



Utah, Nevada & Idaho

July 7-18, 2021

Gray Vireo



Bordered on the east by Utah's Wasatch Mountains, on the west by the Sierra Nevada and the north by the Snake River valley, the Great Basin encompasses most of Nevada and the western half of Utah. It is a vast low-lying area of interior drainage composed primarily of sage flats and salt encrusted playas. Ancient tectonic forces in the region have created chains of north-south stretching mountain ranges, some rising above 10,000 feet, separating the Great Basin into a series of flat valleys.

The early history of our country is ripe with stories of intrepid explorers and pioneers who met tragic ends when they encountered the Great Basin. It was on a route through the Great Basin that the awful story of the Donner party unfolded. This famous tragedy is etched into the lore of the American west, but countless other anonymous adventurers perished along this route 160 years ago during the California Gold Rush. Driving through the area today, it seems unfathomable that men and women traveling in wagons pulled by oxen would dare attempt to journey through this forbidden landscape. However, the eternal siren's song of riches beyond imagination and a new life in a better place has always pulled men to engage in fool hardy endeavors that many of us cannot comprehend.

Today, birders hear their own siren's song calling from the Great Basin. The mournful whistle of the Himalayan Snowcock, the melancholy toot of the Flammulated Owl and a chance to see the recently discovered Cassia Crossbill call us to trek through the upper reaches of the Wasatch and Ruby Mountain ranges seeking our own version of California gold. It is a journey that is not for everyone, but for those seeking an escape from the mundane, it will be an exciting and satisfying quest in a starkly beautiful venue. Consider joining for an unforgettable journey through the Great Basin as we seek ornithological treasure.



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Daily Itinerary

July 7, Day 1: Arrival and meeting in Salt Lake City

Participants will fly into Salt Lake City (airport code SLC) where the tour will begin. Everyone should schedule flights to arrive no later than 2:00 PM. We will be staying at a hotel near the airport that has a free shuttle. We will meet in the hotel lobby at 3:00 PM for a brief meeting and then will spend some time birding at a few wetland sites nearby. After dinner we will drive to a canyon near Cottonwood Heights in hopes of seeing Black Swift return to a nesting site. Be aware that Black Swifts are seen regularly here, but can also be sporadic and if there have been no recent sightings we may forego this activity. Night in Salt Lake City.

July 8, Day 2: Antelope Island & Cottonwood Canyon

Our first stop today will be Antelope Island, a 45-minute drive north of our hotel. Antelope Island is the largest of ten islands in the Great Salt Lake and is connected to the mainland by a causeway. In late July, the shores of the Great Salt Lake become an avian spectacle highlighted by half a million Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes feeding along the shores. Thousands of American Avocets and lesser numbers of shorebirds and grebes make it easy to spend much of a day here. We'll make frequent stops along the 6-mile causeway searching for some of the more difficult birds like Snowy Plover, Long-billed Curlew and Marbled Godwit. Upon reaching the island we'll drive south through the rocky flats where we should find Sage Thrasher, Chukar, Horned Lark, Loggerhead Shrike, Lark Sparrow and Say's Phoebe. At Garr Ranch a small woodlot is excellent for passerines and we may turn up Barn and Great Horned Owls. We'll have lunch back in Salt Lake City and then spend the afternoon at Silver Lake in Big Cottonwood Canyon escaping the heat and looking for high elevation specialties. Possibilities include Williamson's Sapsucker, Cassin's Finch, Red Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, Cordilleran Flycatcher, Rufous Hummingbird and Lincoln's Sparrow. Night in Salt Lake City



Clark's Grebe



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Daily Itinerary (cont.)

July 9, Day 3: Uinta Mountains & Bald Summit

Starting early, we'll work our way up into the Uinta Mountains where many exciting birds will be possible. The first stop will be a riparian area along the Weber River where Willow Flycatcher, Gray Catbird, Virginia's Warbler, Fox Sparrow and Green-tailed Towhee are possible. From there we'll bird our way up the mountains passing through the Park City ski resort, one of the venues for the 2002 winter Olympics. As we rise in elevation we'll stop at a series of campgrounds looking for American Dipper, Red-naped Sapsucker, Dusky Flycatcher, Three-toed Woodpecker, Clark's Nutcracker, Gray Jay and other high elevation specialties. We'll culminate our drive at the Bald Mountain Summit trail, another good site for Three-toed Woodpecker. Here we will hike up the summit trail at a leisurely pace until we reach the scree slopes above the stunted spruce line. This is an excellent area for Black Rosy-Finch and we should be able to find them. They are often very confiding and allow close approach making for great viewing and photography. The trail is moderately steep, but we will walk slowly and can reach the scree slopes in about 30-45 minutes. Other birds here include Mountain Bluebird, American Pipit and Orange-crowned Warbler. Night in Salt Lake City.

July 10, Day 4: Soldier Pass: Gray Vireo Hunt

We'll leave early and drive about an hour and fifteen minutes south of Salt Lake to a low mountain pass west of Utah Lake. Gray Vireo nests here on the juniper clad hillsides and it will be our target this morning. They will have finished breeding, but with a bit of luck and diligence we should be able to find one. Other birds here include Gray Flycatcher, Juniper Titmouse, Western Scrub-Jay and sometimes Pinyon Jay. We should be finished here fairly early and will spend the remainder of the morning birding along the west side of Utah Lake where there are good raptor possibilities such as Prairie Falcon, Golden Eagle and Ferruginous Hawk. There are also good sites along the lake to look for migrating shorebirds and waterfowl as well as chances for Burrowing Owl. After a mid-day rest we will spend the evening in the Wasatch Mountains looking for Flammulated Owl. These small dark-eyed owls are quite common, and with the help of a local birder we should be able to get excellent views of them. Other night birds possible here include Common Poorwill and Great Horned and Northern Saw-whet owls. Night in Salt Lake City.



**American Three-toed
Woodpecker**



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Daily Itinerary (cont.)

July 11, Day 5: Westward to Elko, Nevada

After a late night the previous evening, we'll sleep in and after breakfast depart for the 3.5 hour drive to Elko, Nevada. Along the way we'll pass by the world famous Bonneville Salt Flats, site of the world's land speed record. Though not good for birding, the salt flats are a worth a stop for photography and to take a short walk on the salt plain. After entering Nevada, we'll make several birding stops to break up the remainder of the drive. Wastewater treatment plants in Wendover and Wells should have waterfowl and shorebirds and there are good places for Juniper Titmouse and Gray Flycatcher if we haven't seen hem. Depending on the time, when we reach Elko we may do a bit of birding along the Humboldt River, but will plan for an early dinner and bedtime in preparation for our trek to find Himalayan Snowcock. Night in Elko.

Chukar



Violet-green Swallow





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Daily Itinerary (cont.)

July 12, Day 6: Ruby Mountains & Himalayan Snowcock

It is a 45- minute drive from Elko to the trailhead to Island Lake, and we'll have to leave our hotel at 3:00 AM so that we can begin our hike before 4:00 AM. Many people have spread horror stories about this hike, but it isn't really that bad. Island Lake is 2 miles from the parking area and the trail is a series of switchbacks that work up the mountain, and anyone in reasonably good condition should be able to make it to Island Lake in an hour. Though initially we'll be hiking in the dark, but moonlight and headlamps will provide plenty of light to guide our path. Most birders stop at Island Lake and scan the top the cirque wall for snowcock. It is possible to see them this way, but they will be very distant and the views will be unsatisfying. Instead, we will continue hiking another half- mile or so above the lake where we will have a much better opportunity to get good views. This part of the hike will be across a rock strewn hillside and is somewhat steep at the beginning, but again anyone in reasonable condition will be able to do if they take their time. The plan will be to reach the viewing area by 5:30 when the snowcocks begin calling and flying from their evening roosts. With patience, diligence and several sets of eyes, we should be able to eventually get good views of snowcock. Though it will be physically taxing to reach this place, I can promise that it is one of the most beautiful areas you will ever see. Because most hikers stop at the lake, we should have it all to ourselves and the tranquility and peace combined with the stunning landscape will make it well worth the effort. When we have finished with our snowcock experience, we will take our time and work our way back down the mountain birding along the way. Possibilities will include Calliope Hummingbird, Western Wood-Pewee, Cassin's Finch, MacGillivray's Warbler and many more. When we reach the bottom we can then visit a few birding sites in Lamoille Canyon looking for Lewis's Woodpecker, Mountain Chickadee, Lazuli Bunting and more. We'll return to Elko for a well deserved dinner and night of rest, armed with stories and memories of an amazing adventure. Night in Elko.

July 13, Days 7: South Fork SRA & Ruby Lakes NWR

Our last full day in Nevada will start at the South Fork State Recreation Area where the grassy margins of a large reservoir are teeming with migrant birds in late July. After yesterday's hike, a stationary and comfortable vantage point will be a welcome way to spend the first few hours of the day. Expected species here include Black and Forster's Terns, Eared and Western Grebes, American White Pelican, Franklin's and California Gulls and a nice variety of waterfowl and shorebirds. From there, we'll work our way south over Harrison Pass to Ruby lakes NWR. A nice auto loop at the refuge will add more species to our list with the highlight being Trumpeter Swan, a regular breeder in the marshes. Between South Fork and Ruby Lakes, we'll make frequent roadside stops looking for Bushtit, Pinyon Jay, Lewis's Woodpecker, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and other pinyon- juniper specialists. In the riparian areas along the Humboldt River we may find Black- headed Grosbeak, Bullock's Oriole, Red-naped Sapsucker, Lesser Goldfinch and Lazuli Bunting. Night in Elko.



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Daily Itinerary (cont)



Black Rosy-Finch

July 14, Day 8: Return to Salt Lake City

If we have missed any important birds in the area around Elko, we will make final attempts for them this morning, before beginning the return drive to Salt Lake City. In previous years we have visited Lamoille Canyon to look for American Dipper, Red-naped Sapsucker and Lewis's Woodpecker. By late morning we will start back toward Salt Lake City with plans to reach our hotel by 4 PM. Along the way we can check a few areas around the Bonneville Salt Flats where Snowy Plovers are sometimes found and if we have not yet seen Ferruginous Hawk we will also make a special effort to find one. We'll plan for a nice dinner in downtown Salt Lake this evening and then get ready for the final leg of our journey that takes us into southern Idaho. Night in Salt Lake City.

July 15, Day 9: Golden Spike National Historic Site & to Twin Falls ID

We will leave very early this morning in order to arrive in the grasslands at the Golden Spike National Historic site before dawn. Some years there can be an abundance of Short-eared Owls at this location and when present they are very active in the hour before sunrise. Our other target here will be Gray Partridge which persists in decent numbers in the surrounding pastures and grasslands. Though they are not easy to find during the late summer, we have had excellent luck with them on past tours and we will spend much of the morning trying to find some. By late morning we will continue on to Twin Falls, our base as we explore the South Hills and Albion Mountains in search of Idaho's only endemic bird, the Cassia Crossbill. Night in Twin Falls.



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Daily Itinerary (cont)

July 16-17, Days 10-11: South Hills & Albion Mountains

We will have most of 2 days to explore these mountains in southern Idaho in search of Cassia Crossbill. The birds are fairly common here and with the amount of time allotted we should have no trouble getting good views of them as well becoming comfortable with their distinctive vocalizations. Due to the absence of red squirrels, a voracious and efficient nest predator, nesting songbirds tend to be more common here than they are in forests with squirrels, so the area is a very good birding venue in general. There are several other birds of interest present in the area and if we have satisfactory success early on with the crossbills, we will have plenty of time to look for things like Northern Goshawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Common Poorwill, Williamson's Sapsucker, Hammond's Flycatcher, Sagebrush Sparrow etc. Be aware that many of these are thinly distributed and none are guaranteed, but all are possible. By early afternoon on July 17, we will begin the drive back to Salt Lake City where we plan to arrive by late afternoon. We'll have a final group dinner and compile our final trip list before beginning preparations for our trips home. Night in Twin Falls (July 16) and Salt Lake City (July 17).

July 18, Day 12: Tour Concludes

The tour concludes this morning with flights home from Salt lake City International Airport.





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Tour Information

The tour will be limited to seven participants.

Tour Cost

The cost of the tour will be \$2995 per person double occupancy and the single supplement will be \$600 per person. Price includes eleven nights lodging (July 7-17), all meals beginning with dinner on July 7 through dinner on July 16, park entrance fees, guide fee and all ground transportation during the tour.

Registration & Deposit

In order to reserve a space on the tour, a completed and signed registration form is required along with a deposit of \$500. Registration forms are available on the website at www.otusasiotours.com

Payments should be mailed to:

Otus asio Tours

900 Hillsborough Road
Chapel Hill NC, 27516

Cancellation Policy & Final Payments

Final payments will be due April 8, 2021 and final invoices will be sent in March. Given the ongoing Covid-19 situation and the uncertainty surrounding it, there will be no cancellation penalties for this tour after deposits and final payments are made. All cancellations will be issued full refunds less any unrecoverable expenses that have been incurred by Otus asio Tours. Any such expenses on this tour should be minimal.

Transportation

Transportation throughout the tour will be in a 15-passenger van.

Weather

You will need to be prepared for a variety of weather conditions on this trip. In the deserts around Salt Lake City it will be hot and dry with daytime temps possibly reaching 90. In the mountains it will be cooler and if it is overcast and windy, it may feel quite chilly. Temps there may not get above 55 on cloudy days. Elko is on a high desert plain at an elevation of 5100 feet. Despite the elevation, it is usually warm to hot there in July and temps could also reach 90 during the day. The trailhead in Lamoille Canyon is at 8500 feet. Depending on conditions on the day of our hike, it may be in the high 30's when we begin, so a warm hat and gloves may be necessary. During the hike you will be sweaty and warm, but when we



West Virginia, Ohio & Michigan: A Spring Migration Journey

May 5-16, 2021

Tour Information (cont)

each the top you may feel quite cold standing and scanning for snowcock. Hence wearing layers that will wick away moisture is very important there. Rain in the desert is unlikely, but we may well experience wet conditions at higher elevations.

Physical Requirements

This is a strenuous tour that involves several hikes at high elevation. The hike at Bald Mountain Summit for Black Rosy-Finch will be about 2 miles and is on somewhat rocky terrain. It begins at an elevation of nearly 11,000 feet. The Himalayan Snowcock hike will cover 5-6 miles. It begins at 8,000 feet and may go as high as 10,500 depending upon the group and the conditions. A portion of this hike is off trail and requires walking on uneven ground and on scree fields. At Cottonwood Canyon we will walk on a well traveled mountain trail at an elevation of about 9000 feet. All of these hikes will be optional and with the exception of the snowcock hike, there will be birding opportunities for anyone choosing to opt out. The snowcock hike will be the last of the difficult hikes and the leader will use the two previous hikes to assess the physical abilities of the participants and will make the final determination as to whether individual participants will be capable of completing it. We will also do some walking at the Gray Vireo site and during our evening of owling, but these will be shorter and easier excursions. Antelope Island, Ruby Lakes NWR, South Fork SRA and the areas in Idaho involve mostly road birding both in and out of the vehicle.

Snowcock Hike

On the day we hike for the Himalayan Snowcock, we will leave our hotel in Elko around 3:00 AM. It is about a 45-minute drive to the trailhead and we will need to be hiking no later than 3:45 AM in order to reach a good viewing area by 5:30 AM. It will be dark when we begin, so you will need either a flashlight or a headlamp to negotiate the trail until daylight. The initial portion of the trail is 2 miles of steep, switchbacks. Though it is steep, it is only 2 miles and we will try to travel at a reasonably steady pace. At the same time, we will not go faster than whatever the slowest person can tolerate. After the 2 miles of switchbacks, we will leave the trail and walk uphill over some rocky terrain for about another 3/4 of a mile in order to reach a decent vantage point from which we can scan for the birds. They are usually quite vocal around sunrise, which will be 5:30 AM, so it is important that we reach this vantage point by that time. After their initial vocalizations they fly off to feeding areas and are much quieter. If we're lucky we can see them flying from their evening roosts; if not, we will have to scan vast areas to find them.....or not find them. The higher we can work our way up toward the base of the cirque, the better our chances will be of getting good views of them. All of this is to say that we really need to be on the trail as early as possible to maximize your chances of getting satisfactory views of these birds. After the first few days



West Virginia, Ohio & Michigan: A Spring Migration Journey

May 5-16, 2021

Tour Information (cont)

of the tour, I will assess everyone's physical abilities and may possibly adjust our departure time for this hike. When I am alone, I can make it from the parking area to the viewing site in 50 minutes. With a group it will probably take 2 hours or more. You should also be aware that the hike begins at 8500 feet, so if you have issues with altitude, please let me know as that will be important in determining our speed and could affect our departure time. Finally, because we are leaving so early, there will be no formal breakfast on this day, and we may not get back to Elko until late afternoon. Therefore, you will need to plan to carry food and water for most of a day. I will carry a bunch of energy bars and some fruit, but obviously I won't be able to carry enough sustenance for everyone for an entire day of intense physical exertion.

Meals

Breakfast will be continental style at the hotels in Salt Lake City and Twin Falls. In Elko we will eat breakfast in our rooms on the morning of the snowcock hike and at the hotel on the other mornings. Most lunches will be in the field picnic-style, but there may be a few brief sit-down affairs depending upon the circumstances of the day. Dinners will be at restaurants and will be casual.

Information

For further information on the tour contact Jan Hansen at 919-259-9423 or at otusasiotours@gmail.com Details are also available at www.otusasiotours.com

Above Island Lake: Himalayan Snowcock Haunts

