



“2026 Expedition Yellowstone” Brings Inner-city 7th Graders to the Wildlife of Yellowstone

On May 3, 2026, a hardy group of 7th graders headed to Logan Airport for the flight to Bozeman Yellowstone Airport in Montana. They were the 20 chosen students – out of 99 applicants – that Robinson School in Lowell, MA, had prepared for an unusual wilderness adventure. They would stay for the best part of a week in cabins at the beautiful, remote Lamar Buffalo Ranch in Yellowstone National Park’s Lamar Valley, often called America’s Serengeti for its incredible wildlife and gorgeous scenery.

The “Expedition Yellowstone” adventure is the brainchild of benefactor Shalin Liu, who is one of the principal founders of the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport and the Summer Star Wildlife Sanctuary and Summer Star Meadow, which include 100 acres of protected land in Boylston, MA. In 2014, Ms. Liu conceived the idea together with Thad King, then the Robinson School principal. For many years since then, Ms. Liu has worked in coordination with Bob Fuhrmann, Director of Youth Education & Work Programs at Yellowstone National Park; Dan Sargent, lead teacher and trip organizer at Robinson School; and Lisa Diekmann, President of Yellowstone Forever, the foundation that supports the park, to make this annual Robinson trip possible.

The twenty kids - chosen from 99 student applicants at the school - and five teachers immediately found themselves in wildlife heaven. Wild buffalo, part of the park’s herd of 4,500 genetically pure bison, came within a few feet of the cabins. Gray wolves, members of the ten packs that have thrived at Yellowstone since they were re-introduced to the park in 1995, den in several locations in and near Lamar Valley. Pronghorns, bighorn sheep, elk, and coyotes seem to be everywhere in the landscape.

The Robinson kids were supremely fortunate to be led on their hikes and wildlife classes by two of the best environmental educators in the business, Rangers Avery Berg and Laurel Desmarteau, under the guidance of Senior Park Ranger Beth Tyler and Program Director Bob Fuhrmann. The group trekked through the backcountry to the landmark confluence of the Yellowstone and Lamar Rivers, the Norris Geyser Basin and Mammoth Hot Springs, and the thundering Upper and Lower Falls in Yellowstone’s Grand Canyon.

On one memorable day, the students hiked up and over beautiful sagebrush ridges to an Indigenous wikiup, then used GPS equipment to track down a radio collar that had become detached from one of the park's approximately 87 wolves. The total has gone from more than 110 wolves down to 90 after a difficult winter with very little snowfall, which enabled prey species to escape more easily, plus a recent outbreak among the wolves of the Parvo virus.

The learning part of the trip reached deep. The students were asked to think through big questions – why bison were almost eliminated from the US and now thrive at Yellowstone, what forces cause geological changes in the park, what is ecology and how does it relate to Yellowstone? The group went through a challenging exercise hiding pine seeds to illustrate the difference in memory and food storage patterns between ground squirrels and Clark's nutcrackers. They used scientific methods to compare the skull characteristics of herbivores, omnivores, and carnivores that inhabit the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. They examined parts of a bison carcass to estimate how each part is of value to Indigenous peoples. They participated in a competition to see which of the four student "pods" could identify the activities in which visitors most like to participate in at Yellowstone.

The all-hands campfire on the last evening, an Expedition Yellowstone tradition, was a deeply moving gathering at which each person involved with the trip, both students and adults, talked about how the trip affected them and what thoughts they'll take away from the experience. Tears flowed as the impact of the week sank in. The trip proved to be a good bonding chance and a time to broaden horizons. The teamwork among the Park, the Yellowstone Forever Foundation, Robinson School, and the Summer Star Foundation had been a great success. No one will be surprised if some of the students find themselves in environmental careers sometime down the road, and in every case this experience will prove to be life changing.

