

Part Two. Wyoming & Colorado.

Contributed by Jos

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Largely unplanned, this part of the trip was really conditional on success in the earlier stages of the journey, i.e. the encountering of Polar Bears at Churchill. As it was, with my sightings of both Polar and Black Bear far exceeding even my wildest dreams, this second part of the trip need only to connect with Grizzly Bear to complete the set. As it turned out, Wyoming was truly amazing, the world famous Yellowstone National Park not only producing the desired Grizzly Bear, but also more Black Bears, a pack of Wolves and plentiful birds. Thereafter, slowly drifting south, I travelled into the adjoining Grand Teton National Park and later to the arid canyons and prairie grasslands in the south of Wyoming. As it panned out, I also had time to venture into Colorado, the aim here being to find Prairie Dogs, as well as spend a little time in the canyons and, a total contrast, in the high Rocky Mountains.

21 July. Yellowstone National Park. 6.00 a.m., 1350 km completed, the long overnight drive over. Before me the stone archway to Yellowstone National Park, another destination I had long desired to visit. Just the statistics alone make for an impressive place - first ever designated national park in the world, a land area of 900,000 hectares, over 300 active geysers, 750 km of road to explore. But best of all, a mouth-watering array of mammals - a total of 60 species, including at least 3500 American Bison, up to 14 packs of Wolves and, the key to my trip's success, a Grizzly Bear population numbering perhaps 600, Black Bear also occurring in similar numbers. I was licking my lips, I purchased a seven-day pass, valid also for Grand Teton, and proceeded forward. Another statistic worth mentioning, Yellowstone is also incredibly popular with tourists, some three million per year - the upshot of this is that all the campsites are frequently full from early in the day, so priority number one was making base for my first couple of days, my chosen campsite being at the quaint Tower Falls, just a short hop from the legendary Lamar Valley. Just 40 km or so to reach the campsite, but it took an age, so much to stop and gawp at, Unita Ground Squirrels popping up on short turf and roadsides, the first Bison lumbering across the roads, exquisite Pronghorn prancing across the grasslands. A stop at Blacktail Deer Plateau added a Coyote and a Prairie Falcon, while a short pause at Tower Creek resulting in fantastic views of Williamson's Sapsuckers feeding youngsters. It was way past coffee time when we finally got to the campsite, but fortune was smiling upon us - just as we arrived, another camper was packing up, his spot simply the best, the brow of a hill at the edge of the campsite, the view from the tent a deep valley, wooded on the opposite side. 'Hmm, this has potential', I muttered. Slurped a coffee down, crawled up to a few Unita Ground Squirrels for photographs, then got the itchy feet ... the Lamar Valley was waiting. The approach to Lamar was like a dream, you rise over a ridge then drop into the valley, and what a vista awaits you! Like something from a past era, a twinkling blue river meandering through a broad open valley, the extensive grasslands grazed by herds of Bison as far as the eye could see, all to a backdrop of rising mountains, snow-capped and picture-card perfect. A sharp intake of breath, I pulled over just to enjoy. To our right, Ospreys sat atop a nest, a Mountain Bluebird danced along, Pine Siskins flitted over. But sod the birds, I just couldn't get over the concentration of big mammals filling the valley, not just the Bison herds occupying the valley flats, but also Elk (i.e. Wapiti, not Alces alces) on the valley sides and Pronghorns dotted throughout. We edged up the valley, stopping at random, scanning very carefully, this is also prime bear country. 'T'was now mid-morning. A kilometre or so ahead, a little huddle of cars on the verge, the folk all sat on a bank seemingly intent on something in the valley. I continued onward, stopping a hundred metres or so from them, 'must be something here of interest', said I. With Bison the entire length of the valley, I couldn't see them attracting a little crowd, so I intensified my search, nothing much seemed out of place. I had a quick look at the folks with my binoculars, all seemed keen enough, binoculars and spotting scope, but they were actually looking at nothing, some looking one way, others in other ways. 'Ah well', thought I, and I sat and scanned the valley again. 'Strewth, blow me!', I yelped, perhaps not exactly those words, but as my binoculars swept over a flower meadow mid-distance, one ginormous head emerged like a massive punctuation mark, the snout rising skyward and swinging round, I was looking at yet another bear, number 13 for the trip. And with that, back into the flowers it vanished. 'Er, think that was a Grizzly Bear', said I. I wandered over to the little crowd and indeed it was this Grizzly that they had been watching in the cooler hours of earlier morning. With the increasing temperature, the bear had collapsed into this patch of meadow and was now showing about once or twice an hour, basically just a shuffle of nosey around. Well, with glorious sun and a nice grassy bank, it was not too hard to sit and sunbathe for an hour or so, so that is what we did ... and sure enough up he got again about 40 minutes later, walking all of ten paces before plopping down again into the depths of the meadow. Fantastic, not only did this mean I had achieved the goal of all three North American bears, but with the Black Bear at Riding Mountain a couple of days earlier, I had also managed to see all three within the space of a single week. I had truly thought this was a goal too far. This Grizzly Bear really wasn't playing ball though, basically just sleeping in the meadow out of sight. After an hour, we decided to abandon our sunny perch, we would return later in the day. Along the road, a sulphur vent oozed fumes into the air, Cliff Swallows nesting beneath its lip, a little further along American Kestrels over the meadows. However, I was keen to abandon the car, so for the greater part of the day, I engaged on an extended hike - walking through the meadows and forests of Blacktail Deer Plateau. Despite its excellent mammal selection, the forests of Yellowstone are not actually that good for birds, the near total dominance of lodgepole pines results in a fairly low biodiversity, the patches of deciduous limited and small. Still, my walk was good - Northern Flickers and Yellow-rumped Warblers appearing in new races, Cedar Waxwings calling and a dozen Clark's Nutcrackers sitting in pines and peering down. Also, several more Williamson's Sapsuckers and, just as I had returned to the car, a splendid Dusky Grouse strolling across the road, youngsters in tow. For evening entertainment, there was just one place to go, back to the Lamar Valley to see if our sleepy friend had woken from his slumbers. And indeed he had, the Grizzly Bear now grazing the meadow, wandering from flower patch to flower patch, chomping with great glee. However, Yellowstone being Yellowstone, a static bear had attracted a park ranger, their mission in life seemingly being to keep tourists and

bears apart. Observations were thus rather distant, I would just have to find a bear of my own, rangerless and free. Violet-green Swallows soared through the gorge at Tower Falls, I was ready to hit the sack, another excellent day nearing its end. 22 July. Yellowstone National Park. Today was just one of those days where I was left shaking my head in amazement! Tower Falls campsite, a little after dawn, the sun yet to hit my tent. I clamber out into the new morning, stagger a few paces forward, a quick stretch of the arms and a rub of the eyes ... 'Bleedin' hell, a bear!' What a start to the day, my choice of campsite was paying dividends - on the slope across from my tent, a Black Bear trotting down the slope! A quiet shout to my companion, their little trip to the loo truncated, and there we both were, watching our first Black Bear of Yellowstone as he paused to root amongst the undergrowth, tearing at logs and shuffling along. Magic. After a lazy coffee, it was time to get moving, today would be a general exploration of Yellowstone, stops at Antelope Creek and the Hayden Valley high on my priorities. Antelope Creek is absolutely gorgeous, a riot of yellow flowers filling the valley, a Least Chipmunk darting over the road and Unita Ground Squirrels popping up all over the place. A locality where Wolves have lingered in the past, I also gave it very close scrutiny, but beyond large herds of Elk (Wapiti), no mammals of size were noted. It did however look just perfect for bears, I returned many times in the expectation a Grizzly would saunter through the grass, but it never did. Onward, a few sight-seeing stops in the impressive Yellowstone Canyon, Ospreys also found on the nest here, and then it was off to the Hayden Valley. Another remarkable place, a little similar to the Lamar valley, expansive grasslands and a broad river gently meandering through, Bison dotting the landscape and right flush of birds on the river plain. We stopped and relaxed a while, Trumpeter Swan on the river, small flocks of Barrow's Goldeneyes, adult Bald Eagles, a good mixture. And just then, while we were minding our business, a man stopped and asked if we had seen the Wolves. 'Er, what Wolves?', I promptly replied. It turned out that I was scoping across to an area where Wolves had been languishing earlier in the day, but my vantage point was a little low and he suggested another spot a kilometre or so further, adding as an afterthought, 'Ah, there's also a mama Grizzly with two cubs at the same place!' Well, cool, Wolves would be right nice, another batch of bears too. We relocated without much further ado. So, there we were, on a hilltop bluff, the river below, a small rise to our rear. A small gathering of folks were sat in deckchairs - a wolf-watching posse! And soon we filled in with the details, a pack of Wolves was indeed still in front of us, but had collapsed under the shade of trees in long grass ... at a distance of about two kilometres!!! Once directions had been shared, I set up my scope and waited, and waited and waited. At the two hour mark, my friend decided to wander up to the small hill behind us, apparently the Grizzlies were in the meadow beyond. And just at that moment, up stood one of the Wolves, a grey yearling. It turned round, walked all of a metre or so, then dropped back into the grass. To the naked eye, you could see nothing, and even with the scope it was little more than a shimmering shape in the heat haze, but nevertheless, it was a Wolf, jolly good. My friend returned, mama Grizzly was in the meadow behind, two well-grown cubs at her side. Up popped the Wolf briefly, both of us getting views, then over to the Grizzly Bear I went. With my scope I think I then became the most popular person in Yellowstone, a procession of people arriving to gasp at the views of the Grizzlies plodding about. One French guy in particular was thankful, five days he'd been in Yellowstone and this was his last, but till that moment, he'd still not encountered a bear. With desires to see the Wolves better, we decided to return later in the day, when the cool of evening should see them up and active. For now, we continued down the Hayden Valley, birding at all the small pools and lakes as we went - a lot of wildfowl, breeding American Wigeon and Green-winged Teals, little groups of Lesser Scaup, a female Cinnamon Teal, three more Trumpeter Swans, a small flock of Wilson's Phalaropes, the list went on. Eventually, we reached the valley's end, a small information centre on the shores of the vast Lake Yellowstone, the actual lake near devoid of birds. A quick nosey around the information centre and gift shop, then off to a picnic site for lunch - yum yum, still eating our crate of Ritz crackers and bread from the road in Canada, now boosted by grapes and cheese. Grapes are a very good addition to a picnic lunch, as the accidental dropping of these, or even tossing across to the neighbouring table, is a surefire way to get cracking views of Clark's Nutcrackers and Grey Jays, both descending with great glee to scoff the offerings. It should be pointed out however that it is strictly against park regulations to feed any animals, so I do wish to confirm that all misplaced grapes were due to carelessness, rather than intention, ahem. Anyhow, lunch over, the Nutcrackers and Grey Jays dispersing, it was time to head back to the Wolf spot. We stopped to sniff and savour bubbling sulphuric springs and a mud volcano and then arrived back at the Wolf bluff at approximately 4.30 p.m. And there we sat, me with an eye glued to my scope, more people slowly arriving. Three and half hours passed before anything of note happened, Sandhill Cranes with chicks wandered past, a Great Blue Heron stood alongside the river below, a Trumpeter Swan spent most of time asleep. And then, minutes after 8 p.m., action. Suddenly the whole pack was up and moving - eight animals in all, an alpha male, two females and a couple of yearlings, plus three fairly small pups, the latter occasionally getting a free lift in the jaws of an attentive adult. A right motley crew they were, the adults including a white individual, a jet black individual and two grey ones, while all the cubs were shades of black. Still at a range of near two kilometres, suddenly the pack were off, purposefully on a steady trot across the plains. I suddenly realised where they were going, I hoped exactly to where I had been watching the Barrow's Goldeneyes in the morning. While others were intent on their views, we made a quick exit, jumped in the car and raced down the road. Parking up, I realised we were not in the perfect location after all, so there then followed a mini half-marathon, we both running like crazy across two hillsides and through a spruce wood. Just about at this point, my friend came to sudden halt, a look of abject fear on their face. 'What, what, what?' I asked. Merely a concern that we were running blind through dense woodland in prime Grizzly territory, a fear I had to agree was well-founded. I comforted with words that mama Grizzly was busy in the meadows three kilometres away, so we couldn't bump into her. On we went, reaching the river ... here the Wolves just had to be somewhere in front. We stood and waited, scanning left to right, nothing! I really couldn't understand why I couldn't see them, they had to be in front of us. Three Elk stood on the far bank, their gaze firmly fixed on something ahead, it had to be the Wolves. And then it dawned on me, though it didn't look like it, the lie of the land was gently arking away, so much of the floodplain was actually hidden to view. We needed to get higher, so backing up, we climbed the hill slightly ... and

there were our Wolves, the whole pack now at a run, crossing directly in front of us, still quite distant, but far closer than before. An unforgettable image, eight Wolves trotting across the grasslands, Elk standing in respect, towering forests all around. Well it had been a superb day, so to celebrate, we decided to drive out of the park to get something to eat in the nearby village of Gardiner. En route, and the last animal of the day, a Black Bear on the verge, views down to a couple of metres!!! Tremendous, the day started and finished with Black Bear, and the day's tally amounted to two Black Bears, three Grizzlies and eight Wolves, unbeatable. 23 July. Yellowstone National Park. Awoke early, no Black Bear opposite the tent to start this day, so we chucked our little stove into the car and set off, the desire being to get back into the Lamar Valley early - not only the most productive time for mammal-watching, but also generally free of both other tourists and, as important, park rangers! Serenity on the plains of Lamar, the American Bison ambling back into the valley bottoms, presumably having spent the night a little higher to avoid insects. Ospreys circling, Red Crossbills chirping as they zoomed over. Ahead lay the flower meadow, home to the Grizzly Bear of a couple of days before. And, as I hoped, there he was again - in almost exactly the same place, but much much closer, a mere 40 metres or so from the road. Splendid, absolutely cracking views, the sun now flooding into the far side of the valley, we near alone savouring this young Grizzly Bear as it paralled the road, chomping flowers much as the days before. A few relocations on my part and then I was ready for the bear, sitting quietly as he trundled past, light still a little low for photographs, but no real complaints from me, this was a pleasure indeed. If he continued on his track, he would actually cross the road, so again we relocated and awaited, perfect judgement, he strolled directly towards our car, me now standing alongside, door open for emergency jump. As he approached, I decided the car might be the sensible retreat, and so it was, the bear marched straight past and over the road just three metres to our rear. Off up the hillside he went, off up the valley we went to celebrate, time for morning coffee. Coffee was brewed, or I think I lie, it was probably Ovaltine, in a small pull-out a couple of kilometres further along, the sun now catching us and warming the day nicely. A couple of Irish folk were already adjacent and came over to chat, 'a Grizzly Bear over the valley' they said. And so there was, a large blondie strutting his stuff just below the tree line. Got the scope out, nice views were had by all. It was not yet 9.00 a.m. and I we were already on our second bear! Anyhow, the morning coffee/Ovaltine proceeded and we stopped to chat a while, the vista in front quite wonderful. European Starlings landed in a tree nearby, a couple of Sandhill Cranes paced across riverside grass. A little commotion caught the eye of one of the Irish, I trained my scope in the direction of the fuss ...a family of four Coyotes playing on a dirt pile. Right engaging little critters, darting about and scuffing up the dust. Then a little scampering, one of the Coyotes was in pursuit of something, 'OO er, what the blazes is that?', I exclaimed. It was an American Badger no less! A new species for me. Across the plain it hurried, Coyote on his tail, down a hole and gone. No reaction from the Coyote, back to his mates for more malarky. Blondie the Grizzly was now a vanishing dot up the valley, seemed an apt moment to exit the Lamar Valley. Next on agenda was a hike, a slog up the 3122 metre Mount Washburn. This was however was now getting crazy - no less than 10 km along, as we neared Tower-Roosevelt, yet another bear - toppling stumps and crushing them in his paws, a Black Bear most intent on termites for a late breakfast. How we were bumping into quite so many bears I am not sure - we met many persons who spent several days in Yellowstone without success - but for us, it was the 20th different bear of the trip, sadly as it turned out, despite several more days in bear country, it was also the last. Still, can't moan too much, we'd had a pretty impressive ride! So, to Mount Washburn. I have no desires or aspirations to become a budding mountaineer, so to drag me up those heady heights, there needed to be cause ...this day's cause came in the form of an ungulate, the aptly named Bighorn Sheep. Not ones for low altitude, a climb almost to the summit was required for these beasties. A most peasant climb however - approaching from the south, the route wound up through coniferous forest, gradually becoming ever more stunted and open, the birdlife sparse, but including Williamson's Sapsucker, Clark's Nutcracker and, the jewel of the day, two splendid Townsend's Solitaire, perched on twisted branches, hawking out and purring their soft calls. As the trees finally faded out, with Least and Unita Chipmunks giving their last showings, it was opportunity for another group of mammals to appear - typical inhabitants of the Alpine tundra, a couple of cute Pika huddled alongside rocks and the first of the day's Yellow-bellied Marmots. Another half hour, the views now stunning, and finally the big beasties appeared, a herd of Bighorn Sheep grazing on the northern flanks of the mountain. Just shy of the summit, my friend opted to continue the climb, then return via the same route. Being a tad lazy, I quit the upward trek - my sights were set on the meadows trailing off to the north. Around a remnant snow patch, approximately 30 Bighorns had gathered, the younger ones scampering around on the snow like demented beings, kicking up snow in showers as they skipped into abrupt turns. All looked great fun. Not in the least shy of humans on their territory, I sat a while with these great animals before then deciding on a descent via the north slope. Ten more Bighorn Sheep a few hundred metres further and a very big fat Yellow-bellied Marmot sunbathing aside the track. Meadows virtually all the way down, it was quite a different experience to the way up, flowers and butterflies abundant, Mountain Bluebirds hovering like mini Kestrels. A long meander down and then, as I had arrived back at a different trailhead, a wait for a lift back to the original start point. An hour or so later, onward we continued, the remainder of the day slowly wandering south, exploring the park's many geothermal features - spitting cauldrons of hot bubbling mud, vents of steam and gas, geysers of impressive size and azure blue pools of acidic water. A picnic stop added a Steller's Jay and more Clark's Nutcrackers to the list and a dip of the toes into a stream nearly half scoulded them off, a hot spring flowing in just adjacent! Far to the south, Old Faithful was waiting, the world's most famous geyser, spurting water 100-200 foot into the sky. By far Yellowstone's most popular attraction, I had my doubts as to whether I would appreciate the event - reports of vast car parks, tic tac shops and crowds of people all ready to ooo and arr as the geysur erupted into action, I was not really sure this was my cup of tea. But, as we were passing, it seemed a little criminal to give it a miss. With times predictable, give or take a few minutes, a German couple had told me one of the Old Faithful blow-outs was due at 7.30 p.m., a time that suited us perfectly. Twenty minutes early we arrived and indeed the car park is vast, but the atmosphere is actually not so bad, the reception building and shops fitting into the environment to a degree and the actual Old Faithful area thoughtfully left a scenic arena. But heck, we had dipped - as we arrived, so the crowds were

filing away, Old Faithful beyond a steaming vent. It was like arriving on a UK twitch just after the bird had flown, much chatter of the event and people saying how good it had been. Hmm, darn those Germans, they had given me the wrong time! Fortunately, unlike a flown-off bird, Old Faithful would show again, approximately 90 minutes later. a good perusal of the various shops and then a selection of a prime spot - I fancied the geyser against the now setting sun. And we waited. A few hisses and splutters, gurgling of water, Old Faithful was awakening, and then 'puushhh', the show started, water erupting 50 foot into the sky, 80 foot, the sun was now blocked out, another 'puushh' and the water was at full force, perhaps 130 foot on this day. Actually fairly impressive. Two or three minutes and it all began to subside, clouds of steam now billowing, the show dying down. Nice. Of course it was now far too late to find any campsite with space, so southbound we continued, eventually exited Yellowstone at about 10.30 p.m., home for the night would be a roadside parking area, not really allowed - on leaving Yellowstone, we had immediately entered Grand Teton National Park. Beggars can't be choosy however, our spot proved most fine. 24 July. Grand Teton National Park. Though in effect a southern extension of Yellowstone, Grand Teton is a national park of completely different character - with a far greater degree of deciduous influence in the pines and dominated by the impressive peaks of the snow-clad Teton Mountains, both the mammalian and bird faunas offer something new. Though most of the great mammals of Yellowstone occur here too, including both bears, they are generally in lower densities and are considerably harder to find, the exception being Moose, a species far more prominent in the Tetons than Yellowstone. With regard to birds, Teton was much better, the deciduous woodlands in particular home to an array of woodpeckers and passerines that I simply did not encounter in Yellowstone. And so, an early start, leaving our roadside camp spot pretty much at first light and then driving down the length of Jackson Lake, an exquisite dawn image - a haze of mist rising over marsh and lake, the snowy peaks of the mountains beyond reflecting in the still waters. A few kilometres to the south, a short detour took us to the picnic site at Two Ocean lake, an ideal breakfast stop-over - the lake home to a bunch of Western Grebes, Lesser Scaups and assorted other waterbirds (plus a large Moose paddling in the shallows) and, better still, the patches of mixed woodland alive with roving flocks and tapping of woodpeckers. A half-hour hike soon notched up the goodies, the tops including several Red-naped Sapsuckers, singles of both Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, plus an impressive haul of warblers and other small birds - five MacGillivray's Warblers, dozens of Yellow Warblers and Yellow-rumped Warblers, a couple of Red-breasted Nuthatches, one Western Tanager, one Black-headed Grosbeak and, zipping through, a Broad-tailed Hummingbird. Strolls in the meadows along the track added Wilson's Warbler, Common Yellowthroat and a number of Northern Flickers. Occasional stops as we edged south added bits and bobs more, Western Wood-Pewee, Dusky Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, Grey Jay and Red Crossbill, plus Bald Eagles and a Trumpeter Swan on the Snake River. Finally, the day now another scorcher, arrived at the Gros Ventre River, the wooded banks of which would be home for the coming night. Narrowly missed a Grizzly Bear that had wandered by a little earlier, did see two rather splendid Moose on the banks of the river. A short siesta, livened up by Northern Flickers hopping about next to the tent and Least Chipmunks scampering about, and then it was time for further wanders. Took a hike in open pine forests above the Moose-Wilson road, the highlights of which were an American Three-toed Woodpecker, a Mountain Bluebird and Yellow-pine Chipmunk. The woods were otherwise quite quiet, the nasal trumpeting of a Red-breasted Nuthatch the only memorable distraction. En route back, the sun now beginning to dip, we paused a while aside a flooded stream. A few ripples on the far side of the pool, a plop and then silence. A few moments later, a chewing sound in the nearest clump of willows, a few more ripples radiating out. We carefully edged along and there, just a few metres distant, a Beaver in all its glory, chomping down saplings with much intent. And with that, we abandoned the wilds and headed into Jackson Hole, the lively little town just to the south. One more Moose en route and then a beeline for a bit of U.S. culture. Yum yum, had our fill in the local McDonald's - a burger, fries and coffee coming to just \$US 3.20, what a bargain! Free wifi too. Despite the numerous successes on this trip across North America, there was one thing that almost without exception proved most disappointing - the near total lack of anything of note on night drives. And this night was almost the same - on a 30 km meander through some very nice habitat, we encountered a grand total of one animal! Fortunately it was a rather good one, an American Badger trundling along the road, coming to a halt just in front of the car before giving us a quizzical look and then turning to the right and vanishing into the grass. 25 July. Grand Teton National Park & Southbound. In planning this trip to North America, I had really only thought of one thing - the possibilities of finding all three of the bears, with naturally Polar Bear sitting at number one on the list. Given that I didn't truly believe the likelihood of success was that high, I certainly did not plan to have much time left over at the end for other things. However, with Polar Bear in particular proving easier than I had expected, that was exactly the situation I was in now - 'everything' seen and still quite a number of days to play with. What was needed was a new goal and, in keeping with the mammalian flavour of the trip, what could be better than to try and seek out a few of the most engaging critters on the continent, the highly communal Prairie Dogs. I've never had the pleasure of seeing any of these, so with a little bit of on the hoof route adaption, the grand state of Colorado was added to my burgeoning itinerary, plus southern Wyoming and a little slither of Utah too. All that however was for the future - my morning's pleasure was going to be taken up dipping out on Black Rosy Finch, an enigmatic bird of the high peaks. Splashing out \$29 a piece for approximately 9 minutes of hurtling 1000 metres skyward, the Teton Aerial Tramway deposits you on the top of Rendezvous Peak, altitude 3185 metres and surrounded by patches of snow, Alpine tundra and shingle. Rather a scenic spot it has to be said, but not exactly buzzing with wildlife - a three hour hike, skirting snowfields and dropping into glacial cirques, not only failed to produce the desired Rosy Finch, but also only notched up a grand total of five species of birds and four of mammal! Clark's Nutcracker, Common Raven, Cliff Swallow, White-crowned Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco the totality of birds, with Yellow-bellied Marmot, Pika, Least Chipmunk and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel the mammals. Can't moan too much however, the last was a new species for me. On hindsight I should have walked back down to the village, a lot of excellent habitat apparent on the upper slopes, but instead I opted for the cable car again, back in the humble surrounds of Teton village in a whisk. Also managed a quick nosey around back at the Gros Ventre River, the highlights a Ruffed

Grouse, one Red-naped Sapsucker and a couple of Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and then it was off, departure for the south. Waved farewell to a troop of Bison advancing across the grasslands, plus three Moose aside the river, next stop was to intended to be a comfy Super 8 motel in Green River, 320 kilometres south. Much to the disappointment of my fellow traveller however, I soon got rather distracted by the vast plains of sage bush that began to appear either side of the road from Pinedale onwards. With a whole bunch of birds with 'sage' in their names, I began to get a little itchy ...they just had to be out there waiting to be found. Although in reality I have seen all before, the temptation just got to much when a fine dirt road split off to the left, crossing the rolling hills to a place called 'Big Sandy'. Rather windy when I stopped, a walk of an hour or more producing relatively little. As I zigzagged through the scrub, plenty of Brewer's Sparrows and Horned Larks, but of the sage fellows, only first of the hoped-for possibilities - Sage Thrashers, three or four in all, rather smart birds. Desiring more, I then proceeded to take the car onto ever-smaller, and rougher, side tracks. Bumping and jolting along, the sun slowly edging towards the horizon, a few Pronghorns vanishing over a brow, my friend began to voice concern, visions of a night lost in the sage replacing the comforts of Super 8 seemingly on the cards. No worries, said I, knowing full well that actually I had no idea where we were going. One Prairie Falcon over, two Northern Harriers drifting past, a couple more Sage Thrashers, but no sign of anything else. In the distance, a road appeared, so in sympathy with my friend, I headed for that - it had to be better than the track we were currently on, a pitiful affair that seemed last used by the pioneers of the nineteenth century! But oops, the distant road was not a road, merely an illusion of the lie of the land. With the sun not far off setting, I reluctantly agreed to try to retrack my route, but no sooner had I turned and a flock of Sage Sparrows appeared, reward I thought for capitulating to demands to return. Bigger reward however was waiting a few hundred metres further - two cracking Greater Sage Grouse strutting along, with another four a little beyond. What super birds, giving a wary eye, but standing ground at about ten metres. Brilliant end to the day. Common Nighthawks appeared overhead, easy peezy back to the main road, an uneventful cruise down to Rock Springs and onto Green River, the welcoming Super 8 awaiting us. 26 July. Wyoming, Utah & Colorado. Nothing much flaming about the Flaming Gorge, the supposedly beautiful red rock mountains hardly at their best in the gloom of the early morning mist. Early I had risen, slipping out of the Super 8 for a few hours of pre-breakfast birding - I can't say the birding was too amazing either to begin with, the dew-drenched vegetation stubbornly refusing to reveal birds for quite a while. An hour of stomping about and little did I have to show for my efforts - plenty of Grey Flycatchers and Brewer's Sparrows, but bar those, just a couple of Violet-green Swallows, a little posse of Sage Sparrows and a family of Northern Flickers. Perhaps the desert birds were waiting for the sun, for as I began my walk back to the car, with hints of the sun breaking through, so the birds finally begin to rustle - a Blue-Grey Gnatcatcher, a couple of Bushtits, both Rock and Bewick's Wrens and, top of the lot, two very smart Green-tailed Towhees. Getting soft, I however was keen to get back for the complimentary Super 8 breakfast. Fifteen Mountain Bluebirds, loads of Desert Cottontails and a couple of Mule Deer en route back. Muffins, toast, waffles, cereals, coffee and juice, as much as you could stuff, I can confirm the Green River Super 8 did a fine breakfast. Full for the day, it was time to depart for the south, I had high hopes of a few dog towns by the day's end. Well Utah was amazing, two species of bird that I remember - Osprey and Turkey Vulture - and almost nothing else to jump up and down about. To be fair, it was a mere slither of the state that I passed through and I was fairly impressed by the roadside geology lesson as we progressed southward, regular billboards highlighting each rock formation as we passed, with added detail outlining its age, what fossils had been found in the area and what mighty beasts had trod on the soils several millennia before me. From a wildlife angle however I thought Utah was going to be a near complete blank - and so it would have been if I'd kept my eyes closed for the last few kilometres to the border with Colorado! But instead, a treat - dog towns a'plenty, the inhabitants in this case White-tailed Prairie Dogs. Right cute critters, hundreds of them lining the road in colony after colony, sentinel guards peeping up from earthen mounds, many more dozens risking suicide in mad dashes across the road. And over the border into Colorado I went, the White-tailed Prairie Dogs petering out almost immediately. Still, this new state on my U.S. tick list soon started adding additional bits and bobs to my diary, a Golden Eagle, a Loggerhead Shrike, several Sage Thrashers, a Great Blue Heron flying over. Up and over the 2500 metre Douglas Peak, down into grasslands north of Grand Junction, Lark Sparrows by the roadside, Mountain Bluebirds too, plus ...yet more dog towns, very nice. A quick stop and there I was, watching my second lot of White-tailed Prairie Dogs of the day, a dood couple of dozen this time. And with that, on we rolled, our final destination of the day looming on the horizon, the towering red sandstone cliffs of Colorado National Monument. Up the narrow winding road, hairpins and dramatic views, White-throated Swifts hurtling metres overhead, Rock Wrens prancing over boulders, rock pinnacles rising a hundred metres, a contrast indeed to the grasslands stretching to the north. Erected the tent in the picturesque campsite atop the plateau, then set off to enjoy the scenery now bathed in a late afternoon sunlight. Coyote and Rock Squirrels, Violet-green Swallows amongst the hordes of White-throated Swifts, Say's Phoebe and smart Black-throated Sparrows, here endeth another day. 27 July. Colorado National Monument. Dawn, descended to the valley bottoms, the idea to bird in the ravines beneath the high cliffs. Bighorn Sheep on the way down, plus Hopi Chipmunk and Rock Squirrel. As with the day previous, the first hour after sunrise was strangely quiet, the birds of these arid lands seemingly in need of a few rays of the sun to get the blood stirring. Up a rocky trail I strolled, perched atop a massive boulder to enjoy the unfolding play of colour - a rising sun dancing with the reds and oranges of the canyon walls and rock pinnacles, parched yellows and greens of the scrub, most pleasant. Early lizards scuttled across, birds were beginning to stir - rather stonking Black-throated Sparrows commonplace, Blue-Grey Gnatcatchers too. Ash-throated Flycatchers conducting sorties, Say's Phoebes likewise, plus my first Northern Mockingbirds of the trip, quite a few Black-chinned Hummingbirds and small flocks of roving Juniper Titmice. Desert Cottontails pranced about, but highlight of the morning was a pair of White-tailed Antelope Squirrel, right little stunners they are. Back at the campsite, time for morning coffee - spent half the time flicking our now dwindling supply of grapes across to eager Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays, a little flock soon gathering. It was only after the trip that I was actually to discover Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays are now a new species, the Western Scrub-Jay complex now separated into several species. By 10 a.m., it was already very hot, the

temperatures well above 30 C and still rising. A rather unproductive day thereafter followed, much of the middle of the day spent exploring the scenic delights of Colorado Monument before dropping down to Devil's Kitchen picnic area to have a little siesta. Highlights, Gambel's Quails strutting through the dust, a Golden Eagle drifting over, Say's Phoebe on rocks here and there. Added a flock of Mountain Bluebirds en route back, plus a mega flock of Pinyon Jays, a minimum of 50 moving through broken woodland scrub. And then, with a few hours of day still to kill, we decided upon a change of scenery, returning to the grasslands to the north. A good idea, not only finding a couple more dog towns, wary White-tailed Prairie Dogs in residence, but also supporting the classic lodger, Burrowing Owls. Five scruffy youngsters clustered around one hole, an adult glaring from another. Also, a Northern Harrier hawking the meadows, an American Kestrel, a few Turkey Vultures and a whole bunch of grassland passerines, including Horned Larks, Lark Sparrow and Western Meadowlarks. A small side trail leading into the hills beyond added more of the same, as well as about 25 Western Bluebirds (completing the North American trio) and assorted extras, including Western Tanager and Western Kingbird. One of the most amazing sightings of the entire trip was to follow shortly - driving slowly along a gravel track, I suddenly noticed a Golden Eagle cruising low and fast, almost parallel to us, a mere metre or so above the ground. Ahead a bend in the road, we were on direct collision course, we continued to get closer and closer, the eagle only about ten metres to my left. We reached the corner, I braked, the eagle did not ...bam, it hit the ground, not a collision with me, but straight down onto a hapless Desert Cottontail. A brief struggle playing out just in front of us, up rose the eagle, struggling to remain airborne, supper in talons. Never before have I seen a Golden Eagle actually catch anything, little could I hope it would happen right in front of my nose. A 60 km night drive again produced next to nothing, the total being a Red Fox and a small mouse of some sort! 28 July. Colorado National Monument & Rocky Mountain National Park. Colorado National Monument, Bighorn Sheep and a Black-tailed Jack Rabbit the highlights of a dawn walk in the pine and juniper forests atop the plateau. The birding however proved rather an anticlimax, the best of a limited bunch being Woodhouse's Scrub-Jays, Bewick's Wrens and Rock Wrens, all to a backdrop of Blue-grey Gnatcatchers and overhead White-throated Swifts and Violet-green Swallows. Before the heat had time to soar, we packed our tent and departed, a drive of a few hours taking us westward to the Alpine heights of the Rocky Mountain National Park. A wonderful welcome awaiting us, a Moose paddling in a stream at our chosen campsite, the beastie not in the least fussed by our close presence. Also Least Chipmunks, several Mule Deer and as we ascended the mountain numerous Elk, a variety of birds ranging from California Gulls and White Pelican on a lake to Steller's Jay and Pine Siskins in the forest. I however was eager to climb to the snowfields and Alpine tundra high above the forest, home to White-tailed Ptarmigan, a species I quite fancied bumping into. Hiked many hours, stunning scenery and Horned Larks and American Pipits in no short supply, plus a Prairie Falcon hurtling over and White-crowned Sparrows dotted about. Also Common Ravens, four Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels, no jpy on the ptarmigan however. As darkness approached and temperatures took a decided plunge, back to the campsite we went, nothing seen on our night drive and a chilly night in store. 29 July. Rocky Mountain National Park. A dip of mammoth proportions - spent near the whole day hiking on the Rocky Mountain tops, altitudes ranging from 3500 metres up to about 3800 metres, landscapes all most grandiose, but typical of the height not exactly a hotspot of bird biodiversity! American Pipits by the bucketload, many feeding recently fledged young, others still attending nests. Also, as the day before, Horned Larks and White-throated Sparrows, three Mountain Bluebirds and, an unexpected bird on the high tundra, a Broad-tailed Hummingbird zipping about. Needless to say, the goal of the day, White-tailed Ptarmigan remained elusive ...or almost so, I did find a flight feather of one! Mammals fortunately added considerable compensation. Three Moose near the campsite, then a whole bunch of goodies on the Alpine tundra, albeit most rather on the small size - top of the crop, Yellow-bellied Marmots sunning here and there, Pikas active on rocky outcrops, plenty of Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels and, a new species for the trip, one Montaine Vole, a little scurrier that paused under a tuft of vegetation in the mistaken belief that I could not see him, a couple of quick photographs taken to guarantee identification. Also seen, numerous Elk, three Mule Deer and, at lower elevation, several Least Chipmunks. As afternoon edged on, with still no sign of the ptarmigan, it was time to leave - via the west of the park, through forests with Steller's Jay, we descended to the low altitudes, a pause in a small deciduous woodland adding Ash-throated Flycatcher and a couple of stunning Lazuli Buntings. An hour or so later, we had left the mountains, ahead lay the flat grasslands, the prairies of the Great Plains sitting awaiting. Dawn next morning would see us exploring this area, for now it was a Super 8 in Loveland, a stinking hot town just off Interstate 25. 30 July. Pawnee Grasslands & Lake Hutton. Last full day in North America, and what a treat it was. On the Pawnee Grasslands, birds abounded - from Common Nighthawks in the early morning to longspurs and sparrows as the day progressed, the prairies were simply a buzz of activity. All started shortly after dawn with the superb views of two Common Nighthawks as they sunned on posts just before leaving the highway to begin a slow meander across the Pawnee area. Vast open plains, low rolling hills, wild grasses swaying in the breeze and an abundance of flowers, the prairies at their best. And flocks of birds rising in all directions, hundreds upon hundreds of Lark Buntings, chunky males in their resplendent blacks. In the midst of these birds, my goal was to seek out a few of the grassland specialities still eluding me, longspurs sitting at the top of the list. On we trundled, numerous stops as birds flitted up, Western Meadowlarks, Horned Larks, sparrows doing their best to land just out of sight. An hour or so in, six sparrow species had finally revealed themselves - Savannah and Brewer's Sparrows the most numerous, Grasshopper Sparrows trailing some way behind. And for top rewards, the honours went to Lark Sparrows and, even more so, Vesper Sparrows and Cassin's Sparrows, pairs of each of the latter two being the only ones recorded on the whole trip. As for longspurs however, I had to work rather hard ...a patch of slightly longer grass eventually producing the first of the desired birds - corking McCown's Longspurs, flitty little things that certainly took time to get good views. By morning's end, I had seen a total of about 25, a few feeding on the roads, most in areas of longer grass. As the heat built, soaring to about 36 C, so we continued to tour the grasslands, Burrowing Owl added near a water trough, one Swainson's Hawk too, plus assorted extras including Ash-throated Flycatcher and Western Wood-Pewee. Mammals were rather prominent by their absence though - a minimum of 30 Black-tailed Prairie

Dogs were most welcome, but hopes of various ground squirrels largely fell by the way, a brief Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel the only representative seen. Early afternoon saw us departing Colorado, crossing the border back into Wyoming - with my planned birding sites now exhausted, the natural option would have been to begin the mammoth drive west, our flight due to depart from Chicago next day, some 1400 km beyond the horizon. Never keen to waste precious hours however, a few quick minutes pondering the map led to a little detour to the east, the idea to check out Lake Hutton, a wildlife sanctuary according to the map. With absolutely no information relating to this site, it was just a stab in the dark as to whether it would be good - but as it turned out, it proved most enjoyable as a finale to the trip! Before even arriving, driving down the rough access track, we encountered a number of unexpected bonuses - the first being yet more flocks of grassland birds, chiefly amongst them corking McCown's Longspurs, far more co-operative than those we'd seen in the morning. And if that were not enough, just as we passed an area aside a stream, two male Chestnut-collared Longspurs also appeared, the final grassland speciality that I'd been hoping for. Now rather a happy bunny, things got even better a few moments later with the spotting a medium-sized lump trundling through the grass, its projected course taking it directly towards our now stationary car. Up it lumbered, pausing upon a earth mound just a few dozen metres distant, and there we all lingered, we watching it, it watching us, American Badger in all its glory. Nice. Several kilometres on, Lake Hutton itself, a series of pools in this otherwise semi-arid environment, A positive oasis, brimming with birds, the pools themselves, the emergent vegetation, the grasses around, all full of life. Brewed up a pot of tea, sat back to savour the last of the real birding. Western and Eared Grebes aplenty, one family of Pied-billed Grebes too, plus loads of Ruddy Ducks and other wildfowl species, many with lines of youngsters in tow. Also amongst the rest, a couple of Franklin's Gulls, a few American Avocets, seven White-faced Ibis and, flushing the lot every so often, a couple of quartering Northern Harriers. The sun was beginning to dip, one last treat to round the day off, White-tailed Prairie Dogs popping up like magic all around, the cooler airs of evening bringing them out. As day gave way to night, Common Nighthawks appeared over the grasslands. For us however, it was basically the end. A half hour later, I joined Interstate 80, hit the cruise control and settled back, sixteen straight hours on this road would see me back in Chicago, a long night ahead. 31 July. All Over. A dozen coffees and a couple of McDonald's later, the new day dawned somewhere on the Nebraska/Iowa border, but pushing a looming flight, no time to stop. Raced ever further east, hitting the Chicago area later than expected, my speed now rather higher than might be desired. Dumped the car back at the car rental and transferred to the airport, barely an hour to spare. I don't remember a single species of bird on this day, a couple of roadkill Raccoons the only thing of any note. Overnight Finnair flight back to Helsinki, arriving in the Finnish capital early next morning, a second flight taking me down to Vilnius for 10 a.m. Two hours later, I was back at work, boo hoo, trip over.