corax*) – Seen every day-- best memories are the ones of them feeding on a coyote, a bull elk, and a bison.

*Alaudidae (Larks)*

**HORNED LARK** (*Eremophila alpestris*) – Seen on days 1 and 6--two flocks totaling 75 and 50.

*Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)*

**BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE** (*Poecile atricapillus*) – A half dozen or so-days 1 and 7.

**MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE** (*Poecile gambeli*) – Seen 7 of the 8 days in the field. A couple dozen.

*Cinclididae (Dippers)*

**AMERICAN DIPPER** (*Cinclus mexicanus*) – Found quite a few on 6 of the 8 days in the field.

*Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)*

**TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE** (*Myadestes townsendi*) – Not as many as other years. Seen 4 of the 8 days in the field.

**AMERICAN ROBIN** (*Turdus migratorius*) – A few individuals(4) in the Paradise Valley.

*Sturnidae (Starlings)*

**EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Hundreds.

*Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)*

**PINE GROSBEAK** (*Pinicola enucleator*) – Seen three of the eight days in the field. Several at West Thumb, a dozen in Cooke City, over half dozen in Gardiner area.

**HOUSE FINCH** (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) – Only about three individuals on day 1.

**RED CROSSBILL** (*Loxia curvirostra*) – Good looks at about a dozen individuals on day 3.

*Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)*

**HOUSE SPARROW** (*Passer domesticus*) – Hundreds.

---

## MAMMALS

**NUTTALL'S (MOUNTAIN) COTTONTAIL** (*Sylvilagus nuttalli*) – One individual-day five.

**WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT** (*Lepus townsendi*) – Found on three of eight days in the field-at least 4 individuals--one very close to us . The closest distance ever to this species of jackrabbit (8-10 feet).

**RED SQUIRREL** (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – A couple individuals on days 3 and 5.

**COYOTE** (*Canis latrans*) – Found on days 1, 2, and 6.

**GRAY WOLF** (*Canis lupus*) – Found 14 gray wolves from two packs (Junct Butte 6, Lamar Canyon 8).

**AMERICAN PINE MARTEN** (*Martes americana*) – Found one individual on day 2 crossing in front of snowcoach at Roaring Mountain during a snowstorm.

**NORTH AMERICAN RIVER OTTER** (*Lontra canadensis*) – Nice views of two individuals on the Yellowstone River in the Gardiner Valley. One had a fish in its mouth.

**ELK** (*Cervus canadensis*) – Found five of the eight days in the field. A few hundred individuals. Some very large bulls.

**MULE DEER** (*Odocoileus hemionus*) – Found on five of the eight days in the field. A couple hundred.

**WHITE-TAILED DEER** (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – Found on days 1, 7, and 8. A couple thousand.

**MOOSE** (*Alces alces*) – Found on days 5 and 6. Quite rare these days--4 bulls and a cow. Great looks.

**PRONGHORN** (*Antilocapra americana*) – Found on days 1, 6, and 7. At least 80 at Spring Hill and well over 150 in YNP and 48 in Paradise Valley.

**AMERICAN BISON** (*Bison bison*) – Found on 7 of the 8 days in the field. A couple thousand individuals.

**BIGHORN SHEEP** (*Ovis canadensis*) – Found on days 1, 5-7. Big rams as well as ewes and lambs. Nice views.

---

## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

---

**Totals for the tour: 45 bird taxa and 14 mammal taxa**