

# **COLORADO GROUSE**

**APRIL 13 – 22, 2008**

**LEADERS: BRIAN P. GIBBONS & MICHAEL O'BRIEN**

**COMPILED BY: BRIAN P. GIBBONS**

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Snow punctuated our circumnavigation of Colorado. We also slipped into Kansas, and spent no more than twelve seconds in Oklahoma. The grouse are the highlight of this tour, and they did not disappoint. From our chilly morning in the Gunnison valley, we passed over the Continental Divide to the drier east slope. Once we left the Rocky Mountains just west of Pueblo we would not see them again for a few days until we ended our prairie run when we wound our way up to Walden. Again, in Walden, we were surprised by the amount of snow. These valleys for the last six years have been snow free; this year there were fence posts that had barely made an appearance. Steamboat Springs had a record snowfall of 40 feet, still very much in evidence. This led to our only disappointment, the Dusky Grouse, which did not show. Finally, on our last day, we drove up to 12,000 feet to spy two very well-concealed White-tailed Ptarmigans on Loveland Pass. They were mostly white, their winter plumage betrayed only by a few dark freckles around the face.

Our first grouse was the very rare and range-restricted Gunnison Sage-Grouse. We had a personal best of 63 birds on the lek that morning. They were flinging their heads forward, showing off their thick black filoplumes. From the snowy Gunnison area we headed over Monarch Pass, trying in vain to find montane birds. A great lunch at the First Street Café in Salida provided a midday break. Poncha Springs hosted our only Pinyon Jay of the tour. Further down the Arkansas River valley we found a pair of Juniper Titmice that did their best to avoid being seen by many of us. Dinner at Rosario's was exceptional.

The next morning we headed out into the plains east of Pueblo looking for the Mountain Plover. It was not around this year, as the prairie dogs had disappeared; we did find Burrowing Owls and Scaled Quail. We birded our way into southeast Colorado to our evening stop at the Starlight Motel in Springfield. Along the way we saw Snowy Plovers in a windstorm, lots of ducks, a few shorebirds, and Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

From Springfield we headed to a great breakfast at the Campo Café. Cottonwood Canyon was our birding destination for the day and for our picnic. The whistling wind and an overfriendly dog ended our picnic plans. We did find some great birds. The Lewis's Woodpeckers were conspicuous and allowed for great scope views. Steller's Jays were unusually common for the canyon. Canyon Towhee, Carolina Wren, Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Wild Turkey, and a lonesome Bushtit were other birds of the canyon. In the prairie east of the canyon country we had one of our strangest sightings, a Hermit Thrush in a little burned patch. En route we found the much-desired Mountain Plover in Colorado then Kansas.

We enjoyed a great show in the wind and rain at the Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek in Cimarron National Grassland. We drove back to Colorado in several hours of rain. Finally it stopped, and we did some productive birding at Bonny State Park. There we saw some late Sandhill Cranes, lots of waterfowl, shorebirds, and two Long-eared Owl nests. A fine dinner at Fourth and Main was the culinary highlight of the tour for some folks.

From Wray we made the short predawn jaunt to Bledsoe Cattle Company land to watch the co-champion bird of the trip—the cooing, cackling, and squawking Greater Prairie-Chickens. One bird even saw fit to display on Michael's van. After Wray we were off to the Pawnee National Grassland in search of longspurs. McCown's were common and we had to hunt for the Chestnut-collared, as usual. The flight display of the McCown's was a highlight, as were the spectacular colors of the Chestnut-collared.

Finally we returned to the mountains, well-fortified after a fantastic breakfast at the Silver Grill Café. American Dipper, Common Merganser, Pine Grosbeak, and American Three-toed Woodpecker were some of the fine birds we found in the mountains that day. We ended up in Walden to get ready for the next grouse.

A Golden Eagle scared off some of the Greater Sage-Grouse, but the birds in front of us remained and put on a great show. Again, the snow cover in a mountain valley amazed me. Walden Reservoir was 95% ice. I had never seen ice on this reservoir before. We moved on after viewing the good variety of waterfowl at the reservoir.

Steamboat Springs and the Yampa River valley were our next destinations. The next morning we found a very close and active lek of the Sharp-tailed Grouse. Their spread-wing, twirling, and foot-stomping pleased all. This was our final day and we had some key birds to track down. The most challenging would be the White-tailed Ptarmigan, which we found easily at Loveland Pass despite the wind. Down the hill toward Denver we went, with a great stop at Genesee Park where we found Williamson's Sapsucker and Pygmy Nuthatch, and had great looks at Western Bluebirds. We dropped out of the mountains and made a smooth return to Denver after our 1,750-mile cruise through Colorado, Kansas, and a tiny piece of Oklahoma.

Thanks for traveling with VENT and I hope to see you all again.

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

**Day 2, 14 Apr:** Morning visit to Waunita Lek for Gunnison Sage-Grouse, breakfast at W Café, birding in Monarch pass (few birds), Poncha Springs, lunch at First Street Café in Salida, post-lunch visit to Poncha Springs and drive down Arkansas River to Cañon City, dinner at Rosario's in Pueblo. Night Pueblo, CO

**Day 3, 15 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), Two Buttes State Wildlife Area. Night Springfield

**Day 4, 16 Apr:** Breakfast at Campo Cafe, birding around Campo, birding west to Carrizo Canyon, with a picnic lunch after Cottonwood Canyon, M road to KS produced Mountain Plover. Night Elkhart, KS

**Day 5, 17 Apr:** Morning at East Blind Cimarron National Grasslands for Lesser Prairie-Chicken, drive nearly all day in rain with some light snow, Bonny Reservoir State Park Long-eared Owl nest, afternoon on the Bledsoe Ranch, dinner 4<sup>th</sup> and Main in Wray (excellent). Night Wray, CO

**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, CO

**Day 7, 19 Apr:** Breakfast at The Silver Grill in Ft. Collins, birding up Poudre Canyon with stops in Poudre Park and Cameron Pass, Moose Visitor Center, afternoon birding at Walden Reservoir (mostly frozen) and a brief scout of the GRSG lek area, dinner at Moose Creek Café. Night Walden, CO

**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 Road and Twenty mile Road, dinner at Rex's in Steamboat Springs. Night Steamboat Springs, CO

**Day 9, 21 Apr:** Morning visit to Sharp-tailed Grouse lek on 20 mile Rd, Muddy Creek Recreational parking area (Rabbit Ears Pass), Green Mountain Reservoir, Lunch at Blue Moon Café in Silverthorn, successful White-tailed Ptarmigan search on Loveland Pass in the wind, late afternoon stop Genesee Park, dinner at hotel. Night Denver, CO

**Day 10, 22 Apr:** departure for home

#### **BIRD LIST (167 species)**

**Canada Goose** – Common, seen almost daily

**Wood Duck** – Four seen in eastern Colorado on two days

**Gadwall** – Common, seen six days

**American Wigeon** – Common, seen six days

**Mallard** – Common, seen daily

**Blue-winged Teal** – A few seen on two dates  
**Cinnamon Teal** – Several seen on four dates  
**Northern Shoveler** - Common, seen on five dates  
**Northern Pintail** – Several seen on four dates  
**Green-winged Teal** - Common, seen six days  
**Canvasback** – Seen two days at Walden Reservoir  
**Redhead** – Seen on two days at Walden Reservoir  
**Ring-necked Duck** – Seen on three dates Walden Reservoir and green Mountain Reservoir  
**Lesser Scaup** – Common, seen five dates  
**Bufflehead** – Small numbers seen on four dates  
**Common Goldeneye** – A small flock seen in the hole in the ice at Walden Reservoir  
**Barrow's Goldeneye** – A stunning group of seventeen at Green Mountain Reservoir  
**Common Merganser** – Seen in small numbers in mountain reservoirs and streams  
**Ruddy Duck** – Common, seen six days in a variety of locations  
**Ring-necked Pheasant** – Seen on three dates, thirty-plus seen along the road on the drive from Elkhart to Wray  
**Greater Sage-Grouse** – Fifty-five birds, performing males and many females, many birds flushed after a Golden Eagle made two passes  
**Gunnison Sage-Grouse** – A personal record of sixty-three birds at the Waunita lek  
**WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN** – A couple of cooperative birds seen in the wind at 12,000 feet, Loveland Pass  
**Sharp-tailed Grouse** – Several males displaying on the lek, stunning views of the display, several females about too  
**Greater Prairie-Chicken** – Sixty plus birds put on an amazing morning display, cooing, cackling and hooting  
**Lesser Prairie-Chicken** – Great display of several males in the light rain and wind, Cimarron National Grassland  
**Wild Turkey** – Best seen in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Scaled Quail** – Fair numbers were seen, best near IL road E of Pueblo  
**Pied-billed Grebe** – A few seen at Lake Meredith, five grebes for the day there  
**Horned Grebe** – Best seen on Lake Meredith, superb breeding-plumaged birds  
**Eared Grebe** – A couple at Lake Meredith and also several at Walden Reservoir  
**Western Grebe** – Many seen on Lake Meredith  
**Clark's Grebe** – Several seen on Lake Meredith, great comparison with Western Grebe  
**American White Pelican** – Seen on six days, decent looks at Lake Meredith  
**Double-crested Cormorant** – Seen on a few days, most numerous at Walden  
**Great Blue Heron** – Seen daily, up to ten birds  
**Snowy Egret** – One dropped in at Hasty Campground John Martin Reservoir State Park  
**Cattle Egret** – A single bird in the flooded alfalfa fields W of Lamar  
**White-faced Ibis** – Best seen at Walden Reservoir  
**Turkey Vulture** – Seen daily  
**Osprey** – A few singles here and there in the mountains of northern CO  
**Bald Eagle** – A pair near a nest at Walden, also a few single adults west of Steamboat  
**Northern Harrier** – Seen all but the last day, up to twenty birds in one day  
**Sharp-shinned Hawk** – A single bird, with prey, at the Bledsoe Cattle Company Headquarters  
**Cooper's Hawk** – Several seen on six dates  
**Swainson's Hawk** – Common, seen everyday, great looks at Rufous-morph birds  
**Broad-winged Hawk** – A good find in the Campo City Park, one adult  
**Red-tailed Hawk** – Common and seen daily  
**Ferruginous Hawk** – Two birds, one west of Pueblo and one on Comanche National Grasslands west of Campo  
**Rough-legged Hawk** – One bird at the Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek, three birds on the plains, one bird in North Park  
**Golden Eagle** – Several seen on five dates  
**American Kestrel** – Common, seen daily  
**Prairie Falcon** – One bird on the eastern plains, late and another at Pawnee National Grasslands  
**American Coot** – Common and seen almost daily  
**Sandhill Crane** – Several seen in the Steamboat and Hayden areas were, Greaters, the local nesters, the flock seen at Bonny State Park were, Lessers, the arctic nesters  
**Snowy Plover** – Seven at Lake Cheraw, seen in the wind again!  
**Semipalmated Plover** – A single seen at Bonny State Park  
**Killdeer** – Common and seen daily  
**Mountain Plover** – Two birds seen well in Colorado along M road, a single seen in Kansas

**American Avocet** – Lake Meredith, Bonny Reservoir and several at Walden Reservoir  
**Greater Yellowlegs** – Seen in southeast Colorado  
**Willet** – Subspecies *inornata* (“**Western Willet**”), one distant bird in an alfalfa field near Lamar  
**Lesser Yellowlegs** – One at Lake Meredith  
**Long-billed Curlew** – Several seen in the Comanche National Grassland and at the Mountain Plover spot  
**Baird's Sandpiper** – A couple distant birds, poor looks in the wind at Lake Cheraw  
**Wilson's Snipe** – A couple seen by some folks near Walden Reservoir  
**Wilson's Phalarope** – A few at Bonny State Park and better looks at Haxtun Sewage Ponds  
**Franklin's Gull** – First at Lake Meredith also seen along the road and at Bonny State Park  
**Bonaparte's Gull** – A few around Lake Meredith and also seen at Bonny State Park  
**Ring-billed Gull** – Seen on five dates, fairly common  
**California Gull** – Large numbers pre-nesting around Walden  
**Herring Gull** – A couple seen at Bonny State Park  
**Rock Pigeon** – Common seen almost daily  
**Eurasian Collared-Dove** – Since its arrival in Colorado in 1998 this species had expanded to nearly every corner!  
**Mourning Dove** – Common, seen daily  
**Greater Roadrunner** – One seen by a couple lucky folks in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Barn Owl** – One bird flying out of an old barn in south-easternmost Colorado  
**Great Horned Owl** – A couple seen at Wray State Fish Hatchery  
**Burrowing Owl** – Several seen on several dates, great looks  
**Long-eared Owl** – Two adjacent nests at Bonny State Park, decent looks at one face  
**White-throated Swift** – Several high fliers in Poudre Canyon  
**Belted Kingfisher** – A few singles and doubles on four days  
**Lewis's Woodpecker** – Several in Cottonwood Canyon, excellent looks at a great bird  
**Red-bellied Woodpecker** – Hasty Campground, a beautiful male was a good find for Colorado, a rare nester  
**Williamson's Sapsucker** – A very cooperative female in Genesee Park on the last afternoon  
**Red-naped Sapsucker** – A few in Poncha Springs also seen in Poudre Park and in the mountains around Steamboat  
**Ladder-backed Woodpecker** – A couple seen in Cottonwood Canyon, not seen by all  
**Downy Woodpecker** – Several seen on six days all over the state  
**Hairy Woodpecker** – Several seen on five dates, all around the state  
**American Three-toed Woodpecker** – A couple birds along the road in North Park, great find  
**Northern Flicker** – Common Seen daily, yellow-shafted and red-shafted forms seen  
**Eastern Phoebe** – One at Two Buttes State Wildlife Area (SWA) and many in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Say's Phoebe** – Several seen on several dates  
**Ash-throated Flycatcher** – Good looks at a bird in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Western Kingbird** – Two seen in the Campo vicinity, just arriving  
**Loggerhead Shrike** – Several seen on the eastern plains and a few in the mountains  
**Gray Jay** – First seen at the three-toed woodpecker spot, better looks at Muddy Creek recreational parking area near Steamboat  
**Steller's Jay** – Seen on four dates. These interior birds (*maculophya*) have white eyebrows lacking in coastal forms, the most amazing numbers were in Cottonwood Canyon were this species is not expected  
**Blue Jay** – A couple glimpsed in Wray  
**Western Scrub-Jay** – Several west of Pueblo, one on California park road. These were *suttoni*, a member of the distinct interior group sometimes known as Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay.  
**Pinyon Jay** – One made a visit to a feeder in Poncha Springs, great look!  
**Black-billed Magpie** – Common; seen almost daily; our *Pica hudsonia* now split from Old World Magpie (*Pica pica*)  
**American Crow** – Seen almost daily  
**Chihuahuan Raven** – Several seen, all in extreme southeast Colorado including a nesting bird  
**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 four dates around Gunnison, Walden and Steamboat  
**Violet-Green Swallow** – Several at a stop in Poudre Canyon, high overhead  
**Bank Swallow** – One seen in southeast Colorado  
**Cliff Swallow** – Seen in southeast Colorado  
**Barn Swallow** – Common, seen almost daily

**Black-capped Chickadee** – Seen on three days in the mountains  
**Mountain Chickadee** – Fairly common in mountains  
**Juniper Titmouse** – Two birds came in a few times hard to get looks at them, west of Pueblo  
**Bushtit** – Oddly a single bird in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Red-breasted Nuthatch** – A couple at the city park in Sterling  
**White-breasted Nuthatch** – Singles three days in the mountains  
**Pygmy Nuthatch** – Several seen in the Genesee Park area  
**Brown Creeper** – A couple seen in the Genesee Park area  
**Rock Wren** – Several seen in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Canyon Wren** – Seen in Poudre Canyon and heard a couple other times  
**Bewick's Wren** – Cottonwood Canyon, several seen and hear  
**Carolina Wren** – A singing bird in Cottonwood Canyon, a good find  
**American Dipper** – Seen very well in Poudre Canyon  
**Ruby-crowned Kinglet** – A single singer near Steamboat Springs  
**Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** – A couple seen in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Eastern Bluebird** – A nice male at Bonny State Park and one at Wray State Fish Hatchery  
**Western Bluebird** – Best looks were at Genesee Park on our last afternoon  
**Mountain Bluebird** – Great looks at this stunner, especially around Walden  
**Townsend's Solitaire** – Several seen on four dates  
**Hermit Thrush** – One of our most peculiar sightings, running around in a burned patch of prairie with Horned Larks  
**American Robin** – Common, seen daily  
**Northern Mockingbird** – A couple seen near Campo  
**Sage Thrasher** – Seen very well around Walden  
**European Starling** – Seen daily, unfortunately  
**Yellow-rumped Warbler** – We saw both western “**Audubon’s**” (*auduboni*) and eastern “**Myrtle**” (*coronata*) types  
**Wilson’s Warbler** – One seen by a couple folks in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Spotted Towhee** – Several seen on five dates  
**Canyon Towhee** – A couple seen on the plains near Boone also in Cottonwood Canyon  
**Cassin's Sparrow** – Heard only Comanche National Grassland  
**Rufous-crowned Sparrow** – One in Cottonwood Canyon was seen well in the scope  
**Sage Sparrow** – A great find at the Gunnison Sage-Grouse lek  
**Chipping Sparrow** – Seen on two dates, just three birds  
**Brewer’s Sparrow** – Seen on the southeast plains on three days  
**Vesper Sparrow** – Common, especially out on the eastern plains  
**Lark Sparrow** – One bird southeast of Campo  
**Lark Bunting** – Several early birds near Pueblo and Campo, one in Kansas  
**Grasshopper Sparrow** – A single heard only in southeast Colorado  
**Song Sparrow** – Small numbers seen and heard on five days  
**White-crowned Sparrow** – Common, seen almost daily  
**Dark-eyed Junco** – Seen almost daily; Oregon, pink-sided and “**Gray-headed**” types (subspecies *caniceps*)  
**McCown's Longspur** – We saw fifty-plus on the Pawnee NG including some giving there flight display song  
**Chestnut-collared Longspur** – It took some effort, but we saw them on the Pawnee NG, beautiful breeding birds  
**Red-winged Blackbird** – Common, seen daily  
**Western Meadowlark** – Common and seen daily, but beautiful visually and aurally  
**Eastern Meadowlark** – One singing bird east of Campo is a rarity in Colorado  
**Yellow-headed Blackbird** – We had great looks near Lake Meredith  
**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  
**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  
**House Finch** – Common and seen almost daily  
**Pine Siskin** – Seen many days all over the state

**American Goldfinch** – Seen on a few days  
**House Sparrow** – Seen daily

#### **LEADER ONLY**

**Dusky Grouse, Long-billed Dowitcher, Broad-tailed Hummingbird, Brown Thrasher, American Pipit, Orange-crowned Warbler, Green-tailed Towhee**

#### **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** - SE  
**Desert Cottontail** - SE  
**Eastern Cottontail** - NE  
**Mountain Cottontail** - Mtns  
**Gunnison Prairie-Dog** - Gu  
**Black-tailed Prairie-Dog** - SE, NE  
**White-tailed Prairie-Dog** – North Park  
**Least Chipmunk** - Mtns  
**Wyoming Ground-Squirrel** - Gu (not mapped here), Mtns (recent split from Richardson's Ground-Squirrel)  
**Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel** - NE  
**Rock Squirrel** - SE (Cottonwood Canyon)  
**Eastern Fox Squirrel** - SE, NE, Mtns  
**Ord's Kangaroo-Rat** - SE  
**Vole Species** – North Park  
**Muskrat** - Mtns  
**Yellow-bellied Marmot** - Mtns,  
**Porcupine** - Mtns  
**Striped Skunk** - Mtns  
**Coyote** - Gu, Mtns  
**MOOSE** - Mtns, 2 east of Walden and a couple more near Steamboat Springs  
**Mule Deer** - SE, Mtns  
**White-tailed Deer** – Cottonwood Canyon  
**Pronghorn** - SE, NE, Mtns  
**Elk** - Mtns  
**Bighorn Sheep** – SC and Georgetown on I-70

#### **REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS**

**Boreal Chorus Frog** - Walden and Steamboat Springs

#### **BUTTERFLIES**

**Mourning Cloak**  
**Spring White**  
**Goatweed Leafwing**  
**Painted Lady** was everywhere, seen daily  
**Monarch**  
**Duskywing sp**  
**Milbert's Tortoiseshell**  
**Hackberry Emperor**