

COLORADO

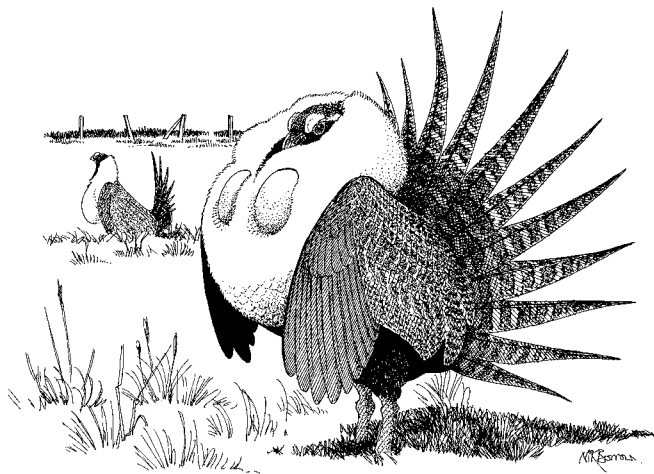
The Ultimate 'Grousequest'

Wednesday 30th March – Monday 11th April 2011 (14 days)

Leaders: Mike Watson and assistant

Group Size Limit: 12

Tour Category: Easy for the most part, occasionally Moderate



Greater Sage-Grouse (Nik Borrow)

Is early spring in Colorado the most spectacular birding experience in all North America? Yes!

First explored by the Spanish in the mid-1600s, Colorado was settled by Europeans only relatively recently. The Santa Fe Trail, a major trading route across the southern part of the state, extending from St. Louis, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, was blazed in 1820 and the year 1858 saw a major gold rush. During this period the Front Range, an area of foothills on the eastern flank of the Rocky Mountains, was settled and this area of Colorado, centred on Denver, remains the most populous in a relatively sparsely populated state.

Straddling the Continental Divide, Colorado is a land of superlatives. Stretching from north to south, the spectacular and awe-inspiring Rockies form the central backbone of the state. This mountainous area is three times the size of the Swiss Alps and Colorado has no fewer than 1,000

peaks over 10,000 feet (3,300 metres). Half of these are over 13,000 feet (4,000 metres) and no less than 54 peaks top 14,000 feet (4,300 metres)! With many mountains still snow-covered in the early spring, the views as one travels through Colorado are truly breathtaking, providing some great photographic opportunities. Teddy Roosevelt once said that the scenery in Colorado bankrupts the English language, and it is certainly difficult to find the words to adequately describe this extraordinarily beautiful place. To the east of the Rockies lie immense prairies and plains, a land of almost limitless vistas and vast skies. To the west is a rugged landscape of lower mountains punctuated by magnificent canyons and remarkable rock formations.

In this fantastic land we will be searching for an exciting collection of avian specialities, most notably the world's most spectacular set of grouse. Within its borders Colorado boasts no fewer

than seven breeding grouse species, more than anywhere else in the world. Most of these are lekking species inhabiting the vast plains and interior basins, and we will have the opportunity to visit leks of all five such grouse. Early morning vigils at these leks provide some of the most memorable spectacles that nature has to offer in the entire North American continent.

Ours is the most comprehensive early spring tour of Colorado available, hunting out more of the state's specialities than any other. Travel around Colorado is generally easy, with comfortable accommodations, although there are some long drives.

Beginning in Denver, we will travel a short distance west to Georgetown in the Rocky Mountains. At the high passes, driven down to lower altitudes by winter snowstorms, endearing White-tailed Ptarmigans congregate, providing an excellent opportunity for observing this elusive species at close range in its pristine white winter plumage, while the coniferous forests hold the uncommon American Three-toed Woodpecker, Grey Jay, Clark's Nutcracker, Pine Grosbeak and Cassin's Finch. Feeders in the Colorado Rockies attract winter and early spring concentrations of rosy-finches and Colorado is one of the best places to see all three North American species together.

Next we will travel out

into the plains to Wray in northeastern Colorado in order to visit a spectacular Greater Prairie-Chicken lek. Our clockwise route around the state will then take us to the Springfield area in the extreme southeast. Here the prairies of the Comanche National Grasslands are inhabited by the equally fascinating Lesser Prairie-Chicken, as well as Ferruginous Hawk and Prairie Falcon, and if we are in luck we will come across Lewis's Woodpeckers hawking insects from the treetops in one of the canyons. The wetlands of the eastern plains host many migrant waterbirds at this season and in particular large numbers of Snow Geese and smaller numbers of the rare Ross's Goose.

Moving west to the edge of the Rockies, we will search for Scaled Quail and Curve-billed Thrasher before continuing to the Gunnison Basin where we will visit a lek of the remarkable Gunnison Sage-Grouse, one of North America's most recently described species. Also in this area we will search for the unobtrusive and extremely confiding Dusky (or Blue) Grouse at the spectacular Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.

Still further west we will experience the awesome beauty of Colorado National Monument with its canyons and red rock pinnacles, and also search for Pinyon Jays, Sage Thrashers and Sage Sparrows before heading northeast to the Steamboat





White-tailed Ptarmigans (Nik Borrow)

Springs area. Here hyperactive Sharp-tailed Grouse gather at yet another lek site.

After an encounter with displaying Barrow's Goldeneyes, the grand finale of our 'Grousequest' will be provided by the unforgettable sight of magnificent Greater Sage-Grouse lekking at close range.

Before we complete our circular route around the state we will spend some time in the Pawnee National Grasslands where Mountain Plovers and both McCown's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs nest. Colorado is also a great place to see a wide variety of mammal species with Elk, Mule Deer, Pronghorn Antelope and Bighorn Sheep all likely to be encountered during our travels.

Birdquest has operated tours to Colorado since 2003.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins at Denver in the late afternoon. On arrival we will drive west to Georgetown for a two night stay.

Day 2 This morning we will devote some time to searching for the sought-after White-tailed Ptarmigan in

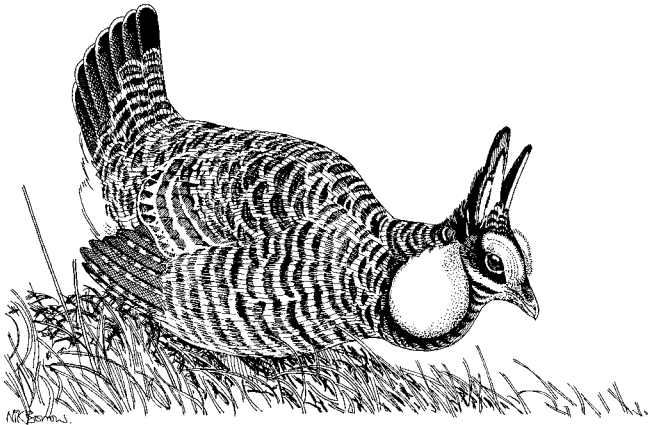
the high Rockies. There is a disjunct southern population of these high altitude denizens in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Each winter these beautiful birds descend from the highest regions and gather on the lower tundra to feed on exposed willow buds. Often they can be seen from the roadside. However, their presence near the road depends on the amount of snow which remains. Being pure white at this season, they need to stay hidden from marauding Golden Eagles and other predators. If there is relatively little snow, finding them may necessitate a walk across the tundra to search the snow patches at a slightly higher elevation, although this is an exhilarating and unforgettable experience in itself due to the sheer splendour and majesty of the surrounding Rocky Mountain scenery, with peaks of over 14,000 ft (4,267m) dominating the vista. If there is still plenty of snow they should be easier to observe, with little or no walking involved. Once located the ptarmigan are extremely confiding and, with care, can be approached to within close range, providing some great photographic opportunities. There will be few other bird species at this

altitude. Indeed, we may only encounter a few Horned Larks. At lower altitudes we will search areas of spruce and pine forest where we may well encounter the endearing Grey Jay, Steller's Jay, the striking Clark's Nutcracker, Black-billed Magpie (now split from its Eurasian cousin), American Crow, Common Raven, the perky Mountain Chickadee, the attractive Red-breasted Nuthatch, American Robin, the resident Grey-headed Junco (currently mostly treated as a race of Dark-eyed Junco and a good candidate for a split), the impressive Pine Grosbeak, the pretty Cassin's Finch, Red (or Common) Crossbill and Pine Siskin. Where fires have created large 'burns', these are ideal for American Three-toed Woodpeckers. In recent years this localized and uncommon species has been found frequently in this area, so we will be hoping this situation continues. The delightful Pygmy Nuthatch is a common bird here and we should also see Hairy Woodpecker of the interesting Great Basin race, the attractive Western Bluebird and the beautiful powder-blue Mountain Bluebird. If we are in luck we will also encounter a newly-arrived Red-naped Sapsucker. Georgetown itself is well-known for its Bighorn Sheep, which are often to be seen feeding close to the expressway. The males with their huge horns are particularly impressive.

Day 3 During the winter months, numbers of all three North American species of rosy-finch gather at feeders in Colorado. The precise location of these gatherings varies from year to year, and even from week to week, so we will concentrate our efforts on finding these birds either today or later in the tour at one or more of several well-known sites, depending on current information. Rosy-finches provide a really attractive spectacle with their brown or black, grey and pink plumage. Typically, but not invariably,

the most numerous species is the Brown-capped Rosy-Finch, which has a rather restricted breeding range in the central Rockies and which travels downslope after the first heavy snowfall. Also usually present in smaller numbers is the striking Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch which breeds in the mountains of western North America from Alaska to California, with northern populations dispersing south and east for the winter. With them we may also encounter one or two birds of the coastal-breeding Grey-faced or Hepburn's race (which may possibly represent a distinct species). Least numerous and least predictable of the three species is the striking Black Rosy-Finch, which breeds to the northwest in Utah, Idaho and Montana. The feeders also attract Black-capped Chickadees and juncos, mostly Grey-headed but also Oregon and Pink-sided (both of which, like Grey-headed, are likely future splits). From the Denver region we will head for the northeastern corner of the state, leaving the majestic Rockies behind and crossing the extensive eastern plains, long since transformed from buffalo- and Indian-haunted prairies to pasture and cultivation. A few Trumpeter Swans winter at wetlands in northeastern Colorado, so if any are still lingering in the area we will definitely make an effort to find one. During the journey we should see a number of common breeding species including Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, the invading Eurasian Collared Mourning Dove, Red-winged Blackbird, Western Meadowlark and Common Grackle. We will spend tonight in the small town of Wray.

Day 4 A very early start will be necessary in order for us to arrive at a Greater Prairie-Chicken lek near Wray before the birds. As the first glimmer of light illuminates the prairie we will be treated to one of



Lesser Prairie-Chicken (Nik Borrow)

the great spectacles of nature from the relative comfort of a partly-enclosed viewing trailer as the males bow, call and display to one another with their large orange air sacs inflated and their pinnae (long feathers on the side of the neck) raised like strange 'ears' or antennae. All this happens just a very short distance away and the birds appear totally oblivious to the presence of the humans in the trailer. It is a truly amazing and unforgettable experience. At one time the local population of these remarkable birds was gravely threatened but, thanks to conservation measures, they now number in the thousands in this corner of Colorado and their future seems secure. As the light intensity rises a number of females will likely be attracted to the lek. When the females appear the cacophony of sound and the level of activity among the males rises dramatically, as the dominant males get the majority of the matings. As the light increases still further there will be ample opportunities to photograph these fabulous birds from the trailer. Once the females have departed, which is usually not long after sunrise, we will also be able to leave the area, thus avoiding any disruption to the lek. A welcome 'country style' breakfast will follow at

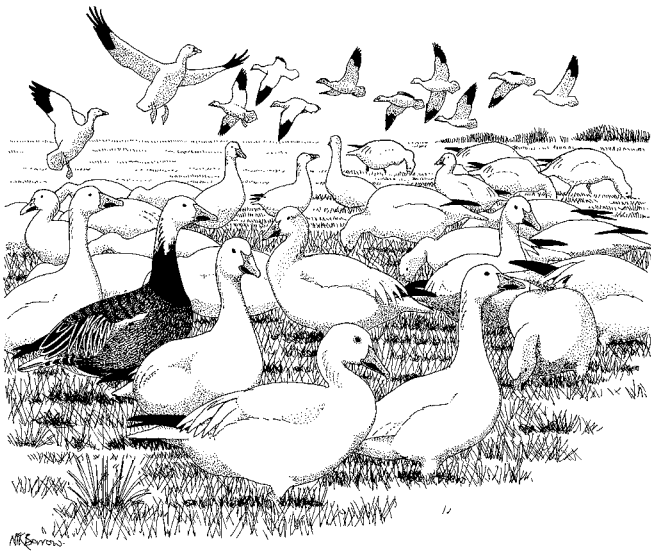
a nearby ranch. From Wray we head south to Springfield in the extreme southeastern corner of the state for a two nights stay. On the way we will drive across impressive expanses of prairie which convey a 'Wild West' sense of almost limitless wide open spaces and endless skies. This landscape is in stark contrast to the rugged grandeur of the Rockies but it definitely has a beauty all of its own. Horned Larks abound in these grasslands and other species we can expect to find in this habitat include the endearing Burrowing Owl, Loggerhead Shrike, Vesper Sparrow, and American Goldfinch. A visit to Bonny State Park, near the Kansas border, should produce a good variety of waterbirds including Western Grebe, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Snow and Greater Canada Geese, Mallard, Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, American Coot and Belted Kingfisher. There should also be a few shorebirds present, including Killdeer, the lovely American Avocet, Greater Yellowlegs and Baird's Sandpiper, as well as some pink-flushed migrant Franklin's Gulls among the Ring-billed Gulls. We are

also likely to encounter some American Herring Gulls (split from European Herring). In addition, we have a good chance of finding some migrating Ross's Geese. In the surrounding fields, hedgerows and woodlands we should find Turkey Vulture, Northern Harrier, Ring-necked (or Common) Pheasant, Wild Turkey, Great Horned Owl (their nests are easy to spot in the still-leafless trees), Downy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, the beautiful White-breasted Nuthatch, Eastern Bluebird and White-crowned Sparrow. We will also break our journey at an area of prairie where Mountain Plovers can often be found in a large Black-tailed Prairie Dog town, and at another reservoir where we will have a further opportunity to look for both Snow Geese and Ross's Geese, as well as other wildfowl and migrant shorebirds. We could well come across our first Great-tailed Grackles in one of the small prairie towns.

Day 5 Another early morning start will be needed to enable us to visit a Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek in the dry grasslands. Lesser Prairie-Chickens occupy a very small breeding range in the state, only just entering the southeastern corner of Colorado, so we will count ourselves fortunate to have an opportunity to witness this extraordinary sight. Like their larger cousins these amazing birds engage in an intriguing repertoire of displays, chasing each other around with purple air sacs inflated and pinnae raised, while all the time making weird popping and hooting sounds. The vegetation here in the Comanche National Grasslands is a little thicker than up at Wray causing the birds to move constantly in and out of view, but this is no less of a spectacle. Other species we should see in the dry grasslands include the impressive but rather scarce Ferruginous Hawk, the powerful Prairie Falcon,

the impressive Long-billed Curlew, Chihuahuan Raven, Brown-headed Cowbird, Cassin's Sparrow and perhaps an early migrant Lark Bunting. Afterwards we will move on to some very scenic, juniper-clad canyons west of Campo. Water is at a premium in this semi-desert landscape and the streams and rivers attract lots of birds. Small numbers of Eastern Phoebe, here at the western extremity of their range, breed alongside the larger Say's Phoebe. Bewick's Wrens, Song Sparrows and Canyon Towhees are fairly common, and we should also find small numbers of gorgeous Wood Ducks. We should encounter our first inquisitive Rock Wrens and with luck we will find the stunning Lewis's Woodpecker (a species that sallies from the tops of large cottonwood trees to catch flying insects, but which has declined markedly in Colorado in recent years). Other likely species here include Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks (either of these *Accipiter* species could turn up anywhere during the tour), Bushtit, Townsend's Solitaire, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, the localized Rufous-crowned Sparrow and House Finch. If we are fortunate we will find Ladder-backed Woodpecker as well.

Day 6 Today we will head for Pueblo for an overnight stay. On the way we will break our journey at reservoirs and lakes where we should be able to find Pied-billed. Horned (or Slavonian), Eared (or Black-necked) and Clark's Grebes, Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teals, Lesser Yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper, Wilson's Snipe (split from Common), Bonaparte's Gull and Tree Swallow, and quite likely large numbers of migrant Snow and Ross's Geese. We will also stop to look for White-winged and Inca Doves, Blue Jay and American Goldfinch. The city of Pueblo is situated at the base of the Rockies and here we will look for the pretty little Scaled Quail and Curve-



Snow Geese (Nik Borrow)

billed Thrasher (the latter a rather localized breeding species in Colorado).

Day 7 From Pueblo we will head further west to Gunnison for an overnight stay. En route we pass through some broad high-altitude valleys lined with a fantastic vista of snow-capped peaks – the epitome of ‘High Plains’ country! Here we may well come across our first roving flock of Pinyon Jays in the pinyon-juniper forests, and we have another opportunity to look for Grey Jay, Clark’s Nutcracker and Pine Grosbeak. Subsequently we will cross the Continental Divide at Monarch Pass (at an altitude of over 11,000ft, or over 3,400m), where yet again we will enjoy some truly spectacular mountain and coniferous forest scenery.

Day 8 It was only recently recognized that the geographically isolated form of sage-grouse which inhabits the Gunnison Basin is actually a distinct species. The Gunnison Sage-Grouse is slightly smaller than its more widespread cousin, the Greater Sage-Grouse, with a different tail pattern and much longer, bushier

filoplumes on the male’s head. It also has a different display. This morning we will set off before dawn to visit a lek of this superb bird. As dawn breaks the magnificent males become evident, dotting the flattened lek area. They strut around with their tails spread vertically, filoplumes raised and huge yellow air sacs inflated and surrounded by a broad ruff of snow white feathers. This amazing display is somewhat reminiscent of that of some of the Old World bustards. After breakfast we will have another chance to visit some feeders to look for lingering rosy-finches if need be: that beautiful Black Rosy-Finch in particular can be a tough critter to find! Alternatively we can check out the high altitude spruce forests if we are still needing Grey Jay, Clark’s Nutcracker or Pine Grosbeak. Eventually we will head for Montrose, to the west of Gunnison, where we will overnight. Those who wish to will be able to look for Western Screech-Owl.

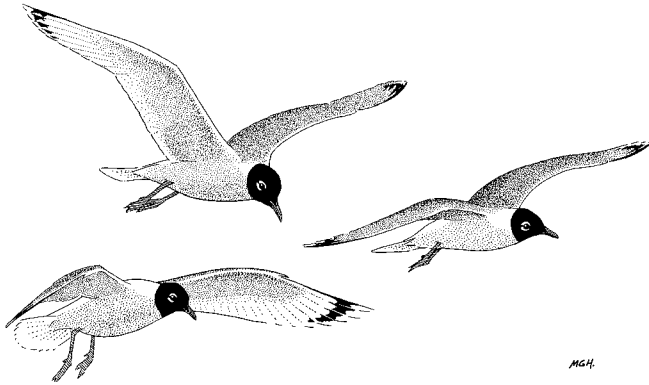
Day 9 Continuing our quest for North American grouse, we will leave Montrose early and head for America’s newest National Park, the

spectacular Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Here, in the seemingly atypical oak scrub habitat along the rim of the canyon, we will hope to find the incomparable Dusky (or Blue) Grouse. We have an excellent chance of locating this confiding species feeding along the roadside early in the morning. With care they are extremely tame and approachable. If we are really fortunate we will even enjoy the fantastic sight of a displaying male with his deep red air sacs inflated and his tail spread, making a barely audible, deep, booming sound like someone blowing across the top of a bottle. Blue Grouse has recently been split, with the form found in Colorado (Dusky, or Blue, Grouse) once more treated as a different species from the Sooty Grouse of the Pacific coastal region. From various roadside pull-offs the views of the canyon and its sheer cliffs are hugely spectacular, for here the Gunnison River winds its way along the valley floor thousands of feet below. One of these precipitous cliffs, the magnificent Painted Wall, is higher than the Empire State Building! The inquisitive Western Scrub-Jay and the handsome Spotted Towhee are common in the scrub along the canyon rim, while the first and Brewer’s Blackbirds may be arriving in the ranch country outside the park. Later we will travel west to Grand Junction for an overnight stay, stopping along the way to look for the skulking Marsh Wren. During the afternoon we will visit Colorado National Monument, an equally spectacular but quite different piece of Colorado compared with the Black Canyon, with extraordinarily impressive red sandstone rock formations and sculptured canyons. From the road which winds its way around the west side of the monument the views are truly breathtaking. Noisy groups of dashing White-throated Swifts dart around overhead, while other species we may encounter here include

Juniper Titmouse and the attractive Canyon Wren with its beautiful piping song.

Day 10 We will make an early start to look for the delightful Northern Saw-whet Owl in the mountains (we will have to be lucky if we are to see one) and then visit an area of sagebrush which holds newly-arrived Sage Thrashers and Sage Sparrows. Golden Eagles are often common in this area. Later, after visiting a canyon where Black-throated Sparrows can usually be found, we will head for Steamboat Springs in northwestern Colorado for a two night stay.

Day 11 The northwestern part of Colorado is the only area of the state where Sharp-tailed Grouse are commonly found. This close relative of the prairie-chickens forms leks in short grass prairie and even on arable land. With an early start we will arrive at one of these roadside leks just before dawn to witness yet another remarkable spectacle. A dry chattering sound pervades the air as the males engage in extremely rapid foot stamping, drooping their wings and inflating their brilliant purple air sacs as they chase each other frantically across the display ground. This amazing display is accompanied by a deep hooting sound somewhat reminiscent of the call of a Great Grey Owl. If anything the whole performance is even more incredible than that of the prairie-chickens, and indeed the rapid foot stamping and circling of these three species of grouse is thought to have inspired some of the traditional dances of the North American Indians. Herds of impressive Elk, the North American cousin of the Eurasian Red Deer, can often be seen grazing on the bleak hillsides and both Mule Deer and Pronghorn are regularly encountered. A small disjunct breeding population of Sandhill Cranes also inhabits this part of Colorado, while another species that



Franklin's Gulls (Michael Hodgson)

can be found here is Blue Grouse. Later we will visit some reservoirs in search of waterbirds. Here we should find numbers of stunning Barrow's Goldeneye among the Common Goldeneyes and see the males of both species displaying side by side. There should also be lots of other waterfowl, including Redhead, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Common Merganser (or Goosander). There should also be some California Gulls and a Bald Eagle or two present.

Day 12 The grand finale of our quest for North American grouse will be a visit to a Greater Sage-Grouse lek. Large numbers of magnificent males gather here very close to the viewing site, but we can avoid disturbing them and enjoy amazing views by staying in our vehicle. This is

arguably the most spectacular of the grouse leks visited during the tour with rewarding opportunities for photography. As the males strut around with yellow air sacs inflated and tails and filoplumes raised, we will almost be able to feel the reverberation of their booming calls through the ground. A good number of females should be in attendance at the lek with the males all vying for their attention and competing for the lion's share of the matings. The whole spectacle is spell binding and simply marvellous to watch.

Afterwards we will pay a visit to a wildlife refuge on the prairies which is dotted with small lakes and ponds. This whole area is superb for waterfowl, raptors and migrant shorebirds (although the latter will only just have started to arrive). We may

also see one or two wintering Rough-legged Hawks (or Rough-legged Buzzards). Moving east, we will cross the Rockies once more (en route to Fort Collins for an overnight stay) and descend a very scenic river valley where we will find the engaging American Dipper. This afternoon we will explore the Pawnee National Grasslands of northern Colorado, which are home to a number of prairie species which are localized or hard to find in other areas of the state. We will be searching for two species of longspurs in particular. Attractive McCown's Longspurs are quite widely distributed across the grasslands and it should not be long before we find some males engaging in aerial song flights. Getting close to them on the ground requires a little more patience, but we should be able to get some very good views. Chestnut-collared Longspurs are decidedly less numerous, preferring areas with slightly longer grass. They are rather patchily distributed in this area, but careful attention to some key areas should produce results. The attractive but threatened Mountain Plover prefers short grass areas and we will have another opportunity to observe this attractive but endangered species today. This is another good area for raptors and we may well find both Swainson's and Ferruginous Hawks. There should also be small

herds of the strange-looking Pronghorn Antelope around.

Day 13 Early this morning we will visit a reservoir where should be some colourful Yellow-headed Blackbirds roosting in the surrounding marshes. With a bit of luck we will also see an American Bittern. Afterwards we will return to Denver, where the tour ends in the late morning.

Accommodation & Road Transport: The motels are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus and roads are good.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy, but there will be several optional harder walks.

Climate: It will vary from quite cold in the early mornings, especially in the Rocky Mountains, to relatively warm in the middle of the day, particularly on the eastern plains and in the far west. Sunshine is the norm, but there are likely to be some overcast periods, either with or without rain (or snow at high altitudes).

Bird Photography: Opportunities are quite good.

Important: As seeing the three rosy-finches and White-tailed Ptarmigan is so weather-dependent, we may have to be flexible and rearrange the tour itinerary while in Colorado in order to maximize our possibilities.