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USA

Canyons & Wildlife in the Land of the Navajo

12 – 22 September 2016

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Pat Lueders

Monday 12 September 2016: Salt Lake City

The flight from London Heathrow arrived early, and after the short shuttle ride to the Salt Lake City Holiday Inn Express, each member of the group received their room key and settled into their comfortable room for the night with a welcome bag which included snacks, water, fruit, and sweets.

Tuesday 13 September 2016: Capitol Reef National Park

After breakfast, where delicious hot cinnamon rolls were well-received, our adventure began with an enormous European starling roost in the parking lot, and our first view of black-billed magpies. A scenic view of downtown Salt Lake City and the Mormon Temple was framed by the Wasatch Mountain range (part of the Rockies) to the north and east.

Traveling the modern Interstate highway, we passed Utah Lake and then travelled through the fertile agricultural valley, stopping in Fillmore for our picnic lunches. We drove scenic Highway 15, pulling over to view and photograph two female and one male pronghorn very close to the road. They were grazing in the grass, our first of many seen along this stretch.

As we approached our first stop, Fremont Indian State Park, clouds began to build, a rare phenomenon for this area since they told us in the visitor's centre that it had not hardly rained "for a year ". With luck the storm held off, and we were able to enjoy the display and explanatory video on the Fremont Indian culture before walking the trail to view their petroglyphs that remain on the cliffs. White-crowned sparrows and a rock squirrel scattered as we stopped to discuss the possible meanings of the intricate rock drawings. After the informative hike, we heard and then saw a large flock of pinion jays flying below us in the valley, allowing us to look down from the cliff onto their brilliant blue backs.

After our picnic lunch, clouds formed in the sky, so we stopped to view the 'newspaper' petroglyph; and, while viewing it in the scope, a hawk migration event broke out as the storm circled around us. First, two golden eagles, then two peregrine falcons, two red-tailed hawks and five broad-winged hawks gathered to form a kettle above us. What a wonderful start to our park adventure!

On the drive to Torrey, we stopped at Koosharem Reservoir to scope three American white pelicans, many American coots, western, Clark's & pied-billed grebes, ruddy duck, blue-winged teal, northern shoveler and a northern harrier working the field. As we left, we found an osprey, a great blue heron and belted kingfisher. Jim spotted another golden eagle perched on a cliff, and two Swainson's hawks were seen sitting in a field watching for grasshoppers, a major prey item on their southward migration. Wow, what a great beginning, we all agreed, as we enjoyed a delicious dinner at Café Diablo.

Wednesday 14 September: Capitol Reef National Park

Before breakfast, we took a short walk around our lodging and found sage thrashers, vesper and white-crowned sparrows, lesser goldfinch, and a Say's phoebe in the early morning light. We enjoyed seeing animal behaviour in action as desert cottontails hid under the sagebrush thinking they could not be seen.

Photographic opportunities surrounded us as we approached the Capitol Reef visitor's centre. A stop at Fruita, the fertile valley still containing orchards planted by the mormons that once lived here, produced a large flock of wild turkey and a family of mule deer drinking from the Fremont River. We heard a repetitive vocalization and found, to our surprise, a yellow-bellied marmot sitting high in a tree and warning others of our presence (normally they are on the ground).

The Capitol Reef scenic drive was impressive with its many geological layers visible, but a green-tailed towhee remained elusive as we walked the river trail. A presentation by a park ranger at the Fremont Indian petroglyph panel helped us understand their native culture, and as the weather cooperated, we can walked the Grand Basin slot canyon to view the rock formations up close.

During a delicious dinner, we had a glimpse of a black-chinned hummingbird quickly visiting the restaurant's hummingbird feeder.

Thursday 15 September: Escalante National Monument, Boulder, Calf Creek, Bryce National Park

After breakfast, we returned to the Rim Rock Restaurant to check the hummingbird feeder, and Jim spotted a pair of coyotes hunting on the ridge across the valley. Red-shafted northern flickers were perched on the cottonwood trees and flying over the valley.

We left the charming town of Torrey, and the aspens were impressive on our drive to Boulder, with many of them having changed to their beautiful yellow fall colours. As our elevation increased, we had our first views of majestic ponderosa pine and a variety of fir trees. We manouvered around a few head of free-range cattle roaming Scenic Highway 12 before arriving in Boulder where we had our first views of western bluebird. A delicious, mid-morning espresso followed by a visit to the Boulder pond was a hit. Here, we spied blue-winged teal, pied-billed grebe, American coot, and one female ring-necked duck.

Our picnic lunch at Calf Creek State Park included a visit to the five hummingbird feeders near the river, where Lindsay first spotted a rufous hummingbird. Additional visits from black-chinned and broad-tailed hummingbirds, male and female, followed the sighting of a Say's phoebe in the wildflower-filled field.

We marvelled at the rock formations as we traveled to the Escalante National Monument's visitor centre, and we had our first views of dramatic rock hoodoos outside of the small town of Tropic.

Sunset at Bryce Canyon was breathtaking, and as a flock of Clark's nutcrackers flew over the rim as we took pictures. Dinner in the cozy dining room of the oldest original lodge in the National Park system, Bryce Lodge, was delicious. We attended the night sky programme to learn about the science of astronomy and to view the planets. Mars, Jupiter, and Venus were all present in view in the sky, bright in the light of the full Harvest moon.

Friday 16 September: Bryce National Park

We were up early to witness a chilly sunrise on the rim before breakfast; and, on our return to the canyon, we observed a Utah prairie dog village, and some great birds – Brewer's blackbird, horned Lark, and western meadowlark near the famous Ruby's Inn.

Many chipmunks call Bryce their home because of the numerous pine cones available for food, and we started to identify them as we walked the paved rim trail. Dark-eyed junco, western bluebird, pygmy and white-breasted nuthatches were seen and heard vocalizing, and we enjoyed a sighting of three Townsend's solitaires in the ponderosa pines.

A picnic lunch at Rainbow Point was followed by a hike on the Bristlecone Pine trail to find specimens of the ancient pines, some over 1,600 years old. We found many along the trail, as well as a western red squirrel collecting pinecones to add to his already substantial cache. Red-breasted nuthatch and mountain chickadee were seen and heard often, and a stop at the Natural Bridge overlook provided an outstanding photographic opportunity on our return.

Saturday 17 September: Red Rock Canyon, Lake Powell, Antelope Slot-Canyon

Our drive to Lake Powell began with a photographic stop at Red Rock Canyon and their informative visitor centre. We then followed the Sevier River Valley south along scenic Highway 89. This fertile marshland yielded us a landing white-faced ibis from flight, ponds with ducks and coots, a northern harrier, and an osprey nest.

After lunch in Page, a town built to house those building the Glen Canyon Dam in the 1960's, we boarded our truck, driven by the Navajo guide Laura, to travel a dry river bed five kilometres to the entrance to the famous Antelope Slot Canyon. Only pictures can describe the beauty created by the sun sliding through the slots in the canyon ceiling. Laura helped us with camera and phone settings to achieve the best photographic results. At the canyon's exit, Laura pointed out a great-horned owl nest. This visit to the Antelope Slot Canyon was a unique experience we will always remember!

A delicious dinner at Wahwhep's Lake Powell Resort with great views from the dining room was the perfect ending to this magical day!

Sunday 18 September: Cruise to Rainbow Bridge

As we began breakfast, Pat checked outside for the greater roadrunner and found one searching for a lizard for his breakfast around the rocks. All ran out to photograph this unique member of the cuckoo family.

The Rainbow Bridge tour includes a headset narrative delivered by local Navajo describing the history and significance of this '8th Wonder of the World'. Our ship cruised through the canyons created by the Colorado River and flooded in the 1960's to create the lake and Glen Canyon Dam. Five bighorn sheep grazing along the shore were spotted by Lindsay.

We landed and walked the two kilometer trail to this historical natural wonder. Datura and Maidenhair fern grew along the weeping wall, and we saw spotted towhee, and both canyon and rock wrens. Pictures don't capture the beauty and magnificence of this sacred Navajo monument.

Our drive to the Grand Canyon traversed across Navajo land where traditional hogans can still be seen alongside simple modern-day Navajo dwellings. A stop at the Cameron Trading Post was a postcard and shopping opportunity and a chance to visit shops with authentic Navajo antiques.

As we arrived at the Grand Canyon in time to enjoy the colours of the sunset reflected on the cliffs, Trevor spotted a male elk with a large antler rack in the woods and we all got photos. Mountain lion warning signs alerted us to watch for this elusive predator.

Monday 19 September: Grand Canyon National Park

We began our morning with a walk along the rim following the Geology Trail. Scenery was incomparable and so were great looks at a male hairy woodpecker, woodhouse scrub-jay, and busy pygmy muthatches. A surprise (late-season) Wilson's warbler appeared near the rim as we discouraged the rock squirrels from begging.

A visit to the Geology Museum couldn't be missed, and we learned more about the formation of the canyon by erosion and the Colorado River. We could see the whitewater and raft tours passing far below from the windows of the museum.

We watched for California condor as we visited Hopi Point, and we travelled to Hermit's Rest using the comfort of the canyon's shuttle. Numerous elk were seen and photographed along the route, to the delight of the group.

The Historic El Tovar Hotel, built at the centre of the rim in 1908, welcomed us for dinner, a delicious ending to a perfect day!

Tuesday 20 September: Vermilion Cliffs, Navajo Bridge, Zion National Park

We awoke to a rainy day filling the canyon with clouds, mist and fog, so we travelled to the Vermilion Cliffs' Navajo Bridge to hopefully find a California condor. We were rewarded by seeing two, #LO and #6, sitting under the bridge in the rain. Scope views left Mike commenting that they were actually pretty ugly birds!

A visit to the Cliff Dwellers area at the base of the cliffs, and lunch at the Cliff Dweller's Restaurant, reminded the group of the old cowboy movies of the wild west. We arrived at the Checkerboard Canyon at the entrance to Zion National Park before sunset, with Jim viewing a few Big horn sheep on the rocks.

Dinner at Oscars was a delicious southwest cuisine opportunity!

Wednesday 21 September: Grafton Ghost Town, Zion National Park

Our hotel warned us with signage of the recent sighting of a mountain lion on the property, but we were not lucky enough to catch a glimpse of this magnificent cat.

After breakfast (cinnamon rolls, again - yum!), we traveled a short distance to Grafton, a mormon ghost town along the Virgin River. Settled by these pioneers, it was eventually abandoned because of frequent flooding, and a trust maintains the remaining historical structures. Near the cemetery, Pat found a large covey of Gambel's quail, which quickly scurried for cover. A male and female vermillion flycatcher then delighted the group and were seen at close range and in the scope.

A rainy afternoon limited any hiking, but the group enjoyed the Zion Canyon shuttle tour and narrative, and lunch was enjoyed in the historical Zion Lodge.

We visited Zion National Park's Human History Museum and, through the clouds, viewed in the park ranger's scope a juvenile California condor perched in its cave across the canyon. The condor was five and a half months old and should fledge in the next few weeks. Its father died from lead poisoning in June, the number one cause of death in the reestablished condor population. We learned that his mother comes to feed him about once a day. The juvenile won't be tagged because of the inaccessibility of reaching the nest.

Returning to the small town we enjoy at the entrance to Zion Canyon, some of the group visited an art and 'whirlyjigg' shop in Springdale. Our final dinner was celebrated at the Bit & Spur Southwest Cuisine restaurant, a tradition, and a fitting ending to nine wonderful days touring the Southwestern USA National Parks.

Thursday 22 September: Return to Salt Lake City & depart

A stop at Cave Fort along our return route to Salt Lake City on Highway 15 gave us looks at mountain bluebird, a Cassin's kingbird, horned lark and rough-winged swallow. A visit to Cracker Barrel for lunch provided a 'rocking chair' rest for the group.

Tornado-type clouds and rain add some excitement on the return drive, but the airport cleared in time for scheduled departures to return home, all of us taking memories of the incomparable scenery and adventures from our USA National Parks and Southwest tour, and new friendships to last a lifetime.

