

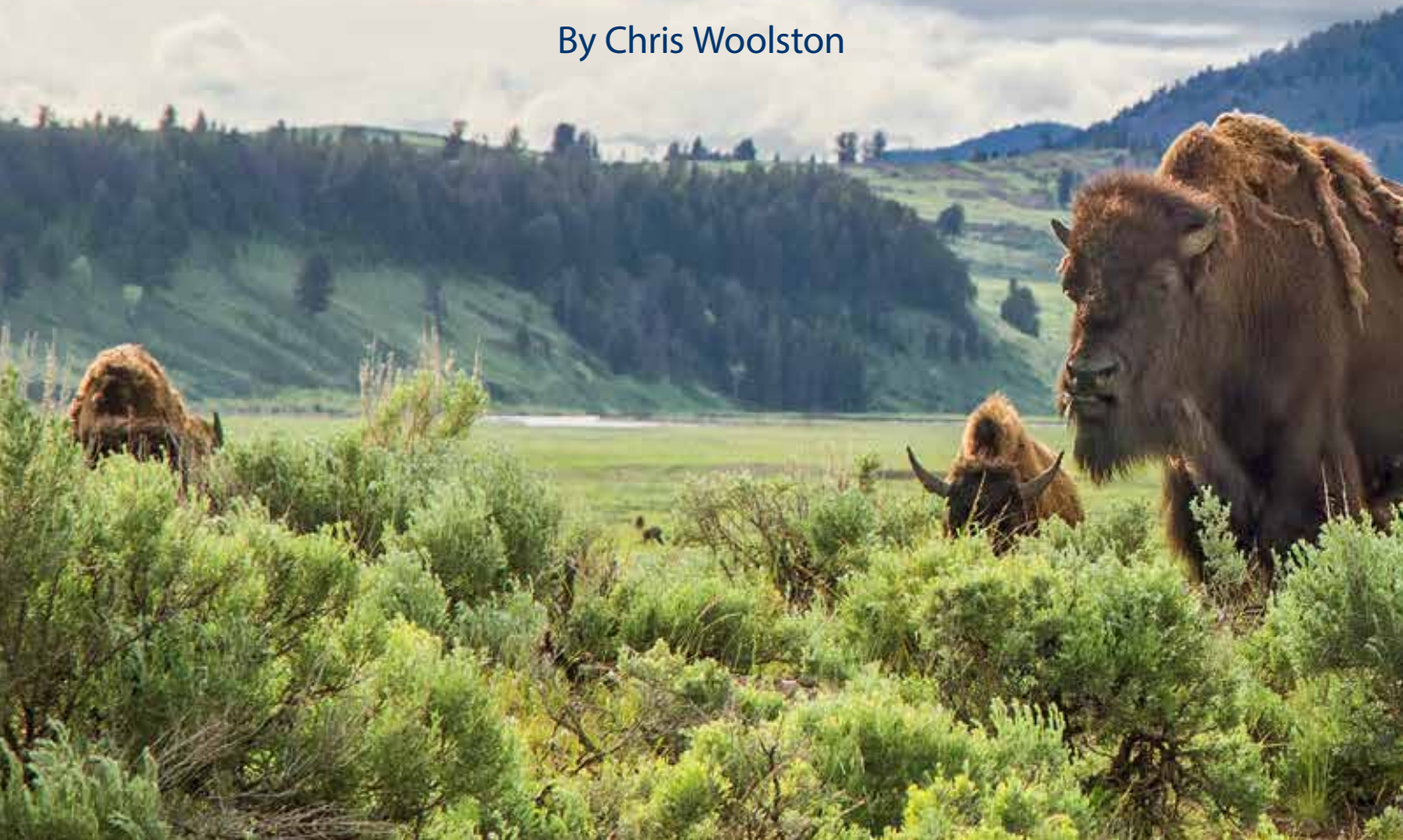


# Secrets OF Yellowstone

GUIDE TO NATIONAL PARKS

Find the best spots—and skip the crowds—  
at America's original national park.

By Chris Woolston





**G**EYSERS SHOOTING water 200 feet in the air. A river rumbling through a primordial canyon. Thousands of bison roaming free across nearly 3,500 square miles of mountains and meadows. The wonders of Yellowstone National Park, a wild land spanning parts of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho, are so legendary that last year more than 4 million visitors came to bear witness. I was one of them.

But as I stood on a winding gravel road in the park's northeast corner, I didn't feel stuck in a tourist frenzy. I had pulled over at this remote spot, in the foothills along Slough Creek, to watch a lone coyote standing sentinel on a bluff. Without warning, a badger—all claws and snarls—exploded from the sagebrush, and the coyote tucked tail and ran toward safer, less badger-full ground. Calm returned, as it always does. Getting into the car, I heard only chattering meadowlarks and the rushing creek.

Yellowstone and I have a history. As a nearly life-long resident of Billings, Montana, I've spent hundreds of days in the park—first as a grade-schooler strapped in the backseat; then as a park employee, cleaning hotel rooms; now as a dad, sharing the

scenery with my own kids. Along the way, I've collected plenty of only-in-Yellowstone memories: the vast Norris Geyser Basin glowing beneath a full moon; a brave coyote nipping at a wolf's heels in the Lamar Valley, on the park's northern edge; a morning mist rising to unveil an elk herd in Gibbon Meadows, south of Norris. I'm not alone in my awe: Yellowstone can attract nearly a million visitors in July, when bison jams slow traffic to a crawl. Still, it's always possible to find peaceful, beautiful moments, especially if you're able to walk a little, take a side road or two, and let Yellowstone reveal its secrets.

### HAVE PATIENCE

Jennifer Jerrett, a radio producer who collects sound recordings for the park's audio postcards—30-to-90-second vignettes that spotlight natural wonders great and small—makes a living by eavesdropping on Yellowstone. One day, she might be capturing the calls of loons on Yellowstone Lake; the next, the bellows of rutting elk in the Lamar Valley. She's often within earshot of car engines or chatty visitors, but she's learned to focus on the natural surroundings and wait for a lull. "Yellowstone can feel like a busy

As many as 4,000  
bison graze the Lamar  
Valley each summer.





**LEFT, White Dome Geyser erupts from one of the largest cones in the park. RIGHT, Morning Glory Pool, in the Upper Geyser Basin, takes its name from its hue.**



place,” she says. “You just have to be patient.”

To feel the park’s heartbeat, Jerrett likes to visit Black Sand Pool, a hot spring in the Upper Geyser Basin. Like all of Yellowstone’s hot spots, the pool sits above a block of magma that could explode in a few hundred thousand years. Or, less likely, tomorrow. Black Sand doesn’t boast eruptions or blazing colors, but those who stand still and listen intently will be rewarded: As gas bubbles burst within the spring, the vibrations shake anyone nearby. “You feel them as much as you hear them,” she says. “Whenever I’m there, the fact that we’re living on top of a super volcano is not lost on me.”

### FIND SOLITUDE

Special places abound in the park, and because few travelers wander far from roads and parking lots, you might find one all your own. I still remember the afternoon I discovered Point Sublime. I left the throngs at Artist Point, on the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone’s south rim, then continued along the cliff-hugging, pine-shaded trail to the canyon’s edge. Beneath me, ospreys soared past lemon- and apricot-hued walls 1,000 feet above the water. Peering down at the distant rapids, hearing nothing but wind and scolding chipmunks, I felt like I had the entire park to myself.

### CHOOSE YOUR MOMENT

Yellowstone can reveal itself at any time, but those who crave quiet should watch the clock—and the calendar. “Timing is everything,” says Jim Peaco, the park’s chief photographer. Early mornings can be especially tranquil, even at Yellowstone’s marquee attractions. Peaco loves taking photos around Old Faithful while most people are still asleep. “You’re walking through a geyser fog, and it feels like another planet,” he says.

Seasons matter, too. Some two-thirds of annual visitors arrive in June, July, or August, leaving opportunities for peace the rest of the year. In fall, animals get busy; on one September day, near Yellowstone Lake, I watched a grizzly stuff her maw with earthworms. From December through mid-March, snow coaches deliver travelers to the steamy winterscape around Old Faithful. Other people drive the plowed road between Mammoth Hot Springs and the northeast entrance to watch bison in the Lamar Valley. In April and May, bears shake off hibernation, and red bison calves buck around meadows. “The weather may not be the warmest then, but the wildlife show is incredible,” Peaco says. Take your zoom lens. “That’s your best chance to put your camera on a grizzly.”

### TAKE THE ROADS LESS TRAVELED

Even in summer, side roads can provide instant respite from Yellowstone traffic. The paved Firehole Lake Drive—a three-mile detour near Old Faithful—passes through a stark white basin of lesser-known thermal features, including White Dome Geyser and the turquoise Firehole Lake. Two-mile, one-way Gull Point Drive brings picnickers to black sand beaches on the west shore of Yellowstone Lake.

But in Yellowstone, crowds happen, and people can be unavoidable. Hours after my badger encounter, I stopped on Upper Terrace Drive near Mammoth to watch a pair of black bears as they trotted across the crest of a limestone formation in the distance. I was alone until a packed minivan pulled up. I gestured excitedly toward the bears as the passengers stepped out. Their eyes widened, and smiles lit their faces. When I returned my gaze to the bears, I had six partners in awe. In the end, some moments are best shared. ●

CHRIS WOOLSTON also writes for *Nature*.

## If you're going . . .

AAA Travel can help you plan a trip to Yellowstone, whether you're creating your own custom itinerary or seeking a guided tour. For details, visit [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel) or call (877) 835-2233 and ask about national park tours from AAA Vacations.



# Solitude beyond the park

Greater Yellowstone includes 30,903 square miles of natural splendor outside the national park, offering more trails, rivers, and lakes—and less traffic. These tranquil destinations are located a short drive from the park in each direction.



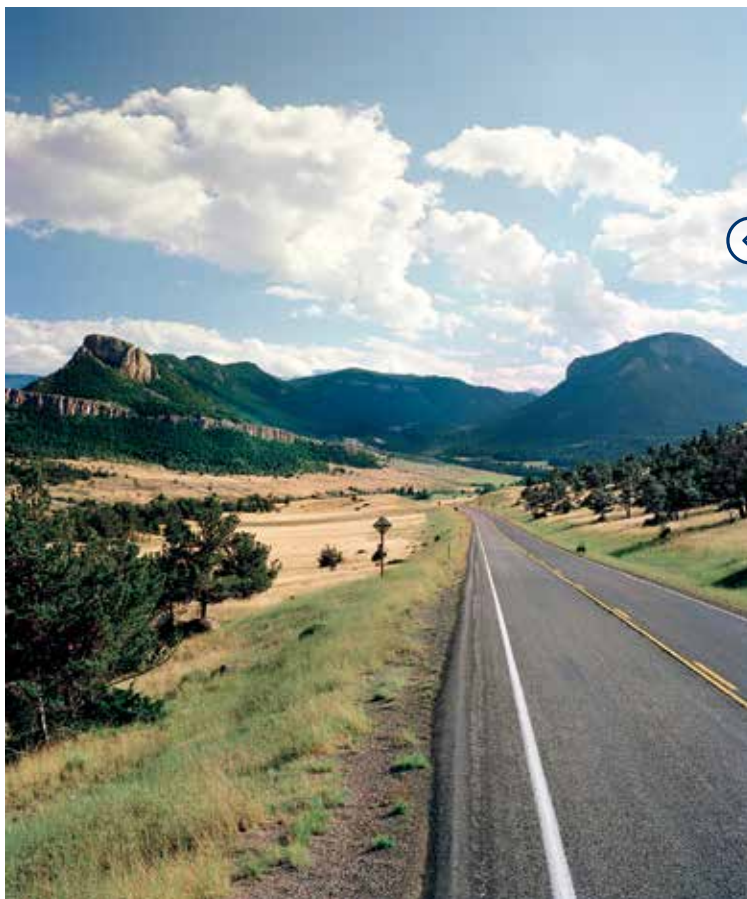
## TO THE NORTH

**Tom Miner Basin, Montana** A 12-mile gravel road 17 miles north of Gardiner, off U.S. 89, passes through meadows, mountain forests, and working cattle ranches complete with weathered barns. Keep an eye out for elk, grizzlies, and pretty much every other type of Yellowstone wildlife. From the Tom Miner Campground at the road's end, an easy, one-mile interpretive trail winds past an aspen grove to a cluster of petrified tree trunks.

## TO THE WEST

### Hebgen Lake, Montana

Fat and happy trout cruise the shore of this lake 20 miles beyond the town of West Yellowstone. Treasured by anglers, the area also beckons paddlers and wildlife enthusiasts who come for the moose, bears, and bald eagles. In summer, stop by the Earthquake Lake Visitor Center to see how a magnitude 7.5 temblor dramatically reshaped the land in 1959.



## TO THE EAST

### Chief Joseph Scenic Highway, Wyoming

Wide grassy valleys and expansive vistas lure adventurers to this uncrowded road. The 47-mile drive connects the skyscraping Beartooth Highway (outside the park's northeast entrance) with Highway 120 near Cody. Most of the route is open all year, but the snowplows stop just short of Yellowstone in winter.

## TO THE SOUTH

**Grassy Lake Road, Wyoming** The slow but scenic drive along this very rough 49-mile dirt road connecting Flagg Ranch (near the park's south entrance) and Ashton, Idaho, serves up epic views of the snowcapped Tetons. The road also meanders into a wildflower-filled stretch of forest. Allow three hours for the whole trip, longer if you want to linger over the vistas or perhaps gaze at the waterfalls on the 3.7-mile hike along Cascade Creek Trail to Terraced Falls.

