Southern Idaho and the Cassia Crossbill

June 13-18, 2022

After two years of not seeing Chukar, we finally had scope views of a singing male in the sage just outside of Boise, this was the day before we saw a rather out of range Least Flycatcher. Idaho is a very birdy state with birds seen almost constantly, in general nothing rare to the area, just a lot of birds.

After a night in Boise, we birded Blue Lake Sewage Ponds where we observed Cinnamon Teal, Northern Shovelor, Gadwall, Ruddy Duck, California Quail, Spotted Sandpiper with its spots, Bank Swallow, and others. A drive along Blacks Creek Road produced more California Quail, a lone Long-billed Curlew in a hay field, our first of many Swainson’s Hawks, our first of a few distant Ferruginous Hawks, the ubiquitous Black-billed Magpie, Lazuli Bunting showing off his lazuli color, along with many brilliantly plumaged male Bullock’s Orioles. Further south we visited Mountain Home where we found a pair of dancing Eared Grebes, Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets, our first of many California Gulls, Brewer’s Blackbirds and more. Lunch at Legacy Park was shared with numerous Yellow-headed Blackbirds, a few Cedar Waxwings, and a few American Goldfinch.

From Mountain Home, we made our way straight for the lodgepole pines in the South Hills, home to the Cassia Crossbill, our target species for the day. The South Hills have numerous lodgepole pines that produce cones from which the Cassia Crossbills extract seeds without competition from squirrels. While waiting patiently for the crossbills to appear, and then not so patiently, we observed Hairy Woodpecker, Mountain Chickadee, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Western Tanager. Eventually two Cassia Crossbills were viewed in the scope atop a lodgepole pine for an extended period.

After a night in Twin Falls, we worked our way through the sage country to the Brockman’s hummingbird feeders where we watched Calliope, Broad-tailed, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds coming to their many feeders. We had a House Wren coming to a nest box, a singing Fox Sparrow on display and a hard to see clearly MacGillivray’s Warbler. As we worked our way through the sage toward the Brockman’s, we had scope looks at Gray Flycatcher, Sage Thrasher, Vesper and Brewer’s Sparrow, Common Nighthawks in broad daylight, a flyby Wilson’s Snipe, and beautifully plumaged male Mountain Bluebirds. As we worked our way back to Twin Falls a stop at Lake Murtaugh added a few new species to our growing list like, Western and Clark’s Grebe, Franklin’s Gull, Forster’s Tern, Western Kingbird, singing Marsh Wren, and more Yellow-headed Blackbirds. What better way to wrap up a long day of birding than to visit Shoshone Falls on the Snake River just east of town? The falls were amazing and the Violet-green and Northern Rough-winged Swallows, Yellow-breasted Chats, Yellow Warblers were special as well.

The following morning, we did the 1.5 mile stroll around Riley Pond at Hagerman WMA where we found our only Ring-necked Ducks and Eastern Kingbirds. We also spied more California Quail, Osprey, Western Wood-Pewee, Marsh Wren, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow Warbler and or first Black-headed Grosbeak for the trip. On our way back to Boise we encountered strong winds that sent us running for the nearby Arby’s, instead of our usually picnic style lunch. The warm meal was welcomed, but birds were calling, or in our next case clucking or whatever Chukars do.

After not finding Chukar where they belong, on rocky slopes with spare vegetation, we decided to hit the sage looking for these large game birds originally from Asia and the Middle East. After a flyby Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Lark Sparrow, and four Lazuli Buntings, we heard the distinctive chuKAR, chuKAR, chuKAR call of the Chukar. After a little cajoling, a male sat atop a sage bush and called repeatedly until we eventually moved on looking for other birds. A few other stops added Common Merganser to our list, but not the staked out Least Flycatcher we saw during scouting.

We were up and out early for our last day of birding in Idaho and headed straight for the Least Flycatcher spot, Discovery Park. Before I had filled out the paperwork at the entrance kiosk, Brandon had located not one, but two Least Flycatchers. It was now time to head to a private residence in Idaho City where we watched many Red Crossbills and even more Cassin’s Finches. Watching the crossbills bath in the water feature was a delight. From the shade of the front porch, we also watched Calliope and Black-chinned Hummingbirds, Red-breasted and Pygmy Nuthatches, Cedar Waxwing, Spotted Towhee, and Black-headed Grosbeak. However, the main attraction was the two White-headed Woodpeckers that came in periodically to dine on suet. Before lunch we made a quick stop at Pioneer Cemetery for Dusky Flycatcher, Cassin’s Vireo, Orange-crowned Warbler, and the always brilliant male Western Tanager. Lunch at Trudy’s, a well-known restaurant, in Idaho City population of 500, turned out to be a good choice. Here we beat the noon time rush and savored our sandwiches. Stops along Grimes Road, which parallels Grimes Creek, added some excitement. We had at least seven Osprey overhead high in the mountains, Spotted Sandpipers along the creek, Hairy Woodpecker, Warbling Vireo, more Violet-green Swallows, Veery, and finally our only Western Bluebird for the trip. A memorable experience was watching two Lewis’s Woodpeckers cavorting in the vicinity of their nest cavity.

As time was running out, on our tour, a final stop for the day added Wood Duck at Ann Morrison Park in Boise, adding one more tick to or growing list of Idaho birds We ended up seeing over 125 bird species and plenty of wonderful scenery.

We plan to return to Idaho in August of 2023 with a slightly altered itinerary.