

CASSIA CROSSBILL: SEEKING THE ABA'S NEWEST BIRD JULY 21-25, 2018

In early July, the AOS (American Ornithological Society) announced its 2017 check-list supplement which detailed several changes to the ABA checklist. Probably most notable of these was the long expected split of the Red Crossbill complex into 2 species: Red Crossbill and Cassia Crossbill. This split has put Idaho onto the ornithological map and suddenly made this heretofore birding backwater (at least to non-Idahoans) a destination. The Cassia Crossbill is found only in the lodgepole pine forests of the South Hills and Albion Mountains in southern Idaho, two remote mountain ranges that share the unique ecological aspect of lacking red squirrels. The absence of red squirrels in these two ranges has allowed the Cassia Crossbill to evolve with essentially no competition for the lodgepole pine seeds that comprise the majority of its diet. The lodgepole pines in these mountains have taken evolutionary advantage of the situation by developing thicker cone scales than those of trees in forests where the squirrels are present. This has made the seeds of these cones accessible only to crossbills with larger and more powerful bills. The evolution of the Cassia Crossbill has allowed it to fill this foraging niche by developing a bill that is thicker and deeper than that of crossbills that are found in forests inhabited by red squirrels.

Just like the birds, we birders also evolve, albeit at a much more rapid pace and in a process much less worthy of scientific study. At any rate, based on this latest taxonomic upheaval, I am pleased to offer this new tour designed to give birders an opportunity to find and observe this newest ABA species. This short tour can be taken in conjunction with next year's Flammulated Owl and Himalayan Snowcock tour scheduled for July 14-22, 2018, or as a separate excursion.

Saturday July 21, Day 1, Arrival 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 6:00 PM. Those

participating in the Flammulated Owl & Himalayan Snowcock tour will return to SLC with the group sometime in the afternoon and attend a final dinner that evening. Those arriving for the Cassia Crossbill tour will shuttle to our hotel upon arrival and there will be a short orientation meeting at the hotel around 8:00 PM. Night in Salt Lake City.

Sunday July 22, Day 2, Salt Lake City to Twin Falls, Idaho: We will depart Salt Lake City early this morning to begin the 3.5 hour drive to Twin Falls. The makeup of the group will dictate our activities for this day. If it is composed primarily of people who were on the Flammulated Owl & Himalayan Snowcock tour, we will drive directly to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and spend the early morning hours on the wildlife drive where a spectacle of migratory waterfowl and shorebirds will be present. This is a great place to get close-up comparisons of Clark's and Western Grebe. If the group is mainly people who were not on the previous week's tour, we will visit the causeway to Antelope Island where hundreds of thousands of Wilson's and Red-necked Phalarope will be staging and other birds of interest include Chukar, Burrowing Owl, Long-billed Curlew, Sandhill Crane and Franklin's Gull. Whatever the schedule, we will eventually make our way to Twin Falls where we will spend the next 2 nights. Night in Twin Falls.

Monday-Tuesday- July 23-24, Days 3-4, South Hills and Albion Mountains and environs and return to SLC: 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 Gray Partridge, 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 Wednesday, we will begin the drive back to Salt Lake City where we plan to arrive by late afternoon/ early evening. Night in Twin Falls (July 23) and Salt Lake City (July 24).

Wednesday July 25, Day 5, Flights home: Participants can schedule their return flights home at any time today.

TOUR SIZE: The tour will be limited to eight participants and can be taken separately from or in conjunction with the July 14-22, 2018 Flammulated Owl and Himalayan Snowcock tour.

COST: The cost of the tour will be \$725 per person double occupancy for persons registered for the July 14-22 Flammulated Owl & Himalayan Snowcock tour, and \$795 per person double occupancy for persons registered only for the Cassia Crossbill tour. The single supplement is \$260. Price includes 4 nights lodging (July 21-24), all meals beginning with breakfast on July 22 through dinner on July 24, park entrance fees, guide fee and all ground transportation during the tour. Note that dinner on July 21 is not included for those participating only in the Cassia Crossbill tour.

DEPOSIT & REGISTRATION: A deposit of \$250 and a completed and signed registration form is required in order to reserve a space on the tour. Registrations forms are available on the website (www.otusasiotours.com)

PACE: This tour will not be overly strenuous. We will do a good bit of walking in the South Hills and Albion Mountains when we are looking crossbills, but by and large it will be a graded roads and trails that are not terribly steep. Anyone in reasonably good physical condition should be able to fully participate in all of the tour activities.

CLIMATE: The lowland areas are hot by mid-morning at this season, but we will limit any time there to the morning hours. The mountains are

much cooler and will provide afternoon respite from the heat. Expected temperatures will range from mid-80's to low 90's in the desert to the 50's and 60's in the mountains in the evening. It may be cool enough for light jackets if it is overcast or if we opt for an evening outing. Basically one should expect a wide range of temperatures given the elevation extremes we will visit. The Great Basin is an arid region, but afternoon thunderstorms are possible in July.

FOOD: Breakfast will be continental style at the hotels. Lunches will be in the field picnic-style and dinners will be at restaurants and will be casual.

ACCOMMODATIONS: We will stay at a hotel near the airport in Salt Lake City with a free airport shuttle. In Twin Falls we will stay at a comfortable hotel with a continental breakfast.

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