



**MERLIN**  
BIRDING TOURS

**Proposal to Wimberley Birding Society: Spring 2019 SW Montana Birding Tour**  
*(1-7 June 2019)*

Exploring wetland, sage-steppe, prairie and mountain forest habitats  
(With optional (5-day) pre-trip extension to Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks)  
*(Proposed by Steve Hoffman/Merlin Birding & Nature Tours LLC; 6.16.18)*

This tour will feature exploration of the wetlands, grasslands and sage-steppe country of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge/Centennial Valley and Beaverhead County, Montana area. This diverse, incredibly scenic (and isolated) landscape, not far from Yellowstone National Park, harbors a remarkable abundance of birds. This 7-day, 6-night tour will explore an array of habitats, ranging from high-elevation wetland, prairie and sage country to adjacent mountain forests. Nesting birds are abundant throughout the refuge at this time of year, with 130+ species possible. Red Rock Lakes Refuge is best known for heroic efforts to save the Trumpeter Swan from extinction back in the 1930's. In addition to the majestic swan, more than 230 bird species have been identified within the refuge. We will likely find Barrow's Goldeneye, Sandhill Cranes, Red-necked Grebes, Western/Clark's Grebes, American White Pelicans, White-faced Ibis, Short-eared Owls and various ducks, flycatchers, kinglets, warblers, vireos, tanagers, thrushes, woodpeckers and much more.

The Dillon/Beaverhead County area is well known for the historic Bannack ghost town, a wild-west boomtown in the gold-rush days of the 1860's. We will search this area for shrub-steppe birds (Greater Sage-Grouse, Sage & Brewer's sparrows, Gray Flycatcher, Sage Thrasher, etc.) as well as prairie species, including Prairie Falcon, Swainson's and Ferruginous hawks (nesting), Bald & Golden eagles, Long-billed Curlew, McCown's Longspur and Burrowing Owl (also nesting). (In May 2018 we were lucky to find the very rare Mountain Plover!) In addition, the wetlands and shorelines of nearby Clark Canyon Reservoir will provide outstanding viewing of numerous waterbirds, including various ducks, loons, grebes, and shorebirds.

**DETAILED ITINERARY**

**Saturday, 1 June 2019:**

**5:00 PM:** Steve Hoffman will meet everyone at the Bozeman Airport - please arrive no later than 5:00 PM. We will eat dinner and overnite in Bozeman.

**Sunday, 2 June 2019:**

**7:30 AM:** After breakfast at our hotel we shall depart for the Dillon area, stopping for some exciting birding along the way. Our first stop will be Headwaters State Park, where the Gallatin, Jefferson and Madison rivers come together to form the mighty Missouri. Here Peregrine Falcons have nested successfully for the past several years. White-throated Swifts, Rock & Canyon wrens, and American White Pelicans are also target birds for this stop. After lunch in Whitehall we will stop just south of town to search for Chestnut-collared Longspurs. A bit farther along the road we will make a brief stop at Beaverhead Rock State Park, a spectacular roadside wetland likely to yield Wilson's Phalaropes, Sandhill Cranes and a plethora of waterfowl and shorebirds. If there is time we may stop at a few other small wetlands along our route before reaching Dillon. If we arrive in



# MERLIN

BIRDING TOURS

time we may visit the local Beaverhead County Museum, which includes a nice display of the area's native birds as well as interesting cultural/historical information. We will have dinner and overnite here in Dillon.

## **Monday, 3 June 2019:**

**5:00 AM:** If there's interest we have the option of getting up early to visit a Greater Sage-Grouse breeding "lek" where males display to attract females – please note, however, that the best time of year for this is in April; hence there may not be many (or any?) birds present this late in the season. After our sage-grouse viewing we'll travel to Bannack State Park for a pit-stop, and to search for birds along the streamside cottonwood, adjacent scrubland and mountain foothills. We often find nesting Great Horned-Owls, as well as Townsend's Solitaire, Mountain Bluebird, Red-naped Sapsucker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Clark's Nutcracker, Cassin's Finch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, Cedar Waxwing and more at this historic park. In addition to the birding we will explore the Bannack ghost town, a thriving mining town starting in the early 1860's. Next we'll proceed south toward Horse Prairie, stopping along the way to view Sage & Brewer's sparrows, Sage Thrashers and Gray Flycatchers, all on their breeding territories.

**LUNCH:** Our sack lunch-stop will be adjacent to the shores and wetlands of Clark Canyon Reservoir, where we will look for various waterbirds, including loons, grebes, pelicans, shorebirds and more. After lunch we will continue south to tour a productive, artificial wetland created through a collaborative BLM-sponsored project. Here we may find nesting Sandhill Cranes as well as rails, ducks, sparrows and warblers. Our final stops for the day will likely be two other wetland areas, including Poindexter Slough. Here we will look among cattails and willow stringers for several species of ducks, Wilson's Snipe as well as various blackbirds, thrushes, warblers and Marsh Wrens. We shall return to our hotel by mid-afternoon in time for an extended nap before dinner.

## **Tuesday, 4 June 2019:**

**7:30 AM:** We will sleep in a bit this morning, eat a hardy breakfast, and depart to explore the rich grasslands and farmlands north of Dillon. We hope to view Ferruginous & Swainson's hawks, Prairie Falcon, both eagle species, and kestrels. Nesting Burrowing Owls are also likely, along with Long-billed Curlew, McCown's Longspur, Horned Lark, Savannah & Vesper sparrows and possibly Mountain Plover. Depending on road conditions we may travel on a gravel road which parallels the Big Hole River. Here we will likely find migrant songbirds as well as a variety of wetland species.

**LUNCH:** We will likely have a picnic lunch along the Big Hole River (depending upon the abundance of mosquitoes!). After lunch we will head south toward Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and Centennial Valley. Our plan is to arrive at Elk Lake Resort by 6:00 PM. We will stay here for the next three nites. After settling into our rooms we will eat dinner (6:30 PM) and then explore the immediate vicinity for birds (optional) before going to bed early.

## **Wednesday, 5 June 2019:**

**7:30 AM:** After breakfast we shall depart for Red Rock Lakes Refuge. (packing our lunches to eat along the way.) An early start will give us the best chance for viewing a great variety of birds and mammals as we drive toward the Upper Red Rock Lake Campground. (We are hoping to arrive at the campground by 9:00 AM to



# MERLIN

BIRDING TOURS

catch the exceptional morning songbird activity.) At the campground and along the road we will view a variety of forest birds in the mature aspen groves, hoping to find various flycatchers, warblers, vireos, tanagers, thrushes, sparrows, waxwings, grosbeaks and woodpeckers. We will then scan Upper Red Rock Lakes for grebes, ducks, loons, pelicans, terns, gulls, and swans on the lake.

**LUNCH:** After birding this area for 2-3 hours we will eat lunch at the campground. After lunch we will continue west and then south, stopping briefly at Shambow Pond to view waterfowl. We will then make a quick stop at refuge headquarters – here we can obtain refuge literature and use their bathroom facilities. Our next stop will be Lower Red Rock Lake. Here we will likely find shorebirds (stilts, avocets, phalaropes, willets, etc.), marsh birds (rails, yellow-headed blackbirds, etc.) and waterbirds (grebes, ducks, cormorants, ibises, herons).

**2:00 PM:** After leaving the Lower Lake we shall proceed in a westerly and then northerly direction, searching for a variety of prairie and wetland species along the way. We shall then drive easterly along the North Valley Road, hoping to find Short-eared Owls, Ferruginous Hawks, Northern Harriers, Prairie Falcons, American Kestrels, Golden Eagles, Long-billed Curlews and other sage/open-country species (possibly Greater Sage-Grouse). We plan to arrive back at the resort for dinner by 5:30-6:00 PM. Dinner is scheduled for 6:30 PM. (After-dinner evening birding around the resort is optional.)

## **Thursday, 6 June 2019:**

**6:15 AM:** *Optional* early morning birding & exploration of the forests, meadows and wetlands near the resort. We will search for late-migrant and resident warblers, vireos, sparrows, tanagers, thrushes and woodpeckers while enjoying breath-taking views of the Centennial Mountains and surrounding landscape.

**BREAKFAST:** 7:30 AM at the resort.

**8:30 AM:** Depart to explore the wetlands, willow thickets and forested mountain slopes hills along Culver Road. We will start by viewing the waterbirds utilizing Widgeon Pond and Tuck's Slough, searching for Trumpeter Swans, American White Pelicans and an array of ducks and shorebirds. We shall then continue exploring the eastern portion of the valley along Culver Road (including checking a traditionally active Bald Eagle nest upslope from the road).

**11:30 PM:** We will start back toward the resort, keeping an eye out for birds along the way.

**12:30 PM:** LUNCH at Elk Lake Resort.

**1:30 – 3:00 PM:** We invite folks to take a 1.5-hour siesta to rest and/or enjoy the spectacular scenery at this locale. (Our relaxing afternoon could be extended a bit, depending on the needs of the group.) If folks are interested we may explore the Hidden Lake area and the associated forested habitats north of the resort.

**3:00 PM:** We will leave the resort to explore along North Valley Road until about 6:00 PM.

**6:00 PM:** DINNER at Elk Lake Resort.



# MERLIN

BIRDING TOURS

**7:30 PM:** If folks are interested we may visit a nearby Greater Sage-Grouse breeding lek to look for late-season evening activity (this is only 10 miles from the resort).

**Friday, 7 June 2019:**

**7:30 AM:** Breakfast at the resort.

**8:30 AM:** We will say our fond farewells and depart in time to return to Bozeman by NOON (we can adjust this time to be earlier or later, depending upon flight schedules).

**Proposed Merlin Birding Tours' Pre-Trip (5-Day) Extension:**  
**Birding & Wildlife Watching in Yellowstone & Grand Teton National Parks**  
*(28 May – 1 June 2019)*

Authorized by U.S. Congress in 1872, Yellowstone National Park is the world's first national park! Containing 2.2 million acres of mostly wild backcountry, this park harbors 322 species of birds and 76 mammal species, including all of the region's native carnivores (including grizzly & black bears, gray wolf, wolverine, mountain lion, coyote, river otter, etc). In fact, wild wolves are more easily seen here than anywhere else in North America. In terms of native wildlife, perhaps Yellowstone is best known for its large and easily observed herds of Plains Bison (often called "Buffalo"). Geologically speaking, Yellowstone is home to one of the largest calderas, containing over 10,000 thermal features and over 300 geysers (including Old Faithful, the most famous geyser on Earth). To the south of Yellowstone, Grand Teton National Park should not be missed, as it combines drop-dead gorgeous mountain scenery with outstanding wildlife viewing!

I was introduced to the "magic of Yellowstone" after my freshman year of college while serving as a summertime short-order cook at Mammoth Hot Springs. I have many vivid memories enjoying the park's abundant and diverse wildlife while exploring its vast backcountry. These Yellowstone experiences convinced me to devote my career to wildlife conservation. I am honored to have the opportunity to share with WBS members my knowledge and passion for this amazing public treasure!

The timing of this trip coincides with not only the best wildlife viewing and bird watching, but also when both parks are at the pinnacle of their scenic splendor! Not only is it the start of the breeding season for most resident birds, but it is also when elk, bison, bighorn sheep and mountain goats are giving birth to their young. There are cute babies everywhere!

Should you have any questions about this pre-trip extension (or any aspects of the main tour), please do not hesitate to contact me (Steve Hoffman) personally at your earliest convenience ([Steve@merlinbirding.com](mailto:Steve@merlinbirding.com); 406-461-5714).



**MERLIN**  
BIRDING TOURS

## **DETAILED ITINERARY**

### **Tuesday, 28 May 2019:**

**5:00 PM:** Arrive at Bozeman airport. DINNER at *Ted's Montana Grill* (specializing in serving locally-raised buffalo at Ted Turner's nearby Flying D Buffalo Ranch). We will then travel to Gardiner (North Entrance to Yellowstone National Park) to spend the night.

### **Wednesday, 29 May 2019:**

**6:00 AM:** After an early breakfast we will depart for Lamar Valley (often referred to as "North America's Serengeti"). For optimal wildlife viewing we will want to enter the park as close to dawn as possible – this will give us the best chance to see wolves, grizzly bears, moose and other relatively shy mammal species. Lamar Valley is the ideal place for early morning wildlife watching. Throughout this expansive valley we can see most, if not all of Yellowstone's large mammals, including bison, elk, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, black & grizzly bears, wolves, coyotes and possibly moose. We shall search intently at the Calcite Springs/Tower Falls area for black bears, nesting Peregrine Falcons, and bighorn sheep. Above Tower Falls we hope to find nesting American Dippers. One spot we hope to visit is particularly good for Williamson's Sapsuckers, an uncommon species.

**LUNCH:** We will likely do a picnic lunch along the Yellowstone River near Tower Junction.

We will then continue exploring the expansive grass-sagelands of Lamar Valley, which typically harbor large herds of bison (more commonly known as "buffalo"), often quite close to the road. This valley is also the best place for viewing both wolves and grizzly bears (especially before 9:00 AM), as well as Golden and Bald eagles, Ospreys, and even river otters! Toward the Northeast Entrance and Cooke City there are excellent viewing opportunities for mountain goats, bighorn sheep, and possibly moose. We shall have DINNER and overnight in Cooke City.

### **Thursday, 30 May 2019:**

**6:00 AM:** On Day Two we'll eat an early breakfast and then continue looking for wolves, grizzly bears and other wildlife while passing through Lamar Valley en route to the spectacular Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, including its dramatic Upper and Lower Falls. After exploring Yellowstone's Grand Canyon area we'll drive through Hayden Valley, best known for its abundance of large mammals as well as a variety of waterbirds (including American White Pelican, Trumpeter Swan, Great Blue Heron and a plethora of waterfowl species) using the Yellowstone River and adjacent wetlands. River otters are possible here, as are grizzlies and wolves. A bit farther upstream LeHardy Rapids provides ideal viewing of sharply-dressed Harlequin Ducks!

**LUNCH:** We will likely do a picnic lunch while en route to the Upper Geyser Basin and Old Faithful. (All Yellowstone visitors should see Old Faithful erupt at least once!) This geyser basin has many other thermal features sure to capture your imagination and sense of wonder. Riverside, Beehive, Grand and Castle geysers can all erupt with impressive force. Farther along the route Midway Geyser Basin harbors the largest, most colorful hot spring in North America: Grand Prismatic Spring. The Fountain Paint Pots seem almost plucked out of a Dr. Seuss book, with the mudpots displaying a fascinating symphony of bubbling mud! We will eat DINNER and overnite in West Yellowstone, just outside Yellowstone's West Entrance.



# MERLIN

BIRDING TOURS

## **Friday, 31 May 2019:**

**7:00 AM:** After a robust breakfast we shall travel to Yellowstone's South Entrance and continue into Grand Teton National Park. We will arrange for a leisurely float (in a large raft) in the tranquil waters of the Upper Snake River, experiencing this incredibly scenic and wildlife-rich landscape. (The snow-clad Teton Range rises nearly vertically 7,000 feet above the Jackson Hole Valley.)

**LUNCH:** We will eat our lunch during or shortly after our float trip. We will then explore the park while looking for a variety of forest and open-country bird species, with possibilities for Short-eared Owls, both eagle species as well as many other raptors, songbirds, woodpeckers, and waterbirds. During the lull of mid-afternoon we shall visit the Park's informative Visitor Center in Jackson. We plan to overnite in Jackson, WY.

## **Saturday, 1 June 2019:**

**7:00 AM:** On this day we shall re-trace our route through Grand Teton National Park, hoping to spot moose, bears and possibly even wolves early in the morning. Depending upon road construction activities and our schedule we may or may not travel back through Yellowstone Park. We shall gradually make our way back to Bozeman, planning to arrive in town no later than 4:00 PM (or sooner if our incoming participants will be arriving earlier in the afternoon). We shall have DINNER and overnite in Bozeman, preparing for our upcoming 7-day birding adventure in Beaverhead County and Centennial Valley.

*Merlin Birding and Nature Tours LLC is a fully licensed permittee for Yellowstone National Park.*

## **YOUR TRIP LEADER: STEVE HOFFMAN**

After a 38-year wildlife conservation career, Steve retired to start his own birding/wildlife-watching tour company (Merlin Birding and Nature Tours LLC). Steve's intense passion for wildlife began in Yellowstone (in 1970) while serving as a short-order cook at Mammoth Hot Springs. During this summer Steve spent every free moment exploring the park's wild backcountry. Steve's breadth of experience in the park combined with his extensive knowledge of its wildlife, along with his commitment to public education and the conservation of park resources will capably serve Wimberley Birding Society participants, helping them learn more about and fully enjoy Yellowstone's abundant and diverse wildlife and dramatic landscapes.

Beyond Yellowstone, Steve has led or co-led many National Audubon Society, HawkWatch International, Montana Audubon and Sacajawea Audubon birding/wildlife-watching tours in Montana, and to Belize, Costa Rica, Mexico's Copper Canyon, Veracruz, and Oaxaca & Baja California regions. Steve grew up in suburban Philadelphia, attended college in eastern Pennsylvania, and received his Master's Degree in Wildlife Ecology from Utah State University.

**TOUR GROUP SIZE:** The group size limit for this tour is 10. Anyone wishing to register once this limit is reached will be placed on a waiting list, and will be contacted immediately if there are any cancellations.



# MERLIN

BIRDING TOURS

**TOUR COST:** The fee for the tour is **\$1695** per person (double occupancy) from Bozeman, Montana. This includes all meals, from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 7, lodging, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities and guide services provided by the tour leader and any additional local guides. It does not include airfare from your home to Bozeman and return, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities (e.g., for your guide), phone calls, laundry or items of a personal nature. The single supplement for this tour is **\$\$450**. You will be charged a single supplement if you request single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we are unable to find one for you.

**COST OF 5-DAY, PRE-TRIP EXTENSION (28 May – 1 June):** The fee for this portion of the tour is **\$895** per person (double occupancy) from Bozeman, Montana. This includes all meals, from dinner on Day 1 to lunch on Day 5, lodging, ground transportation during the tour, gratuities and guide services provided by the tour leader and local guides. It does not include airfare from your home to Bozeman and return, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities (e.g., for your guide), phone calls, laundry or items of a personal nature. The single supplement for this tour is **\$300**. You will be charged this single supplement if you opt for single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we are unable to find one for you.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact Steve at Merlin Birding & Nature Tours (direct mobile phone: 406-461-5714; or email: [Steve@merlinbirding.com](mailto:Steve@merlinbirding.com)). The initial deposit for this tour is **\$350** per person. Your initial deposit can be paid by check, money order, bank transfer or credit card/Paypal. Please complete your Registration Form and Liability Release at the time of your deposit.

**FINAL PAYMENTS:** Initial tour deposits may be made by MasterCard, Visa, check, money order, or bank transfer. All other tour payments, including the final balance must be made by check, money order, or bank transfer. Full payment of the tour fee is due 90 days prior to departure date.

**CANCELLATION POLICY:** Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 90 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$150/person** will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another Merlin Birding tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be only **\$50/person**. If cancellation is made between 90 and 60 days before departure, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 60 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to the pre-trip extensions. ***We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance for your protection.*** If you cancel, your refund will be:

- 90 days or more before departure date, your deposit minus \$150\*
- Between 90 and 60 days before departure, no refund of the deposit, but any additional payments on balances will be refunded.
- Fewer than 60 days before departure date, no refund available.

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another Merlin Birding tour that will run within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$50/person.

**FLIGHT RESERVATION INFORMATION:** Merlin Birding Tours has an agreement with Travel Café in Bozeman. You are welcome to contact Nora Armstrong-Rochford of Travel Café (406-548-3587); she will be



# MERLIN

BIRDING TOURS

happy to make your air travel arrangements from your home and return (be sure to mention to her that you have registered for a Merlin Birding Tours' trip).

**CLOTHING & CONDITIONS:** Late spring/early summer weather in Montana is generally quite nice, but we recommend being prepared for the unexpected. Days are generally warm (60s & 70s), and nights cool (30s & 40s). In late May/early June we anticipate generally fair and mild conditions, but it can also be rainy and unseasonably cool at times. Spring cold fronts from the Pacific Northwest are not uncommon and can produce chilly, rainy weather. Conditions in Yellowstone National Park and nearby Centennial Valley are generally colder than surrounding areas, due to their higher elevation (6-8,000 feet above sea level), with the possibility of some early mornings being near or below freezing. However, significant snowfall is highly unlikely. Hence, a combination of cold and warm weather clothing is recommended. Please consider dressing in layers. We suggest bringing two pairs of long pants, shorts if you like, both short-sleeved and long-sleeved shirts, and a warm jacket or parka that repels water. You might also include a pair of gloves to wear on cold mornings. We also recommend either a sturdy trail-walking shoe or light hiking boot. You might also consider bringing along running shoes or open-toed shoes (sandals or Tevas). A hat for protection from the sun is a good idea. Please note that we will be spending a fair amount of time in our vehicle, but this will be broken up frequently by birding stops and short walks.

**EQUIPMENT:** You should pack a pair of binoculars along with a belt pack or daypack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, etc). As a precaution, it's a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items, medications, and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag. Your leader will have a spotting scope, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. Other items you should be sure to bring are an alarm clock, sunscreen and mosquito repellent.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, *local* guides) is included on all Merlin Birding tours. However, if you feel your Merlin Birding leader(s) or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not required and are optional. Tips can be given directly to your tour leader/guides; tips for Merlin Birding Tours' leaders can also be mailed to Merlin Birding's post office box address after the tour is completed.



