



**Guide: Adam Sell**  
Maximum 7 participants

# **MONTANA**

**Where the mountains meet the  
plains  
& Cassia Crossbill extension**

**June 16-21, 2021**  
**From Bozeman**

\$2095 per person based on double occupancy  
\$390 single supplement

**Extension: June 21-23**  
**Ends in Twin Falls, Idaho**  
\$770 per person based on double occupancy  
\$180 single supplement

Check out the trip website here: [redhillbirding.com/montana](http://redhillbirding.com/montana)

To register, fill out the booking form here: [redhillbirding.com/bookingform](http://redhillbirding.com/bookingform)

Where the Great Plains meet the grandiose peaks of the Rocky Mountains is a place known as Big Sky Country: a land where the vistas are surpassed only by the birds that inhabit them. In the expansive grasslands we will look for Baird's Sparrow, Sprague's Pipit, Mountain Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Ferruginous Hawk, Lark Bunting, and McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs. These grasslands abut grand, snow-capped mountains, with a totally different but equally alluring set of birds, including Black Rosy-Finch, American Three-toed Woodpecker, Dusky Grouse, and Clark's Nutcracker. We will also visit wetlands that will be crowded with breeding waterbirds, including a wide variety of ducks and grebes and a cacophony of Yellow-headed Blackbirds. We will also pass through Yellowstone National Park, giving us a chance to see some of the West's iconic mammals.

This short trip will find some of North America's most highly-sought species on their breeding grounds. Bozeman is a great jumping-off point if you would like to visit Yellowstone National Park or Grand Teton National Park before or after the birding trip. We also offer a two-night extension to look for the recently described Cassia Crossbill in neighboring Idaho.

## ITINERARY

**Day 1, Wed, June 16: Arrival to Bozeman.** We will gather at the Bozeman airport around mid-day (see “Timing” below for arrival details), load the vehicle, and start birding. Our first stop will be an impressive local feeder setup. The feeder are usually very active, with birds like Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting, Cassin’s Finch, Calliope Hummingbird, and perhaps even Evening Grosbeak. The adjacent riparian woods hold American Redstart and “Western” Warbling Vireo.

We will also spend some time birding elsewhere around Bozeman, perhaps looking for American Dipper, Gray Partridge, Dusky Grouse, and Swainson’s Hawk.

**Day 2, Thu, June 17. Bozeman to Harlowton.**

We’ll get an early start to make our way to the Bridger Mountains, en route to the Great Plains grasslands. A campsite and road provide access into the forest and forest edge, where we will search for a couple of uncommon woodpeckers: Williamson’s Sapsucker and American Three-toed Woodpecker. We could also find MacGillivray’s Warbler, Hammond’s Flycatcher, Canada Jay, and other mountain birds here.

We will make another stop at Cottonwood Reservoir, where we will get our first real taste of wetland birding. The lake hosts good numbers of nesting Western and Eared Grebes (and occasionally Clark’s), Wilson’s Phalarope, Willet, American Avocet, and Cinnamon Teal, along with many other waterbirds. Yellow-headed Blackbirds lurk in the cattails and bulrushes at the edge of the lake. A pair of Trumpeter Swans is sometimes present in summer, as are Franklin’s Gulls. The surrounding vegetation hosts Sage Thrasher and Brewer’s and Vesper Sparrow.

We will make it to Harlowton in the afternoon, check in to the hotel, and set out again for our first taste of Great Plains birding. The Judith Gap Grasslands are rich with high quality birds in early summer, many of them singing and displaying. We will look for the full suite of specialty birds: Baird’s Sparrow, Sprague’s Pipit, McCown’s and Chestnut-collared Longspur, Long-billed Curlew, Lark Bunting, and Ferruginous Hawk. We will try for Mountain Plover and may get lucky with Upland Sandpiper, Golden Eagle, or Short-eared Owl. Marshes in the area are home to Marbled Godwit and Wilson’s Phalarope. Pronghorn are common here, too. Common Nighthawks buzz over the town in the evening.

**Day 3, Fri, June 18: Harlowton to Red Lodge.** If we are still looking for grassland birds, we will spend a little time in the morning around Harlowton trying to track them down. Afterwards we will start making our way east and south, making stops to look for Burrowing Owl and to scan sagebrush habitat for Greater Sage-Grouse. We will also visit wetlands that can hold over a dozen species of waterfowl along with White-faced Ibis, Black Tern, Franklin’s Gull, and Black-crowned Night-Heron.

We will make a stop near Billings at Pictograph Caves State Park, where the cliffs are home to Prairie Falcon, White-throated Swift, and Canyon and Rock Wrens, and the scrub and woods host Bullock's Oriole, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Lazuli Bunting. Eventually we will aim for Red Lodge, at the foot of the Beartooth Mountains. If there is time, we will bird a riparian zone near town where we could find Red-naped Sapsucker, Calliope Hummingbird, Dusky Flycatcher, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Green-tailed Towhee.

**Day 4, Sat, June 19: Beartooth and Pryor Mountains.** We will spend the morning in the beautiful Beartooth Mountains. We will focus on finding birds of higher elevations, especially the local Black Rosy-Finch and Clark's Nutcracker. We could also come across Townsend's Solitaire and American Pipit, and maybe get lucky with Dusky Grouse. We will pop into some campgrounds lower in the mountains to look for many of the characteristic birds of the mountains, including Hammond's and Dusky Flycatchers, Red Crossbill, American Dipper, Western Tanager, Mountain Chickadee, Green-tailed Towhee, Violet-green Swallow, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, and "Audubon's" Yellow-rumped Warbler.

After lunch back in Red Lodge, we will continue our birding in the sagebrush grasslands of the Pryor Mountains. The sage here is home to Greater Sage-Grouse, Mountain Plover, Sage Thrasher, Brewer's and Vesper Sparrow, and Sagebrush Sparrow. We will also take a walk along with wide track into a broad canyon where we will look for Gray Flycatcher, the western subspecies of Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Rock Wren, and, if we're lucky, Pinyon Jay. It will be a long day, but very rewarding, with lots of great birds and stunning scenery.

**Days 5, Sun, June 20: Red Lodge to Gardiner via Yellowstone National Park.**

Today we will head back up the Beartooth Mountains, this time crossing the pass into Wyoming and continuing across northern Yellowstone National Park (including passing through the bison-filled Lamar Valley) to Gardiner, Montana. We will be birding and looking for mammals all along the way, especially during our time in the park. As we get farther west, we will look for Williamson's Sapsucker, Pine Grosbeak, Steller's Jay, and Cordilleran Flycatcher in the woods and American Dipper, Trumpeter Swan, Barrow's Goldeneye, and Harlequin Duck in the streams and wetlands. This is the best area of Yellowstone for mammals, too, and we will keep an eye out for Bighorn Sheep, Mountain Goat (introduced here), American Bison, Moose, Black Bear, Grizzly Bear, American Badger, and even Gray Wolf. Before leaving the park, we will stop in to visit the famous Mammoth Hot Springs.

**Day 6, Mon, June 21: Gardiner to Bozeman, departure or continue to the Cassia Crossbill Extension.** We will have a final morning to bird between Gardiner and Bozeman, before making it to the airport in the late morning. We will take into consideration what birds we still need to see and decide on the best plan of action for the morning's birding. Those who are departing will be dropped at the Bozeman airport in the late morning, and the rest will continue driving to Twin Falls, Idaho.

It's a long drive to Twin Falls, but depending on what birds we've missed, we may stop to look for Sagebrush Sparrow and other sagebrush birds along the way. After checking in to our hotel and having dinner, those who are still keen will have a chance to look for Western Screech-Owl.

#### **Day 7, Tue, June 22. South Hills, Idaho.**

We will head out after breakfast for the South Hills. Our main target is the recently described Cassia Crossbill, which is only found here. Fortunately, they aren't too rare. We have to be careful to distinguish them from Red Crossbill, which also occurs here, but we stand a good chance of finding the most recently described bird species in North America. Although Cassia Crossbill will be our primary focus, we will also look for Lewis's Woodpecker, California Quail, "Slate-colored" Fox Sparrow, and Cordilleran Flycatcher. A stop at hummingbirds feeders in the area could help us find Black-chinned, Broad-tailed, and Calliope Hummingbirds.

For those who are interested, we will also spend some time in the South Hills after dark to look for two nocturnal birds that we are unlikely to have seen previously, Common Poorwill and the rare Flammulated Owl. Neither is uncommon here, though actually seeing them can be a challenge!

#### **Day 8, Wed, June 23. Departure from Twin Falls.**

This morning there may be a bit of time for some last minute birding around Twin Falls, depending on your flight schedule. You have your choice of airports for your return trip, as the guide will be driving the vehicle back to Bozeman on this day. You can leave in the early morning from Twin Falls, late morning from Idaho Falls, or the following day (Thu, June 24) from Bozeman. Idaho Falls and Twin Falls are regional airports with limited flight schedules. If you choose to depart from Bozeman on June 24, we will book you into a hotel near the Bozeman Airport on June 23 that will provide transport to the airport the following day for your departure.

## IMPORTANT NOTES

### **Contact information**

The Red Hill Birding **tour manager** for this trip is Josh Engel. To sign up, fill out the [booking form](#) and we will contact you regarding deposit information. If you have questions about this trip, please contact Josh at [info@redhillbirding.com](mailto:info@redhillbirding.com).

### **Timing**

The trip will **begin at a 1pm** at the Bozeman Airport on Wednesday, June 16, 2021, and will end at **11:00am at the same location** on Monday, June 21. These times are organized to align with the daily non-stop flights on United Airlines between O'Hare and Bozeman. If you are taking other flights, please be sure to arrive to Bozeman by 12:30pm on June 20 and to depart after

1pm on June 25. We will coordinate with those who are not taking the non-stop flight from O'Hare or are arriving early.

If you are continuing on to the extension, you can depart from Twin Falls on the morning of June 23 (if flights are available), late morning from Idaho Falls, or on June 24 from Bozeman. The guide will be driving the vehicle back to Bozeman on June 23 and can transport you back to Bozeman on that day.

The main trip starts and ends in Bozeman, Montana, which is very convenient for those who would like to visit Yellowstone National Park on their own before or after the trip.

### Physical difficulty

This trip is **physically easy**. Much of the birding will be done from the road or from easy trails. Although we will be spending time in the mountains, we will not be taking any steep or long trails. We may do some off-trail walking on uneven ground to look for birds as necessary. There are times when we will be on our feet for several hours, but we will be walking at a "birding pace". **We will reach elevations as high as 11,000ft at Beartooth Pass.** The highest elevation for any accommodations is 5,700ft in Red Lodge.

### Pace

The **pace** of the trip is **moderate**. The day length is very long in Montana in summer, with almost 16 hours of daylight. We will typically be getting an early start for birding, taking breakfast with us into the field. We will stop for lunch (sometimes a picnic lunch), continue birding in the afternoon, then have a rest before dinner when time allows. Sunrise is around 5:30 and sunset around 9:15. We will compile our daily checklist (checklist provided) in the evening. There will be opportunities for night birding on the extension, but probably not on the main trip. The guide will also be keeping eBird lists, which we are happy to share with participants.

### Price

The price of the trip is \$2095 and the single supplement is \$350; the price of the extension is \$770 and the single supplement is \$180. This price **includes** all meals and drinks with meals (excluding alcoholic beverages) from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 6 (Day 8 including the extension); all transportation and accommodation during that period; an expert Red Hill Birding guide for the duration of the trip; all park entrance fees; and a bound checklist to keep track of sightings during the trip. It **does not include** alcoholic beverages, optional activities apart from those specified in the itinerary, snacks, laundry, tips (apart from meals), or other items of a personal nature.

A deposit of \$450 per person and the submission of the booking form will secure your place on the trip. Final payment is due by February 16, 2021. We accept payment by check, bank transfer, or the apps Venmo and Zelle. Our prices include a cash discount; we accept credit

cards with a 3.1% service fee. Upon receiving your [booking form](#), we will send you deposit details.

### Hotels

We will be staying in simple, comfortable motels in each location. The hotels all have wireless internet.

### Photography

The **photographic opportunities** are **excellent**. We will often be birding in open habitat with birds that show themselves well. The light in summer is beautiful in this part of the world. That said, this is primarily a birdwatching tour, so while there will be ample opportunities for photography along the way, we will not be making special considerations for photographers.

### Weather

The weather in June in Montana is usually very nice. The average high temperature at that time of year is about 70-75°F and the average low is about 45-50°F, depending on the location. Rain, high winds, snow, and freezing temperatures are possible, so an umbrella and/or raincoat for rain and a mid-weight jacket for cold and wind are recommended. Biting insects are generally not a problem, but ticks and mosquitoes can be present, so bringing repellent is recommended as a precaution.

### Packing considerations

You will generally want to wear **comfortable birding clothes** that you don't mind getting a little dirty.

In terms of gear, you will generally want the usual binoculars, a field guide, and light-weight field clothing. A jacket (and a hat and gloves if you are prone to feeling cold) for cool mornings and high elevations is important. Many people appreciate having a camera along. A reusable water bottle and, for some people, a travel coffee mug, are useful to have along in the car during the day. A raincoat and/or umbrella is useful in case of wet weather. Comfortable walking shoes are important, as we will be on our feet for extended periods. You will not need rubber boots or hiking boots.

### Resources

Our favorite bird field guides in North America are the *Sibley Guides*, the larger *Sibley Guide to Birds* which covers all of North America and the more portable *Sibley Birds West* which will cover all of the birds on the tour. The Sibley Guide App is an excellent app that covers all North American birds, including with good recordings.

### Tipping

We aim to provide **exceptional service**, using guides that are knowledgeable, interesting, personable, and experienced. While tipping is never expected, if you feel that your guides went above and beyond, you are welcome to leave them a gratuity. Tips at restaurants are included in the cost of the tour.

### Travel insurance

We do not require travel insurance for trips within the USA. However, we highly recommend buying it can protect you from unforeseen costs associated with missed, delayed, or canceled flights, sudden illness, medical evacuation, damaged equipment, or other unexpected issues. Red Hill Birding is not responsible for such costs, as laid out in our [Terms & Conditions](#). Note that in some circumstances, such as if you have preexisting medical conditions, travel insurance must be purchased within 1-2 weeks of paying the trip deposit.



Black Rosy-Finch breeds high in the Beartooth Mountains. Photo by Josh Engel.