



Guide: Steve Huggins
Maximum 7 participants

MONTANA

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

June 11-17, 2024

From Bozeman

Price: \$2890 per person
\$705 single room supplement

Extension: June 17-19
Ends in Twin Falls, Idaho

Price: \$995 per person
\$175 single room supplement

Check out the trip webpage here: redhillbirding.com/montana

To register, fill out the booking form here: 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, Tue, June 11: Arrival to Bozeman.

We will meet at our Bozeman hotel in the afternoon (see “Timing” section below) and head out for our first taste of Montana birding. We will spend time birding right around the town, which has many patches of nice habitat. We will hope to visit an impressive private local feeder setup (if the owners are still there and granting us access!). The feeders 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, Wed, June 12. 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, Thu, June 13: Harlowton Grasslands; to Billings.

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.

If time allows, we will make a stop at Pictograph Caves State Park. A wonderful state park on the outskirts of Billings, 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.

Day 4, Fri, June 14: The Pryor Mountains and transfer to Red Lodge

After breakfast in Billings, we head out for a full day birding in the sagebrush grasslands and juniper canyons 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, Mountain Bluebird and, if we're lucky, Pinyon Jay. It will be a long day, but very rewarding, with lots of great birds and stunning scenery.

After a picnic lunch in the field, we will make our way towards Red Lodge, where we will be spending the next two nights. If we have time, we will check out one of the trails in the lower foothills, where we can hope to find Calliope Hummingbird, Dusky Flycatcher, Red-naped Sapsucker, and much more.

Days 5, Sat, June 15: The Beartooth Mountains

We will spend the morning in the beautiful Beartooth Mountains. In the morning, 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. Mammals can also be in the area, including Mountain Goat, Uinta Chipmunk, and American Pika.

After lunch back in town, we will pop into some campgrounds at lower elevation 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.

Day 6, Sun, June 16: 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 7, Mon, June 17. 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 specialists 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 8, Tue, June 18. 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 9, Wed, June 19. 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 20) from Bozeman. Idaho Falls and Twin Falls are regional airports with limited flight schedules. If you choose to depart from Bozeman on June 20, we can book you into a hotel near the Bozeman Airport on June 19 that will provide transport to the airport the following day for your departure.

IMPORTANT NOTES

Contact information

To sign up, each participant should complete the [booking form](#). Once we receive the form, we will send you information about paying the trip deposit. If you have any questions before registering, please contact the office at info@redhillbirding.com.

Timing

The trip will **begin at a 3:00pm** at the group's Bozeman hotel on Tuesday, June 11, and will end at **11:00am at the Bozeman Airport** on Sunday, June 17. Please plan your flights accordingly. If you are not joining the extension, plan your departing flight for 12:30pm or later on Monday, June 17.

If you are continuing on to the extension, you can depart from Twin Falls on the morning of June 19, late morning from Idaho Falls, or on June 20 from Bozeman. The guide will be driving the vehicle back to Bozeman on June 19 and can transport you back to Bozeman on that day at no extra cost.

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 5:30am and sunset around 9:15pm. 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 \$2890 per person** based on sharing a room. The single room supplement is \$705. The **price of the extension is \$930 per person** and the single room supplement is \$170. This price **includes** all meals and drinks with meals (excluding alcoholic beverages) from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 7 (Day 9 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. It also **does not include** lunch or dinner on June 20 for those returning to Bozeman for departure the following day.

A deposit of \$600 per person and the submission of the [booking form](#) will secure your place on the trip. Upon receiving your booking form, we will send you deposit details. Final payment is due by March 11, 2024. We accept payment by Zelle, check, and bank transfer. We also accept payment by credit card with an additional 3.1% processing fee.

Hotels

We will be staying in comfortable motels in each location. The motel in Harlowton is basic but clean. Some motels serve breakfast; at other times we will be bringing our own breakfast into the field.

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 (at high elevations), 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, lightweight clothes**. Given the temperature swings over the course of a day, especially if we are significantly changing elevation, dressing in layers is a good idea.

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. 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.

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 Merlin App is an incredible, free resource from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology that is very useful on all North American tours.

eBird

Your Red Hill Birding guides will be eBirding the entire tour. If you have an eBird account, they will collect your username/email address in order to share those lists and will share them when it is convenient. You are welcome to edit your lists to add/remove species, edit text, or change numbers as much as you would like, since any edits you make to your lists do not change others' lists. And we love it when participants add photos and sound recordings to the checklists!

The leader will also provide an eBird Trip Report after the tour and will add participants who have an eBird account to the report; this way, you can see your own personal trip details and those of the whole group. These trip reports are accessible to anyone who has the link, so participants who do not have eBird accounts can still view the report to see the trip list, photos, and any added text.

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 United States. However, we recommend purchasing it to help protect you against the unexpected. For your convenience, we offer travel protection through Travelex Insurance Services. For more information on the available plans or to enroll, go to www.travelexinsurance.com or contact Travelex Insurance Services at 800-228-9792 and reference location number 13-0441.

Travelex Insurance Services, Inc CA Agency License #0D10209. Travel Insurance is underwritten by, Berkshire Hathaway Specialty Insurance Company, NAIC #22276. 55Y

Note that to be eligible for some benefits, 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.