

**SOUTHWEST
COLORADO:
BIRDS &
BUTTERFLIES**

JULY 16 – 26, 2008

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TOUR REPORT
SOUTHWEST COLORADO: BIRDS & BUTTERFLIES
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By Michael O'Brien and Louise Zemaitis

In Colorado one can witness some of the most breathtaking scenery in North America. During our Southwest Colorado Birds & Butterflies tour we saw much of that scenery—enhanced by a dizzying array of birds, butterflies, and wildflowers. This year's late spring with much snow caused a slight shift in the seasons, particularly at high elevation. We noticed that shift in the brood timing in the birds and butterflies. There were also spectacular wildflowers in the mountains due to the abundance of snowmelt.

We started the first morning less than a mile from our hotel in Denver in the short-grass prairie. Here, in the midst of encroaching human development, we watched a thriving colony of black-tailed prairie dogs with a resident family of Burrowing Owls. Fuzzy owlets perched atop an old prairie dog mound while their parents sat on nearby fence posts with Western Meadowlarks. We continued on to the arid foothills of beautiful Red Rock Park where we saw a number of birds including Western Scrub Jay, Steller's Jay (odd for this lower elevation), Black-capped Chickadee, Canyon Wren, Spotted Towhee, Lazuli Bunting, Bullock's Oriole, White-throated Swift, Violet-green Swallow, and Black-billed Magpie. We managed to get a scope view of an Aphrodite Fritillary before it warmed up and flew off. We caught a glimpse of our first mammal of the trip as a mule deer with a huge rack dashed across the road and up over the hill between the red rocks.

Later in the morning we went over to nearby Apex Park in search of butterflies where highlights included Western Tiger Swallowtails, Two-tailed Swallowtail, Reakirt's Blue, Gray Copper, Coral Hairstreak, Weidemeyer's Admiral, Hackberry Emperor, Taxiles and Delaware skippers, and lots of fritillaries that wouldn't sit still! Traveling west we stopped for lunch at Genesee Park where we found Williamson's Sapsucker, Pygmy Nuthatch, Western Bluebird, and Mountain Chickadee. We also saw Abert's squirrel with its tasseled ears, and an American bison (though behind a fence). We made our first stop at a high mountain meadow on our way to Silverthorne. Loveland Pass was full of alpine wildflowers in full bloom. We were reminded of the late spring when we found ourselves in a brief hailstorm. At least we didn't get rained on!

Each subsequent day on this tour was filled with equally wonderful sightings. Each brought us to a different set of habitats, different birds, and different butterflies. At the Blue River in Arapaho National Forest we found an American Dipper foraging at the water's edge, and enjoyed wonderful views of singing Swainson's Thrush, and Fox and Lincoln's sparrows. In the mountain meadows of Boreas Pass we had some fine butterflying with sightings of Phoebus Parnassian; Mustard White; Queen Alexandria's, Scudder's, and Mead's sulphurs; Variable Checkerspot; Common Ringlet; Colorado Alpine; Chryxus and Uhler's arctics; and Draco Skipper. In the sagebrush flatlands around Alamosa and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge, a completely different setting, we found American Avocet, Wilson's Phalarope, Wilson's Snipe, Swainson's

Hawk, Great Horned Owl (adult and young!), Sage Thrasher, Brewer's and Vesper sparrows, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and Western Meadowlark, along with Garita Skipperling, Pale Swallowtail, and (Lorraine's favorite!) Melissa Blue. Among the Ponderosa Pines at Junction Creek we found Pygmy Nuthatch, Hammond's Flycatcher, Virginia's Warbler, Plumbeous Vireo, Townsend's Solitaire, a beautiful perched Red Crossbill (type 5), Pale Swallowtail, Pine White, Colorado Hairstreak, Nais Metalmark, Great Spangled Fritillary, and Northern Cloudywing. At Mesa Verde National Park we marveled at the ruins and along the way saw Juniper Hairstreak and Tailed Copper.

Some of the most breathtaking scenery on our tour loop was on our drive north through the San Juan Mountains, famous for the narrow gauge heritage railroad that runs 46 miles between Durango and Silverton, and also for the Million Dollar Highway from Silverton to Ouray. In Ouray we visited Box Canyon Falls, which afforded us spectacular views of nesting Black Swifts. We experienced more breathtaking scenery, and another completely different habitat, when we visited Escalante Canyon, a rugged, arid canyon with pinyon-juniper hillsides and a cottonwood-lined stream. The most popular find that morning was undoubtedly the family of Chukars we watched cross the road and work their way upslope. We also enjoyed sightings of Black and Say's phoebes, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Plumbeous Vireo, Juniper Titmouse, Bushtit, Rock and Canyon wrens, Western Tanager, Lark Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, Lazuli Bunting, Becker's Western White, Western Pygmy-Blue, rock squirrel, eastern fence lizard ("southern plateau lizard"), plateau striped whiptail, and a gorgeous yellow-headed collared-lizard.

For another different habitat, and a much cooler environment, we visited the wonderfully cool and lush high mountain meadows of Grand Mesa National Forest. Near the visitor center we saw a perched Bald Eagle (uncommon in Colorado), Clark's Nutcracker, Cassin's Finch, and Pine Grosbeak. The wildflower bloom was the finest that we've seen in years. Among the blooms we observed many butterflies including Large Marble; Banded Hairstreak; Western Tailed-Blue; Coronis, Northwestern, and Mormon fritillaries; Milbert's Tortoiseshell; and Grizzled and Uncas skippers.

Heading east, we visited the spectacular gorge at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. Although the birding there was good, with sightings of Dusky Flycatcher, MacGillivray's Warbler, and Green-tailed Towhee, as well as White-throated Swifts and Violet-green Swallows flying in the gorge below us, the butterflying was some of the best of the trip. Highlights included Two-tailed Swallowtail; Blue and Purplish coppers; Behr's, California, and Banded hairstreaks; Great Spangled, Edward's, and Callippe fritillaries; Riding's Satyr; Common Branded-Skipper; and Dun Skippers, many of these in great abundance. At Gunnison, we visited two sites among the rolling sagebrush hills to search for the recently-split and very local Gunnison Sage-Grouse. To our delight, we had success at finding the prime target bird at both sites!

On our final day, we reached the highest elevation of the trip during our visit to Mount Evans. We spent most of our time there above treeline at Summit Lake. Once again we were treated to a peak wildflower bloom and lots of butterflies, but the clear highlight was a superb view of a Brown-capped Rosy-Finch. A short distance down the trail, we

scanned the cliffs and found distant groups of bighorn sheep and mountain goats, and watched a Golden Eagle soaring overhead—a classic alpine scene and a great way to end the tour!

Day 1, July 16 - Arrivals. Night in Denver.

Day 2, July 17 - Tower Rd.; Red Rocks Park; Apex County Park; Genesee Park. Night in Silverthorne.

Day 3, July 18 - Arapaho National Forest (Blue River); Pike National Forest (Boreas Pass and Selkirk Campground); drive to Alamosa via South Park and San Luis Valley. Night in Alamosa.

Day 4, July 19 - Rd. 8S; Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge; Rio Grande National Forest (Shaw Creek Rest Area; Rd. Wolf Creek Pass); drive to Durango via Pagosa Springs. Night in Durango.

Day 5, July 20 - San Juan National Forest (Colorado Trail and Junction Creek); Mesa Verde National Park. Night in Durango.

Day 6, July 21 - San Juan National Forest (Andrews Lake State Wildlife Area); Box Canyon Falls; Camp Bird Road. Night in Delta.

Day 7, July 22 - Escalante Canyon to mi. 14.2; Grand Mesa National Forest. Night in Delta.

Day 8, July 23 - Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park; Blue Mesa Reservoir; Stevens Lake; Gold Basin Creek to mi. 9.4. Night in Gunnison.

Day 9, July 24 - Gunnison; Antero Reservoir; Pike National Forest (Boreas Pass). Night in Silverthorne.

Day 10, July 25 - Arapaho National Forest (Eagles Nest Wilderness Area; Mt. Evans); Idaho Springs; Genesee Park. Night in Denver.

Day 11, July 26 - Departures.

KEY TO SPECIES LISTS:

N = nest observed

Y = dependent young observed

BIRDS

Canada Goose – seen on 6 days

Gadwall – numerous at Monte Vista; Y

Mallard – seen on 7 days; Y

Cinnamon Teal – numerous at Monte Vista; Y

Green-winged Teal – 10 at Monte Vista

Redhead – 2 at Monte Vista

Ring-necked Duck – seen on 3 days

Lesser Scaup – 1 on pond near Fairplay

Common Merganser – seen at Blue River and Blue Mesa Reservoir; Y

Ruddy Duck – seen on 3 days; Y
Chukar – 20 at Escalante Canyon; Y
Gunnison Sage-Grouse – 4 at Gold Basin Creek and 20 at Hot Springs Creek; Y
Wild Turkey – 1 at Mesa Verde
Pied-billed Grebe – seen on 2 days
Eared Grebe – 150 at Antero Reservoir and a few closer ones at a pond near Fairplay
Western Grebe – 60 at Antero Reservoir
American White Pelican – 50 at Antero Reservoir
Double-crested Cormorant – seen on 3 days
Great Blue Heron – seen on 5 days
Snowy Egret – 4 at Monte Vista
Cattle Egret – 1 at Monte Vista
Black-crowned Night-Heron – 6 at Monte Vista
White-faced Ibis – seen on several days
Turkey Vulture - seen on all but 1 day
Osprey – 3 at Silverthorne; N
Bald Eagle – 1 adult at Grand Mesa and a young bird at Antero Reservoir
Northern Harrier – 1 at Monte Vista
Cooper's Hawk – seen on 2 days
Swainson's Hawk – seen on several days; especially numerous around Monte Vista; N
Red-tailed Hawk – seen daily
Golden Eagle – seen on 2 days
American Kestrel – seen on 7 days; Y
Sora – heard at Monte Vista
American Coot – seen on 4 days; Y
Killdeer – seen on 3 days
American Avocet – seen at Monte Vista and Antero Reservoir; Y
Spotted Sandpiper – seen on 2 days
Wilson's Snipe – 2 at Monte Vista
Wilson's Phalarope – 4 at Monte Vista
Franklin's Gull – a few very distant birds at Monte Vista
California Gull – seen on 3 days
Rock Pigeon – seen on all but 1 day
Eurasian Collared-Dove – seen on 8 of 9 days; an amazing increase in abundance from just a few years ago when it was still a rarity in the state
Mourning Dove – seen daily
Great Horned Owl – 5 (2 family groups) at Monte Vista; Y
Burrowing Owl – 7 at Tower Road near the airport; Y
Common Nighthawk – 10 north of Alamosa
Black Swift – 5 at Box Canyon Falls
White-throated Swift – seen on 6 days
Black-chinned Hummingbird – several at Escalante Canyon
Calliope Hummingbird – 1 at Echo Lake
Broad-tailed Hummingbird – seen almost daily
Rufous Hummingbird – seen on 6 days including excellent views at feeders in Comon
Lewis's Woodpecker – seen near Pagosa Springs and Durango; Y
Williamson's Sapsucker – seen at Genesee Park and Shaw Creek Picnic Area; Y
Downy Woodpecker – seen at Eagle's Nest
Northern ("Red-shafted") Flicker – seen on 7 days; Y
Olive-sided Flycatcher – heard at Grand Mesa
Western Wood-Pewee – seen on most days

Hammond's Flycatcher – seen well at Junction Creek; Y
Dusky Flycatcher – seen at Blue River and Black Canyon
Cordilleran Flycatcher – seen on 6 days; NY
Say's Phoebe – seen on most days; most numerous at Escalante Canyon
Ash-throated Flycatcher – numerous at Escalante Canyon including 1 feeding a baby cowbird; Y
Western Kingbird – seen on most days
Plumbeous Vireo – seen on 3 days
Warbling Vireo – seen on 4 days
Gray Jay – NONE; an alarming miss, suggesting that populations are way down
Steller's Jay – seen on 5 days but much scarcer than usual
Western Scrub-Jay – seen on 4 days; Y
Clark's Nutcracker – seen at Grand Mesa and Black Canyon; much scarcer than usual
Black-billed Magpie – seen daily; Y
American Crow – seen daily
Common Raven – seen daily
Horned Lark – seen on 4 days; Y
Tree Swallow – seen on 3 days; N
Violet-green Swallow – seen daily; NY
Northern Rough-winged Swallow – several at a Bank Swallow colony near Orchard City; N
Bank Swallow – large colony near Orchard City; N
Cliff Swallow – seen daily including a large colony near Shaw Creek; NY
Barn Swallow – seen almost daily
Black-capped Chickadee – seen on 3 days
Mountain Chickadee – seen almost daily; Y
Juniper Titmouse – seen at Mesa Verde and Escalante Canyon
Bushtit – seen at Escalante Canyon
White-breasted Nuthatch – seen on 3 days
Pygmy Nuthatch – seen on 3 days
Rock Wren – numerous at Escalante Canyon
Canyon Wren – seen at Red Rocks, Escalante Canyon, and Black Canyon
Bewick's Wren – heard at Mesa Verde
House Wren – seen on 4 days
“Western” Marsh Wren – seen at Monte Vista
American Dipper – seen on 3 days
Golden-crowned Kinglet – heard only on 2 days
Ruby-crowned Kinglet – seen on 2 days
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – seen on 4 days
Western Bluebird – seen on 3 days; Y
Mountain Bluebird – seen on 6 days
Townsend's Solitaire – seen on 3 days
Swainson's Thrush – several at Blue River
Hermit Thrush – seen at Wolf Creek Pass; heard on 2 other days
American Robin – seen daily; Y
Gray Catbird – seen at Junction Creek; Y
Northern Mockingbird – seen at Monte Vista
Sage Thrasher – seen at Monte Vista
European Starling – seen on 6 days, never in large numbers; Y
American Pipit – seen at Loveland Pass and Mt. Evans
Cedar Waxwing – seen at Monte Vista
Virginia's Warbler – seen at Junction Creek
Yellow Warbler – seen on 5 days

Yellow-rumped (“Audubon's”) Warbler – seen on 7 days; Y
Black-throated Gray Warbler – 1 at Escalante Canyon
Common Yellowthroat – seen at Junction Creek
Wilson's Warbler – seen on 3 days
Yellow-breasted Chat – 1 heard at Red Rocks
Western Tanager – seen on 5 days
Green-tailed Towhee – seen at Black Canyon and Eagle’s Nest
Spotted Towhee – seen on 4 days
Chipping Sparrow – seen on 7 days; Y
Brewer's Sparrow – seen at Monte Vista
Vesper Sparrow – seen at Monte Vista and Antero Reservoir including 1 feeding a baby cowbird
Lark Sparrow – numerous at Escalante Canyon
Savannah Sparrow – seen at Monte Vista
“Slate-colored” Fox Sparrow – seen at Blue River
Song Sparrow – seen on 6 days
Lincoln's Sparrow – seen on 5 days; Y
“Mountain” White-crowned Sparrow – seen on 7 days; Y
Dark-eyed (“Gray-headed”) Junco – seen on 6 days
Black-headed Grosbeak – seen on 4 days
Blue Grosbeak – seen on 3 days
Lazuli Bunting – seen on 2 days
Red-winged Blackbird – seen daily
Western Meadowlark – seen on 6 days; Y
Yellow-headed Blackbird – numerous at Monte Vista and Antero Reservoir; Y
Brewer's Blackbird – seen on 5 days
Common Grackle – a few seen in Denver and Idaho Springs
Brown-headed Cowbird – seen on 6 days; Y
Bullock's Oriole – seen on 3 days; Y
Brown-capped Rosy-Finch – beautiful views of 1 at Mt. Evans
Pine Grosbeak – 2 seen at Grand Mesa
Cassin's Finch – seen on 4 days
House Finch – seen on 6 days
Red Crossbill Type 2 – seen on 3 days
Red Crossbill Type 5 – seen on 6 days
Pine Siskin – seen daily
Lesser Goldfinch – seen on 4 days
Evening Grosbeak – seen at Wolf Creek Pass and heard at Mt. Evans
House Sparrow – seen on 7 days

BUTTERFLIES

Phoebis (“Rocky Mountain”) Parnassian – seen on 3 days, whenever we got above treeline
Black/Old World Swallowtail – 1 at Black Canyon
Anise Swallowtail – 1 at Boreas Pass; several others were either Anise or Old World
Western Tiger Swallowtail – seen on most days
Two-tailed Swallowtail – seen on 4 days
Pale Swallowtail – seen on 3 days
Pine White – 4 at Junction Creek
Becker's White – seen at Escalante Canyon and Black Canyon
Checkered White – seen on most days
Western White – a few at Camp Bird Road, Escalante Canyon, and Grand Mesa

Mustard White – seen on 6 days
Cabbage White – seen on 3 days
Large Marble – 3 at Grand Mesa
Clouded Sulphur – seen on 7 days
Orange Sulphur – seen on 3 days
Queen Alexandra's Sulphur – seen on 3 days
Mead's Sulphur – seen on 3 days
Scudder's Sulphur – 4 at Boreas Pass
Tailed Copper – 1 at Mesa Verde
Gray Copper – 6 at Apex Park
Ruddy Copper – seen on 3 days
Blue Copper – 5 at Black Canyon
Purplish Copper – seen on 3 days
Colorado Hairstreak – seen at Junction Creek and Box Canyon Falls
Coral Hairstreak – 3 at Apex Park
Behr's Hairstreak – 1 at Black Canyon
California Hairstreak – 20 at Black Canyon (the first time we've seen this species on the tour!)
Banded Hairstreak – seen at Grand Mesa and Black Canyon
"Siva" Juniper Hairstreak – seen at Mesa Verde and Escalante Canyon
Gray Hairstreak – 1 at Apex Park
Western Pygmy-Blue – 3 at Escalante Canyon
Reakirt's Blue – 1 at Apex Park
Western Tailed-Blue – 2 at Grand Mesa
Melissa Blue – seen on 4 days
Greenish Blue – seen on 5 days
Boisduval's Blue – seen on 5 days
Arctic Blue – seen on 4 days
Nais Metalmark – 3 at Junction Creek
Variegated Fritillary – seen at Escalante Canyon and Black Canyon
Great Spangled Fritillary – seen on 3 days
Aphrodite Fritillary – seen on 3 days
Edward's Fritillary – 3 at Black Canyon
Coronis Fritillary – 1 at Grand Mesa
Callippe Fritillary – numerous at Black Canyon
Atlantis Fritillary – 5 at Camp Bird Road
"Northwestern" (Atlantis) Fritillary – 1 at Grand Mesa; numerous at Genesee Park
Mormon Fritillary – numerous at Grand Mesa
Purplish Fritillary – several at Boreas Pass; numerous at Mt. Evans
Northern Crescent – several at Camp Bird
Variable Checkerspot – seen on 3 days
Hoary Comma – 2 at Wolf Creek Pass
Mourning Cloak – 1 at Monta Vista and 1 at Junction Creek
Milbert's Tortoiseshell – seen on 4 days
American Lady – 1 at Monta Vista and 1 at Junction Creek
Painted Lady – seen on most days
Red Admiral – 1 at Apex Park
Weidemeyer's Admiral – seen on 7 days
Hackberry Emperor – 2 at Apex Park
Common Ringlet – seen on 4 days
Common Wood-Nymph – seen at Red Rocks, Apex Park, and Junction Creek
Small Wood-Nymph – seen on 4 days

Common Alpine – several at Boreas Pass
Colorado Alpine – several at Boreas Pass
Ridings's Satyr – 7 at Black Canyon
Chryxus Arctic – 6 at Boreas Pass
Uhler's Arctic – 2 at Boreas Pass
Melissa Arctic – 1 at Mt. Evans
Monarch – seen at Monte Vista and Delta
Northern Cloudywing – seen on 3 days
Horace's Duskywing – 1 at Boreas Pass
Afranius Duskywing – seen on 3 days
Grizzled Skipper – 1 at Grand Mesa
Common Checkered-Skipper – seen on 3 days
Russet Skipperling – seen at Camp Bird Road and Black Canyon
Garita Skipperling – seen on 3 days
Uncas Skipper – seen at Grand Mesa and Antero Reservoir
Common Branded-Skipper – seen on 3 days
Draco Skipper – seen on 4 days
Taxiles Skipper – seen on 4 days
Delaware Skipper – 1 at Apex Park
Dun Skipper – 40 at Black Canyon (all on one clump of showy milkweed!)

DRAGONFLIES & DAMSELFLIES

Northern Bluet – seen at Monte Vista and a few other sites
Blue-eyed Darner – seen at several locations
Variegated Meadowhawk – seen at Apex Park

MAMMALS

American Pika – seen at Loveland Pass
Desert Cottontail – seen in Denver
Mountain Cottontail – seen at Escalante Canyon and Black Canyon
White-tailed Jackrabbit – numerous near Monte Vista
Snowshoe Hare – 1 at Mt. Evans
Least Chipmunk – seen on most days
Colorado Chipmunk – at least 1 by the feeders at Box Canyon Falls
Yellow-bellied Marmot – seen on 5 days
Wyoming Ground Squirrel – seen in South Park around Como and Antero Reservoir
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel – seen on 6 days
Rock Squirrel – seen on 3 days
Gunnison's Prairie-Dog – seen on 3 days, from Alamosa to Durando
White-tailed Prairie-Dog – seen near Montrose
Black-tailed Prairie-Dog – seen in Denver
Eastern Fox Squirrel – seen at Idaho Springs
Red Squirrel – seen at Boreas Pass, Wolf Creek Pass, and Eagle's Nest
Common Muskrat – seen near Fairplay
Coyote – seen along the road in the San Juans
Red Fox – 2 at Boreas Pass
Pronghorn – heard of 9 seen in South Park
Mountain Goat – 2 at Mt. Evans
Bighorn Sheep – 3 at Mt. Evans
Elk – heard of 9 along road between Ouray and Montrose

Mule Deer – seen on most days
Feral Horse – 3 at Mesa Verde

AMPHIBIANS & REPTILES

Yellow-headed Collared-Lizard – 1 spectacular individual at Escalante Canyon
Eastern Fence Lizard – singles at Escalante Canyon and Black Canyon; these are of the subspecies *S. u. tristichus* (“Southern Plateau Lizard”)
Plateau Striped Whiptail – 1 at Escalante Canyon