

COLORADO SUMMER WEEK

JUNE 12-18, 2006

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TOUR REPORT
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By Brennan Mulrooney

As you might expect from a state that spans the Continental Divide, Colorado is a land of contrasts. Take, for example, our spring 2006 tour that experienced triple digit record setting heat one day and a snowstorm that closed the roads just two days later. I guess what I'm saying is that you'd better dress in layers! While the weather during our tour could certainly be considered noteworthy, our experiences with the birds would create the lasting memories.

I think what stands out most in my mind was our quest for Mountain Plover. This subtly marked, unobtrusive, oddly named denizen of the high plains has become more difficult to find with each passing year. Acting on a recent Internet report, we started our day on the Pawnee National Grassland by intensively scanning a patch of short-grass prairie that had been holding a pair of plovers in previous weeks. As thousands of dollars of optics scrutinized every inch of the field for our quarry, we were constantly distracted by a family of Burrowing Owls with several fluffy fledglings. Also present were singing and displaying Western Meadowlarks and Horned Larks, and ridiculously cute desert cottontails. Finally we spotted a bird that looked promising. It was just a round head with a short, straight bill poking up over a ridge, but it certainly demanded closer inspection. Once we got it in the scope, we were all thrilled to find that the head belonged to a Mountain Plover! Upon further inspection we realized that it was a large fledgling, accompanied by one of its parents. We watched this little family group for quite a while, relishing the opportunity to witness this moment in the life of a scarce and declining species, all the while enjoying a spectacular sunrise on the prairie.

That was just the beginning of a fantastic day on the Pawnee that saw us enjoying flight displays and close views of both McCown's and Chestnut-collared longspurs, striking Lark Buntings, an endless supply of Horned Larks, and such characteristic mammals as black-tailed prairie dog, thirteen-lined ground squirrel, and pronghorn (many with babies!). As we drove the roads of the Pawnee, we noticed that we weren't the only ones having to deal with the record heat. Every little patch of shade had a bird hiding in it. Larger patches, such as road cuts, absolutely erupted with longspurs, Lark Buntings, and Horned Larks as we would pass. Out on the largely treeless prairies, shade is definitely at a premium. Where we did find trees, the difference in bird life was immediately apparent. Bullock's and Orchard orioles sang from the cottonwoods, Eastern and Western kingbirds fluttered about, and we were treated to an up-close demonstration of the origin of the Loggerhead Shrike's colloquial name of Butcher Bird.

The next morning, up at 12,000 feet in Rocky Mountain National Park, the sunbaked prairies seemed a world away. We marched out the trail onto the tundra, wearing every bit of clothing we had packed. The moist, spongy ground was covered in tiny wildflowers and the horizon was a jumble of craggy snow-capped peaks. Once again we found ourselves scrutinizing every inch of the terrain; while our quarry this morning was quite a bit larger than a Mountain Plover, White-tailed Ptarmigan is not an easy bird to spot. These birds are exquisitely camouflaged, and when they're not moving they easily disappear into their surroundings. So we moved slowly, checking twice to see that every rock on the tundra was truly a rock. Then there it was, just over a little ridge, scurrying from one rock to the next. Moving a short distance we were able to attain spectacular views as this male bird hunkered down next to a small boulder on the tundra and slowly transformed himself into part of the stone—another tough bird, another great result.

Those are just a few of many memorable moments we shared on our trairpse from the plains to the peaks, but many others vie for mention. There was the Brown-capped Rosy Finch that put on a disappearing act of its own, blending in perfectly with the wet dirt at the edge of a snow field. Or how about the Prairie Falcon that gave us a superb show, diving on a querulous flock of Black-billed Magpies right in front of us. And then there was the Northern Goshawk that soared over us at the same spot the following day. Or perhaps I should mention the Great Horned Owl fledglings that we admired right next to the park road, and then the watchful adult that we saw at the nest the next day. Then there were the fields full of Mountain Bluebirds, the perfect views of Golden Eagle, the glowing male Western Tanager perched atop a pine, and the obliging flock of Red Crossbills...I could keep going.

This tour is full of opportunities for memorable moments like these, and this year was no exception. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Colorado, and I'm sure it was due in no small part to a wonderful group that was truly a pleasure to travel with. I look forward to seeing you all again soon.

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Leader: Brennan Mulrooney

ITINERARY:

June 12: Tour orientation and dinner at our airport hotel.

June 13: Picnic breakfast in Castlewood Canyon State Park, followed by morning birding in and around the park; brief birding stop at Salisbury Equestrian Park (aka Parker Park); lunch in Parker followed by birding at Barr Lake State Park and the Lower Latham Reservoir area en route to Greeley; dinner at Potato Brombaugh's.

June 14: Early morning Mountain Plover success followed by celebratory picnic breakfast at Crow Valley Campground; remainder of morning birding the Pawnee National Grassland (esp. Murphy's Pasture); picnic lunch back at Crow Valley; then afternoon birding (Fort Collins and Big Thompson Canyon) en route to Estes Park; dinner at Nicky's.

June 15: Breakfast at the Big Horn; morning birding on Trail Ridge Road (esp. Medicine Bow Curve and Lava Cliffs); lunch at the Sundeck; afternoon birding in Endovalley and Upper Beaver Meadows; dinner at Nicky's.

June 16: Breakfast at the Big Horn; morning birding at Upper Beaver Meadows followed by some time at the Visitor Center while it rained; return to Upper Beaver Meadows followed by lunch at the Estes Park Brewery; afternoon birding at Cow Creek; dinner at the Dunraven Downtown.

June 17: Last breakfast at the Big Horn; morning birding at Wild Basin was a bit impeded by a strong wind following the cold front; heading south and west in Lyons we stopped at Meadow Park before lunch at the Stone Cup; after lunch birding around Lyons and Union Reservoir then on to our airport hotel; dinner at Bennigan's.

June 18: Departures for home.

BIRDLIST

Note: Species that are underlined are birds of special note that are either rare, local specialties, or are otherwise generally hard to find. Bird List order is according to the 45th Supplement to the AOU Check-list as published in *The Auk* 121:985-995 (2004).

Abbreviations:

CC - Castlewood Canyon State Park

BL - Barr Lake State Park

LL - Lower Latham Reservoir

CV - Crow Valley Campground

PG - Pawnee National Grasslands

RM - Rocky Mountain National Park

SWANS, GEESE, AND DUCKS

Cackling Goose - a bit of a surprise, two birds apparently of the *hutchinsii* group, separating these from the smaller subspecies of Canada Geese is rather difficult.

Canada Goose

Wood Duck - a few in a pond on the PG

Gadwall - scattered birds on the PG

Mallard - seen everyday

Blue-winged Teal - BL

Cinnamon Teal - BL and PG

Northern Shoveler - a couple on the PG

Green-winged Teal - only one at BL

Redhead - a single male on a pond near Fort Collins

Ring-necked Duck - a pair on a pond at RM

Common Merganser - a female with 10 merganserlings in Lyons

PHEASANTS, GROUSE AND TURKEYS

Ring-necked Pheasant - several heard in Parker and Lyons

White-tailed Ptarmigan - we had to endure a bitter cold wind, but we were rather quickly rewarded with fantastic and leisurely views of a male that morphed into a rock right in front of our eyes. Run-away winner of favorite bird of the trip.

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe - BL

Western Grebe - many at BL and on Union Reservoir providing good comparison with...

Clark's Grebe - one close up at BL showed nicely, a few at Union Reservoir as well

PELICANS, CORMORANTS, AND DARTERS

American White Pelican - many at BL and again at Union Res. all wearing their black summer hats.

Double-crested Cormorant - a few scattered across the eastern front

BITTERNES AND HERONS

Great Blue Heron - fairly common and widespread

Great Egret - two at Union Res. were a bit out of range.

Snowy Egret - several in a mixed flock near Lower Latham Res.

Black-crowned Night-Heron - one near Lower Latham Res.

IBISES AND SPOONBILLS

White-faced Ibis - a flock in a pond near Lower Latham Res.

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Turkey Vulture - seen most days

HAWKS, EAGLES AND KITES

Osprey - a pair at Union Reservoir

Northern Harrier - one on the PG

Northern Goshawk - an immature spotted by Connie at RM was a great find, while not particularly rare, these birds certainly are hard to see.

Swainson's Hawk - fairly widespread on the eastern front

Red-tailed Hawk - seen daily

Golden Eagle - we had at least three encounters with this majestic species, but watching a nearly fledged nestling standing in the nest as its parents circled overhead in Lyons was one of the trip highlights.

FALCONS

American Kestrel - a few scattered about, mostly on the prairie

Prairie Falcon - a wonderful view of a very cooperative bird, foraging at Upper Beaver Meadows in RM, voted 3rd favorite bird of the trip.

RAILS, COOTS, LIMPKIN, AND CRANES

Virginia Rail - one responded to tape at Union Res., but stayed concealed in the marsh

Sora - multiple birds calling spontaneously at Union Res., were heard, but not seen

American Coot - a few scattered on prairie reservoirs

PLOVERS AND SANDPIPERS

Killdeer - fairly common on the prairie

Mountain Plover - This bird gets harder every year, but with patience and perseverance we finally spotted an adult with a large chick on the PG.

AVOCETS AND STILTS

Black-necked Stilt - one in the Lower Latham area

American Avocet - a small flock near Lower Latham, such elegant birds

SANDPIPERS

Spotted Sandpiper - one in breeding plumage on the east front

GULLS

Ring-billed Gull - several on the larger reservoirs

California Gull - same as above

PIGEONS AND DOVES

Rock Pigeon - it's safe to call them pigeons again

Eurasian Collared-Dove - not yet common in CO, but we saw them in several locations

Mourning Dove - seen almost daily

OWLS

Eastern Screech-Owl - heard only at CV, calling at mid-morning

Great-Horned Owl - fantastic looks at a nest with two large chicks, plus great looks at one of the adults on a return visit

Burrowing Owl - we saw several of these charismatic little owls on the prairie, including at least one brood of fluffy chicks as we scanned for Mountain Plover

NIGHTJARS

Common Nighthawk - several put on a nice show for us at CV

SWIFTS AND HUMMINGBIRDS

White-throated Swift - we saw flocks at CC and in RM

Broad-tailed Hummingbird - more often heard than seen, the metallic trill of the male seemed to be everywhere, we had great scope studies in RM

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher - just a few fly-bys

WOODPECKERS

Red-naped Sapsucker - excellent looks at several, best were a pair feeding young in RM

Williamson's Sapsucker - we had great luck running into the female of this species with at least three found, the males proved much more elusive, and we had to settle for several fly-bys of this very distinctive bird

Downy Woodpecker - we ran into a couple in riparian areas of the foothills

Hairy Woodpecker - fairly common in the higher altitudes

Northern Flicker - we saw several of the "Red-shafted" form

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Olive-sided Flycatcher - great looks at a pair at Cow Creek in RM

Western Wood-Pewee - several scattered in the foothills and few at higher altitudes

Hammond's Flycatcher - we got repeated good looks in RM at this diminutive empid, but more importantly we heard its song and call to compare with the following

Dusky Flycatcher - very similar in appearance to the former, but its diagnostic “dew-hic!” call was heard well

Cordilleran Flycatcher - a relatively easy bird to ID, they were at CC and Lyons

Say’s Phoebe - very localized on the prairie, we found a pair nesting under a bridge out on the PG

Western Kingbird - abundant at lower elevations

Eastern Kingbird - not as many as the former, but we saw several on the prairies

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike - we found a nesting pair on the PG, and we were able to watch as an adult skewered and dismembered a grasshopper for its waiting chick!

VIREOS

Plumbeous Vireo - we nearly missed this Rocky Mountain specialty as it was heard only at CC, but we were fortunate to find a vocal pair in Cow Creek and got great looks

Warbling Vireo - common and conspicuous (by voice anyway) in aspen groves in RM

Red-eyed Vireo - great looks at a very responsive pair in CC

CROWS AND JAYS

Gray Jay - heard only in RM

Steller’s Jay - fairly common in RM

Blue Jay - a few at CV and also in Lyons

Western Scrub-Jay - only at CC

Clark’s Nutcracker - fairly common and very vocal at the high altitudes of RM

Black-billed Magpie - we had great looks at this charismatic corvid in RM

American Crow - seen daily

Common Raven - seen daily

LARKS

Horned Lark - abundant on the PG, their songs were filling the air

SWALLOWS

Tree Swallow - seen almost daily

Violet-green Swallow - scope views of perched birds at CC, plus many elsewhere

Northern Rough-winged Swallow - mostly in the foothills

Cliff Swallows - many nesting under bridges on the prairie and a cliff nesting colony in Lyons were nice to see

Barn Swallow - widespread, but not common

CHICKADEES AND TITMICE

Black-capped Chickadee - concentrated around riparian habitat

Mountain Chickadee - more common in coniferous forests

NUTHATCHES

Red-breasted Nuthatch - we only saw a couple, including one tardy individual at CV

White-breasted Nuthatch - fairly common in all of the forested habitat

Pygmy Nuthatch - seen well at CC and RM, a top contender for cutest bird in North America

CREEPERS

Brown Creeper - heard only in RM

WRENS

Rock Wren - seen well at CC

Canyon Wren - we heard this species' enchanting song at CC and again in Lyons

House Wren - seen or heard every day

Marsh Wren - we heard several singing at Union Res., but only glimpsed them in flight

DIPPERS

American Dipper - one joined us for dinner at Nicky's then we had tremendous leisurely looks at a very close individual in Lyons

GNATCATCHERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher - very vocal and active at CC

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Northern Mockingbird - fairly common at lower elevations

Brown Thrasher - a family group at CV, very confiding adults feeding a fledgling

European Starling

PIPITS AND WAGTAILS

American Pipit - Great looks at displaying birds up on the tundra in RM

WAXWINGS

(Cedar Waxwing) - leader only

WARBLERS

Virginia's Warbler - fast and furtive foothill species, we found a pair at CC

Yellow Warbler - fairly common in riparian habitats

Yellow-rumped Warbler - we found several of the colorful Audubon's race

MacGillivray's Warbler - very windy conditions had this skulker really sitting tight, we only managed to hear a couple of calling birds in RM

Common Yellowthroat - one male posed briefly in a prairie marsh

Yellow-breasted Chat - one cooperative male on territory in Parker gave us great looks

TANAGERS

Western Tanager - a gorgeous male gave us nice views in RM

SPARROWS AND ALLIES

Green-tailed Towhee - singing males in CC and RM

Spotted Towhee - seen well at CC

Cassin's Sparrow - the song makes up for the drab plumage, we saw them at PG and LL

Chipping Sparrow - common and widespread, at least one carrying food to a nest

Brewer's Sparrow - we had to work for it, but we found at least one on the PG

Lark Sparrow - who said sparrows are drab? we saw many of these striking birds at PG

Vesper Sparrow - good looks both at CC and RM

Lark Bunting - these showy birds enlivened endless open expanse of the PG

Savannah Sparrow - only one near Union Reservoir

Song Sparrow - common and widespread

Lincoln's Sparrow - good looks at a couple in mountain meadows of RM

White-crowned Sparrow - we heard several singing above timber line in RM

Dark-eyed Junco - rather scarce this year, we only glimpsed a few (Gray-headed race)

McCown's Longspur - rather common in the shortest grass areas of the PG, we saw several performing their parachuting flight songs

Chestnut-collared Longspur - much less common than the former, preferring taller grass habitats on the PG, these habitats have become scarce after years of drought

CARDINALS AND ALLIES

Black-headed Grosbeak - seen at CC and again in RM

Blue Grosbeak - only in CC

Lazuli Bunting - we saw a pair of these gorgeous birds in CC

BLACKBIRDS AND ALLIES

Bobolink - a rare breeder in CO, we saw them in CC and Lyons

Red-winged Blackbird - common and widespread around water

Western Meadowlark - common out on the prairie

Yellow-headed Blackbird - just a few around marshes at Lower Latham and Union Res.

Brewer's Blackbird - fairly common around the airport hotel area

Common Grackle - common and widespread

Great-tailed Grackle - only around the Fort Collins reservoirs

Brown-headed Cowbird - common and widespread

Orchard Oriole - a few at Parker Park as well as at CV

Bullock's Oriole - same as above

FINCHES

Brown-capped Rosy-Finch - we had to work at it, but eventually we were able to spot one of these enigmatic finches blending in perfectly with the wet dirt at the edge of a snow field in RM

Cassin's Finch - we were lucky to stumble into a handful of these high altitude counterparts to the following

House Finch - a few around Estes Park and Lyons

Red Crossbill - we found a large and cooperative flock at Upper Beaver Meadows that allowed extended viewing of their cone crawling antics

Pine Siskin - except for one that perched ever so briefly, every one was a fly-by
Lesser Goldfinch - nearly as frustrating as the former
American Goldfinch - we had great looks at these especially in Lyons
(Evening Grosbeak) - leader only, heard only

House Sparrow

TOTAL: 145

MAMMALS

Coyote (*Canis latrans*) with pups!
Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*)
American Pika (*Ochotona princeps*)
Mountain Cottontail (*Sylvilagus nuttallii*)
Desert Cottontail (*S. audubonii*)
Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*)
Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*)
Eastern Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*)
Eastern Gray Squirrel (*S. carolinensis*) ??? possibly introduced
Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*)
Black-tailed Prairie Dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*)
White-tailed Prairie Dog (*C. leucurus*)
Wyoming Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus elegans*)
Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel (*S. tridecemlineatus*)
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel (*S. lateralis*)
Least Chipmunk (*Tamias minimus*)
Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) with twins!
Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis*)
Elk (*Cervus elaphus*)
Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)

BUTTERFLIES

Phoebus Parnassian (*Parnassius phoebus*)
Western Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio rutulus*)
Two-tailed Swallowtail (*Papilio multicaudata*)
Cabbage White (*Pieris rapae*)
Large Marble (*Euchloe ausonides*)
Pearl Crescent (*Phyciodes tharos*)
Hoary Comma (*Polygonia gracilis*)
Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*)
Weidemeyer's Admiral (*Limenitis weidemeyerii*)
Common Ringlet (*Coenonympha tullia*)
Magdalena Alpine (*Erebia magdalena*) the big black butterfly of the tundra
Chryxus Arctic (*Oeneis chryxus*)
Melissa Arctic (*Oeneis melissa*)
Silver-spotted Skipper (*Epargyreus clarus*)

OTHER CRITTERS

Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*)