

UTAH & NEVADA: FLAMMULATED OWLS & HIMALAYAN SNOWCOCK JULY 14-22, 2018

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 and the melancholy toot of the Flammulated Owl 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.

Saturday July 14, 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 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 3:30 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.

Sunday July 15, Day 2, Around Utah Lake & Silver Lake: 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 and Western Scrub-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. 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.

Monday July 16, Day 3, Uinta Mountains: 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.

Tuesday July 17, Day 4, Antelope Island & Owling in the Wasatch Mountains: 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. After lunch we'll return to Salt Lake City for lunch and an afternoon rest in preparation for an evening visit to the Wasatch Mountains. Depending upon local reports and our previous experience, we may begin at the Black Swift lookout. From there we'll drive to a nearby canyon and begin our hunt 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, Great Horned and Northern Saw-whet Owls. Night in Salt Lake City.

Wednesday July 18, Day 5, On to Elko NV: 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 them. 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.

Thursday July 19, Day 6, Himalayan Snowcock & the Ruby Mountains: 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, a nearly full moon 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 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.

Friday July 20, Day 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.

Saturday July 21, Day 8, Return to Salt Lake City: We'll have two options for our return to Salt Lake today and the wishes of the group will determine our route. The first option will be to return directly to Salt Lake on I-80 making a few birding stops at sites within 20 minutes of the highway. Angel Lake will be one possibility where Dusky Grouse may be seen. This route is shorter and would allow us to reach Salt Lake City by early to mid-afternoon. The other choice would be to drive around the northern border of the Great Salt Lake through the Great Salt Desert and stop at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge near Brigham City, Utah. This route would add a few species to our list, but would involve 2.5 hours of additional driving and get us to our hotel much later. Either way would be interesting and we will poll the group to determine our course. Whichever route we take, we'll have dinner together in Salt Lake City tallying our final bird list and sharing memories of our experiences in the Great Basin. Night in Salt Lake City.

Sunday July 22, Day 9, Flights home: Participants can schedule their return flights home at any time today.

TOUR SIZE: The tour will be limited to eight participants.

COST: The cost of the tour will be \$2495 per person double occupancy and the single supplement will be \$600 per person. Price includes eight nights lodging (July 14-21), all meals beginning with dinner on July 14 through dinner on July 21, park entrance fees, guide fee and all ground transportation during the tour.

PACE: This tour will involve two moderately difficult hikes: Bald Mountain Summit where we will hike 2.5-3 miles round trip with an elevation gain of about 1000 feet to look for Black Rosy-Finch, and Big Cottonwood Canyon where we will hike 3-4 miles round trips with an elevation gain of around 1500 feet. These will serve as preparation for the strenuous hike in Lamoille canyon of about

5-6 miles round trip to look for Himalayan Snowcock. On each of these we will take our time and anyone in reasonably good physical condition should be able to participate fully. However be advised that in the past there have been participants who have had difficulty with the level of exertion required and with the altitude involved. **I will assess everyone's ability to successfully make it to the snowcock site during these earlier hikes and will reserve the right to make the final decision regarding whether or not people will be able to attempt it. For the good of the entire group, it may be necessary for me to inform particular participants that they cannot attempt the snowcock hike if I feel they will not be able to make it.**

We will make shorter hikes at the Gray Vireo site and during our evening of owling, but these will be shorter and easier. Antelope Island, Ruby Lakes NWR & South Fork SRA involve road birding both in and out of the vehicle.

CLIMATE: The desert areas get hot by mid-morning at this season, but we will limit our 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 when we are owling, and it could be in the 40's when we begin our hike in Lamoille Canyon. 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 hotel in Salt Lake City. In Elko we will eat breakfast in my hotel room or at a restaurant. Most lunches will be in the field picnic-style, but there may be a few brief sit-down affairs. Dinners will be at restaurants and will be casual.

ACCOMMODATIONS: We will stay at a La Quinta near the airport in Salt Lake City. In Elko we will stay at a large hotel attached to a casino.

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