SOUTHERN IDAHO AND THE CASSIA CROSSBILL

June 17-22, 2019

Two weeks prior to the tour it was snowing hard in southern Idaho. One week prior to the tour it was raining hard in southern Idaho. During our two days of scouting and the first two days of the tour temps were in the high 80s, too high for those trying to escape the heat of Texas and Florida, however, the birds did not seem to mind one bit.

After a night in Boise we worked Blacks Creek Bird Reserve and Black Creeks Road. At the reserve we encounter a mini cattle drive that held up traffic for a bit. What was most interesting about the drive was the “cowboys” were on four wheelers; nonetheless we yielded to both cattle and “cowboys”. Once the dust settled we spotted numerous species of ducks, Black-necked stilt, American Avocet, Wilson’s Phalarope, American White Pelican, Franklin’s, California, and Ring-billed Gulls, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Eared and Western Grebes, and Black-crowned Night-Heron. Blacks Creek Road was alive with Lazuli Bunting, Yellow-breasted Chat, Warbling Vireo, Western Kingbird, Black-billed Magpie, Yellow Warbler, and Spotted Towhee. Before getting to the road we enjoyed a close up look at a Burrowing Owl on a fence post, a few Horned Larks and a few Lark Sparrows. Further up Blacks Creek Road we found the Lewis’s Woodpeckers we spotted during scouting, singing Cassin’s Vireo, Bullock’s Oriole, American Goldfinch, and more. After a nice picnic lunch near Indian Creek Reservoir, a truck stop, we made our way straight to the South Hills, Cassia Crossbill country, and after 30 or 40 minutes of searching we had them in the scope atop a lodgepole pine at Diamondfield Jacks Campground. This proved to be a fine way to end a rather long and birdy day.

The following day, with the crossbill in the bag, or at least on our checklists, we made our way to the Magic Ridge Hummingbird feeding station. Along the way we passed through sage country and here we spotted several Sage Thrashers with one perched on the horizontal crossbar of a pipe structure allowing all a fine scope view. Brewer’s Sparrows finally reveled themselves along with California Quail, numerous Swainson’s Hawks of several different morphs, a single Ferruginous Hawk soaring, American Kestrel, Green-tailed Towhee, Western Meadowlark, and a cooperative Gray Flycatcher. A surprise find was a small family group of Greater Sage-Grouse that were spotted walking on a slope near the side of the road. Unfortunately, all we saw where their chests, necks and heads; the rest of the bodies were hidden in vegetation. Shortly after the grouse alert, we encounter a female Gray Partridge in unlikely habitat as it walked across the dirt road in front of our van. At the hummingbird feeding station we had close encounters with the noisy Broad-tailed, tail-pumping Black-chinned, and gorgeous Calliope Hummingbirds. We ended our rewarding drive with a well deserved picnic lunch along the side of the road.

After a short break at the hotel we enjoyed the sights and sounds of the “Niagara Falls of the West”, Shoshone Falls, a remarkable sight along the sinuous Snake River.

After our second night in Twin Falls we headed back to Boise for two nights. At Hagerman WMA we enjoyed an hour walk around one of the big lakes seeing plenty of ducks, more California Quail, a surprise Virginia Rail in the trail, a Bald Eagle carrying breakfast, Belted Kingfisher, and a fine looking sturgeon in one of the fish hatchery tanks. Our return to Boise was delayed as we had to watch a Prairie Falcon put of an aerial display. Once in Boise we visited Hyatt Hidden Lakes where we encountered more Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Cinnamon Teal and a few other species.

On our last day of birding in Idaho we worked our way to a private residence in Idaho City where we watched Calliope, Rufous, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds at liquid feeders. The seed and suet feeders brought in Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, Steller’s Jay, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, Cassin’s Finch in massive numbers, Red Crossbill feeding young, Pine Siskin, and American Goldfinch, however, our target bird was White-headed Woodpecker. We had to wait about 30 to 40 minutes before one showed up, though disappearing before all had a good view. Luckily, the bird returned and spent a long time on the suet allowing all to admire this lovely woodpecker of the west.

A quick stop at the Pioneer Cemetery in Idaho City yielded Nashville Warbler and a few other gems while a stop at the County Council Office in Idaho City proved interesting. Many of the structures in courthouse date back to the 1860s including a piano and slot machine. The original bar and mirror behind the bar is still present from when the town grew to about 6,000 people as rough and rowdy men worked the ground for gold; a gold rush that yielded more gold than from California. Before the strikes played out in the mid-1860s, Idaho City was the largest city between San Francisco and St. Louis.

After a little sightseeing and education we returned to civilized Boise with stops along Grimes Creek and Mores Creek were we encountered Common Merganser, Downy Woodpecker, Gray Catbird, Tree, Violet-green, Bank, and Northern Rough-winged Swallows, Yellow and Townsend’s Warblers, and a shy singing Fox Sparrow.

This was a wonderful tour with pleasant weather, beautiful scenery, and excellent birds.