

# **COLORADO GROUSE**

**APRIL 25 – MAY 4, 2009**

**LEADER: KEVIN ZIMMER**

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Leader: Kevin Zimmer

Time was getting short. We had already scanned every exposed rock outcropping and patch of willows multiple times without so much as a suggestion of a ptarmigan. If only the bird hadn't quit calling. But then, just as I was contemplating bagging it, the White-tailed Ptarmigan called again. And from my new vantage point, I could tell that he wasn't calling from the rocky point where we had focused our attention to this point, but rather, from much farther to our right. There were no rocks in this direction, nor anything more than the smallest tips of exposed willows. It was a winter wonderland of snow, with a few patches of stunted spruce—a nightmare scenario for spotting an all, or mostly white bird. A quick scan of the more promising and more distant patches of spruce revealed nothing. But what if the wind and traffic were muting the bird's voice, and he wasn't as far off as he sounded? There was only one tiny patch of exposed spruce anywhere near us, so I trained my scope on that. JACKPOT! There, amidst windblown clumps of snow trapped by the tiny trees, was a nearly immaculate lump of white with beady black eyes, a black bill, and the beginnings of black scaling on its crown and chest—a male White-tailed Ptarmigan! For the next half-hour we reveled in fine scope studies of this, our 7th grouse species for the trip, and the least expected. In many years, all of the ptarmigan would have left Loveland Pass by now, and would be safely ensconced in their breeding territories, out-of-reach of visiting birders until the highest mountain roads are opened at the end of May.

All that was left at this point was a brief stop at Genesee Park, where the ponderosa pine forest provided us with point-blank looks at a stunning pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers and a pugnacious, but extremely cute pair of Pygmy Nuthatches. It was a fitting conclusion to a tour that had started nine days earlier at a predawn vigil in Gunnison. There, we sat huddled in a blind with our scopes trained on a lek of strutting Gunnison Sage-Grouse, their "ponytails" of filoplumes flopping wildly with each display. When the birds were finished, they burst into flight and came right at us, barely topping the blind. After breakfast, we were greeted by falling snow, which called for a change in plans. Instead of heading west to Black Canyon of the Gunnison, we went north to Crested Butte, hoping the snow would drive some rosy-finches down out of the high country. We found no rosy-finches, but we did score several Red Crossbills and Cassin's Finches, a magnificent Peregrine Falcon, and the first of several Great Horned Owls that we would find on nests.

Working our way to Pueblo, we netted a number of good birds, from a pair of American Dippers along the Arkansas River to Mountain and Western bluebirds and Juniper Titmouse. Of particular note was getting a nice Lewis's Woodpecker in a year in which they were not present in many of their usual haunts in the southeast canyons. But my

personal highlight of the day had to be the flock of more than 50 Pinyon Jays that we happened onto shortly after stopping for the woodpecker.

The next day saw us working our way from Pueblo to Lamar, alternating between grasslands, agricultural land, and various reservoirs and playa lakes. The prairie habitats provided us with superb views of elegant Scaled Quail, singing Cassin's Sparrows, migrant Brewer's Sparrows, and skulking Curve-billed Thrashers, while the latter provided side by side comparisons of Clark's and Western grebes, rosy-tinged Franklin's Gulls, and a pair of cryptic Snowy Plovers. After some searching, we finally found a Mountain Plover, our only one of the trip, and studied it at length.

The next morning found us exploring the grasslands and canyon lands near Campo, in the extreme southeast corner of the state. Fueled by a great breakfast at the Campo Café, we birded through persistent mist and fog for much of the morning (getting some first-arriving Lark Buntings and a Long-billed Curlew in the process), but the weather cleared in time for our picnic lunch. We scored a couple of surprises in Carrizo Canyon, with a fly-by White-winged Dove (the first I've seen in Colorado) and a lovely male Rose-breasted Grosbeak. These complemented more expected fare, which included close studies of a singing Canyon Wren, strutting Wild Turkeys, and recently arrived Black-chinned Hummingbird, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Cassin's Kingbird. A Ferruginous Hawk on a nest was the caper to the day.

After two "leisurely" days of birding, it was time for another predawn start. We met Fred and his trusty school bus in Granada, and then drove to a Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek located on private land. It was getting late in the season for the Lessers (which start displaying earlier in spring than the other grouse), and the wind was howling. Nonetheless, eight birds danced intermittently for us, and the bus provided a nice blind and platform from which to use our scopes. After a hearty "chuckwagon-style" breakfast at Fred & Norma's, we made a stop at the Lamar Community College woods. Hoped-for migrant passerines were not much in evidence, but we did enjoy nice looks at singing Brown Thrashers, a Red-bellied Woodpecker (very local in eastern Colorado), and a fearless Virginia Rail who left no doubts as to whose territory we were in! Heading north, we stopped at Bonny Reservoir before cruising in to Wray. There, we met up with Bob Bledsoe, who entertained and informed us at length before escorting us to the prairie-chicken lek that we would be visiting the next morning. We had nice looks at a number of chickens that were hanging around the lek, which only served to whet our appetites for the next morning.

We were all awakened by the sounds of a monster thunderstorm in the middle of the night, and I was more than a little concerned to discover a few inches of hail on the van in the morning. With Bob's admonitions about hail-induced mortality of prairie-chickens still fresh in our minds, we set out for the lek. Upon arrival, I was disturbed to realize that I wasn't hearing any prairie-chickens in the predawn darkness. Normally they would be booming away by this time. It was over 20 minutes before I heard the first cackle, but within minutes after that, the rustle of wings signaled the arrival of multiple males at the lek. Before long, there were more than 30 male Greater Prairie-Chickens surrounding our

van, some of them displaying within 10 feet of us. At one point, one or two of the birds decided to use our van as an elevated platform from which to dance. It was hard not to laugh at the sounds of the busy toenails and feet skittering about the roof, and impossible not to laugh when the roof buckled and then popped back up, sending the startled chicken(s) blasting into flight. We ended up enjoying a fabulous performance, with great light—the best of the entire trip.

With the eerie booming of the chickens still ringing in our ears, we headed north and west to the Pawnee National Grasslands, where we enjoyed large numbers of McCown's Longspurs (including several males performing their "butterfly-like" aerial displays before "parachuting" back to the ground) and a single male Chestnut-collared Longspur, all in beautiful breeding plumage.

Refreshed after a "sleep-in" morning, we set off from Fort Collins up scenic Poudre Canyon, making numerous short stops for various montane birds. A nesting American Dipper feeding young, a couple of pairs of very responsive Red-naped Sapsuckers, and a stunning male American Three-toed Woodpecker were the highlights. A stop at the Moose Visitor Center on the far side of Cameron Pass treated us to a number of good feeder birds, including Pine Grosbeak and numerous Brown-capped Rosy-Finches (with a single Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch). Unfortunately, a Sharp-shinned Hawk discovered the feeder birds too, and his continued presence guaranteed that there would be no more feeder activity for the duration. We continued on to Walden, where we spent the remainder of the afternoon birding the sagebrush flats and marshes.

We awoke predawn the next day to overcast skies, but the predicted bad weather had not yet set in when we headed off for the Greater Sage-Grouse lek. We found a male grouse displaying in the road and watched him in our headlights for a minute before easing past him to continue to the main lek. As it got lighter, we could see 16 males on the lek, convulsing and strutting away, their great white pectoral ruffs and bizarre yellow breast sacs heaving with each shrug of their shoulders. The birds were close and the views were great, but then it started to rain. With no females present, and persistent light (but cold) rain, the male grouse soon lost their enthusiasm for displaying, and they ended up calling it quits a solid hour earlier than they had just a week earlier. The rain dogged us off-and-on the rest of the day, but not before we had seen both Bald and Golden eagles, singing Sage Thrashers, and had a wonderful encounter with a badger, the first I had seen in many years. That afternoon, we had our first views of Dusky Grouse and Sharp-tailed Grouse, although the experience with each species was only a tease for the next day.

With fingers crossed for good weather, we set out in darkness the next morning, hoping to find a Dusky Grouse displaying near the road. The first pass at the expected spot yielded nothing. I continued on to a convenient turnaround, and pulled over by the side of the road to wait a few minutes before driving back. Out the open window, I heard the explosive fluttering of wings that accompanies the display jump-ups of the male Dusky Grouse. It seemed to be coming from upslope, but I couldn't locate the bird with my flashlight. A low hoot from my left caused me to turn and look up the road. There, in the middle of the road, was a male Dusky Grouse, in full display. We repositioned the van,

and spotlighted the bird in our headlights. Unperturbed, the male continued to display, and was soon joined and challenged by a second male, undoubtedly the bird that I had heard upslope. We enjoyed a great performance by these two birds as the sky quickly paled. It was time to head to the Sharp-tail lek. Upon arrival, we found more than 20 Sharp-tailed Grouse in full display, with wings bowed, heads lowered, spiky white tails pointed skyward, and feet pounding a rapid beat. What's more, the sky was clear, the sun was peeking over the hills, and the entire lek was bathed in beautiful light. We enjoyed the antics of the Sharp-tails for a prolonged period, then returned to Steamboat Springs to pack up. We were headed to Loveland Pass, with one more grouse, the elusive White-tailed Ptarmigan, to search for...

Thanks to all of you for helping make my return to Colorado so memorable. After devising our first Colorado Grouse tour in 1986, and leading it for more than 15 years, it was a real treat to get back (after a six-year absence) and be present when spring returns to the prairies and Rockies of Colorado. There is nothing quite like it!

### **Itinerary:**

**4/25** - Meet in Gunnison

**4/26** - Visit Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek, followed by birding in and around Crested Butte before returning to hotel to check out. We then birded our way east along Hwy. 50 to Pueblo, with numerous stops en route. Evening in Pueblo.

**4/27** - Birding from Pueblo east to Lamar, primarily along the Arkansas River Valley, with stops near Boone, Fowler, Lake Meredith, Lake Henry, Sugar City, and Cheraw, with lunch in La Junta. Evening in Lamar.

**4/28** - Day trip south of Lamar to Campo and vicinity, and then to Carrizo and Cottonwood Canyons, where we had a picnic lunch and spent the remainder of the day birding before returning to Lamar. Evening in Lamar.

**4/29** - Visit to Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek south and east of Granada, followed by birding at the Lamar Community College woods. Then, off to Wray, with a major stop en route at Bonny Reservoir. Late afternoon visit to Greater Prairie-Chicken lek. Evening in Wray.

**4/30** - Dawn vigil at Greater Prairie-Chicken lek on Bledsoe Ranch. After breakfast, we birded residential areas in Wray before heading north to Holyoke and west to Sterling, with various stops en route, including the Haxtun Sewage Ponds. After lunch, we headed to Briggsdale and the Pawnee National Grassland, where we spent most of the afternoon before heading to our hotel in Fort Collins. Evening in Fort Collins.

**5/01** - Fort Collins to Hwy. 14 west through Poudre Canyon to Cameron Pass, with various stops en route. West of the pass we stopped at the Moose Visitor Center, and then headed to Walden, where we birded around Walden Reservoir and Arapahoe NWR. Evening in Walden.

**5/02** - Dawn vigil at Greater Sage-Grouse lek near Walden, followed by return visits to Walden Reservoir, Arapahoe NWR and the Moose Visitor Center. Lunch in Walden, followed by afternoon drive over Rabbit Ears Pass to Steamboat Springs. After checking into our hotel, we drove to Hayden and the California Park Road, and then visited a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek, all in a fairly steady rain. Evening in Steamboat Springs.

**5/03** - Early morning efforts centered on better looks at Dusky Grouse near Steamboat, and a visit to a different Sharp-tailed Grouse lek, this time under mostly clear skies. After checking out of the hotel, we headed back up Rabbit Ears Pass, where we made several short stops for montane birds. Then, on to Kremmling and Silverthorne (where we had lunch), followed by a visit to Loveland Pass, where, after much searching, we finally snagged a White-tailed Ptarmigan. From here, brief stops at Georgetown and Genesee Park before rolling into Denver for our farewell dinner and check-list session.  
**5/04** - flights home

**Key:**

\* = heard only

**Birds:**

**Canada Goose** - seen daily

**Wood Duck** - 4 at a pond just outside of Fort Collins on 5/1

**Gadwall** - Common; seen on all but one day (4/28), and often in good numbers.

**American Wigeon** - Less common than expected; seen on 4 days in small numbers.

**Mallard** - Common; seen daily except for 4/28.

**Blue-winged Teal** - Small numbers scattered throughout; seen on 5 days, with a high of 8 seen around Walden on 5/2.

**Cinnamon Teal** - Scattered individuals and pairs; seen on 3 days, with a high of 30+ around Walden on 5/2.

**Northern Shoveler** - Common; seen on all but two days, and present in numbers at some spots.

**Northern Pintail** - Surprisingly uncommon; seen only at Arapahoe NWR and the Walden area on 5/1 (10+ individuals).

**Green-winged Teal** - Widespread, in small numbers; seen daily except for 4/26.

**Canvasback** - Common at Walden on 5/1 and 5/2, but not seen elsewhere.

**Redhead** - Several at Walden on 5/1 and 5/2, but not seen elsewhere.

**Ring-necked Duck** - Small numbers at Haxtun and Walden.

**Lesser Scaup** - Small numbers scattered throughout; seen on 4 days, with large numbers at Bonny Reservoir and around Walden.

**Bufflehead** - 15 in the Walden area on 5/2 were our only records.

**Common Merganser** - Scattered pairs and individuals along Poudre Canyon on 5/1, and between Kremmling and Silverthorne on 5/3.

**Ruddy Duck** - Widespread; seen on 5 days, with highs at Bonny Reservoir and around Walden.

**Ring-necked Pheasant** - Less common than usual; seen on three days (4/38–30), with most coming on the drive between Lamar and Wray.

**Greater Sage-Grouse** - Nice performance from 16 close males, at least up until the rain shower literally dampened their enthusiasm!

**Gunnison Sage-Grouse** - A better performance than usual from the birds at this, the most distant of our leks. We had at least 16 birds, including some females.

**White-tailed Ptarmigan** - 1 lingering bird at Loveland Pass took persistence to find, but treated us to great scope views. Voted “Favorite Bird” of the trip.

**Dusky Grouse** - We started with a male that KJZ walked up in the afternoon near Hayden; unfortunately, only Ann got to see in on the ground before it flew again, although I think everyone at least saw it in flight as it crossed the road. The next day, we were afforded outstanding studies of first one, then another male displaying in the road pre-dawn, seemingly oblivious to our headlight beams. Still another male was seen along the roadside en route to the Sharp-tail lek. Voted “2<sup>nd</sup> Favorite Bird” of the trip.

**Sharp-tailed Grouse** - We started with 5 uninspired and rain-soaked bird on the afternoon of 5/2, then followed the next morning with at least 17 males and 4 females putting on a great show that went on and on.

**Greater Prairie-Chicken** - This one got the vote for “best performance by a displaying grouse” – we had at least 32 birds displaying all around us, often as close as 10 feet from the van. We even had a couple of birds displaying on top of the van for a few minutes!

**Lesser Prairie-Chicken** - At least 8 of these rapidly declining grouse on the lek. Displays were intermittent, partly due to strong winds, and partly due to the lateness of the season (These guys start displaying earlier in spring than the other species of grouse.), but we had good scope studies from inside our bus.

**Wild Turkey** - Several seen nicely in Cottonwood Canyon, including a strutting male.

**Scaled Quail** - Seen nicely near Boone, and again near Campo.

**Common Loon** - 1 in full breeding plumage on a pond between Steamboat Springs and Hayden on 5/2.

**Pied-billed Grebe** - Small numbers scattered around the Walden, Steamboat Springs, and Kremmling areas.

**Horned Grebe** - 1 in full breeding plumage at Walden Reservoir on 5/2 was a treat. This species is probably missed more often than seen on this trip.

**Eared Grebe** - Common; seen on 5 days, with numbers at Cheraw, Bonny Reservoir and around Walden.

**Western Grebe** - Widespread, with numbers at Lake Meredith, Bonny Reservoir, and the Walden area. We had excellent comparisons with the following species at Meredith.

**Clark’s Grebe** - Excellent studies at Lake Meredith and Lake Henry (where particularly common).

**American White Pelican** - Widespread; seen on 5 days, with numbers around Lakes Meredith and Henry, Bonny Reservoir, and Walden.

**Double-crested Cormorant** - Small numbers at Lakes Meredith and Henry, but much more common at Bonny Reservoir, Walden, and Kremmling.

**Great Blue Heron** - Scattered singles recorded nearly daily.

**Snowy Egret** - 1 at Walden on 5/2.

**Egret sp.** - A group of 6 flying over Fort Collins on 4/30 looked to be Great Egrets on size alone, but traffic considerations didn’t allow binocular confirmation.

**White-faced Ibis** - Seen between Pueblo and Lamar on 4/27, then not again until we got to Walden, where we had a peak of 200+ on 5/2. Also seen between Steamboat and Kremmling.

**Turkey Vulture** - Seen almost daily.

**Osprey** - 1 between Gunnison and Pueblo on 4/26; a nesting pair near Fort Collins on 5/1; and a bird on the nest near Silverthorne on 5/3.

**Bald Eagle** - We saw a pair at the nest at Walden, and another lone bird, possibly one of this pair at Arapahoe NWR.

**Northern Harrier** - Widespread, with scattered singles seen on most days of the tour.

**Sharp-shinned Hawk** - 1 between Gunnison and Pueblo on 4/26, and 1 particularly pesky individual that was terrorizing the birds at the feeders at Moose Visitor Center on 5/1 and 5/2.

**Cooper's Hawk** - 1 perched bird at the Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek was the only one seen.

**Swainson's Hawk** - Common; seen daily, with peak counts of 20+/day in the Walden area. We saw both pale and intermediate morphs, and everything in between.

**Red-tailed Hawk** - Common; seen daily, although typically in smaller numbers than the preceding species.

**Ferruginous Hawk** - 1 seen north of Cheraw, followed by a bird on the nest near Springfield, and an immature on the Pawnee NG.

**Rough-legged Hawk** - 1 near Granada (seen flying along the road as we were coming back from the Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek) and another near Burlington (perched at close range) on 4/28 were the only ones seen. This species is a common wintering bird through late March, but very few remain into late April.

**Golden Eagle** - Fewer than usual, with a magnificent perched bird at Walden on 5/2, and a soaring bird near Kremmling on 5/3 being our only ones.

**American Kestrel** - Common; seen daily.

**Peregrine Falcon** - Outstanding scope views of a perched bird between Gunnison and Crested Butte on 4/26.

**Prairie Falcon** - More elusive than usual. Our only record was a bird that we flushed off the ground near Walden Reservoir, and which flew pretty directly away from us. Our futile pursuit of this individual did, however, lead us to the Badger!

**Virginia Rail** - 1 seen at Lamar on 4/29 couldn't have been seen any better (Where was my camera???) (its presumed mate was also heard); another was heard at Arapahoe NWR on 5/2.

**Sora** - Seen nicely at Arapahoe NWR on 5/2.

**American Coot** - Common and widespread.

**Sandhill Crane** - Scattered pairs seen/heard between Walden and Hayden on 5/2-3.

**Snowy Plover** - A pair at Cheraw was eventually seen nicely in the scopes, although we nearly blew away on our first attempt.

**Killdeer** - Widespread; seen daily in small numbers.

**Mountain Plover** - It took some searching, but we eventually had nice prolonged studies of a bird near Cheraw on 4/27. This species used to be a slam-dunk on this tour, often with multiple encounters at various locations. Sadly, those days are long-gone, and we gratefully take this globally declining species wherever we can get it.

**Black-necked Stilt** - A few at Cheraw on 4/27, and another couple at Arapahoe NWR on 5/1.

**American Avocet** - Our first one was a seemingly lost individual at a tiny stock tank near Campo; we subsequently saw several in the Walden area on 5/1-2.

**Spotted Sandpiper** - Scattered singles at Haxtun and Walden.

**Willet** - 3 at Haxtun on 4/30; more around Walden, with high of 10 on 5/1.

**Lesser Yellowlegs** - A few at Lake Meredith on 4/27 were the only ones recorded.

**Upland Sandpiper** - At least one seen nicely at the Greater Prairie-Chicken lek near Wray on 4/30.

**Long-billed Curlew** - 1 near Campo on 4/28 was seen nicely.

**Marbled Godwit** - 9 at Arapahoe NWR on 5/1.

**Western Sandpiper** - 3 at Haxtun on 4/30.

**Least Sandpiper** - Singles at Haxtun and Walden. Shorebird numbers in the east were way down from past years, probably in part due to the dry conditions at places like Cheraw.

**Baird's Sandpiper** - 1 at Haxtun on 4/30.

**Stilt Sandpiper** - Nice studies of a bird in full breeding plumage (side-by-side with a group of dowitchers) at Haxtun on 4/30.

**Long-billed Dowitcher** - 30+ at Haxtun on 4/30; 20+ at Arapahoe NWR on 5/1.

**Wilson's Snipe** - Winnowing individuals were heard at Gunnison on 4/26, and throughout the Walden and Steamboat Springs areas at the end of the trip; a few of the latter were seen in display, and we flushed a couple of others from the roadsides.

**Wilson's Phalarope** - 30+ at Haxtun on 4/30; 100+ in the Walden area (particularly at Arapahoe NWR on 5/1–2).

**Bonaparte's Gull** - Several at Lakes Meredith and Henry on 4/27 and at Bonny Reservoir on 4/29.

**Franklin's Gull** - Several in a flooded field near La Junta on 4/27; 20+ circling over our heads at Bonny Reservoir on 4/29; and several at Walden Reservoir on 5/1. Many of these birds had the ephemeral rosy blush to the underparts that is typical of this species (and some other gulls and terns) at the height of breeding condition.

**Ring-billed Gull** - Scattered small numbers at various reservoirs, from Lake Meredith and Henry to Cheraw, Bonny Reservoir, and Walden Reservoir.

**California Gull** - Several around Walden Reservoir on 5/1–2.

**Rock Pigeon** - Seen daily; yawn.

**Eurasian Collared-Dove** - The rapid spread of this species through Colorado has been nothing short of remarkable. I remember being excited by finding a pair in Campo in the mid-late 1990s; now they are everywhere, including at Moose Visitor Center at 9000' elevation amidst lodgepole pine, spruce, and fir! We saw them daily, and nearly everywhere we went.

**Mourning Dove** - Common; seen daily.

**White-winged Dove** - 1 that flew right past us in Cottonwood Canyon (side-by-side with a Mourning Dove) was unexpected, and the first that I have seen this species in Colorado (Although given how dramatically the species has expanded its winter range north in New Mexico in recent years, perhaps it is not such a surprise.).

**Barn Owl** - 1 at Lake Henry was well-spotted as it sat crouched in its hole.

**Great Horned Owl** - Several birds on active nests, including near Gunnison, Lake Meredith, and Bonny Reservoir.

**Burrowing Owl** - Scattered singles and pairs between Pueblo and Lamar on 4/27, between Lamar and Wray on 4/29, and around the Pawnee Grassland on 4/30.

**Chimney Swift** - Seen at Fowler on 4/27, and in numbers over Wray on 4/29–30.

**White-throated Swift** - Numbers near Kremmling on 5/3.

**Black-chinned Hummingbird** - 1 in Cottonwood Canyon on 4/28 had no doubt recently arrived.

**Broad-tailed Hummingbird** - 10+ in Poudre Canyon on 5/1, including several seen nicely at feeders. Locals told us that the first birds arrived on 4/15 this year, just before the big blizzard.

**Belted Kingfisher** - Scattered singles on 4/28 (Carrizo Canyon), 5/1 (Poudre Canyon and North Park), and 5/2 (Walden to Steamboat).

**Lewis's Woodpecker** - Clearly a down year for this cyclic and somewhat nomadic species, since there were none in their usual hangouts in Cottonwood and Carrizo canyons. However, we were fortunate to get nice scope views of a bird between Gunnison and Pueblo on 4/26, our only one of the tour.

**Red-bellied Woodpecker** - Seen nicely at Lamar on 4/29, where they have become regular only in the past few years. Also 1 later that day at Bonny Reservoir, which has long been *the spot* for this species in Colorado.

**Williamson's Sapsucker** - Two males scoped at Rabbit Ears Pass on 5/3, were followed by crippling views of a male & female at Genesee Park later that same day. One of my favorite woodpeckers!

**Red-naped Sapsucker** - After striking out at a few of my old stakeout locations, we eventually hit on some incredibly responsive birds at other "old" spots in Poudre Canyon and the Cameron Pass area. Fantastic views!

**Downy Woodpecker** - A pair of birds seen at Lamar, and singles heard at Wray and Fort Collins were the only ones recorded.

**Hairy Woodpecker** - A pair in Poudre Canyon (bullied by the Red-naped Sapsucker) preceded a pair the next day between Cameron Pass and North Park that were feeding at ground-level – there was something good at the base of that tree!

**American Three-toed Woodpecker** - After several stops, we finally hit on a responsive male that landed at eye-level and allowed prolonged studies – sensational!

**Northern Flicker** - Widespread; seen every day except 4/27. Every bird that I saw this year was a "Red-shafted" type or intergrade; some years we've had nice "Yellow-shafted" types in the east, particularly at Bonny Reservoir.

**Eastern Phoebe** - Seen nicely in Carrizo Canyon on 4/28.

**Say's Phoebe** - Several per day between Pueblo and Lamar, Lamar and Campo, and Lamar and Wray on 4/27–29.

**Ash-throated Flycatcher** - Excellent studies of a couple of birds in Cottonwood Canyon on 4/28.

**Cassin's Kingbird** - 1 migrant on the plains near Campo, and another likely summer resident in Cottonwood Canyon on 4/28.

**Western Kingbird** - Common in the eastern plains, with a high of 75+ between Campo and Lamar on 4/28. Also seen near Steamboat Springs on 5/2.

**Loggerhead Shrike** - Widespread; scattered individuals and pairs recorded on 6 days.

**Gray Jay** - Our only one was at Moose Visitor Center, and it was scared off by the Sharp-shinned Hawk.

**Steller's Jay** - Common and widespread in the mountains, first near Gunnison on the first day, and then, later, between Fort Collins and Steamboat Springs. The subspecies here, *macrolopha*, is distinguished from other races by its longer crest, white forehead streaking, and white accents above the eyes.

**Blue Jay** - Several seen nicely this year, primarily in Wray and around Bonny Reservoir, but also at Crow Valley Campground at Briggsdale.

**Western Scrub-Jay** - 1 between Gunnison and Pueblo on 4/26 was seen nicely.

**Pinyon Jay** - One of my highlights of the tour was the flock of 50+ that we observed at length on our drive between Gunnison and Pueblo. We were literally surrounded by Pinyon Jays, which were hopping on the ground as well as in the trees. Oddly, the vast majority of the birds appeared to be juveniles (or at least sub-adults), with more grayish plumage and obvious pinkish gapes. There were several nice adults mixed in.

**Clark's Nutcracker** - This characteristic bird of the high country is often surprisingly inconspicuous at this time of year. Hence, our 1 bird, which was well-spotted by Patricia, was most welcome.

**Black-billed Magpie** - Common and widespread; seen on all but 2 days (4/29–30).

**American Crow** - Unusually inconspicuous (or were we just too focused on other things?) until late in the trip, when we had bunches around Fort Collins, Walden and Steamboat Springs.

**Chihuahuan Raven** - Several in the plains between Lamar and Campo on 4/28, including one whose wind-ruffled neck feathers revealed their white bases.

**Common Raven** - Widespread in the mountains.

**Horned Lark** - Widespread and abundant; along with Western Meadowlark, probably the defining bird of the eastern plains. Seen daily, usually in numbers.

**Tree Swallow** - Only a few seen (4/26 and 4/30) prior to our arrival in North Park, where they were abundant (1000+) on 5/1–2, and the Steamboat Springs area.

**Violet-green Swallow** - Common along the Arkansas River from Gunnison to Pueblo, but not seen again until 5/2 (Walden to Steamboat Springs and Hayden).

**Northern Rough-winged Swallow** - Scattered singles between Pueblo and Lamar on 4/27; common in Carrizo and Cottonwood canyons on 4/28.

**Bank Swallow** - 1 at Lake Henry on 4/27 was our only record.

**Cliff Swallow** - Common in the eastern plains, where we encountered several colonies nesting under bridges.

**Barn Swallow** - Widespread, with small numbers encountered daily.

**Black-capped Chickadee** - Seen on 5 days, including such diverse locales as Crested Butte, Bonny Reservoir, Poudre Canyon, Moose Visitor Center, and the California Park Road near Hayden.

**Mountain Chickadee** - Several seen on 4/26 (Gunnison to Pueblo), and then not again until Poudre Canyon (5/1) where we encountered several more.

**Juniper Titmouse** - A responsive pair along Hwy. 50 west of Pueblo provided us with nice views.

**Bushtit**

**Red-breasted Nuthatch** - A pair of birds responded to owl calls near Maysville on 4/26, and others were seen nicely in Poudre Canyon on 5/1.

**White-breasted Nuthatch** - Seen first at Bonny Reservoir, then again in Poudre Canyon; heard at Genessee Park.

**Pygmy Nuthatch** - Seen only at Genessee Park, where we enjoyed close studies.

**Brown Creeper** - A pair seen near Maysville on 4/26 was our only record.

**Rock Wren** - 2 seen in prairie on 4/27 (Pueblo to Lamar) were clearly migrants; 30+ on 4/28 (mostly in Carrizo and Cottonwood canyons) were, for the most part, in prime nesting habitat, but represented the largest number of this species that I can remember recording in a single Grouse Tour.

**Canyon Wren** - 2 in Cottonwood Canyon on 4/28 (one of which was seen at minimum-focus range), and another in Poudre Canyon on 5/1.

**Bewick's Wren** - A few, mostly elusive birds in Carrizo and Cottonwood canyons on 4/28.

**House Wren** - A couple of birds seen nicely in Carrizo Canyon on 4/28 and a few more at Bonny Reservoir on 4/29.

**Marsh Wren** - 1 bird seen nicely as it alternately sang, fed, and gathered nesting material at Arapahoe NWR on 5/2.

**American Dipper** - First seen along the Arkansas River on 4/26 (2 birds), and then again at much closer range in Poudre Canyon on 5/1, where we watched an adult bird feeding young at the nest.

**Ruby-crowned Kinglet** - A few scattered individuals near Maysville (4/26), in Poudre Canyon (5/1; including a bird that showed off his ruby crest), and Genesee Park (5/3).

**Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** - 4+ birds seen nicely in Carrizo Canyon on 4/28, and a pair seen by some along the California Park Road near Hayden on 5/2.

**Eastern Bluebird** - 1 responsive male at Bonny Reservoir on 4/29.

**Western Bluebird** - A pair was seen nicely along Hwy. 50 (Gunnison to Pueblo) on 4/26, and some saw one or two at Genesee Park on 5/3.

**Mountain Bluebird** - 20+ between Gunnison and Pueblo on 4/26, and then not seen again until we reached North Park on 5/1, when we began seeing scattered singles and pairs between Walden and Steamboat Springs, and in the Hayden area. Also, several were seen on the return drive to Denver from Steamboat.

**American Robin** - Common; seen daily in numbers.

**Northern Mockingbird** - Scattered individuals and pairs seen in the eastern plains on 4/27–29.

**Sage Thrasher** - Seen nicely at Arapahoe NWR on a couple of occasions; heard pre-dawn from the Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek.

**Brown Thrasher** - 1 seen at a homestead near Campo on 4/28; a pair studied at length at Lamar on 4/29; and another singing male in Wray on 4/30.

**Curve-billed Thrasher** - Less cooperative than usual. We glimpsed one, then worked awhile before seeing another pair well near Boone.

**European Starling** - Common; seen daily in numbers.

**American Pipit** - Several migrants seen nicely at Lake Henry on 4/27. These were of the Rocky Mountain-breeding subspecies *alticola*, which is rich buff on the underparts and essentially devoid of streaking.

**Orange-crowned Warbler** - 1 migrant at an abandoned homestead near Campo on 4/28, and a couple more at Lamar on 4/29.

**Yellow Warbler** - 1 in Cottonwood Canyon on 4/28 seemed slightly early.

**Yellow-rumped Warbler** - Seen daily from 4/27–5/1; we saw both “Audubon’s” and “Myrtle” types.

**Green-tailed Towhee** - 1 seen nicely along Hwy. 50 (Gunnison to Pueblo) on 4/27.

**Spotted Towhee** - Seen by some near Maysville on 4/27, and then not again until we caught up with more near Hayden on 5/3.

**Canyon Towhee** - A few seen in Cottonwood Canyon on 4/28.

**Cassin's Sparrow** - Seen nicely near Boone on 4/27, and again near Campo on 4/28.

**Rufous-crowned Sparrow** - A singing bird seen briefly in Cottonwood Canyon on 4/28.

**Chipping Sparrow** - Scattered individuals and small groups seen between Gunnison and Pueblo and throughout the eastern plains; not seen again until we had several at Genessee Park on the last day.

**Clay-colored Sparrow\*** - 1 singing bird that was in with the huge congregation of goldfinches, siskins and Chipping Sparrows at Wray could not be located before it shut-up and flew.

**Brewer's Sparrow** - Lots of migrants seen in the eastern plains on 4/27–5/1, including several near Boone, Campo, and the Pawnee Grassland.

**Vesper Sparrow** - Abundant. Seen every day except for 4/26 (Gunnison to Pueblo) and 5/1 (Poudre Canyon to Walden), and we probably just weren't paying close enough attention on those days. Seen in good numbers in virtually all open grassland and shrubby habitats, including the high basin sagebrush communities around North Park and Hayden.

**Lark Sparrow** - Scattered small groups throughout most of the eastern plains on 4/27–30.

**Lark Bunting** - 8+ near Campo on 4/28, including several males that were nearly in breeding black; 1 more male seen near Granada on 4/29. We were too early to see breeding birds on the Pawnee, but once they arrive, they're everywhere.

**Savannah Sparrow** - One bird seen briefly in a dirt field near Lake Henry was our only confirmed Savannah, although we no doubt flushed numerous others.

**Grasshopper Sparrow** - 1 seen nicely near the prairie-chicken lek at Wray.

**Fox Sparrow** - Superb studies of a singing bird at the Moose Visitor Center on 5/2. These are the subspecies *schistacea*, which some authorities argue should be considered a separate species, "Slate-colored Fox-Sparrow".

**Song Sparrow** - Singles in Cottonwood Canyon on 4/28 and North Park on 5/1 were, oddly, the only ones we recorded.

**White-crowned Sparrow** - Scattered singles and small groups throughout; seen on 5 days of the trip, mostly in the eastern plains.

**Dark-eyed Junco** - Common at Crested Butte (4/26) and in the mountains between Fort Collins and Walden, and between Steamboat Springs and Denver. Most of the birds we saw were of the subspecies *caniceps* ("Gray-headed Junco"), formerly recognized as a distinct species. We saw a few "Pink-sided Juncos" (subspecies *mearnsi*) at the Moose Visitor Center feeders.

**McCown's Longspur** - 100+ at Pawnee National Grassland on 4/30. We had repeated excellent views of numerous superb males in high breeding plumage, and were treated to several "parachuting" display flights.

**Chestnut-collared Longspur** - 1 impressive male at Pawnee NG

**Rose-breasted Grosbeak** - A beautiful male in Cottonwood Canyon was a surprise and a first for this tour. It was not only west of its normal range, but also somewhat early for this far north.

**Red-winged Blackbird** - Common; seen daily in numbers.

**Western Meadowlark** - Common; seen daily.

**Yellow-headed Blackbird** - Our first ones were a tree-full in Cheraw (4/27), followed by scattered small groups between Lamar and Wray on 4/29, and between Wray and Fort

Collins on 4/30. We were recording 100+ at Walden, including some females, and many singing males.

**Brewer's Blackbird** - Common; seen daily.

**Common Grackle** - Common; seen daily.

**Great-tailed Grackle** - Scattered singles and pairs in the eastern plains, from Pueblo to Lamar and north to Wray.

**Brown-headed Cowbird** - Scattered singles and small groups, mostly in the eastern plains, but also around Walden.

**Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch** - A single bird of the subspecies *littoralis* ("Hepburn's Rosy-Finch"), characterized by the extensive gray on the sides of the face, was in with the flock of Brown-caps at the Moose Visitor Center on 5/1.

**Brown-capped Rosy-Finch** - 30+ at the Moose Visitor Center on 5/1–2. These birds were the remnants of a much bigger flock that had been hanging around since the big snowstorm in mid-April. We were lucky to get them this late.

**Pine Grosbeak** - 1 female at the Moose Visitor Center feeders on 5/1, and a male there on 5/2. We also heard them on Rabbit Ears Pass on 5/3.

**Cassin's Finch** - 2 males at feeders in Crested Butte on 4/26, followed by 10+ males & females at the Moose Visitor Center on 5/1–2.

**House Finch** - Small numbers seen around Pueblo on 4/26–27, and again in Poudre Park on 5/1.

**Red Crossbill** - 15+ (males & females) in Crested Butte on 4/26 were a treat.

**White-winged Crossbill** - 1 streaky juvenile responded to tape and allowed brief scope studies on Rabbit Ears Pass on 5/3.

**Pine Siskin** - Common; seen on 5 days of the trip, mostly in mountain areas. There were big numbers (200+) at the feeders in Crested Butte on 4/26, and in the residential areas of Wray (100+) on 4/30.

**American Goldfinch** - Surprisingly, the concentration of 100+ that we had in the residential areas of Wray on 4/30 were the only ones we recorded for the trip.

**House Sparrow** - Common; seen daily in virtually all towns we passed.

**TOTAL = 187 species**

### **Mammals:**

**Black-tailed Jackrabbit** - Campo area

**Desert Cottontail** - southeastern plains

**Eastern Cottontail** - These were the cottontails that we saw around Wray and Bonny Reservoir.

**Mountain Cottontail** - The cottontail of the mountain areas.

**Gunnison's Prairie-Dog** - Gunnison area. These are only recently recognized as a distinct species.

**Black-tailed Prairie-Dog** - This was the widespread prairie-dog that we saw over most of our route (Pueblo, Boone, Lamar, Campo, Pawnee Grassland).

**White-tailed Prairie-Dog** - North Park (particularly Arapahoe NWR). Remember, "it's not a job, it's an adventure!"

**Least Chipmunk** - Mountains, particularly at Moose Visitor Center and around Hayden.

**Wyoming Ground-Squirrel** - Walden and Steamboat Springs areas. This is a recent split from what was called "Richardson's Ground-Squirrel".

**Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel** - These smartly patterned critters put on a real show for us in the Pawnee (Patricia's favorite!).

**Rock Squirrel** - Pueblo to Lamar, and Carrizo and Cottonwood Canyons.

**Red Squirrel** - Gunnison to Pueblo

**Eastern Fox Squirrel** - Wray to Fort Collins

**Abert's Squirrel (Tassel-eared Squirrel)** - We had nice studies of a melanistic (dark morph) animal at Genesee Park. The "gray squirrel" that we glimpsed in the mountains must have been a gray morph of this species (although we didn't see the ear tassels), because no member of the Gray Squirrel complex is known from here.

**Ord's Kangaroo-Rat** - SE

**Muskrat** - Walden area

**Yellow-bellied Marmot** - Poudre Canyon

**Coyote** - Gunnison to Pueblo, Pueblo to Lamar, Walden area

**Mink** - One that scampered across the road in front of us down by the river crossing in Hayden was a rare treat.

**Badger** - One of the real highlights of the trip was our encounter with this magnificent animal on the backside of Walden Reservoir.

**Mule Deer** - Widespread.

**Pronghorn** - Widespread through eastern plains and North Park.

**Elk** - Hayden area

**Bighorn Sheep** - Cottonwood Canyon and Georgetown

**TOTAL = 24 species**