

# THE VERY BEST VANTAGE POINTS TO PHOTOGRAPH YELLOWSTONE

Quick Guide  
Written by Karthika Gupta





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Photograph by Karthika Gupta

Lucky for us here in the US, there is a place unlike any other right here in our own backyard. Every nature buff, wildlife enthusiast, or even photographer knows that Yellowstone National Park is one of the best places to get lost wandering, exploring, and photographing.

No matter what genre of photographer you are, Yellowstone takes your breath away, and you cannot help but want to spend all your time exploring the world's first National Park through your lens.

Being in Yellowstone is a bit like setting foot in an unreal alternate reality world. Colors, shapes, and textures take on a whole new meaning. Amazing and magnificent creatures roam the land, and you feel like you have taken a step into a time and place unlike any other.

Here you might see geysers in vibrant shades of yellow, orange, blue, and gold. Rivers boil, mud gurgles, and water erupts in tall waterspouts at regular intervals. Wolves, grizzlies, black bears, bison, eagles, falcons, pronghorn, and many others call this landscape home, and to see them in their natural habitat is a thrill unimaginable.

Because Yellowstone is such a huge park with so much ground to cover, doing everything in a day is next to impossible. There are five different entrances to the park and hence the park is split into five different regions.

- North Entrance – area around Mammoth Hot Springs
- West Entrance – area around Madison
- South Entrance – area around Grant Village
- East Entrance – area around Fishing Bridge and Lake Village
- North-East Entrance – area around Lamar Valley

Yellowstone's North entrance is the only one open year around. For the best photography experience, plan on spending at least a few days in the park. In terms of things to photograph, this guide is broken up into three different genres along with the best places to visit to photograph the many sights in Yellowstone.



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Photograph by Karthika Gupta

*You never know what you will find as you are driving around, so one good tip is to always keep your camera ready to shoot in close proximity.*

## WILDLIFE

The diversity of animals that call Yellowstone National Park home is incredible. Apart from the big names like wolves, coyotes, bears, and bison, an array of birds like trumpeter swans, ospreys, falcons, and smaller mammals like beavers call this place home.

That means that no matter where you go, you are bound to see animals – grazing around or even just chilling out by the hillside. Sometimes, especially in winter, you might find animals using the road to traverse from one place to the other.

I travel with my camera and appropriate lens attached right next to me in the passenger seat. And if I happen to be the passenger, it is in my hand ready just in case I see something I want to photograph.



**Key Lesson:** This is one instance when looking for crowds is a good thing. If you see a crowd gathering, stop and say hello and ask if they have spotted anything. Many people are more than willing to share wildlife sightings since it is such a special experience.





Photograph by Karthika Gupta





Photograph by Karthika Gupta

*Look all around when you are in Yellowstone. Some animals are easily camouflaged by the landscape and easy to miss.*

## SOME OF THE BEST PLACES TO SPOT WILDLIFE

### **MAMMOTH SPRINGS**

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This is a quick drive from the northern entrance and is a beautiful area in Yellowstone with some historical structures and a small museum in the visitor center. This area is famous for elk herds and bison that frequent the place. Oftentimes you will find elk just laying around outside the visitor center along the grass.

### **GRAND CANYON OF YELLOWSTONE**

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Yellowstone boasts its own Grand Canyon. It is carved by the Yellowstone river and is just as spectacular as the Grand Canyon in Arizona. After Old Faithful, this is probably one of the most popular places in the park, so be prepared for crowds no matter what time you go. There are many hiking paths around Grand Canyon, so for a unique experience get on one of the trails; you never know what you might see. This area is known for a variety of wildlife like bison, bears, elk, and big horn sheep.






Photograph by Karthika Gupta

*Trumpeter swans are huge and can often be seen swimming in Hayden Valley and the area around Grand Canyon of Yellowstone.*

## HAYDEN VALLEY

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In the canyon area, Hayden Valley is a wildlife hot spot. The lush valley of meadow and marsh is the best place to observe wildlife. Hayden Valley is home to huge herds of large bison, moose, and elk. This makes it a prime feeding ground for grizzly bears and wolves. Bears are often seen in spring and early summer when they feed on newborn bison calves and elk calves. You might even see trumpeter swans and bald eagles in the valley.

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Photograph by Karthika Gupta

*Hayden Valley is a hot spot for many herds of bison and elk.*





Photograph by Karthika Gupta


*Lamar Valley's famous bison jams are quite amusing but also very serious traffic hazards. Always give these huge creatures the right of way.*

## LAMAR VALLEY

(Especially just before sunrise and sunset)

This is one of my favorite places in Yellowstone. I have seen the most wildlife in any trip right here in Lamar Valley. Known as the Secluded Valley, this place is quite special. It is a broad glacial valley that provides prime wildlife viewing. Wolves, coyotes, bison, elk, and moose make their home among the landscape in Lamar. Be prepared to spend a significant amount of time here. This area is also beautiful for landscape photography, especially around sunrise and sunset.

Yellowstone is a huge park with over 450 miles of roadways. Distances between each of these spots is vast and take time. Plan your day and don't expect to be able to cover more than a few places in a single day.

 **Key Lesson:** There are several lodging options inside Yellowstone National Park. For the most efficient use of your photography time, try and find lodging inside the park to reduce your driving time.






Photograph by Karthika Gupta

*Yellowstone is super special in winter where wildlife is much easier to spot thanks to fewer crowds. But it is also very cold, so make sure you are well prepared for the below-zero temperatures.*

Yellowstone is one of the few places in the wild where you can actually see animals right from your car. As you can imagine, this can be a bit of a problem on the single lane roads through most of the park. Wildlife jams are a real thing in Yellowstone.

As tempting as it might be to just park your car in the middle of the road when you see an animal, it is not the smartest thing to do – for the animal as well as for others on the road with you. So, if you do see an animal, make sure to pull over on the shoulder and safely observe and/or photograph. If there isn't a shoulder to pull over, drive to the nearest pullout and park.

 **Key Lesson:** Safety of the animals and your fellow travelers is more important than a photograph. Be smart and be safe. The last thing you want is a traffic violation ticket from the Yellowstone park rangers.





Photograph by Karthika Gupta


## GEYSERS AND THERMAL HOT SPOTS

As much as you would want to spend all your time photographing wildlife in Yellowstone, there is so much more to the park. It is one of the few remaining active hydrothermal spots in the world, and almost all of Yellowstone sits in an active caldera. Yellowstone has over 1000 hydrothermal features alone. They come in so many different colors and are very beautiful to photograph.

Here are some of the most popular geysers in the park:

### GRAND PRISMATIC SPRING

This deep rainbow-colored hot spring is the second largest in the world. There is a boardwalk around the spring so you can walk around and take lots of detail shots of the area around the spring. There are also a few different hikes around the area to give you a higher up, overarching view of this colorful spring.

 **Key Lesson:** It is rare to find Grand Prismatic Spring without any people around it. If you are able to, get there really early in the morning to see it sans people. Otherwise just embrace the crowd in your frames. That's the reality of a popular tourist destination like Yellowstone.





Photograph by Karthika Gupta

## YELLOWSTONE LAKE

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Sitting at almost 7800ft elevation, this lake is the largest natural high-altitude lake in North America. From the park's east entrance, the road twists and turns through scenic lake country for almost 30 miles. The first seven miles are quite picturesque. During summer, this stretch of road has some incredible wildflowers. It is a great spot to practice landscape photography.






Photograph by Karthika Gupta

## FIRE HOLE CANYON DRIVE

If you enter the Madison-Norris area from the south via the Grand Loop road, the Fire Hole Canyon Drive is a great detour. The drive offers views of the Firehole Falls. Near the end of this road is an unstaffed swimming hole which is quite popular in the summer.

 **Key Lesson:** With countless mud pots, geysers, and hot springs all around Yellowstone, you will always find something to photograph. But this is also a very fragile and dangerous environment. So, stay on designated boardwalks and trails and don't meander off.






Photograph by Karthika Gupta

## OLD FAITHFUL AND SURROUNDING GEYSER BASIN

Like Grand Prismatic, any Yellowstone itinerary is incomplete without Old Faithful. Old Faithful is very busy, so it's important to get here as early as possible, especially if you want to photograph the geyser erupting. Additionally, the geyser basin around Old Faithful is full of super unique springs and geysers to walk around and check out.

 **Key Lesson:** Be a responsible and conscientious photographer. Don't take up more space than needed with your gear and tripod. Remember, not everyone visiting Old Faithful is a photographer, so they might not understand your need for bulk and large tripods occupying space near the viewing areas.






Photograph by Karthika Gupta

*The area around Old Faithful has many more geysers and hot springs. Most of them are easily accessible via the boardwalk, so take the time to explore.*

## BLACK SAND BASIN

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Black Sand Basin is located about a mile from Old Faithful and has some smaller hot springs and geysers. It is named for its black sand which forms when hot lava cools too quickly. There are many colorful hot springs around this area to explore and photograph.

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Photograph by Karthika Gupta

## HISTORIC MONUMENTS

Being the oldest national park in the world means Yellowstone has a lot of historical significance. There are some incredible monuments in the park that are definitely worth exploring and photographing.

### ROOSEVELT ARCH

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Located near the north entrance to the park, the Roosevelt Arch is one of the iconic features in Yellowstone. It was dedicated in 1903 by President Roosevelt as a symbol of the park. Very often you will see elk meandering along the road leading through the arch.





Photograph by Karthika Gupta

*Yellowstone has some epic sunrises and sunsets no matter what time of the year you are visiting. Get there early and stay late. You will not be disappointed with the kind of images you create.*

## **FORT YELLOWSTONE**

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This fort was built by the US Cavalry in the 1890s. It is topped with red roofs and numerous chimneys and today houses the park's administrative staff.

## **OLD FAITHFUL INN**

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Opened in 1904, the inn has been a staple lodging option for many visitors to the park. This historic hotel is beautiful inside and outside and a great place to people watch and photograph architecture.

Yellowstone is one of those places that you can visit over and over again and still see something new and photograph something unique.

The key to a successful photography trip to Yellowstone is patience. Yes, it is very crowded and extremely popular.

But that does not mean you need to bump shoulders with hundreds of tourists and other photographers everywhere you go.

Plan your days, look for alternative photography spots, arrive early and stay late, keep your gear handy, and most importantly, enjoy yourself.

Amazing photos are sure to follow!





Photograph by Karthika Gupta



### **Self-Check Quiz:**

- 1) When trying to spot wildlife to photograph, why should you pay attention to crowds?
- 2) Should you have your camera with you at all times or keep it safe in the camera bag away from sight?
- 3) What is a wildlife jam?
- 4) Who has right of way on Yellowstone roads - animals, cars, campervans, or motorbikes?
- 5) When is the right time to see some of the geysers and hot springs like Grand Prismatic?
- 6) Is it safe to get off trail and off the boardwalk in Yellowstone? Why or why not?





# Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful (*and FREE!*) photography resources:



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karthika Gupta is a wedding, lifestyle, portrait, and editorial photographer based in Chicago. Her style of photography is fun, fresh, and organic. She strives to capture authentic emotions and interactions among her clients and emotive imagery in her commercial work.

She loves connecting with other creatives and photographers and is always ready for an engaging conversation about photography and the art of storytelling.

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