

COLORADO GROUSE

APRIL 13 - 22, 2008

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Five species of grouse inhabit the prairies and northern valleys of North America—the Greater and Gunnison sage-grouse, the Sharp-tailed Grouse, and the Greater and Lesser prairie-chickens. All are noted for their spectacular mating displays, and all can be exceedingly difficult to find away from the “leks” or display grounds. This tour will focus on observing these birds and their mating rituals. From the sandhills of southeastern Colorado to the high sagebrush parklands of the northern part of that state, we’ll be spectators at some of the most fascinating displays in the bird world, such as the “booming” of the prairie-chickens, the wild dance of the Sharp-tails, and the strutting of the huge sage-grouse.

There are more birds to see in Colorado at this season than grouse. Possibilities will include Golden Eagle, Ferruginous and Swainson’s hawks, Prairie Falcon, Scaled Quail, Sandhill Crane, Mountain Plover, Black-necked Stilt, Lewis’s Woodpecker, Mountain Bluebird, Chestnut-collared and McCown’s longspurs, as well as a host of waterfowl, shorebirds, and prairie and montane specialties. Mammal viewing should also be excellent, and the scenery will be breathtaking. Although the tour will require considerable daytime driving, we’ll make frequent stops.

April 13, Day 1: Arrival in Gunnison. Participants should make arrangements to arrive today and take the complimentary shuttle to our hotel. United Express offers air service to Gunnison from Denver International Airport (subject to change). We will meet in the hotel lobby at 6:30 p.m. for a get-acquainted dinner.

NIGHT: Best Western Tomichi Village Inn, Gunnison

April 14, Day 2: Gunnison Area; Drive to Pueblo. A pre-dawn start will take us to the first of our five grouse leks, this one for the recently split Gunnison Sage-Grouse. With its strange filoplume crest, more prominently banded tail, smaller size than the Greater Sage-Grouse, and tiny range (basically restricted to southwestern Colorado), this new species has instantly become one of the most endangered birds of North America. Though this lek is not particularly close, we should have good scope views of the Gunnisons in their outrageous display.

The remainder of the day will likely be spent birding along the Arkansas River en route to Pueblo, with scheduled stops near Cañon City and Penrose. Common Merganser, Greater Roadrunner, White-throated Swift, American Dipper, Juniper Titmouse, and Canyon Towhee are among the many possibilities. With some luck, we might find the very uncommon and irregular Pinyon Jay as well.

NIGHT: Hampton Inn, Pueblo

April 15, Day 3: Pueblo to Lamar. From Pueblo we’ll head east toward Lamar and the Comanche National Grasslands. Along the way we may encounter raptors such as Red-tailed, Swainson’s, and possibly Ferruginous hawks; Scaled Quail; Burrowing Owl; and Curve-billed Thrasher, a southwestern species that barely enters this corner of Colorado. Stops at prairie playas and reservoirs should produce Eared, Clark’s, and Western grebes; Snowy Plover (uncommon and declining); American Avocet; Black-necked Stilt; and a host of other shorebirds and waterfowl.

NIGHT: The Starlite Motel, Springfield

April 16, Day 4: Campo and Cottonwood Canyons. A 4:00 a.m. start will take us to the second of our grouse display sites, this one a Lesser Prairie-Chicken lek in the sandhill country near Campo. This will be our earliest start of the trip, necessitated by a longer drive to reach the lek. We'll be on the lek at dawn, greeted by the eerie booming and cackling noises of the chickens. As light increases, we will get our first good views of these rare prairie birds—their pinnae erected like horns, pink-orange air sacs inflated, wings drooping, and feet pounding a rapid beat in the sand. After the chickens have departed the lek, we'll search nearby grasslands for Long-billed Curlew and Lark Bunting, along with Grasshopper and Cassin's sparrows.

The remainder of the day will be devoted to scenic Cottonwood and Carrizo Canyons, where pinyon-juniper groves merge with cactus-studded slopes and riverine cottonwoods. Here we will encounter a fascinating assortment of southwestern and Great Basin species. These may include Greater Roadrunner, Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Ash-throated Flycatcher, Western Scrub-Jay, Juniper Titmouse, Canyon and Rock wrens, and Rufous-crowned Sparrow. Our main target, however, will be the Lewis' Woodpecker, an outrageous kaleidoscope of pink, green, red, and silver.

NIGHT: The Starlite Motel, Springfield

April 17, Day 5: Lamar to Wray. A later, more civilized starting time will begin a day largely devoted to travel as we head northward toward Wray. Some birding will be in order as we make stops at Bonny Reservoir, an excellent spot for migrant land and waterbirds. Wild Turkey, Ring-necked Pheasant, Virginia Rail, and early migrant landbirds are also possible. In the late afternoon we'll make the first of our visits to look for the Greater Prairie-Chickens. In some years our afternoon display is so good that no morning visit is required.

NIGHT: Sandhillier, Wray

April 18, Day 6: Wray to Fort Collins. We will start the day with another dawn vigil, this time at a Greater Prairie-Chicken lek. Afterward we'll head west through the Pawnee National Grassland, where Ferruginous and Swainson's hawks abound. With some searching, our chances are excellent for finding Mountain Plover as well as Chestnut-collared and McCown's longspurs, all in high breeding plumage. From there it's only a short drive to Fort Collins, where we'll spend the night.

NIGHT: Best Western Kiva Inn, Fort Collins

April 19, Day 7: Fort Collins to Walden. This morning we could return to the Pawnee to search for any specialties we may have missed. If our luck on the previous day was good, we may opt instead for an earlier start westward through the mountains, allowing us more time to search for and enjoy the montane birds. As we travel through beautiful mountain passes and past snow-covered mountain peaks, we'll search for such montane species as Red-naped Sapsucker, Steller's Jay, Mountain Chickadee, American Dipper, Pine Siskin, Pine Grosbeak, and Cassin's Finch. After crossing Cameron Pass, we'll descend into the high country of North Park, a region of sweeping vistas where snow-covered mountains provide a backdrop for marshy meadows and mint-green sagebrush flats. Sage Thrashers dart between shrubs; Mountain Bluebirds add dazzling touches of color to the landscape; and in some years, roadside snowbanks or local feeders may hold lingering Rosy Finches. Raptors (particularly Golden Eagle and Swainson's Hawk, but also an occasional Prairie Falcon) should be quite evident. Nearby Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge will provide a good variety of waterbirds, including Cinnamon Teal. Mammal possibilities for the day include moose, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, mule deer, and white-tailed prairie dog.

NIGHT: Chedsey Motel, Walden

April 20-21, Days 8-9: Walden to Steamboat Springs and on to Denver. Today we will travel from Walden to Steamboat Springs. The foothills near Steamboat Springs are dotted with sagebrush and peppered with oak thickets. This area is home to the Greater Sage, Sharp-tailed, and Blue grouse. We'll be devoting our two mornings here to seeing these spectacular birds perform their mating rituals. The Greater Sage-Grouse is the largest and possibly the most spectacular of all North American grouse. The Sharp-tail, although smaller and less physically imposing, has the most arresting dance. With tails held high, wings bowed out to the sides, and feet propelling them in circles, they resemble wind-up toys run amok. Imitated by the Plains Indians, this dance is an integral part of spring on the northern prairies. Ambient oak thickets frequently harbor solitary Blue Grouse. Although their presence is impossible to predict (sometimes requiring luck), we will devote some time to searching areas that have been productive.

We'll spend any available time searching for other birds in the foothills, including various raptors, Sandhill Cranes, Green-tailed and Spotted towhees, and Vesper Sparrows. On the drive to Denver, we'll stop in the ponderosa pine belt to look for such transition zone species as Williamson's Sapsucker, Pygmy Nuthatch, and Western Bluebird. Our trip concludes in Denver with a farewell dinner and checklist session.

NIGHT: Holiday Inn, Steamboat Springs (April 20)
Courtyard Denver Airport, Denver (April 21)

April 22, Day 10: Departure for Home. Participants may make arrangements to leave Denver anytime today.

TOUR LEADERS: Brian Gibbons and Michael O'Brien

Brian Gibbons was born and raised in Dallas, Texas. He took an interest in all things wild at a young age and has specialized in birds since age 10. Brian graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University in east Texas in 1994 with a B.S. in biology. Since that time he has worked on a variety of field ornithology research projects, from the Bering Sea and the midnight sun of the North Slope of Alaska to the Dominican Republic. From 1998-2000 he was an observer for the Migration Over the Gulf Project sponsored by a Minerals Management Service grant and administered by Louisiana State University. The project involved placing observers on oil and gas platforms throughout the Gulf of Mexico. The goal was to assess the impact of these platforms on the several hundred million trans-Gulf migrants that pass through the region in both spring and fall. More recently he has worked with the Smithsonian Institution in Jamaica and Mexico as part of a team researching West Nile Virus, and assessing the role of migratory birds in the dispersal of the virus.

Michael O'Brien is a freelance environmental consultant, artist, and author living in West Cape May, New Jersey. He is an Associate Naturalist with Cape May Bird Observatory for whom he conducts numerous workshops and a fall songbird migration count. He is co-author of *The Shorebird Guide*, *Flight Calls of Migratory Birds*, and *America's 100 Most Wanted Birds*. Michael has served on the Maryland/DC and New Jersey Records Committees, as an editorial consultant for *Birding*, and as a regional editor for *North American Birds*. His illustrations have been widely published including in *National Geographic's Field Guide to the Birds of North America*.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 14 participants.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$2495** per person in double occupancy from Gunnison (tour ends in Denver). This includes all meals from dinner on Day 1 to dinner on Day 9, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Gunnison and return from Denver, a Colorado Habitat Stamp (see below), airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$395**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is \$300 per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 90 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Refunds are made according to the following schedule: If cancellation is made 90 days or more before the tour departure date, the deposit less \$125 per person is refundable. If cancellation is made between 90 and 70 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 70 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions, as well as any transfers from one tour to another. *We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself.*

If you cancel:

90 days or more before departure date
Between 90 and 70 days before departure
Fewer than 70 days before departure date

Your refund will be:

Your deposit minus \$125.
No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance will be refunded.
No refund available.

TRIP CANCELLATION INSURANCE: Application forms for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. We **strongly recommend** that you purchase trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering. Contact the VENT office prior to registration for details.**

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

COLORADO HABITAT STAMP REQUIREMENT: The state of Colorado recently implemented a conservation program which requires individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 to obtain and be prepared to present a Colorado Habitat Stamp in order to enter designated state wildlife areas and state trust lands. **IMPORTANT: Since we will visit several of these areas, each tour participant within this age group must acquire this stamp prior to and carry it during the tour.** Since these stamps will not be available for purchase upon entry at state wildlife areas and state trust lands, not having one would result in significant inconvenience for the group. These are available for purchase from the Colorado Division of Wildlife by phone (800-244-5613), via their website (<http://wildlife.state.co.us/ShopDOW/AppsAndLicenses/HabitatStamp/>) or at certain hunting and fishing stores. As of July 2007, the cost is \$10.25 per person.

BAGGAGE: As space in the vehicles is limited, please restrict your luggage to one medium-sized suitcase and one carry-on bag. Soft sided luggage is preferred as it is easier to store.

CLIMATE: Temperatures will range from very warm in the lowland prairies to very cold in the mountains. Daytime highs in the plains could reach the mid 80s, while nighttime lows in the mountains may dip into the

20s. Temperatures ranging from the low 30s to mid 60s would be closer to the norm. Wintry storms are not uncommon in Colorado in April, so be prepared.

CLOTHING: We suggest lightweight field clothing, a warm jacket (possibly down), thermal underwear, hat, and gloves. You should bring a comfortable pair of walking shoes or hiking boots and a second pair of light shoes. Dress will be casual throughout. Sitting in vans on the leks in pre-dawn darkness can at times be chilly, so be prepared with layers of warm clothing.

EQUIPMENT: Pack a pair of binoculars in good repair, along with a belt pack or day pack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, etc.). As a precaution, it is a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items, medications, and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag. Your leaders will have a spotting scope; but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. Other items should include an alarm clock, as well as a good flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries.

HEALTH: If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line (877) FYI-TRIP. You can check the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING: Our website at www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from the store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You might also want to visit such other online stores as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print and hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com, or www.buteobooks.com, which specializes in ornithology books.

Andrews, Robert, and Robert Righter. *Colorado Birds*. Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History, 1992. An excellent up-to-date reference on bird distribution and habitats within the state.

Bailey, Alfred M., and Robert J. Niedrach. *Birds of Colorado*. Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History, 1965. Large and very expensive, but may be available through your local library.

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Johnsgard, Paul. *The Grouse of the World*. University of Nebraska Press, 1984. [See especially pages 109-127 (Sage Grouse); pp. 316-341 (Pinnated Grouse); and pp. 342-360 (Sharp-Tailed Grouse). Excellent discussions of displays and their interpretation.]

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Schroeder, M.A., and L.A. Robb. 1993. Greater Prairie Chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 36. (A Poole and F. Gill eds.) The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA. [Excellent life history account.]

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Zimmer, Kevin J. *Birding in the American West*. Cornell: University Press, 2000.

TIPPING: Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, and local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its Agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. When this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on July 31, 2007 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.