



Russ Seward's Greater Prairie Chicken lek was again the highlight of the tour for most (All photos by Mike Watson)

COLORADO & KANSAS

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LEADERS: MIKE WATSON and GLEN DAVIS

Our 2013 'Ultimate Grousequest' to the Rocky Mountains and High Plains of Colorado (and neighbouring Kansas) was another success with our fifth clean sweep in a row of the 'magnificent seven': the pure white White-tailed Ptarmigan (we did it again!); the extrovert Greater and Lesser Prairie Chickens; the super-bold Dusky Grouse; foot-stomping Sharp-tailed Grouse and the two big boomers – Gunnison's and Sage Grouse. This was some achievement (but also a little lucky) in the worst spring weather we have experienced on this tour so far and at the same time we also reached a new Birdquest highest bird species total of 180 (ABA), or, depending on taxonomy, as many as 190 bird taxa. Some outstanding Nearctic birding included: Scaled and Gambel's Quails; Wild Turkey; Chukar Partridge (OK, the ABA listers forced me to do it!); Snow, Ross's and Cackling Geese; Wood Duck; Barrow's Goldeneye; Hooded Merganser; Great Northern Loon; Clark's Grebe; Ferruginous Hawk; Prairie Falcon; Sandhill Crane; Snowy and Mountain Plovers; Franklin's, California and Kumlien's Gulls; Western Screech, Great Horned, Burrowing and Boreal (heard) Owls; Lewis's (two), Ladder-backed (four) and American Three-toed (three) Woodpeckers; Williamson's (five) and Red-naped (three) Sapsuckers; Grey, Pinyon and the newly-split Woodhouse's Scrub Jays; Clark's Nutcracker; Chihuahuan Raven; Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees; Juniper Titmouse; Rock, Canyon, Marsh and Bewick's Wrens; Pygmy, Red-breasted and 'Rocky Mountains' White-breasted Nuthatches; Sage and Curve-billed Thrashers; the pretty trio of Eastern, Western and Mountain Bluebirds; Townsend's Solitaire; American Dipper; the four Rosy Finch forms (Hepburn's, Grey-crowned, Black and Brown-capped); Cassin's Finch; Pine and Evening Grosbeaks; an early Myrtle Warbler (my first warbler of any species on this tour!); Slaty Fox, Harris's, Sage, Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrows; six forms of Junco (Slate-coloured, White-winged, Oregon, Cassiar, Pink-sided and Grey-headed) and finally McCown's Longspur out in the snow on the plains.

A useful seven 'write-ins' for this tour included: Marbled Godwit; Dunlin (!); Common Redpoll; Lark Sparrow; Golden-crowned Kinglet; Hermit Thrush and a very late American Tree Sparrow. While the mammal list fell a little short of 2011's record total it still reached a creditable 29 species and Northern River Otter, North American Beaver and Hispid Cotton Rat were new for us in Colorado. Our 2013 ornithological road trip had clocked up 3246 miles in less than two weeks through some of the most spectacular scenery on the continent, with the Black Canyon of the Gunnison and Colorado National Monument vying for first place in the landscape competition. We love Colorado in spring!

At 100,000 sq. miles Colorado is the USA's eighth largest state, roughly twice the size of New York. It is also one of the highest. Even its lowest point, where the Arickaree River leaves the state, south of Wray and flows into Kansas is still 1010 metres above sea level and its highest, Mount Elbert in Lake County, is 4399m. Temperatures can fluctuate wildly in spring from the mountains to the plains and although we did not experience the 100+ degrees Fahrenheit high we had in 2011 the range was still around 60 degrees from the low 70s at the start of the tour to 12 in the depths of the second big winter storm in the mountains.

Our 2013 tour started with a small group of Birdquesters gathering at Denver's smart International Airport before making our way westwards up into the Rocky Mountains to the pretty former mining town of Georgetown for a two nights stay. With good weather ahead and a very successful recce of the first couple of days of the tour completed we had reason to be happy. This also included my favourite bar reopening and now offering excellent Mexican food! Georgetown is a very pretty former mining centre, in fact it was the site of Colorado's first silver mines, opened in 1864, leading to it being known as the 'Silver Queen of the Rockies', owing to its rich deposits of the precious metal. For the first time that I can remember we were not being snowed on as we made our west along Interstate 70, through the mighty Eisenhower tunnel to Silverthorne. However, there was still plenty of snow on the ground here and most water bodies were at least partly frozen. Just after dawn, we stopped at one of our regular spots to get the birding started, quickly scoring the sought-after Barrow's Goldeneye, albeit only a single bird this time. Small numbers of these regal diving ducks spend the winter in the Colorado Rockies and often linger well into the spring. The supporting cast was a good introduction for some to Nearctic waterfowl and included: American Wigeon; Green-winged Teal; Redhead; Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup. The nearby Blue River produced our first American Dipper but more surprisingly, a Moose, which had presumably wandered into suburbia in search of food. Silverthorne is also home to several pairs of Western Ospreys and we were fortunate to find some of them already returned from warmer climes. A Belted Kingfisher livened up a brief visit to the water treatment works before we moved on in search of bird feeders.

There are some reliable feeders on the outskirts of Silverthorne and they came up trumps for us again, most notably with the highly sought-after Black Rosy Finch at the first one we visited. This was not a big surprise as we had found this species here a couple of days before the tour but it was a massive relief that it was still present. We usually only see this tricky bird once on the circuit and it is most welcome sooner rather than later! Even better, the other three forms of Rosy Finch (Hepburn's, Grey-crowned and Brown-capped) were also at Silverthorne's feeders and in all the swarms numbered around 200 birds. Also here were a couple of Grey Jays, several Steller's Jays, our first lovely Mountain Bluebirds, Pine Grosbeak (including a couple of

Left: White-tailed Ptarmigan and right: 'Hepburn's Rosy Finch (Mike Watson)



red males), Pink-sided Junco and four Common Redpolls. The latter made its way onto the Birdquest CO list thanks to the biggest ever influx to southern states this winter.

Time came for something a little more adventurous. Our tour allows for five shots at White-tailed Ptarmigan throughout the course of the circuit, which is sometimes necessary if bad weather prevents access to its high altitude habitat. However, the weather was kind to us and we needed only one attempt to secure it this time. Thanks to some sharp spotting by Ian Phillips we all quickly enjoyed some lovely views of a ptarmigan, picking its way across the snow slopes below Loveland Pass, pausing to feed on willow buds protruding above the deep snow. Loveland is a perfect setting for this pure white bird (except for its bill and eye), high up at almost 12,000 feet above sea level on the Continental Divide, with a winter wonderland of snowy peaks all around. Probably the hardest of all birds they stay up high, digging into the snow for shelter, which makes them hard to find, even when you can get to their habitat in bad weather. Thankfully the hardcore hike to Guanella Pass was not now needed and we breathed another huge sigh of relief as we descended the pass back towards Georgetown. All four rosy finches and the ptarmigan under the belt before lunch on the first morning was a totally awesome start! A small flock of Horned Larks landed on a wind-blown bare area of ground at the pass and a powder blue male Mountain Bluebird was the first one I have seen up there in the snow. On the way down a pair of Grey Jays watched over the antics of some snowboarders.

Downslope at Georgetown we made a brief stop to look at the Bighorn Sheep by the I-70 but there were only rather many females this time and no rams so we continued eastwards to the Ponderosa Pine forests of the 'front range'. Here we were delighted by the striking Williamson's Sapsucker at one of its regular sites, Genesee Mountain Park, with some great scope views of two males and two females as well as some other typical birds of this lower elevation: Hairy Woodpecker; Mountain Chickadee; Pygmy, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches as well as Western Bluebirds and Red Crossbill (probably type four). Abert's (or Tassel-eared) Squirrel was a good mammal tick for most here and Genesee is also a great place for an al fresco picnic!

The first day of this tour is always one of the most exciting and we followed up the pine forest birding with a stop at Red Rocks. It is known by most for its landmark rock concerts, particularly U2's 'Under a blood red sky' gig in June 30 years ago but it now also has a great reputation amongst birders for its productive bird feeders. This time we enjoyed a beefy Slaty Fox Sparrow and a veritable junco fest with an incredible six forms: Slate-coloured; Cassiar; White-winged; Oregon; Pink-sided and Grey-headed! Maybe one day there will be some armchair lifers from this session? Also here, over a cup of coffee on the veranda, was a nice selection of other birds: Peregrine Falcon; Great Horned Owl (roosting below the trading post); White-throated Swift; Downy Woodpecker; Say's Phoebe; Woodhouse's Scrub Jay and Spotted Towhee. A very civilized end to a classic day's birding!

Great Horned Owl, Red Rocks Trading Post (Mike Watson)





White-winged Junco, Red Rocks Trading Post

This great start set us up well for an early morning hike in the forests south of Evergreen, where we have had some mixed luck in the past with American Three-toed Woodpecker. Fortunately this time we improved our average with a very nice encounter with a pair of three-toeds, the male's drumming sound tailing off like the bouncing of a ping-pong ball. Although we never miss this bird it was good to get it under the belt early. Our first delightful Townsend's Solitaire followed soon afterwards atop a nearby pine snag. The same selection of Ponderosa Pine specialists, Hairy Woodpecker (of the Rocky Mountains form), Pygmy and White-breasted Nuthatches, Western Bluebird and Cassin's Finch were also common here. Then began the long journey across the plains to the small town of Wray in northeast Colorado. We chose to avoid the interstate in the hope of spotting some raptors on a sunny afternoon and were rewarded with a total of eight Rough-legged Hawks amongst more than double that number of the much more common resident Red-tailed. However, Northern Harriers were again in short supply on this tour, with only four today.

We stopped briefly at Bonny State Park to be met by the very sad sight of a completely dry lake bed, the reservoir having been drained in autumn 2011, following a dispute between Colorado and Kansas. The latter state having won a court battle to force the former to allow water to flow unhindered along the course of the South Republican River. We did not linger long with hardly any birds in the now dusty landscape save a few Wild Turkeys and an osprey, probably wondering what happened to the water here. Instead we checked a couple of sites in the vicinity of Wray itself, the highlights being some nice views of Cedar Waxwing and a large passage of Turkey Vultures, looking for somewhere to set down for the night.

Wray is one of the most eagerly awaited stops on our chicken tour as it marks the first proper dancing display as well as no doubt the best viewing arrangements. The small pioneer town has a population of around 2000 (about the same as Settle in North Yorkshire) and has embraced its new status as an ecotourism destination. Happily everyone made the effort to attend the fascinating orientation meeting at the delightful Wray Museum, along with its amazing display of artifacts donated by Wray residents including big game hunter, Dale Whomble's trophy collection. Another great steakhouse meal followed before we retired to our motel rooms with thoughts of the spectacle ahead.

Well before dawn, we boarded Wray's big yellow school bus, which took us to the prairie chicken hide (or blind as American birders call them), a converted trailer and once everyone was installed, the window shutters were raised and we were open to the elements. I remember that my first visit to this blind felt like I was sitting inside a freezer but it seems to get milder each time (it would been a different story had our 2013 visit been a week later!). In the half - light we could make out the shapes of prairie chickens as the males took up their positions



Greater Prairie Chickens on Russ Seward's Kitzmiller Ranch, near Wray

in the arena of their lekking ground. Their eerie booming calls filled the air and as dawn broke details of their intricately barred plumage were gradually revealed. The dancing starts with some foot stomping, followed by the inflation of their neck sacs as they lean forwards, from which the booming call emanates. At the same time their elongated neck feathers are raised, completing the transformation from their usually innocuous appearance into rather fearsome looking creatures. A visit to a prairie chicken lek is certainly one of the ornithological wonders of the world and was the inspiration for the dances of the Plains Indian tribes. The same leks have been used for hundreds of years, evidenced by the arrowheads archaeologists have found on them, and birds are apparently so loyal that if a road is built across a lek they will simply dance in the middle of it. The dominant males occupy the central, pole positions of the lekking ground and the younger and less experienced ones are literally kicked out to periphery.

Prairie chicken numbers at Russ Seward's Kitzmiller Ranch lek were a little down on 2011 levels with a total of 30 birds that included 13 females, the cause of much excitement amongst the males. The local Department of Wildlife Officer advised that they are still doing quite well at the moment in the area surrounding Wray but no doubt the recent drought will not have helped them. After a couple of hours we were driven back to our friendly hosts at the ranch, where we were treated to a traditional ranch breakfast (as always eagerly awaited by me!) of scrambled egg, rashers of bacon and mountains of waffles. The Stetson-wearing owner of the ranch introduced his team and gave a short speech, after which a brief search again revealed the Great Horned Owl in the cottonwoods near the ranch buildings, which apparently still occasionally preys on the ranch's new kittens.

Again it was a relief not to have to worry about winter weather in this area for a change (we would have plenty of opportunity for that later on this tour!) and if anything it was too warm, having a negative effect on bird activity in the middle of the day, creating heat haze at wetland sites. Heading south, we passed the site of the Battle of Beecher Island, where on in September 1868 a party of 2-300 (some sources say 1000!) Cheyenne and Arapahoe 'dog soldiers' engaged 50 US army scouts. The scouts were able to keep the Indians at bay with their Spencer repeater rifles and were eventually rescued, however, their officer, Lieutenant Fredrick H. Beecher, a decorated veteran of the Battle of Gettysburg, was killed in the conflict. Years of drought have resulted in a fallen water table in Yuma County, there is no longer an island here and the Arickaree River now only flows as a small stream. Originally the rivers of the High Plains lacked the marching regiments of cottonwoods that now stretch from the state line in the east to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, their courses were swept clean by spring floods and emerging saplings were grazed by herds of bison. The arrival of the Europeans led to the removal of both of these factors and the subsequent growth of trees has allowed the westward range extension of eastern bird species, like Blue Jay, Eastern Bluebird and Eastern Phoebe.

With the long drive to Kansas ahead we pressed on southwards, past towns with evocative names like Cheyenne Wells and Kit Carson, to the reservoirs north of Lamar. These now appear to be facing the same fate as Bonny, although purely from lack of precipitation rather than being deliberately drained. There was still some water in Neenoshe and Neegronda and we were happy to add: Baird's Sandpiper, on a white salt lake shoreline; Ross's Goose and Franklin's Gull to our bird list, although it would be hard work to have checked the vast, albeit reduced waterlines properly. We decided to devote more time to the riparian woodland at Lamar Community College instead and, after another stop for lunch at the world's most popular fast food franchise we enjoyed a very productive birding session, the highlight of which was a smart Harris's Sparrow, which eventually broke cover from its chosen tangle and afforded some great views of this sought-after and uncommon migrant. Also here of note were: Cooper's Hawk; Great Horned Owl; Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Townsend's Solitaire; Pine Siskin; White-crowned Sparrow; Spotted Towhee; Northern Cardinal and Lark Sparrow. Today also saw the first of several Swainson's Hawks, migrants on the way north in the good weather with the waves of Turkey Vultures. Eventually we turned east and crossed the Kansas border before making our way to the neat little cowboy town of Elkhart. Unfortunately devoid of weekend restaurants in this frontier settlement we had to make do with a Pizza Hut evening meal again, although this was a still an improvement on 2009's unforgettable burger bar!

The following morning we had another chicken appointment, on the Cimarron National Grassland this time, with the fast declining Lesser Prairie Chicken. We had heard some worrying news from Elkhart that in the last few days only two males had been visiting the lek there and on the morning of our visit, although we were very relieved not to dip out completely, it was incredibly sad to see only one of these magnificent birds. Unfortunately it was also saddled with an unsightly radio transmitter. It is a shame that this outcome probably means this was our last visit to this interesting area. It had previously been a much better bet than the Colorado leks but recently its fortunes have taken a steep downturn, probably owing to the effects of the severe drought in this region. Even though he was something of a 'Last of the Mohicans', the chicken still bravely went through his dancing routine for us, filling his reddish, rather than tangerine orange air sacs and doing plenty of foot stomping and pinnae-raising. He presented a wonderful, albeit very sad picture alone on the prairie with coyotes howling in the distance. We left the sagebrush and yucca prairie of the Cimarron behind but not before we had bagged a couple of new bird species for the tour in Burrowing Owl and Vesper Sparrow as well as the usual mammal, Ord's Kangaroo Rat, of which we again enjoyed some great views in the car headlights. At least I will no longer have to go through the tortuous process of obtaining the permit to visit the Cimarron, which requires completion of the same form to visit a bird blind as to build an oil pipeline!

Before heading back into town for a down-home breakfast at the great diner there we made a detour for another of our most-wanted on this tour, Mountain Plover. Fortunately we were able to find a pair of this wonderful 'High Plains Dotterel' quite quickly, on a large bare agricultural field, which meant we could approach them very closely. This was a tour highlight for many, before a mist rolled in and brought the birding session to a pre-

Mountain Plover, near Richfield KS



ture close. Also in this area were around seven Burrowing Owls. We decided to make another detour, partly to avoid driving too far on the dreaded County Road M but also to tick off Oklahoma – Native America! Most new OK bird lists did not reach double figures during our brief incursion but they did at least include a magnificent dark morph Rough-legged Hawk on a roadside telegraph pole. Oklahoma means ‘Red People’ and the 46th state is also one of the least populated, by birds as well as people, or so it seemed as we travelled through endless farmland and back north into Colorado once more.

We spent the afternoon on the Comanche National Grassland, at one of our favourite spots, Cottonwood Canyon. At least we were relatively sheltered here from a strong wind, which had blown up – bad weather was on the way again. This is becoming an irritating recurring feature of our visits to southeast Colorado! At least thankfully we did not lose any time to flat tires at all on the tour this year but our birding was still adversely affected again by bad weather here. The picturesque canyon lands cut into the prairie grasslands of this region, offering a refuge to riparian woodland and its bird communities. Sheltered from the strong wind we were able to find most of the special birds we were looking for, notably Western Screech Owl, which, thanks to some great work by Glen, we were able to locate poking out of its nest hole, at last! We also added: Long-billed Curlew; Scaled Quail; Ladder-backed Woodpecker (three); Eastern Phoebe; Chihuahuan Raven; Canyon Towhee; Rock and Bewick’s Wrens, however, there was no sign of Canyon Wren or Rufous-crowned Sparrow, despite a great deal of effort, presumably owing to the high winds in the more open areas of the canyon? A very unusual sighting was a Greater Yellowlegs flying south across the open prairie on Road M, with not a drop of water in sight. In fact the whole prairie on the Comanche was tinderbox dry and crackled under our feet. One wonders what natural disaster lies ahead for this area if it does not receive some serious precipitation soon. The bottle openers at Pop’s Liquor Store in Springfield recommended ‘*Get drunk and be somebody!*’ and it was also great to see our good old friend Vladimir still trading despite the current hardships.

Weather forecasts for the next day promised a winter storm would batter the region that lay in our path with a life threatening severity. Fantastic news! This was just what we needed with another long driving day ahead. We took the decision to bring our next overnight stop forward from Pueblo to La Junta in the Arkansas Valley and race there very early in the morning in the hope of beating the severe blizzard conditions that were coming from the northwest. At least we could explore that vicinity and retreat to our rooms if things got too bad. In a game of musical towns we managed to get all the way to La Junta with no sign of the ‘road closed’ barriers coming down and we could then get some birding done. It was not all plain sailing though in winds gusting to 50mph, freezing temperatures and dust storms that covered the road from time to time. One bright note was the fantastic breakfast diner in La Junta where we fuelled up for a day’s birding in the freezer.

On the outskirts of Rocky Ford we caught up with many people’s favourite woodpecker, Lewis’s. A super-smart, crow-like bird, we saw two of these beauties (one thanks again to eagle-eyed Ian Phillips from the moving vehicle), clinging to the sheltered sides of large cottonwoods in an attempt to keep warm(er). Pine Siskins crowded

Western Screech Owl, Cottonwood Canyon





Lewis's Woodpecker, near Rocky Ford

around a bird feeder and a good number of Blue Jays was also seen here. A cruise around the local 'hood in our little convoy of blacked-out SUVs was eventually considered a daft idea after we attracted the attention of some 'homies' with fierce-looking dogs so we headed off to check some of the Arkansas Valley reservoirs.

The Arkansas Valley is one of Colorado's waterbird hotspots and we added some useful species to the trip list in the form of: Bufflehead; Ruddy Duck; Western and Clark's Grebes; American White Pelican; American Avocet; Snowy Plover (22!); Lesser Yellowlegs; Least Sandpiper; Dunlin (oh yes!); Bonaparte's Gull; Buff-bellied Pipit (for some) and amazingly a Curve-billed Thrasher in someone's back yard that we were reversing into! We could shelter behind the tail gates of the vehicles and scope the waters quite well and as time passed by it became clear that we were going to be spared a 'duvet day' with the worst of the snow falling both the east and west of us. Lucky! Not for the birds though, Say's Phoebes covered on the edges of the lakes, a Vesper Sparrow sought shelter near our vehicles and a Turkey Vulture crash-landed in a nearby field. With flakes of snow in the air but really not much more, an exploration of a nearby canyon and an area of riparian woodland yielded more good birds including: another Ladder-backed Woodpecker; Loggerhead Shrike (a pair in an old cemetery for our shrike lover Norbert) and both Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets in the same bush! Gretchen saved her best until last today with a very welcome find – Eastern Bluebird! This one should have been common in the east at both Bonny and Cottonwood Canyon but was nowhere to be seen there this year, probably owing to the weather so her roadside find near Swink was a big relief. We were fortunately still well on schedule despite today's storm, which was forecast to ease overnight, cue another sigh of relief!

A bright and sunny spring day followed as we headed west, getting back on track by lunchtime. Stopping off at a Facebook friend's house we had some great looks at Scaled Quail and Curve-billed Thrasher in her yard but also added a mammal to the Birdquest CO list – Hispid Cotton Rat, which was also cheekily tucking into her bird food, amongst the sparrows and House Finches. I do not know many folks who bought their property because Northern Harrier is a yard bird and true to form one flew through while we were there, scattering the passerines for a while. We repaid the favour by relocating a local rarity, Savannah Sparrow and finding another, Snowy Egret, on her patch. A Peregrine Falcon also flew over here and a couple of Yellow-headed Blackbirds were in nearby trees. We love spring migration - a good site for a 'big sit' we thought? A quick look at Brush Hollow Reservoir failed to turn up the reported Pacific Loon but did produce some early swallows including Bank, Tree, Barn and American Cliff as well as a Black-necked Grebe and three Western Ospreys. Mountain Bluebirds were also a feature today, with around 40 logged. Continuing west up the Arkansas Valley we left the



Left: Lesser Scaup and right: Snowy Egret - the latter a local rarity at Cattails Crossing, Pueblo West

plains behind and entered the Rockies once again, stopping off to catch up with Rufous-crowned Sparrow at our fall back site, which had never been needed until now. Happily at this spot the sparrow was very obliging and instant. Further west, at a regular lunch stop, we saw what may have been a pair of Mexican Ducks (or at least hybrids with Mallard) on a fast-flowing section of the river itself, they are apparently now starting to be taken more seriously in the southwest. We usually press on to the continental divide at this point but this time we decided to have an early try for Pinyon Jay. This was indeed fortunate, with around 70 birds milling around, as we did not see it again later on the tour where we have done in the past. The same residential area also produced a couple of fine Red-naped Sapsuckers, Juniper Titmouse and another White-winged Junco. A nearby lake held the two best-looking ducks on the circuit, Hooded Merganser and Wood Duck, and along the river here a couple of early migrants were spotted, in the form of Myrtle Warbler and Hermit Thrush - my first of either genus on this tour! We had still not yet crossed the divide to Gunnison so we made a sharp exit as the snow started to fall again in the mountains in late afternoon.

Our next chicken appointment was with Gunnison Grouse. This endangered species was not described until as recently as 2000 and it was not even recognized as a subspecies prior to this! Gunnison is renowned as one

Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Tunnel Drive, Cañon City



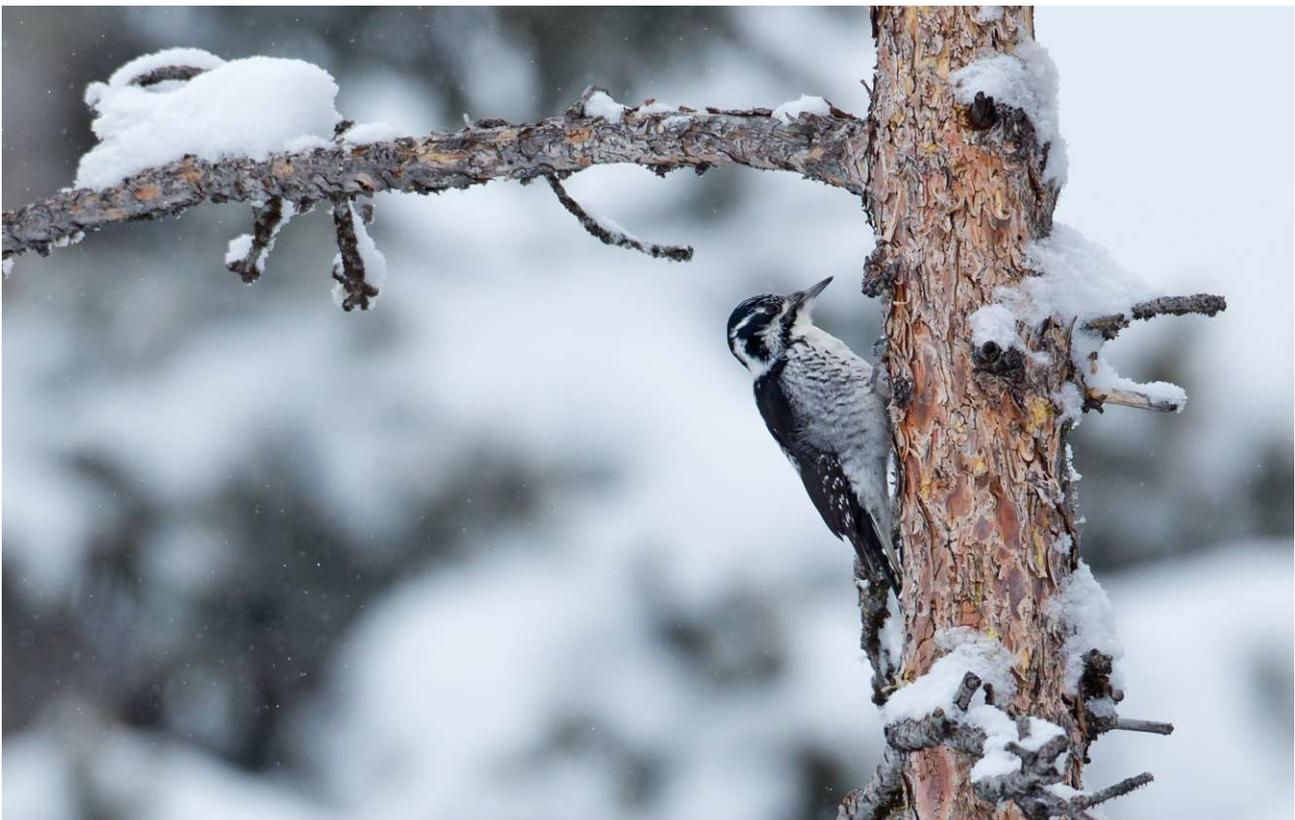
of the coldest places in the USA and it was predictably quite chilly sitting on the wooden benches of another grouse blind, waiting for dawn. However, as we shivered, our local escort was dressed in only jeans and a flimsy jacket – Gunnison girls are tough! As the first rays of light started to illuminate the valley in front of us we could make out dark shapes, occasionally bobbing up and down. Only now she dared to mention that on one or two days during the season, for some reason, the grouse do not show up at all! Eventually we were able to watch their full display, which included the males strutting around with their tail feathers fanned and every now and then they inflated the massive air sacs in their necks to make their booming call, after which they nodded their heads forward, shaking their ponytail like plumes in the process. We estimated seven males and ten females at the lek, which was well down on our 2011 visit, maybe owing to the drought, which has afflicted Colorado's grouse over the last couple of years? Gradually the females left, followed soon afterwards by the males and then the birders as well.

Having been snowed off the previous day we still had one species that we needed to see in the mountain forests, Clark's Nutcracker. After some minimal encouragement we were soon scoping one of these excellent crows not far from the continental divide. It was not interested in our offerings of food but the commotion also attracted a couple of ravens as well as Grey and Steller's Jays. Another reliable spot produced a third American Three-toed Woodpecker, this female allowing a little closer views than earlier on the tour. Flushed with this success (the nutcracker gets ever harder to find on this tour and it was also one of the main targets for Norbert) we headed to the pretty town of Crested Butte. Unfortunately there are hardly any feeders here nowadays and we saw only a handful of Brown-capped Rosy Finches and none of the hoped-for Evening Grosbeaks so we had to settle for lunch in one of the town's many excellent eateries. En route back from Gunnison a snowy roadside stop produced the mega range-restricted Gunnison's Prairie Dog for furry enthusiasts.

Cutting our losses we sped west, pausing at our regular stop, Blue Mesa Reservoir, which, like so many of Colorado's water bodies, was very low this time, although mostly ice-free. We still managed to add Great Northern (or Common) Loon to the trip list, as we usually do here, as well as Canvasback, Bald Eagle and Sage Thrasher of note. Pressing on to The Black Canyon of the Gunnison we decided to delay our evening meal and to make our first evening visit to this awesome place. We were rewarded with point blank views of a couple of male Dusky Grouse, displaying by the snowy roadside and also kept the trip list ticking over with American Bushtit in the evening sunshine.

I can never tire of the Black Canyon and with the grouse in the bag we could concentrate on other things on our big 'birds and geology' day, although we did see four Dusky Grouse next morning without even trying!

American Three-toed Woodpecker, Monarch Pass





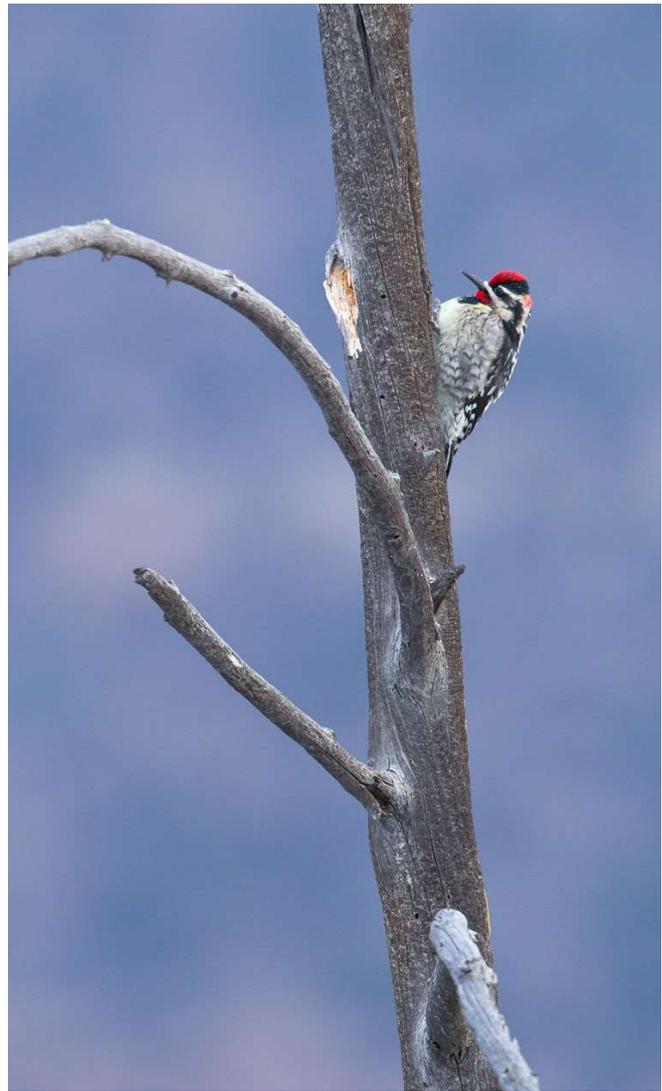
Dusky Grouse, The Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

As always it is a very impressive beast, more reminiscent of a capercaillie than a Red Grouse. Performing a rather subdued booming display on the edge of the snowy roadside oak scrub we were able to watch at leisure from our vehicles as usual and occasionally they would reveal the bright pink air sacs on the sides of the neck. The Black Canyon is always a great place to bird, combining jaw-dropping scenery with some sought-after bird species and we had time for a hike this year. Although it failed to turn up the hoped for pygmy owl we had some very nice views of Red-naped Sapsucker, Clark's Nutcracker, Juniper Titmouse, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Cassin's Finches. We also ticked off the gorgeous Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel here at a roadside lookout. The Black Canyon was declared a national monument in 1933 and then a national park in 1999, encompassing 14 miles of the canyon's 48 miles length. Geologist Wallace Hansen wrote "*Some are longer, some are deeper, some are narrower, and a few have walls as steep but no other canyon in North America combines the depth, narrowness, sheerness and sombre countenance of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison*". In fact in only 48 miles in the Black Canyon the Gunnison River loses more elevation than the 1,500 mile Mississippi River does from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico and it was this downward pressure that allowed the river to cut such a deep gorge in the tough uplifted rock through which it flows. The river has now been tamed by dams upstream as well as the 5.8 mile Gunnison Diversion Tunnel that takes water to the nearby Uncompahgre Valley and no longer has the same erosive power as when it flowed in flood with a force of approximately 2.75 million horsepower! The Black Canyon is one of North America's best - kept secrets and at its deepest the gorge is 844 metres deep (easily more than two Empire State Buildings!). It is certainly one of the geological wonders of the continent.

We usually visit the productive Fruitgrower's Reservoir on the previous afternoon, however, it did not make sense to backtrack so we squeezed in a stop here around lunchtime, adding Snow Goose, Sandhill Crane, Black-necked Stilt and Marsh Wren for some. The second of our two outstanding 'birds and scenery' experiences today was Colorado National Monument. Part of the Colorado Plateau, the national monument was created in 1911 and embraces 32 square miles of rugged terrain of the same geological formation that includes adjacent Utah's Arches National Park and Bryce Canyon. The spectacular Wingate red sandstone rock formation, studded with attractive Pinyon Juniper scrub, is another wonderful place to bird. There were only a few species left that we had not seen yet and we were able to see them, mostly without too much trouble, in a spectacular canyon setting – (the appropriately-named) Canyon Wren, Black-throated Sparrow and Gambel's Quail. We spent what was left of the afternoon enjoying some magnificent views across the totally awesome Wedding Canyon, after which we descended from the plateau to the nearby town of Grand Junction, drivers

concentrating on the tight hairpins and passengers admiring the splendid views of the monument, the Colorado River valley below, the Book Cliffs bad lands opposite and the menacing snow-clad table mountain of the Grand Mesa to the south. Unfortunately the evening's owling session was rather frustrating, hearing two Boreal Owls and not being able to coax either out of their forest hideaways, which were deep in snow. I discovered this was very soft as well, sinking up to my waist instantly. Next time!

With only Sage Sparrow left of our usual targets for this area we decided on a one-hit strategy and drove to within a stone's throw of the Utah border, where we quickly found one of these very smart little sparrows in an isolated stand of waist-high sage brush. A tour highlight for Ken as one of his most-wanted! We were also able to spend some time looking for Brewer's Sparrow, the other sparrow species, which breeds around here but we were probably a little early for this one. Instead we enjoyed some fabulous Long-billed Curlews performing their song flights across the high altitude grassland against a wonderful mountain backdrop as well as some nice looks at White-tailed Prairie Dogs. I was then forced to do something obscene for the ABA listers, ticking off Chukar Partridge in a canyon not far from Grand Junction amongst target shooters and remote controlled truck enthusiasts. Thank goodness it did not play hard to get at all and called from a quite prominent open area of the canyon - it is a smart bird wherever it came from. Again we had to rely on one of my fall back sites for Prairie Falcon having not yet bumped into one. Despite worsening weather and strong winds we had some great views of the North American Saker counterpart at its breeding cliff, as



Above: Red-naped Sapsucker and below: Long-billed Curlew



well as Golden Eagle nesting nearby, Bald Eagle overhead and a Northern River Otter in the stream below. Fantastic stuff once again! Next stop was Steamboat Springs, where in the early 1800s the first Europeans arrived and likened the sound of the mineral spring here to that of a steamboat's whistle. Sadly the spring was silenced by the construction of a railway over it in 1908 and the town has now grown into a bustling ski resort. Although we arrived to find the Yampa Valley fairly clear of snow for a change and it was in fact raining this time, more snow was forecast overnight and we found ourselves with another race against time to see both remaining grouse on our hit list.

We have previously seen both Sharp-tailed and Greater Sage Grouse on the same morning but we awoke to several inches of snow, which had fallen on ice and to dash around in it to cover the distance in time to see both grouse was going to be dangerous. We opted first for Sharp-tailed today and once we had finally made it up to one of their lesser known leks we were delighted to find several males already in residence in a winter wonderland landscape. A pair of Sandhill Cranes nearby looked a bit disappointed with their summer home and to our horror the grouse all suddenly took flight for some reason and flew off the lek towards a nearby wooded hillside. That was that we thought but at least we had seen something of their wing-bowing dancing display. Fortunately they had not gone all of the way to the woodland yet and thanks to a very slow and careful approach we were eventually able to watch them lekking on the roadside right next to our vehicles.

We called in at another Sharp-tailed Grouse lek to find no birds were present at all (they had dwindled to one or two here in recent weeks) but there was a nice adult Bald Eagle on a nearby small lake. Steamboat itself produced the much-desired Evening Grosbeak amongst a small flock of Pine Grosbeaks (these two species can often be found together making it difficult to decide which one of them to look at) and a surprise Williamson's Sapsucker. The forecasted snow was still holding off so we decided to make the journey over the Rabbit Ears pass to North Park and the Moose Visitor Centre at Gould. A bear destroyed the main bird feeder here and the hanging feeders had also been taken down owing to the very strong winds. Even so, as soon as the feeders were up again we were able to enjoy some point blank views of male Pine Grosbeak and amongst the many juncos, a Birdquest CO lifer in the form of an American Tree Sparrow, a winter visitor that is usually long gone by April. We also heard over the local park rangers' radio channel that a 'little red car' we had seen overtake us in the snow earlier had now gone off the road.

All over Colorado (and indeed throughout the Rocky Mountains) large patches of what at first glance appears to be deciduous pine forest can be seen. Instead the trees are sadly the casualties of a widespread Mountain Pine Beetle infestation. The beetle is native to the forests of western North America and periodically stages outbreaks that kill millions of trees. In fact during an epidemic, as is being experienced at the moment, enough beetles can emerge from a tree to kill two or more trees the following year!

Sharp-tailed Grouse, near Steamboat Springs





Pine Grosbeak (ssp montana), Moose Visitor Centre, Gould

The beetles also have an even darker secret, they transmit spores of bluestain fungi that grow inside the trees and assist the beetle in killing them. In some badly affected areas, such as the forests south of Berthoud Pass an approximately 95% mortality rate of Lodgepole Pine is expected. It is thought that global warming is at least partly responsible for the spread of the current infestation, allowing more of the beetle's larvae to survive the normally very harsh Rocky Mountain winters. Another of their fascinating innovations in the war against the trees in this harsh climate is the beetle larvae's ability to produce glycerol, which acts as an antifreeze! It is an ill wind and the present die-off should benefit the dead tree loving American Three-toed Woodpecker, although at the same time it means disaster for species like Grey Jay and Clark's Nutcracker (both of which are becoming more difficult for us to find).

In similar fashion to our last visit to North Park the weather was closing in on us again and after a tasty lunch at the Moose Creek Café in Walden, another of my favourites, we started to make our way out. We had a quick stop at Walden Reservoir, which was full of water birds, adding Cackling Goose and Marbled Godwit to the trip list. Gorgeous Mountain Bluebirds were trying to find something to eat on the icy fringes of the lake and smart California Gulls fed alongside the more familiar Ring-billeds. However, the most notable sighting here was a Bufflehead x Common Goldeneye hybrid. With black and white markings reminiscent of a Cotton Pygmy Goose from Asia, Magnus understandably said '*I have a duck and I have no idea what it is!*' Sadly we had to move on again and make a quick recce of the sage grouse lek for the following morning. A lovely frosty white White-tailed Jackrabbit and some Wyoming Ground Squirrels delighted the mammal listers but best of all was Tricia's exclamation '*Look!*'... at a magnificent Greater Sage Grouse, in the snow right next to the dirt road. The grouse afforded some very nice views, slowly walking alongside before it decided to sit down and try to hide in the snowy sagebrush. We had no idea how important this sighting would be until next morning...

North Park is a large intermountain glacial basin, which holds the headwaters of the North Platte River. Its landscape is one of high sagebrush prairie dotted with numerous lakes, ponds and untamed meandering streams. In 1844 Lieutenant John F. Fremont described it as '*a beautiful circular valley of 30 miles in diameter, walled in all around with snowy mountains, rich with water and grass, fringed with pine on the mountain sides below the snow, and a paradise to all grazing animals*'. It was a shame not to be able to linger longer here but at least we could make it back across the passes to Steamboat for the evening.



Sage Grouse, near Coalmont, North Park

It snowed steadily overnight and we awoke to several inches outside our motel in the morning. Ploughing usually starts at 5 AM and stops at 7 PM so we thought our early departure at the former ought to be OK. In fact we did not see a plough until we were well over the passes, the wide highway now reduced to one lane with deep tyre tracks. I was relieved to be able to follow a plough for a while but more than a little disappointed when it veered off, presumably reaching the end of its set route. We continued eastwards in the dark alone, past the North Park road, which was now just an unploughed wall of snow. No need to consider a grouse lek this morning, it was simply a case of trying to get from A to B in one piece. 'B' was The Pawnee National Grassland, many miles to the east and across the mountains. As dawn broke we took the safest but longest route, via Kremmling and the now familiar Silverthorne, where we stopped off for a break and another look at the rosy finches – all four forms still present in the snow. This was nerve-racking stuff, with sometimes only the posts along the sides of the road as a guide to its course and truly massive accumulations of snow on the underside of the vehicles. We looked a sorry sight when we stopped for gas along the way and folks asked how the roads were towards Steamboat. Despite a little more difficulty on the I70 past the Eisenhower tunnel we were able to complete the journey to Weld County with some time left for birding. The landscape on the plains was one of endless snow-covered fields and prairie, with many hundreds of Horned Larks and smaller numbers of meadowlarks crowding the roadsides for melt water and in hope of finding food. I had last seen the prairie like this in February 1990! We drove around for hours in the snow checking thousands of these small flocks before eventually Magnus spotted the all important white tail of McCown's Longspur and before long we had seen around 25 of these smart little birds, jostling alongside the Horned Larks for a patch of unfrozen ground in the road verge. Returning to our motel in the evening, a Rough-legged Hawk was perched in a field next to the car park – a sign that winter had returned.

Our last morning was a final attempt to find Chestnut-collared Longspur, unfortunately without any luck, and after managing to slip off the road in treacherous driving conditions we played safe from then on and did not take any further risks. Nevertheless we still managed to add a few more species to the trip list: Horned Grebe at the CSU Educational Centre in Fort Collins and Kumlien's and Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Timnath, before it was time to leave a very snowy Weld County and head back to Denver, where our tour finished and some were even able to leave for home... as flights were cancelled with more snow on the way.



McCown's Longspur, near Ault

Finally a big thank you to all of our very enthusiastic group for making this tour such good fun, despite the many obstacles in our path this time and especially to my co-leader Glen Davis for his great support, sharp eyes and ears and boundless enthusiasm! Thanks a lot Glen!



American Tree Sparrow, Moose Visitor Centre, Gould

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

The most up to date referenced taxonomic list referred to in the Tour Report is that of the **IOC World Bird Names**. Gill, F and Donsker, D (Eds). 2012. IOC World Bird Names (v2.11). Available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from *Threatened Birds of the World*, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

(E) = Endangered, (V) = Vulnerable, (NT) = Near Threatened, (DD) = Data Deficient.

Scaled Quail *Callipepla squamata* Noted on the Comanche NG and at Pueblo West (ssp *hargrivi*).

Gambel's Quail ◊ *Callipepla gambelii* Six at Colorado National Monument.

Wild Turkey ◊ *Meleagris gallopavo* First noted at Bonny SWA (ssp *intermedia*).

Sage Grouse ◊ (Greater SG) *Centrocercus urophasianus* (NT) One in the snow near Walden.

Gunnison Grouse ◊ *Centrocercus minimus* (E) A total of 17 (7 males) at Waunita Springs.

Dusky Grouse ◊ *Dendragapus obscurus* Up to four at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.

Sharp-tailed Grouse ◊ *Tympanuchus phasianellus* Five near Steamboat Springs (ssp *jamesi*).

Lesser Prairie-Chicken ◊ *Tympanuchus pallidicinctus* (VU) One male on the Cimarron NG.

Greater Prairie-Chicken ◊ *Tympanuchus cupido* (VU) A total of 30 (17 males) at Russ Seward's Kitzmiller Ranch lek, near Wray.

White-tailed Ptarmigan ◊ *Lagopus leucurus* A male at Loveland Pass (ssp *altipetens*).

Chukar Partridge *Alectoris chukar* One at Cameo, near Grand Junction.

Common Pheasant (Ring-necked P) *Phasianus colchicus* First noted near Bonny.

Snow Goose ◊ *Chen caerulescens* Around 20 at Fruitgrower's Reservoir.

Ross's Goose *Chen rossii* Eight at Neegronda Reservoir, near Lamar.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* Moffitt's Canada Goose was widespread and common (ssp *moffitti*) but we also noted some migrant Lesser Canada Geese (ssp *parvipes*) at least at Fruitgrower's and Walden.

Cackling Goose *Branta hutchinsii* One at Walden Reservoir (ssp *hutchinsii*).

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa* Two near Salida and another two at CSU Fort Collins.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Widespread and sometimes common.

American Wigeon *Anas americana* Widespread and locally common.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Widespread and very common. We also saw a pair showing some characters of Mexican Duck *A. diazi* on the Arkansas River west of Cañon City. Although all such birds have long been dismissed as impure hybrids with Mallards, their presence in the southwest USA is now being taken more seriously.

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors* The first were eight, just over the border in Oklahoma.

Cinnamon Teal *Anas cyanoptera* Scattered records (ssp *septentrionalium*).

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* Fairly widespread and locally common.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* Fairly widespread.

Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis* Widespread and common.

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria* Nine at Blue Mesa Reservoir were the first.

Redhead *Aythya americana* Scattered records, first noted at Silverthorne.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris* Widespread and fairly common.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis* Fairly widespread and locally common.

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola* Widespread and fairly common. A rare Bufflehead x Common Goldeneye hybrid was present at Walden Reservoir.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Scattered records (ssp *americana*).

Barrow's Goldeneye *Bucephala islandica* An immature drake at Silverthorne was the only record.

Hooded Merganser *Lophodytes cucullatus* Two pairs near Salida and another pair at Fruitgrower's Reservoir.

Common Merganser (Goosander) *Mergus merganser* A scatter of sightings.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* Two at Silverthorne were the first.

Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* C.200 at Lake Meredith was the maximum.

Great Northern Loon (GN Diver, Common L) *Gavia immer* Two in breeding plumage at Blue Mesa.

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps* 18 from Pueblo West onwards.

Horned Grebe (Slavonian G) *Podiceps auritus* One at CSU Fort Collins (ssp *cornutus*).

Black-necked Grebe (Eared G) *Podiceps nigricollis* One at Brush Hollow and five at Fruitgrower's.

Western Grebe *Aechmophorus occidentalis* A good scatter of sightings.

Clark's Grebe *Aechmophorus clarkii* Three at Lake Meredith.

White-faced Ibis *Plegadis chihi* Two sheltering behind a snow drift by the roadside in a snow storm on the Pawnee NG was a truly bizarre sighting.

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* Widespread, usually in small numbers.

Snowy Egret *Egretta thula* One at Cattails Crossing, Pueblo West.

American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos* Fairly widespread.

Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus* Also fairly widespread.

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura* Fairly widespread in small to moderate numbers, mostly on passage.

Western Osprey *Pandion carolinensis* Three at Silverthorne were the first.

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* Two at Blue Mesa were the first.

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius* Small numbers seen throughout the tour.

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus* As usual, only a handful (ssp *veloxi*).

Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* Five sightings of this impressive hawk.

Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni* Nine birds - an average showing.

Mallard with at least some Mexican Duck DNA, Arkansas River



Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis* Widespread and fairly common (ssp *calurus*).

Ferruginous Hawk ◊ *Buteo regalis* Only one on the Comanche NG was a poor showing.

Rough-legged Hawk (R-I Buzzard) *Buteo lagopus* A good total of 22, noted in all 3 states visited (ssp *sanctijohannis*).

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* A scatter of records totalled 14 birds and included a pair at their ancient nest site. (ssp *canadensis*).

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius* Widespread and common.

Prairie Falcon ◊ *Falco mexicanus* Six, including the usual pair at their site in Central Colorado.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Three, including one in the magnificent setting of Red Rocks. (ssp *anatum*).

American Coot *Fulica americana* Common and widespread.

Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis* C.130 at Fruitgrower's Reservoir were the first. Several obvious rusty coloured birds of the mid-continental ssp *tabida*, for instance those in the Steamboat Springs area.

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus* One at Fruitgrower's Reservoir.

American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana* C.30 in the Arkansas Valley and one at Blue Mesa.

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus* Common and widespread.

Snowy Plover *Charadrius nivosus* 22 at Lake Cheraw was a high count.

Mountain Plover ◊ *Charadrius montanus* (NT) A pair in roadside agricultural fields near Richfield and another bird on the Comanche NG.

Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata* One near Steamboat and two at CSU, Fort Collins.

Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa* One at Walden Reservoir.

Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus* Two on the Comanche NG and four on breeding territory near Mack close to the Utah border.

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca* One flying south over Road M on the Comanche NG was an odd record and was followed by three more singles.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* Two at Lake Cheraw.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* One at Lake Cheraw.

Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii* One at Neenoshe and 11 at Lake Cheraw.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* One at Lake Cheraw - an uncommon migrant in Colorado (ssp not determined).

Bonaparte's Gull ◊ *Larus philadelphia* Around 70 at Lake Meredith was the maximum estimate.

Franklin's Gull ◊ *Larus pipixcan* Around 70 at Neegronda was the maximum estimate.

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* A good scatter of records.

California Gull ◊ *Larus californicus* Around 10 at Walden Reservoir.

Iceland Gull *Larus glaucooides* One second calendar year Kumlien's Gull was at Timnath (ssp. *kumlieni*).

American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus* One at Neegronda and c.10 in the Fort Collins area.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* Two second calendar year birds were at Timnath.

Rock Dove *Columba livia* A scatter of obviously feral birds throughout.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Common throughout.

Mourning Dove (American Mourning Dove) *Zenaida macroura* Common and widespread (likely ssp *carolinensis* on the plains and ssp *marginella* in the west).

Western Screech Owl ◊ *Megascops kennicottii* One in its nest hole at Cottonwood Canyon.

Great Horned Owl *Bubo virginianus* Singles at Red Rocks, Kitzmiller Ranch and Lamar Community College.

Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia* Nine in Kansas and five on the Comanche NG (ssp *hypugaea*).

Boreal Owl (Tengmalm's O) *Aegolius funereus* (H) Two heard only on the Grand Mesa.

White-throated Swift ◊ *Aeronautes saxatilis* Noted at five sites with a max. of 20 at Red Rocks.

Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon* One at Silverthorne.

Lewis's Woodpecker ◊ *Melanerpes lewis* Two near Rocky Ford.

Williamson's Sapsucker ◊ *Sphyrapicus thyroideus* Two pairs at Genesee Mountain Park followed by another male in Steamboat Springs.

Red-naped Sapsucker ◊ *Sphyrapicus nuchalis* Two near Salida and another at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.

Ladder-backed Woodpecker *Picoides scalaris* After a long absence on this tour we saw three at Cottonwood Canyon and another in the Higbee Valley.

Downy Woodpecker *Picoides pubescens* A good scatter of records this year.

Hairy Woodpecker *Picoides villosus* A good showing this year (ssp *septentrionalis*).

American Three-toed Woodpecker ◊ *Picoides dorsalis* Nice views of a pair in the forests south of Evergreen and a female at Monarch Pass.

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus* A good scatter of Red-shafted Flickers (ssp *cafer*) plus one Yellow-shafted Flicker (= nominate form) at Bonny SWA.

Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe* Six at Cottonwood Canyon and four in the Higbee Valley.

Say's Phoebe *Sayornis saya* A total of 30 on the tour this year after only two last time!

Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus* Three, Higbee Valley plus another three later on the tour.

Grey Jay *Perisoreus canadensis* A good showing this year with six birds seen (ssp *capitalis*).

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata* A total of 20 on the tour this year (ssp *cyanoptera*).

Steller's Jay *Cyanocitta stelleri* Small numbers throughout the mountains (ssp *macrolopha*).

Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay ◊ *Aphelocoma woodhouseii* A very good showing, the first being six at Red Rocks.

Pinyon Jay ◊ *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus* (VU) A flock of around 70 near Salida.

Black-billed Magpie (American M) *Pica hudsonia* Widespread and common.

Clark's Nutcracker ◊ *Nucifraga columbiana* One at Monarch Pass and 3 or 4 at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos* Widespread and common.



Mountain Chickadee, The Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP

- Northern Raven (Common R) *Corvus corax*** Widespread in small numbers (ssp *sinuatus*).
- Chihuahuan Raven** ◇ *Corvus cryptoleucus* At least four on the Comanche NG.
- Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum*** Four at Wray, five at Cottonwood Canyon and two at Salida.
- Black-capped Chickadee** ◇ *Poecile atricapillus* A good scatter of records (ssp *garrina*).
- Mountain Chickadee** ◇ *Poecile gambeli* Very common in the mountains.
- Juniper Titmouse** ◇ *Baeolophus ridgwayi* Noted at Salida, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and Colorado NM.
- Horned Lark (Shore Lark) *Eremophila alpestris*** Common, especially on the plains where we estimated around 7000 in the snow on roadsides around the Pawnee NG (ssp *enthymia*).
- Bank Swallow *Riparia riparia*** Two early migrants at Brush Hollow.
- Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*** Around 30 between Pueblo West and Salida and another two near Grand Junction.
- Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*** Four scattered sightings of nine individuals (ssp *erythrogaster*).
- American Cliff Swallow *Petrochelidon phyrronota*** One at Brush Hollow.
- American Bushtit *Psaltriparus minimus*** 10 Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and 3 at Colorado NM (ssp *plumbeus*).
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Regulus calendula***: One at Lamar and three at Higbee Valley.
- Golden-crowned Kinglet *Regulus satrapa*** One at Higbee Valley.
- Rock Wren** ◇ *Salpinctes obsoletus* Five Cottonwood Canyon, singles Higbee Valley, Cañon City and near Mack plus two at Colorado NM.
- Canyon Wren** ◇ *Catherpes mexicanus* Splendid views of one at Colorado NM (ssp *conspersus*).
- Marsh Wren *Cistothorus palustris*** One at Fruitgrowers Reservoir (ssp *plesius*).
- Bewick's Wren** ◇ *Thryomanes bewickii* One at Cottonwood Canyon.
- Pygmy Nuthatch** ◇ *Sitta pygmaea* Very common in the Ponderosa Pine forests (ssp *melanotis*).
- Red-breasted Nuthatch** ◇ *Sitta canadensis* One at Genesee Mountain Park followed by around 15 at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.
- White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*** Common in the foothill forests - a split in waiting, 'Rocky Mountains' White-breasted Nuthatch (ssp *nelsoni*)?
- Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos* (NL)** One for some near Wray.
- Sage Thrasher** ◇ *Oreoscoptes montanus* Three at Blue Mesa.
- Curve-billed Thrasher** ◇ *Toxostoma rufum* One Lake Cheraw and another Pueblo West (ssp *celsum*).
- Common Starling (European S) *Sturnus vulgaris*** Widespread and common.
- Eastern Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia sialis* Only one, near Swink.
- Western Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia mexicana* Common in the Ponderosa Pine forests.
- Mountain Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia currucoides* Over 190 on the tour was a high total.
- Townsend's Solitaire** ◇ *Myadestes townsendi* One in the forests south of Evergreen was followed by another eleven birds – a good showing.
- Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus*** An early migrant at Salida.
- American Robin *Turdus migratorius*** Widespread and common.

American Dipper *Cinclus mexicanus* The first of a total of five was at Silverthorne (ssp *unicolor*).

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* Widespread and locally common.

Buff-bellied Pipit (American P) *Anthus rubescens* (NL) One for some at Lake Cheraw.

Pine Siskin ◇ *Carduelis pinus* Back to normal this year with a maximum of 70 near Rocky Ford.

American Goldfinch *Carduelis tristis* Maximum of 15 near Rocky Ford (ssp *pallida*).

Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch ◇ *Leucosticte tephrocotis* Around 25 at Silverthorne included one of the grey-cheeked, coastal breeding form 'Hepburn's' (ssp *littoralis*).

Black Rosy-Finch ◇ *Leucosticte atrata* Two at Silverthorne were very welcome!

Brown-capped Rosy-Finch ◇ *Leucosticte australis* Around 150 at Silverthorne and three at Crested Butte Ski Resort.

Cassin's Finch ◇ *Carpodacus cassinii* (NT) Maximum total of 15 at Silverthorne.

House Finch *Carpodacus mexicanus* Common and widespread (ssp *frontalis*).

Pine Grosbeak ◇ *Pinicola enucleator* Three (two males) at Silverthorne, three at Monarch Pass, c.15 at Steamboat Springs and two at Gould (ssp *montana*).

Common Redpoll *Acanthis flammea* Four at Silverthorne were new for BQ in CO (ssp. *rostrata*).

Red Crossbill (Common C) *Loxia curvirostra* A pair at Genesee Mountain Park.

Evening Grosbeak ◇ *Coccothraustes vespertinus* At least 10 in Steamboat Springs (ssp *brooksi*).

Myrtle Warbler *Dendroica coronata* An early migrant at Salida.

Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater* A strong northward passage this year with around 500 seen.

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus* Widespread and very common (ssp *fortis*).

Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula* Widespread and locally common (ssp *versicolor*).

Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus* Around 20 en route to Bonny were followed by a good scatter of sightings (either ssp *monsoni* or *prosopidicola*).

Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta* Widespread and very common (ssp *neglecta*).

Yellow-headed Blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* Two at Pueblo West were the first, followed by another 22 individuals.

Slaty Fox Sparrow ◇ *Passerella schistacea* One at Red Rocks Trading Post.

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia* Small numbers seen throughout (ssp *judithi*).

Harris's Sparrow ◇ *Zonotrichia querula* One of these skulkers was at Lamar Community College.

White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys* A total of c.40 with a maximum of 20 at Pueblo West (ssp *gambelii*).

Slate-coloured Junco ◇ *Junco [hyemalis] hyemalis* A scatter of ones and twos.

Cassiar Junco ◇ *Junco [hyemalis] cismontanus* Two or three at Red Rocks Trading Post.

Oregon Junco ◇ *Junco [hyemalis] oregonus* A scatter of sightings with a max. of c.10 at Higbee Valley.

Pink-sided Junco ◇ *Junco [hyemalis] mearnsi* Scattered records with a max. of 30 at Blue Mesa.

Grey-headed Junco ◇ *Junco [hyemalis] caniceps* Scattered records with a max. of 50 at Blue Mesa.

White-winged Junco ◇ *Junco [hyemalis] aikenii* Singles at Red Rocks and Salida.

Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis* Two at Cattails Crossing, Pueblo West (ssp *nevadensis*).

American Tree Sparrow *Spizella arborea* One lingering winter visitor at Gould.

Chipping Sparrow *Spizella passerina* Six at Higbee Valley and one near Mack (ssp *arizonae*).

Vesper Sparrow ◇ *Poocetes gramineus* Three on the Cimarron NG and eight on the Comanche NG with a scatter thereafter (ssp *confinis*).

Lark Sparrow *Chondestes grammacus* (H) Heard singing at Lamar Community College.

Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata* Noted at Colorado NM, Mack and Cameo (ssp *deserticola*).

Sage Sparrow ◇ *Amphispiza nevadensis* Two near the Utah border northwest of Mack.

Rufous-crowned Sparrow ◇ *Aimophila ruficeps* Two near Cañon City (ssp *eremoeca*).

Spotted Towhee ◇ *Pipilo maculatus* Two at Red Rocks were the first of around 20 (ssp *arcticus*).

Canyon Towhee ◇ *Pipilo fuscus* Noted at Cottonwood Canyon, Cañon City and Colorado NM (ssp *mesatus*).

McCown's Longspur ◇ *Calcarius mccownii* Around 25 on the snowy roadsides east of Ault.

Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis* One at Lamar Community College.

BIRD OF THE TRIP (as voted for by the group):

1. Greater Prairie Chicken
2. Dusky Grouse
3. Lewis's Woodpecker
4. White-tailed Ptarmigan
5. Sharp-tailed Grouse
6. Williamson's Sapsucker
7. Black Rosy Finch
8. Snowy Plover
9. Clark's Nutcracker
10. Mountain Plover



White-tailed Jackrabbit, near Coalmont, North Park

MAMMALS

- Black-tailed Jackrabbit** *Lepus californicus* A scatter of records.
- White-tailed Jackrabbit** *Lepus townsendii* One by a snowy roadside near Coalmont.
- Desert Cottontail** *Sylvilagus audubonii* A couple of sightings.
- Eastern Cottontail** *Sylvilagus floridanus* Two at Lamar.
- Mountain Cottontail (Nuttall's C)** *Sylvilagus nuttallii* Around five south of Evergreen were the first.
- Abert's Squirrel (Tassel-eared S)** *Sciurus aberti* Two at Genesee Mountain Park.
- Eastern Fox Squirrel** *Sciurus niger* Two at Red Rocks were the first of several.
- Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilus lateralis* One at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and another in Steamboat Springs.
- Variegated Ground Squirrel (Rock GS)** *Spermophilus variegatus* Three at Cottonwood Canyon, three at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and one at Cameo.
- Wyoming Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilus elegans* Five near Coalmont.
- Gunnison's Prairie Dog** *Cynomys gunnisoni* Around 15 between Gunnison and Crested Butte.
- White-tailed Prairie Dog** *Cynomys leucurus* Around 15 northwest of Mack.
- Black-tailed Prairie Dog** *Cynomys ludovicianus* Very common on the plains.
- Least Chipmunk** *Tamias minimus* Noted at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.
- Colorado Chipmunk** *Tamias quadrivittatus* Around 10 at Red Rocks were the first.
- American Red Squirrel** *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus* One at Silverthorne and it was also heard south of Evergreen and at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.
- Ord's Kangaroo Rat** *Dipodomys ordii* Five seen in the vehicle headlights on the Cimarron NG.
- North American Beaver** *Castor canadensis* Two near Evergreen.
- Hispid Cotton Rat** *Sigmodon hispidus* Two at a bird feeder in Pueblo West.
- Northern River Otter** *Lutra canadensis* One in Central Colorado.
- Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes* One at Silverthorne was the first of four sightings.
- Coyote** *Canis latrans* One near Silverthorne was the first of several including four at Waunita Springs.
- Northern Raccoon** *Procyon lotor* One in Silverthorne and another for Norbert only in Wray.
- Elk** *Cervus canadensis* The first were three near Evergreen.
- Moose (Elk)** *Alces alces* One next to the Blue River in Silverthorne was a surprise.
- Mule Deer** *Odocoileus hemionus* A good scatter of sightings.
- White-tailed Deer** *Odocoileus virginianus* A maximum of 50 near the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.
- Pronghorn (P Antelope)** *Antilocapra americana* A maximum of 20 on the Pawnee NG.
- Bighorn Sheep** *Ovis canadensis* Five by the I70 at Georgetown and c.60 at Cottonwood Canyon.