Mt. Rushmore and Southwestern South Dakota

September 29 – October 3, 2022

David Bradford/Andrea Ezerins

On my two previous trips to South Dakota, I made the rather long drive from Denver to Keystone, SD, but for the inaugural Relaxed Nature Tour participants flew into Rapid City, SD and we then made the short forty-minute drive to our hotel in Keystone. However, after the drive to Keystone we carried on to the Crazy Horse Memorial where we not only milled about enjoying the numerous exhibits and museum, but we took a short van ride right up to the actual face of Crazy Horse and then walked out onto his arm to admire the recent work on his fingers and knuckles. This was truly a remarkable experience.

Our first morning found us making an early morning drive to the north parking lot along the Wildlife Loop in Custer State Park. We then joined a few thousand other people to watch local cowboys roundup 500 to 700 head of buffalo and run them into corrals for auction. This is an annual event to help keep the buffalo herd in the state park at a manageable size. After the 58th Annual Buffalo Roundup we enjoyed a tasty picnic lunch at park headquarters and returned to our hotel in Keystone via the Iron Mountain Road, a winding twisty road with a few pigtails and great, distant views of the four Presidents.

Saturday, we headed out to Badlands National Park, though we did stop at the ghost town of Scenic, SD., a town that once thrived but has now fallen into disrepair. From here we carried on to the Ben Reifel Visitor Center in Badlands NP for shopping and map gathering. An easy hike on the Cliff Shelf Trail gave us nice looks at Golden Eagle, multiple nearby and calling Townsend’s Solitaire’s and a few Black-capped Chickadees. We then began our drive along the 240 loop that meanders through the heart of the badlands. A stop at Big Foot Pass Overlook provided an excellent view of the badlands while we ate another fine picnic lunch watching Clay-colored Sparrow and Western Meadowlark. We spent the remainder of our time driving the scenic loop stopping at various overlooks and prairie dog towns. On our way north to Wall a roadside stop to view some ducks and a Ferruginous Hawk also revealed three Sharp-tailed Grouse right alongside the road by our van. While watching the three nearby birds a vehicle drove past flushing from along side the road a total of 13 Sharp-tailed Grouse. This was voted by most on the trip to be the best bird experience of the trip. A fine dinner at Cruizzer’s Restaurant, a short walk from our hotel, proved to be a great way to relax and end our day.

The Mammoth Excavation Site in Hot Springs was wonderful. The entire dig is under one roof, and we were allowed to walk through the actual dig site seeing mammoth bones, this was a fascinating location. At Wind Cave National Park, we had another tasty picnic lunch along with more Townsend’s Solitaire, Black-billed Magpie, Black-capped Chickadee, White-crowned Sparrow, and several Spotted Towhees, both males and females. Our subterranean exploration was mediocre, the cave we visited was a dry cave and lacked stalactites and stalagmites and the splendor of other caves. However, the structures that were present were sort of interesting. We finished the day with a winding drive along Needles Highway and another fine dinner within walking distance from our hotel at the Front Porch Restaurant.

On our last day we had time to explore the not so birdy Sylvan Lake area of Custer State Park, where we spotted a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers, several Red-breasted Nuthatches, and a small flock of Pine siskin working trees along Sylvan Lake. A quick stop at Willow Creek Horse Camp yielded a nice looking Orange-crowned Warbler and the nearby KOA Resort provided us a look at the white-winged subspecies of Dark-eyed Junco. From there it was back to Keystone for our final picnic lunch, and we were off to Rapid City for flights home.

Andrea and I plan on returning earlier in September in 2023 allowing us to see the sights and view the birds before they start their way south for fall migration. Temperatures in early September can be a bit warm, but more birds will be present.