

YOUR FREE READER'S COMPANION

The Yellowstone Trip Vault

A companion to Yellowstone Trip Must-Haves · by Cody Ferris

Thanks for picking up the book. This is the part you actually carry: print it, stick it in the trip folder or the glovebox, and tick it off. A Yellowstone trip rewards the prepared and punishes the winging-it, so this vault gives you the whole planning system in one place, the packing checklist, the reservations planner, a budget worksheet and a countdown, plus two insider sheets from the book you will want on the dashboard, the best wildlife pullouts by time of day, and the secret spots most visitors drive right past.

The single biggest rookie mistake is underestimating the park. It is bigger, colder, and busier than it looks in photos, and the good lodges book a year out. Handle the boring stuff early and you get to spend the trip enjoying it instead of scrambling. - Cody

The Complete Yellowstone Packing Checklist

Mountain weather turns in minutes and can swing from sun to snow in the same afternoon, even in summer. Pack in layers and do not skip the wildlife-safety items.

Layers & clothing

- ☐ Waterproof rain shell (worn daily, not "nice to have")
- ☐ Warm insulating mid-layer (fleece or puffy) for cold mornings
- ☐ Long pants + one pair of shorts for warm afternoons
- ☐ Warm hat and gloves (yes, even in July)
- ☐ Sun hat and sunglasses
- ☐ Broken-in hiking shoes or boots
- ☐ Comfortable driving/camp shoes

Wildlife safety & day pack

- ☐ Bear spray (buy in a gateway town; cannot fly with it)
- ☐ Binoculars (the difference between "a dot" and "a wolf")
- ☐ Daypack with 2+ liters of water per person
- ☐ Snacks kept in the car, not the trunk, for long drives
- ☐ Small first-aid kit

Health & sun

- ☐ Sunscreen (high altitude burns fast) and lip balm
- ☐ Any personal medications, in the car
- ☐ Reusable water bottles

Tech & navigation

- ☐ Paper park map (cell service dies at the entrance gate)
- ☐ Phone + car charger; download maps and the NPS app before you lose signal
- ☐ Camera and spare battery

Documents & money

- ☐ Park pass or America the Beautiful pass (or buy at the gate, card only)
- ☐ Lodging and campground confirmations (printed)
- ☐ Card for gas and entrance (most gates are cashless now)

The Reservations & Booking Checklist

In Yellowstone, "I'll figure out where to stay later" is how trips fall apart. Book in this order, this far ahead.

Book this	How far ahead	Done
In-park lodges (Old Faithful Inn, Lake, Canyon, Mammoth)	8-13 months	[]
Gateway-town hotels (West Yellowstone, Gardiner, Cody, Jackson)	4-8 months	[]
In-park campgrounds that take reservations	6 months	[]
Flights to the nearest airport (BZN / JAC / COD / IDA)	2-4 months	[]
Rental car (you need one; no real transit inside)	2-3 months	[]
Guided tours (wildlife, fishing) if you want them	2-3 months	[]
Grand Teton lodging if you are adding it on	6-9 months	[]

If everything looks "full": check gateway towns instead of in-park, watch for cancellations 2-4 weeks out, and consider shoulder season (May, late September) when rooms open up and crowds thin.

Wildlife Watching: Where to Be, and When

The animals follow food, water, and the cool edges of the day. Be at these pullouts at first or last light and you stop hoping for wildlife and start expecting it. Midday is for geysers; dawn and dusk are for animals. Look for the clusters of spotting scopes on tripods, those people have already found something.

Where to go	How to find it	Best window	Most likely to see
Lamar Valley (Slough Creek & Soda Butte pullouts)	Northeast Entrance Road, east of Tower	Pre-dawn to 9 a.m.; last 2 hours of light	Wolves, grizzly, bison, pronghorn, bighorn
Hayden Valley (Grizzly Overlook & river pullouts)	Grand Loop Road, Canyon to Fishing Bridge	Dawn and dusk	Grizzly, big bison herds, elk, waterfowl
Mount Washburn & Dunraven Pass	Grand Loop between Tower and Canyon	Late morning is fine	Bighorn sheep, marmots, bears on slopes
Mammoth parade ground	North district, in Mammoth village	Evening, early morning; fall elk rut	Elk, often among the buildings
Blacktail Plateau & Willow Park	Mammoth-Tower and Mammoth-Norris roads	Dawn and dusk	Black bears, moose, bison
Madison River & Gibbon Meadows	West Entrance and Norris-Madison roads	Dawn, dusk; fall elk rut	Elk, bison, sometimes wolves

Keep bear spray on your hip at every pullout and trail, not buried in the pack. Stay 100 yards from bears and wolves, 25 from everything else. The animals you drove all this way to see are exactly the ones to respect from a distance. - Cody

Secret Spots Most Visitors Drive Right Past

For every jammed boardwalk there is a quiet corner a short walk or a single turn away. These are the places that make people think you have been coming here for years.

The spot	Where it is	Why it is worth it
Grand Prismatic Overlook	Fairy Falls trailhead, south of Midway	The only place you see Prismatic's full color; the crowd stays on the boardwalk below and misses it
Firehole Lake Drive	Two-way spur near the Lower Geyser Basin	A quiet 3-mile loop past Great Fountain Geyser, often nearly empty
Blacktail Plateau Drive	One-way dirt road, Mammoth-Tower	Backcountry feel and real wildlife, no tour buses
Wraith Falls & Undine Falls	Roadside just east of Mammoth	Two easy waterfalls in under thirty minutes total
Natural Bridge	Short trail from Bridge Bay	A 51-foot rock arch hardly anyone knows about
Lone Star Geyser	2.5-mile walk or bike from Old Faithful	A large backcountry geyser with almost none of the crowd
Artists Paintpots	Short loop near Norris	Bubbling mud pots and blue pools at a fraction of Norris traffic
Point Sublime (South Rim Trail)	Beyond Artist Point	The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone without the railing crowds

The Trip Budget Worksheet

Fill in your numbers. Yellowstone is not cheap, but the surprises are the killers, so price them now.

Line item	Estimate	Your number
Park entrance (7-day vehicle pass)	~\$35	\$_____
Flights (per person x travelers)	\$_____	\$_____
Rental car (days x rate)	\$_____	\$_____
Gas (the park is huge; budget generously)	\$_____	\$_____
Lodging (nights x rate)	\$_____	\$_____
Food (in-park meals cost more)	\$_____	\$_____
Guided tours / extras	\$_____	\$_____
Bear spray, souvenirs, misc.	\$_____	\$_____
TOTAL		\$_____

Tip: a cooler with grocery-store breakfasts and lunches from a gateway town saves more than anything else on this list.

The Before-You-Leave Countdown

When	Do this	Done
8-12 months out	Book in-park lodging or set a cancellation alert	☐
4-6 months out	Book flights, rental car, gateway hotels	☐
1 month out	Map your route and daily plan by region, not the whole park at once	☐
2 weeks out	Check the park road-status page; construction can add an hour	☐
1 week out	Pull the packing checklist; order anything missing	☐
2 days out	Download offline maps + the NPS app; print confirmations	☐
Day before	Buy bear spray in the gateway town; fuel up; charge everything	☐
Drive day	Check road status with your morning coffee, then go	☐

That is the whole system: book early, pack in layers, budget for the surprises, and count it down so nothing waits for the last minute. Handle the must-haves and Yellowstone gives you the trip of a lifetime. See you out there.