

COLORADO SUMMER WEEK

JUNE 9 – 15, 2008

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Our Colorado Summer Week tour has few equals when it comes to visiting a wide variety of habitats in a short period of time. And, of course, when you visit a wide variety of habitats, you can see a great diversity of birds. Add to this some of the most stunning scenery in North America, and you can understand why I look forward to this tour so much every year. Having said that, there are a few birds on this trip that tend to garner the lion's share of attention—three birds that have restricted ranges and tend to be lifers for most of the participants.

The first of these is the Mountain Plover—a shorebird that you're not too likely to encounter while walking on the shore, but then you're not too likely to encounter one while climbing a mountain either, so go figure! This species is in decline, and with a global population estimated at 8,500 birds it is dangerously close to extinction. With this in mind, I always arrive a day early for this tour just to scout for Mountain Plover out on the wide open expanses of the Pawnee National Grassland. This year, a full day's search turned up exactly one. Not especially encouraging. So I was a bit apprehensive as we set out for the Pawnee on the second morning of this year's tour. The day started auspiciously enough, as we quickly found a singing Grasshopper Sparrow and had great looks at a skylarking Cassin's Sparrow. Then we spotted a distant shorebird doing a flight display. Some quick repositioning allowed us to re-find our bird, an Upland Sandpiper. This species is a rare breeder on the Pawnee, and it was the first I had seen in my four tours there.

We still hadn't made it to our picnic breakfast spot, but there was a roadside field that I wanted to check at least briefly, and I'm glad we did. A quick scan turned up a Mountain Plover, and then two more! We piled out of the van and all enjoyed excellent scope views of this very special bird. We'd had a wonderful day already and it wasn't even 7:00 yet. Though we joked about going back to the hotel and getting some more sleep, there was still much to be seen. As we toured the grasslands, great birds just kept popping up, literally. McCown's Longspurs flung themselves into the air to belt out their songs, and then parachute back to earth on uplifted wings. Lark Buntings, although scarce this year, enlivened the roadsides with their flight displays and songs. A Burrowing Owl captured a thirteen-lined ground squirrel right next to us, and then was chased by another before it could settle down to eat in full view of our van. A gorgeous male Chestnut-collared Longspur gave us splendid views as it gathered food right next to the road. We enjoyed a wonderful raptor show with Swainson's Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, six (!) Ferruginous Hawks (including a pair at a nest), and, to top it off, a Golden Eagle perched on a pole right next to our van! Pronghorn, black-tailed prairie dogs, and black-tailed jackrabbits certainly added to the flavor of our day on the prairie.

The other two species that are always high on participants' wish lists are White-tailed Ptarmigan and Brown-capped Rosy-Finch. Both of these species are restricted to high

altitudes in the breeding season, and our only chance to see them is at the top of Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park. So I was a bit dismayed when we arrived at the park and found that the road was closed due to snow and ice. While waiting for conditions to change, we entertained ourselves with some terrific birding at lower elevations. We racked up quite a list including Prairie Falcon; Band-tailed Pigeon; Red-naped and Williamson's sapsuckers; Olive-sided, Hammond's, Dusky, and Cordilleran flycatchers; Gray and Steller's jays, Clark's Nutcracker; Pygmy Nuthatch; American Dipper; Townsend's Solitaire; MacGillivray's Warbler; Green-tailed Towhee; Pine Grosbeak; Cassin's Finch; and Red Crossbill. But even having seen all of those great birds, it would have been disappointing to miss the two big ones. Lucky for us, the weather finally broke and we were able to make it to the top of the mountain. I wasn't sure how the unusually large remaining snow pack was going to affect our target species, but I soon found out. We had barely begun our search when we found not one, but a whole flock of Brown-capped Rosy-Finches. In most years we find only a single bird or a pair, but this was certainly a different year. We had some wonderful close views, as they fed on the edges of the melting snow fields. Several times the whole flock lifted up and flew over us, showing their rosy bellies and translucent pale flight feathers.

So we were down to just one, and we knew they were there! During our search of the tundra we found ptarmigan tracks, ptarmigan feathers, even ptarmigan droppings! But, we couldn't find a pstinkin' ptarmigan! Eventually the cold, the wind, and the advancing hour chased us off the mountaintop, but we were not done yet. That night over a hot dinner we decided that we would give it one last try on our final morning before heading back down to Denver. As we climbed the mountain one more time, we could feel the wind buffeting the van, and we started to wonder if this was really going to be worth it. Usually we are able to avoid the wind by getting up there early, but not on this day. The prospect of a bone-chilling walk was weighing heavy on our minds as we pulled into the parking area, but we soon forgot all about the temperature when, before some of us were even out of the van, Kay exclaimed, "I think I've got one!" She did indeed. Just below the parking area was a pair of White-tailed Ptarmigan. We couldn't believe our luck as we watched them shuffle through the snow, feeding quietly no more than 100 feet from us. As if that weren't enough, all of a sudden the male flew right at us—calling, landed no more than 20 feet away on the retaining wall, and strutted back and forth. It was totally mind-blowing. What a finish! It was the perfect way to end an already fantastic trip.

ITINERARY:

June 09: Tour orientation and dinner near our airport hotel.

June 10: Breakfast in Parker was followed by morning birding in and around Castlewood Canyon SP; late morning birding along Cherry Creek then after lunch we headed north. Afternoon birding at Barr Lake SP, Beebe Draw and around Lower Latham Reservoir en route to Greeley

June 11: Early morning success with sparrows, Mt Plovers and a surprise sandpiper was followed by a picnic breakfast at Crow Valley Campground. The remainder of morning was spent birding the Pawnee National Grassland; picnic lunch back at Crow Valley; then afternoon birding (western Pawnee and Big Thompson Canyon) en route to Estes Park

June 12: Breakfast at the Big Horn; morning birding up Trail Ridge Rd was cut short by a road closure, we spent the rest of the morning in Endovalley; lunch at the Sundeck; afternoon birding in Upper Beaver Meadows

June 13: Breakfast at the Big Horn; morning birding in Moraine Park; lunch in Estes Park; afternoon birding up Trail Ridge Rd

June 14: Last breakfast at the Big Horn; triumphant morning return to Trail Ridge Rd followed by visits to Lily Lake and Wild Basin before heading south and east to Lyons. After lunch at the Stone Cup we birded Meadow Park then started working our way toward Union Reservoir and on to our airport hotel for our farewell dinner.

June 15: 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 47th Supplement to the AOU Check-list as published in *The Auk* 123:926-936 (2006).

Abbreviations:

CC - Castlewood Canyon State Park

LL - Lower Latham Reservoir Area

CV - Crow Valley Campground

PG - Pawnee National Grasslands

RM - Rocky Mountain National Park

UR - Union Reservoir and other ponds on day 5

SWANS, GEESE, AND DUCKS

Canada Goose

Gadwall - just a couple, best at Lily Lake

American Wigeon - PG

Mallard - seen everyday

Blue-winged Teal - LL and PG

Cinnamon Teal - LL and PG

Northern Shoveler - LL

Green-winged Teal - LL and PG

Redhead - LL

Ring-necked Duck - Lily Lake

Lesser Scaup - PG
Ruddy Duck - LL and PG

PHEASANTS, GROUSE AND TURKEYS

White-tailed Ptarmigan – success is always sweeter when you've had to work for it right??? Well that should have tasted pretty sweet...

GREBES

Pied-billed Grebe – LL
Eared Grebe - PG
Western Grebe – many at LL and UR providing good comparison with...
Clark's Grebe – Robert spotted one at UR

PELICANS

American White Pelican - a few at LL but much better looks at UR all wearing their black summer hats.

CORMORANTS

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

BITTERN AND HERONS

Great Blue Heron - fairly common and widespread
Great Egret – three birds at scattered locations
Black-crowned Night-Heron - Leader only near LL

IBISES AND SPOONBILLS

White-faced Ibis – LL and PG

NEW WORLD VULTURES

Turkey Vulture - seen daily

HAWKS, EAGLES AND KITES

Northern Harrier – at least one female and one that was hairier at LL and PG
Sharp-shinned Hawk – seen by George at CV
Cooper's Hawk – several juvenile birds
Swainson's Hawk - fairly widespread on the eastern front
Red-tailed Hawk - seen daily
Ferruginous Hawk – six seen on PG was a tour record
Golden Eagle – a second year bird perched by the road gave us incredible views

FALCONS

American Kestrel - a few scattered about, mostly on the prairie
Prairie Falcon – we got just a brief glimpse in RM

RAILS, COOTS, LIMPKIN, AND CRANES

Virginia Rail – very responsive birds at UR

Sora - multiple birds calling at UR were heard only

American Coot - a few scattered on prairie reservoirs

PLOVERS AND SANDPIPERS

Killdeer - fairly common on the prairie

Mountain Plover – we got lucky early finding three birds close to the road first thing in the morning and then saw one with new babies later in the day

AVOCETS AND STILTS

Black-necked Stilt - LL

American Avocet - LL

SANDPIPERS

Spotted Sandpiper - best in Endovalley where we had close looks at a bird in breeding plumage

Willet – singles at LL and UR were a bit of a surprise

Upland Sandpiper – a displaying bird on PG was a surprise and a tour first, they are rare breeders so far west

Wilson's Snipe – great views at LL and RM

Wilson's Phalarope – great views of males and females on PG

GULLS AND TERNS

Franklin's Gull – there were a few in the distance out on LL

Ring-billed Gull - several on the larger reservoirs

California Gull - same as above

Black Tern – BL and PG

PIGEONS AND DOVES

Rock Pigeon - seen daily

Band-tailed Pigeon – just a glimpse for Jerry and me in RM

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

Mourning Dove - seen almost daily

OWLS

Eastern Screech-Owl – we were very lucky to find one at the entrance to its cavity and had excellent views before it was chased back into its hole by a mob of smaller birds

Burrowing Owl – we saw a few, but the best was one that had just caught a Thirteen-lined Ground-Squirrel and was chased by another one before it settled down to eat right next to us

NIGHTJARS

Common Nighthawk – nice views of several on PG

SWIFTS

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

HUMMINGBIRDS

Broad-tailed Hummingbird - these are the only breeding hummer in this part of the Rockies and we heard the males trills almost everywhere we went, we had several good close studies especially while hunting MacGillivray's Warbler

KINGFISHERS

Belted Kingfisher – one near LL

WOODPECKERS

Red-naped Sapsucker – unusually scarce this year, but we had great studies of a male in Moraine Park

Williamson's Sapsucker - finding a nest close to the trail in Upper Beaver Meadows allowed us fantastic looks at both the male and the strikingly different looking female

Downy Woodpecker - we ran into a couple in riparian areas of the foothills, but its larger cousin was conspicuously absent

Northern Flicker - we saw several of the “Red-shafted” form and one “Yellow-shafted”

TYRANT FLYCATCHERS

Olive-sided Flycatcher – George spotted one in Upper Beaver Meadows and we had great close views at it perched unusually low to avoid the howling wind

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

Hammond's Flycatcher - we got repeated good looks in Upper Beaver Meadows 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 luckily we heard it giving it's “whit” call to clinch the ID

Cordilleran Flycatcher - a relatively easy Empid to ID, we saw them at CC, Wild Basin and again in Lyons

Say's Phoebe – nesting on PG

Western Kingbird - abundant at lower elevations

Eastern Kingbird - not as many as the former, but we saw several on the prairies side by side with their western cousins

SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrike – seen well on PG

VIREOS

Plumbeous Vireo - good looks at CC, the Rockies version of the former Solitary Vireo

Warbling Vireo – usually a common and conspicuous species in aspen groves in RM we didn't actually see one until our last morning

Red-eyed Vireo – heard only at CC

CROWS AND JAYS

Gray Jay – seen all three times we drove up Trail Ridge Rd, this species is easily missed

Steller's Jay - fairly common in RM, this subspecies *macrolopha* shows bold white markings in the face

Blue Jay - a few at CV and also in Lyons

Western Scrub-Jay - only at CC

Clark's Nutcracker – common and conspicuous this year, they were being fed at Rainbow Curve and almost landed on us

Black-billed Magpie - we had great looks at this charismatic corvid, seen daily

American Crow - seen daily

Common Raven - seen daily

LARKS

Horned Lark - abundant on the PG and also up above timberline in RM

SWALLOWS

Tree Swallow - seen almost daily

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

Northern Rough-winged Swallow - CC

Cliff Swallows - many nesting under bridges on the prairie and in RM

Barn Swallow - seen daily

CHICKADEES AND TITMICE

Black-capped Chickadee – in the riparian area of Endovalley

Mountain Chickadee - more common in coniferous forests, seen daily

NUTHATCHES

Red-breasted Nuthatch – great view in RM

White-breasted Nuthatch – CC and RM

Pygmy Nuthatch – seen at a nest in Upper Beaver Meadows

WRENS

Rock Wren - seen well at CC

House Wren - seen or heard every day

Marsh Wren – seen and heard around LL and UR

DIPPERS

American Dipper - fantastic looks in Moraine Park

KINGLETS

Ruby-crowned Kinglet - RM; fairly common, but hard to see

GNATCATCHERS

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – good looks for most of us in CC

THRUSHES AND ALLIES

Western Bluebird - seen best above CC

Mountain Bluebird - fantastic looks at CC and again several times in RM

Townsend's Solitaire - good looks in RM

Swainson's Thrush – seen briefly at CV and then we found a set of wings being chewed on by a chipmunk in RM!

American Robin - ubiquitous, seen daily

MOCKINGBIRDS AND THRASHERS

Brown Thrasher - common around CV

STARLINGS

European Starling

PIPITS AND WAGTAILS

American Pipit – we saw large flocks down in the valleys in RM that were either forced down by the weather or hadn't moved uphill yet due to the snow cover

WARBLERS

Virginia's Warbler - fast and furtive foothill species, we had unusually good looks at a responsive male early at CC

Yellow Warbler – a few seen in riparian habitats

Yellow-rumped Warbler – good looks in RM

MacGillivray's Warbler – this species is known as a skulker, but this was just ridiculous! we finally found one on our last morning, but we had to really work hard to get a look at it

Common Yellowthroat – heard around prairie ponds and seen at UR

Wilson's Warbler – abundant this year in the willow habitats of RM

Yellow-breasted Chat - one very squirrely individual in Parker

TANAGERS

Western Tanager - several good looks at this gorgeous western specialty in RM

SPARROWS AND ALLIES

Green-tailed Towhee - great views of a singing male in CC and again in RM

Spotted Towhee - seen well at CC

Cassin's Sparrow – great looks at several on PG

Chipping Sparrow - common in the pine habitats

Brewer's Sparrow – scope views in the *Atriplex* habitat on PG

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

Vesper Sparrow - good looks on the fences above CC

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

Savannah Sparrow - LL and UR

Grasshopper Sparrow – nice scope views early in the morning on the PG

Song Sparrow - common and widespread

Lincoln's Sparrow - good looks at a couple in mountain meadows of RM
White-crowned Sparrow - we saw several in RM
Dark-eyed Junco - good looks at the "Gray-headed" race in RM
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, we had great views of a male gathering food near the road

CARDINALS AND ALLIES

Black-headed Grosbeak – CC and RM
Lazuli Bunting - great looks in CC and Parker, what a stunner!

BLACKBIRDS AND ALLIES

Bobolink - a rare breeder in CO, we had a few doing flight displays above CC
Red-winged Blackbird - common and widespread around water
Western Meadowlark - common in the lowlands
Yellow-headed Blackbird - several around LL and UR
Brewer's Blackbird - common especially in the lower altitudes
Common Grackle - seen daily
Great-tailed Grackle - only around LL
Brown-headed Cowbird - seen daily
Orchard Oriole - a few at BL and mostly heard at CV
Bullock's Oriole - best BL, also at CV

FINCHES

Brown-capped Rosy-Finch – surprisingly common this year, probably due to the large amount of snow still present at the higher altitudes, we had superb views of several feeding almost at our feet and great views of flocks in flight right over our heads
Pine Grosbeak - superb views of a pair on Trail Ridge Rd
Cassin's Finch - never easy to find, we had great scope views of a male at Upper Beaver Meadows and a female on Trail Ridge Rd
House Finch - common in the lowlands
Red Crossbill - amazing close-up views of a pair on our first morning on Trail Ridge
Pine Siskin – lots of good views in RM and Estes Park
Lesser Goldfinch - common in the foothills and at our hotel in Estes
American Goldfinch - less common than the lessers, but we had several

OLD WORLD SPARROWS

House Sparrow - seen daily

MAMMALS

Muskrat
American Pika (*Ochotona princeps*) - we were lucky to see this elusive and unusual mammal in the talus below Rainbow curve
Desert Cottontail (*Sylvilagus audubonii*)

Black-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*)
Uinta Chipmunk (*Tamias umbrinus*)
Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*)
Rock Squirrel (*Spermophilus variegatus*) - CC
Wyoming Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus elegans*)- the plain ones in RM
Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus tridecemlineatus*) - several on the PG
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus lateralis*) - looks like a chipmunk on steroids, common in RM
Black-tailed Prairie Dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*)
Abert's Squirrel (*Sciurus aberti*) – the first I've seen in RM; their tassled ears are distinctive
Red Squirrel (Pine Squirrel, Chickaree) (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – brief view in RM
Coyote (*Canis latrans*) – several good views
Elk (Wapiti) (*Cervus elaphus*) - common in RM
White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – one on the Pawnee
Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) – common in the mountains
Pronghorn (*Antilocarpa americana*) - despite all that you've heard, not really an antelope, classified in its own family Antilocapridae
Bighorn Sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) – several good views, first a bachelor herd in Big Thompson Canyon then a great view of three rams in RM

BUTTERFLIES

Western Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio rutulus*)
Pale Swallowtail (*Papilio eurymedon*)
Cabbage White (*Pieris rapae*)
Variiegated Fritillary (*Euptoieta claudia*)
Silvery Checkerspot (*Chlosyne nycteis*)
Field Crescent (*Phyciodes campestris*)
Hoary Comma (*Polygonia gracilis*)
Mourning Cloak (*Nymphalis antiopa*)
Wiedemeyer's Admiral (*Vanessa*)
Common Ringlet (*Coenonympha tullia*)
Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*)

OTHER CRITTERS

Snapping Turtle - LL