Mt. Rushmore and the Black Hills of South Dakota

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This was our second relaxed nature to enjoy the sights and birds in the southwest corner of South Dakota that includes the Black Hills and various state and national parks. Aside from a few showers(maybe it was a downpour)on the day of our arrival, we enjoyed cool, yet pleasant weather. What a comfortable respite from the suffocating Texas heat. Moving the our forward three weeks along us to catch many of the birds that had already headed south last year. We more than doubled the number of species seen on the October 2022 tour, but in 2022 we did build the tour around the Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup and Crazy Horse Volksmarch which meant many birds had already left for warmer climes further south.

Participants arrived in the afternoon on the first day and after getting checked in to the lovely Comfort Inn and Suites Mt. Rushmore, we made the three mile drive to visit the four Presidents and walk the 0.6 miles Presidential Trail bringing us close to the Presidents and Red Crossbills. Red Crossbills seemed to be everywhere this year, whereas last year we saw no crossbills. After visiting the Visitor Center, Gift Shops, and marveling at the carved edifice in front of us we headed for the Presidential hiking trail where we saw and heard our first of many Red-breasted Nuthatches, a Golden Eagle perched on George’s shoulder, and our first of many Red Crossbills. A dinner at the Carver’s Restaurant at the monument was pleasant enough with fast service.

After our first night in the Black Hills, we were off for a full day of birding in Badlands National Park. However, a stop at Hammerquist Road proved wonderful. Here we were greeted by numerous Red-headed Woodpeckers, Brown Thrashers, and Gray Catbirds. We also spied Prairie Falcon, House Wren, Swainson’s Thrush, Spotted Towhee, Yellow-breasted Chat, Common Yellowthroat and numerous female Blue Grosbeaks. This was a location we did not bird last year and proved to be a great addition for this year and next. As luck, or skill, would have it we stopped at a small roadside pond that produced eclipsed Blue-winged Teal and Gadwall, a soaring Golden Eagle, Northern Harrier, and our first of many Western Meadowlarks. Turns out all the ducks were in eclipsed plumage making for an id challenge.

We finally reached Badlands National Park where we visited the Visitor Center and gift shop and returned to have our first of three picnic style lunches of the trip. After the Visitor Center and a few Badlands Rock Pigeons, we made our way to the short and easy Cliff Shelf Trail. Here we walked the approximately 0.75 mile trail enjoying Golden Eagle, Prairie Falcon, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Rock Wren, Gray Catbird, and Spotted Towhee. As we moved further into the park, we marveled at the unique landforms made from differential erosion and deposition. We even took the time needed to learn the name of the layers of rocks within the park, starting with the oldest and deepest buried, the Pierre Shale that was deposited about 75 million years ago and sitting just below the Yellow Mounds Formation all the way up to the topmost layer that was deposited about 30 million years ago called the Sharps Formation. We made numerous stops at the various pullouts enjoying geology and the few birds we could find. Eventually we arrived at the Roberts Prairie Dog Town in a bit of a wind, but that wind allowed a Burrowing to hover above “its” burrow allowing us to find it in the massive prairie dog town. As we headed to World Famous Wall Drug Store, or at least that is what the sign indicated, we stopped at Bruce Dam for our first Ruddy Ducks, Eared Grebe, Golden Eagle, Horned Lark, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and a lone and slightly out of range Forster’s Tern. After the lake we arrived at the Wall Drug Store, a must for all tourists, where we took in the sights and did a little shopping. After playing tourist, we had to make a stop at the Wall Sewage Ponds for eclipsed ducks, our first Western Kingbird and Brewer’s Blackbird. As we made our way back to the comfort of the Comfort Inn, we stopped to admire a Swainson’s hawk with its reddish bib and a few Black-billed Magpies with long tails and contrasty bodies.

After a hearty breakfast at our hotel the following morning, we set out for the Mammoth Excavation Site in the small town of Hot Springs, but a stop at a spot Andrea found while on her prebreakfast jog, netted us numerous Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches along with more Red Crossbills, Red-naped Sapsucker, and a Northern Flicker. Once at the mammoth site we listened to the introductory video, then took time to walk through the enclosed facility looking at actual mammoth bones in the process of being excavated and walked through the room that explained about the different types of mammoths that have recently walked the earth. From here it was just a few minutes to the very interesting Pioneer Museum, oddly, I recall using some of the tools that were displayed in the museum. Yikes!! From here we made our way to Sylvan Lake to look in vain for a woodpecker with three toes, either would have done, but we did not turn up Black-backed or Three-toed Woodpeckers here or at any time during the tour.  While on the plane in Denver, a friend emailed me a picture of the Three-toed she and her husband were admiring at Sylvan Lake. So it goes I guess. We eventually worked our way to Crazy Horse Memorial where we walked through the many buildings viewing the many displays. After some shopping and sightseeing we took the van ride that brings people right up on top of the monument to have a close encounter with Crazy Horse’s face and lucky for us, some White-throated Swifts. Also, lucky for us were the three Mountain Goats directly below us giving nice looks, but not as nice as the mother and young we later saw walking along the side of the Needles Highway.

On our last full day in SD we headed to the massive Custer State Park, however, before arriving we encountered a flock of about 25 Pinion Jays flying back and forth across the road right in front of us. This was a surprise find and write in bird for our nightly list. We finally loaded back up for a stop at the Visitor Center, then we drove the Wildlife Loop with stops at the newly built Bison Center, Buffalo Corrals, and a few stops for bison and birds. Along the scenic loop we found Hairy Woodpecker, more Red-headed Woodpeckers, Eastern Kingbird, Black-billed Magpie, American Goldfinch, Western Meadowlark, Vesper Sparrow, and Brewer’s Blackbird. Stops at various campgrounds and lodges added Osprey, Bald Eagle, Barn Swallow, more Red Crossbills, and Dark-eyed Junco. Later in the day we drove Needles Highway, quite experience and Iron Mountain Road, quite an experience. Both roads had their own charm and sharp curves making for a white-knuckle afternoon filled with pigtail bridges and interesting scenery. A predinner outing at the local park in Keystone proved to be a bust while dinner at The Front Porch was delightful for the second evening in a row.

Though this was a Relaxed Nature Tour, participants decided we should go birding before flights home, so it was up semi-early for a 7:15am departure for Canyon Lake just west of Rapid City. I had planned on birding two Rapid City hotspots before flights home, but Canyon Lake held our attention all morning long. Here we had a nice walk around half the lake enjoying Wood Duck, Common Merganser, Great Blue Heron, feeding Osprey, Red-tailed Hawk, Downy Woodpecker, Cedar Waxwing, Common Grackle, and Yellow Warbler. Here we parted with two participants that were heading north and west for American Dipper in Spearfish Canyon SD and Devils Tower in Wyoming. The rest of us made our way to the small airport in Rapid City and went our separate ways.

This was a fantastic tour and a fine time to visit the Black Hills, after the Summer and Labor Day crowds went home for school and the sun was still warm. Andrea and I plan on returning to SD in 2024 for a third year in a row, maybe in May or early June, once again, to avoid the busy tourist season. For those that have not seen the sights of Southwestern South Dakota please consider joining four travelers plus Andrea and myself in 2024.