

BLACK HILLS & BADLANDS BIRDING TOUR

South Dakota and Wyoming

May 24-30, 2024

A birding tour organized by Seven Ponds Nature Center and Rocky Mountain Birding

Trip Report & Sightings



The bison of Wind Cave National Park

DAY 1 – Friday, May 24 – Arrival in Rapid City We gathered at the Big Sky Lodge and headed off to our first dinner together, getting to know our guide, Peter Burke, and one another. Most tour participants had traveled together previously, but we did have two “new” folks along, and some others had somehow missed each other on previous tours, so it was nice to enjoy our first evening in Rapid City. After dinner we were back to the lodge and settled in, excited for the adventure to begin in the morning.

DAY 2 – Saturday, May 25 – Badlands National Park We kicked off our tour with a drive east to Badlands National Park. Along the way we stopped occasionally to check out the birds. Our first roadside stop produced a Burrowing Owl and two Say’s Phoebes, along with other birds that we would see throughout our trip, including Western Meadowlark, Horned Lark, and Lark Bunting. Our next pullover gave us an amazing experience with at least six Short-eared Owls, as we enjoyed their moth-like flight over the fields, including an interaction between one of the owls and a Northern Harrier. A roadside wetland a short while later had calling Soras as well as Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Blue-winged Teal. The next stop included Bobolink, Blue Grosbeak, Lark Sparrow, and both Western and Eastern kingbirds. We were getting a nice introduction to the open country birds of the western grasslands.



Stopping in the Badlands for a restroom break, our guide Peter spotted a very distant Bighorn Sheep on a faraway ridge, which he put in the scope for us. We shared this sighting with a passerby, who then shared with us that there was a den of badgers just around the corner. Being a Lifer mammal for most, we hurried around the bend to find three adorable badger cubs sparring with one another on the den, located at the trailhead right next to the parking area. One of many highlights of the tour, we enjoyed close views of these playful badglets for several minutes before moving on.

Our next stop in the Badlands was at the Pinnacles Overlook, where we spotted our first of many White-throated Swifts of the tour while enjoying the vast, stark scenery which lay before us. Our lunch stop was at the Badlands’ Sage Creek Campground. Here we shared the picnic area with a couple of nearby Bison, as well as adorable baby Killdeer. Burrowing Owls, Red-headed Woodpecker, Black-billed Magpie, and two dozen Common Nighthawks rounded out the lunchtime show. Circling back around toward Rapid City, a stop at the oddly named Sage Creek Road Lake gave us looks at nine duck species, plus Eared Grebe and American Coot, along with several songbirds. Altogether we tallied over 50 birds on the first day of our tour – not a bad start!



DAY 3 – Sunday, May 26 – Shortgrass Prairie Birding

Heading north out of Rapid City, our destination today was the shortgrass prairie of northwestern South Dakota. Turning west off SD-79 onto Limpert Fire Trail, we quickly found our vans heading further into a quagmire of rain-soaked clay, tires spinning and digging deeper into the thick mud. Before going a quarter mile, we made the decision not to proceed any farther, hoping that we'd be able to back out without getting one or both vans stuck. But birders have to bird, so before we made the attempt, we spent some time enjoying the birds around us. Those birds included another Short-eared Owl, Upland Sandpipers, Grasshopper Sparrows, and at least three Sharp-tailed Grouse, one of



whom danced in response to Peter's brief playback. After watching the birds for about a half-hour, we decided it was time to attempt our exodus. Carrie, driving the trailing van, went first, and backed out through the muck like a champion. The lead van made it out without incident as well, and we all breathed a sigh of relief (well, at least the leaders did) while scraping all the mud off our shoes. After rerouting and adjusting our plans due to the impassable road, we came upon a hawk perched on a utility pole, giving us all a great look at our first Swainson's Hawk. While there, we also enjoyed extensive views of Loggerhead Shrike and Orchard Oriole.



Our lunch stop today was at Reva Gap Campground in Custer National Forest. Besides the birds, we had the entire place to ourselves. Here we found Yellow-breasted Chat, Western Wood-Pewee, Dusky Flycatcher, and Spotted Towhee among many other more familiar "eastern" birds. At least 30 White-throated Swifts were working the airspace over the canyon wall. Leaving Reva Gap, Peter spotted what looked to him like a couple of large, rusty-colored Hawks in the grass near a utility pole. We stopped and turned around, and confirmed what would be our only Ferruginous Hawks of the trip.

At JB Road (our primary destination of the day), we drove about 12 miles of solid gravel in search of shortgrass birds. We saw Upland Sandpiper, Grasshopper Sparrow, Lark Bunting, Horned Lark, Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Harrier, and many others, including an estimated 150 Western Meadowlarks. We had great views of Chestnut-collared Longspurs and spotted a couple Golden Eagles as well. Walking out to a lake we found, we added several ducks along with shorebirds, including American Avocet, Wilson's Phalarope, Spotted Sandpiper, Willet, and Semipalmated Sandpiper. Unfortunately, we were unable to locate a key target species: Baird's Sparrow. A stop at Bear Butte Lake on the way back to Rapid City turned up nearly a hundred American White Pelicans and more duck species. Altogether, the second day produced our largest day tally of the tour with more than 70 species.



DAY 4 – Monday, May 27 – Devils Tower National Monument While we were certainly on the lookout for birds, the main highlight today would be the massive geological structure in eastern Wyoming known as Devils Tower. That said, along the way we did make a couple of stops for some birding. Just over the South Dakota-Wyoming border, we stopped at Sand Creek Public Access, where we found several new birds for our trip list, including Great Blue Heron, Belted Kingfisher, Warbling Vireo, Rock Wren, Bullock's Oriole, Black-headed Grosbeak, and Lazuli Bunting, among many others. At the Sundance Water Treatment Plant, we picked up several birds for our growing Wyoming list, but nothing new for the trip.



Devils Tower National Monument lived up to the hype, providing awesome views at every turn of the 1.3-mile paved loop trail. Along the trail we did find some new birds for the trip, including Plumbeous Vireo, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Brown Creeper. Leaving the park, we had our second encounter with a Badger, this time observing an adult excavating in a Prairie Dog colony, presumably for lunch. Returning to Rapid City via a different route, we enjoyed the spectacular scenery of this amazing region.

DAY 5 – Tuesday, May 28 – Black Hills – Spearfish Canyon Today we headed up to the northern portion of the Black Hills to the Spearfish Canyon area. Before arriving there, we made a stop at Terry Peak, a ski resort, to



search for spruce forest specialists. Here we spotted our first Mountain Bluebirds of the trip, along with great looks at a trio of Red-naped Sapsuckers, plus Ovenbird, Dark-eyed Junco (white-winged), and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Onward to Spearfish Canyon, a 19-mile stretch of road at the base of towering limestone cliffs that rise high above Spearfish Creek. Our first stop was at Roughlock Falls, where we sat down for lunch after finding American Dipper, Canyon Wren, Veery, and many other birds. Driving down the canyon toward the town of Spearfish, we marveled at the tall canyon walls on either side of the road and added a few more birds along the way.

DAY 6 – Wednesday, May 29 – Black Hills – Wind Cave National Park & Custer State Park Our final full day saw us heading south into the Black Hills proper, where scenery and mammals would challenge birds for our attention. Our first stop of the day was the serene Sylvan Lake Day Use Area. Here we took a leisurely hike up a trail into the open ponderosa pine forest, where Mountain Bluebirds and Red Crossbills put on a display for us. After winding our way through the spectacular rocky outcrops, spruce and pine forests, and grassy meadows of the Needles Highway, with its narrow tunnels, we stopped at Cathedral Spires to take in the expansive landscape. While here, we had a close-up encounter with a brightly colored male Western Tanager.





Lunch was spent at the Wind Cave National Park visitor center, where the group explored the exhibits and learned about the vast cave system beneath our feet. In the skies above, Common Nighthawks hunted by the light of midday – but one of them decided it was time for a nap, landing on a nearby ponderosa pine branch, remaining in the scope for the duration of our lunch. Taking the long way home, we drove the 18-mile Wildlife Loop, which lived up to its name with a Bison traffic jam midway through. We patiently waited and watched as several dozen Bison cows and calves casually ambled their way down the grassy slope, across the road, and westward, many of the adults stopping to wallow in the dust, continuing to break free from last winter's thick coat of fur.

DAY 7 – Thursday, May 30 – Departure from Rapid City Goodbyes, farewells, and well-wishes were shared at breakfast, as most of the group flew out today, while others traveled homeward by car.

TOUR LEADERS

Daryl Bernard – *tour leader, Seven Ponds Nature Center*

Peter Burke – *professional birding guide, Rocky Mountain Birding*

Carrie Spencer – *naturalist and van driver extraordinaire, Seven Ponds Nature Center*

PARTICIPANTS

Jan Giesken – *Lapeer, Michigan*

Sigrid Grace – *Rochester Hills, Michigan*

Lynne Holmberg – *Traverse City, Michigan*

Gabriele Pluhar – *Sawyer, Michigan*

Candy Petrick – *Beulah, Michigan*

Anita Spencer – *Lapeer, Michigan*

Jane Pedersen – *Durango, Colorado*

Steve Somora – *Durango, Colorado*

Barbara Saxena – *Lansing, Michigan*

Yogi Saxena – *Lansing, Michigan*



ACCOMMODATIONS

Big Sky Lodge – Rapid City, South Dakota

RESTAURANTS

Jambonz Deux – Rapid City

Firehouse Brewing Company – Rapid City

Minervas – Rapid City

Guadalajara Mexican Restaurant – Spearfish

Dakotah Steakhouse – Rapid City

Wobbly Bobby – Rapid City



BIRDING LOCATIONS

Saturday, May 25

- SD-44 Highway & Conata Basin Road en route to Badlands National Park (several stops)
- Badlands National Park – Pinnacles Overlook
- Badlands National Park – Sage Creek Campground (+ lunch)
- Sage Creek Road Lake
- French Creek Campground – Buffalo Gap National Grassland (scenic overlook)
- Memorial Park – Rapid City

Sunday, May 26

- Limpert Fire Trail
- SD-79 Highway
- SD-20 Highway
- Custer National Forest – Reva Gap Campground (+ lunch)
- JB Road
- Bear Butte Lake



Monday, May 27

- Sand Creek Public Access Area
- Sundance Water Treatment Plant
- Devils Tower National Monument (+ lunch)
- Devils Tower National Monument – Tower Trail

Tuesday, May 28

- Terry Peak – Stewart Slope Road
- Spearfish Canyon – Roughlock Falls (+ lunch)
- Spearfish Canyon

Wednesday, May 29

- Custer State Park – Sylvan Lake Day Use Area
- Custer State Park – Cathedral Spires
- Wind Cave National Park – Visitor Center (+ lunch)
- Custer State Park – Wildlife Loop State Scenic Byway



TRIP BIRDS – 119

Canada Goose

Blue-winged Teal

Northern Shoveler

Gadwall

American Wigeon

Mallard

Northern Pintail

Green-winged Teal

Canvasback

Lesser Scaup

Ruddy Duck

Wild Turkey

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Eared Grebe

Rock Pigeon

Mourning Dove

Common Nighthawk

Chimney Swift

White-throated Swift

Broad-tailed Hummingbird

Sora

American Coot

American Avocet

Killdeer

Upland Sandpiper

Wilson's Phalarope

Spotted Sandpiper

Willet

Least Sandpiper

Semipalmated Sandpiper

Ring-billed Gull

American White Pelican

Great Blue Heron

Turkey Vulture

Osprey

Golden Eagle

Northern Harrier



Bald Eagle

Swainson's Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

Ferruginous Hawk

Burrowing Owl

Short-eared Owl

Belted Kingfisher

Red-naped Sapsucker

Red-headed Woodpecker

Downy Woodpecker

Hairy Woodpecker

Northern Flicker

American Kestrel

Western Wood-Pewee

Least Flycatcher

Dusky Flycatcher

Western Flycatcher

Say's Phoebe

Western Kingbird

Eastern Kingbird

Plumbeous Vireo

Warbling Vireo

Red-eyed Vireo

Loggerhead Shrike

Blue Jay

Black-billed Magpie

American Crow

Black-capped Chickadee

Horned Lark

Tree Swallow

Violet-green Swallow

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Barn Swallow

Cliff Swallow

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Red-breasted Nuthatch

White-breasted Nuthatch

Brown Creeper



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

Rock Wren

Canyon Wren

House Wren

American Dipper

European Starling

Gray Catbird

Brown Thrasher

Mountain Bluebird

Townsend's Solitaire

Veery

American Robin

Cedar Waxwing

House Sparrow

Red Crossbill

Pine Siskin

American Goldfinch

Chestnut-collared Longspur

Grasshopper Sparrow

Chipping Sparrow

Lark Sparrow

Lark Bunting

Dark-eyed Junco

Song Sparrow

Spotted Towhee

Yellow-breasted Chat

Yellow-headed Blackbird

Bobolink

Western Meadowlark

Orchard Oriole

Bullock's Oriole

Red-winged Blackbird

Brown-headed Cowbird

Brewer's Blackbird

Common Grackle

Ovenbird

American Redstart

Yellow Warbler



Yellow-rumped Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Western Tanager
Black-headed Grosbeak
Blue Grosbeak
Lazuli Bunting

TRIP MAMMALS – 12

Bison

Mule Deer

White-tailed Deer

Pronghorn

Bighorn Sheep

Coyote

Badger

Groundhog

Black-tailed Prairie Dog

Desert Cottontail

Least Chipmunk

American Red Squirrel





PHOTO CREDITS

Anita Spencer – *Short-eared Owl, Badger cubs, Dusky Flycatcher, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Plumbeous Vireo, Western Tanager, Yellow-breasted Chat, Killdeer, American White Pelican, Ferruginous Hawk, Western Wood-Pewee, Western Kingbird, Black-billed Magpie, Rock Wren, Canyon Wren, Lark Sparrow, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Desert Cottontail*

Daryl Bernard – *Bison herd, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Common Nighthawk, Big Sky Lodge, Devil's Tower, Swainson's Hawk, Mountain Bluebird, Lark Bunting, Pronghorn, Badger cub, group pic (on trail)*

Peter Burke – *Badlands panorama, American Dipper, group pic (Badlands), Upland Sandpiper, Grasshopper Sparrow, Bison cow & calf*