



A young visitor peers through a spotting scope on a recent Wildlife Expeditions trip.



WILDLIFE EXPEDITIONS / COURTESY PHOTOS

Bison roam the area north of Kelly on Antelope Flats Road in Grand Teton National Park. Naturalists lead visitors through various critter habitat on half-day to three-day tours.

Who: Teton Science Schools Wildlife Expeditions What: Tours of the region's wildlife When: Year-round Where: Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks How much: Prices start at \$125 for adults, \$99 for kids. Children under 6 are free Just after dawn on the Gros Ventre Road, tour guide Kevin Taylor pulls over near a group of bison and five guides-in-training pop open the van's top hatches and whip out their binoculars.

The bison are acting vigilant, and so are a few elk that appear out of the cottonwoods near the river. All the sudden, a moose bolts through the underbrush, setting off a frenzy of activity among all three species that hints at an unseen predator lurking nearby.

We drive up the road, looking for the source of the commotion, but all we see is a coyote that slinks among some fallen logs.

And that was just the start of the tour. Over the next four hours we see beaver, bison, pronghorn, elk, moose, a bald eagle, mule deer, two wolves (we suspect from the Antelope Pack), a ferruginous hawk, ground squirrels, Western meadowlark, magpies, ravens, a coyote and a nesting great horned owl with two chicks.

All of this wildlife was in plain view or visible through a spotting scope on the short stretch of road between Gros Ventre Junction and the Gros Ventre Campground, with a brief side trip down Mormon Row.

While this impressive tally of wildlife is considered above average for a Wildlife Expeditions trip, the haul is far from one in a million, says Taylor, who coordinates the program.

"What we often see is all the things we mentioned except for the wolves," he explains. "That would still be a really good half-day trip."

The latest iteration of the company was established in 1999 through Teton Science Schools. Like its parent organization, Wildlife Expeditions has a special emphasis on environmental education.

Over the course of the tour, Taylor grills us on wildlife trivia: Why are baby bison red? Because many predators, such as wolves, are red-green color-blind, and the red color helps the babies hide in the grass.

How do cowbirds lay eggs if they're always migrating with bison? Cowbirds leave their eggs in other birds' nests, leaving birds like warblers to raise their young for them.

Why do pronghorn run 60 miles per hour when wolves can only hit about 40? They used to run from a prehistoric cheetah, which is now extinct.

"I love the riddles," Taylor says. "I like to teach and I like to train our staff to have discussions. It's kind of fun for the group to think about it."

That educational process also includes props, such as a beaver tail and owl feathers, that help drive home how special the region's wildlife really is. "It's great to be able to watch a beaver, then get out a pelt and a tail and a skull," Taylor says. "It really adds to the educational experience."

The tours are child-friendly. "We bring along a kid backpack full of different activities -bug boxes and hand lenses," Taylor says, "extra tools to help engage the client."

This strong educational component helps differentiate Wildlife Expeditions from the eight or nine other tour companies in the region. "Being part of a larger outdoor education center helps," Taylor says. "In addition to being guides, we're educators as well."

"We do a nice job adjusting to the level of the group," he continues. "From day to day we're talking about the same geological and ecological principles, but we're able to adjust to the education level of the individuals and their interests." Expedition expenses: A half-day trip costs \$125 per person, \$99 for a child, and kids under 6 are always free on Wildlife Expeditions trips. These four-hour excursions depart at 6:30 a.m. or 4 p.m.

A full-day trip costs \$175 adult and \$139 child.

Multiple-day fall elk bugling, wolf and bear expeditions include lodging, meals, snacks and beverages. Two-day trips, set for Sept. 13-14, 27-28 and Oct. 4-5 cost \$650 adult, \$450 child; three-day expeditions set for Sept. 9-11, 16-18, 19-21, Sept. 30-Oct. 2 and Oct. 7-9, cost \$950 adult, \$745 child.

For reservations, call 733-2623 or visit www.wildlifeexpeditions.org.