



Sharp-tailed Grouse, near Steamboat Springs (Mike Watson).

COLORADO

29 MARCH – 10 APRIL 2017

LEADERS: MIKE WATSON and CRAIG ROBSON

Our 2017 'Ultimate Grousequest' to the Rocky Mountains and High Plains of Colorado (plus a detour into each of neighbouring Kansas, Oklahoma and Utah) marked our seventh clean sweep in a row of the 'magnificent seven': White-tailed Ptarmigan (I still haven't missed it yet!); Greater and Lesser Prairie Chickens; Dusky Grouse; Sharp-tailed, Gunnison and Sage Grouse. Again we experienced some dramatic weather as warm air from the Gulf of Mexico, which caused havoc in the form of torrential rain as well as the usual winter snowstorms. As ever, Colorado is not just about chickens and our tally included plenty of other sought-after Nearctic birds including Cackling Goose, Barrow's Goldeneye, Scaled, Gambel's and Northern Bobwhite Quails; Wild Turkey; Barrow's Goldeneye; Western and Clark's Grebes; Ferruginous Hawk; Rough-legged Buzzard (or Hawk); Prairie Falcon; Sandhill Crane; Mountain Plover; Bonaparte's, Franklin's and California Gulls; Greater Roadrunner, Great Horned and Burrowing Owls; White-throated Swift, Lewis's and American Three-toed (5) Woodpeckers; Williamson's Sapsucker; Grey, Pinyon and the recently-split Woodhouse's Scrub Jays; Clark's Nutcracker; Chihuahuan Raven; Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees; Juniper Titmouse; Rock, Canyon and Marsh Wrens; Pygmy, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches; Sage and Curve-billed Thrashers; the pretty bluebird trio of Eastern, Western and Mountain; 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; Harris's (six), Sagebrush, Black-throated and Rufous-crowned Sparrows; Cassiar, Pink-sided and



Sage Grouse, North Park (Mike Watson).

Grey-headed Juncos and finally both Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs on the prairie. Five 'write-ins' for this tour included: Virginia Rail, American Barn Owl, Black Phoebe, Field Sparrow and (at last!) Northern Pygmy Owl. However, there were hardly any spring visitors and we were warbler-free again. Colorado is great for mammals and an American Marten was new for us on this itinerary. Back after an absence of 10 years, an American Badger watching catching a Wyoming Ground Squirrel is also worth a mention. Our 2017 road trip clocked up more than 3000 miles in less than two weeks through some of the most spectacular scenery on the continent. We love Colorado in spring! We are always thinking about reasons to visit somewhere sooner rather than later and there are a couple of good reasons not to leave Colorado until later. First of all Gunnison Grouse has been uplisted to 'endangered' and the numbers we see at the only public access lek continue to dwindle and move further away. Secondly, we are now on our fourth Lesser Prairie Chicken lek within ten years as the previous three have collapsed completely and now numbers at the fourth and latest lek have more than halved in one year. No doubt we will be looking for another lek soon. One only has to look at the blue pins on eBird disappear as you move the date range forwards to follow its decline and I expect this species to be uplisted soon as well.

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 this time we saw two winter storms, strong winds and torrential rain! As usual our 2017 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. Some successful scouting again boded well for the tour and there had been some significant snowfall this winter. In fact the snow pack up in the mountains was the deepest I have ever seen at this time of year – great news for the spring snowmelt and everything that depends on it from the alpine wildlife to that on the plains. Happily my favourite bar in Colorado, Lucha Cantina (formerly the Red Ram) in Georgetown, is still going strong and we enjoyed some excellent Tex Mex food. In fact this bar was a favourite of John Denver who filmed several TV Christmas specials there. It also featured in Clint Eastwood's 1978 film *'Every which way but loose'*. Georgetown is a very pretty former mining centre, in fact this area was the site of Colorado's first silver mines, opened in 1864, leading to Georgetown being known as the *'Silver Queen of the Rockies'*, owing to its rich deposits of the precious metal.



Silverthorne (Mike Watson).

There are some reliable feeders in the Silverthorne area and they came up trumps for us again, most notably with the highly sought-after Black Rosy Finch and it did not take long to pick one out amongst a rosy finch swarm. We usually only see this tricky bird once on the circuit and it is always welcome sooner rather than later! It is 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 (Heppburn's, Grey-crowned and Brown-capped), also at the feeders and in all the rosy finch flocks in a ten miles radius numbered almost 300 birds. However, the feeders we visit are in residential areas and there have been several incidents of birders going uninvited onto properties, so they are generally kept quiet. Also here Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers provided a good comparison and other new birds included: Northern Flickers; several Steller's Jays; two each of Grey Jay and Clark's Nutcracker; Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees; point blank Pygmy Nuthatches; Western and Mountain Bluebirds; Pine Grosbeak (four females), Pine Siskin, Red Crossbill and Grey-headed Junco. After a great genuine American breakfast at the Mountain Lion Cafe in Silverthorne we enjoyed some other nice birds in this area. An introduction for some to Nearctic waterfowl and included several *parvipes* form Canada Geese amongst the local birds, American Wigeon, Cinnamon and Green-winged Teals, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Common Merganser. However, the real star of this show on a small lake, now in a residential area was a drake Barrow's Goldneye. Previously to be expected, they have become quite scarce in recent years. Nearby one of the artificial nest platforms had attracted a Bald Eagle but the ospreys had not returned to their regular roadside nest site yet.

A storm was on the way in the coming days as we drove east to make the most of the fair weather and see some forest birds. Genessee Mountain Park is a regular destination for us on this itinerary and after we had worked out the current access (many of the roads leading into the park have been closed for some reason?) we finally reached a nice picnic spot among ancient Ponderosa Pine trees. The sky had clouded over and although it was still quite warm there were a few spots of rain in the air as we started our search of the open forest that cloaks the summit of the mountain. These were the first drops of rain I had ever seen in Colorado! All precipitation at this time of year usually falls as snow. It took a little time but eventually we were able to track down a terrific pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers that afforded some excellent views for all. The gaudy male really is one of the best looking woodpeckers of all and no wonder the Cornell Institute chose it as their logo. Also here we added White-breasted Nuthatch and enjoyed some good looks at Western Bluebird.



Brown-capped Rosy Finch and a male Cassin's Finch (Mike Watson)



White-tailed Ptarmigan (Mike Watson).

Our final session today involved retracing our steps back across Denver to Aurora, where at Westerly Creek we relocated the White-crowned Sparrow flock we had recce'd a few days previously. Foraging in the leaf litter by the trail with them was the continuing Harris's Sparrow. The Rockies of Colorado mark the western edge of its winter range and it migrates up and down the middle of the USA from Canada to northern Texas. It is more commonly found to the east in Kansas, however, until lately, who goes there? American Robins were on the move here with around 40, Say's Phoebe was new for the tour as were American Goldfinch and Common Grackle. So, not a bad first day, the rosy finches are always a worry and we saw some useful mountain forest birds that would save us time later.

Next morning we woke up and it was snowing, well sleet to be more precise. However, we were still able get to some nice habitat in the mountains seeing a pair of both Grey Jay and Pine Grosbeak plus a flyover American Three-toed Woodpecker along the way. There were a lot of Red Crossbills up here too, a sign of a good cone crop. After a while we left the dark clouds below us in the valley and could now see some blue sky here and there! Fantastic! Even more fantastic was the male White-tailed Ptarmigan we were able to watch at point blank range at our feet here. Only a few dark feathers around its neck, this was one of the same birds we had seen a couple of days previously. Apart from that its only non-white features are its eye, bill and claws and the tiny shrunken red comb above its eye. This was an almost spiritual moment up here in a winter snowy mountain landscape. We knew that the weather was forecast to deteriorate by lunchtime so it was time to descend while the going was good. A pair of three-toed woodpeckers showed beautifully, the male flashing his yellow crown at us and as we neared the car I could hear the distant repeated whistle of a pygmy owl. I guessed Craig and the rest of the group must be here by now? As I drew closer I saw that his car was nowhere to be seen. Crikey it was a 'real' pygmy owl! Pretty soon we had all caught up and were watching the owl calling from the tops of pine snags around the parking area. Nasty fierce-looking little creature it was! This was a massive bonus as although I've seen them several times in Colorado before I had never managed to see one on the tour itself. Out of signal we hastened downhill looking for Craig and soon discovered that he had not seen the owl, although he had spent some time looking where we had it and no doubt woken it up. No time to chat then, he bombed up the road just in time and everyone caught up with it. Phew! It would have been a cruel blow to miss the both the ptarmigan and the owl!



At last! Northern Pygmy Owl (Craig Robson).

They had also seen a pair of American Three-toed Woodpeckers lower down the slopes, making a total of five birds today and they added some other very nice forest birds to the trip list: Golden and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Townsend's Solitaire and Red-breasted Nuthatch. As we checked out, the bad weather was already here. The flock of Bighorn sheep was next to I70 near the Georgetown exit and off we went, eastwards to the plains. Apart from the last stretch before Wray in Colorado's far eastern Yuma County, this was a really horrible journey, aquaplaning on the interstate. The rain eased towards the end of the afternoon and we had some time to admire roadside birds near Wray like Loggerhead Shrike and Wild Turkey.

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 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 continues to get milder each time.

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 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



Mountain Chickadee (above) and Pine Siskin (Mike Watson).



Greater Prairie Chicken, Kitzmiller Ranch, Wray (Mike Watson).

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 up on 2015 with a total of 31 birds that again included 7 females, the cause of much excitement amongst the males. Josh, the local Department of Wildlife Officer advised that they continue to do quite well in the area surrounding Wray. After a couple of hours we were driven back to our friendly hosts at the 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 was back in his Stetson!) introduced his team and gave a short speech explaining how businesses in the local community support the prairie chicken tours by contributing food and other items for the breakfast. A very worthy cause.

Heading south from Wray, we paused at Beecher Island battleground, where 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 the jay and bluebird as well as a nice surprise in the form of a Field Sparrow, a BQ CO lifer no less! We flushed the only Wilson's Snipe of the tour here and had some nice looks at Downy Woodpecker (of an eastern form here), Golden and Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Townsend's Solitaire (great catch ups for some), White-breasted Nuthatch (also of an eastern form) and five Lincoln's Sparrows, mostly hiding in the brush piles of fallen cottonwoods. Birding this landscape is always very atmospheric, the twisted limbs of the cottonwoods bent over into contorted figures. We continued south from Beecher Island, seeing an excellent Prairie Falcon on a roadside telegraph pole but the weather was closing in again and rain was soon lashing down. We were very lucky to get back onto the black top just in time as farm roads turned into a slippery mess. It was a real effort to make forward progress uphill at times in the van. We turned left and entered Kansas and eventually rolled into cowboy town Dodge City, the site of Boot Hill, on a damp and grey evening.



Cottonwoods at Beecher Island Battleground (Mike Watson).

We had a quick look at one of the possible routes to the next morning's Lesser Prairie Chicken lek and turned back immediately. Oh dear, it was truly horrible out here. The rain had been torrential and fields were flooded with the slightest incline presenting a serious problem to our van. We spent some time figuring out a route, which involved the shortest distance on farm roads off the tarmac and next morning well before dawn we gave it a shot. We only managed a couple of kilometres off the tarmac before the van crawled to a standstill, its tyres coated with sticky mud and it refused to move any further, ugh! A brief effort to get it going again failed so we resorted to ferrying folks in two shuttle runs to the Lesser Prairie Chicken site. Just as well we didn't attempt to take the van further as we saw that it would have been hopelessly stuck in deep mud soon afterwards. The Suburban's 4WD made easy albeit slow work of the worst mud-filled dips in the road, not exactly conditions you would expect in the suburbs and it was nice to see that it can behave as a proper off-road vehicle if necessary! Everyone in place, Craig went back to park the vehicle and as he did a Lesser Prairie Chicken flew in and landed next to him. We hurried back and although this bird quickly left the scene we all eventually had some nice scope views of five birds lekking on the adjacent pasture, a good deal of which was covered with floodwater. We could see their red air sacks clearly and their slightly more subdued display routine than their Greater relatives. While Craig started ferrying folks back the rest of us set off walking to reduce the amount of mud he had to negotiate, seeing a mini flock of four Harris's Sparrows in the process as well as another prairie chicken a couple of kilometres on from the previous ones. Vesper Sparrows and Brown-headed Cowbirds were common here and Craig found three Northern Bobwhites that we caught up with. A flock of Brewer's Blackbirds on the power lines here were the only ones of the tour. The habitat here in Kansas is even more screwed up than in Colorado, with the prairie chickens surviving in small isolated plots of un-ploughed prairie surrounded by agriculture. A sad state.

Back at the stuck-fast van we were lucky to have a very kind local farmer drive by and offer assistance. He fetched a chain and towed me backwards by the axle out of the mud, which took an eternity but eventually we reached the safety of the tarmac again and breathed a huge sigh of relief. We had only lost a few hours and were still on track to get back to Colorado by evening. We stopped for a bit of vegetation in a bare field that initially looked like a... '*Mountain Plover!*' said David but not the twig I stopped for, just to the right of it was a pair of real Mountain Plovers! Well that was spooky! We walked out and got some closer views as well as photos to record the event. One day I might start a campaign to rename this bird '*High Plains Dotterel!*'



A Mountain Plover looks for danger in the sky near Richfield, Kansas (Mike Watson).

Just as well that we found it here as one of my other sites for it has become overgrown – something has happened to the once enormous prairie dogtown there. We continued south through Elkhart and paused for an obligatory photo next to the Oklahoma ‘Native America’ sign on the outskirts of the town. (Thankfully) we are not in Kansas (anymore). For a bit of fun we started an OK list and managed 20 before entering Colorado by nightfall. That list included a few interesting sightings, particularly a flock of 107 Long-billed Curlews in roadside crops east of Boise City, easily the biggest flock I’ve ever seen of this species. We also had some instructive looks at Chihuahuan Ravens, the common raven in these parts. Our Sunday evening meal was also in OK at Boise City’s Pizza Hut, there’s nowhere else open on Sunday for miles around and it was that or Subway in Springfield!!! Bonanza was showing on the TV at Pizza Hut, it seems like time stood still here. Back in Colorado a Golden Eagle on the Comanche National Grassland greeted us with some wonderful storm cloud formations on the horizon. This evening’s accommodation, the Stage Stop in Springfield was also memorable, a delightful period building with a large picture of John Wayne on the landing.

As so often on our Colorado tours, our itinerary was significantly affected by weather events and to follow the torrential rain, next up another winter storm was already on the way from the west. This was forecast to bring snow to the Front Range and that would surely block Monarch Pass, which is prone to closure. Our overnight stay in Pueblo was cancelled and we brought forward our arrival in Gunnison by one night, which meant that we had to squeeze two days of birding into one and get to Gunnison tomorrow evening. Yikes! So, picking the biggest hitting locations along this route we headed out on a big day/bird race to the mountains.

On the edge of the Comanche, Higbee Valley proved a great substitute for our usual stop at Cottonwood Canyon with almost all of the southern CO specialities seen in a couple of hours. We started with Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Rufous-crowned Sparrow and Canyon Towhee. A gang of 36 turkeys crossed the road in front of us, a Sharp-shinned Hawk was our only one of the tour, Rock and Canyon Wrens showed nicely on the low escarpment and a Northern Mockingbird entertained us for a while. East met west with both Eastern and Say’s Phoebes here. At the furthest point we intended to stop the coo-ing sound of a singing Greater Roadrunner was heard and there he was. Standing on the edge of the escarpment as they often do. He even came down to check us out and afforded some superb views! On our way out we connected with five Scaled Quail and a Curve-billed Thrasher, excellent stuff!



Greater Roadrunner, Higbee Valley (Mike Watson).

Next stop was Holbrook Reservoir near Swink in the Arkansas Valley. Clark's Grebe was ticked off here as well as a good selection of other birds such as Bufflehead, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Horned and Western Grebes and Bald Eagle. The water level was the highest I have ever seen it so no shorebirds of note this time. Cattails Crossing at Pueblo West is another regular stop of mine, only just off the route west and it always produces something interesting. The small lake had Pied-billed Grebe, a flock of enormous (presumably *moffitti*) Canada Geese was accompanied by a tiny Cackling Goose, the size of a duck and probably Taverner's Goose with not such a stubby bill and a pale breast. In the tiny cactus garden a Curve-billed Thrasher obliged for the paparazzi in spring blossom and a small covey of Scaled Quails made off across a car park!

So far so good and no sign of any snow yet today. Continuing west up the Arkansas Valley we left the plains behind and entered the Rockies once again, stopping off for Pinyon Jay. This was the only one we saw on the tour, in the same residential area as the last two visits. There was no sign of Hooded Merganser or Wood Duck on nearby Sands Lake but instead a young drake Barrow's Goldeneye was a good record. We had still not yet crossed the divide to Gunnison so we left Salida ('the exit') and started uphill to Monarch Pass. No need to stop here after our success at Georgetown so we pressed on to Gunnison for the night. We had beaten the snow.

Next morning we woke up and it was snowing, again. We had a day to fill here while we sat out the storm. It was pretty cold too as we started out towards Crested Butte, wondering how far we would get. After a couple of slides in atrocious conditions, the answer was 'not very'. We turned back to Gunnison and decided to try somewhere within easier reach of town, like the cemetery. This is still an eBird hotspot and has produced some interesting birds. The best we could manage was some great views of a pair of Great Horned Owls in the tall pine trees, 18 Sandhill Cranes in nearby fields, Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatch and Cassin's Finch. After elevenses the weather had eased, the road had been thoroughly cleared and we could get to Crested Butte without further incident. A Coyote was spotted running across a snowy landscape on the outskirts of the resort and we had a quick look in town but there were no obvious bird feeders in operation. However, up the hill in Mount Crested Butte we could see some small flocks of rosy finches in trees near some homes. Must be a feeder nearby? There were several actually and eventually around 70 Rosy Finches, including three 'Brown-cheeked' Grey-crowned, three 'Hepburns' and most importantly two Blacks. They came and went from the nearby forest so could be easily missed on a single sweep. We enjoyed some great views from the vehicles through flurries of snowflakes as they swarmed around the tiny feeders, wonderful stuff! No



Curve-billed Thrasher, Cattails Crossing, Pueblo West, posing nicely for the paparazzi! (Mike Watson).

Evening Grosbeak yet though in some good places for it. The road between Gunnison and Crested Butte has some Gunnison Prairie Dog colonies and we could watch these subtly different little animals for a while before they disappeared down their burrows. There were also around 70 Mountain Bluebirds here too no doubt seeking refuge lower down from the bad weather. Back down at Gunnison we took a stroll along Riverwalk Drive, a subdivision plonked in some nice riverine woodland. There was a feeder here with a Lincoln's Sparrow and an elusive Cassiar Junco amongst c60 other juncos – Grey-headed and Pink-sided, however, there was nothing else of particular note. A message from my friend Marjorie in Pueblo read 'four inches and still snowing' so surely we made the right decision to bring our arrival here early.

Our next chicken appointment, with Gunnison Grouse, was the following morning. 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. This transpired to be the coldest morning of the tour at minus 11 Celsius. As the first rays of light started to illuminate the hillside across the valley from us we could eventually make out a couple of dark shapes with spiky tails, occasionally bobbing up and down. The grouse moved their lek to this ridge in 2014 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 lo plumes in the process. We only managed four males and one female at the lek, way down on our previous visits but there are apparently more of them just over the skyline. We continue to wonder what will become of this lek viewing arrangement?

After the best breakfast of the tour in town we made a couple of stops by Blue Mesa Reservoir, however, again this time it was almost completely ice-free. Prior to 2015 I had never seen it unfrozen at this time of year. On its calm waters were Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead (drake), Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers. On the sagebrush flats along its shores we had our first looks at Sage Thrashers but otherwise the area was very quiet as the temperature rose. We spent the rest of the afternoon in the mountains near Montrose at the awe-inspiring Black Canyon of the Gunnison, where the highlight was the fantastic Dusky Grouse, which duly obliged in the roadside oak scrub, a male at our feet as well as 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



Dusky Grouse at the awesome Black Canyon of the Gunnison (Mike Watson).

some sought-after bird species and we had plenty of time for a hike this year. Although it failed to turn up the hoped for Red-naped Sapsucker, we enjoyed some great views of Woodhouse's Scrub Jay, American Bushtit and Spotted Towhee. Red-breasted Nuthatches and a couple of Townsend's Solitaires in the late afternoon sun completed the catch up for some and a few of us saw a Slate-coloured Fox Sparrow in the dense oak scrub. We also ticked off the gorgeous Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel and Variegated Rock Squirrel. Again, I have never seen so little snow here on our previous visits to this region.

The Black Canyon was declared a national monument in 1933, encompassing 14 miles of the canyon's 48 miles length. Geologist Wallace Hansen wrote "*Some are longer, some are deeper, some are narrower, and a few have walls as steep but no other canyon in North America combines the depth, narrowness, sheerness and sombre countenance of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison*". In fact in only 48 miles in the Black Canyon the Gunnison River loses more elevation than the 1,500 mile Mississippi River does from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico and it was this downward pressure that allowed the river to cut such a deep gorge in the tough uplifted rock through which it flows. The river has now been tamed by dams upstream as well as the 5.8 mile Gunnison Diversion Tunnel that takes water to the nearby Uncompahgre Valley and no longer has the same erosive power as when it owed in flood with a force of approximately 2.75 million horsepower! The Black Canyon is one of North America's best - kept secrets and at its deepest the gorge is 844 metres deep (easily more than two Empire State Buildings!). It is certainly one of the geological wonders of the continent. We enjoyed views from the lookouts at Pulpit Rock, the Painted Wall and Warner Point.

We like the Black Canyon so much that we returned the following morning but again were unable to track down a Red-naped Sapsucker. We saw three Dusky Grouse this time, two males and a female and more importantly everyone got a great view of Slate-coloured Fox Sparrow, this time it ventured right to the top of a small oak. Also here were Clark's Nutcracker and the excellent Juniper Titmouse, both of which showed beautifully.

Leaving the Montrose area, our next port of call was Sweitzer Lake near Delta. We had some waterbirds to catch up on with the omission of the wetlands we usually visit in the Arkansas Valley. Of note here were a Clark's Grebe amongst the Westerns and a Greater Yellowlegs but nowt else so we pressed on to Fruitgrower's Reservoir near Orchard City for a birding lunch stop. We always add some good birds to the list here and this time was no exception with Eared Grebe, American White Pelican, Belted Kingfisher and Marsh Wren for



The Painted Wall, Black Canyon of the Gunnison (Mike Watson).



Slate-coloured Fox Sparrow, Black Canyon of the Gunnison (Mike Watson).

all. Craig had a Yellow-headed Blackbird, which quickly did a bunk. However, the Lewis's Woodpecker 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 this super-smart, crow-like woodpecker. This is a scarce bird and we usually only see it once on each tour and never bump into it unexpectedly. Happily they have stayed put in the same trees for years here. On our way north we had time to call in at Escalante Canyon where the riverbank lovers, a pair of Black Phoebes, were quickly spotted from the bridge here, another BQ CO lifer! Out of Grand Junction towards Colorado National Monument Craig spotted a Gambel's Quail on a roadside fence post that obligingly stood still until we all had a good view of it.

The second of our two outstanding 'birds and scenery' experiences today was Colorado National Monument in the Grand Junction area, which is 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. We saw some delightful little ginger Hopi Chipmunks and the perky little Juniper Titmouse with ease, only a stone's throw from the rim of an impressive canyon, a regular place for it. 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 badlands opposite and the menacing snow-clad table mountain of the Grand Mesa to the south. This time there were some Desert Bighorns by the roadside and one even on it. This short-horned subspecies of Bighorn was reintroduced to the area in 1979 and around 40 live in the national monument. The evening's owling session was again very frustrating in a strong wind. I don't think we will bother again as suitable conditions to hear a Boreal Owl seem to be so infrequent, I've managed to hear it only twice from six attempts and haven't seen it yet.

Next morning we started in a spectacular canyon setting, the appropriately named Devil's Kitchen, where we had some very nice looks at Black-throated Sparrow. With the newly split Sagebrush Sparrow next on our hit list we drove to within a stone's throw of the Utah border, where, after a brief roadside sighting, we soon found a pair of these very smart little sparrows in the usual area of waist-high sagebrush. There was not much else here apart from three Loggerhead Shrikes and a distant Golden Eagle. A brief foray into Utah moved my state list on a fraction but more importantly at last we caught up with Ferruginous Hawk, a young pale morph bird. Time was ticking away back inside the CO state boundary so we only had a quick look for Brewer's Sparrow



Wedding Canyon, Colorado National Monument (Mike Watson).



Sagebrush Sparrow, near Mack (Mike Watson).

in an area where it breeds, although we were probably a little early for it yet anyway. On a tiny pool out on the prairie dotted with lovely spring flowers a Bufflehead had a drake Cinnamon Teal and three American Avocets for company and there was a Buff-bellied Pipit for Craig only. White-tailed Prairie Dog is *the* prairie dog out west here and we had some good looks at them. We stopped briefly at Coal Creek Canyon, Cameo for the almost unmentionable Chukar but we only had five seconds to spare for this introduced species and moved on when there was no sight or sound quickly. With a long way to go to Steamboat Springs in the Yampa Valley we needed to make tracks.

The journey was quite eventful from a mammal perspective. Somewhere between Meeker and Hayden a conversation between the vehicles went something like *'Did you see that mammal in the field? I think it might have been a marmot so I'm going back for it'*. Wow! It wasn't a marmot but instead a badger, digging for something in a Wyoming Ground Squirrel colony, surrounded by concerned ground squirrels and sure enough it soon sat up with a young ground squirrel in its jaws and proceeded to give it a good shaking. Things did not end well for the poor ground squirrel. The next lump we saw was indeed a Yellow-bellied Marmot that took refuge in a section of plastic pipe. Just in time as a herd of cows appeared with attendant farmer on a quad bike. We arrived in Steamboat right on time, so far so good, five grouse out of seven, only two to go. In the early 1800s the first Europeans arrived here and likened the sound of the mineral spring to that of a steam-boat'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.

Next morning marked the low point of the tour. We rolled up at the traditional site for Sharp-tailed Grouse to find a couple of other vehicles already there. One was a tour van with participants wandering around, setting up gear and their guide walking down the road next to where the grouse usually lek!!!****?? They claimed the grouse had not been seen for the previous days so we headed off rapidly to another lek some distance away. Fortunately there were still ten birds present here and a couple of them right next to the farm track affording some close views, including some of their foot stomping dance. Phew! They are members of the same genus as the prairie chickens and it might be nice if they had bore that name instead of plain old grouse?



Evening Grosbeak, Steamboat Springs (Mike Watson).

Back at Steamboat we followed up a recent Evening Grosbeak report and, after a quick look at a mother Moose and her calf eating a tree in someone's front yard (complete with an Elmer Fudd-alike geriatric local sounding his horn at them), BOOM, there they were! Now this really is another unmissable bird on this itinerary and a little nomadic - I have never seen it at the same location twice so it is always a worry, especially in view of its potential as a split in the future. We visited another new site this year, Stagecoach Reservoir, looking for a Trumpeter Swan, which had been reported from here for a while. There was no sign of the big white thing but we did see a breeding plumage Common Loon, Horned Grebe and a pair of Peregrines chasing the ducks here.

Crossing the dreaded Rabbit Ears pass on snow-free roads again was very welcome indeed but, as always seems to be the case we knew that snow was on its way. I wrote these words in 2015 and here we were again in almost exactly the same situation. As always North Park was great for large raptors and we saw three Golden Eagles and two Rough-legged Hawks from the roads here. We also had a large young bull moose cross the road in front of us and quickly bound away across the prairie. 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'*.

Walden Reservoir is another favourite stop on the circuit and always adds to the trip list. This time it was Canvasback, Marbled Godwit, California and Bonaparte's Gulls. Other interesting birds, which were seen from the shelter of the vehicles on a very windy afternoon, included Cinnamon Teal and American White Pelican. We still had time for a visit to the Moose Visitor Center at Gould, on the edge of the forest before the weather closed in. Storm clouds were gathering and there were some flakes of snow in the air. The feeders were busy as always but with a rather limited selection of birds this afternoon, of which Pine Siskin and Cassin's Finch were the most notable. However, one of the highlights of the tour, animal, vegetable or mineral, was the excellent American Marten sat low in a pine tree watching the feeders. Another 'write-in' to our list and it allowed crazy close approach too!



American Marten, Moose Visitor Center, Gould (Mike Watson).

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 still being experienced, 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 approximate 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. This is starting to show in the respective abundance of these birds on our tours. The crows remain tough but the woodpecker gets easier. Apparently the bottom has also dropped out of the firewood market! We returned to Walden and our really lovely 'non-chain' motel. We like Walden a lot! So does everyone else and we met friends with the Sunbird/Wings group at the steak house this evening.

We woke up next morning and it was snowing. Actually I had woken up about an hour before my alarm went off, took a quick look out of the window and it was not snowing yet as a small group of Mule Deer walked down the middle of the street. As we loaded up it was now snowing quite heavily and had already covered everything with a couple of inches. So off we went at a snail's pace knowing the edges of the road were soft and unforgiving. We couldn't afford any delay more than half an hour or so and a journey that usually takes about twenty minutes took an hour this time as the snow continued to fall. Anyway as long as we made it to the Sage Grouse we would see the birds and we could worry about our next move after that. The storm was forecast to pass by afternoon and we could get anywhere then. The grouse are always there even in deep snow and sure enough they were already in full swing when we arrived long before dawn. We lined up, sat back and watched the action. 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



Sage Grouse, North Park (Mike Watson).

a Sage Grouse lek is a must-see experience for world birders, just as impressive as a bird of paradise lek in my opinion. All was not well for long though, all of a sudden there was a spook and all but three or four birds flew off. Had we done something to scare them or had someone else in the handful of other vehicles here done something? We later learnt that a Coyote had walked past the lek out of sight from us and put them up. Eventually the remainers did some lekking but it was not until we headed back away from the main lek that we encountered a satellite lek of about ten birds and they were really going for it, so we did get the full Sage Grouse experience after all, with some fighting too.

A few Horned Larks were dotted along the roadsides as we left and headed south towards Kremmling, rather than risk crossing Cameron Pass and then the Cache La Poudre Valley and its one million dangerous bends before we got anywhere near Fort Collins. I am getting used to the long southern detour back to the plains now. As we neared Kremmling we started to leave the worst of the storm behind us and we could sit back and enjoy a proper breakfast at the Moose Café there, another of our favourites. After breakfast we had some great looks at Prairie Falcon, the North American Saker counterpart, along the silt cliffs, a pair at one nest and a single at another, no more than 200m apart. No sign of Golden Eagle near its huge tumbledown nest this year though. So that's it! Well not quite, our 7/7 grouse was actually only 6.5/7 as half the group had missed the ptarmigan the first time around and that made the decision to take the long southern route back to the plains much easier but it was going to squeeze our time to see the longspurs on the Pawnee, although we would still have the following morning for that as well if necessary. To cut a long story short Craig managed to find a ptarmigan for everyone and we ended up with some very happy grouse spotters. It would have been such a shame for some to miss this wonderful bird and those who had already seen one did not mind to see it again.

Zooming along the interstate and back out onto the plains for a third time we arrived in late afternoon and fortunately finding the longspurs on the Pawnee was relatively straightforward. David spotted the first McCown's on a pasture we have seen it several times before and we all got some nice views on the ground of a female. It was quite hard to even stand up here at times in a strong but not cold wind so we did not see too much else. Some male McCown's Longspurs followed by the roadside as we cruised around the grassland grid of roads and then just when we had passed my last waypoint of previous sightings we struck gold with three lovely Chestnut-collared Longspurs, perching on fence wires as they seem to more readily than McCown's and even in the middle of the road at times. What a day! We had completed another bird-race-like schedule, beaten



White-tailed Ptarmigan in a blizzard (Mike Watson).

the weather and seen our targets. A rather trendy but noisy bar restaurant in Fort Collins was not the greatest choice for our final log call but at least the food was spot on.

The bad weather had passed now and we could end with a bright sunny and calm morning between Fort Collins and Denver International Airport. We were on our way to Boyd Lake State Park when we noticed a large gathering of birds on a small lake en route. This turned out to be Duck Lake and had a roost of over 500 Franklin's Gulls! We watched them leave gradually and head off west. Other notable sightings included 14 American Avocets and a couple of Bonaparte's Gulls. Eventually we made it to Boyd Lake SP itself where some of the Franklin's Gulls had presumably also gone. We were still able to add a few new species to our list here including Lesser Yellowlegs, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Barn Swallow - spring had finally arrived! There was still time for another couple of stops before we had to head for the interstate and make our way to the airport. First we checked Windsor Lake, a deep lake without a shoreline but lots of birds including 104 Horned Grebes, c80 Red-breasted and c50 Common Mergansers and c20 Bonapartes, c50 Ring-billed, four California and two American Herring Gulls. Last came Lower Latham Reservoir on a hazy sunny spring morning and all our weather issues had gone away. Here we added Virginia Rail, heard only sadly right next to the road only a few metres away, we tried! Northern Harriers quartered the reed beds, which probably did not help! Five Yellow-headed Blackbirds sat in the shade of a tree for everyone this time and a Great Egret flying across a small lake from the interstate completed our birding. That's it!

There were some very funny moments on this tour (you know who you are!) and thanks to everyone in our very enthusiastic group this year for making this tour successful and such a lot of fun (despite the adverse weather at times)!



Black Rosy Finch, Mount Crested Butte (Mike Watson).

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.

Canada Goose (Greater C G) *Branta Canadensis* Ssp *moffitti* plus some migrant *parvipes* at least at Silverthorne.

Cackling Goose (Lesser C G) *Branta hutchinsii* One Taverner's Goose *B. h. taverneri* at Pueblo West. See note.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Widespread and sometimes common.

American Wigeon *Anas Americana* A scatter of sightings.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Widespread and common.

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors* A pair Boyd Lake SP.

Cinnamon Teal *Anas cyanoptera* A drake Sands Lake, Salida was the first of 13 logged. Ssp *septentriolalium*.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* Five at Silverthorne were followed by another c140 logged.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* Two on SW D Road northwest of Dodge City were the first of 8 logged.

Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis* Four Silverthorne were the first of c.100 logged. See note.

Canvasback *Aythya valisineria* c50 on Walden Reservoir.

Redhead *Aythya americana* Only one drake at Sands Lake, Salida.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris* c15 Silverthorne followed by one Sweitzer Lake and two Stagecoach Res.

Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis* Two drakes Silverthorne were the first of c170 logged.



Dusky Grouse, Black Canyon of the Gunnison (Mike Watson).

- Bufflehead** *Bucephala albeola* Female Holbrook Res., drake Blue Mesa Res. and female near Mack.
- Common Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula* 7 Sands Lake, c40 Blue Mesa & en route to Steamboat. Ssp *americana*.
- Barrow's Goldeneye** ◊ *Bucephala islandica* Single imm. drakes Angler Ranch, Silverthorne and Sands Lake, Salida.
- Common Merganser (Goosander)** *Mergus merganser* Five Silverthorne were followed by c130 logged.
- Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator* A drake at Holbrook Lake then c80 Windsor Lake.
- Ruddy Duck** *Oxyura jamaicensis* c60 Holbrook Lake followed by another c50.
- Scaled Quail** ◊ *Callipepla squamata* Five at Higbee Valley and six at Cattails Crossing, Pueblo West. Ssp *hargravi*.
- Gambel's Quail** ◊ *Callipepla gambelii* Three in the subdivisions near Colorado NM.
- Northern Bobwhite** ◊ *Colinus virginianus* Three on SW D Road, northwest of Dodge City in Kansas. **NT**
- Wild Turkey** ◊ *Meleagris gallopavo* Six near Wray and 36 in Higbee Valley. Ssp *intermedia*.
- Sage Grouse** ◊ (Greater S G) *Centrocercus urophasianus* c50 at a lek in North Park. **NT**
- Gunnison Grouse** ◊ (G Sage G) *Centrocercus minimus* Only 5 (4 males) visible at the Waunita Spings lek. **EN**
- Dusky Grouse** ◊ *Dendragapus obscurus* Up to 3 (2 males) on 2 visits to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. See note.
- Sharp-tailed Grouse** ◊ *Tympanuchus phasianellus* Ten at a lek near Steamboat Springs. Ssp *jamesi*.
- Lesser Prairie Chicken** ◊ *Tympanuchus pallidicinctus* 5 males Buckner Creek & another SW D Road in Kansas. **VU**
- Greater Prairie Chicken** ◊ *Tympanuchus cupido* 31 at the Kitzmiller Ranch lek near Wray included 24 males. **VU**
- White-tailed Ptarmigan** ◊ *Lagopus leucura* Single males on two dates in the mountains. Ssp *altipetens*.
- Common Pheasant (Ring-necked P)** *Phasianus colchicus* c10 Wray, two on SW D Road in KS and three in OK.
- Common Loon (Great Northern Diver)** *Gavia immer* One in breeding plumage at Stagecoach Res.
- Pied-billed Grebe** *Podilymbus podiceps* Singles at Cattails Crossing, Salida and Windsor Lake.
- Horned Grebe (Slavonian G)** *Podiceps auritus* Holbrook (3), Stagecoach, Boyd & Windsor L (104). Ssp *cornutusi*. **VU**
- Black-necked Grebe (Eared G)** *Podiceps nigricollis* Two Fruitgrowers Res.
- Western Grebe** ◊ *Aechmophorus occidentalis* c100 Holbrook Res. were followed by another c80 logged.
- Clark's Grebe** ◊ *Aechmophorus clarkia* Six Holbrook Res. and one Sweitzer Lake, Delta.
- Great Blue Heron** *Ardea herodias* One from I76 was followed by another 25 logged.
- Great Egret** *Ardea alba* One between Lower Latham and DIA was the final addition of the tour.
- American White Pelican** *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos* Three Fruitgrowers Res. and c60 Walden Res.
- Double-crested Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax auritus* Seen regularly crossing Denver and maximum c20 Walden Res.
- Turkey Vulture** *Cathartes aura* The first at Wray was followed by c40 logged, a low number this year.
- Western Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus* One in the Arkansas Valley for David was followed by another three. See note.



Ferruginous Hawk, near Mack but in UT (Mike Watson).

- Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos* One near Campo was the first of a total of 15 this year. Ssp *canadensis*.
- Sharp-shinned Hawk** *Accipiter striatus* A female at Higbee Valley was the only record. Ssp *veloxi*.
- Cooper's Hawk** *Accipiter cooperii* One at Silverthorne was the only record.
- Northern Harrier** *Circus hudsonius* Three near Wray were the first of 32 logged. See note.
- Bald Eagle** *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* A pair Silverthorne was followed by another 10 logged.
- Red-tailed Hawk** *Buteo jamaicensis* First noted at Silverthorne, a total of 56 logged. Ssp *calurus*. See note.
- Ferruginous Hawk** ◊ *Buteo regalis* One just over the UT border near Mack.
- Rough-legged Buzzard** ◊ (R-I Hawk) *Buteo lagopus* First noted at Wray, a total of seven logged. Ssp *sanctijohannis*.
- Virginia Rail** ◊ *Rallus limicola* Two heard only at Lower Latham (H).
- American Coot** *Fulica americana* First noted at Holbrook Res., a total of c200 logged.
- Sandhill Crane** *Grus canadensis* Heard near Richfield in KS, 18 Gunnison and 18 Yampa Valley. Ssp *tabida*.
- Black-necked Stilt** *Himantopus mexicanus* Six at Boyd lake SP.
- American Avocet** *Recurvirostra americana* Three on a tiny pool near Mack, 14 Duck Lake and c20 Boyd Lake.
- Killdeer** *Charadrius vociferous* Small numbers noted daily on the plains.
- Mountain Plover** ◊ *Charadrius montanus* A pair near Richfield in KS. **NT**
- Wilson's Snipe** *Gallinago delicata* One Beecher Island battleground. See note.
- Marbled Godwit** *Limosa fedoa* One Walden Res.
- Long-billed Curlew** *Numenius americanus* An amazing flock of 107 in roadside fields just east of Boise City OK.
- Greater Yellowlegs** *Tringa melanoleuca* Three SW D Road, KS, one Sweitzer Lake and c20 Boyd Lake SP.
- Lesser Yellowlegs** *Tringa flavipes* Two Boyd Lake SP.
- Bonaparte's Gull** ◊ *Chroicocephalus philadelphia* Three Walden Res., two Duck Lake and c20 Windsor Lake.
- Franklin's Gull** ◊ *Leucophaeus pipixcan* c500 left a roost at Duck Lake then c50 at nearby Boyd Lake.
- Ring-billed Gull** *Larus delawarensis* Three en route to Wray were followed by a scatter of another c75.
- California Gull** ◊ *Larus californicus* c60 Walden Res., two Boyd Lake SP and four Windsor Lake.
- American Herring Gull** *Larus smithsonianus* Two Windsor Lake. See note.
- Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus* Two subadults Boyd Lake SP.
- Rock Dove (introduced) (R Pigeon)** *Columba livia* A scatter of sightings.
- Eurasian Collared Dove** *Streptopelia decaocto* A scatter of sightings.
- Mourning Dove (American M D)** *Zenaidura macroura* First at Wray of c40. Ssp *carolinensis* east/ ssp *marginella* west.
- Greater Roadrunner** ◊ *Geococcyx californianus* Excellent encounter with a singing bird in Higbee Valley.



Steller's Jay, Moose Visitor Center, Gould (Mike Watson).

- American Barn Owl** *Tyto furcata* Heard only at Wray and SW D Road, KS. Ssp *pratincola*. See note. (H)
- Great Horned Owl** *Bubo virginianus* A pair in Gunnison Cemetery.
- Northern Pygmy Owl** ◊ *Glaucidium californicum* One seen nicely in the mountains.
- Burrowing Owl** *Athene cunicularia* Seven Kitzmiller Ranch, Wray and c30 logged in KS. Ssp *hypugnea*.
- White-throated Swift** ◊ *Aeronautes saxatalis* 13 Arkansas Valley, three Wedding Canyon and two CO NM.
- Belted Kingfisher** *Megaceryle alcyon* Two for Craig at Westerly Creek then one for all at Fruitgrowers Res.
- Lewis's Woodpecker** ◊ *Melanerpes lewis* One near Orchard City.
- Williamson's Sapsucker** ◊ *Sphyrapicus thyroideus* A pair at Genessee Mountain Park.
- American Three-toed Woodpecker** ◊ *Picoides dorsalis* Five in the mountains near Georgetown. See note.
- Ladder-backed Woodpecker** *Dryobates scalaris* A pair at Higbee Valley.
- Downy Woodpecker** *Dryobates pubescens* Two Silverthorne, two Beecher Island and another couple of sightings.
- Hairy Woodpecker** *Leuconotopicus villosus* Two Silverthorne and three Gunnison. Ssp *septentrionalis*.
- Northern Flicker** *Colaptes auratus* Two at Silverthorne were the first of 31 logged, all red shafted. Ssp *cafer*.
- American Kestrel** *Falco sparverius* One near Wray was the first of c90 logged.
- Prairie Falcon** ◊ *Falco mexicanus* 1 on a roadside post near Beecher Island and three (two nests) Kremmling.
- Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus* Two chasing ducks at Stagecoach res. and another at Kremmling. Ssp *anatum*.
- Eastern Phoebe** *Sayornis phoebe* Four Higbee Valley.
- Say's Phoebe** *Sayornis saya* One Westerly Creek plus a scatter of another ten sightings.
- Black Phoebe** *Sayornis nigricans* Two at Escalante Canyon - a Birdquest CO lifer.
- Loggerhead Shrike** *Lanius ludovicianus* The first near Wray was followed by another five.
- Grey Jay** ◊ *Perisoreus canadensis* Two Silverthorne and another two in the mountains. Ssp *capitalis*.
- Blue Jay** *Cyanocitta cristata* One Holbrook Res. and another Boise City OK. Ssp *cyanoptera*.
- Steller's Jay** *Cyanocitta stelleri* First noted in Silverthorne, a total of 24 logged. Ssp *macrolopha*.
- Woodhouse's Scrub Jay** ◊ *Aphelocoma woodhouseii* Up to 10 at the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. See note.
- Pinyon Jay** ◊ *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus* A single bird in Piñon Hills, Salida. **VU**
- Black-billed Magpie (American M)** *Pica hudsonia* Common in the Rockies. See note.
- Clark's Nutcracker** ◊ *Nucifraga columbiana* Two Silverthorne and another Black Canyon of the Gunnison.
- American Crow** *Corvus brachyrhynchos* Common throughout the tour.
- Northern Raven (Common R)** *Corvus corax* Common in the Rockies. Ssp *sinuatus*.
- Chihuahuan Raven** ◊ *Corvus cryptoleucus* Six while passing through OK and another two en route to Higbee Valley.



Juniper Titmouse, Black Canyon of the Gunnison (Mike Watson).

- Juniper Titmouse** ◇ *Baeolophus ridgwayi* Singles at Black Canyon of the Gunnison and Colorado NM. See note.
- Black-capped Chickadee** ◇ *Poecile atricapillus* First noted at Silverthorne, a total of c40 logged. Ssp *garrina*.
- Mountain Chickadee** ◇ *Poecile gambeli* First noted at Silverthorne, a total of c80 logged.
- Horned Lark (Shore L)** *Eremophila alpestris* First noted Kitzmiller Ranch, Wray. Total of c500 logged. Ssp *enthymia*.
- Tree Swallow** *Tachycineta bicolor* c10 Salida, one Fruitgrowers Res., six Steamboat and 8 Boyd Lake.
- Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica* Three Boyd lake the only ones recorded. Ssp *erythrogaster*.
- American Bushtit** *Psaltriparus minimus* Up to five Black Canyon of the Gunnison and two CO NM. Ssp *plumbeus*.
- Golden-crowned Kinglet** *Regulus satrapa* Five in the mountains near Georgetown.
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet** *Regulus calendula* One in the mountains near Georgetown and two Beecher Island.
- Rock Wren** ◇ *Salpinctes obsoletus* Six Higbee Valley and one heard only Colorado NM.
- Canyon Wren** ◇ *Catherpes mexicanus* 1 seen/1 heard Higbee Valley & CO NM & heard Black Canyon. Ssp *conspersus*.
- Marsh Wren** *Cistothorus palustris* One seen, one heard Fruitgrowers Res. Ssp *plesius*.
- Pygmy Nuthatch** ◇ *Sitta pygmaea* Six at both Silverthorne and Genessee Mountain. Ssp *melanotis*.
- Red-breasted Nuthatch** ◇ *Sitta canadensis* Four in the mountains near Georgetown and up to eight Black Canyon.
- White-breasted Nuthatch** *Sitta carolinensis* 10 in the Rockies and 2 Beecher Is. Ssp *nelsoni* in the west. See note.
- Northern Mockingbird** *Mimus polyglottos* One Higbee Valley was the only record.
- Sage Thrasher** ◇ *Oreoscoptes montanus* A pair at Blue Mesa Res. and seven near Mack.
- Curve-billed Thrasher** ◇ *Toxostoma curvirostre* Singles at Higbee Valley and Cattails Crossing.
- Common Starling (European S)** *Sturnus vulgaris* Common throughout.
- Eastern Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia sialis* Pair Beecher Island.
- Western Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia mexicana* Two Silverthorne, four Genessee Mountain and c10 Piñon Hills, Salida.
- Mountain Bluebird** ◇ *Sialia currucoides* One near Silverthorne was the first of c140 tallied.
- Townsend's Solitaire** ◇ *Myadestes townsendi* One near Georgetown, two Beecher Island and two Black Canyon.
- American Robin** *Turdus migratorius* Common throughout, maximum c40 Westerly Creek, Aurora.
- American Dipper** *Cinclus mexicanus* One Salida was the only record. Ssp *unicolor*.
- House Sparrow (introduced)** *Passer domesticus* Common throughout.
- Buff-bellied Pipit (American P)** *Anthus rubescens* One for Craig on the tiny prairie pool near Mack. (LO)
- Evening Grosbeak** ◇ *Hesperiphona vespertina* Three (two males) Steamboat Springs. Ssp *brooksi*.
- Pine Grosbeak** ◇ *Pinicola enucleator* 4 fem. Silverthorne and 5 (1 male) in the mountains. Ssp *montana*.
- Grey-crowned Rosy Finch** ◇ *Leucosticte tephrocotis* c25 incl. c20 ssp *tephrocotis* & 3 'Hepburns' ssp *littoralis*. See note.



White-breasted Nuthatch, Black Canyon of the Gunnison (Mike Watson).

- Black Rosy Finch** ◇ *Leucosticte atrata* Two Silverthorne and three at Mount Crested Butte.
- Brown-capped Rosy Finch** ◇ *Leucosticte australis* c200 around Silverthorne and c60 Mount Crested Butte.
- Cassin's Finch** ◇ *Haemorhous cassinii* Eight around Silverthorne plus another seven logged elsewhere. **NT**
- House Finch** *Haemorhous mexicanus* A scatter of sightings after the first at Genessee Mountain. Ssp *frontalis*.
- Red Crossbill (Common C)** *Loxia curvirostra* Pr Silverthorne, 8 Genessee & c50 near Georgetown. Ssp uncertain.
- American Goldfinch** *Spinus tristis* Two Westerly Creek and four Higbee Valley. Ssp *pallida*.
- Pine Siskin** ◇ *Spinus pinus* c30 around Silverthorne, a total of c120 noted. A high total for this tour.
- Yellow-headed Blackbird** *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus* One Fruitgrowers Res and five Lower Latham Res.
- Western Meadowlark** *Sturnella neglecta* Very common on the plains after the first en route to Wray. Ssp *neglecta*.
- Red-winged Blackbird** *Agelaius phoeniceus* Very common throughout after the first near Silverthorne. Ssp *fortis*.
- Brown-headed Cowbird** *Molothrus ater* c10 SW D Road, KS were followed by another c90 logged.
- Brewer's Blackbird** *Euphagus cyanocephalus* c10 DW D Road KS was the only record.
- Common Grackle** *Quiscalus quiscula* Six Westerly Creek, Aurora followed by another c130 logged. Ssp *versicolor*.
- Great-tailed Grackle** *Quiscalus mexicanus* c30 in KS & c20 noted until Monarch Pass. Ssp *monsoni* or *prosopidicola*.
- Slate-coloured Fox Sparrow** ◇ *Passerella schistacea* Up to two at Black Canyon of the Gunnison. See note.
- Song Sparrow** *Melospiza melodia* A small scatter of records after the first at Angler Ranch, Silverthorne. Ssp *juddi*.
- Lincoln's Sparrow** ◇ *Melospiza lincolni* Five Beecher Island and one Riverwalk Drive, Gunnison.
- Harris's Sparrow** ◇ *Zonotrichia querula* One Westerly Creek, four SW D Rd, KS and one Cattails Crossing.
- White-crowned Sparrow** *Zonotrichia leucophrys* c15 Westerly Creek, 5 SW D Rd, KS & another 14. Ssp *gambeli*.
- Dark-eyed Junco** ◇ *Junco [hyemalis] hyemalis* Singles at Silverthorne and Mount Crested Butte. See note.
- Dark-eyed Junco** ◇ (Cassiar J) *Junco [hyemalis] cismontanus* One Riverwalk Drive, Gunnison for Mike. See note.
- Dark-eyed Junco** ◇ (Pink-sided J) *Junco [hyemalis] mearnsi* Five around Silverthorne, a total of c90 logged.
- Dark-eyed Junco** ◇ (Grey-headed J) *Junco [hyemalis] caniceps* 14 around Silverthorne, a total of c130 logged.
- Field Sparrow** ◇ *Spizella pusilla* One Beecher Island Battleground was a BQ CO lifer!
- Vesper Sparrow** ◇ *Poocetes gramineus* c10 SW D Road, KS and c10 roadside in Oklahoma. Ssp *confinis*.
- Black-throated Sparrow** *Amphispiza bilineata* Four Devil's Kitchen Trail, Colorado NM. Ssp *deserticola*.
- Sagebrush Sparrow** ◇ *Artemisiospiza nevadensis* Five near Mack. See note.
- Rufous-crowned Sparrow** ◇ *Aimophila ruficeps* One Higbee Valley was the only record. Ssp *eremoeca*.
- Spotted Towhee** ◇ *Pipilo maculatus* Up to 15 on each visit to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Ssp *arcticus*. See note.
- Canyon Towhee** ◇ *Melozona fusca* Six Higbee Valley. Ssp *mesatus*. See note.



Hopi Chipmunk, Colorado National Monument (Mike Watson).

McCown's Longspur \diamond *Rhynchophanes mccownii* Four, including one male on the Pawnee.

Chestnut-collared Longspur \diamond *Calcarius ornatus* Three on the Pawnee. NT

Mammals

White-tailed Jackrabbit (Whitetail J) *Lepus townsendi* Two Wray, six Buckner Creek, KS and five North Park.

Desert Cottontail *Sylvilagus audubonii* Two Pueblo West and four in the Grand Junction area.

Eastern Cottontail *Sylvilagus floridanus* One Beecher Island and two Buckner Creek, KS.

Mountain Cottontail (Nuttall's C) *Sylvilagus nuttallii* One Gunnison and another Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

Eastern Fox Squirrel *Sciurus niger* A scatter of sightings in the east after the first at Georgetown.

Yellow-bellied Marmot (Yellowbelly M) *Marmota flaviventris* One between Meeker and Hayden.

Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus lateralis* c20 Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

Variiegated Ground Squirrel (Rock G S) *Spermophilus variegatus* c16 Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

Wyoming Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus elegans* c10 between Meeker and Hayden. See note.

Gunnison's Prairie Dog *Cynomys gunnisoni* c10 near Gunnison.

White-tailed Prairie Dog *Cynomys leucurus* Commonly seen in the Grand Junction area.

Black-tailed Prairie Dog *Cynomys ludovicianus* Very common on the plains after the first near DIA.

Least Chipmunk *Tamias minimus* Noted Black Canyon of the Gunnison and Moose Visitor Center.

Hopi Chipmunk *Eutamias rufus* Several Wedding Canyon, Colorado National Monument.

American Red Squirrel (Red S) *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus* One Silverthorne and three near Georgetown.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* One near Salida for David and another on the Grand Mesa.

Coyote *Canis latrans* Singles at Crested Butte and Silverthorne.

American Mink *Mustela vison* One at Waunita Springs.

American Marten *Martes americana* One at Moose Visitor Center, Gould.

American Badger *Taxidea taxus* One hunting Wyoming ground Squirrels Meeker–Hayden.

Elk *Cervus canadensis* 28 Waunita Sptings and another c60 noted elsewhere.

Moose (Elk) *Alces alces* A mother and calf, Steamboat Springs and a young bull North Park.

Mule Deer *Odocoileus hemionus* Common in the mountains after the first in Georgetown.

White-tailed Deer *Odocoileus virginianus* Eight at Wray were followed by another eight.

Pronghorn (P Antelope) *Antilocapra americana* Four near Richfield in KS followed by another c30.

Bighorn Sheep *Ovis canadensis* c40 at Georgetown and three Desert Bighorns at Colorado NM.



Moose, Steamboat Springs (Mike Watson).



Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Black Canyon of the Gunnison (above) and American Badger (Mike Watson).



Cackling and Canada Geese, Cattails Crossing, Pueblo West (Mike Watson).

TAXONOMIC NOTES

BIRDS

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* & **Cackling Goose** *Branta hutchinsii* The taxonomy of the Canada Goose complex is extremely complicated. The IOC treat the Canada Complex as two species: **Canada Goose** *B. canadensis* (including the subspecies *canadensis* [Atlantic], *interior* [Interior or Todd's], *maxima* [Giant], *moffitti* [Moffit's], *parvipes* [Lesser], *fulva* [Vancouver], and *occidentalis* [Dusky]) and **Cackling Goose** *B. hutchinsii* (including the subspecies *hutchinsii* [Richardson's], *asiatica* [Bering (extinct)], *leucopareia* [Aleutian], *taverneri* [Taverner's], and *minima* [Cackling]). However, the issue seems far from resolved and the complex may well be divided into more than two species. The forms previously recorded on this tour have included the migrant forms *parvipes* and *hutchinsii* and the breeding form *moffitti*, although identification of the larger forms is not always possible with certainty.

Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis* Some authorities lump this species in Eurasian Teal *A. crecca*, using either the name Common Teal (in the Old World) or Green-winged Teal (in the New World) for the enlarged species.

Dusky Grouse *Dendragapus obscurus* Formerly, Sooty Grouse *D. fuliginosus* was lumped into this species with the name Blue Grouse being used for the enlarged species.

Western Osprey *Pandion carolinensis* This species was formerly referred to as Osprey, but it has been renamed following the splitting off of Eastern Osprey *P. cristatus* as a separate species.

Northern Harrier *Circus hudsonicus* Some authorities lump this species in Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus*, using the name Northern Harrier (in the New World) or Hen Harrier (in the Old World) for the enlarged species.

Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis* The forms previously recorded on this tour are the widespread nominate form and the Alaskan-breeding migrant form Harlan's Hawk *B. j. harlani*.

Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata* Some authorities lump this species in Common Snipe *G. gallinago* of the Old World.

American Herring Gull *Larus smithsonianus* Some authorities lump this species in European Herring Gull *L. argentatus* using the name Herring Gull for the enlarged species.

American Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides dorsalis* Some authorities lump this species in Northern Three-toed Woodpecker *P. tridactylus* (of the Old World) using the name Three-toed Woodpecker.

Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay *Aphelocoma woodhouseii* This recent split was formerly lumped with Western Scrub Jay *A. californica*, with the name Western Scrub-Jay being used for the enlarged species.

Black-billed (or American) Magpie *Pica hudsonia* This species was formerly lumped in Eurasian Magpie *P. pica* with the name Common or Black-billed Magpie being used for the enlarged species.

Juniper Titmouse *Parus ridgwayi* This species, which is found from northern Sonora through SE Arizona and eastern California north and east to Idaho and Oklahoma, was formerly lumped in Oak Titmouse *P. inornatus*, with the name Plain Titmouse being used for the enlarged species. Oak Titmouse inhabits coastal and adjacent regions from Baja California north to California and southern Oregon.

White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis* The IOC report a proposal for a four-way split of this species. The forms we see in Colorado are the eastern form *carolinensis*, on the eastern plains, which would retain the name White-breasted Nuthatch *S. carolinensis* and the Rocky Mountain foothills form *nelsoni*, which would become part of the *S. lagunae* group, proposed as 'Mexican Nuthatch'.

Grey-crowned Rosy-Finch *Leucosticte tephrocotis* Includes the *griseonucha* group of races, known as Grey-cheeked or Hepburn's Rosy-Finch which may represent a distinct species. Typically members of this group form only a small minority of the 'grey-crowned' rosy-finches observed in Colorado.

Slate-coloured Fox Sparrow *Passerella [iliaca] schistacea* Formerly, Sooty Fox Sparrow *P. [i.] unalaschensis*, Slaty Fox Sparrow *P. [i.] schistacea* and Thick-billed Fox Sparrow *P. [i.] megarhyncha* were lumped in Red Fox Sparrow *P. [i.] iliaca* with the name Fox Sparrow being used for the enlarged species.

Slate-coloured Junco *Junco [hyemalis] hyemalis* A winter visitor in Colorado. The taxonomy of the 'Dark-eyed Junco' complex remains unresolved: perhaps as many as five species are involved, with a degree of intergradation occurring in some areas. The IOC still treats them as one very diverse species under the name Dark-eyed Junco, but we have treated each form as an allospecies to facilitate accurate recording.

Sagebursh Sparrow *Artemisiospiza nevadensis* This interior form was until recently lumped in Bell's Sparrow *A. belli* with the name Sage Sparrow being used for the enlarged species.

Spotted Towhee *Pipilo maculatus* This form was formerly lumped in Eastern Towhee *P. erythrophthalmus*, with the name Rufous-sided Towhee being used for the enlarged species.

Canyon Towhee *Pipilo fuscus* California Towhee *P. crissalis* was formerly lumped in this species with the name Brown Towhee being used for the enlarged species.

MAMMALS

Wyoming Ground Squirrel *Spermophilus elegans* This form has been split from Richardson's Ground Squirrel *S. richardsoni*.

Elk *Cervus canadensis* Duff & Lawson lump this form in Red Deer *C. elaphus*.