

COLORADO GROUSE

APRIL 7-16, 2011



GREATER PRAIRIE-CHICKEN 12 APRIL 2011 © BRIAN GIBBONS

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Our first morning found us sitting quietly in a dark, cold trailer, most of us strangers. The sky paled in front of us, fading the morning stars. The snow-capped peaks emerged, as well as sounds from the valley—not the hoped for grouse, but coyotes, right from the middle of the lek. I was horrified. A few tense minutes later we saw at least three coyotes scampering about the lek, the Gunnison Sage-Grouse seemingly unconcerned. The birds danced and displayed for more than an hour to our delight. Our first, and often most-sought, grouse was under our belt.

Next, we were off to Crested Butte for the rosy-finches. Bluebird skies never bode well for finches, but we found numerous Brown-capped Rosy-Finches in the trees around town. An improbable sighting by Michael at Monarch Pass allowed us to see Black Rosy-Finches on a little piece of wind-swept tundra. We crossed the Continental Divide and birded around Poncha Springs and down the Arkansas River. Cassin's Finches, Hairy Woodpecker, Red-naped Sapsucker, and Townsend's Solitaire were among the many birds we sighted. On the outskirts of Pueblo we found a very obliging Scaled Quail that sat on a railroad tie fence calling for us.

The following morning we found ourselves in the short grass prairie east of Pueblo. Burrowing Owls, pronghorn, black-tailed prairie-dogs, and a bonus Prairie Falcon were there, but no Mountain Plover. We continued moving downriver to Lake Meredith, which was oddly devoid of birds but for a few pelicans and Clark's Grebe. Lake Henry was birdier, but something had changed. The wind had come up, gusting to 55 mph that afternoon. We detoured around a wildfire near Fort Lyon. The next morning we birded through the continuing wind at Comanche National Grassland. There we found a migrant flock of Chestnut-collared Longspurs coming to a tank for water. Chihuahuan Ravens also cruised the grasslands. Perhaps most exciting was a flight display of the Long-billed Curlew. Cottonwood Canyon was quiet except for a few targets—Rock and Canyon wrens, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, and Eastern Phoebe. On our trip back north, a sprawling prairie-dog town tempted us to stop for a look. Several Mountain Plovers were sighted. We briefly saw a flight display and much tail-wagging. We also noticed that these birds were stained from the ochre dirt. Late in the afternoon the wind died enough for us to enjoy Lamar Community College Woods. Northern Cardinal, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Marsh Wren, and a Barn Owl brightened up the place.

Our earliest departure, short of four a.m., found us driving to meet Fred Dorenkamp in Granada. He would take us out to see the booming Lesser Prairie-Chickens. The chickens popped their brick-red air sacs and chased each other all over the lek. All the while Norma was cooking up an amazing breakfast for us. Along the way to Wray, Long-eared Owls on the nest were betrayed by a wisp of ear tufts at Bonny State Park.

The Greater Prairie-Chicken is often a favorite because of our proximity to the lek; this year was no exception. Surrounded by prairie sandhills, more than 30 males boomed, cooed, and cackled at the females that strolled through blithely. To my eyes the alpha male was a bit tattered with a scab on his left air sac, but he had the performance the ladies were looking for.

From the sandhills we headed west to the short grass prairie of Pawnee National Grassland. A few beautiful McCown's Longspurs were back on their breeding grounds, as was a Mountain Plover. A cloudy morning saw us returning to the mountains in Poudre Canyon. American Dippers dipped along the river. We also saw several Clark's Nutcrackers and Red Crossbills. As we climbed the mountains, the beetle-killed trees were obvious. In an area of Lodgepole we finally got good scope views of a male American Three-toed Woodpecker.

After a quick snack lunch we crested Cameron Pass and dropped into North Park. The Colorado State Forest Moose Visitor Center was birdy, with Pine Grosbeak being a highlight. In the willows on the way to Walden we found our first moose. Walden Reservoir, thawed at the edges, held a variety of waterfowl. Common Merganser, Bufflehead, Scaup, Redhead, and lots of dabblers cruised the edge of the ice. Some ice-skating Marbled Godwits were entertaining.

The forecast was ominous: snow and wind. We planned an early departure to allow for road conditions that might slow us down on the way to the Coalmont Greater Sage-Grouse lek. The huge males were there in the snow and wind, tails fanned, puffing out their chests, popping their yellow air sacs, and swishing their wings. Several females watched as they sat on their hands. It was over too soon, just as the light was bright enough for photography. All the birds flushed; cruising overhead was a pair of Golden Eagles.

Our return to Walden was slowed by deteriorating road conditions. Pronghorn in the snow-covered winter grass were perfectly camouflaged. Rabbit Ears Pass after breakfast would be much worse, but we made it to Steamboat. An evening run to California Park Road near Hayden left us a few hours to search for Dusky Grouse. We walked and stared into the oak woodland; just when we were about to head home, Michael heard a bird hooting quite close. Twenty minutes passed before Elizabeth (BA) spotted a male just at the edge of a copse of oaks. Eventually we got the bird in the scope and beautiful views were had by all.

Our coldest morning found us standing on the roadside watching the wind-up toy antics of the Sharp-tailed Grouse. Lavender air sacs inflated, wings spread, and tails pointed to the heavens are what this show is about. As usual, females wandered through the lek paying no mind. Our return passage of Rabbit Ears was less snowy than the day before, but the wind was again ravaging the spruce fir forest. One last grouse was on our mind. During lunch the road closure was lifted so we would at least have a chance at White-tailed Ptarmigan. It was not to be; blowing snow, 40 mph winds, and the white bird in a white land at 12,000 feet didn't materialize. Down the hill we marveled at a fine Williamson's Sapsucker at Genesee Mountain Park. The Western Bluebirds and Pygmy Nuthatches were numerous, and this was a perfect way to end our circumnavigation of Colorado.

Day 1, 7 Apr: Get acquainted dinner at Ol' Miner Steakhouse. Night Gunnison, CO

Day 2, 8 Apr: Morning visit to Waunita Lek for Gunnison Sage-Grouse, breakfast at hotel, Crested Butte Rosy-Finch hunt and birding in Monarch pass, 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, 9 Apr: IL Road near Boone, Lake Meredith, Lake Henry, lunch at Boss Hogg's in La Junta, Lake Cheraw, wildfire detour north to Haswell and then Eads and south to Lamar (top winds for the trip 55mph). Night Lamar, CO

Day 4, 10 Apr: Breakfast at Hickory House, birding west through Comanche National Grassland to Carrizo and Cottonwood canyons. Prairie-Dog colony for Mountain Plover study. Afternoon birding at Lamar Community College woods was good. Night Lamar, CO

Day 5, 11 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, 12 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 on Pawnee National Grassland; dinner at Austin's in Fort Collins. Night Fort Collins, CO

Day 7, 13 Apr: Breakfast at The Silver Grill in Ft. Collins, birding up Poudre Canyon with stops along highway and picnic near Cameron Pass, Moose Visitor Center, afternoon birding at Walden Reservoir, dinner at Moose Creek Café, snowy evening moose watching for some. Night Walden, CO

Day 8, 14 Apr: Morning visit to 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), dinner at Rex's in Steamboat Springs. Night Steamboat Springs, CO

Day 9, 15 Apr: Morning visit to Sharp-tailed Grouse lek and Twenty Mile Road, Lunch at Blue Moon Café in Silverthorne, unsuccessful White-tailed Ptarmigan search on Loveland Pass in the wind, late afternoon stop Genesee Park, dinner at hotel. Night Denver, CO

Day 10, 16 Apr: departure for home

BIRD LIST (150 species)

Snow Goose – One bird at Bonny State Park
Canada Goose – Common, seen almost daily
Wood Duck – Bonny State Park, and near Fort Collins
Gadwall – Common, seen six days
American Wigeon – Common, seen five days
Mallard – Common, seen daily
Blue-winged Teal – A few on the eastern plains
Cinnamon Teal – Several seen
Northern Shoveler - Common, seen on six dates
Northern Pintail – A few seen on four days
Green-winged Teal - Common, seen six days
Canvasback – Seen at Walden Reservoir
Redhead – Seen at Lake Cheraw and on two days at Walden Reservoir
Ring-necked Duck – Seen on four days
Lesser Scaup – Common, seen on four dates, most numerous at Walden Reservoir
Bufflehead – Small numbers seen on five dates
Common Goldeneye – A few at Walden Reservoir
Common Merganser – Seen in small numbers in mountain reservoirs and streams
Ruddy Duck – Seen on five dates around the state
Scaled Quail – Best looks on the rail tie fence W of Pueblo
Northern Bobwhite – Heard Only at the Greater Prairie-Chicken lek
Ring-necked Pheasant – Seen on two dates, eastern plains
Greater Sage-Grouse – An eagle-shortened snowy show, 22 males and 22 females
Gunnison Sage-Grouse – An amazing show of 31 birds, great display
Dusky Grouse – California park road, Exceptional looks at a male, thanks BA
Sharp-tailed Grouse – Several males displaying on the lek, 16 birds for the day
Greater Prairie-Chicken – 31 males and 27 females put on an amazing morning display, cooing, cackling and hooting
Lesser Prairie-Chicken – Great display of 8 males south of Granada
Wild Turkey – Seen in Lamar along the Arkansas River
Pied-billed Grebe – Two seen at Walden Reservoir
Horned Grebe – A couple breeding-plumaged birds at Lake Cheraw
Eared Grebe – A couple at Lake Cheraw and Walden Reservoir
Western Grebe – Many seen Bonny State Park
Clark's Grebe – A few seen on Lake Meredith
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
Black-crowned Night-Heron – Seen along I-70 in Denver, our last new bird
Turkey Vulture – Seen almost daily
Osprey – A few singles here and there in the mountains of northern CO
Bald Eagle – Seen on three days, birds at a nest near Walden, and Fort Collins
Northern Harrier – Seen on six days, small numbers
Sharp-shinned Hawk – A single distant bird in the mountains near Dusky Grouse
Cooper's Hawk – A few seen, best was a fence-sitter on IL rd E of Pueblo
Swainson's Hawk – Common, seen six days
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 – Several birds seen on five days
American Kestrel – Common, seen daily
Peregrine Falcon – Seen our first and last days
Prairie Falcon – IL road and Comanche National Grasslands
Virginia Rail – Glimpsed by some Cottonwood Canyon, odd location
American Coot – Several seen on six days
Sandhill Crane – Several seen in the Steamboat and Hayden areas were Greaters, the local nesters
Snowy Plover – Seven birds at Cheraw in the wind

Killdeer – Common and seen on most days
Mountain Plover – A great observation of several birds south of Lamar, tail-wagging and flight display were observed, also seen after LEPC lek and on Pawnee National Grassland
Black-necked Stilt – A couple in a flooded ag field near Lamar
American Avocet – Beautiful breeding plumage, Lake Cheraw and Green Mountain Reservoir
Greater Yellowlegs – A few in SE CO
Lesser Yellowlegs – A few seen in the same flooded ag field as mentioned above
Long-billed Curlew – Several seen in the Comanche National Grassland, including a displaying bird in flight
Marbled Godwit – A couple skating on ice at Walden
Wilson's Snipe – A few seen near Fort Collins
Franklin's Gull – Seen in E CO, but best looks were the rosy birds at Walden
Ring-billed Gull – Seen on five dates, small numbers
California Gull – Large numbers pre-nesting around Walden, 1 out of place bird in Poudre Canyon
Rock Pigeon – Common seen almost daily
Eurasian Collared-Dove – Since its arrival in Colorado in 1998 this species has expanded to every corner!
White-winged Dove – Seen by a couple folks in Haswell on our fire detour
Mourning Dove – Common, seen almost daily
Greater Roadrunner – A bird seen by some was near Pritchett
Barn Owl – A lucky afternoon sighting from Lamar Community College woods (LCC)
Great Horned Owl – Seen near lake Meredith
Burrowing Owl – Several seen on several dates, good looks
Long-eared Owl – Nests at Bonny State Park, ear tufts were seen and an eye glimpsed
Belted Kingfisher – A few seen, first near Fort Collins
Red-bellied Woodpecker – LCC woods a good Colorado bird
Williamson's Sapsucker – Finally, a very cooperative male in Genesee Park appeared
Red-naped Sapsucker – A couple seen well in Poncha Springs
Downy Woodpecker – Poncha Springs and LCC
Hairy Woodpecker – Seen on three days, first at Poncha Springs
American Three-toed Woodpecker – Along the highway in Roosevelt National Forest, near Cameron Pass
Northern Flicker – Common, seen almost daily, yellow-shafted and red-shafted forms seen
Eastern Phoebe – Cottonwood Canyon and LCC
Say's Phoebe – Several seen on four days
Loggerhead Shrike – Several seen on the eastern plains, 1 in the mountains
Steller's Jay – Seen on two dates
Blue Jay – A few seen in eastern CO
Western Scrub-Jay – A couple seen along the Arkansas River valley
Clark's Nutcracker – Poudre Canyon, mostly distant flyovers
Black-billed Magpie – Our *Pica hudsonia* now split from Old World Magpie (*Pica pica*), five days
American Crow – Seen on all but a single day
Chihuahuan Raven – Several seen, all in southeast Colorado
Common Raven – Common, seen most days in the mountains and canyons
Horned Lark – Abundant out on the plains, seen daily
Tree Swallow – Seen in SE CO, one day
Barn Swallow – Seen in SE CO and on six days total
Black-capped Chickadee – Seen on four days in the mountains
Mountain Chickadee – Fairly common in mountains, one at Lake Meredith was odd
Bushtit – A single at LCC woods was odd
White-breasted Nuthatch – Eastern ssp birds at Wray State Fish Hatchery, Mtn ssp in the mtns
Pygmy Nuthatch – Abundant in the Genesee Park area
Rock Wren – Seen in Cottonwood Canyon and a few migrants elsewhere
Canyon Wren – One seen in the scope in Cottonwood Canyon, heard Poudre Canyon
Bewick's Wren – Cottonwood Canyon, a couple seen and heard
Marsh Wren – Seen very well at LCC woods
American Dipper – In Poudre Canyon, good looks at the diversion dam
Ruby-crowned Kinglet – A couple singles, E CO
Eastern Bluebird – Along the rd, Arkansas River valley
Western Bluebird – Good looks at Genesee Park
Mountain Bluebird – Seen four days mostly in the mountains

Townsend's Solitaire – A couple singles seen, heard a few times
Hermit Thrush – A couple seen at LCC woods
American Robin – Common, seen daily
Northern Mockingbird – A single seen in SE CO
Sage Thrasher – A few migrants seen
European Starling – Seen daily, unfortunately
Cedar Waxwing – A few seen at LCC
Yellow-rumped Warbler – We saw some at LCC woods
Green-tailed Towhee – Heard Singing along 20-mile road
Spotted Towhee – Several seen on a few dates
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
Chipping Sparrow – Seen on two days
Vesper Sparrow – Seen on six days, very small numbers compared to average
Song Sparrow – Heard in the mountains around Gunnison, Steamboat
Lincoln's Sparrow – Two in LCC woods
White-crowned Sparrow – Fairly common, seen five days
Dark-eyed Junco – Seen almost daily; Oregon, slate-colored, pink-sided and “Gray-headed” types (subspecies *caniceps*)
McCown's Longspur – We saw some beautiful males on the Pawnee National Grassland
Chestnut-collared Longspur – Comanche National Grassland, a migrant group coming to water
Northern Cardinal – LCC woods uncommon in Colorado
Red-winged Blackbird – Common, seen daily
Western Meadowlark – Common and seen daily, but beautiful visually and aurally
Yellow-headed Blackbird – We saw a few singles near Lakes Meredith and Walden
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
Black Rosy-Finch – 11 birds at Monarch Pass, amazing find by Michael
Brown-capped Rosy-Finch – Crested Butte
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 twice, Poncha Springs and at Moose Visitor Center
House Finch – Common and seen almost daily
Red Crossbill – A flock in Poudre Canyon and a single type 2 was at Genesee Park
Pine Siskin – Seen many days all over the state
American Goldfinch – Seen on a few days
House Sparrow – Seen daily

MAMMALS (24 species)

Gunnison area = Gu; southeast = SE; northeast = NE; mountains = Mtns (including valleys at Walden and Steamboat)
Eastern Cottontail - Wray
Desert Cottontail - SE
Black-tailed Jackrabbit – Eastern Plains
White-tailed Jackrabbit – Mtns, North Park
Eastern Fox Squirrel - SE, NE, Mtns
Abert's Squirrel - Mtns
Red Squirrel – Mtns mostly heard only
Least Chipmunk - Mtns
Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel - NE
Rock Squirrel - SE (Cottonwood Canyon)
Wyoming Ground-Squirrel - Gu , Mtns (recent split from Richardson's Ground-Squirrel)
Black-tailed Prairie-Dog - SE, NE
Gunnison Prairie-Dog - Gu
Yellow-bellied Marmot – Steamboat area
Muskrat - Mtns

Porcupine - Mtns

Coyote – Mtns and SE

Red Fox – Great looks in Fort Collins

Mule Deer - SE, Mtns

White-tailed Deer – SE, running with Pronghorn near LEPC lek

Moose – Mtns, Walden

Elk - Mtns

Bighorn Sheep – SE

Pronghorn - SE, NE, Mtns, seen daily!

REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS

Boreal Chorus Frog - Walden and Steamboat Springs

Western Painted Turtle – Haxtun Sewage ponds