Southwest Montana Sage-Grouse “Lek” Tour
(Friday, Saturday & Sunday, May 1, 2 & 3, 2020)
(Exploring one of Southwest Montana’s Largest Greater Sage-Grouse breeding “Leks”)
(Information current as of 2/5/2020)
www.sacajaweaaudubon.org

This Southwest Montana bird watching tour of sagebrush-steppe, grassland and wetland habitats in the Dillon area will be great fun for birders of all skill levels. This 2.5-day, 2-night guided trip will start before dawn in Grasshopper Valley to witness displaying male Greater Sage-Grouse at one of the largest breeding leks in Beaverhead County, near Bannack State Park. We will also be searching for other shrub-steppe songbirds (Sage & Brewer’s sparrows, Gray Flycatcher, Sage Thrasher, Vesper Sparrow, Loggerhead Shrike, etc.). Participants will also enjoy birding the alfalfa fields and grazing lands north of Dillon, with spectacular views of Bald & Golden eagles, Prairie Falcon, Ferruginous Hawk (nesting), Long-billed Curlew, McCown’s Longspur, Say’s Phoebe, and possibly Burrowing Owl. The trip will take you into the Pioneer Mountains along Birch Creek in search of various forest birds, including woodpeckers, jays, raptors and passerines. The wetlands and shorelines of Clark Canyon Reservoir will provide good views of a great many waterbirds, including various ducks, loons, grebes, pelicans and shorebirds. In addition to the birding we will explore the historic Bannack ghost town, which was a booming mining town beginning in the early 1860’s.

DETAILED ITINERARY

Friday, 1 May 2020:
12:00 PM:
Please meet your guides Billy Burton and Gina Pasini at their home across the road from Rocky Creek Farm, 34297 Frontage Rd, Bozeman, MT (see-attached map). This beautiful farm and wetland area 3 miles east of Bozeman, just off the Frontage Rd, is a great safe place for you to park your car here overnight. After a brief get-acquainted “Welcome” and discussion of our upcoming adventure, the tour will depart.

12:15 PM
The tour will depart for an approx. 3 1/2 hour and 150-mile drive to Montana High Country Lodge located in the Grasshopper Valley, of the Beaverhead National Forest.

We will spend the afternoon stopping to observe hawks, waterfowl & song birds as we drive the Lewis & Clark Trail to the Grasshopper Valley in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. The Trident-Peregrine Birding Trail at the historic Headwater State Park will be our first stop with a goal to observe nesting Peregrine and Prairie Falcons. We will pass through the beautiful scenery of lush ranchland around Twin Bridges where the Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby Rivers all converge to form the Jefferson River. As we approach Beaverhead Rock State Park we will stop to view this National Sandhill Crane Nesting Sight and the waterfowl that use this natural landmark documented in Lewis & Clark journals. After a pit stop in Dillon, MT we will proceed west 20 miles to the southern end of the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway. It is there we will follow Grasshopper Creek approx. 8 miles north through mountain meadows, lodgepole pine forests and broad willow bottoms to the Montana High Country Lodge.

Evening: 5:30pm to Sunset:
After settling into our rooms at the Lodge and dinner we will take an evening birdwatching hike. Possible bird sightings could be Saw-wet and Great Horned Owls and Palliated Woodpecker.
Saturday, 2 May 2019:

5:00 AM Early-Morning Breakfast.

After breakfast we will depart for Grasshopper Valley to witness displaying males at one of the largest sage-grouse breeding leks in Beaverhead County (near Bannack). Sage-grouse generally are only active for 1-2 hour after sunrise. After our sage-grouse viewing we’ll travel to Bannack for a pit-stop and to observe some of the streamside cottonwood and mountain foothill birds, including Great Horned Owl (possibly nesting!), Cooper’s Hawk, Townsend’s Solitaire, Mountain Bluebird, Red-naped Sapsucker, Clark’s Nutcracker, Cassin’s Finch, and early-arriving songbirds (Rock & House wrens, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Lincoln’s Sparrow, etc.) at this historic location.

In addition to the birding we will explore the Bannack ghost town, which was a booming mining town beginning in the 1860’s (see attached information on Banannack). Next we’ll proceed south toward Horse Prairie, stopping along the way to search for Sage Sparrows, Gray Flycatchers and raptors (including Prairie Falcons, Swainson’s Hawks, and Golden & Bald eagles).

LUNCH:

Our sack lunch stop will be the wetlands and shorelines of Clark Canyon Reservoir, where we will search for various waterfowl, loons, grebes, pelicans and other waterbirds.

After lunch we will continue south to tour an artificial wetland recently created through a collaborative, BLM-sponsored project. Here we may find nesting Sandhill Cranes and soaring Golden Eagles, as well as waterfowl, more kinglets, sparrows, juncos and early arriving warblers.

MID AFTERNOON:

The plan is try to return to Montana High Country Lodge midafternoon for rest/nap before dinner.

DINNER:

After returning to Montana High Country Lodge, you will have some time to relax before dinner. There is many opportunities for birdwatching around the Lodge.

Sunday, 3 May 2020:

5:00 AM

We will depart for another early morning in hopes of viewing displaying males sage-grouse at the Grasshopper Valley breeding leks. We will return to the Lodge for breakfast. After breakfast we will depart Montana High Country Lodge and travel west to Dillon stopping briefly at Poindexter Slough.

We will proceed north of Dillon along Route 41 to the Beaverhead Rock wetlands and other roadside ponds to view a diversity of waterfowl and shorebirds. We hope to find a few more raptors and songbirds along the way. followed by an exploration of the agricultural and grazing lands north of Dillon, where eagles (both species), Burrowing Owls, Prairie Falcons and Ferruginous Hawks often hunt ground squirrel colonies. This area is also productive for finding Long-billed Curlew, McCown’s Longspur, Horned Lark, Say’s Phoebe, more raptors, and perhaps other grassland specialties.

Depending on forest road conditions we will then travel to higher elevations, in the foothills of the Pioneer Mountains along Birch Creek, where conifer forests rim the Beaverhead Valley. We’ll look for various forest raptors, woodpeckers, grouse, and numerous passerines.

LUNCH: We will either return to Dillon for lunch or possibly have a picnic lunch.

5:00 PM: Arrival back to Bozeman.
Tour Cost Details:

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Your Trip Includes...
- Fully guided trip with Billy Burton and Gina Pasini. Billy is a Wildlife Biologist with Master’s degree in Natural Resource Management and Sacajawea Audubon Society Board Member. Gina is a Wildlife Biologist with a specialty in Environmental Education.
- Small group size (no more than 12 participants).
- Travel together from Bozeman to Montana High Country Ranch in Grasshopper Valley of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in comfortable in 4-wheel drive Suburbans or Passenger Van.
- Two-night’s lodging at Montana High Country Lodge
- Dinner Friday & Saturday evening, Breakfast and Lunch both Saturday and Sunday.

Lodging:
Montana High Country Ranch Lodge
7501 Pioneer Mtn. Rd.
Polaris, MT 59746
(406) 834–3469

*(Located on Pioneer Mountain National Scenic Byway, in the upper Grasshopper Valley, 35 scenic miles northwest of Dillon, Montana on MT HWY 278)*

We will be spending both nights at Montana High Country Lodge. The Lodge is very comfortable, spacious, and completely modern as well as handicap accessible; you will appreciate its thoughtful guest oriented design, laid back luxury atmosphere and traditional western ambiance. We have reserved the entire lodge which includes 10 oversized guest bedrooms and suites all with private baths, huge grand room with stone fireplace, dining room, hot tub room, game room, business center with phone, fax & high speed wireless Internet, and gift shop.

There will be sometime birdwatch and relax around the lodges covered porches with spectacular views of the ranch, its wildlife, the Pioneer Mountains and the Grasshopper Valley.

Meals:
All meal are prepared by Montana High Country’s chef and will accommodate our flexible schedule. (Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free dietary requests can generally be accommodated on this trip, with limited selections and requested prior to trip.)

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Activity level:
This trip is easy; short-distance walking is involved. However, you may need to: 1) Walk on uneven ground occasionally, and 2) Sit for up to 3 hours while traveling in the Suburban to and from Grasshopper Valley. (We will certainly make restroom stops as needed!)

QUESTIONS???
If you have questions about the itinerary or anything else, please ask! Do not hesitate to contact Loreene Reid at 406 600-6666 or loreener@sacajaweaaudubon.org. Our goal is to insure that everyone has an absolutely fabulous, unforgettable experience!
Guides

**Billy Burton:**
Billy has guided trips in Alaska and Montana. Raised in central Idaho by parents that were Naturalist, he strives to spend every free minute in the pursuit of things wild. As a Wildlife Biologist, he has worked with many wildlife conservation agencies and organizations, including research work on sage grouse in Southwest Montana. He holds a degree in Biology, Wildlife Biology, and a Master’s degree in Natural Resource Management.

**Gina Pasini:**
Gina is a Wildlife Biologist with a specialty in environmental education. She has lived and worked in the Beaverhead/Grasshopper Valleys and conducted research studies in many Sage Grouse “leks” in southwest Montana.

**Map of SW Sage Grouse Tour – Bozeman to Mountain High County Lodge**