

Field Guides Tour Report

Montana: Yellowstone to Glacier

Jun 10, 2011 to Jun 19, 2011 Terry McEneaney



Where the sagebrush sea meets the Montana mountain sky, fondly know as the "big sky country" (Photo by guide Terry McEneaney)

Having traveled and lived all over Montana, I can honestly say that this tour ranks right up there with "Yellowstone in Winter" as one of my two favorite Field Guides wildlife tours of Montana to do as a guide. What makes this tour so personally special is that the national parks are not crowded this time of year, there is wildlife galore, and we travel the back roads of Montana or off the beaten path in search of birds, mammals, and points of many interests. What also is special is you get to see all the places I have been fortunate enough to live in throughout my career as a field ornithologist. But then there are the experiences or stories I like to interject, such as: my plane crash in Yellowstone; my experience among the Blackfeet Indians; the cast of characters in the Centennial Valley; being a caretaker of a ghost town; the magnificent marsh of Red Rock Lakes; the unique Montana bars and eateries; the difficult Montana mountain climbs; the unique bird behaviors; quick ways to ID similar birds; the history of a particular area; local geology; and of course the mountains, landscapes, and skyscapes and the reason this beautiful place is so fondly called Montana.

Weather-wise 2011 was an unusual year and, despite the heavy bombardment of rain and snow during the tour, the sun came out when we needed it, and the back roads cooperated and were perfect for travel. Consequently, we managed to pull off a great natural history show. Montana experienced what we call a 30-40 year event. In other words, what we didn't get in the form of rain turned out to be snow or lingering snows. Everywhere we went, flooding was prevalent. There was water where I never have seen water before, and newly formed lakes everywhere (if not quite the magnitude of glacial-epoch Lake Missoula!). We made the best of the unusual situation, and we had fun time traveling this basin-range topography.

We ended up with 174 species of birds and 30 species of mammals. Many of these species were seen either nesting or with newborn young. We had some great birds on our list, and the bird behaviors we experienced were sensational: McCown's Longspurs parachuting; Dusky Grouse displaying; Burrowing Owls perched and even flying; a midday high-flying Short-eared Owl, including an attack on a Turkey Vulture; a magnificent Black Tern aerial-catching insects with snow-covered mountain peaks in the background; a male Northern Harrier performing an exciting undulating display, while another dropped a vole to the female in mid-air; a dark morph Ferruginous Hawk being harassed and chased by two Long-billed Curlews protecting their young; a brilliant breeding-plumaged Common Loon on a nest and one even in flight; Lewis's Woodpeckers flycatching insects in some cases 500 feet above the ground; a subadult Golden Eagle trying to catch a

newborn Mountain Goat kid only to have it protected by a vigilant nanny.

Our mammal list was impressive and included 9 Grizzlies, 7 Black Bears (all different pelage colors), 1 Gray Wolf, a Pygmy Rabbit, a Red Fox (actually a "cross" fox, i.e. silver-red), Beaver, Snowshoe Hare, not to mention Mountain Goats and Bighorn Sheep...the list goes on. We observed some great mammal behaviors as well, including: Grizzlies bird-dogging sagebrush for Elk calves; a lone Gray Wolf crossing and swimming a pond close to where we were standing (and it howled for the longest time trying to locate the wolf pack).

We visited the four fabulous birding areas besides Montana's finest national parks, and out-of-the-way places. We traveled widely and experienced more two dozen mountain ranges, a ghost town, the smallest and wildest wildlife sanctuary in the world, a world-class rock shop, a site where dinosaur eggs were first discovered in Montana, two Indian Reservations, and one world-class Indian Museum. We stayed in fabulous lodges and took two fabulous small hikes -- one through tall cedars, another where the mountains meet the prairie..."the birthplace of clouds" for the Montana Big Sky.

Montana is a trip of a lifetime, a trip of dreams you might say. On behalf of Field Guides and my wife Karen, I hope we made your dream trip of Montana an unforgettable memory. We enjoyed your company and we hope to see you again on future Field Guides birding tours. In the meantime take good care!

--Terry

We have more information about this itinerary and future departures on our web page for Montana: Yellowston to Glacier.

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) – Daily and in many cases numerous. [N] **TRUMPETER SWAN** (Cygnus buccinator) – Observed in Paradise Valley, on the Northern Range of YNP, at Red Rock Lakes and in Centennial Valley, and in Mission Valley. Seen on nests and with young. [N] **WOOD DUCK** (Aix sponsa) – Seen in Mission Valley with large brood. [N] GADWALL (Anas strepera) – Nearly every day. [N] AMERICAN WIGEON (Anas americana) – Nearly every day. [N] MALLARD (Anas platyrhynchos) – Daily. [N] **BLUE-WINGED TEAL** (Anas discors) [N] **CINNAMON TEAL** (Anas cyanoptera) – Many stunning views of this magnificient anatid. NORTHERN SHOVELER (Anas clypeata) **NORTHERN PINTAIL** (Anas acuta) **GREEN-WINGED TEAL (AMERICAN)** (Anas crecca carolinensis) **CANVASBACK** (Aythya valisineria) **REDHEAD** (Aythya americana) LESSER SCAUP (Aythya affinis) – Very common like the Mallard. HARLEQUIN DUCK (Histrionicus histrionicus) - Found them in both Yellowstone in in Glacier despite the incrdible flooding which makes them hard to find. **BUFFLEHEAD** (Bucephala albeola) **BARROW'S GOLDENEYE** (Bucephala islandica) HOODED MERGANSER (Lophodytes cucultatus) - A classic view of a female in flight--a fly by- in GNP. **COMMON MERGANSER** (Mergus merganser) **RUDDY DUCK** (Oxyura jamaicensis) Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (Phasianus colchicus) [I] RUFFED GROUSE (Bonasa umbellus) DUSKY GROUSE (Dendragapus obscurus) – Found a strutting male on a ridge near the road in YNP. WILD TURKEY (Meleagris gallopavo)

Gaviidae (Loons)

COMMON LOON (Gavia immer) – Had a stunning view of a breeding female on a nest incubating eggs on the Rocky Mountain Front, plus a flyover at Warm Springs.

<u>Podicipedidae (Grebes)</u> **PIED-BILLED GREBE** (Podilymbus podiceps)



Yellowstone is noted for its wildlife, but it was originally set aside for its spectacular geothermal features such as this erupting geyser field. (Photo by guide Terry McEneaney)

HORNED GREBE (Podiceps auritus) [N] RED-NECKED GREBE (Podiceps grisegena) [N] EARED GREBE (Podiceps nigricollis) [N] WESTERN GREBE (Aechmophorus occidentalis) [N] CLARK'S GREBE (Aechmophorus clarkii) – Found a few individuals on the first day.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags) **DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT** (Phalacrocorax auritus) [N]

<u>Pelecanidae (Pelicans)</u> AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN (Pelecanus erythrorhynchos)

<u>Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)</u> **AMERICAN BITTERN** (Botaurus lentiginosus) **GREAT BLUE HERON** (Ardea herodias) [N] **BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON** (Nycticorax nycticorax) – Found flying on days 1 and 5.

<u>Cathartidae (New World Vultures)</u> **TURKEY VULTURE** (Cathartes aura)

<u>Pandionidae (Osprey)</u> OSPREY (Pandion haliaetus) [N] Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

BALD EAGLE (Haliaeetus leucocephalus) [N]

NORTHERN HARRIER (Circus cyaneus) – Watched and incredible food exchange fo volefrom male to female. On another occasion had a male conducting its display flight.

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK (Accipiter striatus) - Had one near Tower in YNP.



Gray Wolf swimming, Yellowstone National Park (Photo by participant Bob Mandel)

COOPER'S HAWK (Accipiter cooperii)

SWAINSON'S HAWK (Buteo swainsoni) – Found quite a few including close looks of an adult female on nest with newly hatched young. [N]

RED-TAILED HAWK (Buteo jamaicensis) [N]

- **FERRUGINOUS HAWK** (Buteo regalis) Saw these magnificent buteos on two different days. Most memorable was a dark morph female being harassed and chased by two Long-billed Curlews as it headed out of Dodge with the Rocky Mountain Front in the background.
- **GOLDEN EAGLE** (Aquila chrysaetos) Seen in Yellowstone and Glacier and points in between. Fabulous views of a subadult circling over a newborn kid Mountain Goat in YNP as the nanny protected it from the King of Birds. Also and adult female in GNP hunting Y-b Marmots.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras) **AMERICAN KESTREL** (Falco sparverius)

<u>Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)</u> SORA (Porzana carolina) AMERICAN COOT (Fulica americana) – Even some with newly hatched blood red young. [N]

<u>Gruidae (Cranes)</u> SANDHILL CRANE (Grus canadensis) – Many, including several on nests. [N]

<u>Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)</u> **KILLDEER** (Charadrius vociferus) [**N**]

<u>Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)</u> BLACK-NECKED STILT (Himantopus mexicanus) AMERICAN AVOCET (Recurvirostra americana) [N]

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

SPOTTED SANDPIPER (Actitis macularius)

WILLET (WESTERN) (Tringa semipalmata inornata) – Super views of this bird on ground and in flight. LONG-BILLED CURLEW (Numenius americanus) – Watched two chasing a Ferruginous Hawk. WOW! MARBLED GODWIT (Limosa fedoa)

WILSON'S SNIPE (Gallinago delicata) WILSON'S PHALAROPE (Phalaropus tricolor) – Super close views as well.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

FRANKLIN'S GULL (Leucophaeus pipixcan) – Great views on day 4.



We all became Gray Wolf groupies in Yellowstone National Park. (Photo by participant Bob Mandel)

RING-BILLED GULL (Larus delawarensis) [N]

CALIFORNIA GULL (Larus californicus)

CASPIAN TERN (Hydroprogne caspia) - Great views on days 4 and 9.

BLACK TERN (Chlidonias niger) – My favorite tern of the black persuasion. Found them on prairie potholes. What a bird! [N]

COMMON TERN (Sterna hirundo) - Many times diving in front of us.

FORSTER'S TERN (Sterna forsteri)

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (Columba livia) [I] EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE (Streptopelia decaocto) – Several towns. [I] MOURNING DOVE (Zenaida macroura)

Strigidae (Owls)

BURROWING OWL (Athene cunicularia) – Two individuals.Fairly good views of them on the ground and in flight.
 SHORT-EARED OWL (Asio flammeus) – Found them on two different occasions and days. Most memorable was ofthem displaying and wing-flapping.. Most exciting was an individual calling while circling and chasing a Turkey Vulture out of its territory.

<u>Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)</u> COMMON NIGHTHAWK (Chordeiles minor)

<u>Apodidae (Swifts)</u> VAUX'S SWIFT (Chaetura vauxi) – Super views. WHITE-THROATED SWIFT (Aeronautes saxatalis) – Super views. [N]

<u>Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)</u> **RUFOUS HUMMINGBIRD** (Selasphorus rufus) – Super views. **CALLIOPE HUMMINGBIRD** (Stellula calliope) – Super views.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

BELTED KINGFISHER (Megaceryle alcyon) – Never have I had a better occasion to observe kingfishers in one day. One individual kept flying by as we had lunch.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

LEWIS'S WOODPECKER (Melanerpes lewis) – What a gorgeous bird---one even flew and circled 500 feet above the ground. Watched a pair flycatching. Fun to watch.

WILLIAMSON'S SAPSUCKER (Sphyrapicus thyroideus)

RED-NAPED SAPSUCKER (Sphyrapicus nuchalis)

DOWNY WOODPECKER (Picoides pubescens)

HAIRY WOODPECKER (Picoides villosus)

AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (Picoides dorsalis) – Super looks at this hard to find species in Glacier NP.

NORTHERN FLICKER (RED-SHAFTED) (Colaptes auratus cafer)

PILEATED WOODPECKER (Dryocopus pileatus) – Flew overhead as we birded the cafe grounds. Also heard tem calling.

Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE (Contopus sordidulus)
 ALDER FLYCATCHER (Empidonax alnorum) – Found two pairs of this hard to find flycatcher singing at Pine Butte.
 WILLOW FLYCATCHER (Empidonax traillii)

LEAST FLYCATCHER (Empidonax minimus)

HAMMOND'S FLYCATCHER (Empidonax hammondii)

GRAY FLYCATCHER (Empidonax wrightii) – Found this in the Horse Prairie country. Supe views.

DUSKY FLYCATCHER (Empidonax oberholseri)

CORDILLERAN FLYCATCHER (Empidonax occidentalis)

WESTERN KINGBIRD (Tyrannus verticalis)

EASTERN KINGBIRD (Tyrannus tyrannus)

Vireonidae (Vireos)

CASSIN'S VIREO (Vireo cassinii) WARBLING VIREO (Vireo gilvus) RED-EYED VIREO (Vireo olivaceus) – Super looks.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

GRAY JAY (Perisoreus canadensis)
STELLER'S JAY (Cyanocitta stelleri)
BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE (Pica hudsonia)
CLARK'S NUTCRACKER (Nucifraga columbiana)
AMERICAN CROW (Corvus brachyrhynchos)
COMMON RAVEN (Corvus corax) [N]

<u>Alaudidae (Larks)</u> **HORNED LARK** (Eremophila alpestris)

<u>Hirundinidae (Swallows)</u>
NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (Stelgidopteryx serripennis) [N]
TREE SWALLOW (Tachycineta bicolor) [N]
VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW (Tachycineta thalassina) [N]
BARN SWALLOW (Hirundo rustica) [N]
CLIFF SWALLOW (Petrochelidon pyrrhonota) [N]

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits) **BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE** (Poecile atricapillus)



Terry & Karen McEneaney (Photo by participant Bob Mandel)

MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE (Poecile gambeli) CHESTNUT-BACKED CHICKADEE (Poecile rufescens) – Great looks.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH (Sitta canadensis) WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH (Sitta carolinensis) **PYGMY NUTHATCH** (Sitta pygmaea) – Incredible looks on last day.

Troglodytidae (Wrens) **ROCK WREN** (Salpinetes obsoletus) HOUSE WREN (Troglodytes aedon) MARSH WREN (Cistothorus palustris)

Cinclidae (Dippers) **AMERICAN DIPPER** (Cinclus mexicanus) [N]

Regulidae (Kinglets) **RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET** (Regulus calendula)

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies) **WESTERN BLUEBIRD** (Sialia mexicana) **MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD** (Sialia currucoides) [N] TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE (Myadestes townsendi) **SWAINSON'S THRUSH** (Catharus ustulatus) HERMIT THRUSH (Catharus guttatus) AMERICAN ROBIN (Turdus migratorius)



One of many grand accomodations on the Field Guides Yellowstone to Glacier tour: the magnificient East Glacier Hotel on the edge of Glacier National Park. (Photo by guide Terry McEneaney)

VARIED THRUSH (Ixoreus naevius) - Can't beat this bird--its song and size.

Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers) **GRAY CATBIRD** (Dumetella carolinensis) SAGE THRASHER (Oreoscoptes montanus) – Tons.

Sturnidae (Starlings) **EUROPEAN STARLING** (Sturnus vulgaris) [IN]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits) **AMERICAN PIPIT** (Anthus rubescens)

Bombycillidae (Waxwings) CEDAR WAXWING (Bombycilla cedrorum) – Beautiful bird-great looks.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings) CHESTNUT-COLLARED LONGSPUR (Calcarius ornatus) MCCOWN'S LONGSPUR (Rhynchophanes mccownii) – Love its parachute display.

Parulidae (New World Warblers) **YELLOW WARBLER** (Dendroica petechia) YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S) (Dendroica coronata auduboni) TOWNSEND'S WARBLER (Dendroica townsendi) - Nice looks. **AMERICAN REDSTART** (Setophaga ruticilla) NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH (Parkesia noveboracensis) - Super views. MACGILLIVRAY'S WARBLER (Oporornis tolmiei) - The bird of the shadows--very cool. **COMMON YELLOWTHROAT** (Geothlypis trichas) WILSON'S WARBLER (Wilsonia pusilla) YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT (Icteria virens) - Found one on day 1.

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies) **GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE** (Pipilo chlorurus) – Super views. **SPOTTED TOWHEE** (Pipilo maculatus)



The East Front of the Rockies--the Field Guides Yellowstone to Glacier tour takes us to some of the most remote and beautiful wildlife areas of Montana. (Photo by guide Terry McEneaney)

CHIPPING SPARROW (Spizella passerina) BREWER'S SPARROW (BREWERI) (Spizella breweri breweri) **VESPER SPARROW** (Pooecetes gramineus) SAGE SPARROW (INTERIOR) (Amphispiza belli nevadensis) SAVANNAH SPARROW (Passerculus sandwichensis) FOX SPARROW (SLATE-COLORED) (Passerella iliaca schistacea) – Super views. **SONG SPARROW** (Melospiza melodia) LINCOLN'S SPARROW (Melospiza lincolnii) WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (DARK-LORED) (Zonotrichia leucophrys oriantha) DARK-EYED JUNCO (OREGON) (Junco hyemalis oreganus) DARK-EYED JUNCO (PINK-SIDED) (Junco hyemalis mearnsi) *Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)* WESTERN TANAGER (Piranga ludoviciana) **ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK** (Pheucticus ludovicianus) BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK (Pheucticus melanocephalus) LAZULI BUNTING (Passerina amoena) Icteridae (Troupials and Allies) BOBOLINK (Dolichonyx oryzivorus) - Great color combination- black, gold, and white. **RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD** (Agelaius phoeniceus) WESTERN MEADOWLARK (Sturnella neglecta) YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD (Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus) BREWER'S BLACKBIRD (Euphagus cyanocephalus) **COMMON GRACKLE** (Quiscalus quiscula) BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD (Molothrus ater) BULLOCK'S ORIOLE (Icterus bullockii) – Found one in a nest near the road. [N] Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

CASSIN'S FINCH (Carpodacus cassinii) HOUSE FINCH (Carpodacus mexicanus) PINE SISKIN (Spinus pinus) AMERICAN GOLDFINCH (Spinus tristis) EVENING GROSBEAK (Coccothraustes vespertinus) – Super views of this "gross beak"

<u>Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)</u> HOUSE SPARROW (Passer domesticus)

MAMMALS

PYGMY RABBIT (Sylvilagus idahoensis) – Excellent looks at a very rare mammal for Montana. Adorable little creature. **NUTTALL'S (MOUNTAIN) COTTONTAIL** (Sylvilagus nuttalli)

SNOWSHOE HARE (Lepus americanus) – We got lucky and saw one individual in early morning in YNP.

WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT (Lepus townsendi)

LEAST CHIPMUNK (Tamias minimus)

YELLOW-PINE CHIPMUNK (Tamias amoenus)

RED-TAILED CHIPMUNK (Tamias ruficaudus)

UINTA CHIPMUNK (Tamias umbrinus)

YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOT (Marmota flaviventris)

COLUMBIAN GROUND SQUIRREL (Spermophilus columbianus)

RICHARDSON'S GROUND SQUIRREL (Spermophilus richardsonii)

UINTA GROUND SQUIRREL (Spermophilus armatus)

BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG (Cynomys ludovicianus) – We were fortunate to see these delightful creatures in several places along our Big Sky journey.

FOX SQUIRREL (Sciurus niger)

RED SQUIRREL (Tamiasciurus hudsonicus)

BEAVER (Castor canadensis) – Got to see one large individual very close to the road near Obsidian Cliff. Remarkable views.

MUSKRAT (Ondatra zibethica)

- **RED FOX** (Vulpes vulpes) Not just a Red Fox, but a unique colored individual called a"cross fox", this fox had silver, black and red features and was not interested in us at all as it hunted voles.
- **COYOTE** (Canis latrans) We saw several individuals, including a family group serenading us with their howls at sunrise as the sun came up on the prairie or plains.
- **GRAY WOLF** (Canis lupus) Few people were seeing wolves, but we stood in the right area. While we were watching grizzlies bird-dogging elk calves in sagebrush, an individual Gray Wolf swam a pond near where we were standing. An incredible experience I must say. After the wolf came out of the water, it stayed put and howled for 30 minutes on a ridge very near where we standing. Quite the haunting sound. Now that is wildlife viewing at its best.
- **BLACK BEAR** (Ursus americanus) Found 7 individual bears of varying color types. A blonde along the Jefferson River, a cinnamon in YNP, and 5 of all different pelage colors in GNP.
- **BROWN (INCL. GRIZZLY) BEAR** (Ursus arctos) We had a whopping 8 individual grizzly bears in our short stay in YNP. Our best views were griz bird-dogging sagebrush in search of elk calves. Also as interesting was a sow with two cubs sitting up nursing the cubs and at times almost falling asleep sitting up. Also we had a subadult boar feeding on a spike bull elk carcass. Another bear early morning very close to the road feeding on veg.
- ELK (Cervus canadensis) Not as many as other years in YNP, but some had calves. Elk in other areas as well, including the hard to find elk in GNP.

MULE DEER (Odocoileus hemionus) – Many and with new born fawns.

WHITE-TAILED DEER (Odocoileus virginianus) – Many and some with newborn fawns.

- **MOOSE** (Alces alces) We had moose in three locations: YNP, RRL, and on the Rocky Mountain Front. We also had a cow with newborn calf cross in front of us in the Centennial Valley.
- **PRONGHORN** (Antilocapra americana) Many, but most memorable was a doe with a newborn kid or fawn in sagebrush close to the road in YNP. Saw many with very mobile youngsters as well.

AMERICAN BISON (Bison bison) - A bumper year for bison calves. Wonderful sight. Numerous and plentiful.

MOUNTAIN GOAT (Oreamnos americanus) – Saw many Mountain Goats including an incident of a subadult Golden Eagle circling low over the mother with her newborn kid in YNP. Also found goats on the east, south and west sides of GNP despite the deep snows and constant rain.

BIGHORN SHEEP (Ovis canadensis) – Found many Bighorn Sheep--both rams and ewes with lambs. Many more in GNP than YNP.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 175 bird taxa and 30 mammal taxa