



White-tailed Ptarmigan (all photos by Mike Watson).

COLORADO

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Our 2015 'Ultimate Grousequest' to the Rocky Mountains and High Plains of Colorado (plus a footstep into each of neighbouring Kansas and Utah) marked our sixth clean sweep in a row of the 'magnificent seven': White-tailed Ptarmigan (I haven't missed it yet!); Greater and Lesser Prairie Chickens; Dusky Grouse; Sharp-tailed Grouse and Gunnison's and Sage Grouse. We experienced some unusually warm spring weather this time, which helped us around the circuit, although that also meant many winter visitors had already moved on. However, Colorado is not just about chickens and our tally included plenty of other sought-after Nearctic birds including: Scaled and Gambel's Quails; Wild Turkey; Chukar Partridge (an involuntary fluke this time, honest!); Snow Goose; Wood Duck; Barrow's Goldeneye; Clark's Grebe; Ferruginous Hawk; Rough-legged Buzzard (or Hawk); Prairie Falcon; Sandhill Crane; Snowy and Mountain Plovers; Bonaparte's, Franklin's and California Gulls; Great Horned and Burrowing Owls; two each of Lewis's and American Three-toed Woodpeckers; Williamson's and Red-naped 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; Myrtle Warbler; Harris's (two), Sage, Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrows; Oregon, Pink-sided and Grey-headed Juncos and finally both Chestnut-collared and McCown's



Sage Grouse, North Park - a visit to one of their leks is an amazing birding experience!

Longspurs on the prairie. Three 'write-ins' for this tour included: Red-bellied Woodpecker, Audubon's Warbler and (at last!) Golden-crowned Sparrow. Colorado is also great for mammals and our trip list was a very respectable 31 species. Amongst the highlights, Bobcat and Sagebrush Vole were new for us on this itinerary. Our 2015 road trip clocked up more than 3000 miles in less than two weeks through some of the most spectacular scenery on the continent. We always 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. We visited its lowest point, near Beecher Island, where the Arickaree River leaves the state, south of Wray and flows into Kansas, however, this is still 1010 metres above sea level. Its highest point, Mount Elbert in Lake County, is 4399m. The weather can fluctuate wildly in spring from the mountains to the plains and although we escaped a big winter storm we still saw conditions from a couple of inches of snowfall to temperatures in the high seventies. As usual our 2015 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. Mild weather and some successful scouting boded well for the tour. In fact I had not seen so little snow cover previously in Colorado at this time of year, quite worryingly so in fact as spring snow melt is desperately needed to fill the reservoirs on the plains. Even Georgetown Lake was unfrozen! However, no sooner than the tour had started we saw a forecast for a significant snowfall over the next few days. Ugh! Happily my favourite bar in Colorado, Lucha Cantina (formerly the Red Ram) in Georgetown, was still trading so at least we would have a good evening refuge. 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.

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, although this one took some considerable effort to pick one out amongst the rosy finch swarm. We had seen around 10 of these excellent finches here during our scouting but it was a big relief to at least find one still present, thanks to some great spotting by Ian 'Gryllo' Lewis. We usually only see this tricky bird once on the circuit and it is always welcome sooner rather than later! It is always the least numerous of the rosy-finches in the winter flocks in Colorado and breeds in a small area of the northern Rockies from Utah to Idaho. Much easier were the other three forms of Rosy-Finch (Hepburn's, Grey-crowned and Brown-capped), also at Silverthorne's feeders and in all the rosy finch flocks numbered



Black Rosy-Finch, Silverthorne – the most sought-after of the quartet of North American Rosy-Finch forms.

around 500 birds at any one time. Also here a couple of Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers provided a good comparison and other new birds included: Northern Flickers; several Steller's Jays; a smart Clark's Nutcracker; Mountain Chickadee; Pygmy Nuthatch; Mountain Bluebird; Red Crossbill and Grey-headed Junco. The real star of the show in terms of scarcity on our CO tours was something much less striking in the form of a Brown Creeper - our first on this tour for 10 years! No grosbeaks for once though and some fighting Red Foxes, an American Red Squirrel and a Colorado Chipmunk opened the furry account. Unfortunately the warm spring weather appeared to have urged the wintering Barrow's Goldeneyes to make their way north and in any event one of their favourite small lakes is now being absorbed into a residential area with new homes being built right up to its shoreline. The remaining birds in the Silverthorne area were still an introduction for some to Nearctic waterfowl and included: several *parvipes* form Canada Geese amongst the uncertain form local birds; Cinnamon and Green-winged Teals; Redhead; Ring-necked Duck and Common Merganser. The nearby Blue River again produced an American Dipper and a couple of artificial roadside nest sites nearby had attracted Western Osprey and Bald Eagle.

Late morning called 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, again, the weather was kind to us and we needed only one attempt to secure the grand prize. The birds took a lot more effort to find than usual, including some snowshoe-assisted searching. 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 an even more hardcore hike was not now needed and we breathed a sigh of relief as we descended back below the tree line. All four rosy finches and the ptarmigan under the belt on day one of the birding was another awesome start! However, we had taken so long with the mountain birds that we did not have time for our usual exploration of the lower forests towards the 'front range'. Instead we ended the day at the Guanella Pass road end parking lot where the three-toed woodpecker had unfortunately gone to sleep but a Grey Jay obliged high atop a pine. A distant herd of Bighorn Sheep numbered around 45, high above Georgetown. By the way, browsing the leaflets in Georgetown's information centre I noticed a Colorado Parks and Wildlife Division publication entitled '2014-2015 Colorado Mountain Lion Hunting'. There are various rules and regulations like '*Hunters must be at least 12 years old*'...'*Dogs are permitted, no more than 8 dogs per pack*'...'*Mountain Lion populations are very sensitive to female deaths*' and so it goes on.



White-tailed Ptarmigan - always a favourite on this tour!

Next morning we woke up and it was snowing (!) but it soon stopped and we continued eastwards to the Ponderosa Pine forests of the 'front range'. Here we were delighted by a striking male Williamson's Sapsucker at one of its regular sites, Genesee Mountain Park, although it only zoomed in once to check us out. Some other typical birds of this lower elevation in a winter wonderland of powder snow-covered Ponderosa Pines included White-breasted Nuthatches and Western Bluebirds. Lookout Mountain was very quiet indeed and we failed to add anything there. Unfortunately the rogue Dusky Grouse in its parking lot had been killed by a collision with a car earlier in the week, as often happens to such overly aggressive birds.

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 famous '*Under a blood red sky*' gig in June, 32 (!) years ago and until recently it had enjoyed a great reputation amongst birders for its productive bird feeders. There had not been regular feeding here before our visit and the trading post even seems to be turning into a wedding reception venue with group photos taken against the garden bird feeding area, ugh! This time we only managed Pink-sided and Grey-headed Juncos where previously we have seen six different forms in a single visit! The early spring weather had probably not helped either. We enjoyed a smart little Lincoln's Sparrow creeping through the undergrowth here when eagle-eyed Sieghard rejoined us and mentioned he had just been watching a Golden-crowned Sparrow on the bird table, while we had all been peering into the shadows. Fortunately, the sparrow duly obliged again later, after we had a nice picnic lunch. A Peregrine Falcon soared over the small canyon behind the trading post before resuming its vigil from a sentinel perch high above us. A sleepy Great Horned Owl also entertained us during our lunch break, even stepping out of its roosting alcove in the sculpted red sandstone for a while to take in some warm rays of sunshine. The first Turkey Vultures drifted past along the Dinosaur Ridge raptor highway and Woodhouse's Scrub Jay was also new here. We were now around a day behind schedule but were starting to pick up momentum.

We headed southeast to El Paso county, east of Colorado Springs, where at Squirrel Creek Road we were delighted to find that the pair of Mountain Plovers reported by our friends Field Guides the previous day was still present in the late afternoon sunshine in a Black-tailed Prairie Dog town, along with three Burrowing Owls. A pair of Scaled Quail en route made their earliest ever appearance on this tour, a young Golden Eagle soared over the rolling prairie grassland, Loggerhead Shrikes sat on roadside wires and Horned Larks reminded us that they are Colorado's commonest breeding birds. We then pressed on to Pueblo and a great steakhouse.



The Arkansas River flows through some of Colorado's prettiest landscapes.

It was not snowing this morning, in fact the only snow was on the distant Spanish Peaks and instead it was sunny and quite spring like. Our early morning walk around Pueblo West produced some nice views of a newly arrived Yellow-headed Blackbird as well as numerous Great-tailed Grackles. A Scaled Quail perched in a nearby tree and a Curve-billed Thrasher sang from a rooftop. We also saw a Peregrine Falcon overhead here again. Stopping off at a Facebook friend's house we had some more great looks at Curve-billed Thrasher in her yard but also added a mammal to our list – Hispid Cotton Rat, which was, as usual, cheekily tucking into her bird food, amongst the sparrows and House Finches. Three Blue Jays screeched as they passed across the street here.

A quick look at Blue Heron Ponds failed to turn up the reported Harris's Sparrow but did produce some early Tree Swallows and some waterbirds including American Wigeon, Great Blue Heron, Double-crested Cormorant and five Greater Yellowlegs. A Belted Kingfisher was by the Arkansas River but Mountain Bluebirds were generally absent on our journey today, where had they all gone we wondered? Later in the morning, some kind folks at Cañon City let us access the riverside walk there across their property but again we failed to find Harris's Sparrow (or any sparrows for that matter). Some lovely Mourning Cloak (aka Camberwell Beauty) butterflies, fresh from hibernation, glided through the flowering cottonwood trees and a Say's Phoebe was our first of the tour. It was otherwise rather quiet so we pushed off to the nearest Subway to grab some lunch. Sandwiches in hand we very quickly found our next target bird, the surprisingly delightful Rufous-crowned Sparrow.

Continuing west up the Arkansas Valley we left the plains behind and entered the Rockies once again, stopping off to try for Pinyon Jay. This was not ultimately necessary but this bird has become trickier to see as times goes by. We only managed around four this time in the same residential area as 2013, on a warm, sunny and quiet afternoon. There was no sign of Hooded Merganser or Wood Duck on a nearby lake but instead a regal drake Barrow's Goldeneye with two females in tow was a great pick up! We had still not yet crossed the divide to Gunnison so we made a sharp exit from 'the exit' and started uphill to Monarch Pass. Fortunately the pair of American Three-toed Woodpeckers from my scouting wanderings had not gone to sleep yet and duly obliged working their way up some dead roadside trees. There were at least three pairs in residence on a short stretch of road here this year! Over the pass we descended into the Gunnison Basin, home of the endangered grouse of the same name. We scouted a couple of places seeing Rough-legged Hawk but not much else as darkness drew near.



Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Cañon City.

Our first chicken appointment came next morning, with Gunnison Grouse. This endangered species was not described until as recently as 2000, it was not even recognized as a subspecies prior to this! Gunnison is renowned as one of the coldest places in the USA and it was predictably quite chilly sitting on the wooden benches of the grouse blind, waiting for dawn. As the first rays of light started to illuminate the hillside across the valley from us we could eventually make out dark shapes, occasionally bobbing up and down. The grouse have moved their lek over the last couple of seasons up out of the valley meadows but even at such a long distance (more than 500m!) we were still 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 filoplumes in the process. We estimated 15 males and two females at the lek, again down on our previous visits, maybe owing to the drought, which has afflicted Colorado's grouse over the last couple of years? We also wonder what will become of this lek viewing arrangement? Gradually the birds disappeared out of sight but then a female flew from behind the blind and into the meadow in front of us, followed soon afterwards by three males, affording some much better views than we have usually had in the past when the lek was down the valley. They chased her around for a while without any success and then flew back to the hillside behind us. On the way back to town we diverted for the range-restricted Gunnison's Prairie Dog at a useful stake out, a celebratory sit down breakfast at one of our favourite steak houses followed and then we were off on our way again.

We made a couple of stops by the usually almost completely frozen Blue Mesa Reservoir, however, this time it was almost completely ice-free! On its calm waters were a couple of Barrow's Goldeneyes amongst many more Common Goldeneyes and our first Lesser Scaups, Buffleheads, Western Grebes and California Gulls. On the sagebrush flats along its shores we had our first looks at Sage Thrashers but otherwise the area was very quiet as the temperatures rose. Rolling into Montrose we checked out the excellent Horsefly brew pub and its 'Bug-eyed Blonde' entry level craft beer, whatever that means.

We spend some time in the mountains near Montrose where the highlight was the fantastic Dusky Grouse, which duly obliged in the roadside oak scrub, a male and a female. As always it was a very impressive beast, more reminiscent of a capercaillie than a Red Grouse (or Willow Ptarmigan). We also caught up with some sought-after bird species and we had time for another hike this year. Although it failed to turn up the hoped for Red-naped Sapsucker, we enjoyed some point blank views of Clark's Nutcrackers, American Bushtits, Spotted



Dusky Grouse (male), The Black Canyon of the Gunnison

Towhees and a surprise Chukar Partridge. Distant White-throated Swifts swirled way down in a canyon and a Townsend's Solitaire sang on the edge of the void in the late afternoon sun. I have never seen so little snow here on our previous visits to this region and this probably affected our Dusky Grouse chances. It was just as well that we had already enjoyed some nice views the previous evening as we didn't see one on our drives the next morning (although of course I could have tried harder...). Instead we added a Wild Turkey and a superb Bobcat, a mammalian write-in for this tour. Persistence eventually also paid off and after around five hours of searching we found a Red-naped Sapsucker, working some dead trees, phew! This one was much wanted by some of the group.

Leaving the Montrose area later than ever before, our next stop was Fruitgrower's Reservoir near Orchard City. We always add some good birds to the list here and this time was no exception with Snow Goose and Marsh Wren. However, the pair of Lewis's Woodpeckers nearby was even more welcomed. Easy to overlook as starlings from a distance perched in giant cottonwood trees we were happy to catch up with these super-smart, crow-like woodpeckers. This is a scarce bird and we usually only see it once on each tour and never bump into it unexpectedly. Happily they had stayed put in the same trees for a week since my last visit.

The second of our two outstanding 'birds and scenery' experiences today was in the Grand Junction area and was comprised of the same rugged terrain of the geological formation that includes adjacent Utah's Arches and Bryce Canyon. The spectacular red sandstone rock formation, studded with attractive Pinyon juniper scrub, is another wonderful place to bird. The perky little Juniper Titmouse was located with ease at another scouted stakeout, only a stone's throw from the rim of an impressive canyon. We then descended from the plateau to the nearby town of Grand Junction, I haven't seen much of this view over the years, concentrating on the tight hairpins while passengers admire the splendid views of the canyonlands, 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. The evening's owling session was again very frustrating. Although we teamed up with our friends Wings to avoid duplication we did not hear a single owl despite otherwise fairly calm conditions. Even more disappointing was the non-appearance of the feisty little Northern Pygmy Owl I had seen here the week before. Owling on the Grand Mesa is rarely easy. Next time then!



The Black Canyon of the Gunnison: Pulpit Rock, looking east (above) and Warner Point, looking north (below).



The Black Canyon of the Gunnison's 'Painted Wall' - geologists' paradise!



Wedding Canyon, Colorado National Monument.

There were only a handful of species left in this area 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. The quails afforded even better views in the residential area bordering the park as we headed towards the northern entrance of the park, where we caught up with Pinyon Jay again, Cooper's Hawk as well as the desired Rock Wren. With only the newly split Sagebrush Sparrow left of our usual targets for this area we drove to within a stone's throw of the Utah border, where, thanks to some rear-gunning by Ian, we quickly found one of these very smart little sparrows in an isolated stand of waist-high sage brush. There was not much else here in the midday sun apart from a couple of Loggerhead Shrikes and a distant Golden Eagle and after a brief foray into Utah we moved on. My Utah state list now stands at one species, American Kestrel, of all things. Time was ticking away now so we headed directly for Steamboat Springs, with thankfully no need to look for Chukar Partridge in Coal Creek Canyon on the way. We were welcomed to the Yampa Valley on another sunny evening by some of the local, small and rusty-coloured Sandhill Cranes. In the early 1800s the first Europeans arrived here and likened the sound of the mineral spring to that of a steamboat's whistle. Sadly the spring was silenced by the construction of a railway over it in 1908 and Steamboat Springs has now grown into an expensive and bustling ski resort.

With only one night in Steamboat this time we had an appointment next morning with the amazing Sharp-tailed Grouse. Here Maps helped us to 'X marks the spot' of our 2013 visit to one of the less familiar leks in the Steamboat area and once there we were delighted to find several males already in residence. We had actually flushed one off the road itself a few miles from the lek. We could watch the full display of these little characters, from loud foot stomping to their wing bowing dancing display as they chased each other and also the choosy females visiting the lek. Unfortunately wires usually get in the way of photos at this site but the grouse are fairly close and at least they can be watched here without a procession of heavy trucks thundering past every few minutes like at the famous Twenty Mile Road site that most other folks go to. At least one million Sagebrush Voles scuttled around the roadside verges and the lekking field here. Steamboat itself was quiet and we learnt that sadly the elderly lady who used to feed birds in the area of the school had fallen ill and her feeders were empty of food and birds. Crossing the dreaded Rabbit Ears pass on snow-free roads was very welcome indeed but, as always seems to be the case we knew that snow was on its way again. It held off until night time and we were able to make our usual trip to the excellent Moose Visitor Centre at Gould. Its feeders were covered with birds but of rather fewer species than usual. Red-winged Blackbirds, Grey-headed Juncos and Cassin's



Sharp-tailed Grouse, Steamboat Springs.

Finches abounded and our patience was rewarded by up to three fine Pine Grosbeaks, including a scarlet male of the distinctive grey-bellied Rocky Mountain form *montanus*. A small party of Gray Jays delighted by the roadside on Cameron Pass before we headed back to the small town of Walden.

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! 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 although the present die-off will adversely affect birds like Clark's Nutcracker and Gray Jay, it should benefit the dead tree loving American Three-toed Woodpecker. Apparently the bottom has dropped out of the firewood market!

In the late afternoon we made a quick stop at Walden Reservoir, which was, as always, full of water birds, adding Great Northern Loon, Canvasback, Northern Pintail, Eared Grebe, American White Pelican, American Avocet and Ring-billed Gull to the trip list. Smart California Gulls fed alongside the more familiar Ring-billed and Bonaparte's in the choppy waters along the shore as the storm approached. Happily all we had to do this time was get back to our really lovely motel. We like Walden a lot! 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*'.



Clark's Nutcracker afforded some point blank views at the Black Canyon his year!

We woke up next morning and it was snowing. Not much though, only a couple of inches, so there would not be a problem in getting to where we needed to be, in fact a dusting of snow would be a welcome addition to the background of our photos! Guided in the dark again by GPS we pulled up right alongside our chosen Sage Grouse lek. Wow! It is difficult to describe the best performance of all the grouse that I have seen so far in my trips to Colorado. I have seen them lekking several times before but never quite so close to our vehicles. They were scattered on short grass by a dirt road in a remote area of North Park and some were only a few metres from us. We could easily hear their 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 spectacle of a sage grouse lek is a must-see experience for world birders, just as impressive as a bird of paradise lek in my opinion. Leaving North Park we had to rely on one of my fall back sites for Prairie Falcon again, having not yet bumped into one. We had some great views of the North American Saker counterpart at its breeding cliff and a very welcome sit down breakfast!

With our time in the mountains coming to an end we were now thinking about some of the gaps on our list. Evening Grosbeak was a notable one but there were still a few places ahead where we might expect to see it. One of these we had already visited, Silverthorne. We swung by here again on our way to the plains but had no luck except for the four forms of Rosy Finch again, an obliging Clark's Nutcracker and a pair of Pine Grosbeaks. We did not linger long and quickly headed off for another well-known set of bird feeders at Fawnbrook Inn, Allenspark. Instead of the by now much desired grosbeak we added two mammals to our trip list in the form of the delightful Abert's (or Tassel-eared) Squirrel and a big surprise – Moose! I had no idea they were this far to the east now. Red-breasted Nuthatch was also new here but there was not much else visiting these sometimes-prolific bird feeders so we descended through the pretty Saint Vrain Canyon to the plains.

The plains presented a completely different picture to our last snowbound visit to this place. Instead of freezing plains we were greeted this time by a sea of yellow grass and singing Horned Larks and Western Meadowlarks everywhere. We visited a pasture where we have seen the short grass specialists on previous visits and were quickly rewarded with some fine song-fighting McCown's Longspurs, many hours more quickly than it took to find them by the frozen roadside last time! Also in the same pasture were Long-billed Curlew and a pair of wonderful Mountain Plovers that allowed close walkaway views. We were very happy to leave them undisturbed as we had found them. The other longspur, Chestnut-collared is usually a tougher bird to find here and we had to switch our search to longer grass pastures. Thanks to some great spot-



Sage Grouse, North Park.

ting again by Ian we were able to locate the first of several small parties of these very smart birds. Other birds of note here included Prairie Falcon, a male Sharp-shinned Hawk with its prey by the track side, a couple of Burrowing Owls, a party of five Long-billed Curlews, Say's Phoebes and Loggerhead Shrikes.

Wray is one of the most eagerly awaited stops on our chicken tour as it has by far the best viewing arrangements. The small pioneer town has a population of around 2400 (about the same as Settle in North Yorkshire) and has embraced its new status as an ecotourism destination. Happily everyone again made the effort to attend the fascinating orientation meeting at the delightful Wray Museum, along with its amazing collection of artifacts donated by Wray residents including big game hunter, Dale Whomble's trophy collection. Another great steakhouse evening 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 have been a different story had our 2015 visit been two weeks later!). In the half-light we could make out the shapes of prairie chickens as the males 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 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 another 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 further down on 2013 and preceding levels with a total of 24 birds that included 7 females, the cause of much excitement amongst the males. Josh, 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



Landscapes of North Park: abandoned plough near Coalmont (above) and untamed watercourses near Walden (below).



Mountain Plover, near Ault.

driven back to our friendly hosts at ranch, where we were treated to a traditional down home style breakfast (as always eagerly awaited by me!) of scrambled egg, rashers of bacon and mountains of waffles. Russ (who has now abandoned his Stetson in favour of a baseball cap (!)) 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 and if anything it was too warm, having a negative effect on bird activity in the middle of the day and creating bright glare and heat haze. Heading south, we paused at 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. Our visit produced a pair of Wood Ducks, a Brewer's Blackbird and an intergrade Audubon's/Myrtle Warbler, showing many features of Myrtle such as its breast streaking and head pattern but with a pale yellow throat.

We also stopped briefly at Bonny State Park, where the reservoir had a little water in its bed this time. It was drained completely in autumn 2011, following a dispute between Colorado and Kansas. Again there was not much around except for a few Wild Turkeys (today actually marked the start of turkey shooting season) so we did not linger long and made for Hale Ponds. There was another recent report of Harris's Sparrow, however, vague directions killed our chances of this bird. We couldn't even find the property it was supposed to be lurking near. We did manage a write-in in the form of Red-bellied Woodpecker plus a Belted Kingfisher, an Eastern Bluebird and a few Vesper Sparrows. A foray into neighbouring Kansas added a handful of species to folks' KS lists including around 30 Blue-winged Teal.



Greater Prairie Chicken, Kitzmiller Ranch, Wray.

Eventually we continued on our southbound journey, past towns with evocative names like Cheyenne Wells and Kit Carson, to Lamar. Just west of Holly we found a dead Prairie Rattlesnake on the highway, which appeared to have been forced away from the refuge of the verge by mindless brush burning. Such a sad end for a beautiful creature. We birded the community college riparian woodland at Lamar where a flock of Cedar Waxwings was new, as were around 10 pure Audubon's Warblers busily feeding in the cottonwoods along with around 5 Myrtle Warblers. A small flock of White-crowned Sparrows did not harbor anything less common but we did have a couple of strokes of luck here. Some local birders reported they had just seen a Harris's Sparrow, around 10 miles from town and also an eBird sighting reported (unbelievably) a flock of Evening Grosbeaks in town, less than a mile from our motel! The following day was set up nicely but it would have to be a bird race to try to pack in all of this, in addition to our final chicken appointment.

We boarded another big yellow (former) school bus driven by our dear host Fred Dorenkamp in nearby Holly. Our target was the fast declining Lesser Prairie Chicken. This poor bird is now down to around 40 individuals in Colorado and we wonder for how much longer we will be able to visit its lekking grounds? There are now only three leks in the state and since our last visit to Elkhart in neighbouring Kansas, the lek on the Cimarron National Grassland, which we used to visit, has now collapsed and has been closed as well. Maybe we will have to venture into Oklahoma or New Mexico in future for this one?

Three of these special 'Last of the Mohicans' birds still put on a great show for us, going through their dancing routine, filling their reddish, rather than tangerine orange air sacs and doing plenty of foot stomping and pinnae-raising. They presented a wonderful, albeit very sad picture on their remnant of prairie with agricultural fields all around. We left the sagebrush and yucca prairie of Prowers County behind and headed off for a delicious proper chuck wagon breakfast at Fred and his wife Norma's Arena Dust headquarters, complete with sawdust on the floor and wooden beams. We said our goodbyes and headed a little further west to the splendid Melody Tempel Grove, a lovely stretch of riparian woodland along the Fort Lyon canal. This birding site is also a tribute to Melody A. Tempel, a keen birder, who passed away in 2012, aged only 64 and her husband Gale kindly allows access to birders along the canal here, which has become a Colorado rarity hotspot. It is situated at the tip of the last finger of woodland to the north of Lamar before the plains stretch towards Eads and Kit Carson so must benefit from a funnel effect on migrants. Melody Tempel Grove was very kind to us indeed and delivered not one but two fine Harris's Sparrows amongst the throng of White-crowned Sparrows in the brush



Deserted homestead near Hale on the Kansas border, a sign of hard times in the West.



Cottonwood trees at Beecher Island.

along the canal. Fourth attempt lucky, this marked a major change in our fortunes and from here on everything seemed to go exactly to plan. We also added Golden-crowned Kinglet and Ian had an interesting warbler, which may have been an Orange-crowned but sadly slipped away in all the excitement. We were amazingly still running on time according to our 'big day' schedule and after checking out we made our way to a residential area of Lamar where we very quickly found one of the Evening Grosbeaks, a young bird, still feeding in flowering elm trees. After showing it to some surprised local residents we headed south to our furthest point on this tour, to within a stone's throw of the Oklahoma border.

The afternoon was spent at another of our favourite spots, Cottonwood Canyon. Thankfully again we did not lose any time to flat tires at all on the tour this year and at last our birding here was not weather affected. The picturesque canyon lands cut into the prairie grasslands of this region, offering a refuge to riparian woodland and its bird communities. A couple of Chihuahuan Ravens allowed some nice diagnostic views of their white body feathering and a very fine juvenile pale morph Ferruginous Hawk was much appreciated. This was our only one of the tour and had become a worrying gap on our list. We only saw one in 2013 and several other groups missed it in 2015. Maybe it is struggling at the moment? We were able to find some of the other special birds we were looking for, notably the enigmatic Greater Roadrunner and we also added: Eastern Phoebe; Canyon Towhee and Bewick's Wren (there was no need to look harder for Canyon Wren or Rufous-crowned Sparrow this time). Young Ryan showed us some attractive little Ring-necked Snakes he found while searching for herps in the canyon before it was time to head off once again, this time to the railway town of La Junta.

We woke up next morning and again it was not snowing – a nice contrast to our 2013 visit to this area! Our first port of call was Higbee Canyon, a pretty valley to the south of La Junta, where we saw a lot of good birds on our previous visit. A Scaled Quail was calling from the top of the canyon walls at dawn and a pair of Great Horned Owls chased away a pair of Chihuahuan Ravens, which had strayed into their territory. Canyon and Rock Wrens could be seen singing from high up on the slopes, as could Canyon Towhee and Rufous-crowned Sparrow. Curve-billed Thrashers and Townsend's Solitaires sang from the valley bottom, several Cassin's Finches perched in trees near a homestead and flocks of migrant White-crowned Sparrows were common. However, the only new species for the trip was Northern Mockingbird! As we were leaving, Margaret's wish came true with a pair of Greater Roadrunners, one of which was actually running at full speed across the track in front of us!



Lesser Prairie Chickens, Prowers County.

The Arkansas Valley is one of Colorado's hotspots and we set ourselves a target of 10 new species for the trip list on our final morning. Although we fell a little short at eight, we still had another great day birding on the high plains. At least three Clark's Grebes, at the ever-reliable Holbrook Lake were followed by the same number of Black-necked Stilts and a female Red-breasted Merganser. At Lake Cheraw a roadside Barn Swallow was our only one of the tour and 10 Snowy Plovers plus three Least Sandpipers were also welcome. At least six Horned Grebes at Lake Meredith was our final addition before we made our way north in glorious spring sunshine, along country roads to Denver's international airport where we went our separate ways.



Birdquesting in the big country!

Thanks to everyone in our very enthusiastic group this year for making this tour successful and such a lot of fun!

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

1. White-tailed Ptarmigan
2. Sage Grouse
3. Greater Prairie Chicken
4. Mountain Plover
5. Lewis's Woodpecker



Sage Grouse, North Park.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

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).

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.

Snow Goose ◊ *Chen caerulescens*: Only one at Fruitgrower's Reservoir.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis*: Ssp *moffitti* widespread plus some migrant ssp *parvipes* at least at Silverthorne.

Wood Duck ◊ *Aix sponsa*: Two at Beecher's Island.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Widespread and sometimes common.

American Wigeon *Anas americana*: Widespread and sometimes common.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Widespread and common.

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors*: The first were two drakes at Fruitgrower's Res.

Cinnamon Teal *Anas cyanoptera*: Scattered records (ssp *septentriolalium*).

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

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: Noted at Walden Res. and Holbrook Lake.

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

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria*: Around 50 at Walden Reservoir.

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

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



Gambel's Quail, near Grand Junction.

- Lesser Scaup** *Aythya affinis*: Fairly widespread and locally common.
- Bufflehead** *Bucephala albeola*: Widespread and fairly common.
- Common Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula*: Scattered records (ssp *Americana*).
- Barrow's Goldeneye** ◊ *Bucephala islandica*: Three (one drake) at Salida plus two at Blue Mesa Res.
- Common Merganser (Goosander)** *Mergus merganser*: A scatter of sightings.
- Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator*: One at Holbrook Lake.
- Ruddy Duck** *Oxyura jamaicensis*: C.300 at Lake Meredith was the maximum.
- Scaled Quail** ◊ *Callipepla squamata*: Noted near Colorado Springs, Pueblo West and Higbee Canyon (ssp *hargravi*).
- Gambel's Quail** ◊ *Callipepla gambelii*: Five in the Grand Junction area.
- Wild Turkey** ◊ *Meleagris gallopavo*: First noted at The Black Canyon (ssp *intermedia*).
- Sage Grouse** ◊ (Greater SG) *Centrocercus urophasianus*: At least 59 at their lek in the snow near Walden. **NT**
- Gunnison Grouse** ◊ *Centrocercus minimus*: A total of 17, including 2 females at a lek in the Gunnison region. **EN**
- Dusky Grouse** ◊ *Dendragapus obscurus*: Two at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- Sharp-tailed Grouse** ◊ *Tympanuchus phasianellus*: Fourteen at a lek in the Steamboat Springs area (ssp *jamesi*).
- Lesser Prairie-Chicken** ◊ *Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*: Three males and two females at a lek in Prowers County. **VU**
- Greater Prairie-Chicken** ◊ *Tympanuchus cupido*: 24, incl. 17 males, at Russ Seward's Kitzmiller Ranch lek nr Wray. **VU**
- White-tailed Ptarmigan** ◊ *Lagopus leucurus*: Four at Loveland Pass (ssp *altipetens*).
- Chukar Partridge (introduced)** *Alectoris chukar*: One at High Point, The Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- Common Pheasant (introduced) (Ring-necked P)** *Phasianus colchicus*: First noted near Wray.
- Great Northern Loon (GN Diver, Common L)** *Gavia immer*: One at Walden Res.
- Pied-billed Grebe** *Podilymbus podiceps*: Only two was a very low tally.
- Horned Grebe (Slavonian G)** *Podiceps auritus*: At least six at Lake Meredith (ssp *cornutus*).
- Black-necked Grebe (Eared G)** *Podiceps nigricollis*: C.20 at Walden Res., 12 at L. Cheraw and c.30 at L. Meredith.
- Western Grebe** ◊ *Aechmophorus occidentalis*: A good scatter of sightings.
- Clark's Grebe** ◊ *Aechmophorus clarkii*: Three at Holbrook Lake.
- Great Blue Heron** *Ardea herodias*: Widespread, usually in small numbers.
- American White Pelican** *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*: Twelve at Walden Res. were the first.
- Double-crested Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax auritus*: Fairly widespread.
- Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura*: Fairly widespread, presumably mostly on passage. The first was at Red Rocks.
- Western Osprey** *Pandion carolinensis*: One on a nest at Silverthorne was the first.



White-tailed Ptarmigan (above) and California Gull, Walden Reservoir, North Park (below)..



Ferruginous Hawk, a pale morph, presumed second calendar year bird, Road M, Comanche National Grassland..

- Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos*: A scatter of records totalled five birds. (ssp *canadensis*).
- Sharp-shinned Hawk** *Accipiter striatus*: As usual, only two sightings (ssp *veloxi*).
- Cooper's Hawk** *Accipiter cooperii*: A pair near Grand Junction.
- Northern Harrier** *Circus hudsonius*: A total of 16 was far fewer than usual.
- Bald Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*: One on a nest at Silverthorne was the first.
- Swainson's Hawk** *Buteo swainsoni*: Twenty one was an above-average showing.
- Red-tailed Hawk** *Buteo jamaicensis*: Widespread and fairly common (ssp *calurus*).
- Ferruginous Hawk** *Buteo regalis*: A pale morph 2cy near Cottonwood Canyon was again a poor showing.
- Rough-legged Buzzard** ◊ (R-I Hawk) *Buteo lagopus*: A fairly good total of 13. (ssp *sanctijohannis*)
- American Coot** *Fulica americana*: Common and widespread.
- Sandhill Crane** *Grus canadensis*: C.60 rusty birds of the mid-continental ssp *tabida* in the Steamboat Springs area.
- Black-necked Stilt** *Himantopus mexicanus*: Three at Holbrook Lake.
- American Avocet** *Recurvirostra americana*: Six at Walden Res. plus 17 elsewhere.
- Killdeer** *Charadrius vociferus*: Common and widespread.
- Snowy Plover** *Charadrius nivosus*: 10 at Lake Cheraw. **NT**
- Mountain Plover** ◊ *Charadrius montanus*: Pairs at Squirrel Creek Road and on the northern plains. **NT**
- Long-billed Curlew** *Numenius americanus*: Six on the northern plains.
- Greater Yellowlegs** *Tringa melanoleuca*: Five at Blue Heron Lakes were the first.
- Lesser Yellowlegs** *Tringa flavipes*: Three near Greeley.
- Least Sandpiper** *Calidris minutilla*: Three at Lake Cheraw.
- Bonaparte's Gull** ◊ *Larus philadelphia*: Maximum 12 at Fruitgrower's Res.
- Franklin's Gull** ◊ *Larus pipixcan*: Maximum 15 at Fruitgrower's Res.
- Ring-billed Gull** *Larus delawarensis*: Maximum c.30 at Holbrook Lake.
- California Gull** ◊ *Larus californicus*: Maximum c.50 at Walden Reservoir.
- 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, ssp *carolinensis* east/ ssp *marginella* west.
- White-winged Dove** *Zenaida asiatica*: A couple in Lamar.
- Greater Roadrunner** ◊ *Geococcyx californianus*: One at Cottonwood Canyon and two at Higbee Canyon.
- Great Horned Owl** *Bubo virginianus*: Singles Red Rocks, Cañon City and Wray and a pair at Higbee Canyon.



Juniper Titmouse, Wedding Canyon

- Burrowing Owl** *Athene cunicularia*: Three Squirrel Creek were followed by another six (ssp *hypugaea*).
- White-throated Swift** ◇ *Aeronautes saxatilis*: Maximum c.20 The Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- Belted Kingfisher** *Ceryle alcyon*: First noted at Hanover in El Paso County.
- Lewis's Woodpecker** ◇ *Melanerpes lewis*: Two at Eckert.
- Red-bellied Woodpecker** ◇ *Melanerpes carolinus*: One Hale was a new addition to the Birdquest CO list.
- Williamson's Sapsucker** ◇ *Sphyrapicus htyroideus*: A male at Genesee Mountain Park.
- Red-naped Sapsucker** ◇ *Sphyrapicus nuchalis*: One at The Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- Downy Woodpecker** *Picoides pubescens*: A good scatter of records this year.
- Hairy Woodpecker** *Picoides villosus*: A good showing by the Rocky Mountain form this year (ssp *septentrionalis*).
- American Three-toed Woodpecker** ◇ *Picoides dorsalis*: Nice views of a pair at Monarch Pass.
- Northern Flicker** *Colaptes auratus*: A good scatter of ssp *cafer* plus Yellow(ish)-shafted intergrades in the east.
- American Kestrel** *Falco sparverius*: Widespread and common.
- Prairie Falcon** ◇ *Falco mexicanus*: One in central Colorado and one on the northern plains.
- Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus*: Four, incl. in magnificent settings of Red Rocks and Black Canyon. (ssp *anatum*).
- Eastern Phoebe** *Sayornis phoebe*: Six at Cottonwood Canyon and four in the Higbee Valley.
- Say's Phoebe** *Sayornis saya*: A total of 18 on the tour this year.
- Loggerhead Shrike** *Lanius ludovicianus*: A tally of 17 was a record total this year.
- Grey Jay** ◇ *Perisoreus canadensis*: One on the Guanella Pass road and three at Cameron Pass (ssp *capitalis*).
- Blue Jay** *Cyanocitta cristata*: A total of 13 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 good showing, the first at Red Rocks.
- Pinyon Jay** ◇ *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*: Four near Salida and two near Grand Junction. **VU**
- Black-billed Magpie (American Magpie)** *Pica hudsonia*: Widespread and common.
- Clark's Nutcracker** ◇ *Nucifraga columbiana*: One at Silverthorne and five at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- American Crow** *Corvus brachyrhynchos*: Widespread and common.
- Northern Raven (Common R)** *Corvus corax*: Widespread in small numbers throughout the tour (ssp *sinuatus*).
- Chihuahuan Raven** ◇ *Corvus cryptoleucus*: At least 13 in the south.
- Cedar Waxwing** *Bombycilla cedrorum*: Ten at Lamar was a below average showing.
- Juniper Titmouse** ◇ *Baeolophus ridgwayi*: A pair at Colorado National Monument.
- Black-capped Chickadee** ◇ *Poecile atricapillus*: A good scatter of records (ssp *garrina*).



Grey Jay, Cameron Pass (above) and Brown-capped Rosy-Finch, Silverthorne (below).



Black Rosy-Finch, Silverthorne.

- Mountain Chickadee** *Poecile gambeli*: Common in the mountains.
- Horned Lark (Shore Lark)** *Eremophila alpestris*: Common, especially on the plains (ssp *enthymia*).
- Tree Swallow** *Tachycineta bicolor*: Around 40 at Blue Heron Ponds, Florence.
- Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica*: One at Lake Cheraw (ssp *erythrogaster*).
- American Bushtit** *Psaltriparus minimus*: Five Black Canyon of the Gunnison and one nr Grand Junction (ssp *plumbeus*).
- Golden-crowned Kinglet** *Regulus satrapa*: One at Melody Tempel Grove.
- Rock Wren** ◇ *Salpinctes obsoletus*: One at Colorado NM, two at Cottonwood Canyon and four at Higbee Canyon.
- Canyon Wren** ◇ *Catherpes mexicanus*: Seen nr Grand Junction, Higbee and heard Cottonwood (ssp *conspersus*).
- Bewick's Wren** ◇ *Thryomanes bewickii*: Four at Cottonwood Canyon.
- Marsh Wren** *Cistothorus palustris*: One at Fruitgrowers Reservoir (ssp *plesius*).
- Pygmy Nuthatch** ◇ *Sitta pygmaea*: Very common in the Ponderosa forests (ssp *melanotis*).
- Red-breasted Nuthatch** ◇ *Sitta canadensis*: One at Fawnbrook Inn, Allenspark.
- White-breasted Nuthatch** *Sitta carolinensis*: Common in the foothill forests (ssp *nelsoni*).
- Brown Creeper** ◇ *Certhia americana*: One at Silverthorne was our first on this tour for 10 years!
- Northern Mockingbird** *Mimus polyglottos*: Two at Higbee Canyon.
- Sage Thrasher** ◇ *Oreoscoptes montanus*: Two at Blue Mesa and one at Mack.
- Curve-billed Thrasher** ◇ *Toxostoma rufum*: Three Pueblo West, one Cottonwood Canyon and two Higbee (ssp *celsum*).
- European Starling (Common S)** *Sturnus vulgaris*: Widespread and common.
- Eastern Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia sialis*: Only one, at Hale Ponds.
- Western Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia mexicana*: Three at Genessee Mountain Park and one at Salida.
- Mountain Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia currucoides*: Only 10 seen = 180 fewer than last time!
- Townsend's Solitaire** ◇ *Myadestes townsendi*: Two at The Black Canyon of the Gunnison and three at Higbee Canyon.
- American Robin** *Turdus migratorius*: Widespread and common.
- American Dipper** *Cinclus mexicanus*: One at Silverthorne (ssp *unicolor*).
- House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*: Widespread and locally common.
- Evening Grosbeak** ◇ *Coccothraustes vespertinus*: A single bird seen and another heard in Lamar (ssp *brooksi*).
- Pine Grosbeak** ◇ *Pinicola enucleator*: Three (one male) Moose Visitor Centre, Gould and two (one male) at Silverthorne.
- Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch** ◇ *Leucosticte tephrocotis*: Up to c.150 at Silverthorne, incl. c.20 'Hepburn's' form.
- Black Rosy-Finch** ◇ *Leucosticte atrata*: Two sightings at Silverthorne were very welcome!
- Brown-capped Rosy-Finch** ◇ *Leucosticte australis*: Up to c.450 at Silverthorne.



Black-throated Sparrow, near Grand Junction (above) and Black Rosy-Finch, Silverthorne (below).



Harris's Sparrow, Melody Tempel Grove, Lamar.

- Cassin's Finch** ◊ *Carpodacus cassinii*: A tally of c.45 was a high number for this tour. **NT**
- House Finch** *Carpodacus mexicanus*: Common and widespread (ssp *frontalis*).
- Red Crossbill (Common Crossbill)** *Loxia curvirostra*: Up to six at Silverthorne and c.50 at Allenspark.
- American Goldfinch** *Carduelis tristis*: Four at Briggsdale were the first (ssp *pallida*).
- Myrtle Warbler** *Setophaga coronata*: Around five at Lamar.
- Audubon's Warbler** ◊ *Setophaga auduboni*: C.10 Lamar plus an intergrade Myrtle/Audubon's Warbler Beecher Island.
- Yellow-headed Blackbird** *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*: One at Pueblo West and two at Fruitgrower's Res.
- Western Meadowlark** *Sturnella neglecta*: Widespread and very common (ssp *neglecta*).
- Red-winged Blackbird** *Agelaius phoeniceus*: Widespread and very common (ssp *fortis*).
- Brown-headed Cowbird** *Molothrus ater*: The first were 15 at Pueblo West.
- Brewer's Blackbird** *Euphagus cyanocephalus*: One at Beecher Island.
- Common Grackle** *Quiscalus quiscula*: Widespread and locally common (ssp *versicolor*).
- Great-tailed Grackle** *Quiscalus mexicanus*: C.10 at Pueblo West then a scatter of birds (ssp *monsoni* or *prosopidicola*).
- Song Sparrow** *Melospiza melodia*: Small numbers seen throughout (ssp *juddi*).
- Lincoln's Sparrow** ◊ *Melospiza lincolni*: Singles at Red Rocks, Blue Heron Ponds, Allenspark and Lamar.
- Harris's Sparrow** ◊ *Zonotrichia querula*: Two at Melody Tempel Grove.
- White-crowned Sparrow** *Zonotrichia leucophrys*: A total of c.200, max. c.100 at Melody Tempel Grove (ssp *gambelii*).
- Golden-crowned Sparrow** ◊ *Zonotrichia atricapilla*: One (at last!) at Red Rocks.
- Oregon Junco** ◊ *Junco [hyemalis] oregonus*: One at Beecher Island and two at Lamar.
- Pink-sided Junco** ◊ *Junco [hyemalis] mearnsi*: Scattered records throughout.
- Grey-headed Junco** ◊ *Junco [hyemalis] caniceps*: Scattered records throughout the tour with a max. of 40 at Gould.
- Savannah Sparrow** *Passerculus sandwichensis*: Two at Holly (ssp *nevadensis*). (NL)
- Vesper Sparrow** ◊ *Pooecetes gramineus*: Maximum c.20 in the south (ssp *confinis*).
- Black-throated Sparrow** *Amphispiza bilineata*: Six near Grand Junction (ssp *deserticola*).
- Sagebrush Sparrow** ◊ *Amphispiza nevadensis*: One near the Utah border northwest of Mack.
- Rufous-crowned Sparrow** ◊ *Aimophila ruficeps*: One near Cañon City and one at Higbee Canyon (ssp *eremoeca*).
- Spotted Towhee** ◊ *Pipilo maculatus*: C.10 at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison (ssp *arcticus*).
- Canyon Towhee** ◊ *Pipilo fuscus*: Two at each of Cottonwood and Higbee Canyons (ssp *mesatus*).
- McCown's Longspur** ◊ *Calcarius mccownii*: Eight noted on the northern plains.
- Chestnut-collared Longspur** ◊ *Calcarius ornatus*: Seven noted on the northern plains. **NT**



Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.

MAMMALS

- Black-tailed Jackrabbit** *Lepus californicus*: Singles at Cottonwood Canyon and Lake Cheraw. **White-tailed Jackrabbit** *Lepus townsendii*: Five near Coalmont in North Park.
- Desert Cottontail** *Sylvilagus audubonii*: A couple of sightings.
- Eastern Cottontail** *Sylvilagus floridanus*: Two at Lamar.
- Mountain Cottontail (Nuttall's Cottontail)** *Sylvilagus nuttallii*: C.10 Black Canyon of the Gunnison were the first.
- Abert's Squirrel (Tassel-eared Squirrel)** *Sciurus aberti*: Two at Allenspark.
- Eastern Fox Squirrel** *Sciurus niger*: One at Red Rocks was the first of several.
- Yellow-bellied Marmot** *Marmota flaviventris*: Four between Wolcott and Steamboat.
- Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilus lateralis*: Up to three at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- Variiegated Ground Squirrel (Rock Ground Squirrel)** *Spermophilus variegatus*: Two Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- Wyoming Ground Squirrel** *Spermophilus elegans*: Common in North Park.
- Gunnison's Prairie Dog** *Cynomys gunnisoni*: Three near Doyleville in the Gunnison Basin.
- White-tailed Prairie Dog** *Cynomys leucurus*: Common in the northwest.
- Black-tailed Prairie Dog** *Cynomys ludovicianus*: Very common on the plains.
- Least Chipmunk** *Tamias minimus*: Noted at Waunita Springs and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- Colorado Chipmunk** *Tamias quadrivittatus*: One at Red Rocks was the first of a scatter of sightings.
- American Red Squirrel** *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*: One at Silverthorne was the first of several.
- Long-tailed Vole** *Microtus longicaudus*: Several at the Moose Visitor Centre, Gould.
- Sagebrush Vole** *Lemmiscus curtatus*: Common at the Steamboat Sharp-tailed Grouse lek.
- Muskrat** *Ondatra zibethicus*: One at Steamboat and two at Coalmont.
- Hispid Cotton Rat** *Sigmodon hispidus*: Two in Pubelo West.
- Bobcat** *Lynx rufus*: One at Sunset View, The Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes*: There at Silverthorne.
- Coyote** *Canis latrans*: Singles seen at Waunita Springs and Burlington.
- Striped Skunk** *Mephitis mephitis*: Nice views of one in the headlights on the way to the Holly Lesser Prairie Chicken lek.
- Northern Raccoon** *Procyon lotor*: One at Red Rocks.
- Elk** *Cervus canadensis*: Around 15 in the snow at Genessee Mountain Park.
- Moose (Elk)** *Alces alces*: One at Allenspark was a surprise.



Yellow-bellied Marmot, near Wolcott.

Mule Deer *Odocoileus hemionus*: A good scatter of sightings.

Pronghorn (P Antelope) *Antilocapra americana*: A maximum of c.50 on the northern plains.

Bighorn Sheep *Ovis canadensis*: Around 45 in the Georgetown area.