

Montana

28 May–11 June 2006

Participants:

David Butterworth

Robert Milne

George and Bernie Mowat

Andrew Self

Paula Reynosa

Grahame and John Walshe

Kevin White



Ferruginous Hawk
(Courtesy Bob Martinka)

Leaders: Jeff Marks and Brett Walker

This new tour for Birdfinders covered most of the habitats in Montana, the 4th largest state in the US. In all, we drove 3,000 miles in a 14-passenger van, visiting beautiful wide-open spaces with few people. We saw all of the state's major rivers; the Missouri, Yellowstone, Tongue, Clark Fork, Blackfoot, and Flathead and traversed mountain passes that approached 11,000 feet in elevation. In the end, we tallied 238 bird species, all but 5 of them seen well by the group. Among the feats we accomplished were seeing all 22 species of emberizids that breed in Montana and encountering all 13 species of breeding tyrannid flycatchers. We also observed Northern Hawk-owl and Great Gray Owl at the nest, 4 species of swifts, 10 species of woodpeckers, 15 species of wood-warblers, and a variety of mammals that included Badger, Black Bear, Gray Wolf, Elk, Bighorn Sheep, and Mountain Goat.

Day 1: Participants arrived late in the evening and were taken to the motel in Missoula, our home for the first three nights.

Day 2: Owing to the late arrival the previous night, we met for breakfast at the rather civilized hour of 06.30, our spirits undiminished by the light rain that was falling. Rattlesnake Creek ran beneath the restaurant, and while coffee arrived, we were treated to an adult American Dipper feeding a juvenile not 30 yards from our window seats, an auspicious start to the trip! All of the morning's birding was on foot from the motel. Before we'd crossed the street from the restaurant, a Pygmy Nuthatch flew overhead carrying food, presumably to a nearby nest. We walked along the Clark Fork River just upstream from the University of Montana campus, locating an out-of-place Clay-colored Sparrow and a host of the normal breeders, which included Calliope Hummingbird, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Warbling Vireo, Nashville Warbler, American Redstart, Gray Catbird, Black-headed Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting, Bullock's Oriole, and several species of swallows. Migrating Wilson's Warblers sang from the riparian willow patches and afforded great looks to all. Returning to the motel, we climbed into the van for a short ride to the Rattlesnake Recreation Area, stopping briefly at Greenough Park, where we saw Vaux's Swift, Song Sparrow, and House Finch. A stop at the recreation area produced Hammond's Flycatcher, Western Bluebird, Cassin's Finch, and terrific looks at a male Rufous Hummingbird. After lunch, we visited a mixed coniferous forest in Pattee Canyon and got outstanding

looks at a pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers at a nest and a spectacular male Townsend's Warbler. An afternoon stop along the Clark Fork River produced Lewis's and Hairy woodpeckers and close views of White-breasted Nuthatch. After an authentic Mexican dinner in downtown Missoula, Grahame found the perfect birding dessert; a male Harlequin Duck sitting on a rock in the Clark Fork River! We retired for the night with more than 70 species under our belts.

Day 3: This marathon day began with a 05.00 departure for a breakfast stop at Ovando in the Blackfoot Valley. After a brief look at wetland teeming with waterfowl and breeding (American) Black Terns, we crossed the Continental Divide at Rogers Pass. Our first prairie destination, Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge, produced Swainson's Hawk, Burrowing Owl, Upland Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, Western Kingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, and Chestnut-collared Longspur in the uplands. The wetlands afforded close views of Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Canvasback, White-faced Ibis, American Avocet, Willet, Wilson's Phalarope, Forster's Tern, Franklin's Gull, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. At our next stop, Freezout Lake Wildlife Management Area, we obtained side-by-side comparisons of Western and Clark's grebes and saw squadrons of American White Pelicans overhead. We also saw several Black-crowned Night-herons and chanced upon a Great Egret, which is a rarity in Montana. Several prairie passerines also made an appearance, including Horned Lark and Savannah Sparrow. En route to our final stop, we found a family of Great Horned Owls and a roosting Common Nighthawk in a patch of cottonwoods, and viewed Golden Eagles and Ferruginous Hawks nesting on cliff faces. As the sun started to sink in the west, McCown's and Chestnut-collared longspurs treated us to aerial song displays west of Choteau. Skirting the edge of Pine Butte Swamp, we found a singing Veery and a pair of rust-coloured Sandhill Cranes. Dinner at a rustic bar in Augusta was followed by a night-time drive back over the Continental Divide to Missoula.

Day 4: We began the day at the site of a forest fire that burned on the outskirts of Missoula several years ago. Our main targets, Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers, were found rather painlessly in the standing-dead timber that is so abundant here. We also got great looks at Western Wood-pewee, Dark-eyed Junco, and Western Tanager. But the bird of the morning was a Northern Pygmy-owl that appeared on a bare-topped snag, affording everyone scope views of this tiny but lethal avian predator. Heading up the Bitterroot Valley, a stop at Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge produced Least Flycatcher, Marsh Wren, and Osprey. We stopped for lunch at a birder-friendly inn where two biologists demonstrated how they capture and ring hummingbirds. As we ate lunch, a Rock Wren sang from the hill above us, and dozens of Rufous and Calliope hummingbirds, and at least one Black-chinned Hummingbird, buzzed about our heads. Departing to the south, we climbed to Lost Trail Pass, finding Steller's Jay, Clark's Nutcracker, and Golden-crowned Kinglet. We were met at our hotel in Jackson by a biologist who showed us Northern Goshawk and Great Gray Owl in the conifer forest that rings the Big Hole Valley. Everyone obtained amazing looks at both species, first on nests and later foraging in open meadows in the forest. We ended a very productive day with a gourmet meal.

Day 5: This morning was dedicated to finding several species of sagebrush obligates. We began by looking in vain for Greater Sage-grouse that would have been easy to find on a nearby lek earlier in spring. The lack of grouse was compensated for by encounters with Gray Flycatcher (a rare Montana breeder), Sage Thrasher, Lark Bunting, Brewer's Sparrow, and Sage Sparrow. A stop at historic Bannack State Park produced our first Red-naped Sapsucker and outstanding views of nesting Violet-green Swallow and Mountain Bluebird. Continuing on to the remote Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, we spent the afternoon watching Trumpeter Swans and other waterbirds that included Common Loon (Great Northern Diver) and a late-migrant Red-breasted Merganser. We ended our day at Elk Lake Lodge, enjoying outstanding hospitality and lakefront cabins.

Day 6: A dawn walk produced Lincoln's Sparrow, followed by a scrumptious homemade breakfast. We then headed for Yellowstone National Park. Barely underway, we stopped for a pair of Barrow's Goldeneye on a lake and then two Prairie Falcons, which swooped across a cliff above us. In Yellowstone Park, we picked up Cooper's Hawk in the forested habitat that is regenerating after the 1988 fires. Bison grazed in the high-elevation meadows, a Black Bear fed on a nearby hillside, and one of our eagle-eyed participants spotted a Gray Wolf in the valley below. Everyone was thrilled at seeing this amazing carnivore in its natural habitat. After exiting the park, we stopped at several spots along the Beartooth Highway for American Pipit and Black Rosy-finch at more

than 10,000 feet in elevation. A Sharp-shinned Hawk soared overhead as we descended the pass toward Red Lodge, our home for the next two nights.

Day 7: Today we made a much-anticipated visit to Bear Canyon in the Pryor Mountains just north of the Wyoming border. Along the way we found a Eurasian Collared-dove, which is rapidly expanding its range in the US. Arriving at an old White-tailed Prairie Dog town on the flats below the canyon, we immediately spotted a Mountain Plover, which proceeded to show off for a good 15 minutes! Bear Canyon did not disappoint. White-throated Swifts streaked across the blue sky above us, while a Say's Phoebe sang from a nearby cliff. The riparian habitat was alive with songbirds, including Dusky Flycatcher, MacGillivray's Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Mountain Chickadee, Spotted Towhee, and a special treat, a male Chestnut-sided Warbler that was far outside its normal range. In the sagebrush and junipers toward the canyon mouth, we located Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Green-tailed Towhee. Walking back to the van, Brett found a Western Rattlesnake, which everyone admired from a safe distance! Although we heard several Pinyon Jays in the distance, we failed to see them. A pre-dinner stop at the water treatment ponds in Bridger produced several Wood Ducks. Returning to Bear Canyon, we located a Chukar atop a rocky outcrop in the light of the setting sun. Despite a windy evening, we heard several Common Poorwills calling from the rocky slopes and managed distant views of one of them on the dirt road in the canyon.

Day 8: We started the morning in Red Lodge, finding a flock of very photogenic Red Crossbills. Next, some friends of Jeff's graciously let us invade their home to observe Broad-tailed Hummingbirds attending feeders. After leaving Red Lodge, stops to explore Pictograph Caves State Park and Little Bighorn National Battlefield produced many summer-resident birds, most notably Brown Thrasher, Lark Sparrow, and Lazuli Bunting. After traversing the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservations, we arrived in Ashland, a small town along the Tongue River. We checked into our motel and then explored south of town, finding Cassin's and Western kingbirds that shared foraging areas along roadside fences. An evening drive produced numerous calling Common Poorwills.

Day 9: A morning trip to Cow Creek rewarded us with outstanding views of Plumbeous Vireo, Orange-crowned Warbler, and Ovenbird. Driving north along the Tongue River, we discovered our first Chimney Swift, a singing Dickcissel, and an Orchard Oriole. Stops along the Yellowstone River produced Caspian Tern, and an evening visit to Seven Sisters Wildlife Management Area yielded Baltimore Oriole and Black-and-white Warbler, a rare breeder in Montana. After a tasty pizza dinner in Sidney, we headed out with a local birder to watch a pair of Eastern Screech-owls feeding recently fledged young. We retired to bed with many new species for the day and dreams of what the birding hotspot of Westby might bring tomorrow.

Day 10: A morning visit to Richland Park along the Yellowstone River yielded Red-headed Woodpecker, Northern "Yellow-shafted" Flicker, Red-eyed Vireo, and more Black-and-white Warblers. We also found another Dickcissel singing near the entrance to the park. After breakfast, we headed north, checking in vain for Least Terns along the Missouri River. A close friend of Jeff's who lives in Westby accompanied us later in the day to share his unparalleled knowledge of the local birds. Near Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge, we found Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, LeConte's Sparrow, and Bobolink in a wet meadow. A stop for migrant shorebirds produced a large flock of White-rumped and Semipalmated sandpipers along with a handful of Least and Baird's Sandpipers, a lone Stilt Sandpiper, and a Sanderling. At a second marsh, we found a nesting Red-necked Grebe, an uncommon breeder this far east. On an alkali lake just north of Westby, we found four Piping Plovers, another northeastern Montana specialty. After a brief stop at Westby Town Park, we headed for our overnight stay in Plentywood.

Day 11: We awoke early and headed straight for Westby Town Park to check for migrant warblers that stop here on the way to breeding grounds in Canada. A likely Mourning Warbler sang briefly but disappeared without being seen, and a female Blackpoll Warbler was the only migrant we confirmed. A patch of native prairie near Westby contained numerous Baird's Sparrows. A male singing on a roadside fence was the bird of the trip for several people. A stop in the hilly country near the Saskatchewan border produced a Sprague's Pipit performing a seemingly endless flight display. Heading south, we got point-blank looks at Grasshopper Sparrow and more Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Another stop at the shorebird pond from the previous day led to a good look at

Virginia Rail for some of us (we'd find this bird later) and a good listen to a Sora from deep within the reeds. Passing Medicine Lake again, we picked up a breeding-plumaged Black-bellied (Grey) Plover and a Double-crested Cormorant. After a long drive west to Fort Peck, we stopped just below the dam to find two Field Sparrows in a howling wind. We then drove to Malta through gorgeous prairie country along the Milk River plain.

Day 12: First thing in the morning, several of us scoured the cottonwoods near Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge for late migrants, again in a howling wind that is so typical in this part of the state. Although we came up empty-handed, we were later rewarded by a group of 18 pale-headed raptors feeding in a freshly plowed field, the flock proving to consist of 17 Swainson's Hawks and one Ferruginous Hawk. From the loop road around the refuge we got outstanding looks at numerous waterfowl, Common Terns, and nesting Black-necked Stilts. The highlight, however, was an American Bittern that flushed and landed in the open for all to see! The rest of the day consisted of a drive along Highway 2, the "High Line" of northern Montana. At one point, we watched a pair of Ferruginous Hawks defending their nest from a marauding Coyote. The nest, only 50 yards off the highway, afforded everyone good looks at two of the fuzzy nestlings and all the key field marks on the adults perched nearby. An unplanned detour down a promising side road near Chester led us to a Short-eared Owl coursing over a meadow and a Merlin trying to nab one of many displaying McCown's Longspurs. We ended our long day of driving at Cut Bank on the eastern edge of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

Day 13: After a 5.00am start, we crossed the Blackfeet Reservation in the fog vainly searching for Sharp-tailed Grouse, then emerged into the clear just in time to catch the first rays of sun on the peaks of Glacier National Park. Because Going-to-the-Sun Highway was blocked at the summit by more than 40 feet of snow, we detoured to explore the alpine habitats near Two Medicine Lake, where we picked up Pine Grosbeak, Hermit Thrush, Mountain Goat, and a herd of Bighorn Sheep. At Pray Lake we heard an Olive-sided Flycatcher and saw Northern Waterthrush and Fox Sparrow. With the addition of the sparrow, we completed our quest to see all 22 species of emberizids that breed in Montana! We celebrated our good fortune with a hearty lunch atop Marias Pass, then descended to enter the park at West Glacier. At Avalanche Lake, Black Swifts foraged high above the ridgelines, and we admired a Common Goldeneye on the lake proper. We ended the day in Coram near the western entrance to the park.

Day 14: Jeff rejoined us first thing in the morning as we headed back into the park for one of Montana's rarest breeding birds. Despite persistent drizzle and the distraction of a Black Bear crossing the road in front of us, we located a Northern Hawk-owl attending a nest with large young. A singing Alder Flycatcher surprised us near the owl nest, completing the "slam" of all 13 tyrannid flycatchers that breed in the state! At Fish Creek campground, we found a female Harlequin Duck roosting mid-stream and Chestnut-backed Chickadees in the cedars. After breakfast at Apgar Village, we revisited Avalanche Creek, getting scope looks at Varied Thrush and finally locating a Pileated Woodpecker, a highlight for many on the trip. Soon after exiting the park, we found a male Evening Grosbeak in West Glacier. On the drive down the east side of Flathead Lake, Grahame spotted an enormous Wild Turkey 250 yards away. Needless to say, we turned around to enjoy such a spectacular bird! We then stopped at the foot of the Mission Mountains to top off our list with a cooperative Canyon Wren before heading back to Missoula for the last evening in Montana.

Day 15: Brett and two hardy birders arose at 5.00 to search Pattee Canyon for forest birds, finding a male Williamson's Sapsucker excavating a nest hole and hearing an Olive-sided Flycatcher and a Winter Wren. Even though the second batch of birders started later, they birded until the last minute, crisscrossing Missoula to find more Red Crossbills, and finally, a Pygmy Nuthatch that had eluded them the first morning of the tour. Songs of Western Meadowlarks, Montana's state bird, accompanied the participants as they walked to their airport gate for the return flight home.