Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge Tour
(Friday, Saturday, Sunday & Monday, May 22, 23, 24 & 25, 2020)
(Exploring a vast array of habitat, ranging from high elevation wetland and prairie habitat at 6,600 feet, to the forests of the Centennial Mountains.)
(Information current as of 03/1/2020)
www.sacajaweaaudubon.org

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is located in the incredibly scenic and isolated Centennial Valley of southwestern Montana, about 50 miles west of Yellowstone National Park. This 4-day, 3-night tour will take you into a vast array of habitat, ranging from high elevation wetland and prairie habitat at 6,600 feet, to the forests of the Centennial Mountains (which ascend to over 10,000 ft. above sea level). It is this diverse, wetland-prairie-sagebrush-montane environment that gives Red Rock Lakes its unique character. Nesting birds are abundant throughout Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge at this time of year, with 120+ species possible. Red Rock Lakes is best known as the primary location for heroic efforts in the 1930’s to save the Trumpeter Swan from extinction. In addition to the majestic swan, another 230 bird species have been identified within the refuge, including: Long-billed Curlew, Sandhill Crane, Red-necked Grebe, Black-crowned Night-Heron, American White Pelican, Sora, White-faced Ibis, American Avocet, Willet, Northern Harrier, Bald & Golden eagles, Swainson’s & Ferruginous hawks, Prairie Falcon, Short-eared Owl, Sage Thrasher and various ducks, flycatchers, kinglets, warblers, vireos, tanagers, thrushes, woodpeckers and, if we’re lucky, Greater Sage-Grouse!

DETAILED ITINERARY

Note: The detailed itinerary can change at the discretion of your guides to accommodate site specific conditions. Weather and road conditions could alter specific areas we plan to visit.

Friday, 22 May 2020:
1:00 PM: Please meet your guide(s). (We are in the process of arranging for you to safely park your car overnight on Bozeman’s west side – will send this info as soon as it has been determined). After a brief get-acquainted “Welcome” the tour will depart.
1:30 PM The tour will depart for an approx. 3 1/2 hour and 130-mile drive to Red Rocks Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Elk Lake Resort. We will drive through Madison Valley, possibly making a stop along the way to look for McCown’s Longspurs, Ferruginous Hawks and other shortgrass-prairie specialties. We will also make a brief stops to search the back bays of Henry’s Fork Lake, which often hosts a diversity of waterbird species.. We are scheduled to arrive at Elk Lake Resort by 6:00 PM.

Evening: 6:30PM to Sunset: After settling into our rooms, we will eat dinner (6:30 PM) and then explore the immediate vicinity for birds (optional) before going to bed early.

Saturday, 23 May 2020:
5:30 AM: We shall depart Elk Lake Resort for a morning of birding on Red Rock Lakes Refuge. We will have coffee, tea, eggs, fruit and muffins available for early morning breakfast. An early start will give us the best chance for viewing a great variety of birds and mammals as we drive toward the Upper Red Rock Lake area. (We are hoping to arrive by 6-6:30AM to catch the exceptional morning songbird activity.)
Before reaching the campground, we may stop to bird a unique, relict spruce-fir forest along the southern shores of Upper Red Rock Lake, hoping to find various flycatchers, warblers, vireos, tanagers, thrushes and woodpeckers. At the campground and as we hike the road, we will view a variety of forest birds in the mature aspen groves. We will also scan for Trumpeter Swans and other waterfowl on the lake.

Our next stop will be the sandhills and wet meadows along North Valley Road. Here we will spend an hour or two searching for Short-eared Owls, Long-billed Curlews, Sandhill Cranes, Swainson’s Hawks, Sage Thrashers, Brewer’s & Vesper Sparrows, White-faced Ibis and other wading birds, and more. We will try to spot Peregrine Falcons (with spotting scopes) that usually nest on an artificial platform a mile to the west.

**LUNCH:**
We will return to Elk Lake Lodge for a lunch and a leisure time.

**3:30PM and Dinner to Sunset:**
We will then drive to Lower Red Rock Lake. Here we will likely find shorebirds (stilts, avocets, phalaropes, willets, etc.), marsh birds (rails, yellow-headed blackbirds, etc.), and waterbirds (grebes, ducks, cormorants, etc.). We will then proceed to the Lower Lake boat launch, scanning for nesting herons, grebes, ibis, waterfowl and more. If weather permits, we will have a picnic dinner at Lower Red Rock Lake while viewing and scanning the many sedge islands in Lower Red Rock Lake for various birds and their young. These islands serve as protected breeding grounds for many shorebirds.

**Sunday, 24 May 2020:**

6:15 AM:
Optional early morning birding & exploration of the forests, meadows and wetlands near the resort. We will search for late-migrant warblers, vireos, sparrows, tanagers, thrushes and woodpeckers while enjoying breath-taking views of the Centennial Mountains and surrounding landscape. This 1-mile round-trip walk will be followed by a hot breakfast at 7:30 AM.

BREAKFAST: 7:30 AM at the resort.

8:15 AM:
Depart to explore the sagebrush and sand hills along the North Valley Road, hoping for Sage Thrasher, Brewer’s & Vesper sparrows, Swainson’s Hawk, and possibly Short-eared Owl. We will then drive to nearby Widgeon Pond and Tuck’s Slough to look for Trumpeter Swans, American White Pelicans and an array of ducks and shorebirds. We shall continue exploring the eastern portion of the valley along Culver Road (including checking a traditionally active Bald Eagle nest upslope from the road). Pronghorn, deer and moose are often seen here, too.

12:30 PM: LUNCH at Elk Lake Resort.

1:30 – 2:30 PM: We invite folks to take a 1-hour siesta or relax around Elk Lake Lodge.

2:30 PM: We will leave the resort to explore the refuge until about 5:00 PM.

5:30 PM: DINNER at the resort.

6:30 PM:
If folks are interested we may visit a nearby Greater Sage-Grouse breeding lek to see if there might be any late-season evening activity there (about 10 miles from the resort).
Monday, 25 May 2020:

6:00 – 8:00 AM: Early morning exploration of the forests, meadows and wetlands near the resort or spend time hang out on the dock or enjoying the early morning wildlife on the lake by canoe, rowboat or kayak. Hot breakfast at 8:00 AM.

Depart Elk Lodge by 10:00 AM: We will search for late-migrant warblers, vireos, sparrows, tanagers, and thrushes, resident woodpeckers and raptors while enjoying breath-taking views of the surrounding landscape. We will then drive to the refuge to further explore Red Rock Lakes wetland complex, including a 1-mile walk to Sparrow Pond and slough and/or Idlewild Trail. We plan to depart the Centennial Valley after lunch about 2:00 PM, returning to Bozeman by around 5:00 PM.

Tour Cost Details (Full Payment Prior to the trip 2020):

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Your Trip Includes...
- Fully guided trip with Ronan Donovan, Photographer & Wildlife Biologist.
- A photography workshop.
- Small group size (no more than 12 participants).
- Travel together from Bozeman to Red Rock Lakes NWR in comfortable 4-wheel drive Suburbans.
- Three-night’s lodging at Elk Lake Lodge
- Dinner Friday, Saturday & Sunday evening, Breakfast and Lunch both Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

Lodging:
Elk Lake Lodge
5200 Elk Lake Road
Lima, MT 59739
(406) 276-3282

(Located near the NE boundary of Red Rock Lakes NWR and Montana's wild and pristine Centennial Valley)

We will be spending all nights at Elk Lake Lodge. The resort’s cabins offer the perfect relaxing get-away! Your private cabin sits in a large meadow bordering Elk Lake, surrounded by mountains and abundant wildlife. Country-gourmet cooking is provide by Elk Lake Lodge hosts, Jake and Laurel DeLong. Kayaks and canoes are free to guests of Elk Lake Resort.

Meals:
Elk Lake Lodge will be preparing all meals. Some mornings we will have a hearty picnic breakfast so we can get out for the early morning bird and wildlife viewing. Other mornings we will have hot breakfast at the lodge. On early morning days, we will return to Elk Lake Lodge for lunch and a nap, but generally, we will have sack lunches. Laurel will be preparing a picnic dinner for us on the days we are traveling to the other side of Red Rocks Lakes Refuge. All other evenings we will dine at the lodge (Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free dietary requests can generally be accommodated on this trip, with limited selections and requested prior to trip.)

Activity level:
This trip is easy; short-medium 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 or Van to and from Centennial 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!

Guide: Ronan Donovan, National Geographic Photographer & Wildlife Biologist

A field biologist turned photographer, National Geographic Photographer Ronan Donovan has documented the intimate social structures of wild mammals such as chimpanzees, mountain gorillas and wolves. Ronan was one of six photographers asked to focus on Yellowstone for National Geographic Magazine’s single topic issue on the world’s first National Park that published in 2016. Through his assignments, Ronan has witnessed the complex relationship people have with their natural surroundings and he is passionate about understanding how wildlife and humans can coexist. A contributor to National Geographic Magazine, his photographs have hung on the walls of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and his film work has aired on BBC, National Geographic and PBS Nature. He has shot and filmed for National Geographic, The New York Times, The Nature Conservancy, WWF and numerous other wildlife conservation organizations.

Directions & Map – Tour Meeting Place Friday, May 22, 2020 at 1:00PM

Meeting location directions and map (We are in the process of arranging for you to safely park your car overnight on Bozeman’s west side – will send this info as soon as it has been determined.

Bozeman to Elk Lake Resort. The resort sits on the NE corner of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. We will travel from Bozeman west to US Hwy 287 then head south on 287 to Henrys Lake Rd. Then travel the well-groomed gravel roads Red Rock Pass Rd and S Valley Rd to US Forest Service Rd 8384 to Elk Lake Rd.