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Spring visitors cherish Yellowstone's quiet days before summer crush

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Michelle Holihan, left, and others shovel snow from a rooftop observation deck at the Old Faithful Inn in preparation for the summer season.
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YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK - Baseball fans relish opening day, movie mavens line the sidewalks at Hollywood premieres, and the glamorous glitterati flock to fashion week.

But for nature lovers and animal aficionados, there is no match for the first few weeks of the summer season in Yellowstone National Park.

Though May in Yellowstone seldom seems like summer, it marks a time when locals make that first dash into the park, as well as a chance for workers to gear up for the crush of the millions who will visit over the next few months.

Friday was the first day that auto traffic was allowed through the east gate. Some other entrances had been open for a week, and still others are scheduled to open Friday.

Ranger Candice Phipps was the lone worker checking visitors through the east entrance, a job that requires two or three others working multiple lanes during the height of summer, as hundreds of cars and buses stream through each hour.

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But 30 minutes after opening at 8 a.m., only a dozen cars had passed through, Phipps said, including a couple of local photographers who were waiting at 7:30.

Nature center stage

The scarcity of visitors let nature take center stage over the next eight hours and 200 miles, with dozens of species of animals and ever-changing weather on display.

Nine miles inside the park, Sylvan Lake looks like a sheet of pristine, white satin, adorned with sparkling crystals.

Snow is piled and plowed on both sides of the road, often higher than passing cars. At times, the crisp edges of the neatly plowed snow resemble a giant, wedding cake, smothered in white frosting.

Yellowstone Lake is invisible beyond an impenetrable fog and beneath a static gray sky.

Fishing Bridge slumbers under a thick blanket of snow, its store and other amenities closed, like many other spots in the park will be until the crowds pick up.

By 9:45, 36 miles in, three sandhill cranes stand in the shallow water where Trout Creek meets the Yellowstone River. The birds take on an alien appearance in the fog, with one resembling a monstrous muppet, a silhouette of legs and shaggy feathers with no visible head.

But as the birds spread their wings, they become a scene from a Japanese watercolor before two take flight, calling out in a shrill clatter as the third crane remains.

Just up the road, Cody wildlife photographer D. Robert Franz stands at a turnout with several other photographers, watching and snapping pictures of a bald eagle perched high in a tree above the river.

"We're hoping to head up toward Cooke City and circle back to Cody that way," Franz said, detailing the popular loop trip through Sunlight Basin.

Elusive animals

Franz and other photographers were traveling through the park together, helping each other spot elusive animals along the way.

"We usually try to get in the first of every year. It's a really good time to get bear photos," he said.

At 10:15, the parking lot is empty at Artist Point, an ideal spot to view the Lower Falls in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River.

At Canyon Village, a summer hive of activity where visitors jockey for parking spaces in front of souvenir shops and lunch spots, only five cars sit in front of a single open store. Two are maintenance vehicles.

The road along the Gibbon River, near 196-degree Beryl Spring, shows the ravages of winter's freeze and thaw, with large sections of asphalt heaved or cratered. Repairs must wait for warmer weather.

Throughout the park, hot springs and bright sunshine do battle with ice and snow in a slow-motion, melting dribble that marks the change of season.

By noon, the temperature has climbed to 36 degrees, and 88 miles in, workers at the Old Faithful Inn are preparing for the historic hotel's Friday opening.

John Salvato, the head bellman, is watching his crew shovel snow from the hotel's rooftop observation deck, a favorite viewing spot for Old Faithful's certain show.

The work marks the end of a quiet period between the close of winter services and the start of summer in the park, a time that some Yellowstone residents dread as the end of peaceful days and that others look forward to as the start of an active summer.

Some on Salvato's crew have spent winter in the park, while others are just arriving.

Salvato has returned from a winter trip to Antarctica, where it was summer. He worked there operating a loader at a research station.

The work was rewarding and the people were great, "but there is not a lot of scenery down there, because it's just pretty much white and flat," he said, adding that "nothing really compares to Yellowstone in the winter."

Bleachers that are crowded to overflowing during summer hold only three expectant onlookers awaiting Old Faithful's next eruption.

By 4 p.m., 150 miles into the park, the temperature has reached a high of 51 degrees at Tower Junction, where an energetic coyote hunts among the sagebrush for small prey that can no longer hide under cover of snow.

Along the side of the road in the Lamar Valley, a small group of onlookers has gathered at 4:39 to watch a wolf prowl along the river's far shore.

Photographers snap pictures while others watch through spotting scopes.

Trevor Coleman, a visitor from Idaho Falls, helps a friend's son with his binoculars. A day after his seventh birthday, Dimitri has seen not just grizzly bears and wolves but also dozens of other animals.

Coleman said his group planned to remain in the Lamar Valley for the rest of the day before heading home, adding that he preferred to visit the park in spring and fall, instead of summer.

"It's just less people and more animals," he said.