



Lekking Sharp-tailed Grouse (Simon Colenutt)

COLORADO

29 MARCH – 11 APRIL 2022

LEADER CRAIG ROBSON

Due to the constraints of the Covid-19 Pandemic, our 2022 'grousequest' was the first for three years, but was still characterized by being our ninth clean-sweep in a row of the 'magnificent seven': White-tailed Ptarmigan, Greater and Lesser Prairie Chickens, and Dusky, Sharp-tailed, Gunnison and Greater Sage Grouse. With some dedicated teamwork, and despite locally treacherous conditions with some late snowfall and unusually high winds, our persistence paid-off with several specialities that were harder than 'normal' to find this year.

Although the grouse and prairie chickens made the headlines in Colorado, there were many other avian highlights, including: Ross's Goose, Wood Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye, Wild Turkey, Gambell's Quail, White-throated Swift, White-winged Dove, Sandhill Crane, Western and Clark's Grebes, Mountain Plover, Baird's

Sandpiper, Long-billed Curlew, California Gull, Rough-legged Buzzard, Burrowing Owl, Lewis's and American Three-toed Woodpeckers, Williamson's Sapsucker, Prairie Falcon, Woodhouse's Scrub and Pinyon Jays, Clark's Nutcracker, Juniper Titmouse, Mountain Chickadee, American Bushtit, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Rock, Canyon, and Bewick's Wrens, Pygmy Nuthatch, Sage and Curve-billed Thrashers, Mountain and Western Bluebirds, Townsend's Solitaire, American Dipper, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, Grey-crowned (including Hepburn's), Black and Brown-capped Rosy Finches, Cassin's Finch, Thick-billed (or McCown's), Lapland and Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Black-throated, Harris's, Sagebrush and Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Canyon and Spotted Towhees, and Audubon's Warbler. Colorado is great for mammals too, and this year we found: Coyote, American Badger, Pronghorn, Elk (or Moose), Wapiti (or American Elk), Bighorn Sheep, Golden-mantled and Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels, three species of prairie dog, and Yellow-bellied Marmot.

As usual, after meeting-up at Denver International Airport, we headed westwards into the Rocky Mountains to the pretty former mining town of Georgetown, for a single night's stay. Due to a number of issues, many of which were a result of the Pandemic, this year's itinerary was in an unusual order, but thankfully still worked very well for us. Our first morning saw us venturing out, mini-expedition style, onto the snowy slopes of Loveland Pass. The weather was perfect, but an exhaustive search for White-tailed Ptarmigan unfortunately turned up nothing and, apart from us all being worn out due to the high elevation, our schedule called for us to proceed to Gunnison! We headed south, via lunch at a small family restaurant in Leadville, arriving in the Salida area in the early afternoon. A range of juxtaposed sites near town brought some cracking close-range views of Barrow's and Common Goldeneyes on a small lake, a confiding pair of American Dippers by the bridge where they breed, a smart Clarke's Nutcracker (at exactly the same location where we had seen it three years earlier!), and our first Mountain Bluebirds. Crossing the lofty Monarch Pass to the west, we continued to our hotel in Gunnison.

A very early start ensued, as we were escorted to the trailer-hide overlooking the Gunnison Grouse lekking area. This endangered species was not described until 2000, and was not even recognized as a subspecies prior to that! Gunnison is renowned as one of the coldest places in the USA, and it was predictably quite chilly as we sat on the wooden benches in the trailer, waiting for dawn. As daylight crept into the valley bottom, stretching out from our hide, we could make-out distinctive grouse-shapes with spiky tails. Having moved their lek-site to a distant ridge in 2014, beyond the valley meadows, it was a great surprise to see them back down in the valley. Not only that, but they were considerably closer than I had seen them on my own two previous visits, and there were more of them too!! We counted perhaps 30-40 individuals at the active lek as we took turns at the scopes, before they all got spooked (perhaps by Coyotes), and flew to some nearby slopes. As they flew, a count revealed at least 80 individuals (many of which were females) - an unbelievable total (being at least 64 more than we saw in 2019). Even at this distance, we were able to watch their full display, which included the males strutting around with their tail feathers fanned and massive neck-sacs inflated, as they nod their heads forward, shaking their distinctive ponytail-plumes in the process. Few other birds were noted, apart from Golden Eagle and our first Rough-legged Buzzard.

After breakfast back at our hotel, we checked out and drove up to Crested Butte in search of rosy finches. There had been a recent report of a good-sized flock just before town and, upon arrival at the spot, we soon located a flock of around 150 birds foraging on a sheltered snow-free bank. The twittering throng of Brown-capped Rosefinches was joined by a single much-wanted Black Rosy Finch, as well as at least 15 typical Grey-crowned and three "Hepburn's" Grey-crowned. With another success under-the-belt, we drove on westwards to Montrose and, after picking up one of our many Subway lunches, we drove up to the awe-inspiring Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. Fortunately, there was nothing like the snow-storm that we had encountered in 2019, and a lot less snow on the ground. Unfortunately however, we still came up short in our search for Dusky Grouse, our main target at this site. After adding a few nice birds to our growing tour tally, including Woodhouse's Scrub and Steller's Jays, Mountain Chickadee, Townsend's Solitaire, Western Bluebird, Cassin's Finch and Spotted Towhee, we decided to leave it until early the next morning and headed for our hotel in Montrose.



Brown-capped and Grey-crowned Rosy Finches (Craig Robson)



Black Rosy Finch (Craig Robson)

Back at the canyon the following morning, our search continued for Dusky Grouse, eventually leading us to a grove of pine trees ,where we connected with our quarry - an excellent male flapping indignantly on some lofty bows!! A few other new birds included a 'Rocky Mountains' Downy Woodpecker.



Dusky Grouse (Craig Robson)

Leaving the Montrose area, our next port of call was Fruitgrowers Reservoir. We always find some good birds here, but it was a shame to see that the marshy wetlands had dried-up. A good selection of wintering and passage waterfowl included Canvasback, large numbers of Ring-necked Ducks, Bufflehead, both Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, and there was also a pair of Sandhill Cranes. Several Western Meadowlarks were heard and seen. The nearby Lewis's Woodpecker trees were empty, so we decided to try elsewhere and continued on to Grand Junction. On the outskirts of town, after a field-lunch, we tried another site for Lewis's Woodpecker, and this time we were successful, with nice views of one in its favoured huge old tree.

The outstandingly scenic Colorado National Monument near Grand Junction, which is comprised of the same rugged terrain of the geological formation that includes adjacent Utah's Arches and Bryce Canyon NP's, has spectacular red sandstone rock formations, studded with attractive Pinyon-Juniper Woodland. We started with a walk around the incredible canyon edge at the visitor centre. It was very quiet bird-wise, but we eventually connected with the perky Juniper Titmouse, as well as a pair of American Bushtits. We drove to another park entrance and walked into the Devil's Kitchen, a scenic valley. Black-throated Sparrow showed very well and, in the nearby sub-divisions, on our way to the hotel in Grand Junction, we had great looks at Gambell's Quails.



Colorado National Monument (Craig Robson)

Next morning, we travelled north-west of Grand Junction, beyond Mack, and made a foray into the open high plains towards the Utah border. We first searched a large well-vegetated area for Sagebrush Sparrows. We found at least half a dozen of these attractive sparrows, along with a couple of smart Sage Thrashers, and quite a few Vesper Sparrows. Two surprises were a Short-eared Owl, and a Lapland Longspur that Paul found. We drove just inside Utah, for everyone's state list! Scanning from a bluff, we spotted a couple of Golden Eagles, Northern Harrier, and heard more Sagebrush Sparrows singing. Yet more Sagebrush Sparrows and Sage Thrashers popped-up on our way back to Grand Junction.



Black-throated Sparrow and Spotted Towhee (Simon Colenutt)

Results of local research saw us detour to Colorado State Park, on the outskirts of town, where we soon bumped-into the long-staying Harris's Sparrow, a tricky species that was new for many of us. A brief look at the wetlands in the park also produced Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal, Cooper's Hawk, American Avocet and Belted Kingfisher. We headed off to our next destination to the north-east, the town of Craig. Little was added during our few brief stops en route, with Rock Wren and Loggerhead Shrike being noteworthy.



Harris's Sparrow (Craig Robson)

We were very excited about the following morning, as we had arranged a visit to a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek on a private ranch. Having met the landowner, Ken Bekkedahl, to discuss logistics on the previous evening, we were able to arrive in the dark and position our van in the specified position, using it as our own personal hide. The first glimmers of daybreak revealed the first male grouse making their way to the lek. Soon we were treated to the full sound repertoire from these amazing birds as they inflated their neck-sacs and stomped rapidly back-and-forth with their lek-partners, erecting their specially modified tail feathers at the same time. All manner of cooing, clucking, barking, and popping filled the still and completely peaceful mountain air - and what a great pleasure it was to be all by ourselves. We counted at least 16 birds at the lek (perhaps three females) and, towards the end of our stay, a female Great Sage Grouse even trundled up to see the show! After the performance, Ken invited us in for coffee and a bite. From his house we were able to scope perhaps 15 more Greater Sage Grouse - which also have a lek nearby - including several huge displaying males. It was a really special experience, and we headed back to our hotel well-satisfied. Passing some good-looking habitat on the way, we pulled in for a quick sweep, and were rewarded with seven Pinyon Jays (our only ones of the tour) and our first Bewick's Wren. After picking up our luggage at the hotel, we drove onwards towards Walden on the high-plains of North Park (Colorado Basin).

During a relatively brief birding stop at Steamboat Springs Ski Area, we were rewarded with Steller's Jay, Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Evening Grosbeak and American Goldfinch. On the outskirts of Walden itself, we had a look around Walden Reservoir. There was a strong wind and it was cold too, but there were some ice-free stretches of water already. Good numbers of waterfowl were present, as well as California Gulls, a lonely American White Pelican, and Bald Eagle.

Pre-dawn the following morning, we were in position at the Coalmont Greater Sage Grouse lek, but things were looking decidedly iffy, with a gale-force wind blowing across the site. Indeed, although a good number of males had turned up, when they extended their wings ready for a full display, they were literally getting

blown over. Needless to say, this morning's visit was a bit of a letdown and we would have to return the following morning. We headed back to town for a hearty breakfast and then drove up to the Moose Visitor Centre. There was a great deal of fresh snow, and more coming down. At the feeders we had brief views of a pair of Pine Grosbeaks, and the usual birds also included particularly large numbers of Steller's Jay's and Red-winged Blackbirds. Our plans for exploring further in the mountain forests were completely scuppered by the severe, worsening and treacherous weather conditions, and we retreated to Walden. Another jaunt to the feeders after lunch saw no easing-up in the weather and, at Walden Reservoir, we could only add more pelicans, Golden Eagle, and a couple of shivering American Avocets. A nice Moose was seen on the way back from the feeders.

Our return to the Coalmont lek the next morning was much more rewarding. The wind had dropped, and the birds were able to lek normally. This lek has to be one of the most stable, reliable and atmospheric grouse leks out there. The birds were in full-swing soon after we arrived, scattered on short grass by a dirt road, with a back-drop of snow-streaked mountains; some only a few metres from us. We could easily hear the booming sounds made by the huge air sacs in their necks and the flapping of the wings of the males when they had an occasional altercation. The total of 49 birds (25 females and 24 Males) was very reasonable considering the weather, so we headed back for breakfast well satisfied. The spectacle of a Greater Sage Grouse lek is a must-see experience for world birders, just as impressive as a bird-of-paradise lek.



A pumped-up lekking male Great Sage Grouse (Craig Robson)

We headed south for Silverthorne, with plans for an afternoon return to the Loveland Pass, and further searches for the much-wanted White-tailed Ptarmigan. We had already heard about the pass being closed due to the high winds, but we still held-out hope that it would reopen. We headed towards the pass after lunch but it was unfortunately still closed. We checked a few other sites in the area, but came up with few highlights apart from Barrow's Goldeneye and Brown Creeper. Heading back towards our hotel in Silverthorne, we had one last look to see if the pass had reopened, and miraculously it had!! We shot up

there, arriving after 6pm. At the pass, the wind was still howling and temperatures were well below '0', plus severe wind-chill. We started with a brief sortie to the east, with conditions difficult to bear. Craig then braved the head-on freezing wind and checked to the west - success!! Fortunately a male was right there, in a spot familiar from previous visits. All tour participants were summoned, and guided to the spot, with the bird typically tame and without a care. 15 minutes was enough for even the bravest of us, with faces and hands lashed by the bitter cold. We headed down to our hotel.



White-tailed Ptarmigan (Craig Robson)

The following day began with a welcome sit-down breakfast in Silverthorne, before we drove to the Guanella Pass Road to try and catch-up with some forest species. Walking on snow-banks at times, we were able to find Hairy Woodpecker, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Townsend's Solitaire, another Pine Grosbeak, and good numbers of Red Crossbills, but there was not a sniff of American Three-toed Woodpecker. Extending our search much lower down the road to Georgetown, and almost at the point of giving up, we finally located a male ATTW, which was territorial and showed nicely.

Our next port-of-call was Genesee Park to the east, where we hoped for Williamson's Sapsucker. However, we were thwarted again, with no sign of this attractive woodpecker in its usual haunts. Large numbers of Pygmy Nuthatch were all we could come up with. We decided to try another site and detoured south to Conifer. A fairly short walk brought us to the location, and a lovely male Williamson's Sapsucker soon called and flew in for great views. Relief! We headed north to Fort Collins and an overnight stay.

The following morning, a fairly short drive took us to the Pawnee National Grassland in north-east Colorado. Our first stop was a large open dry area where Mountain Plovers had recently been seen, and we soon located and scoped four rather distant birds. Moving to another spot where the species breeds, we had much closer views of two. Another Sage Thrasher was seen by the roadside, as we headed off in search of Thick-billed (or McCown's) and Chestnut-collared Longspurs. After a couple of hours, we were coming up with nothing, and it seemed like these hardy birds were not back on their breeding grounds. We shifted to a

distant location via the network of rough graded roads. Then disaster, a low tyre pressure warning appeared on the van's instrument pane! Quickly deciding to abort, we located the nearest gas station and headed there asap. Receiving a tip-off about a nearby tyre shop, we added air and rushed the seven miles further south before the tyre went flat. It was soon repaired and, finding ourselves back where we had left-off, we fairly soon located a number of smart male Chestnut-collared Longspurs. Before we could find Thick-billed however, our time was up, and we had to embark on the fairly long drive to Wray, near the Kansas border. This small pioneer town has embraced its status as an ecotourism destination and, before dinner, we attended a very interesting and entertaining orientation meeting at the delightful Wray Museum, in readiness for our appointment with Greater Prairie Chickens the next day.



Williamson's Sapsucker (Craig Robson)

Well before dawn, we boarded Wray's big yellow school bus, which took us to the prairie chicken hide (a converted trailer), and once everyone was installed, the window shutters were raised and we were open to the elements. Before long, in the half-light, we could make out the shapes of prairie chickens as the males arrived from the surrounding sagebrush and took up their positions in the arena of their lekking ground. Their eerie booming calls filled the air and as dawn broke, details of their intricately-patterned plumage were gradually revealed. The dancing starts with some foot stomping, followed by the inflation of their neck-sacs (from which the booming call emanates) as they lean forward. At the same time their elongated neck feathers ('rabbit ears') are raised, completing the transformation from their usually innocuous appearance into rather fearsome looking creatures. The dominant males occupy the central pole positions of the lekking ground, while the younger and less experienced ones are literally kicked out to periphery. A total of 21 males and 12 females were present, and we were also treated to some great views of Burrowing Owls and a fantastic American Badger. After 90 minutes we were driven back to Wray City Hall for a traditional home-style breakfast, prepared by folk participating in local community promotion and support.

As we loaded-up the van there were a number of noteworthy birds, including "Eastern" Downy Woodpeckers and White-breasted Nuthatches (distinct from their Rocky Mountain counterparts), Blue Jay, Townsend's

Solitaire, Common Grackle and Northern Cardinal. Continuing south from Wray, we paused at Beecher Island, on the Arikaree River. On the way, a large flock of at least 50 Chestnut-collared Longspurs was found associating with Horned Larks in the stubble fields, but there was still no sign of Thick-billed! Years of drought have reduced the water table in Yuma County, and there is no longer an 'island' at Beecher Island, with the river but a small stream. Originally the rivers of the high plains lacked the abundant 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, and the subsequent growth of trees has allowed the westward range extension of some eastern bird species. It was particularly dry this year however, with not much to be seen apart from the many Northern Flickers, more Downy Woodpeckers, another Blue Jay, and a brief Eastern Phoebe. Continuing towards our destination of Oakley in north-western Kansas, we encountered another, even larger flock of longspurs. This time, after carefully scanning through the roughly 400 Chestnut-collared's, we eventually found at least four Thick-billed (or McCown's) and everyone was able to get good scope views. Much rarer locally, but of less interest to us Europeans, was another Lapland Longspur.

After lunch at a well-known Mexican Restaurant in Burlington, we decided to check out the local water treatment facility. A fortunate choice, as we found a smart Ross's Goose there, swimming with the Shovelers, and Great-tailed Grackles were also easily seen at close range. There were a couple more sites en route, with one being a large reservoir that was now completely dried-up, and the other a park with but a range of commoner species. Rough-legged Buzzard and Swainson's Hawk were seen on the way into Oakley, where we arrived in good time, and checked-in to our comfortable hotel.

The next morning brought another very early start as we were escorted by our guide Jim to a distant and remote grassland location, where we hoped to get close-ups of the now rare and declining Lesser Prairie Chicken. We had a converted cattle trailer 'hide' all to ourselves, where we sat patiently once we had been dropped off. As dawn approached, the wind was rattling through the trailer, but it certainly did not deter the birds, with 12 males and 3 females putting on an excellent show, along with three male Great Prairie Chickens - this is an area where the species' ranges overlap somewhat. And so we completed the clean-sweep of 'grouse', with our seventh species.

After a tasty breakfast at the hotel, we drove back west into Colorado, and began a tour of some of the reservoirs, starting at Upper Queens/Neeskah Reservoir. Low water levels meant exposed shoreline mud, and this worked in our favour, with several Baird's Sandpipers, as well as the more expected Least, and both species of yellowlegs. Out on the open water were a couple of Western Grebes, while cover by the car park held Chipping Sparrow and Audubon's Warbler. During our lunch-break in Lamar, Simon spotted White-winged Dove for the trip list and, as we continued to more lakes, we spotted our first flock of Wild Turkeys. Cheraw Lake had Great Scaup, Slavonian, Black-necked and Western Grebes, while Holbrook Reservoir, an old favourite, brought Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teals, Long-billed Curlew, two Dunlin, a flock of 11 Long-billed Dowitchers, three Wilson's Snipe, and Buff-bellied Pipit. Finishing off around Lake Meredith, we found both Yellow-headed and Brewer's Blackbirds at the feedlot sewage ponds. Scanning the open lake, we eventually succeeded in spotting our first two Clark's Grebes, as well as more Black-necked's and Western's, Bonaparte's, American Herring, and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and good concentrations of both Double-crested Cormorant and American White Pelican. We retired to our hotel in La Junta.

We found a great place for an early breakfast not far from the hotel, before continuing south-west to scenic Higbee Valley, arriving for our final morning's birding at dawn. With a range of natural and semi-natural dry woodland and brush habitats, and boulder-strewn rocky ridges, this site holds a great range of southern and south-western species. The mix is never quite the same, and this year, we were treated to two unexpected male Wood Ducks, 30 Wild Turkeys, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, a pair of Eastern Phoebes, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Rock, Canyon and Bewick's Wrens, Curve-billed Thrasher, Canyon Towhee, and Chipping and Rufous-crowned Sparrows - and there were great views of everything.

A steady drive back to Denver International Airport concluded another exciting road-trip through the Rocky Mountains, high plains, and wide-open prairies of the American West.



Greater and Lesser Prairie Chickens (Craig Robson)



View from Loveland Pass and The Devil's Kitchen at Colorado NM (Craig Robson)

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

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

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

BIRDS

Total of bird species recorded: 160.

Canada Goose (Greater C G) *Branta Canadensis* Breeding *moffitti* was common and widely recorded.

Ross's Goose *Anser rossii* One at Burlington Wastewater Treatment Plant.

Wood Duck *Aix sponsa* Two males were unexpectedly flushed from a water feature in the Higbee Valley.

Cinnamon Teal *Anas cyanoptera* Small numbers of this smart duck on three dates (*septentriolalium*)

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors* Only seen on two dates, with a total of six.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

American Wigeon *Anas americana*

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis*

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria* Ten at Fruitgrowers Reservoir and 20 at Walden Reservoir.

Redhead *Aythya americana* Reasonable numbers across four dates, with 50+ at Walden Reservoir.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris* Over 250 at Fruitgrowers Reservoir was unusual apparently.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* A male at Cheraw Lake.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola* Always a joy, and well distributed.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Scattered sightings but only 14 or so in total (*americana*).

Barrow's Goldeneye *Bucephala islandica* Great views of 5 at Sands Lake SWA, & 2 at Angler Mtn. Ranch Ponds.

Common Merganser (Goosander) *Mergus merganser*

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* c.20 at Fruitgrowers Reservoir.

Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*

Gambel's Quail *Callipepla gambelii* c.20 in the subdivisions bordering Colorado NM.

Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo* Ten in the Lamar-La Junta area, and 30 or so in the Higbee Valley (*intermedia*).

Sage Grouse (Greater S G) *Centrocercus urophasianus* c.16 near Craig, and 49 at the Coalmont lek.

Gunnison Grouse (G Sage G) *Centrocercus minimus* 80+ at Waunita Springs lek, with better views than recently.

Dusky Grouse *Dendragapus obscurus* A nice male at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.

Sharp-tailed Grouse *Tympanuchus phasianellus* 16 at a lek near Craig (*jamesi*). Voted bird (experience) of the trip!

Greater Prairie Chicken *T. cupido* 33 at the lek near Wray, and 3 males lekking with the next species.

Lesser Prairie Chicken *Tympanuchus pallidicinctus* 15 at a superb lek near Oakley, Kansas.

White-tailed Ptarmigan *Lagopus leucura* A brilliant male was eventually located at Loveland Pass (*altipetens*).

Common Pheasant (Ring-necked P) *Phasianus colchicus*

White-throated Swift *Aeronautes saxatalis* 30 over the visitor centre at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

Rock Dove (introduced) (R Pigeon) *Columba livia*

Eurasian Collared Dove (introduced) *Streptopelia decaocto*

Mourning Dove (American M D) *Zenaida macroura* Widespread (*carolinensis* in east, *marginella* in west).

White-winged Dove *Zenaida asiatica* At least one seen well in flight at Lamar.

Common Gallinule (American Moorhen) *Gallinula galeata* (NL) Paul saw one at Fruitgrowers Reservoir.

American Coot *Fulica americana*

Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis* A pair at Fruitgrowers Reservoir, and then small numbers seen en route (*tabida*).

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps* Just one at Fruitgrowers Reservoir.

Horned Grebe (Slavonian G) *Podiceps auritus* One in breeding plumage at Cheraw Lake (*cornutus*).

Black-necked Grebe (Eared G) *Podiceps nigricollis* Around 30 on the reservoirs near La Junta.

Western Grebe *Aechmophorus occidentalis* A few identified at Fruitgrowers Res., and the reservoirs near La Junta.

Clark's Grebe *Aechmophorus clarkia* Two were eventually spotted at Lake Meredith, north-west of La Junta.

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus* Quite a few at Cheraw Lake and Holbrook Reservoir.

American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana* Small numbers at several sites.



Western Grebe and Rough-legged Buzzard (Simon Colenutt)

Killdeer *Charadrius vociferous*

Mountain Plover *Charadrius montanus* 6 seen well on their breeding grounds in the Pawnee National Grassland.

Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus* 1 scoped Holbrook Res.; another seen in flight by Simon at L. Meredith.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* Two at Holbrook Reservoir.

Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii* At least three at Upper Queens/Neeskah Reservoir, with one fairly close.

Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla* Two at Upper Queens/Neeskah Reservoir, and another at Holbrook Res.

Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* A flock of 11 at Holbrook Reservoir.

Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata* Three at Holbrook Reservoir. Surprisingly scarce.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* Quite a few of this and the next species on reservoirs in the Lamar/La Junta area.

Greater Yellowlegs *Tringa melanoleuca* Numbers somewhat higher than Lesser.



Mountain Plover (Simon Colenutt)

Bonaparte's Gull *Chroicocephalus philadelphia* 25 at Lake Meredith.

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*

California Gull *Larus californicus* Around 30 at Walden/Walden Reservoir.

American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus* A single first year bird at Lake Meredith.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* An adult at Lake Meredith

Double-crested Cormorant *Nannopterum auritum* Noted on three dates, with a maximum of 120 at Lake Meredith.

Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias*

American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos* Good numbers towards end of tour, with 70+ Lake Meredith.

Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* Small numbers on four days.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* Widespread, with at least 16 logged (*canadensis*).

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus* More than usual, with singles noted on three dates.

Cooper's Hawk *Accipiter cooperii* Recorded on four days.

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonius*

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* Widespread, with 22 logged.

Swainson's Hawk *Buteo swainsoni* A total of four were seen en route in the plains, towards the end of the trip.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*

Rough-legged Buzzard (R-I Hawk) *Buteo lagopus* A total of at 9+ recorded across five dates - likely a tour record.

Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia* 4+ at the Great Prairie Chicken lek (*hypugnea*). Mobbing American Badger!

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* One was flushed from sage brush NW of Mack.

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon* One at Colorado River SP, and two at Soldiers Memorial County Park, Kansas.



Steller's Jay and American Bushtit (Simon Colenutt)

Lewis's Woodpecker *Melanerpes lewis* One seen nicely at "The Hacienda", near Grand Junction.

Williamson's Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus thyroideus* A cracking male at Conifer Community Park.

American Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides dorsalis* A single territorial male along the lower Guanella Pass Road.

Ladder-backed Woodpecker *Dryobates scalaris* A male seen well in the Higbee Valley.

Downy Woodpecker *D. pubescens* 1 Black Canyon (*leucurus*); 4 Wray/Beecher Is., 1 Holbrook Res. (*pubescens*).

Hairy Woodpecker (Eastern H W) *Leuconotopicus villosus* Small numbers on three dates (*septentrionalis*).

Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus* Widespread (all red shafted *cafer*).

American Kestrel *Falco sparverius*

Prairie Falcon *Falco mexicanus* Two were noted on the way back to Denver International Airport.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* (NL) Paul saw one at Loveland Pass.

Eastern Phoebe *Sayornis phoebe* One at Beecher Island, and a pair at Higbee Valley.

Say's Phoebe *Sayornis saya*

Loggerhead Shrike *Lanius ludovicianus* Six were noted across four dates.



Clark's Nutcracker (Simon Colenutt)

Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata* Two at both Wray and Beecher Island (*cyanoptera*).

Steller's Jay *Cyanocitta stelleri* Regularly encountered in the rockies (*macrolopha*).

Woodhouse's Scrub Jay *Aphelocoma woodhouseii* A total of five at Black Canyon of the Gunnison & Colorado NM.

Pinyon Jay *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus* A flock of seven in some nice habitat near Craig. Monotypic.

Black-billed Magpie *Pica hudsonia*

Clark's Nutcracker *Nucifraga columbiana* Fantastic views of one going about its business near Salida.

American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*

Northern Raven (Common R) *Corvus corax* Common (*sinuatus*).

Juniper Titmouse *Baeolophus ridgwayi* Three at Colorado NM, and two in junipers near Craig (nominate).

Black-capped Chickadee *Poecile atricapillus* Occasional (*garrina*).

Mountain Chickadee *Poecile gambeli* Widespread and common in the rockies (nominate).

Horned Lark (Shore L) *Eremophila alpestris* Common in suitable habitat (*enthymia*).

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Just three near La Junta (*erythrogaster*).



Mountain Chickadee and Red-breasted Nuthatch (Craig Robson)



Canyon Wren and Curve-billed Thrasher (Craig Robson)

American Bushtit *Psaltriparus minimus* Six seen nicely in Colorado National Monument (*plumbeus*).
Ruby-crowned Kinglet *Corthylio calendula* One popped-up in the Higbee Valley (nominate).
Golden-crowned Kinglet *Regulus satrapa* Just one, along the upper reaches of the Guanella Pass Rd (*amoenus*).
Rock Wren *Salpinctes obsoletus* Eight in Coal Canyon and six at Higbee Valley (nominate).
Canyon Wren *Catherpes mexicanus* One performed admirably at Higbee Valley (*conspersus*).
Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii* Two near Craig and one at Higbee Valley.
White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis* Surprisingly, just one at Wray (nominate).
Pygmy Nuthatch *Sitta pygmaea* Up to 30 noted at Genessee Park and near Conifer (*melanotis*).
Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis* A total of 11 across three dates in the rockies. Monotypic.
Brown Creeper *Certhia americana* One seen and another heard near Silverthorne (*montana*).
Sage Thrasher *Oreoscoptes montanus* Six near Mack, and one at Pawnee National Grassland.
Curve-billed Thrasher *Toxostoma curvirostre* One performed nicely at Higbee Valley (*celsum*).
Common Starling (European S) *Sturnus vulgaris*
Mountain Bluebird *Sialia currucoides* This monotypic beauty was widespread and fairly common.
Western Bluebird *Sialia mexicana* Well distributed, but less common than the last species (*bairdi*).
Townsend's Solitaire *Myadestes townsendi* Easily seen this year, with nine noted across four days (nominate).



Townsend's Solitaire (Simon Colenutt)

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*
American Dipper *Cinclus mexicanus* Two at breeding site near Salida; one seen en route there by Simon (*unicolor*).
House Sparrow (introduced) *Passer domesticus*
Buff-bellied Pipit (American P) *Anthus rubescens* Paul found us one at Holbrook Reservoir.
Evening Grosbeak *Hesperiphona vespertina* At least 15 at Steamboat Springs Ski Area (*brooksii*).
Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator* Pair at Moose Visitor Centre; female along the Guanella Pass Road (*montana*).
Grey-crowned Rosy Finch *Leucosticte tephrocotis* 20+ *tephrocotis* & 3 *littoralis* in Crested Butte rosy finch flock.
Black Rosy Finch *L. atrata* Great close-up male at Crested Butte. This and next species endangered and monotypic.
Brown-capped Rosy Finch *L. australis* The commonest rosy finch: 1 near Salida, 80+ Crested Butte, 1 Moose VC.
Cassin's Finch *Haemorhous cassinii* Occasional sightings in the rockies. Monotypic.

House Finch *Haemorrhous mexicanus* Widespread and frequently encountered (*frontalis*).
 Red Crossbill (Common C) *Loxia curvirostra* 27 logged from Guanella Pass Road to Conifer (presumably *benti*).
 American Goldfinch *Spinus tristis* Three at Steamboat Springs, and 11 at Soldiers Memorial CP (*pallida*).
 Pine Siskin *Spinus pinus* Small numbers at scattered sites in the rockies (nominate).



"Hepburn's" Grey-crowned Rosy Finch (Simon Colenutt)

McCown's Longspur *Rhynchophanes mccownii* 4+ in flock of Chestnut-collared's, Wray-Burlington. Monotypic.
 Lapland Longspur *Calcarius lapponicus* One NW of Mack, and one Beecher Island-Burlington (*alascensis*).
 Chestnut-collared Longspur *Calcarius ornatus* Seven at Pawnee Grassland; c.450 in flocks Wray-Burlington.
 Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata* Small nos. Colorado NM; Coal Canyon; Higbee Valley (*deserticola*).
 Chipping Sparrow *Spizella passerina* One at Upper Queens/Neekah Reservoir & two at Higbee Valley (*arizonae*).
 Dark-eyed Junco (Oregon J) *Junco [hyemalis] oregonus* One was noted at the Moose Visitor Centre.
 Dark-eyed Junco (Pink-sided J) *Junco [hyemalis] mearnsi* Frequently recorded in the rockies.
 Dark-eyed Junco (Grey-headed J) *Junco [hyemalis] caniceps* The commonest junco in the rockies.
 White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys* Scattered sightings and some decent numbers (*gambelii*).
 Harris's Sparrow *Zonotrichia querula* One twitched at Colorado State Park, Grand Junction.
 Sagebrush Sparrow *Artemisiospiza nevadensis* Ten or so NW of Mack. Monotypic.
 Vesper Sparrow *Poocetes gramineus* Small numbers in grassland habitats (*confinis*).
 Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis* A couple in the fields en route from Wray to Burlington.
 Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia* Occasional in suitable wetland habitat (*juddi*).
 Canyon Towhee *Melospiza fusca* Eight at Higbee Valley (*mesatus*).
 Rufous-crowned Sparrow *Aimophila ruficeps* Three seen well at Higbee Valley (*eremoeca*).
 Spotted Towhee *Pipilo maculatus* Eight or so at the Black Canyon, and another at Colorado NM (*arcticus*).
 Yellow-headed Blackbird *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* At least 13 were logged NW of La Junta. Monotypic.
 Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta* Very common in the plains (*neglecta*).
 Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus* Very common throughout (*fortis*).
 Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater* Scattered sightings, with 50 or so at Lake Meredith (*artemisiae*).
 Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus* 12 or so at Lake Meredith. Monotypic.
 Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula* Common towards the end of the tour (*versicolor*).

Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus* Similar locations to last species, though much less numerous (*monsoni*).
Audubon's Warbler *Setophaga auduboni* A nice male at Upper Queens/Neeskah Reservoir.
Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis* A smart male at Wray (nominate).



Lapland Longspur near Mack (Paul Gregory)

MAMMALS

Total of bird species recorded: 21.

Coyote *Canis latrans* A couple at the Gunnison Grouse lek, and others heard.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* One by the road, en route in Kansas.

American Badger *Taxidea taxus* Great looks at one at the Greater Prairie Chicken lek - mobbed by Burrowing Owls.

Pronghorn *Antilocapra americana* Regular encounters with this lovely antelope.

Elk (Moose) *Alces [alces] americanus* One was seen well in riverine shrubbery near Walden.

Wapiti (American Elk) *Cervus canadensis* The biggest count was at the Gunnison Grouse lek, with 125 noted.

Mule Deer *Odocoileus hemionus*

Bighorn Sheep *Ovis canadensis* Two females and a juvenile at the Colorado National Monument (*nelsoni*).

Snowshoe Hare *Lepus americanus* (NL) Jan-Joost saw one at the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek.

Black-tailed Jackrabbit *Lepus californicus* (NL) Simon flushed one at the Pawnee National Grassland.

Desert Cottontail *Sylvilagus audubonii* Frequently seen.

Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel *Callospermophilus lateralis* Small numbers early on during the tour.

Gunnison's Prairie Dog *Cynomys gunnisoni* Small numbers were active near Gunnison.

White-tailed Prairie Dog *Cynomys leucurus* Multiple sightings at the more westerly locations the we visited.

Arizona Black-tailed Prairie Dog *Cynomys ludovicianus* Frequent at the more easterly locations the we visited.

Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel *Ictidomys tridecemlineatus* One by the roadside on the way back to the airport.

Yellow-bellied Marmot *Marmota flaviventris* Great views of one between Crested Butte and Gunnison.

Least Chipmunk *Tamias minimus* Several at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP.

Rock Squirrel (Rock G S) *Spermophilus variegatus* Two at Colorado NM, and one at Higbee Valley.

Abert's Squirrel (Tassel-eared S) *Sciurus aberti* One at the Moose Visitor Centre (perhaps leader only).

Fox Squirrel (Eastern F S) *Sciurus niger* Several noted during journeys.



American Badger (and Burrowing Owl) & Yellow-bellied Marmot (Craig Robson)

APPENDIX 1 - Top 5 birds of the tour

- 1st **Sharp-tailed Grouse**
- 2nd **White-tailed ptarmigan**
- 3rd **Greater Sage Grouse**
- 4th **Lesser Prairie Chicken**
- 5th **Black Rosy Finch**

APPENDIX 2 - Other fauna & flora recorded

BUTTERFLIES

Checkered White *Pontia protodice*

Camberwell Beauty (Mourning Cloak) *Nymphalis antiopa*



Red Crossbill (Simon Colenutt)