

COLORADO GROUSE

APRIL 13 – 22, 2007

**LEADERS:
BRIAN GIBBONS & KIM ECKERT**

**COMPILED BY:
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Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc.

We enjoyed a memorable eight days traversing the amazing state of Colorado—1,700 miles during which we saw snow, wind, blowing dust, and waving trees. Even so we still had great success tracking down quality birds and obtaining stunning looks at most of the grouse we were seeking. Our highest altitude sightings were at Loveland Pass at 11,990 feet, which we quickly passed on our way up to the White-tailed Ptarmigans hunkered down at 12,400 feet. Though one of these birds was starting to transition into summer plumage, the conditions were decidedly wintry with blowing snow, but it was definitely worth it. Our lowest sighting was the Lesser Prairie-Chicken at around 3,500 feet.

We started in Gunnison on a frigid morning. From a blind we observed more than 30 Gunnison Sage-Grouse strutting around and throwing their dense filoplumes forward. As the light brightened the sky we also noted their distinctly banded tails, a field mark that separates this bird from Greater Sage-Grouse. After breakfast we were off to Crested Butte for a feeder-watch at the Powers. The Powers have probably hosted more rosy-finch watchers and rosy-finches than anybody else in Colorado during the last five years. We were not disappointed; there was a nice flock of Brown-capped Rosy-Finches as well as Cassin's Finch, Evening Grosbeak, and other finches. After a great lunch in Salida at the First Street Café, we cruised Poncha Springs. We were rewarded with Pinyon Jay and a cooperative pair of Western Bluebirds. In the evening we had a great meal at Rosario's in Pueblo.

The first highlight bird of the next day was along IL road near Boone. We saw several Mountain Plovers in an area of prairie that was very sparsely vegetated, as they like it. We also saw Scaled Quail, Curve-billed Thrasher, and Burrowing Owls. Heading south and east, we were amazed to see remnant snow cover on the ground around Lamar. The storm just missed us on Friday the thirteenth. Several miles south of Lamar, we were rewarded with a stunning and cooperative adult Ferruginous Hawk.

Our third morning found us at the unoccupied lek of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken, disheartening for a leader. Amazingly, a lone male flew in after dawn and danced alone for us for 20 minutes. Whew! Cassin's and Grasshopper sparrows were singing away in the Comanche National Grassland after the lone chicken departed. After a good down home breakfast at the Campo Café, we headed for our picnic spot in Cottonwood Canyon. We enjoyed Rock Wren, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Canyon Towhee, and other southwestern birds in this area.

Our next day was mostly a cruise from southeast Colorado up to the northeast quadrant of the state. We made a few stops along the way, the most memorable of which was the Lamar Cemetery where a singing male Scott's Oriole greeted us upon our arrival. This bird performed for all of us and even allowed Janeal Thompson, a local birder, to view him after she raced over. No one ever saw this bird again after we left. Also of note was a pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers, a very rare breeder in Colorado, at the Lamar Community College woods. Finally we arrived in Wray where we were stunned by the fine dining at Fourth and Main.

The sun crept up on us the next morning as we were awed by the coos and cackles of Greater Prairie-Chickens. This amazing show won "bird of the trip" honors for the Greater-Prairie Chicken. They were point-blank this year, giving us great looks and listens. After another big country breakfast we were off to the Wray State Fish Hatchery where we found a few birds including a local rarity, White-eyed Vireo. At this point someone cued the wind and it did blow—for the rest of the day. Later that day, at Pawnee National Grassland, I had quit—seatbelt on and iPod stowed—when a call crackled over the radio before it died...something about Chestnut-collared Longspur. We raced backwards. Kim found a couple of birds in the wind and we all obtained good scope views. What luck! Earlier we had enjoyed stunning studies of McCown's Longspurs in their skylarking display flights. Our day ended with another fine dinner at Austin's in Old Town Fort Collins.

One of my personal “foraging” highlights of this trip is breakfast at the Silver Grill in Fort Collins. In a food-induced stupor we headed into the mountains. We greatly improved our looks at the American Dipper with a confiding trio along the Poudre River. Along the way, in the lodgepole pines, we had great looks at many Red Crossbills. We managed to catch one beautiful male that had been stunned by a car; later it flew off strongly, to our delight. Higher still, on our way to Cameron Pass, we were in the spruce and fir zone where we had a stunning discovery; a pair of White-winged Crossbills delighted us at close range. Then we dropped down to the Moose Visitor Center where we had more feeder luck with Pine Grosbeak as the star of the show. Near Walden, the Delaney Buttes hosted a pair of Prairie Falcons.

Greater Sage-Grouse performed for us the next morning as the night faded away, revealing their lek. After watching the amazing show, we headed to Steamboat Springs and then on to Hayden. We finally saw a Dusky Grouse after much searching. We returned to a great dinner in Steamboat.

On our final birding morning we visited the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek. I was a bit disappointed by the high grass, but we maneuvered around until we could see the wing-spread dance fairly well. We also had great luck with Williamson’s Sapsucker, Three-toed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, and more finches at the Muddy Creek Recreational parking area. Next we were off to Loveland Pass at 11,990 feet where we successfully scoped a couple of hunkered down White-tailed Ptarmigans in blizzard-like conditions—our last productive stop on a tour that allowed us to study all of the native Colorado grouse. Thanks for traveling and birding with VENT.

Day 1, 13 Apr: Arrival in Gunnison; dinner at Ol’ Miner Steakhouse. Night Gunnison

Day 2, 14 Apr: Morning visit to Waunita Lek, post-breakfast birding at feeders in Crested Butte (Linda and Jim Powers), birding in Monarch pass (few birds), lunch at First Street Café in Salida, post-lunch visit to Poncha Springs and drive down Arkansas River to Cañon City and Tunnel Drive, dinner at Rosario’s in Pueblo. Night Pueblo

Day 3, 15 Apr: IL Road near Boone (Mountain Plover), Lake Meredith, lunch at Hog’s Breath Saloon in La Junta, Lake Cheraw, John Martin Reservoir area (Lake Hasty). Night Springfield

Day 4, 16 Apr: Morning visit to Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek at Comanche Grasslands, post-lek birding around Campo, breakfast at Campo Café, birding west to Carrizo Canyon, with a picnic lunch in Cottonwood Canyon, return to Springfield birding through Comanche National Grasslands. Night Springfield

Day 5, 17 Apr: Breakfast at truck stop, Two Buttes State Wildlife Area, Lamar Cemetery (Scott’s Oriole), Lamar Community College, drive to Wray, afternoon on the Bledsoe Ranch, dinner 4th and Main in Wray. Night Wray

Day 6, 18 Apr: Morning Greater Prairie-Chicken viewing on the Bledsoe Ranch, breakfast at Demi’s, Wray 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

Day 7, 19 Apr: Breakfast at The Silver Grill in Ft. Collins, birding up Poudre Canyon with stops in Poudre Park and near Cameron Pass, Moose Visitor Center, afternoon birding at Walden Reservoir and Delaney Buttes, dinner at Moose Creek Café. Night Walden

Day 8, 20 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 Rd, with Dusky Grouse being the major highlight, dinner at Old West Steakhouse in Steamboat Springs. Night Steamboat

Day 9, 21 Apr: Morning visit to Sharp-tailed Grouse lek on 20 mile Rd, very successful stop at Muddy Creek Recreational parking area, Lunch at Blue Moon Café in Silverthorn, successful White-tailed Ptarmigan search on Loveland Pass in mediocre to terrible conditions, brief late afternoon stop at Red Rocks Park, dinner at hotel. Night Denver

Day 10, 22 Apr: departure for home

BIRD LIST (species)

Snow Goose – A single bird at the Haxtun Sewage Pond
Canada Goose - Common, seen almost daily
Wood Duck – 4 seen along the Arkansas River east of Pueblo, heard at Lamar Comm. College
Gadwall - Common, seen 7 days
American Wigeon - Common, seen 4 days
Mallard - Common, seen daily
Blue-winged Teal – A few seen on 2 dates
Cinnamon Teal – Several seen on 5 dates
Northern Shoveler - Common, seen everyday
Northern Pintail – Several seen on 3 dates
Green-winged Teal - Common, seen 6 days
Canvasback - Seen 3 days, including a bird in a mud puddle in Campo
Redhead – Seen on 3 days including Lake Meredith and Walden Reservoir
Ring-necked Duck – Fairly Common seen on 3 dates
Lesser Scaup - Common, seen 5 dates
Bufflehead – Best looks at Walden Reservoir Walden Reservoir
Common Merganser - Seen in numbers in mountain reservoirs and streams
Hooded Merganser- A couple seen on a pond on Tunnel Drive
Ruddy Duck - Fairly common, seen 4 days
Ring-necked Pheasant – Only a few seen on 3 dates
Greater Sage-Grouse – 60 birds, performing males and many females on the lek just outside the vans
Gunnison Sage-Grouse – 21 males and 12 females at the Waunita lek
WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN – A couple of cooperative birds seen in a near blizzard at 12,000 feet, Loveland Pass
Dusky Grouse – We chased a male or two around and finally got good looks on California Park Rd
Greater Prairie-Chicken - 60+ birds put on an amazing morning display, very close
Lesser Prairie-Chicken – The Campo Lek hosted only a single male
Sharp-tailed Grouse – About ten males displaying on the lek in high grass
Wild Turkey – Best seen in Cottonwood Canyon, including strutting males
Scaled Quail - Fair numbers were seen, best near IL road E of Pueblo
Common Loon - One at Delaney Buttes Reservoir was in breeding plumage
Pied-billed Grebe – Fairly common, seen on three dates
Horned Grebe – Best seen on Lake Cheraw in direct comparison with Eared Grebe
Eared Grebe – A couple at Lake Cheraw, Walden Reservoir hosted about 20
Western Grebe – Many seen on Lake Meredith also seen at Walden Reservoir
Clark's Grebe – Several seen on Lake Meredith, great comparison with Western Grebe
American White Pelican - Seen on 3 days, best looks at the stunning breeders at Walden
Double-crested Cormorant - Seen on a few days, most numerous at Walden
Great Blue Heron - Seen almost daily
Great Egret – One flyby, seen only by Bob
White-faced Ibis – Seen on a few days, best near the Sharp-tailed Grouse lek
Turkey Vulture - Seen daily
Osprey – A few singles here and there
Bald Eagle – A pair near a nest at Walden, also one immature bird around Walden
Northern Harrier – Seen almost daily
Sharp-shinned Hawk – A few seen on four days
Cooper's Hawk – Several seen on five dates
Swainson's Hawk – Common, seen everyday but the first day of the tour
Red-tailed Hawk - Common and seen daily
Ferruginous Hawk – Seen on four days, stunning looks just south of Lamar
Rough-legged Hawk – One bird in North Park near Walden
Golden Eagle – Several seen on four dates

American Kestrel - Common, seen daily
Merlin – One zipped across the road, brief look for a few folks that saw it
Prairie Falcon - Pair on cliffs near Delaney Buttes
American Coot - Common and seen almost daily
Sandhill Crane – Several seen in the Steamboat and Hayden areas
Snowy Plover - 6 at Lake Cheraw, seen in the wind!
Killdeer - common and seen daily, missed on day one
Mountain Plover – Several seen very well along IL road E of Pueblo, also several seen E of Campo
Black-necked Stilt – One seen on Lake Cheraw
American Avocet – Several on Lake Cheraw and several at Walden Reservoir
Greater Yellowlegs – Seen at Lake Cheraw
Willet – One on the last morning, subspecies *inornatus* (“**Western Willet**”)
Lesser Yellowlegs – One near Lake Meredith
Long-billed Curlew – 1 quick flyby and a cooperative bird in the prairie near Pritchett
Baird's Sandpiper – A single at the Wray Fish Hatchery
Wilson's Snipe – A few around Walden
Franklin's Gull – Most numerous with good looks at Lake Meredith
Bonaparte's Gull – Fairly numerous around Lake Meredith
Ring-billed Gull – Seen on 3 dates, most numerous at Lake Meredith
California Gull - Large numbers nesting around Walden
Rock Pigeon - Common seen daily
Eurasian Collared-Dove – Since its arrival in Colorado in 1998 this species had expanded to nearly every corner!
Mourning Dove – Common, seen daily
Great Horned Owl – A couple seen on nests along the Arkansas River
Burrowing Owl – Several seen on several dates, great looks
Broad-tailed Hummingbird – One heard only in Red Rocks Park, SW of Denver
Belted Kingfisher - Just 5 seen on 3 dates
Red-bellied Woodpecker – A pair at Lamar C.C. was a good find for Colorado, a rare nester
Williamson's Sapsucker – A stunning male came out at Muddy Creek recreational parking area
Red-naped Sapsucker - Great show by two at Poudre Park, glimpsed by a couple folks in Poncha Springs
Downy Woodpecker – Three singles on three dates
Hairy Woodpecker - Several seen on 5 dates
American Three-toed Woodpecker - A responsive pair at Muddy Creek recreational parking, near Steamboat
Northern Flicker – Common Seen daily
Eastern Phoebe – 2 in Carrizo Canyon and one at Two Buttes State Wildlife Area (SWA)
Say's Phoebe – Several seen on several dates
Loggerhead Shrike – Several seen on the eastern plains
White-eyed Vireo – One nice bird at Wray State Fish Hatchery, a great find
Gray Jay - Two seen at Muddy Creek recreational parking area
Steller's Jay – Seen on four dates in the mountains. These interior birds (*maculophya*) have white eyebrows lacking in coastal forms
Blue Jay – A few glimpsed in the towns in eastern Colorado
Western Scrub-Jay - 1 on California park road and another on our last day at Red Rocks Park. These were *suttoni*, a member of the distinct interior group sometimes known as Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay.
Pinyon Jay – One made a brief visit to a feeder in Poncha Springs, how lucky!
Clark's Nutcracker – One seen near Monarch Pass on day one, spotted by Stan seen by a couple lucky folks.
Black-billed Magpie - Common; seen almost daily except in Baca County; our *Pica hudsonia* now split from Old World Magpie (*Pica pica*)
American Crow - Seen almost daily
Chihuahuan Raven – Several seen distantly, all in extreme 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 on 3 dates around Gunnison, Walden and Steamboat
Cliff Swallow – Seen only in Carrizo Canyon
Barn Swallow – Common ,seen almost daily

Black-capped Chickadee – Seen on four days in the mountains
Mountain Chickadee - fairly common in mountains
Red-breasted Nuthatch – One at Muddy Creek recreational parking area
Rock Wren – Several seen, nice study of a singing bird in Cottonwood Canyon
Canyon Wren – One seen on Tunnel Drive in Canon City and heard a couple other times
Bewick's Wren - Carrizo and Cottonwood Canyons, several seen and hear
American Dipper – Seen distantly along the Arkansas River, three seen very well in Poudre Canyon
Ruby-crowned Kinglet – A couple seen as migrants out on the plains
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – A couple seen in Southeast Colorado
Eastern Bluebird – A nice male at the Wray State Fish Hatchery
Western Bluebird – A beautiful pair in Poncha Springs
Mountain Bluebird - Great looks at this stunner, especially around Walden
Townsend's Solitaire – A single bird in Two Buttes SWA
American Robin - Common, seen daily
Northern Mockingbird – One seen by one van near Campo
Sage Thrasher - Seen very well around Walden
Curve-billed Thrasher – First from the road near Boone, then a few others
European Starling - Seen daily, unfortunately
American Pipit – Seen on three days on the plains
Cedar Waxwing – More than thirty seen over several dates
Yellow-rumped Warbler – Well seen in Campo where we saw both western “**Audubon’s**” (*auduboni*) and eastern “**Myrtle**” (*coronata*) types
Green-tailed Towhee – Heard only along 20 mile road
Spotted Towhee – We had this bird fleetingly when we were looking for other species around Hayden
Canyon Towhee – Just a single scoped bird at Carrizo Canyon
Cassin's Sparrow – Seen well in the Comanche National Grassland (NG)
Rufous-crowned Sparrow - One in Cottonwood Canyon was seen well in the scope
Vesper Sparrow – Common, especially out in the Comanche NG
Lark Sparrow - Several southeast of Campo
Lark Bunting – Three early birds near Campo
Savannah Sparrow – Several seen in the Comanche NG area
Grasshopper Sparrow – A sneaky one on the Comanche NG gave us some looks
Fox Sparrow - One at Moose Visitor Center was of the “**Slate-colored**” group (subspecies *schistacea*)
Song Sparrow – Just a couple on our last day, 20 mile road
Lincoln’s Sparrow – One at the LCC feeder, it sneaked off before most folks saw it
White-crowned Sparrow – Common, seen almost daily
Dark-eyed Junco - Seen almost daily; slate-colored, pink-sided and “**Gray-headed**” types (subspecies *caniceps*)
McCown's Longspur - We saw 100+ on the Pawnee NG including some giving their flight display song
Chestnut-collared Longspur - It took some effort and grit in our teeth, but we saw them in the scope on the Pawnee NG, we had had some flyoff looks in SE CO earlier that were just frustrating
Red-winged Blackbird - Common, seen daily
Western Meadowlark - Common and seen daily, but beautiful visually and aurally
Yellow-headed Blackbird – We had great looks near Lake Meredith and Walden
Brewer's Blackbird – A few seen very well in Campo
Common Grackle - Seen daily, subspecies *versicolor*
Great-tailed Grackle – Several seen in Southeast Colorado
Brown-headed Cowbird – Seen on a couple days in the southeast part of the state
SCOTT'S ORIOLE – A singing male at the Lamar Cemetery was a rare find out on the prairie
Brown-capped Rosy-Finch - Fortunately some feeders at Crested Butte (the Powers) still had rosy-finches
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 three days in the mountains, very well at feeders in Crested Butte and Moose Visitor Center
House Finch - Common and seen daily

Red Crossbill – Numerous along the road and on the road near Cameron Pass, at least a couple different types were. Involved a small-billed bird (the one we caught after the car mishap) and the large-billed bird that we found dead on the road.

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL – Amazing luck with this species, seen three days near Steamboat Springs

Pine Siskin – Seen many days all over the state

American Goldfinch - Seen several days

Evening Grosbeak - A great find at the Powers feeders in Crested Butte

House Sparrow - Seen daily

LEADER ONLY

Upland Sandpiper

MAMMALS (26 species)

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

White-tailed Jackrabbit – Mts, predawn only seen by 2 people

Black-tailed Jackrabbit - SE

Desert Cottontail - SE

Eastern Cottontail - NE

Gunnison Prairie-Dog - Gu

Black-tailed Prairie-Dog - SE, NE

Least Chipmunk - Mts (Moose Visitor Center)

Golden-mantled Ground-Squirrel - Mts

Wyoming Ground-Squirrel - Gu (not mapped here), Mts (recent split from Richardson's Ground-Squirrel)

Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel - NE

Spotted Ground-Squirrel - SE

Rock Squirrel - SE (Cottonwood Canyon)

Eastern Fox Squirrel - SE, NE, Mts

Douglas Squirrel - Mts

Ord's Kangaroo-Rat - SE

Vole Species - SE

Muskrat - Mts (very common this year)

Yellow-bellied Marmot - Mts,

Coyote - Gu , Mts

Red Fox -

SWIFT FOX – A couple on the roadside, predawn, only seen by 2 people

MOOSE - Mts, 2 east of Walden, nice pick Mike

Mule Deer - SE, Mts

Pronghorn - SE, NE, Mts

Elk - Mts, best on 20 mile Rd and California Park Rd

Bighorn Sheep - SE, small group in Cottonwood Canyon

REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS

Garter Snake species

Boreal Chorus Frog - Walden and Steamboat Springs