



HILLSTAR NATURE

The Prairies: Longspurs & Pronghorn

June 2nd – 9th, 2023

With leaders George Armistead & Liam Hart



A male Chestnut-collared Longspur issues out its descending, meadowlark-like song of warbles and chortles across a mixed prairie grassland in outside of Minot, North Dakota. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

When the Wisconsin Glacier receded about 10,000 years ago, a new landscape began to emerge across areas of North Dakota and Montana. It was one of prairie and grasslands, grazed by droves of Bison and pockmarked with lakes and ponds of all sizes. This lovely and scenic open country eventually became what we know as the Prairie Potholes and the Shortgrass Prairie, and they hosted a dizzying number of birds and animals.

Today still, choruses of Western Meadowlark, the state bird of the two states we visit on this tour North Dakota and Montana, continue to echo across the prairie. Though much altered since the days of “Manifest Destiny” and the 19th century, humans and in particular European settlers have made their mark here, and in a not subtle or healthy way. Yet even now there are amazing birds that call the prairie home, and some utterly captivating animals too, each casting a spell on those who take the time to look and to listen.

An immersive prairie experience, on this tour we focus on finding, enjoying and photographing animals such as Coyote, Pronghorn, White-tailed Jackrabbit, hopefully American Badger, and a host of fat, furry and absurdly cute rodents (prairie dogs, we are looking at you!). And birds like, Thick-billed Longspur, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Sprague's Pipit, Baird's Sparrow, Franklin's Gulls, American White Pelican, and Sharp-tailed Grouse all are on the docket as well and should feature.

Join us as we cross the prairies, from northern and western North Dakota to eastern and central Montana. From Bismarck to Bozeman, the birds and animals outnumber the humans by a good margin.



The odd and elegant Pronghorn is the only living member of a family that once had more members across the North American continent. Today its closest living relatives are the Giraffids, including the Okapi and the giraffe species. Its genus Antilocapra means "goat-antelope". (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

We're headed for Big Sky Country and we hope to have you with us.

Itinerary

Day 1, Friday, June 2nd: Arrival into Bismarck & north to Minot.

Welcome to the Prairies! The tour begins upon pick-up at the Bismarck Municipal Airport (BIS). Be ready for pick-up here at 2:30pm. If arriving by air this day (rather than a day prior), be sure flights arrive by 130pm. We will head out by 2:45pm for some birding nearby and hope to hit a wetland area nearby to get our first taste of the Prairie Potholes. Expected birds could include our first Black Terns, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, American White Pelicans, and a variety of breeding waterfowl including Redhead, Ruddy Duck, Canvasback, Lesser Scaup, Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal and more. Night in Minot.



The fringes of the Prairie Pothole ponds/lakes often hold Marsh Wrens, and sometimes even Sedge Wren too, like the one pictured here at the Lostwood National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

Day 2-3, June 3rd & 4th: Minot Area.

"Why not Minot?" Well, some say: "Freezin is the reason", but we'll be here at the right time to avoid that. Within a couple hours' drive of Minot are a whole host of great birding and wildlife areas. From the Lostwood and Des Lacs National Wildlife Refuges where the Clay-colored Sparrows and Upland Sandpipers give voice, to the migrant trap that is the Denbigh Experimental Forest with its incredible density of

nesting Least Flycatchers, to the many other grasslands and wetlands in the area which host breeding birds like Chestnut-collared Longspur, Sprague's Pipit, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Common Nighthawk, American Bittern, Sora, Virginia Rail, and sparrows including Vesper, Lark, Savannah, Grasshopper, Nelson's and even Baird's. We'll have our hands full covering the area as wholly as is ideal, but three nights here will put us in a good position to see much of what it possible in this rich area. Nights in Minot.



Birding the big sky prairies of eastern Montana, where the cry of the Marbled Godwit is heard across the grasslands and the Sprague's Pipits give their cascading, stair-stepping song from high on the wing. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

Day 4, Monday, June 5th: Minot to Malta.

Though a travel day, with a good distance to cover between Minot and Malta, we should see a good number of birds along the way as we cover some ground. We will take stock of our wants and needs and aim at seeing a few birds as we head out of North Dakota, switching time zones as we enter Mountain Time when we cross into the Big Sky Country of Montana. Soon the Lark Buntings and Loggerhead Shrikes should pick up, and we'll find lunch along the way as we head for the small town of Malta, our home for the next three nights. Night in Malta.

Day 5 & 6, June 6th & 7th: Malta Area.

With a good array of public roads and BLM land surrounding town, and proximal to the top eBird hotspot in the state at Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge, we will have plenty to do here over our three night stay. A former stop along the Great Northern Railway, apparently this town got a post office in 1890 and a government official allegedly spun a globe for a name for the town here, and his index finger landed on the

Mediterranean island of Malta... or so it goes. The town doesn't have much to offer a normal traveler but of course we are not normal travelers, and for us this area is a treasure trove of birds and animals with some nice wildflowers mixed in to boot. Amongst the Prairie Smoke, Meadow Deathcamas, and Great Plains Yucca are Black-tailed Prairie Dog towns, a few Black-tailed Jackrabbits, and copious Richardson's Ground Squirrels, or "Flickertails" as they're known locally. For birds we won't be hurting either and the nesting shorebirds often pick up here with Marbled Godwits, Long-billed Curlew and "Western" Willets becoming more a part of the picture, while Eared Grebes, American Avocets, and Cinnamon Teal fringe the wetland areas. The Bowdoin (pronounced "Boh-Doyn") Refuge is so full of birds and animals, we'll be wise to visit one or more times, as the lake there often harbors thousands of waterfowl, especially Gadwall, American Wigeon and various teal, as well as hundreds of nesting Franklin's, California and Ring-billed Gulls and a colony of American White Pelicans too. We will visit a shortgrass prairie area as well where the distinct Thick-billed Longspur will hopefully accommodate and where a Ferruginous Hawk or Golden Eagle could make a pass by us. Nights in Malta.



*The Lark Bunting may be the state bird of Colorado, but eastern Montana is surely a stronghold as well. This male was on territory at the Bowdoin Refuge outside of Malta, Montana.
(Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)*

Day 7, Thursday, June 8th, Malta to Big Timber.

Our last full day together we will head west towards Yellowstone. We'll again take stock of what we and haven't seen and try a route that nets us something new, different or improved. Maybe we'll learn of an animal den we can approach at a safe distance or a raptor nest or just a good birding area, such as the Russell National Wildlife Refuge. Likely we'll enjoy a little getaway birding not too far from Malta, before we endeavor the long drive to Big Timber where we'll stay for the night, before our final morning together. Night in Big Timber.

Day 8, Friday, June 9th: Birding the Ponderosas & Points home/onward.

About an hour east of the Bozeman/Yellowstone International Airport, we'll head out from Big Timber this morning and plan to do a little birding around the Livingston area before we drop folks off at the airport at 11am. Consider joining us for a short tour of Yellowstone, or on our Colorado: Best of Summer tour, which begin just after this tour concludes. Regardless, we'll hope to see you afield again soon.

Smooth Sailing! Thank you for joining this Hillstar Nature experience.

Tour Price/person*: \$2975

Deposit: \$500

Single supplement: \$490

Final Payment Due: 1 March 2023, or at registration if after.

Group size: 4 to 8 guests

*Based on double occupancy at lodgings, with a group size of 4 to 8 registrants. Maximum groups size is 8 registrants, plus guide(s) and driver(s). If there are fewer than 4 registrants, this tour may be cancelled or re-negotiated. Note that if you want a roommate we can try to find you one, but we cannot guarantee all guests a roommate. If none is available, you will be charged the single supplement.

The tour price (fee) includes services from upon arrival on Day 1 into Bismarck (BIS) until drop-off in Bozeman on Day 8, including:

- All meals from dinner on Day 1 through breakfast on Day 8.
- All accommodations from Day 1 through until Day 8.
- All transport from pick-up on Day 1 through to drop-off on Day 8.
- All guiding services, access permits, fees and tolls.
- Tips for staff at hotels and restaurants.



A vintage varmint of the American West, the crafty Coyote is always a welcome sight and one we expect to connect with on this tour. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead

Excluded from your tour fee are:

- Any flights. We can advise you on best times for flights, but we do not book flights or arrange air travel.
- Alcoholic beverages, laundry services, charges to your hotel room, or other items of a personal nature.
- Visa fees, airport taxes, airline baggage fees, etc.
- Single rooms. Note that the tour fee is calculated off double occupancy of each room. Single rooms are available if guest pays the single supplement (noted above).

Documents

Beginning May 3rd, 2023, every air traveler 18 years of age and older will need a REAL ID-compliant driver's license, state-issued enhanced driver's license, or another [acceptable form of ID](#) to fly within the United States. All non-U.S. citizens should have a current passport, valid for six months beyond the start date of this tour, with at least 1 blank page for stamps.



Wilson's Phalarope is a colorful shorebird both in plumage & in personality. This is a female, which average more colorful & more aggressive than males, and they take multiple mates and perform no nest duties. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead

Cancellation Policy

We strongly recommend all guests purchase travel insurance in advance of this tour, including coverage for medical evacuation services and trip curtailment. It is highly advisable to protect against financial losses in the event that the registrant/guest becomes unable to participate in the tour. Note that such coverage can be non-refundable so please check with the Hillstar Nature team before purchasing, to confirm the tour is to proceed as planned. If cancellation is received:

- 180 days or more prior to the start of the tour, a full refund minus a \$250/person processing fee is issued to registrant(s).
- Between 179 and 90 days prior to the start of the tour, half of the tour fee will be returned to registrant.
- 89 days or less prior to departure, no refund of payments or deposits are issued.

Right to refuse service: Hillstar Nature reserves the right to refuse service to any registrant/guest who acts disruptive or in a manner inconsistent with the goals of the tour, as assessed by the tour leader(s) or tour staff.

All guests are expected to comply with the rules and agenda set forth by the tour leader(s) of the tour, and to behave in a way that is considerate and conducive to a quality group experience.



Among the most common birds on our route is the handsome Blue-winged Teal. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

Please contact us if you have any questions about if a tour is a good fit for your goals and/or level of fitness.

Pace, Rigor, Climate & Pests

- Moderate pace. Little if any hiking, but some lengthy bouts (2 hours+) on foot and fairly long days, perhaps some of which may feature a mid-day break. We will be out early and late for good light & best wildlife activity. Some longish drives.
- Comfortable accommodations and decent food. Not really a route for food enthusiasts. Dining options are limited but decent to good.
- Typically weather is pleasant, 60-80 degrees Fahrenheit. At times hotter or colder weather is possible,

and high wind and rain are possible.

- Mosquitos can complicate our time. Best to bring good insect repellent. They are not routinely bad but can be heavy in times/places.

Each morning we rise early, pre-dawn to be in position to take advantage of wildlife on the move at a great time of day. Sunset is before 6am and sunset is just before 10pm. We usually will get a mid-day break for a rest or nap, and these could even last 2 or three hours. These will not feature every day and not on travel days, but we always try to build in a little unstructured time for folks to relax. And given we have two different locations where we spend three nights, it is possible to take a strategic afternoon or morning off.

Most breakfasts and lunches are of the grab-and-go, take-out variety. Dinners will mostly be in restaurants, though possible we would do a take-out or picnic one night.

All birding is done along trails, roadsides, or at parks or refuges, and walking is at a slow pace so as not to startle wildlife and see as much as possible. One or two days we may walk out onto prairies or grasslands, and then footing can be uneven, though still should not be challenging for those who are reasonably fit.

Weather is variable. It can be chilly enough to warrant a fleece, sweatshirt, or even a thermal layer, but more often we experience pleasant temperatures and light wind, making field time



The gaudy and loud Yellow-headed Blackbird could scarcely go unnoticed from the marshes of the Prairie Potholes. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)

comfortable. Mosquitoes can be challenging however in areas, and to a lesser extent ticks can be a nuisance too. We strongly urge guests to consult a doctor about vaccinations and medications prior to travel.

We travel by mini-van, with your tour leader driving, and up to 5 guests per vehicle riding as passengers. Photography is welcome on this tour, but note that this is not a “photography tour”, per se. We will always try and allow some time for obtaining images of desirable subjects, but time is a factor in achieving each of the day’s goals, and it will be up to the tour leader when we move on from birds and other photography subjects.

Packing

Please limit yourself to one mid-size suitcase/duffel and another smaller bag for daily use on outings. Group travel dictates we consider our fellow traveler’s comfort, and this includes not over-packing. There is limited space in vehicles for luggage. The typically dry and pleasant climate here is usually conducive to packing a limited wardrobe.

Light layers, a thermal layer or two, sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses are good to have. We are likely to encounter bright, clear conditions. Good trail shoes, hiking shoes or hiking boots should suffice for most outings, while a pair of slip-ons, flip flops, or comfortable walking shoes for around the hotels/lodges are good to have as well. As mentioned, a daypack (small backpack or the like) for your belongings for daily field outings is useful, and some folks find that having a walking stick for balance is nice or having a foldable stool/chair is nice for times when we sit and wait in an area for a bird(s) to show.

Your leaders will have spotting scopes for group use. If you plan to bring your own, and/or intend to bring a tripod keep in mind there is limited space in the vehicles. Generally we recommend sharing group scopes, unless you plan to digi-scope or typically use your own scope for field outings. In case of the latter, while we may have some space in the vehicles, it is best you are prepared to keep your scope/tripod on your person (in your seat) as we travel.



During our scout trip of the Prairies in 2022, we encountered some rain which was most welcome among the locals. It did muddy some access roads, but also made for some marvelous scenery. Here our Hillstar Nature friend Patrick inspects a prairie dog hole in eastern Montana. (Photo ©Hillstar Nature/George Armistead)