

COLORADO GROUSE

APRIL 9 – 18, 2010

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Finding the White-tailed Ptarmigan at 12,000 feet on the last day of our Colorado Grouse tour is always a wonderful relief for the tour leaders. It usually means that we have completed the entire family of Colorado's native grouse, seven species in all.

It all started seven days earlier with our first early rising to observe the incredible filoplumes of the Gunnison Sage-Grouse. An amazing 80 birds, half of them strutting males, made for a great start to our grouse-watching. Sandwiched in between grouse were some amazing Colorado birds. Before our next lek we would find three species of rosy-finches, Clark's Nutcrackers, Burrowing Owls, Mountain Plovers, and Lewis's Woodpeckers.

A windy morning greeted us for our next dawn vigil from the bus. The Lesser Prairie-Chickens did not disappoint. Eleven males strutted, cackled, and jumped for the ladies. Later that morning we practically coasted to Wray with 50 mph tailwinds. We stopped just long enough to enjoy a couple of Long-eared Owl nests at Bonny State Park.

The next morning dawned calm, a welcome relief. We heard the cooing of the Greater Prairie-Chickens before we could see them. They cackled, hooted, and cooed to our delight from point-blank range. Their dancing earned them "display of the trip" honors, which they had to share with the Greater Sage-Grouse.

Then we were off to the west. A very productive afternoon in Pawnee National Grassland garnered a couple of great birds—McCown's and Chestnut-collared longspurs.

The next morning we wound our way into the mountains up Poudre Canyon. Common Mergansers were swimming in the stream surrounded by the incomparable beauty that is Poudre Canyon. The American Dippers stole the show though, as they came in to a nest right on the roadside; stunning views were had by everyone. Farther up the canyon the winds were still light. We were able to find an American Three-toed Woodpecker that came in a few times to check us out.

A quick snack lunch at Cameron Pass was enjoyed by all and we were off to the Moose Visitor Center. The bird feeders there are always a highlight of this tour since they offer a great chance to see some fine birds very up-close. The Pine Grosbeaks were in and we had wonderful views; also around were Cassin's Finches, Gray Jays, and others. Near Walden the reservoir was just starting its thaw. Consequently, the ducks and other birds were right on the roadside. After dinner we went cruising for moose. We were very successful, finding 11 of these monster ungulates, including a cow with a couple of overgrown calves.

Greater Sage-Grouse were our early morning target near Walden. Just 15 males gurgled, swished, and pranced for some 36 females, the greatest sex-ratio disparity I have ever seen on a lek of any species. The alpha male mated at least 12 times, sending the shaking and preening females on their way. The close display with lots of "action" earned this grouse the top spot for displays (shared with Greater Prairie-Chicken).

Next we were off to Steamboat Springs and the toughest of the grouse, the Dusky. Since they don't display in large groups or out in open country, they are always a challenge to find. After we first flushed one from the roadside and glimpsed a couple more stealthily walking through the brush, we finally found a cooperative female that gave everyone great looks.

Sharp-tailed Grouse were calling our name, so we were off again, hoping to see an evening display so that we wouldn't have to get up early for another dawn vigil. Interrupting our evening run was a romp of otters. Curling around each other, rubbing and rolling, they seemed to be enjoying themselves without a care in the world. The gray skies and cooler temps moderated the Sharp-tailed Grouse displays, but we got them. The next morning we would try again, but our weather luck had run out. Mild temps were good, but the spitting rain was not. The birds were there, as it is their duty, but displays were modest again. On the way out of Steamboat, Doug spotted a Dusky Grouse on the side of the highway, just for good measure.

Our next target would be the White-tailed Ptarmigan. Finding this bird is more weather-dependent than any other Colorado grouse. Since it prefers the alpine tundra of 11,000+ feet, blowing snow and poor visibility are a constant part of the challenge. We were not let down. An icy snow pelted our faces as we searched for an all-white bird in an all-white world at 12,000 feet on Loveland Pass. The snow let up and our resolve strengthened. I tried the other side of the highway; we usually don't see ptarmigans over there. To my surprise, a male flew in, calling, attracted to the tape. Scope views for everyone! And a big sigh from Michael and me.

While a variety of birds were chosen for "bird of the trip" honors, the rosy-finches garnered the most votes. We found 166 species of birds and an amazing 26 species of mammals on this circumnavigation of Colorado.

Day 1, 9 Apr: Get acquainted dinner at Ol' Miner Steakhouse. Night Gunnison, CO

Day 2, 10 Apr: Morning visit to Waunita Lek for Gunnison Sage-Grouse, breakfast at hotel, Crested Butte Rosy-Finch hunt and birding in Monarch pass (Clark's Nutcracker), Poncha Springs, lunch at First Street Café in Salida, post-lunch visit to Poncha Springs and drive down Arkansas River, dinner at Rosario's in Pueblo. Night Pueblo, CO

Day 3, 11 Apr: IL Road near Boone, Lake Meredith, Lake Henry, lunch at Boss Hogg's in La Junta, Lake Cheraw, John Martin Reservoir State Park area (Lake Hasty), Lamar Community College woods. Night Lamar, CO

Day 4, 12 Apr: Breakfast at Campo Cafe, birding around Campo, birding west to Carrizo and Cottonwood canyons. Brief afternoon stop at Two Buttes State Wildlife Area. Night Lamar, CO

Day 5, 13 Apr: Morning at Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek with Dorenkamps, windy drive to Wray with stop at Bonny Reservoir State Park (Long-eared Owl nests), late afternoon on the Bledsoe Ranch, dinner 4th and Main in Wray (excellent). Night Wray, CO

Day 6, 14 Apr: Morning Greater Prairie-Chicken viewing on the Bledsoe Ranch, breakfast at Riverside Cafe, Wray State Fish Hatchery, Haxtun Sewage Ponds, lunch at Sterling Village Inn, afternoon birding at Crow

Valley Campground (slow) and the Murphy's Pasture area of Pawnee National Grasslands; dinner at Austin's in Fort Collins. Night Fort Collins, CO

Day 7, 15 Apr: Grandview Cemetery, breakfast at The Silver Grill in Ft. Collins, birding up Poudre Canyon with stops along highway and picnic at Cameron Pass, Moose Visitor Center, afternoon birding at Walden Reservoir, dinner at Moose Creek Café, late evening moose watching. Night Walden, CO

Day 8, 16 Apr: Morning visit to awesome Greater Sage-Grouse lek, breakfast at Moose Creek Café, post-breakfast birding at Walden Reservoir, afternoon birding near Hayden and along California Park Road (Dusky Grouse) and Twenty mile Road (Sharp-tailed Grouse), dinner at Rex's in Steamboat Springs. Night Steamboat Springs, CO

Day 9, 17 Apr: Morning visit to Sharp-tailed Grouse lek, Muddy Creek Recreational parking area (Rabbit Ears Pass area of Routt National Forest), Lunch at Blue Moon Café in Silverthorne, successful White-tailed Ptarmigan search on Loveland Pass, late afternoon stop Genesee Park, dinner at hotel. Night Denver, CO

Day 10, 18 Apr: departure for home

BIRD LIST (166 species)

Canada Goose – Common, seen almost daily
Wood Duck – Seen near Boone & Cottonwood Canyon
Gadwall – Common, seen seven days
American Wigeon – Common, seen three days
Mallard – Common, seen almost daily
Blue-winged Teal – Several seen on three days
Cinnamon Teal – Several seen on four dates
Northern Shoveler - Common, seen on six dates
Northern Pintail – A few seen on two days at Walden Reservoir
Green-winged Teal - Common, seen five days
Canvasback – Seen at Walden Reservoir
Redhead – Seen at Lake Meredith and on two days at Walden Reservoir
Ring-necked Duck – Seen on two dates Walden Reservoir
Greater Scaup – Three seen at Lake Meredith
Lesser Scaup – Common, seen on four dates, most numerous at Walden Reservoir
Bufflehead – Small numbers seen on three dates
Common Goldeneye – Along the Arkansas River and at Lake Cheraw
Hooded Merganser – A female flying off of a small pond along the Arkansas River E of Pueblo
Common Merganser – Seen in small numbers in mountain reservoirs and streams
Ruddy Duck – Lake Meredith and a small lake in Denver (driveby)
Scaled Quail – Fair numbers were seen, best near IL road E of Pueblo
Northern Bobwhite – Heard Only at the Bledsoe Greater Prairie-Chicken lek
Ring-necked Pheasant – Seen on two dates, eastern plains
Greater Sage-Grouse – A good day to be Alpha-male, 15males and 36 females
Gunnison Sage-Grouse – An amazing number 39 males and 41 females, great display
Dusky Grouse – California park road, a couple glimpses then good looks at a female
WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN – A cooperative, mostly white male, bird seen at 12,000 feet, Loveland Pass
Sharp-tailed Grouse – Several males displaying on the lek
Greater Prairie-Chicken – 28 males and 6 females put on an amazing morning display, cooing, cackling and hooting
Lesser Prairie-Chicken – Great display of 11 males south of Granada
Wild Turkey – Seen in Cottonwood Canyon
Horned Grebe – A couple breeding-plumaged birds at Lake Hasty below the dam at John Martin Reservoir
Eared Grebe – A couple at Lake Meredith and Lake Cheraw
Western Grebe – Many seen on Lake Meredith
Clark's Grebe – Several seen on Lake Meredith, great looks
American White Pelican – Seen five days, largest numbers at Walden reservoir
Double-crested Cormorant – Seen on a few days
Great Blue Heron – Seen almost daily
White-faced Ibis – Seen at Lake Cheraw
Turkey Vulture – Seen daily
Osprey – A few singles here and there in the mountains of northern CO

Bald Eagle – Seen on five days! Oddest was the bird E of Lamar, A pair at a nest near Walden
Northern Harrier – Seen on five days, small numbers, displaying male at Lake Cheraw
Sharp-shinned Hawk – Single distant bird in the mountains near Steamboat
Cooper's Hawk – Several seen on four dates
Northern Goshawk – One distant juvenile male, near Cameron Pass
Swainson's Hawk – Common, seen everyday except our first day
Red-tailed Hawk – Common and seen daily
Ferruginous Hawk – Nesting pair near Springfield was nice, also seen a couple other days
Rough-legged Hawk – Northeast CO
Golden Eagle – Seven birds seen on six days
American Kestrel – Common, seen daily
Merlin – One zipped past on our first day, only a few people got it
Peregrine Falcon – One bird soaring near Walden
Prairie Falcon – One zipping along the cliffs of Cottonwood Canyon
American Coot – Only a few singles seen on four dates
Sandhill Crane – Several seen in the Steamboat and Hayden areas were Greater, the local nesters. Joe saw some near Gunnison
Snowy Plover – 22 birds at Cheraw was a great count
Killdeer – Common and seen on five days
Mountain Plover – Two birds seen along IL road east of Pueblo
Black-necked Stilt – Three seen at Cheraw
American Avocet – Seen on four days, beautiful breeding plumage
Greater Yellowlegs – Two at Lake Cheraw were distant, one at Walden Reservoir
Long-billed Curlew – Several seen in the Comanche National Grassland
Western Sandpiper – A single with Baird's at Lake Cheraw
Least Sandpiper – A single at Lake Cheraw
Baird's Sandpiper – Four at Lake Cheraw
Wilson's Snipe – A couple seen by most folks near Walden Reservoir
Bonaparte's Gull – A few around Lake Meredith and also a single at Haxtun Sewage ponds
Franklin's Gull – A few at Lake Cheraw and one at Walden Reservoir
Ring-billed Gull – Seen on four dates, small numbers
California Gull – Large numbers pre-nesting around Walden
Rock Pigeon – Common seen daily
Eurasian Collared-Dove – Since its arrival in Colorado in 1998 this species has expanded to every corner!
Mourning Dove – Common, seen almost daily
Greater Roadrunner – A couple birds near John Martin Reservoir State Park, Eric's find
Great Horned Owl – Seen three times including a bird in Lamar, seen from restaurant
Burrowing Owl – Several seen on several dates, great looks
Long-eared Owl – Nests at Bonny State Park, ear tufts were seen and an eye glimpsed
Chimney Swift – A bird flying in the wind at Burlington, only a few folks got it
White-throated Swift – Seen our first day along the Arkansas River
Belted Kingfisher – A few singles and a double, seen on three days
Lewis's Woodpecker – Four great birds were very cooperative in Cottonwood Canyon
Williamson's Sapsucker – A very cooperative female in Genesee Park
Red-naped Sapsucker – One in Poncha Springs also seen near Steamboat
Ladder-backed Woodpecker – A pair in Cottonwood Canyon
Downy Woodpecker – Two singles seen, best in the scope at Crow Valley Recreation area Pawnee
Hairy Woodpecker – Seen on four days
American Three-toed Woodpecker – Along the highway in Roosevelt National Forest
Northern Flicker – Common Seen almost daily, yellow-shafted and red-shafted forms seen
Eastern Phoebe – One seen, Two Buttes State Wildlife area
Say's Phoebe – Several seen on three dates
Loggerhead Shrike – Several seen on the eastern plains

Gray Jay – Moose Visitor Center
Steller's Jay – Seen on three dates
Blue Jay – A couple seen in eastern CO
Western Scrub-Jay – Several seen in Cottonwood Canyon
Clark's Nutcracker – Monarch Pass
Black-billed Magpie – Our *Pica hudsonia* now split from Old World Magpie (*Pica pica*), six days
American Crow – Seen on six days
Chihuahuan Raven – Several seen, all in southeast Colorado
Common Raven – Common, seen most days in the mountains
Horned Lark – Abundant out on the plains, seen daily
Tree Swallow – Seen in the mountains around Walden and Steamboat
Violet-Green Swallow – Several at a stop in Poudre Canyon, high overhead
Cliff Swallow – Seen in southeast Colorado
Barn Swallow – Seen in SE CO
Black-capped Chickadee – Seen on three days in the mountains
Mountain Chickadee – Fairly common in mountains
Juniper Titmouse – One bird came in, hard to get looks at it, west of Pueblo
Red-breasted Nuthatch – Grandview Cemetery Fort Collins, Genesee Park
White-breasted Nuthatch – Best looks at a nesting bird in Genesee Park
Pygmy Nuthatch – Abundant in the Genesee Park area
Brown Creeper – Singing bird in Genesee Park
Rock Wren – Seen in Cottonwood Canyon
Canyon Wren – One seen in the scope in Cottonwood Canyon
Bewick's Wren – Cottonwood Canyon, a couple seen and heard
Marsh Wren – Heard Only SE CO
American Dipper – In Poudre Canyon, great looks at the diversion dam
Golden-crowned Kinglet – Routt National Forest, at the Three-toed Woodpecker spot
Ruby-crowned Kinglet – A few singles
Eastern Bluebird – Best looks were at Lake Hasty in John Martin Reservoir State Park
Western Bluebird – Good looks at Genesee Park
Mountain Bluebird – Seen five days mostly in the mountains
Townsend's Solitaire – A couple singles seen, Arkansas river and Poudre Canyon
American Robin – Common, seen daily
Northern Mockingbird – A couple seen in SE CO
Sage Thrasher – Seen very well in Crested Butte, odd location
Curve-billed Thrasher – Seen near the small town of Boone in SE CO
European Starling – Seen daily, unfortunately
American Pipit – A few at Haxtun Sewage ponds
Cedar Waxwing – A few small groups seen on four days
Northern Parula – A singing male at Lake Hasty, good find
Yellow-rumped Warbler – We saw a few on two days
Spotted Towhee – Several seen on a couple dates, heard on a couple more
Canyon Towhee – Seen along the highway W of Pueblo also in Cottonwood Canyon
Rufous-crowned Sparrow – One in Cottonwood Canyon was seen well in the scope
Black-throated Sparrow – One lost migrant Comanche National Grassland, RARE
Chipping Sparrow – Heard only in Genesee Park
Vesper Sparrow – Common, especially out on the eastern plains, seen daily
Lark Bunting – Several early birds near Campo
Grasshopper Sparrow – Brief looks near the Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek
Song Sparrow – Seen in the mountains around Gunnison
Lincoln's Sparrow – One with other sparrows along the Arkansas river SE CO
White-crowned Sparrow – Fairly common, seen four days

Dark-eyed Junco – Seen almost daily; Oregon, slate-colored, pink-sided and “**Gray-headed**” types (subspecies *caniceps*)

Harris’s Sparrow – A couple including a singing bird near Wray, Keith spotted them, RARE

McCown’s Longspur – We saw more than 100 on the Pawnee National Grassland

Chestnut-collared Longspur – Pawnee NG, one cooperative bird, a few other sightings

Red-winged Blackbird – Common, seen daily

Western Meadowlark – Common and seen daily, but beautiful visually and aurally

Yellow-headed Blackbird – We had good looks around Walden reservoir

Brewer’s Blackbird – A few seen here and there

Common Grackle – Seen daily, subspecies *versicolor*

Great-tailed Grackle – Several seen in southeast Colorado

Brown-headed Cowbird – Seen on a few days the southeast part of the state

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch – A few seen in Crested Butte, including a couple Hepburn’s

Black Rosy-Finch – Several with the impressive flock in Crested Butte

Brown-capped Rosy-Finch – Crested Butte perhaps 200 birds

Pine Grosbeak – Wonderful looks at these birds at the Moose Visitor Center, these were of the Rocky Mountain subspecies *montanus*, which has extensively gray flanks and belly.

Cassin’s Finch – Seen on four days in the mountains, great looks at Moose Visitor Center

House Finch – Common and seen daily

Red Crossbill – Numerous at Genesee Park, Type 5 were common, and a few type 2

Pine Siskin – Seen many days all over the state

American Goldfinch – Seen on a few days

House Sparrow – Seen daily

MAMMALS (26 species)

Gunnison area = Gu; southeast = SE; northeast = NE; mountains = Mtns (including valleys at Walden and Steamboat)

White-tailed Jackrabbit – Mtns

Black-tailed Jackrabbit – one sighted on the eastern plains

Snowshoe Hare – California Park road, at the Dusky Grouse spot

Desert Cottontail - SE

Eastern Cottontail - Lamar

Gunnison Prairie-Dog - Gu

Black-tailed Prairie-Dog - SE, NE

Least Chipmunk - Mtns

Wyoming Ground-Squirrel - Gu , Mtns (recent split from Richardson’s Ground-Squirrel)

Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel - NE

Rock Squirrel - SE (Cottonwood Canyon)

Eastern Fox Squirrel - SE, NE, Mtns

Abert’s Squirrel - Mtns

Golden-mantled Ground-Squirrel - Mtns

Muskrat - Mtns

Yellow-bellied Marmot – Steamboat area

Porcupine - Mtns

Northern River Otter – A great group of four along the banks on the Yampa River, near Hayden

Coyote – Mtns

Mule Deer - SE, Mtns

White-tailed Deer – E, Bonny State Park

Pronghorn - SE, NE, Mtns

Ord’s Kangaroo-Rat – Seen predawn by some folks

Moose – Mtns, Walden

Elk - Mtns

Bighorn Sheep – SE

REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS

Boreal Chorus Frog - Walden and Steamboat Springs

Western Painted Turtle – Haxtun Sewage ponds