

Yellowstone in the Fall

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Jackson Hole and overnight.
Day 2/4	Grand Teton National Park from Jackson Hole.
Day 5/8	Yellowstone National Park from West Yellowstone.
Day 9/11	Yellowstone National Park from Cooke City.
Day 12	Bozeman.
Day 13	Depart Bozeman.
Day 14	Arrive London.

Departs

September.

Focus

Mammals, birds, other wildlife and Yellowstone's geothermal highlights.

Grading

Grade A – Easy.

Dates and Prices

Visit: www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code USA11).

Highlights:

- Spectacular autumnal landscapes of Yellowstone National Park & the Grand Tetons.
- Look for Grey Wolves & Grizzly Bears in the Lamar Valley.
- Old Faithful & other geothermal highlights.
- North American Bison, Moose, Pronghorn Antelope, Black Bear, Beaver & Coyote.
- Yellowstone Falls & Mammoth Hot Springs.
- Birds including Mountain Bluebird, Williamson's Sapsucker & Black Rosyfinch.
- Led by expert naturalist guides.



From top: Grand Tetons, Grizzly Bear & Clark's Nutcracker. Images courtesy of Shutterstock Images & Peter Dunn.



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Introduction

In the year 1872 a huge area of pristine mountains, forests and geothermal springs known as 'Yellowstone' was set aside as the world's very first national park. Today, almost a century and a half later, Yellowstone National Park is a World Heritage Site and remains one of America's finest protected landscapes, drawing visitors from around the world to appreciate its scenery, waterfalls, geysers and abundant wildlife. The park's geology is fascinating. Yellowstone sits in a huge active volcanic caldera measuring 45 by 30 miles. The heat that wells up from deep beneath fuels over 10,000 geothermal features, from boiling pools of water and mud to huge geysers such as Old Faithful, one of over 250 geysers that dot the Park's steaming valleys. The jagged peaks of the Grand Teton National Park lie just to the south and are now included as part of the 'Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem' a vast protected tract of land that covers over 28,000 square miles.

In the 'Fall', as the days shorten and the colours of the landscape change from the greens of summer to a rich autumnal palette of russet, orange and gold, the mammals are busy preparing for the winter ahead and the resident birds are augmented by migrants from further north. On this exciting 14-day tour we will enjoy Yellowstone and, its equally spectacular neighbour, the Grand Tetons as the two national parks makes their transition from summer to winter. The wildlife will be active, the holiday crowds departed and the colours – weather permitting – should be spectacular!



Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise the best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Jackson Hole

We depart London's Heathrow Airport this morning on a scheduled United Airlines flight to Jackson Hole in the US state of Wyoming (via a US hub). On arrival, we will be met by our local guide and transferred to a comfortable hotel for a 4-night stay whilst explore the mountains, lakes and river valleys of the Grand Teton National Park. It is likely to be mid to late evening by the time we arrive at our hotel.

Day 2 - 4

The Grand Teton National Park from Jackson Hole

We now have three full days to explore the beautiful landscapes of the Grand Teton National Park. The jagged mountains of the Grand Teton range are part of the magnificent Rocky Mountain chain and overlook a picturesque mosaic of forests, lakes and sagebrush meadows bordering the meandering Snake River. During our time here we will not only be admiring the breathtaking scenery, but looking out for a wide variety of mammals and birds including herds of Rocky Mountain Elk, plus Moose, Mule Deer, Pronghorn Antelope (America's fastest land-mammal), Black Bear and Coyote. At this time of the year the Moose and Elk will be resplendent with a full rack of antlers and will only have one thing on their mind, the annual rut and the continuation of their genes! Nearby Jackson Lake acts as a magnet for migrating and wintering waterfowl such as Trumpeter Swan, Barrow's Goldeneye, Redhead and Bufflehead. With the changing of the seasons in full flow, many smaller birds will also be heading south to warmer climes. Flocks of American Robins are common in late September and groups of American Pipits feed on the ground, whilst mixed flocks of warblers and crests should include Yellow-rumped Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler and Golden-crowned Kinglet. Bald Eagle, Dusky Grouse, Mountain Bluebird, Cedar Waxwing and Mountain Chickadee are also likely.



Mountain Bluebird



Moose

Although the rocks of the Grand Tetons are ancient, the spectacular peaks themselves were only pushed up in the past 10 million years and are the youngest range in the Rocky Mountain chain. Massive tectonic forces along the Teton fault have caused the mountains to rise, while the valley floor to the west has dropped. Recent ice-age glaciation then sculpted the mountains into their current form and glacial moraines have enclosed the series of beautiful lakes on the western flanks of the mountains.

During September the groves of Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) undergo a spectacular seasonal colour change. Hillsides and valleys are adorned with a patchwork of yellow, gold, orange, and red colours. The trees in each grove are essentially a single organism connected by runners so that the colour changes in each grove occur simultaneously. In the breeze, the leaves of the Aspen flutter and give rise to the name 'Quaking Aspen' and their wonderfully descriptive species name of *tremuloides*. Another Poplar species, the Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) grows in profusion along the Snake and Gros Ventre Rivers and also produce beautiful autumnal hues.

The town of Jackson Hole will be our base for our time here. This attractive town, which doubles as a ski resort in the winter, has many good restaurants as well as shops and galleries selling wildlife art and souvenirs. There are also some excellent shops catering for outdoor enthusiasts.

Day 5

West Yellowstone

Today we move our base from Jackson Hole to the town of West Yellowstone, located just outside the national park's western entrance. Our journey will take us back through the Grand Teton National Park and into Yellowstone through its south entrance. Heading north, the road follows the Lewis River and passes the beautiful Lewis Lake. On our journey we will also cross the 'continental divide', the line that divides the flow of water between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Rain or snow falling to the west of this line eventually drains into the Pacific Ocean whereas water falling to the east flows down towards the Atlantic. We will cross this important watershed twice more before reaching West Yellowstone!



Old Faithful

At the 'West Thumb' end of Yellowstone Lake we will take the road west to explore the Upper Geyser Basin and view Yellowstone's most famous geothermal highlight 'Old Faithful' (which erupts every 35 to 120 minutes). We are now in the heart of the caldera where steaming fumaroles, hot springs and thick pools of boiling mud dot the landscape testament to the heat welling up from deep beneath our feet.

A short drive from Old Faithful is Grand Prismatic Spring, perhaps the most spectacular geothermal pool in the world! Here extremophile bacteria produce pigments as protection from the heat and, as the water cools towards the edge of the pool, the different levels of pigmentation produce bands of colour that mirror the colours of the rainbow.

Our final 14 mile stretch between Madison Junction and West Yellowstone can be very productive for wildlife. Rocky Mountain Elk are common and both Moose and Black Bear can be seen. Birds to look out for include Red-tailed Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Clark's Nutcracker and Gray Jay. Here we are also sure to encounter the majestic North American Bison, an animal that was driven to the brink of extinction from an initial population estimated to number over 65 million! The story of the Bison is one of the most tragic in natural history, but today nearly 5,000 animals roam the grasslands of Yellowstone National Park and the sight of a herd feeding or slowly plodding across the road in front of us will no doubt be one of the enduring memories of the holiday. A comfortable hotel in West Yellowstone will be base for the following 4 nights whilst we explore the western and central highlights of the national park.



Grand Prismatic Spring

Day 6 - 8

Yellowstone National Park from West Yellowstone

We have the next 3 full days to head back into Yellowstone National Park early each morning to go in search of the wildlife and scenic highlights of the western and central regions of the reserve. We will split out time exploring by vehicle and on foot, but will try, where-ever possible, to escape the confines of the minibus to bird and wildlife watch from the numerous footpaths that criss-cross the forests, meadows and hills.

Once again Rocky Mountain Elk, Moose and herds of Pronghorn Antelope and North American Bison are all likely, plus smaller mammals such as the endearing Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel and three species of chipmunk. River Otter, Beaver and American Marten are also possible, whilst birds to look out for include American Kestrel, Swainson's Hawk, Ruffed Grouse, Pine Grosbeak and mixed flocks of migrating sparrows. For the very fortunate, there's even the chance of the magnificent sight of a Great Grey Owl perched on a dead snag in the late afternoon sun or hunting along the edges of a pine-fringed meadow!



In a park full of breathtaking sights, perhaps the most famous spectacle is the Lower Falls of the Yellowstone River. Here the river plunges 94 metres into the Yellowstone Canyon, a 24 mile-long gorge created by the Yellowstone River as it cuts through the pastel-coloured rhyolite bedrock. On both the north and the south sides of the canyon there are overlooks that give tremendous views. The aptly named 'brink of the falls trail' leads down to an observation platform perched at the top of the Lower Falls.

We will either have a boxed lunch or lunch out and return to our hotel in West Yellowstone each evening for dinner.

Day 9 - 11

Yellowstone National Park from Cooke City

Next we head north to Cooke City, our base for 3 nights whilst we explore the Lamar Valley and the northern and eastern sectors of Yellowstone National Park. En route we will stop at the dramatic steaming travertine (calcium carbonate) terraces of Mammoth Hot Springs. Here the hillside is composed of stepped pools and run off streams, brightly coloured by bacteria and the dissolved minerals in the water. The whole scene is quite otherworldly. From the boardwalks close views of Killdeer is also possible.



We will make a particular effort to find Grey Wolf on evening and early morning drives and walks. This is one of the most reliable places in the world to view this secretive mammal, and although nothing is certain in the world of wildlife-watching – and the Wolves range over huge areas – we stand a good chance of striking lucky! The re-

introduction of the Wolf into Yellowstone is one of the world's great conservation success stories. The last Wolf was shot in the park by government backed hunters in 1926, but 69 years later they were returned to the Lamar Valley and, despite some local opposition and a lot of controversy, Wolves are once again thriving and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is again complete!

The Lamar Valley is also one of the best places in Yellowstone to look for the park's top predator, the powerful Grizzly Bear along with its smaller, and commoner, cousin the Black Bear. Northern American Bison are common and we are sure to hear the characteristic 'bugling' bellow of the male, testosterone-charged, Rocky Mountain Elk. Bighorn Sheep, Coyote and Red Fox are also likely whilst birds to look out for include Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, Williamson's and Red-naped Sapsuckers, Mountain Bluebird, Western Meadowlark and a baffling mix of North American sparrows.



We will also climb (by vehicle) the spectacular Beartooth Pass which cuts through the mountains at 11,000 feet and offers the opportunity to look for an interesting variety of hardy high altitude species. Foremost of these is the attractive Black Rosyfinch and the nimble-footed Mountain Goat, but we will also be on the lookout for Golden Eagle, Horned Lark and White-crowned Sparrow.

Each evening we will return to Cooke City, an old western mining town steeped in history and worthy of exploration in its own right.

Day 12

Bozeman

We have the majority of today to continue our exploration of the northern section of Yellowstone National Park, before we must leave the park for a final time in the mid to late-afternoon to drive a couple of hours north to the town of Bozeman for a 1-night stay in a comfortable hotel.

Day 13 - 14

Fly London

Our flight from Bozeman to London is due to depart in the early afternoon (via a US hub airport). We are due to arrive back into London's Heathrow Airport at around midday on Day 14.

Grading

Grade A. Easy with short walks on easy ground. We will be viewing wildlife from vehicles and on foot. Most of the trails are well maintained, but some can be rough and steep in places. As such this tour is most suitable for those with an average level of fitness who enjoy walking. Yellowstone National Park lies at altitude and the tour

will be exploring areas that lie between approximately 1,980 and 2,560 metres above sea level with the occasional trip higher such as to Beartooth Pass which sits at around 3,300 metres.

Weather

Autumnal weather in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks is as changeable as we experience in the UK in September and early October. It can be sunny and relatively warm, but equally a few colder and wetter days should be expected and packed for. Daytime temperatures climb to the low to mid teens centigrade, but may drop towards freezing overnight. The occasional snow flurry is not unheard of in early October even down to lower altitudes. Heavy snow is possible on some of the higher routes and passes.

At any time of year, it is important to be prepared for sudden weather changes; unpredictability, more than anything else, characterises Yellowstone's weather. Pack for all eventualities!

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation is included in the cost of this holiday. We use a mix of basic, yet comfortable hotels and motels, with all rooms having private facilities. Single occupancy can be secured for the supplement cost outlined on our website and in our brochure.

Please note that the accommodation outlined above may - very occasionally - need to be amended. Replacement hotels will always be of the same standard as the ones outlined in the itinerary and will in no way affect your holiday. Should we have to implement any changes to the above we will notify you as soon as possible.

All meals except evening dinners are included in the tour cost. We will be eating out most evenings in restaurants and diners and choosing from a-la-carte menus. Please budget around £40 per meal for these. We will take packed lunches into the field, but depending on the weather, may also have the occasional cafe lunch from time to time.

Tour focus

This is a general natural history holiday focusing on the mammals, birds and Yellowstone's geothermal and scenic highlights.

Guiding

This tour will be guided by expert local naturalist guides who will meet the group on arrival into Jackson Hole and leave at Bozeman Airport at the end of the tour. This holiday will not be accompanied by a Naturetrek tour leader from the UK.

Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following in the cost of your holiday: lunch and dinner on Day 13, drinks, tips, locally payable airport taxes, US electronic visa fees (ESTA) and all items of a personal nature such as souvenirs, telephone calls, laundry etc.

Your safety & security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/usa or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

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