

Hillstar Nature Tours



# Montana

Glacier to Grasslands

July 9 - 15, 2023

## Trip Report

Tour Leader: Joshua Covill



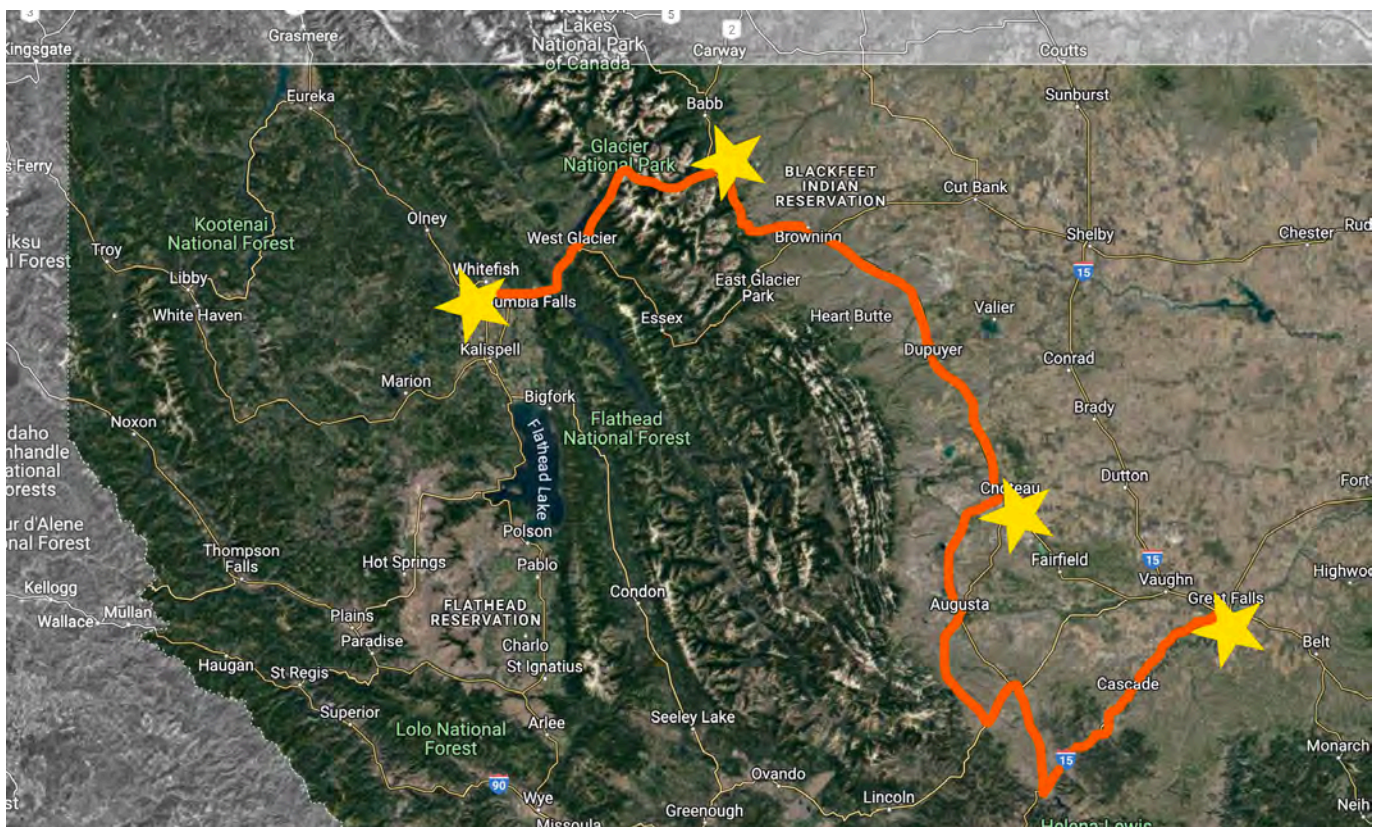
Tour leader **Joshua Covill** and participants Kathy Calvert, Debbie Samac, Colleen Crank, Linda Mack, Yvonne Lenter, and Paul & Maureen Wolter.

I am so grateful to have led such an amazing group for Hillstar's first tour in Glacier NP and this part of Montana.

I have been dreaming of this route for years, and finally making it happen was so exciting! More importantly, it was a smashing success! Everyone had a great time exploring some of the most spectacular landscapes in the country and enjoying some of the best wildlife in the West!

In addition to the 177 species of birds, we encountered 20 species of mammals with highlights being Black Bear, Bighorn Sheep, Mountain Goat, Moose, Pronghorn, Coyote, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Snowshoe Hare, and Yellow-bellied Marmot.

## Trip route



## Detailed Itinerary

### Day 1 | July 9th

Unfortunately, a few folks had flight delays on their routes to Montana, but most arrived more or less on time (Kathy was the most affected, arriving at 10:30pm!).

We all meet in the lobby of the Best Western Rocky Mountain Lodge in Whitefish at 4:00pm and set out for our first bit of birding!

Stopping at the area known by local birders at the “west valley ponds” we kicked off the trip with a number of wetland species. **Yellow-headed Blackbirds**, **Ruddy Duck**, **Eared Grebe**, and **Sandhill Cranes** featured well.

Next, we visited the Tally Lake Campground to look for some classic forest species. Being the Sunday after the 4th of July, the area was packed with campers enjoying the weekend. Despite the people, we picked up a few goodies like **MacGillivray’s Warbler** in the shrubs and a **Red-naped Sapsucker** visiting sap wells!

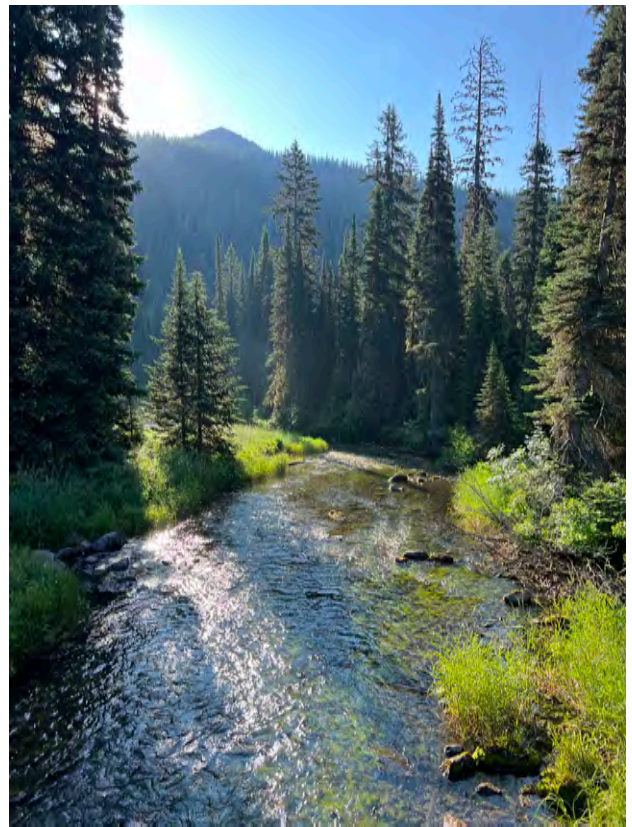
We had our kickoff dinner at Jalisco Cantina in Whitefish, a nice upscale place serving refined Mexican dishes. It’s always great to start a trip with good tacos! After dinner, I picked up Kathy from the airport, glad she made it on the first day even if it was late!

### Day 2 | July 10th

A good Starbucks breakfast in the bag, we set out for an area northwest of Whitefish with great old-growth spruce forests. I was so excited to show folks some of my favorite local birding hotspots, and they did not disappoint! Almost right away driving up the gravel road into the mountains, we had a big bull **Elk** in the road! Stopping to check it out, a bright male **Western Tanager** flew into a tree at eye-level! Shortly after that, we had great looks at a **Ruffed Grouse** sitting along the side of the road!

At Upper Whitefish Lake, we had a number of good forest species like **Fox Sparrow**, **American Dipper**, **Steller’s Jay**, **Northern Waterthrush**, **Varied Thrush**, **Townsend’s Warbler** and **Chestnut-backed Chickadee**. Watching the **Northern Waterthrush** sing in the early morning sun was just a beautiful experience!

On the way further up, we stopped for more **Varied Thrush** and had a great encounter with a spunky **Pacific Wren**.



*early morning in the high elevation spruce forests on Day 2*



*Northern Waterthrush*



*White-crowned Sparrow*

At Red Meadow Lake, a high-elevation lake that sits right on the pass over the mountain range, we had a few more good classic mountain west species like **American Three-toed Woodpecker**, **Pine Siskin**, and **Barrow's Goldeneye**. The best bird was a pair of **Boreal Chickadees** that we found at the very last second! We had started the return trip and stopped to photograph some Beargrass blooms when we heard one calling! We all got great looks, and a few photos.

Lunch was at the Wrap n Roll Cafe, a local staple in Whitefish that seems to be relatively undiscovered by most visitors to the area.

Our afternoon saw us entering Glacier National Park for the first time of the trip. During dinner in Apgar village at the head of Lake McDonald, a young Calliope Hummingbird made a visit to the potted flowers on the patio!

We ventured up the Inside North Fork Road in the evening. **Olive-sided Flycatchers**, **Red-naped Sapsuckers**, and **Western Tanagers** put on a show, as well as some trip birds like **Orange-crowned Warbler**, **Cassin's Vireo** and **Hairy Woodpecker**.

### Day 3 | July 11th

An early departure from our hotel in Whitefish, we set out for Glacier NP. The weather had turned overnight, going from hot and sunny the day before to cold, windy, and rainy! The worst part was a huge thunder cell was heading right for Logan Pass, our planned destination for the morning. Not wanting to be human lightning rods on the top of a mountain, we decided to wait it out by grabbing (more) coffee in Apgar, and bird along the Camas Road.

We enjoyed a relatively rain-free morning with highlights being a family group of **Canada Jays**, a very cooperative male **Western Tanager**, and a female **Evening Grosbeak** putting on a show as she hopped around the bushes and on the ground around our van!

Watching the weather, we made our move, and by 8:30am we were on our way up the famous Going-to-the-Sun Road.

We stopped for even more **Varied Thrush**, watching one sing from atop a tall snag across McDonald Creek at the "Redrock" pullout.



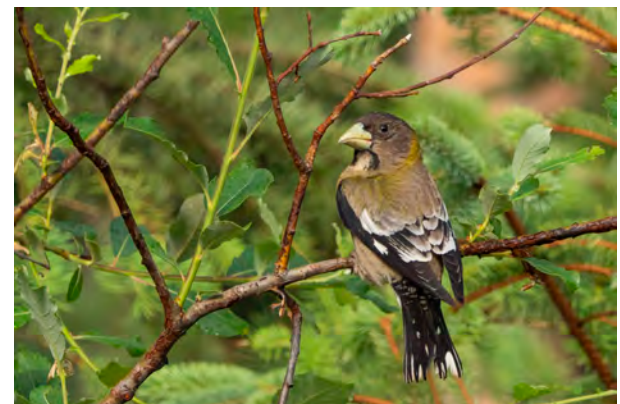
*Boreal Chickadee!*



*the group looking at the Boreal Chickadee!*



*male Western Tanager*



*female  
Evening  
Grosbeak*

Ascending the Going-to-the-Sun Road higher and higher brought us back into the clouds, and we were soon enveloped in fog and rain. After enjoying the moody mountain vistas, we decided it was best to head over Logan Pass and go to St Mary where we will do a small hike and then get lunch.

Our short ½ mile hike along the Beaver Pond loop was really successful, despite it being midday. Great looks at a male **White-winged Crossbill** through the scope, and brief but good looks at a pair of **Black-backed Woodpeckers!**

Lunch was at the St Mary Village Lodge, a big and beautiful building, with a great restaurant.

After checking into our hotel and having a short rest, we set off again for Logan Pass in the afternoon.

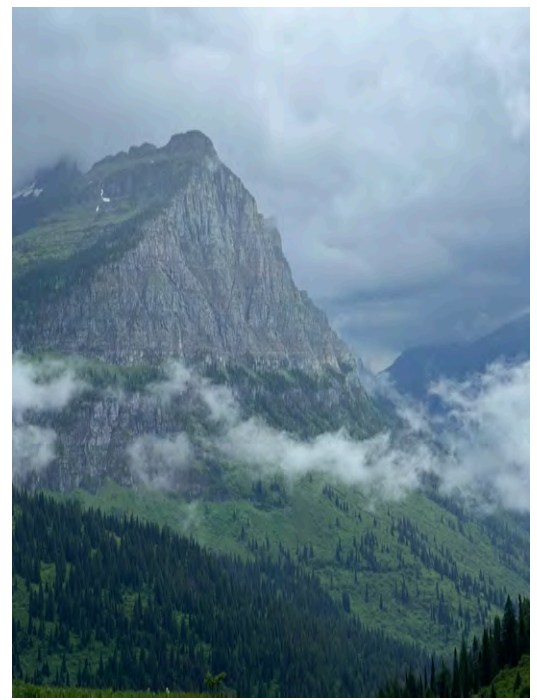
We stopped for landscape photos, and made our way to Haystack Creek falls, back on the west side of the pass. Here we got scope views of a **Black Swift** sitting on a nest! It's the only known Black Swift nest in Montana that can be seen from a road! These incredible and poorly-understood birds nest behind cascading waterfalls high in the mountains, making this a very special experience!

We enjoyed point-blank experiences with both **Bighorn Sheep** and **Mountain Goats** near Logan Pass, and a few folks braved the wind and cold temps to get **Gray-crowned Rosy Finches** along the boardwalk above the Logan Pass visitor center.

We enjoyed an excellent dinner at the Snow Goose Grill inside the St. Mary Lodge, complete with their amazing Huckleberry Apple Cobbler!

## Day 4 | July 12th

We decided to bird the Beaver Pond Loop trail again first thing in the morning and take it all the way to the namesake beaver pond at the 1 mile mark. This proved a great decision as we got many good birds and trip birds on the morning hike! Great views of **Red Crossbills**, an immature **Canada Jay**, and at the pond we had a few baby **Barrow's Goldeneyes** as well as a family of **Ring-necked Ducks**. The main highlight at the pond was quick looks at a large bull **Moose!** It was across the pond from us, and made its way out of the water and disappeared into the forest soon after we arrived. How exciting!



*moody views from the Going-to-the-Sun Road*



*Mountain Goat*



*Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch*

For lunch, we drove the 1 hour up to the famous Many Glacier Lodgel, and had lunch in the "Ptarmigan Dining Room". The food was fabulous, as were the views from the lodge! Sitting on the shore of Swiftcurrent Lake, and with the impressive peak of Grinnell Point looming just across the way, it's hard to not be amazed!

After lunch, we started our drive south into the prairies. We picked up **Lazuli Bunting**, **Ferruginous Hawk**, and **Swainson's Hawk** along the way.

We stopped at an unassuming dirt road through good habitat, a small local spot I know with a silly name. The road is named "Molly's Nipple Road", which almost the whole group found hilarious!

This stop turned out to be very productive, with dozens of **Thick-billed Longspurs** parachuting down from the sky singing their jumbled musical songs.

The hits kept coming, with great views of a **Ferruginous Hawk** perched on the ground, a "Richardson's" **Merlin** chasing and catching a small songbird, our first **Chestnut-collared Longspur**, and some distant singing **Baird's Sparrows** (which we never saw, but rectified later)

The main highlight was when shortly after we arrived, a **Prairie Falcon** made a slow pass right overhead!

After checking into our hotel in Choteau, the Stage Stop Inn, and getting dinner, we headed over the Freezout Lake for a quick hour of evening birding.

It was wonderful, with hundreds of birds all around us! We picked up a lot of wetland species for the trip list, with some highlights being **Cinnamon Teal**, **Franklin's Gull**, **American Avocet** with babies, **Yellow-headed Blackbird**, **Clark's Grebe**, and **Wilson's Phalarope**.

## Day 5 | July 13th

We spent the first half of the day exploring and enjoying the incredible beauty of the "Rocky Mountain Front"; the area where the prairie meets the impressive chain of mountains.

Going west from Choteau, we birded along a gravel road through some great shortgrass prairie. The road was practically lined with **Thick-billed Longspurs**, which were the most numerous songbird, even beating out **Horned Lark** and **Vesper Sparrow**!



*baby Barrow's Goldeneye*



*Many Glacier Hotel as seen from the parking lot!*



*Wilson's Snipe*



*Horned Lark*



*views looking west to the Rocky Mountain Front from Bellview Road*

Being in such a beautiful place with so many Longspurs singing was a magical experience. We got many great views of **Chestnut-collared Longspurs** as well, enjoying the contrast of their black chests and bellies, white and black face pattern, and rusty necks.

We picked up a few **Long-billed Curlews**, a **Golden Eagle**, and a surprise **Sharp-tailed Grouse** sitting atop a mound next to one of the Curlews!

The most anticipated bird of the morning was finally getting views of a **Baird's Sparrow**!

Hearing a few distantly, we never got eyes on any until we found one singing much closer to the road!

Finally, we were able to enjoy good looks at this special prairie species.

We followed to road west as it worked it's way closer and closer to the mountains, and then along Teton Creek through a canyon into the forests of the Rocky Mountains.

We stopped at Cave Mountain campground, and despite it being mid-morning, we had great luck with some great birds!

First was a nest of **Red-naped Sapsuckers**, and next was a few male **Evening Grosbeaks** feeding on Serviceberries right at eye level!

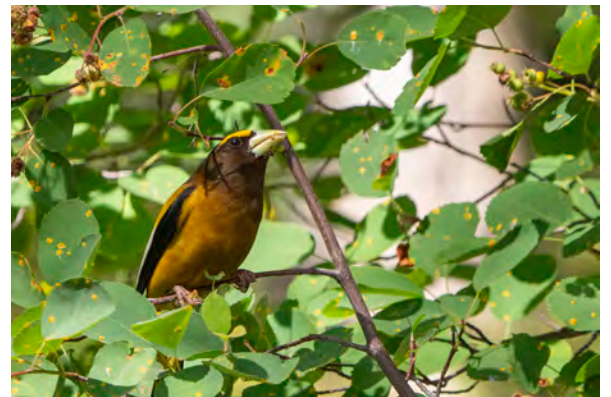
A quick snack break at the Teton Pass ski area netted us looks at a male **Cassin's Finch**, and we started our drive back to Choteau, picking up **Mountain Bluebird** along the way.

After our lunch and afternoon rest period, we headed out for Freezout Lake again, but taking the back roads to look for some new species.

We gained **Clay-colored Sparrow**, **Brown Thrasher**, **Say's Phoebe**, **Western Kingbird**, **Bullock's Oriole**, and **Loggerhead Shrike** along a gravel road, but the highlight was a pair of **Golden Eagles** and a pair of **Prairie Falcons**! Both species have nested on the buttes in the area, but can be hard to spot at that time of year.



*Long-billed Curlew on the left  
Sharp-tailed Grouse on the right!*



*male Evening Grosbeak*

At Freezout Lake, we all enjoyed the spectacle of birds. The prairie wetlands in Montana are incredibly rich with species, and again we got many new and good birds!

Hundreds of **Marbled Godwits**, **Franklin's Gulls**, ducks of a dozen species, and all kinds of shorebirds filled the view. We saw more **Clark's Grebes** with the many **Western Grebes**, kicked up a few **Black-crowned Night-Herons**, watched **American White Pelicans** feeding, and enjoyed the buoyant flights of **Forster's** and **Black Terns**. Ending the day with a spectacular sunset, we headed back to town.

## Day 6 | July 14th

A relaxed morning on our final full day saw us driving south. Our ultimate destination is Great Falls, but we took the long way around, stopping at many good birding spots along the way.

Taking route 434 south, we wandered through amazing landscapes, over rolling hills and in front of the great Rocky Mountains. More **Longspurs** of both species, plus lots of waterfowl in various prairie ponds.

Stopping at the Dearborn River historic bridge, we got good looks at **Spotted Towhee**, **Western Flycatcher**, **Clark's Nutcracker**, as well as our only **Yellow-bellied Marmot** of the trip.

We stopped at a great little ice cream & hoagie place in Wolf Creek for lunch, and made our way along the Missouri River through amazing canyons! A pair of **Caspian Terns** hunting on the river was a good surprise, and we connected with our main target of the area, **White-throated Swifts**.

We had been very fortunate to not have much wildfire smoke in the air throughout the trip, although that changed midday when we arrive to the large town of Great Falls.

After checking into our hotel, we ventured out for the evening to First People's Buffalo Jump State Park.



*Sunset at Freezout Lake*



*Sunset at Freezout Lake*



*View of the Missouri River cutting through the landscape*



We learned a bit about the First Nations peoples of the area and how they would chase herd of Bison off bluffs and reap a huge harvest from all the animals that fell to their death. For birding, this is a great spot. The rocky bluffs hold **Rock Wrens**, which we got great looks at, and the huge **Black-tailed Prairie Dog** towns are also home to Burrowing Owls. We searched the P-dog town at the top of the bluff, finding a gorgeous **Prairie Rattlesnake**, but no owls. At the Prairie Dog town below the bluffs, we had more luck, with 7 **Burrowing Owls**! Back in town, we had a great final dinner at a restaurant right next to the hotel, and told stories of past birding trips, recounted our favorite experiences from this one, and cheers'd to many more adventures!

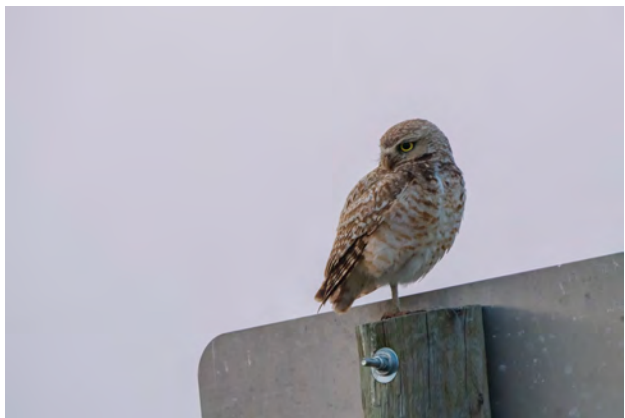
### Day 7 | July 15th

For the final morning, we checked out the nearby Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge. On the short drive out there, we stopped to look at a bold **Burrowing Owl** sitting on the speed limit sign along the main road! At the refuge, we were overrun with birds! The gravel road out through the grassland had hundreds of sparrows along it, as well as over a dozen **Upland Sandpipers**! The morning birding spectacle continued once we got to the wetlands, with hundreds of **Eared Grebes** with babies, many **Ruddy Ducks**, **Yellow-headed Blackbirds**, **White-faced Ibis**, **Black Terns**, and **Wilson's Phalaropes**. The most numerous bird was **Franklin's Gull**, with over 1,000 birds loafing on the pond, flying around, and roosting on the railings of the boardwalk!

It was seriously a special way to end the trip! We all said our goodbyes, and I dropped everyone off to the airport in Great Falls by noon.



*Prairie Rattlesnake*



*Burrowing Owl*



*Eared Grebe with chick*



*Franklin's Gulls & a male Yellow-headed Blackbird*

You can find a full bird species list on the eBird Trip Report at this link:  
<https://ebird.org/tripreport/144636>

### **Full mammal list:**

Snowshoe Hare  
Pronghorn  
American Bison  
Bighorn Sheep  
Mountain Goat  
Moose  
Elk  
Mule Deer  
White-tailed Deer  
Coyote  
Red Fox  
American Black Bear  
Black-tailed Prairie Dog  
Red-tailed Chipmunk  
Yellow-pine Chipmunk  
Eastern Gray Squirrel  
American Red Squirrel  
Columbian Ground Squirrel  
Richardson's Ground Squirrel  
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel  
Yellow-bellied Marmot



*Pronghorn*

**Huge thanks again to everyone for joining me on this incredible trip!  
I'm looking forward to the next one!**

More info on upcoming tours can be found on Hillstar's webpage:  
[hillstarnature.com](http://hillstarnature.com)